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Review/Reseña

Ryan F. Long, *Fictions of Totality: The Mexican Novel, 1968, and the National-Popular State*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008.

Ends of the Revolution

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Late capitalism can [...] be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious. The 60s will then have been the momentous transformational period in which this systematic restructuring takes place on a global scale. (Jameson 207)

Ryan F. Long has written not only an excellent book, but also a necessary one, which promises to become a first reference for any future reflection on Mexico's democratic-neoliberal transition as traced in the

literary. While the social sciences have been writing about Mexico's transition since at least Salinas and perhaps even long before, the Latin Americanist humanities have largely failed to aver the kind of powerful theoretical speculation with respect to the Mexican transition that has for years been the norm in Southern Cone studies. This is owed, to be sure, to the almost exaggerated illegibility of the historical trajectory that constitutes the Mexican transition and also the obscurity with which those events have been received in cultural production. Even Mexican dictatorship is never quite intelligible, as a repressive regime that yet historically holds the only guarantee of social, ethnic, or economic justice.

By way of conceptualizing the Mexican state's peculiar "stability," Roger Bartra writes of the Mexican Leviathan: "Pareciera, pues, que el Estado mexicano mantiene en su amplio seno a grupos de la burguesía conservadora, corrientes socialdemócratas, marxistas, católicos, sindicatos, organizaciones campesinas y de capas medias, populistas y militares: todo cabe en el Leviatan mexicano" (31-32). To put it a bit more cynically, before its rhetorical-ideological disarticulation in the period following the Tlatelolco massacre, the Mexican state constituted itself as a complete and self-fulfilling totality. It contained everything, counted everything, and posited as its *razón de ser* the incompleteness of the task that it held in reserve, to be fulfilled exclusively by the state: "Para los gobernantes mexicanos, la desigualdad real derivada de una inequitativa distribución de la riqueza, no contradice la bondad ni la eficacia estatales en el objetivo de lograr la justicia social. Por el contrario, la lejanía de la meta confirma la 'necesidad' del Estado mismo, precisamente con las características que hasta hoy se la conocen" (Gilabert 23).

Mexico's 1968 student movement and the massacre that crushed it—despite and *because of* the massacre that crushed it—appears both as a point of historical rupture as well as the very midwife to the democratic and neoliberal transitions that the Mexican state is currently undertaking. As such, 1968 forms the central term—and occupies centrally the middle chapter—of Long's daring study. Here it is not merely the case that with the Tlatelolco massacre the state discredited the authority of its rule grounded in the representation of popular sovereignty and thus any claim to

authority as such. Rather, the massacre is also shown to be a symptom of larger, global forces at work in the neoliberalizing world-system that already undermined any possible claim to Mexican national autonomy. Tlatelolco is thus read as a central event, but not, as the teleological, culturalist account holds, the origin of a more “democratic” future. Tlatelolco is “a symptom of the lack of national autonomy that, in turn, exposed the lack at the heart of the national-popular narrative that became more and more visible during the years between the publication of *La región más transparente* and *Morir en el golfo*” (149), the works that frame Long’s ambitious re-reading of Mexican literature from the mid- to late-twentieth century.

What Long establishes as a kind of literary cycle documenting a certain cultural appropriation of Mexico’s 20th century allows a kind of settling of accounts with the question of the relation between literature and the state in Mexico. The parameters of this relation, Long argues, are conditioned by the changing fortunes of the national-popular, that collective social subject long posited as the object of Revolutionary Mexican state form, from its populist apogee in the 1940s until the near-final disarticulation of the popular as political-social desideratum (and rhetorical resource) in the 1980s. 1968 stands between these possibilities, a “momentous transformational period,” as Jameson puts it in my epigraph, that bridges all of the emancipatory promise of the national-popular, Revolutionary state, the lack of fulfillment of that promise, the persistent popular demand to make good on that promise, and finally, its decline.

