

“Dicen que el universo es casi nuestro”:
Claribel Alegrías Poetic Response to Leftist Discourse

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“Dicen que el universo es casi nuestro”:
Claribel Alegría’s Poetic Response to Leftist Discourse

Claribel Alegría (1925) has been publishing poetry since the late 1940s and fiction since the mid-1960s, but it was not until the late 1970s that her work began to receive sustained critical attention. Her rise as an important literary figure came in tandem with the emergence of violent resistance to authoritarianism in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Beginning with *Cenizas de Izalco* (1966), her fiction deals openly with questions of government repression and its effects on the populace, but it is not until the 1978 *Sobrevivo* that politics is overtly integrated into her poetry. Throughout her career Alegría has remained loyal to poetic convention and tradition while simultaneously, and, in my view, particularly beginning in 1961, exploring the efficacy of poetry as a political text.

The majority of the criticism devoted to Claribel Alegría’s work focuses on her narrative texts, both fiction and testimony, and on her defense of Leftist causes. Likewise the bulk of research on her poetry investigates her “letras de emergencia” produced in the late 1970s and 1980s. In general, Alegría’s narratives and poetry that address the oppressive conditions of Central American citizens have been read as attempts to represent the voices of the victims of nations’ political excesses. Her texts’ alliance to the dominant discourse of the opposition has been studied in her narrative works, and in fact these have been seen as the place of birth of truer commitment and solidarity with the “emerging subject” (Yúdice 956). George Yúdice, in the alluded article, praises Alegría’s success at arriving at this point of solidarity in *No me agarran viva: la mujer salvadoreña en la lucha/ They Won’t Take Me Alive* (1983/1987); for he finds that in two earlier poetry collections, *Vía única* (1965) and *Sobrevivo*, the reader contends with “solitary alienation” and a simulacrum (956). Similarly, feminist readings of this testimony have considered its representation of the *guerrillera*’s role as mother and fighter redefines motherhood, so that “it transcends the private sphere and invades the political one” (Sternbach 97). And in a more critical reading of Alegría’s conservative “idealization of Eugenia as a warrior/housewife,” Mary Jane Treacy ultimately concludes that “If Alegría constructs her biography around the images of woman=motherhood=affirmation of love, it is because she sees these traditionally female forces as the only ones capable of overcoming death and destruction” (91). Ileana Rodríguez has expanded the scope of Treacy’s conclusion by arguing that this testimony places woman at its center and “is a metaphor for women as well as for the New Man, written by an international couple as the pattern of a new mode of coupling” (165). Although these readings of Alegría’s treatment of the female guerrilla warrior differ in their foci, they all recognize Eugenia, the protagonist, as a praise-worthy figure of “feminine” revolution. As such, even in Rodríguez’s post-colonialist understanding, Eugenia gives a nod to dominant discourses of revolution.

In contrast, in this paper, I explore the ways in which Alegría confronts and critiques dominant Leftist discourse in poetry that is not explicitly political. This analysis uses as a starting point Rodríguez’s argument, in *Women, Guerrillas, & Love: Understanding War in Central America*, that the leftist conceptualization of the New Man that would arise in revolution, a vital, resolute and tender man, only “pretends to speak in the name of the collectivity” (32). Reading Che Guevara as the “Romantic revolutionary hero,” she asserts that his power, his “irresistible attraction,” resulted “from the combined effect of disparate aspects”: he is “inquisitive,” “gentle,” “dry,” “vibrant,” “trenchant,” and

“serene” (50). Although guerrillas, with Che as the example, were to be manly in their courage and resolve, they also needed “feminine” qualities, such as tenderness, but as Rodríguez writes,

The revolutionaries deluded themselves in believing that by proposing an
“alternative maleness,” one incorporating “female traits” [. . .] they
would deliver the New Man.

Inscribing himself in writing as t/he agent of change, this New Subject posits that his
agency is love [. . .]

The “feminization” of the guerrilla figure, though, does not integrate women into the revolutionary New Man (32-33), in fact even when women form part of the guerrilla army they are relegated to conventional roles: cook, seamstress, courier, “bearer of tenderness” (Guevara cited in Rodríguez 72).

