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978-1-107-08532-9 - The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature

Ileana Rodríguez and Mónica Szurmuk

Excerpt

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Introduction: Light and Proud and Fervent, Like a Flag Fulfilled in the Wind

ILEANA RODRÍGUEZ AND MÓNICA SZURMUK

Porque la mujer [Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda] era hermosa, de grande estatura, de esculturales contornos, de bien modelados brazos y de airosa cabeza, coronada de castaños y abundantes rizos. . . : Era una mujer; pero lo era sin duda por un error de la naturaleza, que había metido por distracción una alma de hombre en aquella envoltura de carne femenina. José Zorrilla, *Recuerdos del tiempo viejo*, 382–383.

[Because the woman (Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda) was beautiful, tall, of statuesque contours, shapely arms, and graceful, framed by abundant brown ringlets. . . : She was a woman, but only because, in a moment of distraction, Nature had clothed the soul of a man in female flesh.]

In the mid-nineteenth century, long before Queer Studies unraveled the field of Latin American literature, José Zorrilla described something momentous: a woman who is truly a man, a lapsed appearance of a male soul enveloped in a woman's body. His impaled perception of gender plays him a trick and leaves him in awe of what he affirms is an error of nature. When we undertook the project of editing the *Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*, we did not expect surprises like the one quoted here. However, as contributions began pouring in, the variety of approaches far exceeded our expectations. What we are presenting now is a huge inventory of proposals that express the joy of examining women's place in the literary space, and of constructing and engrossing the archive. We put forth a diversity of gazes that attest to the ingenuity of women across continents, the inventiveness of genres, the reach and dare of transatlantic connections, the spread of women's qualities of writing, the force and might of their steady entrance into the flesh of the earth in order to make public their plight and to publicize their nerve.

This description is far from an exaggeration. Our volume puts culture on notice and covers with increasing, unwavering, and steady determination all areas of world affairs, from the tiny spaces allocated to the giant tasks of

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maternity to the production of decisive venues of publication; from the intimacy of home and the pleasures of the flesh to journalism, political activism, and worldwide pedagogy in a network that renders a firm testimony of a new mode of being in the world, and a wide gamut of adamant resolutions of selves that are eager to make their mark on it. The studies included here leave an imprint of gender that begins with the recognition of genuflections, and ends in the projection of the infinite universe of possibilities offered by revelation, revolution, and the overall umph of being on the social, the cultural, and the political stage. Women of all social classes, ethnic backgrounds, professions, and ages move to the fore to make explicit their power in all kinds of fora and podiums, whispering or moaning, yelling and shouting, reasoning or loving; they make their presence felt through the obdurate effort of a group of cultural critics who relentlessly search their genealogies, to make them available to a larger audience through this publication. We are still perplexed. How could so much talent be made to disappear so easily into the folds of male concealment? How could such excellence have been left to hover at the margins?

While faithfully complying with the mandate to write original and wide-encompassing chapters, our contributors have produced very different pieces. The bibliographies are undoubtedly the result of groundbreaking research; the approaches are novel. Differences in style and rhetorical strategies underscore the interpretation of a mandate to contribute to the *Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*. How to approach the subject, what to say and how, whom to include, what topics are the most relevant are challenges met in different ways in these chapters. As editors we are more than pleased with the range of approaches, topics, and authors included. The critics themselves have established the parameters of the thematics and limits of the problematics at hand. In this Introduction, we outline the wellspring of initiatives, fields of knowledge, and rhetorical performances of the contributors as well as the figures that are angular in the pantheon of women writers.

There are many different styles of writing in the *Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*. Some of the contributors first constructed a map of authors with their respective salient traits and contributions, and their regional locations. Others wove their quest within the fabric of women's writings into witty essays that open up areas of examination well beyond Latin America. Some extricated themselves from a hardened placenta and organized their works around a topic in which all the literary women partook; yet some others chose to highlight the regional, continental, and even transcontinental position of women writers or to focus on the problematic of the indigenous to let solidarity prevail. What we have here is the filling up of

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gaps, and the suturing of wounds left by neglect and oblivion. The number of women-authored texts is phenomenal; women's contributions, outstanding; their performance, excellent. It is hard to believe that they were washed off, postponed, demeaned, debased, ignored, bypassed. This erasure reveals deafness, blindness, and fear. Therefore, this volume unveils the wealth of women's writings in different centuries and situates them in their different manners of being, living, writing styles, and overall participation in history, society, and the republic of letters, wisdom and knowledge.

