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Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez
The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature
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Reviewed by Carmen Ruiz-Castaneda

Towards a Politics of the Everyday

The world imagined by the counter-culture revolutionaries of the 1960s Nuyorican renaissance has not yet emerged. After decades of oppositional politics, the field finds itself with the enviable problem of having to deal with success. Many of the same writers who railed against an exclusionary canon are now routinely included in collegiate curriculums in the United States. Emerging Latino/a writers can reasonably expect a welcoming press and much better chances at success in the publishing market. Consequently, academic studies of Latino/a writers have had to adapt to changing economic and social realities while still seeking to maintain the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s. In *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature*, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez tackle this development in an engaging and eclectic manner that maps the current critical terrain and looks to find new ways of reading Latino/a literature that does not fall into the trap of nostalgia or simple binaries.

In the introduction, provocatively subtitled “Sellouts? Politics and the Market in Post-Sixties Latino/a Literature,” Dalleo and Machado Sáez contest the opposition between market success and oppositional politics fostered by academic institutions in favor of following the course set by “recent Latino/a literature” that “imagines creative ways to rethink the relationship between a politics of social justice and market popularity—a combination that the critical reception denies by either rejecting one of these elements or articulating them as binary opposites” (3). In this critical volume, the authors investigate different ways of being political in literary and critical discourses about Latino/a culture in the United States. The oppositional legacy of the 1960s continues to be very important to the post-sixties generation, but these contemporary fiction writers are re-mapping the social and literary territory for struggle as well as reforming the tactics used to achieve these new political goals.

The authors bring a Caribbean focus to Latino/a studies by choosing New York City with its predominantly Nuyorican, Dominican-American, and Cuban-American Hispanic populations, as the locus of their critique. The focus on New York City as an important contact zone for this cross-section of the pan-Latino/a community acknowledges their proximity to the publishing market, a crucial aspect of the book’s critical approach heavily influenced by cultural studies. Taking the economic success of contemporary Latino/a literature as their point of departure, Dalleo and Machado Sáez identify three types of readers of this fiction: literary critics, academics with a multiculturalist lens, and academics with an anti-colonialist lens. Each one of these critical perspectives informs the text’s critical discourse; however, the authors claim to be

most closely aligned with the anti-colonialist perspective. With a revised Marxist consciousness, the authors draw from the cultural studies tradition of Nestor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, and George Yúdice in order to interrogate the relationship between authorial politics and the marketplace.

As part of an investigation of a postcolonial, post-Civil Rights “quotidian politics,” Dalleo and Machado Sáez investigate the market as an external force that has direct bearing on the Latino/a authors studied, as well as the representation and analysis of the market within the literature itself (34). The book opens with a chapter on the work of Pedro Pietri, one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Café and a member of the Young Lords. For many, Pietri’s was the voice of oppositional Latino/a politics. Focusing on Pietri’s nostalgia for the oppositional politics, this chapter provides an analysis of two powerful poems that bookend his prolific career: first “Puerto Rican Obituary” and later “El Spanglish National Anthem” in which Pietri is engaged in re-thinking his nostalgia in his earlier writing.” In the first poem, the market is seen as hostile towards texts that asserted Latino identity, encouraging assimilation and erasure. However, in the latter poem, Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue that this is an articulation of a “politics of the everyday,” drawing on Janson Perez’s work on salsa, where “issues of national sovereignty and the seizure of power may no longer be the only way to conceive of politics” (34).

The second chapter, “Mercado Dreams: The End of Sixties Nostalgia in Contemporary Ghetto Fiction,” highlights the evolution of oppositional politics in contemporary Latino/a literature. Abraham Rodriguez’s *Spidertown* and Ernesto Quiñones *Bodega Dreams* challenge the concept of the American dream, yet still engage the realities of living within a market system in a way that differs markedly from the anti-capitalist struggle of their literary forbearers. Rather than a disavowal of the people’s desires for material goods and comforts, they assert that Rodriguez and Quiñones are searching for a progressive politics that would harness the power of the market to effect change and organize communities. The market is no longer a force to be contested or ignored, but one to be engaged and manipulated for personal and cultural gains.

The oppositional politics of the 1960s are further questioned through the text’s analysis of the ghetto as a place of stagnation and repression through the writings of Dominican authors Angie Cruz and Junot Diaz. Contemporary anti-colonial criticism, particularly the work of Juan Flores and Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, names the ghetto as a site of authenticity and as a direct challenge to the kitsch and artificiality of the marketplace; however, this text posits the market as “an unavoidable space for exchange and contestation for Latino/a cultural production” (105). Furthermore, they find the binary posed by anti-colonial criticism between ghetto fiction and immigrant Latino/a literature to be restrictive and too simplistic for the realities envisioned by Cruz and Diaz; there are immigrants living in the ghetto and people born in the ghetto who seek upward mobility. Although the ghetto may abide by its own extra-market rules, it is not immune to the influences of the mainstream media that influence desire and identity formation. Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue that Diaz’s *Drown* “critiques the association of upward mobility with

betrayal while also revealing how the oppositional strategy of opacity restricts the formulation of Latino/a subjectivity and sexuality” (78). In other words, moving out of the ghetto (literally and figuratively) in Diaz’s novel allows new formulations of Latino/a identity that are not traditionally permissible in closed urban spaces. By questioning the ghetto experience as the litmus test for authentic Latino/a experience, the text expands the possibilities for identity construction through the market. In this regard, the unquestioned authenticity of “ghetto experience” is complicated to include the complex negotiations these writers are engaging in their novels.

