Charles Hatfield. *The Limits of Identity: Politics and Poetics in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas, 2015. 168 pp. 978-1-4773-0729-8.

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Going back to the "classics" –those books you never read but re-read, said Calvino- can be a fruitful way to redraw intellectual horizons, if the present weighs as much or more than the dictates of past traditions. This proposition is quite different than Harold Bloom's celebration of the canon and closer to Borges' understanding of "great books." He explained that classics were those texts that certainly demanded an "act of faith" and the recognition of the past, but that these decisions were arbitrary and subject to change: "Clásico es aquel libro que una nación o un grupo de naciones o el largo tiempo han decidido leer como si en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término. Previsiblemente, esas decisiones varían" ("Sobre los clásicos" in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952). Emphasis LDG). He added that generations of readers go back to those books pressed by "different reasons,"[1] rather than the reverential recognition of some kind of transcendental notion. This might be pertinent to Charles Hatfield's *The Limits of Identity* when he masterfully draws from the foundational authors of modern Latin American thought to re-think Latino-Americanism and to suggest a radical departure from the "constrains" of identity politics and anti-universalism.

The Limits of Identity is not a simple refutation of canonic notions of Latinoamericanism but a skillful deconstruction of the *language* and *logic* that governed the field for over a century. The notions of identitarian difference and counter-colonial dehierarchization are at the center of his critique. Hatfield's heuristic strategy draws from North American Pragmatism (Stanley Fish and Walter Benn Michaels) but also, from the Jon Beasley Murray's *Post-Hegemony* and Alberto Moreiras' *The Exhaustion of Difference*. In an unassuming way, *the* book also converses with the heated debate that followed the end of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group --with that heated counterpoint between Ileana Rodríguez, John Beverley, Walter Mignolo, Mabel Moraña, Hugo Achugar, Gareth Williams, John Kraniauskas and Alberto Moreiras, among others. Such background is crucial to understand the politics and the loaded background

[1] Borges writes: "las generaciones de los hombres, urgidas por diversas razones, leen con previo fervor y con una misteriosa lealtad."

in which Hatfield re-reads the canon of Latinoamericanism to invite an "alternative future (…) in terms that are no longer identitarian" (109).

The key axiom that structures Hatfield's argument is succinctly outlined in the introduction through a brilliant reading of Borge's "Conjectural Poem" (1943). It states that the notion of "universalism" that counter-colonial discourses find necessary to question in order to assert difference, cannot be sidestepped without paying a "high price": the foreclosing of its own logic of beliefs --given that "to believe something is to believe that its universally truth." Following Susan Haack, Hatfield states then that the rejection of the universal is profoundly "cynical," since "one gives up on the idea that one's beliefs are true (…)"(5). Two other possibilities not mentioned by Hatfield come to mind: first, obviously, there might be a total lack of awareness about the logical conundrum that "ani-universalism" represents when coexisting with the conviction of "identitarian difference". Second, we have to consider an articulation of Spivak's "strategic essentialism."

The Limits of Identity is organized in four concept-chapters (Culture, Beliefs, Meaning, and Memory) and one important "Coda." The first chapter embarks on critique of probably the most canonical essay in Latin American literature: José Martí's "Nuestra América," (1891). Hatfield's heuristic method, as explained before, leads to the controversial conclusion that this founding figure ends up trapped in the identitarian rational of difference. His failure rests in the impossibility "to move beyond an identitarian politics of race" which, in Hatfield's view, "reveals the extent to which his project is implicated in the colonial and imperial discourses he wanted to repudiate" (28). Chapter two deploys the same logic to debunk yet another foundational text of "Nuestroamericanismo," Rodo's *Ariel*; while expanding the analysis to show that even an antagonist thinker as Rodolfo Kusch, fails to escape the tension between "identity" and "beliefs".

Throughout these two chapters, it is clear the amplitude of the study, which goes on to engage Bolívar, Sarmiento, Alberdi, Leopoldo Zea and Dussel. This breath not only offers historical context –or the historicity of the discourses at stake- but it also prepares us for of an engagement with Post-Colonial and Subaltern Studies. In the third chapter, Hatfield explores more contemporary critics –Paz, Rama, Retamar, de la Campa, Cornejo Polar, Mignolo, Sommer, Graff- through a reflection on reading and meaning. In this case, the issue of identity confronts the resistance of the literary text to find meaning. He concludes that literature is to become a site of disagreement rather than one of difference.

Chapter four engages the politics of "history" and "memory;" two crucial concerns of the Latinoamericanist project. Hatfield points out the contradictions of emancipatory projects when he points out the troublesome connection between neoliberalism and the recognition of a cultural difference that rests on the preservation of "memory."

A coda, "A New Latin Americanism?" interrogates John Beverley's *Latin*

Americanism After 9-11 to conclude that the entrapment persists on this important book. Hatfield's reasoning continues the premises outlined in the prior chapter, suggesting than the project of dehierarchization and identitarian anti-universalism fail as progressive responses to capitalism when they are actually espoused by Neo-liberalism. Here I ask if we do justice to arguably one of the most influential and widely read Latin Americanist critics in the last twenty years. If Beverley's core question is whether Cultural Studies is any longer able to provide proper political analysis of contemporary popular struggles throughout the continent, due to its reliance on theoretical discourse, what are we offering through deconstruction at the advent of the Right Turn in Latin American politics?

Undoubtedly, rethinking *Latino-Americanism* seemed urgent in the context of the now foreclosed progressive cycle we have come to know as the "Pink Tide" or "Left Turn" in Latin America. These powerful expressions of radical populist politics, with its various degrees of social inclusion and reform, also brought about the devastation of extractionism, improvisation and corruption. That being said, our reading of Hatfield takes place in the context of a radical shift towards yet another cycle of neoliberal, conservative politics that clearly assumes control of the state apparatus in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. In other countries of the region, the failures of the progressive cycle have prepared the terrain for similar projects that, without any doubt, won't have the best interest of blacks, indigenous peoples and the poor. Questioning identity politics, dehierarchization, and the "national popular" might be "good theory" but in the current trend of Latin American politics, it also has a price. Deconstructing the cannon of Latinamericanism in this context demands us to weight the responsibility of what is to come. In closing, it is worth recalling Gareth Williams' warning about the political weight of our engagements with theory in the field of Latin American Studies.