The Nonreader Citizen and the Nation in Rosa Beltrán's *Efectos secundarios* (2011)

Amber Workman
Arizona State University

Increasing literacy rates and engagement with reading as a cultural practice in Mexico has been the focus of many postrevolutionary programs, yet studies show that few Mexicans choose to read on a regular, voluntary basis. While the image of Mexicans as nonreaders is a common theme in contemporary Mexican literature and popular culture, few studies exist on the topic. This article analyzes representations of the nonreader in Rosa Beltrán's novel *Efectos secundarios* (2011) and the relationship of these portrayals to citizenship, cultural policy and management, the cultural industry, and the effects of neoliberalism in twenty-first-century Mexico. While novels such as *El último lector* (Toscana 2004; The last reader) and advertising, such as that of the Gandhi bookstore chain, depict reading apathy as a personal failure on the part of Mexican citizens and a lack of volition to exercise what might be seen as a civic responsibility, Beltrán's novel shows Mexican nonreaders as victims of a failed state marked by corruption, impunity, insecurity, and violence, which impede reading as a cultural practice. Because a reading public may be seen as vital for democracy, Beltrán's novel invites critical engagement with key debates on reading and education policy, the politics of the Mexican publishing industry, and the effects of corruption and violence on the distribution of cultural goods.

Keywords: Rosa Beltrán, cultural citizenship, cultural industry, reading, reading culture.

En México, aumentar los índices de alfabetización y el interés en la lectura como una práctica cultural ha sido el objetivo de numerosos programas desde los tiempos posrevolucionarios. Aún así, según diversos estudios, pocos son los mexicanos que leen de manera regular y voluntaria. Aunque la imagen de los mexicanos como no

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos Vol. 37, Issue 2, Summer 2021, pages 176–196. ISSN 0742-9797, electronic ISSN 1533-8320. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/msem.2021.37.2.176.

lectores es una idea recurrente en la literatura contemporánea mexicana y la cultura popular, existen pocos estudios sobre esta temática. En este ensayo, analizo las representaciones de mexicanos no lectores en la novela *Efectos secundarios* de Rosa Beltrán (2011), incluyendo la relación de estas representaciones con ideas de ciudadanía, políticas, gestorías e industrias culturales y los efectos neoliberales en el México del siglo XXI. Mientras novelas como *El último lector* (Toscana 2004) y anuncios comerciales, como los de la librería Gandhi, representan la apatía por la lectura como una falla personal de los mexicanos y una falta de voluntad, y por no ejercer lo que podría ser visto como una responsabilidad cívica, la novela de Beltrán presenta a los mexicanos no lectores como víctimas de un estado fallido marcado por la corrupción, impunidad, inseguridad y violencia, impidiendo la lectura como una práctica cultural. Puesto que el público lector podría ser considerado como vital para la democracia, la novela de Beltrán invita a una discusión crítica sobre debates referentes a políticas educativas, políticas editoriales y los efectos de la corrupción y la violencia en la distribución de bienes culturales en el país.

Palabras clave: Rosa Beltrán, ciudadanía cultural, cultura lectora, gestoría cultural, industria cultural, lectura

No soy lo que pediste.
—Holiday gift-wrap message on books shipped from Mexico's Gandhi bookstore, Christmas 2010

The headline for David Toscana's 2013 *New York Times* article referred to Mexico as "The Country That Stopped Reading." This conclusion is based on that year's UNESCO reading-habits survey, in which Mexico ranked penultimate of 108 countries with respect to its regular reading indices (measured by the number of books read per year), as well as on Toscana's own observations of and interactions with Mexican citizens. Despite more recent national reading surveys that offer more promising results,[1] relatively high national

1. The 2013 UNESCO study found that Mexicans read an average of 2.8 books per year (Mexico Institute 2013). More promising statistics are offered by the most recent *Encuesta Nacional de Lectura*. According to its 2015 study, Mexicans over the age of twelve read an average of 5.3 books that year (CONACULTA 2015), while a 2020 Módulo sobre Lectura (MOLEC) study found the average to be 3.4 books per year (for ages 18 and up). (INEGI, n.d.). Comparatively, a Pew survey from 2018 reported that in the United States people read an average of 12 books per year (Perrin 2019).

literacy rates,[2] and intellectuals who deny the idea of Mexico as a largely nonreading nation,[3] Mexicans as nonreaders is a common theme in contemporary Mexican literature and popular culture, and one that often appears linked to ideas about the nation, citizenship, and *mexicanidad*.

This essay analyzes representations of the nonreader in Rosa Beltrán's novel *Efectos secundarios* (2011) and the relationship of these portrayals to citizenship, cultural policy and management, the cultural industry, and the effects of neoliberalism in twenty-first-century Mexico. While novels such as Toscana's *El último lector* (2004) and advertising such as that of the Gandhi bookstore chain depict reading apathy as a both personal failure on the part of Mexican citizens and a lack of volition to exercise what might be seen as a civic responsibility, Beltrán's novel shows Mexican nonreaders as victims of a failed state marked by corruption, impunity, insecurity, and violence, factors that impede reading as a cultural practice and the creation and distribution of literature "worth reading." Because a reading public may be seen as vital for democracy, the novel invites critical engagement with key debates on reading and education policy, the politics of the Mexican publishing industry, and the effects of corruption and violence on the the distribution of cultural goods and on the engagement with reading as a regular practice among Mexicans.

Like Toscana's librarian protagonist, *Efectos secundarios* tells of a reading-addicted Mexican narrator who works as a book presenter in the nation's capital. A Quixote-like figure, the protagonist—whose name we never learn and whose gender identity (and use of corresponding gender marker) varies depending on the main characters of her current reading material—absorbs herself in (largely modernist) fiction and spends her time reflecting on literature, the workings of the Mexican publishing industry, and the fact that Mexican citizens tend to read very little.[4] The protagonist makes ample use of irony,

2. As of 2015, Mexico's literacy rate for people fifteen years old and older is 94.3 percent (UNESCO, n.d. b).

3. Paco Ignacio Taibo II, for example, claims that many reading surveys take into account only bookstore sales reports and do not reflect books checked out from libraries, purchased in informal markets, or acquired through other means (Aguirre 2016). For his part, Néstor García Canclini holds that in the digital age people are not reading less, but reading differently (2007, 84).

4. On the fluctuating gender of the protagonist, see Sánchez Becerril 2013. In her study, Ivonne Sánchez Becerril refers to the "travestismo literario" of the work as being an attribute of not only the protagonist but also the reader (1269). Here, I will refer to the protagonist as female.

black humor, fictional, and absurdist elements as a means of making sense of her work and the society in which she lives. Beltrán describes this humor as "un humor que lo que hace es obligarte a ver una realidad que estaba oculta, que es una realidad insensata la mayor parte de las veces" (Samuelson 2017, 147)—that is, it is intimately linked to the unveiling of something more profound.

While Mexico—both the nation and the city—is seldom referenced directly, we can infer through allusions to widespread violence, drug trafficking, disappearances, kidnappings, and mass migration in the "north," as well as to e-literature, that the main setting is likely Mexico City of the twenty-first century and—based also on the year that the book was published—that the novel likely takes place, more specifically, toward the end of Felipe Calderón's *sexenio*, a period of militarization of Mexico's "drug war" that led to unprecedented levels of violence and "alternative" forms of organized crime.

While critics of *Efectos* have centered their studies on the figure of the female reader/intellectual,[5] I consider that of the nonreader to be equally deserving of scholarly attention, especially for the way the novel can be inserted into a wider corpus of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mexican literature, film, advertising, and song, in which the question not of who reads but who does not read is prominent and symptomatic of a widespread and pressing societal trend.[6] I first posit the representation of the nonreader in Beltrán as a sort of "nonpublic" and examine the link between reading, citizenship, and cultural rights. Then, I consider Beltrán's portrayal of the formation of nonreading citizens as a failure on the part of postrevolutionary Mexican public education and official cultural policy, as well as the fraudulent workings of the Mexican cultural industry. Finally, I analyze the novel's suggestions regarding the democratization of culture—in this case, reading culture—in twenty-first-century Mexico.

Representing the Nonreader Citizen: The Nonreader as Nonpublic; Citizenship and Cultural Rights

In democratic societies, a strong link is thought to exist between the habit of reading and exemplary citizenship, or the "rights and

5. See, for example, Estrada 2014.

6. To be sure, decreased recreational reading rates are not limited exclusively to contemporary Mexico but are part of a more globalized trend due, in part, to the growing influence of electronic media, the predominance of the image and the spectacle, and an increase in anti-intellectual sentiment.

obligations that formally define the legal status of a person within a state" (Turner 2001, 11). On the one hand, citizens who regularly engage with books, newspapers, and other text-based materials are more likely to make informed decisions, to possess the ability to empathize, and to tolerate other perspectives and opinions. They are more likely to vote, to be able to think critically, and to be civically and politically minded. The teaching of civic values in schools, for these reasons, tends to emphasize literacy development and the cultivation of regular reading habits. Nonreading, on the other hand, is associated with ignorance, a lack of understanding of social issues, being uncultured, and possessing a disregard for community and an ideological intolerance. As a recent National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study expresses, "Good readers make good citizens" (NEA 2007, 18).

Although less studied, citizenship also has a cultural dimension—that is, cultural rights accompany and are interrelated with political, economic, and social rights. These include the right to have access to and to participate in culture, to have access to one's cultural heritage, and the right of ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual minorities to have their cultural identities respected and represented. Cultural citizenship thus facilitates "full inclusion into the social community"[7] and "rights [that] go beyond rights for welfare protection, political representation or civil justice and focus on the right to propagate a cultural identity or life style" (Stevenson 2001, 3). At the same time, ideas regarding individual legal status, "community membership," "personal identity," and "civic culture" are in themselves products of culture and are, in turn, shaped by culture (11). Cultural citizenship ideally also involves access to "a genuinely democratic education, a pluralistic public sphere and a social state that would guarantee [one's] welfare" (Stevenson 2014, 31).

In Mexico, the postrevolutionary state has promoted reading among citizens to a greater or lesser degree of effectiveness. In the years immediately after the revolution, the state, in accordance with the constitution's provision for free, secular, democratic, and public education, encouraged literacy as a means of uniting and modernizing the country. These efforts included José Vasconcelos's programs for mobile libraries and the translation of classics and Lázaro Cárdenas's rural education and literacy initiatives. Subsequently, more contemporary official programs to encourage reading have included Vicente Fox's "Hacia un país de lectores,"

7. Here Nick Stevenson paraphrases Jan Pakluski's argument.

Calderón's "México Lee" campaign, and (most recently) Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) Programa Nacional de Lectura (PNL; now the Programa Nacional de Lectura y Escritura), among others.

While literacy has increased at a national level from around 26 percent (DGCS 2015) at the onset of the revolution to around 94.4 percent (UNESCO, n.d. b), increasing voluntary reading rates remains a challenge. This is complicated by the fact that public and Indigenous education remains largely subpar, and many public schoolteachers have high absentee rates or lack preparation or even credentials, a sign that constitutional promises for quality and multicultural education remain unfulfilled (the effects of AMLO's recent educational reforms have yet to be seen). With respect to post-NAFTA official reading campaigns, Emily Hind considers these to promote not reading itself but the idea of reading, and mostly for the middle class (Hind 2016). Others note that state-sponsored programs such as the PNL may not be well designed or focused, or its budgets well spent (Villarreal 2013).

Yet, we might see as promising the fact that, as of 2004, Mexico celebrates National Librarians' Day, that bookstores still abound in the nation's capital, and that Amazon.com, which had since 2013 offered only Kindle (electronic) books to Mexican consumers, expanded in 2015 to offer print publications in order to serve what the company sees as a promising print-book market (Nawotka 2015). Mexico is home to around 100 established book fairs (Alejo Santiago 2011), including that of the Feria Internacional del Libro (FIL) de Guadalajara (Guadalajara International Book Fair), reputed to be the first largest of its kind in Latin America and the second largest in the world (Restrepo Pombo 2020). Until recently, even Mexico's national currency paid tribute to reading. From 1978 to 2019, different denominations of the peso note have featured the image of famed colonial poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, along with her library. The *sorjuanete*, one of the most common denominations of currency distributed by Mexican automatic-teller machines and widely passed through the hands of Mexican citizens on a daily basis, was one that underscored, at least on a subconscious level, reading as an act of national value and the reader and intellectual as a source of national pride—an ideal citizen.

However, gaffes by none other than Fox and Enrique Peña Nieto show that reading is unpopular even among heads of state. For his part, Fox publicly proclaimed in 2013, "La gente que no lee es más feliz" (quoted in Mireille 2013), and in 2011 then-presidential-candidate Peña Nieto could not correctly recall the titles and authors

of three books that had impacted him.[8] Some worry that a nonreading public can be "easily manipulated." For this and other reasons, Sexto Piso editor Felipe Rosete warns that it is imperative that Mexican society reject at all costs this sort of unculture: "Una sociedad ignorante permite que gobernantes incapaces de citar tres títulos lleguen al poder y hagan lo que quieran desde él, creo que en los momentos en que vive este país, de una violencia exacerbada, indiscriminada y sin sentido, es muy importante retomar la importancia de la lectura para darle un giro a ello" (Mireille 2013).[9] Such ignorance, Rosete indicates, may result in grave social repercussions and may even have a connection to Mexico's recent upsurge in violence.

Whether Mexicans are readers or not, Beltrán's novel is among many works of Mexican literature, film, and popular culture that portray contemporary Mexicans as belonging not to an imagined community of citizens engaged in reading—as in Benedict Anderson's print capitalist literary construction of the nation through people reading about it and each other (2006)—but to an imagined community based on the failure to read: a nation of nonreaders. The novel joins other cultural manifestations, such as Gandhi bookstore's catchy, memorable ads that interpellate Mexicans as a nonreading public and equate nonreading with citizenship and national identity. These markedly national ads include those with slogans such as "La crisis es de lectores" (2009); "Interrumpimos este programa para informarles que México sigue sin leer" (2013); "Lee por patriotismo"; "A ti te cuesta leer y al país le cuesta que no leas" (2014).[10] By distributing these messages to the far corners of the republic through stores located as far west as Tijuana and as far east as Cancún and on the radio, on highway billboards, in magazines, and on consumer products, Gandhi participates in the reinforcement of a real—but also socially constructed and discursively reinforced—community of nonreader citizens who they attempt to shame, guilt, and humor—if not to read—at least to buy their products.

8. Journalist Andrea Mireille notes that Peña Nieto's blunder could just as likely have been made by those who mocked him for it: "La ironía del asunto es que muchos de los que se han burlado hasta el cansancio de dichos sucesos, probablemente tampoco podrían nombrar tres obras. Lo anterior es un claro reflejo de la profunda ignorancia de las autoridades y una muestra de las consecuencias de no leer, efectos que experimentamos cada día" (2013).

9. See references to these and other presidential literary gaffes in Hind 2016, in the chapter on reading and the Mexican middle class.

10. The collection of Gandhi's current and previous ad campaigns can be found on the bookstore's website at https://www.gandhi.com.mx/publicidad/publicidad-gandhi.

Beltrán also links nonreading to Mexican citizenship. In *Efectos secundarios*, nonreading, rather than reading, is tied both expressly to one's being Mexican ("Los libros me han enseñado el placer y la voluptuosidad de vivir sin ellos, para ellos, pensando ávidamente en ellos en un país de varias generaciones sin lectores" [2011, 20]) and by indirect means ("[M]e limito a hablar de lo que nadie quiere oír: libros" [35]). The protagonist, recognizing herself as a lone reader in a nation of bibliophobes, finds a correlation between not only the pleasure of reading for personal entertainment but also a fullness of being and a freedom of living, which we could interpret as a fullness of citizenship.

Beltrán's nonreaders, it could be said, constitute a nonpublic, or those who do not participate in certain cultural activities or visit certain cultural spaces, whether through voluntary or involuntary means. We might say such a nonpublic is deprived of cultural citizenship. Julia Bonaccorsi's analysis of nonpublics in relation to nonreading suggests that a correlation could be made between the idea of reader—one who regularly engages in the act of reading—and nonreader—one who rarely or never engages in the act of reading—and the idea of ideal citizen. A reader is one who is often considered more informed and therefore better equipped to make educated choices. As Bonaccorsi notes, unlike the nonreader, the reader "is free and autonomous in his interpretation: in short, a 'true citizen.' The reader . . . becomes co-author and active interpreter of the text, deriving emotions and pleasure from reading without any mediation. He is both free and autonomous in the production of meaning" (2012, 17). The regular practice of reading has endowed Beltrán's protagonist with superior interpretative abilities as she uses her close reading skills to decipher the messages on *narcomantas* that appear within and around the city, as well as the enigma of Mexico's best-selling books (as I will show later in this essay). In sum, reading makes her a questioning, thinking person, to arrive at truth through the consumption of fiction.

On a more fundamental level, Mexicans may not exercise their right to reading, but *Efectos secundarios* questions if they possess these cultural rights in the first place and, if so, if they are able to put them to use. In Beltrán's work, the reader at first spends her days reflecting on the tedium of her work and the absurdity of presenting books to a country of nonreaders. Later, she becomes more socially engaged, abandoning a book fair in the North at which she is scheduled to present and finding herself face to face with Mexican reality: a *narcobloqueo* cuts off her passage through the streets, and she becomes entangled in an antiviolence demonstration where she

meets people who have had family members disappeared or kidnapped. As I will later explain in greater detail, the people the protagonist encounters are all shown to be nonreaders. This underscores the idea that, despite Mexico's transition to democracy and gains in political rights, a "deficit" remains in human and social rights (Olvera Rivera 2001, 36). These include, among others, the right to "public security, employment, education, [and] health" (36). Citizen disinterest in reading may stem from the violation of other rights, including the social right to a quality education, one that, by extension, involves the promotion of reading and the inculcation of the habit of doing so voluntarily among the public. This, along with the human rights violations associated with Calderón's drug-war militarization and resulting widespread violence, has deprived Mexicans of full citizenship.

