

## The *Boom Femenino* in Mexico



The *Boom Femenino* in Mexico:  
Reading Contemporary Women's Writing

Edited by

Nuala Finnegan and Jane E. Lavery

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## INTRODUCTION

# THE *BOOM FEMENINO* IN MEXICO: READING CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

NUALA FINNEGAN AND JANE E. LAVERY

### **The *Boom Femenino***

This collection of essays entitled *The Boom Femenino in Mexico: Reading Contemporary Women's Writing* focuses on literary production by women in Mexico over the last three decades.<sup>1</sup> Mexican cultural output is characterised during this period by the dramatic emergence of women's voices in the cultural sphere in Mexico and is due, in part to a globalised, modernised cultural environment that has seen rapid change in all areas of women's lives. These sweeping changes have been widely documented and have had social, cultural and political ramifications throughout Mexican society.<sup>2</sup> This book employs the term *boom femenino* as a way of describing the entirety of this cultural output and argues that in so far as it relates to cultural production, it constitutes an integral part of this wider process of change. This study of the *boom femenino* offers an opportunity to think critically about the texts produced during this period and the ways in which they have impacted on the Mexican and international cultural arena. In its exploration of the *boom femenino* phenomenon, the book historically situates the term and investigates the implications of its use in the context of contemporary women's writing. Moreover, it examines a range of aesthetic and thematic preoccupations in relation to concepts of nation, space, gender, feminism, form and other issues.

It must be noted that the literary *boom femenino* is not a uniquely Mexican phenomenon as it is used to refer to the broader explosion in publishing by women writers throughout Latin America as a whole from the 1970s onwards.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the term cannot be understood without, albeit brief, reference to the *boom* and *post-boom*. The *boom* is a widely-

known term amongst those reading or studying Latin American literature and refers to the dramatic increase in literary activity after the 1960s, much of which was translated and found an international public. Whilst some *boom* narratives have come to be associated with complex and inaccessible forms of writing, *post-boom* writing, which refers to Spanish American literary production after the 1970s-80s, is described as a counter-project to the *boom* in its accessibility, less flamboyant experimentation (Shaw 1998) and focus on the quotidian. The *post-boom* frequently centres on youth, pop and mass culture-elements as can be seen for instance in the novels of Mexican writer, Gustavo Sainz (1940-). Typical of *post-boom* writers such as Ángeles Mastretta or Guadalupe Loaeza is the gravitation towards plot-centredness and chronological structure which provide for greater accessibility than did the typical *boom* novel. In comparison with their *boom* predecessors, the *post-boom* writers are often more concerned with the everyday issues than with complex philosophising (Lavery 2005, 8). Indeed as Antonio Skármeta notes: ‘nosotros nos acercamos a la cotidianidad con la obsesión de un miope’ (Lavery 2005, 8; cited Shaw 1998, 138) (‘we adhere closely to ordinary things with myopic obsession’).<sup>4</sup> The *boom* is invariably associated with male writers, especially with the so-called ‘big four’, the highly-acclaimed authors – Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes – whilst women writers rarely feature as part of this elite group. However, as Irma López points out (2010, 27), from the 1970s onwards, new spaces opened up for other writers in particular women writers who became associated with the wider *boom femenino*. Dawn Slack suggests that while the *boom* is studied by international literary and cultural critics and even recognised, to an extent, by non-academics, the myriad of Mexican (and Latin American) women writers publishing since the 1980s have received comparatively little critical acclaim, in spite of (or perhaps because of) their productivity and popularity. The intention of this collection is therefore, in part, to redress this imbalance and to give the urgent critical attention which the *boom femenino* authors and their works examined here deserve.

Whereas a number of important works have already been published on the *boom femenino* writers, this book is innovative in its approach in a number of ways.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while the book does not coin the term *boom femenino*, it is the first of its kind to engage critically with the notion as a way of illuminating the concept for a wide range of readers. The specificities of a definition of the *boom femenino* in Mexico, notwithstanding its extensive usage to refer to writers such as Mastretta or Loaeza, has not really been examined in any great depth. All of the contributors in this

book focus on the notion of the *boom femenino* from a variety of perspectives, and, in some of the essays, they consider broader issues such as the usefulness and/or pitfalls associated with the use of such a term as well as the problems that often emerge as a result of such literary cataloguing based on gender politics. Of course, the book must grapple with the paradoxes of its own construction in the sense that as it is a book focused solely on women's writing which aims to 'counteract the relative marginalisation of women's writing' (Rowe 2010, 265), it unwittingly contributes to the perpetuation of that marginalisation through its explicitly gendered focus. In this sense, Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism'<sup>6</sup> forms a sort of spectral presence over the debates regarding the continuing usefulness of gender categories that are both limiting and provocatively stimulating at the same time. While the contributors to the book find the *boom femenino* a useful and undeniably appealing notion when discussing the works of contemporary Mexican female writers, so too do they often express their discomfort, even irritation, with such labelling for a number of reasons. Finding the *boom femenino* categorisation rather limiting, both Slack and Jørgensen propose the term *b(l)oom femenino* to describe these women writers and their works. During a conference held on the *boom femenino* at University College Cork, Ireland in 2008, Slack introduced the notion of the *b(l)oom femenino* commenting that,

If Williams prefers to refer to the *boom* as more of a 'blip' (1987, 30), then perhaps the increase of women writers in Mexico in the 1980s should be called a *b(l)oom* rather than a *boom*. (...) Certainly, this term, aside from the obvious images of femininity and fertility, connotes the ideas of growth and production that stem from a careful nurturing through time; very rare are the items that just burst forth with no precursors (2010, 94).

Jørgensen's definition of the *b(l)oom* echoes that of Slack's:

My play with the words *boom* and *b(l)oom* is meant to recall and to go beyond the debate over the term *boom* as applied to the international recognition of fiction-writing by a select group of Latin American male authors in the 1960s. Many critics have objected to the use of the word *boom*, with its connotations of an explosion coming out of nowhere and the implied threat of a boom and bust cycle, notions that deny both the past (Borges, Rulfo, Onetti) and the future of Latin American fiction. (...) *B(l)oom*, on the other hand, recognises and honours the long work of cultivation and nurturance that has yielded a rich harvest of literary works by women in Mexico in the past twenty to twenty-five years. The literary production of the 1980s and 90s did not arise *ex nihilo*, but had its roots in the hard, creative work of a set of notable precursors. Elena Garro, Rosario

Castellanos, Elena Poniatowska and María Luisa Puga are a few of the writers who prepared the ground for the writing practices and the success achieved by Molina, Mastretta, Brianda Domecq, Sara Sefchovich, Carmen Boullosa and many others (2010, 131-132).

Emily Hind, on the other hand notes that the label, 'hints at a cloying stereotype of gentle and flowery femininity that contrasts with its explosive, even ejaculatory, predecessor known as the *boom*' (2010, 48). What is clear, however, is that the *boom femenino* frequently carries derogatory connotations as it is invariably linked to 'commercialism,' the concept of the 'best-seller' and by inference, 'light writing.' The Mexican *boom femenino* is popularly associated with bestsellers Ángeles Mastretta, author of *Arráncame la vida* (1985) and Laura Esquivel, author of *Como agua para chocolate* (1989). Despite the commercial and critical success of their work, it is their best-seller status that has led to their dismissal as 'easy literature' by many high-brow critics and by the general reader alike. As discussed in our work on *boom femenino* writers, it can be suggested that it is conceivably because of the Mastretta and Esquivel 'phenomenon' that until recently the Mexican literary establishments have rejected much of women's writing representative of the *boom femenino* for its 'lightness', and therefore considered it unworthy of critical attention (Lavery 2005; Finnegan 2007; Lavery 2010). Just as many contemporary writers, including Mastretta herself, are now repudiating the Mexican *boom femenino* altogether because of its association with the idea that women writers exclusively write *literatura lite*; so too are critics calling for fellow academics to start to look for alternative ways of discussing and writing about this group of writers and their works which moves beyond labelling based on notions of agency and gender categorisations. Sarah E.L. Bowskill, for instance, succinctly alludes to the problems inherent in using the term *boom femenino*:

This widespread tendency to dismiss novels by Latin American women, such as Mastretta, as being for entertainment only, and, therefore, less than 'literature', or 'light literature', raises pressing questions about the usefulness of the term *boom femenino*. By grouping novels together just because they are written by women, the term *boom femenino* may reinforce the ghettoisation of novels by women in a separate category of sub-literature. The original intent behind the label was probably to mark a positive growth in the number of bestselling woman-authored novels published in Mexico akin to the earlier *boom* which consisted exclusively of male writers. The label clearly aimed to mark the 'coming of age' of women authors in Mexico. However, even if well-intentioned, the label is problematic as critics and José Donoso, one of the writers often included as part of the original *boom* have noted, in the 1960s and 70s, the term

*boom* was not only used as a compliment, but also to criticise the *boom* authors for their superficiality, market-focus and temporariness and the same may be true of the term *boom femenino* (Bowskill 2010, 77).

As a marketing phenomenon, *boom femenino* works are often discussed solely in terms of their ‘market worth’, their ‘saleability’ and whether they ‘fit’ neatly into the category of ‘women’s literature’ or ‘chick lit’ as dictated by the publishing industry. Both Bowskill and Niamh Thornton discuss the insidious effect this can have on Mexican women writers and their works in general, particularly on those women whose writing might not slot easily or at all into neat categories like the works of mainstream writers Mastretta or Esquivel. Bowskill notes that:

being part of this brand is potentially positive and the brand’s existence creates opportunities for new and emerging women authors, although the public’s expectations from this brand will also mean that some women authors become excluded from publication and the brand becomes stylised. In consequence, I would argue that many women authors within and outside the Mexican *boom femenino*, will remain marginalised (2010, 79).

The idea of the *boom femenino* as a ‘brand’ or ‘market-led’ trend is taken further by Thornton who remarks:

If it is a purely market-led trend, what is the value of those writers who do not respond to the exigencies of the marketplace or do not conform to the marketable image for women’s literature (or literature by women)? What is their worth? Are they part of the *boom* or just bobbing along on a rising tide that neoliberal capitalism suggests will float all boats? The term, *boom*, then, is both useful but uncomfortable, a term that forces literary criticism into the realm of transnational capital as well as implicating critics in the choices we make with regard to who is studied and why. Simultaneously, it is a category that implies aesthetic commonalities, despite the cross-generational sweep it includes (2010, 219-220).

