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Review/Reseña

Senderos de violencia: Latinoamérica y sus narrativas armadas. Oswaldo Estrada ed. Valencia: Albatrós, 2015.

Fictional Violence and the *senderos* of Literary Criticism

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The new collection of critical essays ably edited by Oswaldo Estrada and published by Albatrós accomplishes a necessary readjustment. By integrating narcoviolence and political violence, it invites readers to reconsider the repressive regimes and guerrilla wars of the eighties within the flows of capital that also fuel drug violence today. The follow-on effects—trauma, revenants, displacement, and exile—haunt their victims all the same, whether the crimes were committed within national frameworks or extra-national, deterritorialized flows.

Edited volumes in some sense have the effect of rendering an x-ray image of critical and theoretical concerns at a given moment. Two tendencies emerge clearly here: the continued relevance of Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence, including subcategories of the latter and complementary formulations by other theorists, notably Bourdieu; and the neo-liberal memory market as elaborated by Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh A.

Payne in their collection *Accounting for Violence* (2011)—a tendency underlined by Bilbija's own excellent contribution to this volume, and by the editor in his introduction.

Striking a balance between regional currents and local specificity, Estrada has gathered nineteen essays under the rubrics of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, Peru, and the Southern Cone. Most of the essays focus on quite recent novels and films. The book thus documents a vital current within Latin American letters today, which, in Estrada's words, "sigue andando con pasos firmes por los caminos de la violencia," defying some of the common stereotypes of post-Bolaño literature in the region (Estrada 26).

Essays by accomplished, mid-career creative writers head up (and in one case close) the geographically defined sections of the volume. These constitute a notable, not to say invaluable, contribution to the debate. By bridging the divide between academic and public sphere discourse on violence, they suggest that the two discursive spaces are mutually determining and remind us that creative writers as public intellectuals continue at the forefront of analysis, interpretation, and processing of violent histories in the region.

Two of the essays by creative writers are quite concrete, using either the mode of reportage or that of the personal essay. Rodrigo Rey Rosa narrates the exhumation of bodies in Guatemala's indigenous regions as a local counterpoint to the nationally and internationally visible genocide trial of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. In a more personal and introspective tone, Lina Meruane ruminates on her experience during the Pinochet dictatorship as a schoolgirl shielded by youth and privilege from the horrors of those years (and yet not truly shielded, as her piece makes clear). She analyzes not only violence vis-à-vis class positioning, but also the effect of adult silence, fear, secret-keeping, and public pretenses on children.

Three of the essays by creative writers take a more analytical approach. Juan Villoro weaves together numerous threads to explain the current "crisis of governability" in Mexico. Observing that much narcoliterature portrays the trafficker or *sicario* as an apocalyptic villain, Villoro argues that this kind of depiction shields readers from the proximity of

evil or rather the degree to which crime *is* us, as banal as we are. Its causes are likewise banal, proximate, caused by political failures, and susceptible to political solutions. For his part, Diego Trellez Paz reflects on the process of writing his novel *Bioy*, a much-discussed contribution to the corpus of fictional works on the Peruvian internal conflict. Sandra Lorenzano uses her essay to ruminate on memory in the context of literary production dealing with the Argentine Dirty War.

Section 1, on Mexico, includes four academic essays. In the first, Oswaldo Zavala compellingly develops Villoro's intuition, mentioned above, analyzing books in the *narconovela negra* vein by Élmer Mendoza, Bernardo Fernández BEF, Alejandro Almazán, and Juan José Rodríguez. These novels depoliticize both the figure of the narco and the assassinated body of his victim, he argues, but they must be repoliticized, that is, re-inscribed within the particular histories and policies of which they are a product. Far from heralding a post-national or post-political form of power, Zavala suggests, the cartels prove the continued relevance and dominance of the state—a corrupt state that has created the cartels and uses them as its scapegoat. In the second article, Alejandra Márquez takes up the figure of the female kingpin in Orfa Alarcón's *Perra brava*, Yurri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*, and the film *Miss Bala* directed by Gerardo Naranjo. The female protagonists, who appropriate masculine machismo and violence to survive, are simultaneously marginalized as stereotypical whore or traitor figures, she suggests, thus becoming both perpetrators and victims of the gendered violence that in the end cuts them down.

