

Introduction

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In *Phoebe*, Volume 11 (Spring 1999) Caridad Souza edited an issue that focused on Latina sexuality. The essays that appeared in that issue discussed the Cuban and Dominican diasporic communities in the United States and examined the “relationship between sexuality and cultural politics by looking at the self-construction of Caribbean Latina sexualities in the U.S.” (Souza 2).

As a complement to that earlier number, this current issue is dedicated to transformative female identity, looking at both Latinas in the United States as well as Latin American feminine identity construction. The article by Eugenio Vilarreal focuses primarily on a contemporary (20th century) analysis of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth century nun considered by many twentieth century critics as the first feminist in the Western Hemisphere. The focus of this paper is the Spanish film “Yo, la peor de todas” (I, the Worst of All) based on Octavio Paz’s *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las tranpas de la fe*. The analysis takes as its starting point the question of Sor Juana’s “sexual orientation” as a way to explain her break with established societal norms for women and nuns in particular. It questions the assumption that Sor Juana’s independent nature and quest for knowledge beyond that permitted to women was due in part to her “romantic” relationship with Maria Luisa, the vicereine of New Spain. The author deconstructs Paz’s study in particular because his analysis is centered on a twentieth century perspective of seventeenth century Mexico (New Spain). My own article takes a different look at female identity in Latin America by developing the argument that Reinaldo Arenas, a Cuban homosexual exile writer, represses female identity in his writing in order to represent the condition of the homosexual under the Cuban Marxist-Leninist regime. By representing women as vessels that mirror the condition of another marginalized group, Arenas’ writing reflects his own internalized machismo that sees women as objects that are manipulated and reshaped according to societal expectations. Arenas, however, found the need to portray his female characters in this manner in order to attack the institutionalized homophobia that permeated Cuban society, a phobia which led to the censorship of writers who opposed the revolution’s agenda. His female characters not only lack individuality and developed form of identity, but sexually they are portrayed as cold and empty, scorned women who gave up contact with men to avoid repeating the betrayal and repression they had already endured.

The next two articles focus primarily on Latina identity and labor participation. Karen McGovern’s is a cross-cultural analysis of oral histories that discusses commonalities between Mexican-American and Palestinian women. As the author writes in the introduction, the purpose of the article is to: “recuperate the related yet untold or forgotten stories of women living under occupation.” The article analyzes

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similarities between the occupation of what is today the Southwest United States (formerly the northern territory of Mexico) and Palestine. By focusing on women's stories of these distinct groups, McGovern is able to pull together a series of commonalities that break down cultural and geographical barriers and that allows for a cross-cultural analysis of women that share a universal bond: displacement and the search for "home". The final article provides a gendered analysis of Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican women's participation in niche labor markets in New York City. Gabriel Aquino demonstrates in his statistical analyses that Puerto Rican men working in ethnic niches benefitted and saw a significant increase in their income between 1980 and 1990, whereas women did not.

These four essays which deal with women, gender and social ideology in different communities and in different historical periods further enlarge our understanding of Latina and Latina American women.