

LATIN AMERICA: INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES



# CIVILISATION AND AUTHENTICITY

The Search for Cultural Uniqueness in the Narrative  
Fiction of Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar



EUGENIA DEMURO

The question “What is Latin America?” has been at the heart of writing from and about Latin America from Columbus’ conquest to present-day discussions and nationalising projects. What this belies is the inherent question “What is Latin America compared to Europe?” This book lays bare the underlying logic of a Latin Americanist discourse through some of the continent’s most influential thinkers, including Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, José Martí, José Enrique Rodó, José Vasconcelos, Fernando Ortiz, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Néstor García Canclini, and Walter Mignolo.

*Civilisation and Authenticity* presents case studies of two of Latin America’s most renowned and representative twentieth-century writers, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier and the Argentine Julio Cortázar and reveals how desire to define Latin America is entwined throughout their groundbreaking experimental novels, focusing on Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) and Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963). New research into the poetics of these authors and jargon-free analyses of their fiction outline how the Latin Americanist discourse persists in both writers’ representations of the Latin American landscape and people as either Europe’s “authentic” and marvelous “Other”, or its “civilised” and modern counterpart.

*Civilisation and Authenticity* presents new research for experts on Carpentier and Cortázar and will be indispensable to students of Latin American literature. Its delineation of the Latin Americanist discourse makes it an ideal reference for anybody studying Latin American cultural studies.

“*Civilisation and Authenticity* makes a worthy effort to summarize and synthesize the long-running internal debates about Latin America’s political and cultural identity. It also offers solid readings of Alejo Carpentier’s and Julio Cortázar’s novels that can serve as useful guides for students and scholars alike and shows its author to be a capable and serious scholar.”

Aníbal González, Professor,  
Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Yale University

“*Civilisation and Authenticity* is an eloquent and well-researched exploration of two of the major Latin American novels of the twentieth century. It synthesizes in an impressive sequence of presentations and analyzes important preceding works, and demonstrates great critical judgment in its assessment of the role played by these novels in expressing the idea of Latin America in the twentieth century.”

Anke Birkenmaier, Assistant Professor,  
Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Indiana University Bloomington

**Eugenia Demuro** was awarded her Ph.D. from the University of Sydney, Australia. Her interdisciplinary approach situates literature within historical, social, political, and cultural contexts of production. Dr. Demuro researches and writes across the areas of sociology, literature, and Latin American studies and translation. At present, she is working to understand the geopolitics of decoloniality and to examine what a decolonial aesthetics may look like. Dr. Demuro is Visiting Fellow in the School of Language Studies at the Australian National University.

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AND AUTHENTICITY



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*For Timothy M. Cahill*





*The Eurocentric perspective of knowledge operates as a mirror that distorts what it reflects...when we look in our Eurocentric mirror, the image that we see is not just composite, but also necessarily partial and distorted. Here the tragedy is that we have all been led, knowingly or not, wanting it or not, to see and accept that image as our own and as belonging to us alone.*

Anibal Quijano (2000, 556)



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## Note on Translations

Unless otherwise specified all translations of primary and secondary Spanish texts are the author's. The original Spanish versions are provided as endnotes.

E.D.





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# Introduction

The twentieth century constitutes the richest period of Latin American literature. It produced Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, María Luisa Bombal, Gabriela Mistral, Juan Carlos Onetti, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Mario Vargas Llosa, José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar, among many other remarkable writers. The problem faced by any discussion of this expansive and diverse century of literary production is, inevitably, how to account for so large a field of vision. In the introduction to *Transatlantic Translations: Dialogues in Latin American Literature* (2006), Julio Ortega proposes to:

examine how the new was perceived in terms of the already conceived, the different constituted by what was already known, and the unnamed seen through what had been already read. That is, to examine the cultural history of representations which, in our reading, are formalized around forms of categorization and validation. (9)

Following Ortega, this book examines how twentieth century narrative fiction assimilated historical expressions of Latin American cultural uniqueness. It argues that twentieth century Latin American literature does this in two key ways: in the quest to define Latin American identity; and as a Modernist<sup>1</sup> renewal of technique and form. That is, literary renewal in the twentieth century was a means of representing Latin America. In this view, the developments of literary discourse and practice in the twentieth century are situated in corresponding social and cultural contexts, and importantly, in the development of a unique, historical Latin American subject and subjectivity.

