

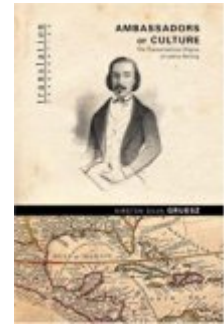
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kirsten Silva Gruesz. *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing*. Translation/Transnation. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. xvii + 279 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-05097-3; \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05096-6.

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## <cite>Letrados</cite>, Land and <cite>Latinidad</cite>

### *Letrados, Land and Latinidad*

A few years ago, while teaching a junior seminar on nineteenth-century U.S. issues in an American Culture program, I assigned a Spanish-language text: no problem. More recently, as an untenured member of an English Department with the usual post-colonial “crush” on the putative Mother Tongue, I was advised to stick to the basics, which meant (among other things): no foreign-language texts. This decision is questionable for all kinds of reasons but especially frustrating here, in light of Kansas City’s large Latino population. Teachers who have faced similar situations will be as pleased as I am with Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s lucid justification for directing students of nineteenth-century U.S. literature to ponder the efforts that certain North American writers made, in the 1820s and 30s, to foster a hemispheric consciousness and then, in the face of expansionist militarism during and after the 1840s, to mark out oppositional stances based on claims of distinctiveness concerning such things as religion, trade practices and philosophies of life. Thoroughly comparatist and theoretically quite supple, *Ambassadors of Culture* re-draws the map of nineteenth-century American literature by showing how *letrados*’ efforts reveal “the historical conditions of contemporary Latino subjectivity within the United States” (p. x).

Key to this large, but rich and suggestive, undertaking is Gruesz’s focus on translation, broadly conceived.

Something of a shadow realm in U.S. literary studies, translation is reconfigured in *Ambassadors* into a field meriting extensive study in its own right due to translations’ capacity to carry, but also re-envision, culture. Not that Gruesz confines the topic of translation to the job of setting received lyrics to new music. Instead, she situates the work of translation within the larger framework of diplomacy by surveying the work attempted by an engaging assortment of men and women of letters, who understood their taste-validated role in print culture to be that of explicators, amplifiers, bridge-builders and even, at times, theorists of a transnational form of community. So wide-ranging a study could lack specificity. Gruesz is scrupulous, however, about explaining precisely the intertwining of literature produced by U.S. citizens with that of exiles from Cuba, Mexico and beyond, as well as with sustained concern for preserving a sense of the exigencies under which *letrados* positioned quite differently pursued their various goals.

This approach marks a significant departure from existing work in Latino literary studies which tends to focus on the work of, say, *californios* or *tejanos*. Yet extensive scope, coupled with an acute sense of the forms of literature produced in exile, is exactly why Gruesz is able to probe the complex origins of the cross-race, cross-national, and dialect-riven phenomenon we know now as *latinidad*. *Ambassadors* will interest historians not only of U.S., Spanish and cosmopolitan literary production, but also of print culture and identity, as well as reading

and ethnicity.

As might be expected from this overview, Gruesz's book is packed with information not covered in the average course in nineteenth-century U.S. literature. Deeply informative of the history of Spanish-speaking America and the rise of Spanish-language journalism, *Ambassadors* corrects the effects of scholarly training which over-emphasizes the literary output of, say, Boston by introducing writers and publication centers aware of the *North American Review* and *Atlantic Monthly* but not mesmerized by either. There is nothing ghetto-izing about Gruesz's study, though, for *Ambassadors* focuses on making a case "for a wholesale revision of hemispheric literary culture rather than simply the construction of a Latino past" (p. 210). As this statement implies, Gruesz directs her comparatist arguments at literary historians versed in the canon and comfortable, perhaps, with the para-canon, yet unaccustomed to working with literary activity in languages other than English. High points of her work, for scholars of this kind, include an extremely useful introduction to the importance of studying translations, a new perspective on the significance of William Cullen Bryant's poetic and editorial careers, and fresh insights into Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's skills as a linguist. For scholars more conversant with Latino studies, *Ambassadors* surveys the career of Maria Gowen Brooks, a New England transplant who re-named herself "Maria del Occidente", offers close readings of the poetry-in-exile of the *Laud* group, and explores the work of Spanish-language writers in what is now the United States, in the decades before Jose Marti arrived in New York.

Still another contribution made by *Ambassadors* is the finding that poetry was central to many *letrados'* efforts.

To help scholars appreciate this work, Gruesz makes a solid case for the importance of "vernacular" and intentionally imitative verse. Imitative poetry is not highly valued, nowadays. Yet when Gruesz re-positions "imitativeness as a form of asserting one's own agency as a cultural producer" (p. xiii), she makes it imperative to address this form of expression respectfully and does much to dissolve the line between high and low culture in the Spanish-language press. For Gruesz, then, "the conventionality of many popular poems might be understood not as signs of their failure to meet the standards of consecrated artistic practice, but as features that allow a wide range of readers/auditors from different points on the literacy continuum to understand, enjoy, and repeat these verses" (p. 25). More reason to study imitative Spanish-language verse is the news that travelers and exiles in that language had so much to say about Niagara Falls, and composed so many translations of Longfellow's "Evangeline" (1847). Gruesz's comparison of this saga of dispossession with Carlos Morla Vicuna's "Evangelina" (1871) brilliantly demonstrates her thesis that "imitation is not a relationship of simple dominance and submission, but rather ... a complex selection process of taking what is useful from the model being copied" (p. 28).

The fact that *Ambassadors* had me revising my American Literature syllabus before I had finished reading the Introduction, led me to wish that Gruesz had supplied an appendix which printed a few of the poems she discussed at length. Perhaps some of this work could be made available in the *PMLA* series on "Little-Known Documents." Even better, though, would be a website to which students could be directed should their interest in Spanish-language literature produced in North America during the nineteenth century be piqued by the insights on offer in *Ambassadors*.

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