

# The Companion to **LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES**



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# Latin American literatures

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The remarkably vast and diverse domain of the literatures of Latin America does not lend itself to easy overviews. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a variety of criss-crossing movements, tropes and categories that link the literary production of the region (Mexico, Central America, Hispanic Caribbean islands, South America, including Portuguese-speaking Brazil). At the same time, the stylistic and thematic coordinates shared by national literatures – such as common language, artistic movements, colonial legacy and the nation-building experiences of the nineteenth century – should not let us de-emphasize regional differences, nor should they obliterate diverse creative expressions of indigenous people. Large portions of South and Central America (the Andean region, Mexico, Guatemala, Paraguay) continue to be influenced by the legacy of the great pre-Colombian cultures of the Inca, the Aymara, the Nahuatl, the Maya and the Guaraní. On the other hand, the African-based cultures of the enslaved have undergone a violent ‘hybridization’ or ‘transculturation’ with European elements in the crucible of plantation economy in Brazil and the Hispanic Caribbean. Finally, various countries of South America (Argentina, Uruguay, Chile) have been most

significantly shaped by European immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To provide a meaningful picture of Latin American literatures means to recognize all facets of its richness and diversity, including the works of women writers and the growing literary output of Latino/a authors in the USA. This task also requires a reassessment of the traditional notion of the 'literary' by bringing into focus forms of writing previously excluded from the canon (travel accounts; confessions and other autobiographical forms; journalism; testimonial narrative).

The process of gaining independence from Spanish and Portuguese rule that began in the early nineteenth century followed different patterns – Mexico, for example, gained independence in 1821, while Cuba had to wait until 1902 – but most of the newly formed states failed to build the stable democracies envisioned by the liberators. Consequently, literary production became further diversified as it strived to embody, both ideologically and aesthetically, the nation-building projects of local elites and to confront the anarchical times dominated by despotic regimes and punctuated by violent political strife between competing ideological groups.

While it is impossible to decide on an emblematic date that represents a watershed between the writings of the colonial period and national literatures, the entry of Latin America into the new era is associated with the publication of the first Latin American novel, *El periquillo sarniento* (1816; tr. 1942 *The Itching Parrot*) by the Mexican José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827). The novel's pedigree can be traced to the Spanish picaresque, on the one hand, and to the ideas of the French Enlightenment, on the other. Unlike some of his

contemporaries whose imagination was captivated by the euphoria of national liberation movements, Fernández de Lizardi did not extol the heroic spirit of his fellow citizens. Instead, through an intermixture of oral traditions, moralizing anecdotes and satire he engaged in a critique of corruption and hypocrisy among the emerging Mexican bourgeoisie. Fernández de Lizardi's overly didactic lead was followed by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834–93), whose sentimental novel *Clemencia* (Clemency, 1896) depicted Mexican society divided by the civil war at the time of the French invasion (1864–67) and proposed an agenda for national reconciliation. In keeping with the emerging tenets of Realism, his later novel *El Zarco* (1901; tr. 1957 *El Zarco: The Bandit*) enriched the portrayal of national reality by blending local patterns of speech with 'true-to-life' characters.

The revolutionary events of the early nineteenth century did not inspire many novelists, but they did trigger an outpouring of heroic verse, which often combined neo-classical style with Romantic imagery. Best exemplified by José Joaquín Olmedo (Ecuador, 1780–1847) and his ode *La victoria de Junín, canto a Bolívar* (The Victory of Junín, Song to Bolívar, 1825), the heroic poetry of the liberation era soon gave way to celebrations of autochthonous nature and the pre-Colombian past. In such widely acclaimed works as the epic 'Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida' (Silva to the Agriculture of the Torrid Zone, 1826) by the prominent Venezuelan poet and thinker Andrés Bello (1781–1865) or 'En el teocalli de Cholula' (In the Temple-Pyramid of Cholula, 1820) by the Cuban exiled poet José María Heredia (1803–39), Romanticism emerged as a more clearly defined style asserting its own Latin American identity. Unified by recurring themes of native landscapes, nostalgic evocations of

indigenous legacies, political exile and struggle against tyranny, romantic poetry resonated with equal force throughout the continent.

Prominent Brazilian writer Antônio Gonçalves Dias (1823–64) contributed to the solidification of Romanticism in his country with three volumes of songs, *cantos* (1846–51), which included a perennial favorite, ‘Canção do exílio’ (The Song of Exile, 1846). The author of *Poemas americanos* (American Poems, 1840) and of an unfinished epic *Os Timbiras* (The Timbira Indians, 1857) grew into prominence as the founder of Brazilian Indianism, a widespread movement steeped in the autochthonous past, for which Romanticism provided the basic mould. In Brazil this trend reached its height with José Martiniano de Alencar (1829–77), whose masterpiece *Iracema* (1865; tr. 1886 *Iracema, the Honey-Lips, a Legend of Brazil*) – a melodramatic novel of tragic love between the indigenous woman whose name is an anagram of ‘America’ and a Portuguese soldier – has enjoyed lasting popularity. Similar attempts to forge models of a more inclusive post-independence identity by rebuilding the connection with the indigenous past were cultivated by numerous Indianist texts from Spanish America: *Tabaré* (1886; tr. 1956 *Tabaré: An Indian Legend of Uruguay*) by the Uruguayan Juan Zorrilla de San Martín (1855–1931), *Cumandá, o un drama entre salvajes* (Cumandá, or a Drama Among Savages, 1871) by the Ecuadorean Juan León Mera (1832–94), *Enriquillo: leyenda histórico dominicana* (1879–82, tr. 1954 *The Cross and the Sword*) by the Dominican writer Manuel de Jesús Galván (1834–1910).

According to some scholars, the publication in Peru of *Aves sin nido* (1889; tr. 1904, *Birds without a Nest*) by the distinguished writer and journalist Clorinda Matto de Turner (1852–1909) marked the birth of literary Indigenism, which turned away from the melodramatic models of Indianism by incorporating native vocabulary in order to render more ‘objective’ descriptions of social and cultural practices. Whereas the first novels in this vein, such as *Raza de bronce* (Race of Bronze, 1919) by the Bolivian Alcides Arguedas (1879–1946) and *Huasipungo* (1934; tr. 1964 *The Villagers*) by the Ecuadorian Jorge Icaza (1906–78) were based on realist or naturalist conventions, mature Indigenism produced a notable body of remarkably original and experimental narratives, including César Vallejo’s (Peru, 1895–1935) sombre novel *Tungsteno* (1931), Miguel Angel Asturias’s (Guatemala, 1899–1974) *Hombres de maíz* (1949; tr. 1974 *Men of Maize*) and Rosario Castellanos’s (Mexico, 1925–74) *Balún Canán* (1957; tr. 1958 *The Nine Guardians*). It was, however, the Peruvian José María Arguedas (1911–69) who was justly hailed as the most original and innovative *indigenista* writer. His *Yawar fiesta* (1941; tr. 1985) and *Los ríos profundos* (1958; tr. 1978 *Deep Rivers*) captured a genuine and complex image of Peruvian ethnicity by means of striking formal experimentation, which included interweaving of Spanish and the native language Quechua, structural fragmentation and the mythical concept of time. In a different vein, the concept of ‘transculturation’ – borrowed by the Uruguayan critic Angel Rama (1926–83) from Fernando Ortiz’s (Cuba, 1881–1969) essay *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y azúcar* (1940; tr. 1995 *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*) – proved critically productive when approaching the hybrid complexity of Arguedas’s masterpiece. Finally, in a unique ideological

development, José Carlos Mariátegui's (Peru, 1895–1930) landmark essay *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1927; tr. 1971 *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*) infused Indigenist principles with Marxist ideology.

Early treatment of indigenous cultures was firmly rooted in romantic nativism, which informs also the iconic text of Latin American Romanticism, *María* (1867; tr. 1890) by the Colombian writer Jorge Isaacs (1837–95). No Latin American novel captures the romantic spirit better than this tale of star-crossed

lovers set against the idyllic landscapes of the Cauca Valley. Acting upon local sources of inspiration, Isaacs created a narrative unparalleled for the subtlety of psychological portrayal, structural complexity and stylistic achievement. *María* has been re-read for generations, but it was not until the 1990s that the critics reconsidered its significance – alongside other Latin American romances – in light of the nation-building agendas of the nineteenth century. In one of the most influential re-evaluations of those narratives, Doris Sommer has adopted Benedict Anderson's thesis that novels inspire the forging of 'imagined communities' and has argued that the authors of romance projected their nation-building ideals into the imagery of sexual union. Sommer's path-breaking *Foundational Fictions* (1991) is among an impressive corpus of recent studies (Roberto González Echevarría, Julio Ramos, Nicolas Shumway, Carlos Alonso, Josefina Ludmer) that instilled new vitality into the study of nineteenth-century Latin American literature.

All of the major European trends of this period – Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism – had a pervasive

influence on Latin American writings of this ‘foundational’ era. While the specific manifestations of these overlapping movements were influenced by regional contingencies, individual creativity assumed a surprising variety of forms. Vivid renditions of everyday customs, local milieux, folk beliefs and oral lore were the domain of *costumbrismo* derived from Spanish literary tradition and catalyzed by the readers’ predilection for distinctly Latin American themes. As *costumbrismo* anticipated the waning of Romanticism (1820–80) and signalled the shift towards Realism (1840–1910), it produced such unique forms as *la tradición*, best exemplified by Ricardo Palma’s (1833–1919) *Tradiciones peruanas* (Peruvian Traditions, 1872–1910; 1945 partial translation, *The Knights of the Cape*), a ten-volume collection of vibrant anecdotes, humorous sketches and legends derived from Peruvian history and folklore. Hybrid terms such as ‘Romantic Realism’ or ‘Naturalistic Realism’ – both proposed by the critic Fernando Alegría – are sometimes used to describe the peculiarities of some of the most significant works of the nineteenth century, among them Esteban Echeverría’s (1805–51) haunting short story *El matadero* (written c.1838 and published posthumously in 1871; tr. 1959 ‘The Slaughter House’), which depicts in sordid detail and with didactic excess the torture of a heroic sympathizer of the Unitarist Party by the followers of the Federalist dictator Juan Manuel Rosas (1835–52). There is a considerable ideological overlap between Echeverría’s political critique and the novel *Amalia* (1851–55; tr. 1919) by his fellow Argentine José Mármol (1818–71). Stylistically, however, the immensely popular *Amalia* is the prototypical Romantic novel that highlights the heroic intrigue and the melodramatic tragedy of young lovers under the Rosas tyranny.

Rosas's oppressive regime marked the entire generation of intellectuals and created a long-lasting polarization within Argentinean society. Among the most notable writers who tried not only to debunk the Federalist regime but also to seek a path out of political turmoil was Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–86), best remembered for his highly influential masterpiece *Facundo* (1845; tr. 1960 *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants, or Civilization and Barbarism*). This eclectic text – a combination of essay, novel and biography – projected the clash between the colonizing centre and the colonized periphery onto the coordinates of civilization and barbarism (see [Chapter 4](#)): the modernizing power of the city (law, culture, reason) versus the uncivilized inhabitants of the rural *pampas* (anarchy, nature, irrationality). Among later works that contributed in meaningful ways to the reworking of Sarmiento's binary, *Doña Bárbara* (1929; tr. 1931) – a highly popular novel by the Venezuelan writer and statesman Rómulo Gallegos (1884–1969) – embodied the barbarism associated with nature in a female protagonist who had to be subjected to the 'civilizing' process of taming. Finally, the figure of *Facundo* – as an authoritarian military chief, *caudillo* – was echoed throughout the twentieth century by most esteemed novelists who dealt with the theme of dictatorship in a variety of daunting novels: from Asturias's surreal *El Señor Presidente* (1946; tr. 1963 *The President*) to Augusto Roa Bastos's (Paraguay, 1917-) hallucinatory *Yo el Supremo* (1974; tr. 1986, *I the Supreme*), Alejo Carpentier's (Cuba, 1904–80) arcane *El recurso del método* (1974; tr. 1976 *Reasons of State*) and Gabriel García Márquez's (Colombia, 1928-) highly complex *El otoño del patriarca* (1975; tr. 1976 *The Autumn of the Patriarch*) and

demythifying *El general en su laberinto* (1989; tr. 1990 *The General in his Labyrinth*).

In addition to providing a forceful denunciation of Rosas's dictatorship and a forward-looking reflection about the identity of Argentina, *Facundo* conveyed, on the one hand, a contempt for the savage and unruly *gauchos*, the nomadic inhabitants of the *pampas*, and, on the other, a fascination with their independent spirit and their unique skills. With all its ambivalence, *Facundo* became a catalyst for the development of a vast body of *gauchesca* literature, derived from the oral tradition of *payadas* (ballads). The figure of the *gaucho* was further moulded into the elite projects that sought to transform him from a marginalized renegade into a member of an orderly nation. The *gaucho's* literary metamorphosis into a symbolic embodiment of national identity culminated in the immensely popular epic poem *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872–79; tr. 1948) by José Hernández (1834–86). Seven years after the publication of the first part, known as *La ida* (The Departure), *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* appeared, denouncing the suffering and economic marginalization of the *gaucho*. As with Sarmiento's civilization and barbarism, the *gaucho* theme continued to resonate in Argentinean literature and it acquired mythical overtones in *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926; tr. 1935), by Ricardo Güiraldes (1886–1927), attesting to the continuing vitality of the *gaucho's* legacy. Recent critical re-readings of gauchesque literature attuned to gender issues and post-colonial approaches have shed new light on many of these canonical texts (Alonso, Ludmer, Rotker, Shumway).

Like *El matadero*, *Amalia*, *Facundo* and *Martín Fierro*, much of the literature of the nineteenth century was firmly rooted in

the belief that writing can be an effective vehicle for fostering projects of political reform and denouncing social injustice. Since the question of slavery occupied centre stage in the slave-based, sugar-producing economies of Cuba and Brazil, both countries witnessed the rise of abolitionist literature. In Brazil, Castro Alves (1847–71) earned the distinction of ‘poet of the slaves’ for his abolitionist poems collected posthumously in *Os escravos* (The Slaves, 1883). In Cuba, a host of writers denounced the horrors of slavery in a variety of forms: from the romantic novel *Sab* (1841; tr. 1993) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814–73) – one of the few women writers to have gained acclaim in the male-dominated literary circles of her time – to the monumental *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma de Angel* (1882; tr. 1935) by Cirilo Villaverde (1812–94), whose political engagement forced him into prolonged exile. *Cecilia Valdés* exemplified the dilemmas of Cuban nationalists whose visions of *cubanidad* assumed a gradual whitening of the population through miscegenation and integration. For an average Cuban, Villaverde’s mulatto heroine continues to be an immensely popular figure embodying the nation’s mixed ethnic heritage.

Few authors of colour attained recognition in nineteenth-century Latin America. Unlike the USA, where there is a substantial body of slave narratives, *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (written 1839, Spanish edition 1937; tr. 1840 *The Autobiography of a Slave*) by Juan Francisco Manzano (Cuba, 1797–1854) is the only known slave account to come out of Latin America. Manzano’s testimonial authority had to do with his position as a victim and witness to the slave’s predicament, but his account was manipulated to fit better the anti-abolitionist rhetoric of white intellectuals such as Domingo Delmonte (1804–53). Manzano’s free mulatto

contemporary, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809–44), known as Plácido, is remembered as an accomplished romantic poet, whose 1843 poem ‘El hijo de la maldición’ (Son of damnation) denounced both slavery and colonial rule. Plácido was executed by the Spanish for allegedly participating in a slave uprising (the Escalera Conspiracy, 1844). José Piedra’s recent re-reading of discourses produced by enslaved Africans and their descendants highlights the different strategies employed by these authors to accept, superficially, European values, while in reality mocking and challenging the oppressive code of the masters.

Women were also among those marginalized by the literary establishment of nineteenth-century Latin America. Nonetheless, a handful of women writers gained professional recognition and readership. In addition to Gómez de Avellaneda and Matto de Turner, Juana Manuela Gorriti (Argentina, 1818–92) and Soledad Acosta de Samper (Colombia, 1833–1913) were successful as authors of short stories, travel accounts, novels and essays, and could be seen as transitional figures anticipating the development of gender-specific writing. However, many women authors have remained unacknowledged until recent reassessments of the literary canon by such critics as Francine Massiello, Jean Franco, Susana Rotker and Adriana Méndez Rodenas, among others.

As Romanticism and *costumbrismo* slowly yielded to Realism, the theme of national identity remained at the very heart of the narrative, albeit under a new guise. The positivist cult of pragmatism became pervasive among the intellectual elites, most notably among the Mexican *científicos* associated with the dictator Porfirio Díaz. In literature, in the face of the

turbulent socioeconomic transformations, Realism privileged a firm sense of social commitment and an uncompromising pursuit of ‘true-to-life’ representation. This attitude was accompanied by a keen awareness of rapid historical change, as evidenced by Alberto Blest Gana’s (1830–1920) *Martin Rivas* (1862; tr. 1918) and *La gran aldea* (1884) by Lucio V. López (1848–94), which unravel the impact of modernization on Chile and Argentina, respectively. The novel was also a medium of choice for the proponents of Naturalism, who sought to infuse their aesthetic practice with the impression of scientific objectivity in their merciless portrayal of the most abject facets of humankind. Novels such as *Santa* (1903; tr. 1999) by the Mexican Federico Gamboa (1864–1939), *Sin rumbo* (Aimless, 1885) by the Argentinean Eugenio Cambaceres (1843–89), and *O Mulato* (1881) by Aluisio Azevedo (Brazil, 1857–1913) unravel the Darwinian forces of heredity and social milieu and denounce the most extreme abuses of power, whereas the stories of *Sub terra* (1904) by Baldomero Lillo (Chile, 1867–1923) are reminiscent of French Naturalist Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) because of their poignant criticism of the squalid working conditions in Chilean coal mines. The heightened sense of social reality also served as a catalyst for Euclides da Cunha’s (1866–1909) novel *Os Sertões* (1902; tr. 1944 *Rebellion in the Backlands*), a pioneering portrayal of the marginalized inhabitants of the Brazilian interior. In a similar vein, sociopolitical awareness was transposed into the realist drama, with *Barranca abajo* (1905; tr. 1973) by the Uruguayan Florencio Sánchez (1875–1910) becoming the first significant achievement of Spanish American theatre.

Around the turn of the century most diverse trends converged in the prolific and original work of Joaquim Maria Machado

de Assis (Brazil, 1839–1908). His most accomplished novels *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881; tr. 1952 *Epitaph of a Small Winner*) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899; tr. 1953) – self-defined as ‘the most oblique and dissembling’ – endeavoured to grasp the complex fabric of Brazilian society, including facets of power, gender politics and ethnicity. Machado de Assis’s impetus towards unrestrained satire, introspection and exploration of the text’s own making produced an unsettling image of human experience, consonant with the turmoil and anguish of modernity. His innovative standing among his contemporaries was also due to his ability to reinvigorate literary forms by parodying the basic principles of Realism and Naturalism. By breaking the confines of traditional narrative, Machado de Assis paved the way for the flourishing of Brazilian experimental Regionalist narrative in the 1930s by such authors as Graciliano Ramos (1892–1953) and Erico Veríssimo (1905–75) and fostered the awareness of vertiginous socio-economic changes so crucial to the development of Brazilian *Modernismo* (1922–45).

In the 1880s, Realism and Naturalism gradually lost hold to *Modernismo*, a powerful new movement that challenged positivist materialism and became the first in a series of continuing confrontations of Latin America with modernity (Jrade 1998: ix). By the time it yielded to avant-garde tendencies in the early 1920s, *Modernismo* had earned an extraordinary and lasting place in Spanish American literary history and had a wide-reaching impact on the most innovative writers of the twentieth century. *Modernista* literary vision was shaped by the dramatic socio-economic and political changes on the Latin American scene that included the disappearance of the old aristocracy, the growth of industrial capital and cosmopolitan centres, the

commodification of art, spectacular urbanization, increase in travel and the diffusion of new ideas through flourishing literary journals (Jrade 1998).

*Modernismo* was born under the spiritual leadership of Rubén Darío (Nicaragua, 1867–1916), whose extensive production of poetry and narrative exemplifies the extraordinary richness of the movement, from the advocacy of beauty and musicality in *Azul* (Blue, 1888) and *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (1896; tr. 1922 *Prosas profanas and Other Poems*) to the unravelling of socio-political awareness and Latin American identity in *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (Songs of Life and Hope, 1905). While Darío recognized the power of literary legacy and drew upon Spanish, French and classical traditions, ultimately the unique appeal of *Modernismo* had to do with striking experimentation with syntax, metre and poetic imagery. Darío and his followers were equally vocal about their ideals and their dislikes. Their anti-bourgeois attitude was predicated on their search for spirituality and enduring artistic beauty. French Parnassian and Symbolist poets (Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé) provided the *modernistas* with models of elegance, cosmopolitan refinement and sensuality, while Romanticism nourished their spiritual pursuit of the exotic, the mythical and the esoteric. All these influences notwithstanding, the shape of the new aesthetic resided in the originality, vision and talent of individual writers, who considered poetry as a literary medium best suited to create rather than reproduce reality. In their well-orchestrated, gracefully crafted and intricate poems – but also in a sizeable body of novels, chronicles, travel accounts, essays and short stories – the *modernistas* sought to encompass their desire for striking

stylistic innovation with their faith in the power of poetic language.

Despite their extraordinary individual talents and inimitable personalities, the *modernistas* shared many of the same values and aesthetic principles. For some of them, however, socio-political involvement took a backseat to their own existential anguish and fascination with ‘art for art’s sake’. The resulting emphasis on extravagant or decadent imagery, escapism and bohemian lifestyle was most ostensibly present in the writings of Julián del Casal (Cuba, 1863–93) and José Asunción Silva (Colombia, 1865–96). On the other end of the spectrum, an unswerving political engagement distinguished the life and the work of José Martí (Cuba, 1853–95), whose highly popular *Versos sencillos* (1891) challenged the assumption of incompatibility between political passion and poetic harmony. In Brazil, a parallel movement of Parnassianism was consolidated in the prolific writings of Olavo Bilac (1865–1918).

Alongside poetry, the essay became another preferred medium of *Modernismo*. As a form it was particularly well suited to express a heightened sense of awareness of Latin American identity. The encroaching power of the United States generated concerns among Latin American intellectuals, especially in conjunction with the semi-colonial status of Puerto Rico, the provisions of the Platt Amendment of 1901 (which restricted Cuban sovereignty), and the creation of Panama (1903) in the aftermath of US intervention. Even though critics have not always associated *Modernismo* with socio-political concerns, recent studies have underscored their relevance for many of the *modernista* writers. Among the few masterful essays that exemplify both

the formal refinement of the period and the obsession with Latin American identity, *Ariel* (1900; tr. 1988) – a highly polemical work by José Enrique Rodó (Uruguay, 1871–1917) – replays Sarmiento’s dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism through a confrontation between two Shakespearean characters: Ariel, as a symbol of spirituality and beauty, and Caliban, as a vulgar barbarian wearing a mask of pragmatism and materialism. *Ariel* was interpreted as an allegory of cultural differences between the utilitarian USA and the spiritually oriented Latin American nations. Decades later, Rodó’s text inspired yet another controversial proposal by the Cuban poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar (1930–). In his *Calibán* (1971; tr. 1989 *Caliban and Other Essays*) it was precisely Caliban/cannibal who stands as a metaphor of Latin American subaltern identity, a powerful symbol of the inverted relationship between the colonial centre and the colonized periphery. Significantly, Fernández Retamar’s concept continued the line of another highly influential *modernista* essay, José Martí’s *Nuestra América* (1891), a powerful and visionary project that sought to build Latin American identity around the harmonious notions of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) and cultural syncretism.

Later *modernistas*, like Enrique González Martínez (México 1871–1952) and Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874–1938), can be credited with bringing the movement onto the threshold of the avant-garde. Together with a significant group of women poets, they form a transitional cluster of authors difficult to classify. It is significant to mention, however, that it was precisely in the wake of *Modernismo* that Latin American women achieved a firm standing as a distinct group seeking to express gender-specific consciousness and transgress, in a variety of ways, the literary moulds of their

time. A diverse gallery of names associated with this important shift includes the poets Alfonsina Storni (Argentina, 1892–1938), Juana de Ibarbouru (Uruguay 1895–1979) and Delmira Agustini (Uruguay, 1886–1914). Most notably, Agustini's *El libro blanco* (The White Book, 1907) and *Cantos de la mañana* (Songs of Morning, 1910) embody the rebellion against the patriarchal establishment by means of a provocative rewriting of romantic and *modernista* imagery. For example, her poems 'El cisne' (The Swan) and 'El nocturno' (Nocturne) transform the emblems of *Modernismo* by infusing them with startling references to female eroticism. Even though the insistence on novelty and unconventional imagery was not a hallmark of Gabriela Mistral's (Chile 1889–1957) poetry, her ability to bring into artistic harmony her lifelong identification with the plight of common people and her own spiritual anxieties gained her the devotion of the readers and the respect of critics world-wide. The first Latin American author to be honoured with the Nobel Prize for Literature (1945) and thus far the only woman from Latin America to have achieved this distinction, Mistral is most remembered as the author of several major volumes of evocative poetry, *Sonetos de la muerte* (1915), *Desolación* (1922) and *Tala* (1938).

The profound social and political changes brought by the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) became the powerful catalyst for a distinct wave of socially committed writings throughout Latin America. In Mexico itself the unsparing criticism of the horrors of war and of the corruption of revolutionary values produced the so-called Narrative of the Revolution, inaugurated by Mariano Azuela's (1873–1952) *Los de abajo* (1915; tr. 1963 *The Underdogs*) and continued, among others, by Martín Luis Guzmán (1887–1977) in *El águila y la*

*serpiente* (1928; tr. 1930 *The Eagle and the Serpent*) and Nellie Campobello (1900–86) in *Cartucho* (1931; tr. 1988 *Cartucho and My Mother's Hands*). Writers throughout Latin America used a variety of styles to grapple with the most urgent issues of each region. While the Andean countries contributed to this socially oriented vein with an extensive production of *indigenista* texts, in Colombia José Eustasio Rivera's (1889–1928) *La vorágine* (1924, tr. 1935 *The Vortex*) struck a sympathetic chord in the readers by presenting a harrowing picture of the exploitation of rubber-gatherers in the Amazon. The Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937) also used literature as a tool for denouncing social injustice (*Los desterrados*, 1926; tr. 1987 *The Exiles and Other Stories*). However, he is most notably recognized for his masterfully crafted tales of fantasy and psychological horror compiled in *La gallina degollada y otros cuentos* (1925; tr. 1976 *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories*).

The regionalist trends in poetry coalesced into *Negrismo* – seen as the Hispanic counterpart of the French-Antillean *Négritude* – which flourished in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in the 1920s and 1930s and was based on the affirmation of African-based traditions. Discussions of *negrista* poetry often revolve around listings of such characteristics as onomatopoeic phrasings, mythological references, Africanized vocabulary, imitation of drumbeat rhythms and the intermixing of the Spanish lyrical legacy with popular patterns of speech (Matibag 1996: 93). Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén (1902–89) is unquestionably the most prominent figure associated with the movement. In his landmark books *Motivos de son* (1930), *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931), *West Indies Ltd* (1934) and *Cantos*

*para soldados y sonos para turistas* (1937) Guillén created a unique blend of musicality, Spanish lyrical patterns and an anti-imperialist agenda, which was artistically and ideologically effective in heightening the awareness of the African heritage, and of the intersecting issues of class and race. In the years following the Cuban Revolution (1959), the internationally recognized poet Nancy Morejón (1944–) enriched Guillén’s lyrical legacy with gender-conscious overtones. Her unique contribution to the reappraisal of *negrista* aesthetics and ideology is epitomized by her well-known poem ‘Mujer negra’ (Black Woman) from the collection *Parajes de una época* (Places of an Age, 1979). In Brazil, Jorge Amado’s (1912–2001) sustained exploration of the African cultures of the Bahian region resulted in a steady flow of commercially successful novels, ranging from the realistic *Jubiabá* (1935; tr. 1984) to the magical *Gabriela, cravo e canela* (1958; tr. 1962 *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*) and the satirical *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (1966; tr. 1969 *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*). His *Tenda dos milagres* (1969; tr. 1971 *Tent of Miracles*) deals with the problem of race relations against the backdrop of the Brazilian syncretic religion, Candomblé.

