

Hopscotch: The Rules of the Game

In this course, we will be reading literary texts—mostly novels but also some poetry, short stories, and one *testimonio* or testimonial novel—from Latin America, that were originally written or published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some are by authors you may have heard of: they include some of the most famous names in Latin American literature, among them five Nobel Prize winners (one of whom, however, the Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, won the prize for Peace, rather than Literature). Others are more obscure, but one thing they have in common is that each of these books, one way or another, has been judged noteworthy or influential. That does not mean you will always enjoy them, but they will be worth reading. Each text provides food for thought and analysis, and so helps us meet this course's first and minimal goal: to engage with a series of interesting and challenging texts, devise strategies to read them well, and expand our horizons through this exploration of new texts, new readings. If we achieve nothing else, I will be happy, and you should be, too.

1. *Playing with Context*

A second and more ambitious goal is to seek patterns of commonality and difference between our readings. What, if anything, binds these particular texts together? What concerns do they share? Alternatively, what makes each one different and distinct? Can we see tendencies or changes over time or according to the various (historical, geographical, social) contexts in which they were written?

Some commonalities are given in the choice of set texts. And these choices may be either arbitrary or determined. Why restrict ourselves to the past 120 years, for instance, or why treat these books in more or less chronological order? Well, you have to begin and end somewhere, and twentieth and twenty-first century texts tend to be more accessible: both easier to get hold of, and, at least initially, easier to understand. Reading the books chronologically can help us observe patterns of influence: a writer such as Gabriel García Márquez does not emerge from nowhere, and he had read authors such as Juan Rulfo; similarly, the extraordinary success of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* went on to inspire (and perhaps also intimidate) the writers who followed him. We can, moreover, gain a sense of the relationship between texts and their contexts: for instance, how different

writers responded to an event such as the Mexican Revolution, the dictatorships and dirty wars of the 1970s and 1980s, or to the current environmental crisis.

But we are not doing history here, not even literary history. We are not doing history because there is a difference—and a distance—between literature and life, and the one cannot be reduced to the other. We cannot expect a text simply to reflect or mirror the historical or social moment in which it was produced or that it sets out to depict. No doubt it will reflect something: by reading, say, Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* we can indeed learn about the Haitian Revolution (whose story it tells) as well as about the interests and preoccupations of a writer like Carpentier in mid-twentieth century Cuba. No text can entirely escape history or its social context, not even the fantastic narratives of Jorge Luis Borges, the comic exaggerations of Mario Vargas Llosa's *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, or the horror story that is Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream*. But nor can they be reduced to that context: there are things that a text cannot or will not tell us; there is distortion, elaboration, invention, mystification, fabrication, and much else.

Of course, every text is both more and less than its context: even a journalistic account, a historical analysis, or a book such as Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú* that strives to report on historical reality as faithfully as possible. Inevitably it will fail to do so, to a greater or lesser extent. But the thing about literature (let this be a preliminary definition) is that it draws attention, even inadvertently, to this gap between representation and the real, and takes advantage of what we might call the "play"—movement or slippage; "free action; freedom, opportunity, or room for action; scope for activity" ("play")—that always intervenes between articulated discourse and its conditions of possibility. To focus on this, to try to keep our sights on the limits and lacunae in representation, is more interesting and more honest than either making literature a vehicle of history or claiming that texts can be explained and understood by reference to their locus of enunciation.

We are not doing literary history either because, frankly, that tends to be boring. You can find literary histories elsewhere if you want. Often if not always they consist in more or less idealistic parades of literary movements and "ism"s: Realism follows Romanticism; Postmodernism comes after Modernism; or in Latin America, there is the so-called Boom of the 1960s and 1970s (when, with authors such as García Márquez and Vargas Llosa,

the region's literature came to prominence in the global marketplace) and its precursors and sequelae, the "pre-Boom" and the "post-Boom."



Schoolgirls playing hopscotch in Old Havana, Cuba

All this when literary history is not simply subordinated to history "proper," as an epiphenomenon of developments elsewhere. But it is more interesting to think of literary and other histories as intertwined or loosely braided—again, in "play," in a series of encounters and missed encounters, resonances and influences, determinations and lines of flight. This is less literary history than an investigation into the relationship between literature and history, or rather between literature and a plurality of possible histories that are not necessarily linear, not necessarily fully compatible. Hence we may start with chronology (although not entirely), but by searching for common themes in a range of contexts and geographies, we can make these texts skip and jump as we find unexpected connections or unanticipated dissonances across time and space.

