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**MARKET REALISM: NEOLIBERALISM AND LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY
MOVEMENTS AFTER THE BOOM**

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

In the final decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, Latin American authors scrambled to build a viable market presence after the unprecedented success of the Latin American Boom, represented by canonical figures such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. While tales of suffering at the hands of cruel dictators set in isolated jungle locales still attracted a healthy readership, these writers attempted to push back against the tropes of magical realism in search of an alternate voice that might connect with domestic and global audiences. This dissertation explores three such efforts in inter-American fiction of the period, attempting to answer the question: How do you construct a literary generation in the age of neoliberalism?

I begin by analyzing the McOndo movement, led by the Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet in the mid 1990s. Its name is a play on García Márquez's fictional town of Macondo from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. McOndian stories are set in societies permeated by hegemonic cultural forces seeping in from the North, where local particularities take a back seat to globalized reality. Then, I trace the rise of what I call the M.F.A. generation, a cohort of foreign-born, U.S.-educated writers led by Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat. Their narratives are directly born out of the expansion of U.S. Latino/a Studies and the legacy of multiculturalism, and their notoriety peaks in 2007 with the publication of Díaz's Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Finally, I consider the case of the misfits: authors such as Roberto Bolaño and Martín Rejtman who evade easy classification, often frustrating audiences and critics but attaining visibility through a reputation for resistance and integrity.

In mapping each group's careful navigation of genre, discourse and ideology, I outline market-driven responses to neoliberalism's privatization of public space, as well as multiculturalism's thrust toward strategic essentialism. Is it possible to assemble a readerly community without overt self-labeling? Can unmarketability become a marketing tool itself? And how might this alter the future trajectory of Latin American representation?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
The Shifting Function of Culture.....	4
The Role of the Intellectual.....	7
The Unifying Power of Difference.....	10
A Study in Three Parts.....	13
 Chapter 1. “OBEDIENT CHILDREN OF NEOLIBERALISM”: MISREADING MCONDO.....	18
Fast-Food Fiction.....	23
Neoliberalism’s Laboratory.....	26
Dueling “Ondos”.....	31
Out of Print, Out of Mind.....	40
Breaking Neoliberalism’s Spell.....	43
A Whole Constellation of Things.....	51
 Chapter 2. LATINO/AMERICANISM IN THE MAINSTREAM: DIAZ, DANTICAT AND THE M.F.A. GENERATION.....	54
The New Latinamericanism.....	58
Labeling Latinos/as.....	63
Shaping the Latino/a Canon.....	66
The Díaz/Danticat Project.....	68
Academia and Circular Criticism.....	72
Updating the Testimonial.....	76
Cultivating Authenticity.....	83
How to Read the M.F.A. Generation.....	90
 Chapter 3. MAKING A MISFIT: BOLAÑO, REJTMAN AND THE JOURNEY INTO WORLD LITERATURE.....	94
Entering World Literature.....	98
Manufacturing the Myth.....	102
The Rules of the Misfit.....	105
The Case of Rejtman.....	123
The Return to Cthulhu.....	137
 Conclusion. FINDING NESTOR SANCHEZ.....	141
 Works Cited.....	154

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INTRODUCTION

That a particular situation in time brings forth those subjects intended for it is to be taken very literally.

-Theodor Adorno

In the beginning is relation.

These are the words of Martin Buber who, in *I and Thou* (1923), argued that early societies developed their speech positionally. As an example, he cites the expression “far away” and a Zulu term that stands for “there where someone cries out: ‘O mother, I am lost’” (18). Buber then extends his claims beyond spatial metaphors: all reality, he believes, is predicated upon encountering the other. Without an awareness of surrounding difference, there can be no subjective notion of the self. And, once individual identity is established, it is through reciprocal relationships that we gain access to a higher plane of existence. “So long as the heaven of *Thou* is spread out over me the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course” (9), Buber wrote. This, he affirmed, is real living.

Market Realism: Latin American Literary Movements after the Boom documents the leap from the personal to the communal for three sets of Latin American authors who emerge in the 1990s and early 2000s. Raised in regions irrevocably shaped by neoliberalism and globalization, they assemble to strategically target U.S. publishers, readers and academics, whom I present as the mediating center in a radiating wheel of continental exchange in the manner of Pascale Casanova’s world republic of letters. As

these writers compete to capture overseas audiences in the shadow of the unprecedented popular success of the Latin American Boom – represented by the likes of Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes – they choose between resisting or recirculating the tropes of magical realism, by necessity engaging with them as a touchstone. Their quest for visibility, however, is often met with skepticism, and their work has drawn criticism for its culturally instrumentalizing, market-oriented qualities. They are accused of cheapening their craft, opting to harness the winds of causality rather than be subjected to the whims of fate, as Buber would put it.

Yet the market orientation might not be by choice. These groups face an unprecedented set of challenges, among them a scarcity of public avenues for non-contractually-mediated creative exchange and an explosion in transnational circulation, eliminating nation- and continent-building as a potential unifying umbrella. Some things remain as they always have been: The basic establishment of a literary identity – a requisite for contemporary global participation – still takes place, as in Buber's model, through the process of connection itself. Internal aesthetic cohesion is premised upon common interests and experiences, and outward difference is cast against the production of competing groups and the preceding canon. But the new hurdles complicate the process of locating affinity, and limit the ways in which audiences can be reached. So: How do you construct a literary generation in the neoliberal era? And does this process condition the kinds of representations of Latin America that these groups are able to successfully introduce into the literary sphere? Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the reproduction of Latinamericanist tropes bears a direct relation to the tools for marketplace visibility available to authors during their time.

Whether they tie themselves to the canon or reject it outright, the rise of these market-savvy scribes sets off an old double bind: In attacking or updating outdated structures of meaning, they often edify new ones that perpetuate the very problems they sought to solve. Through the history of Latin American critical thought, ideologies stemming from struggle and relying on difference to fend off the specter of colonial oppression have often ended up delighting and fueling the colonizer's own fantasies. More pragmatically, the double bind translates itself into the market. The possibilities of publication for these writers are often proportional to the continued performance of an easily classifiable identity, as well as the adoption of a palatable social justice project. This is but one of the appreciable incentives to constituting a literary movement, a time-tested approach to visibility.

Because of their rapid multiplication, defining and delineating literary collectivities has become a fraught endeavor, one that is eased but not resolved by chronological distance. Charting recent collectivities is a surefire recipe for controversy. An index of 20th century movements, for instance, identifies more than 500 groupings involving 3,000 authors. In achieving this sizable number, its editors choose to incorporate schools, tendencies, types and –isms (Harris vii). Broadening the category even further, their listing includes a variety of critical lenses – New Criticism, Structuralism and Feminist Criticism among them – that, according to the editors, have had “an extraordinary effect of literature in the 20th century” (viii). Given this expansion, coupled with the difficulty of identifying recent or ongoing trends, I explore a variety of groupings: one, a classic, self-labeled movement with a manifesto and a shared anthology; another, a subtler regional collective with common aims and aesthetics but no

overt recognition of collaboration; and a third that is, in fact, a non-group, comprised of writers in isolation who deploy similar positional strategies. This latter scenario interrogates the boundaries – and future – of the notion of literary movements themselves.

THE SHIFTING FUNCTION OF CULTURE

Each of these groups is a product of what Theodor Adorno would call the culture industry; each, in turn, ends up shaping the industry itself.¹ For Adorno, the term stands for mass culture determined from above, where high and low art are melded into the middlebrow and audiences are understood strictly as consumers. Its development is portrayed in an entirely negative light, as it “becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness,” as well as an impediment to “the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (18-19). Adorno repeatedly warned of the decline of culture in the face of what he called “socialized pseudo-culture,” characterized by “the omnipresence of alienated spirit” (16).

Within this general malaise, Adorno acknowledged the potential for collaborative coordination in certain aesthetic areas: “A field such as architecture, which – by virtue of its foundation in practical needs – is today better off than the autonomous artistic genres, was never conceivable without administration” (104). Here, cultural administration

¹ Adorno rehearses multiple definitions of culture throughout his writing. For instance: “If culture is defined as the de-barbarization of man, elevating him beyond the state of simple nature, without actually perpetuating this state through violent suppression, then culture is a total failure” (107). Another variant: “Culture long ago evolved into its own contradiction, the congealed content of educational privilege; for that reason it now takes its place within the material production process as an administrated supplement to it” (108).

appears acceptable as long as it is tied to pragmatic, material objectives. Those working in the abstract realm of the arts, however, face a more pressing dilemma. Their work, traditionally premised upon denouncing congealed institutions, is now dependent upon the support of those very institutions, bringing about an intellectual neutralization in the name of exposure.

Momentarily setting aside Adorno's value judgment, there is no question that he rightly identified a shift in the substance and the function of culture, and anticipated the amplification of this trend. George Yúdice understands this change as the advent of culture-as-resource,² where "culture is increasingly wielded as resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration" (9): to, for instance, encourage multicultural tolerance and civic participation, or to spur urban economic growth through the construction of museums (10). Its value is now measured in utilitarian terms, and its expanded role is a consequence of the slashing of publicly supported social services, Yúdice argues. The end of the Cold War marks an intensification of this process, as it "pulled the legitimizing rug out from under a belief in artistic freedom, and with it unconditional support for the arts, as a major marker of difference with respect to the Soviet Union" (11). Inasmuch as we might bemoan this state of affairs, art – either as resource, commodity or pseudo-cultural byproduct – has gained centrality in redressing social problems.

Instrumentalized culture has proven an effective tool for sustaining hegemonic ideology and, on the flipside, for eroding it in the battle for equal rights for a number of

² Yúdice writes that "culture-as-resource is much more than commodity; it is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which ideology and much of what Foucault called disciplinary society ... are absorbed into an economic or ecological rationality" (1).

historically oppressed populations.³ One must refrain from reflexive condemnation in its presence, a method that Yúdice exemplifies in *The Expediency of Culture*. “Although I obviously identify villains and heroes in this book, most of the situations I examine are more complex” (2), he writes. At the same time, one must also resist the assumption that the instrumentalizing drive flows solely from the writer’s hands, or that it is always politically effective. Yúdice explains that he is interested in “sounding a note of caution regarding the celebration of cultural agency” (2), a concern that informs this study.

Throughout this dissertation, I pair my analysis of each group with the critical scholarship that their work elicited, highlighting instances of what I see as a premature exaltation of newness that “for all its protestations of relativism, its displays of epistemological care and technical expertise, cannot easily be distinguished from the process of empire” (213-14) as Edward Said puts it. When critics abstract these works from the networks that allow for their appearance, downplaying the literary performance incentive in order to make enthusiastic proclamations about the birth of a true Latin American voice, they are, in fact, occluding the effect of U.S. hegemony, through the demands of its audiences and publishers, on global literary production.

The increased ubiquity of instrumentalized culture runs parallel to the implementation of neoliberal reforms, initially in the Southern Cone throughout the 1970s via U.S.-backed military dictatorships and later in the Anglophone sphere in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The impact of these measures, devised under the banner of free trade, free markets, private property, and the retreat from governmental regulation of social issues, is evident by the end of the 20th century, around

³ See, among others, Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism in Harasym, Sarah, ed. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

the time that these authors are organizing. Among other effects, this framework's influence on cultural production and human relations brings about heightened training, credentialing and administrative requirements for writers, particularly in the U.S., but not restricted to it.⁴ The first Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing was established at the University of Iowa in 1936; by 1994, there were 64 such programs, and 229 as of 2014, according to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. These programs graduate 3,000 to 4,000 students per year. Even those without the degree, argues writer Chad Harbach, have "imbibed the general idea and aesthetic. We are all M.F.A.s now" (Capuzzi Simon). M.F.A. programs represent a key node in the formation of literary groups, multiplying networking avenues while standardizing representational methodologies.

THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL

Similar professionalizing efforts have taken root in U.S. academia, where publication output has become the chief determinant in the hiring and tenure-granting process. Literary researchers must operate within niche fields of literary criticism and adopt a common lexicon and analytical approach: the scholarly article as genre. To address this development, I occasionally engage in a type of meta-analysis, conditioned, inevitably, by the very same forces that affect the authors and critics discussed within. This approach is not without precedent. For instance, in discussing the Chinese intellectual in diaspora, Rey Chow displays a keen awareness of the irony that academics

⁴ For example, the Iowa International Writing Program, which began in 1967, has awarded residencies to more than 1,400 writers from 140 countries, according to its web site.

whose work hinges upon unveiling oppression, victimization and subalternity simultaneously accumulate power, wealth and privilege, thus widening the gap between practitioner and subject. She writes:

Any attempt to deal with “women” or the “oppressed classes” in the “third world” that does not at the same time come to terms with the historical conditions of its own articulation is bound to repeat the exploitativeness that used to and still characterizes most “exchanges” between “West” and “East.” Such attempts will also be expediently assimilated within the plenitude of the hegemonic establishment, with all the rewards that that entails. (119)

As an antidote, Chow proposes a variety of interventionist tactics to slowly disintegrate the multiplication of rigid fields of study. I share her enthusiasm for exposing and resisting the reproduction of historical disparity, and I believe – like Chow – that this cycle cannot be effectively defused without speaking to the contemporary system that determines entry into the hegemonic conversation over identity construction, one consisting of rewards and punishments doled out by, among others, award selection panels, academic hiring committees, and literary journals.

Timothy Brennan arrives at this problem via an analysis of Salman Rushdie – namely, in the way that Rushdie anglicizes magical realism, deriving inspiration from a visit to Nicaragua. Brennan notes “the eagerness of metropolitan critics to embrace the ‘pluralism’ of the cosmopolitan just when defensive nationalism is on the Third-World agenda” (61). The sort of evasion that Brennan characterized in 1989 endures under somewhat modified terms. Taking the issue back up in 2012, Brennan observes how

“along with genuine feelings of empathy for the plight of refugees, exiles, and migrants, the discourses of diaspora and diasporic subjects today ... shift the focus from interstate rivalries and popular mobilizations against neoliberal policies to powerless individuals” (10). This is precisely the sort of deflection that leads us to be baffled by the success of Donald Trump, the rifts within the European Union, or the spate of right-wing governments spreading through Latin America. When well-meaning critics focus on and unwittingly reproduce powerlessness, they redirect our attention from conditions on the ground.

In an essay entitled “*Mestizaje* and Hybridity: The Risks of Metaphors,” Antonio Cornejo Polar laid out his preoccupations regarding the production of critical discourse about Latin America. Aside from, as the title indicates, raising concerns about the overuse of broad, interdisciplinary metaphors that often occlude social dysfunction, he warns “against the excessive disparity of criticism in English that – under old industrial models – seems to take Hispano-American literature as a raw material to be turned into sophisticated critical artifacts” (762). I believe we have entered an intensification of the process that Cornejo Polar denounces, where U.S.-facing fiction itself now begins to actively reproduce the tropes of U.S.-based scholarship on Latin America, predictively fulfilling its needs. If, instead of mourning “the frayed and not very honorable ending of Hispano-Americanism” (764), as Cornejo Polar feared, many critics are currently celebrating a transnational shift posited on an alterity that “cannot be subsumed or absorbed by the homogenizing practices of the nation-state” (Mermann-Jozwiak 16), it is at the cost of identifying and exposing global imbalances that subsist under a new guise.

From 2009 to 2014, the net number of migrants moving from Mexico to the U.S. was minus 140,000 – that is, there were more Mexican nationals leaving the country than coming in, according to the Pew Research Center (2015). To be sure, this figure is related to a rise in deportations under the Obama administration, as well as a sluggish economy and heightened border controls. Yet “a majority of the 1 million who left the U.S. for Mexico between 2009 and 2014 left of their own accord” (Gonzalez-Barrera), most of them citing family reunification as their main motivation. Many U.S. knowledge producers have struggled to acknowledge their self-constructed subaltern as a decision-making agent, wavering between studying metaphorical holes in the border wall and announcing the advent of the transnational era. This scenario is not coincidental – it is born, I believe, out of a symbiotic relationship between academia and much of the literary production of the era, readily apparent in the texts of *Market Realism*.

THE UNIFYING POWER OF DIFFERENCE

The authors comprising the three literary groupings of *Market Realism* contend with the issue of difference both in the professional realm – selecting who will be allowed in, and who will be cast as an antagonist – and on the level of content. They must decide whether to create narratives premised upon a significant cultural disparity between Latin America and the so-called First World, potentially using it as a device to amplify the illusion of movement, to sustain narrative tension, and to provide clear coordinates

for their audiences.⁵ They are not alone in considering this possibility. Tales of miscommunication, maladaptation, abuse and rejection have flourished in the U.S. throughout the 1990s and 2000s, fictionalizing the hardships of displacement. Particularly after Sep. 11, 2001, there has been a veritable feast of works focusing on the trials of Latin American immigrants attempting to enter or settle into the U.S. Among them: *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), *Fast Food Nation* (2006) and *Sin nombre* (2009) in film, and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Jorge Franco's *Paraiso Travel* (2002) in fiction. The use of an abortive resettling as central conflict is by no means a new phenomenon. For decades, texts like Guillermo Rosales's *Boarding Home* (1987) have been hinting at the possibility that the cultural gap between Latin America and the U.S. cannot be breached, and that those foolish enough to venture north face the possibility of physical or spiritual death.

But as these films and novels dwell on cultural incompatibility, our increasingly globalized world hints at an opposing scenario. The gradual erosion of difference through improved communications, U.S.-centric popular culture and an increasingly mobile population, suggests that we are all moved, more than ever before, by similar needs; that our widely differing "private concerns and evaluations and wishes" (297), as Jack Kerouac once put it, have undergone homogenization, veiled by a thin layer of regionally derived idiosyncrasy. As subtitled reruns of *Two and a Half Men* light up TV screens from Mexico City to the southernmost stretches of Argentina, as English becomes the de facto language of Facebook interaction, and as CNN-style news broadcasts determine how we make sense of daily events, geographic displacement loses its jarring quality. In

⁵ Undoubtedly, alterity is a basic constituent part of any narrative. As Stuart Hall notes, echoing Buber: "Without relations of difference, no representation could occur" (239). The question here is one of type and degree.

the words of George Saunders, we find “that one’s own desires are mappable onto strangers; that what one finds in oneself will most certainly be found in The Other.”

Immigration failures in this scenario have much more to do with economic realities than with incompatible traditions and lifestyles.

The three literary groups analyzed in *Market Realism* both anticipate and react to this representational trend in distinct ways. One embraces the narrative of disparity and culture clash to wide acclaim from critics and readers. The second rejects it outright and finds itself cast out of the literary market. And the third adopts a careful selection of these elements without fully committing to them. If these groups arise, as I suggested previously, in the age of cultural instrumentalization and critical and authorial professionalization, the question of difference deployment constitutes the third point in the triangle of collectivization. The embrace or dismissal of this representational mode becomes as a key point of contact for *Market Realism*’s authors, decisively affecting the reception and circulation of their work. What each group wrestles with is what I term “disarming difference:” a pleasing sort of difference. It allows the reader to feel righteous indignation for the treatment of the Latin American subaltern, while simultaneously perpetuating it as Other; it allows for a sort of poverty tourism; and, most problematically, it downplays the effect of American hegemony throughout the continent. In narratives based upon this representational strategy, peripheral subjects are struggling to enter the center. Meanwhile, all over the continent, the center has already entered their lives, erasing the alleged difference that many of these narratives are eager to voice. In foregrounding or obscuring these historical developments, the authors of *Market Realism* find ideological affinity and a path to notoriety.

A STUDY IN THREE PARTS

Chapter one examines the McOndo movement, led by the Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet in the mid 1990s. Its name, initially coded as a marketing tactic, references the imagined town of Macondo from García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It suggests that the decade's Latin American urban experiences were conditioned by high rises and multinational fast-food chains, and had little to do with the poetic flight of the Boom generation. In 2001, Fuguet published an article in *Foreign Policy* denouncing the "user-friendly magical realism software that politically correct writers were using to spin tales that would give world audiences exactly what they expected: an exotic land where anything goes and eventually nothing matters, for it's no more than a fable" (69).

McOndian authors – young, male and disillusioned – set their stories in cities indistinguishable from any U.S. metropolis, foregrounding the homogenizing effect of globalization and the consequences of the neoliberal project devised and implemented during their childhood.

Even as McOndo's authors cast themselves directly against the output of the Boom, I advocate for pushing back on this market-oriented dichotomy. Much of the critical contempt directed at the movement resorts to a common frame: that the Boom was organic and regional while McOndo was artificial and cosmopolitan, and that the Boom was a politically progressive, pan-continental project while McOndo was disengaged and self-obsessed. I argue that this perspective is premised upon a basic misreading of their work – a misreading encouraged by the group through its brash manifesto – that ensnares a vast number of literary critics, including John Beverley, who asserts that the group represents "an implicit or explicit acceptance of the neoliberal

position” (73). In attempting to differentiate between faithful representation of reality and its embrace, I propose that the authors of McOndo in fact constructed a literature of resistance, albeit one mired in contradictions resulting from strategic concessions required in the name of visibility.

The second chapter concerns the advent of what I call the M.F.A. generation, reaching its apex in 2007 with Junot Díaz and his Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as well as with the publication of *Brother, I’m Dying*, a memoir by Edwidge Danticat. I situate Díaz and Danticat as the torchbearers for a group of foreign-born, U.S.-educated writers who produce sweeping transnational narratives about life in Latin America and the Caribbean, skillfully negotiating literary circuits to achieve acclaim from publishers, critics and readers alike. While these authors recirculate a number of magical realist tropes and borrow approaches from the Latin American testimonial genre, their texts are imbued with a sense of newness through a blend of code meshing, pop culture references, quick wit and careful historical research. The popular success of this generation of authors and their almost unanimous critical cheerleading force us to consider the possibilities of North-to-South representation and the double-edged potential of domestic community-building through the packaging of foreign cultures.

The achievements of this group, I argue, are part and parcel of the development of Latino/a Studies in U.S. academia and of the identification and segmentation of Latino/a individuals pursued under the banner of multiculturalism. In conversation with scholarship by Arlene Dávila and Elena Machado-Sáez, among others, I illustrate how the M.F.A. writers effectively capitalize upon a market opening, their journey smoothed

by the efforts of previous generations. Additionally, I chart the expansion of Latino/a Studies, a crucial aspect in the legitimization of the wide representational scope of the M.F.A. group's narratives. For instance, the editors of a recent compilation of U.S. Latino/a scholarship, *Imagined Transnationalism*, focus on "transnational collectivities and flows generally within the Western Hemisphere and at times reaching to Europa and Asia" (5). Cultures, they argue, "are centrally about being 'in touch,' about negotiation and dialogue" (5). Rendering the world with U.S. Latino/a communities at the center and their interactions at the margins may prove effective as it relates to correcting historical injustices within the U.S. However, I argue, it takes a problematic turn when these writers resuscitate worn tropes in their portrayal of life in Latin America from afar.⁶

The third chapter tracks the rise of the misfits: long-established authors such as Roberto Bolaño, and less-recognized ones like Argentina's Martín Rejtman, who make a name for themselves by refusing to adhere to preexisting categories of classification, placing defiance at the center of their literary identity. I identify three common approaches that these writers employ independently as they attempt to cross into world literature: 1) they situate themselves at the margins but perform expertise; 2) they depict local identities for global readers, and global ones for local readers; 3) and they incorporate links to major historical events, particularly to Human Rights milestones, without an accompanying political stance. I argue that the Bolaño phenomenon is partly owed to this innovative strategy for providing authorial coordinates to non-Latin-American readerships.

⁶ Nirvana Tanoukhi addresses this reality in the context of African literature. She takes on "the problem that specification – the imperative to tell a story well-contextualized in a particular time and place – can be compromised by literary form's susceptibility to repetition," while referring to the authorial tactic of perpetuating old models as "a vampirism of literary value" (670). See Tanoukhi, Nirvana. "The Movement of Specificity." *PMLA* 128.3 (2013): 668-674.

As with the previous two groupings, the misfits must grapple with the legacy of the Boom. In Bolaño's case, its presence loomed so large that he compared it to H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu. He devoted his last public address – shortly before his death at 50 years of age – to harshly criticizing the Boom's major representatives and, by extension, the writers who reproduce their methods and behaviors. Through denunciation and insurrection, the misfits blaze a counterintuitive trail into the market, all the while refusing to band together. But their antagonistic posture remains a stance, and an atomized assortment of artists who are suspicious of trends and collectives can unintentionally spark a movement, especially when their road to notoriety can be tied to a reproducible formula for success that circumvents a number of the more problematic concessions demanded by the market.

Drawing from Human Rights, Diaspora and Border Studies, Inter-American criticism, Latino/a Studies and a number of intersecting fields, *Market Realism* charts the fate of these three literary groupings to make the case that studying collectivization in the neoliberal age calls for careful consideration of content, networks of assemblage, and the surrounding culture industry as it is fueled by academics, publishers, and audiences. Critics have long sought to open the doors to more complex representations of Latin American cultures in globally circulating fiction; it is only by attending to each aspect of the tripartite process of community formation that we can appreciate the incentives and penalties regarding the positioning of literary subjects (*why* authors fictionalize the so-called marginalized, and *where* they situate them). Stuart Hall once warned that “a jejune protest or parochial literature, be it black, gay or feminist, is in the long run no more politically effective than works which are merely public relations” (60). By exploring the

mechanisms through which contemporary depictions of Latin America are devised, distributed and monetized, we come to understand the longevity of some of this literature's lingering tropes and are better positioned to assess its political bite. Even more crucially, in uncovering existing and potential routes for creative interaction, we open ourselves up to more literary voices as they enter the din of the global market.

To return to Buber: even if the *I-Thou* relation is the only one that allows us to experience the fullness of life, it is in the lowly, earthly *It* that we find our era's stepping stone to relation. "The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly – except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled" (17), Buber writes. The process of disentanglement, unspooling the contemporary systems that regulate collectivization, constitutes a defense of artistic exchange as it languishes under a historically unprecedented assault.

CHAPTER ONE

“OBEDIENT CHILDREN OF NEOLIBERALISM”: MISREADING MCONDO

Fundamentally, and precisely in the deepest and most important things, we are unspeakably alone, and a great deal must happen in order that one man may be able to advise or even help another – a great deal must succeed, a whole constellation of things

must be realized for it once to prosper.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

What was mistaken for closeness

Was just a case of mitosis

-Andrew Bird

Consider Luis Miguel, one of the few pan-Latin-American cultural icons of recent years. The baby-faced crooner exploded in popularity in the early 1990s, selling out stadiums throughout the continent and demolishing album sales records. His formula for success: combining tried-and-true tunes with the decade’s reigning pop sensibilities, mostly drawing on the *bolero* – a slow-tempo, triple-time genre that originated in 18th century Spain. It didn’t hurt that he opportunely embodied Latin America’s entrenched beauty standards. In his youth, Luis Miguel sported blue eyes, sparkling white teeth, a slight, unobtrusive nose, a dirty blonde mane, a full, low hairline and a trademark orange tan. Among his album releases were *Romance*, *Segundo Romance*, *Romances* and *Mis Romances*: a bona-fide heartthrob if there ever was one.

What to do with someone as polarizing as Luis Miguel? One could dismiss him, along with *telenovelas* and taco carts, as another pandering, watered-down exponent of

Mexican low culture. Or one might celebrate his musical output as an anti-elitist gesture, for precisely the same reasons. What is less likely, however, is a position of learned indifference: Luis Miguel was *there*, as were fast food franchises and shopping malls, all part of growing up in any major Latin American metropolis during the 1980s. This grouping might not sit very well; after all, Luis Miguel was a homegrown, organic, Spanish-language phenomenon, while McDonald's and its ilk came to the region by way of global economic forces that continue to circulate pre-fabricated, chemical-laden commodities to the South, and revenues to the North.

And yet, it turns out, the alleged ideological gap between Luis Miguel and the Golden Arches may not be so clear-cut. Luis Miguel was actually born on U.S. territory (in Puerto Rico, the son of Spanish and Italian parents). He grew up idolizing Elvis Presley, releasing a bilingual EP of Elvis covers at 14 years old.⁷ Unbeknownst to much of his fan base, a number of his most popular singles are merely Spanish-language translations of tried-and-true U.S. hits: "Será que no me amas" (1990) is "Blame it on the Boogie" by the Jacksons (1978); "Que nivel de mujer" (1993) is "Attitude Dance" by Tower of Power (1991); "Ahora te puedes marchar" (1987) is "I Only Want to Be with You" by Dusty Springfield (1964); and "Cuando calienta el sol" (1987) is "Love Me with All Your Heart" by, among others, the Ray Charles Singers (1964).

