

*Modernity's First Born:
Latin America and
Postcolonial Transformation*

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THERE IS CONSIDERABLE resistance to the idea of Latin American postcoloniality. How and on what basis can we establish links between Latin America and other colonized regions? Can a word such as "colonialism" really refer to the historical experience of Latin America? We are told that Latin America is different, and particularly that the features of its colonization from 1492 are different from British imperialism from 1757. They occurred, says Santiago Colas, "at different historical moments, the colonizers belonged to different nations and to different classes within those nations, and the nations in turn occupied different international positions. Moreover, the 'distant territories' were geographically distinct, the 'implantations' were accomplished through different financial and technical means, and the inhabitants had developed distinct social and cultural habits" (383). To this I would add the radically different institutional location of literary study in English and Spanish cultures (see Baldick; Viswanathan).

So Latin America is under threat from a new colonizing movement called "colonial and postcolonial discourse," yet another subjection, it would seem, to foreign formations and epistemologies from the English speaking centres of global power. I want to suggest, however, that an obsessive fear of the word "postcolonial" is misplaced. There may be good reason for fearing the hegemonic effects of new global discourses, but if we forget for a minute that the term appears to be one more in a long line of "posts" and attempt to understand the significance of colonization and its postcolonial engagements, we may discover that Latin America has given ample evidence of its postcoloniality

long before the emergence of “colonial and postcolonial discourse” from the metropolitan academy.

The problem with the debate on postcolonialism in Latin America is that it has been skewed from the beginning by a rather eccentric view of postcolonialism, largely resting on the assumption of its emergence from poststructuralism, which has led to an understandable resistance to its neo-hegemonic discursive character. A debate in the *Latin American Research Review* in 1993 illustrates both how a limited definition of postcolonial theory has been readily accepted, and how questions about its validity have arisen. The use of the phrase “colonial and postcolonial discourse” itself indicates the extent to which the historical event of colonialism, its discursive machinery, and postcolonial engagements with it have been blurred.

The “field” or “movement,” it is assumed, emerged in the 1980s from a dissatisfaction with previous approaches to colonial analysis. Patricia Seed’s review article in 1991 which stimulated this debate, sees postcolonial discourse as synonymous with the colonial discourse theory initiated by Edward Said. In addition, she claims the interest in the textual and discursive aspects of colonialism is a direct inheritance of poststructuralism. But not only should Said’s own work be distinguished from poststructuralism (see Said, *World*; Ashcroft, “Conversation”), this privileging of colonial discourse theory initiated by his *Orientalism* mis-represents the very complex emergence of postcolonial studies over several decades. Postcolonial analysis, even in its most overtly theoretical form, has been a function of the activity of writers and critics since the nineteenth century, burgeoning in the work of Frantz Fanon and other intellectuals writing in the wake of independence.

Hernán Vidal’s stubbornly ethnocentric contention that the proliferation of literary criticism in Latin America “saw the importation of North American New Criticism, Russian Formalism, German Phenomenology and French Structuralism” (115) demonstrates very clearly the perceived threat to Latin American intellectual integrity posed by outside critical movements. Such a fear appears itself to emerge from a tendency to homogenize the complex range of social experiences co-existing on the

continent. Outlining two strands of literary criticism which he calls "technocratic criticism" and "culturally oriented criticism" (116), Vidal sees the emergence of "colonial and postcolonial discourse" as the creation of a category of research which attempts to endow these two approaches "with a degree of affinity that they have not previously had" (116).

However, this can be understood in another way. The employment of "technocratic" criticism is a clear example of the tendency of colonized peoples to appropriate the formations, discourses, and theoretical strategies of a dominant discourse in making their voice heard. Such a process of appropriation has a long history in Latin American cultural production. Contemporary postcolonial criticism is not a product of the 1980s, the decade in which it began to become more fully described, but a consequence of many decades of postcolonial writing in the former British and French colonies resulting in an uneasy and sometimes fractious alliance among such fields as Commonwealth literary studies, Black Studies, and the emergent colonial discourse theory.

If we take the position that rather than a product of the experience of colonized peoples in the French and English speaking world, postcolonialism is the discourse of the colonized, that it does not mean "after colonialism" since it is colonialism's interlocutor and antagonist from the moment of colonization, then "postcolonial discourse" can be seen to emerge from the creative and theoretical production of colonized societies themselves. This averts the problems raised by the movement towards a new critical orthodoxy resulting from the expropriation of the field by contemporary centres of academic power. If, rather than a new hegemonic field, we see the postcolonial as a way of talking about the political and discursive strategies of colonized societies, then we may more carefully view the various forms of anti-systemic operations within the global world system.

Postcolonialism is generated by a simple realization: that the effect of the colonizing process over individuals, over culture and society throughout Europe's domain was vast, and produced consequences as complex as they are profound. Not all post-

colonial discourse is anti-colonial, nor can it ever, in any of its various forms, dispense with that comparatively simple moment of history which began to churn its social consequences around the world. These consequences have long been the subject of attention by Latin American historians and critics. Walter Mignolo, ostensibly rejecting postcolonialism, cites the postcolonial critique of Edmundo O'Gorman in *The Invention of America* which demonstrated that "language is not the neutral tool of an honest desire to tell the truth . . . but an instrumental tool for constructing history and inventing realities" (122). Similarly Mignolo cites Angel Rama's *La ciudad letrada* which offers a theory about the control, domination, and power of alphabetic writing (122). "O'Gorman and Rama exemplify the perspective of social scientists and humanists located in and speaking from the Third World. They are in some sense contemporary examples of the 'intellectual other'" (123). Mignolo's complaint is that O'Gorman did first what Said and Tzvetan Todorov did two decades later. O'Gorman and Rama were already, several decades ago, critiquing a key feature of colonial discourse: the power of language to construct and dominate the world of the colonized.

Mignolo is correct in suggesting that postcolonialism is not a child of poststructuralism conceived in the metropolitan academy for the benefit of an annoyingly ungrateful postcolonial world. It is born in the struggle of colonized intellectuals to appropriate the discursive tools of imperial discourse and to interpolate their own realities and cultural activities into the global arena. The examples of O'Gorman and Rama could be multiplied many times over. Postcolonial discourse is significant because it reveals the extent to which the historical condition of colonization has led to a certain political, intellectual, and creative dynamic in the postcolonial societies with which it engages.

So, we see that objections to postcolonial analysis have been based on a limited and academically defensive view of the discourse, and that postcolonial analyses have been a feature of Latin American intellectual life at least since the 1950s. But there remains a strong belief in the essential difference of Latin

American postcoloniality even in those who favour its approach. Santiago Colas has adapted the theory of ideology developed by Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek to define the ideology of Latin American postcolonial culture ("Creole"). But how identifying, how distinct is this ideology? Is the difference of Latin America more a function of desire than reality?

Although Žižek's notion of ideology is not as different from Louis Althusser's as he would like to believe, the explanation of the function of ideology as "not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic real kernel" (384), does provide a useful entry to Latin American postcolonial culture. This functions, according to Colas, "as an ideology that converts the persistence of colonial relations and its effects . . . into the precondition for the articulation of a nonmetropolitan identity. The culture then represses this conversion, leaving that identity seemingly self-constituted and self-sufficient—in a word, independent" (384). According to Colas the production of ideology in Latin America is driven by "the unconscious desire for the persistence of colonial relations in terms both of dependence on the former colonial or imperial power and of social inequality within the new nation" (385). In effect, Colas has provided a theory of ideology which is not limited to Latin America as he claims, but in fact astutely assesses the complex structure of colonial relations in all settler colonies. If we see that the postcolonial begins from the moment of colonization, then we understand "the unconscious desire for the persistence of colonial relations" and the conscious desire for separation and independence, are two positions which can exist side by side in any colonized space, but in the settler colony may so overlap that they can become subject positions adopted by the same subject. Perhaps inadvertently, Colas has demonstrated one way in which the inclusion of Latin America can begin to transform the field of postcolonial studies. The complexity of Latin American postcolonial society, far from lending itself to the concept of some Latin American essence, provides the ground for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of postcolonial relations throughout the world.

I Latin America, Colonialism, and Modernity

The most energetic debate on the subject of Latin America and postcolonialism concerns the character and antiquity of the historical condition of colonization. This is where the inclusion of America not only widens the scope of postcolonial theory but demonstrates how deeply colonial discourse is rooted in global culture. I consider this issue in response to a complaint made by Santiago Colas about the absence of Spanish texts from *The Empire Writes Back* and his questioning of its assertion that a discussion of the literatures of former British colonies may be “of interest and relevance” to the literatures of former Spanish colonies. Colas rightly points out that the developments in former Spanish colonies may be “of interest and relevance” to the study of English postcolonial culture and indeed, as he says, “may fundamentally change understandings of that culture” (383). Indeed, Latin America fundamentally changes our view of the postcolonial. The antiquity and character of its colonization, the longstanding reality of its hybridized cultures, the “continental” sense of difference which stems from a shared colonial language, the intermittent emergence of contestatory movements in cultural production—all radically widen the scope of postcolonial theory.

