

Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives. Yajaira Padilla. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012. ISBN: 9781438442778

In *Changing Women, Changing Nation*, Yajaira Padilla provides a fascinating analysis of Salvadoran literature from the 1980s—when the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLF) united left-wing sympathizers—to the early 2000s, focusing on women, particularly *campesinas*, who have witnessed and endured the brutality of civil war in El Salvador. Padilla’s style and clear language introduce the historical coordinates of the period under study. In addition, the author brings together scholarship about *testimonio* as the framework that will guide her analysis of literary works that present women’s points of view, though they were not necessarily written by women. Finally, given El Salvador’s prolonged civil war and the mass migration that it produced, Padilla also examines works written outside El Salvador by migrants and first-generation Salvadoran-Americans. The thesis is that “the portrayals of women in these Salvadoran and U.S Salvadoran narratives also function as a gendered lens through which we see the continuous redefinition of the Salvadoran nation and its subsequent re-articulation as a transnational space” (4). While the book deals with literature, the topic of nationhood related to a specific period of Salvadoran history adds a layer of interdisciplinarity to this volume, making it appealing to a broad audience of scholars concerned with Latin American Studies.

Chapter one is dedicated to analyze Manlio Argueta’s novels *Un día en la vida* (1980) and *Cuzcatlán: Donde bate la Mar del Sur* (1986). In *Un día en la vida*, Argueta offers an absorbing portrayal of the way rural communities have been affected by civil war. For the writer, *campesinas* are the representatives of Salvadoran nationhood, an innovation that no longer highlights the male revolutionary hero. Furthermore, the novel describes liberation theology which provided the ideological fuel for the uprising of peasant communities. The novel is organized as a *testimonio* in which a narrator provides his/her account to a learned

interlocutor and editor. Padilla emphasizes the importance of women in this novel as mothers, sisters, and daughters who stand in opposition to the authoritarian state that instigates political violence through the men of the National Guard. While the author notes that this strategy feminizes the political struggle, she also mentions that it pays due homage to the women who were left orphaned or widowed and had to assume leadership roles in their rural communities. Another group identified by Padilla is the priests who, in siding with the rural population, became feminized and thus were the target of the National Guard's viciousness. Despite their armed strength, the members of the National Guard occupied subaltern positions in relation to the U.S. military, represented as hegemonic. Another aspect that Padilla brings to the fore is the collective impact of the violence against certain members of the community, which is transmitted through anonymous narrators. Regarding *Cuzcatlán: Donde bate la Mar del Sur*, Padilla holds that it can be seen as a continuation of Argueta's previous novel in which the style of *testimonio* is also prevalent and whose central character, Lucía, a *guerrillera*, is her family's and community's spokesperson.

Chapter two is dedicated to testimonies by urban middle class *guerrilleras*, such as *No me agarran viva: la mujer salvadoreña en la lucha* (1987) by Darwin Flakoll, *Nunca estuve sola* (1988) by Nidia Díaz, *Las cárceles clandestinas de El Salvador* (1996) by Ana Guadalupe Martínez. In these texts, the *guerrilleras* are portrayed both as brave and committed and as feminine in their embracement of new forms of republican motherhood. According to Padilla, this rendering indicates a new type of urban, middle-class, female subjectivity. Ileana Rodríguez' insights about female masculinity guide the author's analysis of the above *testimonios*.

Chapter three examines literary works published in the 1990s and early 2000: *La diabla en el espejo* (2000) by Horacio Castellanos and short stories by Jacinta Escudos and Claudia Hernández, which have in common the attention to women's lives and the

representation of violence in civil society. Padilla, however, notes differences in these works: Castellanos' use of the republican mother stresses women's subaltern position in neoliberal Salvador. Escudos' short story also takes place in a corrupt and violent post-war Salvador. Hernández' short stories "Vaca" and "Mediodía de frontera" also depict the daily trials and tribulations of Salvadorans. The first story revolves around a strong woman who reclaims her agency, while the second calls attention to women's marginalized position within the nation.

Chapter four focuses on Mario Bencastro's novel *Odisea del Norte* (1999) and Leticia Hernández-Linares book of poetry, *Razor Edges of My Tongue* (2002) which present contrasting depictions of female immigrants and their subjectivities. *Odisea del Norte* narrates the experiences of Calixto, an undocumented immigrant to the United States, and her wife Lina, a *campesina* who lacks agency and performs traditional gender roles. Also included in the novel is Teresa, a political refugee who is deported to El Salvador. Hernández-Linares bases one of her poems on Prudencia Ayala, who tried to run for president of El Salvador in 1930 to protest the shortage of women in politics. Padilla argues that the poems of *Razor Edges of My Tongue* critique the proliferation of sweatshops populated by female immigrants in search of the American dream.

The final chapter explores three novels by Marcos McPeck Villatoro: *Home Killings* (2001), *Minos* (2003), and *A Venom beneath the Skin* (2005), which feature Romilia Chacón, a second-generation Salvadoran-American detective. Romilia's identity as a Latina stresses her Salvadoran roots and the fluidity of her identity. The novels include references to the Salvadoran past that are given a new relevance as death squads appear in the US. Through the savvy and courageous detective, Padilla notes, McPeck Villatoro posits that Salvadoran women are influenced both by national and transnational developments.

The main strength of *Changing Women, Changing Nation* is the scope of the analyses of Salvadoran and trans-Salvadoran literary works produced in the last forty years, covering © 2018 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 16, Spring 2018 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>
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material ranging from testimonies to forms of popular culture such as the detective novel in which the main character is a Latina, second-generation Salvadoran. The variety of literary forms examined will extend the shelf life of this pioneering and well-written volume.

Carolina Rocha, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville