
REVIEW ESSAYS

BEFORE AND AFTER THE BOOM: Recent Scholarship on Latin American Literary and Cultural Studies

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- BEFORE THE BOOM: LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY NOVELS OF THE 1920s.* By Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001. Pp. 130. \$22.50 paper.)
- BORGES AND HIS FICTION: A GUIDE TO HIS MIND AND ART.* By Gene H. Bell-Villada. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. Pp. 325. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- DISCURSO E HISTORIA EN LA OBRA NARRATIVA DE JORGE LUIS BORGES: EXAMEN DE FICCIONES Y EL ALEPH.* By Nicolás Emilio Álvarez. (Boulder, CO: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1999. Pp. 258. \$32.00 cloth.)
- THE MODERN LATIN-AMERICAN NOVEL.* By Raymond Leslie Williams. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998. Pp. 177. \$32.00 cloth.)
- JOSÉ MARÍA ARGUEDAS: RECONSIDERATIONS FOR LATIN AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES.* Edited by Ciro A. Sandoval and Sandra M. Boschetto-Sandoval. (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1998. Pp. 312. \$23.00 paper.)
- MUTUAL IMPRESSIONS: WRITERS FROM THE AMERICAS READING ONE ANOTHER.* Edited by Ilán Stavans. (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1999. Pp. 326. \$49.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

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CARLOS MONSIVÁIS: *CULTURE AND CHRONICLE IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO*. By Linda Egan. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. Pp. 277. \$45.00 cloth.)

THE *SOCIAL CONSCIENCE OF LATIN AMERICAN WRITING*. By Naomi Lindstrom. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. Pp. 187. \$25.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

THE *EXHAUSTION OF DIFFERENCE: THE POLITICS OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES*. By Alberto Moreiras. (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2001. Pp. 350. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

For decades the Boom has often been regarded as the starting point of the modern Latin American novel, often ignoring the fact that those innovations that made the texts precisely so unique had their origins in the narratives produced during the first four decades of the twentieth century. In the last few years, several critics have embarked on numerous projects in an attempt to recover the literature produced during that period. The purpose of this essay is to assess a group of recent volumes about Latin American literary and cultural studies that shed new light on the lives and the literary and cultural production of Latin American writers before and after the Boom. The books presently under review demonstrate the broadening scope of critical analyses on Latin American literature and culture.

In *Before the Boom: Latin American Revolutionary Novels of the 1920s*, Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez proposes a re-evaluation of Latin American fiction from the 1920s with regard to its influence on the evolution of the contemporary novel in Latin America. She argues that recent postmodern literary theory offers a unique way to reconsider narratives produced during the third decade of the twentieth century. Her project is one of recovery as she attempts to legitimize a literary corpus that has been historically left out of the Latin American literary canon. Thus, in her book, the author seeks to demonstrate the *vanguardistas* break with previous generations and the subsequent creation of an entirely new and original style that clearly influenced all posterior twentieth-century Latin American fiction. Coonrod Martínez focuses on four novels from the 1920s that, although expressly Latin American in nature, possess specific attributes that belong to unambiguous Mexican, Argentinean, Ecuadorean, and Peruvian realities. The novels studied by the author are: Arqueles Vela's *El café de nadie* (México, 1926); Roberto Arlt's *Los siete locos* (Argentina, 1929); Pablo Palacio's *Débora* (Ecuador, 1927) and Martín Adán's *La casa de cartón* (Perú, 1928).

These four revolutionary novels have been identified by the author as true creators of the *vanguardia* and true precursors of the Boom. Coonrod Martínez's thorough analysis of each of these texts within the contexts in which they appeared helps clarify complex and at times obscure issues

that have often been misunderstood by critics and non-specialized readers alike. More importantly, the author does not claim these novels are the only innovators or precursors to the Boom; rather, she suggests these readings may provide a foundation for the reconsideration of other fictional narratives that are not considered “novels” by the critics.

Gene Bell-Villada’s contribution to the recovery of pre-Boom Latin American narratives is manifest in his study of Jorge Luis Borges’ fiction. Written in the 1970s and initially published in 1981, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art*, has introduced the life and works of this literary genius to an entire generation of students and professors. In response to a steady demand for an updated edition, the book has been noticeably revised by the author to incorporate new information that has become available only in recent years, especially since Borges’ death in 1986. This latest edition offers a closer look at Borges’ personal experiences of love and his early encounters with mysticism as well as revised interpretations of some of Borges’ stories. Another example of how the text may be utilized as a handy pedagogical tool is the expansion of the bibliographical materials that include numerous studies that range from an appreciation of Borges’ narrative strategies and the poetics of his prose, to the consideration of Judaic and kabbalistic elements in his fiction.

