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‘Currents of Progress,’ ‘Toy Store for Tourists’: Nineteenth-Century Mexican Liberals View Niagara Falls

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Most people’s knowledge of most places comes through media of various sorts, so that for most people the representation comes before the “reality”.... Literature (along with other more recent media) plays a central role in shaping people’s geographical imaginations.

— Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography*

Introduction

As Michael Crang observes here, narrative texts play a key role in shaping the popular understanding of specific places.¹ For texts such as works of travel writing, this means, in turn, that the places they depict are frequently already mediated “literary landscapes.”² Travel narrative genres ranging from works of historiography through travelogues to adventure novels convey popular notions of a given site as much as factual knowledge and thereby shape practices of travel as well as views of places and peoples. As they offer models of journeying, observing, and describing, these texts contribute not only to travelers’ choice of itineraries and destinations but also to cultural and genre-specific conventions of representing travelers’ views and experiences in written accounts of their journeys.³

One of the most prominent places in the Western hemisphere that exemplifies this phenomenon is Niagara Falls. Located on the United States–Canada border, it has come to symbolize both the grandiose and pristine nature of the New World and the

human struggle to master and subdue it.⁴ While there has been ample research on the Niagara narratives of US American and European travelers, scholars have paid less attention to portrayals of the Falls by visitors from other world regions.⁵ This essay addresses the depiction of Niagara Falls in selected travelogues by one such group, namely, nineteenth-century Mexican liberal intellectuals.⁶

I specifically argue that—as well as demonstrate how—these texts present Niagara as an ambivalent symbol of US progress and of the commodification of its nature, its transformation into a “toy store,” as one traveler put it, for the growing tourist industry.⁷ In so doing, I contest Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s claim that its location on the United States–Canada border produced the perception of the Falls “as an *inter-American icon*.”⁸ My interpretation rests on several factors. Nineteenth-century Mexican travelers journeyed primarily, if not exclusively, to the United States. Visiting Niagara mainly on the US American side, they were exposed to a highly US-centric framing of the site. Moreover, their journey accounts are specifically concerned with portraying the USA, even when also including Canada. As a consequence, the texts present the cataract unanimously as a US American symbol with potential relevance for Mexico. To contextualize this depiction, I will outline key aspects of the period’s Niagara writing in general and of Mexican visitors’ views of the United States before turning to my case studies of Mexican liberal intellectuals’ travelogues from the 1830s through the 1890s. Discussing them in their chronological order, my essay emphasizes the diachronic development of the visitors’ discussion of Niagara as a symbol of both socio-economic progress and capitalist commodification. In so doing, it contributes to a deeper understanding of nineteenth-century Mexican attitudes toward the USA. It further sheds light on the impact the transformation of the Falls had on their cultural representation at the time.

Niagara Falls in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing

First described by a nonindigenous visitor in 1683, Niagara Falls became a major travel destination, cultural icon, and recurrent topic of travelogues about North America beginning in the late eighteenth century. From the 1820s to the 1840s, improvements in public transportation and mass communication opened the Falls for the budding tourist trade: In 1825 the Erie Canal was completed, followed by the Welland Canal in 1829, establishing two continuous water routes from Lake Erie to the Atlantic on the American, respectively the Canadian, side. In the 1840s different railroad lines connected New York City and from the 1850s also Toronto to the Falls, while several bridges spanning the Niagara Gorge near the cataract expedited cross-border travel and trade. In addition to increasing the safety, speed, and capacity of Niagara travel, the new transportation routes also became tourist attractions of their own. They further facilitated the circulation of print media products—works of journalism, travel writing, gift- and guidebooks, prints, and photographs—that aroused popular interest, shaped tourist expectations, and canonized itineraries and activities at the Falls.⁹

Niagara was first and foremost known for its spectacular scenery. During the nineteenth century, the tourist industry brought forth a steadily growing architectural infrastructure, which aroused complaints among visitors seeking “untouched” nature. However, many others embraced the technological and commercial interventions at the site, as they converted the Falls from a threatening wilderness into a comfortable travel destination. Especially from the 1860s onward, Niagara witnessed the “eclipse of the [natural] sublime,” which can be related to the transformation of the area into an industrial hub in parallel with changing social attitudes toward nature and technology.¹⁰ Where Romantic writers had idealized the unmediated experience of pristine nature, both US American and Canadian society during the second half of the century equally embraced protecting this nature and using its hydroelectrical potential. As a consequence, a nature conservation movement preserved the land immediately surrounding the Falls through the creation of the New York State Reservation in 1885 and Queen Victoria Niagara Falls Park three years later. Simultaneously, however, engineers and investors erected several waterpower stations near the reserve and developed more industries nearby. Both developments attracted further tourism to the site’s renewed scenery and novel technological “wonders.” This, in turn, inspired new types of travel writing that celebrated either the Falls’ restored natural splendor or its new industrial sublime.¹¹

Nineteenth-century journey accounts of Niagara Falls largely followed a set of conventions to address their much-treated subject. Narrators consciously set themselves in the tradition of Niagara travel writing. They named previous journey accounts that informed their itineraries in order to legitimize their endeavors as well as to distinguish their narratives from those of their journeying progenitors.¹² The predominant feature of the Falls in these accounts was a sublime spectacle, whether that was to be supplied by wild nature or by the technological and tourist infrastructure harnessing it. Often narrators inaugurated their depictions of the Falls with a gesture of “submit[ing] to sensual inundations or deprivations,” a strategy that allowed them to privilege subjective observations and reflections over accurate descriptions striving for objectivity.¹³ In order to render their experiences comprehensible to large readerships, they used a language rich in imagery that drew especially on comparisons with other well-known spectacles of nature or human engineering. Niagara travelogues further endowed the spectacle of the sublime with deeper meaning. A large body of these texts decried the loss of the natural sublime and distanced themselves from its causes—tourism and industrialization. Others recurred to humor or turned to a sentimental discourse that sought to reclaim Niagara’s lost splendor by aestheticizing the cataract or idealizing its indigenous past.¹⁴ Whether they framed the Falls alternatively as a manifestation of divine power, a natural or technological wonder, or a national symbol of either the United States or Canada, all of these texts voiced changing and competing concepts of nature, nation, technology, and travel.¹⁵

