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Review / Reseña

The Generation of '72: Latin America's Forced Global Citizens. By Brantley Nicholson and Sophia A McClennen. Raleigh, North Carolina: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2013.

Tension and International Displacement in the Generation of '72

Aja Roberts

University of New Mexico

The Generation of '72: The Forced Global Citizens of Latin America (2013), edited by Brantley Nicholson and Sophia A. McClennen, sheds light on a generation of Latin American writers that are limited in the recognition they rightfully deserve as a literary group. Few anthologies are dedicated solely to the authors of the Generation of '72, whose fictional work is strongly characterized by their participants' experiences with displacement. The Generation of '72, sandwiched in between and overshadowed by the distinguished Boom generation and the so-called writers of the McOndo phenomenon "collectively negotiates the tension between the regional and the global in a way that no other twentieth

century cultural movement is forced to do so in Latin America” (Nicholson and McClennen 15). Several of the authors discussed in *The Generation of '72* have previously been examined in works such as Cedomil Goic’s *Mitos degradados* (1992), Idelber Avelar’s *The Untimely Present: Post Dictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, and Donald Shaw’s *The Post-Boom and Spanish American Fiction*. However, *The Generation of '72: The Forced Global Citizens of Latin America* is where we experience a continued discourse and investigation of the Generation of '72 as an interconnected group. This approach helps the reader and scholar of contemporary Latin American literature better understand not only the sociopolitical and aesthetic underpinnings of the group, but also of the output of individual authors. The goal of the editors and contributing writers of this book is to bring up to date the theoretical discussion of The Generation of '72 using a primarily cultural studies theoretical approach, amongst others such as queer theory and psychoanalytical theory.

The anthology focuses primarily on authors from the Southern Cone, principally Argentina (Ricardo Piglia, Osvaldo Soriano and Luisa Valezuela), and Chile (Ariel Dorfman, Diamela Elitt and Antonio Skármeta). Uruguay is represented by Cristina Peri Rossi, examined by María Rosa Olivera-Williams. Beyond the Southern Cone, *The Generation of '72* also looks into the work of Colombian author Fernando Vallejo, discussed by Juanita Aristizábal. Finally, the volume makes an excursus into the Caribbean, shedding light onto the work of Reinaldo Arenas with a contribution by Lázaro Lima.

As Randolph D. Pope, who examines the work of Antonio Skármeta, states “The depth and variety of this generation is impressive, especially when considered, as in this collection of essays, as a cohort of very diverse individual creators” (186). What is essential is that this geographic differentiation reflects a certain social and political common conjecture. As indicated in the essays of the anthology, this socio-political configuration generates a discourse of resistance—represented in allegories of displacement and exile.

The Generation of '72: The Forced Global Citizens of Latin America begins with Patrick Dove’s essay on Argentine author Ricardo Piglia (1941).

Piglia began his career in the late 1960s and devoted much of his writing to the noir genre, and similar to Borges was inspired by North American authors Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. However, whereas according to Doyle one of the defining characteristics of the North American noir genre is its faith in justice and its dedication to fighting a corrupted system (33), in the Latin American noir genre “the promise of modernity has been found empty and justice has been rendered impossible” (33). Piglia’s early noir echoes his disillusion with Argentina’s political system and in its ability to dole out justice under a repressive sociopolitical regime.

It is in Piglia’s most recent crime novel, *Blanco Nocturno* (2010), that we see one of the recurrent themes of *The Generation of ’72*, namely the “displacement of national capitalism and import substitution industrialization by transnational capitalism and financial speculation” (45). Using Giorgio Agamben’s theory of fracture, Dove’s article demonstrates how *Blanco Nocturno* links Argentina’s 1976-83 military dictatorship to Carlos Saul Menem’s neoliberal policies (45), reflecting the globalizing impetus of the Generation of ’72 and its problematization of the deleterious effects of this phenomenon—in this case the spread of transnational capitalism.

The Argentine military coup of 1976 and the country’s economic crisis in the aftermath of the 1983 democratic transition are two vectors around which the Argentine expression of the Generation of ’72 literary production revolved. These two themes, which Dove discussed in his essay, are also prominent in Leila Lehnen’s essay “Itinerant Citizens: Imagining Global Citizenship in the Works of Osvaldo Soriano.” Here Lehnen examines how Soriano’s travel narratives allegorize the crises of citizenship in Argentina. Whereas Dove reads globalization through the lens of transnational capitalism, Lehnen examines how Soriano’s novels emphasize geographical displacement to represent the crisis of the national community.

