

The Latin American Avant-Garde: Innovative Central American Women Writers

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Abstract

This article discusses how the Avant-Garde (s. *vanguardia*), as a cultural renovation intertwined with literary experimentation, offered a space for women to enter the literary scene traditionally occupied by men. These changes occurred at different pace in different countries and within genres, such as poetry, essays, and short story writing. After briefly contextualizing the Latin American cultural scene, a light will be shed on the way questioning women's role and place in society might be considered as a feature of the Avant-Garde and women's entry into the "new art". The literary contributions of Carmen Sobalvarro (Nicaragua, 1908-1947/8), Matilde Elena López (El Salvador, 1923-2010), Pilar Bolaños (El Salvador 1923-1961) and Yolando Oreamuno (Costa Rica, 1916-1956), will serve as roadmaps to an enhanced understanding of the topic.

Keywords: Avant-Garde, unsettling forms, confrontational themes, Carmen Sobalvarro, Matilde Elena López, Pilar Bolaños, Yolando Oreamuno.

Introduction

“[I] hat's where the future is”¹

At the turn of the twentieth century literature in Latin American was marked by the *modernista* movement. This was seen as a self-contained phenomenon, running from the 1880s to the 1920s (Taylor Cane 2014, 23). It was conventionally considered to be characterized by an “art for arts' sake” aesthetic and a reaction against what was perceived as the classical nineteenth century *realista* narrative. A different but related phenomenon would be the advent of the *vanguardia* or the avant-garde. This broad movement or, rather, trend was usually seen as characterized by the adoption of European avant-garde aesthetics, with emphasis on stylistic innovation

¹ (s. “ahí está el porvenir”), from *Manifiesto postumista*, cited in Gelado (2008, 664).

and radical break with tradition. Both these tendencies have been identified as part of a literary genealogy leading to the eventual rise of the experimental *new narrative* in Latin America in the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in the *boom*² of the 1960s.

The narrative of the early twentieth century focused on the questions of national identity as an unresolved subject matter within the rapidly changing and modernizing countries that were still struggling to find legitimate forms of governance.³ The outcome emerged in narratives that sought to capture Latin American reality and grapple with the direction that the continent appeared to be taking. In poetry, the literary form generally identified as the *vanguardia* stronghold in the region,⁴ the predominant voices express “the special cultural and historical circumstances and needs of their own regions and nations. [...] Writers enjoyed a greater liberty to adapt and recombine features of the various “isms” once perceived as rivalrous and mutually exclusive” (Lindstrom 1994, 63).

In this article, after briefly contextualizing the continent’s political and cultural scene and discussing the Latin American avant-garde characterized by confrontational subjects and unsettling forms, we ask how it offered a space for women to enter the literary scene traditionally occupied by men. We focus our debate on Central American women’s literary contributions and shed light on the way questioning women’s role and place in society might be considered as a feature of the avant-garde and women’s entry into *las vanguardias literarias*.

² “The Boom is, in many ways, a phenomenon of publishing, consumption and reception. It marks the period when Latin American, or more particularly Spanish American, fiction became internationally visible on some scale for the first time” (Swanson 2005, 60).

³ “Between 1810 and 1825 all the Spanish territories on the American mainland gained their independence from Spain” (Bakewell 2004, 382).

⁴ Chang-Rodríguez and Filer identify Vicente Huidobro (Chile, 1893–1948) and César Vallejo (Peru, 1892–1938) as the movements most outstanding representatives (2017, 305). They were followed by “Pablo Neruda (Chile), César Vallejo (Peru), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), and Nicolás Guillén (Cuba)” (Read, without page numbers). Simultaneously, Victoria Ocampo’s (Argentina 1890–1979) literary journal *Sur* (published in Buenos Aires from 1931), served as an important outlet for intellectuals from across the continent and elsewhere.

The Latin American Avant-Garde

For much of the nineteenth century, breaking loose from Europe – economically or otherwise – was not a leading concern in Latin America. Most nations consolidated the colonial order exporting raw material and natural resources while simultaneously seeking societal patterns to follow. Liberalism, positivism,⁵ and federalism - North American style – were the predominant alternatives and the political elites argued their cases, including many well-known intellectuals and writers of the times.⁶

The drawback of borrowing from Europe was that, although it made a modernizing break with the colonial period, it did little to give Latin American nations a sense of their own identity. They might be modern in taste, but on the road, they could hardly become more than simulacra of the originals. One European domination was being swapped for another. (Bakewell 2004, 487)

However, the offset of the twentieth century became marked with political, social, and cultural changes.⁷ Growing influence of the United States, industrialization, population growth, urbanization, massive immigration – mostly Italians, Spaniards, and Portuguese – organization of labor, emergent middle class, perpetuating inequalities of income and wealth and shifting patterns of governmental forms characterized the period. “The Depression, with its abrupt shrinking of exports, had some unsettling effects. [...] it marked the end of oligarchies’ domination of political life – the domination that had had its roots in the wealth of the export boon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Bakewell 2004, 515).

⁵ Its theoretical framework linked order with progress and when intertwined with social Darwinism it lifted the ruling class – predominantly men of European descent – to “superior position in society” (Bakewell 2004, 455).

⁶ “France was the most admired, the cultural ideal, the acme of civilization. Almost anyone who could do so gravitated to Paris, from superfluous heroes of independence, to discarded dictators, to painters and poets wishing to advance the leading edge of their arts” (Bakewell 2004, 486).

⁷ The “Triple Alianza” war, that Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay conducted against Paraguay, lasted from 1864–1879. In 1888 slavery was abolished in Brazil, while the Mexican revolution riddled the continent from 1910 until 1924.

