Changing the Terms

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The presence, impact and influence of Spanish-American literature and culture in the United States are undeniable. Emily Hicks (1991) calls it "a cannibalizing pull" from America's "southern backyard." But today, this cannibalizing pull is coming from right within the U.S.—from the 27 million Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans living there. And the Latino population in the U.S. is constantly growing with the influx of immigrants from all countries in Latin America. What happens when this somewhat culturally remote but geographically close area, labelled "exotic," "magical," "mysterious," is found to be "alive and kicking" within the geographical borders of the United States? The Americas are no longer separated by the Rio Grande, the river running between Mexico and the United States. Latino culture is now an inside phenomenon—hybrid, transculturated and more alive than ever.

Many U.S. Latino writers have been proclaiming "the increasing and inexorable latinization of the U.S.", what Gustavo Pérez Firmat refers to as a "rhythm" that sooner or later is going to get to everybody (1994, 1). Ilán Stavans (1995a) refers to the latinization phenomenon as the "Spanish accent" American (that is, U.S.) literature has acquired, while Chicana activist Gloria Anzaldúa proclaims the coming of "the new mestiza"—a racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination—the "raza cósmica"... at the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes
constantly "crossing over"" (1987, 77). Terms such as *transculturization*, *cannibalization*, *biculturization* are used to describe the cultural traffic between the U.S. and Latin America, between North and South, a traffic—no matter how imbalanced—that results whenever cultures meet and clash. Traffic is intensified when cultures share the same geographical space and boundaries become crucial in this situation. Here boundaries work in a two-fold manner depending on the position of the speaker: they can be stigmatizing, homogenizing labels or empowering means of identity formation.\(^1\)

Translation has played a major role in this process: witness the success of Isabel Allende’s writing, films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* and *The House of the Spirits*, the proliferation of Mexican restaurants and Latin/Caribbean music, bilingual street signs, TV stations, commercials, advertising in subways and buses, and most importantly, the Latino—and especially Latina (for women writers)—literary boom. For U.S. Latino writers, translation is a cultural phenomenon, a set of textual practices, a metaphor, an existential condition, a displacement, a *traslado*\(^2\)—a site of both linguistic and topographic cultural difference.\(^3\)

**Rethinking the Interface Between Cultures**

This paper attempts to explore the influence of contemporary Spanish-American literature in translation on the U.S. literary polysystem. I shall examine the ways in which the stronger host system refracts or constructs its image of Spanish America, and show how this corpus of translated literature and its U.S. refractions impinge on U.S. Latino literature. Spanish-American works in translation already interact among themselves in a separate literary system, but they also interact with(in) the U.S. literary polysystem in many ways. The existence within the U.S. literary polysystem of a large body of Latino writers, who, in some way or other, are related to and/or interact with Spanish-American culture (through descent roots, language, culture and traditions), makes the interface of the two polysystems problematic and complex. My approach emphasizes the importance of the Spanish-American component of U.S. Latino literature.\(^4\) I will frame my analysis against the backdrop of Itamar Even-Zohar’s theory of polysystems:

\[O\]n the one hand, a system consists of both synchrony and diachrony; on the other, each of these separately is also a system... [T]he idea of structuredness and systemicity need no longer be identified with homogeneity; a semiotic system can be conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure. It is, therefore, very rarely a uni-system but it is necessarily a polysystem—a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using
concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. (1990, 11)

Even-Zohar’s theoretical framework is particularly useful for examining American literature(s)—an ambiguous term that I am deliberately using here to encompass not only Spanish-American literature and U.S. literature, but also U.S. Latino/Latina literature, a system combining the already multiple systems of both U.S. and Spanish-American literature. Even-Zohar’s theory puts all the individual systems within a polysystem on an equal footing so that there is no hierarchical organization; rather, all the systems are organized around the notions of centre and periphery. This tenet allows for full consideration of the heterogeneous and multiple literatures of the U.S., which are sometimes abandoned in the peripheries of the stronger Anglo-American literary system.

