

## The Peculiar Art of Cultural Formations: Roberto Bolaño and the Translation of Latin American Literature in The United States

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THE LAST THREE MONTHS OF 2007 SAW TWO PUBLICITY EVENTS that are telling indicators of the status of Latin American literature in English translation in the United States. The first is often snubbed by “serious” literary critics, although its repercussions never fail to impress: on October 5, Oprah Winfrey announced her latest selection for her book club: Gabriel García Márquez’s *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985), translated by Edith Grossman in 1988 as *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The talk-show host’s endorsement is a foolproof guarantee of a book’s success<sup>1</sup>, and correspondingly Random House “announced a new printing of 750,000 copies for the novel, and an additional 30,000 for the original Spanish-language text” (Associated Press), a number that probably increased after the release of Mike Newell’s eponymous movie. The second event of note occurred on December 9 when *The New York Times* released “The 10 Best Books of 2007.” This list, split evenly between fiction and non-fiction titles and culled from the “New York Times 100 Notable Books for 2007,” is perhaps the most reliable gauge of the approbation of an author by the U.S. literary establishment. One of the year’s five ostensibly “best” novels was *The Savage Detectives*, Natasha Wimmer’s English-language translation of *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) by Chilean author Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003).

In order to comprehend the significance of these two selections, it is useful to review the titles from the last chosen by both the television icon and the newspaper. With regards to the first, Oprah’s club was launched in 1996 and has presented a total of 64 books to date. *Love in the Time of Cholera* is one of three novels originally written in Spanish that have appeared on her reading list: the Nobel Laureate’s iconic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*, 1967) was featured in 2004, as was Isabel Allende’s *Daughter of Fortune* (*Hija de la fortuna*, 1999) four years earlier. Similarly, a perusal of the “100 Notable Books” lists corresponding to the last ten years offers an indication of the magnitude of the *Times*’ endorsement of Bolaño’s novel with respect to Latin American literature in translation; since 1997, only three authors from the region have been granted this distinction: Jorge Luis Borges in 1998 for his *Collected Fictions*, Mario Vargas Llosa for both *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (*Los cuadernos de Don Rigoberto*, 1998) and *The Way to Paradise* (*El paraíso en la otra esquina*, 2003) in 1998 and 2003 respectively, and Roberto Bolaño himself, only last year, for *Last Evenings on Earth*, a collection of his short stories.

*The New York Times*’s notable book lists and Oprah’s reading club constitute a representative survey of U.S. highbrow and “middle”-brow literary cultures. It is roughly in the overlap of these two populations, that I locate “the U.S. reader,” a term I will employ here to mean a collective figure of reception and discourse that is a major actor in assigning the perceived parameters, meaning and value of, in this case, the limited body of works by Latin American authors that is available in English translation. From the *Times* and Oprah, two

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<sup>1</sup> See Cecilia Konchar Farr’s *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*.

conclusions can be drawn: first, the continued hegemony in the literary market of the most internationally recognized authors grouped under the boom's umbrella; and second, the U.S. reader's insatiable appetite for magical realism. *The Savage Detectives*, although evidently informed by the boom's legacy, represents a break with its aesthetics. The *Times*'s decision to honor Roberto Bolaño's 577-page-long novel with its highest accolade, and the rave reviews the work received in other publications across the country, necessitate the pondering of how the U.S. literary establishment is presently reconfiguring what it deems Latin American literature to be, and, by extension, how it represents the region to itself through literature in English translation.

Translation is not understood here strictly as a practice of linguistic transference, but, following Susan Bassnet and Andre Lefevere, also as a social and political activity that "reads," generally from the center, the works of the peripheries (the source), thus actively participating in the formulation and promulgation of source cultural identities for the target culture. In the following pages, I first propose to review briefly the history of modern translation of Latin American literature in the United States. This shall serve as a means to recall the processes of consecration and the agendas behind the identification of very restricted aesthetic practices —a fraction of the total literary production of the region at any given moment— with the sum of that which is "Latin American," a trend consolidated with the boom. Then I will turn to Bolaño's novel to propose that although the most recent darling of the publishing industry ostensibly realigns the coordinates of the Latin American novel, the image that is gleaned from its pages actually foments a (pre)conception of alterity that satisfies the fantasies and collective imagination of U.S. cultural consumers.

## I. Latin America Translated and Transmitted

The publication of Latin American literature in English translation in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon that began as a sustained project only in the 1930s. Since these early years, the decision behind the translation of certain works and not of others has corresponded to various historical, ideological, political and economic factors, in addition to the inherent aesthetic or literary value of the works in question. In approaching a translated text, critic and translator Suzanne Jill Levine asserts that "readers also need to understand *how* Latin American writing is transmitted to them, and how differences and similarities between cultures and languages affect *what* is finally transmitted" (xiv-xv). The selection, translation, promotion and consecration of particular Latin American works within the United States is uneven, begging the question "de qué afanes hegemónicos se trata, y sobre todo, qué concepciones de la cultura y la literatura se hallan en juego" (Perus 165). Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, which attempts to describe in systematic sociological terms the unequal modern transnational production of literature, is a useful reference in addressing this question.

Casanova considers the role of translation to be one of multiple concrete practices that, together with symbolic literary values —the prestige and history of a language etc.—, constitute the literary "bourse," which assigns value and potentially a coveted place to an author or a work in the "world republic of letters." Translation is thus a "form of literary recognition" (World Republic 133): when it involves the importation of texts from peripheral languages into a language of the center, "it amounts, in fact, to acceding to the status of literature, to obtaining a certificate of literary standing" (135). For Casanova, French is the literary language par excellence, and Paris is the geographical capital of the republic of letters, the point through which the "Greenwich meridian" of literary modernity and consecration passes. This line establishes a global aesthetic "present" against which all literary production

is measured. Although France and French literature certainly have played pivotal roles both in the development and growing international prominence of Latin American literature<sup>2</sup>, Casanova's formulation posits a particular reading of a specific set of historic and sociopolitical processes with literary universality. As one Latin American critic has pointed out, "la literatura mundial sólo es articulable desde una perspectiva nacional concreta [...] que pone en primer plano los intereses críticos de cierta perspectiva nacional o lingüística" (Sánchez-Prado 29). The concrete "national or linguistic perspective" that interests us here is not that of France, but rather the United States: its translation into English and subsequent reading of the literary production of its neighbors to the south.

Within this limited perspective, Casanova's attention to the role of cultural "exchange brokers", publishers, literary agents, scholars, critics and literary prizes (21) facilitates our understanding of the various waves of translations of Latin American authors in the United States. One point of contention with her conceptualization of the world literary structure is her insistence on its relative autonomy. She repeatedly asserts that "no hay vínculo directo ni relación de causa y efecto, entre el poder (o debilidad) económico-político y el poder (la legitimidad) literaria en la escala internacional" ("La literatura como mundo" 77). In examining translation of Latin American literature in the United States, the role of political policies has historically played a pivotal role. As Irene Rostagno states, "the support, promotion and ultimate inclusion of Latin American poets and novelists in the canon of literature in translation have been bound up with political beliefs and ideological values" (Rostagno *Searching*, 148).

Before 1920, only a handful of Latin American books had been translated into English and made available in the United States, and until the late 1960s, almost all concerted efforts to promote them were the personal crusades of individuals. During the 30s, regionalist works such as *The Underdogs*, *Marcela: A Mexican Love Story*, *Don Segundo Sombra: Shadows in the Pampas*, *Martín Fierro*, *The Vortex* and *Doña Bárbara* were published, but largely ignored. When given critical attention, they were almost exclusively appreciated in thematic terms, as examples of picturesque exotica, fomenting an image of a rural, underdeveloped, culturally distant land<sup>3</sup>. Over the next decade, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy encouraged greater interest in Latin America, in both the private and public sectors<sup>4</sup>. In response, a small number of publishers, translators and academics sought to make works from the region more available in English. Alfred and Blanche Knopf led this effort<sup>5</sup>, selecting a wide variety of titles for translation without a clear agenda behind their decisions "other than author popularity, publisher instincts, and circumstantial awareness of specific

<sup>2</sup> See Maarten Steenmeijer's comparative analysis of the first publications of *novelas de la tierra* and boom novels in translation (in France, Germany, Italy, U.S. and England) which demonstrates France's role at the helm of international publishing trends of Latin American literature: Maarten Steenmeijer, "How the West Was Won: Translations of Spanish American Fiction in Europe and the United States." See also: Sylvia Molloy's *La diffusion de la littérature hispano-américaine en France au XXe siècle*.

<sup>3</sup> This, despite the efforts of Waldo Frank, the endorser of many of these translations, to promote them as the natural expression of an organic, tellurian people, their humane social order and sustained spirituality. He sought in these books an alternative model for renewing the materialist and mechanist culture of the United States. See: Irene Rostagno, "Waldo Frank's Crusade for Latin American Literature."

<sup>4</sup> This policy led to the development of economic incentives for language, scholar and cultural exchange programs offered by the State Department and private donors including the Rockefeller Foundation, the creation of Hispanic Foundation by the Library of Congress, and the formation of the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies. See Howard F. Cline, "The Latin American Studies Association: A Summary Survey with Appendix."

<sup>5</sup> María Eugenia Mudrovic cites the following authors: Ricardo Palma, Alfonso Reyes, María Luisa Bombal, Eduardo Mallea, Ciro Alegría, Germán Arciniegas, Alejo Carpentier, Ernesto Sábato, Adolfo Costa du Rels, José Suárez Carreño, Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, João Guimarães Rosa and Gilberto Freyre (131-2).

works”<sup>6</sup> (Mudrovcic 132). This heterogeneity, one critic summarizes, “suggests that up to the 1950s what was understood as “Latin American literature” in the United States was varied, if not arbitrary” (Mudrovcic 132). The Knopfs were challenged to find informed readers, reviewers and translators capable of understanding and appreciating the books they chose. Only much later did a novel of Knopf’s find a broad audience: Brazilian Jorge Amado’s *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*, released in 1962 even achieved bestseller status. Its humor and romantic plotting appealed to U.S. readers as a tropical, exotic and sensual Cinderella story, and came to represent for the U.S. reader the literary flavor of the region. Such widespread success was not repeated until 1969, with the publication of Amado’s *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (Rostagno *Searching* 33).

Official enthusiasm for Latin America, however, had begun to wane overall after 1947, and did not become a cultural or political priority again until the Cuban Revolution, when the federal government and private organizations set aside funds for the creation of Latin American studies programs, and grants for research and study of the region (Cline 64) as part of Cold War intellectual efforts to “counteract the impact of Cuba’s cultural revolution” (Rostagno *Searching* 103). It was in the late 1960s that Latin American literature finally “emerged” in the U.S. consciousness and literary market as a recognizable field. This was made possible through the translation projects of the Literature Program of the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR)<sup>7</sup>, established in 1967, which programmatically selected Latin American novels, subsidized their translation, found U.S. publishers, mobilized New York reviewers and critics, and produced its own magazine, *Review*, under the direction of Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal. CIAR became the “clearing-house or “symbolic banker” of Latin American literature, thus “deciding what should be imported from Latin America and how it should be read” (Mudrovcic 139). Under its auspices, the boom was born within the U.S. literary establishment, introducing readers to over sixty authors including Borges, García Márquez, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Cortázar, Lezama Lima, Donoso, Sábato, Puig, Cabrera Infante and Sarduy.

The reading and reception of these authors varied on a case-by-case basis, and merit individual study, including the role of literary prizes, political positions and affiliations, translations into other languages, etc. In broad strokes, however, the field of Latin American literature, under the boom’s elastic label, has been defined in the United States through two main currents: on one hand there is, Borges, whose fictions, translated belatedly in the United States<sup>8</sup>, revolutionized the practice of modern literature for writers in all languages, turning linguistic, narratological and metaphysical assumptions inside out, and redefining the figures of author and reader in their dissolution in; on the other, there are the novelizations of Latin America’s mythical foundations, history and contemporary urban reality, often structured through techniques derived from Faulkner, Joyce and other English language high modernists. Read alongside Borges are what Rodríguez Monegal termed the “novels of language” —those by Cortázar, Lezama Lima, Cabrera Infante and Sarduy, for example— which helped secure the region’s literary standing among American intellectuals, but were read by a very limited audience. Through the second current, associated most commonly with Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, and García Márquez, the “character” of Latin American literature was defined for and by U.S. readers, leading to interpretations, such as Casanova’s of “[t]he emergence of an

<sup>6</sup> Another important arbiter in the selection process for Knopf was translator Harriet de Onís (Rostagno *Searching* 34).

<sup>7</sup> CIAR was a reincarnation of the Inter-American Foundation for the Arts (IAFA) founded by Rodman Rockefeller in 1962. IAFA’s mission was to foster dialogue between writers, critics and intellectuals from the U.S. and Latin America. See Rostagno *Searching* and Mudrovcic.

<sup>8</sup> The two first anthologies of Borges’s fictions were published in the U.S. in 1962, whereas *Ficciones* (*Fictions*, Paul Verdevoye and Néstor Ibarra, trans.) inaugurated French publishing house Gallimard’s “Croix du Sud” Latin American series in 1951.

aesthetically coherent body of writing in Latin America [...]of a genuine literary unity on a continental scale” (*World Republic* 234). This “coherent” body has been defined thematically and aesthetically around the ascendance of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the practice of magical realism.

## II. The Branding of Latin America Fiction

García Márquez’s novel was the first work sponsored by the CIAR, and was published in the English translation by Gregory Rabassa in 1970. For the greater public, the novel served as a second introduction, after Jorge Amado’s success, to what quickly came to be defined as “Latin American” literature, opening the door for other authors to a U.S. readership. The book’s universal acclaim<sup>9</sup>, however, brought unforeseen consequences: readers, equipped with almost no critical knowledge about the region’s culture and history, much less its literature, approached Macondo as a “complete” mini Latin America to consume and interpret. Instead of discovering an allegory of universal human experiences in society, the remote and exotic setting, fantastic characters, and magical and violent occurrences came to symbolize what was quintessentially “Latin,” a world of “solitude” far removed from U.S. experience. To compound this assumption, magical realism, a legitimately revolutionary aesthetic, was decontextualized, divorced from what Jean Franco characterizes as its subversive role as a destabilizer of Western positivism and cultural hegemony (160), and reduced to a whimsical flight of fancy. This aesthetic practice created a horizon of expectation for the region’s literature so that magical realism was famously employed, in both the popular and academic press, as the mark the authenticity of “Latin” writing.

