

Book Review/Reseña

Paula Cucurella
University of California, Riverside
pcucu001@ucr.edu

***Unsettling Colonialisms. Gender and Race in the Nineteenth-Century Global Hispanic World*, edited by N. Michelle Murray and Akiko Tsuchiya. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019.**

As editors N. Michelle Murray and Akiko Tsuchiya assert in their introduction to *Unsettling Colonialisms*, this collection of essays “examines the entanglements of gender and race in the cultural productions of the long nineteenth century, as they relate to Spanish imperialism” (1). What is to be “unsettled” in colonialism, or, more specifically, in the colonial narratives of nineteenth-century Spain and its former colonies?

If, as Murray and Tsuchiya state, the majority of the essays in *Unsettling Colonialisms* share the common premise that gender is an essential category of social analysis, then the book’s declared focus on Spanish imperialism is secondary to its feminist approach. Evidence of this prioritization can be found in the essays that intend to rethink and restructure current representations of colonial discourse that have traditionally underrepresented and underestimated the role of women as “agents, symbols, or even objects of representation in colonial discourse” (1).

Part I, “Colonialism and Women’s Migrations,” examines women’s mobility through migration, trafficking, and colonial resettlement, and opens with an essay by Benita Sampedro Viscaya, “The Colonial Politics of Meteorology: The West African Expedition of the Urquiola Sisters.” Sampedro Viscaya follows the journeys of two Basque sisters/scientists, the Urquiola sisters (Isabel and Manuela), who in 1874 initiated a trip to one of the most remote edges of the Spanish colonized territory: the Muni Estuary, on the border between Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Initially accompanying Isabel’s husband, the sisters did work that served indirectly to “chart out Spanish possessions in the Gulf of Guinea, and to increase Spanish political and economic expectations regarding their potential for colonial purposes” (24). Despite their role

in the collection of key data, the Urquiola sisters' participation is for the most part unreferenced and "silenced": "Manuela and Isabel Urquiola's accomplishments were silenced, re-appropriated by others, in much the same fashion as was the case for other women who also traveled in the region during those decades" (42). The revisionist exercise in this essay, reliant on the possibilities opened by the archive, is less an exercise in memorialization than "a question of attribution, representation, and inclusiveness" (45) that is currently lacking.

In Chapter 2, Lisa Surwillo reads Eva Canel's autobiographical 1916 book, *Lo que vi en Cuba (a través de la isla)*, at the intersections of self-fashioning, gender, and Hispanism. Surwillo identifies "Hispanism" as Spanish politicians' and intellectuals' belief in Spain's linguistic and cultural authority over its colonies: "often cast in terms of origins and civilization, Hispanism justified neoimperial economic and political schemes" (56). Canel's life story is of interest not solely because it is one more case of a silenced woman writer who begins her intellectual career after the death of her husband (dramatist Pedro Perillán Buxó). Canel is not a feminist. As Surwillo underscores: "Canel promotes the idea of women writers and publishers as long as their work does not disturb their tasks as wives and mothers" (68). Canel's project in *Lo que vi en Cuba* is to account for what is most Spanish on the island, usually found in the way Cuban people lived in the domestic and private sphere. Her type of Hispanism claims a color blindness, which will distance Canel from racist Hispanism. However, Surwillo also highlights how often Canel seems to speak for Cuban women and recalls Spivak's caution against the assumption of claiming to speak from a unified subaltern place, and the patronizing role played by Western intellectuals when they speak *for* a people or a collective position.

The third essay in this section, "Gender, Race, and Spain's Colonial Legacy in the Americas: Representations of White Slavery in Eugenio Flores's *Trata de blancas* and Eduardo López Bago's *Carne importada*" by Akiko Tsuchiya, uses the named works to single out the prevalence of international sex-trafficking and the scene of blooming transatlantic sexual commerce, which included the transportation of women from Madrid and Barcelona. The "radical naturalism" taken up by López Bago and Flores attempted to revalue literary writings by making them suitable to the positivist-curated taste of readers who could better appreciate the inscription of marginal subjects within a medical-scientific discourse, with the concomitant effect of giving visibility to subjects otherwise ignored. But both their narratives are focalized through the perspective of a male metropolitan subject.

