

## Translating an Unreadable Novel: The Lost Steps in the United States

From New York, a disillusioned, contemporary man sets out to find a new way of life in one of the few remaining truly primitive areas — the upper reaches of a great South American river. *The Lost Steps* is the story of a journey, his search for an emotional and adventurous, his self-discovery, and — back in New York — his achievement of a decision.

Jacket cover, *The Lost Steps*, 1967

At the time of this writing, Alejo Carpentier's novel *Los pasos perdidos* is firmly inscribed in the Latin American canon. It has been the subject of significant scholarship by prominent critics of Latin American literature, from Carlos Fuentes to Roberto González Echevarría. It is generally treated as one of the precursors to the *boom*, and a significant literary work in its own right.

As the story is most commonly told, *Los pasos perdidos* received widespread critical acclaim from its inception. The novel was first published in Cuba in 1953. It was translated into French in 1955 and was awarded the prestigious *Prix de Méliès*. Live *Erangere* the following year; it was also lauded in the novel when it was released there in 1956 — approval that was also reflected in the England's strong sales. *Los pasos perdidos* was a local and international success, which is perhaps why the novel's U.S. reception is often overlooked or rewritten. Most critics follow Roberto González Echevarría, who wrote in his seminal work on the author that "The translation into English of *The Lost Steps*, published by the prestigious Knopf of New York, was the object of appreciative reviews, one even calling for a Nobel Prize for Carpentier" (*La traducción al inglés de Los pasos perdidos, hasta una guía que se podía ir Premio Nobel para Carpentier* [19]).

While technically accurate, the narrative recorded by González Echevarría does not reflect the realities of the novel's U.S. publication, as Deborah Cohn and Irene Rostagno have noted. When *The Lost Steps* appeared in 1956, it did not nearly enough to lead Alfred Knopf to call it a year later, a "grounding failure" (14 Jan. 1958), while Herbert Weinstock, the editor responsible for overseeing the translation, declared it was "the severest disappointment I have known as a publisher's editor" (3 Feb. 1958). *The Lost Steps* thus poses a problem for critics interested in the way that literature crosses borders. Why, when it was successful in so many places, did the novel experience such a different reception in North America? How can this failure offer insight into the way that literature is translated from Cuba to the United States?

In this essay, I will examine the publication history and reception of *The Lost Steps* in order to uncover some of the expectations held by the editors at Knopf and the reviewers at large. These expectations become particularly interesting when read in light of *Los pasos perdidos*, itself a novel about border-crossings and translations. The difficulties at play become clear when we consider the jacket copy for the 1967 release of *The Lost Steps*, as the novel came to be called in the United States. In the brief summary of the novel printed above, *The Lost Steps* is a story that begins and ends in New York. As readers of *Los pasos perdidos* know, the novel does in fact begin in New York, but it ends in an unnamed city somewhere at the mouth of an imaginary river in South America. Although it is true that the (unnamed) narrator goes from New York to South America and back again, he crosses the Atlantic a third time in the course of the narrative and even penetrates the jungle for a second time, suggesting a voyage that is more iterative than linear. Furthermore, his return to New York is marked more by dissatisfaction than by decision. I argue that it is Knopf, and not Carpentier's narrator, for whom the story begins and ends in New York.

The disappearance of the narrator's Latin American origins from the Knopf jacket copy has a similar effect. In the novel the narrator sets out on an anthropological mission to find and collect tribal musical instruments, but it soon becomes clear that his journey is not one of exploration but rather one of return, or at least an imagined return. The narrator is Latin American in origin, the question posed by the novel is whether this man, altered by his encounter with Europe and North America, can ever truly return to his place of origin. In the jacket copy, however, the narrator is a New Yorker. His voyage to South America becomes a journey in search of the "other," like so many anthropologists (and fictional characters) before him, what he is bound to discover is himself.

In both of these changes, what we see is an effort on the part of Knopf to locate *The Lost Steps* in a more familiar, North American framework. This effort, as reflected in the translation of the novel, is the subject of the first two parts of this paper. Its failure will be the subject of the third section.

