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Girls, Violence, and Patriarchal Desire in Hispanic Caribbean Women's Narratives:
Review of *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la "conciencia" corporal*

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Nadia V. Celis Salgado, *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la "conciencia" corporal*. (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015), 354 pp.

La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la "conciencia" corporal, by Nadia V. Celis Salgado, represents an important contribution to the fields of Hispanic Caribbean feminist and literary studies. Even though it is situated within a field that has grown exponentially in the last few decades—partly due to the emergence of so-called “Third World Feminism”—most of the criticism of Caribbean women’s literature tends to have an Anglophone, Francophone, or pan-Caribbean focus, such as Helen Scott’s *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization* (Ashgate 2006), Brinda Mehta’s *Notions of Identity, Diaspora, and Gender in Caribbean Women’s Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009), and Odile Ferly’s *A Poetics of Relation: Caribbean Women Writing at the Millennium* (Palgrave 2012). Most other studies on Hispanic Caribbean letters either examine male and female authors combined—such as Claudette Williams’ *Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature* (2000) and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s *The Literature of the Caribbean* (Greenwood 2008)—or are simply focused on a specific nationality (such as my own book, *Family Matters: Puerto Rican Women Authors on the Island and the Mainland*, U of VA Press 2012). Celis’ *La rebelión* enriches the corpus of critical works about Hispanic Caribbean women authors and forces us to reconsider the parameters that tend to define that category.

The book is written in Spanish and consists of a prologue by renowned Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos-Febres, an introduction, and six chapters, each focusing on the works of one or two authors. The writers included in *La rebelión* are: Antonia Palacios (Venezuela), Magali García Ramis (Puerto Rico), Marvel Moreno (Colombia), Fanny Buitrago (Colombia), and Mayra Santos-Febres (Puerto Rico). To my knowledge, this is the first book-length study that examines side by side the narratives of these particular authors. While it is typical to find critical works on the production of Puerto Rican women authors examined next to those of other Caribbean writers, and while it is common to find studies of South American women authors, it is less common to find critical studies that combine authors from the Caribbean archipelago and what is known as the “greater Caribbean” (which includes northern Colombia and Venezuela). The decision to examine these texts in light of each other implies a rupture from the traditional paradigms that have limited the ways we read, interpret, and analyze Latin

American women's literature. Rather than upholding the static divisions (Caribbean/South American) that have circumscribed our readings, Celis breaks the mold and pairs up authors who have never been analyzed together before. In this sense, Celis provides a new model that is bound to move Latin American feminist theory forward. That said, evening out the terrain by examining authors from more diverse backgrounds would be key to providing a broader perspective. As a reader, I found that limiting the study to authors from Puerto Rico (2), Venezuela (1), and Colombia (2) does not seem to do justice to the term "Caribbean" in the book's subtitle.

In the introduction, the author states that the book is a study of the relationship between fiction and the symbolic construction of the female body and sexuality, specifically based on the depiction of girls and adolescent female characters. The genesis of her study, Celis explains, can be traced back to her "visceral" reaction to the suicide of América Vicuña, the 12 year-old lover of Florentino Ariza in Gabriel García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. Appalled by the ubiquity of sexualized girls and adolescents in the Latin American literary canon—and the lack of critical attention this subject has received—Celis decided to take it upon herself to examine the topic in depth. As she notes, "El motivo es tan recurrente que cabe preguntarse qué habrá sido del *boom* sin ancianos enamorados contemplando virginales púberes o seduciendo virtuales 'Lolitas'" (19). Although *La rebelión* does not engage (nor claim to) in a detailed analysis of the leitmotif of the sexualized girl/adolescent in the masterpieces of Latin American letters, through its examination of the representation of girls/adolescents in the narratives of women authors—which tend to challenge those found in the works of their male counterparts—the author provides a forceful critique of the symbolic and hard violence exerted by patriarchy over girls and adolescents. And this is, perhaps, one of the most important contributions this book makes: it sheds light on a topic that most critics and readers have chosen to ignore, excusing literary representations of pedophilia and incest, and thus implicitly condoning these practices. It is practically impossible to read the introduction and remain unmoved by the ethical connotations of the systematic eroticization and fetishization of girls and adolescents in literature, which in itself is rooted in the denial of children's own subjectivity.

According to Celis, "*La rebelión* examina el rol del control del cuerpo y la sexualidad de las niñas en la perpetuidad de las estructuras jerárquicas neocoloniales y poscoloniales y, al mismo tiempo, subraya los retos que la conciencia corporal de la niña contrapone a esas jerarquías" (26). She situates her study at the intersection of the materiality of the bodies and social realities recreated by the authors and the symbolic meanings and effects of the concepts of "girl," "adolescent," and "woman," produced by fiction (26). The author points to the "critical realist feminist" focus that she applies to her analysis, which is also

