



MARÍA ZAMBRANO'S FEMINISM IN CARIBBEAN EXILE

El feminismo de María Zambrano en el exilio caribeño

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María Zambrano's long exile included several sojourns in the Caribbean, both in Cuba and Puerto Rico, between 1940 and 1953. Significantly, the bulk of her feminist writing was done in these locations, perhaps due to her strained relationship with her husband and her collaboration with Gustavo Pittaluga on his treatise *Grandeza y servidumbre de la mujer*. This article examines Zambrano's feminist writing of the Caribbean period, especially her Antigone plays, *Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer*, and the autobiographical novel *Delirium and Destiny*, which, in addition, are some of her most literary works.

Keywords

Exile, Caribbean, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Heloise, Antigone, Delirium and Destiny, Gustavo Pittaluga

El largo exilio de María Zambrano incluye varias estancias en el Caribe, en Cuba y Puerto Rico, entre 1940 y 1953. Es significativo que mucha de su escritura feminista se llevó a cabo en estos lugares, quizás debido a la relación tirante con su esposo y su colaboración con Gustavo Pittaluga en su tratado *Grandeza y servidumbre de la mujer*. Este artículo considera la escritura feminista zambraneana del período caribeño, especialmente los dramas enfocados en Antígona, *Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer*, y la novela autobiográfica *Delirio y destino*, que, además, son algunas de sus obras más literarias.

Palabras clave

Exilio, Caribe, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Eloísa, Antígona, *Delirio y destino*, Gustavo Pittaluga

María Zambrano was born in Vélez-Málaga in southern Spain –Andalusia– in 1904. At a young age she moved with her parents to Segovia in the north, a move she would later consider her first exile. In the 1920s she militated with student groups in favor of a Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939) and when the Civil War broke out in 1936, she defended the Republic with her pen and her voice, speaking abroad to garner support for the Republic and publishing articles in newspapers and journals in Spain with the same purpose. When the Republic was defeated in 1939, like so many Republican militants, she went into exile in Latin America –first in Mexico (1939) and then from 1940 to 1945 in Havana, Cuba, with stays in Puerto Rico after 1943. After two years in Paris between 1946 and 1948, Zambrano returned to Havana from 1948 to 1953. In 1953 she left the Caribbean definitively for a prolonged stay in Rome and finally in rural France near Switzerland. In 1984 she returned to Spain, five years after the dictator Francisco Franco had died. Although she began her writing career with newspaper articles on women in the 1920s, she did not again take up women as a subject until she was living in exile in the Caribbean (1940-1953)¹. This essay explores Zambrano’s Caribbean-era feminist writing, which is some of the only creative writing of her career –her *Antigone* plays and her novel *Delirio y destino*. Zambrano gives *Antigone* a more central role and more speaking lines than the Greek original, and *Delirio y destino* is a personal memoir about Zambrano’s activity in favor of a Republic in the 1920s. Although it cannot determine the reason for the connection between the Caribbean and feminism, the fact that Zambrano experienced marital difficulties during those years may certainly have contributed. Political exile is usually considered a tragedy for those who experience it, and I do not want to diminish that aspect of Zambrano’s life, but exile was also a personal and philosophical liberation for Zambrano. She famously remarked after she returned to Spain in 1984 “Amo mi exilio” (I love my exile). Looking back on her exile at the very end of her life, she theorized her experience in the small book *Los bienaventurados* (The blessed). In this late book, she evokes the revelations of exile, which she considers a pilgrimage among the scattered entrails of tragic history². Hardly any of Zambrano’s work is overtly feminist, and she did not consider herself a feminist, but I hope to show here that during her stay in Cuba and Puerto Rico, many of her works can be in-

terpreted as feminist—taking the woman’s side as she negotiates the restrictions of patriarchy.

One of Zambrano’s first, if not the first, feminist writing of the Caribbean period is “Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer” (1945), in which she interprets Heloise as the figure that gave women a solid existence in the world. There Zambrano considers a new relationship between the self and the world. Interestingly, the self she conjures at this point is gendered. In the essay on Heloise, Zambrano proposes to address “the question of the metaphysical or ontological existence of the woman” (Laurenzi 92). She avers that until Heloise appeared, only men had achieved objective historical presence, while women were submerged in life as a subterranean existence: “her action is imperceptible because it is bound up with life itself” (93). Women had always been pure soul, until Heloise performed the historical feat of gaining liberty without giving up her soul. She evaded the image of women as timeless and ahistorical: “She escaped from the prison of objectivity in order to live and be a subject of her passion. She dared to exist. For Heloise existing is to offer herself... Pure passion has given her an identity (100, 107, 108, 112). The Heloise model is still social in that her existence depends on her existence in history, although Heloise achieved her historical standing through her interior passions.

The second feminist writing of this period is “A propósito de *La grandeza y servidumbre de la mujer*”, a review of Gustavo Pittaluga’s treatise on women³. According to Juan Fernando Ortega, “Estos dos estudios son, sin duda, lo más profundo que ha publicado María Zambrano sobre el tema [de la mujer]. Constituyen una verdadera metafísica sobre la realidad femenina y el método empleado es el de la razón poética” (35). For Zambrano, Heloise was the first woman to act independently of a man –Abelard– to take matters into her own hands and stand on her own two feet. Before Heloise, a woman was only soul [alma], while men defined humanity. Women only acquired humanity in their relationship to men. Zambrano asks if women can participate in male liberty and not lose her nature as a soul. Zambrano believes Heloise realizes this feat. Zambrano continues this line of reasoning in her review of Pittaluga’s book on the greatness and servitude of women.

Delirium and Destiny (written in 1953; published in 1984; English translation 1999) is a novelized autobiography or autobiographical novel centering on Zambrano’s activities during her student days in Madrid when she militated in favor of a republic.

¹ See my “What María Zambrano Discovered in the New World” for a more complete summary of Zambrano’s time in the Caribbean.

² All the translations from Spanish to English are my own except for those from *Delirio y destino*, which was published in English translation by Carol Maier.

³ See Madeline Cámara’s essay “María Zambrano y Gustavo Pittaluga: una sicigía habanera”, in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 852 (2021): 27-41, which convincingly speculates that Zambrano actually collaborated on the writing of the treatise signed by Pittaluga.

She wrote it in the early 1950s to be submitted to a European contest for a novel or autobiography, hoping to win the prize to help pay for her ailing sister's medical treatment. She did not win the prize and did not publish it until after she had returned to Spain in the 1980s. The narrative voice is curious; it is written in the third person "she" with occasional lapses into the first person "I". Those shifts reveal a self that is finding its way in a male-dominated milieu (Zambrano's father was a teacher, writer and friend of the poet Antonio Machado; she studied with José Ortega y Gasset and Javier Zubiri in Madrid). *Delirium and Destiny* reveals a subtle shift from an allegiance to a male-dominated intellectual world in which Zambrano lived, studied, and worked in the pre-War era to a more female-centered life in the post-War period when she began to care for her sister.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Spain was behind the rest of Europe in its attitudes toward women and in providing opportunities for their intellectual development. The feminist movement in Spain was much less developed than in England or France, and education for girls (even at the primary level) was still rare. Zambrano was lucky in this respect, as both her parents were educators, and having no sons, they allowed Zambrano to flourish in her intellectual interests. Zambrano attended grade school in Segovia where she was the only girl; her father told her she would just have to get used to it. By the time she reached the University of Madrid to study philosophy in the early 1920s, there were a few women in attendance, and some of them, including Zambrano, played a high-profile role in the anti-government movement of 1929-90. It particularly rankled the very conservative dictator José Primo de Rivera that women were among those who so very publicly advocated his overthrow.

María Zambrano reached the University of Madrid at the most propitious of moments. Intellectual and cultural life was at its zenith, and intellectuals were taken very seriously by the public and the press. José Ortega y Gasset, her major professor at the university, and Miguel de Unamuno, along with a host of other outstanding writers and thinkers, published daily articles in the press and gave numerous well-attended public lectures at venues such as the Ateneo, the Escuela Normal, and the Residencia de Estudiantes. Spain was delivered a humiliating defeat at Annual. The defeat was the *coup de grace* for King Alfonso's government and paved the way in 1923 for a military dictatorship under José Primo de Rivera, who was welcomed as a kind of savior by the general populace and even by some intellectuals (among them José Ortega y Gasset). The country remained a nominal monarchy (Alfonso was still king), but Primo de Rivera, whose notions of the state were very

conservative, naïve, and simplistic, made all the decisions. His dictatorship, which lasted for seven years (1923-1929), marked the end of almost fifty years of parliamentary monarchy in Spain, and though not a true fascist regime, it borrowed some ideas and strategies from Mussolini.

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Even the intellectuals who had initially supported a "temporary" dictatorship as a necessary measure to curb violence and unrest soon grew disaffected with Primo de Rivera's scorn for intellectual life (for example, he closed the Ateneo and the Central University and censored the press). Miguel de Unamuno was exiled in France for his outspoken criticism of the regime, and he became a kind of national symbol of freedom, an identity he encouraged by living as close as he could to the Spanish border and sending well-publicized open letters to the Spanish people. He would repeat this dissident behavior during the Civil War when he denounced a Nationalist general for proclaiming "Long live death". He was placed under house arrest after this defiant act, and he died shortly thereafter. Unamuno became a nearly mythological figure for exiled intellectuals after the Civil War—a symbol of intellectual independence and courageous defiance of repressive regimes. Many exiles wrote about him and gave classes on him in universities throughout Europe, Latin America, and the United States. He is often evoked directly and indirectly in *Delirium and Destiny*.

The University of Madrid was a focal point for the campaign against Primo de Rivera's regime, and it is in this arena in which María Zambrano was active and on which she focuses in her novelized autobiography. The students belonging to the FUE (University Student Federation), a non-Catholic student organization protested a Primo de Rivera decree giving private Catholic universities the right to confer degrees that were essentially licenses for coveted government positions. As student anger and restlessness escalated, students engaged in the destruction of public property, and some were

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jailed. At the height of the dictator's troubles, the student melées became full-scale riots. Students barricaded themselves in the Medical School building and fired gunshots at the Civil Guard sent to quell the riot. The government withdrew the police in an effort to diffuse the situation and to avoid creating martyrs. Zambrano formed part of a group of students whose unofficial leader was Zambrano's close friend José López Rey, another of Ortega's disciples. This student group approached older intellectuals like Ramón María del Valle Inclán, Manuel Azaña, Gregorio Marañón, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, and Luis Jiménez de Asúa to encourage them to political action. At this point there was no clearly-formed support for a republic among most intellectuals or student activists. They were militating for removal of the dictator and reform in Spanish political life. There was a prescient sense that "something" was going to happen, that things could not continue as they were, and it is a horizon of possibility, a sense of expectation that Zambrano conveys in *Delirium and Destiny*. The intuitional or prophetic quality of some of life's moments is one of the philosophical strands that she develops in later works, and that finds its definitive statement in her last published book, *Claros del bosque* (Clearings in the forest).

Toward the end of *Delirium and Destiny*, Zambrano calls her sister Antigone, a figure she would concentrate on in two plays, also written in the Caribbean. In "Antigone's Delirium" (and later in *La tumba de Antigone* [Antigone's tomb]) Zambrano changes Antigone's fate. Zambrano's Antigone does not commit suicide in the tomb, but lives to experience "deliriums". The Spanish philosopher endows the protagonist of Sophocles' drama with the subjectivity she lacks in the Greek play where her role is limited to the public sphere of Creon's law and condemnation. In the second part of "Antigone's Delirium", titled "First Delirium", we enter Antigone's consciousness and are privy to thoughts, or better, images, that might have come to her while impris-

oned in her tomb⁴. The voice Zambrano creates for Antigone is lyrical, delirious, entranced.

When she began treating the Antigone theme, Zambrano had been exiled from Francisco Franco's Spain for some eight years, living in Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, teaching philosophy, delivering lectures, and writing articles and philosophical works⁵. Like many Spanish exiles, into the early 1950s Zambrano continued to hope that the western democracies, having vanquished two other fascist dictatorships in Europe, would finally oust Franco, allowing the exiles to return to Spain. Surely Zambrano was drawn to the political aspect of Antigone's story in which the protagonist's burial of her brother countermanded the tyrant Creon's law. The Second Spanish Republic, so often depicted as a woman clothed in classical garb, can easily be read into "Antigone's Delirium". The freedom of expression Zambrano allows Antigone recalls that of the quashed Republic, and Antigone's transcendence of her oppression signals Zambrano's hope for the Republic's restoration. In "First Delirium" Antigone conjures a scene in which she is walking with her fiancé Haemon through an olive orchard replete with Republican symbols. Olive branches, which represented peace or victory and were worn by brides in ancient Greece, often appear in Spanish Republican era iconography. The earth on which the couple treads is red and purple (and the poppies—usually symbolizing sleep—are red and purplish) thus recalling the top and bottom stripes of the tricolor Republican flag (Haemon is golden, the color of the middle band of the flag). The traditional Spanish flag also had three bands, but both the top and bottom stripes were red. The Republic added the purple band to symbolize freedom. Importantly, the Spanish word *amorado*, means "purplish" or "bruised".

Zambrano concludes her prologue by observing that Antigone "hopeful justice without vengeance ... continues to rave" and that "[w]e cannot fail to hear her, because Antigone's tomb is our own shadowy conscience. Antigone was buried alive in us, in each one of us". In this sense, "Antigone's Delirium" much more than the recasting of the classical story into a twentieth-century political allegory of Republican

⁴The fact that the second part is titled "First Delirium" suggests that this is an incomplete work and that Zambrano intended to write more deliriums for Antigone.

⁵Zambrano addressed the Antigone theme on at least four occasions. "El delirio de Antigone", written in 1947 and 1948 in Paris and La Habana, Cuba at a crucial juncture in Zambrano's thinking about the self and about women, is the first of Zambrano's retellings of Sophocles' version. The second comes toward the end of *Delirio y destino* (written in 1952 but not published until 1989) where Zambrano calls her sister Antigone. The third is found in a section of *El hombre y lo divino* (1955, 211), and the fourth is a commentary and dialogued fiction or play titled *La tumba de Antigone* published in 1967.

Spain. Zambrano was a master at blending political, philosophical, and literary themes and genres in her work. Antigone's situation as daughter of Oedipus' incestuous union with his mother, her defiance of tyrant Creon's law against bestowing the honors due the dead on her brother Polynices' corpse, her condemnation to death by live burial, and her betrothal to Creon's son Haemon all conspire to make her an ideal subject for Zambrano's multilayered approach. As George Steiner writes, "[i]n Antigone the dialectic of intimacy and of exposure, of the 'housed' and of the most public, is made explicit. The play turns on the enforced politics of the private spirit, on the necessary violence which political-social change visits on the unspeaking inwardness of being" (11). "Antigone's Delirium" combines the philosophical and the public with the literary and the intimate by dividing the piece into two parts. The prologue is a philosophical meditation on consciousness and conscience, while the delirium is an experiment in representing consciousness, which, like Modernist stream of consciousness, employs a wide range of poetic techniques –metaphor, sensory references, synesthesia, ellipsis, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and internal rhyme. These literary devices register the contents of Antigone's consciousness as they are transformed from her awakening sexuality to recognition of her advancing age in captivity.

The prologue on human consciousness contains a sophisticated response to phenomenologists such as Max Scheler, whom Zambrano read in the 1920s, and Zambrano's Spanish university professor José Ortega y Gasset. If Scheler and Ortega believed that consciousness (self-reflectiveness) is what constitutes humanity and separates humans from the world around them, in the Antigone figure Zambrano posits a pre-conscious state. Antigone represents the pre-conscious in that "she scarcely had time to know that she existed, to see herself and be seen. ... The virgin consciousness illuminates and directs itself to what is not itself; to what is not the subject to which it belongs. A rare moment of human perfection ..." For Zambrano, "[c]onsciousness is to awake from life's dream; at first to live is to remain submerged in dreams without any knowledge of the difference between things, the difference that arises from the primary abyss between ourselves and the reality that surrounds us". Zambrano interprets Antigone's eternal virginity as her having been denied the opportunity to reflect upon herself, to reflect upon her own existence.

