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Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought

Historical and Institutional Trajectories

Edited by

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia
To Norma Alarcón, Antonio Cornejo Polar, and Sylvia Molloy
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The “Latin American Keywords Project”: A Critical Disciplinary Genealogy

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia

False Cognates as a Pedagogical Imperative

How do we translate key critical terms from English into Spanish? What kinds of “adjustments” do we make when considering a critical or a theoretical idea? In other words, if a theory emerges from a particular historical, literary, cultural, or visual text, what kinds of changes does it undergo when we apply it elsewhere, in a different semantic field? These changes often go unregistered, and we run the risk of imposing other theoretical concerns rather than illuminating new texts. This critical risk operates at many levels—social, cultural, political, and pedagogical, to name a few—in which theory from elsewhere arrives at a new site (as a new sight) and is used to explain other works and events.

Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought: Historical and Institutional Trajectories reflects on these questions of cultural and critical translation, and uses our experiences in the classroom as a point of departure. We take into account multiple moments of misunderstanding and misreading in which critical terms, or what we call “keywords,” circulate as disciplinary cognates, yet become particularly untranslatable as a result of their different origins and genealogies in Caribbean and Latin American Studies vis-à-vis their initial moment of elaboration. For example, let us take the idea of the “transnational” and its multiple meanings. In most of Latin America, “transnational” immediately refers to the corporations and businesses that are registered and legally operate beyond the confines of a specific nation. This particular notion is closely linked to a process of neoliberal globalization in which countries from the Global South become the alternate locations for franchises of multinational businesses. Transnational corporations have grown exponentially from the 1970s on, and they have become an important
motor for a global economy that has developed in collaboration with and at the expense of the developed countries. This explains why 90 percent of the transnational corporations are found in the industrialized First World, with most of them located in the European Union, the United States, and Japan (Bolívar 2003). However, for us, the circulation of the term transnational within the US academic world has taken on a specific and far more capacious political signification of exchange and cultural negotiation—and this multiplicity or promiscuity of critical meaning has happened in ways that are not reflected to the same degree in the United States and in Latin America.¹ In other words, within the US context of academia, transnational (and its variants) exceeds the ways in which this term is taken up in Latin America.

If in the economic and political world, transnational echoes neoliberal forms of economic domination and exploitation, as a scholarly research agenda, transnational studies signal an interrogation and deconstruction of the notion of the nation as the main organizing historical, political, and/or cultural structure in traditional disciplinary forms of knowledge, such as the study of a national history or a national literature. The transnational framework emerged in the 1990s to encourage the study of the multinational connections that are constitutive of national, cultural, and political formations as a consequence of economic and political globalization. Transnational may point out also—as Chandra Mohanty (2003) has made explicit and as our pedagogical commitment underlines—to the different and unexpected intellectual and political alliances across nations, disciplines, vocabularies, and theories that may be produced inside academia in a wider scope. As a result, transnational studies are conceived as a framework that complicates the facile opposition between the national and the international, to argue that national spaces in the developing as well as the developed world are intimately connected by the end of the twentieth century. The basic tenet behind this particular framework is actually progressive, as it assumes the centrality of the Global South in the development of the modern world.

Yet if we put together these two definitions of transnational, we can immediately see how this particular notion is differentially inscribed in the intellectual and political histories of the Global North and the Global South. Transnationalism as a framework does indeed provide a more nuanced approach to the sociopolitical history of Latin American countries. One of the immediate consequences, for example, is how Wallerstein’s (1974–1989) notion of the world system is translated into a redefinition of a global modernity that now begins in 1492 and includes Africa, Asia, and the Americas, instead of Eurocentric definitions of modernity as originating in the seventeenth century (when rationalism became the predominant epistemic model in Europe) or in the nineteenth century (when the Industrial Revolution sparked the accelerated development of nations in the First World). But “transnationalism” also echoes the asymmetries from which global economies, politics, and epistemologies are conceived, imagined, and defined. It is in this particular context that transnationalism operates as a false cognate that needs to be engaged from the particular locations and inflections in which
Caribbean and Latin American Studies are taking place. Similar problems emerge with ideas such as modernity/modernism, liberalism, and gender, with each having different genealogies in US-based English, American, and Women’s and Gender Studies. So this anthology intervenes in this particular set of debates, and reflects our commitment to produce forms of knowledge that recognize the echoes and dissonances that are constitutive of our fields of study to promote a more open communication, play, and exchange of ideas between US-centered debates in Caribbean and Latin American Studies, as well as the conversations, frameworks, and debates that have become central in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This anthology emerges from an initiative called the “Latin American Keywords Project,” which took place between 2005 and 2014, and establishes and important conversation with the ideas developed by Antonio Cornejo Polar in his last (and very controversial) essay, “Mestizaje e hibridez: los riesgos de las metáforas. Apuntes” (1998). In this essay, Cornejo Polar expressed his concerns with “el excesivo desnivel de la producción crítica en inglés que parece—bajo viejos modelos industriales—tomar como materia prima la literatura hispanoamericana y devolverla en artefactos críticos sofisticados” (the excessive unevenness of the critical production in English that seems—under old industrial models—to take Spanish American literature as raw material that is transformed into sophisticated critical artifacts) (869). More specifically, Cornejo Polar was concerned with the production of scholarship about Latin America that was written in English and was primarily based on critical studies published in English in the United States, creating an implicit hierarchy between the knowledge produced by US-based Latin Americanists and scholars writing in and from Latin America. For Cornejo Polar this tendency illustrated the monolingualism and regionalism of the false universalization of Latin American Studies. Or to put it more simply, in his last essay Cornejo Polar warns us against the totalizing gestures of globalization in the political, historical, and cultural realms.

So the “Latin American Keywords Project” is born out of this pedagogical and disciplinary imperative to complicate debates, and to identify new and useful notions in our disputed fields of inquiry. Yet we want to resist some of the facile simplifications of these particular debates, such as the validation of scholarship produced in the native languages by Caribbean and Latin American scholars as more “authentic” than research produced elsewhere. On the one hand, this would be a weak solution to the set of questions that we have confronted in our classrooms and in our critical work because it will not promote the exchange of ideas that we believe is crucial in our teaching and research initiatives. After all, several theorists and schools of thoughts that have emerged in the Global North have become central in Latin American and Caribbean based debates and scholarship. Furthermore, with the massive migration of people of Caribbean and Latin American descent to the United States, many scholars are engaging in research initiatives that redefine the Americas beyond the confines of the traditional nation-states to include the experiences of an increasing number...
of people who reside elsewhere. However, we do not want to assume a critical stance that would deny the important connections between the debates, notions, and works not published in the Caribbean and Latin America that have become crucial in the articulation of a new lexicon and new theoretical paradigms in these regions. Instead of framing the discussion by any suggestion of a “right” or “proper” language, set of theories, or lexicon to address Latin America or the Caribbean, we take as inspiration Roberto Schwartz’s notion of “as ideias fora do lugar” (misplaced ideas) (originally published in 1973), which are defined as the unceasing affirmation and reaffirmation of “ideias europeias, sempre en sentido impróprio. É nesta qualidade que elas serão matéria e problema para a literatura” (160) (“European ideas, always improperly. In their quality of being improper, they will be material and a problem for literature” [1980, 47]). For Schwartz it was key to be familiar with Brazil’s colonial past, as well as its problematic arrival to modernity, in order to understand how and why key European notions had to be transformed and adapted to concrete historical-political experiences informing the formation of Brazil as a nation. The notion of misplaced ideas, therefore, allowed Schwartz to reconceptualize the productive vicissitudes informing the rearticulation of what Mignolo (2000) would later denominate as global ideas with local designs.

The particular format we have chosen for Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought has its own tradition as a genre in Latin/American and cultural studies: we propose a hybrid between a keyword and a theoretical reflection about the ways in which theory emerges and travels from and into Caribbean and Latin American intellectual and academic circles. To follow the same interdisciplinary and multinational approach that we are applying to each one of the terms presented in this anthology, we are proposing an intellectual exchange between Raymond Williams and Antonio Cornejo Polar about the ways in which lexicon and language constitute and shape different forms of knowledge as different ways of knowing.

We also want to underline another definition for the “transnational,” briefly pointed earlier; the one that has to do with the creation of alliances, expected and unexpected. Echoing Donna Haraway’s project (1991), we consider the pedagogy of crossings and contacts proposed in our book as a form of epistemology, as the way to produce new knowledges within a shared conversation in epistemology and in solidarity with politics. Hence, conversation and solidarity constitute then the center of our pedagogical engine; Cornejo Polar (2002), Williams (1985), and Edward Said (2000) reconsidered travel and movement—contact, conversation, and translation—as the best ways in which a concept can be fully understood.

Emergence of a Dialogue: Keywords, Latinoamericanismo vernáculo, and Other Interventions

Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought is a collection of critical essays and responses that emerges from a series of collaborations