

*HIJAS DEL VIEJO SUR: LA MUJER EN LA
LITERATURA FEMENINA DEL SUR DE ESTADOS
UNIDOS.*

Ed. Constante González Groba.

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and

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Professor Constante González Groba is a central figure in the field of Southern Studies in Europe and his latest two editions only strengthen his international recognition as a distinguished scholar on American Literary Studies. González Groba is Professor of American Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). He has previously edited texts in English and Spanish and has also published a book on the novels of Carson McCullers, as well as having contributed an extensive list of essays, papers and book chapters on authors such as Lee Smith, Bobbie Ann Mason, Toni Morrison, Elizabeth Madox Roberts and others. The two volumes under review encapsulate the topics of history, gender, race, visual arts and literary criticism, presented from interdisciplinary perspectives. All the abovementioned research interests configure the backbone of the *Southern Studies Forum*, an international network of American Studies scholars, of which Constante González Groba is board member.

The attempt to trace a coherent narrative of the history of the south of the United States always presents itself as an arduous quest. Pre-eminent literary scholar Noel Polk claimed that a unified and homogenous South has never existed, nor one single rendering of its past and prospects. He confessed having been isolated from the stereotypical southern experiences as he grew up. In fact, he concluded: “So maybe it was not a protective bubble I grew up in but a womb taking its own good time to birth me into my history” (Web). The wide-ranging discussion masterfully

curated by Professor González Groba would illuminate its readers in resonance with Polk's metaphor.

Following a chronological structure, I would commence by paraphrasing González Groba's words in the introduction to the volume, written in Spanish, *Hijas del Viejo Sur: La mujer en la literatura del sur de Estados Unidos*: The southern woman is crucial for a study and understanding of the American woman since she distinctively participates in the shaping of the national female emblem, in the same manner that the past of the South defines the history of the United States (9). Hence, the volume provides, in six chapters, revisions and challenging considerations of the social types of southern women, embedded throughout historical and artistic representations and narratives of these regional memories.

Distinguished scholar, editor and writer Carme Manuel participates with a provocative chapter on the concept of southern womanhood and its intertwined evolution with the history of slavery. The focus of the narrative is one of the most remarkable intellectuals in antebellum America, Louisa S. McCord. Carme Manuel constructs an exciting explanation of the paradox presented by McCord's beliefs and career as a writer and her internalization of the southern gender roles and social establishments of the time; i.e. her acceptance of the equation slavery and female submission. Manuel proves this statement through a close and contextualized reading of McCord's play *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, published in 1851, which demonstrates both the author's and the general public's notions of classical references at the time. The essay extensively signals how the play embodies an ideal of heroic motherhood and the righteousness of a paternalist order. Simultaneously, the corruption and imperialistic politics of Rome symbolize the North against a victimized South who needed to defend the social effectiveness of slavery in order to maintain the southern utopia.

In chapters II and IV, the editor himself, Constante González Groba, portrays divergent models of femininity. Firstly, he guides the reader through an examination of female renditions in the works of southern writer Ellen Glasgow. His recognition of this literary heritage enhances the sometimes forgotten relevance of Glasgow and the new model of woman she counterpoises with the topical southern lady. Glasgow's style and plots object to southern sentimentalism, false personae, oppressive social matrix and pretentiousness. In order to complement his inclusion of challenging gender stories, González Groba equally comments on different tomboy characters that disputed the restrictive definitions of womanhood in the South. The existence in liminal spaces of fictional girls, such as those created by Carson McCullers in *The Member of the Wedding* or by Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, enrich simplistic Victorian female roles with complicated passages regarding sexual identity, social interaction, manners, desires, etc. Constante González Groba produces an informative reflection on a flexible and fluid definition of southern gender studies.

