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Globalization, Social Action, and Latin American Literary Identity: *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura*, in 1970 and Today

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Hipertexto

In a talk given in 1981, Jean Franco recounts the shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s from primarily social, ethical, and socially committed literary criticism, to theoretical, "academic," and systematic literary criticism in Latin America.

In the 1960s we see a very different literary criticism in Latin America than we see in North America or Europe. In Latin America, it was the novelists and poets themselves, most without a formal university education in literature, who launched new literary theories. These "critics" often defied and challenged the formal academy. Groups of intellectuals formed around regional or national magazines, and wrote for an unspecialized public. Very few critics or writers taught full time at a university. The Latin American Left, and most specifically writers such as Rodolfo Walsh, Haroldo Conti, and Francisco Urondo, all writers who died or disappeared as a result of their commitment to the revolutionary cause, emphasized social commitment in writing above all else. Writers and artists dedicated themselves to vanguard projects like Ernesto Cardenal's community in Solentiname. This revolutionary literary atmosphere of social commitment slowly began to change towards the beginning of the 1970s.

A significant work in the history of this shift in Latin American literary criticism is the polemic discussion published in 1970, between Oscar Collazos, Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa, *La revolución en la literatura y la literatura en la revolución;* a book which Franco describes as the last gasp of the ethical party in Latin American literary criticism. Diana Sorensen asserts that in the sixties Latin America embraced a unique intensity that was framed by the

twin rhythms of euphoria and despair, or utopia and apocalypse. These twin rhythms are seen in *Revolución en la literatura y literatura en la revolución,* in both the language and purposes of the text. More than anything, however, the work gives us insight into the person of Cortázar, one of the paradigmatic and most passionate authors of the sixties.

Hannah Arendt once observed that "Revolutions are the only events which place us directly, ineluctably, in front of the problem of beginnings" (quoted in Sorensen, 7). The decade of the sixties in Latin America was an era of imminent arrival. Much of this sense of imminence sprung from the hope and expectation that came with the Cuban revolution of 1959. For many, the Cuban revolution represented a truly independent Latin American action, and this act of passionate independence inspired similar energy and intensity for the creation of new independent literatures and cultural artifacts. Sorensen also argues, however, that in conjunction with this passionate sense of imminence and arrival, was an underlying fear of defeat or failure. This anxiety is seen in the apocalyptic endings of many Latin American novels, and in the prominent presence of cautionary periodical articles following the revolution. In *Revolución*, we see both, this hope of messianic culmination and an alienation, disenchantment, and apocalyptic fear. The work is also representative of many of the concerns and questions of the Latin American literary identity that came with the *boom*: Latin America's relationship to Europe and North America and to their literatures, the question of political and social vs. aesthetic commitment in literature, and the question of the complicated relationship between the market and the *boom*.

Beginning with an article that Oscar Collazos wrote for the Uruguayan magazine *Marcha* in 1969, the book continues with two more inflamed responses from Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa. The final essay is the counter-response of Collazos. In this debate, Collazos, a twenty-seven year old Colombian journalist, novelist, short story writer, and essayist, has the last word. Collazos represents a person outside of the interior circle of the *boom*, and in many ways his argument reflects this position.

Reading *Revolution* confirms the observation of Carlos Rincón in his article published in 1971, titled "Para un plano de batalla de un combate por una nueva crítica en Latino-América," that in 1970 there was deep lack of theory and depth in Latin American literary criticism. Rincón also observes that misunderstandings are the common denominator of the relationships between reviewers, writers, and critics. *Revolución en la literatura* is full of misunderstandings, personal attacks, and incoherent arguments.

This very informal polemic writing style, which includes personal insults and attacks, is representative of the tension that Sorensen describes between feelings of imminent arrival and apocalyptic fear. It is representative of one of Latin America's attempts to forge and understand its individual identity. According to Rita De Grandis, the personal attacks, the argumentative tone, the

polarization, and the irony and sarcasm in 1960s Latin American literary controversies puts them in the category of "questing fictions," a term coined by Djelal Kadir. "Questing fictions" are fictions from the developing world that try to understand and to establish an independent identity. Because of the fierce desire to force a separate identity, and the fear of dependency on their colonial parent country, the language of these fictions often aggressively dichotomizes and alienates. The personal dramatic language of *Revolución*, and its quest to further develop and embody Latin American identity and literature, exemplifies an intense imminent desire to separate and to do something absolutely original and different.

Like the language of *Revolución*, Collazos' initial argument reflects both fear and a sense imminent arrival. He immediately asserts the paternal relationship between Europe and Latin America as one of great current problems in Latin American literature. He criticizes the writings of Borges, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes and Cortázar for their incoherent escapism, and their mystification of the writing process. Collazos views the new trends in literature as an example of Latin America's dependent gaze toward the literary center of France, in the hopes of its approval. He criticizes Borges for his erudite mystification of reality through language, and for directing an entire group of writers in this direction. He suggests that the post *Rayuela* work of Cortázar "sólo se traduce en "cadencias," en "prosadia." He also notes Vargas Llosa's contradictory and inconsistent statements about the nature of literature.

