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A Carnival of Criticism

One of the most ambitious recent attempts to interrelate the literatures of the Americas is Earl E. Fitz's *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa UP, n.p.). Chapters are devoted to comparing Native myths, explorers' narratives, new world epics, the figure of the halfbreed, American modernism, and so forth. The reader comes away from these exercises intrigued with parallels that she may not have known existed and wanting to investigate some of the many titles heaped together here. At the same time, a specialist will be troubled by the lack of a discernible methodology, the superficiality of many of the analyses, and the unevenness of the presentation. The comments on Canadian literature, for instance, rely strongly on Atwood and Frye without so much of an indication of the debate surrounding their pronouncements; there is no effort to problematize the relation of French-Canadian and English-Canadian literature to each other, and no due attention to the challenge of minority writing to these two "founding" literatures. Women writers are characterized as being at their best when they "involve the reader not merely in a quest to discover what it means to be female or even a Canadian female but what it means to be human." Too often, Fitz's method consists in isolating one or two features—frequently applicable to *any* literature—before making them the basis of a sweeping comparison. The quotation above for instance is followed by the announcement that "this same thematic extrapolation from the sexual, cultural, and political condition of the individual to the universal is also found among a number of fine contemporary writers in Brazil," followed by a long list of names. Fitz's book is to be commended for its sheer courage in taking on such a vast subject, but it leaves much room for additional work.

A more narrow focus is found in *Confluences littéraires: Brésil-Québec, les*

bases d'une comparaison, ed. Zilà Bernd and Michel Peterson (Balzac, n.p.). This book documents both the potential and the limitations of a comparative project which is based on cultural exchange interests rather than actual literary interdependencies. After a rambling introductory essay by Wlad Godzich entitled "Brésil-Québec: à la recherche du *tertium comparationis*," which seems to talk about everything but the Brazil-Québec connection, various essays by Chantal Gamache, Serge Bourjea, Zilà Bernd, and others strain to document parallels that are more or less spurious or else apply to almost any comparison between so-called emerging literatures. Thus, the section "Approches critiques" strongly focuses on questions of "anthropophagie," that is the cannibalistic swallowing up of one culture by another, and on *métissage*, both concepts hardly specific to Brazil or Québec. And yet the book is rewarding because in the best tradition of that branch of comparative literature which is based on affinity rather than direct influence, the sometimes forced conjunctions can provide sudden flashes of insight. Among these are Zilà Bernd's comments on romanticism and modernism, and the realization, confirmed yet again, that Hubert Aquin's work appears to be relevant to almost any modern or postmodern context, and others. The book also provides texts documenting diplomatic relations between Canada and Brazil, as well as bibliographies of Québécois research devoted to Brazilian literature (the name Clarice Lispector looms large here, indication that a large portion of Québec's interest in Brazilian literature may come via Hélène Cixous) and vice versa: Brazilian research on Québec literature appears to favour Anne Hébert.

Confluences littéraires includes translations of poetry by Gaston Miron into Portuguese, and by Alfonso Romano de Sant'Anna into French. The latter is also featured in *Liberté* 36 (February 1994), a special issue on Brazilian literature. Authors included besides de Sant'Anna are Ferreira Gullar, Mário Quintana, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and others. Bernard Andrès and Zilà Bernd, both also contributors to *Confluences littéraires*, provide a tantalizing introduction in which they draw sketchy parallels between Brazilian and Québécois authors as well as suggesting a similarity between the separatist tendencies of Rio Grande do Sul and those of Québec. The selections include only one female author, Nélida Piñon, whose writing is described as excelling in the description of "les motifs fondamentaux de la littérature universelle, l'amour, la passion, la condition humaine et la mort." (Similiarly "universal" qualities are incidentally said to

infuse the relationship between Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, in a review of J.M.G. Le Clézio's *Diego & Frida* included in this issue.) Biographical notes on the translators who have contributed to *Brasilittéraire* indicate that there has been considerable collaboration and visiting back and forth between UQAM and the University of São Paulo in particular, and that there are academic and artistic connections between Quebec and Latin America which so far have failed to materialize to a similar extent in English Canada. While *Brasilittéraire* is devoted to one Latin-American country only, a somewhat greater variety is offered in *La Présence d'une autre Amérique* (La Naine blanche, n.p.), a slim volume anthologizing Latin-American authors currently working in Québec. Featured are Tito Alvarado, Jorge Cancino, Nelly Davis Vallejos, Jorge Etcheverry, Gilberto Flores Patiño, and others. *Ruptures*, subtitled "la revue des 3 Amériques" and published in Montreal, prints texts in French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. A recent issue is devoted to Mexico and among numerous poems and short stories also features an ill-tempered essay by Lazlo Moussong entitled "Malcolm Lowry: the Volcano's Not What They Say It Is," presenting an attack on the book's status as classic from a Mexican perspective: "in Lowry's perception of Mexico, instead of values, we find unbearable weaknesses; heavy-handed distortions, excessively narrow compartmentalization; and, in the smug, petty, superficial way in which he views Mexico and it people, we discover the same point of view as is common among the thousands of North American ne'er-do-wells and European pensioners who settle in Cuernavaca and various other paradises and subsequently proceed to depict the immitigable mediocrity of their lives in exotic hues." A tension between North and South also becomes clear in Alberto Kurapel's *Station artificelle* (Humanitias, n.p.), an autographical work describing the Chilean's work with La Compagnie des Arts Exilio in Montreal. Besides documenting the concept of his theatre, Kurapel also has illuminating things to say about Quebec's multicultural policies which, so he suggests, favour folklore over alternative cultural expression.

