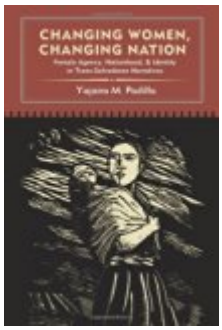
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Yajaira M. Padilla. *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. viii + 191 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-4277-8.

Reviewed by Stephanie Parham

Published on H-Ethnic (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Amy J. Johnson (Brown University)

Focusing on the period between 1980 and 2005, Yajaira M. Padilla's *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives* examines the gendered language of Salvadoran identity, both national and transnational, through the use of literary texts. Beginning with the mobilization of women during the country's civil war and transitioning into the immigration of Salvadorans to the United States after this time of turmoil, Padilla examines how novels and poems, produced in both El Salvador and the United States, construct what it means to be Salvadoran through engagement with both locations. Organized around specific figures, such as the *campesinas* and the *guerrilleras* of the war period, followed by women in postwar El Salvador, those who immigrated to the United States, and finally, Salvadoran-American women, Padilla contextualizes their experiences within the larger framework of El Salvadoran, Central American, and U.S.-Latin American histories.

In the introduction, Padilla frames her work within larger scholarship and theories about transnationalism, identity, and community. The first two chapters establish what Padilla argues are the central discursive tropes of testimonial literature in civil war era El Salvador: the *campesina* and the *guerrillera*. Together, Padilla contends that these representations reveal the production of deeply entrenched heteronormative ideas about gender that structured and limited women's participation in the revolutionary project. Varying her literary texts to include novels and short stories, chapter 3 examines how narratives use female characters to explore the struggles for identity and place that functioned on a wider national scale during the postwar neoliberal reconstruction process. Reiterating the author's goal of analyzing transnational identity, the final chapters focus on how immigrant and second-generation Salvadoran women viewed themselves and their position in society through connections to their homeland as well as their place in the United States. In this section, as in the discussion

on revolutionary women, the implied masculinity of both immigrant and citizen ignores the significant contributions of women in the transnational relationship between El Salvador and the United States.

As an examination of identity formation and cultural consciousness through literary texts, Padilla addresses a number of interdisciplinary themes important to scholars of both Latin America and the United States, including transnationalism, nationalism, gender, and immigration. The organization of Padilla's work offers a straightforward and clear-cut narrative of how Salvadorans, in particular Salvadoran women, actively participated in significant events in their country's history. Because her specialization is in literary analysis, she uses cultural texts to show how authors portray these experiences. At the most basic level, these narrative accounts argue for the necessity of acknowledging the contributions of women as historical actors. However, the central focus of Padilla's work is how cultural texts have created representations of Salvadoran women that reflect a gendered discourse of nationalism and identity and what that means for the transnational construction of identity that has taken place during the postwar period. Engaging with the increased scholarly interest in women's participation in both the revolutionary movement and the postwar nation-building project, Padilla's gendered analysis of popular texts from El Salvador and the United States provides another lens through which to view the gendered nature of such processes as nationalism, identity, and immigration, which are prevalent in much of the scholarship.

In terms of the revolutionary movement and the postwar reconciliation process, the discussion of how histories of the civil war construct women as martyrs or republican or revolutionary mothers demonstrates the power of rhetoric in creating heteronormative tropes for women's experiences. Rather than focus her analysis of gendered language solely on women, Padilla also notes how this discourse applied to the state and its military forces through the feminization of the military because of the nature of its relationship with the United States. Both of these analyses contribute greatly to discussions of gender and revolutionary movements, which figure prominently in the literature about Central America. As Padilla points out in her introduction, the use of these texts, particularly the U.S. Salvadoran narratives, can contribute considerably to existing debates about Latina/o identity in the United States. In this respect, the insertion of the experiences of Salvadoran women is a step toward the inclusion of other Central American women, such as those from neighboring Guatemala, whose experiences as ***campesinas***, ***guerrilleras***, and prominent figures in the postwar democratization process are often portrayed as the exception, rather than the standard. Once the stories of such women are introduced as part of a wider phenomenon in both their countries of origin and the United States, greater attention can be paid to the role of gender in political processes and a more nuanced account of these countries and their transnational citizens can be given.

Similarly, the analysis that takes place in the second half of the book provides a useful and engaging account of how transnational identities shape the histories of immigration and nationhood in both countries. In Padilla's examination of the masculinization of the immigrant community in the transnational discourse, she demonstrates the marginalization of women's contributions to the remittances sent back to El Salvador. Not acknowledging the contributions made by Salvadoran women in the United States perpetuates the masculine nature of transnational identity. Furthermore, the discussion of the positionality of the Central American immigrant community in relation to their lives in the United States as well as their connections, real or imagined, to their homeland provides a useful lens through which to look at generational differences between immigrants and their children.

Overall, this book is a strong contribution that engages with important thematic interests in the field and underutilized sources. The only considerable flaw is that the writing style is extremely technical and the jargon and theory present in the introduction (for example, the repeated use of quotations around individual words, such as "plotted," undoubtedly a reference to the work of other scholars) could potentially alienate readers from other disciplines. While providing a methodological and theoretical framework is important to helping the reader understand the approach being taken and the type of analysis being made, technical terminology at the start of a book can be disconcerting for a reader. Given the useful contributions made by Padilla's work, one would hope that this weakness would not deter readers from this otherwise engaging text. In terms of strengths, the placement of Salvadoran women as central to the formation of nationalism and transnational identity provides important insight into the gendered language of revolutionary movements, post-civil war reconstruction processes, immigration, and the construction of immigrant identity vis-à-vis one's homeland and their adopted country. Furthermore, the analysis of Central America, and the Salvadoran experience in particular, fills an important void in discussions of twentieth-century Latin American history, specifically questions of how civil war and the memory of the war shape the lives of generations of Central Americans, and how those experiences and memories inform the ways in which these individuals construct their own identities. By using literary construction of Salvadoran women to chart important events and themes in Salvadoran history from revolution, to postwar processes, immigration, and memory, Padilla provides a chronologically organized account of how gender operated within the construction of this transnational experience.

The sources selected provide useful and relevant evidence for the study and offer the reader an introduction to available literary sources on the experiences of Salvadorans living in both El Salvador and the United States. ***Changing Women, Changing Nation*** might not be accessible to undergraduate students due to its technical style, but it would provide a useful and engaging text for a graduate class in a variety of disciplines. Aside from literature-based courses, the book would also prove useful in a gender studies course as well as in classes on immigration or U.S.-Latin American relations.

d

ed

d

argued

ed

three

d

ed

the

d

s

both

such

proliferate

s

-

-

the differences in between the

le

,

,

it

to be overwhelmed with technical terminology at the start of a book

os

events

the

the

as well as

ing

As it is,

at

the

level

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-ethnic

Citation: Stephanie Parham. Review of Padilla, Yajaira M. *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives.* H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37950