The reception of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a paradigmatic example of the outside misreading of a text originally composed within a specific cultural, historic and literary context and for a target audience. However, other authors such as Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, and to lesser extent Rosario Ferré and Carmen Boullosa, as well as their promoters, have more deliberately abetted this stereotyping of Latin America letters, achieving commercial success in the wake of García Márquez through the magical realism formula. Ferré has offered, for example, that a “characteristic that helps define Latin American tradition vis-à-vis North American tradition in literature today has often to do with magical occurrences” (36). These assertions of a Latin American cultural essentialism by a handful of authors, and more commonly by the U.S. literary establishment, contribute to what Sylvia Molloy terms the “fabrication of a Latin American “South” (“Postcolonial Latin America” 371), a construction reminiscent of the “Orient,” as analyzed by Edward Said.

This reductive representation of Latin America, as Molloy suggests, is appealing for several reasons: it offers U.S. readers the “*illusion* of an easy familiarity, the *illusion* of translatability, and thus create[s] the *illusion* of [their] cultural competence” (373); it adds temporal and spatial distance between the United States and Latin America, “a region that may be too close for comfort” (374), by relating things that “could not” happen here; it provides an imaginary arena for Western fantasies to play out in a foreign space. One telling example corroborating Molloy’s hypotheses is Oprah’s pitch of García Márquez:

Read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* because of its passion. It's a wildly passionate book that brings to life mythical and colorful characters. In Macondo, wonderful, magical, fantastical, unreal things happen every day. They swirl on a

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<sup>9</sup> Already by 1983, the year after García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize, it had sold over 12 million copies in 30 languages (Payne 2).

canvas as unique and foreign as any you have known yet they evoke basic human truths that are as real as every day (Winfrey).

One tangible repercussion of the above construction is that publishers, critics and readers alike have viewed with skepticism works that do not conform to this preconceived notion of the region's literature, a fact reflected in limited publishing opportunities, unenthusiastic reviewer opinions and poor sales. In addition, the term "magical realism" has been applied retroactively to older works to form an artificial genealogy of Latin American literature, culminating in García Márquez. This practice misconstrues and limits U.S. readers' appreciation of books as rich as the *Collected Fictions* of Borges, promoted by *The New York Times* as: "The first complete English version of all the fictional work of the father of magic realism" ("Notable Books of 1998"). If only ten years ago, magical realism still appealed to the editors of the book section of *The New York Times* as the most accurate (or at least the most effective) way to present U.S. readers to Borges, the question remains as to the longevity of this particular imaginary construction of Latin American literature, and by extension, of Latin America.

In the United States, the slow mapping of Latin American post-boom and "post-modern" trends has been in the making for over twenty years, with the gradual translation into English of authors such as Manuel Puig, Luisa Valenzuela, Reinaldo Arenas, Ricardo Piglia, Fernando Vallejo, César Aira, Ángeles Mastretta and Tomás Eloy Martínez. However, the number of new books translated from all languages into English in North America has fallen sharply, from 1,750 translations in 1980 to 1,400 in 1998; now an average of 200 fiction titles are translated annually (Lowe xiv). In addition, iconic boom novelists claim many of those coveted spots as they continue to produce new critically-acclaimed works, thus eclipsing in visibility their younger counterparts, a trend evidenced in the "100 Notable Books" lists issued by the *Times* during the last decade. Older works are also relaunched by producers of mass culture, years after their original translation, such as Oprah in the case of García Márquez. It should not be surprising, therefore, that widely-read publications are only recently asking, such as *Newsweek* did in 2007, "Is Magical Realism Dead?" (Margolis)<sup>10</sup>.

The affirmative answer, when given, is most often supported not with reference to the writers above, but to those of the self-proclaimed McOndo and Mexican Crack "movements"—among them Alberto Fuguet, Sergio Gómez, and Edmundo Paz Soldán associated with the first, and Jorge Volpi, Ignacio Padilla, Pedro Ángel Palou, Cristina Rivera Garza and Eloy Urroz, with the second. Savvy media ploys as well as aesthetic acts of rebellion, the McOndo and Crack "manifestos" proclaim a literary agenda that distinguishes their signers from the boom generation<sup>11</sup> by rejecting magical realism and Latin American foundational myths. They affirm their affiliation to an expansive, Western, cosmopolitan tradition and maintain their prerogative to write about any topic and geographical location; when their novels address Latin America, the backdrops are usually gritty urban centers in the throes of hyper-capitalism, neo-liberalism and violence. Although critics familiar with the broad spectrum and history of Latin American letters have correctly rebuffed the originality of these precepts<sup>12</sup>, the international commercial success of Volpi, Padilla Fuguet and Paz Soldán, their literary prizes, record-breaking contracts and prominence in government and academic positions, have propelled their claims of a new Latin American mode of expression into the public space of perception that produces literary paradigms. Collectively, the authors assembled around the McOndo and Crack projects have been successful in loosening the stranglehold of magical

