

# The Places of History: Regionalism Revisited in Latin America

Doris Sommer

Latin American literatures are being read in many ways, here in the United States and now toward the end of the millennium. The variety is often apparent within interpretive essays as well as among them. The articles that follow take advantage of skills developed in more strident moments and by more single-minded approaches (including Marxist readings of class relations and the peripheral corollaries of dependency theory, deconstructed messages that predictably falter through the medium of language, feminist and gay denunciations of patriarchal codes). But the engagements collected in this special issue of *MLQ* are generally heterodox, experimental. That is to say, they are essays in reading.

The long list of short essays was meant to represent a broad range of contemporary criticism within a limited space. The eclectic combination of practices in that range, and inside the essays, would have been a predictable, even a desirable, observation about the sampling. Less predictable, perhaps, was the painstaking attention to history. Readers may sense the attention to the specificities of time and place as a renewed response to the pressures of dramatic "globalization," in culture as well as in economics and politics. Particularities of literary context and strategy emerge as if they were the goal of each essay. Pride of place may again be working, as it did in the nineteenth century, to safeguard a sense of personal and collective autonomy, even if the political promise of autonomy may not be immediately apparent. Perhaps the general focus on micrologies, on untranslatable (not movable) particularity, can be called a new *costumbrismo*. Nineteenth-

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century patriotism cultivated specifically local tastes and historical ties. In response to a globalizing modernity, regionalism, or *costumbrismo*, fostered international competition as a motivation for local productivity, which needed interclass alliances. On one reading, the alliances were brokered by an ascending middle class that offered local color (of popular classes, a euphemism for the masses, or the poor) to a modernizing elite that could identify with "the people" in some productive measure.<sup>1</sup> With this stress on finessing internal differences for the benefit of economic and racial elites who take on a popular style but remain indifferent, often hostile, to colorful locals, no wonder that John Beverley worries here about subaltern *testimonios* turning into grist for a *costumbrista* mill. But another dimension of *costumbrismo* was to underline, even to construct, cultural differences between one's own nation and other nations. Differences made sense of economic and military competition. While producers and consumers developed a universalized taste for modern goods, they also defined themselves as culturally particular. However the particularity of values and customs was construed, it was meant to support an ardent patriotism. The elite wrapped itself in lyrical ponchos (as Josefina Ludmer showed for Argentina) or stepped to tropical rhythms (as in Gilberto Freire's idyllic anthropology of Brazil, *The Masters and the Slaves* [1946]), not only to speak *for* one's people but also to speak *to* powerful outside competitors for markets and territories.

Eventually, the culturally consolidating formulas of *costumbrismo* fell prey to the intensity of globalization that pried local elites away from their internal alliances. At the same time, terms like *nationalism*

<sup>1</sup> Susan Kirkpatrick, "The Ideology of Costumbrismo," *Ideologies and Literature* 2, no. 7 (1978): 28-44, develops this perspective on internal alliance.

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and *local culture* ironically came to describe the internal groups that refused to be homogenized, not the centralized projects that hoped to control them in earlier modernization campaigns. The decision-making autonomy or negotiating position that nation-states hoped to secure by alleging their cultural specificity is being performed by culturally or linguistically identified groups inside unwieldy and porous nations.

Such speculations about the concerns and directions of the field will follow from reading this far-ranging collection of historically detailed essays. They range from concentrating on Incan architecture to Chicano and Nuyorican habitats, from turn-of-the-century Argentine criminology to Caribbean homophobia, from the rhetorics of independence and dictatorship to Mexicans' ambivalence about opera, and from the precarious survival of Spanish language to Brazil's move beyond monarchy, to mention a few themes. Together, the pieces describe a cultural richness, and a respect for embedded detail, that should become a guide for future work in the field.

History as a focus should be no surprise here and now, in a place and time that veers or reels away from teleological tales and that leaves universal reading formulas behind. Today, issues can remain unresolved without losing political meaning, and approaches become symbiotic as they borrow techniques from neighboring discourses, anthropology, criminology, music, economics. But it is history that occupies a privileged place here, probably because history focuses the same kinds of specificities that have, again, come to the fore in creative literary studies. With no single approach to exhaust reading, nor any satisfying metanarrative to fit details into tidy systems, postmodern probing is evidently grounding itself in history as it lifts or loosens one or another methodological mooring.

Heterodox languages, multiple audiences, local culture that both hinders and enhances modernization, the constitutive asymmetries of culture and society—these are the fissures that open in one reading after another. One name repeatedly invoked for the pattern here is “transculturation.” Fernando Ortiz coined it to distinguish the unresolvable, often violent tension among cultures in conflict from the neat resolutions of difference suggested by such ideal concepts for *costum-*

*brismo* as syncretism, hybridity, or *mestizaje*.<sup>2</sup> That ultimately seamless ideal has been the banner for consolidation in many countries during revolutionary struggles against Spain and Portugal and through populist programs for economic and cultural independence, mostly from the United States. One paradigmatic expression of syncretic nationalism was *La raza cósmica* (1925), by José Vasconcelos, which made Mexico the site of humanity's mission to amalgamate all races into a biologically and culturally improved "cosmic" stock. Today, readers are more likely to respond to *La raza cómica*, a parody by Puerto Rican critic Rubén Ríos Avila, who suggests that such missions are madness.<sup>3</sup> Productive differences are more likely to be acknowledged than to be overridden now; they are coded as distinct cultural (including gendered) languages, untranslatable either into competing cultures or into transnational codes of class analysis. Perhaps the impression is peculiar to a perspective from North America, where race and ethnicity color political struggles at every level. Yet color-coded politics is common to the Americas here and there, countries that share a history of conquering indigenous peoples, of forced immigration of Africans and welcoming arms open to northern Europeans. This history haunts the hemisphere, north and south. For some reason, race is an underdeveloped concern in Latin American studies, compared to North American scholarship, perhaps because the discourses of *mestizaje* and *costumbrismo* succeeded somewhat in spreading local color through national discourse and mitigating the chiaroscuro of political antagonisms. Or, long years of pseudoscientific, "positivist," racism continue to contaminate racial terms of identification and solidarity.

Cultural differences, on the other hand, have long provided languages of opposition and political positioning, which is why transculturation is so powerful a concept. Ortiz's neologism for the restless, stressful, sometimes violent change as cultural codes collide in the

<sup>2</sup> The reference is to Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940). Since then, the metaphor of counterpoint has been standard in discussions of cultural conflict and conflictual creativity in Latin America. See Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ríos Avila, "La raza cómica: Identidad y cuerpo en Pedreira y Palés," *La Torre*, nos. 27-8 (1993): 559-76.

Americas offers a flexible model for a range of postmodern observations about the incommensurability of “reality” with any one code. Mary Louise Pratt has directed our attention to transculturation in “the contact zone.” Roberto Schwarz has suggested it in the “misplaced ideas” of European Enlightenment imported into slave economies. Here he develops the conflict through Machado de Assis’s cynical portrait of an aristocratic flirtation with the rights of man and the heart of a woman. Walter D. Mignolo’s work has complicated and refined the history of cultural struggles for hegemony by focusing on the Spanish agents as competitors among themselves, since they were variously aligned with regard to indigenous languages.

In Mignolo’s contribution, the fissures that constitute New World languages are shown to develop into creative and contestatory games of “languaging,” those transgressive borrowings across cultural borders. José Antonio Mazzotti shows an important subtlety of the game played by the first mestizo chronicler, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who managed to position himself favorably for an Andean audience; they and not primarily the Spaniards (who took themselves to be the Inca’s ideal readers) would have appreciated his interpretations of local signs of legitimate power. Doubled points of view and the unstable loyalties they produce are themes in Mary M. Gaylord’s reading of “transience” in Golden Age literature, which moved between Spain and the Americas, prose and poetry, and conventional defenses of “real” histories to performances of fiction.

The collective and almost traditional attention to the real, however fissured and performative reality turns out to be, may be an ironic feature of postmodernity, backing away from modernist skepticisms and from Marxist devaluations of (ideological) lived experience, a full circle back to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century valorizations of local contexts. But the irony is familiar to readers of and in the Latin American peripheries of modern movements, whether or not it becomes a recognizable feature of the center. In the frustrating strain to catch up to the center, Latin America’s differences always show up. Those differences from northern Atlantic models of modernity become signs of identity, often coded as obstacles to development. But sometimes they are celebrated as safeguards against the homogenizing anonymity that overrides local distinctiveness in the rush of mod-

ernizing movements. Carlos J. Alonso's essay identifies modernity itself as conflictual, transculturated, even thwarted in Spanish America; Arcadio Díaz-Quñones reads the Puerto Rican struggle for autonomy as performing inside an unstable mix of tradition and revolution; Susana Rotker underlines the literary and political heterodoxy of Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar's mentor; Francine Masiello raises a question about modernity's alleged separation of the public from the private sphere, since gossip continually slips between them to contaminate both; Nancy Vogeley notes the paradoxical reception of an Italian opera about a Moorish hero in postrevolutionary Mexico, where the elite had just executed a mestizo hero; John Beverley notes the discursive overload between competing agendas in a testimonial genre that had seemed so transparent; and Debra A. Castillo further complicates the assumptions by considering *testimonios* written by professional con artists, Mexican prostitutes who sell their lives to greedy readers.

A culturally fissured and porous nation-state is a precondition for democracy, a contractual system of citizens that Jean-François Lyotard takes care to distinguish from the nation, which is defined by birth.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the fissures are also interpreted as rents in the native fabric, by those who would defend national compactness by eliminating personal and collective differences. Good-byes to coherent ideals of nationness and family are hard to say, and the difficult work of mourning remains to be done for the projects of cultural engineering in nineteenth-century American states. A country like Argentina managed to produce a work of public mourning for its irretrievable gaucho past in *Martín Fierro* (1872). But the release from the past was deployed as a banner for a new consolidation, a training manual in collective nostalgia for natives and for the potentially overwhelming waves of immigrants at the turn of the century. Since then, more American migrations, internal and external, have continued to strain the coherence of national states. At the weakened and defensive centers, the sinister face of nativism and cultural nationalism glares through. In this country it has the face of militiamen, monolingualism, and tightened border controls and budgets. Diana Taylor shows that in Argentina's

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard, "The Other's Rights," in *On Human Rights*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, Oxford Amnesty Lectures (New York: Basic, 1993), 136-47.

recent history monocultural patriotism was the state's official libretto in an obsessively repetitive spectacle of eliminating internal differences. The political etymology of discriminating words such as *legitimate*, *criminal*, and *crazy* has a history in nineteenth-century medico-legal practices that Josefina Ludmer tracks. The monoculture of vigilant masculinity marked Chile's recent dictatorship, too, as Mary Louise Pratt recalls in her attention to women's voices that would not be still and to the perverse combination of dread and desire that dictatorship can produce.

A democratizing promise in enlightened nineteenth-century romance, shortsighted as it may seem now, was at least a relief from the heroic monocultures that preceded and followed. Romance was an invitation to dialogue and to alliance, however controlled. Antonio Benítez-Rojo reaches back to put Mexico's Lizardi in that tradition as he developed the preindependence, enlightened, context for romantic resolutions. José E. Limón pulls the formula forward in time and outward in territory in his essay on a Texan romance written long after the Anglo-American conquest and local armed resistance, long enough for its authors to imagine how dread is conquered by desire (between men and women and between men) and how one sleeps with the enemy.

Perhaps José Martí could imagine erotic resolutions of conflicts between men while he listened to Walt Whitman and wrote about him. Sylvia Molloy's essay underscores Martí's amorous response to the seduction of male bonding and shows how short-lived the possibility would be in Latin America's petrification of Whitman, the patriarch. Martí's troubled response to his own availability for seduction by poetry, and by energetic men, is developed by Julio Ramos, who reads Martí in the literary and historical gap between *fin de siglo* sensitivity and the heroic masculinity of unfinished Caribbean independence movements.

José Martí finally left poetry and propaganda to go to the battlefield, where he charged ahead of his troops on a white horse and staged a heroic death for himself. A century later is an auspicious time to rethink cultural and political projects in Our Americas. Nineteen ninety-five commemorated at least three centennials. In addition to the martyrdom of Martí, there were the third centennial of the death

of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun too brilliant and too bold to fit inside Mexico or within her seventeenth century, and the first centennial of the death of Jorge Isaacs, that universal but unhomogenized figure for the unstable and polymorphous nineteenth century. He was a fissured, Mosaic, star, a Colombian Jew, and the century's only Latin American novelist to thrill readers far beyond his own country. But Isaacs's Hebraic habits made him almost unassimilable at home.<sup>5</sup>

The most celebrated centennial was probably that of Martí, author of many works, including the Cuban War of Independence and the influential essay "Our America" (1891). What *our* means in his praise of indigenous and African strains in New World Hispanism is a problem for postmoderns, for two reasons. First, the possessive pronoun neutralizes internal differences and claims ownership in monocultural ways that now seem unproductive. Martí's nineteenth-century nationalism needed to focus on victory by squinting at Cuba, compressing its complexity into a thin but homogeneous *Cubanidad*. The other, more promising problem is that the discriminating pronoun *our* is so shifty, so available for competing positionalities and equivocal meanings. In a New World where commercial, cultural, and political border crossings define so many lives, boundary words like *here* and *there*, *mine* and *yours*, and *now* and *then* are hardly stable signposts. They are, as always, shifters. Merely to translate the possessive claim to "Nuestra América" as "Our America" is to hear it deformed by the treachery of displacement. It is to move from a defensive position right into the enemy's camp.<sup>6</sup>

Strategists will know that mobility is not only a cause for worry but an opportunity to gain ground. Perhaps Nuestra América has a future history here, up north. Translation, of course, literally means switching ground, a movement in which Puerto Ricans have become expert.

<sup>5</sup> *María* (1867), the classic novel by Isaacs, is the most widely read, pirated, and imitated novel of nineteenth-century Latin America. Required reading in Colombian high schools, it is also on standard syllabi in many other countries.

<sup>6</sup> Waldo Frank titled his book about the entire hemisphere *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919). Translated in references as *Nuestra América*, it was, for example, an inspiration and model for José Carlos Mariátegui, the major theorist of a particularized, Peruvian Marxism. Another disciple of Frank may be Walter Benn Michaels, whose new book on "nativism, modernism, and pluralism" bears the title *Our America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).



They are a nation that maneuvers along the fault line of “autonomy” and grammatical shifters, in the space between here and there, now and then, Our America and theirs. They are an entire population that stays on the move, or potentially so, so much so that Luis Rafael Sánchez makes a hysterical joke about the grounding of the Puerto Rican national identity in the *guagua aérea* shuttling across the Atlantic puddle.<sup>7</sup> Literally a nation of *Luftmenschen*, half is provisionally on the Caribbean island and half on and around that other Mad Hatter island, which has become the homeland that Tato Laviera calls *AmeR-íca*, a practically providential metaphor: AmeRíca transforms what for English or Spanish is just a word into a mot juste in Spanglish.<sup>8</sup> It proclaims doubly marked mainland Ricans as the most representative citizens we have. In the same spirit, Juan Flores’s essay, and Latino studies in general, pulls at the seam between be-longing and nostalgia to recognize that cultural history is made here, wherever that happens to be.

This energy is evident in all the essays that follow. They depart from ideal projections of syncretic cultures, coherent class orientations, and patterns of skepticism. The energy opens a space for attending to the historical specificities that fit patterns badly. And the specific points help anchor our cultural discourses as we witness the endless movements of transculturation in Our Americas.

<sup>7</sup> Sánchez, “La guagua aérea” [The air bus], trans. Diana Vélez, *Village Voice*, 24 January 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Laviera, *AmeRícan* (Houston: Arte Público, 1985).