Jorge Klor de Alva asserts in “Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages” that “the very notions of colonialism and imperialism came from the modern experiences of non-Hispanic colonial powers and only subsequently and improperly were imposed on the Spanish American experience from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries” (5). But what is an “improper” use? Does the cultural provenance of theory invalidate such categories as epistemological tools? Indeed, is there any system of analysis which does not have a valid retrospective function? I would go further than this and say that such retrospective analysis has deeply transformed discussion of the British Empire as well. After all, imperialism is a very recent concept, formulated in the 1880s scramble for Africa and consolidated in the late nineteenth-century expatriation of British capital. But there is no good reason why we cannot use the term to describe retrospectively five centuries of European expansion.

Indeed the colonization of Latin America obliges us to address the question of postcolonialism at its roots, at the very emergence of modernity. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century British imperialism demonstrates the centrifugal movement by which the precepts of European modernity and the assumptions of the enlightenment have been distributed hegemonically throughout the world. But including America, as Peter Hulme advocates, we find that imperial expansion is more than the dispersal of European cultural values and assumptions into a Eurocentrically mapped world; it reveals itself as the enabling condition of that very process by which a modern Europe is conceived. Europe's world empire *is* modernity!

Latin America then, the "first born child" of modernity, is simultaneously "worlded" by Europe, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, and relegated to the periphery of that world. Spivak uses this term to describe the way in which the colonized space is brought into the "world," that is, made to exist as part of a world essentially constructed by Eurocentrism, if

we concentrated on documenting and theorizing the itinerary of the consolidation of Europe as sovereign subject, indeed sovereign and subject, then we would produce an alternative historical narrative of the "worlding" of what is today called "the Third World." (128)

However, the process of European expansion, which begins in its modern form with the invasion of America, is an enabling condition of the "worlding" of Europe itself. Imperial expansion, the engine of modernity, gave European societies a sense of their distinction from the traditional premodern societies they invaded, a difference which was taken to be superiority, a status which propelled the continuing discourse of empire itself. The transcultural realities of postcolonial experience are present from this moment as the embedding of global difference begins the process by which the colonized world becomes a crucial factor in the imagining of Europe.

Modernity, which usually refers to those modes of social organization which emerged in Europe from about the sixteenth century, broadly represented by the discovery of the "new world," the Renaissance and the Reformation, does not actually emerge as a concept till the eighteenth century. The invasion of Latin

America begins a process which, two centuries later, had come to constitute, as Jurgen Habermas says, "the epochal threshold between modern times and the middle ages" (5). Clearly, this is quite a different concept of modernity from the one which Colas has asserted "is consolidated and reaches its highest expression in the 1960s" (24). The threshold of "The Modern World" is the confluence of the three great world systems—imperialism, capitalism, and the Enlightenment. Modernity is fundamentally about conquest, "the imperial regulation of land, the discipline of the soul, and the creation of truth" (Turner 4), a discourse which enabled the large-scale regulation of human identity both within Europe and its colonies.

Thus the emergence of modernity is coterminous with the emergence of Eurocentrism and the European dominance of the world effected through imperial expansion. Europe constructed itself as "modern" and constructed the non-European as "traditional," "static," "pre-historical." History itself became the tool by which these societies were denied any internal dynamic of capacity for development. Latin America, the first born child of modernity, remained relegated to the status, if not the fact, of the premodern because this continent represents the first instance of the "worlding" of modern Europe. It was in the relationship with Latin America that the energetic Manichaeic rhetoric of European cultural expansion was first conceived, from Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Darwin's debasement of the Tierra del Fuegians in *The Voyage of the Beagle*. This binarism remains firmly in place today in various guises, most notably as the distinction between the "international" and the "parochial."

The imperial origins of modernity give us a different perspective on the contemporary eagerness to define Latin American cultural productions as postmodern. Rather than the period of the disappearance of imperialism, the "postmodern" remains the site of its ultimate diffusion into global systems of economy and culture. There are several ways of conceiving postmodernity. We can see it as superseding modernity, in which case it appears to give credence to history, the discourse it claims to have overcome. We can see it as a cultural phenomenon focused

in postmodernism, the “aesthetic reflection on the nature of modernity” (Giddens 45). Or we can see it as modernity’s discovery of the provisionality and circularity of its basic premise; the “providential” power of reason. This discovery can be exemplified in Nietzsche’s realization that the enlightenment replaced divine providence with the equally transcendental providence of reason (Habermas, *Discourse*). Divine will was replaced by human autonomy but it was a socially and culturally situated autonomy. In effect, providence was replaced by the temporally and spatially empty dominance of the European Subject. The “providential” rise of reason coincided with the rise of European dominance over the rest of the world and subject-centred reason the philosophical centre of European dominance through the enlightenment.

The postmodern hinges, then, on the provisionality at the centre of modernity. According to this view, postmodernity is coterminous with modernity and represents a radical phase of its development. But in the same way postcolonialism is coterminous with colonization, and the dynamic of its disruptive engagement is firmly situated in modernity. The postcolonial begins from the moment of colonization, but it is from that moment a recognition of, and a contestation of, the hegemonic and regulatory dominance of the “truth” of modern Europe.

My contention is that postcolonialism and postmodernism are both discursive elaborations of postmodernity, which is itself not the overcoming of modernity, but modernity coming to understand its own contradictions and uncertainties. They are, however, two very different ways in which modernity comes to understand itself. Postcolonial theory reveals the socially transformative dimension of postmodernity which actually becomes occluded by aesthetic postmodernism. This is because postcolonialism refills, with its locally situated meanings, a time and space that are “emptied” by modernity, and constructs a discourse of the real which is based on the material effects of colonial dominance.

Indeed, we can only understand modernity, and hence postmodernity and globalism, if we understand the trajectory of imperial expansion. Anthony Giddens, in talking about modern-

ity and globalism, provides a classic example of the blind spot which occurs when we fail to take imperialism into account. Asking if modernity is a Western project, he replies that in terms of the two great modern systems, the nation-state and capitalism, the answer must be yes. But, he asks, is modernity peculiarly Western in terms of its globalizing tendencies? "No," he says. "It cannot be, since we are speaking here of emergent forms of world interdependence and planetary consciousness" (175). So, by this account, globalism is an emergent process which just happens to come from everywhere. But clearly there would be no global modernity without the history of European expansion. The transcultural complexity of globalism certainly depends upon the transformations enacted by local uses and appropriations in various regions, but these do not take place outside a dialectical process of enculturation and contestation set up by the colonizing process. It is precisely the continuing reality of the imperial dynamic that a postcolonial reading exposes. For Latin America the hegemonic spread of global economy and culture is a significant threat to its modes of cultural location. But just as significantly, globalism can be seen as a direct legacy of the process of Eurocentrism begun several centuries ago.

We can view globalization as either the dynamic operation of nation-states, or the operation of a single world system. Clearly, while nations are still the principal actors within the global political order, corporations are recognized as the dominant agents in the world economy. The question remains, what is the function of the local in this structure? A *testimonio* such as *Let Me Speak!* by Domatila Barrios de Chungara, provides a rich site for a postcolonial analysis, because it demonstrates the way in which individual lives are affected by a global system of capital initiated as the economy of the empire of modernity. This novel is amenable to Marxist and Feminist readings, but an understanding of the colonial roots of the system which now appears world wide, helps to explain the racially based cycle of oppression and poverty which presents itself as the Bolivian economy. Common opinion is, she says, that

"Bolivia is immensely rich, but its inhabitants are just beggars." And that's the truth because Bolivia is dominated by the multinational corporations that control my country's economy. (20)

Chungara's complaint is familiar, but she is the victim of a system begun four centuries ago. Immanuel Wallerstein's World System theory compellingly asserts that the capitalist system has been *the* world economic system since the sixteenth century and that one cannot talk about economies in terms of the nation state, nor of "society" in the abstract, nor of "stages" of development, because each society is affected by, indeed, is a part of, the capitalist world economy (Wallerstein, *World System* 391). The proposition of one world capitalist system in operation since the sixteenth century radically affects how we view not only world economics but national politics, class, ethnicity and international relations in general. The theory has no place for local transformations or political change, but it is a useful critique of the historicist idea of a nation's economic growth, particularly in its approach to the economies of Latin America.

One traditional Marxist view of economic development sees all economies as passing through a series of stages, so it would see these economies as existing at a pre-bourgeois, pre-industrialized stage of development. But World System theory holds that these economies are already a part of the capitalist world system; they are not an earlier stage of a transition to industrialization, but are undeveloped because they are "peripheral, raw-material producing" areas, on the margins of, and exploited by, the industrialized world. So economies such as Bolivia's are undeveloped, not because they are at any early stage of industrialization, but because they are marginalized by the world system. Similarly, we can say that Latin America is not at a stage of development which has left the need for postcolonial analysis behind, but that its cultural productions are a lingering consequence of its imperial history; it still lies at the edges of the world system.

The imperialism of the capitalist system maintains its energy through the same kinds of rhetoric of exclusion which drives the imperial project. The miners, the peasants, all those struggling against capitalist exploitation are invariably native Indians. The Bolivian situation is a classic example of the centripetal and global system of capital which continues to marginalize and exploit those on the periphery. But *Let Me Speak!* reveals the

limitations of Wallerstein's theory. The lives of individuals, and particularly their taking control of the discursive tools of the dominant powers can effect a transformation in the local effects of the world system and ultimately in the world system itself. Capitalism is a radical example of the globalizing impetus in modernity—what happens in a local neighborhood is likely to be influenced by factors operating at an indefinite distance away. But equally, the local community can take hold of the global influence and transform it to local uses.

II Strategies of Transformation in Latin American Cultures

The key dynamic of postcolonial discourse, one which affects the survival of local communities within global culture is that of transformation. In particular, the historical experience of colonization has resulted in the mechanics of a transformative appropriation of modernity by colonized societies. Such transformation is *transcultural*, that is, not only are local events affected by the operation of global factors, such as world money and commodity markets, but the global economy of representation is affected itself also by processes of local transformation. Furthermore, this dialectic does not generally occur at the level of the nation-state, an entity which is itself firmly incorporated in global systems of power.

There are many strategies of transformation in Latin America cultures. These strategies come under the rubric of a process I call interpolation (Ashcroft, "Interpolation"), in which the colonized culture interpolates the dominant discourse in order to transform it in ways that release the representation of local realities. The appropriation of language, the utilization of discursive systems of representation such as literature or history, the entering and taking over of systems, such as economics or politics, are all examples of the colonized culture taking the dominant forms and making them "bear the burden" of a different experience, as Chinua Achebe says of the English language. Postcolonial strategies focus on the political and historical reality of colonialism and are directed at transforming its discourses and institutions. Individual modes of resistance and transforma-

tion may have particular local exigencies, such as the oppression of Bolivian miners. But there is an epistemological substrate to the discursive dominance of colonialism which affects all colonized societies within the world system.

To represent modernity as a major revolution in the social life of European, and hence, world society at a particular time in history, a view which only came about in the Enlightenment, is to employ the historical consciousness which is a characteristic of modernity itself. Modernity may be better represented by those discontinuities which signify the most radical divisions between the modern and the premodern and which had the profoundest effect on premodern societies, namely, the separation of time and space, the loosening of social relations from the prominence of locality, and the "reflexive ordering and re-ordering of those social relations in terms of continual inputs of knowledge" (Giddens 17). Postcolonial transformation, which is directed at the engagement with, and re-orientation of, colonizing discourses, is at base an engagement with the deepest re-orientations of modernity, whether the colonized societies are premodern or not. It is not only "traditional" societies which employ these strategies; rather it is modernity which has constructed them as sites of contention within the postcolonial world.

The sites of postcolonial engagement which appear the most contentious are those which stem from the most radical shift in modern consciousness, the shift in the consciousness of time, because this reorientation generated the most disorienting features of colonial regulatory power. These were, the emptying of time and space by separating them from location, and the "disembedding" of social relations from locality, which resulted in the "lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time and space" (Giddens 21). Indeed, the global change in the concept of a world itself is related in some way to this revolution in modern thought. The most profound disruption, therefore, of premodern social life was not the military destruction wreaked by colonial invasion, nor the importation of disease, nor the imposition of colonial language, nor the depredations of colonial ad-

ministrations, for all their devastating effects, but the invention of the mechanical clock.

This one invention and the associated Gregorian calendar metonymize the universal power of European expansion, the hegemony of the capitalist world system, and the most powerful and regulatory discourses of imperialism. The dislocating power of colonial language, the mapping of the world, the naming and regulation of distant lands, the emptying of space and the suppression of place, the surveillance of the colonized, the discourse of history, systematic education, the erection of the imperialism's entire spatial and temporal binarism with its invention of race, of cannibalism and primitivism, and its distinction between the spirituality and transcendence of Europe and the materiality and primitivism of the periphery, all these represent modes of imperial control, which in turn generate strategies of resistance and transformation in Latin American cultural production.

