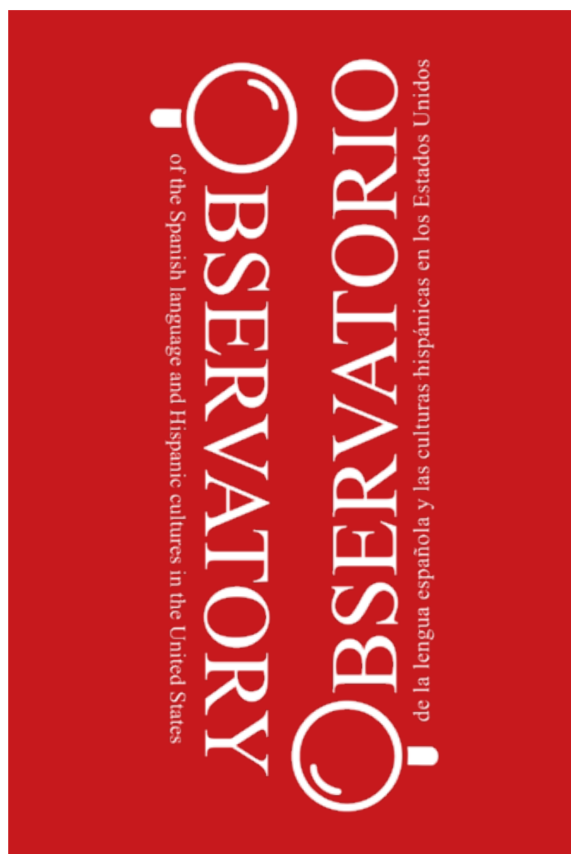




MATERIALES DEL OBSERVATORIO

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MEXICAN SIGNIFICANCE AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE PEOPLE OF PAPER*, BY SALVADOR PLASCENCIA

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The People of Paper, first published in 2005 by Salvador Plascencia, is widely regarded as a metafictional novel. While this is essentially true, I think that its Mexican significance and symbolism are as important. In this paper, I propose to analyze some of those symbols and how they shape Plascencia's book as a whole. As *The People of Paper* is a very complex work, I cannot examine it as much as I would like to, but a brief inquiry would suffice. By "Mexican significance and symbolism," I mean the use of cultural references, items, and allusions that originate from Mexico, such as *Lotería*, *Lucha Libre*, games, food, cinema, etc.

Plascencia was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1976. His family settled in the city of El Monte, near Los Angeles, when he was a child. *The People of Paper* is his first novel. It may seem rather obvious, but it is noteworthy to point out that Plascencia wrote it mostly in English. Spanish is present as well, but its usage is modest. The book is mainly set in El Monte because the author grew up there. While the text depends on its autobiographical layer, it is also very self-conscious, continuously laying bare its fictionality. In the novel, the term "paper" functions literally like a piece of paper on which to write, scribble or toss it away and a metaphor for creation. The title alludes to both functions. Many characters do not have human skin; they have paper instead of flesh. Even the sky of El Monte is made out of paper. Consequently, the paper beings cut off the skin of others when they kiss them or touch them or are badly damaged if their paper skin gets wet. Several critics have pointed out its self-reflexivity, the rich use of metafiction, and its reliance on magical realism as some of the novel's prime features.

I agree that it makes efficient use of all those devices. However, the Mexican significance, which the novel also depends upon, does not draw as much attention, perhaps because it is not as

familiar or known to some American critics. It is reasonable to argue that Plascencia's Mexican roots and American upbringing enabled him to write the novel. For instance, most of the setting takes place in California, and most of the characters either come from the US or Mexico.

In the first place, there are many references to Mexican culture of varying importance in *The People of Paper*. Some of them include glue sniffers, *cholos*, gang members, "elote" sellers (Plascencia employs the term "elote" in Spanish but also "corn" and even "maize"), wrestlers or *luchadores*, cockfights, self-taught curanderos, soothsayers. There are literal references to Catholic saints, virgins, and religious icons, explicit callbacks to Mexican cities like Oaxaca or Guadalajara, and loanwords in Spanish like "brinca," "mijo," "limpia," "oso," "papel." Some characters are clearly inspired by Mexican culture. Santos, a wrestler, named Juan Meza, recalls El Santo. Other characters share a Hispanic background, like Rita Hayworth, a woman of some importance in the novel. While not of Mexican origin, Plascencia comments abundantly on her Spanish roots, as she was born Margarita Carmen Cansino. As she was a relevant American actress, several mentions of her career and movies extend throughout the novel.

But which type of story is told on *The People of Paper*? We may believe that Federico de la Fe could be the main character, as the novel's first part opens with him. He is the father of Little Merced, an eleven-year-old girl. Her mother is Merced. They all live near Las Tortugas, a northern river in Mexico. All of a sudden, Merced leaves them both. The father thinks she leaves them because he uncontrollably pees on the bed. As De la Fe wants to give her daughter a relatively good life, they settle in El Monte, properly setting the plot in motion. However, to put it simply, Federico and his family are some of the novel's vast number of characters.

Regarding its structure, there are four parts in the book, the first being the prologue, and the rest is the novel's backbone, which is separated into three parts, each containing several

chapters. Most of the time, each chapter consists of some stories. Almost all accounts have a title with the character's name or characters whose story is being told. So if the reader wants to know about Federico de la Fe, then those sections named after him are necessary to grasp his overall arc. Plascencia uses this device to help the reader understand how each story unfolds and how they are all connected. The character sections are organized in columns in some chapters, while others are not.

We find later on that the plot seems to be the war that Federico de la Fe and El Monte Flores gang wage against Saturn. Saturn is the fictionalized version of Salvador Plascencia, who plays a crucial role in the novel. But not even he is the main character. The war is supposedly a war for volition, a war against omniscience. Saturn functions as the author's persona; he can stare down on every other character, and know about them, what they do, how they dress, and whose friends are. He spies on them without any shame or remorse. De la Fe and the others feel abashed by this and decide to face him so that he no longer controls them. The novel's first part deals with this conflict at large. It is no surprise why the text explicitly questions many aspects of storytelling and blurs the line between reality and fiction.

However, from the second part, we learn that Saturn is somehow indifferent to being the author's persona. To the extent that Smiley, a member of the El Monte Flores gang, literally tears the sky apart because it is made of paper and manages to enter Saturn's house. Smiley finds that Saturn does not seem bad; instead, he looks outlandish and distracted. Saturn does not care that there is a war against him. He declares to Smiley that he willingly surrenders. Hence I underscored that Saturn is not the protagonist. The protagonist seems to be fiction itself. We, as readers, wonder why Saturn behaves as he does if he is supposedly as powerful as the author, exerting complete control over the text he creates. In truth, we find much later that *The People of Paper* is a story of

unrequited love and abandonment. It is a story about loss and shattered relationships. Love and loss are some of the novel's motifs. Of course, Plascencia is more than aware of this, as shown in the following passage, and I quote: "Unrequited love?" the curandero immediately asked. // "It's more complicated than that, but yes," I said." (Plascencia 2006: 66). This passage summarizes the plot by explicitly drawing attention to one of the novel's motifs while providing extra information. Froggy, another member of the gang, gives such an answer. Indeed, it is more complicated than that. Merced never truly reunites with Federico de la Fe nor with her daughter. Nor do Saturn with Liz. She was once her girlfriend. Perhaps Liz was Plascencia's girlfriend in real life, as one of the novel's dedications is to her. The author repeatedly comments on the book's dedication to the point that he wittingly jokes about it, like not directly mentioning her name but rather using phrases that allude to her. But Plascencia's book is not pure heartbreak and sadness. Another important motif is its playfulness.

Speaking of playfulness, it is essential to highlight how overtly Plascencia uses images and visual devices, as this stresses how entertaining the novel is. There is everything: crossing-outs, vanishing letters, circles, squares, blank and black squares, maps, charts, drawings, scribbling, sign language, binary code, etc.

The first chapter of the first part shows an interesting visual effect regarding *Lotería*, a Mexican game. Let us remember that Merced leaving her family sets the plot in motion. De la Fe and Little Merced try to reach El Monte to settle there. Two of this chapter's sections feature two cards of *Lotería*, which are, respectively, "El Diablito" and "La Muerte." De la Fe plays the game. The *Lotería* caller draws "El Diablito" and De la Fe places a bean over that card and "La Muerte." And he loses every single game. Both cards are foreboding, signaling the ominous future he and his daughter will face in the US and, later on, waging war against Saturn. Plascencia displays

images of both cards to draw attention to the Mexican game, in case the reader does not know about it. That is why the *Lotería* caller expressly explains the rules of the game. The images function as a kind of visual presage because, in the same chapter, we meet Baby Nostradamus, an influential character who, as the name implies, can see the past and the future. This character is reminiscent of a famous episode of *Tristram Shandy*, an 18th-century novel by Laurence Sterne. Those who have read it may remember that, at some point, the parson Yorick dies, and the narrator cannot tell how he dies, as he is taken aback by his loss. Thus, Sterne uses a black square that covers the whole page. Death cannot be told; instead, it is shown. Plascencia does more or less the same with Baby Nostradamus. Whenever we see a section named after him, we see black squares or columns for the most part. Both Hispanic and English references converge visually rather than textually, implying that the author knows well how to link cultures, no matter their differences.

