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**Gaze of the Outsider/Insider: US Latino Authors
Writing of Latin America**

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A growing number of US Latino authors—born or raised primarily in the United States—are finding new locales for their narratives, which draw attention to serious socio-political problems of these countries. These countries happen to be either their birth country or their parents' native homeland. This article is a preliminary observation of an exciting new area of literature based on the texts of three US Latino authors, namely Julia Alvarez, Achy Obejas, and Daniel Alarcón. Furthermore, it is a study of the possible ramifications of such a body of literature—both its problems and positive effects.

Julia Alvarez, the well-known Dominican American novelist, looks at a fictionalized account of the exploitation of Dominican HIV-positive patients for trial drugs by US pharmaceutical companies (Das 2008) in *Saving the World* (2006). Her earlier two novels *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000) are historical novels centered on Dominican women. The former novel is about the Mirabal Sisters, who fought against the Trujillo dictatorship, and the latter is about the 19th century nationalist Salomé Ureña—better known to the Dominicans as the national muse. Alvarez's narrative has clearly shifted from her earlier days of the García sisters trying to assimilate into the US mainstream culture, by losing their Dominican accents, to a narrative focused on Dominican nationalism. She has clearly shifted her focus upon the role of Dominican women in history and the exploitation of HIV-positive patients, and moved away from the expected US Latino narrative of the bicultural angst of immigrants.

Emphasis on the birth culture of the author is also present in the Cuban-born, Chicago-based Achy Obejas. There is a progressive presence of Cuba and its reality in her writings. In her first novel, *Memory Mambo* (1996), the nostalgic Cuba of the exiles is juxtaposed with the reality of present-day Cuba, although never explored, until her next novel, *Days of Awe* (2001), which takes place partially in Cuba, exposing the reader to a present-day Cuba; and finally her most recent novel *Ruins* (2009), completely situated in Cuba with its main focus upon the day-to-day struggles of the common people living with food rationing, unemployment, censorship, and poor living conditions—around the time of the Cojímar exodus incident of 1994—similar to the Mariel boatlift incident of 1980.

Relatively new to the world of fiction, the Peruvian American author, also an anthropologist by training, Daniel Alarcón was born in Lima, grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and now lives in California. He is the author of a collection of short stories, *War by Candlelight* (2005), and the novel *Lost City Radio* (2007). His collection of short stories brings to life personal stories from both Peru and the United States. The Peruvian civil war fought between the Sendero Luminoso and the government in the 1980s and 1990s are a backdrop to many of his stories of poor youth caught up in gangs, the rural migration to urban centers, and young revolutionaries killing black mutts of Lima, among others. The novel *Lost City Radio*, which never mentions its locale as Peru, but obvious from the descriptions of the civil war, looks at the effects and aftermath of the long stretched political situation focusing on the lost people—some simply separated, some in concentration-camp style prisons, and others killed.

A strong case can be made for US Latino literature to be seen as a continuation of Latin American and Spanish culture, although some debate it. Those who oppose this idea argue on two key issues: location and language. The authors mentioned above neither reside within the political borders of the subject nations, nor use Spanish as the language of their narratives, in spite of its dominant presence in these countries. Alvarez, Obejas, and Alarcón belong to what has been called the “one-and-a-half generation,” a term made famous by the Cuban American critic and author Gustavo Pérez Firmat in his book *The Life of the Hyphen*. Pérez Firmat borrows the term from the Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut, who uses it to refer to children born outside of the United States, but raised within the United States. For Rumbaut, these children of the margins belong to neither culture. Pérez Firmat, on the other hand, provides a broader meaning to the “one-and-a-halfers,” as he feels that the inverse is also true: “[...] unlike younger and older compatriots, he or she may actually find it possible to circulate within and through both the old and the new cultures” (4). These authors too are “circulating” both the cultures. Rather than tied to themes popularly associated with US Latino authors—the issues of assimilation, racism, etc. in the United States—they focus completely on their native countries. It is important to note at the beginning of this discussion that although US Latino authors before now have used Latin American locales, and socio-cultural aspects pertinent to

those locales, it has never been done in this manner, where a critical approach to the socio-political themes have been discussed by someone positioned socially and culturally outside the political borders. This new thematic shift brings with it certain ramifications, which are yet to manifest completely and be studied systematically. Although it may be too early to sub-categorize this literature, it is not premature to see some of the dangers and also some positive implications of cultural representations by bicultural agents. One may compare these writings to similar writings from the past, for example the texts from the colonial period, where the author belonged to the culture of the colonizer and wrote about the colonized culture. The choice of this comparison is developed further below, but one distinction must be made now—that of the authors' cultural positioning. The present-day authors are bicultural agents "outsiders/insiders."