Failing the Nonreader Citizen: Education, Policy, and the Mexican Cultural Industry

While the reader may be considered an "ideal citizen," Beltrán's novel shows Mexicans to be deprived of certain civil and social rights that would allow them to become this type of citizen. I now turn to Beltrán's treatment of the ways in which Mexicans are excluded from cultural citizenship, from possessing certain ways of reading or a reading "habitus" (a practice that, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1977), is seemingly natural but is, in fact, cultural), from recreational reading as a regular, cultural practice. *Efectos secundarios* highlights, albeit ironically, the workings of the cultural industry in Mexico, defined as "sectors of organised activity whose principal purpose is the production or reproduction, promotion, distribution and/or commercialisation of goods, services and activities of a cultural, artistic or heritage-related nature" (UNESCO, n.d. a). The Mexican cultural industry is considered important for the nation's development (it generates jobs and economic revenue,[11] as well as intellectual capital), while education and reading could be said to be antidotes against "violence and crime," in part due to their promotion of social and humanistic values (Ruiz, n.d.). For Néstor García Canclini and Ernesto Piedras Feria, the culture industry has the

11. According to a *Mexico-EU Trade Links* report, "Mexico is one of the world's 20 leading exporters in the global market for creative goods and it ranks 6th among developing countries" ("Mexico, a Global Player" 2009, 1), with publishing being "the second most important group of creative products" (3).

power to "democratize and modernize the country and shape society" (García Canclini and Piedras Feria 2006, 105; my translation).

In *Efectos secundarios*, the Mexican cultural industry and state institutions, rather than facilitating access to cultural goods and practices, make that which they are charged with promoting more difficult to access, even for the book-presenter protagonist. The cultural industry does not value the presenter's role in the diffusion of literature: she holds precarious employment for which she is either paid in kind (with books), not remunerated at all, or forced to find a way to obtain the reading material that she is required to present herself, a task complicated by publishers who are not always willing to provide review copies. Like an ambulant street vendor, the protagonist forms part of Mexico's informal economy—her position too little valued to be institutionalized according to industry standards. Moreover, the book presenter does not earn enough money to purchase books for personal use, perhaps an allusion not only to her meager salary but also to the relatively high and often inflated cost of books in Mexico, despite its 2008 Book Law, which requires that new releases be sold at a fixed cost for a certain period. And if not even a book reviewer is able to easily obtain the cultural materials needed for her work, what does this say about citizens without connection to the publishing industry?

The novel makes multiple references to the idea of book circulation (or lack thereof) among this general public. The protagonist alludes to books stored in warehouses that do not reach public hands, as is sometimes the case with government co-sponsored books, which are meant to be distributed exclusively to libraries, and also with books that have been warehoused due to low sales in bookstores. This leads the protagonist to reflect on the nation's ironic relationship to books: "En este país se leen punto cinco libros por año por persona, pero se destruyen miles" (Beltrán 2011, 56). Of course, a nation that destroys its books also destroys ideas and limits access to knowledge.

In *Efectos secundarios*, the protagonist likewise shows how book presentations—which are run by the elite with connections to wealth and power, and further monopolize access to culture and cultural capital—are set up to praise authors lavishly, no matter the quality of their work. According to Beltrán's protagonist, "No importa que el libro sea bueno o malo; el resultado, en la presentación, siempre es el mismo. El autor queda como un dios. Escucha lo que esperaba oír y se reconoce en cada frase, aunque las palabras que cito no sean suyas" (14). The role of the book reviewer/presenter is undermined by the fact that the act of presenting books based on their own merits

is a farce. Moreover, the people who attend the book presentations—mostly young people from the middle class—have not read the books, despite residing in the cultural hub of the nation where they would surely have easy access to them, thus contributing to the presentations' deceptive nature and the illusion of an informed reading public. At one presentation, the room overflows with attendees who show up not to get recommendations for new books to read but to to feel "part of something important" (38–39). Book presentations are spectacles useful only in that they boost one's self-worth and perceived level of sophistication. According to Beltrán's novel, the middle class is attracted to the idea of reading and the appearance of doing so, but, in reality, they do not, and the protagonist presenter ends up filling them in on the books' plot summaries: "Pronto leerán *Almas muertas* sin haberlo, leído y sabrán que se puede negociar con los difuntos sin necesidad de matarlos, cobrando los impuestos al Estado, y conocer el corazón de un pueblo sin causar el menor daño" (45). Reading can teach values, cultivate understanding and empathy, and reduce violence, but where reading is unpopular, these readers and readership must be fabricated, and such values are only alluded to in the book-presentation synthesis.

A similar dissonance between appearance and reality occurs with best-selling books. In *Efectos*, several books for review arrive at the protagonist's doorstep within weeks of one another, each claiming to be the most read book. The books' outer wrappers boast this commercial success, a paratextual element designed to make the books appear as if they were exceptional before even opening their front covers, but also suggest the idea that many people had thought enough of the books' content to purchase, read, and (one might infer) enjoy them. To this, the protagonist responds with skepticism: "¿Cómo puede, en un tiempo en que nadie lee, haber un libro que sea el más leído del mundo?" (35). And later:

> Con tres libros con el lema de "el libro más leído" en menos de un mes sólo podía concluir que o bien el país no hacía otra cosa que leer—cosa totalmente falsa, pues ¿a qué hora desmembraba, torturaba y cortaba las cabezas de los otros entonces?—o que se trataba de un único y mismo libro, cuyo sagrado misterio debía descifrar. El hecho de que el promedio de lectura en este país, como he dicho, fuera de punto cinco libros por año, me hacía inclinarme por la segunda alternativa, aunque se tratara del libro más leído sólo a medias por aquello del punto cinco. Sin contar con que, como la Santísima Trinidad, se tratara de tres libros en uno. (61–62)

