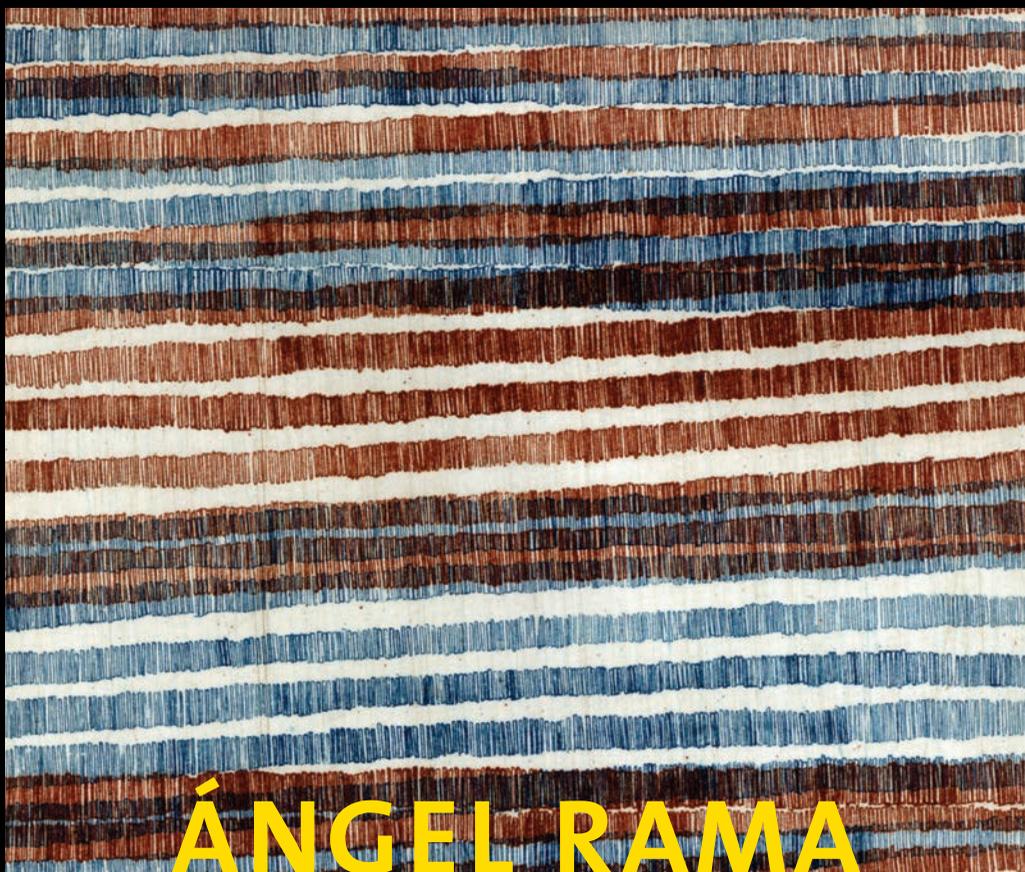




# *Writing across Cultures*

NARRATIVE TRANSCULTURATION IN LATIN AMERICA



**ÁNGEL RAMA**

*Edited and translated by David Frye*

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*Narrative Transculturation  
in Latin America*

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*Edited and Translated by  
David Frye*

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to Darcy Ribeiro and John V. Murra  
*Anthropologists of Our América*

# Contents

About the Series ix

Introduction by David Frye xi

## Part I

1. Literature and Culture 3
2. Regions, Cultures, and Literatures 37

## Part II

Introduction to Part II 81

3. The Andean Cultural Area 85
4. The Saga of the Mestizo 119
5. Mythic Intelligence 133

## Part III

6. The Novel, a Beggar's Opera 159
7. The Crisscrossing Rivers of Myth and History 189

Notes 215

Index 239

## About the Series

*Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and correspondingly demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

Uruguayan Ángel Rama is one of three towering figures of Latin American literary and cultural criticism during the second half of the twentieth century, along with Peruvian Antonio Cornejo Polar, ten years younger than Rama (1936–97) and Brazilian Antonio Candido (1918–present), eight years older than Rama. The three of them constituted the pillar of radical ideas and criticism between 1960 and 1990. Candido established the links between literature and underdevelopment, Cornejo Polar is remembered for his concept of *heterogeneidad cultural y literaria* and Ángel Rama for *transculturación literaria y narrativa*. Rama took

the concept from the Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969). Heterogeneidad cultural is not associated with a specific name, although it was Cornejo Polar who made it central to his intellectual pursuit. It is a natural term regarding Andean history and culture, where the concentration of indigenous people—those of European and of African descent—have been coexisting since the sixteenth century. Rama and Cornejo Polar shared one key example to theorize their respective concepts: the novels of the Peruvian bilingual and bicultural anthropologist and novelist José María Arguedas.