The third Mexico essay, by Rafael Acosta, introduces a welcome comparative element by looking at paramilitary organizations in Colombia and Mexico as depicted in Alonso Sánchez Baute's *Libranos del bien* and Rascón Banda's *Contrabando*, as well as songs and other elements of popular culture. He suggests that that armed criminal groups in both Mexico and Colombia harness pop culture to justify the violence they perpetrate, and points out the irony inherent in the fact that while counterhegemonic discourses such as the *narcocorrido* seem to encourage subaltern voices, *narcocultura* as constructed in the popular media ultimately justifies the

oppression of subaltern sectors at the hands of the cartels or paramilitaries. Closing out the Mexico section, José Ramón Ortigas looks at the liminal spaces inhabited by Central American migrants crossing through Mexico as depicted in Alejandro Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas*, Antonio Ortuño's *La fila india*, and Cary Fukunaga's film *Sin nombre*. The characters in these works are subject continually to violence, degradation, and abuse at the hands of the Zetas, the Mara Salvatrucha, and even middle class Mexican citizens in good standing. Ortigas catalogues the spaces in which such violence occurs with reference to Foucault's notion of heterotopias. Thus, both Acosta's Ortigas' essays open the Mexican discussion to transnational flows and criminal organizations that straddle borders.

Section 2 on Central American and the Caribbean groups three academic essays following Rodrigo Rey Rosa's piece (already discussed). In the first, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner gives a smart and cogent reading of Rey Rosa's *El material humano*, a novelized account of the discovery, in 2005, of the archive of Guatemala's Policía Nacional, disbanded in 1996. This "archivo del mal," comprising close to 8,000 linear meters of files, contains administrative records of kidnappings, killings and other violations of human rights carried out by the state from the mid-twenties onwards. Setting her discussion in the context of theories of the archive, Ortiz Wallner traces how the narrator in Rey Rosa's novel finds the personal and the historical superimposed in this space of enunciation rife with a century of biopolitics. The second essay in this section, by María del Carmen Caña Jiménez, is quite theoretical. She postulates a kind of "latent violence" characterized by flux and fluidity that inhabits the liminal space between structural violence and the violence of the event (objective and subjective violence). Akin to a Deleuzian line of flight, latent violence denotes the pure potential for violence, omnipresent though lacking substance, which surfaces in affective states such as vulnerability, fear, and anxiety. Caña Jiménez demonstrates the usefulness of the concept with readings of two novels and a film, Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco: Thomas Bernard en San Salvador*, Adolfo Méndez Vides's *Las murallas*, and *El regreso*, directed by Hernán Jiménez.

Concluding the Central American and Caribbean section, John Waldron changes geographical location slightly, analyzing recent texts from Puerto Rico, which, unlike other contexts presented in the book, do not have a recent history of internal conflict or drug wars. Waldron suggests that these texts treat violence as an irruption of colonial trauma within the symbolic fabric, thus contesting the normative image of docility the island has constructed for itself. The texts he examines, including Mayra Santos-Febres's novel *Fe en disfraz* and Francisco Font Acevedo's short story *Guantes de latex*, turn on shocking and seemingly unmotivated scenes of physical torment and death. If, as Waldron argues, the violence that constitutes colony (in particular, the violence of slavery) recurs in these scenes, they can be understood as a call to break with normative ideologies of docility.

Section 3, which takes up post-conflict Peru, includes three academic essays. The first, by Liliana Wendorf, reads several texts (Rosa García Montero's film *Las malas intenciones*, José de Piérola's story collection *Sur y Norte*, Daniel Alarcón's novel *At Night We Walk in Circles*) with attention to structural patterns of closeness and distance in their depiction of violence. The second, by Rocío Ferrera, takes up depictions of women during the conflict, which, as the author notes, have largely been omitted from the critical discourse even as the critical corpus has grown. Ferreira's article aspires to change this oversight by detailing literary production on the Sendero war thus far by women. Her essay offers a guided tour of several of the major novels from both the pre- and post-Comisión de Verdad y Reconciliación periods. Major writers she touches on include Carmen Ollé, Pilar Dughi, Karina Pacheco and Claudia Salazar, among several others.