Nineteenth-Century Mexican Travel and Travelogues of the United States

These developments can also be observed in nineteenth-century Mexican travel writing about Niagara. Echoing tendencies in other Latin American countries, members of the Mexican political and intellectual elite flocked to the United States during that time, either as voluntary travelers or when forced into political exile. As they associated their northern neighbor with the very modernity and progress they aspired for Mexico, a number of these visitors traveled across the former and penned their observations and experiences in travelogues to inform their fellow citizens at home about the USA. They tended to praise the country's work ethic, democratic institutions, meritocratic society, secular state, and technological advancements. Their major points of critique included the treatment of black and indigenous populations and what they viewed as widespread materialism and lack of good manners.¹⁶ The travelers further responded to the historic shift in Mexican–US relations from the shared experience of having wrested independence from a colonial power toward an unequal relationship, as the USA extended its territory and claimed political hegemony in North America. Thus, while Mexican liberal visitors to the country during the period from the 1820s until the US–Mexican War (1846–1848) looked to the United States as a possible role model for Mexico, travel accounts following the war voiced concern about the growing US American expansionism and imperialism. At the same time, owing to the crisis of United States democracy in the Gilded Age and to growing political stability in Mexico during the *Porfiriato*—the era and regime of military general Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911)—Mexican liberals' travelogues from the 1870s to the 1890s often denounced US American democracy altogether, praising only the country's nature, economic development, and technological progress.¹⁷ Both changes and continuities become manifest in a comparative, diachronic reading of six such travelogues penned between 1834 and 1895 and depicting visits to the Falls as part of their writers' longer journeys through the United States.

Mexican Travelers Writing the Falls

Mexican Travelers from the Early Republic:

Lorenzo de Zavala, Manuel Payno, and Justo Sierra O'Reilly

Lorenzo de Zavala (1788–1836), a politician, diplomat, newspaper editor, and political writer, was probably the first Mexican liberal to write a travelogue about a trip to the United States after Mexico fully gained its independence in 1821. A supporter and cabinet member of Vicente Guerrero, who had ousted President Manuel Gómez Pedraza in January 1829, Zavala was forced into exile when conservative forces regained power half a year later. He used the occasion to travel through the USA in 1830 and revisited New York in 1833–1834. His *Viaje a los Estados Unidos* (1834) is based on the author's private journal as well as on his readings of various European travelogues. The volume characterizes the political system, economy, and society of

the USA as a democratic utopia and role model for Mexico, flawed only by widespread materialism, poor social interactions, and the racial discrimination faced by African Americans.¹⁸

Zavala's depiction of the cataract in his *Viaje* follows the literary conventions established by previous Niagara narratives yet adds a new, Mexican angle of perception: The text describes the Falls and their impact on the traveler as a "spectacle," a "marvel of nature," and a "giant of a hundred arms" that "produce[d] sensations of wonder, pleasure, horror, and melancholy."¹⁹ In line with the European Romantic discourse of Niagara journeys, the Mexican narrator presents himself as a male "lone traveler reflecting on the correspondence of nature and his moods and looking to experience new emotions through contact with 'the exotic' and 'the wild.'"²⁰ Zavala bolsters the authority of these subjective musings by integrating references to popular anecdotes, historical incidences, and earlier travelogues into his narrative. He cites from François-René de Chateaubriand's travelogue *Voyage en Amérique* (1827), in order to underline the change the site had undergone since the Frenchman's 1791 visit and to voice the differences in perception between the two visitors: Where Chateaubriand characterizes the Falls as a place of retreat from Old World civilization—especially the violence of the French Revolution—Zavala portrays them but as a sign of New World progress and liberation (56–57). Especially by invoking the role of Niagara as a theater in the War of 1812, he praises the bravery of the US American soldiers against a superior British force in order to draw a parallel to the struggle of his own nation against colonial rule in the Mexican War of Independence (1810–1821) (54–56).

Even though *Viaje a los Estados Unidos* acknowledges Niagara as pertaining to both the USA and Canada, when looking at the site as a cultural signifier, the text frames it exclusively as an icon of US American advancement. Reaching beyond the common Romantic appraisal of invisible human interventions that turn a primeval wilderness into a beautiful landscape, the narrator remarks on the technical infrastructure at the Falls: "The Americans have built a bridge over to Goat Island. It is wonderful to see how they have been able to tame the terrible current that plunges down from the rocks. Genius and desire for gain have united to perform miracles of the art" (56). Here, however, it is not so much an Old World perspective that Zavala critiques but his own country's incomplete liberation from the remnants of colonialism. In addition to scrutinizing the "anarchy of Mexico" (57), where political power changed hands frequently—and had enforced the writer's exile—he admits his own failure as a statesman to advance his country: "Oh Niagara! With my eyes fixed upon your swift currents, they seemed to indicate that I was completely engrossed in the grandiose spectacle[.] I was seeing in you the most melancholy representation of our disastrous revolutions. I was reading in the succession of your waves the generations that hasten on to eternity, and in the cataracts that proceed to your abyss, the strength of some men that impels others to succeed them in their places."²¹ The depiction of

Niagara in Zavala's *Viaje* thus contributes to the book's overall representation of the USA as a role model for Mexico to emulate.

