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Benjamin Murphy

Who's That Girl? The Many Faces of Mexican Women Writers

The first book I bought in Mexico was, ironically, in English. After surviving the first week of my high school exchange program in Oaxaca on a Spanish vocabulary of about 50 words, I found my way to a used bookstore downtown in desperate search of a bilingual dictionary, and it was there that I found a dusty old copy of D.H. Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico.* Chronicling this Anglophone author's own journeys through Oaxaca, the collection of essays seemed to parallel my situation so perfectly that I could only take it as an act of fate, so I bought it, and it quickly became my constant companion as I adjusted to my new life in the southern Mexican city.

Yet as I grew close to my host family, made friends, and improved my Spanish skills, certain elements of the book began to trouble me, specifically its treatment of women. I slowly began to notice that the exotic enchantresses that Lawrence described were not the same Mexican women with whom I had grown close over the months, and this wasn't due simply to historical differences. I began to realize that the women Lawrence described were not in fact women, but caricatures of women, simplified and essentialized fantasies, and this realization provoked one of my greatest intellectual transformations. Reading Lawrence in Oaxaca, I embarked on a personal feminist revolution, which led me to a profound desire to encounter Mexican women's self-representations, to hear what they have to say about themselves. Since my time in Mexico during high school, I have become fascinated with modern Mexican women's literature and its relationship to feminism, and what follows is a haphazard collection of books by and about Mexican women writers and the theoretical issues that surround their writing.

The first book by a Mexican woman author that I read was also the most famous of that category: Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate[1]). Reading it on my flight home from Oaxaca, I cried as I usually do with turbulent romance novels, of which Esquivel's is a representative of the highest order. Narrating the passionate yet ill-fated romance that occurs between protagonists Tita and Pedro on a rural farm in Coahuila de Zaragoza, the novel provided me with what I considered at the time an authentic women's perspective, and it deepened my desire to explore Mexican women's texts. Yet as I continued in my dutiful training as a newly recruited feminist revolutionary, I developed a more critical perspective on the book. Upon reading Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble,* I started to question the concept of a "woman's perspective," and the very category of "woman" that is presupposed. I grew frustrated with Esquivel's self-declared status as "women's literature," for I felt that it served only to affirm the marginal status of women within the literary canon.

I expressed this frustration to my host sister, Lorena, with whom I had shared many of my angst-ridden feminist discoveries while in Oaxaca, and she recommended *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Until We Meet Again, Jesus), by Elena Poniatowska, one of Mexico's most prolific twentieth century female writers. Describing the tumultuous life of impoverished yet resilient Jesusa Palancares in first person, testimonial form, Poniatowska's book provided me with just the female sass and rebellion I was looking for. As I read the novel, I fell in love with the character of Jesusa, who refuses to conform to the norms of femininity in the context of late nineteenth century Mexico City, famously ending her wild and unorthodox narration with the rebellious phrase "ahora ya

[1] All translations are by the author, from Spanish to English.

no chingue. Váyase. Déjeme dormir" (Poniatowska 315) ("Now don't fuck with me. Go away. Let me sleep"). Jesusa became my feminist icon and my Mexican literary hero.

When I entered college, I continued to read female authors of the same generation as Poniatowska, absorbing the critiques of sexism and machismo in Mexican society in novels by Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos. Yet as I began taking more advanced classes on Latin American literature and literary theory, my perspectives on Latin American identity began to change. After reading theories on post-colonialism, I learned to question received notions of nationality and culture, and I started to understand the concept of "Mexican-ness" not as a fundamental truth, but as a culturally fabricated discourse that was often deployed in ethnocentric and racist ways. I became more skeptical of the ways in which Poniatowska's novels and those of other Boom generation[2] writers proliferated and normalized stereotypes of Mexico as primitive, exotic, and timelessly indigenous. I realized that many different stereotypes, both cultural and sexual, converged on the figure of the Mexican woman, and I began looking for a new type of literature that addressed these issues.

After my sophomore year of college, I went back to Oaxaca and shared an apartment over the summer with my host sister Lorena, who was attending Universidad Mesoamericana. I became involved in the gay community at the university, and it was there that I was introduced to Gloria Anzaldúa, who to this day remains one of the most influential figures in my intellectual development. Written from the perspective of a Mexican American woman, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* is a bilingual piece that addresses both the racial and sexual discrimination that Mexican women suffer, and

[2] The Latin American Boom was a period beginning in the 1960s when Latin American authors began to gain huge international success. Headed by such giants as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes, Boom novels often capitalized on "Latin American" attributes, such as the famous magical realism.

explores alternative forms of human relationships that escape binary relationships of power. Describing what she calls the "new mestiza," Anzaldúa's theoretical text addressed many of the methodological problems I had encountered in my experiences with Mexican cultural studies, opening up a radical new space for female agency and subversion in which gender, sexuality and race were all called into question.

Anzaldúa's radical interrogation of the terms by which Mexican female identity is constructed has led me to my present fascination with contemporary Mexican women writers. I am now immensely interested in the experimental narrative styles that Mexican women authors have been exploring in the 1990s and early 2000s, and these books comprise a large portion of my collection. Cristina Rivera Garza, for example, following Anzaldúa's deconstructionist approach, has written innovative novels in the historical fiction genre, and her works are among my current favorites. In *Nadie me verá llorar* (No One Will See Me Cry), she wittily ridicules the racist undertones of Mexico's positivist eugenics policies during the early twentieth century, crafting a female character who constantly disrupts every expectation of her, and who evades the various gazes directed at her with an impenetrable and subversive interiority.

My book collection is something that I cherish greatly. Individually, my books are precious objects that I read passionately and scribble in frantically. Collectively, they chart an exciting journey, through Mexican literary history and through feminist critical theory, that continues to this day. Collecting books has been one of my primary intellectual catalysts, introducing me to two of my greatest passions, and demonstrating the infinite ways in which those two are connected. I am fascinated by the feminist possibilities of Mexican women writers, and I hope to continue collecting the works of these authors for years to come.

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