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Escritura y desafío. Narradoras venezolanas del siglo XX.
Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1995.

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Citas recomendadas

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The work of feminist scholars in the past few decades has done much to call attention to the literary accomplishments of Latin American women writers. In spite of the explosion of literary criticism concerned with Spanish American women writers (and the commercial success of contemporary writers such as Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel), few women novelists have gained the same sort of international recognition as their male peers. The "Boom," for example, is markedly male. Granted, a small body of works by twentieth-century women writers has made the "canonical spotlight". But behind the few widely recognized figures are a number of Spanish American women writers whose work is beginning to receive more extensive critical attention (Rosario Castellanos, Luisa Valenzuela, and Rosario Ferré come to mind). The growing interest in writers previously overshadowed by larger figures (fueled by post-Boom burnout, perhaps?), combined with the growing tendency to examine narrative texts using diverse critical approaches, promises a more comprehensive (as well as more inclusive) analysis of not only "women's literature," but Spanish American Literature as a whole.

Escritura y desafío. Narradoras venezolanas del siglo XX, edited by Edith Dimo and Amarilis Hidalgo de Jesús, marks such an attempt to broaden the scope of literary criticism. The collection suggests a number of interesting questions about how we might envision a tradition of women's writing, not only in Venezuela, but also in Spanish America as a whole. Indeed, the editors emphasize that one of the goals of their project is to examine the woman writer's place in Latin America. The essays strive for depth by focusing on a specific geopolitical region, while they show breadth in their coverage of twentieth century authors, including Ana Rosa Angarita, Laura Antillano, Silda Cordoliani, Milagros Mata Gil, Alicia Freilich, María Luisa Lázzaro, Antonieta Madrid, Stefanía Mosca, Antonia Palacios, Lucila Palacios, Nery Russo, Lourdes Sifontes, Victoria de Stefano, Gloria Stolk, Ana Teresa Torres, and Ángela Zago.

Any discussion of Venezuelan women authors is bound to begin with one of the country's best-known novelists, male or female: Teresa de la Parra. The editors contend that we might view Parra as the central creative figure around whom the Venezuelan tradition of women's writing is formed. *Ifigenia* (1924), they argue, functions as "texto motor" which has driven subsequent developments in this narrative tradition, producing "un desaffo al orden convencional a través de la elaboración de un discurso que ... intenta dar inicio a la participación de la mujer-escritora en el proceso histórico-social latinoamericano" (13). Parra initiates a literary tradition that is conscious of the subversiveness of writing itself. Accordingly, the collection begins with two essays that reexamine Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia*: Claire Emilie Martin's "*Ifigenia y el lenguaje de la moda*" and Patricia Dórame-Holoviak's "*Ifigenia, aquella vieja moral: elaboración de la palabra, elaboración del cuerpo.*" These two essays reveal one of the larger thematic concerns of the volume — women's bodies and bodies of writing, "el cuerpo de la mujer y el cuerpo de la escritura" (9) as the editors describe it in their introduction. The rest of the collection builds on this theme as it relates to others, including but not limited to rape and domestic violence, exile and memory, women's relationship to historical and political discourse, masculine and feminine difference, identity formation and subjectivity, and issues of genre and narrative voice. These themes point to similarities as well as differences among the body of texts, and a number of the authors situate the text(s) at hand in a larger literary context, one which goes beyond the boundaries of Venezuela or Latin America.

Due to the large number of essays (twenty), I can only briefly mention a few here. Patricia Dórame-Holoviak's study of Lucila Palacios's narrative *Tres palabras y una mujer* traces the negative consequences of the limitations placed on women in bourgeois society of the 1940s, arguing that the privileged relation "entre la voz y la escritura" becomes subversive in Palacios's text. A number of essays explore the treatment of political discourse in Venezuelan women's novels, another part of the tradition which might be traced back to Parra, who meticulously wove politics into the plot and character of *Ifigenia*. In the texts examined here, political discourse is manifested through often violent means, such as Yesenia Milmar Rodríguez's attention to the historical background of the 1960s guerilla movements in her analysis of "El discurso político en la voz de una mujer en *Aquí no ha pasado nada y Existe la vida*, de Ángela Zago." Alicia Kozameh delves into the relationship between women's oppression and military might via the figure of the *caudillo* in "Ficción e historia en *La mujer del caudillo* del Nery Russo." Kozameh's essay builds on the connection between political repression and women's repression outlined

earlier in Alejandro Bernal's juxtapositioning of Antonieta Madrid's novel *No es tiempo para rosas rojas* with her collection of essays *Lo bello es feo*.

Fernando Reati's examination of Alicia Freilich's novel *Colombina descubierta*, foregrounds the ways in which Freilich fragments the historical subject in order to question the idea of a unified historiographical narrative. Situating the novel in the context of the many retellings of the story of Cristóbal Colón which appeared around 1992, the 500 year anniversary of his arrival in America, Reati draws attention to the questions raised by the novel about the relationship of marginalized groups to History. Historical concerns also play a central part in Cynthia Tompkins's "La re-escritura de la historia en *Doña Inés contra el olvido* de Ana Teresa Torres" and the articles by Gloria da Cunha-Giabbai and Steven M. DuPouy, which examine the uses of discourses of history and myth in novels by Ana Teresa Torres and Lourdes Sifontes, respectively.

A number of the essays in the collection focus on issues of subjectivity and identity. In "Los perfumes de la memoria; *Perfume de Gardenia* de Laura Antillano," Zulema Moret explores the generic hybridity of Antillano's narrative, which she defines as a "mezcla de *Bildungsroman* femenina, novela autobiográfica, novela experimental, confesión" (163). Edith Dimo examines another of Antillano's novels, *Solitaria solidaria*, tracing the ways in which the women's autobiography is a doubly marginal discourse. The final piece in the collection, an interview with three of the writers whose work is addressed in the volume — Laura Antillano, Stefanía Mosca and Ana Teresa Torres — underscores the significance of the creative process while reminding us that in spite of Roland Barthes's proclamation, the author lives.

The shortcomings of the collection are minor and common in anthologies of literary criticism of this kind. Many of the essays are brief; some offer little guidance to readers unfamiliar with the works discussed. This is to be expected, due to the large number of articles and probable page limitations. But it is also unfortunate, as one imagines that one of the goals of the collection is to familiarize readers outside of Venezuela with the tradition of women's narrative. The volume does, however, trigger further interest in the corpus of texts analyzed therein. The brevity of some pieces may also account for a seeming over-reliance on familiar binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, which seem to be reinforced even as the authors try to move beyond them. Yet the majority of the essays subtly acknowledge the complexities, and even some of the dangers, of reading women's writing as if it were all written with the same "white ink," to borrow Héléne Cixous's term.

Overall, the book is an excellent resource for any reader interested in learning more about the diversity of prose fiction produced in Spanish

America, as well as for readers interested in women's literature. Though not an exhaustive study of Venezuelan narrative by women, *Escritura y desafío* provides an inspiring example of the kind of critical work still sorely needed, not only at the national level, but at a Pan-American level as well.

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