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**REVIEW ESSAY:  
LITERACY AND ITS THRESHOLDS**

*Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance*

By Abraham Acosta

Fordham University Press, 2014. 275 pages.

Abraham Acosta's book *Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance* advocates for the pertinence of a deconstructive version of Subaltern Studies, one which had been applied to Latin America since 1993 with limited success. During the 1990s, two projects in the US academy were built around the subaltern in Latin America and occupied the center of academic attention. One is rooted into the social sciences, and comprehends Latin America as a source of knowledge or field of research. The other, developed by literary critics, is inspired by deconstruction and tends to conceive Latin America as a philosophical problem. The two projects had an ephemeral exchange, involving the historian Florencia Mallon and the literary critic John Beverley, but those initial contacts did not find common ground in order to support and expand a dialogue. Three decades later, the deconstructive version of subaltern studies seems to be exhausted. In his book *Latin Americanism after 9/11*, Beverley rejected the validity of the deconstructive subaltern studies approach to understanding the historical present of Latin America. Acosta's book, for its part, aims to reignite the pertinence of deconstruction and its applicability to Subaltern Studies on Latin America.

In *Thresholds of Illiteracy*, Acosta states a type of knowledge that obviates factual verification. In his words, "[D]econstruction and subaltern studies disclose that all dichotomies are contingent and arbitrary—including positivity versus negativity—and thus posit that the historical constitution of the social text can therefore always be otherwise" (24-5). The effort to deconstruct dichotomies in order to denounce social inequalities could be productive if there is a project to overcome those inequalities. But Acosta's skillful analysis leave us with an inconclusive sense of resolution. Contingency here is an ontological certitude unable to draft operational principles of action. For this reason, Acosta's book is not built around an object of study or a theory, but rather on a reading attitude which presciently reveals that every judgment based on dichotomies is always wrong. Acosta explains: "Illiteracy is not a thing nor in itself an object of study, but rather an unreconcealment. I read illiteracy as tracing the critical contradictions at play between ideologically opposed reading strategies, contradictions that, in effect, nullify that very opposition" (9). This perspective is problematic because it reduces social phenomena to logical argumentation. One wonders what would be the meaning of "historical" in this context.

The book presents an introduction, five chapters, and an afterword. Chapter One, "Thresholds of Illiteracy, or the Deadlock of Resistance in Latin America," traces the emergence of postcolonial theory in Latin American Studies during the 1990s. In the process Acosta criticizes the "narrow and limited framework in which representations of social antagonism in Latin America are read and imagined" (2). Postcolonial theory is described as a dubious project, tied to "transculturation." From Acosta's perspective it was an "originary, cohesive principle of racial and cultural mixedness and assimilation" during the early twentieth century, which later become a grand narrative described as "the primary ideological process by which cultural difference in Latin America is both conceived (as different) and reduced (as resistant)" (5). From Chapter Two to Four, Acosta sets in motion the discovery of instances of illiteracy via some prominent readings developed around the "deadlock of resistance" in Latin America. Chapter Two, "Other Perus: Colono Insurrection and the Limits of indigenista Narrative," presents a critique of well known interpretations on *Deep Rivers*, a novel by the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas. Chapter Three, "Secrets Even to Herself: Testimonio, Illiteracy, and the Grammar of Restitution," offers a genealogy of the testimonio form and analyzes the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Chapter Four, "Silence, Subalternity, the EZLN, and Egalitarian Contingency," praises the political interventions of the EZLN, as a "far more radical presentation of democratic, subaltern politics than previously understood" (25). The last two chapters are focused on the US-Mexico border, immigration, and anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona. Acosta thinks that "the heterogeneous figure of the contemporary migrant itself, disallows any attempt to serve as the ground for any culturally resistant

claim” (25). The border belongs to no one, it is a radical heterogeneous zone, a space of cultural intelligibility, from which may emerge the basis for a truly progressive politics.

I agree that transculturation has been subjected to several interpretations that make it difficult to grasp what the theory's agenda was before and during the Cold War in Latin America. But, in Acosta's book there is not enough information on the appropriation and transformation of transculturation since the 1990s. One has the impression that Latin Americanism was a brand new project and started during the 1990s. Nonetheless, the interested reader will find in *Thresholds of Illiteracy* a comprehensive summary of the past thirty years of debates within Latin Americanism as it has been aligned to deconstructivism and subaltern studies.

In the end, a paradox is chasing this book. Acosta builds a conceptual platform to perform deconstructive readings in order to conclude that those cultural and critical practices that are valid in Latin America are the ones immune to deconstruction. For instance the radical heterogeneity and contingency of the US-Mexico border is presented more as a space of promise than a place of intervention. We cannot speak in the name of contingency, and we cannot operate from there. This Latin Americanism is a discursive field repellent to social sciences, and one which uses the space of debate to stage its own soliloquy. Within such a framework, nobody can know what would be a truly progressive politics because the book starts with an ontological certitude and concludes with an act of faith.