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Abraham Acosta. Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. xiv + 276 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Abraham Acosta. *Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. xiv + 276 pp.

Keywords

Latin America, orality, literacy, illiteracy, subaltern, resistance

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Cultural resistance to the West and the agency of the oppressed are popular and well-researched topics in Latin American cultural criticism in recent years, as it happens with cultural criticism in other postcolonial regions. *Thresholds of Illiteracy* is a new addition to the field and offers a major theoretical contribution to the study of these topics: the author's concept of "illiteracy." Acosta understands illiteracy not as the inability to read or write, but as those moments of social antagonism noticeable in certain textual anomalies present in discourses and texts about marginalized populations in different areas and times in the 20th and 21st centuries. For Acosta, when debates take place about a marginal population, both arguments in favor and against take a homogenous approach, as the only option, leading to what he calls a "deadlock of resistance," and thus limiting the voice and agency of those marginalized populations to speak for themselves. His concept of illiteracy brings to light the irreducible heterogeneity of the Latin American social text, and joins other contemporary cultural critics, such as Alberto Moreiras or Jon Beasley-Murray, in questioning the (im)possibility of representation of the subaltern.

Acosta structures his book in five chapters. The first one is mainly theoretical, and he engages in revisions and criticism of previous cultural narratives on Latin American views of Postcolonialism and hybridity, moving from there to the issue of marginal populations and their right to self-representation. Thus, he departs from the Gayatri Spivak's seminal article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to demonstrate that in most cases—so far—the subaltern can do it, but we—academics and society at large—are the ones not listening, offering instead our own readings and filtering the raw material to interpret that reality instead of allowing the reality to flow. In his analysis and critique of the ideologies of reading that make up Latin American studies today, he questions the still prevalent concept of transculturation, which serves to regulate and homogenize the subaltern as one, as well as the present dichotomy between orality and literacy, bringing into question the fact that both are stages in the history of human perception and cognition, independently of world regions, and were present in European history, therefore assigning orality as an essential mark to the practices of Amerindian resistance as opposed to European literacy is misleading. Acosta then explores beyond this dichotomy and demonstrates how there are spaces that are neither orality nor literacy: silences, absences, and paradoxical problematics... what he names "illiteracy." This illiteracy is evidence of the irreducible heterogeneity of the Latin American social field and reading this diverse social field can face only limited success, something that discourses on Latin America frequently forget. Acosta demonstrates this issue by analyzing four

different cultural areas and how those moments of illiteracy are present in each one of them. The subsequent chapters take on each of these four areas: Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States.

The second chapter, “Other Perus,” is about Peruvian *indigenista* narratives, especially José María Arguedas’s *Los ríos profundos* (1953, *Deep Rivers*), and how the debate between Antonio Cornejo Polar and Mario Vargas Llosa offered two sides on Arguedas and *indigenismo* that were blind to spots where other possible Perus were possible. The third chapter, “Secrets Even to Herself,” examines the *testimonio* genre, offering an interesting reflection on who “owns” the definition of *testimonio* and how that is, in itself, another problem, since there are at least two “competing narratives of testimonio,” the Cuban one represented by Miguel Barnet, and the US academia version led by John Beverly (130). Then, he focuses on Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1984, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*), and in particular examines first the controversy generated by David Stoll’s *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999), and then how Menchú’s text itself poses both versions of *testimonio*—the literalness and the literariness—both simultaneous and contradictory, demonstrating the incompatibility between language and the real experience, unable to represent itself, and thus creating uncomfortable silences that were left in the narrative.

Acosta keeps exploring that liminal world between fiction and non-fiction in the fourth chapter, where he studies the six declarations of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN, ‘Zapatista National Liberation Army’) in Mexico, since their first manifestation in 1994 up to the present time, and through the critical evolution in their demands made in 2005, Acosta demonstrates how the EZLN understand their failure of being accepted by the mainstream Mexican government and in the process changed the political landscape of the Mexican state. The fifth chapter focuses on the sad case of the Wellton 26 and their—again, fictional but not so much—depiction in Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* (2004), indicating how the contemporary migrant, the vivid image of that subaltern in most Western contemporary cultural representations, is a deeply heterogeneous figure that disallows any attempt “to serve as the ground for any culturally resistant claims” (25). A brief conclusion on how illiteracy intersects with current US border policies in Arizona completes the book.

This is an impressive study that covers a wide variety of theoretical and literary texts, some canonical and others not. In all these chapters, Acosta’s use of “illiterate” demonstrates the work of these narratives of resistance in unpredictable ways, challenging current practices of reading culture and politics of resistance. It will be of interest to those scholars working with Latin American theory, Latin American marginalized or subaltern populations, and postcolonial

narratives in general, and is especially a fundamental resource to anyone studying Latin America. Although highly recommended, maybe undergraduates should abstain, since the theoretical contents may be too dense at times, especially in chapter one.

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