Not only does this show the falsification of best-selling books as a Mexican editorial marketing strategy, but it also suggests that

citizens do not play a role in forming the best-seller lists; rather, this is done for them by the publishers themselves. In her meditation on the messages painted on *narcomantas*, the protagonist goes on to establish a metaphoric connection between best-seller fraud and organized crime:

> Metido entre las sábanas pensé que, si podía explicar el sistema en que se basaban los mensajes en los libros, la demostración de que no eran falsos, sino que hablaban de la falsedad a gritos, saldría a la luz por sí sola. Se vería de inmediato la complicidad entre editores, mandatarios y asesinos. Pensé que sólo así se descubriría el fraude. Que habrá una verdad que explicaría lo que parecía inexplicable: la aparición de un cuarto, un quinto, un décimo libro con el mismo cintillo impreso. Lo mismo que la aparición de otro par de cabezas, de cinco cuerpos más, de otra manta en una ciudad cerca de la capital y un mensaje en internet que provoca un toque de queda. (74)

Deceitful and underground workings permeate many levels from book-selling to drug-trafficking organizations.

In the latter portion of the book, the protagonist, fed up with the cultural industry's dishonest conduct and monopoly on cultural goods, and the intellectual, social, and economic benefits of having access to reading materials, removes books from the book fair at which she is presenting (a venue that we can imagine affords access to a wide range of genres and periods, and to both light and more sophisticated literature) and takes it upon herself to distribute these freely by depositing the books, quite literally, into the urban landscape as a means of encouraging reading among members of the public. These include banks, parks, government offices, bookstores, and even bushes and trash cans, spaces or objects that would seemingly be passed by or used by people of various ages, ethnicities, religions, and social classes, that is, different members of civil society. At first, the protagonist distributes the books, however, to places where she claims they would cause the least "damage," meaning where only a few people would come across them:

> En las grandes bibliotecas, que nadie consulta; en las bodegas de las editoriales, donde son alimento de roedores o las salas de lectura vacías, ahí estarían a salvo de ellos los lectores. Sin embargo, pronto mis buenas intenciones se vieron rebasadas. En los lugares que albergan libros nadie los quería. Ni esos libros ni los demás: con tal de liberar a algunos de volverse rehenes del mismo crimen, pensé en acompañar los libros no deseados de los otros, los inocentes, al ver que no podía ni podría ya cantar las glorias de la poesía ni el triunfo de la razón. (102–3)

Upon approaching the city's bookstores, the protagonist notices that that books featured there are works of narcoliterature, reading material that she considers worthless, along with the self-help books that constitute most of the books she is required to present. We do not learn the reason for the protagonist's distaste for self-help and narcobooks, but judging from her own preference for works of "high" literature and the fact that the copies she distributes throughout the city belong to the modern Mexican literary canon, we might conclude that she places more value on works of long-lasting esthetic value and universal themes, work that provokes critical thought, and literature that encourages national pride and knowledge of classic works of one's national heritage. The esthetic value of such cultural goods is especially important, as works of long-lasting value inspire people to continue engaging with them. As it were, however, the Mexican cultural industry as represented in Beltrán's novel would favor the official promotion of other types of reading materials.

The juxtaposition of self-help books and narcoliterature as the most promoted reading materials is suggestive, as it points to a failed state incapable of fulfilling its obligations for the security and well-being of Mexican citizens and a symbolic shifting of the onus for doing so from the state onto the people. According to Daniel Nehrig and colleagues, "Self-help books operate through an assumption that attitudes, not social-structural constraints, determine upward social mobility, exposing the political dimension of self-help culture" (Nehrig et al. 2016, i). Self-help books—though logically where one might turn for alleviating one's emotional troubles or for developing coping skills for dealing with trauma, violence, corruption, and insecurity, and potentially empowering on an individual level, especially popular in times of national economic crisis and one of the most popular genres sold in Mexico (Hernández 2011)—cannot compensate for a state unable or unwilling to protect its citizens. Given widespread government involvement in publishing through subsidies and coeditions, this seems even more of an issue. Despite increased privatization of Mexico's cultural industry under NAFTA, some scholars see the self-help genre as becoming more popular thanks to neoliberal policies, as this genre possesses an "underlying discourse of neoliberal entrepreneurialism and the freedom of 'the market,' articulated through reoccurring tropes of survivalism, self-affirmation and boot-strap individualism" (Nehrig et al. 2016, i). However, the genre does not offer challenging reading, provoke critical thought, or—with some rare exceptions—result in lasting forms of literature. Yet, self-help does provide fast and easy profits for the publishing industry.

When the protagonist approaches the offices of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), she finds that the institution meant to promote knowledge freely and widely, first directed by Vasconcelos and itself an outcome of the revolution, proves apathetic to her efforts to democratize reading culture in Mexico City:

> Quemar libros es inmoral y donarlos es imposible: en este país se prohíben las donaciones, me explicaron en la Secretaría de Educación, donde lo que adquieren como bibliotecas son nombres de autores y su colección. Como comprar su propia marca o sus autos deportivos, me explicaron. Los clasificamos por temas que el público podrá distinguir de lejos sin consultarlos, ya que los acomodamos por colores; aunque agradecemos cuando los autores han tenido el buen gusto de empastarlos. (Beltrán 2011, 104)

Here, it should be noted that since the revolution, the Mexican government has been charged with the opposite: with providing reading culture to all and, as a means of doing so, "managing and administering a large part of the country's libraries, museums, and . . . editorial production" (Angulo 2014; my translation). Again, the idea of appearances versus realities stands out here. The maximum institution charged with promoting public education, the SEP, turns its back on education for all citizens, despite this being a postrevolutionary commitment. This is a strong criticism of the failure of public education to effectively promote reading in Mexico, as in Beltrán even the SEP is complicit in maintaining a bibliophobic nation.

