

RESEÑA

**Sophie Esch, Ed. *Central American Literatures as World Literature*.
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¡Felicitaciones! to Sophie Esch, editor of *Central American Literatures as World Literature* (2024), for so many reasons: editing by herself a collective volume of such magnitude, trying to include as many Central American literary productions in it, and specially for continuing the difficult endeavor of, as she asserts in her introduction, “bringing together two elusive categories: world literature and Central America” (1). Indeed, leaving those writers who have transcended to the international arena, like Rubén Darío, Miguel Ángel Asturias and Rigoberta Menchú, the path towards making Central American literatures part of the global literary scene has been and still is difficult. Nonetheless, Esch’s edited volume as part of the *Literatures as World Literature Series* (Bloomsbury Publishing) is another great project that exposes the world to Central American literatures of different genres and mostly from the 20th century.

In her editorial introduction, Esch alludes to “the invisibility and marginality of Central American lives and literatures” vis-à-vis “an overabundance of definitions and conceptualizations” of the term world literature (1). After an elucidating historical and theoretical account about the evolution of such term, she indicates that the writers of the thirteen articles included approach “key issues of world literary debates through the lens of Central American literature, meaning the literatures of Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, Belize and the Central American diasporas” (4); notwithstanding the lack of representation of Costa Rican, Belizean and Panamanian literatures (only one person from the English-speaking country who identifies as Mayan rather than Belizean). This speaks to the fact that, even when making a case for the regional literature at the world stage, it is a very hard enterprise to have all countries represented thematically, and impossible to get foreign and national specialists on the literature of each country. Esch also adds that “Central American literature is, of course, not a national literature; it is a regional literature” (6). I would argue that, while this is the attempt in the academia, the reality is that most of us in Central America, creative writers included, will be happy to identify ourselves as Central Americans, but not before claiming our nationalities or, in many cases, our ethnicities (e.g., Maya, Miskito and Garifuna).

While the volume’s organization might seem peculiar, I must observe that it is nonconforming to the usual colonial/colonized organizational practices. Such organization seeks to orient the readings in a thematic manner, namely modes, constellations and routes, as a way of thinking Central American literatures. Likewise uncommon, Esch did not direct the volume contributors towards a specified definition of world literature but rather challenged them “to clarify in their individual articles what they meant by world literature or how they engage with the term” (4). Kudos for this as well! I believe this is something that must be observed in each of the chapters written, interestingly, by scholars educated and currently active in the anglophone world: Canada, Jamaica, the United Kingdom and, mostly, the United States.

In the initial section, the articles revolve around modes of reading/writing Central American literatures. In the first chapter, “Reorienting the World: Reading Maya Literatures through *Xocom Balumil*,” Rita M. Palacios and Paul M. Worley indicate that Indigenous literatures are further marginalized than other Central American productions and propose to resituate these texts within the literary production process through the titular Mayan textile design representing the cosmos (19). They describe the design, explain this decolonized approach to Indigenous literatures, do situate four Mayan writers and their literary endeavors within their own worldviews, and conclude that *xocom balumil* helps us move “beyond literary hierarchies ... toward an understanding that all peoples are the ‘center’ of their own lives, stories and literary traditions” (35). In chapter two, Sophie Esch and Ignacio Sarmiento Panez present “World Literature in

Minor Key: The Central American Short Story.” They argue that this is a seldom studied literary genre often eclipsed by the novel. In their words,

[t]his chapter traces how [Augusto] Monterroso [Guatemalan] and [Claudia] Hernández [Salvadorean] employ the minor and small categories to their advantage and use the short story genre and the Central American experience and subject position to create literature of extraordinary appeal. (42)

Both writers, despite limitations in the reception of their stories, “embrace the universal and seemingly leave the isthmus behind, yet Central America is still there” (56). The following chapter shows a decisive aspect of internationalized literatures: translation. In “Central American *Testimonio* as World Literature: English Translation and the Canonization of a Genre,” Tamara de Inés Antón studies the consequences of translation strategies that reframe *testimonios* and the reception of Claribel Alegria’s *They Won’t Take Me Alive* (1987), and Rigoberta Menchú’s *Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman from Guatemala* (1984). The article concludes with the assertion that “the overall canonization of *testimonio* as a world literary genre ha[s] been necessarily mediated by translation” (77). For the last chapter of the first section, Magdalena Perkowska, in “When Does Central American Literature Become Global?: The Extraordinary (or Predictable?) Case of Eduardo Halfon,” starts by establishing that Central American literatures are at the periphery of the periphery, with a few exceptions. Then, Perkowska observes that some of Halfon’s stories in translation made it to international circles because of their Jewish-related topics still relevant in Europe and North America, and because they explore *autoficción* as a genre in vogue in France, Spain and Latin America. Perkowska also indicates that Halfon’s fictions do not challenge the dispositions of the majority in metropolitan centres (95).

