

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

<https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/>

Jon Beasley-Murray  
University of British Columbia  
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

CC-BY-NC 2021

## **Conclusion: A World of Difference**

So that was Romance Studies? Perhaps. At the outset of this course, my minimal promise was that we would be engaging with a series of interesting and challenging texts, and our first aim was to figure out strategies to read them well, and expand our horizons through this exploration of new texts, new readings. I am happy enough that we have accomplished this, and you should be, too. You may never read another Chilean, Brazilian, Romanian, or Catalan novel in your life, but you now have some clues as to how to tackle them if you do. Some of the books we have read have been difficult, but I hope that difficulty will no longer put you off. I am not sure what your initial expectations were for this course or for the texts that we have read; you may want to refresh your memory as to what you wrote down in answer to my question when we were reading Proust. But those expectations may well have changed, and I hope that you now expect more of yourself, too. Moreover, you have concepts—modernism, realism, trauma, translation, dialogism, affect, and abjection, but also many, many others—that you can put to use in further expanding your horizons in whatever direction you choose. In some ways we have only skimmed surfaces, but we have also learned to defend superficiality where necessary. What you do with all this is up to you. You, too, are tasked with inventing Romance Studies.

### *1. Patterns of Commonality and Difference*

Our second aim was to trace patterns of commonality and difference between the texts that we read. We could think about patterns of either form or content. There have been a plethora of first-person narrators, for instance. What are the effects of that narrative style, and how has it been deployed, perhaps to different ends? As for themes, we have read for instance many books about memory, history, violence, politics, gender, education, the real... But you may have been drawn to other recurring topics, reflecting your own interests and concerns. Motherhood? Travel? Technology? Food and drink? Pause the video, and think back. What patterns have you seen? Could you group the texts according to their different approaches or obsessions? What common problems do they identify, what common blindspots do they exhibit? Do they constitute a tradition of any sort? Or is every text we have read truly singular, absolutely distinct? Write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a beer, but I'll be right back.

Beer is more a Germanic drink than a "Romance" one, though the world's most copious beer drinkers per head, by far, are the Czechs, followed by the Austrians, and Romania edges Germany from the top three. The French and Italian words for beer (*bière* and *birra*) are not even derived from Latin, but German. It is wine that is associated with France, Portugal, and Italy (the top three nations in terms of per capita consumption), as well as Spain, Chile, Argentina. But beer is a more fully global drink, and breweries are more widespread than vineyards. Beer tends to be affordable, the drink of the working class. Despite the dominance of a small number of multinational brewers (Anheuser Busch, now part of the Goliath AB InBev; Heineken; Carlsberg...) and brands (Budweiser, Miller, Grolsch...), most countries have their "national" beer, and the proliferation of microbreweries has led to an explosion of local product and styles. You can even brew beer at home, in a cellar or cupboard. Beer will be the drink of *our* Romance Studies!

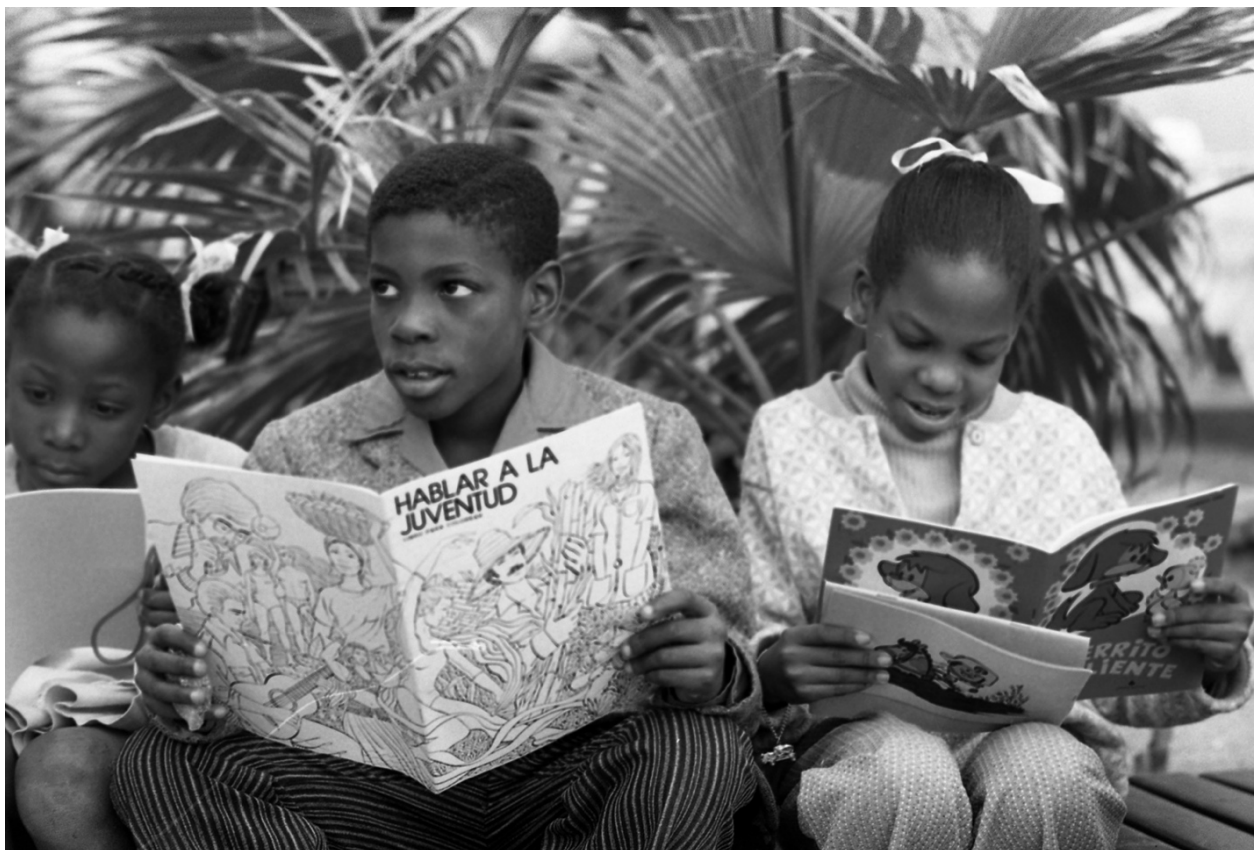
There are no right answers here. In some ways texts, like people or families or cities or countries or anything else, are singularities: abstraction, required even to talk about them, let alone to compare them, inflicts a form of violence. Hence our stress has been on close reading, looking for and respecting the details that make each of these novels different and distinct. In so far as we detect more general patterns, often that says more about us than it says about the books we have been reading. Every text is a Rorschach Test on which we project our own (individual or social) anxieties and desires, whether we know it or not. But it is this that enables us to talk about them, as literature becomes a catalyst for the exploration of a shared political unconscious.

## 2. *Growing Up and Betrayal*

One theme that has been central to many of the texts we have read has been childhood, or the transition from childhood to adulthood. In diverse contexts, from *fin de siècle* France (with Proust) to early twentieth-century Martinique (with Zobel), Francoist Spain (Laforet), war-time Vichy (Perec), or post-war Italy (Ferrante), we have seen narratives, sometimes semi-autobiographical and often from a child's perspective, of a young person's endeavour to decipher and then adapt to the adult world around them, at the same time as growing up both opens up new horizons and places new obstacles in their way. The fact that this theme has recurred so often is somewhat happenstance—a different selection of texts may have yielded other repeated motifs—but on the other

hand, childhood is a common enough setting for fiction, and the passage from youth to maturity offers a readymade plot structure, so much so that there is an entire genre (the *Bildungsroman*) to encompass such "coming of age" stories.

