

DECOLONIZING CULTURE:  
Visual Arts, Development Narratives,  
and Performance in the Americas

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- ART AND REVOLUTION IN LATIN AMERICA 1910–1990.* By David Craven. (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2002. Pp. 240. \$55.00 cloth.)
- THE REVOLUTIONARY IMAGINATION IN THE AMERICAS AND THE AGE OF DEVELOPMENT.* By María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. 336. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)
- THE ARCHIVE AND THE REPERTOIRE: PERFORMING CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE AMERICAS.* By Diana Taylor. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. 326. \$ 79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)
- PREGONES THEATRE: A THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE SOUTH BRONX.* By Eva C. Vásquez. (New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 236. \$79.95 cloth.)

The struggle against the colonialism of yesterday and the neo-colonialism of today has defined Latin American culture. In this way, the conscious or unconscious quest for decolonization is present in all kinds of artistic production from the region. This process, as post-colonial theorists explain, exposes and dismantles colonialism in all its forms, including “the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (Ashcroft et al., 63). These less obvious elements are most often metropolitan cultural models that privilege, among others, “the imported over the indigenous: colonial languages over local languages; writing over orality and linguistic culture over inscriptive cultures of other kinds” (64). The four books reviewed here examine different artistic and literary tendencies from the Americas and their struggle to not only reveal, but to rebel against neo-colonial dominance. This essay will explore how the complex practice of cultural decolonization in the region is presented in each.

## DECOLONIZING REVOLUTION

David Craven's *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910–1990*, is not only a valuable contribution to the scholarship because of its impressive collection of drawings, paintings, and posters from “las tres grandes,” namely the Mexican, Cuban, and Nicaraguan revolutions. It is also an exhaustive examination of the cultural policies employed by these transformational processes, an affirmation of the worldwide impact of the visual arts produced under their leaderships, and a defense of them as autonomous struggles against U.S. imperialism and Soviet influence. Indeed, as he argues, it has been a Cold War definition of revolution, in which historical actors are assumed to be either “the capitalist West or the communist East, with no nation outside this narrow, if also worldwide, conflict having the right to determine their own separate destinies” (2) that has undermined conventional scholarship on the topic.

In this way, Craven's objective is ultimately political; a revalorization of often misunderstood cultural policies in order to stress the significance of these revolutionary movements for future ones. Opposing East-West binaries, he highlights their localness as well as their contributions to revolution on a global scale. Key to his study are Che Guevara's ideas on socialism and the New Person (“el hombre nuevo”) in which, among other important contributions, the revolutionary hero boldly opposes socialist realism. It is this open declaration of cultural independence that is emphasized in the work by artists influenced by three Latin American revolutions.

Craven expertly narrates the Mexican Revolution and its accomplishments, intellectual rifts, and distinct political and artistic tendencies. The work of the major muralists (José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros) is discussed, along with important artist collectives like the Taller de Gráfica Popular. What specifically comes to the fore when referring to projects of cultural decolonization is Rivera's work. Pointing out that recent scholars have noted that these artists expropriated and bent the European variant of modernism to their own ends (37), Craven stresses appropriation and transculturation in Rivera's art, particularly in reference to *El abrazo* and *Campesinos* (39). Just as compelling is his exceptional analysis of the chapel at Chapingo in which he proposes that Rivera pictorially diverges from conceptions of history that were the norm among Western positivists, Soviet communists, and many Mexican nationalists (53). In concluding his section, the author emphasizes the importance of Mexico as a place tolerant of leftist intelligentsia—Leon Trotsky, Fidel Castro, and Guevara, among others, sought asylum there—placing the Mexican Revolution squarely at the foundation of later Latin American revolutionary movements.

Craven's decolonizing analysis gains momentum in the chapter dedicated to the Cuban Revolution. Guevara's aforementioned critique of socialist realism, along with Castro's early declaration that enemies of the revolution were "capitalists and imperialists, not abstract art" (75), had—and continue to have—a notable impact on the arts in Cuba. Along with this, the author underscores the effects of the revolutionary government's long-term commitment to socializing artistic practice through cultural democracy. This has fostered a population that actively participates in observing, performing, and producing art. His examination of the poster art of the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC), the Cuban pop art movement—specifically a comparative analysis of Raúl Martínez and Andy Warhol—and the art of Volumen Uno that emerged in the 1980s, is worth noting.

