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Gender and Violence in Spanish Culture: From Vulnerability to Accountability

María José Gámez Fuentes and Rebeca Maseda García, eds. (2018)

New York: Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers, 236 pp.

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Violence against women is unfortunately not often studied in a way that respects the agency of victims. While studies of gender violence exist across multiple disciplines within and outside academe, María José Gámez Fuentes and Rebeca Maseda García's 2018 edited volume *Gender and Violence in Spanish Culture: From Vulnerability to Accountability* uses a much-needed ethical witnessing approach to grant agency to victims of gender violence in Spain during the past thirty years. Their trauma studies informed approach seeks to remove representations of victimhood from heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks through a deep commitment to feminist theory and praxis. Simply put, the volume aims to "fight helplessness with knowledge" (28) as Ana de Miguel Álvarez asserts in chapter 1. This interdisciplinary volume is an excellent selection for scholars in fields related to Iberian Studies and Women and Gender Studies because the contributors provide readers with theoretical tools to address violence and gender politics. By focusing on Spanish laws intended to protect women from aggression on the basis of gender, such as the Integral Gender-based Violence Law (2004), the editors make the claim that the visibility of gender violence in contemporary Spain fails to dismantle the framework that places women in the position of victims.

The present volume takes Gámez Fuentes's 2015 article *Feminisms and the 15M Movement in Spain: Between Frames of Recognition and Contexts of Action* as its point of departure to address gender-based violence as a pressing human rights issue. In the introduction,

the editors look towards Spanish cultural artifacts to pose the question: “How do we develop new modes of agency that do not deny vulnerability as a resource, but use it in a nondisabling manner?” (7). The editors subsequently propose new modes of agency by developing their ethical witnessing approach from Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang’s work on trauma and storytelling and Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, and Rebecca Stringer’s theorizations of female victimization. Each contributor, the majority of which are female Spanish researchers, tackles the “hegemonic matrix” (7) of discourse formation by analyzing how a variety of cultural artifacts (performance art, films, press coverage of domestic violence cases, online activism, and literature) break the boundaries of hegemonic discourse. The twelve chapters following the introduction are divided into three sections: Theory and Politics, Activism and Associations, and Cultural Production. Each contributor applies a feminist lens to fields like Political Theory, Communication, and Education. Moreover, the contributors provide insights from different branches of feminism, such as equality-based and difference-based feminism, to demonstrate the importance of feminist dialogue. Similarly, the contributors do not dwell on victims’ suffering or include graphic depictions of violence, opting instead to focus on victims’ agency. The chapter notes and bibliographies bring together a wide selection of English and Spanish language texts in the humanities and social sciences to interrogate agency and victimhood and they are a testament to the need for interdisciplinary dialogue about gender-based violence.

The volume’s preliminary Theory and Politics section exemplifies the functionality of the theoretical imperatives proposed by the editors (ethical witnessing and the agency of victims) by problematizing how cases and testimonies of gender violence are treated both in Spain and in an international context. These three chapters provide an overview of the climate of gender violence in Spain during the 1990s and early 2000s and the key events and legal cases of that period. Ana

de Miguel Álvarez (Chapter 1) does a particularly good job of connecting theory and praxis by presenting how different Spanish feminist and academic organizations like the Feminist Network of Organizations against Violence toward Women have addressed gender violence. Juana Gallego Ayala (Chapter 2) advocates for an ethical representation of women like Ana Orantes, a victim of domestic violence who told her story on television and was subsequently murdered by her ex-husband in 1997. Gallego Ayala uses this well-documented case as an example of ethical witnessing, that is, acknowledging the political agency of victims to conceive of violence as “*attacks* against women’s freedom” (53). She amplifies the editors’ call for a global story that gives meaning to gender violence, moving it from the private to the public, political sphere. In doing so, Gallego Ayala draws attention to the impact of new media, namely television, on the increased visibility and scrutiny of women’s testimonies. Although many of the contributors deal with the harm done by the media’s representation of victims as passive, they do not discuss the effects of the Internet or social media in detail. Emma Gómez Nicolau’s chapter “Silenced Voices: Prostitutes, Lesbians, and ‘Bad Women’ in Spanish Public Policies on Gender Violence” provides the most comprehensive intersectional approach in the volume. In it, she nuances assumptions about the perpetrators and victims of gender violence by considering nonnormative genders and sexualities. Nevertheless, the volume as a whole provides little mention of the implications of studying gender violence as violence against *women*. Considering the numerous citations of feminist theory throughout the volume, it is surprising that a more sustained discussion of gender essentialism and the particular implications it has with the LGBT community in support of Gómez Nicolau’s claims does not appear in the introduction.

