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***Toxic Loves, Impossible Futures: Feminist Living as Resistance* by Irmgard Emmelhainz  
(review)**

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**Irmgard Emmelhainz, *Toxic Loves, Impossible Futures: Feminist Living as Resistance*. Nashville TN: Vanderbilt UP, 2022. 186 pp. ISBN 9780-8265-0244-5**

*Toxic Loves* lays out some bewildering complicities that face privileged literates. Within the critique of neoliberal capitalism that will be familiar to specialists, Emmelhainz adds feminist twists, including a genealogy of women thinkers presented informally, in the loose organization of a series of first-person essays. While the explicit thesis aligning the pieces argues that things are not going well on the planet in general, an implicit message is that for Emmelhainz in particular things could certainly be a lot worse. The feminist gesture of speaking frankly about her sex life, parenting challenges, and foibles make the essays an intimate read. Emmelhainz complements this day-to-day feminism with learned attention to select older women. In particular, she admires Elena Poniatowska, a posture that surprises me for its unalloyed fandom, given that historically Mexican women writers have not tended to gush about one another. Poniatowska shares with Emmelhainz the peculiar good fortune of white privilege and elevated social class within a grindingly merciless economic arrangement, and I suspect that the younger writer appreciates the older journalist's sincerity about the limits of her activism.

Take the clever citation that Emmelhainz digs up from the context of Poniatowska's interview with a formerly incarcerated Mexican guerrillera, Paquita Calvo Zapata. In Emmelhainz's quotation of Poniatowska's piece, the journalist writes about how convenient an interview at the former rebel's apartment might be, because of its location near an upscale department store, El Palacio de Hierro: "I thought: 'It's great because when I leave her home, I can pass by the store and see what I can find'" (40). This tangle of empathy with a rebel and conformity with the system is after my own heart. In fact, the contradiction perhaps comprises the heart of Emmelhainz's essays. If it sucks to be a woman, at least there's an individually functional but communally destructive escape, with shade and even air conditioning. As much as critics hate to admit it, there aren't a lot of good choices for women of a certain education level and ambition who reject the capitalist system and prefer to live in places like Mexico City. The survivors among them, the ones who don't wind up broke, in jail, or disappeared, opt for compromise, which leaves them self-knowingly contemplative of shopping the sales.

In another of these feminist citations, Emmelhainz thinks about Guadalupe Loaeza, without the usual easy rejection of Loaeza's satirical alliance with the sort of well-heeled women who visit El Palacio de Hierro. Emmelhainz writes about the timeliness of Loaeza's contribution first published in newspapers columns and later books, beginning in the 1980s, and Emmelhainz has the solidarity to evaluate the writing in terms of the historical moment it catches: "It doesn't go without saying that the hermetic Mexican bourgeoisies could only be narrated from the inside at the moment in which it was about to collapse. Loaeza's book is an inventory of customs as habits, social rituals, of the minutia of a certain class consciousness, their values, but also of the restrictions under which rich women had lived" (35-36). Solidarity with those who deeply observe "hermetic Mexican bourgeoisies" is not the usual overt stance for critics of neoliberalism, of course. This twist of alliances in *Toxic Loves* strikes me as refreshing.

Indeed, a sincere critic of neoliberalism who dares to acknowledge imbrication within the worst aspects of the arrangement surely winds up with a thesis problem, which I think Emmelhainz works to keep at bay by noting the complexities of feminist struggles. She strikes a conciliatory pose in a meditation on canceling men accused of (heterosexual) harassment; like Marta Lamas's book on harassment, Emmelhainz's text seems reluctant to advocate for strict punishments, here linking "cancellation" with "public lynching" (63). Yet, her vocabulary remains edgy, by including

such jargon as “daily micro-misogynies,” surely inspired by the Spanish-language term applied by Luis Bonino, *micro-machismos*. Emmelhainz examines these micro-misogynies in terms of a nakedly described personal life, revealing the agonies of, for instance, interacting with sexist men as romantic partners and teachers before entering a same-sex partnership that has her worried about discriminatory treatment of her daughter at the latter’s potential schools.

If dislike of the system holds the essays together, complicity with that system holds the topics carefully apart. This is not to say that Emmelhainz ignores her racial and class privilege; she nods toward her positionality in such acts as citing the anti-racist feminist Indigenous scholar Yásnaya Elena A. Gil (81, 84). Still, Emmelhainz never quite takes on to my satisfaction the disjunction between her personal privilege as revealed, but not especially examined, in the essays and the rightly enraged, detailed critique of the status quo that overtly unites the essays. I don’t know what a reader who doesn’t know Mexico (City) as well as I do will make of this book. I have found myself citing it repeatedly.

For insiders and novices, I’ll conclude with the one sign of privilege that I simply cannot let pass: Emmelhainz enjoys, as explained in repeated details, access to a private car, though not a driver. Emmelhainz struggles with (economic) balance among the pressures to fund her own writing time, maintain her precarious teaching employment, and fulfill her caretaking duties for a small daughter. The car is the engine that keeps humming in the background of these self-aware complaints about the system that fails her. In theory, getting out of the car would constitute a first step in the project of dismantling another larger engine, the latter described in the essay “To Dismantle the Engine” (150-157). In a telling episode as far as the half-articulated critique of car culture goes, Emmelhainz’s dog is threatened by a vehicle while they cross the street, and a pedestrian comes to her defense against the car driver (43-44). In another memorable car scene, Emmelhainz hands her daughter a plastic bag for the purposes of diarrhea evacuation while still driving them both on the highway, because she is afraid to stop, and in fact, it seems she never pulls over even while cleaning up (95). In a remarkably honest anecdote, Emmelhainz confesses that she hit a car while backing out of her driveway and failed to report it (114).

I want to caution my reader that I am *not* suggesting, at least not in the first place, that Emmelhainz give up the car. I am pointing out one way to get at the reason I find these essays slightly disjointed. The challenge of continuing a life of relative privilege while knowing that this privilege contributes directly to the problem does not lead to the conclusion that women in Mexico should simply abandon that privilege, because the public exercise of wealth helps to ensure their personal safety, a woman’s very visibility—against risk of disappearance and death. I don’t want to see Emmelhainz crash and burn. Without reservation, I appreciate the contradiction at the heart of *Toxic Loves* critique. Who can disagree with a critic who writes about revolutionary struggles and “their blindness toward heteropatriarchy and their current obsolescence under renewed extractivist neofeudalist forces” (30)? Emmelhainz already studied the paths for rebel women—so many women and so few paths—that in the historical cases we remember, at least, led all too reliably to personal misery.

As Emmelhainz is to Poniatowska, I am to Emmelhainz *and* Poniatowska, and I will read every installment Emmelhainz writes on this journey of atonement for what cannot be renounced safely. I recommend that others keep up with this evolution as well. Don’t crash, Emmelhainz. Keep writing, somehow.

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