

## ◆ Introduction

### Urban Cultural Production in Latin America

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Those of us who began the study of Latin American literature a half-century ago remember well the core of the reading list, which was comprised of novels having to do with the countryside, whether as part of the national mythology (Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*, 1926), as part of a national-continental problematic (José Eustacio Rivera's *La vorágine*, 1924), or as the scenario for the transition from a problematic to a national mythology (Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara*, 1929). One also remembers that the first full-time professor of Latin American literature in the U.S. in the 1930s, Berkeley's Arturo Torres-Río seco, very clearly demarcated the separation of the waters of the Latin American narrative. This he did by distinguishing *la novela de la ciudad* (novel of the city) from the *la novela del campo* (novel of the countryside). Almost universally, the former had to do with the degradations and depredations of the city, with all sorts of nasty foreign influences, as perceived equally by both the left and the right, while the latter, even when it dealt with horrible forms of exploitation (and today these novels can be read in terms of environmental concerns and not just injustices done to the indigenous/mestizo peasants), it was still evoking something quintessential about Creole or national identity.

I do not know at exactly what point a more urban consciousness began to emerge with regard to Latin American cultural studies. The Brazilian *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week), which took place in São Paulo in February 1922, certainly put an early twentieth-century stamp on Brazilian studies, but they were barely noticed by most "Latin Americanists," who worked almost exclusively with Spanish; the "Brazilianists"—they few of them that existed—were taking care of Brazil. And, too, perhaps the overwhelming impact of the Mexican Revolution, which mostly took place in the countryside (which is why most of the novels of the Mexican Revolution have a rural setting, beginning with Mariano Azuela's paradigmatic *Los de abajo*, 1915), assured the intense focus on the

non-urban. Not even the Cuban Revolution seemed to change much the focus: the descent from the Sierra Madre seemed more iconic than the entrance into Havana . . . And Che's death in the Bolivian outback reminded one that the countryside was where the "real" Latin America lay: the revolution needed to take place in the heartland.

But three circumstances—one broad in scope, the two other historically circumscribed—helped bring the city into view, at least as far as cultural production and its examination was concerned.<sup>1</sup> The first concerned the relentless migration of populations toward urban centers, as part of complex economic factors and shifting market factors. One remembers well Juan Domingo Perón's project, beginning in the mid-forties, to almost force the rural peasants to migrate to Buenos Aires. Since they were preponderantly indigenous and mestizo, they were derisively called the *cabecitas negras* (black heads) by the inhabitants of Buenos Aires, who were mostly of direct (and frequently, recent) European immigrant descent and who saw this "invasion" of the rural and alien poor with something resembling the horror with which many so-called white Americans view what they see as the invasion of the mostly rural poor from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. The Argentines often say "Dios está en todas partes, pero únicamente atiende en Buenos Aires" (God is everywhere, but he only holds office hours in Buenos Aires). This saying, which summarizes all of the self-attributed superiority of Buenos Aires vis-à-vis the rest of Argentina (and, indeed, the rest of Latin America), has shifted from being symbolic to being ever more literal: there is no need for God to hold office hours anywhere else in the country, since everyone has moved to Buenos Aires, just as everyone has moved to Mexico City, Caracas, Lima, São Paulo, Havana, Santiago, and on and on. Of course, more Puerto Ricans have moved to New York than to San Juan, or so it seems, and until the final affirmation of democracy in Paraguay in the early 1990s there were more Paraguayans in Buenos Aires than in Asunción, which raises the issue of not only national migration toward the capital and other major cities, but also the continental migration toward a handful of mega-urban centers. The sheer weight of this migration has meant that an urban cultural production—say, typically in literature—far outweighs any having to do with the countryside. Indeed, it almost seems quaint when a novel or film focuses on lives outside the megalopolis: all that seems to matter is what happens to individuals *after* their arrival in the belly of the monster that is the city.

