

Carmen Boulosa

In Between Brooklyn and Coyoacan

Edited by

María del Mar López-Cabrales

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Series in Literary Studies



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Acknowledgments

Finalizing this volume was a collaborative effort that was as rewarding for the process as it was for the final product. Ultimately, this project led us to appreciate not only the importance of family and friendship but also the privilege of working with such outstanding authors and colleagues. We would like to express our gratitude to all contributors for their invaluable work and, above all, for their patience with us. We also want to thank the author to whom this volume is dedicated, Carmen Boullosa, for believing in us and graciously sparing time from her busy schedule.

We extend our recognition to those who helped us along the way and whose hard work enriched this project. Our thanks go to Nicolás Kulisheck-López for his diligent efforts in translating a substantial portion of this volume and contributing to the initial proofreading. Additionally, we express our gratitude to Lana Bashir for her assistance in compiling the initial Index.

As we conclude this edited volume, we direct our thoughts to all the authors who have contributed their articles on Carmen Boullosa, acknowledging their essential input to this compilation. Their dedication and erudition have provided valuable perspectives that have significantly enriched our understanding of Boullosa's work and its impact on contemporary literature. To each of them, our sincerest thanks for sharing their knowledge and enhancing this project in such a meaningful way.

Foreword

The idea for this volume emerged from a late evening conversation between two friends who discussed one of Carmen Boullosa's novels. We do not recall the specific novel we discussed, but we concluded that Boullosa's work had not been sufficiently studied in English, hence the reason for our choice of English as the main language throughout this body of work. While there are many interviews with the author, critical works dedicated to her writing are not abundant. This co-edited volume, for the English reader, provides access to a critical analysis of Boullosa's writings. We understand the shortcomings of this volume as we are unable to fully cover all the works done by this prolific writer. An important part of our project was to include Boullosa's voice, who gave us her time for this project in the form of an interview. We are also grateful to one of our contributors, Assia Mohssine, who allowed us to publish an English translation of "Épica mía/ Mi épica" (*My Epic*), a previously published Spanish essay by Carmen Boullosa¹. While working on this volume, many things changed; a pandemic deeply impacted our ways of living and, more than ever, history and memory serve as the epicenter of many political discussions.

¹ Carmen Boullosa, "Épica mía" was published in Assia Mohssine (coord.) *El heroísmo épico en clave de mujer*. Guadalajara, México, Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara (con el apoyo del CELIS, Cátedra Fernando del Paso y Biblioteca Iberoamericana Octavio Paz), 2019, p. 43-55. This essay was translated from the original text by Abbey Ervin.

Introduction

Born in Mexico City, Carmen Boullosa is one of Latin America's most important contemporary authors. As far back as her editorial debut in 1978 with the poemario *La memoria vacía/Empty Memory*, Boullosa's daily writing has produced an enormous and varied literary corpus that includes narrative, theater, and poetry, in addition to her work in television. In talking about her writings and the many genres that she covers, she explains how "friendship and collaboration led [her] to theater, and motherhood led [her] to the novel" while the act of writing, after the death of her mother, was what helped her "transition from a homeless orphaned girl to a woman of the world" (Bady, "After Before"). As it is almost impossible to constrain her works within a specific literary genre, her writing has a distinctive voice and style that often interweaves history and fiction. Boullosa's corpus needs an involved reader who is at all times aware of the creative process. Her works have been translated into many languages and she has received multiple prestigious awards, including the XIX *Premio Casa de América de Poesía Americana* in 2019 for her collection of poems *La aguja en el pajar*. In 2021, she was awarded the IV *Premio Jorge Ibarguengoitia de Literatura* at the Universidad de Guanajuato, México, for her outstanding work as a novelist. More recently, in 2023 she received the prestigious *José Emilio Pacheco Excellence in Literature Award* that recognizes Mexican writers for their work as a whole. With no doubt, we can affirm that she is an integral figure in Mexican and Latin American literature, providing valuable contributions through her diverse works, unique style, critical acclaim, and broad influence.

