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The Trans-American Literature of Empire and Revolution, 1880–1938

During the period of 1880–1938, Latina/o writers such as José Martí, Manuel Zeno Gandía, Julia de Burgos, Salomón de la Selva, María Cristina Mena, Daniel Venegas, and William Carlos Williams addressed readers in English or Spanish and in print venues at various sites throughout the Americas, thereby constructing literary exchanges within what we have come to think of as a trans-American field. Following Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Anna Brickhouse, and José David Saldívar, we may define the field that contains these disparate writers of Latin American origin as “trans-American,” as the scope and anti-imperialist angle of their texts demand a term more partial and limited than “pan-American,” “transnational,” or “hemispheric” labels that have gained currency in U.S. American Studies. Moreover, the term “trans-American” requires attention to the process of *cultural translation* involved in writing about the United States in Spanish or about Mexico or Nicaragua in English, or in more conventionally moving across languages, or interpreting North America from a perspective informed by Latin American and Latina/o cultural formations. Transamerican Latina/o literature of this period thus provides a story of migratory routes rather than the root of a single nation and pushes Latina/o literary studies toward comparative methodologies that attend to language difference and multiple national cultures within the United States.

During the turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, the moving borders of empire and people migrating from Latin America to the United States set *latinidad* in motion, not only along the border that delineated the United States from Mexico after 1848 but also in the context of migration from the Hispanic Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America as a result of U.S. imperial intervention in the first decades of the twentieth century. While migratory sojourners have long figured as contributors to the formation and innovation of national literatures and especially to the emergence of *modernismo* in Spanish and of modernism in English, the recovery of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latina/o writing through the

Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project has made it possible to read foundational texts of multiple national traditions simultaneously as defining the parameters and preoccupations of Latina/o literature. The readership and print community for this literature may have deep roots in the early nineteenth century, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz has argued, but the trans-American scope gains new salience with the formal emergence of U.S. imperial annexations, occupations, and interventions.

In the period of exile and migration during the protracted struggle for national independence in the Hispanic Caribbean, and as Revolutionary armies of Francisco I. Madero, the anarchist Magón brothers, Emiliano Zapata, and Pancho Villa toppled the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, the dueling forces of empire and revolution became key themes and defining forces of Latina/o literature. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese empires lost their last vestiges of formal governance in the Americas, and the United States became an unquestionably imperial force. Only in the latter half of the twentieth century does the United States acknowledge its role as an empire, despite its earlier annexations of Mexico's northern half, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines and its earlier military occupations of Cuba, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Only in response to decolonization and civil rights movements – struggles that continue into the twenty-first century – does the United States begin to address the second-class racialized status of Caribbean, Mexican, and other Latin American migrants resident in the United States. In other words, the decolonial critique demanded by the social movements and cultural expression of the late twentieth century forces a recognition of the earlier writers as not simply national figures of Latin American literary history, but directly relevant to Latina/o literary history as well.

Writers such as María Cristina Mena, Salomón de la Selva, José Martí, Manuel Zeno Gandía, and William Carlos Williams, whose homeland directly experienced or would undergo occupation or annexation, underscored the way North American aesthetics, economics, and objects of consumption represented modernization as both bedazzling and bamboozling for the lands south of the U.S.-Mexico border. Martí attributed common cultural forms and interests to these homelands of the Latin American diaspora in the United States. If this period begins with a call to collective resistance to imperialism and self-affirmation in Martí's Spanish-language manifesto "Our America" (1891), Salomón de la Selva, in his 1918 English-language collection of poetry *Tropical Town*, condemns North American readers' "dirty" dollar and directly rejects U.S. influence by likening its economic interests as a "greenish leprosy" in "A Song for Wall Street" (75).

In contrast to leading anti-imperialists, such as philosopher William James who opposed U.S. imperialism because it would incorporate large numbers of undigestible or unmeltable brown bodies into the (fictively white) nation, these writers draw on a critique of European and Yankee privilege, of the miserable conditions of workers, of the vulnerability of women, and of the role of government in facilitating corrupt imperial economics, which each had observed firsthand from their vantage point as migrants “in the monster” or from the perspective of the colonized territory (Martí *Selected Writings* 347).

Trans-American texts informed by the prism of *latinidad* and steeped in the knowledge of Spanish and North American invasion and expansion speak out about the economic stratification and corruption fostered in many American nations during what Mark Twain called the Gilded Age. These texts offer a trenchant critique of the interconnected logic of extracting raw materials from Latin America, of exporting manufactured U.S. goods to Latin American markets, and of disciplining the bodies of Latina/o workers in the United States during border crossings. As these practices tended to render working-class Latina/o migrants more vulnerable to exploitation and more cautious about organizing to resist abuse, Latina/o literature introduces a critical consciousness by documenting the experiences of peasants in Puerto Rico or of Latina/o migrant workers to the United States as a way of warning readers about the dangers of adopting the United States as a model for political, aesthetic, or economic imitation.

