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INTRODUCTION

The Schoolteacher of America

From the beginning, Gabriela Mistral defied the odds. Born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga in 1889, she grew up in the Elqui Valley of northern Chile, renowned for its view of the magnificent Andes. Although geographically stunning, the Elqui Valley was remote and sparsely populated, and many of its inhabitants, like Mistral's family, were impoverished. Mistral's father, Jerónimo Godoy, deserted the family in 1892, and Mistral, her mother, Petronila, and her older sister, Emelina, lived in a two-room shack while Petronila worked as a seamstress to support them. Though Mistral received some formal education at the primary level, it was erratic at best and she was essentially self-taught.

Who could have imagined that Lucila Godoy Alcayaga would become one of the central architects of Latin American nationalism in the twentieth century—or would be the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1945—or would be known as “Gabriela Mistral” and become an international celebrity? Called “a walking educational mission” by the Chilean critic Fernando Alegria¹ and “a uterus birthing children for the motherland” by the contemporary Chilean author Diament López,² Mistral possessed fame and personal charisma as striking and affecting in public as they were in private.

Although Mistral became the living embodiment of the race/sex/gender politics at the heart of Latin Americanism, after her death in 1957 her stature and work were neglected, obscured, and virtually forgotten. This can be credited to the national narrative that elevated her as the “Schoolteacher of America” [la Maestra de América], an epithet
indicating Mistral’s consecration as a celibate, saintly, and suffering heterosexual national icon. For years, Gabriela Mistral’s place in the Latin American literary canon was justified only by her status as national schoolteacher-mother. Her work was not only barely read but sneered at, because it was “sentimental” and supposedly solely concerned with and aimed at mothers and children. As this book documents, Mistral’s audience was much wider. Furthermore, sentimentality, far from being a minor, incidental genre, was critical to the articulation of the nationalist state project. Sentimentality still permeates a Latin American hagiographic narrative best conceived as a national sob story, sensationalistic at every turn, that plays up the emotionalism of national belonging through a bizarrely distorted account of Mistral’s life and desires.  

As Mistral was a closet lesbian, one wonders if homophobia played a critical role in the oversight of her figure and work after her death and until recent feminist revaluations. But homophobia doesn’t begin to name the complexities of Mistral’s decisions and her reception. The homophobic subject believes itself cleanly separated from its object of hatred, but Mistral inspired affection as well—a type of national childlikeness. She was both repudiated and loved, a revealing contradiction.

Mistral’s life often veered from the sublime to the tragic. Her moment of greatest national apotheosis occurred in Chile but only when she was dead, after long years of illness and a great, accumulated bitterness toward her homeland. Thousands lined the streets of Santiago to pay their last respects, a striking event considering the level of vilification Mistral endured while living in Chile prior to her exile in 1922. In life, she received the Nobel Prize from the hands of the king of Sweden, becoming the first Latin American to be graced with the honor; but Mistral appeared alone, while the other women in attendance held on to the arm of a man. Dressed in a long black velvet gown, she wore neither makeup nor jewelry, in stark contrast to the ladies of the elite society in attendance, with their white gowns and accessorized, feminine bodies.

Mistral’s personal life was in shambles. Her adopted son, Juan Miguel Godoy, had died only two years before. Apparently exhausted by an overly emotional existence, Juan Miguel committed suicide in a most sentimental way. Like the nineteenth-century heroine Emma Bovary, he ingested a lethal dose of arsenic, dying a slow and painful death. Why he decided to commit suicide in this particular manner remains a mystery. Did he understand its impact on his mother and the world? Without realizing it, in real life Juan Miguel supplied the last missing item in the national fantasy life—the enormous tragedy entailed in the loss of a child—thus sealing the myth of the childless sufferer in Mistral’s iconography forever.

Mistral buried Juan Miguel in a cemetery in Petrópolis, Brazil, where they were living at the time. Why she didn’t take his body to the beloved valley where she herself wanted to be buried (and was), or why she chose not to transport him to Spain, where his birth mother reportedly was from, seems peculiar. Perhaps it was an expense she couldn’t afford at the time, but the fact remains: Juan Miguel’s grave continues to rest in Petrópolis, Brazil—receiving neither visitors nor prayers—whereas Mistral is buried splendidly, and alone, in her native Montegrande, surrounded by fresh flowers and tourists.

What an irony that Mistral’s maternal persona, the one that birthed the nation and upheld the importance of blood ties, collided tragically with her chosen nonreproductive experience of motherhood. The sentimentality that she certainly deployed as a norm for mass affect eerily coincided with the circumstances of her son’s death. One can only speculate whether the child’s uncertainty about his biological origin or the status of his national belonging played any part in his death.

