The Global Appropriation of Jorge Luis Borges: Reconfiguring the Scattered Pieces

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Three years after Jorge Luis Borges’s hundredth birthday, in the midst of a rise in the global appropriation of this Argentine author as an international writer, the time is ripe for piecing together some of the many Borges’s configured inside his native country and elsewhere in the world. Outside of Argentina, Borges is viewed today, perhaps more than ever, as “closer” to the English language than any other twentieth-century Latin American author, a cultural figure without national boundaries who, consequently, is perceived to be the least Argentine of all Argentine intellectuals. It would be helpful, then, to begin this survey by recalling some of the most salient moments in the process that constructed the international Borges.

European Discoveries

In 1961 Jorge Luis Borges, together with Samuel Beckett, received one of the most important European awards for literature, the Formentor prize, which gave him a unique visibility. The prize, in part for its rather arbitrary association with Beckett, would prove to be the first step in the adoption of Borges as a member of the European literary community. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, one of Borges’s favorite reference books, comments thus on the consequences of the award:

Prior to that time, Borges was little known, even in his native Buenos Aires, except to other writers, many of whom regarded him merely as a craftsman of ingenious techniques and tricks. By the time of his death, the nightmare world of his “fictions” had come to be compared with the world of Franz Kafka and to be praised for concentrating common language into its most enduring form. Through his
work, Latin-American literature emerged from the academic realm into the realm of generally educated readers throughout the Western world. (Rodríguez Monegal, 2: 385)

The entry implies that Latin American literature before Borges did not have an educated readership outside the academy, and positions Europe as the model for the entire western world. From our privileged perspective, this kind of statement has the double effect of magnifying Borges for the wrong reasons while inventing a void where, in fact, there was none.

A few years later, in 1964, the French journal L’Herne dedicated a whole issue to Borges’s work. Borges was already known in France since “La lotería en Babilonia” [The Lottery in Babylon] first appeared in Lettres Françaises in 1944, but these five hundred pages of L’Herne, under the editorial direction of Dominique de Roux, provided Borges with the opportunity to procure a wider French readership while presenting his work filtered through a critical viewpoint that would remain with him for the rest of his life. While Borges’s writings had already been made available to the French in such publications as Le Monde, Le Figaro Littéraire, Tel Quel, and Cahiers de Sud, it was L’Herne that gave Borges a place within the European canon of the time. A look at some of the articles on and by Borges selected for this issue helps explain the figure one would read about in European publications for years to come.

L’Herne selected primarily those texts that minimized any reference to Argentina. L’Herne’s Borges is the author who writes the prologue to Edward Gibbon’s Pages of History and Autobiography; the “Vindicación de Bouvard et Pécuchet” [Defense of Bouvard et Pecuchet], and “Una vindicación de la Cábala” [A Defense of the Kabala], and even film reviews of Sternberg’s Crime and Punishment and of Hitchcock. The issue also includes “El poema de los dones” [Poem of the Gifts], in which Borges writes about the irony of going blind after having been appointed Director of the National Library:

Enciclopedias, atlas, el Oriente
Y el Occidente, siglos, dinastías,
Simbolos, cosmos y cosmogonías
Brindan los muros, pero inútilmente.

Lento en mi sombra, la penumbra hueca
Exploro con el báculo indeciso,
Yo que me figuraba el Paraíso
Bajo la especie de una biblioteca. (2: 187)

[Encyclopedias, atlas, the East
And the West, centuries, dynasties,
Symbols, cosmos, and cosmogonies
These walls offer, though in vain.

Slowly in my shade, the hollow twilight
I explore with an indecisive cane,
I, who imagined Paradise
In the guise of a library.]

The French translation of this poem tellingly includes a note on Paul Groussac, mentioned in the final stanza, who was Borges’s predecessor as Director of the National Library in Buenos Aires and, like him, also lost his vision. What the French introduction tellingly ignores, however, is that Borges’s designation as Director of the National Library was considered at the time an act of restoration for having been fired, a decade earlier, from his job as librarian under Perón’s increasingly autocratic régime.

