

REVIEW

Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo and Kevin G. Guerrieri (eds.), *Human Rights in Colombian Literature and Culture: Embodied Enactments*, Routledge, 2022.

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Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo and Kevin G. Guerrieri's edited volume *Human Rights in Colombian Literature and Culture: Embodied Enactments* begins with the fundamental contradiction that while human rights "have become the hegemonic language of human dignity at an international level," most of the world's population remain "not subjects of human rights but rather objects of human rights discourses" (xix). This tension is especially apparent in Colombia, where the state is both the guarantor of human rights and a main perpetrator of human rights violations, and where multiple social movements and collectivities have elaborated political grammars that frame rebellious subjectivities beyond liberal notions of "rights" and "the human." How have Colombian writers, filmmakers, artists and activists engaged the field of human rights and articulated alternative languages of human dignity? Can these alternatives be studied productively through the analytical lens of human rights? What do microhistories of human rights in the Global South reveal about the emergence of this universalist discursive regime? Is it possible to imagine a pluriversal framework of human rights rooted in more-than-human subjectivities that encompass relations to the environment, communal modes of living, and the non-human?

Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri investigate these questions by treating cultural products as "embodied enactments" that do not merely reflect or contest hegemonic human rights narratives, but actively perform, stage and represent other visions of subjectivity, memory and justice. The contributors to the volume approach a wide range of novels, films, performances, art installations, songs and graphic narratives as "engaged texts, counter-narratives, and sometimes material and corporal entities that seek to interrogate common-sense assumptions made about both the universal human rights regime and multiple overlapping forms of violence in Colombia" (xx). The concepts of embodiment and enactment illuminate the ways in which cultural products limn "the tension between the abstract universality of human rights and the materiality of violations on individual human bodies and on determined groups" (xx).

Recognizing that Western human rights genealogies have often obscured the contributions of Indigenous, Black, non-Christian, colonized and gender non-conforming communities to social justice struggles and theories of the human, Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri insist on the necessity of interrogating "the predominant historiography [...] through different local and regional narratives from the standpoint of the study of cultural production" (xxiv). To this end, their introduction offers an informative synthesis of the specific development of Colombian human rights discourses from the 19th century to the present. Microhistories of human rights in Colombia complicate many of the narratives found in by North Atlantic historiographies, as well as some popular interpretations of the rise of human rights in Latin America. While Joseph Slaughter notes that the predominant Euro-American genealogy of human rights traces "a direct line of descent from the American Declaration of Independence and the 1789 French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* to the 1948 UDHR [Universal Declaration of Human Rights]," Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri recuperate key moments in the Colombian human rights tradition, such as the 1863 Rionegro Convention that abolished the death penalty and "enlarged tradition of liberal humanitarianism" at the same time as the Geneva Convention (xxv). And in contrast to recent historiographies by scholars including Samuel Moyn, Randall Williams and Patrick William Kelley that "position the 1970s as a key moment in which human rights displaced other utopias," the editors expand on Jorge González Jácome's argument that the emergence of Colombian human rights activism coincided with the ongoing ascent of revolutionary utopian discourses (xxviii).

The individual chapters are divided into four "assemblages" organized around common thematic concerns. The first, "Human rights narratives, micronarratives and subjectivation," begins with Luis Fernando Restrepo's

study of literature, human rights and historical memory in the 19th century. The next chapters by Miguel Rojas-Sotelo and Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo discuss the articulation of traumatic narratives in the work of contemporary visual artist Doris Salcedo and the questioning of established human rights discourses in Daniel Ferreira's novel *Rebelión de los oficios inútiles*, respectively. Carlos Mario Mejía Suárez concludes this section with an analysis of subjectivation, victimhood and the perception of past in present in novels by Laura Restrepo, Evelio Rosero and Azriel Bibliowicz.