Like the Cuban José Martí, Mistral has been claimed as being both radical and conservative. But I suspect that, although exceptional, she was truly neither radical nor especially conservative. Mistral is not the perfect female exemplar of the state—as her official discourse would indicate—nor is she a subversive lesbian writer whose feminist politics can be recuperated by queer readings, waiting to be discovered by contemporary scholarship. What is indisputable is that she is the first female transnational figure of Latin America, with major influence across the hemisphere.

Mistral created a public discourse that supported a conservative role for women within the state, but her private life deviated significantly from the state prescription. There are, of course, numerous ways to interpret this bifurcation. In A Queer Mother for the Nation, I posit that Mistral’s decision to anchor the state’s nationalist project was exactly that: a decision, and not an accident of fate. As with all decisions, it occurred within a historical context, and this book reconstructs part of that period, along with key aspects of Mistral’s life.
Close attention to Mistral’s corpus of prose works, which includes dizzying amounts of correspondence, speeches, newspaper articles, and consular reports, reveals an ambitious and brilliant woman who sought international fame and political power. She actualized all three of her ambitions—literary renown, international recognition, and a revered place in politics—in an extraordinary life.

Disciplined and motivated, she worked from the age of thirteen in various posts around her immediate region in Chile. From her earliest years, Mistral worked diligently on two fronts: contributing to local educational publications, and sending poems to local and regional literary journals. Eventually she worked her way up through a series of school postings in different regions of Chile away from her native town, which took her to the capital city of Santiago only in 1921, a year before the start of her lifelong exile. By then, Mistral had invested approximately twenty years in creating the successful persona of the schoolteacher.

After this assiduous and draining process of self-promotion, the state took notice of the steel schoolmarm. Certainly, Mistral’s public persona was expected to affirm traditional women’s roles, and she advertised herself accordingly as a champion of the home and the family, even though she had neither a stable home nor a heterosexual family. The state had a considerable investment in promoting women’s advancement while simultaneously restricting their participation to primarily the service sector within the rising industrial economy, and Mistral aligned herself to this project. Aside from the demand for women’s labor, the state needed to recruit women as teachers, for reasons that include those discussed in accounts of nationalist education and the role of women in nationalism. But, following in the footsteps of critical revisions of nationalist thought, this book advances hypotheses that depend on a close attention to the state’s relationship to queerness and, in particular, to the queerness of women. Mistral’s role was pivotal in this regard.

Mistral’s process of self-invention began early in life, and it included some hesitancy as to how she should present herself publicly. Mistral went through several versions of her pen name initially, from a mere capital “Y” in her very first writings as a girl, to gender-ambiguous pseudonyms like “Alguien” [Someone] and the more feminine names “Soledad” [Loneliness] and “Alma” [Soul] while she was an adolescent. She used “Alma” often between 1904 and 1908, when she was a frequent contributor to regional newspapers. In 1911, Mistral published a short story, “The Rival,” and signed it with the pen name “Gabriela Mistraly.” The story features an amusingly transparent double for Mistral in the protagonist, Gabriel, who provides a melodramatic first-person account of his tragic losses, in terms of female lovers. Lucila Godoy assumed her mature pen name, “Gabriela Mistral,” in 1913. Even her mature pseudonym can be read as a sign of masculine identification; though feminized, it appears that she took the names of two men, Gabriele d’Annunzio and Fréderic Mistral.

Before leaving Chile, she still used her real name, mostly for official correspondence and journal articles relating directly to education. Most anything related to her career as a writer, however, including correspondence, she signed “Gabriela Mistral.” After 1922, Mistral stopped using her real name altogether, and the pseudonym became her name, the sole exception being in her writing of consular reports and other official paperwork.

Mistral’s first major triumph as a poet came in 1914, when she won the prestigious national prize of the Juegos Florales, organized by the Society of Writers of Chile, for her famous poetic cycle “Sonnetos de la muerte” [Sonnets of death]. Undoubtedly this prize enhanced her value as a national poet and as the “teacher-poet,” a persona she cultivated during these early years in Chile. “Sonnetos de la muerte” also became fodder for the morbid story of unrequited love, culminating in the male lover’s suicide:

Del nicho helado en que los hombres te pusieron,
    te bajaré a la tierra humilde y soleada.
Que he de dormirme en ella los hombres no supieron,
    y que hemos de soñar sobre la misma almohada.

Te acostaré en la tierra soleada con una
dulcedumbre de madre para el hijo dormido,
y la tierra ha de hacerse suavidades de cuna
al recibir tu cuerpo de niño dolorido.

[From the freezing niche in which men laid you to rest, I will lower you to the wet and sunny earth. Men will never know I will put myself to sleep there too, and that we will dream while lying on the same pillow.

I will lay you down in the sunny earth, with a mother’s sweetness toward the sleeping child, and the earth will turn into a soft cradle, once it receives your body, like a child in pain.]
Mistral herself stated plainly (years later, to be sure) that she had not written these verses in connection with any existing relationship with Romelio Ureta, a Chilean rail worker and family friend who allegedly was in love with Mistral; and that Ureta had not committed suicide because of any lover’s despair. But, clearly, Mistral did not refute the story during her early period of increasing notoriety.

The young Mistral was apparently already a master publicist, aware of the extent to which withdrawal and aloofness could spark national curiosity. In fact, she didn’t accept the Juegos Florales prize in person but, it seems, attended the ceremony incognito, delighting in the awarding of the prize while underscoring her absence from the ceremony. It might be noted that she didn’t fit the image of the feminine woman, even though she had authored verses of the most intense maternal despair. Perhaps Mistral intuited that in the elite society of the big city, her figure would strike an undesirable masculine note.

Mistral’s pose as national mother initially served a number of practical purposes, although maternal discourse would become central to her writings for more complex reasons. One of the more obvious benefits of the pose concerned Mistral’s sources of financial support: the Republic of Chile always remained her main employer, first as a schoolteacher, then as a lifelong consul. The stance of national schoolmarm enabled Mistral to leave Chile in 1922, where she was trapped in a consuming bureaucratic existence that afforded her limited possibilities for intellectual growth and literary recognition. José Vasconcelos, Mexico’s minister of education in the first years of the Mexican Revolution, met her while on a trip to Chile immediately after the revolution. Clearly intrigued by Mistral’s presence, he invited her to visit Mexico to assist in the creation of rural schools to be founded by the government in the wake of the revolution. Gabriela Mistral arrived in Mexico on 30 July 1922; she was thirty-four years old.

Mistral’s trip to Mexico, undertaken as a state representative, proved crucial to her career as a writer, because it provided an international profile. The Mexican Revolution occupied center stage in world media at that time, complete with photographs and newsreel images. In fact, it was one of the first world events to be experienced visually through the mass media. Additionally, modern Mexico itself was erected as a nation largely through visual spectacle, evident not only in the work of the three famous muralists Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco but also in public-works construction such as the Mexico City Stadium and the Jalapa Stadium in Veracruz. Because of this trip, and her identification with the newly founded Mexican state, Mistral achieved quite a coup in the publication of the 1922 volume Lecturas para mujeres [Readings for women], commissioned by the Mexican government as a textbook for use in girls’ schools. Mistral astutely included her own writings in the volume; they account for nearly a third of the total entries. Significantly, she deployed “sentimental” discourse and placed the female subject squarely in the project of Latin American nationalism much more successfully than any of her predecessors.

Mistral was courted by other countries as well, most notably Argentina. Had she traveled to Argentina instead of Mexico, her international profile would have been markedly different. For instance, she could not have assumed populist and racialized politics with such ease. She probably would have embodied Argentina’s national and racist goal of European whiteness—the opposite of the image of racial harmony advocated by the Mexican government.

Mistral returned to Chile three times after 1922: in 1925, 1938, and 1954. She became a world traveler, moving frequently on account of state business and responding to engagements that resulted from her ascending fame as the schoolteacher-mother-poet-model for all Latin American women. Once named consul particular de libre elección [consul of Chile with the liberty of choosing post of residence], Mistral was able to choose residence anywhere in Europe, Latin America, or the United States. She was consul in Madrid, Spain (1933); Lisbon and Porto, Portugal (1935); Nice, France (1938); Niterói, Brazil (1940); Petrópolis, Brazil (1941); Los Angeles, California (1945); Santa Barbara, California (1947); Veracruz, Mexico (1949); and Rapallo and Naples, Italy (1950–1952), in addition to short-term postings in other locations. In 1953, she decided to set up house with her companion, the American Doris Dana, who lived in Long Island, New York, and requested a posting as commissioner in the United Nations.

After she left Chile, as a means of supporting herself, and responding to the publicity needs of the government in many instances, Mistral contributed to major Latin American newspapers, a practice she continued throughout her life. She became a consummate essayist, writing about a variety of subjects—geography, customs, pedagogical issues, social issues, celebrities, and religion among them. The challenge in
this first book can be most easily encased in the narrative of the barren, frustrated mother, bereft of her only male love at an early age and forever pining for him.

Mistral's oeuvre consists of six poetry books and several volumes of prose and correspondence. During her life, she published four volumes of poetry. Her first book, Desolación, was published in 1922 in New York City, under the auspices of Federico de Onís, professor of Spanish at Columbia University. The book attracted immediate attention. Mistral's second book of poems, Ternura [Tenderness], soon followed, in 1924, and was published in Spain, with Calleja Press. Three editions were printed before Ternura underwent a transformation and was reissued in 1945. For its final form, Mistral removed all the lullabies and "children's poems" that were originally part of Desolación and the later Tala, and put all the children's poems in the definitive edition of Ternura. She also added poems written independently, some of which were markedly different from earlier, pedagogical celebrations of childhood. Ternura became Mistral's most popular and best-selling book. Her third, and perhaps most important, book is Tala [Felling] (1938). Dedicated to the Basque children orphaned during the Spanish civil war, the book was published by Victoria Ocampo's prestigious publishing house Sur in Argentina, a major cultural clearinghouse of the day. Tala was reissued in 1947. For this edition, Mistral took out all of the children's poems and, as mentioned, placed them in a single volume, the 1945 edition of Ternura. This second edition is the definitive version we know today. Mistral's final book, Lagar [Wine press], was published in Chile in 1954. Two posthumous volumes of poetry also exist: Poema de Chile [Poem of Chile] (Santiago, 1967) and Lagar II [Wine press II] (Santiago, 1991).

Mistral never compiled her hundreds of prose pieces for publication; they are still, in fact, in the process of being collected. There are many compilations; I will briefly highlight the ones most important for this study. Roque Esteban Scarpa, a noted Mistralian, was responsible for compiling much of Mistral's prose during the 1970s: among other volumes, La desterrada en su patria [Exiled in her homeland] (1977), Magisterio y niño [Teaching and the child] (1979), and Gabriela anda por el mundo [Gabriela wanders around the world] (1978) feature some of her key writings on education and culture in Latin America. Luis Vargas Saavedra is responsible for an important volume, El otro suicida de
Gabriela Mistral [The suicidal other of Gabriela Mistral] (1985), and for compiling most of her published correspondence. Mistral wrote thousands of letters during her lifetime, spending several hours each day reading and writing letters, and dispatching them internationally. Interestingly, much of the correspondence is still not available to scholars but exists in the private hands of collectors or with acquaintances and friends. It is tragic yet, it seems, certain that some extremely significant letters were destroyed, either intentionally or through neglect. A specialist will immediately notice gaps in Mistral’s published correspondence: there is very little available, for example, that relates to close female friends.

Being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1945 only increased Mistral’s already frenzied pace of activity due to her by-then-well-established international fame. Aside from her consul work, Mistral held several visiting professorships in Latin America and the United States. She was a prestigious guest speaker, delighting audiences with her brilliant and deceivingly simple conversational style. Mistral reveled in the art of conversation, and apparently whisky and cigarette smoking too, making her a favorite in bohemian circles.

Mistral’s extraordinary success, only outlined here, is all the more remarkable when her significant deviations from accepted “feminine” appearance and conduct are taken into consideration. Although the state offered Mistral as the transnational model for proper feminine conduct, it is curious that she was often described as being more masculine than feminine—or as ambiguous or simply “queer.”

Although hard documentation of her sexuality simply does not exist, it’s quite possible that Mistral’s exile was in part sexual. Certainly, the assumption of the schoolteacher’s image resonated with her need for self-protection while she was in Chile, as did the heterosexual “love” correspondence she shared with Manuel Magallanes Moure, a Chilean writer who was married at the time. Some specialists argue that she saw Magallanes in person twice, at social gatherings. Others claim they had an affair. Whatever the truth is, neither outcome disqualifies the issues I will examine throughout this book.

To date, there are no known love letters to women or diaries to construct as a personal sexual confession by Mistral. None of her associates have ever talked openly for the record in order to provide the apparently necessary “proof” of her “different” sexuality. As Elizabeth Horan writes, “Latin Americanists familiar with the extraordinary range of her work claim to be ready to reject Mistral’s kitschy canonization as ‘spiritual mother;’ but it seems that until some literary detective appears with documentary ‘smoking-vibrator proof’ of the subject’s lesbianism, few will posit in print what virtually all concede in private.”

References to gossip and murmurs about Mistral’s unmarried status appear in correspondence with her friend and fellow Chilean Isao Santelices, and in the memoirs of Pablo Neruda. Mistral regularly mentions anonymous letters of insult that followed her to all corners of Latin America, the United States, and Europe. The content of these letters has not been verified. Some Mistrian specialists have debated whether the letters were part of Mistral’s narcissistic and paranoid musings. I believe that she probably did receive insults, and they probably had to do with her gender difference.

It’s true that Mistral’s tone in her known correspondence suggests that she had clear tendencies toward paranoia. Additionally, her letters indicate that she was an acute observer and analyzer of the boundaries of discourse, with a particular interest in discourse about herself. Despite the volumes of praise bestowed upon her as “the mother of America,” her letters reveal an insecure and sometimes resentful woman. Mistral considered her success hard-won, regarding it as fraught with all kinds of unspecified dangers.

Mistral was not a frustrated mother and wife; she did find plenty of loves to match her early affair; and she was not the unconditional defender of children and racial minorities. These were, however, many of her self-figurations. The riddle is that there is something personal in Mistrian discourse, but not in the way that has been canonically assumed. Thus, A Queer Mother for the Nation unfolds contrapuntally along public/private lines, demonstrating how Mistral’s initial manipulation of the boundaries between the two realms became, in fact, a confounded and confusing blurring—with personal and social consequences.

The personal consequences affecting Mistral remain obscured by the near hagiography of Mistral criticism; and the social consequences affecting Latin Americans persist as problems to the present. The chapters of this book are organized along knots of private/public concern that are most taken for granted and least understood when it comes to a discussion of Mistral and of women in the first half of the twentieth century: the love of mothers and children; the love of racial minorities,
especially indigenous peoples; the love of the schoolteacher and of education; the love of country; and, finally, personal love.

Because the Mistralian corpus is enormous, I had to engage in a process of selection, one that conformed to the needs of the book’s central arguments. Instead of providing a sequential, monographic analysis, the book is focused on the areas that are most contradictory in Mistralian discourse. The primary method employed throughout the book is Foucauldian discourse analysis. Some sections rely on psychoanalytic concepts, as reformulated in queer and postcolonial theory and, I hope, without reproducing the tendency of psychoanalysis to dehistoricize the subject.

Because A Queer Mother for the Nation focuses on Mistral’s intervention in state politics, its main focus is on political, social, and educational essays of Mistral that are, for the most part, unknown to readers of English and little discussed in the Spanish-speaking world. Most of these essays come from two compilations, Magisterio y niño [Teaching and the child] and Gabriela anda por el mundo [Gabriela wanders around the world]. The book also engages Mistral’s best-known but least-understood poetic work—her lullabies and ditties for children, collected in the 1945 volume Ternura [Tenderness].

A Queer Mother draws throughout upon the published correspondence of Mistral and examines letters that were written to her by friends and colleagues and are housed in an archive in the Library of Congress. In addition, I analyze a selection of Mistral’s photographs, which document the wide circulation of her image. The chapter on the photographic archive should give readers an inkling of her visibility and influence as a national and international celebrity.

A born wanderer, Mistral traveled to more places of the world than it is possible to reflect on here. A Queer Mother considers her paradigmatic relationships to Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and Puerto Rico, with some mention of Cuba and Argentina. It also engages Mistral’s relationships to a selection of major Latin American figures: the Mexicans José Vasconcelos and Salvador Novo; the Cuban Lydia Cabrera; the Venezuelan Teresa de la Parra; and the Puerto Ricans Inés Mendoza de Muñoz and Jaime Benítez. Naturally, her vexed relationship to Chile runs as an underlying and not always apparent thread throughout her life, and the book takes notice of and interprets that fact.

A Queer Mother privileges those available materials that enable an unforeseen and unpredictable angle both into Mistral’s writings and politics and into key Latin Americanist debates and issues. Because the book is about Mistral’s relationship to state politics and the state’s gendered, raced, and sexualized deployments of “national culture,” the reader should know in advance that there are areas of Mistral’s existence and work that are not covered here; however, this does not mean I consider them secondary.

The book’s unflinching look at Mistral’s less flattering aspects may strike some readers as perhaps occasionally harsh. My attempt is to do justice to Mistral’s stature as cultural iconoclast, even as I deconstruct her involvement in the state project. Conceived as a work of scholarship pertinent to the fields of feminist analysis, queer theory, and critical race theory, the book certainly keeps its focus on Mistral’s own writings.

The intention is not to bury Mistral; on the contrary, the book places Mistral squarely on the map of both Latin American studies and hemispheric queer studies. My belief is that Mistral’s actions and words weren’t always commendable, but her life was certainly an exceptional and fascinating one.

“Race Woman,” chapter 1, is a gritty portrayal of Mistral’s racial politics, and its main concern is to perform a Foucauldian genealogy of the concept of mestizaje in Latin America. It demonstrates how the championing of the indigenous peoples—a defense of their continued “life” within the nation—occurred at the expense of the depredation of Latin Americans of African descent—a rationalization of their “death” within the nation. Some readers may be surprised to find that Mistral’s racial pronouncements were far from benign, raising the specter of her violent racial mothering of the state. Certainly, Mistral’s “personal” feelings regarding race and sexuality were at a disjuncture with her public discourse on the Latin American “race.”

“Schooling and Sexuality,” chapter 2, analyzes the figure of the schoolteacher in depth. Mistral became the singular image of the national schoolteacher, a figure related to the mother but significantly differentiated from her. Additionally, chapter 2 argues for a psychoanalytic understanding of the child’s relationship to the modern Latin American schoolteacher, proposing this relationship as a double of national belonging. The state capitalizes on the citizen’s desire to fulfill his or her ana-
citonic needs, postponed indefinitely by the process of national schooling. Mistral’s queer figure, described as such by her contemporaries, was part of this deployment.