In studying the publication of *The Lost Steps*, I place this paper in conversation with two previous critics who have written about Carpentier's poor reception in the United States. In her comprehensive study of the publication of Latin American literature in the United States during the mid-twentieth century, Irene Rostagno reviews the publication of numerous Latin American texts by Knopf, known in the post-war period as the preeminent publisher of Latin American translations. Her account locates the 1956 publication of *The Lost Steps* at a moment when U.S. interest in its southern neighbors was dead in the water. During that time, she writes, Knopf deserves "great credit" for bringing Latin American literature into the States (Rostagno xv). In this context, the Knopfs are understood to have single-handedly introduced novels that they deemed important into the North American market despite the financial cost. Selection of these novels was exclusively a matter of taste on the part of the editors or the translators (Rostagno 34). Carpentier's novel thus became just one more poorly received Latin American text published by Knopf in the 1950's. According to the logic of this narrative, Latin American writers would simply have to wait until the 1960's to earn the attention they deserved.

Deborah Cohn's careful study "Retracing *The Lost Steps*" considers more closely the lack of success of *The Lost Steps* in the United States. For Cohn, the novel's poor U.S. reception is particularly remarkable because it not only failed to sell in the 1950's, but continued to fall after the *boom* of the 1960's, when the sales and positive reception of other Latin American novels increased radically. The 1960's saw a nearly three-fold increase in translated texts from Latin America, from 146 titles in 1960 to 414 by 1975 (Mudrovic, 131). Public interest in these texts also increased during this period: in 1962, the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado's *Gabriela, Clave and Cinnamon* became the first Latin American bestseller in the United States (Rostagno 37). As Cohn notes, however, Carpentier's novel was the only one of these to be completely failing to sell in its initial 1956 publication and in a 1967 reprint. According to Cohn's analysis, Carpentier's ties to Castro's communist government caused him to be overlooked during this period.

Cohn and Rostagno both offer valuable recommendations of the optimistic tale told by critics like González Echevarría. But neither reader satisfactorily explains the novel's 1956 failure. Rostagno's analysis, which emphasizes the personal power of translator Harriet de Onis, Alfred Knopf's love for Latin American literature, and indeed Knopf's dominance in the market, does not match the story as revealed by the Knopf archive. Cohn's study, while offering an excellent analysis of the novel's relationship to the boom and the Cold War, does not take into account the fact that *Los pasos perdidos* was selected for translation in 1955 and published in 1956, three years before the Cuban Revolution. There is no mention of politics anywhere among the Carpentier letters before 1959; early reviews of the novel similarly disregard the political scene in Cuba. Instead, the question that seems to have been under debate in the 1950's was a question of taste.

In this paper, I will retell the story of the initial publication of *The Lost Steps*, looking in particular at three moments. First, I will examine the decision to translate *The Lost Steps* in light of matters of taste and money at Knopf. I will then consider conflicts surrounding the structure of the English translation and its title in order to understand the efforts to reframe the novel for a North American audience. Finally I will read the novel's early critical reception to better understand how it failed to be the Latin American novel critics hoped it would be. Ultimately, my analysis of this story will focus on the way that the plot and the aesthetic of *Los pasos perdidos* works in direct opposition to certain assumptions about national literature held by North American critics. For these readers, Latin America had a specific role to play in the discourse around modernity and its discontents. In its aesthetic and its narrative, Carpentier's novel not only fails to play that role, but it also challenges the possibility of a New York-centered reading of Latin America. This made an appreciation of *The Lost Steps* particularly difficult for readers in the United States.

### Part One: Rejection

The story that I will lay out here is constructed primarily from documents available in the Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Manuscript Collection at the Harry Ransom Center. [1] It begins with the decision to publish *Los pasos perdidos*, as recorded through a correspondence between Herbert Weinstock, an editor at Knopf who specialized in Latin American literature, and Harriet de Onis, who, according to Irene Rostagno, became Knopf's most important translator after the death of Sam Putnam in 1950 (34).