The second, more circumstantially historic, factor has to do with the authoritarian governments that began in the mid-1960s. Not that there were not dictatorships and strong-arm *caudillo* in Latin America before that time. However, the apparatus of repression was more urban focused, such as the images of tanks rolling toward government house and not across the Pampas; the images of death squads littering the streets, garbage dumps, and the cityscape in general with corpses, the images of unmarked police cars

and the knowledge of garages, warehouses, and military schools having been turned into detention and torture centers. Some of the apparatus of repression made use of non-urban facilities, and mass burial sites of those massacred by the tyranny have been found in remote places. But even in the case of bodies being dumped from planes in the sinister *vuelos de la muerte* (death flights), the planes most likely departed from urban landing strips, as in the case of the Buenos Aires downtown Jorge Newberry Airport (which remains under military control, as does Ezeiza International Airport, and has a wholly separate military facility alongside the public terminal). Lest one think that this is too much emphasis on the military dictatorship and its presence in/through the city of Buenos Aires, one only need recall the utilization of a major cityscape phenomenon such as the soccer stadium in downtown Santiago, where the first major roundup of detainees after the 1973 coup were held and, in many case, brutalized. Or, in the case of Mexico City, the 1968 massacre of student protestors and their allies at Tlatelolco—the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Plaza of the Three Cultures)—converted this major urban space into an iconic of the political violence in that city in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Elena Poniatowska's documentary, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), is the best-selling narrative of all time in Mexican literary history. The one-word Tlatelolco is shorthand for the period and its events, what I choose to call Mexico's loss of innocence after the certainties, or certitudes, of the half-century following the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

In any event, when I am preparing my students for my January program in Buenos Aires, I always have them watch Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1985), in which the importance of the information on salient aspects of the neofascist regime of the 1970s-80s is complemented by significant scenes of the city where that regime was based. The fact that the military dictatorships of the second half of the twentieth century were so urban centered meant that, as international attention was drawn to information about human rights violations and then to the cultural production (like *La historia oficial*, still the only Latin American production to win an Oscar for best film) related to that historical event, the cityscape became the site of preponderant knowledge about Latin America.

Another important circumstantial historical dimension is that provided by minority and subaltern studies. Although they were not called as such fifty years ago, certainly the interest in the rural inhabitant, as presented by the novels of Ciro Alegría, Jorge Icaza, Augusto Roa Bastos, Gregorio López y Fuentes, among many others, dealt with marginal lives. Now that so many of these individuals have migrated to the city, they are an integral part of the lumpen proletariat that Latin American cultural production continues to focus on, as in the case of internationally acclaimed Brazilian films like Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil* (1998); distributed in English as *Central Station*, and Fernando de Meirelles's and Kátia Lund's *Cidade de Deus*

(2002). Yet the consciousness of diversity and difference, even when one might insist it is more American and European than it is Latin American, has centered on groups that, although they are not exclusively urban in any significant way, are brought into focus by the parameters and possibilities of urban life. This has unquestionably been the case for women, who might have a new beginning in the city (this is the illusion of the heroine of the Peruvian film *Madeinusa* (2006) or who might literally be run over by city life, as in the case of the protagonist of the Brazilian film *A hora da estrela* directed by Suzana Amaral (1985), based on a novel of the same name by Clarice Lispector. And it has also been the case of the lesbian individual: Reinaldo's trajectory from the countryside to Havana, then to Miami and New York. The American saying "we're not in Kansas anymore" [i.e., we are now in New York] is pertinent here: it is not that there are no queers in the heartland, but they are more likely to acquire an identity and participate in a community in city. Moreover, while considerable immigration settled outside urban areas, the story of the Jewish Gauchos is symptomatic here: a first generation of Jewish immigrants were settle in the countryside, but their children ended up in cities, and most immigration to countries like Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela has meant the arrival at and installation in, forever and ever, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, São Paulo, and Caracas. It is also worth noting that, in so many Latin American soap operas, people are always transiting back and forth between the countryside and the city, either because the upper-middle class has properties in both places (that is, the economic system brings the two together inextricably) or because the servant class must migrate from the former to the latter; often the transition from the servant class to perhaps the fringes or even the core of the middle class occurs because someone from the city learns the ways of the city in the course of the series.

There is little doubt that Jewish writers were mentioned by literary histories and examined by literary criticism before the late twentieth-century, but I would venture to say rarely in terms of the Jewish—fundamentally urban—immigrant experience. An interest in Jews as social subjects, from whatever quarters it has come, has meant an interest in their urban contexts, and the same is basically true of other immigrant groups. *Novia que te vea* (1994) may be the first Mexican film to deal with the lives of Mexican Jews, and it is eminently a film about the spaces of Mexico City Jews occupy.

