

Conclusion: Time to Play a Different Game

So that was Latin American literature? Perhaps. At the outset of this course, my minimal promise was that we would be engaging with a series of interesting and challenging texts, and our first aim was to figure out strategies to read them well, and expand our horizons through this exploration of new texts, new readings. I am happy enough that we have accomplished this, and you should be, too. You may never in your life read another Mexican, Chilean, Brazilian, or Guatemalan author, but you now have some clues as to how to tackle them if you do. Some of the books we have read have been difficult, but I hope that difficulty will no longer put you off. I am not sure what your initial expectations were for this course or for the texts that we have read; you may want to refresh your memory as to what you wrote down in answer to my question in the opening lecture. But those expectations may well have changed, and I hope that you now expect more of yourself, too. Moreover, you have concepts—play, performance, translation, dialogism, entrapment, affect, and the trace, but also many, many others—that you can put to use in further expanding your horizons in whatever direction you choose. In some ways we have only skimmed surfaces, but we have also learned (for example, in reading Lemebel) to defend superficiality where necessary. What you do with all this is up to you.

1. Patterns of Commonality and Difference

Our second aim was to trace patterns of commonality and difference between the texts that we read. We could think about patterns of either form or content. There have been, for example, a plethora of first-person narrators, of texts presented as memoir or recollection. What are the effects of that narrative style, and how has it been deployed, perhaps to different ends? As for themes, we have read many books about history, violence, politics, fate, family, gender, madness, rationality, the real... But you may have been drawn to other recurring topics, reflecting your own interests and concerns. Resistance? Disease? Technology? Food and drink? Pause the video, and think back. What patterns have you seen? Could you group the texts according to their different approaches or obsessions? What common problems do they identify, what common blindspots do they exhibit? Do they constitute a tradition of any sort? Or is every text we have read truly singular, absolutely distinct? Write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a Negroni Sbagliato, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Negroni Sbagliato

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a boom in cocktail consumption as people cooped up at home not only drank more than usual, citing (as a Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction survey put it) "a lack of regular schedule, boredom and stress" ("25% of Canadians"), but also had the time on their hands to experiment a little with what they were drinking. One such drink that came to the fore was the Negroni, described at one point as "the cocktail of 2021 [. . .] a serious drink for serious times" (Cartner-Morley, "Stir Craze"). Its popularity was amplified by a viral video featuring actor Stanley Tucci making the drink, which circulated in April, 2020. In turn, the Negroni "Sbagliato" came to public attention in late 2022, when actor Emma D'Arcy (again, in a video that went viral) declared it to be their favourite drink. A Negroni Sbagliato is a Negroni that has been "bungled" or "broken," in which in place of the traditional gin, sparkling wine or prosecco has been mixed with the Campari and sweet vermouth that are the drink's other two elements. But it goes to prove that a bungled cocktail can be just as satisfying as the original, and for some the effervescent fizz adds new life to a drink that is sometimes seen as intimidating or overly serious because of its bitterness and high alcohol content. So with literature as with cocktails (and life), go ahead and play with the ingredients: your so-called mistakes may end up more to your taste than the real thing.

One theme that has pervaded almost all these texts from the outset has been time and temporality in all its various manifestations. We began, after all, with a text—Teresa de la Parra's *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*—that presents itself as a memoir, albeit edited and updated for the fashion of a contemporary age. The tale it tells skips back to its narrator's semi-mythic childhood, an apparently golden age interrupted all too soon by the coming of modernity and exile from rustic childhood play to a city education that is all about improvement and getting on. The past, here, helps to constitute what Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga might call a "magic circle," in which different rules apply. De la Parra's story is in part about how the boundaries of that magic circle are breached as time passes—though its bounds were always precarious at best, encircling a sugar plantation whose produce was presumably bound for international export. In the end, all such circles are connected. Similarly, the past contains the seeds of the present, and part of the point of the novel's publication is surely that we might learn from it still. Likewise,

in other stories we have read that feature (in different ways) interrupted pasts—from Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star* to Rita Indiana's *Papi*—there are always threads that connect past to present, and often history seems to catch up with us sooner rather than later. Indeed in some cases, as perhaps for the Buendía family and the village of Macondo in García Márquez's epic, arguably the problem may be that we cannot escape our past, cannot put enough distance between then and now.

