



## Why Do I Do Cultural Studies?

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I should start by interrogating the question. Why pose it in the first place? Is it just a safe rhetorical device or does a real concern lie behind its apparent transparency, probably a suspicious uncertainty about my academic, intellectual, and ideological sagacity over the past years? Why didn't I question it before? Why now, when Cultural Studies has already been partially institutionalized in US academia? Or is it precisely because that assimilation by the academic *status quo*, as its institutional left wing, renders it another gear in the cultural and ideological reproduction of the capitalist system? Shouldn't I be looking for a safer boat instead of staying to bail out the sinking one? Who am I trying to justify myself to? Is this a statement of principles, a theoretical inquiry, an exercise in self-critique, or maybe I'm trying to answer Neil Larsen's provocative question 'what is "cultural studies" anyway, and why should Latin Americans, or Latin Americanists, bother with it in the first place?' (Larsen, 1995, p. 190).

All these questions are intricately related. Like so many others, I have come to Cultural Studies concerned by the economic and geopolitical global shift, the postmodern turn, the epistemological depreciation of grand narratives, and a renewed awareness of alterity and difference. But I also came to it driven by personal circumstances. When I was very young I wanted to be a writer, but I was not able to register on the *Letras* program at the *Universidad de la República* in Montevideo because it didn't offer evening classes, and I had a full-time job. The only alternative available was to get into the literature program at the *Instituto de Profesores Artigas*, which offered a practical, intermediate, definitely more socially grounded program than *Letras* did. The *Instituto* probably didn't provide me with the sophisticated literary tools I was searching for, but it gave me the unique opportunity to learn from inside the educational apparatus—during the height of its crisis—the fractured, ambiguous, politically charged position of intermediary intellectuals, among which High School teachers have a central role. Moreover, my time at the *Instituto* coincided with the military coup of 1973. I thus experienced first-hand the neo-liberal shift from the humanist, liberal and cosmopolitan educational system (under which the title of *Profesor de Secundaria* carried a respected professional status) to the technocratic, authoritarian and globalized mass culture (under which teachers were politically persecuted as leftists, socially chastised as professional losers, and economically pauperized as productively obsolete). At that time, the option to be *un trabajador de la cultura* was more a structure of feeling than an ideological slogan, and our

cultural praxis—critical analysis and pedagogy—was at the fringes of the academy, intrinsically popular and dangerously political.

This is why, when years later I encountered Cultural Studies, I felt so comfortable with it. It provided me with a hermeneutic and theoretical realm in which to accommodate my long-term interest in history, theater and popular culture; my formation under that particular blend of structuralism, socio-criticism, semiotics and ideological analysis practiced by Carlos Real de Azúa, Angel Rama (both high school teachers, by the way) and Carlos Quijano's *Marcha*; my experience of the late 1960s and 1970s (dependency theory, anti-imperialism, liberation theology, revolutionary politics); and my later professional development under the existential circumstances of migrancy.<sup>1</sup> This explains why I didn't feel any urge to pose the question until now. I just kept doing my work.<sup>2</sup> However, the time is now right for me to face those questions. In what follows I attempt to summarize what makes Latin American Cultural Studies a distinctive field, always seeming to approach the epistemological break that would make it a discipline. In order to do so, I will briefly reflect on some relevant issues that, in my opinion, constitute and distinguish Latin American cultural studies from its Anglo-American counterpart as well as other more traditional disciplines.

### Genealogies

It is intriguing that many Latin American practitioners of Latin American cultural studies always trace their roots directly to the founders of British cultural studies (Hoggart, Williams) or to French sociology and anthropology of culture (Bourdieu, Augé), while circumventing the complex Latin American culturalist tradition. Néstor García Canclini, for example, the most emblematic representative of the field internationally, and Beatriz Sarlo, a Latin American cultural studies practitioner *malgré-lui*, rarely credit any Latin American cultural thinker beyond their own circle. This silencing is somewhat contradicted when García Canclini affirms that he 'became involved in cultural studies before [he] realized this is what it was called!' (1996, p. 84) or when Sarlo says that she 'thought [she] was doing the history of ideas' (1997, p. 87). Obviously, if prior to becoming acquainted with cultural studies as such they were already doing it, it is because Latin American cultural studies' problematics and methodologies predate the field as such. Both Sarlo and García Canclini were working in fields already permeated by theoretical, methodological, and ideological controversies that constitute pivotal issues within Latin American cultural studies.

An example that refers both to the Latin American and the Uruguayan scenes will suffice. The enmity between the paradigmatic figures of Emir Rodríguez-Monegal and Angel Rama during the 1960s was not just 'a war for power, period', as Rodríguez-Monegal put it, but a profound critical, methodological, ideological and political turn in tune with socio-historical events such as the Cuban revolution.<sup>3</sup> Rodríguez-Monegal was director of *Literarias*, the literary section of the influential journal *Marcha*, from 1945 to 1960, when due to ideological differences with Quijano and his team, he was replaced by Rama, who reshaped the section as *Culturales*. Subsequently, during 1966–1967, Monegal became director of the journal *Mundo Nuevo*, published in Paris by the *Instituto Latinoamericano de Relaciones Internacionales* and officially financed by the

