

Forensic Fantastic:

A Conversation Between Oscar Guardiola-Rivera & Gerald Martin

INTRO – OSCAR GUARDIOLA-RIVERA:

Gerald Martin's fascination with Latin America began when he was a child, but took its first concrete form, through reading, when he was sixteen. While studying A-level Spanish in the early 1960s, he read a novel called *Pensativa* (1945) by an obscure Mexican novelist, Jesús Goytortúa Santos. One might call it a beautiful accident. Back then, it was unusual for a Latin American novel to be one of the key 'set texts' in A-level Spanish. 'I thought it was marvellous,' Gerald says. 'Maybe it wasn't really, but I was already an enormous Latin American enthusiast, really since childhood, who knows why. In retrospect, I've been a sort of Latin American, in my imagination, for most of my life. You might say I don't belong anywhere, because I was born in London and yet, by the 1980s, I'd not only visited every Latin American country and lived in two of them, but was frequently perceived in England as having gone quite native. Latin American literature has been my lifelong interest. I've never been disillusioned or

disappointed with it. It's given me a fantastic life.'

Gerald wrote *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*. Published in 2008 and translated into more than thirty languages, it's considered the definitive biography of the Colombian Nobel Prize winner, who was Latin America's most recognisable 'magical realist'. Now, the 79-year-old Andrew Mellon Emeritus Professor of Modern Languages at Pittsburgh has joined fellow enthusiasts Carlos Aguirre, Javier Munguía, and Augusto Wong Campos in co-editing the forensically precise yet marvellously arranged collection of letters penned by the four key members of the Latin American literary 'Boom' of the 1960s. From the second half of the twentieth century, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez put the region not only on the world's literary map, but 'into the mainstream' (to quote Chilean critic Luis Harss who supposedly coined 'the Boom' label in 1967). Entitled *Las cartas del Boom/The Boom Letters* (2023), this explosive combination of the fantastic and the forensic is the subject of our dialogue.

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE FORENSIC AND THE FANTASTIC

GERALD MARTIN (GM): You and I are talking through a digital platform that reduces spacetime yet are expecting some troubling ghost in the machine any time. It underlines something about the job we four friends have done collecting the letters of another four friends. A contrast can be

made between the techniques used for our 'written-letters-biography' in *The Boom Letters* and for the 'trekking-round-the-world biography' of García Márquez. The drill for the latter was 'go there, do interviews.' I didn't even record them. Just went, did it and wrote asap what I remembered how it was said and where. That's what Gabo (García Márquez) did, so I decided to do it like him. I had a fantastic existence travelling, meeting people. I also needed an institutional university, libraries to go in and dig into the books. No Google back then. I started the Vargas Llosa biography a couple of years later, retired, living in rural England. You can't be going up to London all the time. Neither Vargas Llosa's bio nor *The Boom Letters* could've been done if it wasn't the era of digitality. Four contemporary men (Why just men? That's another conversation.) have researched the letters of the other four men who lived in a different period, which was really the beginning of our period. They wrote letters, waited for the letters to cross the Atlantic and then for a reply. Whereas we four worked with the simultaneity of contemporary technology. That's the historical background of *The Boom Letters*.

OSCAR GUARDIOLA-RIVERA (OGR): Your observation is critical. It reminds us of what has changed in the relatively short period of time separating us from these writers. It isn't just technology but its expansion upon the world as we know it, which allows for a different quality of experience. How we sense spacetime and make sense of the world – the exterior world of facts and the inner world of affects, the connections between reality and imagination. It also tells us about the difference

between the flattening power of judgment, fast thought, on the one hand, and on the other the fantastic connectivity of our communications moving between interior vision and exterior fact, somehow equalising them. I associate that with the fantastic set of words you use to make sense of the Latin American Boom: *moment, movement, event, a fellowship, a party, conflict, apotheosis, debating quartet* or *kin*. They suggest music, sparring, among equals, an alternating of voices. Why these words?