Another theme, indeed, might be modernization and its discontents. In very few of the books we have read is modernity an unalloyed good, and it provokes responses that range from nostalgia and grief (in, say, *Mamá Blanca's Memoirs* and *Cartucho*) to a disconcerting sense of uncanny fear and anxiety (in Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome* or Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream*). Putatively modernizing projects are disastrous, if not genocidal, in texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Mario Vargas Llosa can at least laugh at the madness of bureaucratic rationality in *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, though as we have seen we may hesitate to join in with that laughter. In Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*, the liberating potential of the Enlightenment is briefly welcomed, albeit with a recognition of its hypocrisies and failures, but ultimately the promise of progress is cruelly denied. It is perhaps only in Rita Indiana's *Papi* (as well as in the madness of a character such as García Márquez's José Arcadio Buendía) that modernization is ever fully embraced, and even here consumer capitalism devolves into at best a crude cargo cult, at worst a kind of pyramid scheme sustained by faith alone.

Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* may be the most optimistic text we have read, with its querulous multitude of characters waiting for something to happen, waiting for *kairos*—the right time, which will come when nobody expects it. As Marxist theorist Louis Althusser puts it, history in this conception is not so much the foregone conclusion that most theories of modernization and development suggest, and more a matter of circumstance and chance: "the encounter may not take place, just as it may take place. Nothing determines, no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance; it is of the order of a game of dice. 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.' Indeed! A successful encounter, one that is not brief, but lasts, never guarantees that it will continue to last tomorrow rather than come undone" ("The Underground Current" 174). Rather

than complacency about the future, then, many of the texts that we have read advocate learning to appreciate, and take advantage of, fleeting moments of possibility, and preparing ourselves for the certainty that everything will soon change, though we know not when or how. Pedro Lemebel's *My Tender Matador*, for instance, imagines the brief, unlikely encounter between *loca* and activist, a precarious "magic circle" that enables a fleeting, but life-changing, love affair. Here, the gambles the couple take do not quite come off. But looking back at the past (here and in many of the other texts) reminds us that things might have been different, and encourages us to roll the dice again, to replay history in the hopes of a different outcome. Even the most fearsome of dictatorships have their vulnerable side, their moments of panic, the points at which they have to confront the fictiveness of hegemony. From Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths* and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* to *Distant Star*, *Captain Pantoja* to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, these texts mock the pretensions of constituted power, and its ambitions to determine the shape of the future. Is there something specifically "Latin American" about this view of history? There is no doubt that the region offers a privileged (but also traumatically violent) perspective on the traps and false promises of so-called development, on what critic Walter D. Mignolo terms "the darker side of Western modernity." From the very outset of the colonial period, and still in the present, global economic development has depended upon the often rapacious extraction of raw materials from a landscape shaped according to Western desires—to export sugar from the Caribbean, bananas from Colombia, cotton and coffee from Guatemala, soy from Argentina, and so on—in feverish cycles of boom and bust that leave behind little but death and destruction, and ruins of passing splendour. Not that any of these texts buy into the latest utopian project, popularized by Mignolo and others, of some kind of impossible decolonization. After all, they are often keen to explore the possibilities enabled by modern (even modernist) forms of aesthetic and cultural production, not least the institution of literature itself. Writers such as Borges and García Márquez even show that they can teach the Europeans a thing or two when it comes to modernity's rich capacities for contradiction and self-critique. The point is not to deny or roll back the past, but to look instead for spaces or moments where there are some chances for life and freedom, some room to play. Latin America has seen many false dawns—periods in which it seemed change was coming, only for these hopes and

expectations to be cruelly curtailed. Again, Latin American fiction is often drawn to such episodes, to recapture and replay them differently.

None of this quite constitutes a tradition. Not that there are not traditions or lineages criss-crossing the region's literary production, but they neither define nor exhaust it. If, however, there is a characteristic common to much Latin American literature it is perhaps a certain relationship *to* tradition, or to the multiple historical and cultural traditions that claim to circumscribe it: a skepticism or irreverence; an impulse to stop the past, only to set it in motion again; a disposition to see history not as linear, but as a field of potential and still-untapped possibility to which we might still return.