In the 1920s and 1930s numerous writers of considerable merit (Azuela, Gallegos, Icaza, Quiroga, Ramos, Rivera) followed the regionalist imperative to reaffirm local specificity by drawing upon rural landscapes and autochthonous themes. At the same time, an equally prominent group of authors furnished a different vision of Latin America, which was urban and torn by the dramatic contradictions of modernity. Writers as diverse as the Argentineans Roberto Arlt (1900–42) and Eduardo Mallea (1903–82), the Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti (1909–94) and

the Chilean Eduardo Barrios (1884–1963) succeeded in lending their unique style to the shared themes of existential anguish, solitude and the alienation of urban-dwellers. A defiant disregard for patriarchal values distinguished the experimental novels of the Venezuelan Teresa de la Parra (1889–36) – *Ifigenia* (1924; tr. 1994) and *Memorias de la Mamá Blanca* (1929; tr. 1992 *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*) – whereas María Luisa Bombal's (Chile, 1910–80) hallucinatory narratives *La última niebla* (1935; tr. 1947 *The House of Mist*) and *La amortajada* (1938; tr. 1948 *The Shrouded Woman*) exemplified a remarkable synergy of fantasy, reality, myth and memory. Bombal's texts mark a separate achievement of the avant-garde period in the representation of female subjectivity while prefiguring the ambiguous and non-linear novels of the Boom and offering a prelude to what would later become known as Magical Realism. Beginning in the 1940s, the exploration of female subjectivity was enriched by the exquisite prose of a brilliant Brazilian stylist, Clarice Lispector (1920–77). Lispector weaved together unsettling introspection, subtle metaphysical reflection and formal innovation in narratives of striking originality, of which the later ones became particularly influential (*A maça no escuro*, 1961; tr. 1967 *Apple in the Dark*; *A hora da estrela*, 1977; tr. 1986 *The Hour of the Star*).

The conflicting impulses of autochthonous nationalism versus cosmopolitanism are best exemplified by the Brazilian avant-garde movement called *Modernismo* launched in 1922 in São Paulo, during the event known as *Semana de arte moderna* (The Modern Art Week). The movement (not to be confused with Spanish American *Modernismo* or the Anglo-American term Modernism) emphasized the rejection of Parnassian and Symbolist rhetoric, while focusing on

everyday speech patterns and social and existential concerns. At its height, it evolved around the provocative metaphor of cannibalization first introduced in 1928 by Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) in his iconoclastic ‘Manifesto Antropofágico’ (The Cannibalist Manifesto). Andrade broached the question of Latin American cultural autonomy by stressing the incorporation, inversion and transformation of European elements in Brazilian culture, echoing the cannibalistic practices of the Tupinamba Indians. Another leader of the *Modernismo* movement, Mario de Andrade (1893–1945), articulated his quest for Brazilian identity in *Macunaíma* (1928; tr. 1984), a carnivalesque story of a mythical trickster.

The diverse avant-garde movement of the 1920s and 1930s – of which Brazilian *Modernismo* was a distinct, but not the only manifestation – was a *tour de force* artistic response to the vertiginous experience of modernity. It developed against the backdrop of rapid socio-economic growth, dramatic developments in Europe (the First World War, the Spanish Civil War) and upheavals at home (the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath), and, at least in part, under the impact of Oswald Spengler’s (1880–1936) *The Decline of the West* (1918–22). The avant-garde represented the cosmopolitan and urban discernible also in Spanish American *Modernismo*, but it defined itself in terms of audacious formal experimentation and was unequivocal in its rejection of *modernista* conventions. While multiple ties existed between various avant-garde strands, the movement is not easily reducible to a list of common characteristics. Nonetheless, the ‘isms’ that proliferated throughout the continent shared some common features, such as a poignant sense of existential anguish, a defiant assertion of art’s autonomy, an all-encompassing

critique of tradition, an emphasis on the magical dimension of artistic creativity (*creacionismo*), a distrust of hegemonic discourse and a virtuoso level of technical experimentation.

An impressive number of influential cultural journals such as the Cuban *Revista de Avance* (1927–30) and later *Orígenes* (1944–56), the Peruvian *Amauta* (1926–30), the Argentinean *Sur* (1931–70) and the Brazilian *Revista de Antropofagia* (1928) provided a creative platform for writers, artists and critics while facilitating cross-fertilization between the movements and serving as a laboratory for the experimental prose of the 1960s. The *vanguardista*

iconoclastic desire to break with tradition and literary norms was truly unprecedented in its boldness, as expressed in numerous manifestos and programmatic articles, such as Vicente Huidobro's (Chile, 1895–1948) 'El creacionismo' (1925) or Andrade's 'Manifiesto' (1928). But it was probably the intriguing and highly experimental poetry of Huidobro's *Altazor* (1931) and César Vallejo's *Trilce* (1922) that encapsulated the most radical attempts to deconstruct the language and then recompose it by means of free verse, creative use of typography, multiplicity of points of view, obsessive wordplay, unconnected images and most unusual neologisms.

Whereas Huidobro's and Vallejo's experiments often pushed the limits of intelligibility, their contemporary Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904–73) became the most cherished poet of the Hispanic world and gained unparalleled international popularity thanks to his talent for combining the most daring aesthetic experiments with a wide range of themes of great resonance for ordinary readers. Neruda's immensely successful and prodigious literary production earned him

world-wide recognition long before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1971). Neruda ingratiated himself to readers with *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924; tr. 1969 *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*) and with his graceful homage to such seemingly unpoetic objects as spoons, onions and socks in *Odas elementales* (1954; tr. 1961 *The Elementary Odes*). Critics, on the other hand, celebrated his dazzling experiments with the avant-garde in *Residencia en la tierra* (1933; tr. 1946 *Residence on Earth and Other Poems*) and debated the ideological and poetic values of his epic *Canto General* (1950). Finally, Neruda's autobiographical *Memorial de la Isla Negra* (1964; tr. 1981 *Isla Negra: A Notebook*) offered a monumental compendium of his diverse styles and themes, including the recurring presence of Chilean landscapes and the interweaving of politics and art.

The prodigious quantity of Latin American poetic production in the second half of the twentieth century makes any attempt at synthesis extremely difficult. While Neruda's best-selling status and far-reaching influence were difficult to emulate, the distinct poetic voice of the Mexican Octavio Paz (1914–98) also received great acclaim for opening new avenues in post-vanguardist poetry and was later honoured with the Nobel Prize (1990) 'for impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity'. Of fundamental importance was Paz's daring blend of avant-garde experiments with metaphysical reflection and explorations of Mexican identity (*Piedra de sol*, 1957; tr. 1969 *The Sun Stone*). Among dozens of Latin American poets whose literary innovations – from whimsical and fanciful, to politically impassioned – made lasting contributions to the early-twentieth-century poetry, the

following deserve special recognition: the Argentinean Oliverio Girondo (1891–1967), the Mexicans Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–50) and José Gorostiza (1901–73), the Cuban José Lezama Lima (1910–76) and the Nicaraguan Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912–85). In the last three decades of the twentieth century – which brought a stunning development of prose fiction – few Latin American poets inspired the same sense of awe as the novelists of the Boom. Nonetheless, the names of the Nicaraguans Ernesto Cardenal (Nicaragua, 1925–) and Gioconda Belli (1948–), the Chilean Nicanor Parra (Chile, 1914–), the Argentinean Alejandra Pizarnik (Argentina, 1936–72) and two Peruvians, Carlos Germán Belli (1927–) and Antonio Cisneros (1942–), invariably come to mind whenever we consider the bewildering artistry of individual talent and the reinvigorating role of poetry within the framework of national literatures.

The great variety of forms, topics and ideological positions characteristic of the vast body of contemporary Latin American poetry underlies the development of the twentieth-century essay as well and should be considered as part of the relentless quest for capturing Latin American and national identity. The paradigm of identity defines some of the most influential and self-reflexive essays of the century, including José Vasconcelos's (Mexico, 1882–1959) highly controversial *La raza cósmica* (1925), Fernando Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y azúcar* (1940), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's (Argentina, 1895–1964) *Radiografía de la pampa* (X-Ray of the Pampa, 1933), Octavio Paz's, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950; tr. 1961 *The Labyrinth of Solitude*) and *Postada* (1970; tr. 1972 *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*), Sebastián Salazar Bondy's (Peru,

1924–64) *Lima la horrible* (Horrible Lima, 1964), Lezama Lima's *La expresión americana* (American Expression, 1957), Antonio Benítez Rojo's *La isla que se repite* (1989, tr. 1995 *The Repeating Island*) and José L. González's (Puerto Rico, 1926–) *País de cuatro pisos* (1980; tr. 1993 *The Four-Storeyed Country and Other Essays*).

While Latin American drama of the twentieth century has not been able to rival the continuing growth of poetry, the consolidation of the essay and the international recognition of narrative, in the 1960s and 1970s the development of theories of collective theatre by Enrique Buenaventura (Colombia, 1925–) and of the 'theatre of the oppressed' by Augusto Boal (Brazil, 1931–) reinvigorated this area of Latin American creativity and led to the heightening of political awareness and to the flourishing of experimental theatre. Earlier works by established playwrights such as Rodolfo Usigli (1905–79) and Emilio Carballido (1925–) in Mexico, Egon Wolff (1926–) in Chile and Joracy Camargo (1898–1967) in Brazil were followed by those of Osvaldo Dragún (1929–99) and Griselda Gambaro (1928–) in Argentina, Virgilio Piñera (1912–79) and José Triana (1933–) in Cuba, and Sabina Berman (1952–) in Mexico. Far from being dwarfed by the international projection of the novel, Latin American theatre continues to resound with current themes – from post-dictatorial legacies to globalization – by combining the strands of formal innovation and political engagement.

The remarkable trajectory of Latin American prose in the second half of the twentieth century and the emergence of what would come to be known as the Boom of the Latin American novel of the 1960s were directly indebted to

the genius of Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899–1986), indisputably the most influential Latin American writer. Borges – erudite, unabashedly ironic, playful and ingenious – remains a key point of reference for any discussion of topics ranging from postmodernity and metafiction to the fantastic and detective narratives. Few texts can rival the virtuoso art of *Ficciones* (1944; tr. 1965 *Fictions*), a collection of metaphysical, deliberately elusive narratives that highlight the ambiguous, irrational and mysterious aspects of reality by means of labyrinthine structure and conceptual complexity.

It is important to remember, however, that the impulse for literary experimentation came simultaneously from different directions and no single author or text marks a watershed moment between the traditional and the new novel. While Juan Rulfo's (Mexico, 1918–86) phantasmagoric evocation of the tragic plight of the Mexican peasant in *El llano en llamas* (1953; tr. 1967 *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*) and in the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955; tr. 1959) has little to do with Borges's erudite inquisitions, Rulfo's attempt to alter the paradigm of realist representation was equally daring in its amalgamation of myth, reality and imagination. Among the narratives that heralded the rise of an experimental aesthetics during the 1940s and 1950s the following represent a limited yet significant sampling of self-reflexive stances, achronological plots and fragmented structures: *Al filo del agua* (1946; tr. 1963 *The Edge of the Storm*) by Agustín Yáñez (Mexico, 1904–80), *El Señor Presidente* (1946) by Asturias, *La invención de Morel* (1940; tr. 1964 *The Invention of Morel*) by Adolfo Bioy Casares (Argentina, 1914–99) and *La región más transparente* (1958; tr. 1960 *Where the Air is Clear*) by Carlos Fuentes (Mexico, 1928–). Despite the diversity of forms, all of these texts undermine the

straightforward Realism of the Regionalist novels and bear the stamp of the artistic achievements of the avant-garde (surrealist imagery, technical complexity, perspectivism, stream of consciousness, innovative use of speech patterns, exploration of irrationality) while engaging in an ambitious exploration of national and regional identities.

However, it was not until the 1960s that Latin America appeared at the forefront of the international literary stage. A vast body of narrative – mostly novels – published in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution was truly astonishing, not only for its prodigious quantity, but, first and foremost, for its unprecedented aesthetic merit. Both aspects of this type of ‘new novel’ were further enhanced by the publishing industry world-wide and by the spectacular rise of academic criticism. This unique and fortuitous conjuncture – a powerful political catalyst, an unusual concentration of creative talent, and skilful marketing – led to the phenomenon often referred to as the Boom (1960–75).

One of the most salient characteristics of the Boom was the ubiquity of metafictional texts exploring the mechanisms of their own making, from *Rayuela* (1963; tr. 1966 *Hopscotch*) by Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914–84) – a novel whose 155 chapters could be read in varying sequences – to the bewildering wordplay of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s (Cuba, 1929–) *Tres*

*tristes tigres* (1965; tr. 1971 *Three Trapped Tigers*). Shifts in narrative perspective, overlapping identities, temporal disjunctions and conflicting versions of a story became a signature style of the leading Boom novels: Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962; tr. 1964 *The Death of Artemio Cruz*), Mario Vargas Llosa’s (Peru, 1936–) *La casa verde*

(1964; tr. 1968 *The Green House*) and *Conversación en la Catedral* (1969; tr. 1975 *Conversation in the Cathedral*), and José Donoso's (Chile, 1924–96) *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970; tr. 1973 *The Obscene Bird of Night*).

The most successful novels of the Boom were also deeply immersed in regional issues, but in ways that involved responding to the demands of the Anglo-European market. 'Translating' the exotic uniqueness of Latin American culture – often associated with the idiosyncratic blend of transculturated myth, magic and irrational excess – became a style in its own right, known as Magical Realism. First coined by the German art critic Franz Roh, the original term became transposed and intertwined with the concept of Latin American 'marvellous' reality, proposed in Carpentier's novel, *El reino de este mundo* (1949; tr. 1957 *The Kingdom of this World*). According to Carpentier, in modern Europe the 'marvellous' has to be artificially created, whereas in Latin America it is an integral part of everyday reality because of the hybridity that remains at the core of its culture. The critics were eager to affix the label to a wide range of texts engaged in an exploration of myth and irrationality, from Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953; tr. 1956 *The Lost Steps*) to Fuentes's novella *Aura* (1962; tr. 1965), Elena Garro's (Mexico, 1920–95) *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963; tr. 1969 *Recollections of Things to Come*) and Manuel Scorza's (Peru, 1928–83) cycle of five neo-indigenist novels (1970–79). The novel that carried Magical Realism, and the Boom, to the highest level of aesthetic achievement without losing its popular appeal was *Cien años de soledad* (1967; tr. 1970 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) by García Márquez, the Nobel Prize winner of 1982. Inextricably linked to the art of storytelling, on the one hand, and to the literary traditions of

the West, on the other, *Cien años de soledad* is a work of striking originality. Fanciful and humorous, radically experimental but readable and engaging, it established parameters for a fruitful combination of politics and aesthetics and a wide-ranging, muralist portrayal of Latin American ‘archetypical’ reality. In Brazil, the pinnacle of Magical Realism was reached a decade earlier, by João Guimarães Rosa’s (1908–67) *Grande sertão veredas* (1956; tr. 1963 *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), which encompassed multiple perspectives and a neo-baroque exuberance of style to offer an unusual rendition of local legends and myths.