The reader not familiar with Rama's life and work will find in the superb introduction by his translator, David Frye, a clear and concise guide. Within Rama's narrative and arguments, the reader will little by little be introduced to a jungle of information, ideas, analysis, and insights, but he or she will never get lost. Rama's clear prose and arguments take the reader through the different facets and faces of narrative transculturation. Written a few years earlier than his acclaimed *The Lettered City*, and during the time when structuralism and poststructuralism were invading bookstores in Latin America, *Writing across Cultures* is a signal case of the power of Latin American imagination. Rama (as well as Candido and Cornejo Polar) was writing simultaneously with the boom of Latin American literature, which coexisted with the debates on dependency theory and the emergence of theology and philosophy of liberation. This book is, in other words, a key to entering three decades of Latin American social thoughts, cultural criticism, and literary imagination.

# Introduction

DAVID FRYE

The book presented here for the first time in English, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982), was the last one that Ángel Rama published before his unfortunate death at the age of fifty-seven. Together with *The Lettered City* (1984), published a year after Rama's death and until now the only one of Rama's more than two dozen books that was translated into English, *Narrative Transculturation* marks the culmination of a lifetime of omnivorous reading, deep study, and insightful analysis of history, anthropology, social theory, art, and above all, the literatures of the Americas. As in *The Lettered City*, Rama draws ideas and inspirations in this book from far-flung regions of Latin America and uses them to create a startling juxtaposition of ideas, revealing sudden flashes of insight into the hidden commonalities that underlie the continent's regional differences. (Here, I adopt Rama's habit, retained throughout this translation, of referring to all of Latin America—South and Central America, Mexico, and Caribbean—as “the continent” or simply “America.” He specifies “North America” when he means the United States.) *Narrative Transculturation* also links his work on Spanish American Modernism, for which he is well known among students of literature from the continent, with his novel arguments about the strikingly innovative nature of regionalist literature. His conclusions—notably his persuasive position on the close relationship between literary movements such as modernism or regionalism and great world-spanning trends in social and economic development—and his insightful use of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's concept of “transculturation” to analyze the works of the Peruvian regionalist and *indigenista* novelist José María Arguedas have influenced an entire generation of Latin American literary and cultural critics.

Ángel Rama was born in 1926 in Montevideo, Uruguay, the largest city in one of the smallest countries in the Americas, and he was a son of immigrants from the impoverished region of Galicia in northwestern Spain. These facts arguably have some bearing on the course of his life and his life's work.

Montevideo is the capital city of Uruguay, and it is also a port city on the busy Río de la Plata waterway. When Rama was born, it was at its commercial apogee—a growing, bustling city of immigrants, vitally connected with international commerce, art, and ideas. Nevertheless, it remained the poor stepsister of the larger, more glamorous Buenos Aires just up river and across the Plata. Uruguay itself is a small country, and though it was rapidly urbanizing in the 1920s, it was still largely rural. It has one of the shortest histories among the Latin American republics, a product of the eighteenth-century jockeying for power between Spain and Portugal. (By the time Montevideo was founded in 1726, the well-established cities of the empire, such as Mexico City and Lima, already counted two centuries of colonial history.) Uruguay had an important and growing national literature of its own, but it was not large enough to satisfy a restless, searching mind (such as Rama's) forever—especially not when the broad, exciting literatures and languages of neighboring Argentina and Brazil beckoned, not to mention those of Peru, Mexico, Cuba, France, Britain, the United States, Germany, and more. Finally, Uruguay underwent a brutal coup and military dictatorship in 1973 that sent Rama into involuntary exile for the rest of his days.