2. *Seeing and Playing Difference*

I suggested at the outset of this course that we should give up in advance on the quest for any single style, theme, or motif that would identify or characterize Latin American literature. The image I proposed instead for what we would be doing was hopscotch—a children's game that can be played almost anywhere, on many different surfaces, from sand to earth, tarmac to linoleum. Out and back, out and back, in the series of readings outlined over the past twelve weeks I tried where possible to invoke the ludic dimension in the texts we have covered, from the games of innocence and irony in *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* to the war games of Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs*, through to the roleplay in *My Tender Matador* and the end of the game in *Fever Dream*. But the point was not simply to jump to the passages where these texts directly (however fleetingly) thematize sport or play, but rather to approach them in the spirit of a game, to take advantage of the play—the "freedom, opportunity, or room for action; scope for activity"—that literature offers, once we realize that there is no one "right" way of reading.

Many of the authors we have read in what has been effectively a survey of the Latin American canon have been sanctified and crowned with either official acclamation—awards and prizes—or popular affection. But we have not been afraid, I hope, to read against the grain, for instance with a figure such as Nobel Prize winner and sometime popular favourite Pablo Neruda, or alternatively to find new ways to read a so-called "tarnished laureate" such as Rigoberta Menchú. To play with something is also to defer judgment, just as to toy with something (a meal, an idea) is to postpone final consumption or decision, to look at it from all sides without necessarily committing to any one

perspective. Critical analysis is neither a popularity contest nor an attempt to somehow one-up the text by means of a stroke of devastating insight. It is simply a matter of taking time with the words on the page, until perhaps they shimmer or move as if of their own accord, to show their fractures and rifts, the cracks through which (as Canadian singer Leonard Cohen puts it) the light gets in.

If anything, it is the mistakes—the mis-steps, the tensions and contradictions—that can be most interesting in any reading. As critic Erin Graff Zivin puts it, “errors, blind spots, and misunderstandings” can “comprise the most potent aspects of literary texts” (*Anarchaeologies* 3). Similarly, misreading is not opposed to reading, but rather “resides at the heart of the act of reading” (78). When we read, we cannot help but “err,” in the sense of deviating, straying, diverging from some set path. After all, as Borges suggests in “Pierre Menard” (*Labyrinths* 36-44), even the most faithful recreation and repetition of a text will always introduce differences, to greater or lesser effect. And it is in these deviations or swerves that novelty and creation arise. Critic Harold Bloom claims that the history of poetic influence “always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (*The Anxiety of Influence* 30). We might equally point out that the good player of a game often surprises his or her opponent (and sometimes even surprises themselves) with an unpredictable swerve or spin, a deviation however so slight that opens up space on the board or court. This is far from saying that “anything goes”: not all divergences or errors are equally interesting or productive; some misreadings are “strong” (in Bloom’s terms), and others are less so. But the test of a reading is less its fidelity to the past—whether that be whatever we imagine the author may have intended, or some recreation of historical context—than the extent to which it charts a new course for the future.

British novelist Stewart Home’s *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* is, among other things, about the fanatical reader of a book that is (also) called *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess*, whose author claims to have taken the dead body of Princess Diana around a circuit of the prehistoric ruined sites of Aberdeenshire. In homage to this bizarre account, the protagonists of Home’s book haul a ventriloquist’s dummy named Dudley to the same neolithic barrows, stone circles, and iron-age hill forts of northeastern Scotland. That is one way to respond to a text! Home’s novel ends with an ellipsis, to suggest among other things that this “reading” far from exhausts its source: “Living out the death of

these fantasies in blasted and blistered night, we were consumed by the turning of a page. . ." (168). I like to think of the field of Latin American literary criticism as something of a dead princess: a body of work once much more animate (and animated) than it is today, but which we cannot simply abandon to its fate. Rather, as with the ventriloquist's dummy, we can give it new life and make it speak in new ways, as we take it on a tour of unfamiliar sites, other pasts, and other potential futures. Ruins make great playgrounds.