We do not argue that this book offers a comprehensive exposition of the *boom femenino* and it is necessarily the case that some gaps remain with regard to the many women writers who have not been included. Furthermore, it is not possible to assert that the texts that emerge from this sustained period of literary production might be conceptualised in traditional terms as a ‘movement’ or a cohesive body of work. It is true that at the heart of much of the work of the majority of these contemporary women writers, there lies a preoccupation with issues of gender inequality, women’s socio-historical marginalisation, the female body, and sexuality.

Indeed, Irma M. López contends that there is persistent exploration of the theme of woman's identity throughout this body of work (2010, 32-33). Lorraine Kelly (2010, 149-50) also highlights shared concerns of the writers pertaining to the *boom femenino*, such as the fight for equity and equality and their desire to draw our attention to women's daily struggles to overcome the social, moral and sexual constraints imposed by society. In this way, she argues, this fiction becomes part of a theoretical meditation on the place of women in contemporary society.

However, despite certain aesthetic and thematic commonalities, the *boom femenino* cannot be appraised as a unified literary movement, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, the *boom femenino* is characterised by a fluid approach to genre and indeed by a diversity of generic form generally. The principal literary genres associated with the *boom femenino* are the novel and, to a lesser extent, poetry, but there is no doubt that the chronicle (*crónica*) and theatrical productions have also contributed significantly to the increased visibility of women writers. Indeed, as this book highlights, one of the interesting elements of the *boom femenino* has been its revival of so-called traditional forms such as poetry (María Baranda, Elsa Cross, Pura López Colomé), *crónica* (Elena Poniatowska, Guadalupe Loaeza, Cristina Pacheco) and the novel (Ángeles Mastretta, Cristina Rivera Garza, Ana García Bergua).<sup>7</sup>

## Gender, Writing, Feminism

The entry of so many women writers into an arena traditionally reserved for men has inevitably prompted discussion around concepts such as 'women's writing' and the very definition of 'literature' itself. Terms such as *literatura light* to refer to the work by some women writers have triggered discussion (and caused tension) around concepts such as 'women's writing' and prompted debate on the nature of literature and its place in a global world. In this way, it can be argued that the *boom femenino* revives time-honoured polemics surrounding the nature of literature and provokes a debate around universalism. As the conference held in University College Cork in January 2008 on the subject affirmed, there is wide dissension amongst scholars of women's writing concerning the location of women writers within the Mexican literary tradition. There is also strong evidence of a questioning of traditional feminist classifications and renewed focus on the usefulness (and indeed theoretical difficulty) of the use of the category of the 'woman writer' or even more problematically, 'women's writing'. The reliance on a distinct category of 'woman writer' is further complicated in the Mexican context by a widely

articulated hostility towards such classification and labelling. As Ángeles Mastretta declares:

How often can you attend a conference about literature ‘written by women’? Please don’t let them organize another conference on that subject. They are going to drive all of us women crazy, with everyone talking about literature ‘written by women’. Can’t we talk about something else? (De Beer 1996, 230).

Many other writers have expressed similar sentiments of frustration, including María Luisa Puga, who admitted, for example, in an interview with Beth Miller in the 1980s, to a dislike of labels, and even to a fear of distinctions, and noted that ‘the idea of a specialized course on feminine literature alarms me’ (Miller 1990, 249, our translation). Carmen Boullosa has expressed similar opinions and the same point was eloquently demonstrated at the conference in University College Cork by visiting writer, Ana Clavel. On the other hand, many other writers welcome the scholarly attention paid to their work, an attention (it is often muttered) that would not be as forthcoming from male scholars. The divergent, even contradictory positions and remarks on these issues reveal the complex web of meanings and attitudes that surround the terms ‘feminine’ or ‘women’s’ literature and the dilemmas women authors face regarding this classification. As Irma López points out:

On the one hand, they find the adjective (‘women’s’) helpful in explaining their own way of seeing and interpreting the world (and it is from this perspective that their books have evoked interest), but on the other, some still share the concern that they will be pigeonholed as writers within a subgenre. This apprehension increases when their work is linked to feminism, a political position that many of them consider too radical and in other ways limiting. Yet all of these authors agree that as changes in culture and mentality continue to take place in Mexican society there will be less of a need for such distinctions, they will eventually disappear, and the literary skill of a genderless ‘writer’ will be discussed instead (2010, 32).

As this passage affirms, it is frequently (though not exclusively) because of their gender-oriented and (more often) woman-centred writing that these writers have been read and studied. Viewing the debate from that perspective, it seems absurd to divorce gender from the discussion when it so clearly embeds itself into both the literary content of these books and also the networks of cultural power that regulate their production and circulation. On the other hand, this leads to a rather problematic pigeonholing and an understandable frustration.