Primarily known for her narrative, Boullosa states how she was first a published poet and explained that she "wouldn't have become a novelist if [she] hadn't become a mother." She explains that in her opinion one must be "totally devoted to poetry to be a real poet. You have to give yourself over to poetry" (Bady "The Need"). This statement has not eschewed her from writing a prolific poetical corpus with seventeen collections of poetry. It is interesting to note how her poetry is still lacking an in-depth analysis by the critics in the United States. Lawrence Schimel has translated her collection *Hamartia (o Hacha)* and mentions how some of the poems included share Boullosa's personal history, while others have an almost narrative feeling; also mentioned is the clearly present playfulness with language that is so characteristic in her writing. For Schimel, "Boullosa's poetry spans an eclectic range of aesthetic styles and sociocultural themes, traversing national borders in pursuit of a shared humanity." Her language is, simultaneously, an intimate and collective act as "writing is a corporal act" therefore in her pages, the reader finds "a connection

between body, pen, and paper.” Her writing forces us to see the connections between the importance of language, interpretation, and personal growth.

With theater as the genre that brought her to novelistic writing, her theatrical production started in 1980 with the play *Vacío/Emptiness*¹. One that, according to Boullosa, “Fassbinder loved so much that he used one of the scenes in his last film” (Gallo). As Boullosa has expressed on several occasions, theater provided her with a space for a different kind of writing: she has written ten plays, seven of which have been staged. According to Roselyn Constantino, for Boullosa, theater is a “move to discover the multiplicity of unstable identities constituting the *I*.” Therefore, in her plays, she creates questions of gender, desire, and sexuality that break down the binary representations that traditionally framed these categories (182). Her involvement with theater includes not only its writing but directing, acting, and collaborations with “well-known artists such as Julio Castillo, Jesusa Rodríguez, Magali Lara and Alejandro Aura” (183).

Regarding her narrative, critics have mentioned that her novels display a different point of view of the Mexican literary tradition, and of the representations of the Mexican experience that, since Octavio Paz, have been seen as an auto-reflexive dialogue. In many of her novels, Boullosa transforms History into fiction as she presents the past while giving a new life to those events that are brought into the present time. Boullosa’s prolific writing career has yielded nineteen novels, along with two essay collections, including the co-authored work *A Narco History: How Mexico and the USA Jointly Created the “Mexican Drug War”* (2015) with Mike Wallace. In this last work, both authors examine the intertwined twentieth-century histories of both countries that led to this twenty-first-century problem and suggest how to resolve it. Boullosa’s most recent novels are *El libro de Eva/The Book of Eve* (2020), and *El libro de Ana/Ana’s Book* (2016) which she describes as an opium-infused fairy tale. In her writing, it is common to use biographical elements; as for Boullosa, if the artist’s personal life and work “are completely separate, in the end, the novel lacks an intimate voice.”² For instance, the fear of growing up was portrayed in her second novel, *Antes /Before* (1989), both a ghost as well as a coming-of-age story in which the narrator attempts to make sense of her identity, through dreams and memories. Furthermore, according to Jessica Burke, in several of her novels, Boullosa has inserted herself as another character, playing with

¹ Alessandra Luiselli analyzes *Vacío* in her article “*Vacío* de Carmen Boullosa y Sylvia Plath: Performatividad, textualidad y adaptación” within the conceptual framework of salient binaries, including the dichotomies between authorship and adaptation, performance and textuality, as well as the contrasts between repertory and archive productions.

² All quotes from Carmen Boullosa are taken from the interview at the end of this volume.

notions of identity and authorship. In this way, “Carmen,” “Boullosa” or “la autora” (“the author”) are subjected to the “questioning and even ridicule of her own characters and narrators” (113). This cannot take the reader by surprise as “the most intimate space is not reached through one’s Voice (capitalized); it is reached through the act of Creation. Voice exists to project oneself, to refer to others. Creation is a different territory.” Concurrently, “if an author’s personal life becomes too apparent, their voice eats up their own creation” (Boullosa) and, for her, creation is a sacred, fragile thing that needs to be protected.

