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978-1-107-09980-7 - A History of Mexican Literature

Edited by Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, Anna M. Nogar and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

*Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, Anna M. Nogar,  
and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra*

Over the past fifteen years, the field of Mexican literary and cultural studies has grown and evolved considerably in the English-language academy. Although the shared border between Mexico and the United States has always precipitated cultural exchange and academic interest, the study of Mexican literature was for many years eclipsed by Chicano studies or by the dominant interest in the Southern Cone within Latin American letters. In the past decade and a half, however, a new generation of scholars of Mexican literature and culture has achieved tenure-line positions in universities in the United States and Canada, most tellingly at institutions where the field had not previously been represented. This is also the case in Great Britain, where scholars of Mexican literature are found not only at flagship institutions such as Cambridge and Oxford, but also, and increasingly, at universities from Sussex to Ulster. The number of graduate students pursuing doctoral work in Mexican literature has increased exponentially, and the quantity and variety of courses on Mexico aimed at undergraduates has grown correspondingly. The field has become so active that Mexican literature is the sole subject of three yearly conferences in the United States (University of California-Santa Barbara, University of Texas at El Paso, and University of California-Irvine). The Modern Language Association has a stand-alone discussion group on Mexican literature with nearly two hundred members, and the Mexico section of the Latin American Studies Association is currently the largest entity within the institution, due to the significant membership of literary scholars. This has tendered an interest in the study of Mexico, one separate from the continental Latin American perspective, as new scholarship has emphasized many specific traits and cultural processes that distinguish Mexico from the rest of the Spanish-speaking world. These include the nature of its indigenous cultures; the status of Mexico City as a viceregal capital during the colonial period; the early triumph of liberalism in the cultural field of the nineteenth century; the experience of the French and U.S. invasions;

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the Mexican Revolution; and, perhaps most notably of all, the two periods (the Porfiriato and the PRI regime) that established unparalleled, decades-long intervals of stability that in turn allowed for the construction of unusually institutionalized structures of national literature. The mere fact that Mexico was the only major Latin American country that did not operate under a military regime in the twentieth century has generated critical questions around literature and culture that radically diverge from those addressed throughout the rest of Latin America. All things considered, it is clear that the growth of the Mexican literary and cultural field results from its increasing importance and from the need to study Mexican culture in its specificity.

*A History of Mexican Literature* emerges from this demand to study Mexican culture discretely. The previous attempt at creating a book on the subject – *Mexican Literature: A History* by David William Foster and others – was edited in 1994, and even though it remains in print, its readings predate the major paradigmatic changes in the study of Mexican literature that define today's field. Another attempt to write this history – the multivolume *Historia de la literatura mexicana desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días* – has managed to publish just three of its intended volumes between 1996 and 2011. Having only reached the eighteenth century so far, it remains many years away from completion, and it has not found wide circulation in the English-speaking world.

To be sure, the field in the United States and Great Britain has produced major works in subjects such as women's writing, masculinity, indigenous subjects, and intellectual history, to mention a few examples. It is also true that the Mexican academy is very active, and many scholars have produced landmark books on topics such as the avant-garde, the culture of the nineteenth century, and literary institutions. The problem, though, is that these contributions appear in many diverse editorial and academic contexts, and it is difficult to access in a consistent way the ideas and readings proposed by myriad authors. *A History of Mexican Literature* seeks to be a reference in the Mexican literary studies field for the years to come. It brings together a number of scholars from both the Mexican and the English-language academies, all recognized contributors to new critical paradigms whose work has decisively influenced conversations on their respective subjects. Although an exhaustive history is a utopian pursuit, and there will certainly be subjects not covered here that should be addressed by future analogous endeavors, this book is, at the time of publication, the most thorough and most complete history of Mexican literature on the English-language market.

