

"DECENTERING" A DISCIPLINE:  
Recent Trends in Latin American Literary Studies

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- CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE.* By David William Foster. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. Pp. 178. \$29.95 cloth.)
- DO THE AMERICAS HAVE A COMMON LITERATURE?* Edited by Gustavo Pérez Firmat. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990. Pp. 394. \$52.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)
- LA ISLA QUE SE REPITE: EL CARIBE Y LA PERSPECTIVA POSMODERNA.* By Antonio Benítez Rojo. (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1989. Pp. 350. \$35.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.)
- MEGALOPOLIS: CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL SENSIBILITIES.* By Celeste Olalquiaga. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. Pp. 121. \$34.95.)
- RECLAIMING THE AUTHOR: FIGURES AND FICTIONS FROM SPANISH AMERICA.* By Lucille Kerr. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992. Pp. 228. \$34.50.)
- ROOM FOR MANEUVER: READING THE OPPOSITIONAL NARRATIVE.* By Ross Chambers. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Pp. 291. \$40.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

The quotation marks in my title signal my own cognitive dissonance on this subject. The field of Latin American literary studies is without doubt a discipline in the sense of being a branch of knowledge or of teaching. Yet its status as discipline also involves other associations of the term that consider it as a form of controlled behavior or even a system of order based on submission to authority. Disciplines (academic and otherwise) are by their very nature based on relations of power and hierarchical influence. They are unimaginable without their masters and disciples.

If a degree of authoritative centering lies at the heart of the enterprise, therefore, I hesitate to speak of "decentering" as anything but a contingency. Do recent developments within the field provide evidence of a real widening of our discipline's implied structural edifice? Is there in fact a greater, more inclusive space for our intellectual projects? Or have

we merely experienced a change in the location of our headquarters? I ask these questions not out of confidence that I possess the answers but because it would be simplistic to proceed to characterize several intellectual trends and their exemplary texts without acknowledging that contradictions and trade-offs are to be found if sought.

In the last several years, practitioners of Latin American literary studies have increasingly sought to articulate, account for, and defend diversity. As one might expect, the concept of diversity under discussion is itself diverse and eschews categories. Nevertheless, I must attempt to provide a sense of its main directions.

Literary analysts have greatly increased the range of authors that they read and study. Feminists have acted as the primary force behind this new direction,<sup>1</sup> but we now also include more authors representing ethnic minorities<sup>2</sup> as well as those who may be outside the mainstream due to factors such as sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, scholars have taken greater interest in fictional characters who represent these same groups, whether created by authors from the mainstream or the margins.

Latin Americanists have also been less prone lately to confine their studies according to strict geographical boundaries. Focusing on Chilean poets or the Mexican short story has in general given way to fields defined by factors other than nationality. A logical extension of this trend has been the tendency to overcome traditional linguistic barriers. A few more studies have integrated the study of Spanish American and Brazilian texts. In view of the common Iberian heritage of the two literary traditions, there ought to be more such efforts.<sup>4</sup> By taking into account

1. A few of the most recent studies include Ileana Rodríguez, *House/Garden/Nation: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity in Post-Colonial Latin American Literature by Women* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994); Marjorie Agosin, *Las hacedoras: Mujer, imagen, escritura* (Santiago, Chile: Cuarto Propio, 1993); Debra A. Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Susan Quinlan, *The Female Voice in Contemporary Brazilian Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); and *Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women Writers in Search of Themselves*, edited by Lucia Guerra-Cunningham (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1990).

2. See Naomi Lindstrom, *Argentine-Jewish Writers* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989); Saúl Sosnowski, *La orilla inminente: Escritores judíos argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1987); Paul Julian Smith, *Representing the Other: "Race," Text, and Gender in Spanish and Spanish American Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lourdes Martínez-Echazabal, *Para una semiótica de la mulatez* (Madrid: Porrúa, 1990); and Ernesto Avendano de Vargas, *Mestizaje en la literatura iberoamericana a partir de la raíz aborigen* (San Juan, Argentina: Departamento de Historia y Geografía, Universidad Nacional de San Juan, 1989); and Zill Bernd, *Negritude e literatura na América Latina* (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1987).

3. Consider for example, David William Foster, *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Luis Gregorich, *Literatura y homosexualidad y otros ensayos* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1985); and Richard G. Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1990).

