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Introduction to the special issue

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Introduction to the special issue

Abstract

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Introduction

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It is quite appropriate that *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* should devote its 20th-anniversary special issue to the literature of Latin American women writers. After all, in 1995 Latin American women commemorate two milestones in our cultural history: twenty years ago Mexico City was host to the celebration of the first *International Year of the Woman* sponsored by the United Nations; and exactly three hundred years ago, in 1695, the death of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz brought to a close the endeavors of the first American feminist, who also happens to be the first great Spanish poet born to the New World.

This special issue on the dynamics of change in contemporary Latin American literature, then, is not a mere coincidence but rather a sign of our times. The end result of twenty-five years of feminism is precisely to have made women visible and to have empowered them to speak and write in their own voices. Today's Latin American female writers are an integral part of a chorus emerging simultaneously from the four corners of the globe, speaking in hundreds of languages but with one voice of a new vision of the world engendered by a feminine perspective.

The enormous literary output of today's Latin American female writers cannot and does not slip by unnoticed. On the contrary, it is the object of serious and sustained study, both in and outside the countries of origin, as the ever-increasing number of specialized bibliographies suggests. On the other hand, the very growth of this literature precludes the possibility of one definitive reading, however extensive

and encompassing. In order to establish the relevance of contemporary Latin American women writers within a global context, it becomes essential to approach their works from various angles, complementing partial or general studies with more focused monographs.

This special issue of *Studies in 20th Century Literature* does not presume to offer an exhaustive study of even the most significant contemporary Latin American women writers; it does, however, provide a sense of the dynamics that are bringing sweeping changes to Latin American societies as well as the prevailing literary canon. In the process, a very accurate image of Latin America's vibrant and culturally diverse reality emerges filtered through the personal realities of the women writers researched in this volume.

Although the number of writers studied is, of necessity, minuscule, each and every one of them has left her mark on the literary history of Latin America in the 20th century: the matriarchs (Victoria Ocampo from Argentina and Rosario Castellanos from Mexico) whose *testimonios* provide a geocultural axis that upholds the Latin American feminist literature of today; the elder sisters, Elena Poniatowaska (Mexico) and Griselda Gambaro (Argentina), clearly committed to a feminist agenda; and then the youngest ones, like the Mexican Laura Esquivel and the Argentinean Silvia Plager whose gastrottexts have ratified a culinary lexicon as legitimate narrative discourse; the Puerto Rican Giannina Braschi who stands as a metaphor for an identity split by colonialism; the Cuban Nancy Morejon whose poetry is a timely reminder of the vital African legacy in Latin American culture; Tamara Kamenszain whose texts reclaim the feminist attributes of Hebrew deities for contemporary Argentinean narrative; Cristina Peri-Rossi, Elvira Ophrée, Armonia Somers, and Silvina Ocampo whose short stories "feminize" the discourse of the fantastic with innovative and original codes; Diana Raznovich, Cristina Escofet, Raquel Araujo, Sara Joffre, who use the stage to recreate the world in order to change it; and finally, all those women whose critical thinking has induced them to engage in dialogue with European and North American academic feminism, as evidenced in the theories that underlie the analyses collected in this volume.

These articles are indeed a tribute to the tremendous caliber of today's Latin American feminist literature. They are also a measure of the intellectual depth and rigor of the scholars who have chosen to study it. Doris Meyer, Cynthia Steele, Debra Castillo, Sandra Cypess, Ksenjia Bilbija, Maria Carrion, Alan West, Naomi Lindstrom, Maria Clark, Kristen Nigro, and Sara Castro-Klaren are all distinguished Hispanists who enjoy well deserved recognition in our discipline. I am most grateful to them for generously agreeing to collaborate with me in this special issue. The scholarly merit abundantly found throughout its pages is all theirs. Typos and other mistakes are solely my responsibility.

I wish, as well, to extend heartfelt thanks to Lynne Margolies and Claudia Routon for translating my introductory article, to Javier Martinez for translating the "Introduction," and to Jordan Stump for fine-tuning both.