

Epistemology and *The Lettered City*: Ángel Rama, Michel Foucault and Ibn Khaldun

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Even before the posthumous publication of *La ciudad letrada* in 1984, the work of Ángel Rama would have had little need of introduction for an audience versed in Latin American literary criticism. Classic texts such as *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* have had a pervading influence in shaping a bilingual, often multilingual, academic discourse in and about Latin America. John Charles Chasteen's translation of *The Lettered City*, published twelve years after the first appearance of the posthumously published *La ciudad letrada*, helped to provoke a renewed interest in Rama's work in general and this text in particular, and while *La ciudad letrada/The Lettered City* has been prolifically cited and often critically engaged, it has not yet exhausted its impact. Rama's introduction of Foucault and contemporary French theory to Latin American literary criticism has often been noted, but infrequently discussed in conjunction with the new if tenuous paradigm he offers for conceiving of Latin America (and Latin American difference) through expansive literary-historical studies. While respecting the originality and insightful observations in Rama's text, I intend to interrogate further the implications of Rama's turn to Foucault for a theoretical and methodological basis, suggesting that this perhaps indicates an implicit understanding of "modernity" as a Western concept that may not be adequate for *The Lettered City's* attempt to explain the role of the lettered urban elite in Latin America. This is particularly relevant to Rama's discussion of the colonial Latin American city, bearing in mind the unique history of the Iberian Peninsula compared to that of other European countries, and the resonance of the *Reconquista* and (proto)national consolidation with the Spanish colonial project. Given such considerations, I introduce to this discussion the historical writings of Ibn Khaldun, a

fourteenth century Arab intellectual from the Maghreb, with the suggestion that certain points of convergence between the two historical undertakings, both of which attempt to understand the workings of elite power, knowledge and craft in their respective regions, may provide an example of an alternative way in which to approach *The Lettered City*. The implicit relationship between these descriptions of conquest, empire and administrative power, while not conclusive or an attempt at genealogy, may further a discussion of what *The Lettered City* contributes to a theoretical understanding of Latin America.¹

In *The Lettered City*, Rama approaches the study of Latin America as a historical formation by considering the emergence of its cities and the lettered elites that gave rise to them. He examines the city and its elite as part of a broad schema sweeping from the conquest to the twentieth century. In this schema, Rama links the ideal planned city to a semiotic order characterized by the atemporality of the order of signs while appealing to the actual historical city as a constituent unit in the construction of Latin America. From his first sentence, Rama develops this idea within a framework that is at once uniquely Latin American and insistently European:

Desde la remodelación de Tenochtitlan, luego de su destrucción por Hernán Cortés en 1521, hasta la inauguración en 1960 del más fabuloso sueño de urbe de que han sido capaces los americanos, la Brasilia de Lucio Costa y Oscar Niemeyer, la ciudad latinoamericana ha venido siendo básicamente un parto de la inteligencia, pues quedó inscrita en un ciclo de la cultura universal en que la ciudad pasó a ser el sueño de un orden y encontró en las tierras del Nuevo Continente, el único sitio propicio para encarnar. (1)

From the remodeling of Tenochtitlán after its destruction by Hernán Cortés in 1521, to the 1960 inauguration of that most fabulous dream city of the Americas, Lúcio Costa's and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia, Latin American cities have ever been the creations of the human mind. The ideal of the city as the embodiment of social order corresponded to a moment in the development of Western civilization as a whole, but only the lands of the new continent afforded a propitious place for the dream of the "ordered city" to become a reality. (1)²

With this opening Rama clearly establishes his intent to write a history of Latin America that can encompass the region as a totality, most notably with the inclusion of Brazil,³ in terms of a shared epistemological orientation with the West and the ability to realize the ideals of this orientation on its dispensable territory. Rama suggests that the ordered city belongs to a particular (European) moment for which the “new” landscape of the Americas provided the physical space for city planning and building that existing medieval cities made impossible in Iberia, thus enabling the realization in Latin America of the Baroque ideal city, the domain of the lettered elite. In this manner, Rama’s historical narrative explains the rise of the Latin American city as part of a colonial understanding of rationality and order.