Revolution and Empire in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Beyond: A Critique of “Imported Ideas” and the “Bad Copy”

Latina/o writers’ critique of the Spanish colonial regime and of the looming U.S. imperial presence suggests that an emergent nationalist and Latin Americanist imaginary often overlaps with heterogeneous Latina/o perspectives during this period. With the twinned shouts of *Lares* and *Yara* of 1868, struggles for national independence erupted in Puerto Rico and Cuba in the wake of Spain’s Glorious Revolution, threatening to remove these last and most valuable pearls from the crown of the Spanish empire in the Americas. What became the protracted and bloody Ten Years War in Cuba, along with the abolition of slavery in 1873 in Puerto Rico and in 1886 in Cuba, propelled waves of migrants, including many recently liberated from slavery, from the two remaining Spanish island colonies to U.S. cities along the Eastern seaboard, in particular South Florida and the New York City metropolitan area. At a time when immigrants poured out of ships at the feet of New York’s Statue of Liberty from an impoverished Europe, when Edison’s

electric lights began to flood city streets, and the White City of Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893 projected the United States as a pinnacle of civilization and modernity for fledgling Spanish American republics and for the world, Latina/o writing assumed the difficult task of critically translating the remarkable and sometimes terrifying experiences in *el norte* to readers in Latin America and the Caribbean, and eventually for readers in the United States.

Major Latina/o writers from the 1880–1938 period engage in the work of cultural translation and transculturation, terms that derives from postcolonial theory, anthropology, cultural studies, and translation studies, and refers to the work of interpretation – in two directions – across cultural and colonial difference, including languages, national borders, and other categorical differences, on terrain marked by the asymmetries of power that derive from empire and the displacement it provokes. Mary Louise Pratt, drawing on a tradition defined by Fernando Ortiz that revises a diffusionist model of unidirectional, European colonial influence, calls the spaces in which cultural translation takes place a “contact zone.” Although Pratt, and Angel Rama before her, used Ortiz's concept of transculturation to discuss Latin American literature and culture, the notion of movements of influence in two directions across borders illuminates thinking about the trans-American Latina/o literature of empire and revolution, when writers begin to translate the cultural implications of coloniality, slavery, and empire for readers on the both sides of the border. This translation of empire, I have suggested, contributes to the founding of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a minor literature, or a subordinate literary and cultural tradition within and in the process of subverting and remaking the dominant – in this case, U.S. – literature. By infiltrating and then rendering in literary form the imperialist norms they encountered in the north, Martí, de la Selva, Williams, Mena, Venegas, and others translate the cultures and critical perspectives of the occupied, the annexed, and the migrant for readers in Latin America or the United States, with an eye to change the policies and trajectory of an imperial United States. In this move, Latina/o writing establishes a connection between the racializing of multiethnic Latina/o subjects inside the United States and the discourses of race that undergird and apologize for U.S. imperial expansion.

Let us consider the response to these intersecting axes of racialization and imperialism, for example, in José Martí's March 25, 1889 Letter to the Editor of the *Evening Post* in New York, known as “Vindication of Cuba,” which he simultaneously published in Spanish as a pamphlet titled *Cuba y los Estados Unidos* along with translations of the articles to which his Letter to the Editor responds. This intervention in the debates about Cuba's

future makes plain the experiences of racism of Cubans resident in the United States, “where [the Cuban’s] ability is denied, his morality insulted, and his character despised” (“A Vindication of Cuba” 263). Martí’s letter suggests these acts of racial disdain do not merely reflect a U.S. attitude toward Cuban residents who, as Martí notes, “do not want to return” (267). This letter and pamphlet also expose how the discourse about Cubans in the United States, draws on stereotypes about the entire group as a “people of destitute vagrants or immoral pigmies ... an ‘effeminate’ people” to fuel and justify annexation of a neighboring island (264).

