The Dialectics of Our America

In the absence of a pope, what are we to do about the problem of the canon in rewriting American literary history?

—Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity

In light of developments within the American literary historical community, Werner Sollors's rhetorical question about the American canon provides us with an appropriate frame of reference. Indeed, the new "ideological" school of American literary history led by Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, among others, has in many ways underlined and strengthened the need to study our literary and historical past.¹

Thus, the new American literary historians have directed their attention to new writers, addressed themselves to new problems, and, above all, sharpened their methodological tools. For example, Bercovitch in Reconstructing American Literary History (1986) has argued for what he calls a "dialogic mode of analysis." More precisely, his history of American literature resembles Bakhtin's description of the novelistic form: it is often marked by a clashing plurality of discourses, fragments, and a polyethnic system of American codes in what he sees as our age of "dissensus."² Other Americanists, among them Paul Lauter, Juan Bruce-Novoa, Jane Tompkins, and Houston A. Baker, Jr., have centered their "dialecics of validation" on aspects of American literature such as race, class, gender, and difference that had received little attention; such scholars have given a new impulse to the study of subjects ranging from the reevaluation of what constitutes a "classical" American text to the role of a distinctly slave "vernacular" in American discourse in general and in African American literature in particular.³ The theoretical boundaries within which American literary history and interpretation unfold have been redefined in the theoretical works of Fredric Jameson, Frank Lentricchia, Hayden White, and Edward Said. Each has questioned the premises on which the concepts of American hermeneutics, alterity, history, and historiography rest.⁴

Within the ideological framework of these varied tendencies I would like to add two oppositional voices to our new literary history—namely, the Cuban poets and revolutionaries José Martí and Roberto Fernández Retamar.
What lies behind this chapter is a growing awareness of the extremely narrow confines and conservative practices of literary study as is now performed in the academy, and, with that, a growing conviction about the social and political implications of this exclusionary practice. As a literary theoretician outside the mainstream, educated in a segregated farm society in south Texas, I have been particularly sensitive to the absence of writers from Our America. In my view, the greatest shortcoming of the work being done on the American canon is not its lack of theoretical rigor, but its parochial vision. Literary historians (even the newer ones) and critics working on the reconstruction of American literary history characteristically know little in depth about the history, symbologies, cultures, and discourses of the Americas. One value of focusing on comparative cultural studies is that it permits us to escape from the provincial, limiting tacit assumptions that result from perpetual immersion in studying a single culture or literature.

The Dialectics of Our America proposes a new American literary, cultural, and critical cosmopolitanism that fully questions as much as it acknowledges the Other, thereby serving as a more adequate and chastening form of self-knowledge. This new critical cosmopolitanism neither reduces the Americas to some homogeneous Other of the West, nor does it fashionably celebrate the rich pluralism of the hemisphere. Rather, by mapping out the common situation shared by different cultures, it allows their differences to be measured against each other as well as against the (North) American grain.

I

During the past generation the new cultural history of America has been fractured into various professional shards: social history, ethnic history, women's history, African American history, and Chicano history. No longer is American history conceived exclusively as the story of Anglo-Saxon men from the first settlements in the Chesapeake Bay area in 1607 to the present. Looking at American history "from the bottom up," this revisionist scholarship has shattered the traditional consensus. But there has not been enough major revisionist scholarship. Moreover, a stark fragmentation of American intellectual history has plagued some of our revisionist historians, and the literary history of the Americas must be made whole again. Efforts to achieve this wholeness have been begun in the genealogical texts of Martí and Fernández Retamar who in their oppositional discourses attempted to unify the history of the Americas. By looking at the Americas as a hemisphere and by analyzing the real and rhetorical, often hostile, battles between the United States and what Martí called "Nuestra América"—"Our America"—it is possible to perceive what the literatures of the Americas have in common. After the U.S. codes of fetishization—of transforming the realities of dependency, conquest, and military intervention into rhetoric about freedom, virtue, and an "Alliance for Progress"—have been negated, Martí's "Nuestra América" (1891) and Fernández Retamar's Caliban (1971), "Nuestra América y Occidente" (1976), and "Algunos usos de civilización y barbarie" (1977) are texts on which to base an illuminating indigenous American cultural studies critique.

Let me emphasize my goals in reconstructing pan-American literary history: first, to place the leading oppositional intellectual figures from Our America within a limited genealogy of their discursive and nondiscursive practices; second, to show how responsive to their historical situations of hegemony and hostility they have been.

As Jean Franco explains in An Introduction to Spanish American Literature (1965):

Only Martí significantly enriched and transformed the [Spanish literary tradition] on which he drew. He saw art neither as propaganda tools nor as play but as the expression which was communicable because universal. Yet this genuinely original poet and thinker had no followers and it was to be some time before his own optimistic statement [in "Nuestra América"] that "el libro importado ha sido vencido en América por el hombre natural" ["the imported book has been vanquished in America by natural man"] was truly applicable to the literature of the continent.6

Enrico Mario Santí suggests, moreover, that because Martí never collected his prose works in book form, the "piecemeal, fragmented, and foreign publication of the first edition of Martí's collected works between 1900 and 1933 constitute both a cause and effect of this initial vacuum."7

As the United States underwent the transition from "competi-
tive” capitalism to “monopoly” capitalism in the 1880s, Martí grew more critical about the bourgeois way of life there. In “The Modernity of Martí,” Fernández Retamar argues that Martí “identified and denounced the characteristics of what we now recognize as the beginnings of the last stage of capitalism: the rise of the monopolies ("The monopoly, says Martí, sits like an implacable giant at the door of the poor"), and the fusion of banking capital with industrial in a financial oligarchy ("those iniquitous consortia of capital"). In “Nuestra América” and in his newspaper analyses of the United States, Martí constructed a powerful cultural critique of capitalism and Anglocentrism.

