

MARTINEZ, CARLOS, MICHAEL FOX and JOJO FARRELL.
Venezuela Speaks! Voices from the Grassroots. Oakland, CA: PM
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In Venezuela's current Bolivarian Revolution, the Chavez government celebrates the participation of Venezuelan citizens in popular grassroots movements as one of the great accomplishments of the administration. Yet, while many citizens participate in popular movements to improve their communities and to redefine national identity, democracy and education, it is difficult to understand what is happening at the grassroots level. *Venezuela Speaks! Voices from the Grassroots*, a collection of grassroots testimonies, offers contemporary personal accounts from the grassroots community, shedding light on the less researched topic of the revolution-within-the-revolution in Venezuela. While the government celebrates civil advancements towards "twenty-first century socialism" in contemporary Venezuela, every day experiences do not always reflect the government's vision. The ironic disconnect between official discourse and daily realities is summed up by community activist Yanahir Reyes's testimony that, "we are in a revolution yet the shopping malls are full" (81).

In spite of the government's financial support and praise for community grassroots movements that encourage participation and popular initiatives, the community leaders' testimonies show a healthy skepticism for the government. Those giving the testimonies also explain the history of Venezuelan activism that predates the Chavez Administration's inception. This extensive and often overlooked history of popular activism is crucial to understanding the grassroots community's role in contemporary Venezuela and in highlighting the communities' agency.

The book refuses a simple reading of the current political and popular changes in Venezuela. Instead, it offers eighteen first-person testimonies, which are divided into seven themes: Land and Housing Reform; Women and Sexual Diversity Movements; Workers and Labor; Community Media, Arts, and Culture; Indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan Movements; the Student Movement; and Community Organizing. The interviewees, who range from supportive to critical of the Chavez government, are all involved in community and grassroots organizations and share an interest in strengthening their community and fostering participation in governance. The participants in the

community organizations work with the government; however, as their testimonies show, some are also critical of the bureaucracy that persists within the Chavez government. Many of those interviewed point out Chavismo's weaknesses from the inside, and they hope to learn from these weaknesses rather than overlook them. In the case of Yanahir Reyes and her account of the civil association *Primeros Pasos Mujeres* (Women's First Steps), she explains that while the Ministry of Education refused to fund the association's alternative education program, another organization from within the Ministry subsequently agreed to fund the popular project (88). This example highlights one of the many inconsistencies that community organizers face when interacting with the Venezuelan state and the new public policies that foster popular participation.

This eclectic collection of testimonies clearly challenges the oversimplified interpretations of popular movements in Venezuela. It also complicates a Venezuelan reality that the mainstream media often trivializes with its exclusive focus on Chavez. While the powerful mainstream media in Venezuela has played a key role in opposing the current administration, many of the testimonies discuss the rise of community media that questions and contests the mainstream media's portrayal of reality. Nearly half of the testimonies touch on the role of the alternative media as a key component in the grassroots movements in Venezuela. Although it is now supported by the current government and has grown stronger in the past seven years, the alternative media in Venezuela dates back to the 1980s and has served as a form of organization, and as a source of education and communication. The testimony on the radio collective *Radio Libertad* (Freedom Radio) reveals that as of 2002 many of these alternative media sources have now organized under the National Association of Free and Alternative Community Media to support each other and to maintain their autonomy, two conditions key to a democracy and to a participatory political process (179).

While the book presents a broad range of testimonies from the intricate Venezuelan mosaic of community organizers—from student activists to leaders of women and sexual diversity movements—its historical introduction, and glossary make the book accessible to a wide audience. The authors include an introduction to contemporary Venezuelan politics and an abridged history of Venezuela from the early Republic to the present day to orient its readers to the nation's

complicated and changing history. To further clarify specific Spanish terms, names of Venezuelan grassroots movements, and the names and histories of government agencies, the authors include two concise glossaries that help organize this body of knowledge.

The first-person accounts openly and expressively criticize and expose the inefficiency, corruption, and disorganization, as well as the hope and enthusiasm happening as a result of Venezuela's current societal changes. Yet, the reader does not have access to the interviewer's role in the interview process or where the interviewer's voice ends and the interviewee's voice begins. Instead, these interviews are more a hybrid testimony genre that moves toward collaborative authorship mixing the voices of the interviewer with the interviewee while leaving unanswered questions on the interview process. The authors fail to explain their methodology in these interviews, how they were conducted, what language was used, and how the participants were selected. While this information can at times be tedious, it is important to give both authority and transparency to the work and the voices it represents.

Another point to consider is the authors' decision to publish in English instead of Spanish. While readers in Spanish are inundated with messages in support of and against the current Venezuelan government, I have yet to see a similar collection of first-person accounts from such a diverse cross-section of Venezuelan grassroots organizers in Spanish or in English. There is clearly a need for a Spanish language version of this book, and I hope that the authors will consider publishing this book in Spanish to foster a dialogue and share these valuable histories of popular power, struggles, challenges, and organizing.

This book will prove valuable to those interested in understanding Venezuelan popular movements, their current connections to the state, and the contemporary use of testimony. While they are accessible to a wide audience, the testimonies also have a great deal to offer to even the most-well read specialists on Venezuela. This book represents an important step towards recognizing the diversity of voices among the grassroots movements in Venezuela today.

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