



Vol. 11, No. 3, Spring 2014, 368-372

Review / Reseña

Padilla, Yajaira M. *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives..* Albany: State U of New York P, 2012.

Trans-Salvadoran Narratives and Gender

Elizabeth Smith

University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill

Central America is an infamous part of the world. With a dark history of economic instability and political unrest, its countries are simultaneously ignored—in both literary research and the public consciousness of the United States—and stereotyped as being zones comparatively lacking in worthy literature. Yajaira M. Padilla's book attempts to remedy this situation. She covers a wide range of Salvadoran and Salvadoran-American literary productions from 1980 to 2005, and demonstrates the importance of this literature inside and outside of El

Salvador. By discussing recent literature created during and after El Salvador's civil war, Padilla analyzes the portrayals of women in trans-Salvadoran narratives in order to demonstrate how women are used as representations of changing gender roles and nationhood.

Padilla begins her work with an introduction reviewing the recent history of El Salvador and justifying her use of literature created by Salvadorans in El Salvador and in the United States as part of the same literary corpus. She states that in spite of mass migration to the United States during the civil war and during El Salvador's neoliberal reform years, Salvadorans outside the country's borders still continuously shape the conceptions of Salvadoran identity via their economic and cultural influences. Because of how intertwined and mutually influential these populations of Salvadorans are, according to Padilla, a trans-national and trans-Salvadoran approach provides a deeper understanding of nationhood and identity formation. Padilla further specifies her research by narrowing this corpus to portrayals of women and states that she will be using a "gendered history through the optic of cultural production" to analyze the allegorical images of women in trans-Salvadoran narratives to illuminate the intersection of "gender, literature, and identity" (1-2).

Padilla accomplishes this by reviewing a wide range of genres—testimonial novels, fiction, and poetry—with an equally wide range of portrayals of Salvadoran women from new and empowering to mere reflections of a patriarchal society. The book's first chapter discusses Manlio Argueta's testimonial novels *Un día en la vida* (1980) and *Cuzcatlán: Donde bate la Mar del Sur* (1986). Both works use the voices of *campesina* women to elaborate a history of rural oppression and make these women compelling protagonists. Padilla's use of Argueta's novels *Un día en la vida* and *Cuzcatlán: Donde bate la Mar del Sur* allows a more nuanced view of the author's works even as Padilla chooses to read them through a dual narrative and ideological lens. According to Padilla, the narrative quality of the novels allows for the voices of peasant women to be empowered and the ideological qualities of Argueta's novels allows for a different conceptualization of female agency and power. Padilla does an excellent job of selecting powerful and specific moments from both books—

such as when Lupe in *Cuzcatlán* silently watches her husband being taken to his death in order to protect her family—to prove that these *testimonios* allow for a reconceptualization of traditional gender identities for rural Salvadoran women during the war.

In the second chapter, Padilla contrasts Argueta's effective works with other *testimonios* that fail to completely rethink the role of women and instead reinforce popular conceptions of female *guerrilleras*. Padilla uses a mix of testimonial novels created by *guerrilleras*—Guadalupe Martínez's *Las cárceles clandestinas de El Salvador: Libertad por el secuestro de un oligarca* (1996) and Nidia Díaz's *Nunca estuve sola* (1987)—and about *guerrilleras* with Claribel Alegría and Darwin Flakoll's book *No me agarran viva: La mujer salvadoreña en la lucha* (1987). Differing from Argueta's works focusing on rural *campesina* women, these *testimonios* focus on educated, urban women who served in leadership positions with the FMLN during the civil war. Padilla points out that all of these authors fail to recognize the full importance of gender in their works while painting a revolutionary ideal of the woman. These portrayals of women, which Padilla views as representational as well as communicative, show how women simultaneously adopted masculine roles while also epitomizing “abnegated motherhood” as the warrior who sacrifices everything for the cause (45). By using works that appear chronologically after those in chapter one, Padilla shows how the image of the women in El Salvador evolved in works during and after the civil war and how these images range from incredibly empowering to very well-intentioned, though still landing within the realm of patriarchy.

This evolution of female imagery continues in chapter three as Padilla describes post-war narratives in the novel *La diabla en el espejo* (2000), by Horacio Castellanos Moya, and in three short stories: “La noche de los escritores asesinos” (1997), by Jacinta Escudos, and “Vaca” and “Mediodía de Frontera” (2002), by Claudia Hernández. Each of these works focuses on the ever-present violence and cynicism in neoliberal El Salvador. Castellanos Moya's novel differs from the short stories by reinforcing a patriarchal view of women rather than critiquing the sexism and marginalization of women, as we see in the stories by Escudos and

Hernández. Padilla creates a continuous analysis by showing two differing portrayals of woman as nation. In Castellanos Moya, women are depicted as rejecting their republican motherhood and therefore are the cause of problems, whereas in Escudos and Hernández women represent the failings of a post-war El Salvador. The structural contrasts between representations that reinforce patriarchal ideals vs. innovative and empowering visions of women, which are presented in a linear fashion, allow Padilla to guide the reader simultaneously through her book and through a changing El Salvador.

Continuing in chapters four and five, Padilla moves beyond El Salvador's border to incorporate trans-national works. In chapter four, Padilla analyzes *Odisea del Norte* (1999), by Mario Bencastro, and Leticia Hernández-Linares's spoken word poetry in *Razor Edges of my Tongue* (2002). Both of these works describe Salvadoran immigration to the United States, but in Bencastro's novel, the only representations of women are as idealized images of the homeland or as disenfranchised refugees with little to no power. In contrast, Hernández-Linares "reclaim[s] Salvadoran women's voices and underscore[s] the oppression and exploitation of female immigrants" while showing how women served as economic providers for migrant families (95). Padilla's trans-Salvadoran study continues in chapter five with an analysis of the Romilia Chacón mystery series, which feature a Salvadoran-American protagonist, by Marcos McPeck Villatoro. In this series, Romilia represents the conflicting and multifaceted identities of Salvadoran-Americans born in the United States and how women shape and influence the construction of this Salvadoran identity. Not only is Romilia Salvadoran, she is southern, Latina, and a woman, thereby demonstrating the complexities of a Salvadoran identity.

Padilla's greatest achievement in constructing *Changing Women, Changing Nation* is also the book's greatest weakest. While Padilla does effortlessly weave her analysis together using her system of contrasts and chronology while discussing a wide range of different genres and materials, she fails to do so in any great depth. For example, her last chapter on literature featuring Salvadoran-Americans discusses one series of mystery novels penned by one author. Although representative of the complexities

inherent in Salvadoran identity formation, Padilla is unable to give differing representations because she limits herself to a single example. Covering twenty-five years of trans-Salvadoran literature in fewer than 200 pages is going to undoubtedly leave something behind. Nevertheless, her book does an excellent job at intertwining both history and literature while shining the spotlight on women, and it would serve as an excellent introduction to contemporary El Salvadoran literature. Hopefully Padilla's work will spark the interest of other researchers and lead to a deeper exploration of this body of literature.