Even more indicative in that issue is the article by Roger Caillois, “Les thèmes fondamentaux de J. L. Borges,” in which he situates Borges’s works among those of Pliny, Giovanni Papini, Jules Verne, Arnold Toynbee, and Saint-John Perse. He also contends that the concept of circular time is the most relevant theme in Borges’s work. Caillois, who during World War II was part of the Argentine journal SUR to which Borges also frequently contributed, was responsible for bringing Borges both to L’Herne and to prominence on the French literary scene. In his influential article, Caillois reorders Borges’s “other” themes around circular time:

Borges brings two other [themes] that are like
projections in the domains of space and causality: that of the labyrinth and of recurrent creation. These, in turn, inspire the symmetries and play of mirrors, the systems of correlations and equivalencies, compensations and the secret equilibriums that at once constitute the substance and structure of the writer’s stories and poems. (211, trans. mine)

For Caillois, then, Borges needed to be identified with universal subjects and, therefore, measured against a larger, encyclopedic tradition that leaves him unconfined by national boundaries, and measurable only by cosmogonic dimensions: “I do not hesitate to count Jorge Luis Borges among those few perfect encyclopedists, still rare, for whom the inventory of riches available is double that of the planet and of history” (217, trans. mine). Caillois, who was interested in promoting Borges’s work inside France, decided nonetheless to build on the appropriation of Borges by the Europeans, who apparently found in his texts themes and concerns common to those of Caillois and other French writers.

**Across the Atlantic**

The United States managed to create a Borges rather different from his counterpart in France, but only once he had become representative of Latin American literature as a whole. Through a sort of nebulous process, Borges became a member of the so-called Latin American Boom or, as Linda Wertheimer described him on National Public Radio in 1999, a sort of father of magical realism. As a non-realist writer from Spanish America, Borges ended up associated with Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Rulfo, writers both so different in style to Borges and, more important, so very involved with their own local realities, that one wonders whether the people making those comments ever compared these writers at all, or merely assumed a commonality among them based solely on geographical contiguity.

Borges’s reception in American academia has itself been two-pronged. Comparative literature and national literature departments (other than Spanish) favor the notion of an abstract Borges concerned with philosophical
considerations at the expense of the referent. George Steiner’s “Tigers in the Mirror,” published in the *New Yorker* in 1970, and John Updike’s “The Author as Librarian,” also published in the *New Yorker* in 1968, are only two examples of this tendency. Updike’s comments are representative of the anxiety of otherness that seems to trigger a need for appropriation when faced with the task of commenting on Borges’s work. The results mirror the image found in *L’Herne*, where name-dropping and hyperbole are constants: “Borges is a universalist,” claims Steiner (qtd. in Alazraki 119), while Updike states: “Implacably, Borges reduces everything to a condition of mystery. His gnomic style and encyclopedic supply of allusions generate a kind of inverse illumination, a Gothic atmosphere in which the most lucid and famous authors loom somewhat menacingly” (qtd. in Alazraki 63). Of course, all readings always imply a certain degree of distortion through interpretation. What is surprising here, though, is the absolute lack of awareness of that distortion on the part of the performing reader, especially when, as in the case of critics like Steiner, Updike, John Barth and others, they are approaching their subject for the first time in order to introduce a largely unknown writer to a wider audience.

One of the most interesting characterizations of Borges may be found in the curriculum of Spanish departments in the United States, where, during the 1970’s and 80’s, he became an important component of the Latin American literary canon. If the courses taught in these departments accept, however reluctantly, the international appeal of his works, it is because they were themselves interested in building the notion of Latin America as a whole. The notion of an international Borges thus becomes quite handy, in the same way as the Latin American Boom will become useful for the same purpose later on. Perhaps, it is enough to mention a few examples of this tendency in two of the most dedicated Borges scholars of their time, Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Jaime Alazraki, who were among the first to introduce Borges to the American public from American academia.

In *Borges, Hacia una lectura poética* [*Borges, Toward a Poetics of Reading*] (1976), Monegal traces Borges’s involuntary connection to the formulation of Latin America’s magical realism. By way of contrast, Monegal
points out that, unlike the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, who claimed magical realism was the truest form for Latin American literature, Borges was more interested in what he called “fantastic” literature. Monegal makes clear that while magical realism remains closer to surrealism, Borges prefers a model that moves away entirely from any form of realism in order to favor logical and verbal procedures he defines as “fantastic.” In spite of Monegal’s efforts to disengage Borges from magical realism, then, he nevertheless ends up stating that Borges’s critical and creative interest in the fantastic is a true antecedent to the new Latin American novel to come, better known at the time as the Latin American Boom.

Equally, if not more influential in this trend, is Alazraki’s *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (1987), in which he collects some of the most important articles on Borges published in the United States. In spite of his own recollection of the political reception of Borges’s work, Alazraki dismisses his own political framework when commenting on the relation between fiction and political reality in Borges’s work by saying that, in his fiction, “[t]he world has been constructed by means of logic, with little or no appeal to concrete experience, and while it liberates imagination as to what the world may be, it refuses to legislate as to what the world is” (4). Even as Alazraki’s characterization seems to fit quite well with the European Borges already available, he goes on to assert that the Argentine writer is not only refractory to politics, but shares a certain European quality, and that, because of this, he is the quintessential Latin American intellectual:

For Argentines first, and for Latin Americans at large afterward, Borges has become a sort of father figure: the progenitor of a language out of which, like from a seed, contemporary Spanish-American fiction evolved and reached maturity. At the same time, he has come to represent also the denial of everything Latin-American, the glorification of the West and the mutilation of that part of the continent alien to or different from what the West has sanctioned as acceptable or civilized. If to be civilized meant to be like a European or an American, culture thus understood amounted to the rejection of precisely that part which by dint of its
idiosyncratic differences defined what was unique and real among Latin Americans. (7)

Alazraki’s observation is enlightening since, in his view, Latin Americans could be many things: followers of European culture, for instance, or the progenitors of Spanish-American maturity. They could also differentiate themselves from the West—which apparently includes America—and therefore be defenders of their uncivilized cultures. Above all, however, to Alazraki Latin Americans represent a solid block that could be recognized as such from without as well as within, an always integrated whole. This totalizing view, surprisingly, forms the basis for Latin American curricula in Spanish departments; it largely ignores the reality that Latin America encompasses several languages besides Spanish and that pan-Latino Americanism is usually viewed South of the Rio Grande as a political project that had its origins in colonial times as a strategy of resistance to Spain, and not as a natural condition readily available for consumption.

The “monumentality” that tends to dominate U. S. views of Latin America, too often considered “a grand territory of great works,” suppresses the specificity of writings that do not illustrate the idea of a literature that transcends regional differences. This view creates one pan-national literature that extends throughout all of Latin America, and overlooks the possibility of reading canonical works such as Borges’s in relation to other writings in Spanish or other languages. The conflict does not arise from the necessity of replacing canonical works with other texts or readings that are equally definitive and hierarchical; the point is to understand how this one-dimensional interpretation suppresses by definition the critical gesture out of which this canon is constructed, as if readers were not dealing with merely one arbitrary interpretation among many. In other words, this monumentalist perspective erases difference to present itself as an absolute and not as one possible interpretation among many. It is as if the a priori that determines the idea of what is Latin American were a natural product, and not yet another cultural artifact. This view of Latin American literature is clearly paradoxical because it tends, in its strong desire to include all its writers and cultures, to exclude almost each and every one.
For the United States, then, Borges remains a Latin American writer without any ties to Argentina, a view that consequently leaves out considerations of Argentina’s politics and culture in studies of his work. This characterization is different from that of L’Herne, for while the French journal considers Borges one of its own, the view within the United States presents him as a Latin American influenced by American and English literature. Still another example of this mindset is a sign announcing Viking Penguin’s English-language translations of Borges’s works in a New Haven bookstore:

This guy, wow, he’s something else. Out of this world like H. P. Lovecraft minus the horror; literary like a minimalist Joyce; twists of time and place pushing psychological sci-fi but somehow still of this planet, maybe...Intelligent, mythologically obscure, excellent non-linear brain food.

