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Review of Zivin's *The Wandering Signifier*: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary

Ariana Huberman

Haverford College, ahuberman@haverford.edu

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the matter. Claims concerning how Cervantes situates competing social and ethnic interests would be far stronger if they engaged recent work by such scholars as Barbara Fuchs, David Castillo, and William Childers, all of whom have advanced strong arguments that would undermine Pace's configuration of Cervantes's perspective on the hegemonic relationship.

The chapter on *Fuente Ovejuna* is a good deal more successful. Here, Pace's engagement with the critical tradition is far more sustained, which permits him to stake out a well-argued and well-defended position. In particular, he skillfully manages to combine the form of his interpretive framework with its content; in other words, here the confessional act is not only likened to a religious one, it can actually be shown to function as one. As he puts it, "Lope's skillful blending of pastoral confession and monarchical supremacy is a dual attack that at once proclaims the superiority of orderly centralized rule over chaotic regional politics, and the desirable ascendancy of just confessional practices over the cruel inquisitorial counterpart that was becoming increasingly entrenched in Spanish life" (51). In this regard the religious structure of the confessional scene propels the hegemonic restructuring of state power, since "this fusion of pastoral confession and monarchical rule utilizes pastoral confession to redeem both individuals and the emerging Spanish nation. As with confession generally, it emerges out of inner tension and perceived personal peril. Confession rescues Fuente Ovejuna, and it redeems Spain" (51).

The key to this hegemonic redemption, of course, is the position of the Catholic Monarchs as confessors, effectively replacing the traditional position of the feudal lord by way of a state-sponsored religious finesse: "In Lope's drama, the *Catholic Monarchs* assume a priest-like role as they hear a public and collective confession that includes a statement of loyalty to the *Catholic Monarchs*" (53). With this neatly turned chiasmus, Pace has succinctly captured the ideological power of Lope's play, and done so from the vantage of his interest in the confessional form.

While in many cases Pace's conclusions remain merely speculative, and while *Unfettering Confession* is far too brief and the research too thin to do the topic justice, Pace has nevertheless opened an important topic for further exploration.

WILLIAM EGGINTON
Johns Hopkins University

GRAFF ZIVIN, ERIN. *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008. xi + 222 pp.

Erin Graff Zivin's groundbreaking book *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* has arrived at a time when the field

of Latin American Jewish studies is gaining visibility. Recent years have seen the publication of several compilations of essays on this topic.¹ Graff Zivin's book stands out as the first comprehensive analysis of representations of "Jews" and "Jewishness" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American literature. The author uses scare quotes to indicate the constructedness of this category of identity. This is especially important in a book whose author traces the nuances and flexibility of the concepts of the "Jew" and "Jewishness" with the intention of examining the complexities and limits of their representations.

The Wandering Signifier fills a void in the fields of Latin American and Jewish studies with an original, intelligent, and well-researched study of the problems of representing constructions of Jewish identity from a cultural, ideological, racial, and political perspective. Graff Zivin looks at the figure of the "Jew" in the literature of Latin American countries, where the majority of ethnic others are of indigeneous and African descent. That is why her analysis of representations of "Jews" extends to other groups in Latin America that do not have agency. In her words, the "'Jew' . . . functions as a powerful node onto which a fundamental anxiety toward difference can be projected and performed" (20).

In the introduction, the author recreates the long and difficult history of representations of Jews from the Middle Ages in Europe to Latin America today. She also summarizes the critical literature on the subject and adds a brief history of the presence of Jews in Latin America. Then she begins the challenging task of comparing Jews and their cultural representation, which has so often resulted in anti-Semitism. However, this book does not attempt to correct the category of "Jewishness," for the author does not believe in such essentialist identity categories.

The title *The Wandering Signifier* refers to the rhetorical malleability and multiplicity of shape, significance, and meaning that "Jews" and "Jewish" identity take as they are transformed by authors within specific social and historical contexts. The wandering signifier is a particularly effective metaphor because not only does it imply the versatility of the "Jew" as a character in this body of literature—and

1. Examples include David Sheinin and Lois Baer Barr, eds., *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America: New Studies on History and Literature* (New York: Garland, 1996); Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America* (1980; rev. ed. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1998); Marjorie Agosin, ed., *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005); Kristin Ruggiero, ed., *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory* (Sussex, UK: Sussex Academic P, 2005); Ariana Huberman and Alejandro Meter, eds., *Memoria y representación: configuraciones culturales y literarias en el imaginario judío latinoamericano* (Rosario, Arg.: Beatriz Viterbo, 2006); Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, eds., *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2008); and David William Foster, ed., *Latin American Jewish Cultural Production* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 2009).

previously in European literature—but it also points at the “symbolic life” of “Jews” and “Jewishness” in these writings.