What this new information does, among other things, is break loose a problematic dichotomy. Luis Miguel might have been the last great purveyor of pan-Latin expression for the masses – but what to make of his status as surreptitious agent of Northern cultural transmission? And he may have pushed empty-calorie, lowest-common-denominator

⁷ Luis Miguel. *También es rock*. EMI Music, 1983.

tunes from abroad – but what about his carefully cultivated hybridity and knack for pastiche and translation?⁸ Somewhere between fanaticism and condemnation we find in Luis Miguel a symbol for his time, albeit a fragile one. If we approach him with too much ideological zeal, he disintegrates.

The Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet is one of few Latin American public figures who has consistently advocated for that sort of restraint. In the mid 1990s, as Luis Miguel's career was peaking, Fuguet spearheaded a literary movement named McOndo that called for more realistic depictions of life in Latin America – representations that openly acknowledged the presence of global capital and pop culture and, therefore, risked displeasing foreign readers who expected charming, exotic texts filled with regional folklore. For Fuguet, the advent of Luis Miguel was not necessarily a sign of cultural decadence. The “bastard” culture of the 1990s, as he refers to it, was simply the latest instance in a long tradition of continental *mestizaje*:

No estoy juzgando, diciendo que Luis Miguel es bueno o lo que sea, pero es una realidad. Personalmente me divierte; me da risa pertenecer a esta cultura. ... El creer que América Latina no tiene nada que ver con el resto del mundo es como creer que nuestra selva es pura, es mentira. La selva no es pura. Siempre América Latina ha sido un continente mezclado. ... Siempre América Latina ha mirado hacia Europa. Pero ahora América Latina mira los Estados Unidos. El que niega eso está mintiendo literalmente. No quiere ver la realidad. Yo no estoy diciendo si

⁸ While literary scholars are showing increasing interest in the creative potential of multilingualism (see Kellman, Steven. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), few have extended this analytical frame to the global pop-culture phenomena of the 1980s and 1990s. The language-mixing celebration seems to stop with Beckett and Nabokov, then return with Junot Díaz.

sea bueno o malo, a mí no me corresponde eso. ... Esto es un poco la filosofía de McOndo. (Hargrave 18-19)

I'm not judging, saying that Luis Miguel is good or whatever, but this is our reality. Personally, it cracks me up; I'm amused to be a part of this culture. ... The belief that Latin America has nothing to do with the rest of the world is like believing that our jungle is pure. That's a lie. The jungle is not pure. Latin America has always been a mixed continent. ... Latin America has always looked to Europe. Now Latin America looks to the United States. Whoever denies that is literally lying. They don't want to see reality. I'm not saying it's good or bad, that's not my place. ... This is, in a nutshell, the McOndo philosophy.

There is, however, more to McOndism than Fuguet's summary lets on. While Fuguet and his co-authors were bent on portraying the realities of globalization and cultural exchange in the region, the majority of the stories they wrote featured anhedonic male protagonists who were having trouble finding fulfilling relationships. As Latin America became more culturally permeable than ever, for better or worse, McOndo characters were struggling to make connections.

Even so, Fuguet insisted that no judgment was intended, and literary scholars took him at face value. The critical consensus became that the McOndo movement actively supported and profited from the neoliberal reforms imposed upon the region.⁹ Cast both

⁹ According to John Beverley, "the so-called McOndo writers anthologized by Alberto Fuguet, or the Mexican Generación Crack (and especially Jorge Volpi), or the tendency in cultural studies that puts a primary emphasis on consumer choice and 'civil society,' represent an implicit or explicit acceptance of a neoliberal position" (73).

of and against a rich preceding archive – as boleros had been for Luis Miguel, magical realism and the so-called Latin American Boom was for Fuguet – and born under the watchful eye of the United States, McOndo became an unwitting lightning rod in an ideological battle far beyond its purview. To accept and represent reality, with its blemishes and undesirables, was read as a gesture of support for that reality or, at best, as evasion.

That is not a particularly helpful way of looking back at Latin American cultural production at the end of the millennium. McOndo, I believe, was a proactive movement, at the vanguard of representation in its time, and was very much actively engaged in political questions, inasmuch as artistically rendering the feeling of disconnection of Latin America's youth under neoliberalism constitutes a political act. And, as Luis Miguel did, the movement deployed fresh creative strategies in an atomizing, constrictive period, with varying degrees of success. In order to approach McOndo without the polarizing fervor that causes it to shrivel away, a set of binaries regarding the McOndo and its most immediate predecessor, the Latin American Boom, must be resisted: that the former was organic and the latter was constructed; that the former was progressive and collective while the latter was apolitical and narcissistic; and that the former was relatively homogeneous in style and objective, while the latter was heterogeneous and fragmented. We must challenge the oft-repeated framing of Boom authors as parents, and the McOndo generation as shallow, rebellious children in a Bloomian state of anxiety about the all-encompassing shadow of their forebears. Was McOndo fundamentally misunderstood? And how can we properly assess a community-organizing project in an era of, as Robert Putnam famously put it, declining social capital?

FAST-FOOD FICTION

Materially, McOndo the movement begins with *McOndo* the compilation, 262 pages long and published in 1996 by the Barcelona-based Mondadori imprint. The volume was edited by Fuguet and Chilean writer Sergio Gómez¹⁰ and includes short stories by 17 writers – all male (not on purpose, according to the editors), all born around the year 1960.¹¹ Its spare, cream-colored cover hosts a small cropped image from a 1507 painting by Albrecht Dürer featuring Eve, apple in hand and snake at the ready – but, in this case, the apple has been replaced by the multicolored Apple Computer logo. The material within is divided by nationality: Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Spain,¹² Mexico, Peru and Uruguay are represented.

The volume's name, coded as a marketing strategy, is a play on Gabriel García Márquez's imaginary town of Macondo from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, possibly the most cited example of the Latin American magic realist novel, as well as the most widely read work of what came to be known as the Latin American Boom.¹³ “Nuestro McOndo es tan latinoamericano y mágico (exótico) como el Macondo real (que, a todo

¹⁰ Gómez and Fuguet had previously collaborated on a collection released in 1993, *Cuentos con Walkman*, which anthologized young Chilean writers. As its title suggests, it echoed several McOndo themes.

¹¹ In the introduction, Fuguet and Gómez consider that “quizás esto se debe al desconocimiento de los editores y a los pocos libros de escritoras hispanoamericanas que recibimos” (14) (“perhaps this has to do with a lack of knowledge on behalf of the editors and to the low number of books received from female Hispanic American writers”).

¹² The inclusion of Spain in an anthology that claims a new Latin American perspective appears contradictory. Of this decision, the editors write that “los nuevos autores españoles no sólo son parte de la hermandad cósmica sino son primos muy cercanos, que a lo mejor pueden hablar raro ... pero están en la misma sintonía” (17) (“Spain's emergent authors are not just members of a cosmic brotherhood but are our close cousins who, even if they speak strangely ... are tuned into the same frequency”). One imagines that, aside from the linguistic kinship, a similar argument could be made for most of the Global North.

¹³ *Cien Años* was the second work by a Latin American writer to ever appear on the New York Times bestseller list (Cohn 1).

esto, no es real sino virtual)” (15) (“Our McOndo is as Latin American and magical (exotic) as the real McOndo (which, by the way, is not real but virtual”) wrote Fuguet and Gómez. “En McOndo hay McDonald’s, computadores Mac y condominios, amén de hoteles cinco estrellas construidos con dinero lavado y malls gigantescos” (15) (“In McOndo there are McDonald’s, Mac computers and condominiums, as well as five-star hotels built with laundered money, and gigantic malls”). As the daily lives of McOndians became cluttered by the prefabricated products of global capitalism, the poetic flight of Boom authors struck them as increasingly mimetically deficient. Central to this declaration is Fuguet and Gomez’s play on reality and virtuality. Casting McOndo (a self-created virtualization hoping to be accepted as reality) against Macondo (another virtualization, initially, but one that accrued a lasting representational legitimacy) is a leveling move, in the sense that it both equalizes and demolishes. Could the foundations of contemporary Latin American literature turn out to be just as artificially constructed and self-aware as the Baudrillardian, globalized McOndo?

The nine-page essay that inaugurates the volume, entitled “Presentación del país McOndo,” has likely had more of a lasting impact than any of the pieces that follow it. In it, Fuguet and Gómez tell the story of a young Latin American writer who is accepted into the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.¹⁴ Finally journeying from periphery to center, the writer’s timing appears to be ideal. The film *Like Water for Chocolate* is a box office hit, and bookstores are filled with “tasty” novels by authors with Hispanic last names: “Lo latino está *hot*” (9), Fuguet and Gómez write. So hot, in fact, that the editor of a local literary journal offers to publish one of this writer’s short stories, sight unseen. But when the submission makes its way to the editor’s hands he

¹⁴ Unnamed in the introduction, the writer is later revealed to be Fuguet himself.

shoots it down, arguing that it lacks elements of magical realism and could have been written “en cualquier país del Primer Mundo” (10) (“in any First World Country”). The anecdote is itself classically McOndian: personal (and male), pointedly critical (exposing the limited taste of the journal editor and of U.S. consumers in general), global (characters are usually in motion, with the South-to-North route being a favorite), and, at least on its face, egotistical and self-aware. Here, Fuguet may be fighting for more realistic representations of the Latin American condition, a laudable objective, or might come off as an entitled writer, sore over the publisher’s denial. This is the sort of problematically dichotomous thinking that McOndo texts tend to elicit.

In trying to define and assess the movement, literary critics have swayed between two poles, alternatively acclamatory and condemnatory. Perhaps the only agreed-upon conclusions are that McOndo stories are markedly cosmopolitan, tinged with pop culture and U.S. influences; that McOndo characters are individualistic (although, the definition and implications of such a label are contested); and that McOndo writing attempts to eschew or deconstruct nationalism by suggesting a more global arrangement. Yet even the latter consensus might spark opposing conclusions. For instance, Aníbal González argues that McOndo authors are attempting to “rebasar los límites de lo nacional y de ponerle freno a una nostalgia improductiva y limitante” (91) (“surpass the limits of the nation and curb an unproductive, limiting nostalgia”); meanwhile, Kelly Hargrave and Georgia Smith Seminet state that these same authors “valorizan mucho más la cultura comercial contemporánea que un pasado mítico o la noción de la lucha social” (16) (“value contemporary commercial culture much more than a mythical past or the notion of social struggle”). Progressive heroes for some, capitalist lackeys for others.

Skirting these disputes, Fuguet and Gómez insist that the central reason for putting together the volume was to assemble a network of peers and to find out whether others shared their viewpoints and life experiences. In that sense, they argue, the undertaking was a success. Of the other authors in the compilation, they write: “Compartimos una cultura bastarda similar, que nos ha hermandado irremediabilmente sin buscarlo. Hemos crecido pegados a los mismos programas de la televisión, admirado las mismas películas y leído todo lo que se merece leer” (18) (“We share a bastard culture that has irredeemably and unintentionally bound us in brotherhood. We grew up watching the same TV shows, admiring the same movies, and reading everything worth reading”). It seems fitting that children raised as media consumers might one day find kinship in producing new forms of entertainment. But what prompted this urge to assemble? And, most crucially, how did the existing disassembly come to be?

NEOLIBERALISM’S LABORATORY

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is based upon three basic economic pillars: private property, free markets, and free trade. Potential problems are to be resolved by allowing individuals (as consumers) to make rational decisions within that framework. The state must ensure, above all, the free circulation of capital, but abstain from intervening otherwise. In this way, large-scale privatization, or a paring down of the welfare system, are two classic examples of neoliberal measures: in theory, they remove state-created restraints so that economic gains can be maximized through competition and

losses may be minimized. Individual freedoms, meanwhile, are expected to be both enabled and protected by the free market.

But the neoliberal ethos inevitably seeps into social interaction. As David Harvey argues, neoliberalism emphasizes relationships based on contractual obligation, bringing “all human action into the domain of the market” (3). This has the potential to upend previously existing forms of social organization and methods of connection: “technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land” (3), among others. Further, the fact that consumer desire becomes the central way to exercise choice and gauge value brings with it a form of intellectual dehierarchization. John Beverley writes: “For those purposes, it is just as well if you prefer pop culture to high culture, salsa to Schoenberg” (73). This helps account for the timing and manner of Luis Miguel’s ascent to stardom, and, in part, for the visibility of McOndian literature: intellectual gatekeepers wield far less influence than they did before, and broad artistic accessibility is handsomely rewarded.

The past three decades have revealed a number of consequences to establishing what Pierre Bourdieu calls “an unfettered capitalism without disguise” (35). Among them, an increase in economic inequality at the national level, through shifts in taxation burdens, and a similar trend globally, with free-trade agreements and the advent of multinationals widening national commercial imbalances. Under the new system, corporations take on a renewed democratic centrality and attain personhood; education and judicial systems become profit-driven; and individual suffering is increasingly understood as self-inflicted or deserved, given the assumption of a well-oiled, Darwinian framework. We find that, as Henry Giroux puts it, neoliberalism is not simply “a system

of economic power relations, but also a political project of governing and persuasion intent on producing new forms of subjectivity and particular modes of conduct” (1). Like capitalism, it provides an interpretive lens through which to view the world, one so convinced of its own inevitable permanence that it is all but invisible to those raised within the system.

The first attempt at forming a neoliberal state can be traced back to Augusto Pinochet’s 1973 coup in Chile. Spearheaded by the so-called “Chicago Boys,” a group of Chilean economists who studied at the University of Chicago under Milton Friedman, Pinochet implemented drastic changes that included the dismantling of “all forms of popular organization” (Harvey 8) in the name of containing left-wing political movements. Although neoliberal policies as they emerge from the United States and the U.K. do not become fully explicit until the advent of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (in 1979 and 1981 respectively), the Southern Cone served as a surreptitious testing ground well before that time. In addition to Pinochet, dictatorships were established in Brazil (1965), Uruguay (1973) and Argentina (1976). By the early 1980s, the neoliberal turn was in full effect. By the 1990s, the consequences of dictatorship-era policies upon the region were clearly visible.

We might not be surprised, then, to learn that McOndo authors are bound by this slice of history. Sergio Gómez (born in 1962) and Fuguet (1964) were born in Chile. Juan Forn (1959), Martín Rejtman (1961) and Rodrigo Fresán (1963) were born in Argentina, and Gustavo Escanlar (1962) was born in Uruguay. All of them came of age under military rule, witnessing neoliberal reforms firsthand, including the unrestricted influx of U.S. commodities and media products. This cultural opening also brought with it a shift

in mindset, such as “the internalization of neoliberal ways of thinking as well as the critical trends that have favored nihilism over vision and skepticism over debate” (14), as Sophia McClennen puts it. Thus, a binding theme for McOndo authors is the dissonance experienced when comparing the type of literature produced about Latin America during their formative years (let us remember that the Boom was in full force in the late 1960s and early 1970s) with their individual realities, organized under ideological systems that we tend to more closely identify with the North.

As each nation transitioned back to democracy (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay during the mid 1980s, Chile in 1990), their leaders were forced to make broad concessions to maintain an often-tenuous peace. Burdened by debt acquired through military spending, the region turned to U.S.-based institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, adopting their suggestions in hopes of attaining a degree of economic stability. These prescriptions were part of what came to be known as the Washington Consensus, which advocated for balanced budgets, floating exchange and interest rates, foreign investment, privatization, and the removal of trade restrictions, all as a universal recipe for national development (Massey 8). While the extent to which the Consensus pushed core neoliberal ideals is still debated, it certainly mirrored a number of the neoliberal tenets under development throughout the previous decade, advancing an international hegemonic structure (Lechini 10) that sought to delegitimize individual states, eroding and relocating decision-making abilities (11). The program was relatively successful during the early 1990s, bringing in waves of foreign investment, but began to falter after a series of economic crises throughout the middle of the decade – Mexico’s 1994 “Tequila Effect” most notorious among them. Argentina’s financial collapse in the

year 2000 sparked a widespread backlash against Consensus policies, which were denounced as “untested by systematic empirical research” and a product of “single-minded faith in laissez-faire liberalism” (Massey 11). Until the collapse, however, neoliberal policies ruled the day, and borders were open wide to U.S. imports.

A prime example of this pattern, from transition to consensus, was Argentina’s Carlos Menem, who came to the presidency in 1989 with the country beset by hyperinflation and a crushing foreign debt. He immediately enacted policies reducing the state to its basic functions (ostensibly, in order to reduce public spending and redirect the savings toward paying off debt) and announcing the privatization of major public utilities. In many ways, Menem’s swift legislative transformations were a logical extension and intensification of processes originally implemented under military dictatorship (Duhalde 421). Two years later, by 1991, the Menem administration had intensified relations with the U.S. to the point that they were described by Menem’s Minister of Foreign Affairs as “relaciones carnales” – intimate, as opposed to platonic.¹⁵ Much of the continent followed suit. We might remember that, around that time, the neoliberal Fernando Collor de Melo was triumphing over Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil’s presidential elections.

Thus, if the first neoliberal spike hit McOndo authors as adolescents, the second catches them in their early 30s, as they attempt to make a name for themselves. Given the asymmetry of cultural exchange with the U.S., and faced with an unrelenting readerly appetite for exoticized, poetic narratives that, Fuguet believed, downplayed or ignored the impact of neoliberal policies in the region (as in the novels of Laura Esquivel or Isabel

¹⁵ This was Guido di Tella, who also earned a master’s degree in economics from M.I.T. and served as ambassador to the U.S. See O’Shaughnessy, Hugh. “Guido di Tella.” *The Independent* 2 Jan 2002.

Allende), his decision to package, market and compile a themed volume might strike us, at the least, as reasonable, if not justifiable. It responds to a heavy burden, which Fuguet and Gómez define as “las herencias de la fiebre privatizadora mundial” (13) (“the legacy of global privatization fever”).

DUELING “ONDOS”

Much has been made of the antagonistic relation between McOndo and the Boom, and Fuguet has played no small part in escalating that conflict – in part, doubtlessly, to achieve greater visibility. In the introduction to *McOndo*, Fuguet and Gómez, with no small measure of irony, refer to the “código sagrado” (10) (“sacred code”) of magical realism and to the “arcángel San Gabriel” (14) (“archangel St. Gabriel”) – García Márquez, that is. They rail against “esencialismos reduccionistas , y creer que aquí todo el mundo anda con sombrero y vive en árboles” (14) (“reductive essentialism, and believing that everyone around here walks around wearing a hat and lives on trees”), itself, ironically, a reductive argument. They accuse academics and intellectuals of clinging to the idea that “lo latinoamericano es lo indígena, lo folklórico, lo izquierdista” (15) (“what is Latin American is the indigenous, the folkloric, the left-wing”), and call their emphasis on the rural instead of the urban “aberrante, cómodo e inmoral” (16) (“aberrant, comfortable and immoral”). They refer to “la ilusión del realismo mágico para la exportación” (“the illusion of export-ready magical realism”) and maintain that this type of fiction “tiene mucho de cálculo” (16) (“is quite calculated”). In an article published in *Foreign Policy* in 2001, Fuguet intensified his stance, denouncing the “user-

friendly magical realism software that politically correct writers were using to spin tales that would give world audiences exactly what they expected: an exotic land where anything goes and eventually nothing matters, for it's no more than a fable" (69). For all the claims of apolitical nonjudgment, it is clear that Fuguet was drawing a line in the sand. But exactly what, beyond vague stereotypes, was McOndism positioning itself against?

The term "Latin American Boom" is generally used to describe a period of increased interest (particularly in the U.S. and Europe) in the translation and publication of Spanish-language fiction from authors born in Latin America, peaking in the 1960s and 1970s. Its major exponents include the aforementioned García Márquez, as well as Julio Cortázar from Argentina, Carlos Fuentes from Mexico, Mario Vargas Llosa from Perú and José Donoso from Chile.¹⁶ Although efforts to promote Latin American culture in the U.S. had been underway since Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, it was the 1959 Cuban Revolution that most directly shaped the production and reception of Boom texts. According to Deborah Cohn, the Boom "came to represent a cultural correlative of the revolution, symbolizing the region's cultural autonomy and the end of literary colonialism" (5). For the authors, this meant, on one hand, pressures and incentives from both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic forces to conform to their vision of the world; but, on the other, the sense of a shared revolutionary project, one that sought to integrate Latin America to the Western world on its own terms, by charting out its rooted,

¹⁶ There is no universally agreed-upon listing of Boom authors. For example, some critics argue for the inclusion of Jorge Luis Borges, despite the fact that some of his best-known works were published as early as the 1930s. Other regular members of the list include Augusto Roa Bastos, Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Juan Rulfo.

suppressed continental histories. Attempting to upend the traditional canon by redefining the Latin American novel, the Boom was both social movement and marketing event.

The Boom is often associated, and sometimes used synonymously, with the genre of magical realism. While the term itself originates in 1925 with the German art critic Franz Roh, who used it to describe post-expressionist representation (15), it is not until 1948, when the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier introduced his notion of “lo real maravilloso” (“the marvelous real”), that it began to approximate our contemporary usage. After a visit to Haiti, Carpentier wrote: “había respirado la atmósfera creada por Henri Cristophe, monarca de increíbles empeños ... a cada paso hallaba lo real maravilloso” (10-11) (“I had inhaled the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, monarch of incredible undertakings ... at each step I found the marvelous real”). Carpentier chose to extend the concept continentally: “¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?” (11) (“But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?”). Despite the obvious similarities, Carpentier’s term does not fully align with our current definition. For one, he believed that *lo real maravilloso* was a uniquely American phenomenon, rather than global in scope.¹⁷ Second, he located the fantastic in the “juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures” of time, space and human realities in Latin America, rather than relying on symbolic, supernatural events (Zamora 75). And thirdly, Carpentier believed that the region was ripe with manifestations of *lo real maravilloso*, while magic realism, according to Fredric Jameson, demands a transfiguration of reality through a supplement (311).

¹⁷ This definition would cast out global authors who have deployed magical realism in their work, such as Salman Rushdie or Tahar Ben Jelloun.

As we have come to define it today, magical realism refers to a genre of literature where the supernatural appears, but as “an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Zamora 3). Although magical realism as a label appears dichotomous on its surface, the terms are not necessarily in opposition. Magical events act as a complement to realistic depictions, allowing for a temporary subversion of mimetic requirements that forces the reader to confront the possibility of alternative histories. The Boom’s most widely circulated novel, García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is routinely held up as magical realism’s strongest exponent. After its publication in 1967, it received praise from, among others, Ángel Rama, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa, for its expression of a truly Latin American identity. It has been suggested that magical realism arises to fill unknowable gaps in Latin American history (Levinson 26); in this case, García Márquez amplifies the mythical tone through “the circular structure of the book and its juxtaposition of the modern and the premodern” (134), according to María Helena Rueda. Charting about a century of life for one family inhabiting the imagined village of Macondo, García Márquez’s text had, for some, the potential to serve as a symbolic nexus for uniting long-distant Latin American nations. More pragmatically, its sales success turned it into a point of access for Western audiences, allowing for the integration of Latin American artistic production into world literature (Cohn 5).

Yet the notion of the Boom as an organic, regional movement, and of magical realism as its natural expression, is unsustainable. For one, Boom writers were already firmly situated within a larger literary framework before and during their success, both geographically – several resided in Europe and were initially published in Barcelona –

and academically – many Boom authors held teaching positions and participated in writers’ workshops in the U.S. (Kerr 3). Second, they were influenced by an array of Western canonical figures: William Faulkner is often cited as a model for García Márquez and Fuentes, and Camus, Flaubert, James and Joyce were also noted sources of Boom inspiration (Kerr 5). Third, although Boom authors ostensibly shared a thirst for literary innovation – that is, writing about Latin America in ways that departed from the dominant models of their time – they produced a disparate collection of texts, both in ideology and in style. The work of Cortázar leans toward the fantastic; Fuentes might have focused on the Mexican bourgeoisie; Vargas Llosa attempted a form of Peruvian social realism (Cohn 5). As a whole, the movement gathered steam through extensive marketing strategies, was influenced by outside political needs, and was strategically constructed both by its authors, scholarly communities and the publication industry. From this perspective, the Boom appears to have shared more than a few qualities with McOndism, given its transnational, cosmopolitan, heterogeneous, anti-status-quo origins.

Why, then, is McOndism so often believed to be in direct conflict with the Boom? McOndo authors, like those of the Boom once did, understand themselves as renovators of the mainstream, legitimized canon (it just so happens that the canon currently contains the Boom); like the Boom, they rail against what they feel is exploitative, stereotype-laden writing about the region; like the Boom, they attempt to represent things as they are, rather than as they should be; like the Boom, they aim to establish professional networks based on shared interests; like the Boom, they are influenced by U.S. cultural exports; and, like the Boom, they are ready to try new avenues in order to expand their readership. They have even been subjected to similar kinds of reproach: for being

published out of Barcelona rather than their own countries, and for lacking female authors in their midst (Maier 409).

The bond might run deeper still. Both the Boom and McOndo, I argue, arise from a state of identitarian disconnection: the former historical, due to the lingering, exclusionary effects of colonialism leading to a sense of continental ignorance, and the latter personal, due to the spread of neoliberalism. Perhaps this recognition may allow us to approximate the true difference between the two groups. Boom writers responded to their sense of isolation by reimagining a suppressed past and connecting to it through fantasy and abstraction. Its literature presented itself as a form of political progress, and it is through that shared decolonizing thrust that a community was created in the present. The movement had appeal, in part, because it adhered to a satisfying metanarrative structure: after much struggle (exclusion from the canon), underdog Latin American authors were finally valued on their own merits so that the region could speak and rediscover itself. The overcoming of historical injustice was enacted, or performed, through a generative process.

McOndo writers found no such solace in their genre of choice, urban realism. Characters wandered in trance-like states. There was no payoff, as there was no overt political project, and narratives were largely indistinguishable from life in the North. Because, this time around, the isolation was individual rather than continental, it was the search for *any* form of relation that defined the movement, rather than the redressing of historical inequity. As Rory O'Brien puts it, "[Rodó and Retamar] start to look conspicuously anachronistic when, in relation to the complex, globalised circuits explored by works like McOndo, they continue to construe the big Other, against which

the little Latin American other defines itself, as an identifiable metropolitan master” (173). Who is the underdog here? Who should we root for? How can we win? The McOndo malaise cannot be resolved through conventional means, as life in the simulacrum does not ultimately provide the opportunity for overcoming, for feel-good connectedness. As metanarrative, this slow, catharsis-free drift is unlikely to hold the attention of many readers, particularly readers abroad looking to lose themselves in foreign cultures.

Moreover, a conversation fixated on a Boom-McOndo dichotomy leaves out the literary production of what has been termed the post-Boom, which Fuguet jumps over entirely: Latin American texts written starting around the mid-1970s that, like McOndo, represent a response to some of the problematic legacies of the Boom era. This generation of authors, which includes the likes of Antonio Skármeta, Ariel Dorfman, Reinaldo Arenas, Manuel Puig and Luisa Valenzuela, generally saw Boom literature as elitist, too universal and too technical (Shaw 2), instead opting for a return to more grounded social realism. Despite, again, producing a variety of forms, their work tended to be carefully historically and politically contextualized, often dealing with dictatorship and exile, leading to the popularization of the testimonial narrative. They engaged deeply with pop culture and mass media, a trend that encompassed even the most traditional Boom figures, their own work in flux. According to Philip Swanson, “Vargas Llosa turns his hand to farce and soap opera; Donoso adopts the style of erotica, mysteries and transparent realism; Fuentes writes a tongue-in-cheek spy thriller” (88). In this light, Swanson sees McOndo as simply “a refinement of a certain Post-Boom ethos of the seventies and eighties updated to a contemporary context” (96). Although Swanson’s

proposed lineage can be long debated, the omission of the post-Boom by both Fuguet and by those who have analyzed his work is curious, at the least.

A final complication for McOndians was the matter of etiquette. While the Boom was named retrospectively, and most of its authors did not achieve notoriety until well into their careers, McOndism brashly labeled itself, clearly spelled out its opinionated credo, and provided a home for young, unproven writers. Much of the disproportionately negative attention the movement garnered was triggered by what was perceived as McOndo's youthful disrespect toward its forebears – yet, does not every creative renovation demand an accounting of the ways in which the current model has been exhausted? And does the unceasing attempt to trace a genealogy of Latin American literature through García Márquez and Vargas Llosa not ultimately blind us from seeing McOndo on its own terms? Their relationship might be better understood, as Aymar de Llano puts it, with Macondo responding to a project of modernity and McOndo, more contemporary, containing Macondo itself within a virtual global village. De Llano writes: “No pensamos en la sustitución de una lógica por otra, sino en la convivencia de varias postulaciones nuevas” (106) (“We do not think of substituting one logic of another, but in the coexistence of several new postulations”).

