CHAPTER 11

Latin American Literature and Dependency Theory Today

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For the past thirty years or so, Marxist criticism has been in retreat or all but absent in Latin American literary and cultural studies. This may sound surprising, since between the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the Central American Revolutions of the 1980s, Latin America had been a world-historical site of not only revolutionary praxis but also thought, ranging from *foquismo* and dependency theory to Third Cinema and "Boom" narrative. But this state of affairs changed dramatically at the end of the 1980s, with the defeat of socialist revolution, dictatorships, and the imposition of a particularly savage form of neoliberalism across the region. This shrinking utopian horizon, which dovetailed with the rise of post-structuralist thought in Europe and the US, produced a widespread sense of skepticism with respect to Marxist categories of analysis that to a larger or lesser degree persists until today. In a story that will sound familiar beyond Latin American studies, class became seen as a reductive category unable to account for a multitude of identity positions and differences; determination became recoded as economic determinism, and totality as a totalizing view of the world.

Such a view became particularly pronounced in Latin American literary and cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, wherein culture itself seemed poised to overcome the perceived shortcomings of Marxist thought by shedding light on proliferating subject-positions, subaltern agencies, and forms of cultural hybridity. With this, Neil Larsen notes, an earlier vision of Latin America as affording a perspective on "a common social and historical reality – on a *totality*" was shattered, giving birth to a vision of "the 'periphery' as just, in itself, an absolutized 'difference'" ("Latin-Americanism," 42, emphasis in original). More recently, Eugenio Di Stefano and Emilio Sauri have made a related argument, wherein the invisibility of literary form "within postmodern and post-structuralist accounts of the text and the work of art" – ranging from *testimonio* and

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

affect studies – "is doubled by another: the invisibility of the structure that creates class inequality in neoliberalism" ("Making It Visible," n.p.).

Against this backdrop, the present essay proposes a return to Marxist modes of analysis in Latin American literary and cultural studies, not to impose a lost unity, but as a means of returning to the vantage of the wreckage of the present, which includes, but is by no means limited to, chronic financial crisis, mounting ecological catastrophe, and the redundancy of vast sectors of the planet to the valorization of capital. My chosen point of entry is 1960s and 1970s dependency theory, arguably the region's lasting contribution to Marxist theory, in dialogue with the novel. Dependency theory and the novel, I argue, offer parallel means through which to analyze the *structured* nature of Latin American "difference," as arising from within – and not outside or beyond – the order of capital.

While composed of several different currents, the central insights of dependency theory were twofold. First, in an extension of theories of imperialism, dependency theorists held that capitalism did not progressively emanate from one society to another, but instead emerged as a single system constituted by centers and peripheries (or metropoles and satellites). Second, within this single system, centers became rich at the expense of peripheries through mechanisms such as unequal exchange and debt. Unlike modernization theory, which held that societies had to pass through a "traditional" stage to arrive at modernization, dependency theorists countered that peripheral countries had been incorporated into global capitalist networks for centuries; the result of greater integration was not modernization, but what Andre Gunder Frank called "the development of underdevelopment." Free wage labor and debt peonage, or the factory and the latifundia, were inverted but contemporaneous realities, what Osvaldo Sunkel called "the two faces of the historical evolution of capitalism" (quoted in Kay, "Theories of Development," 129).

In its overturning of stagist assumptions about how history operated – and, as a result, questioning the conditions under which socialist revolution might take place – dependency theory generated a vast output of works, and, inevitably, invited fierce debate. (For an overview of these debates, I refer the reader to Kay, "Theories of Development," 163–196, and Stern, "Feudalism"). While the finer points of those debates remain outside the scope of this essay, I want to register that for many Marxists, the issue was the extent to which dependency theory accurately proceeded from an analysis of *production* within Latin American societies. For both Ernesto Laclau and Robert Brenner, for example, it was not surplus transfer in the realm of the world market that underdeveloped peripheral

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

economies, but instead the suppression of wage labor on estates. Marxist dependency theorists countered these critiques by attempting to show how internal production (waged and unwaged) was distorted by the circulatory dynamics of capital on a world scale, as part of what Ruy Mauro Marini named the "dialectic of dependency."

For all its possible shortcomings and lacunae, the dependency moment was one of intense creativity and output. It is to this moment that we owe the most penetrating and audacious attempts to understand the historical logics of capital accumulation in the region, from the hacienda and plantation to the sui generis class structures that constituted them. Dependency also gave birth to world-systems analysis, which modified the dependency schema to include semi-peripheries as a scalar node in world accumulation.

Literary studies deeply internalized dependency theory's vocabulary of centers and peripheries, but in the post-Marxist landscape, they operate in an almost entirely culturalist vein under the guise of decolonial theory, "alternative modernities," and many versions of world literature. In this chapter, by contrast, I am interested in how dependency theory can help us understand the necessary, though often surprising and contradictory, relationship between economic structures and cultural forms. I am guided by an earlier generation of Marxist critics who posit a more dialectical relationship between culture and economics, such as Jean Franco, Roberto Schwarz, and Hernán Vidal, among others. As Franco put it in a key essay from 1975, dependency theory allows us to approach Latin American literature as something other than "an isolated anachronism whose practitioners have simply arrived late at the banquet of civilization . . . or as a few solitary masterpieces . . . which have magically entered the divine order," to instead approach texts as providing insights into a larger system ("Dependency Theory and Literary History," 67).

In a similar spirit, the present chapter returns to dependency theory, both as an alternative to the rampant textualism and culturalism of recent years, as well as a corrective to Marxist critiques that for the most part remain excessively focused on the experiences of historic centers. To this end, I offer a three-part periodization of the Latin American novel: nineteenth-century realism; 1960s "Boom" narrative; and contemporary noir. While this periodization can only be cursory in the context of this short essay, its main purpose is to illustrate a wide historical arc through which literary form becomes intelligible as something other than cultural difference and particularity. In this tripartite division, readers will recognize a European-inspired periodization of realism, modernism, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postmodernism. These categories are at once unavoidable – because Latin American literature emerges from the crucible of world capital – and, to borrow from Schwarz, "counterfeit" insofar as they fail to describe the particularity of peripheral cultures within that totality ("Um seminário de Marx," 95).

"More-Than-National": Roberto Schwarz and Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Realism

Dependency theory emerged in tandem with the 1960s "Boom" in Latin American narrative, a moment when the region's literature was viewed as finally and belatedly reaching world-class status. But it was with respect to little-appreciated nineteenth-century literatures that dependency theory made its biggest impact on literary studies. There are two main reasons for this: first, this was the era in which peripheries were at their most economically and culturally dependent on centers. Between roughly 1870 and 1930, Latin American countries entered the orbit of capital as never before, as producers of raw materials and agricultural commodities. Second, this historical juncture provided a radically new way of interpreting nineteenth-century Latin American literatures that had languished under the sign of imitation and anachronism vis-à-vis their European models. It was only with dependency theory that the very act of imitation could be approached on critical grounds, and the true nature of the problem revealed as one of ideology.

The Brazilian Marxist Roberto Schwarz deserves special recognition in this regard. In a set of essays from the 1970s, Schwarz defined the central problematic of Brazilian culture as one of the improper citation of metropolitan ideals, a tendency that, when placed in its proper frame – the global market – promised to yield key insights into the contradictions of peripheral societies, as well as into those governing the global market itself. As Schwarz notes in an essay reflecting on the Marxist reading group in São Paulo that gave rise to several key works of dependency theory in the 1960s and 1970s (including his own), a key breakthrough came with the identification of slavery as a modern facet of the capitalist system through which Brazil was connected to the "civilized" world: "Before the master or Liberty, the *other* of slavery is capitalism, and this in a very relative way, since (capitalism) is also the cause of (slavery)." This observation, in turn, led Schwarz to make a singular contribution to dependency theory, by showing how the very categories and forms through which capitalism can be discussed in peripheries like Brazil are simultaneously "obligatory" and

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"circulate as counterfeits" (*giram em falso*) because the conditions to which they refer are never the same as those in Europe ("Um seminário de Marx," 93, my translation).

In his classic 1973 essay "Misplaced Ideas," Schwarz shows how European liberalism carried immense prestige among Brazilian elites, even as these ideas were immediately negated on Brazilian soil by the barbaric but entirely up-to-date reality of slavery. In Europe, liberalism was an ideology "well-grounded in appearances"; in Brazil, however, liberalism did not even correspond with appearances, rendering it an "ideology of the second degree" (23). And yet, Brazilian elites could no more stop citing liberal ideas than they could stop participating in the global market on the grounds of slavery. This obligation to cite European norms that did not apply to Brazil resulted in sometimes humorous, sometimes grotesque dissonances between ideology and reality that unwittingly offered a glimpse of the "opaque planetary mechanism" (30) that tied Brazilian elites to the world market, within which Brazil's national oddities become "world-historical" (29).

The meaningful dissonances become even more revelatory in Schwarz's studies of nineteenth-century Brazilian realism. In Europe, Schwarz notes, realism emerged from the rise and expansion of bourgeois market society. Balzac's novels, for example, gave aesthetic form to the dream-crushing impersonality of the cash nexus in Restoration-era Paris. But Balzacian realism underwent inevitable disjunctures when "imported" to Brazil. In José de Alencar's novel *Senhora* (1875), for example, one set of characters behave as if they had stepped out of a Balzac novel (in a plot about a young woman who uses her recent inheritance to punish the suitor who spurned her when she was poor), lending a false and artificial note to the text. The secondary characters, by contrast, live their lives within an order much closer to Brazilian reality, one of patriarchal favor. The dissonance between these two levels makes for a flawed novel, Schwarz argues, but it also maps the peculiar functioning of the class system in Brazil, in which a slave-owning elite participates in the "civilized" order of capital precisely by perpetuating nonbourgeois forms of domination. The novel thus sheds light on "a pattern of conservative modernization, whose story has not yet reached its conclusion" ("Importing of the Novel," 65).

Schwarz's analysis shows that it is precisely through a flawed *imitation* that nineteenth-century Brazilian realism reveals its "more-than-national" character ("Misplaced Ideas," 28). In contrast with European realism's inability to map empire (Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," 349), peripheral nineteenth-century realisms, whenever they "copy," inevitably conjure the

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larger contours of the world-system. And yet Schwarz's analysis does not stop here: while moving dialectically from the local to the global, it inevitably returns once more to deliver a reading of the nation within the distortions produced by the world market. It is here, Neil Larsen proposes, that Schwarz makes his fundamental contribution to dependency theory, showing how the part (the nation) is constituted by the whole (the world market) ("Brazilian Cultural Studies," 214).

National culture, in turn, is founded on internal class divisions; or, as Schwarz puts it, "not the country of our hearts, but the real country of social classes" ("Objective Form," 18). There is nothing reductive about Schwarz's class analysis: instead, in their dialectical rigor, his literary readings yield insights into the specificity of domination in a society like nineteenth-century Brazil. As always, this specificity is provided through an analysis of literary form, as in his masterful readings of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. For Schwarz, the key to understanding Machado's insight into Brazilian society is a small but decisive shift in realist form, wherein his narrators brazenly adopt the perspective of the slave-owning Brazilian elite. In a novel like *Dom Casmurro* (1899), for example, the unreliable narrator speaks alternately as a sensitive bourgeois *and* a "lord and master" with no checks on his own desires, as when he banishes the wife he assumes has been unfaithful ("Brazilian Breakthrough," 79). This conjunction, itself predicated on the structure of the world market, allows civilization and brutality to walk hand in hand in the figure of the white male oligarch: "There is no reason to suppose that just because he is uncivilized within his family, the Brazilian oligarch cannot, or does not want to, enjoy the advances of contemporary civilization" (90). Just as Schwarz's analysis of the "more-than-national" character of realism doesn't stop at the world market, but comes back to the level of national particularity, his analysis of national class domination (expressed through specific constellations of race and gender) returns once more to the level of the global: for just as the scandal of slavery in Brazil hollows out the promises of liberalism in Europe, the monstrous figure of the Brazilian oligarch demonstrates that – on a world level – the expectation of "progress" is a sham. This is because so-called civilization feeds off slavery, but more fundamentally because it reveals that *in the order of capital*, "there is plenty of room for every kind of regression" (90). As in Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that "(t)here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," what Schwarz shows is that the peripheral oligarch is the very personification of this dialectic. This fundamental insight rings as true now as when Schwarz was writing, in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aftermath of the 1964 coup that augured a wave of counterrevolutionary repression across the continent.

Roberto Schwarz's writings remain largely unfamiliar to critics outside Latin American literary studies, and for the most part are limited to readings of Brazil. This is to no small degree because his mode of reading depends upon a ceaseless "dialectic of literary form and social process" ("Objective Form," 10) that demands deep knowledge of Brazilian history and sustained attention to a handful of works. This model might be contrasted productively with Franco Moretti's model of world literature, far better known in English-speaking circles. Indebted to world-systems theory (an outgrowth of dependency theory), Moretti famously recommends a strategy of "distant reading" as the only feasible means of capturing the immensity of global novelistic output. Inevitably for Moretti, the identification of patterns across national traditions become more important than understanding how individual texts illuminate the logic of the system as a whole. Schwarz's strategy is, to be sure, more painstaking, but also more rewarding, in so far as it allows us to understand the dialectic between peripheral literary forms and *history*. It is in this same spirit that I now turn to two later articulations of the Latin American novel under shifting conditions of dependency.

Periodizing the "Boom"

The literary current most associated with dependency theory is not nineteenth-century realism, but the so-called Latin American "Boom" of the 1960s, still the best-known literary movement to emerge from the region. The "Boom" and dependency theory emerged apace of one another, in a moment dominated by the rise of a US-dominated phase of imperialism, on the one hand, and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, on the other. In fact, as Larsen puts it, dependency theory, the Boom, and the Cuban Revolution formed a "gravitational field" that came to define the very idea of Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s ("Latin-Americanism," 41). And yet, save early works by critics like Jean Franco and Hernán Vidal, Boom narrative remains undertheorized with respect to the insights of dependency theory (see for example, Franco, "Dependent Industrialization").

Immediately, with respect to dependency theory and the Boom, we can note that both are readings of Latin American history in its specificity, with much debate regarding the efficacy of both. The nonlinearity of dependency theory converges with the high modernist narrative strategies of

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Boom, both of which were energized by the stirrings of revolution in the air. Moreover, the very name given to the "Boom" posits an overt relationship to the nineteenth-century global division of labor identified by dependency theorists, in its reference to export commodity booms (and busts) that had marked the continent since Independence. The Boom novel unavoidably situates itself within this historic division of labor, while at the same time inverting its terms by exporting highly sophisticated literary works to the metropole.

For spokesmen of the Boom, such as the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, Latin America had finally been able to create its own "revolutionary" literary language as part of a larger historical awakening on the continent, in which "modernity had arrived" (*La nueva novela*, 28). At times, this historical awakening is credited to the possibility of continent-wide revolution, as in Fuentes's inclusion of a postscript from Havana, Cuba at the end of his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. At other times, however, as critic Hernán Vidal shows, this sense of historical awakening is directly inspired by capitalist *development* in Latin America after WWII, especially via mass consumption in burgeoning cities. As Fuentes states in an interview, "The entry of a good third of Mexicans into the world of consumption is a fact we cannot ignore and that offers an extraordinary opportunity: that of *revolutionizing* ... consumer society in Mexico" (quoted in Vidal, *Literature Hispanoamericana*, 83, my translation). In this period, Latin American countries entered a stage that Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto have named "development *and* dependency," characterized by limited industrialization, the expansion of the public sector, and public works projects.

In this context, the revolutionary impulse articulated by Boom authors thus coexists and becomes confused with the expansion of *capitalism* in its Third-World, developmentalist guise. Along these lines, the historian Tulio Halperín Donghi quips that in the tumult of the 1960s, it became easy to think that an hacendado from Southern Brazil could be an "unexpected Lenin," or that the propertied Chilean class might happily ingest the revolutionary medicine "that Dr. Allende was going to prescribe them" ("Nueva narrative," 11, my translation). This double-sided appraisal also guides Fredric Jameson's essay "Periodizing the Sixties," in which the worldwide revolutionary upheaval coexisted with the deepening of commodity relations across the world.