With respect to reasons for the nonreader citizen in Mexico, Beltrán's novel, ironically—but not unconvincingly—suggests that Mexico's cultural industry itself participates in the creation of this type of citizen through the fabrication of best-selling books, the emphasis on the diffusion of literature that might sell but does not inspire critical thought (necessary for democracy, modernization) or a knowledge of national literary heritage, and a public education system that shows marked disinterest in the principle of education as a common good. In these ways, the Mexican nonreading "nonpublic" is excluded from meaningful cultural participation through education, the cultural industry, and policy.

Forming the Reader Citizen: The Democratization of Reading Culture in Mexico

The final pages of *Efectos secundarios*, in which the reader-protagonist distributes books to the public, could be said to function

as a commentary on the possibilities for the democratization of reading culture in Mexico, that is, the promotion of reading and access to books for all. Since books are a cultural product, it should be noted that the Mexican Constitution states that education should "be national," that it should "preserve and develop our culture,"[12] and, as such, from 1921 to 2015, the cultural sector linked itself to education. Since the early 1990s, with the appointment of Rafael Tovar y de Teresa as head of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA), the state has emphasized the democratization of culture as including the "diffusion of heritage and popular or Indigenous culture," instilling "culture as an economic resource," and the "promotion of [Mexican] heritage for tourists" (Secretaría de Cultura 2014; my translation)

As already mentioned, unlike the publishers that promote self-help and narcolit, Beltrán's protagonist instead disassembles (in a literal sense) the modern Mexican literary canon and places books of national patrimony and considered Mexican (postrevolutionary) classics—such as the works of Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Josefina Vicens, and Juan Rulfo—in public places and in government offices. Part of cultural democratization involves the diffusion of cultural goods with attention to "meaningfulness, quality and aesthetics" (Stevenson 2001, 6). With the culture industry farcical, corrupt, and broken, the protagonist in *Efectos* takes it upon herself to distribute national classics in a desperate last-ditch effort to encourage people to read and to provide them with their right to their own cultural patrimony. These works are quite different from the self-help and narcoliterature promoted by the Mexican cultural industry and the apathy of the SEP toward any type of reading material (at least as shown in the novel), even toward that of the national literary canon. In this way, the protagonist provides citizens with free access to their cultural patrimony and cultural citizenship and democratization.

Nonetheless, in Beltrán's novel, like the publishers who try to diversify markets by selling books in grocery stores, the metro, and other "high-traffic" spaces,[13] the free books fall on deaf ears (or blind

12. Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, art. 3; my translations.

13. "Asociadas a las grandes firmas, las editoriales diversifican sus mercados, sus objetivos y puntos de venta, planean estrategias para atraer compradores, invierten en aparadores a la entrada del metro, de los supermercados, en las esquinas de las calles, en los aeropuertos. Organizan ferias y programas de televisión con actores de cine, comunicadores y *vedettes*, donde se anuncia la aparición de un milagro para una determinada fecha. Que no llega, como es natural, aunque llegue. Un milagro que permanece a la espera" (Beltrán 2011, 55–56).

eyes). When presented with reading material, average citizens become aggressive—even hostile—or are confused by the gesture. Like children not yet socialized to respect books as works of art, repositories of knowledge, teachers of humanistic values, and portals for imagining the world as other, the people do not know what to do with the books upon receiving them, or they reject them entirely:

> Quise repartir mis últimos libros como otros repartían comida, al fin y al caos fueron mi alimento por tantos años, pero, primero sorprendidos, después indignados, los hombres y mujeres a mi alrededor me los devolvían o los arrojaban a un lado en la calle, se limpiaban el sudor o las manos después de arrancar algunas páginas, y mis ojos veían haciendo la vista gorda, tal como hacemos todos en los grandes crímenes que no podemos perseguir. Estás fuera de lugar, parecían decirme, ¿cuándo se ha visto que los personajes de una obra tomen libros que otro les reparte y se pongan a leer en medio de la trama? No se puede leer mientras uno es personaje y así vine a saber que no había teatralidad ni sociología ni periodismo mi sobreexposición, que sólo había escritura, y que yo, perdida en una ciudad que conocía al dedillo . . . adquiría una extraña autonomía y era parte de esa ficción. (Beltrán 2011, 13)

Like a rebirth of the Vasconcelian initiatives of the early twentieth-century meant to foment literacy, reading, and nationalism, the protagonist tries to resurrect great works of national literature, to give people books that she considers worthwhile reading—some of them part of Mexico's postrevolutionary national literary canon—but the effort is to no avail. With literature as the only lens by which the protagonist, an anomaly in twenty-first-century Mexican society, interprets the world, she discovers that Mexicans no longer have use for such idealism.

This is not the only disillusion that the protagonist experiences in her attempt to forge a Mexican reading culture. Upon attempting to deliver books to different parts of the unnamed northern city, the protagonist is detained by a *narcobloqueo* and robbed by people in a pirated taxi who take her boxes of books, jewelry, and money but end up dumping the books as loot that holds little monetary or social value. The protagonist, hopeful at first that the stolen books would be perused, admits, "Casi me sentí feliz, aunque unos metros adelante el taxi se detuvo y arrojó las cajas con gestos de amenaza y grandes insultos. Recogí los libros, sucios y doblados, varios de ellos deshechos; los más, fuertes y decididos, listos para continuar" (104).

Throughout most of the book, the protagonist's own relationship to reading could be said to be an absorbed or escapist one, an experience that allows her to evade the realities of the country. The protagonist reads in an adherence to what José Martínez Rubio calls

a sort of "culturalismo," the belief that literature and art have the ability to effect social change (Martínez Rubio 2015). She establishes this rarefied role as reader from the beginning: "En un país que se hace experto en la recolección de cadáveres, yo reúno palabras. Oculto con esmero frases perfectas como joyas, frases que tomaron años, a veces siglos en gestarse" (Beltrán 2011, 16). But esthetics prove impotent to social realities. At one oddly successful book presentation where more books were sold than usual, the narrator feels as though those who had purchased the books had been duped: "Porque los libros que había vendido el editor eran los usuales bodrios de autoayuda y optimismo en una época en que no podemos ayudarnos" (99).

