

# RECENT PUBLICATIONS IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

*Silvia N. Rosman*  
Bates College

*AGAINST LITERATURE*. By John Beverley. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Pp. 168. \$34.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

*CRITICAL THEORY, CULTURAL POLITICS, AND LATIN AMERICAN NARRATIVE*. Edited by Steven M. Bell, Albert H. Le May, and Leonard Orr. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993. Pp. 227. \$29.95 cloth.)

*LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF DIFFERENCE*. Hispanic Issues vol. 10. Edited by Amaryll Chanady. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Pp. 254. \$44.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

Latin American literary and cultural criticism is actively debating issues related to postmodernity, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, as the books under review here demonstrate. The editors of *Critical Theory, Cultural Politics, and Latin American Narrative* describe the present time as "the postscript age," which is witnessing an examination of the possibilities open to literary and cultural theory and criticism after the master narratives of modernity and their basic concepts (such as class, nation, and identity) have been called into question. As Neil Larsen has summarized the problem, "how are we now to think about, produce and/or consume culture without succumbing either to the tainted universalism embodied in Enlightenment notions of 'civilization' or to the equally suspect particularism linking notions of 'national culture'?"<sup>1</sup>

The urgency of this question is evident in the many recent works published on these issues in Latin America and the United States.<sup>2</sup> In

1. Neil Larsen, "Foreword" to D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xi.

2. Examples include Beatriz Sarlo, *Escenas de la vida postmoderna: Intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994); Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994); *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*, edited by George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Carlos Alonso, *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

"Postmodernity and Transnational Capitalism," George Yúdice has emphasized the political dimension of the current debates in framing this rhetorical question: "Is there still an emancipatory potential in the aesthetic or cultural realm?"<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if the presuppositions of the Enlightenment have been permanently destabilized, is its goal of liberating knowledge still possible? The authors of the works under review here grapple with this question from varying critical perspectives in seeking the most effective means of formulating cultural politics at present.

Latin American texts have continually treated the very issues under discussion today—some would say they have anticipated them. For example, the question of national or cultural identity vis-à-vis the "metropolitan centers" recurs throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American writings. Yet the current move away from totalizing, organic, and originating theories has raised doubts about the pertinence of this issue. The difficulty of theorizing about the concept of identity today is the central focus of the prominent literary critics, philosophers, and anthropologists who have contributed to the volume in the Hispanic Issues series entitled *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*. Contributor Blanca de Arancibia poses the problem in these terms: "We must ask ourselves . . . how it is possible to investigate literature from the perspective of the problematic we propose [that of identity] at a time when the affirmation of identity in contemporary texts can be considered as a belated 'modernist nostalgia' or an 'invitation to exclusion' and 'closure'" (p. 70).

Editor Amaryll Chanady's opening essay, "Latin American Imagined Communities and the Postmodern Challenge," responds to the critical impasse suggested by Arancibia. Chanady argues that "Latin American postcolonial societies were 'born in difference,' as the nations struggled for independence against an imperial center" (p. xx). Difference has thus been a defining element of Latin American identity. Chanady distinguishes among three approaches to the question of identity that purport to account for that difference. In the first, which she calls "the colonized Other," the identity is that of an external Other, the exotic subject of ethnographers and anthropologists but also of twentieth-century *indigenista* novels that take an essentialist and often idealized view of indigenous culture. In the second approach, "the colonizer as Other," postcolonial identity is defined in opposition to colonial domination. Europe and later the United States have become Latin America's Other: artificial,

Press, 1990); Antonio Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva postmoderna* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1989); Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989); and recent issues of *Boundary 2, Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, and *Nuevo Texto Crítico*.

3. George Yúdice, "Postmodernity and Transnational Capitalism," *On Edge*, 12.

corrosive, something to be expelled in order to allow an authentic culture to grow. According to this logic, for example, Fernández Retamar's Caliban can be affirmed only after the colonial domination of Prospero is exposed. In Chanady's view, José Martí's notion of "nuestra América" as well as Alejo Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* can also be considered part of the second approach to difference.

