Relocation of Knowledge: The Postcolonial Debate in Latin America

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Postcolonial discourse encompasses a vast and by no mean homogeneous field of study. In this article I will focus on the possibilities, limitations and consequences of textual representation, and therefore will emphasize this aspect of postcoloniality.

The problematization of the postcolonial starts with the term itself. Beyond a postmodern reluctance to offer formulaic definitions, critics raise numerous questions regarding the scope, time frame, and methodology in the study of the postcolonial. For example, Ella Shohat asks: "When exactly does the postcolonial begin?" (103) and the historian, Arif Dirlik "misreading the question deliberately" gives an answer that is only partly funny: "When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe" (329). I will, however, offer a working definition for the purposes of this work: "the postcolonial entails the social, political, economic, and cultural practices which arise in response and resistance to colonialism" (Mishra and Hodge 284). I will use this definition to challenge two general assumptions about postcoloniality:

- that its discourses relate only or mostly to the English (Commonwealth textuality) and Francophone areas, and
- they are produced mostly after the second world war, when a vigorous decolonization process was taking place in many parts of the so-called Third World (India, Middle Eastern and African countries) (cf. Paredes).

Focusing on the postcolonial debate in this continent, I seek to demonstrate that Latin America is not only a postcolonial space, but also that postcolonial textual and cultural production, in fact, is pioneered in Latin America. Hugo Achugar points out that the desire of postcolonial studies to liberate knowledge production from the categories and ideas produced by colonialism has been a major concern in Latin America for over a hundred years. If this is so, the question might be asked: why has Latin America, ostensibly a quintessential site of such postcolonial phenomena as mestizaje, linguistic and cultural hybridism, not produced texts that have been canonized as required reading for postcolonial scholars worldwide? Is the problem, as has argued Jorge Klor de Alva that the employment of colonial structures and the enactment of the decolonization process in Latin America are unlike that which took place in other parts of the colonized world? Klor de Alva, and also Mark Thurner, point out that, since the majority of independence struggles in Latin America were waged by *criollos* belonging to the landed elite, and not by the indigenous population, independence then did not mean restoring governmental control to the original inhabitants, but to a new population modeled on European forbears. Should we assume then that Latin America has not produced a Gayatri Spivak or Ngugi Wa Thiong"o because colonialism was something different in India

or Kenya than it was in Mexico or Peru? Do the Americas really have a colonial, much less a postcolonial history? In an article published in the *PMLA*, Santiago Colás argues that neither of these categories is applicable to Latin America, because "there is a striking lack of coincidence between the changes that have been brought about by independence and the relative stasis in economic and social relations" (384). In fact, Colás is not asking what the term postcolonial can contribute to the understanding of Latin America, but in a clever move he inverts the question: "What can the culture of Latin America contribute to the understanding of the postcolonial?" (383).

Following this logic, my answer to the question of the postcolonial theory's validity in the study of Latin American texts has a double agenda: first, to show how Latin America' s very nature as a postcolonial territory prevented it, until fairly recently, from participating fully in an international discussion of postcoloniality, and secondly, to demonstrate that, Latin America has been producing important, even groundbreaking contributions to this discussion. When we visualize the body of postcolonial theory, why do we concentrate only on names like Bhabha, Spivak, Said, Ashcroft, or more recently, Loomba, Dirlik or Ahmad (some of whom are from postcolonial countries currently living in so-called industrialized countries), and not remembering names like García Canclini, Ricardo Kaliman, Roger Bartra, Enrique Dussel, or Sonia Montesinos (who still live and write in Latin America)? Clearly, this tendency illustrates that postcolonial theory is itself a product of globalization, and its dissemination in a world market depends on economic and linguistic powers in the realm of publishing and book distribution (both in print and electronic form)[2], powers to which Latin America still has limited access. This paradox is compounded by the fact that postcolonial theories, complete with terminologies, strategies of resistance, and transtemporal applications, have been circulating in Latin America for at least 100 years -- as Achugar suggests -- but they were not recognized as such. What Ngugi Wa Thiong"o calls the "decolonization of the mind" has been an ongoing process in Latin America (cf. Achugar, Paredes). Here is a small sample of what I believe are some of the most important texts that may be included in the postcolonial critical body of writing. The earliest text, and one of the most ignored, is *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios,* by Fray Ramón Pané. Written in the 15th (!) century, it documents the earliest resistance to the Spanish colonial enterprise by the natives of Hispañola. Juan José Arrom compares it to the *Popol Vuh*, a text written in the Quiché language using the Castilian alphabet. As in the best postcolonial tradition, the authors of the *Popol Vuh* adopt and use -- as a tool of resistance -- the two main instruments of cultural subjugation: the European writing and the Christian worldview, just like Guamán Poma did in *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno.* Among the works written during the Independence period José Martí"s *Nuestra América* (1891) should definitely be included, as well as major works of the 20th century. These include Fernando Ortiz"s *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y el*

azúcar (1940), Calibán (1971), by Roberto Fernández Retamar, Angel Rama"s brilliant follow-up of Ortiz"s book, Transculturación narrativa en America Latina (1982), his Ciudad Letrada (1985), and the works written in the past decades by José Joaquín Brunner, Enrique Dussel, Nicolás Casullo, Mirko Lauer, Jesús Martín Barbero, Leopoldo Zea - the list is far from complete.

What might these texts bring to postcolonial theory, and what postcolonial theory might we bring to such texts? We could look closely at Fernández Retamar, a writer whose ideas in many ways parallel those of his Caribbean counterpart Frantz Fanon. The employment of his theoretical frame begins with a recognition of Latin America's long and continuing tradition of anticolonial protest. "Para ser consecuentes con nuestra actitud anticolonialista," he says, "tenemos que volvernos efectivamente a los hombres nuestros que, en su conducta y en su pensamiento, han iluminado esa actitud. Y en este sentido, ningún ejemplo más útil que el de Martí" (43). True to his Marxist orientation, at no point does Retamar calls his "anticolonial attitude" a theory; for him it all depends on action. But he does recognize that "thought" embodies this attitude, and that the best example of this thought in the Americas is found in the work of José Martí.Martí's vision for an America that progressively frees itself from colonialism, not just in terms of Spain's initial colonization, but also from the colonizing ideology of the United States, is present in much of his enormous body of writing, but is outlined most concisely in *Nuestra América.* As Edna Acosta-Belén notes:

> While Martí developed the concept of *nuestra América* in reference to a nineteenth century Latin America that was struggling with the evils of tyranny, exploitative economic forces, and social injustice, (even after most Spanish colonies had achieved independence) he realized that the destiny of the continent was inextricably linked to the Colossus of the North. (87)

Nuestra América marks the beginning of a new epoch of resistance to the empire in the Americas. José David Saldívar sees Martí as a specific intellectual in the Foucauldian sense who "stands between two ways of thinking: the last representative of a 19th century romantic idealism and the first forerunner of a Latin American continental solidarity" (7). In my view,[3] *Nuestra América* may be read as a dialogue with nineteenth-century writers such as Sarmiento, whose post-independence texts combined racist and elitist rhetoric to promote a new wave of Eurocentric attitude. If the distinction between *civilización y barbarie* for Sarmiento[4] is between the maintenance of European models of cultural and economic production and the "threat" of the indigenous element, then his worries, as Martí realized, were really about gaining independence at the expense of losing a colonial format. Sarmiento proves that colonization is not about "us" as a native power and "them" as the finally ousted colonizer, but about the pervasiveness of colonialist

notions within the so-called post-colonial nations.

Martí's rejection of Sarmiento's ideas and his insistence on *nuestra América mestiza* constitutes one of the first sustained attacks on Eurocentrism and neocolonialism in Latin America. Written in New York in 1895, many years after the independence of all of Latin America except Cuba and Puerto Rico, Martí focuses on two main points: the necessity to recognize the value of indigenous elements in the development of free republics, and the demand for creation of home-grown methods instead of imitation of foreign models in the execution of these efforts. Unlike the picture Klor de Alva paints for us today, Martí was convinced that both independence and Latin America"s contemporary condition as a conglomerate of free republics depend on Indian, mestizo, as well as *criollo* elements. In spite of this, it must be recognized that Martí himself was not devoid of Eurocentric thinking. For example, his suggestion about the different countries in Latin America that have been established "entre las masas mudas de indios," whose collective future depends on "estos hijos de nuestra América, que ha de salvarse con sus indios" (27). Why are the indigenous masses „mute"? Because they do not express themselves, or because they are not heard, not even by Martí? Whom does he call "estos hijos de nuestra América" to be saved "con sus indios"? Aren"t the "indios" also sons of "nuestra América"?

