

**GENDER AND HISTORY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LATIN AMERICA: THE DIDACTIC DISCOURSES
OF SOLEDAD ACOSTA DE SAMPER**

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Faced with the task of articulating the relationships among national identity, citizenship, and the individual at a time when the idea of “nation” itself was still in flux, nineteenth-century Latin American authors frequently turned towards historiography and historical narratives as appropriate and useful vehicles for their statements about the process by which (semi)arbitrary geographical boundaries could come to signify nations with distinct identities. Many nineteenth-century authors decisively rejected the Spanish colonial past and envisioned the post-Independence period as a new epoch of history whose existence depended on the violent and complete break with Spain represented by the Wars of Independence (1810-1824).¹ But other authors, while recognizing the importance of the rupture with Spain and with the colonial past, created historical narratives about the Conquest, about colonial Latin America, and about the Wars of Independence in order to justify their ideas about national identities, to comment upon contemporary political and social situations, and to elucidate the historical roots of current problems. They explored the past in order to make the present comprehensible to themselves and to their readers, who were meant to learn how to be exemplary citizens of the new Latin American nations through their consumption of these narratives.

The historical novel afforded authors the opportunity to explore questions about nationality and identity in a popular format and to reach a wider potential audience. The deployment of the genre, however, was a problematic device for the majority of historical novelists in nineteenth-century Latin America, since they had to contend with a conflicted attitude towards

history and the past, simultaneously returning to the history of pre-Independence Latin America and acknowledging that the forceful rejection of that history was the basis for the construction of independent Latin America. The conflicts over the differing roles of history vis-à-vis the national project frequently appear in nineteenth-century historical novels as an authorial anxiety about the production of historical narrative itself. This anxiety can be read in the frequent rhetorical gestures with which the authors call attention to the narratives' codes of production. For example, nineteenth-century Latin American historical novelists often made use of prologues or appendices to explain their historicizing project, to impart necessary background information, and to justify the significance of the historical period about which they wrote. Historical novelists repeatedly attempted to claim an authority based on their putative status as historians, even—or especially—when they wrote historical fictions instead of “traditional” historical texts. The very process by which they asserted their historicizing authority, however, serves to highlight the ambiguous nature of their historical novels and calls into question the status of the historical novel in Latin America.

Such questions about the competing and complementary roles of history and fiction in the nation-building process are further complicated when women writers take up the genre of the historical novel. Mary Louise Pratt has argued that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “women inhabitants of nations were neither imagined as nor invited to imagine themselves as part of the horizontal brotherhood” that produces the imagined community of the nation postulated by Benedict Anderson. In Pratt's words, “women inhabitants of modern nations were not imagined as intrinsically possessing the rights of citizens; rather, their value was specifically attached to (and implicitly conditional on) their reproductive capacity. As mothers of the nation, they are precariously other to the nation” (51). Nineteenth-century Spanish-American women writers who wished to engage with pressing questions of identity formation and nationalism had to negotiate their position on the margins of literary society and national discourse as they produced texts that dealt with the relationships among gender, identity, nationalism and history. At a time when women were consistently excluded from the literary and public spheres, nineteenth-century Latin American women writers were frequently figured as literary anomalies, not as members of a community of literate and literary women. When women authors worked with the already-problematic genre of the historical novel they were forced to deal with identity on multiple levels of nationality and gender as well as to contend with the difficulties endemic to the historical novel in Latin America. The career of the Colombian journalist and author Soledad Acosta de Samper (1833-1913) provides an excellent case study for the critical examination of questions about the

relationships among gender, nationalism, history and identity in nineteenth-century Latin America.

Despite the fact that women were frequently marginalized in the nation-building project and in literary circles, Acosta de Samper was able to take advantage of her gender in order to create an authorial persona fully capable of issuing powerful assertions and directives to her audience. Between 1878 and 1881 she published the journal *La Mujer* in Bogotá and was almost solely responsible for producing the editorial contents that filled its pages. She wrote summaries of news from Europe and other Latin American countries, histories of women from antiquity to the present, opinions about women's education, charity work, and domestic duties, novels set in contemporary Colombia and Europe, and historical novels. In a typical issue of *La Mujer*, the only items not written by Acosta de Samper were a couple of poems and a translation (by herself) of an article by a French author.²

In the first issue of *La Mujer*, Acosta de Samper published a justification of her editorial project. She claimed that *La Mujer* would be the first magazine by women and for women in Latin America, and she acknowledged the heavy responsibilities she was about to incur. Such a magazine should both entertain and instruct, for its purpose was to improve the women who read it through practical and moral advice at the same time that it offered them a brief respite from their taxing domestic duties. She emphasized the fact that the contents of *La Mujer* would not be tiresome or preachy, despite always being moral, for her readers deserved the fleeting pleasure and comfort that she hoped *La Mujer* would bring them every two weeks. As she explained,

“Otras plumas habrá que se dedicarán a halagar la vanidad de la mujer, a elogiar su belleza y el encanto de sus gracias, encomiando su donaire y gentileza; nosotras procuraremos hablar a su corazón y a su conciencia, recordándola a cada paso que no ha nacido solamente para ser feliz sobre la tierra, sino para realizar muy altos fines de la Providencia. No las diremos que son bellas y fragrantas flores, nacidas y creadas tan sólo para adornar el jardín de la existencia; sino que las probaremos que Dios las ha puesto en el mundo para auxiliar a sus compañeros de peregrinación en el escabroso camino de la vida [...]. En fin, no las hablaremos de los **derechos** de la mujer en la sociedad, ni de su pretendida **emancipación**, sino de los **deberes** que incumben a todo ser humano en este mundo transitorio.” (*La Mujer*, 2nd. ed, 1880, 1-2)

