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**From the Selected Works of Cheyla Samuelson**

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[Review of] Estrada, Oswaldo, ed. Senderos de violencia. Latinoamérica y sus narrativas armadas

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With *Senderos de Violencia: Latinoamérica y sus narrativas armadas*, Oswaldo Estrada has gathered together a group of world-renowned scholars and artists to address the subject of narrative representations of violence in Latin America over the last forty years. The texts contained in *Senderos* focus on the role of literature and art in societies that are, or have been, shaken by horrendous violence. Although the authors employ diverse theoretical approaches to their analyses, they share a common goal, which is to uncover the deeper causes and impacts of the violence that has so wounded the countries and individuals that have experienced the trauma of war, state repression and atrocities, and criminal violence. Many of the articles offer analyses based on contemporary theories of violence in its multitudinous manifestations, including the objective, subjective, symbolic, latent, systemic, structural, cultural, linguistic, abject, mythical, and even divine understandings of violence in human societies. In this sense, *Senderos* contributes to the ongoing debate about our understanding of the role of art in the context of unspeakable violence, and advocates for the idea of literature and art as mattering in the world, as relevant to politics, and as a possible antidote to the crushing power of criminal, political and economic violence. All these scholars are drawn to the power of literature to incite empathy and open new paths of inquiry in the curious and ethical mind. In many cases, we see how literature can function to question official discourse and history, to reveal hidden truths, or sometimes to simply stand witness to the suffering of those affected by violence.

Estrada's clear and passionate introduction offers the reader a guide to the fourteen academic chapters and the five more personal texts by acclaimed fiction writers as well as a unifying narrative that communicates the urgency of the questions posed by the articles contained in the book. *Senderos* is organized into sections by geographic regions, from north to south. The first is "Fronteras de Violencia y Narcotráfico," and focuses on the cultural production related to the ongoing violence that has shaken Mexico to its core, demonstrated the corruption and ineptitude of its government, and taken more than 100,000 lives in the past decade. The second section is "Archivos de Violencia

Latente,” and includes an exploration of the theme of violence in Central America and Puerto Rico that seeks to understand the causes, and lasting impacts of violence in those regions. The third section is “Géneros de Violencia”, and moves south to consider representations of the turbulent years during which Peru was consumed by civil war with the guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso. The final section is “Fracturas de la Memoria”, and deals with representations of the era of repressive state violence in Chile and Argentina in which up to 40,000 people lost their lives, with many bodies of the *desaparecidos* never found. The coherence of the book is found in the many surprising points of commonality among the various chapters, from the prevalence of the ominous victim-blaming phrase “algo habrán hecho” o “por algo será” across time and space, to the ubiquity of State terrorism across the region.

The chapters in “Fronteras de Violencia y Narcotráfico” are perhaps the most urgent contained in *Senderos*, because the violence that the writers are grappling with is ongoing and still poorly understood. Juan Villoro, celebrated Mexican author and a courageous journalist, offers a view of the situation in Mexico that urges us to look deeper than the sensationalized and often romanticized vision of the *narvos* that fascinate even as they terrorize an entire country. In his text “La alfombra roja: Comunicación y narcoterrorismo en México,” Villoro argues that the mythology of the *narvos*, as presented in *narcocorridos*, television programs and novels dedicated to depicting their larger than life wealth and cruelty, serves not only the criminals it eulogizes, but also the government and police forces simultaneously ineffectual in the “war” against the *narvos*, and often complicit in the illegal trafficking of drugs and the prevalence of corruption in Mexico. In his text, Villoro seeks out novels that deviate from the norm, in that they do not reproduce the image of the *narvos* as more powerful than the state and completely inhuman in their cruelty. As a counterpoint to the prevalence of stereotypical depictions found in narconovelas, Villor offers up the examples of Victor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *Countrabando*, and Daniel Sada’s *El lenguaje del juego* as two works that offer a vision at once more human and more disturbing than the stereotypical *narconovelas* that predominate the market.

With his contribution to the volume, entitled “Cadáveres sin historia: La despolitización de la narconovela negra mexicana contemporánea” Oswaldo Zavala continues his persistent effort to reveal the paucity of the popular understanding of the drug war in Mexico. Zavala’s analysis cuts to the heart the perception of the *narvos* as constituting a shadowy “second state” in Mexico that outmaneuvers and outguns the government in their fight to control territories and the flow of drugs and people through them. According to the author, this is a convenient narrative that allows a corrupt and complicit government elude responsibility for the situation, while also glamourizing the *narvos*. Zavala’s analysis is sophisticated and nuanced, and draws on complex political and philosophical ideas to offer

a clear view of how authors can be complicit or critical in their representation of violence in Mexico. For example, he posits that the texts of Elmer Mendoza have segued from depicting the corruption of the State and the complexity of the Mexican geopolitical reality to fall into the commercially appealing representation of *narcos* as interchangeable Versace wearing thugs. Zavala signals the success of Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *La reina del sur* as being responsible for the explosion of the genre of the *narconovela*, and points to the novels of Yuri Herrera, Heriberto Yépez, Orfa Alarcón, Bernardo Fernández (BEF), and Alejandro Almazán as exploiting the spectacular and stereotypical image of the *narco* to the detriment of a more nuanced representation of Mexico's complex social, political and economic realities.

Alejandra Márquez's chapter "Allá derecho encuentras algo: mujeres y violencia en tres narrativas de la frontera" explores how representations of women in *narco* literature and film (including *Perra Brava* (2010) de Orfa Alarcón, *Trabajos del reino* (2004) de Yuri Herrera and *Miss Bala* (2011), a film directed by Gerardo Naranjo, tend to reproduce the patriarchal system that underlying the world of the *narco*traficantes.. In her consideration of *Perra Brava*, Márquez underscores the fact that simply transforming an abused woman into a violent and abusive agent does not serve as a positive alternative to the usual *narco* narrative. In her analyses of these works, Márquez offers no happy endings and no easy solutions, but rather explores the bleak outlook for women caught in a system of violence in which there are often no good choices.

In "La narconarrativa: el papel de la novela y la legitimación de los Grupos Armados Ilegales", Rafael Acosta describes the ways in which novels and popular culture (most notably the *narco*corrido) have served to both mythologize and demonize the individuals involved in, or touched by, the drug trafficking that has brought appalling levels of violence to Mexico and Colombia. In his description of the double edged sword of popular culture, Acosta invites us to consider how the popular culture that celebrates the actions and lifestyle of GAI, or *grupos armados ilegales* also allows the state powers to abdicate any responsibility for the deaths and violence occasioned by the "drug wars" they participate in.

With "Heterotopías mexicanas: representaciones de la violencia contra los migrantes centroamericanos indocumentados," José Ramón Ortigas brings a necessary and often overlooked point of analysis to the consideration of the situation in Mexico when he explores representations of the experience of Central American immigrants as they attempt to cross Mexico on their way to the United States. In his analysis he looks at the literary depiction of spaces that imperil, confine, injure or kill Central Americans as they move across a hostile landscape. Ortigas also offers a clear

description of some “theories of violence” that allow the reader to move beyond the consideration of physical or “direct” violence to an understanding of the structural and cultural violence that underlies and perpetuates the violence visited upon some of the most vulnerable in Mexico.

Renowned Guatemalan author and translator Rodrigo Rey Rosa offers the first text in the section “Archivos de Violencia Latente,” which focuses on violence in Central America. The text, entitled “La segunda sepultura,” diverges from the traditional academic essay format to offer a glimpse into the lasting effect of the violence that ravaged his country in the 1980s. His personal style of writing and his description of his own efforts to find answers in the archives of the Guatemalan military offers images of a society that is still processing the effects of the state sponsored violence perpetrated largely against the indigenous population of Guatemala. He describes the efforts of family members to identify their lost kin among the remains in found mass graves throughout the Guatemalan landscape, and offers a vision of the incomplete nature of mourning and of the difficult but persistent search for justice.

In her chapter “Sobre la genealogía de la violencia. Una lectura de *El material humano* de Rodrigo Rey Rosa,” Alexandra Ortiz Wallner examines the image of the archive in Rey’s novel, as both a source of knowledge about atrocities committed by the state, and a repository of cultural power. Basing her arguments in theories violence, archives and Ortiz describes how Rey weaves a narrative in which seeming objectivity of the archive is complicated by the ongoing human drama that does not conclude with the official end of the dirty war. The juxtaposition of these two texts, one by the actual author of *El material humano*, and Ortiz Wallner’s nuanced consideration of the novel itself offers a fascinating insight into the creative and personal processes that join to create a work that is both moving and incisively critical and self-aware.

