

LATIN AMERICA IN AN  
INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT:  
Questions of Language and Travel in  
Literary Criticism and History

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*UNHOMELY ROOMS: FOREIGN TONGUES AND SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE.* By Roberto Ignacio Díaz. (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002. Pp. 248. \$45.00 cloth.)

*STRANGE PILGRIMAGES: EXILE, TRAVEL, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICA, 1800–1990S.* Edited by Ingrid Elizabeth Fey and Karen Racine. (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000. Pp. 258. \$55.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

*ACENTO EXTRANJERO: DIECIOCHO RELATOS DE VIAJEROS EN LA ARGENTINA.* Compiled by María Sonia Cristoff. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000. Pp. 256. \$7.87 paper.)

*WRITING PARIS: URBAN TOPOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN FICTION.* By Marcy E. Schwartz. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999. Pp. 182. \$18.95 paper.)

In a review of contemporary Latin American literary criticism and history one will find *unhomely* rooms, strange pilgrimages, and foreign accents. Notions of estrangement, foreignness, or the unhomely are crucial in the recent critical explorations that choose to look at discourses of *place*, but only in relation to their counterpart, discourses of displacement. The works reviewed here formulate questions around the most salient issues being debated today, issues related to and inseparable from the experiences of border crossings and dislocation.

If the intriguing title of Roberto Ignacio Díaz's *Unhomely Rooms: Foreign Tongues and Spanish American Literature* contains words that recall the realm of architecture, it is because its author seeks to underscore the artificial nature of thinking about culture. This *house of culture* in Spanish America, to use Díaz's architectural metaphor, has been often constructed on the basis of multiple elisions and erasures. According to

the main premise of this outstanding book, the elisions in the construction of Spanish American literary history consist mainly of cultural expressions in languages other than Spanish. It is the ubiquitous presence and the conjunction of these other languages—in one author, text, or Spanish American literary tradition at large—that this book thoughtfully discusses.

Rethinking the categories of autonomy and linguistic parameters in Spanish American literary culture, Roberto Ignacio Díaz discusses *heterolingualism* as the opposite term to the Spanish-centered *monolingualism*. In doing so he looks at the writing that crosses the traditional boundaries of national literature, and employs the notions of *interlingual* and *interliterary* as they pertain to ‘contact zones’ (to use M. L. Pratt’s term), between languages and literatures. This new *heterolingual house* of Spanish American literary culture contains Sigmund Freud’s notion of *heimlich* (a “semantic oddity”, as Díaz puts it, which can mean its opposite, *unheimlich*) to describe its hybrid spaces. A fact that these rooms are now characterized as *unheimlich* or unhomely calls first for an understanding of what we mean when we say *home*. It is here that Díaz aptly situates the notions of home and homely around the presence of Spanish language. He argues convincingly that although many readers in Spanish America do know other languages, Spanish American literature has been constructed as a monolingual tradition.

*Unhomely Rooms*’ insertion of foreign languages within the South American continent’s systems should modify, Díaz states, “how one defines and discusses Spanish American culture in general, which is, after all, what other disciplines have already done” (2002, 25). That the heterolingual authors and texts are there, “is not just a fact, but a call for interpretation” (*ibid.*). Díaz concludes by pointing out that if anthropology, history, and linguistics fully recognize Spanish America’s multilingual condition, “the field of literary studies, by examining its own axioms and broadening its concepts, may well opt to do the same in the future” (*ibid.*). However, it is important to note that the author of *Unhomely Rooms* is fully aware that the promulgation of what may appear as a non-Spanish American literature engages an apparent oxymoron. Thus, it is important to underscore that even as the work continuously stresses linguistic plurality, at the same time it seeks to show why Spanish American literature remains an indispensable concept for literary scholarship. In short, this study seeks to undermine the essentialist arguments about an autonomous character of the Spanish American literary canon.

Order and symmetry are some of the principal categories that Díaz addresses in his elaboration of unhomeliness as means of disrupting cultural discourses of one nation. Díaz argues here that hybrid and

heterolingual texts suggest a story that undermines symmetry and order, the very categories that national stories told by literary scholarship often underscore. The author reminds us that the role of literature is crucial in uncovering and welcoming languages that may threaten national unity.

