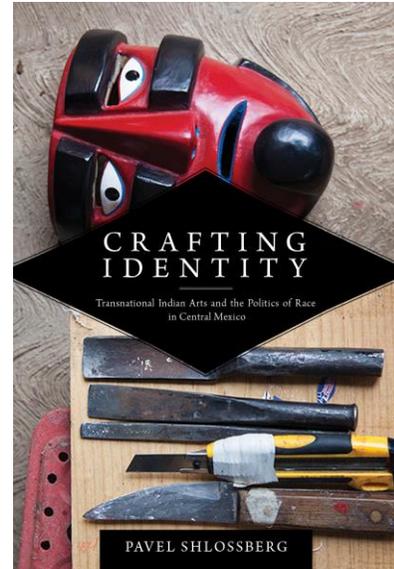


Pavel Shlossberg, **Crafting Identity: Transnational Indian Arts and the Politics of Race in Central Mexico**, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015, 268 pp., \$55.00 (hardcover).

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In ***Crafting Identity: Transnational Indian Arts and the Politics of Race in Central Mexico***, communication scholar Pavel Shlossberg examines traditional Mexican mask making as a form of media widely perceived to communicate about indigenous identity. The study complements research on cultural citizenship exploring the flow of indigenous images, symbols, and artifacts within a variety of media and popular culture venues (Brady, 2009, 2011; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002; Marchi, 2009). Interrogating theoretical understandings of identity and cultural citizenship through the lens of Mexican masks and festivals, the author illustrates how dominant institutions of cultural production mediate Mexico's *arte popular*. The term *arte popular* ("art of the people") is used throughout Latin America to refer to handicrafts and folk art considered to be authentic embodiments of a country's cultural traditions. This art is typically created by economically impoverished indigenous peoples and rural mestizos (individuals of mixed indigenous and nonindigenous ancestry).



A romanticized nostalgia for "the primitive" has accompanied the secularization, standardization, and industrialization of modern life, fueling a large and growing market for "traditional" masks, pottery, and crafts originally produced in relatively small quantities for personal consumption and daily use by Mexico's indigenous inhabitants (Barbash, 1993; Esser, 1988; Chibnik, 2003). Shlossberg vividly illustrates that while *arte popular* is extolled and promoted by Mexico's government, tourism industry, elite art institutions, and mass media, the rural indigenous and mestizo people who create this art continue to be nearly as disenfranchised today as they were 500 years ago.

Based on ethnographic work conducted over a two-year period with mask makers, collectors, museum curators, art book editors, and others, Shlossberg places Mexico's mask makers within the larger context of their relationship to the nation-state, examining the symbolic and material pressures that force rural artisans to enact self-racializing stereotypes and performances of stigmatized indigenous identities. These include notions of indigenous people as childlike, humble, culturally pure, and geographically isolated beings who operate outside of the polluting influences of modernity and capitalism. Weaving together cultural theory and ethnographic data, the author reveals how concepts of indigenous authenticity are deeply shaped by racist and classist assumptions held by nonindigenous elites, and how rural practices of mask making are influenced by tourism, commerce, international trade, art catalog publishers, and museum curators.

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The book is a critique of essentialist discourses about race and ethnicity, drawing on the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being made by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration (Foucault, 1989, 1991). It is also a critique of scholarship that has argued that recent upsurges in indigenous identities in Mexico and across Latin America are grassroots phenomena in response to the displacement of state power under globalization and neoliberalism (Appadurai, 1996; Brysk, 2000; García-Canclini, 1993, 1995; Nagengast & Kearney, 1990). In contrast, Shlossberg expands our knowledge of how and why the Mexican state retains a durable capacity to manage and promote racialized indigenous identities (Friedlander, 2006; Martínez Novo, 2006; Saldívar, 2011).



Figure 1. Traditional Mexican masks of animals, devils, saints, Moors, and Christians.

A well-established aspect of ritual life in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, masks symbolizing animals, warriors, kings, and other important individuals were worn in ceremonial dances during rites of passage and sacred festivals to teach histories and instill collective cultural norms. In the 16th century, Spanish missionaries appropriated existing Mesoamerican masking traditions to promote Christianity via morality plays, with masks representing saints, angels, the devil, other biblical characters, and battling "Christians" and "Moors." Today, ceremonial masking remains an important aspect of Mexico's village festivals and, since the early 20th century, tourists, art collectors, and museums have purchased Mexican

masks (Figure 1) as emblems of the country's national patrimony. High-profile annual competitions to judge mask aesthetics have been instituted by the Mexican government and elite art institutions (e.g., the national Casa de Artesanías, the National Fund for the Promotion of Crafts, and others), purportedly to reward talented artisans and keep rural masking traditions alive.

The book poignantly depicts how indigenous craftspeople are patronizingly glorified by Mexico's cultural institutions and mass media as conveyors of "authentic México," but are allowed no say in setting the criteria by which the quality of their work is evaluated and, therefore, no say in pricing their products for domestic and international markets. Shlossberg illustrates how this keeps Mexican mask makers impoverished and responsive to the aesthetic preferences of elite mask appraisers, who judge masks based on their own tired tropes of indigeneity. He argues that social inequality is naturalized and justified by widespread discourses that invoke the category of the "Indian" in ways that keep rural people in a space outside of and supposedly resistant to modernity. The myth that Mexico's rural villagers live in premodern worlds with their own timeless way of doing things, he further contends, justifies neoliberal policies that evade governmental responsibilities to provide quality education, health care, or job opportunities in poor rural communities.

Chapter 1 offers firsthand descriptions of mask-judging events attended by the author, illustrating the hypocrisy of the evaluation process, in which upper-class, nonindigenous scholars, art collectors, and other elites from Mexico and abroad decide which masks embody Mexico's "authentic" indigenous culture. These decisions are made behind closed doors—by invitation only—to determine the value and pricing of masks, while the actual mask makers are excluded from the decision making that determines the value of their creations. While the judges (who Shlossberg notes hail from some of the wealthiest families in Mexico) stay in luxury hotels and feast sumptuously at annual mask-judging events, the mask makers eat and sleep outside on the ground. Unable to exercise creative autonomy in their craft or earn enough to live, families that have made masks for generations are increasingly migrating to the United States and elsewhere, jeopardizing the future of Mexican mask-making traditions altogether.

Chapter 2 discusses how masks are used in the performance of morality plays, or *pastorelas*, during village festivals, where characters publically perform allegorical dramatizations that represent tales of good and evil and often present ironic critiques of injustices, corruption, and other abuses of power. The chapter reveals that, while poor and disenfranchised, Mexico's rural mask makers are quite connected to the modern world, whether as fans of Iron Maiden rock music or as followers of national and international politics. The author illustrates that indigenous and mestizo mask makers are much more modern and politically savvy than their quaint and primitive portrayals in Mexican tourism publications and art catalogs suggest. Many have lived in the United States (or are in regular contact with relatives abroad) and are actively engaged with contemporary politics and popular culture. Like other artists aiming to keep their work relevant in the 21st century, they create masks reflecting the world in which they live, playfully incorporating into their mask designs characters such as the Incredible Hulk, Superman, Mexican soccer icon Pável Pardo, U.S. President George W. Bush, and Mexican President Vicente Fox. One modern allegorical figure in *pastorelas* is "Chuparman," whose name comes from the Spanish verb *chupar*—"to drink." He is a drunkard who exhausts his health, wealth, abilities, and reputation through his dedication to the bottle—a cautionary tale not to worship the false god of alcohol (Figure 2). Worn during public

performances at village festivals, such contemporary visages serve the same educational roles that masks have served for centuries, but in ways that reflect today's world, rather than a bygone universe of Aztec kings, Spaniards, and Moors.



Figure 2. Macho drinker "Chuparman" performs in pastorela for townspeople.

Yet, as chapters 3 and 4 illustrate, no matter how well carved these masks may be or whether they have been "danced" at festivals (which normally increases a mask's value), such popular culture-themed masks are routinely judged as worthless by the elite art establishment. Chapter 3, in particular, provides an interesting critique of discourses that exaggerate and/or romanticize the cultural isolation of Mexico's rural communities, analyzing texts from archetypal books about Mexico. Taking special aim at Donald Cordry's classic *Masks of Mexico* (1980), the prominent Mexican magazine *México Desconocido* (which targets aficionados of Mexican folk arts), and Nestor García-Canclini's highly regarded *Máscaras, Danzas y Fiestas de Michoacán* (1985), the author argues that binary discourses of cultural purity versus cultural imperialism (discussed and critiqued in detail in chapter 4) devalue the creative autonomy of mask makers, forcing them to produce very limited types of "authentic" art. Since the praise, money, and business connections bestowed by transnational and institutional art elites are crucial for the mask makers' economic survival (discussed in chapter 5), these artisans are faced with the choice of creating the expected "indigenous" styles, or having their work priced so low that they cannot make a living (discussed in chapter 6).

With vivid ethnographic detail, Shlossberg shows how the assumptions of cultural purity inherent in theories of dependency and cultural imperialism undermine rural artisans' cultural autonomy and economic viability—degrading rather than bolstering their ability to keep popular mask-making traditions alive. He ends with a call to scholars of international and intercultural communication for more self-reflexive and critical scholarship

to examine and address how discourse and scholarship within the field has itself accepted, produced, reproduced and policed racial distinctions and boundaries between authentic indigenous and traditional arts and the global mass media and mass culture. (p. 217)

This book is filled with informative, unique anecdotes and rich ethnographic detail. Shlossberg convincingly argues that the imposition of stereotypical ethnic indigenous traits on mask makers and other craftspeople is linked to national and transnational processes of racialized subordination, marginalization, and exclusion. The text will be a welcome addition to courses in cultural communication, anthropology, Latino studies, ethnic studies, folklore, and other fields dealing with cultural citizenship, transnational culture, globalization and media, ritual communication, and related topics.

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