

## David E. Johnson

### How (Not) to Do Latin American Studies

In the tenth “periphrase” of “Circumfession,” in the context of a particular genealogy in which he outlines his too-mortal place between two dead brothers and recalls what will have been his experience of the news of his mother’s imminent death, of the anticipation of her death, and thus the moment in which he begins to mourn a mother not yet dead, Derrida writes:

Whereas my sole desire remains that of giving to be read the interruption that will in any case decide the very figure, this writing that resembles the poor chance of a provisional resurrection, like the one that took place in December 1988 when a phone call from my brother-in-law sent me running for the first plane to Nice, tie, dark suit, white *kippa* in my pocket, trying in vain not only to cry but, I don’t know, to stop myself crying, *et fletum frenabam*, to get myself out of all the programs and quotations.<sup>1</sup>

At stake in this confession of his desire to escape the program, to break out of the anticipated response and feeling, is the *impossibility* of personal experience and thus the impossibility of what might be considered a simple or simply-thus-

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absolutely-positioned subject. Derrida's expression and determination of his feelings is always already scripted, inscribed; his emotions are circumscribed, both "cut off, turned around" and "marked, signed." Simply put, his feelings are remarked. The "re-" not only indicates the repetition of the mark, which means the repetition of the conscious articulation of emotion; it also refers to *res*, to the thing, and thus to the constitutive possibility of affect: affect is only ever possible insofar as it is remarked, reproduced, represented.<sup>2</sup> What appears to be most singularly my own, my affective experience—that which, according to Derrida, "only happens to me" (305)—necessarily comes from another, repeats itself in me, and thus constitutes my ownness as foreign, as alien, to me. In short, my experience "will never come down to the same" (315). My experience is the experience of another.<sup>3</sup> Derrida says as much insofar as he locates his singular, personal experience in and cites it from Saint Augustine, who, Derrida notes, also "had this experience" (53).

Why open this special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, which is devoted to Latin America and Latin American studies, by recalling Derrida's fifty-nine circumlocutions on circumcision and confession, on circumfession? Why talk *about* Latin America and Latin American studies by talking *around* them? Why not get to the point, the thesis, by taking up Latin America and Latin American studies *from* or *within* Latin America or Latin American studies, from within, then, the horizon or frame of a certain citizenship, one that will not have been always already cut off, circumscribed through a certain circumcision? Why not confess to and from—and thus own up to—a citizenship that will not have to turn around and about in order to constitute itself in the first place? Only because to do so is impossible.

First in "Circumfession," then in *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida takes on citizenship, personal experience, and the impossibility of autobiography. Both texts turn on and around the impossibility of identity. This does not mean Derrida opposes identity; on the contrary, in response to Franz-Olivier Geisbert's question "What do you think of the growing demands for identity," Derrida answers, "Who could be against 'identity?'"<sup>4</sup> This is not, however, a simple affirmation: "But like nationalism or separatism, pro-identity politics encourage a misrecognition of the universality of rights and the cultivation of exclusive differences, transforming difference into opposition" (119). Such opposition, Derrida notes, "tends, paradoxically, to erase differences" (119). Nevertheless, he admits, "it is also true that in situations of oppression or exclusion, 'identity' movements or strategies

can be legitimate” (119). Such legitimacy, however, is not absolute, even under circumstances of exclusion and oppression. It is necessary to take seriously Derrida’s qualification, “up to a certain point and in very limited conditions,” for this syntagm poses the law of identity, or, more exactly, of identification, which only ever instances itself “up to a certain point” and under “very limited conditions.” As Derrida explains, “In its common concept, autobiographical anamnesis presupposes *identification*. And precisely not identity. No, an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures.”<sup>5</sup>

It is worth remembering the stakes of *Monolingualism of the Other*, its point of departure or its determination of the place in and from which Derrida speaks. To begin, Derrida poses the antinomical axioms at the heart of all language use and language possession: first, “We only ever speak one language—or rather one idiom only”; second, “We never speak only one language—or rather there is no pure idiom” (8). These axioms can be restated in the following way: “*I only have one language, yet it is not mine*” (2). Furthermore, as Derrida reminds himself, the two antinomical axioms are “the intractable traits” of the necessary impossibility of translation, but “a translation other than the one spoken about by convention, common sense” (9–10). “— *We only ever speak one language . . . (yes, but) — We never speak only one language . . .*” “is not only the very law of what is called translation,” Derrida remarks. “It would also be the law itself as translation” (10). The law of discourse, then—of locutionary or speech acts—is translation. If locutions always take place in and from a specific place,<sup>6</sup> that place is, according to the law of discourse, always already displaced: to translate means, literally, to carry or to transfer to the other side; accordingly, translation is of the order of the movement or operation of *-ference* and thus of the order or operation of *différance*. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to speak or even to speak for oneself. It is in fact only possible to speak *for* oneself, to speak *as if* one were oneself, and thus to speak *from* the place of the other *as* myself. The assertion that translation is the law of any locutionary act means that speaking is only possible insofar as it is impossible, insofar as one is not *in oneself, chez soi*. To speak *for* oneself and thus to speak *from* one’s own proper place or location is impossible, not because we cannot speak but because speaking is from the start displaced, dislocated, sent off.

