



From Mexico City to World Literature: Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari's and Hugo Meltzl's Global Literary Projects

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Abstract: In founding *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877), Hugo Meltzl included Spanish among ten languages of world literature, gesturing towards the journal's linguistic politics at a global scale. His collaborator in Mexico City, Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari, a Spanish émigré and pivotal figure in the city's literary scene, collaborated on the literary journal *Revista Universal* (1868–1876), where the Cuban writer José Martí published prolifically upon arriving in Mexico City in 1875. Olavarría y Ferrari also edited the second run of *El Renacimiento* (1894). His editorial decisions positioned Spanish as both a tool of resistance and a means of reinscribing imperial structures. These journals became exchange points between the local and the global, creating a literary universe that transcended national boundaries and positioned Mexico City as a cosmopolitan center, expanding early comparative literature's scope.

Keywords: Hugo Meltzl, Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari, José Martí, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, indigeneity.

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Residing in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg—then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a transnational city and site of multilingualism—Hugo Meltzl (1846–1908) founded the journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* in 1877, seeking to emphasize the equality of languages and to advocate for “minor languages,” with translation as an important component. Soon after, he shifted his focus from polyglottism to decaglottism, arguing that practical constraints necessitated limiting the journal's scope to ten languages: German, English, French, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish, and Hungarian. The status of Spanish on this list is particularly revealing of the journal's linguistic politics at the global scale, especially in relation to Latin America's literary networks. One of Meltzl's collaborators was Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari (1844–1919), a writer and historian based in Mexico City. A brief portrait of Olavarría y Ferrari's work confirms that while *Acta Comparationis* centered European languages, the inclusion of Spanish through Meltzl's collaborator functioned both as a tool of resistance against empire and, at times, as a means of reinscribing new forms of empire. As Spanish circulated within literary circles connected to Meltzl, the localization of Mexican Spanish differed from Iberian Spanish.

A Spanish émigré and nationalized Mexican who arrived in Mexico in 1865, at the age of twenty-one, during the Second Mexican Empire, Olavarría y Ferrari became a pivotal figure in Mexican literary circles. Within Mexico, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834–1893), whose group Olavarría y Ferrari was a part of, directed what is considered one of the most significant attempts to create a literature rooted in nationalism.¹ Olavarría y Ferrari's work was highly regarded; the third edition of *Reseña histórica del teatro en México. 1538–1911*, published posthumously in 1949, featured a prologue by Salvador Novo (1904–1974), a prominent poet of the Mexican Renaissance and a member of the avant-garde group *Los Contemporáneos*.² Olavarría y Ferrari collaborated on high-profile literary magazines

1. María José Garrido Asperó, “Los episodios históricos mexicanos de Olavarría y Ferrari: La novela histórica y los indios insurgentes,” in *La imagen del México decimonónico de los visitantes extranjeros: ¿un Estado-nación o un mosaico plurinacional?*, ed. Manuel Ferrer Muñoz (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 2002), 306. For an analysis of how Altamirano portrayed Indigenous identity positively in his novels, see Robert McKee Irwin, “The American Renaissance and the Mexican ‘Renacimiento’: The Long Critical Disconnect in the Americas,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8, no. 1 (2008): 235–251.

2. Salvador Novo, prologue to *Reseña histórica del teatro en México. 1538–1911*, by Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (México: Porrúa, 1961), xiii.

such as the second run of *El Renacimiento* (1894) and *Revista Universal* (1868–1876). Most prominently, the Cuban writer José Martí, known for his manifesto, *Nuestra América* (1891), which advocated for an autonomous Latin America, free of colonial and imperial forces, was a prolific contributor to *Revista Universal*. The triangulation between these writers forms a network between Martí and Olavarría y Ferrari on one side, and between Olavarría y Ferrari and Meltzl on the other.

