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Review/Reseña

Joshua Lund, *The Impure Imagination: Towards a Critical Hybridity in Latin American Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Puros híbridos: Closing the Book (almost) on the Latin American ‘Hybridity’ Debate

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I

Reading *The Impure Imagination*, Joshua Lund’s definitive critical study of ‘hybridity’ as intellectual-cultural *topos* in Latin America, it’s hard to avoid the feeling that its publication (in 2006) comes a little more than a decade too late. Had it appeared in the 1990s, when the ‘hybridity’ obsession of U.S. Latin-Americanism was reaching its peak, it might have spared the latter a great deal of wasted time and effort. Consider, for example, Lund’s central thesis, stated early on in the book with characteristic lucidity and forthrightness:

...I am beginning by asserting a general principle: *to theorize hybridity is to operate within a discourse of race*. I announce this rule immediately, and even somewhat polemically, for a reason: in spite (or because) of the obviousness of the relationship between hybridity and race, in Latin Americanist criticism that relationship has sunk to the level of the implicit, whereby its force has gone underestimated, and in some cases disavowed. This structural condition has frustrated the emergence of an effectively critical theory of hybridity in Latin American writing, to the point that failed theories of hybridity are now constitutive of the basic concepts of Latin Americanist literary and cultural studies. In what sense do these theories ‘fail’? In the sense that, despite repeated claims to the contrary, they can never succeed in going beyond the discourse of race in which they dwell. (3)

This is an explanation *in nuce* for the implicit sense dogging this latest, academic re-discovery of ‘hybridity’ that it was over before it began. For was it really anything more than the further prolongation of such a ‘failure,’ a flight forward into a purportedly revolutionizing category that, far from transcending its more obviously racialized antecedents (e.g, ‘mestizaje’) only reinstated them under a new heading?

But this may already be too optimistic a scenario. Even if Lund’s book had been there to point out the fundamental conventionality and “self-evidence” (xx) of the concept itself—the act that “hybridity in the most literal sense...describes almost all things and certainly all human beings” (xix)—or to expose the ease with which it slips into becoming an apology for the inequalities it purports to overcome,¹ the hybridity ‘moment’ would still probably have had to run its course. The literary-critical and cultural wing of U.S. Latin-Americanism had, by then, already become a kind of subsidiary industry, recycling the successive upgrades of a poststructuralist-inflected metropolitan ‘theory,’ starting with the ‘debate’ over Latin America and postmodernism before pouring its energies into the no less over-determined ‘testimonio’—*cause célèbre* in the 1980’s—and finally losing momentum in the seemingly permanent controversy over the non-controversy of “Cultural Studies” and the academic operetta that was “Latin American Subaltern Studies.”

¹ Despite claims on its behalf by theorists such as Stuart Hall, hybridity has, writes Lund, “entailed a historical forgetfulness [in Latin America] that has allowed the trivialization of real exclusions to persist” (xiv).

‘Hybridity,’ it is true, could have claimed the more local, Latin-American traditions of an Oswald or Mario de Andrade, a Mariátegui, a Vasconcelos, or a Gilberto Freyre—the latter two being among the principal subjects of Lund’s more historical and less neurotically ‘vanguardist’ approach to, as he terms it, “hybridology.” But it is characteristic of the moment itself that these Latin American precursors were largely ignored and, almost without exception², a near monopoly granted to Néstor García Canclini’s *Culturas híbridas*, which had first appeared in 1989, and, especially after its translation into English in 1995, became the ‘theoretical’ standard-bearer on all things Latin American and ‘hybrid.’ Readers in search of one of the more convincing critiques of the book should consult chapter two of *The Impure Imagination*, but the question remains how such a largely descriptive and, from a critical-theoretical standpoint, derivative work could have become the focus of so much of the ‘theoretical’ attention of 1990s ‘hybridology’? The answer, of course, is that it really wasn’t. García Canclini was, always already, U.S. Latin-Americanism’s local surrogate for the true higher authority on ‘hybrids,’ Homi K. Bhabha, whose “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” the work that made “hybridity” a fixture of the postcolonial theoretical lexicon, had first appeared in 1985. Whether *Culturas híbridas* had fallen under the latter’s spell is beside the point. Within the magic circle of US Latin Americanism and its satellites, those who read it already had. And even if they hadn’t read Bhabha either, the ‘postcolonial’ aura projected from the arch-theorist of ‘hybridity’ onto just the word itself already shimmered above the pages of *Culturas híbridas*, like it or not. Just as there would probably have been no North American ‘debate’ over *testimonio* except for the prior authority and notoriety of Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (first published in 1983), there almost certainly would have been no Latin American Studies Association panels devoted to ‘hybridity’ in the 1990s but for the implicit—and ironically *colonizing*—intellectual stamp of the Derridean/Lacanian postcolonial theory of “Signs” and other essays subsequently published as *The Location of Culture*. (Perhaps the one

² E.g. Antonio Cornejo-Polar’s concept of “*heterogeneidad*,” whose defenders at one point argued for its more fully radicalized theoretical possibilities.

saving grace of “Latin American Subaltern Studies” is that it openly acknowledged this kind of prior authority, and, in the case of John Beverley’s brief for Ranajit Guha, made explicit arguments in defense of it.)

García Canclini’s star has since set, at least in North America, but it is a measure of the abiding intellectual attraction of Bhabha’s version of ‘hybridology’ that Lund himself, lowering his own critical guard in the case of things not Latin American, mounts a defense of it. But more about that, and Lund’s own orthodox Derridean moment, below. Meanwhile, to drop the anachronism and state the obvious here: no doubt even the two-dimensional Minerva’s owl of 1990s ‘hybridology’ had to flit off into oblivion before *The Impure Imagination* could look back and size up its limited truth-content. Not the least of the strengths that has made this patient work of critical scholarship timely after all is that, unlike the less critical work of the previous decade, and more oblivious of the latter’s vanguard ‘theory’ anxieties, it looks further back, to ‘hybridologies’ that had already shaped the Latin American present before it became ‘postcolonial.’

II

These foundational ‘hybridologies’, specifically the “discursive formations” of ‘*mestizaje*’ in nineteenth and twentieth century Mexico, and that of ‘hybridity’ itself in modern Brazil occupy the core of *The Impure Imagination*. It is Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa grande & senzala* that Lund principally takes up in the latter case, while in the Mexican instance he engages with an impressive range of cultural and intellectual objects, from Gabino Barreda’s *Oración cívica*, the novels of Ignacio Altamirano and the writings of the *científico* Andrés Molina Enríquez and anthropologist Manuel Gamio to *La raza cósmica* and *Los de abajo*. The results are too rich and nuanced to summarize here. Instead, I want to remark on what is arguably the climax of Lund’s ideology-critique of *mestizaje*: the re-discovery and re-interpretation of Heriberto Frías’ little-known 1906 fiction *¡Tomochic!* The novel describes the actual events surrounding the massacre by a federal *porfirista* army of a rebellious Chihuahuan village, whose residents Frías himself identifies as *mestizos*. But, as Lund discovers, a range of the novel’s more prominent critics

(including Azuela, Magaña Esquivel, Monsiváis and Benítez-Rojo) consistently misidentify the victims as indigenous (99).

Why this misidentification? Lund's answer is to point to the ideology of a modern Mexican state that must not be thought capable of slaughtering its own citizens, who are here coded as '*mestizos*.' This is so even when the state depicted in *iTomochic!* is the pre-revolutionary *porfiriato* and even (and perhaps especially) when such an ideology takes the 'left' form of a defense of the state's 'others'—here coded as 'indigenous.' With this discovery Lund has truly put his finger on the navel of this ideology itself, effectively proving its existence by pursuing it beyond its more obvious, 'hybridological' manifestations straight down to its occult, structural-genetic source. It is an electrifying moment, and, for what it's worth, a textbook instance of what Slavoj Žižek, in the language of the latest addition to his serialized *magnum opus*, calls the "parallax view": a "constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible."³ That *mestizos* are mistaken for indigenes under the ideological gaze of 'hybridology' becomes backhanded confirmation that, for such a gaze, '*mestizo*' and 'indigene' are *both* misidentifications. One can be mistaken for the other because, underlying the binary of the 'hybrid' versus the racial 'pure-breed,' there is only a gap, the void that is 'race' itself.

This capturing of Latin American(ist) 'hybridology' at the site of its own racializing blind spots, when it is most confident of having transcended 'race' altogether, is repeated at various points throughout *The Impure Imagination*. Thus, for example, one thinks one has read Vasconcelos until, reading Lund's book, it is discovered that *La raza cósmica* bears only a partial resemblance to the radically-utopian redemption of non-white Mexico it had somehow been assumed to be, and that, in fact, it is as much the extension of the racist and elitist Mexican positivism of the *porfiriato* as it is the latter's repudiation. Or, by the same token, but with the polarity reversed, the eugenicized 'hybridity' and romanticized racialism of *Casa-grande & senzala*, complacently dismissed by a present day 'hybridological' consensus, reappears under an entirely

³ *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 4.

new light when Lund discloses that, for example, contrary to those who charge him with propagating a myth of “racial democracy,” Freyre himself never uses the term and is as skeptical of it as are most of his critics. Rather, *Casa grande & senzala* is, in Lund’s words, a “document whose racism emerges from a desire for anti-racism” (151)—differing little, in its ambivalence towards race, from the writings of a Fanon, a Mariátegui, or, for that matter, from those of a Bhabha, a García Canclini or an Anzaldúa.

