LOCAL/GLOBAL LATIN AMERICANISM

‘Theoretical Babbling’, apropos of
Roberto Fernández Retamar

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The discussion of certain themes central to contemporary Latin Americanism in the light of the postcolonial debate finds a pre-text in the work of the important organic intellectual of the Cuban Revolution, Roberto Fernández Retamar. As this essay recontextualizes his discussion within the local history of current post-dictatorships in the Southern Cone, it further engages in dialogue with postcolonialism, postmodernism, postoccidentalism and postorientalism – the four critical projects that aim at overcoming modernity (Mignolo 1998). Two questions open the debate. With reference to the international division of intellectual labour, how does the growing Anglo-Saxonization of reflection about Latin America correlate with the local epistemologies? How do local histories, as producers of knowledge and of a ‘rhetoric of the colony’, impact global epistemologies and the ‘rhetoric of empire’? The further heuristic introduction of Latin American ‘theoretical babbling’, understood as a non-hegemonic descriptive tool, adds other layers to the debate. Is it productive to advance such a descriptive tool for postcolonial discourses developed in Latin America as instances of a non-European, non-North American or non-Commonwealth theorization? If shorn of the negativities associated with difference, is ‘theoretical babbling’ an appropriate category of analysis? Can it be seen as a form of resistance? Or does it weave a less than strategic connection with the colonizing category of barbarism, thus paving the way for the disqualification of discourses that do not follow the rules of production established by the hegemonic sites of knowledge?
Quel sera l’avenir?
La révolte des peuples sans histoire.

(Cioran 1997)

In Uruguay, in January and February 1999, the discussion about disappearances during the dictatorship and also about the confrontation between civilian power and the military took an unprecedented turn. The so-called ‘Sanitation Plan III’ aims to ensure that 95 per cent of the population of Montevideo region has access to the benefits of a sewerage system, and not only those in the city. The construction connected with the plan caused discussion between the national army, the regional administration – currently lead by the Frente Amplio, a left-wing coalition – and various other sectors of the national political spectrum. The discussion questioned whether the sewerage pipes should follow their projected route, which involved crossing a barracks, or whether the route should be modified. The barracks in question has been named as one of the places where numerous disappeared people were buried during the military dictatorship (1973–85). The matters at stake, which were debated by both sides, touched on the revision of the past, the theme of human rights, the authority of the army and of the regional government, and the preservation of any possible human remains – quite aside from technical matters, security issues, and questions of authority.

So, why begin an essay on the critical work of Fernández Retamar – and its theoretical implications – dating from the early 1970s, with a reference to the vicissitudes of Montevideo’s Sanitation Plan III from the late 1990s? The answer has to do with so-called ‘local histories’ and their importance in the production of theoretical discourses linked with ‘Latin Americanism(s)’. The answer is also related to what Nadia Lie notes in her development of the idea of ‘the rhetoric of colony’:

It follows that the much advocated attention to ‘the rhetoric of empire’ (Spurr 1995) might have to be complemented by what could be termed ‘the rhetoric of the colony’. It goes without saying that this does not imply that colonialism continues to be visible. What it does, however, hint at is that those people that live in the ‘margins’, are not ‘better readers’ - if they are at all - simply on the basis of their oppression by the West, but also because of concrete, local interests. (Lie and D’haen 1997: 265; emphasis added)

I do not agree word for word with Lie’s argument, however I do agree that those ‘concrete, local interests’ form the basis of readings from the margins or the periphery. It is also true that ‘concrete, local interests’ are not exclusively relevant to ‘those people that live in the “margins”’. In this sense, I find relevant Walter Mignolo’s comments about the four critical projects that aim to overcome modernity - the postmodern, the postcolonial, the postoriental and the postoccidental – because they contribute to the restitution of local
histories as producers of a knowledge that challenges, substitutes and displaces global histories and epistemologies, at a moment when the subject, stripped of the knowledge postulated by Descartes and articulated by modernity, is increasingly difficult to sustain (Mignolo 1998: 43).

The idea that the restitution of local histories as producers of a knowledge and the condition of reading from the periphery according to ‘concrete, local interests’ could both eventually function in the same way does not necessarily imply that local histories would be the same for all, even in the margins or the peripheries. The local history of one social subject is not the local history of another, even when both belong to the same community. The production of a social subject is not dependent only on a local history but also on ‘positioning’ – the ‘concrete, local interests’ – within that local history. The families of those who disappeared are not positioned in the same way as the military even though both groups, to some extent, share the same local history of the dictatorship.

