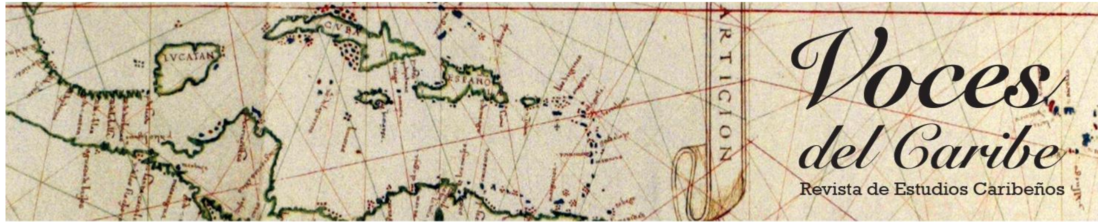

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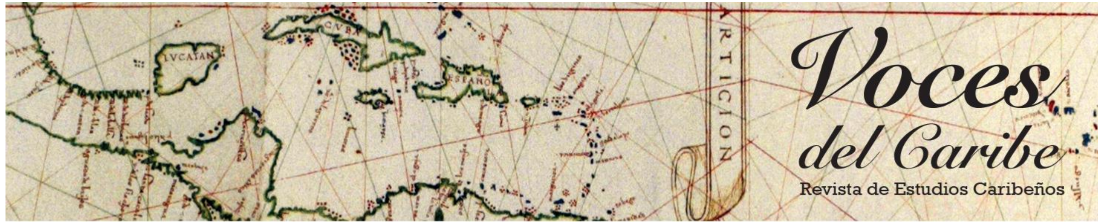
Patricia Lapolla Swier. *Hybrid Nations: Gender Troping and the Emergence of Bigendered Subjects in Latin American Narrative*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009. 229 pages. Hardback. $42.50. ISBN-13: 978-0-8386-4209-2.

Although its title, *Hybrid Nations*, may bring to mind notions of cultural or racial *mestizaje*, Patricia Lapolla Swier's provocative study is, in fact, dedicated to the task of revealing the persistent presence of "feminized men" or "evolved masculine subjects" in canonical, male-authored Latin American narratives from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. By rejecting the strident *machismo* of the caudillo, these evolved subjects, who are figured as heroes or would-be heroes in the texts examined by Lapolla Swier, embody a modern, enlightened masculinity that their authors intend to serve as a model for national and regional development. The new masculinity portrayed in these texts not only privileges reason above brute strength, but also incorporates key aspects of the feminine, thus making those who incarnate it into the "bigendered subjects" of the book's subtitle. Analyzing examples of what she calls "gender troping"—that is, "the utilization of gender codes in order to persuade the reader of the (political) objectives of the author" (20)—Lapolla Swier acknowledges that this form of troping overtly relies on traditional notions of the male-female binary. At the same time, she suggests that, in their attempt to redefine masculinity in modern or progressive terms, the authors she examines "have either advocated for a recovery of the feminine in their texts or have inadvertently disturbed traditional conceptualizations of gender based on binary oppositions" (22). Through her close analysis of three novels from distinct countries and historical moments—namely, José Marti's *Amistad funesta* (Cuba, 1885), Rómulo Gallego's *Doña Bárbara* (Venezuela, 1929), and Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (Guatemala, 1946)—the critic traces the emergence and development of these "evolved masculine subjects" over several decades.

After laying out the main tenets of her argument in the book's brief preface, Lapolla Swier turns, in her introduction, to a pair of seminal mid-nineteenth Argentine texts, which provide early examples of gender troping: Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* (1837) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilzación y barbarie* (1845). Focusing mainly on the former work, Lapolla Swier underscores the contrast between the short story's two central characters: its villain, the hypermasculine, ultraviolent Matasietes; and its martyred hero, the reasoned,



citified—and, one might argue, sissified—anonymous young Unitarian. Agreeing with the critical consensus that the struggle between these characters dramatizes the national battle between the *caudillismo* incarnated by the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas and the enlightened reformist agenda supported by Echeverría and Sarmiento, Lapolla Swier nevertheless concludes that both authors fail to imagine a viable new masculine subject, instead representing "a passive, dominated positioning that clearly casts [their evolved masculine subjects] into the feminine domain" (35). The second part of the introduction gives a broad overview of perceptions of women—especially mad, degenerate, or pathological women—in the scientific and psychoanalytical discourses of nineteenth-century Europe. Additionally, it reviews notions of gender developed by philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Stressing the strong influence these ideas had on Latin American intellectuals of the same period, Lapolla Swier returns to them repeatedly in the following the chapters.