The trans-American literature of empire and revolution asserts Latino/a difference as present within the not yet fully recognized heterogeneity of North America, without losing sight of the trans-American implications of such racial discourses. In a key early example of this inscription of Latina/o difference, José Martí’s 1880 essay “Coney Island,” published initially in Bogotá, Colombia, defines his disillusionment with the promise of democratic political and economic opportunity that led many immigrants to the United States in the first place: “[H]owever much the first impressions may have gratified their senses, enamored their eyes and dazzled and befuddled their minds, the anguish of solitude possesses them in the end” (*Selected Writings* 92). The frustrated expectations of the “men [sic] of our Hispanoamerican peoples who live here” differentiate a group of migrants with distinct aesthetic and social criteria for defining cultural value or common sense (92). These subjects who perceive the spectacle of Coney Island with suspicion echo the ironic excess that the writer of the English-language “Impressions of America (By a Very Fresh Spaniard)” (1880) comments upon in the United States, where everyone merely “looks like his own master” (32, my emphasis). The North America of the 1880s pretended self-government in a society marked by extreme class differences, racial terror, and European-style imperial ambitions, and Latina/o writing comments on these contradictions.

The North American culture seems to these Latina/o writers to be preoccupied with material consumption and an unconvincing performance of unending happiness: the correspondent reporting on “Coney Island” (1880) ironically notes the “absolute absence of any visible sadness or poverty” (92–93). In the viciously Anglocentric environment in which Theodore Roosevelt associates “True Americanism” with speaking only English, a milieu that Martí describes in his diary as living “as if under a hail of blows” (287), the chronicler’s aestheticizing appeal to superior Latin American-influenced taste develops into a more radical position of public dissent in his chronicles about the massacre of Chinese miners in Wyoming in 1885, the state-sponsored killings of the Chicago anarchists in 1887, the mob violence in “The Lynching of the Italians” (1891), and the spectacular

savagery of white citizens lynching a black man in “A Town Sets a Black Man on Fire” (1892). Martí ends his career as a journalist reporting on U.S. culture with an unequivocal declaration on “The Truth about the United States” (1894), in which he asserts the “crude, unequal and decadent character of the United States, and the continual existence within it of all the violence, discords, immoralities and disorders of which the Hispanoamerican peoples are accused” (333). He proposes translation of U.S. journalism into Spanish as a means of unmasking this “crude” inequality in the United States for readers across the Americas.

This keen consciousness of the United States’ imperial or economic ambitions, not only for the Caribbean and South America but also with respect to Mexico, tempers self-critique with a call to action. In the opening lines of “Our America” published in New York and in Mexico, when Martí addresses the “prideful villager,” he alludes to the Latin American leaders in their respective countries, who assembled at the invitation of the U.S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine for the first Pan-American conference in 1889–90. Martí observes the persistence of coloniality in the tendency among his elite interlocutors to attune themselves more to the fashions and ideas of Paris, Madrid, or New York than to ideas emerging from the indigenous, African-descended, and *mestizo* majorities of their nations: “America ... endures the weary task of reconciling the discordant and hostile elements it inherited from its perverse, despotic colonizer with the imported forms and ideas that have in their lack of local reality, delayed the advent of a logical form of government” (292). The Mexican American writer María Cristina Mena repeats this exhortation to draw on the cultural forms and knowledge of the people who make up the nation’s majority in her “My Protocol for our Sister Americas” (1943): “[O]ne can’t very well ignore the PEOPLE – the masses – who are the Nation” (“Protocol” 358). Martí, de la Selva, Williams, and Zeno Gandía similarly affirm the creative self-definition of the majorities of the American nations, an idea that will have radical implications in a few decades when non-Hispanic whites are projected to become a minority in the United States. These Latina/o writers demand ideas and forms that embrace and articulate the interests of the working people of color majority, for only this perspective will offer a viable program for decolonization.

This call to creative self-affirmation and decolonization interestingly repeats itself in the language of the Filipino Revolutionary José Rizal, who published his philosophical Spanish-language text *El Filibusterismo* in 1891, the same year Martí published “Our America.” Rizal’s romantic nationalist turned cut-throat saboteur of the colonial system, Simoun, challenges Basilio to see the limitations of liberal appeals for Hispanization or reform

within the Spanish system: “That’s just the road to becoming a bad copy” (55). Simoun’s radical and militant vision, like that of Martí after the founding of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892, aims to strike at the roots of all vestiges of coloniality. Filipino revolutionaries, with whom Martí had contact during his last years, found inspiration in the Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionary imaginaries. Reading Rizal together with Martí reveals the pernicious and trenchant legacy of the Spanish system, in which any expression of independent thinking was condemned by the Spanish authorities as *filibusterismo*, or subversion.