GM: I've always felt that – speaking on my own, but partly also for the other editors; we discussed this – the Boom can be summarized in a single phrase: the four are the four (a sign of four). It works no matter how ludicrous it sounds. Because discussions of the Boom are vitiated by either vagueness or the eventful fact the Boom was a literary conjuncture intertwined with a historical conjuncture, which doesn't always happen. Often the literary conjuncture comes later, and the historical conjuncture comes first. The Boom raises such questions. It's a fascinating kind of puzzle. I felt there needed to be a focused taking apart and bringing together. Not a frame giving us some definitive view or judgment, but a grasping what it was about. The Boom was shocking because that kind of rupture doesn't happen often in literature or history. We felt the letters solve a lot of problems. They show what I always thought. That these were four very different writers who managed to make something different happen as individuals and as a group, which was and still is a rare thing. A fellowship which was also a rivalry. Think the Three Musketeers with D'Artagnan. We stress that in the introduction. Hopefully, somebody will

probably write a book about it. Because going through the letters, what you see is the creation of an atmosphere of *recognition*. These four people recognise that they're the key novelists of their generation, their moment – and that that generation and that moment is not Mexican, Argentinian, Peruvian or Colombian, but *Latin American*. They were recognising each other and themselves as a group; not only recognising each other but also Latin America itself, at the time of the Cuban Revolution. And in recognising each other they recognised that other people, although they might be as brilliant, would not comply with the Boom categories, the unwritten rules of its game, which we codify, part seriously and partly as a joke, in our introduction. Which in a kind of satirical way we divide into four because, as mentioned, the whole book is about the sign of four. We figured the Boom under the sign of four. Remember: this was also the moment of all the great rock bands, and four was the usual number of members in them as well. It almost never happens that you get four equal directions at a crossroads, but that's what happens with the four writers of the Boom. That kind of fellowship is something I find interesting. It's fantastic, for it rarely happens, leastways not in literature.

LATIN AMERICA ISN'T A PLACE

GM: On the back of that motif of recognition and fellowship we come to the next point. Whatever one may think of the politics of these four people, they were all political. Not in the sense of being so and so, but in that of

becoming. Take Julio Cortázar. By the time he's writing *Hopscotch* (1963), he's outgrowing it and Surrealism, becoming something else. That's very interesting because he was the oldest of the four. That's where the politics come in: there is always sparring, movement backwards and forwards. But under the sign of recognition. Four equals, in tension. That's unusual. You could talk for a long time whether the infamous episode of Vargas Llosa punching García Márquez was about a supposed sexual misstep, or something much more political. We don't know. What we do know is that those writers tried to keep their fellowship going – in, across, and beyond their politics. A difficult thing. So, those words you mentioned before, Oscar, they apply both to the literary and the political dimensions. We were very aware of these dimensions while collecting these letters.

OGR: The intertwinement between these dimensions becomes more interesting as the reader of *The Boom Letters* proceeds. I couldn't put it down. The literary and the political, including the cosmic and the personal, compose a cross-cultural picture of ourselves. It seems a given now, but it hadn't happened before in modern times. Whoever writes the book you suggested before will focus on that. If that person happens to be a Latinx living in London, bringing the Latino and Anglo-Saxon trajectories together, they will point to the centrality of the concept of fellowship – both aesthetic and political. From William Morris's 'Pilgrims of Hope' to Wilson Harris's 'life of the word', shattering the static beliefs and the limited frame we had come to expect of the method by which we're taught the past and the novel. This speaks to us today, not in a romance-of-the-margins way, but

because we live in times of framed identity and normalized post-fascism. Your rendition of fellowship makes one think of that. Something that affected me deeply as I read *The Boom Letters*: fellowship in the life of the word.

GM: I've found it very moving, too. A good friend of mine, John King, himself a Latin Americanist, told me that he has too. He has now finished reading our book (having previously assessed our introduction), and says he feels deeply affected. In terms of the Boom writers, I think the reason is the word you're using. Because in these grim times it's very 'moving' to see people with different backgrounds, different politics and aesthetics nevertheless holding on as best they can to a rare and important fellowship. They do assume or imply the concept of fellowship. Consider García Márquez's repeated use of the word 'hermano' (brother), which, again, is quite striking both aesthetically and politically. I agree with you completely.