American readership is thus presented with a Latin American writer ready for consumption, one that can ultimately “understood,” assimilated at last to the familiar, and sadly indistinguishable from other writers in the world.

The Invisible Side of the Spectrum

Argentina’s reception of Borges, conversely, is truly embedded in local cultural politics. Before the Formentor prize and, in spite of the Britannica’s comments, Borges was, in fact, well known in Argentina. While Borges, the oral Borges of endless interviews and public statements, would actively help create a multilayered image of himself that contributed to his internationalization, many of his comments were themselves answers to national circumstances, grounded in both his own political referent and that of his contemporaries. This is one of the blind spots of the international perspective on Borges.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1899, Borges lived in Argentina until his family moved to Switzerland, where he attended high school until they relocated to Spain. Before returning to Argentina, Borges wrote two books of poetry, which he subsequently burned. He then published his “first” book, Fervor de Buenos
Aires [Fervor of Buenos Aires], in 1923. “Las calles” [The Streets], the first poem in the volume, sets the tone for the collection and presents his poetry as part of a territory, a certain imaginative landscape that will be a lasting theme throughout his work. It is a mesh of constant references to Argentina and its culture:

Las calles de Buenos Aires
ya son mi entraña...
Hacia el Oeste, el Norte y el Sur
se han desplegado--y son también la patria--las calles;
ojalá en los versos que trazo
estén esas banderas. (1: 17)

[The streets of Buenos Aires
are now my very core...
Toward the West, the North and the South
they have unfurled--and they are also my country--these streets;
I hope that in the verses I sketch out
those flags may lie.]

Here, Borges seems most interested, at least on the surface, in establishing a personal connection to place than in making a nationalistic statement. However, many years later, presenting a new edition of his second book of poems, Luna de enfrente [Moon Across the Way] (1925), he makes explicit the differences that link these two books of poems, and, implicitly establishes their common ground:

Olvidadizo de que ya lo era, quise también ser argentino. Incurrí en la arriesgada adquisición de uno o dos diccionarios de argentinismos, que me suministraron palabras que hoy puedo apenas descifrar: “madrejón”, “espadaña”, “estaca pampa...”

La ciudad de Fervor de Buenos Aires no deja nunca de ser íntima; la de este volumen tiene algo de ostentoso y de público. (1: 55)
[Forgetting that I already was, I also strove to be Argentine. I made the risky acquisition of one or two dictionaries of argentinisms, which provided me with words I can barely decipher today: “madrejón,” espadaña,” “estaca pampa…” The city in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* never stops being an intimate place; the one in this volume has something ostentatious and public about it.]

It is his concern with the “public” that should make readers look at the dual reception he has received in Argentina, in particular between the 1940’s and the ’60’s, long before the Formentor prize reintroduced Borges in his own country as an international success.

In fact, as early as 1933 an important Argentine literary journal, *Megáfono*, published an entire section dedicated to the reception of his work. The discussion in the issue could be summarized as two-sided; on the one hand, it asked: “Is Borges really engaged with a national literary project, or is he merely using folkloric topics in order to call attention to his subjects which, as was the case with gaucho poetry, many considered crucial for a discussion of Argentine cultural politics?” On the other hand, this question was raised: “Is Borges truly rooted in local politics and, therefore, interested in proposing a particular idea of Nation, or is he just trying to use the gaucho, national history, and the literary recreation of marginal characters as a springboard toward a more abstract humanism to move away from the Argentine referent?”

