H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Silvia Spitta. *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America.* Houston, Tx.: Rice University Press, 1995. xii + 246 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89263-321-0.

Reviewed by Elliott Young (University of Texas, Austin)
Published on H-LatAm (September, 1996)

Silvia Spitta's *Between Two Waters* synthesizes previous scholarship and adds new insights to the debate over cultural interaction in Latin America. While she analyzes "narratives of transculturation" produced in the Americas, her theoretical conclusions seem applicable even beyond those continental boundaries. Whether or not one agrees with her readings of this geographical and temporally diverse selection of texts and visual images, the book forces the reader to consider the vital and interconnected issues of language, knowledge, and power. Moreover, Spitta presents her complex and sophisticated argument in clear prose, unencumbered by the jargon that weighs down other literary criticism.

Her argument centers around the concept of "transculturation," a term coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s. Whereas "acculturation" implies a one-way imposition of the dominant culture, transculturation for Spitta consists of the "complex processes of adjustment and re-creation–cultural, literary, linguistic and personal–that allow for new, vital and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations" (p. 2). Concretely, she defines a "transculturated subject" as someone who is "consciously or unconsciously situated between at least two worlds, two cultures, two languages, and two definitions of subjectivity, and who constantly mediates between them all" (p. 24).

Anxious to show that the process works both ways, that the "experience of discovery and colonization will change not only the colonized, but the colonizer as well," she begins by analyzing Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*, an account of his early-sixteenth-century travels through what is now the U.S. Southwest. Spitta argues that Cabeza de Vaca's adoption of indigenous culture and medical practices demonstrates that he transculturated. For instance, his ambiguous use of "nosotros" (us) to refer to himself and indigenous people with whom he traveled, as opposed to "los cristianos" with which he labeled other Spaniards, illustrates that he, or more correctly the "we," is "speaking from the American world" (p. 48). Cabeza de Vaca, according to Spitta, thus ranks as one of the earliest examples of Spanish transculturation because he, unlike other Spanish chroniclers, began to "change and question the imperialist 'I/eye"' (p. 34). While Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios* may prove that he personally transculturated, though this point is still subject to considerable debate, his case may not the best one to make the more general argument that colonizers change in the process of discovery. In fact, Cabeza de Vaca contends that he had lost his ability to dominate and to be the colonizer because his weapons proved useless and he had no food to sustain himself. His transculturation comes about only after he has been captured by an indigenous group and realizes that "his survival depends on his usefulness" (p. 36). To what extent, then, can Spitta prove that colonizers transculturate based on a case where a prisoner, even if once a colonizer, adapts his masters' cultural code to survive? If transculturation is a two-way street, and I believe that it is, then the subordinated seem to travel it far more frequently than those who hold power.

A chapter focusing on Spanish priests' attempt to extirpate Andean idolatry raises the question of just how far one has to deviate from one's culture to transculturate. Priests quickly recognized that although indigenous Andeans took up the form of Catholicism, beneath the words, symbols, and at times, beneath the very Catholic icons, lay indigenous symbols and meanings. Therefore, Spitta argues that priests had to become ethnographers and "transculturate Catholicism in order to render it accessible to a different culture.... In the process of changing the Other, they inadvertently changed themselves" (p. 57). However, using knowledge of a culture in order to dominate it and impose a foreign one seems significantly different than Cabeza de Vaca's becoming a Shaman to survive. Even if Arriaga, Avila, and Bocanegra, the priests who attempted to stamp out idolatry in the Andes, had to learn the local languages and become ethnographers, they seem never to have lost the imperial "I/eye," to use Spitta's term. Undoubtedly they were

changed, as anyone would be by any such experience, but how much, and can we call that change transculturation?

