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Introduction to Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America

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CLCWeb Volume 4 Issue 2 (June 2002) Article 1
Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz,
"Introduction to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America*"
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.2 (2002)
Thematic Issue *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America*
Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz
<<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/>>>

Sophia A. McCLENNEN and Earl E. FITZ

Introduction to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America*

The genesis of the thematic issue *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America* in the journal *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* stems from a growing conviction on the part of the guest editors of the issue that, given its vitality and excellence, Latin American literature deserves a more prominent place in comparative literature publications, curricula, and disciplinary discussions. As statistics compiled by Sophia A. McClennen clearly show, the literatures of Spanish America and Brazil appear much less frequently in comparative literature journals worldwide than do works written in such languages as English, French, and German. That this situation exists at all in an age when the very future of comparative literature as an academic discipline is once again being questioned suggests to us that 1) there still exists, in some quarters, a lingering bias against literature written in Spanish and Portuguese and 2) that by embracing Latin American literature more enthusiastically, comparative literature would find itself reinvigorated, placed into productive discourse with a host of issues, languages, literatures, and cultures that have too long been paid scant attention in its purview. With this volume of essays, the guest editors are seeking to change this situation, to gain for Latin American literature the kind of respect and admiration that is routinely accorded other, more "canonical" national literatures. Believing deeply in the efficacy of the comparative method, and in its implicitly egalitarian approach to the world's languages and literatures, our intention, therefore, is not to weaken or diminish comparative literature as a politically and intellectually important form of literary study but to strengthen it, to open it up to the authors, texts, and traditions of one of the world's most complex and challenging cultural conglomerates -- Latin America. Our goal, in short, is to play an active role in the reenergizing of comparative literature by helping it adapt to changing times. Indeed, we would stress that, as the 1993 Bernheimer Report makes clear, the unique ability of comparative literature to respond to the rise of new languages and literatures constitutes one of the discipline's greatest and most enduring strengths (see Charles Bernheimer, et al., "The Bernheimer Report," ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association (1993): <<http://www.umass.edu/complit/aclanet/Bernheim.html>>).

Historically, comparative literature has always been best defined as an issue of methodology, of how and why certain texts or aesthetic and intellectual issues are brought together for study, rather than as an issue of reading lists made up of certain works from certain "canonical" languages and literatures. We know that, in its incipient stage, comparative literature did deal primarily with texts written in certain European-based languages, and that, for some, these came early on to not only delineate the discipline institutionally, but also to establish the models against which all other literatures would have to be measured. And while we all agree that English, French, and German and other mainstream European nations have produced many wonderful works of literature, we also recognize that other languages and cultures have produced many outstanding works of literature as well. In our view, literary excellence is not the exclusive domain of certain languages and not others. Consequently, it is imperative that the discipline of comparative literature (and that of comparative cultural studies) be understood, essentially, as an issue of methodology, as a way of studying literature from an international perspective and as a rationale for framing its studies, rather than as a hierarchy in which some literatures, texts, and authors are always perceived to be at the top while others are automatically relegated to a secondary status. Understanding comparative literature and culture as an approach for the international study of literature and as a method for its even-handed commentary allows us to get beyond the rigid hierarchies that result from identifying the discipline with certain languages and national literatures and not others.

What Latin Americanists bring to this debate (in addition to several hundred years worth of first-rate literature) is a great deal of experience reading their texts in the light of other, more "prototypical" texts, of constantly having to evaluate their authors in the context of standards and forms that, in far too many cases, render them inescapably and ineradicably "marginal" no matter how excellent their artistic and intellectual qualities might be. Borges, for example, had to be translated first into French and then into English before he gained an international following, and even then, in the beginning, at least, only because readers unfamiliar with him, his works, and the