OGR: One might even take that resonance and say these four men managed to build a universal republic as opposed to the 'universal' republicanism of each of their four countries. Hence, the next step in your examination of today's significance of the Boom.

GM: I'm old, and have studied these writers who were about 30 to 18 years older than me. Previously, I'd studied Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Guatemalan writer who was 45 years older. His experience in the 1920s,

living precariously between Latin America and Europe – but in his day, the journey out and back was a huge enterprise; it couldn't be done very often, and you couldn't phone your friends in other countries. Latin Americans meeting outside of their territory – in many parts of Europe as a whole, but especially in Paris (more significant to them perhaps than Barcelona) – had the first modern experience of discovering what a Latin American was. (The label itself, significantly enough, is a French one). It happened in the 1920s and 30s, to both students and writers, but without the benefits of continuity and repetition. I think one of the key things that happened after World War II was that many Latin American artists and intellectuals, and specifically the four writers we are talking about, gathered again in Paris in the last great post-war moment of French cultural and political influence. There they went through exactly that same thing: 'discovering' Latin America, in the backwards motion of letting go of it. García Márquez made that discovery in the mid-1950s. Cortázar had made it from the early 1950s onwards. Fuentes, in contrast, was always already a cosmopolitan. The letters show the depth of that discovery through their discovery of each other: the discovery of an alternate voice, one that speaks in the first-person of the plural. Also, their conversation happens at a very high level, even if it isn't always demanding or interrogatory. And then there's Cuba: a process unfolding between 1953 until '59, and onwards. Cuba wishes to become, if not the capital of Latin America, certainly its focus. It establishes as influential a cultural institution as Casa de Las Américas. These guys already know about the Parisian connection, plus the Hispanic one. But it's the Cuban connection which gives their relationship an extra

edge. Nowadays, in contrast, when Latin American writers go to Europe and meet up, it tends not to be in Paris so much, but in Spain, the old empire, now a member of the European Union, and the essential motivation is much more commercial than cultural and intellectual. Or, increasingly, writers go to study or work in New York or Miami, and a different, much more overwhelming kind of colonialism comes into play. And so Latin Americans, despite the internet, have become more scattered and disunited again; they are in danger of forgetting their continental history and the things they have in common. But from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, there was a rare moment of coming together, of crystallisation and distillation. Before the neoliberal counterattack.

OUTRO – OSCAR GUARDIOLA-RIVERA:

In the wake of the novel's pinnacle during Latin America's literary Boom, a continuing trend of brilliant novels is being published by authors both within and outside of the region (Carlos Fonseca in the UK, Hernán Díaz in the USA and Juan Gabriel Vásquez being exemplary instances). But there's also an ongoing 'golden age' of Latin American non-fiction, including critical and philosophical literature. The latter tends to be ignored and remains undervalued in the West, despite its worldwide impact and the debates around 'the decolonial turn', decentring Western forms of knowledge, or 'the ontological turn', positing different ways of being in our different worlds, which were launched from places like Bogotá, Quito and

Rio de Janeiro in the late 90s. Let's call for its recognition. We invite you to imagine what literature and science would look like if we were to take up the fantastic principle of chance as the flip side of fate – and to run with it!

Latin America is not a place. No longer being the place of magical realism, either, it is clear now in retrospect what our ancestors before and during the Boom years were doing: they were creating for us a space to see the forest. The world. The planet. Latin America emerges as an alternative future.

Gerald Martin is Andrew W. Mellon Professor Emeritus of Modern Languages at the University of Pittsburgh and Senior Research Professor in Caribbean Studies at London Metropolitan University. For twenty-five years he was the only English-speaking member of the 'Archives' Association of Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature in Paris, and he is a recent president of the International Institute of Ibero-American Literature in the United States. Among his publications are *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, a translation and critical edition of Miguel Angel Asturias's *Men of Maize*, and several contributions to the Cambridge History of Latin America. He lives in England.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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