

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War  
by Tabea Alexa Linhard

Review by: Sebastiaan Faber

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While biographical profiles of authors are usually unnecessary for literary analysis, in this book, crucial information about Blanca Valmont is wanting. The majority of *The Latest Style* focuses on the columns of this “important” and “longest-running voice” in the world of Spanish fashion and readers would benefit from knowing the basic contours of her identity. Given that Davis was unable to uncover any information about her, this reader wonders whether or not Blanca Valmont existed as a historical person or only as a periodical personality. Did her profile encompass several ghost writers and ideologies? Whatever her historical identity, it would be useful to know who paid for her promotion of the fashion industry and what bearing they might have had on the course of the commercial outlet for which she wrote. Was she backed by any specific French designers? Are there extant records from the magazine or notarial archives in Paris, where Valmont resided?

*The Latest Style* is well written and a pleasure to read. Ten pages of illustrations complement Davis’ text. However, there were a few surprising repetitions of quoted material; moreover, the very brief conclusion opens with a paragraph that reproduces exactly a passage from Chapter 2. Her conclusion would have been an excellent place to summarize the related topics that Davis uncovers in this book but leaves to future researchers. Her highly suggestive book invites scholars to ponder the role of fashion in economic and cultural imperialism, as readers outside of Madrid were guided by Valmont to use French fashion to remove all markers of their provincialism and pass for urban and consequently, international citizens. Similarly, Valmont’s lessons to her readers on the economics of imperialism that underwrote the development of *haute couture* anticipate current discussions of the authenticity of “national culture” and globalization (35-36).

**Lisa Surwillo**  
Stanford University

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***Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War***

University of Missouri Press, 2005

By Tabea Alexa Linhard

The intersection of war and gender makes for a series of interesting paradoxes. On the one hand, war has long been seen as a quintessentially male occupation, a pathology that affects men much more than women. “Obviously there is for you [men] some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we [women] have never felt or enjoyed,” Virginia Woolf famously wrote to a lawyer friend in reference to the Spanish Civil War. If it were up to women, she implies, pacifism would rule. On the other hand, as Tabea Linhard points out in this fascinating book, one can argue that enlisted soldiers take on a female-gendered role defined by service, blind obedience, and sacrifice; there is even an association of soldiers’ shed blood with fertility. Similarly, on the one hand war reduces women to helpless victims whose lives and bodies count for less than those of men; women are rarely accused of war crimes, to be sure, but conversely crimes against women are rarely coded as human rights abuses, as Catharine A. MacKinnon has recently shown. On the other hand, though, war and revolution—temporary suspensions of social normalcy and its structures of repression—can provide women with opportunities for emancipation. War can offer an escape from conventional roles and spaces; a more prominent public role; and even the doubtful privilege of bearing arms and helping to wipe out the enemy.

Even these kinds of changes, though, tend to be short-lived. As Linhard shows in relation to post-Civil War Spain and post-revolutionary Mexico, the return to postwar normalcy is all too often accompanied by a reinstatement of traditional gender roles. Linhard argues, moreover, that this re-domestication of women after war and revolution is not only social but *discursive* as well. Narratives of war are quick to cast women protagonists in a stereotypical female role—positively or negatively; as heroines or

prostitutes—or turn them into “icons, symbols, and myths” that might seem to enshrine women warriors but that in the end serve to neutralize “emancipatory discourses of change and renewal that revolutions convey” (3). Linhard argues that this process of discursive domestication, which is operative in historiography as much as in political discourse and literary criticism, in effect buries or erases women’s stories of the war or revolution and of their role in it. War stories are overwhelmingly told by men. What is suppressed in this process is not necessarily a purely emancipatory impulse, though; Linhard shows that warring women themselves constantly oscillated between the poles of domestication and liberation, and that emancipation is often seen as a secondary objective, or a side-effect, within the larger revolutionary struggle. Rather, what is suppressed in the “gendering of official memories” is a whole *experience* of women’s struggles in all their “complexities and heterogeneities” (228). Indeed, the ambivalent values attached to the image of women soldiers—have they risen to heroic prominence or sunken to base violence? have they transcended their role or betrayed it?—are fully present in Linhard’s notion of fearlessness, which can be interpreted as a loss as much as a gain. “My reading,” she writes, “centers on the uncomfortable relationship among emancipation, political agency, and violence,” investigating “whether engaging in violent behavior . . . is necessarily a sign of agency or political emancipation” (15).

It is these missing, untold and unheard stories—subaltern voices or, as Linhard puts it, “phantom limbs” absent from the mutilated discursive corpus—that are the real subject of this transatlantic study. (The combination of Spain and Mexico is fruitful and apposite for many reasons; in reality, of course, the Mexican conflict was a civil war as much as the Spanish one was a failed revolution). Linhard’s main argument is that “the traces of a spectral female corporeality inhabit and haunt the textual bodies that emerge” from revolution and war (230). Through a series of close readings of literary and other texts and images, Linhard “traces the way in which the itineraries of gendered subjects

in these two conflicts appear written in and out of literature and other forms of cultural production” (3). The author’s theoretical debts to Derrida (specter) and Spivak (subaltern) are evident and clearly acknowledged.

*Fearless Women* is divided into four parts of two chapters each. Part 1, “The Haunting Pain of a Phantom Limb,” sets up the argument and provides some initial analyses of key texts. Part 2, “Death Stories,” deals with different representations of the fate of “Adelita” and her generic namesakes in *corridos*, Baltasar Dromundo’s *Francisco Villa y la “Adelita,”* (1936), and Josephina Niggli’s play *Soldadera* (1936). Part 2 also covers multiple versions of the Spanish “Trece Rosas” story, which recounts the death by execution of thirteen young women at the Ventas prison in Madrid in August 1939. Part 3, “Writing Violence,” provides extensive analyses of Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho* and the short stories of María Teresa León. Part 4 functions as an epilogue of sorts; its two short chapters study more recent attempts by novelists to fill in the “interstitial spaces” left uncovered by the traditional literary and historical discourses on fearless women: *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969), by Elena Poniatowska; Ángeles Mastretta’s *Mal de amores* (1996); Jesús Ferrero’s *Trece Rosas* (2003); and Dulce Chacón’s *La voz dormida* (2002).

*Fearless Women* makes for a fascinating read, but not an easy one. Because this book deals with a subject that is defined, from the outset, as ungraspable—popular, subaltern, oral, and therefore impossible to recuperate in any written form, let alone through scholarly discourse—both the style and the arguments have a provisional, hedging and even aporetic quality that can become somewhat exasperating in the long run. But, then again, that seems precisely to be the point: this is, after all, what subaltern studies is all about. We are not dealing with a present body, textual or otherwise, but with the faint traces of a collective ghost.

**Sebastian Faber**  
Oberlin College