The Spanish-American Boom

In focussing on the Spanish-American influence on U.S. Latino literature, I shall centre my analysis on the literary boom of the 1960s and 1970s in Spanish America, which, it is important to point out, involved mainly the genre of the novel. For many novelists and critics, “la nueva novela” meant (rather pejoratively) commercial success, or bestsellerism. There resulted a plethora of definitions to describe this literary boom, and even recipes on how to write a boom novel. But more importantly, the Spanish-American literary boom gave rise to a translation boom and international diffusion for the writers. The fact that this literary boom generated such translation activity into various European languages was taken as a sign of the maturity of Latin American culture, a coming into its own, as it were. Thus Sara Castro-Klarén and Héctor Campos (1986) wrote:

[F]este fenómeno ha sido tomado como la prueba más eficaz de la madurez de la cultura latinoamericana. Se pensó, así, que la traducción en sí misma constituía el llamado “boom”. La cultura latinoamericana habría pasado de ser una cultura de consumidores, consumidores de bienes intelectuales, a ser una cultura capaz de producir “civilización”. Quiero decir que siendo leída en Europa, reseñada en L’Express o en la revista Times, había llegado a una paridad con la cultura metropolitana. (320)

[This phenomenon has been taken as the most effective proof of maturity of Latin American culture. Thus, it was thought that translation itself constituted the so-called “boom.” From a consumer culture of intellectual goods, Latin American culture became a culture capable of producing “civilization.” Being read in Europe and
reviewed in *L'Express* and *The Times* meant parity with metropolitan culture.]

In their opinion, translation into European languages, interviews of writers in metropolitan media and the new superstar status of some of the writers helped create the image of Latin American literature as a homogeneous product. They see the literary boom as a market phenomenon that involved only a few writers, and that was grossly misunderstood in the target systems into which the works were translated.

But, the Spanish-American literary boom meant more to the writers themselves. In the foreword to José Donoso’s *The Boom in Spanish American Literature: A Personal History*, Ronald Christ writes: “During the 1960s in Latin America there appeared in different countries, and almost simultaneously, a number of novels and collections of short stories that by their virtuoso technique and style dazzled a large reading public that no one had ever guessed was there” (1977, viii). This statement stresses two very important points: the Pan-American nature of the boom, and the appearance of a large reading public unknown until then. As Christ points out, “This sudden flowering of writers like Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa won ever more attention because these same writers began, almost at once, to be translated into foreign languages, and to put Latin America on the international literary map for the first time” (viii). José Donoso himself indicated that in order to be recognized in their own countries, many Latin American writers first had to achieve success in Europe and the United States. The boom “conferred a unity where there may have been none, and a connotation more powerfully economic than esthetic” (Christ 1977, viii).

Inherent in the concept of the Spanish-American literary boom was the notion of internationalization, of movement beyond borders: geographical borders, because the boom implied movement beyond national boundaries into the rest of Latin America, Europe the U.S.; linguistic borders, because translation was a necessary and important factor in the internationalization process; narrative borders, because the new novel implied going beyond traditional narrative strategies and seeking “foster parents” outside the writers’ own traditions, finally to coalesce into what Sarah Crichton calls “the hallmark of Latin American literature—‘magical realism’” (1982, 27).

This movement beyond borders, made possible through the translation of Spanish-American works, effectively prepared the U.S. audience for the U.S. Latino literary boom. Literary reviews especially played a major role in this process because they create, feed and constantly reshape the U.S. construct of Spanish-American literature. In addition, a wide gamut of rewrites and refractions—in the form of translations, reviews, criticism,
anthologies and films—over the last twenty years helped shorten the cultural distance between the U.S. and its geographically close, yet culturally distant, southern neighbours. As André Lefevere wrote, “the interaction of writing and rewriting is ultimately responsible, not just for the canonization of specific authors or specific works and the rejection of others, but also for the evolution of a given literature, since rewritings are often designed precisely to push a given literature in a certain direction” (1984, 219). So, what triggers what? What feeds what? Does a successful translation trigger more translations? Does a successful film version of his/her book boost a writer’s popularity and open new markets for his/her work? Is it a good review in a prestigious newspaper that brings success to a particular author? The position of publishing houses as canon formers and important means of refractions cannot be overlooked. In fact, the manipulation of literature in such a way that only a few Spanish-American writers dominate the market has created a situation in which “the search for stars has obscured the firmament” (Tritten 1984, 36).