There is, however, no better subject for reflecting on Borges’s concern with nationalism than his sustained attack on Nazism. Annick Louis describes the evolution of Borges’s opposition to Nazism and nationalism in a series of essays on these topics. In “Borges ante el nazismo” [Borges on Nazism], for example, Louis remarks that the period under consideration is relatively extensive, given that it starts at the beginning of the 1930’s with the rise to power of German National Socialism, and continues until 1955 with the end of the first Peronist administration. We might divide these years into three distinct “moments,” all determined by historical circumstances: the first from 1933 to 1939, coinciding with the Nazi ascension to power and the Spanish Civil War, a time during which
Borges is clearly against Fascism and Franquism; the second corresponding to World War II between 1939 and 1945, and the third starting with the fall of Nazism and the ascension of Perón to power, from 1945-46 to 1955 (313-14). For Borges, Nazism is not only a matter of European politics—a problem that he could relate to as a fellow “European”—but more importantly a concern for what he believed constituted a major obstacle in Argentina’s cultural development. Borges found a way of developing a critique of Nazism as one manner in which to critique Argentine nationalism. His interest in history finds a natural extension in his concern, before and after World War II, for the establishment of nationalism as an Argentine political problem. Borges’s political references are always grounded within the literary sphere, and many of his comments (almost in passing, Annick Louis reminds us) are centered on European intellectual production and the various public discourses he reads and comments on as a way of discussing Argentina’s nationalism.

In the first version of “El tiempo circular” [Circular Time], published in 1941 and later included in La historia de la eternidad [The History of Eternity] (1943), Borges explores what he calls the three forms of “Eterno Regreso” [Eternal Return] (1: 393). He discusses Plato’s Timaeus, then Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell, and finally Marcus Aurelius for whom, Borges explains, the only available reality is the present. To Borges’s thinking, one cannot lose the past or the present, because one cannot lose what one does not own. He concludes the essay by stating: “En tiempos de auge la conjetura de que la existencia del hombre es una cantidad constante, invariable, puede enristecer o irritar; en tiempos que declinan (como éstos), es la promesa de que ningún oprobrio, ninguna calamidad, ningún Hitler podrán empobrecernos.” [In good times, the conjecture that man’s existence is a constant, invariable quantity might sadden or irritate; in times of decline (like these), it is the promise that no ignominy, no calamity, no Hitler will be able to impoverish us.] (qtd. in Louis 314). Disguised by a series of quotes and bibliographic references extraordinary not only for their number but for their juxtaposition, Borges uses Marcus Aurelius to write (in a rather oblique way, even for 1943) an essay on the nature of time
that comments in ventriloquist-like fashion on the contemporary political moment. At this time, Perón is designated Minister of Labor, about which Borges writes: “ninguna calamidad, ningún dictador podrá empobrecernos” (1: 396). In the 1945 version of the same essay, as Annick Louis points out, Borges replaced “Hitler” with “dictator” as a way of including Perón.

In yet another work, “Aspectos de la poesía gauchesca” [Aspects of Gauchesco Poetry], the long historical essay he read at the Universidad de Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1945, Borges addresses Peronism in the closing section. In a philosophical tone, he summarizes the courage and the violence that, in his view, were essential to the life of the gaucho and to his political circumstances. In a direct reference to the political persecutions that marked Juan Manuel de Rosas’s dictatorship in the 19th century, Borges remembers how, many years before, during the marked tranquility of his youth, he mistakenly thought that those horrors were a thing of the past:

Los poemas gauchescos eran, entonces, documentos de un pasado irrecuperable y, por lo mismo, grato, ya que nadie soñaba que sus rigores pudieran regresar y alcanzarnos.

Muchas noches giraron sobre nosotros y aconteció lo que no ignoramos ahora. Entonces comprendí que no le había sido negada a mi patria la copa de amargura y de hiel. Comprendí que otra vez nos encarábamos con la sombra y con la aventura. Pensé que el trágico año veinte volvia, pensé que los varones que se midieron con su barbarie, también sintieron estupor ante el rostro de un inesperado destino que, sin embargo, no rehuyeron. (33-34)

[At the time, gauchesco poems were documents of an irretrievable and, therefore, pleasant past, since no one dreamed that its rigors could ever return and affect us.

