

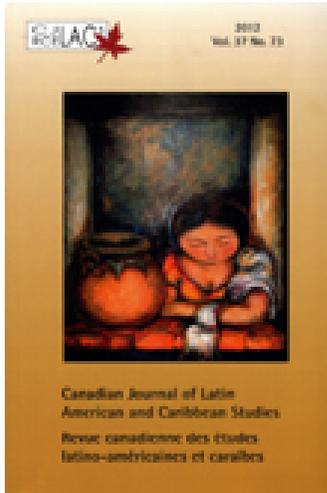
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### Border Work: Resituating Twentieth-Century Latin American and Caribbean Women Writers

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# **BORDER WORK: RESITUATING TWENTIETH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS**

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Nicole Roberts and Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, eds.

*Border Crossings: A Trilingual Anthology of Caribbean Women Writers*  
Kingston, Jamaica: U of the West Indies P, 2011, 266 pp.

Madeline Cámara Betancourt, translated by David Frye

*Cuban Women Writers: Imagining a Matria*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 191 pp.

Lady Rojas Benavente

*Canto Poético a Capella de las Escritoras Peruanas de 1900 a 1960*

Lima: Editatú Editores, 2010, 473 pp.

Bringing attention to the work of Latin American and Caribbean authors who work on the margins of mainstream global and national publishing circuits is no easy task. The challenge is doubly hard, one could argue, when said authors are women writing outside of or against the norms of their social and cultural milieu or working in “minor” or multiple languages. Three recent works on women authors from the region address these challenges both implicitly and explicitly while at the same time highlighting the impressive artistic and social

contributions many of these authors have made over the course of their careers. While these three studies are vastly different in style and scope, their shared focus on women writers reminds us of the continued saliency—and slipperiness—of feminist literary critique. A multilingual anthology of Caribbean-born writers, a sketch of an alternate literary history focusing on dissident women writers in Cuba, and a comprehensive study of Peruvian women authors and cultural workers from the early to mid 20th century, these texts provide an excellent insight into the lives and works of the writers under study.

According to editors Nicole Roberts and Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, the trilingual nature of their anthology of Caribbean women writers sets it apart from other anthologies of women authors from the region. The collection features six short stories by writers from Jamaica, Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Haiti, all born between the early 1940s and the mid 1950s, and the selected texts display a broad range in content and narrative voice. Given the anthology's geographical and thematic scope, its trilingualism is indeed one of its defining features and is a welcome contribution to the study of Caribbean women's literature. In their Introduction the editors point to the linguistic borders (or boundaries) faced by Caribbean writers and the scholars of their work when attempting to create a dialogue across the many languages of the region. By choosing to provide texts in three major languages of the Caribbean—English, Spanish, and French—the editors and translators have taken a great step in crossing these borders and have given their readers the tools to follow suit. As they signal early on, many of their selected writers do not necessarily fit into a single linguistic or national category, making the appearance of their work in translation even more important. Since location (including dislocation and multiple locations) and identity both inside and outside of the Caribbean are some of the themes connecting a number of these short stories, attention to the importance of cross-cultural linguistic communication not only fills a gap in Caribbean literary scholarship but also in discussions of diaspora, transnationalism, and multiculturalism.

The texts are organized by language of origin followed by the translations in the two other languages. The collection begins with two stories by the English-language authors, followed by two texts from the Francophone writers, and ends with two stories by the His-

panophone authors. Thematically, many of the stories in this anthology touch on geographical and social location (and how these are often related). This theme is approached in a number of ways, but primarily through the protagonists' experiences of isolation through linguistic, class, and racial differences, migration from the country to the city and from colony to metropole, and through socially imposed cultural and gender roles. "Location" can also be perceived in the stories that deal with aspects of aging and the often difficult transition from youthful idealism to the cold, and sometimes tragic, realities of adulthood.

The opening stories by Olive Senior and Shani Mootoo highlight the various class and racial hierarchies that affect their protagonists, both within their respective islands (Jamaica and Trinidad) and outside of the Caribbean. Senior's deceptively simple story, "Bright Thursdays," charting a young girl's move from her mother's poor rural home to her paternal grandparents' upper-middle-class house, is more broadly about the racial and class differences between dark-skinned and light-skinned Jamaicans, which, ultimately, isolate her from both her maternal and paternal families. Shani Mootoo's text similarly highlights "difference" insofar as the narrator becomes aware of how she and her family members, who are of Indian descent, are Othered by her British English teacher in Trinidad and later on by her White Canadian friends when she is an adult living in Vancouver: her English teacher looks down on her family for being dark-skinned and Hindu while her Canadian friends who love all things Indian try to "teach" her about her culture. Another aspect of "difference" in this story is the narrator's central revelation that all Whiteness is not the same, adding another layer of nuance to an already complex narrative. The stories by Gisèle Pineau (Guadeloupe) and Carmen Lugo Filippi (Puerto Rico) have in common older female protagonists who have spent a lifetime avoiding the realities of the present and their troubled relationships with their husbands only to find disillusionment with themselves, their marriages, and the decisions they have made along the way.

