

Silvia del Pilar Castro Borrego and María Isabel Romero Ruiz, eds. 2009: *Identidad, migración y cuerpo femenino*. Oviedo: KRK. 289 pp. ISBN 978-84-8367-213-6

Justine Tally
Universidad de La Laguna
jtally@ull.es

Identidad, migración y cuerpo femenino is a nicely edited volume of essays, a product of the contributions of a group of international academics who participated in the first international conference on 'Identity, Migration and the Female Body', organized by the editors at the University of Malaga in December of 2008. Its English title, however, is perhaps more revealing as to the specific thrust of the essays, *Identity, Migration and Women's Bodies as Sites of Knowledge and Transgression*, taken in fact from the full title of the original conference. (In accordance with the use of two official languages at the conference, both English and Spanish contributions are included in the volume.) It is this focus on the intersection of the physical, the psychological and the geographical that distinguishes it from other volumes on 'Gender Studies' and is perhaps most eloquently illustrative of the move away from essentialist views in which women, by nature of their gender, are somehow inseparably linked, independently of their specific contexts. These essays demonstrate that the incredible variety of experience in the movement of *femaleness* across borders more accurately reflects a post-positivist realist approach to gender studies and thereby broadens the scope of our understanding of 'women'. In the words of Karina Valle Olsen in the last essay in the book, entitled '*La interseccionalidad a debate desde la teoría crítica feminista*': "... *la interseccionalidad habría de producir no solo conocimiento nuevo, sino nuevas formas de pensar sobre ese conocimiento*", helping us to "construir argumentos de equidad"; and providing "*una herramienta que ha de usarse en pro de la justicia social*" (286). But as Grace Kyungwon Hong has written, while the concept of *intersectionality* (a term coined and popularized later by Kimberlé Crenshaw) is well-known, "the epistemological implications are too infrequently theorized" (2007: 35). Valle-Olsen not only theorizes but is also quite adept here at relating the theoretical to the practical. As a review of the postulations as well as the critique of 'intersectionality' within a methodology of research, this essay might have been productively situated at the beginning rather than the end of the volume (although I do understand that, because Dr. Valle-Olsen is based at the University of Málaga, the editors possibly did not wish to open with the home front). On the other hand, coming at the end of five different sections, this final essay certainly ties together the multiple testimonies to a wide array of experiences that might be usefully incorporated into intersectional research, or which at least should serve as a compass to guide our further study. So much is suggested and discussed that the spectrum of possibilities for further research is daunting, not to mention the challenges for developing a theoretical approach which would meaningfully encompass and yet allow for and respect such variety.

Although all participants in the conference were invited to submit their contributions for publication, this quite heterogeneous volume is in fact a selection of

twenty-nine essays, nine of which, in addition to the Introduction, are written in Spanish, the remaining twenty in English. The grouping of these twenty-nine studies under five seemingly arbitrary headings helps to break up the volume into manageable reading. Some of the subtitles seem so similar that they are distinguishable only after a bit of thought, but all insist on the issues of identity in a complicated world of transition. Not all of the essays are 'cutting edge' to a seasoned reader, but perhaps fulfill their mission of introducing the novice in gender studies to the manifold possibilities of the field as well as to historical moments that are too often forgotten (or at least taken for granted) in contemporary discussion. And from those contributions in which the discussion is more informative than analytical, there is much to be learned (or to be reminded of), even by those of us who have been around for a while. It is obviously impossible to enter into a detailed discussion of each of the twenty-nine essays, so I wish here to group certain contributions which engage similar approaches or themes, and to select (obviously according to this reader's own preferences) certain representative pieces, either because of exceptionally perceptive analysis, clarity of writing, or because the content itself is an innovative addition to the field.

Castro and Romero open the discussion in a thoughtful Introduction which explains the *raison d'être* and the genesis of this volume as an attempt to "... examinar factores determinantes para la construcción de una identidad femenina como sujeto colonial y poscolonial, como son el género, la liminalidad y la frontera, así como las realidades más oscuras de la alienación, la discriminación, el trauma, el desequilibrio mental y espiritual" (15). It is important to note that the position of the physical body is foregrounded in particular in the first section, entitled 'Body, Identity and Female Sexuality', in which the essays address not only the abuse of the female body (through rape or appropriation) but also resistance (in film and in performance art, as in Noemí Acedo Alonso's '*Las palabras de los cuerpos heridos*'), and even health (Romano Maggi examines the benefits of Shiatsu for women specifically). Daniela Corona illustrates the 'Mediterranean Crossings in the Fiction of Marina Warner' with a comparison of the Queen of Sheba, Rahab and Leto. Anabella Di Tullio re-examines in an erudite historical review the development of a feminist perspective on the nature of the female body right up to the opening years of the new century, engaging not only Foucault (and his study of the French Hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin) and Judith Butler but also Laqueur, Diana Maffia and Mauro Cabral. Laëtitia Lefèvre-Thierry's thoughtful essay on the use of the rape of the black body as strategy for combating racial stereotypes prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century is a good example of the double-bind of feminist inquiry: is the violent ab/use of the female body (even though it is insinuated and not visually portrayed in the two Oscar Micheaux films discussed) justified as a means to an end? Or does the voyeuristic attraction of such a portrayal trump the politics? The films may be old; the dilemma, unfortunately, continues to be contemporary, a theme picked up by Inmaculada Pineda Hernández in Section IV in her discussion of 'Women in Hip-Hop Culture': just how subversive can these performers be if consumer culture demands that they conform to a specific way of behaving/dressing/performing in order to be commercially successful? (Such a dilemma, though not specifically nor theoretically addressed, underlies María Teresa Silva Ross' look at the attempt to transgress '*estereotipos de género en la música country norteamericana*', also in section IV). Lastly