The next chapter, “Latino/a Identity and Consumer Citizenship in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” further extends the possibilities of understanding Latino/a identity through market processes. Garcia’s novel engages Cuba as a country in which revolutionary nostalgia is not necessary because the revolution is still in progress; it occurs in present tense. Rather than being a utopia, this ever-present revolution forecloses any growth or change in its citizens. The critique of *Dreaming in Cuban* asserts that the market is a necessary aspect of the articulation of hybrid identity. However, before making this claim, the text distances itself from multiculturalist literary critics Ilan Stavans and Gustavo Pérez Firmat whose culinary metaphors for culture are deemed essentialist and overly celebratory of assimilation. Arguing that the postcolonialist perspective suffers from an acute case of sixties-nostalgia, their analysis asks readers to consider the possibility that the multiculturalist perspective contains serious shortcomings in its conception of culture as a static product and of consumption as a one-directional phenomenon. This perspective limits the creative prospects for a continuation of Latino/a culture in the United States as it ultimately leads to assimilation with an accent. Where literary strategies, such as metaphor, seem to fall short in understanding contemporary Latino/a identity the text turns to cultural studies, particularly the work of Canclini and Arlene Davila to interrogate the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of U.S. Latinidad. These critics do not construct consumption as a one-way process between an empowered media and submissive consumers, but as a complex and interactive process in which the masses can influence the means of media. Through this paradigm, the Latino/a consumer can be understood as a creator of culture rather than a cultural cannibal.

However, the Cuban experience of Garcia is limited in its application to other Latino/a groups whose relationship with the country of origin are less strained due to the relative ease with which immigrants can return and maintain ties with the home culture. Julia Alvarez provides a return to, and re-envisioning of, a politics of the everyday within this framework. Focusing on two of Alvarez’s more political novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*, the authors argue that literature and literary criticism must move past a paralyzing nostalgia for the revolutionary 1960s and embrace a new, and undoubtedly, less glamorous quotidian politics that will reshape the nation from within, rather than through violent revolutionary confrontation. Alvarez’s recent forays into adolescent and children’s literature are her contribution to a “postcolonial, post-Civil Rights Americas ... in which politics takes place

not only on the level of contests for national sovereignty but also in everyday struggles to build a better world” (157). The focus on young adult fiction also suggests that Alvarez is interested in shaping the political opinions of the future reading public in the present political context.

In the conclusion, Dalleo and Machado Sáez return to the question of “selling out” from the perspective of a different geographical and cultural location, the sphere of the New York metropolis. The book turns its critical lens decidedly to the southern Latino/a capital of Miami, asserting that, in this locale, “the sellout label is related to a betrayal of what is deemed appropriate politics for and by their community” (159). Unlike the majority of the Latino/a literary community, Miami-based Cuban writers have to deal with the struggle of being labeled “too liberal” or “leftist” by the conservative Miami political establishment. However, the critical discussion challenges the reader to consider the fact that simply being from the Miami Cuban community increases the likelihood that writers will be viewed or read with suspicion in the Latino/a literary establishment. In other words, the implicit assumption is that a Cuban-American voice cannot be a progressive voice, especially when this voice is writing from Miami. In order to circumvent the censure of both of these gate-keeping groups, the text finds that contemporary Cuban-American authors Nilo Cruz, Chantel Acevedo, and Ana Menéndez use the genre of historical fiction in order to diffuse the charges of improper political affiliation from either side. The historical dimension provides a third space where Cuban-American authors can engage with the legacy of the 1960s as part of a common Latino/a inheritance, while not alienating either community. Like these authors, Dalleo and Machado Sáez, aim to articulate “a third space for literature” in the academy that “grapples with the possibilities and limitations embodied by the market” (175). Despite the author’s bold claims to be forging new territory for the study of Latino/a literature, their posture reveals a significant degree of anxiety about breaking with the oppositional politics and wholeheartedly embracing a market approach to studying literature. The market often proves to be an unstable place on which to ground theoretical analysis, primarily if one is interested in maintaining a revolutionary spirit. While the novels analyzed in the text may have reached a new understanding of the place of the market in forming Latino/a identity, the critical discourse has yet to formulate corresponding vocabulary and methodology to address similar concerns. By providing critical paradigms from which to approach questions concerning the intersection between economic production and literary production Dalleo and Machado Sáez give readers a new critical insight into the field of Latino/a studies. Moreover, their book also offers provocative avenues for further study, such as the place of gender in the critical marginalization of economically successful women writers and the impact of geography on both publishing and political climate for emerging authors.