Globalisation and Literary History*

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Last week I was at a meeting of Latin American scholars who were debating a joint project provisionally titled, ‘Between Power and Knowledge. Towards a History of Intellectual Elites’. It soon became clear that all of the terms of the title including ‘between’ were to be contested. Such radical revisionism also haunts Latin American literary studies as we attempt to rethink national and regional cultures in what is now regarded as a post-national moment, one in which there has been a rejection of linear historical narrative, a questioning of the very term ‘Latin American’ as a self-explanatory framework and of literature as an evolving series of well defined genres and movements, evaluated according to not always very clear aesthetic criteria and with regard for linguistic virtuosity. The national and continental imaginaries, deployed in Neruda’s Canto General, in Gabriela Mistral’s Canto a Chile, in López Velarde’s Suave Patria, and explored, re-evaluated and condemned in countless novels, are diluted or dissipated as Latin American writers now situate their narratives in Siberia, Germany, Africa, London, Paris or a myriad of other places or abandon the nation’s capital for its margins and provinces. When I began teaching in the early sixties, it was quite common for people to ask what was ‘my’ country, taking it for granted that one specialised in a national culture. José Donoso remarked on the fact that it was uncommon in 1960 to hear laymen speak of the contemporary Spanish American novel: ‘there were Uruguayan, or Ecuadorian, Mexican or Venezuelan novels’ (Donoso, 1977: 10). Yet many writers, most prominently Borges, had already repudiated the idea of a purely national tradition. Cortázar (1969) boasted of the mental ubiquity afforded him because of living and writing in Paris, and Donoso (1977: 19) enthusiastically supported the ‘disfiguring contamination of foreign languages and literatures’.

But this did not mean that they did not situate their writing within the nation, although their view was often oblique. There was an abundance of terms – dependency, underdevelopment, Third World, periphery – to which thinking about the nation was yoked (Escobar, 1995), and there was anxiety over anachronism, over the time warp, over the need to attain parity, or, as Octavio Paz put it (e.g. Paz, 1967), to inhabit a time when Latin Americans would be in synchrony with the rest of the world, a synchrony which the novelists felt themselves to have attained. The boom was a coming of age, an entry into adulthood, and a refusal to be identified with the rural or with anachronistic narratives such as the ‘novela de la tierra’.

In attempting to write a history of literature in the sixties, one was immediately faced with such epochal changes and disruptions, with the fissures in ‘our America’ that, though supposedly united by a common language and by a shared colonial history, achieved this commonality thanks to the suppression or elision of many indigenous languages, and the ‘forgetting’ of the Afro-American population. Moreover, a history confined to the recognised literary genres of novel, theatre and poetry was woefully impoverished, especially as – in the colonial period and the nineteenth century – it would mean passing over the crucial defining Latin American texts: the writing of conquistadores and missionaries, Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier’s autobiography. The alternative of confronting aberrations and anachronisms was daunting, as is all too evident in Anderson Imbert’s expressions of irritation and embarrassment as he contemplated in 1961 the disorderly and unclassifiable cultural mess in an introduction to his *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*. Describing his history as a ‘public service’, he promised to bring order to the field: ‘juntar lo disperso, clasificar el farrago, iluminar con una única luz los rincones oscuros de una América rota por dentro y, por tanto, desconocida, poner en manos del lector una Suma’ (Anderson Imbert, 1961: 14). What he meant by an America ‘broken on the inside’ can only be an oblique reference to the heterogeneity that did not then have a name.

In my own three no doubt foolhardy attempts at writing histories of Latin American literature I first of all, in *The Modern Culture of Latin America* (Franco, 1967), evaded this problem by cutting out everything before Modernism and centring it on the writer as a hero of modernity and the voice of the other. The last chapter, ‘The Writer and the National Situation’, is followed by a conclusion (as if there could be such a thing) that insists, rather lamely, on Latin American difference. In subsequent histories (Franco, 1969, 1973), I tried a delicate balance between the broad canvas of the past – the, as I then saw it, uncrowded expanse of the colonial period and the increasingly crowded national canvases of the near present. But in these histories Brazil disappeared and the focus was on the traditional genres.