A frank discussion of the Cuban Revolution's cultural policies is not complete without mention of censorship. Craven eloquently defends these policies and reminds readers of the U.S. expulsion of artists like Charlie Chaplin and denial of travel visas to Pablo Picasso and Gabriel García Márquez, among others (116). He asserts that U.S. media cannot legitimately criticize Cuban culture until it begins to look at it more rationally, rather than employing a "reflex-like dismissal" of it since the revolution, concluding that "the problem is not that the U.S. media and many in Academia criticize Cuba, but rather that they do so for reasons at once misinformed and self-serving" (116).

All the more reason to question why Craven never makes very explicit that one of "las tres grandes" continues to exist. The Cuban Revolution, despite adverse economic hardships, maintains its project of social transformation. Although a shift has undoubtedly occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, according to an Oxfam America's report (2002), "throughout the 1990s, the share of Cuba's gross national product spent on social programs increased by 34%" (3). Essential aspects of the cultural democracy that Craven speaks of are upheld in the national system of art education, which is "the most important vehicle for popular participation in the arts" (12).<sup>1</sup> With total enrollments at all levels of education at 76 percent of the population at appropriate age (11), and *casas de la cultura* in each municipality, a vast majority of Cubans continue to have access to the means of cultural production. Taking this into consideration, it would have been preferable to see a brief mention of the new problems the island has encountered within the realm of arts

1. Arts education in Cuba "operates free of charge through primary and secondary schools, specialized art schools and high schools, university-level art education and the Casa de la Cultura, which is an art institution present in every municipality [that] offers free and low-cost art lessons for children and adults and provides space for exhibitions and performances" (Uriarte 2002, 12).

and culture since the fall of the Soviet Union, rather than limiting the study to 1989. By not doing so, the author leaves out a new generation of Cuban artists and, more notably, inadvertently fails to recognize the efforts, successes, and errors of the revolution's last fifteen years.

Craven undeniably favors the Nicaraguan Revolution and addresses in his last chapter its decolonizing efforts with regards to culture. Once again, he makes apparent that an essential part of Latin American revolutionary projects is a clear declaration of cultural independence. The author proposes that the Sandinistas' most remarkable gain was a critical inquiry into the "nature of art and its relation to society as a whole," while elevating art and making it more publicly accessible (118). The Sandinista government introduced policies that allowed for the reevaluation of indigenous and popular art forms, considered up to that point to be inferior to metropolitan forms, and proposed critical reconstruction of Nicaraguans' heterogeneous cultural lineage by looking to the past while endorsing new revolutionary concepts like equality between men and women (123). By balancing this with diverse artistic tendencies and competing cultural traditions, the revolution, "fostered a dynamic process of 'socialist pluralism' [that] was at odds with the dogmatic of any 'purely' revolutionary style" (121). In the same way, primitivist painting, murals, as well as art looking to consciously incorporate both metropolitan and local tendencies, were not created to appeal only to already existing audiences but instead were aimed at their reconstitution.

In sum, Craven's artistic analysis, along with his appendices and endnotes, demonstrate a vast knowledge and are engaging to readers. His passionately committed defense of Latin American social transformations and generously wide scope are his greatest contributions to the field.

#### DECOLONIZING DEVELOPMENT

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's study of development narratives and their incorporation into revolutionary movements, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, is perhaps the most insightful call for cultural decolonization of the four books reviewed. She proposes that the principal reason behind the failure of Latin American liberation movements has been their articulation of a developmentalist model of revolutionary subjectivity and consciousness in response to capitalist models of national development (7). Crossing ideological and political lines, she explains, both capitalist and revolutionary discourses of development share metaphors, tropes, and theorization; both have their origins in Enlightenment doctrines of "progress, evolution, and change that were historically articulated, with

the practice of European colonialism and colonial capitalism;" and both share a theory of "human perfectibility" (7).

