

LESBIAN VOICES FROM LATIN AMERICA

Elena M. Martínez

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For K. B.
with love and appreciation

In memory of
NANCY CÁRDENAS
(1934-1994)

It is our fiction that validates us.
Monique Wittig

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FOREWORD

The idea to write this book began burgeoning in 1988, when upon finishing my doctoral dissertation at New York University on the narrative works of the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti, I read enthusiastically *En breve cárcel* (*Certificate of Absence*), the first Spanish American novel with a lesbian theme, written by the Argentinean literary critic Sylvia Molloy. I was so impressed by Molloy's work that I wrote an essay ("*En breve cárcel*: la escritura/lectura del (de lo) otro en los textos de Onetti y Molloy") on the themes of the "other," "otherness" and voyeurism in *En breve cárcel* and in two works by Onetti, "Bienvenido, Bob" and "La novia robada." However, like other critics who have studied Molloy's novel, I did not address its lesbianism in my essay.

In 1989, my attention turned to the works of a Cuban writer living in Sweden, René Vázquez Díaz, who is the author of *La era imaginaria*, *Querido traidor*, *La precocidad de los tiempos*, *Trovador americano*, *Tambor de medianoche* and *Donde se pudre la belleza*. His novel *La era imaginaria* attracted my interest because of its polyphonic texture as well as its articulation of four major discourses: the literary, the feminist, the humorous and the sexual. The articulation of feminist and sexual discourses interested me in particular because of the author's ability to present and develop a wide range of conflicting possibilities and ideas that contest Western cultural traditions. *La era imaginaria* gives voice to a broader representation of women and gay men, thus creating a more inclusive discourse than other Latin American literary works.

My interest in Molloy's *Certificate of Absence* and Vázquez Díaz's *La era imaginaria* stems from my commitment to the study of literature that presents women's issues and homosexual themes. In 1991, after being appointed Assistant Professor at Baruch College (City University of New York), I participated in a series of workshops on "Multiculturalism and Pluralism" organized by Profs. Paula

Berggren and George Otte of the English Department at Baruch. At that time, I was asked to give a talk on Latin American writers whose works present a different perspective from the mainstream Latin American literary canon. As part of those workshops on "Multiculturalism and Pluralism," I included the study of Latin American works that present gay and lesbian themes, such as the works of the Cuban gay writer Reinaldo Arenas and Sylvia Molloy's *Certificate of Absence*. During those workshops in 1991 at Baruch College, I became more aware of the importance of studying lesbian and gay voices in Latin American literature. Hence, this book grew out of a movement toward raising awareness of pluralistic views on literature and diversity in society.

* * *

PREFACE

In spite of the attention that Latin American women writers have attracted over the last two decades, a book dedicated exclusively to those writers whose work primarily articulates a lesbian perspective is still missing.

The purpose of *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground* is to bring attention to and examine the articulation of lesbian themes, motifs and issues in the works of Magaly Alabau, Nancy Cárdenas, Sylvia Molloy, Rosamaría Roffiel and Luz María Umpierre. It aims to study the problems pertaining to the specific literary representations of lesbianism and to examine the dimensions of a lesbian view in the works of these authors. This study underscores my belief that Latin American lesbian writing merits an independent investigation. By undertaking the study of the works of these women writers, this book contributes to the recognition and legitimization of a lesbian literary discourse.

Magaly Alabau (1945-) is a Cuban poet living in New York City who left her country after the outbreak of the Cuban revolution. She has published *Electra/Clitemnestra* (Electra/Clytemnestra; 1986), *La extremaunción diaria* (The Daily Extreme Unction; 1986), *Ras* (Edge; 1987), *Hermana* (Sister; 1989), *Hemos llegado a Ilión* (Ilium; 1991) and *Liebe* (1993). Her poetry has appeared in Spanish in various journals. Nancy Cárdenas (1934-1994), Mexican poet, playwright, and theater director, was, until her death in April 1994, an activist for women's and particularly lesbians' rights. Her book *Cuaderno de amor y desamor* (Book of Love and Absence of Love; forthcoming) and her play *El día que pisamos la luna* (The Day We Arrived in the Moon; forthcoming) articulates an openly lesbian erotic discourse. Sylvia Molloy (1938-), born in Buenos Aires, is a novelist and a literary critic who has lived in the United States for many years. She is the author of *En breve cárcel* (1981; translated as *Certificate of Absence*, 1989) and numerous articles and books of criticism on Latin American literature, among them *Las letras de*