Both Zavala's embrace of human intervention at the cataract and his judicious self-assessment would give way in subsequent Mexican travelogues to intertwined critiques of the parallel ensuing mass tourism at Niagara and US American imperialism toward Mexico. In 1845, the writer, journalist, and public servant Manuel Payno (1810–1894) spent almost the entire year in the United States on a Mexican government commission to study the northern country's prison system. Many of his writings embody Mexican *costumbrismo*, a mode of writing focusing on detailed descriptions of regional and social customs and characters, often with the intention to inspire reforms and develop a sense of national identity.²² This also becomes manifest in a series of short accounts on US American life—based on the traveler's observations in New Orleans, New York, and New England—which soon appeared in Mexican periodicals. These reports praised the United States as an example of political liberty, economic success, and social progress. Simultaneously, they lamented widespread materialism, scrutinized slavery in the South, and warned of the threat the USA increasingly posed to Mexico's territorial integrity.²³

Payno visited Niagara Falls in August 1845. He opens the respective section of his travel writings with a disclaimer, arguing that this much-cited example of “sublime and marvelous things” was primarily an obligatory part of his journey that would allow him to boast about this experience after his return.²⁴ However, upon hearing and seeing the cataract for the first time, the narrator admits to remaining overwhelmed and speechless by the spectacle he had witnessed (233–34). These contrasting opening passages combine two common rhetorical gestures that enabled the writer to pay tribute to the Falls yet eschew readers' expectations of originality. His subsequent narrative squarely follows the conventions of Niagara literature, as it describes both the cataract and Payno's itinerary in great detail. Moreover, it closes with a scene that defies its initial rejection of conventions. Revisiting the Falls at night when no other travelers would disturb his encounter with nature, the narrator points out: “I found myself at the same places where years earlier Chateaubriand had passed the night” (240). In contextualizing Payno's personal experience, this scene testifies to the unresolvable dilemma of the mid-nineteenth century Niagara visitor—the wish to find unmediated sublimity at a major tourist sight. At the same time, the passage consciously presents the Mexican visitor as a cultural heir to the French writer he admired and to the Romantic travel experiences and “aesthetic appreciation of landscape” which Chateaubriand represented.²⁵

In Payno's case, this appreciation took the striking form of a series of contrasts. On the one hand, he voices his admiration for the spectacular nature in a language of religious devotion, as he repeatedly calls Niagara the work of God in his text (234–40). On the other hand, and echoing the *costumbrismo* of his writings about Mexico, he validates an interest in popular lore and the experiences of common people at the site, as he integrates anecdotes about tragic accidents and curious sights into his account.

In a similar vein, and in line with the gendered Romantic discourse of the beautiful and the sublime, Payno's narrator depicts the Falls proper as an embodiment of "masculine" sublimity. Accordingly, their "turbulent, impetuous" and "gruesome" waters displayed a "powerful impetus" and a "majestic roar" that endowed them with an "imposing and sublime majesty" (235). In contrast, the surrounding nature is described by the narrator in a language of feminine virginity and fertility with a potential for both submission and treachery: The area was available for visitors' "penetration" but simultaneously lured them to the abyss of the cataract.²⁶ In using this gendered language, Payno's text captures the complexity and contradictions of the Niagara experience in familiar images of innate qualities and power relations.

In his narrative, Payno echoes Zavala's one-sided depiction of Niagara as a solely US American site—Payno had visited Canadian attractions like Table Rock House but never mentions having crossed the border. Similarly, he shares the earlier visitor's fascination with the technological facilities serving visitors at the Falls (237–38). However, his account strikingly deviates from Zavala's optimism in voicing concern about the impact of mass tourism on the cataract. Where Zavala's text praises the bridge to Goat Island as a symbol of US American advancement, Payno's travelogue criticizes it as an unpleasant intervention into nature, one accelerating the transformation of the Falls by improving visitor access. In the same vein, the narrator scrutinizes the profit orientation of the tourist industry, manifest to him in souvenir shops selling Native Americana and the fees charged for parts of the visitor program (236, 238–39). Rather than viewing the cataract as an icon of progress, Payno's rejection of commodified nature at Niagara thus ties in with his concern about slavery and the growing US imperialism toward Mexico, originating in what he identifies as an insatiable desire for material gain.

The US–Mexican War that Payno anticipated in his travelogues would crucially sever the relations between the two countries and also alter the way Mexican visitors viewed the northern neighbor state. Justo Sierra O'Reilly (1814–1861) was one of the first Mexicans to testify to the war-era tensions between the USA and Mexico in a volume of travel writing. The Yucatecan lawyer and judge had made a name for himself as a liberal diplomat, periodical editor, and writer. In 1847 he was deployed to Washington, DC to negotiate US support for the independence of the state of Yucatán from Mexico and on behalf of the white Yucatecans in the region's Caste Wars against the Maya population.²⁷ During his stay in the United States, Sierra O'Reilly journeyed through various parts of the country and recorded his impressions in a personal journal. In spite of its title, *Impresiones de un viaje a los Estados Unidos de América y al Canadá* (1850), the travelogue he penned on the basis of his diary solely deals with his trips through the USA and also addresses a transnational border region like Niagara exclusively as part of his US American experience. The author's diplomatic mission notwithstanding, the book equally targets a Yucatecan and a larger Mexican audience. Moreover, echoing Zavala's narrative, his journey account presents the United States as a potential model for reorganizing Mexican society and economy after the lost war.