4. Recent books include Paul B. Dixon, *Reversible Readings: Ambiguity in Four Modern Latin American Novels* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985); David William Foster,

literature involving themes such as exile, immigration, or assimilation and groups like Caribbeans and Chicanos, moreover, studies have crossed the Iberian boundary and included works in French, English, and other languages as well, while maintaining their essentially Latin American character.<sup>5</sup>

Along with surveying more authors, languages, and cultural groups, the discipline has widened its view of the text to include manifestations not traditionally studied in literature programs. These include elements of popular culture such as film, pulp fiction, soap operas, and the lyrics of popular music<sup>6</sup> as well as documentary and testimonial texts that are usually political in nature.<sup>7</sup>

Comparative studies bridging genres have become more common. Examples are those importing principles of music into the discussion of literature or vice versa, those examining literary texts from the perspective of the plastic arts, those showing the incursion of history into fiction or that of fiction into historical writing, and so forth.<sup>8</sup>

Literary studies in general have undertaken to undo what might be considered the dominant analytical model of the twentieth century, at least in the United States: Anglo-American New Criticism, which emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and became firmly institutionalized in U.S. universities in the 1950s and 1960s. The central tenet of the school was that the

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*Alternative Voices in Contemporary Latin American Narrative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985); Earl E. Fitz and Judith A. Payne, *Ambiguity and Gender in the New Novel of Brazil and Spanish America: A Comparative Assessment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993); Alfred J. MacAdam, *Textual Confrontations: Comparative Readings in Latin American Literature* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Leopoldo Bernucci, *Historia de un malentendido: Un estudio transtextual de La guerra del fin del mundo de Mario Vargas Llosa* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Anselmo F. Amaral, *As origens do gaúcho na temática de Martín Fierro: Ensaio crítico* (Porto Alegre: Martins, 1988); David Arrigucci, Jr., *Enigma e comentário: Ensaio sobre literatura e experiência* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987); and João Alexandre Barbosa, *Transformations of Literary Language in Latin American Literature: From Machado de Assis to the Vanguard* (Austin, Tex.: Abaporu, 1987).

5. Readers may consult Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991); Barbara J. Webb, *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Edouard Glissant* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Marta Ester Sánchez, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

6. These include Charles A. Perrone, *Masters of Contemporary Brazilian Song: MPB, 1965–1985* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); and Claudia Schaefer, *Textured Lives: Women, Art, and Representation in Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992).

7. For a general discussion, see Elzbieta Sklodowska, *Testimonio hispanoamericano: Historia, teoría, poética* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

8. For example, see Octavio Paz, *Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature*, translated by Helen Lane (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 1987); John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*, translated by Ronald Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

literary text should be considered as a self-contained artifact and ought to be examined for its intrinsic structure, independent of its mode of genesis and social context. Literary criticism is now blatantly contextual. Whole disciplines—including postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, and cultural studies—now derive from the premise that literary texts are inevitably social documents that emerge when humans exercise their political natures, usually through attempted or actual domination of one kind or another. Latin American literature, with its elaborately troubled political history, presents a corpus of texts made to order for these kinds of critical orientations.

The motivations underlying this diversification are numerous. The liberal impetus behind affirmative action programs in the United States has found a comfortable intellectual home in the humanities programs in U.S. universities and has been reinforced by the actual demographic pluralism of faculties. Just as important has been the enthronement of literary theory within our ranks. Structuralism, which caught on in literary studies during the 1970s, probably deserves credit for reorienting priorities. Affording precedence to general linguistics over the elaboration of grammars for individual languages meant, on the literary level, attempting to describe a general set of literary rules and procedures, as opposed to interpreting particular texts. Textual evidence became supporting data for theories, and consequently, more diversity in the data made the theory appear more generally applicable. While structuralism has few authentic practitioners in literary studies in the 1990s, its legacy has lingered in terms of the exaltation of theory. Poststructuralism or deconstruction, which had its heyday in the 1980s, has also left a powerful residue relating to the decentering of literary studies. One of the central tenets of this movement called for eliminating textual hierarchies such as those giving privileged status to the traditional literary genres and lesser status to texts produced for bureaucratic, analytical, personal, or commercial ends. All writing was reduced to an equal field. On the practical level, that doctrine aided in the widespread questioning of literary canons and the inclusion of texts within the corpus of scholarly writing that previously would not have been considered appropriate.