Children inhabit a world that is like our own, but not quite, that is familiar but also distant, and the process by which we leave that environment often involves both ritual (the ceremonies that in many cultures accompany becoming a "man" or a "woman") and story-telling. There is something traumatic about achieving maturity that seems to call for narrative, for a tale to be told that would justify and explain that transition. In returning to such crucial narratives, these novels inevitably also question them, by revisiting the trauma that coming-of-age stories both conceal and preserve. By extension, they may make us think about other narratives of development, too, in which the present is framed as the natural (but superior) outgrowth of a now distant and outmoded past.



Children reading, Cuba, 1978

Turning to childhood, and specifically to a child's perspective on the adult world, is also a prime mode of defamiliarization. It enables an account of social practices in which not

everything is taken for granted. The perplexity with which children sometimes react when they learn the way things are—the toddler's incessant question, "why?"—reminds us that adults do not always have good answers, and that another world is possible, even if our capacities to imagine that otherness have been dulled over time. Defamiliarization is also de-family-ization, a break from the intimate but also social structures that we all inhabit. A child's voice can militate against habit, against the habituation that ensures that the arbitrary workings of power go without saying, are so naturalized that they can almost seem invisible. Indeed, even without knowing it, a child's perspective can make the unseen visible, registering what otherwise goes without comment, enabling what French philosopher Jacques Rancière would term "a new distribution of the sensible" that implicitly questions why some things (some viewpoints, some people) "count" and are recorded, while others are not.

By revisiting narratives of development and by defamiliarizing our sense of the world around us, many of these novels also both partake in and subvert an account of social and aesthetic history in terms of "modernity" and "postmodernity." These categories have helped to structure this course—we began with a discussion of modernism and the "modern novel" in Proust but also Aragon and Bombal, and moved later to an assessment of the postmodern, explicitly with Perec and implicitly for instance with Bolaño and Cercas, and the games their texts play with truth and fiction, referentiality and the real. We confirmed a more or less linear narrative in which nineteenth-century realism is replaced by a variety of experiments with multiple perspectives, reframings, and self-referentiality, followed by a return of the real in mid-century (Moravia, Sagan, Rodoreda...) before the still more radical decentring and uncertainty evident in *Lispector* or, in different ways, *Fuentes* or *Manea*. Yet that linearity breaks down as the priority of the present over the past (or alternatively, the determination of present by the past) is questioned and even overthrown in texts as varied as those by Bombal, Zobel, or Agualusa, for whom the more pertinent opposition might be the spatial hierarchy between centre and periphery, which they also propose to challenge and dispute.

I emphasize the many ways in which these texts feature children who turn against their elders (sometimes tragically, as in Sagan; at other times futilely, as in Bolaño), or in which they challenge the past—and even the very notion of pastness—to highlight another theme that runs through them, to which I pointed at the outset: betrayal. All these texts,

in one way or another, turn against tradition. From Proust and Aragon to Ferrante and Agualusa, they manifest a drive to innovate, to do things differently, to start again, to rewrite the rules. If they turn to the past, this is to mark their difference and distance from it, to rewrite history and not to repeat it. Whether they succeed in this or not (and they are often realistic or disenchanted about the hold that the past still has on the present), something always escapes.

This, in the end, is what literature does: even as it takes on old forms, established genres (such as the novel itself), and as it alludes to or quotes from previous texts (as it inevitably must), a literary text always seeks the limits of language, to trace the shifting frontier between what can and cannot be said, between the sayable and the unsayable. Literature "betrays" tradition also in the second sense of that word, in that each text discloses or reveals something about the discourses against which it rebels, if only by showing that things could have been said otherwise, that there is nothing natural or pre-ordained about the relationship between words and things. *If the hallmark of literary representation is that it is an unfaithful representation of the real, then perhaps the most literary texts are those that betray (again, disclose or let slip) that infidelity even as they indulge in it themselves.*

There is something slippery and excessive about all the texts that we have read. They are slippery in that they cannot fully be trusted, they do not exactly fit within the moulds that we may have prepared for them, they cannot exactly be grasped or pinned down. It is not that they are hiding anything, that they seem to be saying one thing, but are in fact saying another. There is no secret key to their "true" meaning. It is that they are always on the move, that they exceed their original contexts while their meanings multiply and change in the new contexts in which we read them, but also that they move us in different ways depending on our own contexts and experiences. This is why we keep reading them: they open up a world of difference!