And if Fuguet's rejection of the strictures of magical realism and disengagement with the post-Boom continue to strike us as gratuitously adversarial or overly simplistic, then we might turn to García Márquez himself, who channeled his inner Fuguet in a conversation with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza published in 1982:

Mendoza: Quizás el éxito logrado con (*Cien Años de Soledad*) no te parece justo respecto del resto de tu obra.

García Márquez: No lo es. ... Lo que en *Cien Años de Soledad* se cuenta se parece a la vida de todo el mundo. Está escrito además de una manera simple, fluida, lineal y yo diría – y lo he dicho ya – que es superficial.

Mendoza: Pareces despreciarlo.

García Márquez: No, pero el hecho de saber que está escrito con todos los trucos de la vida y todos los trucos del oficio, me hizo pensar desde antes de escribirlo, que podría superarlo.

Mendoza: Derrotarlo.

García Márquez: Derrotarlo, sí. (65)

Mendoza: Perhaps the success of (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) doesn't seem fair when compared to the rest of your work.

García Márquez: It's not. ... What is told in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* could be anyone's life. Besides, it's written in a simple, fluid, lineal way, and I would say – and I've said it before – that it's superficial.

Mendoza: You seem to despise it.

García Márquez: No, but because I knew for a fact that it was written using all of life's tricks, and all of the profession's tricks, I thought I could surpass it even before I started writing it.

Mendoza: Defeat it.

García Márquez: Defeat it, yes.

OUT OF PRINT, OUT OF MIND

In an interview conducted almost 20 years from the day that *McOndo* was first published, Fuguet left no room for doubt: “La era McOndo ya se cerró” (“The McOndo era has come to a close”) (Gómez Bravo). Throughout those two decades, the reception and visibility of *McOndo* and its writers waxed and waned. Initially, U.S. media outlets appeared to welcome Fuguet and his brethren. He was named one of the top 50 Latin American leaders by both *Time* and *CNN* in 1999; he was featured on the cover of *Newsweek International* in 2002; and his celebrity status was noted by the *New York Times* in 2003 (Reber 201). Meanwhile, the volume garnered little attention in Latin America. Dierdra Reber ascribes this in part to the Argentine economic crisis of 2001, which was blamed on the unsustainability of neoliberal precepts and, ostensibly, brought renewed skepticism upon the lifestyle that *McOndo* was depicting. With a burgeoning leftist resurgence around the region, the argument would have been that “*McOndo* now fell into ideologically enemy territory for having drunk the Fukuyama Kool-Aid of the universal triumph of liberal democracy ... and then getting caught with its pants down when it turned out that history had maybe not ended after all” (201), Rieber writes. While there is no question that the region’s antihegemonic political turn made an outlier of McOndo’s platform of nonjudgmental indifference, this argument submits to a flawed binary: that any depiction of life under neoliberalism that is not explicitly condemnatory is implicitly supportive. In other words, that tasting the Fukuyama Kool-Aid, even if just to describe its flavor, is a sure sign of surrender.

The authors of *McOndo* generally found literary success, despite failing to reach Boom-like levels of notoriety. Fuguet continues to publish his work – his latest novel, *Sudor*, was released in 2016 – and in 2000 he compiled a follow-up anthology, *Se habla español: voces latinas en USA*, which collected depictions of Latin American experiences in the U.S. He also continues his work on film. Among other *McOndo* writers, at least two have garnered comparable levels of attention: Argentina’s Martín Rejtman, who directed a number of acclaimed films and published several short story volumes, and Bolivia’s Edmundo Paz Soldán, who penned a number of well-received novels such as *El Delirio de Turing* (2003) and currently teaches literature at Cornell University. *McOndo* contributors like Rodrigo Fresán, Juan Forn and Jaime Bayly have enjoyed similarly healthy careers.

While Fuguet clung firmly to the notions espoused in his introduction, doubling down on them in his *Foreign Policy* article, it was Paz Soldán who first began to backtrack publicly. In 2005, he referred to himself and his co-McOndians as “young and naïve,” and characterized their response to magical realism as “visceral.” He added: “we have a much more nuanced view of the situation now” (Arias 141). Meanwhile, in a hastily written blog post marking the occasion of *McOndo*’s ten-year anniversary, Fuguet remained defiant:

Me han llegado muchas solicitudes para hablar de *McOndo*, para reeditar *McOndo*¹⁸, etc. Un par de cosas: en efecto, se cumplen este mes 10 años de la aparición del dichoso libro. Creo q pocos libros se han leído peor. Pero da lo

¹⁸ The spelling error is present in Fuguet’s original blog post. It is unclear whether it is intentional – as a brisk, sarcastic dismissal of the requests of “serious” academics and intellectuals – or a simple mistake.

mismo. A aquellos académicos que me preguntan, les respondo: el libro está agotado, debe estar en algunas bibliotecas norteamericanas, y NO será reeditado. Básicamente porque no quiero.

I've received many requests to talk about *McOndo*, to reedit *McOndo*¹⁸, etc. A couple of things: indeed, this month marks 10 years from the appearance of that blessed book. I think few books have been so extensively misread. But it makes no difference. To those academics who keep asking: the book is out of print, it can probably be found in some North American libraries, and it will NOT be republished. Basically because I don't feel like it.

Beneath Fuguet's brash sarcasm ("dichoso libro," "porque no quiero") is a cutting indictment. *McOndo* has been fundamentally misunderstood, he argues. This makes any conversation about the movement – conversations that have dominated much of his career – inherently unproductive, and so Fuguet chooses to end the movement materially, as it began.

Was the end of *McOndo* a direct consequence of falling on the wrong side of history? This appears unlikely. As of this writing, Latin America is once again cozying up to neoliberal policies, with Sebastián Piñera's recent presidency in Chile, Mauricio Macri's climb to power in Argentina, destabilizing pressure against Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and the early end to Dilma Rousseff's government in Brazil, replaced by Michel Temer. It is clear that the movement's perspective is by no means obsolete. If we heed Fuguet's criticism and attempt to read *McOndo* more attentively, focusing on

narrative structure and affective engagement, we find ample signs of discomfort with the region's status quo, a perspective that might still resonate twenty years later.

BREAKING NEOLIBERALISM'S SPELL

“La gente de látex” (“The Latex People”) by the Mexican-born¹⁹ Naief Yehya is prototypically McOndist. In the story, narrated in the first person, a nameless male who earns a living performing roles on Jerry Springer-like talk shows reflects upon a series of sexual encounters with a female colleague. The title transparently declares the story's central preoccupation: the question of artificiality. The protagonist is an avatar of inauthenticity. Buried under layers of makeup and latex, he is paid to act out roles – jealous husband, sexual abuser, serial killer – but does not appear to have a stable center or core of his own, that which we would normally define as authentic. Yehya intensifies this effect by consistently drawing back the story's framing by piling layer upon layer of media: by the end of the story, we are told of a friend of the narrator who makes a living taking photographs of talk show audience members who share their opinions on camera. The simulacrum folds in upon itself, precipitating a *myse en abyme*. For our narrator, the only path to recovering his sense of humanity appears to be through his secret affairs, but the story's final twist – the revelation that the female colleague was in fact a prostitute – pulls us back to the original theme: everything is performance, nothing can be trusted.

One way to process the story's postmodern concerns is by understanding them as an indictment of storytelling itself, both present and past. If life consists of acting out a

¹⁹ Yehya has lived in Brooklyn since 1992 (that is, well before *McOndo* made it to print). Many of the compilation's authors have spent extensive time in the U.S.

series of self-aware roles, with reality always constructed and manipulated, then the fictional representation of this reality (that is, Yehya's own work) can be nothing but. As Linda Hutcheon states, "this does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation" (63). If we were to force Yehya's story into one of the dichotomies that have long dominated McOndo criticism, then this focusing of attention would fall, of course, onto the Boom itself. We might never find out what lies under the layers of latex and makeup, but we are too clever to celebrate others' attempts to imagine that void (because we are enlightened cosmopolitan subjects). Our only source of respite is our shared awareness of the impossibility of drilling down and striking so-called authenticity, hardly a satisfying way to bond.

Regardless of this reading's defensibility, it neglects what, to me, is at the ideological core of McOndo writing: the matter of affect (or absence thereof). Yehya's anhedonic narrator has trouble making friends and building relationships. Of the memory of his sexual encounter, he tells us that "no me queda muy claro qué clase de emociones me produce" (217) ("I'm not sure what kinds of emotions it elicits"). The few episodes that interrupt his emotional blockage are either onanistic – his sexual encounter does not include penetration – or fetishistic – "en una ocasión interpreté a un hombre que amaba demasiado los zapatos de mujer y me excitó muchísimo" (217) ("I once played the part of a man who loved women's shoes too much, and got really turned on"), he tells us. We might be tempted at this point to pursue a classically Marxist reading; to be sure, Yehya

appears to be foregrounding the devastating appeal of commodities, as well as the impossibility of relationships that are not materially mediated.²⁰

But what I see as the true conceit of the piece is introduced in its opening two lines: “Desde niño siempre quise vivir en hoteles. Soñaba con el glamur de las giras, los aviones, la carretera, y la asepsia anónima de los baños recién desinfectados” (215) (“As a child, I always wanted to live in hotels. I dreamed of the glamour of touring, the airplanes, the road, and the sterilized anonymity of freshly disinfected bathrooms”). As an adult, however, this excitement has faded through repetitive, suffocating monotony. The narrator is subjected to extensive makeup application sessions, his meals are rushed, his work hours are burdensome, and he gets little sleep. Aside from the moments of sexual transgression, later revealed to be under false pretenses, his daily routine is unmemorable. He tells us: “a veces trato de recordar cómo se pasaron esos días y no puedo recordar qué hacíamos para matar el tiempo aparte de comer y ver la televisión” (219) (“sometimes I try to remember how I spent those days and I can’t recall what we did to kill time other than eat and watch television”). The narrative arc is one of disillusionment. After an initial infatuation with the spoils of late capitalism – a homogenized, transitory, impersonal environment where one could forget oneself – the narrator reaches maturity and must come to terms with the human cost of this idealized lifestyle. Struggling with affective dulling, he turns to amphetamines, cocaine and alcohol as coping mechanisms. After the story’s final revelation that his sexual partner was a prostitute, we are told that he stops drinking. (Whether it’s for the rest of the night or for the long term is up for interpretation.) The implication here is that something has

²⁰ In Volume 1 of *Das Capital*, Marx writes that “just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand” (772).

snapped. The levels of deception may have become unsustainable, even if temporarily. Despite the open-endedness, this is a remarkably optimistic closing for a McOndo story – change is possible.

This exact tripartite narrative structure – initial naïveté and acceptance of the status quo, then isolation and despondency, and a final, open-ended question mark (“will he walk away?”) – constitutes the basic McOndo template. It reflects the historical circumstances of its writers, as the promises of neoliberalism in the region gave way to its (dis)affective realities. Alberto Fuguet’s own contribution to the volume, entitled “La verdad o las consecuencias” (“Truth or Consequences”), follows the pattern to a tee. The protagonist, Pablo, is a Chilean fruit exporter²¹ who has fled to the U.S., abandoning his wife, Elsa. He feels alienated and uncertain: “a la deriva” (109) (“adrift”), lacking in human contact, “siente que no siente nada, que todo le resbala” (112) (“feeling that he feels nothing, that everything bounces off of him”). He cannot concentrate, he is horrified at the prospect of sharing a room with someone, and he discloses that, even in Chile, he had no intimate relationships – only acquaintances (117). He is currently abstaining from sexual intercourse. He says that left his wife, among other reasons, when he realized he had lost the ability to laugh. Thus far, Pablo neatly embodies the McOndo malaise.

If, as the critical consensus goes, Fuguet unequivocally embraces and celebrates the neoliberal condition, then we would expect Pablo’s journey through the U.S. and Mexico – he spends time in Tucson, then crosses from El Paso to Ciudad Juarez and back, and winds up in a one-traffic-light town in New Mexico named Truth or

²¹ Fuguet’s choice of profession for Pablo appears to be rife with meaning, considering the role of fruit in the exoticizing of Latin America through figures like Carmen Miranda. We are also told that Pablo studied cartography at a private university, which relates to Pablo’s travel writing and possibly to Fuguet’s desire to chart alternative perspectives for the continent.

Consequences – to be rendered as a transcendent experience, one that allows him to connect with the original, lost center. But Fuguet implies nothing of the sort. Pablo’s first encounter with an iconic U.S. landmark – the Grand Canyon – makes him vomit. As he heads west along Route 66, “Pablo siente que ha estado en lugares que le parecen familiares” (110) (“Pablo feels he has been to these places, they seem familiar to him”). This leads Pablo to conclude that “los Estados Unidos le han colonizado su inconsciente” (110) (“the United States has colonized his unconscious”). The language harkens back to Jerry Mander’s prescient 1978 text, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.²² Mander contends that our understanding of the world, especially of places we’ve never visited, is inevitably reliant upon (and limited by) television images, of which we are but passive observers. Our brain does not automatically distinguish between those and real, lived experience. “The natural evolutionary design is for humans to see *all* things as real, since the things that we see have always been real. *Seeing things on television as false and unreal is learned*. It goes against nature” (252), Mander writes. One could surmise that this false/real dichotomy is what causes Pablo’s discomfort at the Grand Canyon and along Route 66. The actual, physical landscape does not replace the mental image, and thus fails to provide a moment of catharsis (so *this* is the real thing!). Sightseeing, like Pablo’s life, is nothing but repetition and performance.

Throughout the story, Pablo performs multiple identities. Each is marked by both television and by travel; the distinction between the two is purposely blurred. He watches a stereotype-laden BBC travel show about Chile where children of *desaparecidos* are interviewed, and the notion of Chileans’ uniquely romantic lifestyle is explored. This does not evoke any nostalgia or resolve his crisis of belonging. Pablo then tries U.S.

²² One of Mander’s four arguments is in fact titled “The Colonization of Experience.”

Latino identity on for size. He watches the news on *Univisión* (124) and decides that his life is lacking in fiery Latin emotion (125). His trip into Ciudad Juarez does not go well – he spends a fearful evening at a seedy bar and is almost not allowed back into the U.S. It is only after reaching Truth or Consequences that his surroundings finally begin to resonate: “el paisaje le recuerda el Cajón del Maipo. Y Siete Tazas. Siete Tazas le gustaba a Elsa” (“the landscape reminds him of the Cajón del Maipo. And of Siete Tazas. Elsa liked Siete Tazas” 129). This leads to the story’s final revelation. Pablo’s travel partner, an Argentine named Adrián, tells him that what ultimately binds us together is fear. Pablo’s reaction is that “por un instante no piensa, solo experiencia algo que no le interesa describir”²³ (132) (“for a moment he doesn’t think, he simply allows himself to experience something he is not interested in deciphering”). His parting thought is that he “podría acostumbrarse a vivir así: enfrentando a la verdad, asumiendo las consecuencias” (132) (“he might get used to living like this: facing the truth, accepting the consequences”). The ending is uncertain, as Pablo *might* have gathered the willpower to face reality (fully encountering its constructedness) and leave behind his Chilean routine for good. The prototypical McOndo narrative structure reappears: youthful acceptance of the status quo, an unhappy early adulthood, and an uncertain breaking point.

As in Yehya’s story, it is all too easy to overlook Fuguet’s subtle but steady undercutting of the neoliberal dream. Again we find an initial fascination with hotels and transitoriness – “Pablo siente que los hoteles son lugares especiales. Está cómodo en ellos” (110) (“Pablo feels that hotels are special places. He is comfortable in them”). But this romantic appeal is literally shot down (among other incidents, a young woman commits suicide in the room next door to Pablo, the bullets making their way into his

²³ The spelling error is present in the original. The collection’s overall editing seems rushed.

room). He rides on a Greyhound bus and feels disappointment: “demasiados perdedores” (110) (“too many losers”), he says. He rents a car that has no miles on it and smells like plastic, but after a few days, “ahora está impregnado a transpiración” (111) (“now it’s soaked in sweat”). Crucially, the moment of revelation does not arrive at any of the grand U.S. sightseeing meccas visited along the way, but in a forlorn town named after a television show, one that captures the uneasy coexistence of reality and representation that McOndo writers consistently thematize, one that is largely insulated from the networks of global capital. The final nugget of enlightenment – that we all live in fear, and that this fear is all we have in common – is hardly an endorsement of life in the mid 1990s. Neither is the story’s underlying exhortation: muster up enough courage to sever all ties and confront the depth of your unhappiness.

A final example of this narrative progression is “Gritos y susurros” (“Screams and Whispers”) by the Uruguayan Gustavo Escanlar, which closes out the volume.²⁴ Once again, the story centers on a male, unnamed first-person narrator connected to the media – a freelance journalist and actor specializing in commercials.²⁵ Lacking better job opportunities, the man accepts a position as editor of the personal ad section of a newspaper. He begins doctoring the ads to increase their shock value and, concurrently, he decides to explore his own sexuality by pursuing encounters with male ad submitters. Those experiences tend to be short-lived or truncated. He dates a female newspaper

²⁴ Escanlar, who worked in radio, television and newspapers in his native Uruguay, died in 2010. He is, to this point, the only deceased author among those included in the original compilation.

²⁵ Much of the era’s cinema also focuses on the experiences of the creative class under neoliberalism. See Sánchez Prado, Ignacio. *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.

employee, but is unsatisfied with the relationship.²⁶ After finding out that the government was planning to censor the personal ads section, the narrator quits his job, severing all the relationships it entailed. He says: “No fui más, sencillamente. Me fui sin saludar. Me gusta irme así de los lugares, de las vidas” (255) (“I simply stopped going. I left without saying goodbye. I like to leave places, to leave lives that way”). Many of the essential McOndo themes are present in Escanlar’s story: the need for (and impossibility of) connection in an isolating age; the malleability of so-called reality, particularly through the media; and the burden of a stultifying routine. For the third time, we encounter the same structure: initial acceptance of the status quo, increasing dissatisfaction and emotional distance, and an uncertain ending that hints at possible long-term change.

By no means do I intend to argue that, despite these overt similarities, all McOndo stories follow the same template. The compilation hosts a variety of themes and styles, a heterogeneity that is more notable in the case of non-Southern Cone authors. Instead, my argument is simple: That in presenting the unreflective acceptance of the neoliberal lifestyle as deeply disabling on a personal level and as an impairment that must be overcome, McOndo authors *are* in fact taking a political stance, despite Fuguet’s claims to the contrary. Thus, we should be wary of the claims of literary critics who accuse McOndians of being “hijos obedientes del neoliberalismo” (Palaversich 48) (“obedient children of neoliberalism”) or who assert that *McOndo* “wholeheartedly embraces the fact of United States-dominated globalization,” accepting “the very forces that were seeking to commodify them” (Rieber 200). If McOndism arises from a need to combat artistic isolation and emotional disconnection, its members are unlikely to celebrate the

²⁶ In characterizing this woman’s alleged mediocrity, the narrator mentions her love of Luis Miguel. Perhaps McOndo writers *do* pass judgment at times.

very conditions that brought about this moment of crisis. We might wonder whether the vehement critical backlash could have been avoided through a more explicit ideological positioning, but we must keep in mind that such candidness would have carried a high price tag.

A WHOLE CONSTELLATION OF THINGS

In *The Ends of Literature*, Brett Levinson declares that the Latin American Boom constituted the final great literary movement of the West.²⁷ Historically, he argues, literature (as a category) served as agent of revolution or conservation (or both). In the case of the Boom, revolution itself became marketable, and those two functions became indistinguishable. At that blurred juncture, “literature ceases both to sustain and disrupt the social dichotomies upon which the globe banks and thus concludes its modern function” (28). Regardless of how Levinson’s bold prediction pans out, it helps us debunk the allegedly anomalous nature of McOndo, as it clearly replicates the methods of the Boom. McOndo’s subtle literary disruption, both revolution and conservation, was rewarded with fleeting notoriety. If the Boom marked the end of literature, then McOndo returns our attention to that cauterized wound.

McOndism’s strategy of selling itself as an antidote to the reductively commodifying strategies of literary modernity was self-defeating: it was inevitable that the movement would find *itself* commodified and misread. McOndo’s authors may have knowingly put themselves in that position, forced to choose between obscurity and self-

²⁷ Despite the fact that the book is subtitled *The Latin American “Boom” in the Neoliberal Marketplace*, Levinson makes no mention of the McOndo generation. This might speak to McOndo’s lack of legitimacy within the academy, or simply to Levinson’s personal interests.

promotion. More concerning, however, is the possibility that generations of emergent authors can no longer relate to each other but as commodities or consumers, as Fuguet's description of the binding elements of the McOndo generation (films, books and television) suggests is the case. This realization, buttressed by the detached, unfulfilling nature of their narratives, should compel us to deal with these works on their own terms, as a direct reflection of their historical context. Marking the Boom as an end point for global literary movements may lead us to ignore McOndo altogether, categorizing it as an opportunist fad that takes advantage of market structures. Rather, it may be time to pursue a redefinition of the term. Should the process of gathering like-minded artists automatically be termed a movement (is *any* attempt at community formation inherently revolutionary in an atomizing age)? Must every movement carry a clear-cut political or social justice stance? Must every movement work outside the system in its efforts to subvert it?²⁸ And what if the movement's ideology has no impact on reality, other than boosting visibility? Does that render it inauthentic, or less desirable? Who decides?

The reluctance of McOndians to claim a higher purpose beyond their comparatively pragmatic point about realistic representations of Latin America leaves us on unsteady ground, as do their stories. But rather than blame this alleged passivity on intellectual laziness or fear of commitment, we might more generously perceive it as a response to what Levinson refers to as the *aporia* of Latin Americanism:

²⁸ This question is central not just to McOndism, but to popular music around the time of *McOndo*'s publication. Curtis White cites Nirvana and Radiohead as examples of bands attempting to evade commodification by producing commodities. White writes: "The crazy-making irony is that this intent cannot be realized in the only context in which it is possible even to express the intent" (56).

What to do, what to write, when the differences between the literary and the cultural, between the state-form and the poststate, between totality and fragmentation slip away and lose legitimacy – yet, when any effort to make a transition beyond them, to pronounce their conclusion, cannot help but violently (or silently) resurrect and reestablish their ineffective corpses? (9)

This impossibility of movement in the face of the rising neoliberal tide constitutes the heart of the McCondian condition. Fuguet's short story *La verdad o las consecuencias* opens with the following lines: "Pablo siente que todo esto es un paréntesis.... En vez de actuar, esperas. Esperas que el boomerang se devuelva y cierre lo que le costó tan poco abrir. ... Pablo siente que este tiempo muerto se está alargando más de lo conveniente. Se está acostumbrando. Eso es lo que más le asusta." (109) ("Pablo feels this is all a parenthesis ... instead of acting, you wait. You wait for the boomerang to return and close off what it so easily opened up. ... Pablo feels this dead time is stretching beyond what is convenient. He is getting used to it. That is what scares him the most"). It is the waiting that we see rendered aesthetically over and again, and in its indefinite prolongation we find, at last, the act of resistance.

CHAPTER TWO

LATINO/AMERICANISM IN THE MAINSTREAM: DIAZ, DANTICAT AND THE M.F.A. GENERATION

This in fact ... is the constitutional paradox of creative writing – that it wants to bring the metaphysical outside in.

Mark McGurl

At the turn of the millennium, U.S. Latino/a academic extraordinaire Ilan Stavans published a short story entitled “Xerox Man.” Its protagonist is a character named Reuben Staflovich, an Argentine-born orthodox Jew living in New York City. Staflovich, we find out, has been arrested for stealing rare Jewish texts from museums and universities, photocopying them in their entirety – throwing out, each time, a single, random copied page – and then burning the originals in trash cans. The narrator recalls Staflovich’s personal philosophy as follows: “Something along the lines that the world in which we live – or better: in which we’ve been forced to live – is a Xerox of a lost original. Nothing in it is authentic; everything is a copy of a copy” (304). His sense of alienation might be explained away, predictably, by the move from Argentina to the U.S. But Stavans adds another wrinkle: With the original Jewish diaspora as one of the classic exilic dispersals, Staflovich can be understood to be twice removed from his imagined source, explaining his Baudrillardian obsession with imitation. “I hated my orthodox Jewish education in Buenos Aires,” he complains. “Everything in it was derivative. The Spanish-speaking Americas are pure imitation. They strive to be like Europe, like the

United States, but never will be” (306). It is not the South-to-North relocation that has destabilized Staflovich’s sense of world. Rather, it is the memory of the initial diasporic scattering: the severing of the present from an imagined ancestral past.

That Stavans, who has been tasked with editing the recently released *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, allegorizes questions of belonging, authenticity and existential angst without appealing to binary North-South identities is outside the norm for contemporary U.S. Latino/a Studies. The field has gathered an unprecedented cultural cachet thanks to a generation of writers who have shed the activist foundations of the discipline, operating, in part, within the long history of imperial emissaries attempting to render the exotic Americas for thirsty readers in the manner of Christopher Columbus or Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. This collective shares a number of basic characteristics: born abroad but raised in the U.S. from a young age, trained in M.F.A. programs, and authoring thoroughly researched, historically contextualized migrant narratives of suffering in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their work, which sets out to empower Latino/a communities at home and denounce injustice abroad, has, like all discourses, its flip side: Not only is it prone to essentializing gestures as it depicts life south of the border, but it engages with a complex system of rewards and concessions to achieve visibility in a crowded literary market.

The torchbearers of this shift, I argue, are the Dominican-born author Junot Díaz and the Haitian-born author Edwidge Danticat – the former a Pulitzer Prize winner, both of them MacArthur Fellows. In exploring the recent transformations that have facilitated their mainstreaming, I focus on three basic plot points: the development of U.S. Latino/a identity, the repackaging of the Latin American testimonial, and the legacy of the Latin

American Boom. I believe that these three frames allow us to track the rise of Díaz, Danticat and their peers in relation to the marketing and publication maneuvers that have expanded their readership. Breaking down the mechanisms of exposure for this Caribbean-U.S. collective leads us back to the question of representation and authenticity raised by Stavans: What costs have Díaz and Danticat incurred along the path to notoriety, and to what extent are these a prerequisite for carving out a voice in contemporary identity construction?

I position Díaz and Danticat as emblematic of a movement that begins during the 1990s, peaks in the mid-2000s, and is largely premised upon biographical commonality. Díaz was raised in New Jersey from age 6 onward (Gross).²⁹ He attended college at Rutgers University, completed an M.F.A. degree at Cornell, and has taught creative writing at M.I.T. for more than a decade. Danticat was raised in Brooklyn from age 12 onward (Jaggi), graduated from Barnard College, earned her M.F.A. from Brown University and taught creative writing at NYU and the University of Miami. Díaz was born in 1968; Danticat in 1969. Their peers include authors like Jhumpa Lahiri (born in London in 1967, moved to the U.S. at 2, completed an M.F.A. at Boston University), Daniel Alarcón (born in Lima in 1977, moved to the U.S. at 3, completed an M.F.A. at the University of Iowa), and Rivka Galchen (born in Toronto in 1976, moved to the U.S. at 5, completed an M.F.A. at Columbia University). These authors perform a complicated dance, alternating between insider and outsiderism, insistent on rendering difference via victimized migrant or foreign protagonists – what I call *disarming* difference, one that often charms readers at the cost of silencing the represented. Here we find this

²⁹ Díaz's brief biography on the MacArthur Foundation's web site incorrectly states that he has been in the U.S. "since adolescence." The suggestion of extra time spent in the Dominican Republic feeds into the idea of Díaz as organic intellectual, to put it in Gramscian terms.

generation's unifying trait, outside of personal trajectory: the acceptance of cultural commodification in the name of visibility, sustained by the skillful use of media and academic networks to push each other's projects.

Even as I propose that the rise of this migrant M.F.A. cohort marks an exceptional moment for ethnic literature in general and for U.S. Latino/a Studies in particular, I resist the idea that Danticat and Díaz's writing constitutes a demonstrably "new" American³⁰ (that is, U.S.) literature (Mermann-Jozwiak), categorically unlike what came before, providing English-speaking academics with long-awaited access to the realities of Latin America or the Caribbean. Díaz, Danticat and their peers, despite the ample merits of their work, cannot entirely evade the trappings of instrumentalized multiculturalism, or embody a relentlessly hybrid site of resistance. If one of the central purposes of migrant representation is empathy – that is, migrant authors want readers to learn about the hardships of a fictional migrant community so that its members may be encountered with more generosity in real life – then unabashed (though well-intentioned) narratives of victimhood may backfire entirely. Without a healthy dose of readerly skepticism, the communities in question might be perceived as damaged goods with no true agency or, its equivalent, as exotic birds whose song can only be rendered intelligible by their U.S.-educated interpreters.