Structural factors within the profession have also contributed toward this “decentering.” A degree of idolatry is perhaps endemic to most disciplines. Nowhere, however, is this master-disciple relationship more evident than in the organization of academic conferences for literary studies. The unquestioned practice at such conferences is to schedule, in addition to sundry specialized sessions with three or four panelists addressing small audiences, major sessions where all participants are invited to hear discussions by better-known colleagues. The amount of prestige attached to being selected as one of these plenary speakers cannot be overestimated. Understandably, essays read by these speakers

cannot be of the same kind that would be appropriate for the smaller, specialized sessions. In order to address the interests of a wider audience, plenary speakers usually theorize to a greater degree (theory now being the only real common ground for literary studies in general), or give wide-ranging talks referring to texts from a geographically, temporally, or otherwise diverse corpus. Thus institutional factors have also contributed to the diversifying trend through a structure that gives “star status” to those most inclined to transcend narrowly defined fields of inquiry. What has been said about meetings is reflected in the book trade as well. In a time when production costs are high and authors’ subventions are a matter of course for specialized monographs, authors as well as publishers feel pressure to look toward more theoretical or broadly based endeavors. Paradoxically, such trends can be viewed as decentering or as redefining the discipline’s real center.

These are the significant directions in the discipline as I see them, characterized along with their intellectual, social and institutional underpinnings. It now remains for me to review several samples of recent scholarship that demonstrate these trends.

The most obvious example to be discussed is David William Foster’s *Cultural Diversity in Latin American Literature*. Foster, perhaps the most prolific scholar writing on Latin American literature in the United States, has also been one of the most sensitive to its evolutionary development. A survey of his long list of publications provides a good idea of the shifting priorities within the field over the last several years. *Cultural Diversity* focuses on a handful of authors, not so much to interpret their texts as to view them as case studies of important although inadequately studied directions in the Latin American literary scene.

Foster looks at literary relations between Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin America, ascribing to Brazilians a more open-minded attitude toward the literary achievements of their Spanish American counterparts than vice versa. He notes with irony that in Buenos Aires—that great cultural melting pot, archive of cosmopolitanism, and neighbor of Brazil—it is practically impossible to find books in Portuguese (p. 2). Foster suggests interesting possibilities for thematic and ideological comparisons: between authors such as Julio Cortázar and João Guimarães Rosa, who are very different stylistically but similar in their fascination with enigmas and paradoxes beneath the veneer of appearances; or between Guimarães Rosa and Juan Rulfo, who both cultivate regional rural speech with poetic transformations. Other fields for comparison are found in feminist writing, testimonial and documentary texts that often react to dictatorial regimes, and gay writing.

Foster examines homosexual literature, surveying the most significant gay and lesbian texts but also viewing Latin American homosexuality from a sociological and theoretical perspective. He discusses cul-

tural and historical factors that have repressed free expression of gay sensibilities and searches for factors that reveal such an esthetic when overt homosexual discourse is not possible. Claiming that the literary texts of high culture have been insensitive to alternative voices, Foster locates authentic gay expression in more popular texts. In particular, he provides interesting discussions of the tango and Mexican pop singer Juan Gabriel.

In his treatment of children's literature, Foster shows how such writing qualifies as an alternative voice because it is effectively tamed by strong conventions of appropriateness. Literature for young people, following the liberal ideology of "consciousness raising . . . in general . . . adheres to something like a principle of reformism: nothing like a reconfiguration of social reality, but a more sensitive recognition of it, and then only in its most benevolent dimensions" (p. 76). Foster acknowledges nevertheless that few of these texts may be considered truly radical or subversive in that they "move beyond the need to provide primary instruction and the confirmation of beneficent social awareness" (p. 77). In this context, Foster examines texts by the Argentine songwriter, poet, and children's narrator María Elena Walsh, showing how she uses figurative language, word play, and ironic self-awareness to challenge many of the hierarchical categories at the heart of patriarchal culture.

Finally, Foster surveys several plays written by Argentine Jews. He discusses them as reflections of general intellectual, cultural, and theatrical trends as well as comments on the problematics of immigration and assimilation among this significant Argentine minority group.

The chief virtues of Foster's *Cultural Diversity*, in my view, are its straightforward exposition of the issues underlying the study and its exposure of new horizons outside the field's traditional canons. As is always the case with Foster, readers will find considerable bibliographic richness, which those inclined to pursue these new directions will no doubt appreciate. The book's blatantly programmatic nature, however, makes it rather predictable and short on analytical subtlety. One occasionally gets the impression that Foster discusses texts with little real literary conviction, not because he finds them that interesting in their own right but merely because they reinforce his diversifying project. In addition, I cannot help but notice a kind of dissonance between form and message. Should a book proposing to account for and even encourage cultural openness be so tightly defined and even categorical in its own structure, with its four neatly conceptualized and compactly argued main essays?