García Márquez and Allende

Thus, a canon of Spanish-American literature in translation started to be formed. While the boom can be considered a landmark in the history of this process, two important milestones certainly boosted it: the publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1970 and the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to García Márquez in 1982. The universe opened up by Gregory Rabassa’s excellent translation of García Márquez’s novel had far-reaching consequences: it stirred interest in Latin American culture, and set the mould for this literature, so much so that writers who did not fit into the mould were excluded from commercial success. The popular success of García Márquez’s novel fuelled interest in other Latin American writers, such as Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, and promoted translation. As John Vinocur commented:

[García Márquez] has been widely regarded as a leading figure of the recent Latin American literary renaissance, which in the United States is reflected in the recent publication of books by [several Latin American writers].... But their books never approached the worldwide readership of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose success opened publishing doors in foreign countries to many Latin American writers. (1982, A1)

The status of translation in the host polysystem is crucial to an analysis of canonicity. As Even-Zohar observed:

One might of course find sporadic references to individual literary translations in various periods, but they are seldom incorporated into
the historical account in any coherent way. As a consequence, one hardly gets an idea whatsoever of the function of translated literature for a literature as a whole or of its position within that literature. Moreover, there is no awareness of the possible existence of translated literature as a particular system. The prevailing concept is rather that of "translation" or just "translated works" treated on an individual basis. (1990, 45)

In fact, the by-now classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* illustrates Even-Zohar’s point. García Márquez’s novel has been part of the U.S. literary polysystem for more than twenty years by now. Can we still consider it a work isolated from U.S. literature, with no imprint whatsoever on the polysystem in which it moves? Within the frame of Even-Zohar’s theory, it would be reasonable to say that García Márquez’s work interacts with the U.S. polysystem in various ways. But what has become canonized in the U.S. literary polysystem is his particular mode of narration, which has become the model associated with Latin American writing. In distinguishing between two different types of canonicity, “one referring to the level of texts, the other to the level of models,” Even-Zohar calls the establishment of a literary model in a system “dynamic canonicity” (1990, 19). The new, revolutionary mode of narration—the model of which is embodied in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—thus established itself as a “productive principle” in the U.S. polysystem, shaking up the dynamics of the existing system and proving to be very stimulating for the U.S. Latino novel as a genre. In the U.S., García Márquez’s model has been used as the yardstick to compare and measure the work of other Spanish-American and Latino writers.

Reviews and critical articles of Spanish American writers began to appear in major U.S. magazines and newspapers. In her analysis of reviews of Latin American literature that appeared in various U.S. magazines between 1970 and 1984, Tritten reports:

the number of reviews during this period was surprising: approximately two to four reviews per year in the *New York Review* (each article frequently included several works); two in the *New Yorker*... Two to four reviews per year were published in *Time. Newsweek* printed the fewest with only one or two per year... (1984, 36)

It truly was the literary “discovery” of a continent ignored until then, for these reviews undoubtedly had an impact on a large segment of the U.S. readership, since the various magazines cater to different audiences. Between 1982 and 1994, there appeared in the *Book Review Digest* 259 entries under the heading “Latin American Literature”: 122 for the period 1982-
1989; 132 for 1990-1994. The year 1991 saw the most reviews. In many of the reviews, even if García Márquez is not the main subject, his style or mode of narration is evoked as a point of reference to introduce other works into the polysystem. One case in point is the review of Isabel Allende’s Of Love and Shadows (Kakutani, 1987, C27): “Ms Allende is not mostly imitation García Márquez. Happily, Ms Allende is no longer the novice... [She] skillfully evokes both the terrors of daily life under military rule and the subtler forms of resistance...” Allende is truly a child of the sixties/seventies boom. Fifteen years after the publication of One Hundred Years of Solitude, she made her entrance on the U.S. literary scene with The House of the Spirits, a piece in the same mould as the greatest hits of the Spanish-American literary boom, a piece that brought her stardom overnight. But, if it was anticipation of revisiting the García Márquez’s model that lured readers to Allende’s novel, they soon discovered her own powerful voice.

