

Stacey Balkan, sbalkan@bergen.edu
Contemporary Intercultural & International Literatures

North America—United States, Mexico, and Canada

Arriaga, Guillermo. *A Sweet Scent of Death*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2002.

Arriaga's novel is a postmodern tale of unrequited love between a recently murdered (and rapidly decomposing) woman and an adolescent shopkeeper. Narrated in the tradition of magical realism—temporal dysfunction, supernatural landscapes, omniscient narrator—and consequently teeming with impossibilities, Arriaga's novel is a succinct portrait of the postmodern Mexican migrant. Set in one of the many *ejidos* (or migrant communities) of Southern Mexico, the story instantiates political and social injustices that are the hallmark of this lawless Mexican frontier; and Arriaga not only satirizes this by rendering it in an absurdly magical context, but he likewise creates a modern adaptation of the classic tragic form by giving his readers a beloved tragic hero—"the Gypsy"—and even providing a blind oracle.

Cahan, Abraham. *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. New York: Dover, 1970.

Set in the late nineteenth century on the lower east side—on Hester Street—Cahan narrates the title story of the Jewish ghetto vis-à-vis one of the many clothing sweatshops operating in a poorly ventilated tenement. *Yekly* is a prototypical immigrant saga—of cultural adaptation and assimilation and its attendant struggles—and it intimates the real lived experiences of Jewish immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This text also interrogates issues of gender in what was an ardently patriarchal culture.

Kaldas, Pauline & Mattawa, Khaled. *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab-American Fiction*. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2004.

This collection has a wide thematic range, illustrating both stereotypical notions of Muslim-American assimilation—in terms of gender, etc.—along with some unlikely tales of love in what may often be deemed an oppressive or perhaps regressive context. Pauline Kaldas's "Airport" offers its readers a glimpse into the unexpected romance of an arranged marriage while Mohja Kahf's "The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweah, Iowa" narrates the struggle of a severely abused Muslim wife attempting to escape from her home while being aided by an upper-class Muslim-American woman who is a seemingly unlikely confidante. This collection also features Sahar Kayyal's "Shakespeare in the Gaza Strip," which is a must read for U.S. college students.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

This collection of short prose features a wide range of what may loosely be termed "immigrant narratives" as they deal *en masse* with issues of estrangement, adaptation, and assimilation. The tales range thematically from the postcolonialist "Third and Final Continent" in which the United States becomes the "third" world (chronologically speaking) to the satirical "This Blessed House" in which religious icons are parodied as ludicrous talismans that litter the home of Indian newlyweds. Lahiri received the Pulitzer prize for this collection, and her texts have great pedagogical value.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

Morrison's novel is a postmodern psychological deconstruction of the racialized persons living in the U.S. during and after the Civil Rights amendment has passed. She deftly illustrates the socially constructed ills—pedophilia, promiscuity, domestic abuse, etc.—that plague the “Breedlove family,” which are quite obviously the direct consequences of the socially sanctioned rape of the father, the internalization of racial inferiority by “Pecola,” and the tragic marginalization and silencing of “Polly.” Morrison subverts normative chronology—telling her story backwards—to give the readers a more holistic sense of the social and psychological construction of her protagonists. She also plays with language giving names like “breedlove”—an obvious referent to the sociosexual dynamics of the family and the larger community.

Viramontes, Helena Maria. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. New York: Plume, 1996.

This novel chronicles a family of *campesinos*—Mexican migrant workers—living in the Southwestern United States. Viramontes offers a glimpse into a Chicano family who live at the mercy of immigration laws that delimit their collective opportunities and facilitate the actualization of stereotypes like the thieving boys who quite literally steal the fruit of their own labors and the violent young woman who resorts to such measures in the face of a hospital administrator who turns away her ailing brother. Viramontes also interrogates the consensual notion of a “white Jesus” illustrating the damaging effects that such Eurocentric images can cause in the hearts and minds of young *Chicanas*.

Central America & the Caribbean

Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak?* New York: Vintage, 1996.

