

From 'Imagined' to 'Inoperative' Communities: The Un-working of National and Latin American Identities in Contemporary Fiction

Over the last twenty years the Mexican writer Jorge Volpi has frequently questioned the existence of Hispanic/Latin American literature.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes this will be in the form of a diplomatic question: '¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de narrativa hispanoamericana?' ['What are we talking about when we talk of Hispanic American narrative?'] (Volpi, 2008: 100).<sup>2</sup> At other times it will be an explicit and controversial statement like 'La literatura latinoamericana ya no existe' ['Latin American literature no longer exists']<sup>3</sup>: the title of his article for the *Universidad de México* magazine. His arguments usually follow a series of steps. First, he will acknowledge that a regional literature could be seen to have existed for almost two centuries following the Independence era, citing the common language and tradition. He will write about the 'Boom' writers of the second half of the Twentieth Century as the culmination of this history, by virtue of the fact that they saw themselves as 'parte del mismo tronco común' ['fruits of a common tree'].<sup>4</sup> But then he will chart Latin American literature's demise and extinction leading up to the millennium.

This chapter examines some of the challenges facing students and researchers in the study of contemporary Latin American literature, in particular in the decades before and after the turn of the millennium. In order to narrow the scope of the task (a necessary process, as I shall demonstrate) I examine a particular trope that has become popular amongst some successful Latin American authors of recent times: that is, writing about the themes of Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust. Between 1996 and 2015 there have been at least eight texts that have all taken one of these themes as their central element, more than ten if you include Brazilian texts, and many others that mention Nazis as part of a sub-plot.<sup>5</sup> This raises the question *why* are

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<sup>1</sup> Volpi uses both terms at different times. Here I am technically referring to Hispanic American literature, given that the term excludes Portuguese-speaking Brazil. However, I shall predominantly use the term 'Latin American' since it is the broader frame within which the regional literature is usually discussed.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all translations from Spanish into English are by the author of this chapter. Jorge Volpi, *El insomnio de Bolívar: cuatro consideraciones intempestivas sobre América Latina en el siglo XXI*. (Buenos Aires: Debate, 2009), p.100.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Volpi, 'La literatura latinoamericana ya no existe'. *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 31 (2006), p.90.

<sup>4</sup> Volpi, 'La literatura', p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bolaño, 1996, 2004; Volpi, 1999, 2010; Padilla, 2000; Vásquez 2004; Pron, 2008; Puenzo, 2010.

Latin American authors writing about Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust *now*? What can this tell us about how Latin American authors understand the contemporary exercise of literary writing in the region? Can the recourse to this theme be considered emblematic of a new phase of transnationalism in literature or is it part of a longer history of this process of literary globalization? And if it is a new phase, what makes it 'new'? Answering these questions might offer clues as to how to go about designing research questions and critically approaching a diverse body of regional/transnational work.

### Studying Latin American Literature

When designing research questions in Latin American literary studies it has been traditionally useful to occupy area-based delimitations. In influential cultural theory, the region has been associated with strong historic ties between writing and nationhood. In Benedict Anderson's now-classic text *Imagined Communities*, he argued that print capitalism (novels and newspapers) were decisive in promoting 'national' sentiments. He noted that the need to promote such sentiments arose earlier in the Americas than in Europe: Latin American countries needed to differentiate themselves from their neighbour countries, often with very similar populations and comparably dense and diverse terrains.<sup>6</sup> Their peoples could not so easily be separated by the use of different languages and dialects as in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In order to make people to feel connected within a given territorial unit—without them ever meeting most of their fellow citizens face-to-face—novels sought to undertake an imaginary mapping of the national community by enshrining in writing the identifiable features of these new nations such as their landscapes, their military heroes, and their people and customs.