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<sup>10</sup> See also Nicole Laporte's 4 Jan. 2003 review of McOndo and Crack writers in *The New York Times* and Rachel Aviv's 21 Jan. 2004 review of Jorge Franco's *Rosario Tijeras* in *Salon.com*.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, Crack and McOndo writers enjoy the promotional blessings of Carlos Fuentes.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher Domínguez Michael's discussion of Mexican authors in "La mort de la littérature mexicaine."

realism over the U.S. conception of Latin American letters, and individual novelists such as Volpi have even achieved significant moments of stardom<sup>13</sup>. Other, vastly superior authors such as Daniel Sada and Juan Villoro have yet to have their masterpieces translated. Nevertheless, U.S. publishers, critics and readers appeared to be biding with growing anticipation, the appearance of *the* successor of García Márquez's axial role, a new author-figure around whose persona and work the terms of a new breed of Latin American fiction could be fixed. I would venture that in 2007, with the English-language release of *The Savage Detectives* by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, all bets for such a match were placed on Roberto Bolaño.

### III. The Portrait of the Artist as...

The virtual catapulting of Bolaño from obscurity to celebrity within the U.S. field of letters is a fascinating case in the making, one that combines his creative genius, compelling biography and tragic death together with the actors, institutions and concrete practices that Casanova outlined as contributing to the demarcation of the literary field. These factors combine and coalesce to “produce” the figure of Bolaño for U.S. reception and consumption, and in doing so, anticipate the reading of his work that is propagated in this country. As Bolaño gained prominence in the Spanish-speaking world almost a decade before he did in the United States, it is useful to note several pertinent details of his earlier success. As in the case of most Latin American authors, Bolaño was virtually unknown until his novels were accepted by prominent publishers in Spain: after six books were released by small presses, Seix Barral edited *La literatura Nazi en América* in 1996, and then Anagrama, under the leadership of Jorge Herralde, became his official publisher, with thirteen Bolaño titles to its credit. The publication of *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) brought Bolaño international recognition, earning him both the XVI Premio Herralde and the Rómulo Gallegos prize, one of Latin America's most prestigious awards. In the following years, Bolaño signed contracts in ten countries, not including the United States (Herralde 19), and earned the admiration of young writers, many of them associated with the McOndo and Crack groups. Less than a month before his death from liver failure on July 15, 2003, Bolaño was invited to the first “Encuentro de escritores latinoamericanos” in Seville<sup>14</sup>, an event that served to publicly position Bolaño as the “hermano mayor” (in the words of Volpi) of many of these same writers, a role that Bolaño may have seen at best with skepticism<sup>15</sup>. With the publication of his posthumous *2666*, Bolaño's celebrity status in the Spanish-speaking world was secured. Despite himself, Bolaño seemed to possess the all ingredients for success: an abundance of talent, a Spanish label to promote him, literary prizes, a coterie of successful self-proclaimed “younger brothers” and a tragic demise at the peak of his literary career.

It is interesting to observe how this trajectory got “translated” in the United States. Before Bolaño's death, his only works available in English were stories appearing in *The New*

<sup>13</sup> Jorge Volpi's 1998 novel *In Search of Klingsor* received the 1999 Biblioteca Breve prize given by Spanish publishing house Seix Barral, an award that had been suspended since 1973. *Klingsor*, the story of a U.S. physicist charged with discovering the identity of the mastermind of the Nazi atomic project, was lauded as a “German novel” written in Spanish. Translation rights were sold for over half a million dollars, and the novel became an international bestseller, opening the doors for other young Latin American writers to major Spanish publishers.

<sup>14</sup> In attendance were Jorge Franco, Rodrigo Fresán, Santiago Gamboa, Gonzalo Garcés, Fernando Iwasaki, Mario Mendoza, Ignacio Padilla, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Cristina Rivera Garza, Ivan Thays and Jorge Volpi.

<sup>15</sup> See Bolaño's speech, “Sevilla me mata” in *Entre paréntesis* for his critique of the young writers' pursuit of “respectability” (fame, power and money) instead of writing with the urgency and abandon of devoting all to the service of literature.

*Yorker*, *Bomb*, *Grand Street*, and *Tin House*. The following year, New Directions began to publish Chris Andrews's careful translations of Bolaño's shorter narrative: *Nocturno de Chile* (*By Night in Chile*, 2003), *Estrella distante* (1996) (*Distant Star*, 2004), *Amuleto* (*Amulet*, 2006), and stories taken from *Llamadas telefónicas* (1997) and *Putas asesinas* (2001), given the title *Last Evenings on Earth* (2006). These works garnered acclaim from celebrity authors Benjamin Lytal, Francisco Goldman and Susan Sontag, whose remark of admiration —“The most influential and admired novelist of his generation in the Spanish-speaking world”— now appears obligatorily on the back cover of all Bolaño titles. However, it was *The Savage Detectives*, translated by Natasha Wimmer and published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (FSG), nine years after its original release, that suddenly had reviewers chorusing encomiums such as this one that appeared in *The Washington Post*, penned by prominent academic Ilan Stavans: “Not since Gabriel García Márquez, whose masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, turns 40 this year, has a Latin American redrawn the map of world literature so emphatically as Roberto Bolaño.” This “map” will continue to be “redrawn” with the upcoming English-language translation of *2666* also by Wimmer, scheduled for release by FSG in 2008.