While numerous narratives written in the Magical Realist vein went unnoticed in the long shadow cast by García Márquez’s masterpiece, Isabel Allende’s (Chile, 1942–) best-selling novel *La casa de los espíritus* (1982; tr. 1985 *The House of the Spirits*) was successful in foregrounding its own brand of Magical Realism, defined by a unique mixture of fantasy, myth, romance

and feminist parody of patriarchal models. According to some critics, *La casa de los espíritus* also exhibits the fundamental characteristics that help separate the aesthetics of the Boom from the following promotion of writers, associated, for the lack of a better term, with the so-called Post-Boom (1975–). Various critics’ efforts (see Shaw 1993, 1995; Swanson 1995; Williams 1997) to differentiate between the Boom and the Post-Boom, and in an added complication, between the latter and the vast terrain of postmodernism, resulted in the following list of features based on the works of authors as divergent from one another as Allende, Antonio Skármeta (Chile, 1941–), Manuel Puig (Argentina, 1932–90), Luisa Valenzuela (Argentina, 1938–), Gustavo Sainz (Mexico, 1940–), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba, 1943–90), Severo Sarduy

(Cuba, 1937–93), Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay, 1941–), Luis Rafael Sánchez (Puerto Rico, 1936–) and Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico, 1942–): renewed confidence in the power of language; consistent use of humour, satire and parody; highlighting of pop, youth and mass culture (film, music) in an effort to attract broader readership; and the triumphant recognition of formerly marginalized viewpoints, especially those of women, gays and lesbians.

While many of the writers established by the Boom – Fuentes, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa – continued to write prolifically throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they, too, moved away from hermetic narratives based on exacerbated stylistic innovation (epitomized by Fuentes’s monumental *Terra Nostra* (1975; tr. 1977)) towards such ‘user-friendly’ texts as *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981; tr. 1982 *Chronicle of Death Foretold*) and *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985; tr. 1988 *Love in the Time of Cholera*) by García Márquez, *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977; tr. 1982 *Aunt Julia and the Scripwriter*) by Vargas Llosa, and *Gringo Viejo* (1985; tr. 1985 *The Old Gringo*) by Fuentes. The writing scene of the Post-Boom included also, according to Seymour Menton (1993), the unusual rise of the New Historical Novel represented by an impressive array of books particularly keen on reconfiguring the colonial period and the independence movements through fictional projections of historical figures, such as Carpentier’s *El arpa y la sombra* (1979; tr. 1990 *The Harp and the Shadow*), Abel Posse’s (Argentina, 1936–) *Los perros del paraíso* (1983; tr. 1989 *The Dogs of Paradise*) and Fuentes’s *La campaña* (1990; tr. 1991 *The Campaign*).

Many of these historical novels depicted the cycle of repression, terror and protest as endemic to Latin America,

often using the past as an allegory of the present. In the 1970s, the escalation of terror by the authoritarian regimes of El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina had broad repercussions for writers and intellectuals, who were often forced into exile and, in many cases, imprisoned, tortured or ‘disappeared’. The collective experience of torture, suppression and exile was reflected in a variety of innovative and aesthetically accomplished works, including Valenzuela’s powerful short stories from *Cambio de armas* (1982; tr. 1985 *Other Weapons*)

and Ricardo Piglia’s novel *Respiración artificial* (1980; tr. 1994 *Artificial Respiration*), a compelling denunciation of Argentina’s violent present disguised as a postmodern meditation on metahistory and metafiction. Diamela Eltit’s (Chile, 1949–) performance-based novel *Lumpérica* (1983), and *El padre mío* (1989), which emerged out of the resistance movement to the Pinochet regime, challenged readers by eroding any remaining standards of literary representation.

With the dominant focus on the violent reality at hand, it was, however, the non-fictional genre of *testimonio* that became the most important outlet for redressing socio-political grievances. In the 1980s and 1990s *testimonio* was critically recognized as a unique narrative form representing the creative vitality of Latin American culture and its power to express the defiance of subordinate groups and to recover historically muted voices. As a form of life-writing that attempts to ‘interface’ several disciplines (literature, ethnology, historiography) with a progressive political agenda, *testimonio* does not fit comfortably within the contours of any single disciplinary model. Nonetheless, the paradigm of rebellion that underlies *testimonio*, combined with the moral responsibility of the intellectual, inspires

multiple associations with confession, autobiography, ethnography and New Journalism, on the one hand, and the Latin American tradition of giving voice to the marginalized and defying hegemonic forms of expression, on the other. In order to define *testimonio* as a distinct form of non-fictional writing, it is helpful to limit it to the narratives that recover the unspoken experience of the oppressed by means of a ‘solidarity pact’ forged between intellectuals and the common people in the process of transcription and editing of an eyewitness account by a professional writer or journalist (see Gugelberger 1996; Sklodowska 1991).

Even though *testimonio* is fraught with tensions related to mediation, editorial interventions and cross-cultural (mis)understandings, in its heyday (1960–85) it produced a veritable treasure trove of texts of great artistic merit: from Carolina Maria de Jesus’s (Brazil, 1914–77) *Quarto de despejo* (1960; tr. 1963 *Child of the Dark*) and the enormously successful *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966; tr. 1968 *Biography of a Runaway Slave*) by Miguel Barnet (Cuba, 1941–) to *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969; tr. 1987 *Until We Meet Again*) by the Mexican Elena Poniatowska (1933–) and the internationally acclaimed *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983; tr. 1984 *I Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*) by Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala, 1959–). This impassioned account – edited by Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray – told by a Maya Quiché woman activist whose family and village had been destroyed by the political violence in Guatemala, brought Rigoberta Menchú the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. However, more recently, in the highly publicized book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (1998), American anthropologist David Stoll

revealed a number of inconsistencies and fabrications in Menchú's *testimonio*, triggering a widespread debate about truth and lies, political commitment and the creation of political myths. Menchú – the icon of indigenous resistance and testimonial authenticity – became a target of vitriolic attacks.

Even though *testimonio* has been canonized as a super-genre of sorts that has changed for good the paradigm of subaltern (under)representation in Latin America, its significance in the wake of the twentieth century also has to do with the fact that it self-critically embodies one of the most debated issues of the postmodern/post-colonial era: the constitution of the subject and the configuration of representation within the context of globalization, multiculturalism and hybridity.

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## 6

# Approaches to Latin American literature

Brian Gollnick

Contemporary Latin American literary studies can be dated to a November evening in 1940, when Pedro Henríquez Ureña (Dominican Republic, 1884–1946) gave his first lecture as the Norton Distinguished Visiting Professor at Harvard University. The book he prepared from these lectures, *Literary Currents in Hispanic America* (1945), is the best early academic history of Latin American letters. Continental in scope, analytical in approach, and written in a language which remains elegant and accessible, *Literary Currents* combines the breadth of its author's continental perspective with the depth of his historical knowledge. Henríquez Ureña's work was not a solitary achievement, however, but the consolidation of an intellectual generation, including Alfonso Reyes (Mexico, 1889–1959) and Mariano Picón Salas (Venezuela, 1901–65), which largely defined Latin America's cultural heritage during the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps more than his contemporaries, Henríquez Ureña put into practice the nationalist agenda of José Martí (Cuba, 1853–95) and José Enrique Rodó (Uruguay, 1872–1917). Rodó's essay *Ariel* (1900) defines Latin America as a

spiritual culture whose aesthetic values must be guarded against Anglo-American materialism, while Martí's *Our America* (1891) pleads for Latin American intellectuals to embrace popular culture and galvanize their societies against US imperialism. Crucially, both assign literature a privileged role in understanding Latin American society (Ramos 2001: 251–67).

*Literary Currents* extends this privileging of literature into a systematic cultural history which can be described as a form of humanist nationalism: nationalism in the sense of defining the particularity of Latin American culture *vis-à-vis* Europe and the USA; humanist in the sense of understanding Latin America's cultural tradition as a progressive history of self-expression. Henríquez Ureña was consistently optimistic about the role of literature in this history: as Latin America moved towards autonomy and integration, he saw its literature as an increasingly perceptive reflection of society. Significantly, Henríquez Ureña measured this progress through the institutionalization of culture. More than great writers or aesthetic movements, *Literary Currents* documents the consolidation of cultural institutions which Henríquez Ureña hoped would unify the region's citizens: newspapers, libraries, museums, and especially schools. Henríquez Ureña never relinquished his faith in these institutions or in the importance of literature and literacy as guarantors of cultural autonomy and civil rights. Unfortunately, the need to defend those rights has only grown since Henríquez Ureña's death. Latin American literary theory, however, has come to question his belief in education and literature as the best tools for doing so.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Latin American literature was dominated by the region's poets, many of whom were active participants in the international avant-garde. Latin American narrative would not attain a similar international profile until the second half of the twentieth century, when a series of experimental novelists achieved recognition outside the region. This shift culminated in the 1960s with the 'Boom' of the Latin American novel, and the popularity of authors like Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914–84) and Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru) quickly eclipsed the poets' legacy. The popularity of the Boom novelists coincided with an influx of critical tools. Some were imported, principally from the Paris of the late 1950s and early 1960s, where Sartrean existentialism had given way to the structuralism and post-structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. One example is Cuban novelist and critic Severo Sarduy (1937–92), who lived in Paris for three decades and was directly involved in the development of post-structuralism. Both structuralism and post-structuralism reject a direct or mimetic relationship of language to the world, either in a material sense of accurately representing reality or in a Platonic sense of expressing ultimate truth. Sarduy elaborated this rejection of the mimetic function of language into a Latin American model of the baroque. The ongoing influence of post-structuralism can be felt most powerfully, however, through Cuban-American critic Roberto González Echevarría.

González Echeverría's most influential study, *Myth and Archive* (1990), theorizes Latin American narrative from the sixteenth century to the present. His theory centres on the mediating function of three forms of social discourse: law, in

the colonial period; science (as expressed in travel writing) from independence to the 1920s; and anthropology, from the 1920s until the late twentieth century. For each period, González Echevarría traces how Latin American narrative strives not to give a direct reflection of social life, but to appropriate the truth-value associated with these other forms of knowledge. Latin American narrative then emerges as a doubly-mimetic expression: it represents society, but only indirectly, by mimicking the discourses which have defined authoritative knowledge. As fiction, however, narrative itself makes no claims to truth, and its ability to mimic other forms of discourse serves to reveal the fictional nature of their authority. Finally, Latin American narrative's engagement with these other discourses is understood to be encoded in the literary tradition itself, particularly in 'archival novels': works written in the mid to late twentieth century whose self-reflexive nature glosses the function of the law, science or anthropology in Latin American narrative. By problematizing the direct relationship between literature and society, González Echeverría's framework undermines the centre of humanist criticism. In *Myth and Archive*, literary history can no longer be traced as the expression of a collective subject – 'the cultural spirit of Latin America'. Instead, literature glosses its own development.

The elegance and scope of González Echevarría's theory are impressive. Yet, while he historicizes the discourses mediating Latin American narrative, he does not similarly locate the changing function of narrative itself. Narrative's doubly-mimetic critique seems to operate in the same manner in every historical period. This flattening out of history exemplifies post-structuralism's distance from the referential function of language: *Myth and Archive* understands texts

primarily in relationship to other texts, and the social critique which forms the centre even of many 'archival fictions' becomes marginalized. Clear examples include the appropriation of indigenous lands in Miguel Angel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (Guatemala, 1949) or the massacre of banana workers in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Finally, with language separated from its referential function, writing becomes personified as a historical actor. González Echevarría traces a critical function operated by the narrative form itself, which replaces both social history and authors as the subject of literary history. Ultimately, this means that narrative's critical function operates without concrete agents, and therefore without objectives or meaningful consequences.

The other major movement in criticism during the 1960s took its inspiration not from abroad, but from within Latin American sociology, particularly from dependency theory. Dependency theory developed in the 1950s, when Latin American scholars began to theorize the subordination of their regional economies to the global market. Dependency theorists understood the economic success of the USA and Europe as resulting from their dominance over peripheral regions: overdevelopment in some regions caused underdevelopment in others. Breaking this cycle meant altering the periphery's dependence on the global economy through a realignment of political and economic power. In keeping with its Marxian roots, dependency theory was thus a revolutionary paradigm which advocated radical social change. For many years, the Cuban Revolution offered hope that such change was possible, and dependency theory enjoyed wide currency in the late 1960s and 1970s. For economic history, dependency theory sought to understand

the specific circumstances of Latin America within the world system. Literary scholars sought to understand Latin American literature within the social sphere defined by that economic history. In particular, dependency theory generated renewed interest in the moments and techniques by which Latin American literature had expressed its independence from the metropolis. Alejandro

Losada (Argentina, 1936–85) elaborated the most systematic effort in this direction. Losada replaced national frameworks with regional divisions defined by their social structures and engagement with the global economy. He then considered the possibilities of each regional literature breaking with metropolitan models. The synthetic power of his work is considerable and Losada establishes broadly insightful comparisons. However, his judgements about particular authors, works or movements are not always convincing when these are seen in their specific contexts.

Even before Losada, the eminent Brazilian critic Antônio Cândido authored a more successful reading of Latin American literature through dependency theory. In ‘Literature and underdevelopment’ (1969), Cândido identified three broad periods in Latin American literature based on awareness of the region’s relationship to the world economy: the ‘ideology of the new country’ (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the ‘pre-consciousness of underdevelopment’ (the early twentieth century to the 1940s), and the ‘consciousness of underdevelopment’ (the 1950s and 1960s). The ‘ideology of the new country’ understood the natural wealth of Latin America as promising strong nations, while the ‘pre-consciousness of underdevelopment’ inverted this formula and took the overwhelming presence of the region’s environment to symbolize the weakness of its

institutions. Finally, the ‘consciousness of underdevelopment’ criticized the region’s relationship to the global economy through an original aesthetic project that Cândido called ‘meta-regionalism’, defined in part by the Boom authors. ‘Literature and underdevelopment’ continues to offer a powerful alternative to periodizations based on imported nomenclatures, such as ‘Romanticism’ and ‘Naturalism’, most of which could be said not fully to address the adaptation of these aesthetics in Latin America. However, the widest impact of dependency theory in literary criticism has been through Uruguayan critic Angel Rama (1926–83).