The primary objective of Collazos' original article in *Marcha* is to illuminate the current divergence in Latin American literature from a focus on social commitment to a focus on language. Collazos assumes that this separation comes from the influence of French structuralism and Russian formalism, and his goal is to propose a new revolutionary literature that is absolutely and completely connected to reality. For Collazos, however, Latin American reality or social and political context is very clear: Essentially, it is socialist revolution. For Collazos, the Cuban Revolution is the only way that Latin America has truly forged its own identity. He says: "En una revolución cada carta barajada es una carta clara. Las palabras, cuando el lenguaje está reestructurándose, con el tono de una nueva conducta y de un nuevo tipo de relaciones culturales y sociales, se vuelven rigurosamente significantes" (37).

Revolución also touches on the problematic relationship between the market and the *boom*. The *boom* was due in part to a savvy editor, Carlos Barral, and his vision for a vanguard editorial and the expansion of a market. Barral's publishing house, Seix Barral, used prizes for the consecration of certain texts, created an "in-group" in the new market, to sell Latin American novels to the elite. Although Collazos only briefly alludes to the economic implications of the *boom*, he does note that every day the publicity mechanisms are pushing the "escritores consagrados," toward a consumer model. Because Collazos represents a person outside of the inside circle of the boom, his strong arguments suggest an

inferiority complex towards those in the interior circle.

Cortázar's language in his rebuttle is both dramatic and ironic, with subtitles exclaiming: ¡Realidad, cuántos crímenes se cometen en tu nombre!" and "¡Muchachos, maten al papa!" Vargas Llosa's language in his answer to Collazos is even more severe. He calls the reasoning of Collazos: "digno de un fraile medieval cazador de brujas" (80). Cortázar claims he has no intention of sparking controversy, but his words suggest otherwise. In his rebuttal, Cortázar affirms that the innovations of the new Latin American writers, and their incorporation of French and North American techniques, are what ultimately permit them to achieve great heights. Cortázar and Vargas Llosa defend the originality of their artistic efforts and attack Collazos' narrow vision of reality. Vargas Llosa affirms that a perfect union between politics and art impedes all spontaneity, something necessary in art. They both advocate a more broad, multifaceted, and complex reality that includes a freedom for spontaneity and a variety of perspectives. For them, revolutionary literature isn't just literature that has a revolutionary content, but also literature that revolutionizes the novel itself. Cortázar affirms that his *62/modelo para armar*, which Collazos criticizes severely, is as revolutionary, although not as explicitly as his story "Reunión," based on Che Guevara's *Paisajes de la guerra revolucionaria,* because it questions the levels of reality that move the man.

Collazos' final counter attack, "Contrarrespuesta para armar," is by far the most dramatic, hyperbolic, sarcastic and entertaining of the book. Collazos dramatically asserts that he cannot support so many personal attacks, and that he must respond to his "admirado amigo y compañero," Cortázar. Because Cortázar's essay seems to depict him as a "terrorista-parricida-dogmático-znovista," Collazos feels it is necessary to respond publicly, thus giving reason for the publication of *Revolución,* as a book. He proceeds to repeat many of his previous arguments, in a much more dramatic way.

He also criticizes inconsistent leftist Latin American writer behavior, most specifically those who go to North American universities to speak, but who do not speak out about Civil Rights or about the political implications of their visits. Ultimately, Collazos sees an inconsistency between the literary centers and the ideals of the Cuban Revolution.

Collazos' text expresses feelings more than rational arguments, but there is a seed of truth in his idealistic passion. *Revolución* reflects the unsystematic, accessible, personal literary criticism of the 1960s and to some degree there is something refreshing in its bold assertions. The *boom*, however, created new power dynamics and new hierarchies, and exacerbated the fear of failure that came with the bright utopian energies of the early 1960s. In 1970, the hope in the Cuban revolution was not quite as bright, and the world remained insecure and complicated. In some ways, Collazos' essay is an attempt to control and bring security to the Latin American literary identity. Because *Revolución* was written at

the end of the decade, in the heat of the cold war and the mass marketing of Latin American literature, we see more despair than euphoria and hope.

Thus, the emotion of *Revolución* brings us once again to the tensions in 1970 between the need for a more systematic literary criticism, and the need for Latin America to find its own identity apart from Europe and North America---between the intense waves of utopian dreams of beginnings and revolution, and the apocalyptic fear of failure and dependency. Fifteen years later in another article, Franco laments the change between the 60s and 70s in Latin American literary criticism. Although she asserts that her intention is not to give an idyllic vision of the 60s, the article contains a definite nostalgia for the criticism of this era, with its bold intentions to transform the act of reading and to challenge the academic norms with vanguard projects. Her later article is also a lament about the current state of Latin American literature: its mass international marketing, its dependence on North America, and its residence in the university.

While *Revolución* is a controversy of personal attacks, and perhaps could be easily classified as a publicity stunt, very far from the criticism that Rincón asserted as necessary, *Revolución* reveals some of the pertinent questions of the 1970s, and the struggles of the Latin American literary identity. Ultimately, *Revolución* reminds us of the very distinct literary and political culture of Latin America.

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