

# Studies in Twentieth Century Literature

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Special Issue on Dynamics of Change in  
Latin American Literature:  
Contemporary Women Writers  
Guest Editor  
Adelaida López de Martínez

Introduction

Adelaida López de Martínez

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Dynamics of Change in Latin American Literature:  
Contemporary Women Writers

Adelaida López de Martínez

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*Abstract.* Over the last twenty-five years Latin American societies have undergone profound changes. Where once the legalized abuses of dictatorships gave new meaning to the word “silence” for both men and women, now large segments of the population fight hard to sustain democratic regimes throughout the Continent. Repressive governments are being replaced, and shattered economies have begun to recover. Encouraged by the ever-increasing strength of international feminism, Latin American women (from Chiapas, Mexico, to Plaza de Mayo in Argentina) have risen to play key roles in this socio-political reformation. The writing of female authors has proliferated in this environment, and the literary canon of our time has been enriched. This article examines first the impact of twenty-five years of feminism in Latin America, and second, the status of contemporary Latin American women writers within a global context. (ALM)

## The Early (Feminist) Essays of Victoria Ocampo

Doris Meyer

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*Abstract.* This study examines the essays written by Ocampo between 1920 and 1934, prior to the time when she publicly voiced her adhesion to feminism and the rights of women in Argentine society. In these works from her *Testimonios* in which Ocampo struggles to find her voice as a female writer, the maleable essay serves her need to engage in discursive dialogues from the margins of the literary culture of her time. Both as a woman and a member of the oligarchy, she questions cultural assumptions and gender-based binary structures common among the male writers of her time, many of whom she knew personally. Using rhetorical strategies that show the self-reflexive and subversive nature of her writing, Ocampo reads and reinterprets these works from a parenthetical feminist perspective, contesting their intellectual and aesthetic biases. The active agency of the reader as writer in these early essays shows Ocampo's awareness of her own unorthodox subject position—alienated from the conventions of her class, her gender, her national culture and language. Her autobiographical musings and her engagement with literary modernity in the 1920s and 1930s reveal a woman who accepted the liabilities of articulating an autonomous self, both in a European and a Latin American context. The influence of family bonds and patriarchal morality decisively shaped, but did not ultimately control, the way Victoria Ocampo eventually defined herself as a feminist author. (DM)

## Power, Gender, and Canon Formation in Mexico

Cynthia Steele

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*Abstract.* I propose to analyze Castellanos's trajectory from marginalized ethnographer and critic of "latino" society, to presidential insider and ambassador, and the first modern Mexican woman writer to be accepted into the literary canon. I will explore the intersection of politics, gender, and the (self-) creation of a literary persona with regard to the following issues: 1) the tension between self-exposure and self-censorship in Castellanos's literary work; 2) Castellanos's intense and problematic relationship with her illegitimate, mestizo half-brother; 3) the coincidences and con-

traditions between Castellanos's journalistic account of her relationship with her servant Maria Escandon, and Maria's own oral history twenty years later; 4) the tension between depression and dependency, on the one hand, and self-assertiveness and audacity, on the other; 5) the relation between Castellanos's role as ambassador and the personal, apolitical, often frivolous character of her journalistic articles written in Israel; 6) the contradictory readings of Castellanos's death, and the respective implications for her place in the canon; and 7) the implications, for their reception, of the love letters published in *Cartas a Ricardo* 1994, as opposed to 1974. (CS)

## Gorgeous Pedagogy

Debra Castillo

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*Abstract.* Elena Poniatowska's recent *Luz y luna, las lunitas* immediately impresses the reader with its beauty; it is akin to a "coffee table book" in its sheer gorgeousness. I intend to explore the question of how to read the gorgeous object within the context of Poniatowska's oeuvre and within the frame of a pedagogical endeavor. Poniatowska, of course, represents the epitome of the elite but socially conscious Latin American author. As in certain of her other works (but perhaps more obviously here, because of the very nature of this book), the mix of elitism and social consciousness undergoes a multiple displacement. Like her other works, *Luz y luna* constitutes a palimpsest of discourses, seems to partake more of the modern semi-autobiographical gender essay than of the traditional (male) essay, and explicitly addresses the challenge of feminism in a Latin American setting. Nevertheless, this social consciousness enters into an implicit conflict with two of the book's other fundamental qualities: its polished and lyrical approach to the people and landscape of Mexico, and its utopian nostalgia, especially with respect to Mexico's indigenous cultures. In essence, then, this paper will explore how—more clearly than in her less overtly polished works—the problem of a pedagogical model drawn from Poniatowska is highlighted in this text. (DC)