Differing from Klor de Alva's assumption that mostly *criollo* populations formed a new governing class in the image of Europe, Martí marks a crucial distinction between the two factors in the process of building independent nation-states. "Los hombres naturales han vencido a los letrados artificiales," he writes. "El mestizo autóctono ha vencido al criollo exótico. "And then, in a clear rejection of the kind of Euromodeling that informs Sarmiento' s work, and according to Klor de Alva, pervades the would-be Latin American postcolonial condition, Martí adds, "No hay batalla entre la civilización y la barbarie, sino entre la falsa erudución y la naturaleza" (28). Like Angel Rama would do many decades later, Martí emphasizes the role "letrados" played in establishing and maintaining colonial order. He specifically targets the use of imported books and the suppression of local languages and histories, both common battlefields in contemporary postcolonial debates. These are the functions of "la república que lucha contra la colonia" (30), that is, a republic that struggles against the colony in a Latin America that, at the time, had been independent for the greater part of 70 years. The *Nuestra America* essay is vintage postcolonial theory because it addresses both the history of colonialism, and the current threat of colonialist practices from the "colossus of the North." That is, it recognizes the presence of the colonial within the postcolonial.

This is perhaps the most important distinction between the colonial/postcolonial question in Latin America (and other areas of the globe). Many Latin Americanists recognize the complex and varied vestiges of colonialism in the post-independence epoch, the resilience of structures brought by the colonizers and maintained by *criollo* and mestizo supporters of colonial institutions, and later

layered with the implantation of “foreign economic models that have failed in all countries in question” (Manzor 157). On the other hand, there is no doubt that independence efforts and national agendas *were* in many cases tied to postcolonial or anti-colonial beliefs, despite the fact that those advancing these agendas were not strictly of the “native” population.

Retamar believes that Martí's views project "una visión calibanesca"(46), an idea he develops in substantial detail in his essay "Calibán." Martí is the grand figure of Latin American anti-colonial thought, and Caliban is the consummate symbol of that resistance, a literary icon that spans the entire range of historical moments from Columbus through to the present moment. One of the remarkable characteristics of this essay is its visionary nature. Some twenty years before the current discussions on the validity of a concept like "hybridity" in postcolonial studies, Retamar already recognized that José Vasconcelos' idealist views of a hybrid "cosmic race" were "a bit confused but full of intuitions" (13). Although Retamar accepts Martí's description of the Americas as mestiza, he notes that despite this *mestizaje,* countries with highly developed systems of capital can create and have created what he calls "una relativa homogeneidad en este orden" (11). For Retamar, Martí prefigures Fanon[5] being the "primer anti-colonialista de nuestro continente" (55), part of a tradition from which stems a sustained discussion that continues to expand and develop. It may be evidenced in Fanon‟s ideas about the psychological effects of colonization, Aimée Césaire‟s take on the Caliban theme, *Une Tempête*, Edouard Glissant‟s proposal of reappropriation of history and language, and Fernando Ortiz's use of the terms *transculturación, ajiaco,* and *contrapunteo,* all of which contest the simplistic and traditional reading of Caribbean history as only colonial or once-colonial. We can see this theme evolving in the region‟s negotiation of complex racial and ethnic legacies as manifestations of the interaction of colonial and postcolonial conditions, and we can see it more recently in the critical work of Walter Mignolo, whose emphasis on "writing without words" is both an examination and a criticism of the colonial privileging of the written text, resulting in the exclusion or suppression of other forms of historical representation (a similar approach to that of Angel Rama in *La ciudad letrada*). Finally, we can return to Retamar's *calibanismo,* because it recognizes both the tremendous impact of colonialism in the New World, as well as the existence of a history of resistance, both colonial and postcolonial. Many scholars have reread Shakespeare‟s *The Tempest* as a commentary on decolonization using the "colonial" metaphor of Prospero and Caliban‟s relationship. This relationship parallels the interaction between colonizer and colonized (Zabus 35). Retamar uses the figure of Caliban as a kind of marker that moves from colonial to postcolonial discourse, between colonial history and contemporary reality. For this reason he follows the Caliban vs. Ariel debate from José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900) to O. Mannoni's text, *Prospero and Caliban: Psychology of Colonization* (1950)[6], and then to Fanon's rejection of Mannoni's ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)[7]. I would argue that Retamar