The bicultural agent may not completely be seen as an outsider because of his ancestral ties, as is the case of Alvarez, Alarcón, and Obejas, but his positioning as a US citizen or resident writing to a US readership creates the problem of a presumed cultural authority of a geographical space outside the author's own presumed space, similar to the colonial narrative. Compare these authors to cultural anthropologists or ethnographers who study cultures of the others to report back to their own. James Clifford studying ethnographic authority says that ethnographic writing:

[...] includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This has classically involved unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text. (120)

A social scientist, like the ethnographer, might be sympathetic to the target culture, as is the case with the authors—Alvarez, Obejas, and Alarcón—but has been formed and educated in another culture, which is privileged and associated with power and dominance. The countries in question, like many other Latin American nations, would rank lower in a hierarchy of what one perceives in the US as a free and thriving democratic nation. The authorial voice combined with the text becomes the spokesperson for the target culture, which is little known to an English-speaking readership in the United States. There within lies the problem of creating an image of the "other," a theory central to most post-colonial writings. For the longest time US Latinos battled with the image created of them by the mainstream American culture, until they started to speak for themselves, and created their own "self," for the longest time US Latinos battled with the image created of them by the mainstream American culture. For example, the US Administration used "Hispanic" as the term to refer to anyone of Latino descent, until Latinos promoted the term "Latino/a," to refer to the various Latino ethnicities, and it is only now that the US Administration has adopted the term. In the last census of 2000, the term "Latino" was used along with "Hispanic," and one may only hope that by now, in 2010, everyone will be familiar with the term chosen to self-represent the Latinos. Given the history of cultural representations

it is curious to note that US Latino authors, by writing of their birth nations, are taking on the risk of adopting a similar hierarchical stance in the discourse of representing Latin America—one of the many “Others” of the United States. This shift in discourse in the US Latino writings also leads us to reevaluate the US imaginary that is just getting familiar with the Latino self-representation. The American reader of the US Latino texts is familiar with the racial and identity conflicts of a Latino in the barrios. The readers are just learning to accept the self-representative term “Latino” instead of the imposed term “Hispanic.” In such a time it becomes imperative to understand how this thematic shift in the US Latino texts will affect the US reader. US Latinos writers are starting to create a new discourse, which involves Latin American issues--of the originating cultures, and not of the continuing cultures.

In Alvarez’s novel *Saving the World*, the protagonist, a Dominican American author, makes the conscious choice to write about a Spanish woman from the colonial times, who fought for the rights of the orphans used in an experimental trial during the Small Pox epidemic in the Americas. She chooses to do so against her publisher’s wishes. The publisher would have liked her to write a multigenerational saga about a Latino family. There is no doubt that this character reflects the author Alvarez herself in many ways. Apart from the autobiographical similarities—both are Dominican Americans, and they both live in rural Vermont—Alvarez’s authorial voice resonates strongly in the thematic shift of the narrative. The fictional author’s choice to focus on an issue not driven by the demand of the market is an attempt to bring to light, in this case, the participation of women in the history of medicine and human rights. It also echoes Alvarez’s own attempt to write about the abuse of HIV-positive patients in her birth country, instead of what the market expects of US Latino authors. Alarcon’s novel takes a step further: the protagonist of *Lost City Radio* is not a bicultural agent, like Alvarez’s fictional author, but is instead a radio-journalist from Lima who confronts the truth of the violence and abuse by both the guerrilla outfit, Sendero Luminoso, and the Peruvian government of common people, both the rural indigenous population and urban citizens. Similarly, Obejas’ principal character, a 54-year-old still true to the ideals of the Revolution, struggles along with his fellow Cubans to survive in the deteriorated ruins of Havana. He is confronted with poverty and hunger like many others. Some try to survive by making money through illegal means or leave the country. He tries not to be angry with those who have lost faith in the promises of the Revolution: he just wants to die in his homeland.