Near the end of the book when the protagonist experiences the *narcobloqueo* and, later, unwittingly takes part in an antiviolence demonstration (which, ironically, includes knife-wielding citizens and some would-be rapists), she comes face to face with the realities of Mexican society and learns why people do not read. In the march, people from different walks of life tell her about their personal experiences as victims of kidnapping, disappearances, robbery, and other acts of violence. In other words, they are more concerned with lower-order needs such as personal and familial security than—less immediate—self-actualization or leisurely engagement with artistic creation.

Though Mexico City as cultural and political center of the nation could be said to function as a microcosm for the rest of the country, the protagonist looks beyond the city for potential readers. However, she finds the situation equally dire and literature just as out of place: "Frente a los inmuebles tachados de grafiti y abandonados por sus residentes a causa de la violencia en esa ciudad del norte, hablé de casas habitadas por pájaros en cuyo patio hay un surtidor de agua y un árbol que se enciende como una flama con los rayos del crepúsculo" (79).

Upon distributing books to other regions, she finds that societal conditions have resulted in mass migration:

> No podía no darme cuenta de que cada vez acudían menos oyentes a las presentaciones de libros. Algunas ciudades empezaban a vaciarse porque sus moradores, asfixiados por las grandes sumas que se veían obligados a pagar a quienes los extorsionaban y agobiados por una vida de continuo temor, habían preferido dejar atrás sus bienes y aventurarse en otro país o en una ciudad ajena. (77)

In the end, Beltrán's protagonist declares reading useless and abandons her efforts:

> Prefería renunciar a todos y cada uno de los libros que me llevaron a imaginar que el mundo era o podía ser otro. Y al darme cuenta con horror de que empezaban a llegar el vigésimo, el cuadragésimo, el quincuagésimo primer libro con su cintillo respectivo mientras la suma de cadáveres crecía, ya no me quedó duda de que la relación entre este motín y el de las mantenía una conexión más estrecha de la que hubiera podido imaginar. (103)

Through the book presenter's failed efforts to democratize reading culture by distributing books herself, *Efectos secundarios* shows that, without the support of the country's institutions, such initiatives are not possible. Furthermore, twenty-first-century Mexico lacks the societal conditions needed for people to be willing and able to engage with recreational reading as a cultural practice: the "side effects" of violence and crime are such that a reading anything other than self-help or narcoliterature seems superfluous, while works considered part of the national canon, once a means of promoting national unity and identity, no longer hold value.

Pardoning the Nonreader: The (Side) Effects of Nonreading

Vis-à-vis other works of contemporary Mexican literature, film, and popular culture that represent the nonreader as a disengaged and irresponsible citizen, reluctant to exercise rights bestowed upon him or her, Beltrán is apologetic. *Efectos secundarios*, despite its humorous tone, underscores the causes of nonreading, which include the failure of postrevolutionary Mexico's institutions to cultivate reading as a national practice, a cultural industry that privileges profits over cultural democratization, and cultural policy concerned mostly with providing the appearance of reading promotion rather than actually doing so.

In addition to the long-term failure of Vasconcelos's postrevolutionary educational initiatives, the author shows how the cultural industry has not done enough to encourage a reading culture in Mexico; furthermore, she questions if Mexico has the societal conditions necessary for such a culture in the first place. Mexicans, Beltrán shows, still do not enjoy "full citizenship," despite the nation's transition to democracy. Thus, with respect to a reading culture, Mexicans constitute a largely disenfranchised "nonpublic."

Beltrán's book does not offer solutions but paints a dismal picture of the ability of average citizens, readers such as herself, to effect meaningful change. In the last pages of Beltrán's novel, we find a meditation on the failure of revolutionary guarantees in Mexico. Here the reader-protagonist superimposes Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*,

the classic Mexican critique of failed revolutionary promises—promises dead like the dead narrators featured in the novel. When the protagonist, now deprived of her books, is asked what she thinks about the country's state of insecurity and increased citizen-to-citizen distrust, she replies, "Nos hemos convertido en un rencor vivo" (Beltrán 2011, 128), a recontextualization of Rulfo's description of his main character as a symbol of corruption and authoritarianism. In personalizing Rulfo's "rencor vivo" and applying it to both the reader and Mexicans in general, Beltrán shows that the collective (side) effects of not reading are the same as the causes of not doing so.

Returning to Toscana's sobriquet, Beltrán's protagonist suggests that contemporary Mexico as a "Country That Stopped Reading" is one fated to suffer its fate. As one's identity is defined by what one does (or does not do), so the nation is defined by its actions: "¿Cómo puede alguien no ser más de lo que lee, no ser más que la suma de sus lecturas? ¿Cómo puede ser un país la suma de sus muertos o el cálculo de los vivos que están por morir?" (Beltrán 2011, 58). This character, a far cry from the revolutionary vision, leads the protagonist-turned-activist to ultimately determine that perhaps it does not matter that Mexicans are not readers. This remits to the reason the protagonist decides to distribute literature in the first place: Since Mexican reality is sometimes stranger than fiction—like it or not—everyone is "reading the same book" (100).

References

Aguirre, Joel A. 2016. "Las cifras de lectura en México son falsas: Paco Ignacio Taibo II." *Newsweek en Español*, February 15, 2016. https://newsweekespanol.com/2016/02/falsas-las-cifras-de-lectura-en-mexico/.

Alejo Santiago, Jesús. 2011. "En México, cerca de 100 ferias del libro." *Milenio*, November 25, 2011. http://www.milenio.com/cultura/Mexico-cerca-ferias-libro_0_196780339.html.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.

Angulo, Mauricio. 2014. "El gobierno como editor de libros." *Forbes México*, November 5, 2014.
https://www.forbes.com.mx/el-gobierno-como-editor-de-libros/.

Beltrán, Rosa. 2011. *Efectos secundarios*. Mexico City: Random House Mondadori.

