

Contemporary Latin American Narrative: National and Transnational Origins and Destinations

Katie Brown (University of Exeter) and Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela (King's College London)

This collection considers the definitions and boundaries of the 'Latin American', exploring the political and aesthetic possibilities of narrating Latin American reality from within and outside the continent, for multiple readerships, in both Spanish and English. In *New Approaches to Latin American Studies* (2017), the editor Juan Poblete outlines some of the principal directions the field has taken since the 1980s and thinks about these radical transformations in terms of 'turns' in disciplinary and interdisciplinary spaces. This special edition brings together recent research on Latin American literature that responds to the tremendous changes Poblete describes in relation to the scales, scope and assumptions of the field. The interest in studying contemporary narrative from the region is strong. In the last decade, specialised volumes on contemporary Latin American narrative have attempted to describe the broad cultural and historical processes that have shaped the writing we call 'Latin American' or 'Spanish American' post-1980s. *New Trends in Contemporary Latin American Narrative: Post-National Literatures and the Canon* (Robbins and González 2014) is a synthetic account that identifies key aspects of contemporary life in Latin America that shape the way cultural producers relate to their social formation and their national spaces. *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolaño and After* (Corral, De Castro and Birns 2013) is a more encyclopaedic endeavour, offering introductions to sixty contemporary authors from all regions of the Spanish-speaking Americas but also delineating 'trends', from McOndo to Mexican "crack" and from metafiction to dirty realism. Cecily Raynor's recent monograph, *Latin American Literature at the Millennium* (2021), like this special issue, explores a selection of contemporary novels with a focus on the mediation between the local and the global. This

special edition similarly engages with the preoccupations around methodology and subject definition present in these studies in relation to previously understudied texts.

The narratives we examine in this special edition were published between 2005 and 2017: Santiago Gamboa's *El síndrome de Ulises* (2005), Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* (2007), Carlos Arcos's *Memorias de Andrés Chilibringa* (2013), Valeria Luiselli's *La historia de mis dientes* (2013) and its 2015 translation *The Story of My Teeth*, and Lola Larra and Vicente Reinamontes's hybrid novel *Al sur de la Alameda: diario de una toma* (2014) and subsequent fanzine *Apuntes para una historia de las movilizaciones estudiantiles* (2017). The volume provides an analysis of this contemporary moment in Latin American narrative and offers a critical tool for researchers working either on the specific authors who are the subjects of the essays or on other authors who can be plotted on the 'map' of general trends identified by the essays and this introduction.

The authors examined by the essays are representative of the field of Latin American narrative production in informative and revealing ways. Authors discussed in this volume have been published and translated by enormous global publishers (Penguin Random House, in shape of Alfaguara, Planeta and Harper Collins) and two have been singled out by the international Hay Festival as talent to watch from Latin America (Alarcón and Luiselli). The essays in the volume respond to this common context of publication and marketing and the questions it raises about the production of literary specificity for a global audience, about language (the publishing houses often simultaneously translate the works into various languages) and about authenticity. Transnationalism is then both a key theme and the context of these narratives.

In this special edition, we use the term ‘transnationalism’ to think about how the nation state is displaced as the origin (and subject) of literary production. Transnationalism allows us to identify movement in a way that contrasts with the limits to movement implied by the alternative label of ‘post-national’. And it is this mobility (between the city, the local, the regional, the national and the global, and all kinds of combinations and interrogations of these scales) that is a marked characteristic of the works examined here. In one sense, our findings are similar to those of the editors of the anthologies cited previously – the narratives we examine share a conscience that the experiences they shape in fiction take place in a horizon that is, in a significant sense, global. We agree with Aníbal González’s observation that:

Aún cuando estos autores escriben acerca de un ambiente latinoamericano reconocible—ciudades como México, DF, o Santiago de Chile, por ejemplo—les preocupan menos las cuestiones de la identidad nacional o del “color local” que el reto de representar situaciones humanas apasionantes con las cuales puedan relacionarse los lectores ajenos al ámbito latinoamericano e incluso ajenos a la lengua castellana. (González 2012: 52)

[Even when these authors write about a recognisable Latin American environment – cities such as Mexico City or Santiago de Chile, for example – they are less interested in questions of national identity or “local colour” than in the challenge of representing gripping human situations with which readers foreign to Latin America and even to the Spanish language can relate.]