Derrida takes himself as an example, which is to say, he takes his iden-

tity, his identification, for the example of identity and identification. Following the Aristotelian paradigm in which “what is ‘the most this or that’ or what is ‘the best this or that’” serves as the model for “thinking the being of what is *in general*” (11), the most or best, as the case may be, becomes the example of the normal. According to this logic, the example of the Franco-Maghrebian *in general* derives from the *most* Franco-Maghrebian. Hence, in this case, the *most* Franco-Maghrebian, perhaps even the *only one*, is Derrida himself: “My hypothesis is, therefore, that I am perhaps the only one here who can call himself at once a Maghrebian (which is not a citizenship) and a French citizen. One and the other at the same time. And better yet, at once one and the other *by birth*” (13). It is not necessary to linger over the details of Derrida’s account of his life, his autobiography. Of interest is the Aristotelian paradigm, in which the most or the best, which is necessarily singular, provides the rule for the general or universal, which, as a rule, cannot be singular. The aporetic logic of the example dictates two incompatible and contradictory laws. On the one hand, in order to be exemplary, the example—which according to Aristotle is “the most this or that”—must be singular. As the singular or unique instance of the most or the best, as the only one, I alone can testify to this or that experience, this or that status or being. Consequently, I am able to speak only one language, my own language, one that expresses my singularity. On the other hand, in order to be exemplary and thus a model, any other must be able—must be in a position—to testify exactly to this experience, this status or being. Consequently, my language must be universal, capable of being appropriated by any other, and thus not my own. The logic of identity always follows the logic of the example: that which is singular or unique, uncommon, that to which one can only testify, must be universal; it must take place “in a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental” (20). As Derrida puts it, the logic of testimony and the example, thus the logic of identity, always comes down to this: “What holds for me, irreplaceably, also applies to all” (20). In the “prólogo” to *La cifra*, Jorge Luis Borges captured something of the tension between the singular and the universal in the place of the witness: “No hay una sola hermosa palabra, con la excepción dudosa de *testigo*, que no sea una abstracción [There is not a single beautiful word, with the doubtful exception of *witness*, that is not an abstraction].”<sup>7</sup> Whether in Derrida or Borges, the point is not that there is no singularity, hence no personal experience. The point, rather, is that the testimony that produces the truth of personal experience as singular

necessarily universalizes that testimony. Such universalization or transcendentalization does not invalidate the testimony; on the contrary, without the possibility of its universalization, testimony would be absolutely idiosyncratic, so idiomatic as to be incommunicable and useless. This does not amount to a privileging of the universal, however, in that without the claim to its necessary singularity, an absolutely universal testimony would be no less useless than an absolutely singular testimony; it would in fact be meaningless as testimony and thus as experience in that it could have no claim on anyone as experience. The aporetic demand of testimony, then, is that it be at once both singular and universal. The demand of translation, therefore, is doubly aporetic. Translation is that which universalizes and makes singular: as “the operator of differance,”<sup>8</sup> translation displaces the singular as the impossible condition of its possibility and inscribes singularity in the universal insofar as translation from this or that idiom into this or that idiom cannot avoid the inscription of idiomaticity or singularity. As already noted, translation’s corruption of the absolute values of singularity and universality is not to be conceived as the fallen condition of either pure singularity or pure universality. Rather, translation makes possible both the singular and the universal.

This understanding of the constitutive aporia of singularity and universality displaces the opposition—currently dominant in a certain Latin American studies—between an empiricism that speaks *in and from* Latin America and a transcendentalism that speaks *about* Latin America. There is no such opposition; to be more exact, there is no empiricism without a necessary recourse to transcendentalism, and there is no transcendentalism without a necessary recourse to an empirical moment. This was never not the case. Certainly the traces and effects of this aporia have been legible in European philosophy since the inception of what is called European modernity—in Descartes, say, and Hume; but it must also be legible in any system of signification, in any theory of subjectivity or agency. There is no way to resolve this aporia.

