INTRODUCTION

READING THE LATIN AMERICAN NOVEL AFTER FREE TRADE

The preamble to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect January 1, 1994, reads like a commerce-minded acrostic poem.[1] Fifteen resolutions, each of which is allotted its own line, commence with an infinitive verb in all caps followed by prose attesting to the signatories' shared commitment to fortify collaboration and partnership, particularly as relates to trade. For example, the first three resolutions read as follows: to "STRENGTHEN the special bonds of friendship and cooperation among their nations; / CONTRIBUTE to the harmonious development and expansion of world trade and provide a catalyst to broader international cooperation; / CREATE an expanded and secure market for the goods and services produced in their territories" ("North American"). A lexical analysis of this series of infinitives underscores the generally affirmative or generative nature of the resolutions, e.g., *to establish* rules governing trade, *to ensure* a commercial framework, *to foster* creativity and innovation, and *to promote* trade ("North American"). Of the fifteen all-caps infinitives,[2] the fourth boasts the only verb that does not connote growth or accumulation: to "REDUCE distortions to trade." Ten years after NAFTA, this preamble was copied almost verbatim into the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA),[3] and

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once more the fourth point—to "Avoid distortions to their reciprocal trade" ("[CAFTA-DR] Preamble")—is the only resolution to seek a curtailment of sorts, to so-called "distortions" to commerce.

The provocative phrase from NAFTA's preamble, "to reduce distortions to trade," implies adjusting or tempering policies and laws that, until the trade agreement was implemented, had typically served to safeguard constituents and domestic interests—national industries, workers' rights, consumer protections—in Mexico, Canada, and the United States. In practice, reducing distortions has looked very different for each of the three countries in the agreement. For Mexico, it has meant reducing labor protections and agricultural subsidies, for instance, and all three nations agreed to "reduce" their ability to scrutinize companies under investigation as a means of, yet again, "reducing trade irritants" ("NAFTA Trade Remedies"). For the so-called group of smaller developing economies of CAFTA-DR ("CAFTA-DR"), the later trade agreement has meant an erosion of domestic labor laws to such an extent that CAFTA-DR practices do not comply with "basic international norms" under conventions established by the United Nations (UN) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) ("Failure to Protect"). Furthermore, labor protections that were guaranteed in prior trade agreements have been phased out or diluted by CAFTA-DR. These protections had, for instance, guarded against exploitation of child labor and prevented union busting by imposing tariffs on countries without such protections. In this way, CAFTA-DR has increased multinational corporations' profit margins to the detriment of human rights and labor standards domestically. The erosion of consumer and worker protections demonstrates that the flip side of the drive to reduce distortions to trade is a proliferation of distortions to what Vincent Cable has called the protectionist nation-state, or the state that seeks to safeguard domestic interests and populations against the vicissitudes of finance capital.

The language of NAFTA and CAFTA-DR proves prophetic regarding the profound impact of international treaties and free trade agreements not only on economics, but also on domestic politics and culture, including, as this book argues, to the form of the novel. It is at this junction—narrative meditations on the transformed nation-state under global capitalism—that the present

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study is situated. Borrowing the language of NAFTA, this book coalesces around political and literary distortions portrayed in and enacted by the contemporary Latin American novel, a reality I theorize through the prism of postnationalism. To this end, *Novel Distortions* examines recent (1996–2019) Mexican and Central American novels that contain a *postnational aesthetics*, a term I propose to describe narrative fiction that is attuned to emergent political and literary trends related to the shifting grounds of the contemporary nation-state. The postnational novel concerns itself with the tensions and contradictions that arise as the nation-state morphs in form and function, forsaking its people, the social contract, territorial sovereignty, and similarly constitutive components of national modernity. In particular, *Novel Distortions* is attentive to the ways in which the postnational turn has accelerated with neoliberalism's rise as the dominant order of reason and social relations. The novels that I examine here were written in the throes and wake of the forced neoliberalization of the region; and while recognizing the problematic and violent history of the nation-state—an institution that has often protected the interests of the minority elite at the expense of a disenfranchised majority—these works have a shared preoccupation with the fluctuating locus of power as neoliberalism erodes the sovereign mandate of the state. Due to their formal and thematic treatment of the withdrawal of the traditional nation-state alongside a persistent inquiry into their own role and responsibility in this shifting milieu, I examine these novels as postnational fictions.

This economic subtext is a common thread across the Latin American postnational novels considered throughout *Novel Distortions*. Published in the twenty-five years following the 1994 implementation of NAFTA and its 2006 counterpart, CAFTA-DR, these Mexican and Central American novels recognize neoliberalism as an accelerant of postnational logic. Postnational literature does not always reflect on the relationship between the contemporary nation-state and neoliberalism—and, indeed, theorists of national modernity recognize the seeds of postnationalism in the very earliest iterations of the nation-state, well preceding neoliberal thought.[4] But the first shared feature of the narrative works examined here is that they coincide in their interrogation of neoliberalism as an important contributor to postnational form and

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logic. The second shared feature relates to structures of power. The six novels that inform my study identify patriarchy as a constant force undergirding the nation-state in its various iterations. From the postimperial commonwealth to social democracies that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and up to the contemporary neoliberal state, patriarchal political structures and paternalistic social relations have characterized national communities from Europe to Latin America. Oftentimes, this characteristic manifests in the form of state terror and extreme violence (e.g., dictatorships, military coups, authoritarianism), which contribute to the unraveling of the social contract. In this regard, postnational aesthetics problematizes the gendered social structures of patriarchy: indexing its presence, critiquing its effects, and imagining alternatives to its phallogocentric logic.