Surprisingly, over six months of correspondence, beginning in August of 1954, Weinstock twice declared his intentions to reject *Los pasos perdidos*. In his first letter, which he sent to de Onis with a request for her second opinion, he wrote:

I surrender.  
*Los Pasos Perdidos* is either a pretentious piece of imitation Proust or it is a great work of imaginative literature — but in either case I find it unreadable. [...] I cannot read it; my mind simply will not stick with it. Just possibly, it may be well translated and be highly welcomed by a small number of pro-obscurantists; that it could pay back the expense (and really staggering difficulties) of translation seems to me impossible.  
 Reject. (Aug. 10 1954)

Weinstock makes two points that deserve attention here: first, that the novel, with its complex sentences and its accumulation of obscure artistic and literary references, is highly erudite, and second, that it will not sell. We will find that his initial impressions of the novel are correct on both counts.

In response to Weinstock's rejection, de Onis wrote an enthusiastic letter pushing him to reconsider. In her letter, she compared Carpentier to Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and Herman Melville's *Typee*, making a clear move to locate Carpentier within an Anglophone context. This move also placed him at the intersection of the anthropological novel (*Typee*) and the modernist novel (Joyce's *Ulysses* is the most obvious match). In this same letter, using a phrase that attracted Deborah Cohn's attention, de Onis called the novel "essentially Latin American and at the same time universal" (26 Aug. 1954).

The letter from de Onis prompted a second reading from Weinstock. In his response to this second effort, he called the novel a "not-very-original story" and described it as "an assemblage of highly recondite references to philosophy, music, religion, the fall of unbroken paragraphs ten pages long which have no direct bearing on the story" (15 September 1954). Weinstock concluded by once again deeming the novel too expensive to translate and too highbrow. In a concurrent letter to Carpentier's agent, he suggested that perhaps a solution would be to await the French publication (to be released in 1955, although he does not seem to have been aware that it was under production) (Letter to Jean Malaquais 20 Oct. 1954). This delay, had it been taken, would have allowed Knopf to judge the French reception of Carpentier; it would also have made it possible for other editors at Knopf to read the novel. Although Weinstock does not say this explicitly, his language in this letter suggests that there were no other editors at Knopf who could read Spanish.

Although he did leave open the possibility of reconsidering the novel in the future, Weinstock concluded his letter by writing, "my vote is that we decline in full awareness that someone else may publish." Based on the language and content of these two letters, it is clear that Weinstock was personally and professionally opposed to publishing the novel. How, then, to explain the next letter, sent in December of the same year, proposing the plan to negotiate for rights to *Los pasos perdidos*? In this letter Weinstock explained that "My often-expressed despair over interesting American readers in Latin-American novels led me to be overcautious in my first reactions to *Los Pasos Perdidos*" (12 Dec. 1954), but this explanation does not correlate to the previous letters, and reads as an effort to gloss over his change of heart.

Another way to interpret Weinstock's decision to publish is to see it as further evidence of the dominance of Harriet de Onis in the process of selecting Latin American literature for translation. Irene Rostagno writes that "it was largely [Harriet de Onis] who decided which novels would be translated into English. Notwithstanding the bubbles from certain reviewers [...] Alfred Knopf relied heavily on her judgment and taste" (Rostagno 34). This seems to be the standard understanding of the dynamics at Knopf, repeated, for example, by María Mudrovic (Mudrovic 132). It suggests that Weinstock's opinions in this case were secondary to an undomesticated (spoken?) conversation between Alfred Knopf and de Onis. But a note from de Onis telling Knopf about Carpentier three months after the decision to publish was made suggests otherwise. His response, scrawled beneath her typed text, reads simply: "Very nice. But you've got to have a plan for presenting him to our public" (Knopf 2 Mar. 1955). It seems that not only was Knopf removed from the decision, he was also skeptical of it. Furthermore, his skepticism suggests a concern that the novel will not sell. This is hardly the father of Latin American literature in the U.S., taking on projects regardless of cost, who Rostagno describes. It's possible that the editors at Knopf, and Alfred Knopf himself, dreamed of a future windfall when public interest turned towards Latin America. But there is no evidence that at this time, months before the novel had its resounding success in France, anyone at Knopf thought that Carpentier would sell.

