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LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE TEMPEST: ARIEL OR CALIBAN

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ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to address the dual character of Latin America in reaction to the debate of "Latin American identity". William Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest* has inspired many Latin Americans to seek self definition through two of the book's slave characters, Ariel the obedient spirit, and Caliban the mutinous native, both captured by their European master Prospero. In order for one to understand more about what relevance the two literary tropes of Ariel and Caliban have, in relation to the question that many intellectuals have raised of "What is Latin American identity", it is necessary to look at the Global significance of these characters. In other words, just as Retamar's methodology for Latin America implies, what happens in Latin America should not be considered in isolation from anything remotely relevant anywhere past or present. The continent in essence must to continue 'assimilating inspirations from all parts of the world'. This is the unique feature which perhaps identifies and defines Latin American identity.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Ariel, Caliban, Latin American identity.

RESUMO

Este texto pretende abordar a dupla natureza da América Latina no debate sobre a "identidade latino-americana". O drama de William Shakespeare *A tempestade* tem inspirado muitos latino-americanos a buscar uma auto-definição através de dois dos personagens escravos do livro, Ariel, o espírito obediente, e Caliban, o nativo amotinado, ambos capturados por seu mestre europeu Próspero. Para uma melhor compreensão da relevância dos tropos literários de Ariel e Caliban para a pergunta suscitada por muitos intelectuais sobre "qual é a identidade latino-americana?", é necessário determinar o significado global dessas personagens. Em outras palavras, conforme a metodologia de Retamar, o que acontece na América Latina não deve ser considerado de maneira isolada em relação a qualquer outro assunto remotamente relevante, em qualquer lugar do passado ou presente. O continente na sua essência deve continuar as "inspirações assimiladas de todas as partes do mundo". Essa é a única característica que talvez identifique e defina a identidade latino-americana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Shakespeare; Roberto Fernández Retamar; Ariel; Caliban; identidade latino-americana.

Introduction

Latin America is an area of many extreme polarities such as poverty / wealth, civilization / nature, strong / weak and white / black. As a result, Latin American identity reflects this complex mixture of contrasting characteristics, which has provoked the inhabitants to ask "who are we". One explanation may be offered by language, as language is the essence and historical epitome of one's culture. By replacing a language, one enacts the erasure of a cultural history, which is one of the consequences of the European conquests during the middle ages. This, in addition to a negation of a cultural existence and the enforcement of an adherence to a "superior" form of civilization, were all transformations that shaped Latin American Identity over the last five hundred years. The feats of the European discoveries in the new world would have a severe impact on the inhabitants, which William Shakespeare infers in *The Tempest*. The main indication of this can be found through an analysis of the interaction between the characters. For example, the relationship between Prospero and his slave Caliban is analogous to the hierarchy affiliation shared between the repressive colonizers and the enslaved population. Consequently, many writers since then have interpreted the relationship between the two characters of Shakespeare's play as a possible answer to the question of 'who are we?' in terms of Latin American identity. However, as the nature of this subject is so changeable, assertions have even been made to Ariel the spirit as an accurate representation of the continent, as opposed to the character's degenerate antithesis Caliban. Therefore, one immediate question would be, what real significance could the tropes of a spirit and a slave have for Latin American identity, and if so, why? In order to answer these questions, it would be appropriate to address the debate of

Latin American identity in conjunction with some references to *The Tempest* to understand the discourses stimulated by the tropes of Ariel and Caliban.

Discovery of a new World? Or the reestablishment of an Old civilization?

First of all, it is important to establish what the characters Ariel, Caliban and in this case Prospero represent from a Latin American viewpoint and identify the first major discourse on the region's identity. What is instantly recognizable about Ariel and Caliban is that they are both slaves who have to serve the powerful Prospero. However, even in servitude these two are not treated in the same manner, which is reflected by the way Prospero, the story's architect, controls the audience's perception of these servants. This is achieved through the distinctive ways he refers to his servants such as, 'Approach my Ariel' (SHAKESPEARE, 1623, p. 32) and 'Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself...' (Idem, p. 37) to Caliban. From the start, the audience's perceptions of the characters are influenced by Prospero's perspective of the pure spirit Ariel and the barbarous hybrid Caliban. Everything is engineered and transformed by the proficient European from what he interpreted as chaos into absolute order. So it is possible to see Latin America's connection with the drama's tale of an island conquered by a European possessing superior scientific wisdom, who enslaves the autochthonous inhabitants to subservience and laborious work. This is because many Latin American intellectuals feel that their past like the story of the *Tempest* has been dictated from a European point of view. Edmundo O'Gorman advocates this concept, as he highlights that, the descriptions made by Christopher Columbus and Vespuccio in their testimonies to the Monarchs, were exaggerated to suit the objectives of their masters (O'GORMAN, 2004, p. 185). So, the conquerors akin to Prospero, were attempting to make their stories more palatable for their target audience, by overstating the details of the Islands they had visited, in order for the Kings to gain interest and sponsor further expeditions. These over-elaborated tales