Olavarría y Ferrari positioned his journals as an exchange point between the local and the global; his work constituted an early attempt to create a literary universe that transcended national boundaries, with Mexico City as a cosmopolitan center. This unique positioning of Mexico City influenced Olavarría y Ferrari's literary contributions—an aspect that *Acta Comparationis* would have likely engaged with, especially in relation to the historical and linguistic landscape of Latin American languages, which encompasses a multitude of Indigenous languages as well as traces of African influence.³ Therefore, while Meltzl's inclusion of Spanish may be read as centered on the European continent, it is necessary to consider Latin America, and the connections forged between Meltzl and Olavarría y Ferrari. Figures like Olavarría y Ferrari, alongside historical figures he celebrated—such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695)—and contemporaries he edited, such as Martí (1853–1895), offer the promise of a critical intervention into early conceptualizations of comparative literature.⁴ At the same time, these figures are always situated within ongoing processes of coloniality. A transnational literary network thus shaped Olavarría y Ferrari's eventual collaboration with *Acta Comparationis*. In 1879, Olavarría y Ferrari became involved with *Acta Comparationis* as a correspondent, with his name, which appeared in the May 1879 and all following issues, listed under “associates of the work.”⁵ An 1885 issue of the journal, no. 163–165, included an announcement of Olavarría y Ferrari's recently published book: *Episodios históricos mexicanos. El castillo de Acapulco*. Noted as an octavo-sized (8°) book and part of a collection of novels that recounted historical events in Mexico, this novel was originally published in 1882 in Mexico City and later reissued as a complete set alongside the other episodes.⁶ Nineteenth century historical novels in Mexico often focused on colonial themes, and Olavarría y Ferrari was the first to narrate the Mexican War of Independence in an episodic, fictionalized form.⁷ Listed under the bibliography section of *Acta Comparationis*, the entry states, “Containing only those forgotten, literary, new, and other works,” referring to literary works sent to the editorial team for review or inclusion.⁸ Olavarría y Ferrari had likely sent his historical novel to the journal as part of his correspondence.

In producing Mexican literature that was both inward and outward looking, Olavarría y Ferrari positioned himself within Mexico City's literary circles and envisioned national literature in global, comparative terms. His work consistently sought to place Mexican cultural production both within local literary traditions and in dialogue with wider comparative and transnational networks, alongside his contemporaries, anticipating the horizons of a modern national literature.⁹ Olavarría y Ferrari contributed significantly to the Mexican intellectual landscape—he advocated for a modern Mexican national literature, independent of colonial powers, which he viewed in global terms, hence his collaboration with Meltzl.

Multilingualism, Minor Languages, and *Criollo* Identity

How did Olavarría y Ferrari's work with the journals employ a form of Spanish distinct from that used in *Acta Comparationis*, and to what extent can Spanish be considered a “minor” language within the context of Mexico?

3. Mexico City is the only city in the Americas that was a pre-Hispanic capital and remains a capital today. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, in *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, highlights how cities like Istanbul, Athens, and Mexico City “had to deal with history in a unique fashion and, unlike many other cities, could not easily dispense of the past.” Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 309.

4. For a planetary reading of Sor Juana's poetry, see Stephanie Kirk, “Global Sor Juana,” in *Mexican Literature as World Literature*, ed. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 23–37. As Caroline R. Egan shows, Sor Juana employed multilingualism strategically in two sets of *villancicos*, specifically in the *La Inundación castálida* (1689), which includes *tocotines*, a popular form from the Iberian Peninsula. Egan argues that Sor Juana's inclusion of Nahuatl was different, writing, “Reexamining Sor Juana's *tocotines* with this earlier tradition in mind permits a different approximation to the question of what these Nahuatl verses say about the nun's perspective on the colonial world.” Caroline Egan, “Lyric Intelligibility in Sor Juana's Nahuatl *Tocotines*,” *Romance Notes* 58, no. 2 (2018): 207–218.

5. “socii operis.” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 5, no. 49–50 (May 15, 1879).

6. Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari, *Episodios históricos mexicanos. El castillo de Acapulco. Continuación de las memorias de un criollo. 1813* (México: Tipografía Literaria de Filomeno Mata, 1882).

7. Garrido Asperó, “Los Episodios históricos mexicanos, 306–307.”

8. “Enthaltend nur diejenigen vergi. litterar. nova u. a. Werke.” “Announcement of Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari's *Episodios Históricos Mexicanos: El Castillo de Acapulco*,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 17, no. 163–165 (1885): 80. My translation.