It is of note that Rama begins his narrative not with the “lettered” city itself but rather with an account of the general rise of the colonial city and the strategic importance of its planning, both concerns he shares with the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun. In Rama’s schema, the importance of the ordered city is accompanied by the appearance of a similar preoccupation with order in discourse. In the first chapter, “La ciudad ordenada” [“The Ordered City”], Rama directly links his schematization to Foucault’s epistemic descriptions in *The Order of Things*. Working with the notion of the epistemic break as a tool of periodization, Foucault compares the Renaissance to the Classical age, finding in the latter, as Rama emphasizes, a general orientation to knowledge through order. For Rama, the construction of the episteme and Foucault’s schematization become a lens through which to interpret colonial Latin America. By aligning the Spanish American Baroque with the European Classical age theorized by Foucault, he constructs a narrative that seeks to explain the development of a lettered urban elite in relation to the conventions of discourse constituting the episteme.

Rama’s use of Foucault’s *The Order of Things* is particularly significant because he introduces this French philosopher’s work into the field of Latin American theory. Moreover, Rama’s contribution has been to perhaps usher in a new approach for conceptualizing the region. Since its publication, critical responses to *The Lettered City* have continued to re-conceive of Latin America’s relationship to European articulations that theorize analytical modes such as structuralism and poststructuralism. In addition, Rama’s text has provided a significant argument for identifying the lettered elite as a locus of

power in colonial Latin America and the residues of that association after independence from the Iberian empires that has similarly been adopted, reformulated, or resisted by critics.⁴

Although they bear particular concerns for Latin America, these aspects of *The Lettered City* also dialogue with broader discussions of (post)colonialism and world literature. In Ibn Khaldun's history, now known as the *Muqaddimah*,⁵ we will find in many ways a similar discussion of the structures of a cultural administrative elite, the ranks of the "pen," in the medieval Maghreb and Al-Andalus; in considering these tenuous comparisons, it is also pertinent to remember the influence of the Arab presence in Spain well into the fifteenth century, and the direct associations in colonial Latin American writing between the *Conquista* and the *Reconquista*. A comparative look at the historical methodology of the *Muqaddimah* and *The Lettered City*, however, first requires that we examine the relationship between Rama's work and that of Foucault.

Certain readings of *The Lettered City* reflect on the Foucauldian presence and merit reviewing as we consider and perhaps problematize Rama's references to Foucault. For example, in his influential *Latin Americanism* (1999), Román de la Campa opens a discussion of the influence of Foucault's notion of the episteme in Rama's thought. While acknowledging the contributions of Carlos J. Alonso, Mabel Moraña, and Rolena Adorno, in "The Lettered City: Power and Writing in Latin America" de la Campa maintains that "[Rama's] most careful readers to date have tended to look at other key aspects and problems or touched on the question of colonial discourse as a structuring episteme only tangentially" (21). The reader of this passage is prompted to assess de la Campa's engagement with this same question. While he does discuss the episteme as a foundational structure in *The Lettered City*, the primary focus of his article is to situate Rama with regard to debates over structuralist, poststructuralist and postcolonial theory.⁶ For de la Campa, Rama seems to anticipate the theoretical debates of the U.S. university in the nineties by pointing to the "difficulties inherent in poststructuralist theorizing" and disengaging high and low culture. De la Campa expresses a particular urgency in his reading of *The Lettered City*, finding in Rama an alternative to the discursive reordering and conservatism epitomized by Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. Despite *The Lettered City's* evident focus on the production of a literate cultural elite in Latin America, or

perhaps because of it, de la Campa extrapolates from Rama a theory of discursive dispersal capable of countering the closure found in the process of Bloom's canon formation. For de la Campa, *The Lettered City* speaks directly to the debates over theory and canons that plagued or invigorated U.S. academic debates and made headlines in national newspapers. De la Campa writes of Rama, "his work affords the possibility of grasping margins, supplements, and residues from Latin American cultural history to question that privilege generally reserved for literary masters as the only story worth retelling or deconstructing."⁷ According to this reading, Rama's text employs Foucault's archeological approach to conceive of heterogeneity and dispersal in the analysis of discourse.