traditions out of which he was coming could, seeking ways to praise him, opine that he wrote as if he were "a French intellectual," a term that reveals a great deal about how Borges was received in the United States of the early 1960s. An even more egregious example of this sort of culturally dismissive attitude pertains to the case of the Brazilian author, Clarice Lispector, whose extraordinary texts (and especially her 1973 "fiction," *Água Viva*. Rio de Janeiro: Artenova, 1973, translated as *The Stream of Life* by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl E. Fitz, with a Foreword by Hélène Cixous. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) provided Hélène Cixous with the prototypes for her concept of "l'écriture féminine," but whose fundamental importance to this immensely influential reading strategy is rarely noted, much less commented upon, except by Latin Americanists. And what if we were to begin arguing that Machado de Assis, now recognized as "the premier nineteenth-century Latin American writer and one of the best of all time anywhere," was an inventive genius on the level of -- or even superior to -- "Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe" (Roberto González Echevarría, *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.95), (or even the great Flaubert himself!)? How would this be received by our more conservative colleagues in comparative literature? Are authors currently decreed to be the "best," or the most exemplary, forever to be enshrined in this exalted category? Or, given the nature of comparative scholarship (which seeks always to integrate new literatures and cultures into the mix), is it not possible that a writer from a very rich but widely ignored national literature (in this case Brazil) could be shown to be "superior" (however we would like to define that elusive term) to her or his European models? To be a comparatist (and a Latin Americanist) is to believe that the answer to this question is, unequivocally, "yes"; indeed, to us this is the essence of comparative literature, the heart of its intellectual integrity as a discipline. To answer this question "no," on the other hand, is to condemn our discipline to a slow and painful demise, one brought on by narrow-mindedness, an ill-considered embracing of exclusivity, and hypocrisy, qualities which are anathema to it but which, according to some scholars, all too accurately characterize the state of the discipline at the present time.

Although we do not seriously entertain the notion that alluring, but critically misleading, terms like "the best" have any eternal and unchanging value (except, perhaps, as abstract concepts), we do believe that there is much to be gained in reading a writer like Flaubert (or Joyce, Verlaine, or Kafka) in the light of a "marginal" writer like Machado de Assis. It is for this reason that, while we do advocate comparisons (albeit inverted) with the established models (European or otherwise), we do not wish to promote writers like Machado, Clarice, or Borges as automatically and forever more "the best," for to do so would be both simplistic and little more than the substitution of one form of hierarchical and binary thinking for another. Merely to replace one form of canon with another will surely lead to the same problems again in the future. Rather, we are calling for the kind of fluid, evolving approach often associated with René Etiemble, who has long ago called for a truly "planetary comparatism," one that considers all literatures openly and equally and without the Eurocentric prejudices of culture (especially the warping pressures of coloniality), language, and prestige (see his *Ouverture(s) sur un comparatisme planétaire*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1988).

Frustrated by generations of feeling that they are the "poor cousins" of the literary world, Latin Americanists are now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, in a position to revitalize the field of comparative literature. Moreover, they are in a position to do so by upholding, on the strength of their authors and texts, its fundamental commitment to international literary study, its flexible, open-minded approach to all literatures (even those long derided as "marginal," "derivative," or "inferior"), and its basic, conceptual belief that everyone should get a seat at the literary table, that no worthy text should ever be excluded, and most especially not because it was written in a supposedly "lesser" language or that it comes from a supposedly "lesser" culture. The great challenge now facing comparative literature is, precisely, whether it can accommodate this type and degree of change, whether it still has the requisite level of conceptual flexibility to do so. Long practiced in the comparative method (and, by tradition, very favorably disposed toward it), Latin Americanists believe fervently that it does. Indeed, by virtue of their training and their sense of where their own authors stand in relation to the rest of world literature, Latin Americanists are, at their best, skilled and sophisticated comparatists in the truest sense of the term. Fluent, or, at least, competent, in several languages (including, very often, both English and French) and typi-

cally knowledgeable in their literatures, Latin Americanists nearly always possess the extensive linguistic and literary training that is the distinguishing feature of the comparatist. Yet even today the training of the typical Latin Americanist is too often not what it should be, especially if our goal is to gain greater visibility in comparative literature journals and curricula around the world. In too many cases, doctoral students are permitted to complete a program in Latin American literature without ever studying much, if any, Portuguese or Brazilian literature, thus cutting out from their program a knowledge of the world's sixth most widely spoken language and one of the richest national literatures in the New World, one that (reflecting an ideal situation for the comparatist) has numerous parallels and points of contact with Spanish American literature as well as a great many differences and contrasts. Roberto González Echevarría, to cite one prominent scholar who has come to similar conclusions, writes, in fact, that "Brazil's is, with that of the United States, the richest national literature in the New World" and that "In the second half of the nineteenth century, Brazilian fiction was unequaled in the rest of Latin America in terms of production and quality" (*The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. xii, 15).