9. For an analysis of Olavarría y Ferrari's role in the literary scene, see Miguel Ángel Vásquez Meléndez, “Enrique De Olavarría y Ferrari, heredero de un conflicto (1869–1896),” in *Conflicto, resistencia y negociación en la historia*, ed. Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Leticia Mayer Celis (Ciudad de México: Colegio de México, 2016).



Multilingualism is not always readily apparent—beyond the overt presence of multiple languages in a given landscape, as in Mexico, it also manifests in more implicit, subtle forms that drives language beyond its limits, especially in terms of resistance and collectivity. Discussing the seventeenth century, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel contends that the European expansion into the Americas served as an “*extreme experience*” that pushed the boundaries of imperial languages, challenging their ability to depict and communicate the “experience of conquest, colonization, and progressive creolization of local subjects and cultures.”¹⁰ For this reason, she draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari Deleuze, who describe minor language as employing “tensors” or “intensive” linguistic tools that facilitate a shift toward the outer edges of meaning or beyond it, driving language to its furthest limits, toward “a reversible beyond or before.”¹¹ The use of Spanish in this context allows for a form of minor literature, which Deleuze and Guattari identify as characterized by three characteristics: (1) a “high coefficient of deterritorialization”; (2) “everything in them is political”; and (3) “collective value.”¹² Arguing that Spanish in the context of colonial Mexico was a minor language, Martínez-San Miguel shows that ambivalence was a driving force within the *criollo* community, especially in its reappropriation of language and the efforts to reposition itself within the structure left behind by colonialism. Over two centuries, writing in this language evolved into national Mexican literature, one in which Olavarría y Ferrari played an instrumental role.

As a young man, Olavarría y Ferrari became involved in the historic struggle of the *criollo* community—a term commonly used in Mexico for descendants of Spaniards born in the Americas—one that was in favor of independence and separation from Spain while being also driven by the desire to improve its own position.¹³ Discussing the early modern period, Martínez-San Miguel describes how, in their prolonged political and intellectual struggle, *criollos* sought to demonstrate “their rational and physical equality” in relation to colonizing powers of Spain.¹⁴ Seeking to gain legitimacy, they worked to prove their intellectual capacities and their entitlement to take part in the local governments created by the Spanish monarchy.¹⁵ Within the colonial hierarchy, social identities took shape, ranging from Indigenous and African groups to delegates of the metropolitan authority—positioned between these extremes, *criollos* gradually developed a discourse of their own.¹⁶ This further complicates Olavarría y Ferrari’s place in the literary circles of Mexico City, as he strove to support and shape this literary milieu.

The Triangulation between Martí, Olavarría y Ferrari, and Meltzl

This portrait of Olavarría y Ferrari revises the status of Spanish in *Acta Comparationis*. In his article, “Hugo Meltzl and That Dangerous American Supplement; Or, A Tale of Two 1877s”, Alfred J. López argues that 1877 saw two global events in the field of comparatism—the publication of *Acta Comparationis* and José Martí’s prospectus for *Revista Guatemalteca*—each of which, in their own ways, contributed to the development of the discipline. López notes that while Meltzl is often considered one of the founding figures of comparative literature, Martí was advancing his own comparatist project in Guatemala City around the same time.¹⁷ Martí, like Meltzl, wrote an early article on world literature; intended for the proposed journal, *Revista Guatemalteca*, it remained unpublished.¹⁸ López demonstrates that Martí’s vision was “explicitly transatlantic, and implicitly global” vis-à-vis Guatemala, the Americas, and Europe, and that Martí’s prospectus, “in its geographic, linguistic, and political reach offers the superior vision of a truly *global* comparative literary and cultural study, one that the discipline of comparative literature, then and now, ignores to its peril.”¹⁹ Importantly, while Mexico had already gained independence, Cuba remained a colony, and Martí, travelling through Guatemala, later to New York, and then Mexico City, was writing back against imperialism.²⁰

Particularly given that five of the ten languages of decaglottism were spoken in the Caribbean, López posits that

10. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess: “Minor” Readings of Latin American Colonial Discourse* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 38.

11. Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess*, 38.

12. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–17.

13. For a discussion of how the term *criollo* [creole] changed over time in Mexico, see Miguel Valerio, *Sovereign Joy: Afro-Mexican Kings and Queens, 1539–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 21.

14. Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess*, 35.

15. Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess*, 35.

16. Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess*, 34.

17. Alfred J. López, “Hugo Meltzl and that Dangerous American Supplement; Or, A Tale of Two 1877s,” *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 220.

18. López, “Hugo Meltzl,” 229.

19. López, “Hugo Meltzl,” 229.

20. Martí later lived in exile in New York City, where he wrote “Nuestra América,” first published in January 10, 1891, in New York City’s *La Revista Ilustrada*, and then in Mexico City’s *El Partido Liberal*, on January 30, 1891. It issued a call to action for not only Cuba, but the entire Latin America, in resistance to the imperialism of the United States. José Martí, *Nuestra América*, edited by Hugo Achúgar (Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2005).

Meltzl's foundational documents for *Acta Comparationis* overlooked colonized and subaltern groups, and that, despite Meltzl's claims to an inclusive "principle of polyglottism," comparative literature defined itself by routinely excluding texts connected to the central historical trajectory of European imperialism.²¹ Proposing Martí's extensive work as a counterpoint, amidst a wider corpus, López shows how his contributions challenge these traditional borders, often using the same languages, but in ways that reflect the historical linguistic presences that have been excluded.²² From this perspective, multilingualism takes on many forms—one in which the text carries traces of other languages, and another in which it enacts modes of resistance through a reappropriation of Spanish. Ultimately, López calls for the discipline to reconsider its boundaries toward a more global vision, as embodied in Martí's prospectus. As López demonstrates in his scholarship on Martí, the Cuban writer creatively reappropriated Spanish, using it as a tool to denounce coloniality. This is especially relevant when tracing new genealogies of world literature, particularly in light of the triangulation between Meltzl, Olavarría y Ferrari, and Martí.

While López's article, which has become central to conversations around *Acta Comparationis*, raises important questions about the genealogies of early comparative literature and the implications of coloniality and European imperialism, archival research into Meltzl's network of contributors reveals that, although he prioritized ten languages, he also demonstrated interest in languages and literatures beyond the immediate scope of the journal. In asserting that all literatures, and by extension, all languages, should be protected, including those belonging to "literatureless peoples," Meltzl advocated for the protection of other forms of literary production. However, this is complicated when considering what "protection" would encompass and what it actually means to be "literatureless," particularly in the context of a modernity tied to coloniality.²³ While he critically acknowledged the primacy of written literature, he also emphasized the importance of "protecting" all linguistic and literary forms.²⁴ This protection, he counseled, should come without external attempts to alter or "improve" these literatures through what he describes as "missionary zeal."²⁵ In other words, Meltzl insisted that dominant literatures should not impose themselves, through the colonial infrastructure that facilitated the extraction and circulation of oral literatures, on minor literatures or the people who spoke them.²⁶ While Meltzl's omission of the literatures of the colonies where the European languages pertaining to decaglottism were spoken is symptomatic, his collaboration with someone like Olavarría y Ferrari, who in turn published writers like Martí, invites a reassessment of this position. At the same time, it is important to consider the penumbra between protecting all literatures and engaging in acts of extractivism, which may involve extracting not only valuable resources from the environment and exploiting labor, but also extracting cultural forms, such as art and literature.

Martí's use of Spanish reflects an important counter-narrative, one that becomes a tool to resist the occupation of European colonial powers, specifically Spain, by employing the language to express the unique positionality of writers in the Americas. In an article that Martí wrote for *Revista Universal*, on May 22, 1875, titled "Cuba," he traces the journey of another article from the journal, *La Estrella Solitaria* in Cuba: first printed in Camagüey, sent to Jamaica, to New York, and eventually arriving in Mexico City. He writes, "Clearly, this tells how, despite the constant surveillance of the coasts, the Spanish gunboats cannot impede movement and communication between the Island and Jamaica, and the coasts of Cuba and the neighboring cays and islets. The supplement is dated February 1st: it has left Cuba for Jamaica or the cays, from there to New York, from New York to Mexico: — the communication, therefore, is now happening regularly."²⁷ This illustrates Martí's attention to the transnational networks of communication and political resistance, revealing literary networks and the broader circulation of

21. López, "Hugo Meltzl," 222–224.

22. López, "Hugo Meltzl," 224.

23. "litteraturlosen Völker." Hugo Meltzl, "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur. II. Das Prinzip des Polyglottismus," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 15 (1877): 311; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," translated by Hans-Joachim Schulz and Philip H. Rhein, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongsieni Buthelezi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 45.

24. Importantly, when Meltzl uses the term *litteraturlosen Völker*, he refers specifically to peoples without written literature, not to those entirely without literature; his argument explicitly includes folk literatures, oral literatures, which he values as significant forms of literary expression.

25. "missionsüchtiger Unberufenheit." Meltzl, "Vorläufige Aufgaben," 311; Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45–46.

26. Minor literature may be understood through Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term, where "minor" does not imply inferiority but refers to literature produced either in a language outside the major language or within a major language that is repurposed from the margins, thereby challenging the dynamics of an ever-shifting cultural center. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

27. "Claramente dice esto cómo, a despecho de la constante vigilancia de las costas, las cañoneras españolas no puedan impedir el movimiento y la comunicación entre la Isla y Jamaica, y las costas de Cuba con los cayos e islotes vecinos. —El suplemento tiene fecha de 1 de febrero: ha salido de Cuba para Jamaica o los cayos, de allí para New York, de New York para México: —la comunicación, pues, se hace ya regularmente." María Luisa Bombal and Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, *Obras Completas* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1996), 121. My translation.



information within the context of Latin America's resistance to coloniality, and also demonstrating how literature, along with the ideas, form, and content within it, played a role in this resistance. Through tracing the route of this article, which contains news of insurrections and defiance to the Spanish colonial presence, Martí uncovers an important network that existed between journalists across the Caribbean archipelago, New York City, later Mexico City, and beyond.

At the same time, to begin to expand upon this global vision, it is also necessary to acknowledge the division between Olavarría y Ferrari's literary circle and the Indigenous communities prevalent in the Americas, which complicates the vision. López notes that "Martí's vision is not free of his own anxieties regarding the relation of Latin America's educated elites to Europe—and in particular the creole class's desire to differentiate itself from the very subalterns Martí champions as part of that class's effort to claim intellectual parity with Europe."²⁸ This tension, which Martí shared with others in his network, reveals a struggle to set themselves apart, while also being affected by the ideas of civilization that echo colonial ideologies. López quotes Martí from his prospectus, highlighting the quiet tension that erupts in this single line: "Having applied ourselves and labored intelligently on this docile, rich land, we must forcefully present it everywhere, *not as an obscure legend, not as a beautiful, barefoot Indian woman*, but as a fertile and impatient ground, rich in intelligence, beauty and products."²⁹ The Americas—long exoticized—have been for centuries been part of the colonial imaginary, metaphorically tied to the body of an Indigenous woman. This, at times, implicit, ambivalence is similarly evident in the writings of Olavarría y Ferrari and his work with the journals, where there is an ongoing awareness of alterity and difference; even if, at times, there was an explicit desire to bridge this gap or to recognize Indigenous people as equal citizens, the tension still remains with individual priorities centered in their own discourses. At times, this tension became evident in the way the Indigenous body and the land were linked through their alterity, as well as in the colonial trajectory of occupation and extraction—not only of natural resources but also of labor and cultural knowledge.

In this way, Meltz's project first became linked with that of Olavarría y Ferrari, and, through him, with Martí, particularly after Martí moved to Mexico City in February of 1875 and began writing for Olavarría y Ferrari's journal, *Revista Universal*, in March of that year.³⁰ The folding of a figure like Martí into this network suggests the potential for a re-appropriation of Spanish, especially in terms of writing back against empire. This move can be understood as a form of multilingualism and, even more significantly, as an undeniable presence of multilingualism that runs alongside these narratives, which often excluded Indigenous languages, while simultaneously pointing to them in their works.³¹ Thus, the role of Spanish in early comparative literature needs to be reassessed, not only as a European language but as a medium for Latin American cultural, intellectual, and literary expression. Martí expands the literary scene through his work, opening it to a much broader audience, including subaltern citizens. His writing gestures toward a more definitive conception of Latin America, marking a transition in thought in *Nuestra América*, where he actively engages with Indigeneity as part of a vision of the Americas independent of European influence.

Indigenous Discourses in *Revista Universal* and *Acta Comparationis*

A comparison between *Acta Comparationis* and *Revista Universal* reveals a shared preoccupation with Indigeneity in the Americas within this network. For example, Ramón Carrasco and Manuel María Ramírez y Blanco co-authored an article in *Revista Universal* on the Indigenous communities of Mexico, a theme that would later develop into a broader project of Indigeneity. While they reproduce the colonial dichotomy of "civilization" versus "barbarism," Carrasco and Ramírez y Blanco advocate for the rights of Indigenous people, positioning them as citizens with equal rights in Mexico's future political landscape.³² Carrasco and Ramírez y Blanco write: "In all that is currently debated in Mexico regarding the life and political future of the devalued classes, it is not understood that perhaps the question of greatest importance is that of the indigenous."³³ Arguing that the political future of Indigenous

28. López, "Hugo Meltz," 228.

29. "Aplicuese el trabajo inteligente a la tierra dócil y rica, es forzoso presentarlo en todas partes, *no como una leyenda oscura, no como una india hermosa y descalza*, sino como un terreno fértil e impaciente, rico en inteligencias, belleza y productos." López, "Hugo Meltz," 228–229.

30. López, "Hugo Meltz," 101–106.

31. For considerations on multilingualism, see *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, where Yasemin Yildiz explores how a "third space" enables the creation of "new hybrid codes" through code-switching and other forms of language blending, as seen in works like Kafka's. Yildiz also challenges the concept of a "monolingual" mother tongue, suggesting that all languages are dynamic sites of ongoing exchange. Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012).

32. Ramón Carrasco and Manuel María Ramírez y Blanco, "La civilización de los Indígenas," ed. Vicente Villada, *Revista Universal. De Política, Literatura y Comercio* 11, no. 11 (1876): 1.

33. "En todo lo que se debate actualmente en México la vida y el futuro político de las clases desvalidas, no se encuentra quizá una cuestión de mayor interés que la de los indígenas." Carrasco and Ramírez y Blanco, "La civilización," 1. My translation.

people is one of the most pressing issues in contemporary Mexican debates, they emphasize that Indigenous people should be recognized as full citizens, asserting that their inclusion is necessary for the nation's future. These are early gestures to something that would become much more explicit in Mexican national literature, which would go on to imagine a more expansive view of the canon and a recognition of pre-Hispanic literary traditions. Ultimately, this was not only about constructing a Mexican literary tradition but also about shaping a post-revolutionary national identity, where *Indigenismo* played a central role. Invoking Indigeneity was a means of recentralizing Mexican cultural heritage within the nation.

The collaboration with Olavarría y Ferrari was not the only instance in which Latin America and its multilingual literary traditions appeared in *Acta Comparationis*. Most importantly, in the first issue of *Acta Comparationis* in 1877, Ramón León Maínez (1846–1917), a writer from Cádiz in Andalusia, Spain, became one of the first Spanish-speaking contributors to the journal.³⁴ Known for his studies on Miguel de Cervantes, particularly his work on *Don Quixote*, Maínez contributed the first of several articles on Quixote, "Comentario inédito de el Quijote." In the November 1877 issue, Maínez reviewed a book titled *Los idiomas de la América Latina*, written by Félix C. y Sobron, a Spanish physician and scholar.³⁵ Maínez's review is noteworthy for its recognition of Latin America's multilingual linguistic landscape, extending the conceptualization of Spanish beyond a European framework. As he writes, "The objective of this book is to provide knowledge of the most notable languages and dialects spoken by the indigenous peoples of the various regions of Latin America."³⁶ Maínez discusses how the author, Félix C., explores the languages of Mexican, Chilean, Peruvian, Paraguayan, and Brazilian regions, while also focusing on how Spanish and Portuguese missionaries played a so-called civilizing role.³⁷ According to Félix C., missionaries not only sought to evangelize, but also studied Indigenous languages and dialects.³⁸ Maínez writes of the work, "It offers a great deal of biographical information about the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries who, from the early moments of the conquest to the present day, have devoted significant efforts to civilizing the indigenous peoples and studying their languages and dialects, customs, practices, and tendencies."³⁹ Maínez does not explicitly question this colonial narrative; both the reviewer and the author overlook the imperative to complicate the civilizing missionary framework. Coloniality, often enforced through the Church, language, and translation remains implicit in their discussions of Indigenous languages. Ultimately, Maínez's critique of the book rests with it being, "too brief in relation to the nature, structure, and importance of each of the languages it discusses."⁴⁰ This critique reflects a broader concern with the insufficient exploration of these languages' structures and significance, albeit without considering the colonial imperative.

