Book Review: *A Revolution in Movement*


There is a timeliness to the release of K. Mitchell Snow’s *A Revolution in Movement: Dancers, Painters, and the Image of Modern Mexico* in September 2020, a moment when the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill. We were suddenly confronted with empty roadways, empty classrooms, and the constant hum of the computer fan running in overdrive to keep us virtually connected through a litany of corporate collaborative platforms: Zoom, Skype, Yammer, Slack, Canvas, Blackboard. At the same time, protestors and activists took to the streets across the hemisphere, from Chile to Mexico to the United States, disrupting the stillness to demand civic, social, and racial justice. Against this backdrop of capitalism and modernity stressed to their very limit and a collective longing for connection, Snow’s book brings the vitality of movement and the promise of collaboration into relief, not only in the context of Mexico, but also as a global phenomenon that betrays the missteps, strategies, and serendipities that together yield nationalist imaginaries.

*A Revolution in Movement* surveys nearly a century of Mexican nationalism and modernity through the lens of dance, choreography, and theatrical performance. This historical survey also testifies to the previously underexplored and myriad ways that the most lauded figures in Mexican visual art—Diego Rivera, Carlos Mérida, Jean Charlot, to name but a few—not only professionally contributed to dance productions but were often at the helm of dance institutes and national programming. Moreover, Snow looks beyond national borders to document the global connections (USSR-Mexico, US-Mexico, and France-Mexico connections receive the greatest attention) and collaborations that breathed life into Mexican nationalism.

Snow is an independent arts writer and scholar based in Washington, DC, whose body of work since the 1990s has embraced dance, performance, and visual arts in near equal measure, making his latest book feel like the synthesis of decades of work rather than a pivot. Snow’s writing has long extended beyond academic silos by way of cultural studies, and *A Revolution in Movement* is no exception, though its compact historical narration takes precedence over the more theoretical framings that have come to be standard in visual and cultural studies today. In this way, the book stands apart as an encyclopedic text that surveys the individuals, moments, and institutions that, in Snow’s estimation, helped to construct a national aesthetic and ethos in dance and visual arts alike. The book’s density stems from the myriad creative agents at play as well as the wide chronological lens, which begins with an abbreviated glimpse into performance during the Porfiriato and its cultural presentation abroad, such as the Broadway unveiling of the *jarabe tapatio* (known colloquially in English as the Mexican hat dance) circa 1900. The book ends in 1984, with a dance performance in homage to painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, commissioned by his daughter Adriana, a trained dancer, and produced by the celebrated US-born, Graham-method dancer Anna Sokolow—an apt bookend to a narrative that fluidly traverses transnational contexts.

As the title suggests, movement operates as the book’s organizing principle. It can be dizzying, indeed, but this seems to be the point. Unlike visual and material culture studies such as Rubén Gallo’s *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution* (MIT Press, 2005), John Mraz’s *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity* (Duke University Press, 2009), or Rick A. López’s *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2010), Snow anchors his text in social interactions and institutional relations rather than images, objects, and aesthetics. (Incidentally, Snow draws heavily from López in the first half of his book.) The book moves in loose chronological fashion, with each chapter organized around one or two key creative individuals (i.e., painters, dancers, and choreographers) and

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a state-sponsored institution or company with which those individuals intersected. Snow also anchors his text with José Luis Cuevas’s decisive 1953 essay “La cortina de nopal” (The cactus curtain)—a parable about dogmatic nationalism in Mexican art—to demonstrate the local and global tensions that dancers, painters, and institutions were perpetually negotiating. Snow’s rhizomatic study thus positions national Mexican patrimony and tourism heritage within and against an international horizon that dialogues with recent exhibitions and catalogs such as The Avant-Garde Networks of Amauta: Argentina, Mexico, and Peru in the 1920s (2019) and Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art (2020). Conversely, these case studies also exemplify—much in the spirit of Creating Patzcuaro, Creating Mexico: Art, Tourism, and Nation Building under Lázaro Cárdenas (University of Texas Press, 2018) by Jennifer Jolly—the synchronization of national imaginaries with regional practices.

The book’s images, printed in black and white—many of which derive from black-and-white photographs—emphasize the performative and formal stagings echoed in the book, yet they hold a minor place in the author’s text, leaving room for further visual analysis. Preparatory designs by artists such as Miguel Covarrubias, who produced the set for Carlos Chávez’s ballet Los cuatro soles (fig. 1), have had marginalized roles in Mexican visual scholarship, but these works profoundly demonstrate the liveliness and immediacy of color and form in the promotion of indigenismo not only through dance but also through illustration, which was Covarrubias’s primary practice. These images serve as exciting vectors of collaboration, emplacing international figures onto Mexican stages to activate and promote immersive environments of national aesthetics and ethics.