For a substantial segment of Latin Americanists, whether or not they are Latin American citizens, Descartes is the proper name of the philosophical conceptualization and organization of European modernity, which, according to one of the leading philosophers of liberation, was consolidated in relation to colonialism. “Modernity,” Enrique Dussel argues, “originates more than a century before (1492) the moment in which the paradigm . . . adequate to the new experience is formalized.”<sup>9</sup> It is Des-

cartes who formalizes the new paradigm by theorizing the universal, incorporeal, thus positionless subject; he does so, moreover, in Dussel's account, by simplifying "Muslim-medieval corporeal subjectivity" (§39/60). Up to a point, Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* sustains Dussel's argument: "From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I'—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist."<sup>10</sup> Dussel calls "the negation of the embodiment of subjectivity," together with the determination of a "solipsistic subjectivity without community," "the most important" of the "reductions" constitutive of modernity (§40/62). Effectively, Dussel understands the reduction of the body or of embodiment as the modern subject's attempt to distance itself from its implication in the world, which, as he notes, results in the "two *absolute* limits" of the "world-system" (§43/64). These absolute limits are, first, the destruction of the natural world and, second, the destruction of humanity. Withdrawal of the ego from the body enables withdrawal from the world and the community. Insofar as the subject is no longer in touch with the world and the community, insofar as the subject is no longer in touch with itself in that it no longer has or needs a place in the world, the world system, which has manifested itself in and as European modernity for the last five centuries, meets no resistance other than the *absolute* limits of life and, thus, its destruction in its absolutism. This is what Dussel calls, in the *Ética*'s first sentence, the crisis of the world system: "We find ourselves before the massive fact of the crisis of a 'world-system' which began to gestate 5000 years ago, and which is globalizing itself until it reaches the last corner of the earth, excluding, paradoxically, the majority of humanity" (II). The excluded, for whom and from whose perspective Dussel claims to write *Ética de la liberación*, add up to the subaltern, perhaps the figure par excellence of the current Latin American studies discourse, whether imagined, à la Dussel, as the victims of globalization or, à la Alberto Moreiras, as the "nonsubject of the political."<sup>11</sup> In Adriana Johnson's essay in this volume, the "nonsubject" lies "at the heart of the problem of subalternity" as that which "lies beyond [the] frontier" or "outside that province we call modernity." The subaltern is constituted in its exclusion from modernity: it is a figure of the included-excluded in that

modernity, according to Dussel, “cannot limit itself [*no puede autolimitarse*]” (*Ética*, §43/65). In thus globalizing itself to the last corner of the earth, modernity—or the world system of the last five hundred years—cannot not affect and thus include, even if only as excluded, every being on earth. This perhaps helps explain the interest in Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of sovereignty and the state of exception, which turns on the included-excluded status of both sovereign and *Homo sacer* and thus dreams of a paradise beyond temporalization, beyond the difference between law and justice.<sup>12</sup>

At multiple points in their analysis of Walter Mignolo’s highly influential critical apparatus, Scott Michaelsen and Scott Shershow demonstrate the arcadianism of Mignolo’s border thinking, not least in their exposure of Mignolo’s apparent dream of an Amerindian writing that, while remaining writing, makes possible the immediate presentation of the thing itself. It goes without saying that were such “writing” possible, it would be the writing of God, but as such, it would be neither writing nor language of any sort. In the absolution of the temporalization necessary to referral and thus to the possibility of any signifying system whatsoever, not only would language be impossible, but so too would anything else. The absolute sovereignty of such a god, which would be invulnerable to any other in that it would be absolutely in itself, immediately in touch with itself, would also and necessarily instance its absolute vulnerability to every other, because such a god would be incapable of imposing conditions on any other. Absolute immunity from every other is, therefore, absolute exposure to every other.