Borges (1979; translated as *Signs of Borges*, 1994) and *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (1991). Rosamaría Roffiel (1945-) is a Mexican writer who has had a significant role in the Mexican feminist movement. She has worked as a journalist for *Excelsior* and the journals *Proceso* and *Fem*. Roffiel has published a collection of poetry, *Corramos libres ahora* (Let's Run Freely Now; 1986; revised edition; 1994), a documentary narrative, *¡Ay Nicaragua, Nicaraguita!* (Oh, Nicaragua, My Dear Nicaragua!; 1987), and a lesbian novel, *Amora* (Love in Feminine; 1989). Luz María Umpierre (1947-) is a Puerto Rican writer and literary critic. She came to the United States in 1974. Umpierre has published five collections of poems: *Una puertorriqueña en Penna* (A Puerto Rican in Penna; 1979), *En el país* (In the Country; 1982), *...Y otras desgracias. And Other Misfortunes...* (1985), *The Margarita Poems* (1987), *En el país de las maravillas* (In Wonderland; 1990) and *For Christine: Poems and One Letter* (1995). At present, she is working on a collection of poems dedicated to people who recently died of AIDS.

The works of Magaly Alabau, Nancy Cárdenas, Sylvia Molloy, Rosamaría Roffiel, and Luz María Umpierre present an unconventional sexual orientation. These writers frame their work within a double marginality: as women and as lesbians, they break with the patriarchal view that has insisted upon seeing sexuality as a function of reproduction. Patriarchy, based on a network of sexual and class restrictions, supports the psychological and physical repression of women. Restrictions imposed on women's sexuality are central to the subjection of women's lives and experiences in general, but in the case of lesbians there is a double exclusion, since they break with the discourse of the official (heterosexual) sexuality.

I have been selective in my study of the works of these women writers. Rather than undertaking an exploration of all their works, this book examines particular aspects of the textual representation of lesbianism. This does not mean, however, that I will attempt to reduce the works of these writers to a homogeneous literary body or to limit the possibilities of Latin American lesbian literature to the particularities of the works of these five writers. Instead, I am interested in exploring the similarities and differences of each writer's literary expressions as well as the complexities of the label "Latin American lesbian literature."

This heterogeneous group of writers offers a good sample of the types of lesbian literature being produced by Latin American

women living in the United States (Alabau, Molloy, Umpierre) and in Latin America (Cárdenas and Roffiel). My selections do not correspond to any geographical distribution but rather to my personal literary taste and to the availability of works. My study is temporally limited to writers whose work began to appear in the 1970's and who, except for Cárdenas, who passed away in the spring of 1994, are still writing.

The title of this book, *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground*, echoes previous literary criticism dedicated to the study of the works of Latin American women authors, such as Naomi Lindstrom's *Women's Voice in Latin American Literature* (1989) and Evelyn Picón Garfield's *Women's Voices from Latin America: Interviews with Six Contemporary Authors* (1985). The word "voices" in the title indicates the heterogeneity of the literary manifestations of the group of writers I am studying and my desire to stress the diversity in their literary expressions.

The perspectives of this book reflect my experiences as a Latin American woman who has been in the United States since 1980 and who completed her graduate studies in this country. Whereas I avoid the appropriation of concepts foreign to the conditions of Latin America, the views presented here have been shaped by my cultural and social experiences in the United States.

My work echoes the works of the Chicanas Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, American critics like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, and the French lesbian feminist Monique Wittig. In addition, this book is preceded by the valuable contributions of David William Foster, Amy K. Kaminsky, and Luz María Umpierre, who have pioneered the study of gay and lesbian Latin American literature. These critics have all presented valuable insights that have helped me develop an approach to defining and conceptualizing the lesbian perspectives of the writers I am studying. However, while the theoretical background for this book is connected to the vein of Chicana, American lesbian, and feminist literary theories, I recognize the dangers in using literary theories that do not necessarily correspond to the social realities and cultural identities of Latin America.