Three sites of cultural change—language, place, and history—situate perhaps the most profoundly complex interchanges of cultural formation and transformation. In many respects, the key to these strategies lies in the use of language. A persistent argument of ethnocentric resistance is that to speak in the colonizer's language is to remain colonized. But an equally persistent argument of postcolonial writers is that the language may be appropriated for the writer's own purposes, its rhythms and syntax changed to correspond to a local idiom. This is the position taken by Angel Rama in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*. In this book, he adapts Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's conceptualization of local Latin American culture as a "transculturation" or *neoculturación* of metropolitan models to the task of generalizing the literary phenomenon of neoregionalism, represented by authors such as Juan Rulfo, José María Arguedas, Guimarães Rosa, and García Márquez. *Neoculturación* is a more global term for the operation of the postcolonial strategies of appropriation and interpolation. This happens at various levels and in virtually every form of cultural discourse, particularly literature, but nowhere more powerfully than in the medium of *testimonio*.

III *Testimonio*

Latin America is not only the beginning of modern Europe's self-representation, but it is also the site of the most powerful post-colonial textual production of modern times; *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. Associated almost exclusively with Latin America, *testimonio* offers an unparalleled example of interpolation: the insertion of an oppressed postcolonial reality into the master discourses of literature and history. It does this by coming into being at the margins of both; entering a "zone of indeterminacy" from which genre expectations are disrupted. The writings of indigenous subjects of settled colonies provide the greatest range of autobiographical and *testimonio* like texts. But in no place outside Latin America has the form achieved the kind of genre focus, readership, consistency of subject matter and rich development as it has in this region since 1970.

The political urgency, the determination of the narrator to speak for the community, to adopt a subject position (which conflates the personal and the political in what may be not just dangerous but genocidal conditions) make the form recognizable across various ethnic, national, and political boundaries within the region. A *testimonio* such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is an example of a genre at the margins of literature; its occupation of a zone of indeterminacy between speaking and writing, between literature and history, between autobiography and communal record, between the personal and the political statement, makes it a fascinating confrontation with modernity.

The most striking strategy in *testimonio* is the construction of a collective subject position which more than anything else sets it apart from other similar narrative forms. As Menchú says,

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. . . .

My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. (1)

Testimonio affirms a self-identity that is inseparable from the collective oppressed group or class. This disturbs one of the most treasured enlightenment assumptions, that of individuality, an

assumption enshrined in the related but very different genre of autobiography. Rather than accept modes of representation as transparent, *testimonio* is the strategic attempt to control representation. This indeed lies at the core of the whole interpolating process. The form is not so much the representation of an absolute truth as formal history might claim to be, but the urgent representation of the experience of a reality which is contesting at various points the modes of representation of the discourse it is interpolating.

The scandal of *testimonio* for contemporary theory, and perhaps for postmodernity itself, is its shameless construction of presence. What is at stake, however, is the particular nature of the "reality effect" of the *testimonio*. The most important feature of the form is that it produces if not the real then certainly a sensation of *experiencing the real*. As Jara points out, *testimonio* is "a trace of the real, of that history which, as such, is inexpressible" (qtd. in Beverley 22). In this sense it circumvents the temporal strictures of the historical in favour of a culturally located time and space which occupies the indeterminate zone of colonizing genres. In this way, it fills time and space that are emptied by mechanical time and fills them in a process which uses the tools of the colonizer.

Like many postcolonial texts *testimonio* implies a challenge to the privileging of literacy and literature over orality. More important, it represents the entry into literature of those persons who would normally be excluded. But this interpolation produces a form of transitional literature which disrupts the authority of writing. As we have seen, the representation of orality in *testimonio* is an important feature of its location of a communal subject, one that exists outside formal legitimation or authority. Of course, orality is not by any means synonymous with post-coloniality, but it does focus the kinds of discursive engagements which characterize the power struggle in all colonized societies; the engagement is not equal and not always successful for the colonized but it does reveal the extraordinary capacity of indigenious and indigenized forms to appropriate and reform the powerful discursive practices of the colonizer.

One of the most prominent features of the interpolating power of subaltern discourse is its capacity, and indeed its willing-

ness to appropriate of all kinds of dominant discursive practices. In *testimonio*, we find examples of an extremely wide range of appropriations: language, genre, social discourse, such as religion and politics, political organization and strategy, by which the local communities have developed an effective resistance to government tyranny.

But such appropriations did not come without considerable personal and cultural struggle. The Quiché Indians of the *altiplano* appear obsessed with their cultural purity. Refusing to eat Ladino food, to wear Western clothes, to send their children to school, or to learn Spanish, they regarded everything white as both symbolically and literally a contamination. This is not an unfamiliar response to colonial oppression. Yet this very exclusivism had the direct effect of making the various Indian peoples of Guatemala—isolated culturally from each other, speaking different languages and thus unable to form indigenous alliances—vulnerable to almost any devious, oppressive, or criminal act of official power to remove their land.

