

Art and Politics in Latin America: A Book Review Article of New Work by Van Delden and Grenier, Sánchez, and Cohn

Nicole L. Sparling
Central Michigan University

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Nicole L. SPARLING

Art and Politics in Latin America:

A Book Review Article of New Work by Van Delden and Yvon Grenier, Sánchez, and Cohn

In the article at hand I review Maarten Van Delden's and Yvon Grenier's 2009 *Gunshots at the Fiesta: Literature and Politics in Latin America*, Fernando Fabio Sánchez's 2010 *Artful Assassins: Murder as Art in Modern Mexico* (trans. Stephen J. Clark), and Deborah Cohn's 2012 *The Latin American Literary Boom and U.S. Nationalism during the Cold War*. All three books were published by Vanderbilt University Press.

Van Delden and Grenier remind us in their introduction to *Gunshots at the Fiesta* of "the close interweaving of literature and politics ... as a key characteristic of Latin American culture" (xiii) and they later justify their comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the topic because "literary critics can learn a great deal from acquainting themselves with the concept of politics as it is used in the field of political science, while social scientists can learn much from the insights into language, narrative, history, and human psychology that have been developed in the field of literary criticism" (237). Indeed, Grenier's expertise in comparative politics and Van Delden's in comparative literature produce an innovative and interesting approach to writing both collaboratively and interdisciplinarily. The balancing act between marking and transcending disciplinary methodologies, epistemologies, and parameters is not easy to perform, and Van Delden and Grenier reveal their struggles in the dialogue that structures the conclusion. The conclusion is perhaps the most illuminating portion of the text, where it is easier to observe the disciplinary politics of positioning and the asserting, conceding, or sharing of intellectual territory.

In order to be able to conceive of such a project, Van Delden and Grenier define the nature of their terms, namely politics and art: "the case can be made that a political mind-set looks for closure, action, and victory, rather than purely reflective or contemplative activities" (2) whereas art's domain is theoretical in nature: "an operational characterization [of art] would have to comprise a certain detachment from practical matters and a keenness to cultivate various kinds of ambivalence. As a human activity, art tends to welcome the paradoxes and contradictions that result from the simultaneous consideration of multiple views, sentiments, and perspectives without the urge to designate a winner" (5). At first, by establishing such a dichotomous view of both fields, the authors, perhaps inadvertently, fail to capture their complexity. However, as they later admit, "perhaps, in addition to our two 'logics' (literature and politics), we should have paid some attention to the 'logic' of scientific discovery — or, to put it another way, the logic of academic work" (231). In their conclusion, this tension does arise in the discussion of the measurability of influence, or how politics impacts literature and literature impacts politics. For instance, when Grenier remarks that "most political scientists would readily admit that nothing is more difficult to measure than influence" and Van Delden claims that "there is simply no evidence to back up such grand generalizations about the subversive or redemptive powers of literature" (233). One could argue that in this moment they allow the epistemological concerns of one discipline to cloud the other, namely that lack of empirical evidence means there is no proof of such patterns of influence. That said, the authors try to maintain a stance of reciprocal influence, namely how political views can shape our reading and interpretation of literary texts as much as literature can help us to better understand politics. Here I provide a case in point of such ideology: "Contemporary criticism has taught us to see that even the most subjective literary expressions cannot be understood outside of the historical and political dimension in which they take place. But the equation can be reversed: politics itself cannot be understood in isolation from the human passions that inform it, and there is no better guide to these passions than literature" (52). There is little contention, within the framework of this text, that politics may have important influence on the creation of art and on its interpretation, but what remains more difficult to explain is the impact that art has on politics. In response to this dilemma, Van Delden and Grenier propose that "Art can inspire fresh thinking about politics. This is the other possible conjugation between art and politics — that is, beyond the politicization of art or aestheticization of politics, art can inspire us with a radical

critique of modernity without forsaking what is valuable in it: criticism, and the political institutions that make peaceful criticism possible" (97).

Gunshots at the Fiesta covers a wide range of Latin American authors (mainly from the Boom; on the Boom, see, e.g., Bell-Villada <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1148>>; on Latin American literary studies, see, e.g., McClennen; McClennen and Fitz) and literary critics who have made essential contributions to the topic of literature and politics in Latin America. For example, scholars of Latin American literature, culture, and politics will find essential analyses in the chapters dedicated to Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, José Martí, Octavio Paz, and Mario Vargas Llosa. In addition, readers will be fascinated by the authors' political reading of the works of literary critics John Beverley, Walter Mignolo, Alberto Moreiras, and Donald Pease, as well as a comparative essay on Claribel Alegría and Ricardo Piglia. While there is little acknowledgement of what Latin American feminism and Latin American women writers have contributed to the conversation on literature and politics, Van Delden and Grenier open up the possibility for more dialogue between the disciplines of comparative politics and comparative literature of which women's literature and gender studies is a necessary complement.

What Van Delden and Grenier ultimately leave us with is a useful metaphor for thinking about literature and politics in Latin America: "gunshots at the fiesta." Building on an image from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* and Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* in which he "argues that the fiesta is a communal celebration of life that almost invariably culminates in an explosion of violence. The gunshot, in other words, is an integral part of the fiesta" (xii), Van Delden and Grenier connect literature and politics through a potentially violent or even fatal metaphor. They explain further that "In Paz, the gunshot represents the culmination of the fiesta (suggesting continuity), but it also brings the fiesta to an end (suggesting discontinuity). Similarly, this book begins from the assumptions that literature and politics are intimate bedfellows in Latin America, but our ultimate goal is to show how strange and incongruous this cohabitation often turns out to be" (xiii). Indeed, Van Delden and Grenier acknowledge that "on the surface, at least, [the gunshot] would appear to blend perfectly with the surrounding ambience, echoing the sounds of inoffensive firecrackers," but what remains to be explored is the impact the gunshot has once it is recognized as such and the effect of its violent disruption (xiii).

Rather poignant is the connection between this metaphor and actual "gunshots at the fiesta" that Fernando Fabio Sánchez cites as an inaugural scene of postrevolutionary Mexico in his study of the Mexican crime genre in *Artful Assassins*: "The symbolic meaning acquired by the assassination of Obregón is of great significance for my study of the Mexican crime genre. The July 18, 1928, *Excélsior* newspaper account of the event, which occurred in a Mexico City restaurant, reveals the process of national foundation that took place at the murder scene. The report mentions the confusion that reigned after the shots were fired. No one knew where the shots had come from because the sound of the gunfire was at first mistaken for the sounds of the live band" (18-19). If, as *muralista* Diego Rivera states, "the Revolution is a fiesta, a celebratory rite of passage through which Mexico comes into existence," then Obregón's assassination seems to mark its end (Rivera qtd. Sánchez 25).

Sánchez's *Artful Assassins* provides a strong foundation for scholars who would like an introduction to the Mexican version of the crime genre in art, literature, and film of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (1940s to present day). Sánchez's exploration is based on the assumption that one "of the foundational elements of this narrative construct known as modern Mexico has been the act of assassination and murder, both in artistic representation and in historical fact" (1). Using such examples as the *muralista* movement, *fichera* films, the *neopoliciaco*, and their postmodern reworkings, Sánchez situates Mexican crime fiction within the political context of modern Mexico and within the framework of literary movements. For Sánchez, "this study of Mexican crime fiction, through a tripartite focus on the Revolution, Mexico City, and the concept of national identity, provides a critical reading of the texts, spaces, and discourses that have legitimized the postrevolutionary Mexican state, assured its continuance in power, and promoted the imposition of the capitalist model in Mexico beginning in the 1940s" (2). At times, the organization could be improved as the multiple subheadings within each chapter prove to be more distracting than orienting, but Sánchez builds on his argument with each successive chapter and situates us within the relevant historical periods.

Perhaps most salient are his contributions which connect the Mexican crime genre with discourses of modernity and national identity where the detective has the power to locate the criminal, or, in this case, banish the criminal to a space outside of modernity and the nation itself: "The detective is authorized to invade every corner of society, using his reasoning to control and assign meaning ... The detective story is, in the final analysis, an act of assigning identity: the perpetrator is unmasked, and by proclamation of the detective he is labeled a criminal. The detective therefore, can be seen as analogous to the agents that construct and maintain the correspondence between identity and subject in the modern world" (9-10). Not only does Sánchez explain how the detective's rationality and modern epistemology polices modernity, but also re-situates Mexican crime fiction within its own tradition and challenges its relegated position outside "Western" modernity: "In other words, 'Mexico' should not be seen merely as a poor imitation of modernity, or as failed modernity, but instead as a unique form of modernity. This idea corresponds to my analysis of the Mexican crime genre not as a deformation of classic mystery and detective fiction, but as one of many variations on what has become an important literary and cinematic category in our time. Such an analysis allows us to look beyond the tradition of dependence on the Western canon as defining local and regional realities and allows Mexico to be freed from the paradigm of Anglo-Saxon and European modernity" (183). By analyzing Mexican crime fiction on its own terms, Sánchez is able to elucidate what he calls the "post-Mexican condition," which challenges any stable notion of modernity itself through "disbelief in 'modernity' and reflections on the collapse of metanarratives in modern Western nations" (177).

One particular puzzle remains to be solved, however, and this is how Sánchez arrives at his assessment of Mexico in the twenty-first century, in particular what he calls "the collapse of the oppressive patriarchal system": "Given its disappearance, the state has lost its monopoly on violence and has 'authorized' the emergence of criminal groups who fight for control of territory" (182). Although Sánchez acknowledges the ways in which the victims of crime in the fiction he analyzes are often female, feminine, or feminized and that the genre of crime fiction itself has been relegated outside the canon, and therefore feminized, his analysis does not explore the implications of such representations of gender in much depth (36, 52). In effect, gender often stands in for something else: the marginalized, the lower class, the devalued genre, or that which must be sacrificed to preserve the integrity of the nation, but rarely is ever analyzed on its own terms: "the murderers, on the other hand, belong to a firmly entrenched patriarchal system that used gender-based violence to safeguard the structures of the same system. Here we observe the murderer's bipartite mission: to create and to affirm masculinity through the act of murder" (52). Whereas Sánchez clearly does not support the logic of patriarchal violence, a more in-depth exploration of the gendered implications of these foundational fictions could prove to be vital for Sánchez's future work.

Cohn's genealogy of literary translation in *The Latin American Literary Boom and U.S. Nationalism During the Cold War*, albeit indirectly, helps to account for the apparent overrepresentation of male writers in the Latin American literary Boom: "It is difficult to imagine what Latin American literature in the United States might have looked like today without the [Center for Inter-American Relations] intervention and patronage throughout the sixties and early seventies ... Arguably, the Latin American canon would likely be more heterogeneous, diverse, and more open body of texts (and authors)" (191). What is more, translators' aesthetic preferences for what constitutes "good" literature in combination with the concerns about translatability and marketability to an English-speaking audience were also important factors in the translation business, as Cohn elucidates in her discussion of Harriet de Onís and Alfred A. Knopf. In Cohn's text, literary historians will find a much needed supplement to the foundational moments of Latin American literary studies such as the impact of the Cuban Revolution and Cold War politics on increased support for study in the region, the inter-American collaboration at the historic International PEN Congress in 1966, the formation of the Latin American Studies Association and its journal *Latin American Research Review*, and the support for the field garnered by Cornell University's Latin American Year. Cohn also provides background to the translation movement in Latin American literature led by Gregory Rabassa and Federico de Onís at Columbia University and the legacy of Alfred A. Knopf and one of his key translators, Harriet de Onís in Latin American literature. What is more, Cohn reminds us of the ways in which translation plays a vital role in the political history that informs canon formation. Whether the Boom in Latin American

literary history would have emerged in the same way without the Cuban Revolution and U.S. Cold War politics is, perhaps, still up for debate.

Cohn's contribution to inter-American literary studies exposes the often contradictory Cold-War politics behind U.S. support (either government-sponsored initiatives or NGOs) for the translation of major Latin American works that would become known as the Boom and the potential of such decisions to impact the worldwide access to and reception of such works: "national security, in the government's eyes, depended on the security of the hemisphere, and so, after 1959, Cuba and Latin America as a whole became top priorities. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson fostered the image of the United States as an ally to the Latin American nations and a political model for them, and the men worked to bring the region under U.S. sway through programs such as the Alliance for Progress, which supported development and modernization projects as means of building democracy and political stability — and thereby, it was hoped, containing the spread of Communism — as well as gaining goodwill in the public sphere" (25). Although the U.S. supported "the study of the region and Latin American artistic endeavors," with the aim "to offset Cuba's influence by making U.S. culture attractive," U.S. foreign policy did not always operate in agreement with such goals, especially in terms of immigration law (27). The McCarran-Walter Act, for instance, which "authorized the denial of visas to enter the United States to individuals with Communist affiliations, whether documented or simply alleged," particularly impacted Latin American intellectuals, whose entry into the U.S. was often contingent upon the U.S. government's assessment of the particular individual's stance on the Cuban Revolution (34). In effect, as Cohn clarifies, "the U.S. government thus chipped away at the freedom of expression and the free circulation of ideas among citizens as well as foreigners, bringing about one of the greatest ironies of U.S. Cold War politics: constitutional guarantees thought to be fundamental differences between U.S. democracy and the Soviet system were undermined in the name of U.S. national security" (61).

Latin American and inter-American scholars alike will find a good model for comparative work in Cohn's study, which also "expands our understanding of the impact of Latin American authors on U.S. writers and the U.S. literary academic scenes" and avoids maintaining an imperialistic unidirectional pattern in which a "civilized" U.S. influences a "barbaric" Latin America. Furthermore, Cohn contends that "there is a web of connections that links writers from the South and North and that demands that we too cross borders in order to best understand their poetry, their publishing histories, and their politics" (198). In fact, all of these recent works from Vanderbilt University Press do just that — they cross borders (disciplinary, ideological, generic, and political) in order to reveal multiple perspectives that complicate our understandings of art and its politics in the Americas.

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Author's profile: Nicole L. Sparling teaches world literatures, gender studies, and critical theory at Central Michigan University. Her interests in scholarship include literatures of the Americas, gender, race, and feminist studies, and ethics and human rights. Sparling's recent publications include "Mothers of *Afrolatinidad*: Dislocating New World Identities in Latino/a Studies and African American Studies," *Inter-American Studies/Estudios Interamericanos* (2012) and "Deauthorizing Anthropologies and 'Authenticating' Landscapes in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo*," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* (2011). E-mail: <sparl1nl@cmich.edu>