

The “Latina Madwoman” at the Crossroads of Harm and Hope

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Halperin, Laura. *Intersections of Harm: Narratives of Latina Deviance and Defiance*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2015. xii + 238 pages. ISBN 978-0-8135-7036-5. Pbk. \$29.95.

Laura Halperin's *Intersections of Harm: Narratives of Latina Deviance and Defiance* is a timely intervention in Latina/o literary and gender studies' current preoccupation with multi-layered harm inflicted on women of colors by oppressive historical, political, and medical practices of American cultures and institutions. Offering meticulous close readings of the ways physical violence wrecked on female subjects intersects with mental traumas and geopolitical harm in contemporary Chicana (Xicana), Puerto Rican, Dominican American, and Cuban American female authors' novels and memoirs, the volume might as well be labeled as a material feminist project which further enriches the discourse on the “corporeal turn” dominating late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary and cultural studies. While Halperin's study is undeniably a valuable contribution to the broader academic fields of body and feminist studies, the greatest merit of the book lies in its polemics that expand on the conventional feminist concerns of female corporeality and relocate the critical focus on the less foregrounded aspect of harm in current Latino/a literary criticism, that is, mental illness as a gendered marker of Latinas' ethnic and racial pathology. Situating mental anxiety at the pivotal point of juncture of the physical, psychological, and geographical dimensions of harm, Halperin's intersectional venture foregrounds the figure of the “Latina madwoman” to highlight the ways her portrayal “challenge[s] dominant dissociations of mind from body and place, extend[s] beyond a pathologization of the individual, and destabiliz[es] essentializing gendered and racialized constructions of Latinas as ‘mad’” (6).

In her introduction, Halperin undertakes to dismantle the binary rhetoric of mind vs. body and personal vs. collective trauma that predominate the cultural constructions of Latinas' inherent socio-historical vulnerability. As such, she argues for the intrinsic ambiguity of harm, which, though it seems to be world-destroying for the affected Latina characters, constitutes within itself alternative forms of resistance and hope for survival. Fusing the radical Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory with Western methodological apparatuses of “pain theory, ecocriticism, environmental justice, geography, postcolonial studies, [and] medical anthropology” (22),

Halperin applies the central notion of intersectionality not only as a signifier of her subject matter, but also as her methodological approach and mode of theoretical inquiry into essentializing perceptions of racialized and gendered harm. Intertwining the literal with the abstract and practice with theory, Halperin substantiates her project as a US Third World feminist venture. She hastens to assure the reader, though, that her Pan-Latina analysis consciously avoids homogenizing the social and cultural differences among various Latina groups across the US by highlighting the notion of solidarity as a potential crossroads where diverging US Third World feminist writings meet.

In the ensuing chapters, each of which comprises of a character-by-character close reading of one novel (except for the first which compares two memoirs by the same author), Halperin employs her double-edged intersectional reading of the works. While at subject level she provides a thought-provoking rendition of how the theme of geopolitical harm converges on personal and collective histories of physical and mental pathologization, her nuanced analyses seem to lose their argumentative consistency due to the limited success in formulating a coherent and well-rounded intersectional theoretical framework. To argue for the distinctly Latina configuration of female insanity, Halperin maintains that the selected narratives integrate into, and, at the same time, expand on, the Eurocentric and Anglocentric literary traditions of the madwoman. However, beside sporadically drawing on (and, at times, apparently simply reading into) the similarities between the mentally traumatized Latina subjects and such epitomes of the literary madwoman as *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Antoinette Cosway, and *Hamlet's* Ophelia, the reader is left without any edifying contextualization of the specific historical or critical grounds on the basis of which these canonized figures of the madwoman can be considered “alongside with” and as “literary precursors” of US-Latina manifestations of female madness (12).

The first chapter comparatively explores the Puerto-Rican Irene Vilar's memoirs, *The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets* (1996) and *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict* (2009), to highlight how the environmental damage caused by American industrial activity in Puerto Rico converges on legalized medical intervention into the reproductive system of the maternal body, which renders Puerto Rican women as “multiply colonized” subjects (29). The insightful analysis of the memoirs' matrilineal cycle of trauma presents Vilar's family history of psychiatric institutionalization, suicide attempts, maternal abandonment, and repression of women's reproductive liberties, which, surfacing first in her maternal

grandmother's stories, haunt both Vilar's and her mother's conflicting accounts of femininity and motherhood. Beginning her investigation with Vilar's grandmother, Lolita Lebrón, who was incarcerated and tortured in a mental ward following her act of opening fire on the US Congress in 1954, Halperin convincingly illustrates the pervasiveness of conflating national resistance with Latina insanity in US political history. The chapter juxtaposes harmful racial ideologies of mental illness with the medical legacy of coerced sterilization and "oral contraceptive testing" (25) of Puerto Rican women on a mass scale between the 1930s and 1980s and provides the reader with a commendably detailed contextualization of their historical and legal background.

The second chapter forms an intriguing dialogue with Vilar's maternal legacies of sexual violence as it concentrates on how Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999) foregrounds oppressive urban spaces as instrumental to the perpetuation of the cycle of sexual abuse among two generations of women of a US immigrant, Afro-Dominican-American family. Halperin juxtaposes images of the memory of dictatorial persecution, internalized racism, poverty, bodily violation, and mental health as they interlace with the central concept of "home as a paradoxical space of identification, alienation, fragmentation" (57). Arguing that the idea of home features as a fluid, plural site signifying both a site of destruction and resistance, Halperin stresses that Pérez's female figures are capable of constructing a psychic home of belonging dissociated from traumatic memories without wanting to leave the boundaries of their harmful geographies. Thus, the Latina characters' act to place themselves in harm's way that permeates their inhabited geographies is viewed by the author as a distinct Latina coping mechanism and means of survival that contrasts with the Euro/Anglocentric configurations of madwomen who instead rebel against their confinement.

Interweaving ecofeminism and ecocriticism with Chicana feminist studies, the third chapter focuses on Chicana Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993). The section reveals the debilitating physical and mental consequences of land appropriation and environmental genocide that the mestiza mother, Sofi, and her four daughters at the US Southwest border are exposed to. Halperin posits a refreshing reading of magical realism, which is the most widely noted and analyzed characteristic of the novel. As such, she cautions the reader against the dismissal of supernatural occurrences of violence as completely devoid of material realities. The supernatural forces often implicated in the brutal physical deformations, mental breakdowns, and early

demise of the four sisters constitute a scathing cultural critique of the harm also done by “gendered judgement” (95) and patriarchal religious views of normative sexuality that, according to Halperin, the community itself imposes on Latina characters.

The fourth chapter shifts away from matrilineal legacies of stigmatized sexuality and turns to female genealogies of artistic passion stigmatized as psychological aberrance of three generations of Cuban American women in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). Setting it in the post-revolution Cuba and the United States, Halperin persuasively dissects the inextricably interlinked notions of art and revolution, which, however, expose Latina characters to multiple forms of harm—ranging from mental hospitalization to syphilis, miscarriage, and eating disorder—and mark women-of-color characters’ rejection of their pathologization by patriarchal histories.

The Dominican American Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) establishes a dialogue with García’s novel in the fifth chapter. As Halperin describes, the “stifled or censored expression” (158) of Latinas’ imagination in *Dreaming in Cuban* resonates with Alvarez’s “abundant imagery of clamped mouths and muted cries” (160) highlighting the repression of the artistic voice as a mode of self-articulation. The linguistic violence experienced by the four García sisters, who are coming of age in the United States diaspora, is positioned alongside with the haunting memories of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Halperin elucidates how Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of “intimate terrorism” underlies the intertwinedness of the sisters’ personal sense of dislocation and the underlying structural forces that silence and instill shame and fear in the bordered subjects of Latinas.

Halperin’s *Intersections of Harm* is a compelling testimony to the overarching motif of harm that permeates contemporary US Latina literature. It offers valuable insights into the entwined personal and collective traumas of bodily, mental, and geopolitical violence and delineates how, despite pervasive harm, “hope lies in the interstices” (195) of the narratives. Halperin’s nuanced arguments at some points, however, contain inconsistencies and self-contradictions. By identifying the racial component as the only source of differentiation between the Latina and the Euro/Anglocentric literary construction of female madness Halperin’s explication evokes the same binary rhetoric of white mainstream (colonizer) vs. racial Other (colonized) portrayals of mental illness her project otherwise aims to overcome. Therefore, her polemic inevitably falls into the trap of

positioning Latina representations of harm less “alongside with” (12) and more in opposition to Western literary portrayals of gendered madness. Apart from the ostensible struggle to formulate a well-rounded intersectional framework that reveals exciting facets of the dialogic relationships between US Latina literary representation of mental harm and the Euro/Anglocentric tradition of the madwoman the book is exemplary in its elucidation of the multilayered structural forces underlying the construction of mental illness, which is all too readily attributed to Latina subjects as a stigma of their ethnic difference.

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