Her writings invite an in-depth analysis due to their rich complexity and explorations of various themes.³ In the 1990s, some critics referred to her work as postmodernist, an adjective that brings up not only the pastiche elements present in her writings but the deconstruction of both body and language, creating a fragmented narration full of heteroglossia, intertextuality, metafiction, palimpsest, and parody. Boullosa has never labeled herself as a “model writer,” and, using her own words, she describes herself as “untamed.” In her eyes, as a writer, she is much more of an animal than an intellectual. Furthermore, she also sees herself as a *grafónoma*, relaying in numerous interviews her daily need to write, which began at the age of fifteen.

By analyzing Boullosa’s literary corpus, critics can examine how she reshapes historical narratives and offers thought-provoking perspectives on modern society and its problems. Carmen Boullosa’s work has a significant social impact, prompting discussions on the topics of gender, power, history, social inequality, and cultural diversity while encouraging critical thinking and empathy. For example, her novel *Duerme/Sleep* (1994) is a multifaceted narration set in Colonial Mexico. This novel is full of intertextuality and its main character, Claire, is a woman passing as a man who will adopt and abandon several identities to end up eternally sleeping at the border of Mexico City, she ends up with no voice and is unable to be part of History. Boullosa’s focus on identity, particularly regarding genre and cultural identity, offers the reader a new perspective on societal norms and power dynamics.

In addition, the use of fragmentation creates a space to reinvent the official truth. Many of her works offer a changing concept of History, shying away from a monolith, unique version of events and instead putting forward a multilayered approach where the reader is presented with different, equally valid voices. As such, the reader must accept all perspectives as equally valid, “thus contesting the grand, totalizing historical narratives of the past” (Burke

³ The Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library hold the collection “Carmen Boullosa papers” which includes academic and professional files, correspondence, and publicity materials from 1970-2016. MssCol 2321.

113). This choral approach delivers a new version of the official truth/History upon which each specific work is based. In works such as *Son vacas, somos puercos/They're Cows, We're Pigs* (1991), and *Las paredes hablan/The Walls Speak* (2010), the narrator acts as both the memory of past events as well as the sole surviving participant in them. These historical settings do not serve history itself, as they are neither memoirs nor testimonies. As with many novelists, Boullosa observes the surrounding reality, then subverts it by correcting its flaws and finally reinventing it altogether (Gallo).

Conversely, Boullosa's writings also provide a voice to those whom society has muted. These are concepts that she explores in her included essay, *Épica mía/My Epic*, where she explains how women and their societal roles have been silenced throughout History. Across many novels, Boullosa offers a platform for real and fictional women alike who have been forgotten or mistreated by History, with capital H, empowering them to recount their narratives. In her novels, Boullosa features renowned female protagonists like Cleopatra, Sofonisba de Anguisola, or Ana Karenina -among many others- voices that present the reader with their personal intimate experiences. In *El libro de Eva/The Book of Eve* (2020) for instance, Boullosa provides an account diverging from *Genesis*, granting a new perspective to Eve across this imagined memoir-like narrative. A new version of the story that breaks from the Judeo-Christian patriarchal lens which has echoed for centuries, depicting women merely as a companion and accessory to men. In this novel, with a fictional prologue by Teresa de Avila, according to Boullosa's words, lays Eve's verbal space, her voice (lower-case), telling a story that is retractable by those who hear it because it is not capitalized. Through the pages of this apocryphal manuscript (10 books and 91 passages), the reader realizes that History is only a point of view. Therefore, when marginalized voices find expression, History, which we consider immobile, fractures. From these cracks emerges a very different History than what we were previously able to imagine. By giving voice to these excluded perspectives, Boullosa fractures notions of an ossified historical record and allows alternate histories to develop.

Mostly in Spanish, her artistic production has been the subject of extensive literary criticism due to her innovative narrative techniques and the depth with which she explores complex themes. For the reader who is able to read in Spanish, we would like to point out two compilations of critical essays about her literary corpus: *Acercamientos a Carmen Boullosa* (1999), edited by Barbara Dröscher and Carlos Rincon, and *Pensar en Activo* (2019), coordinated by Assia Mohssine. Across the two volumes, readers can explore multiple critical lenses applied to Boullosa's literary canon. Maria Inés Canto provides in her essay a brief overview of the academic study of Boullosa's writings in the United States. Canto mentions the works of Emily Hind and Assia Mohssine, who describe