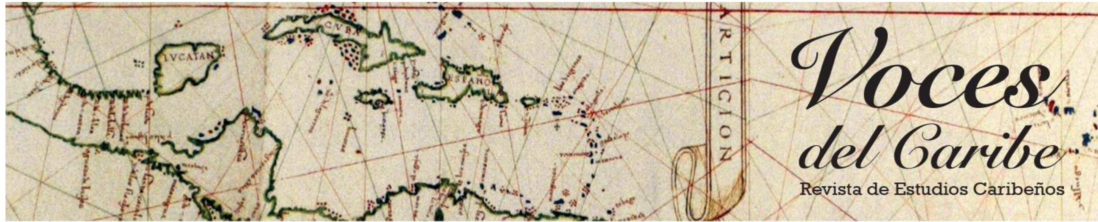
Chapters One and Two of *Hybrid Nations* examine the work of Martí. The first focuses on gender troping in the Cuban patriot's chronicles and essays, with the dual aim of explaining the political climate that dictated the relationship between Latin America and the United States between 1881 and 1885, and tracing concomitant changes in representations of both the US and the ideal masculine subject in Martí's writing during the same period. Both of these efforts bolster her original—if not entirely convincing—reading of Martí's novel *Amistad funesta*, to which she dedicates her second chapter. Here, Lapolla Swier argues that "the pathological depiction" of the hero's betrothed, Lucía, "reflects the precipitous conduct of US foreign policy between 1881 and 1885 as it unmasks the deleterious characteristics of modernity" (84). This chapter offers a rich reading of Lucía, as a pathological and hypermasculine woman; and of Juan, as an ultimately failed version of Martí's ideal man, who blends masculine and feminine qualities but is finally undone by a too-feminine passivity. Here, the critic's analysis highlights complexities and pitfalls faced by Martí and other nineteenth-century intellectuals intent on breaking free of traditional gender norms. However, her insistence that Lucía herself does not simply represent the destructive values of modernity embraced by the US, but actually incarnates the US itself—despite the fact that "Martí never specifically links [her] to the United States" (109-10)—perhaps goes a step too far.

Chapter Three offers a reading of Gallego's *Doña Bárbara* that runs counter to those who have emphasized the Venezuelan writer's reliance on dichotomous argumentation. While acknowledging that the narrative highlights oppositions such as

barbarism/civilization and male/female, Lapolla Swier nevertheless argues that not only Doña Bárbara but also the novel's ideal male protagonist, Santos, blurs traditional gender lines. Doña Bárbara does so in a "pathological" and uncontrolled manner. As a citified and therefore feminized male, Santos more intentionally "reappropriates some traditional codes of masculinity" in order to model himself into a new male who is active, powerful, and even, when necessary, aggressive (131). However, due to his ability to show *ternura*, or tenderness—and to instill the same in Doña Bárbara's daughter, Marisela—he avoids falling victim to the barbarism that has plagued the model of leadership represented by the Venezuelan dictator, Juan Vicente Gómez. Thus Lapolla Swier argues that, by productively appropriating masculine and feminine qualities, Santos exemplifies a relatively successful evolution into a bigendered subject.

Finally, Chapter Four reads Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* as an example of what Hélène Cixous, in her classic 1976 essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," calls *écriture feminine*. More particularly, she connects Asturias's incorporation of pre-Colombian myth to a "subjective world associated with the feminine [that] challenges a paternal authoritative order" (150). Accordingly, Asturias identifies the lack of the feminine (or the maternal) in the hypermasculine order of the dictator as the source of its pathology, and "posits the feminine space as a means of contesting and resisting" that order (156). Interestingly, Lapolla Swier's analysis reveals both the presymbolic realm of the feminine and the symbolic order of the dictator, to be represented in the novel as incoherencies. The latter, however, is revealed as such despite presenting itself as the originator of the law, while the former employs incoherence as a form of resistance. Although she focuses on the female and otherwise marginal characters in the novel, Lapolla Swier also offers Cara de Ángel as this novel's "evolved masculine subject."

Throughout *Hybrid Nations*, Lapolla Swier does an admirable job of tracing the complexities of gender construction, and deconstruction, in her chosen narratives, as well as of connecting such "gender troping" to various concepts of identity, such as race; to nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical discourse; and to the nation-building projects of the authors in question. At times, however, suggestive aspects of her analysis remain lamentably underdeveloped. For example, in the introduction, she notes that new concepts of gender, and particularly of womanhood, often conflicted with traditional, Church-sanctioned ones. Despite a few scattered references to *marianismo*, however, she never expands on this idea or explores its implications.



Thus, in her reading of *El matadero*, she notes that the slaughterhouse women depicted by Echeverría are "unlike those defined within the traditional concepts of femininity, of *marianismo*," but she offers no further scrutiny of the effect or impact of this discrepancy (34). More importantly, one pattern in particular, which is suggested by her analyses of the three main texts, goes almost completely uncommented: according to her readings, in the novels by Martí and Gallegos, the violent hypermasculinity of US imperialism and the dictatorship of Gómez, respectively, is incarnated by monstrous, pathological female characters. Why is this so, and how does the repeated representation of masculine violence as emanating from feminine bodies complicate the novels' progressive political agendas and "evolved masculine subjects"? Moreover, why does this change in Asturias, and how does this difference contribute to—or how is it reflective of—his overall strategy of *écriture feminine*? These and related questions remain, to my mind, largely unanswered.

Despite these limitations, Lapolla Swier's readings of Martí, Gallego, and Asturias are often innovative and stimulating, and they certainly contribute to critical debates about these canonical texts. Moreover, the larger queries that give shape to her study are worthy of consideration. These include the pointed question, "can we not include 'feminized' men into [the] intricate pattern of representation of the oppressed?" (191). Lapolla Swier thus challenges her readers to examine their own prejudices about certain writers and literary traditions and to confront and root out certain kinds of binary thinking that she judges to have infiltrated contemporary gender studies.

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