

**Title:**

‘Muses Beyond the Seas’: Spanish and Latin American Women Poets as Figures of the Transnational Avant-Garde (1920-1936)

**Author details:**

Dr. Christina Bezari (Ghent University)  
ORCID identifier: 0000-0001-8031-6344

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**Note on the Author:**

Christina Bezari is a post-doctoral researcher and teaching assistant at Ghent University, Belgium. She is currently working on a project that examines the participation of Spanish women poets in international avant-garde circles (1918-1936). By looking at poetry collections, literary circles and avant-garde magazines, this project aims to rethink the generational approach to Spanish vanguard poetry and place Spanish women poets in a transnational context.

**Abstract**

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of an avant-garde culture, which marked a turning point in the literary history of Spain. Until recently, the dominant approach to Spanish vanguard poetry, has been a generational one. Critics have mainly focused on male poets identified with the ‘Generation of 1927’, which has been seen as a predominantly Spanish phenomenon. This study takes a different approach by questioning Spain’s exclusion from studies of the transnational avant-garde. By looking at literary circles and avant-garde magazines, this article provides an insight into the transnational exchanges between Spanish and Latin American women poets, who shared an aesthetic approach and engaged with avant-garde themes. It also examines the correspondence between Carmen Conde and Ernestina de Champourcín and highlights their connections to Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou and Delmira Agustini. A study of the transatlantic connections among these women poets aims to provide a better understanding of the influences they received, the impact they exerted beyond borders and the mediating role they played across cultural and geographical boundaries.

**Key-words:** transnational; avant-garde; women; Spain; Latin America.

**Resumen**

A principios del siglo XX surgió una cultura de vanguardia que marcó un punto de inflexión en la historia literaria española. Hasta hace poco, el modelo generacional ha sido el enfoque

dominante en la poesía de vanguardia en España. Los críticos se han centrado principalmente en los poetas varones pertenecientes a la denominada *Generación del 27*, la cual se ha considerado como un fenómeno predominantemente español. El presente estudio adopta un enfoque diferente, al cuestionar la exclusión de España de los estudios de la vanguardia transnacional. A través de un estudio de los círculos literarios y de las revistas de vanguardia, este artículo analiza los intercambios transnacionales entre las poetas españolas y latinoamericanas que compartieron un enfoque estético e incorporaron temas vanguardistas en sus poesías. A tal fin, se examina la correspondencia entre Carmen Conde y Ernestina de Champourcín y se analizan las conexiones que ellas crearon con poetas latinoamericanas como Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou y Delmira Agustini. El análisis de las conexiones transatlánticas entre estas mujeres poetas tiene por objetivo ofrecer una mejor comprensión de las influencias que marcaron sus obras, del impacto que ellas ejercieron más allá de las fronteras nacionales y del papel mediador que desempeñaron a través de las fronteras culturales y geográficas.

**Palabras clave:** transnacional; vanguardia; mujeres; España; América Latina.

## Introduction

In a 1928 letter to Carmen Conde, the young poet Ernestina de Champourcín contrasted the work of Spanish women poets to that of their Latin American counterparts: ‘No veo gran analogía entre nuestra voz y la de esas musas allende los mares. Creo que somos diferentes y -guárdame el secreto- más jóvenes, sobre todo, más de hoy’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 232). Champourcín’s observation suggests an antagonistic relationship with those ‘muses beyond the seas’, who established themselves in the literary scene during the 1920s and 1930s. But who were these ‘muses’ beyond the Atlantic and to what extent did they influence the work of Spanish female poets? How did women obtain access to the avant-garde literary circles of their time? How did they respond to criticism from their male counterparts? To provide an insight into these questions, this study examines the correspondence between the Spanish poets Carmen Conde and Ernestina de Champourcín both of whom expressed an interest in Latin American literature. It thus seeks to adopt a transnational approach to the history of the avant-garde and explore the influences that shaped women’s poetry in the interwar period.