### *3. Romance Studies as Minor Literature*

What then of Romance Studies as a frame or mould? The novels we have read transgress the boundaries of the "Romance languages" as much as they make a mockery of any notion of a "Romance world." They pick up on, reflect, and turn against multiple traditions. Proust, Aragon, and Bombal, for instance, are in dialogue with an international modernism that is not confined simply to French or Spanish. Equally, Lispector's

cockroach is a remaking of Kafka's, Fuentes's narrative criss-crosses the US/Mexico border, and Agualusa shows the ways national narratives are stoked or shaped by global conflicts. A focus on Romance-language texts may reveal different facets to globalization—it is not all Microsoft and McDonalds—but is no less global for all that.

At the same time, we have seen plenty of heterogeneity even within this chosen frame: what if anything brings together (say) Aragon's Paris with Rodoreda's Barcelona or Manea's Bucharest? It would be simplistic to claim that there is some kind of "Romance culture" that can be identified and disentangled from the global forces (modernization, fascism, totalitarianism) that shape these three European cities, let alone from the still broader movements of capitalism, colonialism, and revolution that shape Bombal's Chile, Zobel's Martinique, or Fuentes's Mexico. Any account of Romance Studies must fit within these larger geographies and histories, rather than pretending that there is something "resistant" (to some notional Anglo-American "hegemony") in the mistaken idea of a "Romance world."

At its best, Romance Studies might trace the fate and potential of minor literatures. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (*Kafka* 16). And while there is no doubt that French, Spanish, Portuguese and so on are "major languages" in Deleuze and Guattari's sense—languages of Empire, principally, which explains their global spread, but also languages of governance and rule in individual nation states (and not only France, Spain, and Portugal)—within a global context they are increasingly "minor," no matter how many millions of speakers and learners they may have. In the global distribution of power and knowledge, more and more it is only English that counts, and even languages such as French or Spanish are relegated to conveying cultural particularity rather than being seen as vehicles for thought. Moreover, that particularity is to be translated into English for it to become intelligible, comparable, quantifiable. It is above all as literature *in translation*, then, either in fact or in potential, that Romance literature becomes minor literature, a vector of deterritorialization, flight, and betrayal no longer relative only to the classical paradigm of Latin (and Greek), but also to the global monolingualism for which "world literature" can only come into being in English.

"The three characteristics of minor literature," Deleuze and Guattari tell us, "are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (18). We have seen these characteristics in the novels we have read, though we might add that they are often better characterized as what Alberto Moreiras calls *infrapolitical*, rather than political, in that they concern the conditions of possibility for politics *per se* as much as for revolution, or rather the conditions of possibility for a revolution that might be an escape or flight from the political as it is currently constituted. The collectivities that they imagine, their "collective assemblage[s] of enunciation," bring together diverse materials and bodies—human and non-human, animal and other—from a madeleine to a trenchcoat, a lobster to a cockroach, a cup of tea to a pint of beer. Romance Studies would be about inventing new assemblages, new concepts, with this minor literature, to escape the deadening homogenization of bureaucratic reason.

*works cited*

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986.
- Moreiras, Alberto. *Infrapolitics: A Handbook*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004.

Image:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johnas\\_Savimbi,\\_leader\\_of\\_Unita,\\_the\\_Angolan\\_Rebels.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johnas_Savimbi,_leader_of_Unita,_the_Angolan_Rebels.jpg)

Song: "Walls Come Tumbling Down!" (The Style Council)