One additional note: as the study of Latin American culture has moved beyond the study just of literature, it has incorporated the study of cultural genres that are also typically associated with the city: while it is true that theater can be performed virtually anywhere, as in the flatbed of a truck in the case of Juan Valdez's famous Teatro Campesino, theater movements are urban centered because of the interlocking resources only found in a major city with an economic base capable of providing those resources. There are

probably over a thousand films that focus on the Mexican Revolution; among them are those that focus on an urban setting, despite the enormous emphasis on rural settings, but they were produced, distributed, viewed, and archived in Mexico City. Television is overwhelmingly urban, in both its programming and in the circumstances of the industry. Much of print culture—not just books, but newspapers, magazines, reviews, comic books—are urban produced, and their content is urban: only when Mafalda and her family go on vacation does Quino move them outside the urban barrio: in one typical strip, Mafalda is looking out the train window; she observes that it is kind of like seeing the country on television (although she adds that TV programming is better than the reality of the slums through which the train is passing).

The studies that make up this volume do not pretend to provide a mosaic of Latin American urban spaces; there are simply too many of them, given the limited confines of this volume. Moreover, the cultural production of some areas simply has more resonance: it is not just that Mexico City and Buenos Aires are inevitably going to overshadow everywhere else (and São Paulo should be included here, with a proper attention to Brazil as part of a Latin American continuum). It is also a matter of how certain urban areas may present issues that are part of larger global concerns. It is inevitable that an attention to Mexican cultural production is likely to outweigh that of all of Central America, and, thus, no effort has been made here to achieve equal attention for all. Concomitantly, therefore, no apology is made for the skewing of representation, which, inevitably, reflects the research interests of the profession as a whole.

Cristina Ferreira-Pinto Bailey's examination of Sonia Coutinho's fiction set in two cities traditionally associated with international images of Brazilian culture, Salvador, the capital of the tourist destination of Bahia and Brazil's colonial past and Afro-American heritage, and Rio de Janeiro, the legendary center of Brazilian society in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. There are many congealed images of both Salvador and Rio, and women associated with these images tend to be sexist and little related to actual women's lives. By examining the fiction of a highly rated young feminist writer, the critic references urban dimensions that cannot be recovered through tourist stereotypes.

Leila Lehen's discussion of Marcelino Freire's narratives is also concerned with the dual image of the city, but this time it is Brazil's dominant megalopolis, São Paulo, and the two worlds are those who live the opulence of the center of Latin American finance and the vast margins of what is a staggering urban sprawl. São Paulo, like Mexico City, exemplifies the migration of the urban poor into the city, where the little chance of even visually approximating the centers of power leads to the array of urban malaise that someone like Freire can only effectively evoke through the trenchant details of an urban dirty realism. Indeed, the dichotomy between

opulence and margin in São Paulo is also that of what is invisible (the former: only its most superficial manifestations are routinely seen by the individual on the street) and what is visible (urban misery and destitution).

A recurring phenomenon of the creation of the Latin American megalopolis has been the abandonment of the founding city core. This is particularly to be seen by the way in which the signature building of São Paulo, the Edifício Copan (partially attributable to Oscar Niemeyer), now stands bereft of its formerly high-class residential and commercial neighbors just off the Praça da República, once the garden gem of São Paulo's center (the not-too-distant Edifício Martinelli, Latin America's first skyscraper has suffered an equal fate). Juana Suárez directs her attention to the same sort of abandonment of the city center to be found in Bogotá. Here, *film noir*, in several Colombian versions, is the vehicle for an interpretation of the significant changes in the city in recent decades. In one dimension, the decline of the urban core—the old downtown, with all its trappings of modernity—is an objective correlative for larger social issues that the *noir* genre, like narrative dirty realism, is particularly adept at transcribing.