Such statements show that Acosta de Samper consciously defined herself as a woman writer and believed that she had a vital role to play in the creation of literature for her women readers. By establishing a feminine economy of textual interchange based on a commonality of gender and shared domestic experiences, she was able to assign a moral value to her works and explain

their importance and relevance to her audience. She based her moral and textual authority—qualities that she insistently linked—on the fact that she was a woman writer, privy to knowledge and experience that she was best qualified to communicate to her fellow women.

While defining herself as a woman writer was a source of empowerment for Acosta de Samper, since she could use her gender in order to define her project, her audience, and her moral right/write, this definition was also a source of anxiety and doubt.³ The moment in which she proclaims, for example, that “no escribirán en [*La Mujer*] sino **mujeres**” (v. 1, 1) is followed by the simultaneously proud and panicky statement, “Tócanos a nosotras, pues, el haber iniciado en Bogotá esta obra; [...] puede que después otras mujeres más competentes sigan nuestro ejemplo” (1).⁴ At times she points towards the very newness of her situation in order to stake out an authoritative position for herself; at others, she uses that novelty as a modest way to excuse her faults, blaming any problems in her writing on the difficulties inherent in being a gender pioneer. Acosta de Samper’s delicate position may be reconstructed in part by examining her professional relationship with her husband, the well-known author and politician José María Samper. Harold Hinds has pointed out that despite the fact that both husband and wife were prolific writers, they worked in decidedly different genres and literary arenas.⁵ According to Hinds, Acosta de Samper accommodated herself to her husband’s career and “chose to restrict her creative work to areas which did not duplicate, that is, challenge, her husband’s talents and considerable ego. This, obviously, did somewhat restrict her, but it also left considerable room for her main interests” in the areas of history and, as Hinds adds, “feminine topics for a feminine audience” (37). Whether this decision was a conscious choice or not, the fact that her work never overlapped with that of her husband indicates that Acosta de Samper was continually forced to confront the varying expectations of her different audiences. Asserting herself as a woman writer allowed her to claim a textual authority enabling her to address topics such as domesticity and women’s roles from a privileged vantage point. But that very assertion could also be constricting, for any deviations from the norms established for women writers could well be seen as marked by a loss of her textual/sexual authority.

The majority of Acosta de Samper’s historical novels first appeared as serials in *La Mujer*. Her first work of historical fiction, *Cuadros y relaciones novelescas de la historia de América*, began appearing in *La Mujer* early in the journal’s run.⁶ While the first four “cuadros” or stories were brief episodes, the fifth was a full-length novel titled *Los descubridores: Alonso de Ojeda*, which was published in book form in 1907 under the title *Un hidalgo conquistador*. These episodes were the beginning of what would become an extensive project to document the history of Latin

America through historical fiction. Next Acosta de Samper wrote a trilogy about the adventures of an upper-class Creole family during the Colombian Wars of Independence: *La juventud de Andrés* in 1879-80; *La familia de tío Andrés* in 1880-81; and *Una familia patriota* in 1884-85. The first two novels in the trilogy also appeared in *La Mujer*, while the last was published in the second journal she edited, *La Familia: Lecturas para el Hogar*. In 1886, she published *Los piratas en Cartagena*, which covers that coastal city's history throughout the colonial period, and *La insurrección de los comuneros*, her novel about a lower-class uprising against colonial rule in the early 1780s in Colombia, appeared in 1887. After this spate of historical novels, Acosta de Samper turned away from that genre and focused on her writings in other venues such as "traditional" histories, essays, and domestic manuals. But in 1905 she returned to the historical novel, publishing *Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas*, in which a Spaniard is kidnapped by Indians and rescued by his devoted wife and an Indian shaman, and *Un chistoso de aldea*, which shows the effects of the Wars of Independence on a small Colombian village; both novels were serialized in her journal *Lecturas para el Hogar*. The fact that Acosta de Samper's earliest historical novels appeared in the pages of *La Mujer* shows that the two projects were intimately linked. Clearly, the novels were intended to serve the same purposes as *La Mujer*: that is, they were meant to improve women's moral characters and to ameliorate their working and living conditions. Furthermore, I argue that Acosta de Samper had recourse to the genre of the historical novel as a means to address her predominantly female audience on matters of national import and as a response to what she perceived as moments of specific threat to the survival of Colombian democracy.

The introduction to *Cuadros y relaciones novelescas de la historia de América*, Acosta de Samper's first work of historical fiction, describes her plan to write a historical novel about the major episodes of Latin American history. She uses this introduction to explain her purpose and to tell her audience what to expect from these stories and how to read them. She explicitly invokes the Horatian prescription by arguing that "nuestra intención es divertir instruyendo e instruir divirtiéndose" (29). She claims that historical novels grip the reader more intensely than other fictional texts because of the allure of truth under the veneer of fictitious narrative; the historical backdrop lends the novels "un encanto que no se puede reemplazar con sucesos imaginarios" (29). She further discounts the relative importance of the fictitious aspects of the stories by saying, "sólo inventaremos los pormenores" (29); that is, only nonessential details will be added to adorn the factual narrative.