Benigno Trigo includes de la Campa's excerpted discussion in his edited and compiled *Foucault and Latin America: Appropriations and Deployments of Discursive Analysis* (2002), a survey of the variety of influences Foucault's work has had on Latin American(ist) theory. Trigo's book organizes the selections into four headings that arguably blur together in many of its examples: discourse, government, subjectivity, and sexuality. He begins his volume with "The Ordered City", which constitutes one part of the section on discourse and immediately follows it with de la Campa's contribution; this distribution suggests that, while relating the importance of writing in the colonies to the development of a bureaucratic administrative core, *The Lettered City* more precisely pertains to cultural hegemony than government. Trigo notes de la Campa's affirmative response to Rama's application of discursive analysis and the possibility it opens for the inclusion of alternative cultural and literary expressions, one that Foucault acknowledges as fostered by his own practice in *The Archeology of Knowledge*.⁸ Although both suggest that Rama critically and purposefully selects elements from Foucault's archeological project to assist in his analysis, neither pursues the possible contradictions in Rama's application nor the alternative readings they might invite.

The premise of "The Ordered City", which in turn shapes the rest of the text, is that the authority and power of the urban lettered elite in colonial Latin America can be explained as the result of an epistemological orientation towards order paralleling that described by Foucault as the Classical episteme in *The Order of Things*. A quotation from this text, in fact, acts as the pivot point for Rama's chapter: "Tal como observara Foucault, 'lo que hace posible el conjunto de la

episteme clásica es, desde luego, la relación con un conocimiento del orden” (7) [“As Michel Foucault observed, ‘what made the classical episteme possible as a whole, of course, was its indispensable relationship to a knowledge of order’” (5)]. For Rama, it is this relationship that characterizes the Spanish (Latin) American Baroque and thus firmly situates the conquest and urban development of the continent within the course of “Western civilization”. To support this lineage, he includes the text of a royal directive from 1513 and cites the repeated mention of “order” as the “lexical key” to the colonial enterprise. In accordance with this schematization, he also points to the similarities of the colonial discourse to that of the general grammar of Port-Royal, including references to Arnauld and Nicole that posit a link between the Baroque and Foucault’s discursive analysis of the same project. Through this connection to seventeenth-century French discourse of general grammar, Spanish (and Portuguese) urban plans for the New World can be interpreted as the fulfillment of a Baroque ideal. Within this schema, discordance between the ideal planned city and its actual urban counterpart can be understood as the indication of a shift in the relationship between signs and things in the episteme of Western culture.

Adopting the episteme (and the epistemic break) as a unit, Rama sets up a striking and effective affiliation to French historical periodization. From the notion of the episteme, he derives a conception of the Baroque less as a temporal designation than one pertaining to its epistemological orientation. In “The Ordered City”, the definitive expression of this orientation is the planned city which maps out through signs and symbols an imagined design for social control. Thus *The Lettered City* introduces the notion of the epistemological break to Latin American theory as a way to write the history of a shift in discursive formations, or the history of discontinuity. However, *The Lettered City* appropriates not only this practice, but also the content of the epistemological break Foucault describes in *The Order of Things* a general orientation toward order in the seventeenth-century episteme. What happens in this instance, then, is that the methodological logic of Foucault’s deployment of the epistemic break is reversed in Rama’s schema: first a general orientation to knowledge is established, vetted by *The Order of Things*, and then analysis of colonial discourse is conducted in accordance with this orientation.

One might consider an obvious example. In “The Ordered City” a royal directive plays a crucial role in demonstrating the importance of order as an epistemological construct in the early colonial period. Rama emphasizes the word “order” in his excerpted guidelines from the seventh point of the directive to Pedrarias Dávila:

Vistas las cosas que para los asentos de los lugares son necesarias, y escogido el sitio más provechoso y en que incurren más de las cosas que para el pueblo son menester, habréis de repartir los solares del lugar para hacer las casas, y estos han de ser repartidos según las calidades de las personas y sean de comienzo dados por *orden*; por manera que hechos los solares, el pueblo parezca *ordenado* [. . .] porque en los lugares que de nuevo se hacen dando la *orden* en el comienzo sin ningún trabajo ni costa quedan *ordenados* e los otros jamás se *ordenan*. (6)

Having ascertained what things are necessary for the settlements and having chosen the site most advantageous and abundantly provided with all things necessary to those who will settle therein, distribute town lots for the construction of houses, in *orderly* fashion, according to the quality of the recipients, so that, once constructed, the town will appear well-*ordered* [. . .] because where such *orders* are given from the outset, *orderly* results will follow without undue cost and effort, and in other places *order* will never be achieved. (4)

For Rama, this passage exemplifies the pivotal role of order in colonial discourse and legitimates the conflation of this period with that described by Foucault as the Classical episteme.