In this revised edition, Bell-Villada has added a much-needed section that explains Borges’ reading of Argentine and world politics, especially his conflictive relationship with Peronism. Bell-Villada approaches the study of Borges’ fiction with originality, creativity, and erudition, making *Borges and His Fiction* stand out from countless other recent publications on the subject.

Written for the specialized reader, Nicolás Emilio Alvarez’s *Discurso e historia en la obra narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges: Examen de Ficciones y El Aleph*, combines a narratological approach that applies the theories of Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, and F.K. Stanzel with other literary theories from a variety of fields that include semiotics, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, and hermeneutics. In his analysis of Borges’ *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, the author applies various semiotic, aesthetic, and narratological postulates derived mostly from Roland Barthes, Wayne Booth, Umberto Eco, Northrop Frye, Wolfgang Iser, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Alvarez’s book provides a valuable supplement to the countless number of studies of Borges’ narrative fiction. His analysis is extraordinarily comprehensive and thorough. His third and last chapter stands out, in particular, for its contribution to our knowledge and interpretations of Borges’ narrative discourse and historical narrative.

A specialist on twentieth-century Latin American fiction, Raymond Leslie Williams’ research on the contemporary Latin American novel

has materialized in his latest book, *The Modern Latin American Novel*. Drawing from John S. Brushwood's landmark book *The Spanish-American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey* (1975), which provides a comprehensive overview of the Spanish-American novel from 1900 to 1970, and Naomi Lindstrom's *Twentieth-Century Spanish American Fiction* (1994), also an analytical panorama of twentieth-century literature, Williams sets out to provide an ambitious overview of modern Latin American fiction, from the literature produced in the mid-1940s to the most recent currents in postmodern fiction. The present book was not written in a vacuum, however, as it is conceptually a continuation of studies the author initiated with two earlier books: *The Colombian Novel: 1844–1987* (1991) and *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America: Politics, Culture, and the Crisis of Truth* (1995). The book is suitable not only for an undergraduate or graduate course on the subject but also for a general interest audience. The text is divided in three parts, each dealing with various authors and their works. The first part deals explicitly with the rise of the modernist novel and covers the period 1945–57. The focus of this section is on the fiction of Miguel Angel Asturias, Agustín Yáñez, and Alejo Carpentier. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the novels of Leopoldo Marechal and Juan Carlos Onetti, on the one hand, and the rise of the Brazilian modernist novel examined through the works of José Lins do Rêgo, Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, and Rachel de Queiroz, on the other. Part 2 begins with an introduction to the phenomenon that came to be known as the Boom and covers the novels of Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez. The last chapter of this section, chapter 12, covers the work of four accomplished writers of that period that were not actually part of the Boom. He includes Brazilians João Guimarães Rosa and Clarice Lispector, the Chilean José Donoso, and the Venezuelan Salvador Garmendia, who might be considered a member of what has been labeled the “boom junior” generation. The third and last part of the book considers the most innovative fiction to have appeared in the region since the 1970s, as readers and critics became aware of the demise of the Boom as a unified political and aesthetic project. This last section begins with an introduction to postmodern fiction in Latin America and then provides an overview of postmodern fiction in South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean (chaps. 13–15). In the last chapter of the book, the author offers concluding remarks about the modern and postmodern novel in Latin America and discusses a recent variant on the postmodern that he identifies as the “post-national novel.”

Williams' text shows that although the modern Latin American novel has only been in the spotlight of an international reading public since the 1960s, due in part to both the publicity created by the Boom and the names of distinguished Nobel laureates like Gabriel García Márquez,

Miguel Angel Asturias, and Pablo Neruda, Latin American literature today belongs to a long tradition that preceded both the writers and the 1960s.