Born into poverty, and striving for entrance into the middle classes, Rama's parents were sojourners who could just as easily have ended up in any other port or capital across the continent, such as Havana, Mexico City, Lima, or (like the Galician parents of Rama's second wife, Marta Traba) Buenos Aires. It is perhaps not too much to speculate that Rama, growing up in the small but cosmopolitan port city of Montevideo as the son of striving immigrants, and spending much of his later life in exile from Uruguay, was fated to move on, sooner rather than later, from the project of rethinking his own native country's national literature to a lifelong project of understanding it as part of something broader: a literature of the Americas. According to Rama's friend and colleague, the Argentine critic Noé Jitrik, Rama justified his obstinate and sometimes combative style in a roundtable discussion by proudly proclaiming it “a Galician and immigrant trait, a nameless and aimless tenaciousness: there were things that had to be done and so you did them, and twenty more

things too, and you got into everything; Ángel,” Jitrik concluded, “was the greatest Renaissance man I have ever known.”<sup>1</sup>

Rama was the youngest charter member of what he called the “Critical Generation,” the vibrant set of Uruguayan men and women of letters whom others termed the “Generation of 1945.” In Rama’s case, this latter designation is quite accurate, for he embarked on his public literary career in the “lettered city” in 1945 at the age of nineteen, writing on culture for the Montevideo newspaper *El País*, translating articles from French to Spanish for Agence France-Presse and taking classes in humanities at the Universidad de la República. However, Rama himself found the year less descriptive of his generation than it was of the “critical spirit” that pervaded the “cultural environment in which I was formed”: “Parodying Graham Greene, I might say that ‘Uruguay made me’: the critical spirit that developed there during the exact historical period in which I happened to live was so dominant that I settled as a title for my book on Uruguayan literature from 1939 to 1968 on *La generación crítica*. Everyone — poets, fiction writers, essayists — was possessed by that critical spirit; all were inscribed by the times, by the urgency with which society had become embroiled in its self-scrutiny after a long period of carefree confidence, to such a degree that no other assessment was possible.”<sup>2</sup>

From 1945 to the early 1960s, Rama played the role of the *letrado* to perfection. He founded or cofounded several small literary journals and publishing houses, beginning with the journal *Clinamen* in 1948. He worked, talked, dined, laughed, and argued with every member of his “critical generation,” and in 1950 he married the prominent Uruguayan poet Ida Vitale, one of the cofounders of *Clinamen* and, like Rama, a charter member of the generation. He spent eighteen months in Paris on a fellowship from the French Embassy (1955–56); published two novels (1951, 1960) and two books of short stories (1958, 1966); and wrote and produced three plays (1958, 1959, 1961), which were presented to some acclaim by the Compañía Nacional de Comedia in Montevideo. All the while, he tirelessly wrote literary reviews, eventually publishing more than 1,400 during his lifetime.

Rama’s primary focus during these years was the literature of Uruguay and Buenos Aires (in neighboring Argentina), but as he pursued a project of rethinking the connections between the history of *platense* letters and the political history of his country, he gradually expanded his scope to encompass a rethinking of regional literature within the broader cur-

rents of Latin America as a possible whole. As *Marcha*'s cultural editor from 1959 to 1968 (a position first held by the great Uruguayan novelist Juan Carlos Onetti), Rama deliberately expanded the spectrum of literature that the prominent Montevideo weekly published, introducing the broader literature of Spanish America and Brazil to his Uruguayan readers and, as the fame of *Marcha* spread, to a wider Latin American public. He was one of the first to bring writers such as Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, and Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru to the attention of readers beyond the boundaries of those writers' own countries. According to Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco, "We largely owe to *Marcha* and to Rama our current idea of Latin American literature, in a part of the world where books, even those written in our own language, rarely circulate between one country and another unless they are published in the old colonial metropolis."<sup>3</sup>

With his career at *Marcha*, Rama embarked on the second phase of his literary career, swiftly becoming a transnational figure of Latin American letters. His home base remained Montevideo, where he was named professor and chair of the department of literature at the Universidad de la República in 1966, but he spent more time each year giving talks, attending conferences, and teaching university courses all across the continent. In 1973, when he was teaching Latin American literature as a visiting professor at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, his travel abroad unexpectedly became exile when a brutal military coup crushed the Uruguayan democracy. The dictators soon abolished *Marcha* and other symbols of freedom in the country. Clearly, return was impossible. Exile turned Rama's intellectual project of creating and defining "Latin America" (or, as he preferred to put it in terms drawn from José Martí, simply "América") into a personal quest to form a new, transnational homeland. The best symbol of this project was his primary role in creating the Biblioteca Ayacucho, a vast publishing project that Rama dreamed up and successfully proposed for funding to the president of Venezuela in 1974. Rama's vision for the Biblioteca Ayacucho was to have it create a framework for building a common Latin American culture by publishing a series of five hundred carefully selected books that would embody the literary, social, and political history of the continent and create a theoretical framework for understanding the unity of Latin America and its literatures within the diversity of its regions. The project was the perfect illustration of his expansive view of literature and the revolutionary power of "letters." As he wrote, "our cultural integration is

a revolutionary effort, which, as such, intends to create a future, building the utopian vision of a continent and an ideal society.”<sup>4</sup>