The discussion here relies upon the elaboration of a broad concept, the 'Latin Americanist discourse,' defined as the sum of essays and creative texts that—responding to the question 'What is Latin America?'—have attempted to define Latin American culture, identity and reality. More importantly, since the inception of Latin America as the 'New World,' what characterises this discourse is the constant referent of Europe, whether to position Latin America as the same or different, authentic or Other. With these parameters in mind, the Latin Americanist discourse provides insight into the contexts of literary production in the twentieth century, and is also a critical conception of

historical problems proposed by definitions of Latin American culture and identity.

This work focuses on two particular authors as exemplary of the function of this discourse: Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980) and Julio Cortázar (1914–1984). These authors' most indicative works, *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*, 1953) and *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963) respectively, explore questions of a unique Latin American subject defined in relation to Western culture, and do so by renewing the modes, language and techniques of literary practices. This study of their fiction is thus an examination of *how* they formulate the relationships between literature, history and reality. To do this, it examines their work in the larger framework of the Latin Americanist discourse, focusing on how historical positions regarding Latin American culture and identity are reproduced in the mid-to-late twentieth century through literary practice and poetics. In this endeavour, this work moves away from the tendency to view mid-to-late twentieth century Latin American literature merely as an instance of 'magic realism,' which limits the critical evaluation of literature to a few aesthetic characteristics.

In Carpentier's and Cortázar's fiction, Latin American identity is neither presented nor produced progressively, rather, it is reproduced according to the historical problematic of a dichotomy between European and Latin American cultures. The problem of how to identify and represent Latin America thus remains the same: the dual structure of Latin American culture and identity. What changes in twentieth century literature is the mode of expression; the contemplation of Latin America's cultural identity produces distinct modes of literary practice. These, however, are themselves lived as a relation to Europe in its literature. What is worth examining, as stated by Ortega, is *how* these new readings of Latin American history, and new literary modes and discourses, are developed in relation to what had already been conceived and known as far back as the fifteenth century.

In its analysis, this book combines three general approaches: the historical development of the Latin Americanist discourse; biographical accounts of Carpentier and Cortázar to situate them historically in relation to the Latin Americanist discourse and to demonstrate how they formulate poetics in relation to it; and exegetical analysis to demonstrate how they implement this in literary practice. The book is organised into three parts. Part I, comprised of the first three chapters, provides the historical, cultural and literary contexts that inform Carpentier and Cortázar's literary production. Parts II and III focus explicitly on the lives, poetics and literary production of Carpentier and Cortázar, respectively. Three important critics underscore the analysis of this book, these are: Roberto González Echevarría, whose work on 'archival fictions' informs the analysis of *Los pasos perdidos* and *Rayuela* as texts that are intricately bound to the foundational myths of the continent; Néstor García

Canclini, whose work on 'aesthetic moments' of Latin Americanism has been instrumental in the analysis of the relationship between art and politics as a historical moment; and finally, Walter Mignolo, whose work on the emergence of Latin America as a result of European expansion, and the interrogation of Western epistemology, has been crucial to enact a critical reading of the responses to the question 'What is Latin America?'. Each of these authors has left their mark on the overall framework of this book, even when this is only as an underlying impulse or implicitly inscribed in the analysis rather than through direct citations. González Echevarría, García Canclini and Mignolo, each contribute a critical paradigm through which the poetics and fiction of Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar can be examined; without consultation of their works, this would certainly have become a different book.

The first chapter provides a historical account of modern Latin America and an analysis of the arguments contained within the Latin Americanist discourse since the moment that the cultures of Europe came in contact with America. This collision of cultures is the pivotal moment replayed repeatedly in the rhetoric of the Latin Americanist discourse. Following from this, key discussions that have interpreted Latin America since its Independence from Iberian colonial powers are examined. The chapter defines the Latin Americanist discourse by providing an overview of its major arguments; including the concepts of 'discovery' and 'invention'; *mestizaje*; transculturation; hybridity; José Enrique Rodó's Ariel; and Roberto Fernández Retamar's Caliban.

The second chapter fixes Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (*Facundo: Civilisation or Barbarism*, 1845) and José Martí's 'Nuestra América' ('Our America,' 1891) as rhetorical poles for the arguments of the Latin Americanist discourse. Sarmiento argues that Latin America be culturally dependent on, and imitative of, European models; in stark contrast, Martí delineates an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric, which privileges autochthonous Latin American elements over European or North American ones. These two positions epitomise the limits of the Latin Americanist discourse, and subsequent debates are played-out between them. The aim of the first two chapters is to delineate how Latin America has been historically conceived and defined in relation to Europe: in the minds of its greatest thinkers and intellectuals, Latin America cannot be considered without either positive or negative comparison to foreign—traditionally European but more recently, North American—models.

