

## Report on San Juan Symposium, September 2015

The second symposium of the 'Science in Text and Culture in Latin America' research network was held in San Juan (Puerto Rico) on 10-11 September 2015. The theme was 'Science Fiction from Latin America: The (Re)invention of a Genre', and papers were invited to consider Latin American contributions to the global SF genre, seeking to expand and challenge existing views of its origins and evolution. While SF is often considered an imported genre in Latin America, we sought to challenge this perspective by delving into the historical origins of the genre, and exploring its specific evolution in relation to scientific thought and fictional practice in the region, as well as examining its stylistic hallmarks and its distinctive reworkings of European and North American projections of imperialism and modernity.

Papers covered historical periods stretching from the late nineteenth century to the present day, focusing on a wide range of national contexts, including Argentina, Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Puerto Rico. There was a good balance between papers taking a more historical perspective on the origins and development of the genre, sometimes from a comparative perspective, and with those questioning the contributions of Latin American science fiction to current cultural and theoretical debates on globalized identities, neoliberalism, posthuman and ecological perspectives. In her opening keynote, Joanna Page brought together history and theory in her thesis that what distinguishes Argentine science fiction from the more dominant genre of the fantastic is its commitment to exploring different forms of materialism with a simultaneous pursuit of reflexivity: questioning, for example, the prosthetic function of literature or the role of technology in the transmission of culture. The debate following this paper led to a first line of discussion regarding the ways in which a theory of Latin American science fiction needs to be historicized to account for the ways in which different socio-political formations and literary traditions yield variations in cultural theorization, within a country or a region.

Many presenters focused on SF as a particularly fertile genre for literary acts of appropriation, parody and resistance, and a powerful tool in the decolonization of thought or when harnessed to specific forms of political contestation. Such was the case in Itala Schmelz Herner and Regina Tattersfield Yarza's joint paper on science fiction as both a baroque and countercultural genre, as evidenced in the cinematic work of René Rebetez, in which they pointed to SF as a means of contestation with respect to Amerindian civilizations.

The research conducted by some paper presenters was clearly making a significant contribution to the task of constructing a national or regional genealogy for SF in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean. This was the case, for example, with three of our keynotes: Emily Maguire's presentation on Cuban SF; Rafael Acevedo's discussion of Puerto Rico's relation to the genre from the nineteenth century; and Soledad Quereilhac's presentation on fin-de-siècle scientific fictions from Argentina. One of the challenges posed by historicizing SF in Latin America is the genre's lack of prestige in many countries, as well as its close imbrication with other genres, which has meant that most authors of SF texts cannot clearly or uniquely be defined as such: most have written one or two SF texts within a more diverse body of work, or their writing demonstrates a debt to the genre but cannot fully be categorized as SF (such is the case, for example, of Roberto Bolaño as presented by Josué Solís Hernández). Our shifting understanding of the genre and its evolution has also meant that it is only now possible to trace backwards and recuperate texts that had previously not been considered part of the SF corpus.

It was obvious, of course, that the label 'Latin American' obscures a wealth of differences in the themes and styles of SF in the region. There is a clear difference, for example, between the more metaphysical leanings of SF in the *rioplatense* region and SF as practised in countries with a greater legacy of magical realism (a problematic discussed by Jaime Orrego in his discussion on Colombian

José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo) or the fantastic (as delineated by Erwin Snauwaert in his paper on Peruvian author José Güich Rodríguez). One way, therefore, to distinguish Latin American science fiction is to consider the specific relationships it maintains with the genres around it, including fantasy and magical realism, or to locate it within a broader relationship between elite and popular/mass culture, which differs according to national context.

Another fruitful line of enquiry that transected many of the papers presented was the engagement of Latin American SF with questions of modernity, particularly given the strong identification of the genre globally with the themes and forms of modernity. In SF from Latin America, modernity may be depicted as an invasion, for example; it may be the object of critique, perhaps of neoliberal labour practices (explored by Matt Goodwin in his paper on Alex Rivera's short *A Robot Walks into a Bar*); or it may be represented with retrofuturistic devices that draw attention to the hybridization of temporalities wrought by modernization in many areas of the region. A critical approach to modernity and the processes of modernization certainly appears to be central to many SF texts generated in the region.

Indeed, a study of SF in the region offers a privileged perspective on how Latin America has engaged with its past. Antonio Córdoba's paper on César Aira's *El congreso de literatura*, for example, focused on the particular "ética de memoria" it proposes, and an escape from the vampirism of the past, as symbolized in the technique of cloning. This relationship with the past also includes how Latin America has negotiated its (variegated) insertion into a global media market. While early examples of (proto-)SF were often fully embedded in national contexts, forming part of debates over modernization, reflecting the shifting relationship between science and spiritualism during the period, or playing a part in the formation of a literary canon, more recent SF is written and composed in an era in which Latin Americans have grown up with Superman: subsequent incursions into the genre cannot ignore the legacy of North American and European SF, and is therefore more likely to be parodic or self-reflexive, and to engage critically with this tradition. Along these lines, Rachel Haywood Ferreira's paper on "retrolabelling" of science fiction offered a fascinating history of the establishment of science fiction communities from the fin de siècle to the early days of the Cold War in Latin America—a history shaped by both legacies and divergences from the genre's development in the North. J. Andrew Brown brought these lines of enquiry together by identifying the cyborg as a means of processing national trauma, but also focusing on the sampling and remixing of global popular culture that generates a novel like Edmundo Paz Soldán's *Iris*, simultaneously plugged in to global mass media and to a very local experience of neoliberalism in Bolivia.

Another area of interesting discussion – and possible future exploration – that emerged from the symposium was the close relationship between the SF genre as practised in Latin America and forms of political and social reality, as well as literary and artistic realism, which are often considered antithetical to fantasy and SF. Some examples would include Alex Rivera's reflections on the documentary origin of his SF film *Sleep Dealer*; the relationship David Conlon drew between Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*, the essay tradition in Argentina and even the *novela indigenista*; the relationship traced by Soledad Quereilhac between early twentieth-century science fiction and journalism, and the work Erica Segre presented that demonstrated the reflexive and performative appropriation of SF tropes in Mexican photojournalism during the 1960s and 1970s to narrate a series of arrivals, insertions and invasions, producing estranged visions in order to question an authoritarian modernization. Many of these examples allow us to explore in much greater depth and specificity the claims made by many SF theorists that science fiction is a mode of realism.

The organizers would like to thank all the participants for their contributions to two days of very interesting papers and debates. They would also like to thank Geoffrey Maguire, the Research Network Coordinator, for his invaluable help with the logistics of the event.