For Saldaña-Portillo, this legacy is intimately related to the various raced and gendered subject formations behind colonialism; it spurs on the idea of the arrival to consciousness as the transcendence of a premodern ethnos. The revolutionary must leave behind indigenous and/or peasant cultural identity to become "highly ethical, mobile, progressive, risk taking and masculinist, regardless of whether the agent/object of a development strategy is a man or woman, an adult or child" (9). The adoption of such a discourse has been gravely damaging to liberation movements for, as she suggests, it is precisely their adherence to a colonialist—and consequently racist and sexist—theory that has been the cause of resistance from the very people that these movements intended to liberate: women and men of color, indigenous peoples and the land-poor peasantry (9).

The author's theoretical position is best demonstrated in chapters dedicated to showing how this developmentalism is endorsed and then rejected in texts written by Latin American revolutionaries. She notes the "disturbing resemblance" between Guevara's and Mario Payera's subjects presented in their diaries and the liberal subject of development (63). These *guerrilleros* represent revolutionary transformation "as an epochal conversion experience, as the epistemic death of a prior subject" (9). The subaltern condition, in these cases either peasant or indigenous, is rendered a premodern—and thus prerevolutionary—stage that must be transcended in order for consciousness to be transformed (170).

Saldaña-Portillo counters this with what is undoubtedly the most enlightening aspect of her study. Timely discussions of *testimonio*, Elizabeth Burgos and Rigoberta Menchu's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1988), and EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) communiqués are clearly the basis for its decolonizing project. In these last two works, she proposes, the model of human subjectivity and agency is completely retheorized. These new revolutionaries embrace class, ethnic, and gendered particularities, and in so doing, rewrite revolutionary projects in the Americas to include the subaltern as authorities of their own experience (12). In the first case, the Zapatistas reject the inherent developmentalism in the term *mestizaje*, which implies erasure of the indigenous subject in order to progress to the supposedly more advanced mestizo subject, and threaten neoliberalism by demanding control over economic resources by indigenous peoples (12). In Burgos and Menchú's text, coming to consciousness is not represented as epochal or revelatory. Rather, Menchu becomes aware of her people's exploitation through what has been traditionally considered to be a premodern ethnic formation: the everyday experiences of indigenous peasant women (11). Even so, as the author necessarily points

out, both Menchú and the Zapatistas bring an understanding to the revolutionary tradition of precisely how their ethnic—as well as class and gendered—specificities are an effect of the development of the productive forces in Latin America (260). That is to say, they do not look to challenge a model of revolutionary consciousness from “indigenous purity;” rather, they see themselves as part of a legacy and therefore not formed outside of development.

Saldaña-Portillo’s book demonstrates profound intellectual breadth and real political commitment and solidarity; its contribution to decolonizing efforts in the Americas cannot be overstated.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, “Americas” is the key term here, for her last chapter looks to apply this same analysis of development discourse to revolutionary subjectivity in the United States. Her critical readings of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Tomás Rivera’s *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1987), and Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation* (1992) reveal similar findings, and more significantly, are a valuable addition to a necessary reconfiguration of Latin American studies.

#### PERFORMANCE AS DECOLONIZATION

Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* includes chapters on Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña, Walter Mercado, Princess Diana, and September 11, among others. Although fashionable, it is not her research, but the theory behind it that suggests a decolonizing project. The basis of her work is that performance functions as an episteme, a system of learning that stores and transmits knowledge (16). This is absolutely critical, she asserts, for, if performance did not, “only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity” (xvii).