This novel plays with the Haitian tradition of storytelling in which the audience asks for a story—“Krik”—and the bard responds—“Krak.” Danticat offers a story that illustrates the ancestral traditions of what is seemingly a matriarchal culture, and offers up a bevy of “narrative dumplings” that intimate the experiences of Haitian women *en masse* and the often brutal journey made by these women to the shores of the United States.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

Diaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel is a traditional Diasporic text that narrates the lives of the de Leon family—Oscar, Lola, and Beli—and their journey from Bani (in the Dominican Republic) to Paterson, New Jersey where they perform the stereotypical roles of the Dominican/a culture. Oscar Wao is a parody on Oscar Wilde—and functions as a double entendre for both his literary prowess and his perceived homosexuality—while Oscar, Diaz's tragic hero, is actually fatally obsessed with women. This novel, which chronicles Oscar's family as an analogue for the Dominican Diaspora and the colonial realities of Trujillo's DR, offers two narratives: there is the fictional novel that follows a normative chronology; and then there is the subtext told in a series of (somewhat excessive) footnotes that offer the reader a comprehensive history of Dominican colonialism and Diaspora.

Espada, Martin. *Imagine the Angels of Bread*. New York: Norton, 1997.

This collection is emblematic of Espada's theory (borrowed from Walt Whitman) that the poet has a social duty to speak for the silenced masses. The title poem offers up images of impoverished and otherwise disenfranchised persons in a various contexts—urban slums and coffee plantations alike—and serves as a means of resistance and protest. Likewise, Espada's famous poem "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper" is featured in this volume and tells the story of a sweatshop in New York City.

Kincaid, Jamaica. *Autobiography of my Mother*. New York: Plume, 1997.

This "autobiography" is a first person narrative of a young woman in colonial Antigua who narrates her tale from the perspective of both a daughter and also the collective female voice of a colonial site in which racism and class exploitation are pervasive. The protagonist grapples not only with the realities of race within her family, but with her subject position within the context of a culture that has uniformly internalized the inferiority of persons of color and consequently embraced Victorian/European notions of culture, decorum, and gender roles.

South America

Alarcon, Daniel. *War by Candlelight: Stories*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

Alarcon's collection of prose includes several narratives that illustrate the assimilation of formerly agrarian communities into a rapidly transforming Lima. The title story, "War by Candlelight," is a succinct portrait of the paradoxes of Latin American socialism *en masse*, and Peruvian socialism specifically; and his narrative form exemplifies the new McOndo movement in Latin America, a literary departure from "Magical Realism" by children of a postmodern generation who no longer feel a connection to the idyllic landscapes of their grandfathers. Alarcon's stories (and the majority of the McOndo tales) speak to the needs of a new (and predominantly urban) Latin American landscape. Alarcon's collection also includes "Flood" and "City of Clowns," both of which refer directly to the mass migration of the rural "mestizo" to the postmodern city of Lima.

Franco, Jorge. *Rosario Tijeras*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.

This McOndo "narcosaga" is a story of Medellin—a thriving Colombian metropolis—that was plagued by drug violence during the 1980's. Franco (like Gabriel Garcia Marquez) employs magical elements in his text—subverting time, etc.—to give the reader a metanarrative of a postmodern Latin America that is being colonized by a new kind of cultural imperialism—a globalized drug trade. The hallmark of McOndo narratives like this one is brutality and unrelenting violence; and Franco's novel is consequently difficult to digest at times. His protagonist, whose last name literally means "scissors," is a murderer socially constructed as such by a pervasive drug trade.

Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Harper, 2006.

Marquez is often lauded as the father of "magical realism" for his supernatural satires of the European colonization of South America; and this novel is invoked *ad nauseum* as the reason why. This novel chronicles the "Buendia" family—a name ironically translated as "good day"—whose successive generations are succinct referents for the postcolonial subjectivities of the indigenous/native other. The story opens with the patriarch standing

before a firing squad—indeed not a “good day”—and continues along a mythological path that even includes the somewhat exhausted theme of Biblical flooding that Marquez is, of course, able to rejuvenate via his beloved satirical tactics.

McNees, Pat. *Contemporary Latin American Short Stories.* New York: Ballantine, 1996.

