



*Literature,  
Subjection,  
and the  
Historical  
Project of  
Latin American  
Literature*

Beginning roughly at the end of the nineteenth century, Latin American writers launched a project to map the whole convoluted reality of their countries in their literary works. However, Latin American countries were (and still are) notoriously heterogeneous spaces. Soon, then, the literary enterprise was confronted with the task of giving voice to a vast array of people with whom literature shared little in terms of values and cultural makeup. Writers did not recoil from the challenge. Convinced as they were of literature's representational power and its seemingly limitless ethical neutrality, they focused on the best strategies to represent the marginal in its many shapes: the excluded, the downtrodden, the abject, the almost forgotten past. Their effort to reach the outskirts of social representation fostered a modification of the literary form, an enhancement of its capabilities, and a transformation of its principles of composition. There was a moment, however, when it became apparent that the dialogue between the excluded and the literary regime of representation could not continue without a more radical questioning of the literary form itself. This book thus centers on authors (Juan José Saer, Augusto Roa Bastos, Jose María Arguedas, Nellie Campobello) who test the limits of literary representation and thereby interrogate the intrinsic complicity that binds literature to social power. The dynamic by which literature must look to its own arsenal

for weapons that may allow it to negate its historical domestication is the one I try to evoke with the title *Literature and Subjection*.

This dynamic, which ties literature to representation and representation to social power, is not the product of independent, contingent, and unrelated personal literary projects, but an affair of literature as a whole. It constitutes a historical project, a project that relies on a conception of literature as a mere form able to lend its dreamlike body to the most variegated materials. In this book, I try to remain faithful to what I perceive as a tension between the supposedly universal reach of the literary word and the singular, sometimes intractable areas of the Latin American experience that literature not only symbolizes but also searches for, that it struggles with or begrudgingly abandons. The combination of a close study of literary formations with an intense attention to the context of their deployment may justify, I hope, the characterization of this book as a cultural study of the literary form. This kind of study is easy to undertake when the researcher is willing to replace the literary experience with a sociological or historical flight of fancy. I have tried to avoid this path. In my view the only way to honor the potentialities of a culturalist approach is to first pose the fundamental question that defines the field of literary studies: What is literature?

The book thus combines two approaches that are often vulgarized as antithetical. I do not follow this path out of a desire to find a “happy medium” between dissentient positions. Rather, the need for a dual approach to literature arises from the conditions that constitute our field. As Antonio Cornejo Polar puts it, any meaningful investigation of Latin America must locate itself at the intersection of historical determinations and theoretical demands (1989, 177). A historical account of literature unable to pose theoretical problems (in this instance, unable to pose the question of Latin American literature as a theoretical problem) is one that will inadvertently inherit and reproduce the limitations already encapsulated within the practice of literature itself. It will remain imperialist and colonialist while pretending to be representative and emancipatory. But a theoretical account of literature that fails to recognize that literature always arises out of a negotiation between literary enunciation and the historical constrictions

of what can be said ends up measuring the existent with the yardstick of the nonexistent.<sup>1</sup>

Although this dual perspective puts a notorious strain on the analytical effort, my intention here is to maintain the tension between the two constitutive and essential components of the literary experience: its transcendental aim and its actual form. Attending to only one side of the equation will always result in a certain simplification. Any “transcendental” interrogation of literature remains naive if it fails to address how the primary disposition of the literary leads it to articulate the goal of culture as an apparatus of capture and adaptation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, no cultural inquiry into the politics or the pragmatics of literature remains valid if it fails to account for the singularity and autonomy of literature.

The intimate relationship between literature and power is by now an academic truism. We are accustomed to approaches that break the aesthetic cordon sanitaire that the nineteenth century wove around the work of art (and that formalist and structuralist emphases later reinforced) and confront the text in its most vital political contexts. So if literature bears the mark of the Kantian identification of art with disinterest, culturally based approaches to society resist this identification and denounce the entanglement of literature with various political or institutional interests. In the field of Latin Americanism, several authors who have delved into the intimacies of state power and literary imagination come readily to mind: Angel Rama, Antonio Cándido, Josefina Ludmer, and David Viñas.<sup>3</sup> The key insight that literature has been historically tied to the evolution of different elites allowed certain authors to question the foundations of canon formation, which in turn facilitated the promotion of new literary names and forms. Finally, a general redefinition of the ways in which power impresses its aims on bodies and populations also helped position literature within a larger cultural landscape.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the risk of such demystification is to imagine that it yields the real structure of the literary experience, that freeing literature from all its mystifying elements (its claim to an immanent value, the aesthetic ground of canon formation, the excess of communication that defines the aesthetic word) will finally render its truth. What escapes those who entertain such

an illusion is the simple fact that literature became literature because of these mystifying, ungrounded, and excessive elements, not in spite of them. These elements, in other words, signal the essential center of the literary experience, even if they themselves are not this center.

