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# The Postmodern in Latin and Latino American Cultural Narratives: Collected Essays and Interviews

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THE POSTMODERN  
IN LATIN AND  
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CULTURAL NARRATIVES  
COLLECTED ESSAYS  
AND INTERVIEWS

EDITED BY  
CLAUDIA FERMAN

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the ominous foreboding, the debate over postmodernity in Latin America is alive and well.<sup>1</sup> That does not mean that it does not suffer from some endemic problems: subjects are often talked about and debated with little or no awareness that in reality various aspects of the postmodern debate are being discussed; moreover, a lot of heated debate about the term takes place without it having much to do with the questions raised by the postmodern debate. In any case, the importance of this debate does not lie in the amount of ink spilled over it but in the presence of new cultural phenomena and in the vitality and high level of discussion associated with it, a vitality which has enabled the debate to expand in several directions at a rapid pace.

I believe that for Latin America this debate now contains two big areas of controversy, which are deeply rooted in its history and which have profound cultural and political significance. First, the postmodern debate encompasses a series of aesthetico-cultural subjects, such as questions related to literary genre (the remodeling of textual forms), the processes of literaturization and deliteraturization,<sup>2</sup> or the questions of gender associated with textual production. Secondly, the postmodern debate relates to considerations about the processes of the transnationalization of economic and cultural production,<sup>3</sup> and their complex implications concerning questions of identity and cultural production in Latin America. The dissolution of boundaries and the vast global flow of peoples and cultures are forcing us to confront the very terms that have defined much of our past academic debates: for instance, can we still speak of the "foreign," the "alien,"

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<sup>1</sup>A good indication of its relevance can be found in publications such as *Boundary 2* 20.3, which Duke University Press published in book form in 1993.

<sup>2</sup>See my book, *Política y posmodernidad. Hacia una lectura de la Anti-Modernidad en Latinoamérica*. Miami: Iberian Studies Institute, 1993; and Buenos Aires: Almagesto, 1994.

<sup>3</sup>I am currently working on a project entitled *New Localities for Cultural Production: Transnational Languages and Texts*, which examines the relationships between diasporic processes in Argentina in the last thirty years and its cultural production.

in terms of cultural production? In the "global flows of people and things" (Appadurai),<sup>4</sup> cultural objects—even those that are specifically literary—become emancipated from the categories in which we previously contained them. Free from the exclusive and excluding boundaries of national origins and cultural heritage, these objects sail free in spaces without borders, for Appadurai "fractal" and "non-euclidean." Within the general context of globalization and homogenization, one must revise concepts of national and regional lineage of contemporary Latin American cultural production; it is necessary to incorporate as well the new questions of identity that permeate these productions (cf. Bartra, Benítez-Rojo).

Each one of these questions is profoundly significant since they allude to phenomena which are played out in the daily cultural life of Latin American countries—independently of its more or less fortunate label—involving real people and institutions with real problems of survival and growth. Thus, the distrust of the discussion framed by postmodernity has been marked by considerable triviality and bias. It should not come as any surprise, then, that the response to that rejection occupies an important place in this book, specifically when the researchers who live in Latin America express their ideas (cf. N. Richard, R. Bartra, N. Casullo, J. Juanes, but also C. Tompkins and S. Colás).

The political implications of each position assume crucial importance. Guided by the claim that the conglomerate of continental and extra-continental Latin American societies have not gained access to modernity (they are still "pre-modern" and therefore "non-post-modern"), the term "primitive" inadvertently slips in, that is, what is different is described as preceding a certain "superior" formulation. The same phenomenon occurs when one speaks of "native" or "pre-colonial," or also "post-colonial" in this context. What this disqualification (which is nothing but another variant of eurocentrist thinking) basically does is to remove the cultural production of this conglomerate, from the general space of consideration and debate to a subsidiary space in which it is necessary to make clarifications and compromising actions (literature versus "national" or "regional literatures," etc.).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Arjun Appadurai, "Disjunctures and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2.2 (1990): 1-24.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the foundations that could inform this debate (which exceed the scope of this book) in terms of Latin America, see Enrique Dussel, *1492, El encubrimiento del otro. (Hacia el origen del "mito de la Modernidad")*, Santa Fe de Bogotá: Ediciones Anthropos, 1992; Walter Mignolo, "Linguistics, Maps and Literary Geographies: Nations, Languages and Migrations," (forthcom-

The criticism of the use of concepts such as "center" and "periphery" represents an important articulation of the response to these notions. While these concepts describe the problems of political and economic power of Latin American reality, they cannot express the nature of a cultural production. Cultural productions are neither "central" nor "peripheral." Indeed, the political systems and powers are capable of "marginalizing" cultural expressions, that is, of disregarding them, or with effective marketing strategies, of silencing them. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the producers and consumers of that cultural production, that product is always central, however inappropriate it may seem in relation to different cultural interests and dogmas. The role of the "gurus" of culture (as Roger Bartra describes them) who decree what must be done in the domain of culture, what is most advisable, what can be accepted as Latin American, and what must be rejected because "it does not belong to it," has not been immune to this politicization of cultural production. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the "masters of the Latin American" have lost a good number of battles while a diverse, heterogeneous and free cultural production has multiplied.

Another perspective on the same question appears in the area of aesthetic questions. What the postmodern debate introduces as the presence of cultural products in which there is a visible irruption of the popular into the "high culture's" domain (the effacement of the limits between *low brow* and *high brow*) represents a long-standing question in Latin American literature. Since the inception of colonization, "high culture" has been represented by the models of the European artistic tradition. The result is that the combination of these models and the vernacular ones (in terms of the debate which concerns us, those perceived as "low brow," and designated as handicrafts, folklore, etc.) became one of the most important spaces of conflict in terms of the development of cultures in Latin American countries. Beverley's article specifically revisits this aspect of the question and does it in terms of what seems to be the voice of the 90s: cultural criticism.

The emergence of Cultural Studies as a field is in part the product of the impact of the commodification of culture in late capitalism on the human sciences, the same commodification that postmod-

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ing in *Modern Language Quarterly*), and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

ernist ideology celebrates (or diagnoses) in its sense of the breakdown of the distinction between high and mass culture. (421)

The elements contained in his line of argument clearly show the questions which are at stake: the rejection of the apocalyptic vision of a Latin America invaded culturally and silenced (a vision cherished by the cultural thinking of Marxist origins); the re-foundation of the critical object, as long as the literary object seems to have drifted away from the places where it was normally found (writing losing its predominance over every other cultural artifact); the notions of "hybridity, nomadism and transvestism," [224] which are necessary to describe contemporary cultural production, the offspring of strong waves of globalization; the new theoretical concepts which must accompany these changes in cultural practices. For their part, all these new critical parameters make up a good portion of the methodological space in which cultural criticism is situated. On the other hand, this question of the postmodern debate—the neutralization of canonic, generic and formal hierarchies of the European tradition—is necessarily associated with the debates at the center of postcolonial criticism. The long history which this question has had in Latin American countries enables us to point to an area of contact of enormous richness and activity, once the discourses of a certain disparity of origin and vocabulary find spaces of intelligibility.

Now then, if it is unquestionable that the postmodern debate and cultural criticism mutually inform each other, it is still not equally clear in what space literary criticism develops which deals with the analysis of contemporary Latin American production, and within which parameters it accomplishes it. I have the impression that since the explosion of criticism which accompanied the so-called narrative of the **Boom**, literary criticism has still not attempted to produce a generalized reflection which would provide globalizing categories like those which accompanied the **Boom**; in general terms, the thinking devoted to the **Postboom** had little strength and did not turn out to be theoretically productive. And it has not stopped doing it for fear of relapsing into macrotheories in conflict with this new postmodern *episteme*; or, at least, not only because of it: other questions seem to have engendered this silence. The origin of this phenomenon is not located in the field of literary criticism but in the change in the conditions of production and reading (reception): after the **Boom** Latin American literary production could no longer capture the attention of the readers in the publishing market on a massive scale. Not because it was of less interest or quality—at least not in my opinion—but because the conditions of production and reading changed so considerably that they made a phenomenon of massive access like the **Boom** unattainable. The Spanish American textual tradition exceeded its "bor-

ders" (with which criticism had successfully played), and the analysis applied to that textuality started to express other necessities and other interests.

As we have seen, the globalizing discussions which recently have captured the interest of criticism center on phenomena which transcend the chronological and movementist aspects (such as those which defined the Boom), that is, a certain body of literature produced within a certain time period in a specific geographical space. The application of these globalizing postmodern configurations manifests itself in the works which deal with aspects relative to *género*, in the double meaning which the word entails in Spanish: *el género* as a discursive category and therefore also literary (*genre*); and *el género* as a category of intercultural differentiation between social, political and economic roles associated with sexual determinations (*gender*). The result of such critical practices are categories such as *el testimonio* (cf. Colás) or *la escritura de la mujer* (cf. Arias and Tompkins) that we described above as the aesthetico-cultural questions with which the postmodern debate deals. These categories have enabled the movement across borders and temporal contexts, giving rise to a critical reflection which relates more closely to the cultural debates than to the idiosyncracies of authors, styles, periods or movements, and have produced perceptive illuminations. In the context of the postmodern debate these globalizing gestures have not fallen into the trap of the universal, but much of their agility and interest stems from their translocal and transtemporal condition. Because of this migratory condition, I would like to designate them *horizontal categories*.<sup>6</sup>

We shall call the complementary class, *vertical categories*. A vertical category demarcates a chronological space, and by means of the parameters of a movement: a certain temporal cut, a more or less defined aesthetic resolve, a group of authors, a body of production, a history, that is, a cluster of events associated with that production. This methodology of generalization would be represented by categories such as the "literature of the Boom," or, in Mexico, "la Onda": the critical (logical) system concretizes an aesthetico-cultural-social phenomenon, and attributes characteristics of the same works and authors to it.