Boullosa's postcolonial gaze. Some critics, such as Julio Ortega or Jessica Burke note how the author's complex narrative structures are challenging, and her blending of reality and fantasy is disorienting. Hind explains how "Christopher Dominguez Michael finds [Boullosa's] work both fascinating and irritating, sometimes "within the same book" (32). Yet, these elements are often seen as part of her unique literary voice and contribute significantly to her critical acclaim. Despite the diversity of critical perspectives regarding Boullosa's work, analysis often focuses on her exploration of identity and gender, particularly through strong female characters who challenge traditional norms. Other regularly examined topics are power and history. As such, her works are predominantly analyzed in the context of feminist literary criticism as well as sociopolitical and postcolonial literary criticism. As critics, we need to consider that this focus risks overlooking the full complexity at play across the many layers within her writings.

No literary work is separated from the influences that an author receives. Among these, we have to include the location in which they live. In Boullosa's case, while living in central Brooklyn, New York, which the author uses as a background of one of her novels, *La novela perfecta/The Perfect Novel* (2006), she proudly describes herself as a being from Mexico City and spends extended periods in the neighborhood of Coyoacan. For her, she has "an umbilical cord [with Mexico] that never breaks. [...] It is a sense of belonging" (Bady, "The Need"). In her own words, "Mexico [is]: my wound, my strength, my pain, my angst, my origin, my motherland, myself. I live there, I work here (*México: mi herida. Mi fuerza. Mi dolor. Mi ansia. Mi origen. Mi patria. Mi ser. Vivo allá, trabajo acá*)." In several interviews, she has mentioned how she has a romance with both cities, Mexico City and New York City. Brooklyn fascinates her as an almost prototypical city, with people from all over the world living together in proximity. Using Boullosa's words, she does not live in constant motion, but on a constant border. Both cities emerge as a muse in her novels shaping her literary universe. As, for her, in Brooklyn, there is always a border zone between cultures, a border in which all these different cultures coexist. This landscape of diversity shapes her literary imagination and appears in the many perspectives presented in her works, which, as several critics noted, are almost impossible to categorize within a single genre. As Ortega states "cada libro recomienza desde su propio vacío, recortado de cualquier tradición narrativa, recusando su repertorio de pretextos y motivos y volviendo, cada vez, a empezar todo de nuevo."⁴

⁴ Our translation: "Each book restarts from its own void, cut off from any narrative tradition, refusing its repertoire of pretexts and motives and choosing, every time, to start everything anew" (Ortega).

Aligning with Boulosa's view that each work begins from its own creative emptiness, away from any literary tradition or genre constraints and thus manifesting a distinct, one-of-a-kind nature; this volume is structured into three distinct yet interrelated segments. The initial part is composed of six essays that analyze Boulosa's narrative and theatrical works. The first of these essays, by Michael Paul Abeyta, "Voices against Empire: Shifting Borders, Decoloniality, and Deterritorialized Subjects in *La otra mano de Lepanto* and *Texas* by Carmen Boulosa," examines how Carmen Boulosa's *La otra mano de Lepanto/Lepanto's Other Hand* (2005) and *Texas: La Gran Ladronería en el Lejano Norte/Texas: The Great Theft* (2012) depicts the violent expansion of imperial borders in the early formation of both nation-state and empire. In this essay, Abeyta interprets these novels in relation to Walter Mignolo's remapping of knowledge in reference to decoloniality and the decolonial responses implied through resistance. Along the lines of the new Latin American historical novel, following Seymour Menton's characterization (22-23), these novels challenge traditional historiographic mimesis by presenting us with innovative picaresque and collective narrators who undermine traditional imperialist tropes. The use of both historical figures and parodied literary characters, from authors contemporary to the two historical periods, establishes extensive intertextual relations. *La otra mano* reinterprets several works by Cervantes, incorporating both literary and historical figures into its novelistic discourse. The protagonist, María *la bailaora* (Maria, the flamenco dancer), rewrites and undermines the character of Preciosa from the exemplary novel *La gitana*. Boulosa deconstructs Cervantes's othering of Roma people and transforms the gypsy: she is adopted and trained to fight by Moriscos, she cross-dresses to serve as a sailor and soldier in the Spanish Armada and takes on new names and identities. In the satirical spirit of Mark Twain, *Texas* depicts how the shifting border imposes a reconfiguration and questioning of individual and national identities. The novel pays homage to and reinterprets Twain's anti-imperial and satirical depictions of hypocrisy, racism, and capitalism in the western expansion of the United States during the nineteenth century. Both novels also dialogue with other classic authors from Spain and the United States, such as Quevedo, and Stowe, but Cervantes and Twain are of primary concern in this study.

