

POSTSTRUCTURAL SAND CASTLES  
IN LATIN AMERICAN POSTCOLONIAL  
THEORY TODAY

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*LATIN AMERICANISM*. By Román De la Campa. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Pp. 223. \$18.95 paper.)

*MODERNISMO, MODERNITY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE*. By Cathy L. Jade. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. Pp. 293. \$30.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

*LOCAL HISTORIES/GLOBAL DESIGNS: COLONIALITY, SUBALTERN KNOWLEDGES, AND BORDER THINKING*. By Walter D. Mignolo. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. Pp. 371. \$19.95 paper.)

*RECLAIMING IDENTITY: REALIST THEORY AND THE PREDICAMENT OF POSTMODERNISM*. Edited by Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Pp. 354. \$24.95 paper.)

*PROCEED WITH CAUTION WHEN ENGAGED BY MINORITY WRITING IN THE AMERICAS*. By Doris Sommer. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. 356. \$55.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

One can safely say that postcolonial and poststructural theory continues to have a huge impact on Latin American and U.S. multicultural studies today. The question is, does the cross-pollination of theory help in understanding our contemporary multicultural reality of the Americas more deeply? In partial response to this question, I will explore variously the critics and their five recent contributions to the field of Latin American and U.S. multicultural scholarship listed at the outset of this review essay.

*Overview*

In *Proceed with Caution When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*, Doris Sommer explores a variety of writers over a long stretch of time: from Walt Whitman to Julio Cortázar, from El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega of the sixteenth century to Mario Vargas Llosa, from Rigoberta Menchú to Toni Morrison. Here Sommer carves out a transnational framework for approach-

ing the literature of the Americas while simultaneously paying attention to a given text's specific location within history and the social polity. In this fashion, her ultimate goal is to formulate a theoretical approach that contributes "toward a rhetoric of particularism" (p. x).

To this end, Sommer's analytic frame sets out to situate the social and historical locus of enunciation of "minor texts" to show how such texts incorporate rhetorical structures that prevent their mastery by outsiders. In *Proceed with Caution*, she identifies the intended readers of these texts not as "co-conspirators or allies in a shared culture" (p. 9) but as Western outsiders who seek to turn the "minority subjects" into the fetishized object of a conquering gaze. Thus with respect to Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, Sommer finds her "being coy on the witness stand, exercising control over apparently irrelevant information, perhaps to produce her own strategic version of truth" (p. 115). In this case, as in others such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Walt Whitman, the non-Guatemalan Western outsider becomes the target of what is traditionally identified as the silent third world Other. Sommer demonstrates how Menchú skillfully provides information and then elides it with strategically placed silences. She engages the reader "without surrendering herself" (p. 4). Menchú thus fends off the totalizing impulse of the ethnographic Western reader who would otherwise mistake the individual—Rigoberta Menchú—for a voice that speaks to the truths of her people and Latin America generally.

Sommer similarly uncovers the particular rhetorical strategy used by Mario Vargas Llosa in *The Storyteller/El hablador* to reveal how the author "stages" the movement in and out of "the slippery space" of language and identity to destabilize the meeting of mestizo and Jewish bodies and texts in Latin America (p. 269). For Sommer, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is more than a text that has become part of the aesthetic patrimony of Latin America via its multiple translations (notably one by Jorge Luis Borges). It exemplifies the creation of an "aesthetics of liberal democracy" by a poet (p. 39). *Leaves of Grass* provided an antidote against divisive particularities and inequalities not with words but within the "gaps that Whitman left between the fragments" (p. 39). Sommer's reading of the more contemporary Robert Young film adaptation, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, shows how a text can perform a "pattern of refusals" inscribed in a racist Tejano justice system (p. 97). Editing techniques of fragmentation and elision set the "trap for its Anglo viewers and eludes their efforts to grasp its meaning until the end" (p. 98).

For Sommer, how these texts perform their narrative—controlling the ebb and flow of information through narrative fragmentation, parodic narrative technique, and blurring of the border between genres—becomes the degree to which they fend off or "sting" a reader's desire to master the third world subject as Other (p. 8). For example, the violent movement back and forth of forced "forgetfulness" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* becomes an act of staging the "confrontation of intimacy versus information" as well as

drawing attention to her uneasy juxtaposition of the “chronicle, personal confessions, slave narratives” (p. 161). Morrison’s text, then, prevents the reader from complete textual mastery but also thrusts a forward history of forced silence on African Americans. Sommer’s readings aim to highlight how Menchú, Morrison, Whitman, Vargas Llosa, Young and other “resistant authors” deliberately disrupt the outsider’s desire to conquer and master meaning. Sommer’s minority texts thus formally empower those kept at the textual, social, and political margins.

