

Book Review

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Desde los márgenes a la centralidad. Escritoras en la historia literaria de América Central. Editado por Consuelo Meza Márquez y Magda Zavala. Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2019.

In 1979 Guatemalan feminist and poet Alaíde Foppa (disappeared in 1980) declared a new consciousness among women writers: “Ya no: ‘somos iguales, queremos ser iguales’, sino: ‘somos diferentes y nos gusta ser diferentes’” (31). It is this maturing sense of self-as-subject, opening a space in a “room of their own,” and at the same time connecting with other women, that guides the eleven contributors to *Desde los márgenes a la centralidad*. This massive volume (770 pp.) is the most complete project to date charting the history of the contributions of Central American women writers. While students of Latin American literature might recognize some of the “canonical” names included in this study—I use the word “canonical” advisedly, since women were largely invisible in the male-dominated field for centuries, dogged research has unearthed little-known writers of the past and has documented the explosion of women now writing in the twenty-first century. This wealth of information and critical insight will be indispensable for research libraries, feminist scholars, and students of Central American literature.

Desde los márgenes establishes a genealogy of women writers whose voices have created a counterdiscourse to patriarchy, commonly disguising their identities in pseudonyms to protect their reputations and their families, to escape the discrimination directed against female artistic production, and/or to be playful. Here their identities are revealed and given overdue attention. This project has been ten years in the making under the auspices of the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico. Its History of Women’s Literature in Central America program has prioritized rescuing from oblivion “los procesos literarios, géneros y escritoras borradas por la orientación patriarcal de índole occidental” (16) in literary studies. Given the unevenness and fragmentary condition of the field, much work had to be done to analyze the historical trajectory of women’s literature. To be sure, *Desde los márgenes* is more than lists. It incorporates many examples and analyses of verse and prose passages. This study fills a critical need.

Many of the contributors have explicitly stated that their approach to literary history will not be the traditional ones of generations or periodizations. They prefer instead to structure their articles around different topics such as genres or writers and their specialties, generally keeping to a chronological order within each category. Consuelo Meza Márquez credits indigenous and Garifuna foremothers with the earliest oral traditions and legends in Belize, then moves to specific genres to describe the importance of women in constructing the new nation through literature—poetry, drama, essay, short story, and novel—to contest space for gender, sexual, and ethnic identity. By the time Belize gained its independence from Great Britain in 1981, women had benefited from hard-fought gains by their sisters in the rest of Central America and the world.

Chapters on Costa Rica (Magda Zavala and María Bonilla), Honduras (Janet Gold), and Panama (María del Socorro Robayo Pérez and Enrique Jaramillo Levi) generally follow a chronological development by genre, giving special attention to women who show, as Zavala writes, “sensibilidad ante las búsquedas sociales de las mujeres con todas sus contradicciones, avances y retrocesos” (157). Zavala also recognizes the oral heritage of pre-Columbian women and points to the fact that her contemporaries are now working to “rescue” those voices as well as other precursors.

The chapter on El Salvador (Carmen González Huguet) includes more political history than the others and presents writers chronologically in perhaps the longest inventory of the book. González Huguet situates them in relation to oligarchy, coffee, dictatorship, violence, the Cold War, social organizations, and the Church. Her work has helped to remedy the “minimal corpus” of Salvadoran women writers that has existed to this day.

Helena Ramos writing on Nicaragua follows a chronological order as well, beginning in pre-Conquest days. Her contribution is notable for the ethnic and linguistic diversity it highlights: Garifuna, Miskito, and Creole women writing in English or Spanish and the presence of the “Nicaribe.” Her research has yielded other nuggets, such as the fact that two great grandmothers of poet Rubén Darío were poets—las Darío—but their work was never seriously regarded and has since been lost. There are interesting bits of gossip, too: Carmen Sobalvarro, poet lover of Augusto Sandino, was never appreciated for her work by male contemporaries but rather relegated to the role of Muse. Ramos underlines the valuable role of the Revolutionary poetry workshops in promoting women’s writing. More than any other chapter, this one packs in more information below the footnote line than above!

Particularly insightful are the contributions on Guatemala (Aída Toledo) and Honduras (Janet Gold, the only US critic among the contributors) and how women writers transgressed their boundaries, even in the days of the young republics. Toledo is especially interested in who has taken on crucial themes of emancipation and free thinking in a world dominated by men and how they managed to do so. Even the earliest women working in journalism, a field permitted to a select few, “dressed up” their pieces to pass male censure, she notes. This “travesía intelectual” (428) found its most important expression, according to Toledo, in the pivotal work of poet Ana María Rodas, *Poemas de la Izquierda*

Erótica (1973). Rodas deconstructs the traditional feminine subject in a new countercultural discourse. Most Guatemalan women writing since Rodas have had to negotiate her legacy and aesthetic.

Gold also discovers a more daring discourse of independence and denunciation in Honduras, developed over a century and a half, in a beautifully crafted essay organized around two metaphors: women's voices as a *tejido*, or weaving, and as constellations. The constellations include a diversity of historians, compilers, thinkers, storytellers, teachers, poets, writers of testimonials, song singer-composers, journalists, women's associations, librarians, and "las valientes"—the brave women, the most important of whom is undoubtedly poet Clementina Suárez, who because of her artistic experience is a member of several of Gold's constellations.

Following suit in Panama, María del Socorro Robayo Pérez studies poetry as a window to women's struggle for emancipation since the birth of the country in 1903. "Rompiendo paradigmas" (Breaking paradigms), Ana Isabel Illueca was the first Panamanian poet to call women to "wake up" to their subjugation. She and others in the second half of the twentieth century took on the canal, colonialism, machismo, and the US presence in their country, throwing out euphemism and embracing edgy, bold strategies to challenge the status quo. More "travesía lírica" (722).

Panama's best-known short story writer and only male contributor to *Desde los márgenes*, Enrique Jaramillo Levi fills out the rest of the chapter on short fiction writing by women in his native country (apparently, the woman charged with writing about Panama had to withdraw from the project for health reasons). His special contribution to this volume is his salute to the future. He states that more than 100 new voices have joined Panama's literary ranks since 2000, over half of whom are women. Jaramillo Levi then introduces three of the most promising voices with examples and analyses of their writing. Two of them have been students in his advanced creative writing classes and have added to the corpus of "good literature"—where content and aesthetic strategies complement each another, attuned to the most significant contradictions of the human condition, ultimately transfiguring the reader (752).

Desde los márgenes maps the possibilities into the future. While all the contributors express excitement about the proliferation of women writers, editors, and publishers in the new millennium, they also celebrate the diverse directions: experimenting, adopting new forms, playing with words, breaking old molds, reaching beyond the isthmus, engaging with global culture, unafraid to touch any subject. Much work still needs to be done, but this volume has provided a rich trove of discoveries, connections, and challenges for future research. As Helena Ramos writes in modest response to well-known traditionalist male critics who discount gender, class, and race as serious criteria for evaluating texts: "Aun así, la mera existencia de esta muy resumida *Historia*... denota un avance" (665). Women are banging their pots and pans and pens. Hear them roar!

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