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Towards a Map of the Current Critical Debate about Latin American Cultural Studies

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Abstract: In his paper, "Towards a Map of the Current Critical Debate about Latin American Cultural Studies," Julio Ortega surveys the shifting disciplinary, critical, and methodological paradigms used to study Latin American culture in both the United States and Latin America. Describing the post-theoretical period as a moment when grand analytical models are abandoned in favor of microanalyses, Ortega sees great potential in this new paradigm shift. In his paper, Ortega pays particular attention to the ways that the field of cultural studies has emerged and transformed in Latin American academic inquiry and he considers the disavowal of master critical models to open up spaces for dialogue and critical exchange. Nevertheless, the practice of cultural studies in Latin America and the U.S. has not always indicated emancipatory politics or liberating critical readings. In order for cultural study to be heterogeneous, fluid and dialogic, scholarly work must take care to negotiate the prevailing discourses of power. Ultimately, Ortega points to the emerging field of Trans-Atlantic Studies as an exemplary case of new critical practice and he describes the field as a dynamic and open-ended area of study that does not require a traditional canon or disciplinary configuration.

Julio ORTEGA

Towards a Map of the Current Critical Debate about Latin American Cultural Studies

In the current post-theoretical scene, where what Ernesto Laclau calls a "contamination" between theory and the empirical is taking place, intercultural studies has acquired a distinctive role (vii). Laclau establishes a positivist solution to the current dilemma: "The destiny of theory in our century is a peculiar one. On the one hand we are certainly witnessing the progressive blurring of the classical frontiers which made "theory" a distinctive theoretical object: in an era of generalized critique of the metalinguistic function, the analysis of the concrete escapes the rigid straitjacket of the distinction theoretical framework/case studies. But, on the other hand, precisely because we are living in a post-theoretical age, theory cannot be opposed by a flourishing empiricity liberated from theoretical fetters. What we have, instead, is a process of mutual contamination between 'theory' and 'empiria'" (vii). Probably the first characteristic element of the post-theoretical period is a prudence, even reticence, before the temptation to propose another theoretical model as superior, syncretic and summary relief. At the same time, there is a serious challenge to the critical possibility of a space of dialogue -- a dialogue less determinate and vertical, where new reencounters come to play between reading, text, context and discursive genre. This time that interplay produces another object (a literary and cultural object conceptualized as process) that shows and demonstrates itself to be as porous as it is persistent, as dense as it is free. This rush to resignification is, moreover, in such a fluid state, that it casts a parodic emphasis over recent theoretical hyper-interpretation. We might conclude that, as the century drew to a close, the predominance of grand theoretical models was exceeded by their own conversion into a system of authority. But this would not have been possible without the intense questioning of the will to truth that these models exercised from their centralizing position; they wound up as current currency, mere academic power, and mediatic novelty.

Tilottama Rajan affirms in "The University in Crisis: Cultural Studies, Civil Society, and the Place of Theory" that "theory today has become an endangered species" (8). Cultural theory has been displaced in this age of economicist predominance by cultural studies. The conceptual premise of cultural studies would be based, according to Rajan, on the notion of "absolute transparency" and on "total communicability." Rajan distinguishes between two types of "Cultural Studies": on the one hand, the tendency that comprises post-colonialism, gender, popular culture, and forms of everyday life; on the other hand, the tendency that includes technology, science, and conceives of itself as part of the process of globalization. The first dedicates itself to identitarian politics, the second to economicism. Both forms, ultimately, leave out literature and theory; they are a simulacrum of the social sciences from the humanities, and their "presentism" is grounded on the idea of an "end of history." Although this faith in cognoscente rationality seems to have taken to extremes the optimism of the legible that distinguishes semiology, it is also typical of the operativity of a contextualizing reading, whose principle of articulation presupposes the transparency of objects formed by a disciplinary field. The demonstrative lesson of this reading implies a political voluntarism (because it turns its demonstration into a norm) and privileges the heroic role of the subject among historied objects. But this perspective, characteristic of the social sciences, also carries nostalgia for a self-sufficient politics: it turned the document into the original scene of denunciation. In the rhetoric of denunciation, objects were converted into topics. From the Latin American perspective, nevertheless, the crisis of the disciplines as methods of monologic reading has been forging the theoretical experience of critical reading. "Cultural Studies," dedicated to the media and mass consumerism; "cultural history," dedicated to the social configurations of memory; and "postmodern" relativism, dedicated especially to placing in doubt institutionality are some of the critical practices in tension with models from the academic Archive that, since the 1980s, illustrate disciplinary limits -- limits, that is, of an objectivity overcome by the flux of signification of new objects and by liminal readings of the new. When disciplinary fields tried to reconvert themselves into an archive of genealogies or into the cultural field of markets and consumption, it was clear that the normative gaze of the disciplines had lost sight of the

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objects of anti-canonical displacement and fluid mixing. Some new perspectives emerged from the boundary breaking produced by writing, from anti-metaphysical philosophy, the ethnology of nomadism and speculative psychoanalysis. It was demonstrated again that the disciplinary limits were not those of social experience and, moreover, that cultural objects could not be contained by the fields of reading. Disciplinary authorities shifted to "recycling" with the mediatic functionalism of the "market" or the identitarian politics of the "marginalized" but these functions were less explicable each time and more crossed by contrary and residual forces.

Dynamized by the new complexity of objects and the fluidity of subjects, intercultural studies soon distanced themselves from both positivist documentation and relativist constructivism; and they understood the instrumentation of some and the skepticism of others as situated readings between objects that were not always totally legible. This debate has circulated among a number of Latin Americanist journals interested in a revitalizing critique. Some examples are: *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (London), *Revista de Crítica Cultural* (Santiago, Chile), *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* (Dartmouth and Lima), and *RELEA, Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Avanzados* (Caracas). The latent promise of this transition corresponds, at the very least, to the eruption of new social subjects that were capable of forging strategies and cultural agencies during the exhaustion of dominant theories, which had begun to cancel even the notion of Subject. Excluded by institutional systems, with a cultural practice tested by regional discourses, migrations of every sort displayed the praxis of a heterogeneous identity -- the position of the subject created in the interpolation of spaces. Identitarian politics were not enough to map these movements of desocialization. The question of the subject, its networks of negotiation and its plots of association were foregrounded. It soon was clear that this was not only a question of the Other in its margins of exotic and remote otherness. It was a question of the immediacy of the transient, whose new language cast doubt on traditional ethics now that an urgent "you" seems to decide the moral fiber of the situated "I." The problem of the subject has been retraced by Enzo del Búfalo in *El sujeto encadenado* (1998), *Individuo, mercado y utopía* (1998) and *La genealogía de la subjetividad* (1991).

Certain groups of critics preferred to situate this Subject as "subaltern" among agents of social stratification; for others the Subject was cast as an actor of ethnic "resistance" among institutionalized powers; and in other cases, the Subject was understood as an "acculturated" victim between "colonial" and/or "postcolonial" forces. A rich bibliography recognizes the advances in these approaches, even if in certain instances they were willfully presentist, and on occasion they saw themselves taxed by the good professional conscience and liberal paternalism of symbolic compensations. The testimonio and indigenous literature, in addition to the study of the popular imaginary, have contributed notably to overcoming purist autarchy and ethnological nostalgia in the name of the intense "de-urbanization"reflected by popular culture. The work of Martín Lienhard, William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, and Yolanda Salas are fundamental in this field; but this area still requires more comprehensive and articulated approaches that can provide a theory of the crisis and also illuminate the work of popular culture in processing everyday life -- that is the community of the poor.

Other nuclei of scholarly work chose the uncentered horizon of "Cultural Studies," paying special attention to the costs of modernization, the role of the mass media in the social imaginary, and contemporary forms of mass culture. Groups inspired by postmodernism advanced the questioning of disciplinary tradition, at a time when the Latin American university, feeling threatened, on the one hand, by neoliberalism and, on the other, by new currents of contextual analysis, was becoming more disciplinarily conservative. Literary studies in Buenos Aires moved to emphasize the dramas of nation and nationality. History became documentary history and, in Brazil, self-sufficient discourse. Only in Santiago, Chile, after the dictatorship, did the university cross the disciplinary boundaries opened by theoretical practice. In almost every instance the most innovative research, interdisciplinary, and creative, took place in research centers within small critical communities. And although this is not meant to be a catalogue of all pertinent groups, it is important to mention at least those that opted to work on studies that focused on the border,

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contact, or hybridization (*mestizaje*) including bilingual literature, migratory sagas, and more contemporary forms of mixing as a creative space.

These and other parallel critical persuasions are characterized by their common empirical focus, their independent use of theoretical sources and models, and their methodic consciousness of academic borders. Fredric Jameson thought that cultural studies was a re-politicization of the North American academy, but in his enthusiasm he forgot that campus politics can only be classically liberal. In fact, the political dimension of criticism has been better suited to casting doubt on dominant models as well as debating institutional domestication and the conversion of the academy into a market. Also, it has been successful in providing readings that recover the critical radicalism of works and texts liberated from the museum of the canon and the archive of origin, returning them to the procedural power of their indeterminate and never-ending present. It should be noted that in the fields of Latin Americanism and Hispanism these contextualizing practices, despite some initial flirtations with authority, have contributed to renovating this dialogue, moving beyond the monolinguistic boundaries of recent jargons, autocratic convictions, and the consolation of areas of specialization. We no longer need concern ourselves with those who believe that vindicating personal inclinations demands a profitable philosophy. The biography of the critical profession has yet to be written to include the militant "isms" of the powers-that-be, as well as the assimilation of minorities as second-class citizens through bureaucratic compensation -- although this task probably belongs to the novel. The creativity of criticism is first and foremost in the strength of its self-critique.

Within this fluid and heterogeneous space, critical endeavor can today be conceived of as an open instrumentation defined by its dialogical capacity. If its protocol is that of resituated dialogue, then its relevance is operative, communicational, and its meaning the hypothesis of an articulation. It is because of this that diverse critical instrumentations have coincided, which, from philological genetics (based on the updated archive) to constructivism (de-based in the rhetorical construction), have sought to approximate one another. Not only has it been demonstrated that all disciplines are the daughters of their age -- and oftentimes of the priorities of State reorganization -- but also that artistic, literary and cultural objects say more about themselves when seen under the mediating light of a reading capable of breaching the borders of the object, both in terms of historical lineage as well as formal character. Disputes over interpretation are part of analytical operativity, but they are equally part of the cultural (and even political) history of such objects when reread. The relevance of this dialogical perspective has shown itself in the need to propose new readings of the articulation/intersection between social practices, symbolic production and narratives of identification and difference. Granting the circulatory hybridity of these objects it would be vain to propose a singular method for such an endeavor. Rather, it is more interesting to assume the creative opening of the field, broadened by trans-disciplinary interactions. It is furthermore important to recognize the exploratory will of a radical criticism freed of the fetishism of authorities of theory, transformed into a common currency by the highs and lows of academic power. Derrida has said that, having died, deconstruction would live on much like the ghost of the Freudian father, demonstrating an even greater presence in its absence. Perhaps more accurately, it could continue to do so as the theses of Marx and Freud have done, circulating as forms of modern -- or given the case at hand -- postmodern critical consciousness.

Even if these excesses might seem caricaturesque, it cannot be forgotten that only ten years ago, for example, it was widely taken for granted that the indigenous world of José María Arguedas was nothing more than an archaic and sentimental national myth. From this point there was but one step to holding that indigenous peoples could either enter modernity or disappear. This, however, was a step into the abyss of contradiction: this condemnation, in effect, proved the critical and moral bankruptcy of those who needed to penalize such excluded subjects in order to maintain their dominant discourse. Further, this was done through another myth, that of a West equipped with all forms of reason, including that of mortal sanction. Owing to its elaboration within theory, radical criticism today has become more pragmatic, realizing itself as such through the linking of cultural objects to both the contexts of their origin and their future. Symptomatically, Arguedas's work has in effect brought us "up-to-date" thanks to its migratory and fragmented

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saga of the modern, its sense of urgency as well as its enigmas. As Doris Sommer has suggested in *Proceed with Caution*, the bilingual cultural object is the most fragile and requires the greatest care. Alberto Moreiras, on the other hand, has provided a historiography of the distinct critical points of view of "Latin Americanism" that the North American academy has explored and in his book, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Moreiras dramatizes the contemporary importance of José María Arguedas as a heterodox paradigm (1).

Currently, intercultural studies seek to redefine the terms of this practice. For some work groups, this is undertaken as a repostulation of American Studies to include the multiple languages of the continent, and a relocation of relationships of border, region and nation (what they refer to as the "post-national" as a means of freeing the dominant narrative from an abusive unity of authority). The discussion of community, nationality, citizenship, and the role of the mixing and hybridity of identities based not in similarity but alterity (Ricoeur), has, however, proven to be more complex, despite the simplification introduced by the project of "globalization." This redefinition of "globalization" as a producer of differences, is, by its own symmetrical contradiction, a theoretical necessity of reappropriation. For other groups, this has meant the reformulation of the long and unequal exchange between Spain and Latin America as a means of overcoming the regrettable division between the areas of "Peninsular" and "Spanish American" studies: having become a tired and fruitless practice, this has dulled and left barren the most relevant texts -- precisely those texts which are best understood through their modern inclusivity and *mestizaje*. It is a painful truth that there are many experts on the Spanish Baroque, for example, who are completely unaware of its American origins. This is particularly problematic given the fact that the Spanish Baroque was stimulated by the abundance and wonder of the Americas, and cannot be understood without the gold, silver, chocolate, pineapple, birds, colors and flavors of the laboratory of the New World. And although the notion of a "Creole consciousness" transforms the object into a proof of itself, the practice of mixture (grafting, hybridism, intersection) can be called by many names, as long as these names don't domesticate the objects and their open process.

In this search for critical initiatives, which also includes teaching and methodology, Trans-Atlantic studies appears as a distinct possibility, free from the disciplinary genealogy and liberal *parti pris* that condemns the subject to the role of victim -- colonial, sexual, imperial, ideological, etc. The Trans-Atlantic, then, is a map reconstructed amid its European, American and African currents, one that therefore redefines the monuments of civilization, modern institutions, and hermeneutics in debate. As such, more than historical it is intra-historical time intersected by constantly updated narratives. Its discourse moves amid islands that reassign names and along coasts that exceed the process of cataloguing. Trans-Atlantic Studies brings to power distinct disciplines and different upheavals of the fields of social and humanistic studies. In England this designates at least two tendencies: studies of new internationality which foreground postcolonial interlocutors; and Anglo-American Studies, which now encompass a variety of ethnic and cultural minorities in the United Kingdom and the United States. Both appear fomented and supported by the principle (and perhaps the promise) to connect and broaden these spaces through the concurrent model of dialogue (what some of us know of others) and of the Trans-Atlantic (what we do not know from one to an/the Other).

An illustrative case of these reading operations, which in situating the object decide its status, is that of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The latest readings of this work and the Caribbean subject (Caliban: Caribbean, cannibal) have been the terrain of postcolonial theory. In postcolonial studies the dominant hypothesis has been the political paradigm of imperialism and its symmetric notion of axis and periphery, as in the ideological diagram of master and servant, and the ethics of the Other and otherness. According to Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, postcolonial studies critique the notion of "a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (9) and its symmetric notion of axis and periphery, as in the ideological diagram of master and servant, and the ethics of the Other and otherness. On the other hand, the postcolonial perspective also implies the historicist view of the colonial subject as deprived of identity by the brutal forces of the modern. Through a reductionist derivation, "dependency theory" would later deny that the Latin American subject had an authentic culture of its own,

