

MÓNICA ALBIZÚREZ GIL Y ALEXANDRA ORTIZ WALLNER, EDS. *Poéticas y políticas de género. Ensayos sobre imaginarios, literaturas y medios en Centroamérica*. Berlin: Edition Tranvía/ Verlag Walter Frey, 2013. 312 pp.

The armed struggles that divided Nicaragua until 1990, El Salvador until 1992 and Guatemala until 1996, casting Costa Rica into the role of a nervous peacemaker, and demoting Honduras to a U.S. military base, placed left-right ideological strife at the core of political and personal agendas. Only after these conflicts ended, albeit in ways that failed to rectify the inequalities that had ignited them, did contemporary issues, such as gender identity, environmentalism, cultural diversity, corrupt legal systems and drug-gang violence, come to the fore. These dynamics have unfolded against the ominous backdrop of the memory of those who were killed, displaced or physically abused. The sense of being hamstrung by the past is particularly debilitating with regard to explorations of gender, which must confront the essentialist stereotypes, which the wars consolidated, of the man as hyper-masculine soldier or guerrilla, and the woman as either heroic mother of the nation, or available victim of sexual exploitation or sexual violence. Not only does the recognition of more flexible and varied gender identities arrive later on the isthmus than elsewhere in the Americas; this awareness also comes into play in a cultural environment burdened by an inheritance of Manichean definitions of masculinity and femininity.

This compilation of articles, all but three of them by women, all but one by Central Americans (the sole exception is German), betrays an earnest desire to assert Central America's status as a credible contributor to contemporary gender discourse. As the editors state in their introduction, the book aspires to remedy Central Americans' "estadio de eternas ausentes de los estudios de género en América Latina con el fin de dar cuenta de cómo las producciones culturales centroamericanas están debatiendo intensamente temas y problemas actuales y urgentes ..." (28). This intensity is not always an advantage. Contemporary explorations of gender depend on a certain security to engage in irreverent experimentation and linguistic play. The dire state of contemporary Central America – drug czars at large, 1980s war criminals unpunished and still in power, indigenous cultures fraying fast, a natural world under daily assault by mining companies and canal projects, a yawning chasm between globalized rich and increasingly transient poor – reproduces the ideological binaries of the war years. This volume "makes gender" with the same doctrinaire determination with which publications of earlier decades "made revolution." The enemy is no longer the Cold War-era capitalist

security state but rather the strictures of heteronormativity; rigid “identidades sexogénicas” (15) serve as a symbolic stand-in for the more intransigent foe of globalized capitalism.

The focus on gender brings with it a flight to the margins. No recent work by any of the Central American writers who are well-known beyond the isthmus – Gioconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal, Sergio Ramírez, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Humberto Ak’abal, Claribel Alegría, Eduardo Halfon – receives critical study in this volume. War-era novels by Ramírez and Belli, from the 1970s and the 1980s respectively, are analysed briefly by Óscar García in “Machismo y revolución.” Lucrecia Méndez de Penedo’s discussion of the groundbreaking Guatemalan feminist poet Ana María Rodas concentrates on work from the 1970s. Méndez’s assessment of the younger poet Regina José Galindo’s “desmitificación de una familia tradicional y feliz” (87) is illuminating, but it is striking that Galindo has almost no readership. Like Galindo, the younger generation of Mayan women poets, studied by Gloria E. Chacón in “Cuerpo y poesía,” write a poetry that is “mucho más reconocida en el exterior que en su país de origen” (274). This is particularly true of the Quiché-Cakchiquel poet Rosa Chávez, born in 1980, whose two slender volumes have been the object of significant critical study in the foreign academy, yet are almost impossible to find in Guatemalan bookstores. Like some of her contemporaries, Chávez uses performance pieces, which she has presented in tourist towns such as Panajachel, to draw attention to her work. These strategies highlight the way that globalization has dispersed the readership for Central American literature abroad – where more and more Central American readers now live – or turned literature into a tourist attraction, while depriving writers of a national readership and literary infrastructure to which they can respond.

While all Central American writers confront these dilemmas, conditions differ from one country to another. Uriel Quesada’s “San José o la ciudad sexualizada,” which discusses gay identity and gender ambiguity in recent Costa Rican fiction, emerges from an environment where the middle-class readership is sufficiently large to support genre fiction, such as campy detective novels, and queer cultures are less beleaguered than in neighbouring countries. Laura Barbas Rhoden’s introduction of “ecofeminismo” as a response to neo-liberalism and “el ámbito literario transnacional” (242), though based on rather obscure works, is perhaps the only chapter that is playful enough to make a convincing case that gender studies in Central America are as up to date as the editors’ introduction claims. Chapters on the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1930s expose predictable patriarchal attitudes in language that is familiar to the point of being hackneyed. Many of the articles grind out worthy, valid, yet utterly

unoriginal, characterizations of skewed gender dynamics as though this were all that was expected of them. The subject matter may be Central American, but the book provides very little evidence of specifically Central American approaches to gender. After reading this uneven yet rather ideologically uniform collection, it is difficult not to ask whether gender theory is not simply the latest metropolitan ideology to be projected onto the isthmian bourgeoisie, the successor to Romanticism and positivism, and the sparring partner of globalizing neo-liberalism, as revolutionary Marxism was the antagonist of modernizant national capitalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Justice for millions of displaced, marginalized, widowed, impoverished or abused women, or for gay men who face violent discrimination, matters a lot; even in the purely literary realm, making Central America's gender theories sound identical to those of the United States matters much less.

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GEOFFREY BAKER. *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiii + 362 pp.

*El Sistema* is the Venezuelan youth orchestra program founded in 1975 by politician, economist, and conductor José Antonio Abreu (1939-). Through the promise of using music in the service of society, *El Sistema* has garnered political and economic support to expand across Venezuela through the establishment of music-education centers called *núcleos*. News media reports, documentaries, a book, and a long list of international awards have highlighted this musical movement. As a result, *El Sistema* has captured the attention of a wider public to become a global phenomenon. However, despite its increasing popularity, Geoffrey Baker, a Reader in the Music Department of Royal Holloway, University of London, correctly asserts that this project has been subject to little or no in-depth research or serious debate. Baker explains that, in Baroque fashion, the spectacle of *El Sistema* has won over the hearts of global audiences, while, at the same time, suppressing the mind. His full-length, critical study of *El Sistema* is, therefore, a necessary and timely addition to discussions of the program in relation to music, education, and social justice in Venezuela, Latin America, and beyond.

Baker takes us on a well-organized journey, beginning with an introduction outlining the theoretical foundations, approach, and sources of the study, and continuing on through the analysis of *El Sistema* in four