

Introduction

In 1999 and 2000 the Mexican authors Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla caused a stir on the national cultural scene when they published novels dealing with events, people and philosophical questions relating to Nazism and the Second World War that did not include any ‘Mexican’ themes, characters or locations.¹ One critic, José Felipe Coria, said, ‘Ya no podemos considerarlos autores mexicanos porque ni su tema ni su tratamiento se remiten a México (We can no longer consider them to be Mexican authors, because neither their topics, nor their treatment of them, refer to Mexico)’ (Ortega Ávila).² The esteemed author and critic Elena Poniatowska said of the ‘Crack Generation’, the wider group to which they belonged, ‘La verdad, los escritores le tiraron siempre a la sofisticación, a escribir sobre temas internacionales, que interesaran en Alemania, Francia, Italia e Inglaterra... Eran un poco esnobs, la verdad (The truth is, the writers always aimed for sophistication: to write about international themes that would be of interest in Germany, France, Italy and England... Honestly, they were a bit snobbish)’. Yet, the fallout provoked by Volpi and Padilla’s novels merely confirmed the impulse behind their post-national literary gestures in the first place. It proved that cultural nationalism was alive and well in Mexico (and Latin America, more broadly)³ and that the pressure on authors to showcase their nation on the literary world stage was still strong.⁴

However, it was not the absence of Mexico that first caught my attention when reading these novels. Instead, it was the presence of a particular set of historical referents: Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust. Viewed in the light of stories by Jorge Luis Borges from decades before such as ‘El milagro secreto’ (The Secret Miracle) and ‘Deutsches Requiem’, as well as Carlos Fuentes’ enigmatic novel *Cambio de piel* (Change of Skin), José Emilio Pacheco’s *Morirás lejos* (You Will Die in a Distant Land), Carlos Onetti’s *El Pozo* (The Well) and Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* (Artificial Respiration), the examination of these

interrelated historical phenomena formed part of a sporadic – but significant – Latin American literary corpus that had built up since the events themselves unfolded in the early part of the twentieth century.

There has been an accelerating trend in dealing with these themes among a new generation of Latin American authors, starting with Roberto Bolaño's *La literatura nazi en América* (Nazi Literature in the Americas) published in 1996. Bolaño's fictional anthology of 'nazi' writers was followed closely by two post-war detective novels: Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor* (In Search of Klingsor) and Padilla's *Amphitryon* (Shadow without a Name), discussed earlier. Bolaño produced another significant Nazi / Second World War-themed plotline in the posthumously published *2666*. This came out in the same year as Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *Los informantes* (The Informers; 2004) – a novel that interweaves the story of a father and son with that of a Jewish émigré to Colombia and the wider United States foreign policy in the Americas during the Second World War. Soon after, two Argentine interventions emerged: Patricio Pron's *El comienzo de la primavera* (The Beginning of Spring), the story of an Argentine student who bears witness to debates about Nazi complicity amongst philosophy faculty members in Germany; and Lucía Puenzo's *Wakolda* (2010), a re-imagining of the famous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele's trajectory through Argentina as he fled capture by the Mossad. Finally, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, two novels by Brazilian authors appeared: Michel Laub's *Diário de Queda* (Diary of the Fall; 2011), about a Jewish Brazilian whose grandfather had survived Auschwitz, and Marcos Peres' *O Evangelho segundo Hitler* (The Gospel according to Hitler; 2013), an apocryphal reinterpretation of the life and work of Borges linking him to a satanic cult formed of Nazi officials.

This list is by no means exhaustive. It does not include texts with minor related subplots or characters. It forced me, however, to consider the following: is it a coincidence that many of the most successful contemporary Latin American authors have chosen to re-visit this particular historical moment and its aftermath? Do these narratives have anything in common in their approaches to the subject? Are they similar engagements to those of their canonised precursors such as Borges, Fuentes, Onetti and Piglia? Or does this wave represent new directions in Latin American (and world) literature?

This book sets out a framework within which to answer these questions. By taking a thematic, rather than national, approach to contemporary Latin American literature, I offer a cross-sectional portrait of a generation of authors who are usually considered less likely to share commonalities

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across national and regional boundaries than previous generations. Attempts to delineate 'generations' are always imperfect and incomplete; but at the very least I propose that there is an important distinction to be made between the immediate post-'Boom' generation (identified and characterised by Donald Shaw, amongst others) and the generation of authors predominantly born in the 1960s and 1970s examined here. The 'Boom' generation itself constituted a phenomenon against which the production and success of all subsequent Latin American authors continues to be measured, to some degree. The so-called big four – Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez – achieved success on a scale not seen in Latin America prior to their eruption on the world literary scene in the 1960s. A brief literary and contextual history from this point to the present will provide a basis for establishing what is different about Bolaño, Volpi and others from the Boom and the post-Boom writers.

Although there is some debate as to the specific characteristics of the Boom generation, two of the main distinctions of its writers were as follows: first, their cultivation of a strong cross-country (Latin American) affiliation between themselves; and second, their achievement of the *internationalisation* of Latin American literature. It was Europe's engagement in two brutal wars for a significant part of the first half of the twentieth century that, in many ways, created the cultural conditions for the Boom generation to break onto the world stage and become one of the best-known cultural movements from the Latin American region. The Boom authors seized upon the loss of status and legitimacy of Europe as a 'civilisational' cultural model, to narratively present their own alternative ways of being-in-the-world. Indeed, the genre of 'Marvellous' or 'Magical' realism, which became almost synonymous with 'Latin American literature' for the non-Latin American reading public, represented an attempt, according to Phillip Swanson, to 'develop a non-Eurocentric Latin Americanist perspective' (*New Novel* 9).

The Cuban Revolution further contributed to the sense that an alternative model of social and economic community was possible and itself shaped the nature of cultural debates in the 1960s. The strong investment of the Cuban regime in culture saw a growing demand for political commitment from writers, asking them to make a choice between a dubious dichotomy of revolutionary (socially realist) literature and formal experimentation (aestheticist / apolitical writing) (Franco, *Decline* 2). Whilst Jean Franco makes a case for a tension between the Boom writers' claims of public commitment and their essentially apolitical production,

Swanson, in line with his notion of the Boom as essentially a marketing boom, points out, ‘One might even be forgiven for suspecting that the new novel, of the Boom in particular, depends on ambivalence and ambiguity for its literary appeal, yet needs attractive political certainties for its promotion and marketing’ (Swanson, *New Novel* 9).

Carlos Fuentes, one of the main thrusts behind the Boom’s cultural coherence, provides a useful case study of how contemporary international and domestic Mexican events shaped literary preoccupations, as well as how an interpretation of Nazi history was incorporated into this picture. Closely monitored by the FBI due to his initial support for the Cuban Revolution he was denied entry to the United States during the early sixties and later due to his criticism of the Vietnam War. Whilst his most significant early novels *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air is Clear*) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*) dealt with national themes, including a critique of the stagnation of the Mexican Revolution, the fissurous political landscape of the late 1960s produced *Cambio de piel* (*Change of Skin*). This represented a shift away from the preoccupation with national identity and an investigation of Nazism alongside other eruptions of barbarous violence. The novel emblematised a moment of widespread disillusion in the authority of nation-states, as the debates about the war in Vietnam came to a head and student movements across the globe clashed with the authorities.

The novel was published only two years earlier than Fuentes’ work of criticism, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (*The New Hispanic-American Novel*), and is thus often seen as the practical application of Fuentes’ theory, which included a call for the discovery of a ‘mythic language’ for the region (discussed further in Chapter 3). *Cambio de piel*’s chaotic structure and juxtaposition of violent events – such as the conquest of Mexico, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam War – suggest that violence is cyclical, evoking Nietzsche’s notion of the ‘eternal recurrence’ of war (*The Gay Science* 285). Indeed, Fuentes uncannily predicts the next horrific event in Mexico: The Tlatelolco massacre, which occurred the year after the publication of *Cambio de piel* in October of 1968. It was prophesied in a passage in which graffiti from the recent election of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz is juxtaposed by Fuentes to a vignette about the massacre at Cholula during the conquest of Mexico (17). It was the administration of Díaz Ordaz that ordered the military occupation of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the military to fire on a protest in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, which is said to have killed around 300 people, many of them students, and wounded many more (Zolov 130).

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By the 1970s, any revolutionary optimism remaining in the rest of the region was also waning as – in an increasingly polarised ideological context – other states turned to the use of military force to suppress popular insurrection and roll back the tide of revolution. In the Southern Cone, dictatorships of varying levels of violent brutality took hold; leftist movements and their cultural narratives were driven underground, and many authors were forced into exile. The unifying moment of the Boom appeared to have been short-lived; there was an abrupt end to high-modernist textual ‘games’ and writers turned towards more personal themes to evade censorship or interrogate the particular forms of violence suffered within their respective societies. It is an engagement with these violent histories and their immediate aftermaths that has been the most urgent concern of the so-called post-Boom generation.

Post-Boom authors felt the need to move away from the Boom’s avoidance of three elements that would become broadly characteristic of the latter’s production: ‘plot-centred novels, overt political commitment and proletarian characters and settings’ (Shaw 7). Established figures of the post-Boom include Manuel Puig, Antonio Skármeta, Gustavo Sainz, Sergio Ramírez, Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas and Miguel Barnet. Other characteristics that broadly united them included a shift from the ‘epic’ to a focus on the everyday; an emphasis on dissidence and rebelliousness, pain and the body; and practices of mourning and critical melancholia.⁵ In Chile the Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA) was emblematic of an ethical-political avant-garde moment of the 1980s. In some ways their practices – albeit more visceral and shocking as a response to the more acutely concentrated political violence of the era – anticipated the ethical orientation of some of the more contemporary works that will be analysed here; likewise, the focus upon touch and the haptic. Touch is configured in the more recent novels as a potential site for reconciliation, whereas language proves to be violent and exclusionary.

The authors primarily examined here – Patricio Pron, Lucía Puenzo, Roberto Bolaño, Marcos Peres, Jorge Volpi, Ignacio Padilla, Juan Gabriel Vásquez and Michel Laub – have diverse styles and concerns amongst themselves. But it is worth considering the factors they have in common, as well as the differences; and how, in turn, their preoccupations differ to those of the generation known as the post-Boom. One such difference, I suggest, is that these newer works are characterised by an attempt to move beyond – or enact closure of – the dictatorship-related themes that were a key concern of much fiction produced in the 1980s and early 1990s. This goes almost directly against what I had expected to find.

In line with memory and trauma studies, disciplines that have taken lessons from the aftermath of the Holocaust as a means of understanding other contexts in which dictatorship and post-dictatorship trauma is widespread, I imagined that authors would refer to the themes of Nazism, the Second World War or the Holocaust as means to explore, in a displaced sense, Latin American military dictatorships.

Indeed, even if the texts do flirt with such comparisons, more often than not, they emphasise the different historical circumstances, rather than any meaningful similarities between these spatially, temporally and politically distinct cases of dictatorship, oppression and violence. I argue that crucial to understanding these works is to acknowledge their rejection of a wholly introspective and self-critical gaze towards their own societies. Instead, they turn the mirror back on Western culture and politics to reflect the structural flaws of the contemporary *international* order. What they show is that aspects of Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust exemplify the acute philosophical and material tensions inherent in our modern global system of governance in times of democracy, as much as in times of dictatorship.

Furthermore, with the extension of a neoliberal political economy across the globe and the deepening of structures of inequality, precarity and war – the authors examined here are increasingly exploring *ontological* means of expressing our relationships to one another. This might attest to the fact that, as we have seen in this section, conventional politics does not seem to have created communities that protect people's basic human rights to live out their lives in a natural way, with shelter, care, dignity and without the fear of death or torture. The need for an ontological approach to the problems facing humanity is explicit in the philosophical work of Jean-Luc Nancy and begins with an assertion of the violence inherent to the Western metaphysics of the subject; also humorously and creatively alluded to in Ricardo Piglia's engagement with the Nazi theme in his 1980 novel *Respiración artificial* (*Artificial Respiration*).

In some ways, Piglia's novel is a bridge between the two generational processes described here (the first: the post-Boom, an introspective gaze during the time of dictatorship; second, the critique of the wider global system) but must properly be situated in the post-Boom camp. Famously evading censorship by the regime, it casts a sideways look at the Argentine dictatorship by weaving a fabric of convoluted and digressionary conversations about literature, history and philosophy. The second part of the novel (entitled 'Descartes') consists of Professor Tardewski, an ex-student of Wittgenstein living in Argentina, telling anecdotes to the narrator

