
Nadia V. Celis Salgado, *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la "conciencia corporal"*. Frankfurt: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert Verlag, 2015. 354 pp.

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The title of Nadia V. Celis Salgado's *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la "conciencia corporal"* may translate as "The Girls' Rebellion: The Caribbean and 'Corporeal Consciousness'" (or bodily consciousness), and the book focuses on precisely that: consciousness of the centrality of the body and awareness of *how* the body – particularly the prepubescent and adolescent body – is represented in the literature of Latin America and the Caribbean.

But there is more to this title. For scholars of Spanish and Latin American literatures, *La rebelión de las niñas*, "the girls' rebellion", resonates instantly with the title of an early nineteenth-century play, Leandro Fernández de Moratín's 1805 *El sí de las niñas*, most commonly translated as "The Maidens' Consent".¹ Fernández de Moratín (1760–1828) was an admirer of William Shakespeare and Molière, whose theatrical works he translated. He emulated these authors' grasp of comedic elements and criticism of social conventions. One of his preferred subjects of exploration – which, while represented in a humorous light, served to critique the mores of the late eighteenth century and uphold the values of the Enlightenment – was the relationship between much older men and very young girls. In *El sí de las niñas*, the Spanish playwright presents the story of the sixteen-year old Francisca, whose mother wants to marry her off to a wealthy, elderly bachelor named Diego. Francisca, of course, is secretly in love with someone her own age, Félix (aka Don Carlos, who is really Diego's nephew). In the end, reason and a sense of humanity prevail, and Diego asks Francisca to choose between him and Don Carlos. His first play, the 1790 comedy *El viejo y la niña* (*The Old Man and the Young Girl*), also explored the consequences of arranged marriages between older men and adolescent girls. It is true, as Mayra Santos Febres posits in her introduction, "Un cuerpo propio" (A body of one's own), that Celis examines the ways in which Latin American literature has continued and expanded the discursive *topos* represented by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and all subsequent – and preceding genealogies of – literary *Lolitas* and the access of male

protagonists to their bodies. However, I must point out that the author places this motif in a broader context, reaching back through centuries to trace the precursors of a long lineage of fictional 'girls', through the development of the archetypal 'young girl/old man' model, and their subsequent and varied 'rebellions' as portrayed in contemporary texts.

La rebelión centres on the work of Antonia Palacios (Venezuela), Marvel Moreno and Fanny Buitrago (both from Colombia), Magali García Ramis and Mayra Santos Febres (both from Puerto Rico). Celis refers to these writers and many of their characters as "literary rebels". I must underline the word "rebellion", because this detailed study is not about the representation of a passive body, but rather the exemplification of a body-in-action – a body that is conscious of its own power and/or lack thereof, a body that negotiates and re-negotiates the tensions between oppression and agency, control and autonomy.


This groundbreaking examination presents a valuable contribution to Latin American and Caribbean studies and many related fields; firstly, because it does not simply focus on denouncing the centuries-old literary relationship and the obvious power dynamics it feeds; secondly, because it highlights the shocking absence of critical attention to this ongoing *topos* and offers a springboard for subsequent studies of the Latin American literary *corpus-body* (terms that Santos Febres insightfully connects); and thirdly, because it brings to the fore the discursive strategies these writers use to destabilise the dichotomic model in which the young girl's body stands in oppositional intercourse with the dominant male's.

One of the great strengths of this book is that Celis's close readings draw from a comprehensive range of critical concerns: cultural studies; postcolonial and poststructuralist studies; queer, gender and feminist studies; and psychoanalysis; along with meticulous attention to geographic, historical, political, sociological and philosophical contexts with special consideration to the intersections of race, class, and gender. This study also takes into account the importance of the genre and literary styles chosen by the writers in order to subvert configurations of power, aspects that are often overlooked.

Some of the most thought-provoking topics in this discussion of the presence and agency of the pre-nubile female body are: fetishism (the young girl as fetish), subjectivity and power; morality and social constructs of decency; the hermeneutics of violence; pleasure and eroticism; constructions of sexuality;

and “girls’” consciousness of the body as a tool for rebellion and activism. As sociologist Ángel Quintero Rivera underlines in his blurb on the book’s back cover, Celis’s work

transcends a facile (though necessary) feminism of denunciation of the use of women’s bodies as objects, to [enter the realm of] a rich feminism where the feminine is a subject not only through personhood, but also through the communication and expressiveness of the body itself. The female body appears as the center of a subjectivity that makes no apologies for her bodily condition, creating the possibility of inter-subjective transformations.²

La rebelión de las niñas invites readers to look at prevalent models of adolescent bodies in Latin American literature, to re-posit female agency and corporeal possibilities for enacting choice and change, and to re-examine texts that we have read before from completely different perspectives. It is an invitation to discover other ways to ‘read’ the incipient female body, its representations, and its significance across theoretical, stylistic, social and political divides. 

NOTES

1. Fernández de Moratín’s *El sí de las niñas* was written in 1801, published in 1805, and presented onstage in 1806.
2. See Vervuert Verlag’s description, at <http://www.iberamericanalibros.com/cgi-bin/infodetail.cgi?doknr=521836&lang=es&txt=beschreibung> (my translation).

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