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Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-Centering

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## Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-centering

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**Nelly Richard**

The narratives of encounter and disencounter between Latin America and postmodernity are particularly difficult to analyze:

First, because of the aloofness of the features that name this disperse configuration called “postmodernity,” an exact definition is not guaranteed. A mixture of modes (*modos*) (doubt in philosophy, parody and simulacrum in aesthetics, deconstruction in critical theory, skepticism in politics and relativism in ethics, syncretism in culture, etc.) and fashions (*modas*) (pastiche and citation in architecture, post-Marxist disenchantment, narcissist play and cool detachment, neutral eclecticism in cultural taste and bland pluralism in social values, etc.) makes it so that the confusion between postmodernity and postmodernism(s) is the enveloping frame for a diffuse feeling that accompanies the epochal changes marked by the *dissemination* and *contamination* of meaning: a crisis of totality and pluralization of the fragment, a crisis of singularity and a multiplication of differences, a crisis of centrality and the proliferating overflow of the margins.

Second, because of the unevenness of Latin America’s own internal matrices, which integrate unequal historical-cultural processes in each

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country: Peru, Chile, and Argentina do not share the same antecedents of modernity, modernization, or modernism. The unfolding of cultural tendencies has not been uniform and the mixture of myth and history, ritual and progress, tradition and market, has taken root unequally among them. Therefore, the dispositions of each of these countries to postmodernity, considered as the critical balance of the achievements and frustrations of a modernity encrusted according to regionally specific dynamics of forces and resistances, are not comparable.

In spite of these problems, we can probably agree on a general definition of the category *postmodernity*, synthesizing its main features: the fracture of the ideals (subject-history-progress as the absolutes of reason) that monologically regulated the civilizing process of the dominant Western modernity; the subsequent heterogenization of signs and the multiple voices of meaning; the passage from the macrosocial phase of integrating powers to the microsocal phase of disintegrating forces; the abandonment of certainties and the resignation to the partial and the relative as the fragmented horizons of a new theoretical-cultural landscape situated under the vacillating sign of doubt; and the disembodiment of the social-real converted into mass-mediated artifice through images whose spatiality and temporality have lost historical texture and density.

The physiognomy of “we” (as the Latin American site of the questions of whether and how postmodernity affects us), however, is so dissimilar that it fragments the subject of enunciation into incompatible parts. Even if only as a polemical notation of a “difference” activated against the dominant international postmodern, “Latin America” designates a zone of experience (call it marginalization, dependency, subalternity, de-centering) common to all the countries situated at the periphery of the dominant, Western model of centered modernity. How does the discourse of the postmodern, which theorizes the failure of this centered modernity, intervene in (disorganize, reformulate) the way that Latin America has had of imagining itself under modernist dependency?

The fractured syntax of postmodernity allowed the Center to be the first to meditate about its crisis of centrality and about recovering the transversal proliferation of its margins. The periphery, one of the margins now re-integrated into the rhetorical complex of the disintegrated, sees itself today forced to re-diagram its axis of polemical confrontation due to this perverse inflection of the Center, which aims at appropriating the periphery’s alterity and its anti-hegemonic protagonism. Part of the challenge revolves around the conversion of the postmodern theme to a Latin American key, a project

that raises the question of the value, insurgent or resigned, of the new relations of authority and cultural power between: Latin American marginality and the postmodern defense of the margins, the crisis of authority and the metanarrative of the crisis, the theory of de-centering and the center-function of this theory as a symbol of cultural prestige, and the rhetoric of difference and the politics of difference. I want to pose this question in the context of the relations of the terms (*model/copy* or *original/translation*) that structured the behavior of the Latin American periphery faced with the universalizing paradigm of the Center: dependency and imitation as colonized inflections, but also parody and recycling as decolonizing strategies. Do the disarrangements introduced by the postmodern, registered in the chains of meaning that surround the idea of the Center, alter or not the distributions of cultural power that separate decision makers and followers, "strong" subjects and "weak" subjects on the stage of discourses, practices, and institutions?

### **Model and Copy: The First World Ceremony**

To be the peripheral extension of models centrally promoted by the metropolitan networks means to belong to a culture distinguished as *secondary* with respect to the anteriority and superiority of the model, to a culture of "reproduction," in which each image is an image of an image reproduced until the very idea of an original is lost in the distance. Accustomed to images by means of copies deformed by illegitimate substitutions, I am, as a Latin American, obligated, in the absence of the originals, to take advantage of my deficit of originality, exaggerating the *copy* as a self-parodying vocation, pasting over cosmetically my lack of identity-property with the device of the disguise, the allure of the borrowed or stolen, the ornamentality of the artificial.