I want to finish this paper by analyzing how well rooted the novel is in Mexican culture and references in a crucial passage that involves Saturn. Saturn's heartbreak is described touchingly in the novel's last chapter, as his longing for Liz clearly shows how much he misses her. I quote, "She whose name is no longer cited in the dedication page would pick up and instantly hang up the receiver. And when she would not pick up, Saturn talked into the answering machine: «It is me, Sal, me. Te extraño mucho». So that she would understand and she next door could not overhear" (Plascencia 2006: 236). As we see, Saturn says "Sal," the short form of "Salvador," instead of referring to his actual character's name.

He speaks in Spanish to express his yearning. On the surface, he uses Spanish as a coded language so that Liz would understand him and the woman next to her not. More importantly, Plascencia makes his persona speak Spanish for a narrative and expressive reason. Saturn talks in the most sincere possible way. He reveals how much he needs Liz. He can no longer deal with

being heartbroken and being so torn apart. Some paragraphs later, Liz says that what she has done is not that bad; it just happens. By reading Saturn's arc, we learn that Liz left him because of the book we have in our hands and how much time he has spent on his writing rather than on the people close to him. Paradoxically, the novel's dedication has a positive meaning, and I quote, "And to Liz, who taught me that we are all of paper." (Plascencia 2006: 9). It is vital to indicate that this is the novel's second dedication. The first one, which appears on the previous page, is to the author's parents and his sister and is written in Spanish.

Regarding the second dedication and what I have said about Saturn and Liz, Plascencia humanizes the character's relationship by making it believable and relatable, as he emphasizes both the positive and negative aspects. Whether it is true or not that her girlfriend left him is secondary. What is significant is that Saturn expresses himself in his mother tongue in a crucial moment, highlighting Salvador Plascencia's cultural identity. At the beginning of my paper, I said that it is not entirely written in English. While the usage of Spanish is modest, its employment is meaningful. Language is a matter of identity, and how an artist chooses to express himself is revealing.

In conclusion, *The People of Paper* is a fascinating work. It is an ideal case study about cultural exchange, influence, and identity. Even though I barely scratched the surface regarding its Mexican symbolism, I hope Plascencia becomes more known in both Mexico and the US and that we keep studying his novel. He is a young artist and will probably show us his future work soon.



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“Mexican Significance and Symbolism in *The People of Paper*, by Salvador Plascencia”.



Dr. Julio María Fernández Meza
El Colegio de México

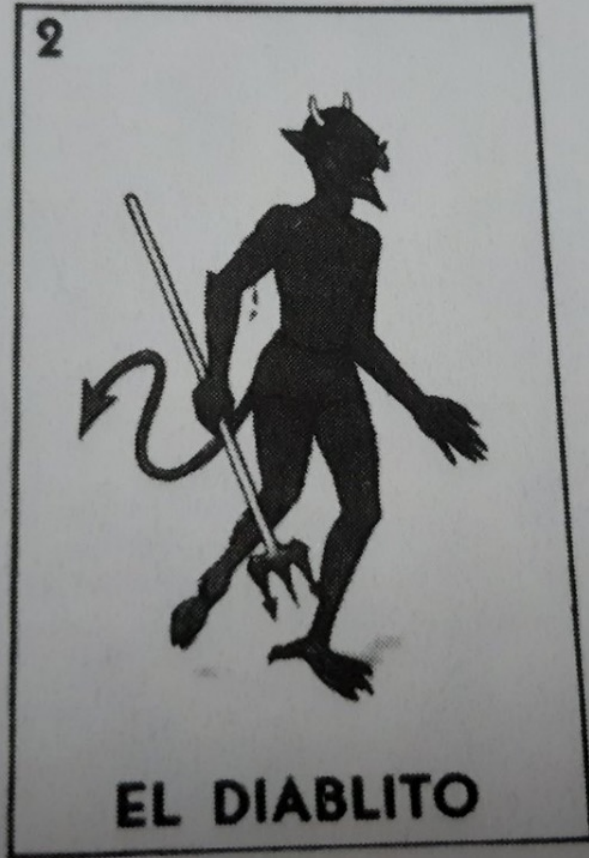


“Unrequited love?” the curandero immediately asked.

“It’s more complicated than that, but yes,” I said.” (Plascencia 2006: 66).

First edition cover, published on McSweeney’s Books (2005).

I started the game and the first card
I drew was:



“El Diablito” Lotería Card
(Plascencia 2006: 21).



Laurence Sterne, *The Life
and Opinions of Tristram
Shandy, Gentleman*, vol. I,
ed. 1769, p. 71.



A section titled after Baby
Nostradamus showcasing a
black column (Plascencia 2006:
23).

“She whose name is no longer cited in the dedication page would pick up and instantly hang up the receiver. And when she would not pick up, Saturn talked into the answering machine: «It is me, Sal, me. Te extraño mucho». So that she would understand and she next door could not overhear” (Plascencia 2006: 236).

“And to Liz, who taught me that we are all of paper” (Plascencia 2006: 9).

Sources

Plascencia, Salvador, *The People of Paper*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., New York, 2006.