“Magical realism” became the ready-made formula used to label anything produced by America’s “southern backyard”: a pot of milk falling spontaneously off a table, a green-haired woman... Is this sheer misunderstanding on the part of the host culture or is it depletion of a model? Depletion effectuated not only by critics and reviewers, but also by writers themselves seeking to fit the canonized and commercially successful model. Magical realism is what publishers and readers look for in this literature; anything that strays from the model is marginalized to smaller, more academic publishing presses, and branded as not Latin American enough. García Márquez’s literary production exemplifies this attitude: Of Love and Other Demons (1995) has all the ingredients readers have come to expect in a García Márquez novel.10 Not surprisingly, the novel sold very well, as did almost all his work in translation, except The General in His Labyrinth, which, even though it revisits the same historical period (independence from Spain to early twentieth century), does not quite fit the canonized model he himself created. As Tim Padget writes: “The author’s own grandness is less on display... The sensuous detail that enchants such work as Love in the Time of Cholera is too often reduced to tedious historical minutiae” (1990, 70).

Modes of Translation

The stronger the host polysystem, the more fluent the translations and refractions. In Lawrence Venuti’s opinion, it is difficult for a translator of a cultural other within a strong monolingual polysystem to try to practice translation as a “locus of difference,” in an effort to avoid “an imperialistic domestication of a cultural other” (1992, 13). And referring specifically to the U.S. polysystem, Carol Maier observed that there was such a preference
among publishers for readability, that an author's style is many times sacrificed "in the name of a more appropriate version in English" (1990-1991, 20). Thomas di Giovanni's English translations of Jorge Luis Borges's work is an interesting example of how a writer's work can be sacrificed for the sake of readability and easier understanding. Matthew Howard relates the "intimate collaboration" between di Giovanni and Borges that would span over a period of four years:

Indeed di Giovanni's translations tended to proceed from one underlying principle: to make Borges's writing clearer and less ambiguous for North American readers. He therefore saw one of his main tasks as explaining obscure regional references and providing historical details that Borges had omitted in writing for Argentine readers. (1997, 72)

He describes di Giovanni and Borges's method of translating, and suggests that Borges himself acted as censor, attempting to create "a mirror, rival 'Borges,' Borges as an English writer" (76). At work in these translations, therefore, is a domestication of the source text with the apparent consent of the author.

In Latin America "the essentially literary quality—literarity truly made manifest in certain works—... is 'mulattoed' by other functions." And the reason for this, according to Roberto Fernández Retamar, is clear: "given the dependent, precarious nature of our historical existence, it has fallen to literature to assume functions that in the metropolises have been segregated out of it" (1989, 86). But, when Latin American works are moved to another polysystem, their instrumental nature, or "cultural difference," as Neil Larsen (1990) terms it, loses its immediacy and the works are decontextualized: in the Latin American context, "local, historical circumstances ... have generated the possibility of a literature that overcomes the traditional modernism/realism duality by effectively being both modernist and realist at once" (52). The coinage of the term "real maravilloso" enabled Alejo Carpentier to define "América's" cultural difference at the crossroads of history and culture.

Cultural difference marks a clear, unmistakeable rift between the two worlds, whereas History, given its inherent universalizing concept, reduces difference, hence identity, to the point of disappearance... Here culture is, on the contrary, the point of entry into "a historical reality yet more real," which otherwise remains hidden from view. In proclaiming the cultural difference of "América" as the key to its historical identity, Carpentier, in effect, proclaims its modernity as both original and autonomous. (Larsen 1990, 54)
This emphasis on culture as "a point of entry into a historical reality" is crucial to understanding the import of context—the specific social and historical bearings—when discussing the cultural production of Latin America. The social responsibility of the majority of Latin American writers is even present in the experimentation of the boom novels, and as Doris Sommer writes: "even where [Jean Franco] sees social irresponsibility, for example, in the experimental 'Boom' novels of the 1960s and 1970s, a different reading would discern the novelists' social criticism in the form of impatience with standard social-narrative projects gone sour" (1988, 113). Thus it can be said that the literature that lays the greatest claim to modernity is that produced by the so-called generación del boom:

Early attempts to trace the new Latin American literature to the influence of foreign models ... have, especially since the Cuban revolution, tended to be de-emphasized in a more consciously nationalist or regionalist impetus to set forth the uniquely local sources of a literature that, if it does betray the superficial traits of outside influence, transforms the foreign element into a radical original compound. It is this complex, synthetic originality that, as this general line of thinking goes, lays proper claim to a modernity that would otherwise—if allowed to retain its privileged but alien metropolitan exemplarity—fall victim to its own intolerable unmodernity as a repetition. (Larsen 1990, 50)

