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Academic readers, as an academic genre, take many forms. Readers for undergraduate history classes typically include a mix of primary sources and secondary analyses. Readers for graduate seminars most often mix major articles with new work on some relatively circumscribed topic. Readers that attempt to define an entire field, however, must include all of these things while at the same time attempting to frame that field in practical, methodological, theoretical, and (for the more adventurous) political terms. The first two reader types are fairly straightforward projects; the third is much trickier.

As its title suggests, The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader is a reader of the third, or field-defining type. Indeed the general introduction promises “to provide a comprehensive view, documented through established texts and authors, of the specific problems, topics, and methodologies that characterize Latin American cultural studies” (1). That it brilliantly delivers on this ambitious goal testifies to the breadth, vision, and rigor of its editors. Some of the field’s leading lights—those included in this volume and especially those who didn’t make the cut—may well be disturbed by many of its conclusions and implications. But for the rest of us, The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader will serve as an insightful, balanced, indispensable guide to a hard-to-define, much contested, interdisciplinary field “where human and social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, historiography, communications, and literary criticism, converge around a new conception of the ‘cultural’ (as a) field of struggle” (9). And I would wager that scholars across all these disciplines will be referencing this book and assigning it to graduate seminars for some years to come. More important still, coming at a crisis point in cultural studies in general, it should help reinvigorate a field worn down by more than a decade of academic culture wars and internal squabbles.

The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader has a clearly articulated and systematically developed thesis that revolves around “two axial hypotheses”:

First that Latin American cultural studies are a disputed field in a global scenario, which cannot be fully understood or further advanced without considering its historical grounding in Latin American sociocultural processes, and second, that . . . Latin American cultural studies are not just the product of an epistemological break, postmodern or otherwise, but
also the result of specific historical continuities.” (1)

Both hypotheses stress the productive tension that results from the intersection of external influences (most recently British and U.S. cultural studies) and a long-standing Latin American “tradition” of cultural critique with “its peculiar aesthetic, institutional, political, and cultural problematics, its diverse methodologies, and its historical antecedents, precursors, and founders” (1). And indeed, the editors identify and trace five “cognitive constellations”—neocolonialism, modernity and modernization, the national question, the popular, and identities/altermities/ethnicities—that have preoccupied generations of Latin American social theorists, constellations that look more than a little postmodern/poststructuralist/postcolonial despite their deep Latin American roots.

The reader is organized into four more or less chronological sections (with some overlap especially between the two final sections): Forerunners, Foundations, Practices, and Positions and Polemics. The “Forerunners” section includes classic essays by authors who have helped give Latin American cultural studies its distinctive contours: Antonio Candido on cultural dependency; Darcy Ribeiro on decolonization; Roberto Fernández Retamar on underdevelopment (Latin America as Caliban); Antonio Cornejo Polar on heterogeneity; Angel Rama on transculturation.

The “Foundations” section provides representative essays by some of the great names in Latin American cultural studies: Jean Franco on women’s popular fiction; Carlos Monsiváis on the Americanization of Mexican culture; Roberto Schwartz on creative copying; Beatriz Sarlo on intellectuals as ideologues; Walter Mignolo on imperial mapping and cultural hybridity; José Joaquín Brunner on peripheral modernities; Jesús Martín-Barbero on melodrama and re-cognition; Néstor García Canclini on anthropological and sociological traditions in cultural studies.

“Practices” offers a broad sampling of different approaches—interpretive strategies, disciplinary foci, methodologies—to Latin American cultural studies: Irene Silverblatt on the contested status of indigenous Andean women after the conquest; Beatriz González Stephan on the deployment of new notions of citizenship in the years following independence; Eduardo Archetti on the gendering of national identity in Argentine soccer; Adrián Gorelik and Graciela Silvestri on ideologies of urban development in twentieth-century Buenos Aires; Ana López on Mexican melodrama and female subjectivity; Francine Masiello on the transnational commodification of contemporary Latin American literature; Renato Ortíz on modernity as a distinction-producing lifestyle; Daniel Mato on transnational representations of indigenous cultures; Gustavo Remedi on Montevideo’s community radio as a local public sphere; Román de la Campa on the subversive potential of mimicry; José Rabasa on Zapatismo and the intelligibility of subaltern discourse; Debra Castillo, María Gudelia Rangel Gómez, and Armando Rosas Solís on internet client networks for Tijuana brothels; and Juan Flores on the genealogy of pan-Latino identities.