Graff Zivin questions the ethics of representation that stem from the examination of literary texts that appropriate the “Jewish” other to the realm of sameness. With this purpose in mind, she introduces Emmanuel Levinas’s groundbreaking philosophical concept of the ethical relationship between self and other. Levinas believes that written literature inevitably objectifies the other. While his philosophy inspired Graff Zivin’s book, she questions his radical distinction between ethical and rhetorical language by highlighting the ways in which they overlap. The last chapter, “The Limits of Representation,” delves into this issue.

The Wandering Signifier discusses the presence of “Jews” and “Jewishness” in canonical as well as lesser-known works by Jewish and non-Jewish authors. It is divided into three parts, each centering on the themes and tropes of diagnosis, transactions, and conversions. The first chapter explores the importance of positivism in nineteenth-century Latin America and the central presence of Max Nordau among Latin American intellectuals of the time. She also looks at the interconnectivity of representations of Jews and the pathological discourse in European culture since the Middle Ages and in Latin American literature since the nineteenth century. She discusses these themes in Jorge Isaacs’s *María*, Julián Martel’s *La bolsa*, José Asunción Silva’s *De sobremesa*, Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill’s *Vivir afuera*, Rubén Darío’s *Los raros*, Luisa Futoransky’s “De pe a pa,” and Margo Glantz’s “Zapatos.” The Jewish characters in these texts both heal and contaminate the body of the nation. They are in between the diagnostic scene and thus represent an ambivalence and a surplus, an element that cannot be codified, blurring the line between same and other. For this discussion, Graff Zivin brings in Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría’s notion of the “Other Within” (35). The chapter ends with the suggestive idea that looking at the construction of “Jewishness” in these texts can be a litmus test for learning about cultural, aesthetic concerns that go beyond this identity category, and that all that “Jewishness” has to offer is its rhetorical capacity and malleability.

The second chapter discusses representations of Jews in relation to money and prostitution. Graff Zivin revises the anti-Semitic history of this connection by studying the layers of significance that build the scene of transaction in Julián Martel’s *La bolsa*, a Brazilian samba by Noel Rosa, Jorge Luis Borges’s “Emma Zunz,” Hilário Tácito’s *Madame Pommery*, and Clara Beter’s *Versos de una . . .* in order to identify what Walter Benjamin codifies as thresholds, a surplus of difference that eludes commonplace representations of Jews in the scene of transaction.

In the third chapter, Graff Zivin turns to “textual conversions,” a clever reference to the assimilation of difference into “the totalizing project of the text” (120). She focuses on stories of *conversos* who themselves represent the “Other Within.”

The *converso*, or Jew converted to Christianity, has historically provoked anxiety because he can neither be trusted to fully assimilate nor to be identified as other. Graff Zivin analyzes the narratives of Sierra O'Reilly's *La hija del judío*, Jorge Isaacs's *María*, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's "A cristã nova," and Dias Gomes's *O Santo inquerito*. All four texts include an interesting mother–daughter dynamic that invites a discussion of the gender issues that are part of the cultural, religious, and political transformations that take place in these texts. In this chapter, the author also discusses Carlos Heitor Cony's *Pessach: a travessia* and Mario Varga Llosa's *El hablador*, two texts that expose the malleability of the "Jew" to the extreme—in one story the "Jew" becomes a committed revolutionary and in the other a Peruvian Machiguenga storyteller. At the end of this chapter, Graff Zivin returns to her dialogue with Levinas's philosophy by questioning his distinction between rhetoric and ethics. In her final chapter, the author studies the possibility of representing alterity in literary discourse by discussing Jorge Luis Borges's "Deutches Requiem," Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, and Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas*, three works that share postmodern aesthetics.

Thanks to her sophisticated analysis of the difficult problem of representation of alterity in Latin American literature and her novel perspective on the uses of the concepts of the "Jew" and "Jewishness" in this body of literature, *The Wandering Signifier* makes an important contribution to Jewish and Latin American Studies scholarship and to the field of cultural studies in general.

ARIANA HUBERMAN
Villanova University

WHITFIELD, ESTHER. *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. 248 pp.

In her precise and well-crafted monograph, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction*, Esther Whitfield explores print culture of the Cuban Special Period by employing a cultural studies theoretical framework to holistically validate her arguments on the exotics of Cuban culture as currency. She not only analyzes fiction print culture but also other cultural media (e.g., music, photography, film) that have shared the circuits of Cuban cultural consumption in recent decades. Whitfield explains the importance and intricacies of the production and consumption of these materials, while tying them to consumerist trends of Cuban cultural goods, on and off the island. Whitfield formulates a detailed argument about the global cultural proliferation of Cuba and Cuban goods that thrived during the historical time frame of post-Soviet Cuba, better known as the Special