Toril Moi discusses these dilemmas in a recent provocative study on the subject of women writers and her insights are of relevance to the attempt to locate our interpretations of contemporary cultural production by women in Mexico. She writes, 'Why are some women writers reluctant to acknowledge that they are women writers? How are we to take the claim, 'I am not a woman writer?' (2007, 263). Answering her own question, Moi argues that responses of that nature 'are always in response to a provocation. In other words, such statements are defensive speech acts...' (265). Taking our cue from Moi, then, it could be argued that the defensive position adopted by many writers in Mexico is symptomatic of a continuing chauvinism, the legendary Mexican *machismo* that continues to relegate women writers to a kind of sub-category. In this sense, their defensiveness is explained by their hostility to a constructed structural inequality dividing what Patricia Coughlan calls 'writing' (i.e. mainstream, men's work) from 'women's writing' (received as a kind of supplement)' (Coughlan and O'Toole 2008, 1-2). And yet, while there is ample evidence to support the continued existence of resentment towards women writers and often unchallenged assumptions about the content of their writing, it is also the case that many women writers actively seek recognition on the basis of their female-oriented prose and, that furthermore, their success as women writers frequently rests entirely on their gendered positioning within the Mexican literary sphere. Examples of this include work by Elena Poniatowska, Ángeles Mastretta, Laura Esquivel and Guadalupe Loaeza who address an almost exclusively female readership. In this sense, there is no easy resolution to the dilemmas around labelling.

Toril Moi traces what she sees as the more generalised antipathy towards literature and aesthetics in feminist theory since the 1980s, an antipathy she maintains that coincides with the rise in poststructuralist interest in Barthes, Derrida, Foucault whose work, of course, signalled an increasing move away from questions of agency *per se*.<sup>8</sup> Highlighting the importance of Judith Butler's theories on the performative nature of gender (particularly her ground-breaking *Gender Trouble*) in this regard, she concludes that 'the result is a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and the word 'woman' is theoretically dodgy' (Moi 2008, 264). How these observations transpose to the different context of Mexican cultural production and indeed the specifically Mexican critical sphere requires further elucidation. In some ways, the theoretical turn away from questions of agency in the Western academy has occurred in a very different manner within Mexico. It is not that scholarship on the subject of women's writing in Mexico has not been



inflected by the same theoretical debates. It is clear from work produced on gender and literature in that context that it engages robustly with a diversity of theoretical methodologies and tools. However, rather from fleeing from the question of agency, it would seem to be the case that this issue retains prominence and that there is a lively community of feminist scholars still dedicated to the recovery of women writers from the past. The Mexico-based Taller de Teoría y Crítica Literaria ‘Diana Morán’ has produced a number of valuable studies in this regard and the recent series, *Desbordar el Canon: Escritoras mexicanas del siglo XX* further attests to the commitment to the re-framing of Mexican literary history.<sup>9</sup> It would appear then from current work being carried out in the Mexican context, that questions of the location of women writers within national literary discourses continues to be of paramount importance and that the tensions between competing notions of feminism and nationalism are still being played out in the Mexican literary sphere.

It is also the case that while the sense of ‘schizophrenia’ as outlined by Moi above may not be felt as acutely within Mexico, it is certainly present within feminist literary criticism elsewhere. Indeed, there was a deep sense that it prevailed amongst the scholarly community from the US, Europe and Latin America at the conference in University College Cork in 2008. Also marked was the division between some scholars (hostile in the same way as the writers they study) to the classification of women writers as a separate, sub-category and others who insisted on the political importance of the category of ‘woman writer’ and the feminist necessity to continue to study it as separate. This collection cannot, of course, hope to resolve these many complex tensions or provide easy answers to questions that have concerned scholars for many decades. However, it is hoped that the book will provide a space in which these questions are debated and point the way towards a kind of dialogic criticism in which conflicting approaches might converge in providing new understandings of those same questions.

## **Women Writers, Women Readers**

A key element in any discussion of the *boom femenino* concerns the role of the reader. Furthermore, if the *boom femenino* is defined as the dramatic increase in publishing by women in Mexico, then consumption, the role of (non-) Mexican readers and (foreign) market forces also become other central concerns that impinge on how the term itself is conceptualised. The role of the female reader and the notion of the ‘feminisation’ of the market place and its impact on the relationship between writing and reading then,

is central to any study of the emergence of women writers during this time period. While it is difficult to obtain hard data on reader statistics in Mexico (Anaya Rosique 1996, 63-70), it is widely acknowledged that women make up the current majority in readership. As Juan Villoro (1993, 48) attests: 'Un dato clave es que el público lector en su mayoría está integrado por mujeres' ('it is clear that the reading public is largely made up of women'). Women's increased presence in the labour force has resulted in the presence of a disposable income that has enabled them for the first time to become both consumers and producers of culture. Many cultural critics have lamented this feminisation of the market-place asserting that its impact has led to the 'dumbing down' of literary production. Gustavo Guerrero exemplifies this attitude as is evidenced in his damning review (1997, 3) of Mastretta's *Mal de amores*:

*Mal de amores* representa más bien un 'best-seller de género', una obra que, siguiendo las reglas de la mercadotecnia editorial, ha sido concebida y ejecutada con vistas a explotar un provechoso filón. De ahí que no sea difícil describir sus características: es un producto que se destina a un público mayoritario (¿quién ignora hoy que las lectoras son más numerosas que los lectores?) (our emphasis).

(*Mal de amores* represents a kind of 'genre best-seller', a book that follows the rules of the publishing technomarket and has been conceived and executed with a view to exploiting this profitable seam. From that premise, it is not difficult to describe its characteristics: it is a product aimed at a majority audience (*who doesn't know that today female readers are more numerous than males ones?*) (our emphasis).

This dislike of the feminisation of the market-place and its alleged affect on literary production has been aggravated by the results of the rapid globalisation of publishing that has seen the concentration of publishing power in the hands of very few multinational companies (e.g. Planeta, Alfaguara, Mondadori). As a result, there has been anxiety over the place of smaller presses producing so-called 'quality' literature in direct opposition to the aggressive development of niche marketing lines that have deliberately constructed a category of 'implied readers' in Wolfgang Iser's sense of the term that comprise middle and lower middle class women.<sup>10</sup> Linda Saborio makes reference to this community of readers pointing out that in Mexico in tandem with the *boom femenino* in literary and cultural production, there is a 'booming class of readership (middle-class readers and book buyers)' (2010, 108) that are facilitating the act of writing as a profession. What then, are the effects on women writers of this expanded, globalised published industry? If one of the results has been

greater readability, it is difficult to ascertain which came first: the promotion of readability by the publishers or the readable texts. It has been suggested elsewhere that it might be more properly understood as a fluid and ever-evolving dynamic in which writers move to fill spaces created by publishers and the market, their texts in turn generating new demand that comes to be filled again (Finnegan 2007, 176-177). Another element in the construction of the *boom femenino* has been the practice of reviewing. Indeed it is critical to acknowledge the role played by reviewers, literary prizes and indeed academics in the creation of the *boom femenino* and in ensuring the commercial and critical success of many of its writers. Sarah Bowskill's contribution to this book examines in detail the role played by the review with regard to Laura Esquivel and Ángeles Mastretta but there is arguably much more work to be done in this regard.

## Structure

*The Boom Femenino in Mexico: Reading Contemporary Women's Writing* comprises four sections each of which groups a selection of essays by theme. Thus, the first section, which consists of three chapters is entitled *The boom femenino in Context* and as the title suggests, the contributors provide a panoramic overview of the *boom femenino* since the late 60s to the present whilst also engaging with terms such as *boom*, *b(l)oom*, *bust* or *post-b(l)oom*. The first section of the book will consider various controversial aspects surrounding the use of such terms as well as grapple with the theoretical challenges posed by the categorising of women writers in this way.

In Chapter One, ‘‘The Will to Be’’: Mexican Women Novelists from the late 1960s to the 1990s’, Irma M. López examines the social and literary changes that have taken place over the last three decades of the twentieth century in Mexico during which period the country experienced a number of socioeconomic transformations crucial to the emergence of a new generation of women writers and readers who were mostly women. As part of the cultural and intellectual production of the time, López argues that this writing has not been exempt from the debate on the effects that literary market forces have had on the production of literature written by women, nor from the polemics surrounding the value of classifying this work separately within the literature itself. The discussion attests to the complex situations these authors face in producing creative work and López examines the unprecedented recognition of this output as well as its enthusiastic reception. For López, whilst these women writers have developed their own vision and stylistic structure to convey their unique

approach to thematic considerations, they also share common concerns such as the role of identity, which, over three decades of writing has developed in three visible forms: personal identity, identity in gender relationships, and national identity, all recreated in urban and contemporary settings. López notes that this fixation on identity reveals the change of mentality that has occurred within Mexican culture, a change that questions deep-rooted notions of self and citizenry, but that also exposes the central role that women have been playing in expanding the horizons of understanding of literary and social discourses in Mexico at the dawn of the new century.

Continuing with the topic of literary production by Mexican women writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in Chapter Two, 'Six Authors on the Conservative Side of the *boom femenino*, 1985-2003: Boullosa, Esquivel, Loaeza, Mastretta, Nissán, Sefchovich', Emily Hind examines a variety of terms that might elucidate what she calls the *post-boom femenino*, including *boob* literature, *bust*, *b(l)oom*, and Neo Age. Here she coins the notion of *señora*-ty to clarify a feminine approach to authority that ultimately seems to limit women writers' and characters' political influence. Across a range of writers, from the intellectually-respected Boullosa to the 'light' writer Esquivel, Hind suggests that the *post-boom* authors share an interest in female biological functions and engage with the difficulty of making the transition from the *señorita* to the *señora* role. For Hind, *post-boom* exploitation of the expectations of unmarried and married women lead to these novels transmitting conservative messages that succeed in holding audiences' attention. Ultimately, Hind concludes that this conservative angle defies readers who would find progressive feminism in all the texts, and it emphasises the responsibility of individual women characters over the community when it comes to embracing the divide between *señorita* and *señora* status. The final contribution to this section, Chapter Three, 'The Origins of the Mexican *boom femenino*', traces its development and compares it to the very different set of cultural circumstances that led to the emergence of the *boom* in Latin American literature in the 1960s and 70s. In the chapter, Sarah E.L. Bowskill draws on reviews from Mexican and US newspapers and magazines to study the reception of four novels by two authors who epitomise the Mexican *boom femenino*: *Arráncame la vida* and *Mal de amores* by Ángeles Mastretta alongside *Como agua para chocolate* and *La ley del amor* by Laura Esquivel. Bowskill is thus able to evaluate the relative importance of the roles played by reviewers, readers, authors, publishers, marketing, commercial success, literary prizes, film tie-ins, and academics in the creation of the Mexican *boom femenino*.

The second section of the book (*Narratives of Resistance*) comprises five chapters which focus on an array of so-called 'liminal' genres of the *boom femenino* – poetry, chronicle, short story and theatre –, but which nevertheless attest to the rich diversity of cultural output which characterises the *boom femenino*. As in the previous section, all five contributions examine the multiple forms and functions of the *boom femenino*. They also deal with the notion of resistance in its many forms, from the chronicle's elusive status and its resistance to canonical conventions to the powerful role poetry can play in combating women's experiences of oppression and marginalisation.

Chapter Four, 'If a Mexican Woman Wrote, and No One Read Her, Did She Really Write?: An Examination of Cristina Pacheco's Contributions to the *b(l)oom femenino* in Mexico' by Dawn Slack, examines the *boom* in the context of one particular author of this period, Cristina Pacheco. First, the manner in which her texts defy canonical categorisation is explored; then, the persistent focus on marginalised sectors of a dystopian modern society is analysed; finally, the effects of Pacheco's questioning of societal norms and her commitment to exposing its contradictions are theorised. In Chapter Five, Linda Saborío examines Mexican theatrical production by women playwrights and argues that, though often perceived as a marginal genre, theatre is no less important in its contribution to the *boom femenino*. 'The Mexican boom femenino and the Production of Gendered Theatre in Sabina Berman's *El suplicio del placer*' examines contemporary Mexican playwright Sabina Berman's play, *El suplicio del placer*. According to Saborío, Berman's postmodern interpretation of desire, a postmodernism comprised of contradictory performances, challenges narratives that authorise gender roles by manipulating gender-scripted desire and distorting binary gender poles. In the play, focal points of male/female performances are at times not merely inverted but transposed upon each other. As one of many female authors categorised as participating in the *boom femenino mexicano*, Berman offers her audiences a feminist perspective from the public space of the stage, a perspective that challenges male views and fixed gender roles. In her essay entitled 'Rossana Reguillo: Deconstructing the Culture of Fear' (Chapter Six), Beth E. Jörgensen explores the chronicles of Rossana Reguillo. In line with Slack's own thinking regarding the chronicle's slipperiness yet central role in the context of the *boom femenino*, Jörgensen maintains that the *crónica* is an important genre in contemporary Mexican literature to which women writers have made an enormous contribution since the 1950s. This chapter briefly examines the role of journalism and chronicle writing in the careers of women authors in

Mexico, and then it analyses selected works by Rossana Reguillo, a prominent cultural anthropologist from Guadalajara. Jørgensen explores how Reguillo's research since the late 1980s has focused on urban youth, mass communications and, most recently, the mechanisms of the social construction of fear and the interests that are served by the increasing sense of fear and defencelessness in Mexico and Latin America. Through a reading of her book *Ciudadano N: Crónicas de la diversidad* in conjunction with interviews and scholarly articles, this essay enquires into the meaning and the value of Reguillo's efforts to write narratives of everyday life that contest official representations of poor urban youth, and other marginalised sectors of society. Lorraine Kelly, meanwhile, considers the short stories of Brianda Domecq within the broader context of the *boom femenino* in Chapter Seven, "La pieza desquiciante de la jerarquía": Reading the Work of Brianda Domecq as a Philosophy of Feminism'. Kelly proposes that a philosophy of feminism can be drawn from Domecq's work, in which she isolates Judeo-Christian mythology; what she terms, 'deformaciones educativas'; silence; and humiliation as the four primary tools of patriarchy used to confine women to the margins. This essay focuses on a reading of 'De las rosas y otras cosas', 'El sinuate' and 'La trilogía', from Domecq's short story collection, *Bestiario doméstico*, in which Domecq explores the existential possibilities facing the female Subject and traces the presence, structure and origin of the notion of a psychic prison of femininity back to *The Book of Genesis*. Kelly suggests that Domecq uses fiction as a theoretical vehicle through which to explore women's daily struggles to escape the social, moral and sexual constraints imposed by society. Furthermore, she reads this innovative use of fiction as theory as characteristic of many of Domecq's contemporaries of the *boom femenino*. In her consideration of how Mexican indigenous women have allied with the Zapatista Revolution to take a feminist stance concerning their marginalisation, Tiffany Dawn Creegan Miller examines the *boom femenino* female poets who form part of the collective, *Conjuros y ebriedades* and who contest the same oppressive forces of globalisation as the contemporary Zapatista movement. 'Conjuros y ebriedades: (Re)Negotiating Global Politics of Ethnicity and Autochthonous Production in The Mayan Highlands Of Chiapas' (Chapter Eight) suggests that while these female poets are contributing to the increase in publishing by women characteristic of the *boom femenino*, their work is distinguished by the nature of its production and circulation in that only a limited number of copies are released and all are made by hand. This essay considers the effects of promoting this collection in the global market, the implications of there being a translator involved, and how these women appeal to the

Western imagination. According to Miller, these writers are renegotiating what they define as 'indigenous' and 'authentic' to export poems that both satisfy and unsettle Western expectations of their ethnicity. Because of modern technologies previously unavailable to the Maya, Miller proposes that these women have made themselves more visible, hoping to foster international interest to exert external pressure on the Mexican government.

The third section of this book is entitled *Writing and the Politics of Form*. While still engaging with the importance of the *boom femenino* in its broader context, the chapters in this section focus on the process of writing and the politics of form by examining, for instance, how the theory and practice of *boom femenino* writing cannot be simply contained within the traditional frames of linguistic and national borders. Here, notions of canonicity and its limitations will be considered as well as the difficulties of fitting certain *boom femenino* writers into the marketable categories ascribed to the early authors of this phenomenon.