But Acosta de Samper's emphasis in the introduction on history's attractions for her readers begs the question of why she would write

historical fiction in the first place. By 1878 she had already begun to write short histories and biographical sketches of Colombian heroes, showing that she was capable of and interested in producing traditional historiographical discourse. If history in and of itself has the powerful appeal that she herself admits only “LA VERDAD” (29) holds, why does she feel compelled to turn to historical fiction? The answer may be found in a paragraph that concludes the introduction to *Cuadros y relaciones novelescas*. There Acosta de Samper asserts,

Ponemos esta obra bajo el patrocinio de nuestras compatriotas, porque ellas, no teniendo tiempo para estudiar obras seria y extensas, tal vez encontrarán distracción y agrado en las siguientes relaciones, pues dan idea de las costumbres y los hombres que hicieron papel en la historia de nuestra patria. (29)

Here we see an explanation for both the content and the form of the texts that follow in this series. She directs her novels to her female readers, who, preoccupied with household tasks and families, lack the necessary time for serious study. Although they must be instructed in Colombian history, they also deserve some recreation in the form of Acosta de Samper’s palatable, fictionalized histories. This didactic purpose explains her previous emphasis on the historical accuracy of what she is writing; these novels are meant to substitute for—not augment—traditional historiography. Her earlier statement that she wishes to “divertir instruyendo e instruir divirtiendo” (29) may be reread in the context of the last paragraph as well: she wishes to attract her female readers with fictional tales and instruct them with historical facts. Her move to historical fiction can be seen as a way to reach an otherwise inaccessible audience of women who would not be interested in the “traditional” historiographical texts Acosta de Samper also continued to write.

Acosta de Samper takes a similarly didactic stance in the introduction to her 1887 novel *La insurrección de los comuneros*. Although there is no indication here that her text is addressed to a strictly female audience, she repeats her intentions to instruct and entertain her readers in “Cuatro palabras al lector” and affirms the historical accuracy of her account. She justifies the “embellishments” she has added to the characters of Juan Francisco Berbeo and José Antonio Galán by claiming that the historical record was written by their enemies, so she is portraying them sympathetically to offset the negative portrayals handed down by their enemies. In short, she avows that art can tell truths that history cannot. What she has created, she concludes, are the personalities, justifications, and motives of the characters; she has not altered the facts or deeds of history. Her novel adds what traditional history cannot illuminate—the emotions, thoughts, and desires of the participants. Lastly, in an apparent spasm of anxiety about her status

as a historians, she emphasizes that what she has added to history at least appears to be truthful, even if it is not, strictly speaking, historical fact. Sheer fancy, if it is to be mixed with historical fact, will at least present the appearance of truth.

In addition to using her prologues to orient her readers to her authorial project and intentions, Acosta de Samper also deploys her introductions to present her readers with the historical background to the fiction they are about to read. The introductions enforce a particular interpretation of history by preceding the novels with supposedly crucial background information without which the reader cannot understand the novel that follows. For example, *La juventud de Andrés* begins with a chapter titled "Situación de la Nueva Granada en 1782" in which the author announces, "para que se comprendan mejor los acontecimientos histórico-novelescos que vamos a relatar, preciso será, antes de entrar en materia, hacer una corta reseña de la situación política" (*La Mujer*, 3:29, 112). Similarly, the first chapter of *Un chistoso de aldea* describes the protagonist's village in the year the novel begins and gives information about the social context and economic activities of the town that will later help explain some of the plot twists in the text. *Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas* opens with the tale of Columbus's second voyage to the Caribbean, copiously annotated with detailed footnotes in which Acosta de Samper cites and contradicts other historians. The message of such introductions is that in order to enjoy adequately and appropriately the "diversión" of the novel, the reader must successfully acquire the "instrucción" or historical content of the text. Acosta de Samper's introductions prepare her reader to approach the text "correctly", demonstrating her interest in enforcing a particular kind of reading and interpretation of her novels.

Such prescriptions for correct reading help identify Acosta de Samper's historical novels with what Susan Rubin Suleiman has called "authoritarian fictions", or ideological novels, a definition that Suleiman applies to novels that attempt to impose a particular vision of reading and that form "a novelistic genre that proclaims its own status as both overtly ideological and as fictional" (2). Among the hallmarks of the ideological novel, Suleiman finds a forthright didacticism; the purpose of the ideological novel is to persuade the reader of a particular argument. The ideological novel attempts to eliminate the possibility of ambiguous interpretations of its meaning by multiplying redundancy and by overdetermining its own interpretation. Repetition at the formal and semantic levels hammers home the argument of the novel and erases potential doubts or confusion on the part of the reader.