This has implications for the historical model that is engaged in *The Lettered City*. While Rama relies significantly on *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, 1966) for his epistemological construction, he does not cite Foucault’s subsequent publication, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (*L’Archéologie du savoir*, 1969). In the latter, Foucault clarifies and expounds on the archeological method in his earlier work, articulating an exclusively material approach to history structurally dependent on the

relationship between the historian and the archive. For Foucault, the archive consists of the collection of documentary materials and their discursive formations that are available to the historian for analysis; this collection can include only actually existing statements, in accordance with what Foucault terms the historical *a priori*, and mutually depends on the observer. In this sense the historian both applies structure to the archive and encounters it as his own limit; he (or she) looks for correlations in discourse at the level of the statement, and from these similarities schematizes a certain kind of discursive sameness, or regularity, that he identifies with an episteme. When the historian perceives a shift in these regularities and the appearance of new epistemological orientations, this constitutes an epistemic break. Thus for Foucault the epistemic break functions as an organizational framework only so far as it remains tied to the notion of the archive; it cannot, in this figuring, be taken as a structure evident in history itself, but only through the correlation of discourse by an observer. Such considerations invite the reader to interrogate both Rama's position vis a vis the archive and the restrictions caused by the kind of discursive analysis he undertakes.

The Lettered City can only loosely be identified with Foucault's archeological moment as a comparative study reveals substantial difference in their historiographic practices. In *The Lettered City*, this episteme is taken as a given that may then be projected on Baroque/colonial discourse. As a consequence, Rama writes with a narrative style that invokes discursive analysis to support broad, sweeping claims. In this passage, which merits quoting at length, Rama directly uses *The Order of Things* to explain the growth of cities in America:

Las ciudades, las sociedades que las habitarán, los letrados que las explicarán, se fundan y desarrollan en el mismo tiempo en que el signo "deja de ser una figura del mundo, deja de estar ligado por los lazos sólidos y secretos de la semejanza o de la afinidad a lo que marca," empieza "a significar dentro del interior del conocimiento," y "de él tomará su certidumbre o su probabilidad."

Dentro de ese cauce del saber, gracias a él, surgirán esas ciudades ideales de la inmensa extensión americana. Las regirá una razón ordenadora que se revela en un orden

social jerárquico transpuesto a un orden distributivo geométrico. (4)⁹

The cities of Spanish America, the societies that were meant to inhabit them, and the “lettered” interpreters of them developed together in a time when signs became no longer “direct representations of the world, linked to it by secret, solid ties of likeness or affinity with what they represent,” and began instead “to signify from within a body of knowledge” and “to take from it their probability or certainty.” From that flow of knowledge sprang forth the ideal cities of the Iberian empires’ American vastness. Their ordering principle revealed itself as a hierarchical society transposed by analogy into a hierarchical design of urban space. (3)

It seems that in *The Lettered City*, the appropriation of the epistemic break indicates an oscillating desire to narrate and to describe; that is, an internal tension in the text between historiographic approaches.

The difference between these historical modes and the tension—perhaps contradiction—present in *The Lettered City* brings us back to the pertinence of Ibn Khaldun’s work to a re-reading of Rama. Wlad Godzich contrasts the historical practice of the *Muqaddimah* to that of the “dependence of the discourse of the [Western] historian upon narrative” and the exigencies of plot, considering them to be two historical models:

This dominant Western mode of historical discourse is understood more easily if one contrasts it with the descriptive imperative of, let us say, Ibn Khaldun’s reflection upon history, which places greater importance upon a structural representation than upon a cause-and-effect account. The model is still one of closure and finality, but both of these are conceived in relation to a structure rather than a historical movement. (57)

Godzich further elaborates this distinction with the suggestion that the “paramount question” asked through the causal mode of historical discourse is *why*, while in the sort of structural representation undertaken by Ibn Khaldun, the focus is *how* (57). In this manner,

Ibn Khaldun and the *Muqaddimah* offer the reader of *The Lettered City* more than a comparative project between two somewhat related undertakings of conquest and empire, bringing to bear the questions of their historical mode(s).