Recent scholarship has made significant steps in identifying the avant-garde as a transnational movement that, like modernism, has been ‘shifting, expanding [and] including an ever greater variety of registers, stylistic forms, genres, participating agents and locations’ (Eysteinnsson and Liska 2007, xi). Taking these factors into account can help us understand the avant-garde as a multifaceted movement that flourished during the interwar period. As Sascha Bru has shown, avant-garde artists and poets were ‘able to cross many linguistic and cultural hurdles with remarkable ease’ due to their mobility in and outside Europe (2015, 2). Indeed, transnational mobility and the crossing of borders are key elements that allow us to see different avant-garde movements as more than ‘national spheres of literary activity’ (Berman 2011, 31). Although some avant-garde movements have been viewed in the past as nation-based (e.g. ‘French’ Surrealism, ‘Italian’ Futurism, ‘German’ Expressionism), there have been significant

attempts to establish a ‘transnational optic’ that ‘brings previously marginalised languages and literatures into view’ (Berman 2011, 29).

Despite efforts to expand the geographical and cultural boundaries of the avant-garde, Spain is systematically excluded from major studies of this movement (Posman *et al.* 2013; Bäckström and Hjartarson 2014). On certain occasions, the avant-garde movements that flourished in Spain during the 1910s and 1920s are considered as ‘peripheral’ or ‘imitative’. As Derek Harris contends, ‘much of the activity of the avant-garde in Spain was an occupation conducted in clothes borrowed from abroad’ (1995, 1). According to this view, Spanish poets were ‘functioning within borrowed horizons and seeking to adapt them to an indigenous circumstance’ (Harris 1995, 1). Harris argues that the main cultural influences in early-twentieth century Spain came from France and that tendencies that occurred in Paris arrived in Spain thanks to the mediation of travelling artists. And yet, as George Yúdice observes: ‘the dialectics of the avant-garde have been constructed from a Eurocentric perspective’, leaving out the dialogues and exchanges that took place between Spanish poets and their counterparts in Latin America (1999, 76). Despite this fruitful debate on the transnational character of the avant-garde, scholars have often neglected an important aspect of literary life: the participation of Spanish women poets in the avant-garde scene of the interwar period.

Contemporary scholars have described the 1920s and early 1930s as ‘a period of intense literary and artistic renovation’ and a ‘Silver Age’ in Spanish literary history (Bou 2004, 555). Despite the importance of this historic moment, the literary landscape of the 1920s has long been ‘dominated by male figures deemed to belong to the famed Generation of 1927’ (Leggott 2005, 91). In recent years, critical studies have attempted to revise the term ‘Generation of 1927’ and have argued that the generational model has reinforced the exclusion of Spain from studies of European modernism (Bretz 2001; Anderson 2005; Soufas 2007). To counter this exclusion, Soufas has urged scholars to ‘embrace the period category of modernism as a more appropriate model’ and study the Spanish avant-garde ‘as a vital, autonomous, yet integral part’ of the European modernist tradition (2007, 10). Despite these efforts to place the Spanish avant-garde at the heart of European modernism, scholars have mainly focused on the work of established male poets such as Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Luis Cernuda, and Vicente Aleixandre (Huárag Álvarez 2004; Soufas 2007). These poets experienced similar influences in their youth, shared an aesthetic approach, and frequented the *Residencia de Estudiantes*, a cultural centre in Madrid that was reserved to male intellectuals.

In her letters to Carmen Conde, the poet Ernestina de Champourcín seems well aware of women’s marginal position in the literary scene of the 1920s and emphasises the need for social renewal: ‘En este siglo nuevo falta una renovación; la de los cerebros enmohecidos que deben remplazarse sin tardanza’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 181). While Champourcín’s contempt for the status quo can be regarded as a sign of rupture with the literary norms of her time, her voice as well as that of her female contemporaries seems to have been silenced both during Franco’s dictatorship and during the years of the Spanish democratic transition (1975-1982). According to Eduardo Gregori and Juan Herrero-Senés, the Francoist cultural program aimed to re-appropriate Spanish culture, dismissed the avant-garde as fundamentally anti-Spanish, and neglected women’s contribution to the literary field (2016, 3). During the democratic transition, Spanish literary criticism paid little attention to women intellectuals and

neglected the contribution of avant-garde poets because some of their works ‘were apolitical and unconcerned with social commitment’ (Gregori and Herrero-Senés 2016, 3). While these major events have overshadowed the memory of Spanish female poets of the avant-garde, scholars in the past two decades have shown an increasing interest in their work.

