

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

Cifuentes-Goodbody, Nicholas. The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa: Martín Luis Guzmán and the Politics of Life Writing. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016. Print. 174 pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t59z0tv>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 6(2)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Livingstone, Victoria

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T462033568

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Cifuentes-Goodbody, Nicholas. *The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa: Martín Luis Guzmán and the Politics of Life Writing*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016. Print. 174 pp.

VICTORIA LIVINGSTONE
WHITMAN COLLEGE

Martín Luis Guzmán's *El águila y la serpiente* is widely considered a foundational text. One of the most accomplished, stylistically innovative accounts of the Mexican Revolution, the book has enjoyed multiple editions, has been translated into various languages, and chapters from the text have appeared in anthologies. A number of Guzmán's other books, including *La sombra del caudillo* and *Memorias de Pancho Villa*, are equally significant and the author was an influential figure in other capacities as well. He was a politician who served as senator, a journalist who ran a newspaper, and the owner of a publishing house. Until recently, however, his work has largely been ignored by contemporary literary scholars, in part because of the events of 1968. When the Mexican government violently repressed student protests that year, Guzmán aligned himself with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and failed to condemn the massacre in Tlatelolco. As a result, the author fell out of favor with the intellectual class. The relative lack of criticism on Guzmán's literary production in the decades after Tlatelolco reflect this disapproval. Now, however, a body of scholarship is emerging that offers a new understanding of Guzmán's life and work. Nicholas Cifuentes-Goodbody's *The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa: Martín Luis Guzmán and the Politics of Life Writing* is the latest contribution to this field.

The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa follows the publication of two other recent books on Guzmán: Susana Quintanilla's *A salto de mata: Martín Luis Guzmán en la Revolución Mexicana* (2009) and Tanya Huntington's *Martín Luis Guzmán: Entre el águila y la serpiente* (2015). While Cifuentes-Goodbody draws in part on archival sources and includes a great deal of biographical information, it is important to note that *The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa* is not a biography. Rather, Cifuentes-Goodbody reflects on practices of life writing and questions the degree to which authors are able to shape their legacies. The book is a study of Guzmán's efforts to construct a politically convenient, patriotic narrative of his life's work and a reflection on the practical and theoretical limits of life writing.

The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa is not organized chronologically, which may make it difficult for some readers to keep track of the shifting political landscapes the author presents. Overall, however, this structure offers more advantages than drawbacks. Cifuentes-Goodbody highlights parallels and inconsistencies between texts written during different periods and emphasizes the ways in which changing historical contexts shaped the marketing and reception of Guzmán's work. The book opens with an introduction that positions Guzmán as an important historical figure representative of his era. Cifuentes-Goodbody then defines life writing, an inclusive term that "occupies a space between biography and autobiography" (5). The references to life writing (as opposed to biography or autobiography) allow Cifuentes-Goodbody to examine the extra-literary factors that influenced the circulation and reception of Guzmán's work. The term is also broad enough to allow for an analysis of an impressive range of genres, including letters, speeches, biographies, essays, newspaper articles, and slippery texts such as *El águila y la serpiente*, at times classified as memoir, other times as a novel. Cifuentes-Goodbody then proceeds to analyze different phases of Guzmán's career.

Part One studies Guzmán's push to promote his work during the 1950s and 60s. During this period, Guzmán strove to promote particular interpretations of his work, emphasizing certain aspects of previously published texts and omitting details when these did not support his political agenda. Most notably, Guzmán deemphasized and sometimes failed to mention his exile in Spain, a time during which he formed a close friendship with President Manuel Azaña and gave up his Mexican citizenship. The inclusion of this detail would have undermined the patriotic image Guzmán wished to project. Here Cifuentes-Goodbody notes inconsistencies in the author's narrative and calls attention to a dispute between Guzmán and Antonio Carreño, one of his fellows in the Mexican Academy of Language. While Carreño's criticisms regarding the omissions in Guzmán's version of events were indeed accurate, here Cifuentes-Goodbody highlights the material aspects of Guzmán's legacy: "Carreño's speech is buried in the annals of the Mexican Academy of Language. A thousand copies of that particular volume were printed in 1960. In contrast, *Academia* [Guzmán's text] saw two editions by itself and four more as part of the author's complete works, the last in 2010 with a printing of three thousand copies" (65). Guzmán's portrayal of the history of the Academy was therefore more enduring, though not more accurate.

With Part Two, Cifuentes-Goodbody shifts his analysis to focus on Guzmán's earlier work, principally the writing he produced during his exile in Spain. Through an excellent analysis of texts including *El águila y la serpiente* and *Crónicas de mi destierro*, Cifuentes-Goodbody shows how Guzmán's

books “reveal a preoccupation with the figure of the artist that transcends political borders and focuses on his role in understanding, communicating, and even creating truth” (72). That is, Guzmán’s principal focus had not always been Mexico, as he later claimed. In this section, as in others, the non-chronological organization of this book is effective. Cifuentes-Goodbody evaluates texts written during different periods, showing how Guzmán’s representations of his own identity and his understanding of biography shifted. The critic analyzes, for example, the differences between biographies that Guzmán wrote in the 1930s, works which revealed “a clear appreciation [of] the flexible and opaque nature of identity,” and texts he wrote after returning to Mexico at a time during which the author’s “political and economic future depended on an unambiguous reading of the life depicted” (109).

The third section of *The Man Who Wrote Pancho Villa* studies Guzmán’s writing after his return to Mexico in 1936. These final chapters examine the ways in which Guzmán used texts such as his *Memorias de Pancho Villa* to position himself as an important ally of the Cárdenas government. This period saw a resurgence of images of Villa, who was celebrated as a liberal hero and was transformed into a symbol that provided a sort of historical and ideological justification for the Mexican state. Guzmán presented his writing on Villa in accordance with this interpretation, aligned with the government’s agenda. Not surprisingly, the author began to enjoy greater privilege during this period. Cifuentes-Goodbody writes, “As the government slowly incorporated the Centaur of the North [Villa] into the official pantheon of revolutionary heroes, the author would be a mainstay at public ceremonies inaugurating new monuments in the generals’ honor, tying him to the political priorities of the PRI. In fact, Villa’s redemption would go hand in hand with Guzmán’s rise within the postrevolutionary government” (141-2).

As he seeks to reconstruct Guzmán’s career and examine the intersections between political contexts and texts, Cifuentes-Goodbody reveals a productive awareness of his own desire to fashion a particular narrative. That is, he acknowledges the bias we always have as critics and literary historians. He writes, “Taking on the role of biographer myself for a moment, I feel compelled to speculate, to create a coherent narrative using the same *Obras completas* that the author holds up as his textual self-portrait” (112). The critic does not rely solely on his subjective readings of texts, however. Rather, he combines his interpretations with biographical and historical information that support his readings.

In his study of the *Memorias de Pancho Villa*, for example, Cifuentes-Goodbody convincingly shows how Guzmán sought to “retranslate” historical texts such as *El General Francisco Villa*, written

by journalist Manuel Bauche Alcalde in 1914” (144). For Cifuentes-Goodbody, this retranslation is partly an act of political maneuvering. By using other texts to validate the historical accuracy of his account while criticizing stylistic aspects of these sources, the author argues, Guzmán “sets his work apart as more authentic, a more faithful version of the general’s voice and therefore life” and “calls attention to his own participation in the Revolution, effectively tying his own rehabilitation within the Cárdenas government to that of his biographical subject” (144). The argument that Guzmán used the *Memorias* in part to curry favor with Cárdenas is not based only on Cifuentes-Goodbody’s reading of the text. The critic also cites a telegram from Guzmán, revealing that the author had sought out the president in order to deliver copies of his text and discuss it with him. Yet Guzmán could not control all interpretations of his text and his *Memorias*, while significant for historical reasons, was not a critical success.

Throughout this book, Cifuentes-Goodbody highlights the many ways in which Guzmán promoted his work, from forging political alliances to taking advantage of his role as a publisher and bookseller. Ultimately, however, Guzmán’s efforts to shape his legacy failed. Clearly, the author’s affiliation with the PRI and his refusal to speak out against the government’s brutal tactics in Tlatelolco played a major role in damaging the writer’s legacy. Cifuentes-Goodbody fully acknowledges this, but goes further to explore more broadly the limitations of life writing. Citing Judith Butler, he concludes with theoretical reflections on the need for a subject to relinquish some degree of control in life writing, something Guzmán refused to do. Guzmán certainly would have left a more positive legacy had he not rigidly allied himself with the PRI government in 1968.

I have only briefly sketched some of the ways in which Cifuentes-Goodbody explores the reaches of Guzmán’s life writing. He analyzes a number of other texts that I have not mentioned, exploring the inconsistencies in Guzmán’s life writing and establishing parallels between seemingly disparate texts. One of the book’s strengths is the way in which Cifuentes-Goodbody analyzes the material and political conditions of Guzmán’s success in order to offer new readings of texts such as *El águila y la serpiente* and *Memorias de Pancho Villa*. The reflections he presents could provide a base for a broader discussion of the ways in which writers are able to shape their public images and influence interpretations of their work. Similarly, the theoretical discussion of life writing could be expanded and applied to other contexts. Above all, Cifuentes-Goodbody has set the groundwork for other new readings of Guzmán’s work and helped affirm that Guzmán is deserving of further critical attention.