Many a night has fallen since then, and what we cannot now be unaware of has happened. I understood then that my country had not been spared the cup of bitterness and sorrow. I
understood that we were once again facing shadow and adventure. I thought the tragic year of 1820 was returning, I thought the men who had measured themselves against the barbarism of that time also felt stupor before the face of an unexpected destiny they nevertheless did not flee.]

Borges ends the essay with “Poema conjetural” [Conjectural Poem], which was originally published in the newspaper La Nación earlier in 1943. In this poem, a tribute to the memory of Francisco Laprida, a distant relative of his mother, Borges describes Laprida’s death at the hands of Rosas’s Montoneras. In this context the barbarians of the past are the same as those of the present. Borges writes in a first-person monologue:

Pisan mis pies la sombra de las lanzas que me buscan. Las befas de mi muerte, los jinetes, las crines, los caballos, se ciernen sobre mí…Ya el primer golpe, ya el duro hierro que me raja el pecho, el íntimo cuchillo en la garganta. (2: 246)

[My feet step upon the shadows of the lances that seek me out. The jeering at my death, the riders, the manes, the horses close in upon me…Now the first thrust, now the hard iron slashing my chest, the intimate knife in my throat.]

If Borges’s insistence and directness in addressing Peronism through the reinterpretation of a historical poem surprises contemporary readers, this should not be attributed to any absence of it in his writing. The reception of Borges’s work in the United States has, until recently, simply sacrificed the complexity of his political concerns in favor of a more international view of him, one more suitable to the commodification of his work.

It was not only Borges who was interested in the political sphere; his contemporaries in Argentina also discussed him in connection to politics because they viewed his work, and not just his public persona, as a response to local
political circumstances. Today in the United States, Borges’s political concerns seemed to have largely fallen through the cracks, and more than ever, look remote and alien to his work. We prefer to read Borges in a non-political fashion, a reality that reveals more about ourselves than about his work.

Of the many moments of Borges’s public life in Argentina that forced intellectuals to revise and make public their own political positions, one in particular merits mention. Historia universal de la infamia [A Universal History of Infamy] published in 1935, is conventionally considered a thematic turn in Borges’s career, as from that time forward he would move away from marginal characters and local subjects in his writing toward more universal themes. El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan [The Garden of Forking Paths] (1941), a book he submitted for the National Literature Award in the period 1939-41, falls within this category. Only one judge voted in his favor, and Borges failed to receive the award. To compensate for this perceived slight, SUR decided to publish in its issue #94 of 1942, what is known as “Desagravio a Borges” [Apology to Borges]. Briefly described, SUR invited some of the most visible writers of the period, Ernesto Sábato, Eduardo González Lanuza, Eduardo Mallea, Manuel Peyrou, José Bianco, and Adolfo Bioy Casares among others, to offer their own valorization of Borges’s work in general, and of El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan in particular, as a response to, and criticism of the prize commission. With certain ambivalences due to the effort to separate their own poetics and personal disagreements with Borges from their admiration for his work, the forty pages of testimonials move back and forth between praising Borges and criticizing the commission in charge of the prize.

One of the judges on the panel, Roberto F. Giusti, a writer associated with the socialist movement, decided then to take up the defense of the commission’s decision. In what turns out to be an openly political criticism, and a serious misreading not only of Borges’s work but also of the relation between politics and literature, Giusti characterizes Borges’s writings as decadent and uninteresting for the working class, rehearsing, once again, an old political discussion between the literary groups Florida (art for art’s sake) and Boedo (political engagement):
Si el jurado entendió que no podía ofrecer al pueblo argentino, en esta hora del mundo, con el galardón de la mayor recompensa nacional, una obra exótica y de decadencia que oscila, respondiendo a ciertas desviadas tendencias de la literatura inglesa contemporánea, entre el cuento fantástico, la jactanciosa erudición recóndita y la narración policial...juzgamos que hizo bien. (qtd. in Bastos 146)

[If the jury felt that it could not present the Argentine people at this moment in time with an exotic work of decadence as winner of their most lucrative national book award, a work that, in response to certain skewed tendencies of contemporary English literature, contains elements of the fantastic, smug recherché erudition and detective fiction...we judge that it did well.]