Ford Foundation. He resigned, however, after the journal was accused of being covertly funded by the C.I.A. as another ideological weapon in Cold War propaganda (see Mudrovic, 1997). Afterwards he had a crucial role, during his tenure at Yale from 1968 to 1985, in the promotion of Latin American literatures as an independent field of study, related nevertheless to the widely complex development of Latin American studies across US universities, government agencies, and private foundations. As Rama summarizes this intense period, Rodríguez-Monegal, who practiced an extremely elegant sort of new criticism, introduced mostly English language writers and disseminated others like Borges and those of *Sur*, 'from the restricted appreciation of literature of a "pure literati"'. My circumstances were different', Rama says, 'I had to reinsert literature into the general structure of culture, which inevitably lead me to its grounding in the historical; and to work with sociological methods capable of holistic constructions ... committing [criticism] to the social demands of the Latin American community.' He adds later, defining the paradigm shift in unmistakable terms: 'Criticism began to be historical, sociological and ideological, providing explanations that related the work to its context and scrutinized the concrete grounding of cultural phenomena. This movement emphasized the interest in a sociology of culture [...] and Marxism' (Rama, 1972, pp. 88–89, 208).

In a word, Rodríguez Monegal's criticism would stand for what Hernán Vidal calls the 'technocratic deviations' of the 1960s. Rama, on the other hand, embodied a 'social understanding of literature' according to which 'the literary critic was supposed to abandon his identity as a technical analyst of privileged texts in order to take on the identity of a producer of culture from a consciously defined political position.' After this turn, concludes Vidal, 'literary criticism thus moved closer to symbolic anthropology, sociology, and political science' (1993, p. 115). The debate between these two camps, or better yet, within these two moments in the development of Latin American criticism, ranged from the status of the literary text to the composition of the canon, from the relation between literature and art to their limitations with regard to the popular, from the technologies of literary and cultural criticism to the political role of the intellectual. All of these issues would be central to Latin American cultural studies during the 1980s.

Perhaps literary criticism provides the most appropriate way into achieving a comprehensive understanding of the endogenous historical foundations of Latin American cultural studies, which are ultimately embedded in Latin American colonial and neo-colonial history. This is the approach pursued by Julio Ramos, who is concerned with the discursive, disciplinary, and institutional genealogy of national literatures, and the central role of cultural policy in the consolidation of nation-states and their national imaginaries. In his view, Latin American cultural studies deal primarily with the emergence or the survival of ethnic identities, diasporic subjects, and subaltern lores, topics which nurture an epistemology at the limits of traditional disciplinary boundaries. These topics reflect (upon) the intensification of conflicts in heterogeneous social formations, such as the postmodern border culture of southern California and the uneven modernity of Latin America throughout its history. The difference between current Latin American cultural studies and traditional Latin American thought is that the latter believed in the integrating capabilities of national literatures and art, while the former criticize them as apparatuses of power. The fact remains,

however, that not only many issues but, most importantly, the institutions and practices of knowledge in Latin America had always been 'heterogeneous, irreducible to the principles of autonomy which limited the disciplines in the United States or France'. Latin American cultural thinkers in the tradition of Andrés Bello, José Martí, Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, and Angel Rama, 'worked, precisely in the interstitial site of the essay, with transdisciplinary devices and ways of knowledge.'<sup>4</sup> They are, in the truest sense, the precursors of Latin American cultural studies.

### Epistemologies

It is generally accepted that one of the most important characteristics of Cultural Studies is its multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary methodology. The most distinguished practitioners of Latin American cultural studies indicate that decidedly. Speaking from the US Academy, John Beverley, one of the most distinguished practitioners of Latin American cultural studies, stresses that 'the point of cultural studies was not so much to create a dialogue between disciplines as to challenge the integrity of disciplinary boundaries per se' (Beverley, 1993, p. 20). Néstor García Canclini's position, on the other hand, is cautiously nuanced. Although he applauds cultural studies' interdisciplinary methodology, he warns us that 'it must not become a substitute for the different disciplines. [...] Each discipline of the humanities and the social sciences should become involved in the study of culture, inform one another, interact, and make their respective boundaries as porous as possible. But from the pedagogic point of view, it seems to me that at university level the differences between disciplines should be kept (Canclini, 1996, p. 86). While Beverley celebrates *transgression*, García-Canclini recommends a *complementary balance* between the disciplined pedagogic moment and the ulterior multidisciplinary professional practice. But the core of the matter is that multi- and interdisciplinarity are deeply engrained in Latin American writing, in the form of an essayist thrust that evolves from the nineteenth century intellectual (the lawyer by profession who was also a poet, a journalist, an ideologue, a politician, a statesman) (Rama, 1984). Such a practice—very close indeed to the kind of contingent, impure, deprogrammed 'border text' proposed by Nelly Richard, quoting exclusively European post-structuralist writers, as paradigmatic of 'cultural criticism'<sup>5</sup>—traverses discursive formations, confuses social spheres, and contaminates all the disciplines even before their institutionalization at universities at the beginning of this century. For this reason, Latin American cultural studies cannot be defined either by its multi-, inter-, or transdisciplinary methodology, an issue which, as Larsen correctly argues, is not 'a serious issue any more' (Larsen, 1998, p. 247). I entirely agree with Walter Mignolo when he writes:

Running the risk of essentialism, one could say that there is a style of intellectual production, in and from the Third World, which consists of a certain undisciplinarity [...] It is not essentialism that explains this: it is rather the history of colonialism and the game of power and cultural scholarship in the history of the colonial countries and in the history of the colonies. (1998a, p. 112)