## Dramatic Strategies Made Clear: The Feminist Politics in Griselda Gambaro's *Puesta en claro*

Sandra Cypess

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*Abstract.* In this essay I explore the feminist aspects of *Puesta en claro*, written in 1974, when Griselda Gambaro was not yet considered a writer who paid attention to feminine issues. Yet to the extent that Gambaro always focuses on the constellation of problems relating to power relations, she is including feminine and feminist issues in her text, and continues a tradition many critics relate to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, as I shall argue in my conclusion. Seen within the trajectory of Gambaro's dramaturgy, *Puesta en claro*, as a play from the 1970s is also remarkable in showing a change in the typical pattern of victimization for her characters. Her audience sees that it is possible for the victims to renounce their passivity and rebel. Moreover, she embodies that message in the sign of a blind, apparently defenseless, domesticated, dominated woman. I suggest that in the creation of the blind woman Gambaro comments on the significance of the male gaze, not as an inherent attribute, but as a controlling agent derived from the patriarchal system. She also shows that the private spaces of the domestic sphere to which women are relegated within the patriarchy can be reconstituted as a site of power. (SMC)

## Spanish American Women Writers: Simmering Identity Over a Low Fire

Ksenija Bilbija

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*Abstract.* After establishing the parallel between the kitchen and the alchemist's laboratory, this article shows that traditionally, the kitchen has come to symbolize the space associated with the marginalization of women. However, the recent explosion of the novels dedicated to the resemantization and reevaluation of the realm of the kitchen is the best evidence that it is also a space from which much creativity emanates. A close reading of two such cookbook/novels, *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and *Like Potatoes for Varenike* by Sylvia Plager, points toward a quite parodic and critical gender perspective. Furthermore, it calls for a reinterpretation of stereotypical power relations and of male and female identity symbols. (KB)

## Geography, (M)Other Tongues and the Role of Translation in Giannina Braschi's *El imperio de los sueños*

María M. Carrión

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*Abstract.* The Big Apple seems to be the central axis for the readerly and writerly “I” in *El imperio de los sueños* (*Empire of Dreams*), by Giannina Braschi. Readers can easily realize that the text is not just about New York, but that it actually journeys through praise and blame, drinking and dancing, talking and perverting many other cities and landscapes. *El imperio* is a space of bohemia with streaks from the Latin American Quarter in Paris, the *barrio chino barcelonés*, the *zaguanes* of Borges’s Buenos Aires, from colonial houses in Old San Juan; it evokes dandy places, the Madrid of the *Profane Comedy*, also, of course, an Empire State full of shepherds and other poetic voices. This textual geography, intertwined with socio-political maps and blueprints of different cultural systems and manners, leads to a boiling pot of literary references. In sync with its new maps of New York, Russia, Puerto Rico, Spain, and Latin America, *El imperio* represents Spanish as a strong and vivid character chiseled after many national and communal forms and frames of meaning; nothing along the lines of a preformulated vehicle for Braschi’s narrative and/or poetic acts. The text displays an endless mix-and-match of Puerto Rican idioms—both from the Island and from the Spanish spoken in New York by Puerto Ricans—with *españolismos*, *argentinismos*, and other renditions of Spanish. The tongue of Spain, the *madre patria*, thus multiplies its performative potential and expands the role of translation. In *El imperio* Spanish is not just a process to move meanings beyond its lettered confinements, out of its “grammatically correct” boundaries, into another—or foreign—language, but a way to show off its own capacity for otherness. (MMC)

## The Stone and its Images: The Poetry of Nancy Morejón

Alan West

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*Abstract.* The essay explores the roots of Nancy Morejón’s poetry within the context of a transculturated afro-Cuban identity. Beginning by an examination of the poems that directly deal with the

orishas of santería, the essay moves on to some of her more lyric poetry. Morejón's relationship to Dulce María Loynaz provides particular interest in how both writers treat the metaphor of the house in two important poems. This is followed by a discussion of some of Morejón's overtly feminist poetry, placed both within a Cuban context of the history of its revolution, and the displacement of exile (in dialogue with Cuban women outside the island). Morejón's aesthetic scope is wide and her affinities with Poe, the French symbolists, the Cuban poetic tradition, and the plastic arts (Mendive, Brueghel), as well as the essays of Bachelard, are drawn upon to understand the multiple sources of her work. Throughout the essay different critical methods are brought to bear on how Morejón weaves together nature, politics, myth, aesthetic insight, and personal testimony in a poetry with enormous historical resonance. (AW)