It was during this period that Rama wrote the articles that later became the scaffolding for this book. First came a lecture that he gave on “The Processes of Transculturation in Latin American Fiction” before a graduate seminar at the University of São Paulo in 1973, which he published the following year as an article in the journal of the University of Zulia, Venezuela.<sup>5</sup> In this article, which in revised and expanded form became part I of the present book, Rama placed the panorama of Spanish American and Brazilian literature within a framework of the structure of Latin America, as viewed through anthropological theory. He had, after all, studied history at the Sorbonne under Marcel Bataillon and Fernand Braudel, and he had worked closely with the brilliant Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, his colleague and collaborator at the Universidad de la República in Montevideo in the years following the Brazilian coup of 1964 and Ribeiro’s own involuntary exile. In particular, Rama placed two Latin American literary anthropologists in post-humorous dialogue with each other: the Cuban lawyer, folklorist, historian, and self-taught anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) and the Peruvian novelist, poet, indigenista, folklorist, and professor of anthropology José María Arguedas (1911–69). From Ortiz’s foundational study of Cuban culture, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Rama drew the concept of *transculturation*, which Ortiz introduced as a specifically Latin American replacement for the Anglo-American anthropological concept of *acculturation*.<sup>6</sup> The term *acculturation* was introduced during the 1930s to describe the process of cultural change observed in so-called primitive societies under the onslaught of colonial rule, but as Ortiz noted, the implication of the term seemed to be that the process of cultural change “consisted merely in acquiring another culture,” as if the “primitive” were an empty vessel, immaculate of ideas and ready to receive enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Transculturation, by contrast, emphasized the process of passing from one culture to another, and Ortiz further specified that this process included deculturation — “the loss or uprooting of a previous culture” — followed by neoculturation, “the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena,” which would not be a simple replication of the colonizer’s culture but would be a hybrid of two (or more) cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup> Ortiz’s starting point for understanding Cuba was to insist that “the real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations.”<sup>9</sup>

Ortiz's theory of transculturation made an immediate impact on Rama, who saw its applicability not only to Cuban culture but also to regional cultures across all of Latin America, where indigenous, African, and European cultures and societies had been intermeshing and forming kaleidoscopic new cultural arrangements for the better part of five centuries. In this regard, Rama was particularly struck by the manifesto-like declaration "Yo no soy un aculturado" (I am not an acculturated man), which José María Arguedas presented in 1968 on the occasion of his receiving the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega prize, Peru's highest literary honor.<sup>10</sup> For Rama, Arguedas's insistence that he partook equally of both Spanish and Quechua, the two major languages (and, by extension, cultures) of Peru, rather than of a homogenized, "acculturated" Spanish Peruvian-ness, immediately called to mind Ortiz's rejection of the terminology of acculturation to describe Cuban history and culture. Rama tirelessly promoted the literary genius of Arguedas, who until then had been considered a strictly regional writer of Andean Peru. By applying Ortiz's theory to Arguedas, Rama argued that it was precisely his immersion in local, transculturated sensibilities that allowed the Peruvian novelist to solve the problem of representing the underlying realities of his country, making him a major Latin American thinker and artist whose regionalist writing was illustrative of processes that had taken place all over the continent.