Another definitional divide usually mentioned is the critical overcoming of

National Literatures as the primordial site of hegemonic symbolic power (the canonization of a literary corpus at the core of a foundational imaginary servicing the modern state), and the parallel collapse of bourgeois humanist education (Remedi, 1996). In this context, it is not difficult to understand the roaring popularity of *testimonio* during the 1980s among US practitioners of Latin American cultural studies and the prominence obtained by *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in the polemics around the literary canon that shook English and Comparative Literatures programs at US universities. *Testimonio* provided many US Latin Americanists with an anti-literary literary genre, albeit duly canonized by Casa de las Américas' literary awards since 1970, from which they sought to rebuild their own jeopardized political and intellectual hegemonic position. As Georg Gugelberger summarizes, *testimonio's* popularity was mainly due to the fact that:

It was at the crossroads of all the discourses of institutional battles in recent years: postcolonial and/versus postmodern; genre versus non-genre; interest in autobiography; the function of the canon; authenticity/realism; the debates on subalternity; othering discourse; orature/literature; dual authorship; editorial intervention; margin/center; race/class/gender; feminisms (some apparently unjustifiably declared the *testimonio* women's discourse); minority discourse; Third World writing; the post-boom novel; Latin Americanism; questions of disciplinarity; and so on. *Testimonio has been the salvational dream of a declining cultural left in hegemonic countries.* (1996, p. 7, my italics)

George Yúdice, Marc Zimmerman and John Beverley are among those who have produced the most fertile analysis of the political and epistemological possibilities of *testimonio* as a counter-hegemonic literary genre. For Yúdice, *testimonio* is the practical manifestation of an 'aesthetics of community-building, of solidarity' upon which the marginalized 'wage their struggle for hegemony in the public sphere' (1996a, pp. 53, 57). Meanwhile, *testimonio* helped Beverley to make a strong case against academic literary institutions and, more importantly, to argue for an ambitious turn 'from an epistemology and politics of representation to one of solidarity' (1996a, p. 220). What makes this turn thinkable is the double status of *testimonio*, as truthful account of socio-historical events (its ethical value and epistemological veracity) and as a literary artifact (its aesthetic value and narrative verisimilitude). However, the problematic ambiguity of this double status, although detected early on by several critics, allowed for *testimonio's* paradoxical aesthetic canonization as an anti-literary genre, based upon its truthful, direct presentation of the Real by the supposedly authentic voice of the subaltern, whose word, as Sklodowska put it, was 'perceived as natural, pure, uniquely insightful, and immune to ideological blindness.' Put differently by Sommer, far from being transparent, the text amounts to a 'rhetorical (decidedly literary) performance,' and this is clearly shown by Rigoberta Menchú's careful, sophisticated elaboration of her persona as an organic intellectual and a political cadre built expressly for transnational consumption in her second book.<sup>6</sup> The crux of the matter is that *testimonios*—a paraliterary or nonliterary writing that long predates its critical recognition—became *testimonio*—an antiliterary literary

genre—by the suspension of their literariness while being constructed as a literary icon. In other words, the genre's specific cultural value was built upon an extraliterary stance or 'subdued sublime', in Moreiras' terms (1996, p. 195). This iconization implied its simultaneous commodification (Williams, 1996, p. 236) as well as a double fetishization: the epistemological fetishization of the text as the ground of unmediated truth, and the consequent political fetishization of the poetics of solidarity, the emotional apparatus that enables the critic's identification with the testimonial subject. Of course, this double fetishization severely limits not only the epistemological benefit of the strategy, but its political outcome as well, constrained by an ethical-emotional urge. The literary canonization of *testimonio*, despite the well-intentioned political purpose of the poetics of solidarity, ended up depoliticizing it, in converting its socio-political vigor into an academic auratic strategy, whose final goal was to legitimize the metropolitan academic's locus of enunciation. *Testimonio* offered an extraordinary milieu for the left Latin Americanist to bypass the mediation of local (Latin American) intellectuals in order to establish direct political alliances with the ultimate subaltern subject (natives, Indians, women), and by doing so, reinstate his metropolitan position in a devalued and de-centered field. It produced, in effect, a double subalternization in which it is possible to perceive the Latin Americanist's gaze fixing its subaltern subject.

While Beverley's rage 'against literature' seems overblown when compared to more compelling Latin American issues, and Moreiras' hypothesis that 'Latin American literary writing loses cultural hegemony' as a consequence of the collapse of the national revolutionary movements of the 1960s seems a strangely exogenous construct, they express some anxieties specifically pertinent to the left Latin Americanist both trained by and working for US academia. It is hardly imaginable that any Latin American intellectual, including the most conspicuous 'boom' writers, would have thought of 'high literature' as an 'effective' weapon 'in the fight against late-capitalist globalization', as Moreiras proposes (1996, p. 194). On the other hand, Beverley's 'fascination' with an alternative negative literature reveals a neo-avant-gardist urge that hardly hides his nostalgia for a pure, unpolluted, universal form of Art through which Western Culture will keep the upper hand (Larsen, 1995, p. 18). His postmodern project thus symptomatically meets Sarlo's conservative modern defense of 'aesthetic values', which he so chastises, at least halfway.<sup>7</sup>