US Latino literature not only struggles to be accepted as part of mainstream Latin American literature (when referring to the authors of Latin American heritage), but also of the United States. Language is one of the key factors for this exclusion. For the longest time US Latino literature written in English was a marginal literature within the United States, because it was peppered with Spanish, making it difficult for non-Spanish speakers to understand without a glossary. The US Latino-Boom of the 1980s was brought

about by the publishing houses promoting new writings of the Latino culture in the United States, written in a more accepted “standard English,” thus catering to a larger audience. Meanwhile, publishing houses started by Latinos provided many more US Latino authors with another avenue medium to reach the public. On one hand, the Latino culture found a space for itself in the mainstream US culture; on the other hand, it grew apart from its origins.

The other excluding factor for US Latino literature from Latin America has been of location. An author living outside the reality of a nation is regarded as suspect to write or speak of that reality. Social and political issues are usually of the highest concern. In the case of bicultural agents, they are seen as Americanized or having assimilated into the culture of a powerful nation with whom many Latin American nations have a colonial or neo-colonial relationship.

Undoubtedly one of the impacts of this new thematic shift in US Latino writing is to make the Latin American reality real and accessible to a larger audience, to an audience unaware of these countries in their neighboring south. Latin America in the US imaginary is the exotic beaches of the Caribbean, the dictatorial communist Cuba of the Castro brothers, or the undocumented Mexicans crossing US borders. Therefore, the narratives written by Alvarez, Alarcón, or Obejas are actually powerful tools that have the potential of recreating this imaginary by talking of real issues that need not only local attention, but also, the attention of a powerful country like the United States. These authors are like journalists, similar to the fake persona that Alvarez’s protagonist takes upon herself to settle a local issue that arises from the use of the HIV-positive patients, and similar to the protagonist of Alarcon’s novel, a radio journalist who reads the names of the missing on her radio show titled the “Lost City Radio”—the little that she can do in the face of government censorship of the 1980s in Peru. Obejas too, maintains an apolitical stand on the governing policies of Cuba, and simply documents the life of a longtime believer of the 1959 Revolution. The documentary nature of *Saving the World*, *Lost City Radio*, and *Ruins* is personalized by the names of the characters, and knowing their innermost fears and hopes. In spite of being fiction, the strategy serves multiple purposes. It allows entrance into a world from which the authors have been excluded by their location. The authors show a serious compromise by speaking of the harsh realities of the Latin American countries which remain unknown simply because they have little impact on US economic and political stability. On the other hand, this is also a strategy of identity politics. For Latinos in the United States who live on the fence, the past and the present knowledge of their native countries makes them belong to a place. They belong to their past not by recounting nostalgic tales of their parents’ and grandparents’ glorious past but by remaining connected to a present, which is harsh; and for many, the reason for immigration or for not returning. This can also be seen as a strategy of national identity formation, in which the concept of nation lies beyond just the political borders. Daniel Alarcón answering Gabriela Jauregui on the legitimacy of using English to write about Latin America, simply answers by saying, “As borders

become more fluid, language does as well: cultures and languages are colliding; spaces between people are shrinking (Alarcón *Lost City Radio* “P.S.” 3-4).” Then he goes on to talk about the Peruvian poet César Moro, who wrote in French, and the indigenous literature in Quechua, resting his case that language does not determine “national literature.”