Dussel’s understanding of globalization, with its division of the world into victims and victimizers, is ultimately disturbed by a similar gesture toward the absolute. At the outset of *Ética de la liberación*, he explains, “Human life is not a concept, an idea, nor an abstract horizon, but rather the mode of reality of every concrete human being” (11). As a consequence, for Dussel the other is always an anthropological other, and “an ‘absolutely Other’ in this *Ethics* would be something like an Amazon tribe that were to have had *no contact with contemporary civilization* [*ningún contacto con la civilización actual*], today practically nonexistent [*prácticamente inexistente*]” (16, emphasis added). Of interest in this claim *about* the place of the absolutely other is its necessary impossibility: if this other is like a “tribe,” it must have a recognizable political form. Consequently, it must have had

and must have contact with civilization, if only with its own; yet Dussel imagines an other, an empirical other, always a man or a woman, that will have had no contact with *civilización actual*, which means this other would be neither present [*actual*] nor contemporary [*actual*], neither to itself nor to us. Accordingly, insofar as it would have had no contact whatsoever with global civilization, such an absolutely other would be neither victim nor victimizer. Therefore, the absolutely other (although Dussel insists it is an *empirical* other, which means it must both have experience and be experienced) would be neither included nor excluded; it could neither have experience nor be experienced.

Dussel's concern for an absolutely other that would nonetheless be an empirical other is troubling in that he argues that the globalizing world system distributes loci of enunciation according to the binary logic of victim/victimizer. Consequently, he leaves himself with the possibility of an empirical, albeit absolutely other that has no locus of enunciation inasmuch as it neither has experience nor is experienced. In effect, Dussel paints himself into a corner, for if the absolutely other belongs to "something like an Amazon tribe," then we have to admit that the absolutely other is a positioned subject: otherwise, this other, despite its empirical existence, will be nothing more than an object of the totalizing world system with which, however, it will have had no contact and thus by which it could not have been victimized, that is, objectified. If the other is a member of a tribe, it must be political, which means it must be a subject, if only so that it can be subjected. This holds as much for the subaltern or the so-called "non-subject" as for Dussel's absolute other. According to Dussel, however, the only subject that has no locus of enunciation—the only subject, then, that has no relation to the world or to an outside—is the transcendental subject, *which simply does not exist*. In other words, Dussel invokes as the absolutely other the same figure that, in *Ética de la liberación*, he considers the principal figure of the colonization of knowledge, namely, the Cartesian subject, with its constitutive denial of the locus of enunciation.<sup>13</sup>

Two points need to be made concerning the attempt to answer Cartesian transcendentalism by recourse to empiricism.

First, Dussel overstates—by simplifying—the Cartesian subject's withdrawal from the world. Descartes's attempt to conceptualize the limits of autonomy and heteronymy, that is, the limits of freedom and determination, ultimately leads him to posit an absolute difference between the soul and the body; but because the difference between the two is absolute,



Descartes no longer needs to imagine a distance or withdrawal from the world. A reading of *Les Passions de l'âme* makes this clear. At the beginning of part 2, "The Number and Order of the Passions," Descartes writes:

We know that the ultimate and most proximate cause of the passions of the soul is simply the agitation by which the spirits move the little gland in the middle of the brain. But this does not enable us to distinguish between the various passions: for that, we must investigate their origins and examine their first causes. They may sometimes be caused by an action of the soul when it sets itself to conceive some object or other, or by the mere temperament of the body or by the impressions which happen to be present in the brain, as when we feel sad or joyful without being able to say why. From what has been said, however, it appears that all such passions may also be excited by objects which stimulate the senses, and that these objects are their principal and most common causes. From this it follows that, in order to discover all the passions, it suffices to consider all the effects of these objects. (*Philosophical Writings*, 1.349)

Inasmuch as Descartes recognizes that the "ultimate and most proximate cause of the passions" is the animal spirits that move throughout the body and agitate the pineal gland located in the brain, he cannot possibly conceive of certainty as an effect of *distance* from objects. The Cartesian project would be untenable were this the case, which explains why Descartes attempts to secure the soul from the passions—from affect—no matter how intimate their origin. The passage quoted above, then, does not argue that the level of certainty—the clarity and distinction of an idea—corresponds to the distance between the subject and the object, but rather that for expository clarity it is easier to discover and to remark on the passions as they arise in the affections of the soul in relation to external objects. Nevertheless, there is no structural difference between the passions that result from contact with external objects and those that derive from internal causes. In other words, because between the subject and the object there is an *absolute* difference, it can never be a question of more or less difference. It is an all-or-nothing game, in sum, and necessarily so in that for Descartes the possibility that the soul might be absolutely determined by causes arising from a place other than the soul means the cogito is not free. Self-determination, therefore, depends on the absolute autonomy of the soul from any corporeal determination. Despite his assertion of the absolute

difference of body and soul, Descartes was well aware of the problem the singular fact of enunciation—and thus the locus of enunciation—posed for the apodicticity of knowledge. This tension is legible throughout the Cartesian text,<sup>14</sup> but it requires a reading of Descartes that refuses simplification in favor of a rigorous complication of the Cartesian text that would turn around the necessary empirical remainder within the transcendental project.