From 1881 until just before his death in 1895 (he died battling the Spanish empire in Cuba), Martí rarely left the United States. As one scholar put it, “In the U.S., Martí became a politician, a chronicler of North American history, and a man of action.” Although as chronicler he wrote on a variety of North American topics (for instance, Grant’s Tomb, Whitman as the great poet of the Americas, Emerson as philosopher) as well as on subjects such as Darwin and Marx, he emerges in “Nuestra América” as a firm anti-imperialist who wrote about the emergent empire: “I know the monster; I have lived in its entrails.”

Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (1837) established the grounds for a popular national American literature: “Each age must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.” Martí’s “Nuestra América” similarly provided a base for a national Latin American, literature capable of incorporating both the Spanish and First American experiences in the New World. In “Nuestra América” and “Madre América,” as elsewhere, his view of the American hemisphere is cast in a Manichaean struggle. He proposed in La Nación:

On the one hand, there is in [the Americas] a nation proclaiming its right by proper investiture, because of geographical morality, to rule the continent, and it announces . . . that everything in North America must be its, and that this imperial right must be acknowledged from the Isthmus all the way south. On the other hand, there are the nations of diverse origins and purposes . . . [Nuestra América].

Any revisionist literary history of the Americas would have to contend with Martí’s conviction of a profound gap between “Our America” and the other America, which is not ours. “Nuestra América” in particular can provide the central oppositional codes on which to base a dialectical view of the American continent and of the Americas’ many literatures.

“Nuestra América” marks the beginning of a new epoch of resistance to empire in the Americas. As a specific intellectual in Foucault’s sense, Martí stands between two ways of thinking: the last representative of a nineteenth-century romantic idealism and the first forerunner of a Latin American socialist ideology of continental solidarity. Cuban Foreign Minister Raúl Roa, speaking to the United Nations in May 1968, emphasized: “At the level of international relations, the fundamental antagonism of our epoch is expressed in the struggle between imperialism and the peoples of the underdeveloped world.” Martí is one of the first cultural critics from Our America bold enough to document to the rest of the hemisphere what he saw as emerging U.S. ideas, languages, and reality of empire. (Parenthetically, the Nicaraguan “modernista” poet Rubén Darío would join Martí in attacking Teddy Roosevelt’s “Big Stick” policy in his 1903 poem “To Roosevelt.”) Martí prophetically stated in “Nuestra América”:

Our America is running another risk that does not come from itself but from the difference in origins, methods, and interests between the two halves of the continent, and the time is near at hand when an enterprising and vigorous people who scorn or ignore Our America will even so approach it and demand a close relationship. And since strong nations, self-made by law and shotgun, love strong nations, and them alone; since the time of madness and ambition—from which North America may be freed by the predominance of the purest elements in its blood, or on which it may be launched by its vindictive and sordid masses, its tradition of expansion, or the ambitions of some powerful leader—is not so near at hand, even to the most timorous eye, that there is no time for the test of discreet and unwavering pride that could confront and dissuade it; since its good name as a republic in the eyes of the world’s perceptive nations puts upon North America a restraint that cannot be taken away by childish provocations or pompous arrogance or parridical discords among Our American nations—the pressing need of Our America is to show itself as it is, one in spirit and intent, swift conqueror of a suffocating past, stained only by the enriching blood drawn from the hands that struggle to clear away ruins, and from the scars left upon us by our masters.
The scorn of our formidable neighbor who does not know us is Our America’s greatest danger. And since the day of the visit is near, it is imperative that our neighbor know us, and soon, so that it will not scorn us.14

Stylistically, the passage is typical of Martí’s rhetorical grace, power, and lexical play: the balanced schemes of repetition, especially anaphora; the willingness to use alliteration to present harsh judgments; the amused, delicate use of understatement (“an enterprising and vigorous people . . . will demand a close relationship”); the tropical cadence of apostrophe; and the active use of a binary methodology. Its content, however, is a striking description of “the development of underdevelopment” in Latin America, for Martí’s primary concern in the passage is the reality of relentless expansion by the North Americans. No Cuban has surpassed Martí in his lucid denunciation of American empire. No writer has been more graceful and clear than Martí in describing the negative way of life in the United States.

By 1882 Martí became convinced that the United States had given up its rhetoric of freedom and dignity. In New York he witnessed the huge influx of European immigrants bringing with them “their wounds [and] their moral ulcers.” Describing the miserable life of the underclass there, he wrote: “He who can observe the deplorable life of today’s wretched workingman and woman in the cold latitudes without feeling his soul wrenched with pity, is not only barely insensitive, but commits a criminal act” (Obras Completas 32:168). He also observed, with pen in hand, the rise of blatant forms of white dominance over nonwhite populations in the urban metropole—blacks, Chinese, and the First Americans (Amerindians) were characteristically discriminated against by a white supremacist ideology.15 So it came as no surprise to Latin American readers of “North American Scenes” when, in 1886, he wrote of the prototypical North American character: “[Achieving a] fortune is the only object of life. . . . Men, despite all appearances, are tied together here only by interests, by the cordial hatreds that exist between those who are bargaining for the same prize. . . . It is urgent to feed the lamp of light and reduce the beast.”16

Thus, to fully understand Martí’s call for Latin American cultural autonomy, nationalism, and self-determination in “Nuestra América,” it is essential to note his emergent sociopolitical radicalization in the United States. At the same time, his antiimperialism stemmed from a close reading of U.S. “manifest destiny” doctrine.17 His allegory of reading the imperial designs of North American foreign policy became a warning to Our America to prepare itself to withstand relentless expansion. From 1881 to 1889, then, he clearly perceived that U.S. foreign policy and industry would need both a cheap source of raw materials and a world market for their surplus goods. Our America, he predicted, was ripe for both: “The descendants of the pilgrim’s father had their celebrations. What a difference though! Now they are no longer humble, nor tread the snow of Cape Cod with workers’ boots. Instead they now lace up their military boots aggressively and they see on one side Canada and on the other Mexico.”18 What Martí dramatizes for us in his voluminous essays, letters, and journalistic pieces (collected in seventeen volumes by Cuban publishers) is an alienated Cuban, exiled in the ghettos of New York, one of the first Latin American intellectuals of his time audacious enough to confront U.S. imperial history, its imperial ethic, and its imperial psychology. Imperialism, he suggests, penetrated the very fabric of North American culture and infected its imagination. The U.S. metropole, once and for all, would now enjoy and exploit a structural advantage over the Latin American “periphery.” He reads the grammar of imperialism and dramatizes how U.S. domination of the weaker economies in Our America (and its political and social superstructure) were to ensure the extraction of economic rewards—what André Gunder Frank calls the “development of underdevelopment.”19

As a handbook describing the codes of imperialism, “Nuestra América” not only analyzes the overdetermined causes of “Yankee” domination, but points out strategies to resist it. He believed that the first step for governing “our republics” is a thorough knowledge of the diverse elements that make up the Americas as a continent, for “the able governor in Our America is not the one who knows how to govern the Germans or the French; he must know the elements that compose his own country; and how to bring them together, using methods and institutions originating within the country. . . .” (p. 86). Second, he contended that Our America must refrain from rewriting its narratives of government according to paradigms not their own—with laws, constitutions, discourses, and systems taken from totally different cultural contexts: “A decree by Hamilton does not halt the plainsman’s horse” (p. 86). Leaders from
Our America would have to account for the popular indigenous elements within each culture and recognize their inherent value. In rejecting the "monumentalist" European university for the American, Martí, like many of today's cultural studies critics, believed that one of the principal sites of contention was to be the university: "The European university must yield to the American university. The history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught letter perfect, even if the Argonauts of Greece [are] never taught. Our own Greece is preferable to the Greece which is not ours" (p. 88). What is at stake in Martí's view of the university are competing political and intellectual visions. What should count as knowledge and critical thought in the education of our hemisphere's future generations? How can we prepare students to enter the multicultural world of the future? In negating European and North American colonial and neocolonial rule (the imposition of European institutional, nondiscursive practices over American), "Nuestra América" also anticipates Caliban's revolutionary overturning of Prospero's disciplinary techniques of mind control, repression, and anxiety in January 1959—namely, in the Cuban Revolution.

For all its rhetorical significance, its expressive emphasis, its tropic melodic variety, and its delicate use of repetition and balance, the real power behind Martí's discourse is not merely in its grammatical play, but in its historical challenge to U.S. domination. Against the Eurocentric reading of American history and the canon ("Our own Greece is preferable to the Greece which is not ours") "Nuestra América," like "The American Scholar," privileges an indigenous American cultural studies practice. For Martí, political discourse and what he called versos sencillos (simple verses) had to be written "en mi propia sangre" ("in my own blood"), not in "tinta de académicos" ("academic ink"). What is significant for our new American literary history, then, is the lessons he teaches. He warns us that two distinct peoples, set poles apart by language and psychology, inhabit the same hemisphere. His America spoke mainly in Spanish, worshiped non-Protestant gods, and struggled against the political and economic realities of U.S. empire.

It would be an understatement to say that Martí has profoundly influenced the course of Cuban-Marxist oppositional thinking in the twentieth century. Although one Marxist-Leninist critic, Juan Marinello, has chastised Martí for being a romantic idealist, most Cuban-Marxists (including Fidel Castro) acknowledge their revolutionary ties to Martí's political, aesthetic, and social philosophy. Others, like Fernández Retamar, have had to insist that they are not rewriting Martí as a Marxist revolutionary, which he was not. In his numerous studies of Martí, Fernández Retamar illuminates the ties between his oppositional criticism of North American culture and the Cuban-Marxist ideology of resisting U.S. empire as a way of life. What is essential in Fernández Retamar's interpretation of Martí's work can be summarized in this way: Martí took the first necessary step toward ending Cuba's peripheral status by advocating the solidarity of all indigenous peoples of Our America. By April 1960, Che Guevara was able to state about Cuba, with biting irony and self-mockery: "Sometimes we even thought it was rather pompous to refer to Cuba as if it were the center of the universe. Nonetheless, it was true or almost true. If someone doubted the revolution's importance he should read the newspaper. . . . Man, we're strong and dangerous. We have poisoned the American environment and threatened the sweet democracy of Trujillo and Somoza. . . . Oh it is so great and comfortable to belong to such a strong world power as dangerous as Cuba." Only after the Cuban Revolution did U.S. "institutional practices" begin to invest aggressively in "Latin American Studies." According to Roberto González Echevarría, "the financing of literary journals had a crucial bearing on the creation [and reception] of the new Latin American literature of the sixties." I would add that it certainly had an ideological bearing on how an "idealistic" literary aesthetic was imported into American universities, for the importing of typically colonial writers such as Jorge Luis Borges rendered Latin American radicalism safe for the so-called Free World.

II

What is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?
—Roberto Fernández Retamar, Caliban

This section, dealing with Foucauldian motifs of power, genealogy, and history, originates in my attempts elsewhere to write a brief history of the profound influence of the new Latin American
narrative on postmodernist, ethnic American literatures. In the process of writing it became clear that the discourses of these new pan-American writers were themselves historically situated acts that can be understood only as events within larger networks of discursive and nondiscursive practices in the American hemisphere at the height of what Ernest Mandel calls "late capitalism." It became apparent, moreover, that there was no way to grasp the past and present social and cultural role of this new narrative except by seeing it as situated within an intense quarrel between North American domination and a new (Cuban) Latin American Marxist resistance to U.S. empire.

In the limited genealogy that follows, Fernández Retamar becomes central to an oppositional American literary history precisely because his work makes clear that Latin American nueva narrativa, literary history, and intellectual power are specifically situated historical practices enacted within a set of hostile relations in the American hemisphere. Focusing on the tensions between "Nuestra América" and "el Occidente," then, permits us to look at American cultures anew. My main concern is with the role of the committed artists and critical intellectuals associated with Fernández Retamar’s literary organization, journal, and cultural center—Casa de las Américas. Fernández Retamar has produced perhaps the most powerful model of oppositional critical practice in Our America since Martí. In large part, his project results from his organic relationship to Castro and Guevara’s practice of a new Latin American Marxism, which, in turn, explains his passionate desire for solidarity and social change in the Americas as a continent.

Fernández Retamar is an oppositional figure who has learned many of the lessons of Martí’s, Guevara’s, and Castro’s anti-imperialist efforts. An erudite critic, he is known for his meticulous efforts to dismantle the impact of Eurocentrism (with its implied theory of world history) on pan-American societies. But, as González Echevarría states, “To read him is to discover not the bilious ideologue that some imagine, but a searching, groping essayist with an academic bent, who is far from being a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist.” My own view is that he is important to the history of modern criticism, to the new American literary history, and to comparative cultural studies precisely because in his numerous books and essays the question of the writer-intellectual in a post-colonial context emerges as the central issue in post-contemporary critical practice in the Americas. His writings are intimately engaged with the problematic of Latin American history—how it has had to serve the economic, political, and cultural "barbarism" of the West. In this regard, he is dialectically overturning Marx and Engels’s use of the term “barbarism” in The Communist Manifesto (1848): "Just as [the bourgeoisie] has made the country dependent on towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois." On the other hand, he is subverting Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s idealist vision of an epic struggle between “civilization” and "barbarism" in Argentina. In his highly influential Facundo Quiroga: Civilization and Barbarism (1845), Sarmiento equated all that was wrong with the marginalized and the periphery—the gauchos and the pampas. Again, I think González Echevarría is correct when he writes that “though there is a progressive loss of specificity with respect to literature [in his essays in Casa de las Américas] one finds a greater ideological and methodological coherence” (p. 74). It is precisely this “ideological” coherence in Fernández Retamar’s work that I would like to examine.

Like Edward Said’s oppositional criticism in Orientalism, Fernández Retamar negates in Caliban (which preceded Said’s work by seven years) what he sees as an insidious “Prosperan” and “Occidental” ruling culture of anxiety and mind control in Our America. Put more forcefully, he deconstructs these hierarchical terms, empties them, and reveals their hegemonic function to oppress those excluded from their domains, or to exclude those who are other. Defined in this light, Fernández Retamar’s deconstruction is the inversion of hierarchies and systems, the overthrow of entrenched authority in the West, and the reversal of the subjugated “concepts” in the hierarchies.

In “Nuestra América y Occidente,” Fernández Retamar suggests that we should recatalog the organizing “Discovery of America” in our historical textbooks in terms of what, in fact, it really was: “El Desastre.” He says:

A lo largo de la historia, hay numerosos casos de encuentro de dos comunidades y sojuzgamiento de una por otro. El hecho ha solido llamarse de muy diversas maneras: a menudo, recibe el nombre de invasión o migración o establecimiento. Pero la llegada de lo paleocentinales a estas tierra, llegada que podría llevar distintos
nombres (por ejemplo, El Desastre), ha sido reiteradamente llamada descubrimiento, “El Descubrimiento.” Tal denominación, por sí sola, implica una completa falsificación, un Cubrimiento de la historia verdadera.

(The encounter of two communities, and the subjection of one by the other, has been known throughout history by many names: invasion, migration, or foundation. But the arrival of the paleo-Western European on these shores, an event that could have been variously designated (e.g., The Disaster), has been repeatedly referred to as a discovery, The Discovery. Such a name, per se, is a complete falsification of history, a covering up of true history.30)

From the beginning of European versions of history in Our America, he continues, “Los hombres, las culturas de estas tierras, pasan así a ser cosificados, dejan de ser sujetos de la historia para ser ‘descubiertos’ por el Hombre, como el paisaje, la flora y la fauna” (“Thus are the people and cultures of these lands reified—ceasing to be subjects of history. Rather, they are “discovered,” like landscape, flora and fauna, by Man” [p. 359]. In other words, he shows us how Western culture depersonalizes the First American as subject, and, in the process, falsifies Our American historical experience. Like E. L. Doctorow’s reading of metahistory in “False Documents” (1983), Fernández Retamar examines how history is explicitly connected with “the power of the regime” and self-interest.31 His criticism recognizes the political materiality of culture. He does not merely turn “Our American culture” into a literary myth, but as a Cuban-Marxist he describes how culture is related to the idea of hegemony.32 For him, “Western culture” is both a literary sign and a social structure and concept that must be negated.

Fernández Retamar’s Cuban experiences of colonialism and dependency account for his negative attitude toward what he sees in Our America as a fairly monolithic “Occidental” culture. As is clear from his many references to Fanon, Césaire, and Lamming in his Casa de las Américas essays, he has been influenced by their “studies of resistance” and their multipie meditations on the problem of critical cosmopolitanism, or, of the possible relationships to be established between an uneven global system and a socialist collective project. In his autobiographical “pamphlet,” Caliban, his description of the colonial domination of Western culture in Our America is scandalous, powerful, and moving:

The white population of the United States (diverse, but of common European origin) exterminated the aboriginal population and thrust the black people aside, thereby affording itself homogeneity in spite of diversity, and offering a coherent model which its Nazi disciples attempted to apply even to other European conglomerates—an unforgivable sin that led some members of the bourgeoisie to stigmatize in Hitler what they applauded as a healthy diversion in Western and Tarzan films. Those movies proposed to the world—and even to those of us who are kin to the communities under attack and who rejoiced in their evocation of their own extermination—the monstrous racial criteria which has accompanied the United States from its beginnings to the genocide in Indochina.33

Given Fernández Retamar’s strong sense of Western culture’s oppression (it is even dramatized for him in Westerns and Tarzan films he saw as a boy), it is not surprising to find him, like Martí, advocating an “alliance” pan-American politics: all Americans, he claimed, including “el indio autoctono” and “el negro indigena importado” were engaged in a hostile struggle between “Nuestra América” and “el Occidente.” Broadly conceived, his discourse is about the role of Third World American intellectuals and writers in a postcolonial world—how in their work in and on culture they choose either to involve themselves in or avoid the political work of social change and cultural critique. As he suggests in Caliban, intellectuals (Ariels) have a choice to make: either they can side with Prospero (the Occidental metropole) and help fortify ruling culture and hegemony or they can side with Caliban, “our symbol,” and help resist, limit, and alter domination in the Americas.34

Since my primary concern is less with Fernández Retamar’s literary theory and more with his intellectual leadership in the Casa de las Américas’ literary organizations and cultural center, his work as editor and publisher is especially relevant, particularly for understanding how the new narratives and poetics produced by some Latin American and ethnic North American writers are inscribed within the discourses and institutions based in Havana.

In literature, film, and politics, Havana has become an alternative capital of the Americas, an alternate possibility of some sense of a new, pan-American postcolonial identity. Each year for the past thirty, writers, professors, and intellectuals from across the Americas are invited to Havana to judge the Casa de las Américas Award,
what Steve Hellman, a recent judge of the prize, called “the Cuban Pulitzer.” Since its inception in 1960, the award has been judged by such brilliant writers as Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Allen Ginsberg, Gabriel García Márquez, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite and has been presented to outstanding writers who include Roque Dalton (El Salvador), Austin Clarke (Barbados), Reina María Rodríguez (Cuba), Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala), and the Chicano novelist Rolando Hinojosa (United States).

Perhaps for our purposes the most significant cultural conversation between Havana and the United States occurred in 1976 when Hinojosa was awarded the prestigious prize for Klail City y sus alrededores [Klail City and Its Environs], a chronicle of U.S. and Mexican Border hostility. Hinojosa’s Chicano novel immediately became an international success. Almost overnight, Hinojosa’s ethnopoetic American subject, his mythical county, Belken, and Klail City in particular, became required reading not only for intellectuals in Our America, but also for leftist intellectuals in Germany (both formerly East and West), Spain, France, Italy, and England.

Klail City y sus alrededores was praised by Carlos Onetti (Uruguay), Domingo Miliani (Venezuela), Lisandro Otero (Cuba), and Lincoln Silva (Paraguay) for its postmodernist dialectical forms and content, its artistic use of the revolutionary avant-garde form—the collage—for its folkloric Texas-Mexican motifs (such as the décima and the corrido), and for its multiplicity of sociopoetic dialogues. No longer could Chicano narrative be seen by U.S. literary critics as an anomalous North American discourse—a product of a marginalized tradition. Instead, through Hinojosa’s novel that narrative had joined the lofty tradition of the nueva narrativa exemplified by the works of García Márquez, Fuentes, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Isabel Allende.

Why is this moment significant in radically altering the course of American literary history? Because of Fernández Retamar’s leadership in helping to include Chicano narratives within the Latin American nueva narrativa in general and the Cuban-Marxist literary canon in particular, American literary history no longer can be written by separating the ethnic groups (even Yankees and WASPS, according to Werner Sollors, are ethnic!) that produced such literatures. The dominant assumption is that North American writers have little in common except their so-called national “ethnic roots.” As Sollors tells us in Beyond Ethnicity: “The published results of this procedure are the readers and compendiums made up of random essays on groups of ethnic writers who have little in common . . . ; meanwhile, obvious and important literary and cultural connections are obfuscated.” I propose, instead, that we take the Casa de las Américas’ cultural conversations between Havana and the United States as a possible model for both a broader, oppositional American literary history and a new comparative cultural studies project. If we are to map out this new American literature, we would start by examining what the new narratives by García Márquez (who helped found Prensa Latina in Havana after the revolution in 1959), Fuentes (who initially supported the Cuban Revolution by completing his novel about the Mexican Revolution, La muerte de Artemio Cruz, at the home of Alejo Carpentier in Havana in May 1960), Julio Cortázar, and Allende have in common with ethnic North American works produced by such U.S. writers as Rolando Hinojosa and Ntozake Shange whose radical ethnopoetics have been dialectically validated by the Casa de las Américas. To be sure, all of these pan-American writers are rewriting American history from a subversive, “Calibanic” typology, in opposition to the U.S. ruling “center.”

It would seem that as Sollors has suggested, if anything, our new American literary history “ought to increase our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different [national] backgrounds, the cultural mergers and secessions that took place in [the] America[s], all of which can be accomplished only if the categorization of writers as members of [national] ethnic groups is understood to be a very partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best” (p. 15). Recast in this way, American literatures can be understood only as part of the larger debates and confrontations between “Our America” and the “other America, which is not ours.” Whether they know it or not, writers, teachers, critics, and literary historians participate in this rhetorical war of positions. At least since 1960, Cuban-Marxist intellectuals have known this to be the case. Fernández Retamar, in particular, has tried to develop a new terminology that goes beyond a North American and Latin American “idealistic” criticism, for Casa de las Américas was born in the very struggle between American imperialism and Latin American Marxism.

