

# INTRODUCTION

PETER READ AND MARIVIC WYNDHAM

‘Latin America’ was the annual study theme of the Australian National University’s Humanities Research Centre for 2002.

A major conference flowing from the theme was ‘The Diaspora of the Latin American Imagination’. Between the fiestas, concerts, festivals and exhibitions of the four-day event were nineteen academic presentations, four of which we are unfortunately not able to reproduce here. All the others, after expert refereeing, are presented here in this first on-line edition of *Humanities Research*, while six of these have already been published in a print edition, ‘Migrants, Strangers and Purple Bananas’ (*Humanities Research*, Vol. X, No. 1, 2003). To introduce our theme, we asked our chief Ambassadorial advocate during the conference planning, His Excellency Dr Abelardo Posso-Serrano, Ambassador of the Republic of Ecuador to the Commonwealth of Australia, to write an introduction to these on-line proceedings. He chose as his theme the focus of the first day of the conference: Human Rights in Latin America.

In choosing the theme of Diaspora, we, the organisers and editors of this volume, first discussed the strengths and weaknesses of what has been carried to Latin America by its many invaders. Later we asked conference contributors: How have these cultural forces meshed with the rich, pre-existing indigenous cultures?

What, of these complex transformations, has been exported from Latin America as literature, film, art, political theory? What is the Latin American imagination?

One theoretical dimension of the diaspora is the process known, after Ortiz, as ‘transculturation’. The eminent Cuban historian Alejandro García Álvarez, writing in our volume, regards this as one of the gifts of Latin America to the world: the processes whereby its many civilisations accepted the culture and religions of invaders and transformed them into something local and powerful, yet ever-changing and adaptive. Then the invaders came again, no longer as soldiers and missionaries but as tourists, scholars and artists, to learn from and to absorb that imaginative transformation.<sup>1</sup>

We begin our discussion with Miguel Huezo Mixco’s blazing demand of Salvadoreans, including his fellow artists: Why have they allowed themselves to lie quiescent through volcanoes, earthquakes and civil revolt? Why do they seek relief in Mexico, Havana, Managua, Washington and New York? Even allowing that thinking or doing nothing may grant emotional relief, Miguel demands: shouldn’t we writers, painters and musicians reflect more often about, and in, those places of trauma and grief? Why, he thunders, have Salvadoreans been so impotent in the face of civil or political disaster? The diaspora of the

imagination has been the flight of the Salvadoreans themselves. Quoting the Salvadorean academic Beatriz Cortez, Miguel makes a connection between national forms of violence and a rigid national identity.

Olga Lorenzo pursues the same theme in her probing consideration of the nature of Latin American governance by the *caudillo*, the *generalissimo* and the dictator. Humiliation in childhood brings shame, she argues, and the shamed personality remains, in adulthood, anarchic and asocial. Rage is stored within the weakened self to re-emerge in the bullying of others. She cites several nations in which it seems that corrupt, undemocratic or cruel dictators were shaped by an inflexible and unforgiving early education. Perhaps, Olga speculates, the origins of a destructive form of Latin American leadership may lie in the Inquisition, the Islamic invasion and the fortress mentality of the Spanish over many centuries. At any rate, authoritarianism and anarchy are all too often twinned in the same Latin American leader. Olga ponders whether the *caudillo*-dictator is one of the most regrettable manifestations of the Latin American imagination.

Part of the diaspora, then, is pain, an element emphasised by Peter Read's discussion of one consequence of enduring exile. For all the moral abdication which, in Miguel Huezco Mixco's view, emigration may sometimes imply, any kind of permanent departure unties knots which can never again be secured. Peter reflects upon the anguish which intensifies year by year amongst Cuban émigrés as reports worsen on the state of the Colón Cemetery in Havana. How can Cubans carry out the religious and family responsibility of caring for and showing respect for their own dead

parents and grandparents? To put it bluntly, they can't. Peter's meditation begins in the cemetery's splendid avenue of national heroes and ends in the sinister shadows of the Tomb of the Reporters to reflect upon the unforeseen concomitant of leaving one's birthplace, perhaps for ever. The Spanish verb 'destierro', uprooted, carries a force which no English word can match.

