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## About the Author

Yvette Fuentes received a BA in History from Barry University (1991), an MA in Spanish History from the University of Miami (1993) and a PhD in Spanish, with an emphasis on Latin American Literature, also from the University of Miami (2002). Her research interests include Latin American Women Writers, Hispanic Caribbean Literature, and US Latino/a Literature and Culture. Some of her publications have appeared in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, *Caribe: Revista de Cultura y Literatura*, *Texturas: Nuevas Dimensiones del Texto y de la Imagen*, and *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diaspora*. She is Associate Professor in the Division of Humanities where she teaches Spanish.

## Book review of *Josefina Niggli, Mexican-American Writer: A Critical Biography* by Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

by Yvette Fuentes

Coonrod Martínez, Elizabeth. *Josefina Niggli, Mexican-American Writer: A Critical Biography*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. 317 pp.

In *Josefina Niggli, Mexican-American Writer: A Critical Biography*, Sonoma State University Professor Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez offers an in-depth look at the life and literature of Josefina Niggli. Besides delving into the different periods of this author's life, Coonrod Martínez' book includes literary selections of the author's most important works, as well as photographs of Niggli and her family.

Although few are familiar with her work today, Josefina Niggli was a popular playwright and novelist in the U.S. from the 1930s through the 1950s. As the first Mexican-American woman to write in English on Mexican themes, Niggli's work deserves analysis and recognition. Indeed, Niggli was ahead of her time for her progressive stance on gender, racial and ethnic equality. Undeniably, Niggli's ability to write *and* publish successfully during this time is a testament to her character. Through her struggles, Niggli paved the way for future Chicano/a writers and scholars, especially the feminists Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros.

In chapter 1, "Introduction and Early Life: 1910-1935", Coonrod Martínez introduces readers to Niggli, offering a detailed background of her childhood and early adulthood. The chapter also includes a sampling of Niggli's earliest poems. It should be noted that Niggli was the only author

writing in English during this period who presented an insider view of Mexican culture. As Coonrod Martínez illustrates, Niggli related Mexican myths and legends, documented the Mexican Revolution and presented early feminist ideals. Her interest in the *mestizo* within Mexican culture placed her in a unique position among writers of her generation within the U.S.

Born in 1910 in Monterrey, Niggli belonged to a middle-class family of immigrant extraction. As a child, her family lived in several locations, in both the U.S. and Mexico. In 1925, Niggli settled in San Antonio, where she completed high school and attended the all-girls Catholic College of the Incarnate Word. Although she majored in philosophy, Niggli spent most of her undergraduate years improving her literary skills. With the help of a college professor, she published several poems and shorts stories. After college, Niggli returned to Mexico where she turned her attention to theater. Her fascination with the theater led her to pursue graduate studies in playwriting at the University of North Carolina, arriving in Chapel Hill in 1935. Although she lived briefly in several places during her lifetime, she came to consider North Carolina home.

Chapter 2, "Playmaking in North Carolina: 1935-1942" turns to Niggli's work in the theater, within the university and the community. As Coonrod Martínez explains, the Chapel Hill years were productive. During this time, Niggli published her first book, *Mexican Folk Plays*, a collection of comedies and dramas, to positive reviews. In addition to discussing this collection, chapter two includes literary analyses of some of Niggli's best known plays, including *The Cry of Dolores*, *Soldadera*, and *The Red Velvet Goat*. In her examination of *Soldadera*, Coonrod Martínez maintains that this play was the first theatrical representation, north or south of the border, of women's participation in the Mexican Revolution. Coonrod Martínez argues that in *Soldadera* women resist erasure from history. And she adds that in this play and subsequent ones, Niggli launches two prevalent themes: women as contributors to society and the mestizo consciousness (38).

In chapter 3, "Books and Novels and Hollywood: 1942-1953," Coonrod Martínez concentrates on Niggli's most productive literary period. With her Master's in hand, Niggli returned to San Antonio to help care for her parents and grandmother. Although under great strain, she remained active. Between 1943 and 1946, Niggli taught at a private girls' school and worked at an advertising agency and a local bookstore, all while caring for her ailing grandmother and parents. More remarkable is the fact that during these three years, Niggli managed to complete and publish three books, including her first novel, *Mexican Village*. The novel, which makes references to racial and ethnic intermarriage, industrialization and cultural syncretism, received positive reviews. Later scholars would view the work as a direct precursor to Chicano literature for the themes upon which it touched and its specific linguistic style.

