

Rivas, Cecilia M. *Salvadoran Imaginaries. Mediated Identities and Cultures of Consumption*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0813564616.

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This book focuses on Salvadoran transnational imaginaries, which study author Cecilia M. Rivas understands as shared ways of thinking about spaces that transcend the territorial boundaries of the Central American nation-state and yet have their origins in the people, history, and landscapes of El Salvador. Following Arjun Appadurai (1996), Rivas defines the imaginary as an expression of a collective, and in her research, she explores the ways Salvadoran imaginaries of transnational realities take shape from, and in turn shape, the lived experience of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Rivas' timely book excels as an example of integrative scholarship, and the author draws effectively upon the tools of anthropology, sociology, and phenomenology, as well as from cultural and literary studies, in her examination of contemporary phenomena such as call centers; online and print newspaper sections; shopping malls; and advertising. Most importantly, she argues for an understanding of material culture in relation to the dynamics of belonging and alienation; rejection and celebration; inclusion and exclusion; nostalgia, longing, ambition, and regret, each expressions of a range of psychosocial realities for those who migrate, those who stay, and those who move between national borders in an age of "cultures of consumption."

Rivas' concise study takes its place at the intersection between a growing body of scholarship focused on dimensions of the phenomenon of Central American migration into the United States and research worldwide about the transnational spaces in which information, identity, and lived experience are constructed, mediated, and contested in an era of globalization and cross-border migration. Rivas' study makes a unique scholarly contribution to a diverse field of research that considers Salvadoran migration as an important category of Central American migration: general studies that analyze migration in the context of the postwar Salvadoran nation (Silva Prada 2000; Andrade-Eekhoff 2003; Lauria-Santiago and Binford 2004; FLACSO 2005; DeLugan 2012), research specifically focused on gangs (Zilberg 2011; Ward 2012), and studies on labor and migration (Pedersen 2013), as well as immigrant networks (Menjívar 2000), among others. Appadurai (1996), generally, and Néstor García Canclini (2001), in the field of Latin American cultural studies, have theorized about the nature of

transnational spaces in an era of globalization, and Rivas draws from their scholarship in framing her own exploration of border-transcending, post-war Salvadoran cultural realities.

Rivas' volume is comprised of five main chapters, a brief introduction and conclusion, as well as careful footnotes, a wide-ranging bibliography, and a comprehensive index that makes the volume easy to use for readers interested in specific topics. Rivas includes chapter-length explorations that are de rigueur for a project like this one, for example, on the emergence of both the term and idea of "Departamento 15," a reference to a fifteenth department (or province) of El Salvador, which has fourteen such territorial units. Departamento 15 has come to refer to, rather than to a territorial and political unit, a "diasporic space" (Rivas 25) comprised of individuals of Salvadoran origin who live and work abroad. In Chapter 1, "Tracing the Borderless in 'Departamento 15,'" Rivas analyzes the notion of Departamento 15 as it relates to the coverage of borderless Salvadorans in the newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica*. She contextualizes her analysis of media representations of the Salvadoran diasporic community with information about changes in journalistic work, such as the founding in 1998 in San Salvador of *El Faro*, Latin America's first digital newspaper, and postwar economic change, such as the "Ley de Integración Monetaria" [Monetary Integration Law], both of which indicated shifting possibilities and mentalities in El Salvador after the 1992 Peace Accords.

In Chapter 2, "The Desperate Images," Rivas delves deeper into media coverage to consider how narratives of migration and displacement circulate in news outlets, and by their circulation, become normalized as everyday Salvadoran experiences (Rivas 72). Importantly, Rivas considers the way both the experiences and representations of migration are gendered and includes analysis of stories of both successful and unsuccessful migration attempts by men and women. Oscar's story, for example, details the story of his fall from "La Bestia," the notorious cargo train on which many Central America migrants hitch a perilous ride north through Mexico, and the aftermath of that fall for him and his family as he is repatriated with severe injuries. Zuleyma's story is of a migrant experience in which family members are killed and she is brutally assaulted, only to be returned to a life of poverty she had left behind in El Salvador. Rivas uses each story to illustrate the power dynamics of the migration experience, as well as the ways that both individuals and the media try to make sense of daily tragedies associated with it.

