Politics, Writing and the Nobel Prize in Latin America

IDSEM-UG 1711, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, NYU
Interdisciplinary Seminar, Fall 2013

Professor Linn Cary Mehta
English and Comparative Literature, Columbia U.
Course will begin promptly M/W 3:30-4:45 p.m.
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Office hours will be W 1:00–3:00 or by appointment. I am also available to meet after class.

COURSE DESCRIPTION
In the course of the 20th century, seven Latin American authors have won the Nobel Prize: Gabriela Mistral (1945); Miguel Angel Asturias (1967); Pablo Neruda (1971); Gabriel García Márquez (1982); Octavio Paz (1990); Rigoberto Menchú (Peace Prize, 1992); Mario Vargas Llosa (2010). Together, they give us a chance to consider some of the major literary and political movements in Latin America leading up to the present. The poetry of Mistral and Neruda reveals the successive influences of surrealism, communism, and socialism, up to the eve of the Pinochet coup in Chile; through novels and autobiography, Asturias and Menchú explore very different aspects of the indigenous struggle in Guatemala; the novels of García Márquez in Colombia and Vargas Llosa in Peru embody different aspects of magical realism; and Paz, in Mexico, in his poetry and essays, represents a country that has been a literary cornerstone of Latin America. We will consider a few authors who almost received the Nobel Prize and why they did not – in the case of Borges, for political reasons, and Roberto Bolaño, who might have if he had lived long enough. We will conclude with one of Bolaño’s novels as representative of the generation of Latin American literature after magic realism.

The Nobel Prize website provides a starting point for background on each of the Nobel laureates: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/. This seminar will give us the opportunity to delve into the relation of their writing to the political context of their respective times and countries, and consider how and why the Nobel Committee might have chosen to honor these authors rather than others.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

• Use interdisciplinary research to ground literary works in their political and historical contexts
• Analyze and contextualize the content and structure of literary works through close reading
• Translate critical reading into elegant and persuasive expository writing
• Deepen interdisciplinary perspectives through class presentations and discussion
## SYLLABUS

### WEEK #1
9/04 W  
Introduction; reading Latin American texts (selections); methodologies

### WEEK #2
9/09 M  
**RIGOBERTA MENCHU (1959 - )**  
*I, Rigoberta Menchú* (chapters 1-20 – to page 152)  
Read *Popul Vuh* (excerpts)

9/11 W  
Finish *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (chapters 21-34 – 154-247)  
Begin *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, Background (1-57)

### WEEK #3
9/16 M  
**I. Group Presentation on Guatemala: History and Politics, 1970-present**

II. Divide into groups to debate *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*:
1. Perspective of Menchú herself  
2. Perspectives of Stoll and Rohter  
3. Critics of Menchú  
4. Defenders of Menchú

In each group, read relevant articles and prepare opening statements.

9/18 W  
**MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS (1899-1974)**  
I. Prepare responses and finish debate of *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*

II. Intro to Miguel Angel Asturias  
Read selections from “HOMBRES DE MAIZ” (Men of Maize)  
Relate to *Popul Vuh* reading

### WEEK #4
9/23 M  
**II. Group Presentation on Guatemala: History and Politics, 1821-1974**

Read Asturias, *The President (El señor presidente)*  

*Part I: The 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of April (7-73)*

*Part II: The 24th, 25th, 26th and 27th of April (77-194)*
9/25  W  Finish Asturias, *The President*
     *Part III: Weeks, Months, Years (197-287)*
     Analysis of novel in terms of political and historical background.

*ESSAY #1 DUE BASED ON YOUR INTERPRETATION OF THE MENCHU CONTROVERSY*

**WEEK #5**

9/30  M  **BOLIVAR and INDEPENDENCE**

III. Group Presentation on Colombia: History and Politics, Colonial - 1830

Begin Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*

10/02  W  Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*

**WEEK #6**

COLOMBIA

10/07  M  **IV. Group Presentation on Colombia: History and Politics, 1830 - 1964**

Begin Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967), 1-181

10/09  W  Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años*, 181-313

**WEEK #7**

**GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ (1927 - )**

10/14  M  ACADEMIC HOLIDAY

10/16  W  Finish Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años*, 315-417

**WEEK #8**

**GABRIELA MISTRAL (1889-1957)**

10/21  M  The *Locas mujeres* Poems of Gabriela Mistral, 1-91

Selected essays and early poems (scanned)
10/23  W  The Locas mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral, 91-147

V. Group Presentation on Gabriela Mistral’s Context: Chile and Mexico;
Her Life and Times

WEEK #9  PABLO NERUDA (1904-1973)

10/28  M  The Essential Neruda: Selected Poems, 1-63 and
extracts from Canto General, 68-106