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Perhaps the most direct way to describe the evolution of Mexican literary studies over the past twenty-five years, and the context within which *A History of Mexican Literature* is inscribed, is by emphasizing the gradual decline of Mexicanness and Mexican national identity as the main subjects of analysis, and the rise of new perspectives put forth by fields such as gender studies and intellectual history, among others. The critical framework defining national Mexican literature cannot be overlooked, but the picture of Mexican literature that emerges from today's scholarship is far more complex than it ever was under the hegemony of identity-based scholarship. A case in point: for many years, the discussion of literature written between 1920 and 1940 was centered on the contrast between the realist, telluric aesthetic of the novel of the Mexican Revolution and the cosmopolitan poetic work of the Contemporáneos group, which produced a paradigm based on the binary opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. A series of recent studies on the period shows that in fact the intellectual networks and aesthetic debates of the period were far more nuanced and complex, demonstrating that the actors involved with that binary – such as novelist of the revolution Mariano Azuela or Contemporáneos poet Xavier Villaurrutia – favored positions that related both to the construction of a national culture and to the idea of the right of the Mexican writer to be cosmopolitan. Furthermore, these studies indicate that other actors in these debates (such as the *estridentista* poets or the wide array of socialist and communist writers) played a far more prominent role than had previously been acknowledged by traditional scholarship. A similar critical evolution has occurred in the research on the colonial period, in which debates on Creole protonational consciousness and the Baroque dominated the conversation. Recent work has illustrated the complex role played by indigenous and mestizo intellectuals among colonial elites, as well as the importance of critically diversifying the literary map of colonial Mexico beyond its capital city. Thus, today's picture of the literature of the *colonia* has expanded across new understandings of gender and race, and beyond the core culture of the Baroque, to show a tenser and more hybrid cultural production. Within the new paradigms that define the study of Mexican literature in all periods, *A History of Mexican Literature* is designed to achieve five fundamental contributions to the field.

First, this is the first overview of Mexican literature in which Mexicanness, in all of its forms, is no longer the essential question. By relieving Mexican literature from the burden of relating to a clearly identifiable and homogeneous notion of national identity, these essays

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show, in an unprecedented way, the heterogeneous nature of literary production, as well as the frictions and productive conflicts that result from it. In this sense, the chapters contribute to an original mapping of Mexican literature across regions, social differences, and periods, recognizing the complexities of the cultural terrain rather than imposing a homogenizing understanding from above.

Second, a core group of essays in each section is concerned with the sustained study of institutional and intellectual networks across periods. By inviting selected contributors whose work has deepened our understanding of how literature operates at the material level, the book is the first history of Mexican literature that understands it not only as an aggregate of books and topics, but also as a complex social practice, one related to other cultural fields (such as art or cinema) and to different configurations of social power. Our book resists simplistic ideas of “official” or “resistant” literatures and shows canonical works, in some cases for the first time, in their multifaceted and complicated relationships to the social.

Third, some essays question the naturalized relationship of Mexican literature to the Spanish language and, as a result, expand its cartography in two significant directions. For one thing, they recognize literatures in indigenous languages, both pre-Columbian and contemporary, by building on the increasing knowledge that has developed on both over the past twenty-five years. And for another, this is the first comprehensive study of Mexican literature that acknowledges the literatures of Greater Mexico, produced by Mexican-Americans and Chicanos, as part of this history. By incorporating chapters pertaining to those two subjects, *A History of Mexican Literature* moves away from narrow understandings of Mexican literature as a solely national pursuit by including elements that exceed traditional boundaries of the national.

Fourth, *A History of Mexican Literature* is the first volume of its type to recognize the centrality of contributions from scholars in women’s, gender, and LGBTQ studies to the field of Mexican literature. Most of the chapters incorporate into the core literary discussion the many writers whose work has been unveiled and valorized by these scholars – from the women who shaped colonial letters to the emerging gay and lesbian voices in contemporary Mexican writing. The book also devotes two chapters specifically to women and LGBTQ writers, recognizing the long path to which diverse gender identities have been subjected in order to claim a place in a tradition that has been markedly phallogocentric and heavily defined by its male actors.