Giusti goes on to add: “Lo más curioso, como índice de la confusión de ideas en que se vive actualmente, es la adhesión a este libro de algunos paladines de la literatura proletaria” [What is most curious, and an indicator of the confusion of ideas prevailing today, is the following this book has among some defenders of proletarian literature] (qtd. in Bastos 146).

What is of interest here is not so much the possible opinions regarding Borges’s cultural politics (i.e., what does “skewed tendencies of contemporary English literature” mean? Is the detective novel a non-proletarian genre? What does it mean to be “decadent” in this context?), but the fact that all too soon Borges’s political inscription tends to be overlooked. What attracts attention to this problem is, ultimately, what it has to say about the Latin American canon. Without suggesting that the notion of Spanish American literature as a whole be abandoned, I believe we must start revising this construct with respect to a writer such as Borges who himself was so resistant to the totalizing notion of Latin American literature. I am proposing that we rethink Borges’s work in light of its political and cultural dimensions, both inside Argentina and elsewhere in the world.
By Way of Model

Clearly, there will always be more than one way to approach Borges’s work. One of these, almost always absent within American universities, requires a discussion of Argentina’s political history, the history of nationalism, and, of course, Peronism. Still another approach, not in conflict with the latter, would imply a re-reading of Borges’s literary production that does not attempt to make him part of a general idea of Latin America. The monumentalist approach thus becomes a flattening force, another form of transnational appropriation erasing difference in its eagerness to produce homogeneity. Ironically enough, it accomplishes the opposite of what Borges proposed on so many occasions, namely, that literature should be rewritten in the gaze of each new reader. It is in critical works that undermine this monumentalism that we could begin to uncover Borges’s wonderful complexity and richness.

Today, in the midst of the process of globalization, we face the need to rethink our approach to Latin American literature. It is in the context of globalization that the discussion of how to define Latin American literature arises again in relation to the canon. On the one hand, I am proposing that we identify specificities by paying attention to the different readings that, in Borges’s case, take place simultaneously, in order to question the sense of wholeness that national literatures have so carefully developed through years of insistence on a homogenous corpus and chronological canon. This is a difficult task because it involves a distancing from what is most familiar, and implies taking the risk of creating new connections without losing sight of, or discarding what we already know. If my own first gesture is to point out specific differences, for example, in the local views of each community of readers (as in Borges’s resistance to critiquing nationalism and the overlooking of this particular position in the French or American reception of his work), there is, I believe, a second movement, one that will give us a more general view of Latin American literature, taking us out of the beehive and back to the position of proposing new readings that would challenge a rather static sense of Latin American cultural boundaries.
I would like to propose, rather briefly, a different approach that I believe reflects on the possible redefinitions of the field of Spanish Latin American literature as we know it. After being confronted with truly divergent receptions of Latin American literature, it is inevitable to fear fragmentation and dispersion. The realization of that fragmentation and the awareness of specificity are already available in the constant discussions of the politics of identity. It is enough to look at the increasing Hispanic and Chicano presence within the United States to realize that once neat dividing lines have ceased to offer the only radical view that can provide a better understanding of contemporary cultural affairs. Ours is a present that includes a strong cultural critique questioning, among other issues, neocolonialism as an extension of neoliberalism, but which, more often than not, rehearses time and again the dispute between the political and the literary avant-garde. It is within this ideological framework that critics may fruitfully explore possible new connections in the Americas.