III

But for all its skill in foiling the alibis of hybridity when it comes to ‘race,’ *The Impure Imagination* leaves the most critical question unanswered and, in terms of its own theoretical standpoint, seemingly unanswerable: namely what, then, *are* the conditions of possibility for exiting this racial logic? If, to repeat Lund’s earlier-cited words, theories of hybridity “can never succeed in going beyond the discourse of race in which they dwell,” how then is *any* theory, whether Lund’s or anyone else’s, to “go beyond” such a “discourse”?

There is, in respect to this question, a deep ambivalence in *The Impure Imagination*. On the one hand, Lund clearly understands ‘race’ to be a purely ideological construct, an effect of modern forms of ‘biopolitics.’ ‘Race’ is a “name,” as Lund puts it in his introduction, “for the normalization of hierarchical social reproduction.” (xviii) This would seem to imply the theoretical possibility of “going beyond” such an ideological construct or biopolitical effect, the possibility of a world without ‘race’—and, indeed, what other interest could a critique of ‘hybridity’ have if not this real, social outcome, however utopian it might seem under contemporary conditions?

But the closer *The Impure Imagination* gets to confronting this question—also the question, effectively, of its own immanently critical standpoint—the more its concrete and historicizing critique of ‘hybridology’ retreats into calculated rhetorical evasions. Take for example Lund’s repeated references to the “coloniality of power,” Aníbal Quijano’s term for, in Lund’s words, “the way in which colonially derived social relations underwrite our contemporary world” (ix). Would not exiting the

racializing logic of ‘*mestizaje*’ and ‘hybridity’ therefore become a question of abolishing—of *negating*—such a form of “power”? Lund himself openly confirms this.⁴ Yet this possibility remains *pro forma* in *The Impure Imagination*, and the “coloniality of power” turns out to be the periodic invocation of a structure without a history, a form of “power” that will always manage to infiltrate any historically existing, practical movements aimed at its overthrow and transformation. Of course, Lund would be the last person to withhold his sympathies from such movements, but there is no theoretical, critical category in *The Impure Imagination* to correspond to such sympathy. The “coloniality of power” is a stand-in for such a category here, a theoretical term that, for all its apparent reference to the real history of colonial and neo-colonial subjugation and integration in places like Latin America, is as ahistorical as the Nietzschean-Foucauldian philosopheme to which it seeks to add a gloss of anti-imperialism. This is not the result of any inflection that Lund himself brings to the theory: its pseudo-historicity and purely rhetorical subversions are there already in Quijano, Dussel and Mignolo. Here, as there, the argument obeys the logic of an “inverted Eurocentrism”⁵ in which “Europe” equals, *a priori*, a violent domination of the ‘other’ that is always already contained in any claim to universal meaning, reason or truth and “Latin America” (or, *mutatis mutandis*, the “subaltern”) equals, *a priori*, the resistance to such domination. But the result is that both terms, “Latin America” as well as “Europe,” lose all historical specificity and placing one or the other in the position of ‘other’ becomes purely a question of a prior, and irrational, will to power. “Nothing is true, everything is permitted,” as Nietzsche had it in *The Genealogy of Morals*—and Nietzsche would have been the first to point out that the “coloniality of power” as *theory* is as easily invoked as a *defense* of colonialism as it is as a call to its subversion. The jargon of “coloniality,” a neologism that both evades the unavoidably historical reference of “colonialism” but also brandishes it upon request, already

⁴ See, for example, p. xxi of the Introduction: “I will be arguing, then, that the ambivalence of hybridity theory toward (trans)nationally marginalized subjects articulates it to a coloniality of power, and that this articulation suggests not a haphazard coincidence but a cultural logic whose operations can be described, analyzed, and potentially stopped.”

⁵ See Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989)

says it all: it is merely a variation on “difference” onto which there have been sutured the interchangeable artificial limbs of “colonial” oppression and emancipation.