It is in this context of inclusion of “feminine” characteristics in the definition of the New Man and the exclusion of women from revolutionary discourse that Alegría’s works offer a poetic retort. In these poetic responses, Alegría questions mainstays of revolutionary thought in Central America, including the necessity of sacrifice and martyrdom for the “warrior” and the efficacy of political action by the general population, the “little people.”

Elsewhere, I have posited that *Huésped de mi tiempo* (1961) is Alegría’s transitional text wherein the poetic speaker’s feminist awakening leads to a greater awareness of the political reality that surrounds her. In the 1961 collection’s “Monólogo múltiple,” a polyphonic poem, we hear the voices of a variety of “little” men and women who attempt to understand, and survive, their society, its politics and expectations. The poem’s speakers’ (the Mother, Lover, Warrior, Old Man and Artisan) comments function as critiques of resistance and social upheaval (Aparicio 102). The five personae allow Alegría to provide a multi-perspective understanding of the sociopolitical roles of the common people (Mother, Lover, Old Man), the military (Warrior) and, the martyr (Artisan). Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, in this poem, the Artisan is the only figure with transformative agency: he is the one who will give his life for his fellow men and women despite himself. As he admits:

No escogí
el haber nacido.
Menos
el servir de mártir. (165-168)

Although the Artisan ultimately accepts his martyrdom unquestionably, the poem in its totality questions the efficacy and necessity of the cyclical sacrifice of martyrs and the acceptance of predetermined social roles by all five poetic speakers (Aparicio 106-107). These social roles, referred to as “archetypes” in the poem’s epigraph, lock the collectivity into individual “puddles” from which they cannot escape. Unlike Alegría’s reiteration of the guerrilla mantra, in *No me agarran viva*, that believes that the “death of the revolutionary leads to rebirth in others and a rekindling of fervor to fight” (Treacy 85), in “Monólogo múltiple” the representation of an accepting but not completely convinced martyr figure is a key criticism of Leftist discourse and its praise, and promotion, of martyrdom (Aparicio 107-108).

In a later poetry collection, *Vía única* (1965), Alegría critiques several aspects of Leftist discourse and women’s roles within it. In “Pequeña patria,” the poetic speaker, a bourgeois woman, fails to enact social transformation via popular, government and Leftist channels. “Pequeña patria,” an

ironic retelling of the story of Chicken Little, follows the poetic speaker as she attempts to warn her “small” homeland that the sky is falling. The description of the I’s small, little, perhaps insignificant homeland initiates the poem’s recitation of the I’s struggle to convince her compatriots of impending doom. The representation of the “pequena patria” focuses on the motherless, on poor mothers and on beggars:

Detrás de mí
un remolino de huérfanos pálidos
de niños con el vientre hinchado
de madres pordioseras
exhibiendo a sus hijos
llenos de moscas
de mendigos astutos
que invierten su vida
en una pierna morada de costras
y vendas sucias. (1-10)

This whirlwind of abandonment, poverty, illness and slyness is the stage on which the I screams out her unheeded warning, “Se está cayendo el cielo” (11-12). The “scenery” for her act lies behind her, “detrás de mí” (1), and the only response she receives is from a woman dealing cards to other women:

“Queridas”,
comenta la señora gorda
mientras baraja el naípe
“¿saben la última noticia?
Dicen que el cielo se está cayendo.” (13-17)

The poetic speaker’s audience then appears to be limited to “the” lone fat lady whose function is to pass this news on as she would any piece of gossip. For just a second the “señora gorda” divests the I of its agency as the announcer of impending doom. But still, the female audience, “Queridas,” does not react accordingly so the poetic speaker continues on her search for a receptive listener.