Tsuchiya proposes examining this representation and the problems it entails from the perspective of the tension between the "disciplinary function of naturalist discourse, which is to contain and eradicate the social ulcer ('llaga social') of prostitution, and naturalism's voyeuristic tendencies that unwittingly transform the prostitute's body

into an eroticized spectacle for the male gaze” (95), a convenient receptacle to reinscribe the narrative of sexual danger in the colonies.

Whereas Part I focuses primarily on women’s migrations, Part II, “Race, Performance, and Colonial Ideologies,” is devoted to the construction of race in literary works. Chapter 4, “A Black Woman Called *Blanca la extranjera* in Faustina Sáez de Melgar’s *Los miserables* (1862–63)” by Ana Mateos, explores the intersectionality of race and gender in the context of Spain’s slave trade. According to Mateos, besides proposing a critique of bondage and marriage, *Los miserables* underscores a strategy for the emancipation of women across racial lines. This emancipation is carefully depicted through a reading of the novel’s main character and her philanthropic activity performed in blackface to make visible her own blackness.

Mar Soria analyzes the performance of race through a reading of theater pieces in “Colonial Imaginings on the Stage: Blackface, Gender, and the Economics of Empire in Spanish and Catalan Popular Theater.” In 1820 Spain abolished the slave trade but not slavery. By the 1850s and 1860s an increasing number of Spanish politicians, economists, and writers opposed the institution of slavery, and theater functioned as a particularly effective platform to educate a broad audience on the abolitionist cause. Soria shows in detail how the comedy *Las Carolinas* (1886) by Antoni Ferrer i Codina and *La perla cubana* (1890) by José Jackson Veyán present seemingly opposing ideological views regarding slavery. While *Las Carolinas* seems to advance abolitionist and anticolonial ideas, *La perla cubana* advocates for slavery and colonialism: “the comical staging of blackface [in *Las Carolinas*] mocking black Cuban men ultimately configures a superior Spanish masculinity as the benchmark of empire during key moments of its decline” (141), a superiority that is reinforced by the presentation of women as men’s possessions. Soria concludes: “the production, staging, and consumption of blackface and blackness in Spain respond to a white Spanish imaginary’s desire to control and contain the fear when confronted with otherness” (160).

Part III, “Gender and Colonialism in Literary and Political Debates,” narrows its scope to *fin-de-siglo* political and literary narratives and debates. Chapter 6, Julia Chang’s essay, “Becoming Useless: Masculinity, Able-Bodiedness and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Spain,” features an analysis of Benito Pérez Galdós’s historical novel, *Aita Tettauen*. Chang studies the depiction of Spanish soldiers and able bodies within the context of a growing concern for virility, as the symbolic counterpart to a Spain in the midst of surviving its own imperial failure. While Spanish military power depended on its able-bodied men, Chang argues that nowhere else is masculinity more important and yet more fragile. Medicine and narrative fiction are examined for a close look at the engendering of the masculine ideal of *el útil*, which included the presence of both testicles and male genitalia, and *el inútil*, who lacked male genitalia

and failed to meet other requirements, such as having ears, nose, a lip or lips, and permanent boldness. *Aita Tettauén* is a historical novel published in 1905, set in the context of the 1859–1860 Spanish Moroccan War that: “even as it tells a story of empire, . . . also occludes a historical account of Spanish colonialism” (185), where disability and gendered perversions become bodily inscriptions of racial degeneration.

In “From Imperial Boots to Naked Feet: Clarín’s Views on Cuban Freedom and Female Independence in *La Regenta*,” Nuria Godón demonstrates that discourses by Leopoldo Alas (“Clarín”) on both women and colonies illustrate a common paradigm of power and reflect the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, social class, race, and colonialism. More specifically, Clarín calls for a “renegotiation of power to achieve women’s greater autonomy, all the while rejecting their full emancipation in different arenas, including education” (227).

Joyce L. Tolliver’s essay in chapter 8, “*Dalagas* and *Ilustrados*: Gender, Language, and Indigeneity in the Philippine Colonies,” analyzes these two key figures in Philippine nationalism. The *Ilustrados* were privileged young men in the small minority of elite Filipinos who had been educated in Spanish. “Nearly all of them lived in Spain for an extended period, and their anticolonialist periodical *La Solidaridad* was published, from Barcelona to Madrid, in Spanish. . . . Through their choice to publish and speak in Spanish, the *Ilustrados* signaled that they were speaking both to people from the peninsula and to fellow Filipino elites, rather than to the members of any one of the many vernacular linguistic communities in the archipelago” (233).

The term *dalagas* designates Philippine native women, whose virtue and exuberance were much thematized and feared. The essay’s climax arrives with the account of how, in 1888, a group of twenty young Philippine women from the city of Malolos formally requested of the governor a Spanish language school for women, and the petition was denied. But the women received support from the *Ilustrados*, concretely from José Rizal who writes an open letter to the women of Malolos. However, as Tolliver underscores: “Whatever egalitarian humanism informs Rizal’s arguments is undercut by his reliance on the traditional notion that the primary social value of women’s education is that educated women make better wives and mothers” (237). Something similar happens with another supporter, the *Ilustrado* Pedro Paterno. Both Paterno and Rizal wrote in Tagalog and not in Spanish, in accordance with their shared sense of an idealized indigenous past from which they took their models of womanhood, overlooking that the women supported might not be content with the role of mere rhetorical figures.

In chapter 9, Aurélie Vialette writes about the use of colonies for penal purposes. As the book’s editors note: “Vialette argues that this plan implied a paradox: the act of sending the convicts to remote islands created the illusion of their rehabilitation and

conversion into citizens; yet, the criminals become citizens in the colonies only, thus creating a mechanism for transforming them into neocolonizers of these islands” (11). Viallete proposes to consider the project of penal colonies “as a colonial biopolitical laboratory . . . [that] served to assert the capacity and power of a sovereign power to organize bodies, to model an ideal subject who will become a neocolonial figure to revive a crumbling empire” (256), a plan that undeniably implied the establishment of a space of exception in some Spanish islands. Viallete explores this topic through the work of Concepción Arenal, a nineteenth-century Galician feminist who engaged in debates from which women were usually excluded. Behind Arenal’s concern about the treatment of inmates, Viallete reads an attack on the uselessness of penal colonies and the human rights they violated. Viallete concludes that Arenal’s “writings aimed to raise consciousness in her readers and make them understand that prisoners were actually citizens” (273).

After reading the essays in this book, I cannot but agree with Murray and Tsuchiya: this is a feminist book. Nevertheless, it is a feminist book that inquires about the place of feminism within current academic debates on colonialism and postcolonialism. For contemporary readers of nineteenth-century Spanish literature, and readers whose main interest is postcolonial studies, the perspectives offered by these essays work together to expand this discourse away from conventional approaches to peninsular studies by highlighting neglected and often concealed narratives, subjects, and experiences.

Paula Cucurella, PhD (Comparative Literature, SUNY at Buffalo). Her poems have been published in Mexican poetry journals (*Círculo de poesía*, *Revista Monolito*, *La Rabia del Axolote*, and *Revista Marcapiel*) and in *Revista Laboratorio* (Chile). She is the translator into Spanish of David Johnson’s *El Can de Kant* (Metales Pesados, November 2018) and *El mundo en llamas* (Pólvora Editorial, 2019); cotranslator of Carlos Estévez’s *Bottles to the Sea* (SUNY, 2014) and of Rosa Alcalá’s *MyOther Tongue* into Spanish (together with Colombian poet Andrea Cote). Her academic articles and literary essays are published in *The New Centennial Review*, *Revista Laboratorio*, *JCLA*, and *Latino Studies*, among others. Her first poetry book, *Demasiada luz para hacer poesía*, was published in 2020 (Dobleaeditores, Santiago, Chile). *Los últimos inanes días*, a second book of fragments and vignettes, was released in December 2020 (Dobleaeditores, Santiago, Chile). Her first theory book, *Jacques Derrida & Nicanor Parra. Un ensayo sobre la poesía en tiempos de censura* [reviewed in this issue], was published by Pólvora Editorial in 2021 (Santiago, Chile). Paula is currently pursuing a second PhD in Hispanic Studies at the University of California Riverside.