The novels of the boom that created a modest demand for such histories of Hispanic American literature were still dominated by a national imaginary even while recording the failures of the nation as the vehicle for modernisation. They depict a nation whose development thwarted by *caudillismo* – in Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en la catedral*, Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, and José Donoso’s *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, taken over by the all powerful dictator in García Márquez’s *El general en su laberinto*, Roa Bastos’s *Yo el Supremo* and Carpentier’s *Recurso al método* or surviving in the ruins of revolutionary projects in Carpentier’s *Siglo de luces* and Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*. Writers prospered on this record of failure, fulfilling the role of public intellectuals, educators of a new readership and even heroic dissidents who defended the autonomy and importance of literature that a more recent generation of writers has satirised. Roberto Bolaño’s *Nocturno de Chile*, for example, describes a decidedly unheroic literary community, one of whose prominent members blithely ignores the fact that the *tertulha* he attends is positioned over a torture chamber. To become a literary critic, for Bolaño (2000), is to enter the zone of the irrelevant, of the perverse and of sanctioned ignorance.
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The national narrative had, of course, long been questioned and undermined by gay writers and women who exposed the exclusions from the nation state and the masculinist bias of the boom writers. Consider, for instance, Manuel Puig’s sly depictions of revolutionary ideology and of a so-called Argentine national culture that was permeated by Hollywood films and North American detective stories, or Severo Sarduy whose trajectory after De dónde son los danzantes took him east in Cobra and Mayta and back to a Cuba reinvented as an Aids asylum in Pájaros de la playa, or Carmen Boullosa, who after 1968 returns again and again to the foundering of all alternatives to the Eurocentric narrative of progress: the pirates of the Caribbean, the Egypt of Cleopatra, the Muslims before Lepanto. Or again, consider Nicanor Parra’s mockery of the lettered city: ‘Hacer brotar un mundo de la nada/pero no por razones de peso/por fregar solamente – por joder’ (Parra, 1985: 75).

At the same time, those whom the lettered city had claimed to represent were speaking out aggressively in testimonios and performance unregistered in the literary canon. Indeed the testimonio – ‘an essentially democratic and egalitarian narrative’ (according to John Beverley (1993: 75)) – encompassed the subjective record of torture and repression that was not easily accommodated into the fictional. The endless publicity and controversy surrounding the publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony raised questions and controversies around subalternity, nation, pedagogy, the academy and the factual that could not be evaded; it was hailed as evidence of an emergent popular democratic culture, on the one hand, and on the other it figured prominently in the cultural wars of the seventies and eighties in the USA when conservatives described it as a blight, a significant lowering of the standards of high culture.

After the sixties what had been lurking under the radar, what was alien to a coming of age narrative, to the national scenario and the parameters of a cold war culture that pitted an abstract universalism against a spurious social realism, complicated genres and produced all kinds of hybrids that demanded new categories and wholesale revisions of the past in order to make literary history possible. This was the question that exercised the three major literary critics of the period: Antonio Cândido, Angel Rama and Antonio Cornejo Polar. Angel Rama’s La ciudad letrada (1984), Antonio Cândido’s ‘exposición’ in Literatura latinoamericana como proceso (1985) and Cornejo Polar’s essays on heterogeneity, Escribir en el aire (1994), represent their very different responses. For Cândido, literature was a system which only came into being when universally valid works began to form a tradition which, in the case of Brazil, dated from the neoclassicism of the mid-eighteenth century. This tradition was both national and cosmopolitan without there being any conflict between the two. And tradition was essentially Iberian. ‘We may not like it’, he said, ‘but the Indians were vanquished and the culture that was installed in Brazil was Iberian, European’ (Cândido, 2001: 41, my translation). For Rama and Cornejo, however, this was by no means the case, although what Rama saw as a process of modernisation and democratisation, Cornejo Polar saw, in very different terms, as heterogeneity. Rama’s La ciudad letrada was written from the vantage point of power and described the complicity of the intelligentsia in the state that began with the conquest. He argued that writing was the monopoly of the urban bureaucracy, administrators and writers who jealously monitored the boundaries of the lettered city.
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until well into the nineteenth century. The sub-text to the book, written when he was exiled from Uruguay and fighting his deportation from the USA, wrongfully labelled a subversive and a Communist, was the hope of the full achievement of modernisation with democracy. What he had in mind, perhaps, was the ultimate realisation of Latin America as a kind of social democracy in which marginalised and culturally different groups could become bonded with the rest of the population in a common culture achieved through the admission of indigenous and local elements into the national culture, a process he had elaborated in his book on José María Arguedas (Rama, 1982). His view of transculturation, however, assumed the dominance of the literary over orally transmitted cultures.