The first chapter of *Unhomely Rooms* is entitled “Maskings of Our America.” It takes up the masking metaphor from José Martí’s now canonical *Nuestra América*, and argues that not only Martí’s essays but a number of other texts dealing with issues of continental culture create a discourse in which English and French heterolingualism is often branded as negative. In all of these texts, the role of Spanish is celebrated as homogenizing and therefore indispensable to the construction of a national discourse. Analyzing the central issue of literary taxonomy, or the question of “who belongs and who does not,” Díaz looks at how this tension is manifested in the works of the following writers: Jorge L. Borges, Victoria Ocampo, Domingo F. Sarmiento, Lucio V. Mansilla, William H. Hudson, Manuel Mujica Láinez, Pablo Neruda, Carlos Fuentes, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Nicolás Guillén, Ana Lydia Vega, and others. Some of these authors speak with what Díaz calls a “magnificent forked tongue: even as they elevate Spanish, they underscore its problematic status and open the door to other languages” (34).

The second chapter continues to look at the difficult path towards Spanish American authorship for those writers caught between languages and cultures. This chapter analyzes how some very visible writings (Enrique Anderson Imbert’s *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* and Rubén Darío’s “A Roosevelt” for example), have contributed to the commonly held view of a monolingual Spanish American literary tradition. These two prominent Spanish American authors, each in their own right, have also written to suggest the possibility of reading heterolingualism as a part of Spanish American culture. As it turns out, Díaz writes, the less official a critical site is, such as Anderson Imbert’s *Los domingos del professor* or Darío’s *Los raros*, the more favorable a reception may be afforded to the continent’s linguistic multiplicity.

The third chapter examines closely the geographic and linguistic crossings—between France and Cuba—in Comtesse Merlin’s writing. It thoroughly examines Merlin’s heterolingual *La Havane* (1844), where this author’s foreign craft adopts forms linked with Cuban *costumbrista* writing, thus functioning as a vehicle in the creation of national literature. Yet again, the multilingual operates within as it disrupts the national.

The first part of the fourth chapter explores the writings of the Anglo-Argentine W. H. Hudson, and specifically *The Purple Land* (1885). The second part of this chapter focuses on yet another Spanish American text written in English, namely María Luisa Bombal’s *House of Mist* (1947). Resonant with the modalities of Spanish American literature,

“these texts yield their meanings most clearly when read not only as French, English, or U.S. American works, but as elements within the systems of Spanish American writing” (19).

The fifth chapter discusses heterolingualism in a more recent period in the works of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Holy Smoke* (1985) and Carlos Fuentes’s *Una familia lejana* (1980). Fuentes’s novel tells a complex story of the Spanish American origins of several French-language poets: José-María de Heredia, Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), Jules Laforgue, and Jules Supervielle. In this chapter Díaz argues that Cabrera Infante and Fuentes tell a story of multilingual Spanish American literature that literary history often forgets or suppresses. *Unhomely Rooms* focuses precisely on the elisions and erasures from the official sites of Spanish American literary culture, and in doing so, it examines the lack of a true linguistic center in its construction. In the same vein, the study argues convincingly that Spanish America is a polyglot region.

In conclusion, Spanish American literature, as non-Spanish elements become meaningful under its sway, emerges as a more complex and influential category than Spanish monolingualism would allow. Díaz’s study seeks to redesign the house of Spanish American literature as a multilingual archive: a polyglot location for authors, texts, and readers that may be seen as further evidence of the continent’s hybrid makeup. It is here that the author offers an original insight into the discussion between *the native* and *the foreign* in the construction of culture and language. In Díaz’s critical reconceptualization of these notions, the seemingly foreign rejoins the obviously domestic and constructs a new house of Spanish American literature. This new house, Díaz argues, has many more rooms than the previous edifice of Spanish American literary criticism would allow. However, what Díaz calls for is not a mere augmentation of the existing cultural edifice but rather a critical opening that will be fine-tuned enough to retrieve and incorporate seemingly discordant but ultimately meaningful, voices and inflections coming from European languages other than Spanish.

In the collection of essays titled *Strange Pilgrimages: Exile, Travel, and National Identity in Latin America, 1800–1990s*, the historians Ingrid Fey and Karen Racine depart from Gabriel García Márquez’s notion of strangeness within displacement that he elaborated in *Strange Pilgrims*. Another guiding principle of this collection may be found in a statement by José Carlos Mariátegui: “We went abroad not to learn the secret of others, but to learn the secret of ourselves” (2000, xi). Each chapter in this collection explores the deceptively simple idea that while living in foreign countries, a writer becomes more aware of his or her own personal and national identities.