With “Violencia latente: pasaportes, puertas y murallas en la literatura y el cine centroamericanos,” María del Carmen Caña Jiménez examines the psychological effects of living in a “risk society”, in which the threat of physical harm is constant. Caña Jimenez looks at three texts from three different Central American countries as a way of exploring common themes across seemingly disparate national situations. Her exploration of how official documents (such as passports), and spatial barriers such as fences and walls function within risk society to generate a generalized sense of anxiety that plays out in psychological and physically harmful ways offers a coherent image of the larger effects of perceived risks across societies.

John Waldron’s chapter “Ritos de violencia y hábitos hegemónicos en tres representaciones puertorriqueños” explores transgressive narratives and performance art from Puerto Rico as a way of

exposing the violence that underlies a seemingly compliant society. Waldron's article is enlightening in that he considers texts and performances that cut through surface appearances to uncover the legacies of slavery, imperialism and neoliberalism that have created a society in which only certain lives are valuable and others may be discarded as complicit in their own destruction.

As an introductory text to the section "Géneros de violencia," author Diego Trelles Paz describes his creative process in "*Bioy* o la escritura como condición límite." Trelles Paz's contribution helps the reader to understand the ethical reasons for the brutality of the novel, as he seeks to bring the full impact of the horror of the years of the Peruvian civil war to his narrative. As he explains, the ultimate goal of novels like *Bioy* may be seen as an insistence on memory and the importance of mourning for a society that still suffers the repercussions of the violence suffered.

Focusing on film and narrative production in the aftermath of the Sendero years, Liliana Wendorff posits in "La violencia en el Perú desde dentro y desde fuera" that there is a marked difference between narratives that originate from authors who lived through the violence of the civil war versus those written by someone like Daniel Alarcón, who grew up in the United States and writes about the conflict from an "outsider" position and operates more as a forensic examiner than as a witness. Across her analysis we see how narratives constructed from differing point of view offer disparate visions of the violence of those years and how it affected Peruvians in different classes and ethnicities.

Rocío Ferreira's chapter "La mujeres disparan: imágenes y poéticas de la violencia política en la novela peruana contemporánea" offers an enlightening consideration of narratives produced by women writers both before and after the publication of the final report of The Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (2003). Ferreira argues that narrative by women writers serves to broaden our understanding of those years, as they focus on issues specific to women.

Oswaldo Estrada's contribution to the volume is "Narrar el horror: Nuevos senderos de violencia simbólica en la literatura peruana," in which he looks at narratives that explore the violence that terrorized Peru from multiple perspectives, including that of members of the *Sendero Luminoso* and the military that engaged them. Throughout, he looks at narratives that underscore the humanity of the participants in the war. Estrada's subtle analysis of the novels is passionate and informed by his theoretical readings, as he makes the argument that there are certain aspects of the conflict that only the novel can reveal, while at the same time cautions against the sort of narrative that seeks to use "violent Latin America" as stereotype that sells novels.

Chilean writer Lina Meruane invites the reader to the section “Facturas de memoria” with her text “Señales de nosotros” offers an illuminating personal glimpse into the partitioned world of Pinochet’s Chile in her recounting of her childhood spent in the isolated world of a private *colegio británico*, where in the students dedicated themselves to ignoring the signs of the brutality and economic Darwinism practiced by the regime. Her description of the gradual coming into consciousness of her generation allows us to understand how a bulk of a citizenry could willingly remain ignorant of the atrocities committed in the name of law and order.