In the "First Delirium" Zambrano attempts through literary strategies to reveal the consciousness, the inner self, male writers –Sophocles, Hegel, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard– deny Antigone. One of Zambrano's central philosophical concepts is poetic reason, which finds in literature a means of considering the soul. She

believed that the soul, abandoned in the rational age, should be restored to philosophical thinking, but she did not wish to completely relinquish the notion of reason (or standard philosophical concepts and methodology) in her literary approach, thus "poetic reason". The term *delirio*, which I have translated rather literally as "delirium", is both a literary and philosophical category. Philosophically, it refers to a conscious state that is not the autonomous consciousness of modernist philosophy, especially the phenomenology within whose milieu Zambrano cut her philosophical teeth, nor is it a Jungian or Freudian subconscious, notions also contemporaneous with her philosophical formation. It is a personal consciousness (or conscience) –the moment when the individual awakes to reality.

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Beatriz Caballero lists the contexts in which Zambrano employs the term *delirio* for a state resulting from "persecution", "creative intoxication", and "love" (940). *Delirio* occurs when hopes and reality clash and the disparity between them becomes manifest; it is a coming into consciousness. Caballero defines delirium in Zambrano's work as "the mental state that arises as a result of a deep frustration and/or strong pressures placed on the individual. ... Because the state borders on insanity, it confers a liberty on the individual, which he or she did not have before, and makes agency possible" (94, my translation). It is no coincidence that Zambrano began elaborating these ideas in Paris and Cuba in the late 1940s when she had seen the European horrors personally during her stay in France from 1946 to 1948 to attend to her sister after her mother's death⁶. In addition, she was assimilating the fact that the western democracies, having won the Second

⁶Araceli, María Zambrano's sister, remained in Paris with her mother after the Spanish Civil War. In the French capital Araceli witnessed first hand the horrors of the Nazi dominated Vichy regime. See my "María Zambrano as Antigone's Sister: Towards an Ethical Aesthetics of Possibility", note four, for details of Araceli's life in Paris and for an analysis of *La Tumba de Antigone*.

World War, were not going to turn their depleted energies toward Francisco Franco's Spain. Antigone, like Zambrano, descended to the depths, awoke to reality, fell into consciousness or conscience, and in the ensuing delirium (for Antigone the "First Delirium" and for Zambrano her lyrical philosophical writing –poetic reason) achieved liberty.

Zambrano's interpretation of *Antigone* as a feminist rendition of the classical figure, ties together the political, the philosophical, and the literary dimensions of "Antigone's Delirium". Elena Laurenzi believes that Zambrano had Hegel's interpretation of Antigone in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in mind when she transformed Sophocles' defiant female character into a woman with an inner life. Laurenzi also argues that Zambrano's changing Antigone's fate from suicide to survival is a feminist move⁷. I agree that Zambrano's version of Antigone can be considered feminist, but Zambrano employs an existential/phenomenological vocabulary that gives her Antigone a universal dimension. Zambrano explicitly names all human kind in her identification of Antigone with "us" at the end of the prologue. Even so, it is hard to ignore that Antigone is a woman and that she interprets her own plight from a female (even feminist) perspective. In her delirium Antigone recognizes that she assumed the traditional passive female role in her relationship with Haemon. Antigone accuses Haemon of acting like many men in their relations with women –preferring not to become physically involved with the woman's body until after she is dead. In the end she pointedly remarks that she is left alone to suffer the consequences of her actions with no man to save or protect her. Paired with her "Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer", "Antigone's Delirium" (written a year later) completes the picture of how Zambrano transformed concepts such as the soul, which she at first associated with literary and historical female figures, into universal notions in subsequent books such as *El hombre y lo divino* [Man and the divine] (1955) and *Persona y democracia: La historia sacrificial* [Person

and democracy: the sacrificial history] (1958). Thus the Caribbean period was definitive for Zambrano's development of her key concepts of poetic reason, consciousness, and a female or feminist perspective that would become a universal human perspective in her later work.

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⁷Laurenzi also believes that Zambrano avoids difference feminist Luce Irigaray's interpretation of Antigone as trapped in a patriarchal system. Laurenzi may be right that Zambrano has avoided this view of Antigone, but interestingly, Zambrano has been an important source of inspiration for Italian and Spanish difference feminists. See my "Hablar con el cuerpo" and "La filosofía de María Zambrano" for discussions of Zambrano's work in the context of European difference feminism.