Meanwhile, some of the differences between the texts we are studying are also given in our initial selection. I have sought a rough balance in terms of gender, geography, period, and language: we are reading books written by both men and women, from Mexico to Argentina, Brazil to the Dominican Republic, and from almost every decade in the twentieth century (plus two in the twenty-first). Most were first published in Spanish, but not Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* (written in Brazilian Portuguese), while Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* and Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú* have complicated relationships to national languages, the first with its "Spanglish" hybrid of English and Spanish, the second as a collaboration between an indigenous woman whose first language is Mayan Quiché and a Venezuelan anthropologist based in France.

We are, of course, reading everything (or almost everything; not Braschi) in translation, a hop or skip from the original, which may flatten out differences by casting it all into a common tongue. Variations of accent or regional vocabulary will go mostly unnoticed. Equally, the texts are translated in another sense, in that they are ripped from their original context and read within a common frame. But many of the books also thematize translation and other forms of mediation and dislocation, so we will have occasion to consider its effects and what we are missing (or what has been added) as a result. Still, enough contrasts and particularities remain.

We may ask if these are significant differences (whether there is a real distinction between women's writing and writing by men, for instance, or between literature from different Latin American countries) as we go along. Our selection could have been more diverse—there is only one text from Brazil and one from Central America; the Andes (Bolivia,

highland Peru, and Ecuador) are also perhaps short-changed, while there may be too much Mexico and Chile for some tastes; there is no drama or, more significantly, nothing from the genre of the Latin American essay—but I put it to you that it is a pretty good mix. There are constraints and limits to every game. What we have here is more than enough to play with. It is certainly sufficient for us to explore myriad themes and concerns, issues and preoccupations, across these texts. Among our key concepts will be writing and power, representation and the real, essence and adornment, the politics of literature, and much else, some of which will emerge only as we go along. Other concepts and concerns—violence, gender, resistance, indigeneity, memory, history, anxiety, sexuality, kinship, class, capitalism, the environment—will crop up and disappear, return and resonate, flowing explicitly or implicitly from one text to another.

2. Hopping from Theme to Method

Let us focus on the most obvious principle of selection, the one that enables and constrains everything else: this is a course on "Latin American" literature. This means that all these texts are tied in some way to those parts of the Americas that were colonized by Spain or Portugal, and where either Spanish or Portuguese is the official language or spoken by much of the population. This definition includes not only, say, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, but also parts of the United States (Southern California and South Florida, for instance) as well as Caribbean islands such as Puerto Rico and Cuba. It does not include South American countries such as Suriname or Guyana. Arguably, nor should it include areas such as highland Bolivia or Peru, which are majority indigenous and not "Latin" in any simple sense. We could also complicate what it means for a text to be "tied to" this region: several of the books we are reading were written elsewhere (in France or Spain, for instance), and some are also set elsewhere (from New York to the high Arctic). But for now, let us accept that this is a valid category, and that we can somehow identify a set of texts that qualify as "Latin American literature." The question is whether this classification is arbitrary or significant. Do these texts have anything in common simply thanks to the fact that they share, to a greater or lesser extent, some common cultural or linguistic heritage? Are they different in any coherent way from texts tied to other parts of the world: European literature, Asian literature? What, in short, if anything, is distinctive and different about Latin American literature?

This is also a question for you, here at the starting line, before the whistle has blown. What do you expect of the readings that lie ahead? What associations do you have with the idea of Latin American literature? What do you imagine you will learn from it? There is no right answer here, but it may be useful to set a benchmark, to note your initial assumptions and expectations. You can come back to this at the end of the course, and see how far these expectations were either met or challenged. So pause the video and write down some ideas: I suggest this is the time to start a notebook in which you will document your ongoing thoughts and changing perceptions. What do you anticipate a reading of Latin American literature to offer? While you do that, I'll have a margarita, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Margarita

The margarita is a cocktail that comes in an astonishing profusion of varieties. Usually made with tequila, for a smokier flavour it can be made instead with mezcal. And though it normally features lime juice, there are margaritas made with mango, peach, strawberry, and much else. Its third key ingredient, orange liqueur, can also come in many forms: triple sec, Cointreau, Gran Marnier, Curaçao. . . This last element points to the drink's hybridity, in that while tequila and mezcal are firmly Mexican, triple sec is French and Curaçao comes from the Dutch Caribbean. Moreover, although the drink's many origin stories tend to locate the site of its invention somewhere in Northern Mexico (usually Baja California), at least one tale tells that it arose from a mistake made by an Irish barman (Wondrich, "Tequila Daisy"). Finally, the margarita's associations range from sketchy Mexican cantinas to holiday resorts full of white, middle class, middle-aged, and middlebrow vacationers listening to Jimmy Buffet. As both signifier and substance, it is slippery and changeable, and can never quite be pinned down. But it tastes good.