³⁰ I use "America" to refer to the continent and "U.S." to the country. When another author uses "American" to refer to the U.S., as in this instance, I will note the intention. For more on these conflicting labels and their academic implications see McClennen, Sophia. "Inter-American studies or Imperial American studies?" *Comparative American Studies* 3.4 (2005): 393-413.

THE NEW LATINAMERICANISM

Throughout this chapter I will address representations of U.S. migrant communities, of Caribbean populations, and of Latin America as a whole. This contextual slipperiness is by necessity: the authors in question are commonly read not only as informative of the U.S. migrant experience (Díaz on behalf of U.S.-Dominican communities, Danticat on behalf of U.S.-Haitian communities, and both as representative of a larger Caribbean context) but are often understood to provide privileged insight into life in Latin America and the Global South. In an attempt to develop a theoretical frame for such an analysis, I turn to Nestor García Canclini who, writing in the early 1990s, addressed the challenges inherent in narrating multiculturalism. At the time, Canclini noted an opposition between new academic approaches that theorized hybrid, transnational identities, and on-the-ground realities, where ethnic and national conflicts refused to abate. This was, in some sense, a self-created struggle: Literary studies had been historically complicit in driving this identitarian segmentation, structuring society by creating narrow (usually national or language-based) communities of belonging (10). As made clear by Benedict Anderson, all forms of community building require some manifestation of difference, and making this difference explicit is a double-edged move: strengthening bonds at the center is often premised upon the exclusion of those removed from the identitarian paradigm. Yet even as academia celebrated the gradual decline of rigid national monoidentities, Canclini argues, new strategies arose to suppress the polyphony of Latin American culture. He writes:

Me parece que la operación que ha logrado más verosimilitud es el fundamentalismo macondista: congela lo “latinoamericano” como santuario de la naturaleza premoderna y sublima a este continente como el lugar en el que la violencia social es hechizada por los afectos, reúne textos de países muy diversos, desde los de Carpentier a los de García Márquez, de los de Vargas Llosa a los de Isabel Allende y Laura Esquivel, y los encarrila en un solo paradigma de recepción, que es también un solo modo de situar la heterogeneidad de América Latina en la globalización cultural. (11)

I believe that the strategy that has achieved the most verisimilitude is Macondist fundamentalism: It freezes the “Latin American” as a sanctuary of premodern nature and sublimates the continent as the place where social violence is bewitched by affection; it gathers texts from very diverse countries, from Carpentier to García Márquez, from Vargas Llosa to Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, and funnels them into a single paradigm of reception, which is also a way of positioning Latin America’s heterogeneity within globalized culture.³¹

Not only does M.F.A.-driven migrant literature reach its contemporary audience through the recycling of magical realist tropes, among other strategies – engaging in a form of Macondist fundamentalism – but the general reticence of literary critics to dwell upon market demands for these types of narratives counteracts their very attempt to outline and celebrate alternatives to the hegemonic model. This does not mean that Macondist fundamentalism cannot be deployed productively, as Díaz and Danticat bring renewed

³¹ All translations are my own unless specified.

scrutiny to past and present human rights violations: the dictatorships of Rafael Trujillo and François Duvalier,³² and the mistreatment of Dominican and Haitian migrants, among other topics. But to pretend their novels exist in a vacuum is disingenuous.

How, then, can one begin to disassemble Macondist fundamentalism? For Canclini, it is through an emphasis on multimedia and multicontextuality. That is: thinking about the platforms through which identity is reified and circulated, and thinking about the conditions that surround its circulation. Contemporary identity is a co-production, Canclini tells us. It is generated through narrative conversation. Yet this conversation does not always take place on a level playing field: “Una teoría de las identidades debe tomar en cuenta los modos diversos en que éstas se recomponen en los desiguales circuitos de producción, comunicación y apropiación de la cultura” (14) (“A theory of identities must take into account the diverse ways in which these are reassembled within the unequal circuits of productions, communication, and cultural appropriation”), Canclini writes. This conversational imbalance has been studied through a number of protean perspectives. Through the work of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group – focusing on *how* and *why* the so-called subaltern is rendered in academia – and of scholars like Alberto Moreiras, who employed a deconstructive lens to get at issues of difference in representation, “Latin American cultural studies reached a high level of theoretical sophistication, critical sharpness, and methodological flexibility” (Trigo 367). Of these various methods, perhaps the one most central to this study falls broadly under the umbrella of Latinamericanism. Extending from Edward Said’s

³² With the obvious risk that the Trujillo/Sauron hybrid in *Oscar Wao* might be perceived by U.S. readers simply as a dastardly fictional figment, a Third World bogeyman.

Orientalism through the work of Enrico Mario Santí, it asks us to think about the ways in which Latin America is imagined and represented from centers of power.³³

Scholars throughout the continent have identified several recurring tropes in representations of Latin Americans, as in the following listing by Hugo Achúgar: “Cannibals, barbarians, natives, savages, subalterns, slaves, ‘people without history,’ marginalized, colonized, dominated; the list of descriptions or assessments of some of the characters of Latin American history – heroes or villains, depending on the storyteller – is even longer” (671). John Beverley has extended this mode of inquiry to academic discourse itself, noting the characteristic tropes in the work of Moreiras and the other drivers of what he calls second-wave Latinamericanist deconstruction: “post-dictatorship, trauma, mourning and melancholy, ‘inoperative community,’ ‘savage hybridity,’ the ‘remainder’ or fragment, the ruin, the residue, the margin, allegory” (55). Beverley proposes that a self-critique of academic reason is vital to enable a possible alliance “between the progressive sectors of the intelligentsia and social movements” (24).

One of few scholars who have attempted to place Danticat and Díaz within a larger framework – that of Latinamericanist representation, and of its market and academic incentives – is Elena Machado Sáez. She defines her notion of “market aesthetics” as the ways in which “the style and the content of the historical fiction articulate a conflict between the pedagogical ethical imperative and the market lens of the reader” (1). Machado Sáez argues that recent multicultural historical fiction, which includes Danticat and Díaz, is premised upon creating historical counternarratives. These

³³ A more tongue-in-cheek definition by Emil Volek: “*Latin Americanism, Ltd.*, natural and prodigal *kin* (to avoid the gender-biased ‘son’) of Hispanism, modern blend of *marxondismo*, destined for consumption in U.S. Spanish graduate programs, and methodologically circumscribed by diverse *post-s*. Harmless if not swallowed” (38).

writers, aware of and concerned by the commodification of their work and the compromises inherent in reaching wider audiences, use that very tension – pushing for new readings while knowing they will quickly be categorized and marketed – as creative inspiration. Machado Sáez identifies what she sees as moments of conflict within their works, opening a conversation between market and text that reminds us that these authors are neither cynical strategists who pursue market segmentation for their own gain, nor naive purveyors of uncomplicated transnational narratives.

In addition to Machado Sáez's work, a concept that can add nuance to our understanding of the output of the M.F.A. collective is that of the discursive threshold, which comes to us from Human Rights Studies. According to Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, this threshold is the point at which “local movements that ‘go national’ or ‘international’ ... generate climates that enable the reception and recognition of new stories” (16). If we take for a fact that writers like Danticat and Díaz seek to give a voice to their birth communities and to their peers in diaspora, we can understand their poetics as an effort to bring attention to other, similar stories. Further, in order to be heard in the first place, they must adopt narrative strategies that match the previous mainstream literary threshold, largely created by the Boom. If their chosen modes of representation run against audience expectations, they risk having their knowledge of their home countries questioned or outright ignored¹⁰. Thus, I do not mean to be condemnatory when I contextualize these narratives within the geographic expansion of U.S. literary studies and the mainstreaming of post-Civil-Rights multiculturalism. These texts are a product of their time through and through, born from the uneasy confluence of Latinamericanist representation and the manufacturing of U.S. Latino/a identity.

LABELING LATINOS/AS

The idea of an overarching ethnic category that encompasses all U.S. residents of Latin American descent is a recent development, launched by federal agencies in the 1970s (Dávila 2). The official census category of “Hispanic” – first appearing in 1980 – has, increasingly, taken a back seat to the term “Latino/a,” more intimately connected to activist resistance. Both terms attempt to consolidate a diverse array of distinct communities under one designation, although their criteria are not always explicit: any group can be included or excluded based on language of origin, geographic location, race, and cultural traditions, among other factors. Certain nations – Brazil or Haiti, for instance – have tended to find themselves repeatedly at the margins of an already tenuous category. What began as an essentialist attempt to establish common characteristics has found different points of contact throughout the past four decades, perhaps chief among them a common history of oppression – one of European colonization followed by U.S. intervention – and the pan-American ideals espoused by figures like Simón Bolívar and José Martí. More recently, concepts such as *latinidad* have emphasized the constructedness of collectivity formation, where belonging is circumstantially deployed or performed. Despite their reservations, most academics have embraced the Latino/a or Hispanic rubric even as they seek to complicate it. Marta Caminero-Santangelo, autor of 2007’s *On Latinidad*, reveals that “ironically, strategically accepting the to-some-degree hegemonically constructed, homogenizing category of ‘Latino’ allows me to undermine the category’s homogenizing tendencies” (218).

Even so, the categorization continues to thrive in arenas such as public policy and marketing, the latter of which has proven to be inextricably linked to the development of Latino/a public image. In *Latinos, Inc.* Arlene Dávila argues that “the reconstitution of individuals into consumers and populations into markets are central fields of cultural production” (2). In that spirit, she traces the first appearance, in the 1960s, of the networks that would become *Univisión* and *Telemundo*, as well as the establishment of the first explicitly Hispanic advertising agency in 1962, the addition of ethnic marketing departments for U.S. multinationals in the 1980s, and the appearance of Spanish-language offshoots of mass media staples like *People en Español*, among other significant events. More specific to this study, Dávila sees the construction of a marginal Latino/a consumer as serving to maintain the fiction of white, heterosexual, mainstream U.S. identity. “It is not the actual difference of the ‘ethnic consumer’ that sustains ethnic marketing and customized marketing efforts but contemporary U.S. society’s demand for exotic and segregated others” (219), Dávila writes. Much as ethnic marketing acts as an agent of social regulation, I see the recent batch of M.F.A. migrant narratives as participants in a comparable process of national reassurance.

In academia, the notion of a pan-U.S. Latino/a identity has been approached through a variety of theoretical lenses. In *Latino Dreams*, for instance, Paul Allatson begins with the premise that, historically, there has never been a stable, clearly delineated distinction between English-speaking North America and the rest of the continent. As participants in a ceaseless battle of myth, ideology and cultural logic, U.S. Latinos “struggle for leverage over what the U.S. state signifies in an imaginary sense” (23). In order to combat the “U.S.-centric gaze” (31) that pushes Latino/a literature to the

periphery, Allatson turns to Fernando Ortiz's notion of transculturation, locating texts that might challenge the virtual contours of the United States. Like Allatson, a significant number of recent studies make use of Ortiz's concepts, as well as Ángel Rama's subsequent extension. Ortiz sought to find a more fluid term – replacing the one-sided “acculturation” – to describe the phases of exchange between cultures, particularly during waves of migration. Transculturation is seen as failed if one of the cultures perishes, and, under non-failing conditions, entails a loss of preexisting cultural traits with the development of new ones. For Ortiz, the intensity and frequency of this process in the Caribbean was unprecedented: “Toda la escala cultural que Europa experimentó en más de cuatro milenios, en Cuba se pasó en menos de cuatro siglos” (138) (“The entire cultural spectrum experienced by Europe in more than four millenia took place in Cuba in less than four centuries”). Given the volume of population flow and the variety of Latin American communities resettling within the U.S. throughout the 20th century, Ortiz's ideas serve as a logical touchstone for charting these experiences.

Other theorists have honed in on the figure of the hyphen as a metaphor for the tension between each of the national cultures that contest each other in the context of a larger sense of identity. Stavans has described this state as “to exist in constant confusion, to be a hybrid, in constant change, eternally divided, much like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (13). In the Cuban-American context, this condition was famously explored by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in 1994's *Life on the Hyphen*. While acknowledging a sense of fracture and incompleteness, Pérez Firmat emphasizes the capacity of immigrant generations to navigate multiple cultures, strategically evading marginality and engaging in skilled translation: “More than one, less than two” (5), he writes. By dwelling on exilic

sentiment and split identities, approaches like Pérez Firmat's, informed by a specific community, could be extrapolated to other Latino/a populations. Stavans explicitly adopted this mission: "My overall hope is to demonstrate that we Latinos have an abundance of histories, linked to a common root but with decisively different traditions" (20), he writes. The unifying effort sidesteps political realities and social justice goals by invoking the realm of personal psychology: in the uncertainty of the individual lies the root, the binding material of the U.S. Latino/a collective. Stavans's introduction to the Norton Anthology is entitled, fittingly, "The Search for Wholeness."

SHAPING THE LATINO/A CANON

More pragmatically, attempts to organize Latino/a writing into a fixed canon have had to contend with its explicitly counter-canonical origins. Historically excluded from both U.S. and Latin American literary anthologies – the first two editions of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, in 1979 and 1985, did not include any writers of Latin American heritage other than William Carlos Williams (Dalleo 386) – Latino/a writers began garnering some degree of visibility on the heels of the Civil Rights movement. Small-scale, geographically and ethnically arranged anthologies of Nuyorican and Chicano writing were published in the early 1970s, among them *Aztlan: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (1972), *From the Barrio: A Chicano Anthology* (1973), and *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature* (1974) (Machado Sáez 2). The mid 1970s are often characterized as a dividing line, from marginalized resistance to more apolitical market success. Soon thereafter, during the early 1980s, we see the first efforts

to consolidate what had been until then approached as separate units – Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans – under the banner of Hispanic identity (Stavans 11). An ascent toward academic and critical legitimacy is evident in the types of anthologies published from the 1990s on: *Masterpieces of Latino Literature* (1994); *The Latino Reader: An American Literary Tradition from 1542 to the Present* (1997); *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature* (2005), culminating with the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011) (Machado Sáez 2). The latter has, as previously mentioned, been edited by Stavans, a professor of Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College and arguably the most influential figure in the field. Stavans emphasizes a politics of linguistic and cultural infiltration over one of overt opposition, and optimistically circulates immigrant success stories: “The vanishing of a collective identity – Hispanics as eternally oppressed – necessarily implies the creation of a refreshingly different self” (18), he writes. This “multiculturalist orientation” (6), as Machado Sáez puts it, closely matches Danticat and Díaz’s biographies, and even extends to their narratives, premised upon code mixing, cultural learning through travel and a variety of influences that far exceed the early precepts of Latino/a activism.

The publication of the Norton anthology constitutes a watershed moment for Latino/a literature, although its potential long-term impact is still to be seen. In an essay entitled “What Was Latino Literature?” Kirsten Silva Gruesz presents it as an end point, critiquing the anthology’s organizing principles, periodization and identity groupings, and its inclusion of a vast number of English translations. Silva Gruesz argues that the project comes too late, as ethnic literature can no longer serve to advance a collective political project, having been subsumed by market forces. Simultaneously, she adds, it

comes too early, as Latino/a literary history cannot yet be rendered as a coherent narrative arc that tracks its development. As to its present purpose, Silva Gruesz understands the volume as a marker of respectability: “The satisfying heft of those pages constitutes proof that Latino literature *was*. The unanswered question of *what* it was seems beside the point” (340), she writes. Raphael Dalleo reaches a more ambivalent conclusion, as he identifies the historic Latino/a canon as one in a constant state of flux, where editors often selected authors based on newness or underrepresentation, often leading to an erasure rather than an expansion. “The frequently stated goal of *supplementing* prior canons ultimately translates into *supplanting* them” (394), Dalleo writes. The question now, for Dalleo and for the rest of us, is whether the Norton anthology will mark the end of this process of replacement or find itself unseated by a future collection. And, if it is indeed an endpoint, we might wonder to what extent it has been catalyzed by the generational turnover of Danticat, Díaz and their peers.

THE DIAZ-DANTICAT PROJECT

The year 2007, I argue, marked the flashpoint of this shift, as Díaz published his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Danticat released a novel of her own, a part-memoir, part-nonfiction account entitled *Brother, I'm Dying*. Both are intergenerational migrant narratives. In *Oscar Wao*, the Dominican-born titular character struggles with life in the U.S., returning to his native land in an attempt to lose his virginity. He is killed after he accomplishes his objective, the latest in a series of tragedies that befall several members of his family, their lives set against the backdrop of

the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. The entire account is premised upon the notion that the American continent itself, and not just Oscar's family, is suffering from a *fukú*, or curse. In *Brother*, Danticat tells of her own family's difficult transition from Haiti to the U.S., with the focus eventually shifting to her uncle, Joseph Dantica, who in 2004 was detained in Miami while trying to flee violence in Haiti and died under opaque circumstances in an immigration prison. Despite the dense emotional content inherent in these stories of trauma and oppression, both texts are heavily annotated, often taking on a scholarly tone. Díaz opts for footnotes, while Danticat references newspaper articles and legal transcripts. They often perform the work of historians and journalists, even as they refuse to label themselves as either.

Both texts won the National Book Critics Circle Award that year – Díaz in fiction, Danticat in the memoir category. After that came a slew of awards, media interest and critical attention. Díaz took home the Pulitzer Prize the following year, and was named a MacArthur Fellow (also known as the “genius grant”) in 2012, joining Danticat, who was inducted in 2009. In June 2007, on the *New Yorker* magazine's fiction podcast, Díaz read one of his own short stories, and Danticat was invited to discuss it with the podcast's host, Deborah Treisman.³⁴ In December of 2009, Díaz made another appearance, this time to read Danticat's short story “Water Child.” In March of 2013 it was Danticat's turn to read (she selected a piece by Jamaica Kincaid). And in February of 2017, Díaz was featured for a third time, discussing another Danticat story, “Seven.” Meanwhile, attention from literary critics surged. A cursory search of the MLA International Bibliography reveals over 100 articles devoted to Díaz, and over 200 to Danticat. In

³⁴ See Castro, Anne. “Caribbean Collusion: Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat and the *New Yorker* Fiction Podcast.” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 32.2 (2013): 11-26.

broader, more interdisciplinary databases, we find totals of up to five times that number. In 2015, a BBC poll of U.S. critics declared *Oscar Wao* the best novel of the 21st century (Flood).

The popularity and alleged newness of the genre is premised, in part, on a dialectical engagement with several preceding literary strains. Their work can be situated in at least four broad sites: 1) among historical Latin American migrant fiction that comments on life in the U.S., as in Jose Martí's writing; 2) among the production of the Caribbean diaspora, in particular that of foreign-educated émigrés such as Aimé Césaire, who re-examine life in their countries of origin; 3) among young, cosmopolitan U.S. writers excavating their roots, such as Jonathan Safran Foer; and 4) among the updated production of the magical realists, still heavily influenced by the legacy of Gabriel García Márquez. This is hardly an exhaustive list: one can group these novels through language, race, gender, etc. This is a testament to their inarguable complexity. Yet multiple contradictions arise as soon as we begin to scrutinize each of these groupings.

Although Díaz and Danticat are, by strict definition, Latin American migrants, the fact that they do not write in their native language would preclude their presence in many studies of the genre. Their status is tenuous: Perhaps they can best be identified as members of Generation 1.5, a term coined by Rubén Rumbaut. In his recent comprehensive study of Hispanic immigrant literature study, Nicolás Kanellos specifically excludes "writers who were born or socialized in the United States and write in English" (9). Other studies err on the side of inclusivity, eliding the terms "migrant" and "marginalized" or "understudied", and privileging the output of English-language,

second-generation authors. Kanellos argues that these sorts of studies “negate the roots and history of the Hispanic communities in the United States” (13).

Even if we take for granted that Díaz and Danticat belong in migrant literature, we would still have to struggle with a more refined classification. Kanellos suggests three possible categories for the production of migrant authors: native texts – that is, texts that take place mostly in the U.S. and seek to set off cultural change inside the country; immigrant texts – those that yearn for the homeland and want to recreate it in the U.S. by building bridges; and exile texts – those that yearn for return to the point of origin, expressing disillusionment with life in the U.S. The largely negative portrayals of their homelands in Danticat and Díaz (armed conflict, poverty and authoritarianism in *Brother*; chauvinism, hypersexuality and authoritarianism in *Oscar Wao*) makes them unlikely candidates for the exile category. But their work does present aspects of both native and immigrant texts. One can try to force them into the antihegemonic ethos of a “stateless, nonassimilating migrant” (Lomas ix) like José Martí in the late 19th century;³⁵ yet the fit is imperfect, as they are, perhaps, thematically closer to the novels of Julia Alvarez or Oscar Hijuelos, both second-generation authors, whom Kanellos describes as following “the well-worn path of American ethnic autobiography and the American Dream myth” (13). Still, the rags-to-riches approach does not entirely fit the mold, as the stories Díaz and Danticat circulate are often ones of irreconcilable conflicts of identity, or an inability to cross borders, even as their personal biographies tell a different story. What we might begin to sense, here, is the extent to which the critical framing of their narratives plays a central role in how their content is received.

³⁵ Danticat gestures in this direction with the title of 2010’s *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*.

ACADEMIA AND CIRCULAR CRITICISM

While a full survey of migration and ethnic studies as they have developed in the U.S. is beyond the scope of this study, a basic understanding of the growth of these fields can help illustrate how they condition the production and reception of M.F.A. migrant texts, implicitly vetting their authenticity and relevance.³⁶ Going forward, I will generally refer to migration discourse as an umbrella term that encompasses a series of overlapping approaches, such as border, diaspora, cultural, ethnic, postcolonial and subaltern studies. I do not mean to dismiss the particularities of each of these but, rather, I wish to highlight a few common aspects that I believe have deeply shaped the present U.S. critical and editorial market.

There are two historical points of departure that may serve as markers in our discussion. One is the emergence of the notion of cultural pluralism in the 1920s, often attributed to philosopher Horace Kallen, where ethnic groups are to be understood as collective individuals. This leads into what we currently understand as multiculturalism, where each of these well-defined collectives are, in what appears a contradictory move, assimilated into the nation as Other – simultaneously member and marginalized observer. In academia, critical discourse begins to address this process by exploring culture and identity through the lens of difference. The second moment is the appearance and expansion of creative writing programs housed in universities, with particular force from the 1950s onward, which Mark McGurl refers to as “the most important event in postwar American literary history” (ix). The study and production of difference enables “a new

³⁶ By authenticity I mean verisimilitude, i.e. coming off as intuitively credible or naturalized. I do not intend to jump down the rabbit hole of representational accuracy.

way of accumulating symbolic capital in the fervently globalizing U.S. academy, pointing scholars toward valuable bodies of expertise they might claim as their own” (333) and kicking off, for authors, “a process of self-commodification” (337). In fact, the line between authors, critics and professors becomes increasingly blurred. The major figures of Chicano/a literature – Rolando Hinojosa, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros, among others – were all U.S. academics, as were their critics (332). M.F.A. programs begin to encourage minority students to find and develop a uniquely ethnic voice, often a way of responding to the overwhelmingly white constituency of each cohort.³⁷

These minority writing efforts find a degree of disciplinary kinship in migration discourse and related fields, premised upon the hope that an emphasis on crossing boundaries can help construct a messier picture, one of negotiation, performance and flux. Marie Louise Pratt suggests an approach revolving around what she terms the contact zone, “intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy” (37). The construction of a double identity is encouraged in this environment of multivalent dislocation, as in Anzaldúa’s description of the new *mestiza* as someone who “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity ... nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (79). Soon after the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera* in 1987, her call is taken up by

³⁷ In a *New Yorker* article entitled “MFA vs. POC,” Díaz takes M.F.A. programs to task for their lack of ethnic diversity: “Simply put: I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color – that did not in other words include me.” A subsequent *New York Times* article reported that Díaz’s cohort was “100 percent writers of color” (Capuzzi Simon) and that Díaz neglected to include this information.

academics such as Emily Hicks, who seize upon the trope of border crossing. Border crossers, Hicks tells us, are “both ‘self’ and ‘other’,” emerging “from double strings of signifiers of two sets of referential codes, from both sides of the border” (xxvi). In the wake of postcolonial theory, a new subject is born: partially A, partially B, always in between.

Elements of border theory have taken on both metaphorical resonance – latent in concepts such as hybridity and in Homi Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space – and geographic utility, circumscribed to specific border locations, as in the work of Claudia Sadowski-Smith, who associates border fictions at the U.S.-Mexico dividing line with “resistance to U.S. empire” (9), affirming that they “collectively move beyond dominant conceptualizations of who inhabits and can speak for the border” (11). These sweeping proclamations are not without their problems. Border discourse often does not fully overcome the affixing, stereotyping proclivities of previous frames. It tends to reinforce simplistic notions of two-sided cultural fragmentation, while downplaying the performative aspects of claiming a border identity. And it often condones an uneasy reconciliation, or a coexistence of these fragments, as a possible solution, while overlooking the external pressures that condition the process. These elements take center stage in the narratives of Danticat and Díaz, who come to the U.S. in the context of massive northward population flows. As of 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that about 1.7 million individuals of Dominican descent were present in the U.S., while Haitians numbered almost 1 million in 2010. Although the U.S. does not share a land-based border with Haiti and the Dominican Republic, their proximity, as well as the scale of circulation, makes the tools of border analysis broadly applicable.

In this context, we might begin to see the success of Díaz and Danticat less as a spontaneous phenomenon and more as the culmination of a slow, synergistic process between creative writing programs, literary academics and publishing houses. An emblematic case here is that of Sandra Cisneros. *The House on Mango Street* was first published in the 1980s by Arte Público Press, a label based at the University of Houston focusing on Latino/a authors (McGurl 334). The current editor of Arte Público Press is University of Houston professor Nicolás Kanellos, whose comprehensive study of Hispanic immigrant literature I referenced earlier. Cisneros herself is a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, where, she states, she first became keenly aware of her difference: "I began writing in the voice I now write in, and, perhaps if it hadn't been for Iowa I wouldn't have made the conscious decision to write this way" (Cisneros). What Cisneros learns to cultivate is her status as an inside-outer. Using an anti-academic narrative voice, she becomes "an enlivening liminal figure internal to the institution" (McGurl 338). Danticat and Díaz, after completing their M.F.A. degrees, find that a path has been blazed. Their work is now embraced by mainstream publishers: Díaz's first short story collection, *Drown*, was printed in 1996 by Riverhead Books, a division of Penguin. Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, was published in 1994 by Vintage Books, a division of Random House. And unlike Cisneros, who taught creative writing sporadically, both Díaz and Danticat quickly found full-time employment as instructors in M.F.A. programs.

Díaz acknowledges his affinity for Cisneros: "My first real adult love was someone like Sandra Cisneros. I adored her. I adored her work. I adored what she meant, what she was trying to do, her experimentalism, her poetry" (Lewis). What we witness

here is a gradual mainstreaming. The academic effort to encourage minority voices creates a niche, which is eventually commodified so that the next generation is greeted by a pre-established audience and improved opportunities for publication. Audiences of readers and critics experience the consumption of authorial difference as a social good, as well as a form of personal growth and an expansion of empathy. This engenders further demand for new forms of cultural difference. In catering to this market segment by adding social justice themes derived from the tradition of Latin American testimonial literature, the M.F.A. generation unearths a formula for commercial and critical success.

UPDATING THE TESTIMONIAL

Testimonial writing as a recent Latin American genre begins to develop during the second half of the 1960s, through Miguel Barnet's notion of the "novela testimonio." Barnet's original idea was to transcribe – with relatively little fictionalization, other than a few stylistic touches – the oral testimony of an oppressed subaltern subject, usually with the hope of correcting or exposing a specific historical injustice. As the genre opened up, more overtly fictional novels of witnessing, particularly those responding to violent dictatorships, gained centrality in the Latin American canon. The seeds of the genre, more widely understood, can be traced back to counternarratives exposing the devastation omitted from the original chronicles of colonial conquest, as well as to confessional religious literature. Some academics have linked it directly to the work of Bartolomé de las Casas, and to Bernal Díaz del Castillo and his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, published posthumously in 1632.

In his 1969 essay “La novela testimonio: socio-literatura” Barnet positions the testimonial novel as a specifically American continental response to stagnation in the Western European novel, and as a reaction to the legacy of colonialism. He believes that by recreating social events that marked true cultural milestones in the history of a country, one can ultimately uncover (“desentrañar”) reality. The recreation begins with an interview, preferably with someone deeply involved in, and vulnerable to, the events in question. After many hours of conversation, as well as extensive historical research, the author will redact the material, adding his or her own style, but retaining the tone and the content from the interviewee. “Uno es el otro ya y sólo así podrá pensar como él, sentir entrañablemente los golpes de vida que le son transmitidos por el informante, sentirlos como suyos. Ahí está la poesía, el misterio de este tipo de trabajo” (36) (“One becomes the other, and only then will one be able to think like him, to feel in one’s gut the blows of life that are shared by the informant, to feel them as one’s own. Therein lies the poetry, the mystery of this kind of work”), Barnet writes. This process can be applied to several subjects within a single work: Contrapuntal techniques can be used to convey a multiplicity of perspectives. Ultimately, Barnet sees the testimonial as a vehicle for collective memory: “América requiere de la obra de fundación. América necesita conocerse” (41) (“America requires foundational works. America needs to know itself”), he concludes.

