

Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America
Ángel Rama

Ed. and Trans. David Frye

264 pages, 2012, \$23.95 USD (paper)

Durham and London: Duke University Press

Reviewed by Abril Trigo, The Ohio State University

Nunca es tarde cuando la dicha es buena, says the popular saying in Spanish, or *It's never too late to have joy*. I can't say that this is a timely publication, because *Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, by Ángel Rama, should have been published in English twenty years ago, at the highlight of the debates about the politics of Latin American cultural studies. But it is always a cause for rejoicing when the translation of one of the Latin American masterworks in literary and cultural critique is made finally available to English-speaking readers, and particularly so if it is a good translation, because Ángel Rama's convoluted thinking and arboreal syntax is diabolically difficult to grasp.

In the back cover of the book there is a blurb by John Beverley where he states that, "[i]n a sense, modern Latin American literary and cultural criticism has been in a dialogue with Ángel Rama's notion of 'narrative transculturation,' first advanced in these essays." What Beverley does not say is that that dialogue in the 1990s was mostly critical when not overtly hostile to transculturation theory, in reaction to the notorious influence that Rama's book had had in the 1980s. Written in the 1970s (though the book was published in 1982), Rama's *transculturation* was a theory strongly embedded in the ideological paradigms and political struggles of the 1970s. Read after the postmodern turn, the book became the subject of a highly critical, ahistorical, and sometimes even purposely biased misreading from some quarters of Latin American cultural studies. Even though some of these critiques offered sharp and responsible theoretical reflections, they were ultimately wrong, simply because they interpreted models of transculturation that had been thought out for specific eco-cultural formations and, therefore, within a limited historical and geographical scope, as if they were universally valid theories. Neither Rama's transculturation model, nor the ones proposed earlier by Fernando Ortiz and Mariano Picón Salas would have ever been able to meet these demands, because their ideas were framed by the ideological horizon of their times and stubbornly concerned in finding answers to the problems of those times. Ahistorical interpretation is a vicious malaise completely at odds with the more basic premises of cultural critique.

This is the reason why this book should have been published years ago, when *Narrative Transculturation* was a hot potato in the cauldron of Latin American cultural studies. However, perhaps after all now is a good time, when the protagonists of those debates are scattered all

around, and the passing of time and new events have changed the subject, to get the book to the public. Perhaps now is a good time to restart the conversation—yes, this time as a real dialogue—with the theories of transculturation and Rama’s argument, which, as Jean Franco also states inside the back cover, “has a broader relevance to cultures that have had a peripheral relation to the metropolis ... enabling debates about transculturation to be resituated in a more global context.”

As I have already said, David Frye has done a very good job as editor and translator. His translation is always respectful to the fluidity of ideas, new concepts, elaborate arguments, historical allusions, erudite references, profuse connotation, and blind spots in Rama’s text. Rama was a very good writer, but he always wrote at fast speed, with a sort of carelessness, as the good cultural journalist he used to be. He wrote fast—the same way he thought and lived according to his times—and never bored himself with revising and editing his texts in depth so they convey a sense of urgency and the impression of a rough, unfinished product. In a way they still are a work in progress. And that makes them difficult and enticing. Still, Frye has managed to produce a pleasantly readable translation that actually improves the presentation of some passages by subtle, punctual emendation, such as cutting paragraphs at different points, introducing or eliminating subtitles, etc. I disagree, of course, with the rendition of some passages, the chosen wording for important notions, or the even increased confusion in regard to the epigraph to chapter six (Rama, like many other essayists, used to quote from memory, a bad habit even for a man with a truly Renaissance mind). I do not like the new title, *Writing across Cultures*, which not only pushes back the original title as a subtitle but, more importantly, contravenes the meaning of *transculturation* as *the conflictive and dialectical transformation of cultures* developed by Latin American thinkers, and reverts to its Anglo-Saxon anodyne usage. The brief introduction is fair, but I wonder about its usefulness and who actually are its targeted readers. It definitely does not say anything that the informed reader does not know, and does not provide the necessary contextualization for uninformed readers, particularly in relation to the polemics I mentioned above, its early impact and later fall into oblivion. Perhaps this publication foretells their eventual comeback.