I am willing to bet that one term that cropped up as you described your expectations for this course was "magic (or magical) realism." This is, after all, apparently Latin America's contribution to world literature: the matter of fact or taken for granted presence of magical or fantastic elements and events in otherwise realist narrative; the miraculous made mundane. A character is followed around by myriad butterflies; another ascends to heaven while folding laundry; a baby is born with the tail of a pig. These three

examples all come from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose extraordinary success not only inspired others both in Latin America and elsewhere, but also established a lens through which all of García Márquez's other work, as well as that of many other Latin American authors, has been seen and understood.

We will come to magic realism when the time is right. But an image—by now a fantasy—of magic realism overdetermines too much public preconception, and even experience, of the region's literature. At one point, I had thought of a course on Latin American literature in which the phrase was never uttered, but in the end that, too, would be to give it too much importance. Suffice it to say that there is much more than magic realism in the texts we will be reading, and that the term probably does not much help us understand even García Márquez, let alone the other authors we are studying.

Moreover, I propose that we give up in advance on the quest for any single style, theme, or motif that would identify or characterize Latin American literature. In other words, we should not be seeking to replace "magic realism" with some more accurate or helpful term. Any replacement would be equally reductionist, equally detrimental to what I called our "first and minimal goal" of reading these texts well. Perhaps even the idea of Latin America is an obstacle. An equivalent course on European authors would not endlessly be trying to determine what is characteristically "European" about (say) Jane Austen, Gunter Grass, or Marcel Proust. I suggest that we assume that there is no such thing as "Latin American literature," or rather that we do not try to lend it any meaningfulness or significance. That project is dead. The "Latin Americanness" of the texts we are reading is merely an arbitrary constraint, no more significant than if we had chosen to read a set of texts by authors whose surnames begin with "D" (why not? Dante, Dickinson, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Donoso, Duras, DeLillo...). It is simply a rule of the game we are playing, and we would be wasting our time by interrogating it or asking "Why?"

The image I propose instead for this course is hopscotch. This is, of course, a children's game, played in streets and playgrounds worldwide, from Glasgow to Barcelona, New York to Lagos, Mexico City to Hong Kong. Apparently the game originated in India up to 3,000 years ago. It was played by the legionnaires of Ancient Rome. The word "scotch-hop" or "scotch-hopper" first appears in English in the seventeenth century, but the game goes by many other names around the world: in Malaysia it is *tengteng*; in France it is

marelle; in Albania, *rrasavi*; in Zimbabwe, *pata*. The rules are simple enough, though with many local variations. All you need are a stick or a piece of chalk to mark a court of squares and numbers in the ground or on a pavement, then a pebble or coin to act as a marker: you throw the marker into this set of etched-out squares in sequence, and hop around the court accordingly, picking the marker up on your return. Out and back, out and back, the game requires precision and agility and is often accompanied by a rhyme to complement the rhythm of the player's hops and steps. A player runs the risk of falling, losing their balance by trying out new forms of perhaps ungainly movement, but a good player makes it look as graceful as dancing.

Hopscotch (*Rayuela*, 1963) is also the title of a novel by the Argentine author, Julio Cortázar. It has 155 numbered chapters, and in a preliminary "Table of Instructions" the reader is told they may begin the book either at chapter one, and read in linear fashion before finishing at chapter 56, "at the end of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words *The End*," or they could begin at chapter 73—i.e. after "the end"—and follow a suggested sequence in which, for instance, chapter three follows chapter 116, chapter 92 follows chapter 144, and so on. Taking the second option, skipping forwards and back, between a section designated "From the Other Side," set in Paris, a section "From this Side," set in Buenos Aires, as well as the "expendable chapters" labelled "From Diverse Sides," the reader has the chance to experience the book differently, or to uncover another book among the "many books" that *Hopscotch* contains.

The third and final goal of this course, then, is to think about the many things we can do with (Latin American, but not only Latin American) literature, as well as what that literature does to us. *What is the "play" —again, 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* (though there still may of course be wrong ways)? How to take literature both more seriously, as something other than mere reflection or degraded copy of the "real," and at the same time more playfully, with less anxiety about always getting the "right" meaning, the "correct" interpretation. For meaning is never finite and fixed, and in any case there may well be other, sometimes more interesting, things to do with texts beyond simply interpreting them. This is all a matter of method more than theme: asking less what (Latin American or any other) literature is, and more how we should read it. Your response to this third challenge will largely be up to you: I will not prescribe how you

should be approaching literary texts. Which is not to say that anything goes: there are no games without rules. The question is what to do within the limits that those rules impose, unafraid to fall, prepared always to get up and play again.

works cited

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Image:

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Song: "Games without Frontiers" (Peter Gabriel)