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Cover image: *Detail of one María Zambrano's manuscripts.*
Courtesy of the Fundación María Zambrano.

Special issue: María Zambrano in Dialogue

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María Zambrano in dialogue

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The idea of putting together this collection of essays on the work of María Zambrano emerged initially from an encounter between several scholars who participated in a panel titled “Zambrano in Dialogue” at the Modern Language Association annual convention in Boston in January 2013. Miguel Ángel Balsa Marín, one of the panel organizers and a co-editor of this special issue, passed away in December 2013. We dedicate this special issue to his memory, in honor of his vision.

Writing about Spanish philosopher María Zambrano (1904–1991) can be a daunting and risky task, but that does not make it less necessary. It is accurate – though not very novel – to say that the primary challenge in writing about Zambrano lies in the interplay that her “method” of Poetic Reason establishes between philosophy, poetry and religion. Her thought skips lightly across disciplinary and discursive boundaries that many would rather leave undisturbed. An exile who crossed many national borders during her almost 40-year-long absence from Franco’s Spain, Zambrano developed a unique form of commitment in her thought and life, at the same time philosophical, ethical, political and even religious. The essays gathered in this volume embrace the challenge of what Mari Paz Balibrea has felicitously called the “transversality” of Zambrano’s thought.¹ They do so by opening that thought up to a dialogue with other thinkers and writers, many of whom Zambrano did not or could not encounter herself.

Zambrano addressed the connection between thinking, writing and intellectual commitment in the first article she published in 1934 in José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista de Occidente*, entitled “Por qué se escribe.” In her search for an answer to that question, she contrasted the dispersion of the spoken word – its indebtedness, even servitude, to the moment in which it is uttered – with the written word’s attempt to counter the verbal and temporal dispersion of speech by containing the words in their own time-space: the time-space of writing and solitude. While initially aligning writing with solitude and secrecy (the latter associated with the truth or idea that escapes the spoken word and is pursued in writing), Zambrano’s essay soon switches to a different register. It does so by turning to the vocabulary of communication and community, of making the secret public, of loyalty and faith: loyalty to truth and faith in the ability to communicate it. For Zambrano, without faith in the liberating potential of truth, which for her is intrinsic to the communal and public dimensions of writing, the connection between the writer and her audience is

impoverished. In this sense, the love of truth, which harkens back to the etymological meaning of philosophy as love of wisdom, is liberating only when it is combined with faith in the public function of truth pursued and communicated in writing. In a double allusion to the notion of philosophy as love of wisdom, and to the Christian conception of love informed by faith, Zambrano concludes that a word that does not have faith in its potential to liberate is a form of "impotent love" or mere philanthropy.

Keeping in mind the year of the essay's publication (1934), Zambrano's reader cannot help but be struck by the examples she chooses to illustrate acts of faith: planting a bomb, setting fire to a city – events that, once set in motion, follow an unpredictable course with possible far-reaching consequences. Readers coming to her text with the benefit of hindsight cannot but reflect on how it anticipates a number of terms that would frame her work in exile following the demise of the Second Republic and the Civil War. Her expulsion from her city and country in flames and the consequent severance of the link between her language and its public would put to the test the limits of her faith – not just in a religious sense but as an expression of political faith and loyalty to the Republican cause.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Zambrano's work and figure is how often she has been invoked for wildly disparate intellectual and ideological projects, even radically opposed ones. In the past decade, roughly following the 2004 celebration of the centenary of her birth, Zambrano's work has attracted increasing scholarly attention on both sides of the Atlantic, including Europe as a whole, resulting in a growing number of increasingly sophisticated and critically informed readings. In this respect, the new critical edition of Zambrano's complete works, directed by Jesús Moreno Sanz, which is currently underway, will undoubtedly have a decisive impact on the quality of Zambrano scholarship. Here, we can only mention a few examples of recent work that illustrate a wide range of perspectives on Zambrano's writings. In his epilogue to his book *Wild Materialism*, Jacques Lezra offers a brief but rich reading of Zambrano's essay "Lo que le sucedió a Cervantes: Dulcinea," in which he argues that the portmanteau figure of Zambrano/Dulcinea/Aldonza constructed in the essay can be read as a personification of what he calls resistant republicanism. By recounting the story of Cervantes' novel in terms of the encounter between the author-narrator and a woman that his novel cannot consume or contain, Zambrano productively reframes the tension between materialism and idealism, that is, the materiality of the body (*res*) and public consumption of the idealized images of the modern republic generally and of the Spanish Republic in particular. In his seminal essay "The Last God: María Zambrano's Life without Texture," Alberto Moreiras reads Zambrano's *El hombre y lo divino* as a significant critical engagement with the political implications of Heidegger's thought. Moreiras finds in Zambrano's work a radical questioning of the categories of subjectivity, sovereignty and partisanship that frame the modern conception of politics. Rather than embracing the Heideggerian conception of the forgetting of Being, Zambrano's thinking on the sacred and the divine exceeds the link between politics and theology, and that excess is what Moreiras names "political a-theology." The connection between Zambrano's philosophy, religion and politics receives a radically different interpretation in José Luis Villacañas' rigorous analysis of Zambrano's notion of delirium in the pre-Francoist period. Villacañas reads Zambrano's *Delirio y destino* as an example of a gnostic idea of history, a battle between the forces of good and evil. In this sense, Zambrano would fit within a larger tendency in Spanish thought of the pre-war era, which sees

history as a flow of fleeting instants whose true meaning is found in the spiritual realm of messianic hope in a community “sin fisura, sin exceso, sin alteridad” (568). Some of Villacañas’ conclusions resonate with Ana Bundgård’s careful study of the ambiguities and contradictions in Zambrano’s thought during her early exile years. Her first book on Zambrano, *Más allá de la filosofía. Sobre el pensamiento filosófico-místico de María Zambrano*, took exception to the majority of Zambrano criticism that had been published in Spain. She alleged that it unduly emphasized the originality of Zambrano’s thought, instead of placing most of her essays within the Spanish essay tradition that sought answers to the “Spanish problem,” to Spain’s “enigma.” Bundgård argued that the discourse on Spain that Zambrano developed during her exile years is ahistorical in approach, because of the inescapable essentialism of the intuitive method she employed. For Bundgård, much criticism of the second half of the twentieth century has tried to fit Zambrano into a contemporary horizon of thought, thus failing to appreciate her main concerns.

This monographic issue and the essays it contains do not represent a unified approach to Zambrano’s work, grounded in a particular academic (sub)field or a pre-determined intellectual agenda. Rather, they are responses to the stimulus or even provocation of opening Zambrano’s thought up to new discursive contexts (coloniality, film and contemporary theory) and new critical questions. They seek to establish links and connections that lie outside the limits of Spanish studies and the national tradition they, however uneasily, evoke. What subtends these readings is the notion of dialogue, which – as Massimo Cacciari reminds us in a text about Hannah Arendt, a thinker often invoked in connection with Zambrano – always entails both proximity and distance. In tackling the complexity of Zambrano’s thought and unveiling its layers as well as its contradictions, these essays adopt the attitude that some time ago Fernando Savater attributed to Zambrano herself: that of being “alerta, pero no en guardia.”

The connections that this volume proposes between Zambrano and other thinkers are original in that they belong, like poetry according to Aristotle, to the realm of possibility rather than that of actuality. Some of the diverse dialogic relationships proposed in this volume are rooted in friendships or intellectual exchanges experienced by Zambrano during her lifetime. Others take shape through our critical gaze. All expand and deepen our understanding not only of her work but also of the human condition as she theorized it.

Tania Gentic’s “Rethinking the Cartesian Subject in Latin America and Spain: Decolonial Theory and María Zambrano’s Philosophy” sets up a conversation between Zambrano’s understanding of poetic language and contemporary decolonial thought, which will, no doubt, surprise many readers. What we think of today as decolonial thought emphasizes the locus of enunciation, separating Europe from its others in a clean, almost surgical way. Gentic, however, proposes that Zambrano’s notion of “razón poética” includes “affects and relationality with others” and therefore constitutes a path toward decolonizing the mind from within Western thought. Her essay issues a challenge to Zambrano scholars as much as to decolonial thinkers.

One of Zambrano’s greatest contributions, the philosophical genre of the *delirio*, is a rebuttal of the classic Socratic dialogue of Western philosophy. In “¿Es posible encontrarle un nomos al pensamiento? María Zambrano, las confesiones, los delirios y el mito de Antígona,” Jorge Briosio carefully explores Zambrano’s choice of Antigone as a figure rather than Socrates, suggesting that Zambrano conceived of

Antigone as having a philosophically superior relationship to the *nomos*. Zambrano, Briosio reminds us, wrote three texts on Antigone. The first is an essay that appeared in the Cuban journal *Orígenes*, "Tres delirios" (1954); the second is "Antígona: el personaje-autor" (1965), a fragment of a longer book; and the third, to which Briosio ascribes the greatest philosophical weight, is *La tumba de Antígona* (1967). Zambrano, Briosio shows, held a lifelong dialogue with classical philosophy, which he puts into dialogue with the experience of exile.