Here I try to capture the dual being of literature in a simple formula: literature is an institution and, simultaneously, an instituting power. Literary texts exist in a tension that makes literature both a creative power and a set of territorialized practices in which that power is already mediated, silenced, or forgotten. Neither aspect of literature can be said to exist without the other. The “institution of literature,” therefore, does not refer here to literature simply as it is conceived by state institutions (pedagogical possibilities, literary prizes, cultural politics, etc.) or by associative institutions such as publishers, national language academies, and academic associations of different sorts. Indeed, in my view, literature’s role as an instituting power (one that creates social bonds through enunciation) makes these other institutions possible.

Within the first, institutional perspective, the formation that interests me may be termed the “historical project” of Latin American literature. Briefly, this project entailed the symbolic incorporation of peoples and practices persisting in the margins of society or nation into a sanctioned form of representation. It is more difficult to describe the instituting power of literature. Unlike institutions, instituting power has no history. While its nature is not primary or original, it replicates the inaugural instituting force that manifests itself in and through language. I understand this force along the lines of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s differentiation between *said* and *saying* (*le dit* and *le dire*) (1981, 40–42). For Levinas, speaking—independent of what is actually said—is the primary opening of the world. In Levinas’s phenomenological phrasing, speaking is an “intuition” of sociality. Speaking always goes beyond its intention because it cannot put forward any meaning without simultaneously building the social frame within which language can make sense. It is with this definition in mind that I refer to literature as the formalization of the instituting power of language. Now, although the instituting function of language has no history, the full extent of its revelation is no doubt a historical event.

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*Institution* and *instituting* provide a sort of phenomenological description of the being of the literary. This description, however, is still too broad, because it lacks the defining character of all cultural objects in modernity: historical density. How has the historicity of the literary form—not its contingency, but its being as being-historical—been conceived? Jacques Derrida, in an interview entitled “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” begins by circumscribing literature as a “relatively modern form” (1992c, 37).<sup>5</sup> It is not self-evident, he argues, that “Greek or Latin poetry, [and] non-European discursive works . . . strictly speaking belong to literature” (40). This assertion is based on the specific form of institutionalism that literature takes in modernity. As a modern form, Derrida notes, literature “is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy” (37). While establishing a commonality between literature and democracy runs the risk of presenting literature as nothing but a cultural moment in the evolution of bourgeois political life, if one reads carefully, it is clear that Derrida’s argument moves in a completely different direction. It interrupts the matter-of-fact bourgeois identification between “democracy” and the development of the ethos of a Europeanized middle class. In the region of the semiotics of power, however, good news readily turns into bad news, and vice versa. Although, as Derrida explains, “the freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon,” it is also a weapon, rapidly neutralized “as fiction” (38). The “critical function of literature” (which has been identified as an ideal of political intervention in Latin America and elsewhere for more than two centuries) could thus be undermined by the very thing that grants literature its disruptive force. With literature condemned to be a fictional account of the world, its commitment to criticism may seem hypocritical, and “the writer can just as well be held to be irresponsible” (38). Derrida goes on to rephrase this “irresponsibility” as the highest form of responsibility, since it implies a “duty . . . of refusing to reply for one’s thought or writing to constituted powers” (38). Despite the institutional forms that literature must take in order to exist, an unbridgeable distance separates the instituting power of literature from its already naturalized existence in institutions.

It is necessary to bring this apt Derridean description into clearer focus, or at least to bring it more in line with the goals of this study. The historical

project of Latin American literature is an equivalent of what Derrida calls the responsibility of literature. But in the case of Latin America, this responsibility appears thoroughly determined by the experience of colonialism, which integrated the continent into the timetable of European modernity. In this context, literature reveals itself to be part of a larger process of intercultural and intersemiotic translation. The representational role that fell to Latin American literature for most of the modern period depends on the simple fact that the representing and the represented instances belong to different orders. For this reason, since the instantiation of national literatures, the translation of the local and the status of the universal have constituted a persistent problem. As Angel Rama suggests in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, this representative character is closely linked to a given work's originality. Unlike Rama, I interpret *originality* to mean a work's proximity to the origin, its meaningful relationship to lived reality. In a postcolonial context, the fissure that separates work from origin is never closed, and its existence is so notorious that it often ends up as the subject of the work. Here lies the explanation for the fact that all the essential concepts of Latin American cultural criticism—transculturation (Ortiz, Rama), heterogeneity (Cornejo Polar), hybridity (Canclini), colonial semiosis (Mignolo), third space (Moreiras), tropological mimesis (González Echevarría), auto-ethnography (Pratt)—underline, with different intonations, the fissured self of Latin American culture as its ineluctable condition of possibility.<sup>6</sup>