in section I, Özlem Türe Abaci looks at 'Strategies of Subversion and Resistance', using a literary analysis to show how Grace Nichols works to undermine just such stereotypes in her poetry.

The title of Section II, 'Identity, Migration and Diaspora', would seemingly shift the focus of the discussion to the challenges of forming an identity when forced migration shatters links to homeland and community; yet the essays herein focus almost exclusively on internal migration or on problems of acculturation in the lives of African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans within the U.S., trying to negotiate the cultural values of their original communities with the demands of an omnipresent Anglo influence. María Luz Arroyo Vázquez returns to an analysis of the visual through a look at the artistic representation of black American life, particularly the paintings of Jacob Lawrence. Laura Gillman, drawing on the work of Satya Mohanty in his article 'The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity', argues for the theoretical advantage of using 'post-positivist realism' to approach the issues of identity as a source for the generation of knowledge, and focuses on the political and social dimensions of *mestiza* identity. For post-positivist realists identity is socially constructed because identities refer outwardly to categories and structures of race, class, gender and sexuality in the real world. Identities also have an epistemic content to them because, from their particular location, people create interpretations out of their lived experiences. As Gillman concludes, "by testing out the accuracy of their interpretations against imposed identity schemas, members of marginalized groups are able to negotiate the social world, gaining more reliable theory-mediated knowledge about themselves, and reorganizing their identity in order to make it cohere with their material interest" (94). Gillman then proceeds to apply Amalia Mesa-Bains' concept of *domesticana mestizaje* to Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, arguing that the novel is an excellent example of the tension inherent between 'subjugated identities' of domestic life and *mestiza* women's attempts to reclaim domestic space and to explore the hidden meanings of *mestiza* identity.

Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard is particularly adept at depicting the ways in which Asian American fictional women succumb to or surmount the pressures of adaptation. How much of the past is usable or even desirable for a future in the U.S.? Carolina Soria Somoza looks specifically at the ways in which authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Ha Jin subvert the 'skin-deep' characteristics of their women protagonists through 'Weakening the Strong, Strengthening the Weak'. Turning to black minorities, Silvia Castro discusses the presence of the diasporic past in African American women's literature, while Bibian Pérez Ruiz relates certain communal functions to Africa, adds the problem of aging and the stereotypes associated with the process, and then introduces us to literary works by women from South Africa, Senegal and Egypt by way of example. Both of these essays provide contextualizing background for Mónica Glonzalez Caldeiro's discussion of the 'Intersections of Race and Gender in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*'.

For the actual shift to transnational movement and the diasporic migration we must turn to Section III: 'Identity, Migration, Interculturality and Transnational Feminism', in which the complex issues of immigration are complicated even more by the stereotyping of the female body. An analysis of Marjane Strapati's 'Persépolis' – both in

its comic and film versions – is broached by four different yet coordinated researchers (Adela Cortijo, Mireia Calafell, Meri Torras and Begonya Saez) who, in the words of Saez, discuss the creativity of this very cutting-edge text as a ‘transit novel’. The protagonist, exiled from her native Iran as a very young teenager, must factor in movement, both physical and cultural, across national boundaries and add the experience of *extrañamiento* to the difficult process of building an identity as an adolescent who, in essence, belongs nowhere. In an excellent theoretical contribution, Yousef Awad underscores the feminist agenda that underlies Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*, while Antonia Naravvo Tejero uses Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism* to critically examine the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, concluding that while it may be her objective to denounce and combat the misogynist violence in Iran through her film, texts and interviews, the rhetorical strategies that she employs, in fact, reinforce the orientalist stereotyping of Islam and Muslim people. This type of textual deconstruction also underscores Valentina Castagna’s reading of Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs. Noah* as subversive rewriting of patriarchal myth. Castagna draws on classical Greek myth, however; had she looked past the Greeks to their origins in the ancient Egyptian veneration of Isis, she might also have demonstrated more clearly how the patriarchy wrested dominance from the original mother figures and powerful goddesses, turning them into the submissive handmaidens of their powerful brothers/fathers/husbands.