Dianna C. Niebylski explores Diamela Eltit’s narrative work in “En Estado de violencia: abyección y miseria en *Impuesto a la carne* y *Fuerzas especiales* de Diamela Eltit.” Niebylski offers a grim but informative analysis of Eltit’s allegorical, fantastical narrative project, in which the theories of violence and economics combine to describe a neoliberal Chile dedicated to the exploitation and marginalization of vulnerable populations. Ksenija Bilbija’s contribution, entitled “Transacciones y fracturas neoliberales: el valor de la pena desde Luz Arce a Arturo Fontaine,” examines the implications of the various manifestations of Luz Arce’s recounting of her own history as a leftist revolutionary that become a collaborator with Chile’s military dictatorship after undergoing torture. Bilbija’s analysis is fascinating, as she considers the implications of confession and *testimonio* is a country where amnesty is presupposed and the horrific stories of the past function as commodities without ethical value.

In her consideration of Cristián Rodríguez’s work, “Represores y torsión poética de resistencia en *Madrugada negra* de Cristián Rodríguez,” Corinne Pubill examines a novel that challenges the norms of representation and perspective as a way of truly bringing the reader into an awareness of the atrocities of Argentina’s Dirty War. Pubill posits that, more than the victims’ perspective, it is perhaps the perspective of the perpetrator that we must understand in order to grasp the full horror of the kind of remorseless torture and killing that was carried out. Her chapter explores the broken syntax and brutal stream of consciousness of a novel that seeks to recreate in its very grammar a mechanized and dehumanized “servicio público criminal” that has lost its connection to common humanity and operates as part of bureaucratic killing machine.

Fernando Reati’s “Complicidad social y responsabilidad individual en la posdictadura argentina: *La culpa* y *Una misma noche*” begins with a review of the ongoing philosophical debate in Argentina about the limits of personal responsibility in the context of the Dirty War, and an acknowledgment of his related personal experiences during the *junta* years in Argentina. In his consideration of several texts that center around the themes of guilt and responsibility, Reati explores

the usefulness of such concepts in a society where everyone can be considered guilty of complicity, but everyone can also be conceived of as a victim of the terror that reigned at that time.

Sandra Lorenzano closes the volume with “Cuerpos y ausencias: Por una poética de la memoria,” in which she considers the conversion of former clandestine places of torture and death into spaces designed to expose the truth of the years of the Dirty War in Argentina, as well as to offer a space dedicated to the memory of the *desaparecidos* and the truth of what befell them. Lorenzano considers documentary and photographic works that seek symbolically re-unite families broken by violence, while underscoring the loss implied not only by absence, but also by the lack of a body to definitively close the story of that loss. She ends with a poetic rumination on the motivations of those that struggle to write through and about the horror of the violence that has shaken so many countries in Latin America.

With this and other publications, Oswaldo Estrada has proved himself a talented editor who knows how to shape an edited volume to be more than just a collection of articles. The decision to include writers and journalists as well as literary critics means that this volume pursues its theme from diverse perspectives, allowing reflection on the creative process to stand alongside critical explorations of texts. This approach is refreshing, and useful for the reader who sees creation and analysis as interdependent and complementary. The analyses contained in *Senderos* consider the impacts of not only at the starkest manifestations of violence, but also at the underlying systems that guarantee the persistence of violence, including the economic violence that so often underlies the causes of repression, criminality and other forms of objective violence.

A characteristic that makes this volume particularly interesting is the fact that in some cases the violence explored by these critics and the works they focus is absolutely current (especially in the case of Mexico), while in others (especially in Peru, Chile and Argentina) there is a distance of decades. This makes for a fertile mix of investigation and reflection. While those of us that work on Mexican literature are struggling to uncover the truth behind many of the terrible acts that are chronicled in newspapers and reflected in narrative works, those that focus on Guatemala are still searching for justice in the aftermath of State Terror, while investigators working on narratives from other countries where the atrocities are less fresh are able to access the information containing in Truth and Reconciliation processes, and explore how narratives have evolved in the aftermath to consider issues such as memory, trauma, collective responsibility and even redemption. The juxtaposition of these temporally and spatially diverse texts offers a new perspective on the work being done in any one



region, and also demonstrates that the effects of violence linger beyond the immediate impact and continue to affect the artistic and critical output of a country long after the killing is over.

In conclusion, *Senderos de violencia: Latinoamérica y sus narrativas armadas* is a timely and important book, and will be useful for scholars and students who want to understand the contemporary discourse surrounding the complex relationship between representations of violence and cultural production, as well as for those interested in contemporary literary production in Latin America.