Film is also the featured cultural genre of Eduardo Caro's essay, which looks at Medellín, especially in terms of the cinematographic representation of one of the much-vaunted garden cities of Latin America, but one that has undergone a radical transformation under the influence of postmodern chaos. Caro uses the metaphor of "coming out of the closet," which is used both with reference to (homo)sex in the city, but also the mergence into public view, via film, of urban social tension long contained by the garden city image. Medellín as the bloody scenario of the wars of the Colombian drug cartels evokes a recurring motif of Latin American urban studies: violent and unplanned metamorphosis as an index of often minimally understood social change. In the case of the texts examined by Suárez and Caro with reference to Colombian cities, one sees not only a segment of the overwhelmingly urban focus of recent Colombian filmmaking, but of filmmaking throughout Latin America.

Film is also the point of departure for Salvador Oropesa's treatment of Mexican road movies, and his essay exemplifies the way in which urban issues cannot be viewed only in terms of images and representations of the details of city life, but that there is an urgent importance in seeing how urban culture is carried out to the countryside or outback. Where formerly Latin American cultural production may have preferred to view the city almost exclusively as a place that people from rural areas had to deal with and come to—often typically brutal—terms with, Oropesa examines the motif of the road in recent filmmaking not just as a route of access to the city and the link between cities, but how they have transformed the country through the phenomena of urbanization they represent, such that the road may blur the distinction between inside and outside the city and a conventional distribution of life in terms of a binary urban/rural. Indeed, like the Brazilian

film *Central do Brasil* (1998) mentioned above, roads may enable the return to the countryside and, in turn, as in the case of new tourist centers like Cancún, facilitate, for better or worse, a measure of their urbanization.

Highways are examined by Héctor D. Fernández L'Hoeste as part of the national imaginary and not exclusively as a sociological element of demographic migrations, and as a financial element of national and international commerce. To what extent do highways promote—inscribe—national hegemony as though a writing on the landscape? One certainly recalls the enormous symbolic importance of the U.S. Highway system of the 1940s and the Interstate system of the 1960s as two overlapping but also interacting constructions of the American landscape. Some routes are exceptionally iconic, as in the case of U.S. route 66 (very much disappeared and, therefore, cause for immense nostalgia) and Interstate 5, the spinal column of California. Cities have been created and destroyed by highway systems, and community and individual lives deeply affected by them, as in the case of, say, ethnic neighborhoods bulldozed as part of the creation of a highway's right-of-way. Roadways are part of public space and interact with other significant built aspects of the public environment, and in this sense they must be viewed as very much a form of "cultural text."

Emily Hind's essay on Mexican camp returns to more conventional text-based studies. Mexico City remains one of the most vital sites of cultural production in Latin America, and there continue to be broad areas of artistic activity that remain inadequately studied. Hind looks at three authors from the mid-twentieth century who have used modalities of camp and familiar backdrops of the cityscape to explore in particular alterity and gender issues.

Alterity and gender issues as they relate to metropolitan society are at the center of David William Foster's analysis of Paz Errázuriz's photography accompanying Diamela Eltit's narrative concerning inmates at the Chilean Putaendo mental facility north of Santiago. In this case, as in Oropesa's examination of Mexican road movies, the urban is present in an oblique fashion and must be read in a subtextual fashion. Going against the notion of gender roles as putatively natural—and, therefore, unquestioned—givens, the essay challenges the heterosexist assumptions of Errázuriz's photographs, where the intimate pairing of inmates is assumed to conform to metropolitan heteronormativity. By showing that such a pairing may not be globally operant, Foster underscores the still very dominant homophobic heteronormativity that still radiates out from the Chilean urban center.

As I announced at the outset, it has been impossible to assemble a volume that incorporates scholarship referring to all of the major urban centers of Latin America, and the gaps here are painfully clear, especially as regards Havana, Montevideo, and Caracas. However, far more important than completing the inventory of Latin American urban centers has been, in my view, the task of assembling essays that model my understanding of some of the reasons for Latin American urban prominence: topics such as

ethnicity and gender, genres such as photography and film, and phenomena that are at the crux of the imaginary of the cityscape: highways, urban collapse, and the fragmentation of the social world into mutually exclusive realms of the visible and invisible.

## Notes

1. I believe that even a casual bibliographic examination will reveal that historical and sociological studies were dealing with the city far before literary scholarship found reasons to emphasize urban production.

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