Emilio Renzi. One of the anecdotes is about a trip to the British Museum library, where he was mistakenly given a copy of *Mein Kampf* by Hitler. Tardewski, who is superstitious ‘como buen positivista lógico (like any good logical positivist)’ decides that it is fate that the text has fallen into his hands, so he decides to read it. What struck him first, he says, ‘lo que comprendí de inmediato fue que *Mein Kampf* era una suerte de reverso perfecto o de apócrifa continuación del *Discurso del método* . . . de René Descartes (what I understood immediately was that *Mein Kampf* was a kind of perfect reverse, or apocryphal continuation of the *Discourse on Method* . . . of René Descartes)’ (Piglia, *Respiración artificial* 241). He elaborates, ‘¿Podría ser ese libro (pensaba yo mientras anochecía en la biblioteca) considerado como una flexión final en la evolución del subjetivismo racionalista inaugurado por Descartes? (Could this book [I thought as the night drew in in the library] be considered as a final flexion in the evolution of the rational subjectivity inaugurated by Descartes?)’ (242). Elaborating upon the similarities he goes on to say, ‘Los dos eran monólogos de un sujeto más o menos alucinado que se disponía a negar toda verdad anterior y a probar de un modo imperativo e inflexible, en qué lugar, desde qué posición se podía (y se debía) erigir un sistema que fuera a la vez absolutamente coherente y filosóficamente imbatible (Both were monologues by a subject, more or less delusional, who were disposed to negate all previous truths and prove, by imperative and inflexible means, from which place, by which position, one could (and one should) elaborate a system that was at once absolutely coherent and philosophically invincible)’ (Piglia, *Respiración artificial* 242). The ‘subject’ who constructs ordinary discourse, like Descartes inventing – by his own fireplace – the *cogito*, does not take into account the Other or others and is therefore the ‘absolute for-itself which is both impossible (humans need to cooperate to survive) and ultimately violent (Nancy, *Inoperative Community* 4). Tardewski humorously critiques both the method and violent ends of the *cogito* saying, ‘se podría decir que Descartes escribió una novela policial: cómo puede el investigador sin moverse de su asiento frente a la chimenea, sin salir de su cuarto, usando sólo su razón, desechar todas las falsas pistas, destruir una por una todas las dudas hasta conseguir describir por fin al criminal, esto es, al *cogito*. Porque el *cogito* es el asesino, sobre eso no tengo la menor duda, dijo Tardewski (one could say that Descartes wrote a police-procedural novel: how can the investigator, without moving from his seat by the chimney, without leaving his room, using only his reason, eliminate all the red herrings, destroy one by one all of the doubts until managing to describe, finally, the criminal, that is, the *cogito*. Because the

cogito is the murderer, of this I am in no doubt, said Tardewski' (Piglia, *Respiración artificial* 244). The *cogito* is the murderer, of that Tardewski is in no doubt. That is because the non-discursive self-referential ego has no space for the Other, the contingent, or experiential knowledge. It is for this reason that, for Jean-Luc Nancy, instead of the 'subject-representing' we should think in terms of the 'being-communicating' (*Inoperative Community* 24). Sovereignty must be *shared*: 'shared between *Daseins*, between singular existences that are not subjects and whose relation—the sharing itself—is not a communion, not the appropriation of an object, nor a self-recognition, nor even a communication as this is understood to exist between subjects' (*Inoperative Community* 25). These singular beings, Nancy argues, are 'constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced* by the sharing that makes the *others*: other for one another' (*Inoperative Community* 25). In the novels *Diário da Queda* and *Los informantes*, examined in Chapter 4, the spacing between members the same family is asserted as a means of seeking to disrupt the divisive function of inherited conflict and/or memory, and its use to justify violence in the present.

Piglia seeks to come to terms with the brutal violence of the Argentine dictatorship at a time when its threat is still very real. Yet by incorporating references to other forms of violence, such as that unleashed in line with the blueprint from Hitler's self-referential *Mein Kampf*, he demonstrates that this violence is not unique to Argentina, but inherent to the operation of the *Subject-State* (see Section 'From "Imagined" to "Inoperative" Communities'). In the following passage from *La ciudad ausente* (The Absent City), Piglia articulates one of the uncomfortable realities at the heart of a number of novels in this thesis (most notably Puenzo's *Wakolda* and Bolaño's *2666*). I shall quote at length:

La tortura es la culminación de esa aspiración al saber, el grado máximo de la inteligencia institucional. El Estado piensa así, por eso la policía fundamentalmente tortura a los pobres, sólo a los que son pobres o son obreros o están desahuciados y se ve que son negros, los torturan los policías y los militares y muy excepcionalmente han torturado a gente que pertenece a otra clase social y en esos casos se han desatado grandes escándalos . . . porque cuando se deciden a torturar a gente de rango un poco más elevado se produce un escándalo y en estos años, después que el Ejército actuó atacado por el rencor homicida y el pánico y fueron torturados y brutalizados hombres, mujeres y niños pertenecientes a clases distinguidas de la sociedad, todo se denunció y se supo y si bien por supuesto la mayor parte de los asesinados han sido obreros y campesinos, también fueron ejecutados sacerdotes, estancieros, industriales, estudiantes, y al final tuvieron que

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retroceder ante la presión internacional, que acepta como un dato de hecho que se masacre y se torture a los humillados del campo y a los pobres, a los desgraciados afebrados de los ghettos y de los barrios bajos de la ciudad, pero reacciona cuando se trata de ese modo a los intelectuales y a los policías y a los hijos de las familias acomodadas.