Larsen seems to prefers this "regionalist and autonomizing" construct because it avoids distortion by "the worst kind of mechanical, colonizing pseudoclassification" (50). In his opinion, the most systematic and critical elaboration of this issue is provided by Angel Rama's concept of transculturation, which Larsen describes as:

A category of narrative composition and analysis [which] proposes that the Latin American narrative text ... avoids the double bind in which one either settles for a direct imitation of metropolitan imports or seeks to expunge all "foreign" cultural differences. Instead, the narrative text must treat the local or regional culture itself as a species of language or code, with which to, as it were, speak or rearticulate or, in this sense, "transculturate" the exotic cultural dominant. (1991, xiii)

The "transcultural" and the "anthropophagous" are "two alternative paradigms of postcolonial oppositional culture" (xiii), which offer ways to cannibalize foreign models. Spanish-American literature is a transculturated, hybrid product, the synthetic operation of different referential codes, a contact zone for contending cultures. Thus, when moved to an alien polysystem, it is the code more familiar to the host polysystem that reviewers will
emphasize. They will also tend to use stereotypes as the first step in learning about, and as a way of domesticating, the foreign product.\textsuperscript{14} In the case of Spanish-American literature, "magical realism" became the stereotype by which to define a "peculiar reality," one that is "magical and exotic."

To combat decontextualization, some "North American critics of Latin American literature must realize that to continue to stress the 'magical'... is to deny the larger, broader understanding of reality that informs these texts" (Hicks 1991, xxvii). Hicks proposes a different metaphor that surpasses the binary opposition magical/real, that of "border writing": "Border writing emphasizes the differences in references codes between two or more cultures. It depicts a kind of realism that approaches the experience of border crossers, those who live in a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality" (xxv). In the context of the Spanish-American literary boom, these border crossers were called "transculturators" (by Ángel Rama), writers who transformed the influence of foreign elements into a radically original compound, into a "border text," as Hicks defines it. Once Spanish-American literature is seen as having taken root in the U.S., the meaning of terms to express cultural traffic, such as transculturation and cannibalization, radically change. The questions raised are: Who cannibalizes whom?\textsuperscript{15} How is cultural traffic constructed? How is the new territory charted?

The Latino Boom

The U.S. Latino literary boom gives visibility to a social group that maintains its shifting cultural borders within a "lived reality of colonial social conditions" and unequal power relations. Groups transculturate; new elements are added, contents may change, but boundaries still exist to preserve a group from being melted into the "multicultural pot," "euphemism for the imperializing and now defunct 'melting pot'" (Anzaldúa qtd. in Spitta 1995, 196).

How can we trace the history of this Latino literary boom, taking into account its colonial condition?\textsuperscript{16} There are two forces at work: assimilation and resistance. And the Latino literary boom can be read in two ways: as a shift from magical realism to the reality of the \textit{barrio}, the birth of "the up and coming" intellectual proclaiming the Latinization of the U.S., relishing a newly constructed Latino identity, trying to make it from the periphery to the centre of the poly system; or as the commodification of a fashionable ethnicity, the birth of the "domesticated Latino"—a homogenized group where all Latinos are alike and interchangeable—who can provide "enlightenment without irritation, entertainment without confrontation" (Gómez Peña 1993, 51). The Latino boom bears such a striking resemblance to the Spanish-American boom in the U.S. that it could be considered a child of
the latter. The emergence of Spanish-American writers on the U.S. scene prepared the stage for the discovery of local Latino writers. And indeed, the exotization of Spanish America reverberates in the works of U.S. Latino writers; the mainstream readership had already framed these writers within a certain stereotype and expected them to write within the boundaries of magical realism. As for translation activity, Stavans points out that after the Latino boom, the demand for translations of Spanish-American works diminished because the magical realism quota was now being filled by Latino writers.

