

Review Essay: The State of a Field in Five Books

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SERGIO DELGADO MOYA. *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil*. U of Texas P, 2017, 285 pp.

TOM MCENANEY. *Acoustic Properties: Radio, Narrative, and the New Neighborhood of the Americas*. Northwestern UP, 2017, 313 pp.

IGNACIO SÁNCHEZ PRADO. *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Fiction, the Neoliberal Book Market, and the Question of World Literature*. Northwestern UP, 2018, 233 pp.

ADAM SHELLHORSE. *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017, 258 pp.

SARAH TOWNSEND. *The Unfinished Art of Theater: Avant-Garde Intellectuals in Mexico and Brazil*. Northwestern UP, 2018, 301 pp.

Judging by the quality, coherence, and diversity of the monographs surveyed in this book review essay, Latin American literary and cultural studies enjoy excellent health, the contraction of the academic job market notwithstanding. Inasmuch as the sample considered here may be representative, a number of tendencies emerge. Single-author, national tradition monographs seem to be on hiatus. Ditto for book-length analyses of masterpieces, in the manner of Josefina Ludmer on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Brazil is finally conferred the prominent role it deserves. While the influence of a generation of Southern Cone exiles wanes, Mexico emerges as the new darling of US-based Latin Americanism. As a critical paradigm, cultural studies are superseded by interdisciplinarity. Theory is integrated within, but also subsumed by, literary criticism. Methodologies are eclectic. Archival visits intensified in the years leading up to COVID-19. Northwestern University Press consolidated its standing next to the more established imprimaturs of Pittsburgh University Press and University of Texas Press.

A demure contrarian with a stand-on-the-shoulders-of-giants demeanor, Adam Shellhorse manages to cite or acknowledge many authorities in the field while also defying critical consensus at every turn. *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina* (2017) studies a host of works across media from the two countries (chiefly Brazil) that oppose an understanding of literature as patrimony of the nation-state or mechanism for the resolution of difference. The definition of what “literature” is, for “anti-literature” to be its other, elliptical and indexical. At the onset, Ángel Rama is hinted at as anti-literature’s other (5, 21). The gesture returns at the level of the authors studied, when Domingo Faustino Sarmiento appears as David Viñas’s other (58), and so on. Though unmentioned, Shellhorse’s corpus would find an antagonist in Jorge Amado, a preeminent Brazilian novelist that once gravitated around the Spanish American literary boom, and in the hagiographic, textual-based literary criticism that marked his generation. Aside from the intriguing Brazilian-centric rearticulation of Latin Americanism, this erasure and phantasmatic vilification of the critical practices of yore follows in the footsteps of the agonistic ethos of Alberto Moreiras, Brett Levinson, and Jon Beasley-Murray. And yet Shellhorse resists the production of obsolescence. While nodding at the purported impasse of Latin Americanist criticism, Shellhorse vigorously demonstrates the exhaustion of exhaustion.

“Figurations of Immanence: Writing the Subaltern and the Feminine in Clarice Lispector,” the first of six chapters, achieves a seemingly impossible task: to rehabilitate the aloof upper-class Brazilian experimentalist Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) for progressive politics. Navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of *l’art pour l’art* and engaged writing, Shellhorse argues that Lispector neither politicizes nor de-politicizes language, but somehow empowers it. Her writing, and *Anti-Literature* as a whole, seek to reveal “a new capacity of language in the work, a new design for language that includes its feminine dimensions” (23). In other words, undecidability and proliferation are critiques of power in themselves. Shellhorse brackets the question about the author’s site of enunciation and disavows identitarian concerns. This works well for the chapter’s close reading of *A hora da estela* (1977). Had it considered *A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964), where the protagonist famously stumbles upon a cockroach in the maid’s room, Shellhorse might have been inclined to revisit identity and intersectionality.

Chapter 2, “The Letter’s Limit: Anti-Literature and Politics in David Viñas,” offers an inverted mirror to the bold radicalization of Lispector by tempering a notorious Argentine radical. Counterintuitively and rather compellingly, Shellhorse finds in Viñas “a necessary regeneration of language that purges it of the abrasions and ideological clichés of bourgeois calculative logic” (47). Thanks to a careful reconstruction of the great essayist’s underexamined screenplay for the film *Dar la cara* (1962), he exposes a Viñas that is less Sartre-programmatic and more Lispector-experimentalist. In this tour de force reading, Viñas’s “montage prose” (58) brings him closer to the subject of the remaining chapters: Brazilian concrete poetry and its enduring legacy.

We are now back in the 1920s for chapter 3, “Subversions of the Sensible: The Poetics of Antropofagia in Brazilian Concrete Poetry.” The transition is abrupt and unabashed, as if to signal the contemporaneity of one Oswald de Andrade.

