

About the Literatures of the Americas: A Review Article of New Work by Castillo and McClennen

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**Deborah N. COHN**

**About the Literatures of the Americas:  
A Review Article of New Work by Castillo and McClennen**

Debra Castillo concludes her *Redreaming America: Toward a Bilingual American Culture* by stating that "a hemispherically cognizant variation" of American studies "is still an unrealized dream" (194). While this may yet be the case, the discipline has indeed, over the past fifteen years or so, become increasingly aware of the porosity of its borders and of the commonalities that link the history and cultures of the U.S. to those of other nations in the Americas and elsewhere. Latin American studies has likewise been affected by the breakdown of the power of nation-states in the late twentieth century and the rise of the global power of transnational capitalism. The dramatic growth of both Latin American studies and inter-American studies in the academy in recent years, in fact, attests to the increasing awareness of the imbrication of national and literary histories throughout the Americas and beyond. In this review article studies I discuss two recent books that are testaments to this work: Castillo's own *Redreaming America* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005) and Sophia A. McClennen's *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2004). In *Redreaming America*, Castillo analyzes how Latino/a writers have strived to bridge their native cultures and the dominant U.S. culture; she asks how including these writers as part of U.S. literature leads us to reconsider our understanding of what comprises national literature. McClennen, like Castillo, studies the issues faced by writers who are caught between two or more nations. McClennen focuses on writers from Spain and Spanish America who went into political exile and whose works follow their efforts to figure out where "home" is, where they belong, and what values and languages best reflect their lives. The experiences of exile and (im)migration are different, with each responding to and being characterized by different exigencies and pressures, and I do not in any way mean to equate or conflate them. It is important to note, however, that the study of the expatriate's navigation of new territory does allow both McClennen and Castillo to engage with critical questions of rootedness and rootlessness, of the conflict between nostalgia for the past and assimilation to a new land, and with the difficulties of being perceived of as foreign both in the homeland and in the place where the immigrants have made their home.

In *The Dialectics of Exile* McClennen studies the work of three writers: Juan Goytisolo's "trilogy of exile" (*Señas de identidad*, *Reivindicación del conde don Julián*, and *Juan sin tierra*), novels published following his exile from the Franco regime in 1960, Ariel Dorfman's *Viudas*, *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, and *Máscaras*, as well as his poetry and memoirs published during the writer's exile from Chile following the Pinochet coup d'état; and several stories, poems, and a novel, *La nave de los locos*, written by Cristina Peri Rossi, who left Uruguay during the military dictatorship of the 1970s. The shared background and experience of exile of these authors provide McClennen with a solid foundation for making a compelling argument about exile literature: each left behind a homeland where a government with socialist tendencies had been replaced by authoritarian regimes embracing transnational capitalism; each challenges official versions of national identity projected by the authoritarian regimes in power; and each author's representation of ideas about the subject, the nation, history, and exile is deeply affected by postmodernism and poststructuralist theory. *The Dialectics of Exile* offers insightful textual analyses and takes a significant step towards theorizing the literature of exile more generally. Additionally, the study of exile and of exiles' ties to multiple nations complicates constructions of cultural and national identity and contributes to the contemporary questioning of national boundaries. Finally, by presenting a comparative study of authors whose exiles took them to Europe, Spanish America, and the U.S., *The Dialectics of Exile* makes an important contribution to the growing field of transatlantic studies and foregrounds the inherently comparative nature of studying Spanish American and Spanish literature.

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The first two chapters of McClennen's book identify the critical tools and terminology at the heart of McClennen's argument. The Introduction (Chapter 1) discusses the necessarily comparative framework for studying the literature of exile and defines key terms that provide the basis for subsequent arguments, including "exile," "nationalism," "transnationalism," "postmodernism," "poststructuralism," and others. Chapter 2, "The Dialectics of Exile: Towards a Theory of Exile Writing," builds upon this, bringing together theories of dialectics as articulated by Hegel and Engels with theories of exile writing put forth by Claudio Guillén, Michael Seidel, and Edward Said, among others. According to McClennen, critics have tended to analyze exile literature "according to a binary logic, where exile either produces creative freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia" (2), even as they acknowledge that exile writing does not, for the most part, exclusively represent one term of a polarized set. McClennen's central argument, in contrast, is that the literature of exile reflects a dialectic between opposing tendencies: the universal and the regional, the transnational and the national, the transhistorical and the historical, the collective and the shared, etc. The work of the exiled writer is thus characterized not by the oppositions themselves but by the constant dialectical tensions ensuing from the navigation between multiple opposing possibilities. McClennen looks, then, to the dialectic as "a fluid and open-ended critical framework for understanding cultural production created in exile" (29). Subsequent chapters of the book explore the dialectical tensions in several principal, constitutive elements of the exile's cultural identity: nation, space, time, and language.

McClennen's arguments on the exile's relationship to nation, in Chapter 3, "Alien Nation," and space, in Chapter 6, "Lost in Space: The Geography of Exile," are interrelated, and center around two main dialectics. First, Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Rossi reject the images of national identity in their native lands that have been constructed and imposed by the authoritarian regimes from which they have escaped. Instead, they offer in their work opposing visions of the nation that reflect their desire to continue to play a role in constituting the national identity from which they have been excised. These writers are at once outside of the nation, interested in what becomes of it, and wary of constructs such as nationalist discourse and national identity. Second, the critiques of nationalist discourse that exiled writers proffer provide insight into the transnational workings of global capital: the dictatorships from which Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Rossi were exiled came to power through national political developments that were deeply inflected by global pressures. Thus, their work traces the imbrications of the local and the global, and reveals the nation-state's loss of autonomy within an increasingly globalized world system. Their portraits of their homelands demonstrate further challenges involved in attempting to recover any sense of home: where, McClennen asks, "is home for the exile who has left a nation governed by an authoritarian system influenced by the internationalization of capital?" (164). The search to set down new roots is further complicated by the fact that the writers discussed by McClennen have spent their exiles in countries such as the U.S., which supported the regimes that led to their exile. The exile is thus in perpetual limbo: no longer "in" and yet nevertheless "of" the homeland; connected to the nation and yet outside of it; and setting down roots in another nation in which she is not considered to be a native. McClennen takes an important step in Chapter 6 by noting that while scholars such as Said and Aijaz Ahmad, among others, challenge the representation of the exiled subject as both national and transnational, Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Rossi "each create metaphorical constructions of a nation that expose the tension between nationalism and transnationalism in their visions of a cultural community" (165).

In Chapter 4, "Exile's Time," McClennen demonstrates how Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Rossi, as well as other exiled writers, struggle to reinscribe themselves into a history from which they have been erased, much as they seek to reinsert their presence back into a place from which they have been expelled. McClennen models her idea of exile's time on Julia Kristeva's idea of women's time where women exist in multiple temporal categories. The exile's experience of time, McClennen argues, is likewise irremediably split: he/she is exiled from the present in her native land, able only to live in its past and in the present of his/her country of exile. McClennen asserts that the exiled writers in her

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study, as well as others, have a "promiscuous vision of temporality" that encompasses simultaneously the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern: exile is a universal condition that inserts them into a time-less and infinitely repeated cycle of banishment and exile that is associated with pre-modern, mythical time; exile excludes them from participating in their homeland's (modern) linear history; and the exile's rejection of both linear time and official renderings of the past, her efforts to write her own version of history, represent a counter-attack on the manner in which authoritarian regimes appropriate national time that is informed by postmodern challenges to representation, to the hegemony of linear time, and to the nation itself.

In Chapter 5, "To Be Is Not to Be: Exile and the Crisis of Linguistic Representation," McClennen demonstrates how the exiled writer's relationship with language is inherently dialectical. Exile represents both a loss of one's native language and the acquisition of a new one. Quoting Cuban exile Octavio Armand, McClennen notes how for the hispanophone exile, the crisis may be summed up as "'ser es dejar de estar,'" where "ser," in Spanish, is a form of "to be" that refers to unchanging attributes, such as national identity (at least supposedly), and "estar" is another verb for "to be" that expresses more transient qualities, such as an individual's location. In other words, as McClennen paraphrases, "'to be [someone] is not to be [somewhere]," or, "to be is not to be, and that is the problem" (119). In this chapter, McClennen discusses how writing is an act of reclaiming one's identity and history, and of reinserting oneself in the history from which one has been erased -- a paradoxical act in and of itself, for it was Goytisolo's, Dorfman's, and Rossi's work as writers and public intellectuals that brought about their exile in the first place. Once again, McClennen draws on Kristeva's thought on the contradictions involved in women's use of speech and writing to describe the exiled writer's relationship to language. McClennen asserts that exiled writers, like women, use language as a means of resisting the order to which they are subjected. This endeavor leads them into additional paradoxes: writing as a mode of resistance presupposes the ability of language to communicate information and to have an effect on the world (including bringing down the regimes from which the authors have been exiled), but the writers in McClennen's study view transparent language as both a product and instrument of authoritarian regimes and their efforts to control society through official discourse, propaganda, and censorship. The writers' indebtedness to poststructuralist theories that challenge language's ability to represent reality and the past further compounds their skepticism. They are thus left to struggle with the constant tension between their belief on the one hand in writing as a means of communicating alternative versions of history, of effecting political change, and of wresting the control of language away from authoritarian regimes, and, on the other, their doubt at language's capacity to escape the control of authority.

Chapter 7, "Culture Shock," situates the exiled writer in a tug-of-war relationship with both identity politics, wherein minority groups draw on the notion of a shared cultural identity predicated on difference in their efforts to challenge the hegemonic order from which they have been marginalized, and multiculturalism, a politics that McClennen describes as "revolving around fighting for acceptance of difference" in general, rather than aiming to empower individual marginalized groups (205). McClennen characterizes Goytisolo, Dorfman, Rossi, and other exiled writers as caught betwixt and between these two strategies: on the one hand, they are committed to lobbying for a disenfranchised group, while at the same time they respect the notion of difference -- often eradicated by authoritarian regimes -- underlying multiculturalism. As McClennen demonstrates through her analyses of the works of Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Rossi, exiled writers espouse multiple, and often contradictory, ideas about cultural identity as part of their explorations of alternatives to and ways out of the political structures responsible for their exile. Their positions further serve to challenge theories of cultural identity predicated on binary oppositions, thereby cementing the usefulness of the dialectical approach as a mode of studying the literature of exile.

Questions of cultural identity lie at the heart of Castillo's *Redreaming America* and she observes that

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Authors, texts, and ideas have always moved across international borders; yet to the degree that they confound monolingual and nationally based literary projects, such crossings and meditations have been insufficiently studied even by an academic audience that prides itself on its border-crossing analytic abilities. Ironically, then, we can trace a kind of unconscious critical resistance to the very writers who seem to incarnate the site of the internationalized critical community in their writing, who speak from within the often contradictory spaces of a transborder consciousness, who most strikingly embody the more pertinent observations on transnational cultures in the very weave of their literary works. (188)

Where McClennen uses the writings of exiles to problematize ideas of national literature, Castillo does so through the analysis of narratives of immigrant identity and the immigrant condition by first-generation immigrants from Latin America to the U.S. -- what Castillo refers to as "new Latino/as" -- focusing on their explorations of the multiple identities, languages, and positions that they bridge (or, at least, strive to). As Castillo suggests in Chapter 1, "Introduction: El Boom Latino," redreaming "America" -- whether conceived of narrowly as the U.S. or broadly as the Americas as a whole -- is an inherently trans- and post-national task that entails rethinking U.S. literature, Latino literature, Latin American literature, and the academic infrastructure in which these literatures are studied and taught. This is a project that demands a hemispheric approach to the study of cultural production in the U.S. It is also one that holds the promise of reconfiguring the U.S. imaginary to reflect the nation's heterogeneity, the many nations, ethnicities, languages, and cultures that comprise it, and of rethinking U.S. literature to include literature written in languages other than English.

Chapter 2, "Origins," sets the stage for subsequent chapters' analyses of twentieth-century fiction. Here, Castillo focuses on three novels, all of which were set in the years surrounding Hernán Cortés's 1519 conquest of Mexico: *Jicoténcal* (1826), published in Spanish and of uncertain authorship and Robert Montgomery Bird's *Calavar; or, The Knight of the Conquest: A Romance of Mexico* (1834) and *The Infidel; or, The Fall of Mexico* (1835). All three novels were published in Philadelphia, a magnet for Spanish American intellectuals and exiles during the revolutionary period. The early nineteenth century was a "preimperial moment" (19) for the U.S., when there was a sense that the Spanish American struggles for independence responded to the same ideas as the US-American Revolution. The belief in common goals lay behind efforts to theorize a continental alliance and a shared sense of exceptionalism that was predicated on the rejection of European political systems. Castillo attributes the novels' engagement with the moment of conquest as an effort to set up the heroic indigenous past and its tragic defeat as an indictment of the conquest and colonial period. She finds in these novels a counterhistory of the conquest that foregrounds the civilized nature and heroic resistance of the indigenous peoples and the barbarism of the Spanish conquistadores. This corresponds to the authors' implicit situation of the indigenous past as the source of authority of the republican present, with the colonial period representing an illegitimate interruption of an otherwise direct genealogy. The novels thus represent a celebration of the new republics' achievement of independence in the contemporary period and an implicit call for further revolutionary action, as well as suggesting a "collaborative continental struggle for independence from Europe" (54).

In Chapter 3, "Crossing," Castillo studies characters' negotiations of their liminal status with regard to U.S. hegemony and the crossings and collisions of borders and cultures that this entails in works by Ana Lydia Vega, Eduardo González Viaña, Carlos Fuentes, and Margarita Oropeza. Most of these narratives of crossings are bleak, even when playful. They examine the sacrifices made by immigrants in their efforts to attain the so-called American Dream; the built-in prejudices that result in the disenfranchisement of marginalized citizens; and the self-loathing of the Mexican border-dweller who aspires to but can never achieve success and social acceptance in the U.S. Hope is found only in Oropeza's story of a Mexican migrant's negotiations of her sense of rootlessness and gradual assumption of a Chicana sense of self, but even then the hope is tempered by the conflicts between the protagonist's burgeoning Chicana consciousness and her Mexican identity. The chapter is a bit unevenly structured, ranging from the less than four pages devoted to González Viaña's collection of stories, *Los*



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*sueños de América* to the almost twenty that focus on Fuentes's *La frontera de cristal*. The extended engagement with Fuentes, however, allows Castillo to elaborate a sustained critique of the Mexican's centrist representation of the nation's northern border as modern, Americanized, and, essentially, lacking in both autonomous and autochthonous culture, and seeking to fill this void through the emulation of the northern side of the border. Castillo pointedly contrasts his approach with that of "liberal-to-left" scholarship that has, in recent years, cast the border as a space of potential, of hybridity, and of hope that "inverts the traditional dominant culture ... stereotypes about Mexico's northern border as a place of deplorable cultural mixing, intellectual and creative vacuum, and immoral depravity" (76).

Ariel Dorfman's memoirs and the semi-autobiographical fiction of Boris Salazar, Gustavo Sainz, and Sonia Rivera-Valdés -- themselves immigrants to the U.S. -- are the focus of chapter 4, "Arrival" (the absence of Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's memoirs from this chapter is curious, given that he engages with many of the issues addressed by the other writers included here). In many ways, the chapter does not analyze "arrival" narratives as much as it traces the never-ending process of arriving that immigrants face, the continuous need to redefine oneself in relation to a lost homeland and to find a way to belong to, or in, a new country of residence. Each of the narratives studied in this chapter revolves around a romance plot in which the protagonist's relationship functions as an allegory of the immigrant's efforts to bridge the home from which she has been displaced, the difficulties of trying to fit in, and the conflicted feelings prompted by trying to setting down roots anew. As Castillo notes, the protagonists' love interests are both functionally overdetermined and undercharacterized: in these works, they stand in for the homeland and the narrators' connection to what they have lost; they may also represent a connection to cultural "authenticity" (whether at home or in the new setting), or a mediator between the lost past and the as-of-yet unrealized aspirations to feel rooted in the U.S. Castillo singles out Rivera-Valdés's *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* for depicting relationships that hold the possibility of success precisely because they are non-normative (e.g., homosexual, or with partners who do not belong to the dominant U.S. culture), and because they prompt a return to the homeland rather than assimilation to U.S. norms and values.

Like McClennen, Castillo foregrounds the role of language as a primary determinant and emblem of immigrant experience. Chapter 5, "Language Games," focuses on bilingualism as a strategy for representing and recreating Latino experiences for a reader or audience. The chapter examines Latino anxieties of ethnicity and authenticity in the bilingual and bicultural works of Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Dolores Prida, and Giannina Braschi. For Castillo, the use of bilingualism in the texts that she studies represents an appropriation or celebration of double consciousness: rather than conveying Du Bois's "unreconciled strivings" and "warring ideals," for Hinojosa-Smith, Prida, and Braschi (as well as for Castillo herself, who in this chapter does not translate the passages she cites), code-switching is a means of challenging the dominant, supposedly universal (but generally Western and Anglophone) culture. The "aggressive Spanglish" of the texts Castillo examines here -- most of which bend assumptions of genre as well as presumptions about language -- transgresses simultaneously both English-only policies and understandings of national literatures as monolingual and, in effect, rooted in one nation only. As in her previous chapters, Castillo traces the conflict between the immigrant's longing for the lost homeland and efforts to incorporate her past into the present, the desire to fit into the dominant culture, and the sense that she does not belong. Here, however, Castillo foregrounds the fragmentation not just of the works that she studies, but of the identities that they reflect: the works are open-ended and often dislocated, and in Braschi in particular, the emphasis is on mobility, flux, and transnationalism, disconnected from concrete spaces and ideas of fixed nations alike. Castillo's final chapter, "Hemispheric American Studies," is in many respects a call to action to scholars to look to works that cross borders and languages as a point of departure for reconsidering their understanding of what comprises national literature, and for reconfiguring the study of the Americas as a whole. She calls upon scholar activists to "counter the persistent prejudice in the United States that displays

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itself in the imbalance of authority between speakers using English and Spanish" (190) and lobbies for the inclusion of Spanglish texts -- and, by extension, the acknowledgment of bilingual readers -- in curricula of Spanish and Latin American studies (it would seem important to also find a niche for them in English departments as well if the goal is to break down the national and linguistic boundaries that have long structured both literature and area studies departments in the academy).

McClennen's and Castillo's studies of writers in the diaspora negotiating new ideas of home offer key insights into the relationship between nation and identity in a globalized world. Both scholars also argue for the necessity of a transnational frame -- whether inter-American, pan-Hispanic, or transatlantic -- for conducting research and analysis. The study of the literature of exile and the literature of (im)migration is inherently comparative: both fields embody the interdependency and imbrication of national histories as well as notions of national literature. If the mobility of capital breaks down national borders and traditional notions (and powers) of the nation-state, so, too, does the movement of individuals represent a crossing -- both of national lines and of national histories, cultures, and languages. *Redreaming America* and *The Dialectics of Exile* alike offer substantive, synthetic, and intertextual analyses of works that engage with these issues and that prompt us to fundamentally reconfigure geographically-based approaches to literary studies.

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