

Constante González Groba, ed. 2012. *Hijas del viejo sur. La mujer en la literatura femenina del Sur de los Estados Unidos*. València: Publicacions de la Universitat de València (Biblioteca Javier Coy). 306 pp. ISBN: 978-84-370-9028-3.

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The feminist turn in Southern studies towards a focus on women's literature owes its origin to the path-breaking historical research of Anne Firor Scott and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. As the book under scrutiny makes cleverly explicit, the combination of a well-documented historical as well as a literary analysis is essential in order to appreciate the complexity of the sociological and aesthetic texture found in the tradition of Southern women's literature. *Hijas del viejo sur*, edited by the renowned scholar on the field Constante González Groba, is a timely volume that makes a worthy contribution to the last decade's interest in a gendered reading of the Old South and in an academic revisiting of ante-bellum women writers through contemporary, feminist, and cultural critical lenses (Taylor 2006).

The collection is divided into an introductory essay and five chapters about different writers, ordered in chronological progression from ante-bellum to contemporary times. The introductory chapter by the editor, "La mujer en la historia y en la literatura del sur de los Estados Unidos," devotes a substantial section to developing a well-informed historical analysis to expose how fundamental the representation and production of womanhood was for the coexistent modern slave society and feudal social system of the Old South until the Civil War, and how these values survived through the Reconstruction and delayed changes in the understanding of femininity in the more contemporary New South. The control of sexuality and feminine behavior through the ideals of the *Southern lady* and *belle*, influenced by the Victorian *cult of true womanhood*, is revealingly exposed by González Groba, as is the more difficult task of showing the intricate relation of these ideals to race issues and the control of black bodies as tools for production and reproduction. As the author rightfully asserts, "el mito de la *lady* fue un instrumento crucial del patriarcado sureño para mantener el status quo y someter a la mujer blanca y a los esclavos negros" (20). The chapter also presents a review of how different Southern women writers (e.g., Kate Chopin, Lillian Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Bobie Ann Mason and Jill McCorkle) reflected their concerns about Southern society throughout history.

Chapter one of the collection, “Louisa S. McCord: la mujer sureña como ángel custodio de la civilización esclavista,” written by Carme Manuel, surprises the reader in its examination of an anti-feminist and anti-abolitionist woman writer. The intellectual Louisa S. McCord was a very popular figure in the ante-bellum South because of her essays on economic politics and in her role as an opponent to the Northerner feminist Margaret Fuller. As Manuel suggests, “McCord logró con sus escritos llegar a una síntesis de los argumentos políticos, económicos y religiosos aceptados en su época y transformarlos en una filosofía coherente, capaz de sustentar una sociedad basada no solo en el trabajo de los esclavos, sino también en una rígida jerarquía en la que las clases bajas se vieran desde el punto de vista biológico e histórico como razas inferiores” (63). Manuel’s research recovers a lost figure in female literature whose work’s value resides, as Fox-Genovese puts forward, in making explicit the concealed relation between gender and racial subordination and taking over the public sphere of political debate (1988, 369). Manuel further studies McCord’s transatlantic dialogues with abolitionist British intellectuals and her closet drama (a play meant to be read) *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1851). Manuel reads this work from an autobiographical perspective, as an example of the weight of classic Rome in the collective imaginary of the time and, more importantly, as a representation of the concept of *republican motherhood*: an empowering new social role for women as educators of the nation’s future.

Chapter two, by González Groba, “La mujer en la novela de Ellen Glasgow: el rechazo de la *lady* sureña y la defensa de la ‘nueva mujer’,” analyzes this key figure in Southern female literature. Ellen Glasgow, who wrote in the early decades of the twentieth-century, is crucial to understanding the ambivalences of Southern women towards the changing models of femininity in the New South. This author’s cosmopolitan, humanistic and feminist spirit is portrayed in detail by González Groba’s thorough study of her life and work. Throughout the lives and troubled minds of her heroines, Glasgow managed to bring to light the contradictions and weaknesses of the system of patriotic and feminine idealization in the Old South. Two novels in particular, *Barren Ground* (1925) and *Vein of Iron* (1935), show through their female heroines a particular specular relation between self and land, a down-to-earth poetics of self and place away from romance. As González Groba asserts, Glasgow “propone un sur alternativo que no se encuentra en las sofisticación esclerotizada de las grandes ciudades sino en la gente tenaz de los valles y las montañas, un sur cuyo protagonismo corresponde, no a las *belles* y las *ladies*, sino a estas mujeres vigorosas que se identifican con la tierra” (173). Glasgow’s inner ambiguity between her female self and her beloved South is reflected in the workings of her feminine fiction, where she is able to productively resolve it, as González Groba’s analysis wonderfully contributes to revealing.

In chapter three, “Damas y esclavas, madres y *mamis* en el Viejo sur: *Gone with the Wind* de Margaret Mitchell y ‘The Old Order’ de Katherine Anne Porter,” Susana María Jiménez Placer presents a detailed historical analysis of the experiential realities of motherhood for black and white ante-bellum women. Reading those texts from

a bakhtinian theoretical framework, the author considers that the double system of physical sublimation and corporeal materiality present in feudal society was reinstated in the Old South's racial and sexual ideology, projecting itself in the figures both of the *southern mother* and the *black mammy*: two opposite though interrelated practices of maternity sustained by patriarchal and racist paradigms. The ideal of the *southern mother* (i.e., kind, righteous, ethereal and asexual), represented by the characters of Ellen in *Gone with the Wind* and Sophia Jane in Porter's story "The Old Order," finds its counter-figure in the black *mammy* (Mammy in Mitchell's novel and Nannie in Porter's story). The *mammy* provided the physical comfort and care that the southern lady could not facilitate as she was prevented, due to decorum, from engaging in any physical work, including breastfeeding. Jiménez Placer focuses on the depiction of these double-sided maternal roles in the fictional works mentioned, written in the thirties, and she highlights their different resolutions and ends. The representation of maternity in the South has generally lacked the complexities that actual experience entailed (Warren and Wolff 1999, 1); Jiménez Placer interestingly contributes to fill this lacuna by studying the interracial relation between women as mothers in the Old South's household.

Chapter four, "El *tomboy* cuestiona las rígidas dicotomías de género y raza de la sociedad sureña," by González Groba, is a revealing study of the figure of the masculinized girl in Southern literature: the girl that prefers outdoor and physical activity and speaks her mind, being loud and resolute. As the author of the essay informs us, the term *tomboy* has a long history in English but is especially relevant in Southern studies for being a recurrent figure in women's literature. González Groba provides interesting connections in the analysis of this figure in four novels by Southern women writers. E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1888) showed through its great success how Capitola Black's manners appealed to the hidden desires of late nineteenth century women. Carson McCullers in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and Harper Lee with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), present the *tomboy* as site of conflict and resistance against stagnant twentieth-century Southern stereotypes of gender and race. Finally, Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987), suggests a more contemporary reconfiguration of the *tomboy* as a generator of a subversive lesbian continuum. González Groba illuminates how the transgression of gender and racial dichotomies is conveyed in the figure of the *tomboy* and provides a postmodern feminist reading of these manly women as cultural resilient agents.

"Sureña y subalterna: narrando la rebelión de la mujer en Alice Walker" by Jesús Varela Zapata, is chapter five and last of the volume. The author uses postcolonial feminism to approach the fiction of Alice Walker, opening the chapter with an analysis of Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Walker represents in her fiction the specific conflicts of the African-American woman as subaltern in the South, a conceptual and spatial coordinate where these women recreate their search for self-definition and voice. In the analysis of her short-stories and the novel *The Color Purple*, Varela Zapata reflects on Walker's Southern fiction's main issues: the importance of the rural environment

and the community, the oppression of black men's patriarchal behavior and physical violence, and the prevailing racism of white society many generations after the Civil War. The chapter ends by highlighting the practice of quilting by African-American women as an artistic source for self-expression and female bonding. It is to the editor's credit to place this chapter at the end of the collection, since Varela Zapata's reading finishes the volume with the suggestion, following Walker's vision, of the possibility of a reconfiguration of racial and gender dichotomies in the South, as well as of women's representations and roles within it.

In *Hijas del viejo sur* the analysis of sex/race interdependent ideologies in the South and the close relation of women to place, space and land become key issues that provide the backbone to the heterogeneous chapters of the collection. As critics in the field suggest, these two issues were marked as pivotal by Fox-Genovese's pioneering early work (Edwards 2012, 577-578), and have continued to be the most characteristic elements of the lives and experiences of Southern women throughout history. In addition, the volume also includes enlightening visual illustrations in every chapter, as well as an intriguing cover photograph to which one keeps returning in an attempt at interpretation as one's reading progresses. As a downside, it could be said that there is a prevalence of narrative and one misses attention to other genres such as poetry (i.e., Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, to name a few, are all worthy contributors to Southern women's literature [Inge 1990]), or autobiography; this latter being a key literary form for Southern women's expression (Prenshaw 2011).

On the whole, *Hijas del viejo sur* is an indispensable collection for any US cultural and literary scholar in order to understand the important role women have played as cultural producers in this unique region's society and literature. The volume exposes how gender was a structuring element in the Old South's paradigms and ideologies by analyzing the contribution of women's literary works from the ante-bellum period up to contemporary times. Gynocritical in scope, this book helps make visible female authors outlining a Southern female literary tradition and foregrounding history and women's experience. Nevertheless, its value resides in presenting a prismatic perspective of multiple Southern women's experiences and works thanks to its diverse chapters, suggesting a heterogeneous female tradition but, in its analysis, never losing sight of how the land as home or the South as self commonly permeated these women authors' writing.

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Received 12 September 2014

Accepted 12 December 2014

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