Menchú tells how she learned Spanish precisely for this reason. While the forms of oppression were physical and brutal demonstrations of power, the mode of resistance was discursive. Not only the Spanish language but also models of resistance from the Bible were woven into the fabric of their resistance. Menchú's *testimonio* is therefore metonymic of the whole process of appropriation by which the Quiché Indians managed to resist oppression, indeed managed to avoid extermination. This required some profound cultural compromises:

The community decided no one must discover our secrets now. . . . We prepared our signals . . . which were to be the everyday things we use, all natural things. I remember that we performed a ceremony before beginning our self-defense measures . . . where we asked the lord of the natural world, our one God, to help us and give us permission to use his creations of nature to defend ourselves with.
(125)

We broke with many of our cultural procedures by doing this but we knew it was the way to save ourselves. (128)

We needed to be on the constant lookout for new techniques.
(130)

These accommodations with necessity are urgent and practical examples of the general strategy of postcolonial material and discursive appropriations. The conqueror's culture is used specifically to protect the people from the conqueror. Similar issues arise in the production of the testimonial text itself in which the interlocutor might be accused of manipulating or exploiting the material the informant provides to suit her own cosmopolitan political, intellectual, and aesthetic predilections (Beverley 20). But this overlooks the power of the interpolation of the story of the Guatemalan Indians to reach an influential international audience.

Clearly one of the central themes of testimonial literature is the violation of human rights of members of the community by agents of the state. If established literature can be seen as a "cultural form" complicit in this domination, a form of epistemic violence which either implicitly or explicitly sustains these material brutalities then their appropriation by oppressed peoples seems problematic. But postcolonial analysis has shown the extent to which the appropriation of dominant discursive forms throughout the world has been effective in the counter-discursive project of postcolonial societies. Testimonial literature, by interpolating itself at the juncture of literature and history puts into question both the standard forms and the idea of literature or of history themselves.

IV Colonialism and History

If historicism is the naturalization of empty time, then these texts denaturalize time by inscribing the practices of denaturalization which are constantly present in communal life. Menchú shows how the Quiché ceremonies conflate history in such a way that the Spanish invasion is made to seem an aspect of present experience. All the ceremonies are conducted in terms of an explicit binary which contrasts a putatively unchanging tradition with the contamination of the white man. It is not unlikely that this motif in the ceremonies is a rather contemporary one, developed for purposes of resistance, but it has an extremely important ideological effect upon the daily lives of the Indians.

Historicism fixes the indigenous subject at a static moment in the past, a prehistory located under the sign of the primitive, of

a primal innocence or barbarity. This is the static historical moment from which History, the record of civilization, begins. In response to this, the Quiché Indians continually re-inscribe the arrival of the white man in their rituals and ceremonies, thus exposing the originary colonial moment as a prominent feature of the present. Time is dismantled so that the location of the indigenous subject by history in a fixed time of primitive innocence is disrupted. By showing the distant historical event of invasion as an aspect of the present of native Indian consciousness, the time of the colonized Indian is constituted as the present time, and thus a time amenable to change and alteration in a political sense, while also being the time of a changeless tradition. The fascinating aspect of this disruption of time is that the present oppressors are not "white" in the sense of being Spanish, but are mestizos produced by centuries of intermarriage. By continually reinscribing the colonizing event as a permanent feature of the continuing present, the "history" of Latin American independence and hybridization which has, according to many Latin American critics, made the region inaccessible to postcolonial theory, is itself disrupted and denaturalized by at least one colonized group.

However, the tactic is problematic because, on the one hand, it perpetuates the myth of an unchanging Quiché ethnicity and culture, a myth which is contested at every level of contemporary Quiché life and, on the other, it binaristically reinstates the predominance of the colonizing power of the "white man." The preservation of cultural purity is also undermined by the way it puts the people at the mercy of the government. Not only are the Indian groups at the mercy of the dominant landowning class because they cannot speak Spanish, but they cannot communicate with one another and thus organize a united front. Such an organized resistance can only come about once the relevant aspects of the dominant culture are appropriated.

The most extreme and horrific struggle represented in the book is the struggle of the gaze of history described by Menchú in a scene in which the army gathers the villagers from miles around to watch the torture, degradation, and burning alive of their relatives and friends. Nothing could more powerfully demon-

strate the way in which colonial power inscribes itself on the bodies of its subjects. The torture and disfigurement seem more than a brutal inflicting of pain; its depravity rests on an organizing principle—that of the “ordered” power of the state (the body politic) against which the bodies of its subjects are rendered subhuman.

Yet the most profoundly brutal aspect of this act is its excessive and violent attempt to control the gaze of the community. The act of forcing the people to watch this appalling spectacle is to interpellate them as the objects of genocidal authority, as powerless voyeurs of their own abjection. Apart from its obvious function of terrorizing the people, it operates discursively as a metonymy of the historical gaze—they are forced to watch their own violation. The gaze in which they are interpellated is the gaze of history. It is this terrorism of the gaze which Menchú’s interpolation into history is specifically designed to reverse. By revealing the appalling horror of these actions in this book, by constructing an audience of Spanish and hence English speakers, she appropriates the power of the historical gaze; she turns the gaze of the reader and hence of history onto these criminals. By this means of interpolation, the gaze of history itself is reversed.

V Conclusion

The *testimonio* of indigenous groups is a relatively uncontentious subject for a postcolonial analysis. But I want to suggest that the real relevance of such analysis to Latin America emerges in that engagement with modern time consciousness and its effects, which occurs in a great range of social groups—mestizo or Ladino, urban or peasant, bourgeois or working class. One example is Juan Rulfo, who is a much more contentious case for a postcolonial analysis. A canonical figure, he is legendary in Latin American literary studies, a formative figure whose brief career is credited with penetrating “by sheer force of poiesis into the epical and even mythical unconscious of peasant Mexico” (Larsen 51). Rulfo is often credited with modernist innovation, his *Pedro Paramo* “a bold excursion into modern techniques of writing” (*Burning Plains* ix). But his postcoloniality becomes

apparent through the medium of Rama's use of the concept of transculturation. Reading Rulfo's use of language in *Pedro Paramo* and *The Burning Plain* Rama shows how language becomes the site of a conflict between the colonizing modernity of the language and the inflection of a localized place.

The author has become reintegrated with the linguistic community and speaks from within it, with unimpeded use of its idiomatic resources. . . . Here we have the phenomenon of "neoculturation," to use Ortiz's term. If the principles of textual unification and the construction of a literary language of exclusively aesthetic invention can be seen as corresponding to the rationalizing spirit of modernity, by compensation the linguistic perspective that takes up this principle restores a regional world view and prolongs its validity in a form yet richer and more interiorized than before. It thus expands the original world view in a way that is better adapted, authentic, artistically solvent, and, in fact, modernized—but without destruction of identity. (Larsen 56-57)

The perception of Rulfo's "reintegration with the linguistic community," speaking "from within it," is a metaphoric and essentialist description of language which would be better expressed metonymically. Rulfo does not so much speak from within local idioms as metonymically signify the local in his language variation. The fact that Rulfo's language does not actually correspond to the speech patterns and narrative forms of Jaliscoan countryfolk (54) is immaterial to the metonymic operation of the language variation, which inscribes not authentic identity, but metonymic difference. Rama's analysis is nevertheless very much in the nature of a postcolonial reading because the use of language by a Spanish speaker is seen to be adaptable to modes of re-inscription of the local creating a metonymic gap in which the difference of the local can be imagined (see Ashcroft, "Constitutive" and "Metonymy").

Transculturation in Rama's formulation represents the appropriation of the dominant language for the purpose of re-inscribing place, which Rama refers to as the "regional world view." The primacy of place in premodern settings has been largely destroyed by the separation of time and space and the "disembedding" of social groups from the significance of locality. The process of "re-embedding" is very clear in Native American

testimonio. But place remains as a significant site of contention in modern colonial cultures as well. Rulfo's writing demonstrates how a settler culture invents a language which re-invents place. An "appropriation" of language such as Rulfo's metonymically links the language to place in a way which re-invents it in the process of re-inscribing it. The separation of time and space which is central to modernity is redressed metonymically by the use of language in this way which reinscribes the concept of local difference. Crucially, this is not a feature of a clash between a premodern culture and a modern discourse. Colonialism embeds the cultural anxiety attending its emptying out of local space and this becomes a site of contention in a range of colonized societies.

The consideration of Rulfo and Menchú brings together two very different writers, periods, sub-cultures, and classes in Latin American literary history. Yet they reveal to us that the operation of the transformative strategies of postcolonial discourse, strategies which engage the deepest disruptions of modernity, are not limited to the recently colonized, nor to the premodern societies who are still the most marginalized victims of modernization. Postcolonial strategies are those set in motion by the huge effects, both material and discursive, of colonization, no matter how distant the event. This is because colonialism is the militant material working of European modernity, the repercussions and contradictions of which are still in evidence in the global structure of neocolonial domination.

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