These societal shifts became reflected in the arts, not only in literature but also in the plastic arts, painting in particular.⁸ The regional realist mode characteristic of the late nineteenth century was challenged by *modernismo*, a renovation of poetic form and techniques, extending to the use of free verse.⁹ However, the experiments remained within accepted and traditional prosodic molds. The *vanguardia*, on the other hand, instituted a radical search for new, daring, confrontational themes and shockingly novel forms. These changes occurred at different rhythms in the various genres. The most daring and quick to adapt was poetry, perhaps because it was aimed at a smaller, more sophisticated, and receptive audience. Jean Franco agrees with José Emilio Pacheco on the fact that it's possible to talk about two *vanguardia* trends and argues that one is dedicated to the exploration of language and ignores the social component, while the other is politically and/or socially committed.¹⁰ Therefore, and before turning to the study of how the *vanguardia* offered a space for women to enter the literary scene traditionally occupied by men, a further grasp of the main characteristics of avant-garde poetry on the one hand and the novelistic narrative on the other is needed.

As the modernist era waned, many authors still favored imaginative artistry. They were antirealist but disdained modernism as an outdated, establishment mode. Hence, authors were seized by the avant-garde impulse that had been coursing through European literature during the decade of the 1910s. "However, these early manifestations of avant-gardism often prove [...] to be tentative and precarious" (Lindstrom 1994, 62). Gradually, though, the Latin American intellectuals and authors

[...] began to take into account the special cultural and historical circumstances and needs of their own regions and nations. [They] sought an accelerated, streamlined expression, stripped of embellishment and ornamentation, suitable to the rapidly changing times; discontinuous, fragmented texts became common, as did experimental treatments of time, space, and person. (Lindstrom 1994, 63)

⁸ Bakewell, in his chapter "Defining themselves" (2004, 486-491), appreciates the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera (1886-1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Siqueiros (1898-1974) for celebrating "the perceived native identity of the country, whether pre-conquest or present" (2004, 490).

⁹ The movement's so-called father in Latin America is Rubén Darío (Nicaragua, 1867-1916).

¹⁰ "[...] se dedica a la exploración del lenguaje poético y que rechaza la temática social, y la otra 'comprometida'" (Franco 1998, 269).

In this wake of *modernismo* and against its by now worn innovations and aspirations, *vanguardista* poetry freed itself from prosodic constraints and the pursuit of sublime beauty, choosing instead to seek the poetic in the prosaic and to delve into the inner recesses of the self, no matter how dark.¹¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, poets such as Chileans Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, and Pablo Neruda; Mexican Octavio Paz; Cubans Nicolás Guillén and José Lezama Lima; Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos; Argentines Jorge Luis Borges and Oliverio Girondo; and Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal, made their marks within the literary scene.¹² However, without entering the nuanced theoretical debate of “*transculturation*”, as Fernando Ortiz has put it,¹³ between modernism and avant-gardism, it becomes relevant to emphasize the political component of the Latin America *vanguardia*, because one of its main impulses was to incorporate peasant, indigenous and African artistic traditions into the mainstream of Latin American life. The regionalist novel dramatized the Latin American quest to define its culture as deriving from the continent’s natural forces. This productive and dramatic contradiction made the “narrative of the land” (s. *novela de la tierra*) the literary tradition within which and counter to which new novelistic projects were measured. Swanson (2005, 42) observes that the movement was led with “skepticism with regard to order as an epistemological or even ontological concept.”

If realist literary structures implied ordered values and attachment to the idea of external social reality, the new, fractured writing of the twentieth century was suggesting a much wider existential or metaphysical malice, in which the very idea of reality was problematic and life itself was possibly without any fundamental meaning. (Swanson 2005, 42).

¹¹ “The premier poets of the whole group were Neruda and Paz, though cases can be made for Jorge Luis Borges and José Lezama Lima”

(<https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-American-literature/The-20th-century>)

¹² Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz won Nobel Prizes, Mistral in 1945, Neruda in 1971 and Paz in 1990. For more see: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature/>.

¹³ Ortiz, referring to the Cuban cultural mixing (s. *mestizaje*), emphasizes the inevitable influence one culture, hence cultural entity, has over another through co-existence over time and/or space. For more see *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940).

As far as stylistic manifestations of the Latin American avant-garde – in addition to the inclusion of novel themes – appeared the search for the original and the surprising, as well as anti-sentimentalism and the anti-anecdotal. Simultaneously, the humorous and playfulness, as well as the alteration of syntax and change of classical linguistic elements such as punctuation were challenged (Chang-Rodríguez & Filer 2017, 305). A complementary tradition, attuned to the rebelliousness, *skepticism*, and contentiousness of the avant-garde, emerged mostly in the so-called southern cone states (Argentina, Chile and Brazil), during conflictive times of intense cultural transformations during which literary discourses played an important role conveying political practices within disputed social situations. Therefore, the historical route of avant-garde prose and poetry, followed well known patterns of political and economic developments, like other facets of Latin American culture and society. Ultimately, and even if the avant-garde movements in Central and South America often shared minimal contacts, they uniformly promoted the creation of a distinct reality, hence “attempted to reformulate Latin American identity vis-à-vis Europe” (Gelado 2008, 653), promoting a more inclusive national fabric.

Women’s Innovative Voices and the Avant-Garde

The *vanguardia*, as a political and cultural movement in Latin America, had traditionally been occupied by men and women’s literary contributions up until early twentieth century considered minor or lesser than – hence, repeatedly ignored in anthologies or literary studies. Their entrance onto the scene represented stylistic renovation and experimentation, that occurred at different paces in different countries and within genres, such as in poetry, prose, and essay writing.

In *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative* (2014), Adrian Taylor Kane studies forgotten narratives by renowned Central American authors to demonstrate that this art movement was not only alive and well during the early twentieth century, but also incredibly important and influential.¹⁴ Kane argues that Central American avant-garde studies have primarily focused on poetry and manifestos, while narrative has been mainly ignored. Furthermore, he claims that while vanguardist Latin American authors were clearly influenced by their European peers, the movement was partly developed within unique regional

¹⁴ Taylor Kane focuses his study on male authors, namely Miguel Ángel Asturias (Guatemala), Luis Cardoza y Aragón (Guatemala), Flavio Herrera (Guatemala), Rogelio Sinán (Panama) and Max Jiménez (Costa Rica/Argentina).

cultures. He emphasizes that no Central American country other than Nicaragua had a coordinated avant-garde movement, which in part helps to explain why they have fallen through the cracks of literary history.

Amongst those lost voices are numerous experimental fictions written by Central American women in the early twentieth century. And even if they have not usually been discussed in connection with the avant-garde movements, insofar as *las vanguardias literarias* are characterized by literary experimentation, and representing a radical search for bold, confrontational themes and the use of unsettling forms, works by these female writers can and should be considered a part of the avant-garde movement in Latin America.

Nicaragua

“I’m a tropical flower”¹⁵

Nicaraguan political and social life, in early twentieth century, was marked by a long period of political instability. On the one hand the US occupation (1912-1933)¹⁶ dominated international relations and on the other political and military activism of Sandino’s guerilla movement reigned national politics. In the cultural sphere the omnipresence of poet Rubén Darío’s legacy, the so-called “father” of *modernismo* in Latin America as he initiated the renovation of Hispanic poetry and literature leading to the independence of Latin American literature, dominated the scene. His search and expression of national identity was applauded but eventually also questioned. Therefore, when the avant-garde movement emerges in the late ’20s it was marked by a group of young writers, mostly former students from the Colegio Centro-América, led by José Coronel Urtecho, Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Joaquín Pasos, in the city of Granada.

Nicaragua was the site of an intense avant-garde movement that swept up many of the nation’s most promising young writers; in this case, verse was really the standard medium for literary innovation, with prose generally reserved for making statements (Lindstrom 1994, 70).

¹⁵ (s. “[...] soy flor tropical”). From Carmen Sobalvarro’s poem “The Indian girl from Nicaragua” (s. “Indita de Nicaragua”).

¹⁶ Commonly referred to as part of the “banana wars”. It’s initial aim was to prevent the building of a canal through Nicaragua.

The publication of “Oda a Rubén Darío”, considered as the movement’s manifesto, along with other texts published as part of the *Anti-Academia Nicaragüense*,¹⁷ implied a break with the poetics of the times and Darío’s recognized legacy. To modernize literary expression and shape a true Nicaraguan tradition, poems by its members enhance the use of irony and absurdity that mocked modernism poetics. Often described as *poesía chinfónica*,¹⁸ they praised Nicaragua’s popular culture and a sense of nationalist sentiment by criticizing bourgeois literature.

The importance of the movement within the Nicaraguan literary history has been quite thoroughly analyzed. However, most of the anthologies and academic publications on the matter dismiss the presence of Carmen Sobalvarro (1908-194?), the most predominant female poet of the period who fell into oblivion from national literature.¹⁹ However, thanks to Helena Ramos’s research and archival work, part of Sobalvarro’s legacy has been restored and legitimized within the Nicaraguan first avant-garde wave (Ramos 2004, 45-58). According to Ramos’s studies, besides the evident literature’s androcentrism and exclusiveness of that time, this absence could be explained by the fact that Sobalvarro partly lived in Honduras and wrote and published her poetry from there.

Due to the archival gaps and lack of biographical sources Sobalvarro’s poetry and life remain comparatively unknown, despite having in the 20s’ and 30s’ played a crucial role as an avant-garde poet and a political activist. Nevertheless, we now know that Sobalvarro was born within a modest family in the extreme north of Nicaragua, in 1908. She started her literary career publishing in local Nicaraguan newspapers. *El Gráfico* of Managua from the 3 November 1929 mentions her as a member of the Central Republican Committee of Tegucigalpa – the capital of Honduras (s. Comité

¹⁷ For more see: “Ligera exposición y proclama de la Anti-Academia Nicaragüense”, published in *Diario nicaragüense*, city of Granada, in April 1931.

¹⁸ The “Chinfonía burguesa”, by Joaquín Pasos and José Coronel Urtecho, was first published as a dramatic poem in 1931 but transformed into a play in 1936.

¹⁹ Poet Helena Ramos discusses the topic and writes: “No one remembers Carmen Sobalvarro” (s. “Nadie recuerda a Camen Sobalvarro”). In her study she laments not only Sobalvarro’s marginalization and lack of archived material, but also the death of her contemporaries as beholders of important memories of her literary and political legacy. “Escritoras nicaragüenses: un festín de marginalidad” (2004, 46).

Central Republicano de Tegucigalpa), hence legitimizing her political position to the public. Various of her poems, such as “A rose” (s. “Una rosa”) and “I would like to be ...” (s. “Yo quisiera ser...”), were later published in the same newspaper. In these and some other poems that followed she displays noteworthy modernist and romantic features, not yet that vanguard nor particularly innovative. An affective subjectivity reminds the reader of feminine aesthetic, described as a *poetisa* *aesthetics*.²⁰ Perhaps, her use of these aesthetic styles resembles her hesitant break from traditions and served to gain recognition and readership before experimenting with more politically engaged writings. Between 1929 and 1930 she regularly collaborated with the journal *Mujer nicaragüense*,²¹ while only first really gaining public recognition when portrayed as one of Sandino’s girlfriends. According to Jorge Eduardo Arellano, in his *Diccionario de autores nicaragüenses* (1994), Sobalvarro declared her platonic love to general Augusto Sandino in 1929 by sending him letters and poems.²²

With Sobalvarro’s growing reputation in literature, politics, and public space, she travels to Granada to join forces with the avant-garde group in 1931. Along with her fellow male *vanguardistas* she signs the manifest *Anti-Academia Nicaragüense*, hence officializing her affiliation to the movement. The literary relationship she fostered with the men of the vanguard group remains quite enigmatic as the reasons behind her acceptance into this exclusive and selective group of men is still debated.²³ Pablo Antonio Cuadra, one of the groups’ members, describes her enrollment as follows: “Suddenly, this girl with beautiful eyes and a peasant air about her appeared. She brought us ballads as beautiful and fresh as the “ocotales” of the north. This was Carmen Sobalvarro, melancholic and in love with Sandino”.²⁴

²⁰ Esthetics designated to female poets as *poetisa* in Spanish refers to a female poet, while a male poet is *poeta*.

²¹ The journal *Mujer nicaragüense*, edited by writer and precursor of feminism in Nicaragua, Josefa Toledo de Aguerri, focused women’s access to education and politics, as well as promoting conscious maternity.

²² No factual evidence of this correspondence nor references by Sandino to this relationship have been identified. Arellano, *Diccionario...* (1994, 99)."

²³ Sobalvarro published in *El Diario Nicaragüense*’s, section “Rincón de Vanguardia” (1931–1932), dedicated to the avant-garde movement.

²⁴ “De pronto apareció una muchacha de bellísimos ojos y aire campesino. Nos llevaba unos romances tan bellos y frescos como los ocotales del Norte. Era Carmen Sobalvarro, la melancólica enamorada de Sandino” (1986, 164).

This quote implies many interrogations regarding her role and contribution to the group. Firstly, she appears to be a poetic muse, while simultaneously serving as a link between the group and the Sandinista rebellion or even Sandino himself. Some sources point to her joining the movement to disseminate pro-Sandinista propaganda as numerous members came from upper middle-class backgrounds. Indeed, along with Manolo Cuadra, she was one of few leftists among a group of pro-Somoza men. Secondly, critic Helena Ramos offers quite a different perspective from Pablo Antonio Cuadra's observations on Sobalvarro's contributions. She affirms that the young woman was accepted by the group thanks to her literary merits (Ramos 2004, 50). Moreover, Sobalvarro's influence, especially her Sandinista ideology and guerilla experience, she states, might have helped to shape, and reinforce the vision of the group, seeing avant-garde through its more military meaning, as some manifestos and other publications confirm.

Sobalvarro's recently rediscovered poetic production, which includes seven poems, exposes few predominant characteristics that include free verses, the Spanish *romances* form, and a prose poem. As previously discussed, from a thematic perspective, her poetry is dominated by metaphors often associated with the *poetisa* figure. The predominance of fantasy related imagery in poems such as "How I got his book" (s. "Cómo me llegó su libro") is quite prone to a modernist approach which doesn't quite match with the fierce anti-modernism promoted by her fellow avant-garde group members, thus questioning her affiliation with the movement. Simultaneously, other characteristics reveal the complexity and relevance of Sobalvarro's poetry as pertinent to the avant-garde hesitant trend. For instance, the poem "The Indian girl from Nicaragua" (s. "Indita de Nicaragua"), which displays characteristics of the *poesía chinfónica* by exalting nationalist sentiments and steps to reformulate national identity using irony.²⁵

*Yankecito de buen color,
no me pidas amor ...
Porque con un indio me voy
al verdecito maízal
porque soy flor tropical.*

²⁵ "Sobalvarro's mastery of chinfonía speaks to her lyric command of *el habla nicaragüense* and the popular genres of her day. Pivoting from strategically sentimental verse to acerbic social critiques, she establishes herself as an accomplished and complex poet" (Finzer 2022, 462).

*Tu país es muy hermoso
y dicen ... que es muy lujoso
y que hay muy ricas manzanas;
pero a mí me dan más ganas
de andar descalza en mis llanos
comiendo dulces bananos ...*²⁶

Furthermore, looking at different definitions of the *vanguardia* aesthetic than the one promoted by the *Anti-Academia Nicaragüense*, the articulation of romantic imagery with social criticism and anti-imperialism may be understood as an *indigenista* form of avant-garde poetry. In her poem, “I’m sad” (s. “Estoy triste”), written shortly after Sandino’s assassination, she reflects this same articulation. This widely reclaimed poem gained enormous popularity among Central American women.²⁷ It’s recognition and popularity gave a new dimension to Sobalvarro’s public figure, as she embodied not only a poetic personality but in addition, she became a symbol for mourning women from across Central America.

After Somoza’s rise to power Sobalvarro was forced to leave Nicaragua in exile. She is registered to have lived in the neighboring countries where she became known for her political activism, even if she died in anonymity in the late 40s’. Although not particularly innovative in terms of avant-garde criteria, her poetic legacy appears to be more complex than commonly considered. Daisy Zamora characterizes her poetry as “spontaneous, primitivist and with a free verse so natural that it seems antiquated” (Zamora 1991, 936), which tends to essentialize her poetry as inherently feminine by nature, as Ramos observes (Ramos 2014, 51).