The Question of Antiracism in Hispanic Caribbean Writing

This climate of race-based exclusion fostered by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896, and the rise of lynching in this period enforced the stark racial and class hierarchies that characterize post-slavery societies such as the United States. In this context, Martí’s controversial antiracist declaration that “there is no race hatred, because there are no races,” diverges radically from the prevailing nineteenth-century tradition of scientific racism. In Martí’s essays addressed to the revolutionary movement and the migrant community or to Latin American leaders, such as “With all and for the Good of All,” “My Race,” or “Our America,” the emergence of the nation must redress centuries of racism, for racism and colonialism are intertwined. The notion that, by ending slavery and the colonial regime, it would be possible and necessary to put an end to centuries of racialization, coupled with the crucial role of black leadership by Antonio Maceo and others in positions of authority in the revolutionary forces, convinced many Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent to risk their lives fighting against Spanish colonialism. But this view also suggests a naïve misconception of how easy it would be to disentangle institutions and psyches from the entrenched legacies of racial hierarchy and enslavement. As Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal has pointed out, the nationalist program did not eliminate racism in the new Cuban republic, and Martí’s premature death does not permit us to learn whether he would have endorsed the struggle of the Partido Independiente de Color, the suppression of which in 1912 resulted in the Cuban army’s massacre of 3,000–4,000 who took up arms to oppose a law that prohibited the creation of political organizations based on racial differences. More generally, the resistance fighters of 1912 sought to challenge the marginalization of black Cubans in a country that many black Cubans and Puerto Ricans had sacrificed their lives to create.

Among those Puerto Ricans who initially joined the independence movement was Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, who supported anticolonialism to

the extent that he was among the signatories of the documents that led to the creation of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano. However, after the annexation of Puerto Rico and the dismantlement of racially mixed associations such as the Union Maceo-Martí, and in light of the racism that continued more virulent than ever in Cuba and the United States, Schomburg turned fully to the project of building the largest archive of books by and about people of African descent in the Americas. This shift in his attention, his adoption of an English spelling of his name for certain periods of his life, and his composition of his major essays in English – including “The Negro Digs up his Past,” which appeared in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925) – perhaps suggests his disillusionment with the abiding racism in the anticolonial project despite Martí’s exhortations, or perhaps, due to the insufficiently acknowledged racism persistent in Cuban nationalism just as it was created, with an official silence about race, as Ada Ferrer has suggested. Lisa Sánchez González, Frances Negrón Muntaner, and Antonio López argue that Schomburg’s affiliation with blackness should be read as a redefinition of *latinidad* as always-already black.

Popular Collective Action as a Way out of Coloniality in Zeno Gandía’s *The Pond*

Much as “Our America” asks the *criollo* elite to recognize their dependency on, rather than authority over, the peasants or working people of African and indigenous descent whom they claimed to represent, Manuel Zeno Gandía’s novel *The Pond* (*La Charca*) brings into focus what Juan Flores has called the “interlocking worlds” of the 1894 novel’s two main protagonists, the coffee plantation owner Juan del Salto and the poor peasant girl Silvina (Flores, “Introduction” 13). The axis of asymmetry here does not address the hierarchical structures of race or imperialism that we might expect, as Zeno Gandía witnessed emancipation firsthand, which his own slave-owning father vehemently opposed. Zeno Gandía, a medical doctor by training, sidesteps the question of race during the 1887 *compontes*, when Afro–Puerto Ricans bore the brunt of the state’s suppression of an emergent liberal autonomist movement for reform, as Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof has shown. This repression of artisans of color – coincident with the massive mobilizations for an eight-hour day in the United States, led by the Spanish-speaking mixed-race anarchist Lucy Parsons – in turn transformed Sotero Figueroa and his adopted son Francisco González Marín, and perhaps also Martí, into revolutionaries, for all joined and led militant organizations in New York in the wake of the *compontes* and the Haymarket anarchist hangings. The unresolved antagonism that defines the dramatic

buildup of *The Pond* builds on the tensions between landowners and workers, or between the privileged male landowners and sexually abused peasant women who lived and worked on del Salto's coffee plantation.

Zeno Gandía's text critically assesses the way the culture of colonialism prevented the oppressed coffee plantation workers and the women who depended on them from denouncing abuses they suffered or claiming their rights as citizens and human beings. The emergent social force of "el negocio" – that is, the unscrupulous business dealings, usury, and murder associated with the unsympathetic characters Andújar, Galante, Gaspar, and Deblás, two of whom launch an import-export business by the end of the novel – leads the reader to suspect that U.S. capitalist modernity on the island's horizon would merely amplify these abusive practices.

