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**Under the Spell of Magic: U.S. Latin Americanism  
and Its Others**

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*Le merveilleux n'est pas  
le même à toutes les époques...*

These musings, intended as food for thought, focus on the current *malaise* in Latin American studies in the U.S., questioning how dogmatic theoretical assumptions, specifically postmodern and postcolonial, may impair productive critical diagnosis of, and dialogue with, the contradictory and rapidly changing reality, such as that of Latin America today. As a result, two very different images of present-day Latin America are put forth. One, by a diverse group of emerging new leading Latin American thinkers and scholars, critical of those intellectual currents that, around the 1960s and 1970s, coalesced in *macondismo*, and the other, by U.S. Latin Americanism, still anchored politically in the 1960s, entangled methodologically in a hodge-podge of postmodern, poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, and enthralled by *macondismo*. This “Latin America,” concocted by the hegemonic U.S. academy for its own consumption, is then re-exported to Latin America which, paradoxically, is struggling to liberate itself from the secular plague of magic, miracles, exceptionalisms, utopias on demand, and other spells of *macondismos*. These notes, if fully developed, would argue for a retooling of theory and for a critical reexamination of postmodern epistemology and other post-tenets.

### **Exordium**

The invitation to reflect on the state of the art of our discipline, Hispanic studies in U.S., could not have come at a better moment. Actually, this thought process has already begun (see, for example, *Spain in America*, ed. Richard Kagan, 2002; *Latin America Writes Back*, ed. Emil Volek, 2002; *Ideologies of Hispanism*, ed. Mabel Moraña, 2005, among others). Reflections on identity, methods, and history may be a sign of crisis; but let's hope and see in this predicament a sign of impending change, reorientation and, ultimately, redemption.

### **Tentative definition**

*Latin Americanism, Ltd.*, natural and prodigal *kin* (to avoid the gender-biased 'son') of Hispanism, modern blend of *marxondismo*, destined for consumption in U.S. Spanish graduate programs, and methodologically circumscribed by diverse *post-s*. Harmless if not swallowed.

*Encycl.* (philos. boudoir): Contemporary U.S. Latin Americanism firmly believes in the superior reality of certain formerly neglected social and cultural agencies and forms, tends to devalue all other mechanisms, especially those of more complex cultural productions or those not fitting its many conflicting theories, and proposes itself as *the* interpretation and solution for all of the fundamental life problems in Latin America. Latin Americanism does not allow those who cultivate it to abandon it as they please. There is every reason to believe that it acts on the spirit of its performers as a kind of narcotic agent.

### **Burdens of History**

The early U.S. Hispanism eagerly accepted and further developed the French invention of Spain as the *Romantic* country *par excellence*. What would later become Latin America, inherited this legacy of exotic charm, though closeness and business interests worked somewhat against that. When Spanish exploded in the U.S. for the first time at the beginning of World War I, coinciding with the opening of the Panama Canal, cultural values were squarely put in the Peninsula and raw economic interests were centered on Latin America, (suddenly closer than ever before.) This schizophrenic attitude continued long into the twentieth century.



The Panama Canal, breaching the thin hymen of the Central American isthmus, finally pried open Latin America for business and for other pleasures of a more intimate intercourse. But it always takes two to tango.

Moreover; even Spain was valued, if at all, for the *past in present*. The site of transnational cultural capital, after the fall of German, was—and still is—concentrated in English and in French. In spite of its phenomenal growth and increasing presence in this country, Spanish continues to be a second-tier citizen of the academic and intellectual universe. Cultural values accumulated around Spanish—such as those in philosophy, science, and culture in general—has not made as yet any significant impact on the “world” in modern times (and seem unlikely to do so any time soon.) Borges alone does not make a summer. Literature by itself does not make it either. The Revolution of the 1960s attracted the romantic gaze and desire of many, but it did not deliver in goodies or critical thinking, though it helped to launch the *boom* and to lift Miami from its slumber.

As it stands now, the most clever mimetism, mixing or derivative rehash of discourses invented elsewhere, will not get the U.S. Latin Americanism—and Hispanism for that matter—out of their predicament. And worse: the question actually is whether these concoctions, obviously so unimportant for the outside, are helpful at least for the “inside” or whether they serve to *cover* more than to *discover*. Some landmarks along the road are worth recalling:

The war of 1898 sealed the communion of the cultural elites of Spain and Spanish America. Both turned inward; Spain invented and celebrated her “España profunda” and Spanish America made a fatal u-turn from the pains and rigors of modernization, which was failing anyway. The “cultural turn,” opposing Spanish America to the Anglo-Saxon materialistic, vulgar modernity, only glorified this failure. The road to *macondismo* was wide open, but its blueprints go back to Columbus’ maps and travels. Since the very beginning, the discovered “New World” was not what it was supposed to be (on *macondismo* see *Latin America Writes Back* and my “José Martí, ¿fundador de Macondo?”). In modern times, “Macondo” has become the literary embellished equivalent of the yesteryear’s “banana republic.”

The Civil War of 1936 brought about the Spanish Diaspora, and U.S. universities among others filled with republican émigrés. This wave was not politically homogeneous, but it did cement the dominance of peninsular Hispanism for decades.

The 1930s and 1940s also shifted the Latin American intellectual and political landscape. The *arielista* elites were challenged by populism; the ideals of social betterment through high culture and theosophy, among other lofty ideas so popular by the 1920s that were substituted by class warfare and diverse local blends of socialist and fascist programs. After the defeat of fascism, Marxism appeared to embody the pure and universalist version of this challenge, linking neatly the local to global struggles. Yet the local concoctions did not yield easily (see the endurance of APRA in Peru, *peronismo* in Argentina and the PRI party in Mexico). On the other hand, the transition from religion and theosophy to Marxism was surprisingly soft and easy (see the case of Vallejo, or the Theology of Liberation, among so many others).

In the course of the “Cold War,” the local and the global intermingled. While Arbenz and Batista (the latter even celebrated by Neruda) were taken for crypto-communists, Fidel on the mountain looked like a prophet of democracy (Washington style). (The academic Latin Americanism is not the only one destined to misread Latin America.)

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 brought this shift and its “glocal” complexities to the fore. Cuban exodus began. In the ensuing Latin American brutal “dirty wars,” one focus of Revolution after another was extinguished at great human cost and waves of refugees from aborted utopias followed. This flood of émigrés, politically more homogeneous, found warm welcome in U.S. and in Western Europe (whereas their misencounters with the “real socialism” in Eastern Europe make for some good anecdotes). The U.S. academy was prepared for this infusion through the years of struggles for civil rights for minorities and against the unpopular and botched Vietnam War. To add complexity, what was once mainly “outside” became a sizable and ever growing “inside.”

The two radicalized academies merged in the new Latin Americanism, as we know it today. The romantic longing for participation in the “Third World” struggles prevailed. “Life” was elsewhere. High culture sucked. Literature sucked. Why study textual labyrinths and their complex social interactions if there was direct action possible, somewhere. Solidarity and passion overwhelmed the few attempts at a dispassionate critical thinking (see the hoopla in departments of languages and literature around *Testimonio*).

Personally, I have no problem with individual commitments and/or solidarity actions; to the contrary: sometimes they are called for and may be an exercise in true democracy (my style). Besides, I was also a refugee (though a “wrong one” and coming at a “wrong time,”

according to some accounts). We are in the world and part of it. The problem comes only when ideologies—all Grand Theories included—interfere with the purported object to be studied, and understood.

The World, if poorly understood, is only poorly changed by poorly conceived actions. Marxism and the host of “real socialisms” and their populist clones stumbled on this notwithstanding their purported intentions, exacting an exorbitant human cost for their historic failure.

In addition, Latin American reality, only partially grasped by U.S. Latin Americanism(s) at that time, has “moved on.” (This does not mean that old problems disappeared or that the continent is better off now.) Yet U.S. Latin Americanism seems to be stuck in the mindset of the 1960s. Every pretext imaginable and every “theory” dug up somewhere will serve to justify this inertia, while the appearance *appears* to be changing frantically. Yet *plus ça change...* the mindset remains.

### **Burdens of Theories**

U.S. Latin Americanism seems to be over-theorized and under-researched. The overuse of theories may just cover up the underuse of the archive. Yet archive is not only the library and much less is it reducible to the limited and many times haphazard horizon of the MLA Bibliography. A study of “foundational fictions” done without the benefit of local archives may turn those narratives and the theories that sustain the commentary into more fiction than imagined.

Theories—we all know, but it’s worth repeating it—are only hypotheses, helpful or not, valid only until falsified. They create contexts of verisimilitude (*epistemes*), that’s all. In other words, a theory per se does not guarantee anything; all depends on how it is used. It may be enough if a piece of it is somewhat useful. Yet the most current practice of theories is to apply them like hide-markers, marking territory and property on the intellectual *pampas*. (I don’t know why this makes me recall my tiny *shitsu*, heroically peeing around several city blocks to mark off *his* territory. Also, *pampas* is not *le mot juste*, but it sounds better than “in the intellectual brothels.”)

All works well then until the context of verisimilitude keeps its *verisimilitude*. Since this context changes now and then (some speak of five-year cycles), the favorite academic pastime is to go around and remark all hide on sight (this is usually called “cutting edge”). Other times, the game follows the rules of snowballing effect (such as the long process of “modernizations” of Sor Juana—on the *via crucis* from the still sensible Dorothy Schons up to all the current *críticas necias*

regurgitated ad nauseam—that reached its climax with Trabulse’s revelations of alleged documents hidden in an avowedly empty archbishop’s file he had found somewhere, in 1995).

Currently we seem to live in a hypothetical universe managed by the *ménage-à-trois* of three posts: poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. (I leave aside the fact that their own epistemic underpinnings have not been sufficiently explored, and some may appear as clearly wanting.) This triad in turn circumscribes the other local posts (such as feminism, gay and queer theory), condemning them to be post- or *passé* whether they know it or not yet. In these triangular situations, usually a couple forms and eventually walks away (a look at the history of the Avant-Gardes is instructive). This seems to be happening now with the unlikely alliance of postmodernism and postcolonialism, both trying to leave the controlling leash of the theorist’s theory—poststructuralism—behind.

Post-modernism centers on the popular mass and media culture and post-colonialism focuses on domination, hegemony, and contestatory practices. The latter is most clearly re-floating the old-fashioned Marxism *cum Gramsci salis*; the hope is perhaps that this mutation will be more predictive for the “Third World” since it failed in the First. But at least it maintains some macro-perspective on reality. Marxism, through the mediation of the Frankfurt School, is less apparent in postmodernism which is rather influenced by the later Foucault and his microphysics. Postmodernism also loves to trash “high culture,” but it does so based, unfortunately, on antiquated aesthetics and philosophy. Not everything posturing as post- is actually up to date.

The question for me is not whether something in these theories is useful, it almost always is; rather, what interests me is what is left out and, in turn, how this type of created lens tends to create a reality to its liking, while leaving plenty of stark real world in the shadow (such as the real aporias of the “subaltern” who speaks not in the *Testimonio*). Yes, we can never see everything, much less everything at once, but...systematic exclusion may only lead to systematic blindness.

The same goes for “cultural studies,” a long shot from the possibly useful and even necessary field of “studies of culture(s).” In the U.S., cultural studies were born in the Humanities as a graft of gender studies on postmodern cultural interests. These two branches have never managed to create a tree together. As a simulacrum of interdisciplinary studies, this field—I said elsewhere—has turned into a “jack of all trades...” I will not repeat the meticulous devastating analysis done by Carlos Reynoso (in his *Apogeo y decadencia de los estudios culturales*,



2000). In Latin America, cultural studies have been on a stronger footing, since they derived from the British neo-Marxist Birmingham School in social sciences. However, both modalities share predilection for the sociological -- if not for the cultural fringe. Whereas great works of art, personalities, etc., are unique (intertextualities notwithstanding.) and are more exceptions than embodiments of norms or purported generalities.

All in all, cultural studies in the U.S. seem to return us to the pre-nineteenth century situation, with the difference that literature, culture, and the profession itself have become once again part of the amateur (this time, amateurish and mass-) culture—and ‘culture’ definitely lowercased. (Nothing against amateurs, if they were called Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Goethe.)

Again, there is nothing wrong with expanding the field of inquiry. Yet chasing trivia may not get us beyond trivia themselves, whichever side of them we may take, *popular* or not. After the research is done and the book published, the trivia, on which it is based, are more forgotten than the Middle Ages.