10/30  W  Neruda: Canto General, Intro and books I-V (1-160)

VI. Group Presentation on Latin American history to 1948,
Using Canto General (I-V) as your guide

WEEK #10  CANTO GENERAL (INTER-AMERICAN IDENTITIES AND REVOLUTIONS)

11/04  M  VII. Group Presentation on Latin American history since 1948, focusing on Chile
with Canto General (V-XV) as your guide; Neruda’s death and the Pinochet Coup

ESSAY #2 DUE

11/06  W  OCTAVIO PAZ (1914-1998)

VIII. Group Presentation on Mexican history to 1948
Read The Labyrinth of Solitude [Selections scanned]

WEEK #11  MEXICO

and individual selections; reading from Enrique Krause [scanned]

FINAL PROJECT TOPIC DUE
IX. Group Presentation on Peru: History and Politics, 1899-1974
Begin Mario Vargas Llosa, The Feast of the Goat (2000), ch 1-16 (to 256)

WEEK #12

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA (1936-)

X. Group Presentation on Dominican Republic: History and Politics, 1899-1974
with a focus on Trujillo
Finish Mario Vargas Llosa, The Feast of the Goat, ch 16-23 (256-404)

11/20 W
Guest lecture on Mario Vargas Llosa

WEEK #13

21st CENTURY LITERATURE: NOBEL PRIZE, POLITICS AND WRITING

11/25 M
Those who did not get the Nobel Prize:
Jorge Luis Borges article and selected short stories

XI. Group Presentation on Argentina: History and Politics, 1899-1974

PROSPECTUS FOR FINAL PROJECT DUE

11/27 W
Roberto Bolaño, The Last Interview, Intro and Interviews I & II (9-67) [scanned]

11/28
HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!

WEEK #14

ROBERTO BOLAÑO (1953-2003)

12/02 M
The Savage Detectives, Parts I (1-139) and III (589-648)

12/04 W
Read The Savage Detectives, Part II (141-588)

FINAL ESSAY DUE (Initial Version)

12/06 F
Gathering at 139 East 79th Street at a convenient time.
WEEK #15

ROBERTO BOLAÑO (1953-2003)

12/09  M  Complete *The Savage Detectives*, Part II (141-588)

View film (“La virgen de los sicarios” based on the novel by Fernando Vallejo)

12/11  W  Conclusion

FINAL ESSAY DUE (Revised Version)

SIGN UP FOR PRESENTATIONS (IN PAIRS):

I.  Guatemala: History and Politics, 1970-present
II.  Guatemala: History and Politics, 1821-1974
III.  Colombia: History and Politics, Colonial - 1899
IV.  Colombia: History and Politics, 1899 - 1964
V.  Gabriela Mistral’s Context: Chile and Mexico; Her Life and Times, 1889-1957
VI.  Latin American history to 1948, using *Canto General* (I-V) as your guide
VII.  Latin American history since 1948, focusing on Chile with *Canto General* (V-XV) as your guide; Neruda’s death and the Pinochet Coup
VIII.  Mexican history to 1948
IX.  Peru: History and Politics, 1899-1974
X.  Dominican Republic: History and Politics, 1899-1974 with a focus on Trujillo
XI.  Argentina: History and Politics, 1899-1974

Sources for group research and presentations:

Biography, history, journalism, letters, diaries, testimonials, videos, other art forms
Build a website using as many sources as you can on [Google docs]: list your sources; use links; write up what you find (1) in outline form for your presentation and (2) in narrative form in relation to the novel(s) or poetry that relate to each country and period.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

*Grading/Requirements*

Attendance/ Participation throughout (including online responses) 20%
Group Presentation (in pairs) 10%
Presentation Website 15%
First Essay (2-3pp) Wed 25 Sept 10%
Second Essay (5-7pp) Fri 8 Nov 20%
Third Essay (8-10pp) Wed 11 Dec 25%
Attendance/Participation
Regular attendance, punctuality, and engagement with the readings are keys to being an active participant. As such I will expect you to be present and on time at each of our class sessions. For your benefit and mine, I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. Should you need to miss a session, let me know ahead of class by email, as I will not consider retroactive explanations and each unexcused absence will incur a two point reduction from your final grade (with a maximum of five). After five unexcused absences, you will receive an “F” for participation/attendance. More importantly, though, I will expect you to come to class prepared, which of course means that you have read/seen/heard the work assigned in advance of each class, and are ready to participate in discussions about the materials. Please take this course only if you think you will be able to handle a reading load of about a novel a week.

