

Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History. Laura Barbas-Rhoden. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. ISBN: 9780896802339

Laura Barbas-Rhoden's first book, *Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History*, is an eloquent and accessible contribution to Latin American literary criticism and a testament to the contributions of women authors' literary history in Central America. Additionally, the text engages with a much wider conversation about the creation and ownership of history. Barbas-Rhoden utilizes the expansive pool of works from the four most widely published Central American female authors: Claribel Alegría, Gioconda Belli, Rosario Aguilar, and Tatiana Lobo. These authors' bodies of work provide myriad examples of women-centered feminist characters that acknowledge, and privilege, subordinated voices by creating a narrative that focuses on the existence of women's, indigenous and African histories. In addition to creating a space for long-silenced voices to be heard, Barbas-Rhoden also showcases the various ways each author subverts not only the national narrative, but also the western model of literary narrative structures.

The text is broken down into four main chapters: one for each of the authors examined in the study, as well as an introduction and conclusion that help situate the text within the larger field of literary criticism and feminist histories of the region. Additionally, the author provides an invaluable bibliographic survey of Central American women authors in the appendix. While in some cases the material in the appendix would have been helpful in the body of the text itself, especially for those unfamiliar with Central American literature, this survey is very useful.

Barbas-Rhoden first brings our attention to Claribel Alegría, arguably the most celebrated female author in El Salvador. She focuses on three works by Alegría that are historical and feminist in nature: *Cenizas de Izalco* (1966), *No me agarran viva* (1985), and *Despierta, mi bien, despierta* (1986). Alegría's work showcases strong female characters at the center of the plot, often both as external actors driving the narrative forward, and as internally complex individuals navigating through often patriarchal, classist, and violent realities. The author shows how Alegría utilizes alternative forms of narrative sources and styles, such as testimonials, diaries, and oral history in the text to challenge both the erasure of women's lives from history and the silencing of non-patriarchal methods of communication. By utilizing these various sources, Alegría is able to create alternative historical narratives that challenge traditional and modern gender norms, power relations, and the national narrative of conquest and revolution. Furthermore, in unpacking this alternative history, Barbas-Rhoden teases at the margins of the macro question of historical ownership and historical "truth," a question central to the entire text.

*Cenizas de Izalco* offers the reader the first chance to see the contestations of historical memory and national narrative at work. Barbas-Rhoden delves into the motivations of the main character in the text as she traverses through the plot working toward a more authentic understanding of her own identity. Moreover, a growing awareness of the implications of denied memories and silenced voices on both an individual and a national level becomes apparent. Of note here, Barbas-Rhoden uses the role of some men in *Cenizas de Izalco* to show that feminist pursuits were not, and are not, the exclusive purview of women.

*No me agarran viva* and *Despierta, mi bien, despierta* are both more blatantly political in nature, as they both center on revolution and civil war. In *No me agarran viva*, the tale of a female guerilla comes to life through her coming of age story, which culminates in her participation in the armed struggle. *Despierta, mi bien, despierta* looks further at the crisis of the family unit during the civil war, and in so doing, highlights the ways in which women became

aware of and challenged patriarchal norms. All three of the texts Barbas-Rhoden studies in this chapter examine how women's newfound consciousness of oppression impacted their lives and the lives of those around them. Additionally, these characters' stories, in some small and in some large ways, challenge the function of history and story-telling as citizens of the nation. Barbas-Rhoden highlights the various manifestations of activism that Alegría utilizes, such as how reading or writing become activist endeavors—and arguably revolutionary acts—in the lives of each of her main characters.

The next chapter shifts the reader's attention to the works of Gioconda Belli, set in Nicaragua. While Belli's novels likewise explore the development of political consciousness, the role of gender, race, and class in modern society, and the contestations of historical memory, Belli also utilizes the trope of mother/daughter relationships as a critical site of tension, mystery, dissolution and nation-building. Barbas-Rhoden studies three novels by Belli: *La mujer habitada* (1988), *Sofía de los presagios* (1992) and *Waslala* (1996). In this chapter, the author focuses on the overarching narratives of gender identity, subaltern populations, and silenced experiences. She also posits that Belli's use of alternative narrative style in her novels provides a challenge to normative storytelling in much the same way that her narratives textually challenge the national narrative. Many of Belli's works are non-linear compendia of multiple voices, with many speakers narrating their experiences through the eyes of multiple "main" characters. Thus the project itself articulates the feminist practice of non-hierarchical speaking privilege, whilst the plot simultaneously showcases the lives of women experiencing their own feminist awakenings.

Chapter Three presents an analysis of several works by Rosario Aguilar. Aguilar is one of Nicaragua's most celebrated and prolific female authors. Her work spans over four decades and has been widely translated around the world. Barbas-Rhoden focuses primarily on three of her historical novels: *Rosa Sarmiento* (1968), *Las doce y veintinueve* (1975), and *La niña blanca y los pájaros sin pies* (1992). The author astutely points out how Aguilar creates narratives that examine historical moments through women-centered feminist plots, thus providing a critique of both the national narrative and the way citizens are expected, or even permitted, to hear about history. Motherhood comes to the forefront again as a site of tension; however, unlike Belli, Aguilar expounds on the imposition of maternity and the resulting regulations and restrictions to both women's bodies and identities that maternity affords. Barbas-Rhoden keenly perceives Aguilar's treatment of maternity as an indictment of the manner in which a patriarchal nation-state exploits motherhood and maternity to regulate women's lives in ways that fatherhood and paternity are not used to regulate men's lives.

In Chapter Four, Barbas-Rhoden turns to the last of the authors in her study, Tatiana Lobo, whose publications have been largely in the form of Costa Rican historical novels and short stories. While the breadth of Lobo's work is expansive, for the purposes of this analysis Barbas-Rhoden examined *Tiempo de claveles* (1990), *Asalto al paraíso* (1992), *Entre Dios y el Diablo* (1993) and *Calypso* (1996). Of all the authors discussed throughout the text, arguably the most controversial is Lobo. Her work challenges gender, race, class, citizenship, and not just the historical narrative in general, but who has the right to draft such a narrative. This chapter also proves to be the most engaged with theoretical discussions of cultural assimilation and identity, utilizing theories such as Mary Louise Pratt's *contact zones* and Gayatri Spivak's *subalternity* to frame her arguments. Lobo explores the above-mentioned throughout her novels, but it is her treatment of globalization, cultural marginalization, and neo-colonial politics that sets her work apart from the others.

The text ends with a short conclusion that reiterates the salient points woven in throughout the book about gender, race, and the power dynamics behind the “construction” of history. Barbas-Rhoden writes in a lyrical style that is both pleasant and engaging. While the text does require an understanding of literary terminology and a basic theoretical foundation, it has a place outside the English or literature classroom. *Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History* would be embraced in a range of interdisciplinary graduate seminars, not least of which would be History and Women’s Studies courses. The arguments Barbas-Rhoden presents use literary texts to highlight the ways that marginalized groups including women, indigenous communities, and Africans, to name a few, have been silenced and erased from the historical narrative of many Central American countries. But this is not the most important lesson to be learned from this text. *Writing Women in Central America* offers its readers a glimpse into a form of rebellion and resistance that has not always been given due acknowledgement. To the victor may go the spoils of war...but to the writer goes the construction of our histories.

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