In her search for a less nonchalant audience, the I makes her groundbreaking announcement at a meeting of powerful officials:

A las tres de la tarde
se abre la reunión de directorio.
Me levanto y digo:
“Señores,
hay un solo capítulo
en la agenda de hoy
se está cayendo el cielo.” (18-24)

Her assertion that her news is the only pending business gives the poetic speaker an air of importance. In this setting, unlike the previous scene of poverty, the I must be able to receive a more appropriate response. In fact, she does rouse the leadership into action, or at least to promised action: the agitated “gerente” proposes the construction of an underground vault to “proteger nuestros archivos / los valores” (25-30). But what are the values that need protection? And who will protect the people? The poem does not reveal which archives or valuables need protection but it does propose a solution to

save the nation: the military. The barracks are contacted and the general gives the soldiers an unusual solution to prevent the sky from falling: “que levanten rifles y bayonetas / que sostengan el cielo” (36-37). The military, then, retains its function as national armed defense albeit in an unconventional fashion.

The efficacy of this fury of official action, though, is halted by a second “narrative” description of the I’s “small homeland,”

El día está nublado.
Se cumple una cuota normal
de actividades.
Los carniceros venden tres cuartos
a las amas de casa
y cobran un kilo (38-43)

Life goes on as it has been predetermined, the “normal” quota of activity is reached, women complete their daily grocery shopping and, as usual they are taken advantage of by others. The focus on women’s daily life continues and paints a picture of naïve, bitter women who lie at the mercy of their social roles and of men,

las solteras ventilan sus odios
en aulas de pupilos
los donjuanes se pavonean con sus amigos
mientras las criadas
arruinan la comida
y contemplan el aborto. (44-49)

The poem goes on to subtly contrast the carefree, confident lives of the male seducers, “los donjuanes,” and those of worry of the women who are seduced, the servants. The maids’ lives are defined here by their inadequate work skills, they ruin their bosses’ meals, and the burden of their sexual fertility. The maids, like the teachers, professional women, are both marked by their sexuality and their reaction to it: the “solteras” avenge their spinsterhood on their virtual children and the maids contemplate how to deal with unwanted pregnancies. Meanwhile, in this poem, the men are: sly beggars, “managers,” generals and soldiers and “donjuanes.”

After providing illustrations of the population, the poem then returns to the description of the I’s and the “small homeland’s” physical environment that had begun with “El día está nublado,” and had been interrupted by the descriptions of daily life. In these lines the poetic speaker returns to the country’s natural environment and points to the relations of national production that parallel the maids’ pregnancies:

Pronto el arbolito de café
dará cerezas rojas
la caña, miel
los desfiladeros de algodón
nubes carnosas
que habrán de convertirse
en Cadillacs
en una noche de casino
en el alquiler de una suite en Cannes. (50-58)

The list of coffee plants, sugar cane and cotton re-affirm the poem's Latin American locale and its productivity ("cerezas rojas," "miel" and "nubes carnosas"). Unlike the development of the maids=fetuses, the fruits of these productive plants will come to fruition: not in their current environment nor form, however. For the actual (national) production is elided in order to list the possible destinations of the profit earned by the land's harvest: cars ("Cadillacs"), entertainment/games of chance for the wealthy (casinos), and relaxation/vacation (Cannes) (56-58).

As in the previous descriptive fragments, the I does not comment on this chain of events, instead she moves on to her next "meeting":

Me siento a las mesa de los intelectuales.
 "¿Qué haremos?" pregunto
 "se está cayendo el cielo."
 Sonríe el viejo radical.
 Hace veinte años lo predijo.
 "¿Y si fuera verdad?"
 pregunta el joven iracundo
 "¿qué haremos?"
 Con ademán ajustado
 al significado histórico
 saca su pluma
 y comienza a redactar sobre el mantel
 un manifiesto de intelectuales y artistas. (59-71)

Like at the meeting of government officials she attended earlier, at this meeting the male protagonists react in a stereotypical, unsurprising manner: in the earlier lines the bureaucrat fears for the national documents and the general calls for the use of firearms. In this case, the old radical, the male figure of authority, sure of his foresight and historical relevance does what he has customarily done, write. However, in contrast to the previous meeting, here the I aligns herself with her audience by asking "¿qué haremos?" and a member of the group, the angry young man, attempts to participate in the decision making. His question both repeats the poetic speaker's worry, what can be done?, and questions the old radical's wisdom, "¿Y si fuera verdad?" (64). But, regardless of these differences the resolution made does not allay the I's fears nor the young man's doubts.