In Deborah Cohn's interpretation of this episode, Weinstock and de Onis decided to translate Carpentier because they came to believe in his universal appeal — the "Latin American and at the same time universal" aspect that de Onis referred to early in the correspondence. This universality is a concept that Cohn traces through several other North American readers as well, and it is one that I find convincing. If the argument is that Weinstock chose his position on the novel because he decided that it had a "universal" appeal, it's worth considering what about *Los pasos perdidos* makes the novel universal, particularly in light of Weinstock's harsh criticisms. Is it the novel's erudition, its constant reference to other texts from the canons of western literature, that give it a universal flavor? Or is it the effort to escape modernity in search of a more authentic (primitive) world that made these readers as universal? As we will see, Weinstock and de Onis may not have been clear about their own understanding of the universal appeal and its relationship to the novel's flaws, an uncertainty that would impact the translation of the novel.

### Part Two: Translation

In a November 1955 letter to Alejo Carpentier, Herbert Weinstock wrote, "I feel that, while it is of first importance to recreate the author's meaning in the new language, it is almost equally important that the result be readable and reasonably idiomatic in the new language" (30 Nov. 1955). "Readability" was a primary concern for de Onis and Weinstock during the translation process, particularly given Weinstock's own early declaration that the novel was "unreadable." If *Los pasos perdidos* was unreadable for Weinstock, it was likely to be even more problematic for the general American public, who Weinstock characterized as anti-intellectual and subject to stupidities, explaining in a later letter that the novel was, "from an American point of view, a 'difficult' book" (23 May 1956). Two aspects of the translation process in which Weinstock played a negotiation role — the paragraph lengths and the title — are particularly demonstrative of the effort to produce a readable American novel.

During the translation process for *The Lost Steps*, de Onis and Weinstock made the decision, with Carpentier's blessing, to reduce the lengths of paragraphs and the play of syntax that characterized the original. When Carpentier saw the finished manuscript in the summer of 1955, however, he had second thoughts. He sent Weinstock a generally enthusiastic letter about the translation, apologizing for the limits of his own English. "The only thing that I find a bit strange, I confess, is the division of the text into short paragraphs," he wrote, wondering whether this division was necessary in order to maintain the complex structure of tense: "that it took so much work for me to establish (*Lo único que me hace un poco raro, se lo confieso, es la división del text en parrafos cortos. [...] que me costó bastante trabajo establecer*" (Carpentier 26 Aug. 1956)).

Weinstock responded by reminding Carpentier of their earlier agreement and insisting that the modified paragraph lengths stand, a decision that is unsurprising given his early rejection of the novel on the basis of its long and unnecessary paragraphs. (Given the fact that almost all of Carpentier's paragraphs are extremely long, we might speculate that Weinstock found the entire novel unnecessary.) An examination of the first paragraphs of the novel, however, is sufficient to show the substantial change that the shorter paragraphs produce throughout the entire novel. In the Spanish version, the initial paragraph of the novel extends for four pages, a block of text that is broken in the final English translation into five distinct paragraphs. Indeed, the first chapter, which is made up of only two paragraphs in the Spanish, becomes twenty-two in English. This is not just the minor reconstruction of a few unnecessary paragraphs; it must be read as a fundamental shift in the structure and presentation of the novel.

It is tempting to say, as Weinstock did, that the different paragraph lengths are merely products of an aesthetic difference between the two languages. Spanish is a more fluid language among English speakers for its extensive sentences, featuring the seemingly endless aggregation of clauses. The decision of whether these sentences should be maintained, or whether they should be shortened, is a subject of much debate among translators. Although current translation practices are more committed to preserving these Spanish idiosyncrasies, shortened sentence lengths would have been consistent with translation practices in the 1950's.