“Citizen Mother,” the third chapter, closely examines and contextualizes two central essays in Mistral’s career, “Palabras de la extranjera” [Remarks of the foreigner] and “Colofón con cara de excusa” [Colophon to offer an apology]. The former is the introduction to the book Lecturas para mujeres [Readings for women]. The latter is the afterword to the second edition of Ternura [Tenderness]. The chapter acknowledges the fact that Mistral practiced “separate spheres” thinking in some key ways (thus separating women from men in some instances) but questions whether this was a uniform discourse to be accepted at face value, or whether this female discourse was an instance of a far more complex and troubling self- and state enunciation. By historicizing Mistral’s woman-centered essays, the reader will discover that maternal discourse is neither uniform nor uniformly benign.

“Intimate Nationalism,” chapter 4, examines Mistral’s vexed relationship with her own child, Juan Miguel Godoy, or “Yin Yin,” tying personal circumstance to the literary production of sexually ambiguous “children’s literature.” “Intimate Nationalism” relates Mistral’s own narcissism to the kind of narcissistic nationalism that was influential in the emergence of the Latin American liberal states of the twentieth century. The miniaturization of the state’s cultural politics is evident in Mistral’s ditties for children. One particular version of the “queer family” is presented, not to denigrate the idea of lesbians who have children but rather to perversely interrogate the bases of the national family. The national family inhabited a closed, anguished, and claustrophobic world. Two closeted women attempted to recreate its parameters, and they closed in on the object of their and the state’s affection: the white child. Ironically, Juan Miguel Godoy suffered the fate projected for the racially marked child. He was asphyxiated by mother- and father-love and did not survive—or so goes the narrative of the letters between Mistral and her former secretary, the Mexican woman Palma Guillén.

“Image Is Everything,” chapter 5, focuses on the photographic image of Mistral. It analyzes the progression of her image from demure and feminine writer-teacher to masculine “Mother of America.” Some people consider Mistral’s image as being asexual, unpressed. Others have compared her physicality to that of the nun. I don’t agree with either assessment; for me, Mistral was masculine and was seen in her own time as being manlike. “Image Is Everything” interprets the circulation of her sexual indeterminacy and speculates as to its possible ends. Mistral was not conventionally feminine, nor was she passing as a man—but she was not androgynous or asexual either. She was a prime example of what Judith Halberstam has usefully conceptualized as “female masculinity.”

“Pedagogy, Humanities, Social Unrest,” chapter 6, discusses some of Mistral’s key pedagogical writings, tracing first the contradictory emergence of the visual within the basic materials needed to teach literacy to children. Enamored of the visual image, Mistral came to express an almost fascistic belief in the image’s powers. At the same time, she foresaw the printed word’s changing relationship to an ascending cultural industry interested in quick, repetitive consumption rather than critical thinking. Mistral lamented the “death” of ideas, even as she enthusiastically aligned herself to the rise of the image.

After this exposition, chapter 6 moves on to the first of two historical examples in the field of education, to test the importance of such “image making” for the state. The first is a student strike; the second, colonial education. Puerto Rico, my native country, is the axis of these examples, but not because of my national origin. The reason for the inclusion is twofold. First, materials in Puerto Rico have not been as heavily censored as elsewhere, because Puerto Rico is often forgotten in Americanist narratives. Second, Puerto Rico is certainly “queer” with respect to the rest of Latin America, especially in its colonial relationship to the United States. As such, it is ideal for this analysis. Because Puerto Rico has existed as a colony of the United States since 1898, was a primary target of U.S. capital investment, and became the showcase for U.S. intervention in Latin American economic life, Mistral’s attachment to Puerto Rico is especially paradigmatic of a larger Latin Americanist projection. (It’s worth remembering that during the cold war, Puerto Rico was regarded as a model for U.S. policy in Latin America.)

The two examples taken from Puerto Rican politics act as historical studies.

The second part of chapter 6 offers an examination of the cultural politics of the public university, especially through the example of the colonial government in the wake of a student strike at the University of Puerto Rico in 1948, one of many such strikes across Latin America. Mistral was the commencement speaker. Her internationally acclaimed
image was critical to the successful crushing of the strikers and the dis-
sident views they espoused. My intention is not to suggest that the state
had a singular agency that dictated flawlessly the existence of social and
individual subjects. As the student strikers demonstrated, although the
state had fantasies of social control, its subjects in many instances acted
independently of the state’s imposition. The confrontation is both chill-
ing and fascinating: it included visible and brutal state violence, but it
also provided Mistral with an occasion to promote her views on how to
manage social conflict through educational practices.

