

***Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America* edited by Gabriela Polit Dueñas and María Helena Rueda**

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Polit Dueñas Gabriela, and María Helena Rueda, eds. *Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 258 pages; \$85.00.



An anthology addressing so heterogeneous and so fashionable a topic as violence in Latin America necessarily must negotiate the conflicting demands of, on the one hand, a theoretical rigor and thematic specificity that would set it apart, and, on the other hand, a breadth of scope and narrative or descriptive content to give it broad appeal. *Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America* leans toward eclecticism and narrativity, and many of its chapters are primarily devoted to recounting a particular experience or set of related experiences of violence from an ethnographic perspective, or to discussing in largely expository fashion aesthetic objects that represent or respond to violent events. These pieces sometimes fail to meet the interpretative goals that frame their presentation, although they raise important problems and convey meaningful empirical research. Other contributions do productively address theoretical and methodological challenges of the field. The collection as a whole proffers an overview of the diverse forms of violence operative in Latin American societies that have garnered scholarly attention and a sampling of different disciplinary approaches to their interpretation.

Cristian Alarcón's *crónicas* of the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Fuerte Apache, as the only chapter composed in an expressly narrative and nonacademic genre, represent the most palpable case of the collection's overall methodological tendency. Arturo Arias relates the experiences of indigenous women guerrilla combatants in Guatemala, but provides little

argumentative support for his claim that these women articulate “radical alternatives to modernity” (18). María Victoria Uribe describes some of the disparate—and often extraordinary—responses of Colombian communities to the anonymous corpses delivered into their territories by the country’s rivers. Victor Vich details Ricardo Wiese’s project commemorating the nine students and their teacher who were murdered at the Universidad de la Cantuta in Peru. Polit Dueñas extols the work of journalist Javier Valdez in chronicling the violence of the drug trade in Culiacán, Mexico.

If these chapters fall short of a rigorous critical engagement with their objects of study, it is often because they espouse a certain ethical approach that tends toward a celebratory mode singularly resistant to the risks that a more attentive reading inevitably entails. Uribe, for example, limits her discussion of the practices she documents to a moral evaluation, censuring the residents of Marsella— “The town’s population feels no moral commitment toward these [unidentified murder victims]” (45)— and grants unqualified endorsement to an autopsy technician in Guajira who declares, “the love that I feel for my corpses is greater than the love that I feel for my mother, for my father and for my children” (47), without noting the surprising hyperbole here or asking whether it might be symptomatic of something other than a functional moral compass such as she finds lacking in Marsella. In her piece on the femicides of Ciudad Juárez, María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba most explicitly articulates the lofty ambitions of her scholarly work as a response to decades of on-going murders of women inadequately addressed by the judicial system in Ciudad Juárez: “One aim of this essay is to bring justice, at least in my discourse, to the victims of this silent holocaust and their families” (119).

There are, of course, a number of exceptions: Marta Peixoto’s essay in particular exemplifies an ethically engaged approach that avoids the pitfalls of moralistic reductionism. She offers an acute comparative analysis of recent Brazilian films that takes into account the ethics of genre, channels of distribution, and differing epistemological conditions of reception. Samuel Araújo’s “Sound, Violence, and Politics” considers problems of research praxis involving marginalized subjects from a social scientific perspective, and Javier Auyero and Matthew Mahler advance methodological recommendations for political analysis in general in their discussion of the exploitation and instigation of collective violence by political elites based on case studies from Argentina.

Insofar as *Meanings of Violence* can be read as a unified project traversed by common theoretical and thematic concerns, the first question that arises—and one that is addressed by the editors in their introduction as well as by most of the contributors—is that of what is designated by the term *violence*. Polit Dueñas and Rueda introduce the critical distinction between violence conceived as an aberration or disruption of the social order and violence as intrinsic to that order to claim that the collection challenges such categorical approaches. But these categories remain highly relevant despite their necessary mutual contamination, and all of the authors rightly privilege a systemic understanding of violence, most patently in the case of societies structured by inequality and differentiated citizenship, but also

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(albeit too cursorily and infrequently) as constitutive of democracy itself (for example, in Auyero and Mahler).

The title of the anthology raises a second, perhaps less obvious but no less consequential question: what is meant by *meanings*? Many of the contributors privilege social and aesthetic practices that make legible what initially appear as senseless acts of violence. Uribe writes, for example, “The atrocities of our time lack words that can give them meaning,” and extols the cultural practices that “fill with meaning actions that are perceived as senseless” (49–50). The notion of redressing these atrocities by uncovering or constructing “meaning” in a gesture that avoids political action or any actual reduction of lethal violence is reiterated in the chapters by Polit Dueñas, who argues that Javier Valdez’s chronicles “return some legible sense to those otherwise misunderstood cruel destinies” (159), and Vich, who proclaims that “The cantutas repair, correct, and neutralize a desecration” (172). Through a series of unfounded semantic equivalences and oppositions, *meaning* becomes a value in itself: an antidote to violence, which is here implicitly restored to its discredited sense of disorder and unreason.

In sum, all of the chapters in this volume proffer valuable documentation of aesthetic, social, and juridical responses to and representations of the mechanisms of violence that structure power relations within and beyond Latin American societies; some also advance innovative theoretical and methodological approaches to their respective fields. Others serve to evince the appreciable challenges of reading these texts, practices, and experiences productively without succumbing to the desire for moral certainty or hermeneutic closure.

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