2. Even though Cuba is not within the scope of Saldaña-Portillo’s study, it is relevant to point out that, while it has taken a severe economic crisis, the Cuban revolution has brought about notable changes to its own developmentalist rhetoric, particularly in regards to agricultural practices (see chapter 4, “Irresistible Seduction: Rural Subjectivity under Sandinista Agricultural Policy” [109–47], in Saldaña-Portillo’s work). Since the early 1990s, Cuba has undergone what is essentially “the largest conversion from conventional agriculture to organic or semi-organic farming that the world has ever known” (Rosset and Benjamin 1994, 5). The “Classical Model” with its emphasis on monoculture of foreign crop species primarily for export and imported technologies, has been replaced with the “Alternative Model” that seeks to promote ecological sustainability and soil conservation (Rosset and Benjamin 1994, 4–5). A more recent change of policy occurred in December 2002, when Cuba’s Minister of Economy and Planning announced significant restructuring of the sugar industry, its traditionally strongest agricultural export. The decrease in production, while significantly reducing costs, allows more land for cattle and sustainable farming in order to boost the country’s food production for internal consumption.

Recognizing performance in this way has an impact that is far reaching, since by embracing performed and embodied behaviors (the repertoire) as a way of studying social memory and cultural identity, rather than the traditional emphasis on literary and historical documents (the archive), new histories, memories, tensions, and struggles become apparent. Furthermore, viewing text and narrative as the only valid form of cultural memory carries strong political implications, for as Taylor rightly asks, "what is at risk politically in thinking about embodied knowledge and performance as ephemeral, as that which disappears? Whose memories 'disappear' if only archival knowledge is valorized and granted permanence?" (36). It also raises valuable questions of validity and authenticity of sources. In this way, throughout her study, the author suggests looking at cultural productions not just as text and narratives but as scenarios. These theoretical claims are best addressed in chapters dedicated to the study of performance in the transmission of traumatic memory. In "'You are Here': H.I.J.O.s and the DNA of performance," Taylor proposes that the link between the protests of the grandmothers and mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and children of the disappeared, exiled, and political prisoners (H.I.J.O.S) in Argentina is twofold. First, and most obviously, they share a biological connection (DNA). However, not as apparent is their common use of protest strategies. All three generations have used images, whether they are large placards held during demonstrations with photo IDs of missing relatives, these same images in art exhibits, or, most recently, photographs of children holding pictures of their disappeared parents. These images, traditionally considered to be part of the archive as positive identification, and in this case, erased from official archives because they represent the disappeared, have been used to trigger traumatic memory and convert it into a political and performative practice, even when there is no documented evidence to back up claims of political violence. In this way, colonial notions that the archival and biological are more lasting than embodied performance practice are challenged (173), and genetic and inherited political lines continue, assuring that the disappeared will never be forgotten.

When there are not even photographs to document violence and torture, the only evidence that exists is the repertoire of survivors' accounts, flashbacks, and gestures. In the chapter entitled "Staging Traumatic Memory: Yuyachkani," Taylor acknowledges once again the political importance of recognizing the repertoire as a valid form of knowledge, evidence, and transmission of social memory. The politics behind notions of ephemerality have a long tradition, dating back to the Conquest, "of thinking of embodied knowledge as that which disappears because it cannot be contained or recuperated through the archive" (193). In Peru, the author contends, just as in Argentina, violence is known

only through “a performatic repeat” (209). This is the case of Peruvian collective theatre group Yuyachkani’s political performances. Their work attempts to make evident the history of Peru’s military violence at the service of neo-colonial power and local allied elites, against peasants and indigenous peoples. In plays like *Contrael viento* (1989), *Adios Ayacucho* (1991) and *Antígona* (2000), a history of violent conflict—what has been disappeared—becomes visible.

In a broader sense, Taylor proposes that performance studies help to rework our understanding of Latin America because the field challenges the limits of fixed disciplinary, national, and methodological boundaries, and thus destabilizes traditional area studies. By incorporating a “hemispheric” perspective, she seeks to decenter a U.S. America for a hemispheric America, and in this way, to affirm the interconnectedness of supposedly separate geographical and political areas, and particularly our shared histories of conquest, colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and globalization. Certainly, this is a valuable argument that Latin American thinkers have sustained throughout the struggles for colonial and neo-colonial independence. One immediately thinks of Simón Bolívar’s “Carta de Jamaica” (1815); José Martí’s “Nuestra América” (1891); José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900); José Carlos Mariátegui’s *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928); Alejo Carpentier’s prologue to *El reino de este mundo* (1949); and Roberto Fernández Retamar’s *Caliban* (1971), to name a few. Nevertheless, Taylor’s work is an important step in acknowledging marginalized expressions of cultural memory. Its most notable contribution is undoubtedly a defense of the growing field of performance studies as a tool of decolonization.