The final Peruvian essay, by editor Oswaldo Estrada, identifies ongoing shifts and direction changes within the accumulating corpus of narrative about Peru's internal conflict. Estrada argues that attention has increasingly shifted from stereotypical portrayals of the war's violence toward such elements as affect, marginality, and fear of the other. He focuses his discussion through two recent novels exemplifying these trends, Diego Trelles Paz's *Bioy* and Óscar Colchado Lucio's *El cerco de Lima*, showing how these texts exceed the limits of subjective violence and begin to delineate the

terrains of objective violence associated with the Peruvian war. His essay comes as a welcome follow-up to Trelles Paz's account of writing *Bioy*, which heads the Peru section.

The last section, on Southern Cone contexts, includes articles on Chile and Argentina. Dianna C. Niebylski studies *Impuesto a la carne* and *Fuerzas especiales* by Diamela Eltit, novels that take on the violent exclusions of marginalized social groups throughout Chile's history. Despite their differences, Niebylski suggests, both books are concerned to delineate the three-way linkages between structural violence, poverty and corporal/moral abjection. A biopolitical conception of power thus underwrites each novel's microcosm (a hospital in one case, a city slum in the other), which allegorically, or perhaps metonymically, reflects the diseased body of the neo-liberal nation. This section's second essay, by Ksenija Bilbija (whose dominant position in the study of post-conflict trauma and memory under neo-liberalism is evident throughout the collection), takes the form of an elegant reading of three linked texts, Luz Arce's testimonial *El infierno* (1993), the book of Arce interviews Michael Lázarra published fifteen years on registering her response to the reactions her book aroused (*Luz Arce: Después del infierno*, 2008), and a novel fictionalizing a remarkably similar case: that of a former combatant and regime collaborator who tells her story in a testimony, Arturo Fontaine's *La vida doble*. Carefully situating each text vis-à-vis the memory market at its historical moment, Bilbija reads the rhetoric of each, touching on key concepts of value, bravery, treason, complicity, guilt, truth, and confession.

Switching countries, the section's third essay by Corinne Pubill discusses the aestheticizing of violence in the context of the Argentine dictatorship. Beginning from aesthetic postures and qualities such as silence, the cryptic, the excessive, and the understood, she demonstrates the ways in which recent Argentine fiction (specifically, Cristián Rodríguez's *Madrugada negra*), aestheticize violence as a political protest against the horrors of the dictatorship. In the section's final essay (also the last in the book), Fernando Reati delineates the differences between collective and individual responsibility for complicity with state terror. He begins his chapter with two

riveting personal memories of radical militancy in Argentina and the oppressive police tactics with which it was met. He proceeds to explore the turn to individual responsibility (that is, away from conceptions of collective guilt) through readings of two recent novels, Antonio Dal Masetto's *La culpa*, and Leopoldo Brizuela's *Una misma noche*. Whereas the first of these presents guilt as something ahistorical and universal, making it impossible to assume the burden of personal responsibility, even when admitting one's guilt may feel salutary, the second is more nuanced in treating levels of guilt defined through categories put forward by German theoretician Karl Jaspers after World War II.

What stands out most powerfully after reading *Senderos de violencia* is that from north to south fiction writers and filmmakers are engaging with histories of violence in dynamic ways. Their works have become increasingly central to national literary scenes across the region. Furthermore, despite vastly different histories, attempts to mediate trauma and violence through fiction and film possess a notable, regional coherence. The essays presented in this volume blaze productive critical paths for approaching these texts. *Senderos de violencia* should be required reading for anyone interested in fictional treatments of violence in Latin America today.