Faced with these different rather indifferent reactions to her announcement, the poetic speaker retreats indoors, "Hace días no salgo," and admits that now everyone agrees that indeed the sky has not fallen:

El cielo no se cae.
 Los políticos lo han dicho
 los directores
 los generales
 hasta los mendigos lo afirman. (73-77)

In spite of her worries, the authorities, and even the beggars, have proven her wrong. There has not been a catastrophe and her surroundings, society, and sexual relations have remained the same:

Para cada señorito
 hay una criada encinta

manteniendo el equilibrio.
 Para cada señora gorda
 un tuberculoso que recoge algodón
 para cada político
 un ciego con bastón blanco.
 Todo es lícito. (78-85)

The poetic speaker's ironic tone is heard more clearly beginning with these verses in which she openly comments on her small homeland's conditions. One can read the current situation as one of "normalcy" and equilibrium: the image of the "donjuanes" of line 46 is transformed into a more specific figure, the "señorito," he who as heir can harass, and impregnate the maids, spend the family money and remain idle. Likewise, the "señora gorda" that earlier in the poem seemed connected to the "people," via contiguity, is here the recipient of the cotton worker's labor and finally the "gerente" of lines 25-30, is the generic politician in search of symbolic representations of charity and empathy. As she concludes, in this reality everything listed is just, "lícito" (85), whereas her fear of a falling sky is childish and inappropriate:

Mi pavor, infantil.
 La exhibición pública
 de la angustia
 hace daño a las gentes
 interfiere con el comercio
 amedrenta a los niños. (86-91)

Curiously, according to these lines, the result of the speaker's personal fear not only affects those who witness her "exhibición pública," but also her nation's economy and its children's well-being.

Thus, to atone for her actions her psychiatrist advises her to go to the market, to spend her money; and an added bonus is that this trip to the market and her brief contact with her poorer compatriots will grant her a feeling of perhaps misplaced compassion,

Mañana iré al mercado.
 Lo recetó el psiquiatra.
 Podré ofrecerle
 diez centavos a un mendigo
 y sentir compasión. (92-96)

The poetic I's well-founded fear, if one believes her and the old intellectual's prediction, is solved through medication (alluded to by the visit to a psychiatrist rather than a psychologist), consumerism (market shopping), and a little charity (ten cents in alms to a beggar). This woman, an intellectual of the bourgeoisie (she uses "we" when she addresses the old radical and his brood), is unable to bring about any transformation in her "pequeña patria" even when she (temporarily) convinces those with power of the threat of a falling sky.

The poetic speaker's self-identification with a folk character, Chicken Little, who overreacts, infects her friends with her needless worry (a falling acorn is not a falling sky) and leads them to the hungry fox who will eat them is telling. The poetic speaker converts her fear of a disaster into nothing more than a childish outburst that is easily allayed by aiding the beggars that she previously called astute (like the fox). In an interesting twist, the poetic speaker-Chicken Little's worries, which in the folk tale

lead to her demise, in “Pequeña patria,” are treated as mental illness. The poem as a retelling of “Chicken Little,” posits the I as a woman whose worries are neutralized via her integration into “male structures,” consumerism, and her treatment as a madwoman in the psychiatrist’s office (de Lauretis 89).

If the poem’s title is also understood as an allusion to “Chicken Little,” then it too becomes an anxiety-ridden entity that causes chaos, (for example, the troops must rush to hold up the sky), with its outlandish worries. The I’s “little” homeland functions as something that is less than important, that cannot protect itself nor bring about changes to its dreary condition as a “remolino de huérfanos pálidos” (2).

Thus, ultimately the desire for a shared space within the discourse of social change, of the Left in this case, remains unfulfilled. The poetic speaker as Chicken Little, like the Artisan in “Monólogo multiple” are unable to promote or activate concrete transformation nor speak for themselves nor their “puddles.” The Old Man’s affirmation in the monologue, “Dicen que el universo es casi nuestro,” as well as Chicken Little’s fervent belief in the truth of the falling sky, and therefore in an active listener, go unheeded as was the need for the construction of a New Woman that did not imitate the New Man.

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