Long’s book indexes this decline to that of the totalizing novel, understood as “a fictional work that aspires to reconstruct a day... an event, or even a nation in its totality” (2). If such totalizing novels sought to compensate Mexico’s intense social, ethnic, and economic divisions, the Mexican-Revolutionary state, in turn, appears as a project that obeys a remarkably similar logic, that is, towards the gradual (fantasmal-compensatory) integration of the social field under its purview. As Long puts it: “Traditionally, the national-popular state’s hegemony relied upon sustaining the ideology of the Revolution, which cast that event as an unfinished project whose gradual completion was leading the nation—with

the state as custodian—toward a future moment of national unity and coherence” (2). Under the dispensations of the neoliberal era, the state grows increasingly unmoored from such a national-popular centered, totalizing function as its *razón de ser*, as does the novel, whose function is that of a suture to smooth over the Revolutionary state’s unfulfilled promise and imagine another, fuller, “compensatory totality” (32).¹

The work of, as Long designates it, “narrative redemption,” is central to the first work the study reads, Carlos Fuentes’s 1958 *La región más transparente*: “*La región* intends to save the ideals of the Mexican Revolution from the corruption that has defined its legacy by constructing a compensatory totality, a coherent, all-inclusive social space capable of reconciling long-standing personal and national-historical contradictions” (17). By demonstrating the high point of the Mexican totalizing novel, the novel that attempts to fulfill the task of complete representation of Mexico, this chapter sets the stage for the remaining chapters, which “establish a trajectory of the decline of totalizing thought in the Mexican novel of the national-popular period” (18). To be sure, the novel’s incorporative gesture—like that of the Revolution itself—comes up against its limit, is founded, indeed, on an exclusion, here embodied in the character Gladys García, a figure for what Long calls—citing Alberto Moreiras—“the unmasterable excess of the social” (47).

In the second chapter, Long takes on Fernando del Paso’s *José Trigo* (1966), a text which, if not a moment of the full-fledged decline of the totalizing desire of the literary, marks this unmasterable excess as a central preoccupation. If for Fuentes totality is a fully conceivable desideratum, del Paso mourns the death of that totality even as it hopes to animate its

¹ I could not agree more with Long that such an unmooring opens on to the emergence of extra- or post-literary genres. Indeed, it is no mean coincidence that the “novelistic” representation of the Mexican government’s violent repression of the 1968 student-popular movement, which, again, Long takes as a watershed for the transition of both literature and politics (and the relation of literature *to* politics), has most frequently taken *testimonio* and the chronicle as its vehicles for literary representation. Here I have in mind, above all, a well-known trio: Carlos Monsiváis’s *Días de guardar* (1970), Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), and Luis González de Alba’s *Los días y los años* (1971).

corpse. Writes Long: “The sutures that structure Mexico’s totality in del Paso’s novel become more visible than they were in Fuentes’s *La región*, and this process of exposure is related to the way *José Trigo* questions its ability to sustain a totalizing vision of Mexico’s historical experience, its present, and its future” (56). The novel refuses, as it were, its own totalizing impulse and instead inhabits a disarticulated and dismembered topography. Central to this disarticulation is the severed body of Luciano, a murdered leader in the novel’s fictionalized narration of the 1958-59 railroad workers’ movement, which is in some ways the antecedent to a certain 1968 student-popular movement, if not to the student movement as such. The multitude of workers gathers around the body and dismembers it collectively, sharing the pieces: “The workers dismember Luciano’s cadaver in order to re-member it later as the foundation of their political identities” (73). On this lack, a community is founded (74).

The third chapter, on María Luisa Mendoza’s 1971 “cronovela,” *Con Él, conmigo, con nosotros tres* addresses centrally the Tlatelolco massacre and the painfully ironic site of its occurrence, the Plaza of the Three Cultures, as the failed, originary archive of the mestizo, Mexican nation. Any integration of this massacre into the national narrative would repeat the violent error of the Plaza itself by founding the promised reconciliation of divided social and ethnic forces on sacrificial grounds. It is in this light that Long reads Octavio Paz’s poem “Intermitencias del oeste” (3). After Tlatelolco: no blank page, no justification, no redemption, no community. Only stains. In like fashion, Long writes, Mendoza’s novel suggests that “the only thing born of the ‘painful birth of the mestizo nation’”—as the Plaza’s 1964 dedicatory plaque defines its own originary gesture—“is more death” (103).

