

# Studies in 20th Century Literature

---

Volume 14

Issue 1 *Special Issue on Fin de Siècle in Latin America*

Article 2

---

1-1-1990

## Introduction

Jean Franco  
*Columbia University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Franco, Jean (1990) "Introduction," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1238>

This Introductory Material is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## Introduction

### Abstract

Introduction to the special issue.

### Keywords

Latin American literature, dark, mode, women, subaltern classes, indigenous, postmodernism, authoritarian modernization, progress, national emancipatio

## Introduction

Jean Franco  
*Columbia University*

The essays published in this issue reflect the dark mood of much contemporary Latin American literature and criticism in the eighties. While, on the one hand, non-canonical genres such as the testimonial and the chronicle testify to the emergence of new social actors—women, subaltern classes, the indigenous,—for most writers and intellectuals the end of the twentieth century seems to evoke anxiety rather than hope, backward glances towards the past rather than projects for the future. Even the debates surrounding postmodernism again and again seem to develop into discussions of history and the failed, incomplete or authoritarian modernizations of the past. The redemptive and totalizing visions of progress, of national emancipation, which were closely allied to certain concepts of originality, authorship and agency, now seem anachronistic.

This hindsight, however, also permits new readings of the past. Two essays in this issue, Christiane von Buelow's study of Vallejo's short story, "Los caynas" (1923), and Julio Ortega's reading of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* as a metaphor for the end of the world, discuss the limits of potentially redemptive and totalizing narratives—social Darwinism and popular Catholicism. In "Los caynas," Vallejo actually imagines the retrogression of the species into apes, but as von Buelow argues, the story problematizes and holds in tension the uneasy marriage between Darwin's story of species mutation and the doctrine of social progress and perhaps foregrounds the difficulty of making analogies between the history of the species, the social and the individual. Although discussing a very different text, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, Julio Ortega is also concerned with the disparity between ideology (that of popular Catholicism) and the violence and breakdown of collectivity with which it contends. Both these essays examine the slippage between the individual and the social in these redemptive and totalizing narratives.

Contemporary narrative, on the other hand, is informed by the ironies of hindsight particularly when, as in the case of García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth are framed by the desolate landscape of failed modernization. As Mabel Moraña shows in her discussion of García Márquez's novel, the two male protagonists, Dr. Urbino and Florentino Ariza act out conflicting ideologies—that of scientific progress and modernization and that of individual redemption through romantic love. The latter, it turns out, provides the critical standpoint from which modernization can be assessed.

Yet one could also argue that *Love in the Time of Cholera* is itself anachronistic because of its totalizing intention and its attempt to inscribe negation within the history of modernization. It is an anachronism that resonates ironically with Hugo Achugar's vision of present-day Uruguay as it emerges from military dictatorship. Over a decade of dictatorship and economic decline have left a formerly strongly bonded culture in fragments. It is clear however that it is not just the failure of an economic model that is at stake but also the fact that there is no national consensus as to what Uruguayan culture is or should be. Achugar's article both monitors the process of fragmentation whilst reflecting a nostalgia for the totalizing vision that, for García Márquez, still seems unproblematic.

A similar desolation marks a great deal of contemporary writing and art. As Cynthia Steele points out, Mexican novelists are obsessed by the nation in ruins, and Norma Klahn finds a predominantly apocalyptic strain in contemporary Mexico poetry. Yet this desolation seems attributable at least in part to the shift in the intellectual's or the writer's relation to the community. As Cynthia Steele argues in her discussion of José Agustín's novel, *Cerca del fuego*, there is a fear of loss of identity in a city in chaos. At the end of José Agustín's novel, the author emerges intact from his mythic descent into a lumpen hell, but only because he affirms rather than subverts patriarchal values. Thus the price of salvaging the myth of author as redeemer is high, since it involves ignoring the fact that the destruction of the master narratives is not merely willful but is a consequence of the growing importance of those marginalized actors—women and the lower classes—whom previous generations of writers had “represented.”

Poetry that also reflects the problem of lost authority for the poet can no longer naively assume a prophetic voice. In her essay on Mexican poetry, Norma Klahn traces the transformations of a poetic

subject represented successively as existential individual, as a collective subject and finally as palimpsest, arranger or simply “reader” of past texts.

Clearly at this point the notion of originality and the idea of the author as creator of a unique text cease to have any meaning. It is also clear that the author as sole originator of a work, as prophet and redeemer, was closely bound up with the very totalizing and redemptive narratives that are now fast losing their hold. Pastiche—non-satiric imitation and juxtaposed citations—is a mode that both foregrounds the precarious and ready-made nature of any structure and refuses originality in favor of commentary on a prior text.

As I show in my article on contemporary Latin American writing, however, pastiche goes far beyond copy or imitation, for it involves the appropriation of another’s style in order to make it say something else, thus allowing the productive space of discrepancy. Thus, although pastiche is yet another indication of the crisis in authorship which marks our “fin de siglo,” (as is evident, for instance, in Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel, *El hablador*), it may, in certain instances, reinforce emergent though as yet non-hegemonic tendencies in the present.