The volume’s third essay about Argentina focuses on Luisa Valenzuela’s *Como en la guerra*. Written between 1973-75, the novel was only published in 1977. As Geoffrey Kantaris explains, the text had to be

rewritten several times before it passed censorship, which was in effect even before the 1976 military coup. In his essay, "The Psychosomatic text: Re-reading Psychoanalysis and Semiotics in *Como en la guerra*, or the Sister(s) of Oedipus," Kantaris employs Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Butler's ideas on gender to probe into the novel's psychological investigation of existential identity, assimilation and exclusion. Kantaris contrasts Valenzuela's interpretation of psychoanalysis and "Butler's displacement of the Lacanian symbolic in the switching of circuits between Oedipus and Antigone" (101). Displacement, in Valenzuela's text, occurs at the level of interpersonal relations as well within the ontological sphere.

As suggested by the composition of Nicholson's and McClennen's anthology, exile is another key aspect that defines the Generation of '72. In María Rosa Olivera-Williams's essay, "El legado del exilio de Cristina Peri Rossi: un mapa para géneros e identidades," Olivera-Williams incorporates Linda McDowell's theory that bodies serve as places with distinct political boundaries to describe the main characters of Rossi's *La nave de los locos* (1984), as "cuerpos fuera de lugar"(125). Olivera-Williams argues that the "cuerpos fuera de lugar" symbolize a state of exile that, in turn destabilizes hegemonic gender definitions. According to Olivera-Williams, Peri Rossi interrogates traditional gender roles and their attendant exclusions through the protagonist of *La nave de los locos*, Equis. As suggested by his name (which can be read as a reference to the female chromosome), Equis is a man who feels uncomfortable whenever he occupies the traditional role of the powerful male (125). Olivera-Williams proposes that Equis' discomfort challenges the heteronormative culture that buttressed and was supported by the military dictatorship. Equis' uneasiness allegorizes not only ontological displacement, but also forced dislocation, such as Peri Rossi's own exile in Spain during the 1973-85 dictatorship in Uruguay.

Exile is also a key topic in Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (1992). In Lázaro Lima's essay, "The King's Toilet: Cruising Literary History in Reinaldo Arenas' *Before Night Falls*," he approaches exile from the lens of sexuality and gender identity. Using Leo Bersani's queer theory approach, Lima discusses the different adaptations of the book in film and opera and demonstrates how Arenas' autobiography has

been coopted in order to support different agendas. Arenas' autobiography commences with him in a public restroom cruising for sex only to be rejected. In his essay, Lima reads the incident in the bathroom as a transformation of Arenas' body into a literary artifact ("Arenas' body becomes a book and the loo's queens his unwilling literary critics" [231]). Lima discusses how, in its reception of the book the LGBTQ community in the United States viewed Arenas as a victim of the Castro administration and perceived his exile to Miami as a result of the oppression of his homosexual identity. However, Lima problematizes this reading. He shows how Cuban immigrants in the United States cast Arenas' exile and autobiography as a protest against the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the Castro administration. For Lima both approaches to Arenas' text are reductive, and reflect personal oppositional ideologies to the Cuban government. According to Lima, what is lost is the literary value of *Antes que anochezca*. Just as Arenas was exiled from Cuba, his text is displaced from the literary realm via ideological readings. Lima's essay rescues the literary impetus of Arenas' autobiography by reading it through the lens of gender identity and sexuality, while also paying attention to its critical stance towards the Cuban Revolution and by adding a discussion of the literary components of *Antes que anochezca* to the mix.

During the most violent and oppressive years of the authoritarian regimes in Latin America the majority of the writers of the Generation of '72 were exiled. However, novelist Diamela Eltit stayed in Chile during Augusto Pinochet's reign of terror. José Agustín Pastén elucidates how Eltit's writings trace a genealogy between this period and the economically 'successful' Chile of today. Through "Radiografía de un pueblo enfermo," Pastén praises Eltit's determination to succeed as a writer even though she faced much criticism for being a woman and for writing in what can be considered a cryptic style. Pastén argues that "despite the crowded post-dictatorial literary field in Chile, Eltit has left a lasting inscription on the Latin American canon that speaks both precisely and abstractly to the existential vicissitudes of the late-20th century Southern Cone" (McClennen and Nicholson 24). Pastén's contribution traces the trajectory of Eltit's works and how her literary career is enmeshed with her sociocultural

activism. As such, the essay focuses on Eltit's involvement as a performance artist with the Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA) and on her most recent novels *Jamás el fuego nunca* (2007) and *Impuesto a la carne* (2010). Pastén's essay suggests that, similar to Piglia's critique of the spread of transnational capitalism and its negative effect on Argentinian society, Eltit's literary productions articulate a critique of the problematic legacy of neoliberal economic policies in Chile.

