

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Appropriating Theory: Ángel Rama's Critical Work by JOSÉ EDUARDO GONZALEZ

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Source: *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Primavera 2018), pp. 633-636

Published by: Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26663379>

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possible to see a deep ambivalence in González's proposal, which touches on the very question of literary faith that underwrites much of what is of interest in this book. As a literary critic, González seems to be constrained in his affirmation of a need for (literary) faith; however, it is too timid in that regard, for what is at stake is nothing less than the stability of the social. On one hand, religious discourse is decoded to the point where it is shown as a mere textual effect, an artistic technique, which reveals the "transcendental" as a form of fiction, thereby robbing it of its status as absolute; on the other, that fictional faith is presented as absolutely necessary if we are to steer clear of the growing desert of fragmentation and senselessness. It is not that González is not clear about his position, stated most visibly in the section on Borges while commenting on Flaubert. There he claims that, after modern literature has managed to show us the ultimate emptiness that lies where the foundations were supposed to stand, the philosophical and political consequences seem obvious and go without saying. Flaubert's "literary theology" results in a concept of the novel that is "fundamentally nihilistic" and which "tended toward quietism" to which González only adds a rhetorical question: "What else could be done after contemplating emptiness?" (57). The specificity of Latin American fiction lies in the alternative it proposes to this Flaubertian result—and that alternative is the novel's knotting with the nation and the sacred, the holy trinity already mentioned. If it is true that nothing religious can be destroyed simply by the work of logic, science, philology, or literary criticism, perhaps it is because it is our religious archive itself which brings to light that it is the withdrawal of God that takes the grounding out from under all human institutions. That God is not here is what makes religion possible in the first place, but it is also what prevents the religious from ever being fulfilled. It is possible to read, even if against the grain of some of González's insights, some of the political consequences of contemplating that absence in the texts studied here as most certainly not leading to quietism. But this is a tack that is set aside in the name of the sacrosanctity of Latin American identity – perhaps a necessary fiction, but a fiction first and last.

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JOSÉ EDUARDO GONZÁLEZ. *Appropriating Theory: Ángel Rama's Critical Work*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017. 232 pp.

Ángel Rama (1926-83) is known in North American academic circles for research on Spanish American *modernismo*, conceptualizations of narrative

transculturation, and literacy and power. His work has also been criticized for overemphasizing the role of intellectuals in societal transformation and for minimizing the violence of subaltern assimilation. Many readers have concluded that Rama's writings have become outdated in the time of neoliberal-administered globalization, when intellectuals and literature have ceded their erstwhile hegemonic positions.

In his *Appropriating Theory*, José Eduardo González proposes a new perspective that complements and differs from previous critical receptions of Rama's work. He also explains why Rama's relevance has not yet lapsed: Rama's writings are concerned with mediation and are driven by fear of a world where mediation has been subjugated to the immediate mediacy of global capital. The book contains seven chapters. The first two explore studies of Spanish American *modernismo* with an emphasis on the sociohistorical basis of Rubén Darío's preoccupation with literary style. Rama demonstrates that the cultural landscape of Darío's poetry reflects an experience of Latin American modernity as a symptom of dependency in Rama's early criticism and, in later critical work, as what Rama terms a "rich and heterogeneous" (as quoted in González 51) combination of formal elements. González traces a shift in Rama's engagement with Marxist intellectual history from György Lukács to Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Chapters Three to Five explore how Rama's interest in the Frankfurt School informs critical assessments of mid-twentieth century Spanish American narrative together with interest in cultural mediation and technique. The penultimate chapter discusses Rama's critical outlook as shaped by exile, while the final chapter assesses how Rama's reading of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* presents limitations and unexpected benefits for understanding literacy and power in *La ciudad letrada*.

In this sweeping study of Rama's writings dating from the mid-1960s through the 1980s, González highlights continuities and shifts while highlighting the organic nature of Rama's life work. The unity is defined by an overriding concern for the question of form, not only literary form but also form as a concept for understanding the possibilities of social and political agency for subjugated groups. Form is understood as determinate arrangement of the elements of the artistic or social totality that opens up the possibility of a modernity freed from the constraints of dependency. González also identifies an important intellectual debt that has gone unnoticed in critical receptions of Rama's work, namely, his engagement with the writings of Benjamin and Adorno. An explanation for this oversight can be found in the vicissitudes of Rama's theoretical production: while in his earlier writings he explicitly engages with these Frankfurt School thinkers, in the later works the references are almost nonexistent. An instance of this "encryption" of critical theory is seen in Rama's reflections

on cultural mediation. *La transculturación narrativa* represents the best-known example of this focus. In this work, Rama reads José María Arguedas and others through a Latin Americanist lens provided by Fernando Ortiz, who appropriated the dominant anthropological concept of *acculturation* and renamed it as *transculturation* in order to describe the encounter between dominant and subjugated cultures as a fluid, multi-directional process. Transculturating writers transform popular cultural forms, such as the “Jalisco peasant’s way of thinking” (71) in Juan Rulfo, into something akin to high-modernist literary form. In contrast to the regional novel’s tendency to evaluate popular culture from above, transculturation allows popular form to infiltrate the entirety of the text and thereby assert itself as a work’s unifying feature. The transculturating writer produces a work of universal standing – Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez are the artistic peers of Franz Kafka and William Faulkner – in which the popular can find itself interpellated.

But this gloss fails to register a major claim in *Appropriating Theory*: that Rama had been considering narrative poetics and societal transformation long before *La transculturación narrativa*. This concern also predates his reading of Ortiz. In Rama’s writings from the early 1970s, all the concerns that will later give shape to *La transculturación narrativa* are already present. They are developed through an appropriation of Benjamin’s meditations on how mechanical reproduction and photography reshape historical experience in the nineteenth century. Rama’s focus falls on “finishing,” “objectivity,” and the “optical unconscious” (64-70). Finishing derives from Benjamin’s explorations of how the logic of industrial capitalism is internalized by bourgeois culture as the need for a “refined, finished look” (65). “Objectivity” and the “optical unconscious,” meanwhile, channel Benjamin’s discussions of how nineteenth-century technological advancements generate revolutionary ways of observing nature and experiencing art. Benjamin’s reflections on technology provide a way to interrogate possibilities for recording and understanding Latin American social reality: for instance, the deployment of modern recording devices to document regional speech variations spawns a literary genre, *testimonio*, which promises new avenues for subaltern politics.

González proposes that, by substituting the Frankfurt School for Ortiz, Rama engages in a Latin Americanist cultural politics in which the affirmation of identity replaces the work of critical analysis of social formations. By hitching his theorization to Ortizian transculturation, Rama advances a rigid universalizing claim: transculturation explains the interactions between dominant and subordinate cultures throughout human history. Here something significant happens: Rama’s theory of cultural transformation in the periphery no longer offers an account of an

“exceptional moment in history”; theory now claims to capture a transhistorical phenomenon associated with a regional essence, or “another example of Latin American culture surviving the assault of foreign cultures” (78).

*Appropriating Theory* provides us with a valuable study of the intellectual trajectory of one of Latin America’s most important critics. The book underscores Rama’s efforts to dialogue with critical theory while also remaining attentive to how local particularity informs the appearance of the concept in its universality. González moves critical discussion beyond *criollista* celebrations of Rama’s work as exemplifying an inward-looking Latin American intellectual production presumed to be unencumbered by external debts. This is also what makes his book a timely intervention into Latin Americanist debates about theory.

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EDUARDO LEDESMA. *Radical Poetry: Aesthetics, Politics, Technology, and the Ibero-American Avant-Gardes, 1900-2015*. New York: SUNY Press, 2016. x + 348 pp.

Eduardo Ledesma’s study successfully negotiates an uneasy relationship between body, technology, and politics, reflected in the ever-changing, yet stable nature of the Ibero-American avant-garde poetry. The avant-garde, Ledesma argues, has a cyclical nature: it is reincarnated in different forms to reflect the current social and political conditions. The avant-garde, and in particular experimental poetry, does not completely reinvent itself with each passing historical period, but rather adapts to it and uses its principal characteristics as a means of poetic expression. Often, these characteristics appear to be in conflict with the nature of the avant-garde. Ledesma explores an uneasy relationship between technology as a tool of capitalist production and therefore a symbol of oppression, and technology as a means of protesting against this oppression. Ledesma also highlights the fleeting nature of avant-garde poetry and the paradox that it figures among the key subjects of current academic research and study, even though one would think that its marginalized character would be a barrier to its inclusion into the mainstream corpus of literary studies.

Ledesma recognizes the limitations of his undertaking and chooses not to go down the well-trodden path of including the analyses of Octavio Paz’s “signs in rotation,” Vicente Huidobro’s poetry, or the works of Ferreira Gullar. Instead, he focuses on the much less explored pieces by José Juan