Group presentations (in pairs)
You may choose a partner, with whom you will be responsible for researching and preparing material on the history and politics of a particular country, region, and/or period. Your research will result in a 20 minute presentation in class (about 10 minutes each) supported by a website with links and commentary that you will assemble. The presentation will represent 10% of your grade, and the finished website with commentary and analysis will account for another 15%.

Responses (by text)
I will ask each of you to write not weekly responses, but responses to each of the eight major novels or collections of poems that relate it to the historical, political, and economic context addressed in the presentations. The responses should be about a page (one or two paragraphs) in length. They can take the form of questions and analysis of whole works or parts of works, or responses to questions raised by other students. You should aim to make specific interdisciplinary connections between each work and its context. These should be posted on the discussion board while we are reading the work or, at the latest, within a week of finishing the work. These required responses will not be graded separately but will become a part of your overall participation grade.

Essays #1, 2, and 3
The first essay will be 2-3 pages long and based on your interpretation of the Menchú controversy. You should email me (Lcarymehta@gmail.com) your essay by Wednesday, September 25th. You may also drop off your essays in the mailbox outside my office (1 Washington Place, Rm. 622) if you prefer.

The second essay is a longer analysis of a single work of fiction or poetry. It can take off from one of your responses or a part of presentation that particularly interests you. This essay should be 5-7 pages in length (double spaced, 1 inch margins, 12 point font, Times New Roman or comparable font) and is due the week of Nov 4th (Election week!)

Once the second essay is done, or as you are writing it, I will ask you to submit a topic to me for your third and final paper, which should include more in-depth research on a particular topic or set of connections between one or more novels or poetry and their context. I would like to see a basic outline or prospectus for your final essay before you begin to write it. The final essay should be 8-10 pages long, and is due no later than a week after the final class; if you wish, you may hand in a draft or part of a draft for feedback during the last two weeks of classes.
**Extra Credit**
Over the course of the semester, the instructor may make extra credit opportunities available to students. These may include attending relevant talks, performances, films, expositions, etc, followed by brief 1-2 page reaction essays submitted on the Discussion Board tab of the course website. Students are also encouraged to recommend any events that strike them as relevant to the course. Each extra credit opportunity will add one point to a student’s final grade, with no more than three points possible.

**Late Submissions/Incompletes**
Students can ask for extensions and will receive them at the instructor’s discretion, though any late submission will incur a half grade drop unless the delay results from documented medical reasons or family emergencies. **Only requests made in advance of the deadline will be considered.** Assignments submitted late without previously alerting the instructor will not be graded. The last day to submit all your work is **11 December.** If you anticipate being unable to meet this deadline, you should contact the instructor immediately and request to receive an Incomplete, which will be granted at the instructor’s discretion and only with a previously approved plan to complete outstanding work.

**Academic Integrity**
As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website for a full description of the academic integrity policy:
(www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)
REQUIRED TEXTS (from NYU Bookstore, 726 Broadway, (212) 998-4678; some texts can be found at Shakespeare & Co. Booksellers (www.shakeandco.com), 716 Broadway, (212) 529-1330):

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala by Rigoberta Menchú,
- Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and Ann Wright (Jun 1984).
  Verso, 2009, $15.61; Kindle and used ($ 0.01)

The Rigoberta Menchu Controversy
- Arturo Arias (Editor), David Stoll (Contributor).
  Univ. of Minnesota Press 2001; used and new ($14.02)

Miguel Angel Asturias (1967):
- The President (El Señor Presidente, 1946), Frances Partridge (Translator). Waveland Press, 1997; $12.99; used and new from $4.50

Gabriel García Márquez (1982):
- The General in His Labyrinth (Everyman’s Library). $13.82; new and used from $0.01 - $6.99
- One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien Años de Soledad, 1967). Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. $8.87; new and used from $2.45

Mario Vargas Llosa (2010):
  16 new from $5.04 27 used from $3.22

Gabriela Mistral (1945):
  13 used from $11.94

Pablo Neruda (1971):
  City Lights Publisher, 2004. $11.53 or used ($6);
  16 used from $14.75

Octavio Paz (1990):
  47 used from $8.21

Roberto Bolaño:
  Picador, 2008. 67 new from $7.23 99 used from $2.51.

OPTIONAL TEXTS:


Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude: The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, the Philanthropic Ogre by Octavio Paz. Grove Press, 1994 (will scan extracts).

Mario Vargas Llosa, The Dream of the Celt: A Novel tr. Edith Grossman (Jun 5, 2012); or,
  The War of the End of the World by Mario Vargas Llosa (Picador, 2008). Kindle or new ($2.59).

Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones tr. A. Bonner. Grove Press, 1994. $5 new from $6.60 77 used from $3.30 (will scan).