Another Chilean author whose work bears the traces of the country's violent recent history is Ariel Dorfman. Like so many of the Generation of '72, Dorfman was forced to leave Chile in 1973, the year of the military coup. John Riofrio's essay "Connecting September 11's," focuses on Dorfman's most recent romance, *Americanos: Los pasos de Murieta* (2009). In this essay, Riofrio juxtaposes 19th century California with post 9/11 U.S. history "in order to explore larger issues regarding history, identity, and the right to interpretive power" (78). The appropriation of California from Mexico by the US and 9/11 are connected: both highlight the consequences of U.S. imperialism. In *Americanos*, Dorfman also connects Chile's independence from colonial Spain (1810) and the Mexican American war (1846-1848). The loss of Mexican territory to the United States—primarily California—is represented in the romance not only as a physical divide, but also as a symbolic rift. Dorfman's text proposes that the US usurpation of Mexican territories is ground zero for the Manichean modus operandi that culminates in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11th, 2009. By juxtaposing different historical episodes, Riofrio demonstrates how the narration of history must be polivocal. At the same time, the mediation of history (through state discourse, for example) generates violence, often by creating justifications for said violence.

As indicated by Riofrio, Dorfman's literary fame is in part due to the accessible manner in which he narrates history and in which he describes Chilean popular culture. Another author who has also received international acclaim is Antonio Skármeta. Similar to other writers of the Generation of '72, Skármeta was exiled to Argentina and later Berlin where he wrote *Soñé que la nieve ardía* (1975): a political novel that

describes the tyranny of the Argentinian and Chilean dictatorships. In Randolph D. Pope's contribution, "Antonio Skármenta's Uniqueness," he asks the reader, "What makes Skármenta an internationally successful writer?" (183) Pope shows the techniques Skármenta uses in order to appeal to an international readership. Pope notes for example how Skármeta prefers to use less colloquial Chilean Spanish. He opts instead for more mainstream variation of Spanish. Using Skármeta's literary output as an example, Pope maintains that much of the literature produced by The Generation of '72 writers has lost its oppositional stance over time. At times, this occurs through the film adaptations of literary works of the Generation of 72' writers. Pope demonstrates this depoliticization through his analysis of the cinematic adaptation of Skármeta's 1984 novel, *Ardiente paciencia*, which was the basis for the internationally acclaimed film *Il postino* (Michael Radford, 1994).

Social awareness is a reoccurring theme in the writing of The Generation of '72. However, not all of the writers from this generation voice this awareness in an overt manner. Juanita Cristina Aristizábal uncovers the ironic and polemic nature of Colombian author Fernando Vallejo in her essay "Gazing Backwards in Fernando Vallejo." Aristizábal claims that Vallejo is an odd member of this generation due to the representation of a seemingly autobiographical narrator that reoccurs throughout his novels. The narrator is an old man (Fernando) who is also a writer. Fernando is a jaded cosmopolite who can be frequently seen occupying various cities in Europe and Latin America. What makes this narrator so strange is that he is an elitist, a racist who "critiques modern egalitarian values" (Aristizábal 206). Nonetheless, despite his seemingly apolitical nature, Aristizábal argues that via Fernando Vallejo articulates an ironic critique of the Colombian government's efforts and subsequent failure to modernize the country.

As McClennen and Nicholson's anthology suggests, the thematic pairing of the authoritarian and the neoliberal experience is one of the distinguishing traits of the Generation of 72'. One of the fallouts of this pairing is a sense of displacement. Dislocation is a common denominator in all the essays included in *The Generation of '72: The Forced Global Citizens*

of Latin America. This dislocation, however, assumes manifold guises: exile, both internal and external, estrangement from self and from country, a breakdown of social ties. In this sense, the anthology shows us how the Generation of '72', while grappling with the legacy of the Boom, also foreshadows many of preoccupations of present-day Latin American literature. One can recognize the traces of writers such as Piglia and Arenas, Vallejo and Eltit in the novels of travel and consumer culture that are coming out of Latin America nowadays. And similar to the texts of Soriano and Dorfman, the books of writers such as Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Rodrigo Fresán highlight the tension between the local/regional and the global that has been a constant in Latin American letters since at least *modernismo*.

The Generation of '72: The Forced Global Citizens of Latin America reminds us that the writers of this generation not only produced an important testimony of their epoch through their writing, but that their literary output continues to be culturally and socially relevant at the present time. This collective book is thus an important and valuable tool for any scholar of Latin American literature and culture to understand Latin American literature and society during a time of crisis and to comprehend how this crisis has shaped and continues to shape Latin American countries and their culture.