



Women's Perspectives on the Jewish and Spanish Exile in Mexico

Miradas femeninas sobre los exilios judío y español que México reunió

Coordinator:
EUGENIA HELENA HOUVENAGHEL
Universiteit Utrecht

Presentation

This issue focuses on the work and life trajectories of writers who were descendants of two emblematic generations of exiles in Mexico: the Jewish and the Spanish. These exiles had their origins in persecutions or in European wars during the first half of the twentieth century. The daughters and granddaughters of both adopted new perspectives on exile and on the experience of their families. We thus propose an intergenerational focus that includes women writers of the first, second, and third exile generations.

A number of texts written by or related to first-generation twentieth-century women exiles in Mexico have remained unknown or unpublished for many years. Thanks to a new interest in women's experience in exile, these texts have been rediscovered and published in recent decades. Their appearance coincides with the publication of many new works by their daughters and granddaughters. The current issue aims to emphasize the timeliness and relevance of the older works, recently rescued from oblivion, by considering them in dialogue with the more recent works of later generations.

This issue is organized around two major themes. The first part of the issue grants a central place to the meaning of networks and communities for both the Jewish and the Spanish exiles in Mexico. Communities and net-

works are constructed both in private spheres (through private correspondence, personal assistance, family ties, friendships, and informal meetings) and in the public sphere (through more structured circles, public meetings and events, partnerships, and official collaborations). The issue adopts a gender perspective on networks and communities and juxtaposes women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The authors consider how social formations are characterized by constant processes of transformation and development. What do these dynamic processes mean for the "inheritors" of exile? How do they look back on their mothers' and grandmothers' communities?

The second part of the issue pays attention to the negotiation of identity by women writers in later generations of their Mexican exile. These essays bring to light a search for roots through spirituality, and emphasize the tension that exists between established traditions and canonical texts on the one hand, and the appropriation of this heritage in a feminine key by women writers on the other. They juxtapose the different strategies writers have used to carry out this search for identity, either from an individual and intimate perspective or from a collective one.

Part I. Networks and Communities

The opening article, "La red mexicana de Rosa Chacel: su correspondencia (1954-1972) con Tomás Segovia, Inés Arredondo y Concha de Albornoz," by Helena Houvenaghel (Utrecht University), reconstructs an unexplored part of Chacel's network in exile. Chacel is mainly associated with cultural circles in Buenos Aires, and very little is known about her contacts with the cultural world of Mexico. Drawing on a set of unpublished letters from 1954 to 1972 exchanged with Tomás Segovia and Inés Arredondo, Houvenaghel highlights the key moments in the development of Chacel's relationship with the flourishing generation of the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*. Her analysis shows how this Mexican network successfully combined the public and private spheres: it offered Chacel opportunities to publish in an active cultural circle and welcomed her into a warm and friendly family environment.

In “Margarita Nelken y Anna Seghers. Telarañas de intriga y espionaje,” Tabea Alexa Linhard of Washington University in St. Louis offers a different story about networks, one where suspicions and mistrust can make it impossible to collaborate. Linhard’s study begins with an encounter between Margarita Nelken and Anna Seghers in Valencia, in 1937. They were to meet again in Mexico, where both went into exile. Linhard explains how suspicions and accusations made the relationship between these two Jewish women impossible. Nelken, possibly involved in espionage, found herself entangled in the midst of different networks and was accused several times of conspiracy and treason by opposing political groups. Linhard links Nelken’s story with Edward Said’s notion of the “loneliness of exile.”

The next study, “Transtierro y destierro en *El eslabón perdido*, de Luisa Carnés,” by Kristine Vanden Berghe (Université de Liège), focuses on Carnés’s novel, written during her Mexican exile in the 1950s and early 1960s, which remained unpublished for forty years. The book was discovered and published in 2002. Vanden Berghe gives a central place to the bond that the novel’s protagonist, a Spanish exile in Mexico, forges with his adopted country and the consequences of this bond on his relationship with his home. The protagonist believes that most of the Spanish exiles who integrate successfully into Mexican society are disloyal to Spain and the ideals of the Spanish Republic. He becomes isolated, and despite his best efforts he fails to connect with his new home. Is this tormented protagonist shaped by the author’s image? Vanden Berghe suggests that this is indeed the case, as Carnés has much in common with the protagonist of *El eslabón perdido*.

María Carrillo Espinosa (Université de Franche-Comté) closes this first part of the special issue with her study “Figuraciones femeninas desde el humor. El exilio judío en México en la trilogía de Rosa Nissán Novia que te vea (1992), *Hisho que te nazca* (1996) y *Me viene un modo de tristeza* (2019).” The trilogy offers a gender perspective on the Jewish community in Mexico by looking back, from a contemporary angle, on the struggles of Sephardic women in Mexican society in the first half of the twentieth century. How did the women of past generations try to overcome the limitations imposed by the Jewish social system and familial structure? Carrillo Espinosa focuses on the multiple uses of humor in Nissán’s in-

tergenerational reflection on the place of women in the Mexican Jewish community.

Part II. Negotiating Identity

The second section of this special issue opens with “Hacia una poética de la distancia o el linaje místico de *Migraciones* (2022) de Gloria Gervitz,” by Denise León (CONICET/Universidad Nacional de Salta/Universidad Nacional de Tucumán). León focuses on the Jewish-Mexican poet Gloria Gervitz (1943-2022) and her appropriation of the Judeo-Christian mystical tradition in her poetic work *Migrations*. The article’s starting point is the diasporic component of Judaism as its defining feature. From this perspective, León highlights the evocation of female experiences of displacement and diaspora in Gervitz’s poetry.

“Margarita Nelken y su red transnacional judaico-feminista,” by Paola Bellomi (Università degli Studi di Siena), notes that because Nelken is usually associated with her role as a political leader and intellectual of the Spanish Republic, critics have given little attention to her relationship with her Jewish identity. Nelken expressed her view on the Jewishness in two different books, one published in Spain, *Las escritoras españolas* (Barcelona, 1930) and the other in Mexican exile, *Los judíos en la cultura hispánica* (México D.F., 1949). Bellomi adopts a comparative perspective on the two works, focusing on Nelken’s struggle to be both a woman and Jewish in the Spanish and Mexican context.

Dolores Rangel (Georgia Southern University), in “Los exilios de Esther Seligson: búsquedas y encuentros espirituales,” focuses on Seligson’s concept of Jewish identity in three works: her novel *La morada en el tiempo* (1981), her memoir *Todo aquí es polvo* (2010), and her collection of poems *Negro es su rostro* (2010). Rangel’s approach combines the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas with those of Claudio Guillén on the “literarización” and “tematización” of the concept of exile, and with Eduardo Milán’s view on the poetics of writing as a form of exile.

The issue closes with Houvenaghel’s “Angelina Muñiz-Huberman en diálogo con Hannah Arendt y Máximo José Kahn: identidades del refugiado hispanojudío en *El sefardí romántico* (2005).” This study addresses

how the final part of Muñiz-Huberman's novel constructs the identity of the Sephardic refugee in Mexico. Houvenaghel draws on concepts from Hannah Arendt's essay "We, Refugees" (1943) to show how the protagonist develops from a "parvenu" who hides his Jewish identity into a "conscious pariah" who fully lives his Jewish identity. The article shows how the guidance of Maximo José Kahn, a Jewish refugee in Mexico, is essential for this transformation.

The contributions to this special issue, "Women's Perspectives on Jewish and Spanish Identity in Mexico," establish a dialogue among literary texts written by exiled writers from different collectives in Mexico. Taken together, they propose possible new paths to understanding these women exiles. These paths are based not on the political, cultural, or linguistic differences that separate them, but on the Mexican context of reception and on their shared identities as exiles and as women.