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Book Review: Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship

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Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship. Edited by Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010, 375 pp., \$79.00 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

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“Looking back to the past means acknowledging one’s own wounds: both the visible ones and the hidden ones on the inside, those that cure more slowly and sometimes are never completely healed” (Herrera, chapter 17: 291). I begin with this quote because it captures the intellectual and political pulse of *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean*. This volume reflects on decades of activism and scholarship in and from the Americas to assess the past with an eye toward adjusting future political and academic strategies. The process contributes to the ever-growing archive of Latin American and Caribbean women’s history.

The contributors reflect the breadth and depth of Latin American and Caribbean feminist scholarship and activism in a variety of ways: As Alvarez notes in the foreword, they are the “founding mothers of the field and newer voices alike” (p. xi). The collection brings together political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, cultural critics, lawyers, and activists. Geographically, the contributors represent universities and organizations throughout the Americas, including Argentina, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela.

Following the introduction, the first section provides context by analyzing the effects of the changing political and socioeconomic dynamics of the past four decades with respect to women’s lives, their work, and their families in this irrevocably neoliberal world. The next two sections share histories of national and regional movements, including their successes, and challenges. These two sections poignantly begin with interviews with a mother and grandmother of the disappeared in Argentina. The women remind us of the significance of the title of the section “Women’s Agency for Plural Democracy and Full Citizenship.” They demonstrate that agency is in full force in Argentina as they strive for complete citizenship, including prosecution of the guilty and reunion with their grandchildren. Also included here are Latin American and Caribbean women’s experiences with intersecting oppressions, including “sexual dissidence” (Mogrovejo, chapter 11) and ethnic racial others.

The next section, “Shaping Public Policy with a Gender Perspective” examines women’s struggles and successes in bringing about legal changes

that advance women's full citizenship rights. This section is particularly attentive to one of the major themes of the book: mainstreaming gender versus autonomous grassroots organizing. The case of domestic violence policies in Costa Rica is quite illustrative of this tension as the author, Sagot, describes some astounding successes in the legal and policy realm for protecting women victims and survivors of domestic violence while at the same time undermining the message that domestic violence is the result of a system of structural power imbalances between women and men.

The final section of the book looks at the experiences of women at local, regional, and international levels, with the individual cases speaking to the inevitable linking of all three realms. Navarro and Mejía's chapter about the Latin American Network of Catholics for the Right to Decide captures another prevalent theme in the book: the transnational reach of misogyny and patriarchy as they confront the efficacy and determination of feminists.

While the book is a tremendous theoretical and substantive contribution to Latin America, Caribbean, and global feminist studies, I found two aspects frustrating. First, the book was not as useful for undergraduate students as I anticipated. The cases are so timely and offer such historical detail I hoped it would be perfect for the classroom, but my freshmen students did not agree. Second, while this was not my experience, I suspect some social scientists might get frustrated by the absence of systematic discussions of methods in most of the chapters.

In sum, this book is neither naively celebratory nor paralyzingly cynical. It is a case of exemplary activist scholarship, documenting social movements and the actors responsible for substantial social, cultural, and political changes while also identifying political obstacles from which to learn. In addition, it is activist scholarship in the truest sense of the word. Many of the contributors have lengthy histories working with and forming social movement organizations, gender or sexuality related as well as national liberation movements. Thus, the history makers are also the history writers, an implicit goal of all feminist scholarship. *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean* will no doubt rise to the top of the feminist Latin American and Caribbean Studies canon. It also deserves an influential position in the rapidly growing transnational women's studies canon. I highly recommend it to scholars in either field.

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