This collection incorporates the famed magical realists—Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Oscar Fuentes—into an anthology that also celebrates the metaphysical detective fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, the adolescent foibles and classist hierarchies of Mario Vargas Llosa, the gender dynamics of Manuel Puig, the gritty *favela* sagas of Jorge Amado, and the feminist prose of Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. Oscar Fuentes’s “The Doll Queen” and Jorge Luis Borges’s “Death and the Compass” are both densely metaphoric texts that invoke what are now transcendent (in terms of era and region) leitmotifs of Latin American fiction; and they duly serve as excellent means of illustrating (for literature students) myriad narrative tropes—allegory, foreshadowing, imagery, etc.

Tapscott, Stephen. *Twentieth Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Addition.* Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1996.

This bilingual collection features an incredibly wide range of authors—Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Jose Marti, Marjorie Agosin, Cecelia Mereiles, Manuel Bandeiras, Octavio Paz, Cesar Vallejo, and even Che Guevara. Thus, the text offers an opportunity to interrogate the canon of Latin American literature through various critical lenses—Marxist, Structuralist, etc. Likewise, aesthetic forms range from Brazilian formalism to Chilean modernism to Argentine postmodernism.

Zapata, Celia Correias & Allende, Isabel. *Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real.* New York: Modern Library, 2003.

This collection features an eclectic collection of prose writers including Clarice Lispector, Luisa Valenzuela, Maria Luisa Bombal, Maria Elena Llano, and (of course) Isabel Allende. Consequently, the text offers a variety of themes and forms—traditional “coming of age” tales are accompanied by the fiercely satirical magical realism of Isabel Allende’s “Act of Vengeance.”

South Asia

Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Middleman and Other Stories.* New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Mukherjee’s collection offers what may seem like traditional immigrant narratives of struggle, but she concurrently offers characters whose social, cultural, and religious diversity pluralize an otherwise homogenous image of the “Indian immigrant.” She likewise contextualizes her protagonists in a wide range of geographical contexts and plays with numerous stereotypes. One tale, “The Management of Grief,” features an Indo-Canadian family coming to terms with a tragic plane crash and having to deal with the consequent red tape, which is as illegible linguistically as it is culturally.

Naqvi, Tahira. *Attar of Roses*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 1997.

Naqvi's collection offers multiple tales of Pakistani life; and she effectively recuperates images of Muslim women both from under the Burqa and within arranged marriages. The title story parodies the fetishization of the veiled women and follows a man who is intoxicated by the scent of "Attar of Roses" that he assumes to be emanating from one such mysterious woman. Naqvi's "A Peephole Romance" further intimates the person under the "veil" while "Love in an Election Year" offers a portrait of Pakistani politics and the many political fault lines of South Asia.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Random House Trade, 2008.

This novel illustrates the plight of a southern Indian family grappling with an exploitative class/caste system and its attendant gender politics. Roy imaginatively paints an image of emerging Marxism in the context of the Indian merchant class, and she simultaneously creates female characters who illustrate both the traditional feminine role—one steeped in maternity—as well as a more progressive female persona who maintains a degree of sexual autonomy. This novel is likewise a metanarrative of Indian Marxism; and Roy seems to chastise the Marxists as hypocritical neocolonialists who do not seem very different—in form and content—from the British Raj.

Rusdhie, Salman. *East, West*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

This collection is partitioned into two sections—"East" and "West"—each of which are emblematic of Rushdie's signature brand of satire—magical, sardonic, and postcolonial. "East" features the acclaimed story "The Prophet's Hair," which is a biting satire of fundamentalism that follows the theft of a hair of the Prophet Muhammad, which wreaks considerable havoc; and "West" offers a story entitled "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship," a story that plays with the traditional narrative of the conquest of North America.

The Middle East

Al-Amir, Daisy. *The Waiting List: An Iraqi Woman's Tale of Alienation*. Austin, TX: UT Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1994.

Al Amir's collection includes stories that employ multiple narrative forms all conveying the experience of modern Iraqi persons grappling with an exponentially changing political and natural landscape. Two tales that successfully illustrate this theme are "Weeping" and "For a Pittance," both of which emphasize the theft of Iraq's past and its natural landscape. Al Amir's feminist approach is clear in "A Crutch in the Head," in which she parodies the conversation between a man and a woman.

Al-Shaykh, Hanan. *Beirut Blues*. New York: Anchor, 1996.