Antigone's rich valences for philosophical reflection are tied to the peculiar combination of personal resolve and familial and social vulnerability that her person signified juridically. In "Radical Fragility: The Appearance of the Subject in Arendt, Zambrano and Sanchis Sinisterra," Miguel Ángel Balsa Marín stages a dialogue between Hannah Arendt, Zambrano's *Persona y democracia* (1958) and contemporary Valencian playwright José Sanchis Sinisterra. For Balsa Marín, the point of contact between the three writers is precisely the relationship between vulnerability and the emergence of a genuine human subject. Only in situations of extreme fragility does the subject emerge. Balsa Marín examines this instantiation in three realms: politics in Arendt, history in Zambrano and theater in Sanchis Sinisterra.

Vulnerability is also central to Tatjana Gajic's essay, "(Re) Moving the Heart: Interiority and Intrusion in María Zambrano, Jean Luc Nancy and Claire Denis." Gajic, like Balsa Marín, anchors her analysis in *Persona y democracia*. She relates Zambrano to Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus* (2000) and Claire Denis's 2004 film of the same title, a loose adaptation of Nancy's meditation on his heart transplant and life-transforming experience of vulnerability. The essay focuses on one of the central notions of *Persona y democracia*, that of the "void within." Gajic's discussion leads to an examination of the trope of intrusion in these three figures. A philosophical and autobiographical account of intrusion in Nancy serves as a springboard for an examination of Zambrano's and Denis' treatment of the issues of crime, the sacred and sacrifice.

In "*¿Qué es entonces una isla?: ruinas, islas y escritura en el Caribe de María Zambrano*," Lena Burgos-Lafuente examines Zambrano's significant and vexed relationship to Puerto Rico, a country which represented a possible respite, intellectual as much as financial and personal, from the severe upheaval of her first period of exile. While Burgos-Lafuente notes the dialogue that Zambrano maintained via correspondence with several Puerto Rican intellectuals, more central to her essay is the striking rhetorical similarity between the figure of the island that emerges in Zambrano's writing at this time, and the figure of the ruin that appears in her works published a decade later. In addition, Burgos-Lafuente reveals an invisible obverse to these tropes and to her ostensibly benevolent philosophical dialogue. This is manifested principally in Zambrano's letters about her disenchantment with *América* or, more precisely, with its inhabitants.

Elena Laurenzi's essay "Love Lessons: María Zambrano and Rosa Chacel in the footsteps of Diotima" focuses on the commonalities between Rosa Chacel and María Zambrano, both followers of José Ortega y Gasset. The dialogue here is between two friends, two women coming of age in male-dominated intellectual environments. Laurenzi distinguishes between Chacel's and Zambrano's critique of Ortega's masculinism in his philosophical writings. While Chacel, she argues, embraces gender neutrality as a counter to masculinism, Zambrano seems to have embarked on a twisting and turning itinerary through the thickets of sexual difference as a philosophical

proposition. While never adopting a feminist position, neither did Zambrano sidestep the issue by assuming the presumptive philosophical gender neutrality of the masculine's universal use to signify humanity.

This special issue also includes an unpublished manuscript by Zambrano which relates to our project's rethinking of Zambrano's writings in the light of contemporary critique. Our heartfelt thanks go to the Fundación María Zambrano in Vélez-Málaga, Spain, for granting permission to print this text for the first time.

The issue's contributors believe that the reasons for Zambrano's current re-emergence lie in the striking fact that her work speaks to a wide range of intellectual fields. *María Zambrano in Dialogue* seeks to spark interest in the thought of an intellectual who, in our view, has a great deal to offer scholars in the Humanities at large. Simply put, we wish to build intellectual bridges that grant Zambrano's work a place in current debates that transcend existing linguistic and/or ideological barriers. It is in this spirit that our issue brings together a group of scholars of diverse origins who, writing in both English and Spanish, draw on their respective bodies of knowledge to create a series of dialogues between Zambrano, her world and our own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. Balibrea referred to the transversality of Zambrano's thought in her opening remarks to the congress "María Zambrano Amongst the Philosophers: A Reconsideration" which took place at Birkbeck University, May 21–22 of 2015.

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