This tension between universality and particularity, between literature's translative machinery and the material to be translated, unambiguously calls for a postcolonial perspective in our work on Latin America, notwithstanding all protests against this approach.<sup>7</sup> Either because the vanquished people were able to sustain a cultural-political autonomy through four centuries of imperial or republican darkness, as in the case of the Andes or some areas in Mesoamerica, or even because the national anti-imperialist project reawakened an internal cultural difference (as in *indigenismo*, *negrismo*, or *nativismo*), the fact is that Latin American literature seems condemned to portray once again this vital disjuncture between modernizing logos and intractable realities. Not only did this postcolonial condition originate in the trauma following the conquest, but it further represents a structural

matrix. This matrix speaks of an ever-unfinished dialectic between knowledge and reality, of an almost existential crisis—to use an unfashionable but necessary expression—in the relationship between Latin American populations and their ways of inhabiting the world. Later I will discuss how some of the most meaningful acts of symbolic decolonization have emerged linked to the question of production as the poietic appropriative event of cultural life. For now, suffice to say that in its most basic dimension, literature betrays its postcolonial character any time that it understands itself as translation—any time that it registers the uncomfortable resistance of a cultural Real in the stories it tells.<sup>8</sup>

While every literature is a translative device, and while it may be objected that the difference between Latin American and European literature is one of degree rather than kind, I would argue, like Hegel, that differences of degree become differences of nature. In fact, the German philosopher offers an instructive way to clarify our predicament. Hegel, although writing in a country that represented the rearward of capitalist modernization, nonetheless attempted an endeavor that was quite free from the constraints of coloniality.<sup>9</sup> He strove, first in *The Science of Logic* (1812–16) and later in the *Encyclopedia* (1817), to show that the conceptual order of thinking and the real order of the world not only coincided but were actually the same thing. His logic, as subsequent commentators noticed, was simultaneously an ontology (C. Taylor 1998). Literature has long been Latin America's most explicative ontology. It is, moreover, an ontology that constitutes the world according to a set of rules that precedes its involvement with the facticity of events or the brute materiality of life. Perhaps for this reason, whenever Latin American literature has tried to portray the identity between thinking and being, it has been denounced as an agent of violence and domination.<sup>10</sup>

Is not all this an exaggeration of the importance and reach of the literary word? After all, Julio Ramos has shown that at the end of the nineteenth century, literature appears as little more than an outcast from the domain of serious discourses. Further, Roberto González Echevarría has convincingly argued that the authority of the literary word depends, in the case of Latin America, on the authorizing presence of a master discourse (law in the nineteenth century, anthropology in the twentieth) that validates

literature's claims (1990). This relative dependence of literature upon law or ethnography is, although real, inessential. The *coming after* of literature does not compromise its grounding role. Its word is always inaugural. Asserting the foundational value of literature does not mean ignoring all its ideological uses, all the petty appropriations of the discourse of origins. Ontologies too grow discredited and fade. Here lies the charm of the literary: unlike most ontologies, literature has resisted historical criticism and managed to become the undisputable space for intercultural translation. It has become, in other words, a hegemonic form of universality. This is why I am reluctant to classify literature as a "white mythology" and prefer instead to advance some queries that will guide the interrogation of literature in the chapters to come: What if literature is marked not in its content, ideology, or morality, but in its very form, by the presence of elements belonging to a regional—mostly European, mostly bourgeois—design? What if this form—especially since it is always historically incarnated—reveals itself to be content? And finally, what if a notion of literature as the ideology of the total commensurability of experience, the transparent translation of any location, has survived all the attacks on the universal that we have seen in the development of structuralism, post-structuralism, postcoloniality, and postmodernity? These critical and theoretical breaks have done very little to "dislodge," as Neil Larsen puts it, the basic categories of the aesthetic with which "most of us were effectively indoctrinated" (1995, 105).

To illustrate my point, let me refer to Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller* (*El hablador*, 1987). This novel is told from the perspective of a narrator who acts as Vargas Llosa's alter ego: an intelligent, sensible, skeptical, and defiant intellectual. Some chapters, however, immerse the reader in the world of the Machiguenga Indians, by way of a narrator who tells a Machiguenga story *as if he were a Machiguenga speaking to a Machiguenga audience*. In these chapters, the reader is pulled by twin, almost contradictory currents. On the one hand, he/she has access to an indigenous worldview, or rather, to its translation, but a translation that strives to be, point by point, identical to its original. On the other hand, the reader seeks to restore a logical narrative to the story because he/she perceives the structure as a deviation from a norm of narration. In following this antinomy, the reader retreats from any real possibility of questioning the standard liter-

ary form, which, now sovereign, acts as a transcendental schema ordering the coordinates of the ethical encounter. Another culture is thus read and reduced through an appeal to literature as the primary form of a dominant universality.

Not by chance, *The Storyteller* is one of the Latin American books most persistently included in the canonical lists of world literature programs. The expression *world literature* itself suggests a democratic expansion of the actual universality of the literary—an expansion based on the ideology of literature that I have been questioning, which holds that literature incarnates the last and only lingua franca available to us. Far from constituting a truly democratic step, this assumption turns the concept of world literature into a platitude. The quasi-adjective *world* adds no diversity, but leaves the concept stranded in a certain state of unworldliness. World literature, a valid and valuable enterprise in other respects, cannot deliver the critical promise evoked by its name, because a dismantling of the dominant universality inherent in the conception of literature cannot be achieved by adding names to the membership list of a club that has long recognized a most exclusive membership. Dismantling is, above all, a task of determination and destruction.