A more radical contribution to this debate is Cornejo Polar’s analysis of heterogeneity. In ‘Nuevas reflexiones sobre la crítica latinoamericana’ he had called for a paradigm shift that would encompass the destabilising variety and hybridity of Latin American literature (Cornejo Polar, 1990). Rejecting the notion of unitary subjects, in Escribir en el aire he asks why it should be so difficult ‘to assume the hybridity, the variety, the heterogeneity of the subject configured in our space’ (Cornejo Polar, 1994: 21, my translation). He also rejects the idea that cultural history is a seamless process; rather it must be situated ‘on the frontier of dissonant cultural and sometimes incompatible systems’ (1994: 16, my translation). That is why in this book he focuses on decisive moments of the constitution of Andean heterogeneity as exemplary of Latin American particularity.

These three critics are on the cusp of change, for the idea of a national literature had to be questioned, although the full effects of globalisation that cast doubts on the literary itself would only come into play at a later date with the expansion of the entertainment industry and the resulting devaluation of cultural literacy. This, along with the increasing importance of aural and visual culture meant that culture was, as George Yúdice argues in a recent book, increasingly a resource ‘embedded in economic circuits and political regimes’, with the result that ‘culture is no longer experienced, valued or understood as transcendent’ (2003: 12). The military regimes which came to power in the seventies and the birthing of neoliberal societies out of civil war and military government further brought to the fore ethical questions expressed in memoirs of exile or testimonials of torture and repression that complicated the division between fiction and reality and drew attention to witness and performance as a strategy of denunciation. Rigoberta Menchú and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo became the iconic figures that for many marked the exodus from the shelter of the academy. Transitory actions like those performed by CADA (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte) in Chile were documented and publicised through the writing of Nelly Richard and Diamela Eltit (Brito, 1990; Richard, 1994). Richard wrote of the need for languages that could re-signify the historic reference to violence (fragments, residues, fragmented narratives) and cut through sedimented indifference (Richard, 1998).

It was not only the past that was in question; that promised ‘future’ that had permeated so much thinking and writing about Latin America in the sixties gave way to a preoccupation with the present as a transition whose outcome could not be calculated. Alberto Moreiras cites Paul Bové, who refers to the present as
an interregnum – that place and time in which there is as yet no rule when there are ordering forces but they have not yet summoned their forces into full view.

... The fact of being within modernity and the state while trying to be in but not of postmodernity and globalization produces as yet unfulfilled demands for thinking, a process that can only be satisfied in a movement that does not work within the tread marks of previous intellectual systems themselves principally attendant upon either modern state formation and their epiphenomenal or romantic embrasures of local struggles against global forces. (Moreiras, 2001: 254)

Alberto Moreiras’s *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001), Idelber Avelar’s *The Untimely Present* (1999), Francine Masiello’s *The Art of Transition* (2001), Nelly Richard’s *Residuos y metáforas* (1998) can all be taken as symptomatic of this sense of suspension when history is revised and stripped of its teleological narratives to reveal all kinds of subterranean and contradictory possibilities (Masiello, 2001).

Does this state of suspension mean that literary history cannot now be written? Certainly ‘Latin American’ is itself a disputed category, a political invention that is now being carved into regions – the Caribbean, the Andes, the Southern Cone, the Amazon and MesoAmerica. Latin Americanism as defined in the USA has been thoroughly discredited for its imperialist assumptions and literature has been displaced by a cultural studies that has lost the political thrust of its inception. How then is literary history to be written? And can it be written? I shall suggest three possibilities, not all of them felicitous: (a) a history of literature as a global system that includes Latin America; (b) the possibility of a subaltern history and (c) a disjunctive history in which boundaries are delimited by the state.