Because we believe that for a Latin Americanist of the twenty-first century such a lacuna is professionally untenable, we are strongly in favor of doctoral programs that require extensive training in both Brazilian Portuguese and Brazilian literature and culture. More than this, we advocate the inclusion of Brazilian texts on reading lists and in the dissertations that eventually evolve from them. In short, we recommend that the training of our future Latin Americanists extensively involve both "brasileiro" and Brazilian literature, even for students who wish to specialize in Spanish and Spanish American literature. For Latin Americanists concentrating on the Caribbean, however, or perhaps on Andean or Central American issues, it would, of course, be wise to consider making French, Dutch, or an indigenous tongue the second language. As a general rule, however, it seems to us that to have both Portuguese and Brazilian literature as part of our training not only enhances our teaching and research capabilities, it also provides the fledgling Latin Americanist with the tools necessary to do serious comparative work, and to do so in a way that is both methodologically rigorous and fully characteristic of the best of the comparative scholarship being done through other language combinations.

We therefore hope that this collection points to a number of productive avenues for the comparative study of Latin America, its literatures and cultures. Certainly, a key way to change the role of Latin America in comparative literature is through scholarly essays that exemplify this dynamic and diverse field. In addition to raising the visibility of comparative Latin American studies through publications, we believe that for real progress to be made it must begin in the classroom. We have both made concerted efforts in our teaching and curricula development to enable and facilitate comparative work on Latin American culture. Earl E. Fitz, while at Pennsylvania State University, initiated a series of courses in the department of comparative literature dealing with Inter-American Literature. Since joining the faculty at Vanderbilt University, he has also made a course in comparative methods a requirement for all doctoral students in the combined Spanish and Portuguese Ph.D. program (see at <<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/spanport/grad.htm#PHDSP>>). And Sophia A. McClennen designed a Master of Arts concentration at Illinois State University in Hispanic Transatlantic Cultural Studies for students pursuing concentration in the cultural history of Spain and of Spanish America through comparative analysis of the cultural interactions between the regions (see at <http://www.foreignlanguages.ilstu.edu/graduate/reading_lists/>). Each of these pedagogical endeavors involves the application of comparative methods to Latin American culture. We believe that curricular initiatives such as these will help to foster and promote a new generation of Latin American comparatists.

As Latin Americanists look for increased participation in the world of comparative literary studies, two very promising possibilities come to mind almost immediately: Inter-American literature and Latin American literature cast in a larger, more international perspective. By virtue of their languages and training, students of Spanish America and Brazil tend to be natural inter-Americanists. Because it is virtually impossible to read Latin American literature and culture without constantly referencing the United States, Latin Americanists are uniquely prepared to extend

their areas of expertise and specialization to issues germane to the United States as well. Courses and research projects can easily involve both traditions and, in so doing, coherently expand and compliment one's primary research area. A Latin American colonialist, for example, might well wish to begin to consider comparing and contrasting the colonial situations in Brazil and Spanish America (which are themselves far from identical) with the situation in English North America. Issues of race, religion, and socio-political organization immediately become apparent as sites of difference and, in some cases, of conflict as well. The question of relations between the European conquerors and the indigenous people is also one that Latin Americanists could easily develop into an inter-American perspective, as is the too often overlooked issue of the very different literary heritages brought to the New World by the English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. How, for example, does the Latin American Baroque compare to the attitudes about creative literature held by the English Puritans? How do the poems of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Gregório de Matos compare to those of Anne Bradstreet or Edward Taylor? Or how might we compare the sermons and essays of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antônio Vieira, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards? We do not advocate that Latin Americanists abandon their primary areas of specialization to pursue inter-American connections, but, because we believe that Latin Americanists are in a particularly advantageous position here with respect to what is a very fast developing new field, we do urge students and scholars of Brazilian and Spanish American literature to consider at least some forays into the inter-American ken, developing this aspect of their professional portfolio as a closely related and inherently comparative secondary field.