Lund’s open reliance on deconstruction, specifically Derrida’s “The Law of Genre”, at least has the virtue of exposing to full view the above conceptual subterfuge. There is no space for going into detail here, but a glance at the kind of logical contortions to which Lund is driven in order to give the appearance of circumventing what is, clearly, a theoretical impasse in his own argument will suffice. Note, for example, the following passage in chapter one of *The Impure Imagination* (“Genres are not to be Mixed”) in which Lund first (ably) summarizes the basic thrust of Derrida’s argument in “The Law of Genre”:

Thus the mark of exemplarity is also the condition of exemption, the trait that exemplifies membership in a set, but that enigmatically does not belong there itself, that participates without belonging. It is the foundational gesture of deconstruction: the same kind of trait that generates identification degenerates into differentiation. This trait or mark is managed even if unmanageable (or, not containable) by (or within) an authority whose force resides in coloniality: it is that on which (neo)colonial authority *depends* and must insist. (23)

But what kind of “authority” is it about which it is, evidently, undecidable whether or not it ‘manages’ or ‘contains’ the “trait” already posited as subordinate to such an “authority”? And what could it mean for such an “authority” to possess a “force” and for the latter to “reside” in anything at all? Lund’s attempt to hedge his argument with ambiguities—“even if unmanageable” etc.—seems already to be a tacit admission of the answer here: no kind of “authority” or “force” at all. Derrida is no doubt right, for what little it’s worth, to point out the ‘discursive’ or rhetorical paradox—“participation without belonging”—underlying the logic of genre or class *tout court*: that the general, abstract trait on the basis of which an individual entity is classified as belonging to a particular genre does not itself fall within such a genre. But this reduces, on further reflection, to the tautology of pointing out that it is inherent in the concept of, e.g., the ‘hybrid’ that it not be ‘containable’ within a single genre or genus. The fact that, as Lund himself acknowledges (xii), today’s hybrid (e.g., the

variegated narrative traditions that combined to form the novel) is tomorrow's genre as good as acknowledges the historical, dialectical relativity and inter-penetration of the two terms themselves. Declaring it to be a law that "genres are not to be mixed" so as to be able, in a display of would-be subversion, to mix them anyway and thus violate the "law" is about as 'subversive' as declaring oneself to be on the side of history long after the fact. In the same way, arguing that "(neo)colonial authority depends" on the 'exempt' exemplarity of the 'hybrid' is tantamount to arguing that colonialism "depends" on itself, since, as Lund also affirms, the "coloniality" underlying the Eurocentric claim to universality already posits the need for an exception to the (universal) rule, and thus, as "genre," already contains the "hybrid" that falls outside it. "Coloniality" and "hybridity" are thus two names for the same conceptual term. Positing the existence of a *historical* relation between them that assigns the former to "Europe" (or the United States) and the latter to "Latin America" can claim no more theoretical necessity here than the reverse. "Latin America," that is, has ceased to exist as a *historical* entity.

It is the same sleight-of-hand already raised to the level of virtuosity in Bhabha. But here, as there, the attempt to translate the paradoxes and rhetorical slippages of a deconstruction that finds them anywhere it looks into a "force," whether of an emancipatory or an oppressive historical praxis, achieves precisely the opposite result: the possibility of such praxis now belongs only to the sphere of textuality or "discourse." It's hard not to speculate that, behind these sorts of strained arguments, Lund has tacitly come to the same conclusion, and that his only rhetorical option is to go for broke. How else to read Lund's claim, in defense of the legendary "difficulty" of Bhabha's writing, that such writing "exemplifies the fact that effective critique, like revolution or even just modest social change, will only be wrought with great difficulty and through much effort"(47)? He really must be joking: is there a surer way to waste the time and effort it will take to change the world than to pore over Bhabha's equivocal prose? Yet this only reveals *in flagrante* the sophism repeated, with more circumspection, by classical deconstruction itself: namely, to both affirm but also disclaim the logic of indeterminacy or undecidability that

purportedly undermines all binary oppositions—a logic that would refute any possibility of a *critical* standpoint insofar as it would deny the existence of any *determinable* difference between critique and the object under critique—by placing the undesirable term “under erasure.” This is what Lund, apparently, wants to fall back on as his own “critical” standpoint with respect to ‘hybridity,’ his answer to the implied question posed above of how, unlike ‘hybridity,’ to “dwell” *outside* the “discourse of race”? By putting ‘race’ “under erasure,” however, he has only succeeded in reproducing the standpoint of ‘hybridity’ itself vis-à-vis ‘race’—a standpoint whose affinity for deconstruction he himself has acknowledged.⁶ ‘Hybridology,’ it seems, was right all along. Its only mistake was not to have fathomed the conceptual subterfuges of Derrida and Bhabha. Thus when, for example, Freyre, in *Casa-grande & senzala*, de-racializes the relation of “black” to “slave” only so as to reverse this process and, in the name of a hybridized *cultura brasileira*, turn slaves back into “blacks”, what basis could there be to criticize the ideology behind this move? Was *Casa-grande* not in fact, without knowing it, putting “black” “under erasure”? That would in fact accord with what Lund himself, under the Derridean aegis⁷, concedes to Freyre: that the “impossibility of his project”—“the impossible desire to think a world without race”—cannot in fact be “delinked from the vertiginous impossibility of our own” (150).