On an artificial island in what was once the great Lake Xochimilco, not far from the former seat of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, now a suburb of Mexico City, is a similarly grotesque sight, that comes with its own rather gruesome (and perhaps doubtful) narrative: a colony of old, once discarded, dolls, many missing eyes or limbs or otherwise mis-shapen and damaged, hanging from trees and tumbledown buildings. The modern legend of this "Island of the Dolls" involves a drowned girl and a somewhat obsessed caretaker of the island, Julián Santana Barrera, who over the course of fifty years living there strung up these dolls to placate the girl's spirit, which in turn allegedly inhabits the deformed figurines (Froelich, "Real Story Behind 'Haunted' Island"). The place is now a tourist attraction and also, Mexican magazine *Reforma* tells us, inspiration to the likes of Hollywood director Tim Burton (Tinajero, "Inspira a Tim Burton"). Play and performance, spectacle and compulsion, superstition and canny marketing mix in this drive to reshape the physical environment by recycling and re-using objects otherwise seen as no longer fit for use. Moreover, we see here that playfulness and the grotesque can (and often do) go hand in hand, as it is hard to judge the level of seriousness with which we should take the installation: is the joke on us, the bemused tourist, prone to seek out the exotic and the macabre (the real marvellous) in Latin American folk culture?

Lake Xochimilco is also the last remaining natural habitat for the (critically endangered) salamander, the axolotl. Its name, in fact, comes from the Nahuatl: "*atl* (water) and *xolotl* (doll, toy, mythical personality)" (Levinson, "The Other Origin" 5); it is a water doll, a water toy, or perhaps some kind of supernatural being. Indeed, the axolotl is a creature famous for its prodigious healing abilities, its capacity to regenerate limbs, tail, and even gills and eyes and parts of its brain if they should be damaged and require repair. This is partly because, unusually for amphibians, axolotls do not metamorphose into an "adult" state; they remain effectively larvae, perpetually immature. With lidless eyes and broad, apparently smiling mouth, an axolotl can appear to be staring at us, quietly confident of



Isla de las Muñecas, Xochimilco, Mexico City

something that it knows that we do not. This is the premise of *Hopscotch* author Julio Cortázar's short story, "Axolotl," in which a man comes daily to a Parisian aquarium to stare at these creatures, pressing his face up against the glass of their tank. He is fascinated by the gaze that they return to him: "The eyes of the axolotls spoke to me of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing. [. . .] Perhaps their eyes could see in the dead of night, and for them the day continued indefinitely" (579, 580). He keeps returning until one day he finds himself trapped in the tank, looking outwards. He is now an axolotl, but he can also see himself staring in: "I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew back and I understood. [. . .] Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible" (581). As critic Brett Levinson comments, the narrator's plight is a metaphor both for the anthropological gaze and for the destiny of Latin America, condemned always to be other even to itself: "Cortázar's Latin American, in other words, is an axolotl: a being forced to dwell as a prisoner inside alienating Western structures and discourses [. . .]—structures and discourses that this person must nonetheless use if he or she is to live or speak at all" (11). But the story also clearly plays out the plot of writing or literature, as at its conclusion the narrator/axolotl imagines himself (the narrator/man) to be the potential author of the story that we ourselves are reading: "I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls" (582). Literary fiction may not ultimately tell us much about axolotls—they remain beyond understanding, uncannily seductive and captivating, storehouses or screens for our own projected desires and fantasies—but by imagining ourselves axolotl, larval subjects looking from the outside in or inside out, we may gain new perspective on the strangeness that is genuinely ours.

At its best, then, *literature constructs for us scenarios and spaces in which, at least for a time, other habits and customs are in play, and which thus allow us to see that the rules of the everyday games that we play are as arbitrary as any others.* This is not to say that those rules can simply be changed at will: any game is embedded in an entire infrastructure that penalizes infringement of its codes of behaviour and rewards those who choose to forget, or are oblivious of the fact, that they are playing a game. But who knows? As Borges reminds

us, it may take only the most imperceptible of variations, the smallest of swerves, to transform everything and inaugurate an entirely new field of play.

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Song: "Don't Look Back in Anger" (Oasis)