

Cultural Revisions of Gender And the Mexican Revolution

Kristine A. Byron*

The growing number of studies on gender and the Mexican Revolution might be linked to various phenomena: an increased interest in gender and war and the emergence of cultural studies as a field of inquiry; as well as more recent events in Mexico —the Zapatista rebellion in particular, whose best known spokesperson regularly emphasizes the importance of women in the movement. In 1996 Sub-commander Marcos commended “the rebellious, worrisome Mexican women who have insisted on emphasizing that history without them is nothing more than badly fashioned history....Tomorrow —if tomorrow comes— will include them, and above all will be because of them.”¹

Nearly 100 years after 1910, the post-Porfiriato struggle remains engraved in cultural memory, inviting new, as well as revisited, analyses of female figures of the Mexican Revolution. These transgressive and highly symbolic figures form a nexus for a number of important questions at the intersection of literary, historical and artistic representation. Taking into account the multitude of forms of narratives of revolution, I would like to briefly consider in this essay a few examples of cultural representations of women, focusing primarily on the figure of the *soldadera*, suggesting its iconic value in the context of female representations of Mexico. I would preface this dis-



Gustavo Casasola, S.A. de C.V. Publishing Fund

* Researcher at Michigan State University.

cussion by noting that I use the term *soldadera* in its broadest sense, to include all women functioning in a wartime role, whether this be actual combat or support activities such as nursing, cooking and so on. Women need not literally take up arms to be revolutionaries, any more than men do. Yet this is often assumed to be a prerequisite or a sort of measuring stick to be applied when “evaluating” women’s role in political struggle.

The case of the *soldaderas* in Mexico is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. First, these women are not usually seen as individual actors, but rather as groups of women working together outside of formal institutions. Because historiography often focuses on the contributions of individuals at the expense of groups, the *soldaderas* are simultaneously seen as part of and yet not part of history. In addition, since many of these women were not literate or educated, fewer traditional forms of self-narration exist. In many instances they are mediated by others’ records of them (such as photography, literature and film). Nevertheless, the *soldaderas* have taken on mythic significance and are still alive as an occasion for political commentary, nostalgic idealism and cultural consumption.

The *soldaderas* occupy a liminal space between literary and historical, visual and verbal representations of the revolution. Reflecting on the meanings of “liminal,” I am convinced of the value of liminality as a keyword for cultural analysis of the *soldaderas*.² The majority of *soldaderas* are silenced by virtue of their class, their gender, their ethnicity. Their voices may be barely perceptible in official accounts of revolution, yet they are not invisible, thanks in part to literature, photography and

**The *soldaderas* have taken
on mythic significance
and are still alive as
an occasion for political
commentary, nostalgic idealism
and cultural consumption.**

film. They suggest the challenges of scholarly work that seeks to uncover and understand the elusive female revolutionary subject.

The perception of women who were active in the period 1910-1920 has, of course, changed over time. Andrés Reséndez Fuentes has observed that female soldiers received much notice in the press and arts during the revolution and its aftermath. They were portrayed as fearless women dressed in men’s garb flaunting cartridge belts across the chest and a Mauser rifle on one shoulder. But they were invariably shown in the guise of curiosities, aberrations brought about by the revolution. This presentation of the female soldier as a spectacle or “aberration” is common in the context of many other civil wars and revolutions worldwide.

After the armed struggle is over, women’s participation in war and revolution is frequently downplayed, denigrated or forgotten. In Mexico, women’s participation in the revolution has often been contested, minimized or distorted. As Elizabeth Salas has argued:

After the violent phase of the Revolution, the Mexican mass media transformed *soldaderas* into either self-sacrificing, heroic camp followers or prostitutes....The *soldadera* as prostitute conforms with

the patriarchal ideology of the Mexican revolutionary state, which suggests a moral and sexual understanding of women within a “good woman-bad woman” dichotomy. To acknowledge that *soldaderas* were essential to the armies... would call into question the ideological constructions that make manhood synonymous with soldiering and military history a male sphere.³

In addition to the specific focus surrounding Mexican women’s assigned identity in Mexico as defined by the “good woman-bad woman” dichotomy, Salas’s argument draws attention to the underlying issue: if women’s participation were recognized as indispensable, it would deconstruct the boundaries between the public and private spheres and undermine traditional notions of the relationship between gender and nation as categories.