And yet translation remains a concern for the peripheral writer, the kernel of his/her intellectual function. But what is to be translated, and how? Faced with the seemingly insurmountable problems of cross-cultural translation, the conscientious translator soon reaches an apparent paradox: a successful translation is always a failed one. For this reason, all ideologies of translation have undergone an epochal change when confronted with the historical and political process of global decolonization.<sup>11</sup> Today, translation can no longer be a process of giving the alterity of meaning a secure space of being and a true language because the conditions for this universality have been shattered. Translation is always, in the last instance, a translation of difference. The project of translating difference speaks directly to a final possibility of cross-cultural translation that I have not yet mentioned, although it is the very matter of this book: a resistance to translation strong enough to make the translative machine break down. This breaking-down also figures the collapse of hegemonic universality. And if the most resilient form of this universality is the literary form, this breaking-down en-

tails, as many of this book's analyses will suggest, the failure of literature itself. I don't impose this language of failure on literature from the outside. Literature—not the individual texts, but their transtextual solidarity, the institution of literature—fails according to its own standards, its own historical project. This takes me to the next point.

### The Historical Project of Latin American Literature

The universalization of literature that offered a rationale for cataloging any product of the imagination as “literature” is a relatively recent development. In the case of Latin America, it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century that the emergence of representative national-popular states fostered the need to map all the vast and disparate products of the imagination and incorporate them into a broad concept of national literature (with subdivisions like “folklore,” “traditional folk tales,” “oral literature,” “urban narrative,” etc.). The institutionalization achieved by popular forms and materials entailed recognition as much as co-optation. If these forms were incorporated into a larger and prestigious framework (that of literary expression), they entered into this arrangement in a subordinated position where their former plasticity is lost, insofar as the cultural apparatus that brought them recognition favors the perpetuation of certain traits deemed idiosyncratic to their poetic disposition.

In this process, literature is simply playing along with larger sociopolitical forces. The process of incorporating peripheral voices into the store of “national” expression coincided with a vast redefinition of the notion and function of culture, a redefinition that, while severing the idea of culture from that of civilization, led to the popularization of the so-called anthropological notion of culture as referring to the totality of a society's material and spiritual life. This shift granted an enormous purchase to anthropological discourses in the process of the imaginary constitution of modern Latin America. Its giants include figures like Manuel Gamio in Mexico, Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, and of course Fernando Ortiz in Cuba—who coined the most influential term in the history of Latin American cultural criticism: *transculturation*. My intention is to grapple with the work Ortiz crafted several decades before he became an advocate of transculturation in order

to show that the representational drive that characterizes the deployment of the literary institution in modern Latin America is part of a larger process that involves enlisting cultural productions in the calculations of modern governmentality.

In 1906, Ortiz published *Los negros brujos*. This “ethnographic” book on Cuba’s black population answered a continental demand that intellectuals reach out to the constitutive others of every national formation. Ortiz here speaks from an autonomous discourse, that of ethnography, but nonetheless remains hesitant about the proper boundaries between his obligations to the state and his commitment to scientific work. Ortiz conceives of anthropology as an autonomous science, free of moral prejudices and able to build its own set of rules for the evaluation of social reality. Likewise, the Cuban state is here no longer identified as the enforcer of a moral set of rules, but rather as a neutral apparatus for the articulation of social means and needs. But even in this case, the line dividing the ethnographer from the state functionary remains fragile. For example, Ortiz the ethnographer, having embarked on a study of Afro-Cuban religion (Ortiz’s word is *fetisbism*), does not hesitate to call for the persecution of black sorcery and the confiscation of “idols, images, necklaces, fetishes, altars . . . from the sorcerer’s temples” (1973, 246).<sup>12</sup> Ortiz advises the police to remove the idols from the temples and destroy them, thus employing state force to supplement one of the goals of his book. But a few sentences later, as if resenting the scientific autonomy he has sold so cheaply, Ortiz changes his mind: “The most characteristic [of these objects] should be spared and sent to one of our museums. . . . It is important to preserve these kinds of objects for the sake of scientific knowledge” (246).

Despite its hesitations, Ortiz’s text already displays the cultural conditions that would soon make the life of the people indistinguishable from the life of the nation. The deep identification of researcher with material is one of the standards of the emerging configuration. One can hardly fail to mention that this passionate inquisitor of black sorcery would end up practicing the rituals he condemns in this early work, while also promoting the identification between black popular culture and national culture in Cuba. The underside of this identification between *popular* and *national* is that once culture becomes national expression, its operations appear increas-

ingly mediated, facilitated, and monitored by state institutions, be they repressive (the police) or ideological (the museum).