Even when formal independence from the Spanish had been proclaimed by most of the Latin American territories, there were ongoing (military) disagreements about the exact form that the new communities should take. During this time literature was frequently bound up with

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev ed, (London: Verso, 2006), p.52.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, p. 49.

presenting a persuasive view of the preferred national project of the author, who would often themselves be involved in military consolidation as well. This was the case of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, the Mexican novel chosen by Doris Sommer to exemplify the argument of her seminal work *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*.<sup>8</sup> In this work she observes a trend in 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American novels in seeking to inspire patriotic sentiment through the resolution of class, racial, or economic tensions within the new societies through love stories.<sup>9</sup>

The use of narrative fictions to create and strengthen communal identities is described by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy as 'myth' or 'foundation-by-fiction'.<sup>10</sup> The example he uses to describe myth-making is that of the storyteller of primitive communities who binds the members of a given tribe together by telling them a story about their origins. Myth-making is, then, an integral part of creating a bond between people in a closed community, such as that of a nation. The interest in doing this is that the state can then make demands of its citizens to form a productive work-force contributing to the growth and development of the nation; or exclude people from that territory if they do not possess the required characteristics of having been born there, or having family ties. If necessary, members of the community can be asked to sacrifice themselves to defend the territory in war. Myth-making is therefore naturally a somewhat arbitrary and contradictory process given that national borders tend to be imaginary (and changeable) lines. Just because a person is born on one side of the line, does not mean that they necessarily share more characteristics with the people on the same side of it. Nancy holds that closed communities are necessarily violent and exclusionary and thus calls for us to work towards an 'inoperative' global community, meaning a community that is inclusive of everyone, and does not 'make work out of death'.<sup>11</sup> By this latter phrase he is referring to the idea that lives should not be sacrificed for any community.

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<sup>8</sup> Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Despite the weight of political and military power behind them, we have to bear in mind that the extent of the influence of these novels when first written would have been limited to a very small number of literate elites.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor, trans. by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp 44-53.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy, p. 14.

In the early Twentieth Century Latin American literature became more inclusive of voices that had previously been excluded, but nationhood and cultural nationalism in the arts strengthened. Through more universally-accessible education, reading, writing and citizenship were increasingly democratised. The sectors of the population that needed to be fictionally 'incorporated' into the national project kept growing, and events like the Mexican revolution, as well as the influx of European immigrants to countries like Brazil and Argentina catalysed the production of more popular literature in the region.<sup>12</sup> This body of work started to reflect the plurality of voices and experiences within these wider national units. For Ángel Rama the Mexican Revolution was a key turning point in weakening the close relationship between writing and power. He uses the example of Mariano Azuela who, in his famous novel *Los de abajo* [Those from below], is 'más crítico del intelectual que del jefe revolucionario' ['more critical of the intellectual than the revolutionary boss'].<sup>13</sup>

These shifts further coincided with the rise in popularity of more accessible forms of culture such as film, radio and television. In the early Twentieth Century global flows of migration from Europe to Latin America coincided with the increased circulation of forms of 'electronic mediation' of subjectivities, and yet still long preceded the rupture in modern subject-formation that for Arjun Appadurai happened in the two decades prior to his writing of *Modernity at Large* in the 1990s. In that account he takes 'media' and 'migration' as the defining factors in bringing about this rupture. However, the difference in relation to earlier moments, he holds, is that earlier narratives still formed subjectivities within 'national' imagined bounds. It is only in the last two decades, for Appadurai, that we have reached transnational or even postnational forms of subjectivity because of the now 'massive globalization' of the movement of people and images.<sup>14</sup> This timeline would seem to coincide with Volpi's narrative of the decline of Latin American

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<sup>12</sup> Gareth Williams, *The Other Side of the Popular: Neoliberalism and Subalternity in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Some emblematic examples are Nelly Campobello's *Cartucho* (1931), a chronicle of the Mexican Revolution told through the eyes of a child; the Chilean Manuel Rojas' *Hijo de ladrón* (1951); and Roberto Arlt's writing from the immigrant outskirts of Buenos Aires with novels like *El juguete rabioso* (1926).

<sup>13</sup> Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984), p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.8.

literature. However, there is another key factor more specific to the circulation of *literature* that Volpi seeks to highlight when accounting for the ultimate weakening of regional literary bonds. This relates to a phenomenon that he calls ‘neocolonialismo editorial’ [‘editorial neocolonialism’].<sup>15</sup>

In his book *El insomnio de Bolívar* [The insomnia of Bolívar] Volpi explains that during the economic crises of the 1970s in Latin America, the large regional editorials were acquired by Spanish companies which led to ‘una distorsión en el campo literario en español donde un país con apenas una decimal parte de los hispanohablantes del mundo ejercía –y todavía ejerce—un control casi absoluta sobre la industria editorial de los demás países en conjunto’ [‘a distortion in the field of literature in Spanish where a country with barely one tenth of the world’s Spanish-speakers exercised—and still exercise—almost absolute control over the editorial influence over the rest of the countries together’].<sup>16</sup> In a more recent assessment of the Spanish publishing industry Bernat Ruiz confirms that ‘The Spanish publishing bubble was accompanied by a lack of interest in publishing authors from the other side of the Atlantic’.<sup>17</sup> Ruiz’s article ‘The Fall of the Spanish Publishing Empire’ highlights the fact that even since 2008—when Volpi was writing his analysis—there have been further significant changes in publisher ownership, accentuating a trend towards control of the industry by a few extensive global media corporations. Global Planeta (ranked 10<sup>th</sup> largest in terms of revenue worldwide in 2016)<sup>18</sup> is the only Spanish heavyweight left after Grupo PRISA went bankrupt and sold literary brands such as Alfaguara to Penguin Random House.<sup>19</sup> The so-called Big Five consist of Pearson (UK), Thomson Reuters (Canada), Reed Elsevier (UK/NL/US), Wolters Kluwer (NL) and Penguin Random House now

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<sup>15</sup> Volpi, ‘El insomnio de Bolívar’, p.92.

<sup>16</sup> Volpi, ‘El insomnio de Bolívar’, p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Bernat Ruiz, ‘The Fall of the Spanish Publishing Empire’, *Logos: The Professional Journal for the Book World*, 26 (2015), p.9.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Milliot, ‘The World’s 52 Largest Book Publishers, 2016’, *Publishers Weekly* (2016)

<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/71268-the-world-s-52-largest-book-publishers-2016.html>> [accessed 6 October 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Ruiz, p.10.

owned by the German company Bertelsmann.<sup>20</sup> Consumer markets by revenue are led by the United States, China, Germany, the United Kingdom and France.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that Latin American authors are competing in a highly globalized market, with a deficit of Spanish-language stakeholders to champion their cultural production. This shift in market share and orientation might be one reason that a topic such as Nazism—that seems to appeal to a European and U.S. market—might become popular amongst Latin American writers who know that they are primarily targeting such markets. However, that is by no means the only or most significant hypothesis. Another key reason, I argue, is that the ideology of Nazism, and the particular horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust exemplify some of the most extreme dangers of closed-communitarian or identity-based thinking. These dangers are not just relevant to states of exception, cases of authoritarian rule like the Nazi government in Germany, but are also structurally inherent to territorial democracies as well; as is evident when modern states, for example, exclude access for refugees. Before moving on to examine the way in which Volpi and Padilla seek to highlight the violence of identitarian thinking in their two novels, I shall briefly chart the history of ‘myth-making’ in Mexico to further contextualise their ‘postnational’ gestures.

### Mexican Myth-Making

In Mexico, over the course of the Twentieth Century a particularly strong myth-making apparatus was developed that, even more closely than in other parts of the region, tied writing to state power. This was due, in large part, to the cultural policy of the post-revolutionary government, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutionalized Revolutionary Party; PRI] who were able to direct and shape the Mexican myths over the 71 years that they remained in power as a

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<sup>20</sup> Ruiz, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> ‘International Publishers Association Annual Report 2015 – 2016’, *Internationalpublishers.org*. <[https://www.internationalpublishers.org/images/reports/Annual\\_Report\\_2016/IPA\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015-2016\\_interactive.pdf](https://www.internationalpublishers.org/images/reports/Annual_Report_2016/IPA_Annual_Report_2015-2016_interactive.pdf)> [accessed 6 October 2018].

one-party state. Some of the most iconic examples of the state-led attempt to create an identification of the population with certain codes of 'Mexicanness' were the famous public murals by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros. Amongst other written works, there were two influential texts that set out to 'identify' the features of the national character: *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* [The Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico] by Samuel Ramos<sup>22</sup> and *El laberinto de la soledad* [The Labyrinth of Solitude] by Octavio Paz.<sup>23</sup> They identified certain archetypes which ostensibly characterised the national psyche such as the 'pelado', the 'macho' and 'la chingada'.<sup>24</sup>

Mexico's representative of the 'Boom' generation, Carlos Fuentes, engaged at length with such archetypes to begin to nuance as well as deconstruct them. A capable theorist and very adaptable thinker, Fuentes' own ideas about the role of the writer and the intersection between nationhood and subjectivity shifted over the course of his career. The association of the writer's task with 'myth-making' was strong in Fuentes' writing of the 1960s. In his text *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* [The New Hispanic-American Novel], in many ways the 'manifesto' of the Boom generation, he describes the novel as consisting of 'mito, language y estructura' ['myth, language and structure'], explaining that he believed that the Latin American author should engage in 'myth-making' in order to bring their national cultures into the position of the 'universal' that had been claimed by European civilization for too long.<sup>25</sup> However, in novels such as *Cambio de piel* [Change of Skin] (1967) he, too, radically highlighted the logical fallacy of national identity and the dangers of sovereignty.

In *La jaula de la melancolía* [The Cage of Melancholy] the Mexican sociologist Roger Bartra examined the figures and myths which belonged to the way in which Mexican intellectuals constructed the Mexican popular subject. Critical of this process he says, 'Me interesa [...] mostrar críticamente la forma que adopta el mito a fines del siglo xx, pues me parece que los mexicanos

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<sup>22</sup> Samuel Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (México: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, [1934] 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad. Posdata* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, [1950] 1981).

<sup>24</sup> 'Pelado' means a kind of vagrant and 'la chingada' means 'the raped one' referring originally to the rape of indigenous women by the Spanish conquerors.

<sup>25</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*. (Barcelona: Seix Barral, [1967] 2001) p.20.

debemos deshacernos de esta imagería que oprime nuestras conciencias y fortalece la dominación despótica del llamado Estado de la Revolución mexicana' ['I am interested [...] in critically showing the way in which myth is adopted at the end of the Twentieth Century, because it seems to be that we Mexicans should do away with this imaginary that oppresses our consciences and strengthens the despotic domination of the so-called State of the Mexican Revolution'].<sup>26</sup> As is evident, he too recognises myth-making as a mechanism of control. He further proceeds to show that there is nothing unique about the Mexican myths since they are all, he argues, based upon the same age-old Western archetypes used to interpellate citizens of all modern capitalist states.<sup>27</sup> For example, the dichotomy of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mexican patron saint, and 'La Malinche'—the indigenous woman attributed with facilitating the conquest of Mexico through translating for Hernán Cortés and becoming his lover—are compared by Bartra to the two biblical Marys: Mary the virgin mother of Christ and Mary Magdalene the prostitute.<sup>28</sup>

Volpi and Padilla were, therefore, by no means the first Mexicans to question the role of the writer in articulating national imaginaries. Despite this, in 1996 they broke onto the scene with this message as part of a group of five authors of a literary manifesto called the 'Manifiesto Crack' [Crack Manifesto]. In it they each presented their vision of 'Crack' literature (meaning their own work) and how it would be different from what came before. In Padilla's section he said:

Ahí hay más bien una mera reacción contra el agotamiento; cansancio de que la gran literatura latinoamericana y el dudoso realismo mágico se hayan convertido, para nuestras letras, en magiquísimo trágico; cansancio de los discursos patriotereros que por tanto tiempo nos han hecho creer que Rivapalacios escribía mejor que su contemporáneo Poe.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (México: Grijalbo, [1987] 1996), p.17.

<sup>27</sup> Bartra, p. 191.

<sup>28</sup> Bartra, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> Jorge Volpi et al., 'Manifiesto Crack'. *Lateral. Revista de Cultura* 70 (2000), p.5.



[There is a kind of reaction against exhaustion; tiredness of the fact that the great Latin American literature and the doubtful magical realism have become, for our literature, tragic magicalism; tired of patriotic discourses that, for so long, have made us believe that Rivapalacios wrote better than his contemporary Poe.]

Padilla was forced to clarify afterwards that he was not criticizing the grand masters of Latin American literature or the inventor of magical realism, Gabriel García Márquez, but rather, the market demand for magical realism that had led other Latin American authors to keep producing magical realist works in the hope of producing bestsellers. The manifesto was met with hostility in the Mexican cultural context. There were both criticisms of their audacity to break with the great Latin American literary tradition, as well as from those who pointed out that in every generation there was some kind of attempt at rupture so that they were not as original as they seemed to think. Despite this shaky start, which pre-disposed critics to judge their literary production harshly, eventually the authors found success. Volpi and Padilla both won prestigious literary prizes in Spain leading to their eventual re-incorporation into Mexican literary favour.

The two novels that won the prizes were those about Nazism and the aftermath of the Second World War. Published three years after the release of the manifesto these novels also caused a stir in Mexico due to the fact that they were not set in Mexico, had no Mexican characters and made no mention of Mexico whatsoever. The controversy over this matter proved the extent to which the expectations on Mexican/Latin American authors were still bound up with articulating national realities on the global stage. Time and time again Volpi and Padilla were forced to reiterate the same kind of statement that Jorge Luis Borges had made in the Argentine context of the mid-century that 'Shakespeare se habría asombrado si hubieran pretendido limitarlo a temas ingleses' [Shakespeare would have been shocked if they had tried to limit him to English themes'].<sup>30</sup> Volpi's defence in an interview was the following:

Para mí era absolutamente natural escribir sobre un país que no fuera el mío -por un lado, continuando una vasta tradición latinoamericana que tiene su punto medular en Borges-

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<sup>30</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', *Discusión*. (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957), p.156.

, y no dejó de sorprenderme que la crítica señalara con tanta asiduidad esta aparente voluntad de distanciarme de lo latinoamericano. Ahora simplemente creo que un escritor latinoamericano puede escribir sobre cualquier tema posible con la misma naturalidad crítica.<sup>31</sup>

[For me it was absolutely natural to write about a country that was not my own—on the one hand continuing a vast tradition that was measured by Borges--, and it never ceased to surprise me that the critical establishment would signal with such assiduousness this apparent desire to distance myself from the Latin American. I now simply believe that a Latin American author can write about any given topic with the same critical capacity].

The difference between when Borges was making his statement, and Volpi his, is that the early 1950s was perhaps the peak of the influence of 'nationhood'. Postcolonial nationalist movements were breaking out all over the world and states such as Argentina and Mexico were pursuing economic self-reliance through Import Substitution Industry (ISIs). By the time Volpi was writing, on the other hand, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had been signed and increasingly globalized economic structures had been reducing the significance of national borders for the movement of trade and capital for a few decades. It is significant, however, that in both of their respective periods, Borges and Volpi used the theme of Nazism in fiction to denounce closed identities and cultural nationalisms.<sup>32</sup>

### Nazism in Contemporary Latin American Literature

Volpi and Padilla are not the first Latin American authors of recent times to take up the themes of Nazism and the Second World War. Nazi characters and themes featured in a number of Roberto Bolaño's texts including, most obviously, *La literatura nazi en América* [Nazi Literature in the

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<sup>31</sup> Jorge Volpi, 'Entrevista' in López de Abiada, José Manuel, Félix Jiménez Ramírez, and Augusta López Bernasocchi (eds.). *En busca de Jorge Volpi: ensayos sobre su obra* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2004), p. 372-3.

<sup>32</sup> See Daniel Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

Americas] published in 1996.<sup>33</sup> As the title suggests, a key difference with Volpi and Padilla's treatment of Nazism was that Bolaño's geographical scope was 'the Americas'. The text consisted of a fictional anthology of figures from the region who were either Nazi 'precursors', connected to the Nazis in some way or Nazi/neo-Nazi *aficionados*. This gesture worked to de-centre Nazism from geographically and temporally defined associations with Germany and the countries Hitler's army directly invaded. By suggesting that there could be Latin American 'precursors' to Nazism Bolaño further suggests that the ideology that underpinned Nazism was, to a certain extent, global and timeless in its origins.

In literature from the Southern Cone, references to Nazism sometimes pick up on the fact that countries like Argentina and Paraguay granted exile to a significant number of prominent Nazis following the Second World War. Lucía Puenzo's *Wakolda* (2011), for example, fictionally re-constructs the movements of the infamous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele at a time when he was known to be in Argentina, but when his activities and whereabouts were unclear as he fled the Israeli secret service, following their capture of Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Southern Cone narratives might be expected to make parallels between the European fascist dictatorships and the later Latin American military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, or the subsequent transitions to democracy afterwards. Through charting the journey of an Argentinian student through Germany, Patricio Pron's novel *El comienzo de la primavera* (2008) allows post-war questions of complicity within the German university system to speak to similar debates in Argentine society around the time of the ongoing trials of unremorseful generals of the Dirty War (1974-1983).<sup>35</sup> Finally, in the case of *Los informantes* (2004), Juan Gabriel Vásquez deals with the question of the integration of Second World War Jewish immigrants to Colombia, as well as the effects of Second World War foreign policies on German and Japanese populations already settled in the Americas.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *La literatura nazi en América* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Lucía Puenzo, *Wakolda* (Barcelona: Duomo, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Patricio Pron, *El comienzo de la primavera* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Juan Gabriel Vásquez, *Los informantes* (Bogotá: Alfaguara, 2004).

The novels of Volpi and Padilla stand out against these more recent novels in terms of their lack, as mentioned, of reference to any aspect of their own national (Mexican) realities. Instead both authors used their novels to explicitly thematise ‘myth-making’ and questions of identity, and to denounce the violence and suffering caused in the name of upholding or expanding national communities. Volpi’s *En Busca de Klingsor* deals with the investigation by an American physicist (Francis Bacon) who has been employed by the United States army to identify ‘Klingsor’, the code name for Hitler’s chief scientific advisor. The novel takes the form of three ‘books’ each formed of a series of ‘Leyes’ (e.g. ‘Leyes del movimiento narrativo’ [Laws of narrative movement]), ‘Hipótesis’ (e.g. ‘Sobre la infancia y la juventud de Bacon’ [Hypotheses; On the infancy and youth of Bacon]), and ‘Diálogos’ [Dialogues] all interspersed with information about the lives of scientists working on the German Atomic Project, and narrated by the mathematician Gustav Links.<sup>37</sup> The novel, therefore, makes explicit comparisons between literature and science: both legitimising discourses used in different ways. In doing so, Volpi comes to the conclusion that both can be used to the detriment of society if not monitored by careful ethical oversight. Science can be used to invent atomic bombs with the potential to kill millions of people, and fictions—in the form of ‘myths’ as we saw Bartra denounce above—can be used to underpin ‘dominación despótica’ [despotic domination] of populations.<sup>38</sup>

Both *En busca de Klingsor* and Padilla’s *Amphitryon* contain mythic figures in their titles and explicitly thematise myth: Amphitryon is the name of a figure from Ancient Greek myth, and Klingsor is the name of the evil magician taken up in Richard Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*.<sup>39</sup> If myth is used—as described above with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy’s thought—as a mechanism of control and to bind people together into closed communities, in *En busca de Klingsor* Volpi explicitly details the way in which Hitler’s capacity to fabricate a myth of the future (the unification of German blood and soil) allowed him to dominate others:

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For more on this novel and contemporary Latin American narratives dealing with Nazism and the Second World War see Emily Baker, “‘Darse la mano es como desarmar una bomba’: Division by Language and Reconciliation by Touch in *Los informantes* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez. *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*. 51.2 (2017), pp. 417-439.

<sup>37</sup> Jorge Volpi, *En busca de Klingsor* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Bartra, p.17.

<sup>39</sup> Ignacio Padilla, *Amphitryon* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 2000).

En medio de la confusión permanente, nunca falta quien aprovecha la ceguera ajena para aliviar sus propios temores. Alguien se eleva por encima de los otros y, como si se tratase del mayor acto de heroísmo, insiste en ser dueño de una verdad superior. Convencido de sus propósitos, se lanza a procurar el bien de su pueblo, de su raza, de sus amigos, de sus familias o de sus amantes, según el caso, imponiendo su propia fe a la incertidumbre ajena. Toda verdad proclamada es un acto de Violencia, una simulación, un engaño [...] Todo aquel que puede hacer creer a los demás—a los demás débiles—que *conoce* mejor el futuro es capaz de dominar a los otros [...].

Hitler era un *visionario*.<sup>40</sup>

[In the midst of permanent confusion, someone is never lacking that will take advantage of the blindness of others to relieve their own fears. Someone raises themselves above the others and, as if it was the highest act of heroism, insists on being deliverer of a superior truth. Convinced of their proposition, they strive forth to seek the benefits for their race, their friends, their families or their lovers, according to the case, imposing their own beliefs onto others uncertainty. Every truth proclaimed is an act of violence, a simulation, a deceit [...] Whomsoever can make others believe—other weaklings—that they have a better sense of the future is capable of dominating others [...]. Hitler was a visionary].

Volpi shows how this fabrication of a myth of the future is directed toward securing privileges for a closed community made up of the 'race, friends, family' of the speaker, and thereby predicated on the exclusion of others. Despite using the example of Hitler, the quotation is phrased in universal terms. By the narrator's logic anyone that presents a compelling vision of the future can impose themselves upon weaker people.

Padilla's *Amphitryon* deconstructs subjectivity at an even more radical and personal level than Volpi. The novel is divided into five parts each apparently corresponding to a different figure, location and date, for example the first section is entitled: 'Una sombra sin nombre - Franz T. Kretzschmar: Buenos Aires 1957' ['A Shadow without a Name - Franz T. Kretzschmar: Buenos

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<sup>40</sup> Volpi, *En Busca*, p. 440.

Aires, 1957']. However, as the novel progresses it proves almost impossible to match bodies to names since the men going to fight in the First or Second World Wars stake their fate on games of chess, swapping passports, ranks and destinies. In general terms the emphasis is on the anonymity and interchangeability of men at war, contrasted with the over-emphasis on national, ethnic or regional identities that states played upon to boost their fighting numbers. Referring to the First World War the novel says: 'En esa guerra que parecía prolongarse hasta el infinito, tarde o temprano todos los hombres terminarían desangrándose en la misma trinchera. Y sus nombres, como sus vidas, se igualarían al fin en el más rotundo de los anonimatos' 'In this war that appeared to prolong *ad infinitum*, sooner or later all the men would end up bleeding to death in the same trench. And their names like their lives would equal out at the end in the most decisive anonymity'.<sup>41</sup> In a postmodern fashion, the central enigma (never resolved) relates to whether the Eichmann captured in Buenos Aires is actually the 'real' Eichmann since it is suggested that identical doubles of key members in the Nazi hierarchy were made for the purposes of a coup attempt. In neither of the novels is the central question answered: we never know for sure who Klingsor was, nor which Nazi officials managed to escape. This is a decisive break with, and subversion of, the myths that are incorporated into the narratives to lull the reader into a sense of knowing how the stories will play out.

In addition to the thematization of identarian violence, on another level what Volpi and Padilla's novels achieve is to *perform* the 'post-national'. In other words, by refusing to write about Mexico and Mexican themes they refuse to fulfil the function expected of Mexican/Latin American authors to keep creating 'myths' to underpin the national/regional 'imagined communities'. Volpi's desire to take the opportunity to re-shape the relationship between intellectuals and the Mexican state in the wake of the fall of the PRI government after 71 years is explicitly set out in his article 'The End of the Conspiracy'. He says: 'if Mexican society has finally managed to complete its difficult divorce from the PRI party, then perhaps it is time for something

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<sup>41</sup> Padilla, p.23.

similar to take place between Mexican intellectuals and political power'.<sup>42</sup> This 'interruption of the myth' of communal identification is, precisely, the task set out for literature by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*.<sup>43</sup> The final way in which this is done, according to Nancy's thought, is by acknowledging that we are all singular human beings, with a matrix of different things in common with people from all over the world, of different backgrounds, ages, ethnicities and nations. It is appropriate, then, that both Volpi and Padilla end their novels by signing off with their proper names. In this sense they are honest about the status of their authorship: they speak for themselves, and not on behalf of any community in particular.

## Conclusion

Through this brief overview I have shown that there can be value, when studying contemporary Latin American literature, in designing research questions thematically, and not simply sticking to area-based delimitations. The tracing of one particular set of themes—in this case Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust—has shed light on a certain set of globalized flows of people and ideas that historically preceded the extreme age of interconnectedness in which we now live. It revealed ways in which authors re-cast certain moments of history in order to critically intervene in present debates. It also allowed for the discussion of global editorial patterns of marketing and distribution. The theme itself gave an entry-point into condemning the kinds of closed and violent formations that structurally underpin a territorial approach to community, and thus the implicit assumptions we make when we study literature in those terms. This approach does not—and should not—prevent the texts from being adequately contextualized in terms of both the historical context from which they emerge, as well as the national and regional literary traditions that they draw upon, and emerge from, to the degree that these are relevant for the interpretation of the texts. With ongoing and greater integration of the Modern Language areas

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<sup>42</sup> Jorge Volpi, 'The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico', trans. by Carl Good. *Discourse* 23.2 (2001), p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy, p. 63.

as a whole, the thematic approach should pave the way for even more diverse connections between different cultures and academic disciplines in the future.

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