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MEDEIROS-LICHEM, MARÍA TERESA. *Reading the Feminine Voice in Latin American Women's Fiction: From Teresa de la Parra to Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela.* New York: Peter Lang, 2002. 240 pp.

The attempt to develop a theoretical framework for understanding even one aspect of a large body of writing — and particularly a concept as broad as the significance of "voice" in Latin American women's fiction — is a daunting, yet potentially enormously rewarding, challenge, and this is precisely the task María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem undertakes in her first book, *Reading the Feminine Voice in Latin American Women's Fiction: From Teresa de la Parra to Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela.* While the analysis of "voice" and the struggle by women writers to speak the "unspeakable," or that which has been silenced by phallocentrism and patriarchy, is not a novel idea — Debra Castillo, for example, explores the "multiply-voiced" nature of Latin American feminist writing in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* —, nor is a dialogic approach unheard of in feminist literary theory (Medeiros-Lichem acknowledges, among others, the collection *Feminism, Bahktin, and the Dialogic*, edited by Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry), this analysis applies a specifically Bakhtinian approach to the concept of voice in a Latin American feminist context through a well-organized, clearly written work. While offering valuable insights into the applicability of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory to women's writing in a doubly-subordinate, "Third World" context, Medeiros-Lichem also provides clearly stated definitions of all Bakhtinian terminology used as well as a broad, yet sufficient, overview of other theorists upon whose work her analysis builds, rendering *Reading the Feminine Voice* a valuable contribution to specialists while still remaining accessible to the (relative) novice to literary theory.

Like Sara Castro-Klarén, who posits the idea of Latin American women writers' "double-negativity," or the double discrimination they face as both women and as *mestizas*, and Jean Franco, who affirms that Third World women's position in society is often inextricably linked to the fate of their community as a whole (*Plotting Women: Gender & Representation in Mexico*), Medeiros-Lichem also argues that Latin American women's specific cultural, historic and

political circumstances require a literary theory that speaks to — but differs from — Anglo-American and European feminisms in its necessary incorporation of the political and social engagement seen by many women writers to be inextricable from any specifically "feminist" goals they may have. In her proposal of a dialogic approach to explain feminine mechanisms of achieving discursive authority, Medeiros-Lichem responds to the assertion made by Castro-Klarén (*Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology*) of Latin American women writers' dialogue with, rather than outright rejection of, the masculine literary canon in order to engage those authors' works in a new way (a practice to which Castro-Klarén refers as "contamination," borrowing Nélida Piñón's term), and affirms the need to develop a theory that includes a consideration of power relations as they relate to gender. Amy K. Kaminsky (*Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*) had suggested the latter as essential to any approach that intends to "question the ground of traditional [literary] analysis" (Kaminsky xiii).

In *Reading the Feminine Voice*, Medeiros-Lichem carefully and explicitly relates the creative writings and theoretical observations of a wide range of Latin American women writers and feminist theorists to Bakhtinian dialogism, culminating in two chapters devoted to more in-depth analyses of Elena Poniatowska's novels *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *Tinísima* and Luisa Valenzuela's collection of short stories *Cambio de armas*. Medeiros-Lichem begins the book with a brief theoretical analysis of the concept of "voice," demonstrating the centrality of this concept to women's writing in general and to Latin American women's writing in particular as it contends with a patriarchal literary tradition in which (non-minority) male authors, such as Pablo Neruda, are able to speak for the marginal by virtue of their position of power. This is contrasted to women authors' attempt to give voice to the subaltern while also identifying with her marginal position. She considers Susan S. Lanser's suggestion that women attain discursive authority "by an act of blurring boundaries, by altering the established *textual strategies*" to be particularly apropos with regard to the fiction of Latin American women writers (7, emphasis in original), and states her own desire "to reach beyond the feminist gynocritical approach," most of which, in her view, relies heavily on poststructuralism, by incorporating Bakhtinian dialogics

and linking it with feminist criticism "mainly through their view of language and its relation with a societal attitude and power" (8).