Existing studies have generally focused on individual cases of women poets operating within a single national context. Among those who received scholarly attention in recent years are Rosa Chacel who has been associated with the avant-garde Ultraist movement in Spain (Kirkpatrick 2003; Bellver 2010), Concha Méndez whose literary journals *Héroe* and *1616* were instrumental to her male contemporaries (Leggott 2005; González-Allende 2010; Calles Moreno 2014), and Ernestina de Champourcín who was, along with Josefina de la Torre, the only female poet to be included in Gerardo Diego’s celebrated anthology *Poesía española contemporánea* published in 1934 (Comella 2002; Landeira 2005). All of these women poets share a series of common characteristics: they were all born between 1898 and 1910, they were cosmopolitan and drew inspiration from European and Latin American avant-garde movements, they published their poetry in international literary magazines such as Victoria Ocampo’s *Sur*, Alejo Carpentier’s *Revista de avance*, and Xavier Bóveda’s *Síntesis*, they used daring metaphors and imagery in their poetry to describe the experience of transition and a sense of personal and social crisis. Although existing studies have continuously attempted to recover their memory, most of them have focused exclusively on their identity as Spanish women poets and have neglected the amount of contacts that these women established outside of Spain.

Drawing on Steven Vertovec’s definition of transnationalism as ‘sustained cross-border relationships [and] patterns of exchange’ (2009, 2), this article opens up a dialogue across geographical and cultural borders and stresses the need to study the avant-garde as an inclusive concept that is not conducive to isolationism. In considering Spanish women poets as figures of the transnational avant-garde, this article explores the overarching themes of their poetry, their contributions to modernist and avant-garde magazines, and their exchanges with Latin American female poets, who visited Spain during the 1920s and early 1930s (e.g. Alfonsina Storni and Margarita Abella Caprile from Argentina, Gabriela Mistral from Chile). By examining these aspects of women’s work, the present study seeks to open up possibilities for comparative research and provide an insight into the transnational influences that shaped the avant-garde movement in Spain. It also aims to go beyond the centre vs. periphery paradigm that has dominated European discourse on literary innovation. Building on the idea of ‘a polycentric model of literary history’ (Frassinelli and Watson in Frassinelli *et al.* 2011, 207), this study will show how cultural exchanges between Spanish and Latin American women poets can help us to rethink literary history from a transnational perspective.

### **Who Were They? Ernestina de Champourcín, Carmen Conde and the ‘Muses’ across the Atlantic.**

Ernestina de Champourcín (1905-1999) and Carmen Conde (1907-1996) came from different backgrounds but became close friends in the late 1920s. Champourcín was born in an aristocratic family, which offered her a broad education. Her father was a lawyer and possessed the title of baron of Champourcín, while her mother was born in Montevideo, the only daughter

of a military man, with whom she often travelled to Europe. Conde was born into a family of modest means and had to work from the age of sixteen in a naval planning office owing to the collapse of her father's fabric business. Later on, she studied at a teacher training college in Murcia and started to write articles for local newspapers. Despite their differences, the two women published their first poetry collections in 1929 and 1926 respectively. Their early verses were influenced by Juan Ramón Jiménez and his commitment to 'pure poetry', a literary current that was associated with French symbolism and urged poets to disengage from 'sentimental, ideological and moral objectives' in order to embrace *pure* aesthetic values (Guillén 1927). Despite Juan Ramón's early influence, Champourcín and Conde expressed their admiration for a number of Latin American women poets, whose work became a crucial point of reference.

In their private correspondence, Champourcín and Conde exchanged views on the literary tendencies of their time, the influences that shaped their poetry, and the difficulties that they faced as young female poets in interwar Spain. It is obvious from their letters that Conde did not have the social confidence and financial independence to join the literary circles that flourished in the Spanish capital during the 1920s. Writing from Cartagena, a port town in the Murcia region, Conde admitted that she struggled to find her own voice while living in a small provincial town that was stifled by tradition and conservative social mores. In her correspondence with Champourcín, she expressed a feeling of isolation and regret for not being able to form literary friendships in her home town:

Yo no trato a nadie en Cartagena. Tengo amistades, pero no literarias. No hay nadie aquí, casi [...] Pero ya ve V.; estoy completamente apartada de lo externo. Salvo la Amistad de V., nadie más. Y ya ve que estamos lejos y no tenemos una absoluta comunicación personal [...] ¿No le parezco a V. una muchacha demasiado provinciana? (Conde in Urtasun 2007, 63).

In this passage, Conde expresses a fear of being considered 'provincial' in comparison to her friend Champourcín, who she viewed as more cosmopolitan. Being unable to participate in the avant-garde circles of the capital, Conde was therefore less influenced by the avant-garde ideas of her time. This is obvious from her two pre-war collections, *Brocal* (1929) and *Júbilos* (1934), which were written in prose poetry and did not include avant-garde themes or other experimental modes of expression. Conde eventually moved to Madrid in 1935 to work at an orphanage primary school but the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War made it impossible for women to join literary circles and engage in literary activities. Before the Civil War, however, Conde attested to the influence of Latin American women poets, such as Juana de Ibarbourou, María Monvel, Alfonsina Storni and Gabriela Mistral, with whom she collaborated on different occasions.

In contrast to Conde, Champourcín wrote her letters from Madrid and described her participation in conferences, exhibitions, and concerts, which had become important meeting points for avant-garde poets: 'Eso sí, asisto a exposiciones y conferencias, que ahora abundan; tampoco faltan los conciertos y yo procuro seguir de cerca todas las manifestaciones artísticas' (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 60). She was also a central figure of the *Lyceum Club Femenino*, a literary institution in Madrid, which aimed 'to defend the moral and material interests of women' (Urtasun 2008, 19). Champourcín's financial independence as well as her

assiduous participation in literary associations and salons allowed her to meet with avant-garde poets and embrace the movement. Her active involvement in the cultural life of Madrid also allowed her to meet with prominent literary critics such as Francisco Ayala, Juan Guerrero, and Rafael Cansinos-Assens, who often helped her to publish articles in well-known magazines of the time such as *Cosmópolis*, *La Gaceta Literaria*, *La Época*, and *La Libertad*.

While Champourcín's first poetry collection *En silencio* (1926), contains poems that are influenced by 'pure poetry', subsequent collections, such as *Ahora* (1928), *La voz en el viento* (1931), and *Cántico Inútil* (1936) follow different models by bringing sensual feminine images to the fore and seeking ways to transcend social norms. As Dru Dougherty has observed, 'la joven poeta tuviera que rebelarse contra su propia formación poética para pasar el "umbral de todo un Arte" brindado por las vanguardias' (2009, 653-654). Champourcín's affinity to the avant-garde is obvious in her ability to create lyrical subjects in line with the 'new spirit' of the interwar period: 'El sujeto lírico que Champourcín modeló sintonizó con los años de las vanguardias, en gran parte por su notable inestabilidad' (Dougherty 2009, 654). By expressing a sense of instability, uncertainty and crisis in her poetry, Champourcín became one of the few female poets in Madrid who was directly linked to the literary avant-gardes of the time.

In a letter that she sent to Conde in January 1928, Champourcín mentioned the work of the Uruguayan poets Juana de Ibarbourou and Delmira Agustini and introduced a comparison between Spanish female poets and their 'sisters in America':

Le escribo rodeada de libros uruguayos; mi padre ha llegado hace dos días de Montevideo y los parientes que tengo allí se empeñan en que conozca a todos sus poetas. Hay entre ellos algunas mujeres admirables. ¿Conoce usted a Juana de Ibarbourou y Delmira Agustini? Nuestras hermanas de América, más valientes que las españolas se confían al papel en todo momento, incluso algunas, y esto ya es deplorable, que no tienen nada interesante que decir (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 60).

As this passage suggests, Champourcín was familiar with the literary scene of Uruguay and drew her friend's attention to the work of Juana de Ibarbourou and Delmira Agustini. Both of these poets experimented with avant-garde imagery and used metaphor as a vehicle for self-expression. Ibarbourou's first poetry collection *Las lenguas de diamante* (1919) includes erotic images and describes women as sensual creatures in harmony with the natural world. In a similar vein, the poetry of Delmira Agustini is known for its sensual undertone and sense of transcendence. Thanks to her family in Uruguay, Champourcín appears aware of their poetry and expresses admiration for them. She, nevertheless, adopts a critical stance and argues that certain female poets 'have nothing interesting to say'.

In her response to this letter, Conde expresses a growing interest in the poetry of her Latin American counterparts, which she seems to reconsider and reevaluate: 'He vuelto a leer a las poetisas americanas y me han parecido mejores. Sobre todo Juana de Ibarbourou. No sé por qué se ha operado este cambio de opiniones en mí' (Conde in Urtasun 2007, 66). Conde's change of attitude reflects an openness to new ideas and influences. Nevertheless, there is a hint of hesitation as she admits that she was not instantly inspired by everything she read. Later on in the same letter, Conde compares Juana de Ibarbourou to the Chilean poet María Monvel: 'Fíjate en la coincidencia de María Monvel con ella al hablar de la lluvia. Dice la primera:

llueve, llueve, llueve. Y la segunda: lluvia, lluvia, lluvia. Y las dos quieren darse a la frescura del agua, desnudas; jóvenes y fragantes como las palmas' (Conde in Urtasun 2007, 66). Pointing to the similarities of their poetry, Conde emphasises the young and carefree attitude they adopt. This attitude seems to be the result of a common desire to renew and revitalise poetic language. Champourcín adds to this discussion in another letter, where she compares women poets from Uruguay to the Argentinean poet Alfonsina Storni: 'Ayer en el "Lyceum" el ministro del Uruguay nos habló de sus poetisas en una conferencia. Yo prefiero a todas ellas la argentina Alfonsina Storni. Me parece más personal y nueva que las otras' (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 69). In this letter, Champourcín expresses a strong interest in Storni's poetry and gradually moves away from the Uruguayan literary scene.

In January 1930, Champourcín met Storni in Madrid and introduced her to the Peruvian writer Angélica Palma, who resided temporarily in Spain and participated in the literary activities of the *Lyceum Club Femenino*. By that time, Storni had already contributed to some of the most important modernist and avant-garde magazines in Argentina: *Caras y caretas*, *Atlántida*, *La Nota*, and *Nosotros*. Upon her arrival in Madrid, the literary circles of the city were already familiar with her work and invited her to participate in salon gatherings and recite her poetry. In one of her letters, Champourcín argues that she acted as a mediator between Storni and Concha Espina, a well-respected Spanish writer whose literary salon on Goya street was frequented by the most prominent poets and artists of the time: '[...] ha llegado Alfonsina Storni, hay que ocuparse de ella; le preparamos un té a Angélica Palma y otro a Concha Espina' (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 342). In this letter, Champourcín appears content with Storni's visit in Madrid. After their first encounter on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1930, she wrote back to Conde with an enthusiastic outlook: 'Hemos quedado grandes amigas. Iré una tarde a tomar el té con ella sola y a hablar de poesía. Me pareció muy comprensiva e inteligente' (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 345). Champourcín's admiration for Storni led her to organise a series of events that would help her Argentinian friend to advertise and disseminate her poetry in Spain. These events took place not only in the salons of the upper-class but also in the *Lyceum Club*, which provided opportunities to Spanish and foreign women of letters:

El martes le damos un té en el club; prepara unas conferencias en la Comedia combinadas con los recitales de su amiga [Blanca de la Vega]. Estarán mes y medio por España las dos aprovechando las vacaciones y pronto tendrán que volver a sus cátedras de Buenos Aires. [Storni] tiene empeño en conocer todas las muchachas que "piensan y escriben" así que no dejes de escribirle pronto (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 345).

In this letter, Champourcín emphasises Storni's important contribution to the literary life of Madrid and highlights her desire to meet with promising women writers. Residing in Cartagena, Conde did not have the chance to attend Storni's lectures in the capital but she was encouraged to write to her and introduce herself through her letters. In the 1930s, literary events such as lectures and tea gatherings as well as written correspondence were efficient ways to engage in transnational exchange. Women poets of different nationalities shared ideas on the literary tendencies of their time and acted as cultural mediators. In so doing, they remained 'active across linguistic, artistic and geographical borders' and found 'channels to export their literary gems' (Meylaerts and Roig-Sanz 2018, 132-133). In her letters to Conde, Champourcín seems

aware of the benefits of transnational exchange and speaks in favour of transnational encounters between Spanish and Latin American women of letters. These encounters allowed female poets to create platforms of expression, expand their network of acquaintances and present their poetry to larger audiences.