Celeste Olalquiaga's *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* illustrates well the road not taken by Foster. Her domain is also diversity, but the cultural decentering she seeks to account for is reflected in a discourse of rapid and free-ranging referential shifts. The speed with

which she moves among realms including but not limited to semiotic and cultural theory, architecture, advertising, fashion, music, film, and art can be dizzying. But given the reality Olalquiaga describes, this dizzying pace seems poetically appropriate.

The subject of *Megalopolis* is the faddishly current concept of postmodernism. Olalquiaga views contemporary urban reality as the emblem and locus of postmodernist sensitivity in that it combines a profound multiplication of lives and lifestyles with an abiding sense of insufficiency. Postmodernism in her opinion is “profanely ambivalent and ambiguous, rejoicing in consumption and celebrating obsessions, ignoring consistency and avoiding stability, favoring illusions and pleasure . . . , the only possible contemporary answer to a century worn out by the rise and fall of modern ideologies, the pervasion of capitalism, and an unprecedented sense of personal responsibility and individual impotence” (p. xi). Olalquiaga elaborates further on this state of disillusionment:

The fragmentation, intertextuality, and massive commodification of everyday life that began with modernity once had a function that has now been totally lost. Modernization strove to create a better world, but belief in a better world is now exhausted, and only its formal mechanisms remain. In the same way that the ruins of the world’s fairs, which once grandiosely represented this belief, have aged, so too has modernism, leaving only the dusty shells of its dreams behind. In the midst of this obsolescence, however, new ways of life emerge, more skeptical of those visions that represent the world as moving in only one direction. I believe this moment of new life emerging from the ruins of decaying dreams has been properly called postmodernism. (P. xx)

Olalquiaga discusses Brasília as a similar emblem of the postmodern condition, with its bold general layout and futuristic buildings now decaying and surrounded by incongruous, impoverished satellite cities.

*Megalopolis* unabashedly favors expressions of popular culture as manifestations of this new “emerging life,” while decrying the “deeply rooted belief that culture, unless it is manifested in one of the liberal arts, is not a proper object of intellectual attention” (p. xii). Olalquiaga’s book belongs in this review of trends in the area of literary studies not as a member of the field per se but as one of a growing number of statements that calls into question the traditional parameters of the field. Nor is *Megalopolis* about Latin American culture in a conventional sense. Just as its author emigrated (leaving her native Chile for the metropolis of New York by way of Caracas), the concept of Latin American culture has emigrated. While various Latino phenomena are discussed in the book, they are taken not as the corpus of study in themselves or even a subculture but as a significant current of urban culture in general.

One of Olalquiaga’s primary tenets in characterizing popular manifestations of postmodernist sensitivity is that of creative reception. Mass audiences do not engage in passive spectatorship or merely absorb mes-

sages as intended by their senders. Rather, they dynamically appropriate the components of such messages for their own ends, practicing a pleasurable and at times perverse recycling of cultural icons. Hence the passions of postmodernism—pastiche, quotation, recycling, and simulation (p. xvii).

Some of the Latino phenomena Olalquiaga discusses in this regard are the *altares*, popular domestic configurations of religious icons and personal memorabilia that have now lately been adopted by different artists as a means for exploring feminist, ethnic, and esthetic concerns. She also elaborates on the general subject of religious kitsch in an intriguing taxonomy. Olalquiaga characterizes as first-degree kitsch icons like plastic saints, emotionally charged reproductions of religious scenes, and cheap, brightly colored rosaries produced and sold for their straightforward devotional value. Reception at this level is either sincerely appreciative or an “aficionado” sensitivity that appreciates the sincerity of the primary consumers (pp. 42–43). She defines second-degree kitsch as deliberately anomalous products such as plastic Virgin Mary water bottles or papal T-shirts and alarm clocks, which are self-conscious about their unrefined taste and intended primarily as “toys, curiosities to be bought to show or give to somebody else” (p. 45). Third-degree kitsch is produced when iconography is recontextualized, hybridized, and in the process “invested with either a new or a foreign set of meanings” (p. 47). The example Olalquiaga cites is Chicano artist Amalia Mesa-Bains’s construction of altares honoring nonreligious figures like Frida Kahlo, Dolores del Río, and her own grandmother. Olalquiaga attributes an ideological component to this kind of art, claiming that such secular borrowing from the religious tradition constitutes an affirmation of feminine independence and a critique of old patriarchal models (p. 49).

The most interesting chapter of *Megalopolis* for Latin Americanists, and perhaps the most illustrative of the idea of creative reception, is the one discussing mutual appropriations between North and Latin Americans. Olalquiaga discusses the Tex-Mex food phenomenon in the United States as the appropriation of a kind of gustatory stereotype, contextualized in restaurants decorated in saturated pink and green. More interesting is her treatment of the pastiche of such stereotypes in popular manifestations in Latin America. “Superbarrio,” a Mexican knockoff of Superman, converted the apolitical image of the original superhero into a real political character who crusaded for more rapid reconstruction of Mexico’s poor neighborhoods after the 1985 earthquake. In Santiago, Chile, young people have adopted the punk dress code, but only on weekends and only for fun, thus draining the style of its revolutionary impulse. One of Rio’s samba schools in 1987 conducted a brilliant postmodern carnivalization of Northern stereotypes of Latin America by imagining Brazil as Tupinícópolis: “Its theme described the Tupi Indian, happy inhabitants of



an unbridled cosmopolis where, amid neon and trash, they ride super-sonic Japanese motorcycles and play rock music, wearing the Tupi look: brightly colored sneakers, phosphorescent feathers, and blenders as head-gear. Its *carros alegóricos* showed a high-tech urban scenario of mirrors, chrome, and plastic made in golden, silver, and electric colors and set up in expressionistic diagonals and spirals" (p. 83). The final *carro alegórico* in the display presented a pile of abandoned refrigerators, cars, and televisions, all painted gold, beneath a large sign reading "Watch all that happiness, it's a smiling city," while the musicians sang "Even trash is a luxury as long as it's real" (p. 84).

*Megalopolis* presents a fascinating ideological reading of contemporary urban culture while offering a fresh take on the place of Latinos within that culture. Olalquiaga's book hovers between a consciousness of fragmentation, disconnectedness, and discomfiture and a sense that the popular sensibility cannot be smothered, like Carlos Drummond de Andrade's well-known flower poking its way up through the asphalt of a decrepit world.

It is no accident that *author* and *authority* are related terms. Traditionally, the author has been conceptualized as the proprietor of textual significance. Grasping the author's intent was a heuristic necessity for accurate interpretation. In this light, Lucille Kerr's *Reclaiming the Author: Figures and Fictions from Spanish America* belongs in a discussion of decentering. Her primary concern in this book is how current Spanish American narrative has explicitly called this centered, authoritarian model of textual significance into question. As has become de rigueur among Latin Americanists studying literature, Kerr gets her theoretical material about the debilitated role of the author from the French. In particular, she discusses Roland Barthes's notion of the "death of the author" and his call for a more "readerly" model of literary significance (pp. 4–7). She also cites Michel Foucault's view that the author is a mere conduit, more a "discursive function" or "ideological product" of society than a creator of original genius (pp. 7–9). But Kerr perceives a special significance in the fact that Spanish American writers do not so much theorize about the more open conception of the text as actually make it part of their fictions. She reports that a colleague in French commented, "The Spanish Americans are actually *doing* what the French are only talking about" (p. vii).

Yet this self-conscious inscription of inquiry about writers within the writing itself creates a curious ambiguity in the end:

One could find in [the texts of several Spanish American fiction writers] a good many experiments that seem either to presuppose or to produce . . . an authorial demise.

Yet, in their own inimitably adventurous fashion, Spanish American narratives also reveal that the question of the author remains, that both old and new questions about the concept and its figures can still be raised. For even in texts

that foster its disappearance or death, the figure of the author may also be reclaimed. Spanish American fiction seems to divert one's gaze from this figure while . . . persistently drawing one's attention to it. (P. 25)

Kerr considers works by mainstream writers (her chapters focus on Julio Cortázar, Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig, José Donoso, and Mario Vargas Llosa), but she explores how in each text the hegemonic status of the author is somehow called into question. For example, Kerr examines how Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* as an example of testimonial narrative would seem to efface the traditional author by giving the word to another. In a different way, however, the author reemerges in order to satisfy "the conventions of testimonial literature [which] virtually dictate that the author must assume additional responsibilities," namely, to make claims about the essential veracity of the account and to justify the extent to which the author has shaped what is told (p. 62). Kerr reads Puig's *Pubis angelical* and his interview statements surrounding it as a repudiation of the controlling voice, which paradoxically cannot cease to claim that control for itself. She observes, "Puig becomes identified as the originator of the words of others, as the proprietor of authorless styles which nonetheless seem to find their perfect author in his writing" (p. 162).