The last approach discussed in this essay is the one she favors, "Latin American identity as hybrid." Here, difference is not defined in relation to an external source of dominance but is located within Latin American society itself. Latin American hybridity is thus similar to Angel Rama's concept of transculturation and José Martí's "mestizo America," that is, a notion of Latin America as a heterogeneous crucible of influences and cultural productions. But as Chanady points out, her idea of hybridity "goes beyond Bakhtinian polyphony or heteroglossia, and certainly beyond the appropriation or assimilation of various intra-national others in a strategy of textualizing the multifaceted culture of a country as a means of colonizing it symbolically and homogenizing difference in an institutional practice that consolidates dominant forms of identity construction" (p. xvi). Herein lies the essay's postmodern challenge to all the forms of identity construction just described: how to avoid relegitimizing identity as a form of representation while allowing opportunity for "silenced voices" that are "demanding to be heard." This aporia presents the epistemological as well as ethical dimensions of current critical debate over identity.

The foreword to *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*, Alberto Moreiras's "Pastiche Identity and Allegory of Allegory," serves as a critique of most of the essays in the volume. Moreiras proposes a "postsymbolic reading" of the concept of identity through a careful reading of Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Moreiras begins by presenting some of the fallacies of a certain kind of critical discourse. One example is the appeal to "difference" as a way of countering naturalizing and homogenizing notions of identity: "difference, in most critical formulations, is not quite understood as resistance to identity, only as its underside. A fallen but very powerful dialectic seems to be operating here, organizing a swampy discursive field within which any substantive positing of identity is constantly undermined by a necessary appeal to identity as difference (i.e., postcolonial identity as difference from the metropolis); and within which any radical appeal to difference is immediately overturned by the necessary co-positing of difference as identity (postcolonial difference as identity against the metropolis)" (p. 205). To break away from the identity-difference dialectic, which Moreiras describes as a "totalizing monology," he posits the need to think about identity postsymbolically, that is, beyond the Hegelian postulate of the symbol as a conflation of consciousness and world, meaning and being.

Such a definition of symbol implies a “harmony” or mediation between universal principles and particular Others. And as the well-known master-slave dialectic shows, such harmony implies the domination of the Other, the subordination of difference to universality.

A postsymbolic conception of identity would seem to do away with this mediation by positing the unrecognizability of the Other, who cannot be fully known (identified) and thus cannot be appropriated or dominated. The alterity of the Other, to paraphrase legal scholar Drucilla Cornell (who is quoted often in this essay), points to the limits on all quests for identity, whether they are politically progressive or not. The Other is precisely what resists conceptual mastery, and therefore the Other’s difference cannot be reduced to an essence, as Moreiras believes most notions of difference do. Given this essay’s inclusion in a volume seeking to intervene politically in the cultural sphere, Moreiras’s piece raises this question: What would an ethical or political practice be like if its starting point is the impossibility of representing the Other, no matter how hybrid or multicultural?<sup>4</sup>

The ethical dimension of criticism is the underlying concern expressed in *Critical Theory, Cultural Politics, and Latin American Narrative* by editors Steven Bell, Albert Le May, and Leonard Orr. These eight essays by literary critics, a novelist, and a historian were presented at the First Biennial Conference of the Latin American Studies Consortium, “Narrative Practices and Cultural Discourse,” which was held at the University of Notre Dame in 1990. In the Prolegomenon, Bell explains that one of the volume’s goals is to explore the problematic relation between “first-world critical theory and third-world Latin American narrative.” A fragment of an interview with Argentine writer and critic Ricardo Piglia serves to introduce this collection of essays:

In Argentina there have been semantic displacements that constitute an important ideological operation and that allow one to say, for example, that all Argentines are authoritarian. Now, between an authoritarian individual and the torturer Señor Videla . . . there is an immeasurable difference. . . . The use of one common word to define two types of discursive strategies—one on paper, the other acting on bodies of flesh—has to do with the current situation of theory, which I see linked to the neoconservative wave and which, in brief, is the theory of the total fictionalization of the world, the theory that everything is discourse. . . . That leads to a perception of reality as pure fiction: it is all discourse, it’s all the same, what a writer says and what a military man says. . . . I believe that Argentine history is crisscrossed by fictions but it is not a fiction. We Argentines know very well that . . . reality is discursive but not only discursive. (Pp. 1–2)

At stake here is the status of the political itself, which Piglia views

4. For a recent discussion of such practices in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Drucilla Cornell, see Judith Butler, “Poststructuralism and Postmarxism,” *Diacritics* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1993):3–11.

as threatened by postmodern theory's preoccupation with discourse and its being separated from the properly historical.<sup>5</sup> The focus of this collection of essays is the need to rethink the facile opposition between "first-world critical theory" and "third-world Latin American literature" by examining their intersection in cultural politics. Hence Bell proposes to define the volume as a dialogue between first world critics and Latin American writers (the first essay is by Fredric Jameson and the last by Luisa Valenzuela). This dialogue relies on their being equal partners and not the European-North American "discoverers" of an exotic third world Other. The need for such dialogue is expressed in terms of an ethical practice. In Bell's view, "Today more than ever, Latin American culture and literature belongs to us all, if differently, as a right, a privilege, and also a responsibility" (p. 233).

Bell's assertion is quickly tested by the collection's first foray into the possibilities and limits of such a responsibility: Fredric Jameson's "Americans Abroad: Exogamy and Letters in Late Capitalism." Jameson focuses on Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*, which he calls a "gringo novel" set in a Latin American country. The essay questions the boundaries of what has traditionally been labeled as Latin American narrative: should a text's inclusion under this heading be determined by the language in which it is written, by the author's place of birth, by the setting, or by the text's ideology?

The question running through Jameson's essay is "whether it is possible to transcribe the substance of one national life, with its specific language, into the language of another one. Can the novel be subtitled?" (p. 46). The word *subtitle* is aptly chosen here in implying the "co-presence" of an "original language" and its translation. Jameson quickly concludes that no such subtitling is possible. The Latin American Other in the "gringo novel" is neither irreducibly different nor absolutely Other. As Jameson notes, the gringo novel duplicates the Hegelian model of master and slave, thus proving that "an imperial power cannot represent itself to itself, cannot come to any authentic form of representational self-knowledge, unless it is able to include within that representation the represented realities of its own colonies" (p. 59). Thus Jameson concludes that

5. Françoise Perus echoes Piglia's concern in "Modernity, Postmodernity, and Novelistic Form in Latin America," her contribution to *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*: "We will have to determine . . . whether postmodernity does not run the risk of relegating political discourse, and politics itself, to pure fiction (in the traditional sense of the term), thus returning to a magical-mythical conception of language" (p. 46). Moreiras's review of Perus's essay in the same volume comments: "Perus proves that it is not the postmodern, as she understands it, that will fictionalize politics. On the contrary, modernity, by presenting itself as the myth of the termination of myths, was responsible for a technologizing conception of language whose magico-mythical horizon was all the more powerful for being hidden from view under the disguise of Enlightened universality" (p. 221).

*A Flag for Sunrise* is actually "about" Vietnam: "It is not only the fact that most of the characters of *A Flag for Sunrise* have lived through the Vietnam war itself; it is also the ominous and bewildering fact that Central America really is Vietnam, is still Vietnam; and not the least unnerving moments of the book are the ones when . . . unexpectedly and without warning everything turns back into Southeast Asia" (p. 39). In this novel, Central America functions as a metaphor for the U.S. national phantasm.

Stone's novel thus strays far from the "unconsciousness" that Jameson believes is common to "first-world writers" in their relation to the problems of community and national identity. Jameson's reading of *A Flag for Sunrise* actually seems to complicate his much-discussed theory that "all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, they are to be read as what I will call national allegories."<sup>6</sup> Jameson has suggested that "national allegories" are also characteristic of a certain kind of "first-world literature," as Aijaz Ahmad noted in his reply to Jameson's 1986 article.<sup>7</sup>

Mary Louise Pratt's "Criticism in the Contact Zone: Decentering Community and Nation" takes a more positive approach to the question of the responsibility of critical practice. Pratt notes that the transnational nature of contemporary cultural production in metropolitan countries has eliminated the traditional correspondence between culture and nation. Heterogeneous social groups challenge what critic Homi Bhabha has termed the concept of "the People as One" (the historicist, evolutionary discourses that presuppose the nation as an organic whole), and such groups thus undo static and holistic notions of collectivity. Pratt proposes the "contact zone" as a spatial concept that privileges the borders where varying social groups meet in their separateness. Thus as in Chanady's essay, differences become a constitutive part of membership in a community.

According to Pratt, women writers exemplify the contact-zone perspective in their ambiguous relationship to the nation: "From the moment they were denied equal political and legal rights, the relation of women to the ideologies of the nation and to the imagined fraternal community was sharply differentiated from that of men" (p. 92). Pratt finds that texts by Juana Manuela Gorriti and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda provided a counterdiscourse to the nineteenth-century nation-building texts of writers like Andrés Bello, José María Heredia, and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Because they are located at the borderlands of nationalist ideology, such women writers can destabilize concepts long held to be static and unitary.

Pratt identifies *testimonio* as a paradigmatic genre of the contact zone, an example being *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la con-*

6. Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (Fall 1986):65–88.

7. See Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text*, no. 17 (Fall 1987):3–25.

*ciencia*. In the collaboration between a “third-world political activist” and “first-world intellectual” for the purpose of recording, writing, and publishing, a testimonio can affect “metropolitan and elite consciousness” (p. 90). Yet as Pratt immediately acknowledges, the “authority that testimonios claim for themselves is anchored mainly in community and authenticity.” The problem remains then of how to decenter concepts on which the political efficacy of a text depends without doing away with that efficacy.

John Beverley’s *Against Literature* is also another work concerned with the development of a cultural politics. As suggested by Beverley’s title, “The burden of these essays is to question whether literature can or should continue to be the privileged signifier of the desire for a more egalitarian, democratic and ecologically sound social order” (p. xiv). Beverley emphasizes the role of literature in the formation of the nation-state and its central role in maintaining capitalist hegemony, especially in colonialist and neocolonialist endeavors. Beverley believes that nonliterary cultural practices may be significant in producing new forms of liberation struggle.

Beverley proposes U.S. mass culture as a model for the cultural politics of the Latin American Left. He points out that he is not promulgating the present form of U.S. mass culture as such but rather the possibilities that it presents for production, distribution, and consumption. At stake for Beverley in this proposal is the democratization of the cultural sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Popular culture plays a key role in Beverley’s conception of a legitimate cultural politics. He considers the testimonio (specifically *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*) to be a paradigmatic “extraliterary and anti-literary” cultural practice. Like Pratt, Beverley emphasizes the testimonio’s capacity to produce an “alliance” between a member of the popular class and an intellectual, an arrangement that suggests “as an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity” (p. 78). But unlike Pratt, who interprets the position of subalternity as a form of resistance, Beverley emphasizes testimonio’s presence. In fact, he criticizes Fredric Jameson’s affirmation that testimonio produces “a new anonymity” because it “runs the risk of conceding to its subjects of enunciation only the facelessness that is already theirs in the dominant culture” (p. 75). Beverley thus stresses testimonio’s power of

8. Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo raises a similar concern (albeit from a different critical position) in her recent book *Escenas de la vida postmoderna: Intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994). In this work, she analyzes the relation between art and video culture, which she considers different spheres that should not be equated, and the possibilities for democratic access to them. Sarlo is also concerned with how popular culture can be defined in the present technological juncture and how popular cultures process the “cultural goods” of the market.

agency, clearly in response to certain poststructuralist and deconstructionist readings of the humanist conception of the subject (the notion of the self as a coherent and stable unit, the “maker” of history).<sup>9</sup> Such interpretations have been accused of being nihilistic or politically non-progressive, especially because their critique comes at a time when marginalized groups have been demanding recognition of their status as subjects.

Yet it remains unclear from Beverley’s essay how Rigoberta Menchú’s rise to self-consciousness (as emphasized in the full title of her testimonio) can stand for “the collectivity” as a whole. This difficulty was discussed by Jameson in another context: “One cannot acknowledge the justice of the general poststructuralist assault on the so-called ‘centered subject,’ the old unified ego of bourgeois individualism, and then resuscitate this same ideological mirage of psychic unification on the collective level in the form of a doctrine of collective identity.”<sup>10</sup>

As Beverley acknowledges, the testimonio’s capacity to represent an “authentic subaltern culture” is problematic. One of several essays in *Against Literature* on the topic, “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio” emphasizes the form’s anti-literary stance as well as its place within literature: “What has to be understood . . . is how testimonio radically puts into question the existing institution of literature as a form of class, race and gender privilege at the same time that it constitutes itself as something like a new literary genre” (p. 82). Yet for Beverley, testimonio is a genre that sidesteps the “textual in itself,” which belongs to literary forms like the novel. Thus testimonio is for Beverley what Umberto Eco has described as an “‘open work,’ which implies the importance and power of literature as a form of social action” (p. 84).

Regardless of the literary or anti-literary “engagement” of *Against Literature*, Beverley shares with other critics of testimonio Yúdice’s evaluation of the genre as an emancipatory practice in the cultural sphere. Contrary to Octavio Paz’s view that the projects of the avant-gardes have

9. Critic Barbara Johnson responded to this concern in her introduction to the 1992 Oxford Amnesty International Lectures: “Our lecturers are being asked to consider the consequences of the deconstruction of the self for the liberal tradition. Does the self constructed by the liberal tradition still exist? If not, whose human rights are we defending?” See “Introduction,” *Freedom and Interpretation* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 2. A recent interpretation of the political agency of testimonio appears in Santiago Colás, “Of Creole Symptoms, Cuban Fantasies, and Other Latin American Postcolonial Ideologies,” *PMLA* 110, no. 3:382–96.

10. Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” 78. Beverley comments on testimonio’s shift from self to collective expression in this manner: “Testimonio is an affirmation of the authority of a single speaking subject, even of personal awareness and growth, but it cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression and struggle. If it does this, it ceases to be testimonio and becomes autobiography. If [Rigoberta Menchú] had become a writer instead of remaining as she has a member of and an activist for her ethnic community, her narrative would be autobiography . . .” (Beverley, p. 83).



become exhausted and cannot be considered part of postmodernity,<sup>11</sup> Yúdice asserts that testimonial literature provides an occasion for thinking about a Latin American or peripheral avant-garde as an unfinished project. For Yúdice, the testimonio is part of a literary tradition in which “the avant-gardes sought to reactualize indigenous traditions, thus projecting new imaginaries with strong ethical contents” (p. 14). Although Beverley does not utilize the concept of avant-garde as part of his critical paradigm, he emphasizes that testimonios are “not only *representations* of subaltern resistance and struggle but also models and even *means* for these” (p. 90, Beverley’s emphasis). He also claims that testimonios permit the formation of alternative identities—subaltern, female, gay, indigenous—whereas literature in Latin America “has been (mainly) a vehicle for engendering an adult, white, male, patriarchal, ‘lettered’ subject” (p. 98). In their ambivalence toward literature, testimonios question whether the formation of these identities should be, in Beverley’s words, “contained within literature.”

The three collections of essays reviewed here form a significant polemical contribution on the most salient issues being debated in Latin American literature and cultural studies: the construction or deconstruction of the concept of identity; the role of the intellectual in formulating cultural politics; the status of culture in the mass media era; and post-structuralist and deconstructionist readings in Latin American criticism. These volumes will undoubtedly become important in the rapidly expanding bibliography on these issues.

11. According to Paz, “Today we witness the twilight of the aesthetics of rupture; the art and literature of our turn of the century have gradually lost their powers of negation. For a long time now their negations have been ritualistic repetition, their rebellions formulas, their transgressions ceremonies.” Octavio Paz, “El romanticismo y la poesía contemporánea,” as cited by Yúdice in “Postmodernity and Transnational Capitalism,” *On Edge*, 26.