The rhetorical exacerbation of this fascination with the copy as the plagiarizing rite and illusionist comedy of a "Latin Americanness" that owes more to the derivative fiction of appropriation than to an original truth of its own, would appear to assign to the colonial imaginary the task of protagonizing initially that distribution of parodic figurations we celebrate today as postmodern. This Latin American neo-baroque, retro-reading of the copy as a signifying exercise of cultural transvestism (cosmetic prowess, allegory of dubbing, transfigurative mimicry) is stimulated by postmodern artifice. The postmodernist decline of postmodernism permits, thanks to the reappraisal of the copy, the following inversion of scene: From dependent and imita-

tive, always behind the latest international slogan of the new, Latin America now becomes the precursor of the postmodernist simulacrum in the simulations and dissimulations already contained in the colonial signature that feigned obedience to the European code, while diverting its icons toward alternative messages. This reversal of roles (from backward to advanced, from secondary to principal, from extra to protagonist) reverses the colonialist sanction that punished repetition with the denigration of the “*déjà vu*,” inasmuch as the “*déjà vu*” of the copy is now the adulterated hypothesis that the periphery theatricalizes in order to ridicule the dominant European belief in the integrity of the model. In a postmodern manner, it is true, but using cultural pastiche as a form of satire that reverses the First World hierarchy of the model of imitation, although the model itself may have become, in the post-auratic phase of this hierarchy, the desecration of the model. In *refunctioning* the copy as its colonial heritage, the periphery disorders the foundational protocol of the before and after, reinaugurating itself caricaturistically as the *pre* of the *post*.

Thus, we arrive at one of the tricks of meaning elaborated by the Latin American periphery. It uses (abuses) the postmodernist model in international competition (the parodic quote) in order to auto-consecrate itself postmodernistically as both pretender and impostor in the ceremony of the precedences and successions of the First World, in order to auto-consecrate itself as the usurper of the role of master of ceremonies.

Up to what point does this strategy of reversal effectively disadapt the mechanism of authority fixed between the *original* (the postmodern text of the center) and the *translation* (the postmodern reading of the periphery)?

### **De-centerings versus Re-centerings: The Rhetorical Subterfuge of “Difference”**

*Original* and *translation* are the marked terms of a hierarchy (in the first sense, the canonical reference) that validates the superiority of the Center—prescription and control—in relation to the periphery—dependence and obedience. The postmodern mutation upsets several of the instances of domination that sustained that hierarchy: The contaminating and disseminating multiplicity of meaning affects the assumption of unanimity of voice according to which the originals were the depositories of a foundational truth; the center-functions have experienced various disintegrating processes that have led to the explosion of its images of totality as a homogeneous fiction. It is necessary to find out whether these upheavals

of meaning in the center-functions were also successful in destabilizing the network of control of cultural power symbolized by the institutional complex (universities, endowed chairs, libraries, etc.) that protects the privilege of a certain "subject position" in complicity with its advantages, epistemological and operational, over subaltern positions.

The postmodern discourse of the other is distinguished by its recuperation of the divergent and the alternative, of the minority. This new heterological disposition would appear to benefit the resurgence of all those cultural peripheries until now censured by European-Western dominance and its universalist foundation in a self-centered representation. Postmodernism decrees its own role in decreeing the end of Eurocentrism, claiming that its critique of modernity has damaged the superiority of the European model by weakening its fantasies of domination through the relativization of absolutes and the delegitimization of universals. This fall of the model invites the subcultures of the margin or periphery to be prominent parts of the new antiauthoritarian modulation of a postmodernity finally respectful of diversity.

Following the lesson of the same postmodernity that raised suspicions about scientific method, however, we also need to *doubt* this new "centrality" of the margins that suddenly recompenses categories up until now out of circulation, such as the feminine or the Latin American. Feminism (the sexual key to the critical dismantling of the apparatus of representation of hegemonic masculinity) and Latin Americanism (the dissident practice of the transcultural fragment) are categories relegated by the new movement toward the borders of the center culture. But women and the Third World are categories more *spoken for* by postmodernity, without obliging the cultural institution to loosen its discursive monopoly over the right to speak, without ceding to them the much greater right to become autonomous subjects of enunciation, to assume a critical *positionality* itself capable of intervening (disorganizing) in the rules of discourse that determine property and pertinence (*pertenencias y pertinencias*).

Celebrating difference as exotic festival—a complement of otherness destined to nuance, more than subvert, the universal law—is not the same as giving the subject of this difference the right to negotiate its own conditions of discursive control, to practice its difference in the interventionist sense of rebellion and disturbance as opposed to coinciding with the predetermined meanings of the official repertory of difference. If the Latin American no longer fits with the search for "identity" (essentialist nostalgia for the self as origin and being), neither does it fit submissively with

the silhouette of difference, the merely functional marking of the postmodern rhetorization of otherness. The Latin American empowers itself more as a demand to know why the identity/difference conflict continues to be arbitrated by the discursivity of the First World. Even when their current hypothesis is that of de-centering, those who formulate it continue to be surrounded by the reputation, academic or institutional, that allows them to situate themselves in "the center" of the debate at its densest point of articulation. If it is a question of heterogeneity, of fragmentation and plurality, it will be necessary to de-symbolize difference, opening it to a *differential multiplicity* of practices not included in the arena of theoretical-cultural prestige of the authorized signature. To escape from the control of the centrist signature and to destabilize its power of auto-referentiality are strategies to be undertaken by the deviant/devious (*desviante*) resources of the peripheral citation, of the fragment mobilized by a *situational* politics of critical resignification of the very operation of cultural transference.