Visual studies scholars will find that the book veers away from explicit argumentation or positionality in favor of a fairly opaque and archivally rigorous historical framework. Snow saturates the pages with narratives that extend across time, nations, and creative practices. Snow’s historical text supplants linearity with an authorial multivocality and multidirectionality that mirrors his social and creative subjects, who seem to persistently negotiate disciplines and borders. In so doing, Snow maps foundational nationalist Mexican ideologies, such as mestizaje and indigenismo, onto an expansive network of primarily female dancers and choreographers long obscured from view in Mexican visual studies.
In a compelling undercurrent of the book, Snow illustrates the ways in which collaboration and cross-disciplinary pollination is not always benign or equitable. Multiple chapters reveal how the primarily male painters that scholars and the public have come to celebrate as progenitors of *mexicanidad* had in fact infiltrated, influenced, and co-opted the world of Mexican national dance, having been granted license to dictate who and what received financial and cultural support for choreography and performance. These visual artists were often lauded in popular media for their contributions to dance productions, while the dancers were often disparaged for their disappointing performances.

The literal and figurative paternalism at play—indeed, some of Mexico’s most celebrated dancers were daughters of renowned visual artists such as Siqueiros and Mérida—is a persistent if underexplored facet of Snow’s book. This seems a welcome invitation for students and scholars to take up the issue in future studies. Snow alludes to these problematic of gender anecdotally, never fully situating them within an overarching gendered polemic, but the cumulative effect of this narrative is potent and undeniable. Chapter 9, “The Golden Age of Mexican Modern Dance,” for instance, recounts how composer Carlos Chávez, then in charge of Mexico’s new national dance academy, strictly dictated that only nondancers be appointed to the advisory board. The impact, Snow wryly notes, is a board composed of an “entirely male” cohort of painters, composers, and writers who “largely determined which works were to be developed by the academy’s dancers” (203). From this seemingly straightforward rehashing of historical events, Snow gestures toward significant power differentials that position the primarily female world of dance as subordinate to the patriarchal sphere of Mexican nationalist production. Mexican art history scholars will be reminded of Adriana Zavala’s indispensable *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (Penn State University Press, 2010), a reference regrettably absent from Snow’s bibliography that begs to be read against Snow’s historical text; together, these sources will surely yield new conversations in the field about gender, race, and nation in postrevolutionary Mexican art and performance.

Indeed, *A Revolution in Movement* will be received by most art historians and visual culture scholars as a generous invitation to further inquiry. Every chapter signals a wealth of conceptual and aesthetic questions that have yet to be plumbed. Snow does an admirable and formidable service to Mexican visual studies by laying a rigorous historical groundwork that maps individuals, institutions, and events onto an interrelational network. But these constellations, presented to the reader in mass, each surely contain critical worlds unto themselves. In addition to the genderedness of Mexican modernity, the book also, if anecdotally, raises questions about racial dynamics in Mexican tourism heritage and national patrimony when, for instance, the author introduces the renowned African American dancer/choreographer/anthropologist Katherine Dunham as an influential figure in mid-twentieth-century Mexican national dance, noting that she was a favorite choreographer of painter and Mexican School of Dance Director Carlos Mérida. Dunham’s work has long been situated in European and Caribbean contexts, but her intersections with Mexico have been underexamined in the scholarship, save for Theodore W. Cohen’s recent publication, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation After the Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). By virtue of incorporating Dunham—whose syncretic Afro-diasporic method brings together Haitian vodou and West African vodun movements with Western modern dance—into Mexican modernisms, Snow creates exciting and necessary avenues to consider the Afro-diasporic dimensions of *mexicanidad*.

Mexican-born art historian and anthropologist Anita Brenner (1905–74) regularly wrote about Mexican regional dance alongside her studies of Mexican visual art and culture, even authoring the original ballet “Día de los Muertos” in the 1920s, which was never realized. According to Brenner, Mexico is, first and foremost, a nation of makers. Perhaps this is the most salient takeaway of Snow’s book—it reveals a sphere of creative expression unbounded by medium or discipline. In this way, Snow contributes to a growing chorus of scholars pivoting Mexican art history and visual culture away from the fetishization of muralism and privileged subjects, rendering present once again the ecology of creative, if imperfect, revolutionary labor through which Mexican national culture was conceived and through which it became refracted on a global stage. *A Revolution in Movement* gives voice to the artists, performers, and cultural ambassadors who have long been stewards of Mexican modernity but who, until now, have been obscured behind the curtain.

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