The ‘post’ of the post-dictatorships of the Southern Cone enters into dialogue with the four ‘posts’ indicated by Mignolo. It is a ‘post’ that plays a central role in the production of knowledge, in particular because of its relation to political history and to the national and cultural imaginations of the ‘pre’-dictatorship era, as well as of all the narratives that organized that universe ‘pre’ or before. That is to say that the centrality of this ‘post’ is due to the ruptures it introduces with a past, the reconfiguration of cultural agendas and the repositioning of social subjects.

The ‘concrete, local interests’ that form the place of reflection for Fernández Retamar, myself, and many others are not necessarily equivalent. It is not only the ‘concrete, local interests’ that differ, but, following Walter Mignolo’s argument, the languages used are not equivalent either. Despite his validation of local histories as producers of a knowledge that displaces global epistemologies, Mignolo maintains (when he refers to an attempt by the Argentinian del Barco to contextualize Fernández Retamar’s discourse) that ‘the moment of energy and intellectual production in Latin America [supposedly the 1970s] tends to get blurred in the international theoretical scene because of the hegemony of the English language and the discussion about postmodernism and postcolonialism, which is fundamentally conducted in English’ (1998: 39). Mignolo’s proposal seems to suggest that the vindication and restitution of ‘local histories as producers of a knowledge that challenges ... global histories and epistemologies’ is possible only in English. This begs the question of whether the statement is related to the ‘local histories’ of Mignolo’s place of writing and reflection – the North American academy – and to the emergence of a Latino-North American theoretical ‘market’, as well as the growing ‘Anglo-Saxonization’ of reflection about Latin America.3 Whether ‘pre’ or ‘post’, ‘local histories’, like any story, presuppose heroes and villains, strategies and narrative models.

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3 It is worth remembering what Antonio Cornejo Polar pointed out in his (posthumous) essay ‘Mestizaje e hibridez: los riesgos de las metáforas. Apuntes’ (1998), and his questioning of, and unease with, the growing production of work about Latin America in English.
1 On histories and filiations

Cannibals, barbarians, natives, savages, subalterns, slaves, ‘people without history’; marginalized, colonized, dominated: the list of descriptions or assessments of some of the characters of Latin American history – heroes or villains, depending on the story-teller – is even longer. These are nouns and adjectives that, without necessarily being synonymous, evoke different archives, traditions, and narratives.

Some of those archives propose that in the beginning was William Shakespeare and his well-known work The Tempest, vision of the ‘original inhabitants’ of the American continent. A more long-winded tradition includes Columbus, Montaigne, and other Europeans who elaborated visions of the ‘original inhabitants’ of the American continent which would soon be inherited in order to characterize future generations of ‘hybrid’ or ‘transculturated’ Latin Americans. It would be possible to go back even further and to maintain that the original archive is to be sought in Herodotus or in Jenofonte’s and Arrian’s Anabasis. We could even dream of travelling back in time in order to witness the moment when a person not belonging to a tribe was first labelled ‘foreign’. We could seek out the first document or human being to identify another person as an object to conquer, as a threat, or as a convenient enemy on the basis of language, skin colour, or religion. We could seek out that document or norm that established categories of citizens – A, B, C – and permitted some of them to speak but not others, as occurred during the Uruguayan dictatorship – or as occurred with the Indians and then with black people during the ‘Conquest’, and as seems to occur today with the division of intellectual labour and the hegemony of certain languages.

There is no single history of the genealogies of the Other. Some include Herodotus, Columbus, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Renan as links in a complex plot that in Latin America continues into the late twentieth century. Among others, this plot incorporates Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, José Enrique Rodó, and Fernández Retamar. Other variants would include Vicente de Valverde, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, Bartolomé de las Casas, Guamán Poma de Ayala, José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, Frantz Fanon, or ‘Che’ Guevara. While some writers (Harold Bloom (1992), for example) include Aimé Césaire, John Dryden, and Jan Kott, they do not even mention Rodó, Fernández Retamar, or George Lamming – and Lamming does not write in Spanish, but in Prospero’s own language. There are yet others who include Fidel Castro without taking account of the fact that other ‘others’ rule him out. The archives, filiations, and genealogies are numerous, as has been indicated, and they are not only nourished by ‘writers’ but can also include mapmakers, painters and sculptors.