ranged from the vast riches Columbus had discovered, to the cannibalistic rituals of the inhabitants, which is inferred to by Shakespeare's anagram of cannibal from Caliban. Hence, O'Gorman preferred the term, "The Invention of America" as opposed to the discovery of America. The very discovery of Latin America had to be disguised as a place that could be understood by Europeans, as this strange 'New World' created a problem. This was because in Europe everything before the discoveries could be explained by religion for example the tripartite idea of the world was the belief professed by the scriptures', that the planet consisted of three continents. Now this way of thinking would have to change as a result of this 'la cuarta parte del mundo' (O'GORMAN, 1958, p. 185).

However, the cause for the volatile nature of the Latin American identity debate can be traced to the fact that, once these Islands were finally recognized as new discoveries, the Europeans conceived them to be a menace. The existence of a new land in between Europe and Asia was seen as a barrier to achieving the age old desire of establishing easy contact with the Far East. So, Columbus' belief that he had found Asia, along with the Voyagers' fear of not discovering riches equivalent to those found in Asia, meant that Latin America would not establish an immediate identity until the ones who controlled history said so, namely the Europeans. Instead, they would start what O'Gorman refers to as 'el proceso' (Idem, 1958, p. 185). in which Latin America was invented through a series of voyages between 1492 and 1507. The fact that these discoveries were not preconceived by the scriptures began to make Europeans question and modify what had previously been learnt from hermeneutics¹ as well as epistemology² (Idem, 1958, p. 126). This two way process becomes increasingly unbalanced as history progresses, because most of Latin American culture is imposed from

¹ The branch of theology that deals with the principles of critical explanation or interpretation of the bible.

² A branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge.

outside and shaped to reflect other civilizations. Latin America was not seen as the dynamic structures or by the multi-secular process that kept it together, it was just defined by what Europeans instilled. Rather than recognizing the discovery of a New World, the colonizers would instead create a new Europe. Therefore, this process is what can be seen as America's inclusion in to Europe's self modernization project that would also affirm the European dominance over the "natural world".

Inevitably then, two further questions are raised. Firstly, what could explain the digression of Latin America? Secondly how could the tropes relate to the issue of recovering a Latin America identity? O' Gorman offers an answer to both of these questions that point out the two paths that can be taken by the repressed subordinate, in a power struggle. Latin America in O'Gorman's view was enslaved by European values as Latin America took 'the path of imitation' (O'GORMAN, 1958, p. 156). The 'backwardness' of Latin American society in light of '*La invención de América*' was blamed on the copying of European models to shape Latin American society. Whereas, North America takes the second path of being 'Americano' (O'GORMAN, 1958, p. 157), which meant adapting the model to the circumstances as opposed to the other way around. So in other words, Latin America plays the passive role of imitating the savage behavior of the conquerors and showing no sign of sophistication or originality. Whereas, the United States on the other hand refutes these old ideals of Europe and invents their own principles free from the colonizers influence. The parallels of Caliban to barbarous Latin America and Ariel to the liberated United States can be thus loosely envisaged here. Although these comparisons don't quite fit, and O'Gorman's text does not refer directly to the characters of the *The Tempest*, it was still important to refer to *La Invención de América* to fully appreciate the relationship shared between Latin America, the U.S. and Europe. What is missing from this text is a positive comparison of Latin America that could enable both an international and Latin

American reader understand the condition of Latin America as a “developing” continent of the future, as O’Gorman appears to give too much appraisal to the United States, thus downplaying his own continent’s accomplishments. In the context of O’Gorman’s argument, the uncouth character of Caliban would perfectly convey the degenerate Latin American society, which contrasted with his conception of the ethereal sphere created by the Ariel like North American civilizations. So, the cultural success of the U.S. understandably would make one choose Ariel as the character to follow in the power struggle against Prospero, but what exactly could this symbol of a spirit mean for Latin American scholars.

Latin America as Ariel?

In this section, Ariel is the main symbolic focus as it represents a specific type of reaction to power in which the subordinate, albeit reluctantly, abides by the masters’ commands and waits patiently for his freedom. In the Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó’s book *Ariel*, he states that Latin America is faced with a new enemy. In light of the fall of the Spanish empire and the rise of the United States as a Global power, he identifies the U.S., Latin America’s antithesis, and the ever-pervasive American influence as a potential threat to Latin American identity. So, in contrast with O’Gorman’s perspective, as the future of Latin America according to Rodó did not mean following the path of the United States, as it was a deeply materialistic, utilitarian continent that promoted the specialization of workers’ knowledge in only one area. The concern at the time was that this sort of mentality would create individuals who were ‘apt in one aspect of life but monstrously inept in all others’ (RODÓ, 1900, p. 43). Furthermore, the act of constantly carrying out the same activity is not only a way of diminishing the workers’ mind but also their ‘spirit’.

So, in an attempt to restore the spirit and counter the threat seen to Latin American identity, *Ariel* is addressed to the youth, as they symbolize ‘light, love

and energy, for individuals, for generations, and also for the evolutionary process of society' (Idem, 1900, p. 34) The story is appropriately situated in a classroom with Ariel and Caliban as disciples of the wise European professor named Prospero, who pontificates one last secular sermon. The pupil Ariel is the personification of youth, human spirit and the aesthetic beauty that was emphasized by Greek philosophers. Ariel was 'reason and feeling' (Idem, 1900, p. 31) over the basic instincts of irrationality in contrast to Caliban who represented "basic sensuality' (Idem, 1900, p. 31). These embodiments, were supposed to persuade the youth to embark on the path of continual self-improvement and promote widespread education. To reestablish the Latin American "spirit" Rodó uses the models of Greece and Rome, both of which advocate the arts as a form of learning. So, he adapts the classic concepts of ancient western culture as opposed to the U.S. modern utilitarian culture that only partially educated the continent's members, consequently making high culture much harder to acquire.

Rodó's main argument against the imitation of the U.S.'s path is that it leads to mediocrity, as they do not advocate ideals like 'selective education' (Idem, 1900, p. 82) or an inclination to enable 'excellence to rise above general mediocrity' (Idem, 1900, p. 82). Therefore, the argument was that the democratic ideals of the U.S. that glorified utilitarianism only lead to a norm of mediocrity, which destroyed the civilized values of aestheticism and idealism. This in turn, would result in a lack of individual excellence and meant that there would be no ruling elite edify the higher values of civilization. So, Rodó's apotheosis of a civilized Latin American society would be a democracy, in which a group of only the finest elected individuals would be allowed to rule over the vulgar masses. The danger that the youth would be encouraged by the success of the U.S. to imitate the American democratic culture of 'the utilitarian and the vulgar' (Idem, 1900, p. 63) instead of establishing a Latin American culture, stimulated Rodó to recommend the youth's adherence to the virtues of specific philosophers. The fact

that they were all European intellectuals like Auguste Comté, Joseph Enerst Renan and Frederich von Schiller was no coincidence. These were supposed to vindicate Rodó's claim that in order for Latin America to be itself they would have to revert back to their European roots, as 'we Latin Americans have a heritage of race' (Idem, 1900, p. 73) and therefore should respect their European heritage by remaining loyal to one's country of origin.

So, Rodó has moved the position of Latin American identity another stage on from the feeling of ineptness that O'Gorman conveyed in making a comparison with the U.S. Although he shares O'Gorman's view of Latin America's backward condition in relation to the U.S., Rodó prefers to take a more optimistic approach to Latin America's problems rather than succumb to "Nordomania". Instead, he ignores the anti-democratic perspective of Renan and Nietzsche to retrieve their 'moral values and emulation' (DEL SARTO, 2004, p. 97) as the enviable characteristics shown by figures of admiration for the Latin American youth to naturally follow. However, it is this fantasy of antiquating Latin American society to hide the "barbarity" of the indigenous inhabitants that highlights a fundamental contradiction and a flaw in Rodó's argument. Firstly, the denial of any recognition to the indigenous kind would be an abnegation of the true origins of Latin America. Furthermore, establishing democratically elected white Creole ruling elites would not be truly representative of the mixed race population and as a consequence could not be considered a legitimate democracy. Finally, albeit making the superfluous statement that Latin America is not Europe, Rodó should recognize that these two distinct regions do not contain corresponding historical and cultural compositions, which would facilitate a transposition of the Latin American political constitution for a European model. Therefore, Rodó's Ariel as the symbol of European ideals, is more like a euphemism for the imitation of Colonialist authoritarianism and prejudice towards the indigenous members of the colonies, rather than a symbolical representation of a unified Latin America. So, if Ariel as

the spiritual intellectual does not comfortably fit the profile of representing Latin American identity, then what could the remaining character Caliban, the complete opposite to Prospero's 'spirit slave', mean in the context of Latin American identity.