Shellhorse drives the discussion on the “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928) away from the “what” and towards the “how”: though the text explicitly thematizes swallowing European and native culture alike to regurgitate a new Brazilian identity, Shellhorse, always the non-identitarian, claims that “the critical force of [Andrade’s] poetry lies not in identity but in its self-reflexive, multimedial defiance of representational logic” (71). Suited for prolific, long-lived practitioners, the chapter spans several decades leading to Augusto de Campos’s 2008 “mercado,” every bit the calligram that Apollinaire would have written had he witnessed globalization and the twenty-first century. (For good measure, the volume features elegant illustrations throughout.) Shellhorse puts his foot down: “The question remains: how do the concrete poets participate [in politics] in practical terms? *By revolutionizing language*” (87). Not everyone will agree that this constitutes revolutionary politics. Shellhorse acknowledges this by citing Bruno Bosteels (in passing) and Gonzalo Aguilar (extensively).

Chapter 4, “The Untimely Matter of Anti-Literature: The Politics of Representation in Haroldo de Campos’s *Galáxias* (1963–1976)” discusses an erudite, experimental work of poetry that “effectuates a powerful mediation of the social bond” (97). Tempering the analysis of composition that dominates the literature on the sui generis volume, Shellhorse examines the political character of the text in light of Beasley-Murray’s theorization of post-hegemony and Badiou’s of the event, among other sources. Per Shellhorse, *Galáxias* requires a new experience of reading that subverts the techno-mediated manipulation of reality under the Brazilian dictatorship and, more broadly, under capitalism.

Chapter 5, “The Antinomies of Anti-Literature: The Politics of the Baroque in Haroldo de Campos and Osman Lins,” traces the polemic between the two authors and the aftermath of Lins’s famous repudiation of concrete poetry in the 1970s. In contradistinction with the crisis of the literary in the Spanish American boom, Lins embraces visual puns and radical multimediality, in addition to a surprising incorporation of medieval motifs that Shellhorse examines to great effect. Likely to become a high-water mark in the relatively small body of criticism on Lins, the chapter makes a cogent case about anti-boom mythopoesis in the poet’s aesthetic of ornaments.

“Writing Subaltern Redemption and Insurgency: Haroldo de Campos’s ‘The Left-Winged Angel of History,’” the last chapter of Shellhorse’s monograph, restates the main argument: “an exodus from the conceptual coordinates of traditional culturalist and philological approaches” (167). *Anti-Literature* closes with a well-informed discussion of a sexagenarian Haroldo de Campos’s engagement with Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). Tottering between intellectualizing and denouncing, Campos memorialized massacred militants. Reproductions of Sebastião Salgado’s well-known photographs on the subject are included, recreating the powerful encounter of avant-garde artists and landless peasants in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Brazil. The limelight of canonicity had moved on by then from a poet that, as Shellhorse deftly shows, redefines the rules of writerly engagement in this late work. A very short conclusion section, “The Untimely Secret of Anti-Literature,” reaffirms the volume’s commitment to the openness of meaning and to the continued eventfulness of the literary works considered.

Anti-Literature can be faulted for treating as “pariahs” works that have been widely celebrated (193), however excluded they may have been from the Spanish Americanist gaze. The same goes for rejecting Roberto Schwarz’s and others’ critiques of the reactionary politics of *poesia concreta* on the grounds that they ignore the disruptive power of the movement’s material-semiotic matrix. This may be so, but other more straightforwardly committed poets, who never translated Dante and were not eulogized by Elizabeth Bishop, would paint a fuller picture and account for the harshness of Schwarz’s pronouncements. (Think of the human rights lawyer and poet Ana Montenegro, exiled in East Germany after the 1964 coup, or of the guerilla intellectual Carlos Marighella, whose poems got him arrested.) Still, one of *Anti-Literature*’s great merits is setting in conversation provinces of Latin Americanism that often talk past each other.

Sergio Delgado Moya’s object of study in *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil* (2017) partially overlaps with Shellhorse’s. From afar, the studies have much in common: a penchant towards multimedia art forms, a political interest in literature, and some degree of methodological affinity. They even discuss the very same artfully-lettered poem “beba coca cola” by Décio Pignatari (1957). The similarities end there, for while Shellhorse highlights the transgressive powers of language, Delgado Moya is more direct and contextual: “The merit of [this poem] rests largely on its effective appropriation of the range of associative techniques employed in advertising” (107). Simply put, while Shellhorse sees the utopian element in these cultural forms, Delgado Moya sees both the reactionary and the utopian aspects.

