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Spanish and Italian newcomers and the Argentinian Scene (1930-1976): A gendered perspective

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In this third and final part of the special issues Spanish Exile and Italian Immigration in Argentina: Gender, Politics and Culture, the spotlight is on theatre, dramatists’ narrative production, and TV drama that captures the transnational experience of Spanish and Italian newcomers in Argentina (1930–1976). In line with the series’ focus on gender, this final issue gives protagonism to women playwrights, their self-construal in autobiographical and testimonial writings, and the representation of women’s experiences in dramatic and TV productions. Theatre is an artistic field that requires the cooperation of many artists and engages in direct dialogue with the audience. It is therefore fertile soil for transnational connections. Let us take a closer look at the influences exerted by dramatists and television directors of Spanish or Italian origin and by a multicultural audience on the Argentinian scene.

By the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s, Buenos Aires had an excellent reputation as a centre of culture in the Americas. This image was created partly thanks to the increasing European, especially Spanish and Italian, immigration to Argentina at the end of the 19th century. The immigrants enriched Buenos Aires’ ‘landscape of modernity with their cultural and linguistic variation’ (Sarlo 2000, 110). Buenos Aires’ residents formed a multicultural audience, eager to attend spectacles, plays and other forms of entertainment. By the middle of the 20th century, Buenos Aires had tens of theatres, most of them founded before the 1930s (Llanes 1968, 17–20).

The image of Buenos Aires as a centre of culture in the Americas caught the attention of the greatest Spanish and Italian dramatists of the time, such as Federico García Lorca and Luigi Pirandello. The memory of García Lorca’s six-month stay in Buenos Aires (1933—1934), remains alive today. His plays were strongly applauded and were on stage for months at the Teatro Avenida. His visit to Buenos Aires had a positive impact on the artistic trajectory of the writer, who was welcomed as a celebrity by the porteño cultural community. On the Italian side, Luigi Pirandello travelled to Buenos Aires in 1927 on a tour with his theatre company Teatro d’Arte di Roma and did so again in 1933 when he chose Buenos Aires for the world premiere of his play Quando si è qualcuno (When One Is a Somebody) (Aldama 2015, 57). The influence of Pirandello’s work—his novels, plays, and ideas on aesthetics and philosophy—on the cultural life of the Argentina of the 1930s was reinforced by his Nobel Prize in 1934. The presence of famous Italian and Spanish
dramatists in Buenos Aires contributed to strengthening the transnational evolution of the Argentinian theatre.

It is in this multicultural context, forged by the fusion of Spanish, Italian, and Argentinian audiences and dramatists, that two theatre women emerge: the Spanish actress and stage director Margarita Xirgu and the dramatist of Italian descent Griselda Gambaro. They had a major impact on the development of the Argentine theatre in the 20th century: Xirgu in the 1930s and 40s, Gambaro from the 1960s and 1970s. 

Even before the Spanish War (1936–1939), Buenos Aires was a major destination of Spanish theatre companies touring in America. The Teatro Avenida traditionally hosted the Spanish companies in Buenos Aires, including Margarita Xirgu’s company (Llanes 1968, 54). Nevertheless, the political turmoil in Europe left a mark on the transnational networks of Argentinian theatre. The Spanish War caused tensions among the porteño theatre audiences. Margarita Xirgu, whose company carried the banner for the theatrical avant-garde in Spain, was touring in America at the outbreak of the Spanish War. Her arrival in Argentina in 1937 led to an ideological division in the audiences. The Argentinian government of the time was reluctant to host anti-Francoist exiles as they were considered dangerous, being likely to spread revolutionary ideologies. In this context, artists and writers such as Margarita Xirgu, Rafael Alberti and María Teresa León were branded ‘rojos’ (‘reds’) by the media.

As a consequence, the supporters of the Republican faction in the war defended Xirgu’s productions, while the supporters of the Franco regime sided with Lola Membrives’ stagings (Foguet i Boreu 2002, 103–104). This division was spurred by the media and the theatre critics (Binns 2012, 75–77). In spite of the controversy, the Teatro Avenida had a major significance for the Spanish Theatre of the Republican Exile, welcoming one of its landmark events: the world première of García Lorca’s La casa de Bernarda Alba (The House of Bernarda Alba) in 1945, under the direction of Margarita Xirgu’s company (Vilches de Frutos and Dougherty 1992). It also registered the premières of work by important Spanish dramatists. Among these cases we highlight El adefeso (The Hideous) (1944), by Rafael Alberti; La dama del alba (The Lady of the Dawn) (1944), by Alejandro Casona; and El embustero en su enredo (The Liar in His Entanglement) (1945), by José Ricardo Morales, all of them staged by Margarita Xirgu’s company (Aznar Soler 2009, 10). The stage-to-film adaptations based on famous Spanish plays were noteworthy in the 1930s and 1940s. These adaptations were enhanced by the collaboration of Argentinian directors and Spanish exiled artists. Xirgu’s impact on the Argentinian scene peaked in 1938, when she starred, together with other actors of her company, in the famous film version of García Lorca’s Bodas de sangre (Blood Wedding, directed by Edmundo Guibourg), with costume design by Victorina Durán (Gaitán Salinas and Murga Castro 2019, 408).