The more radical stance of later Puerto Ricans writers who emigrated to New York after the Jones-Shafroth act imposed U.S. citizenship in 1917, including Jesus Colón, Bernardo Vega, and Julia de Burgos, locates the hope to end the gridlock of these interlocking forces with the creativity of working people. The poetic persona of "To Julia de Burgos" rebels against the gendered, consumerist, elite-identified "lady" that her colonized society expected her to be, and instead situates herself among the masses who do break into protest with torches in hand. De Burgos's poetry, journalism, and memoirs explicitly endorse socialism and anti-imperialism, all while documenting the life of the Puerto Rican diaspora in relation to the broader formation of *Pueblos Hispanos*, which is also the title of Juan Antonio Corretjer's newspaper where Julia de Burgos and many others published short essays in Spanish that affirm an ongoing connection between the Puerto Rican diaspora and peoples throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Julia de Burgos launched her career as the most important Puerto Rican poet with her collection, *Poema en Veinte Surcos/Poems in Twenty Furrows*, in 1938, just prior to her movement away from Puerto Rico to New York via Cuba.¹ Juan Flores asks us to consider Zeno Gandía and Julia de Burgos as major writers of an American literary tradition, and Julia de Burgos's remarkable experiments with a divided poetic persona and the use of the authorial name as a third person in her poems make major contributions to poetics of the early twentieth century.

Zeno Gandía's *The Pond* – like Daniel Venegas's novel *Don Chipote* and Maria Cristina Mena's stories to which we will shortly turn – makes a vital contribution to this phase of Latina/o writing by depicting the popular culture of the peasants as offering the most effective and creative response to coloniality on the island. Two scenes in the novel depict the solidarity and collective action of the peasants as a source of inspiration for the paralyzed Juan del Salto and his overseer, Montesa. First, having been whipped the

previous day, Inés Marcante, a worker on the plantation, heroically rescues a fourteen-year-old boy from drowning when the river in their village floods. Second, after Gaspar steals the savings of the elderly and impoverished Marta, the workers on the plantation draw on the popular cultural riches of island to express their anxious desire for an alternative to the capitalist prescriptions of hoarding and hard work. Both scenes demonstrate the view that the way out of the stench and stagnancy of the miasma, or *charca*, of coloniality will derive from popular, collective practice and working-class celebrations of life:

The couples revolved around the hall like the links of a chain pump. . . . The billowing wave of humanity stirred incessantly, knee striking knee, each couple sharing the same breath, feeling at every instant collisions of tender delicacy and the friction of short hair tingling against foreheads, creating currents of restless love – of desires mortified by the nearness of the unattainable object that tantalized them – the warm soft desire of a life filled with anxiety for pleasure and happiness (107).

With the force of a pump, the dancers' bodies work together to extract from the difficult conditions of their lives a now globally influential cultural form of music and dance. Indeed, rhythms of Puerto Rican and Cuban music that continue to tropicalize the urban landscape of the United States, to reference Guillermo Cotto-Thorner's metaphor, derive from traditions on the islands of making music influenced by African drums and indigenous percussion instruments such as the *güiro* (which Zeno Gandía specifically refers in this section). Unlike the solitary or elite academic reflections of Juan del Salto, the peasants who work for him collaborate to give original form to their collective future. Already the narrator evokes the power of this cultural practice to engender pride and affirmation of Puerto Rican-ness in the face of colonialism upon leaving the island: "away from home, it [the music] was touching . . . swelling one with pride for having been born there" (108).

Latina/o Perspectives on the American Dream Myth

Literature by writers born in Latin America who migrated to the United States and did not affiliate culturally and politically presents a serious exception to a long-standing and celebrated tradition of ethnic immigrant writing that portrays the United States as the land of opportunity and an exemplary nation where it is possible to experience freedom and progress unavailable in the migrants' places of origin. Daniel Venegas's novel of Mexican migration to the United States offers an exemplary definition of the genre of "Hispanic immigrant literature," which according to Nicolás Kanellos

deconstructs the American Dream myth by documenting the lack of upward mobility for Latina/o workers.

Like Zeno Gandía's *The Pond*, Venegas's *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote, o Cuando los pericos mamen* (*Don Chipote, Or When Parrots Breast-Feed*) affirms the creative power of popular working-class culture, in a kind of writing that formally calls attention to its intended working-class audience of "Chicana/os" in Los Angeles (a term that makes an early appearance in this text). With vernacular language and broad dialect, Venegas's 1928 novel uses humor to empower working-class migrants to criticize, survive, and overcome the myriad injustices that they faced in the United States. Whereas Zeno Gandía's or Martí's Spanish-language texts, although opposed to a certain kind of European-identified elite intellectual, speak from a position distinct and separate from the peasants, working classes, and people of color whom they charged the self-critical intellectuals – like themselves – to represent or govern with more justice, Venegas's narrator affects the position of an organic intellectual, who uses the working-class dialect as an artistic resource to approach the unrepresentable predicament of Chicana/o migrants. Despite his abandonment of Doña Chipota and their children, Don Chipote gains the reader's sympathy by hard work, unlike the despicable Pitacio, who after sojourning in the United States returned to the Chipote's village to induce Don Chipote to migrate *al Norte* by misrepresenting it as a fabulous land of opportunity: thus the title and narrator of Venegas's novel suggests that Mexican migrants to the United States will achieve the wealth and equal status associated with the American dream, "when parrots breastfeed," which is to say, never.

In this text originally written in Spanish, the narrator of *Don Chipote* criticizes the tendency of Mexicans who elect upon arrival in the United States to assimilate and forget their cultural origins and their first language.² Among the horrors that Mexicans face upon migrating, Venegas's narrator mentions specifically the system of debt peonage by which bosses and suppliers so indebted migrants that, even after working incredibly long hours, they found themselves with more debt than earnings at the end of the season. The narrator comments with shock on U.S. citizens' lack of concern about the violation of Chicana/o labor rights, and reprimands established Chicana/os for their lack of solidarity with – or worse, their artful preying upon – the vulnerability of those "greenhorns" or "cholos" who have recently arrived (51). The narrator complains about reductive stereotypes of Mexicans as "drunken tramps" and *charros*, in the popular theater productions frequented by Don Chipote in Los Angeles, and where working migrants like Don Chipote and Venegas participated actively in the audience, or, as in Venegas's case, as a playwright (117).³

Venegas's novel portrays the routes and rituals of migration upon traveling between the United States and Mexico, and thus suggests the communication and ongoing connections among people in Mexico and migrants of Mexican origin resident in the North. Moreover, the novel assumes a trans-American readership of potential migrants or of current or past migrants now resident in the United States. The novel portrays the dehumanization that migrant subjects experienced in crossing the border, laboring in the fields, dealing with the judicial system or other public institutions, and even in negotiating social interactions, such as the interactions Don Chipote has with a flapper upon whom he lavishes all of his attention and funds, at least until Doña Chipota finds her errant husband in Los Angeles.

This novel's account of the forced derobing and application of pesticides in the shower scene suggests the text's canniness about the disciplining and vulnerability of the bodies of migrants from Mexico during and after border crossing, a humiliating ritual which renders migrants less able to respond to unjust working conditions or to the abuses of the suppliers and bosses. In chapter four, the narrator details the physical process of crossing the border from Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, which begins with the border officer failing to understand anything Don Chipote says, and Don Chipote unable to understand the officer. At this impasse in verbal communication, the *gringo* guard forces Don Chipote "into a room where his fellow countrymen were taking off their clothes to enter the shower" (35). The humor of this scene plays simultaneously on the audience's own recollections and survival of this collective delousing, and in the heterosexual normativity that the reader is invited to perform by laughing at Don Chipote who "actually takes pleasure in the first humiliation that the *gringo* forces on Mexican immigrants!" (35)⁴ The novel invites a trans-American readership of Greater Mexico to develop a critical consciousness about these abuses and calls for solidarity with both Don Chipote and Doña Chipota, who eventually return to their homestead in Mexico and begin their lives again, having gained nothing except the consciousness of the impossibility of return.

In its recursive screening of the same scenes of "peace and calm" back in the Chipotes's Mexican village, where Don Chipote continues to "poke at his oxens' asses" just as he did in the opening scenes, the book's epilogue characterizes the transformation the migrant's consciousness. Now Don Chipote dreams his life as if he were the protagonist of a film, with a modernist self-reflexivity: "And in his dreams he saw bitter adventures, in which he had played the protagonist, unwind like a movie reel, sweetened by the remembrance of his flapper's love" (160). This screen-memory simultaneously springs from his unconscious as an object of obsessive desire. At the same time it triggers an awareness of the real – that is, the long history

of harsh difficulties of Latina/o migrants – and of the imaginary narratives and representations of that history. Because it unwinds like a movie reel, the memory both captivates the audience and distorts the audience's memory of the bitter adventures in the North.⁵

**Latina/o Modernism of María Cristina Mena,
Salomón de la Selva, and William Carlos Williams**

Writers such as the relocated Mexican María Cristina Mena and the Nicaraguan Salomón de la Selva – who immigrated to the United States as a child and began to compose stories or poetry in English – articulate a critical distance from the ideology of the American dream, and thus present a challenge to Kanellos's division of Latina/o literature into immigrant Spanish and "native" English categories. Whereas Kanellos limits the interrogation of the American Dream to immigrant texts in Spanish, and posits that the children of immigrants who write in English usually reinforce and celebrate the promise associated with life in the United States (3), these texts invite us to consider other factors besides language, generation, or migratory status – such as class, relationship of the homeland to the empire, political critique, and gender – in shaping English-language subjectivities that dismantle the American dream and the United States as model.

As migrants or children of migrants, Salomón de la Selva, María Cristina Mena and William Carlos Williams, all of whom published in English, go beyond affirmation or rejection of the dominant culture to demand and engage in a redefinition of the literary tradition and culture of the United States. These early twentieth-century pioneers of Latina/o modernism in English write against the American grain (as Kutzinski suggests with respect to Williams) in order to affirm the sovereignty and dignity of their homelands that the United States must learn to respect and to invent in English-language literary texts "a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit" (Williams *Autobiography* 176). Thus drawing on a simultaneously local, multilingual, and trans-American cultural archive, these Latina/o writers define a mode of modernist poetry or prose that articulates a Latina/o difference rather than imitating European, Yankee, or other Old World traditions. This orientation seems to directly echo Martí's affirmation of "our wine," and "our Greeks," or the mestizo American culture over reheated leftovers of coloniality.

The task of translation between Mexico or Nicaragua and the United States provided María Cristina Mena and Salomón de la Selva with the materials that they transformed into prose and poetry in their twenties, after arriving in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century at

age fourteen and eleven, respectively. While Mena had already developed fluency in Spanish, English, French, and Italian thanks to her elite upbringing in Mexico, and de la Selva had earned a scholarship from the Nicaraguan congress to study English, both spent formative years in the United States and began to convey a Latina/o critical distance from the dominant culture of their country of residence. Their bodies of work (Mena's entirely in English and de la Selva's mostly in Spanish, after his English-language debut) bear the marks of the revolutionary upheaval in their countries where the working class and peasant masses sought to transform the extreme class and racial hierarchies of Central America and Mexico. Mena's upper-class parents sent her to the United States to escape the unrest leading up to the 1910 revolution, and she takes the revolution as a theme in her stories, "The Sorcerer and General Bisco" and "A Son of the Tropics," in which Carmelita and Tula elect to become *soldaderas* in the revolution. De la Selva witnesses firsthand as a soldier in the British military the massive carnage of World War I, but moreover he directly engages in intellectual and activist resistance to U.S. occupations of Nicaragua. The so-called "Banana Wars" began in 1910 while de la Selva was still in the United States, but they cumulated with Augusto César Sandino's armed revolution from 1927 to 1933, and de la Selva became one of Sandino's most outspoken supporters during his residence in Mexico after returning from England, and while writing for working-class newspapers in Panama and Nicaragua. Much of de la Selva's prose has appeared in a three-volume anthology; current translation and scholarship activity suggest that de la Selva's stature as a Nicaraguan, a Latin American, and a Latino writer will continue to grow.

Mena, de la Selva, and William Carlos Williams circulated in cosmopolitan literary worlds, to which they contributed by experimenting not primarily with form, but with a dissenting sensibility and a new mode of poetic language. De la Selva knew and translated Rubén Darío – the leading spokesperson of the movement that came to be known as *modernism* – into English; he became closely acquainted with Edna St. Vincent Millay when he was teaching at Williams College, and his English-language poetry reveals their shared adherence to classic lyrical forms while introducing a startlingly intimate poetic persona. De la Selva knew Williams's college interlocutor Ezra Pound and Anglophone modernism through contact in London after World War I, which helps explain the more radical formal experiments of his Spanish-language text *El Soldado Desconocido* (The Unknown Soldier) of 1922, which featured Diego Rivera's artwork on the cover and which has not yet appeared in English, like most of de la Selva's later work. Similarly, Mena was married to Australian playwright and journalist Henry Kellett Chambers, and exchanged correspondence and visits with D. H. Lawrence

and Aldous Huxley. T. S. Eliot selected Mena's story, "John of God, the Water-Carrier," for reprinting in *The Monthly Criterion*, after which it was chosen for *The Best Short Stories of 1928*.

Both Mena and de la Selva assumed the role of cultural translators with vehemence and dissented from the dominant conceptions of their home countries. De la Selva openly interrogated U.S. views of Nicaragua as a banana republic that existed for North American bankers and capitalists to exploit. Mena's stories in mainstream magazines such as *The Century*, *Cosmopolitan*, *American Magazine and Household*, educate Anglophone readers by teaching them not only to pronounce the names of the Aztec God of War, Huitzilopochtli and his mother, Cuatlicue – "Weet-zee-lo-potchtee," by explaining pronunciation, "Kwaht-lee-quay, with the accent on the 'lee'," in her "Birth of the God of War" – but also to consider as the narrator does, that Cuatlicue, mother of the Aztecs' "protector-genius" who was destined to fame in key works of twentieth-century Chicana feminism, led a more "charming" life than that lived by Virgin Mary, who "remained on this sad earth as the wife of a carpenter" (69).