I believe the comparison of the success of *The Savage Detectives* in the United States with that of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is apt for several reasons, but perhaps not those originally intended by Stavans. In referring to “world literature,” Stavans subscribes to an understanding of the literary field similar to Casanova's, one which can be succinctly critiqued in the words of Pedro Ángel Palou: “la literatura mundial es un efecto de lectura, es un efecto -hoy en día más que nunca- de mercado” (313). The broad appeal of García Márquez's polysemous novel can be largely attributed to the *effect* of a very particular reading (or misreading) of his work that is highly marketable, as we have seen above, and that unfortunately has overshadowed other appreciations of his work. A similar process appears to already be in effect with *The Savage Detectives*.

FSG's packaging of Bolaño's novel deliberately sets the stage for its consumption, as illustrated by the dust jacket designed specifically for the U.S. edition. Blurbs run together from the back flap to the back cover, visually reminiscent of the newly released “original scroll” version of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The front flap offers a picture of the Bolaño, but not the image already iconic in the Spanish-speaking world and that New Directions also chose for its Bolaño publications —the novelist at forty-something with cropped hair, a black jacket, round glasses and a cigarette in hand; rather, FSG's Bolaño is a young man with long locks and a faint mustache, a nostalgic memento for U.S. readers evoking the rebellion and counterculture of the 60s and 70s. This revived photograph has been developed into a widely disseminated verbal portrait of the author by mainstream media. Bolaño's alter-ego, Arturo Belano, is one of the protagonists of *The Savage Detectives*, and the novel parallels aspects of the author's life and those of his friends. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bolaño's personal story features prominently in profession and amateur reviews of his novel, particularly episodes of his youth: his arrest, detainment and release from jail after the Pinochet coup; the formation of the infrarealist poetry movement in Mexico City together with Mexican writer Mario Santiago (the inspiration for the fictional Ulises Lima) and their failed literary revolution; Bolaño's itinerant existence through Europe; his odd jobs and drug habit; his uncompromising commitment to the poetry of living and the living of poetry. These iconoclastic episodes coupled with Bolaño's passing at 50 are too irresistible to narrate as anything but a tragedy of mythical proportions: here is someone who actually saw his youthful ideals through to their ultimate consequences. “Meet the Kurt Cobain of Latin-American Literature,” reads the title of one review (Crimmins). Never mind that *The Savage Detectives* and all his major prose works were written as a sober and settled family man, during the intensive, seven-year countdown to his impending death. Bolaño appears to the

reader, even before he crosses the novel's threshold, as a cross between the beats and Rimbaud, his life already the stuff of legend.

The simplest of the multiple readings *The Savage Detectives* offers only furthers this superficial appreciation of Bolaño and his work, based principally on the diary entries of Juan García Madero, from Oct. 1975 to Feb. 1976, that compose first and third sections of the novel. A seventeen-year-old law student, García Madero drops out of school to join the cadre of visceral realists, young avant-garde poets who peddle drugs to bankroll their publications, disrupt readings by the literary establishment, and impetuously defy bourgeois social, political and literary mores. These first-person accounts chronicle García Madero's experiences in Mexico City as he steals and devours books, passionately writes poems the reader never sees and has exuberant sexual encounters with multiple women. Eventually he flees the capital in a Chevy Impala in the company of Arturo Belano, Ulises Lima and a prostitute named Lupe. The escape has the dual mission of eluding Lupe's violent pimp and tracking down Cesárea Tinajero, the founder of visceral realism, who lives forgotten somewhere in the Sonoran desert. These events, which occupy less than a third of the novel, constitute the closest thing to a plot, and seem to command the book's greatest appeal for U.S. readers.

The entire novel, but García Madero's diary in particular, has been categorized by many U.S. reviewers as a road trip story, joining ranks with the recent Latin American films *Por la libre* (Juan Carlos de Laca, 2000), *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *Los diarios de la motocicleta* (Walter Salles, 2004). In *The Savage Detectives*, as in these movies, the voyage is full of mishaps and memorable escapades: the travels culminate in a desert showdown, resulting in the accidental deaths of the elephant-sized Cesárea, the pimp and a crooked cop; Belano and Lima depart with the three corpses and Lupe and García Madero are hopping from pueblo to pueblo when the diary abruptly ends. The scenario borders on the outrageous, but I suspect that the U.S. reader feels little need to avail himself of Bolaño's ever-lurking irony. This is Latin America, after all, a space in which to satisfy one's desires for rebellions and adventures of all stripes: political, sexual, spiritual, substance-induced, literary. As one critic opines, "*The Savage Detectives* is undeniably a very "Latin" book, and giving oneself over to its pleasures is akin to treating oneself to a slow-paced holiday south of the border" (Weibezahl). This geographical demarcation is of utmost importance in sustaining the road-trip mythology, already in full throttle in beat writing about Mexico of the 50s; "south of the border" is the exotic stomping ground for the U.S. reader's imagination, a destination where such extraordinary happenings are —seductively— not fictional, but quotidian. This space, the critic implies, is appropriate for "holidays," for a break from the serious business of real life in the north.