Meanwhile people are entering, not leaving, Latin America in increasing numbers in search of the fruits of its imagination. They come to Cuba, for example, where Adrian Hearn has been studying how community-based organisations deliver welfare services. In this paper he writes of santería, the form of Afro-Cuban religion practised widely on the island. His insightful diary entries record that the tourists find, perhaps, what they come looking for, but is that the real santería? Indeed, so many are the photographers, the students and the visitors that we can ask if there is any longer a single santería; or rather, is the tension between cultural transformation and cultural resistance so strong as to make the performers of Cuban African religious rites a little schizophrenic as they try to please both visitor and elder? Can the imaginative response survive under such commercial pressures?

The distinguished Cuban historian Alejandro García Álvarez develops the theoretical model of transculturation in his cultural history of the first three decades of the Cuban republic from 1902. The Indigenous, Spanish and African influences sometimes intertwined, sometimes grew in parallel. Dependence on the imperial sugar trade brought artistic and political ideas as well as foreign domination. The very exploitation of the masses and, later, the disillusionment of artists and intellectuals in

the Republic between the World Wars galvanised endeavours, in Alejandro's analysis, which 'concretised as one the love of culture and of revolutionary action'. In a complex argument he traces the flowering of *aruaco* (indigenous), *mulato*, Catholic, Spanish and African cultures into a nation which, despite some inadequate or corrupt governments of the period, created a national culture and a powerful imagination. Generously Alejandro concedes that this strong leap of national imagination has remained both inside the island and been exported by the exiles. The artists and intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s gave a significant impulse to the formation of the precious cultural heritage which the Revolution received in January 1959, and which in some form has been carried by the strong emigration that since that date has taken place from the largest island of the Antilles.

Jessica Wyndham also finds reason for optimism in her analysis of the reasons why our own Asia Pacific region should adopt a regional human rights charter following the analogy of the Americas. They, for all the disparity between member nations, produced a charter of rights which predated that of the United Nations itself, a charter further codified in the 1960 Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. By 1969 there existed an American Convention on Human Rights. Some of its members were the first nations in the world to abolish the death penalty, and although not all states subscribe to this ideal, the Convention imposes strict limitations and guidelines on all its members. Though the Americas have a far from unblemished record in human rights, she argues, there is much that our own region can learn from the instruments and systems established in the Americas to protect them.

So far we have swum with the ideas

and cultures of the imaginative diaspora. Now it is the turn of the people who take those ideas with them to hold the microphone. In this second part of our introduction we ask: How are Latin Americans who bear the rich fruits of many centuries of transculturation received in the countries to which they emigrate?

The unhappiest experiences are in the country of destination.

Outright rejection can occur in Spain, even though, as Begoña Lobo Abascal cries out in her passionate account, far more Spaniards have settled in Latin America than ever have come from there to Spain. Both populist political parties, and what is claimed to be Spanish popular opinion expressed in the media, trade on easy prejudice and unreasoning anger. Of course, they should begin with the idea that not all intending migrants are the same. Some people Begoña (quoting Bertaux) describes as requesting 'their own parcel of sovereign power, and who want to share the benefits of the national inheritance'. Others come as refugees (these are some of the people of whom Miguel Huezo Mixco writes) because family or friends have been killed in a political coup or gone into exile; there is nothing left to stay for. Yet whatever their status, Latin Americans seem to be resented far more than immigrants from the European Union who in fact numerically greatly outweigh them. Frequently they are known by the disparaging and all-embracing term 'sudaca'.

So the experience of most arrivals to Spain is very far from ecstatic greeting. The Colombian Luzmar, interviewed by Begoña, found herself restricted and coerced in having to obtain, with immense difficulty, a work permit. Valentín, from El Salvador, another

interview subject, found the concept of Spain the Mother Country meant in practice nothing. One might as well, he reflects bitterly, have tried to migrate to the United States.

The same disparity of motive divides the Cuban American community in Miami. Marivic Wyndham reflects upon these different waves of Cubans to Miami, the inheritors of some of the cultural transformations which Alejandro García Álvarez described. Cuban émigrés range from the 1959–1960 ‘aristocracy of exile’ of those who left in political or moral protest, to the 1980s Marielitos, many released and ejected by Castro from Cuban jails. Among the many differences between them were that the first waves of the post-Castro diaspora were exiles, that is, they were people who didn’t want to be in the United States, welcoming and familiar though it was to them; they lived for the day when they could return to their beloved island. Now, as their children born in the US become more and more ‘American’, the possibility of return seems much less likely; but the Cuban political and economic diaspora has left a literary, political and linguistic legacy which is now a significant element of the Hispano-USA.

