Vinodh Venkatesh, The body as capital: masculinities in contemporary Latin American fiction

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To cite this article: Brianne Orr Álvarez (2016) Vinodh Venkatesh, The body as capital: masculinities in contemporary Latin American fiction, Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes, 41:3, 464-466, DOI: 10.1080/08263663.2016.1225684

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2016.1225684

Published online: 02 Nov 2016.
lessons in the general anthropology classroom and it will also appeal to teachers, scholars and professionals working in fields like sociology, medical anthropology, Latin American studies, urban studies, and public health, and on phenomena such as neoliberalism, citizenship, development studies, disability studies, critical public health studies, medicine and culture, and social science and medicine.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2016.1225682


Vinodh Venkatesh’s The Body as Capital (2015) builds off theories that propose gender as a category in flux to suggest that masculinity is a “fluid, sociohistorically specific, and interrelational identity that is plural in nature” (3). For Venkatesh, a fluid approach to the study of masculinities becomes particularly important in a neoliberal age in which the erasure of borders – geographical, economic, and national – leads to “translational gender positions” that challenge conventional structures and relations relevant to the nation-centered discourse of the dictator novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (5). In such works, the caudillo, often symbolized through the Lacanian phallus, occupies the central discursive space. Taking a neoliberal context as his backdrop and borrowing from Gayle Rubin’s notion of the feminine as commodity, Venkatesh traces how a broad sampling of contemporary Latin American writers that appeal to local and global literary markets – a group he tentatively names the “Generation Alfaguara” – rewrite “the Masculine” in “black ink” (16) (a clear allusion to Helene Cixou’s 1976 “white ink” characteristic of l’écriture feminine) through a “capitalization of the [masculine] body” as metaphor and dialogic site of enunciation (6).

The book’s structure reflects Venkatesh’s three-pronged focus on the new historical narrative, popular music as original literary soundtrack, and literary responses to the theoretical. The result is an ambitious model of how to analyze gender in relation to the literary, cultural, political, and economic shifts evident at the turn of the century that urges the reader to (re)think “neoliberalized bodies” and the state of masculinities per se in and through the diverse lens of contemporary Latin American fiction.

In Part I, Venkatesh sets himself the task of examining how four new historical novels – Margarita, está linda la mar (1998), Nadie me verá llorar (1999), La fiesta del chivo (2000), and Tengo miedo torero (2001) – succeed (or not) in re-writing “the Masculine” as a metaphor for capital and as a new dialogic site of enunciation. The introductory chapter provides the clearest example of Venkatesh’s proposal by evaluating how Sergio Ramírez queers the nation by writing the testes as origin of biological and ideological seed and linking the anus to such characters as Parrales, who undermines “the Masculine” through ambiguous sexuality and open-border practices, a clear allusion to Nicaragua’s compliant role in a neoliberal era.

In Chapter 2, the author introduces a potpourri of theoretical approaches that, at times, takes away from the book’s initial proposal to show how Rivera Garza creates a “rhizomatic” (27) “economy of masculinities reminiscent of free market Mexico” through her typified masculine characters (36). Chapters 3 and 4 evaluate how Mario Vargas Llosa (La fiesta del
chivo) and Pedro Lemebel (Tengo miedo torero) reconsider “the Masculine” through allegorical representations of the caudillo in the realm of the homosocial and varying queering processes, respectively. For Venkatesh, Trujillo’s masculine body (though broken) functions as a key local and global discursive site in the dialogues between the past and the present. However, in nurturing the unlikely friendship between La Loca (the transvestite) and Carlos (the rebel), Lemebel succeeds in dirtying the borders between heterosexual-homosocial-homosexual through the scatological as unhygienic, irrepresible, and fluid. In relation to this, Venkatesh’s link between the economy and gender(ed) body becomes most clear through his use of diarrhea as a metaphor for free-flowing neoliberal practices.

Part II evaluates the works of Generation Alfaguara authors Pedro Lemebel (2001), Mayra Montero (2001), Alfredo Bryce (2003), and Franz Galich (2000, 2006), who cinematographically use music as literary soundtrack to encrypt and interpret gender codes linked to specific historical, cultural, and geographical settings. The content in this section at times departs from the book’s main thesis and instead focuses on music as a “semantic queering device” through which the characters simultaneously bring to the surface hidden thoughts and desires and detach their identities from specific spaces, moments in time, and discursive loci (61). Nevertheless, Venkatesh’s consideration of Nicaraguan Franz Galich’s sequential thrillers Managa, Salsa City (¿Devórame otra vez!, 2000) and Y te diré quién eres (Mariposa traicionera, 2006) brings us back on point and serves as a poignant example of how music is used in contemporary narrative to root critiques of consumptive gender(ed) practices in the heat of the local as urban space and cultural episteme (Managua) and to deterrotorcialize “sites of neoliberal carnage” through interactive and internationalized intertextualities (98).

In Part III, Venkatesh conceptualizes new ways of writing masculinities in neoliberal times using additional fictions produced by the Generation that “stretch conceptions of Latin Americanness” and promote “cultural ideologies of gender”, thus re-mapping the topographies of masculinities in a continually global(ized) framework (109). This closing section builds off the theoretical foundation Venkatesh establishes in the introduction, returning to Connel and her concept of “transnational business masculinity” (128) and the penis as metaphor for “the Masculine” to show how Hernán Rodríguez Matte, Enrique Serna Jaime Bayly, and others write masculinities through metaphor (technology, nature), the phallus as “failing penis”, and cojo masculinity (123).

The focus of all three chapters lies on the relationship between global economic practices and gender(ed) subjectivities, but Venkatesh’s analysis of masculinities in the context of Mexican author Enrique Serna’s “glocal” fiction is most helpful in locating the evolution of rewriting masculinities that he seeks to trace throughout Body as Capital (2015). If for the authors studied in Part I, the phallus as symbol of the Masculine is overshadowed by contemporary authors’ use of the testes, the anus, and the mouth as a means to re-focus gender analytics, it reclaims center stage as a protagonist in Serna’s La sangre erguida (2010), albeit in a dysfunctional form as “the failing penis” (123). Here, gender-as-broken-subjectivity positions the male characters in a Foucauldian heterotopic holding zone in which they are neither “Masculine” nor “non-Masculine”; neither “local” nor “global”. This fluid shading of gender leads Venkatesh to conclude his book with a profound example of gender as performance through Peruvian author Santiago Roncagliolo’s repetitive and robotic cyborg body, Max (Tan cerca de la vida, 2010); a union of technology and anatomy that Venkatesh posits as the discursive starting point for challenging hegemonic masculinities in a neoliberal age.

Venkatesh holds in his hands a fascinating proposal, which he traces through a broad range of contemporary Latin American authors from his coined Generation Alfaguara. His literary corpus and varied conceptual framework is the result of diligent research and he clearly selected works, theories, and even created concepts (“butcher homosociality”, 73) that best showcase how a reshaping of “the Masculine” through a commodification of
masculinities occurs (or not) in turn-of-the-century dialogic narratives. Venkatesh’s pre-section introductions, conclusions to chapters, and visual language are effective in mapping out the relationship between previous and upcoming arguments and his intuitive detail to alternative readings and directions of analysis is quite impressive, even if at times distracting.

Venkatesh’s work succeeds in underlining how the tumultuous neoliberal times have urged contemporary Latin American authors to bring to the surface of their narratives the ideas, relationships, and creative juices that “the Masculine” has historically “cock-blocked”. Nevertheless, one tabu remains for the author himself: performativity. Though the idea of gender as performance appears as an (un)intentional intertextuality throughout the book and this concept, both in a real and metaphorical sense, is at the root of many of the “gender [as] transitory” relationships Venkatesh flushes out throughout Body as Capital (2015), the author consciously dispels North American gender theories as “falsely universalizing”, but at a cost for his study and for his readers (48). In fact, Venkatesh is most effective when questioning how performance as subversion simultaneously detaches masculine subjectivities from the phallus and blurs the purportedly rigid borders between past and present as historical or contemporary discourse, gender code, and economic regulatory pattern.

References

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2016.1225684

The heart in the glass jar. Love letters, bodies, and the law in Mexico, by William E. French, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2015, 318 pp., CDN$43.92 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8032-6678-0

In The Heart in the Glass Jar, William French examines love letters written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the rural communities of Chihuahua, Mexico. The book seeks to “explore the particular ‘literacy event’ associated with love letters” (10), an interesting premise that challenges our traditional conception of love letters. This is a provocative book that proposes groundbreaking concepts, such as the sentimental anatomy and the anatomy of sentiments, and uses an innovative methodological approach. French seeks to understand letters in a poetic way, highlighting the importance of the genre’s metaphorical aspects and performative characteristics.