Many of Acosta de Samper's historical novels strive to enforce a particular code of reading and interpretation in the way that Suleiman describes "ideological novels" as doing. *Un hidalgo conquistador* and

Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas give forceful justifications of the supposed founding moment of Latin American history, the discovery of the New World. *Los piratas en Cartagena* blame the fall of the Spanish Empire on its inadequate stewardship of its colonial possessions. *La insurrección de los comuneros* posits that the drive towards independence began not in 1810, but thirty years earlier with what had generally been seen as an unrelated and minor peasant uprising. The *Andrés* trilogy and *Un chistoso de aldea* depict the Wars of Independence as a flawed beginning for Colombian independence that explain contemporary Colombian political turmoil. All the novels present their versions of the past as historical truth, and the various moments of authorial intervention in the narratives—in the form of introductions, historical asides, footnotes, and appendices—can be read as visible marks of her efforts to construct texts that will function as exemplary narratives. The fictional narratives must be transformed into what Suleiman calls “the bearer of an unambiguous meaning” (27). Acosta de Samper not only wants her texts to convey particular messages about the initiation and progress of Latin American history; she also wants her audience to read that message in the “correct” way, without errors in transmission or in reception. Both desires can be traced back to her originary wish to teach her female audience about Colombian history and their own relationship to patriotism and national history.

One of the most important lessons of the novels is that women are integral to the work of nation-building because of their family roles. In Acosta de Samper’s historical narratives, the male characters participate in and create history; they discover new lands, conquer or convert Indians, and fight for ideals of liberty and justice. Meanwhile, the women endure, heroic in their suffering. Women’s role, suggests Acosta de Samper, is to nourish the family with patriotic ideals and to furnish a safe place where family members may gather, protected from the vicissitudes of national politics. It is only from this core of familial and patriotic values, she argues, that nationalism may spring and thrive. Her works depict women as essential to the nation-building process and offer models of patience and patriotism with whom her female readers can and should identify. Moreover, the novels provide the “mothers of the nation” with the knowledge of national history and moral lessons about that history that they need in order to instruct their children in patriotic behavior. Although Pratt has said that “women are precariously other to the nation” (51), Acosta de Samper’s novels stress the links between domesticity and patriotism, showing that women can and should be devoted inhabitants of their nations. She connects Eros and Polis, to use Doris Sommer’s phrase, through her insistence on narrating “history” side-by-side with “fiction”. That is, her narratives switch back and forth between plots involving “real” events and plots about the amorous or

domestic tribulations of her heroines. As she claimed in the introduction to *La insurrección de los comuneros*, the fictional “embellishments” enable her to communicate certain emotional truths about the historical events she narrates. Moreover, by repeatedly connecting the private and public worlds, the historical and the fictional, Acosta de Samper demonstrates that events in the domestic realm have the same degree of importance as those in the public realm and that the two spheres are intimately connected. Her texts represent this phenomenon for her readers and urge them to emulate it in their own lives, as they present morally-uplifting history lessons and examples of women who overcome historical and personal difficulties in order to occupy successfully their rightful roles as patriotic wives and mothers.

The regular alternation between the historical and the fictional in her novels is all the more intriguing because it is so often forced. Rather than seamlessly integrating the two plots together, Acosta de Samper usually divides them into alternating chapters. This narrative structure calls attention even more forcefully to the ways in which the domestic fictions of the novels support and comment upon the historical events also being narrated. For example, in *La insurrección de los comuneros* Acosta de Samper invents a doomed love affair between José Antonio Galán, a mestizo who helped lead the comunero rebellion and was executed by the viceregal forces, and Antonia de Alba, the daughter of a staunch royalist. Frequently the shifts between the “historical” and “fictional” plots of the novel are obtrusive and abrupt, marked by arbitrary interruptions such as the moment when the narrator jumps from a conversation between two women to a description of Galán and back by announcing, “ya es tiempo de que volvamos a oír el fin de la conversación de Antonia y Martina, y que sepamos qué podía tener que hacer la hija de un rico realista con el Jefe de los Comuneros” (46). Such seemingly clumsy devices are necessary because the two story lines are otherwise unconnected; the events of the comunero rebellion do not intersect naturally with those of the Alba family. Indeed, Antonia seems to serve mostly as a sympathetic listener to whom some of the events of the comunero uprising are told, either by Galán himself or by Manuela Beltrán, another participant in the insurgency.

More than serving as a depository for narratives created by other characters, however, the figure of Antonia is crucial to the structure and meaning of the novel. Here it is important to note that Acosta de Samper had already published a biographical sketch of Galán in 1870. When she returned to the theme of the comuneros sixteen years later, it was in the form of a historical novel, not another biography or other form of nonfiction narrative. It must be the case, then, that Antonia’s appearance in the narrative serves an end that could not be met by “traditional” historiography. By inserting Antonia and by extension the domestic realm into the narrative,

Acosta de Samper could target a predominantly female audience and draw attention to the links between the home and the nation. Moreover, Antonia functions as a role model for her readers. At the end of the novel, she is forced to marry Juan Francisco Berbeo, another insurrectionist. Despite her unwillingness to enter the marriage, Antonia resigns herself to her fate and dedicates herself to her family, causing Berbeo to say of her, “‘Uno de los rasgos que yo admiraba más en su carácter, era la profunda simpatía que profesó siempre a la extinguida causa de los Comuneros. [...] Ella, más que yo, inculcó en nuestros hijos un amor patrio independiente de la idea de España, modo de ver las cosas espontáneo en ella’” (190). Contrary to Berbeo’s belief, however, this is not a “spontaneous” reaction on Antonia’s part; rather, her sympathy towards the comunero cause is rooted in her love for Galán. The amorous plot enables Antonia to learn true patriotism and love of independence by giving her a personal connection to political events. In turn, her use of fiction to illuminate historical moments and to impart an otherwise ineffable emotional truth about history allows Acosta de Samper to present her readers with an inspirational narrative about the ways in which patriotism is both literally and figuratively propagated.

