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Panel Abstract

Teaching Survey of Latin American Literature through Translators and Translation

This panel proposes ways of teaching Latin American literature survey courses—the ubiquitous Spanish major staple—through a thematic focus on translators and/or translation. The canonical Latin American literature textbooks seldom take into account, or do so in a cursory manner, Native- and mestizo-authored works or native “ways of knowing, and textual forms, including knotted, painted, and lettered accounts of spiritual, social, and scientific principles” (as stated in the conference call for papers). While it is always possible to use supplemental materials, which many educators frequently do, the very status as a supplement continues to marginalize these non-canonical texts and alternate ways of storing and communicating knowledge. Nor are students easily captivated by the literary canon as presented in textbooks. By thematizing Latin American literature through the figure of the translator or the act of translation, the “entangled translations of empires and civilizations between and among indigenous, African, and Europeans in the early Americas” become the central focus of the course, complicating the traditional survey and thus exposing students to a more nuanced, and ideally more interesting, perspective on the topic.

The first paper describes how the presenter, Heather Allen, taught the survey through a focus on the figure of the translator in the Spanish invasion and colonization of New Spain. She found that by juxtaposing differing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historiographical and pictorial accounts of translators—including captured natives like Doña Marina (La Malinche) and captive Spaniards such as Jerónimo de Aguilar—with contemporary re-imaginations of such figures—from Carlos Fuentes’ *El Naranjo*, and Elena Garro’s “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas,” to artwork by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, and the film *También la lluvia*—the constructed nature of historiography becomes readily apparent to students. In this way, students are brought to their own realization that history (pictorial or alphabetical), just like fiction, is a genre susceptible to the biases of the authors, their sources, and the particular zeitgeist of the era; and authors are understood to be cultural, as well as linguistic, translators themselves.

In the year marking the 400th anniversary of his death, the second paper positions Inca Garcilaso de la Vega as a cultural and geographic translator in the Latin American colonial literature survey. Whereas students invariably express their desire to learn more about the indigenous cultures of the New World, the complexity of works penned by Native American and mestizo authors proves a constant challenge. This paper describes how the presenter, Kim Borchard, has used *La Florida del Inca* as the centerpiece of a unit on the southeastern United States, which comes to light as the nucleus of the sixteenth-century struggle between England, France, and
Spain for control of North America from Newfoundland to Zacatecas. In addition to reading excerpts from Inca Garcilaso’s history of the Hernando de Soto expedition, students compare testimony from other episodes of Florida history (the journey of Cabeza de Vaca, the expedition of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés to exterminate the French settlement at Fort Caroline) with Garcilaso’s acerbic assessment of them. Through his treatment of these emblematic scenes from early colonial America, the great Andean historian intertwines the histories of North and South, Anglo- and Spanish- America, emerging as the translator and political commentator par excellence of the early modern Atlantic world.