The *soldaderas* are incorporated yet marginalized in national history. They occupy the border between tradition and modernity. They stake their claim as symbols of the first revolution of the twentieth century, of “modern” Mexico, but a modernity defined in opposition to Porfirio Díaz’s modernity and dressed in the guise of the *campesina*, the rural, the indigenous. The *soldaderas*, the female revolutionaries, symbolize a temporal space that reveals, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s phrase, the “splitting, ambivalence, and vacillation” inherent in the formation and transformations of cultural mythologies and national histories.⁴ In his essay “DisemmiNation,” Bhabha asks, “How does one write the nation’s modernity as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal? ... The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent tempo-

ralities of the nation-space”.⁵ The *soldaderas* represent the liminal space between the everyday—the domestic and the familial—and the epochal—the revolution as a symbol of twentieth-century political struggle and as a marker of modernity. Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughn have noted that the *soldaderas* literally reconstituted their households on and around the battlefields. In civil wars, the home front is the battle front.⁶

In historical and visual accounts of revolution, political women’s voices are often mediated; this has certainly been the case of the *soldaderas*, who have been romanticized or vilified in numerous forms of cultural production, including novels and short stories, films, *corridos*, plays, paintings and historical accounts. In these lines I would like to briefly examine three kinds of cultural production surrounding women in the Mexican Revolution: 1) a personal narrative; 2) an infrequently cited *corrido*; and 3) visual images of women and the revolution—specifically, the best-known images of the *soldaderas*: those found in the photographs of Casasola and others.

Leonor Villegas de Magnón (1876-1955) is a particularly salient example of the extent of women’s participation in the revolution on both sides of the border. Daughter of a wealthy family, raised in the borderlands of Mexico and Texas, educated in the United States, she founded the White Cross and formed part of the Revolutionary Junta, supporting Carranza. Unlike the majority of the *soldaderas*, she had access to education, wealth and networks of key individuals both in the U.S. and Mexico during the revolution. Yet much of her personal narrative is concerned with documenting the history of the White

Cross and the contributions women made to the struggle in a variety of forms, from cross-dressing soldiers to nurses, from journalists to cooks. Similarly, Villegas’s struggle to publish her life story should be examined in the context of post-revolutionary backlash against women, who, in many cases, are sent back to the home and traditional roles after the armed struggle is over.

Villegas, and later her daughter, searched tirelessly for a publisher for her manuscript, both in the United States and in Mexico. As late as 1959, four years after Villegas’s death, the rejection letters kept coming. The Institute of Historical Studies of the Revolution explained that their board had found the memoirs “very interesting, but at the same time thought that the memoirs’ novel form makes it impossible for them to be published by us because we only publish history or chronicles about the revolution.”⁷ Her daughter succeeded in publishing a serialized form of her narrative, entitled “La rebelde” (The Rebel) in the Spanish section of *The Laredo Times* in 1961. Her manuscript in English, written for a U.S. audience, was only published decades after her death in 1994. The Spanish version of the text was published in its entirety in 2004.

Soldaderas are incorporated yet marginalized in national history. They occupy the border between tradition and modernity. They stake their claim as symbols of the first revolution of the 20th century.

The type of commentary offered by the Institute of Historical Studies of the Revolution and other publishers marks Villegas’s decades-long struggle to make her voice heard. It also suggests the constraints women’s lifewriting has faced historically. As Clara Lomas reminds us, “various marginalizations situated her story within precarious borders, in particular the marginal status of women’s autobiographies. The autobiographical/memoir genre imprisoned her story within a narrative form which has historically privileged male authority, authorship and discourse, and ignored or devalued those same female qualities”.⁸ Male forms of historiography and chronicle are privileged over the “personal” memoir. The novelization of Villegas de Magnón’s memoirs further highlights the female autobiographer’s struggle with authority and authenticity. Throughout her narrative, there is no “I”. Instead, Villegas represents herself in the third person, referring to herself as “the Rebel.” This split subject not only documents her own involvement, but also serves as a voice to record other women’s participation. “Carmen Serdán,” she notes, for example, “became the heroine of the Madero Revolution. She ignited the flaming torch that illuminated the path for democracy and hastened the overthrow of President Porfirio Díaz. Men say much about themselves. Do they not remember the brave women?”⁹

We might say that Villegas’s text displays generic instability: it is simultaneously memoir, novel and history. This generic instability is characteristic of narratives of revolution in general. Hayden White and Sidonie Smith’s work on narrativity and subjectivity, respectively, reminds us of the complex relationship between historical “truth”

and representation. Women revolutionaries' writing can often be located in the liminal space between history and text, between self and nation. Moreover, this text both highlights and problematizes the real and imagined borders between the U.S. and Mexico. As Clara Lomas has noted: Villegas de Magnón "protagonizes an 'aristocratic' rebel whose task is to immortalize the border activism of *los fronterizos*, to move them from a marginal backstage to center stage. Her story provides yet another instance of the struggle for authority and interpretative power waged by the various revolutionary factions of the borderlands."¹⁰

While most *corridos* of the revolution generally allegorize women, depicting them, as María Herrera Sobek explains, in a range from "romanticized love object to mythic archetype,"¹¹ not all of them depict the *soldaderas* as simply self-sacrificing women. The *corrido* "Marijuana, la Soldadera" draws a more complex picture of the female revolutionary. Though at first she appears to be just another "*galleta*" or "cookie" (as *soldaderas* were sometimes called), Marijuana is clearly off to battle, as the second stanza of Part I shows. She has gone with her "Juan," but she is an integral part of the revolutionary forces. She later gives birth and then, "with the baby on her back" she makes massive quantities of incredible food out of ingredients she finds "*dondequiera*"—wherever. This first part of the *corrido* concludes by praising her, declaring her "más valiente que su Juan," "braver than her Juan." Rather than separate her from the physical battle, this *corrido* places Marijuana at the center of it. The second part of the *corrido* recounts Marijuana's transformation from a support to a combat posi-

Marijuana, la soldadera¹

Part I

Va a la guerra Marijuana
tras su querido Juan
va al compás de los clarines
del tambor el rataplán

¿Adónde va? Va a morir
al pie de su pabellón,
por la asesina metralla
que lanza fiero el cañón.

Juan abraza su fusil,
y Juana con su chontal,
bajan dando barcarolas,
saltando sobre el riscal,

Anoche, al llegar al pueblo,
la Marijuana dio a luz
y al nuevo Juan le pusieron,
al bautizarlo, Jesús.

Así, con el niño a cuestras,
cumpliendo con su deber,
ella saca de dondequiera
muchas cosas que comer.

Marijuana hace tortillas,
hace caldo, hace pipián,
y antes que lleguen los juanes
ya tiene mucho que cenar.

Así aquella soldadera,
más valiente que su Juan
camina entre los peñascos:
del tambor al rataplán.

Marijuana goes to war
following her beloved Juan
keeping time with the bugle
and the drum's rat-tat-tat.

Where is she going? To die
at the foot of her banner,
by the murdering shrapnel
launched by the fierce cannon.

Juan grasps his rifle
and Juana her hat,
singing as they descend,
jumping over the rocks.

Last night, arriving in town,
Marijuana gave birth
And the new Juan was named
at baptism: Jesús.

Now, with a baby on her back,
fulfilling her duty,
she can find anywhere
many things to eat.

Marijuana makes tortillas,
makes soup, makes *pipián*
and before the soldiers arrive
she has plenty for dinner.

So, such a soldier woman,
braver than her Juan,
walks the rugged paths
with the drum's rub-a-dub.

¹ Carlos Marín, "Marijuana, la soldadera", performed by Los Hermanos Bañuelos in *The Mexican Revolution: Corridos about the Heroes and Events 1910-1920 and Beyond*, disc 3 (El Cerrito, California: Arhoolie Productions, 1996).

Part II

El enemigo está al frente,
los juanes de tiradores
y Marijuana, también,
al fulgor de los cañones.

Suena la primera descarga
el humo oscurece el viento
y al fin Juan muere en las filas
sin proferir un lamento.

Marijuana cuando oyó
el ronco son del clarín
embraza en lugar del Juan,
con gran valor aquel fusil.

Lista pasan al concluir
del tambor el rataplán
y ven formando en las filas
a Marijuana por Juan.

A sargento el general
a Marijuana ascendió
y en su honor ahí en el campo
al batallón destinó.