What is significant about these different approaches to the subject is that they add several important perspectives and angles to the history of literature itself, to the context in which the works were written, as well as to the relevant topics of yesterday and of today alongside the positioning of the contributors to the text. It is unquestionable that the national and regional traditions press certain issues and approaches, some more bound to the political in traditional terms speaking about social justice and injustice; some more modern, playful, and witty, turning politics into a theater of the absurd or underscoring the cruelty of modernity and the indifference of postmodernity. We include novel examinations of marketing structures, and of the hopeful entrance of the previously neglected into lettered culture. Very provocative is the need to highlight the south-south dialogue as well as the bridge between the Americas and transworldism.

The chapters of this book can be grouped together under the following nomenclatures: (1) very informative essays that provide novel information acquainting the reader with a whole battery of women writers not previously mentioned by any history of culture, totally ignored by the archive. These essays thus provide us with an unedited feminist view of cultural history and a theory of genres that expand upon well-trodden ones. The texture of these chapters is a fine-tuning of the intervention of women writers in history and their participation in all kinds of cultural and social affairs since the colonization of Latin America and beyond. (2) Very well argued pieces in which ideas like modernity, cosmopolitanism, the global and local, the peripheral and centric are deployed so that we can see the arch of their distribution through time and the deaf dialogue between systematizers of the center, and of the periphery as well as male versus female considerations of the questions at hand. (3) Very inventive pieces that chart the roots and the routes of consciousness informed by a feminist point of view that looks at the world otherwise. Proposing alternative meanings to old concepts such as sense and sensibility, transoceanic localizations, criminality, inheritance, and sexuality, these pieces turn our heads around with a new twist.

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Ambitious in geographical and spatial terms, *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature* explores the lettered production of women from the ancient indigenous worlds up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is organized chronologically, but it is much more than a list of periods, names, and topics, and much more than a series of chapters on individual writers, genres, and movements. It is a book that thinks over the relationships among literacy, the literary, and literature; it reconsiders the historical articulation between oral and written worlds, accounts for the key role of women in inventing new genres, and in creatively engaging in the social and political spheres from the ancient indigenous worlds to the present. While it is a book that can be read from cover to cover, students and scholars can also use it as a resource for specific information on an author or topic. We envisioned it as both a readable narrative and a reliable conceptual reference source. Its treatment of a drastically changing literary canon is both sophisticated and sensitive. We hope readers will value its narrativity as well as the wealth of original information it offers, and that they will share our delight in the depth and creativity of our contributors and in the commitment of the hundreds of women on whose words this volume is built.

The volume is divided into four parts: I, Women in Ancient America: The Indigenous World; II, Women Writers in Creole Societies: Nation Building Projects; III, Women Writers In-Between: Socialist, Modern, Developmentalists, and Liberal Democratic Ideals; IV, Women Writers in a One World Global System: Neoliberalism, Sexuality, Subjectivity. These rubrics cover the field as amply as possible and allow the contributors to provide the specificities for each case. Part I encompasses the indigenous worlds, the confrontations between peoples of the Iberian Peninsula and American indigenous empires – Aztec, Maya, Inca, and Aymara. The second part corresponds to the disengagement from empire and the newly imagined independent world known as nation building, when Creole or local-born Spanish descendants struggled for their independence; Part III describes the struggle between social and socialist liberations and modern, developmentalist, and liberal democratic ideas; and the fourth part corresponds to the aftermath, in which liberal capitalism as a one world system establishes the era of globalization and neoliberalism with its effects on the population, and on the written word.

Our list of contributions presents a developed map of the field, and the prominent place women occupy in it. It underscores major salient points. The field is very large and serious academic studies on women's literature very abundant. We move within and away from romanticized roles assigned to

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women toward more historically accurate imaginaries. Our trajectory begins with the original societies, moves through the colonial and the national, and into the postcolonial. There is no enigma left unteased, as there is no relevant issue kept out of focus. The consolidation of epoch-making imaginaries is highlighted, but so are the dilemmas that cause rifts, fractures, and ruptures. The volume visits issues critical to the plotting of the continent, ranging from domination and sovereignty, to natives and citizens, nationalism, national security and official imaginings, gendering ethnicities and populations, all viewed from the catalyzing, organizing, and transcending power of literature. The point is to offer indispensable access to Latin American women's literature in an all-encompassing volume that rethinks the field by reorganizing its totality in a scenario whose unfolding greatly partakes in the social unraveling of the continent.

In summary, the principles behind *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature* are (a) the articulation of chronology, space, and place; (b) the heavy contextualization and thematic and topical structure; (c) the organization into categories and groupings that are highly debated and debatable; (d) the historicization of "Latin America" rather than of "Spanish" literature. Thus, *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature* tracks the time line that runs from one writer to the next in close proximity to regional emphasis. It focuses on women who write in different languages – prominently Spanish and Portuguese, but also English, French, Creole, and indigenous languages, or in a mixture thereof. *The Cambridge History* does not attempt to cover all the written tradition in these diverse languages, but it recognizes the intersections with other traditions and considers the literature written inside, as well as outside the continent, in exile, or by expatriates, and the borders crossed by them – for instance, that literature that is Mexican or Puerto Rican or Nicaraguan in its origins becomes Latino/a in the United States, or Sudaca in Spain. It recognizes the fluidity and shifting definitions of languages and linguistic communities in the region over the centuries.

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PART I

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WOMEN IN ANCIENT AMERICA:
THE INDIGENOUS WORLD

¿Qué loca ambición nos lleva
de nosotros olvidados?
Si es para vivir tan poco,
¿de qué sirve saber tanto?
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 8

[What mad ambition drives us / To forget ourselves, to our grief? / What
use is all our learning, / When human life is so brief?]

While most literary histories of Latin America literature start with the Spanish and Portuguese conquests, we appeal to the innovative work of feminist scholars who have reached into archival materials in order to reconstruct women's cultural participation before and immediately after colonization. In order to do so, we nuance the concept of the literary in order to give a more comprehensive and attentive account of how ideas about literacy and orality have developed. Joanne Rappaport, for instance, argues that literacy in colonial Latin America can be conceptualized as the intersection of European and indigenous alphabetic, visual, and performative strategies. The written word is thus embedded in a broader constellation of writings – legal, religious, political – that produces a particular type of “papereality,” a propensity for writing that creates lived worlds. Key to this idea is the fact that socioracial classification emerges out of literate conventions and legal and visual genres. The literary is very much tied to orality, historical memory, and European literate conventions, such as alphabetic writing and narrative pictorial representation. It cannot be ignored, as scholars such as Elizabeth Hill Boone and

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PART I

Walter Mignolo have shown, that books in ancient indigenous societies were written not with words but with images and woven in knotted strings.

New theories of *mestizaje* put forth by the continent's indigenous scholars, as well as by decolonial theorists, including Rolena Adorno, Silvia Rivera-Cusicanqui, and Sara Castro-Klaren, define new visions of the exchanges among European, metropolitan, and indigenous cultures. The point of departure is the confrontation between the indigenous and the European world, marked by the European-white-male hegemony over the indigenous. To recognize the *mestiza* voices problematizes such a paradigm. *Mestizaje* thus is not simply a biological or phenotypical concept related to skin color. It also defines the work of white-skinned women already mesticized, women whose contesting and realistic spirit jeopardizes the dominant paradigm. The classical case of *mestiza* writing is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's, but there are other women in diverse religious orders who have recently been the object of study including the daughters of powerful indigenous people who were serving at convents in Mexico, Peru, and Chile. Among distinguished *mestiza* women we find Micaela Bastidas, La Perricholi, and Manuela Sanz. There are also diverse instances of distinguished military women, winners of many battles, whose genealogy is traced to Catalina de Erauso, known as la Monja Alférez.

The five articles that make up this section highlight the following themes: (1) archives and the place of women in them; (2) the double inscription of women as *doñas* and *ñustas*; (3) varieties of genres explored by women; (4) and lettered women. The exploration, examination, and interrogation of archives run throughout the volume as an examination of the presence and absence of women in them, and of the construction of alternative archives. One very attractive example of how women establish their presence in archives is Santa Arias's representation of the continents in *Theatrum Orvis Terrarum*, in which America is a woman warrior; it is a manlike woman or a masculine woman signaled by the arrow in one hand and the head of a bearded man in the other. A helmet-like structure in her head and Medusa-like hair position her squarely within combat zones; her posture at ease conveys the feeling of a well-practiced métier. Arias calls this representation hybrid because it partakes of the Greek mythological *topoi* and the figure of the Amazon. Taking a leap to the twenty-first century, in more recent queer bibliographies, manliness in the representation of women introduces into the discussion transvestism as a concept that destabilizes gender – are these men in women's garb in the *Theatrum Orvis Terrarum*?

Santa Arias's chapter provides an overview of the range and nature of alphabetic archival documentary sources. In these sources, one can find the pieces to reconstruct a more inclusive, accurate narrative of the cultural manifestations

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Women in Ancient America

and experience of indigenous societies, specifically by highlighting the role of women before the arrival of Europeans. This overview examines the range of newly identified “archives” where writers and scholars can find the bodies, voices, life ways, and sentiments of indigenous women. These include graphic indigenous texts (such as hieroglyphs and *quipus*); indigenous oral traditions and myths, music and performance; visual representations (such as murals and pictographs); archaeological excavations; and especially material artifacts (such as weavings, ceramics, household and agricultural implements).

In her chapter “*Mulieres Litterarum*: Oral, Visual, and Written Narratives of Indigenous Elite Women,” Rocío Quispe-Agnoli introduces the reader to several noble indigenous women including Inés Huaylas, Angelina Yupanqui, Beatriz Clara Coya, Micaela Bastidas, and María Joaquina Uchu Túpac Yupanqui, who weave together their Quechua titles of nobility (Coya, Ñusta), with their Spanish designation of *señoras naturales* (local noblewomen) and Doña (Lady). That they were entitled to their former rights and privileges precipitated their writing, a by-product of which is the constitution of an alternative archive. Either as Coya, Ñusta, or Doña these *Mulieres litterarum* (women of letters) interacted with the written word by listening, reading, writing, dictating, and signing. They accessed public discourse (legal-judicial petitions, claims of rights, history, heraldry, emblems), multiple genres (epistles, books, records, accounts), and varying writing styles (alphabetic, pictographic, oral, and musical writings) to intertwine the private and domestic to the public, and the indigenous to the Spanish traditions. Their use of the first person, “I,” is a sign that they were litigating their own ontological place. Their texts constitute an autoethnography but also a place where economy blends with tradition, and the Incas’ exchange of women to firm up power alliances is welded to the Spanish tradition of using legal writings to claim a legitimate place and retain noble status and rights.

If *coyas* and *ñustas* who became *doñas* are paradigmatic examples of a society in movement, the figures of interpreters, such as Malinche, or Malintzin, the indigenous woman who played a crucial role in the conquest of Mexico serving primarily and foremost as one of the translators of Hernán Cortés, alongside religious women such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Mexico, become important archaeological points to explore. Malintzin and Sor Juana are paradigmatic, powerful, influential figures engraved in stone, and Mónica Díaz puts the reader on notice as to how their representation exposes competing bibliographies, traditions, and interpretations. For instance, the mode of presence of Malintzin in the Spanish chronicles and histories contrasts with who she turns out to be in the indigenous texts, the Florentine Codex, the Lienzo of Tlaxcala, and the Texas Fragment or Codex Tizatlán. Something similar happens with

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the nuns whose biographies or *vidas* written under strict church guidelines were inflected by the presence of spirits, of possessions, counterbalancing their posture in society, becoming visionaries, intermediaries, and mystics.

Our contributors ponder on how to disentangle archival materials and consolidated readings in order to highlight how women partook of the city of letters from the earliest times of the confrontation between Europe and America. The question, as Jean Franco has argued, is always, How are they plotted? Valeria Añón takes the cases of María de Bárcena, Isabel de Guevara, and Francisca Pizarro. Bárcena was accused of witchcraft and her writings offer her an opportunity to reflect on her accusations; de Guevara writes to Governess Princess Doña Juana about the Conquest of Río de la Plata, highlighting the role of women; and Pizarro dictates her last will and testament. These women make use of a variety of rhetorics, which Añón calls rhetoric of silence/silencing, rhetoric of request and claim, and rhetoric of deviation, which give rise to and firm up hybrid genres. The women treated by Quispe-Agnoli and Añón choose from among a broad selection of legal discourses, particularly *probanzas* and petitions but also letters, inquisitorial transcripts, and wills and testaments, which evidence reflection on the proximity of death, a privileged textual space for self-configuration. The letters, Añón argues, follow the rules of *captatio benevolentiae* and keep to the descriptive-argumentative discourse required of a report to the authorities; their intention was to communicate with family members and to ask for assistance. By recording their own gaze and lived experience, women chroniclers created new possibilities of enunciation among the controversial voices of the subaltern. Such *ars epistolandi* used mediators such as scribes and notary publics. Other women writers of noble lineage, such as Isabel Moctezuma and Francisca Pizarro, underscored a “presence-absence” type of rhetoric that reveals strategies similar to those of soldiers, Ladino translators, indigenous nobles: all of them subaltern voices that take advantage of every gap within the law of what can be said, in direct dialogue with the authorities.

At the very center of all these lettered women is the monumental Sor Juana introduced in elegant and precise prose by Beatriz Colombi as a figure: a *mulier docta*, wise, erudite, scholarly, and knowledgeable about science and law. Her epoch-making poetry underwrites the pleasant ordeal of womanhood. In Colombi's piece, the epoch, the writer, the woman come to life before our very eyes. It is the writer, the person who twirls and swirls around with intelligence in the folds of an image that is created and recreated from the meaning of being *docta*, to phoenix and bee, a woman who speaks Latin. Sor Juana is the apex of a woman writer. Without her there is no women's city of letters, no valid archive.