An eclectic and innovative thinker, Rama’s work is difficult to exemplify through a single text. His two most influential studies, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982) and *La ciudad letrada* (The Lettered City, 1984), synthesize Latin America’s literary history through complementary genealogies of cultural power. *Transculturación* draws on Fernando Ortiz (Cuba, 1881–69), a Cuban intellectual who replaced the unidirectional term ‘acculturation’ with the term ‘transculturation’ in order to describe the complex process by which the slave trade and agricultural production in the Caribbean combined African and Hispanic cultures, even influencing European society. Rama drew on Ortiz to revindicate the regionalist novel, a body of work dating from the early 1900s to the 1950s. Among regionalists, Rama privileges a group he identifies as ‘transculturators’: those whose work engages with experimental narrative techniques from the international avant-garde and forms of orality drawn from traditional rural cultures. In these writers Rama finds a measure of cultural specificity asserted against the homogenizing effects of modernization.

Ultimately, Rama posits transcultural narratives as a model for a nationalism capable of integrating the heterogeneous elements characteristic of many Latin American countries. In assigning literature the capacity to express an alternate national project, *Transculturación narrativa* follows the humanist vision of literature expressing a collective social subject. However, Rama approaches this heritage through a global concept of modernization influenced by dependency theory. In keeping with the bi-polar model of dependency theory, Rama depicts economic and social modernization as forces which move unilaterally from the centre of the global system towards the periphery. Peripheral intellectuals may preserve a measure of their own identity, but Rama does not see peripheral societies contributing to modernization itself. A break from this uni-directional conception of the centre-periphery relationship had already been announced in Ortiz's work, but a similar perspective would not emerge in Latin American literary studies until Anglophone post-colonial theory had influenced the field.

Just as most Anglophone post-colonial theory departs from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), most efforts to develop a similar project for Latin America depart from *The Lettered City* (1996), Rama's posthumously published analysis of Latin America's intellectual class. Taking the elitist nature of education in the region as its starting point, *The Lettered City* questions the humanist tradition. Far from being the progressive force of integration and stability which Henríquez Ureña had imagined, Rama sees literacy as a crucial form of privilege and domination. However, education, with literacy and literature as its key expressions, has not simply functioned as the servant of power. Instead, Rama suggests

that the dominant classes in Latin America have needed men of letters, writers, lawyers, historians and the like to spread their message to the people. In the light of that mutual need, the educated elite – the *letrados* – developed as a semi-autonomous guild which mediated between the elites and the general population. At the top of this guild, Rama identifies intellectuals with an explicit awareness of education as a mechanism of exclusion. These cultural directors constitute ‘the lettered city’: the ideologues charged with ensuring the continued interdependence of education and privilege. A large portion of *The Lettered City* traces this sector through its origins in colonial Latin America. However, Rama demonstrates that the lettered city’s hold was difficult to overcome, even for radical or revolutionary intellectuals. In contrast to the optimism of *Transculturación narrativa*, *The Lettered City* thus explores how the relationship between literacy and power remained largely unchanged until the 1960s, when the mass media introduced broadcast forms of communication capable of mediating between the elites and the masses without recourse to the written word.

Two misconceptions are easily drawn from *The Lettered City*. The first rejects Rama’s theory as one in which power is exercised with little space for dissent. The second accepts Rama’s theory but understands it as announcing the dawn of the mass media as the main site of cultural struggle. Both misconceptions fail to locate the historical experience informing Rama’s book.

If any society in Latin America should have fulfilled Henríquez Ureña’s vision of education as the building block of democracy, it was Uruguay. Rama’s rise to become one of the most prominent cultural figures of his day owes much to

the Uruguayan public education system, the most advanced in Latin America during the 1940s and 1950s. However, the Uruguayan military coup in 1973–74, only months after a coup in Chile and ten years after a coup in Brazil, forced Rama into exile. The coup also demonstrated that even the most educated population in Latin America was not a bulwark against authoritarianism. If Rama's interest is in culture's collusion with power rather than resistance, it is because *The Lettered City* emerges from the enormous challenge presented by South American military governments in the 1970s.

Rama was not, however, prepared to abandon the possibility that intellectuals and literature might promote change. Instead Rama criticizes radical intellectuals from the early twentieth century for their 'inability to imagine forms of democratization less dependent on the state' as the primary agent of reform. He also attacks their 'failure to reflect on the capacity of institutionalized power to reproduce itself in ever more rigid and authoritarian forms' (Rama 1996: 104–5). Implicitly, correcting these failures would require realigning intellectuals away from institutionalized, vertical forms of power rooted in the state and towards more diffuse, horizontal forms of power rooted in civil society. Here one can sense the long-standing influence of Antonio Gramsci, whose reflections on the importance of intellectuals and culture in forming cross-class alliances marked a major renovation in twentieth-century Marxism. Rama's implicit appeal that intellectuals learn to work from civil society rather than from the institutional power of the state generates a utopian moment in the otherwise pessimistic history of *The Lettered City*: the symbiosis between elites and *letrados* can be broken only when the latter cease to identify the state and its institutional structures as the objective of struggle and as the

agents of social change. This hope to realign the political function of intellectuals may have seemed dim in the early 1980s, when civil society was largely shut down in many areas of Latin America, but that hope is not absent from *The Lettered City*. By pointing to this need for intellectuals to engage with social movements as participants rather than as self-appointed vanguards of change, Rama does not reject the humanist dream of literature as a collective expression. Instead, he rejects the privilege which Martí, Rodó, and even Henríquez Ureña assigned to elite literary aesthetics as a form of knowledge uniquely suited to express societal norms and aspirations. In this sense, *The Lettered City* develops a broader framework for understanding the importance of transcultural writers who engage with popular culture outside the lettered city. As presented in *Transculturación narrativa*, these writers allow for imagining a more inclusive form of national culture. Read in conjunction with *The Lettered City*, their work allows for something more important: imagining new functions for intellectuals within the nation.

Despite the closely related nature of Rama's two most influential works,

*The Lettered City* has frequently been read as a repudiation of *Transculturación narrativa*. In this sense, *The Lettered City* has provided a Latin American genealogy of knowledge and power similar to the relationship Said traces in *Orientalism*. Said studies metropolitan intellectuals in their depictions of colonized regions and Rama studies intellectuals in colonized societies, but both demonstrate the closeness of intellectuals to political power. Said and Rama thus suggest that intellectuals (including creative writers) wield real influence over social policy. As Neil Larsen has recently argued, a corollary conclusion has often been that revealing the

intellectual's relationship to power constitutes a form of post-colonial criticism (Larsen 2001: 3–31). The work of John Beverley is perhaps the most influential example of this reading of Rama.

Engaging with historians working on colonial India, Beverley has spearheaded efforts to study the role of the popular classes – or subaltern groups – in the Latin American literary sphere. Beverley initiates this project by reading *The Lettered City* as a repudiation of Latin American literature's closeness to political power. For Beverley, the most urgent object of analysis is then 'the complicity of the academy itself – *our* complicity – in producing and reproducing the elite/subaltern relation' (Beverley 1999: 10). *The Lettered City* is thus taken to mean that the question posed in *Transculturación narrativa* – how can elites engage more effectively with marginalized or subaltern cultures? – is impossible without first undertaking a critique of intellectual institutions. This critique not only precedes engagement with subaltern knowledge; in some ways, Beverley sees it as precluding such an engagement: bringing subaltern knowledge into literary expression subsumes subalterns into the very institutions which have defined subaltern cultures as inferior. Beverley's approach to subaltern studies follows Rama in questioning the humanist belief in literature as a privileged vehicle for expressing the collective consciousness. However, by excluding the possibilities that elite intellectuals might apprehend subaltern knowledge in a non-repressive manner, Beverley denies the possibility of an alternative alignment between intellectuals and civil society. The utopian moment implicit even in *The Lettered City* thus dissipates into a Manichean divide between elite and subaltern cultures.

Argentinean scholar Walter Mignolo's efforts to engage Latin American literature with debates on post-colonialism are perhaps closer to Rama's original critique. Throughout the 1980s, Mignolo became one of the principal figures in renovating the field of colonial Latin American literary studies, and his book on this topic, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995), frames a broad project for approaching non-textual forms of indigenous cultural expression and for theorizing their exclusion from literary histories. Unlike Beverley, Mignolo defends the theoretical validity of intersecting literature and subaltern cultures. By analysing non-traditional objects of study – pictographs, maps, non-alphabetic forms of writing, textiles, and so forth – Mignolo's work is closer to Rama's project of using popular knowledge to de-centre elite authority. Mignolo's interest in these non-traditional objects of study has produced a number of innovative vocabularies. Unfortunately, meta-theoretical concerns often overdetermine these vocabularies. For example, the frameworks in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, including 'pluritopic hermeneutics' and 'post-Occidentalism', are most convincing as interventions in the theory of European colonialism. This dynamic has only sharpened in *Local Histories, Global Designs* (2000), where Mignolo develops the concept of 'border gnosis' for communicating between elite and subaltern knowledge on a transnational scale.

Alternative models for understanding Latin American literature in relation to previously excluded forms of cultural and textual production have emerged most strongly from other innovators in the field of colonial literature. Through her collaborations with the prominent anthropologist John Murra, US scholar Rolena Adorno (1986) has located the

early seventeenth-century Spanish-Quechua bilingual writings of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala in a densely contextualized framework which emphasizes the contestatory position of native writing in colonial Peru. In a similar vein, Swiss critic Martin Lienhard expanded his initial work on twentieth-century Peruvian narrative into a cross-cultural and historical project on Latin America's indigenous writing. His study, *La voz y su huella* (The Voice and Its Trace, 1991), synthesizes the interactions between the dominant literatures of Latin America and their depictions of indigenous peoples, on the one hand, and the counter-tradition of indigenous peoples' own writings, on the other. Like Mignolo, Adorno and Lienhard engage literature with forms of knowledge traditionally excluded from high culture. However, their approach works from the ground up, beginning with detailed counter-histories preserved in fragmentary and little-understood texts. By recuperating these texts and reconstructing the traditions from which they emerge, Adorno and Lienhard add a dimension of specificity to the contestatory engagement between oral and written culture. The complexity of the social subjects and textual production revealed by this work makes it impossible to assimilate the literature of the colonial period into a synthetic understanding of national history. Perhaps most importantly, Adorno and Lienhard also demonstrate that despite the close association of education and power traced by Rama, subaltern groups in Latin America also possess a long tradition of appropriating the written word into cultures of resistance.

Because they are inflected across ethnic and class division, studies of sexuality and gender have offered the most decisive examples of non-traditional intellectuals working to subvert the 'lettered city' from within. The social history of feminism

in many regions of Latin America emerges in tandem or even ahead of such movements in the USA or Europe. Alongside the efforts of those movements to claim rights in the public sphere, women intellectuals have made decisive contributions to the arts and literature in Latin America. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf's study *Untold Sisters* (1989) established a programmatic framework for recuperating and valorizing the writings of nuns during the colonial period. The texts which Arenal and Schlauf study have opened an important door onto the history of women intellectuals. These investigations reveal the challenges faced by women writers who had to defy and affirm the norms of colonial society to attain some degree of self-representation in patriarchal cultural spheres.

Given the barrier of education, women's literature in modern Latin America has, until recent decades, largely been restricted to the upper classes. Important women intellectuals, including Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela, 1889–1936), María Luisa Bombal (Chile, 1910–80), Elena Garro (Mexico, 1920–98), Rosario Castellanos (Mexico, 1925–74) and Clarice Lispector (Brazil, 1925–77), have used access to education to create literary works and essays critical of the limitations placed on women. Recuperation of work like theirs constitutes a major project within feminist criticism. Significant efforts have been made to recover and revindicate the production of women writers in the nineteenth century, once considered the darkest period for Latin American women intellectuals. Francine Masiello's (1992) research on Argentina offers one prominent example. Such work has not, however, simply been a project of recuperation. Like Adorno and Lienhard's studies of indigenous writing, work on women writers represents a sustained application of archival research

guided by the theoretical project of displacing the masculine normative subject which has grounded nationalist and humanist literary histories. Within those established histories, the work of women writers has alternately been marginalized because of its rejection of patriarchal values or subsumed into a masculine canon which ignored its challenge to gender norms. Recovering and restoring the tradition of women's writing means re-thinking the constitution of the literary canon and the collective values it espouses and sustains. To date, perhaps the most influential effort to re-think the literary canon from a feminist perspective has been Doris Sommer's analysis of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century narrative. In *Foundational Fictions* (1991), Sommer approaches the established canon of the Latin American novel during the period of national formation and exposes how melodrama and the family romance establish an imaginary project of social unity based on patriarchal norms. In these plots, gender dynamics – usually the allegorical marriage of characters from disparate social groups – mask the unresolved heterogeneity of Latin American society. Sommer thus demonstrates the centrality of gender analysis to the constitution of the literary sphere.

Given the political nature of this work, re-articulations of the literary canon in the light of gender have most often been associated with the emergence of women as social agents. This trend was never more visible than in the 1970s and 1980s, the darkest years of military dictatorships in South America and civil wars in Central America. Women's organizations in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile became a critical focal point of criticism against military governments. In Central America, women in guerrilla organizations, particularly in the successful Sandinista revolution in

Nicaragua, brought gender issues to a new prominence, including the work of women writers.

Perhaps more than any other critic, the English scholar Jean Franco has articulated a broadly based feminist analysis of Latin American literature informed by this contemporary social history. Long considered among the foremost scholars of Latin American literature, Franco's work is as broad-ranging, influential, and difficult to synthesize as Rama's. Her early works include a study of intellectuals in Latin America and a history of Latin American literature (1967, 1969). Beginning in the 1970s, Franco's synthetic knowledge of Latin American literature and its relationship to political history allowed her to produce important reappraisals of the Boom authors and to trace changes in the position of literature in the regional and international market-place. In the 1980s, she published a series of powerful essays denouncing the systematic torture and brutalization of women by military governments in South America. In these articles, Franco demonstrated that even in the extreme deformations produced by authoritarian regimes, gender dynamics inflect the public sphere and the possibilities of resistance. In 1989, Franco published *Plotting Women*, a highly influential study of women's writing in Mexico. Other critics have updated the specific analyses Franco offers of Mexican women writers, but *Plotting Women* remains a highly influential study because of the example it offers of how a national literary canon can be re-evaluated from the perspective of gendered exclusions. However, Franco's most enduring contribution to the development of a Latin American feminist criticism has been her persistence in arguing that women's subordination in patriarchal societies does not by itself situate them as effective representatives for other oppressed groups. Franco has always insisted on the need to link feminist analyses to

criticism of other forms of privilege and domination, including ethnicity, social class and sexual identity.