The first chapter, "The Current Latin American Feminist Literary Debate," offers a useful overview of Latin American feminist theoretical production and a summary of the principal themes arising in this field, beginning with the perspectives of the Venezuelan and Argentinian writers Teresa de la Parra and Victoria Ocampo, moving on to the Mexican Rosario Castellanos and the Brazilian Clarice Lispector, and finally considering more contemporary views on Latin American women's writing emerging from conference and symposium presentations by writers and theorists such as Lucía Guerra, Marta Traba, Rosario Ferré and Sara Castro-Klarén and published works by theorists Jean Franco, Francine Masiello, Debra A. Castillo and others, to conclude with theoretical works by the two authors whose narrative works form the core of Medeiros-Lichem's analysis, Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela. In a clearly outlined second chapter, Medeiros-Lichem sets about tracing the development of a body of Latin American feminist narrative works which she divides into three phases: early works focused on women's "individual ego and personal struggle" (de la Parra, María Luisa Bombal); works demonstrating women's "awareness of the Other" (Castellanos); and finally the movement in subject position from private to public space (Marta Lynch, Ángeles Mastretta). Throughout this chapter, Medeiros-Lichem carefully demonstrates links between such Bakhtinian concepts as "active double-voiced speech" and the lies of María Eugenia, protagonist of de la Parra's novel *Ifigenia* (1924), she considers the "dialogic interaction" of the anonymous female narrator of Bombal's novel *La última niebla* (1935) and her female addressee, and applies the Bakhtinian concepts of *heteroglossia* and *hybridization* to Castellanos' novel *Balún Canán* (1957) and Bakhtin's "sociological stylistics" to Marta Lynch's *La señora Ordóñez* (1967). At other times, Medeiros-Lichem makes use of postmodernist theory, such as in her analysis of Lispector's *A Paixão segundo G.H.* (1964) as "the journey of a postmodern female Faust" (79). This relatively broad overview of a wide assortment of writers provides the historical background for Medeiros-Lichem's deeper analysis of Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela in the third and fourth chapters. Poniatowska's novels, including *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) and *Tinísima* (1992), are deemed by Medeiros-Lichem to

"[inscribe] the culmination of a process of self-awareness and the inclusion of the multiple voices of the social spectrum" in the form of the Bakhtinian "polyphonic novel" (106), while in her analysis of Luisa Valenzuela's narrative works she relies more heavily on French feminist theory and Luisa Valenzuela's own theoretical writings in order to analyze the creation of a *lenguaje hémbrico* and the importance of *jouissance* in works such as Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas*. This "feminine language" differs from the French theoretical concept, concerned primarily with gender in its semiotic and cultural aspects, due to Valenzuela's particular focus on "ethical commitment" in order to subvert dominant discourse and express the truths of gender dominance and political repression in an uncensored language. Medeiros-Lichem concludes that Poniatowska and Valenzuela, the two authors to whose analysis the text is primarily devoted, "mark a culmination in the literary tradition of the feminine voice that had developed from isolated and reluctant acts of resistance to, and subversion of, the patriarchal norms of behavior into a questioning voice that gains autonomy and challenges univocal criteria of institutional power" (210).

Reading the Feminine Voice, a very impressive first book by Teresa Medeiros-Lichem, accomplishes the author's proposal "to read the feminine voice as the dialogic interaction that results from listening to the 'other,'" an "other" which includes not only women's experience but also those of ethnic subalterns, male and female, and victims of political persecution (2). Though this first work achieves its goal and does so through an easily intelligible and concise prose, it is somewhat lacking the literary flair or playfulness of works such as Debra Castillo's *Talking Back*, cleverly — and significantly — organized around the metaphor of the *recetario* (cookbook), or the unabashedly political (and therefore immensely gratifying) stance of Jean Franco's *Plotting Women* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, a defiance which had made reading these books feel more like a liberating romp through the hallowed halls of academia than a sitting down to the serious business of "theory," despite the profound theoretical seriousness of these works. A seeming hesitance on the part of the author to too strongly reveal her own "voice," combined with the strengths of extreme detail to organization and unambiguousness of style, may be explained by the fact that this work evolved from a Ph.D. dissertation (Carlton University), yet Medeiros-

Lichem must be commended for rendering what could be very complicated arguments transparent. *Reading the Feminine Voice* presents a contribution to the field that must not be underestimated. Its value, in my opinion, resides as much in its clear and concise definition and application of Bakhtinian concepts, which can sometimes be employed without a deeper (or perhaps explicit) consideration of their full implications — when not taken for granted completely by theorists who may have relegated Bakhtinian theory (mistakenly, I believe) to the storage files of "common knowledge" and therefore ground already familiar to all of their readers —, its utility as a convenient reference for students not only of Latin American feminist *theory* but of Latin American feminist *theorists* (both theorists *of* Latin America and theorists *from* Latin America), of whom Medeiros-Lichem includes a broad survey, and of the profound link in Latin America between "theory" and "practice" (relating strictly "theoretical" works to the theory expressed implicitly in narrative works as well as explicitly in theoretical pieces by primarily narrative authors), as it does in its insightful and original analyses of the literary and political significance of voice in Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela's narrative works. True to the goal of the narrative authors she analyzes, Teresa Medeiros-Lichem's work may be considered yet another contribution to the effort to break the silence of Latin American women's voices as her work reminds her Anglophone audience of the (many) other side(s) to the conversation surrounding Latin American women's literary production in which so many American and British academics are engaged.

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