

# **The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolaño and After**

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## **General Introduction**

This book The contemporary Spanish-American novel is much talked about, but all too little seriously understood. This book seeks to remedy this situation by providing an in-depth guide to recent outstanding fiction from the Spanish-speaking Western Hemisphere. It is easy or even axiomatic to think that the best and fairest descriptions of novels might be nearly as long as the massive novels of the Latin American Boom of the 1960s. But the struggle with the burden of the past, and the imprecise and predictably partial nature of contemporary novelists' present acceptance, should not overshadow the inherent and lasting value of the novels and novelists included in *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolaño and After*. At the eighth Hay Festival held in Cartagena, Colombia that ended on January 27, 2013, Mario Vargas Llosa commented that 50 years ago the Boom (of which he is the only active member left) and its writers opened a door to sophistication and cosmopolitanism that has not been closed. Three younger authors (Valeria Luiselli, Tryno Maldonado, and Carolina Sanín) little known outside of their countries, said that today we witness a "more interesting and sane" dispersion of voices, that the literature published by small Latin American houses has the virtue of breaking "the star system," and that "the supposed bridge that was Spain does not have that role anymore and it is the small publishers that connect Latin American writers and their readers."

In fact, Vargas Llosa and the younger authors who spoke with him in Cartagena share different types of idealism, and the circumstance that their own experimentation works within the larger parameters and palimpsests of Western literary modernism. Other facts are that the door was kept closed for some authors of the subsequent decades, there is a new "star system" for contemporary authors, the Spanish bridge has, as it were, been simply refitted or brought up to code, and the expectedly smaller Spanish publishers devoted to either the recovery, revelation, or direct publication of Spanish-American authors are still considered prestigious. If Álvaro Enríque, one of the novelists we include, is correct in stating in Cartagena that there are still authors who want to be published by Alfaguara or Anagrama, both prestigious Spanish publishers with Latin American branches that respond to marketing rules at Spanish headquarters, Enríque is more correct in asserting that Latin American novels have become shorter, if one were to judge by most of the novelistic production included here. So the

differences between before and after are not straightforward. Consequently, a major goal of this book is to introduce and correlate the new “new” novelists to a readership that may get to know them in languages other than Spanish, in different cultural contexts, and certainly out of their original time frame.

Our effort responds to what is known about them in Spanish, and to a degree in English, providing scholarly and concise overviews engendered by fine tuning our choices and considerations with our publisher, and the anonymous readers before asking the contributors to work on the novelists we gather. This is the first comprehensive book devoted to the continent’s present novelistic production, in English or Spanish, and introduces English-language audiences to the richness and complexities of Spanish-American novels by authors born between 1949 and the early 1970s, and to novels published mainly between 1996 and 2012. Besides this criterion, which does not define generations or movements by birthdate, other criteria employed are: 1) the authors’ reception in their native country, Spanish America, and Spain; 2) existing and ongoing translation into English by the authors chosen; 3) critical reception as revealed by the presence of their work in university courses worldwide; and not unimportantly 4) evident literary authority of the fiction published to date.

Factoring in their degree of publication outside of Latin America, some of the new novelists are more visible than others. Some whose novels are translated have not maintained their prestige beyond the Western Hemisphere. Others who are prominent in the continent have had a poor reception in other languages, yet some Spanish-language publishers still put out their books. Still, we bet on the posterity or establishment of these novelists, and do not aim for recovery or justify “promise” based on a single novel of great value, entry into foreign bestsellerdom, or a teaser for better things to come. These additional contexts can help explain the division between larger and shorter essays, and striking a balance in our selections. Readers familiar with these novelists or with the younger ones who do not necessarily follow in their footsteps now have an authoritative and all-inclusive context for a combative novelistic tradition that is transforming contemporary world fiction. Given Spanish America’s diversity, considering issues like exile or migration (Goldberg, Pohl), and gender representation from the sixties on (Febres), this volume covers all demographic areas, including some novelists who emigrated very early in their lives to the U.S. and write originally in English. There are many older Latino novelists who still enjoy recognition, but in this century there are important differences: the younger ones are being translated quickly into Spanish, particularly due to the borderless location of culture and greater diversity they inhabit, as with the Dominican Junot Díaz.

We do think it is relevant to include Latino authors who are not from older, dominant U.S. groupings (e.g. postwar Puerto Ricans or Chicanos). Recent authors such as Díaz have expanded not only the definition of what U.S. Latino writing is but operate in very different

linguistic matrices than earlier texts, for instance being translated into Spanish and gaining wide traction in the Spanish-speaking world. Until very recently the trend was, instead, to translate Spanish-American novelists into English. Now, with the ones we include, not only is the corpus of the “Spanish-American” novel rightly expanding, but also there is a new concept of what is and should be Spanish American that is not dependent on previous identity politics. After all, the current U.S. canon of Spanish-American novelists hardly does justice to the diversity and richness of the continent’s recent fiction, even when a few U.S. editors publish some of their novels in the original Spanish.

We include original essays that provide an overview of the authors’ development. The essays are informative and strike a balance among description, updated critical information (local/national and foreign), and conceptual apprehensions; without depending on a particular theory or theme, and avoiding the limitations of encyclopedia entries or biographical dictionaries. This latter information is now readily available in writers’ blogs and other internet sources, and our contributors are aware that when one buys a novel one is also buying the history of that novel, not all of which may be of interest. Given Spanish America’s diversity and again considering issues like exile, migration, and gender representation, we divide our volume according to standard demographic areas: Mexico, Central America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (including Venezuela), the greater Andean region (Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay), and U.S. Latino authors.

Although there are no common traits applicable to all novelists, especially in a grouping that could be larger and is certainly dynamic enough to change, its few critics, foremost among them the Spaniards Ignacio Echevarría and Eduardo Becerra, have culled some commonalities. Keeping in mind that the author cohort included has an uneasy relation with hierarchies; those qualities can be subsumed as perhaps the most important rewriting of the codes of Spanish-American literary production since the avant-garde from the 1920s and 1930s, which in turn had its precursors in the abstract turn in art from a century ago. Among the changes, perhaps the most pertinent is the search for new masters from abroad, who tend to be new to Latin America although of earlier generations (Roth, Carver, and Sebald, not Faulkner, for example) or younger or more “hip” authors of the English-language tradition (Auster, Foster Wallace, Tóibín) or earlier Latin American avant-gardists, in addition to the Spaniard Enrique Vila-Matas and the Mexican Sergio Pitol, both of whom privilege self-referential essayistic modes for their novels. Rather than a totalizing rejection of previous novelistic characteristics, the preceding can be conceived as a renewal of depleted themes, and not as exclusive or permanent preferences.

Before this book

As readers of *The Contemporary Spanish-American American Novel* may know, Isabel Allende is one of the most popular Latin American writers of the last century. Prolific, she publishes simultaneously in Spanish and English the type of novels international readers tend to associate with the continent. Her best-selling *The House of the Spirits* is now 30 years old, and the novelist, now over 70, is at the height of her magical realist powers. At about the time that novel was published in Spanish (the English version is from 1985, the film from 1993), on February 16, 1982 *The New York Times* published Edwin McDowell's "U.S. is Discovering Latin America's Literature." Since many of the notions introduced by McDowell are still present in *The New York Times'* important and ongoing construction or (re)discovery of a novelistic world canon in languages other than English, the article is disheartening.

McDowell's view is emblematic of the wonderment with which Latin American literature is still perceived, and of the uninspired repetition of some clichés about the content and form of the continent's novels. He provides the usual statistics still found in comparable reports, and although he rightly includes Brazilian masters, many now forgotten, McDowell underestimates and ignores numerous Spanish-American novelists who even then were distancing themselves from the Boom of the 1960s and 1970s that did so much to make Hispanic fiction part of world literature, with a boomerang effect. McDowell incorrectly states that "The problems of suburbia are about as remote as anything could be from the themes developed by Latin American writers in recent and forthcoming books, most of which invoke illusion, metaphor, fantasy and mysticism."

Such views—written for U.S. lay readers for whom the Boom was in full flower even when it was inactive in Latin America as a cultural production—are representative of reception norms for Latin American narrative since the 1960s. In that decade, the distinguished British translator J. M. Cohen published an anthology that became an early reference for English-only audiences. For him "Around the year 1940, literature in Latin America achieved independence and maturity" (11), adding: "Lacking self-assurance and an interested public, their novelists and poets either pursued a course of restless experiment, or explained themselves and their situation in excessive detail" (11). He also notices a condition that, despite new media, many small publishers or nationally published novelists could confirm today: "Owing to difficulties of communication, custom barriers, and the lack of an international book trade, nothing is harder than for the Mexican writer to discover what is being written in Buenos Aires, Santiago or Rio de Janeiro, and vice versa" (12). Cohen, whose introduction is dated "December 1964" (by 1963 Vargas Llosa had published *The Time of the Hero* to great, lasting acclaim) excludes Jorge Amado from the older writers and Vargas Llosa from the younger ones "because, being principally novelists, they have written nothing suitable in length and quality [sic]" (14). It is fair to ask—even in hindsight, keeping in mind that older novelists frequently speak to new generations with greater brilliance or propinquity, and putting aside that to some critics and

readers writers do not become “writers” until they have published novels—if Cohen would have excluded Borges if his anthology had concentrated on the novel instead of on the short story and poetry.

Here we see novelists being defined by genre, not, as post-Boom novelists often were, by generation. It is interesting that the rhetorical self-definition of current novelists is so generational when that of the Boom, with some exceptions, was not. The Boom was less of a group because, despite their sympathies and associations, detailed in José Donoso’s 1972 (rev. in 1983) *Historia personal del boom* (*The Boom in Spanish American Literature: a Personal History*, 1977), and in various memoirs by Spanish publishers and agents, interviews or press reports by some protagonists who did not want to be perceived as a generation. A manifesto would have put them in an aesthetic straitjacket, but there was one exception: Carlos Fuentes’ *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (1969, *The New Spanish- American Novel*), which extended his own implicit poetics to other Boom novels.

The non-movement’s writers also received an unexpected boost from the uneven yet informative *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (1967) by Luis Harss, with Barbara Dohmann. Those conversations, which include interpretative commentary and was the first to perceive the Boom novelists (without using the term) as a group but not a canon, were published in Spanish a year later, with the triumphant title *Los nuestros* (*Ours*)—it was finally published in Spain in 2012. The irony that this survey was published in English first should not be lost on readers, especially when U.S. publishing still contributes to defining what a Latin American writer is or should be (De Castro). Throughout the 1980s academic critics were also recycling similarly trite topics for interpretation, interpretation, even when they may have had the advantage of knowing the work of avant-garde novelists of the 1920s and 1930s who rejected the social realism that ruled in Latin American aesthetics during those decades. Those novelists wrote about cities (suburbia was then more of a U.S. development) invoking totally different types or uses for illusion, metaphor, fantasy, and mysticism.

By the 1980s, testimonial literature patterned on that of the Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú, whether as novelization of violence based on ideological struggles, or easily morphed into eyewitness narratives of human concern that had little to do with verifiable political agency, was coming to an end. Despite the unease among self-anointed progressive critics, novelists started to write fiction that was not exclusively dependent they could stand up without time-locking apprehensions, and the practitioners included Central and South Americans who were somehow expected to be committed to myriad political causes. Around 1982 the oldest of *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel* authors were in their early thirties, the youngest were not ten. McDowell mentions plans to publish novels by Donoso, several books by Julio Cortázar, and that Vargas Llosa’s *Aunt Julia* and the

Scriptwriter, about to be published, was “a story about the narrator’s scandalous relationship with his aunt and with his fellow scriptwriter.”

McDowell naturally could not estimate how the work of those Boom writers would exert varying kinds of influence on the future generations of novelists, or how the older novelists have not been very forthcoming in supporting the younger ones, an exception being Vargas Llosa, so recognized by new novelists and critics in Vargas Llosa. *De cuyo Nobel quiero acordarme* (2012, Vargas Llosa. *Whose Nobel I Want to Remember*). McDowell does mention that Jaime Manrique, included in this volume, has a contract for a novel (1983’s Colombian Gold), and that, according to translator and agent Thomas Colchie, “In contrast to only a few years ago, most comparative literature programs today include selections or books by Latin American writers.” McDowell’s article, despite its good intentions, is ultimately indicative of the disconnection between foreign and local views of Spanish-American narrative, a condition this volume endeavors to correct with the advantage of hindsight but without relying on foresight. About ten years ago, in Madrid’s *El País* newspaper, the youngish (he was 45 in 2012) Colombian author Efraim Medina Reyes impudently and rudely referred to the now 84-year-old Gabriel García Márquez as “García Marketing.”

Roberto Bolaño, the late Chilean master to whom any evaluation of contemporary Spanish-American novels must return, was no less kind with Allende or most of the Boom authors (see the posthumous nonfiction of *Between Parentheses*). He called them “grandpas,” and referred to contemporary magical realism imitators as “the retarded children of García Márquez.” The prolific Argentine César Aira, a less-heralded master for many novelists born in the 1960s and 1970s, expressed his contempt for generational groupings in a 2002 article on “The books of the Past” for Barcelona’s *Guaragua*: “I lost my taste for reading my contemporaries many years ago. It is an insurmountable indifference, a mix of distrust and disinterest that paralyzes me before novelties.” (59). Such comments and others by the Mexican Ignacio Padilla, are more a trademark and less of youthful bravado, given the age differences among Aira, Bolaño, Mendoza, and Padilla.

These views can be put into greater perspective by consulting the still under-examined yet already numerous nonfiction published by these and other novelists (Corral 2012), a template of which may be Aira’s quirky and arbitrary views in his extensive *Diccionario de autores latinoamericanos* (2001, *Dictionary of Latin American Authors*). More importantly, even before stereotypical magical realism had been reified among U.S. critics, the notions espoused by the younger novelists, Cohen, and McDowell had been explicitly contradicted by Vargas Llosa in a classic article called “Primitives “Primitives and Creators” published by *The Times Literary Supplement* in November 1968. If at one point many novelists born around 1968 seemed “typical,” such dating, while signaling a parting of the waters, omitted slightly older authors born in the 1950s who were foundational or representational in many respects, among

them Bolaño, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Héctor Abad Faciolince. There were naturally others born immediately before them (Aira, Diego Cornejo, Diamela Eltit, and Manrique, all born in 1949), and a few in the 1970s, all of whom are also defining what the continent's contemporary novel is becoming. In these unavoidable intersections gender, borders, and other analogous notions are part of the larger novelistic reality with which we deal, and any "representational" purpose flouts literary history to allow readers to discover even more novelists who should or could be in our book.

Authors like Medina Reyes are still to find their niche in the story of the Spanish-American novel. Other than Bolaño's, a major impetus, their reputations as builders of new trends are more familiar than their fiction. In interviews published in Spain and Argentina, Medina Reyes and others seem to be looking for a bad master or a bad influence, and their outrageousness is better known than their novels. Lest one think that that kind of sarcasm (and frequent misogyny) is the privilege or monopoly of whippersnapper novelists, consider the two following press reports. In 2004 the late Mexican master Fuentes—the only living major Boom writers are Vargas Llosa and García Márquez—was asked by the Chilean press about the continent's new narrative. Fuentes curtly said that Juan Villoro, a serious and well-recognized author was "a Mexican writer," adding: "I don't know Bolaño and I have never read anything by him." By the time of his death Fuentes had acknowledged Villoro's existence, and was even stating he would read Bolaño. The earlier assertion of incuriosity was odd for a novelist like Fuentes, famous for being up-to-date with recent trends on a cosmopolitan basis. Yet it is the same Fuentes who said in a different 2004 interview: "I have been a companion and friend of the generation that followed me, made up of people who are 50, just as I am a friend of the generation that is between 30 and 40, the famous Crack: Volpi, Padilla, Palou, and Rivera Garza's are my friends; so they keep me young."

#### McOndites and Crackites

Those two stories merely confirm that in literature, as in other humanistic endeavors, generational struggles and differences are common. But how does one negotiate aesthetically with the misbehaving recent generations? There are very few gestures by new writers that are as hostile or prone to ostracism as self-definition, trying to prove you are new, rebellious or erudite, giving yourself a place in history, or leaving a generational testament. In 2003 a dozen younger Spanish-American writers did all that at a conference in Seville, sponsored by the Spanish publisher Seix Barral, which initially published most if not all of the Boom writers. The young ones were in Seville mainly to "translate" the generation that immediately preceded them, and to speak about how their narrative had to negotiate the influence left by the frequently masterly narrative produced by the Boom novelists.

The proceedings of that gathering were published as *Palabra de América* (2004, *America's Word*). The intricacies of the Spain/Spanish America literary relations at the time of the Boom are sorted out in the reprints of original reviews in Spanish newspapers and journals gathered in the exhaustive volume edited by Marco and Gracia, which includes critical overviews, while Burgos has collected revealing statements and poetics of the immediately preceding generation, sometimes mistakenly related to the "postboom." The authors invited to Seville were Bolaño, Jorge Franco, Rodrigo Fresán, Santiago Gamboa, Gonzalo Garcés, Fernando Iwasaki, Mario Mendoza, Padilla, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Cristina Rivera Garza (the only woman so "honored"), Iván Thays, and Jorge Volpi, most of whose novels are discussed in this volume. It is a safe bet that of those twelve disciples only Bolaño's name rings a bell for general readers outside of the Hispanic world, and in *Between Parentheses* Bolaño goes out of his way to herald the work of some of them, sometimes exaggeratedly or contradictorily, or with pithy comments. With the exception of Bolaño and Garcés, all the Seville participants were born in the 1960s and are still relatively young in terms of promise.

Other than their talent, many share having lived in Spain, where some still reside, or lead nomadic lives, a frequent theme in their narrative. If the anointed in Seville represent "America's Word," there are logistical and conceptual problems with that representation, because other novelists, some of whom write successful detective and crime fiction (let us remember Borges and others) and even sentimental romances, also represent that "word," including a Chilean partially raised in the U.S. like Alberto Fuguet and the Latino novelists we have chosen. Any sensible and fact-based assessment of contemporary Spanish-American narrative and its history so far safely allows adding a good number of "new" authors, not all born after 1968. Among them are the Mexican of long residence in Peru, Mario Bellatin, as well as Gamboa, and to a different degree the Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres, the Dominican Pedro Antonio Valdez, and from those born in the 1970s, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Alejandro Zambra, Patricio Pron, Guadalupe Nettel, and Pola Oloixarac.

There are many others, some included here, affected by what could be called the curse of local publishing; that is, having one's novel appear in small national presses of little or no circulation and distribution: this is true, for instance, of some of the Central American writers we have included. The novelists born in the 1970s habitually share having started writing in their countries, and staying in them for some time. They are also generally identified by not having sought publishers in Spain (who came to them only after their novels became a critical or public success in their own countries), a condition that initially did not define, for example, the Peruvian Thays in the *Palabra de América* group. In her introduction to the paperback edition of *The Savage Detectives*, her translation of Bolaño's masterpiece, Natasha Wimmer, who is gaining prominence as a U.S. reviewer of Spanish-American literature, provides a trenchant if perhaps tendentious critique of the relations among the new novelists: Some young



writers of the 1990s, such as the Mexicans Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla, set their novels in Europe or in imaginary European-seeming countries.

Others, like the Chilean Alberto Fuguet, borrowed heavily from North American writers such as Bret Easton Ellis and focused on upper-middle-class Latin Americans lost in the shallows of North American pop culture. In general, these were programmatic rebellions, and it showed. They lacked the new life, the freedom of imagination, and needed to produce work that was urgent and active, rather than reactive. (x–xi). Amid all the generational posturing, the reader without a stake in these quarrels will want to try to find what is worth reading. We do not assume readers' familiarity with these novelists and novels, and leave the choice of specific works of interpretation about them to our critics.

With the exception of Bolaño, Aira, and Volpi, the reception of this new narrative is understandably dispersed in reviews, interviews, general journalistic notes, surveys (Ruffinelli), a few academic journals with limited influence, and collections that provide understandably incomplete views of these novels or novelists (Balanzó, Becerra, ed., Bolognese, Esteban, Fornet, Montoya, Noguero, Ramos Izquierdo and Barataud). Informative, these studies do not always curb their enthusiasm or avoid becoming endogamic or a catalog of curiosities (see Raphael). The premature reception of some novelists and their works has no set aesthetic permanence or market rules, even if these times are more attuned to their values and meaning of those novels. In that context, it is unwise to underestimate the influence of Spanish and Spanish-American newspapers, literary supplements, and journals in the reception and initial introductions (Becerra 1996, Fuente) to these authors.

At the forefront of these efforts is *Babelia*, the weekly cultural supplement of the influential Spanish newspaper *El País*, which not coincidentally, is the property of the conglomerate that also owns Alfaguara publishers (Barrera Enderle). *Babelia's* articles, notes and book reviews, sometimes written by Latin Americans, are not necessarily objective, truly informative, unbiased toward Spanish editions of Latin American prose, or ideologically impartial, and frequently seem to be discovering gun powder to Latin American readers and critics. Not all countries are selected, and the issues *Babelia* devotes to smaller ones like Ecuador, and the absence of countries like Paraguay, Uruguay and others, have occasioned questions about the consultants, invited editors, and contributors, who tend to be selected from already existing elites. Something similar happens with *ADN Cultura*, the cultural supplement of Buenos Aires's *La Nación*. Nevertheless, these supplements' issues on national literatures, despite their introductory level, at least keep novelists and their novels on the radar, at times with some inspired interpretations. *Letras Libres*, the influential Mexican cultural journal that also has a Spanish branch, offers generally scathing reviews and notes on contemporary fiction, most of them on target when it comes to Mexico.

Related to the press, the loosely defined Boom, now half a century old, had a very positive effect on the diffusion of Latin American literature and its present international influence, but it is still hard to fathom its real effect on the contemporary novel. As Nicholas Birns rightly asserts in his essay on Fuguet, "Despite their different subject matters and approaches, there is a fundamental continuity of values between the Boom writers and the McOndo writers," and it may be that both generations did not present themselves as guardians of a lost art. Immediately after the purported end of the Boom, which many critics and authors see as a Spanish commercial enterprise, the continent's novel was vaguely described as the "Post-boom," a period in which the "new historical novel" abounded, although there were other narrative expressions that combined high and low cultures.

Those hybrids were engendered by postmodernism, an umbrella term that caused publishers to generally ignore great and valid exceptions to that literary trend (Burgos). While it is possible to force comparisons among postmodern characteristics and today's Spanish-American novel, they do not hold up under close scrutiny. It is similarly unsustainable to argue that the contemporary novel obliterated national or regional literatures by setting many of its works in non-Latin American settings, because "peripheral" novels can respond to hierarchies that could easily present them as canonical, with a logic that has little to do with the market. By the period between centuries digital culture had changed the logistics of writing, if not its conceptualization.

The resulting narrative seemed to project the notion that many of its paragraphs were placed in a certain part of the novels simply because it seemed a place as good as any other to shove it in. This practice went unchallenged until the mid-90s, when some publishing events changed the panorama and outside perception of Spanish-American narrative. In 1996, a sort of *annus mirabilis* for the production of contemporary narrative and the beginning of critical awareness of it, a short-story anthology entitled *McOndo* (Barcelona: Mondadori) put together by two then unknown storytellers, Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, was published to great acclaim. The compilation professed to introduce the new wave of Spanish-language (some of the authors were Spaniards) narrative, and to that end anthologists Fuguet and Gómez provide a sort of poetics in their Introduction.

Among their many pronouncements designed to startle the cultural establishment, and impact the market, one reads: Latin America is MTV Latina [...] Televisa, Miami, and banana republics and Borges and Sub-Commander Marcos and CNN en Español and NAFTA and Mercosur and external debt and, of course, Vargas Llosa. To sell a rural continent when in fact it is urban (beyond the fact that its overpopulated cities are chaotic and don't work) seems to us an aberration, convenient and immoral. (18) The anthologists base their statements on a lasting conceptual conundrum for the continent's writers: what should define Latin America, the necessarily continuing social struggle for justice and exoticism based on regionalist

referents, or the Western cosmopolitanism that defined the twentieth century? The McOndo generation obviously prefers the latter. Not totally different from their predecessors, they have no problem accessing high and low cultures, combining them as they see fit, yet not disdaining canonical traditions. For them, “McOndo” replaces García Márquez’ Macondo as the mythical and idealized Latin American locale to which foreign readers are accustomed. For Fuguet, Gómez, and the other twelve Spanish-American and four Spanish writers included in McOndo the world has no borders, conventions are unwelcome, “magical realism” is rightly long gone, replaced by magic neoliberalism, and recent culture serves to trump U.S.-inspired political correctness.

Most of our novelists’ work confirms those beliefs and to varying degrees their novels put in practice versions of the attitudes mentioned by Fuguet and Gómez. The new location of culture for the recent generation includes ghettos (not in the preferred U.S. barrio sense), McDonald’s, Mac computers, gigantic malls, the TV host Don Francisco, Ricky Martin, Julio Iglesias, apolitical stances and telenovelas. Clearly not all our novelists belong or would have wanted to belong to that world, particularly those born in the early 1950s, who did not come of age during neoliberalism and were earnest progressives in their youth but, like Bolaño, became critical of political excesses of any stripe. A typical case is that of another Chilean, Roberto Ampuero, author of *The Neruda Case* (2012), the first of his crime fiction bestsellers to be translated into English. According to José de Córdoba in the December 21, 2012 *Wall Street Journal*, “... Ampuero’s life of exile is representative of the experiences of a now-graying generation of idealists who lived through Latin America’s heady decades of revolutions, coups and guerrilla wars, only to be shipwrecked on the shoals of history, living Robinson Crusoe-like lives in the wreckage of socialist island paradises” (D5), a development for which Corral (2010) provides a more ample context. Still, if those born in the early 1950s and those born in the late 1960s do not comprise a generation per se, they share the attitude of not being afraid of what they call “bastard” culture, and they welcome opera, Spanish-American rock, and traditional authors. Theirs, especially the McOndo writers, is also a decidedly anti-progressive positioning, for at least a couple of reasons.

First, presumably speaking for their fellow writers, they admit to being conscious of the “feminine absence” in their book, attributing it to “publishers’ lack of knowledge and the few books by Spanish-American women writers we receive” (16), adding “At no moment did we think about the laws of compensation in order to look bad to anybody” (16). Secondly, they argue, “There is a sector in the academy and the traveling intelligentsia who want to sell the world not only an ecological paradise (Santiago’s smog?) but a land of peace (Bogota, Lima?). The more orthodox among them believe that being Latin American is being indigenous, folkloric, and leftist. Our cultural creators would be people who use ponchos and sandals.” (17). Around the time of McOndo, in 1996, the young Mexican writers Pedro Angel Palou, Eloy

Urroz, Padilla, and Volpi, with assistance from Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, published their “Manifiesto del Crack.”

In the late 1980s, Padilla, Urroz, and Volpi had met in high school, and together with Alejandro Estivill, came up with the idea of putting into one volume what they had written up to then. Admirers of Juan Rulfo, who wrote sophisticatedly of the desolation of rural Mexico, they yet saw themselves “affected by all the clichés of the false ruralism and magical realism a la García Márquez.” They opted for writing a “novel” composed of falsely rural short stories, to be narrated by “Hugo,” a composite of the four authors, and the result was *Variaciones sobre un tema de Faulkner* (1989, *Variations on a Faulkner Theme*). They called themselves “La Compañía Antirruralista” (The Anti-Rural Company).

That short novel, a user’s manual from 2004, the Crack manifesto, and a bibliographical narrative of 365 five ways of “doing Crack,” were published in 2004–5 in Mexico and Spain as *Crack. Instrucciones de uso* (Crack. User’s Manual). What does “Crack” stand for, when each member has gone out of his way in interviews and reports to deny that such a movement, generation, or group exists, that it is a “literary joke”? Are they having their cake and eating it too? It would seem so, despite the fact that Volpi is the only member whose works have had consistent recognition, and translations with smaller presses.

Different from the McOndo writers, who have disbanded and express nary a word about a communal aesthetic, the “Crack” group insists on and markets a single world view, despite their vast differences in talent and reception. Almost 20 years have passed since the McOndo and Crack generational grandstanding, and although there has been a parting of the waters among the groupings, they all still refuse the fraidy-cat tolerance of all points of view. They are more a clutch of writers who share a lack of pedigree. The problem with thinking that both generations offer something new is that there is a cyclical nature to literary rebellion, and it is not difficult to find the equivalent of their attempt to shock the bourgeois throughout previous centuries. As Birns also reminds us vis-à-vis the McOndo group, they criticized their predecessors for being too provincial in much the same way the Boom writers had censured their immediate literary ancestors. Believing what is recent to be totally new is also the fault of the few critics who have tried, prematurely, to define these groups or denounce their sexism (Palaversich).

Focusing primarily on a few authors since the late 1990s leads some of those critics to a blurring blurring (Noguerol 2008) regarding the impact of immediately earlier novelists and their poetics (Burgos) and subsequent ones, or to those who publish locally, references to whom are very rare, not unfailingly accurate, and expectedly perfunctory (Bértolo). What is new about the “McOndites,” “Crackites” and similar parvenus is their daring and willingness to name names, especially in a climate in which sensitivity has acquired surplus value. But of the eighteen writers gathered for McOndo, only three made it to the Seville canonization. Among

them only the Colombian Gamboa has consistently written well-received novels, only one of which is available in English, while a couple of other less accomplished McOndites have had theirs appear in that language. McOndo did not invite Volpi, one of the better known writers of the new generation, but did include the Ecuadorian Leonardo Valencia, who is not in *Palabra de América*, despite his successful fiction and positive reception in Spain. Aira, who publishes an average of two short novels a year since his first one in 1975, was not invited to Seville either.

Literary history repeats itself: generational categories are notoriously subjective, clearly incomplete, hastily assembled, and can thus have an undeservedly negative effect on a writer's reputation, or an exaggerated one, particularly on a younger writer. Birns affirms that "One could argue that the novel genre has to take in too much of the human experience to be strictly defined by generational self-assertion and/or resentment," to which one could add self-indulgence. In most of the metafictional novels of this generation little is interesting enough to not notice an egotistical authorial presence suspended above. In a sense the new novelists are aware that the Spanish-American "novel of language" from the 1970s, much touted by Fuentes, made too much of an effort to impose on narrative language a slippery content that was never expressed, thereby defeating the purpose of communication and relativizing meaning.

There are of course many metafictional exercises in today's novels, but they are not a stock in trade for any one author, and they all seem aware that those devices were daring and amusing, but now they have to work better. Those experiments leave plenty of room for endless and self-defeating interpretive disputes about originality and textuality, and no easy comity in storytelling. So, today the novelistic emphases are on concision, easy wit, fairly straight narrative flow, vernacular insights, a continuing discovery of new masters, and even bittersweet perspectives on emotions and moods. As counterpoint to the anxieties of influence it is useful to comment on the one member of the new generations who is not only their peer, but their predecessor: Bolaño.

The subtitle "After Bolaño" should be understood in its full semantic possibilities: as influence or idea whose time has come, lapsed progenitor, point of reference, and not a perfect personal or aesthetic model. It is very revealing, in terms of generational self-perception, that he is not in McOndo, and was made an "honorary member" of the Crack only after his death. Yet, he is the only one of them to have become a legend, a myth, an overnight success, and an industry, all at the same time. He is the master of the new generations. Sadly, just as Bolaño railed broadly and sometimes unjustly against what he called *donositos*, or reverential followers of Donoso, readers are already dealing with derivative McOndites, Crackites and "Bolañites" who show that imitation is not the best form of flattery. There seems to be a consensus that if

any author or work from the generations we include will survive the frenzy of trying to select the one with long-lasting values, the Chilean is ahead.

Generational groupings persist, and perhaps the most accurate template is Eduardo Becerra's thorough, and polemical anthology *Líneas aéreas* (1999, *Airlines*). The following year, the U.S. branch of Spain's *Alfaguara* marketed the somewhat arbitrary anthology *Se habla español. Voces Latinas en USA* (*Spanish Spoken. Latin Voices in USA*). Bolaño is absent from both compilations. Recently, tomes like *Bogotá39. Antología de cuento latinoamericano* (2007, *Bogotá39. Anthology of the Latin American Short Story*), which gathered authors who were under 40 then, and Diego Trelles' *El futuro no es nuestro: narradores de América Latina nacidos entre 1970 y 1980* (2008, with a more representational and shortened English translation in 2012), try to expand the corpus, betting on younger writers, some of whom are included here.

The new generations may be overhyped, self-congratulatory, and gimmicky, but there is no doubt that they are optimistic and quixotic, and frequently promising, which is a positive stance for the Spanish-American novel at this time. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the generational tangle we summarize—keeping in mind its state of flux—is that its authors are vastly changing what is meant by “national” literatures, fitting in imperfectly with the new definitions of “world literature,” including the “world republic of letters.” Blatantly urbane and open, these novelists cannot let go entirely of personal codes that can frequently be construed as their “Inner Latin American,” a condition they generally employ for one-upmanship when confronted by identity politics.

In this regard, they are not different from, say, recent English authors whose cultural origins are in the Indian sub-continent, practicing what Fredric Jameson, in “Dirty Little Secrets” (*London Review of Books* [November 2012]) has called “transcoding,” which “presupposes an allegorical structure, a system of levels, in which we find ourselves obliged to translate from one to the other, inasmuch as each of these levels speaks a different language and is decipherable only in terms of a specific code” (39). More significant than that code switching, the paucity of women among the new generations is cause for concern, and keeping in mind our selection one cannot fail noticing that in the U.S., Latina writers, conversely, generally have a greater public than that of men. There are aesthetic and publishing lessons in this situation, and generational change does not make those lessons pointless. A related question, which we put in check by opening our contents to a wider audience, is who is defining the new Spanish-American canon for the continent, and for whom, especially when U.S. Latino writers prefer to write in English because their Spanish is merely functional, judging by interviews and press reports. Given the new media (many of these writers have blogs), a conclusion that is perhaps closest to present reading experiences is that the new generations, in their work and public pronouncements, are trying to deemphasize the literary marrow of their interests, which might

be a good thing. The new novelists, some of whom practice criticism, know that at this time there are no large, heroic critical figures and that with the new media critics have to be on their game, since anyone with access to a computer could quickly subvert persistent or canonical critical assumptions. The new generations have obviously not ended, and perhaps in another generation we will have the perspective to judge them fully. In the meantime, we have their bangs, not their whimpers.

Corral, Will H.; De Castro, Juan E.; Birns, Nicholas. *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolano and After*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.