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Finally, and for all the reasons outlined above, *A History of Mexican Literature* constitutes a major reimagining of Mexican literary history, breaking with any kind of teleological accounting. Instead, this is the first history to understand Mexican literature as a cultural practice of relative autonomy, in the sense in which sociologist Pierre Bourdieu assigns the term. That is, *A History of Mexican Literature* privileges the processes inherent to the development of literary institutions and production in themselves, while recognizing the links between literary and historical processes. Therefore, the book resists a narrative that understands literary history as a progression strictly parallel to cultural history. Rather, it seeks to understand literature as a practice in constant dialogue with the social and as an endeavor that, in many instances, develops in a manner that does not necessarily intersect with the political sphere. *A History of Mexican Literature* is divided into three periods, encompassing preindependence, the interval between Mexican independence and the revolution, and post-revolution. Although this division does not challenge existing periodizations, it accurately reflects the way in which the study of Mexican literature remains divided in chronological fields. Nevertheless, the organization within the book's sections balances the temporal with the thematic, avoiding a simple sequential scheme by intercalating chronological development, with specific chapters addressing concerns that require study apart from the chronological narrative.

This volume begins with consideration of the literatures of the colonial period. It could be argued that a pre-Columbian literature chapter would be necessary, but we are taking the controversial stance that, in many cases, the corpus of pre-Columbian writing is heavily mediated by appropriations in the colonial era and by the ways in which modern and contemporary indigenous communities claim that past, so pre-Columbian culture is folded into the chapters dedicated to subjects in which this kind of engagement takes place. The volume's first section examines the trajectory of literary expression prior to Mexico's conquest by the Spanish in 1520 and its time as a colony of Spain until Mexico achieved independence in 1821. The section's texts and their readings not only comprise the background for Mexico's later literary production, but also, and more fundamentally, they reflect how New Spain conceived of itself from within and in the context of globalizing agendas and changing identities, both national and racial. The ideas and individuals that emerge in these early pieces – from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's baroque expressionism and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's chronicle of conquest to the Nahuatl-speaking and -writing intellectuals that predated them – establish the point of departure from which Mexican literature

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becomes a cognizant entity. Though often silenced for most of the nineteenth century as nation-building efforts sought to erase Spanish cultural and literary influences in favor of a more purely Mexican sensibility, the colonial period was intellectually fertile, determinative of later Mexican letters, and essential to understanding how Mexico would later conceive of race, religion, gender, and its very origins. In order to capture this expansive influence, the essays in this section examine works that span an extended time frame: from pre-Columbian Mexico into the Renaissance, Baroque, and Enlightenment periods, the events of which ultimately transitioned into and precipitated the formation of the nineteenth-century Mexican state. As colonial literary studies takes an approach more archivally – and historically – oriented than those of other periods, emphasizing, unearthing, and contextualizing new sources of information, some of the essays in this section treat subjects that are considered canonical, while others purposely expand the colonial Mexican knowledge base to locate newly rediscovered writers and subjects within established and evolving critical frameworks.

Studies of the New Spanish chronicle are the starting point for early scholarship of the Mexican colonial period, specifically examinations of what have been considered its canonical texts: Hernán Cortés's letters recounting the conquest of Mexico; his foot soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo's loquacious narrative of the same (providing fodder for centuries of narrative and icon formation); Francisco López de Gómara's official account of Mexico's early history; and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *relación* of his unexpected travel through the northern frontier area of New Spain. Studies of the *crónica* include examinations of pre-Columbian structures of knowledge, encompassing a diversity of texts, authors, and means of chronicle production, and include readings of indigenous codices such as the *Florentine Codex*, *Codex Boturini*, *Codex Mendoza*, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, and the *Ramírez Codex*.

Contemporary investigations into this genre expand the parameters of the chronicle as a genre, reconsider indigenous *crónica* production, and bring significant new voices to bear on the conversation – including those of indigenous authors Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin, Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, and Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, as well as mestizo author Domingo Muñoz Camargo. This scholarship demonstrates how the dynamics of domination and control (their assertion and subversion) are threaded through these early documents of the Mexican colonia. These readings reveal how even documents that have been understood as primarily artistic works (such as Bernardo de Balbuena's poetic laud of colonial Mexico City, *La grandeza mexicana*)

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served the ends of a growing colonial economy and the shifting power structures within it.