To understand how far his editorial leadership in Casa has evolved, let us consider one more dialogue in June 1981 in Havana:
American literatures, might flourish. Her geography is thus always sociopoetic, and in her discourse places act as “ciphers” for alternative visions of social existence in the Americas. Russell A. Berman suggests in a different context: “Geographical designations, even the apparently most objective, are never neutral. Names, distances, and directions not only locate points but establish conceptualizations of power relations. The nomenclature of space functions as political medium.” 42 From this point of view, Shange’s “Bocas: A Daughter’s Geography” allegorizes the persistence of an antithetical geographical space in the New World. Her archaeology of Our America uncovers many layers of New World identity opposed to the Occidental tradition that constantly tries to project its structures outward, creating and re-creating its North-South dichotomy to render the South as “Other” and victim.

Hence, when we investigate the literary history of the Americas and analyze “New World” group formation in transgeographical terms, we will be better served by Martí’s oppositional cultural studies vocabulary in “Nuestra América” and Fernández Retamar’s negative, dialectical, Calibanic typology of the self than by the separatist, formalist baggage contained in idealist readings from both North America and Latin America. Further, reconstructing the history of Casa de las Américas will negate North American parochial versions of literary history, and it will subvert traditional models of contemporary Latin American literary history as well, as is illustrated in the institutional history of nueva narrativa. Traditional histories of the “new writing” in Latin America usually recount the genealogy of fiction from Borges to García Márquez and Cabrera Infante, but fail to adequately explain why those narratives came to dominate. 43 For example, Emir Rodríguez Monegal skilfully shows that, although Latin American poetry (as practiced by Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and César Vallejo) was the leading force during the avant-garde in Latin America, the new narrative produced in the 1940s by Borges and in the early 1950s by Carpentier soon rose to international prominence. According to Rodríguez Monegal, it was the new fiction “that projected Latin American literature onto the global stage.” 44

When a group of European and U.S. publishers awarded the first Formentor Prize ex aequo to Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges in 1961 (Rodríguez Monegal’s symbolic starting date for the rise of the nueva narrativa in Latin America), Our American literature was
finally given its rightful place. Borges’s *Ficciones* (1941) was immediately translated into various languages, and, according to Rodríguez Monegal, “aroused general interest” in the totality of new Latin American fiction that Borges “so brilliantly represented” (p. 686, *Borzoí Anthology* [BAL]). Traditional accounts of the new narrative thus give a prominent place to Borges’s *ficciones*. (As an aside, let me remind readers that John Barth, among many others, has dedicated enthusiastic essays to Borges’s work.)53 Because of Borges, Rodríguez Monegal concludes that “the new Latin American novel was no longer the exclusive provenance of specialists but was recognized and discussed all over the world” (p. 687, BAL).

Rodríguez Monegal’s analysis, however, does not grant Casa de las Américas a proper role in determining the final political shape and influence of the new narrative. His “idealistic” reading of Latin American literary history must be supplemented with a reading in terms of an oppositional, rhetorical, hermeneutic model; in this reading, textual facts, are, in Steven Mailloux’s words, “never prior to or independent of the hermeneutic activity of readers and critics.”46 Against this incomplete view, I submit an alternative reading in terms of a wider historical set of topics, arguments, tropes, and ideologies that determine how discourses are established as meaningful—that is, through socially symbolic, rhetorical exchanges between “Our America” and “the other America, which is not ours.” As Mailloux contends, we “should provide histories of how particular theoretical and critical discourses have evolved” (p. 629).

If anything, this model is part of a Calibanic practice, an intervention in cultural politics, just as the emerging new narratives by Cortázar, García Márquez, Fuentes, and Allende, among others, in Latin America, and by Hinojosa, Shange, and Margaret Randall in the United States are part of a global social and cultural struggle that reached its zenith at the end of the 1950s: the ascendancy of the American typology of Caliban, the negative of the master-slave relationship, over its bourgeois white supremacist counterpart, Prospero. What Castro and Che Guevara initiated in their negation of Prospero (and in the process subverting the U.S. Empire that began asserting its seignorial rights in Our America in 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine, prohibiting “outside” intervention in the “American” hemisphere) was completed at the discursive level by García Márquez and his pan-American heirs. In the words of Robert Coover, the *nueva narrativa* from Latin America “was [thus] for a moment the region’s headiest and most dangerous export.”47

III

The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.

—Gabriel García Márquez, “The Solitude of Latin America”

Of the many nonfiction writings that, in preliminary ways, articulate and decenter the historical and cultural conflicts between Our America and the West, one has been particularly influential; García Márquez’s “The Solitude of Latin America.” His 1982 Nobel Prize address was among the first to begin resisting Reagan’s, Bush’s, and NATO’s cold war mapping of the world. This “cold war” of positions in the Americas is precisely the one that García Márquez chose to attack. He wanted his address “to be a political speech presented as literature.”48 Contesting NATO’s hostile views of socialist Latin America, he asserted:

Latin America neither wants, nor has any reason, to be a pawn without a will of its own; nor is it merely wishful thinking that its quest for independence and originality should become a Western aspiration...