Several 20th-century women playwrights had an impact on the Argentinian scene, but the most influential is Griselda Gambaro, born in Buenos Aires in 1928 to Italian immigrants. In the framework of this series of special issues that focuses on the period 1930–1976, we will emphasize the first and second decades of her production (1960s-1970s) and its connection with Argentina as a host country for European migrants and exiles. The 1960s and 1970s were for Argentina a period of increasing militarization and influence of European fascism. During World War II, Argentina remained officially neutral. Still, president Perón was an admirer of Mussolini and maintained contacts with the
Spanish dictator Franco (1939–1975). After the Second World War, refugees from Germany and Italy who entered Argentina often had connections with fascism. The ties between Argentine and European fascism were, therefore, very strong in this period. Finally, in 1976, Videla’s military coup started a period of extremely violent right-wing dictatorship (1976–1983). During this period, Griselda Gambaro went into exile in Spain and stopped producing theatre.

Before her Spanish exile, in the 1960s, Gambaro’s first plays were depicting both the growing militarism and escalating violence in Argentina and the fascist horror of the German concentration camps. Her play El Campo (The Camp, 1967) is one of her most significant works. It won the prestigious Argentores Prize of the Society of Argentinian Authors. In this play, the character named Franco, referring to the Spanish dictator, in Nazi uniform, evoked the international context of European fascism. Gambaro’s plays of the 1970s revolved around the responsibility of the silent bystander in the face of fascist horror. In Información para extranjeros (Information for Foreigners, 1972), the audience is lead through a house of torture. The violent scenes represented in its rooms are in some cases similar to incidents of abduction and torture reported in the Argentina of the 1960s and 1970s. The audience became part of the performance, which highlighted the responsibility of the people who witness the horror of fascist regimes without protesting. The play situated this discussion in an international context and thus implicitly also raised the question of whether or not the German people and the countries that offered a haven to fleeing European fascists were complicit in the horror of the Nazi concentration camps. In sum, Gambaro’s work foregrounded both Argentina’s identity as a host country of fascists and Second World War criminals and the growing repression exercised by Argentina’s military forces.

While first-generation exile Margarita Xirgu and second-generation migrant Griselda Gambaro had a strong presence on the Argentinian scene, other women dramatists, such as the Spanish exiles María de la O Lejárraga and María Teresa León did not manage to stage their plays in Argentina. However, they both realized other cultural activities during their Argentinian exile and published part of their works in Buenos Aires. By means of autobiographical and testimonial writings, León and de la O Lejárraga gave shape to their identity as exiles and preserved their memories for future generations. It is striking how the life of each exiled dramatist has inspired the production of 21st-century biographical plays by renowned Spanish playwrights, stage directors and choreographers such as Maite Agirre, Vanessa Montfort, Luz Arcas, and Abraham Gragera.1 Thanks to these theatre initiatives, Lejárraga’s and León’s experiences as exiles and pioneering women in theatre, culture, and politics were given due recognition on the Spanish stage. In the same transgenerational context, 21st-century TV productions in Argentina construct a collective memory of the previous century’s exile and immigration experiences.

Francisca Vilches de Frutos opens this Special Issue with a reflection on the transnational character of Contra viento y marea (1941, Against all Odds) and Juego limpio (1951, Clean Game), published by María Teresa León during her exile in Buenos Aires. Both these testimonial narratives have dramatic features and stage León’s experience of the Spanish War. Vilches de Frutos reveals the transnational dimension of these testimonies by showing how León combines the creation of a collective memory of the Spanish War, on the one hand, with her interest in strengthening ties between Spain and the Latin American host countries of the Spanish Republican Exile on the other. León’s radio talks,
broadcast between 1942 and 1943 by Radio El Mundo (Buenos Aires), reveal the same transnational way of thinking and put the same emphasis on shared values and interests that connect Latin America and Spain.

Inmaculada Plaza-Agudo focuses on Tragedia de la perra vida (Tragedy of a miserable life, 1956), a play written and published by the Spanish writer María de la O Lejárraga during her exile in Buenos Aires in which she merges the story of her own exilic existence with a mythological plot. Plaza-Agudo reflects on the reasons why this play was not performed on the Argentinian stage and investigates how myth and testimony interact within the play to construct a universal reflection on war and exile. The play’s female characters embody the ideology of Spain’s Second Republic (1931–36), which created optimal conditions for women’s advancement in society. María de la O Lejárraga thus places Spanish feminism of the 1920s and 30s in a context that transgresses national borders.