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<sup>6</sup>The spatial metaphor intended here proposes a content for the term "horizontal" which is very different (even contradictory) from the one proposed by Homi Bhabha to describe the "empty time of the nation's narrative" ("DissemiNation," *The Location of Culture* [London and New York: Routledge, 1994], 152-53). In the present work, the horizontal is associated with the line (trail) marked out by a route (like the lights of moving vehicles in a photograph taken at night) and therefore with the dynamic; whereas the vertical is seen as static.

The horizontal categories show more self-awareness of their *reading* role, that is, of the fact that they offer themselves insofar as they are working with comprehensive spaces of debate which are not necessarily located in the area where literature is happening. Hence the slow removal of theoretical reflection from the strictly literary domain (the book) to an extended field, that of cultural criticism, and the multiplicity of its object.

The choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context. . . . Thus, for example, although there is no prohibition against close textual readings in cultural studies, they are also not required. Moreover, textual analysis in literary studies carries a history of convictions that texts are properly understood as wholly self-determined and independent objects as well as a bias about which kinds of texts are worthy of analysis. That burden of association cannot be ignored. (Grossberg *Cultural Studies* 2).<sup>7</sup>

This methodology of "close textual readings" seems to be the natural space of literary criticism, and undoubtedly that is what this practice has been doing without interruption. On the other hand, there is no doubt that said "bias," foreign to cultural criticism, is still present in the space of Latin American literary criticism. When textual analysis is practiced, the chosen object corresponds to the canonic Gutenbergian model (which can be associated with the *print capitalism* of Anderson);<sup>8</sup> even today, after several years of postmodern debate, of the influence and spread of cultural studies. For that reason, this book has given adequate space to these practices; it has not rejected them, because they are also part of the configuration of the thinking about Latin American cultures.

The result is that within the postmodern debate it is still possible to produce new *horizontal categories* which account for other conglomerates of cultural production which have still not made their entry into Latin American criticism for the reasons which we have noted. For example, the space of the

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<sup>7</sup>Lawrence Grossberg, Introduction, in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, eds. (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).



intersection of youth poetics, electronic communication and urban cultures,<sup>9</sup> which are undoubtedly associated with the eminently postmodern phenomena of "literaturization and deliteraturization."

The main thrust of this book is summed up in the attempt to develop a space of interplay between academic instances which are not necessarily identical: that of researchers working in Latin American countries, and that of those who are working in the United States. Certainly, such an effort is a response to the new conditions of communication and exchange of information which are produced by the cybernetic revolution (cf. Martín-Barbero). As we know, forms of communication shape us. In the same vein, every *data bank* shapes our knowledge. Academic discussions rely more and more on access to and the participation in those *data banks*. A new map of communications organizes the dialogues and exchanges in the passage toward the twenty-first century. This map is composed of a congested intersection of channels (modes and media of communication). One of the properties of this intersection is that its congestion is reproductive. That is, the larger the intersection the larger the generation of communicational alternatives. In other words, the number of terminals to which an individual, community or enclave is exposed constitutes the coefficient of reproductivity of these terminals. The higher the profusion of communication channels, there exists an increased possibility of access to new channels. If the number of terminals is low, or zero, chances are that it will remain the same unless other chaos coefficients intervene. Literary salons of today cross boundaries and oceans, this time with new class conditioning: an X number of nodes. In these conditions, without a conscious and continuous effort, thinking in the Latin American field runs the risk of being transformed into a space of enormous exclusivism, dissociated and schizophrenic, in the permanent attempt to interpret and translate to the languages which are presumed to be authentic.

On the other hand, the same places recognize unparalleled conditions of hybridization. Hence the title of this book, *The Postmodern in Latin and Latino American Cultural Narratives*, which communicates the very field of geography as an unstable, hybrid space which is opened to new demarcations, which in itself simultaneously contains limits and the transcendence of those limits, their problematization (cf. Olalquiaga).

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<sup>9</sup>John Beverley as well as George Yúdice, among others, have successfully ventured into this field without there yet existing, however, a widespread awareness of its importance for Latin American cultural production.

By way of conclusion: the present imbrication of aesthetic forms of the Hispanic and pre-Hispanic literary tradition and mass culture (which in Latin America is associated with the different and massive migratory waves, plus the processes of globalization) stands in close relationship to the new conceptions that we have been discussing. In them we can verify the use of the array of models which appear at the disposal of cultural producers, in the rejection of concepts such as high and low culture, external and indigenous, typical and foreign, also in the context of a radical critique of the cultural and political models which specifically established those categories and those limits and borders for cultural production. Within the postmodern debate there appears a formulation of this cultural crossroads. On the other hand, this formulation does not (only) set out to delineate a group of works associated with a set of traits (vertical categories), but it also travels along the length and breadth of cultural production, in its effort to identify and participate in the current cultural debates (horizontal categories).

Translated by Robert Sims