Likewise, in the *Andrés* trilogy about the Colombian Wars of Independence, Acosta de Samper presents an extended narrative in which fictional and historical events play out alongside one another. Indeed, both *La familia de tío Andrés* and *Una familia patriota* center on the women of the family, for their stories impel the fictional part of the novels’ plots. Because most of the male characters are involved with the “real” events that make up the historical plot, their characters are subordinated to the historical reality Acosta de Samper narrates. Just as in *La insurrección de los comuneros*, however, it is important to note that while the young men of the novels are heroic for their deeds in war, their brave actions and their willingness to risk their lives for their nascent country, the women are heroic because of their ability to endure suffering. They manage to resign themselves to separation from their brothers and husbands and endure such events as one brother’s imprisonment on a chain gang in Bogotá and the execution of another. The sisters Mariquita and Marianita carry themselves with dignity in the face of humiliations inflicted on them by the Spanish. Acosta de Samper also uses the story of their friend Pepita Piedrahita’s devotion to Custodio García Rovira, a Bogotan intellectual who later became a general in Bolívar’s army, in order to demonstrate the intimacy between romantic love and love of independence. Pepita falls in love with García Rovira precisely because he is a hero of the independence struggle; after his execution she dedicates herself to preserving his memory in the new nation. Such women are able to scheme against the Spanish when necessary, undertake feats of daring and bravery to save themselves and their loved ones, and band together in a show of mutual support and strength. In these

ways, Acosta de Samper consistently creates narratives that both instruct her female readers in patriotic history and offer them role models of how to integrate that historical knowledge into their daily lives as Colombian wives and mothers.

Still, the question remains of why Acosta de Samper felt impelled to instruct her female readers about their relationship to history and to the nation. Why did she turn to the historical novel twenty years into her literary career, and why did she connect the project of writing historical novels with the inaugural issue of *La Mujer*? I believe that her sudden production of historical novels—seven between 1878 and 1887—was a response to the political crisis she saw besieging Colombia. She began publishing *La Mujer* and writing historical novels during a period of civil unrest and political dissensions with which both she and her husband, José María Samper, were involved. The Liberal Party, which had been in power since the beginning of the Republic, was losing its hold over the political system. Not only was the Conservative Party growing stronger, but the Liberals were plagued by internal dissent which eventually led to a party split between the Radical and the Independent factions. These problems came to a head in 1876, when the Independents put forth their own candidate for president, Rafael Núñez, against the Radical candidate. Núñez lost in a bitter and close election, and three months later, the Conservatives, with only spotty support from the Independents, rose up in armed rebellion. Both Sampers were on the wrong side of this rebellion; they openly supported Núñez in 1876, and Acosta de Samper dedicated her 1886 novel *Los piratas en Cartagena* to him. Núñez's reply, reprinted in the novel, refers to "la época tempestuosa de 1875" and to what he calls her welcome and valuable advice given at that time, as well as to "el enorme contingente de su ilustre esposo" (xxiii). The political ties between the Sampers and Núñez would serve them well in 1886; but in 1876, while Samper was away fighting against the Liberal government, their printing press was confiscated and Acosta de Samper was evicted with her daughters and given 24 hours to hand over her house to the authorities.⁷

Acosta de Samper thus directly suffered the ravages of civil unrest. While her historical novels offer her female readers positive role models and instruct them in the intricacies of Colombian history, they also contain explicit attacks on contemporary politics and pointed comments about the degeneration of Colombian society. In *La juventud de Andrés*, for example, she rails against the venal and mediocre politicians of her day, carefully differentiating between democracy in general and democratic politicians in particular:

"Yo no culpo de ningún modo a la República, el gobierno ideal de la verdadera civilización [...]: culpo a los ambiciosos, a los corrompidos, a los malos hombres que se han hecho dueños de este desgraciado país para

explotarlo y corromperlo, [...] culpo a los buenos mismos que no han sabido unirse para formar un gobierno verdaderamente civilizador, y que pasan la vida disputando acerca de menudencias y pequeñeces.” (*La juventud de Andrés*, in *La Mujer*, vol. 4, no. 37, May 15, 1880, p. 9)

Rather than achieving the nineteenth-century ideal of progress, Colombia has declined from its previous glories because contemporary politicians are unworthy of their task. Elsewhere Acosta de Samper pinpoints the chief problem confronting Colombian democracy when she criticizes “este amor al lucro a cualquier precio, estas mezquinas y villanas pasiones de los hombres materialistas del día” (*La Familia: Lecturas para el Hogar*, 684). Materialism and greed, she claims, are the fatal flaws causing the imminent downfall of the Colombian nation. The dream of democracy has been betrayed and politicians think only of the opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of their nation.