“Positions and Polemics” exposes some of the important divisions within Latin American cultural studies: John Beverley’s defense (and clarification) of the subaltern studies project; Mabel Moraña’s critique of subaltern studies as “epistemological re-centralization”; George Yúdice’s assessment of the impact of transnational cultural flows.
on Latin American intelligenzia; Hugo Achugar’s reworking of Fernández Retamar’s Calibanism in the context of neo-liberalism; Nelly Richard’s thoughts on the different positions from which knowledge about Latin America is produced; Alberto Moreiras’s analysis of the current crisis in Latin American cultural studies and its possibilities; Neil Larson’s concerns about the neo-exoticization of Latin American popular culture by progressive North American intellectuals; John Kraniauskas’s revision of the concept of hybridity in the context of globalization. The section concludes with a brief coda: Antonio Cornejo Polar’s brief ruminations on the eclipse of the Spanish language in the production of knowledge about Latin America—no doubt an intended irony on the part of the editors of this “definitive” collection of essays translated from or written originally in English.

No short review can begin to plumb the depths of a collection like this. Each of these well-chosen essays merits its own review and many have already garnered considerable scholarly attention—hardly surprising given the canonical status of several of the contributors. Still I suspect that there will be some pleasant surprises even for the cognoscenti, especially in the final two sections. Excellent essays by Gorelik and Silvestri (on urban development), Remedi (on community radio), and Castillo, Rangel, and Rosas (on Internet Johns) were completely new to me; so were the theoretical insights of Larson and Kraniauskas. My only real complaint is with the García Canclini selection. Although it presents a useful genealogy of disciplinary differences between anthropology and sociology in their respective approaches to cultural studies, the essay seems an odd choice given the centrality of Canclini’s conceptualization of hybridity, consumption, and urban imaginaries to Latin American cultural studies in particular and transnational cultural studies in general. Canclini’s many contributions are generously acknowledged throughout the book but it would have been nice to have some of his seminal work included as well. In defense of the editors, Canclini’s major work is readily available in both English and Spanish while the essay included here appears for the first time in English translation.

The editors’ introductions are as remarkable and useful as the essays themselves. Abril Trigo’s “General Introduction” establishes the reader’s thesis/hypotheses (noted above), and it confronts head-on the thorny question of Latin American cultural studies’ relationship with British and U.S. cultural studies, and provides a convincing three-stage account of its development since the 1960s. According to Trigo, the politically-charged 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the radical “theories of cultural imperialism, internal colonialism, pedagogy of the oppressed, theology and philosophy of liberation, and dependency” that would become “the first Latin American theoretical product[s] for export” (11). During the 1980s, he argues, the cognitive constellations (noted above) shifted as “Latin American cultural studies tried to elucidate and come to terms with neoliberalism” through “completely renovated subfields . . . such as colonial studies, gender and minorities, modernity and/or post-modernity, media and mass culture, and cultural hybridity.” (13) The 1990s, then, “staged the blooming and subsequent implosion of the field . . . [as] theoretical oversaturation and deconstructive hypertrophy . . . [led] to the present mood of uncertainty, disorientation, and fatigue.” (14)

Alicia Ríos’s introduction to the “Fore-runners” section provides the historical
background needed to support the editors’ argument for a distinctly Latin American strand of cultural studies. For Ríos, the field has its indigenous roots in a long-standing tradition of cultural critique that began with the liberal "dreams of reason" of nineteenth-century thinkers like Simón Rodríguez, Andrés Bello, and Domingo Sarmiento who sought ways to bring order to a region fragmented by the deep political, economic, social, and cultural divisions produced by a debilitating legacy of violent conquest and colonial dependency. This tradition picked up steam at the turn-of-the-century with the influential essays of José Martí and José Enrique Rodó on Latin American identity; reached "maturity" with the Marxist-inflected sociological—anthropological analyses of Manuel González Prada, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Fernando Ortiz; and laid a foundation for contemporary cultural studies with the works of Candido, Ribeiro, Fernández Retamar, Rama, and Cornejo included in this section. More than an overview of two hundred years of Latin American writing on culture, Ríos’s introduction convincingly demonstrates the dialogic, almost conversational aspects of these writings—as each generation of essayists engaged deliberately, critically, and reflexively with its intellectual predecessors.

Ana del Sarto’s introduction to “Foundations” extends the argument about Latin American cultural studies into the 1980s. As the heyday of British and U.S. cultural studies, this represents a decisive decade for Latin American cultural studies—the moment when it might seem to have been subsumed into a transnational field dominated by the Anglophone academy and Continental social theory. And indeed most of the essays included in this section deal explicitly with questions of cultural dependency in the context of mass media, mass consumption, and increased globalization. “If optimism was the generalized feeling of the 1960s and 1970s,” del Sarto notes, “the numbing perplexity and pessimistic sensibility of the 1980s, filtered through the spectralization of neoliberalism, became symptomatic of historical failure” (155). Haunted by the specter of neoliberalism, Latin American intellectuals (the most prominent featured in this section of the reader) “began to revise the old theoretical models and to reformulate lines of research and methodology, in order to interpret and explain a rapidly changing reality that was constantly spinning on itself” (156). As might be expected, revision meant considerable borrowing from other cultural studies approaches. Nevertheless, del Sarto insists that: “even when they operate within the framework of and in response to globalization, Latin American cultural studies are imbued with a cluster of methodologies, critical and theoretical paradigms, and cognitive constellations forged at different moments in intricate trajectory of Latin American cultural criticism and thought” (157). Del Sarto’s argument is that, in contrast to the situation in Britain and the United States, “Latin American cultural studies are not the product of epistemological ruptures but instead of concrete historical continuities” (157). If I had any doubts on this score, the essays included in this section put them securely to rest.

Abril Trigo’s introduction to the two final sections—“Practices” and “Polemics”—addresses the current state of Latin American cultural studies. According to Trigo, “the 1990s staged the blooming and the subsequent implosion of the field” (347). He attributes the florescence of Latin American cultural studies to a number of factors including a growing
Spanish language market, the migration of Latin American academics to the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, the shift from Cold War geopolitical concerns to neo-liberal transnationalism, and the presence of "a generation of progressive, anti-imperialist U.S. Latin Americanists, who were gradually torn between feelings of solidarity and superiority toward their object of study." (347) This convergence produced a "versatile and dynamic field, traversed by multiple faults and constant disputes, to the point of installing an unfortunate divide between Latin American and U.S.-based scholars." (348) Trigo’s account of the theoretical trends (subaltern studies, deconstructionist discourse analysis, postcolonialism, transnational cultural studies) and political in-fighting that characterized Latin American cultural studies in the U.S. academy during the 1990s is both comprehensive and highly critical. His analysis of the testimonio (testimonial) "craze" associated with the I, Rigoberta Menchú controversy, for example, ends with the withering comment that "testimonio provided U.S. leftist Latin Americanists facing the global ideological defeat of socialism, the institutional vacuum left by the obsolescence of Latin American studies, and the methodological crisis of modernist literary criticism with an object and an alibi upon which to reinvent themselves" (354). In response to these academic interventions, scholars working in Latin America began to speak out against the fetishization of Latin America by U.S.-based intellectuals. The ideological struggles that resulted from these protests produced, Trigo insists, a sense of "uncertainty and fatigue" that led some scholars to declare the field exhausted and sent others back to "the vilified classics of Latin American critical thought" (367–368). Trigo’s argument is convincing and discouraging, at least in so far as the intense theorizing and academic in-fighting of the 1990s is concerned. I’m less convinced and less discouraged when it comes to Latin American cultural studies as it is currently practiced in Latin America and the United States. Indeed, the excellent selections in the "Practices" section of this reader—given relatively short shrift in Trigo’s introductory essay—testify to the richness and interpretive power of cultural studies as a discipline. Theoretical exhaustion might be disturbing but it hardly presages the end of Latin American cultural studies. And the importance and timeliness of The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader may well reside in the ways in which it comes to terms with the field’s turbulent past and, in so doing, frees its practitioners to get on with a critical project that has become increasingly important in this neo-liberal age.

Reference Cited
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