Professor Susana María Jiménez Placer, a Katherine Ann Porter specialist, writes a revealing consideration on the archetypal opposition southern lady/southern mammy, employing as case studies the novels *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and Porter's short story "The Old Order." These two fabled female stereotypes are mainly contrasted through race, sexual identities, morality, roles in the household and male perception. The behaviors associated with these social labels were deeply rooted in women, becoming the elements that maintained the balance of submission in the paternalistic and racist southern plantation. Additionally, Jiménez Placer expands her literary analysis with several examples of the perpetration of these stereotypes in popular culture that effectively complemented the wealthy white male imperative; and she also cohesively inserts Bakhtin's literary theories. Particularly interesting are the readings of motherhood and the body developed in this chapter, concluding that biological traits turned into essential supports for the 19th century cult of true womanhood.

The closing chapter is the work of Professor Jesús Varela Zapata who has edited a number of books on postcolonial and cultural studies and is also the author of a volume on V. S. Naipaul. In this occasion, his research is devoted to Alice Walker's efforts in her fiction to provide the social, economic, gender or race subaltern with a voice. He ponders on the way in which women were rendered mere instruments in the South either through sex and male desire or through reproduction. Walker, Varela Zapata explains, proposes a controversial perception of motherhood as a source of suffering and loss of freedom and individuality. As well as that, her fiction denounces the violence perpetrated against women, described realistically and even by means of grotesque passages. Walker is here introduced as a representative of African-American literary discourses fighting constant threats of being gagged, hence finding visibility within the canon. Consequently, Varela Zapata establishes a parallel discussion of diverse ideological concepts such as hegemony and resistance, from Marxist and postcolonial perspectives.

This already exhaustive investigation on the diversity and complex nature of the South is, nevertheless, centered on gender studies. The most recent volume edited by Constante González Groba expands the scope and depth of the former one with a multidisciplinary approach to the distinctive idiosyncrasy of the American south. The articles included in the book *Unsteadily Marching On: The U.S. South in Motion* construct an elaborate survey of the constant changes undergone in this specific region of the nation, its resilience and, yet, the entrenched concepts of memory and nostalgia. The different collaborations examine the consequences of these mutations on artistic and historical interpretations of the South. There is, notwithstanding the evident differences, a link between the two volumes; both consider the contrasting existence of a resistance to change, together with the stoic reconfigurations present in the past of the South. As a matter of fact, Professor González Groba explains the following in the introduction to the latest volume: "The

irreparable loss of traditions associated with a central relation to the land forces people to seek new definitions of fundamental concepts such as home, community, and family” (16); all three essential structural components of southern identity.

The idea for this volume germinated from the Biannual Conference of the Southern Studies Forum in 2011, held in Santiago de Compostela. As the title reveals, the main topic both of the symposium and the collection of essays evolves around the concept of movement and, in consequence, transformation in the U.S. South, which is closely related to the history of these states, as well as, obviously, to the routes of pilgrims that converge in Santiago. The long journeys of this tradition are filled with storytelling and so are the South and its memory. This plural book by transatlantic scholars, therefore, functions as a detailed guide of the latest research developed in the field of Southern Studies as it branches out through diverse theoretical underpinnings: literary studies, popular culture studies, historical analysis, political considerations, film studies, religious or border studies.

The volume is divided into six thematic sections and, due to its length, an individual analysis of each article surpasses the scope of this review. Nevertheless, the coherently structured presentation of the edition permits a clear identification both of the general narrative in the volume, as well as of the different topics grouping these studies. It is, consequently, constructed round the historical processes shaping the South and the longing associated to them. Richard J. Gray argues that: “southerners have not so much possessed the historical consciousness as been possessed by it; (...). They are caught in that web of historical relations and obsessions, a web that can frustrate, certainly, but that can also challenge and inspire” (22). These two verbs would also most definitely describe the reaction of the readers of this edition.

