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The Cultural Turn? On the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (1992–2004)

The first issue of the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* was published in 1992, the year of the *Quinto Centenario*.¹ It includes articles by Beatriz Sarlo and Jesús Martín-Barbero, both on the transformations in contemporary political practice symptomatized by the media-dominated electoral campaigns and governments of Menem in Argentina and Fujimori in Peru (Sarlo referred to it as a “post-politics”). There are also articles by the Brazilian cultural historian Nicolau Sevchenko and William Rowe—both members of the original editorial board of the Journal, then known as *Travesía*. Rowe, as well as Catherine Boyle, David Treece and I, constituted the Journal’s “founding” editors and were all based in London. The other member of the editorial team at the time was Daniel Balderston who, like Sevchenko, provided links outside the UK (that is, to the US and Latin America). Sevchenko’s article is an analysis of a short story by Guimarães Rosa and critically examines the workings of the “progress-primitivism” binary in Brazilian liberal positivism. For its part, Rowe’s article examines the emergence of new forms of cultural criticism in Latin America—mainly Argentina and Peru—in the context of violent dictatorship and war. This theme is continued in a comic short story by Julio Ortega on the experience of Sendero Luminoso, “Ayacucho Goodbye.” The inclusion of art work in the Journal has been important from the start, and I shall return to its significance below. At the time, it was also critically important for us to register Latin American events in the UK in the form of a “Chronicle”: for this issue Catherine Boyle wrote a critical review of the reception of Ariel Dorfman’s play *Death and the Maiden*, so successful in the UK. The publication of Volume 1, number 1 was celebrated with a small presentation event at which Beatriz Sarlo—Simón Bolívar Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge at the time—toasted the appearance of the Journal.

The second issue, published towards the end of 1992, included an article by the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita on poetry, poetry by Zoé

Valdés, an article by Margo Glanz on Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*, as well as a "chronicle" by me on Luis Echeverría's interesting film version, *Cabeza de Vaca*. Most importantly, however, at least from a disciplinary perspective, was our inclusion of a debate on Canclini's recently published *Culturas híbridas* with contributions from Jean Franco, Gerald Martin, Martín Luis-Barbero, me, and a response by Canclini in which he accepted that his concept of hybridity tended to overlook the political, economic and cultural violence on which it was premised—the first in what would become a series of conceptual self-defenses on his part.

I think this gives a fair image of the Journal and its intellectual context at the time. Of course, by this time historical communism had collapsed, sparking a crisis of futuricity associated (but not identical) with postmodernism. Jameson's foundational work in this respect—*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—was published the year before (although its fundamental theses were already well-known from the mid-1980s). Interestingly, although extraordinarily widespread, the term has never been an important one for the Journal. Latin America, meanwhile, was being rocked by debt-crisis, violent civil war, neoliberalism—including the emergence of a powerful illegal capitalism: *narco-tráfico* and the privatization of public resources—and (the traumas of) post-dictatorship—all, of course, very much *Cristóbal Nonato* territory. One of the key debates emerging at the time, for example in *Punto de vista*, as well as in the several volumes of essays dealing with the "fin de siglo," and associated with the crisis of futuricity mentioned above, was the perceived "fall" of the figure of the intellectual (or, as Gramscians might say, of the "traditional" intellectual). As it scanned for popular alternatives, some of the work associated with the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group was also a particular, slightly later inflection of this idea. Taking what is arguably Angel Rama's weakest essay—*La ciudad letrada*—as its point of departure, such perspectives also eventually lead, via Edward Saidian accounts of the neo-colonial aspects of Area Studies, to critiques of Latin-Americanism as a whole. Although Néstor García Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo and Jesús Martín-Barbero are not associated with this later set of US-centred arguments, they are associated with the conjuncture and regarded as the "founders" of something called "cultural studies" in or of Latin America. At its origins the Journal also shares in this moment, but ex-centrally so to speak—switching between (or even combining) Latin American

cultural criticism and critical US Latin Americanism, in all its varieties. Herein lies our (the Journal's) drama.

As *Travesía*, the journal was originally published by the Centre of Latin American Cultural Studies, established at King's College London by William Rowe and me (a graduate student at the time) in 1989. We had by then already organized a series of related conferences at which Martín-Barbero and García Canclini had been present. Indeed, the latter presented a version of his discussion of "the popular" from *Culturas híbridas*, published in 1990. Other important speakers included Roberto Ventura and Martín Leinhard. We had also invited Julio Ortega and David Viñas to give short courses at the Centre (Ortega had at that time developed his idea of "textos de cultura" from his semiotic engagement with the work of Arguedas and Luis Alberto Sánchez). Despite their obvious differences, these last names are important because they register an important *continuity*, rather than what might be perceived as a supposed *break* associated with the so-called "founders" of Latin American Cultural Studies. For, as far as I remember, we regarded the latter as part of, and developments within, a dynamic critical tradition associated for us with the names Angel Rama, Antonio Cornejo Polar and Alejandro Losada (whose largely forgotten projects to reconstruct a multi-temporal geo-history of the area's literary systems, for all its problems, was extraordinarily rich and ambitious), even Roberto Schwartz and Carlos Monsiváis, all so important to the socio-cultural turn in Latin American literary criticism between approximately 1975 and 1985. The peripheral anti-capitalisms of the latter, in particular their problematization of the nation-form and their varied ongoing accounts of post-coloniality within the experience of neo-colonialism, still constitute, in my view, a critical alternative to much of the postcolonial thought that has emerged from the British colonial experience. It is the inadequacies of the latter, coupled with its dominance, which endows the work of Losada et al. with a critical after-life. Indeed, one of the very first artisanal publications of the Centre was a commented bibliography of this work focusing on the critical projects, not only of Rama, Losada, and Cornejo Polar, but also of Hernán Vidal and Beatriz Sarlo (Kraniauskas, *Keywords*). Similarly, the "From the Archives" section of the Journal has dedicated itself to keeping some of this tradition alive. The establishment of journals and other publishing ventures were crucial to it, and although *Casa de las Américas* constituted an important background to much of this, my

feeling is that different and more productive forms of reflection were going on in the Minnesota-based *Ideologies and Literatures* (publishing a journal and a series of important books), and the more or less migrant *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*. *Hispamérica* was important too, as was the Asociación de Estudio de Literaturas y Sociedades de América Latina (AELSAL), which for some years after the death of Losada continued to meet (and publish) in the late 1980s in a variety of European locations and develop his project. Both William Rowe and I briefly attended and contributed to their meetings. AELSAL was an important forum for exiled Latin Americans and European scholars to meet and looking back, it is a connection the Journal could perhaps have made much more of as the Asociación came to an end.²

Other important figures at the time: Josefina Ludmer's probing of the interface of literature and the state was particularly important and spoke very powerfully to all our concerns. Julio Ramos too, who for a brief period during the late 1990s joined our editorial team: a kind of *hijo de . . .* Ludmer and Rama. In both, moreover, a critique of the *cuidad letrada* avoids the populist inversion so common to conventional cultural studies to suggest rather its "withering away" through a democratic leveling of forms. Their work is often itself highly composed; tentatively approaching and renovating that key form of the *cuidad letrada*, the essay (can we still productively oppose this form to the dominant "article-form"?). In the UK I should mention the poet and US cultural historian Eric Mottram, who ran a cultural studies seminar for years at King's College, that was very different from the usual British tradition, and for which US sociology and anthropology (C. Wright Mills and David Reisman), developments in scientific inquiry and technology (especially in their interface with avant-gardist poetics) as well as writers such as Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Virilio and poets and novelists such as Charles Olsen, Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs were important.³ Of course, one also has to mention Raymond Williams and the work of the Birmingham Centre. Indeed, for me, for all their differences and deficiencies, Williams and Rama constitute similar kinds of figures, producing democratizing, anthropology-based conceptions of culture. These were important beginnings.