Just as Maínez's review gestures toward Latin America's multilingualism, another instance of Indigenous language appears in *Acta Comparationis* in 1882, with the inclusion of a Nahuatl-language poem, a Nahua text, attributed to the poet Ixtlixochitl, titled "Aztekisches (Nahuatl) Liebeslied." Alongside the Nahuatl, the publication includes a Spanish translation and two German translations: one in unrhymed verse, and another in rhymed, metrical form; Baron Gagern translates the work and provides brief contextual commentary.⁴¹ Several years later, in 1886, the text is translated into English by Henry Phillips. This version is also contextualized by Baron Gagern, who notes that it was first published in a Mexican magazine and speculates that its author lived during the time of Cortez's invasion

34. For an analysis of Ramón León Maínez and Meltzl's collaboration, see *Proyectos Políticos y Canon Literario*, where Antoni Martí Monterde traces the history of the collaboration between Maínez and Meltzl, detailing "la conexión gaditano-transilvana [the Cádiz-Transylvania connection]." Antoni Martí Monterde, "Proyectos políticos y canon literario en los orígenes del comparatismo europeo: Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok (*Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*) y *Crónica de Los Cervantistas*," *Bulletin Hispanique* 116, no. 1 (2014): 221.

35. Ramón León Maínez, "Los idiomas de La América Latina," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 17, no. 15 (1877): 355–356.

36. "Tiene por objeto este libro dar conocimiento de los más notables idiomas y dialectos que se hablaban y hablan entre los indígenas de las diversas comarcas de la América Latina." León Maínez, "Los idiomas." My translation.

37. León Maínez, "Los idiomas."

38. León Maínez, "Los idiomas."

39. "Ofrecen muchos datos biográficos acerca de los misioneros españoles y portugueses que, desde los primeros momentos de la conquista hasta nuestros días, han puesto mayores desvelos para civilizar a los indígenas, y estudiado con mayor esmero sus lenguajes y dialectos, costumbres, usos y tendencias." León Maínez, "Los idiomas." My translation.

40. "demasiado breve en lo relativo a la índole, estructura e importancia de cada una de las lenguas de que se habla." León Maínez, "Los idiomas." My translation.

41. Ixtlixóchitl, "Aztekisches (Nahuatl) Liebeslied," trans. Baron Gagern, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 12, nos. 7 & 108 (1882): 2160–2161.



of Mexico, as a contemporary of Nezahualcoyotl, the poet and ruler of Texcoco.⁴² The appearances of the text, and the mentions of these figures, simultaneously raise questions of cultural extractivism and about the methods of transcription and translation—especially as the translations are interpretive and impose new meaning on the text. This is another instance, alongside the collaboration with Olavarría y Ferrari, in which Indigenous languages and dialects in Latin America appear in *Acta Comparationis*. Maínez's review, together with the translations of the Nahuatl text, gesture towards Latin America as a region of many literary languages, but also as a terrain shaped by Indigeneity, a landscape intimately tied to coloniality and mediated through translation.