Although world literature is a commercial category designed to market non-European literatures, often under the now empty signifier magical realism, it is also a symptom of the globalisation of literary studies that attempts to rescue the specificity of literature in the face of cultural studies and promises an extension of Comparative Literature – hitherto largely interpreted as European literature – to include post-colonial literatures. Franco Moretti’s (1996) mapping of world literature (though restricted to the novel) and Pascale Casanova’s *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999) both rely on sociological models, Franco Moretti drawing on Wallerstein’s world systems theory, and Casanova on Braudel’s world system and Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theories. Both works challenge the limitations of national literatures and extend literary study beyond Europe to the world. Casanova’s book, in particular, has been, received with enthusiasm by critics on the left, especially Terry Eagleton (2005) and Perry Anderson (2004), who thinks it might have the same liberating influence as Said’s *Orientalism*. According to Casanova, literatures are not emanations of national identity but are constructed according to unacknowledged rivalries and struggles, dating back to the struggles of vernacular literatures against Latin, and the formation of European national literatures with Paris in the vanguard. France was the first country to establish the autonomy of
literature and free it from national and political pressures, and it had a culture industry that promoted translation and boasted a network of influential critics and intellectuals. Paris came to dominate the world system and to impose the criterion of the universal, which determined membership of the world republic of letters. The republic is relatively autonomous in relation to the geopolitical and economic map, but is inhabited by writers struggling over language, over style and for recognition. The universal she describes as the gold standard – a fiction invented by the centre that imposed standards and obliged peripheral and petites littératures, to compete for recognition or resign themselves to marginality. It is only when a writer liberates him – or herself from the national that they gain entry into the republic whose own criteria are constantly revised through rebellions and struggles. In a gesture at the end of her book, Casanova sets herself up as a fellow traveller of the rebels of the periphery and wants her book to be recognised as a critical weapon in the service of all the excentrics and of the dispossessed and dominated literatures; she hopes that her reading of the texts of du Bellay, Kafka, Joyce and Faulkner can be instrumental in the struggle against the centre that ignores the inequality of access to the literary universe. Thus the global approach promises a new kind of literary history stripped of aesthetic judgments. In both Moretti and Casanova’s theorisations a hierarchy is established between ‘world’ and nation. Moretti compares those engaged with national literatures to trees while the world literature critics are concerned with the great waves of literary movements and he advocates distant reading for those whose interest is the big canvas rather than the close reading of traditional literary criticism. The disadvantage of world literature is precisely this, that because of its scope, it cannot provide more than a sketchy account and often inaccurate survey, based on secondary sources, of national and local processes, nor can it account for changes in the status of the literary. Indeed, the weakest chapter in Casanova’s book, De l’internationalisme littéraire à la mondialisation commerciale? describes the globalisation of the literary market as a US induced commercialisation marked by the invasion of American best-sellers such as Gone with the Wind (1999: 227–237). Since this change is not internal to the struggle for recognition within the republic, she cannot address the crucial factors that have displaced literature as emblematic of cultural achievement.

In his book The Exhaustion of Difference, Alberto Moreiras suggests that whereas literary studies once had a key role in the codification of the nation, cultural studies ‘now replace literary studies in the ideological articulation of the present’ (2001: 12). Cultural studies thrusts literature into a subordinate position as it is overtaken by visual culture, media studies, the postmodern revival of orality and so on. In this situation, literature assumes a subaltern function, in which case, he argues, literary reflection might assume a new role in a potential counterhegemonic articulation. But the focus of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group founded in the USA in 1988, which included for the most part Latin Americanists working in the USA and Britain, was on representation rather than on literature as such. In their Founding Statement (1988), they stated that the subaltern was, ‘by definition, not registered or registrable as a historical subject capable of hegemonic action’ and they stressed the impossibility of representing the subaltern in the terms of the academic institution.
‘How can one claim to represent the subaltern from the standpoint of academic knowledge when that knowledge is itself involved in the “othering” of the subaltern?’ John Beverley asked (1999: 2). The original Subaltern Studies Group founded in India had focused primarily on history defined as a history that, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty ‘makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenship in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other projects of human solidarity’ (1997). This, of course, describes not a history of literature but a history of history, a demystification of categories of analysis such as progress, development and even nation that could no longer be taken at face value. Such deconstructive strategies characterised the work of several scholars who did not describe themselves as subalternists. Indeed, my book Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico (Franco, 1989) traced over several historical periods the tortuous strategies adapted by excluded women in order to elaborate counter discourses. But the most important work in this respect centred on the exclusion of the indigenous. Gordon Brotherston’s Book of the Fourth World (1992) and Walter Mignolo’s The Darker Side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization (1995), in rather different ways, constituted alternative histories to the exclusionary discrimination of traditional literary studies, Brotherston by expanding the notion of writing beyond the phonetic alphabet to encompass scripts used by indigenous civilisations and Mignolo by exposing western assumptions about the relationship of writing and history. Both books were written on the cusp of change, Brotherston’s was published in 1992, the year of the Declaration of Quito and the emergence of the indigenous as a political force, and Mignolo’s in 1995, a year after the Zapatista rebellion put a new indigenous agenda on the table. But history was also being rewritten by the indigenous themselves, who brought their historical memory and their languages into the political arena. The defence and use of indigenous languages is now an important issue and the term pachakuti, from pacha (tierra) and cuti (return), constantly recurs in Andean politics to differentiate between the ‘empty time’ of capitalism and the eruption of indigenous memory into the political present. The emergence of indigenous intellectuals promoting literacy in indigenous languages all over Latin America, and of writers in indigenous tongues whose work is no longer a retrieval of oral tradition, raises the question of whether a Latin American literary history is possible without their inclusion. Yet for many of these writers, the transcription of their languages into phonetic form is an impoverishment and they frequently question the limitation of writing in phonetic script. Natalia Toledo, writing in Zapoteco, dedicates a poem to her teacher, ‘With cat’s eyes and no legs. He taught me to walk on paper’, thus associating writing with the mutilation that involves her separation from another kind of wisdom: ‘the things I learned barefooted, under a tamarind that told stories’ (2002: 19–20; my translation from the Spanish). The Mapuche poet Leonel Lienlaf, writing in mapuzungun, confronts the rebellion of his hand: ‘My hand told me that the world cannot be written’ (1989: 79, my translation from the Spanish). The poet Adriana Paredes Pinda, writing in Spanish, mapuzungun and chedungun, in the introduction to her poem Ûi, which recounts her life journey to become a machi, complains:
yo aquí pegada a la máquina de escribir a mis dedos los miro y no me los veo, me he despalmado tal vez en el agua, no logro zafarme del hechizo de estala escritura buinca por que me arranca y me arranca el aliento estoy enferma posesa por el wefvfe (espíritu malo) de la escritura, condenada a la metáfora grecolatina y aunque Kavafi es hermoso y terrible, esta la lengua castellana ha matado mi alma, mi espíritu, una y otra vez (2005: 7).

