David Bowles
*Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*


We are always revisiting our myths. In Europe and America, attention to myth has historically bolstered claims to national and (white) racial greatness by drawing on the heritage of the robust mythic and folkloric traditions of Ireland, Scandinavia, France, Germany, Russia, and others transmitted orally and written down in epics and sagas, or penned by the fairy-tale collectors of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Today, a vast field spanning both popular and literary fiction attends to

**Nota Bene**

*Short Circuits: Aphorisms, Fragments, and Literary Anomalies*
Ed. James Lough & Alex Stein
Schaffner Press

Following James Lough and Alex Stein’s *Short Flights*, an anthology of short-form writing, *Short Circuits* has expanded its scope beyond that of its predecessor to include such writing as flash fiction, mini-essays, and concrete poetry. The collection strives to give readers a series of “little enlightenments” in an effort to rewire the brain for the reader’s own well-being.

Maria José Silveira
*Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother and Her Daughters*
Trans. Eric M. B. Becker
Open Letter

Translated from Portuguese, *Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother and Her Daughters* traces back five hundred years of Brazilian history and the history of a family through the women of that family, starting with a Tupiniquim warrior in 1500 and ending with a woman in 2001. While critical of the aspects of culture that oppress women, Silveira’s powerful, vivid prose details the ways in which these women are the bedrock of society.
The book divides its history of the universe into seven sections that narrate the epochs of Mexico up to the conquest. The first three are cosmogony: how the gods and the order of things came to be, including a wealth of etiologies, from ultimate concerns with the purpose of human and animal sacrifice or the sanctity behind sacred sites; to natural and animal phenomena, like animal morphologies and habits; and the ordering of time, causes of eclipses, or spots on the moon (these caused by Feathered Serpent hurling a rabbit at the moon). At the heart of the story of the gods is the conflict between Feathered Serpent, creator and protector of humankind, and his brother, Heart of Sky (Hurricane/Tezcatlipoca), a tortured, jealous deity who seeks to destroy the people of Mexico in every age.

The final four sections tell of the human world, the world after the “Reign of the Demigods” and the exploits of great heroes, like the trickster Lord Opossum, Maya twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, Mixtec archer Yacoñooy, and Aztec warrior Huitzilopochtli. These sections narrate the rise and fall of the Toltecs, the Maya, and the Aztecs, concluding in the final portion of the book with the coming of Hernan Cortís, which Bowles recognizes as the final triumph of Heart of Sky in his battle against Feathered Serpent and Mexico’s people. Yet all is not lost; at the end of the time of myth emerge new peoples of “palimpsest souls”: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos.

More than a compelling work of narrative art, Feathered Serpent is a project in restoring and forging a mythohistorical identity for contemporary Mexican and Mexican American peoples from whom these stories were taken by the ravages of Spanish conquest, which included the burning of nearly all manuscripts recording Mexican mythologies. Bowles’s genre-defying book translates, recovers, retells, and pastiches histories and myths largely lost in the wake of colonialism. Here is the Mexican approximate of the Greeks’ Theogony, Iliad, and Odyssey, the Malinké’s Sundiata, the Hindus’ Ramayana, the Babylonians’ Enûma Eliš—a singular work of art, yet in conversation with the many voices who, over centuries, shared the stories that Bowles sutures into one. He offers new, engaging translations and retellings of scenes from what few sources remain, including Aztec codices, the Mayan Popol Vuh and Songs of Dzitbalché, and oral and folkloric traditions from a range of Mexican cultures, producing a mythic chronicle of Mexico that draws on Cora, Huichol, Maya, Mazatec, Mixtec, Nahua, and Otomi storytelling.

Feathered Serpent is a significant work toward the recovery of a pre-Columbian episteme of Mexico, arguing for an ethical relationship between humans and the cosmos, since it is humans’ good deeds (and sacrifices) that keep Xiuhtecuhltli (time and fire god) and Nanahuatzin (the sun) in motion. The prose is artful, often playful, leading the reader through worlds and times she will want to read more of. It is a needed infusion of teotl, of vital life force, into the study and circulation of world mythologies today. Bowles’s Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky will be crucial to Mesoamerican literary and cultural studies as well as important to Mexican and Mexican American rediscoveries of effaced pasts, for many years to come. Scholars and readers of mythology and folklore: add this to the classics.

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