As far as *Travesía* was concerned, the cultural turn of its cultural studies was thus more like a bend, a slight curve rather than a change in direction as such. Despite emerging from the intersection of a variety of cultural fronts, the beginning of the Journal's life was predominantly as-

sociated with shifts in Latin American criticism and its concerns—with which it engaged in conversation through translation. My feeling is that this, although to a much lesser degree, remains important, although less apparent. The real turn has to do with another shift, which I will discuss below.

There have been important changes in the Journal. The editorial team has changed as has the means and mode of its production and distribution. In 1995 what is now Taylor and Francis, the publishers of Routledge books as well as a large number of journals under the imprint of Carfax, began to publish the Journal. This involved a change in name to the far more bureaucratic and disciplinary *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*—in what was clearly part of a project to dominate what was perceived as an emerging transnational field of cultural study. Once the artisanal product of a very small University-based Centre, it is now part of a transnational knowledge economy and subject to the twin pressures of routinization and commercialization—evident not only in its exorbitant prices but also in its design. I am referring to the capitalization of intellectual labor here. In 1997–98 William Rowe, having brokered the agreement with Carfax, left the Journal, to be followed this year by David Treece (due to pressure of work). Daniel Balderston had already left previous to these developments, not long after the last of our first series of conferences and the publication of the excellent double “border issue” of *Travestía* (over the last five years we have organized a series of very small end-of-year one-day conferences, with four to five speakers at the most). Julio Ramos replaced Balderston soon after the transformation, but left two years ago, to be replaced himself by Hermann Herlinghaus (based in Pittsburgh). Nicolau Sevchenko and Raquel Rivas Rojas, now working in Venezuela, have also been and gone. Much of these changes in non UK-based collaborators have to do, I think, with an inherent conflict within the Journal between its origins as an intellectual project requiring close cooperation, discussion and face to face argument, on the one hand, and its gradual routinization as an institutionalized academic journal, on the other. Decisions on what eventually goes into the Journal remain very much an editorial one: despite readers’ reports, sometimes we just do not want to publish an article on a particular theme, no matter how good (how many articles can one, or should one, publish on the *testimonio*?). At other times, we might consider publishing a piece that may not be quite of established academic standards, but which has other things going for it—a new, exciting object, for example.⁴

There are also production schedules to keep. The temporality of the Journal's production, the pressure from the publishing company to increase the number of issues produced per year (from two to three, and now they want four), as well as to rationalize and facilitate their production and consumption (in exchange for their production and distribution facilities) is increasingly at odds with the temporality of the intellectual project as it was or as it wants to be.⁵ As Adorno pointed out some time ago (and George Yúdice recently reminded us), whoever talks of culture, also talks of administration—and administration here also refers to commodification. Although it is important also to note that this institutionalized space is a site of intellectual and ideological conflict and struggle too. Of the founding editors only Catherine Boyle and I are left, joined now by Herlinghaus—based in the US—and a group of younger scholars (Lorraine Leu, Jens Andermann and Ben Bollig), a couple of whom are still graduate students (Philip Derbyshire and Nicholas Roberts).