Although responses to *The Lettered City* have challenged its paradigm by contesting its description of the hegemony of the lettered elite, they have generally accepted its narration of the workings of this hegemonic power as historical movement, namely the idea that the conquest of the Americas coincides with an epistemic break in European thought that ushers in a foundational regime of symbolic order on the new continent. As previously mentioned, this is based largely on the prescriptive reading of a royal directive that extends to Rama's figuration of the conquest as a whole. For Rama, the conquest of Spanish America differs from that of Brazil or the United States in its speed and scope. He includes a quotation from the French historian Pierre Chanu, which seems to guide the construction of his narrative of conquest: "The mainland was 'opened, explored, and roughly seized during the three initial decades of the sixteenth century at an insane rhythm, never equaled'" (10).¹⁰ The exceptionalism of the Spanish American conquest then forms the basis for Rama's model of the imposition of cities and a lettered class on the newly conquered territory to maintain control and administer a colonial bureaucracy. According to Rama,

[L]a conquista española fue una frenética cabalgata por un continente inmenso [. . .] dejando a su paso una ringlera de ciudades, prácticamente incomunicadas y aisladas en el inmenso vacío americano que sólo recorrían aterradas poblaciones indígenas. Con una mecánica militar, fueron inicialmente las postas que permitían el avance y serían después las poleas de trasmisión del orden imperial. (14)

The Spanish Conquest was a frenetic gallop across continental immensities [. . .] leaving in its wake a scattering of cities, isolated and practically out of communication from one another, while the territory between the new urban centers continued to be inhabited almost solely by the dismayed indigenous populations [. . .] 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)

For Rama, such newly founded cities are also likened to the Classical Greek polis and its citizens surrounded by the barbarians of the hinterland, yet these cities did not arise, as in Europe, from the gradual centralization of people and goods, but were instead initiated as strategic urban centers. Here Rama's central concern is the description of how urban centers came to dominate the Latin American imaginary.

What Rama does not mention, nor do his critics, is that this schema of rapid expansion and conquest accompanied by religious, linguistic and cultural hegemony is not unprecedented but was modeled for the Spanish some centuries before. In its narrative thrust, *The Lettered City* ties the development of urban centers and lettered elite to a (European) epistemological break, constructing a founding narrative of "Latin America" that situates it within "Western civilization". Its emphasis on the construction of the urban center and the elite, however, align the text with a descriptive practice that is, as previously mentioned, more appropriately reread in conjunction with the work of Ibn Khaldun. What Rama does not consider is the possibility that Foucault's epistemic break may not coincide with the conquest of the Americas, and the royal directive pivotal to "The Ordered City" may not so much mark, as he suggests, a shift in the self-conception and elaboration of colonial power; instead, its underlying epistemological concerns may display certain commonalities with earlier (non-Western) histories of conquest and empire.

For example, Ibn Khaldun, like Rama, described the method and practice of a period of conquest and colonization initiated centuries earlier but then in decline. Born to a prominent family in Tunis in 1332, Ibn Khaldun worked throughout his life in a variety of positions as a scholar, teacher, judge and administrator in several courts throughout the Maghreb and Egypt. Ibn Khaldun's best known work, the *Muqaddimah*, examines the practice of historiography as it seeks to account for *'umrân*, often translated as civilization, population, or perhaps more accurately, organized habitation. This explicit orientation toward understanding the workings of *'umrân* through the practice of historiography has been interpreted by Western readers of the *Muqaddimah* as Ibn Khaldun's exceptional observation of

sociological and economic questions. However, the *Muqaddimah* approaches *‘umrân* from the perspective of elite power¹¹ and its operations in the Maghreb, Al-Andalus and other regions affected by the Arab expansion of the seventh century.¹²