"Land environment, commodity: The human and the non-human" explores human rights narratives in connection to land, memory, extractivism, displacement and interspecies relationality. This section includes Daniel Coral Reyes' study of "multidirectional memory" in Ciro Guerra's film *El abrazo de la serpiente*; a chapter by Ligia S. Aldana on rebellion and testimonio in the songs of the Afrodescendant cantadora de bullerengue sentao Ceferina Banquez; Felipe Gómez Gutierrez's analysis of "embodied enactments" in recent graphic-narrative representations of forced displacement; and Vanesa Giraldo Gartner and César Ernesto Abadía Barrero's ethnographic study of plants' memories in the Amazon region. One of the most methodologically innovative contributions, Giraldo Gartner and Abadía Barrero's chapter is exemplary of the volume's intention to think both with and beyond the human rights framework.

In "Structural, political, and gender-based violence and resistance," Constanza López Baquero investigates representations gender-based violence in recent novels, films and art installations by Colombian women including Laura Restrepo, Jineth Bedoya and Doris Salcedo; Eunice Rojas and Carlos A. García Pinilla examine the denunciation of human rights violations in contemporary urban music, focusing on social cleansing, "false positives" and the killing of teenager Dilan Cruz by police in November 2019; and Carolina Sánchez analyzes the connections between public and private violence in Laura Restrepo's novel *Delirio*.

The final cluster on "Transitional justice, grassroots activism, and problematizing victimhood" begins with chapters by Cheryl Elston and Nicolás Rodríguez-Idárraga that examine the tensions around human rights, memory and transitional justice narratives as they appear in the play *Antígonas, tribunal de mujeres* and the House of Memory in Tumaco. In both cases, the authors argue that grassroots cultural productions and memory spaces disrupt official narratives of human rights, victimization, historical memory and transitional justice. These interventions are followed by Juan Camilo Galeano Sánchez's study of ex-combatant reintegration in Flor Romero de Nohra's 1968 novel *Mi Capitán Fabián Sicachá*, arguing that it was "pioneering the concept of 'reintegration'" decades before this term became part of the Colombian transitional justice lexicon (249).

By untethering human rights discourses and practices from "conventional registers of human dignity that have been universalized around Western conceptions of the human and linked to the morals and logics of the market," these chapters suggest that human rights "can and must be continually reformulated and embodied through alternative, non-hegemonic languages and grammars within the pluriverse" (xlvii). In doing so, the volume makes important contributions to multiple lines of inquiry. First, it extends and nuances previous works in critical human rights scholarship by investigating Colombia's specific histories of human rights discourse and activism. Within the vast literature on representations of violence in Colombian cultural production, this is also the first book to explicitly take up "human rights" as its primary analytical framework (Fanta Castro et. al; Herrero-Olaizola; Martínez; O'Bryen; Suárez). Finally, it expands upon recent scholarship on Latin American human rights histories and cultural forms by modeling novel ways of studying

Human rights narratives, practices and representations as “embodied enactments.”

Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri’s introduction is refreshingly self-reflexive, inviting readers to question the book’s “implicit assumptions” (xlii), recognize “new lines of inquiry” and create “new assemblages” (xxxviii). Taking up this invitation to think beyond the book, a few areas of future research come to mind. Despite this volume’s attention to matters of race and gender, it is light on LGBTQ experiences. The work of queer and trans performance artists such as Analú Laferal, Pasión Cusqueña, Nadia Granados and collectives like the Red Comunitaria Trans [Trans Community Network] would dialogue productively with the questions about humanity, political subjectivity and embodiment raised throughout the chapters. Future studies might also question the usefulness of human rights as an analytic lens in certain contexts. While the introduction’s inclusion of Afro-Colombian intellectuals Amir Smith-Córdoba and Manuel Zapata Olivella within Colombia’s human rights genealogy is an important corrective to human rights narratives that erase the contributions of Black thinkers, no mention is made of Zapata Olivella’s own critical comments on human rights as a discursive regime (Zapata Olivella, 22). These absences should not be understood as shortcomings of Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri’s illuminating volume, but rather as signs of its value as a point of departure for new investigations into the complex history of human rights vis-à-vis other political imaginaries.

The individual chapters and introduction draw upon a rich theoretical corpus, including decolonial, biopolitical, ecocritical and memory studies approaches. Combined with the wide range of topics and cultural expressions covered by the contributors, this theoretical breadth makes Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri’s book an excellent resource for researchers and educators in Latin American cultural studies and subfields such as performance, ethnic studies, women and gender studies and the environmental humanities.

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