Debra A. Castillo's contribution, 'An Intimate Hell: Rosa Beltrán's *El paraíso que fuimos*' (Chapter Nine), examines how author Rosa Beltrán, like fellow novelists in her contemporary Mexican transnational academic cohort (Carmen Boullosa, Cristina Rivera Garza), is a committed woman writer interested in finding an original form of expression, while knowing that such a possibility is limited. Castillo examines how Beltrán's essay, 'Susan Sontag: *El paraíso que fuimos*', offers the reader a commentary on the US culture critic's work, *Against Interpretation*. Moreover, she contends that Beltrán employs the same organising image as Sontag and that it functions as an illuminating interpretative device for unlocking the text. Castillo focuses on Beltrán's ideas about art and aesthetics and in particular on her insistence on its experimental nature that leads to a kind of intellectual catharsis that is simultaneously attractive and offensive. In Chapter Ten 'Laura Esquivel and the *boom femenino*: Popular Genres and Double Encoding', Claire Taylor considers one of the most prominent Mexican women writers of recent years, Laura Esquivel, and her relationship to the Mexican *boom femenino*. After a discussion of the term and a consideration of its slipperiness, the chapter analyses Esquivel's principal novels. Adopting a particular focus on her bestseller *Como agua para chocolate* as well as her subsequent novel *La ley del amor*, this chapter examines how these novels combine a variety of popular genres as a mode of 'talking back' to the masculine paradigms of the preceding boom. The chapter then argues that these genres are engaged in a process of double encoding through which generic conventions are both installed and (partially) undermined. In this way, Taylor argues that Esquivel's novels are ambivalent, and it is precisely their ambivalence, and refusal to

be pinned down, that has led to the often heated debate about her works and status as a writer.

Continuing with the topic of narrative genre, Niamh Thornton in her essay, 'Ana García Bergua's *Púrpura*: Gay Narrative and the *boom femenino* in Mexico' (Chapter Eleven) examines *Púrpura* by Ana García Bergua, an original, playful novel which, she contends, is as much influenced by international culture as it is a product of Mexico. Belonging to a younger generation than the original successful *boom femenino* writers such as Ángeles Mastretta and Laura Esquivel, Thornton reveals how García Bergua fits uneasily into any neat marketing category for women's writing. Indeed, she analyses how García Bergua blends knowing and playful references to popular culture in a novel that owes much to both the melodrama and the nineteenth century novel. Thornton suggests that over the course of the narrative, the gay narrator operates on various levels, revealing much about snobbery and corruption in Mexico in the early decades of the twentieth century while, at the same time concealing much of what might be termed the interior configurations of the characters. Informed by a conversation with the author, this chapter explores how *Púrpura* conforms to and differs from the *boom femenino* and its significance as a Mexican gay novel. 'Carmen Boullosa: Re-writing the Surrealist and Latin American Quest' (Chapter Twelve), by Inés Ferrero Cándenas, examines two of Carmen Boullosa's novels, *Duerme* (1994) and *La Milagrosa* (1993), by looking at how the novels employ a stylistic and thematic reworking of surrealist aesthetics to elaborate a female quest for identity, subjectivity and self-knowledge while simultaneously representing the extraordinary reality, culture and history of the Mexican part of the Americas. The chapter focuses on the surrealist 'quest for the marvellous', the way in which an analogous idea of the quest was disseminated in the work of male writers of the Latin American *boom*, and the manner in which it relates to, and objectifies, women's bodies and personas. In a first instance, this approach helps to offer a new reading of Boullosa's work that indicates how she has developed an alternative discourse that challenges in gender terms and yet intimately dialogues with various aspects of both Surrealism and canonical modern Latin American literature. In the second instance, the chapter considers the politics of this dialogue and its implications for the consideration of Boullosa as a central figure within the panorama of contemporary Mexican women writers. The final contribution to this section focuses on the role of poetry by contemporary Mexican women writers. Olwen Rowe argues in her essay 'What Does it Mean to be a 'Woman Poet' in Mexico Today? Critical Challenges in Assessing the boom femenino for Contemporary Mexican



Poets' (Chapter Thirteen) that while the *boom femenino* is almost exclusively used to describe the success of popular fiction by Mexican women writers, an analysis of the term in relation to women's poetry is valuable. Rowe points to the fact that while there has been unprecedented growth in the publication of poetry collections by Mexican women since the 1980s, poetry by women has received limited critical attention and only makes up a disappointing portion of general anthologies of Mexican poetry. Rowe takes as her focus a number of anthologies of Mexican women's poetry that have been recently published, in both Mexico and the US. Rowe ultimately concludes that an analysis of the role of these anthologies and the critical reception of Mexican women's poetry is essential if we are to understand if and how the recent *boom femenino* in women's poetry can or will challenge the canon and the perception of Mexican poetry as a male-dominated field; or whether this poetry will remain on the periphery, simply relegated to the category of 'women's writing.'

The fourth and final section of this book, *Self/Subject, Nation and Place*, comprises four chapters. As in the preceding essays, all the contributors in this section engage in a debate with the term *boom femenino*, its significance in a wider cultural context and the controversies and limitations associated with such a term. Whereas the essays adopt different approaches, they also overlap in terms of thematic concern. Indeed, the narratives of the various *boom femenino* writers discussed in this section highlight a common preoccupation with issues of gender, identity and self; and discourses and counter-discourses of national identity. Notions of location are explored in relation to the city, a locus of tensions between past and present, centre and periphery, tradition and modernity, where questions of (national) identity become inseparable from questions of place. In these essays the importance of place as an integral aspect of literary construction and the writing process; or the writer's status in relation to the Mexican literary establishment are also considered.