Like the works of Coonrod Martínez and Raymond Leslie Williams, whose projects are part of an on-going process of recovery of outstanding Latin American fiction, Ciro and Sandra Sandoval's text examines the literary production of one of Latin America's most outstanding writers: the Peruvian José María Arguedas. Like the fiction of Agustín Yáñez, Leopoldo Marechal, Roberto Arlt, Alejo Carpentier, and even Clarice Lispector and Salvador Garmendia, among others, the works of José María Arguedas have remained until recently, relatively unknown and, to a certain degree, unappreciated by the general reading public. In contrast to their *oeuvre*, however, the work of Arguedas is based on ethnological and anthropological research with profound ramifications for the cultural critique of modernity, acculturation, transculturation, and the survival of native cultures. *José María Arguedas: Reconsiderations for Latin American Cultural Studies* is a rich and thought-provoking collection of essays written by leading experts on the subject like Martin Lienhard, William Rowe, Julio Ortega, and Pedro Lastra. In addition, the volume includes one of the most important essays written on the topic by the late Antonio Cornejo Polar entitled "Migrant Conditions and Multicultural Intertextuality: The Case of José María Arguedas," which illustrates how migration and exile, both recurring topics in the works of the author, are the product of cultural *mestizaje* and transcultural intersection. The essays included in this reconsideration of Arguedas' work attest eloquently to the recent need on behalf of cultural critics and academics to give legitimacy and new critical recognition to this Peruvian intellectual. The present study will no doubt open a new page in the research on the work of Arguedas.

Martin Lienhard's contribution to the volume vehemently attests to Arguedas' gift as a Quechua poet. Lienhard addresses the complexities inherent in Arguedas' poetic system that is at once urban and bucolic, and the product of an oral as well as a written tradition. The linguistic dimension in Arguedas' fiction is meticulously examined by Julio Ortega in his essay "The Plural Narrator and the Quandary of Multiple Communication in Arguedas' *Deep Rivers*," where he invokes the notion of systematic plurality by examining the problematic position of the narrator in the novel *Los ríos profundos*. In his essay "Arguedas: Music, Awareness, and Social Transformation," William Rowe reevaluates Arguedas' poetic and narrative discourse through the study of music, song, and dance, and argues that music, more than any other medium, serves as a viable alternative to western rationalism.

These aspects of Arguedas' work are explored in these essays in a fascinating variety of contexts and perspectives, providing the reader

with an excellent balance of interdisciplinary scholarship and pedagogical practice. Those who are already familiar with the work of José María Arguedas will benefit immensely from this superb collection of essays. On the other hand, both students and non-specialized readers will also find this book an invaluable source of information on the life and works of this exceptional writer. Furthermore, this anthology makes the works of José María Arguedas accessible to broader audiences working in the areas of Latin American studies, including anthropology, ethnography, and folklore as well as sociology, history, linguistics, and literature.

Another writer and public intellectual who has recently received much deserved recognition is Carlos Monsiváis. Presently one of Mexico's leading intellectuals, Monsiváis has become, over the last four decades, one of the most prolific chroniclers and cultural critics of Mexico and its people. Although his works are well known among the Mexican intellectual community, his *oeuvre* has been largely excluded from the literary canon and has remained virtually unknown to readers and academics in the United States. In *Carlos Monsiváis: Culture and Chronicle in Contemporary Mexico*, Linda Egan gives legitimacy to Monsiváis' work and makes it available to a larger audience.

The book is divided in two parts. The first examines Carlos Monsiváis as a journalist and a theorist of Mexican culture, while the second focuses on his literary production. In the first part, Egan argues for the need to insert Monsiváis in the literary canon, thus essentially *canonizing* the chronicle as a legitimate literary genre and Monsiváis as its patriarchal figure. In "Voicing a Poetics of the Contemporary Chronicle of Mexico" (chap. 5), Egan traces the history of the *crónica* genre in Latin America and develops various theoretical frameworks for its analysis. In the second part of her book, Egan examines Monsiváis' first five *crónicas*: *Días de guardar* (1970), *Amor perdido* (1977), *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (1981), *Entrada libre* (1987), and *Los rituales del caos* (1995), devoting a chapter to each of these five principal collections. In this book, Egan shows how Monsiváis' *crónicas* both reflect and define the cultural landscape of Mexico and Latin America. Linda Egan's book constitutes the first full-length analysis of Monsiváis' *crónicas* written in English and will undoubtedly stand, for years to come, as the authoritative guide on the subject.

Mutual Impressions: Writers from the Americas Reading One Another, edited by Ilán Stavans, is part of a growing trend in the humanities that encourages the reading of literary texts beyond national boundaries. Stavans' text dispels commonly held assumptions that literary figures on both sides of the North/South divide have had little or no interest in the works of one another. This masterfully chosen collection of essays on various authors and their works shows just how solid these connections have been, at least since the early days of the twentieth century.