reads all these texts through a lens that depends not just on Marxism (as many argue), but more so on a postcolonial interpretation of literary events. This is why Retamar finds value in Vasconcelos' cosmic race, and believes that even if Rodó is wrong about who is Ariel and who is Caliban, recognizing the importance of *The Tempest* as a key work in the representation of postcolonial Latin America was Rodó"s undoubted merit. He arrives finally at the well-known conclusion that Caliban is an iconic figure for *nuestra América mestiza.* Caliban thus becomes the colonized everyman, the first and last in a long list of anti-colonial voices that includes Túpac Amaru, Bolívar, Martí, Zapata and Sandino. The list goes on today to include those who will not, as Djelal Kadir does, place their hope in the "civility of graceful endurance" (21), and who find neo-colonialist efforts directed toward Latin America objectionable: Eduardo Galeano, Cornejo Polar, Paulo Freyre, the much embattled Rigoberta Menchú, and other "organic intellectuals" like her (Beverly"s term). In addition to the interpretation of contemporary works, the Latin American textual production of decolonization may be used for rereading texts written during the Colonia, such as those I already mentioned: Fray Ramón Pané"s *Relación*, o *El Primer Nueva Corónica* by Guamán Poma or the *Popol Vuh*. If we read them without these theoretical groundings, these texts remain merely ethnographical or historical accounts; but with them we recognize an entire Calibanesque discourse not just of "vituperative cursing" (Pané), but of the aftertaste of deception, the awareness of annihilation, and the reality of cultural submission. Without Martí's *Nuestra América,* we can discount such texts as the lost messages of obliterated people; with it we recognize them as integral elements of the long tradition of Latin American resistance to colonization.

The question here finally is not whether Latin America's colonial and postcolonial histories are different from what was experienced elsewhere, but *how* they are different. Just as the issue for Ortiz was replacing the universalist (and essentialist) notions of acculturation with the local reality of transculturación[8], the melting pot with a local *ajiaco* and Cuban citizenship with *cubanía*[9]*,* thus should we, as Latin Americanists, recognize the rich tradition of local postcolonial textual practices.

In conclusion, I am not advocating here the usage of analytical frameworks that originate from theories that are inapplicable to Latin America just because they are now popular in the academic scene. It is precisely Martí who warns against "confused and incomplete readings of foreign texts" (Ripoll). Moreover, Pérez Firmat also points out, "One of Ortiz's important lessons ... is this awareness that one of the most insidious types of colonialism is the onomastic or conceptual, the situation that arises when the originality or distinctiveness of the home-grown is explained and rationalized using foreign categories" (31). Because I do not believe that it is productive, or even possible, to attempt a neat separation among current critical practices of discourses of resistance, I conclude that what I call Latin American postcolonial critique comes with many names, brands and approaches.

Some Latin Americanist critics, like Román de la Campa, Nelly Richard and Eduardo Mendieta explore a community of discourses in an effort to disentangle the narrative complexities of an "incredibly rich self-referenced Latin American discursive tradition" (Campa ix). John Beverly, Marc Zimmerman, Georg Gugelberger and Ileana Rodríguez initiated the Latin American subaltern studies group that was fashioned after Ranajit Guha"s subaltern studies group (1982), which lead to the publication of the *Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (2001). Alberto Moreiras, Brett Levinson, and Gareth Williams advance theories related to Bhabha"s concept of a "third space" in their analysis of Latin America's cultural, political, and literary practices. What unites all these approaches in my mind is an attitude of resistance to cultural colonization that is a vital characteristic of postcolonial discourse (Galeano, Yúdice, Canclini).