By the end of Storni's sojourn in Madrid in February 1930, Champourcín appears to be grateful for her new friend and mentions her exchanges with Blanca de la Vega, an Argentinian opera singer who she met through Storni: 'Alfonsina Storni me ha tomado un cariño loco y Blanca de la Vega ha incluido mi poema "Amor" en el programa de su primer recital' (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 346). As this passage suggests, exchanges in tea gatherings and salons resulted in collaborations between women who helped each other to become more visible in the cultural scene. By including Champourcín's poem 'Amor' in her recital programme, Blanca de la Vega helped her new friend to disseminate her poetry and attract the attention of a wider public. As Santiago Ontañón has emphasised, informal meetings were of great importance to avant-garde poets and artists, who attempted to carve out a space for themselves: 'In those tertulias people talked, discussed, prophesied, lied and told the honest-to-god truth. In those cafés or temples of leisure, poets, politicians, cheaters and fakes were made. It was a time of the spoken word as much as it was of the written word' (Ontañón in Mangini 2010, 26). Indeed, as seen in Champourcín's letters, gatherings in houses and in the *Lyceum Club* offered women the opportunity to engage in fruitful dialogues that were potentially beneficial to their career. Another educational institution and cultural centre that provided support to women of letters in early twentieth-century Madrid was the *Residencia de Señoritas*. Founded by María de Maeztu in 1915, it soon became an important space of encounter between Spanish and foreign women. In a 1928 letter to Carmen Conde, Champourcín mentioned her encounter with the poet Margarita Abella Caprile and described a literary gathering that took place in the *Residencia de Señoritas*:

He estado haciendo los honores de Madrid a Margarita Abella Caprile, una poetisa argentina que recitó sus versos en la Residencia de señoritas. Casi no tuvimos tiempo de hacer amistad; ayer regresó a Paris pero con proyectos de volver. Es una muchacha muy sencilla y simpática. Te envío un poema suyo. No pertenece aún a la nueva poesía, pero en sus últimas composiciones parece orientarse hacia ella (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 70-71).

Though little known today, Margarita Abella Caprile was a prolific novelist and poet, who was a prominent figure in the literary circles of Buenos Aires and a friend of Alfonsina Storni. As the above passage suggests, Champourcín and Caprile met in April 1928 in Madrid. The two women exchanged poems and Caprile had the chance to present her work at the *Residencia de Señoritas*. The transnational nature of this exchange is remarkable despite Caprile's short stay in the Spanish capital. In her letter, Champourcín appears to be in favour of a poetic renewal, which she describes as a 'new poetry'. Despite this innovative approach, Caprile's poetry was best known for its romanticised descriptions and classical style. While Champourcín did not consider her counterpart's poetry as belonging to the 'new' movement, she still praised her talent and argued that her latest poems were heading towards a more innovative direction.



In her writings, Champourcín often expressed her commitment to avant-garde poetry and deplored the criticism she received for being a female poet in favour of innovation. In an article published in the magazine *La Gaceta Literaria* in 1930, she highlighted the rebellious nature of the ‘new literature’ (*la joven literatura*) and expressed her wish to part from previous generations of poets: ‘La juventud quiere sentirse vivir libremente, guiada por sus propias intuiciones, y opone una reacción violenta al peso de la experiencia ajena, sobre todo cuando esa experiencia pretende imponerle los moldes, ya usados, de su pensamiento o su conducta’ (Champourcín in Buckley and Crispin 1973, 398). In the same vein, she expressed her intention to collaborate with Pérez Ferrero on the literary magazine *Más* and launch a new section on Spanish avant-garde poetry along with other female poets: ‘El sábado en el “club” vi a Pérez Ferrero, que entra en la redacción de *Más*. Si voy yo con él seremos la plana joven y revolucionaria del periódico’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 341). Despite her enthusiasm, her literary section caused negative reactions at the salon of the *Revista de Occidente*, a prestigious periodical that was founded in 1923 by José Ortega y Gasset:

Ayer en la Asamblea se metieron con la tendencia “vanguardista” de nuestra sección... y nosotras tan frescas. En la tertulia de la R. de O. sé que me critican y me ponen verde y ya ves... yo tan fresca. También me publican cosas en provincia, sin yo saberlo y... ¡sigo tan fresca! No hay más remedio que mirar desde lo alto esas molestísimas pequeñeces (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 343).

As is obvious from this passage, Champourcín faced a number of scathing critiques that aimed to put into question her belief in a new poetry. Her refusal ‘to internalise the “feminine” features of passivity, sentimentality, and purity’ was thought to go against what was ‘deemed “natural” and beneficial’ to the women of her time (Bellver 2001, 18). In addition to receiving criticism for her literary section, Champourcín and the female poets who gathered around the *Lyceum Club Femenino* had to face exclusion and discrimination. One of the most ferocious critiques came from the writer Jacinto Benavente, who famously refused to give a lecture at the *Lyceum* by arguing that he does not like to talk to foolish women: ‘A mí no me gusta hablar a tontas y a locas’ (Benavente in Johnson 2003, 28). Champourcín recalls that distrust and mockery were the first reactions towards women poets who displayed talent and commitment to their art. As she states in one of her letters to Conde, her male contemporaries were sceptical of women’s place in the literary scene and often tried to discredit their writing and question their legitimacy: ‘Aquellos libros no podían ser nuestros: éramos mujeres’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2013, 214).