Much the same can be said of our desire to take Latin American literature and culture into the larger, international arena. The integration of our texts into the European tradition is, of course, one that all Latin Americanists know well, although typically our experience with this effort means that our texts are inevitably judged to be the "lesser" ones, the ones that, though measured against the masterworks, always appear to be derivative and "marginal." Although this problem is endemic to the Americas, it has persisted in Latin America longer and more perniciously than it should have. It is time for a change. Keying on the originality of our works (an originality that often stems from the collision of the three great cultures that have formed Latin America: the European, the Indigenous, and the African), we need to learn to assert ourselves more in terms of these international comparisons; we need to learn to not be timid about arguing that very often it is our authors and texts that are demonstrating the most interesting formal and thematic innovations, and that these deserve much more attention than they have gotten. In addition to the inter-American project, the guest editors see certain other internationalist approaches, such as transatlantic, postcolonial, and comparative cultural analysis, as being especially productive for Latin American literature and for engaging comparative literature both imaginatively and restoratively.

Finally, a word should be said about the articles featured here. Our wish from the beginning was to bring together pieces from both new and established scholars that focused not merely on Latin American literature but on how Latin American literature might gain more recognition within the discipline of comparative literature. Given our loci as scholars working in the United States and Canada, we were especially interested in calls for disciplinary changes that would affect the comparative study of Latin America in the U.S. and Canadian institutions, even though a number of the articles in this collection pay particular attention to comparative work and disciplinary innovations in Latin America. We understand all too well that what we have proposed to do here is an immensely complex and contentious undertaking. We also understand that there are many important perspectives, positions, and discussions that are not included here, and for this omission we apologize to our readers. They were not intentional. Still, we firmly believe that the selections that are included all make important contributions to our overall goal, and it is our sincere hope that they will help initiate a dialogue the eventual outcome of which will be the heightened international and comparative recognition that Latin American literature so richly deserves. If, as you read these articles, you find yourself enumerating multiple possibilities for additional study not included in this volume, then we have achieved our goal. We hope, above all, that this collection will serve as a gateway to heightened dialogue, debate, and consideration of the scholarly potentialities that will arise from an increased interaction between practitioners of Latin American studies,

comparative literature, and comparative cultural studies. While the organizational failings are ours alone, we hope our readers will join with us in thanking our contributors for allowing us to benefit from their stimulating thoughts and ideas. The essays selected for inclusion here range widely in terms of subject matter and argument, yet all provide new avenues for the comparative (cultural) study of Latin American literature. Thus, the concept of *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America* follows the principal aims and objectives of *CLCWeb*. Further, for a thematic issue related to the present volume of *CLCWeb*, see *Intercultural Negotiations in the Americas and Beyond*, guest edited by Barbara Buchenau and Marietta Messmer in *CLCWeb* 3.2 (June 2001):

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/>>. While the papers in *Intercultural Negotiations in the Americas and Beyond* represent current European scholarship on the cultures and literatures of the continent, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America* contains scholarship emanating from U.S. and Canadian scholarship.

The papers in *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America* are organized in alphabetical order by author, as follows. Gene H. Bell-Villada (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/2/>>) writes of how our concept of the "canon" has been affected by Hispanic literature (especially that of the Spanish American "Boom" novelists of the 1960s), how Latin American authors are now beginning to replace European authors as an important source of influence on writers from the United States, and how the Comparatist/Hispanist must not allow the "canonical" figures of Latin American literature to be subsumed by departments of English eager to broaden their reading lists. Calling attention to the richness and diversity of our ancient Native American heritage, Gordon Brotherston and Lúcia Sá (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/3/>>) discuss the importance of the Mayan Popol Vuh and demonstrate that the literatures and cultures of our "first peoples" lives on, throughout the Americas, as a vibrant and compelling, if too often overlooked, aspect of our New World existences. They argue that the rich legacy of Latin America's indigenous heritage is typically neglected in favor of seeking intertextualities and literary trends that link Latin America with Europe. They show, rather, that much European literature was influenced by contact with Latin American indigenous culture. Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/4/>>), on the other hand, examines the experimental Spanish American novel of the 1920s and considers the many ways these texts exemplify certain aspects of the European avant-garde even as they express social, political, and intellectual problems germane to the Latin American experience. Linking these texts to the basic tenets of Modernism, the author also argues that the experimental narratives of the 1920s should be acknowledged as important precursors of the "Boom" novels of the 1960s and that they merit their own comparisons with the better known United States and European novels of the period. Román de la Campa (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/5/>>) turns his attention to the ways that Latin American literary study has changed since 1989. He suggests that the study of Latin American culture is entering a new phase where the intersection of political and economic change in the region coincides with increased attention to postmodern and postcolonial theory. Using the example of testimonio he compares its study in the U.S. (via the work of John Beverley) with its study in Latin America, particularly Chile (via the work of the Nelly Richard). Ultimately, he calls for new comparative methods to be applied to the cultural production and academic study of Latin America.