Melancholia became not only a strategy—perhaps a failed one—but
also the defining affect of the pedagogical state. Chapter 7, “Education
and Loss,” demonstrates the blurring of the truly private and the carefully
crafted private discourse disseminated by the state, especially through
the nation’s women. The manufactured “personal” discourse becomes
that which is used to communicate the truly personal, threatening to
efface the space where the supposed “truth” of (queer) sexuality resides.
To illustrate this point, the chapter examines the correspondence between
Mistral and a schoolteacher—turned—first lady of Puerto Rico, Inés Men-
doza de Muñoz. This correspondence shows not only how these women
communicated their affections but also how the affect represented by
their truncated interactions got translated into state policy regarding
education and, in effect, penetrated the arena of social policy.

At one level, A Queer Mother for the Nation is about refuting, or at least
complicating, the dominant interpretations of the life and work of a
very famous and influential twentieth-century figure: Gabriela Mistral.
At another level, this book is about aspects of Latin American nationalism
that illuminate the state’s investment in that writer’s nationally pro-
jected queerness. Broadly speaking, the first part of the book considers
the possibility of constructing a “gay hagiography” for Mistral, in David
Halperin’s words. The second part moves on to the vexed question of
“queering the state.”

The word queer is used as adjective, verb, and noun throughout this
book. As an adjective, queer is much more than a translation of rara, an
appellation contemporaries used to describe Mistral. I use queer to cen-
ter issues about sexuality, race, and gender that may, upon first glance,
appear “off-center” but are, in fact, critical to nationalism. Thus, queer
does not signify certainty about Mistral’s sexual identity; neither is it
dependent on Mistral’s having had any clear-cut identity as a lesbian,
although it does not discount this possibility either. As a noun, the
“queers” in this project may be Mistral herself; some of her employers
and associates, who may or may not have been conscious of their at-
traction to this icon; schoolteachers made “strange” and isolated intel-
lectually, socially, and economically by educational policies; or a cultura-
ally “unmoored” country like Puerto Rico, appearing in the transnational
narratives of Latin America as simultaneously “lost” to U.S. imperialism,
culturally dead, and privileged because of its residents’ U.S. citizen-
ship—but queerness is, above all things, a shifting and unstable posi-
tion, not an identity to be applied across the board to any off-center
situation. Finally, “to queer,” as a verb, indicates my active deployment
of critical methodologies designed to circumvent at least partially the
limitations of earlier gay/lesbian studies approaches, which could lapse
into nostalgic or recuperative projects even where “hard” evidence of
sexuality could not be found. Thus, “queering” gives the researcher more
agency to critique sexuality’s uses and to make much broader the spec-
trum of people and practices accountable for homophobia, racism, and
sexism. This means that an individual or circumscribed group will not
bear the burden of being at fault for reproducing the status quo nor,
conversely, become a heroic “precursor” for resisting. It’s important to
stress that such projects may be viable in certain instances, but they
can’t be the end point of queer scholars.

The term queer might at times be too elastic; yet it works in this par-
icular study because the period was characterized both by intense ac-

tivity around the normalization of subjects, particularly around sexual-
ity, and by the centralizing potential of a strong state. This book in
particular belongs with recent scholarship that takes queerness to task
for its normalizing actions. This is to say not that all queerness has a
normalizing effect, but merely that queerness is as susceptible to nor-
malization as any other sexual or gender experience and that queerness
can abet certain forms of heteronormativity.
Notes

All translations of correspondence, poetry, interviews, and prose works of Gabriela Mistral are my own.

Introduction


4. In a funny yet pointed passage, Lila Zemborain recounts a telling experience during a recent trip to Chile. She had the opportunity to visit Montegrande, where Mistral is buried. This is her impression of the official narrative regarding Mistral: "I witnessed one of the visits by a group of schoolchildren to Gabriela Mistral's home-school. The story recounted by the guide to those young boys and girls constructed an image of Mistral's personal life which, seen from an adult perspective, might appear tragic; but seen from the schoolchildren's perspective must have struck them as a true horror story. The guide told of a life marked by the suicides of those closest to her; by loneliness; by the turmoil of too much travel and professional success. The morbidity of the details proffered about Mistral's life is worthy of note. When she was a child, Mistral's father abandoned the family because he liked to 'drink.' She maintained a spiritual, non-carnal relationship with Romelio Ureta, her beloved, who committed suicide because he robbed a friend's money. Her adopted son, Juan Miguel Godoy, also committed suicide because a 'Frenchwoman' rejected
him. Juan Miguel had been born deformed because he had been extracted with forceps from his mother’s womb. His biological mother died in the process. This dubious information appears as the prelude to Mistral’s professional success as a teacher, diplomat and writer, whose corollary is the Nobel Prize which she received in Sweden in 1945. The kids looked at each other in astonishment. What does suicide mean? What are forceps? It’s possible that they retained the image of the horribly deformed child, instead of the desire to read Mistral’s poetry. Even if it is set on real-life events in Mistral’s life, the distortion of biographical details shows an image of a rural schoolteacher, lonely and single, who, in spite of the many sufferings she had to confront, was able to triumph professionally.” "Modalidades de representacién del sujeto lirico en la poesia de Gabriela Mistral" [Modalities of the lyrical subject in Gabriela Mistral’s poetry] (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1997), 6–7.

5. The most important postings were Antofagasta in 1911, Los Andes in 1912, Punta Arenas in 1918, Temuco in 1920, and finally Santiago in 1921.

6. For useful and accessible background on the time period and its specific influence on Mistral’s choices, see Horan, "Gabriela Mistral and Women in Chile, 1800–1920," in Gabriela Mistral, 11–42. For a general introduction to the history of feminism in Chile, see Juliesta Kirkwood, Ser politica en Chile: Los nodos de la sabiduria feminista [To be a political woman in Chile: Knots of feminist knowledge] (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1980), especially 91–175. An account of the relationship between intellectuals and the state in Latin America is found in Nicole Miller, In the Shadow of the State: Intellectuals and the Quest for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Spanish America (London: Verso, 1999).

7. There are many, many theories of nationalism, and it is impossible to cite all the works that have influenced me. With respect to nationalist education, perhaps the best-known studies are those of Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991); and Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983). A recent study that I found useful is David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, Culture and the State (New York: Routledge, 1998). Indeed, Lloyd and Thomas employ a Gramscian idea of the relationship between the state and education, arguing that the ethical state’s reach extends beyond the Althusserian notion of the “ideological state apparatus” (although, of course, Althusser’s formulation is clarifying). Additionally, this book shares the Gramscian understanding of the state and civil society as distinct, but not necessarily opposed, entities, especially within liberal-capitalist orders. Lloyd and Thomas summarize it thus: “Gramsci’s conception that the institutions of civil society that are usually conceived of as private are actually part of a general conception of the state turns on his understanding of the ‘educative and formative role of the state,’ on the state as ‘educator’” (21). See also Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 242, 247, 263.


8. She adopted "Gabriela" either from the archangel Gabriel or from Gabriela d’Annunzio, an early favorite writer. "Mistral" she took either from the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral or from the French word for a northerly wind that blows cold, dry air into the French Mediterranean region.


10. Enrique Gonzalez Martinez issued the formal invitation, on behalf of Vascunclos.


12. Approximately twenty years after its initial publication, Mistral summed up the success of her pedagogical volume: "The 'Anthology,' in any case, had much more success than it had originally intended. Not only did the official first edition of seventy-five thousand copies, printed by the Mexican government, run out; the Spanish edition published by Calleja is out of print too." "Palabras de la recolectorita" [Words of the compiler] (1941), in Mistral, Recados para hoy y mañana: Textos inéditos de Gabriela Mistral, comp. Luis Vargas Saavedra (Santiago: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999), 1347.

13. The date of Mistral’s receiving this title is given variously as 1931, 1932, and 1933.

14. I have used the dates given by the Mistral Museum of Vicuña, Chile. Dates are approximate and vary in other accounts.


18. David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Simultaneously playful and serious, Halperin uses the phrase “gay hagiography” ironically to discuss critically Michel Foucault’s gay identity and politics. I, of course, am not replicating Halperin’s gesture with Mistral, but I am referencing his gesture in order to provoke reflection on the general topics of exemplarity and self-making in the case of figures in recent history widely suspected to be queer. I wish to interrogate the bases upon which to construct a “queer life” and “queer politics.” A more straightforward critique of hagiography in Mistral and women’s studies is Elizabeth Rosa Horan, “Sor Juana and Gabriela Mistral: Locations and Locations of the Saintly Woman” *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* 25, no. 2 (November 1996): 89–103.


1. Race Woman

1. “Race woman,” a phrase borrowed from African American studies, refers to a militant woman who upholds or defends the race. Often her actions and writings adapt to the normative standards that define the race, presupposing a conservative and heterosexualized gender discourse. At other times the race woman may be more critical of the sexism of her male colleagues.


7. Mistral and Pedro Aguirre Cerda, *Antologia mayor* [Comprehensive anthology], vol. 3 *Cartas* [Letters], ed. Luis Vargas Saavedra (Santiago: Cochrane, 1992), 100 (emphasis added).


9. Acts of organized protest included the worker revolts in Puerto Natales and Punta Arenas in 1919 and 1921, respectively. The state violently suppressed both, massacring workers and indigenous peoples alike. Mistral was stationed in Punta Arenas during the former revolt and had already left the region by the time of the latter. See Teitelboim, *Gabriela Mistral publica y secreta, 87–91.*

10. See Mistral’s preface to *La desderrada en su patria*, 1: 11–25. This preface was written almost three decades after Mistral had left Magallanes. It is possible that Mistral, on hearing of her friend’s intention to compile a book about her early years in Chile, wanted to influence its reception and to shape the public perception of her stay in Magallanes. She insisted on writing the preface.