Following this, the third chapter examines the development of twentieth century Latin American literature to assess how social, cultural and historical contingencies shaped literary production. Three moments of twentieth century literature—loosely the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s—are discussed in terms of their ruptures from one another in narrative modes, but also in terms of the

continuity of the thematic concerns of the Latin Americanist discourse. Although completely different in their approach to literary practice, the moments of the telluric novel, the New Novel and the subsequent *Boom* coincide in a shared quest to find an appropriate means of representing Latin America. Though the representations vary greatly, and while the conception of literature is in each case particular, the novels of the twentieth century engage the full range of discussions contained within the Latin Americanist discourse. Although this chapter is necessarily schematic (an in-depth account of these literary moments demands a full manuscript in itself) the purpose of this third chapter is to contextualise the emergence of Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar within the literary traditions of the twentieth century.

The remaining chapters examine the poetics and major works of Carpentier and Cortázar, who are the focus of this work. Chapters Four and Six show how these two writers develop their poetics in relation to historical contingencies. Chapter Four discusses Carpentier's theory of *lo real maravilloso americano* (the Marvellous Real); Chapter Six examines Cortázar's writings on the relationship between reality and literature. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate how Carpentier and Cortázar engage history, politics and culture through their poetics and how they conceive of their literary practice in relation to lived reality. The chapters also demonstrate that, for these writers, the literary forms of Europe provide a constant source of polemic and reference.

Carpentier's and Cortázar's lives played out between Europe and Latin America, as they both travelled to and lived in Paris for extended periods of time. Each stated that their views on Latin American culture, and the role they assigned to the Latin American writer, were substantially influenced by their experience of Europe. Europe, they contend, afforded them a vantage from which to critically view Latin American identity. Rogelio Rodríguez Coronel asserts that Latin American identity has been a constant obsession for Latin American studies, and is of no less concern for Latin American writers of the last century. He emphasises that '[t]he writer, as a cultural subject, is author and actor of a culture geographically and historically conditioned...His orientation and fixation on identity are not made from outside of his own social position, [nor from outside] the status and the role that have been assigned to him within society' (9).<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, it is imperative to examine Carpentier's and Cortázar's literary production in light of their biographies.

Chapters Five and Seven provide exegetical analyses of Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* and Cortázar's *Rayuela*, respectively. These chapters discuss the novels' Modernist renewal of literary forms. The analysis focusses on the novels' assesment of Western culture and its relationship to Latin America's modernity. This will demonstrate how Carpentier's and Cortázar's

formulations of Latin American identity engage the Latin Americanist discourse, and how these are put into practice in their writings.

What the novels have in common is that they provide a critical account of the relationship between literature, history and reality. Each is structured through the dichotomy of Latin America and the West—*Los pasos perdidos* speaks of *Over here* and *Over there*, *Rayuela* is structured according to *That Side* (Paris) and *This Side* (Buenos Aires). Duality so penetrates every aspect of these novels' structures that fragmentation and duplicity become predominant thematic and structural concerns. More importantly, however, these polarities represent the constitutive components of Latin America, and are a commentary on Latin America in its relation to Europe. In this way each novel takes up the dominant theme of Latin American literature, and provides an unequivocal response to the quest for identity. Gerald Martin argues that 'there is [a] series of works, of which *The Lost Steps* was the first, and *Hopscotch* the most influential, which either have a European-style narrator or set out purposefully to contrast Europe and Latin America, or the capital and the interior, or the city and the country' (*Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* 67).<sup>3</sup> Martin's assertion could not be more appropriate: *Los pasos perdidos* and *Rayuela* provide a commentary on the binary of European 'civilisation' and Latin American 'authenticity.' *Los pasos perdidos* presents a critical account of capitalist modes of production, the ensuing phenomenon of alienation, and the decadence of Western culture following World War II. *Rayuela* critiques the ideology behind Western rationality, dictated by the binary logic of the dialectic. In both novels departure and dissatisfaction are the driving force of the protagonist, and an accompanying will for restoration is formulated in opposition to universal Western culture. This is passed over in favour of the authenticity found in Latin America: the protagonist of *Los pasos perdidos* travels from North America to the culture of his infancy; in *Rayuela*, Oliveira's search for authenticity returns him to his natal Buenos Aires. The quest for fulfillment universalises Latin America, as does the depicted erosion of Western culture.

In its endeavour to demonstrate how Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar exemplify the Latin American discourse, this work makes an original contribution to the field. No other work has sought to explicitly examine these novels' engagement to the Latin American 'quest for identity,' let alone done so in reference to the key critical discussions of 'discovery' and 'invention'; *mestizaje*; transculturation; hybridity; Ariel and Caliban, civilisation and barbarism, and 'Our America.'

