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Betancourt, Sonia. *Oriente no es una pieza de museo: Jorge Luis Borges, la clave orientalista y el manuscrito de Qué es el budismo.*

CHLOE HUH PRUDENTE

BETANCOURT, SONIA. *ORIENTE NO ES UNA PIEZA DE MUSEO: JORGE LUIS BORGES, LA CLAVE ORIENTALISTA Y EL MANUSCRITO DE QUÉ ES EL BUDISMO.*

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Chloe Huh Prudente
Temple University

The emergent scholarship on Orientalism in Latin American literary traditions owes much to the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) and his numerous references to Asia in his works. Borges incorporated elements of Oriental religions and literature in his writings. *¿Qué es el budismo*, a collection of essays on Buddhism originally published in 1976, was the culmination of the writer's study of the religion. Sonia Betancourt's book *Oriente no es una pieza de museo: Jorge Luis Borges, la clave orientalista y el manuscrito de Qué es el budismo* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2018) is a great addition to the scholarship on the Orientalism in the Latin American literary traditions, and especially, Borges' Orientalism. Betancourt brings forth an investigation of the Argentine writer's connection to the philosophies and Asian religions he developed early in his life and continued throughout his lifetime, offering a valuable revelation about Borges' relation to the Orient.

The title of the book *Oriente no es una pieza de museo* is a parody of Borges' concluding remarks from his lecture: "Para mí el budismo no es una pieza de museo" (cited in 19). Betancourt's deliberate substitution of the word "el budismo" with "Oriente" suggested by the writer's relationship with the Orient, expands the scope of the Argentine writer's interest of the religion to the whole continent and its cultures. The primary source of information is the invaluable manuscript of Borges, passed down from Borges to Jurado, then to Betancourt in 2001 (131). This notebook contains the outline, drafts, and notes for the eight seminars on Buddhism led by Borges at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores de Buenos Aires between 1950 and 1951.

The book comprised of the prologue and the introduction, and two main parts— 1) La clave orientalista and 2) Entre la erudición y la fantasía. Génesis e interpretación de *Qué es el budismo*— followed by the conclusions, the reproduction of Borges' manuscript, Maria Kodama's letter to Betancourt, and the bibliographies of selected works. Betancourt's study of Borge's biography is

complemented by the study of his publications that contain influences from the Asian philosophy. Betancourt recognizes the significance of Borges' family ancestry, while showing how Borges strived to gain a personal understanding of the Orient through the world literatures and Asian religions. Betancourt undertakes comparative analysis of the manuscript, the publication *¿Qué es el budismo?*, and Borges' other essays and fictional writings.

The organization of 1) *La clave orientalista* is in chronological order. Betancourt opens each chapter with an epigraph that summarizes the experiences that shape Borges' Orientalism in his childhood, the 1920s-1930s following his stay in Geneva, and the 1940s-1950s. In the discussion of Borges' childhood, Betancourt scrutinizes textual sources that sparked an interest in the Orient that would continue throughout his life, establishing the grounds for the following two chapters that illustrate Borges' continued search for knowledge in European, Argentinian and Hindustani contexts. As Maria Kodama acknowledges in her letter, Betancourt emphasizes the function of Borges' family heritage against the consensus that could portray Borges' Orientalism as experimental or escapist. Betancourt exemplifies how the wealth of books found in the family library and Borges' proficiency in English granted access to original versions of English literature and the English translations of literary canons from around the world. Betancourt effectively validates the authenticity of Borges' interest demonstrated in his published works despite the lack of firsthand experiences of Asia that other writers had, since he only visited Asia as an octogenarian.

In order to demonstrate the scope of Borges' study, Betancourt expands the discussion to European philosophers and Argentine writers and artists. It is possible to see the trend in Borges' study of Oriental history, languages, customs, and religion, and their advancement through other resources. The inspiration included Argentine writers and artists who participated in the culture circles of the Buenos Aires between the 1920s and 1930s, as well as European philosophers who had gathered sources of theosophy and mysticism from a wide array of resources, including Hindustan, China, and Japan. The important aspect of this part comes from Betancourt's analysis of young Borges' bibliography that reveal their Orientalist connections, which Borges continues to develop through his life.

The second part of the book, 2) *Entre la erudición y la fantasía. Génesis e interpretación de ¿Qué es el budismo?*, is composed of seven chapters that provide a close reading of the manuscript. At first, Betancourt provides pre-textual evidence in the manuscript and compares them to those from the final edition, published after more than 20 years. Betancourt establishes historical backgrounds for Borges' writings on the study of Buddhism. This section follows the outline of *¿Qué es el budismo?*, focusing on the process that

takes place between the redaction of the initial outline in early 1950s and his other publications.

The close reading follows the index of the 1976 publication and includes brief descriptions of each school of Buddhism Borges studied and their connections to the elements of time and circularity in his fictional works, as well as his essays and lectures. Betancourt comments on the process of transformation based on the differences between the two works and the notes from the manuscript, which includes additions, omissions, marginal notes and strikethroughs that reveal the process of revisions. According to Betancourt, the revisions of the last five chapters of the publication are from the collaboration with Alicia Jurado, who was able to offer first-hand observation of Asian culture from her stay in Asia (226).

While Betancourt successfully demonstrates the link between the manuscript and the 1976 publication, the sections on the connection to fictional works are simplified. Although Betancourt identifies the titles of fictional works that contain Oriental elements, there is less analysis of short stories in connection to Borges' creativity from his study of Asian religions and European philosophy that established connections to them. The comparisons between the manuscript and the pre-texts of essays and short stories might benefit from having a more in-depth analysis Betancourt had in the first part of the book to discuss the significance of Borges' childhood readings in relation to his development as a writer.

With this said, Betancourt deserves recognition for successfully exemplifying the panorama of Borges' Orientalism, not to mention her bringing Borges' manuscript to light. The major strength of the book comes from her exceptional description of the life influences of Borges that constructed his identity as both a writer and an Orientalist. The analysis of Borges' childhood readings and their Buddhist undertones especially gives validity to Borges' experience of immersion as the scholar and practitioner of Buddhism throughout the course of his life. As Betancourt suggests, the question of "What is?" (¿Qué es?) in the title of the 1976 publication both encapsulates Borges' approach to the religion and his writing process and makes a direct reference to the first method of meditation (*koan*) of Zen Buddhism (227).

In conclusion, Betancourt combines the analysis of Borges' bibliography and their Orientalist roots and the selections of his writings that provide the direct evidences of Orientalism. Betancourt approaches the complexities of interpreting the foundations of *¿Qué es el budismo?* with originality and detail. Through these evidences, Betancourt concludes that Borges's Orientalism is not experimental but is the product of a personal commitment to the doctrines of Buddhism and a belief in enlightenment. This

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book is an essential addition for scholars of Asian religions who will approach the topic with the same curiosity and openness with which Borges did. Furthermore, the book is an excellent resource for researchers who will study Jorge Luis Borges in the context of Hispanic Orientalism and cosmopolitanism in the Latin American literary traditions for the wealth of bibliographical resources on the author.



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