In *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Walter D. Mignolo similarly seeks to trace the particulars of localized knowledge and enunciating text-acts. Mignolo interviewed Latin Americans from taxi drivers to writers and politicians to show that transitional alliances and connections can be built to transcend the shortcomings of nationalist rhetoric while being located in the local and specific interests of the people. The Zapatistas are a case in point. Mignolo reads across a variety of disciplines—history, culture, and politics—as they crisscross at different moments in time and geographic space (precolonial and postcolonial as well as modern and postmodern) and crystallize into what he identifies as the “subalternization of knowledge.”

*Subalternization of knowledge* is defined as the system of understanding self and world as conceived from a resistant place. In other words, while the West imposed on the natives of the Americas a knowledge system that worked in favor of colonialism and later imperialism, these imposed ways of being and self-reflecting were not digested and internalized without resistance. Contact “from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system” led to a transcultural, subalternized knowledge system articulated from within those spaces traditionally marginalized and identified as Other. Key to this formulation is the idea, not unlike Sommer’s, of the double-voiced articulation. In Latin America, Mignolo remarks, “every act of saying is at the same time a ‘saying against’ and a ‘saying for’” (p. 25). Subalternization of knowledge results from contact and transculturation of nativist and Western systems. Identifying a text’s double-voiced articulation allows one to locate in the specific text-act how subalternization of knowledge exists at the “intersection of local histories and global designs, and at the intersection of hegemonic and subaltern grounds and undergrounds” (p. 25).

Like Sommer, Mignolo sets up his project against poststructuralist theory. Both view poststructuralist theorists as using the third world subject and text as a static object that articulates a theoretical difference at a distant remove from the local social, political, and cultural discourses that shape individual Latin American bodies and texts. Mignolo seeks to infuse the local back into the global by formulating a theory of Latin Americanism that arises from outside “the borders of the system” (p. 315). Subalternization of knowledge (identified as “the colonial epistemic difference”) spins out of the local and, as Mignolo amplifies, “emerges in the exteriority of the mod-

ern/colonial world" (p. 315). New ways of localized enunciating and thinking could only be obtained through a localized reading of the responses—"the colonial epistemic difference"—to historical, political, and social circumstances that mark the Latino and Latina and Chicano and Chicana body.

Mignolo views globalization as a contemporary incarnation of colonialism. Just as history has proved that the West turned to the Americas for raw materials and labor to exploit, globalization—in the form of capital but also poststructural theory in the academy—seeks to suck the life out of "local histories" (p. ix). Viewed from this angle, such a poststructural theory is clearly obsolete. Mignolo addresses the characterization of the West-as-center and the third-world-as-periphery, emphasizing that in today's world where the peripheries are now in the centers (third world subjects inhabit first world centers), the local space is not to be found only across bodies of water. Erstwhile Western centers are now filled with bodies and texts traditionally identified as inhabiting the geopolitical margins. Subalternization of knowledge is the process of adapting, rejecting, integrating, and confronting "two kinds of local histories displayed in different spaces and times across the planet" to produce what Mignolo calls "the coloniality of power" (p. ix).

In his formulation of the local/global subalternization of knowledge, Mignolo turns to the example of language. He celebrates the multiple-voiced linguistic act—such as Caribbean creole and Chicano and Chicana *caló* that exemplify a localized celebration of the impure perspective (tainted English, French, or Spanish) that speaks to a subalternized epistemology. The three languages that Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa uses in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*—English, Spanish, and Nahuatl—represent what Mignolo identifies as "a new way of languaging" that celebrates worldviews suppressed by monolingual ideologies (p. 228). Nahuatl takes center stage, no longer a displaced language. Similarly, Spanish is no longer "displaced by the increasing hegemony of the colonial languages of the modern period (English, German, and French)" (p. 237).

Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff further exemplifies for Mignolo how such "polylanguaging" threatens to disrupt essential cultural codes of national identity based on artificially imposed narratives of pure (French) language. Cliff's creole came out of the knowledge system that deliberately anchored language and identity to territory but as attuned to a localized history and culture that resulted from contact. In this way, the act of speaking creole is linked to Créolité, the knowledge system defined "by a mode of being rather than by a way of looking" (p. 242). Thinking and writing in a subaltern language like creole is therefore an expression of being and not a theoretical construct. Polylanguaging is an act of mapping, producing, and distributing a local, subaltern knowledge system. Cliff's creole and Anzaldúa's plurilanguaging, then, are acts of "changing linguistic cartographies" and imply "a reordering of epistemology" (p. 247). By speaking in

multiple registers, Cliff and Anzaldúa denaturalize the tie “between language and territories” that traditionally oppresses the subaltern subject (p. 229). Moreover, Mignolo asserts, their celebration of the linguistic fractures become texts with the power to transform everyday political and social practices as margins re-form centers of empire. He contends, finally, that “the idea of national languaging and, indirectly, of national literacies and literatures in Europe as well as in the United States” is being challenged by today’s migratory movements toward those areas (p. 236). This trend leads to a new way of thinking about how “linguistic maps, literary geographies, and cultural landscapes are being repainted” (p. 236).