Why is the originality so readily granted us in literature so mistrustfully denied us in our different attempts at social change? Why think that the social justice sought by progressive Europeans for their own countries cannot be a goal for Latin America, with different methods and for dissimilar conditions? No: the unmeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness, and not a conspiracy plotted 3,000 leagues from our homes. But so many European leaders and thinkers have thought so, with the childishness of old-timers who have forgotten the fruitful excesses of their youths as if it were impossible to live at the mercy of the two great masters of the world. This, my friends, is the very scale of our solitude.49

Almost as if to deconstruct his earlier negative dialectical hermeneutic in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1967], where “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second
opportunity on earth,”^50 here he presents a more positive position: his “utopian” side of the hermeneutic dialectic. He tells us that it is not too late to create a “new and leveling utopia of life where no one can decide the form of another person’s death” (p. 17). As any reader of his fiction knows, this utopian view is much more optimistic than any yet depicted in his literature. His Nobel Prize address offers, in fact, a profound affirmation of the essentially humanistic imagination in Latin American socialism: “In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues nor famine nor cataclysm nor even the eternal wars throughout centuries and centuries have managed to reduce the tenacious advantage of life over death” (p. 17).

Although he begins his speech playfully by referring to the magical and exaggerated visions inspired by the “discovery” of the New World (El Dorado, the fountain of eternal youth, the indigenous giant of Patagonia described by a sailor on Magellan’s voyage, who when shown a mirror for the first time “lost his sense, overwhelmed by his fear of his own image),” he ends his address by describing a Frankfurt School, Marxist ideology of hope, a vision, where “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have at last and forever a second opportunity on earth” (p. 17).

By presenting this limited institutional genealogy of American discourse from Martí and Fernández Retamar to García Márquez, Hinojosa, and Shange, we can begin to identify areas of agreement and confluence and lay the groundwork for finding historical, ideological, and cultural simultaneity in the imaginative writing of the Americas.
1 The Dialectics of Our America


2. See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch’s comments on “dissensus” in “America as Canon and Context: Literary History in a Time of Dissensus,” American Literature 58/1 (March 1986): 99–107. See also Bercovitch’s “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” pp. 632–33. Finally, see Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s radical reconceptualization of the novel in The Dialectic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). According to Bakhtin, the novel is a genre, in contradistinction to such fixed genres as epic and lyric, with the ability to speak out in the most diverse and often conflicting voices. Put plainly, the novel, says Bakhtin, is “dialogic,” that is, an interaction of utterances, a “polyphonic” multiplicity of voices and meanings.


particular force to the historical experience of two nations—South Africa and the United States. As generally understood, white supremacy refers to the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over ‘nonwhite’ populations. In other words, it involves making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry. In its fully developed form, white supremacy means ‘color bars,’ ‘racial segregation,’ and the restriction of meaningful citizenship rights to a privileged group characterized by its light pigmentation’ (p. ix).


17. Carl N. Degler notes in Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America (New York: Harper & Row, 1984; 3rd ed.) that “historians usually credit John L. O’Sullivan, spread-eagle nationalist editor of the Jacksonian Democratic organ United States and Democratic Review, for originating the phrase. In an article in 1845, justifying America’s claims to the Oregon territory, O’Sullivan asserted that the American claim ‘is by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the Continent which Providence has given for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us’” (p. 118, n. 4).


20. In “Mexico and the United States,” first published in the New Yorker, September 17, 1979, pp. 136–53, Octavio Paz localizes and supplements Martí’s thesis: “The opposition between Mexico and the United States belongs to the North-South duality as much from the geographical as the symbolic point of view. It is an ancient opposition which was already unfolding in pre-Columbian America, so that it antedates the very existence of the United States and Mexico. The northern part of the continent was settled by nomadic, warrior nations; MesoAmerica, on the other hand, was the home of an agricultural civilization, with complex social and political institutions, dominated by warlike theocracies that invented refined and cruel rituals, great art, and vast cosmogonies inspired by a very original vision of time. The great opposition of pre-Columbian America ... was between different ways of life: nomads and settled peoples, hunters and farmers. This division greatly influenced the later developments of the United States and Mexico. The policies of the English and the Spanish toward the Indians were in large part determined by this division; it was not insignificant that the former established themselves in the territory of the nomads and the latter in that of the settled peoples” (p. 138). More recently, Carlos Fuentes, at a conference at Michigan State University entitled “The Politics of Experience” (October 1985), said this about the essential North-South opposition: “There is a character in One Hundred Years of Solitude who decides that from now on it will always be Monday, and one has the impression in the relations between Latin America and the United States that it is always Monday, that nothing happens because the actual difference is never understood. But if there is a difference, it is the difference as regards the consideration of the past and memory. There is a tendency in this country to look too much towards the future and to forget the past” Centennial Review 30 [Spring 1986]: 133).

21. Juan Marinello pointed out that José Martí did not think in “materialist” terms. See his Once ensayos martianos (Havana: Comisión Nacional Cubana de la unesco, n.d.): 193. But as Fidel Castro justly claimed, Martí was his mentor. A typical statement of Castro’s debt to Martí is the following: “I carry in my heart the teachings of the Maestro. Martí is the instigator of the 26th of July Movement,” quoted in Ruiz, Cuba: The Making of a Revolution, p. 58.


25. See Ernest Mandel’s Late Capitalism (London: NLB, 1975). According to Mandel, “this new period [1940 to 1965] was characterized, among other things, by the fact that alongside machine-made industrial consumer goods (as from the early 19th century) and machine-made machines (as from the mid-19th century), we now find machine produced raw materials and foodstuffs. Late capitalism, far from representing a post-industrial society, thus appears as the period in which all branches of the economy are further industrialized for the first time; to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation (with the exception of pure repair services) and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure” (pp. 190–91). Relevant here to my study are Jean François Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and
Fredric Jameson’s “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53–93.


28. See Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1979). Sarmiento’s hegemonic vision, to be sure, was very powerful among the ruling classes in Latin America; and echoes of Facundo can be found in José Enrique Rodó’s Ariel (1900), another target of Fernández Retamar in *Caliban*. Rodó’s Ariel was one of the first Latin American appropriations of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Rodó glorifies Prospero, whose advice to Latin American intellectuals is to preserve the aristocratic qualities of the mind; admire the greatness of the United States; and preserve the spiritualism of Ariel.