Hegel thought that theoretical discourse was impossible in the Americas (1946: 171–80). So, can Latin Americans in Latin America have ‘theory’,
whether minor or major? Who are those Latin Americans? Can they formulate a theoretical discourse, or are they capable only of ‘emotion’, of producing ‘magical realism’, ‘carnival’, ‘hyperinflation’, ‘tango’, ‘enchiladas’, ‘murals’, ‘drugs traffic’, and ‘coup d’état’? Can marginalized and subaltern Latin Americans produce theoretical discourses, or should they limit themselves to translating them from English, like they used to do from French or German?

Can it be that anything that is not part of the written and prescribed tradition that follows Shakespeare, Columbus, and many others cannot be heard? Can it be that on a theoretical or scientific level the ears of the northern hemisphere will always perceive discourse from Latin America — whether major or minor, learned or popular, left wing or right wing, from men or women, miners or academics — as incoherent or inconsistent theorizing?

2 ‘Theoretical babbling’ and Caliban’s ‘incoherence’

PROSPERO: Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which
good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison.

CALIBAN: You taught me language; and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!
(Shakespeare 1995: 19–20)

Prospero interprets and qualifies Caliban’s speech as ‘gabble’ — that is, as incoherent speech. In fact, Prospero’s judgement of Caliban’s incoherence refers not only to the incoherence he perceives in human ‘babbling’; it is the incoherence of a turkey, ‘a thing most brutish’ that does not know how to talk. Prospero has tried to teach Caliban to talk but all he has learned to do is to talk incoherently, to ‘talk rubbish’/’gabble’, to ‘gabble’/’babble’ like ‘a
interventions – 5:1

thing most brutish’. According to Prospero, Caliban has learned only to make ‘inarticulate sounds ... as of fowls’. The movement from ‘gabbling’ to ‘babbling’ takes us from the animal to the child, but both terms imply, for Prospero, degraded speech, as is clear from the affirmation that Caliban cannot talk coherently and therefore does not qualify as a competent speaker. Caliban cannot speak the conquerors’ language correctly, although he can curse. He cannot carry on a major discourse but can only ‘maldecir’/‘decir mal’ – that is, ‘curse’/‘speak awry’, or, rather, carry on a discourse of resistance, a minor discourse.

Caliban’s speech qualified as ‘gabble’ would strike the hegemonic ears as a poor imitation of the dominant discourse. Is this true, or is it the case that Caliban does have a discourse of his own that Prospero cannot understand? There is no reference to Caliban’s own, original language. There is no record of it because the ‘aboriginal’ language has been wiped out, silenced. The only one that remains and is recorded is the language he has learned. By the same token, what has been learned badly can only produce – to Prospero’s kind of ears – a bad imitation, a ‘babbling’, a mere ‘gabbling’.

The linguistic scene of The Tempest does not raise ambiguities: ‘gabbling’ and ‘babbling’ are negative. But the negative exists as such only for Prospero; Caliban does not apprehend it this way. ‘Babbling’ for Caliban is affirmative: it states his resistance to Prospero’s power. In Shakespeare’s adumbration of the linguistic scene in the seventeenth century, ‘babbling’ is negative; Caliban’s interpretation is not valid. But such a scene did not end with The Tempest in the seventeenth century; it has continued into our days.

In Caliban: Apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América, when Fernández Retamar refers to the ‘linguas francas’ that (we) Latin Americans speak, he argues:

Right now, that we are discussing, that I am discussing with those colonizers, how else can I do it except in one of their languages, which is now also our language, and with so many of their conceptual tools, that are also now our conceptual tools? This is the extraordinary cry that we read in ... The Tempest ... the deformed Caliban, whose island Prospero had stolen, and whom Prospero would enslave and teach his language, this Caliban reprimands him ... Knowing how to curse. (1971: 12)

A learned language, which is now our language, one in which it is possible only to ‘curse’, ‘speak awry’, ‘babble’, and which therefore is a ‘minor’ language, ‘minor’ discourse. The language scenario designed in The Tempest has continued into the present. The ‘babbling’ that the minor language can produce is not capable of what is perceived as ‘systematic’ and ‘methodic’ thought. At the beginning of Para una teoría de la literatura hispanoamericana y otras aproximaciones, Fernández Retamar subscribes to José
Gaos's contention that in Spanish and Spanish American thought the 'most original and valuable aspect is the essay, the article and the speech' (1975: 43). He highlights constraints in systematic and methodic thinking:

in what pertains to studies of literary theory in our America, we should not limit ourselves to works that take the form of 'the systematic and methodical tract or course' ... rather ... we should consider others; apparently less rigorously structured around this discipline. (ibid.)