Ortiz's double convocation of the repressive power of the state and the seductive exemplarity of culture foreshadows the evolution in Latin America toward the national-popular state form. This shift was, in a sense, the same one that Antonio Gramsci mapped for the physiognomy of the state in Europe. For Gramsci, the development of the modern state in the twentieth century required that the state be redefined as "not only the apparatus of government, but also the private apparatus of 'hegemony' or civil society" (254). In the new conception of the state (Gramsci's ethical state), culture becomes so entangled with state policies that even the most private endeavors can be understood as aiding the consolidation of modern state form. When, many years later, Louis Althusser defined the task of ideological state apparatuses as the reproduction of the social conditions of production, he had Gramsci's intervention in mind. Now no society can reproduce itself without taking some form of pride in its own constitution. Literature was a valuable tool for constructing the desirability of the present in the process of the rationalized reproduction of the social in various modernizing Latin American countries. New hermeneutics evolved with the sole goal of singing the praise of that which existed, although they could also revert to criticizing, a movement exemplified by two early Latin American international best sellers, *Doña Bárbara* and *El mundo es ancho y ajeno*. Of course, the structure of supplementarity between culture and governmentality was not exclusive to Latin America. In Europe and the United States, too, literature served to negotiate the agonistic tensions that marked capitalist development (Lloyd and Thomas 1998). But while in the metropolis social enfranchisement was achieved mainly through the promotion of market relationships, and citizens' incorporation through the juridical sphere of rights, in Latin America—where these routes were deficient, blocked, or nonexistent—aesthetics acquired paramount importance, not only supplementing other forms of enfranchisement but attempting to replace them because of their shortcomings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of national literature was consolidated through the creation of different departments in major Latin American universities. The establishment of this concep-

tual framework amounted to an ethnicization of literature based on the differential value of the Spanish language, immediately marginalizing vigorous oral, popular, and sometimes even indigenous traditions. This ethnicization further entailed the notion that literature was a repository of national virtues and a site of revelation of the national character. Cornejo Polar points to the importance of Alberto Sánchez, who single-handedly created a modern concept of Peruvian literature by claiming the hitherto uncharted region of colonial expression as an organic part of this tradition (1989, 117–18). Similar enterprises were widespread in Latin America at the time. In 1910, Ricardo Rojas published *Historia de la literatura argentina*, which expanded the horizon of the national to encompass not only the remote colonial past but also forms of writing that took the concept of the literary beyond a merely belletrist ideology, such as historical documents and essays. This movement took on continental proportions, to the point that we may say, despite the years that sometimes separate them, that Sánchez in Peru, Rojas in Argentina, Alfonso Reyes in Mexico, and Franz Tamayo in Bolivia constitute essentially the same intellectual figure (the paradigmatic case may be the supranational Pedro Henríquez Ureña). In his memoirs, José Vasconcelos scorns this new breed of intellectuals, which he sees represented in his old friends from the Ateneo—noisy proponents of a new aesthetics who managed to build their careers without ever writing, much less publishing, any of the revered creative books insinuated in the bohemian nights of pre-Revolutionary Mexico (1964, 234). Vasconcelos's accusation is unfair, and not just because he should have directed the same reproach at himself. It is unfair because, as he knew quite well, in the origin of the historical project, critical reflection precedes artistic production. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, creative writers were catching up with turn-of-the-century “critical intellectuals” as they began to produce literary texts that were consonant with the historical project essayists had initiated some years earlier.

A common desire to incorporate residual and peripheral subjects and communities traverses such otherwise dissimilar movements as *criollismo* (in Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), *indigenismo* (in the Andes, Brazil, and Central America), and *negrismo* (in Central America and the Caribbean). The search for the nation's essence became the subject of

many literary works, prompting the reader to receive them as sociological works rather than as works of imagination. *Doña Bárbara* (1929), by Rómulo Gallegos, symbolically retakes the plains of Venezuela from barbarism by educating the region's unruly inhabitants (Marisela) and inauthentic visitors (Santos Luzardo); Arguedas's *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) reminds the authorities that indigenous traditions are to be respected in all their unwieldy idiosyncrasy; Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* (1929) claims the nomadic existence of the gaucho for the national community; Carpentier's *Ecué-Yamba-O* (1933) replaces the false identity provided by modernity with the bongo "antidote for Wall Street"; and Martín Luis Guzmán's *The Eagle and the Serpent* (1929) strives, despite the author's aversion to violence, to uncover the essence of Mexico in those revolutionary men "used to the weight of the rifle" (1965, 87). The conceptual culmination of this movement uniting the hermeneutical authority of the nation with literature as an active transculturative machine came in 1949, with the publication of *Hombres de maíz*, by Miguel Angel Asturias.<sup>13</sup>

All these examples bear witness to a single, continentally unified function of literary formation (sometimes operating alongside or competing with other cultural forms such as magazines, newspapers, *folletines*, theater, popular songs, carnivals, and parades). Since the late nineteenth century, the institution labeled "Latin American literature" has been entrusted with mediating between an emerging nation-state and a disenfranchised population. From its intermediary position, literature has strived to make the nation-state conscious of its own vast heterogeneity. Simultaneously, it has tried to make heterogeneous populations aware of their national destiny. These attempts at modernization often present themselves robed with the garments of tradition. But narratives invoking indigenous legends or ancestral lore were not governed by nostalgia. Rather, they addressed the problem of how to fit even the most traditional (and sometimes seemingly backward) forms of national culture into the emerging notion of a national popular state.<sup>14</sup> In calling attention to the functionality that literature suddenly acquired, I am far from suggesting that it falsified its nature to serve as a sort of propaganda for the process of state formation. Literature did not betray its essence in putting itself at the service of this process. The

autonomy of the literary work secured for it a privileged relationship to the modern question of subjection.

