
Book Review

The Latino/a canon and the emergence of post-sixties literature

Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez

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In a timely study that explores the relationship between post-60s Latino/a literature and the establishment of a Latino/a canon, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez examine the impact of a globalizing market on the production and reception of contemporary Latino/a literature. They focus on three Latino/a groups from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean – Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Cubans – because, despite their distinct histories, they share a “common inheritance of the anticolonial Civil Rights Sixties” (12). Dalleo and Machado Sáez set the bulk of their study in a 1990s and early twenty-first century New York City because of New York’s proximity to the publishing industry and history of Civil Rights struggle. They argue against the ready categorization of post-60s Latino/a literature as apolitical, assimilationist, upwardly mobile and inauthentic, and emphasize its creative and politically progressive potential.

Dalleo and Machado Sáez draw from multiculturalism and anticolonialism to challenge the separation between post-60s and 60s and 70s Latino/a literature. They use a methodology akin to that of anticolonialists, yet take issue with multiculturalists and anticolonialists. They explain that multiculturalism uncritically celebrates

a hybrid *Latinidad* without considering how this hybridity is premised on histories of violence and struggle. They depart from anticolonialism because it locates oppositionality in a closed, idealized past, and they call for a framework that looks ahead. Moreover, Dalleo and Machado Sáez posit that contemporary Latino/a literature is far more nuanced than either multiculturalists or anticolonialists portray it to be.

Indeed, they emphasize the ambiguities of this literature. Contesting the notion that 60s and 70s “ghetto fiction” alone can be oppositional or “authentic,” they ask what defines Latino/a literature; if it is marked by oppositionality or authenticity, how are these traits construed? They question why anticolonial ghetto fiction has been characterized in stark contrast to post-60s Latino/a literature and why post-60s Latino/a writers have been labeled “sellouts.” Ultimately, they encourage a move away from such binaries.

The book’s structure and examples highlight the need for said move. *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* begins by explaining that the work of Nuyorican anticolonial writer Pedro Pietri provides a model for post-60s literature (12). The text



then questions anticolonialism's political efficacy through its analysis of Abraham Rodriguez's *Spidertown* (1993) and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* (2000). The first part of the book thus destabilizes the confinement of resistant Latino/a literature to the Civil Rights period and the depiction of ghetto fiction as a successful tool for political mobilization.

The remainder of *The Latinola Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* further disrupts the dichotomies that divide anticolonial and post-60s Latino/a literature. For one, it blurs the differentiation between "resident" and "immigrant" Latino/a literature. The former refers to US residents and groups directly colonized by the United States who are affiliated with a "lowercase tradition," "an urban realism and resistant politics," whereas the latter refers to "newcomer" Latino/a groups positioned as "upwardly mobile and destined for market assimilation" (73). Through their reading of two Dominican-American texts, Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001), Dalleo and Machado Sáez contest the distinctions that scholars like Lisa Sánchez González, Juan Otero Garabís and Juan Flores draw between "resistant" literature and post-60s literature. Dalleo and Machado Sáez instead illustrate how Díaz and Cruz portray a restrictive ghetto setting and limited realist mode (73).

Analyzing the works of two contemporary "market successes," Cuban-American writer Cristina García and Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez, Dalleo and Machado Sáez continue to challenge the dismissal of post-60s literature as assimilationist. Reading *Dreaming in Cuban's* (1992) Pilar as a hybrid, transnational consumer subject in a global market, they counter the multiculturalist schools of thought outlined by scholars like Ilan Stavans and Gustavo Pérez-Firmat and turn to the layered, multi-directional and creative formulations of

Latino/a identity and consumer subjectivity offered by theorists like Arlene Dávila and Néstor García-Canclini. Dalleo and Machado Sáez similarly underscore the transnational, intersectional scope of Alvarez's repertoire by engaging with postcolonial and US ethnic studies. They reiterate the limitations of anticolonial Latino/a literature by emphasizing how Alvarez criticizes the role of the writer as spokesperson for the people in the anticolonial project while remaining "nostalgic for these social projects and the public voice that they offered the writer" (139). Through Alvarez, Dalleo and Machado Sáez advocate a "minor, everyday" politics that adopts the reformist ideals of the Civil Rights era yet places them in a post-60s context (157).

Concluding their study with a call to weave together elements from the Civil Rights and post-60s literary traditions, Dalleo and Machado Sáez turn to Miami-based Cuban-American writers caught between a politically conservative geographic establishment and progressive Latino/a Studies tradition. Since geography and political ideology seem to determine what qualifies as "legitimate," these Cuban-Americans are denied access to claims of legitimacy and are labeled "sellouts" from both sides (161). Dalleo and Machado Sáez insist on moving beyond this "double bind dynamic" toward a third space (160). Focusing on historical fiction by Nilo Cruz, Chantel Acevedo and Ana Menéndez, Dalleo and Machado Sáez demonstrate how this genre opens up avenues through which to reach said space.

Dalleo and Machado Sáez's transition from a politics of authenticity to a politics of ambiguity corresponds to, and follows from, the directions in which the field of Latino/a Studies is moving. Given contemporary market demands, it is crucial to investigate how post-60s writers negotiate – working within and against – these pressures, rather than



dismissing them outright because of their market success. Disrupting the binaries that divide Latinos/as and underscoring a critical hybridity, Dalleo and Machado Sáez recognize the heterogeneity of Latinidad and facilitate collective Latino/a mobilization. Dalleo and Machado Sáez move from an idealization of

the past to a forward-thinking vision of a present and future influenced by the past.

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