The life and works of the “*décima musa*” of colonial Mexican letters, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), are a perennial focus of literary examination – and with good reason. An intellectual genius and brilliant author, Sor Juana’s writing exhibits a female intellectual autonomy that strategically confronted and resisted the strictures of a restraining patriarchal society. *Primero sueño*, her master literary work, is emblematic of a body of work that spanned theater, poetry, essay, and epistles; her deft artistry never fails to engage. An iconic historical figure, Sor Juana remains a subject of scholarly and creative innovation today.

Pioneering archival research in the 1980s and earlier by Josefina Muriel, Asunción Lavrin, Stacey Schlau, and Electa Arenal uncovered previously disregarded texts written by other colonial women authors, primarily religious, including nuns. The publication of these long-overdue works and their authors’ biographies forged a growing area of study that compelled a rereckoning of women’s roles in colonial Mexican society. Current studies apply this questioning paradigm to other forms and venues of women’s contributions to New Spain’s cultural milieu. This volume offers numerous other articulations of female intellectual agency in colonial Mexico – including women’s ownership of printing presses and both pre- and postconquest writing by indigenous women – and specifically delineates the communities of reading for Spanish nun Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda’s writing in New Spain, accomplished through its publication and circulation in Mexico.

Circling out from these traditional core areas, novel topics and new approaches re-form our understanding of the literary influences that shaped colonial Mexico. Pioneered by Irving Leonard, José Toribio Medina, and others, the bibliographic study of printing and print culture takes the next step forward as current scholarship examines the act of reading itself, the press’s history in Mexico, and texts published in Nahuatl for indigenous consumers. The field of theater studies is the site of convergence for anthropological, historical, literary, and theatrical scholarship, embracing the notions of spectacle and performance. Here, the application of this approach not only unearths a myriad of dramatic presentations that influenced New Spanish observers, but also explains how performance and the bodily participation of actors reinforced colonizing narratives and hegemonic realities.

Transitioning through the end of the colonial era into Mexico’s nineteenth century, several key historical ideas stimulate literary analyses of the



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epoch. One of these is the shift in power structures resulting from the change of Spanish ruling houses from Habsburg to Bourbon in the eighteenth century. A second is the attendant growing sense of Mexican autonomy and self-determination that were eventually actualized as independence from Spain, expressed at times through Enlightenment ideology. Much examined from a historical perspective, understanding of these topics is deepened and expanded through literary examination. Attentive to how power and Creole identity were expressed through text, and how certain types of erudition were seen as proof of Creoles' superior local knowledge (and therefore implied ability to self-govern), this volume exposes the negotiations of informal and institutional control expressed in colonial documents. A culminating event resulting from Bourbon rule – the expulsion of the Jesuit order in 1767 – precipitated increasing disregard for peninsular structures of power in Mexico; the impact of the order's textual production, particularly as related to Enlightenment concepts, contributed to the fomentation of a national sensibility. In sum, the innovative essays in the first section of this volume evince the advancement of a dynamic and evolving field, balancing past discoveries and scholarship with new approaches and areas of study that cover over three hundred years of literary and cultural production.

The second section of this volume examines literature in a broad sense. It includes journalism, poetry, and all manner of knowledge disseminated through writing, including history, natural sciences, ruminations on the occult, and political propaganda. It encompasses a literary timeline beginning with the writings of Servando Teresa de Mier, in the crucial period leading up to Mexican independence (1810–1821); proceeding to 1910, when the regime of Porfirio Díaz comes to an end with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution; and culminating with the publication a year later of Mariano Azuela's *Andrés Pérez, maderista*. The section addresses the advent of new literary genres – a direct by-product of the laws on freedom of the press and of independence itself – which generated, in turn, an unprecedented degree of literary production in which history, law, and moralizing prose combined in scores of pamphlets and proclamations, even as the novel, the nineteenth century's premier genre, continued to advance. The dialogue between local conditions and European paradigms and, later, with American literature – romanticism, the *feuilleton*, and nonfiction works, from personal travel accounts to popular science texts – created an uneven but abundant outpouring of poetry, journalism, and fiction, made possible by the rise of print media as well as by the interventions of literary and learned societies. Henceforth, literature was to become the



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central medium through which subjective and intersubjective experiences became shareable articulations of locality, class, culture, and, ultimately, the nation.

The main contribution of the section in *A History of Mexican Literature* that focuses on the nineteenth century consists of defining its literature as fully entangled in the complex sociopolitical discussions that shaped independent Mexico – both as a product of these tensions and as an indispensable field in which nation-shaping projects, frequently utopian, were tested, contested, promoted, and fiercely rejected in verse, prose fiction, journalism, and a panoply of reflexive discourses, from oratory to dictionary entries, that shaped the formalization of literary criticism.

This definition of nineteenth-century Mexican literature is accomplished, firstly, by examining how emerging textual practices helped the insurgent effort, and then by concentrating on the characteristics of the new literary field that emerged out of independence from the colonial regime and its draconian restrictions on intellectual practice. This approach is not limited, as it has usually been, to the study of literature in terms of the emergence of new genres such as insurgent journalism, the printing of popular verse, and the first novel in Latin America; more importantly, it reads these genres in terms of the wider political contexts in which they appear, paying particular attention to the tensions produced during the last years of Bourbon colonial domination. Such factors permit an important reexamination of the work of the period's central figure, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi – a period marked by a richer context, within and without the *Diario de México*, involving the wide commercial success of broadsheets and the anxieties created by the new modes of printing and selling literature.

The period after independence, with its ensuing struggles over different forms of government and the practice of nationality, is carefully read, not only in terms of common topics such as the discussion of national literature at the Academia de Letrán, but also as the moment when criticism appears – a development nearly simultaneous with the first creative texts in pioneering literary journals. This allows us to examine, alongside the better-known liberal literature, the sorely undertheorized conservative writing that resists it, as well as how the two shape each other. The clash of these discourses takes several forms, occurring simultaneously in the political arena and in the creative one, often heralded by the very same men: Guillermo Prieto, Manuel Payno, Francisco Zarco, Ignacio Ramírez, José Justo Gómez de la Cortina, Lucas Alamán, and José María Luis Mora. One of this volume's strengths is that it chooses to dwell on the different aspects of this

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foundational tension using different artifacts, not solely on the ones readily relatable to traditional literary history.

In other words, this section is as much about cultural institutions as it is about the individuals who influenced them. The corporations explored in this section range from informal (and yet all-important) *tertulias*, both the ones convened by a group of very young writers in a modest room and the salons attended by more established and acclaimed intellectuals in opulent mansions, to the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua, the National Museum, the National Library and Archive, or the important Sociedad de Geografía y Estadística that survives to this day, and the several reincarnations of the National University. To understand the literature of the nineteenth century, we must not only study the printed page, but also delve into, for instance, the space devoted to novels in newspapers; how more and more sophisticated magazines emerged that were geared toward different sectors of readership; how journals, newspapers, and printing presses were financed; and what was translated and how those translations were read.

To name a case in point, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano is examined not solely as the author of predictably schematic pedagogical novels, but rather also as one of the century's great critical minds and as an editor capable of creating a cultural middle ground where the deeply divisive wounds of Archduke Maximilian's "empire" could find a neutral space to heal – and where, through the creation of a model of cultivated fraternity, the seeds of a shared national project are successfully sown. Altamirano's prowess is understood as part of the intellectual system likewise shaped by various lesser-known intellectuals, such as José Joaquín García Icazbalceta, José Fernando Ramírez, Francisco Pimentel, and Manuel Orozco y Berra.

In a similar vein, Mexican *modernista* poetry and chronicle, as well as the realist novel written as *modernismo* became hegemonic, are examined via their inextricable relationship with the unique cultural logic dictated by the politics of the Porfiriato – which is partially a product of the politics of conciliation that Altamirano had shaped. Thus, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Rafael Delgado, José López Portillo y Rojas, José Tomás de Cuéllar, Heriberto Frías, Salvador Díaz Mirón, and Amado Nervo are read in the light of an efficient state apparatus that ably controlled the press (and with it the livelihood of many writers of the time), as well as through the lens of positivism and its main proponent, Gabino Barreda.

The third section is dedicated to the literary production corresponding to the period from the Mexican Revolution and through the ensuing political domination of the Partido de la Revolución Institucional, or PRI (1910–2000). Besides covering the literary output of the twentieth