The yellow butterflies and floating beauties of García Márquez's fiction form no part of the scenery in the above films or Bolaño's novel. I would argue, however, that from them, a new, equally reductive image of Latin America is emerging in the U.S. collective imagination, one that *The Savage Detectives* unintentionally feeds. An extravagant cast of characters populates its pages: a bisexual poet named Luscious Skin, a Uruguayan exile who hides for a week in a bathroom stall during the 1968 police occupation of Mexico City's national university, an institutionalized architect who communes with a dead poet, a pimp who regularly measures his phallus with his knife. These personages may not be born with pigs' tails, but for U.S. readers, they certainly feel exotic, belonging to a reality far-removed from their own. In a sense they are perhaps even more fantastic than García Márquez's inventions because they probably *are* real; after all, readers have been warned, this is a thinly disguised autobiography<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For the "real" identities behind various characters, see Carmen Boullosa's "Bolaño in Mexico."

In interviews, when asked “—¿Usted es chileno, español o mexicano?” Bolaño would answer “—Soy latinoamericano” (Maristain 62). This response is significant because it situates the author, his novel and its characters in the context of a continental identity, a vision shared by Crack and McOndo writers in their movement away from national labels and their claim to deterritorialize literature. In the case of *The Savage Detectives*, this identification facilitates a reading of the novel as representative of an entire region. The long middle section, in which García Madero is pointedly absent, expands the geographic scope even further; it indirectly documents Arturo Belano’s and Ulises Lima’s peripatetic wanderings in Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, during the two decades (1976-1996) following the fateful Sonoran road trip. Despite the vastness of the physical space covered by Belano and Lima—a two-person diaspora—their mode of inhabitation of places as diverse as Paris and Luanda, Tel Aviv and Berlin is the same: non-conformist, impulsive, bohemian and stubbornly intent upon attaining some elusive, indeterminate goal or state, with little regard for the consequences. Laura Jáuregui, one of Belano’s girlfriends, recalls his explanation of his plans: “he named countries like Libya, Ethiopia, Zaire, and cities like Barcelona, Florence, Avignon, [...] And then he said: I don’t plan to *see* them, I plan to *live* in them the same way I’ve lived in Mexico” (193-194). This existential attitude, the U.S. reader supposes, and Bolaño seems to corroborate, is quintessentially “Latin American,” allowing one more variation of an old adage: “You can take the Latin American out of Latin America, but you can’t take Latin America out of the Latin American.” This generalization of continental behavior finds a canonical antecedent in Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), with its displaced Argentines in Paris. It is interesting that while Latin Americans find the collective label of magical realism an anathema (too kitschy, too folksy, too limiting), the new regional identification—a continent of literary Che Guevaras who have not capitulated to conformity—is one some have been quick to endorse<sup>17</sup>.

We would be wise to ask why this new packaging of Latin America works well with U.S. consumers of literature in translation. I conjecture that they can fashion from *The Savage Detectives* two, complementary messages that are appealing to their sensibilities and expectations. On the one hand, in reading the novel their buried “adolescent” idealism is indulged, discovering in Latin America and the “Latin American,” the prospect of an adventure undertaken with the earnest belief in the saving power and transcendental meaning of action and poetry. A character in the novel, the Spanish translator Joaquín Vázquez Amaral, expresses what many U.S. readers may feel while peering into the lives of the visceral realists, “all I saw were those kids, those eager, idealistic kids, you understand? And that, as a *foreigner*, I appreciated” (186, my emphasis). This is the charm of García Madero’s truncated bildungsroman: its precipitous ending leaves his ardent, irrepressible youth and belief relatively intact, a state associated in the U.S. psyche with a bygone generational experience. Thanks to Bolaño, baby boomers and those born later can vicariously relive the best of the 70s, fascinated with the notion of a Latin America latent with such possibilities.

On the other hand, Bolaño’s novel may even be read as a cautionary moral tale, demonstrating to the “sensible” reader the consequences of taking such rebellions too far and too seriously. The twenty years Belano and Lima spend wandering the globe bring only disappointment, hardship, loss and possibly death; the two poets produce almost no literature, their reputations are often maligned by many of the fifty-odd characters that narrate the middle section, and they end up alone, with no apparent epiphany for their efforts. Jacobo Urenda, a photographer who accompanies Belano on the last leg of his journey in several war-torn African nations remarks: “I got the sense that life meant nothing to him, that he’d taken the job so he could die a picturesque death, a death that was out of the ordinary, the usual

<sup>17</sup> See Marco Antonio Coloma, for example.

bullshit. My generation all overdosed on Marx and Rimbaud” (498). It is as if Bolaño were confirming what U.S. cultural norms tout as truth: it’s fine, even expected, to be rebellious and full of chutzpah at seventeen, but then if you don’t grow up, get serious and settle down, the results are most often pathetic and tragic. One could even argue that a convincing case is made through the protagonists’ example for societal conformity and the superiority of Protestant work ethics and values.