The Arab model, a rapid and expansive conquest to rival that of the Spanish in the Americas, reoccurs as an example throughout the detailed treatment of “organized habitation” and dynastic power in the *Muqaddimah*. As in Rama’s narrative of Latin America, in his discussion of the operations of the state (*daula*) and its elite administrators, Ibn Khaldun considers the city to be an essential element of expansion. For Ibn Khaldun, urban development, while dependent on the authority and organization of a state for its construction, is likewise necessary for a dynasty to maintain power over the surrounding area:

Towns and cities are secondary (products) of royal authority. The explanation for this is that building and city planning are features of sedentary culture. (II, 201)

If there are no cities, the dynasty will have to build a new (city), firstly, in order to complete the civilization of its realm and to be able to lessen its efforts, and, secondly, in order to use (the city) as a threat against those parties and groups within the dynasty that might desire power and might wish to resist. It is thus clear that royal authority calls for urban settlement and control of the cities. (II, 204)

The city acts both as a civilizer and as a fortress to ensure the obedience of the hinterlands to the new ruler; according to these statements, the imperial Arab city is conceived in the same manner as in Spanish America in “The Ordered City”. According to the *Muqaddimah*, a dynasty either imposes its control on existing urban areas, exemplified by the Arab appropriation of Persian construction (II, 231-2) or must attend to the planning and founding of towns and cities (II, 210-14).¹³ Although, like Rama, Ibn Khaldun clearly recognized the need for planned urban settlement, and in actuality spends much of the text discussing the nuances of the various “crafts” that come with sedentary (urban) life, the *Muqaddimah* demonstrates skepticism with regard to the decadence and corruption that accompany the consolidation of dynastic power in the city and seem to cycle toward its decline.

As Rama notes, the colonial Spanish American city plays a double role, described as a locus of military and administrative power and as an evangelical emissary of civilized Europe. However, as is clear from Rama's account, despite this benign rhetoric, the urban settlement of Spanish America entailed (violent) extraction from the local market economy and the enforced protection of interests in natural resources. For example, Rama remarks about the writings of Fernán González de Eslava, "los siete fuertes que religaban la ciudad de México con las minas de plata de Zacatecas y permitían el transporte seguro a la capital virreinal de las riquezas, se transformaron en nada menos que los siete sacramentos de la religión católica" (17) ["[he] describes the seven forts linking Mexico City to the Zacatecas silver mines (thus securing the safe transport of mineral wealth to the viceregal capital) in terms that transform them into nothing less than the seven sacraments of the Catholic faith" (13)]. Rama's description makes clear, if his analysis neglects to elaborate, the link between evangelism (or the secular "civilization") and control. As colonial control shifts from military domination to administrative authority, the lettered elite develops to continue this double vocation. According to Rama, the strength of the lettered city stems from the need of empire to transmit and implement directives within the network of cities constituting the colonial settlement; the bureaucrats also carry out the "transculturation" of indigenous populations.

While Rama narrates the consolidation, secularization, privatization and decline (and perhaps the democratization) of the power of the *letrados*—which locates Latin America a propos European modernization, Ibn Khaldun details the factors that influence the recurrent rise to power and eventual decline of state power. One dynasty may build on the urban landscape of another or continue the "habit" of the former's crafts and sciences, but the luxury of sedentary life will erode its (tribal) group feeling (*'asabiyyah*) and it too will be replaced by a new dynasty. In this sense, the historical narrative in the *Muqaddimah*, though it may endeavor to present a complete and expansive history, subscribes more to a cyclical model¹⁴ than a teleological one. Accordingly, while he focuses on the Muslim—and primarily Arab—presence in the Maghreb, Ibn Khaldun does not neglect the influence of other groups, among these the Persian and Byzantine empires, the Berbers in the Maghreb, and the Visigoths in Spain.

Due to their unprecedented scale and contemporaneity, however, the Arab conquests and the deterioration of the empire and its influence are at the core of the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Khaldun observes that in its rapid expansion the Muslim dynasty found the office of a secretary or scribe necessary to communicate throughout the vast new territory.

