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Review/Reseña

Gayle Walker and Kiki Suárez, *Every Woman is a World: Interviews with Women of Chiapas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Every Woman has a Voice: Recording the memories of Chiapas' Grandames

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First and foremost, this book is a captivating selection of very personal stories by the doyennes of Chiapas, every one of them with a momentous history to look back upon. These stories aren't long but there is a bountiful twenty-eight of them, each accompanied by a portrait photograph of the respective narrator. The images themselves are rich and telling, providing a valuable first impression that sets the tone of each story. The narratives by Chiapanec women from sixty to over a hundred years of age were recorded by the authors in individual sessions and vary both in depth and length. They are sketches more than exhaustive accounts, and it is the women themselves who decide

which aspects of their eventful lives they wish to flesh out with details, which to only hint at, and which to omit entirely. As a result there is a lot to be read in between the lines and this is what makes *Every Woman is a World* by Gayle Walker and Kiki Suárez particularly interesting.

The life-stories presented here feature a broad spectrum of women who have almost all grown up in Chiapas during the first half of the 20th century and who have lived through decisive historic moments such as the Mexican Revolution, the devastating pandemic of the Spanish Flu or the violent land redistribution under the rule of President Lázaro Cárdenas. Mostly, however, they focus on the very personal events that marked these women's lives: the relationship with their parents, first love, marriage, childbirth and the loss of close kin.

As there are enormous differences in ethnicity and class between the women featured in this book, these experiences take on starkly varying forms. While one woman recalls with pride how her husband took part in disowning Chiapas' landed elite in the late 1930s, the next still bemoans having had her farm burned down by a group of indigenous revolutionaries led by the same man. While one woman describes the spoils of having been born into the well-to-do families of San Cristóbal, another recalls the racism that same elite displayed towards her and her indigenous kin. Although it doesn't look it at first glance, this book is highly political as it provides marginalized women with a voice that speaks of their systematic exploitation as a cheap workforce in the capitalist economy, as housemaids for the San Cristóbal *ladino* elite, and as sex objects, cooks, and child bearers for the men in their lives. The political salience of this book is highlighted in the foreword by the renowned journalist Elena Poniatowska, herself an expert biographer of Mexican women and co-founder of Mexico's leading leftwing daily *La Jornada*.

In spite of the broad range of biographical sketches there are several links between many of the women. Thus, quite a few are Lacandón Maya from the border area with Guatemala, a group of indigenous people "discovered" in the mid 20th century and subsequently studied and documented by the Danish anthropologist *de pasión* Frans Blom and his Swiss wife Trudy Duby. Ever since, the Lacandón have been paraded around as the "original Maya," taken advantage of by the government and logging companies, and eventually

converted to evangelism. Although Trudy Duby Blom was not herself interviewed by the authors due to her death in 1993, she looms large in the book as episodes from her own biography feature in the narratives of many indigenous women with whom she had a personal relationship. It is notable that a large percentage of those interviewed had been anthropologists' study subjects before. The fact that many of the women are well versed in telling their stories makes them all the more captivating but it also left me wondering how representative these accounts actually are.

These narratives by indigenous women often speak of dire poverty, which comes across in childhood memories of hunger as well as in vivid descriptions of tasty foods that only were available on rare occasions. They also tell tales of violence administered to mothers and children by drunk fathers, which frequently disappeared from the girls' lives either due to an early death or because they abandoned their families. Quite a few of these women later shared the fate of their mothers as they were left by their partners to bring up their children alone. Others learned from such experiences and chose not to become involved with men at all. Most interviewed indigenous women were still alive at such an advanced age only because they had managed to provide for themselves by mastering a trade such as weaving and pottery or by becoming a midwife. This may be the reason that their narratives display the course life has taken for them as one of progress towards higher living standards. Frequently they also describe the changing world around them in optimistic terms. Thus, the arrival of electricity and roads that now link San Cristóbal with remote villages, along with the fact that cement houses have replaced adobe ones with dirt floors is usually regarded as a good thing. Interestingly, such stories are often contradicted by the authors' expressing their regret for the loss of traditional cultural elements, some of which just happen to include such things as adobe houses with dirt floors.

Another group of women providing the stories in this book comes from San Cristóbal's well to do *ladino* elite, the *coletos*, who have traditionally been at odds with the indigenous population of Chiapas as their wealth is owed to their systematic exploitation on the *fincas*; for centuries these landed estates have produced cattle, coffee, and other crops employing first peons in debt servitude and later underpaid

landless laborers. Many *coletos* either owned *fincas* themselves or grew rich from trading with them. The discrimination of the indigenous population continues to this day and as some women in the book recall, they were not allowed on the city streets after nightfall as recent as the 1960s.

For me, the most interesting contributions in this book have come from two Catholic Capucine nuns whose grassroots work has greatly influenced political organization in Eastern Chiapas. A member of a congregation made up purely of Tzeltal Indígenas relates how her dreaming about the Virgin Mary led to her becoming a nun – not at all an unusual way to arrive at one’s vocation in indigenous Chiapas. The sister of the Divine Shepherd speaks about how important her work has been in promoting indigenous women’s rights and emphasizes the equally decisive role of the Zapatista uprising in 1994. *Every Woman is a World* would have profited from a discussion of that important event, of its antecedents and context, but regrettably it is only briefly mentioned on the last pages.

What all stories in the book share is a female perspective. While this is nuanced by personal experience and social standing, most of the women converge in their views on the men in their lives. Although these are not always explicit targets of criticism, the bulk of them seem to have been oppressive, jealous, and abusive fathers and husbands, who have made life for most women in this book so much harder than it already was due to poverty and marginalization. Thus, the reader learns of indigenous girls who were forced into marrying much older men and who became mothers at the age of thirteen. Physical abuse and alcoholism appear to be the norm rather than the exception. Often, catholic tradition was used to reinforce the women’s role of being passive recipients of the lot dealt to them by the men in their lives. Shining exceptions are the two aforementioned nuns who made use of religion to forego that fate.

Every Woman is a World doesn’t attempt an analysis of the presented narratives nor does it try to systematize the twenty-eight life-stories. It doesn’t claim to be more than a presentation of raw material and therein lays its honesty. However, after finishing the last of the women’s stories, the reader is surprised by an unexpected “People, Customs and Events” section. It is here, right at the end of the book,

that themes and personalities, which are key for a thorough understanding of many of the women's biographies, are finally addressed. Unfortunately, important issues such as the Mexican Revolution, Land Reform, Evangelism and the Zapatistas are only cursorily touched on, sometimes by taking recourse only to a singular and outdated source; more often than not there is no reference as to where the information in this last section derives from. The work as a whole would have greatly benefited from investing a little more scientific rigor in researching these key issues and by bringing them to the front of the book.

The ethnographic thickness of the descriptions makes up for some of the details that may have been lost in translation from Lacandón, Tzotzil or Tzeltal Maya, to Spanish and eventually to English. It is the broad colorful spectrum of personal biographies that makes this book such a rich and exciting source not only for the historian and social scientist but generally for everyone with an interest in Mexico, its indigenous people, and its women.