This is a literature that constantly evokes the pre-national, that forces us to consider the nation state as a temporary phenomenon, that looks to a time both before and beyond. It is a different kind of history, a kind of history that sub-comandante Marcos has tried to reinvent in the Lacandón forest, but I would suggest that it is not history that will be written in the academy.

This brings me to a third possible literary history implicit in the writing of Josefina Ludmer. In a recent article ‘Territorios del presente’, published in Confi nes, she describes the present as the moment when all prior categories are subject to a process she calls de-differentiation:

ciaen las divisiones tradicionales entre formas nacionales o cosmopolitas, formas del realismo o de la vanguardia, de la literatura pura o la ‘literatura social’, y hasta puede caer la diferenciación entre realidad histórica y ficción. Aunque muchas escrituras siguen usando esas divisiones clásicas de la tradición literaria (la tienen como centro y quieren encarnarla), después de 1990 se ven nítidamente otros territorios y sujetos, otras temporalidades y configuraciones narrativas, otros mundos que no reconocen los moldes tradicionales. Que absorben, contaminan, y desdiferencian lo separado y opuesto y trazan otras fronteras. (2005: 103–110)

Ludmer has always been aware of the importance of boundaries that mark, not only the borders of states and classes but those between genres, between fiction and reality, and she is also aware that boundaries shift. This is what makes her particular form of writing literary history so compelling. Her pathbreaking book, The Gaucho Genre. A Treatise on the Motherland (2002), was initially intended, she writes in the introduction to the English translation, to cover three geographical areas: Argentina, the indigenous Andes and the Caribbean; in other words, areas where the literary use of the subaltern voice and the economic use of the body lurked under the radar of the lettered city. As Ludmer puts it, ‘I wanted it to be a reflection on certain Latin American literature founded in the differential uses of the voices and words of gauchos, Indians, and blacks, which define the meanings of the uses of bodies’ (2002: xiii). She desisted from the enterprise, she states, because work on the indigenous and the Caribbean was already being done by Antonio Cornejo Polar, Martin Lienhardt, and the Subaltern Studies group. Ludmer’s project, even though only partially realised, reflected a focus on the tenuous boundaries of what came to constitute the nation. The Gaucho Genre is described as a ‘treatise’ on the motherland, and is larded with insights and styles that are rarely met in literary criticism: irony, odd interruptions such as a dialogue with Chomsky and the anarchist’s universal grammar. The gauchesque
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she places in the period after Independence and before the consolidation of the nation state in 1880, that is, ‘before the autonomization of the political and its constitution as a separate sphere from the cultural and literary space’ (2002: 201).