In the Muslim dynasty, the Arabic language situation and (the custom of) expressing what one wanted to express in good form intensified the need for the office [of the ministry of official correspondence and writing]. Thus, writing came to convey, as a rule, the essence of a matter in better stylistic form than was possible in oral expression. [. . .] When the language became corrupt and a craft (that had to be learned), (the office) was entrusted to those who knew Arabic well. (II, 22)

In addition to issuing orders, this administrative unit serves to maintain the purity and quality of the language through its correct—and elite—expression in written form. This elite mode of expression, unable to be accessed by the majority of the population, and certainly not by speakers of native vernaculars, distinguishes the Arabic of the educated and literate classes. A hierarchy of languages accordingly develops between the elite and the populace: “The urban population is in general deficient in obtaining the linguistic habit that results from instruction. The more remote people are from the Arabic language, the more difficult it is for them to obtain it” (III, 306). According to Ibn Khaldun, the “linguistic habit” of native speakers of Arabic, and particularly those proficient in writing, allows them to form a cultural administrative elite—the ranks of “the pen.”

Here many comparisons can be drawn between Rama and Ibn Khaldun, evident in their attempts to understand and construct a narrative account of their respective societies, and in the role of “the pen” or the “letrado” and urban development to the imperial project. From this discussion it becomes clear that Ibn Khaldun’s description of the Arab model of conquest and administration does in certain respects “prefigure” Rama’s account of the Spanish in America, although this observation does not suggest a causal or genealogical link between their projects.

The Lettered City has, as Rama intended, left a paradigmatic mark on the critical study of Latin America, and precisely for this reason it should continue to be interrogated. However, with a proliferation of references, the “ciudad letrada” and the “letrado” dwelling within it run the risk of becoming floating signifiers that are overeagerly attached to any mention of a Latin American intellectual elite. The usefulness and subsequent popularity of the lettered city as a figure in Latin American(ist) discourse have contributed to this growing ambiguity over the epistemological content signaled by Rama’s term. Like all totalizing narratives, the history Rama constructs, while in some ways productively expansive, collapses regional and local specificity in its broad scope.¹⁵ Along with this tendency, his enterprise leans on Foucault’s epistemic divisions to such an extent that the general analysis of documentary evidence drops out of the text in favor of a limited number of documents that are asked to stand in for colonial discourse. In such moments the text turns from a descriptive mode to an explanatory one.

The Lettered City, while demonstrating an underlying discursive and thematic similarity to *The Muqaddimah*, also turns toward a narrative mode to offer an explanation of European epistemological orientations as the impetus for the development of colonial structures. This appeals to the discourse of *latinidad* that, beginning in its nineteenth century conception, explicitly or implicitly seeks to identify Latin America with a European cultural, racial, ethnic and intellectual heritage. Rama’s schema (wittingly or unwittingly) reproduces the process of identification with Western logic and civilization, Southern Europe, Catholicism, and in this instance, French poststructuralism, that erases the native, the African, and the (non-Latin) immigrant from the imaginary landscape of Latin America. This is not done through the content of *The Lettered City* but through the explicit orientation of its theoretical and historical models. However, the problem of describing Latin America through *latinidad* unintentionally creeps into Rama’s argument through its unwitting alignment more closely to the historical method of Ibn Khaldun than that of Foucault. Instead of an archeology of knowledge, *The Lettered City* offers an attempt to understand and account for the ontological status of “Latin America” with its diverse, complex and unequal sociocultural relations.

Read in this way, *The Lettered City* contextualizes and dialogues with Rama’s earlier argument on narrative transculturation; yet

as with *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, I find *The Lettered City*'s relationship to paradigms of European modernization to be problematic. It may be that the apparent similarities between the *Muqaddimah* and *The Lettered City* offer a different way to approach the intellectual historiography of Latin America. In terms of knowledge production, this observation takes on particular significance in light of the proliferation in the past thirty years of theories of Latin Americanism, in which grouping *The Lettered City* should be considered a foundational text. The danger, perhaps, is that in their abstract theoretical engagement, these formulations lose their ontological basis in the particularities of the continent they claim to represent.

Notes

1. In his prologue to the Spanish edition, Hugo Achugar writes of Rama's contribution to the study and conception of Latin America: "Se refiere, en cambio, a aquella visión que asume a Latinoamérica como un cuerpo vivo y provocativo de tensiones y luchas que configure una identidad cultural particular. Un cuerpo trabajado por contradicciones y paradojas, por lo mismo que es considerado el espacio de una lucha ideológica, cultural y social. Es a ese tipo de visiones y a esa apuesta a un determinado proyecto de patria grande, que pertenece el grueso de la obra de Ángel Rama y, en particular *La ciudad letrada*" (x).

