

# The Insubordination of Signs

Political Change, Cultural Transformation,  
and Poetics of the Crisis



NELLY RICHARD

*Alice A. Nelson and Silvia R. Tandeciarz, Translators*

# *The Insubordination of Signs*

POST-CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

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In memory of Germán Bravo, for those moments

when what he called a “gentle inquiry into the insuturable

character of questions of meaning” fails.



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## Author's Note

This edition brings together five texts that converge on a single problematic: the interplay of tensions between culture and society, aesthetics and politics, signs and ideologies. The stage on which these tensions are debated corresponds to Chile in the 1980s and early 1990s. The book analyzes the meaning of the discursive strategies constructed by the political culture of the left, the aesthetic neo-avant-garde, and the alternative movement in the social sciences, including their problematic differences. But the questions contained in this analysis go beyond their contextual referent to engage in a discussion—vital for any cultural and political context—regarding the relationships between institutional discourses and critiques of representation, constituted and informal forms of knowledge, social identity and subjectivity in crisis, legitimized practices and those situated at the margins of organized cultural systems.

Other than “Roturas, memoria y discontinuidades (homenaje a W. Benjamin)” [Ruptures, Memory, and Discontinuities (Homage to Walter Benjamin)], the chapters are revised and transformed versions of previous publications and talks. Chapter 2 first appeared as “Una cita limítrofe entre neovanguardia y postvanguardia” [A Border Citation: Between Neo- and Post-Avant-Garde] in the anthology *Modernidade: Vanguardias artísticas na América Latina* [Modernity: Artistic Avant-Gardes in Latin America] (Sao Paulo: Memorial/Unesp, 1990). Chapter 3, “Destrucción/reconstrucción/desconstrucción” [Destruction, Reconstruction, and Deconstruction], was pub-

lished in the journal *Nueva sociedad* (Caracas) 116 (November/December 1991). Chapter 4, “En torno a las ciencias sociales: Líneas de fuerza y puntos de fuga” [The Social Sciences: Front Lines and Points of Retreat], is based on a paper delivered at the first meeting of the Inter-American Cultural Studies Network, organized by the Center for Social Research, City University of New York, and the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana [UNAM], which took place in Mexico City in May 1993. Chapter 5, “Escenario democrático y política de las diferencias” [Staging Democracy and the Politics of Difference], was published in the *Revista de crítica cultural* (Santiago) 5 (June 1992).

## Translators' Acknowledgments

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## Translators' Preface

Nelly Richard figures among the most prominent cultural critics writing in Latin America today. As part of the Chilean neo-avant-garde that emerged during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90), Richard worked to expand and deepen the possibilities for cultural debate within that constrained context and has continued to offer incisive cultural commentary about the country's transition to democracy. Richard's rigorous essays and books engage questions of Latin American identity within the context of North/South debates on postmodernism and neoliberalism, with a strong emphasis on gender analysis and micropolitical strategies of resistance. Well known as the founder and director of the influential *Revista de crítica cultural* (Santiago, Chile), Richard has been central to the dissemination throughout Latin America of work by key contemporary thinkers, including Beatriz Sarlo, Néstor García Canclini, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Fredric Jameson, Jesús Martín Barbero, and Diamela Eltit. Like Richard's own essays, the *Revista* has put into dialogue theoretical perspectives from Latin America, Europe, and the United States, creating a lively forum for intellectual debate on culture, theory, and politics since its founding in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Born in France, Richard completed her degree in literature at the Sorbonne and moved to Chile in 1970, a year characterized by the euphoric victory of Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) under the leadership of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende. During the Popular Unity period, Richard served as coordi-

nator of art exhibitions for the Museo de Bellas Artes in Santiago, a post that she abandoned after the violent overthrow of Allende in 1973. Under the Pinochet dictatorship, Richard became involved with unofficial art circuits, aligning herself within the margins of opposition to the military regime, as both a protagonist and an analyst of the neo-avant-garde (or *avanzada*) cultural scene. The essays in this book bear traces of that time, whether in Richard's emphasis on alternative artists and art movements, such as CADA (*Colectivo de Acciones de Arte* [Art Actions Collective]), or in her piecing together fragments of art history and criticism first circulated precariously as photocopies under the military regime.

Richard was also closely connected to the feminist movement reconstituted slowly in various pockets throughout the country. Although many of those engaged in oppositional activities from the beginning of the Pinochet years were women, a feminist movement only received public acknowledgment as such after the eruption of massive national protests in 1983–84. As Julieta Kirkwood and other Chilean feminists noted, the ways in which power operated under the military regime had made feminist analysis not only particularly relevant but also politically necessary. In 1987, Richard served as one of the main organizers of what would prove to be the most significant literary event under the dictatorship—indeed, one of the most important in all of Latin America during the 1980s—the *Primer Congreso de Literatura Femenina Latinoamericana* (First International Conference on Latin American Women's Literature), held in Santiago in August of that year. As is evident in *Escribir en los bordes*, a published collection of essays from the conference, this gathering raised questions of difference and institutional exclusions faced by women writers and resituated debates on *écriture féminine* within particularly Latin American cultural coordinates. Richard's *Masculino/femenino*, published in 1993, revisits key questions from this conference, reconsidering them in light of Chile's return to democracy.

Like *Masculino/femenino*, Richard's other collections—particularly *La estratificación de los márgenes* (1989), *La insubordinación de los signos* (1994), and *Residuos y metáforas* (1998)—have insisted on micropractices of difference and an aesthetic of the fragmentary, partial, and