Second, if it is necessary to complicate the Cartesian project by reading its empirical remainder, it is no less necessary to complicate empiricism by reading its transcendental ground. Although Dussel insists on an empirical—albeit absolute—other and although his *Ética* foregrounds the empirical relation to the other, empiricism is not up to the task reserved for it, namely, articulating the locus of enunciation without resorting to the denial of the circumstances constitutive of it. The bedrock or ground zero of empiricism is that all knowledge derives from sense impressions, which means that knowledge is fundamentally local. Nevertheless, on David Hume's account, "there is no impression constant and invariable."<sup>15</sup> Rather, "the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (253). Hume, however, warns against taking the theater metaphor too seriously: "The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions [impressions and ideas] only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos'd" (253). In short, according to Hume, there is no given unity of consciousness; no proscenium remains in place as the determinate and determining site of perception. The stage, then, or the mind, far from being the given site of synthetic operations, is itself constituted in an originary synthesis. Hence, Hume concludes, "there is properly no *simplicity* in it [the mind] at one time, nor *identity* in different [times]" (253). At least two implications can be drawn from this understanding of the temporality of impressions. The first is that Hume must posit a nonempirical synthesis in order for there to be the possibility of any conception whatsoever. Insofar as he understands that no impression is constant and that ideas are nothing more and nothing less than decaying sense impressions, there can be no knowledge or understanding without the possibility of synthesizing the constant flow of impressions and ideas. Hume introduces the notion of belief to designate the necessary synthetic operation. Without such a syn-

thesis not only would there be no thought, there would also be no sensibility, for without a synthesis it would be possible to recognize neither the self-identity of any impression nor the self-identity or unity of the subject that will have been affected. This means that precisely in order to identify myself, in order to posit the unity of my consciousness, I must “believe” in myself; yet this belief cannot be experienced as such, thus it cannot be empirically determined. The second implication is that the impossibility of feeling or knowing myself as such, and thus of experiencing myself, empirically, finds its corollary in the impossibility of communicating with any other from the dislocated place of my specific self-determination. Consequently, in order to form not only a more perfect community, but any community at all—in order, then, for there to be any possible communication among others—we must evacuate that which according to Hume is constitutive of the very possibility of experience in the first place, our sentiments or impressions, that is, our particular location:

One may, perhaps, be surpriz’d, that amidst all these interests and pleasure, we shou’d forget our own, which touch us so nearly on every other occasion. But we shall easily satisfy ourselves on this head, when we consider, that every particular person’s pleasure and interest being different, ’tis impossible men cou’d ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. (591)

On the one hand, the cognition of experience requires a nonempirical synthesis. Such a synthetic operation makes possible both the recognition of the impressions “as such,” that is, as impressions, and the unity of the subject as a singular being. On the other hand, in order to communicate with others, the subject must give up its singular point of view—which, although it is already synthetic and thus a generalization, is fundamentally incommunicable—and assume a more general point of view, one that, however, cannot be empirically determined as the subject’s own.

It would not require a particularly nuanced or even insightful reading to show that for Hume the general point of view that we must elect in order to establish community is Eurocentric. More interesting is the understanding articulated within one of the founding texts of empiricism—an empiricism, moreover, upon which much recent Latin American studies claims to depend—that empiricism is impossible in that it necessarily

follows the doubly aporetic logic of translation. But even more important for conceptualizing community and politics is Hume's suggestion that we *choose* a more common point of view in order to communicate and understand one another; in Hume's account, moreover, we must do so before any commonality is possible or even conceivable. But this choice of a common perspective, which in every case would have to be singularly determined from within the horizon of a singular perspective: what makes it possible? A patient reading of Hume would reveal that such a choice is *impossible*, which does not mean community, or something like it, does not happen. Hume's insistence on the temporality of impressions, on incessant succession, ultimately means that every determination is necessarily exposed to whatever comes. Every decision, then, is finite, always already corrupted, contaminated, infinitely open to the other. And while this is the limit condition of every decision, it is also the necessary condition of possibility of any decision whatsoever. In short, at the moment I decide to set aside my particular circumstances in order to elect a more general position in which to communicate with others, I inevitably articulate a singularity that is so singular as not to be my own. By the same token, however, at the moment I attempt to articulate the singularity of my place, I have already, without election or intention—indeed, regardless of election or intention—remarked my universality, which is, by definition, not my own. Nevertheless, there remains the impossible possibility of decision, of deciding. Even before the constitution of the “I,” then, there must be some power to decide; this power, however, which Derrida calls *ipseity* and which appears as indivisible sovereignty, the power of self-determination, nonetheless remains exposed to the other, open to the future and to whatever comes, and does so precisely in the figure of a certain circumcision and circumlocution, that is, in the figure of a simultaneity, of a turning around, that turns back and turns on itself. In short, the subject is constituted in its turn (back) on itself.<sup>16</sup> This is not a condition specific to European subjectivity or European experience or European languages; on the contrary, the exposure to the future and the referral to the other are the necessary conditions of *any* subjectivity, of *any* experience, and of *any* language.

The condition of possibility of self-determination, of freedom, and therefore of any possible decision, is referral to the other, exposure to the future. Without such referral and exposure, without such temporalization or what Derrida calls *spacing*,<sup>17</sup> “I” cannot take place; yet such referral and exposure, such temporalization, also and necessarily, in making the “I”

possible, make it impossible in that its place is always already divided, hence indeterminate, undecidable. The one who says "I" in this or that place is necessarily and absolutely blind to the place in which he or she speaks: "I" never say "I" where and when "I" say "I." And this is the very possibility of saying "I." Were "I" absolutely where "I" say "I" am, were "I" therefore *in myself*, no one could ever understand me, nor could "I" understand myself. "I" could not even be recognized. The temporalization or *spacing* necessary to the possibility of the "I" does not reduce either the affectivity or the effectivity of discourse, of what "I" say: on the contrary, it makes discourse possible as both affective and effective. In other words, there is intentionality and therefore agency as well only insofar as there is *spacing* (which, strictly speaking, is not), only insofar as there is the possibility of unintentional effects, only insofar as, therefore, my intentions do not absolutely govern or dominate what happens. Put simply, despite my best intentions not to harm the other, it is always and necessarily possible that my actions, my decisions, will hurt the other. This possibility cannot be foreclosed, nor should we want it to be; for without the referral to the other and to the future, there is no chance for intention. Indeed, without the referral to the other or the openness to the future, there would be no chance for politics, whether "emancipatory" politics or the politics of regimes that resist struggles for emancipation. For example, were the world system as absolutely totalizing as Dussel suggests, there would not be any possibility that his *Ética* could become "the final recourse of a humanity in danger of auto-extinction" (*Ética*, §402/568), not because the extinction of humanity is not possible (according to Dussel it is the logical effect and foregone conclusion of the globalizing world system), but because insofar as the limits of this system are absolute, there could be no chance for resisting its domination. In other words, if we take Dussel at his word, we would have to agree that the efforts of the EZLN in Chiapas and the recent election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, to name only two examples, are always already inscribed *within* the absolute horizon of the world system that has been imposing itself for five thousand years and in the same guise for the last five hundred.

Only because the world system is not total, absolute, are the elections of Evo Morales and of Michelle Bachelet in Chile possible; only because the world system is not absolute is the EZLN capable of impacting Mexican politics. Indeed, only insofar as the world system is not total is Dussel's *Ética de la liberación* able to have any effect in the world. But what this

“effect” is remains open. We cannot know that the elections of Morales and Bachelet is a “good”; we cannot know whether the impact of the EZLN is positive; nor can we know that Dussel’s *Ética* does emancipatory work. It is always possible, necessarily so, that in each case, it will be determined that they have furthered oppressive regimes, that they have victimized those they would have emancipated. In every case, in short, we will have to decide.

But it is more than this, finally, for were the world system absolute, as it is in Dussel’s description, it would be unconditional; its borders would be, as Dussel argues, absolute and thus untransgressable. There would be no possibility of translation, no possibility of displacement or *-ference* in general. It would not only be impossible to resist such a world system, however; it would also be impossible to sustain it, for, following a logic Derrida outlines with regard to the university, an absolute or unconditional world system would be no less a world system absolutely without conditions.<sup>18</sup> An unconditional world system—an unconditional civilization, say—is a civilization without conditions, a civilization without borders or limits and thus without defenses such that it is absolutely vulnerable to every other. The world system, precisely in order to globalize itself to the ends of the earth, must in fact always be conditioned and conditional. Otherwise it cannot be effective. But insofar as it is conditioned, it is also always under siege, threatened, both from outside, beyond its borders (which is why the borders must be erected), and from the inside, which is why the world system, whatever its political form, necessarily makes decisions that are ultimately fatal to itself. This is the logic of autoimmunity, which is, in fact, the logic of spacing or of *différance*.

Although Derrida develops the logic of autoimmunity most thoroughly in terms of what he calls “democracy to come,” autoimmunity—qua *différance* or the trace—is always already operative everywhere. As he explains in *Rogues*, “Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event” (152). Because autoimmunity is the law of survival, of life, and of the possibility that anything can happen at all, it also stands to reason that whatever happens or survives cannot happen or survive *in itself*, indivisible or absolutely immune from the other. In short, nothing is ever properly in itself: whatever is *is* only insofar as it is always already divided, remarked, by the effects of *différance*. This is what is at stake in Derrida’s claim, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, that “all culture

is originarily colonial” (39). This is necessarily the case because no culture or civilization, precisely in order to secure itself, could ever be *in itself* absolutely cordoned off from every other; the implicit acknowledgment of this, Derrida notes, is that “every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some ‘politics’ of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations” (39).<sup>19</sup> Such mastery, however, is only possible insofar as it is not absolute:

For contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as “his own.” (23)

Derrida calls this the “first trick” (24) in an endless game. Mastery, which is to say a certain appropriation of language as one’s own, is possible only because, as Derrida insists, “language is never owned.”<sup>20</sup> But because language never allows itself to be possessed, it “provokes all kinds of movements of appropriation” (101), including those that ostensibly emancipate it from the master: “Liberation, emancipation, and revolution will necessarily be the second trick. It will provide freedom from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by reappropriating it—but only up to a certain point, for . . . there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriation. Because there is no natural property of language, language gives rise only to appropriative madness” (*Monolingualism*, 24). “Up to a certain point” and under certain limited conditions: it could not be otherwise. The constitutive ex-appropriation of language is at the heart of the displacement, whether empirical or transcendental, of any subject of language and thus of any subject. Language can only be appropriated, up to a certain point and under very limited conditions, because it cannot be appropriated. Consequently, because the subject is constituted

in a language that is not the subject's own, the subject can never be self-identical; it can never *be* in itself.

One upshot of the preceding would be the following: Latin American studies is impossible. It is not impossible because Latin America does not exist or because it exists in name only, as a European invention.<sup>21</sup> It is of course undeniable that Latin America exists in name only, but this would be the case regardless of the name, whether it were called, for example, Anáhuac, as what is now known as the valley of Mexico was called during the reign of the "Aztec" (who were themselves known as the Mexica), or by any other name. Insofar as Latin America is named, it *is* in name only, which means Latin America is not *in itself*; it is not proper to itself or as such. Latin America belongs therefore neither to itself nor to any other. Rather, Latin American studies is impossible, but no less necessary for this impossibility, because it is unlocatable. Indeed, its discovery or invention, that is, its having been named, by anyone and everyone, depends on its impossible location. And this is not all bad, either: were Latin America an object *in* and *from* which "we"—whoever we might be—could speak "it," to say "it" in such a way that "it" will not have been displaced and thus lost, "we" would have to be identical to "it," absolutely conditioned by "it"; hence, whatever "we" might say about "it" would be absolutely invulnerable but also, and no less so, absolutely vulnerable. Whatever might be said—and in fact nothing could be said, for the possibility of speaking requires an absence that cannot be subordinated to self-presence—would be neither affective nor effective.

If the opposition between speaking *in* and *from* Latin America, on the one hand, and speaking *about* Latin America, on the other hand, is moot, undermined from before the beginning of anything like Latin American studies, then what is at stake in the desire to speak *in* and *from*? Speaking *in* and *from* Latin America amounts to the dream of the direct presentation of an object, Latin America, *in itself*. It amounts to the dream of the absolution of difference and the unity of subject and object. We know, however, that self-presentation is only possible *as* representation, which means that every locution that would find Latin America in its proper place is a circumlocution. The essays included in this special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* do not represent an exhaustive sampling of Latin American studies work; far from it. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think they represent a particular school of Latin American studies; they do not. The essays collected here have little more in common than an unapologetic commitment



to saying something *about* Latin America and Latin American studies. There are moments—specific theoretical commitments and amalgamations, strategies, conclusions—in these essays with which I very much disagree. But I salute their commitment to theory, whether “European” or “Latin American,” and, therefore, their insistence on a theoretical Latin American studies. Such commitment and insistence, I think, are necessary in that Latin America and Latin American studies only ever are in theory.

