

Elston, Cherilyn. *Women's Writing in Colombia. An Alternative History*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 242pp.

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CATHERINE VALLEJO
Concordia University, Canada

This timely volume by Cherilyn Elston from the University of Reading (United Kingdom) won LASA Montserrat Ordóñez Prize in 2018, a prize established to honour the literary legacy of this writer (Barcelona 1941-Bogotá 2001), in order to promote the search for new ways of writing, which would carry on Montserrat's explorations of women's (forgotten and ignored) accomplishments in Latin America, as presented in recent publications related to women's writing in Colombia. It is clear that Cherilyn Elston's study fully deserves this award. The aim of the study is to "reveal the key role that feminism has played and continues to play in Colombian history" (1), and proposes that her analyses of still "understudied writers" will "allow us to rethink not only the development of feminism in Colombia but standard accounts of Latin American literary history" as well (7), and thus, of the continent's women in general.

The volume begins with an excellent introduction titled "Modernity's Rebel Daughters," which offers a thorough summary of the history and characteristics of the varied forms of feminisms in literary productions and criticism, summarizing historically accepted views of recognized critics and theorists, but also discussing recent studies, and especially some related to Colombia, "inspired by the need to narrate an ignored history in a period in which feminism is presumed to have completed its goals." (3)

This introduction continues with "The 'Sudden' Emergence and Disappearance of Latin American Women's Writing," which discusses the continued absence of women writers from national literary histories and canons. Elston then discusses the "Alternative Narratives of Colombian Feminisms" elaborating a particularly relevant issue in the third section, "Feminism and Conflict". The following five chapters deal with specific Colombian authors and texts. In Chapter 2, titled "*La Violencia*, Postmodernity and Feminism: The Nonsynchronicity of Albalucía Ángel", Elston notes that this author is still absent from many anthologies and literary histories. She concentrates her own study on Ángel's 1975 novel *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón*, which was both harshly criticized and highly popular—a contradiction, as Elston points out (43)—, that typifies other writers she studies in her work. She sees the novel as a case of "Postmodern historical fiction" (43). It is an experimental novel, like all of Ángel's

writing, but also engages with *La Violencia* of Colombia's history of the twentieth century. Here, Elston proposes a reading of *nonsynchronicity*, "...exploring not simply its juxtaposition of the personal and the political and its complex engagement with a series of historical intertexts, but its renegotiation of the relationship between high literary culture and mass culture..." (43) In the next two subsections of this chapter Elston delves into "Modernity and Mass culture" (51), and "Cultural Studies and Feminism" (61), and how Ángel's novel relates to these components.

In Chapter 3, "Ni Engels, ni Freud, ni Reich': Marvel Moreno as Boom/Post-Boom Writer" Elston remarks that, although Moreno is "arguably one of the most important Colombian novelists and short story writers of the twentieth century...", she is again "excluded from Latin American literary history" (75). Concentrating on Moreno's 1987 novel *En diciembre llegaban las brisas*, Elston argues that its theoretical framework is constructed around the master narratives of modernity informed by Nietzsche and Freud, rather than integrated into the discourses of the Latin-American *boom femenino* of the 1980's (76-80). Elston explains her view in the two sub-sections that follow: "Ideological construction of modernity" (83ff) and "The Postmodern incredulity towards Metanarratives" (92).

Chapter 4 begins by questioning the status of María Mercedes Carranza as "Una voz antifeminista?" and presents her as a "Public Intellectual and 'Postmodern' Poet." Elston finds that "Carranza's practice highlights the often strategic negation of a 'feminine' identity by the Latin American woman writer, as a means of negotiating her anomalous position in the literary canon." (108) The author then discusses Carranza's five collections of poetry published between 1972 and 1997. She finds that Carranza's "poetic and intellectual practice engages with the complex intellectual and ideological debates surrounding modernity and its relationship to the literary" (110) and its consequent contradictions which "link [Carranza] to the other 'untimely' and 'non-synchronous' Colombian women writers" Elston studies in her volume (111). In the following subsections of this chapter, the author uses pertinent interrogations to present her points: "A Feminist poet? A Postmodern Poet?" (111), "The Crisis in Modernity" (117), and "What Are Poets for in Destitute Times?" (124).

In the first pages of Chapter 5, "*Testimonio* in a Post-revolutionary Era: The Writings of Female Ex-combatants," the author offers some statistics regarding the participation of women in armed conflicts in various Latin American countries, how women have only recently begun to write about their own personal "gender-specific" conflicts, now being published as "journalism, *testimonio*, ethnographies, essays, novels and mixed narratives" (145). The chapter then presents an outline of "Colombian

testimonial practices” (148), which discusses this genre specifically as it relates to Colombian reality. The second sub-section of this chapter, “Revolutionary Romance: [Vera Grabe’s] *Razones de vida* and [María Eugenia Vásquez’] *Escrito para no morir*” (158) analyses these works, whose titles already suggest the depth and magnitude of some of the issues these writers had to deal with.

Chapter 6 deals with another Colombian reality, beyond armed conflict, with the examination of the alternative perspective: a now large group of women pursuing pacific solutions to the sustained national differences in Colombia. In “Sexual Difference in Times of War: The Poetry of Piedad Morales and the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*,” Elston presents the poet Morales as a one of the founders of the “feminist, pacifist and non-violent” *Ruta pacífica* in the mid-1990’s. Here, she asks “what a feminist, pacifist and anti-militarist organization can tell us about contemporary Colombian politics and the possibility of resisting the securitization and militarization of Colombian society...” (187), centering also on small, regional “non-canonical poetry festivals” which offer opportunities to ‘other’ poets (indigenous, Afro-Colombian, rural). A study of Piedad Morales’ work follows in the sub-section titled “*Antígona insumisa...*” (201).

The volume ends with a brief Chapter 7 of “Conclusion,” summarizing the author’s thoughts and arguing that “feminism, in all its complex and diverse formations, *is* Latin American [and] not simply exported to Latin America from the West...” (225).

To summarize, Cherylyn Elston’s book—which includes impressive bibliographies in all chapters—is an important study of the writing of a particular group of women. She has offered a dialogue between different—sometimes contradictory—histories and philosophies, linking them in new ways, and arguing for the need of a continued revision of the theoretical and literary canon. The work constitutes a thoughtful, complex totality that challenges the traditional organization, concepts and history of feminisms—in which Latin American writing has always occupied a fringe component. It shows how these Colombian women writers have interpreted, used and adapted these concepts in their work, thus providing a more complex totality, not only offering an “alternative” history, but also a complementary one. Finally, I would strongly recommend the book be translated into Spanish: it is necessary that it be read by a larger Spanish-American (Colombian) public.