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### **TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World**

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Carlos Alberto González Sánchez, professor of early modern history at the University of Seville and a specialist in the history of printing and reading brings to the academic English-speaking world an updated translation of his first book published in 1999 with the title: *Los mundos del libro: Medios de difusión de la cultura occidental en las Indias de los siglos XVI y XVII*. González's work offers an interesting account and thorough description of the circulation and possession of books in the Iberian world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Despite the strength of this field in North American, British, and especially French historiography, the history of book circulation and reading practices remains a novelty for the Iberian and Iberian American worlds. In the past decade scholars such as Rolena Adorno, Magdalena Chocano, Pedro Guibovich, Araceli Tinajero, and Nicholas Wey Gómez have produced cutting-edge scholarship in this area of analysis. Carlos Alberto González is part of this trend, and his four books in Spanish and this latest in English are mandatory readings for anyone interested in this important yet still new avenue of research in the historiography of the region.

One of the earliest and best attempts at reconstructing and analyzing the book trade was that pursued by Irving Leonard in his *Books of the Brave* (1949), which González cites as his source of inspiration. Leonard's brilliant study of the circulation of ideas and popular literature, e.g. novels of chivalry and *El Quijote* in America, set the bar so high that it still stands out as an example of great scholarship. Throughout his work, González remains in conversation with Leonard, at times expanding his work, at times reaching different conclusions.

González begins by noting that the expansion of Iberian power to the New World happened at a time when the printing presses were taking off in Spain and Portugal, which

turned books into vital instruments of imperial expansion. González claims as his main concern the influence of European Spanish book culture in America. What books formed part of this culture and who received them are his leading questions.

Professor González places his work in an Atlantic context, a decision that suits this topic, for when one talks about culture, it is impossible to restrict the analysis to a specific area of the Hispanic world. The book makes only few references to the Portuguese Atlantic. This might derive from the fact that Portuguese America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was sparsely colonized and its cities lacked the density and intensity of Mexico's or Lima's courtly life.

One of the strengths of Professor González's contribution is his vast research. He has been working on these topics for almost thirty years and this book is a testimony to the depth of his knowledge and his vast experience with archives. He brings fascinating evidence from the General Archives of Seville, Seville Provincial Historical Archive, and the National Library of Madrid. González presents his sources with clarity and generously suggests possible avenues of research for new adventurers in this field.

The book is divided in six chapters, which follow a thematic order. González devotes the first section to a historiographical discussion. Here he explains his decision to focus on books printed in Spain, which he claims accounted for the majority of books circulating in the New World. He combines his research on their publication with an analysis of their transportation and ownership in Spanish America. González discusses in detail the strengths and weaknesses of his sources: inventories of libraries; *bienes de difuntos*, the property of the deceased, especially those of Spaniards who died in the Indies without heirs and demanded the intervention of the *audiencias* (royal courts) and *consulados* (house of trade) to settle matters; and finally the boarding licenses of passengers, who would sometimes mention the books they were taking along for the long journey ahead. In addition, González works with more conventional sources used extensively by Leonard, such as the *registros de naos* or ship registers and inquisition records on censorship.

Chapter two pursues various goals. It begins by analyzing the books passengers owned. Through ship inspections, González presents a reading universe conformed of epic texts and novels, the *picaresca* in particular, comedies, some history texts, classics, manuals for medicine, calendars, legal and nautical matters, as well as religious and moral books- the old version of self-help texts. The chapter then turns to a detailed explanation of the

mechanisms through which the crown organized and controlled the circulation of books, the role of the Inquisition and House of Trade and how these mechanisms changed through time. Refuting the Black Legend, González concludes that the crown actively promoted the circulation of certain books and encouraged their reading.

In chapter three, “Literary Worlds,” González departs from Leonard to argue that about ninety percent of all books that reached the Americas legally dealt with religious matters. Moreover, considering lay books and literature and in opposition to Leonard, Gonzalez claims that books of chivalry constituted only a minor part of the book trade. He notes, however, that by 1605 there was a strong presence of *Guzmán de Alfarache* and *El Quijote*, which the crown favored for their moralizing predicaments. These strong statements merited a lengthier discussion, one that could have included a reflection or a comment on the role of illegal trade and contraband in the circulation of books. French historians have written extensively on these matters and economic historians of Spanish America have shown the enormous weight of illegal trade in the region.

The last two chapters are shorter. We learn in chapter five that the principal consumers of legally imported books were clerks, priests, merchants, and artisans.

The chapter concludes with a helpful discussion of prices, which proves that books were indeed expensive and out of reach for the majority of the population. They could be read aloud in public spaces and switched hands often, but they remained a rare possession and an investment. Chapter six wraps up the arguments and describes which books dominated this early literary republic. Here again, the author could have brought more nuances to his analysis, for his findings reflect a mostly official literary culture. His more balanced sources, the records of the deceased, are also biased. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, few relatives would have run the risk of declaring forbidden books among the possessions of a deceased loved-one. The book ends with an epilogue in which the author reflects on his research and the relevance of the topic. His vast experience and commitment to this kind of research shows that if anyone is suited to undertake the more challenging history of the underground circulation of forbidden texts, to paraphrase the great Robert Darnton, it's him.

Finally, two notes of caution. While it is important to recognize the power of books in the Hispanic world of the Golden Age, we should not forget that illiteracy prevailed in both Spain and its new American kingdoms. For the sake of putting matters in perspective, an analysis on literacy rates would have been a welcome addition. Second, González

enthusiasm for his subject of study leads him to end his book with a rather unfortunate quote by Leonard celebrating that Spain “gave [America] generously, something more lasting: her books, which are the undying symbols of her creative genius.” Spanish colonization of the Americas was anything but generous. The spread of Spain’s fantastic book culture came at the loss of indigenous practices that spread knowledge and culture through sophisticated glyphic systems, oral traditions, and quipus.