*Strange Pilgrimages* follows a chronological criterion with regard to the organization of included essays. It thus places the accounts of the

early nineteenth-century travelers at the very beginning of the collection. The first section refers to "Constructing Nations after Independence and Beyond." Karen Racine is the author of the opening essay titled "Nature and Mother: Foreign Residence and the Evolution of Andrés Bello's American Identity, London, 1810–1829." She argues that Bello's Americanism born of exile is most apparent in his two famous poems, "Alocución a la poesía," and "La agricultura de la Zona Tórrida." In "Alocución a la poesía," for example, Bello set up a contrast between the artifice of Europe and the prodigious nature of America. By the 1820s the theme of America's salvation and regeneration dominated Bello's thoughts. Writing from across the Atlantic, Bello, "a self-appointed moral tutor of the American people," found in England inspiring examples for a civic future of Latin America. There is no doubt, Racine concludes, that Bello became an American while sitting among the books of the British Museum.

In this interdisciplinary collection of travel writing and other forms of displacement the editors included translations as well, such as those of Francisco de Paula Santander's "Extract of a letter to Señor Don Vicente Azuero, New York, January 19, 1832," and Rubén Darío's turn-of-the-century "The Lure of Paris." Darío's essay introduces the reader into the second section of the book that focuses on modernity. In this section Ingrid Fey's essay examines the role played by Latin American women in turn-of-the-century Paris. In analyzing the creation and re-creation of Latin American identity, processes that often took place in an international context, the second and third sections look at feminism and other progressive ideologies. Guatemalan historian Arturo Taracena Arriola, for example, examines the anti-imperialist struggle fought by the General Association of Latin American Students and writers living in Paris in the 1920s and early 1930s. Taracena Ariola argues that AGELA's (Asociación General de Estudiantes Latinoamericanos) public activities were marked from the beginning by the anti-imperialist sentiment already embraced by its principal mentors: Manuel Ugarte, José Ingenieros, José Vasconcelos, and by its general secretary, Carlos Quijano. The fight to defend Nicaraguan sovereignty would become the axis of AGELA's activism. The group dissolved in 1933 due to certain internal problems and to the subsequent return of many of its leading members to Latin America. Of the Central Americans, Miguel Ángel Asturias remained in Paris until 1933, but he was increasingly removed from university political circles. Instead, he dedicated himself to journalism and engaged in writing the manuscript of his novel, *El Señor Presidente*.

The historian Daniela Spenser's contribution to *Strange Pilgrimages* is titled "Encounter of Two Revolutions: Mexican Radical Elites in Communist Russia during the 1920s." She argues that the reaction of

Mexican intellectuals to the Soviet post-revolutionary practices was marked by disillusionment. The relative conservatism of Mexico's revolutionary elite is then explained as being in part the result of Mexican activists' travel and foreign residence in post-revolutionary Russia. The same radical elite, Spenser draws a conclusion, "that had been instrumental in establishing diplomatic and friendly relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1920s advocated their rupture in 1929" (159). Arthur Schmidt's essay focuses on the work of Manuel Gamio (Mexico's first professionally trained archaeologist) in the United States.

The fourth part of *Strange Pilgrimages* explores various manifestations of Latin American popular culture in the United States. Brian O'Neil's essay is suggestively titled: "So Far from God, So Close to Hollywood: Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez in Hollywood, 1925–1944." O'Neil argues that it is no coincidence that the only two Mexicans (or Latin Americans, for that matter) to achieve lasting star status in Hollywood during the 1930s were women. Hollywood's racial politics at the time, O'Neil explains, precluded the foregrounding of "ethnic men" in prominent roles, particularly when paired with Anglo female protagonists. Latin women were seen as less threatening. In this regard, O'Neil points out that a standard narrative trope of this Hollywood film period, "demanded that any pronounced ethnicity on the part of a Latin American woman be tamed via a romantic union with a North American male" (216). Such gendered and racialized logic, O'Neil explores effectively, provided the base for the rise of del Río and Vélez to Hollywood stardom. Yet, their subsequent careers and their respective star images were quite different. Dolores del Río was cast as a cultured, artistic lady of incomparable beauty and grace, and Lupe Vélez was a wild "Mexican Spitfire," an actress with a tempestuous "primitive soul" of uncontrollable emotion and sexuality. Darién Davis's thought-provoking contribution to *Strange Pilgrimages* is titled "To Be or Not to Be Brazilian? Carmen Miranda's Quest for Fame and 'Authenticity' in the United States." The cornerstone of this essay's insightful analysis is the premise that identity is a construct, not an essence. In this regard, Davis's essay examines a series of identity negotiations in Carmen Miranda's prolific career. At the end of *Strange Pilgrimages*, there is an informative list of suggested readings based on the following themes: Latin American exiles and travelers; Latin Americans' accounts of their own experiences abroad, and secondary sources for the experiences of Latin Americans in the United States, England, and France. In addition, the editors provide a list of films related to the themes of the collection.