Language is simply one of the many markers of identity. The monolithic cultures—especially the European model of one-language, one-religion, one-nation—existed simply to dominate one group by the other, and provide a semblance of unity. The argument of Spanish as the language of Hispanic American literature harps back to the colonial times and the colonial hierarchies. English is not the only language of the United States either. The Latino community is too large to be ignored, and so is their narrative. The narratives considered in this study create a space for a dialogue within the United States to talk of Latin America, not as the “orientalized” mass of land, of which little is taught in classrooms or reported in the mainstream media. Latin America becomes a living place with serious issues, and in many cases, with direct or indirect implications of US involvement, which goes unequivocally for the Dominican Republic and Cuba, where US presence is a historical reality. In Peru, Fujimori’s neo-liberal policies were fully backed by the United States. Alvarez herself in the post-script in one of her earlier novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, says that her intentions for writing the novel was a means to let the US readers know of the pain and suffering the Dominicans endured during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (324).

Despite the bright side to this new narrative, as mentioned above, a concern far more important than of exclusion due to language or location remains. A serious issue of exploitation may arise from this kind of representation. It is yet to be determined if this shift is more than just a fad. The Boom phenomenon of the 1960s in Latin America and the Latino Boom in the 1980s in the United States has shown that the popularity of a genre or a style of writing can be manipulated by the marketing of literature as a commodity. Potentially, other US Latino authors who make a conscious choice to write about Latin American social issues and its history will do so to create a platform and open a dialogue, or simply to satiate the demands of the market. In such a situation it is imperative for the critic to be aware of these writings. It is also implied that the narrow specializations, into which the academic world is divided, will broaden their horizons. Thus, it is important that the Latin Americanists, who are much more in-tune with Latin American issues embrace the opportunity to critique this new literature even though it lies outside the purview of their academic world of specializations. This also allows a new dialogue between the Latin Americanists and the US Latino scholars.

Evaluating a fictional narrative to the same standards as an ethnographic document may be considered too stringent, but it is important to be wary of the power of fiction. Since its publication in 1790, *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the

most fascinating fictional adventures that has also shaped the readers' mind about the Americas and its exotic savages—cannibals—who needed to be tamed and saved, or in other words, needed European colonization. Alvarez, Obejas, and Alarcón, despite being fiction writers, needed to be thorough in their research to present a factual representation of the problems. By representing the present-day problems of their native countries they made a conscious choice in their adult lives to be part of these countries present. These authors and those who follow suit are the unofficial spokespersons for these countries: identified as significant voices among their readers in the English-speaking world, and what they say or write will be accepted in the US imaginary.

Fiction has a larger reach than an academic investigation in the field of social sciences. The following example does not refer to Latin America, but highlights the concern of becoming an unofficial spokesperson of a culture alien to the US imaginary. Salman Rushdie, an Indian-born author, is well known in the western world, where he resides, for his books like *Midnight's Children* and the *Satanic Verses*. His former novel is considered one of the established texts in English about modern India. In 1997, the Vintage Book publishers, to commemorate India's 50 years of independence from British rule, published an anthology of Indian stories co-edited by Rushdie and Elizabeth West. In the preface of the collection, Rushdie, the "spokesperson" for India, writes that the Indian writings in English in the last 50 years of Indian literature have been "the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books"(x). Another version of the introduction was also published in *The New Yorker*. In the western world no one questioned Rushdie, but the Indian intellectuals were flabbergasted by this commentary, and this caused uproar in the academic circles. On one hand, as Bishnupriya Ghosh suggests that "the interaction of postcolonial texts written in English with vernacular and popular cultural texts [...]" is tied to the polemic of authenticity versus hybridity (p.31), thus causing the exclusionary discourse. The other objection in this case is that Rushdie does not read most of the regional languages of India, of which there are many, and therefore he was in no position to be qualified to say that the stories in English were more valuable than those written in languages like Assamese or Malayalam—inaccessible to the western world without English translations.

In case of Alvarez, Alarcón, or Obejas, the reader enters their texts with equal trust, as one might have felt reading Rushdie, simply because they partially belong to these cultures in which they situate their creations; yet it is important that one remains cautious as to how the Latin American issues are represented, and how much importance is given to these texts. It is the role of the critic to make sure that the thin line between fiction and reality is not abused for a misrepresentation of the Latin American issues, or to promote US Latino writings. These novels, however fictional, base themselves in a social reality, which shapes our understanding of places not yet encountered. These texts are only a part of a large corpus of writings about Latin America, and therefore should be approached as such—a bicultural gaze of an outsider/insider.

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