Like the writers of the Spanish-American boom who sought fathers outside their own literary polysystems, U.S. Latino writers seek validation for their models outside the U.S. literary poly system, in their Spanish-American forefathers, in their “descent roots.” In Dreaming in Cuban, Cuban American writer Cristina García relates the Cuban revolution and exile through the story of the Del Pino family. In her review of the novel, Thulani Davis stated: “[i]t is perhaps [the] ordinary magic in Ms García’s novel and her characters’ sense of their own lyricism that make her work welcome as the latest sign that American literature has its own hybrid offspring of the Latin American school.” Chicana writer Ana Castillo dedicates her Mixquiahuala Letters to Julio Cortázar, “the master of the game.” And indeed, the multiple readings that her novel offers point back to Cortázar’s Hopscotch. In How the García Girls Lost Their Accent, Julia Alvarez exploits the family saga genre to recount the story of the García family under the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and their subsequent immigration to the United States. Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré, writing in English, offers The House on the Lagoon, which follows the history of the island through the saga of a prominent Puerto Rican family “in the manner of Gabriel García Márquez” (front cover comment). The elements of magical realism in these works attest to the adoption of a model that is still working for U.S. Latino writers. Critics claim these texts as belonging to both American and Latin American literatures.

But if the sixties/seventies Spanish-American literary boom was an exclusively male phenomenon, the situation today is completely different. Interest is mainly centred on Latina and Spanish-American women writers; many anthologies of their work have come to light over the last years, as has a large amount of scholarly criticism. In the introduction to a recent anthology of women writers, Susan Bassnett (1990) laments the omission of many superb writers and adds: “We console ourselves with the thought that perhaps the very scale of omissions will lead to further books, to more translations, to new editions and re-publications of neglected materials...” (7). And, this is certainly happening. The large number of anthologies of women writings over the recent years shows that the long silence is finally over. We
are witnessing a female boom. Spanish-American and U.S. Latina—for many anthologies place both groups in the same volume, thus blurring the boundaries between them—women’s voices are surpassing those of their male counterparts. The success of the sixties/seventies boom novels in the U.S. also gave rise to the emergence of other Latin American masterpieces in the U.S. polystystem, such as the work of Ernesto Sábato, whose novel *Sobre héroes y tumbas* was not published in English translation in the U.S. until 1981—twenty years after its publication in Spanish.

The publication of Latino works by major U.S. publishing houses such as Vintage, Harper and Alfred Knopf attests to the mainstream success of some writers, and the push toward the centre of the U.S. polystystem. Traditionally, Latino and Spanish-American writers were handled by smaller publishing houses such as Curbstone, Bilingual Press and Ediciones del Norte, or by university presses. The move from a small press to a major U.S. publishing house is therefore an indication of success. One case in point is Ana Castillo’s first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, which was originally published by Bilingual Press in 1986, but which has recently been republished by Doubleday. This means more visibility and wider distribution in major bookstores, such as Barnes and Noble.

Translation becomes an important issue again when we consider that U.S. Latino writers who write in English are now being translated and published in Spanish in the United States. Moreover, classics of the boom generation are being relaunched (in Spanish) by divisions of major U.S. publishing houses, such as Harper Libros and Vintage en español, to meet the demands of a growing Spanish-speaking audience at home and south of the border. Puerto Rican writer Esmeralda Santiago wrote her first novel, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, in English, and later translated it herself into Spanish. Elena Poniatowska, a prestigious Mexican writer, translated Sandra Cisneros’s English-language work into Spanish, in order to bring the Chicano writer into the Mexican polystystem, which has always cast a suspicious look at literature produced by Mexicans on the other side of the border. Could this trend mean an unofficial institutionalization of Spanish as the de facto second language of the United States?

Indeed, translation has become a highly significant activity and practice. But, in the case of Latino writers, the notion of translation needs radical redefinition: the rigid dichotomies target language/source language, original text/translated text seem quite inadequate in this hybridized context. In the introduction to the Spanish version of her novel *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Esmeralda Santiago explains:

> When I write in English I have to translate from Spanish, the keeper of my memories; when I speak in Spanish, I have to translate from
the English that defines my present. And when I write in Spanish, I find myself in the midst of three languages, the Spanish of my childhood, the English of my adulthood, and the Spanglish that constantly crosses over from one world to the other, just as we crossed from our neighborhood in Puerto Rico to the “barriadas” in Brooklyn. (xvii)

Translation is a way of life, a strategy for survival in the North. Some writers choose to write in English because it puts them in a better position to move from the periphery to the centre, and it offers access to a larger audience. In this case, Spanish becomes a touchstone, the locus of difference, the site of political and poetic imagination. Other writers have no choice in the matter: English was the language of schooling, and is therefore the language of writing; Spanish belongs to the private and more personal domain. However, sometimes the boundaries between English and Spanish no longer exist; a hybrid language is forged (as Esmeralda Santiago’s “Spanglish”) and attempts to use either English or Spanish exclusively create a feeling of being lost in translation.