Delirious Consumption examines the prominent role that consumerism had in shaping some of the most influential literary and artistic contributions from Mexico and Brazil in the twentieth century. Striving to elucidate the logic of consumption, and to drive the conversation away from the paradigm of production while recognizing the necessary dialectic between these two poles, Delgado Moya puts together an impressive corpus of works that mimics or reproduces forms of consumer culture (9). A substantive introduction theorizes “consumer reason,” polemicizing with George Yúdice while borrowing from Frankfurt School thinkers, the history of design, accounts of industrialization in the region, and an eclectic collection of critical sources. Though not exhaustive, the heuristic notions of distraction, fascination, and homemaking provide a sufficiently robust backbone for this uncommonly well-documented discussion of riveting case studies.

The first of four chapters, “Attention and Distraction: The Billboard as Mural Form,” focuses on a different facet of the great Stalinist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros: his dealings with Hollywood and commercial design, which in some ways underpin even his most programmatic, grand communist designs. The chapter has the qualities of a *catalogue raisonné*, striking a difficult balance between coverage and analysis. It participates in what it describes: “there is room in the idea of attention in distraction for a negative moment, a moment that takes away from a full engagement with the object of analysis” (77). While paying attention to Siqueiros, Delgado Moya also consumes him, distractedly. Best and Marcus’s “surface reading” paradigm comes to mind, though it is not explicitly thematized in *Delirious Consumption*. This unheroic take on the epic painter yields interesting

results, especially on his often-overlooked essays and late work. For instance, the hyper-bombastic *La marcha de la humanidad en la tierra y hacia el cosmos* (1964–1971) could be dismissed as belated, self-plagiarizing muralismo. Without denying such claims, Delgado Moya shows how that work participates in deeper-seated trends: “it became clear that the contest of conflicting desires that Siqueiros upheld so fruitfully for the better part of his career had been resolved in favor of commerce” (80).

Chapter 2, “Fascination; or, Enlightenment in the Age of Neon Light,” turns to Brazilian concrete poetry for another round of dealings with consumer culture. These are born under the sign of ambiguity. The “capitalist mimetics” that Taussig reads in Benjamin are rendered tactile, material in Augusto de Campos’s foundational *Poetamenos* (1953). The book “takes neon light seriously, kneading out of it a lyricism that is well beyond the spectrum of commercial culture” (86). After a captivating digression on *Quebrantahuesos* (1952), a collaboration between the Chilean poets and multimedia artists Nicanor Parra, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Enrique Lihn, among others, Delgado Moya sees Pignatari and the de Campos brothers under an uncommon light. “The noncommunicative aspect of language in advertising, its gloss and glow, the intensity of its impact and shock, is precisely what drives desire,” he observes (101). Differently put, what makes *concretismo* attractive—and deeply problematic—is nothing other than its nonsensical, commercial quality.

Chapter 3, “Poetry, Replication, Late Capitalism: Octavio Paz as Concrete Poet” brazenly applies Brazilian poetics to analyze the Mexican classic. And why not? Citing the epistolar exchange between Haroldo and Paz, Delgado Moya explains their affinities and collaborations. More importantly, he provides a variegated examination of Paz’s stance on the relationship between poetry and market capitalism. Considering a vast trove of Paziana that includes letters, essays, visual writing, and traditional poems, Delgado Moya contends that the Mexican author “craft[s] an experience of language that replicates and resists the logic of consumer culture” (121). The elucidation of Paz’s collaborations with the Spanish exile artist Vicente Rojo stand out, as does a revision of the Mexico City poems. From the extensive bibliography on Paz’s milestone experimental poem *Blanco* (1966), Delgado Moya’s most sustained interlocutor is Enrico Mario Santí.

The last chapter of *Delirious Consumption*, “Lygia Clark, at Home with Objects,” considers not just the title artist, but a constellation including Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape (who moonlighted in the advertising industry), and others. The section’s precise analysis of *objetos relacionais* is a major contribution to the understanding of *neoconcretista* aesthetics within the continuum of art and life—a staple of the avant-garde—and within the fluid interplay of literature and the plastic arts. Delgado Moya doubles down on connoisseurship, rivaling any disciplinarily-trained art historian in the process. Psychoanalytical theory informs this chapter, somewhat at odds with the critical theory in earlier sections. The end result is an interrogation of the last frontier of consumerism: the home. Per Delgado Moya, this purportedly private realm, besieged by shiny gadgets and coveted commodities, finds in Clark’s creations a therapy of sorts.

