



Exchanges, Crisis and Climate Change: Readings on Early Modern Iberian Globalism

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle. Madrid-Frankfurt: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2023. 180 pp

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BOOK REVIEW

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle. *Exchanges, Crisis and Climate Change: Readings on Early Modern Iberian Globalism*. Madrid-Frankfurt: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2023. 180 pp.

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle's monograph, *Exchanges, Crisis and Climate Change: Readings on Early Modern Iberian Globalism*, tackles a provocative topic that has remained largely overlooked until recently: the literary representation of climate change during the Iberian colonial expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the author argues in the introduction, while it is scientifically established that Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas triggered microbiological changes that dramatically reduced the continent's population, its speculative connection to the regional cooling of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—known as the Little Ice Age—remains hypothetical (11). Rather than seeking to confirm or refute this hypothesis, Gil-Osle is more interested in tracing the relationship between climate anxiety and the ambition for imperial expansion as they are represented in the literature of the period.

Though highly engaging—or perhaps precisely because of that—the book is relatively short and structured in two distinct parts that may at times feel somewhat disconnected—at least in explicit terms, though underlying thematic links emerge throughout. The first section, “Exchanges in a Global Renaissance,” studies early globalization through trade routes, while the second, “A Reading of Climate Change in the Baroque,” examines the ecological consequences of imperial expansion, with each part comprising two chapters. The introduction works to establish coherence between these sections. The section titles further underscore this bipartite structure, as the terms “Renaissance” and “Baroque”—the central frameworks of each part and virtually synonymous with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively, in early modern Iberian studies—delineate an aesthetic periodization that shapes the book's organization. Even though one of the monograph's most provocative premises is that the experience of landscape devastation was one of the main forces that triggered Baroque esthetics, its structure implicitly suggests a sharp rupture between these two periods—an interpretation I find somewhat overstated, since aesthetic sensibilities may shift without necessarily signaling a radical transformation in broader sociocultural dynamics. Nevertheless, the book does advance arguments throughout its chapters that could potentially transcend the traditional Renaissance–Baroque divide. Despite this primarily structural disagreement—arguably its only drawback, though some may see it as a productive choice, a perspective I acknowledge—the four chapters offer exceptionally thought-provoking analyses. Gil-Osle's prose is a genuine pleasure to read.

Following an introduction that compellingly sets out the book's core arguments while also tracing the development of “environmental history methodologies”—from foundational historians Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to more recent contributions by Ricardo Padrón, Ayesha Ramachandran, and Ning Ma—the first chapter analyzes literary representations of early modern exchange systems in the Americas and Asia. Grounded in a robust theoretical framework of gift exchange and the rhetorics of friendship, the chapter conducts a series of incisive close readings of excerpts from Columbus, Cabeza de Vaca, Joseph de Acosta, Francis Xavier, and Pigafetta. The analysis of this well-curated textual corpus underscores the critical importance of acknowledging global transactions in our

disciplines—an argument that Chapter 2, “Global Schemes: From the Southwest to Greater India,” expands by shifting its focus from textual representations to the conceptualization of global interconnectedness, particularly through the interplay between texts and maps from the period.

While Part I of the monograph lays out what is at stake in fully embracing a global perspective on the early modern period—placing voracious Iberian imperial expansion at its center rather than the British and French traditions—Part II provides the book’s most substantial contribution to the field by clearly exposing the overlaps between early modern climate change and the literary sensibilities of the time. In this sense, the very title of Chapter 3, “Globalization of Emotions,” is a bold declaration of intent: its point of departure lies in placing emotions at the very origins of today’s accelerated globalization, thereby underscoring the continuity between the imperial past and the neoliberal present. Meanwhile, the chapter adopts a comparative framework involving the late Ming dynasty and the Habsburg Empire, examining how their proto-national literature reflected “overexaggerated emotional expressions of friendship and love” (100) in response to global climate impacts in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Yet perhaps the crowning jewel—the chapter that best encapsulates both the discursive *modus operandi* and the overarching ethos of this book—is the fourth, aptly titled “The Global and the Little Ice Age.” Here, Gil-Osle once again dissects texts by canonical authors including Luis de Góngora, Francisco de Quevedo, María de Zayas, Tirso de Molina, Baltasar Gracián, and Sigüenza y Góngora, alongside lesser-known and anonymous works. Through this selection of close readings, he demonstrates that the era’s calamities were not attributed solely to divine wrath or astrological influences; rather, writers also showed a keen awareness of natural phenomena, whatever their underlying causes. A brief conclusion—conceivable as an extension of the previous chapter—underscores how the empire’s margins offered exceptionally fertile spaces for exploring early modern responses to environmental upheavals, thereby reinforcing the broader argument that climate disruptions undoubtedly shaped the literary imagination of the period.

Gil-Osle’s book’s interdisciplinary scope further expands its scholarly impact. In addition, the book serves as an excellent entry point to global early modern studies and environmental history/ecocriticism, thanks to its rigorous grounding in primary-source-based scholarship and its theoretical sophistication. Its four concise chapters make it especially adaptable for classroom use: Chapters 1 and 2 are well-suited to graduate seminars or advanced undergraduate courses surveying early modern history and literature from a global perspective, while Chapters 3 and 4 lend themselves to studies focusing on colonial ecocritical frameworks.

In sum, *Exchanges, Crisis and Climate Change: Readings on Early Modern Iberian Globalism* offers a fresh perspective on colonial literature by situating the Iberian tradition within crucial twenty-first-century dialogues and foregrounding early modern hispanophone writing in contemporary Anthropocene debates. The publication of this book is part of a broader wave of renewed interest in ecocritical perspectives on a global scale, aligning with other recent monographs such as Orlando Betancor’s *The Matter of Empire: Metaphysics and Mining in Colonial Peru* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017) and Miguel Ibáñez Aristondo’s *Ecological Imperialism in Early Modern Spanish Narratives: Excavating the Environmental Conflicts of the Iberian Globalization* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024). As hinted in this review, what is most compelling about the emerging synergy among scholars exploring the ecological dimensions of Iberian colonialism is its simultaneous impact on shaping the field, reconfiguring the boundaries of early modern studies in contemporary critical discourse.

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