There have been other developments: although always weighted towards literature, the Journal has in my view succeeded quite well in being interdisciplinary, including articles on dance, music, art, a variety of popular and mass forms, and articles by historians, anthropologists and so on. Our latest issue, for example, includes pieces by young enthusiastic scholars on Latin American exploitation cinema alongside another by Martín Leinhard [see above] on Central American *indigenista* cinema. In many ways the Journal remains dynamic, and fits quite snugly in the research-article-book publishing circuit.⁷ However, a cursory look at the statistics, the geographical distribution of our subscriptions and website downloads, along with our article submissions, reveals that there *has* been a turn, a turn towards the US, its academic institutions, its postgraduate cultures and pedagogic discourses, its Latin Americanism, critical and not so critical, as well as its financial power. A history of this institutional and critical shift in our part of the field would have to mention dictatorship and exile, the crisis of Latin American universities and the process of attracting excellent graduate students to consolidate and dynamize the field (part of an academic competition very much centred on graduate provision). Which means that in feeding the “desire called cultural studies,” in Jameson's words, we become dependent, like so many other journals, on its power, both financial and ideological. Let me be clear: this does not necessarily mean that the work is bad; on the contrary, a lot of it is very good indeed,

outstanding even. It just involves the journal in a different set of critical and intellectual concerns and institutional mediations, which has to do with the parallel emergence within the lifetime of the Journal of a powerful US literary and cultural Latin Americanism which has pulled the Journal into its sphere of influence.

What this means concretely is that the life of the Journal is now guaranteed, not by the life of a critical or intellectual project, but by its institutionalization as a predominantly US journal within the field. In other words, it is now an academic journal. In this context, however, I still believe that it remains interesting, different, dynamic and relatively critical—and this takes a lot of work (which again, however, and rather frustratingly, is not really recognized in the charts outlining our most popular downloaded articles). Thus the constitutive tension structuring the Journal's production I mentioned above remains.

Let me conclude here with a final observation about the Journal's contents. As I have mentioned, we try—not always successfully—to include works of art in the journal. We have published photographs, plays, cartoons, screenplays, short stories, even poems. Against the grain of other, more populist conceptions of cultural studies, we have not been anti-literary, anti-poetic, or anti-aesthetic—in part, perhaps, because we have generally not favored overtly semiotic cultural analyses either. We have rather maintained an interest in artistic practice as such, as well as in cultural form. Perhaps for this reason, for example, the debates in radical US Latin-Americanism on the *testimonio*—central to the emergence of a cultural studies inflection in the field there—have not found an echo in our pages (and this despite our interest in anthropological work). Indeed, we might have offered a completely different approach to such texts, seeking out their aesthetic-cultural content, on the one hand, and their relation to the histories of bio-political regimes of labor in Latin America, on the other. With regard to the former, for example, we might have picked up on Luis Camnitzer's discovery in the late 1960s and 1970s of a post-conceptual art dimension to guerilla warfare and read the Rigoberta Menchú text in that light: firstly, as part of the strategic “spectacularization” of politics associated with urban guerrilla actions (Camnitzer is referring to the Tupamaros, but this was equally the case for the Sandinistas; see “Contemporary Colonial Art”); designed, secondly, to impact on and change the cultural and political milieu in which they took place as events, and in which the figure of Rigoberta Menchú herself (as an “organic” intellectual who “speaks”)

becomes a collective semi-industrial and political production with diplomatic intent; which finally, has internalized lessons from the traditions of political art in Latin America from the 1960s on (for example, those of the political documentary film—for which all the recording practices of anthropology were so important, not to mention those of advertising too).

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NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Jens Andermann, Catherine Boyle, Philip Derbyshire and William Rowe for their help in writing this account. What follows is a more or less personal story. From now on I will refer to the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, as well as its artisanal precursor *Travesía*, as “the Journal.”

² Such links might even have helped to establish a Euro-Latin Americanism!

³ See, for example, the essays collected in his *Blood on the Nash Ambassador*.

⁴ To my surprise, I did lose an argument to publish an essay by subcommander Marcos: it supposedly had nothing new to say about globalization. This may be an example of the essay-form losing out to article-form.

⁵ This assistance is also financial, to pay for editorial help and translations. But this is also, however, part of a common “putting out” system, which transfers labor production costs “down” and “out,” increasing profits. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refer to this labor as “immaterial labor” in their book, *Empire*.

⁶ Crucial, especially in the US academy, for the tenure process (increasingly in crisis).

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