Scholars will come back to *Delirious Consumption* for its curatorial quality. The monograph is indeed very generous in spirit by providing its readers with

multiple jumping off points to launch their own research projects. Perusing it sometimes feels like getting a good lead from a colleague on what to look for next. By the same token, source review at times overshadows argument; subtitles supplant rather than reinforce logical transitions. There is also inconclusiveness: “ambiguity” is valorized throughout, including in the curt general conclusions. To boot, more discussion about the differences between advertisement and propaganda would enrich the notion of “delirious consumption.” This last point is not about mere semantics, but about the central ideological conflict—capitalism vs. communism—that haunts the book. None of these perceived shortcomings mar the accomplishments of Delgado Moya’s rich study.

Sarah Townsend shares Delgado Moya’s national pairing, albeit considering an earlier era. Among a crop of remarkable monographs, her *The Unfinished Art of Theater: Avant-Garde Intellectuals in Mexico and Brazil* (2018) stands out for its rigorous and original use of archival sources. Townsend’s object of study is well defined: theatrical avant-gardist texts and practices from the interwar period in Mexico and Brazil. What could be a niche topic in the hands of a less adept critic becomes a rich site for contesting narratives of the avant-garde (especially Fernando Rosenberg’s and Vicky Unruh’s, but also Carlos Monsiváis’s) while prioritizing the could-have-been over the well-established. Townsend is all about loose ends and missed opportunities, which she builds up into limit-cases to understand the political force of “theater,” with scare quotes to signal capaciousness.

A gifted pedagogue, Townsend has a knack for explaining complex cultural dynamics in simple terms and for identifying lively vignettes that further her case. The former include such gems as “counterintuitively, the fact that Mexico City and São Paulo were becoming cultural capitals in their own right probably also acted as a disincentive to more regular communication” (8) and “progress depends on the persistence of the primitive” (187). The latter include a 1924 news piece about fifty schoolgirls who fainted while preparing multitudinous choreographies at José Vasconcelos’s behest (30) and a 2005 backdoor negotiation between a cutting-edge theater director and a TV personality to fund a megamall in São Paulo endowed with a Walter Gropius-inspired “stadium theater” (209). As these vignettes suggest, the monograph revisits grandiose mediations of mass culture in the two largest (therefore comparable) cultural economies in the region.

Chapter 1, “Rehearsals of the Tragi-Co(s)mic Race,” brings us Vasconcelos at the cusp of becoming the most powerful man in Mexican cultural politics. We see him here as the insecure author of an idea-driven play, *Prometeo vencedor*, first penned in San Diego circa 1918. Townsend leverages her close reading of the bizarre work to produce a revisionary interpretation of the later *La raza cósmica* (1925) and of Vasconcelos’s public buildings. For all the brick-and-mortar glory of the muralist-ornamented facades, and for all the enduring presence of the famous essay, Townsend sees in Vasconcelos a fragmentary, experimental avant-gardist ethos, best understood in its unstable performativity. Buildings demolished and failed plays are, to her eyes, more revealing than standing structures.

“Primitivist Accumulation and *Teatro sintético*,” the book’s second chapter, considers late *estridentista* ethnographic plays by Luis Quintanilla and Teatro del Murciélago, peculiar in more ways than one. With one foot on the international movement of synthetic theater that was sweeping Russia and France, and one foot

on local folklore, such pieces were “part of the affective labor expended in the campaign to forge new economic alliances and industrialize Mexico” (88). Townsend recreates staged tableaux through the eyes of the American Industrial Mission—distinguished attendees who kept an invaluable scrapbook of ephemera. Illustrations from souvenir programs complete the picture. An enthralling forgotten form emerges in all its contradictory glory, multifariously self-exoticizing and nation-building.

Chapter 3, “Radio/Puppets, or the Institutionalization of a (Media) Revolution” risks becoming a different monograph entirely: “at several moments along the way I almost decided I was writing a book about theater and sound” (23). The gamble pays off handsomely. Without venturing as far into media studies as Tom McEnaney (below), Townsend tackles uneven development by analyzing *Troka el Poderoso*, an early 1930s technophilic radio show for children that revolved around the title character, an automaton. The subject was ripe for antiquarian idiosyncrasy and allegorical reading, but Townsend steers clear from cuteness or facile identification of the character with the modernizing project. Instead, she convincingly revises the historiography of *estridentismo*, which *Troka* comes to bookend, and illuminates the Mexican techno-social: “in my account of the fantasies of liberation via industrialization *Troka* enabled, it was the interference, the part of the radiophonic voice listeners had to learn to hear past in order to believe the promise of its power: the struggles and calculated compromises, material and organizational infrastructure, and all the other still-visible strings that made the ‘wireless’ medium of radio work (or not, as the case may be)” (118).