Ignorance about Latin Americans in Australia is infinitely greater than in Spain or the US. Only to a point are the newcomers differentiated by country of origin: Brazilian dances and Cuban bands are chic, and political refugees from Chile and Argentina will find some leftist sympathy. Yet, as in Spain, Latin American intending immigrants, in the eyes of Australian immigration officials, are neither the most desirable migrants (still probably northern European) nor the least desirable (Asian and Middle Eastern).

From the moment of arrival in Australia, our authors report, the Latin

American migrant embarks on an unending journey of refashioning a cultural identity.

In the 1970s, people from Thailand, Laos, Vietnam or Cambodia, even Burma or India, tended to be labelled ‘Asians’ by other Australians. Thirty years later we know better and distinguish arriving nationals by their birth country. But Latin Americans in Australia still have much education to impart to their newly found countrymen and women, for Australians remain perhaps more ignorant of Latin American geography than any other of the world’s continents. Officials may not be much better informed. Standing uneasily before the not very sympathetic eye of an Australian immigration official, Gabriela Coronado, the promising young Mexican academic, felt that she was being placed in the box of a potential illegal, a potentially sick person wanting to get free medical treatment, likely to be a political refugee, a traumatised survivor from a dictatorship or from the drug wars. Thus the Australian tendency to lump Latin Americans together not as the derogatory ‘sudacas’ (used in Spain) but as the more neutral ‘South Americans’. Mexicans are bundled in with the rest, as Gabriela notes ruefully in her paper: ‘For Australians, Mexico is in South America, and not in North America as I learned when I was at school’. When she was asked if she was from ‘South America’ she used to respond spontaneously ‘No’. Now she is beginning to answer, after some hesitation, ‘from Mexico’, but she never answers Yes’.

From rejection, then, to something better, at the very least, to tolerance. But what should Latin Australians themselves bring to the negotiation of what kind of Australians they are to be? Individual communities must decide how they want to present themselves. Erez Cohen charts the interesting histories of two Adelaide

Latin communities producing their own radio programs on the Special Broadcasting Service Radio bands. The producers of one sought to represent all Latin American interests in Australia as a 'language community', the other a much more narrow base of Salvadorean interests. Erez reports that those involved in the first program, 'Voices', had to negotiate among themselves to what extent they should represent broad (in practice, left-wing) Latin American interests such as human rights violations or US global capitalism, and, more particularly, whether these issues were of continuing interest to Adelaide listeners even if they were from Latin America.

Meanwhile the other, Salvadorean-interest, radio program labelled its interests as exclusively those of the country of origin. Some of the producers wanted the presentation entirely apolitical, by encouraging, for instance, the broadcast of social messages between Adelaide families. They tried to avoid controversy, which meant that the program soon was criticised for presenting El Salvador (as Erez writes) in an idealised way that avoided mentioning, criticising or explaining the harsh realities of life there. Yet the relationship never remains static: it's hard to imagine that the Adelaide Salvadorean broadcaster who kept announcing the weather in his birth country would have continued his faraway predictions indefinitely. What, we wonder, would Miguel Huezo Mixco have made of such pronouncements?

From the initial position of 'Non English Speaking Background', one may progress in time to the status of 'Latin America', even though it's like a German being labelled a 'European'. The epithet is of course not chosen by the migrant but — in the absence of any better information — imposed by the surrounding society. So

in the midst of negotiating with one's fellow nationals how to be a Peruvian Australian, or a Chilean Australian, or a Cuban Australian, one is also having to learn, simultaneously, the many meanings of being a *Latin American* Australian.