The fourth chapter takes up Jorge Aguilar Mora’s 1979 *Si muero lejos de ti* as an ambivalent reflection of its own ambivalent times, those of the 70’s-era attempt to reconsolidate the state’s hegemony by way of its partial, strategic opening. Known as the *apertura*, this period led to increased freedom of expression for the intelligentsia and was characterized by an increasing recognition of the lack of national-economic autonomy that made conceivable the state’s promise of national

development and social justice. Set in the time of the student movement and its aftermath, the novel's main character, Yoris, goes to Europe in the employ of an art forger to steal a medieval painting and replace it with a fake. He does not fulfill this task, and returns home to see the apocalyptic destruction of Mexico City. According to Long, the novel underlines the traumatic nature of the Mexican state's attempt to establish a national community, which Aguilar Mora seems to understand on more or less Althusserian terms, thus staging "the incommensurability between the desire for a complete, coherent community, on the one hand, and the violence emerging at the limits of the integrative, totalizing ideology on the other" (122). After Tlatelolco, the state's claim on the social totality can only increasingly appear as violence itself.

The final chapter, on Héctor Aguilar Camín's 1986 *Morir en el golfo*, approaches the text through the lens of Jameson's writings on detective novels. "A compelling thriller," writes Long, "*Morir* organizes its plot around a search for the truth that reveals the rotten underbelly of Mexican power politics" (152). Aguilar Camín's novel closes the cycle of the totalizing novel, offering a parodic narration of the oil boom and bust of the late seventies and early eighties—which Long captures with both complexity and clarity—that served as the national-popular state's last chance of redemption. This chapter, like the others, makes clear that Long is not only a fine literary scholar, but possesses a broad historical knowledge that informs his readings without making them weakly historicist or sociological. Rather, the historical text is read here as yet another fiction of totality whose author, the Mexican national-popular state, was never quite able to bend to its designs.

A conclusion follows in which the author repeats the book's main lines of argumentation and extends them to the present, reflecting on the post-NAFTA emergence of the Neo-Zapatista guerillas/social movement and also the 2000 ouster of PRI from presidential power. The impact of these developments is registered, Long suggests, in recent phenomena such as the prominence of the chronicle and also the emergence of the so-called Crack movement, which "condemned what its members consider an unproductive obsession with national culture" (185). This obsession with

the obsession, Long suggests, in an insightful but all too brief appraisal of the Crack's ethos, shows that the representation of the nation "remains as a repressed task no longer addressed in positive terms" (185). The task persists, even if today's writers claim to resist its call. The remains of this totality, its ruins, still hold our imagination, even as lack, pure and simple.

Long's is an important, groundbreaking study that opens up not only the extremely tangled question of Mexican literature and the state, but of Mexican cultural production and politico-economic transition. *Fictions of Totality* gives us new tools for thinking not only about 20th-century Mexican narrative, but also of the Mexican present itself, a moment that despite all pronouncements about the victory of democracy is just as obscure and intractable as the past from which it seemed to present a rupture. Long takes on the responsibility, finally, of thinking of what Bartra once called the twin legacy of defeat and transition: "El año de 1968 nos ha dejado dos herencias: la derrota y la transición" ("Dos visiones del 68"). The transition he refers to is the slow, ongoing "democratic transition" in Mexico, which, as I mention above, crystallizes following the 2000 elections, when the right-wing PAN defeated the PRI, ushering in the presidency of Vicente Fox. But after *Fictions of Totality*, perhaps we can understand defeat and transition as but one legacy. Perhaps defeat is transition. And transition, as Long's study makes clear, is not "democratic transition" but rather the transition from national-popular, developmentalist state to neoliberal market that the PRI, 1968, the students themselves were all and are all somehow a part of. That is, the obscure end of the Mexican Revolution.

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