The first section is entitled “Inward Journeys”; including authors such as Mark Twain, Walker Percy or Reynolds Price, three essays compose a narrative of how the self and space are intertwined; thus, when the real is altered, the individual can but acknowledge the new surrounding referents, in order to perform a new cultural, gender or adult identity. The following group of papers are encompassed under the title “On the Road Again with Cormac McCarthy,” covering the author’s peculiar depiction of the South. In particular, these analyses focus on McCarthy’s devotion to craftsmanship and its relation with masculinity, his rendition of plantation memory and the fear of repeating a tragic past, the symbolism of the Mississippi river, and, finally, the picaresque genre in *The Road*. The third part, “Moving across Genres: Literature and Film,” draws an interesting critical approach to cinematic representations of the South. The movie adaptation, for instance, of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is reviewed as a failure due to the significant changes made to create a suitable characterization and plot for a wider audience; additionally, filmic portrayals like *Driving Miss Daisy* present food and the spaces in the home related to it as a more efficient communicative tool for interracial

understanding than actual language. Lastly, Elvis Presley films are considered as a more normative depiction of this initially rebellious popular culture motif originated in the South.

The subsequent section entitled “Marching as a Political Statement: The Civil Rights Movement” marks a difference in the volume as it contains two articles written from a historical and political perspective, which praise the influential reforms initiated in the South; from the Poor People’s Campaign to the progressive Catholics that fought against segregation. Due to the interconnection between history and fiction these two studies perfectly complement the volume analyzing, on the one hand, Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, dealing with the freedom struggle as part of the African diaspora and, on the other hand, the work of Thulani Davis, *1959*, that points at the complicated issue of school integration. The brief segment after the aforementioned, under the title “Religious Peregrinations,” maintains the historical approach, addressing how strongly religion merges with culture in the South; faith schisms in the past, for example, deeply troubled the population who have always integrated religion in their conception of history; equally, moral discussions permeated literature, and the instance proposed is Peter Taylor’s short story “The Hand of Emmagene.”

The concluding and longest section, “Inroads and Outroads,” reflects on migration movements from and to the South in different geographical and temporal frameworks and motivated by different political and personal triggers. In this manner, the articles deal with the following disparate topics: the case and stories of an Ethiopian-born Indian immigrant doctor treating AIDS patients during the 1980s in the South; also, the themes, treated by Connie May Fowler in *Sugar Cane*, of race relations and mixed ancestry located in Florida during the 1960s; a narration that complicates the traditional biracial history of the South; there is also a tale of inclusion of Appalachian culture and identity presented in the study of Chriss Offutt’s *The Good Brother*. Additionally, an essay is incorporated, interestingly revealing the writings of different southern authors about their travels to Europe-physically transcending the borders while their inspirational source was still in the South. And, finally, this detailed and documented study of evolution in the South is concluded with a significant historical and sociological presentation of the phenomenon of the Great Migration.

The two books reviewed are examples of the literary and critical research of excellence being developed in Spain, and generally in Europe, which always maintains constant conversation with American specialists. Hence, the task of pointing out flaws turns difficult; however, I would like to foreground as a positive feature the visual content present in *Hijas del Viejo Sur: La mujer en la literatura femenina del sur de los Estados Unidos*, which was, conversely, absent in *Unsteadily Marching ON: The U.S. South in Motion*; and yet only the latter includes a list contributors, which is always useful information for the reader. I would have

appreciated the addition of concluding remarks in both editions to reinforce a final sense of internal coherence in the papers. I would consider the possibility of translating the volume in Spanish in the future, as, due to its significance and quality, it should be available to the English reader, dedicated to the study of the evolution of southern self-consciousness. This awareness, which Fred Hobson broadly describes (6), discovers the subtleties of the history and present of Southern identity, which, in turn, delineates the global character of the American nation.

Constante González Groba's edited volumes represent, most definitely, an important contribution, with innovative analyses, ample fictional and historical evidence, and precise and comprehensible pieces of academic writing that significantly enrich the perception of the South as a result of the participation of renowned international and national scholars from diverse disciplines. Consequently, these objective and balanced volumes of articles would interest, not only academia, but also students pursuing an international education on the South as a diverse and complex source of research, which can always be further explored. Thus, the texts deconstruct fossilized perceptions and provide new readings of the stories that narrate the multifaceted identity of the American South.

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