Such a scenario seems to repeat itself. Latin American theoretical discourse tends to appear in other forms and those who elaborate it include not only 'pure theorists' or 'critics' – such as Alfonso Reyes, Henríquez Ureña, etc. – but also, in Fernández Retamar's words, 'protagonists of our literature', like Martí and Rubén Darío. Apparently, for Gaos and Fernández Retamar, the 'systematic and methodical tract or course' is not characteristic of Latin Americans (although it is more than possible that they were thinking only of Spanish America); instead, what is recommended is 'theoretical babbling', as Latin American thought appears in essays, articles, and speeches. Those who think that there is only one way to do theoretical work – their way or what their institutions define as the way – cannot recognize the discourse of the Other as structured and will qualify whatever they interpret as unsystematic and unmethodical as mere 'babbling'. Once again it seems that there is a hegemonic or Prosperian way to theorize, and a cannibal, subordinate, or minor way. But Caliban's reply to Prospero implies the vindication of his speech – his right to 'babble' not as an invalid or incoherent speech but as his own valid and structured discourse. What is it that is being established: a difference or the Prosperian use of difference as a mark of disqualification? Both: difference and disqualification. For Fernández Retamar, theoretical activity in Latin America is different. For Gaos, theoretical activity in Latin America is different and worthy of disqualification. However, while Fernández Retamar subscribes to Gaos's contention of difference, the latter's further emphasis on difference qua disqualification punctually contaminates the former's discourse with traces of ambiguities, which might have momentarily undermined the force of his argument.

Fernández Retamar's second observation runs in a different direction:

The works that I mentioned at the beginning [El deslinde by Alfonso Reyes and La estructura de la obra literaria by Félix Martínez Bonatti] are attempts at literary theory written in Spanish America, but not theories of Spanish American literature. The reason for this is simple: they aspire to be general theories. (1975: 43)

This second observation, which to my mind is the weightier and the more intrinsically interesting of the two, allows Fernández Retamar to stress local
The theories of Spanish American literature could not be made by taking over and imposing en masse criteria that were forged in relation to other literatures, metropolitan literatures. Such criteria, as we know, have been proposed - and introjected by us - as having universal validity. But we also know that this is altogether false, and represents no more than another manifestation of the cultural colonialism that we have suffered, and that we have not completely stopped suffering, as a natural sequel of political and economic colonialism. In the face of this pseudo-universality, we must proclaim the simple and necessary truth that a theory of literature is the theory of one literature. (1975: 48)

He goes further and argues - as is logical given the historical moment that the Cuban Revolution was going through - that, by virtue of their shared colonial past, the countries of the Third World have everything in common. This homogenization of the colonial past - perhaps tributary to the political needs of the Revolution in the 1970s - does not seem to maintain the line of argument that local history determines the production of knowledge. In this sense, in the essay 'Brazilian culture: nationalism by elimination', the critic Roberto Schwarz seems to offer another line of argument, holding that the class variable in local histories becomes preponderant at the moment when 'originality' or colonial impositions (copies) are to be established (Schwarz 1992). A paraphrase of both Schwarz and Fernández Retamar would allow us to affirm that theoretical discourse is the theoretical discourse of one class - an idea that also draws on a long tradition of Marxist thought.

But there is another dimension to Fernández Retamar's thesis regarding the necessity to react 'in the face of this pseudo-universality' by proclaiming 'the simple and necessary truth that a theory of literature is a theory of one literature'. Situating theoretical literary discourse as the 'theory of one literature' does not only presuppose a local history, or, following Schwarz, the reality of class projects (or those of a particular class), but also proclaims the pseudo-universality of certain theoretical propositions. This is something that feminism, among other projects, has signalled time and again. In fact, it questions the very idea of 'globalization'.

This line of argument would seem to run the risk of rendering theoretical discourse unviable for more than one local history, or even for more than one class or gender. This is not however the thrust of Fernández Retamar's argument. He problematizes the very notion of 'Spanish America' and foregrounds its historical condition. Moreover, taking up propositions made by José Carlos Mariátegui, he argues that the unity of Spanish or Latin America will not be achieved within the bourgeois order. That is to say, the possibility...
of scientific or universal knowledge is not rejected, but projected into a future in which the bourgeois order will have been defeated (and, although he does not extend his discussion to include it, when a ‘subject’ capable of producing a truly universal scientific discourse will have arisen: the proletariat).