In *Latin Americanism*, Román De la Campa expresses a like interest in identifying the local articulations of Latin American knowledge and its power to transform the cultural, social, economic, and political reality. In his formulation of Latin Americanism, De la Campa also keeps poststructuralist theory at arm’s length as “a paradigm committed to showing the artifice implicit in all historical constructs” (p. 122). He thus questions deeply its application to understanding Latin American studies. For De la Campa, poststructuralist theory acts to erase local difference in Latin America, displacing the Latin American text, body, and subject to an obscure exegetical never-never land, and it credits Western theorists like Paul de Man or Jacques Derrida for theories already articulated by Jorge Luis Borges and other Latin Americans.

Given the language De la Campa uses (one of “ludic uncertainty”) and his assertions, despite his view of poststructuralist theory as having “reached a point of exhaustion” (p. vii), he nonetheless acknowledges its impact on his and other Latin Americanists’ theory. De la Campa does not wish to turn literary deconstruction into what he calls “a *bête noir*.” Rather, he seeks to identify its “blind spots within Latin Americanism” (p. viii). To this end, De la Campa explores Borges as well as other Latin American “native figures” such as Augusto César Sandino, Julio Cortázar, and Che Guevara, whose texts are “unprotected by literary and political canons.” They allow him to develop an analytic frame for a wide-ranging and “hopefully freer sense of textual historicity” (p. ix). Each of these author’s “unprotected” texts highlights the “production and articulation of Latin America as a constellation of discursive constructs” (p. viii). Like the works by the authors cited in De la Campa’s work (Gayatri Spivak, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Homi Bhabha, and Judith Butler, to name a few), language—its figures of speech, construction, mode, and so on—ultimately translates into how one relates to the world and how the world is related to one. But if reality is a text, then as De la Campa proposes, language can also be considered to be “rhetorical praxis and agency” (p. vii).

From this standpoint, Borges’s uniqueness as a writer for De la Campa “is his Latin American provenance, a historical sense of political and intellectual liminality not devoid of a sense of epistemic violence that is now

observed on a global scale" (p. 34). Moreover, Borges's revolutionizing of "cerebral essays and detective narratives riddled with epistemological twists filled with their own sense of violence" ultimately speaks not to his uniqueness as an individual but to his experience of the deeper contradictions that inform a Latin American culture "so laden with ludic uncertainty" (p. 35).

De la Campa investigates Latin American writers and theorists (including Caribbeanists Edouard Glissant and Benítez-Rojo) whose text-acts reach beyond their formal boundaries to transform their everyday reality. On one occasion, De la Campa celebrates Latin American critic Angel Rama's posthumously published *The Lettered City* (translated in 1996) as a text that addresses "a broad spectrum of cultural and social articulations" (p. 121). Rama turned to themes and techniques seen in Modernista poetry and later in more contemporaneous novels that rupture master narratives (constituting epistemic breaks) and destabilize one's understanding of structures that naturalize hierarchies of difference in colonial relations.

With similar energy, De la Campa turns to analyzing how the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua resulted from reading Rubén Darío not as an apolitical aesthete but as a political icon (p. 40). In examining Julio Cortázar's fragmented, episodic, and factual-fictional "Apocalypse at Solentiname," De la Campa concludes that it is an "experiment to bring revolution to the world of art" (p. 46). Cortázar's text epitomizes the Latin American resistant text through its "self-reflexive fusion of technological novelty, Sandinista spiritualism, and his own memory of politically motivated violence in Latin American liberation movements" (p. 50).

On another occasion, De la Campa identifies Che Guevara's body as a text that acquired political meaning leading to revolutionary transformation as it was moved from Bolivia to Cuba (p. 36). In so doing, De la Campa locates the text within the interplay of political and economic intersections that "deconstruction generally dissolves or invalidates" (p. 40). Thus for De la Campa, textual production and the subsequent transformation of reality does not have to take only the forms of writing and reading. The dissemination of resistant knowledge can take many forms. Finally, De la Campa uses these works as examples of texts in which the "uncertain interplay" between aesthetics and epistemology (what he calls "episthetics") intersect in Latin America to inform and incite everyday revolution and transformation (p. vii).

Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García's edited volume of essays entitled *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* uses Satya Mohanty's post-positivist realist theory as a springboard for reclaiming identity as both real (essential characterizations) and constructed (series of signifiers that assign meaning to bodies).<sup>1</sup> The essays in this vol-

1. See the initial formulation of this theory in Mohanty's, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," *Cultural Critique* 24 (1993):41-80.

ume hail from a range of disciplines—literary criticism, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences—and examine an array of texts that include Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, to name a few.

The postpositivist realists aim to couple a deconstructionist and an essentialist mode of understanding identity in the Americas (mostly North America) as unique to localized social, economic, gendered forces and having the possibility of reaching beyond the local. For example, according to the theorists of postpositivist realism, there *can* be an essential, say, female identity. Thus an individual experiences the world according to his or her perception of himself or herself and interaction with a world where opportunities and resources are distributed according to being identified as a type: black, white, or brown and either woman or man. At the same time, although Moya and the other contributors to *Reclaiming Identity* believe that identity determines how we experience the world in specific ways (hence their critical stance toward poststructuralist theory that proposes the indeterminacy of identity), they are careful to declare that they are “not naive empiricists” (p. 2). Thus while they posit a localized experience of the social, political, and other arenas, they believe that knowledge of reality is not objective. Like the poststructuralists, they too believe that all observation and knowledge—and therefore reality—is mediated.

For example, in “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics,” Linda Martín Alcoff does not want “to deny the constitutive impact of theory and social context on truth” (Moya and Hames-García, p. 315). At the same time, she recognizes that “ontologies can be thought of as models of reality useful in science (or in social theory) that approximate the world as it is, thus capturing some truth about it . . .” (p. 316). And Michael Hames-García analyzes how Michael Nava’s protagonist Henry Ríos in *The Hidden Law* can both identify as gay and yet because of his identification as Chicano, simultaneously feel “*solidarity and connection* with the homophobic Chicano characters” (p. 105, emphasis in original). Post-positivist realism allows Hames-García to read Ríos’s identification sexually and racially as both “expanding one another and mutually constituting one another’s meaning” (p. 106) and as identifications that have genuine consequences. Hames-García concludes that Henry Ríos’s identity as a lawyer and a detective leads to real “consequences not only for himself and others like him but also for others who are straight and/or not Chicano” (p. 114).

Post-positivist realist theorists create a frame that identifies an essentialized identity (self-perception and perception by others) in the world—but a world filled with mediated knowledge. Yet this formulation is not simply a replaying of what Gayatri Spivak has termed *strategic essentialism*. Unlike Spivak’s model, according to postpositivist realist Linda Martín Alcoff, the new theory does not divide and distance the “‘knowing’ theorist” from the “‘unknowing’ activists who continue to believe in identity” (p. 323).

This outcome is a consequence of postpositivist realism being generated from the ground up, from “the real people,” and not from the top down, from the theorists. Moya, Hames-García, Alcoff, and the other contributors to *Reclaiming Identity* aim to speak directly from the real and not the abstract subject to maintain a direct connection with and affirmation of their socially active base of Chicanos, women, and African Americans.

Cathy Jade’s *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature* is concerned with identifying and drawing out the specific dynamics—social, racial, political—of a localized moment in Latin American cultural history. Jade anchors her local-versus-global dialectical understanding of identity and the text-act to a theory about Latin American Modernismo (unlike European Modernism) as a movement concerned both in content and form with the social, the cultural, and the political. She reads a number of early Modernistas, like Mexico’s Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, whose erotic poetic themes of beauty, goodness, and truth Jade interprets as “the fight for freedom and for the privilege of envisioning realities beyond those of established political and poetic structures and modes” (p. 29). She also explores at length Modernistas like Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, who radically altered meter and verse to highlight a supernatural coherence that would provide refuge from a chaos-filled, modernizing everyday life.

To expand the Modernista group, Jade includes Peruvian José María Eguren, Argentine Leopoldo Lugones, and Cuban José Martí. Jade views Martí’s interest in establishing an identity as a writer seeking the power to change the material conditions of the people in the face of alienating modern technology and capitalist materialism as an early Modernista move. Jade observes, “Martí tied socioeconomic and literary factors together and proposed not only a truer way of knowing but also an antidote to the excesses of modernization and North American hegemony” (p. 25). For Jade, membership in the Modernista group meant a common intellectual search to safeguard their world against marauding nascent imperialist forces. The creative act was simultaneously the political act.

For the Modernistas, poetry in particular increased the political and social consciousness of the people and ultimately affirmed nativist Latin American values because it represented a heightened form of knowledge. But as Jade shows, “*modernismo*’s optimistic worldview, formulated under the syncretic influence of the occult sciences and based upon ancient beliefs in the harmony of the universe,” no longer appeared viable after the early 1920s (p. 136).