Oscar Wao and *Brother* operate partly in this tradition. They narrate traumatic, momentous historical events – the rise of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, decades of Haitian violence and military coups and, closer to the present, recent waves of immigration into the U.S. – and they do so in the first person. In Danticat’s hybrid

memoir, the implied speaker is herself; in Díaz, we have a narrator, Yunior, who acts out the role of compiler and transmitter but shares a number of biographical characteristics with the author. These texts have rarely been subjected to fundamental questions of representation, perhaps because they so clearly operate within an in-demand, academically validated and delineated genre whose claim to social justice has survived extensive debates – let us remember the ways in which Rigoberta Menchú’s writing became a focal point of the so-called “culture wars” beginning in the 1980s (Pratt). Here, again, I am less concerned with judging the kind of work that Danticat and Díaz are doing, and more with how they are naturalized, by literary critics, as cultural representatives and transmitters.

Several critics have approached the work of Díaz and Danticat through *testimonio*. Caminero-Santangelo, while drawing a distinction between *testimonio* and historical trauma literature, believes that Danticat’s 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* – which deals with the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo – performs both functions, as it “forces readers to continue to evaluate and act on their present socio-political situations in concrete ways” (21). In criticism of Díaz, Lauren Gantz reads *Oscar Wao* through the lens of *metatestimonio*, a concept borrowed from Nereida Segura-Rico. Gantz argues that while the novel does share the perspectives of the victimized, thus complying with the basic guidelines of *testimonio*, it additionally calls attention to Yunior’s storytelling process, reminding readers of the constructed aspect of the text (126). Sandra Cox chooses to view Díaz’s and Danticat’s fictional representations of the *Trujillato* through two broad testimonial categories: the forensic, which attempts to revise historical narratives, and the epideictic, which encourages

readers to take a position on this new evidence. Cox writes that “these responses may lead to direct action on the part of the readers, but the more likely responses might be ideological” (111). This latter mode, I argue, is of particular concern. To address U.S. cultures as autonomous critical thinkers while rendering Caribbean cultures as silent victims may unintentionally reinforce hegemonically constructed binaries, especially in the absence of a pragmatic political project. Furthermore, the fact that no members of the M.F.A. generation have produced a historical narrative strictly through the eyes of one of its participants – instead, they blend personal experience and archival research – invites some fundamental questions about representation.

As Linda Alcoff has observed, we know that when privileged authors speak about the less privileged, regardless of intention, the original framework for oppression might be reinforced. In order to avert this phenomenon, we often focus on location: Is the author a member of the group in question? The answer is always complex, and neither Díaz nor Danticat can be categorized cleanly enough to confirm or deny their insider status – therein lies some of their allure. Consequently, we must remain skeptical of critical approaches that present their representations as inherently reliable because of their subaltern locatedness, widening the applicability of their texts to sufferers of colonial trauma across the board. Alcoff asks us to consider the differences between speaking with, to, and for others, with the first two being the most desirable. Without attempting to force *Brother* and *Oscar Wao* exclusively into any of these categories, we can hone in on a few gestures within each text that demonstrate an awareness of the complications of representational speech.³⁸ The idea is to understand how and why their

³⁸ Díaz displays a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand in this excerpt from a recent *Financial Times* article: “Our visions of an immigrant community and an immigrant experience

communities of origin come to be represented as silenced and powerless, thus deflecting questions of authorial appropriation – Díaz and Danticat make the case that they *have* to speak for others. Alcoff argues that “one cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there” (26).

Danticat and Díaz both write in English yet benefit from a type of Sapir-Whorf regard, as in Steven Kellman’s work on translanguaging.³⁹ Their relation to their cultures of origin, however, is harder to assess. Díaz enlisted the help of the Cuban-born writer Achy Obejas to translate *Oscar Wao* into Spanish. When asked about its reception in the Dominican Republic, he replied: “It’s hard to say, Santo Domingo is like any Third World Caribbean country: it’s not like there’s a huge market for books ... there’s a very small fraction of people who have read the book. But even that small fraction, it’s hard to generalize” (Moreno 535). This is where the conversational metaphor breaks down – rather than an exchange of perspectives, we find a largely one-sided relationship.

Danticat faces a similar conundrum. On the rare occasion of translating one of her short stories into Creole for a radio program, she experienced its performance “as if the voice in which I write, the voice in which people speak Creole that comes out English on paper, had been released and finally I was writing for people like my Tante Ilyana, people who did not read” (*Create* 50). That emotional moment can be read, inversely, as an acknowledgment that her traditional U.S. readership is largely disconnected from Haitian

are highly moralistic. ... I feel like our reality is William Gibson meets Toni Morrison, yet the way we’re interpreting the morality of immigrants is Chaucer.” He adds that the frames through which we understand immigrants “tend to be highly simplistic and highly reductive, and just strangely ungenerous” (McDermott).

³⁹ See Kellman, Steven. “¿Qué es Literatura Translingual?” *American Book Review* 35.5 (2014): 6, and *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

reality, and therefore not in a position to act on her depictions of injustice. Meanwhile, Tante Ilyana remains a character – not an interlocutor – in Danticat’s fictional cosmos.

Aware of these challenges, Danticat consistently thematizes the complications inherent in representation and testimony. As the first-person narrator of *Brother*, she tells of her role as cultural conduit as a child, “deciphering” (22) her father’s letters from abroad for her Haitian relatives, due to his hard-to-read handwriting. As she grows up, so does her influence in the process of transmission, now assisting her uncle Joseph after his tracheotomy (the literalization of a loss of voice): “if he wasn’t able to make himself understood, either with his gestures or with his sometimes indecipherable handwriting, then one of us would *interpret* him” (64). Eventually, Danticat receives the typewriter she always desired, and moves to writing. Her book contains not just the stories of her father and uncle, but also the stories of others who, for one reason or another, do not have the means or the ability to tell them for themselves. Thus, Danticat not only plots out a testimonial progression – deciphering to interpreting to writing – but simultaneously justifies her intervention and defuses possible accusations of exploitation: “I am writing this only because they can’t” (26), she informs the reader. This preemptively defensive stance conjures up, on the part of her subjects, a lack of agency and an implicit willingness to have their story told. Most problematically, it positions Danticat as a neutral cultural conduit, or a witness to reality. Barnet, who struggled with this question as well, did his best to keep stylistic interventions from modifying the essential content of his transcribed interviews.

One effective way of approaching these questions of representation is by focusing on moments of performativity. A fruitful example is a section of *Brother* where Danticat recounts her experience visiting detention centers as a community activist:

One man, who had received asylum but had not yet been released when we visited, showed us burn marks over his arms, chest and belly. His flesh was seared white, with rows and rows of keloid scars. It seemed like such a violation, to look at his belly, the space where the scars dipped farther down his body. But he was used to showing his scars, he said. He had to show them to a number of immigration judges to prove he deserved to stay. (213)

The passage foregrounds the performance incentive. In order to gain asylum, the man learns to fit his scars into the proven narrative of those who have succeeded before him, and to show them often. Here, physical proof becomes our source of information in determining what is happening on the ground. Still, we are not hearing the man's story; instead, we must imagine its horrors, our interpretation conditioned by the context of the passage and our knowledge of similar human rights violations. This leads to one of the fundamental conundrums of Human Rights literature: Forsaking personal specificity in pursuit of more broadly representative narratives of victimization may constitute, in the long run, a disempowering form of parochial expression, as Stuart Hall puts it.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The full quote from Hall reads as follows: "If there is to be a serious attempt to understand present-day Britain with its mix of races and colors, its hysteria and despair, then writing about it has to be complex. It can't apologize, or idealize. It can't sentimentalize. It can't attempt to represent any one group as having the total, exclusive, essential monopoly on virtue. A jejune protest or parochial literature, be it black, gay or feminist, is in the long run no more politically effective than works which are merely public relations" (60). From Hall, Stuart. "Old and New

Moreover, the painful act of looking at scars – which certainly *does* feel like a violation, as Danticat acknowledges – can also bring pleasure or entertainment, feeding the audience’s sense of generosity and self-importance, as well as potentially confirming oversimplified assumptions about the inferiority of foreign cultures.⁴¹ If these questions are rarely brought up the context of the M.F.A generation’s production it is, I believe, because its authors are often perceived as organic cultural representatives.

CULTIVATING AUTHENTICITY

Díaz, Danticat and several other members of the M.F.A. collective make varied claims about life in their communities of origin. The fact that these assertions are delivered through narrators who act as thinly veiled avatars of the authors makes them hard to pin down. They derive authority from the author’s implied firsthand experience, but are, occasionally, to be understood as representative of a particular character’s viewpoint rather than a factual claim. Early in *Oscar Wao*, in one of many historical footnotes, Díaz writes: “if we Latin types are skillful at anything it’s tolerating U.S.-backed dictators” (3). Unlike the work of Kerouac, these declarations do not set off our insensitivity meter. For one, they further the much-needed counternarrative propelled, in part, by postcolonial theory – speaking back to empire, or at least appearing to. In addition, readers accept the narrator (and author, by extension) as part-insider, and therefore engaging in self-criticism (after all, Yuniors and Díaz are both “Latin types,”

Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*. Ed. Anthony King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 41-68.

⁴¹ See Collins, Jo. “Confronting Violence in Reading and Representation: Brutality and Witnessing in the Work of Edwidge Danticat.” *Skepsi* 3.2 (2010). 41-50.

whatever this term might actually mean). Adding to this interpretive morass is the instability permeating the novel: Yuniór intersperses moments of hesitation that undercut his previous claims just enough to make them palatable, adapting to the narrative requirements of postmodernity. On the difficulty of researching an anecdote about Trujillo, Díaz writes: “What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here” (243). This destabilization through meta-reflection is made explicit in a section entitled “A Note from Your Author” in which Díaz anticipates the critical reception of his work: “I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he’s writing *Suburban Tropical* now” (284). One cannot accuse Díaz (by way of Yuniór) of writing so-called *Suburban Tropical* when he has already accused himself. In this way, Díaz preempts negative criticism, thickening the armored plating around his narrative.

As a complement to this strategy, both he and Danticat elicit and redirect positive criticism through canonical associations, drawing several overt connections to Caribbean poetics. *Oscar Wao* begins with an epigraph culled from Derek Walcott’s “The Schooner *Flight*.” Oscar’s fictional return to the Dominican Republic appears under the subheading “The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Nativeland” (272), a play on Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. Danticat, too, references Césaire and Frantz Fanon in her more theory-oriented writing (*Create* 9), although these ties are more abstract in *Brother*. For instance, in a scene outside the doctor’s office, we are told that “everyone in the waiting room, mostly Caribbean, African, and Eastern European immigrants, seemed to be struggling for breath” (7). Díaz regularly makes similar statements of community cohesion: “Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena” (149). Their texts are filled with signposts pointing toward

négritude, postcolonial discourse and regional collectivity. Yet the ease of the enterprise should give us pause: a wary reader might recognize that these references and communitarian juxtapositions bring with them a certain heft, much as writers like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento or José Enrique Rodó once drew their own ties to European high culture to underscore their erudition and buttress their ideological arguments.

This does not mean we should disregard all collectivization attempts. If contemporary Haitian identity is unavoidably diasporic, as Adlai Murdoch affirms, and we extend a similar line of reasoning to the Dominican experience, we can understand Díaz's and Danticat's writing as an attempt to provide a cohesive sense of identity through a shared origination myth (in the case of *Brother*, one revolving around stories of death and rebirth). Danticat herself refers to *dyaspora* as the tenth of Haiti's nine geographic departments (*Create* 49). An emphasis on national origins, in this scenario, may perform valuable work in binding together individual emigrés. Elvira Pulitano, a professor at California Polytechnic State University, argues that teaching *Brother* in her Critical Race Theory courses serves to "not only correct misperceptions while challenging hegemonic discourse but also empower the tellers by bringing cohesiveness and strength to entire communities" (40). Beyond creating a space for speech that surpasses internal schisms and contradictions, these constructions harness intense emotions, rendering the feeling of unmooring that diaspora often elicits. Regarding this quest for lost origins, Stuart Hall writes that "it can never be fulfilled or required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery – in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives" (245). Grouping Díaz and Danticat through the lens of cross-Caribbean

solidarity, as many critics have done, is both justified and fruitful, as long as there remains a recognition of the ways in which their narratives actively call for and benefit from such readings.

One can also place these texts within a creative network of up-and-coming U.S. writers who venture out of their comfort zone to learn about a new culture and, ultimately, themselves – even as it appears to rob Danticat and Díaz of their cultural specificity. Here we find texts such as Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), in which the U.S.-born, Jewish narrator journeys to the Ukraine to learn more about the fate of his family during the Holocaust. The travel narrative is combined with historical research on (and a reimagining of) the disappeared Jewish shtetl of Trochembrod, in Poland. In *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006), Dave Eggers relates the experiences of a Sudanese refugee. Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* (2007) is set in a nondescript South American country under authoritarian rule. Through an emphasis on suffering and witnessing, these narratives suggest that one can mature through an exposure to foreignness and ancestry, an encounter that nurtures empathy and cultural awareness.

Yet we might wonder why the lens of multicultural discourse, let alone migrant fiction, has so rarely been applied to the vast number of U.S.-based authors who, in previous decades, ventured south of the border in search of new material. Jack Kerouac, for instance, was born Jean Louis Lebris de Kerouac in Massachusetts to French-Canadian parents (Charters); grew up speaking French, struggling with his English during childhood; studied at Columbia University for two years; and wrote fiction that hinges upon mobility, exploration, innovations in tone and style, and a sense of newness and

defiance of literary tradition – a trajectory comparable to that of any member of the M.F.A generation. Yet despite devoting a sizable portion of his best-known novel, *On the Road*, to Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty's romp through Mexico by way of whorehouses and marijuana plantations, no critic has advocated for Kerouac as a representative of a new, hybrid, global literature, or used him as a source of knowledge about Mexican communities. In fact, Mexican writer Jorge García-Robles argues that “Kerouac never took Mexico very seriously ... it was a symbol more than something real” (Cave). It is possible this attitude prevailed because the theoretical frameworks for our current analyses had not been developed, but also because Kerouac does not claim to speak for anyone but himself. That is, we do not sense any privileged knowledge in Kerouac's writing: It is all too apparent, at least for today's readers, that *On the Road's* Mexico is a crude and cartoonish representation. Sal and Dean *need* the Mexicans to be different, as they need Denver to appear in stark contrast to San Francisco, and to New York City. Without this difference there would be no travel or experience, only cyclical motion through an unchanging wasteland.

A comparable dynamic holds for Allen Ginsberg, who was raised in New Jersey to Jewish parents and, like Kerouac, attended Columbia University. He devoted much of his career to documenting and denouncing social injustice, often far from his home country. In Varanasi, he lived “among the outcasts of Indian society” (Miles 353). Similarly, William S. Burroughs graduated from Harvard University, and later wrote about his experiences living in Mexico City, Tangier, and several European capitals. As with the M.F.A. generation, their vision extended to Latin America. In 1963, Burroughs and Ginsberg published *The Yage Letters*, an epistolary text that compiles their

exchanges during Burroughs's trip to the Amazon in search of *yagé*, or *ayahuasca*, a substance derived from a particular vine that is said to have hallucinogenic qualities. Burroughs refers to Panamanians as "about the crummiest people in the Hemisphere" (9). Colombians are not far behind, described as an "ugly, crummy looking populace ... it seemed like every second person had a hairlip or one leg shorter than the other or a blind festering eye" (17). The so-called Indians he meets are "too lazy to eat" (21) and, of the general population, he complains that "these people do not have even the concept of responsibility" (19). The rare times that Spanish makes an intrusion in the text, it is mangled. Of his experience with a doctor, Burroughs writes: "he took my temperature and said, 'Carramba!' ⁴²" (25). He even, in a fit of anger, informs the locals in Lima that "Spanish language belonged in the outhouse on a peg with the old Montgomery Ward catalogues" (44). His tone might begin to explain why critics are loath to link the Beat poets with the current generation of U.S. multicultural authors. But the comparison forces us to consider the limited possibilities of North-to-South witnessing, and the double-edged potential of community-building through the exoticizing of foreign cultures for U.S. audiences.

An additional possible grouping involves the writers of the Latin American Boom, linked through the use of magical realism. Díaz establishes a connection with Gabriel García Márquez by describing the *zafa* – a curse-breaking maneuver – as "bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo" (7), a reference to *Cien años de soledad*.

While Díaz's setting is largely realistic, in moments of grave danger both Oscar and his mother encounter men without faces, and are assisted by a supernatural apparition, "a

⁴² Misspelling is in the original. Although Díaz's deployment of Spanish in *Oscar Wao* is vastly more complex, we still encounter occasional blunders. E.g.: "Oscar, our hero, said: No te preocupas" (200).

creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt” (149). Although these sporadic appearances may not justify a full categorization under magical realism, Macondo has been mentioned time and again in criticism of Díaz’s work, often at the expense of addressing *Oscar Wao*’s indebtedness to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series and to several popular comic books. The bias toward the Latin American canon results in a misleading imbalance, as it is only through the amalgam of these strains that we can appreciate the novel’s “uniquely Dominican-American fantasy perspective” (139), as Tim Lanzendörfer argues.

While *Brother* has no obvious moments that might be categorized as classic instances of magical realism, Danticat makes these intertextual ties explicit in a eulogy for García Márquez published shortly after his death: “I am often surprised when people talk about the total implausibility of the events in García Márquez’s fiction. Having been born and lived in a deeply spiritual and extraordinarily resourceful part of the Caribbean, a lot of what might seem magical to others often seems quite plausible to me” (“Gabriel García Marquez: An Appreciation”), she writes. Further, Haiti’s centrality in *Brother* connects her work to the very origins of *lo real maravilloso*, and Danticat often references Alejo Carpentier.⁴³ In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat hints at the possibility that the question of where to bury Uncle Joseph’s body at the end of *Brother* draws poetic resonance from García Márquez’s notion that “a person does not belong to a place until someone is dead under the ground” (17). Anticipating the work of critics, Danticat and Díaz suggest a literary genealogy designed to expand the context of their narratives far beyond the confines of the U.S.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the differences between *lo real maravilloso* and magical realism, see chapter one.

HOW TO READ THE M.F.A. GENERATION

“How do we begin studying world-system literatures of the Global South?” asks José David Saldívar at the start of his recent study on Díaz. As an answer to his self-posed question, Saldívar elects to follow the “narratological compass” (121) of *Oscar Wao*, which he praises for unveiling complex histories of structural disparities of power. Other critics have highlighted the ways in which the novel engages in a tradition of cross-Caribbean discourse (Jelly-Schapiro); elevates transnational writing through insurgent code-switching (Gramling); denaturalizes gender constructs (Weese); and challenges hegemonic discourse by focusing on the marginalized (Harford Vargas). To this list, I would add that one can productively approach Díaz’s work to chart the flow of publication capital and critical attention to the North; evaluate readerly appetite for narratives of subaltern victimhood in highbrow U.S. publications, among them *The New Yorker* magazine; and think deeply about the commodification of the burgeoning academic business of Latino/a Studies. And so we might return to Saldívar’s original question with an addendum: How do we begin to study world-system literatures of the Global South *through the lens of contemporary U.S. Latino/a fiction*? How do we approach complex diasporic narratives without exoticizing their subject matter or elevating their writers to organic representatives of their cultures of origin? And can we track the asymmetrical process of identity construction through the intertwined realities of the literary market and academic knowledge production?

Literary scholars have largely pursued celebratory, expansive readings of the production of the M.F.A. collective. For Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, *Oscar Wao* is

positioned *against* multiculturalism – defined by her as a recognition of difference that ultimately aims at national assimilation – and inaugurates a new era, that of the transnational. She characterizes the migratory patterns of Oscar’s family as “regular and circular” (8), despite the fact that poverty, sex and self-discovery are largely linked to the Dominican side – forcing the diasporic scattering – and intellectual exploration, racial discomfort and social dysfunction are largely linked to the U.S. – compelling the return. If this is the circle being referred to, it is hardly the harbinger of an era of mobility: On both sides there is death, one violent and sudden, one slow and sustained. Recent Latino/a literature, Mermann-Jozwiak rightly argues, can be seen as “a site of resistance to official representations of ethnicity” (7). Yet there is no exploration of how these representations resuscitate historical tropes in the process of fictionalization. It is possible that Mermann-Jozwiak’s unconditional show of support relates to the urgency to bind and empower U.S. Latino/a communities, and perhaps the contributions of Díaz and Danticat find their political weight in this area. But to claim that “the ‘new’ American literature, written by authors who identify themselves as U.S. citizens but have strong ties to Latin America and the Caribbean, demonstrates that the Latin American is not an alien Other” (112) seems premature.

Mermann-Jozwiak argues that these texts mark a shift from ethnic studies to what she calls a Latinist perspective, moving away from identity politics and politics of difference (129). As evidence, she suggests that in previous migrant texts, “returns to the home country were largely celebrations of an iconic and mythical past representative of the ethnic’s roots” (129), and that ongoing connections between these Latin American subjects and the U.S. were thus rendered invisible. I am not convinced that replacing

dewy-eyed narratives with stories of death and trauma solves the riddle of representation; further, I argue that identity politics have become commodified rather than abandoned, with continued uncertainty regarding the ultimate function they perform. Mermann-Joswiak's claim that "the disruptive force of these works lies in their presentation of an alterity that cannot be subsumed by the homogenizing practices of the nation-state" (129) simply does not hold water in light of the rapid multiplication and burgeoning books sales of the M.F.A. generation, as well as the continuous development of U.S. academic programs that engage with their output. When alterity is so avidly subsumed by the market, it is likely that we are missing out on at least one side of the conversation.

The first step toward advocating for what Mabel Moraña calls "platforms where egalitarian discussions could take place" (32) is recognizing that current U.S. platforms are not performing that role. These deficiencies can be rendered visible by deviating from the top-down, community-creating drive of academic literary discourse. Harder yet to unravel is the narrative use of human rights conflicts, placing texts under the aegis of social justice, rendering them largely impermeable to criticism. It is, then, the very contemporary foundations of humanities scholarship – that one must fight in the name of the afflicted, and that new forms of difference must be uncovered and protected – that must be challenged, as they shroud the circulation of Latinamericanist tropes. In other words, these well-meaning objectives bring about a continuous self-sabotage.

The answer, I believe, is not simply to revert to previous nation-based models to find ever-more authentic cultural representatives – say, swapping Junot Díaz for an author raised and educated in the Dominican Republic, or championing the work of Dominican literary scholars – although those voices are certainly welcome. Beverley

himself briefly flirts with a return to the national paradigm when he contemplates stepping back from the study of Latinamericanism and refocusing on his relationship with his own country, the United States. In realizing that the two are inextricably linked, he imagines a different line of inquiry:

What would it mean then to pose the question of the United States “desde Latinoamérica” – that is, from my own investment in Latin America and Latin American radical politics and criticism – instead of, as I have been doing for so many years, posing the question of Latin America *from* the United States? (71)

Beverley renders himself a transparent link in the chain of knowledge production. Rather than using, for instance, Danticat to tackle Caribbean reality, this mode would, at every turn, remind us that we are reading the Caribbean through Danticat through the political Beverley, an imaginative exercise so far removed from the historical *semilla* that we could not, in good conscience, process it as a viable source of cultural information. The critical and popular acclaim earned by the M.F.A. generation, coupled with the mainstreaming of Latino/a Studies, demands that we reframe our reading practices: By looking from the outside in, rather than from the inside out, we may finally come to appreciate how, in our attempt to access continental realities, we perpetuate them.

CHAPTER THREE

MAKING A MISFIT: BOLAÑO, REJTMAN AND THE JOURNEY INTO WORLD

LITERATURE

Él mismo tiene medio cuerpo metido en el molde y lo sabe, pero ese saber es activo y no la resignación del que marca el paso. Con su mano libre se abofetea la cara la mayor parte del día, y en los momentos libres abofetea la de los demás, que se lo retribuyen por triplicado.

-Julio Cortázar, *Rayuela*

In 2003, the year of his death from liver failure, Roberto Bolaño attended a conference for Latin American writers in Seville, Spain.⁴⁴ By this point, Bolaño was widely regarded as one of the contemporary masters of Hispanophone literature; his novel *Los Detectives Salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*) had received the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in 1999. In light of his declining health, Bolaño might have chosen to leave behind some choice words of encouragement for the region's coming generation of authors, or perhaps a broad, retrospective self-appraisal of his oeuvre. Instead, he read a prepared text entitled "Los mitos de Cthulhu" ("The Myths of Cthulhu"), an allusion to H.P. Lovecraft's monstrous, many-tentacled deity. It was a scathing critique of the state of Hispanophone literature. With no minor dose of irony, Bolaño began by swiftly dismissing the work of several of Spain's bestselling authors. Their popularity, he

⁴⁴ The "Primer Encuentro de Autores Latinoamericanos," organized by Barcelona-based publishing house Seix Barral.

reasoned, was premised upon their accessibility, the fact that their stories “se entienden” (536) (“are easily understood”). Other examples of accessible literature, as per Bolaño: Hitler’s writing, and self-help books.

Next, he set his sights on the Latin American Boom. Bolaño’s speech focused on the corrupting influence of grotesque, looming ancestors, in the manner of Vico’s giants. He described Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa as “escritores epigonales,⁴⁵ pero claros y amenos” (542) (“epigonal⁴⁵ writers, but clear and enjoyable”); as a “dueto de machos ancianos” (542) (“pair of ancient *machos*”); and as the first offenders within a literary landscape that, today, is dominated by an “avalancha de glamour” (543) (“avalanche of glamour”). He shared a memory of Vargas Llosa jogging at sunrise, and of García Márquez, clad in patent leather shoes, greeting the Pope in Havana with slightly creased lips and taut skin “como si acabara de hacerse un lifting” (543) (“as if he had just gotten a face lift”). He lambasted a new generation of writers who do nothing but “sonreír incesantemente y decirle sí al poder” (544) (“smile incessantly and say yes to those in power”). And, in perhaps his most lacerating strike, he asked that “Dios bendiga a los hijos tarados de García Márquez⁴⁶ y a los hijos tarados de Octavio Paz⁴⁷” (545) (“God bless the idiot children of García Márquez⁴⁶ and the idiot children of Octavio Paz⁴⁷”). His sarcastic prayer conveyed a rare blend of denunciation and empathy: It is young Latin American fiction writers, the offspring of the Boom,

⁴⁵ Merriam-Webster provides two definitions for “epigonal”: relating to 1) an inferior imitation, and 2) a prehistoric culture of coastal Perú and Chile. However, it is more likely that Bolaño was referring to the Greek origins of the word, used simply to describe the successor of a previous generation.

⁴⁶ García Márquez had two children, Rodrigo and Gonzalo. Rodrigo is a Harvard graduate who works as a television and film writer and director and has been involved in HBO shows such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* (Nepales).

⁴⁷ Paz’s only daughter, Helena, now deceased, was a struggling writer and poet.

whose mediocre output and superficial fame-seeking were not up to Bolaño's standards, even as he recognized the difficulty of operating under the oppressive shadow of their predecessors.

The intensity of this invective is par for the course for Bolaño. He has made a career out of public defiance: of literary genres and movements, of audiences who demand easily classifiable and digestible works, and, as in this occasion, of his own peers. So how do we account for Bolaño as global phenomenon, given his rejection of the Latin American canon? Can Bolaño's path to critical and readerly success teach us something about the rewards of eschewing collectivity, whether as performance or practice? It is my contention that Bolaño's ascent to fame, bolstered by a careful process of self-mythification, inaugurates a new paradigm, where the template for insertion into world literature set by the Boom writers and embraced by subsequent generations, such as *testimonio* writers – that is, via a pan-Latin-American, overtly political project – is rendered obsolete. In a literary visibility game that has traditionally revolved around broad affinities that facilitate recognition from international readers, Bolaño has been commonly portrayed as an exception to the rule, with the expectation of a swift return to the status quo. Yet this reversal, I believe, is unlikely.