The second section “is dedicated entirely to divergent cosmopolitan constellations” (12). In chapter five, “Cosmopolitanism and Disillusion in Rubén Darío,” Carlos F. Grigsby establishes Darío’s *cosmopolita* poetics to theorize “about the place of world literature in [the poet’s] writing and about the place of Darío’s writings in world literature” (104). Grigsby indicates that Darío utilized cosmopolitanism as both an analytical model to classify literature in Spanish and an expressive term in his own poetry (107). Grigsby also delves into Darío’s Parisian disillusion regarding the city’s industrial capitalism and marginalization of Latin American literature in the European continent. Next, Carolyn Fornoff’s “Álvaro Menen Desleal’s Speculative Planetary Imagination” introduces us to a writer whose speculative fiction contrast with the Generación Comprometida’s political and realist literature in El Salvador. Fornoff affirms that Menen Desleal’s science fiction takes a distance from local contexts to respond in a different and innovative manner to political authoritarianism and cultural marginalization, criticizing in the process neo-imperial aspirations and the belief that Salvadorean political interests weren’t related to geopolitical issues of the time. Fornoff asserts that the writer’s aesthetics’ “sardonic disenchantment with literature’s didactic responsibility anticipated trends in contemporary literature from the isthmus” (136). Contrasting with the previous chapter we are presented with “Between Internationalism and Cosmopolitanism: Roque Dalton and World Literature,” written by Yansi Pérez who looks at two works of the Salvadorean writer from the Communist concept of the “international” as “an imaginary affective-communal space that proposes alternative forms to understand, feel and imagine the common” (141). Under that lens, Pérez finds in the poem “Taberna” an imagined locus for everyone without a national or global place, for anyone who didn’t align with the Eastern and Western worlds of the time. Likewise, Pérez sees in Dalton’s *Las historias prohibidas de Pulgarcito* a reconceptualization of the poet’s community outside national constraints and beyond world narratives.

Chapter eight, "Rewriting the Militant Left: Untranslatability and Dissensus in Horacio Castellano Moya," by Tamara L. Mitchell, aims at examining the Honduran-Salvadorean writer's strategic intertextuality with renowned Central European authors as a conduit for placing Central American political views and literatures within international fora, and then demonstrates it through an analysis of the writer's novel *La diáspora* (1989). Mitchell posits that "Castellanos Moya's oeuvre does not just dialogue with authors of world literary status; his works undeniably belong to the world literary canon" (159) as his "corpus has proved cosmopolitan not only in content but also in translation and dissemination" (160). In the next chapter, Gloria Elizabeth Chacón's "Humberto Ak'abal's Pluri-verses: Indigeneity, Cosmolectics, and World Literature" endeavours to read the late Maya K'ich'e' poet's works as artistic creations that converse with the cosmos and as an invitation to think about different forms of connecting to and questioning cosmopolitan, global, literary market, translation and theoretical tenets. Chacón discusses Ak'abal's literary trajectory and asserts that his creative production is a literary system that contributes to world literature and represent relationships that offer and elicit solidarity.

The third section of the volume is titled "Routes," with four chapters. The tenth chapter belongs to Harris Feinsod who, in "Canal Zone Modernism: Cendrars, Walrond, and Stevens at the 'Suction Sea'," takes a different path than other chapters since it designates the Panama Canal "as a key figure in any history of modernist world literature at sea" (192), not to study Panamanian writers but to engage with works by Swiss, Jamaican, Nicaraguan and United States authors. While there are some historical information and an entertaining study on modernists writing, it is regrettably not to see a study on Panamanian literature dedicated to the Panama Canal, such as the *literatura canalera* that has seldom been approached by literary critical circles. Following is Tatiana Argüello's "Creole Poetics of the Ocean: Carlos Rigby, Ecological Thought, and Caribbean Diasporic Consciousness," which approaches an Afro-Nicaraguan author whose poems have gone unpublished due to regional marginalization but are nonetheless deserving of international recognition because of their connection to 1960s-Nicaraguan culture and politics through an "ecological poetry [that] imagines a new Nicaraguan identity and shares realities beyond the country's limits" (208). Argüello contends that Rigby's oceanic poetry belongs to global literary circles because of its multiculturalism, connection to surrealist, Rastafarian and indigenist thought and aesthetics, exchanges with other Caribbean literatures and the cultural realities of the Global South. In the next chapter, "US Central Americans Writing Global South Spaces," Andrew Bentley presents a study of Central America diasporic authors writing in English in the United States whose works "describe Global South spaces ... negatively shaped by military interventions and neoliberal globalization," positing that such "works achieve world literary standing in which a trans- or even postnational Central American canon is possible" (224). Bentley's listing of several of these works from different time periods, albeit specific to the 21st century, is both informative and productive as Bentley argues that "more recent literature points to new trends in US Central American writing that represents an even broader multiplicity of world experiences" (228). For the last chapter, "Caravaneros as Citizens of the World," Robert McKee Irwin makes a case for books like *Caravaneros* (2020) –a testimonial drama by the Honduran Douglas Oviedo detailing the 2018 on-foot migration that started in Honduras and ended in Tijuana– and *Sobrevivientes: ciudadanos del mundo* (2018) –a testimonial migration journey by Haitian Ustil Pascal Dubuisson whose 2016 voyage took him from Haiti to the Mexico-United States border via several Latin American countries. Irwin propounds that, since these authors write about the transnational context of migrating routes while in the migratory process, the abovementioned texts should be read intertextually as contributions to contemporary world literature (255-256).

Central American Literatures as World Literature is an excellent theoretical, thematic and literary criticism resource for educational and research purposes. The quality and breadth of the chapters in this collective volume testify, on the one hand, about the quality of much Central American literature, from canonized authors to recently published ones, in par with world literary productions; even though many canonical writers from Central America have been obviated. On the other hand, the volume attests the quality of already established and currently young literary critics in anglophone North America and the Commonwealth. Let's hope that this great English-written contribution to critical studies on Central American literatures makes such literatures more visible and moves them closer or less peripheral to world literature. As a *centroamericanista* I want to say to each contributor and especially to the editor: ¡Muchas gracias!

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