Taking a theoretical tact, Earl E. Fitz (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/6/>>) argues that Latin American literature should always be thought of as including both the Spanish American and the Brazilian traditions, that Latin Americanists can easily expand their work as comparatists by engaging inter-American literature (an emergent field and one for which they are exceptionally prepared), and that the entire discipline of comparative literature is being redefined and rejuvenated by the inclusion of texts from Spanish America and Brazil. Moving us in a similar direction is Roberto González Echevarría (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/7/>>) who, lamenting the current state of comparative literature as a discipline, challenges us, in our courses and in our critical studies, to make use of Latin American texts as the models against which the other texts have to be evaluated (to read Joyce only after reading Lezama Lima, for example) and, in so doing, to revolutionize comparative literature by displacing the stifling Eurocentrism that, in

the early years of the twenty-first century, is preventing it from developing as naturally and as salubriously as it should. Summing up the profound changes that are characterizing Latin American literary and cultural scholarship at the present time, and arguing that Latin American literature is best (and most naturally) studied from a comparative perspective, Sophia A. McClennen (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/8/>>) offers us five very promising research areas or initiatives that conflate comparative literature, Latin American literature, and cultural studies and that demonstrate how, collectively and individually, these disciplines can benefit from heightened interaction. Alberto Moreiras (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/9/>>) turns his attention to Jorge Luis Borges, perhaps the most well known Latin American author among U.S. comparatists. Moreiras offers us a provocative intervention into the reading and interpretation of Borges, focusing on the "Tema del traidor y del heroe." Surveying some of the disciplinary changes that have taken place in U.S. and Latin American universities, Julio Ortega (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/10/>>) discusses the emerging field of Transatlantic Studies. Ortega describes the field as a dynamic and open-ended area of study that does not require a traditional canon or disciplinary configuration. Through her study of masculinity in Cuban American literature, Christina Marie Tourino (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/11/>>) argues that the massive flow of people within and beyond Latin America complicates comparative projects that focus on the national. She suggests that more productive comparative categories might track, for example, along lines of gender and sexuality and she provides a detailed comparative analysis of Cuban masculinity in Reinaldo Arenas and Oscar Hijuelos. Mario J. Valdés (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/12/>>) gives an account of the process of compiling the first history of Latin American literary culture. Describing the intricacies of the project, Valdés presents us with a theory of literary history, which is comparative and informs, but which does not totalize the object of study. Last, but not least, Sophia A. McClennen (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/13/>>) has compiled an extensive bibliography of web resources and published works that are representative of comparative Latin American cultural studies. This rich resource should serve as a useful starting point for further teaching and research.

We would like to thank Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, editor of CLCWeb and series editor of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies by Purdue University Press (<<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/Comparativeculturalstudies.html>>) -- where this thematic issue is forthcoming in book form, see below -- and the advisory board of CLCWeb for their support of this project. We also thank the Louisiana State University Press for the permission to reprint Roberto González Echevarría's article. We hope that having this collection available in free-access in electronic media will facilitate the dissemination of these articles and will help encourage debate and discussion of their arguments. It seems fitting that a reevaluation of the traditional field of comparative literature should take place in one of the most innovative scholarly venues available today. CLCWeb and the guest editors of this issue encourage readers to send their comments to the editors and/or to the authors of the papers via e-mail (e-mail addresses are in the authors' biographical profiles with each paper).

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