Fernández Retamar problematizes the idea of a universal literature when he meditates: ‘does that literature already exist, that world literature, not as a mechanical addition but as a systematic reality?’ (1975: 44). Interrogating Goethe’s idea of a ‘Weltliteratur’, he maintains that ‘European capitalist expansion had established the premises for a world literature because it had established the premises for the genuine globalization of the world’ (ibid.: 45). He adds: ‘but these premises could not be crowned within the capitalist framework: such a task would correspond precisely to the system that would dismantle that framework – at the moment, still incomplete’ (ibid.). He based the impossibility of a universal theory on the fact that the world still was not united – neither in Goethe’s time nor in 1972 when he was writing his essay. Read today, in 1999, after the fall of the Soviet Union and in the midst of the age of ‘economic and financial globalization’ or of the ‘globalization of culture’, Fernández Retamar’s affirmation sounds like wishful thinking. Without discussing the more general theme of possible ‘globalization’, which, as Appadurai argues, is often little more than a synonym for ‘North Americanization’, ‘Japanization’, etc., it would seem apposite to recall the near commonplace that, alongside these ‘global’ processes, there are also ‘local’ or ‘localization’ processes (Appadurai 1993). In this respect the term ‘glocal’ is extremely eloquent.

The preceding point does not, however, resolve the question about the possibility of a theoretical or scientific discourse with universal validity. From another perspective, the question of global or local discourse also presupposes that of the subject. Unless, given the present balance of power and the location of economic and military hegemony, it is to be maintained that knowledge production can only take place in the northern hemisphere, particularly in the US, and that only subjects living in the northern hemisphere are capable of producing knowledge – even if they are originally from Latin America, India, Pakistan, Australia, or even ‘minor’ European countries. On this matter, it is interesting to consider what Fernández Retamar indicated in 1971, commenting on the ‘legacy’ of Martí and Rodó, a legacy that carries Martí’s idea of ‘Our America’, as opposed to Anglo or North America, and Rodó’s idea of a ‘spiritual’ (Ariel-like) Latin America in opposition to a ‘material’ or ‘non-spiritual’ (Caliban-like) Anglo or North America.

So, if, because of the strange circumstances mentioned, that knowledge [of Martí’s work] was forbidden or was only permitted in a limited way … what then can we say about more recent authors who have editions of Martí to hand but, nevertheless, insist on denying him? I am not thinking, of course, of scholars who are more
or less foreign to our problems, but, on the contrary of those who maintain a consistent anticolonial attitude. The only explanation for this fact is painful: colonialism has penetrated us so deeply that we only read anticolonial authors disseminated from the metropoles with real respect. (1971: 39–40)

However, even if the site of knowledge were to be identified with, or rather decided by, the new Prosperos of the North American or Commonwealth academies, the universality of theoretical discourse would continue to be a problem, at least in the human sciences. For Fernández Retamar, the problem of universality weaves into the discussion of the theme of the West; thus, the West and ‘occidentalism’ are categories that belong with the dichotomy bourgeois order/socialism. In fact, he claims the right to theoretical discourse of those who belong to the margins of the capitalist world.

Once again, the problem seems to be between Caliban and Prospero, between speaking or not, thinking or not. Spivak (1988) has claimed that the subaltern cannot speak and that at the point of speaking he or she abandons, or no longer occupies, the situation of the subaltern. From different positions and with different implications Bhabha (1994) and Irigaray (1977) have posited that the option available to certain ‘marginal’ and ‘hybrid’ subjects is ‘imitation’ (mimicry).

Can barbaric Latin Americans theorize? Should they ‘Prospereanly’ speak or can they ‘barbarically’ babble? Speaking differently used to mark one off as a barbarian; it was, literally, ‘to babble’. Is there only one way of theorizing? Can I, as a barbarian, have the right to my own discourse? Or should I theorize, as Prospero does?