Torture is the culmination of this aspiration to knowledge, the maximum degree of institutional intelligence. The State thinks that way, which is why the police habitually torture the poor, only the poor or the workers and the dispossessed who are visibly darker-skinned; the police and military torture them and very exceptionally they have tortured people who belong to a different social class, and those cases have provoked huge scandals . . . because when you decide to torture people of a slightly higher social status it causes a scandal. And these years, in which the military has acted based upon a homicidal panic, men, women and children belonging to the distinguished sectors of society have been tortured and brutalised, everything was denounced and brought to light, and even if the majority of those killed were workers and peasants, there were also priests, landowners, industrialists, students, and in the end they had to retreat in the face of international pressure, which accepts as a given that the humble rural folk and the poor, and the disenfranchised of the ghettos and the low-class neighbourhoods are massacred and tortured, but reacts when intellectuals, police and the children of well-to-do families are treated this way.

(Piglia, *La ciudad ausente* 118)

The most extreme form of (biopolitical) control or ‘aspiration to knowledge’ is expressed through torture, and Piglia presents a scenario in which poor people, workers and people of colour are routinely and habitually tortured (the implication is, during times of ‘normal’ political and economic governance); it is only when ‘people of slightly higher social status’ are tortured (under ‘states of exception’/dictatorship) that ‘international pressure’ comes to intervene (*La ciudad ausente* 118). The wider implications of this are that political memory work (in other words, using fiction as a space within which to mourn losses incurred during dictatorship), whilst necessary and urgent for those involved, in certain senses replaces a more sustained and universal critique of the violence of the contemporary economic system. Walter Benjamin’s maxim that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ is a running theme throughout the chapters that follow (*Illuminations* 257).

Among the new generation examined here, the attempted closure of political memory work related to the ‘post-dictatorship’ or ‘transition’ periods is the first of two broad trends in contemporary Latin American literature that I observe. The second relates to a shift away from confidence in traditional forms of political institutions and collective movements,

towards a form of politics that is, in reality, more of an *ethical ontology*: the narrative rehearsal of relationships of responsibility-towards-others. It is this approach to community that, for some of the authors, holds the potential to lay the fundamental and necessary groundwork, for the alteration of our most urgently preoccupying humanitarian injustices and crises: from macro phenomena such as mass racialised labour exploitation, to personal problems such as alcoholism and social alienation. Central to this disillusionment in politics qua parties and other traditional institutions is their heavy reliance on territorially bounded, exclusionary entities: in other words, nations.

From ‘Imagined’ to ‘Inoperative’ Communities

If one wants to critique nationalism in any form, the horrors of Nazi ideology and its destructive consequences are an excellent place to start. More broadly, however, struggles over nationhood (of one form or another) have been responsible for hundreds of millions of deaths over the last two hundred years. It was this fact that provided the impulse for Benedict Anderson’s now classic study, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. How was it possible that these relatively recent constructions (nations) had persuaded ‘so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings’ (7). In his study into the origins of nationalism, Anderson finds that novels and newspapers were crucial in forging a sense of territorial and cultural connection in the early days of nationhood by describing national landscapes and customs to their readers. As Anderson notes, the development of ‘nationalist’ sentiments emerged in the Americas prior to in Europe. The desire for independent control over politics and economic resources by creole elites necessitated ideological separation from the Spanish and a way for each nascent nation to culturally distinguish itself from its nearest neighbours (50). This sparked a long tradition in which Latin American writers sought to identify ‘national’ characteristics and inspire patriotic loyalty often, as Doris Sommer has found, through representing fictional romances between people from different sectors of society. A useful by-product, therefore, of authors such as Volpi and Padilla writing stories about Nazism, set in Europe, is a critique of the residual *cultural* nationalism that expects them to continue in this tradition.

Unlike many of their literary forebears, the authors examined in this study resist the historic role of literature as a means of creating an identification of the ‘subject’ or ‘citizen’ with their given state. Rebecca