Spanish-American Versus Latino Writing

The cultural difference between U.S. Latino and Spanish-American writings sometimes needs to be explained. Since culture is read differently by different audiences, cultural elements in these writings must be translated for certain audiences, and many Latino writers give a translation of the Spanish used in their texts, either weaving it into the fabric of the text or including a glossary. Silvia Spitta refers to this strategy as the “radical heterogeneity of those narratives,” in terms of “the intercultural and transcultural dynamics of Latin American narratives” (1995, 198). Indeed, the stories move constantly between different cultural spaces that shape identities. There is a tension between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and thus the risk of depoliticization of borders. But the stronghold of roots and tradition that comes across in these texts indicates that the majority of Latino writers are politically committed to their communities. In Castillo’s The Mixquiahuala Letters, for example, Tere, the protagonist and writer of the letters, travels and translates back and forth between Mexico and the U.S., English and Spanish, Chicano traditions and her U.S. Latina self, as she negotiates her border identity.

At the core of many Latino writings is the tension to preserve that locus of difference—a difference that is sometimes erased in reading, depending on the audience—and thereby resist acculturation. On the other hand, there is also the need for consent, for visibility, for dialogue with the other component of their hyphenated identities—the stronger Anglo
America—without being crushed by the imbalance of power. And, at the same time, there is the need to preserve the specificities of their own individual cultures (for Cuban culture is not the same as Chicoano, Dominican is not the same as Puerto Rican). Preserving specificities is a way of avoiding depoliticization, and at the same time, it enables the writers to surpass the boundaries of stereotyping and the homogenizing labels that freeze groups into “emerging voices” or “exotic minorities,” as Guillermo Gómez Peña says.

Interest in Latin America has manifested itself in the proliferation of Latin American Studies programs throughout the U.S., programs that also include Latina (women) studies. The large critical output from these programs is such that some critics talk about “Latinoamericanism,” which Enrico M. Santi compares to “Orientalism”:

Like Orientalism, then, Latinoamericanism would identify the corporate institution that frames both a systematic discipline ... and the whole network of political, economic, and imaginary interests that underlie that discipline. To focus on the status of each as discourses would actually mean to deal principally with their own internal consistencies, not with their supposed correspondence with given cultural or geographical realities. (1992, 90)

The critical output from these programs is mainly produced in English, and in many cases does not take into account critical work produced over the years in Spanish, in Latin America. The fact that much of Latin American criticism in Spanish is only recently being translated accounts for its late incorporation into critical writing in U.S. academia. This lag allows, however, for late “discoveries,” a fact that Fredric Jameson (1989) draws attention to in his foreword to the English translation of Roberto Fernández Retamar’s essays.

The main goal of this paper was to discuss the cultural traffic in the Americas, and show how it affects the U.S. literary poly system. I have been reluctant to frame this discussion within the concept of postcolonialism, which, in my opinion, mainly refers to the East-West cultural traffic. Here, in the Americas, there is rather a North-South traffic which has succeeded colonialism (by the Spanish) to a form of neocolonialism (by the U.S.), a more pervasive, yet more subtle phenomenon. The heavy cultural traffic in the Americas is constructed on a North-South/South-North plane. Spanish-American intellectuals, since their countries’ independence from Spain (in the early nineteenth century, for the most part), have been trying to imagine and write their national states in relation—sometimes in opposition, at other times in apposition—to the northern giant, the United States. This trend can be observed not only in Domingo Sarmiento’s conception of civilización y
barbaric and José Martí’s nuestra América, but also in Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera.

Translation is an important cultural vehicle in the Americas, a means of making it north along the Pan-American highway. This northbound cultural traffic is accompanied by successive waves of migration, especially from Central America and the Caribbean. These traslados opened the way for the recognition of the large Latino presence in the U.S., a force which is now expanding, within the U.S. borders, its own national borders in an attempt to rethink their “imagined communities.” This cannibalization of the geographical borders of the U.S. forces us to rethink, from within these same geographical borders, the appropriation of (the concept of) America. America must be redefined so as not to reflect another appropriation from an imperial centre, but rather to consciously encompass the totality of the Americas.