**3 Latin American critical discourse as intervention?**

How pertinent as a category of analysis is ‘theoretical babbling’, understood as a non-hegemonic theoretical thought, for referencing Latin American discourse in its non-European, non-N orth American, or non-Commonwealth specificity? Is it possible to think of a ‘minor’ use of theory – making a free paraphrase of Deleuze’s proposition – and ‘theoretical babbling’ as a positive and valid category? Or does ‘theoretical babbling’ run the risk of being appropriated as barbarism, as just another way of disqualifying any discourse produced outside the rules of theoretical discourse of the ‘centre’, or of the northern hemisphere universities? Will Latin American cultural criticism, ‘essay-writing’ (ensayismo), or thought thus be seen as worthless theorization because they do not fall within the academic parameters of ‘scholarly’ thought – in the double sense of the word ‘school’ – from the Commonwealth and the gardens of academia? That is to say, to what extent are those who do not theorize like ‘I’ do perceived as barbarians who cannot speak Greek but can only ‘babble’ because they do not theorize within ‘my’ system? Who
determines and disqualifies a discourse as barbaric ‘babbling’: the speaking subject or the one who listens?  
Isn’t something similar happening in the dialogue between Latin Americanists from the north and the south to what was happening in the dialogue between Prospero and Caliban? Does it not keep happening today when Latin American discourse is heard from the perspective of the Prosperian Commonwealth theoretical discourse, of Anglo-Saxon postcolonialism, or of certain positions of Latino-North Americanism? Isn’t it the case that, as Fernández Retamar said, the only ones to merit ‘real respect [are] anticolonial authors disseminated from the metropoles’ and that the speech of those who are disseminated from Latin America is just ‘gabble’ to metropolitan ears, or to those of us whose ears have been so deeply silenced by colonialism? To put it another way, how is this matter related to other problems: the problem of the savage, of the cannibal or of Caliban; the problem of the Latin American subject or speaker; and the problem of ‘theory’ in relation to Latin America? To what extent do Fernández Retamar’s claims constitute a specific way of thinking and to what extent do they reveal a more general situation? 

In 1975, when Fernández Retamar published Para una teoría the Latin American critical project – labelled by Antonio Cornejo Polar as ‘the great epistemological project of the 70s’ (1994: 14) – included many other voices and seemed to have reached a climax. In fact, Fernández Retamar’s formulation arose in the context of critical restlessness and theoretical proposals from many countries in Latin America. There is the evidence of the so-called ‘Conversatorio de Lima de 1974’ in which, among others, Nelson Osorio and Antonio Cornejo Polar participated, and also the earlier polemic between Oscar Collazos, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar, as well as many editorial projects and various of Ángel Rama’s essays of the early 1970s. In Argentina, different critical projects were consolidated, some of which were later carried on in Mexico and the US, and others, although under more difficult circumstances, in Argentina itself. In Peru, and then in Germany, Alejandro Losada aspired to give an account of social and literary systems. In Brazil, apart from the work of Antonio Candido (and his polemics with Haroldo de Campos), a whole critical endeavour, which included Roberto Schwarz, was developing. To the former there should be added the work developed in the Rómulo Gallegos Centre of Latin American Studies by Domingo Miliani and the research group comprising members from various Latin American countries. Towards the end of the 1970s, works like Carlos Rincón’s El cambio de la noción de literatura (‘Changes in the notion of literature’) or Roberto Schwarz’s Ao vencedor as batatas: forma literária e processo social (‘The winner gets the potatoes: literary form and social process’), among many others, signalled that the Latin American critical project had a multiple presence. Finally, the colloquia and essays convened and published by Casa de las Américas in La Habana and by Biblioteca
Ayacucho in Caracas indicated if not a conscious ‘project’ - the idea of a project could imply a sense of conspiracy or strategy that never existed - a kind of convergence of efforts that were not necessarily identical or homogeneous. In fact, Fernández Retamar’s proposals met with resistance from many active critics of the time, some of whom (Rama, Miliani) believed that Para una teoría risked proposing a ‘critical ameghinism’.11

The enthusiasm and re-evaluations triggered by Fernández Retamar’s proposal - in the different participants in the Latin American critical debate both inside and outside Latin America - confirm the importance of the text published in 1975, and its articulation with the situation in Latin America (particularly the Southern Cone, including Brazil) and Cuba.

So, to what extent did the proposal of Para una teoría represent an intervention in Cuba’s internal debate and also in the Latin American debate? Moreover, to what extent did this, or these, essays constitute the theoretical foundations of Caliban’s ‘theoretical babbling’? In other words, to what extent did Latin America’s ‘theoretical babbling’ constitute a minor discourse?

Before attempting to answer this question it is necessary to turn back and consider the relationship between Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero.

4 On Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero and the function of the Latin American intellectual

For a sector of both the First World and the Latin American academy, the Uruguayan José Rodó and his Ariel (1900) - a book that was to dominate the intellectual scene during the first decades of the twentieth century because of its aesthetic, anti-utilitarian, and anti-North American spirit - symbolize the position of the elitist intellectual who is linked to the power system and who carries out its orders; they are characteristic of the ‘lettered city’ as described by Ángel Rama: ‘in the centre of every city, passing through various stages that reached their plenitude in the vice-regal capitals, there was a lettered city forming a circle that was protective of the power system and that carried out its orders’ (1979: 33).