When Acosta de Samper uses her historical novels as vehicles for her diatribes about the petty spirit of greedy politicians, she is condemning the men who turned her out of her house. But more generally, she is critiquing the failure to resolve conflict peacefully. The revolution, she reminds us, was marred by quarrels between the leaders of the independence movement; these internal rifts have been carried forth to the present day. The pattern of violent resolution to conflicts that should be settled legally and peacefully in the new democracy continues to her present, when she and her family become the victims of the inability of politicians to follow democratic procedures. Such ideas intrude into her attempts in the *Andrés* trilogy in particular to create a narrative about the Wars of Independence that would follow through on her avowed desire to trace the growth of the spirit of liberty throughout Spanish American history. The sense of fatalism that pervades the trilogy prevents the creation of an uplifting narrative about the rise of the new Spanish American nations. While the creation of modern Colombia is one of the themes of the *Andrés* novels, it can never be an unmitigatedly utopian vision; rather, Acosta de Samper points towards the dystopia resulting from the euphoric beginnings of Spanish American independence. Earlier I suggested that Acosta de Samper employs the alternation of historical and fictional events in order to present her female readers with viable role models for the combination of familial and national love. But the conclusion of the trilogy works against Acosta de Samper’s avowed purpose in presenting a fictionalized version of Colombian independence, complete with patriotic mothers whose behavior and beliefs should be emulated by her readers. *Una familia patriota* ends with Mariquita reunited with her soldier-husband, but with her health shattered. Marianita marries a titled Spaniard and returns to Spain with him. One of the most forceful female characters is thus removed from the literary-historical scene

and from her nation, sent into amorous exile. Finally, Pepita Piedrahita, the widow of the revolutionary hero Custodio García Rovira, retires to a convent to dedicate the rest of her life to guarding the memory of her lost love. Her words close the novel as she tells Marianita, “‘La vida es un enigma sin solución [...]. Me resigno y acepto mi suerte sin quejarme’” (690), averring that it is better to be the widow of the perfect husband than the wife of an inferior man. This ending does not point to a clear future for the Colombian inhabitants of the novel; Clemente and Mariquita do not have children, nor do any of Andrés’s nephews marry, while Pepita asserts—and Marianita’s marriage to a Spaniard confirms—that there are no Colombian men worthy of their national heroines. Colombian marriages are unproductive, and the one new marriage that concludes the novel is instantly transplanted to Spain, back to the colonizing power. The trilogy weaves together contradictions in such a way that the series concludes with a weak compromise between the two narrative threads of the fictional and historical plotlines, as the two possible endings for women—marriage and the convent—prove deeply inadequate for the demands of the narrative scheme and of the new Colombian nation.

Briefly, then, Acosta de Samper first took up the genre of the historical novel as an attempt to respond to what she perceived as the failures of Colombian democracy. Once the political turmoil associated with Núñez’s attempts to win the presidency had died down, she left behind her historical fictions; between 1887 and 1904 she concentrated on editing family magazines and on writing “conventional” histories, travel narratives, and domestic manuals. Twenty years later, however, she returned to the genre of the historical novel and in 1905 published her last two historical novels. *Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas* is a colonial novel that follows the misadventures of a Spaniard taken hostage by fierce Carib Indians, while *Un chistoso de aldea* narrates the effects of the Wars of Independence on a small rural community. Acosta de Samper’s return to the historical novel after a lengthy hiatus was, I believe, prompted by what she saw as a disastrous event for Colombia equivalent to the civil unrest that had threatened the continued existence of Colombian democracy in the early 1880s.

Once Rafael Núñez won the presidency in 1884, the Conservatives occupied all governmental posts, supplanting the Liberals. Liberal dissatisfaction finally erupted decisively into civil war in late 1899. The War of a Thousand Days dragged on as intermittent guerrilla fighting until the end of 1902, having disrupted trade, destroyed the infrastructure, and caused rampant inflation. This war was followed only a year later by Colombia’s loss of Panama in 1903. Panama seceded from Colombia under the protection of the United States military, which guaranteed Panamanian sovereignty in order to protect its own future rights to the Panama canal. The

loss of Panama was a crushing blow to Colombian pride and underlined the nation's inability to retain its territories in the face of the overwhelming political and military power of the United States.

Acosta de Samper responded immediately to this affront to her nation by writing a manifesto and circulating it among more than 300 Bogotan women. The manifesto addressed the acting president, José Manuel Marroquín, reminded him of past Spanish American heroes who had fought successfully against foreign oppressors, and beseeched him to follow their noble example. Acosta de Samper viewed the loss of Panama and the role of the United States in this catastrophe as potent threats to the Colombian nation, already weakened by the War of the Thousand Days. The outbreak of a civil war to resolve questions of political succession and access to power replicated a history she had already lived twenty years before, when Conservatives and Liberals battled in a mirror-image struggle of the rebellion she now witnessed. And as she had done then, in 1905 she turned once again to the past in an effort to find appropriate models for contemporary national behavior at this time of crisis. In addition to the proclamation she addressed to Marroquín, Acosta de Samper published two historical novels in her magazine, *Lecturas para el Hogar*. Once again, she had recourse to the historical novel as a way to create persuasive models for national behavior and to issue forceful pronouncements linking personal responsibility with patriotic duties. In addition, with *Aventuras de un español* and *Un chistoso de aldea* she returned to the two founding moments of Spanish American history: the Conquest and the Wars of Independence, the settings for the majority of her previous historical novels as well.