## Notes

This issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* would not have been possible without the generosity and help of Grant Farred and Christi Stanforth. Under normal circumstances the production of a journal, especially one in which every issue is guest edited, is fraught with difficulties. “Latin America, in Theory,” however, did not come together under normal circumstances; for this reason it required a great deal of last-minute flexibility and creativity, as well as a heavy dose of good cheer. Grant and Christi have an abundance of these qualities, which made working on this issue an especial pleasure.

- 1 Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52–53. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text. Derrida quotes from Augustine, *Confessions* IX, xi, 27.
- 2 On the way in which representation constitutes the *res* even of so-called nonrepresentational art, see Stephen Gingerich, “Arte y el dominio de la representación,” in *rostro@representación.com*, ed. José Luis Pardo, Stephen Gingerich, Manuel Saiz, and Begoña del Teso (San Sebastian, Spain: Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 1998): 47–67. On the “re-” of representation as repetition, see Jacques Derrida, “Sending: On Representation,” in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Christ (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 107–38.
- 3 See Jacques Derrida, “The Deconstruction of Actuality,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 93.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, “What Does It Mean to Be a French Philosopher Today?” in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 119. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; Or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 28. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 6 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (compact ed., 1971), a locutory, for instance, is “an apartment in a monastery set apart for conversation.” Locutory also refers to the grille through which monks might communicate with those outside the monastery, which means the locutory names the specific place of discourse that marks the limit between the interior and the exterior that is, nevertheless, always already trespassed or translated; it marks the opening of the inside to the outside such that the outside is already inside

the inside and the inside is outside the outside. The locutory is the place—always already transgressed—of translation.

- 7 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas III: 1975–1985* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996), 290; my translation. On the aporetic relation of singularity and universality in Latin American literature, see David E. Johnson, “Kant’s Dog,” *Diacritics* 34.1 (Spring 2004): 19–39; and “Marking (Out) Ethics, in Other Words: On a Single Line in Kant and Juan García Ponce,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 5.2 (Spring 2004): 50–72.
- 8 Rodolphe Gasché, “The Operator of Differance,” in Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, and Translation*, ed. Christie V. MacDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 114.
- 9 Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y la exclusión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1998), §39/60. Subsequent citations will be given by section (§) and page number and will appear parenthetically in the text. All translations of Dussel are my own.
- 10 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 127. Subsequent citations from Descartes will be by volume and page number and will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 11 See Alberto Moreiras, “Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference (part 1),” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1.1 (2005).
- 12 See David E. Johnson, “As If the Time Were Now: Deconstructing Agamben,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.2 (forthcoming).
- 13 Michaelsen and Shershow come to the same conclusion with regard to the subject position legible in Mignolo’s conception of border thinking. Having quoted Mignolo’s description, in *Local Histories/Global Designs*, of the effects of the interaction between theories that travel and those that do not, they remark: “How exactly are we to understand this place of intersection and interaction which is neither a hybrid nor a syncretic combination, this site which is neither atavistic nor cosmopolitan and yet from which ‘all’ can be seen? Is this not precisely that nonplace of the (European) Enlightenment gaze that, at once everywhere and nowhere, claims the whole domain of knowledge as its privileged domain?” I have taken up the problem of the absolutely other in Dussel in “The Limits of Community: How ‘We’ Read *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*,” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 23.1 (Winter 2001): 154–69.
- 14 For example, see Descartes’s discussion of the “internal emotions of the soul.” His insistence that such emotions “are produced in the soul only by the soul itself” (*Philosophical Writings* 1.381) notwithstanding, his example makes clear that contrary to Descartes’s intention, the soul is affected by an outside; see *Philosophical Writings* 1.381–82. I thank Galen Brokaw for helping me to read this moment in Descartes.
- 15 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 251. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 16 See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10–12. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

- 17 See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–27. More recently, see Derrida, *Rogues*, 35.
- 18 See Jacques Derrida, "The University without Condition," in Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202–37.
- 19 On the imposition of French as the national language of France, see Jacques Derrida, "If There Is Cause to Translate I: Philosophy in Its National Language (Toward a 'litterature en française')," in Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: The Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 1–19.
- 20 Jacques Derrida, "Language Is Never Owned: An Interview," in Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 101.
- 21 On the invention of the Americas, see Edmundo O'Gorman, *La invención de América* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958); Enrique Dussel, 1492: *El encubrimiento del otro (Hacia el origen del "mito" de la modernidad)* (Madrid: Editorial Nueva Utopía, 1992); José Rabasa, *Inventing the Americas: Spanish Historiography and Formation of Eurocentrism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (London: Blackwell, 2005).