Latin America as Caliban?

It has already been ascertained that Caliban represents the more instinctive impulses of mankind, the savage of the play. Rodó and Renan's embodiment of Caliban as the 'suffering masses' that ferociously rebelled against the upper classes, was supposed to express their condemnation of the ruling elites' subjugation by the common multitudes in the 1789-1799 French revolution. This was articulated by Renan's book *Caliban: suite de la Tempête* which not only inspired Rodó but also had a large impact on writers in the post colonial period. For instance, the Black Francophone writers Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon provided a fresh perspective to the *The Tempest* symbolism discourse by glorifying Caliban as a heroic representative of the colonized sufferers. Their championing of the repressed colonized inhabitants demonstrated that the evolution of social history was parallel to society's concept of Caliban, as it personified the ideals that were promoted by the intellectuals of the time. Therefore, it is inevitable that Latin American identity evolved, as the repressed subject means different things to different generations. Roberto Fernández Retamar another writer inspired by Renan also incarnates Caliban as the "common man" (JOSEPH, 1992, p. 5) but adds a twist of his own to this discourse of symbolism and Latin American identity.

The Cuban essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar can be seen as the next stage of progression in the process of positively recognizing Latin American identity in the power struggle. Retamar shows no enthusiasm in a Latin American imitation of the U.S. path, nor does he wish to advocate the European ideals of yesteryear as an answer to his continent's ills. Alternatively, he wishes to confirm that Latin America has a culture that should be respectfully recognized, as opposed to

following the trend of previous hispanic writers in ignoring or pushing aside the black and native races that help define Latin Americans from other parts of the world. Therefore, Retamar's open acceptance of Latin American social and cultural background, allows him to not only rescue, but resuscitate the abrogated native traits of Latin American identity in his essay *Calibar* (RETAMAR, 1955, p. 31). In this text, Retamar addresses the issue of identity sustaining this open-minded approach towards the sources and examples he uses. The essay commences with a journalist's question of "Does a Latin American culture exist?" (Idem, 1900, p. 3). In answering this, Retamar enables himself to see what other Latin American writers overlooked. He was aware of the important link between one's culture and language. By looking at other former colonial counties like India and Vietnam, he recognized that similarities as well as differences can be established with Latin America. Firstly, Retamar points out that, although all countries could claim to be "mestizo", the capitalist countries managed to establish relative homogeneity a long time ago, and tried to achieve this in the colonies, but were not entirely successful. That was the difference between the wealthier parts of the world and the "Third world".

One further distinction to separate Latin America from the other post colonial regions is made by Retamar. He says that in the former colonial African and Indochina countries, mestizaje would not provide an accurate description for the majority of the population. Conversely, the reference to Latin America by Cuban poet José Martí as "Mestizo America" was demonstrative of the dexterous manipulation of language that was endowed to the colonized mixed race. Whereas, the other former colonized states can converse in their own language, the descendants of various Indian, African and European communities have to use the language of the colonizer as a "conceptual tool" (Idem, 1955, p. 5). By this term Retamar links the argument to the enslavement and language tuition that Caliban endured at the hands of his colonizer Prospero. Therefore, he concludes the

introductory chapter with, 'How else can I do this except in one of their languages' (Idem, 1955, p. 5), to relinquish any guilt Caliban's might feel in using the language to "curse" the colonizer.