In her essay, 'Who's Buried in Beatriz's Tomb? Monuments, Mementos, and Muses' (Chapter Fourteen) Claudia Schaefer explores the novel *Cenotafio de Beatriz* by NAFTA generation writer Eve Gil. The fourteenth century story of Dante Alighieri and his muse Beatriz is retold and refashioned on the streets of Mexico City, which is starkly depicted as an inferno of pain. In this world, emigration, poverty, prostitution, disease, and an earthquake form part of the devastated backdrop to their lives. Schaefer suggests that the heroic rescue of daughter Laura from the debris of a demolished building underlines the concept of survival as central and that, like her namesake, the mysterious subject of Petrarch's sonnets and his true

love, this child shifts time into the future rather than the (disappeared) past. Schaefer concludes that Gil's narrative may be read as an innovative rereading of canonical love stories for post-NAFTA times. María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem ('The Dissident Subject as Protagonist in the Nation Narration of Ángeles Mastretta and Elena Poniatowska', Chapter Fifteen), considers how nation, political community and narration envisioned through a gendered lens have increasingly mapped the Latin American fictional territory of the past decades. Using a theoretical approach derived from the work of postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, this chapter analyses the writing strategies of two Mexican female writers, Ángeles Mastretta and Elena Poniatowska in their elaboration of a counter-discourse to the nation-building master narratives, as well as their representation of the dissident subjects that are produced in tension with monological streams of power. This chapter refers to the novels *Mal de amores* (1996) and *El tren pasa primero* (2005) to emphasise the deconstructive approach of these authors in the re-elaboration of the historical master discourse and highlight the role of the women characters as agents of change. Meanwhile, in Chapter Sixteen, Jane Lavery examines the novel *Los deseos y su sombra* by Ana Clavel, whose work thus far remains on the fringes of the *boom femenino*. Lavery argues that whilst *boom femenino* best-sellers Mastretta and Esquivel have received extensive critical attention, there are many other equally notable writers – particularly a younger generation of female writers such as Bergua and Clavel – whose works have not been given the scholarly consideration they deserve. 'The Fragmented Nation, Self and Body in *Los Deseos y su sombra* by Ana Clavel' examines the complex character of Soledad García, who struggles to define her own sense of identity in socially repressive Mexico City (1960s-1980s). Clavel's representation of the city challenges the concept of a 'coherent' urban space and thus the 'coherence' of the alleged miracle of *desarrollismo*. In establishing Soledad's identity as a complex *sujet en procès*, Lavery proposes an allegorical connection with the text's reconstruction of an alternative conceptualisation of national identity. Lavery also points to the correlation between the female body/self as established in the text to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and its link to the notion of the 'monstrous feminine' and invisibility or disembodiment. Despite Ana Clavel's relative obscurity in literary circles, this chapter attests to her particular contribution to Mexican letters and argues that she be considered a central figure of the literary *boom femenino*.

The exploration of the fragmented self or the self in crisis explored in the previous chapter is continued by Ana Cruz García in her examination of Puga's novel *Antonia* in 'Living in Constant Fuereñez: Writing and the Self in *Antonia* by María Luisa Puga' (Chapter Seventeen). In this essay, Cruz

García probes notions such as *fuereñez* and investigates Puga's vision of writing as a process of catharsis. Cruz García suggests that like Puga, the narrator finds in her writing a crucial way to reconstruct her shattered identity. However, if on the one hand it constitutes an artistic process of liberation formulating new ways of self-consciousness, it also has the effect of ostracising her and leaving her slightly outside more mainstream literary discourses and on the periphery of the literary establishment. In this way, the chapter displays the recurring difficulties still experienced by representatives of the *boom femenino* to find some type of self-understanding in a national and literary discourse that while maintaining enough flexibility to respond to those (female) voices, keeps controlling their production, reception and distribution.

## Conclusion

The contributors to this book raise a series of important questions concerning the role of the critic in the construction of the *boom femenino* and they highlight diverging approaches of continuing the task of interpretation. Many signal ways in which production by women writers might be analysed within different interpretative frameworks or indeed located within different literary traditions. This sense of breaking beyond categories is one, it is hoped, that this collection might be seen to achieve in spite of its retention of an explicitly gendered focus, a problematic concept for many. Key to the project has been the inclusion of critics from Mexico, the US and Europe in a transnational forum. The collection as a whole aims to stimulate further enquiry, research and critical reflection into the riches of women-authored Mexican literary texts and traditions. We need to move away from the position described by Moi that 'instead of supporting women interested in investigating women's writing, our current theories appear to make them feel guilty, or – even worse – scare them away from working on women and writing altogether' (2008, 264). Collections such as this one, then, can provide a space without either the fear or the guilt suggested by Moi, in which both male and female critics might usefully debate the merits of varying and indeed often conflicting critical approaches to the subject of writing by women in Mexico. Indeed, taken together, the essays written in this book suggest that academic interest in Mexican women's writing of the *boom femenino* is still thriving. Overall, it is hoped that the conclusions presented here will lead to provocative discussions about the location of women within prevailing cultural paradigms and their role in the complex mapping of power in evolving textual canons.

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