Bolaño represents the prototypical instance of the advent of the misfits, a term I will use to describe Latin American authors whose legitimacy and visibility is sustained by a performance of resistance through their work and their personal lives (or at least in the details they strategically disclose), always staying at arm's length from popular literary movements and genres. While this path to visibility is not necessarily new – one could argue that many canonical figures have, particularly at the outset of their careers,

consciously disrupted the literary status quo – its contemporary circumstances as they relate to Latin American writing in the global marketplace imbue it with unprecedented qualities. Disillusioned with the outcome of the ostensibly decolonial project of the latter half of the 20th century, the Latin American misfits navigate genre, discourse, and ideology, avoiding labels and shunning the multicultural thrust toward identity performance, yet still offer audiences abroad an identifiably regional product. This renders them isolated and protean but paradoxically bound by a common project: that of charting alternative literary avenues to the Boom.

While the external forces responsible for the Bolaño phenomenon – marketing, critical attention, fortunate timing – have been well documented (Andrews, Corral, Hoyos, Pollack) I believe a central component of misfit-making has gone largely understudied: the mindful and deliberate way in which these authors build their persona through their literature. In order to break down this process, I have developed a set of three tenets that, I believe, lay the groundwork for capturing global audiences: 1) The misfit embodies expert literary knowledge and skill from a marginal position; 2) The misfit performs a regional identity for global readers and a global identity for regional readers; 3) The misfit insinuates ties to historical milestones without taking an explicitly political stance. Although there certainly are other strategies at play, adherence to these three fundamental precepts has allowed a handful of Latin American writers to breach the barriers of world literature without engaging in significant compromises. Because misfits cannot be easily compared to their peers or predecessors, or marketed as the latest exponent of a preexistent trend or genre, they must find ways to telegraph their presence

to readers via a series of literary coordinates. These three tenets represent, at their most basic level, a shortcut toward recognition.

After exploring the misfit aspects of the early work of Bolaño, I will illustrate their centrality in the production of Argentine filmmaker and writer Martín Rejtman. Through a close reading of Bolaño's *La Literatura Nazi en América* (*Nazi Tales from the Americas*, 1996) and Rejtman's *Tres Cuentos* (*Three Stories*, 2012), I argue that the misfits, although fiercely independent, execute some common, carefully choreographed evasive maneuvers in order to assemble a readerly community without overt self-labeling. I am aware that positioning Bolaño as the spearhead of a new generational approach carries with it some inherent temptations: I do not intend to be either retrospectively deterministic – every single thing Bolaño did got him to the position he occupies – nor overly prescriptive – the Bolaño way is the only way. My core argument is as follows: in an era where nonmonetized social relations have become increasingly rare, partly as a consequence of the privatization of public space under neoliberal policies, Bolaño's solitary disconformity and carefully crafted persona offer an updated, functional road map to global legitimacy for the region's authors.

ENTERING WORLD LITERATURE

In October of 2016, the *New Yorker* magazine published a story by Kevin Barry entitled "Deer Season." Set in the Irish countryside, it tells of a young woman's attempt to lose her virginity to an English stranger who passes regularly near her house. Her

seduction strategy, she decides, will consist of sitting outside reading a book in order to lure the man into conversation.

He twisted his face to read the name on the book's cover.

“Roberto...”

“Bolaño,” she said.

“Any good?”

“He's dead.”

“Oh. That's gloomy.”

“No, it isn't. I mean...the book isn't.” (Barry)

That Bolaño's name, in this story, acts simply a stand-in for literature – an abstraction, a means for performing intellectuality between two Anglophones – is but the latest indicator of the pervasiveness and durability of the global Bolaño phenomenon. As with David Foster Wallace, his broad relevance in popular culture is sustained by the prestige conferred by a massive, intricate *magnum opus* (2666 for Bolaño, *Infinite Jest* for Wallace) and by an early death, ostensibly at the height of his literary prowess. For a generation of rising Latin American writers – and, it appears, some Irish ones, too – Bolaño has now assumed the contours of Cthulhu.

A number of recent academic studies have attempted to make sense of what Chris Andrews, who has to date translated eight of Bolaño's books into English, calls “the Bolaño anomaly” (3). Andrews identifies a number of possible explanations for Bolaño's transition from regional to global icon, of which the following appear the most plausible:

1) he was an exceptional writer, because of his unique positioning in the field and his energetic yet literary prose; 2) his writing was broadly pan-American, yet recognizably Latin American for U.S. readers; 3) he was easily translatable, without losing too much linguistic particularity in the process; 4) he profited from personal myth-building; and 5) the inconclusive and messy nature of his work scratched an itch in the overly professionalized realm of North American fiction. Yet even these reasons, Andrews cautions, cannot fully account for what happened. Andrews believes that Bolaño's success ultimately hinged upon a series of coincidences – reviews and endorsements from literary celebrities, the publication of his stories in desirable venues at opportune times, and so forth – and has more to do with the uncertainty principle (28) than with any form of meritocracy.

In another such study, Héctor Hoyos locates Bolaño's sway in his dense, all-encompassing global vision, comparing *Los detectives salvajes* to Jorge Luis Borges's "El Aleph." Hoyos argues that the novel lends itself to multiple readings, some superficial and more pleasing to U.S. readers, and some that reflect the complicated, uncertain post-Cold-War arrangement throughout the continent. According to Hoyos, *Los detectives salvajes* "has enough in common with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a total novel informed by the sixties and dependency theory, to be recognizable as Latin American. But it also thematizes the intensity of migration and cross-cultural flows that characterizes our present era" (19). Hoyos thus sees Bolaño's work as an ideal starting place for, on the one hand, exemplifying the ways in which globalization has an aesthetic effect on form, and, on the other, uncovering the shared characteristics of what he terms the new global Latin American novel. In *Beyond Bolaño*, Hoyos pairs the author with

several of his less visible peers, among them the Argentine César Aira, the Colombian Fernando Vallejo, and the Chilean Diamela Eltit. Rather than as an anomaly, then, Bolaño is understood as part of a regional trend. All of these authors, Hoyos argues, share a single characteristic: they find productive energy in the tension between the local and the global.

Wilfrido Corral's *Bolaño traducido: nueva literatura mundial* situates Bolaño as the protagonist of a “new world literature” (9) where identity is now freed from national and political constraints. Corral suggests two fundamental explanations for Bolaño's success: his “demasiado bueno para ser verdad” (10) (“too good to be true”) life story, and the eager, lavish praise heaped upon his work by the U.S. news media. For Corral, the reception of the English translation of *2666* – published in 2008, it won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was selected as a notable book or top book of that year by the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times* and many others – has ensured Bolaño's canonicity and will guarantee a steady supply of future readers for the rest of his work. Corral is careful to note that Bolaño's ascent does not fit neatly within a center-periphery model where prestige comes from validation by “mercadotecnia anglosajona” (9) (“anglo marketing”), given that Bolaño was well appreciated among Spanish-language writers throughout the 1990s. Regardless, Corral believes that Bolaño's irruption into world literature marks a clear break in the way Latin American literature is perceived abroad: readers have now ceased to “ver el continente latinoamericano como una republica bananera de las letras que exporta varios tipos de realismos y magias” (15) (“see the Latin American continent as a banana republic of letters that exports several types of magics and realisms”). For Corral, as for Hoyos and Andrews, Bolaño has

untethered himself from traditional regional forms, in particular from those established by Boom authors. It might not surprise us, then, that U.S. audiences, after more than five decades of exposure to magical realism and testimonial narratives, would experience his novels as radical palate cleansers.

MANUFACTURING THE MYTH

Because Bolaño's biography has been subject to both self-inflicted and external manipulation in an effort to shape his public image, much of it remains under contention. Bolaño was born in Santiago de Chile in 1953 and grew up in various Chilean towns until he turned 15, at which point his family moved to Mexico. Soon thereafter, he dropped out of school and dedicated himself to reading and writing. In August of 1973, after a slow cross-continental journey, he claims to have returned to Chile in support of Salvador Allende's socialist project.⁴⁸ In November of that year, shortly after the September 11 coup d'état led by Augusto Pinochet, Bolaño has said he was imprisoned, then released a few days later thanks to the well-timed intervention of some old friends. He went back to Mexico to work on his poetry – his first work, *Reinventar el amor* (1976), was a 20-poem chapbook of which 225 copies were made (Corral 52) – and to co-found a minor movement known as *infrarrealismo*, to which I will return shortly. In 1977, he left for Europe, settling in Barcelona and sustaining himself through a series of odd jobs: night watchman in a summer campground, seasonal laborer, dishwasher, and longshoreman (Pollack 358). Gradually, he began to shift from poetry to prose in an attempt to better

⁴⁸ In a *New York Times* article entitled "A Chilean Writer's Fictions Might Include His Own Colorful Past," journalist Larry Rohter interviews some of Bolaño's old friends in Mexico, none of whom can confirm that the Chilean journey or the imprisonment actually took place.

support his family. In 1984 he published his first novel, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce*, co-written with Spanish novelist A.G. Porta, as well as his second (and first solo) novel, *La senda de los elefantes*. His first genuine burst of critical attention did not come until 1996, with the release of *La literatura nazi en América* and *Estrella distante*. His status in Spanish-language literature was reconfirmed and further elevated two years later with *Los detectives salvajes*, which won the Premio Herralde de Novela and the Rómulo Gallegos Award. His crowning epic, *2666*, was intended to be divided into shorter works but published whole in 2004, a year after his death.

Armed with this biographical skeleton, journalists, critics and publishing houses have emphasized, embellished or outright fabricated aspects of Bolaño's life, feeding into the Bolaño myth in the process. Sarah Pollack has documented how Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which published the 2007 English translation of *Los detectives salvajes*, chose a back cover design reminiscent of the famous original scroll of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The publisher also selected an author picture of a 20-year-old Bolaño, long-haired and sporting a mustache, which "evokes the rebellious counterculture of the sixties and seventies" (357). This phenomenon is not limited to translations. Anagrama's 2010 compilation of Bolaño's short stories, entitled *Cuentos*, sports a cover illustration of Bolaño smoking a cigarette with his face shrouded in half-darkness.⁴⁹ Pollack lists a number of U.S. reviews of Bolaño's work that play up (or make up) the author's rebellious side: one refers to him as "the Kurt Cobain of Latin-American Literature," and

⁴⁹ On occasion, publishing houses have opted against titillation. Chris Andrews's translation of selected stories from *Putas asesinas (Killer Prostitutes)* and *Llamadas telefónicas (Telephone Calls)* was published by New Directions in 2006 under the more demure title *Last Evenings on Earth*.

others claim that Bolaño's liver disease was a consequence of Hepatitis C contracted from heroin use (358).

To complicate matters further, Bolaño himself has repeatedly blurred the line between biography and fiction, mostly through his alter ego, Arturo Belano. Asked in an interview whether he believed that his work was too autobiographical, Bolaño responded that he writes from "lo que solía llamarse la experiencia colectiva, que es, contra lo que pensaban algunos teóricos, algo bastante inaprehensible. Digamos, para simplificar, que puede ser el lado fantástico de la experiencia individual, el lado teologal" (Swinburn) ("what used to be known as collective experience, which is, contrary to what some theorists believe, something relatively inapprehensible. Let's say, to simplify, that it can be the fantastic side of individual experience, the theological side"). Bolaño's answer forestalls any attempt to separate the factual from the imagined, the individual from the communal. A final, key ingredient in the mythmaking process is the outsize and often misguided praise heaped upon his literary abilities, with descriptions of Bolaño's "Joycean" technique and "Kafkaesque" themes (Corral 51). In recounting these accolades, Corral himself elevates Bolaño's figure by comparing his short stories to "Carver's gritty realism" and "Chekhov's unsentimental insights" (53). The combination of these elements – savvy marketing from publishers, hyperbolic praise from reviewers and critics, and self-fictionalization – helps account for a sizable portion of Bolaño's explosive popularity, particularly among Anglophone audiences.

THE RULES OF THE MISFIT

Despite the temptation to ascribe the global embrace of Bolaño solely to this confluence of external interests, I believe a closer look at his early literary production reveals a methodical self-positioning through the performance of erudite dissent. We might think of this strategy as an investment: by providing readers with certain consistent coordinates, Bolaño sets himself up for future rewards. To illustrate this process, I turn to one of his less-lauded works, *La literatura nazi en América*. This compendium of brief biographies of imaginary writers from the Americas who expressed sympathy for right-wing causes was published shortly before *Los detectives salvajes* – that is, immediately before Bolaño gained broad recognition. As is the norm for Bolaño, the work’s metanarrative density is enhanced through parallels to his own authorial situation at the time, underappreciated and marginalized. One possible overarching reading of the text is that, much like the fictional right-wing writers, Bolaño is *himself* in danger of falling by history’s wayside. The savvy reader will be able to separate, as Bolaño does for his gallery of writers, real talent from mediocrity, thus vindicating the act of writing and saving deserving authors from oblivion – by extension, saving Bolaño himself.

La literatura nazi was first published by Seix Barral, although the manuscript was previously rejected by Alfaguara, Destino and Plaza Janés, according to Bolaño’s longtime editor, Jorge Herralde. Sales of the first Spanish edition were so slow that it was discontinued, an episode that, Herralde recalls, “resultó muy traumático para Roberto” (35) (“was very traumatic for Roberto”). Originally, critical attention was limited and mixed, while more recent reviews of the text – in particular its 2008 translation to English

– have been more generous, presenting it as an early glimpse into Bolaño’s talent. Still, detractors linger to this day. In a 2010 review in *The Guardian*, Alberto Manguel states that *La literatura nazi* is “at first mildly amusing but quickly becomes a tedious pastiche of itself. Like a joke whose punchline is given in the title, the humour is undermined, and all that is left is a series of names, dates and titles that, since they don’t come across as funny, become merely irritating.” Perhaps because of the difficulty of countering Manguel’s argument – a series of brief apocryphal biographies does not allow for sustained poetic flight – much of the scholarship devoted to the text has skirted the question of literary quality, instead focusing on its aesthetic and historical connections to fascism.⁵⁰ In support of such readings, Bolaño peppers the lives of his creations with factual references. Additionally, *La literatura nazi* has been referenced for its final and longest entry, which introduces the character of Carlos Ramírez Hoffman and serves as the foundation for the novella *Estrella distante* (1996).

My interest in the text relates to what I call misfit performance. By exploring each of the three precepts listed previously, we observe in closer detail how Bolaño carefully positions himself within the global literary sphere while resisting the concessions – accessibility, collectivization – that have been, traditionally, a requisite for widespread visibility.

1) The misfit embodies expert literary knowledge and skill from a marginal position.

⁵⁰ In his chapter entitled “*Nazi Tales from the Americas at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*,” Hoyos expands on the idea of Nazism as signifier in the text, connecting it through a comparative lens to other Latin American novels.

Near the end of 1975, during his early days as a poet in Mexico City, Bolaño spearheaded a movement known as *infrarrealismo* along with a group of his peers.⁵¹ Its name denoted a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it served as a call for young poets to move beyond superficial realism, engaging more deeply (“beneath”) with underground life; on the other, it was a descriptor of the low status of these young poets in Mexican society. According to Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías, “la clave de la metáfora se encuentra en la marginalidad. Los poetas infrarrealistas debían permanecer alejados de los circuitos oficiales de cultura, y declararse abiertamente enemigos de la burocracia y los espacios de poder” (59) (“the key to the metaphor is marginality. Infrarealist poets had to stay away from the official circuits of culture and declare themselves enemies of bureaucracy and of the high spheres of power”). Bolaño penned a manifesto for the group, entitled “Déjenlo todo, nuevamente” (“Give It All Up, Again”).⁵² In this meandering and often inscrutable text, Bolaño introduced some of the concerns that would remain with him throughout his career: artistic creation, intellectual revolution, and an oppositional relation to the canon.

Son tiempos duros para la poesía, dicen algunos, tomando té, escuchando música en sus departamentos, hablando (escuchando) a los viejos maestros. Son tiempos duros para el hombre, decimos nosotros, volviendo a las barricadas después de una jornada llena de mierda y gases lacrimógenos, descubriendo/creando música

⁵¹ The group included artists and musicians in addition to writers. Among its members were Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, José Vicente Anaya and José Rosas Ribeyro (Mejías 59). The development of *infrarrealismo* is recreated under a thin fictional veil in *Los detectives salvajes*.

⁵² Bolaño is referencing a 1922 piece by André Breton entitled “Leave Everything” in which Breton asks the reader to “Leave everything / Leave Dada / Leave your wife, leave your mistress / Leave your hopes and fears” (Legge 99).

hasta en los departamentos, mirando largamente los cementerios-que-se-expanden, donde toman desesperadamente una taza de té o se emborrachan de pura rabia o inercia los viejos maestros. (55)

These are tough times for poetry, some say, while drinking tea, listening to music in their apartments, talking (listening) to the old masters. These are tough times for humankind, we say, returning to the barracks after a day filled with shit and tear gas, discovering/creating music even inside apartments, gazing at the cemeteries-that-expand, where the old masters desperately drink a cup of tea or get drunk on pure anger or inertia.

Bolaño's infrarealist identity is premised upon a series of oppositions: inside/outside, consumption/creation, traditional poetry/life, mastery/inexperience. In each of these binaries, the first element is that which Bolaño's imaginary mainstream antagonist seeks (and canonized literary figures already possess): a comfortable, controlled intellectuality. Meanwhile, "we" – that is, the young poets – are out in the trenches, preparing for a proletarian upsurge. The abstract, freewheeling approach of the poets cannot be easily pinned down, and is, in fact, invisible to much of Mexican society. Thus, in order to provide a functional frame of reference, Bolaño must allow the second element of the binary to be defined by its opposition to the first. This brings up a potential hazard: the possibility of being anchored long term by these conservative coordinates, which might explain Bolaño's insistence upon literary shape-shifting. Later in the manifesto, he writes: "El verdadero poeta es el que siempre está abandonándose. Nunca demasiado

tiempo en un mismo lugar, como los guerrilleros, como los ovnis, como los ojos blancos de los prisioneros a cadena perpetua” (60) (“The true poet is always abandoning himself. Never too long in one place, like guerilla fighters, like UFOs, like the blank eyes of prisoners on a life sentence”). Bolaño warns us that the act of resistance may well become petrified unless it is periodically relocated.

La literatura nazi, published almost 20 years after the infrarealist manifesto, marks one of the final occasions where Bolaño’s protean, underdog persona fully aligns with the overlooked characters in his fiction. The volume is not entirely a novel in length or structure, yet neither a novella nor a short story collection, either.⁵³ It is encyclopedic in tone, with its unnamed narrator acting alternatively as academic, critic, and historian. It does not fit within any existing genre, although it can be linked to the types of apocryphal biographies produced by Stanislaw Lem or Italo Calvino (Corral 246). It falls under the category of prose, but only because Bolaño has grudgingly accepted that he cannot support his family on poetry alone, and not because he believes it to be the best vehicle for his talent. As Corral puts it, “*La literatura nazi en América* tiene el tono del poeta fallido que encuentra poesía en la prosa” (249) (“*Nazi Tales from the Americas* has the tone of the failed poet who finds poetry in prose”). All of Bolaño’s imagined American writers are failed, too – some talented and unjustly ignored, others mediocre yet charming in their futile pursuit of success. We are presented with an entire gallery of misfits, their existence briefly seized from the clutches of oblivion by the nameless narrator, the head misfit. Their rendering, though entirely fictional, is plausible, considering the wave of

⁵³ Bolaño referred to it as a novel, one where “la literatura es el personaje” (“literature is the protagonist”) (Cobos).

German immigration to the continent after World War II, as well as the historical persistence of right-wing extremism in Latin American politics.

By now it is abundantly clear that Bolaño cultivates a marginal position for himself, his work and his characters. In *La literatura nazi*, he faces the additional challenge of performing expertise from this underdog location. This he accomplishes in two principal ways: first, he subtly signals, from the neutral narrative voice, that he has the ability to determine which of the fictional writers possesses true talent, thus separating the wheat from the chaff. And second, he engages with the (real) inter-American canon, both constructively and destructively, to provide reference points for his readers. Both gestures set the stage for the display of a broad literary knowledge that surpasses that of any single character in the collection. A few examples of the first tactic: Luz Mendiluce Thompson is described as “de todos los escritores de su familia, la que tuvo más talento” (28) (“of all the writers in her family, the most talented”) and her poem “Con Hitler fui feliz” is said to have been “incomprendido tanto por la derecha como por la izquierda” (30) (“misunderstood both by the right and the left wing”) – although, one surmises, properly grasped by the narrator. When appraising the life of Pedro González Carrera, the narrator mentions that a handful of hagiographies agree that “su obra fue tan brillante como gris fue su vida” (69) (“his work was as brilliant as his life was gray”), and he suggests that “tal vez no les falte razón” (69) (“they may well be right”). Of Irma Carrasco, he tells us that “el mundo literario mexicano, casi sin excepción, le gira la espalda” (89) (“the Mexican literary world almost without exception turns its back on her”) – the one certain exception being the narrator, who has granted her his attention. He describes works by Willy Schürholz and Zach Sodenstern as incomprehensible; similarly,

he tells us that Harry Sibelius wrote “una de las obras más complicadas, densas y posiblemente inútiles de su tiempo” (127) (“one of the most complex, dense and possibly pointless works of his time”), and that “sus historias no siempre son originales” (129) (“his stories were not always original”). Bolaño’s narrator consistently takes on the voice of the arch-academic, not limited to compiling facts, publications and critical opinions but gradually establishing the authority to criticize those opinions themselves. As readers, we learn to be on the lookout for his confirmations of talent.

In terms of Bolaño’s engagement with inter-American literature, references to canonical figures are rife throughout the text. Among them: a writer is obsessed with Edgar Allan Poe’s bedroom (18); another publishes diatribes against Julio Cortázar and Borges in newspapers (27); another harbors a deep hate of Alfonso Reyes (54); another is involved in a rivalry with José Lezama Lima (61) and is praised by Virgilio Piñera (63); another has a fanatical admiration for Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (83); another copies the works of Aimé Césaire (123); another one punches Allen Ginsberg (145); and so forth. It might strike the reader as odd that these forgotten writers, on the wrong side of history, would so often come into contact with such a range of literary luminaries.⁵⁴ The act serves, in part, as a great leveling. As Corral argues, “las biografías imaginarias tienen un papel ambiguo, porque dan memoria y dignidad a obras insignificantes o subestimadas que podrían ser semejantes en valor a las canónicas” (258) (“imaginary biographies play an ambiguous role, as they give memory and dignity to insignificant or underrated works that may be similar in value to canonical ones” 258). If not for a single historical twist, any of the authors in Bolaño’s gallery might be considered required reading today. Even

⁵⁴ Occasionally the connections turn global in scope, with references to Kafka (61) and Rimbaud (169).

if only as mental exercise, these bizarre connections demand a temporary reformulation of the canon, furthering an effect that is alternatively absurd, admiring, and ghostly, as Celina Manzoni puts it (343).⁵⁵

Much has been made of Bolaño's playfulness; in this case, the play not only has profound aesthetic and philosophical implications, but takes the expertise projected in the realm of the imaginary and confirms it in the reader's domain (that is, our own). Bolaño acknowledges an awareness of this type of performance in his short story "Días de 1978": "La chica pálida se larga a hablar y les cuenta la última película que ha visto, muy mala, dice, y luego les pregunta si ellos han visto alguna que esté bien y que se la puedan recomendar. La pregunta, en realidad, es retórica. La chica pálida, al formularla, lo que está haciendo es sugerir una jerarquía en la cual ella reina en uno de los lugares más altos" (273) ("The pale girl starts to talk and tells them about the last movie she's seen, quite terrible, she says, and then she asks if they've seen a good one that they might recommend. The question, in fact, is rhetorical. The pale girl, by formulating it, is suggesting a hierarchy in which she dwells among the highest of places"). With a healthy dose of metanarrative intricacy, as is the norm for Bolaño, he positions his characters and, by extension, himself, at an elevated world literary vantage point, all the while circumventing the need to identify a stable lineage or pay homage to his predecessors.

2) The misfit performs a regional identity for global readers and a global identity for regional readers.

⁵⁵ Manzoni concludes that Bolaño's use of the canon is driven by "el intenso deseo de perdurar sostenido en la levedad de la escritura" (356) ("the intense desire to endure, sustained upon the levity of writing").

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova proposes a framework for studying the unequal power relations that determine the transnational literary canon. In an arena parallel to the classic capitalist marketplace, writers accrue or lose symbolic capital in a relentless battle waged across centers (Paris, historically, but in the case of Spanish-language letters, Barcelona) and peripheries. Casanova believes this model to be, at times, autonomous from contemporary politics and economics, and offers as an example the success of Latin American writing in spite of the region's diminished global role. More specific to this inquiry, Casanova argues that every writer is doubly situated, fighting for visibility in both the international and the national space. International transformations are often a result of national processes. "Contrary to the conventional view, the national and international are not separate spheres; they are two opposed stances, struggling within the same domain" (82), Casanova asserts. A writer who desires a wider audience must maneuver with "extraordinary sophistication" (89), keenly aware of this double location.

This awareness is apparent in the work of Bolaño, as his writing displays a careful balance of particularity and universality. He is as prone to share his take on the cultures of Spain or Mexico through neutral language that eschews localisms as he is to describe a transnational, movement-laden Latin America in narratives filled with idiosyncratic dialogue and vivid local details. The same double logic holds for his choices of setting. The characters in *La literatura nazi* are born all across the continent, with Argentina and the U.S. at the forefront, and Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Haiti, Uruguay, Cuba, Colombia, and Guatemala following close behind. Yet most of these writers are surprisingly mobile, and they die not just in Germany or Spain, as could be reasonably

expected, but in places like Laguna Beach, Paris, and Kampala, Uganda. Bolaño's own global path – Chile to Mexico to Spain – lends credence to this peripatetic trajectory, which might strike some readers as fanciful. In its basic setup, the collection incorporates a variety of national, regional, and global backdrops, with enough local color to satisfy multiple audiences.

An entry picked at random from *La literatura nazi* will inevitably contain these multiple registers. By way of example, we can turn to Bolaño's descriptions of the poet Ramírez Hoffman in the collection's final chapter.⁵⁶ Bolaño's similes are, initially, locally contextualized: "Él era moreno y flaco, con esa cara de tristeza y de perplejidad que sólo tienen los nacidos a este lado del río Bío-Bío" (190) ("He was dark-skinned and thin, with a visage of sadness and perplexity possessed only by those born on this side of the Bío-Bío river"). Then they turn to the national: "Chile lo olvida" (206) ("Chile forgets him"). After that comes a regional generalization: "Pensé que parecía un tipo duro, como sólo pueden serlo – y sólo pasados los cuarenta – algunos latinoamericanos. Una dureza tan diferente a la de los europeos o norteamericanos" (212) ("I thought he looked tough, as only some Latin Americans can – and only after they turn forty. A toughness so different from that of Europeans or North Americans"). And finally, Bolaño goes global: "No parecía el tipo que había volado a la Antártida para escribir un poema en el aire" (212) ("He didn't seem like the man who had flown to Antarctica to write a poem in the air"). This progression in perspectival scale runs parallel to Ramírez Hoffman's narrative arc, as he goes from obscure local poet-in-training to national celebrity to global exile, at which point we lose track of his trajectory.

⁵⁶ The character is renamed Carlos Wieder in *Estrella distante*.

The mélange of geographic perspectives allows readers to, according to their inclinations and interests, ignore certain narrative strains while focusing on others. For instance, although the collection is densely intertextual and filled with literary and historical minutiae, it can still be enjoyed without these resonances – that is, without previous knowledge of the signified. This abundance of coexisting, optional paths in Bolaño’s work has led to some degree of critical controversy. Sarah Pollack has argued that *Los detectives salvajes* offers, for U.S. readers, a comfortable reading that reproduces the civilization vs. barbarism dichotomy, as it “plays on a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in defining itself vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy, mature vs. adolescent, responsible vs. reckless, upstanding vs. delinquent” (362). Simultaneously, she notes, Bolaño provides young Latin Americans with a renewed worldly, marauding identity, based on bohemian rebelliousness: “a continent of literary Che Guevaras who have not capitulated to conformity” (360). Bolaño’s narrative universe is packed with stereotypes – some regressive, some progressive – and readers are free to either grapple with the resulting contradictions or gloss these over entirely.