31. See E. L. Doctorow’s essay “False Documents” in *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard trenner (Princeton, N.J.: Ontario Review Press, 1983): 16–27. In this essay, Doctorow, like Roland Barthes and Hayden White, García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, Rolandinojo and Nitozake Shange, challenges the distinction, basic to all historicism in all its forms, between “historical” and “fictional” discourse, between what he sees as the “power of the regime” (history) and “the power of freedom” (fiction/narrative). Doctorow’s principal aim here is to attack the vaunted objectivity of Western historiography. And this is precisely what he does: he exposes the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation with which it has been associated. Although Doctorow has not been “canonized” by Fernández Retamar and the Cuban-Marxist school of the nueva narrativa, I believe that his works (from *Welcome to Hard Times* [1960] to *Billy Bathgate* [1989]), which are essentially Nietzschean in their semiological method, can be seen as part of the generalized negation by the American *nueva narrativa* that seeks to break down the distinction between the novel and history as institutions. See, for example, Jason Weiss’s “An Interview with Carlos Fuentes,” *Kenyon Review* 5/4 (1983): 105–18. Fuentes remarks that “after all, history is only what we remember about history. What is fact in history? The novel asks this question” (p. 106).


34. Ibid., 24. As Fernández Retamar tells us, “Our Symbol then is not Ariel, as Rodró thought, but rather Caliban. . . . I know no other metaphor more expressive of our cultural situations, of our reality.”


36. Only two years after Rolando Hinojosa’s new narrative *Klaí City y sus alrededores* (Havana: *Casa de las Américas*, 1976) was published, Hinojosa’s text from south Texas found its way into the Eastern bloc, via the German Democratic Republic in a German version entitled *Klaí City und Umgebung*, trans. and epilogue by Yolanda Julia Broyles (East Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1980). In recognition of the Chicanos novel’s merits, the Federal Republic of Germany’s premier “canonical” publisher, Suhrkamp Verlag, adopted the East German edition for publication in the West as *Klaí City und Umgebung* (Frankfurt, 1981).


38. See my comments on Doctorow’s “False Documents” in n. 31 above.


44. See *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature: The Twentieth Century from Borges and Paz to Guimarães Rosa and Donoso*, ed. Emir Rodríguez Monegal (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), esp. 687–89. Also relevant here are two politically distinct views of the boom: Monegal’s *El boom de la novela latinoamericana* (Caracas: Editorial Tiempo Nuevo, 1972) and José


3. According to Raymond Williams, “García Márquez’s reading of Kafka during the 1940s allowed the discovery that literature . . . can not only present moral problems in social contexts, but also place into question the matter of reality itself.” See Williams, Gabriel García Márquez (Boston: Twayne, 1984): 14. For García Márquez’s evaluation of Jorge Luis Borges, the following comments by the author are telling: “I carry [Borges’s Collected Works] in my suitcase; I am going to read them every day, and he is a writer I detest. . . . But, on the other hand, I am fascinated by the violin he uses to express things. . . . I think that Borges’s writings are a literature of evasion. Something strange happens to me with Borges: he is one of the authors I read most and have read most and perhaps the one I like least. I read Borges because of his extraordinary capacity for verbal artifice. I mean he teaches you how to tune up your instrument for saying things.” See La novela en América Latina: Diálogo (1976), pp. 36, 40.


7. See, for example, The Fragrance of Guava: Plinio A. Mendoza in Conversation with Gabriel García Márquez, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1983). In a section devoted to a discussion of his politics and his political education in Colombia’s secondary schools, García Márquez tells us, “The algebra teacher would give us classes on historical materialism during break, the chemistry teacher would lend us books by Lenin and the history teacher would tell us about the class struggle. When I left that icy prison [in Zipaquira] I’d no idea where north and south were but I did have two very strong convictions. One was that good novels must be a poetic transposition of reality, and the other was that mankind’s immediate future lay in socialism” (p. 96).

8. For a good overview of dependency theory, see André Gunder

---

2 “Squeezed by the Banana Company”

1. For García Márquez’s influence on contemporary African American writers, see Vera M. Kutzinski’s “The Logic of Wings: Gabriel García Márquez and Afro-American Literature,” Latin American Literary Review 13/15 (January–June 1985): 133–46. García Márquez’s influence on Chicano and Chicana writers has been much commented on. A representative Chicano position is the following by Raul A. Paredes, who suggests that contemporary Chicano writers “often rejected the Anglo-American literary

---


45. For an analysis of Borges’s influence on North American metafictionalists, see Tony Tanner’s City of Words: American Fiction, 1950–1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). According to Tanner, “a part of the appeal that Borges has for American writers is his sense that ‘reality’ is an infinitely plural affair, that there are many different worlds and that the intersection points might not be so fixed as some people think, that the established ways in which we classify and order reality are as much ‘fictions’ as his stories” (p. 42). Also see John Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Atlantic Monthly 222 (August 1967): 29–34. For an alternative analysis of Borges's impact on postmodernism in general, see Jean Franco’s “The Utopia of a Tired Man: Jorge Luis Borges,” Social Text 4 (Fall 1981): 52–78. According to Franco, “the graph of Borges’s reputation” began to rise rapidly after 1961, “precisely the time when Gerard Genette, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, the Tel Quel group, and others had begun to challenge the procedures of discourse and the assumption on which traditional narrative, history, metaphysics, and science based their authority. . . . Everyone surely wanted to join [Borges’s] revolution which involved no bloodshed” (p. 52).