In further contrast to O'Gorman's view, Retamar points out the same anagram of Caliban from Cannibal, but believes it is significant because it refers to the valiant Carib Indian race, that defended their territory from the Spanish colonizers. Retamar illustrates the history of myths, legends and critical essays that have personified the inhabitants of the Americas down the centuries in *Caliban*. This was to prove the point that literature of the colonists defined civilization and as a result dictated the personification of Latin Americans. So, to exemplify this point further, Retamar recites the proud histories of the once conquered isles and comments from Latin American heroes to contrast with the comments of European writers like John Wain who saw the colonizers' language as a feature which weakened Caliban (Idem, 1955, p. 13). Whereas, Retamar's reference to the post-colonialist writers' texts written as "one of the three great colonial languages" (Idem, 1955, p. 13) suggests that it has given them great ability to articulate their thoughts on colonial rule like Edward Brathwaite and Aimé Césaire expressed. The latter introduced the new idea of Ariel being a mulato slave alongside the black slave Caliban in his drama *'The Tempest: Adaptation for a black theatre'*. While Edward Brathwaite dedicated works to Caliban as well as works on Cuba in which he includes details of how the country relates to the Trope. Therefore, Retamar uses all of this as historical evidence to support his theory that Shakespeare's character Caliban is Latin American. Retamar strongly contradicts Rodó several times but makes his stance especially lucid when he says that "our symbol is not Ariel, as Rodó thought, but rather Caliban" (Idem, 1955, p. 48).

Consequently, the invasion of Caliban's island, his enslavement and erudition of language is all indicative of not just who the Latin Americans were because of the colonizers, but also what power they had inherited from the

colonizers. From this power struggle, one can make several vital points. Firstly, Latin America had no need to simulate other cultural models as it would only lead to a poor imitation. Secondly, the revolutions were of cultural significance in Rodós warranted preoccupation of impending “Yankee imperialist influences” in Latin America. To counter this, Retamar suggests that despite their differences Ariel and Caliban are both slaves of the same dominant power. As a consequence it would be a logical solution for them to amalgamate their efforts to fight the repressive forces. However, in light of the successful Cuban Revolution, the defiant Caliban still remains the trope that characterizes Latin America and not the obsequious Ariel. Ultimately, writers like Retamar want to give a voice to the previously mute and negated “multitudes” by indicating the power of language they have inherited from the colonizers. He makes this possible by recommending a project of a “universidad americana” to which he quotes Che Guevara’s discourse on education, in which his desire was to ‘extend it to the people’ (Idem, 1955, p. 45). Therefore, to summarize, Retamar implied that the problem was one of a social divide between the “multitude” and the “elite classes”. As a consequence the replication of European ideals would only produce a poor copy of a European state, which is what a Latin American is sometimes mistaken for, a poor cousin of a European. It is in this sense that Retamar recognizes that Latin America has no choice but to define itself with the language of the colonizer in order to understand the past. Europe is the sovereign and theoretical subject of this nation and history, as the nation state is a European concept. As a result, Caliban could be a powerful representation for Latin American Identity, as Retamar proves through a positive personification of these two deeply misunderstood complementary subjects.

Conclusion

On account of what has been discussed, it is clear that the original concept of Latin America fulfilling the position of the pupil aspiring to be like its’ master,

Europe, may not be entirely accurate. What was initially believed to be an inspiration to Latin American identity could actually be inversed and that the two subservient characters Ariel and Caliban were inspired by the perceptions of the Island written by voyagers. This is what O’Gorman suggested and Retamar asserts convincingly as there is overwhelming evidence to prove that Latin America provided inspiration not just for “*the Tempest*”, but also to a whole history of European arts. From the 15th century to the post colonial period, Europe made historical progression via the observations of the new World that was being colonized. So, Retamar strongly disagrees with O’ Gorman and Rodó by asking the question, why does Latin America have to imitate a model from a different or older region? Although Rodó wished to highlight the erroneous barbarity of violent rebellions that took place in the U.S and France to achieve democracy, his own concept of a democratic state was not exactly perfect neither. His ideal secluded the vast numbers of indigenous people who represented the heart of the American population. His ideals are based on forming elite communities or what Benedict Anderson termed ‘*imagined communities*’³ that shared old imperialistic desires to homogenize the new world rather than accept heterogeneity. Therefore, Rodó’s concept of Latin America as Ariel could be dismissed as a positive illusion instead of a legitimate realistic solution to the Latin American identity debate. Retamar, conversely, takes the more open view by assimilating inspirations from all parts of the world including secluded parts of Latin America to help resolve the issue. As a consequence, post colonial Black and Latin American writers want to make it clear that their nations cannot afford to neglect any part of their society. These marginalized social segments can be given the power of language that once belonged to the colonizer, now they can use it to be heard. The voice of the population once termed as “degenerate” and were “excluded” from the rest of

³ The Term given by Anderson in his book (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Published by London: Verso 1991.

society can now rejoin their middle to upper class compatriots that Rodó personified as Ariel, to form an identity against the invading American influences.

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