The density of viewpoints and branching narratives in Bolaño’s work might help account for the wide range of critical interpretations that *La literatura nazi* has elicited. In his review of the 2008 translation, John Brenkman of *The Village Voice* asserts that “the jugular that Bolaño particularly goes for is the literary sensibility and talent that seduces itself with grand political fantasies” – in other words, that the collection’s imagined right-wing authors are to be condemned for their naiveté or lack of literary integrity. In contrast, a piece by Tim Martin in *The Financial Times* argues that the text, like most of

Bolaño's work, hinges upon the search for lost writers. Martin writes: "There's an oblique pathos and fellow-feeling in his accounts of these oddball lives, each of them lived on the outside of an uncaring literary establishment." Here, the characters are to be identified with, their salient trait being their shared misfit condition. A third possible reading crops up in a *New York Times* review entitled "The Sound and the Führer," where Stacey D'Erasmus states that "part of Bolaño's genius is to ask, via ironies so sharp you can cut your hands on his pages, if we perhaps find a too-easy comfort in art, if we use it as an anesthetic, excuse and hide-out in a world that is very busy doing very real things to human beings" (B9). The blame, here, falls squarely upon readers (although the notion that Bolaño is producing art in order to discourage the consumption of art is, to say the least, problematic). Despite their seemingly mutually exclusive nature, each of these interpretations can be legitimately sustained through textual evidence. Whether Bolaño intended such a scenario as part of a carefully designed game with a specific end in mind is beyond the scope of this study. What is clear is that these chameleonic traits are consistent in Bolaño's work, and allow for an assemblage of audiences that, for many other authors, would prove incompatible.

The novelty of Bolaño's approach – that which allows his work to appear national, regional and global simultaneously, without fully committing to any of these – can be further appreciated in contrast to the practices of the Latin American Boom. Despite their many individual differences, Boom authors were collectively concerned with "the region's cultural autonomy and the end of literary colonialism" (5), as Deborah Cohn puts it. Their pursuit of a total Latin American novel involved the search for a shared Latin American identity sprouting from national cultures: that is, specificity in

service of pan-regionalism. According to Mexican author Jorge Volpi, Bolaño seemed to follow a similar approach but ultimately achieved the opposite end.⁵⁷ Bolaño, Volpi argues, wrote novels that “jugaban a pertenecer a las literaturas de estas naciones pero que terminaban por revelar el carácter fugitivo de la identidad. Al impostar las voces de sus coterráneos, Bolaño se convirtió en el último latinoamericano total, capaz de suplantar a toda una generación” (176) (“pretended as if they belonged within national literatures, but ultimately revealed the fleeting nature of identity. By forging the voices of his compatriots, Bolaño became the last total Latin American, able to replace an entire generation”). For Volpi, Bolaño is synonymous with finality: of Latin American writing as a genre, of nationally inscribed literatures, and of the mythical, collective Boom imagination.

If Boom writers derived legitimacy and authority through the figure of the archive, as Roberto González Echevarría proposes in *Myth and Archive*, Bolaño sustained his fiction through the cartographic metaphor, skimming across surfaces rather than excavating a single spot. As Valeria de los Ríos argues, “el mapa cognitivo de Bolaño no es el Macondo de García Márquez, territorio utópico, exótico y de límites claramente establecidos, sino la aldea global marcada por viajes” (240) (“Bolaño’s cognitive map is not García Márquez’s Macondo, a utopian, exotic and clearly demarcated territory, but rather a global village defined by travel”). For de los Ríos, Bolaño’s thematic emphasis on futile searches is concretized in his novels through literal and mental maps, which allow for sudden shifts in the representation of spaces and identities. In *La literatura nazi*,

⁵⁷ Volpi is known as a leader of the Crack generation, a mid-90s literary movement of young Mexican authors that called for a return to certain aspects of the Boom aesthetic. See Redondo-Olmedilla, Carlos. “El *Crack* y su generación: exegésis de la fisura.” *Confluencia* 31.2 (2016). 72-84.

a U.S.-born writer named Zach Sodenstern is said to have written a novel entitled *El control de los mapas* (*The Control of Maps*) that is described as follows: “llena de apéndices, mapas, índices onomásticos incomprensibles, se propone como un texto interactivo, aunque el lector razonable apenas utilice esta variante de lectura” (114) (“packed with appendices, maps, incomprehensible lists of authors, it proposes itself as an interactive text, even if the reasonable reader would rarely pursue this reading variant”). This is a classic self-referential Bolaño moment, one that brings together our previous strains. Not only does the passage accurately describe *La literatura nazi* itself and Bolaño’s oeuvre in general, but it openly acknowledges the unlikelihood that any single reader will travel down the multiple narrative paths available within Bolaño’s sprawling geography. (Reasonable) visitors can have their pick of an abundance of national, regional and global registers, a mimetic performance so skilled that, like Narcissus at the pool, readers might well become transfixed with that which they reflexively sought out in the first place.

3) The misfit insinuates ties to historical milestones without taking an explicitly political stance.

Contrary to the writers of the Latin American Boom, who found an ideological correlative in the Cuban Revolution (Cohn 5), Bolaño has refused to openly advocate for a political project. Critics, despite agreeing on Bolaño’s status as a figure of renewal in Latin American literature, remain split on the existence of an identifiable political ethos in his work, and have largely concluded that Bolaño does not offer a constructive

alternative to neoliberal precepts (Lynd 171). “Bolaño often sounds like a romantic anarchist” (216), Jean Franco has stated. In Bolaño’s violence-soaked fictional universe, Franco adds, “there is no alternative but to march heroically onwards towards nowhere” (215). Bolaño’s feelings on the subject are all too clear: To move literature into the realm of political utilitarianism would demand sacrificing inscrutable complexity for accessibility, a kowtowing to the interests of the powerful. Such a gesture would cheapen his misfit aura.

Yet Bolaño has chosen to make September 11, 1973 – the date of Augusto Pinochet’s overthrowing of Salvador Allende’s socialist government in Chile – a recurring element in his literary and biographical constellation. Unlike other Chilean authors – perhaps Ariel Dorfman most visible among them – who have sought to bring balance to the historical record by narrating the experience of the oppressed during those years, Bolaño does not claim to have any privileged insight into the events surrounding the coup d’etat. Instead, as with his choices of setting and his references to the canon, the date becomes a touchstone for readers in a sea of shifting reference points. It acts as a backdrop for several of his works, among them *La literatura nazi*’s final chapter; its related novella, *Estrella distante* (1996); and the novel *Nocturno de Chile* (2000). It also has become a centerpiece of Bolaño’s personal mythology, through his tale of imprisonment shortly after Pinochet’s rise to power. Comparably, his novel *Amuleto* (1999) is set during the Mexican army’s occupation of the UNAM beginning on September 18, 1968, which was shortly followed by what has become known as the Tlatelolco massacre – the killing of student protesters by Mexican police and military forces. These are two of the most visible and enduring human rights violations of their

era in Latin America; as such, they provide a concrete reference point for global readers. They also bear a vast historical weight, as they inaugurate the violent continental transition toward neoliberal policies and decades of repression in the name of fending off Communism. It is only post-Boom literature, as Rory O’Byrne argues, that begins to address this new reality (474).

In this way, Bolaño enmeshes himself within human rights discourse – which has sustained much of the past half-century of Latin America-centered literary criticism, particularly in U.S. academia – and nurtures his personal mythology, but avoids committing to a specific cause. In line with this pattern of personal association, the final entry of *La literatura nazi*, which centers on the Pinochet coup, abruptly shifts in tone and style: For the first and only time, the nameless, neutral narrator is revealed to be involved in the events of the story, and is identified as Bolaño himself. The plot, once again, revolves around the search for a lost author. The poet Ramírez Hoffman begins honing his craft during the Allende presidency. After the 1973 coup, people close to Ramírez Hoffman begin to disappear – the aunt of a woman he had dated, the leader of a poetry workshop he had attended – and it is implied that he may have carried out those murders himself. He then becomes a member of the Chilean Air Force and takes to skywriting his poems. Here is where Bolaño first appears, held in a Chilean detention center for what he calls “banal circumstances” (193). Looking up at the sky, he sees Ramírez Hoffman’s verses firsthand. As Ramírez Hoffman continues to pursue diverse artistic endeavors, he is associated with more unsolved murders.⁵⁸ A particularly

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of Ramírez Hoffman’s production and its connection to actual artistic movements, see Jennerjahn, Ina. “Escritos en los cielos y fotografías del infierno. Las ‘Acciones de arte’ de Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, según Roberto Bolaño.” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 28.56 (2002): 69-86.

controversial photography exhibit (we are not privy to the exact content, but it might be related to the killings) marks the end of his time in Chile, at which point he disappears from public life. We now move forward to the mid 1990s, when Bolaño, now in Barcelona, is contacted by a famous police investigator from the Allende period who wants to track down Ramírez Hoffman. “Para encontrar a un poeta necesitaba la ayuda de otro poeta” (206) (“In order to find a poet, he needed the help of another poet”), Bolaño writes. After some research, Bolaño manages to identify Ramírez Hoffman at a café, and it is insinuated (but not confirmed) that he is finally killed by the investigator.

Not only does the narrative offer enough factual grounding to be read as a traditional human rights text, but it tackles some classic human rights themes, such as the relationship between art and violence and the question of reconciliation versus justice. Yet the narrative steers clear of advocacy, never once revealing Bolaño’s personal position or feelings. We might speculate that Bolaño’s imprisonment was related to supporting Allende, and we might wonder whether Bolaño has a crisis of conscience upon realizing that his services will result in the death of Ramírez Hoffman – we do not get a firm answer to either question.⁵⁹ In fact, Bolaño injects destabilizing elements into the story, which we find in passages such as “todo lo anterior tal vez ocurrió así. Tal vez no” (199) (“perhaps all of this happened that way. Perhaps it did not”), or “a partir de esa noche las noticias sobre Ramírez Hoffman son confusas, contradictorias” (203) (“after that night, news about Ramírez Hoffman becomes confusing, contradictory”). As

⁵⁹ Some of these questions are fleshed out further in *Estrella distante*, where “the narrator, as a reader and interpreter of Wieder’s artistic works and crimes, extends his own memories into the present, trying to reconstruct Wieder’s criminal and artistic trajectory, but ends up facing the limits and risks of this reconstruction to the point that he becomes doubtful of his own self, and even doubtful of the implications, at the political, aesthetic, and moral levels, of Wieder’s violent acts” (Rodríguez 205).

exemplified by the literary metamorphosis of these events as they reappear in *Estrella distante*, Bolaño undercuts the reliability of his narration, setting limits between his prose and historical writing. Yet through it all, he manages to place his literary persona within global markers of trauma and violence, offering readers a set of shifting but recognizable coordinates.

Scholars who have attempted to uncover Bolaño's politics through his fiction have found it hard to identify an organizing principle. Three recent studies – by Eugenio Santangelo, Rory O'Bryen and Juliet Lynd – have separately concluded that the most salient political element in Bolaño, if any, relates to the demands he places upon his readers. His literature “seeks to confront its reader with our historic failures to render justice” (Lynd 188) but “confers the ultimate responsibility for agency with the reader” (171). His work “is *political* insofar as it demands, in *Nocturno* and *Amuleto*, respectively, that we read against the grain of the ‘democratic’ turn of recent Mexican and Chilean politics” (O'Bryen 485). His branching narratives are designed to thematize “la lectura como lucha y experiencia crítica” (Santangelo 357) (“reading as struggle and critical experience”). This redirection of political responsibility from artist to audience can be understood as an optimistic take on the interpretive issues initially raised by Pollack. The fact that readers face multiple pathways, as is the case for any complex historical event, forces them to exercise critical thinking. To spell out conclusions would equate to patronizing handholding.

The prevalence of deflection, intertextual play and autobiographical intrusion in Bolaño's work impedes a positive definition of his politics. At best, we might agree on what Bolaño is *not*. Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott argues that “his narrative is not reducible

to the allegorical economy of traditional anti-imperialism” (200), and that his novels, in their post-national scope, “entail a return to world-literature in which there is no hope for a redemptive education of humankind” (194). Herein lies the tension in Bolaño’s position. He recognizes the futility and reductiveness of tying the horror of contemporary life to a single ideology. And yet, if he does not provide some manner of political underpinnings – as is often required for access to the world literary canon – he runs the risk of becoming, like the anthologized characters of *La literatura nazi*, a lost author himself. As he navigates these choppy waters, Bolaño is unwittingly setting a template for future Latin American misfits.

THE CASE OF REJTMAN

At first glance, Bolaño and the Argentine director and writer Martín Rejtman do not appear to have much in common. Born in Buenos Aires in 1961, Rejtman has garnered some degree of regional notoriety through his films – four full-length features so far, beginning with *Rapado* in 1991 – and, to a lesser extent, his short story collections – another four to this point. Unlike Bolaño, he is hardly a household name. He is best known as one of the originators of what has been labeled New Argentine Cinema, which I will discuss shortly, and for his meandering, affectless narratives. I have no intention of arguing for Rejtman as the next Bolaño in world literature, nor do I want to downplay the very obvious differences in their work. Further, I am not suggesting that Bolaño has influenced Rejtman in any direct way. What I do see in Rejtman is a prime example of the misfit model at work today. In his close adherence to the tenets of misfit identity

construction, Rejtman gives us a glimpse at the future of outward-facing Latin American fiction. Through an exploration of the three misfit strategies in his films and, particularly, his short story “Este-Oeste” from his collection *Tres Cuentos* (2012), I argue that the Bolaño model is alive and well throughout the American continent, to such an extent that we might consider whether the multiplication of misfits might, ironically, force us to conceive of them as a cohesive bloc.

Unlike Bolaño, Rejtman has not been subjected to a significant degree of mythification from critics, publishers and audiences. Consequently, few details of his life have been made public. One biographical highlight mentioned routinely in interviews is his time studying film at New York University. He spent a year there as an undergraduate in 1981, found he did not feel comfortable, and returned to Argentina upon the fall of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship and the transition back to democracy. “I wanted to be there for this change,” Rejtman says (Rizov). In 1985 he went back to NYU for another year, but felt even more out of place than before. According to Rejtman: “People were saying that all these new buildings and the Tisch School were paid for by TV, so they wanted people to become more conventional filmmakers. So I felt a little bit like an outsider. Then I dropped out” (Rizov). In this selective sharing of personal information we begin to see some typical misfit moves: the emphasis on marginality, the combination of national color and global mobility, and the nonexplicit political positioning through a human rights touchstone.

Each of these strategies figures prominently in his short story “Este-Oeste”, which approaches novella length at 96 pages and is divided into two parts. The first follows Lara, an Argentine high-schooler, as she travels from Buenos Aires to several Chilean

cities and back. The second concerns Esteban, a young Argentine who receives funding for an artist's residency in the U.S. After a frustrating stay that ends with Esteban burning down his studio, he relocates to Los Angeles. As is the norm for Rejtman's work, both plots are vague and non-linear. In film, he has been noted for his "tendencia anti-narrativa" ("anti-narrative tendencies") and the "ritmo alienante" ("alienating rhythm") of his cuts (Ceresa 187). The technique is, in fact, an appropriation of the language of contemporary mass media, in particular the beats of the sitcom genre. Rejtman deploys it in service of a subtle critique of neoliberalism, what Jens Andermann calls "a post-Brechtian device of apprehending the real through defamiliarisation" (18). Rejtman's writing, similarly, does away with emotional and psychological introspection and relies, instead, on brief, punctuated dialogue and constant movement. Thematically, his films and short stories tend to focus on young men and women who exist "in a somewhat childish state of uncertainty and indolence" (Depetris Chauvin 214). Perhaps the best way to think of Rejtman's imprint is through the idea of the "estética de la inercia" ("aesthetic of inertia"), as developed by Rocío Gordon. By removing the logic of causality, characters are emptied of motivation and propelled entirely by external forces (Gordon 290). Underpinning this creative approach is Rejtman's deployment of the three misfit tenets.

1) The misfit embodies expert literary knowledge and skill from a marginal position.

Rejtman has been at the forefront of at least two minor movements. His short story "Mi estado físico" was included in the original *McOndo* (1996) compilation, whose

title playfully melds Gabriel García Márquez's mythical Macondo with the McDonald's brand, as well as with condo buildings, in an effort to problematize Boom representations of Latin America. In film, he is known as a figurehead for New Argentine Cinema, a directorial approach developed throughout the 1990s that emphasizes simple stories, a realist aesthetic and quotidian dialogue and situations (Aguirre 39).⁶⁰ Rejtman's *Rapado*, filmed in 1991 but not released widely until 1995, is commonly cited as the first full-fledged example of this style.⁶¹ Both McOndo and New Argentine Cinema reject the work of the preceding generation: the Boom, in the case of the former, and "the auteurist approach of the well-established Argentine film community" (Falicov 49) and its overreliance on themes of national identity and political struggle, in the case of the latter. Additionally, both movements serve as a direct response to neoliberal policies established across Latin America. As Ana Forcinito argues, "el nuevo cine argentino expresa el desconcierto frente a las transformaciones que vienen de la mano de los discursos celebratorios de la globalización económica y cultural" (37) ("New Argentine Cinema expresses the confusion arising from transformations that go hand in hand with the celebratory discourse of economic and cultural globalization"). Thus Rejtman comes to be identified with two youth-driven, underdog methodologies that, with Davidian zeal, are meant to challenge to canonical representation.

⁶⁰ For a full account of the development of New Argentine Cinema, see Falicov, Tamara. "Los hijos de Menem: The New Independent Argentine Cinema, 1995-1999." *Framework* 44.1 (2003): 49-63.

⁶¹ Rejtman struggled to obtain funding for the film. Upon its release, the Argentine National Institute of Film (INCAA) decreed that *Rapado* was a "película sin interés" ("film of no interest") for its depiction of youth lacking in ideals. For more, see Suárez, Pablo. "Martín Rejtman: la superficie de las cosas." *New Argentine Cinema*. Buenos Aires: Tatanka, 2002.

Like Bolaño, Rejtman has intensified his authorial aura by publicly denouncing mainstream artistic production while associating his own work with that of prestigious, less-visible auteurs. In a 2000 opinion piece entitled “The Wonderful World of Filmmaking,” Rejtman raises the question of whether Western cinema has lost its way: “Films made in developed countries these days tend to suffocate you with the same tired old plots and easy images drawn from ubiquitous television” (19). Ensuring that he is excluded from this trend, Rejtman refers to “those of us outside mainstream cinema” (19) and emphasizes his independent filmmaking credentials. He has similarly cast himself as alone and isolated at the outset of his career, a positioning that serves to confirm his originality. In an interview conducted in 2015, he reflected: “I feel that I have filmmakers with whom I can share a conversation about film now. It was not the case when I started making movies” (Robinson). Rejtman has been hesitant to name his influences, although he occasionally engages with the production of other artists. In September of 2014, he mentioned, among others, “Bresson, of course; Ozu; some Italian cinema, especially Antonioni” (Marchini Camia). In an interview two months later, he reversed course, balking at the Bresson comparison: “Me llama la atención que me relacionen con él. Lo han hecho siempre. Yo creo que Bresson es un director con una puesta en escena tan cuidada y creo que en mis películas la puesta en escena es mucho menos elaborada, por eso me asombra esa referencia (...). A veces pienso que fuerzan un poco la relación” (Nazarala) (“I’m surprised when they compare me to him. They’ve always done it. I think Bresson is a director with a *mise-en-scène* so precise, and I think it is far less elaborate in my movies, which is why I am amazed by that reference (...). Sometimes I think they’re forcing the comparison somewhat.”). In the style of Bolaño, Rejtman provides audiences

with some canonical coordinates, an act that confirms his own expertise. But he eludes direct comparison and undercuts his own claims, lest he be perceived as derivative or self-promoting.

In “Este-Oeste,” the construction of expert marginality takes place through the character of Esteban, who can be read an avatar for Rejtman himself. Esteban has three minor art exhibitions under his belt when he receives the offer for a residency in the U.S., which he is not particularly enthusiastic about. His parents have divorced and sold off his childhood home, forcing him to stay with friends. Of Buenos Aires, he says: “*acá ya no tengo nada*” (47) (“there is nothing left for me here”). He is adrift and alone. When he arrives at the artist’s residence in an unnamed U.S. town, he immediately feels uncomfortable, like Rejtman in New York City, and clashes with his peers. Upon meeting an artist from Idaho, he finds that “*la conversación es poco fluida y ninguno de los dos hace ningún esfuerzo*” (52) (“conversation is not fluid and neither of them makes any effort”). He steals food from the shared kitchen and drinks wine that belongs to other artists. He is confronted by a sculptor from Minnesota but refuses to own up to his crimes, at which point the rest of the artists get up from the dinner table and leave him eating by himself. From that point on, “*lo excluyen de toda actividad colectiva*” (56) (“he is excluded from all collective activities”). The narrator speculates that Esteban’s lone friendship, with a Californian writer named Clay, is based upon the disregard of others toward them.

After thoroughly establishing Esteban’s marginal pedigree, Rejtman must now imbue him with the piercing vision of the ur-critic, indicating a deep reservoir of artistic talent. Esteban routinely exposes the commonplace: “*esto lo ví en miles de películas*”

(60) (“I’ve seen this in a thousand movies”), he says of a clichéd scene by a lake. He describes a playwright from the artist’s colony as “muy inteligente, con una ingenuidad un poco calculada y difícil de sostener” (100) (“very intelligent, with a somewhat calculated and hard to sustain ingenuity”). Here, Esteban performs as an arbiter of intellectuality and a keen observer of human behavior. He is incensed when the other artists brag about their prolific output during the residency; his own production is slow and tortured. When he does manage to eke out some drawings, he uses them to light his studio on fire. In California, he switches from the visual to the written word, as Rejtman does routinely. He tries his hand at this new skill in spatial and auditory isolation, once again: “Esteban está solo en el living, tratando de escribir, con el aire acondicionado al máximo y los tres turbos que compraron en Walmart encendidos” (76) (“Esteban is alone in the living room, trying to write, with the air conditioning on full blast, as well as the three fans they bought at Walmart”). He eventually takes on translation projects and offers conversation classes for UCLA and USC Spanish students – “no le pagan mal y el tiempo pasa volando” (100) (“the pay isn’t bad and time flies by”) is his casual assessment of the situation. In this way, Esteban embodies the trope of the tortured genius – supremely talented, but unwilling to exploit or broadcast that talent. The setup ultimately provides a manner of credentialing for Rejtman himself.

2) The misfit performs a regional identity for global readers and a global identity for regional readers.

This is likely the category in which Rejtman's belonging is most self-evident. His narratives hinge upon circulation – sometimes within neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, often between Latin American nations, and occasionally through world travel. His storylines tend to begin with intensely personal situations and, through a series of apparently coincidental events, widen in scope and geography. For instance: the protagonist of the film *Los guantes mágicos* (*The Magic Gloves*, 2003), Alejandro, is a private taxi driver who shuttles customers to the two airports in Buenos Aires. His passengers fly out to a spa in Brazil, among other locations, and fly in from Canada – “viven en Canada pero no son canadienses” (“they live in Canada, but aren't Canadian”), we learn, in a typical Rejtman complication. Later in the film, Alejandro tries his hand at importing gloves: they, too, “vienen de Canadá pero no son de Canadá” (“come from Canada but aren't from Canada”) – they are, in fact, made in China. Alejandro exists at the intersection of the local and the global, even as both registers are mildly destabilized. The film ends with Alejandro taking up a job as a long-distance bus driver, stopping in forlorn towns in the interior of Argentina, becoming a symbol for national exploration.

Silvia Prieto (1999) similarly complicates rigid, geographically based identities through circulation. For instance, the following dialogue takes place between the titular character and an Italian tourist she has just met in Mar del Plata, a coastal town in the province of Buenos Aires:

Tourist: Disculpe mi castellano, pero hace poco que lo hablo. ¿Qué ciudad tan increíble, no?

Silvia: Dicen que Mar del Plata es uno de los lugares más lindos del mundo.

Tourist: Estuve en el casino. Todos mis amigos me decían que cuando venía a Sudamérica tenía que probar esa maravillosa (sic) marihuana que ustedes tienen.

¿Tú sabes donde la puedo encontrar?

Silvia: ¿Paraguay?

Tourist: Pardon my Spanish, but I recently started speaking it. What an incredible city, no?

Silvia: They say Mar del Plata is one of the most beautiful places in the world.

Tourist: I've been to the casino. All my friends said that when I came to South America I had to try that wonderful marijuana you people have. Do you know where I can find it?

Silvia: Paraguay?

Rejtman's humorous take on stereotypes suspends his audience's ability to generalize about each character. The Italian tourist commits small blunders in his pronunciation of "maravillosa" and his use of the past tense, but his Spanish is surprisingly good for a beginner. His view of South America as a land of potent drugs is an obvious cliché, which Silvia counters by reminding him that the continent contains multiple nations, although she evokes another national stereotype in the process. Silvia's own local preconception – that of Mar del Plata as a beautiful city – is undercut by rainy, windy weather around her. In a single exchange, Rejtman introduces three stereotypes – one global, one regional, one local – and undercuts them, while stopping short of fully rejecting them. In the process, like Bolaño, he is providing multiple points of entry into

his work: through curiosity about local communities, for domestic viewers, and through larger national or regional inquisitiveness, for audiences abroad.

The idea that these registers are irrevocably intertwined is crucial in understanding Rejtman's work. His 2006 documentary *Copacabana*, a study of an annual celebration by Bolivian communities in Buenos Aires, moves from focusing on close-knit neighborhood associations – dancers practicing their choreography in empty garages – to the border between Argentina and Bolivia, charting transnational movement. Here, it is the quotidian that sustains collective identity. As César Barros argues, “hasta el más brutal de los quiebres, parece decirnos Rejtman, está plagado de lugares comunes, de superficies” (374) (“even the most brutal of ruptures, Rejtman seems to tell us, is riddled with common places, with surfaces”). Rejtman's insistence upon superficiality allows for brisk motion, constructed upon a succession of seemingly spontaneous events.⁶²

Copacabana can be viewed for its insight on Buenos Aires, on Bolivian cultural traditions or on South American migratory patterns, all bound together by small-scale daily experience.

In its opening line, “Este-Oeste” announces such geographic overlap: “Cuando Lara tenía tres años, su padre, Julio, se fue a vivir a Mendoza con una mujer chilena que conoció una tarde en el patio de comidas de un shopping del centro de Buenos Aires” (9) (“When Lara was 3, her father, Julio, moved to Mendoza to live with a Chilean woman he met one afternoon in the food court of a shopping mall in downtown Buenos Aires”). We move from the local to the national to the global, from food court to Argentine wine country, then over the Andes. Rejtman's shifting registers take on a material dimension

⁶² Rejtman's surface aesthetic can be read, in part, as a counterpart for the figure of the map in Bolaño.

throughout the story. We find them in objects such as an Austrian hunter's coat known as a *loden*, popular with well-off Argentines and Chileans, which is being displayed along Avenida Santa Fé in Buenos Aires (15); a *kuchen de murta* (cake with berries) consumed in Valparaíso, Chile, as well as instant coffee spiked with *pisco* from a Coke Zero bottle (31); Chilean youths clad in North Face and Patagonia jackets listening to a CD of "canciones gitanas" ("gypsy songs" 34); an L.A. apartment in Koreatown, which reminds Esteban of Sao Paulo, Brazil (65); "alfajores de maicena" (traditional Argentine corn starch and dulce de leche cookies) sold in a Westwood café (70); and so forth. These objects have the power to evoke, nostalgically, some sense of an origin or distant identification, but their separation from their original context, recombination through circulation, and commodification by the neoliberal marketplace renders them decorations in Rejtman's gallery of surfaces. The fact that they do not serve an overt ideological function means that, as with Bolaño, readers are welcome to grasp onto any particular geographic register without feeling obligated to adopt an explicit stance toward it, or to acknowledge other coexisting strands. Given his partial destabilization of identitarian claims through humor and irony, Rejtman can claim, with a wink, a deconstructive approach. But this does not result in mutually exclusive readings: all audiences are welcome.

3) The misfit insinuates ties to historical milestones without taking an explicitly political stance.

Rejtman has been adamant about separating his personal ideas from his creative oeuvre. “There’s no reflection whatsoever in my films,” he has said. “I don’t like to have my own opinion in my films. There is my point of view, of course, but my point of view on the story, not on any kind of social or sociological or political situation” (Marchini Camia). Despite his insistence, his work has been associated with at least three historical moments. The first is the most recent Argentine dictatorship. Not only does it determine the course of his education abroad, but it brands him a misfit early in his career, when Argentine film production appeared entirely devoted to dramatizing and working through the human rights violations of the period.⁶³ The second moment is the arrival of neoliberalism in the region, with its ensuing flood of foreign products and culture. This turn is often cited as the explanation for the proliferation of objects in Rejtman’s work, and the fetishistic attachments his characters have toward them. The third is the Argentine political and economic crisis of 2001, when crowds took to the streets, chanting “que se vayan todos” (“they must all go”) after the government, facing a currency collapse, froze all bank accounts in a desperate, stopgap measure (Goddard 271).⁶⁴ Some critics have retroactively read the crisis into his production; for instance, Irene Depetris Chauvin asserts that “almost all of Martín Rejtman’s films and short stories follow the lives of apathetic middle-class youths pauperized as a result of the

⁶³ Prominent examples include *La historia oficial* (1985), winner of an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and *La noche de los lápices* (1986). Rejtman released his first short, *Doli vuelve a casa*, in 1986.

