Latin American Women Writers

When I was appointed to the editorial board of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* in 2012 for a three-year term, I decided to focus my contribution on strengthening the exchange and dialogue between Spanish-speaking Latin American and American women scholars and their respective critical traditions. Although language and national borders are often thought of as the origin of separate cultural fields, questioning those borders and revealing their arbitrariness has been crucial for women writing and thinking in Latin America since at least the nineteenth century. Building sisterhood across borders has been a way to create networks of intellectual, creative, and political exchange and support that cross not only national borders—in Latin America and elsewhere—but also oceans and languages. Excluded from the brotherhood of citizenship since the creation of republics in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, Latin American women were expected not to leave home, not to leave their nations, religion, or language. Soon after independence, they learned other languages, created their own journals, published their fellow women writers, became translators, traveled, and witnessed, both for themselves and for their women readers, that there are different ways of being a woman and that there is no “natural” path attached to any of them.

These networks are still vital today, both for writers and scholars. They are powerful but can, and need, to grow stronger. For this forum, then, I engaged three young scholars who demonstrate the transnational character of women’s writing in Spanish-speaking Latin America. Their articles show the ways in which American and British work on and by women has been read by some Latin American women or how these women dealt with similar challenges in order to pursue the education, material resources, and intellectual autonomy that would enable them to devote their lives to writing. Publishing articles about these crossroads in English in such a relevant journal as *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* aims to show the ways in which the literary and critical traditions of Latin America and of the United States and Britain are interwoven and shed light on each other. It is also a way for writers and critics to continue the cross-cultural work that has helped women to share and build their lives.

Two of the authors included in this forum, Lucía Stecher and Azuvia Licón, are based in Latin America—Chile and Colombia, respectively—while Claudia Cabello Hutt is currently located in the United States. Stecher is originally from Perú, Licón from México, and Cabello Hutt from Chile, and they are all a part of a network of feminist scholars that have been working together for nearly ten years with frequent meetings mostly
in Santiago thanks to the generosity of our colleagues at Universidad de Chile but also at Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá. The articles focus on late nineteenth-century women’s periodicals, working-class women’s writing and professionalization in the 1920s and 1930s, and feminist activism and criticism from the 1930s and 1950s. The literature discussed in the articles shows women negotiating authority based on their needs and on their particular national, class, and ethnic identities in dialogue with work from Europe and North America.

Licón’s article, entitled “Modernity, Editorship, and Readership in Victorian and Colombian Periodicals: The Girl’s Own Paper and Soledad Acosta’s La Mujer,” “presents a comparative analysis of two late nineteenth-century magazines’ positions on women’s work and independent living,” arguing that the ways in which the two periodicals negotiated “tradition and modernity were influenced by their respective publishing markets and readerships” (p. 17). It is an article about periodicals for and by women and the tensions triggered by modernity when social class and gender intersect. As the article shows, “the study of the nineteenth-century periodical press sheds light on the professionalization of women’s writing, the expansion of public female readership, and the participation of women in public space” (p. 17). The theoretical and critical framework Licón employs helps her explore “the processes, actors, and forces involved in the configuration of the press and its place as a cultural object in the intellectual landscape” of Colombian journalism, which she has recently helped to reconstruct (p. 18). Her study argues that the reduced publishing market in Colombia “resulted in more editorial freedom for Acosta, which translated into not only wider editorial agency (which set a precedent regarding female roles in the public space) but also more conservative discourses on gender” (pp. 18-19).

“Working to Pay for a Room of One’s Own: Modern Women Writers in Latin America,” by Claudia Cabello Hutt, explores the work of two renowned working-class Latin American women poets and essayists, Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938) and Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957). Faced with the challenges and opportunities brought by the development of an uneven modernity since the late nineteenth century in Latin America, Storni and Mistral reflect on the material conditions necessary for intellectual and creative work in general as well as on the conditions particular to women who wanted and needed to build and preserve their autonomy. Cabello Hutt shows how, for these two poets, the conditions identified by Virginia Woolf in her essay A Room of One’s Own (1929) were only the beginning of their quests. Examining their concerns about productive working conditions, Cabello Hutt asks: “From where does [the] money come? What happens after writing? What are the non-monetary costs of women’s writing? How does a woman negotiate space and power in the
literary field?” (pp. 40-41). This article examines the material conditions women workers faced in Argentina and Chile during the 1920s and 1930s and the many ways in which Mistral and Storni dealt with them. Cabello Hutt argues that writing for newspapers, editing magazines, and establishing networks with writers across the Americas and Europe, while often working in poorly paid jobs, was essential to these authors. This article reveals “the extent to which the interaction of class and gender together with geographic marginality—coming from a province in a country that is peripheral to global culture—shaped their ideas of and strategies for participation in the literary field” (p. 41). Having a job and earning a living shaped their writing, but they longed for more time to devote to their work.

Lucía Stecher focuses on Camila Henríquez Ureña (1894-1973) as a transnational scholar and intellectual in “Camila Henríquez Ureña’s Feminist Essays and Literary Criticism: The Trajectory of a Transnational Intellectual.” Born in the Dominican Republic, where she lived during her early childhood, Henríquez Ureña spent most of her life between Cuba and the United States during the tumultuous decades prior to the Cuban Revolution. Her feminism drew from the traditions of both countries, but she distanced herself from the imperialistic and egotistical tones she found in American feminism. For Henríquez Ureña, Stecher states, “feminism must maintain a critical perspective regarding hegemonic conceptions of liberty and autonomy, which at that time greatly privileged individuality over collective projects and responsibilities” (p. 66). This article is a valuable contribution to the understanding of Latin American feminisms and of the strong movement that developed in Cuba in the 1930s, bringing to light a figure that has not yet been recognized as one of the movement’s most relevant activists. Stecher also studies Henríquez Ureña’s essays on women authors, especially in the epistolary genre, which in many ways makes her “a predecessor to the feminist criticism of the 1980s” (p. 72). As is the case with many other women, Henríquez Ureña’s transnational perspective helped her develop her career and autonomy but also deprived her of recognition within a national critical tradition.

These three articles show some of the main trends in scholarly research on women authors being done in Latin America today. The work in our field has shifted its emphasis for several years now from the study of literary works to the study of their production and circulation and of the material conditions of writing. The contribution of this focus to the comprehension of the Latin American literary field in general has been enormous, and it has also helped characterize and make visible the intellectual networks that have been vital both for women’s writing and for critical understanding.

Carolina Alzate
Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá