

Report on Oxford Symposium, April 2015

The 'Science in Text and Culture in Latin America' research network held its first symposium in Oxford on 18 April 2015. The theme was 'Science and Culture in Latin America: Transmission, Circulation, Exchange', and short papers were selected on topics relating to cross-fertilizations between science, culture and the arts in Latin America. Papers covered a wide range of countries and historical periods, from the colonial era to the present day via the highly significant nineteenth century, and including examples from Argentina, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Peru. The term 'culture' was interpreted broadly to include early colonial accounts, literary fiction, periodicals, discourses of identity, artistic performance, poetry, bio-art, contemporary cinema and the essay, while 'science' also embraced several different areas of knowledge, including zoology, medicine, psychiatry, criminology, disability, thermodynamics, genetics and conservation.

The critical and theoretical focus of the papers presented was also very diverse, and included the following (among others):

- the relationship between literary bohemianism and ('pseudo')-science in the nineteenth century (Sandra Gasparini)
- the place of science in some of the foundational texts of Spanish American culture, such as Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios reales de los Incas* (Yarí Pérez Marín)
- the relationship between modernity and discourses of social pathology (Michela Coletta)
- how categories borrowed from zoology may illuminate the processes by which cultural identity is formed (Nicola Foote)
- how cultural texts may engage with the science of uncertainty and conceptualize the integration of science and culture in the contemporary world (María Alessandra Woolson)
- how 'Bolivian science' combines 'lo indígena' and 'lo técnico', and how conservation scientists have adapted their practices to conform to local uses of, and discourses on, science (Anne Toomey)
- Humboldt's account of the electrical machine built by a lonely plainsman as a precursor to the figure of the solitary, eccentric creator in Latin American literature (Carlos Fonseca Suárez)
- the influence of thermodynamics on José Vasconcelos's aesthetic thought (Brais Outes-León)
- the depiction of genetic irregularity, inheritance and selection in the work of Lucía Puenzo (Anna Forné)
- maternal impression theory in José Gumilla's eighteenth-century natural history, and exchanges provoked between the scientific and artistic imaginations by the case of 'Marie Sabine', the slave girl with vitiligo (Ruth Hill)
- differing relationships between poetry and scientific discourse in the work of Severo Sarduy, Néstor Perlongher and Jorge Eduardo Eielson, and the combination of modern mathematics and Andean *quipus* in Eielson's poetic-plastic oeuvre (Julio Prieto)
- the role of scientific discourse in tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the novels of César Duayen (Andrea Castro)
- medicine (disability and infirmity) as a site of discursive nation-building in Guatemala, and local adaptations to scientific practice (Heather Vrana)
- how nineteenth-century literature draws on the scientific discourses of geography to promote an ontological vision of the nation (Kari Soriano-Salkjesvik)
- changing conceptions of the relationship between nature and culture, and new explorations of – and challenges to – biopolitics in the work of Brazilian bio-artists (Jens Andermann)

The Steering Committee members present would like to thank all the participants for contributing such a diverse range of insights in this inaugural event. A number of the papers developed valuable perspectives on the specificity of the evolution of scientific discourses and a scientific culture

within Latin America, while others focused on how writers/artists had drawn inspiration from scientific ideas in their creative work, both themes that go to the heart of the objectives set out by the research network. The organizers were particularly pleased that the open call for papers had brought together – as intended – scholars starting to work on the relationship between science and culture in Latin America who had not yet published extensively on the subject, thus encouraging the exchange of ideas and stimulating future work within a field that is still very much in formation.

Strict time-constraints on paper delivery had not made it possible to contextualize individual cases thoroughly within broader debates on interdisciplinarity and the relationship between science and culture, or to theorize this relationship more explicitly. In its meeting following the symposium, those members of the Steering Committee present felt it was important, going forward, to allow more time for such considerations, and to encourage them by soliciting papers on theoretical debates. It was decided, for example, to form a panel on ‘Theorizing Science and Culture After Foucault’ at the Buenos Aires symposium, and to focus the Cambridge symposium more centrally on exchanges and divergences between Latin American, Anglophone and Francophone approaches to studying relationships between science and culture.