

ERIN GRAFF ZIVIN: *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of scholarly works that focus on Jewish Latin American culture, literature, film and art, as well on the history of Jews in Latin America, on their social background, and on the dialectics between diverse Jewish collectivities and their surrounding environment. The wealth of academic approaches within the field of Jewish Latin American studies attests to the multiple ethnic, sociological, historical or literary perspectives of Jewishness within the Latin American context, while discussing ethnic differences, alterity, identities, and their various cultural representations.

Erin Graff Zivin's *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* belongs to this forming tradition that aims to explore the Judeo-Latin American field by studying late nineteenth- through late twentieth-century literature from Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, and Nicaragua. She opts for a unique perspective by proposing that Jewishness be viewed as a wandering signifier, a floating artifact that shifts between literary texts and socio-historical contexts, a sign that may pertain to certain extra-textual circumstances, yet still remain a sublime textual representation, never fully attained.

In this original and profound study, Graff Zivin raises deep philosophical and methodological concerns regarding the ethics of representation within a literary text and the process of interpretation. She focuses on three concentric circles that reflect the different hermeneutics within which the signifier "Jew" or "Jewishness" acquires meaning. First and foremost, what captures the author's attention is the intimate circle of Jewishness understood as a rhetorical device, which gains meaning according to the purposes of the literary text. Graff Zivin plays with the idea of the wandering signifier by evoking the figure of the Wandering Jew, and proposing that we rethink the mobility of the signifier "Jew" itself. In her first chapter, the author argues that this sign may be a multifaceted one that can acquire mutually contradictory meanings, designating various opposites that can coexist within a text at the same time. Then moving outward from this first most intimate circle, Graff Zivin shifts her gaze to a broader question regarding the dilemma of representation and brings the issue of signifying Jewishness into the Latin American context. The second hermeneutical circle allows her to focus on the tensions that exist in feelings toward the signifier "Jew", such as anxiety, desire, paranoia, attraction, and repulsion, and other feelings related to the notion of otherness. Thus, Jewishness becomes the sign of the transcendent alterity, by signifying the "other others" within a context, which in itself becomes the

space of the other, particularly when compared to its meaning in the European or North American context.

Unlike most scholarly works that focus on Judeo-Latin American themes, this book offers yet one more angle for reflecting upon the concerns mentioned above. Following her interpretation of the meaning of Jewishness and her consideration of the multiple representations that this floating signifier acquires within Latin American letters, Graff Zivin offers here a third circle to discuss broader concerns regarding the idea of representation in general. She refers to the work of the Jewish Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and attempts to give weight to the ethical question of representation within the literary text. She examines Levinas's critical standpoint in regard to art, searching for possible venues through which the face of the other can be heard within the literary text, without necessarily being objectified, hence, eliminated figuratively.

The issue of representing the wandering signifier is analyzed by exposing three scenes within literary texts: diagnosing diseases and practicing medicine, executing sexual and financial trafficking, and forming Jewish conversion. The latter, Jewish conversion, becomes also a textual conversion of the narrative order of representation once this model for racial assimilation, ideological engagement, and national consolidation is explored. Graff Zivin illustrates how shifting identities may be interpreted as resulting from a fear of the unknown (hence the use of the emblem "Jew" or "Jewishness"). She goes even further to point out that acts of diagnosis, of transaction, and of conversion may be viewed as the entrance key into the realm of fantasy, which shields the subject from the void. In doing this, she suggests that perhaps the core of the wandering signifier is an absent one: a non-place that may be filled with or transported into diversified fields of meaning. It is here, in the third section that concludes the book, where the importance of Graff Zivin's work lies, raising the discussion of Jewishness to a completely new level.

Reevaluating the ethics of representation by manipulating the Jewish signifier as a wandering artifact implies reconsidering the relation between a text and its context, between concrete circumstances and their textual inscription, between authorship and authority (particularly when otherness is at stake), and between fundamental imaginaries and the void spaces of memory. As she states in the title, *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in Latin American Imaginary*, this study is not so much about defining the narrative text and the hermeneutics it offers according to a well organized and recognizable space, but rather about demonstrating the impossibility of anchoring the sign within a specific univocal zone, and about acknowledging that this sign is only, and will only ever be, part of a discursive system, a rhetorical signifier, which gives to the artifact "Jewishness" a whole new meaning. Thus, as an original and free-floating sign, the Jewish

signifier can be implanted into any imaginary surrounding, including the Latin American context, which appears not as a surprising, out-of-place, territory to explore the issues briefly described here, but as a legitimate and relevant scenario to negotiate identities, to evaluate notions of acceptance and marginalization, and to determine the price one must pay when crossing textual, psychological, linguistic, and ethical borders. The wandering signifier, according to Graff Zivin, hence becomes the ambivalent sign of acceptance and rejection, of sacred and profane, of sameness and otherness, liberated from semiotic constraints to float with the absolute freedom that fiction grants.

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HEATHER LEVI: *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

*Lucha libre*, or professional wrestling, is a tremendously popular sport and spectacle in Mexico. In May of 1997, Heather Levi began what would be a year of anthropological fieldwork investigating the world of *lucha libre*, training with other wrestlers (men and women), attending live matches, viewing televised matches, and interviewing both male and female wrestlers.

Luis Jaramillo, a trainer retired from the wrestling ring and his masked identity as *Águila Blanca*, or White Eagle, agreed to take on Levi as an apprentice only if she understood that he dealt in the true *lucha libre*, not the spectacle for television viewers. Clearly Levi operates on the participant-observer model common to anthropological research. But she is not content to simply report on her field work. She wants to study *lucha libre* as “performance ... subculture... and symbol” in Mexican culture and politics.

She begins her book in 1988 with the advent of Superbarrio during the presidential elections, a masked wrestler functioning as a superhero representing the concerns of the popular classes whose homes were devastated by the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City and who were fed up with the inaction of politicians.

She discusses the question of what constitutes a sport as well as the question of genre: is *lucha libre* a sport, theater, spectacle, or ritual? The answer seems to be yes, it can simultaneously be any or all of those genres. Is *lucha libre* hegemonic or counterhegemonic? Yes again.

Levi provides a history of *lucha libre* in Mexico, imported from the United States in 1933. She explains the three styles of wrestling (Greco-Roman, Olympic, and Free Style), the creation and power struggles of the *empresas*, the companies that promote wrestlers and wrestling in the arena and on television.