While the "Boom" is most frequently interpreted through either sociological readings of literary markets (internal or external) or culturalist readings of Latin American identity, I want to examine it in a wider frame,

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in relation to widescale historical transition in the 1960s. As an example, we can turn to a novel I mentioned above, Fuentes's modernist *Bildungsroman*, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962). The novel is itself a story of transition, in which an Afro-mestizo peon on an hacienda in Veracruz rises to become, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, a capitalist under the protection of the official state party, the Partido Institucional Revolucionario. Beginning with Cruz's death and ending with his birth, the novel charts, in reverse, an epic historical transition from the prerevolutionary agrarian enclave to state-led industrialization. This transition is also refracted on the level of the novel's modernist aesthetics. In one scene, Artemio Cruz walks into his office building, breezing past a "court of lottery-ticket venders, shoeshine boys, women wrapped in rebozos, and children with snot-encrusted upper lips," to pass through a set of revolving glass doors. Once inside the building, he adjusts his tie in the mirror, and becomes disoriented by a second mirror opening back onto the street, as he watches "a man identical to himself, but far away, adjust[ing] the knot of his tie at the same time, with the same nicotine-stained fingers, the same double-breasted suit, but without color, surrounded by beggars" (Kindle loc. 220).

The aesthetic strategy of estrangement and doubling is recognizably modernist, with a specifically peripheral inflection. The everyday passage of the extremely rich from protected spaces of private property through, briefly, the immiseration of the street causes disorientation and estrangement; the mirrored images throw into relief, simultaneously, the contrast between gleaming opulence and poverty, *and* the unavoidable presence of the poor even in the most opulent barricades. This brutal structural divide is, in turn, refracted through race: the shawled woman is encoded as indigenous, while the suited capitalist projects an estranged image of himself as "without color."

Marxist critics ranging from Perry Anderson and Fredric Jameson to, more recently, the Warwick Research Collective have argued that in both centers and peripheries, modernism arrests the simultaneous presence of emergent capitalist and residual noncapitalist social relations in a single setting (Anderson, "Modernity," 104; Jameson, *Singular Modernity*, 141; Warwick, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 10). This transitional character – associated with Trotsky's notion of uneven and combined development – is detectable here in the image of the capitalist breezing past a woman whose shawl bears the imprint of her recent rural past. And although it is difficult to disentangle the archaic from the modern in this setting (Artemio Cruz, after all, is born on an hacienda that produces cash

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crops for the market), it is true that Fuentes's novel index *changes* within the uneven dynamics of accumulation in twentieth-century Mexico. An older landed order does indeed morph into an urban-industrial one; and nonwaged labor on haciendas does in fact give way to waged labor. At the same time, in keeping with Marxist dependency theory, these transitions look very different in centers and peripheries, both in history and in the novel. As Ruy Mauro Marini has shown, the peripheral capitalist profits from the remuneration of labor below its value (super-exploitation), which in turn creates blockages to growth because workers have limited access to consumption goods ("Dialéctica," 134). At the same time, super-exploitation depends upon a relative surplus population of outsized proportions, what the Argentine sociologist José Nun, in dialogue with Marx and dependency theory, began to call the "marginal mass" in the late 1960s. Fuentes's novel provides an arresting image of this situation: the modernizing capitalist, no matter how many times his own image is multiplied through mirrors, is structurally "surrounded by beggars," even in periods of relatively high growth.

The transitional character of Boom-era narrative is perhaps even more powerfully captured in the current's best-known aesthetic: magical realism. The most basic definition of this current is the narration of supernatural events in realist fashion, often by means of peasant, Afro-Latin American, and/or indigenous belief systems. The most cliched example is the wondrous world of Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), in which Remedios the Beautiful levitates while hanging laundry, with no one batting an eye. Since the 1990s, most approaches to magical realism have approached the current through the prisms of culture and identity, either celebrating it as a postcolonial aesthetic or criticizing it for trucking in outdated stereotypes of the region. Such interpretations, though, tend to miss what is historical about magical realism. In the same vein of Marxist understandings of modernism cited above, magical realism registers an encounter between older and newer social forms (Jameson, "Magic Realism in Film"; Warwick, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 72). Chief among those is a shift from societies organized around peasant labor (which is connected to markets but not directly subordinated to capital) to those organized around wage labor in a peripheral context.