Nevertheless, our contributors simultaneously discover a serious engagement with (rather than a rejection or a dismissal of) the nation as an idea. The context of resurgent populist and

nationalist discourse globally and the continued and diversified presence of global capital flows appears to prompt a return to thinking about how the nation both defines and is used to define populations and identities. The seasoned indigenous Ecuadorian travellers in Carlos Arcos's novel may live a transnational reality (dressed in Reeboks and selling their CDs of Andean pan pipe music around the world) but they are also required to conform to certain stereotypes by their appreciative audiences in the U.S.A. This abstraction – an old conjuring trick of the nation to produce a coherent identity – is exposed and confirmed in Arcos's novel. In Luiselli's work the relativity of the national is similarly exposed, this time through a self-conscious maintaining of the local in the face of the global. So, representations of place (at the micro level of the neighbourhood, for example) that may only resonate fully with a very specific local and not even national audience are maintained. Luiselli offers readers a tour of the marginal neighbourhood of Ecatepec, following in protagonist Highway's footsteps – and this very 'tour' reflects the questions (which inform the entire novel) about how value in terms of identity is created. Daniel Alarcón's novel is in one sense a set piece about a very 'Peruvian' problem, the internal armed conflict of the 1980s and 90s. The historic marginalisation of indigenous people and the context of inequality it gives rise to is offered by the novel as an explanation for why the conflict ignited. In Alarcón, the racial specificity is elided, and the focus placed on the economic and social inequalities and tensions which lead to the fragmentation of the unnamed nation in the novel and to eventual conflict in order to enable parallels with other regions of the world which are deliberately invoked (Palestine, Bosnia etc.). The effects of this elision and translation are manifold, depending on the diverse readerships imagined for the book.

These contemporary writers, appear to distance themselves from two specific political and social issues that have been at the heart of 'nation building' novels: race and gender. In the

ideal of transnational narrative, novels are now embedded in other spaces of production, distribution, and consumption. But the absence of race and gender as explicit themes and subjects is curious because they are subjects that are at the centre of global debates and narratives too. Perhaps the narratives we examine mark a moment in the arc of a particular narrative production. Carlos Arcos's novel is the only text examined in the volume that clearly addresses the racial dynamics of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century nation-building novel from which the protagonist gets his name. These dynamics are replayed and inverted in a self-conscious manner with Arcos turning upside down the usual solution to the problems of heterogeneity for national coherence offered in classic 'nation building' novels (inter-racial marriage) by having the indigenous male protagonist have a sexual relationship with the elite white woman. But it's not the case that transnationalism is being conflated with progress in some simplistic way. These novels do not propose post-racial or post-gender realities. Arcos's self-consciousness is key here, the narrator consistently reminding us that he is yet another 'mishu' (white man) writing the experience of a racially other man (the indigenous Chiliquinga). Similarly, Gamboa's protagonist uses sexual relationships with various women symbolically to assert his belonging in a new country. The privileged position of their narrators (and attempts to challenge this position or diversify it) is a concern for all the texts included, but the examination and profound unease around inequality and difference most commonly translates into searching examinations of social class rather than of gender or race in the novels we have gathered. This may be something to do with the self-conscious representation of the authors' own class filiations and certainly connects with a much longer tradition of examining the production of the literary in relation to the historically asymmetrical economic and social conditions in Latin America.

Central to these considerations is the readership of the novels. What we identify is how forging a readership may in fact involve forming plural readerships - multiple spaces in which these novels are understood, once again putting into play all the relationships of scale we have outlined earlier. In the hybrid *Al sur de la Alameda: Diario de una toma* and its afterlives as a digital project, this multiplicity is most obvious, reaching out to readers across generations and geographies in a pedagogical endeavour. Similarly, in Luiselli and Alarcón, the play of translation and self-translation might be understood to perform a similar function. What is important to bear in mind is that this is not freeform play; there is a craft and often a political intention to the shaping of readerships (for Larra and Reinamontes they want readers to draw connections between the events of 2006 in Chile and the human rights abuses of the dictatorship twenty years before, as well as student protests around the globe both historical and contemporary; while Alarcón is concerned with offering his readers a contestation of the hegemonic interpretation of a civil war).

Since at least 1996 and the McOndo anthology edited by Fuguet and Gómez, contemporary Latin American authors have been challenging the perception of a certain stereotype of Latin American writing created by the demands of global publishers. The McOndo movement is sometimes accused of having produced an alternative stereotype itself however (Trelles Paz 2009), and it is evident that the critical desire to link authors by region and to trace genealogies and canons remains. The authors we examine, which we name as transnational in their own biographies and in the subjects of their work, engage with the issue of genealogy (national, regional and 'world') in many ways, perhaps one of the most explicit being the notion of audience. Luiselli claims to be writing with and for the factory workers, but her work is full of references to both canonical Western literature and up-and-coming Latin American writers.

The novel appears to speak with multiple voices; one playing with an expectation of a certain level of literary knowledge from the readers, another that works without this field of reference, and yet another (this time in the English translation) accommodating the presumed ignorance of Anglophone readers by supplying new material making more explicit the Hispanic literary references. Similarly, one significant strand of Arcos's novel (but crucially it is not the exclusive way to read the book) works with the assumption of an audience literate in the Ecuadorian canon specifically in order to understand the extended references to *Huasipungo* and the contestation of its premises involved in this rewriting of it. Gamboa sets his novel resolutely in the most iconic city for 20th century Western canonical writers – Paris. His diasporic Colombians inherit a fascination with the city that has been the destination of choice for 'modern' Latin American artists. It is from this position in a city known for its literary prestige that Gamboa questions the legitimacy of privileged intellectuals speaking for the subaltern, as well as the tendency to write a version of Latin America appealing to North American and European audiences. In Alarcón, writing in English, the references are more deliberately global. The influence of North American writers of 'popular' fiction (namely hard-boiled detective fiction) is invoked, as well as the work of journalists writing longform 'literary' journalism, which Alarcón reads in translation. The translated aspect and the generic diversity are important, we would argue, demonstrating the range of reference in these fictions in terms of canon and genealogy. Luiselli's work, intervening in the quintessentially Latin American genre of *testimonio* and transforming it through the translation processes, provides a similarly complex point of entry into discussions around the influences at play in these novels and how they relate to literary tradition. In Larra and Reinamontes, the hybrid format of the novel (graphic and textual) takes this even further, involving not only different genres but different media. Their text explicitly discusses questions about ideologies, truth claims and how ideas are disseminated which are key to all the works in this volume.

In short, the collected essays bring together a number of authors who appear to be questioning the burden of tradition, both regional and national (the *novela de tierra* [novel of the land], the Boom, the *testimonio*), as well as the demands of the globalised literary marketplace. Nonetheless, the label 'Latin American' remains strategically important (either in the works themselves, in the ways in which these works are marketed or as read back into them by us as critics).

Works Cited

- Corral, Will H., Juan E. De Castro and Nicholas Birns (eds.) (2013) *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolaño and After* (London: Bloomsbury).
- Fuguet, Alberto and Sergio Gómez (eds.) (1996) *McOndo* (Barcelona: Mondadori).
- González, Aníbal (2012) 'Introducción', *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 46(1), 51-53.
- Poblete, Juan (ed.) (2017) *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power* (New York: Routledge).
- Raynor, Cecily (2021) *Latin American Literature at the Millennium: Local Lives, Global Spaces* (Lewisburg: PA, Bucknell University Press)
- Robbins, Timothy R. and José E. González (2014) *New Trends in Contemporary Latin American Narrative: Post-National Literatures and the Canon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Trelles Paz, Diego (2009) *El futuro no es nuestro* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia).