

# The Poetics of Social Justice in Central America

## The Writing of Claribel Alegría

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EARLY LAST SUMMER, after being asked to present an informative paper on Claribel Alegría, the recipient of the 2006 Neustadt Prize, I was overcome with gratification.<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, gratification for Claribel, a most deserving choice for this honor, and second, for Alegría's native Central America, its magnanimous people, its vibrant culture, and its captivating history. Having first encountered Central American culture, literature, and history more than twenty-five years ago, I couldn't help but reflect on how much things have changed over the years, especially since my early days as a graduate student of Latin American literature, when Central America was frequently consigned to the status of a backwater, a region of interminable conflict whose literary production—with the exception of Nicaragua's Rubén Darío, one of the founding fathers of Spanish American literary modernism, and Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Nobel Prize winner from Guatemala—was lacking compared to other regions and the national literatures of Mexico, Cuba, and Argentina. Thanks to more recent attention to Central America by the North American scholars Sandra M. Boschetto-Sandoval, Marcia Phillips McGowan, John Beverly, Marc Zimmerman, and the Central American scholars Arturo Arias, Yvette Aparicio, and Beatriz Cortez, as well as publishers like Curbstone Press, Central America's wealth of cultural and literary production, which have always been a part of the isthmus, are now being appreciated on an international scale.<sup>2</sup> In the context of Central American art and literature, the work of Claribel Alegría is not only a testament to the cultural patrimony of the region and to her two native homelands, El Salvador and Nicaragua, but also an important contribution to the cause of social justice in the region.

Her being chosen as the recipient of the 2006 Neustadt Prize will help to ensure that her work, as well as the efforts of other Central American writers, will not be neglected and overlooked in the future.

### AN OUTSPOKEN VOICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA has been an active voice for her culture and people for more than five decades. Growing up as a writer in El Salvador during the 1940s, literary expression was all too often limited by the restrictions imposed by dictatorship. In spite of these conditions, Alegría remained steadfast in her commitment to the possibility of a politically more open society that recognized the need for economic and social justice. In the contemporary United States, where the very role of literature in our society is significantly different, we are not generally accustomed to associating literature with commitment to social justice. By contrast, in the larger framework of Latin American artistic production, where themes that convey social concerns or the need for socioeconomic change are prevalent, the writing of Alegría acquires its resonance and can be situated as literature committed to these very changes.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the predominant political model in Central America has been authoritarian. Four of the republics of the isthmus—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua—were all too often ruled by dictators, “the flies” as the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda referred to them in his poem “United Fruit Company.” These authoritarian regimes stifled any political opposition and imposed a de facto kind of censorship on any writing they perceived as threatening

to or critical of the status quo. In conditions such as these, literary expression often occupies an alternate space, a space where that which is prohibited can be recast and alluded to allegorically or through symbols. In this way, literature or literary discourse—in particular the fictionalization of the historical—is a powerful literary instrument that has been used as a tool to raise the level of awareness of a public often deprived of information about important national events. In her narrative fiction, Alegría's use of the historical record is often used to foreground seminal events of the region's history that have been subjected to historical erasure or deletion.

### RECOVERING THE PAST: *ASHES OF IZALCO*

WITH THE PUBLICATION of her novel *Ashes of Izalco* in 1966, Alegría draws upon a particular historical period in El Salvador to depict a society layered with injustices and a fundamental lack of self-understanding. Through her treatment of the oligarchy and the popular sectors of El Salvador in the 1920s and 1930s, Alegría is able to offer a voice to those who never possessed one in a critical sense. This novel, however, is not limited to social commitment; it is also an important text in that it advances a narrative aesthetic that will influence other writers. In the words of the eminent Central American scholar Arturo Arias, "This text opened the way for a transition in narrative mode and led towards the creation of a new Central American novel" (38).

Alegría's novel *Ashes for Izalco* addresses a fundamental issue that is central to our historical understanding of a region and its culture. I refer to the process of memory, specifically historical memory. And even though memory of defining national events is essentially collective or shared, it can be fragile and subject to ellipsis or selective erasure by journalistic or historiographic controls from above that shape its depiction and could even question its veracity. The Latin American historical record is replete with such incidents, many of which have served to inspire some of the region's most renowned writers. This tendency of collective forgetting or amnesia that can afflict a nation regarding a particular historical event is masterfully depicted in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. An oft-cited example of the way a literary text approaches such a lapse can be seen in the horrendous massacre of peaceful protesters in García Márquez's fictionalized town of Macondo, which in reality alludes to the actual massacre that took place on the north coast of Colombia in the 1920s. It should be noted that Alegría's novel *Ashes for*

*Izalco*, published a year before García Márquez's novel, resurrects the memory of a forgotten massacre in El Salvador in 1932. In Alegría's own words, "[The dictator] Martínez ordered all the newspapers of the epoch to be burned, and nobody dared to write about that chilling event. It seemed as if the Salvadoran people had suffered a collective lobotomy. Nobody remembered the horror" (Ruffinelli 5). The central events for the novel are found in the eruption of the Izalco volcano in 1932 and the *matanza*, or massacre, of the same year, both of which scar the collective consciousness of the nation. The novel is framed around the recovery of a diary, which in turn allows for the retrieval of a buried collective memory, allowing for the personal (the diary) to transect with the national (the event) and to allow for a historical reconstruction of the forgotten event. Alegría's ability to retrieve and analyze its impact on Salvadoran society in the twentieth century is central to her work.

In the depiction of the savagery unleashed by the dictator Hernandez Martinez and the massacre of thousands of peasants and trade-union workers in El Salvador in 1932, *Ashes for Izalco* reveals to us the origins of a perpetuating system of social injustice that is to culminate later in the mobilization of a popular movement (the FMLN) that crystallizes some fifty years later in the 1980s. In this regard, Alegría's work can be seen as a precursor or, as Marc Zimmerman asserts, "one of the essential forgers of the system" (222), that is to say a Central American woman writer whose groundbreaking regional narrative precedes and anticipates the coalescence of a national popular movement, which, in the Central American context, articulates the urgent need for social equality and justice.

### WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE TESTIMONIAL

ALEGRÍA'S MORE RECENT WORK *They Won't Take Me Alive* is, in essence, a testimonial account of the revolutionary struggle in El Salvador in the 1980s. Similar to the transcriptions by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray of the Rigoberta Menchú testimonial *I Rigoberta Menchú*, Alegría's *They Won't Take Me Alive*, published in 1987, is a unique contribution to the corpus of Central American testimonial narratives. In the words of Illeana Rodríguez, Alegría's work is "fundamentally a women's collective, and . . . the intention is to make these women visible, to give them voice, to place them in the theatre of history and to incorporate them into history through the incorporation of their actions and voice" (50).

The construction of Eugenia, the female protagonist of the work, is achieved by Alegría through a series of interviews with her family. This retrospective testimonial of Eugenia's struggle and that of other courageous Salvadoran women appeals to the necessity for change on two fronts: a fundamental shift in gender relations as well as the need for the integration of reforms for women within the broader context of revolutionary goals in El Salvador. It is in this text that Alegría reveals the feminine presence as an anchoring point in the larger revolutionary project. However, the work is not limited to a call for gender reform; much of the work documents accounts of the human cost of violence that envelops El Salvador in the 1980s. Alegría's description of the fallen serve to "humanize" or put a real face on the anonymity and incomprehensibility of the casualty figures (approximately seventy thousand killed in the 1980s) that the conflict in El Salvador produces. Of equal importance is the accomplishment that affirms Alegría's commitment to social justice—namely, that a representation of Eugenia's voice be allowed to resonate in a society in which the marginalized voice had traditionally been silenced, and that her voice and vision be integrated onto the stage of history where it had always been silenced or absent.

## THE POETICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

IN MANY WAYS, Alegría's numerous poetry collections mirror the commitment to social justice we find in her novels, the exception being that she is able to isolate certain motifs in a more compact economized form. While many of the poems in her collection *Women of the River*, published in 1989, coincide thematically with her narrative, here she is able to focus more precisely on Central American women's identity within her culture and its relation to equality in a larger sense. Two of her better-known poems from this collection, "Documentary" and "From the Bridge," clearly exemplify this process. Alegría's retrospective poem "From the Bridge" traces autobiographically her evolution from a position of observation and inaction to a progressively more disillusioned state of awareness on the cusp of full commitment to revolutionary social change. The poetic voice captures the stages of her evolution as she hides from reality in her deluded engagement with the world of texts: "You've taken another step, you wear your hair short, have textbooks under your arm. Poor deluded thing, you learned the consolations of philosophy, before understanding why you had to be consoled, your books spoke to you, of justice, and carefully omitted the filth that has always

surrounded us" (49). The use of the lyrical in this poem is fundamental; it allows for the autobiographical depiction of Alegría's evolution as a socially committed writer at the same time we witness the poetic as a denunciatory mode that reveals the injustice and inequality that remain unaddressed in her society.

In a similar vein, the poem "Documentary" from the same collection uses the metaphor of the zoom lens of the documentary camera as a means of focusing in on the underlying, often unseen, reality of El Salvador. Here again, in her indictment of the devastating effects of choosing to create an economic system and society grounded in monoculture, the implicit message of the poem foregrounds Alegría's uncompromising commitment to social justice and reform. Upon reading "Documentary," we discover that central component (and culprit) of this underlying reality is coffee, the same crop whose ascendancy in the nineteenth century precipitates the land-tenure inequities that serve as the catalyst for the peasant uprising and subsequent massacre in 1932. In "Documentary," the poetic voice underscores the multiple layers of influence that coffee wields; it casts a wide net of suffering upon those whose burden it is to harvest it, drowning out their efforts to acquire an alternate mode of subsistence, and ultimately plunging them into spirals of poverty, marginalization, and political disenfranchisement. "The golden coffee sparkles with malaria, blood, illiteracy, tuberculosis, misery. A truck roars out of the warehouse. It bellows uphill drowning out the lesson: A for alcoholism—B for battalions—C for Corruption—D for Dictatorship—E for exploitation—F for feudal power" (Alegría 63). Here the power of the indictment of the Salvadoran agricultural model is paralleled by Alegría's emotional and maternal attachment to her land—"my wounded country, my child, my tears, my obsession" (63)—and the implication that the learning process (i.e., El Salvador learning about its history and itself) is sure to be long but must continue.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate my warmest congratulations to Claribel Alegría, to her poetic voice and all those who have inspired it, and to those who have been moved by and embraced her strength and commitment. As we have observed, a unique feature of Alegría's work is the constancy of commitment and the multiple ways she succeeds in integrating her concerns for social justice into the different genres reflected in her work. In acknowledging the time and effort the Neustadt Prize's selection committee invested in making this appropriate choice for this most prestigious award, one

can only conclude that Alegría's commitment to social justice, deeply embedded at the ethical core of her poetics, was a primary rationale for awarding her the 2006 Neustadt Prize.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholarship devoted to Central American literature and culture has proliferated in recent years, and publication of its growing number of writers is also expanding, in part due to the efforts of Curbstone Press. Several recently published studies on Central American literature have shed new light on the multifaceted literary production of the region. The new study by Arturo Arias, *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), provides a comprehensive, analytical commentary on continuity and innovation in Central American literature. Also, John Beverley has contributed to a greater understanding of the "testimonial narrative" in Central America with the publication of his study *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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