Unlike the vast majority of her earlier historical novels, *Un chistoso de aldea* does not follow the narrative pattern established by those earlier texts of alternating a historical storyline with a fictional one. Rather, Acosta de Samper focuses on the ways that the revolution affects Justo and his village. Indeed, she explicitly rejects the opportunity to narrate once more the story of the struggle for independence, saying, "No entra en nuestro plan hacer aquí la reseña de las desgracias y desaciertos de los Padres de la patria" (171). In this way she claims that she wants to avoid narrating the history of the controversies and internal struggles that threatened to tear the nascent country apart. Given that this novel was written at least partially in response to the United States' intervention in the Panamanian secession, it makes sense that Acosta de Samper would turn away from a portrait of Colombia as a divided nation in favor of portraying the independence period in more favorable, even uplifting terms. The successful fight for independence and nationhood might then serve as an inspirational model for her readers as they faced what seemed to be another threat to Colombian sovereignty. At the very least, if Acosta de Samper cannot bring herself to rewrite Colombian national formation as a positive, ideal experience, she expresses the desire

to silence the unpleasant aspects of that history in favor of focusing on the personal lives of the villagers affected by the revolution.

But if Acosta de Samper is in fact attempting to create an inspirational novel for her readers in a time of national crisis by recurring to a previous moment in which Colombians fought successfully for their independence from an arbitrary, oppressive colonizing power, other aspects of *Un chistoso de aldea* work against that interpretation. While the narrator claims that the novel will not include an account of the problems plaguing the founding of the nation, that very statement appears immediately after the narrator sums up the years between 1810 and 1816 by saying, “en breve las contrariedades, [...] la desunión, las rivalidades, las envidias de unos, el orgullo y el poco juicio de otros, fue perdiendo a los patriotas y a la República” (171). In fact, despite the narrative’s assertions that a critique of the revolution is not part of the novel, it is obvious that the same doubts and fears about the revolution that marked Acosta de Samper’s earlier novels are in play in *Un chistoso de aldea* as well. Not only does she include pointed barbs about the inability of the patriots to cooperate with one another, as she did in the *Andrés* novels, but she also inserts statements about the inability of the common people to understand the events in which they are taking part. For example, Justo participates in the rebellion because it appears to him to be an amusing adventure, not because he grasps the concepts of liberty, justice, or freedom. While Acosta de Samper’s stated intent may be to ignore the internal dissent that she had emphasized in previous historical novels about the wars of independence, *Un chistoso de aldea* ends up repeating and reinscribing many of the same critiques contained in her earlier novels of the independence period as a time flawed by infighting among the patriots and by the growing access of the masses to an independence they do not deserve.

The tension in the novel between the explicit desire to avoid a narrative focusing on the internal conflict of the revolutionary period and the inability to avoid touching on that very topic finds an uneasy resolution in the withdrawal of the narrative action to the isolated village of Guaduas. This also has the advantage of removing the protagonist, Justo, from the mob violence in which he participates in Bogotá. Given Acosta de Samper’s clear disdain for the working classes, Justo can only serve as a viable hero of her novel when he is singled out as an individual, not marked as a member of a collectivity. To emphasize his individuality further, in Guaduas he must go into solitary hiding. Acosta de Samper in this way literally distances Justo from the mob she so obviously scorns and keeps him from taking part in the scenes of mass violence and rebellion she criticizes in this novel and in her others as well. But this removal also has the effect of reducing the wars of independence to a matter of personal dislike, since the main conflict is played out between Justo and a member of the Spanish bureaucracy, the anonymous Oídor, who is alternately his victim and his torturer. The

political motivations of both sides are transformed through this narrative mechanism into clashes of personality between the jesting Justo and the humorless Oñdor. The problem with this is that the Wars of Independence scarcely form even a backdrop to the novel; they are only a pretext for the conflict between the two men and their various allies. If Acosta de Samper wants to use the independence period either as a cautionary tale or as an inspirational example for her readers—and she seems to want to do both—the two desires cancel each other out, leaving her—and her readers—with neither of the desired texts.

In *Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas*, published almost simultaneously with *Un chistoso de aldea*, Acosta de Samper returns to the time period she had previously treated in *Un hidalgo conquistador*. *Aventuras de un español entre los indios de las Antillas* focuses on Cristóbal de Guzmán, a historical figure abducted and killed by Carib Indians in 1528. In Acosta de Samper's version, Guzmán survives thanks to the protection of Cauquil, an Indian who, after having been taken to Spain by Bartolomé de las Casas, rejects Christianity, returns to his people and becomes their shaman. The novel alternates scenes of Guzmán's struggle for survival with the determined efforts of his faithful wife, Mayor, to arm an expedition and rescue her husband. Mayor's desire to punish the Indians is changed to pity and remorse when Cauquil is slain by a Spaniard and she then learns that he was in reality Guzmán's rescuer.

Acosta de Samper establishes a polarity between the "good" and "bad" Spaniards, one facilitated by the pre-existing division of the two Spanish enterprises in the early colonial period—conquest and colonization. The peaceful, Catholic colonizers, symbolized by the Guzmáns, oppose the greedy, military conquerors. One party wishes to convert, civilize, and assist the Indians; the other wishes to enslave and eradicate them. Acosta de Samper uses this opposition in order to play out the conflict between Colombia and the United States; on the one hand are the true Catholics whose aim is to settle the land and create a civilization, on the other are the irreligious soldiers interested only in despoiling the New World for personal interests. These self-interested militaristic conquerors are stand-ins for the forces of the United States, which had just used its military power to facilitate Panama's secession. An American warship had prevented Colombian troops from arriving in Panama when the rebellion broke out there, and statements by both President Theodore Roosevelt and the United States Congress made it clear that the United States military would act to protect Panama from Colombian troops. This protection was, of course, motivated by the treaty the United States had signed guaranteeing it the Canal Zone, with its lucrative potential for controlling vast amounts of trade. Similarly, the "bad" Spaniards of the novel exploit the Indians, natural resources of the New World, for personal gain, while the "good