## Subjection

Subjection means, of course, becoming a subject. There are two dominant and to some extent antithetical accounts of how subjection comes into being in modernity, one stressing the role of ideology, the other maintaining that subjection is the material effect of routines and practices. Both approaches reject the dominant liberal narrative that sees the subject as the product of a gradual education through which the values of conscience and agency are interiorized.<sup>15</sup> In already classical studies, Jürgen Habermas and Ian Watt have both observed that the first expansion of the novel took this liberal subject as its default hero (Habermas 1993; Watt 1957). Structuralist and post-structuralist theorists—particularly Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser—harshly criticized this approach and provided a different account of the formation of the subject, one in which the subject's constitution depends on bureaucratic and regulating apparatuses (prisons, hospitals, ideological state apparatuses). Between these two positions, the all-too-optimistic assertion of the freedom fostered by liberalism and the all-too-pessimistic affirmation of structural serfdom, it is possible to distinguish a third, more nuanced approach. In the work of Jacques Lacan, the subject becomes a subject by entering into the symbolic order, which is alienating and preexisting. In the Lacanian model, the subject chooses—although in a complex and convoluted logic of “choosing”—to embrace the symbolic and give up plenitude. By choosing after the fact the lot that in any case will befall him or her, the subject retains a slight but important margin of self-foundation. Foucault's later work followed a similar path as Foucault began to theorize the possibility that forms of power can be rearticulated into manifestations of resistance. I will use the word *subjection* in reference to this constitutive ambiguity, by which, as Judith Butler puts it, “the subjection of desire require[s] and institute[s] the desire for subjection” (1997, 19). Subjection becomes visible in our increasing inability to determine the exact limits between our desires and the realm of social

impositions.<sup>16</sup> These questions will be the focus of chapter 4, but for now, I wish to stress the fact that literature, which Roland Barthes credited as the formal presentation of subjectivity in modernity, is the cultural practice that codifies—perhaps like no other—the possibilities and predicaments of this epochal transition from open coercion to the incorporation of the law as a desire of the subject.

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The double edge proper to subjection finds a neat exemplification in the notion of transculturation, championed by Angel Rama, among others. As is well-known, Angel Rama borrowed this concept from Fernando Ortiz and went on to make it the most influential paradigm for the study of Latin America, to the point at which it was even understood as the region's proper historical modality of existence. According to this narrative, when Christopher Columbus set foot in the New World, he triggered a dynamic of cultural contact that has been part of Latin American history all along.<sup>17</sup> Today, it is obvious that a good deal of the currency obtained by transculturation stems from the ease with which it describes the subjective changes necessary to adapt Latin American populations to the most general conditions of capitalist modernization. In Alberto Moreiras's account, Fernando Ortiz's initial "loosely anthropological sense" of the term readily gave way, in Angel Rama's work, to an idea of transculturation as the incarnation of "cultural plasticity," a regulative machine for the constant adaptation of backward practices and populations to the demands of a centrally driven modernization (Moreiras 2001, 186). It is true that Rama may have viewed transculturation as simply providing an apt description of the path of modernization in Latin America, but as Moreiras warns, transculturation "does not simply refer to a social relation but rather is 'itself a social relation'" (2001, 186). From being merely descriptive and critical, transculturation became prescriptive and administrative. Increasingly throughout the twentieth century, transculturation appeared as the specific cultural discourse that the ideology of modernization acquired in Latin America. In this sense, the project of transculturation far exceeded the realm of literature. It became a project of epic proportions, a continental cultural machine for reading the relationship between center and periphery. It prompted the

constant adaptation of Latin American populations to an ever-increasing flow of social information and commodities emanating from the modernized world; and it simultaneously offered Latin American states invested in integration into the global economy a narrative capable of negotiating the impact of this integration upon the native population.<sup>18</sup>

Although most accounts of transculturation pay attention merely to its synchronic aspect, the power of transculturation is only fully revealed in its diachronic dimension. From a syntagmatic point of view, this power resides in the concept's ability to override the seemingly unavoidable sense of contradiction in everyday life in favor of an integrated sense of national community. But this power is always dependent on the possibility of paradigmatically accommodating the historical multiplicity of past times, subsuming them into the time of the nation. In the ideology of transculturation, the nation takes the form of an "underlying necessity" imparting a unified narrative to a disparate multiplicity of interests and events. The nation-state gathers and recalls all these past events and emotions (whether grievances of the Creoles, the subordination arising from the colonial relation, or the people's common belonging to traditional forms of culture) and becomes, to use a Hegelian expression popularized by Slavoj Žižek, a posited presupposition. The nation appears to be always already there, as an undeveloped, embryonic form of the contemporary nation, guaranteeing the identity of the present and the past by its very transhistorical subsistence. There is thus a specifically historical dimension of the *trans* of transculturation, a dimension that produces identities out of disjointed temporalities.