As an illustration of this argument, I want to turn to a less famous example of 1960s magical realist mode, found in the Peruvian novelist José María Arguedas's posthumously published *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below* (1971). The novel is set in the coastal city of Chimbote, Peru, which in the 1960s became the fishmeal export capital

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of the world. In a scene set in a factory, a manager takes a strange guest on a tour, showing him how giant metal centrifuges chop and spin anchovies into oil. The macabre dance of dead labor and dead fish sets the stage for another dance, as the visitor spins like a top, his arms outstretched, and shows signs of transforming into the mythical fox of the title, as a small group of Andean migrant workers look on, sipping anchovy broth.

Such an encoding can only happen in a specific moment: when the indigenous and agrarian Andean lifeworld has come into direct contact with capital. The encounter highlights the weird and unnatural aspects of capital through a still-active register of Andean lifeworlds, and, with it, the potentially explosive recentness of a process of expropriation. But, dialectically speaking, the very encounter expressed in a magical realist mode registers an irrevocable historical shift toward proletarianization, a shift that, while neither linear nor total, nonetheless becomes a decisive tendency.

At the same time, Arguedas's novel suggests that the society on the other side of this historical shift will look very little like those in the North. Industrialization, for one, occurs on an extremely limited basis, here remaining export-driven, and divorced from the needs of the local population. Workers, for example, eat anchovy broth, a byproduct of export-driven production, signaling a still-massive gulf between circuits of (export) production and (local) consumption that drives the permanent super-exploitation of workers. On a deeper level, the scene also transmits the limited basis upon which proletarianized labor can be employed at all. Beyond the scene discussed above, the rest of the novel unfolds outside the factory, in the shantytowns, brothels, and market stalls in which former peasants – doubly liberated, from the brutality of the hacienda but also from land and community – must now eke out a living amidst the noxious waste and ecological depletion of the fishmeal industry.

Arguedas's novel, in its very staging of an encounter between indigenous myth and capital, already shows that this encounter cannot reproduce itself forever, either in society or as an aesthetic mode. As Anderson remarks of modernism more generally, magical realism provides "no eternal fountain of youth" ("Modernity," 109). By the same token, however, the exhaustion of the mode augurs some of the antimonies and contradictions within societies to come.

The New Ring of the Spiral: Neoliberalism and Noir

As we come closer to our present, it is both easier and more difficult to see the relevance of dependency theory to understanding Latin American societies and, as a result, literature. Easier, because it reveals the period

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of state-led development and industrialization between the 1940s and 1960s to have been a short blip on the radar within a longer history of dependency: by the 1970s, the global economy entered a period of stagnation that made developmental aspirations impossible for peripheral nations and former colonies (Benjamin, "Developmental Aspiration"). This worldwide crisis dovetailed with the rise of brutal dictatorships and counterinsurgencies across Latin America – waged by local oligarchies in tandem with the forces of US empire – whose entire *raison d'être* was to defeat the socialist threat. Under emerging neoliberal economic regimes, Latin American societies were returned to their old position within the global market, restricted to the production of primary commodities for the global market (such as soy, lithium, and palm oil), and disciplined by international financial markets. In this context, as John Smith, Jaime Osorio, and others have argued, 1960s dependency theory has become more relevant than ever to understanding the particular forms of brutality visited upon the former third world, in the form of super-exploitation, IMF austerity plans, and the ejection of millions into the ranks of the sub- or unemployed. The contemporary era thus presents what Marini called in a different context "a new ring of the spiral" of dependency ("Dialéctica," 39).

At the same time, this context also makes it more difficult to assess the relevance of dependency theory to literary studies today, precisely because the defeat of developmentalist and revolutionary projects resulted in what seems like the final imposition of the commodity form across the region. As I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, Latin American literary and cultural studies responded to this moment with an explicit rejection of Marxist categories like class, totality, and determination, and an embrace of proliferating difference and micro-agencies. With this, critics imagined that culture had acquired autonomy from the economic in the same moment in which commodity relations became more dominant than ever, in what can today be grasped as a symptom of the very historic process critics were unable to analyze in the 1990s. Such an observation, of course, does not discount the real abstractions of contemporary capitalism, in which the world truly does appear as centerless, and trapped in a permanent present of proliferating commodity difference.