There's little doubt that the 1940s were the high point of Niggli's life. Already recognized for her plays, Niggli also became popular for her novel and two professional writing guides. By 1947, she had published her second novel, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, and a number of short stories. In her analysis of *Step Down, Elder Brother*, Coonrod Martínez explains that although today the work is barely noticed, at the time of its publication it received numerous reviews. Not only did the publisher take out ads in the *New York Times* but the novel was chosen book of the month in December 1947. For Coonrod Martínez, the novel's greatest contribution is its portrayal of post-revolutionary Monterrey and specifically its divided social classes, what Niggli referred to as

"the world above" and "the world below" (135). In addition to tackling Mexico's socio-economic system, Coonrod Martínez maintains that the novel is also significant for its vivid imagery of Mexican cultural practices as well as metropolitan Monterrey. In her analysis, she proposes that Niggli may have been inspired by the *Casasola* photographic collection, published in 1942 in Mexico City. The collection contains photographs of popular street scenes and of Mexicans dressed in late nineteenth and early twentieth century attire, including revolutionaries and *soldaderas*. Not only does Niggli's narration include vivid descriptions of these popular photographs, but the characters in the novel make numerous references to them, thereby adding an element of intertextuality to the work.

After the success of *Step Down, Elder Brother*, Niggli decided to try her luck in Hollywood, writing steadily for different movie studios. She wrote scenes for the smash hit *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* as well as for various television shows, including *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Twilight Zone*. In addition, much of her work was translated into Spanish for the first time, including *Mexican Village*, in 1949, as well as various short stories which appeared in diverse academic journals. After a short period in Europe on a travel grant, Niggli returned to California to begin work on the production of a Technicolor movie based on *Mexican Village*. The film, *Sombrero*, was completed in 1952 and included such legendary actors as Ricardo Montalban, Rick Jason and Yvonne de Carlo. Although plans were put in place for a second film, it never materialized. Nevertheless, Niggli contributed plot ideas and serial episodes to Hollywood for the next few years. In general, Niggli's diverse artistic work received positive reviews. Coonrod Martínez suggests that this popularity may have been partly a result of the growing interest in Mexican and Latin American culture during 1940s and 1950s. This may help explain why Niggli's work was nearly forgotten until only recently when she was rediscovered by contemporary Chicano/a writers.

Niggli's final thirty years took her back to North Carolina, where she had first begun her writing career. Already in her forties, Niggli abandoned Hollywood for a teaching career at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. In chapter 4, "A Final Novel and Teaching 1953-1983," Coonrod Martínez speculates that the author may have pursued a teaching career at this time due to the rise of McCarthyism and mounting pressure against actors, artists and writers. After a short time teaching dramatic art at the Woman's College, Niggli accepted an offer to teach at the prestigious Old Vic Theatre School in England. But she returned to North Carolina the following year and began teaching at Western Carolina College in Cullowhee, not far from the Tennessee border. She remained at WCC until her retirement in 1975, and lived in North Carolina until her death in 1983.

In 1964, Niggli wrote and published her third and final novel, *A Miracle for Mexico*. Often mistaken for a children's book, the novel centers on *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and her importance within Mexican culture. Niggli's novel was the first creative work written in English on Our Lady of Guadalupe and is also significant due to the amount of research Niggli conducted in order to write it. In effect, as Coonrod Martínez elucidates, Niggli proved herself a competent cultural historian for her research of both historical and popular accounts on the Virgin of Guadalupe. She incorporated fictional *mestizo* and indigenous figures and historical ones to represent what Coonrod Martínez calls a believable sixteenth-century society' (242). *A Miracle for Mexico*, like Niggli's previous novels, is a precursor to later Chicano/a works and like *Step*

*Down, Elder Brother*, offers a realistic depiction of post-revolutionary Mexico. In this chapter, as in previous ones, Coonrod Martínez's clearly demonstrates that in her varied literary works, Niggli strove to represent a balanced view of Mexico and Mexican and Mexican-American culture.

In sum, in *Josefina Niggli: Mexican-American Writer, A Critical Biography*, Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez presents a discerning look at a writer who succeeded in representing Mexican and Mexican-American culture to non-Spanish speakers through various literary forms. Although almost forgotten, Niggli's work must be taken into account in any study of the literature and culture of U.S. Latinos. Coonrod Martínez's thorough, well-written biography is a valuable resource, offering readers an opportunity to learn more about the life and literary works of this trailblazing Mexican-American author.