Part 2: Activism and Associations presents a somewhat abbreviated overview of the many forms of emerging multimedia feminist activism. The power of discourse and dialogical

feminism forms a common thread through these three chapters that advocate for what Sonia Núñez Puente (Chapter 4) terms the “counterhegemonic frameworks of recognition” (77) of gender violence. In her chapter, Núñez Puente establishes a dialogue between forms of cyberactivism carried out by the Spanish web platform ACVG (Art Fighting Gender-Based Violence) and the implications of such activism beyond Spain. Her discussions of feminist online media activism emphasize the “global circulation of activist practice” (81) and how Spanish activism has gained traction throughout the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America. Moreover, she offers insights into how ACVG’s methodologies for making artwork visible with technology can be applied to a wide range of contexts to reframe the discourse of victimhood. She cites Barbara Hudson and Kelly Oliver’s work on “awkward politics” as a key theoretical tool for analyzing awkward moments of user engagement with feminist politics via new technologies. Awkward politics allow activists to engage in culture jamming as a form of resistance to the objectification and spectacle of the victim’s image, thus restoring agency to the victim. Given the ongoing work of online platforms like ACVG (Chapter 4) and the documentary *Las Sinsombrero* and its accompanying hashtag #MiSinsombrero (Chapter 5), the interactive component of these case studies in light of the functionality of the eBook could have been better utilized. Despite the short case study analyses and few images of visual and performance art, these chapters interrogate the many gaps in the discourse on gender violence such as cyberactivism and outreach work with women without university degrees (Chapter 6).

Part 3: Cultural Production draws from often cited texts, films, and visual art depicting gender violence, from Dulce Chacón’s novel *La voz dormida* (Chapter 7) and Paco León’s films *Carmina o revienta* and *Carmina y amén* (Chapter 11) to paintings in the Prado Museum (Chapter 8). The contributors attend to these cultural artifacts by applying the framework of

ethical witnessing to create new forms of female subjectivity in the wake of violence. In doing so, this section will be of special interest to scholars in the humanities looking to apply feminist insights to art history, literary studies, and film theory. Chapters 9 and 10 on homophobia in the film *Pasos* and victimhood in the docufiction film *Ella(s)*, respectively, connect especially well with the editors' ethical witnessing approach. Like much of the volume, chapters 9-11 problematize representations of violence in popular films by positing survivors as active subjects. Vera Burgos-Hernández (Chapter 10) explains how certain film genres, such as melodrama and thriller, recreate heteronormative frameworks that dismiss gender violence by making the abuse of women highly visible. Her application of feminist film theory subverts these film tropes by analyzing how *Ella(s)* portrays victims as speaking subjects, refuses to show viewers their abuse, and forgoes introducing the figure of the aggressor. The docufilm solves the problem of film audiences only feeling pity towards survivors by reworking the cycle of abuse and portraying survivors as active subjects in an effort to compel audiences to respond ethically. The concluding chapter reiterates the potential for feminist epistemology to address the shortcomings of legal approaches to achieving justice for victims of gender-based violence.

While reading *Gender and Violence in Spanish Culture: From Vulnerability to Accountability*, I felt compelled to theorize and work alongside the editors. Even though feminists began to conceive of women as agents during the 1990s, contemporary Spanish culture has yet to revise the masculine narrative of female passivity in the face of violence. Each chapter carries out the important work of highlighting moments where Spanish activism and cultural artifacts break boundaries in representing and discussing gender-based violence. Although many similar interdisciplinary anthologies on the topic of gender and violence like Laura O'Toole et al.'s collection *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2007) are available, this well

written volume stands out for the strength of the theoretical frameworks articulated by each contributor. In light of the specificity of the volume's case studies of Spanish cultural artifacts, the contributors' commitment to feminist inquiry offers a wide array of connections with other areas of research within and outside of contemporary Iberian Studies. Moreover, it is the ideal reference volume for scholars well-versed in feminist theory looking to apply this knowledge to the context of contemporary Spain without needing to consult resources in Spanish. While the editors give a rationale for the application of certain key feminist concepts in the introduction, more definitions in later chapters would help orient researchers less familiar with how scholars in different disciplines apply these concepts. As noted in Emma Gómez Nicolau's and Alfredo Martínez-Expósito's chapters on gender and sexuality, a more widely applied intersectional approach to gender violence will help address the unequal treatment of victims. Overall, the sections are well organized with ample citations and bibliography, and each chapter overlaps with the central theme of deconstructing heteronormative frameworks of gender-based violence. The contributors in this volume thus explore the possibility for social change to occur within and outside of academe when witnesses of gender violence evaluate victims' stories and treat them as subjects with agency.