IV

But how, then, if we are unwilling to surrender the possibility of “thinking a world without ‘race,’” or to deliver ourselves over to deconstruction and its theoretical ‘hybridology,’ are we to ground this ‘desire’ theoretically and historically? That, clearly, is a question far

⁶ “Critically, hybridity has evolved into a concept that is often invoked as a kind of deconstructive lever, as a way to reverse and displace authoritative rhetorics and discourses” (xii).

⁷ “Although aporias are always daunting, it is worth remembering, with Derrida (1990), that their impossibility is also productive, and that their attempted passage (or the undecidable decisions they provoke) is the essence of effective critique” (150). By these criteria, my “undecidable decision” to pass beyond the “impossible desire to think a world without race” and declare myself a defender of white supremacy would, no less than a position of anti-racism, count as an instance of “effective critique.”

exceeding the limits of this review (and the limitations, very likely, of this reviewer), but I want to close here with two observations prompted by it.

The first takes the form of a postulate: that the evident ability of ‘race’ and racialized categories to insinuate themselves, in the end, even into consciously anti-racist positions indicates the existence here of a direct link between ‘race’ and the reified forms of consciousness generated by capitalist modernity itself. What if ‘race’ belonged, not simply to the sphere of an ‘ideology’ understood (by both Marxist and non-Marxist critical race-theories) to be the mystification of class or other relations of political power but to that of ‘second nature’ itself? This is a postulate implicitly if not explicitly worked out in Moishe Postone’s path-breaking theory of anti-Semitism⁸ as well as in contemporary German critical theory (see work by Robert Kurz, Roswitha Scholz, and Ernst Lohoff⁹, *inter alia*)—arguments that I cannot attempt to summarize here. There are obvious difficulties accompanying such a postulate, among them that ‘race’ and *racism*, when viewed from the standpoint of a biologized ‘second nature,’ appear to lead an antediluvian, *pre-modern* existence. But if it were to hold true, the theory of ‘race’ as a fetish-form of consciousness, traceable, in its structure, to the commodity-form itself, would account for the evident ability of ‘race’ to work its way back into the theoretical consciousness of the modern *anti-racist* political movements (anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and twentieth century ‘proletarian’ revolutions included) that have essentially struggled to win a place *within* capitalist modernity rather than to overthrow it.¹⁰

My second observation brings me back, finally, to *The Impure Imagination* and the fact that, unlike the postcolonial and poststructuralist theory with which it rather grudgingly lines up in the end, it does not *start*

⁸ See “The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century,” in *Catastrophe and Meaning: the Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, eds. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁹ See Kurz, *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus* (Eichborn:Verlag AG:Frankfurt Am Main, 1999); Scholz, “Homo Sacer und ‘die Zigeuner,’” *Exit!:Krise und Kritik der Warengesellschaft* #4: 2007; Lohoff, “Die Verzauberung der Welt,” *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft* #29 2005.

¹⁰ For my own attempt to develop this idea, taking *Casa-grande & senzala* as its point of my departure (and initiated thanks to an invitation from Joshua Lund) see: “O híbrido como fetiche: ‘raça,’ ideologia e narrativa em *Casa-grande & senzala*,” in *Gilberto Freyre e os estudos latinoamericanos*, eds. Joshua Lund & Malcolm McNee (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2006), 379-392.

from the premise that equates 'hybridity' with subversion or emancipation but is driven back to it even as it attempts to overturn such a premise. In the process, Lund lays out a series of historically grounded, critical interpretations of Latin American 'hybridology' that surpass anything I know of in the field of contemporary Latin-Americanism. That *The Impure Imagination* is unable, finally, to push its way beyond the boundaries of a form of ideology critique that, when it comes to 'race,' cannot locate its own immanent standpoint, is a limitation that, *qua* critical theory itself, it shares with the rest of us. With the exception of a few, incipient breakthroughs, we as yet have no critical theory of 'race.'