More important still, it leads one to consider how crucial these relationships are likely to become in the future. The essays gathered in the volume include pieces by leading novelists, poets, and essayists, men and women of letters, on their "impressions" of one another. Some essays of note include Katherine Ann Porter's examination of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* as one of the very first novels written in Spanish America, and Pablo Neruda's observations on the poetry of Robert Frost. The selection also includes several essays both *from* and *about* authors from the Caribbean, an area that is not frequently included in Latin American studies. For instance, there are remarkable contributions from José Martí on Walt Whitman, Paul West on Alejo Carpentier, and Nicolás Guillén on Langston Hughes. *Mutual Impressions* constitutes a delightful read that will give both students and academics access to some of the most prominent writers of the Americas.

Due to the historical dynamic that has produced it, literature in Latin America has, over time, assumed distinctive forms. These unique characteristics have allowed the literature of Latin America to serve as a vehicle for the discussion of political, social, and cultural debates. In *The Social Conscience of Latin American Writing*, Naomi Lindstrom addresses these issues, which are currently the focus of intense debate among intellectuals and cultural critics. Written for a general, well-educated audience with a Latin-Americanist interest, composed of both specialists and non-specialists, Lindstrom's text is a superb study of the symbiosis of literature and culture in Latin America. The book is divided into five chapters that explore concepts such as autonomy and dependency, postmodernism, testimonial narrative, intellectuals and the mass media, and gender issues, including gay and lesbian themes. The first chapter addresses the problematic of dependency theory in the context of globalization and the prevalence of a post-Boom, post-modernist literature. Lindstrom discusses the literary manifestations of dependency theory in several texts but favors the analysis of Manuel Puig's 1968 novel *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, for it offers an overt critique of commercial mass culture and the disproportionate cultural influence of powerful nations like the United States. Towards the end of the chapter, Lindstrom shows how Fernando Ortiz's formulation of the concept that came to be known as transculturation may provide an alternative way of focusing on the relationship between dominant groups and those of less powerful nations of the periphery. The second chapter deals with the phenomenon of postmodernism as it relates to Latin American culture. In presenting the case for a postmodern condition in Latin America, Lindstrom makes use of works by Spanish American as well as Brazilian authors. Chapter 3, on the other hand, examines some of the issues raised by documentary narratives by members of

subaltern groups, known as *testimonios*, and discusses several innovative texts that have appeared in recent decades. Among the texts examined by the author are the Cuban Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) by Elizabeth Burgos Debray with Rigoberta Menchú (winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize). In chapter 4, Lindstrom considers the relations between Latin American intellectuals and the mass media. She is specifically concerned with the way Latin American intellectuals have historically reacted to, and become involved with, mass media and cultures. Her last chapter focuses on women's writing and gender issues in Latin American literature. Borrowing from elements of both European and U.S. feminist discourse, Lindstrom proposes a formulation of Latin American feminist thought through the reading of Latin American literature itself, especially fiction and non-fiction writing by women. While this chapter focuses almost entirely on the study of women's writing from a feminist studies perspective, its final section examines the more recent development of gay and lesbian studies in the context of Latin American literature.

This skillfully written work of scholarship is a compelling read that, in my view, constitutes a valuable addition to the field of Latin American literary and cultural studies. Lindstrom's observations elicit keen insights into the social conscience of Latin American writing.

Another text in which the epistemological locus is brought to the fore is Alberto Moreiras' *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, a sophisticated application of poststructuralist analysis that problematizes the function of critical reasoning in the context of globalization. Drawing on Marxist theory, deconstruction, literary criticism, and subaltern and postcolonial studies, Moreiras questions the specificity of Latin Americanist reflection and whether regionalistic knowledge may be an effective tool for the critique of contemporary reason. In contrast to the texts discussed thus far, *The Exhaustion of Difference* stands out as the most conceptually sophisticated project of theoretical reformulation.

Recent scholarship on Latin American literary and cultural studies offers a great range of methodological and interpretative frameworks. Each of the books reviewed in this essay provide significant insights into the literary and cultural production of several Latin American intellectuals. The fact that critics continue to publish extensively on the works of Borges and Arguedas attests to their relevance and their contemporaneity. The reconsideration of Monsiváis' *oeuvre* in the context of a postmodern condition, in addition, reveals a certain degree of urgency to recover and to give greater critical recognition to one of Latin America's great literary minds. Many of the studies reviewed here represent, in one way or another, a challenge to established assumptions

on what is literature and culture and shed new light on current events in subalternism, globalization, and cultural studies.

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