Notes

1. Suzanne Oboler (1995), xvi-xvii, explores the implications of ethnic labels, which she calls “social constructions,” as both “strategic and referential.”

2. Translation has become a favourite metaphor among Latino intellectuals and writers. Stavans and Pérez Firmat talk about the Latino as an individual “lost in translation.” The concept of translation is deployed by many writers as they search for a mode of expression to transmit their bilingual experience, so much so that the boundaries between source and target language have become highly contested ground.

3. The concepts put forward in Sherry Simon’s exploration of the ways in which “translation embodies paradigms of cultural difference” (1992), 160, are extremely helpful to our exploration of the import of translation in the context of U.S. Latino literature.

4. See Stavans (1995b), 32, who raises the question “What happens when Latinos are seen as a Hispanic American branch reaching beyond the spiritual and geographical limits of a U.S. minority?” Oboler (1995), 159, stresses the need to recognize and study the “cultural, linguistic and historical ties to various nations in Latin America,” as well as to research and study the “histories, cultures and experiences that have shaped the various and multiple meanings and social values of being Latinos and Latinas in the U.S.”

5. In a way, this organization can be seen as hierarchical in that the stronger system(s) are always as the centre of the polysystem, setting the boundaries of what is peripheral in relation to them.


8. It seems to me that the characteristics attributed by critics to the Spanish-American literary boom—bestsellerism, homogenization, exclusion of writers—are reinforced when the works are translated and reviewed in an alien polysystem.
9. Even-Zohar (1990), 19, refers to the establishment of a specific text in a literary canon as “static canonicity.”

10. See Stavans (1995c), 149-71, for a reassessment of Gabriel García Márquez’s imprint in the literary world.

11. See also Riding (1983) for a discussion of the role of Latin American intellectuals.

12. Gustavo Pellón (1992), 82, warns against socio-historical decontextualization “that is brought to bear on a literary corpus such as that of Latin America, which one could argue is consciously defined by its problematic discourse with its society and history.”


15. The terms cannibalization and domestication are used to express a two-way cultural traffic. Both concepts presuppose a power relation. Whereas cannibalization is taken as a strategy of resistance, domestication implies colonization. Both terms, however, point to the same direction. The question is when and how does cannibalization become domestication, and vice versa.

16. I am reluctant to use the term postcolonial here. In an essay contextualizing the use of the term postcoloniality, Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani (1996), 274, propose: “the particular relation of past territorial domination and current racial composition that is discernible in Britain, and that lends a particular meaning to the term ‘postcolonial’ does not, we feel, obtain [in the U.S. context].” They suggest using the term “‘post-Civil Rights’ broadly, to refer to the impact of struggles by African American, American Indian, La Raza, and Asian American communities that stretched from the mid-1950’s to the 1970’s.” 274.

17. In a conversation at Amherst College, October 1995.

18. Gladys M. Varona-Lacey (1994), 126, in her review of the Spanish version, Sonar en cubano, writes: “En Sonar en cubano Cristina García ofrece descripciones que lindan con el surrealismo y el realismo mágico” [In Sonar en cubano Cristina García offers descriptions that verge on surrealism and magical realism].

19. For example, Stavans (1995b), 19, questions: “Is Oscar Hijuelos possible without José Lezama Lima and Guillermo Cabrera Infante? Or is he only a child of Donald Barthelme and Susan Sontag?”

20. The University of Texas at Austin is very active in this field.

21. By the 1960s, U.S. interest in Latin America had become part of the Zeitgeist. If the U.S. looked upon Latin America as its “backyard,” the Cuban revolution in 1959 dealt a blow to the neighbourhood. It fuelled strategies and policies to prevent the spread of Communism in America, such as international development programs (IDPs), the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, military threat and/or military intervention. IDPs included financing Latin American studies which would cover a wide range of activities, including the translation and diffusion of authors from and topics on Latin America. This was reinforcement of the Cold War without being overtly political.
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IMPACT OF SPANISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE


**Novels**


