

Remarkable Women of the Americas

Early Spanish-American Women Writers

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Tuesdays, 1:30-3:30, Smith College, 308 Lilly Hall

Many people in the U.S. know little of Spanish-American history and culture, something I want to remedy in this seminar. I taught Spanish for 34 years at UMass, specializing in Women's and Colonial literature. In 1999 I published *Madres del Verbo/Mothers of the Word*, a bilingual anthology of early Spanish-American women writers, which will be our basic text (University of New Mexico Press, ISBN: 0-8263-2144-5). This volume includes works by nine authors, from 1556-1867, including an early settler, three colonial nuns (a transvestite soldier; a brilliant poet; and a mystic), as well as women of the 19th century who claimed a role in the development of their new nations, and in particular, of women's rights. We will cover works from Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Cuba and Argentina. (See a brief list of the authors on p. 2)

Seminar participants will lead a discussion or prepare a 30-minute presentation on an author selected from the text. Each seminar will have two discussion leaders. We will follow the chronology of the authors covered by the text. See the next page for a list of the authors.

I hope this topic will be both eye-opening and enjoyable.

Isabel de Guevara. 1556. Among the first settlers of Asunción, Paraguay. Letter to the Princess Juana (sister of Philip II, and regent of Spain while he was in England, married to Mary Tudor) requesting a land grant, the same as men were receiving. We have no further information on her life.

Catalina de Erauso. (“The Ensign Nun”) Born in Spain in 1592 (?). Ran away from her convent before taking her vows; cross dresses as a man, embarks for the New World, and fights many a battle in Chile before her gender was discovered. She became notorious both in the Americas and in Europe.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. (1648/51?-1695) Illegitimate daughter of a Mexican mother and a Spanish father, she lived at the viceregal court and became a celebrated poet even before entering a convent. She was the most brilliant poet of the Americas, North or South, and a militant feminist.

Madre Castillo. (1671-1742) Colombian mystic, she discusses life within her convent (not always tranquil!) in her spiritual autobiography.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-72). Cuba and Spain. Lived by her pen, had a child out of wedlock, and published the first antislavery novel of the Americas (*Sab*, 1841), eleven years before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, among many other writings.

Juana Manuela Gorriti. Argentina. (1816-92) Another headstrong woman, she also supported herself by writing and teaching. She lived the era of terrorism under the dictator Rosas, as described in her short story “The Executioner’s Daughter.” It is eerily similar to Argentina’s “Dirty War” of the 1980s.

Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera. Peru. (1845-1909). Like Gorriti (they were close friends) she also made a living writing and teaching in Lima. Her essay, “A Comparative Study on Intelligence and Beauty in Women,” highlights her own intelligence.

Teresa González de Fanning. Peru. (1835-?) Educator and writer, close friend of Gorriti and Cabello, she advocated for proper employment for women, especially single ones.

Soledad Acosta de Samper. Colombia. (1833-1913) Another prolific writer (this one happily married and mother of four daughters). Well-travelled, she was trilingual in Spanish, English and French. Her novella, “Dolores,” is an astounding account of a young, lovely and well-born young woman who contracts leprosy, at that time endemic to Colombia, destroying her beauty but enabling her to write during her terminal illness.