In a section dominated by the ‘exotic’ (read ‘unknown’) ‘other’, the inclusion of Antonia Sagredo Santos’ more sociologically-oriented discussion of ‘Irish Women Migration and its Impact in the U.S. Labour Market’ is certainly a change in pace. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that the massive forced migration (and I mean not ‘physically coerced’ but ‘economically compelled’) of the Irish to the United States certainly determined important segments of its history, the labor movements included. The struggle of these women first for survival and then for dignity is a story of which we need to be reminded.

Section IV, ‘Female Identity and Creativity through Music, Drama and Literature’, again situates the analyses of contemporary women in the U.S. in the fields of theater and music, of which Claudia Alonso Recarte’s critical look at ‘Mythistory? Women’s Blues and Feminism’ offers an excellent analysis. Deconstructing the myth of female blues singers as prototypical feminists, she explains that, in fact, “as a business primarily handled by men the personas created in the songs had to appeal for the most part to a masculine audience. Women appear as objects just as much as subjects” (199). This is a strong piece that dares to take on veritable heavy-weights in the field: “Writers such as Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Daphne Duval Harrison have endorsed an image of these women that is just that: an image” (193). As feminists we certainly need our myths of strong women, but we need to keep our eyes open and our sense of reality in check as well.

In addition to the two essays on popular U.S. music mentioned above, two contributions to this section deal specifically with the theater: Marís Dolores Narbona Carrión sees the stage as a place for ethnic women to develop both acceptance and defense of their ‘othered’ bodies; Raquel Ruíz García discusses the search for identity in the characters of Zöe Akins. In the eyes of all the contributors to this section, the arts have a fundamental place in both the reclamation of the female body and the

subversion of pernicious stereotypes which, in spite of major progress, continue to plague women in the U.S.

In 'Colonial and Postcolonial Legal and Medical Discourses', two essays rely on literary and historical record to document female participation in oppressive colonialist attitudes by English and German women in the past. While we would do well to recognize our participation in suppression of the 'Other', it is also not irrelevant to consider that the women under discussion here were also products of their time. 'Science' of the nineteenth century predicated a hierarchy of the human species as to the development, capacity and intellect of different 'races', and it would have taken a true visionary equipped with postcolonialist/feminist theory at the time to recognize scientific racism for what it was. Such an unusual woman is the subject of María del Rosario Piqueras Fraile, who resurrects the history of Elizabeth Blackwell, 'A Pioneer in the American History of Medicine', yet another woman from the past who should be an example of just what one individual can accomplish against daunting odds. And María Isabel Romero's study on the 'Vile Traffic' of prostitution complicated by migration and transnationalism is certainly *sine qua non* for a volume of this nature and still horrifyingly pertinent in a world that has yet to come to terms with, and eradicate, female slavery. This is a problem that acutely, albeit painfully, distills the relationship of Identity, Migration and the Female Body.

Part VI, 'Intersectionality, Globalisation and Gender Politics', not only contains the Valle Olsen essay discussed at the beginning of this review, but also introduces an innovative approach to the language adopted by young British and Spanish adolescent girls via web blogs, who seem to be attempting to construct an identity of 'Mean Girl'. Antonio García Gómez argues that

the analysis makes it possible to argue that this British and Spanish female adolescents' construction of their self-concept does not only function at the level of the individual but must be regarded as an integrated multi-dimensional process, where the individual self struggles to meet both interpersonal (i.e. relational self) and social demands (i.e. collective self) (271).

The adoption of what the author terms 'masculine aggressiveness' to express their feelings, particularly for the opposite sex after a break-up in the relationship, is noteworthy (I'm trying hard here not to date myself by saying *alarming*). If indeed, as the author suggests, this verbal posturing indicates "a nascent culture-specific change in Spanish female adolescents' social representation of verbal aggression" (277), what it seems to me to be is rather an indication that we might be losing the younger generations to a poor imitation of males rather than fomenting those values we cherish as feminists. I cannot but protest the author's choice of terminology when he designates this type of aggressive language as "androgynous femininity (e.g. feminisation of masculine expressions)" (272). We need to keep our terms clear here: to my understanding 'androgyny' would not feminize the aggressive masculine but continue to be a cultural goal through which both sexes would accept equality and respect for all other creatures, male and female alike, without resorting to the violence of aggressive (sexualized) language. What this essay does indicate is that more work like the contributions to this volume should be continued, promoted and published.

Perhaps not every one of the essays will appeal to each and every one of us. In their entirety, however, they speak to the impressive scope of research that is currently being undertaken in Gender Studies; in doing so they provide a daunting view of the vast amount that is still to be done.

Works Cited

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Justine Tally is Professor of American Literature at the University of La Laguna where she specializes in African American Literature and Culture. She is author of *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths* (Lit Verlag, 1999), *The Story of Jazz: Toni Morrison's Dialogic Imagination* (Lit Verlag, 2001) and *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origenes* (Routledge, 2009). She has edited the *Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (CUP, 2007), and co-edited, with Walter Hölbling, *Theories and Texts* (Lit Verlag, 2007, 2009)

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universidad de La Laguna. 38201 Tenerife, Spain.
Tel.: +34 922317645. Fax: +34 922317611.