The volume voices admiration for the US American political, economic, and social institutions, its industrialization, and technological infrastructure, scrutinizing only the practice of slavery and the country's war against Mexico.²⁸

Sierra O'Reilly's account of Niagara Falls was first published separately and only later added as an appendix to his *Impresiones*, a move that testifies to the relevance of the Falls in the Mexican public imagination and the resulting interest in reports about the site.²⁹ The narrator opens this section with a series of rhetorical gestures of modesty that granted him license to speak: Probably anticipating Romantic aesthetic criticism that the cataract defied human representation, Sierra O'Reilly follows Payno in recurring to the trope of being at a loss for words upon sight of the Falls. He further declares his text a "light fragment" of "impressions of a fellow citizen" (699–700) rather than presenting it as an expert account. With these caveats in place, he provides a detailed record of his activities and observations. An almost scientific topographical description of the site soon gives way to a more emotional language that foregrounds Sierra O'Reilly's sensual impressions. These largely follow the conventions of the discourse of the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime, according to the degree of human intervention into nature they imply: Specifically, akin to Payno's gendered characterization, the cataract appears in *Impresiones de un viaje* as a ferocious creature. The narrator explicitly invokes its "powerful, formidable, and monstrous roar" and the "savagely greatness" of its "sublime view" (701). In contrast, he calls Goat Island, whose park-like landscape represents tamed nature, a "veritable enchanted island" offering almost unbelievably picturesque vistas (702).

Similarly recalling the earlier Mexican journey accounts, Sierra O'Reilly's depiction of his tour to Niagara testifies to the impact of premediated textual or visual images of the cataract on the traveler's perception. His most striking example includes his citing of José María Heredia's Romantic "Ode to Niagara" (1825), resulting from the Cuban poet's visit to the site one year earlier, as having triggered his desire to see the Falls (700). Paired with the symbolic date of his visit, July 4, the United States's Independence Day, O'Reilly's invocation of the Cuban poet exiled for advocating his island's independence clearly indicates a political agenda: The writer seeks to endow his own diplomatic and personal journeys with the legitimacy of decolonization movements in the Americas, such as the US American Revolution and the Cuban fight against Spain. For both Mexican audiences suffering from the losses of the US–Mexican war and readers from Yucatán supporting the region's independence from Mexico, this must have resonated strongly. In Sierra O'Reilly's text, Niagara Falls thus becomes a symbol of the strength and striving for freedom in the New World.

Once again in line with Payno's account, Sierra O'Reilly's *Impresiones* further criticizes the impact the ongoing human intervention at Niagara had on people's experience of the Falls. To do so, the text causally connects the development of tourism to the disappearance of Niagara's Indigenous inhabitants. At the time of Chateaubriand's visit, when only resident Indigenous nations gathered at the site, white travelers could solemnly contemplate the cataract, the text claims. In contrast,

by 1848 the area “had lost half of its illusions” (701), owing to the omnipresence of tourists and of the infrastructure catering to them. Reduced to a “miserable rest,” the remaining Indigenous nations were “barely tolerated on the lands of their fathers” as souvenir vendors (701). In invoking the plight of Niagara’s Indigenous peoples to scrutinize the commodification of the Falls, the narrator employs the popular trope of the “vanishing Indian”: While nostalgically deploring the lost Amerindian societies, this line of discourse tends to frame the fate of Indigenous people as a “natural” consequence of their presumed inability to adapt to white civilization rather than holding white society accountable for it.³⁰ Sierra O’Reilly’s text accordingly exoticizes the Niagara Indigenous nations as little-civilized “unhappy creatures” deserving “sympathy” (701). As such, the Indigenous populations remain excluded from the narrative of emancipation and aesthetic admiration the volume’s Niagara section otherwise conveys. This paternalistic attitude further aligns with the author’s role as Yucatecan diplomat who lobbied for US support for quashing the Maya independence movement in his own state.³¹ Against this backdrop, *Impresiones de un viaje* exploits the Niagara Indigenous nations in order to scrutinize a seemingly insatiable Anglo American greed. At the same time, their seemingly “inevitable” fate serves to justify similar practices of white land-taking and Indigenous subjugation in Yucatán—and thus to disentangle Sierra O’Reilly’s critique of the USA and his own diplomatic mission.

Travelers of the Porfiriato: Guillermo Prieto, Alberto Lombardo, and Justo Sierra Méndez

The growing ambivalence toward both US American politics and the transformation of Niagara Falls into a major tourist destination that can be witnessed in the journey accounts from Zavala to Sierra O’Reilly continued to inform Mexican travelogues through the last quarter of the nineteenth century. One of the most prolific of these later visitors was the writer, journalist, politician, and educator Guillermo Prieto (1818–1897). A loyal supporter of former liberal president Benito Juárez, he was forced into exile after Porfirio Díaz seized power through a coup in 1876. Prieto used the occasion to journey extensively across the United States. Based on his travel diary and signed with one of his popular pen names, Fidel, he published the journey account *Viaje á los Estados-Unidos* (1877–1878) shortly after his return to Mexico. Although his travelogue scrutinizes corruption in the US American political system, law enforcement, and media, the text acknowledges the economic prosperity and technological advancement of the northern neighbor as a model for regenerating Mexico.³² This was a common attitude among Mexican liberals of the period, as the growing influence of positivism in the country generated a hitherto unknown enthusiastic appraisal of science and the economy, two fields in which the United States excelled during the heyday of the Industrial Revolution.³³

Prieto’s *Viaje* further shows the specific influence of the author’s cultural and journalistic formation. With its flowery prose and focus on landscape description and

historical information, the text recalls Alexander von Humboldt's Latin American travelogues. As Thea Pitman points out, Humboldt's works enjoyed a renewed popularity in Mexico during the 1860s and early 1870s for their blending of scientific study, personal observation, and compelling narrative. By imitating the thematic scope and writing style of the Prussian scholar, Prieto explicitly placed his account in the highly esteemed tradition of Humboldtian travel writing.³⁴ This approach is demonstrated in an exemplary way in Prieto's depiction of his visit to Niagara Falls. The respective chapter in *Viaje á los Estados-Unidos* chronicles Prieto's itinerary and his sensual impressions of the cataract. Historical information and moving anecdotes further render the text both informative and entertaining. Following the conventions of Niagara literature, the narrator characterizes the Falls as a sublime spectacle, which not only manifests a divine hand but also inspires intellectual reflection and artistic imagination.³⁵ The most striking examples of the latter are probably the two poems Prieto inserted into his narrative, which not only muse about the powers of God and creation but also about the vanity and transitoriness of life. By explicitly dating the second poem May 5, 1877, the writer endows the piece with a patriotic meaning: The date marks the fifteenth anniversary of the Battle of Puebla, the most famous Mexican victory in the nation's fight under Juárez against the Second French intervention in the country (1862–1864). Prieto's poetic reflections about life and death may thus be read as a strategy to express not only his personal loss but also his hope in the restoration of liberal democracy in Mexico.³⁶

The Niagara poems also connect to the surrounding prose in their dealing with the impact of technological intervention at the Falls. While the poems convey the water power of the cataract in the mechanical image of a pump (305–06, 310), the prose sections positively acknowledge the transformation of Niagara through tourism and trade, manifest in the fellow visitors and the infrastructure serving them (284, 291, 294–97). Prieto's *Viaje* particularly marvels at the two suspension bridges across the Niagara River, which had become major sights of their own by the late 1870s.³⁷ For instance, the text calls the Niagara Railway Suspension Bridge "one of Niagara's wonders" (289) and it characterizes the railway crossing the bridge as an icon of North American industrial modernity and mastery of nature: "Hither crosses the locomotive, taking the villages and the seeds of universal brotherhood as its trail, making the bridge shake, ringing out its triumphant bell, with its summit of smoke and flames suspended above the abyss, at the bottom of which bellows the torrent" (290). In welcoming the transformation of Niagara and integrating it into a traditional discourse of aesthetic appreciation, Prieto's narrative represents a radical turn away from the previous generation of Mexican travelogues that had treated the two issues as rather incompatible.

However, one area in which *Viaje á los Estados-Unidos* firmly aligns with its predecessor texts is its identification of the Falls with US American civilization. Like Sierra O'Reilly, Prieto never mentions that he crossed to the Canadian side of the cataract or that the bridges across the Niagara River connect the two countries (289–

90). This exclusive focus on the USA as well as on interactions of modernity and tradition, powerful technology, and pristine nature, would also characterize the travelogues of two other Mexican writers of the *Porfiriato*, Alberto Lombardo and Justo Sierra Méndez. Little is known about the life of the former. A lawyer with a strong interest in Mexican history and politics, Lombardo (c. 1847–?) debuted as a writer with the 1884 journey account *Los Estados Unidos: Notas y episodios de viaje*. In contrast to the earlier Mexican travelogues examined here, Lombardo's volume resulted neither from an enforced exile nor an officially commissioned journey but from a private leisure trip.³⁸ Due to advances in transportation that made such journeys affordable for a larger public, Thea Pitman points out, "the sudden possibility of leisure travel, both at home and abroad, [was] a trademark ... of the Porfiriato."³⁹ *Los Estados Unidos* consciously echoes the positivist approach toward the United States voiced in Prieto's journey narrative. The book provides Mexican readers with information about the USA that criticizes the country's politics and society while recommending its urbanization, industrialization, and economic progress as a model for a modern Mexico.⁴⁰

Echoing all of the earlier Mexican travelogues, Lombardo's depiction of his visit to Niagara Falls in *Los Estados Unidos* squarely follows the conventions of Niagara writing. It describes the physical appearance of the cataract, tells anecdotes related to it, narrates the author's activities and observations, and frames the transnational site as a solely US American one. Lombardo's narrative further recurs to a poetic register to characterize the cataract, even personifying it as a fugitive human. "Chased by an invisible enemy, [the water] has taken a rapid path Now it runs among the rocks ..., takes advantage of an exit amidst flowers; now it kisses the feet of corpulent trees as if asking for their protection" (178). Simultaneously, the travelogue deviates from the previous accounts in its frequent use of scientific terminology and statistical information, possibly to endow the book with a scholarly quality.⁴¹ At times the narrator mingles literary, scientific, and religious language, for instance when he invokes how the violent path of the water molecules creates beautiful rainbows (178). Elsewhere, he compares the space behind the curtain of falling water to a "royal reception room" before characterizing it as "cavern of crystals formed by nature" (180) and describing the emotional response it elicits in the beholder: "The soul remains stunned in view of such a luxurious ostentation of all that is possible to reunite the beautiful and the picturesque, admirable, dreadful, and moving" (180), the narrator concludes.

To underline its blended poetic and scientific approach to the Falls, *Los Estados Unidos* cites famous European travelogues such as Chateaubriand's comment on the diluvial origins of Niagara or Lord Byron's description of Marmore Falls in Italy as a springboard for Lombardo's reflections about the passing of time, which the course of the water and the age of Niagara represent to him (179). In a different vein, the writer follows Zavala in pointing to the role of the area as a theater in the War of 1812 and, like Sierra O'Reilly, he invokes Heredia's "Ode to Niagara" as a reference to the area's rich vegetation. However, he abstains from endowing his observations with political meaning through parallels to developments in Mexico (178, 182). This was clearly in line

with the writer's stated intention to educate the Mexican reading public by entertaining them with "light narratives"—which, albeit, integrate scientific knowledge and poetic or religious reflection.⁴²

Lombardo's only critique of Niagara concerns its commodification by the tourist industry. In contrast to earlier travelogues, *Los Estados Unidos* does not target the visual transformation of the space through architectural infrastructure entrenching on nature. However, the travelogue scrutinizes the capitalist drive behind the local tourist trade. Echoing Payno's complaint, Lombardo's narrator laments that "the museums are merely a medium to take the foreigner's money," and "the portrait painters did not cease to follow [the visitors] for a single moment" (181). This changed perception of the impact of tourism likely results from the successful preservation initiative that was in the process of protecting the Falls area as a nature reserve at the time of Lombardo's visit. As public parks and refurbished architectural infrastructure flanked the water on both sides, the cataract once again conveyed the more lavish appeal of the early days of Niagara tourism.⁴³