As with women, there have always been important gay and lesbian intellectuals in Latin America, including Teresa de la Parra, José Lezama Lima (Cuba, 1910–76), Lydia Cabrera (Cuba, 1899–1991), Salvador Novo (Mexico, 1904–74) and Xavier Villaurrutia (Mexico, 1903–50). It is only in recent decades, however, that their work has been studied in relationship to their sexuality. The explicit thematization of sexual identity in high-profile authors like Manuel Puig (Argentina, 1932-90), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba, 1943–90) and Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay), as well as in popular works of documentary fiction, such as Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la Colonia Roma* (Mexico, 1979), contributed to interest in gay writing. As with feminism, however, the emergence of sexuality studies has responded largely to gay and lesbian political organization and the efforts of gay and lesbian intellectuals to produce cultural histories which include sexual identity. Prominent examples can be found in the work of Mexican critics Carlos Monsiváis (1997) and José Joaquín Blanco (1991), or the Argentinian poet and essayist Néstor Perlongher (1997). Finally, the vitality of sexuality studies also emerges from an awareness among feminists that definitions of masculinity and femininity necessarily intersect with definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality. In many ways, sexuality studies thus extends the feminist project of questioning the bases from which traditional literary histories constructed a male, essentially European, and heterosexual writer as the protagonist of culture.

José Quiroga's *Tropics of Desire* (2000) is among the most insightful interventions into the field of Latin American literature from the perspective of sexuality. *Tropics of Desire* examines several prominent intellectuals, including Villaurrutia, Lezama Lima, Cabrera, and Cuban millionaire editor José Rodríguez Feo. All of these writers were able to live their homosexuality with surprising openness during the first decades of the twentieth century. Quiroga, however, insists that these writers did not construct themselves only through sexuality. His project in *Tropics of Desire* is thus not to create a counter-canon of great gay and lesbian authors. Instead, Quiroga sees the semi-acknowledged homosexuality of figures like Villaurrutia and Lezama Lima in terms of a deep ambiguity which undermines all fixed identities. In this sense, *Tropics of Desire* works not to elaborate a theory of gay Latin American literature, but to interrogate the possibilities of defining culture through the categories of sexuality. Sexuality, a crucial aspect of modern understandings of human identity, should not be taken as a stable category for defining social subjects. This effort to undermine established forms of identity formation places *Tropics of Desire* among the most sophisticated attempts to articulate a Latin American literary project within the field of queer theory, which sees the evasive definition of sexuality as a model for subverting essentialisms and resisting all forms of exclusion and domination. However, what kind of cultural politics can be generated from the complex intersection of race, gender, class and sexuality is unclear, particularly as Latin America moves into an era increasingly dominated by the global mass media.

The relationship of literature to commercial and popular cultures has defined the field of cultural studies in the US and

European academies, but these issues have long been of concern to Latin American scholars as well. Inherent to Rama's long periodization of the lettered city was its demise in the early 1960s, not through a radical democratization of culture, but through the broadcast media. Television in particular has generated a powerful cultural sphere which does not rely on the written word to create normative social identities. Much earlier, Cândido's reflections on 'Literature and underdevelopment' emerged from a similar awareness that the mass media stood poised to displace the centrality of literature and traditional understandings of a literary education as crucial to the definition of cultural citizenship. Rama and Cândido both saw the mass media as too controlled by commercial interests to permit any kind of critical distance, and early engagements between the mass media and literary criticism in Latin America largely reflected this perspective. Ariel Dorfman's and Armand Mattelart's classic study of cultural imperialism and Disney cartoons, *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971), offers one of the most popular examples. Throughout the period of military governments in the 1960s and the 1970s, tight censorship and the consolidation of powerful media monopolies similarly cautioned against seeing the mass media as a site of contestation. However, even in the 1960s, writers like Puig in Argentina, Luis Rafael Sánchez in Puerto Rico and José Agustín in Mexico began to produce innovative literary works that incorporated techniques from the movies and popular music. These writers focused on how media products are incorporated into systems of meaning that have little or nothing to do with the intended messages. Latin American literature itself thus came to question a monolithic image of the mass media's influence, and literary critics were quick to follow.

Jesús Martín Barbero (1993) was a pioneer in elaborating a sociology of the mass media specific to Latin America, and his work has been influential on literary critics. However, Argentinean scholar Néstor García Canclini has achieved perhaps the highest international profile in this area. Educated in literary studies, García Canclini left Argentina following the 1976 coup and has since worked as a cultural anthropologist in Mexico. His studies of popular culture and the media focus on the sociology of art (its financing, display and circulation) and on the ethnography of the urban experience (1993, 1995, 2001). In particular, García Canclini's redefinition of 'hybridity' (1995) as related not simply to the composition of cultural products, but also to their circulation and interpretation, has proven highly mobile as a tool for engaging with postmodernism and cultural studies. In moving towards the anthropology of daily life, García Canclini focuses on the consumption of the mass media (2001), a significant part of contemporary identity formation. However, the diffuse nature of these processes makes constructing a concrete social movement around consumption a project as utopian as Rama's dream of realigning intellectual authority.

An alternative account of literature's engagement with popular culture can be found in *Memory and Modernity* (1991), by William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, two leading scholars in the United Kingdom. A global assessment of the relationship between the mass media, folk art, and literature, *Memory and Modernity* outlines a broad project for understanding how popular culture and high art have combined in Latin America to form contestatory counter-histories. Rowe and Schelling highlight the disjunctions between both the mass media and literature as

dominant forms of expression which differ from popular culture but also use and influence it. To date, *Memory and Modernity* remains the most successful programmatic statement of a cultural studies approach to Latin American literature. However, its scope prevents the authors from developing the kind of detailed case studies demanded by the local and ephemeral nature of popular culture. Such specificity has most effectively been achieved by scholars deeply rooted in a particular context, as demonstrated by the prominent Mexican critic Carlos Monsiváis.

Monsiváis began his career as a cultural journalist in Mexico City in the 1950s, and he has never abandoned the eclectic focus and immediacy of journalism. Over the years, Monsiváis has developed a vast knowledge on a variety of subjects, including Mexican cinema, Mexican politics, Latin American popular music, urban growth, and the relationship of all these to Mexican literature. Above all, Monsiváis is the semi-official chronicler of daily life in Mexico City, one of the world's most populated urban centres. This position at the centre of the global periphery has provided Monsiváis with a privileged perspective on Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. For many years, however, his work was little known outside of Mexico, in part because the rootedness of his essays in Mexican cultural history disguised the depth of his engagement with theories of popular culture. By the 1980s, however, he had become widely respected in the Spanish-speaking world and the appearance of a collection of his essays in English (1997) has positioned Monsiváis as perhaps the most important interlocutor for academics interested in the relationship between literature and popular culture in Latin America. Neither cynical about the mass media nor reductive about its

subversive potential, Monsiváis's essays on romantic ballads (*boleros*), Mexican movies, soccer fans, and a host of other phenomena strike a remarkable balance between the criticism and celebration of popular culture. Moreover, Monsiváis is an unusually successful example of an intellectual who has made his career outside the Latin American institutions of academic authority which have defined the lettered city. More than any other contemporary literary critic, Monsiváis demonstrates that the realignment of intellectuals away from state-centred, vertical forms of power is a rare but genuine possibility. As free-market reforms and economic globalization diminish the ideological centrality of the state in Latin American culture, the kind of non-traditional intellectual authority Monsiváis has built is likely to become more appealing, especially to critics working outside Latin America. To what extent the global institutions of academic authority will succeed in adapting his work to their own ends and to what extent his work will influence the agenda of those institutions will doubtless serve as a powerful test-case for the future of Latin American literary studies.

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# 8

## Latin American visual cultures

Andrea Noble

### VISUAL CULTURE

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become a commonplace to state that everyday human experience is more visually oriented than ever before. Image-centred forms dominate the way in which we interact with and comprehend the world that surrounds us: from the icons on a computer screen; through advertising billboards that we pass on our way from A to B, the Internet, television and cinema; to modern technologies, such as medical imaging. All are examples of image forms that have extended the purview of vision beyond that which could be seen before. What is more, in an age in which globalization is calling into question established national boundaries and the allegiances that they foster, images now circulate transnationally in ways that were barely imaginable only ten years ago. Indeed, the Latin American cultural critic Néstor García Canclini argues: ‘Where globalization can be seen at its most effective is in the audiovisual world: music, cinema, television and information

technology are all being reorganized from within a few companies in order to be disseminated across the whole planet' (Donde se ve más efectiva la globalización es en el mundo audiovisual: música, cine, televisión e informática están siendo reordenados, desde unas pocas empresas, para ser difundidos a todo el planeta) (1999: 15).

The alleged new visibility of contemporary culture, in which the metaphor for the world-as-text has been replaced by an understanding of the world-as-picture, has given rise to a new field of study: visual culture.<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, a critic who has mapped out some of the key issues and themes of visual culture, argues convincingly that 'The gap between the wealth of visual experience in postmodern culture and the ability to analyze that observation marks both the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study' (1999: 3). Taking as their object a wealth of visually encoded artefacts – film, television, photography, painting, digital imaging, etc. – scholars working in this field are not simply concerned with the analysis of visual images as they circulate in their conventional contexts such as the art gallery, the cinema, etc. They are also, importantly, interested in the relationship between the visual and everyday experience: the ways in which we encounter visual images as we go about our daily activities to the extent that our everyday experience can be said to be increasingly mediated by the visual image. In this way, the image, in its multiple forms, is understood not as a mere reflection of the context in which it is embedded, but rather is actively involved in the production of meanings and values within that context. The study of visual culture therefore places an emphasis both on the formal elements that make up the image and the crucial role of its reception in the form of the viewer's engagement with the image: an

engagement that is in no way uniform or static. As subjects whose identity is determined by questions of gender, class, race, sexuality, and historical and geographical location, viewers interact with images in ways that are determined by their socio-cultural contexts. The meanings that are associated with a given image, or sequence of images, come about in this dynamic interplay between viewer and image, making of the latter 'a place where meanings are created and contested' (Mirzoeff 1999: 6).

Visual products circulate today with unprecedented fluidity and are therefore consumed by a more diverse viewing public than ever before. Popular Mexican soap operas, for example, are as avidly watched by viewers in Russia as in their original context of production. It would be wrong to assume, however, that such fluid circulation is suddenly free from the power structures that have traditionally governed the flow of goods and knowledges since the advent of Western colonization in the fifteenth century. Within globalized structures of power, Latin America is still more likely to be a receiver of cultural goods than it is to be a transmitter. Indeed, García Canclini puts this equation in stark numerical terms when he notes that 9 per cent of the world's population live in the European Union, which exports 37.5 per cent of the cultural goods in circulation. By contrast, 7 per cent of the world's population live in Latin America, and yet the subcontinent exports a mere 0.8 per cent of cultural goods (1999: 24). The asymmetrical balance of power as applied to the sphere of artistic endeavour is conveyed with striking simplicity by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García in *Upside-Down Map* (1943, Torres García family collection, Montevideo). By inverting the map of South America, Torres García lays bare the way in which certain locations and geographies of art

have been privileged as the arbiters of value and meaning over others. *Upside-Down Map* forces the viewer to perform a kind of mental somersault. Our initial response to this image is to reinvert the map, to put it back ‘the right way up’. In provoking such a response, Torres García not only exposes the constructed nature of maps and mapping and the hierarchies of value to which they give rise. His inverted map also demonstrates how the visual image cannot be separated from the sets of viewers who give them meaning: meaning which is always anchored within a given socio-political context. *Upside-Down Map* is furthermore an example of a strategy frequently deployed in Latin American visual culture to subvert and thereby convert (into something different) the dominant discourses that are the legacy of colonization and would posit the subcontinent as culturally inferior.



*El norte es el sur (North is South/Upside-Down Map)* by Joaquín Torres García. Reproduced courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York

In fact, as a new field of study, perhaps one of the biggest challenges that faces visual culture is precisely its strategic potential to break with dominant, Eurocentric paradigms that have characterized art history, film and media studies and other disciplines that deal with the visual. Such paradigms emerged in the fifteenth century with the rise of colonial expansion, seeing Europe (and, latterly, European-modelled nations such as the USA) as superior to the rest of the world.

Despite the end of colonialism, Eurocentric discourses continue to influence the way in which the world is conceptualized. Indeed, mindful of this power dynamic, Mirzoeff suggests that ‘At present, it must be recognized that visual culture remains a discourse of the West about the West ... In short, the success or failure of visual culture may well depend on its ability to think transculturally, oriented to the future, rather than take the rear-mirror anthropological approach to culture as tradition’ (1998: 10). In the case of Latin American visual culture, the success or failure will depend on the possibility of offering an account of what is historically and culturally specific about visual culture in the region. How, then, might we go about this?

## COLONIAL IMAGE WARS

Perhaps the first step towards offering an account of the historical and cultural specificity of visual culture in Latin America involves casting our gaze back to the central role of the visual in the very processes of conquest and colonization. These processes, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, are intricately linked to the current cultural moment. Globalization, according to these critics, ‘usually evokes a recent phenomenon involving complex realignments of social forces engendering an overpowering wave of international political, cultural, and economic interdependency’ (2000: 384). It is, moreover, a process that elicits radically different responses that alternate from a celebration of the world-wide availability of cultural goods and information, to objections to the homogenizing tendencies that such availability may entail and that, for some, pose a threat to local diversity. Whether

we read contemporary globalization as an ultimately benign or malign force, however, Shohat and Stam usefully remind us that:

What is often forgotten is that ‘globalization’ is not a new phenomenon; it forms part of the much longer history of colonialism going at least as far back as 1492. Columbus, in this sense, performed the founding gesture of globalization. Although colonization *per se* pre-dated European colonialism, what was new in European colonialism was its planetary reach, its affiliation with global institutional power, and its imperative mode, its attempted submission of the world to a single ‘universal’ regime of truth and power. (2000: 384)

If the contemporary global moment has become associated with a new turn to the visual, it is tied to an earlier cultural event, namely Western expansion, the legacy of which we are living with today. It should perhaps not surprise us then that Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of America and its aftermath similarly gave rise to strikingly image-centred colonial cultures. In other words, by taking the long view, it is possible to bring into focus the powerful historical role that visual culture played in the formation of cultural identities in Latin America.

In a wonderful book that has recently been translated into English, the ethno-historian Serge Gruzinski explores the role of the visual image in the conquest and colonization of the ‘New World’ by the Spanish. In *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)* (2001), Gruzinski suggests that on one level the conquest and colonization of Latin America can be understood in peculiarly visual terms as

a kind of war of images.<sup>2</sup> As cultures with radically different conceptions of the world came into violent contact with one another, the visual image came to occupy a central position in that encounter. Just as in today's globalized world, in which images facilitate communication across linguistic boundaries, they fulfilled a similar role in the colonial encounter between the Spanish and the myriad ethnic groups. In fact, Gruzinski's analysis of the role of the visual image in the conquest and colonization is fascinating on many levels, not least in his exploration of the way in which the indigenous peoples and the Spanish had very different conceptions of what constituted a religious image. For instance, where the European colonizers perceived idols, indigenous peoples saw sacred religious objects. The process of colonization therefore involved an encounter between fundamentally different gazes – the indigenous and the Spanish – and different systems of visual representation. The clash between two different visual traditions initially led to the mass destruction of 'idols' by the Spanish. In their colonizing zeal, the latter attempted to cancel out the pre-existing visual traditions and start afresh, saturating the visual domain of the 'New World' with a specifically Catholic iconography (for example, images of the Virgin and Christ) and way of visualizing the world.

From this very brief account of what is a richly complex exploration of the role of the visual in colonial relations in Latin America, there are a number of factors that are worth underlining. First, it is plain to see that colonial looking relations are shot through with questions of power. In the struggle to impose their own world-view on the indigenous peoples through Western iconographic traditions, the Europeans encountered resistance and often the results achieved were uneven. Indeed, colonial image wars provide a

graphic definition of Mirzoeff's notion that the image is 'a place where meanings are created and contested' (Mirzoeff 1999: 6). Given the complexity and diversity of the indigenous cultures, the struggle by the colonizers to impose a European frame of reference on the pre-existing visual cultures of the 'New World' was inevitably incomplete. What emerged from the process was instead an essentially syncretic cultural imaginary, that is to say, a way of seeing and imagining one's place in the world that fused elements from both systems of representation. Second, colonial image wars were very much part of everyday experience, a sphere that was radically transformed in the wake of the first waves of iconoclasm, during which the Spanish set out to destroy what, in their eyes, were indigenous idols (as opposed to their own Christian icons). In this process of transformation, visual culture was crucial in shaping the way people saw and experienced the world, themselves and others in the (new) world. And third, although the war of images that was unleashed in the colonial period was to a large degree centred on religious iconography, Gruzinski's study nevertheless has repercussions for an understanding of visual culture produced in the more secular modern period. This is because his study establishes a historical context in which to explore the power relations that underpin visual images that circulate in post-colonial Latin America and that play a fundamental role in the formation of cultural identities in the region. Indeed, Gruzinski makes the connection between contemporary visual culture and the colonial war of images explicit in the playful subtitle to his book: 'from Columbus to *Blade Runner*'.

## CINEMATIC IMAGE WARS

By invoking Ridley Scott's futuristic film *Blade Runner* (1982), Gruzinski makes a direct link between colonial and post-colonial image cultures. More specifically, he is pointing towards the way in which in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the global war of images has continued in the moving image and particularly the Hollywood domination of global cinema.

Since its rise to prominence during the First World War, Hollywood has held sway in film circuits not only in Latin America, but also in the vast majority of global cinema markets, with important implications for the development of so-called 'world' cinema(s). As Ana López forcefully argues: 'One way or another, all nations aspiring to produce a "national" cinema have always had to deal with Hollywood's presence or, sometimes, its absence' (López 2000: 418). Dealing with Hollywood is not simply a question of facing up to its dominance of the circuits of film distribution and exhibition. It is also about acknowledging how the combination of continuity editing, narrative causality and the construction of time-space coherence that characterizes Hollywood's mode of film-making has had a profound influence on the kinds of narrative expectations held by audiences and the related viewing positions that these create.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that Hollywood is clearly linked to a precise geographical and cultural location, rarely are the values that a Hollywood film embodies considered to be linked to the national context of the film's production. Instead, these values, on the whole, pass as 'universal'. What effect, then, has Hollywood had on the development of the film industry in Latin America and how have the region's

film-makers faced up to the powerful presence of their northernmost neighbour in what we might term, following Gruzinski, the cinematic war of images?

A cursory glance at some of the literature on Latin American cinema will turn up a series of watchwords that seem to characterize the development of the industry across the region: 'in crisis', 'discontinuous', 'uneven', 'in decline'. These are words that stand in opposition to the brief flourishing of 'golden ages' in key national cinemas. What is more, owing to the economic implications involved in film-making, those industries whose output has approached anything nearing regular and steady production have tended to concentrate in a cluster of countries in the region, namely Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Hollywood's hegemonic hold over cinema in Latin America in terms of its saturation of local markets with its own product, and also control over the raw materials of film production, has not, however, been met without resistance: a resistance that was at its most energetic in the second half of the twentieth century.

The aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution – an event that defined the radical political and cultural climate of the time – saw the production of films and the publication of a series of 'manifestos' by film-makers and critics that together constitute what is known as 'New Latin American Cinema'. Headed primarily by film-makers based in Argentina, Brazil and Cuba, those involved in the New Latin American Cinema conceived of film as a form of oppositional practice, with the aim of denouncing underdevelopment and economic dependence. At the same time, as a movement that was simultaneously nationalist and internationalist in its outlook, New Latin American Cinema was based on the concept of

film as a medium that could transform social practice through its radical appeal to its audience.

A selection of the manifestos produced as part of the movement has recently been re-published in the useful two-volume *New Latin American Cinema*, edited by Michael T. Martin (1997). These impassioned tracts offer us a flavour of the highly politicized cultural moment out of which films made in the movement emerged. Originally published in 1969, in 'Towards a third cinema', Argentines Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino denounce the 'expansion of U.S. imperialism and the film model that is imposed: Hollywood movies' (Martin 1997: 41). Instead, they advocate a revolutionary cinema, defining it as 'not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: *rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification. To put it another way, it provides discovery through transformation*' (1997: 47). In fact, 'Towards a third cinema' was put together after the making of Solanas's landmark film *La hora de los hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces, 1968), a four-hour epic that condemns Argentina's neo-colonial status and exhorts the spectator to become involved in political activism. In what we might imagine, given the film's marathon duration, were welcome breaks in the film, at the end of Part II of *La hora de los hornos*, a voiceover addresses the spectator directly: 'Now the film is pausing, it opens up to you for you to continue it. Now you have the floor.'<sup>5</sup>

Authored by a leading exponent of Brazil's *Cinema Novo*, Glauber Rocha's 'An aesthetic of hunger' (1965) recognizes hunger – in both a literal and metaphorical sense – as a key component of the Brazilian situation: a hunger which, for the

Brazilian, 'is a national shame. He does not eat, but he is ashamed to say so; and yet, he does not know where this hunger comes from. We know -since we made these sad, ugly films, these screaming, desperate films where reason does not always prevail – that this hunger will not be cured by moderate governmental reforms and that the cloak of technicolor cannot hide, but only aggravates, its tumors' (Martin 1997: 60). The 'sad', 'ugly' films to which Rocha refers were made at the time of the 1964 military coup and ensuing dictatorship. This period marked a growth in the nation's cinematic output and saw the establishment of influential directors such as Rocha himself, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Carlos Diegues and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade. In what Ismail Xavier terms 'allegories of underdevelopment', films of this period – such as Rocha's *Terra em Transe* (Land in Anguish, 1967) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Fome de Amor* (Hunger for Love, 1968) – make of Brazil's underdeveloped status, its lack of advanced technical resources, an expressive force to question and critique a political system that perpetuates social inequities.

Finally, at the epicentre of radical politics in the region, the Cuban Revolution effectively brought to life a cinematic culture on an island with a surprisingly large number of cinema-goers, but with little in the way of national film production. Indeed, the revolutionary leaders were quick to harness the potential of film to their project, with the formation of ICAIC (Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industria Cinematográficos) in March 1959. Here again, we find film-maker Julio García Espinosa, some ten years later, denouncing what he terms the 'perfect cinema' of Hollywood and Europe as reactionary. In 'For an imperfect cinema' (1969) he argues instead for an alternative ('imperfect')

cinema that draws on popular art forms, makes the struggles and problems of ordinary people its subject matter, and encourages the active participation of its audience. As in other cinemas across Latin America of the time, debates around the relationship between culture and society figure prominently in Cuba and Cuban cinema. These are crystallized in films such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968) and Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (One Way or Another, 1974), which mingle fiction and documentary to reflect upon social upheaval in the aftermath of the Revolution.

New Latin American Cinema emerged out of the specific historical and social conditions that defined both the national contexts of its films and film-makers and also the continent-wide political movements of the period. It represents a move to question cinematic paradigms – particularly those inherited from Hollywood and European cinemas – and to question the function of film and how it might be put into the service of social transformation. As such, New Latin American Cinema understands film as a radical medium engaged in the struggle against the neo-colonizing forces at work in Hollywood's saturation of Latin American film markets. In short, the visual domain in the form of cinematic technology represents a site of ideological struggle and conflict. Filmmakers of the movement stress the 'imperfection' of the film-making conditions in which they operate in the form of limited resources. In their films they manifest 'imperfection' and in so doing make of it a strategy to confront and challenge 'perfect cinema' and its values. And at the heart of this cinematic war of images we find the spectator. Via his/her engagement with the (in filmic terms) imperfectly presented

events as they unfold on the screen, this spectator is urged to abandon the kind of passive viewing positions purportedly encouraged by Hollywood-style narrative techniques and instead to adopt a critical, socially aware stance. These factors were ultimately some of the key characteristics of the 'newness' of the New Latin American Cinema. Another was the fact that practitioners involved in the movement attempted to effect a radical break not only with Hollywood, but also with a cinema that was in some ways considered equally ideologically suspect, the so-called 'old' cinemas of Latin America. Or, to put it another way, the newness of New Latin American Cinema was also predicated, in part at least, on its not being 'old'.

Indeed, until recently the 'old' cinemas of Latin America – produced in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – have languished in critical neglect. Condemned as derivative of Hollywood models, over-reliant on the sentimentalities of melodrama and beholden to the interests of the ruling classes, for many years critics wrote off films made in this period as third-rate and what we might today call 'politically incorrect'. In so doing, however, such critics were dismissing a form of cinema that had a genuine appeal to a mass audience. What is more, as Ana López states, they 'did not take into account that this was the first indigenous cinema to dent the Hollywood industry's pervasive presence in Latin America; the first to consistently circulate Latin American images, voices, songs and history; the first to capture and sustain the interest of multinational audiences throughout the continent for several decades' (1993: 148).

The critical neglect that the old cinemas of Latin America suffered has now, however, been rectified. Thanks, in part, to

a re-evaluation in film studies of melodrama as a filmic mode, to a critique of the elitist assumptions that underpin the rejection of mass cultural forms, and also to the work of scholars such as López, the old cinemas are currently enjoying renewed interest. So, there may be no doubt that the majority of the films produced in the period were imitative in one form or another of Hollywood models. Nevertheless, it is now widely acknowledged that the translation and transformation of such models from one cultural context to another are much more complex than the notion of a straightforward act of cultural imposition will allow.

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of intense cultural activity and change in many Latin American republics, and particularly in the three centres that dominated film production of the period, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Cultural activity took the form of heightened nationalism as Latin American nation-states sought to consolidate a homogenous national identity in what were effectively complex, multiethnic societies. Given the fundamentally capitalist thrust of these nation-states, cultural nationalism went hand in hand with the move towards cultural modernity. Across the region everyday life underwent rapid and radical change as segments of the population experienced the inevitable shifts in mores and values that occur in societies going through the vertiginous (and in all cases) incomplete transition from tradition to modernity, from Catholic to secular, from rural to urban, from agricultural to industrial. As an example of a complex new technology, and as an urban-based form that reached a mass audience, the cinema itself was a quintessential symbol of cultural modernity. The moving image was, moreover, a vital tool in the consolidation of a single national identity: film was a perfect vehicle

through which to play out at a fictional level the conflicts and struggles encountered by characters experiencing the disorienting effects of the processes of modernization that gained momentum alongside nationalist discourses.

In considering the role of cinema in the processes of cultural modernity it is helpful to consider a key film text from the Mexican cinema, a cinema that in the early 1940s experienced a brief 'golden age'. During this period, film production rose exponentially, a specifically Mexican star system developed (including actors such as Dolores del Río, María Félix, Pedro Armendáriz and Pedro Infante) and key film genres were established. Amongst the latter, melodrama was central. The film in question is the family melodrama *Una familia de tantas* (Alejandro Galindo, 1948) and is particularly lucid in its thematization of the conflicts brought about as a result of processes of modernization.

Set almost entirely inside the stiflingly claustrophobic confines of the Cataño family home, *Una familia de tantas* centres on the relationship between middle daughter Maru (Martha Roth) and vacuum-cleaner salesman Roberto del Hierro (David Silva). The latter manages to infiltrate the family home, a bastion of traditional values (associated in the film with the ex-dictator Porfirio Díaz) presided over by the violently patriarchal figure Don Rodrigo del Cataño (Fernando Soler). In the course of his courtship with Maru, Roberto convinces Don Cataño to purchase two prime modern commodities (a vacuum cleaner and a refrigerator), before whisking Cataño's daughter off against her father's will to what the film sets up as a more democratic and modern marriage. That the film can be read at a national level as a metaphor for Mexico's transition from the feudal,

authoritarian values of traditional society to a more enlightened, modern society with its values implicitly modelled on those of the USA (the name of the company for which Roberto works is significantly The Bright O' Home Corporation) is signalled clearly. The Cataño family is 'one of many' (*Una familia de tantas*). And in the opening sequence the camera pans from right to left across a panoramic cityscape into the Cataño home through Maru's bedroom window, thereby establishing a connection between the urban setting as macrocosm and the family's status as a microcosm within it.

In the film's mediation of the implicitly progressive values associated with modernization, it is important to emphasize the way in which *Una familia de tantas* engages its audience through the processes of identification that are inherent in the act of cinematic spectatorship. In very bald terms, the film invites its audience to reject the old-fashioned patriarchy embodied by Don Cataño and his comically feckless eldest son Héctor (Felipe de Alba), and to identify with Maru, admire her defiance of her father and approve of her marriage to the thoroughly modern Roberto. In so doing, it is effectively inviting an engagement with cultural modernity as a progressive force for change.

*Una familia de tantas* is just one film of many made during the period and across the cinemas in question that plays out the familial – and by extension national – conflicts associated with societies in a state of flux. In so doing, it undoubtedly buys into an important and popular genre in the Hollywood cinema: family melodrama. However, in the process of cultural importation, the 'foreign' model is nationalized and thereby transformed for consumption

by a local audience steeped in the traditions not only of Hollywood but also, importantly, local popular culture. Indeed, across the cinemas of Latin America, the presence of the local is perhaps nowhere more keenly felt than in the proliferation of film genres that incorporate music and dance numbers. Argentine cinema's most buoyant moment was arguably dominated by tango-led productions starring Carlos Gardel in the 1930s; in Brazil the musical comedy or *chancada* was immensely popular in the period; in Mexico the *cabaretera* or brothel melodrama became a key national genre of the country's old cinema.

When reconsidering Latin America's cinemas of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, it is therefore important to remember that as a popular form of mass entertainment, the old cinemas developed a language and style that reflected the local within the framework of the more international idiom of cinema as it was developing in Hollywood. As such, film played an important role in nation formation in that it activated common codes that invited the audience to recognize and to imagine themselves as members of a given community. Furthermore, as in the earlier period of colonial identity formation, the visual (now the audio-visual) became a key site for mediating the dramatic changes that were permeating everyday life.

## **STILL IMAGES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The moving image was but one mode of visual representation engaged in the negotiation of cultural identity and mediating the transition to modernity in the twentieth century. The still image in its multiple forms has also been constitutive of

national collectivities in the region. In fact, in Mexico, in the aftermath of the 1910–20 Revolution, in the first instance it was not film, but rather painting that assumed this mediating role. Indeed, in a statement that has echoes of the New Latin American Cinema some forty years later, a key cultural architect of Mexican cultural nationalism, José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), argued in the 1920s that the cinema was ‘a typically US cultural product impossible to develop as a national form’ (López 2000: 425). Vasconcelos may have given the cinema short shrift; he was, however, a major advocate of the still image and more particularly monumental muralism which, via his role as Minister for Education, he promoted as a revolutionary national art form.

For all that it was lacking in clearly definable ideological goals, the 1910 Revolution was a decisive event that defined the course of Mexican history and had reverberations across the whole of Latin America where it was hailed as the subcontinent’s first major social revolution. The Revolution swept aside the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, removed many of the landowning elite, and, in its nationalist rhetoric at least, made way for new figures within national culture: the indigenous peasant and the worker. After the initial violent struggle – during which, out of a population of some 15 million, 1.5 million perished – the Revolution entered a phase of institutionalization during which the highly factionalized dispute was effectively reinvented as a coherent and socially cohesive myth of national origin. In a largely illiterate society, fractured by ethnic and regional divisions, visual culture came to play a central role in this process of reinvention not only of the Revolution itself, but also of Mexico’s history.

The Mexican muralist movement was dominated by three artists, the so-called '*tres grandes*', Diego Rivera (1886–1957), José Clemente Orozco (1898–1974) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1883–1949). Throughout the colonial and extending into the post-independence period, visual culture in Mexico (and indeed elsewhere in Latin America) had been dominated by European artistic traditions, which in the eyes of the proponents of revolutionary art were seen as elitist. Creating huge images on the walls of public buildings, the muralists instituted a monumental form of art about the (Mexican) people, for the people. Art moved out of the private, elitist European-style art institutions and into the public, egalitarian spheres of national buildings. In this way art, which was held to have explicitly didactic powers, was to become part of the everyday environment. Rivera in particular became interested in revisioning Mexican history in his murals, looking to the past, to pre-Columbian culture in his search for the authentic, quintessentially Mexican roots of the contemporary nation.

In *The Great City of Tenochtitlán* (1945), part of the cycle of murals initiated in 1929 in the National Palace at the heart of Mexico City, Rivera depicts an idealized view of the Aztec capital. The viewer is presented with a harmonious market scene in which the busy people that fill the mural are engaged in commerce based on a system of bartering. The panoramic, open, bird's-eye view of the city, coupled with the light blues and whites that preponderate in the composition, add to the harmonious feeling that the mural creates. This contrasts sharply with *The Disembarkation in Veracruz* (1951), also at the National Palace, which is a damning indictment of the violence and cruelty of the Spanish conquerors of Mexico. The mural's representation of the pale, sickly, green-tinged

Spaniards reminds the viewer of the deadly epidemics that wiped out the millions of Indians with no immunity to the diseases that the Europeans harboured. The enslaved Indians have been made to destroy the natural environment, their small anonymous figures reminding us that, with the arrival of the Spaniards, they were to become effaced from history until, in theory at least, the Revolution. In the left-hand corner the mural draws a visual parallel between a cross, symbolizing the evangelical designs of the colonizers, and the diminutive figures of Indians who have been strung by their feet from the remaining trees and whose forms echo that of the cross.

In this brief snapshot of just two murals from Rivera's vast *œuvre*, we can begin to grasp some of the conflicts and paradoxes that underpin muralism, particularly as it was practised by Rivera. On the one hand, Rivera's work stands as a strategic corrective. Its glorification of the pre-Columbian past served to restore a sense of value and worth to Mexico's indigenous heritage which for so long had been denigrated and marginalized in favour of more 'sophisticated' models of European origin. On the other hand, however, as a visual strategy it also raises a series of problems. Rivera's revisions of the past are arguably too black-and-white and lacking in nuance and complexity. His idealization of indigenous culture was, moreover, deeply ambivalent and chimed with contemporary *Indigenista* discourses. In the aftermath of the Revolution, the *Indigenista* movement sought to reinstate Mexico's indigenous communities into the heart of national life. In the final analysis, however, what it really involved was co-opting the picturesque, folkloric elements of indigenous cultures and incorporating them as myths and symbols within the

powerfully centralizing and homogenizing nationalist discourses.<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps where the ultimate paradox of Rivera's muralism lies. For all that muralism claimed to be an egalitarian form of art about the people, for the people, its didactic intentions were arguably directed more at the elite sectors of society who had, so to speak, 'to learn to love' the indigenous past, or at least a pristine, sanitized version of it.

For a more nuanced vision of the complexities of Mexican identity in the post-revolutionary period we need to read the monumentality of muralism in tandem with the diminutive work of Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo. Since an important 1982 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London that re-presented Kahlo's paintings alongside the photographs of Italian-American photographer Tina Modotti, curated by British critics Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, there has been an upsurge of interest in Kahlo. After a period of critical neglect, the Whitechapel exhibition relaunched Kahlo, re-packaging her in the light of feminist interventions into art history. Such interventions sought to make good the erasures of women artists from the texts of art history and at the same time to critique the masculinist bias of traditional work in the field. In fact the Whitechapel exhibition – with its emphasis on the blurring of the boundaries between the personal and the political and on the body as cultural artefact in Kahlo's work – was to set the tone for much critical work on Kahlo in the 1980s and 1990s. This work reads her intensely personal and dramatic self-portraits as embodying a feminist aesthetics. And to be sure, Kahlo's imagery pushes back the boundaries of what can be legitimately represented in the visual domain: from bloody miscarriages to scenes of domestic violence. There can be no denying the powerful and shocking impact of images such as *A Few Small Nips* (1935,

Collection of Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City), which depicts a naked woman who lies prone on a bed, her body covered in vicious, bloody slashes, besides which stands a man, knife in hand. The image's wooden frame, like the woman's body, is splashed with red paint/blood, thereby preventing the viewer from distancing him/herself from the violent scene contained within the frame.

However, the tendency to read Kahlo and her work as iconically feminist has at times obscured the way in which her images offer a more complex vision of issues of identity than that found in the work of Rivera. The latter's work tends to be rather reductive and binaristic in its visual narration of the nation

which 'was being crafted as a "true" essence, with either the Indian or the mestizo standing in as the "authentic" Self in contrast to a "false" Other, the Spanish, European and colonial past' (Volk 2000: 171). By contrast, in paintings such as *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* (1932, Collection of Mrs Manuel Reyero, New York), *The Two Fridas* (1939, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City) and *My Nurse and I* (1937, Collection of Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City), Kahlo thematizes the complexity of Mexican identity, emphasizing its multiplicity, exclusions and conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, she faces up to the colonial past and, rather than rejecting, incorporates the 'false' others demonized by Rivera as an integral part of contemporary Mexican (and Latin American) identity.

Facing up to the legacy of colonialism within visual culture also involves confronting the powerful presence of European artistic traditions in the form of the 'Old Masters'. As Oriana

Baddeley and Valerie Fraser suggest in their invaluable book *Drawing the Line*:

Another feature of the traditional academic training with far-reaching consequences for Latin American art is that of copying from the Old Masters. It is axiomatic that art cannot be reproduced in the same way as can music or literature, so for aspiring young artists in countries where the public collections contain little or nothing apart from their own colonial and nineteenth century past the impact of a trip to Europe can be immeasurable, and the art of copying whilst on such a visit of special value. (1989: 43)

It is, however, one thing for a European artist to copy from the ‘Old Masters’. It is quite another for a Latin American artist to do so. This is because copying from European images was one of the ways in which the indigenous subject was re-educated simultaneously into Christianity and the Western traditions of representation and visualizing the world that Gruzinski outlines in his study on colonial image wars.

Parodic copying has therefore, unsurprisingly, become a strategy deployed by Latin American artists in a decolonizing gesture similar to that displayed by Torres García’s inverted map. Arguably the best known of the ‘copyists’ is the Colombian Fernando Botero, famous for his inflated, *faux naïf* figures, and who, in a number of his most reproduced images, turns explicitly to his European intertexts. Thus *The Presidential Family* (1967, Museum of Modern Art, New York) is based on Spanish artist’s Goya’s *Family of Charles IV* (1800, Museo el Prado, Madrid), which is itself a parodic version of another Spanish ‘master’, Velázquez’s classic painting, *Las Meninas* (1656, Museo el Prado, Madrid). The

pomposity and vacuity of the inflated ‘first family’ in Botero’s image are sent up via its reference to Goya’s version of his equally vacuous royal subjects. So too in Botero’s image is the artist, who has included himself in the painting, standing at his easel in a visual echo of both Goya and Velázquez, in the left-hand corner of the frame. The parodic inflation of the artist, and by extension the institution of art, turns

on the way in which in Velázquez’s original the artist garnered elevated status for himself via his association within the frame with the Spanish royal family. Such status is clearly short-circuited in Botero’s ‘copy’, in that far from prestige, the presidential first family by association can only bestow ridicule on the artist.

Velázquez and the institution of art are also central to our understanding of *Self-Portrait in Velázquez Costume* (1986, Galerie Beyeler, Basel). At the centre stands the artist who has donned a costume reminiscent of that worn by his Spanish, seventeenth-century counterpart in *Las Meninas*. Botero is clearly about to paint a female nude, a theme that has come to connote art itself within the Western tradition of art. The robust female figure that stands before the artist, however, has her back turned to the viewer, signalling that this painting is not a conventional nude as such, but rather a painting about art and its institutions. That Botero is dressed in a Velázquez costume serves to remind us that the category of artist that is enacted in the frame is one that is acquired within the cultural institutions of art. Furthermore, the costume also indicates that artistic genius – a status that Velázquez achieved – is not something that one is born with, but rather is itself a cultural artefact. Therefore if Latin American artists have struggled to achieve status in a

European-dominated art world (or to put it in Torres García's terms, if Latin America has conventionally been situated at the bottom of map), this is not due to some form of 'natural' inferiority. Rather, it is the result of the processes of cultural colonialism that have produced such a position. Therefore, in such overtly self-referential paintings as *The Presidential Family* and *Self-Portrait in Velázquez Costume*, Botero is able to reflect on and critique art as an institution: an institution that through the legacy of colonialism has condemned Latin America to the status of a second-rate, pale copy to Europe's (and the North's) status as originator of value and meaning.

## **THE FUTURE OF LATIN AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURES**

The foregoing discussion has, by necessity, offered the briefest and most fleeting of glimpses at a very limited selection of the wealth and variety that are the visual cultures of Latin America. The emergence of visual culture as a field of study that flourishes across a range of disciplinary contexts without being confined and thereby circumscribed by any one does, however, open up a new kind of space for considering questions of vision and visibility in Latin America. In this space it becomes possible to put new visual objects onto the critical map that have previously been occluded from view. At the same time, as an exciting new development, visual culture provides an opportunity to scrutinize and critique the Eurocentrism of disciplines such as art history and film and media studies. In their most conservative and conventional

forms, these disciplines have been blind to the cultures that exist beyond their limited field of vision. But perhaps more than this, the ongoing and dynamic development of the study of Latin American visual cultures represents an invitation: to explore the historical and cultural specificities of the 'image at war' in an area in which the colonial encounter brought into contact two very different ways of visualizing the world.

## NOTES

**M**artin Jay (1994) provides a helpful definition of the slippery distinction between vision and visibility where the former is used to describe the physiological process of seeing and the latter understands the practice of vision as inevitably embedded within and therefore shaped by culture and history.

**A**lthough the focus of Gruzinski's book is Mexico, as comments in the introduction make clear, the broader ramifications of the study have implications for an understanding of the image in Latin America more generally.

**C**ontinuity editing, narrative causality and the construction of time-space coherence are all elements that characterize conventional Hollywood cinema and which together serve to make the telling of a story through filmed images seem transparently 'natural', akin to 'real life'. They are, of course, simply conventions. See Vasey (1997) for more on Hollywood's conventions and attitudes towards its overseas markets.

**T**his is not to claim that other Latin American countries are not involved in film-making – they are, but not on the same

scale as the countries mentioned above. Owing to the constraints of space, this chapter can only touch upon the more established industries.

Quoted in King (1990: 87).

See Knight (1990) for an excellent discussion of the complexity and problems associated with *Indigenismo*.

See Volk (2000) for an excellent discussion of Kahlo's representation of the nation.

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