Emily Hind's essay "Boulosa, Driver's License, and the Energy Gratitude Test" presents an original analysis of Boulosa's work from the perspective of the petroculture (oil culture). The critique of fossil-fuel-reliant infrastructures that Carmen Boulosa launches in her work never actually changes the characters' petro-privileges. Those privileges can be summarized as a "driver's license," or

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Professor López-Cabrales served a two-year term as Secretary of the Asociacion Internacional de Literatura y Cultura Femenina Hispanica. She has been a visiting professor at the Universidad de Cadiz, Spain (Summer 1999) and on the Semester at Sea program (Fall 2000, Fall 2017).

In 2019-2020 Professor López-Cabrales received the John N. Stern Distinguished Professor Award in the College of Liberal Arts and in the Spring of 2020 the Center for Women's and Gender Studies recognized her with the Hazaleus Award as a role model for other women on campus

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and Media Studies Director and she is currently the Creative Writing, Publishing, Editing Director (2022-2025). From an interdisciplinary approach, her current research and scholarship reflect an interest in transnational literature and human rights, feminist theatre and performance in the Americas, as well as film studies. Among her publications are the book *Definiendo a la mujer: Cristina Escofet y su teatro* (Puerto Rico: Penelope Academic Press, 2012) and a co-edited bilingual (English and Spanish) volume *How the Films of Pedro Almodóvar Draw upon and Influence Spanish Society* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), as well as several publications in peer-reviewed journals.

Contributors

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Emily Hind is a Fulbright scholar and Professor of Spanish at the University of Florida, where she received a University of Florida Term Professorship for a distinguished record of research and scholarship, 2016-2019. She was voted Professor of the Year 2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 by the graduate students in the Hispanic literature program. Hind is the author of *Dude Lit: Mexican Men Writing and Performing Competence, 1955-2012* (University of Arizona, 2019), which received an honorable mention for Best Book in the Humanities 2019 from the Mexico Section of Latin American Studies. She has also published *Femmenism and the Mexican Woman Intellectual from Sor Juana to Poniatowska: Boob Lit* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Her third book of interviews, *Literatura infantil y juvenil: Entrevistas* (Peter Lang 2020) gathers 22 conversations with writers and editors of children's and young adult literature in Mexico. She is currently working on a book about plants and oil in Mexican literature and film.

Assia Mohssine is currently a professor-researcher of Latin American literature at Clermont Auvergne University. She has coordinated the research project "Descentramientos" and the research program "Gender, Colonialities, Modernities. From Postcolonial Studies to the Decolonial Turn"(with Chloé

Chaudet and Anne Garrait) at the Center for Research on Literature and Sociopoetics (CELIS) of the Clermont Auvergne University.

Her main areas of interest are Mexican literature of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Sociocriticism. She has published the collective books: *Sociocritique et tournant décolonial*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2023, *Figuraciones del mal en las creadoras hispánicas contemporáneas* (Sevilla, Alfar, 2023), *Pensar en activo. Carmen Boullosa entre memoria e imaginación* (Nuevo León, UANL, 2019), *Genres littéraires et gender dans les Amériques* (Clermont-Ferrand, PUBP, 2019), *Heroísmo épico en clave de mujer* (Guadalajara, Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, Academic Excellence collection, 2019), *De l'héroïne mythique à l'héroïne en haillons. Métamorphoses du genre épique dans l'écriture des femmes des Amériques et de l'aire Ibérique* (CIMEEP / Federal University of Sergipe, 2017), *Récits de voyages et gender dans les Amériques (1830-1950). Une esthétique de l'ambiguïté* (University of Granada, 2014), *Dissidences génériques et gender dans les Amériques* (Tours, 2012). Her individual publications include more than 40 book chapters in academic publications in France, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Morocco.

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