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Latin American Literature in Translation

Time to Play a Different Game

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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So that was Latin American literature?

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.

Your initial expectations may well have changed, and I hope that you now expect more of yourself, too.

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.

PATTERNS OF COMMONALITY AND DIFFERENCE

Our second aim was to trace patterns of commonality and difference between the texts that we read.

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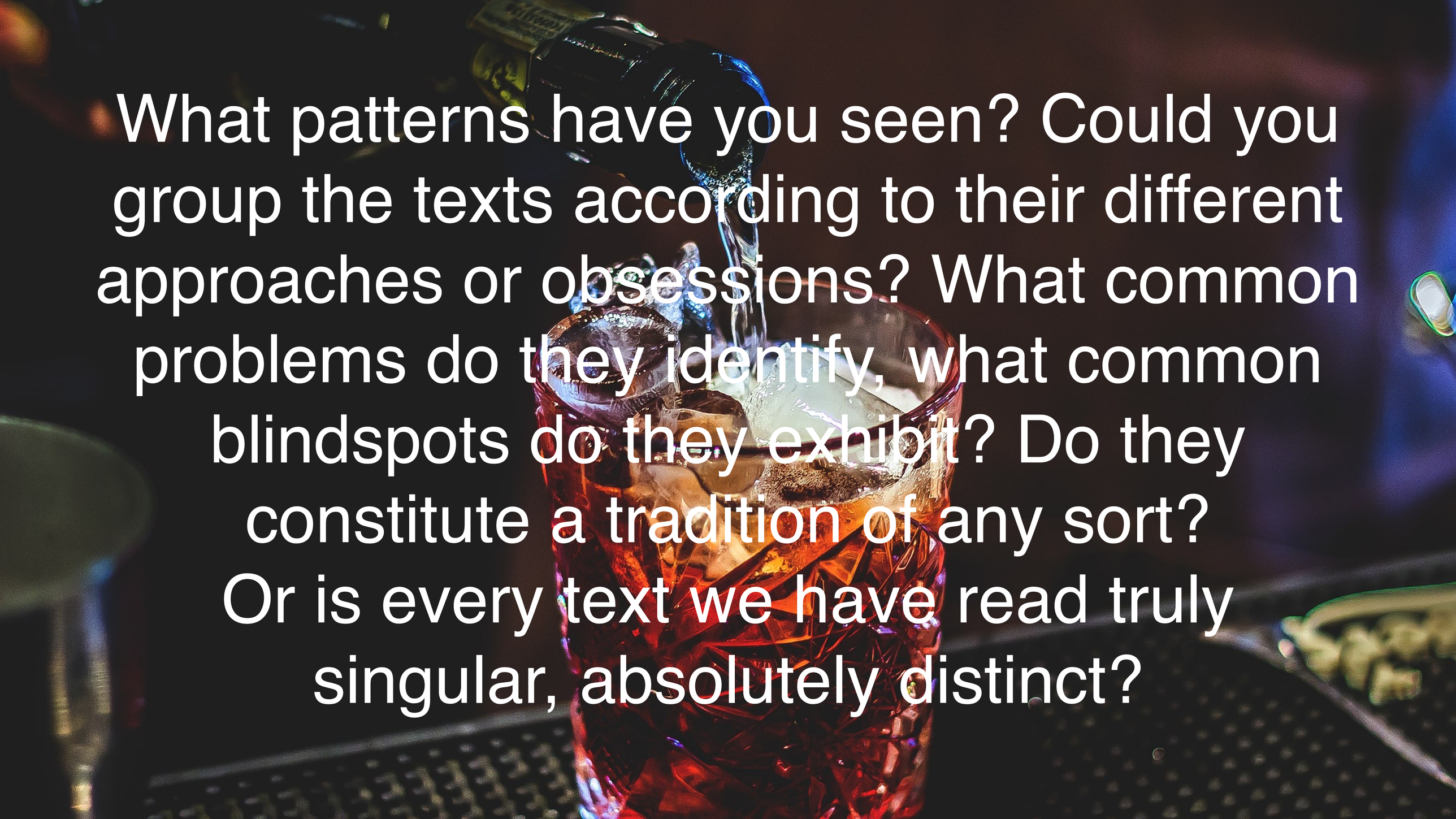
We could think about patterns of either form or content.

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?



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One theme that has pervaded almost all these texts from the outset has been time and temporality in all its various manifestations.

The past, in *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*, helps to constitute what 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. In the end, all such circles are connected.

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In some cases, the problem may be that we cannot escape our past, cannot put enough distance between then and now.

Another theme 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 to a disconcerting sense of uncanny fear and anxiety.

It is perhaps only in Rita Indiana's *Papi* 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.

“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.”
(Louis Althusser)

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.

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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?

The region offers a privileged (but also traumatically violent) perspective on the traps and false promises of so-called development, on “the darker side of Western modernity” (Walter Mignolo).

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 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, 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.

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.

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Latin American fiction is often drawn to such episodes, to recapture and replay them differently.

None of this quite constitutes a tradition.

If there is a characteristic common to much Latin American literature it is perhaps 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.

SEEING AND PLAYING DIFFERENCE

I suggested 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.

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.

The point was not simply to jump to the passages where these texts directly thematize sport or play, but to approach them in the spirit of a game, to take advantage of the play 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 or popular affection. But we have not been afraid, I hope, to read against the grain.

To play with something is also to defer judgment, just as to toy with something is to postpone final consumption or decision, to look at it from all sides without necessarily committing to any one perspective.

Critical analysis 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 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.

“Errors, blind spots, and misunderstandings [. . .] comprise the most potent aspects of literary texts.” (Erin Graff Zivin)

“The traumatic kernel of misunderstanding, misreading, [. . .] resides at the heart of the act of reading.” (Erin Graff Zivin)

When we read, we cannot help but “err,” in the sense of deviating, straying, diverging from some set path.

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It is in these deviations or swerves that novelty and creation arise.

“Poetic influence [. . .] always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation.”
(Harold Bloom)

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.

But the test of a reading is less its fidelity to the past than the extent to which it charts a new course for the future.

“Living out the death of these fantasies in blasted and blistered night, we were consumed by the turning of a page. . .”
(Stewart Home)

The field of Latin American literary criticism is 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.

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.

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Ruins make great playgrounds.

Playfulness and the grotesque can (and often do) go hand in hand.

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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?

“The word ‘axolotl’ is of Nahuatl origin—*atl* (water) and *xolotl* (doll, toy, mythical personality)—[. . .] These salamander-larvae have inhabited the waters of Mexico for centuries.” (Brett Levinson)

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.

With lidless eyes and broad, apparently smiling mouth, an axolotl can appear to be staring at us, quietly confident of something that it knows that we do not.

“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.” (Julio Cortázar)

“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.” (Julio Cortázar)

“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.” (Brett Levinson)

“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.”
(Julio Cortázar)

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, 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.

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

MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”

PRODUCTION

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¡Don't leave it to mañana!