#### DECOLONIZATION AS PERFORMANCE

Eva C. Vásquez’s book, *Pregones Theatre: A Theatre for Social Change in the South Bronx*, considers Puerto Rico’s struggle for decolonization as it is represented in performance. Her study proposes that the island’s colonial status has been at the heart of the development of political theatre groups both on the island and in the United States. Thus, her work begins with a basic—yet daunting—task: educating its audience to the history of Puerto Rico as one of the “few remaining colonies in the world” (2). This political condition along with the strong efforts of Americanization through all forms of media, she proposes, has crippled Puerto Ricans’ sense of language, economy, education, self-image, nationhood, and freedom (5). Theatre, she counters, can be used to symbolize the country’s struggle and its people’s relationship to their history and culture, as well as to explore their “Puerto Ricanness” (7). This, Vásquez insists, is absolutely necessary to bring about significant social change. It is not surprising then that the

unresolved political situation between Puerto Rico and the United States is at the core of her analysis.

While Vázquez chooses to focus on Pregones Theatre (founded in 1979 in the Bronx) because it represents Puerto Rican reality in terms of ethnicity, language, and different cultural influences, her knowledge of Latin American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican theatre groups is well-documented in her study, and particularly relevant to her discussion of Pregones' methodology, aesthetics, techniques, and plays. Arguing the impossibility of studying its artistic contribution without acknowledging the colonial experience from which its work is born (120), the author highlights the group's connections to Latin American traditions, theatrical aesthetics and methodologies as part of the process of cultural decolonization. She pays particular attention to the collective theatre model, with its emphasis on the destabilization of the hierarchies of individual authorship and the divisions in the roles of actor, director, and playwright, and the introduction of an active engagement by the audience. Vázquez insists that this departure from First World methods "points to a conscientious rejection of technical device" (49), rather than a lack of sophistication. Interviews with Teatro Pregones' artistic and associate directors in the study's appendices provide valuable information in this regard.

Cultural resistance to Americanization, denunciation of the new ways of life imposed by colonialism, the struggle for cultural survival and insistence on the reevaluation of the concept of "America," are all aspects that make Teatro Pregones' work essential to a decolonizing project and, in turn, make Vázquez's work significant for recognizing it. Somewhat disconcerting, however, is her emphasis on Puerto Ricanness as an integral part of this effort. Even as anti-imperialist liberation movements have customarily embraced nationalism as a way to unite many diverse groups, just as the empires they struggle against, they run the risk of oppression in its other forms; namely class, ethnic, gender, and sexual. In the construction of nationhood, "specific identifiers are employed to create exclusive and homogeneous conceptions of national traditions. Such signifiers of homogeneity always fail to represent the diversity of the actual 'national' community for which they purport to speak" (Ashcroft et al. 1998, 150). Hence, "constructions of the nation are thus potent sites of control and domination" (150). Although one could argue that the strategic essentialism behind the term "Puerto Ricanness" may help to unite diverse groups, Puerto Rico, in its quest for independence, must continue to be redefined to include those that have been traditionally marginalized because of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. These pressing issues are not taken up to the extent that they could be in Vázquez's study and consequently weaken its principle arguments.

## CONCLUSIONS

The books reviewed here share the quest for cultural decolonization in the Americas. The objective of this essay has been to highlight how that struggle, with its strong social implications, has been manifested in each. While some aspects have been critiqued, these studies are valuable because they demonstrate that rigorous academic practice does not deny, but rather affirms taking a political stand. This is especially valid for the moment in which we live. These days, the latest U.S. imperialist war is leaving thousands of people dead, injured or tortured and liberation struggles are considered—by the Right and the Left—to have been eliminated by the “democracy” of neoliberalism. At a crucial time for the Americas and the world, it is indeed heartening that there continues to be politically committed scholarship in our field.

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