Apart from the more recent theoretical debates on the characterization of her poetry, Sobalvarro’s transgressive participation in the Nicaraguan avant-garde literary circles and amongst political activists are of special interest as her indiscretions overlap within these different spaces. Firstly, on

²⁶ Authors unpublished translation: Fair skinned Yankee / don’t ask me for love... / because I’m off with an Indian / to the green cornfields / because I’m a tropical flower. / Your country, I’m told, is both beautiful / and luxurious, / and a place of tasty apples / but that makes me want even more / to walk barefoot through my fields / eating sweet bananas ...

²⁷ Finzer analyzes the process of circulation and understanding of this poem which portrays Sandino as a mythical figure particularly attractive for women of the region. Finzer, “Among Sandino’s girlfriends: ...” (2012, 144).

the literary scene where she stands out for being a woman, *sandinista* and *vanguardista*, and secondly, within the public sphere for being a female political activist. These multiple modes of provoking the expected and established role for women could therefore explain why her legacy was and still is – intentionally or not – marginalized, forgotten and dismissed. In addition, the thematic concerns of her poetry, pivoting social engagement and feminine stereotypes, could also have been another reason to belittle and exclude her relevance.

Critics Ramos and Zamora emphasise that other women poets, such as María de la Selva Escoto and Aura Rostand, were also actively engaged in the Nicaraguan literary circles in early twentieth century. However, their legacy differs from that of Sobalvarro insofar as they were not formally members of the Nicaraguan avant-garde ranks nor publicly defined as followers of Sandino's political ideology. Nevertheless, their poetry and cultural engagements deserve attention as they serve as proof of female presence in Nicaraguan letters and for being important agents for change, as well as opening the gates for subsequent generations of women writers, particularly important in the '60s and '70s.

El Salvador

"American Women /
shaping the present with their rhythm"²⁸

In El Salvador *modernismo* continued to dominate the literary scene until the early '40s. Nevertheless, the modernist tradition, even if in decline (Toruño 1957, 57), left the door open for early and hesitant avant-garde attempts marked by political and social conflicts. The drop of coffee prices in 1929 provoked an economic, political, and social crisis that promoted the establishment of a military dictatorship following a coup led by general Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in 1931. Repression and conservatism, also tangible in the cultural spheres, enhanced a status quo characterized by the rise of regionalist literature that idealized the peasant (s. *campesino*) traditional figure.

However, a new collective of intellectuals was hesitantly emerging, and it embodied the renovation of national literature through avant-garde

²⁸ (s. "Mujeres de la América / marcando con su ritmo las horas del presente"), a fragment from López's poem "Message to the American Women" (s. "Mensaje a las mujeres de América"), published in *Diario Latino* (29 October, 1942).

features. This generation of writers, poets, and playwrights arose against outdated norms and static aesthetics. It was politically engaged and positioned itself against the dictatorship and contributed to the fall of Martínez's government in 1944, therefore identified as *Generación del 44* (López 1998, 97). These intellectuals, considered rebel voices within Salvadorian literature, gathered in different antifascist groups such as "The SEIS group" (s. *Grupo SEIS - Grupo Social en Ideas Superiores*) and the "Antifacist group of writers and artists for a free world" (s. *Comité de escritores y artistas antifascistas y de mundo libre*), creating a web of resistance. The members of these groups promoted a literature of change, rooted in social protest and leftist ideology, while offering a true confrontational form of literature not only in terms of engagement but also in language, subject matters, and metaphors. A literature that aimed at national liberation through the capture of human dignity confronting the decadent however exotic modernism styles of the previous generation. The *Generación del 44* reached maturity and managed to shape a creative consciousness and a realist avant-garde trend deeply rooted in the country's historical context. Amongst emblematic members were Antonio Gamero, known as *el poeta salvaje*,²⁹ Pedro Geofroy Rivas, Hugo Lindo, Oswaldo Escobar Velado, José María Méndez, and Matilde Elena López (1923-2010), a founding member of the *Asociación de escritores y artistas antifascistas*, poet, essayist, professor, and a literary critic.

Matilde Elena López - now considered one of the most polyvalent and prolific figures of Salvadorian literature of the twentieth century - began her long career while still a teenager by publishing poetry. At the age of 16 she was asked to contribute on regular basis to the *Diario Nuevo* newspaper with a section that addressed women's rights and literature.³⁰ With her growing reputation she gained standing and published articles, poems and short essays in national journals and newspapers such as *El Diario de Hoy*, in which she displayed not only literary abilities but also her political engagement (Velásquez 2007, 253-265).

In López's writings, even if she did not consider herself as a feminist early on (Velásquez 2007, 257), she argues for the integration of

²⁹ The poem "Buscando tu saliva" by Gamero is considered a turning point of Salvadorean avant-garde poetry. Vulgar and surrealist it caused a scandal when published as part of T.N.T. (1943), his first poetry collection.

³⁰ The section was directed towards women readers and called "Talking with them" (s. "Charlando con ellas").

women's views in social and political debates and promotes the radical reformist and renovative vision of the *Generación del 44*. In addition, she puts forth new and radical images of women in both poetry and public space, images that certainly match with the revolutionary changes promoted by this generation of intellectuals, i.e., the use of literature as a tool to raise political awareness, expressed in an innovative voice:

We ask that poetry be something more than sensual, romantic, or epic. We want today's poetry to be more transcendental and profound. Something intimate and sacred. We want poetry to be anti-declamatory, anti-rhetorical, anti-glorious.³¹

In her narrative López reflects an ideology where the empowerment of women is significant. In her essay "Down with the frivolous dolls" (s. "Abajo las muñecas frívolas"), published in *El Diario de Hoy* in 1942, she explains: "Now is not the time for women to employ seduction or spend time on frivolous matters. It is high time that they become aware of educational progresses and that we can learn from across the world [...]".³² While in another article, published the following year in *El Diario de Hoy*, she states:

Our intellectual women do not simply write verses or prose poems anymore but are concerned with finding solutions for the nation's most urgent challenges. [...] This should be understood as a flattering symptom of change. Women have identified their battlefield and their contributions will undoubtedly play a role and be decisive in achieving greater progress, greater civil society, and a greater culture for El Salvador.³³

³¹ "Nosotros pedimos de la poesía algo más que chuladas más o menos eróticas, románticas o épicas. Queremos que la poesía de hoy sea algo más trascendental y profundo. Algo íntimo y sagrado. Queremos una poesía anti-declamatoria, anti-retórica, anti-gloriosa". "Grupo Seis, entidad cultural y literaria de El Salvador." *Diario Latino*, 16 March, 1942.

³² "No es hora de aprender las armas de la seducción. Las mujeres no deben perder el tiempo en frivolidades. Ya es hora de que tomen conciencia de su propio proceso de educación y de que tomemos ejemplos de todo el mundo [...]". *El Diario de Hoy*, date missing, 1942.

³³ "Nuestra mujer intelectual ya no sólo se decide a escribir versos o poemas en prosa, sino que también se preocupa por la solución de los más importantes problemas

López's future in El Salvador was marked by her activism, firstly as a member of the Women's Democratic Front (s. *Frente Democrático Femenino*), where she contributed significantly to the struggle for women's rights, and secondly by her revolutionary ideas expressed in her growing social and political activism against the dictatorship. Reflecting her understanding of the avant-garde as a front-line political force, she contributed to the social uprising (Velásquez 2007, 254) starting from the failed coup attempt, followed by the "sit down strike" (s. *huelga de los brazos caídos*), to the eventual overthrowing of the dictatorship. After a short democratic period, another militarist coup, led by Colonel Osmin Aguirre y Salinas, succeed in El Salvador and López was forced to flee El Salvador with numerous other political opponents, first to Guatemala and then to Ecuador where she later graduated from the Central Quito University (s. Universidad Central de Quito) becoming the first Salvadorian woman to gain a doctorate in Philosophy and Literary Studies, in 1956.³⁴

Aside from Matilde Elena López, other prominent female figures within the Salvadorian avant-garde literary scene and members of this network of revolutionary intellectuals were María Loucel, Lydia Valiente, Margot O'Connor, and Pilar Bolaños. Bolaños (1923-1961) was a member of *Grupo SEIS* and her literary legacy shaped by her struggles for radical social reforms with a feminine and feminist perspective. The combination of her militancy and poetry writing challenged traditional gender norms, stressing women's active social roles within class struggles and the emergence of a new society. As an example of her ideology in the poem "The whole of me" (s. "Mi ser entero")³⁵ her lyrical "I" believes in women and mothers as well as in workers and the poor to embody the future of a peaceful society. Interestingly, here and in many of her other poems, Bolaños offers a holistic and intersectional perspective by giving poetic voices to other subaltern groups than women. Thus, in accordance with avant-gard practices elsewhere in Latin America, her perspective embraced

nacionales [...]. Síntoma halagador decimos, por cuanto nuestras mujeres han encontrado al campo de la acción bien hechora y cuyo aporte será indiscutiblemente un factor decisivo en el logro de un mayor progreso, de una mayor civilización y de una mayor cultura para El Salvador." *El Diario de Hoy*, 1 November 1941.

³⁴ After spending 12 years in exile in Guatemala where she studied at the University of San Carlos of Guatemala, López left for Ecuador's capital city before turning back to El Salvador in 1957. See Velásquez (2007, 255).

³⁵ López, Matilde Elena: "Mi ser entero" in *El Diario de Hoy*. 12 May, 1942.

the urban and rural working-class and the Indigenous, including them as poetic, national and Pan-American subjects oppressed by the system and key parts for the future of the societies they live in. Reflecting this perspective is the poem “A message to American women” (s. “Mensaje a las mujeres de América”),³⁶ where she calls on women from across the continent to take control of their fates by tracing a genealogy with indigenous identities. Likewise, the poem “The izalcos song” (s. “Romance de los izalcos”)³⁷ proposes social criticism articulated around an indigenous cosmovision in which nature is humanized.

As was the case with other members of those antifascist groups, mostly due to political and economic instability, Bolaños exclusively published poems, short essays in newspapers and journals in El Salvador until she was exiled to Costa Rica in 1943, where she kept publishing mainly in the magazine *Repertorio Americano*.

A victim of political persecution for her involvement in communist and revolutionary movements in Costa Rica, she committed suicide at the age of 38, leaving behind a literary legacy yet to be collected and anthologized.³⁸ In summary, both Pilar Bolaños and Matilde Elena López participated in the construction of a movement that promoted the presence and active participation of women in Salvadorian literary circles and society.

Their influence was not only Salvadorian but can in addition be traced in neighboring countries where they maintained their resilience and resistance through their participation in political activism and with their literary contributions.

³⁶ López, Matilde Elena: “Mensaje a las mujeres de América” in *Diario Latino*. 29 October 1942.

³⁷ In this poem Bolaños uses the traditional Spanish *romance* stance, renovating it as some Spanish *vanguardistas*, such as Federico García Lorca, did by keeping the form but innovating metaphors and imagery. See López, Matilde Elena (1943): “Romance de los izalcos” in *Repertorio Americano*, No. 40, 18.