The same year that *Strange Pilgrimages* came out in the United States, Editorial Sudamericana published *Acento extranjero: Dieciocho relatos de viajeros en la Argentina*. The travel-writing pieces included in this book span a period between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries. The

interdisciplinary nature of the included pieces is reflected in the titles of the six sections that compose this compilation: “La experiencia,” “La expedición,” “La naturaleza,” “La compañía,” “La religión,” and “El ocio.” Well-documented and informative essays written by María Sonia Cristoff, the collection’s editor, introduce each section and each author included in it. Although the selected texts all focus on various places in Argentina, they are usually excerpts from larger-scale travel books that include visits to other South American countries as well.

The first section includes articles by Rosita Forbes, Sir Richard Burton, and Edmondo de Amicis. Rosita Forbes’s contribution, suggestively titled “Eight Republics in Search of a Future,” comes from a larger work with a homonymous title. It includes reflections from Forbes’s trip throughout Latin America in 1932. A selection of Richard Burton’s writings is earlier in date: it covers his 1865–69 South American trips. Burton’s text is actually a letter, one of twenty-seven that compose his “Letters from the Battlefields of Paraguay.” The author of the following essay, the Italian traveler Edmondo de Amicis, arrived in Buenos Aires by invitation of Lucio Vicente López. It is not the lifestyle of the elite, however, but rather the arrival of Italian immigrants to Argentina that catches his attention.

*Acento extranjero’s* section titled “La expedición” includes expedition testimonies written by Alexander Campbell, Sir Francis Drake, and Alejandro Malaspina. Campbell’s text is particularly intriguing in its legal dimension of a letter, a letter that he wrote in self-defense after being accused by the English crown of attempting to join Pizarro’s Spanish forces. The following essay comes from *The World Encompassed*, a text written by a cousin of Drake’s. It tells a fascinating story of pirates and conspiracy that took place around Puerto San Julián, Patagonia, in 1578. Rivalry between world empires permeates the pages of yet another *expedición* text: Alejandro Malaspina’s 1789 “Viaje político-científico alrededor del mundo por las corbetas Descubierta y Atrevida.” Here Malaspina, an Italian traveler, embarks on a voyage around the world in order to provide scientific measurements to the Spanish crown. Because of his pro–Latin American Independence sentiments, Malaspina was incarcerated and his text prohibited by the Spanish colonial authorities. He is remembered in history as the author of the first print map of the Argentine coast.

Félix de Azara’s, Carlo Spegazzini’s, and John Ball’s texts compose the section on nature taxonomies. While de Azara focuses on fauna and Spegazzini on flora, Ball looks at both in his 1882 “Notes of a Naturalist in South America.” In the following section, titled “La compañía,” Marion Mulhall accompanies her husband through Latin America, and writes “Between the Amazon and Andes or Ten Years of a Lady’s Travels in the Pampas, Gran Chaco, Paraguay and Mato Grosso.” Following an excerpt

from the well-known "El Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes," this section concludes with a travel piece written by Lina Beck Bernard, wife of an immigration recruiter in Switzerland and Germany appointed by the Argentine president of the time, Bartolomé Mitre. The section about religious issues encompasses texts written by the Jesuit Florian Paucke, and by the missionaries in Tierra del Fuego, Alberto De Agostini and Thomas Bridges. Florence Dixie (a Patagonia traveler), W. R. Kennedy (a sports writer), and C.D. Mackellar (a 1905 tourist) are contributors selected for the closing section of *Acento extranjero*.

Marcy E. Schwartz's *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* is a book written not about travels to Paris, but about Paris as a trope in Latin American narrative. Schwartz's lucid discussion of Paris reveals a metaphor for a broad spectrum of culturally and ideologically bound desires. The starting premise of *Writing Paris* is centered on a long history in which Latin American urban culture has designated Paris as an idealized, hegemonic cultural center that has served as both a model and a myth for European modernity. The book's first chapter is thus aptly titled "Desiring Paris: The Latin American Conception of the Lettered City, 1840 to 1960." Drawing from postcolonial thought, the following chapters in Schwartz's insightful book focus on four contemporary writers' questioning of the model and the myth that Paris traditionally represented. Schwartz's book illustrates precisely the moments of rupture within this idealizing and imposing tradition. Furthermore, the study critically addresses the contradictions within Paris's incorporation into contemporary fiction. In fact, *Writing Paris* reads the French capital as a city re-mapped, re-read, and ultimately re-designed by postcolonial realities.

