

STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (180)

TITLE: La Vida manda, y otros textos
AUTHOR: Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta
EDITOR: Madeline Camara
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Subject Areas: 20th-Century Latin American Literature, Cuban Republican History & Journalism, Feminist & Queer Theory, Transatlantic Intellectual History, Women's Writing

I. OVERVIEW & SIGNIFICANCE

Bringing together the landmark 1929 novel La vida manda alongside a curated selection of hard-to-find journalistic essays, feminist manifestos, travel chronicles, and short stories, this critical edition by Madeline Cámara restores to the Latin American canon Cuba's most visible and radical feminist intellectual of the 1920s and 1930s: Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta (1902–1975).

Librarian of the Club Femenino de Cuba, founder of the journal *Espartana* (1927), frontline militant against the Gerardo Machado dictatorship, and spearhead of the 1930–1932 feminist campaign in the mass-circulation magazine *Bohemia* (50,000 weekly copies), Rodríguez Acosta bridged denotative political journalism and connotative literary fiction to demand women's total economic, sexual, and civic emancipation.

At the center of this volume stands Gertrudis, the unforgettable protagonist of *La vida manda*, a working woman who insists on opening her own bank account ("ganar dinero por cuenta propia, como los hombres"), experiences mutually fulfilling heterosexual desire with Damián, navigates a charged lesbian subtext of eloquent silences with Delia, and pursues motherhood outside the "declining, insincere" institution of bourgeois marriage.

Preceded by Madeline Cámara's comprehensive study—which synthesizes the author's ideology into a "Feminist Decalogue" and traces her late evolution in Mexican exile from naturalist social realism toward poetic existentialism—this Stockcero edition is an indispensable text for courses in Caribbean Literature, Feminist & Queer Studies, and Twentieth-Century Intellectual History.

II. CONTEXT & CRITICAL APPROACHES

• Anticipating Beauvoir and Woolf—The "Feminist Decalogue":

Nearly two decades before Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and several years ahead of Virginia Woolf's anti-war manifesto *Three Guineas* (1938), Rodríguez Acosta's Lyceum lecture and essay *La tragedia social de la mujer* (1932, refuting Russian sociologist Anton Nemilov) dismantled biological determinism, demonstrating that women's "biological tragedy" is actually a social construct fabricated by patriarchal law.

Simultaneously, her anti-militarist columns in Bohemia ("La mujer y la guerra") denounced warmongering patriotism long before WWII.

• Economic Liberation, Free Love, and Queer Subtexts in La vida manda:

Engaging scholarship by Nina Menéndez, Emilio Bejel, and Vicky Unruh, instructors can analyze how La vida manda rewrites heterosexual and queer erotics. Gertrudis claims

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active erotic subjectivity while sharing an unspoken, queer bond with Delia ("¿En qué me has conocido, Delia? / En tus silencios"), anticipating Rodríguez Acosta's pioneering 1940 novel *En la noche del mundo,* one of early twentieth-century Cuba's most progressive literary portrayals of a gay male couple.

• Socialist Feminism, Eugenics, and the Rights of Illegitimate Children:

Unlike moderate "salon feminists," Rodríguez Acosta drew on Marx, Engels, and Alexandra Kollontai to argue that moral or political freedom is impossible until women are freed from "the yoke of domestic slavery."
Students can debate the fascinating ideological tensions of her positivist faith in science—most notably her controversial embrace of eugenics in the story "La concepción de un hijo" as a utopian contract for autonomous single motherhood—alongside her successful campaign to abolish the legal stigma of "illegitimate" children, which directly shaped Article 56 of the 1940 Cuban Constitution.

• From Militant Naturalism to Poetic Existentialism:

Cámara's anthology allows students to compare Rodríguez Acosta's stark early naturalist stories (such as "La bruta," depicting domestic abuse and murder in Havana's slums) with her sensory travel chronicles from Morocco, Spain, and London in Grafos (*Europa era así,* 1941), her anti-fascist and anti-Sartrean philosophical novels in Mexican exile (*Sonata interrumpida, La dama del arcón, Hágase la luz*), her mystical essay *La muerte pura de Martí* (1955), and her late symbolic ecofiction ("Agonía").

• Paired Pedagogical Module (Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta & Graziella Garbalosa):

Paired with Stockcero's critical edition of Graziella Garbalosa's *La gozadora del dolor* (058, 1922), instructors can build an unmatched comparative unit on 1920s Havana feminist fiction, contrasting Garbalosa's decadent-naturalist rebellion with Rodríguez Acosta's "practical feminism," journalistic activism, and modern working-woman protagonist.

Classroom Discussion Questions:

• In a famous 1930 interview in *Bohemia*, Rodríguez Acosta quickly tossed her lit cigarette out the window when her father, a judge, entered the room, explaining

: "He doesn't like me to smoke. I try to keep him happy, as much as I can." How does Madeline Cámara use this scene to symbolize the contradictions between patriarchal respectability and feminist subversion in Republican Cuba?

• Why does Gertrudis in *La vida manda* insist that female emancipation begins not merely with romantic idealism or the ballot box, but with earning a salary, saving money, and opening a personal passbook account in the bank?

• Why did Rodríguez Acosta argue in 1930 ("*El voto femenino y el momento político cubano*") that demanding women's suffrage under Gerardo Machado's dictatorship was "irresponsible" if the vote would merely be used to legitimize a tyranny? How does her critique of "salon feminists" reflect intersections of gender, class, and race in 1930s Cuba?

• Examine the short story "La concepción de un hijo," in which Virginia proposes a purely biological, non-marital contract to Eduardo to conceive a child under her sole guardianship, only to be defeated in court by "the law of men." How does Rodríguez

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Acosta's use of eugenic discourse both advance radical reproductive autonomy and reveal the ideological pitfalls of early twentieth-century positivism?

III. ADVANCED DISCUSSION & RESEARCH PROMPTS

• Journalism versus Fiction—Two Modes of Feminist Persuasion:

Using the primary texts in this volume, write a research paper comparing how Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta articulates a single ideological issue—such as free love, single motherhood, or the critique of bourgeois marriage—across two distinct genres: her denotative, combative columns in Bohemia and the connotative, dialogic narrative of *La vida manda.*

• Queer Silences and Sexual Modernity in Republican Cuba:

Drawing on Emilio Bejel's *Gay Cuban Nation* and Nina Menéndez's queer readings of *La vida manda*, analyze the representation of female erotic agency and the relationship between Gertrudis and Delia.
How does Rodríguez Acosta negotiate the tension between her fictional exploration of lesbian desire and the nationalist, heteronormative medical discourses (such as Gregorio Marañón's theories) circulating in her essays?

• The Trajectory of a Utopian Intellectual—From Havana to Mexican Exile:

Trace the stylistic and philosophical transformation in Rodríguez Acosta's prose from her early naturalist story "La bruta" and La vida manda (1929) to her travel chronicles in Grafos (1936), La muerte pura de Martí (1955), and the symbolic late story "Agonía" (1957). Why did her faith in institutional civic reform give way to individual spiritual uplift prior to her final years of silence and institutional confinement?

IV. SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

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• Unruh, Vicky. *Performing Women and Modern Literary Culture in Latin America: Intervening Acts.* University of Texas Press, 2006.

V. RELATED STOCKCERO RESOURCES

A comprehensive collection focusing on female protagonists, writers, and the shifting societal roles of women in Latin America. Included titles: *Sacrificio y Recompensa, Stella, La gozadora del dolor, Mecha Iturbe, Eleodora - Las consecuencias, A Dead Rose, La Vida manda, y otros textos,* and *Roque Moreno.*

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