

## A Glimpse into the World of Jorge Luis Borges: An Exploration of Transculturation in “El evangelio según Marcos”

The works of Jorge Luis Borges have transcended through his time and for ages left a lasting impact on the world’s view of rewriting, intertextuality, and transculturation. One of Borges’ most prominent works “El evangelio según Marcos” otherwise known as “The gospel according to St. Mark” addresses the idea of transculturation and puts it into his own understanding of rewriting. This paper will be adopting Borges understanding of transculturation which can be defined as a phenomenon of merging and converging cultures, which in turn creates a transition from one culture to another, and additionally carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena. This is played out in “The gospel according to St. Mark” especially when considering Borges attachment to the Gutres and the Bible. There is a tension and resistance between the European nations and Latin American peoples that can be seen in many moments and interactions with Gutre family, whose forebears, the Guthries of Inverness, descendants of Bible readers and Espinosa a personified God figure. One of the central moments that leads to a ultimate rewriting of the story is the crucifixion on Golgotha, which is considered a central and symbolic moment in Christianity, that is taken place on an Argentine ranch in the story. The centralization of the crucifixion in the Argentinian setting converges these to cultures, both Western and Argentinian. Borges continued criticism stems from his work not containing the accumulated Argentinian writing style, but within his work he returns this criticism with his moments such as the crucifixion as a comment on the power of transculturation and his identity as an Argentine writer. However, Ultimately Borges use of transculturation functions within the context of as a rewriting “El evangelio según Marcos” through the moments that converge western and Argentinean culture.

Borges' tradition of rewriting has existed throughout his academic career, occupying the Argentine literary world. Sergio Waisman writes in his book "Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery" that, in the eyes of Borges rewriting "challenges preconceived cultural political notions by positing that the margins are not necessarily limiting for writers, just as translations are not necessarily inferior to originals" (Waisman 40). As Borges challenges the preconceived cultural political notions it can be seen both in "El evangelio según Marcos" and some of his other work that have simply been republished and rewritten, there is an intentionality to push the barriers of writers' limits. It can be seen in "Fervor de Buenos Aires" that Borges takes on a radical rewriting of his original work from 1923 and republishes his collection of poetry in 1969. This extreme physical rewriting strongly contrasts the nature of rewriting that we see in "El evangelio según Marcos" but it's important to note, due to the complexities of Borges' writings. The rewriting in "El evangelio según Marcos" stems from a place of "elliptical, complex, and often paradoxical or even contradictory, techniques that disarm the reader as they challenge our suppositions about translation and originality" as Waisman writes (Waisman 41). Borges weaves the idea of transculturation into his understanding of rewriting which is why "El evangelio según Marcos" creates a fascinating contrast. The process that takes place in this story encompasses more than transition from one culture to another, but it merges the two cultures of the Gutres and Espinosa and conceives a new cultural understanding. Borges' relocation and transfer of the crucifixion on Golgotha bring to fruition this conceptualization and shows rewriting in a whole new unique way.

The crucifixion on Golgotha is a fundamental moment in the story of "El evangelio según Marcos" because it is the essence of how transculturation is functioning as rewriting for Borges.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is considered a central act of Christianity in western culture and is known as an act of sacrifice for the gentiles and Christians to be forgiven of their human condition. In “El evangelio según Marcos” the crucifixion is on Golgotha, this central act of Christianity, is transferred to an Argentine ranch,

“El día siguiente comenzó como los anteriores, salvo que el padre habló con Espinosa y le preguntó si Cristo se dejó matar para salvar a todos los hombres. Espinosa, que era librepensador pero que se vio obligado a justificar lo que les había leído, le contestó: -Sí. Gutre le dijo entonces: -¿Qué es el infierno? -Un lugar bajo tierra donde las ánimas arderán y arderán. -¿Y también se salvaron los que le clavaron los clavos? -Sí -replicó Espinosa, cuya teología era incierta... Los tres lo habían seguido.... La muchacha lloraba. Espinosa entendió lo que le esperaba del otro lado de la puerta. Cuando la abrieron, vio el firmamento. Un pájaro gritó; pensó: es un jilguero. El galpón estaba sin techo; habían arrancado las vigas para construir la Cruz” (Borges).

In these final moments of the story it can be seen that there is an immense tension that is created by Espinosa, being the free thinker that he is pushed this boundary, as did Borges with this moment in the text. The symbolic building of the cross by the Gutres, in the countryside of Argentina, further pushes this moment into a rewriting of the biblical crucifixion. The rewriting of Espinosa’s character from a medical student to a God- hero embodies the imagined character of Espinosa, a free thinking and catholic influenced individual and puts him in place of Jesus Christ to create a whole new meaning. Waisman furthers this by writing about ‘definitive text’ and Borges’ “formulations of creative infidelities, and his focus on the importance of shifts in timely connected to the writing of his own fictions” (Waisman 84). Waisman addresses two

important links to Borges rewriting as describing this retelling of the Gospel of Mark as a creative infidelity, explaining the intent behind Borges was not to replicate but rewrite. This furthers the importance of the timely connected to the writing of his own fictions; there is a deeper connection with this work.

Transculturation is very meaningful as it works within the scenery and setting that Borges paints as Espinosa is introduced to the countryside of Argentina. In terms of the Cuban anthropologist and founder transculturation, Fernando Ortiz, it is described it as the phenomenon of when two cultures fuse into one. The many moments in the text where this fusion takes place is cleverly played out through the merging of Argentinian and biblical Middle Eastern cultures. Given the context of the Bible we can see that Espinosa refers to this when talking about rain and the landscape. He says, (Borges ). This part is very similar with the Bible, especially with images from the Middle East and the Old Testament with regard to flooding. In the context of the Bible flood to have a meaning with great change. This is the same for this story. The flood is foreshadowing the turmoil he faces during his crucifixion but also how western culture has opposed the Latin American peoples. During his stay in Daniel he learned a lot about the country, the landscape and the Gutres: all this symbolizing the Bible in many ways.

Transculturation works within “El evangelio según Marcos” because Borges is taking the context of his story with his character Espinosa and giving and reproducing similar attributes about a story that originally originated in the Middle East and now in Argentina. This indicates how interwoven transculturation is in the text. At one point Espinosa describes “the Gutres like, the Gutres dispatched the carne asada and the sardines not to delay the Gospel” “Los Gutres despachaban la carne asada y las sardinas para no demorar el Evangelio”

(Borges 4). Although this commentary is brief it is profound. Facets such as food description represent a part of an individual's culture, but the gospel can transcend through culture and ultimately be a melting pot of two cultures. As for the text through the lens of a single cultural understanding, it may limit what Borges was trying to communicate, transculturation is imperative to the understanding.

“The next day, looking out over the flooded fields from the gallery of the main house, Baltasar Espinosa thought that the stock metaphor comparing the pampa to the sea was not altogether false -- at least, not that morning -- though W. H. Hudson had remarked that the sea seems wider because we view it from a ship's deck and not from a horse or from eye level” (Borges).

“Al otro día, Baltasar Espinosa, mirando desde la galería los campos anegados, pensó que la metáfora que equipara la pampa con el mar no era, por lo menos esa mañana, del todo falsa, aunque Hudson había dejado escrito que el mar nos parece más grande, porque lo vemos desde la cubierta del barco y no desde el caballo o desde nuestra altura” (Borges)

Following the trend of transculturation in this story, Borges imagines the Gutre family, whose forebears, the Guthries of Inverness, descendants of Bible readers. Borges description of the Guthries characterizes the significance of nationality and culture, and the merging of the two, “They lacked any religious faith, but there survived in their blood, like faint tracks, the rigid fanaticism of the Calvinist and the superstitions of the pampa Indian. Espinosa later told them of his find, but they barely took notice” (Borges). Borges responds to the wider social cultural meaning of what it meant to be Argentinian in this moment in history. Specifically he is

rewriting the Gutre family as a literary expression of the plural ethnicity inherent in all of his characters. The 'rigid fanaticism of the Calvinist' in relation to the pampa Indian shows a blending of two contrasting figures joining together as one. Borges revisits the idea of plural ethnicity again in relation to 'blood' when he says, "Leafing through the volume, his fingers opened it at the beginning of the Gospel according to Saint Mark...It surprised him that they listened attentively, absorbed. Maybe the gold letters on the cover lent the book authority. It's still there in their blood, Espinosa thought" "Le sorprendió que lo escucharan con atención y luego con callado interés. Acaso la presencia de las letras de oro en la tapa le diera más autoridad. Lo llevan en la sangre, pensó" (Borges). The learned culture of the bible in relation to it being biological attribute acting as an authority over the body is Borges way of displaying transculturation. Espinosa recognizes the Gutres as "barbarizes" the Gospel is a way to re-inscribe the original text and speculate America as a site of privilege. The juxtaposition of his ability to read the bible as well as have a this type of authority over not only the body but also the culture extends back to Espinosa as a God hero as well as inherent privilege that is attached to identities. However this is also an attempt to rewrite Borges' own language and it is important to note that this as much as it is a product of Borges' own understanding of his own inheritance.

The idea of rewriting is intertwined with the way in which Borges conceived of his own language; Borges life and the infliction of his travels and his identity go hand in hand. This was constantly changing through out his life and shown many of his works "El evangelio según Marcos" is a muse of just that. Marta Morello- Frosch writes about Borges literary lineage in "Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts" and in part expands on how his identity is exposed in his work.

“It was one of Borges’s chief concerns to establish a literary lineage for himself, a task he carried out by tracing cultural ancestors and by identifying predecessors of his own choosing- more often than not giving them an apocryphal paternity...His own ‘otherness’, what turned into an original, often dissident, and always heterodox figure in the national sphere” (Morello- Frosch 26)

It can be inferred that Borges represents himself via Espinosa as being of Argentinian lineage but also describing his character as a freethinker, “Espinosa and asked him if Christ had let Himself be killed so as to save all other men on earth. Espinosa, who was a freethinker but who felt committed to what he had read to the Gutes” “El día siguiente comenzó como los anteriores, salvo que el padre habló con Espinosa y le preguntó si Cristo se dejó matar para salvar a todos los hombres. Espinosa, que era librepensador pero que se vio obligado a justificar lo que les había leído, le contest” (Borges). The rewriting of Borges himself, as a character in the story, is in part a moment that transculturation is functioning as Borges “otherness”. Borges father being described as a freethinker makes the connected to Morello-Frosch’s commentary on the “apocryphal paternity” and how important “El evangelio según Marcos” was to this idea of transculturation within the context of both a familiar and literary base in his work. Borges task as a writer in “El evangelio según Marcos” in the context of rewriting is rooted in the exploration of his own literary lineage but also the creating something entirely new.

In conclusion it can be found that transculturation is the foundation of Borges form of rewriting in “El evangelio según Marcos” which makes the conceptualization of transculturation imperative to fully understand Borges’ purpose of the story. Although in many instances it can be found that Borges is rewriting is connected with symbolic biblical stories, but there is also

moments where Borges is creating something new all together. The rewriting of the Guthries, Espinosa, and the bible all coincide with Borges' rewriting as a cultural hybrid. The plural ethnicity is utilized in all of his characters, which is Borges' form of literary expression as much as it is a product of Borges' own understanding of what identity means. These moments in the text where Borges is outlining the outward cultural inheritance and underlying attributes within each of the characters is where transculturation can be read. Ultimately, Borges rewriting of these characters is a reflection of Borges own understanding of his plural identities, which further gives a glimpse into the writings, and expressions of Jorge Luis Borges.