³⁸ Matilde Elena López literary work is hard to come by despite publishing several books starting from the early '50s. She wrote most of her poems in El Salvador and Guatemala, where she gained recognition and won several poetry prizes. Nevertheless, these publications are missing from her personal and national archives.

Costa Rica

“Are our girls merely educated to serve as good housewives, wives, and mothers?”³⁹

In the case of Costa Rica and women’s participation in the avant-garde movement, the fact that realist literary trends dominated national letters well into the twentieth century prevented modernism from becoming as rooted and decisive as elsewhere in the region. Therefore, and due to the existence of the prominent literary collective *Generación del Olimpo*,⁴⁰ the Costa Rican literary context eased into a transnational form of *vanguardismo* quite effortlessly. In addition, and probably the main reason for the spread of avant-garde priorities in the country, was the publication of the literary magazine *Repertorio Americano*, founded and edited by Joaquín García Monge, between 1919 and 1958.⁴¹ It served as a platform that encouraged political and literary exchange by publishing creative writing, translations, and critical articles by intellectuals from Europe and Latin America. The magazine rapidly played a role in nurturing and disseminating ideologies with visible Marxist and avant-garde concerns. From some of the first issues, renovation appear as its watchword and two main stanzas are debated in this process; on the one hand the theorization of the avant-garde as aesthetics and, on the other, an avant-garde focused on social struggles (Videla de Rivero 1983, 96-122).

The magazine’s international scope turned out to be beneficial for young and emerging Costa Rican intellectuals as it promoted a consolidation of a movement that shared similar political values and curiosity for innovation and change. The importance of the magazine for the literary history of Costa Rica is partly reflected in the name designated to the collective involved as *Generación del Repertorio*, later also referred to as

³⁹ (s. “¿Se educa a nuestras muchachas para que sean buenas señoras de casa, correctas esposas y fuertes madres [...]?”), from Oreamuno’s essay “¿Qué hora es?” (1938).

⁴⁰ This generation of intellectuals was active between 1890 and 1920. Its members preached positivist liberalism and were instrumental in the consolidation of Costa Rica as a nation-state. Writers of this generation shaped national literature as a nationalist and civilizing project in which traditions and liberal modernism coexisted. This Eurocentric project was centered in the coffee growing region, the central highlands, excluding the Caribbean and spaces traditionally occupied by indigenous and peasants.

⁴¹ For more see <https://www.revistas.una.ac.cr/index.php/repertorio>

Generación del 40. Among the members were Isaac Felipe Azofeifa, José Marín Cañas, Max Jiménez, Eunice Odio, and Yolanda Oreamuno. To further contextualize the emergence of this new generation, the Costa Rican political and economic system built on coffee production suffered, as other Central American countries, a severe financial crisis, leading to a period of radical reforms under the presidency of Rafael Ángel Calderón (1940-1944). During which he promoted the reformation of labor laws, the health system, economy, and education, while alliances and ties were established with labor unions, the progressive sector of the religious community and the Communist Party of Costa Rica.⁴²

It is at the threshold of these changes, that national literature undertakes radical renovation and new forms to incorporate the social subjects and subaltern groups left aside during the liberal and oligarchic era (Pacheco Solórzua 2014, 63). It is within this social, political, and literary context that Yolanda Oreamuno (1916-1956) emerged as a significant figure, both within the avant-garde political movement and in Costa Rican letters. She was essential in questioning women's representations in literature and address gender inequality – both in society and literature. Now considered the first female *vanguardista* writer in Costa Rica, it was only in 1961, five years after her death, that critics started to recognize, appreciate, and analyze her work. Until the publication of a collection of dispersed writings, mainly published in *Repertorio Americano*, titled *Along the short path* (s. *A lo largo del corto camino*, 1961),⁴³ Oreamuno's work remained excluded from the national literary canon, partly because she had been mythologized for her tragic life rather than for her literary legacy (Caamaño 2008, 95).

In her many articles published in the magazine, her approach to *vanguardismo* was clearly expressed. On the one hand, she positioned herself for freedom of consciousness, inclusive social justice, and women liberation – a topic that truly caused controversy. In the article “Ways you suggest liberating the Costa Rican women from surrounding frivolity” (s. “Medios que Ud. sugiere al Colegio para liberar a la mujer costarricense de la frivolidad ambiente”),⁴⁴ published in the section “What time is it ...?” (s. “Qué hora es...?”), Oreamuno denounces the social situation of Costa

⁴² Interestingly, to ease such alliances the party changed its name from *Partido Comunista de Costa Rica* to *Partido Vanguardia Popular* in 1943.

⁴³ Oreamuno, Yolanda (2014): *A lo largo del corto camino*. San José: Editorial Costa Rica.

⁴⁴ Oreamuno, Yolanda (1938): “Medios que Ud. sugiere al colegio para librar a la mujer costarricense de la frivolidad ambiente” in *Repertorio Americano*. No. 20, 2.

Rican women within the educational system. She sees frivolity as a plague, criticizes the role of education in reproducing gender-based stigmas that keep women at a distance from social participation. Moreover, she stresses women's need to abandon predominant stereotypes to efficiently raise their claims and assert themselves. Furthermore, she attacks the feminists of her time, as she accuses them of understanding women liberation only through the realm of economic emancipation. This oppressive situation, according to her, leads to an objectification of women that prevents them from developing their own consciousness as free social subjects within society.