What can the contemporary Latin American novel offer under such conditions? As Emilio Sauri has recently argued via Yuri Herrera, the novel is able to body forth the abstract principles that govern social life within larger structures. It can also, as Sharae Deckard has argued with respect to Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* (which hinges on the murders of women

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776523.012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

assembly plant workers along the US/Mexico border), refract the relation between capital and female labor in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement. In a compatible vein, I propose that the contemporary Latin American novel can help us think historically about the wreckage of the present, to return a sense – however limited – of the totality within which fragmented subject-positions and differences proliferate. As an example, I turn to Fernanda Melchor's 2017 novel *Hurricane Season*, which recounts the murder of a transgender woman nicknamed "La Bruja" (the witch) in La Matosa, a small town in Veracruz that languishes between major oil installations on one side and sugar plantations on the other. This is the same region of Mexico from which Artemio Cruz escaped to become a rich Mexico City capitalist in Fuentes's 1962 novel. The characters in *Hurricane Season*, by contrast, are trapped in the contemporary enclave *as a class*.

Each chapter of *Hurricane Season* takes the form of a long single paragraph (in the style of García Márquez's 1975 novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch*). Individual characters – all of whom are un- or underemployed – provide separate but interlocking perspectives on the murder of La Bruja, and seemingly disconnected details about their lives: how one character, for example, came to own a truck as compensation for an accident that pulverized his leg; how another is beaten by her grandmother with scissors used for cutting up chickens; or how the character who murders La Bruja seeks money to buy a bus ticket to Cancún to find work. This swirl of voices, encased in individual chapters, open onto a centerless and hyper-individualized world, characteristics associated with contemporary noir fiction in the North as well as in Latin America. In *Hurricane Season*, the noir genre expresses the extent to which what Ernst Lohoff calls the "asocial sociality" ("Off Limits," n.p.) of the commodity form organizes existence in La Matosa: new recruits cut cane for "peanuts" (*Hurricane Season*, 215), and prostitutes "barely earn(ed) enough to eat once a day" (281).

But if the narrative voices in *Hurricane Season* are atomized, they are also layered to provide some window onto a larger system organizing life and death in La Matosa. Melchor carefully periodizes the present through reference to 1978, the year a hurricane and landslide destroyed the town. Though the novel doesn't mention this directly, this hurricane occurred at the height of the oil boom that fueled Mexican borrowing from Wall Street and, subsequently, the 1982 peso crisis that marked the end of the developmentalist state, and a definitive turn toward neoliberalism (Sánchez Prado, "Melchor's *Hurricane Season*"). The title of the novel thus alludes to

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a literal and metaphorical hurricane from which La Matosa never recovered: in the present, it is squeezed between an oil enclave, on the one side, and voracious sugar plantations, on the other, while being structurally redundant to both. Just as carnage unleashed by the so-called drug war and migratory crises can only be understood within this larger system, so too the everyday forms of brutality and misogyny encountered in *Hurricane Season* play out as expressions of the value-form and its depredations. At the same time, as Ignacio Sánchez Prado points out, the name of the town in the novel comes from a seventeenth-century Angolan slave leader, Francisco de la Matosa. With this, Melchor provides a possible utopian horizon in a distant past deeply embedded within the emergence of global capitalism.

Dependency theorists showed that Europe and North America were never meant to provide blueprints for Latin America's future, so long as it remained in the orbit of capital. At the same time, the extreme immiseration highlighted in a novel like Melchor's might presage aspects of the future of historic centers under conditions of deep capitalist crisis. The real future of capital – in centers or peripheries – was never shared development, but, as Marx held, the creation of distinct poles of wealth and misery: "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery ... at the opposite pole" (*Capital*, Vol. 1, 799). Under such conditions, sites like La Matosa might augur aspects of a shared future not because they remain outside the logic of capital, but because they fully embody it. Today, as in the past, a future beyond the brutality visited upon the majority of the world's inhabitants depends not on further rounds of capitalist development, but on collective struggle against it. It is for this reason that the Latin American novel, even in a world enveloped by the commodity form, continues to provide critical insight into the history of the present.

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