

# NARRATIVE, CRITICISM, AND POLITICS: Negotiating Latin American Transition

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*LETTERS TO A YOUNG NOVELIST.* By Mario Vargas Llosa. Translated by Natasha Wimmer. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Pp. 136. \$17.00 cloth.)

*A STORY TELLER: MARIO VARGAS LLOSA BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM.* By Braulio Muñoz. (Oxford and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000. Pp. xi+135. \$56.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

*LATIN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE CONQUEST: REINVENTING THE NEW WORLD.* By Kimberle S. López. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002. Pp. x+260. \$37.50 cloth.)

*NO APOCALYPSE, NO INTEGRATION: MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN LATIN AMERICA.* By Martín Hopenhayn. Translated by Cynthia Margarita Tompkins and Elizabeth Rosa Horan. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001. Pp. xix+160. \$64.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*THE ENDS OF LITERATURE: THE LATIN AMERICAN "BOOM" IN THE NEOLIBERAL MARKETPLACE.* By Brett Levinson. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. Pp. xii+208. \$49.50 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

Much has been said lately about the cultural aspects of Latin America's recent political and economic transitions. The exhaustion of the developmentalist state model, postdictatorship, globalization, neoliberalism; such phenomena have manifested themselves prominently within the field of cultural production, which in turn has shaped the comprehension of transition. Though some may suggest otherwise, literature, an often-privileged form of cultural production, is not isolated from its contemporary context. This fact is perhaps most evident in recent critical discourse, which has been insistently questioning and rethinking literature's relevance and representative legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> The

1. Prominent recent publications that contribute to a broad, critical understanding of the position of literature and literary criticism within Latin America include the following:

literary “Boom” of the 1960s persists as a central reference point for critical reflection, probably because the Boom represented, or appeared to represent, the clearest, most resounding, and regionally uniform response to the question of literature’s pertinence for comprehending Latin America. Understood as the novelistic manifestation of a way to reconcile the contradiction of combining ontology and history, the Boom incorporated much more than the most prominent works of a handful of writers. Its celebrators defined it as the pinnacle of mid-twentieth-century literary production and thought, a phenomenon that explained no less than who Latin Americans were by demonstrating the historical reasons for their identity.<sup>2</sup> It became a grand narrative of its own importance, a narrative not unlike other pretransition stories, such as the developmentalist state and the teleology of national liberation.<sup>3</sup> Like other such narratives, the Boom’s current remnants exist as a fragmentary cluster of unanswered questions, a discursive field that has, paradoxically, shaped the same critical discourse that highlights its tenuous validity. Thus recent scholarship on Latin American narrative, fictional and otherwise, finds itself in the precarious position of reflecting upon the present while recognizing and at times emphasizing the difficulty, or impossibility, of sustaining the paradigms it has inherited.

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Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999); John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999); Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); and Alberto Moreiras, *Tercer espacio: Literatura y duelo en América Latina* (Santiago: Universidad Arcis/LOM ediciones, 1999).

2. The Boom formed part of a broader philosophical trend, namely the quest for Latin American identity, whose validity was bolstered by the works of, among others, Samuel Ramos, Fernando Ortiz, Octavio Paz, and Leopoldo Zea, not to mention the Boom’s immediate predecessors and early cofounders, like Miguel Angel Asturias and Alejo Carpentier. My emphasis on these last two writers owes itself to a work that provides a particularly insightful general perspective on the Boom’s literary context, Gerald Martin’s *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989).

3. Two particularly influential and optimistic contemporary definitions of the Boom were written, not surprisingly, by Boom novelists: Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (México, DF: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio* (Barcelona and Caracas: Seix Barral, 1971). A clear enunciation of the Boom’s political ramifications, in relation to the Cuban Revolution’s importance as a model for emancipation, is Jaime Mejía Duque’s *Narrativa y neocolonización en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Crisis, 1974). An important early criticism of the Boom is Angel Rama’s “El ‘boom’ en perspectiva,” in *Más allá del boom: Literatura y mercado*, edited by David Viñas, et al., 51–110 (México, DF: Marcha Editores, 1981).

The five texts I review in this essay formulate answers to a number of questions passed down from the Boom and its discursive context. What is literature? What makes a good novel? How are fiction, politics, and national identity interrelated? How does Latin America's colonial past continue to inform contemporary efforts to construct regional identity? To what extent is it possible to define collective, socially equitable political narratives in contemporary Latin America? How do literature and literary analysis help develop a rigorous critical position that is capable of challenging neoliberal hegemony?

While only two of these texts, Hopenhayn's and Levinson's, explicitly address Latin American transition, all of them respond, in one way or another, to its effects. Returning to his earlier critical efforts, most notably *Historia de un deicidio*,<sup>4</sup> Vargas Llosa continues to insist upon the autonomy of the literary work and, by extension, criticism. His efforts to establish universal criteria for literary quality speak to his reluctance to engage with contemporary critical debates. Muñoz's portrait of Vargas Llosa favorably contrasts modernist ideals, particularly regarding ethics and sociology, to postmodernism and the contemporary consequences of the market's hegemony. Thus, in the face of transitional uncertainty, Vargas Llosa's and Muñoz's texts exhibit a desire to return to previous paradigms. López's study focuses on a post-Boom genre, the new historical novel, in order to investigate how contemporary novelists rewrite the colonial period. Her work is significantly informed by recent postcolonial theoretical discourse and a healthy dose of skepticism vis-à-vis the viability of constructing an autonomous Latin American identity. Hopenhayn's anthology assembles a constellation of reference points for negotiating what remains of previous paradigms. Hopenhayn productively engages the sociopolitical ramifications of transition by bringing together a sophisticated, nuanced, and well-informed series of previously published essays. Levinson's text challenges the ontological ground of the term *transition*. His unwavering critique of identity and of the fetishization of literature opens up a productive space from which to rethink contemporary Latin American literature and literary discourse. Because it thoroughly questions such key terms, Levinson's book refuses to offer a positive critique of the present. Though its profoundly negative stance sometimes appears to lead to an impasse, the book's particular strength may very well be its reluctance to fuel false hopes.

#### THE NOVEL AND AUTONOMY: MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *LETTERS TO A YOUNG NOVELIST*

Natasha Wimmer's outstanding translation of Vargas Llosa's *Cartas a un joven novelista* introduces to an English-speaking readership a

4. *Op. cit.*

concise reprisal of many of the writer's ideas about what defines a good novel.<sup>5</sup> Several concepts from Vargas Llosa's mammoth *Historia de un deicidio* reappear here in condensed form, such as the notion that a writer of fiction rebels against reality (21), that history determines his or her thematic choices while manipulating form is where the author exercises freedom (17), and that a successful literary work appears to replace reality, seducing its readers into believing that it is a discrete entity, "freed from *real life*" (27, italics in the original). Aside from presenting abbreviated discussions of ideas that have played a central role in Vargas Llosa's philosophy of the novel since the Boom, *Letters* contains several clearly written and detailed chapters about novelistic structure and technique. For this reason, the essay could be a valuable teaching tool, especially for courses that introduce students to literary analysis.

Although compelling and pedagogically useful, the essay advances a position on literature and criticism that ultimately mystifies the relationship between a text and its context. This aspect of *Letters* emerges most clearly in its discussion of form, which provides the basis for Vargas Llosa's aesthetic judgments. Briefly, he argues that a good novel conceals the construction of its form whereas a bad novel exposes, either deliberately or unintentionally, its scaffolding (31–35). While Vargas Llosa acknowledges the necessarily illusory character of a novel's autonomy, he insists that a good novelist must sustain this illusion, setting in motion a machine that appears to efface the reality it is meant to represent and that appears to live on its own. Vargas Llosa's concern for the good novel's ostensibly organic nature is especially evident in the negative sense, when he describes what happens when analysis attempts to expose artifice. His antianalytical perspective is particularly pronounced on this point: "To isolate theme, style, order, points of view, et cetera, in other words, to perform a vivisection, is always, even in the best of cases, a form of murder. And a corpse is a pallid and misleading stand-in for a living, breathing, thinking entity not in the grip of rigor mortis or helpless against the onset of decay" (131). In positive terms, Vargas Llosa describes a good novel's autonomous coherence as a force resistant to criticism. This protection from analysis is especially important because it supports Vargas Llosa's view that literature's aesthetic value is ultimately ineffable:

A successful fiction or poem will always contain an element or a dimension that rational critical analysis isn't quite able to encompass. This is because criticism is a labor of reason and intelligence, and in literary creation other factors, sometimes crucial to the work—intuition, sensitivity, divination, and even chance—intervene and escape the very finest nets of literary criticism. (132)

5. Mario Vargas Llosa, *Cartas a un joven novelista* (Barcelona: Ariel/Planeta, 1997).

*Letters* defends an understanding of fiction that defines a good novel as a totality whose sum is mysteriously greater than its recognizable parts, escaping rational human perception. It is a mechanism whose components work together to create an essence that “emanates” from their masterful juxtaposition (121–22).

Vargas Llosa’s approach to aesthetics rejoices in the failure of understanding and in the futility of critics whose nets cannot establish a grid capable of explaining a successful novel’s magical qualities. While completely exposing a text’s origins and debunking its aesthetic effects in the name of a superior critical perspective is a likewise dubious goal, Vargas Llosa’s insistence upon valuing a work’s autonomy hinders critical efforts to connect a work of fiction to the historical context that produced it. Such efforts often teach the important lessons to be learned from a literary text’s representative limitations, as opposed to its illusory and deceptive self-sustaining totality.<sup>6</sup>

#### A CONTEXT FOR VARGAS LLOSA: BRAULIO MUÑOZ’S *A STORYTELLER*

Speaking to Vargas Llosa’s continuing prominence, Muñoz’s essay seeks to explain the connections between the Boom novelist’s sociopolitical and literary discourses. Foregrounding the national, Muñoz identifies what he considers to be several defining aspects of Vargas Llosa’s relationship to Peru: the social conflicts that divided his family and marked him from childhood (87–89); his report on the incident at Uchuraccay (29); further perspectives on Peru’s indigenous populations that emerge from Vargas Llosa’s analysis of José María Arguedas and his work (95–102); Vargas Llosa’s bid for the Peruvian presidency in 1990 (63–69); and his subsequent move to Spain (74–75). Relating these biographical factors to Vargas Llosa’s fiction, Muñoz centers his analysis around psychosocial conflict. For example, he begins his essay by placing Vargas Llosa within the category of, “Mestizo Man: an embattled being who embodies the fundamental contradictions of our times” (x). Then Muñoz proceeds to outline and discuss the events and contradictions that have shaped Vargas Llosa and his career.

One of Muñoz’s most significant lines of thought acknowledges contemporary neoliberal hegemony and emphasizes how literature’s aesthetic value, so important for Vargas Llosa, clashes with its market value.

6. Levinson rejects the desire for totality that Vargas Llosa expresses. See below. Two significant contributions to comprehending a literary work’s representative limitations and what they reveal about the context of its production are Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Pierre Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London and New York: Routledge, 1978).

Muñoz argues persuasively that Vargas Llosa, in what appears at first glance to be a contradiction, has embraced the market. He points out, for example, how Vargas Llosa became a model of the professional writer (14–15). In addition, he argues that Vargas Llosa understands the market as the ultimate western value and its hegemony as evidence of western superiority (30). For his part, Muñoz cautions against such a celebration, warning that “moral systems around the world are being eroded by the power of the Market as a giant calculus” (35).<sup>7</sup>

Muñoz’s observations on Vargas Llosa’s relationship to the market help him contextualize the novelist’s life and work within a broader discussion of Peruvian and Latin American identity. As his text’s full title makes clear, Muñoz frames this analytical operation by relying upon the long-standing dichotomy of civilization and barbarism. His use of this paradigm assumes and sustains its validity, often blurring the line between his take on Vargas Llosa—whom he accurately defines as someone who “wishes us to acknowledge that he belongs squarely in the Western tradition” (ix)—and his own position. Vargas Llosa, according to Muñoz, incorporates the market into his notion of the western tradition. Muñoz wants his readers to identify him, in contrast to Vargas Llosa, as someone who sustains an earlier tradition of western modernity. This tradition embodies “civilization.” Evidence of Muñoz’s motivations is how he contrasts the modernist tradition (Muñoz refers often to Kant, Marx, and Durkheim, for example) to contemporary “postmodernism,” a term whose notoriously ambiguous meaning is not clarified here,<sup>8</sup> and whose alleged pervasiveness Muñoz relates to market hegemony (22–23).

Muñoz’s use of the civilization/barbarism paradigm clarifies very little, and at times it slips into dangerous stereotypes. It does not appear that he is being ironic or indirectly adopting Vargas Llosa’s perspective when, for example, Muñoz calls Latin America one of the “not-quite-mature areas of the world” (26), or when he asserts that the end of the millennium is “a time when the impertinent Many are turning politics into a mundane, murky, carnivalesque affair” (65), and that Peru is “backward” and “barbarous” (67). Thus Muñoz’s essay tends to reproduce one of the most troubling aspects of the western tradition as it is still commonly sustained: its adherents define and equate terms

7. Levinson develops a similar argument, but from a very different perspective (30). He does not share Muñoz’s optimism regarding modernity’s continuing influence as a counterweight to the market’s hegemony. See below.

8. Muñoz often defines postmodernism parenthetically, without explaining precisely what he means, like when he contends that Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, as “postmodern theorists,” responded positively to Lukacs’s request that critics exhibit “‘virile maturity’” (11); or when he condemns the “gaping nihilism postmodernism fosters” (29).

like *civilized* and *western* by dismissing and excluding populations that allegedly lie beyond modernity's purview. Furthermore, an acritical appeal to "the west" tends to deny this act of exclusion, as if the western tradition could be identified unquestionably as existing prior to its originary violence.<sup>9</sup>

THE COLONIAL CONTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: KIMBERLE S. LÓPEZ'S  
*LATIN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE CONQUEST*

López's study focuses on the dialectical relationship between the west and its others by analyzing a number of contemporary fictional representations of Latin America's colonial period that belong to the genre known as the new historical novel.<sup>10</sup> As López explains, novels that have been labeled as such typically enact a critical rereading of historical events, questioning "the notion of historical truth by employing multiple perspectives on events" (3). Reminding her readers that the years surrounding the quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage fostered profound cultural and historical reflection among Latin Americans and Spaniards alike, of particular interest to López are texts narrated from colonizers' perspectives. She contends that, "For generations, Latin American writers have been looking for autochthonous cultural roots, while often neglecting to critically examine their European cultural ancestry" (13). By focusing on the European components of Latin America's cultural traditions in her close readings of several recently published novels, López's book makes an innovative contribution to the field of scholarship on contemporary Latin American fiction.

Emphasizing the heterogeneity of the Spanish population, López analyzes five novels whose colonial-era protagonists and narrators are influenced by processes of identification constructed around social, ethnic, religious, and sexual differences: the young cabin boy in Juan José Saer's *El entenado* (1983); the old Christian and the *converso* who appear in both of Homero Aridjis's pair of conquest novels titled *1492: Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (1985) and *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* (1988); those condemned by Spanish authorities as "sodomites" in Herminio Martínez's *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* (1990); and the transculturated, fictionalized Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in Abel

9. For two different, extensively developed positions on the allegedly universal western tradition's exclusive origins, see Walter Dignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

10. As López acknowledges, the genre's characteristics are discussed in detail in Seymour Menton's *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

Posse's *El largo atardecer del caminante* (1992). López grounds her analysis by establishing a paradigm she identifies as "the anxiety of identification." She argues that this paradigm helps explain, "how fictionalized colonizers fear losing their cultural identity by identifying too much with the colonized Other" (18). Thus desire also plays a central role in López's investigation. Connecting fictional representation to the colonial context, López refers to the work of Memmi, Fanon, and Bhabha in order to support her position that, "the colonial situation [is] an inherently ambiguous one involving simultaneous impulses of attraction and repulsion felt by the colonizing self toward the colonized Other" (19). López's main argument proposes that "the anxiety of identification" structures the novels she analyzes.

Significantly, López's thorough readings of historical novels stress the important fact that radical heterogeneity characterized the colonial period in Latin America and Spain. Equally important, López's book demonstrates how that heterogeneity continues to influence Latin American society, not least of all by shaping how writers of fiction understand Latin America and its colonial legacies.

While providing an insightful and well-developed framework for understanding cultural conflict, at times López's study impedes a clear comprehension of the colonial period and the contemporary novels that reconstruct it. Difference often appears in López's analysis less as the structural effect of a particular historical context than as the result of an individual decision or character flaw. For example, this distortion occurs in the contrast López establishes between Juan Cabezón and Gonzalo Dávila, characters in Aridjis's novels. Cabezón, a *converso*, is "more sensitive to the indigenous culture," and Dávila, an old Christian, is "so insensitive as to attempt to steal a precious relic from a temple" (79). Though López casts these perspectives vis-à-vis indigenous culture as the results of each character's personal history, and her analysis often carefully associates context and individual perspective, her study risks suggesting that fictional characters set against a colonial backdrop are conscious of their own degrees of cultural sensitivity and transculturation, two discursive anachronisms. For instance, López explains how Cabezón and Dávila adopt different "approaches to indigenous otherness" (79). Her analysis describes a Spanish officer in *El entonado* as "lacking in [a] sense of cultural relativity" (59), and portrays Cabeza de Vaca's character in *El largo atardecer* as someone "in favor of transculturation" (131). When relations to radically different populations are described as resulting from personal strengths and weaknesses, López's analysis provides only a limited account of how specific historical contexts produce particular processes of exclusion, differentiation, and identification.



RECONFIGURING THE POTENTIAL OF THE PRESENT: MARTÍN HOPENHAYN'S *NO APOCALYPSE, NO INTEGRATION*

*No Apocalypse, No Integration* compiles several of Hopenhayn's previously published pieces in a clearly translated and well-organized anthology. Hopenhayn's work advances an insightful and productive outline for understanding contemporary Latin American social conditions, especially in relation to influential discursive traditions that range from utopian thinking to conceptions of the state. The line of thinking with which Hopenhayn most clearly identifies himself posits modernity as an incomplete project, a point of view that he is careful to develop critically.<sup>11</sup> Adopting an "intermediate position" between modernity and the "postmodern perspective," Hopenhayn ultimately characterizes postmodernism as providing important insights on how to, "enrich or recreate postponed challenges within modernity itself" (77–78). In the preface written specifically for the English edition of the anthology, Hopenhayn argues that three crises inhibit Latin America's incorporation into modernity, two of which, "the crisis of utopias, especially the socialist utopia [and] the crisis of state modernization," lead to the third, "concerning the role of the social sciences and intellectuals" (xi). This third crisis emerges as the book's primary focus, as it formulates possible answers to the question of the intellectual's role in comprehending contemporary Latin America. Hopenhayn responds to contemporary crises from an optimistic and critical standpoint whose cautious and ambivalent tone reveals a significant, and prudent, degree of uncertainty regarding the possibility of mapping out clear solutions:

The disenchantment that succeeds perplexity in these crises has two faces: entropy and alchemy. The former paralyzes and undermines the creative imagination. The latter accepts failure as an opportunity for conceiving new forms of utopian invention and libertarian mysticism. The author of the present book looks at the second face, not in order to give answers, but to stir up the embers of the search-fires. (xviii)

Throughout the collection, Hopenhayn enacts this response to the failure of past paradigms by alluding to instances within which the possibility for a positive social transformation makes itself visible, if only briefly.

Like López, Hopenhayn seeks to identify and explain why certain populations are integrated into or excluded from given contexts. Starting

11. For other recent scholarship on Latin American modernity, see Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), and *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, edited by Vivian Schelling (New York: Verso, 2001).

from the fact that currently in Latin America, "there are more impoverished people today than there were a decade ago, and [that] the distribution of income is less equitable than at the beginning of the 80s" (6), Hopenhayn relates integration and exclusion to how different populations necessarily respond differently to globalization. One of Hopenhayn's central observations defines the paradox of global integration; namely, that it leads to social disintegration within Latin American societies (37–38). In turn, Hopenhayn outlines processes of articulation that help conceive of equitable and just modes of integration. Hopenhayn responds to the globalization paradox by first describing its particular and contradictory manifestations: "In contrast to the insecurity of the excluded, those who are integrated [social and economic elites] experience the everyday dimension of life through progressive diversification by way of consumerism and a swift incorporation of the latest technological advantages" (6). Those whom Hopenhayn calls the "disarticulated underclasses of Latin American societies" (9), suffer from the "vertigo of the excluded," produced by "the ceaseless recompositions of the backdrop" (10). This constant change not only alludes to cultural and material instability, but also to the ways in which Latin American intellectuals' general conceptions of the region's history have shifted over the last few decades of transition from more or less clearly defined teleological projects to a moment when the viability of any such project is constantly called into question by social conditions and theoretical reflection alike (71–74).

In his response to this context, Hopenhayn does not shy away from teleological thinking, a fact that emerges clearly when he discusses utopia as a line of reasoning, which he embraces as, "a factual impossibility [that is] absolutely desirable, that serves as an orienting horizon to frame the intelligibility of the real and to make patent the potentially repressed" (151). Significantly, Hopenhayn complicates the notion of utopia by emphasizing the need to avoid determinism by establishing potentially flexible horizons based on critical observation of the present (152). He advances a vision of history and the future that allows for constant revision, which Hopenhayn describes as a function of articulation, a term that does not suggest a fixed teleology, but that instead provides a context where one is able to, "celebrate this orphanhood of comprehensive narratives and to visit, without prejudice, some partial narratives that may not totally convince us, but could pertain to an itinerary whose outcome is clearly uncertain" (45).

Articulation appears often in Hopenhayn's discussion of the state in Latin America. In turn, his thoughts on the state intersect his ideas concerning utopian thinking. Hopenhayn wishes to establish an organizational but malleable, productively responsive horizon for understanding the present. He warns against conceiving the state as the "Great Articulator," its imagined role at the height of what he refers to as the

"Planning State" (99). Indeed, Hopenhayn does support bolstering state legitimacy throughout Latin America, arguing for the need to "go back to the long-standing problems of articulation between the Planning State and civil society, problems that the Planning State . . . hinted at solving" (97). Acknowledging that, like his conception of utopia, "The State model that could turn out to be more functional . . . is still unclear" (115), Hopenhayn insists on salvaging the state as a force capable of aiding in the production of integrating responses to the "external vulnerability" caused by globalization, responses that do not exacerbate the different experiences of globalization that separate the integrated from the excluded (115). The fact that Hopenhayn's analysis hesitates to provide his readers with a clear conception of such a form of articulation reflects the cautious optimism that characterizes this collection of essays. Bringing his recent publications together in one volume for an English-reading audience provides a detailed, carefully constructed panorama of Hopenhayn's thought that succeeds in reconsidering and revitalizing previous paradigms for understanding Latin America.

AN OPEN-ENDED ARTICULATION OF THE PRESENT: BRETT LEVINSON'S *THE ENDS OF LITERATURE*

Levinson is even more wary than Hopenhayn is of returning to previous paradigms or establishing new ones. *The Ends of Literature* develops a much more consistently negative critique of how to respond to Latin American transition. Similar to Hopenhayn, Levinson relies on the term *articulation*. He develops this term as a complex notion that connects his book's diverse array of textual and conceptual analyses, which includes, among other topics, a reading of Cortázar's "Axolotl" (1956);<sup>12</sup> a discussion of justice in post-dictatorship societies; a look at the issue of community in Edward James Olmos's film *American Me* (1991); a critique of postcolonial studies; and a rethinking of testimonial literature through an analysis of Rigoberta Menchú's eponymous text. Central to Levinson's position is a strong critique of transition. Identifying shifts from the literary to the cultural, statism to post-statism, and totality to fragmentation (9), Levinson focuses his attention on the ambiguity of these changes, arguing that the differences between the terms of each shifting pair have begun to "slip away and lose legitimacy" (9). Levinson contrasts the apparently emancipatory qualities of the categories of the cultural, post-statism, and fragmentation to the roles these same categories play in sustaining neoliberal hegemony (8). Coopted by the market, these categories have lost their resistant power, provoking a nostalgia for the

12. Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl," *Ceremonias* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983) 125–30.

categories at the other side of each shift, the literary, statism, and totality. Levinson cautions, however, against affirming the complete bankruptcy of this series of shifts: "What to do, what to write . . . when any effort to make a transition beyond them, to pronounce their conclusion, cannot help but violently (or silently) resurrect and reestablish their ineffective corpses?" (9). Regarding these shifts, Levinson's analysis grounds itself by rethinking the term *literary*.

A radical, well-established, and convincing critique of closure and of limits that define discrete totalities, Levinson's analysis undermines the fetishization of literature that isolates literary works in a separate, privileged sphere, emancipated from the contexts of their production. Levinson's emphasis on relationality keeps his approach to the literary from falling into its own fetishism. In a phrase at first glance similar to Vargas Llosa's contention that good literature is mysteriously hermetic and resistant to criticism, Levinson explains that "the charge of literature [is] the invention of an articulation for the relationality of beings, which no existing semiotics or common sense can supply" (26). The crucial distinction between Vargas Llosa's and Levinson's position is that the latter argues that categories like common sense are akin to constructed systems of semiotics, and that what is deemed rational must be understood as always open to future revision. Thus Levinson avoids reifying literature:

. . . literariness lies not in the object but in the subject. Literature *happens*; it does so when the reader is exposed to the finitude of his own common sense (in a work of literature, often by tropes) and is thereby forced to interpret or phrase the articulation, to add an unfamiliar element to his field of understanding, thus to shift that field: not to know necessarily, but to learn or grow. (27)

Levinson's notion of articulation applies to transition in a similar fashion. When considering the Latin American present, Levinson proposes that it is essential to conceive of ways of incorporating the unfamiliar, that which the future always holds in store, without resurrecting or accepting established paradigms.

Levinson extends the relevance of poetic articulation beyond literature to other fields, including the political: "If the relation of projects, discourses, or disciplines swings on the articulation between them, on a poetics, then literariness is necessary to all such undertakings, from interdisciplinarity to new social movements" (54). Once again he is careful to resist reification stressing that even, and especially, the limits of poetic articulation must be recognized. This acknowledgment organizes Levinson's compelling analysis of Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1981).<sup>13</sup> Focusing on written communication (the letters that structure

13. Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración artificial*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pomaire, 1980).

much of *Respiración*) and the themes of exile, national community, and translation, Levinson emphasizes how communication only exists between beings whose engagement with one another is exterior to and determinant of them. Writing functions in a similar way: "Writing cannot claim or proclaim itself. It disclaims itself as it gives itself over to other times and spaces" (71). This aspect of writing contains its necessarily ambiguous relation to the future, and also explains the relation of articulation to that which is possible but necessarily unknown: "The future of a present articulation, its displacement onto a different spatial and temporal context, belongs to the structure of that articulation. . . . Futurity, in this sense, is not the outside but the temporal limit of writing (and presence)" (71).<sup>14</sup>

Levinson's refusal to posit a potentially knowable future, which is the logical consequence of his insistence upon being's necessary exteriority, is an important component of his critique of transition. Although this position is at times frustrating, appearing to offer no identifiable alternatives to neoliberal hegemony, Levinson persuasively explains the need for his caution. At a moment when Latin America's transition is becoming something else, Levinson argues, the assertion of a positive paradigm risks resurrecting reified paradigms. Reification is the order of business in the allegedly inevitable neoliberal order, which strives to establish a terrifyingly uniform social space, within which every entity is definable and quantifiable by a desired universal form of measurement:

The real impasse, in fact, is not the end of literature but the end of that end, a world in which the boundary written across the One, language as such, is no longer indexed, . . . yielding a universe without bounds, a homogeneity without limits, hence Others. This is a world without the possibility of thought, art, and ethics, indeed of the very opening to the future, inconceivable without a conclusion to the present and of presence, that is possibility itself. (30)

Throughout his study, Levinson returns to warn against the nullifying effects of uniformity and the calculability it enables. In turn, he repeats the urgent need to posit articulation as an opening onto something that escapes measurement and insistently challenges accepted and constructed systems of categorization. By foregrounding articulation, Levinson enunciates a unique and significant means of understanding literature, which in turn enables a critical and productive perspective from which to approach the questions raised by Latin American transition.

14. As Levinson acknowledges, his observations on writing are influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, particularly *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1982).