To illustrate this point, we can refer to Alberto Flores Galindo's *Buscando un inca*, in which the Peruvian historian and sociologist discusses the slow sedimentation of the idea of a unique indigenous (Andean) people unified under a political utopia that would end colonial suffering through the return of the Inca rulers (*la utopía andina*). Nationalist historiography in modern Peru appropriates this long sedimentation, producing a concept of Peruvian or Andean "indigenesness" out of a disparate variety of cultures and peoples, as proof of a national spirit active throughout the centuries. Flores Galindo, in contrast, painstakingly points out that, despite all appearances, the building of an Andean utopia was a dynamic process that may have been marked more by dissent, internal warfare, and overlapping

alliances than by any unified protonationalist idea of race, political allegiance, or regional belonging. As Flores Galindo notes, any protonationalist and hegemonically oriented indigenous revolt, like the one commanded by Tupac Amaru around 1780, failed precisely because of the extremely disaggregated character of those involved in the uprising (1988, 103–70).<sup>19</sup>

Like any true form of subjection, the process of transculturation cannot be exhausted by the meaning it acquired in the hands of the different Latin American elites. Everywhere the people left their imprint on the historical process of Latin American societies. No criticism of transculturation can disregard the fact that the establishment of hegemonic states in Latin America was a positive and democratic step that opened venues for the action of subaltern and oppressed peoples. As John Kraniauskas remarks, “Narrative transculturation . . . figures a process of contradictory cultural democratization and integration, the widening of the hegemony’s cultural parameters under the impact of the expanded reproduction of capital and the ideology of development” (2000, 115). Transculturation, in other words, is not just the historical presentation of a tamed domination; it also rests on elements of emancipation without which it would be unable to validate its operations.

In spite of its historical role in the constitution of a Latin American identity, the once-celebrated idea of transculturation has today come under fire.<sup>20</sup> Some of the reasons for this sudden shift in fortune have to do with the very place of enunciation for professionals involved in the hermeneutics of culture. The crisis of the nation-state’s sovereignty, which granted a space of action to intellectuals throughout Latin America for almost two centuries, has left hermeneutical activity in search of a new critical vantage point: transculturation can no longer be said to afford such a critical position. Yet it would be inaccurate to assert the partial dismissal of transculturation as a phenomenon fueled by the present conditions of our knowledge; the fractures in the process of transculturation were always too glaring to be ignored. Literature’s own relationship to the historical project is ambivalent. If we look for the counterproof to the teleological narrative of the nation-state, we will find it, many times, in the same literary texts that champion the ideal of transculturation. Santos Luzardo cannot educate Doña Bárbara, and she flees the plain; Alejo Carpentier regrets

his inability to capture the voice and the essence of the Haitian migrants in *Ecue-Yamba-O*; any time Guzmán gets hold of the “indefinable essence of Mexico,” this essence slips away beneath adjectives like “formless” and “inhuman”; Don Segundo Sombra simply withdraws with no intention of returning; and Arguedas finds that the demand for recognition by the Indians of Puquio is incommensurable with the prose of recognition that the Peruvian state is willing to grant.

### Recognition

*Recognition* is of interest to us for one fundamental reason: José María Arguedas makes it the center of his rebuke of dominant society in the Andes, and in translating this refutation into his texts, he effectively closes the historical project of Latin American literature. The caliber of Arguedas’s accomplishment in his thematization of recognition as the center of political subjection can be appreciated in terms of the deep naturalization that has veiled the nature of recognition in most contemporary scholarship.

In a recent book, Paul Ricoeur wonders why there is no important philosophical work that bears the title *Recognition* (Ricoeur 2005, 23).<sup>21</sup> The fact that *recognition* cruises our supposedly hypervigilant gaze without question already constitutes an interesting enigma. If anything, recognition is almost unanimously greeted as the hard-won right of our late democratic times. From political theory to ethnography, and from literature to philosophy, every discourse seems to bend before the mighty prerogatives of a word that combines the rights of the particular with the irrefutability of an ethical apology. There is certain agreement that in being recognized, our freedom and individuality shine forth, unbound of all the chains that history, violence, and culture weaved around us.

Recognition is, in other words, part of the critical interest that the issue of ethics has attracted recently across the humanities. The ethical underpinnings of the term are eloquently argued in *Time and the Other*, a work on critical ethnography by the Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian. Classical anthropology, Fabian contends, operates through what he calls a denial of coevalness, inviting us to think that the time of the other and the time of the ethnographer (which is also our time) do not coincide. Leaving the

other to exist in a differential time, essentially removed from the time of the researcher, amounts to disavowing the other's presence, and for that reason, Fabian concludes, cognition is obtained in classical ethnography through the denial of recognition (1983, 37–69). For Fabian, the only valid knowledge of the other is the one obtained through acknowledging the singularity and validity of the other's points of view and beliefs. The importance of Fabian's claim lies, above all, in the way it inverts the authoritative relationship between science and subject, introducing an as yet unresolved (and probably irresolvable) crisis in the rules of validity and truth for the "sciences of man."

Perhaps no other contemporary intellectual did as much to promote the rights of recognition as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Like Fabian's criticism of the denial of coevalness, Charles Taylor's critique of the social contract rests on ethical claims about the nature of the social link. As Taylor asserts in "The Politics of Recognition," "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (1994, 25). His politics of recognition dresses itself in the garments of the absolutely singular and, firmly planted in this ethic, speaks fundamentally of an "equality before the other," which is implicitly opposed to the devalued liberal notion of "equality before the law." Equality before the law continues to be, of course, an active force in politics and society, but only as negativity. Most of the actual positive contents that affect social and cultural behavior are based on an idea of rights, anchored in the lived experience of human beings. At this point, it is appropriate to recall that both the attack on transculturation and its defense make similar claims about the recognition of differences. Transculturation is said to have performed this act of recognition through the sublation of difference into the transcultural product. Critics of transculturation—even subtle ones, such as Cornejo Polar—charge transculturation with obliviousness to the singularity of cultural experiences, which are erased rather than salvaged in the process of transcultural incorporation.

Most approaches to the concept of recognition unproblematically adopt the dubious liberal trope of "natural rights," with its implication that individuals preexist and transcend the society that has created them. Culture, language, and action thus become elements that these subjects possess,

rather than some of the many means that they use and submit to in the construction of their social experience.

In spite of all its current prestige, the promotion of recognition has an ironic and untimely ring to it. Far from being a new development, the present recognition of recognition simply brings to the foreground one ideological kernel of the expansion of modern capitalism. Recognition always turns out to be recognition of a property. (As Hegel unwillingly suggested, there is nothing to be recognized in the juridical figure of a real slave.) As a matter of fact, property appears as almost indistinguishable from recognition in the history of modern liberalism, in whose narrative every expansion of the democratic liberal ethos was accompanied by an expansion of property/recognition. From a historical perspective, then, the present reign of recognition, which makes of the concept an uncontestable universal right, perhaps needs to be weighted with regard to the current unprecedented general expansion of the notion of property (intellectual rights, virtual rights, trademarks), as every inch of the planet is subjected to the juridico-political relationship of late capitalism.

In Latin America, the original scene of capitalist recognition takes place at the end of the nineteenth century, when the continent is integrated into the world market. Only at this point are local elites forced to recognize the most coveted property: the labor force. However, as we know quite well, modernization in Latin America is never a straightforward process. Resistance to modernization arises from the modernizing elites themselves, for whom modernization almost always takes the form of an irresolvable tension between a welcomed economic modernization and abhorred processes of social change. The question of gender is perhaps the point at which this contradiction is most egregious. As a rule, late nineteenth-century capitalist modernization incorporated an important contingent of women as labor force, while simultaneously condemning and even criminalizing the spatial and social mobility of proletarian women in the public space. Likewise, the need to recognize the labor force often took perverse forms, such as the racialization of the working class and the use of an extensive discourse of eugenics that barely distinguished between the working person and the socially excluded who constituted the capitalist army of reserve labor living in almost inhuman conditions. Even in the most dynamic economies of

the time, such as oligarchic Argentina or Porfirian Mexico, recognition and ownership of the labor force were pitted against each other in spite of this pair's essential unity.

That recognition always recognizes a property means, among other things, that it is a system that presupposes both an economy and all the ungenerosity that comes along with it. Although recognition seems to advocate the cause of the underdog, which to some extent it does, we must confront the fact that recognition is above all a strategy through which power reasserts itself in the minute details of the everyday. The recognition granted by the state (or by literature as a state apparatus) is never a gift, but a loan that is finally collected in kind. In this economy of reflexion and return, the state provides recognition in exchange for recognition. The recognizing activity of the state depends on the fact that the subjects receiving its favor must first recognize the state as the recognizing instance. In this structure, one cannot win legitimacy without giving up historical initiative, and one cannot claim autarky without consenting to sanction from above. Every recognition granted by the state further empowers the state's own imaginary constitution. In the end, the state's recognizing activity is an exercise in self-recognition. This structure does not pose major problems when the cultural makeup of the nation is relatively uniform, but it is destined to progress via waves of violence and suppression in those regions, like Latin America, where the heterogeneity of society cannot be easily reconciled with the centripetal impulses of nation-state formation. In such heterogeneous contexts, the false morality of recognition becomes even more blatant. Finally, recognition's link to the contractual notion of sovereignty is obvious: recognition serves as the visible and pristine counterpart of this enigmatic, abstract process, through which the people is said to transfer its sovereignty to the state's sphere of action.

Recognition binds capital and culture through their common reference to property. It also binds literature and labor force in the crystallization of the historical project (the three great *novelas de la tierra*—*Doña Bárbara*, *La Vorágine*, and *Don Segundo Sombra*—are all about the adjudication of resources and the labor force). Although this binding is an appropriation, it is not a lie. There is a common ground to art and labor that we express

through the notion of work. Like labor, art and literature are primary ways of inhabiting the world. This is why we keep going back to them, expecting to find in them the disclosure of a productive dimension that, bringing us full circle in the system of our determinations, will provide a genuine possibility for overcoming the postcolonial heritage that keeps logic and ontology separate in our experience of the world.