

Professional Leave Report Cover Sheet

Name: Rafael Lemus

Department: Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

College: Arts & Humanities

Leave taken: ☒ Sabbatical      ☐ Difference in Pay      ☐ Professional Leave without Pay

Time Period: ☒ Fall 2023

☐ Spring

☐ Academic Year

☐ Other

Your report will be sent to your Dean for your PAF and to the Library Archives.

## **Sabbatical Report**

Rafael Lemus

Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

### **1. Reporting on the Success of the Leave**

I am pleased to report that I had a highly successful sabbatical leave over the Fall 2023 semester. As outlined in my proposal, I dedicated this time to finalizing the manuscript on imaginary places in Mexican literature in which I had been working since 2019. More precisely, during my leave I drafted the last two chapters (Chapter 8 and Chapter 10), wrote the book's introduction, and revised the entire work in preparation for its publication. No modifications were made to the original proposal.

I am glad to share that the book is now under contract with Penguin Random House, and will be published in Mexico in the fall of this year.

### **2. Benefits to you as a faculty member**

As noted in my proposal, this book marks both a continuation of my exploration into contemporary Mexican culture and a significant departure in my scholarly trajectory, affording me a fresh perspective on Mexican literature. Expanding the temporal scope of my investigation, I delved into Mexican narrative from the 19th century onwards, while shifting my focus towards the spatial dimensions embedded within literary works. This new approach led me to uncover conflicts, affinities, and places that had previously escaped my attention. Now that the book is finished, I am confident that it is so far my most substantial scholarly contribution to my field, while at the same time an opening to a new stage in my research and writing.

### **3. Benefit to the university**

In the same manner that this project has solidified and reshaped my research, it has also enhanced my teaching. First, during the research phase I discovered literary and theoretical texts that I have incorporated into my courses and intend to continue assigning to my students. Secondly, adopting a spatial approach to Mexican literature has heightened my awareness of various political and cultural issues, such as conflicts over land ownership, voluntary and forced displacements, and utopian and dystopian imagination. These topics have become central to my teaching agenda. Third, as William Faulkner once said, one writes a book to learn how to write a book, and during these years I have learned more about the writing process. As a result, I am better equipped to guide my students through their own writing endeavors.

Moreover, I plan to propose a graduate topic course on fictional places in Latin American literature, and I would be happy to present my research to colleagues during the forthcoming Spring semester.

### **4. Original Proposal**

At the end of this document, I have attached a copy of my sabbatical proposal. I would be happy to provide any additional information or materials you may require.

## Proposal

### SECTION 1: PROPOSAL

#### Project Summary

I am requesting a one-semester sabbatical of support in order to complete a book-length manuscript on imaginary places in Mexican literature in which I have been working since late 2019. By the time the fall term of 2023 begins, I plan to have drafts of nine chapters of the book. During my leave, I will complete an additional chapter, write the book's introduction, and revise and update the entire work to prepare it for publication. Thus, this leave will allow me to culminate an academic project that has occupied me for the past years, and that deepens my research on Mexican culture while opening new perspectives which will enhance my contribution to the Fresno State community.

#### Project Description

A nation is a complicated sum of material and imaginary places. There are concrete, tangible locations where millions of tangible and concrete persons live and die. There are less obvious spaces –not less relevant for that– which are suspended nowhere, somehow oblivious to the passing of time, once speculated in a poem or a novel and since then visited by multitudes of readers. These fictitious places do not occupy a precise point on the map of a national territory but, nevertheless, they are a fundamental part of the sensitive fabric of a country.

Mexican literature has produced a wide constellation of these imaginary places. The first of its national novels, *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816), contained, among its hundreds of pages, a utopian island, the island of Saucheofú, lost somewhere in the Pacific, inhabited by methodical citizens and a happy image of what the Independent Mexico could be. Some of the best stories and novels being written right now in the country add geographies to that list, such as Fernanda Melchor's "Trópico Negro" or Andrea Chapela's futuristic scenarios. In the two centuries that stretch between these works: a legion of literary cities and towns that have multiplied Mexico's spaces.

This project consists of writing a book of essays about those imaginary Mexican geographies. Its central purpose is to map and analyze a series of places (urban and rural, utopian and dystopian, fantastic and realistic) that have been plotted and founded by a diverse band of writers (almost all of them Mexican) since the mid-nineteenth century. Although some of these places try to escape their present to powerfully imagine the future, they all bear the mark of their time. Even when the most daring seem absolutely fantastic, they all carry within them the tensions of the material world in which they were written. Thus, thinking about the specificity of these places means, at the same time, thinking about Mexico.

In its final version, the book, tentatively titled *Atlas de (otro) México: geografías imaginarias en la literatura mexicana* [*Atlas of (another) Mexico: Imaginary Geographies in Mexican*

*Literature*], will contain ten chapters, each dedicated to a particular fictional place. These ten locations are very diverse but in the end they all meet two criteria: they come from a novel and they float not too far from Mexican soil. This is the list of places visited (and the books in which they are contained):

1. Nueva Filadelfia (*El monedero*, 1861, by Nicolás Pizarro)
2. Villautopía (*Eugenia*, 1919, by Eduardo Urzaiz)
3. Quauhnáhuac (*Under the Volcano*, 1947, by Malcolm Lowry)
4. Galeras (*El fin de la esperanza*, 1948, by Rafael Bernal)
5. Comala (*Pedro Páramo*, 1955, by Juan Rulfo)
6. Ixtepec (*Los recuerdos del porvenir*, 1963, by Elena Garro)
7. Plan de Abajo (*Estas ruinas que ves*, 1975; *Las muertas*, 1977; *Dos crímenes*, 1979, by Jorge Ibargüengoitia)
8. Placeres (*El sol que estás mirando*, 1981; *La canción de las mulas muertas*, 1981; *El tornavoz*, 1983; *Sóñar la guerra*, 1984, *Los músicos y el fuego*, 1985, by Jesús Gardea)
9. Santa Teresa (*2666*, 2004, by Roberto Bolaño)
10. La Matosa (*Temporada de huracanes*, 2017, by Fernanda Melchor)

Combining textual analysis, cultural criticism and history, the chapters in this book perform a series of common operations. First: they draw a map of the points and corners of those imaginary places, some of them quite well known and others almost forgotten and hardly visited today by readers. Second: they record and analyze the habits, social relations and political forms that rule in each of those spaces, emphasizing in each case their relationship with material Mexico. Third: they explore, through these locations, an important area of Mexican cultural imagination, the ways in which Mexican literature has dreamed –sometimes with illusion, sometimes with horror– of alternative spaces to seek ways out of reality. Lastly: they expand the map of the Mexican Republic, enlarging and enriching it with these places that are a crucial part of the nation and yet do not appear on the available political maps.

### **Work Plan and Schedule**

So far, I have written seven of the ten chapters in the book. Composed during a pandemic, and in the narrow gaps between my classes and my university duties, they are all drafts that need –some more than others– a revision.<sup>1</sup> I am currently nearing the end of an eighth chapter, and hope to finish one more during the spring semester of 2023. Thus, I plan to devote my sabbatical leave to writing the tenth and final chapter, composing the book's introduction, and revising the entire manuscript for publication. The sabbatical is crucial to finish this book because what I need at this final stage is, above all, concentration and a sustained effort, without interruptions, to write that last chapter, conceive the general introduction, and stylistically homogenize and attune the entire book. A one-semester leave will be enough to finish the project since most of the book has

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<sup>1</sup> In the spring of this year, I submitted six of these seven chapters to one of Mexico's more important literary contests, the Premio Bellas Artes de Ensayo Literario José Revueltas [Fine Arts Award for Literary Essay José Revueltas], and my work was awarded the prize, which encourages me even more to complete it and publish it as a book.

already been written and I just need time to complete it, put it all together, and get it ready for publishing.

This is my estimated time table:

TIMELINE	
August 17 – September 15	Complete draft of the missing chapter (Chapter 8: Placeres)
September 16 – October 31	Complete draft of book's introduction
November 1 – December 22	Revision of the entire manuscript and preparation for publication

## SECTION 2: BENEFITS AS A FACULTY MEMBER

Since the fall of 2019, once I finished the manuscript of my first academic book (*Breve historia de nuestro neoliberalismo: poder y cultura en México*, published in 2021), I have concentrated all my attention into this new project about imaginary places in Mexican literature. On the one hand, this project continues and deepens my research on Mexican culture, to which I have devoted practically all my academic work. On the other hand, it represents a change of perspective, a slight but important shift that has allowed me to look at Mexican literature from a new standpoint. In this new manuscript I have not only extended the time frame of my research (addressing Mexican narrative since the 19th century) but I have also shifted my focus to be able to appreciate, above all, the spatial dimension of literary works. By doing this –by emphasizing spatial constructions and relationships within the texts– I have come to see Mexican literature with new eyes. Thus, the sabbatical would allow me to culminate a project that is at the same time a continuation and a rupture in my scholarship.

In addition, once completed, this book will contribute to my discipline, the field of Mexican cultural studies, in at least three ways. First: by offering a reading of the Mexican literary tradition from the spatial studies perspective, until now a viewpoint little explored in my field and capable of shedding light on new areas of cultural production. Second: by exploring the Mexican political and cultural imagination from that same spatial perspective, allowing us to rethink the utopian and fantastic projects that Mexican literature has plotted to try to overcome the limits and accidents of the nation. Lastly: by linking literary works separated by time but connected by a certain spatial affinity, thus creating an original archive composed by both canonical (*Pedro Páramo*, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, 2666) and marginal works (*El monedero*, *Eugenia*, *El fin de la esperanza*).

## SECTION 3: BENEFIT TO THE UNIVERSITY

This project has already benefited my teaching and will continue to do so. During the last semesters, I have emphasized the spatial aspects of literary works in my literature classes, and

that has allowed us to delve into Mexican literature and culture from new perspectives. Encouraged by this same interest, in the spring of 2023 I will teach a topics course on Mexico City (SPAN 148T. Mexico City: A Cultural Journey), which will introduce students to both the city's most emblematic spaces and the ways in which they have been represented in literary, artistic and cinematographic works. Upon finishing the book and returning from the sabbatical leave, I plan to propose a graduate course on fictional places in Latin American literature.

When I was working on my previous book, I delivered a talk at the university (Latin America Brown Bag Series) about its topics and findings. This time I plan to do the same, as I am always interested in sharing my research with colleagues and finding intellectual connections within and outside my department.

Finally, the sabbatical leave will not only support me to complete this research project. At the same time, by helping me wrap up this book, it will allow me, in the near future, to embark on a new intellectual project, always with the goal of staying active professionally and continually contributing to the Fresno State community.