Despite the difficulties that she faced in Madrid, Champourcín allied herself with some of the most well-respected figures on the international literary scene. Out of all the Latin American women that appear in her letters, the most respected and admired figure was Gabriela Mistral. As Torre and Hutt have observed, Mistral’s poetry ‘confronts cultural, existential, and philosophical issues appearing in the more visibly experimental works of both the Latin American avant-garde and the high modernists of the English-speaking world’ (2012, 16). Influenced by modernist thought and by avant-garde aesthetics, Mistral’s poetry became a major source of inspiration for younger female poets who sought to find a place in the literary world. Situated within a shifting political environment and engaging with the themes of

autochthony, geographical marginality and social crisis, her work displayed a transnational consciousness that was both innovative and inspiring for younger generations of poets.

Gabriela Mistral as well as Alfonsina Storni were almost a decade and a half older than Champourcín and Conde. By the time they visited Madrid in 1924 and 1930, they had already published their first poetry collections and were seen as literary models for Spanish women who aspired to claim a place in the literary field. What brought all of these women poets together was their education and the relative freedom they could enjoy as a result. Between 1933 and 1935, Mistral resided in the Spanish capital, where she served as Consul for the Chilean government. It was during that time that she established a friendship with Champourcín, who praised her literary talent and compared her own poetry to that of her Chilean counterpart: ‘Conocí a Gabriela Mistral hace tres años y sus versos me impresionaron mucho, tanto que trascendieron a los míos aún inéditos y balbucientes’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 61). This comparison allows us to reflect on the transnational exchanges that took place between the two women poets.

As Champourcín became close to Mistral, she realised that her own verses were still not as advanced and she expressed her willingness to learn from her friend and develop her writing style. She also spoke favourably of Conde’s work and familiarised Mistral with the Spanish literary scene of the early 1930s. In a letter to Conde, she mentioned their conversations, which allowed them to bond and exchange views on contemporary poetry: ‘Con Gabriela hablamos de ti largamente, la veo mucho y nuestras charlas se prolongan mañanas enteras’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 382). Champourcín’s admiration for both Conde and Mistral led her to draw a parallel between the two: ‘Quiero verte enseñando; vas a ser con el tiempo una especie de Gabriela Mistral. ¡Poeta y maestra! Qué bellos resultan esos dos nombres unidos’ (Champourcín in Urtasun 2007, 46). As this passage suggests, Mistral had become a role model for young talents in Spain and embodied the hope that women could occupy a prominent place in the public sphere as poets, writers and teachers.

Mistral’s influence on both Conde and Champourcín was long-lasting. Conde recalls having read Mistral’s verses in 1925 in a collection of Spanish-American poetry published by the editorial house *Cervantes*: ‘Mi conocimiento de la poesía de Gabriela Mistral data de 1925. La editorial barcelonesa Cervantes publicaba una colección de poesía femenina hispanoamericana en la cual figuraba ella’ (Conde in Benavente 2013, 185). In her view, Mistral succeeded in constructing a poetic universe that was predominantly female and was thus able to introduce a new sensibility into the dominant literary canon: ‘Representa Gabriela Mistral en el universo poético femenino lo más acabado, lo más perfecto del sentimiento. Y desde la concepción pura del poeta, lo más realizado también [...]’ (Conde in Benavente 2013, 182). As is obvious from this passage, Mistral was seen as an emblematic figure in the literary scene of the time. Being able to travel and develop transnational connections far beyond her immediate environment, she embodied the image of the ‘cultural ambassador’:

Cuando Gabriela Mistral tomó su puesto de cónsul honorario en Madrid, en julio de 1933, su recepción fue calurosa: amigos y políticos llegaron a saludarla con alabanzas y elogios tanto por las calles como, después, en artículos de revistas y en la radio. Algunos la nombraron la “embajadora espiritual de la América Hispana” por ser consejera de la cultura hispana y por sus virtudes destacadas (Benavente 2013, 182).

In 1934, Conde's poetry collection *Júbilos* was prologued by Mistral and illustrated by Norah Borges. In an article entitled *Gabriela Mistral en mi memoria*, Conde recalls the first time they met at Mistral's apartment on Menéndez Pelayo avenue in Madrid. This was the start of a long-lasting friendship between two women who admired and praised one another with passion: 'He aquí, resumida en pocas líneas, la historia de un encuentro: el primero entre dos poetisas, una de las cuales era admirada y reverenciada por la otra, mínima, llena de apasionada juventud total' (Conde 1977, 11). In this article, Conde described their meetings at café *Moka* on Alcalá street and explained that she introduced Mistral to the Spanish poets Zenobia Camprubí and Clemencia Miró. The two women also met with Pablo Neruda who was working at the Chilean consulate in Madrid in the early 1930s. Despite being married to the poet Antonio Oliver Belmás, Conde seems to have developed ambivalent feelings towards Mistral: 'Decididamente tengo mala suerte: siempre quiero lo que no es para mí' (Conde in Sibbald 2010, 211). Nevertheless, their relationship remained platonic as social restrictions limited women's sexual freedom. In February 1934, Conde wrote to Mistral to inform her about her return to the city of Cartagena. While she appears to have benefited from the transnational exchanges that took place in the salons and the cafés of Madrid, she also expressed a feeling of sorrow and isolation upon her return to the province:

Los viajes a Madrid se nos han terminado. Sabe Dios cuándo volveremos y si volveremos a encontrarnos... (Para Ud. Que tantos mares ha cruzado, de la tierra y de los espíritus, (y que de tan enorme mar dispone dentro de sí) esto no tiene importancia. Para mí, que tengo un mundo tan pequeño relativamente, y en el cual Ud. es figura de máxima magnitud. Esto es muy sensible (Conde in Benavente 2013, 212).

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the two women never met in person again but they maintained correspondence during the time that Mistral was residing in Lisbon, Paris, Rome and Naples. Later on, in 1967, Conde dedicated a large part of her analysis to the work of her Chilean friend in her renowned anthology *Once grandes poetisas americanas hispanas*. These exchanges reveal an intellectual connection between Conde and Mistral, both of whom wished to extend their influence beyond borders by engaging in a transnational dialogue.

In addition to Mistral's impact on both Conde and Champourcín, it is possible to trace a number of dialogues and exchanges that have received little attention. The most cited female poets in the correspondence of the two Spanish women are: Dulce María Loynaz and Emilia Dermal from Cuba, María Monvel from Chile, Victoria Ocampo and Norah Borges from Argentina, María Enriqueta Camarillo from Mexico. There are also references to Berta Singerman, an Argentinian actress of Belarussian descent. All of these women positioned themselves in the cultural sphere as figures of modernity and some of them developed close ties with avant-garde poets, artists and émigré circles. During the time that they spent in Madrid, they had the opportunity to meet with Conde and Champourcín and participate in the literary activities of the *Lyceum Club Feminino*. The exchanges that occurred between them bring a new perspective to the literary life of the 1920s and 1930s, as women struggled to assert their identity and find their own voice within the nascent avant-garde movement. As seen in this essay, the influences that shaped women's poetry in Spain resulted from a mutual understanding

with their Latin American counterparts, which allowed them to overcome isolation and remain open to new ideas. By examining their transatlantic connections and their multifaceted contributions to the avant-garde movement, future studies will continue to shed light on the legacy of women who acted as cultural mediators and agents of change in and outside of Spain.

## Conclusion

The study of the correspondence between Carmen Conde and Ernestina de Champourcín has shown that they both engaged in a dialogue with Latin American female poets. The transnational connections that they established during the interwar period were beneficial to their personal development and had a positive impact on their writings. As seen in her letters, Champourcín played a vital mediating role across cultures by welcoming Latin American poets in Madrid and introducing them to the local audience. A closer look at her correspondence with Conde has revealed the importance of avant-garde magazines and literary salons in encouraging transnational communication and exchange. Based on existing efforts to counter ‘the subaltern situation of Latin Americans vis-à-vis the idea of the West’ (Rosenberg 2006, 2), the present study has shown that Latin American women poets travelled to Spain in the 1920s and 1930s, interacted with prominent literary figures, engaged in meaningful conversations and had a direct impact on their Spanish counterparts. By examining women’s literary activities, this study has attempted to expand, problematise, and redefine the avant-garde as a transnational movement that does not consider Latin America as an imitative periphery. By rethinking women’s position in the literary scene of the interwar period, future scholars can move beyond the centre vs. periphery discourse and discover the transnational dialogues that helped shape the avant-garde movement on both sides of the Atlantic.

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