Griselida Gambaro’s El mar que nos trajo (The sea that brought us, 2001) sheds light on the often-ignored group of women who deal with the consequences of labour migration when left (temporarily) behind by their husbands, lovers or fathers. Helena Houvenaghel offers an intertextual reading of this novel. She connects Gambaro’s approach to Italian, Spanish, and Argentinian women who are left behind with Homer’s and Ovid’s construction of Penelope and other abandoned Greek heroines. This intertext proves to be a helpful tool for tracing the evolution of these women’s answer to abandonment across generations.

Julio E. Checa Puerta closes this issue with a contribution on the transnational TV drama Vientos de agua (Winds of Water, 2006), created by the Argentinian director of Spanish descent Juan José Campanella. Checa Puerta focuses on the TV series’ transnational production process and on its reception in Spain and Argentina. He then foregrounds the series’ transgenerational perspective on the migrant experience. The TV drama draws parallels between two different migratory flows in the 1930s and the 2000s between Spain and Argentina. Taking a critical perspective, Checa Puerta problematizes the tension between history and melodrama in the series. He argues that the director’s approach to coming to terms with the past may have overshadowed the series’ historical and educational dimensions.

In conclusion, this series of special issues Spanish Exile and Italian Immigration in Argentina (1930–1976): Gender, Politics, and Culture aim to juxtapose the experiences and expressions of transnationalism by Spanish and Italian newcomers in Argentina. The special issues move away from the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, set aside the binary division between forced and voluntary migration, and give, instead, a prominent role to transnational interaction between the host country and the country of origin. Hence, the series is a pioneering effort to set two massive waves of migration to Argentina side by side and view them through the same lens of transnationalism.

The issues take a micro-historical perspective and highlighted individual cases of first generation exiles and migrants. Via in-depth interpretation of their writings and cultural activities, the issues show a variety of practices by which the newcomers aimed at establishing a transnational dialogue. In some cases, these efforts fell on fertile ground and in other cases, they failed to reach their target audience but were conserved for future generations.
The studies included in these special issues especially concentrate on women’s diverse ways of thinking and acting transnationally. This variety includes the newcomers’ struggle to make contact with the multicultural audience of the host country, and their negotiations between identities and communities. The special issues also encompass the newcomers’ endeavour to ‘translate’ ideologies, lines of artistic expression, national symbols, or individual testimonies to a universal or broadly comprehensive language in order to make them viable beyond national boundaries. The series finally comprises the newcomers’ attempts to integrate their work in existing cross-border networks, or to create new collaborations through their cultural activities. The special issues have thus contributed to both historicizing and gendering the concept of transnationalism.

By adopting a cross-border perspective, these special issues have revealed that one of the principal similarities between the Italian and Spanish cases is its transgenerational resonance. Several contributors adopt a transgenerational perspective and reflect on the way the stories told about the 20th century exiles and migrants by the subsequent generations have shaped and reshaped these newcomers’ experiences. The following generations of writers, dramatists, scriptwriters, and stage directors in Spain, Italy, and Argentina have all shown an equally keen interest in recuperating and re-interpreting the past exilic and migrant experience. The experiences of female newcomers, in particular, have attracted their attention. The list of Spanish, Italian, and Argentine creators who were inspired by the 20th-century migratory flows and whose work has been foregrounded in this series is impressive. This group establishes, clearly, a new transnational bond and finds new routes to continue the dialogue initiated by their predecessors. While it is true to say that many of the first generation’s attempts to create transnational alliances were undervalued or forgotten, it is also true that their efforts are recognized and brought back to life by the subsequent generations.

Note
1. Two plays based on the life of María Martínez Sierra’s life were produced: Y María, tres veces amapola, María (And Maria, three times a poppy, María 2002) was created by Maite Agirre, and Firmado Lejárraga (Signed Lejárraga, 2019) by Vanessa Montfort. Another play was inspired by María Teresa León’s memoirs; stage directors and choreographers Luz Arcas and Abraham Gragera produced Una gran emoción política (A great political emotion, 2018).

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out the following Special Issues coordinated by Houvenaghel:

- **Agency and Transnationalism: Spanish Refugee Women in Transit in France.** Special Issue in Impossibilia, 2020 (Open Access via [https://impossibilia.org](https://impossibilia.org))
- **Jewish Mexican Second Generation Refugee Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, a voice of non-conformism,** Special Issue in INTI, 2021 (Open Access via [https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti))
- **Women’s Networks and Routes: the Spanish Exile in Argentina,** Special Issue in Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana, 2022 (Open Access via [https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ALHI](https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ALHI))

*Luísa García-Manso,* Please see vol 38, issue 3 article “Memoria trascultural....”.

*Monica Jansen and Maria Bonaria Urban:* Please see Article vol 38, issue 3 article “Rosalia Polizzi...”.

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