Bolaño seems to have anticipated and ironically encouraged this reading, embedding in the novel the perspective of Barbara Patterson, a “gringa” who goes to Mexico City to study the works of Juan Rulfo, where she becomes friends with the visceral realists and falls in love with one of them, Rafael Barrios. She summarizes her initial impression of the poets in the same positive language U.S. reviewers have used to describe their own impressions of the novel: “I liked them. They reminded me of the beats. [...] I wanted to have a good time, and around them things were always lively” (162-3). Her opinion is modified, however, once they move to Los Angeles. The “good time” the Latin Americans offer, translates poorly in the practice and grind of daily living, and Barbara’s accounts of her cohabitation with Rafael reflect her growing frustration in cultural terms:

One day I said things can’t go on like this. Rafael wasn’t doing anything. He didn’t work, he didn’t write, he didn’t help me clean the house, he didn’t do the shopping, all he did was take showers (because if nothing else, Rafael is clean, like practically all fucking Mexicans) and watch TV until dawn or go out for beers or play soccer with the fucking Chicanos in the neighborhood [...] who called him Poet Man (which he didn’t seem to mind) (324).

Unwittingly —or perhaps even with provocative deliberation— *The Savage Detectives* plays into a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in its self-definition vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy; mature vs. adolescent; responsible vs. reckless; upstanding vs. delinquent. In a nutshell, Sarmiento’s dichotomy, as old as Latin America itself: civilized vs. savage. Regarded from this standpoint, *The Savage Detectives* is a very comfortable choice for the United States to represent Latin America and Latin American literature, offering both the pleasure of the savage and the superiority of the civilized.

Obviously these statements represent a gross reduction of both *The Savage Detectives*, and U.S. readers’ capacity to appreciate and comprehend it. Innumerable observations could be made here in praise of this undeniably brilliant novel, ones that many U.S. readers already have stated: its intertextual dialogues with Latin American, European and U.S. literary traditions and its original tongue-in-cheek classification systems of writers; the unique, kaleidoscopic and fugue-like structure of the middle section with its deflecting and fracturing of narrative through 53 distinct perspectives; Bolaño’s interplay of conviction and irony in exploring the fusion of life and poetry. As a disclaimer, I would stress that the purpose of the above reading is not to attempt an exegesis of the text. Rather, the motives have been dual: first, to begin to comprehend why *this* novel has been chosen to inherit the place occupied by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the representation of Latin American fiction; and secondly, to anticipate *how* the United States may represent and translate to itself the representation Bolaño offers of himself, his generation and Latin America.

This is a riddle of a reading of a reading of a reading, the type of literary mirror game dear to Bolaño and to Borges, the author he most urgently read and recommended others to reread as the starting point for the future renewal of Latin American letters (*Entre paréntesis* 30). Like Borges, Bolaño privileges literature over authors or readers, a conviction he expresses in his essays and fiction, and in this novel through the voice of Iñaki Echevarne:

For a while, Criticism travels side by side with the Work, then Criticism vanishes and it's the Readers who keep pace. The journey may be long or short. Then the Readers die one by one and the Work continues on alone, although a new Criticism and new Readers gradually fall into step with it along its path. Then Criticism dies again and the Readers die again and the Work passes over a trail of bones on its journey toward solitude (456).

Nevertheless, the Readers and the Criticism that accompany a Work, Bolaño knows, are infinite "Pierre Menards" who, even in the most faithful exercise of reading or translation—the identical, word for word rewriting of a text—reveal the Work as something perpetually *other*. Borges, in "Los traductores de las 1001 noches," celebrates the heterogeneous, one could call "unfaithful" translations of the anonymous classic, destined for readers of different epochs, places and cultures, as they concretely demonstrate the infinite richness and indefinable nature of the Work. Bolaño's novel itself is a practice of this very conceit: his 53 narrators offer disparate "translations" of Belano and Lima's lives, whose original, definitive version is unknowable. Not all readings or translations add to a work, however, operating instead to limit its immensity and curtail the scope of its speaking. This was the case of the U.S. reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and it seems that a similar process is already underway with regards to Bolaño and his novel. It remains to be seen if the accompaniment of U.S. Readers and Criticism on this "journey" with *The Savage Detectives* will "be long or short," what spawns it will produce, and the exact terms in which it will be defined. Even while erring on the side of pessimism, as I may have above, we can find consolation in Borges who, in discussing the poor translations and misreadings of *Don Quijote*, professes his faith in the ultimate prevailing of the Work: "la página que tiene vocación de inmortalidad puede atravesar el fuego de las erratas, de las versiones aproximativas, de las distraídas lecturas, de las incomprendiones, sin dejar el alma en la prueba" (204). We may rest assured that likewise *The Savage Detectives* will survive this and other battles.

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