informed by the emerging field of “girls’ studies.” In *La rebelión*, Celis adopts a multidisciplinary framework that combines theoretical tools from a range of disciplines, including cultural and literary studies, post-structuralism, postcolonial studies, Caribbean studies and feminist studies, with a particular emphasis on Third World Feminism. Weaved throughout the study are the voices of some of the most recognized feminists of color: Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Chandra Mohanty, Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, and Kamala Kempadoo, among many others. The focus that this study about Latin American women’s narratives places on “women of color” theory is one of the aspects that set it apart from previous studies of its kind. Applying these theories to the literary production of Latin American women certainly helps to foster a cross-cultural dialogue and to move the field forward. At the same time, the heavy emphasis on these critics and the limited integration of more “locally specific” criticism in some chapters can have some limitations. While Celis productively integrates a significant amount of the criticism produced in regards to both Marvel Moreno’s and Fanny Buitrago’s work, that is not the case with the analysis of Antonia Palacios, Magali García Ramis, and Mayra Santos-Febres. I believe that incorporating more recent criticism on their works would help to provide a better context for the analysis of these authors. This is especially crucial in the case of the Puerto Rican authors studied in *La rebelión*, given the layers of complexity that a discussion of Puerto Rican literature entails. While integrating the criticism of feminists of color (Caribbean and African American) such as Jenny Sharpe, Mimi Sheller, and Patricia Collins opens new critical venues for texts such as Santos-Febres’ *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*—which is important—an analysis of this work demands an examination of the issue of female sexuality within the context of Puerto Rican racial, class, gender, historical, political, economic, social, cultural and colonial specificities.

In the first chapter, “Entre el cuerpo ‘apropiado’ y el cuerpo ‘propio’: corporalidad, subjetividad y poder,” Celis lays out the theoretical framework that informs her study. She proposes a feminist revision of the notions of subject and power found in the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others. The work of Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Ann Balsamo, and Lois McNay are at the center of Celis’ discussions of the body’s role in the formation of subjectivity. One of the main points this book makes is that the experiences of girls in the fiction of the Caribbean authors suggest that modes of resistance that promote forms of consciousness can be found in *embodied* practices (46). In other words, this study seeks to challenge the symbolic appropriation of girl sexuality and textual silencing through a reaffirmation of the active condition of the body and the subjectivity of its protagonists (52). The girl, therefore, ceases to be a passive victim of patriarchy. She uses the tools she has at her disposition to fight against her objectification, sexualization, and victimization.

Chapter two, “Antonia Palacios y Magali García Ramis: De cómo se (de)forma una niña decente,” focuses on the main characters in Palacios’ *Ana Isabel, una niña decente* and García Ramis’ *Felices días, tío Sergio*, two young girls who rebel against the societal gendered restrictions imposed on them by family, schools, and the Church. Lidia’s and Ana Isabel’s awakening sensuality not only exposes the conflict between “el cuerpo propio” and “el cuerpo apropiado,” but also challenges the expectations of ignorance and docility associated with girls’ “innocence” (37). In breaking the sanctioned mold of femininity, these characters denounce the double standards that patriarchal society has imposed on girls/women. In chapter three, “En diciembre llegaban las brisas de Marvel Moreno: la psique del poder,” Celis examines Moreno’s *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* applying a feminist revisionist approach that calls into question the central myths about girls’ psycho-sexual development produced by psychoanalysis, such as penis envy, the masochism of female sexuality, and maternal power, among others. While the heavy focus on psychoanalytical theory can make this chapter more challenging for some readers, I consider it to be one of the most important due to the contributions it makes to the field: 1) it examines the role that the home (family space) plays as nucleus of violence against girls and women; 2) it denounces the role that the figure of the mother often plays in perpetuating patriarchal violence; 3) and it denounces the sexual abuse of children (including incest and pedophilia). Regarding this last point, Celis takes issue with what she calls the “sacralization” of the “magic folkloric aura” of texts by Caribbean authors (García Márquez) that represent pedophile practices, and therefore, help to symbolically legitimize sexual violence against children.

Chapter four, “Fanny Buitrago: de la ‘mujer-niña’ y la feminidad como ‘pose,’” takes a broader approach through its examination of the depiction of the “mujeres-niñas” (women-girls) in various texts by Fanny Buitrago. One of the most significant contributions of this chapter lies in calling attention to—and trying to remedy—the lack of critical studies that contextualize the works of Buitrago within the Latin American and Caribbean canons. In contrast to the somber tone of Moreno’s feminist narratives, Buitrago relies on humor and sarcasm to bring forward her scathing criticism of Colombian patriarchal society. In her analysis, Celis examines the use of satire in the cultural construction of femininities in Buitrago’s novels. Among the most relevant criticisms are: the infantilization of femininity in Caribbean and Latin American cultures, the production of bodies at the service of patriarchal culture, the impact of violence against women, the pressure exerted by beauty parameters, and the hypocrisy of patriarchal society evident in the paradox of girls’ textual and visual representation: as angelic figures in texts but as “Lolitas” in popular culture. In Chapter five, “Mayra Santos-Febres: la Mirada de La Negra,” Celis examines the historical figure of Isabel la Negra as she is portrayed in Santos-Febres’ novel *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*. She takes

issue with the myth of the provocative yet passive black woman that has become naturalized in many Latin American cultures. Through an analysis that borrows from feminist Afro-diasporic thought and Caribbean sexuality studies, the author shows how Santos-Febres' novel subverts those assumptions. While this chapter adds to the body of criticism on Santos-Febres by anchoring its analysis on mostly African-American feminist theory, I believe that it would have benefited from a more in-depth examination of the specificities that inform this text of Puerto Rican literature. For instance, that would include engaging with the topic of the "great Puerto Rican family" (given that family is central in the analysis) as well as addressing the issue of how race, class, and gender play out in the novel based on how these axes of identity are constructed and understood in the Puerto Rican insular context. And finally, in chapter six, "El Caribe y la conciencia del cuerpo," Celis provides a conclusion to her study and offers future venues of inquiry.

Without a doubt, *La rebelión de las niñas* represents a contribution to the field of feminist and Caribbean literary studies. Its deep engagement with "women of color" feminism will serve to move the field forward and is likely to inspire additional studies on the works of women authors from the Greater Caribbean.