All the writers in this section of *Humanities Research* reveal that Latin American migrants never cease to be called upon to reinvent themselves. Crossing borders creates new borders. Wall hangings or colourful handicrafts, regarded here by non-Latins as archetypally 'Mexican', may be associated in that country as denoting an indigenous or working-class orientation, or as urban popular culture, or as kitsch, or even as evidence of bad taste. Gabriela Coronado, the now senior Australian academic, has not felt the need to associate closely with other Mexicans; nor would such an association make her feel any closer to her friends back in Mexico. Many of them, in any case, were not born in Mexico at all, her friends are international. Yet Gabriela sends her Mexican-Australian daughters off on school excursions wearing their beautiful peasant caps, their *cachuchas* — which they probably stuff in their schoolbags as soon as they are out of sight of home.

Food is one way in which other Australians understand points of origin beyond 'Latin American'. For the first time in her life Gabriela made *mole* and tortillas, out of the common diaspora tendency, she writes, (perhaps it is almost a requirement!) to show off her Mexicanness. Yet note, as well, an internal imperative. The producers of the Salvadorean radio program organised *pupusadas* (parties at which was dispensed the Salvadorean national food), not to impress their friends but because such celebrations came naturally

to them. Most Australian Cubans in their search for familiar foodstuffs seem to have followed that latter principle too. Euridice Charon Cardona found that even Cubans whose houses carried no more obvious an ethnic marker than a fridge-magnet flag would always offer her a Cuban *cafecito*, perhaps followed by *arroz con pollo* (chicken and rice). Euridice quotes Ghassan Hage's point about positive nostalgia, that migrants are better equipped to confront the new life by such practices, which indicate a desire to be Cuban *here* rather than Cuban *there* — and certainly not a 'Latin American' anywhere. And yet transformations are never fixed. Euridice found that Cubans are keen to include Argentinian barbecued beef and Uruguyan caramel in their new 'Australian' diet.

From 'Non English Speaking Background' to 'ethnic' to Latin American to, finally, Chilean, Venezuelan or Cuban Australian. Penelope Richardson's intriguing paper demonstrates that the endpoint of the process is not necessarily the disappearance of an original identity and remembered history into a featureless cultural homogeneity. Troubled by her own Australian colonial past, and uncertain how deeply she belonged here, Penelope travelled to Bogotá, Colombia, as an artist. While describing her own artistic journey, she also in her paper follows the parallel trajectory of the Chilean artist Juan Dávila, resident in Melbourne.

Perhaps being an artist imparts a confidence in an essential, sharable humanity, for both Penelope and Juan Dávila threw themselves into the task of interpreting the new cultures in which they found themselves. Each situated themselves as the outside observer who seeks, at least temporarily, to join the artistic conversation. Dávila's stand was

neither Chilean nor Chilean-Australian. Rather he claimed the territory, as Penelope puts it, 'as an artist and through making a conscious engagement with the new culture he was able to engage this new visual reality and culture without abandoning his Chilean cultural language'. Penelope, analogously, in Bogotá, found herself at first without language and history. Absorbing both her material and cultural milieu, she began to work in the local materials of sugar, coffee and maize; she explored in her work the Colombian issues of indigeneity and slavery. She inserted gold letters into blocks of sugar spelling 'Blue Blood', words that played ironically on the history of gold in the pre-Columbian era, and 'on the political and economic situations in the country that have caused the spilling of blood'. In the same way Dávila commented artistically on refugees, Ned Kelly, football and pies.

Penelope's expectations as an artist freed her from the usual experiences of Latin Americans as they recall their experiences abroad. Mainstream Australian culture, she argues, situates newcomers as multicultural, and provides special funding to make art about the experience, and so migrant artists are 'limited (perhaps condemned) to the position of working within the realm of nostalgia ...'.

The two issues of *Humanities Research* are only a step among many towards better understanding of what the process has meant and will continue to mean. How do Latin American communities keep in touch with each other outside the continent itself? Can an imaginative diaspora be thought of as a form of stateless power, as transnationalism, as postcolonial nationalism or as deterritorialised nationalism? In the host countries, the barriers to the diaspora, are

conceptual as well as physical, not only social but intellectual. For the Latin American imagination to be able to find grip in the ever-widening intellectual circles in which it finds itself, it needs first to be recognised and appreciated as a distinct but parallel experience. Regardless of birthplace, all of us need conceptual and analytical tools, intellectual as well as social responsiveness, to bring the Latin American and host cultures into a constructive dialogue. The papers in this exciting volume allow us to advance the journey.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1940/1995).