Postmodernism initially had a liberating streak; it freed people from the overbearing and castrating seriousness of modernity (including the Freudian couch and its incentives). However, after the demise of the *agélastes* class of preachers of utopias, according to Rabelais, “those who had no sense of humor,” the frivolity and the “unbearable lightness of being” postmodern culture generated in its stead, almost begged for some gravity to return, begged for those good old days when one could always count on the first-world intellectual’s self-chastising rituals of guilt and bad consciousness as well as on U.S. imperialism as repository of all evil on Earth. Unfortunately, the call has been heard and answered in ways unexpected: now there are new heroes and also new contenders for the bad guys.

And I don’t mean solely the terrorists. In the twentieth century, Latin Americans were railing against the U.S. despoiling them of raw materials and other riches; if I am not mistaken, now an emerging East Asian world power buys what remains there left and right. And it does not appear to me that the comrades, immune to the appalling poverty of their own folks, are disturbed by the poverty they find in Latin America. But it will take time for the intellectuals here to redirect the periscope from looking backward to forward.



## U.S. Latin Americanism versus Latin America

While U.S. Latin Americanism has studiously gone out on a limb, jumping from one theory to another in search of illumination, yet remaining basically faithful to the 1960s mindset, Latin Americans returned—and turned—home. That home was not the same as they left it in the wake of the 1960s. Sensing the failure of the Grand Theories and other salvational utopias, dramatically highlighted by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a diverse group of leading Latin American intellectuals turned from *macondismo* and/or utopia to the reality which was undergoing spectacular changes right before their eyes. In the late 1980s, José Joaquín Brunner, Néstor García Canclini, Jorge Larraín, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Beatriz Sarlo, to name a few, although each of them adopting strikingly different stance, all began to look beyond Macondo in order to study the shape of the new Latin America emerging from the momentous modernizing processes going on since the 1950s under the nose, yet “under the radar,” of the “enlightened” “progressive” intellectuals, still under the spell of their *macondismo* and/or utopian fever (on this score, see *Latin America Writes Back*). During the 1990s, a number of young Latin American writers challenged *macondismo* in literature (among others, the collection of short stories *McOndo*, edited by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez). Other Latin Americans, such as the Guatemalan Mario Roberto Morales, have walked around their countries, wandering and wondering, and have let new realities and facts—unpredicted and unpredictable—rush in, overwhelming theories conjured up in distant classrooms (his revealing *La articulación de las diferencias*, 1998, still has not found its way to the U.S. academic market).

In my opinion, the present-day U.S. Latin Americanism has experienced growing difficulty in coping with the local complexities of Latin American realities and with the rapid changes prompted by conflicting local and global trends. It also has chosen to ignore the best new developments in the Latin American academy.

There seems to be a widening gap as well as asynchrony between the two academies, their research agendas, politics and indeed ethics. But not as it is usually put from the North: there, the poor Latin Americans immersed in their underdeveloped provincial localities and not up to the latest theoretical sophistication here (this is especially pathetic in those cases when some half-ignoramus *petit-mâitre*, perhaps freshly minted from some Dupe University, feels empowered to look





down on well-educated Latin American intellectuals as inarticulate inarticulate “subalterns” who need escort service through the “modern cultural worlds”).

### Coda

I hope that these sketchy and perhaps “untimely musings” will help shake the inertia here, and will help understand and bridge the gap between the two academies, between the two emerging images of Latin America. So far, too many theories here appear to get their inspiration from Macedonio and try their hand in building bridges from one side of the river to the same side... from North to North, from one endogamic group to the same endogamic group. To open the dialogue is to open one’s mind to the wonderment (*thaumazein*) of the world. Theory is not a master key, much less a comprehensive toolbox ready to unlock whatever; at its best, it is a piece of wire that sometimes works and may even lead to surprising “new worlds.”

### Supplement

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- . “Beyond Latin Americanism and Other Accidental/ Occidental Tourism: Guatemala(ns) In Search Of Cultural Theory, and More.” *Universum: Revista de humanidades y ciencias sociales* 20.1 (2005): 189-203.
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URL: <http://spanport.cla.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/hispanic-issues-online/hispanic%20issues%20online-1.htm/volek.pdf>

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