

**IDENTITIES ON THE MOVE: CONTEMPORARY
REPRESENTATIONS OF NEW SEXUALITIES
AND GENDER IDENTITIES**

Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego and María Isabel Romero Ruiz, eds.

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Sixteen chapters might seem too many for a collection of essays, and the diversity of topics, objects of analysis, and theoretical frameworks found in the table of contents might, at a glance, suggest a degree of random incoherence. However, an attentive reading demonstrates that those factors constitute one of the main strengths of the volume. *Identities on the Move* travels with ease and smoothly from one chapter to the next in an engaging trip that gradually integrates a wide range of issues and analytical tools with two distinctly common denominators: the focus on gender and sexuality (as the book's subheading appropriately points out) and the interdisciplinary, politically committed frame of cultural studies. More significantly, the volume is further enriched by the shared interest of all the chapters in the intersectionality of identity, as they all center on the meaning and implications of the crossing of gender and sexuality with other axes constitutive of the so-oft questioned notion of identity; namely: class, race, (post)coloniality, religion, location, and the socially-inflected assessment of intellectual ability.

Equally remarkable is the wealth in terms of the 'media' of (re)presentation that are discussed, as critical analyses range from literary approaches to narrative fiction, to post-human interpretations of science fiction films, queer readings of television series, or politically engaged historical perspectives on the status and condition of women in the hard realities of their daily lives. Thus, after a brief introduction by the editors, the volume opens with Laura Gillman's study of Alicia Gaspar de

Alba's 2005 detective novel *Desert Blood*: a necessary and long-awaited literary denunciation of the massive (and unpunished) 'femicides' of Chicana working-class *maquiladoras* in Ciudad de Juárez, as well as the systematic control of their bodies and reproductive capacities by their company owners. Borrowing Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano's coinage from Spanish *feminicidio* to emphasize a critical transborder perspective (2010: 4-5), Gillman unravels how the dehumanization of the *maquiladoras* as disposable brown bodies stems from the interrelated hetero-patriarchal ideologies of *marianismo* and *familismo*: the roles of virgins or of self-effacing mothers are the only choices for Chicanas unless they are ready to dishonor their families having the features of the *malinche* (the sexed, inhuman side of the goddess) attached to them, which apply to non-heterosexual and profession-oriented women.

María Isabel Romero Ruiz provides an in-depth study of the causes, defining features and evolution over the last two centuries of the phenomenon of human trafficking across borders, which involves —among other common factors— coercion and exploitation, in most cases sexual. She highlights the ideological bases for the shift of approach from the nineteenth-century, when the dominant colonial discourses saw 'white slaves' as innocent, pure victims as their unwillingness to become prostitutes and their whiteness were emphasized as symbolizing their chastity, to the present day, when the racial bias has been erased and only the gender bias remains. Romero Ruiz denounces the denial in official discourse of the human rights of the (mostly) women and children coerced into prostitution by trafficking mafias, since they are considered illegal immigrants in receiving countries, while the obvious link between poverty and vulnerability to exploitation is systematically ignored in first world countries.

The enslavement and sexual exploitation of autochthonous women in the European colonization of South Africa is the starting point of Cynthia Lytle's analysis of Zoë Wicomb's novel *The One that Got Away* (2008), as it explains the contrast in colonial representation between the pure white ladies' bodies and the dehumanized, immoral hypersexual black women's bodies in need of taming. The theme of sexual abuse extends to the next chapter, where María Elena Jaime de Pablos introduces a new factor, the Catholic Church, in her analysis of Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996). Based upon a real case, the novel explores the patriarchal domination of the female body in Ireland, where a girl victim of incest is denied the right to terminate a pregnancy, the result of being repeatedly raped by her father. The essay also constitutes a denunciation of the denial of child sexual abuse in Ireland, where it seems to be an endemic problem.

Focusing mainly on the issue of social class, Logie Barrow presents an engaging account of the many ways in which intellectual ability is used to create social

differences between groups and to justify discrimination against the less privileged. He claims that inclusiveness is the basis for collective action, so his proposal is to mobilize gender and ethnic dimensions alongside class ones. For Barrow, the ascription of an excessively high, or low, estimate to social groups has damaging consequences, since internalizing negative stereotypes may disable us: our abilities seem to diminish and we may then suffer from impostor syndrome. He adds an autobiographical angle to the discussion and focuses on his experience in and knowledge of the elitist system of public schools in Britain, calling attention to corruption in the form of the manipulation of external examining boards to maintain the status of exclusive public schools. This view is complemented with an account of how medical expertise was used to dismiss women's intellectual capacity during the suffragettes' struggle for women's franchise, exposing epistemology as an always ready-to-hand weapon of discrimination.

The volume centers the body as a site of struggle with Eduardo Barros Grela's focus on American performance artist Bob Flanagan's "deconstruction of the body as a holistic center of identity" (105) through the self-inflicted physical torture of his ill, hurting body, and the punishment of his penis allegedly to destabilize the privilege of the male in the gender hierarchy. The body is also central in Rocío Carrasco's post-human approach to US science fiction movies, which she analyzes under the lens of gender studies. Despite optimistic feminist readings of the concept of the post-human, Carrasco deftly proves how, over the last three decades, cinematic representations of cyborgs, the influence of information technologies, prostheses and other materializations of the notion, have merely reinforced gender stereotypes and dominant structures of power.

The following two chapters, by Lucía Gracia Magaldi and María José Coperías Aguilar respectively, offer complementary comparative studies of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and its post-colonial prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1986), by Jean Rhys. Though redundant at first sight, the combination of both articles turns out to be productive as Magaldi's applied interpretation of sexuality as "a cultural construct, subject to the influence of temporal and spatial location" (127) in its connection to power and gender relations is nuanced in Coperías' article with the post-colonial critique on the hyper-sexualization of the non-white body, and the paradoxical power status of the upper-class Creole woman: Antoinette/Bertha, in the case of the novels.

Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego offers an interesting analysis of Audre Lorde's essays and speeches on the discrimination of non-normative sexualities within the black community in the 1970s, in the homophobic context of black cultural nationalism. She pays special attention to Lorde's call for "difference as creative rather than divisive" (152) and focuses on black lesbian sexualities as a way of reclaiming the dehumanized black female body through women's desire and agency.

Attention moves from lesbian sexuality to queer identity in David Walton's essay, where he applies the notion of gender migration to his exploration of the performative character of gender as theorized by Judith Butler. He interrogates the results in two particular cases: hyperbolic body representations in three sketches from British TV series *Little Britain*, and Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Yonqui* (2008), the autobiographical account of her becoming transgender through hormone ingestion and adopting typically male behavior patterns. Walton's significant conclusions corroborate that, rather than jeopardize the stability of binary gender categories, the migration from one gender to the other does nothing but reinforce the existence of those two ontologically stable places.

Kate Joseph and Antje Schuhmann scrutinize the hetero-patriarchal and colonial ideological bias underlying the South African print media representations of black women's bodies when the Equatorial Guinea women's soccer team was accused of including men or 'too-manly' players in the 2010 African Women's Championship. Black identity and its relation to queerness is taken up by Inmaculada Pineda Hernández in her analysis of two plays by African American feminist playwrights Pearl Cleage and Cheryl L. West, where they denounce homophobia directed at gay men within the black community and AIDS-related discrimination.

140

Angelita Reyes centers on the mixed feelings expressed by the reception of Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* (2009), which has been accused of being racist, sexist and offensive by African American critics and readers. Instead, Reyes highlights the agency, perseverance and dignity of African American domestic workers whose solidarity played an important role in the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960s. Set in the same context, Susan Straight's *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (1993) is explored by Concepción Parrondo Carretero in an essay that stresses the plight of a fat black female teenager who becomes a single mother and must take on masculine attitudes and features as a necessary means of self-defense as she tries to create her own sense of identity and survive in the hostile world of the Southern States in a period of convulsion.

Finally, in her approach to Muslim women immigrants living in Canada and Sweden, under the lens of Bhabha's notions of diaspora, hybridity and the third space, Mariam Bazi blames Orientalist and colonialist discourse for imposing stereotypes on Muslim women and thus creating in them a sense of split identity. She engages in a defense of Islam by unraveling how present day Islamic law regarding women's rights and status derives not from the Qur'an but from a distortion of Islamic religion. She concludes by admitting that the time has come for urgent reforms to be implemented with regard to women in the field of Islamic law.

This volume gathers valuable research on a wide variety of interconnected cultural issues and fields of study within the frame of cultural studies, providing a very rich,

Reviews

multifaceted perspective on the identity axes of gender and sexuality as they intersect with other constitutive elements, reminding the reader that difference is not a source of division but rather the opposite. One of its main contributions to this field, I would say, is its inclusive quality and the coherent way it develops the notions of migration and of the liminal nature of identity in present day societies. One question that may be raised by this collection of essays is the extent to which genders and sexualities may be described as 'new'.

Works Cited

FREGOSO, Rosa-Linda and Cynthia Bejarano. 2010. *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke U.P.