Rather than referring to a historical process of overcoming colonialism, Schwartz reads the "postcolonial" within the specificity of the Latin American context. In this regard, she draws on Walter Mignolo's conceptualizations of the subject. In doing so, Schwartz explores effectively Mignolo's notion of *occidentalización*, according to which "postcolonialism" refers to a critical position with regard to legacies of colonialism. Another important underlying principal in Schwartz's study is indebted to Carlos Alonso's analysis of the contradictory incorporation and rejection of both indigenous and foreign cultures that he calls Latin America's "rhetorical predicament."

The cornerstone of Schwartz's analysis is the premise that although the centrality of Paris is often considered a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenon, contemporary writing still acknowledges and confronts Paris as a locus of international cultural power. In this regard, *Writing Paris* examines narrative texts by Julio Cortázar, Manuel Scorza, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, and Luisa Futoransky. These writers explore Paris, Schwartz points out, "as an explanatory zone for women,



revolutionaries, anarchists, and exiles who rewrite the bohemian aesthete's Parisian literary experience" (1999, 7). Schwartz's lucid discussion of Paris reveals that the Parisian trope is built into narratives as a cultural construct in order to provide an urban framework for both spatial organization and cultural projection. In a critical gesture similar to that of Roberto Ignacio Díaz, Schwartz employs architectural metaphors, such as windows, arcades, and the Parisian metro in her analysis of Julio Cortázar's texts.

Chapter 1 of *Writing Paris* discusses Paris as prestige in Sarmiento; it then moves on to address the *modernista* desire for Paris which has often resulted in failed utopias, such as those that Rubén Darío writes about in his article "París y los escritores extranjeros." Chapter 2's point of departure lies in the fact that, more than an obvious autobiographical detail, Cortázar's personal geography serves his writing as a location from which to examine the cultural and political dimensions of Latin America's postcolonial condition. Here Schwartz aptly asserts that Cortázar uses Paris and its traditional projection in Argentina in order to problematize cosmopolitan cultural identity in Latin America. In Schwartz's reading, Cortázar's stories relocate the "cosmopolitan versus the local" debate at the core of his writing. Interestingly, the Argentine writer contests European domination of the New World on Old World grounds, in Paris itself. In short, Cortázar's fiction politicizes the city as a stronghold of Western capitalist values and a repository of postcolonial alienation and marginalization. For it is from Paris, Schwartz reminds us, that Cortázar observed the Algerian struggle for independence and the Vietnam conflict. In other words, the Paris that guides much of Cortázar's short fiction represents the core of France's defeated empire.

Chapter 3 considers Manuel Scorza's *La danza inmóvil*, a work that, according to Schwartz, provides one of the most dynamic examples of Latin American "regional" writing. This type of writing, however, is positioned in dialectical relationship with that of urban cosmopolitanism. It is here that Schwartz explores the theme of Paris in the literature of Latin American leftist activism. More specifically, she reads Scorza's novel in dialogue with Cortázar's *Libro de Manuel* (1973). Although previous communities of writers celebrated an image of the city as the capital of literary inspiration, *La danza inmóvil* criticizes the role that Paris has exerted on aesthetic sensibilities, and above all, on commercial and marketing strategies. In its critical tone, Scorza's novel evokes much earlier works with the theme of "Paris as a failed utopia," such as *Raucho* by Ricardo Güiraldes (1917), and *Pobre gente de Paris* by Sebastián Salazar Bondy (1958).

Chapter 4 focuses on Alfredo Bryce Echenique's *La vida exagerada de Martín Romaña* and *El hombre que hablaba de Octavia de Cádiz*. Through

Martín Romaña, a Peruvian writer in Paris, Bryce Echenique's novel undermines the city's role as a literary capital. However, in the vein of the Parisian disillusionment texts, the novel shows the ideal of achieving literary fame in Paris through the lance of satire. The following chapter reads inscriptions of Paris in Futoransky's fiction. All of the Argentine writer's books focus on displacement as this experience profoundly conditioned her own life trajectory. Daughter of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to Argentina, a Latin American who first lived in Asia, and later in Paris, Futoransky once described herself as a "perpetual outcast." She is the author of *Son cuentos chinos* and *De Pe a Pa: O de Pekín a París*, novels that grapple with challenges of intercultural communication.

The studies about the role of language, travel, and other forms of displacement that are reviewed here belong to a growing corpus of texts in the disciplines of Latin American literary criticism, history, anthropology, sociology, and their many intersections. In the field of Latin American literary criticism, more specifically, these books elicit new meanings from old topics and point toward new questions. To borrow from Schwartz's and Díaz's architectural metaphors, the reviewed works are rooms that open up the space of Latin American cultural studies as they embrace more amply the vast range of writing in Spanish and other tongues by writers and travelers from the continent.