

Men, Power and Liberation

Readings of masculinities in Spanish
American literatures

Edited by
Amit Thakkar and Chris Harris



Men, Power and Liberation

Each contribution to this book discusses key issues arising from the portrayal of men and the formation of masculine identities in a range of representative and landmark texts, fictional and non-fictional, drawn from different historical periods and from various countries in the Hispanophone Americas.

There is an emphasis on the ways in which writers from Argentina (Manuel Puig), Chile (the Spaniard Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga and the Chilean Nicolás Palacios), Mexico (Gustavo Sainz and Ángeles Mastretta) and the Hispanic USA (Jennifer Harbury and Francisco Goldman) have explored the themes of love, friendship and trust and their transformative power for gender relations in situations and contexts where deception, exploitation and oppression are often disturbingly present. There is also a discussion of the applications, insights and limitations of different theoretical frameworks and concepts relevant to the task of producing gendered readings, including Connell's 'world gender order' and 'hegemonic masculinity', as well as 'the cult of virility' as characterised by Still and Worton, Chela Sandoval's 'decolonial love' and 'methodology of the oppressed' and Beasley-Murray's 'posthegemony'.

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INTRODUCTION

Men, power and liberation: readings of masculinities in Spanish American literatures

This special issue is the latest product of the project Masculinities and Violence in Latin American Cultures (MAVLAC). The project was conceived as an attempt to build upon the work of pioneering scholars whose research has analysed and discussed the intersections between Hispanic Studies and masculinities. Such work includes studies by Paul Julian Smith (1992), Rebecca Biron (2000), Chris Perriam (2003), Robert McKee Irwin (2003), and Mark Millington (2007). These scholars have provided us with various readings of literary and cinematic texts informed by the ideas of a number of gender theorists including Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Laura Mulvey. Our project has now extended the scope of this work by developing research based on an evaluative engagement with specific sociological theorisations of gender relations, especially those of Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995), and by examining cultural products in the light of these.

MAVLAC began in 2008 with a conference panel which led to the publication of a special issue of the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* in 2010. Our concern at that time was to assess the extent to which concepts and theories that had circulated for decades within sociology and peace studies, particularly those of Connell ("hegemonic masculinity," 1987) and Johan Galtung ("structural violence" 1969), could usefully be employed to produce gendered studies of relevant themes and their formal presentation in Latin American literatures and film. The special issue of 2010 generated ample evidence that these theories could be applied insightfully to cultural texts from countries as diverse as Cuba (Amit Thakkar), Mexico (Chris Harris, Victoria Carpenter), and El Salvador (Jim Knight). Additionally, the work of Matthew Brown on a single letter to a Colombian colonel demonstrated the important role that questions related to masculinities play in the field of military history. Subsequently, in December 2010, a MAVLAC symposium was held in Lancaster funded by the Joint Initiative for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean (JISLAC). That symposium has resulted in the current special issue.

Whilst the special issue of 2010 focused primarily on assessing the importance of social scientific theories for the study of various cultural products, including film and materials drawn from historical archives, this time we decided to focus specifically on literature, understood broadly to refer to all genres of written texts. This focus has elicited various approaches to literary and narrative analysis: close

readings of novels (Harris, Carpenter), a study which incorporates consideration of how filmic discourses influence fiction (Thakkar), a comparative study of both fictional and non-fictional works (Cornelia Gräbner), and a longitudinal study of newspaper archives, poetry and essays (Joanna Crow). Such a focus has enabled us to search for literary commonalities in the form of gendered tropes and themes with the most obvious common thematic area being the power dynamics of gender relations and the different ways in which those relations can be understood with reference to cultural, socio-economic and political contexts.

In this regard, a striking concern with equality and inequality, not only in politics and society, but also in intimate relationships, informs all of the articles. In various ways, for example, Gräbner, Harris, and Thakkar all engage analytically with the themes of love, friendship, and trust; and, in different Latin(o) American texts and localities, they show how these cultural values are represented as a platform for opposition to patriarchal culture and therefore as the foundation for transformative processes within gender relations. As a result of these processes, models of non-violent masculine behaviour emerge as potential alternatives to patriarchal patterns shaped by deception, exploitation, and oppression. These alternatives are by no means unproblematic: they are shown to be contradictory in the cases of the characters analysed by Thakkar and Harris. At the same time, in Gräbner's study, such positive change is shown to necessitate an unlearning process in which codes of behaviour rooted in colony are questioned and ultimately discarded by both men and women. Similarly, a concern with narrative form – especially with the issues of control over and liberation from the structure and meanings of fictional texts and national narratives – underpins the analyses presented by Thakkar, Carpenter, and Crow.

Formal considerations are, of course, vital to understanding the ways in which masculinities are constructed in literature. Thakkar's discussion of Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), set during the "dirty war" in Argentina, demonstrates how such gender constructions can absorb filmic discourses. On that formalist basis, Thakkar explores how men are initiated into certain forms of masculinity and encouraged to follow a "social script" informed by a "cult of virility" (Still and Worton 1993), itself propagated in literature by writers like Ernest Hemingway and in film by Hollywood. The main relationship in the novel is characterised by a power struggle in which Molina and Valentín, the two prisoners, both conform to and challenge this social script in sometimes contradictory ways. Although Molina's aversion to physical violence is evident in his attachment to the feminine values that underpin his film stories, his behaviour is exploitative too. Furthermore, the codes underlying masculine initiation, particularly notions of fearlessness and activity, are both reaffirmed and subverted in the relationship between the two protagonists, and shown to be determined as much by personal as by public demonstrations of commitment to them. At the same time, the novel's footnotes invite the reader to view political liberation as a process which is parallel to and contingent on sexual liberation. In this way,

Puig encourages the reader conditioned by the fast-paced, often violent narratives of Hollywood to “slow down the projector” in order to examine the content of the novel, thus permitting both the “synthesis” of filmic narrative and the “analytic” quality of the novel to co-exist. Thakkar’s argument is that Puig artfully catalyses readings that are deconstructive of the social script with a multi-layered narrative in which different texts are presented, the three most important being dialogue, film stories, and footnotes.

The concern with the relationship between theme and form is echoed in Carpenter’s close reading of Gustavo Sainz’s novel, *Obsesivos días circulares* (1969), a work of the Mexican Onda of the 1960s which has largely been neglected by critics. Her analysis traces the relationship between the two main characters, Leticia and Terencio, as a “power tug-of-war.” Recalling Thakkar’s treatment of the relevance of a “social script” to the construction of masculinities, the object over which power is being contested is the text itself and thus “text control” becomes a vital aspect of Carpenter’s analysis. What distinguishes her reading is that it establishes this tug-of-war in the theoretical context of “masculine” forms of text control that are hegemonic (Connell 1987, 2005) and forms that can be read as post-hegemonic (Beasley-Murray 2003). The former is marked by “instrumental cognitive control” and the latter by Harris’s elaboration of the concept of “feelings of power” (“patriarchal affect”) in his study of Juan Rulfo’s “El llano en llamas” (2011). The result is the radical proposition of a “shift from hegemonic to post-hegemonic forms of control” in which the ownership of discourse is marked by appropriations of the “affective sphere” that are less violent as they exist in multiple loci, are constantly in flux and never uni-directionally imposed. In this way, the fictional character Leticia is able to achieve liberation from her narrator’s patriarchal control over a text which she herself inhabits.

Gräbner’s article also deals with the theme of control and possession as well as the gendered and political implications of the creation of stories in the context of intense personal relationships. In her study, these stories are heavily inflected by “cataclysmic” moments in the political history of Guatemala. Gräbner considers three texts in which geographical, class, ethnic, personal, and generic borders are crossed: Francisco Goldman’s *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992) and Jennifer Harbury’s *Bridge of Courage* (1994) and *Searching for Everardo* (1997). The argument revolves around applications of three main concepts and theories: Chela Sandoval’s “methodology of the oppressed,” Tzvetan Todorov’s “dreadful concatenation,” and Connell’s “world gender order.” By shuffling these three theoretical parameters in her close readings of the texts, Gräbner demonstrates that “decolonial love” must be predicated on a premise of equality, however difficult it is to overcome, or “delink,” the obstacles to that equality. These obstacles lie in the hierarchical forms of thinking inherent in “coloniality” and the gender-specific habits acquired as a result of a patriarchal world gender order. Both masculinities and femininities are presented with this challenge in Gräbner’s readings of the texts under consideration and, whilst the frustrations and demands of the process