The Modernistas had a good forty-year run from the 1870s until the 1920s. But the movement fizzled out when the overwhelming sense set in that poets and artists were no match for an industrial modernization that violently ripped apart everyday reality (as shown by World War I). Facing unfavorable odds and a sense of utter powerlessness, Modernista intellectuals and artists turned to occultist and esoteric worldviews as a way of



combating “the hegemony of the scientific and economic in modern life” (p. 3). Most of them turned to occultist sects like the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucians and embraced beliefs such as cabalism, astrology, magnetism, hypnotism, gnosticism, alchemy, and several Asian-based religions. Nor was this trend unique to the Modernistas. As Jade delineates, other periods of economic tectonic shift have resulted in a similar turn to the esoteric for answers, as with the English and German Romantics of yesterday. As Jade begins to suggest, this trend can be seen with today’s post-structuralists, who turn to highly abstract theories of the subject and reality, both of which are considered social constructs and forever undetermined because mediated through language. In the face of today’s rabid economic globalization that provokes a deep sense of powerlessness and alienation, poststructural theorists are similarly turning to what could be identified as a postmodern version of the esoteric and the irrational.

### *Critique*

A recurrently observed phenomenon is that when society is confronted with rapid and deep transformations, reason and science are widely replaced with irrational thought. Mysticism and esoteric belief systems are packaged as methods for individuals to master reality. Today, the postmodern brands of Latin American studies and U.S. multiculturalism as well as postcolonial theory in general have taken up this role. Theory becomes a substitute for genuine political activism and is packaged as empowerment to the public. A particular public is expected to use a certain theory (one of the many constantly cranked out by academics) as a means of breaking out of the prison house of language, surmounting the master narratives, and revolutionizing all spheres of life under capitalism that restrict being in the world.

With the exception of Jade, Mignolo, Sommer, De la Campa, and Moya and Hames-García et al. seek empowerment in a radically changing reality. Similar to the Latin American Modernistas, who no longer trusted grand narratives and understood reality as a series of intersecting correspondences between discourses that worked to maintain the status quo, these theorists seek to destabilize the text in order to empower “the people” and alter reality. But not unlike the Modernistas who were critical of European and U.S. technology and bourgeois materialism yet relied on them to get their books printed and sold, to travel, and to meet other intellectuals, artists, and persons of influence, these theorists are filled with deep contradictions. The Modernistas fragmented poetic form to shock and revolutionize social hierarchy, yet many of them also served as ambassadors in European capitals, set their sights on intellectual life in these urban imperialist centers, and were attuned to the latest in the European dandy look (Darío had a strong penchant for Parisian sartorial wear). They engaged in all of

this while using medieval beliefs such as occultism to fend off change and thus whistling to the tune of ideological conservatism. Postcolonial Latin American studies share the same contradictory bind: their authors promote theories aimed at radically altering a capitalist reality, yet they rely on a huge industry based materially and ideologically in that reality to promote their theories.

Theory has appeared in many guises since the ebb of structuralism, changing with every whim of intellectual fashion. But generally speaking, for theory to appear to have the power to alter social conditions, the world must be a text and the text, the world. For the authors under review here, the text-act in the form of literature is a living social text akin to a political and historical document. Their theory aims inter alia to show how literary and other texts advance or hinder a critique of racial, gendered, or sexual power relations. For Sommer, it is her identification of “minor texts” and their detainment of the reader “at the boundary between contact and conquest” that becomes an act of political mobilization (p. ix). Here, for instance, Whitman’s fragmented poetics promises to deliver “America, citizen by (free) citizen, like an infinite machine of (equal) interchangeable parts” (p. 60). Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is thus invested with the powers of a political machine, a political party rallying millions of people in the cause of equality and democracy.

Similarly, when De la Campa writes about the “articulation of Latin America as a constellation of discursive constructs” (p. viii), the world becomes a text, and textual analysis is political praxis. These theorists agree that deconstructive theory erases the local textual designs and subalternized knowledges present in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> They have therefore sought to carve paths that acknowledge, as De la Campa explains, “the local in the global; the here, the there, and the in-between loci of enunciation” (p. ix). Ultimately, however, these theorists believe that the text is a “rhetorical praxis” that can transform reality (p. vii). Hence it comes as no surprise that De la Campa identifies the Sandinista revolutionary spirit as spinning from the moment when the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan people in general reread Rubén Darío not as an apolitical aesthete but as a political icon; their “form of cultural revolution was the Sandinista’s ‘love for poetry’” (p. 40). Thus while postcolonial theorists might claim to distance their theories from post-structuralism, they ultimately must adhere to its central tenet: the political sphere and the space of cultural production overlap and are indiscernible.