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having been dispossessed of substance by the dominant culture. However, if we situate ourselves in an intercultural reading, we can demonstrate that the colonial subject does not always display such victimization, but rather that the colonial subject can, at times, negotiate its own margins. This subject is not always confined to the narrative of the Masters of the moment or to the archive of genealogies. Further, being a discursive construction first and a political construction second, it is not transparent to the social sciences. Similarly, we could demonstrate that in *The Tempest* Caliban does not learn to speak merely in order to "curse" as he himself says. Greenblatt argues persuasively that Caliban's "profit" here is his moral definition. In his book, *Learning to Curse*, Greenblatt affirms that "Caliban's retort might be taken as a self-indictment: even with the gift of language, his nature is so debased that he can only learn to curse. But the lines refuse to mean this; what we experience instead is a sense of their devastating justness. Ugly, rude, savage, Caliban nevertheless achieves an absolute if intolerably bitter moral victory" (*Learning* 25). In truth, this would be a "victory" which would only confirm his dependent and subsidiary position. Instead, it is more interesting to demonstrate that in learning to speak, Caliban has become capable of naming. Consequently, he reappropriates the diversity of his own Island, recovering it from his owner, thanks to the fact that he, Caliban, knows better the fertility and abundance of the trees, fruits and flowing waters of nature, a nature which he rehabilitates thanks to language. That then is the shift in meaning: his passage is from "natural man" (slave) to "noble savage" (humanized by language). In the face of a postcolonial reading that would require the most monstrous of him in order to prove its denouncement, another reading could propose that Caliban is in the process of his own humanization.

This is the same colonial Subject that in Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Nueva Corónica* (New Chronicle) learns to write and in Inca Garcilaso's *Comentarios reales* (Royal Commentaries) learns to read. This reappropriated Spanish language is a tool for reconstructing cultural memory and reestablishing shared spaces. Our Subject is, therefore, constructed through the intense hermeneutics of exchange: European definitions are followed by American redefinitions. In a certain sense this suggests an allegory reborn from the "self-taught philosopher." Indigenous and *mestizo* intellectuals put this Subject to work not in the lost past but in the future-in-the-making -- one of dialogue, difference and negotiation. As such, it can be demonstrated that the mestizo colonial world therefore constituted Spain's true modernity -- a paradoxical modernity, in effect, that would soon become the political sign of the new.

Following the Seminario Iberoamericano, organized by Hispanists from Cambridge University (1995 and 1996), the Trans-Atlantic Project working group at Brown University has sought to raise this field of studies as a new exploration of intercultural history (see <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Hispanic_Studies/Juliortega/Transatlantic.htm>). The representations of the Trans-Atlantic Subject and the re-writing of the colonial stage, the construction of the Other in voyage narratives, the hybridity of translation, and the crossings of exile and the avant garde(s) are but a few of the nuclei of this debate. In the process of defining an agenda for this dialogue -- which included Doris Sommer (Harvard), Alicia Borinsky (Boston University), and Beatriz Pastor (Dartmouth College) -- the notion of the Trans-Atlantic was formulated as the theoretical-practical plot of intersections between Europe (especially Spain) and our Americas. The topics of study emerged from the interests of the group and, from the first instant, introduced the present of Spanish in the United States as a social and cultural mediating force between unequal spaces. In other forums -- and in particular in the one dedicated to Spanish in the United States organized at the Casa de América in Madrid (1997) by the Trans-Atlantic Project from Brown -- we explored the thesis that our cultural objects are best read by the light of both shores of the language, in its constant voyage between the migrations of forms and the transformation of codes.

Colleagues from the University of Puerto Rico joined the working group and convened a colloquium on "The Trans-Atlantic Caribbean" that demonstrated the current state of this perspective in a region, which from its origins has been generated through the dynamics of this exchange. "Trans-Atlantic Mexico," a colloquium organized by the Brown Project and the Division of Studies of Culture at the University of Guadalajara in 2001, was held with the participation of

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colleagues from *UNAM* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), *UAM* (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana), El Colegio de México, the University of Guadalajara, and the University of Buenos Aires, in addition to the members of the base group. The thesis of these colloquia is that our countries are not only national creations, but that they are also the product of cultural interaction with the Atlantic world and its various branches of a Modernity which cannot be understood without the contradictory constitution of Latin America. In an age of globality these studies reveal the dramas of particularity and difference. Perhaps the best to come of these Trans-Atlantic Studies -- favored by "New History" which works memory like a fertile shore of the present -- could be the fact that they do not require a set program or canon: instead, they are an open exploration and a proposal for the reconstruction of dialogue.

Translated from the Spanish by Sophia A. McClennen and Corey Shouse

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