Whereas the Roberts and Walcott-Hackshaw anthology showcases fiction by Caribbean women writers, Madeline Cámara Betancourt's work provides four essays analyzing the literature produced by Cuban women writers. Translated into English from Spanish, the essays

in this collection provide a unique and highly engaging take on the works of four well-known Cuban writers: Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, Lydia Cabrera, María Elena Cruz Varela, and Zoe Valdes (whom she respectively dubs the Utopian, the Founder, the Prophet, and the *Picara* [the Crafty One]). At first glance, this may seem like a highly eclectic mix of literary forms—Cámara focuses on Rodríguez's political writings and early feminist activism, Lydia Cabrera's "poetic ethnography," Cruz Varela's religious poetry, and Zoe Valdés's post-modern novel about life in Havana. However, the thread connecting the work of all these women is their use of writing as a tool for giving voice to people and perspectives that are, or have been, otherwise silenced (women, Afro-Cubans, and anti-Castro dissidents). It is primarily this link between their works that Cámara sees as creating the basis for the imagined "matria" (Motherland) of her title. As she states in her Introduction, "only a *subversive women's discourse* can re-write the matria. Its *liberating* aspect creates a different *ordering* from that of the *Law of the Father* that applies in the male imaginary of the Patria [Fatherland]" (p. 9, her emphasis). Much like Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, then, Cámara's idea of nationhood is intrinsically tied to the writing and communicating of shared values and histories in the construction and maintenance of a viable, differentiated identity. The nation she is interested in portraying in this collection of essays, however, is precisely that face of the nation that traditional, male-focused accounts often miss.

Given the excellent work these women writers have accomplished over their lifetimes and the potential of this line of thinking, the analysis that is ultimately provided in *Cuban Women Writers* itself often ignores some very important facets of the Cuban matria. Her essay on Lydia Cabrera's fascinating body of work rightly identifies Cabrera's seminal writings on Afro-Cuban culture and religion as "postmodern ethnography" à la Stephen A. Tyler, and she supports Cabrera's view that her ethnographic work faithfully represented the voices of the "walking archives" with which she worked. Unfortunately, this uncritical view of the "voice" of ethnography does not take into account the important class and racial differences between Cabrera and her Afro-Cuban "subjects" of study, many of whom were also ostensibly women and had had very different experiences of *patria* from Cabrera's. Without addressing the limits of the ethnographic voice

and the privileged position of the researcher (whether or not they are engaged in more liberatory forms of research than early anthropologists) or qualifying the use of “woman” as a category of analysis, Cámara runs the risk of imposing yet another totalizing narrative onto a very complex group of texts and heterogeneous group of people. The replacement of one totalizing discourse by another is also evident in her treatment of María Elena Cruz Varela’s complex work, where her analysis of the motif of the body—both as the Freudian feminine body and the Christian tortured body—are presented as expressions of liberation from the tyranny of Castro’s patriarchal nation-state. While Cruz Varela’s poetic critique of the Castro regime (her very public dissidence led to her imprisonment and eventual exile) can certainly be read as being subversive, both Christianity and traditional psychoanalytic models (notwithstanding the work of Julia Kristeva she cites in this field) have constructed women in the negative and should be problematized as such in any analysis of their role in a “liberatory” feminist discourse. Nevertheless, Cámara’s analysis of Cabrera’s, Cruz Varela’s, and Valdes’s work, their struggles with the Castro regime, and the experiences of exile they chronicle demonstrates the poignancy of these writers’ re-imagining of the *Patria/Matria* in light of their imposed physical separation from the island.

If Cámara’s collection of essays can be thought of as an alternative literary history based on feminist dissidence, Lady Rojas Benavente’s *Canto Poético a Capella de las Escritoras Peruanas de 1900 a 1960* provides instead a corrective to existing Peruvian literary histories by shedding light on the existence of an extensive and rich body of poetic production by some 20 women writers in the first half of the 20th century. Rojas introduces her impressive book by outlining some of the methodological challenges faced when undertaking this kind of study, such as difficulties in obtaining the texts produced by these writers—small print runs and usually no more than a single edition—and the dearth of secondary literature on these writers’ work. According to Rojas, there is a paucity of critical works on women writers from this period in the histories of Hispanic-American literature and little knowledge about the emergence of women in both the literary/artistic field and the labour force. Citing this state of affairs as the general impetus for engaging in this research, Rojas goes beyond the literary in *Escritoras Peruanas* by also tracing these writers’ artistic and

cultural activities in their roles as teachers, activists, and journalists who put forward their “vanguardist” vision in both their writing and their extraliterary work. Thus, like Cámara, Rojas is also interested in demonstrating how Peruvian women writers in this period were social agents who effected fundamental historical change.

It is evident that Rojas’s book is the product of in-depth and meticulous research and is a valuable intervention in the field. Rojas guides the reader through a rich historical context—or genealogy, as she puts it—for understanding the emergence of these writers and their works (beginning with such early politically committed writers as Ángela Ramos and Magda Portal); she then provides individual analyses of a number of their texts, as well as transcripts of interviews she conducted with a number of her subjects. This study not only calls our attention to the lives and works of these writers, but also to the process of canonization and what this process often leaves out. In this sense, these three publications on women’s writing in Latin America and the Caribbean are in dialogue with this larger process and provide a thoughtful reflection on its limits and possibilities.