

Saucedo Lastra, Fernando. *México en la obra de Roberto Bolaño. Memoria y territorio*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015. 204 pp.

There are probably as many ways to approach Roberto Bolaño's work as there are novels, short stories, essays, and poems in his oeuvre. In general, scholarship about Bolaño's writing falls into one or more of three categories: to consider a text by Bolaño in order to write about a broader theme, such as writing, violence, the nature of evil, adolescence, or the Latin American left; to conduct a close reading of a single text in order to elucidate its meaning; or to devise a way of connecting several of Bolaño's texts in order to identify traits that define and unite them. This final approach has perhaps the most potential to benefit Bolaño scholars and general readers alike while it also raises the risks of inadvertently highlighting omitted texts and simplifying the category employed to characterize an entire body of work.

In *México en la obra de Roberto Bolaño*, Fernando Saucedo Lastra takes the third approach, and he organizes his book around the self-evident but complicated topic of how Bolaño represents Mexico, a country that significantly affected Bolaño's life and writing. Saucedo Lastra identifies instances of Mexico as a topic in Bolaño's prose fiction, starting with *La senda de los elefantes* (1984) (better known by its second title, *Monsieur Pain* [1999]) and ending with *2666* (2004). He aims to explain what Mexico denotes, connotes, and symbolizes in the context of each separate text and as the product of connections among texts, and he proceeds in a generally teleological fashion. Highlighting the importance of Bolaño's departure from Mexico in 1977, when the author was still a young man, Saucedo Lastra's book argues that a return to Mexico in Bolaño's work evolves and intensifies over the years, appearing especially clearly and substantially in the longest and most complicated novels, *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) and *2666*.

Saucedo Lastra concludes that Mexico tends to be associated in Bolaño's work with memory, nostalgia, violence, mystery, and myth. The development of this conclusion succeeds and fails along lines that correspond to the difficulties associated with approaching an author's entire work, mentioned above. Saucedo Lastra's readings of specific texts are often very good but the comprehensive category of Mexico his conclusion sustains, ends up being somewhat disappointing for being insufficiently nuanced and for failing to explain why some texts were either insufficiently considered or omitted.

Especially good are Saucedo Lastra's convincing and detailed readings of *Detectives* and *2666*. Regarding the former, he explains how this novel portrays the instability of time and space, a topic particularly relevant to his discussion of the palimpsest that maps out the nomadic lives and legacies of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. Saucedo Lastra's very careful and perceptive analysis of *2666* will serve as an exceptionally thorough guide for scholars because of its clear and comprehensive explication of the novel's structure. Also helpful is the taxonomy of Mexico as it appears in Bolaño's work, which Saucedo Lastra develops over the course of the book, a taxonomy that will no doubt be a good starting point for further investigations into the topic of how Bolaño represents Mexico. Overall, Saucedo Lastra's book

presents its readers with a well-written, clearly organized, and comprehensive analysis of a topic crucial for understanding Bolaño's work and life.

One of the pitfalls of identifying a unifying theme for understanding a body of work as substantial as Bolaño's is the risk of leaving something out. While I would not expect total comprehensiveness, the omission of a sustained discussion of *Amuleto* (1999), to my mind one of the best novels there is about the events of 1968 in Mexico, is an odd choice. A reading of the short story, "Últimos atardeceres en la tierra" (2001), would have helped develop Saucedo Lastra's discussion of where Mexico fits in relation to the way in which Bolaño often integrates autobiography into his fiction. The argument that Mexico gradually appears more clearly in Bolaño's work as the latter develops his publishing career is interesting and often convincing, but ultimately too simple. The constant returns of and to multiple texts in Bolaño's work (which Saucedo Lastra does mention) unsettle the neatness of the teleology as Saucedo Lastra presents it. The conclusion about Mexico in Bolaño—generally that it is a dark, mythical site of defeat and stagnation—does not sufficiently consider irony, humor or nostalgia, let alone the degree to which all of these are not only techniques but also topics of reflection in Bolaño's writing. Furthermore, the conclusion about Mexico occasionally risks monotony, appearing at times as if all of Bolaño's books reached the same point. To argue that Bolaño's writing is marked by resignation and nihilism also raises the question of why the author would put so much effort into writing about resignation and nihilism. Saucedo Lastra's book makes clear the need for further discussion of why Bolaño dedicated his life to writing and how that motivation appears in his fiction.

The focus on one country tends to make that country into the sole explanation for a number of puzzles concerning the present and twentieth-century history, for example, political upheaval and mass murder. In his discussion of *2666*, Saucedo Lastra argues that Mexico is "la contracara de la modernidad" (167). Saucedo Lastra's analysis would have been more nuanced had he developed a more sustained discussion of how, instead of being opposed to modernity, Mexico is actually part of a global dysfunctional modernity. This discussion would also have obliged Saucedo Lastra to consider Mexico as Bolaño constructs it as less of a mythical and more of a historical place. Saucedo Lastra does consider how Bolaño presents Mexico's history in his discussion of the *maquilas* and Mexico's place in global capitalism, but he could have done more with the topic, especially in relation to a discussion of global modernity. World War II in *2666* is also a topic that places Mexico within a broader historical context, but again Saucedo Lastra's discussion of it, since his book is dedicated to defining Mexico, ultimately downplays the larger fictional world of which Bolaño makes Mexico a part, a part that cannot so easily be distinguished from the whole. Finally, *México en la obra* lacks a comprehensive conclusion. The final chapter ends abruptly. A brief chapter that tied together the multiple, detailed, and compelling readings of specific texts that Saucedo Lastra succeeds in developing would certainly have presented the reader a clearer understanding of how a topic as relevant as Mexico is also an analytical category helpful for comprehending Bolaño's work.