Kerr's other essays develop along similar lines. Most if not all of them seem to have some connection with the classic liar paradox. Just as calling oneself a liar creates a quandary of believability for the listener, readers are bound to consider the source when authors write about the dissolution of the author and to realize that what the writers take away with one hand, they restore with the other.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat's collection of colleagues' essays reveals a well-defined direction and exemplifies the current trend toward international contextualization in Latin American literary studies. Each of the thirteen essays contained in *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* takes a comparative approach along a North-South axis. David Haberly develops a taxonomy of the "New World legend" and examines Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (U.S.), José Alencar's *Iracema* (Brazil), and Justo Sierra's "La fiebre amarilla" (Mexico) as examples. Doris Sommer looks at how Argentine essayist Domingo Faustino Sarmiento made use of material drawn from James Fenimore Cooper, thus adopting a paradoxical strategy of "self-authorized discipleship." Enrico Mario Santí studies the creative and sometimes skewed borrowings arising from Walt Whitman's supposedly pervasive influence on Latin American writers. And René Prieto shows how French theory now serves as a kind of cultural bridge between North and South, revealing its importance for Quebecois writer Nicole Brossard and Cuban novelist Severo Sarduy.

*Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* provides a sort of compendium of currently viable critical approaches. It also affords examples of the best and worst criticism now being produced, in my view. José

Piedras's essay, "Through Blues," represents the latter, indulging rather arrogantly in mystification, reverse ethnic stereotyping, and generally implausible scholarship under the aegis of neo-African awareness. His mystification coalesces around the notion (borrowed from Ishmael Reed and Houston Baker, Jr.) of the x-factor of Afro-American textuality, a special something unique to African sensitivity and logic that may be implied but can find no actual means of expression because of ill-fitting discursive models imposed by the dominant culture. This move bears a marked resemblance to the "unspeakability" topos of classical rhetoric: like that commonplace, it allows speakers to make their listeners imagine something profound or important without actually obliging the speakers to articulate it. Such strategies are allowed for poets, but not normally for scholars. Piedras's stereotyping involves an exaggerated account of the insensitivities of Western civilization, exemplified by his opening statement: "most Westerners think of musical sounds as either distorted variants of complete words or rhythmic patterns of isolated letters—such as the scales arbitrarily labeled with monosyllable 'nonsense' as *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti*, or with alphabetic 'sense' as *a, b, c, d, e, f, g*" (p. 107). This comment ascribes an astounding degree of naiveté to Westerners and ignores the difficult process by which the culture gradually developed a symbolic system of representation for sounds that were always considered preminent. Piedras's implausible scholarship appears, for example, in the ludicrous assertion that the name *el son*, designating the Caribbean popular music form he compares with the blues, has an "ungrammatical aura" and arises from a "linguistic misnomer." He claims that the name means "the they are" or "he they are," and he connects these anomalous constructions with notions of problematic selfhood and marginalization (pp. 113–14). Any notions of ungrammaticality or dubious identity insofar as the name *son* is concerned are purely in the eye of the beholder, given that the word, obviously related to *sonido*, can be found in numerous contexts (including the dictionary) to mean simply *sound* or *tune*. "Through Blues" is filled with such unstudied assertions. Critical scrutiny of peers would normally guard against such excesses. Unfortunately, it appears that when sensitive racial issues are involved, a hands-off policy often prevails. Unless Piedras and others receive the kind of critical evaluation we all need, I fear that claims for an ethnically different logic may come to be regarded as lack of logic altogether.

An example of highly successful scholarship in the Pérez Firmat collection is John Irwin's essay on Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges. Irwin begins his study with a walk along the "well-worn path" of famous readings of Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" (p. 200). Surveying essays by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Barbara Johnson, Irwin points out their critical game of rereading and one-upmanship. He then asserts that Borges employed the same kind of tactic. Irwin argues persuasively that

Borges's three analytic detective stories—"The Garden of Forking Paths," "Death and the Compass," and "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth"—can all be viewed as trumps of rereading, based on Poe's great detective tales. Irwin focuses primarily on "Death and the Compass" and its relationship to "The Purloined Letter." Via a fascinating excursion into cabalistic lore, Irwin shows that an interplay between mystically significant quantities—three and four—lies at the heart of both stories, formally as well as thematically. Then Irwin returns to the famous triad of Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson and turns it into a quartet by claiming for Borges an originating place in the game of superseding rereadings. Irwin's essay glows with intelligence as it breaks new ground in interdisciplinary research, demonstrating exemplary lucidity while remaining firmly anchored in the critical analysis of individual texts.

