

Judith Sierra-Rivera. *Affective Intellectuals and the Space of Catastrophe in the Americas*. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2018. 217 pp. ISBN 9780814254950.

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Overall, this book seeks to explore the complex ways in which intellectuals construct collective communities by means of affect. By studying the cases of Carlos Monsiváis, Francisco Goldman, Pedro Lemebel, Josean Ramos and Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, Sierra-Rivera intends to explain how these authors negotiate meaning –their political positions– with an imagined, intimate community of debate, as well as the means by which said imaginary reinforces, or seeks to reinforce, the concept of an affective “we.” Furthermore, Sierra-Rivera argues, these intellectuals are not trying to emotionally persuade their audience as much as to point them to the directions of other bodies, those of the marginalized: LGBTQ sexualities, indigenous people, immigrants, afro-descendants, inhabitants of poor neighborhoods, survivors of militarism and wars.

Parting from the work of Lecia Rosenthal, Sierra-Rivera considers the space of catastrophe to be one where intellectuals have the unique opportunity to recognize the current flaws and reflect upon the vulnerability of current social structures. And yet, “What if we are living within a systematic catastrophe? What if that which we perceive as catastrophes (natural or sociopolitical) are just critical instances that give us a glimpse of structural dysfunction?” (5) If “neoliberalism is the space of catastrophe of capitalism” (9), then the ultimate catastrophe has been the seriously dysfunctional capitalist system.

Are we still, nonetheless, living in a capitalist-space mode of production? Is it, perhaps, alternatively, a transnational space of catastrophe? Is it, rather, a new form of production mode? The five cases studied in this book, according to Sierra-Rivera, may very well be representative of moments where capitalism seems to be transforming into something else.

Following the critical work of Sara Ahmed, Sierra-Rivera also considers emotions as social and cultural practices that shape or transform bodies –both individual and social– into “objects of feeling”. Emotions are therefore not only a fundamental part of the materiality of said bodies, but in fact constitutive of their materiality. Emotions, too,

attract bodies away or towards someone or something, and configure representations of social space.

As her analysis turns to marginalized bodies, Sierra-Rivera considers “negotiating communities”: bodies that oppose or resist the promise of happiness, unhappy bodies that are not welcomed into a social space sculpted by such promise, alienated bodies. On the one hand, then, a collective national, neoliberal “we” is formed. On the other, we have the bodies of those that come together in resistance, the unhappy ones, gathering around an opposing “we”, creating spaces and body politics aiming to destabilize the neoliberal space of catastrophe.

Parting from this theoretical framework, each of the five authors mentioned above is studied in a separate book chapter. The first one is dedicated to a series of essays and chronicles by Carlos Monsiváis on the historical events of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, the 1985 earthquake, the Zapatista insurgency in 1994, and their respective aftermaths (and connections). In the analysis of these texts, Sierra-Rivera concentrates on the way in which Monsiváis’ intellectual gaze –his very own “cruel optimism”– brings to light the emergence of “unhappy bodies” and their struggle to negotiate social space: a search for the moment in which a diversity of marginalized bodies come together to create a collective “we”, demanding their inclusion in –and denouncing their exclusion from– the project of the imagined, happy, homogenous Mexican modern nation.

In Chapter II, Sierra-Rivera analyzes the journalistic work of Guatemalan-American-Jewish writer Francisco Goldman, concentrating on the very particular way in which this author’s geographical and cultural movement creates a “borderland” locus of enunciation. From this perspective, Goldman can mediate as a sort of affective, intellectual translator between the U.S and Central America, in key topics like military intervention, drug trafficking and migration. Furthermore, this section intends to reveal the implicit –imaginary– audience with which these texts aim to engage: a transcontinental emotional community of readers that seek to understand the complex and very problematic historical relationship between the United States and the Hemispheric Americas.

Chapter III concentrates on the radio program *Cancionero* as well as on the book *De perlas y cicatrices*, broadcasted and published, respectively, by Pedro Lemebel during the 1990’s –a key period of democratic transition in contemporary Chilean history. By focusing on the affective construction of *La loca*’s voice, a queer character through which Lemebel transmitted his intellectual discourse, Sierra-Rivera continues to attend to the relationship between affect and unhappy bodies. She achieves this by demonstrating the way in which the character was configured to resist the neoliberal consensus of official silence and oblivion. Delving into the politics of performance and looking closely at the emotions involved in *La loca*’s discourse, at this point Sierra-Rivera has chosen some of the most rich and touching excerpts from Lemebel’s writings and scripts. These texts recreate painful, haunting memories of the disappeared, the abused, and the assassinated.

Chapter IV analyses the autobiography *Antes de la guerra* by Josean Ramos as well as several of his articles, where this Puerto Rican intellectual addresses college students to share his experiences in the U.S. military. The key issue here is male friendship, which Ramos uses an affective politics of angry love. He hopes to both reach the younger generations through his emotive intellectual voice, as well as to create a means to resist the perverse logics of recruitment, militarism and wars –which rely on exclusive national love. Furthermore, there is a recurring call of attention to the young and poor, for which a military career may very well be the only chance of higher education; these vulnerable bodies, Sierra-Rivera argues, turn into Ramos' collective locus of enunciation.

The fifth and final chapter is dedicated to Sandra Ramirez's blog *Negra cubana tenía que ser*, where the author writes on the implications of being a black woman and a lesbian in Cuba as well as around Latin America. By analyzing the blog's entries as well as some of the comments these receive, Sierra-Rivera also considers the online networks that build around LGBTQ activists and organizations. She poses two main arguments: (i) that Ramirez's blog constructs an alternative physical and virtual space where the female Afro-Cuban body can be (re)signified, surrounded by a network of revolutionary love; and (ii) that the author's discourse on body politics, together with her ability to participate and foster said networks, intensely undermines that of the official Cuban government.

Throughout the book there are, however, some flaws worth pointing out. First, as much as Sierra-Rivera seems to have an ample knowledge on the foundations of neoliberalism, one finds a rather vague definition and discussion of a concept so crucial to her arguments. Nowadays, when it is almost commonplace to use the term indiscriminately, the book certainly calls for a deeper examination of the matter.

Furthermore, one feels a recurring sensation of disconnect between the highly complex and ambitious theoretical framework and the partial conclusions that the author draws from her close readings. There is a definite will to delve into the primary texts and read them both critically and closely –and this is perhaps where Sierra-Rivera's work is most delightful. Yet the complexity and thoroughness of the concepts and ideas carefully deployed in the introduction, at times seem to flee from the textual analyses. Thus, although presented in a clear and very readable style, arguments tend to become repetitive, and partial conclusions predictable.

Sierra-Rivera's book is, nonetheless, certainly worth reading. Innovative, compelling, and carefully written. Students and scholars will find novel and original insights on how the role of emotions and intellectuals on community-making may very well become the basis for approaches to knowledge and political action.