⁶⁴ Bolaño references the Argentine crisis in his short story “El gaucho insufrible” (“The Insufferable Gaucho”). He writes: “La ciudad estaba llena de mendigos y la gente decente hacía ollas comunes en los barrios para tener algo que echarse al estómago. Había como diez tipos de moneda, sin contar la oficial” (440) (“The city was packed with the homeless, and decent folks organized neighborhood soup kitchens to have something to fill up their stomachs. There were about ten types of currency, not counting the official one”).

Argentine economic crisis” (214).⁶⁵ Yet considering how much of Rejtman’s work was released previous to the crisis, and the consistency of his aesthetic, developed throughout the 1980s, perhaps the impact of the events of 2001 might be overstated.

In addition to withholding personal opinions, Rejtman has disavowed ties to Argentine current affairs. Of his latest release, 2014’s *Dos disparos (Two Shots Fired)*, he said: “I happen to live in Argentina and I happen to have made the film there with Argentinean actors and Argentinean technicians, but that doesn’t mean that I’m talking about Argentina. I’m talking about this particular story that happens to take place in Argentina. Of course it’ll reflect something of the country, but nothing intentional” (Marchini Camia). Here we find the fragile balancing act of misfit ideology. In spite of an attempt to produce high art that is universal and transcendental, any narrative that renders contemporary living will experience the intrusion of a number of national and political markers, as it must be grounded in specificity, providing audiences with reference points. In fact, many of Rejtman’s films stumble upon what can be thought of as hot-button political issues. These are always neutrally framed, delivered as anecdotal slices of life. *Copacabana*, for instance, features an extended shot of Bolivian immigrants weaving clothes in a clandestine workshop. The documentary does not include any guiding commentary and does not denote an ideological stance.

The few moments of pure political speech we find in Rejtman’s films are quickly subverted. In *Los guantes mágicos*, we witness a rare rant from Luis, one of Alejandro’s partners in the glove-import scheme. When the business fails, Luis decides to return to Canada, where he earns a living as an adult-film performer. “No es un país serio” (“This

⁶⁵ For more on the impact of the crisis on the Argentine middle class, see Adamovsky, Ezequiel. “Esperando otro 17 de Octubre: la identidad de clase media y la experiencia de la crisis de 2001 en Argentina.” *Sociohistórica* 29.1 (2012): 183-201.

is not a serious country”), Luis complains of Argentina. “Acá no hay industria. ¿Y sabés por qué? Porque en este país somos todos como hermanos. Yo hago una película acá, al día siguiente salgo a la calle, todo el mundo se da vuelta y me señala con el dedo. Canadá es otra cosa. Allá sos más anónimo. En un país desarrollado es otra cosa.” (“There is no industry here. You know why? Because in this country we’re all like brothers. I make a movie here, the next day I go out on the street, everyone turns around and points at me. Canada is different. You’re more anonymous there. It’s different in a developed country.”) Rejtman takes the elements of a classic Argentine complaint – lack of professionalism and industrial underdevelopment – and disrupts it through an unexpected claim about life in North America, where anonymity proves to be an advantage. The disconnected state of Rejtman’s characters appears to imply that this North-South binary does not hold any longer; as an audience, we cannot take Luis seriously. We find a similar declaration in “Este-Oeste” from a character named El Sueco (The Swede): “Las sociedades postindustriales son las que están alienadas; los países en desarrollo no” (42) (“Postindustrial societies are alienated; developing countries are not”). In this manner, broadly political claims are deflated and robbed of their power: they are simply opinions, of which the most explicit tend to be the most misguided.

“Este-Oeste” includes, as in Bolaño, a broadly accessible human rights entry point: a reference to the parents of one of Lara’s acquaintances who are said to have left Chile for Norway during the Pinochet years (36). However, the story restricts ideological speech to a single secondary character, Pato, Lara’s high-school friend, described as a politically active militant. Of the *loden* in the display window, Pato declares: “Ahí está la quintaesencia del nazismo, el ultimo resto de aristocracia que no pudo democratizar la

política de posguerra” (15) (“There we see the quintessence of Nazism, the final dregs of aristocracy that post-war politics were unable to democratize”). After traveling together, Lara grows weary of Pato’s “erudición ideologizada” (37) (“ideologized erudition”). But when she is on her own again, she acknowledges that “le gustaría que estuviera Pato para poner en limpio su razonamiento” (45) (“she wishes Pato was there to clear up her reasoning”). Perhaps the original sin of ideological speech is aesthetic: in its forcefulness and ornamentation, it falsifies the moment. If, as Rocío Gordon argues, “lo contemporáneo de Rejtman se encuentra en una mirada y un lenguaje totalmente despojados que parecen percibir con claridad la realidad” (292) (“the contemporary in Rejtman can be found in a pared-down perspective and language that appears to clearly perceive reality”), then we can understand how heavy-handed political intrusion, in the style of Pato, might interfere with that vision.⁶⁶ The end goal, for Rejtman, is what Gordon calls “la construcción de una indiferencia marcada por el desencanto con la realidad” (303) (“the construction of an indifference marked by disenchantment with reality”). Rejtman ultimately delivers an understated critique of contemporary human relations but, as is the case for Bolaño, it is heavily shrouded, lacking in easy resolutions and clear alternatives.

THE RETURN TO CTHULHU

Writers removed from the centers of publishing power have faced a historical dilemma. Although their perceived difference has served to marginalize them, it is this

⁶⁶ Gordon cites Giorgio Agamben’s definition of contemporaneity, which she summarizes as the ability to perceive the shadows in one’s own time.

very gap that, under the right circumstances, can attract and sustain broad readerly interest. In this sense, Bolaño and Rejtman are simply the latest iteration in a long tradition of Latin American artists subjected to a series of incentives and penalties as they pursue global visibility. In *Cosmopolitan Desires*, Mariano Siskind explores the connections between Latin American literary production and the advent of the discourse of world literature over the past two centuries; as he defines the focus of his research – which includes works by Martí, Rubén Darío, Carpentier, García Márquez and Borges – we notice how closely it resembles the misfit predicament:

The hero of this book, if I may call him that, is a Latin American cosmopolitan intellectual (a distinctively male writer) who derives his specific cultural subjectivity from his marginal position of enunciation and from the certainty that this position has excluded him from the global unfolding of a modernity articulated outside a Latin American cultural field saturated with the nationalistic or peninsular signifiers that determine its backwardness. (9)

Aside from a slight semantic update – dichotomies such as modernity versus backwardness have been recast for our era – the protagonists remain unchanged: male, cosmopolitan intellectuals who vehemently reject the constraints of literature premised upon local, national or regional identity and, instead, take aim at the universal.

What is new, then? Not only have the canonical and the marginal always been closely intertwined – by definition, the norms of the former determine the latter – but, as Noé Jitrik notes, movements such as *modernismo* or even the Boom itself arose as

challenges to traditional representation: “When a contracanonical formulation makes itself heard (...) attempts are made to domesticate its effects and to reinforce an order, albeit a renewing one” (72), Jitrik writes. Marginality, whether in content or style, finds an audience, becomes homogenized, imitated and misread, and the cycle is renewed. Even if revolutionary outbursts are short-lived, Jitrik reminds us, they are always ongoing. Latin American literary history might thus be better conceptualized as a constant rather than a series of disruptions, and Bolaño (and those who share some of his characteristics) can be recast as the latest predictable instance of this pattern. Further, the idea that at some point in time authors dreamed up their work and intellectual goals in absolute isolation, unaware of what literary strategies might improve their reputation or widen their audience, is demonstrably false. Even if the circumstances of production have changed, the self-positioning process has always held true.

But circumstances *have* changed, and drastically so, with the spread of neoliberalism throughout Latin America. As difference has been subjected to progressive erasure, the region’s artists have been forced to recast strategies for creating conditions for visibility, nudging the playing field in their favor. With increased skepticism toward regional solidarity – or what might be perceived as any form of collective consolidation of power – and reduced avenues for non-contractually-mediated intellectual exchange, Bolaño and Rejtman have stumbled upon a starkly similar formula, locating themselves globally through the thematization of this very positioning process. As part and parcel of their self-reflexive play, the misfits demystify the actions of their predecessors. By exposing the inorganic process of engaging with global audiences, Bolaño and Rejtman

allow for a return to Cthulhu and his minions with a steady hand rather than trembling knees.

CONCLUSION

FINDING NESTOR SANCHEZ

Among select readers who are aware of his existence, Néstor Sánchez is considered to be Argentina's greatest unheralded writer. Sánchez (1935-2003) lived a turbulent life, ideal for mythification, and published the bulk of his densely experimental novels at the height of the Latin American Boom, ideal for canonical incorporation.⁶⁷ He grew up on the margins of the city of Buenos Aires, performing as a tango dancer and spending time at horse-racing tracks from the age of 14 (Salinas). His first novel was released in 1966; from that point on, he was firmly esconced within the literary networks of his time. Julio Cortázar, a friend, advocated on behalf of Sánchez to several major editorial houses (Ortiz). In Europe, Sánchez was published by Seix Barral and Gallimard. In 1970, he edited an anthology of up-and-coming Argentine writers, including short stories by, among others, Ricardo Piglia.⁶⁸ And, around that same time, Sánchez accepted a writing fellowship at the University of Iowa.

Then he tore it all down. Sánchez left Iowa after four months – “no soportaba ese desierto, esa soledad espantosa” (Ortiz) (“I could not endure that desert, that awful loneliness”), he said – denounced the Boom⁶⁹ – “vendieron como si fuera la mejor una

⁶⁷ Sánchez published the following novels: *Nosotros dos* (1966), *Siberia blues* (1967), *El amhor, los orsinis y la muerte* (1969), and *Cómico de la lengua* (1973), as well as the short-story collection *La condición efímera* (1988).

⁶⁸ Sánchez, Néstor. *20 nuevos narradores argentinos*. Monte Ávila: Caracas, 1970.

⁶⁹ Even Cortázar, his literary co-conspirator, was not spared from criticism. Sánchez affirmed: “Creo que era muy adolescente la actitud política de Cortázar, muy atrasada, le llegó tarde el marxismo” (Ortiz) (“I think Cortázar's political attitude was too adolescent and belated; he came to Marxism too late”).

literatura superficial, inaugurando el camino del facilismo. Fue el momento más bajo de una lengua” (“they sold a superficial literature as if it were superior, inaugurating the path of facilism. It was the lowest moment for our language”) (Salinas) – and, after an unfulfilling stint in Spain and in France, spent years adrift in poverty in the U.S. According to the Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas, “recorría enloquecido las calles de San Francisco y Nueva York, durmiendo en coches y casas abandonadas” (“in his madness, he roamed the streets of San Francisco and New York, sleeping in cars and abandoned houses”). It is rare to encounter such potential for literary appeal at every level, a perfect storm of historical context, professional networks, biographical allure and intellectual antagonism.

But then there’s the matter of actual content. His first two novels, *Nosotros dos* (1966) and *Siberia Blues* (1967), have been compared to tango and to jazz, respectively (Vila-Matas). It is difficult to say anything more concrete about them. Sánchez practiced what he called “escritura poemática” (“poematic writing”), melding life experience, poetry and narrative, resulting in disconcerting, often inscrutable texts with the feel of improvisation (Guaragno). Eventually, he became entirely silent: after 1973, he stopped writing for 15 years. “Mi obra no fue entendida” (Ortiz) (“My work was not understood”) reflected Sánchez in a 2001 interview. He blames this development on the threat that his public image posed to publishers, claiming that it went against “el buen negocio de la facilidad y los lugares comunes que tanto abundan” (Ortiz) (“the booming business of facility and of the all-too-abundant commonplace”). Yet it was not simply alterity that hindered Sánchez’s exposure; it was the insurmountable combination of his literal and conceptual illegibility.

Throughout this study, I have argued that neoliberal reforms enable the circulation of certain kinds of texts, and that collectivization – through renewed pathways that run through the hallways of academia and publishing houses – has played a key role in cementing readership. Returning to the Adorno epigraph that inaugurated this study, Sánchez was, perhaps, not a subject for his time. He was either born too late – where his strict ethical code on what constituted the life of an artist⁷⁰ would have been commonplace and, thus, his visibility would have hinged to a greater degree upon the perceived quality of his prose – or too early, where his difference could have been commodified, imbued with positional coordinates for readers, and pre-mediated by critics (Sánchez is inscrutable *because* he resists our contemporary cultural paradigms, introduces Derridean play into Latin American letters, etc.). Within the literary production of neoliberalism, Sánchez could have been linked to the output of McOndians, misread (let us recall that Fuguet made analogous claims regarding critical misunderstanding) but at least locatable, or, in what is likely the closest fit, grouped with the misfits and presented simultaneously as regional and global literature.

The three case studies in *Market Realism* provide us with a basic panorama of how global-facing Latin American letters find an audience from the 1990s onward, but the Sánchez situation brings up a postponed, lingering question: How should we *feel*

⁷⁰ “El código del escritor lumpen, del poeta, era sencillo: 1) No hacer la carrera literaria, 2) No ganar ningún premio nacional, 3) No hacer periodismo y, 4) No hacer publicidad. Siempre fue así hasta que la crisis económica trastocó todo, permitiendo que los facilistas se adueñaran del corazón y la mente de los lectores como si el corazón y la mente fueran sólo un mercado” (Salinas) (“The code of the *lumpen* writer, of the poet, was simple: 1) Do not pursue a literary career, 2) Do not win any national awards, 3) Do not go into journalism, 4) Do not go into advertising. It was always like this until the economic crisis affected everything, allowing the simple-minded to take over the hearts and minds of readers, as if the heart and the mind were a single market”.

about these developments? Should we mourn the missed opportunity of a canonized Sánchez? Should we, like Adorno, lament the standardization and instrumentalization of culture? To what extent have the era's available networks for visibility conditioned artistic and intellectual freedom? And, most centrally, do these authors ultimately prop up the U.S. hegemonic model, perpetuating the very biases of publication that allow for their success? Or do they represent steadfast obstacles to its expansion, carving out a more nuanced conversational space for pan-Latin-American values and identities? The answer, for each of the three groupings, is beyond the scope of this study, and is indisputably hard to parse. The ideological slipperiness of these texts exceeds the binary advanced by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who once proposed that all literature is composed of two aesthetics: one of "exploitation and of acquiescence with imperialism" and one of "human struggle for total liberation" (38).

In *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow drew up some useful guidelines for assessing this question. Although Harlow was mainly concerned with armed conflicts of national emancipation in non-Western locales, her identification of common characteristics of resistance remains applicable to Latin American literary output under neoliberalism. For Harlow, resistance literature 1) is written under an occupying power; 2) challenges existing ideological paradigms, exposing power structures and imbalances; 3) "insists on its own historical specificity" (80), standing in as a document for an alternate history; 4) "calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a politicized and political activity" (28); 5) "presents a serious challenge to the codes and canons of both the theory and the practice of literature and its criticism as these have been developed in the West" (xvi); 6) proposes a shift from genealogy – that is,

intergenerational family ties – to the collective, as in the work of Rigoberta Menchú,; and 7) often faces “serious consequences that go well beyond the issues and penalties of censorship and publication” (120). Excluding this final criterion – none of the authors in this study have had to contend with a threat greater than obscurity – we may briefly attempt to gauge our three groups in relation to the six remaining benchmarks.

The writers of McOndo, as I have argued in chapter one, present a contradiction-riddled version of resistance. In many ways, they fit Harlow’s framework. Their work can be understood to stem from an intangible form of occupation – the impact of globalization on the Southern Cone – and a more specific one – the C.I.A.’s backing of military dictatorships and the associated U.S. influence over national policymaking in the region. They may not directly challenge ideological paradigms, but they expose the human toll of neoliberal systems. And they subvert the Western literary and critical canon in their dismissal of the Boom, as well their rebuke of traditional notions of high and low culture. In other ways, they fail to live up to Harlow’s standards. They do not point toward alternate pasts or produce texts that can be read as historical documents. They are suspicious of politicization and ideological overttness. And, despite dismissing generational and familial ties, they do not advocate for alternative community-building possibilities. We find, then, that they are properly labeled as “children of neoliberalism,” as referenced in the chapter’s title, but that their full submission to these precepts is, at the least, up for debate.

For the M.F.A. generation, the equation is almost entirely reversed. Their work does not arise under occupation, nor does it oppose contemporary literary criticism, engaging in a symbiotic relationship with it. Further, although these authors repeatedly

render power imbalances, particularly when it comes to the treatment of migrants, the troping of Latin American subalternity robs the work of much of its political impact, as I have argued. Yet their texts do comply with a number of resistance requirements. Chief among them is the fictionalization of alternate histories, particularly in the context of Caribbean dictatorship, and the presentation of their texts as historical documents, backed by painstakingly researched footnotes, journalistic citations and testimonial-like structures. While the M.F.A. authors tend to use family as a core organizing principle, their narratives propose a variety of complementary identitarian banners, including that of Latino/a, Caribbean diaspora, and racial and ethnic solidarity. These links are enacted in the marketplace through mutual authorial promotion. It is yet to be seen whether the collective will manage to disrupt longstanding inequality within the U.S. through their fictionalization of identitarian struggle under multiculturalism. But it is clear that, thanks to their strategic positioning, they have tapped into an audience far exceeding that of the short-lived McOndo experiment.

The Latin American misfits present the most intricate deployment of resistance. They overwhelmingly fulfill the guidelines, but almost always with a caveat. Like McOndians, they were raised under a form of ideological occupation, yet tend to work from abroad or, as in the case of Rejtman, focus their narratives on transnational themes rather than those of national liberation. They represent mainstream ideology in a negative light, but rarely criticize it overtly. They render alternate histories, as in Bolaño's compendium of Nazi sympathizers, but choose topics that cannot be tied to ongoing fights for social justice. They anchor their plots to historical milestones of immense political significance, but avoid openly political stances. They appear to subvert the

Western canon – Bolaño against the Boom, Rejtman against mainstream cinema – but subtly associate their own work with that of less-visible, high-prestige artists, in a performance of marginal expertise. And they reject generational narratives, yet refuse to propose a suitable replacement, insisting upon staunch independence that leads readers on a heroic march toward nowhere, as Jean Franco puts it. Unlike the previous two movements – incomplete, opposing sides of a literary coin – the misfits embody a new path to global exposure that has, to this point, managed to elude claims of cultural instrumentalization: a legible opposition.

One of the basic functions of resistance literature, in Harlow's view, is to "wrest back from the repressive authorities the control over cultural production" (12). While, again, only grappling with this issue symbolically, our three groups experience the difficulty of enacting this reversal from within the market, as gaining visibility in a crowded cultural arena demands the creation of new authority, thus unseating its previous incarnation. The line between resistance as marketing hook and as political project becomes increasingly blurry, as does that between the defense and the exploitation of the victimized. As racial and regional tropes are contested and complicated through their intersection with U.S. reader expectations – Oscar, the sci-fi-aficionado in New Jersey; Pablo, the self-aware, marauding fruit exporter in Arizona; Esteban, the tortured artist in Los Angeles – other historically destructive dichotomies remain, most often that of civilization versus barbarism. These narratives succeed as performances of progressiveness aimed squarely at U.S. readers: they feed their sense of worldliness, they allow them to feel like participants in redressing historical injustice, and they introduce them to new paradigms of identity that are perceived as a social good. And even as these

texts unwittingly recirculate regressive binaries perpetuated by their literary progenitors, the fact that their authors successfully forge relationships and attain ideological synchronicity in an isolating age is no minor achievement.

I have attempted to make that case that the brisk dismissal of Latin American literary output under neoliberalism for its instrumentalizing qualities – that is, because it does not restrict itself solely to the attainment of artistic beauty or to the waging of creative revolution – is an absolutist, short-sighted posture. In tracing the idea of art for art’s sake, Gene Bell-Villada parses through the writing of Kant, Schiller, Poe and the *modernistas* to conclude that the notion has “constantly shifted its arguments and position” (267) over a 200-year history. Inherent in the notion of aestheticism, whether in poetry or prose, is a set of techniques and values. “To deny this is either bourgeois philistinism, Stalinist dogma, or priestly excess” (269), writes Bell-Villada. Aestheticism, he concludes, “is itself a participant in history” and “forms part of economic, political, and cultural developments” (291). Artistic achievement will always be judged based on its accompanying historical definition, and its content and form will be determined by the circuits available for propagation and preservation at any given time. As with the rhetoric of political resistance, there are distinct rewards and punishments even for outwardly disinterested, creatively independent pursuits.

As a sidenote to his project, Bell-Villada warned of the spread of this ideological bias into literary criticism, which he called Criticism for Criticism’s Sake: scholarly work that abstracts texts from the background, aims and experiences of its authors, amounting to little more than an aestheticized nihilism (271). In that light, I do not believe that highlighting market systems and incentives, as this study has insisted upon, constitutes a

literary devaluation. Rather, it is clear that these mechanisms are not just key to dissemination, but actively regulate content in our age, a function once performed by philosophical tenets or nationally circumscribed ideology. I have attempted to identify these patterns by deploying a comparative perspective, settling upon some basic shared approaches; I believe that contemporary Latin American representation cannot be understood, complicated, contested and expanded without a basic sense of these commercial configurations. This has been the driving force behind *Market Realism*: rather than attempting to circumscribe literary trends, and pairing these with easy praise or condemnation, I have sought to delineate circuits for visibility. I am convinced that there is much to be learned from how McOndians, the M.F.A. generation and the misfits stake out a position in an ongoing, highly exclusionary dialogue.

If we agree that facilitating artistic connections constitutes a desirable endeavor, we are left with two broad alternatives. One is to reverse course, redrafting cultural policy with public interest at its center and seizing back control from private institutions, as Néstor García Canclini proposes:

It is not a matter of returning to state ownership (of radio and television) but of reconstructing the state's role as regulator of private companies, driver of the weakest and nonprofit social initiatives – theater and musical groups, libraries and community centers, independent media – and advocate and coordinator of publicly valuable actions. To rediscover the place of the state at this juncture it is necessary to rethink it as an agent of the public interest and of the multicultural collective and as arbiter of disputes between private interests and between

enterprises of the hegemonic nations and those of the underdeveloped countries.⁷¹
(167)

In his escalation from cultural policy to international conflict, Canclini recognizes the vast power of representation in reproducing global asymmetries. Only the figure of the state, so beleaguered in transnational criticism, possesses enough clout to ensure that profit does not supersede social needs. For Canclini, it is out with the new, in with the old.

The other alternative is to pin our hopes on the enterprising spirit of these emerging writers, who find that the numerous roadblocks to connection are far less intimidating, and far more familiar, when examined under the proper light. This illumination can be aided by a sober, grounded literary criticism, wary of Manichean binaries and regressive deployments of difference but realistic about the need for compromise attached to global circulation. It is a criticism that finds a middle ground between strict materialism – which “fails to test the limits of human creativity and to recognize the reality of agency and of consistent cultural reformulation and contestation” (Vélez-Ibáñez 17) – and cultural essentialism, which “makes either/or distinctions rather than variable distinctions in degree” (Fuchs 13). And, crucially, it recognizes its own imbrication in commoditized knowledge production. In honestly encountering our work and its role in the market, we may succeed in reducing the legibility burden for the next Néstor Sánchez. As we find ways to read better, we allow our constellation of literary voices to expand.

⁷¹ Translation by George Yúdice.

In 1969, Sánchez interviewed none other than Jorge Luis Borges for the arts magazine *Artiempo*.⁷² It was a remarkably uneven encounter. The literary master, today understood by some as the progenitor of the Boom (Vargas) through his deployment of the fantastic, knew nothing about the novice. The setting did not help the situation. Borges received Sánchez in an intimidatingly sumptuous room in the Argentine National Library, which he directed at the time. But there were underlying commonalities: the scope of Borges's work, like that of Sánchez, routinely exceeded Latin American particularity, settling upon a broader universalism that made it an awkward fit within the identity-driven literature of the Boom. And, without reaching Borgesian levels of erudition, Sánchez was extraordinarily well read and proficient at literary criticism and conversation.⁷³ For Sánchez, there might have been some mixed feelings involved. On the one hand, it was an opportunity to personally enact the canonical upturning he so deeply desired; on the other, Borges, with his often miscategorized and misunderstood imagination, represented a possible kindred spirit.

Faithful to his style, Sánchez launched a barrage of questions designed to pin down Borges's literary genealogy. Borges, believing Sánchez was but another in a long line of journalists, was reluctant to play along. When Sánchez inquires about the possible influence of Apollinaire and Cendrars, Borges is unequivocal: "En realidad, no. Creo que en mi obra (no hay otra manera de llamar a lo que he escrito) no hay influencias" ("Not really. I think that my work (there is no other way to call what I've written) has no influences"). Sánchez tries an alternate route, now trying to break apart previously

⁷² Transcribed in Ortiz, Lautaro. "El día que Borges leyó a Néstor Sánchez." *Lezama* 4, July 2004.

⁷³ See, for instance: Sánchez, Nestor. "En relación con la novela como proceso o ciclo de vida." *Revista Iberoamericana* 37.76 (1971): 569-574.

established lineages. He wonders if Borges might have exaggerated the importance of the influential Argentine writer Macedonio Fernández. Borges doubles down: “No, creo que es el hombre más inolvidable que he conocido a lo largo de mi vida” (“No, I believe he is the most unforgettable man I have met in my entire life”). Reversing course, Sánchez again presses Borges on influences and this time is rewarded with two names: George Bernard Shaw, and the English writer G.K. Chesterton. Emboldened, Sánchez inquires about the French writer Marcel Schwob, but Borges swiftly shoots him down: “cuando encaré su lectura atenta me sentí, si se quiere, defraudado” (“when I read him more attentively I felt, if you will, let down”). Sánchez asks Borges if he has ever felt alone; never, Borges replies.

The stilted interview ends on an odd note. Asked about the meaning of life, Borges reminisces about how, when he was in his 30s – Sánchez was 34 at the time – “cultivaba desdicha, necesitaba ser cada día más desdichado⁷⁴” (“I cultivated misery, I needed to be more miserable each day”). In his old age, Borges says, he has found serenity and a sense of peaceful resignation. The rift between Borges and Sánchez, who has clearly failed to bring this otherworldly figure down to the realm of mortals, has become insurmountable. If Sánchez was hoping to relate to Borges through literary connection, Borges’s refusal to follow his lead, combined with the thinly veiled projection of youthful discontent, has cemented the latent power disparity. But the scorned Sánchez has one round left in his chamber. He adds a short epilogue to the interview transcript, the final sentence of which reads as follows: “*Borges se pone de pie y consulta el reloj: el mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; él, desgraciadamente es Borges*” (“*Borges stands up and checks the time: the world, unfortunately, is real; he,*

⁷⁴ Here, Borges may be invoking the literary trope of the *poète maudit*.

unfortunately, is Borges”). Reality remains the last great leveler: upstarts, misfits and masters, all equally beholden to it.

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, The Pennsylvania State University Doctoral minor in Latin American Studies	2017
M.S. in Print Journalism, Columbia University	2007
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PUBLICATIONS

- “Xerox Men: Technological Tropes in U.S. Latino/a Displacement Literature.” *symplokē* (forthcoming 2017).
- “Un poquito más de ‘Danubio’: Virgilio Piñera y el revisionismo absurdo.” *Latin American Theatre Review* (forthcoming 2017).
- Review of *Counterfeit Politics: Secret Plots and Conspiracy Narratives in the Americas*, David Kelman. *Comparative Literature Studies* 53.4 (2017).
- Review of *Brother, I’m Dying*, Edwidge Danticat. *American Book Review* 36.4 (2015).

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Comparative Literature 143: Human Rights and World Literature.
- Comparative Literature 005: Introduction to Literatures of the Americas.
- Spanish 003: Introductory/Intermediate Spanish.

SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS

- 2016 Dissertation Fellow, Center for Global Studies, Penn State
- 2016 Summer Resident, Institute for the Arts And Humanities, Penn State
- 2015 Forrest S. Crawford Graduate Fellowship in Ethical Inquiry, Penn State
- 2015 Rock Ethics Institute Scholarship, Penn State
- 2011 University Graduate Fellowship, Penn State
- 2006 Maria Moors Cabot Scholarship, Columbia University

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

- “Market Realism: Political Resistance in McOndo.” Writing Resistance. MLA Forum on History & Literature. Modern Language Association Annual Meeting. Philadelphia, PA (2017).
- “Disarming Difference: Reading Race and Diaspora in Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying*.” The Persistence of Race: Neoliberal Colorblindness in Western Europe and the Americas. American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting. Seattle, WA (2015).