The simultaneous transformation of the Falls area into a more pleasurable and commodified experience of nature that Lombardo's account speaks of also informs one of the last Mexican travelogues of the nineteenth-century United States, Justo Sierra Méndez's *En tierra yankee: Notas a todo vapor* (1898). The son of Justo Sierra O'Reilly, Sierra Méndez (1848–1912) had gained distinction as both a liberal diplomat, jurist, and politician and as a journalist, writer, and educator. His travelogue records his observations from a private two-month railway journey through the USA he had undertaken in 1895.⁴⁴ In this text, he openly struggles to free himself from the conventions of Latin American journey narratives, especially the tendency to depict the United States as a model of unparalleled modernity.⁴⁵ However, stylistically informed by the author's literary and journalistic background, *En tierra yankee* "exudes fin-de-siècle, pan-Hispanic self-confidence ..., frivolity, and intellectual cosmopolitanism," as Guy Thomson observes.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the travelogue paints a rather negative and often ridiculing picture of the USA, targeting especially the nation's ignorance of Latin American countries and its simultaneous striving for hegemony in the hemisphere. Yet, in line with Sierra Méndez's enthusiasm for science, the text also joins Prieto's and Lombardo's accounts in praising US American economic, technological, and industrial advancements.⁴⁷

En tierra yankee ascribes a monumental character to the urban spaces of the United States. This has an equivalent in the majestic nature of Niagara Falls, which Sierra Méndez visited in winter.⁴⁸ The narrator's depiction of the site once again includes some of the stereotypical elements of Niagara writing, namely geographical descriptions, anecdotes, and a narrative chronicling the traveler's itinerary, thoughts, and experiences. By invoking Dante's *Inferno* when watching the abyss of the cataract, Sierra Méndez conveys its impression on the visitor through an image familiar from European culture (176). Although he distinguishes the US American from the Canadian side of the Falls, he never addresses the cataract as a Canadian travel destination.

Instead, references to the visits of Chateaubriand, Heredia, the Irish scientist John Tyndall (1872), and Sierra O'Reilly further enforce his mediated knowledge of the site as an American attraction.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, *En tierra yankee* turns away from the tradition of Niagara journeys. In contrast to these earlier travelers and aligning with Lombardo's text, the narrator does not frame the Falls as a political symbol of either pristine nature or technological progress. Instead, he likens the snowclad landscape to "a cadaver, very rigid, very pale."⁵⁰ In a similar vein, where earlier Mexican travelers had employed Niagara as a springboard for reflections on conditions in Mexico in their narratives, Sierra Méndez merely calls the Falls a "perpetual stage set for the subjective drama [...] of one's inner life."⁵¹

Nonetheless, *En tierra yankee* reaches back to the tradition of Romantic Mexican Niagara narratives, as it critiques the industrial consumer capitalism that had transformed the Falls into a commercial tourist attraction. Possibly inspired by the writer's fear of being viewed as a common tourist himself, the narrator employs an often-humorous, albeit at times acid, tone.⁵² For example, he scrutinizes the omnipresence of souvenir shops and ethnographic museums near the cataract: The Native American artifacts displayed at these venues, he states, not only appeared "like props from a Fenimore Cooper novel," but they were also inauthentic. Rather than being produced by the Indigenous nations of Niagara, these souvenirs were "made by the *redskins* ... in Germany,"—that is, they were merchandise mass-manufactured in international production circuits.⁵³ Sierra Méndez's writing about the disappearance of the Indigenous population at Niagara and his derogatory terminology once again invoke the trope of the "vanishing Indian" also employed in Payno's travelogue. Echoing his views about the indigenous element of Mexican society, Sierra Méndez, although primarily criticizing the tourist industry in this passage, also considers Indigenous lifeways as incompatible with the American modernity Niagara represents to him.

In addition to targeting the commodification of Amerindian culture for marketing purposes, these and other comments also reveal how Sierra Méndez's own knowledge of US culture was informed by popular media representations, such as Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Interestingly, his complaint about the disappearing natural sublime at Niagara does not extend to the technological interventions at the site, such as the controversial project of enlarging the hydroelectric power capacities of the Falls.⁵⁴ Moreover, while Sierra Méndez displays his acquaintance with various cultural representations of the site (172), *En tierra yankee* presents the less familiar image of a visit to the cataract in snowfall (174–79). And in spite of lamenting the loss of untouched nature at Niagara (177), the narrator nonetheless finds a moment of sublime experience that once again blends the discourses of religion and technology: "What amazed me was the supreme majesty with which the current reached the edge and the sudden frenzy of the fall; the mass has been following the mass, the molecule the molecule, incessantly, incessantly since Creation" (178).

Conclusion

As Charles Forsdick observes, Niagara Falls “ha[s] been deployed as a shifting trope in various places, at various moments and for various purposes.”⁵⁵ It is hence no surprise that it was endowed with special meaning in the travelogues nineteenth-century liberal Mexican intellectuals penned about their journeys through the United States. The six narratives studied here squarely follow major literary conventions of US American and European Niagara writing of the period, depicting their narrators’ itineraries, observations, thoughts, and experiences. A sublime spectacle of primeval nature that was increasingly harnessed and transformed into a major tourist and industrial site, the Falls inspired the Mexican visitors to reflect on Mexico’s stagnating development, on the destructive potential of US American economic transformation, and on the differences between the New World and the Old.

While they all voice admiration for the spectacular nature of the cataract, the Mexican writers’ assessments of the commercial and technological interventions into the area vary considerably, depending on the situation at the Falls, on the one hand, and on the visitors’ attitudes to science, capitalism, and the USA, on the other. Informed by Romantic thought and more unanimously viewing the United States as a social, political, and economic model for their own country, Mexican travelers of the 1830s and 1840s displayed a growing mistrust of the nascent tourist industry and its impact on nature. Where Lorenzo de Zavala’s 1834 travelogue still welcomes the modest human interventions at Niagara as a sign of US American civilizational progress, Manuel Payno’s and Justo Sierra O’Reilly’s accounts from 1845 and 1848 critique the growing tourism at the site. The latter, however, also echoes Zavala’s political interpretation, as his narrative implies a view of the cataract as a symbol of New World strength and striving, which he aspired for Mexico to achieve as well.