Bonaccorsi, Julia. 2012. "The Role of the Term Non-Public in Ordering Cultural Initiatives." In
Looking for Non-Publics, edited by Daniel Jacobi and Jason Luckerhoff, 7–25. Quebec:
Presses de l'Université du Quebec.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes). 2015. *Encuesta Nacional de Lectura y Escritura, 2015–2018*. Accessed September 15, 2018. https://observatorio.librosmexico.mx/files/encuesta_nacional_2015.pdf.

DGCS. 2015. "La alfabetización en México, de logro histórico en cantidad, a rezago latente en calidad." *Boletin UNAM-DGCS*, Dirección General de Comunicación Social (UNAM), September 7, 2015. http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2015_515.html.

Estrada, Oswaldo. 2014. *Ser mujer y estar presente: Disidencias de género en la literatura mexicana contemporánea*. Mexico City: UNAM.

García Canclini, Néstor. 2007. *Lectores, espectadores e internautas*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

García Canclini, Néstor, and Ernesto Piedras Feria. 2006. *Las industrias culturales y el desarrollo de* México. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno/FLACSO.

Hernández, Laura. 2011. "Libros de autoayuda, a flote en época de crisis." *El Economista*, February 5, 2011. https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/arteseideas/Libros-de-autoayuda-a-flote-en-epoca-de-crisis-20110205–0025.html.

Hind, Emily. 2016. "The Rise of Reading Campaigns in Post-NAFTA Mexico." In *The Middle Class in Emerging Societies*, edited by Leslie L. Marsh and Hongmei Li, 33–57. New York: Routledge.

INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). n.d. *Módulo sobre Lectura (MOLEC)*. INEGI. Accessed March 21, 2018. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/molec/doc/resultados_molec_feb20.pdf.

Martínez Rubio, José. 2015. "El culturalismo como evasión: Violencia y horror en *Efectos secundarios* de Rosa Beltrán." *Orillas* 4:327–36.

"Mexico, a Global Player in Creative Industries." 2009. *Trade Links/Lazos Comerciales* 9 (11): 1–4. http://www.economia-snci.gob.mx/sic_php/pages/bruselas/trade_links/ing/noving2009.pdf.

Mexico Institute. 2013. "Among 108 Countries, Mexico Is Second to Last in Reading." Wilson Center. April 24, 2013. https://mexicoinstitute.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/among-108-countries-mexico-is-second-to-last-in-reading-spanish/.

Mireille, Andrea. 2013. "México padece por los efectos de no leer." *Sin Embargo*, June 7, 2013. https://www.sinembargo.mx/076–2013/644000.

Nawotka, Edward. 2015. "Amazon Mexico Now Sells Print Books Online." *Publishing Perspectives*. July 2, 2015. http://publishingperspectives.com/2015/07/amazon-mexico-launches-print-online-bookstore/#.V9hpDq32Y54.

NEA (National Endowment for the Arts). 2007. *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence.* Washington, DC: NEA.

Nehrig, Daniel, Emmanuel Alvarado, Erik C. Hendriks, and Dylan Kerrigan. 2016. *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry*. Hampshire, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Olvera Rivera, Alberto J. 2001. "La construcción de la ciudadanía en México en los albores del siglo XXI." *Sotavento* 9:35–48.

Perrin, Andrew. 2019. "Nearly One in Five Americans Now Listens to Audiobooks." Pew Research Center, Fact Tank. September 25, 2019. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/08/nearly-one-in-five-americans-now-listen-to-audiobooks/.

Restrepo Pombo, Felipe. 2020. "¿Qué futuro les espera a las ferias y festivales literarios?" *Washington Post*, November 27, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2020/11/27/festivales-libro-coronavirus-feria-guadalajara-hey-gabo/.

Ruiz, Norma. n.d. "Las industrias culturales, factor importante para el desarrollo del país." Centro Universitario de Ciencias Económico Administrativas, Universidad de Guadalajara. Accessed November 16, 2018. http://cucea.udg.mx/es/noticia/03-dec-2014/las-industrias-culturales-factor-importante-para-el-desarrollo-del-pais.

Rulfo, Juan. 1955. *Pedro Páramo*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Samuelson, Cheyla. 2017. "La escritura como refugio y punto de resistencia: Entrevista con Rosa Beltrán." *Confluencia* 33 (1): 144–60.

Sánchez Becerril, Ivonne. 2013. "Subversión del género en *La muerte me da*, de Cristina Rivera Garza, y *Efectos secundarios*, de Rosa Beltrán." In *Diálogos culturales en la literatura iberoamericana*, edited by Concepción Reverte Bernal, 1264–75. Madrid: Editorial Verbum.

Secretaría de Cultura. 2014. "El Conaculta, una redefinición profunda del papel del Estado en la vida cultural del país: Rafael Tovar y de Teresa." Gobierno de México. January 17, 2014. https://www.gob.mx/cultura/prensa/el-conaculta-una-redefinicion-profunda-del-papel-del-estado-en-la-vida-cultural-del-pais-rafael-tovar-y-de-teresa? state=published.

Stevenson, Nick, ed. 2001. *Culture and Citizenship*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

———. 2014. "Cultural Citizenship, Education, and Democracy: Redefining the Good Society." In *Cultural Citizenship in Political Theory*, edited by Judith Vega and Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, 16–34. New York: Routledge.

Toscana, David. 2013. "The Country That Stopped Reading." *New York Times*, March 5, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/opinion/the-country-that-stopped-reading.html?_r=0.

———. 2004. *El último lector*. Mexico City: Random House Mondadori.

Turner, Brian S. 2001. "Outline of a General Theory of Cultural Citizenship." In Stevenson 2001, 11–32.

UNESCO. n.d. a. "Creative Industries." UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Accessed November 10, 2018. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/santiago/culture/creative-industries/.

UNESCO. n.d. b. "Literacy." Sustainable Development Goals. Accessed September 3, 2018. http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy.

Villarreal, Héctor. 2013. "Programa Nacional de Lectura: Reprobado." *Letras Libres*, April 24, 2013. https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico-espana/programa-nacional-lectura-reprobado.