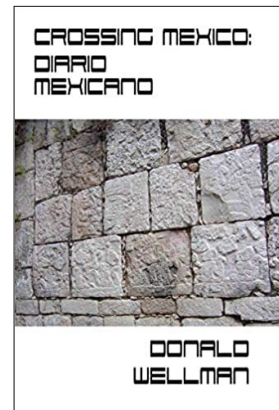


Review of Donald Wellman's
Crossing Mexico: Diario Mexicano,
Dos Madres Press

reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

Donald Wellman's new work, *Crossing Mexico: Diario Mexicano* has transported me to Mexico, a place I've never physically set foot (except for a brief, five hour sojourn over the border to Tijuana in 1976). As Wellman explains in an introductory note, his work is "an art of crossings and hybrids as well as an art of traversing a continent." As such, the poet's role constantly shifts and overlaps: he is a guide, an explorer, an explainer, an analyst, a tourist, and an "experienter." These multiple identities sometimes complement one another and sometimes conflict. As such, the poet himself is a symbol of the complex culture he describes in a journey rendered not only through poems, but also through photographs, historical notes, and personal reflections from diary entries.



Mexico is "profoundly a Christian nation, more so than I had anticipated," Wellman writes in "Mexico a travers de los siglos," but also "an indio nation, make no mistake." The hybrid quality is accepted as a fact of Mexican life, as a truck driver the poet meets on his travels illustrates: "For him, the bonds between 'indio' [referring to indigenous Mexican inhabitants and culture] and mestizo peoples [referring to the combined European and indigenous, culturally mainstream Hispanic America] are facts affecting housing, diet, commerce, and spiritual health. Wellman the poet-observer becomes the poet-experienter, seeing, as described in the poem "Valladlid": "People of so many shapes and color that my instinct/ is to protect myself by merging continuously/ with disparate forms." Pre-Columbian cultures, such as the Mayan and Aztec, contribute gods such as those listed in "Ceremonial notes": "Tlaltlecuhtli: earth monster, death disk./ She has mouths at her knees and elbows/ Her upper half becomes the earth/ Her nether parts the sky, from her body come plants that nourish." But the ancient religions and deities have become intertwined with the Catholic culture initially imposed by European invaders, such as the figure of the "Black Christ," which is "an amalgam of Christ and Ik'al, a pre-Columbian cave dwelling deity." In the poem "Road it Isamal," Wellman notes, "Catholic and Mayan Yucatan meet at Kinich Kak Mo, sacred/ to the sungod, maker, modeler, bearer, begetter, Itzamana,/avatar of the Madanna of Izmal/ The Convent of Saint Anthony of Padua, founded upon/the ruins of one of several pyramids . . ."

But the history of indigenous culture is imbued with violence, including not only human sacrifice, but also in sports with deadly rules, such as "[d]ecapitation when the play of the ball went counter to the direction of the sun," as Wellman references in the poem "Rivera's Murals." Wellman also depicts the juncture between European culture as defined by violence in "Retablo: Genocide," first transcribing in his notes how Europeans of the 1500's "came upon resistance in the jungles of Guatemala and caused

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all the inhabitants to be slaughtered,” then describing the circumstances in a poem: “In the hilltop jungle/ a raising of wood and feather shields against the onslaught of pike/ and armored bodies.”

Wellman observes another form of hybridization, as cultural traditions merge with the facts of daily economic life. He notes of the commerce thriving at historical sites: “My desire was brocade or applique, fine details,” he writes in “Tribute,” “shining threads, I found these on dolls sold in the streets of Merida and Valladolid, replicas/ or indigenous costumes/ as in the anthropological museums./ . . . warehouses and racks of blankets and crockery, with Mayan or Aztec emblems, offerings not to be despised or possessing consumer value.” In “Kuanon of the Pyramid,” the merging of ancient culture with a tourist economy are shown to be obvious: “On the paths between sacred sites/precisely where/flayed virgin remains/filled the cistern/were displays for pilgrims, abundant/ masks and retablos, solar disks,/ miniature pyramids of brilliant hues/in plastic and hand-carved forms./ Attention to detail/gives magical authority/to the object./The carnival play of the vendors/who occupy winding paths /among monuments,/ as integral to sacred space.” Catholic shrines also adapt to consumerism, as in “The Convent of San Bernardino,” which “has become a family center, sacred to a Madonna/ who is herself a doll in a pretty dress,” or in “Symbols at a crossroad,” where Wellman notes “[a] Totanaca child, hand in hand with her mom, selling dolls to tourists in San Miguel de Allende.” A woman selling dolls poses for photograph: “For her, the taking of photographs/ was an aspect of doing business . . . / Her costume like that of her dolls,/ a selling point/ . . . Marketing enters the imagination/ as a fascination/ to those children whose mothers/ bring them to the Jardin. It’s in the blood.”

The heritage that is “in the blood” is recorded by Mexico’s most noted artists, such as Diego Rivera, whose works, seen by tourist-poet Wellman in a museum, “express a brutal history, identifying hope with a recovery of an indigenous humanity . . . The nation/ and its cultures, a project, both political and aesthetic in it shaping stratagems,/ unresolved, incomplete.” But as with objects based on sacred shrines, even the work of an artist like Frida Kalo is subject to consumerism. Wellman writes, “In Frida’s garden, I considered the purchase of a blue cat/ . . . She is present in decorative elements, patents for flatware, small bowls/ Café furniture: sunflower yellow chairs with tangerine and olive finials.”

And Wellman, too, recognizes the complexity and the interconnectedness of the many roles he plays. Referring to his journey as, in one sense, “a video of my life,” he records without commentary images that strike him, such as “[c]hildren on a turquoise and aquamarine mattress washed ashore by the tsunami,” or a pleasing memory in which “[w]e shared Turkish coffee on a second story/ balcony overlooking the ornamental garden.” In the poem “Children,” Wellman, conscious of his role as observer, records “an impulse to rest against a sunny wall/ and photograph human forms:/ vendors and their children, close together,/ boarding a bus. Mapmaker poet swept up, inundated.” Mapmakers observe and record, but Wellman cannot ignore the economic conditions in the country through which he journeys. In the poem “Uxmal” he defines “my status:/ consumer without identity in an impoverished land.” And it is difficult for him to simply record imagery without commentary: “Does manufacturing

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cloth or leather/ also fascinate the cross-legged child/ sitting at a loom with crippled feet/ or endlessly sanding/ mahogany mask, salad bowl, totem." Wellman encounters " . . . young soldiers [who] force me to step from my car./ They are impatient, in newly pressed uniforms,/ black M-16's click against their shoulder straps./ The dark smell of gun oil as cars and trucks speed by." The imagery is vivid, redolent of his description of the "pike and armored bodies" that easily defeated the "wood and feather shields" that failed the indigenous populations centuries earlier. The poet becomes analyst, but "[m]y fear and personal revulsion/ at tyrannical politics/ does not carry any weight/ with those who fill the streets/ and bus terminals./ Better to keep silent . . ."

What, ultimately has been the role of the poet traveler? He has observed and absorbed. His experience shapes his way of looking at the world, as "New England reflections merge with notes taken in a hotel." We join him as his "diary loops between notes/ from among the high hills and low mountains of Weare, New Hampshire/ (listening to "over the Hills and Far Away" from John Gay's *Beggars' Opera*)/ and solitary wandering to pilgrimage sites in the Yucatan and Bajio,/ employing baroque methods/ to approximate a redemptive confusion." As Wellman creates an experience for himself, he creates one for us as well, reminding the reader of the associations forged in the opening poem of *Diario Mexicano*, "Tiempos mezclados": "inexplicably, a photo of an expedition to Lovewille Mn./ . . . as if dispassionate fate had chosen to forge a unity between/Thoreau's Concord and Merrimack/ and this project, diary of intercut Mexican spaces."

In one of the volume's concluding poems "On an Evening," the reflective poet, returned home and to his daily routines, finds his perspective altered by his journey, which has also become our journey: "In New Hampshire, I slice citrus. Fresh juice has become a fetish/ . . . My mornings are too hurried,/ now that I am teaching./ I set the table with tangerine and lemon yellow china/ made incidentally in Mexico./ The pattern is pleasing. I find patterns among the elements tossed together, verbal ensaladas, / A sketch of a possible score in several parts . . . / The song is an intimation of an end . . . / Learn now to appreciate a simple transition, a fortunate interim/ in which to meditate upon dishes and beverages."

I am thankful for Wellman's *Diario Mexicano*: I've followed his map; I've examined the photographs; I've absorbed the experiences, the historical information, and bursts of inspiration he's shared; I've ruminated about his analysis of the cultural and economic interrelationships within the country. And the experience of losing myself in his volume has blotted out the nearly fifty year old memories that lingered from my brief trip over the border: of Elvis paintings on black velvet, of dirty streets, and of handbills inviting me to bars featuring abominable acts. Wellman has enlarged Mexico for me, physically and temporally, deepening its significance with his words and images. I encourage others to partake of his journey. Viva, *Diario Mexicano*!