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Visions of the Emerald City: Modernity, Tradition, and the Formation of Porfirian Oaxaca, Mexico

Mark Overmyer-Velazquez

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Visions of the Emerald City is an absorbing historical analysis of how Mexicans living in Oaxaca City experienced “modernity” during the lengthy “Order and Progress” dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911). Renowned as the Emerald City (for its many buildings made of green cantera stone), Oaxaca City was not only the economic, political, and cultural capital of the state of Oaxaca but also a vital commercial hub for all of southern Mexico. As such, it was a showcase for many of Díaz’s modernizing and state-building projects. Drawing on in-depth research in archives in Oaxaca, Mexico City, and the United States, Mark Overmyer-Velázquez describes how Oaxacans, both elites and commoners, crafted and manipulated practices of tradition and modernity to define themselves and their city as integral parts of a modern Mexico.

Incorporating a nuanced understanding of visual culture into his analysis, Overmyer-Velázquez shows how ideas of modernity figured in Oaxacans’ ideologies of class, race, gender, sexuality, and religion and how they were expressed in Oaxaca City’s streets, plazas, buildings, newspapers, and public rituals. He pays particular attention to the roles of national and regional elites, the Catholic church, and popular groups—such as Oaxaca City’s madams and prostitutes—in shaping the discourses and practices of modernity. At the same time, he illuminates the dynamic interplay between these groups. Ultimately, this well-illustrated history provides insight into provincial life in pre-Revolutionary Mexico and challenges any easy distinctions between the center and the periphery or modernity and tradition.

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