Although the fourth chapter, “Parsifal on the Periphery of Capitalism,” inaugurates the Brazil section of the book, by this point multiple connections between the two countries have been established. Townsend turns now to Mário de Andrade, a towering figure that Shellhorse and Delgado have mostly elided. Closer in her affinities to Roberto Schwarz than the other two scholars, Townsend’s discussion of the hypercanonical figure falls along Marxist lines, which she supplements with a consideration of race and sexual orientation. At stake is the open secret of Andrade’s ethnicity and queerness, as filtered through cultured operatic references. A detailed account of the acrimonious dispute with Oswald (who reportedly mocked Mário by calling him “Miss Macunaima” [151]) reveals itself to be more than just the *petite histoire* of Brazilian avant-gardism. Offering a refreshing perspective on the much-storied 1922 *Semana de Arte Moderna*, Townsend purports that “the constitution of *modernismo* as an intellectual public and the paradoxical authority of *modernismo*’s pope are bound up in—and bound together by—a sense of backwardness and shame” (173). One could quibble that the chapter has too many moving parts. Still, it is a brilliant moment in a monograph that puts to rest hagiographic, rupturist, and epic accounts of the avant-garde.

Chapter 5, “Phonography, Operatic Ethnography, and Other Bad Arts,” acts as the media studies-oriented section of the Brazilian half. Mário de Andrade, the opera buff returns, further grounding the need to regard the pope of *modernismo* as a multimedia creator. Leaving text-centrism far behind, Townsend examines unstaged operas that, in a parallel move to the synthetizations of *jarabe tapatio* in Quintanilla, integrate *emboladas* into arias. Then comes the Victor Talking Machine

Company, which, as Townsend documents, had an outsized influence in the way Andrade saw and heard the world. As Wagner and sambas share a shelf in his record collection, the poet makes striking realizations: “For Mário, there was no reason why opera had to be elitist, and if it was a ‘foreign’ art, the same could be said of every other tradition (including indigenous music) in a country where a national culture did not yet exist” (197). He goes on to pen the libretto for *Pedro Malazarte*, an opera built on popular types that could well have been staged in the mid-1930s, when Andrade oversaw the Teatro Municipal, the same building he had fled under a hail of verbal abuse at an ill-fated public reading years before. In committing this work to the archive, Andrade indexes the constitutive disappearance of performance; more to the point, he stands as the perfect illustration of the deterritorialized ideas that, for Schwarz and Townsend, underpin Brazilian-ness. Shellhorse cringes.

Townsend’s final chapter, “Total Theater and Missing Pieces,” doubles as the book conclusion (it is followed by a two-page postscript). Oswald de Andrade takes the spotlight. In some ways, his 1930s unperformed play *O homem e o cavalo* is the central object of study; in others, it serves as the vehicle to articulate the book’s take on total theater and unperformativity. The play itself was described by a prominent theater director as a sublation of Russian constructivism “blended with the Great Rituals that shape the Brazilian Mixed Races culture” (210). Madame Jesus, talking horses, and spaceships are a fixture. Townsend engages Wagner, Benjamin, and Adorno more explicitly and at length than in other moments of the monograph in order to understand the immersive experience of total theater. Fittingly, she also historicizes the Brazilian avant-garde theatrical experience through police archives from Delegacia Estadual de Ordem Política e Social (DEOPS), which infiltrated the philo-communist gatherings of Clube dos Artistas Modernos (CAM). The stuff of fiction, let alone narratively-textured scholarship, this riveting backstory speaks volumes about the precariousness and daring of avant-gardism. The chapter’s closing statement is worth citing at length: “If *O homem e o cavalo* is difficult to understand within the contours of Brazilian theater, and if the few critics who discuss the play struggle to contain it within the limits of literary discourse, that is because it lies in the middle of a critical split—a ‘transition’ between ‘the war horse and the turf horse (bourgeois society) and horse-power (socialist society)’—that was never realized on the world stage” (248).

In striving to create a methodology for the unfinished and unperformable, Townsend’s book reveals a slow, uneven temporality for aesthetic rupturism. This is without a doubt a major achievement. Still, a Nietzschean vindication of active forgetfulness might object that some pieces are best unremembered. For example, no one should take seriously Vargas Llosa’s late novels (cf. *Cinco esquinas* [2016]) or neglect his early contributions to Latin American fiction. Perhaps, this calculation is transferrable to the Mexican and Brazilian corpora considered here. Another question worth asking has to do with the implications of this monograph for the field. Should literary studies account for multimedia practices, expanding the realm of what is possible under the aegis of cultural studies? Or should theater and performance studies adopt Spanish and Portuguese-language practices, ideally without succumbing to the paradigm of translation? If a compromising position seems appropriate, Townsend’s work shows the way.