I conclude this article with an observation by Walter Mignolo regarding alternative centers of enunciation and theorization that I find particularly relevant: "..postcolonial discourse is not just a new field of study or a gold mine for extracting new riches, but the condition of possibility for constructing new loci of enunciation as well as for reflecting that academic knowledge and understanding should be complemented with learning from those who are living in and thinking from colonial and postcolonial legacies..Otherwise we run the risk of promoting mimicry, exportation of theories and internal (cultural) colonialism, rather than promoting new forms of cultural critique." (130-131)

End Notes

1. Hugo Achugar suggests that it is misleading to construct accounts of Latin American history and culture from the perspective of the colonial past rather than from that of the modern nation. Latin Americans, he says, have long debated their identities and their locations relative to the metropolis on the basis of their emergent nationhood. These identities are already known to be deeply heterogeneous and hybrid – so postcolonial studies has nothing to add (380).
2. An interesting article by V. Carchidi talks about the importance of the Internet for postcolonial writers,en- titled: "Come Into My Web: Literary Postcolonialism in the Information Technology Age."
3. Although I offer a purposeful reading of Martí"s *Nuestra América*, I exclude myself from the group that Saumell Muñoz talks about suggesting that certain readers adjust their "horizon of expectations" (Jauss) in their rendering of Martí"s ideas. (He talks about specifically Fidel Castro"s appropriation of Martí"s works for the advancement of his Marxist agenda.) (99).
4. From Idelber Avelar"s "Transculturation and Nationhood": Ricardo Piglia once pointed out that the apocryphal quote at the beginning of Domingo Sarmiento"s *Facundo* (1845) – the French sentence "on ne tue point les idées," written by Sarmiento on a wall after being attacked by a federalist gang – can be taken as an emblem of Argentine literature in its foundational moment; not simply in its banal content, but primarily in its form and in the discursive economy that presides over its historical inscription. By relating how Rosas dictatorship, "after sending a committee in charge of deciphering the hieroglyph," (Sarmiento 5) must have wondered what in the world it could mean, Sarmiento draws the line between civilization and barbarism with a mere epigraph: barbarians are, of course, those unable to read the sentence. More than in the utopian vision it voices, "the sentence"s political content resides in the use of the French language" (Piglia 15). A voracious student of foreign languages, Sarmiento locates in the transculturation of European sources a sine qua non condition for the construction of a modern civilized Argentine nation. Transculturation is, however, always already torn apart by aporias, not the least of which plagues the authorship of Sarmiento"s epigraph (web source).

5. Fanon"s two major concerns, the ill-effects of colonization on the psyche of the colonized and the anti-colonial liberation are interrelated throughout this work, although the critics are divided on how this interrelation might work. According to Bhabha, Fanon indicates that colonial identities are always oscillating, a divide between black skin and white mask is not a neat division, but "a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once...It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the distrubing distance in between, that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness - the White man"s artifice inscribed on the Black man"s body" (187). On the other hand, Benita Parry reads Fanon as an author of liberation theories who "affirmed the intervention of an insurgent, unified black self, acknowledged the revolutionary energies released by valorizing the cultures denigrated by colonialism and, rather than constructing the colonialist relationship in terms of negotiations with the structures of imperialism, privileged coercion over hegemony to project it as a struggle between implacably opposed forces" (226).
6. Mannoni was the first psychologist to make use of this metaphor in a critical study of colonization: "Mannoni"s inaugural gesture helped to shape the trajectory of those associated appropriations which lay ahead and, concomitantly, to bring about the reestimation of "The Tempest in Africa and the Caribbean" (Nixon 562).
7. We could also include George Lamming in the list of those who subscribe to the calibanesque discourse: "...a new turbulence is at work everywhere and Caliban is wide awake."
8. "Entendemos que el vocablo transculturación expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transtivo de una cultura a otra, porque este no consiste solamente en adquirir una distinta cultura, [que es la aculturación], sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o el desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse de una parcial desculturación, y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse de neoculturación...En toda mezcla de culturas sucede que en la cópula genética de los individuos; la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos. En conjunto, el proceso es una transculturación y este vocablo comprende todas las fases de su paráola" (Ortiz 103).
9. Pérez Firmat uses of the term (intralingual - Spitta) *translation* instead of transculturation (living in the period of "trans" after the "post"). The problem with this term is that it overlooks the friction that may be present in any cultureal exchange.

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