## Female Divinities and Story-Telling in the Work of Tamara Kamenszain

Naomi Lindstrom

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*Abstract.* Tamara Kamenszain (b. Argentina, 1947), in her creative writing and her essays, brings together two concerns. One is her examination of concepts of woman and femininity. She specializes in mythical and archetypal representations of woman. Her texts present such figures as the great mother and forest nymphs. On many occasions, she evokes a past in which female divinities were respected, even in the Judaic tradition that is frequently Kamenszain's frame of reference. The other current that stands out in Kamenszain's writing is her interest in Jewish traditions of informal narrative. In her texts, folk narrative displaces learned and canonical narrative. Her concern is not only with stories about magic, but also with tale-telling as a magic practice. Kamenszain's writing often makes the point that magic, and particularly feminine magic, has succumbed to modernization. Setting her own writing in opposition to this tendency, Kamenszain brings back feminine magic forces and endows biblical heroines with the talents of sorceresses, priestesses, or goddesses. Her narratives also suggest that women have a special way of reading, learning, and story-telling. (NL)

## Usurping Difference in the Feminine Fantastic from the Riverplate

María B. Clark

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*Abstract.* This study intended to define the concept of a feminine fantastic as a narrative mode in contemporary short fiction by women writers from Argentina and Uruguay. As a point of departure, the study examined the narrative techniques and conventions of the fantastic and their strategic use for the expression of feminine concerns. The concept of the feminine was used in the sense of referring to an interpretation of femininity as a construct of language rather than an essentially feminine narrative mode based on a biological gender division. An overview of fantastic short stories by women writers from Argentina and Uruguay examined the use of a gender-coded discourse and its subversion as the controlling strategy of the feminine fantastic. The study proposed that the feminine fantastic, because of its foregrounding of the inherent power relations of discourse and language, may also become a political practice for women writers. It was found that the subversion of reality in this narrative mode is often linked to the deconstruction of the binary oppositions underlying gender identity and difference, and that the strategic use of the fantastic may serve the deconstruction of cultural concepts that traditionally engender hierarchical and oppressive meanings in patriarchal discourse. (MBC)

## Filling the Empty Space: Women and Latin American Theatre

Kirsten F. Nigro

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*Abstract.* In recent years, Latin American women have begun to appropriate and fill a space once empty of their presence. This essay looks at the work of four such women, (Diana Raznovich and Cristina Escofet of Argentina, Raquel Araujo of Mexico and the Peruvian Sara Joffre), to see how they give substance and voice to their particular concerns. In the process, this essay focusses on: 1) the notion of gender as performance; 2) the feminist deconstruction of narrative; 3) the female body in theatrical space; and 4) new, postmodern ways of doing feminist political theatre. (KFN)

## The Subject, Feminist Theory and Latin American Texts

Sara Castro-Klaren

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*Abstract.* From a feminist perspective, this essay reviews and analyzes the interaction between metropolitan feminist theories and their interphase with the academic criticism of texts written by Latin American women. Discussion focuses on the question of the subject, which the author believes to be paramount in feminist theory, in as much as the construction of gender and the historical subordination of women devolve on the play of difference and identity. This paper examines how the problematic assumption by feminist theorists in the North American academy of Freudian and Lacanian theories of the subject pose unresolved problems and unanticipated complications to subsequent deployment of this subject theory as modes of interpretation of texts written by women in Latin America or even to the emancipatory goals on feminists in the academy. This is a case where "traveling theory" must be examined and evaluated very carefully. The second part of the paper concentrates on the feminist challenges that have been already made to both Freudian and Lacanian theories of the feminine. It highlights the work of Jane Flax, Nancy Chodorov, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler in suggesting a way out of theories that rely on the primacy of the male subject formation and therefore occlude and preclude the investigation of the modes of women's agency. (SC-K)