Conclusion: Planetary and Extractivism in Comparative Literature

Returning to López's argument, Martí's 1877 unpublished comparativist prospectus, unlike Meltzl's, offers a politically and geographically expansive approach that remains neglected in the field. The triangulation between these three early comparativist figures prompts the question: What new understanding emerges when Martí is considered alongside Olavarría y Ferrari, one of Meltzl's contributors, and Olavarría y Ferrari is situated at the intersection of Meltzl and Martí? The triangulation allows for another genealogy of comparative literature, a field that acknowledged the languages of the Americas and that, through Olavarría y Ferrari, was deeply involved in the production of Mexico's historical narrative.⁴³ However, as seen in Olavarría y Ferrari's positioning of *criollos* over Indigenous peoples, the interest in Indigenous literatures and languages, while seemingly progressive, operates as a form of cultural extractivism. This re-centering of Mexico and the Americas provides a new understanding of comparative literature—the center of the discipline expands to include multiple centers, one being Mexico City and, more broadly, the Americas. This vision, which involves preliminary gestures toward Indigeneity as a spectral presence—faint gestures to a presence that would eventually become more solidified—points not only toward extractivism but also toward resistance.⁴⁴ This demonstrates that language can serve as both a tool for challenging coloniality and a means of reinscribing the structures established by colonialism. In this framework, early comparative literature becomes a space where the movements and tensions of language between resistance and the reinscription of empire can be critically reconsidered. This framework offers a more nuanced understanding of these literary networks, inviting a global, even planetary, vision of the field.

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42. Ixtlilxóchitl, "Aztec Love Song," trans. Henry Phillips, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 16, no. 171 (1886): 2993. The published translations render the poem as a love song, yet the original Nahuatl text centers on maternal grief. For instance, Nonantzin, ihcuac nimiqui motleculipan xinechontoca is more accurately rendered as "Madre mía, cuando yo muera entiérrame en tu hogar (hearth)" [My mother, when I die, bury me in your hearth], and Ihcuac tihuallaz tlaxcaltica, nopampatica xonchoca as "Cuando vengas con las tortillas, llora por mí" [When you come with the tortillas, weep for me]. Moreover, Nonantzin, ¿tleca tichoca? ¿Tlein aquíya? Titlananquiliz is more accurately translated as "Madre mía, ¿por qué lloras?" [My mother, why do you weep?] "¿Qué ha entrado? Contestarás." [What has entered? You will answer.] As John Joseph Sullivan notes, lines 5 and 6—Xiquilhui xoxoc in cuahuatl and ixtlaciuh etla popoca—are "more difficult to interpret but appear to reference green wood and smoke...." These corrected translations were discussed in personal correspondence with Sullivan, email message to author, September 2, 2025. There is also scholarly debate regarding the time period in which this poem was written, as noted in personal correspondence with David Bowles, email message to author, August 25, 2025.

43. Olavarría y Ferrari was part of the literary circle of D. Vicente Riva Palacio, who edited *México a través de los siglos*, to which Olavarría y Ferrari contributed to the fourth volume, focusing on the history of Mexico after the independence. The first volume, written by various contributors and overseen by Riva Palacio, presented a global framework for early Mexico that transcended colonial narratives, offering theories on African migration, the Nahuas' potential global connections, and cosmological ties to Atlantis. This approach challenged colonial perspectives and reimagined Mexico's pre-Columbian history as part of a broader global context, with a focus on Indigenous civilizations, including the Aztecs, and a reappropriation of Spanish to emphasize Mexico's pre-Hispanic legacy. See Vicente Riva Palacio, ed., *México a través de los siglos: historia general y completa del desenvolvimiento social, político, religioso, militar, artístico, científico y literario de México desde la antigüedad más remota hasta la época actual* (México: Ballescá y Compañía; Barcelona: Espasa y Compañía, 1887).

44. In the early twentieth century, a few Mexicans began translating Nahua poetry, including Ángel María Garibay Kintana and his former student Miguel León-Portilla. Jongsoo Lee, "Emergence and Progress of Contemporary Nahua Literature: Fray Ángel María Garibay Kintana, Miguel León-Portilla, and the Pre-Hispanic Past," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 39, no. 1 (2014): 29–58.

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