

BOOK REVIEW

Violence and Endurance: Representations of War and Peace in Post-War Central American Narratives

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The book gathers together the results of two seminars on Central American literary and cultural studies organized by the Department of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Liverpool and the Department of Arts at the Central American University, Jose Simeon Canas, in El Salvador. The objective of these meetings was to create a Network of Central American Studies to allow specialists working in European, North American and Latin American universities to share critical interests, approaches and perspectives. The need to have a network for Central American scholars is due to the notable marginalization of the region and its cultural practices in international networks of publication, distribution and critical studies, which tend to focus on different centres of culture and different themes, while leaving to one side Central American cultural production. If we take into account the devastating effects of decades of dictatorships, civil wars and violence, which have forced many Central American intellectuals into exile in Mexico, Canada, the USA, Europe and beyond, we can understand the urgency of creating alternative channels of distribution for studies of Central American thought and literary production.

The papers published in this book respond precisely to the need to create a common space for the discussion about Central American Cultural Studies, encourage a multidisciplinary focus, and stimulate criticism and reflection about the cultural expressions of this particular region, such as testimony, literature written in indigenous languages and literature that deals with the violence. These three factors represent the point of departure for a critical reflection on the current literary production in Central America, and they come about in reaction to the region's multi-ethnicity, its unjust, hierarchical, social relations and the impact of the violence of the armed struggle.

The essays that make up this book address essential issues regarding the problematics and unity of Central American literature, such as social denunciation, literature's relationship with political themes, as in detective fiction, the importance of profound historical knowledge and the emergence of literature in indigenous languages. Another important dynamic that affects Central American literary production is the relationship between the local and the global, with the insertion of instances of local cultures in the global market. It is clear that the relationship between the local and the global entails an imbalance between subalternity and centralization in political, economic and therefore also cultural terms. The dissemination of testimony is a clear example of the difficult relationship the subaltern subject has with the global dissemination of culture, in which s/he participates as an 'informant', as a marginalized and decentered object. The canonization of this genre has determined its use in the construction of Central American national identities, even after the end of the armed conflicts.

The emergence of subaltern voices manifest themselves in a very clear manner in the indigenous literary production of Central America, in particular in Guatemalan case, where novels, poetry and essays in the Mayan languages demonstrate the vitality of a culture and thought alternative to the westernized canon, with sufficient power to enforce its own critical conscience and its own concept of modernity.

Poverty, violence and marginalization are not just literary themes but also key to understanding the current situation, factors that reconstruct on a historical level the national identities of the post-war period. Thus, the violence of the armed conflict has opened space for domestic and street violence, for betrayal of revolutionary ideals, for deception regarding the construction of a society that is going nowhere. Violence, memory and trauma represent, apart from literary themes, the very essence of the construction of society and personal identity. These thematic and structural factors are accompanied by others no less important, such as historical reconciliation after the civil wars, gender perspectives, construction of national identity and proper historical understanding as a basis for nationalism.

The essays by Dante Liano, Arturo Arias, Leonel Delgado, Werner Mackenbach, Emilio del Valle Escalante, Hector M. Leyva, Valeria Grinberg Pla, James Knight, Astvaldur Astvaldsson, Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, Yansi Perez, Karen Poe, Uriel Quesada and Yajaira M. Padilla, that make up this volume, represent a fundamental, critical reflection on the nature and the direction of Central American literature in the last 30 years. Because of its multidisciplinary character, for providing an up-to-date critical discussion, for representing a rich and articulated approach to the cultural practices and the vitality of Central American societies, I consider this volume to be a fundamental contribution to Central American Studies. The analytical depth and multiplicity, the convergence of interests and urgencies in the cultural and social fields make this book a great example for the importance of making progress in the science of sharing working practices and projects in the academic environment.

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