

## Book Review

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**Yvette Aparicio. 2014. *Post-Conflict Central American Literature: Searching for Home and Longing to Belong*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.**

Yvette Aparicio's *Post-Conflict Central American Literature* promises a study of "homeland as place of origin and, most importantly, of home as belonging, a 'feeling' that is palpable yet undefinable; of being part of a flexible, changeable yet constant *we*" (7, emphasis in original). Her usage of terms like "home," "homeland," and "belonging" are a deliberate choice to emphasize the "feeling" attached to one's place of origin in contrast to politically charged terms like "nation" and "nationalism." At once readers see that her focus is less on a connection to one's place of origin, in line with the purported rational goals of nationalism, and more on an expansive concept that links individuals to their homeland in terms that may or may not have overt political implications. Along these lines, she defines home as "a presence": "a thrum, a pulsing *here-ness* that exists amid the mass media images of the placeless-ness trumpeted by globalization" (9, emphasis in original). She explores what recourses writers have at their disposal to imagine their home as unique, that is, a specific place that indicates their origin, given the impact of globalization that has sought to homogenize the world in a single market with tastes that are ubiquitous and not unique to a given country. This topic is not unique to Central America or even to the period covered by the book. However, it has a sense of urgency, in part due to the changes wrought by the impact of globalization in the period after the end of the armed conflicts that dominated much of Central America during the 1980s (and often earlier). Globalization through the adoption of neoliberal economic models, along with the process of democratization after the end of war, have ushered in a new period in which these changes are especially relevant. Aparicio's book focuses on the poetry and short stories of writers from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica and covers the period from the late 1960s, prior to the end of the armed struggles in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and extends to recent years.

The first chapter, "Central America in Pieces: Dismembering the Isthmus," addresses poetry from the revolutionary period and a Claudia Hernández (El Salvador) short story originally published in 2002. Poetry by Roque Dalton (El Salvador) and Leonel Rugama (Nicaragua) is the subject of the

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main point of Aparicio’s exploration of the revolutionary period. Together, their works elucidate her argument that the homeland is imagined “as a place to inhabit as a citizen; as a place in which to belong and with which to identify; and, finally, as a place to recreate and reinvent literarily” (26). Dalton’s poetry clearly expresses a problem: “[h]is homeland fails to nurture its citizens, or ‘children,’ and instead poisons them, urinates on them, and generally debases them” (29). Rugama’s poetry makes use of similar imagery through its invocation of the Acahualinca neighborhood of Managua bordering Lake Managua and the city dump. One “poem’s final promise clearly echoes Rugama’s political and religious ideologies and constructs a linguistic memorial to the future Acahualincan heroes who will populate a new homeland” (35), and Aparicio finds that both authors’ poems imagine an improved world. However, their optimism regarding a better future failed to materialize. Hernández explores the rampant crime that emerged after failed revolutionary movements in a story that posits cannibalism as a solution to the country’s problems: “The needs of citizens are met by the compatriots’ bodies rather than by a caring homeland or oppositional groups or churches, for instance” (41). Aparicio concludes that the failure of revolutionary ideals has led to a still-imperfect world in which the sacrifice of revolutionary heroes serves their compatriots as literal food rather than as inspiration for change.

The next two chapters examine the concept of the homeland as a place in disarray through contrasting attempts to imagine it. The second chapter, “(Re)membering Central America,” looks at the ways in which a façade of economic prosperity dominates public images after the adoption of a neoliberal economic model and masks a poetic desire for “an (imaginary) wholeness at home and of home” (49). Poets Marta Leonor González (Nicaragua) and Susana Reyes (El Salvador) express estrangement as they “poetically traverse home in search of a remembered belonging and also imagine becoming whole,” but their quest is doomed to failure, because “their *paseos* confirm that important markers of their pasts have disappeared from home” (55). While postwar construction and reconstruction in cities like San Salvador and Managua sought to impose a different image, Aparicio notes that “[t]he city’s new buildings and parking structures . . . cannot erase the scars or soothe the pain and memory of the Salvadoran Civil War” (62). The poetic images, more importantly, mark a change in the conception of what can be done in their homelands. In contrast to revolutionary projects embraced by earlier poets like Dalton and Rugama, “opportunities to effect the transformative changes imagined by Salvadorans did not readily emerge. The post-conflict ‘new world’ did not turn out to be fundamentally different from the ‘old world’” (63).

While the poets presented in chapter two project a positive view of nostalgia for their known, prior concept of homeland, the third chapter examines, among other texts, Nicaraguan Juan Sobalvarro’s *Agenda del desempleado*, whose “bored poetic speaker calmly raises his pistol and destroys the talking heads. The killings verify that a magic-less world cannot be made magical (‘No hay poesía’) and life’s vicissitudes (e.g., unemployment) cannot be allayed by poetry” (80). In short, the world stinks, much like heavily polluted Lake Managua. Rather than positing homeland as a better place when viewed nostalgically, the texts in this chapter “critique the rotting, waste-filled homeland yet express no desire to leave” (90). The failure of the revolutionary project has left poetic voices without an alternative: they accept that they live in a dirty world yet fail to “imagin[e] or dream . . . of ways to remake” it (94).

Chapter four, “Touring the Homeland,” addresses primarily Luis Chaves’s poetry about Costa Rica that challenges the image found in earlier poetry by Salvadoran and Nicaragua poets who considered Costa Rica an ideal that could be achieved. Even in a country imagined to be stable and developed, at least by Central American standards, not all is well, as the impact of globalization creates “a palimpsest” that requires writers to “look *elsewhere* for a home” (110, emphasis in original). As a result, “visible, material remnants or synecdoches of the imagined or remembered whole can only be conjured fragmentarily” (110). As a result, home is imagined as both solid and imaginary (110).

The conception of home as concrete and also imagined is further explored in the last chapter, “Almost Home: Central America in a Globalized World,” that addresses the impact of mass media on perceptions of identity. Aparicio argues that the home space inhabited is less welcoming than the home space imagined: “inhabitants of this virtualized, disposable everyday [*sí*] exist between the physical space in which they live and the invented virtual one in which they ‘live.’ Their stance on the ground beneath their feet is not based on the reality of their home but rather on the ‘global’ ground they are constantly (re)inventing as real” (128). This concept returns Aparicio’s argument to a postcolonial conception of home as one in which ideals of “home” were created elsewhere and transferred, most commonly by so-called developmental or modernizing political-economic models that created colonized, nonorganic desires. Furthermore, the implementation of such models led to multiple social issues, such as political instability, crime, and emigration that negatively impacted the region. As these effects changed their homelands, writers struggled to redefine what constituted home for them.

As a book concerned with postcolonial conceptions of home, it is fitting that the introduction and conclusion address U.S. films on the region as well as Joan Didion’s influential *Salvador*, a reportage on the Civil War, as they are part of the global imagination of what Central America represents and, as such, an image that its writers address. The book deftly considers multiple facets of the construction of home and the difficulties writers face in conceptualizing it in poems and short stories. This book, free of jargon, is an important contribution to studies of Latin American poetry and the short story in the period that comprises the end of revolutionary movements and the implementation of neoliberal economic models to complement the democratization of the region. Likewise, it is a valuable contribution to studies of postconflict Central American literature.