2. All quotations in Spanish are from the 2002 edition of *La ciudad letrada*. Translations are from Chasteen.

3. While Rama often writes of "Latin America" and makes several references to Brazil, at times he specifically refers to "Spanish America" and much of his argument focuses on the latter.

4. Rama himself, while working within the mode of academic discourse claimed by the "lettered" city, points to moments of transgression by the elite power of the written word, further elaborated by Mignolo and others in an effort to revalorize (subaltern) oral tradition.

5. The *Muqaddimah* received attention in Western Europe with the publication of William Mac-Guckin de Slane's translation into French, *Prolégomènes historiques d'Ibn Khaldoun*, in 1862, 1865 and 1868 (Rosenthal cviii). This is, of course, at a time when France has particular concern for the colonization of the Maghreb.

6. Consequently, de la Campa brings a wide array of theories into dialogue with *The Lettered City*, including those of Laclau, Derrida, Mignolo, and García Canclini, as well as Foucault.

7. De la Campa supports this claim with a catalog list of engagements in the text that includes, in de la Campa's terms, "subaltern social thought, subversive orthography, the social realm as epistemic excess, peripheral modernity as real-izable cities, unlettered revolutions, and the languages of graffiti, tangos, and *corridos*" (37).

8. Trigo identifies this type of analysis, also apparent in *The Order of Things*, as belonging to a Foucauldian moment that corresponds to the postcolonial direction of de la Campa's Latin Americanism. Trigo distinguishes this from the postmodern moment, discernible in *History of Sexuality* and *Technologies of the Self*, and suggests that in de la Campa's account, these constitute two distinct moments, and consequently two Foucaults, rather than one critical aporia.

9. Rama further explains this process of analogy: "Para que esta conversión fuera posible, era indispensable que se transitara a través de un proyecto racional previo, que fue lo que magnificó y a la vez volvió indispensable el orden de los signos, reclamándosele la mayor libertad operativa de que fuera capaz. Al mismo tiempo, tal proyecto exige, para su concepción y ejecución, un punto de máxima concentración del poder que pueda pensarlo y realizarlo. Ese poder es ya visiblemente temporal y humano aunque todavía se enmascare y legitime tras los absolutos celestiales" (4-5).

10. In the Spanish text, this quotation appears in French: "reperée, explorée et grossièrement saisie au cours des trois premières décennies du XVIe siècle a un rythme insensé, jamais égale" (14).

11. In contrast to those who emphasize Ibn Khaldun's exceptionalism, Aziz Al-Azmah aligns Ibn Khaldun with the traditional practice of Arab historiography in this point, noting that while the concept of history in the *Muqaddimah* is that of a "narrative of organized habitation," the narrative practice of history proper to "an age or people" refers to "names and exploits of kings, their sons, their wives, descriptions of their insignia and seals, in addition to narratives about the men of rank who execute their powers and prerogatives such as chamberlains, judges and *wazirs*" (12).

12. It should be noted, however, that like the diverse group that constituted the Spanish conquistadors and initial settlers of the Americas, the "Arab" conquests also referred to a diverse group, unified by conversion to Islam.

13. Ibn Khaldun criticizes the Arabs somewhat in the latter respect, mentioning several examples of poor decisions in the location of cities (II, 213-14).

14. In his introduction to the *Muqaddimah*, Franz Rosenthal attributes this conception in part to an orthodox Muslim environment, in which "it was believed that human intellectual power was always constant and capable of producing the highest civilization at any given time." Rosenthal asserts that

for Ibn Khaldun, “political and cultural life was moving in never-ending, always repeated circles” (*lxxxiv*).

15. One obvious consequence is that Brazil does not factor consistently in his argument and instead drops in and out of the text. “The Ordered City” attempts to compensate for this disjuncture by switching back and forth from the “Iberian Empires” to “Spanish America.” This inconsistency calls into question the foundation of the idea of a “Latin American” urban ideal or even, though Rama does not make the claim, a Spanish American one.

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