2. The storytelling form of magical realism epitomizes this erasing of difference. Postcolonial theorists criticize poststructuralists for identifying magical realism as paradigmatic—or what counts as ethnically authentic—of third world literary production and epistemology. See Gayatri Spivak’s essay, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value,” in *Literary Theory Today*, edited by Peter Collier (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990). See also my forthcoming book *Rebellious Mimetics*.

They are also part of an imagined community in which a rhetorical praxis originating in postcolonial theory may convince the powerless that they can become empowered if they destabilize the master narratives that control the imagined community.

*The Postcolonial Marketplace*

It is an inescapable fact that the academy—including postcolonial Latin American and U.S. multicultural studies—exists within a capitalist marketplace. No matter how emphatically theorists announce their distancing and withdrawal from this economic framework, they must ply their trade to exist in a society in which the academy, publishing houses, and all their sources of income are governed by the market economy characteristic of capitalism. The publication of certain types of books to be eligible for tenure, the building of star departments that muster prestige to increase fund-raising capabilities, and the reproduction of theoretical legacies by making disciples out of graduate students are some of the main means open to secure one's position in an increasingly precarious economy. An aspiring academician must work with and within the machine to stay alive and must do so in conditions of the economy that are rapidly deteriorating everywhere, including the United States and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Rafael De la Campa and Walter Mignolo both reflect on the Latin American scholar's position within the marketplace: forced to use English instead of Spanish to be marketable. As De la Campa insists, "Their academic future demands it" (pp. 15–16). Given the impact of increasing pauperization, unemployment, and underemployment in Latin America, these theorists have moved to the United States, where in cities like Los Angeles and New York they outnumber all such theorists in Latin America. This outcome leads De la Campa to declare, "More than a field of studies, or the literary articulation of a hybrid culture, Latin American literature and criticism are perhaps best understood as a transnational discursive community with a significant market for research and sales in the industrial capitals of the world" (p. 1). In sum, Mignolo, Sommer, De la Campa, Moya, Hames-García, and their colleagues are compelled to work in a declining market economy that governs the academy and society as a whole. They must formulate theories that in today's academic marketplace must yield to a social or political reading of textual production that claims the capacity to replace real political action with its textual ersatz. Thus to produce a marketable commodity, theory must claim a power to transform reality through the textual and the theoretical and to empower people.

3. This practice recalls the Modernistas, who secured their incomes as journalists, civil servants, ambassadors, or lower-ranking diplomats while using esoteric beliefs as a critique and system of counter-knowledge to imperialist materialism and technology.

The contradiction arises again. For all of these theorists' talk of empowerment within globalization, their work cannot help but mirror the financial speculation taking place in today's gangrening economic system. Like the currently declining capitalism that both creates a society of spectacle and uses speculation massively to prevent the fragile spectacle from crashing back to reality, Latin American and multicultural theorists must pump more and more theory to hold on to their positions in academia and the sand-castle theoretical frames they have built to obtain their status.

### *Post-Structures?*

Central to these theorists' articulation of subalternized knowledges is the impulse to reveal how the local structures make particular texts—the imagined community—unique. Sommer identifies a “rhetoric of particularism” that contours the local to counter the outsider's desire to master and universalize nativist (or “minor,” as she calls them) text-acts of the Americas (p. x). In her opinion, this locally based resistant narrative has the pragmatic effect of promoting a liberal education wherein readers become “sensitive to textual markers of the political differences that keep democracy interesting and honest” (p. 4). Certainly, Gabriel García Márquez's skies with snow angels or rain-blossoming flowers should not be the only stand-in for artistic, exoticized expression of an entire continent. And assuredly, charting the local can open readers' and students' eyes to a Latin America that is complexly layered and not simply a sign that refers to so-called third worldness. But for Sommer and others, magical realism merely indicates a simplified sign of a text that critiques or buys into neocolonial discourse. Its own complex expressive modes are lost, and complexity is given over to reductive declarations: the world is the text—again.

For these theorists, identifying patterns and structures would be equivalent to believing in a reality that is objectively out there. So for them, structural analysis is anathema. Yet the contradictory bind surfaces again. Sommer, Mignolo, De la Campa, and Moya and Hames-García et al. are obliged to recognize patterns and structures even when they posit a subalternized and localized text-act that, they assure, can resist and transform master narratives. When Sommer sets up an analytic method to articulate a rhetorical specificity that identifies the intentional silences in her so-called minor texts, she references the paragon of structuralism, French narratologist Gerard Genette. Thus in order to argue for the power of the literary text to disallow interpretation, she is forced to identify a recognizable and shared rhetorical system: “The challenge for readers of ‘minority’ literature is to develop that system to include tropes of multicultural communication that block sharing” (p. 24). Yet the poststructuralists' world-is-text theory equates text-act with social-political-act: to write or to read the revolutionary text is tantamount to undertaking the revolution. But when Sommer informs her

readers that Rigoberta Menchú strategically denies full mastery of her text/ life and identifies this approach as a form of “respectful, nontotalizing politics,” Sommer is compelled to identify essential rhetorical structures that make up the testimonial act (p. 137). So for the local to be articulated, Sommer and other theorists must fall back on the very procedure they claim to have banished: structural analysis, which allows one to identify, compare, and contrast independent features and even appeal to a comprehensive analysis based on universal systems of knowledge.

As mentioned, these Latin Americanist and postcolonial theorists rely on a conception of language and the world that reads all texts—social, political, literary, even the body—as effective acts. When Mignolo discusses the U.S. territorial expansion into Mexico’s northern territories in 1848, then into the Caribbean between 1898 and 1959, he identifies the link between “territorial configurations” and “imperial languages and linguistic (colonial and national) maps” (p. 249). The equation of reality with text has been present in one guise or another in the different versions of poststructuralist theory. As Steve Woolgar, a constructivist-relativist sociologist of science, has explained, poststructuralism “is consistent with the position of the idealist wing of ethnomethodology that there is no reality independent of the words (texts, signs, documents, and so on) used to apprehend it. In other words, reality is constituted in and through discourse.”<sup>4</sup>

The denial of an extratextual reality is counterintuitive—no one in everyday life confuses words with their referents, no one believes that the word *salt* will make his or her meat taste better—but it is also oxymoronic, literally pointedly foolish. If the world is a text, or if as Jacques Derrida claimed, “There is no outside-the-text,” all but a few sciences would be superfluous: grammar or linguistics would suffice for humans to know or to investigate how all matter functions—from atoms and subatomic particles to human brains and societies. Yet postmodern and postcolonial theorists need to posit this assumption as an incontestable postulate to be able to claim that the “revolutionizing” of a text is identical to the “revolutionizing” of minds and society. Hence a postmodernist or a postcolonialist critic is by definition a revolutionary.

Thus for Mignolo, speaking in polylingual “other tongues” (compare with Alfred Arteaga) is an act of articulating an “other thinking” that has as a matter of consequence the power to reclaim the colonized territories. Mignolo cites Cherríe Moraga’s bilingual writing in *The Last Generation* as another case in point: “Bi-linguaging is no longer idiomatic (Spanish, English) but is also ethnic, sexual, and gendered. Spanish and English ‘recede’ as national languages, as the language of a nation called ‘Queer Aztlán’ arises” (p. 269). But when Mignolo identifies a poetics of Queer Aztlán and

4. Steve Woolgar, “On the Alleged Distinction between Discourse and Praxis,” *Social Studies of Science* 16 (1986):309–17.

remarks that it is irrelevant that both English and Spanish are “hegemonic languages of the empire and the nation” and that their use is “unavoidable due to globalization and the consolidation of hegemonic languages” (p. 269), he must base such considerations on the identification of essential linguistic structures. According to Mignolo, “linguistic maps are attached not only to literary geographies but also to the production and distribution of knowledge, changing linguistic cartographies implies a reordering of epistemology” (p. 247). In other words, Mignolo (like Sommer) must both acknowledge structures and at the same time deny them.

*Social versus Empirical*

Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García and their contributors are aware of this double bind and therefore apply Satya Mohanty’s theory of postpositivist realism to their examination of identity. Hence they acknowledge directly the possibility of objective knowledge. But because they maintain a constructivist stand, their theory still articulates objective knowledge as framed and determined by language, the individual, and the social. As Moya notes, postpositivist realists believe that “linguistic structures both shape our perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world” (p. 12). Consequently also, one can identify essential characteristics that define a person as woman and Chicana, yet one must bear in mind the “different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest” that inform such an understanding of identity (p. 13). Thus although Moya puts forward arguments in favor of objective knowledge, she ultimately falls back on the relativist and constructivist notion that “knowledge is not disembodied, or somewhere ‘out there’ to be had, but rather that it comes into being in and through embodied selves. In other words, humans generate knowledge, and our ability to do so is causally dependent on both our cognitive capacities and our historical and social locations” (p. 18). The key words here are “causally dependent.”

Postpositivist realism, then, is not so much a new theory of knowledge as it is poststructuralism wearing a new sartorial cut. Linda Martín Alcoff’s essay “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics” serves as a case in point. Here Alcoff, like Moya, wants to have her cake and eat it too. Applying the eclectic procedure of her fellow postpositivist realists, she acknowledges the real existence of reality and the objectivity of truth, yet contradictorily, she does not want “to deny the constitutive impact of theory and social context on truth” (p. 315). This contradictory stance allows Alcoff to posit eclectically the existence of identities as textual or social or personal constructs capable of transforming a world that is really out there. Hence she can conclude with this general methodological remark: “Ontologies can be thought of as models of reality useful in science (or in social theory) that approximate the world as it is, thus capturing some truth about it, without

enjoying a one-to-one correspondence with categories of entities as they exist completely independently of human languages or human practices" (p. 316). After making this observation, Alcoff reiterates and adopts the fashionable relativist clause holding that "knowledge claims are contingent on theories that are themselves contingent in the sense that they might have developed otherwise" (p. 317).

### *Conclusion*

Poststructural and postcolonial ideas and theoretical constructions have flooded the U.S. academic market for so many years now that any alternative to them seems almost impossible. Any attempt to reintroduce in literary studies and other related fields of inquiry a minimum of logical or scientific strategies is shortly met with aversion or contempt. The self-proclaimed progressive or even radical character of postcolonial and post-structuralist studies is brandished as a weapon to belittle and block research that seeks to understand the actual functioning of texts as texts, their modes of production, and their modes of reception and is used to chastise that research for being utterly devoid of an activist political and social agenda.

Some recollection of the facts is in order. Since its origins, Marxism has been committed to fostering the radical (as opposed to partial) transformation of society in each country and throughout the world by means of the self-liberating action of the working class organized with its own totally independent organizations (trade unions as well as political parties nationally and worldwide). This program has been distorted and even turned into its opposite in the myriad guises of reformist and counter-revolutionary policies adopted in the labor movement, even in the name of Marxism, throughout the twentieth century. Most likely as a result of this failure, it has become fashionable in academia to regard classrooms, textbooks, essays, and treatises as the ersatz means of "empowering" and "liberating" certain members of society—women, gays, lesbians, Chicanas, Chicanos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and a long list of others—in lieu of actually mobilizing an autonomously organized youth and labor force. But teaching, research, and writing do not necessarily have to be regarded in that fashion. Other goals are possible and even desirable.

To acknowledge the significance of structure is not to sell out. In the field of Latin American literary analysis, for example, hypothesizing and then testing to see how various storytelling structures work to convey meaning can provide a model that others in the field can build on. This is not to say that objective analysis is foolproof, only that certain basic patterns exist that we can identify as structures and use to build, accumulate, replace, or modify hypotheses with a view to interpreting texts with a more solid understanding of them. Such inquiry might produce a new theory of how texts convey meaning—what that meaning is in its diverse layers of com-

plexity and how that meaning is received in the various sociohistorical circumstances. Or it might partially overlap with older theories, but there is the basic understanding that the investigation fulfills the criteria of scientific reasoning (among them, coherence and documented evidence). We can determine, for instance, how García Márquez, Cortázar, and Borges have utilized and modified genres and storytelling techniques used by others in the Western literary canon as well as how they have altered structures to work against existing canons. For example, a “local reading” of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would end up interpreting it simply as an allegory of imperialism and foreign hegemony that takes Macondo into Latin American modernity, which is tantamount to reducing the complex layers that exist within its pages. Forcing the literary text to correspond to an a priori agenda causes readers to reduce the text to a singular message instead of opening the door to engaging its rich complexity. Close readings of texts and identification of their essential structures or basic patterns can offer new ways of asking large questions about those texts, their authors, and their readers. Finally, Sommer’s caveat that “universal meaning will erase local cultural difference” (p. ix) is possibly but not necessarily so.

I do not propose isolation. We need dialogue across disciplines. In literature, for example, the insights procured by philosophical, social, historical, anthropological, psychoanalytic, and other disciplines may contribute to a better understanding of the texts being scrutinized. But from the perspective of literary analysis and theory, they are ancillary, not substitutes.

My observations here about today’s Latin American postcolonial and multiethnic studies—their attempt simultaneously to reject and finally embrace relativist and constructivist poststructuralism—are meant to direct scholarly attention to how theory radically confuses the act of social and textual inquiry with wishful thinking and the spurious application of a political agenda. To reiterate: while knowledge is fallible and operates though a trial-and-error method, it is a system that relies on the basic understanding that an objective reality exists that can be known and on which we can perform changes. It is the role of the university to increase and to divulge such knowledge, and it is the role of the organizations built by the workers to mobilize the millions of people needed to abolish the racism, sexism, homophobia, oppression, and exploitation that exist in every country. Theorizing a “subalternization of knowledge” and identifying the “minor texts” that detain readers “at the boundary between contact and conquest” will do little to transform the real social circumstances that determine the life of workers and campesinos, women, ethnic minority groups, gays and lesbians, and others. Simply put, we scholars are accountable for what we do and say. We need to develop theories and analysis that others may verify or refute in order to build productively the field of Latin American and U.S. multicultural studies.