Some of her other articles, among them "Back to basics" (s. "La vuelta a los lugares communes") and "Protest against folklore" (s. "Protesta contra el folklore"), reveal her innovative conception of literature. Over the course of her public engagements, she calls for a spirit of improvement and the need for renovation. She focuses *foklorismo*, *costumbrismo* and *regionalismo* to analyze how artistic movements create clichés and fall into decadence while staying stagnant, individualist, and unilateral. Symptoms of this depravity, according to her writings, are represented in the lack of originality and the overuse of metaphors and comparisons. She invokes the necessity to 'sanitize' poetry while simultaneously deepening its contents. Her emphasis is on going beyond by opening new paths.

Her novel *The route of their escape* (s. *La ruta de su evasión*), first published in Guatemala in 1948, after winning a contest organized by the Guatemalan Ministry of Education, represents a true "rupture novel" (s. *novela de ruptura*),⁴⁵ a narrative that best reflects Oreamuno's perspective on literature in terms of style and ideology. The novel tells the story of a traditional bourgeois family, focusing on the mother Teresa, through an omniscient narrator. The absence of dialogic passages and abundance of inner monologs heighten the characters' interiority and submerges the reader in their psyche and consciousness. Indeed, the prominence of inner space serves to present her criticism on women's limited role in society and them not being allowed to express themselves in the public sphere. Using flashbacks on the one hand, and polyphonic voices on the other, the author accentuates the deep-rooted cultural patriarchal practices and how women's pain creates a web that interconnects the characters. The author adverts her readers of the fact that the oppressive patriarchal family structure is to blame for women's agony and social exclusion. Furthermore, given that no specific location is exposed, the novels thematic concerns have a wider

⁴⁵ Implies a rupture within the national literary landscape, a change of paradigm in both ideology and aesthetics.

resonance and are easily applicable to any Latin American cultural reality. Therefore, in *The route of their escape* (1948) Oreamuno, having declared her literature both socialist and psychoanalytic (Molina Jiménez 2019, 2), skillfully manages to combine both.

Considered nowadays as a feminist novel it should however also be understood as emblematic for the avant-garde movement in the region as it combines the fictitious character's identity quest, literary modification through innovative literary devices, and a particularly radical criticism of patriarchy (Coto-Rivel 2021, 17). Ideologically ahead of its time and renovating Central American letters, the novel resurfaced decades after its first publication, and has gained a prominent place within Costa Rican literature and as an early voice of feminist political demands.

Conclusions

"Tupy, or not tupy that is the question"⁴⁶

The purpose of this article has been to question how the *vanguardia*, as a cultural critique intertwined with literary experimentation, offered a platform for women to enter the Latin American literary scene and reveal how these processes happened at a different pace, in different ways in different countries, and within different literary genres. Firstly, we briefly described the region's cultural scene in the early twentieth century and provided some background and context. Secondly, we introduced the literary careers and works of Carmen Sobalvarro from Nicaragua, Matilde Elena López and Pilar Bolaños from El Salvador and Yolanda Oreamuno from Costa Rica, to provide an understanding of how women writers engaged with and became a part of the avant-garde. Furthermore, Taylor Kane's observation on Central American avant-garde fiction being marginalized by literary critics because they focused on authors from countries with more prominent metropolitan centers and better-established literary circles, has been challenged.

The conclusions confirm that the Central American *vanguardista* poets and writers transformed literary arts in the region, even if they did not manage to revolutionize the communities they emerged from. The Central American poetic production and narrative continued to be: "dominated by white males (with

⁴⁶ Words by Oswald de Andrade, a Brazilian avant-garde critic, cited from his *Manifesto antropológico*, in Gelado (2008, 663), where he draws attention to the much needed reformulation of Latin American identity.

few black, indigenous, and female poets) who continued to perpetuate legacies of colonial appropriation even as they sought to dismantle them” (Read, 2022). The much-needed reshaping of the regions’ identity was already underway and while representatives from different minorities and marginalized social groups slowly started to emerge as literary figures more and more women took matters into their own hands. Through their female perspective and feminist gaze, young innovative women writers, such as Sobalvarro, López, Bolaños and Oreamuno, emerged on the literary scene and made their voices heard.

Firstly, Carmen Sobalvarro entered the Nicaraguan literary circles and as a political activist at a time when few women openly voiced their political priorities. Simultaneously, the thematic concerns of her poetry, pivoting social engagement and feminine stereotypes, stirred the scene for the experimental artistic practices she used to express them. Secondly, Matilde Elena López’s and Pilar Bolaños’s legacies are founded in their socially engaged art and the construction of a movement that promoted the presence and active participation of women. Their enhancement of the avant-garde in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America was obtained through resilience and resistance, their participation in political activism and within the avant-garde literary circles. Lastly, Yolanda Oreamuno questioned women’s representation in Costa Rican letters and addressed gender inequality - in society and the literary circles. In her narrative she confronted predominant clichés and cautioned other intellectuals of the danger of staying stagnant and unilateral in approach. Of the four she was perhaps the most engaged social critic as well as an activist within the avant-garde political movement and Costa Rican letters.

In summary, we have demonstrated how the Central American *vanguardia* cannot be studied separately from historical, political and/or economical processes. The unsettling times in the region in the early twentieth century prompted comprehensive changes in all spheres of society. Political confrontations extended to multiple forms of power struggles that in turn influenced the artistic community, hence the literary circles. Encompassing innovations influenced ideology shifts, aesthetic practices and even women’s place in the social fabric. The avant-garde in this context would hardly “fit any strict description” (Hjartason et al. 2020, 6) and should be considered a denominator as well as a promotor of these correlative modifications. In any case and despite persecutions of the individuals that put their mark on the movement, the *vanguardia* remained hopeful and positive and continued to influence prose and poetic innovation in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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