The questioning of Rodó is old and has a long history (a large part of which can be found in Fernández Retamar’s Caliban), the same way that the accusation of arielism is not new. In 1967, some years before Fernández Retamar published his rereading of Rodó’s Ariel, Carlos Real de Azúa, referring to a colloquium and subsequent book edited by Lipset, maintained: ‘the first and most used [of an abundant set of stereotypes] consists in attributing resistance to Yankeeization to the fact that intellectuals are “arielists”’ (Real de Azúa 1987: 306). Rather than Rodó’s Ariel itself, the problem resides in what was done with the book – or, rather, in whether
arielism is viewed as a synonym of antidemocratic and elitist discourse. It is true that such a reading of Ariel and arielism is valid; but it is just one way of reading Rodó. Ariel, and therefore Rodó himself, can and have been read differently. Among other things, Caliban is such a rereading of Rodó’s Ariel. Most important, however, are a rereading and a substantial modification of the view of the function of the Latin American intellectual. Moreover, Caliban questions a metropolitan discourse that doubts the existence of Latin American discourse, or that considers it of little importance as mere reproduction. It is not in vain that the essay begins and presents itself as a response to a question formulated by ‘a European journalist, seemingly of the Left’:

The question seemed to me to reveal one of the roots of the polemic, and it could be expressed in another way: ‘Do you exist?’ Because to question our culture is to question our existence, our very human reality, and as such, it indicates a readiness to take the part of our irremediable colonial condition, suspecting that we are only a disfigured echo of what is going on elsewhere. That elsewhere, of course, is found in the metropoles, the colonizing centres. (Fernández Retamar 1971: 7)

The clear provocation establishes its situation of enunciation: ‘the recent polemic about Cuba’; the identity of a them – ‘some bourgeois European intellectuals (or aspiring to be so), with visible colonialist nostalgia’; and of an us – ‘the major writers and artists of Latin America who reject open and veiled forms of political and economic slavery’ (ibid.).

At the beginning of the 1970s, Cuba was at a particular political moment. Following the Cultural Congress and after the Padilla ‘case’, the polemic referred to by Fernández Retamar at the beginning of Caliban was unleashed, and intellectuals were divided between those who supported the Cuban Revolution and those who criticized it. In the following quotation Ambrosio Fornet described that stage of the Cuban Revolution, which produced intense debate inside and outside of Cuba:

Everyone took the existence of the other for self-justification. The offensive of dogmatism only made the liberals cohesive; the cohesion of the liberals worsened dogmatism. Every time the dinosaurs moved – as Jorge Ibarra would say – the butterflies jumped; every time the butterflies jumped, the dinosaurs moved. In this vicious circle the only things that got damaged were the insects on the ground, the plants that had already been planted and the ground itself. (Dalton, Fornet et al. 1969: 51)

It would be productive to read Caliban in this context, which also allows us to understand Fernández Retamar’s proposed rereading of the Ariel-Caliban-Prosero trio and his proposal as to the function of the Latin American intellectual. It is in this context that he affirms, at the beginning of the second
part of Caliban and after his archaeology of the character, ‘our symbol is not, then, Ariel as Rodó thought, but Caliban… I do not know a metaphor better fitted to our cultural situation, to our reality’ (Fernández Retamar 1971: 30). He immediately goes on to elaborate a long list that functions as a filiation of ‘our cultural situation’. The list includes Independence leaders, martyrs like Tupac Amaru, social activists, poets, sculptors, popular music from the Antilles, Carlos Gardel but also Héctor Villalobos, Mexican muralism, Violeta Parra, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, etc. It is Fernández Retamar’s filiation and that of anyone who identifies with it.

What is interesting is not so much the postmodern mixture of this unchaotic ‘enumeration’, but rather the implicit elaboration of a ‘them’ and an ‘us’, of Ariels and Calibans. According to Fernández Retamar, ‘they’ are the Ariels, ‘bourgeois European intellectuals (or aspiring to be so), with visible colonialist nostalgia’. ‘We’, Calibans, are, for Fernández Retamar, ‘the major writers and artists of Latin America who reject open and veiled forms of political and economic slavery’. However, the ‘them’ and ‘us’ that his text sets out from the beginning and maintains for a long time are then reformulated into another opposition, where Ariel is less of an enemy than Prospero.

