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## Postmodern Indigenism: "Quetzalcoatl and All That"

Debra A. Castillo

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Postmodern Indigenism: "Quetzalcoatl and All That"

*Debra A. Castillo (bio)*

“One can have too much of a good thing,” she said to Ramón.

“What good thing in particular?” he asked her.

“Oh—Quetzalcoatl and all that!” she said. “One can have too much of it.”

—D. H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, 471.

Cultural circulation between Latin America and the First World offers a number of edifying exchanges. Before the “Boom” novel of the 1960s traveled outside Latin American borders to amaze and enchant us with a literary form often hailed as a Third World version of postmodernism with a magical-realist charge to it, there was a long tradition of Anglo-American and European authors who traveled to Latin America to seek exotic objects of knowledge or useful objects for trade. For example, Mexican critic José Joaquín Blanco explores the famous obsession with indigenous Mexico in writers like Artaud or Bataille, who with a tourist’s Spanish, rudimentary and second-hand anthropological concepts, no knowledge of Mexican history, and no understanding of indigenous **[End Page 35]** languages, imagine and create a Mexico that fits their preconceived notions (26). These notions then find their way into several of the many elaborations of postmodern theory where the staged exoticism of half-imagined indigenous practices resonated strongly with Western anti-canonical cultural projects. At the same time and in a parallel fashion, this transformed, fetishized, and transculturated version of indigenous America serves as the spur for what Mario Vargas Llosa calls the “*sed de exotismo*” (“thirst for the exotic”) that has created an Anglo-European market for Latin American cultural artifacts. As George Yúdice notes in one of the most important and lucid elaborations of postmodern theory in the Latin American context, “not only did professionalized, superstar novelists like Fuentes or Vargas Llosa sideline ‘vocational’ writers, . . . they also sought to integrate with the growing consumer culture among elites . . . that made popular and indigenous cultures irrelevant unless they too integrated or ‘transculturated’ into consumer society” (11). It is no wonder that Latin America in general, and

these novels in particular, are often acclaimed as post modern *avant la lettre*, while concurrently, metropolitan thinkers decry the lack of theory in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is something about the sidelining of indigenous cultures, while appropriating and even highlighting a certain aestheticized indigenism, that seems to me to mediate an important and underdiscussed thread of the modernism-postmodernism debate as it affects Latin America.

In the broadest possible terms, this debate involves questioning the processes involved in defining any particular cultural identity at all, and of tracing the conceptualizations of cultural identity with respect to their textual inscriptions. Any Western recognition of indigenous voices also and inevitably points towards the aesthetic and institutional models that frame this act of recognition within the context of a specifically Western institutional hierarchy. As Satya Mohanty reminds us, “Notwithstanding our contemporary slogans of otherness, and our fervent denunciations of Reason and the Subject, there is an unavoidable conception of rational action, inquiry, and dialogue inherent in this political-critical project” (26). If, on the one hand, metropolitan postmodernist critics and writers intuit a missing something or someone left out of traditional Western conceptual frameworks, on the other hand, the epistemological possibilities of native self-representation pose significant ethical and political challenges even to iconoclastic cultural projects. **[End Page 36]** One typical postmodern reaction to the High Modernist canon has been to seek out these missing others to Western culture; the subsequent packaging of the exotic others has, however, tended to turn them in to safely exotic artifacts for domestic consumption.

Accordingly, this study is a two-part project that will fit this strained relationship of texts and theories into an uneven dialogue between north and south. In the first part, I will explore two exemplary Anglo-American texts in this uneven cultural exchange, texts which enact variations on the theme of the cosmo-metropolitan’s encounter with the irreducibly alien: *The Plumed Serpent*, D. H. Lawrence’s classically

obsessed modernist novel of an Englishwoman in a post-revolutionary Mexico convulsed by an Aztec revival; and *Keep the River on Your Right*, Tobias Schneebaum's impressionistic-ethnographic account of...



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Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)  
[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



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