As well as considering Spanish transculturators, Spitta examines their indigenous counterparts in a chapter focusing on the Cuzco school of painting. This school developed its distinctive aesthetic in the eighteenth century when Andeans refused Spanish tutelage and continued to paint Catholic religious icons without the guidance of European artistic and religious standards. Western critics dismissed much of this indigenous art as "provincial" and "imitative" on the one hand, and yet "deformed," "degraded," and "naive" on the other. The critics, Spitta convincingly argues, simply overlooked the liberties and inventiveness of indigenous artists and their ability to "create a space for themselves, their world, and their cosmology, while apparently imitating European religious engravings" (p. 89). An extended "picture essay" comprises the later part of the chapter, with brief descriptive explanations of various paintings.

Spitta's analysis of Peruvian writer Jose Maria Arguedas' novels and stories provides perhaps her strongest example of conscious transculturation in literature. In fact, she opens her book with Arguedas' 1968 speech "yo no soy aculturado" (I am not acculturated), setting up at the outset the dichotomy between acculturation and her/his notion of transculturation. Arguedas lived between two worlds of the Andes and the coast and attempted to bring these two parts of himself and Peru together in his literature by writing in Spanish from a Quechua Indian perspective. While Arguedas succeeded in his literature, he was apparently unable to mediate this tension in his own life and ultimately committed suicide.

The last two chapters introduce a critical feminist perspective, examining Elena Garro's analysis of the myth of Malinche in Mexico and Gloria Anzaldua's writings about the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. This feminist perspective on gender works well with the narratives discussed in the last two chapters, but such a perspective might have been fruitfully extended to the other chapters. For example, Spitta argues that "women's discourse constitutes itself by subverting hegemonic and historiographical discourses," but I wondered how that subversion differed from that of Arguedas or of Cabeza de Vaca (p. 190). In other words, is "women's discourse" particularly subversive or just another expression of transculturation?

Finally, the book practices what it preaches by including both the original and English translation for every quotation. While some may find this method cumbersome, especially in cases of long references, the centrality of language to the argument makes having the original worthwhile. Unfortunately, Spitta relies on an English translation of Father Pablo Joseph de Arriaga's *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*, a major primary source in one of the chapters.

In the conclusion, Spitta cites performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena's critique of the appropriation and de-politicization of "the border" by the mainstream and particularly proponents of multiculturalism. "The border as metaphor," he proclaims, "has become hollow." In this race to multiculturalism, differences have been erased so that "everything becomes everything else" (pp. 196-97). And therein lie the dangers of transculturation, a concept that fits such a wide range of temporal and geographical contexts, all the way from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century, from the Andes to the Rio Bravo.

A similar impasse has been reached in the social sciences with the concept of resistance. In an effort to show working-class or subaltern agency, scholars have uncovered the surprisingly large arsenal with which the oppressed resist domination. Collectively known as the "weapons of the weak," this evidence of foot-dragging, gossiping, and sabotage under even the most repressive circumstances, such as slavery in the United States, demonstrated the creativity and humanity of the conquered, colonized, and oppressed. After countless microstudies turned up similar evidence, the question became, "so what"? The tentative answer has been to attempt to demonstrate the links between this subtle resistance and more visible forms of social change.

My guess is that transculturation may quickly arrive at a similar impasse. Would not the Irish-American student who comes from a working-class background and enters academia at an elite university not also be transculturating? Do not we all mediate among linguistic, religious, and professional worlds? Spitta's final sentence, citing Gomez-Pena, indicates that "any encounter between people of different cultures constitutes a 'border experience"' (p. 213). If the meaning of "border experiences" and transculturation continues to expand to include almost everyone, then it will cease to be analytically, not to mention politically, useful.

Between Two Waters is a thought-provoking and intelligent book. My only fear is that instead of Arguedas' "yo no soy un aculturado," we are going to hear frequently hear "todos somos transculturados." Like the "todos somos indios" or "todos somos Marcos" that rang from tens

of thousands of voices in Mexico City to support the Zapatista indigenous uprising in Chiapas, there is a danger of erasing differences in the rush to solidarity. Spitta's book reminds us, however, that there are many inside and outside of academia who have struggled to live between two waters and to bring two worlds together without making them the same.

Copyright (c)1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Elliott Young. Review of Spitta, Silvia, *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=618

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.