The binational framing of the above studies (Brazil-Argentina, Brazil-Mexico) may speak to a number of things. At best, to an investment in both comparative and sustained analysis. A most sensible acknowledgement of the transnational nature of cultural phenomena could also play a part. At worst, it speaks to an internalization of a certain ethos, where the thing to do in light of a competitive job market is to hedge one's bets. Rather than second-guessing the intentions of scholars who are evidently committed to their *métier*, it is worth asking the question about the institutional conditions under which they operate.

The concern about cultural capital is addressed explicitly in Ignacio Sánchez Prado's *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Fiction, the Neoliberal Book Market, and the Question of World Literature* (2018). The monograph, which conjoins two long-standing research lines of the author (on World Literature and on Mexico), self-consciously plays out the very phenomenon it describes. If, per Said, orientalism is a form of exoticization that reveals more about the subject who exoticizes than about the exoticized object, Mexican Occidentalism reveals more about that country than it does about the West. The "strategic" bit comes to bare in that the push to assimilate is supposedly pretend. The template is Spivak's "strategic essentialism," whereby minorities temporarily assume the identities that the hegemonic power imposes on them to leverage political gain, or when radically differentiated peoples (Bengali, Tamil, Muhajir, Marathi) act as one (South Asian) to assert themselves against a greater power (Britain). Sánchez Prado studies Mexican writers whose worldliness and cosmopolitanism lead them to "acquire cultural capital within their national tradition" (19). The parallelism breaks down when the writers considered (Sergio Pitol, Jorge Volpi, Ana García Bergua, and so on) all write in Spanish, and not in the indigenous and minority languages of Mexico, such as Nahuatl, Zapotec, or Mixtec. Sánchez Prado is, but also plays the role of, the bilingual Mexican informant vis-à-vis Anglophone world literature theory. As befits a monograph keen on stoking up controversy, there is room for different readers to find this invocation of Spivak alternatively honorific, innovative, meta-strategic, anecdotal, or appropriate.

Methodologically, the monograph pivots between institutional critique and close reading. Under the title "Mexican World Literature," a meaty introduction posits that a sociology of local literary fields is a precondition to theorize world literature. The through-line between the three long chapters is factual. *Strategic Occidentalism* traces the progressive "establishment of a transnational circuit of literary publishing that would better suit both cosmopolitanism and the demands of the neoliberal cultural market" (21). The fateful year of 1968 would put the last nail on the coffin of the storied Mexico of *muralismo* and *cardenismo*—see Delgado Moya, above. Sánchez Prado picks up the thread in the wake of nationally-subsidized publishing and cultural nationalism, taking it all the way to the end of PRI rule with the election of Vicente Fox in 2000.

Chapter 1, "The Networks of a Personal World: Sergio Pitol's Heterodox Cosmopolitanism," packs so much learned commentary on the author as to merit its own separate study. (The same is true of the other two chapters, each a world onto its own in terms of comprehensive erudition.) An essay that could serve as the introduction to Pitol's complete works, the chapter also illuminates a period between the 1960s and the 1980s often dominated by narratives of the boom and

of magical realism. Before the internet, Pitol embodies a network with global reach. Sánchez Prado offers a vivid portrait of this notoriously well-traveled diplomat, editor, translator, and novelist. Painstakingly, the chapter reconstructs the unifying vision in Pitol's multiple endeavors: an antiauthoritarian streak. Sánchez Prado documents this through the author's relationship to the literature of the Eastern Bloc, his idiosyncratic take on Russian formalism and English modernism, a short story he wrote in Moscow ("Nocturno de Bujara" [1979]), and the novel *El desfile del amor* (1984). Pitol brokered between world literature and the Spanish language in his capacity as editor of *Heterodoxos* (1970–1976), the series at Tusquets. His own lighthearted style and signature humor emerge from his encounters with authoritarianism abroad and at home. Also, in Pitol's own mordant account, from his encounters with Jorge Ibarguengoitia. The end result is a cosmopolitanism that rejects the total novel (Fuentes et al.) while renegotiating the role of literary institutions.

Chapter 2, "The Crack Group: Cosmopolitanism contra the Magical Realist Imperative," also builds its case by opposition. Cultural nationalism, authoritarianism, and the total novel are still foes; they are joined now by magical realism understood as "postcolonial exotic," (88) borrowing Graham Huggan's felicitous coinage in his eponymous *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001). Unsurprisingly, this is exactly the antipode of what the Crack, the loose collective formed by Jorge Volpi, Pedro Ángel Palou, the late Ignacio Padilla et al., stands for. Acknowledging more exacting accounts of the still-unfolding history of the group, Sánchez Prado turns his attention to "publishing practices [as] an essential way to address the blind spots in systemic accounts of world literature" (89). According to Sánchez Prado, the legacy of the Crack consists in its unprecedented ability to navigate the newfound continuity between art and market under neoliberalism. And yet some of its authors' individual books "actually resist, through cosmopolitanism and worldliness, the institutional structures that the work of the Crack group helped construct" (22–23). So emerges the by-now familiar motif of the tension between creation and commerce, thematized in all other sources discussed here. (In passing, Sánchez Prado compares the 1990s with the 1920s of the Contemporáneos group, a lead worth following [93].) Polemicizing with the author of the present book review essay's examination of Crack fictionalized Nazism as a cognate of Roberto Bolaño's, he situates Volpi in a Mexican trajectory of such fictionalizations (103). Sánchez Prado goes on to note that "the true formal interest at work in *En busca de Klingsor* is its economy of mystery. Here, Volpi clearly pushed Pitol's trend toward the unsolvable" (105). Other Crack authors, their works, and editorial trajectories are similarly discussed.