Del soldado mexicano
mucho, mucho hay que contar
porque todos son iguales
a Marijuana y a Juan.

The enemy is at the front,
the soldiers sharpshooting,
and so is Marijuana,
by the flare of the cannons.

The first shot is heard,
smoke darkens the wind;
in the end Juan dies in the ranks,
without uttering a lament.

When Marijuana heard
the muffled bugle's tune
with bravery she grasps
that rifle, instead of Juan.

They call roll at the end
with the drum's rub-a-dub
and standing in the ranks
is Marijuana instead of Juan.

The general promoted her
to the rank of sergeant
and honored her on the field
by assigning her to the battalion.

About the Mexican soldier
there is much more to tell
because they are all exactly
like Marijuana and Juan.

tion. Juan falls and dies —and Marijuana, hearing the “muffled tune of the bugle” picks up his rifle and takes his place in the ranks, where she is discovered after the battle by the general, who promotes her to the rank of battalion sergeant.

Though this is clearly still an idealization of the *soldadera*, this text opens up a more fluid space between the male and female division of labor and the “valiente” versus “abnegada” (or brave versus self-sacrificing) figure of the *soldadera*. Instead of being a love object like “Adelita” or “Valentina” or a mythologized Amazonian type like “Juana Gallo,” Marijuana signifies the truly *modern* woman —balancing family and work, her personal and civic duties, motherhood and civil defense. Another intriguing aspect of this *corrido* is its conclusion, which emphasizes that both Marijuana and Juan are “Mexican soldiers,” that they represent all who are fighting. This couple is an example of the “revolutionary family,” functioning at both a literal and symbolic level.

Most analyses of the *soldadera* figure lead me back, inevitably, to the evocative and fascinating images of those women, those couples, those women with children who inhabit the photographs of Gustavo Casasola and others. Because the photograph functions simultaneously as a historical document and as a form of self-representation (however mediated), an analysis of the photographic iconography of Mexican revolutionary women might suggest something about the nature of the interplay between visual representation and historical process. Visual images are of crucial importance, especially if we consider the ways in which history may be seen as “staged.”



Gustavo Casasola, S.A. de C.V. Publishing Fund

In these images one can find narrative threads that might be described as “performance gestures” —self-fashioning through dress, posing for photographs and so forth. Especially interesting are the ways in which these actions establish revolutionary women’s subjectivity, authority and agency.

Because of the anonymity of many of the women in the photographs and the historical tendency to lump women together in groups (harking back to the bread mobs of the French Revolution), the *soldaderas* are often stripped of any agency. Analyses of revolutionary movements are often guided by a concept of political agency as seen through the lens of Western definitions of political agency which tend to be masculine and individualistic.

We might locate these women in a female tradition of political agency which is communal rather than individualistic, Mexican rather than European. In her essay which accompanies the selection of photos in her 1999 book *Las soldaderas*, Elena Poniatowska notes, “When an attempt is made to define women’s participation in armed struggles, they are never linked to mythical or legendary images like Coyolxauhqui or Coatlicue (the mother of the god of war); rather, their intervention is reduced to thinking of them simply as the soldiers’ servants.”¹² Whether or not women were conscious of this tradition, many of the photographs imply an awareness on the part of their subjects of their importance in the struggle. Even the most “candid” shot might be read as a posed or constructed image. As Leonor Villegas insists in a part of her memoirs, where she instructs the official White Cross photographer not to sell any pictures or negatives without her permission, “photographs are history.”¹³

**In place of the extreme
visions of *soldaderas*
as glorified man-soldiers
or comfort women, Poniatowska
stresses their fertility,
strength, patience
and endurance.**

Post-revolutionary cultural representations of *soldaderas* have varied but, as we have noted earlier, the female soldier is often presented as an aberration. All too often, the *soldadera* seems to resemble Mariano Azuela’s “*La pintada*” or the pin-up sex symbol Adelita found in Ángel Martín’s popular calendars from the 1940s. Elena Poniatowska reflects on the disparity between the *soldadera* as masculine anomaly or pleasure servant and the story the photographs suggest:

In [the film] *La Cucaracha*, actress María Félix portrays a *marimacha*, or masculine woman, who administers slaps right and left, and, with a cigar in her mouth and a raised eyebrow, carries a flask of firewater between her breast and her back. Was there ever a *soldadera* like her? It’s not documented anywhere. In contrast, Casasola shows us one after another of slight women dedicated to the patient drudgery of hauling water and making tortillas... always carrying a grinding stone or *metate* —Does anyone know how hard it is to lug a *metate* over kilometers of military campaigning?— and, at the end of the day, breast feeding her hungry son. Without *soldaderas*, there would be no Mexican Revolution: they kept it alive and fertile like the earth.¹⁴

In place of the extreme visions of *soldaderas* as glorified man-soldiers or comfort women, Poniatowska stresses their fertility, strength, patience and endurance as the qualities that come across in the Casasola photographs. She also cleverly insinuates that what so often is disparaged as “women’s work” (especially the image of hauling a *metate* for miles and miles) is beyond the imagination or understanding of those who would define soldiering as an exclusively male undertaking.

A cultural study of the *soldadera* figure, then, must take into account the diverse representations of women in the context of the Mexican Revolution —visual and verbal, historical and literary. Worthy of further exploration are the ways in which this visual iconography runs parallel to auto-biographical narratives of female revolutionaries in Mexico, such as those by Leonor Villegas de Magnón. Like the photograph, which Roland Barthes describes as bringing “an explosion of the private into the public sphere”,¹⁵ personal narratives of female revolutionaries, with their tensions between fact and fiction, historical and literary artifact, reveal much about the ways in which the boundaries of public/private space and male/female gender roles are negotiated during times of national transformation. Visual modes of representation further reveal the kinds of image construction that go into mythmaking, particularly the photograph, in its simultaneous function as historical document of war/revolution and form of self-representation. The photographs of the *soldaderas* have been maintained as part of the “official” national memory of the revolution, yet they are also a commodity for consumption (as one might see in many a market or muse-

um in Mexico). Barthes observed the “paradox, [that] the same century invented history and photography;...the age of the photograph is also the age of revolutions.”¹⁶ This observation is particularly interesting in the context of female revolutionary figures, who raise important questions about the intersection of literature, history and popular culture, and about the place of gender in the formation of national histories both within and beyond Mexico’s borders. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, Juana Ponce de León, ed., *Nuestra arma es nuestra palabra: escritos selectos* (New York: Siete Cuentos Editorial, 2001), p. 12. Important studies of Mexican women in the revolutionary period include those by Ángeles Mendieta Alatorre, Ana Macías, Shirlene Ann Soto, Elizabeth Salas, María Herrera-Sobek, Ana Lau and Carmen Ramos, among others.

² From the Latin “limin” or “threshold,” the liminal can also mean “of or relating to a sensory threshold” or “barely perceptible.” One might also envision these women as literally and figuratively at the border —“border” not only as an imagined or real boundary, but also “border” in the sense of marginality.

³ Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas, 1990), p. 102.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, “DisemmiNation,” Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 298.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

⁶ See Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan, eds., *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850-1990: Creating Spaces, Shaping Transitions* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994). See also Margaret R. Higonnet’s observation that “Civil wars, which take place on ‘home’ territory, have more potential than other wars to transform women’s expectations. In all wars roles traditionally assigned to women are political in the sense that to maintain the hearth takes on ideological coloration. Yet nationalist wars against an external enemy repress internal political divisions and with them feminist movements. Civil wars by contrast may occasion

explicit political choices for women,” Margaret R. Higonnet, “Civil Wars and Sexual Territories,” Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Merrill Squier, eds., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1989), p. 80.

⁷ Leonor Villegas de Magnón, in Clara Lomas, ed., *The Rebel* (Houston: Arte Público, 1994), p. xxx.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹¹ María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 114.

¹² Elena Poniatowska, *Las soldaderas* (Mexico City: Fototeca Nacional/Ediciones Era, 1999), p. 21.

¹³ Leonor Villegas, op. cit., p. 120.

¹⁴ Poniatowska, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-98.



**Sexualidad
en tu
propia voz**

Radio Educación

**Un programa de orientación para
jóvenes, en la voz de los jóvenes**

**Conducido por
Elizabeth Nolasco y Fidel Romero
todos los viernes a las 18:00 horas
en vivo**

1060 AM

Tel. 1500-1060

**Producido por
Graciela Ramírez**

www.radioeducacion.edu.mx