Arguedas had been born in the highlands of southern Peru, far distant (physically, culturally, and politically) from the political and intellectual capital, Lima. Though he came from a Spanish-speaking mestizo family (his father was a rural lawyer; his mother died when he was two years old), he grew up speaking the Quechua language of the family's indigenous servants. Moving to Lima at the age of twenty in 1931 to study literature and ethnology at the national university, he quickly felt the influence of *indigenismo*, the artistic and political movement promoted by Peru's most prominent intellectual of the era, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930).<sup>11</sup> The positive evaluation of the long-suppressed indigenous cultures of Peru by Andean indigenistas, and the possibility they raised of building a new national consciousness for the country based on an appreciation of indigenous identity, made a deep impression on young Arguedas, who published his first short story in Quechua in 1933. His subsequent life was difficult, troubled by political repression (in 1937, his political activity landed him in prison for eight months), the familiar economic difficulties of forging an intellectual life in an impoverished country, and recurrent depression. Throughout, his steady attention to

his intellectual project of understanding indigenous cultures on their own terms (in his role as folklorist and anthropologist) and to his parallel artistic project of reflecting the realities of Peruvian life as he knew them, in literary idioms that he invented to incorporate both Spanish and Quechua sensibilities, brought him growing recognition, culminating with a professorship in anthropology and the Inca Garcilaso prize, which he received one year before his final depression and suicide in late 1969.

Rama reminds us that Arguedas left behind an impressive body of literature, including novels—the best known being *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) and *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, 1958)—and short stories, books of poetry (he wrote all his poems in Quechua), and many scholarly studies of the folklore and ethnology of Peru. Indeed, during the very years that Rama was working through his ideas about narrative transculturation as a key to Latin American literature, he was also editing two posthumous compilations of Arguedas's anthropological essays.<sup>12</sup> Rama's prologues to those edited works, together with a third article inspired by his consideration of the anthropology of Latin America, form the early versions of the chapters presented here as part II. Then, a few years after this immersion in Arguedas's ethnological writing, Rama noted in his diary that he had picked up and begun rereading what he considered Arguedas's best novel, *Los ríos profundos*, and he was immediately struck with “amazement for its precise and rapid writing, for the lofty movement of the action, for the levels of construction that transform it into more of an ‘opera’ than a novel. The fabulous opera of the poor.”<sup>13</sup> Looking over the articles he had written about the Peruvian writer, he realized that he would have enough material for “an ambitious book: ‘The Narrative Transculturation—José María Arguedas,’” with the addition of two new essays that he was then writing.<sup>14</sup> These new essays form the chapters of part III, focusing on *Los ríos profundos* as the most accomplished example of narrative transculturation in Latin America, thus completing the circle that began with his general exploration of transculturation in Latin American fiction.

This reconsideration of Arguedas took place during the next phase of Rama's life—in reality, its final phase, one marked by a further expansion of his frame of vision. In 1979, Rama and his second wife, the novelist and art historian Marta Traba,<sup>15</sup> had begun teaching at the University of Maryland, where he received tenure in 1981. Fellowships from the university and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation allowed Rama to undertake a broad-ranging study at the nearby Library of Congress for a book on “the building and structure of the Latin American culture.”<sup>16</sup>

His work was interrupted, but not derailed, when he and Traba ran up against United States foreign policy. In July 1982, Immigration and Naturalization Service functionaries in the Reagan administration denied permanent working permits to the couple, largely in response to complaints about their work with the Havana literary institute Casa de las Américas since the early 1960s (even though they had already distanced themselves from the institute over the Cuban government's human rights record).<sup>17</sup> Forced once more into reluctant exile, the couple moved to Caracas, Bogotá, and Paris during the following year. Rama vigorously fought the visa denial, and in the long run he might have met with success, but an accident intervened. In November 1983, Rama and Traba were on their way to an international literary conference on Spanish American culture in Bogotá, together with their friends and colleagues, the novelists Jorge Ibarguengoitia of Mexico and Manuel Scorza of Peru. After leaving Paris, the plane crashed upon landing at a scheduled stopover in Madrid. There were no survivors.

Rama left us with plenty of work to consider, both published and not quite published yet. He had seen the first product of his new grand project, the Spanish version of *Transculturation*, into print in the same year he was forced from the United States, and he completed a draft of the second book of the project, *The Lettered City*, which was published posthumously in Spanish in 1984 and in an English translation in 1996. In the decades since his death, several newly edited collections of his writings on Latin American letters have been published, his concept of literary transculturation has entered the vocabulary of Latin Americanists, and new generations of readers continue to discover the comprehensive panorama that he constructed through his close and comparative reading of texts from across the Americas.

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My main source for the basic facts of Rama's life is the "Cronología" and "Bibliografía," accredited to Fundación Internacional Ángel Rama, which appear as appendices to Ángel Rama, *La crítica de la cultura en América Latina* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), 381–402. Other sources I found very useful, in alphabetical order, are the following:

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