This novel is set in the late 1980's in a tragically divided Beirut—a modern (and secular) West and a parochial East that is under siege by fundamentalists who the narrator feels are holding her hostage. This novel employs an alternative narrative form not unlike a great many postmodern feminist authors. Al-Shaykh offers the reader a series of "letters" in which she deftly moves between the atrocities of war and everyday life.

Darwoush, Mahmoud. *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*. U of California P, 2003.

Darwoush is a recently deceased Palestinian nationalist poet whose work illustrates both the degradation of the Palestinian spirit and the destruction of its natural landscape. From tales of disenfranchised Palestinian families to weeping olive trees, the poems in this volume enable an intimate glimpse into Palestinian solitude and oppression.

Kaufman, Shirley. *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity*. New York: Feminist Press, 1999.

This collection offers a wide range of poetic forms and is representative of myriad historic contexts and political perspectives. The reader is introduced to tales of both women's empowerment in the context of the Old Testament as well as to the post-war generation of women seeking to secure a Jewish homeland. In the "Water Queen of Jerusalem," for example, Rachel Chalfi offers a speaker who is the personification of Israel and who is swimming against the "rising tide of Arabic" wearing nothing but a bathing suit "made of Yiddish."

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Paris: Pantheon, 2003.

This graphic novel is the memoir of a woman growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Tehran (Iran) in the late 1970's. Satrapi uses a graphic format and minimalist images—black and white illustrations with intensely expressive eyes and gestures, but lacking the somewhat gaudy quality of traditional comics. The text is told in a series of vignettes that follow little "Marji" from her youthful naivete during which she is blindly devoted to God to her embrace of Marx to her rebellious adolescence which is partially spent in Austria. The text is likewise a metanarrative of politicized Islam; thus it logically invokes Marxism as the antithesis of what is clearly a political movement that depends upon the subjugation of the poor.

Africa

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy*. New York: NOK Publishers International, 1978.

This subversive novel, which is now part of the publisher's "African writer's series," utilizes both prose and poetry to communicate the experience of "Sissie," an African student who travels to Germany to "represent" her nation. This expressive form is an ideal means of illustrating Sissie's subject position—the westernized, educated African—as it disrupts the traditionally linear coming of age tale. Aidoo's protagonist "Sissie" is chosen to "represent" her nation, and in so doing she must come to terms with her cultural/national heritage as well as the English language in which she was taught.

Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. New York: Anchor, 1988.

This satire of neocolonial Nigeria illustrates corruption as an intrinsic quality of power, and offers characters with whom the reader can easily identify. While Achebe is often lauded for *Things Fall Apart*, for more sophisticated readers—college students—this text offers its readers the opportunity to interrogate the corrupt colonial and neocolonial regimes of Western Africa via not only a traditionally patriarchal perspective, but also through more fully realized female characters.

El Sadaawi, Nawal. *Woman at Point Zero*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1983.

El Sadaawi's feminist narrative follows the story of Firdaus, an exiled housewife turned prostitute whose life is an analogue for the precarious position of women in a newly fundamentalist Cairo. This visceral text offers the reader not only an alternative to traditional illustrations of silenced Egyptian women, it actually brings you into the prison cell of its protagonist who has been convicted of murder after killing her oppressor—her “pimp”—in self defense.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Arabian Nights and Day*. New York: Anchor, 1995.

This magical satire of Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights* offers a bard—i.e., the infamous Shahrazad—who weaves tales of resistance against the corrupt politicians of Mahfouz's generic Caliphate. Mahfouz not only demystifies what is a traditionally exoticized land (and people) but he duly tells his narrative in the Q'ranic tradition—a succession of vignettes/suras—each of which detail sardonic anecdotes of a totalitarian Sultan and the impoverished working class that live in his domain. Mahfouz's novel is the epitome of magical realism—it is a supernatural satire in which death is an illusion and the grim reaper drives much of the plot.

Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1970.

Celebrated Sudanese author Tayeb Salih's novel is a classic postcolonial text whose protagonist possesses the dual subjectivity of the western educated “other” who returns to his “homeland.” The clichéd tale of colonialism notwithstanding, this novel illustrates the paradoxical identity of the colonized mind of a man who is bitterly critical of both east and west; and it is an excellent pedagogical resource for it epitomizes this postcolonial dichotomy in the persona of a protagonist with whom readers can easily sympathize.