

*Foucault and Latin America*  
 Ed. by Benigno Trigo  
 New York: Routledge, 2002  
 Paperback: \$24.95

*Reviewed by Albert Colón*

The essays that make up this collection represent not only the vast concerns that interest theorists of Latin American texts, but they also represent the considerable influence the theories of Michel Foucault have had on Latin American intellectual discourse. Benigno Trigo, an Assistant Professor in Hispanic Languages and Literature at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, has not only served as the editor of the book, he has also written an introduction and contributed an essay.

Trigo's introduction serves as a preparation for what is to come and allows him to show his knowledge of Foucault's large and varied work. He implicitly agrees with the claim made by Román de la Campa, who "describes Foucault's work as a divided corpus," (xiii) a claim that seems to me to be not only correct, but dominates the way most of the contributors approach their work. Trigo is clearly aware of this when he writes that "it is the common search for the uncertain ground of discourse and the vicissitudes of that search that explain the attraction of Foucault's theory and his critical appropriation by the critics included in this volume" (xv). The fertile contradictions and intellectual adventurism that inform Foucault's best work are what makes him an essential thinker for those who study literature, philosophy, history (of science, prisons, in short, all social institutions) and art. Foucault's erudition and knowledge intimidates none of the contributors; in fact, they are energized and often see the limitations of his ideas.

Trigo separates the book into four sections: Discourse, Government, Subjectivity, and Sexuality. The first section, Discourse, begins with "The Ordered City from The Lettered City" by Angel Rama. Rama is concerned with how Spanish conquerors attempted to control the indigenous population they encountered. According to Rama, the New World presented the Spanish conquerors with the opportunity to create ideal cities, "ordered cities" that would be almost Edenic in a way that the rigid cities of Europe could never become. In other words, potentiality was the key notion arresting the conquerors and their city planners. Of course, the problem of the indigenous population was something the conquerors had to deal with. "They" had to be controlled. One of the most important and effective means of control was to urbanize the territories they seized. Meticulous planning was implemented to create cities that not only controlled the indigenous population, but also served to fortify the empire. As Rama writes, "in the mechanism of military domination, the urban network functioned to provide, first, bases for successive forays of conquering forces, and then, relay stations for the transmission of subsequent imperial directives" (11). Order was at the center of the Spanish American cities (as in all cities), a fact that is still the case and an idea that fits nicely with Foucault's notion that "what made the classical episteme possible as a whole, of course, was its relationship to a knowledge of order" (quoted by Rama, 7). For the Spanish, cities were not merely places where you lived, they were the "civilizing" tools and seats of power where the indigenous peoples were seen, controlled, and made docile by the enveloping stare of the controllers; they were ordered urban centers where the ingenuity, expressiveness, and creativity of the empire were on display in ways that could not be realized in Europe where the Spanish were surrounded by powerful countries. In the New World, the Spanish could decide what to make of their subjects and themselves, paving the way for avenues of potentiality.

In Román de la Campa's "The Lettered City: Power and Writing in Latin America from *Latin Americanism*," Rama's ideas are explored and extended. De la Campa is concerned with the subject and how it becomes what the dominant power wants it to become. The subject is created, not understood. This line of reasoning is Althusserian in that the notion of a power elite creating the concept of the self casts in doubt the very possibility of creating or identifying a true self. For de la Campa, this leads to "a representational crisis that composes the interplay of excesses inherent in a far-reaching set of social nodes that organize Latin America's epistemic horizon: city/countryside, elite/popular, resistance/complicity, Americanism/Eurocentrism, writing/orality, among others" (33). I would add that the representational crisis is not only felt in Latin America and its cultural and personal products, it is felt throughout all Western

cultures as our fixed notions of the self have undergone a radical restructuring. Indeed, one can argue that a representational crisis is at the heart of all postmodern texts, whether they are classified as fiction or non-fiction.

It is this representational crisis that forms much of the power of Roberto González Echevarría's "A Clearing in the Jungle: From Santa Mónica to Macondo from *Myth and Archive*." This is not the proper forum to discuss the extraordinary richness and brilliance of this essay in the way it deserves to be discussed. Indeed, the best way to approach this essay is to read the book that it comes from and then commenting on the whole text. Suffice it to say that Echevarría creates a hypnotic and gripping reading of Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) and García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), works he considers founding fictions. He suggests that Carpentier's work is about trying to find the origin, the archive, of Latin American history, thought, philosophy, idealism. But the plan is doomed from the beginning because the paths the explorers are treading are, as the title makes clear, lost. Márquez's work, then, is not about finding the lost history as much as it is about creating a new mythology, a written mythology that supersedes all the fictions of creation that preceded it. By creating a new myth, Márquez allows Latin America "to see itself as other" (56). Latin America, the vision it has of itself, is merely a fiction, one that it can free itself from. Echevarría makes his point near the end of the essay:

It does not escape me that the hegemonic discourse described here comes from "outside" Latin America; therefore Latin America appears to be constantly explaining itself in "foreign" terms, the helpless victim of a colonialist's language and image-making. There is a level at which this is true and deplorable. However, in Latin America in every realm, from the economic to the intellectual, the outside is always the inside; García Márquez and Vargas Llosa hardly think like *llaneros* and *campesinos*. This duality, which is for the most part a stance or in the worst of cases a posture, is present from the start, for instance, in Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca. Latin America is part of the Western world, not a colonized other, except in founding fictions and constitutive idealizations (79).

In the section on Government, Trigo assembles Doris Sommer's "Love and Country: An Allegorical Speculation from *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*," Aída Beupied's "From Liberty to Fatherland: Sacrifice and Dad Certainties in the Critical Discourses of Cuba," Juan Poblete's "Governmentality and the Social Question: National Formation and Discipline," and Fernando Feliú's "Rendering the Invisible Visible and the Visible Invisible: The Colonizing Function of Bailey K. Ashford's Antianemia Campaigns." All of these works present an image of a political and powerful elite controlling school curriculum in Sommer's essay, the very notion of the individual in Beupied and Poblete's essays and medicine in Feliú's work. Sommer makes the point that the governments in Latin American countries have approved novels of romance as the official reading lists in schools. These novels present a romantic ideal that has helped to create an image of Latin Americans being romantic, passionate, erotic, and strict in the ways they view gender roles. The novels have always been a political tool used to present an image of Latin America to Latin Americans, an image that creates a myth about their ways of looking at the world and their desire for control and order in matters physical and political. Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, especially his point that "the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities ... *measured the body*, and penetrated modes of conduct" (Foucault as quoted by Sommer, emphasis added, 109), clearly influences Sommer. The very fact that romance novels are what are overwhelmingly taught in schools in Latin America allows Sommer to see the body as the place of control. And control is essential to Sommer. For her, "these states, in other words, tacitly accepted the nineteenth century potboilers as founding fictions that cooked up the desire for authoritative government from the apparently raw material of erotic love" (119). The other essays in this section continue the themes of power and control. I found Feliú's essay on how medicine was used as a colonizing tool in Puerto Rico by the United States as particularly compelling and important.

Of the essays in the section on Subjectivity, I would like to point out Elzbieta Sklodowska's "Author-(dys)function: Rereading *I Rigoberta Menchú*" to be especially stimulating. Using Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" as a jumping off point, Sklodowska questions the function of the editor, in this case Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the reporter of Menchú's story. She raises important questions, such as what does the editor leave out and how does the editor organize the story she is being told? It is apparent that the

"I" of the title is a slippery term. Who is really speaking? Who is controlling the narrative? At the core of this essay is the questioning of the authority of the author, which is a central focus of much of Foucault's work. What separates Sklodowska's work from many others who use Foucault as an intellectual authority is that she sees the cultural colonialism at play when she uses Foucault to view Latin America and its cultural products. The essay's shift from a questioning of editorial authority to a questioning of philosophical and cultural authority is startling and thought provoking.

The final section, *Sexuality*, is filled with compelling and satisfying readings. Most exciting is Licia Fiol-Matta's " 'Race Woman': Reproducing the Nation in Gabriela Mistral." In this text, Fiol-Matta revels in the seeming contradiction of a lesbian becoming a spokesperson of normative heterosexual sexuality. Mistral became a self-appointed voice of the people who promoted the reproductive imperative of all Chilean and, by extension, Latin American women. What is most interesting is the fact that Mistral presented and celebrated herself as *mestizaje*, a person of mixed blood, when she was a racist. Mistral is seen by Fiol-Matta as an early believer in José Vasconcelos' eugenics of taste, which called for the self-annihilation of "the Negro" through improved education. Mistral, although she championed mixed race Latinos throughout her life, always saw Latinos of African descent as dirty, ugly, and destructive. In fact, she blamed them for the suicide of her adoptive son, going so far as to claim that the gang of youngsters who were guilty of the crime confessed to her! It is important to note that Fiol-Matta is not performing a hatchet job on Mistral and her memory as much as she is contributing to one of the major ideas of this collection: the crisis of representation. Fiol-Matta is aware that the self is made up of a slew of selves that do not always present a unified front. Therefore, the essay becomes an object lesson of the ways contradictions form individuals.

*Foucault and Latin America* is an important and exciting collection. It not only serves as a testament to Michel Foucault's remarkable influence in literary and philosophical circles; it also celebrates the depth, richness, and sheer brilliance of the criticism written from and about Latin America.