In contrast, and in line with their more thorough criticism of United States politics and society, Mexican travelers of the *Porfiriato* tended to increasingly reject the capitalist commodification of Niagara Falls. At the same time, they embraced the technological interventions at the cataract as signs of US American industrial modernity, which they still viewed as an inspiration for reforming Mexico’s economy and society. While Guillermo Prieto’s 1877 travelogue appreciates the amenities of the tourist infrastructure at the Falls, Alberto Lombardo in 1884 and Justo Sierra O’Reilly in 1895 clearly reject the way the industry took advantage of visitors. Moreover, although they viewed Niagara as an example of US American technological–industrial advancement, their narratives did not endow the cataract with any deeper socio-political meaning. As this overview of Mexican travelogues from the 1830s to the 1890s has thus shown, in less than seventy years, Mexican liberal intellectuals’ perceptions and representations of the Falls moved from a set of “swift currents” of progress to a landscape commodified into a “toy store” for tourists.⁵⁶

Notes

¹ Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1998), 44.

² Crang, *Cultural Geography*, 7.

³ Ottmar Ette, *Literature on the Move*, trans. Katharina Vester (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 24–25, 40–41.

⁴ William Irwin, *The New Niagara: Tourism, Technology, and the Landscape of Niagara Falls, 1776–1917* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵ See, e.g., Irwin, *New Niagara*; McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*; Linda Revie, *The Niagara Companion: Explorers, Artists and Writers at the Falls, from Discovery through the Twentieth Century* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003); Charles Forsdick, “French Representations of Niagara: From Hennepin to Butor,” in *American Travel and Empire*, ed. Susan Castillo and David Seed (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

⁶ Scholarship that mentions Mexican travels to Niagara includes Victoria Lerner, “Ensayo sobre la evolución de las ideas y actitudes de los liberales mexicanos hacia Estados Unidos durante el siglo XIX,” in *Estados Unidos desde América Latina: Sociedad, política y cultura*, ed. Víctor A. Arriaga Weiss and Ana Rosa Suárez Argüello (Mexico City: Colegio de México / Instituto Mora, 1995); Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Ana Rosa Suárez Argüello, “Imaginar a la patria en la distancia: Cuatro viajeros mexicanos en Estados Unidos a fines de la primera república federal,” in *La construcción del discurso nacional en México: Un anhelo persistente*, ed. Nicole Girón (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2007); and the studies on individual travelers cited in this essay.

⁷ Justo Sierra [Méndez], *En tierra yankee: Notas a todo vapor* (Archives.org.), <https://archive.org/details/entierrayankeenooosier/177>.

⁸ Gruesz, *Ambassadors*, 30, original emphasis.

⁹ Irwin, *New Niagara*, xix–xxii, 12–19, 22, 31–61, 64–65; McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, 37–38, 127–130, 133–40, 149, 156–64, 253–56; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 2–4, 13.

¹⁰ McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, 251; see also Irwin, *New Niagara*, 2, 19–23, 30; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 4. On the concepts of the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime see Revie, *Niagara Companion* 5–9.

¹¹ Irwin, *New Niagara*, xvi–xvii, 61–130, 207–11; McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, 256–58, 262–74; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 143–51, 158–59.

¹² Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 59–60, 109–10.

- ¹³ Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 155.
- ¹⁴ Irwin, *New Niagara*, 18, 70, 207; McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, 136, 156–77, 191–200, 215–28; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 110–12, 157–59.
- ¹⁵ McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, 39–40, 43–44, 46–54, 89–108; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 110–12, 153–57.
- ¹⁶ Jack Ray Thomas, “Latin American Views of United States Politics in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 360–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3123835>; Astrid Haas, “Between Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny: Spanish American Travel Narratives of Jacksonian America,” in *The Transculturation of Mobile Narratives: Travel, Migration, and Identity*, ed. Eleftheria Arapoglou, Mónica Fodor, and Jopi Nyman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31–32.
- ¹⁷ Thomas, “Latin American Views,” 360, 366, 370–72; Lerner, “Ensayo,” 60–75; Guy Thomson, “Mexican Liberals and the Uses of the United States, 1829–1910,” in *Americanisms: Discourses of Exception, Exclusion, Exchange*, ed. Michael Steppat (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 309–14.
- ¹⁸ Haas, “Between,” 32–36, 39–40; Suárez Argüello, “Imaginar,” 73–79, 89–104; John-Michael Rivera, “‘A Complete Though Bloody Victory’: Lorenzo de Zavala and the Transnational Paradoxes of Sovereignty,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 428–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876718>.
- ¹⁹ Lorenzo de Zavala, *Journey to the United States of North America / Viaje a los Estados Unidos del Norte de América*, ed. John-Michel Rivera (Houston: Arte Público, 2005), 54–55.
- ²⁰ Thea Pitman, *Mexican Travel Writing* (New York: Lang, 2008), 38; also 40.
- ²¹ Zavala, *Journey*, 57; see also, Rivera, “Complete,” 435–36; Suárez Argüello, “Imaginar,” 77.
- ²² Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 38, 40–42, 52.
- ²³ Blanca Estela Treviño, “Prólogo,” in *Crónicas de viaje por Veracruz y otros lugares* by Manuel Payno, ed. Boris Rosen Jélomer (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1996), 24, 26–30; Ana Rosa Suárez Argüello, “La Mirada en el espejo: El viaje de Manuel Payno a Estados Unidos,” *Anuario de historia, Nueva Época* 1 (2007): 103–12, <http://www.journals.unam.mx/index.php/anhist/article/view/31579>.
- ²⁴ Manuel Payno, *Crónicas de viaje por Veracruz y otros lugares*, ed. Boris Rosen Jélomer (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1996), 231. Here and in the following, all English quotes from Spanish texts are my own translations.
- ²⁵ Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 38; see also 40, 53.