The book focuses on Mexican and Central American novels produced during and in response to the postnational turn. By "Mexican and Central American novels," I refer to narrative works that bring into relief topics and challenges facing these two regions today. In contrast to studies that examine a single national context or take a broader Latin Americanist approach, my focus derives from Mexico's and Central America's history as areas that have experienced the most persistent and, in recent decades, the most intense forced neoliberalization carried out by both supranational entities and the United States. Due to fiscal restructuring and trade liberalization—often imposed on the region through economic bullying (threat of embargo, suggestion of tariffs, reduced access to debt relief, etc.), sustained military and political interventionism, bi- and multilateral trade agreements, and simple geopolitical proximity to the United States—Mexico and Central America serve as case studies of sorts for understanding the expansion of neoliberalism across the globe. The region's complex and multifaceted relationship with the United States as a self-styled global superpower means that, although Chile was the laboratory of early neoliberalism, in the decades since Milton Friedman's Chicago school wielded the "shock doctrine" (Klein) to bring Salvador Allende's socialism to an end, Mexico and Central America have experienced unparalleled military, economic, and political interventionism. These actions sought to bring these countries into alignment with the neoliberal model, a figurative

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passing of the baton from Chile to Mexico and the isthmus that I explore in chapter 1. This economic realignment has distorted the very ontology of the nation-state, shifting its raison d'être from its people to the capitalist market. As I show, these distortions are recorded and reflected in postnational narrative form.

Novel Distortions: Postnationalism and Literary Form in Mexico and Central America theorizes the postnational as a key prism through which we must understand contemporary politics and culture. Bringing together political theory, economic inquiry, and cultural and literary analysis, this book shows how narrative fiction illuminates our comprehension of politics and envisions new forms of community and relationality from the postnational present. In what follows, I examine literary works from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that frame Mexico and Central America as regions confronting this new reality. I attend closely to the ways in which this corpus lends imaginative definition to the state's increasing incapacity—or unwillingness—to guarantee the safety, stability, and well-being of the demos. I do so by examining six authors who hail from or have deep ties to Mexico and Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras): the Chilean Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003), Honduran-Salvadoran Horacio Castellanos Moya (1957–), Salvadoran Claudia Hernández (1975–), Mexican-Canadian Laury Leite (1984–), Mexican Valeria Luiselli (1983–), and Guatemalan Carol Zardetto (1959–). Revealingly, the fictions that I examine do not deal exclusively with Mexican and Central American themes, nor are they necessarily penned or set inside these nations' geopolitical borders. In this regard, I argue that each work should be read as exemplary of contemporary national literature not in spite of their transnational poetics, but precisely because of it. Indeed, although this book's focus centers on cultural production by Latin American writers, *Novel Distortions* makes a case for reading Mexico and Central America not only together but, moreover, together with the United States, due to the inextricability of North and Central American territories and economies in the neoliberal era. In this way, I explore how the analyzed texts unsettle the category of national literature as a means of representing and responding to the emergence of a distinctly postnational epoch, which portends both political and literary implications.

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The novels that I analyze here position themselves as literary products of and cultural responses to the postnational present in that although the traditional novel developed alongside the nation-state and served as the cultural counterpart to its political form, the postnational novel is self-aware of its unmoored condition, which emerges through literary form and in its relationship to the narrative tradition. In light of this reality, a key trait of postnational literature is the way in which these novels interrogate their own capacity as narrative fiction to account for or affect sociopolitical and economic realities of the postnational present. As I discuss in the following section, this breakdown—what we might call the contemporary novel's identity crisis—stems from the genre's development concomitant to the rise of national modernity.

The Novel of National Modernity Unmoored

Since the seventeenth century, the nation-state has been theorized as a bounded territory where a centralized political unit governs with the consent of a people united through a shared identity and national consciousness,[5] what Ernest Renan calls "sentiment" and "a soul, a spiritual principle" (18–19). As Jürgen Habermas summarizes: "The idea of the nation . . . makes the residents of a single state-controlled territory aware of a collective belonging. . . . Only the symbolic construction of a people makes the modern state into a nation state" (64). Enlightenment ideals of the social contract, where the nation-state acts as protector and representative of a people in exchange for the populace granting legitimacy and authority to the state, and of liberal democracy, which guarantees individual rights and freedoms, including economic rights and principles of free trade, have been codified in national constitutions and have served as fundamental principles for the development of the nation-state in the West. Of course, these notions of representative democracy and constituent consent are uneven in reality, and the actual materialization of nation-states has been anything but uniform. In the Latin American context, Ileana Rodríguez has shown how the postcolonial and multicultural reality of the region presents a particular misfit to the norms of liberal democracy.[6] This misfit is germane to the below discussion of the sharp shift toward the postnational state with the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico and Central America, which chiefly occurred through

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