"Vega's Disgust" (Chapter 3) is a markedly different chapter in that it explores a fictional representation of migration and return. Rivas studies Horacio Castellanos Moya's 1997 novel *El asco*: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador in order to probe difficult psychological realities that are part of transnational imaginaries. Of particular interest to Rivas is the way fictional representations like Castellanos Moyas' contest tidy representations of transnational experience; in *El asco*, for example, the protagonist expresses disgust with homeland and compatriots upon his temporary return to El

Salvador in the wake of his mother's death. Castellanos Moya is far from alone in exploring cynicism and disgust in fiction from the postwar period, and though Rivas' chapter is not ~~on~~ a literary reading of the novel per se, she presents her close reading of the novel against the backdrop of literary scholarship about Central American fiction and the broader social context in which it is written and circulates.

If Chapter 3 reads human emotional experiences closely, Chapter 4 does the same for a particular site of the experience of globalization: the bilingual call center. "Exporting Voices: Aspirations and Fluency in the Call Center" draws from the author's interviews with call center recruiters, employees, and former employees, as well as upon print and television ads for call center employment opportunities, to foreground a particular kind of Salvadoran identity, one that is coded as desirable in the international labor market. Rivas is particularly interested in the contradictions of the call center phenomenon, which for consumer-callers is a readily available source of assistance for purchasing or product and service-related troubleshooting, at the same time that it represents a labor and language challenge for call center operators and staffers. Rivas observes that since call centers privilege English language proficiency and "neutral" Spanish, they invite the mostly young people they employ to embody and project a particular Salvadoran identity in the workplace. Meantime, the complex personal histories from which such bilingualism derives exist just beneath the surface in stories of migrants who return, or children of migrants abroad to whom job ads appeal to discover their roots by returning to El Salvador to work.

In the same innovative vein as the exploration of call centers is Chapter 5, "Heart of the City," which presents a close reading of shopping malls, particularly Metrocentro and La Gran Vía in San Salvador. The chapter effectively weaves together an analysis of physical space and architecture, advertising, and lived experience, punctuated by thoughtful commentary on the shift from the valorization of public spaces for civic life (such as plazas) to private ones (like malls) in the neoliberal city. The consideration Rivas gives in this chapter to transnational expressions of cultures of consumption will be of interest to those working in cultural studies, particularly those with environmental approaches, since she thoughtfully documents the phenomenon of consumption and the rise of private spaces for social life, as well as alternative experiences of national life, such as street markets and neighborhoods that they displace and marginalize and with which they coexist.

Finally, Riva's brief conclusion on "Renewing Narratives of Connection and Distance" underscores an important point she makes throughout her study. Narratives of "becoming global," that is, these collective expressions of imagination, she asserts, are "produced, circulated, consumed, and mediated," as well as contested, in daily life (150). The conclusion also opens the door for further research about citizenship, displacement, and transnational spaces in the experience of globalization.

Rivas presents realities of transnational life as perceived from multiple angles of analysis—class, gender, physical location, age, level of education—rather than from

one alone, and this sensitivity to diverse experiences makes her book a particularly noteworthy example of integrative and interdisciplinary scholarship. By drawing on direct, qualitative research, as well as primary and secondary published sources, and giving it all cogent analysis, Rivas offers readers a unique book that conveys a complex understanding of transnational realities with regard to subjects of different positionalities: middle class, middle-aged women employees; young call center recruiters; migrants who have succeeded financially in the United States; marginalized young men and women repatriated after traumatic journeys. Read together, chapters on realities that are normal, everyday, and desirable, such as hardworking migrants abroad or bilingual call center employees at home, as well as chapters about the dark and yet still quotidian side of transnational experiences, such as mutilation, exploitation, and family separation yield a nuanced view of Salvadoran transnational imaginaries. Rivas' work makes a valuable contribution to transnational studies, migration studies, Central American studies, and Salvadoran studies, and scholars and students in each of these areas will find it a valuable resource and a catalyst for further work.

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