Chapter 3, "The Idea of the Mexican Woman Writer: Gender, Worldliness, and Editorial Neoliberalization," puts the *boom femenino* under the lens of strategic Occidentalism. Tactfully, it also disavows the boys' club narrative from the previous chapters. Coeval with the Crack, the trifecta considered in this chapter—Carmen Boullosa, Ana García Bergua, and Cristina Rivera Garza—faced an uphill battle to attain cultural legitimacy and carve out a space for themselves following the commercial success of Laura Esquivel and Ángeles Mastretta, on the one hand, and the critical success of María Luisa Puga or Angelina Muñoz-Huberman,

on the other. Sánchez Prado is concerned with describing “the strategies through which women writers position themselves in the neoliberal editorial market—beyond the strategies that relate directly to gender” (140). The chapter unearths fascinating sources, such as the *Letras Libres* review of Boullosa’s historical novel *Duerme* (1994), her first with Alfaguara, misread for lack of cultural categories for sophisticated, marketable fiction by Mexican women authors. After documenting similar travails in the other two writers, the chapter closes on a triumphal note, celebrating Rivera Garza’s metatextual serious games as double victories against narrow gender-coded reading and Occidentalist constraints.

The book’s conclusion recapitulates its findings and defends an asystematic take on world literature, best seen as “the product of overlapping sets of institutions constructed in a diversity of spaces” (190). Predicting the continued internationalization of contemporary Mexican fiction, Sánchez Prado takes one last opportunity to draw lines in the sand in the world and Latin American literature debates. Allegedly, one camp would be elitist and top-down; the other, insurgent and rooted.

Strategic Occidentalism constitutes Mexico itself as a case study. Indeed, it follows from Sánchez Prado’s reasoning that there should be volumes devoted to Guatemalan world literature, Salvadorean world literature, all the way to Tierra del Fuego. This spells out the death of Latin Americanism by a thousand cuts, however the critic may early on “want to stress that a focus on individual countries and subregions is not meant to detract from the continental approach and its importance” (12). All things considered, the monograph acts against this premise. Regardless, its many merits shine through. Other than the evident and sizable contribution to Mexican studies, there is the introduction of a host of critics based in classics, English, and comparative literature departments that some readers of *Strategic Occidentalism* may not have had occasion to encounter. The usual suspects of David Damrosch, the late Pascale Casanova, and Franco Moretti aside, these include Alexander Beecroft, Rebecca Walkowitz, Aamir Mufti, Pheng Cheah, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Eric Hayot, and especially Sarah Brouillette.

The final monograph summarily considered in this review essay, Tom McEnaney’s *Acoustic Properties: Radio, Narrative, and the New Neighborhood of the Americas* (2017), trades the institutional for the infrastructural. A daring “prehistory of our wireless culture” (vii), the study addresses the under-examined role radio played in the hemispheric history of the novel, and vice versa, from 1932 to 1982. McEnaney sets out to demonstrate that “authors in the radio age developed a new kind of writing that was also a practice of listening” (6). What may sound like a flight of theoretical fancy is actually a rigorous application of sound studies. With the proponents of the techno-social, McEnaney understands that human affairs are embedded in nonhuman networks. The connections between listening and writing are less a matter of speculation than a matter of fact. The broadcasts that transmitted Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” destabilized national borders, transformed communities, and served both neocolonial and anticolonial agendas. Usefully, two concepts anchor McEnaney’s reflections: the title-phrase “acoustic properties,” which is all about how sound cannot be owned in the way that, say, land can; and “narrative acoustics,” which is a transposition of this idea into the task of bringing about new social relations. At a macro level, the

“new neighborhood,” América, is the promise of the book as a whole. Within its subsections, the *descamisados* that former radionovela star Eva Perón summoned into existence and the *pueblo de Cuba* addressed by Fidel Castro’s guerrilla radio network Radio Rebelde, among others, get their dues.

The book has three sections, each one dedicated to the codevelopment of radio and the novel. The first section, “The New (Deal) Acoustics” is devoted to US writers, namely John Dos Passos, Raymond Chandler, Carson McCullers, and Richard Wright. Close to eighty pages long, the section alone has the substance of a short, solid work of US Americanist criticism. It ends in Buenos Aires, however, with the first English-language film shot in the country, an adaptation of Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) under the title *Sangre negra* (1951) by acclaimed director Pierre Chenal. “Anticipating the association between US Black Power moments and Fidel Castro in the early 1960s,” we read, “*Sangre negra* offered the Argentine government and film industry an opportunity to critique the United States’ racial inequality as a failure of democracy” (109). FBI scrutiny was swift.

The second section, “Occupying the Airwaves,” is best read next to Townsend’s Troka chapter. It recounts the propaganda wars surrounding the Cuban Revolution in 1959 while offering fresh insights on Félix B. Caignet’s epochal radionovela *El derecho de nacer* (1948) and Severo Sarduy’s experimental radio drama *Los mata-dores de hormigas* (1978). McEnaney follows the money: as it turns out, Caignet was backed by the US, which advertised its products during the intermissions and, more generally, sold Cubans to the idea of becoming a commercial protectorate. Castro soon seized this powerful medium, not without risking losing it all to disembodiment. At stake, “the importance of the *body in uniform* as necessary to his military *decorum*, which seeks to assure that his fellow revolutionaries are recognized as lawful combatants” (135). Strictly speaking, Guevara’s doctrine of *foquismo* would not have been viable without the “medium” of the radio. For his part, from Paris, Sarduy produces an anticolonial work that looks back at Radio Rebelde and “imagines rebels killing ants to hold onto the crop [sugar] that has colonized them from the start” (166).

The third section, “Hand-to-Hand Speech,” brings readers back to more familiar references when it comes to thinking about the relationship between radio and the novel: Manuel Puig and Ricardo Piglia. The deep histories in earlier chapters provide a new framework. Contra Borges’s antipopulist sensibilities, McEnaney posits that the realism of the popular types in *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1968) and *Boquitas pintadas* (1969) derives from the “imitation of their imitation of radiophonic speech” (177). He continues to characterize nonproprietary literary listening in the spinning cassette tape of *La ciudad ausente* (1992), which already falls outside of the scope of the study. Content with having elucidated the warring political and literary communities brought about by the age of radio, McEnaney foregoes general conclusions.

To be sure, *Acoustic Properties* can be unwieldy, but arguably this a byproduct of the book’s enormous ambition. It carries out fundamental research. McEnaney does not use the Benjaminian vocabulary of mechanical reproducibility and loss of aura à la Delgado Moya, nor does he cite post-hegemony every other chapter à la Shellhorse, but he addresses such concerns all the same. If I had a crystal ball like Jorge Volpi in his hemispheric long essay *El insomnio de Bolívar* (2009), I

would venture to suggest that McEnaney's multilayered description of the political, legal, and nonhuman variables in cultural change charts a path that future studies will follow. The same can be said about his salutary self-awareness of the United States as *de facto* site of enunciation.

In the volumes considered above, the material conditions for the production and reproduction of culture are laid bare. However, although all reject textuality as their exclusive object of study—considering alongside it performance, oral and visual forms, literary institutions, and so on—they ultimately apply methods that originate in literary and cultural criticism. McEnaney alone engages problems that are literally, not metaphorically, material: radio waves being one of them. Consistently, he incorporates insights from new materialist practices from the broader humanities and social sciences that Latin Americanism has often bypassed. Going forward, importing some of these elements into the subdiscipline may lead to further methodological renewal. A more interesting development would consist in mobilizing the considerable resources of Latin American culture to fully engage in the pressing issues of our day, in criticism and otherwise. Awareness that transistor radios and peoples are cocreated is an instance of something bigger: the sense that literature is embedded in “stuff.” This hitherto relatively fringe position is poised to become the precondition for future reflection. The present ecological crisis and the role of cultural production therein, absent from these studies, are sure to have a greater impact on the next crop.

Be this as it may, Delgado Moya's capacious discussions of consumerism, Shellhorse's stimulating politicization of legibility, Townsend's thought-provoking intervention in multimediality, Sánchez Prado's knowledgeable Mexicanization of world literature, and McEnaney's engrossing account of predigital media exemplify scholarship of the highest caliber. Boding well for the field at large, they illustrate the professionalization and rigor that Latin American literary studies have come to be known for. The sample is limited, of course. Other gems are to be found outside the realm of English-language academic presses. Such works would reinforce the impression that Latin Americanism has long overcome the stigma of belatedness that once befell the region and its criticism alike.