Mena asks her Anglo readers to compare cosmologies and recognize Aztec equality if not superiority, much as she critically assesses the implications of "a spirit named 'modern improvement,'" from the angle of the indigenous working-class Mexican. "John of God the Water Carrier" invites a critique of the introduction of automated U.S. pumps from insofar as they would displace – and offer no real benefit – to the titular character Juan de Dios, who delivered water to people's homes. In "The Gold Vanity Set," her readers encounter a familiar white tourist snapping photographs of "Indians" as part of a frenzy of exotic consumption, but as told through the eyes of the tall, slender, strong, rebellious, and beautiful Petra, whose picture the white tourist has just taken. Mena counteracted stereotypical portrait of Mexicans as exotic, backward, and in need of U.S.-styled modernization that littered the pages of *The Century Magazine* and the minds of its readers.

Living in the interstices of cultures, and translating back and forth between the imperial center and peripheral Central America and the Caribbean, Latina/o writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century innovated the national literatures of the United States, Nicaragua, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and beyond, simultaneously creating landmarks of a Latina/o literary tradition that challenges the scope and significance of the singular national, monolingual traditions. Lisa Sánchez González's recontextualization of William Carlos Williams as part of the Puerto Rican diaspora in light of his anticolonial activism and the influence of his Puerto Rican mother, Elena Hoheb, invites us to consider this canonical writer in relation to other Latina/o writers who engaged modernism. In *Yes Mrs. Williams*,

Williams affirms that the home in which he grew was a Spanish-speaking household. He copies into this text his mother's most hermetic and humorous comments and her constant movement back and forth between Spanish and French. Here the reader encounters Elena's spellbinding version of Corneille's *Horace*, ending in the famous curse of the empire: "Rome enfin que je hais!" According to Williams, "All her contempt and even hatred that we had earned in this benighted country [i.e., the United States] through the years was contained in that anathema" (*Yes* 18). This Latina/o critique of U.S. imperialism informs his lack of interest in the turn to Europe for poetic inspiration, in contrast to his friend Ezra Pound and many others modernists who moved to Europe to become expatriates. Like Martí in his last and most widely read poetry collection, *Versos sencillos*, Williams privileges the common voice, and specifically the local working-class idiom of Paterson, New Jersey. Williams's critique of empire becomes undeniable as his archival excavation of early American history – *In the American Grain* – confronts his readers with the "orgy of blood" brought about by European colonists to the Americas. The "we" of those who arrived (in which he includes himself) is ironically excoriated as "'heavenly m[e]n' bent on murder" (*In the American Grain* 41).

While turning away from "imported" Yankee and European ideas, these Latina/o writers participated in the definition of futurity and a redefinition of the modern forms of poetry and of the social, there and here, in light of the periphery's transculturation of the center. David Colón, in his evocation of Salomón de la Selva's "Deep Translation and Subversive Formalism," notes the poet's aspiration to stage the reversal whereby the peripheral or provincial speaks to and defines a "co-experience" of distinct Americas (27) nonetheless reveals that "my people and your people are the same" (*Tropical Town* 84). De la Selva articulates this desire by inviting his readers to view "his" Nicaragua, so that the reader in the North must see that her humanity and indeed her future is caught up with his Nicaragua's struggle, survival, and difference. De la Selva, in his philosophical meditation on the historical production of our common trans-American present in the closing poem of *Tropical Town and Other Poems*, affirms Martí's declaration of the universal sources and interlocutors for his *Versos sencillos*: "Yo vengo de todas partes, y hacia todas partes voy" [No boundaries bind my heart/ I belong to every land] (20–21). Emblematic of the trans-American literature of empire and revolution we have examined here, de la Selva's poem "Of Time and Song" invites the reader to think across the linguistic and other borders that render our perceptions at once untranslatable, and yet necessarily in communication: "Thus, on and on/ all days are somehow linked, all songs are one" (*Tropical Town* 161).

Notes

- 1 See Vanessa Pérez Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon*.
- 2 See my translation of Martí's critique of Latin American immigrants who quickly adopted U.S. citizenship, spoke in the language of power and cultural capital, English, and attempted to hide the "last drops of his mother's milk" that lingered as a telltale sign of their foreign origin and their mother tongue in "Thinking Across, Infiltration and Transculturation," 18.
- 3 Kanellos's research has revealed that Venegas created many musical comedies for blue-collar audiences, but also works of drama in which renowned Mexican actress Virginia Fábregas acted.
- 4 I am grateful to my students and to Andrew Lester in particular, whose work on this text illuminated the forbidden homoerotics of this shower scene and of other homosocial spaces in the novel.
- 5 I am indebted to John Morán González for calling my attention to this film metaphor and its implications.

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