Following Olalquiaga's approach, one might legitimately speak of the "Latinization" of the humanities, for although scholars of Latin American literature have always shown an interest in European and U.S. models, we are seeing more "Northern" natives looking South for exemplary texts. Irwin, for example, reads Borges from the perspective of a professor of English and humanities. Another excursion into Spanish American literature may be found in *Room for Maneuver: Reading the Oppositional in Narrative* by Ross Chambers, a professor of French and Comparative Literature. Chambers claims that his choice of primary texts, drawn from France but also from peripheral areas such as Australia and the Americas, is itself an oppositional gesture "with respect to the cultural hegemony exercised by Europe; . . . attention to Latin America and Québec functions, in the United States, as a reminder that we live not in America, but in las Américas" (p. 5). This book focuses on power relations—those obtaining in life itself, those involved in representing political situations, and those underlying the act of reading. The oppositional as everyday behavior is a response by those usually considered powerless, one intended to aid psychic adaptation to their oppressive circumstances. The newspaper carrier, for example, can make rude customers walk further to fetch their morning papers from inconvenient landings. Chambers points out that such practices "do not really work against prevailing systems but, to the contrary, strengthen them by making them livable" (p. 7). Similarly, oppositional narrative "does not attempt to . . . change the structure of power in which it operates" (p. 11). Rather, it "exploits that structure of power for purposes of its own" (p. 11). This situation may hold for writers operating within repressive circumstances. But it may also apply to the relation between narrator and reader. The narrator holds authority; he or she is a "dictator." The reader agreeing to be a part of that system of power may nevertheless exercise some individual prerogatives within the system. Oppositional narrative is essentially ironic narrative—a class of discourse that in one way or another invites the beholder to

arrive at an independent set of conclusions not explicitly invited by the content of the story. In a sense, the reader rejects the authority of the narrator. But the reader never rejects the system and in a sense can never escape the narrator's authority. Even by adopting an ironic reception, the reader usually assumes the role of a kind of accomplice, merely choosing to live by an alternative set of rules no less determined by the narrator.

Chambers's interesting discussion of Latin American texts focuses primarily on Alejo Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*, Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*, and Miguel Angel Asturias's *El señor Presidente*. In all three, Chambers draws attention to evidence that the protagonists are seduced to some degree by their oppressors, that they exercise their oppositional wiles within closed and inescapable systems. They may appear to subvert the oppressive power structure but often actually end up accomplishing by their seemingly insubordinate behavior the designs of their masters. Chambers repeatedly points out the metaliterary isomorphism involved: what happens on the level of characters—who are sometimes collaborators and sometimes rebels in relation to their oppressors—also happens in the relationship between the narrator and the one who receives the narration.

I have reserved until last my discussion of Antonio Benítez Rojo's *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna*, a highly successful, even exemplary demonstration of many of the trends evident in current criticism. Written by a Cuban, squarely situated within the field of Latin American literary study, and remarkably focused in its thesis, this study nevertheless presents impressive diversity in temporal and national scope and in its theoretical underpinnings and methodology.

Benítez Rojo's subject is the Caribbean, which he correctly identifies as a kind of postmodern microcosm because of its linguistic, political, ethnic, and economic multiplicity. According to Benítez Rojo, the culture of the sugar plantation is the single most important factor for understanding the Caribbean in its various cultural manifestations. This thesis has been used by Gilberto Freire and others to explain Brazilian culture, but it is probably more valid as applied to the Antilles than to Brazil.

Part of the broad applicability of Benítez Rojo's concept comes from a metaphorical acumen. The machine, which pounds away at the heart of the sugar-processing operation, is figuratively expanded to encompass such realities as authoritative governments, whether of the Right or the Left, and the entire colonial enterprise. Although the historical *ingenio* itself may have fallen silent long ago, the cultural products of the machine repeat themselves through space and time. The plantation thus exists as a cultural foundation in its own right (repeating numerous variations of the theme of masters and slaves), but also as the impetus for countercultures, whether based on systems of cattle, tobacco, or black marketing and piracy.

After discussing historical, economic, and ethnic aspects of this thesis, Benítez Rojo demonstrates its relationship to literature of the region. For example, he interprets an oddly “legendary” moment in which Bartolomé de las Casas described a plague of ants as a kind of unconscious allegorical prophecy in which the priest perceived the dominating influence of the sugar plantation and the dire social consequences of slavery. Applying Sigmund Freud’s theory of the uncanny, Benítez Rojo detects signs of the priest’s own guilt complex in the account. As another example, he cites several poems by Nicolás Guillén to characterize the Cuban writer as a protest poet rather than an apologist. Benítez Rojo discusses in particular “Los ríos,” a poem from the collection *El gran zoo*, as figurative discourse equating caged snakes in a zoo with the two oppressed races of the Americas—blacks (metaphorically associated with the Mississippi River) and Native Americans (correspondingly linked with the Amazon). Benítez Rojo equates the zoo, along with its gazing children, with the powerful machine of social institutions that establishes and perpetuates social injustices.

Turning to Fernando Ortiz’s influential book, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, which views sugar and tobacco as powerful emblems of Cuban culture, Benítez Rojo finds that the formal elaboration of this book reflects its content. The concisely written main essay of *Contrapunteo cubano*, adhering to the logic of binary oppositions, seems to imitate the machinelike commercial logic of the sugar plantation. The freewheeling interdisciplinary notes that accompany the essay suggest the airy, spiritual quality of tobacco. Having identified the book’s hybrid, diversified, and relative nature, Benítez Rojo dubs it a proto-postmodern creation.

In comparing the voyage of discovery in novels by Alejo Carpentier (Cuba) and Wilson Harris (Guyana), Benítez Rojo discovers a Caribbean myth in which the privileged desire to unite with the powerless, finding in the process a utopia of authenticity and overcoming the structure of the sugar plantation. Benítez Rojo discusses Fanny Buitrago’s novel *Los pañamanes* (Colombia) as a microcosm for the Caribbean region in its creation of a mythos of its racial origins. Here he emphasizes the image of *el solar*, a patio or yard crowded with people of all races and surrounded by ramshackle houses, as a figure for the Caribbean as a whole. Returning to Carpentier, Benítez Rojo offers a fascinating reading of the presence of syncretic African religion in “Viaje a la semilla.” He identifies a structural syncretism or crossing as well, showing that the text presents two simultaneous progressions of the same basic material, proceeding in opposite directions. Finally, Benítez Rojo relates the novel *La noche oscura del Niño Avilés* by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (Puerto Rico) to an early historical account of the island by Fray Augustín Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra, detecting in both a fascination with rebellion and excess. Benítez Rojo associates these qualities with the Caribbean’s natural sym-

pathy for the “*cimarrón*” or runaway slave and employs Freudian psychology to pinpoint a sensationalistic “libido” characteristic of fictional or historical narratives in general, and Caribbean ones in particular.

This brief review of *La isla que se repite* cannot do justice to Benítez Rojo’s eclecticism. His book represents a potpourri of literary theory, sociology, history, political science, and folklore, as well as interesting critical commentary on music, dance, the plastic arts, and cooking. The book even dabbles in mathematics and chaos theory. Very little of this material is gratuitous. Benítez Rojo has produced a successful example of the new diversity in Latin American literary studies, I feel, because although he defines a broad field of inquiry, he avoids superficiality by dwelling on crucial details. Theoretical and cultural discussions appear consistently in a supporting role. Benítez Rojo gives priority to the illumination of texts, a task he performs in a judicious yet imaginative way. In revealing the richness of the parts, he conveys a sense of the whole. His decentering supports a social program, to be sure, but it goes beyond that agenda to achieve its real strength in the pleasurable enterprise of intelligent reading. Benítez Rojo’s diversity is not so much a well-balanced diet as a feast, an enthusiastic indulgence in the multitudinous combinations of textures, tastes, and aromas that make up Caribbean culture.

Most Latin Americanists would agree that we have experienced a real diversification in the discipline of Latin American literary studies—at least in terms of the availability of works to read, critical perspectives to employ, and contexts to identify. Whether this trend represents an authentic opening of our minds or merely another way to close ranks is perhaps still open to question. The ultimate efficacy of the project will depend on our skills as individual scholars—on the extent to which we are truly open to our own creative impulses, the insights of others, and the meaningful possibilities of the texts we study.