

Vinodh Venkatesh

The Body as Capital: Masculinities in Contemporary Latin American Fiction

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Transformations in the labor and familial orders, propelled by neoliberal restructuring, have placed Latin American traditional, hegemonic masculinities in crisis. In *The Body as Capital*, literary scholar Vinodh Venkatesh examines these emerging masculinities-in-crisis through a series of innovative interpretations of novels recently published across the Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas. In each of the twelve short chapters, Venkatesh preforms close readings of one or two novels per chapter, where he focuses on scenes of evolving masculinities. Demonstrating contemporary Latin American literature's continuation of classic registers--e.g. tropicalism, *caudillismo* [strong-man ideologies]--Venkatesh convincingly argues for the need to rethink these legacies as they are being reinterpreted in contemporary novels. Neoliberalism and its attendant transformation of political and intimate life, as well as its shifts in aesthetic and discursive representation, have fundamentally reoriented these categories. Venkatesh proposes a new conceptual topography for Latin American masculinities, while each chapter grapples with remapping the coordinates. Latin Americanists will find *The Body as Capital* to be a refreshing reworking of classical frameworks around gender and power. Scholars of gender or masculinity may have trouble with the untranslated Spanish passages in this mostly English-language text. Nevertheless, they will gain insight as to how global changes in political economy and state power are transforming Latin American lived relations.

The Body as Capital is divided into three sections: new historical masculinities, lyrical and deterritorialized masculinities, and transnational masculinities. Each section contains four short chapters that delve into one or two specific texts. Venkatesh's analysis moves between interconnected sites of masculine power--industrial economy, authoritarian and democratizing governance, intimate care and awkward eroticisms. While at times the reader might wish for more explicit threads connecting one idea to the next, his interpretations of different literary scenes evoke a consistent set of questions: How is masculinity generative of modes of domination that it can no longer control? Has masculinity shifted from a source of confidence to one of anxiety? and, What do those anxieties tell us about transforming and co-constitutive regimes of political economy and meaning making?

The first section, "New Historical Masculinities," most explicitly lays out the shift that Venkatesh proposes between traditional hegemonic masculinities and what we might call neoliberal precarious masculinities. Crucially, Venkatesh demonstrates these new masculinities with a sustained comparison between characters representing decadent forms of masculine power (and in particular the figure of "the dictator") with other characters who demonstrate emergent masculinities that will be detailed throughout the book. Thus, each chapter in this section foregrounds the relationship between these two figural positions as a way to capture a paradigmatic shift in the historical present. Particularly convincing in this respect is chapter four's analysis of Pedro Lemebel's *Tengo Miedo Torero*, a fictionalized historical account of a failed assassination attempt against Augusto Pinochet told through the eyes of a transvestite named *la loca* (the crazy one). Venkatesh draws illuminating comparisons between the revolutionaries opposed to Pinochet and the dictator himself. Calling attention to another man's semen stain that threatens Carlos's heteronormative masculinity and a second fecal stain on the sheets of the aging dictator, Venkatesh shows the maintenance of masculine insecurities even as protagonist and antagonist are motivated by destroying the other. This leads to the second major theme in the

section: the body as index of changing political and economic regimes. Venkatesh shows how body parts become metonymic of the new economy (testicles as the site of production in the neoliberal order, or Pinochet's loss of anal control as the loosening grip of authoritarianism). The corporal imagery, Venkatesh briefly but provocatively suggests, has supplanted the phallus as the central image of the masculine imaginary.

The second section, "Lyrical Readings and the Deterritorialization of Masculinities," turns to musicality as a rhetorical mechanism that rearranges bodies, and, consequently, reconsiders masculinities as objects that float between bodies rather than exclusively becoming attached to them. Chapter five "Defining the Literary OST," functions more as a methodological overture, where the author demonstrates how the songs referenced in the novel intertextually frame the mood of the narrative. This method is fully realized in chapter eight's analysis of Franz Galich's novels *Managua Salsa City* (*¡Devórame otra vez!*) and *Y te diré quién eres* (*Mariposa traicionera*). Set in Nicaragua's capital city, Managua, the novels portray a cast of interweaving characters that negotiate the turbulent transitions of crisis capitalism that heighten already existing inequalities. Fans of Latin American music will quickly recognize the subtitles as a well-covered salsa standard and a ballad by rock-pop group Maná respectively. These songs set the mood for a city that is replete with new pleasures and dangers as the breakdown of hegemonic masculinity also seems to suggest the breakdown of the social write large. Venkatesh describes: "Money and its fain drive the characters within the market as they jockey for social and sexual position, even though they can never really escape belonging to an impoverished scavenger class that is maintained as the substrate for the rich bosses vacationing in Miami" (94). *Plus ça change...* Intertextual musicality here does not only deterritorialize bodies but also brings together intersubjective space on many levels--from the urban to the transnational. If the new historical masculinities analyzed in the first section were primarily framed by national imaginations then the masculinities depicted here are simultaneously globally underdetermined and locally vulnerable.

The focus on transnational masculinities occupies the final section. New archetypes appear of masculinities transformed--characters attempting to reconfigure and reapproach hegemonic masculinity on an altered neoliberal field. In chapter nine's analysis of Rodríguez Matte's *Barrio Alto*, the businessman becomes the new figure of a reconstituted dominant masculine figure. Thriving on the performative enactment of success in a terrain where the market performs the same chimerical ruses, business becomes a new site of conservative male homosociality. Masculinity in the market gets a new life through conspicuous consumption expressed in sartorial aesthetics. Chapter ten examines Enrique Serna's *La sangre erguida*, a novel which follows Latin American migrants to Barcelona who must contend with masculine identities in a location where they are divorced from their traditional sources of power. It is no coincidence that impotence becomes a central feature of these migrant stories as gender role reversals and economic and social frustration appear to demasculinize them. The migrant is the underside of the transnational business masculinity, which appears with cyborg masculinity and revolutionary masculinity as other iterations on the topic. As might be imagined, such a packed conclusion feels a bit rushed, and even less a conclusion than a continuation of the central themes of the book. But the inclusion of these additional new masculinities at the end reinforces a central argument that new Latin American masculinities are plural and refractory, resisting one dominant narrative that may have been available in a previous era.

The Body as Capital offers a survey of the many potential directions of masculinity in contemporary Latin American cultural representation. Readers will gain a broad perspective on contemporary Latin American literature, and perhaps be exposed to novels which they can explore further. One open question from this survey is the lack of female authors considered. Certainly female authors have much to say about contemporary masculinities that would offer a rewarding point of view. A second question arises about neoliberalism, which is deployed throughout the book as the predominant vector of structural change

transforming masculinity, but which is not substantively analyzed in its political, economic, and social particularities. (Venkatesh often gestures at the polyfunctionality of neoliberalism as it impacts many features of life.) As Latin America was the laboratory for neoliberal policies under the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, it would have been interesting to think of neoliberalism as something *generated* from the political experience Latin America and not only something imposed on it. These questions do not detract from the incisive connections made in *The Body as Capital*. It is a compelling analysis of neoliberalism and gender roles in the contemporary era.

Joseph Jay Sosa
Bowdoin College