Spaniards"—true creoles—attempt to strike a compromise with the native inhabitants and to bring them civilization and religion. The issue here is how Spaniards and Indians will manage to coexist and to share the same territory. But the solution is in either case a final one: the Indians are to be exterminated and/or converted. In this respect, it is telling that Acosta de Samper situates her narrative among the Carib Indians, a tribe rapidly exterminated by the Spanish and never successfully pacified or converted. Despite the apparent possibility of conversion and peaceful colonization offered by Mayor's vow at the end of the novel to dedicate the rest of her life to helping Las Casas' charitable efforts, this possibility is just as quickly erased by the revelation that the Captain of the expedition to free Guzmán has continued his voyage with the intention of capturing and enslaving Indians. The goodness and religiosity of Mayor, Guzmán, and his brother Fray Vicente are negated by the cruelty and mercantilism of the other Spaniards, leaving us once more with a novel whose stated ends cancel one another out.

In conclusion, Acosta de Samper turned to the historical novel in what she perceived to be a time of national crisis, just as she had twenty years previously. She wanted to elucidate for her readers the historical backdrop to the events that they were witnessing and to present appropriate models of behavior for them; however, the contradictory messages of the novels' plots, characters, and conclusions show that her efforts to articulate an uncomplicated message about gender, national identity, and patriotism for her female readers were doomed from the start by her own misgivings about the eventual outcome of the events she was witnessing. Both in the period from 1878 to 1887 and again in 1905, Acosta de Samper made use of the genre of the historical novel in order to create a narrative space from which she could speak to a female audience about issues of national scope and import. While her works in all genres were meant to have an edifying effect upon her readers, she had recourse to the historical novel in particular when she wanted to convey messages about nationality, patriotism, and female roles within the home and the nation. By publishing these novels in her journals, *La Mujer*, *La Familia*, and *Lecturas para el Hogar*, she further defined her own audience and created a space from which she could speak about issues in the public sphere without threatening or disrupting cultural norms for female behavior. She wrote romantic historical novels in which she combined tales of thwarted love with historical data and published them in magazines whose titles clearly show the intended audience and even the place of reading—the home. Within this apparently domestic sphere and domestic genre, however, Acosta de Samper instructed her readers about how best to participate in the national scene; her audience learned about the importance of national history and its connections to contemporary politics and found out what their roles as wives and mothers entailed in terms of

national identity and democratic consolidation. Acosta de Samper uses her series of “episodios histórico-novelescos” in order to produce her own historical tradition. Her texts do not merely record history but make it, encoding a particular narrative of Latin American history into literary tradition. Although her novels at times communicate mixed or even contradictory messages to her readers, the fact remains that Acosta de Samper managed to construct an enunciatory space from which she could issue pronouncements about events of national scope. Acosta de Samper’s conscious involvement in the effort to create a space within the public sphere where she and other women could voice their opinions about national and political events shows that women were active participants in the creation of national discourse and that issues of gender and national identity were increasingly entwined in late nineteenth-century writings in Spanish America.

NOTES

- 1 For a description of the ways in which early nineteenth-century Latin Americans conceived of the break in and with history, see Anderson, especially pp. 192-5.
- 2 The specific issue to which I am referring is that of October 1, 1879, but almost all of the other issues follow a similar pattern.
- 3 Lucía Guerra Cunningham points to this dynamic in her analysis of several other novels, seeing in Acosta de Samper’s early novels an attempt to deal with the dialectic of gender and writing through the creation of a Romantic heroine who “asume una posición de sujeto subvirtiendo imaginariamente su alteridad histórica. Sin embargo, dicha posición queda [...] a nivel de un gesto tronchado [...]” (364). Guerra Cunningham also points out that José María Samper wrote the introduction to his wife’s first novel, *Novelas y cuadros de la vida sur-americana*, and calls this an example of how Acosta de Samper’s work is located “bajo la ley patriarcal” (355).
- 4 Although Acosta de Samper claimed that *La Mujer* was the first entirely female-run magazine in Latin America, there were by 1878 examples of other female-edited journals, such as Petrona Rosende de Serra’s *La Aljaba* (1830), Rosa Guerra’s *La Camelia* (1852), and Juana Manso de Noronha’s *Album de Señoritas* (1854), all in Argentina. Since the authors in many of these journals adopted pseudonyms or otherwise remained anonymous, it is difficult to state with certainty whether or not they were all women. However, Acosta de Samper does seem to be the first female journalist to advance explicitly and forcefully a journal solely written by women. See Masiello, pp. 7-19.
- 5 For a cogent survey of Samper’s literary career, see Williams, especially pp. 31-33.

6 The first four months of the journal were reprinted in 1880, but the serialized histories and novels were rearranged sequentially; that is, it was not a facsimile edition of the journal. For this reason I have been unable to determine exactly when in 1878 Acosta de Samper began publishing the *Cuadros*.

7 For these and other biographical details, see Ordóñez and Otero Muñoz.

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