²⁶ Payno, *Crónicas*, 234–36; on the gendering of these categories see Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 6–7.

²⁷ Throughout the 1840s, the Mexican province of Yucatán struggled for independence from Mexico. Moreover, in 1847 the so-called Caste Wars broke out when the indigenous Maya population rose against white oppression and fought for their own independent state. On Sierra O'Reilly see Ludwig Nolte Blanquet, "La Imagen de los Estados Unidos de América en la obra del mexicano Justo Sierra O'Reilly" (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2005), 9–11, 23–42, <https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/7018>.

²⁸ Lerner, "Ensayo," 64–65; Nolte Blanquet, "Imagen," 11–12, 49–57, 91–153, 156; Manuel Sol, "Estudio preliminar," in *Impresiones de un viaje a los Estados Unidos del Norte de América y al Canadá* by Justo Sierra O'Reilly, ed. Manuel Sol (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012).

²⁹ Justo Sierra O'Reilly, *Impresiones de un viaje a los Estados Unidos del Norte de América y al Canadá*, ed. Manuel Sol (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012), 699; see also, Sol, "Estudio preliminar," 10.

³⁰ On the trope see, for example, Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), 3–12.

³¹ Nolte Blanquet, "Imagen," 107, 128–29, 133.

³² Gruesz, *Ambassadors*, 199, 202–03; Francisco López Cámara, *Los Viajes de Guillermo Prieto: Estudio introductorio* (Cuernavaca: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias, 1994), 19–20, 101–03; Marina Martínez Andrade, "Al encuentro con el otro: Un viaje de Guillermo Prieto," in *Espacio, viajes y viajeros*, ed. Luz Elena Zamudio (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana–Iztapalapa, 2004), 67–71, 81, 84–85.

³³ Lerner, "Ensayo," 65–68.

³⁴ Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 16–17, 54–55.

³⁵ Guillermo Prieto, *Viaje á los Estados-Unidos*, vol. 2 (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2017), 286, 290–91, 293–94, 299, 303–04, 307–08, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/nd/ark:/59851/bmcm0365>; see also, López Cámara, *Viajes*, 20, 143–44.

³⁶ Prieto, *Viaje*, 305–06, 309–12; see also, Gruesz, *Ambassadors*, 202–03.

³⁷ On the bridges see Irwin, *New Niagara*, 36, 42–43.

³⁸ Adán Cruz Bencomo, "Un enigma de nombre Alberto Lombardo," in *Republicanos en otro imperio: Viajeros mexicanos a Nueva York, 1830–1895*, ed. Vicente Quirarte (Mexico

City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2009), 367–70; Silvia Ruiz-Tregallo, “Nation and Woman: From Conquered to Conqueror in ‘Los Estados Unidos (Notas y episodios de viaje)’ by Alberto Lombardo,” *Romance Notes* 50, no. 3 (2010): 296.

³⁹ Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 67.

⁴⁰ Cruz Bencomo, “Enigma,” 370–71; Lerner, “Ensayo,” 68, 70–71, 73; Ruiz-Tregallo, “Nation,” 295.

⁴¹ Alberto Lombardo, *Los Estados Unidos: Notas y episodios de viaje* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora; Houston: Humanities Research Center and Fondren Library, Rice University, 2010), 177–82, <https://scholarship.rice.edu/jsp/xml/1911/27421/1/m012.tei.html>; see also, Ruiz-Tregallo, “Nation,” 296.

⁴² Lombardo, *Estados Unidos*, n.p.; see also, Cruz Bencomo, “Enigma,” 369.

⁴³ Irwin, *New Niagara*, 63–95; Revie, *Niagara Companion*, 144–46.

⁴⁴ Jesús M. Zulueta, “Justo Sierra en Estados Unidos,” in *Actas del XIV. Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas*, vol. 4, ed. Isaías Lerner (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2004), 691; Cristina Beatriz Fernández, “Espacios y signos de la modernidad en los escritos de Justo Sierra (sobre su viaje a los EE.UU.),” *El hilo de la fábula* 11 (2011): 122, <https://doi.org/10.14409/hf.v1i11.1971>.

⁴⁵ Fernández, “Espacios,” 122–23, 128, <https://doi.org/10.14409/hf.v1i11.1971>; Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 51, 70.

⁴⁶ Thomson, “Mexican Liberals,” 311; see also, Zulueta, “Justo Sierra” 691; Lerner, “Ensayo,” 72.

⁴⁷ Fernández, “Espacios,” 122–26; Zulueta, “Justo Sierra,” 692–98.

⁴⁸ Fernández, “Espacios,” 126–27.

⁴⁹ Sierra [Méndez], *Tierra yankee*, 172; see also, Pitman, *Mexican Travel* 69.

⁵⁰ Sierra [Méndez], *Tierra yankee*, 176, and again in a similar metaphor on page 179.

⁵¹ Sierra [Méndez], *Tierra yankee*, 179; see also, Zulueta, “Justo Sierra,” 693.

⁵² Pitman, *Mexican Travel*, 72; Zulueta, “Justo Sierra,” 691–92, 694.

⁵³ Sierra [Méndez], *Tierra yankee*, 174, 175, original emphasis and ellipsis; see also, Fernández, “Espacios,” 127.

⁵⁴ On the power plants see Irwin, *New Niagara*, 109–20.

⁵⁵ Forsdick, “French Representations,” 58.

⁵⁶ Zavala, *Journey*, 57; Sierra [Méndez], *Tierra yankee*, 177.

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