The polemics around the epistemological status of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* stirred by David Stoll's (1999) accusations about the text's factual veracity, and the criticism of the poetics of solidarity that I have summarized above, have undoubtedly contributed to the decline of *testimonio*'s popularity, but the real reasons behind its demise lie elsewhere. 'The moment of *testimonio* is over', not because 'the originality and urgency or—to recall Lacan's phrase—the "state of emergency" that drove our fascination and critical engagement with it, has undoubtedly passed', as Beverley disingenuously writes (1996b, pp. 280, 281). The moment of *testimonio* is over because the politics with which it was invested and the original strategic maneuver on which it was founded were designed outside and above Latin America. It is over because it was just the 'salvational dream of a declining cultural left in hegemonic countries', in complete disregard of the *real* epistemological, political or literary status of testimonial writing in Latin America. It is over because it was the *Real* only for those metropolitan

academics in search of their vanishing *other*. Just as testimonios existed long before the enshrining of *testimonio* by US academics, densely allied to journalism, the chronicle, and political activism, they will continue to play a part in Latin American cultural reality, despite the downfall of the 'international solidarity networks'. The debate about *testimonio* is more about the bankruptcy of Latin Americanist literary criticism than about Latin American literatures and cultures.

What I have tried to demonstrate by means of this long detour about how *testimonio* should be read as a self-legitimizing ideological construct of US Latin Americanism, it is that its ravaging popularity in the USA has been hardly reproduced among literary and cultural critics in Latin America—where testimonios continued to have a life of their own—not due to a generalized 'resistance to theory', as has been remarked repeatedly, but to the necessarily different relation of Latin American intellectuals to the political and cultural practices and institutions in their respective countries. The debate about the literary canon has not been as central in Latin America as in the USA, partly because the Latin American literary canon has been built with and from extra-literary and nonliterary texts since its early beginnings; partly because academic disciplines tend to be much more rigidly established in the Anglo-Saxon world than in Latin America; and partly because the Latin American intellectual is compelled to cross discursive boundaries and participate actively in politics, in contrast to the socio-political containment that characterize academic life on college campuses. For these reasons, the crisis of national literatures as well as the emergence of new cultural practices and new modes of cultural (re)production, circulation and consumption are felt, in Latin America, not so much as the collapse of literary criticism, as part of the more dramatic changes introduced by transnational mass culture. In any event, if *testimonio* embodied that 'desire called Cultural Studies' for the metropolitan Latin Americanist (Jameson, 1993, p. 17), it does manifest an epistemological and political shift, from a productivist epistemology to a consumerist one. This shift, which delves into the Benjamin-Foucault-de Certeau aggregate, has become extremely fashionable after the spread of cultural studies in the USA, but it encounters vehement resistance in Latin America and understandably so. Even those who celebrate the creativity of the consumer and her/his micropolitics of resistance, like Brunner, Martín-Barbero, and García Canclini, suffer when it comes to accommodating this perspective on consumption to the Latin American social, economic, and cultural neoliberal turn (Martín-Barbero, 1987; García Canclini, 1989). In the periphery it is not so simple to discard or even disregard the productive instances, nor the ubiquitous power of the culture industry, nor the insidious character of transnational mass culture. Does the fashionable celebration of mass culture by Anglo-American cultural populists, which emerged as a response to the right's entrenchment in traditional values (During, 1993, p. 16), have the same effect in Latin America? How do we speak about the popular? What is the place of popular cultures and their connections to the market(s)? Is it enough to blend the popular with civil society, as simply 'that part of society that cannot be confused with the State nor with hegemonic discourses'? (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 16). For the vast majorities of Latin Americans, globalization is experienced from the margins and the residues of capital. These are the real cleavages that make up the field of Latin American cultural studies, and they are truly political ones.

### The Political

Any standard definition of cultural studies, both by its adherents and its adversaries, stresses its political scope, or how it performs a triple articulation of culture, 'where "culture" is simultaneously the ground on which analysis proceeds, the object of study, and the site of political critique and interventions' (Nelson *et al.*, 1992, p. 5). This is, to say the least, a problematic statement. For some it is an improper politicalization of culture; for others it is a defeatist depreciation of politics, befitting to progressive bourgeois liberalism. British cultural studies, as is well known, were tamed in their acclimatization to the US academic world. According to During, however, this shrinking of political expectations had more to do with the globalization—and denationalization—of British cultural studies, which first moved away from Marxism and class analysis, then shifted its emphasis from the study of power blocs and subcultures to ethnic and gender identity politics, and finally reduced identity politics to the politics of survival. The celebration of commercial transnational culture by several critics, in a move toward 'cultural populism' apparently at odds with traditional, canonical monoculturalism, ultimately closed the circle of cultural studies' retreat into globalization (During, 1993, pp. 15–17).

As a matter of fact, this retreat from the political has always been inscribed in the history of cultural studies as an integral, constitutive contradiction. Stuart Hall, responsible for introducing the 'colonial' issue that has kept cultural studies' radicalism alive under its global turn (Mignolo, 1998a, p. 112), wrote:

We thus came from a tradition entirely marginal to the centers of English academic life, and our engagement in the questions of cultural change—how to understand them, how to describe them, and how to theorize them, what their impact and consequences were to be, socially—were first reckoned within the dirty outside world. The Centre for Cultural Studies was the locus to which we *retreated* when that conversation in the open world could no longer be continued: it was politics by other means. (Hall, 1990, p. 12)

Hall, one of the most politically conscientious theorists of British cultural studies, acknowledges that their politics is a politics by default, and that culture, granted of a politically emancipatory dimension, became 'a surrogate for a politics of social emancipation' (Larsen, 1995, p. 193). At any rate, to keep that contradiction in permanent tension is already a political practice. Therefore, Hall warns against the danger of forgoing that tension and its political edge by crystallizing theoretical thinking as bombastic ventriloquism, endogamic over-textualization, and academic re-disciplining. In a word, he warns of losing sight of 'the critical distinction between intellectual work and academic work', and argues for the need to produce an organic critique, even though in brackets or, put differently, between belonging to the establishment or being part of the *intelligentsia*. The reductionism of politics, from social class struggle first, to identity politics, and then to academic survival, is mentioned with a grain of irony by Fredric Jameson (1993, p. 25). He also remarks that the demise of the original Marxist project and its subrogation by the 'politics of difference' has finally helped to cover deeper inequalities and radical alterities under the ideological veil of multiculturalism. This would explain, of course, the overt

distrust that theories and policies originating within US Latin Americanism encounter in Latin America, despite their best intentions.

This is the case of the *Inter-American Cultural Studies Network*, directed by George Yúdice, whose main objective is to respond to unstoppable globalization through the organization of Latin American cultural studies practitioners, all around the world, by means of the internet, conferences, publications, and the implementation of common projects. The collective has already produced a significant body of work, most notably the book *On Edge*, and conferences co-organized with host institutions in Iztapalapa, Mexico, Bellagio, Italy, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Yúdice, 1992). The project's most remarkable feature is obviously its aim to institutionalize Latin American cultural studies beyond the parochial horizons of US academia, and under the umbrella of the 'uneven transnational space' called 'cultural studies', thus creating a suitable space for the discussion of the unique Latin American problematic.<sup>8</sup> Then it raises the question: 'To what extent is it possible to articulate a common project while respecting, and building upon, the respective regional specificities? Would it be possible to avoid, in a hemispheric project, the dominance of the Anglo-American research programs?' These are precisely the most delicate issues, probably insurmountable due to the global, postnational, and Pan-American scope of the project, in spite of the presumed dispersal of its centers of power. How could the proposal of 'the Americas' be accepted from Latin America as a single social subject, without theorizing the inequalities involved? How could it not evoke the phantom of Pan-Americanism that haunted *our America* for decades? How could the transposition to the periphery of methodologies and cultural policies used in the metropolis be accepted without qualms? How could identity politics and multiculturalism—the backbone of the US cultural studies' agenda—be allowed to overshadow other, more pressing issues? The three areas of interest singled out by the organization, notwithstanding their unequivocal relevance for Latin America, reveal distinctly metropolitan concerns and controversies: theory and methodologies; civil society, as the space of cultural consumption where the local and the global, popular practices, and mass culture converge; emergent social subjects, including new social movements (women, gays, environmentalism, etc.) and national minorities (blacks, indigenous peoples, Latinos in the USA).

Thus, the skepticism raised by this agenda among Latin American intellectuals is understandable. As Yúdice states, they are suspicious of 'a de-centered centrality which attempts to relegitimize itself in a global context appealing to alterities, marginalities, subalternities, with the participation of postcolonial intellectuals from its own academic apparatuses of production of knowledge' (Yúdice, 1994, pp. 44–45). In other words, the project has been seen by many as a stratagem to bolster metropolitan power while positioning it as peripheral: its appropriation of the subaltern's subalternity, dissimulation of centred power, its simulation of marginality. The same doubts have been raised about the reliance on some theoretical concepts of doubtful applicability, such as multiculturalism, deterritorialization, and hybridity, although the last one has been powerfully introduced in Latin American cultural studies by an Argentinian anthropologist working in a Mexican state university.

The other major theoretical proposal coming from US Latin Americanism is introduced, of course, by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, and is

presented in its 'Founding Statement' as 'one aspect, albeit a crucial one, of the larger emergent field of Latin American Cultural Studies' (1993, p. 116). The Subaltern Studies Group basically transposes to the study of Latin America the theoretical and methodological tenets developed by its South Asian homologue, in particular the elusive concept of subalternity, its ambiguous status as subject/object of study, and the methodology of reading 'against the grain' in order to bring the subaltern to light from 'the seams of the previously articulated sociocultural and administrative practices and epistemologies' (p. 119). The aporia of subalternism lies in its own definition of subalternity, a purely relational category characterized by its negativity, which is nevertheless flatly constructed as negation, without framing it into specific, historical hegemonic formations. This is probably due to Beverley's populist non-dialectical and non-historicist idea of 'simple negation, as opposed to dialectical negation', which he takes from Feuerbach, based upon the argument that that is the Manichaeic way 'subaltern people experience history' (Beverley and Sanders, 1997, p. 242). Subalternity ends up being a paradoxical category, since even though the subaltern is not subject of (subjected to) a hegemonic formation but left out of it, always already a residue condemned to its exterior, her/his identity depends, nevertheless, on their relational positions ('The subaltern is subaltern only by virtue of having been placed in that relationship by some practice or discourse') (Beverley and Sanders, 1997, p. 243; see also Beasley-Murray, 1998). It is, in the end, an empty signifier deprived of agency, which s/he only acquires through the solidary recognition of the enlightened intellectual and only then. In sum, 'the subaltern is subaltern because it can't be registered adequately in academic culture' (Beverley and Sanders, 1997, p. 243). Such ahistorical indeterminacy of subalternity and the Manichaeic 'center-periphery duality' which found subalternist's politics of solidarity, has prompted Williams to note its 'implicit essentialization' (1996, p. 237), and has caused Moraña to consider it 'an inclusive, essentialist, and homogeneous category, which covers all and every group subordinated to discourses and praxis of power' (1997, p. 51).

The contribution of subalternism to a better understanding of subalternity resides in posing the question of 'how to re-represent the subaltern in U.S.-based Latin Americanism without yielding under the burden of fetishistic or exploitative forms of discursive practice' (Williams, 1996, p. 227). Read against the grain, subalternism signals the aporia of its own project, since the aim to present the subaltern masks 'the underlying desire to represent themselves as transparent non-agents' or, as Gareth Williams brilliantly says, it amounts to a modernist 'disciplinary fantasy' of metropolitan intellectuals, 'a critical practice that seems to carry within itself, as its very ground of possibility, the very impossibility of its grounding in possibility' (1996, pp. 240, 242). The process involves four moments. First, the group explicitly proposes self-sacrificing its ability to represent the subaltern (collective intellectual aphanisis) in order to restore the subaltern's capacity to self-representation. However, this desire carries a fundamental contradiction, inasmuch as the subaltern's voice can be restituted only through the subalternist's self-erasure, which implies that the subaltern's mere existence depends on the Latin Americanist's whim. But then, as the 'Founding Statement' fully acknowledges, what happens if the subaltern doesn't want, or doesn't even care about, either the Latin Americanist's representation or self-sacrifice? According to Williams, the conviction about the subaltern's ultimate

rejection gives the Subaltern Studies Group 'what it desires, namely, an exotopic space of epistemic breakdown and disciplinary fantasy from which it can actively engage in the enjoyment of its own exclusion and "otherization", together with the opportunity to act out its spectacular (non)agency in its processes of cultural exchange.' In other words, the Subaltern Studies Group's strategy of self-erasure actually reasserts—by concealment—the hegemonic position of the metropolitan intellectual: 'Latinamericanist enjoyment of subaltern restitution through self-destitution paradoxically maintains the centralized site of the intellectual in the processes of restoring the subaltern to historical agency' (Williams, 1996, p. 243).

Beverley's later move to salvage the strategy theoretically by linking it to liberation theology's concept of 'the poor' seems like a desperate maneuver (1996a, p. 220).<sup>9</sup> The dense complexity of 'the preferential option for the poor', basically the outcome of an ethical and mystical impulse, lies elsewhere, but not in the political, despite its political implications. On the contrary, the move probably exposes more blatantly the political misery of subalternism, as well as its ultimate design, which is not just to contribute to the self-representation of the subaltern (whoever and wherever s/he is, s/he is always in Latin America), but to create a legitimate political focal point for the intellectuals who represent the desire to, and the impossibility of representing the subaltern (from the transnational academic jet-set). Subalternism is undoubtedly the most coherent ideological intervention—with the ambition of becoming a new paradigm—to have developed from the crisis of self-legitimation within Latin Americanism. Moreover, it manifests the ways in which left Latin Americanism 'recomposes its agenda, its historic mission, and its scriptural centrality, trying to define another "otherness" in order to pass, "from outside and from above", from representation to representativity' (Moraña, 1997, p. 52). In Jameson's words, not much more than a desire.

Now, what do subalternism and *the Americas network* have in common? They offer to Latin American intellectuals an epistemological and institutional structure from which to bypass—one from below, the other from above—the boundaries of the nation-state. The subaltern is, by definition, before and outside the nation. The Americas network is, by principle, above and after it. But, is the national a closed question in Latin America (or in the world, by the way)? Has the national been superseded by globalization, neoliberalism, and regional economic treaties? Do new social movements and the emergence of previously suppressed identities replace national imaginaries and national politics? Is civil society outside or against the state? What is the articulation between civil society and the national? Does the deterritorialization of capital deterritorialize old territorial allegiances? Among the most serious errors committed by US Latin Americanists has been to believe that globalization equals, in Latin America, post-nationalism; that civil society is beyond the national; that the successes of neoliberalism are final and go uncontested; that the politics of consensus have really replaced the politics of antagonism.

The politics of the 1960s were guided (and many times dogmatically misguided) by the premise that the main contradiction of the times was *imperialism versus nation*. Such a contradiction subsumed every single socio-political conflict, and once it had been determined, would allow for the formation of a popular national historic block capable of carrying out the pending national-democratic

and social revolutions. Both dependency theory and theology of liberation, the most important critical paradigms to emerge from Latin America in that period, directly nurtured and/or responded to said premise. Later, imperialism and the nation, the main characters in this drama, faded out from the scene. Imperialism, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the end of a bipolar world, the advent of flexible postindustrial capitalism, and the dispersal of its centers, lost its currency. It is impressive how capitalist economic power has de-centered itself; but what about political and military power? If it is no longer possible to think in terms of modern economic and cultural imperialism, how can the peoples of the periphery name these postmodern, apparently de-centered, transnational centers of power? How can they devise emancipatory political strategies without naming this imperial postmodern, this flexible, ubiquitous, omnivorous regime? Correlatively, how can these peoples name themselves—that is, create themselves as agents of their own destiny—when it is no longer acceptable to think in terms of third world or dependent countries? Every time the USS bombs Iraq, who gets the Latin American's sympathies? I rejoiced with the detention of Pinochet by British authorities on the request of a Spanish judge, but still, as a Latin American, I feel humiliated by the neocolonial implications of the affair, the paternalistic lesson in civility ('if you don't do it, we'll do it for you'), the new world (dis)order disregard for the modern principles of self-determination and national sovereignty, disguised under the hypocritical defense of human rights. The national is still a capital issue in Latin America, and so is dependency theory, a vernacular form of *post-Marxism*—not to be confused with *post-Marxism*—and *anticolonialism*—not to be confused with *postcolonial studies*—whose main objectives of economic justice, popular democracy, and cultural emancipation are still unfulfilled. Both dependency theory and anticolonialism are intimately related, and both need to be revised *vis-à-vis* the national question under the transnational, but always keeping in mind that the heart of social and cultural utopia continues to be conflict and antagonism (Achugar, 1998, p. 97; Iturri, 1995, p. 9).

This is why to insist upon the political is crucial to any project within Latin American cultural studies. But since politics has become old-fashioned, and reading literature and culture in political terms has become *à la mode*, the status of the political needs to be elucidated—politically—more than ever (Jameson, 1990, p. 44). What is the articulation between culture and politics, or better yet, between the cultural and the political? And between the political and politics? The healthy trend to interpret literatures and cultures in political terms should not end up depoliticalizing politics. On the contrary, a more rigorous discernment of the mutually overdetermined status of the political and the cultural, should allow for a deeper and renewed politicalization of both politics and cultures on the understanding that they still constitute two discernible—although never discrete nor autonomous—spheres of social action. Culture is overdetermined by the political as politics is overdetermined by the cultural, but yet there is a specifically political praxis as well as there is a specifically cultural one. And here is where utopia comes in, because if utopia is, basically, a necessarily evasive horizon, it needs to be permanently re-inscribed in our critical practice in the same way politics has always been inscribed in cultural studies as a tension between the intellectual and the academic, desire and knowledge (Hall, 1980, p. 17). As Jameson has said, utopia must be named (1990,

p. 51), and this will for utopia, renovated as practice, and not just as desire, is what must be kept alive in Latin American cultural studies.

### Intellectual Loci

Last year I was invited by friends at the *Instituto de Profesores Artigas*, in Montevideo, to give a talk on Latin American cultural studies. It was supposed to be an informative talk to an audience composed for the most part of students and professors of literature and history. It was exciting to go back to my old *Instituto* after so many years. Although I publish in Montevideo more or less regularly, and maintain a number of exceptionally fruitful relations, I keep myself at a peaceful distance from intellectual circles. I've made it very clear that I have no intentions of going back to the country to dispute anybody's place, and have avoided getting involved in polemics on a couple of occasions. The task didn't seem complicated, although I had to keep in mind the scarce bibliographic resources and the general lack of information about trends and fashions that circulate in transnational circuits. My public was not going to be on 'the cutting edge'. But what is for many in US academia a matter of survival, is for our distant colleagues in Montevideo a yuppyish fad, a plain and simple confirmation of our frivolous snobbery. I was expecting misinformation, curiosity, questions, rebuttals, resistance. All of this I got. It was interesting to see the audience divide in two arguing camps: on one side, a few professors, entrenched in the defense of literary values and the aura of education; on the other, many students, interested in popular culture and non-canonic texts. So far so good. What I was not expecting were my own reactions. Probably because I was trying to map out a field not yet recognized as such by my audience, I felt as if I were bringing the good news to them, as if I were *lecturing* the uninformed natives on the accumulated knowledge of a transdisciplinary discipline. I felt endowed with the learned savvy of the traveler, the Euro-American insider, the prodigal son. I was speaking in the same place I had spoken many times before, and yet my locus had changed. I saw myself reflected in their eyes and in their reflection I intuited the abyss. I had been where they were now, but where was I now speaking from?

Hugo Achugar, writing from a position of cultural power in Montevideo, insists on the necessity to specify 'the position from which one speaks.' And then he goes on to destabilize the totalizing enunciating subject: 'We speak from a space configured by utopia [...] We speak from the Latin American periphery [...] we speak from the periphery of those who bet on utopia; and we speak from Latin American discursivity which is another form of periphery. We speak therefore from a contaminated space' (1998, p. 83). Achugar parodies those who abrogate for themselves an authority that is solely produced by rhetorical strategies during the act of enunciation, but then he falls into some sort of inverse reification to sustain that while the periphery is a problematic locus of enunciation, the metropolis is not. This difference obviously grants to the periphery a privileged epistemological status, since everything produced in it would have an added value, a surplus of meaning, an additional edge 'to think the world' (1998, p. 97). To be honest, I have sustained similar assumptions before, and the argument about the epistemological productivity of the margins, deeply rooted in cultural and postcolonial studies, has been the main tenet of

many diverse strategies within Latin American thought—from Martí to Fernández Retamar to Richard—as well as in recent Latin Americanism. In order not to get trapped into the binary formula center/periphery, the question is *who* establishes and *from where*—following Achugar's recommendations—*where* the periphery stands, or begins. Is Achugar speaking from the periphery? Is his locus more problematic than mine, or is my locus, as a Latin American migrant in the USA more productive than his? Any 'politics of location' risks essentialization, and this inconsistency exposes Achugar's argument to Beverley's ironic dismissal of it as a maneuver by Achugar to position himself as a 'creole interlocutor to US academy', in 'a kind of neo-Arielism, which seeks to posit again literature and literary intellectuals [...] as the bearers of Latin America's cultural originality and possibility' (Beverley and Sanders, 1997, p. 255). The question is, according to Mignolo, 'who is talking about what, where, and why', because:

[o]ne is the political agenda of those of us (an empty category to be filled) born in North or South America [...] but writing and teaching *here* in the United States [...] The other issue is the agenda of those (an empty category to be filled) born or writing *there* in [...] South America who are struggling to resist modern colonization, including the academic one from *here*. (1993, p. 122)

According to Mignolo, local circumstances produce different politics, but there's no privileged cultural position nor social condition nor ontological status of any kind that determines the production of knowledge. Knowledge is produced in the tension exerted upon the epistemological subject by the disciplinary framework and the hermeneutic context of needs and desires within which s/he is speaking. Many Latin Americans are caught between the shifting articulation here/there, an interstitial and exogenous position in which they become Latin Americanists, professional intellectuals specialized in constructing a doxy on Latin America. A contradictory condition indeed, as 'border academics, Latinamericanists in-between, members of diasporas, nomads, who travel the geographic and cultural space of Latin America searching for a discursive cartography, catching a glimpse of infinite possibilities to reread a past that we feel belongs to us from afar' (Román de la Campa, 1996, p. 701). For this diasporic intellectual the question is how not to become a neocolonial intermediary between subaltern Latin America and the hegemonic metropolis, without essentializing any social, cultural, national, ethnic, gendered, historical or regional position.

A similar operation to Achugar's is undertaken by Nelly Richard, who formulates a more sophisticated criticism of US Latin Americanism as an 'instrument of academic knowledge' about Latin America, merely its 'object of study [and] field of experience.' Richard's criticism rotates around the institution of an asymmetrical division of intellectual work according to which US Latin Americanism monopolizes the production of representational and theoretical knowledge over the material, experiential reality of Latin America. Hence, Latin America becomes 'the primary (non mediated) source of action and imagination, struggle and resistance [...] that supplies the metropolitan intellectual with a experiential popular surplus which he translates into solidary struggle, political commitment, and testimonial denunciation' (Richard, 1997, p. 6). The fetishiza-

tion of Latin America as a privileged epistemological locus and ethical reservoir implies its correlative containment as a pre-logical time-space ('a pre- or sub-theoretical state of consciousness') that reproduces and reaffirms, surreptitiously, the uncontested authority of a presumably de-centered center, and thus keeps Latin Americans marginalized 'from the battles over the metropolitan codes that decree and sanction the meaning of Latin America' (Richard, 1997, p. 8). Probably there is no better description of this objectification than the following definition of Latin Americanism provided by Moreiras:

Latin Americanism is the sum of knowledge, received opinions, working hypotheses and scientific methodologies which conform for Western learning a whole discursive-representational apparatus over the geopolitical block known today as Latin America. [...] If there's no representational nature before representation, we could affirm, somewhat radically, that Latin America only exists as an object of Latin Americanism. (Moreiras, 1998, pp. 48–49)

Is it possible, as Achugar suggests, to subvert this dichotomous power relation by merely resorting through to a geopolitical enunciatory positioning located in Latin America? To reclaim the epistemological advantage of a discourse produced in Latin America is to imply their fetishization and the mystification of the ambiguously hegemonic position of the intellectual as intermediary between local readers and the transnational market. A compelling critique of US Latin Americanism is only legitimate on condition of a concomitant problematization of homemade Latin Americanism. The epistemological borders don't disappear because the intellectual happens to write from Montevideo instead of Pittsburgh. On the other hand, is Richard's Latin American brand of 'cultural criticism' a more grounded alternative to Latin American cultural studies? It is true that Achugar and Richard practice a kind of transversal transdisciplinarity, 'midway between the essay, deconstructive analysis, and theoretical criticism', and 'blend those different registers in order to examine the intersections between social discourses, cultural symbolizations, power formations, and subject constructions' (Richard, 1998, pp. 142–143). Richard is absolutely right in remarking that the academic origins of US Latin American cultural studies feed its tendency to institutionalization, in contrast to 'cultural criticism', and I definitely applaud her insistence on making critical practices a political intervention. However, I sincerely doubt that her conception of practice as 'a strategy of theoretical-discursive intervention', 'a critical disassembling and re-articulation of sense in order to examine the local and specific connections that link signs to their politico-institutional networks', will make for an effectively political intervention, beyond her reductive conception of politics to the discursive realm (Richard, 1998, pp. 12, 144). Post-structuralism taught us how to read the discursive texture of power, but power has other, more brutal dimensions. We need to go beyond discourse and culture in order to re-articulate the political, the economic, and the social to the texture of the cultural.

A possible way out of this stalemate is probably Mignolo's call for a break with modern Western epistemology, which is based upon the instrumental relationship between a subject of knowledge and his object of study (1998a, p. 115). In order to do that, he proposes a 'border epistemology', an epistemology that would work *simultaneously* within modern Western *civilization* and its

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