An important part of the essay’s argument does aim to dismantle Rodó’s Ariel, and the very symbol of the intellectual who is occupied in Prospero’s service. The fundamental force of rejection or questioning, however, is directed toward Prospero rather than Ariel. As has been seen, the fact that Rodó’s proposal is forcefully and unmistakably called into question does not imply that the essay’s historical function and usefulness are ignored. Following Mario Benedetti, in the following quote Fernández Retamar affirms:

> Despite its lacks, its omissions and its naivetes … Rodó’s vision about the Yankee phenomenon, rigorously located in its historical context, was in its time the first springboard for other later claims which were less naive, better informed, more far-sighted … today, the almost prophetic substance of Rodó’s arielism conserves some of its relevance. (1971: 31)

He comments, ‘these observations are supported by incontrovertible realities’ (ibid.). Further on, and after strongly questioning Rodríguez Monegal’s interpretation, he affirms:

> All things considered, it is almost certain that these lines would not carry the name they do if it were not for Rodó’s book, and I prefer to see them as a homage to the great Uruguayan whose centenary is being celebrated this year. It is not strange that the homage should contradict him on more than a few points. (ibid.: 34)

Ariel and Caliban are two forms of our culture for Fernández Retamar. The fact that one is the traditional, belletristic intellectual and the other the
organic intellectual or revolutionary (ibid.: 82) does not imply that both could not be, in his words, merely ‘servants in the hands of Prospero, the foreign sorcerer’ (ibid.: 35). This is what allowed him to affirm earlier in relation to Rodó that ‘even if he got the symbols wrong, as has been said, it is no less true that he was able clearly to point out the great enemy that our culture had in his time – and in ours – and that is massively more important’ (ibid.: 31). Prospero, the greatest enemy, is for Fernández Retamar ‘the foreign sorcerer’. However, Prospero also represents or constitutes the site of knowledge, as has already been said. This is the knowledge that can disqualify Caliban and ‘dazzle’ Ariel, the knowledge that allows him to dominate the island that they ‘all’ inhabit. Moreover, Prospero also represents or constitutes the knowledge of power – knowledge fitting for a ‘foreign sorcerer’.

Fernández Retamar’s proposals are taken up by some, adulterated by others, and even translated into English. The sanitation plan that is crossing the barracks in Montevideo is celebrated by some, lamented by others, and demonized by still others. How are we to read the present that is a form of reading the past and of constructing the future? From where is the future to be read? Whose future?

‘What will the future be? The revolt of the people without history’, Cioran asked and answered himself (1997). What cultural tradition does Cioran belong to? Is it valid for a Latin American to quote him? One possible answer – to which the present meditation does not aspire – would be negative. The optimism that could be read as inspiring the passage by Cioran is surprising in a writer who does not often turn to thoughts that are, if not utopian, at least ‘happy’. Although the answer seems simple and direct it raises various problems. Who are these peoples without history? What does it mean to be without history? Is it those who live on the margins of history in a western sense – that is, outside western (European) historical time? Or is it those who live within the history of the West (including the Latin American periphery) but in a marginal or subordinate position and therefore have an ‘invisible history’? Is it possible to conceive of the history of peoples without history? Would it be possible to express it in one language or should it be done in many languages at the same time?

Could it be that those who have no history or whose history is invisible (in Arendt’s sense) are those who cannot talk and can only ‘babble’ in Prospero’s sense? Could it be that the new Prosperos who hold power and who will rewrite history are prepared to proceed as Arnoldo de Regensburg proposed around 1030? Are the current Prosperos ready to uphold a version of Regensburg’s affirmations that might read:

It is not only appropriate for new things to change old ones, but also that if the old things are disordered, they should be thrown out and forgotten; or if, on the other
hand, the old things fit in with the proper order of things but are seldom used, then
they ought to be buried with a salute to the flag. After all, I, Prospero, know what
is best for both Caliban and Ariel, and, as if that was not enough, the present and
the future belong to me?

Let me finish by proposing two further questions. Could it be true that
there is not only one postcolonial discourse and that it does not remain self-
identical through history and across languages and cultures? Could it be that
‘theoretical babbling’ is the place that present Anglo-Saxon postcolonial
discourse reserves for postcolonial discourse in other languages? Clearly the
answer is not simple. It is particularly complex if one takes into consideration
the peculiar situations in which Latino-North Americans live, as does José D.
Saldivar, who is then led to inscribe his theoretical discourse in a ‘space of
hybridity and betweenness in our global Borderlands composed of historically
connected postcolonial spaces’ (1991: 153). This is a space that is not only
composed of historically connected postcolonial ones but also of colonizing
spaces, since for Latin America the US continues to be a colonizing force.

What remains unsettled and without resolution is the past of our own
present. What remains unsettled and without resolution is a multiple dialogue
between the numerous interlocutors. What remains unsettled and without
resolution is the need to transform Prospero’s monologue into a truly demo-
cratic assembly.

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LOCAL/GLOBAL LATIN AMERICANISM

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