Conceiving the Americas as a whole, like having one definitive reading of Borges’s work, is truly impossible. In spite of this impossibility, or perhaps because of it, critics may propose readings that old geopolitical demarcations formerly precluded. The idea of a unified Americas seems to cut across languages and history in a way that complicates the simplicity of boundaries conceptualized as clear landmarks between literatures and cultures. The field can question the notions of South and North, a notion that originally helped create a reductionist view of culture and literature by appealing to a rather rigid, but reassuring, sense of identity. This polarization, which proved useful in the past for political mobilizations, devolved into reductionism by appealing, once again, to the polarizing impetus of dividing cultures into another “Us vs. Them.” This is a point of view that, in the best possible scenario, equates mass cultural production with foreign policy on one side, and popular culture with political critique on the other, without accounting for other manifestations of resistance.

Even though the field has been in the making for many years--from Jose Martí’s “Nuestra América” [Our America] and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo* to Bell Gale Chevigni’s and Gary Laguardia’s 1986 *Reinventing the
*Americas*, and more recently through a multiplicity of talks and essays by a host of scholars—the specificity of the Americas takes on a new and interesting challenge when the discussion is placed within the framework of globalization. Is it possible for the discourse on the Americas to upset the homogenization associated with the cultural consequences of transnational capital? Is there a proposal for the Americas that could cut through the crushing effect of culture as synonymous with non-local, debased literary productions, presenting anew a point of view capable of integrating an interest for the vernacular while projecting itself outside its boundaries? In other words, could one develop a critique of cultural imperialism while pointing at common concerns in literary production in the United States and Latin America? Those are the kind of questions that could help critics dynamically redefine literary studies while avoiding yet another canonical list not on the shelves because it has no shelf life.

One of the most traditional views of the Americas is that of the disjunction produced by the confrontation between South and North, which pushes for a consolidation of each of these terms in a rather contrived way: the South becomes a more or less uniform block from the Rio Grande down to Tierra del Fuego, for which the North, usually equated with the United States and Canada, represents the term of opposition. This view brings us to the solid discursive consolidation of both sides, reinforcing in a perverse way a series of nationalist discourses that remain stumbling blocks in any attempt to understand difference not only in relation to one another, but within each of these supposedly seamless unities. One possible way of rethinking literature in the Americas, then, would be in the intersection of common issues and different languages, instances in which concerns, and not their outcomes or resolutions, could be recognized as shared moments. A case in point would be the connection between Thoreau and Guillermo Enrique Hudson, or Waldo Emerson and José Martí, Jorge Luis Borges and the Brazilian Oswald de Andrade.

It is not enough, therefore, to move away from Europe, or for that matter from the United States; it is also necessary to make room for the other in order to reposition oneself constantly along the spectrum of active readings. We must
open the critical gaze to new connections that ultimately echo the richness of those texts, instead of confining them to a discussion of national literatures that emerged in Europe under diverse circumstances. This is not merely a matter of privileging those interpretations that share the same social space, like assuming that an Argentine interpretation of Borges is closer to the “truth” than a European or American one is. On the contrary, it is a matter of looking at the construction of all readings along with their interplay, in order to recover a virtual map capable of opening up new connections among literary works. This new map should be based on many close-ups and not the usual general readings undertaken in order to confirm a pre-established idea of what that map should look like.

Even assuming that a nation could be defined by its culture, a notion less self-evident and predictable than the Latin American literary canon suggests, how may we understand the rigidity of national literatures except as a result of the institutional violence with which the university defends them in creating its own feudal territories? Why not consider literary studies as the practice of a pedagogy of borders while examining the zeal involved in the construction of national identity? Why not create the possibility of studying the many moments of resistance and criticism of the literary establishment with a continental scope, and do so not only as a coincidence but as the product of active critical reading? In the context of globalization, understood as a perspective that tends to erase differences, we could counter-read the literatures of the Americas as one opportunity among many to think anew the boundaries of national literatures, and redraw the map from the perspective we wish to bestow upon it, not only from an idea of nation that was formulated in the 18th and 19th centuries to fulfill a political agenda clearly not ours today.
WORKS CITED