It is significant to note, however, that unlike long sentences, extremely long paragraphs are not a universal characteristic of Spanish prose. For example, the nineteenth-century novel *Sab* written by the Cuban writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, features paragraph lengths that approximate those of the English translation of *The Lost Steps*. The paragraphs in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges (see for example *El aleph*, published in 1957) are similarly comparable to standard English prose. Long paragraphs are, however, characteristic of two particular literary movements. The first is the Latin American boom of the 1960's and 1970's, which is often characterized by a stylistic complexity that has drawn some critics to see Carpentier's work as a direct precursor. The second is the English modernism of the early twentieth century.

Carpentier's letters show that he was aware of his affiliation with the modernist aesthetic. In his letter to Weinstock, he wrote, "I have seen that it is always the North American and English writers, precisely, who most prefer long paragraphs without breaks. I don't have to cite Faulkner, or Beckett, as examples..." (*To había visto siempre que eran los escritores norteamericanos e ingleses, precisamente, los más aficionados al párrafo largo, sin fractura. No he de citar a Faulkner o a Beckett, como ejemplos.*" [26 Aug. 1956]). In a sense, Carpentier seems to have seen his own work as a Cuban or Latin American or even a Spanish-language response to English modernism. [2] What I find remarkable, however, is that Weinstock had no desire to publish what might have been described as a Latin American modernist novel. As he responded to Carpentier that August, in the United States, Faulkner and Beckett don't sell (Weinstock 31 Aug. 56).

The decision to reduce the paragraph lengths, therefore, was not merely an effort to produce a "readable and reasonably idiomatic" version of *Los pasos perdidos*. It was also a decision to subdue the modernist aesthetic of the novel. We can see this same purpose in the debate over titles for the novel. In Spanish, the word "pasos" refers to the marks (the "steps") on a tree trunk that show the narrator the way to a hidden city: *The Lost Steps*, the title proposed by Weinstock, is a literal translation. But it loses the metaphorical sense of "pasos" as a path taken and lost. Harriet de Onis's suggestion of *The Traveler's Sense of Direction* or *No Return* emphasizes this double meaning. The titles offered by Carpentier and his agent take this metaphorical element even further with *Beyond the Last Waters*, *Time Beyond*, *Even Time is Not Enough*, and *Clean Waters*. None of these titles, notably, maintains the literal meaning and assurance of the original. Furthermore, only *The Lost Steps* maintains the literal meaning of the title to the sacrifice of its figurative significance.

Reading this debate in the context of a question of paragraph lengths reinforces the sense that Weinstock was working against the aesthetically and interpretively complex modernist aspects of Carpentier's novel. I might say that he was translating the modernism out of *The Lost Steps*.

### Part Three: Reception

*The Lost Steps* was published by Knopf on November 4, 1956, the day after what came to be known as Black Sunday (the day that Russian tanks entered Budapest). Despite this auspicious beginning, Weinstock wrote to Carpentier later that the titles that sales to date were "extremely satisfactory," describing sales at around 8,000 copies, with 500 more sold that same day (26 Nov. 1956). This enthusiasm, however, was not fostered to last (and may, indeed, have been mere show). Soon after, Weinstock wrote another letter to Carpentier declaring that "I am extremely disappointed over the fact that we do not seem to be able to sell *The Lost Steps* to an American public" (13 Jan. 1957). The date of publication, a negative *New York Times* review, and the American anti-intellectualism were all blamed in the months to come. A review of the reviews of this unsuccessful novel, however, shows a more interesting story.

Although Rostagno and Cohn describe reviews of *The Lost Steps* as generally positive (aside from the *New York Times* review), in fact they were mixed across the board. Reviewers tended to focus on certain key aspects of the novel: its literary allusions, the escape from modernity, the encounter with a primitive other, the reassertion of manliness on the part of the protagonist, and the descriptions of the natural world. The extensive allusions earned review from some readers ("impressively erudite," said the *New Yorker*) and distasteful from many others: the *Partisan Review*, for example, described the novel as a repository for the "appalling rag-bag of Carpentier's mind" (143). *Time* magazine, which published one of the most positive reviews, cited the universal appeal of the desire to escape modernity, but for the *Hudson Review* that same story seemed tired and even "deadly." The search for the primitive other was presented as exciting in some reviews (the *Detroit Times*, for example), but for others, such as the *Baltimore Sun*, it seemed unbelievable and excessively exotic: "the reader wonders if this is pure phantasmagoria, or do such places really exist?"

These reviews invite broad questions about the ways in which *The Lost Steps* was read in the United States, particularly with regard to its Latin American origins. It is possible to interpret the distrust for Carpentier's erudition, for example, as evidence of an anti-intellectual strain among North American readers, just as the emphasis of the narrator's gender roles can be read to reflect the performance of 1950's gender roles in the U.S., and the doubts about the narrative's authenticity can be seen as evidence of U.S. isolationism. On the other hand, what if the problem with Carpentier's erudition is that Latin America readers are concerned to speak for "the south," not "the west"? If we take this interpretive angle, then concerns about authenticity and erudition become concerns about the ways that Carpentier strays from a Latin American stereotype. The reviews in this case begin to suggest the shape of an ideal Latin American narrative, in which the writer functions as an authentic guide, leading North American reader through an authentic Latin American experience that matches the preconceived notions that these readers might have about America's southern neighbors. Carpentier's greatest weakness in this context is that as a Latin American novelist writing in the modernist vein, he fails to live up to U.S. expectations.

There is evidence that this understanding of the reviews has some validity. In the harshness of all the early reviews, John Cullen skewered *The Lost Steps*, calling it a poor translation of a bad novel, and expressing his despair over the state of Latin American (and, incidentally, French) letters. Cullen's conclusions are particularly telling. He wrote, "If sex and cynicism had been removed it might have been a good travelogue. In its present form it is suitable only for an immoral aesthete." *The Lost Steps* was obviously not to Cullen's taste for a number of reasons. (I have to wonder what novels he did like.) He is not the only reader, however, who seems to have read *The Lost Steps* as a failed travelogue. Almost all of the reviewers described Carpentier's portrayal of the natural world as a major asset to the novel, regardless of their overall opinion. A number of reviews included quotes from the novel that emphasize this aspect of the prose while downplaying the plot. Furthermore, while some reviewers followed de Onis in reading Carpentier alongside modernists or even Rousseau, a more common comparison was with the Argentine naturalist W. H. Hudson, whose 1904 novel *Green Mansions* is self-described as a "romance of the jungle." Hudson was known for his lush descriptions of the South American jungle rather than the complexity of his plots. It seems that these reviewers, in making this comparison, wanted to follow Weinstock in reading the modernism out of Carpentier.

There is evidence in examining these reviews is not to accuse the entire U.S. reading public of the 1950's of ignorance and bigotry. I simply want to point to some of the expectations about Latin America that underlie the early reviews of *The Lost Steps*. These expectations, and indeed the entire publication narrative that I have sketched here, become particularly interesting when they are read in light of Carpentier's novel. *The Lost Steps* is, after all, the story of an artist's attempt to move between New York and Latin America. In the novel, the protagonist's erudition, a product of his New York education, stands for the stuff of modernity. Perhaps the protagonist's desire to shed his own erudition is matched by that desire in the readers, from Weinstock to Cullen. If we take pleasure in that erudition, we fall victim to modernity's artifices. By rejecting the erudition in favor of a straightforward travelogue, then, do the readers more successfully achieve the kind of return that the protagonist dreams of?

As for the novel itself, what are the implications of these conclusions for a novel that travels to New York City out of the Cuban publishing environment? Near the end of the *The Lost Steps* the protagonist, having returned to New York, finds that his former home has rejected him, leaving him impoverished, hopeless, and alone. Perhaps this was the professional risk that Carpentier took when he sought to publish his novelistic condemnation of North American urban life in New York City. Carpentier's novel, like his protagonist, was forced to retreat to the cities of South America and to build an artistic movement on its own lands. [3] In this, at least, we can consider *The Lost Steps* a success.

### Notes:

[1] The Knopf archive contains an excellent and quite comprehensive collection of documents and correspondence. It is, however, one-sided: it would be intriguing to examine the letters of Carpentier and de Onis in relation to this narrative.