Ludmer’s book *The Corpus Delicti* (2004a) covers the period after the consolidation of the nation state and her present post-national project. Described as a manual, the book is innovative in design. In the Spanish edition, footnotes inserted after each chapter are small essays and are far longer than the chapters themselves. The English edition undermines this innovative device by putting the notes at the back but has the advantage of foregrounding the fact that while the text is 169 pages long, the footnotes add up to some 220 pages. The mocking tone of the book is established in the first page where she cites Marx to the effect that:

A philosopher produces ideas, a poet poems, a clergyman sermons, a professor compendia and so on. If we look a little closer at the connection between this latter branch of production and society as a whole, we shall rid ourselves of many prejudices. The criminal produces not only crimes but also criminal law, and with this the professor who gives lectures on criminal law and in addition to this the inevitable compendium in which this same professor throws his lectures onto the general market as ‘commodities’. (2004a: 3–4)

This bracing account of academic commodification certainly puts an end to any highflying claims of scholarly independence. Emphasising both the power and the flexibility of boundaries, Ludmer writes, “Crime” is one of the critical instruments of this manual because it functions as a cultural frontier that separates culture from nonculture, which founds cultures, and which also separates lines in the interior of a culture. It serves to draw limits, to differentiate and exclude. With crime, guilty consciousness and fables of foundation and of cultural identity are constructed’ (2004a: 5). She continues:

Crime as a frontier or line of demarcation can function in the interior of a culture or national literature [...]. It can serve to divide certain times of this culture, and it can also divide and define various lines or levels. In each time and in each line the constellation is different because, depending on the literary representation of crime (and its verbal complex of subjectivities, justices, powers and truths), the frontiers are more or less clear [...]. The constellation of crime in literature not only allows us to mark lines and times, but also to read in the fictions the tense and contradictory correlations of subjects, beliefs, culture, and the state. And this in a multiplicity of times, for cultural beliefs are not synchronous with the division of states, but rather drag along with them previous and sometimes archaic phases and temporalities. (2004a: 5–6)

These brief summaries hardly do justice to the complexity of Ludmer’s criticism, but what I want to emphasise is that this attention to frontiers and how they are drawn, frontiers between nations, between genres, between populations, helps us
understand that the autonomy of literature is determined by the state’s compartmentalisation of knowledges at the moment of its consolidation. Whereas Casanova’s world literature had described the process as one of achievement of an autonomy without understanding what mobilised the process and how it might come to an end, Ludmer sees both the necessity of detailed examinations of the differential boundaries implanted by the nation state and the provisional and temporary nature of those boundaries. In the essay I mentioned earlier, ‘Territorios del presente’, she tackles the post-national, outlining the process of de-differentation and taking as her corpus a series of novels written in the nineties by novelists from all over Latin America that are, she says, ‘engaged in the work of reorganising the boundaries of public imagination. The rural in opposition to the urban now disappears and there appears an urban literature of drugs, sex, poverty and violence. In fictions and reality, the urban becomes barbarised and the rural urbanised’ (my translation). Her corpus includes novels by Fernando Vallejo, Daniel Mella, César Aira, Mario Bellatin and many others; all depict groups of people that do not belong to a class, an ethnic group or a family, but constitute a group of the sick (of Aids in Mario Bellatin’s Salón de Belleza), of cartoneros in César Aira’s La villa, of drug gangs in Fernando Vallejo’s La virgen de los sicarios. In other words literature no longer engages with national and territorial identities but territorialises other subjectivities, identities and politics. Ludmer is indebted to the Italian philosopher Paulo Virno for her insight into the pre-individual that bonds these groups, the pre-individual being what doesn’t suffer historical and cultural mutations (Ludmer, 2004b). This eruption of nature into the political is, of course, increasingly obvious in contemporary politics around Aids, procreation, assisted suicide and rape. In a civilisation in which millions are dying of Aids and when the bird flu epidemic is as threatening as the nuclear bomb, we cannot but recognise a devastation that is ‘outside’ history. At the end of her essay, she posits the need for new categories in order to decipher the enigma of the urban island, conceptual instruments that are preindividual, post subjective and post state (Ludmer, 2005: 108). I find something stimulating in all these attempts to reimagine the place and history of literature at a time of porous boundaries between disciplines, and porous frontiers between nations. We are a long way from The Modern Culture of Latin America but that is not necessarily something we should regret.

References


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