Notable Hispanic American Women is one of the many reference works issued by Gage (n.p.). Writers, composers, dancers, and actresses are listed along with activists, entrepreneurs, chefs, government officials, lawyers, social workers, and educators (a particularly long list). While the entries tend toward the journalistic, there is still much to be gained from perusing this volume. Especially among older notable women, Hispanic backgrounds tend to be erased along with the names: Margarita Carmen

Cansino becomes Rita Hayworth, Blanca Rosa Welter adopts the name of Linda Christian, and Florencia Bicenta de Casillas Martinez Cardona turns into Vikki Carr. Several women complain that they have lost their Spanish because family and schools did not encourage them to cultivate it. The only alternative to ethnic invisibility appears to have been stereotyping. Rita Moreno for instance tells how she was frequently typecast as the fiery Latin, roles she "played. . . the same way, barefoot, with my nostrils flaring." Even the biographies of women who, like the writer Sandra Cisneros, have asserted their ethnicity, often display great conflict which in equal measure derives from their uneasy position within the mainstream as well as from the traditionalism, sexual and otherwise, of their own background. The 450-page volume, like all Gage publications handsomely laid out, comes with several indexes (by occupation, ethnicity, and subject), and makes for both a valuable research tool and an illuminating read. Women also dominate the anthology *One Hundred Years After Tomorrow: Brazilian Women's Fiction in the 20th Century* (Indiana UP, US 12.95 pd.). Darlene J. Sadler, the editor and translator, has sought to include well-established authors as well as less known ones. Thus, we find Clarice and Elisa Lispector but also Lygia Fagundes Telles and Dina Silveira de Queiroz. Female sexuality is evoked in Márcia Denser's work and, as Sadler points out, "the theme of erotic love seems to dominate much of the new writing."

One can only hope that John Updike's recent novel, *Brazil* (Alfred Knopf, n.p.), is a colossal joke for what the cover blurb coyly calls a "stylized Brazil" is the stuff of sensationalist pulp fiction without a trace of irony to mitigate its luridness. Tristão Raposo, "a nineteen-year-old child of the Rio slums," speaks the kind of stilted language peppered with italicized words that in colonial discourse used to characterize the Noble Native, while characters with a leftist bent are given to orating like a Marxist textbook. There are frequent erotic encounters of the hardcore Harlequin romance type, in which the virile Tristão induces Isabel Leme, "an eighteen-year-old upper-class white girl," into the joys of sex. The book is appalling. Not quite so irritating but getting close are several of the contributions to *Erotique noire/Black Erotica*, eds. Miriam Decosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell (Anchor, n.p.), an anthology. Calvin Hernton for instance feels compelled to interrupt his description of a steamy welcome at the airport with a sermon: "Why lascivious? She thought. For one thing, she and Yakubu were Black. Nobody, not even other Blacks, liked to witness such open display of

sexual feelings between Black women and men, right out in public! Such shameless behavior fed into White folks' stereotypes of Blacks." However, the book is worth looking at not only because it contains also some writing that is much better than this but also a number of essays such as Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and a piece on sexual imagery in the Trinidad Calypso by Keith Warner. Stereotypes of Blacks in Brazilian literature are the subject of David Brookshaw's *Race and Color in Brazilian Literature* (Scarecrow, n.p.), as well as "the Afro-Brazilian writer's view of his experience and attitude towards Brazil's ethnic and cultural identity." Brookshaw draws valuable comparisons with stereotypes of Indians, and he does not exclude Brazil's star author, Jorge Amado, from his observations. Commenting on the mulatto figure in *Gabriela, Cinnamon, and Spice* and other novels, Brookshaw to some degree shares the view of literary historian Alfredo Bosi that Amado "has been. . .more interested in exploiting the stereotypes of Bahian life, and more prone to the portrayal of social stereotypes than concerned with illustrating the real causes and effects of social tension." Although ostensibly devoted to accomplishing the opposite, journalism and travel writing frequently contribute to reinforcing stereotypes. Paul Rambali's *It's All True: In the Cities and Jungles of Brazil* (Heinemann, £9.99) does some gritty reporting on the fate of Brazil's street children, on the *favelas*, political racketeering, and ecological destruction but it does not avoid the usual sexual clichés either which describe an afternoon shower as happening "with sexual release" or orchids "that open like the sex of women, like laughing faces, the secret laughter of the jungle." Several of Rambali's subjects (*telenovelas*, soccer, carnival) re-appear in *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*, eds. William Rowe and Vivian Schelling (verso, US, $17.95). However, this is not a breezy travel report but an exemplary exercise in cultural studies, which makes a persuasive argument for the inclusion of so-called "low-brow" phenomena like soap operas in popular culture.

Aficionados of Bakhtin will enjoy Roberto Damatta's *Carnivals, Rogues and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* (U of Notre Dame Press, US $24.95), a study in comparative sociology. Damatta compares the Brazilian carnival, in particular the parade, not only with military parades but also with Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. He draws the conclusion that, in contrast to the Brazilian suspension of class difference during carnival, the Louisiana version affirms it. The chapter on Pedro Malasartes,

a Robin-Hood-like character, is also informative, presenting in his subversiveness and adaptability a number of parallels to the Canadian trickster figure. The book which operates within all the usual scholarly trappings of sociology, is nevertheless motivated by a fervent sense of civic responsibility: "Perhaps all that I am doing here is trying to get to the heart of some issues that always bother me as a Brazilian. I refer to the perennially anti-democratic (and anti-egalitarian) Brazilian elitism that is characterized by an arrogant style of dealing with social and political differences. From this perspective, this text is a political denunciation of social practices that nobody takes seriously in Brazil but that I am convinced are at the heart of the Brazilian power structure. . . By studying what is indisputably 'Brazilian' in this system, I hope to open the door to the understanding of the blind authoritarianism that never ends, despite systematic libertarian experience and rhetoric." An even more satisfying book, also concerned with questions of national identity, is Nicolas Shumway's *The Invention of Argentina* (U of California P, n.p.), a well-written, lucid account of Argentinian concepts of nationhood. The book frequently evokes literary contexts as carriers of nationhood, as in its comments on *gauchismo*, and Shumway is careful to document questions of cultural institution as well.

Turning from Damatta and Shumway to *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*, ed. Amaryll Chanady (U of Minnesota, US $18.95 pa.), is not an altogether happy experience. The introduction and several of the essays predictably plunge into the thickets of Derrida, Bhabha, and others, creating the impression that one has read it all before. The contributors are best when they get away from this framework and dwell on the specific, such as Iris M. Zavala's "A Caribbean Social Imaginary," an attentive essay on the "bookishness" of new world culture; questions of genre and periodization are also well handled in Françoise Perus's "Modernity, Postmodernity and the Novelistic Form in Latin America." Roberto González Echevarria's *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge UP, n.p.) posits 16th-century legal discourse as the source of the picaresque, as well as of early travel and scientific documents about South America and, finally, of Latin-American fiction. In proposing his theory, Echevarria takes issue with Bakhtin who, he claims, wrongly perceives authority and its manifestations as somehow less natural and integral to society than its opposite, the carnivalesque. However, Echevarria's comments on Bakhtin and other critics such as

Foucault and Lévy-Strauss tend to be desultory and the whole book has a conversational rather than tightly organized quality about it.

Coach House Press has initiated its new "Passport Books" series which will be devoted to international fiction in translations. So far the series includes short fiction by Marguerite Duras, Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Ozdamar, Julio Cortázar and Argentinian writers Marco Denevi and Liliana Heker. Heker's *The Stolen Party* has been translated by Alberto Manguel who also provides a short afterword, situating Heker's work within the Argentinian context. Unlike Cortázar with whom she initiated a correspondence on the subject, Heker "maintained that her place was within the strife, taking the risks assumed by all those who were not able to leave." Heker was fortunate enough not to be arrested, but Guillermo Infante Cabreras found himself detained in Havana when he returned for his mother's funeral in 1965. He now makes his home in London having had to leave Madrid following pressure from Franco's government. Together with other prominent exiles, he participated in the 1987 Wheatland Conference in Vienna; *Literature in Exile*, ed. John Glad (Duke UP, US $37.50) contains the proceedings. Some of the liveliest material in the volume emerges during the discussions which are also printed here; many of the participants were Central Europeans, and their complex response to each other and to their Western and Russian colleagues make these exchanges an interesting complement to the Lisbon conference, also held in 1987. Exile is a political necessity for many Latin-American authors; other citizens exist in a condition approaching internal exile because their sexuality challenges hierarchies and authoritarianism: Manuel Puig, in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, posited gay exile as an allegory of political exile. David William Foster's *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Fiction* (published in the Pan American Series of U of Texas n.p.) provides a "first comprehensive review" of the topic examining tropes such as "Vampire Versions of Homosexuality" and "Utopian Designs" while also submitting his material to dominant theoretical models such as deconstruction and Marxism. The result is an eclectic, often intriguing book, prefaced by a remarkable introduction in which Foster pitches his investigation against similar ventures in North-American literary criticism. In *Exilerfahrung und Literatur: Lateinamerikanische Autoren in Spanien* (Narr, n.p.), Petra Stumm looks at Latin-American authors in Spanish exile and presents a detailed, but sometimes sketchy, analysis of the manifestations of this experience in their work.