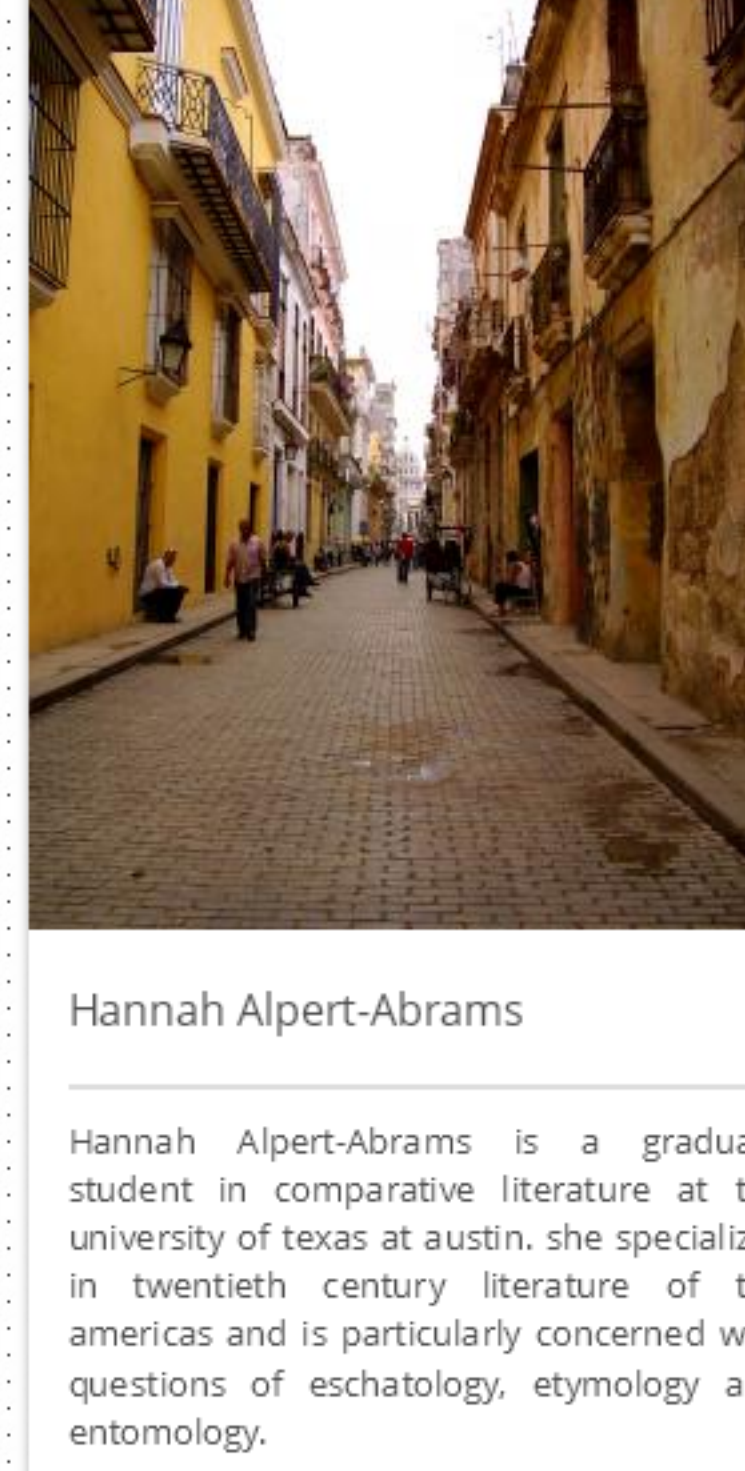
[2] For an interesting commentary on the way that modernism translates into Latin American literature, particularly that of Carpentier, see Neil Larsen's *Determinations*.

[3] This is particularly relevant when considered in light of Carpentier's Spenglerian philosophy about the decline of Western civilization and rise of South America. See, for example, Esther Sánchez-Pardo's incomplete but provocative analysis of this aspect of Carpentier's work.

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