* * *

This book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, "The Poetics of Space and the Politics of Lesbian Exile: Magaly Alabau's

Poetry and Sylvia Molloy's Novel *Certificate of Absence*" studies the representation of space in Magaly Alabau's poetry (*Hermana*, *Electra/Clitemnestra*, *La extremaunción diaria* and *Hemos llegado a Ilión*) and Sylvia Molloy's novel *Certificate of Absence*. The representation of interior and exterior spaces in these works articulates the marginal social positioning of lesbian subjects in society. The representation of space in the works of these two writers has a poetic function as well as an ideological and political value for the theme of lesbianism in Latin American literature. While focusing on Magaly Alabau's poetry and Sylvia Molloy's novel, I shall also draw parallels to Nancy Cárdenas' poetry collection *Cuaderno de amor y desamor* (forthcoming), Rosamaría Roffiel's novel *Amora* (1989) and her poetry collection *Corramos libres ahora* (1994).

The second chapter, "Re-reading a Tradition: Lesbian Eroticism in Magaly Alabau's *Electra/Clitemnestra* and *Hermana*," is dedicated to the study of eroticism in Magaly Alabau's two collections of poetry *Electra/Clitemnestra* (1986), and *Hermana* (1989). Here I study the textual representation of sexual love and emotional intimacy in the lesbian relationships presented in these texts.

The third chapter, "Privileging Lesbian Eroticism: The Works of Rosamaría Roffiel and Nancy Cárdenas," examines the representation of love among women in the works of these two Mexican writers and its connection with Audre Lorde's definition of love. For Cárdenas and Roffiel, reclaiming love and lesbian sexuality are political acts that empower women and challenge their traditional positioning in society.

The fourth chapter, "Lesbian Eroticism and the Act of Writing: Sylvia Molloy's *Certificate of Absence*," examines the relationship of lesbian love, violence and writing in Molloy's novel. I explore the interesting connection between lesbian love and sexuality as a source of literary inspiration. The fifth chapter, "Sexual and Political Affirmation in Luz María Umpierre's *The Margarita Poems* and ... *Y otras desgracias. And Other Misfortunes...*" studies the themes of sexuality as a political affirmation bound to the Latina perspective that is presented in the works of the Puerto Rican writer Luz María Umpierre.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without colleagues and friends who have given me the help and encouragement to pursue this project.

First, I would like to thank David William Foster for his interest and support of my proposal to write a book on lesbian themes. I would also like to express my gratitude to Phyllis Korper, senior editor at Garland, for her editorial advice.

I thank my colleagues in the Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature as well as in other departments at Baruch College (CUNY), particularly Tom Hayes, who has shown a continuous interest in my work, and to Baruch College librarians who worked patiently and diligently to help me to obtain the necessary material for my research. To Louisa Moy and Edward Keller, many thanks.

I have had the good fortune to have a group of friends who have been part of this literary journey through lesbian voices. I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my dear friends Mark Albano and Francisco Soto, without whom this book would not have been a reality. I am extremely grateful to the two of them because they have read and criticized each chapter of this book, and have offered me valuable editorial advice. My work has been improved by their criticism and recommendations. I am also indebted to them for the inspiration and the expressions of sincere friendship they have offered me during the process of writing this book.

I also want to thank other friends who read partial sections of the manuscript and who made insightful comments. They are Carolina Grymbal, Mercedes Roffé and Joseph Ulitto. I thank Joseph Arsenault for helping me to proofread the manuscript. I am also thankful to James Cascaito, who has been a source of inspiration, and to Adriana Collado for her encouragement.

Ana L. Sierra, Francisco Nájera, Julio Marzán, and Ileana Ordoñez, friends and colleagues of an ongoing study group, have provided me with support and motivation. To them I am thankful.

I am especially grateful to Ana L. Sierra for her sincere friendship since graduate school.

Finally, I want to express my deepest appreciation to Kathy Buist for her patience, affection, and optimism. But above all, I thank Kathy for believing in this project since its early stages. To her, and to the memory of Nancy Cárdenas, pioneer of the Mexican lesbian and women's movements, I dedicate this book.

* * *

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

With the exception of some of Luz María Umpierre's poetry, all the texts that I study in this book were written originally in Spanish. I have included quotations in both the original Spanish texts and English versions.

I have used (with permission of Magaly Alabau and her translator Anne Twitty) the unpublished translations of *Electra/Clitemnestra*, *Hemos llegado a Ilión*, as well as the bilingual edition of *Hermana/Sister*, published by Editorial Betania.

With the assistance of Anne Twitty, I have translated Alabau's *Ras*, and *La extremaunción diaria* as well as those for Rosamaría Roffiel's, Nancy Cárdenas' and Luz María Umpierre's poetry.

All quotes from Sylvia Molloy's novel *En breve cárcel* are from Daniel Balderston's translation into English, *Certificate of Absence*.

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INTRODUCTION

[Lesbianism] is a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. Male homosexual literature has a past; it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent—just as all women are as women at all levels. When one has read the poems of Sappho, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anäis Nin, *La Bâtarde* by Violette Leduc, one has read everything. Only the women's movement has proved capable of producing lesbian texts in a context of total rupture with masculine culture, texts written by women exclusively for women, careless of male approval.

The Lesbian Body.
Monique Wittig

There exists in Latin America, like everywhere else, a denial of lesbian existence and thus, of the possibilities of a lesbian literature. It is important to contest the assumption of general heterosexuality that prevails in literature and in the institutions of literary criticism and which, as Adrienne Rich has asserted: "afflicts not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers."¹ Therefore, it is necessary to study the particulars and peculiarities of lesbian Latin American voices because they denote not only a sexual orientation but a network of cultural and social relations that requires careful examination.

The term "Latin American lesbian literature" presents many difficulties, among them the notion of definition. Does the term refer to the content of the literature itself or does it refer to the sexual orientation of the writer? I do not agree with those critics in the United States who have tried to clarify the questions concerning the use of the term by restricting their studies to the works of those

women who are openly identified as lesbians. I reject this stance for two reasons. First, the biographical approach that tries to prove the sexual orientation of the writer is non-literary. Second, many Latin American writers have not been able to identify themselves as lesbians due to social and cultural restrictions.

Much of the lesbian scholarship produced in the United States focuses on the definition of "lesbian" and "lesbian writing." The critics working on a theoretical lesbian approach have given different definitions to the term "lesbian." In this book, the word "lesbian" is used to refer to the representation of women who have erotic and sexual interest in each other and whose fundamental emotional connections are with other women. My definition coincides with the one proposed by Catherine R. Stimpson and Charlotte Bunch, for whom both the erotic and sexual involvement of women is intrinsic to the definition of lesbianism. In "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," Stimpson defines the lesbian writer, character, and reader as a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying.² For some critics, "lesbian" is a word strictly used to describe women who are sexually involved with other women, while for others, like Lillian Faderman and Audre Lorde, "lesbian" does not necessarily imply sexual or erotic involvement with other women. For the latter critics, lesbianism describes an emotional bond where sexual contact may be present to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent.³ I disagree with critics who have used the word "lesbian" in a general sense and who have only paid attention to the emotional connection among women while overlooking the sexual aspect. In my view, desexualization of woman to woman relationships is linked to the sexist opinion that women's sexuality does not exist and that women can only relate to other women on emotional terms. While it is true that many lesbians desexualized their relationships in order to establish solidarity with heterosexual women of the women's movement, that time has passed. The gay and lesbian movement in the United States has taught us that lesbians must claim their sexuality. It is precisely the sexual dimension of lesbian relationships that differentiates them from friendship, support, and solidarity.⁴

A radical argument in favor of claiming lesbians' sexuality is made by writer and lesbian activist Pat Califia in her book *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (1994). Califia attacks not only heterosexual institutions, but lesbian and gay groups that attempt to