Cristian Camilo Cuervo

Representations of Women in Female-authored Anglophone Uchronias: Female Agency in Alternative Worlds

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

ELCH
Studies in English Literary and Cultural History

ELK
Studien zur Englischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Band 91

Cristian Camilo Cuervo

Representations of Women in Female-authored Anglophone Uchronias

Female Agency in Alternative Worlds

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Cuervo, Cristian Camilo: Representations of Women
in Female-authored Anglophone Uchronias:
Female Agency in Alternative Worlds / Cristian Camilo Cuervo. -
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2025
(ELCH ; Band 91)
(Zugl.: Dissertation, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2025)
ISBN 978-3-98940-088-7

Printed and published with the support
of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

ISBN 978-3-98940-088-7

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503
Internet: www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de
www.facebook.com/wvttrier

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book originated as a doctoral thesis, presented under the same title at the University of Heidelberg in the summer of 2025. After completing a PhD, writing acknowledgments may seem like a simple task. However, the fear of overlooking someone or failing to express my gratitude adequately, as well as the very real risk of using too many clichés, may make this endeavour more difficult than anticipated. Still, my genuine desire to thank everyone who contributed to making this book possible is reason enough to overcome my fears and inspire me to write these pages.

First of all, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Vera Nünning, for her invaluable expertise, exceptional guidance, and unconditional support throughout this PhD. Her insightful recommendations, kindness, and constant encouragement have not only shaped this research but also facilitated many aspects of my daily life in Germany. I am also sincerely thankful to PD Dr. Margit Peterfy, my second examiner, for her thoughtful suggestions, which significantly enhanced the quality of this study.

Under Professor Nünning's mentorship, I had the privilege of joining her team in the English Department at Heidelberg University. There, I was not only able to contribute to the Chair of British Language and Culture, but I also met extraordinary people who enriched my experience with their insights, advice, and camaraderie. In that sense, my thanks go to Gesine Bowen for her assistance navigating countless bureaucratic procedures before I arrived in Germany; Claire Earnshaw, who warmly welcomed me during my first year in the team; Nina Gillé, whose kindness and professionalism made working at the seminar an even more enjoyable experience; and in particular Désirée Link, who was not only a diligent and helpful co-worker but, amid the winds and tides of these turbulent years in the world, became my first and best friend in Heidelberg.

In the same way, I want to extend my appreciation to Brigitte Brune, Corinna Assmann, Max Cannings, and Cara Vorbeck for their academic and professional assistance during this period of my life, and to my colleagues at Professor Nünning's Oberseminar for their stimulating discussions and valuable feedback, all of which positively influenced the development of my doctoral project. I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Astrid Wind, Coordinator of the Heidelberger Graduiertenschule für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften (HGGS), for her invaluable academic and personal guidance. Her optimistic and empowering attitude towards my ideas has been a constant source of motivation.

Despite the ocean that separates us, I am grateful to my friends in Colombia – Adriana, María Mercedes, and Patricia – for caring about my welfare and for

their encouragement throughout this learning journey. I am especially thankful to Patricia, or “Pato”, for offering a listening ear and her enthusiastic support during my doctoral studies, and whose friendship, in general, has been fundamental to me since we met nearly three decades ago. I also dedicate this work to Francisco, a truly ethical man, an exceptional leader, and a dear friend, who unfortunately could not see the completion of this project. Here in Germany, I would like to thank Simon for taking care of many day-to-day matters, enabling me to focus during those long sessions of reading and writing, as well as for providing me with daily doses of laughter and supporting me in many other ways.

I am also indebted to Professor Sara González Ramírez and Professor Nohra Vargas Buitrago in Bogotá, who believed in me throughout different stages of my academic, professional, and literary life. They have been inspiring mentors who, from the very beginning, wholeheartedly endorsed my decision to embark on this doctoral adventure.

Additionally, I want to express my gratitude to Professor Vera Nünning, Professor Ansgar Nünning, and Dr. Erwin Otto of the Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (WVT) for their role in publishing this study as part of the ELCH collection, as well as Markus Nussbaum, from the WVT team, for his dedication and patience during the editorial process. Finally, my sincere thanks to the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) for its generous financial support, which enabled me to pursue this research and present its results in the form of this book.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

> "Women have always made history as much as men have, not 'contributed' to it, only they did not know what they had made and had no tools to interpret their own experience. What's new at this time is that women are fully claiming their past and shaping the tools by means of which they can interpret it."
>
> Gerda Lerner (1979 [1981]: 166)

At first sight, it might seem strange to explore the representations of womanhoods in alternate histories[1]. If one is concerned about the discrimination against women, their lack of choices, and their alleged attributes, one might focus on historical fiction. If, on the other hand, one is more interested in the potential of women, especially in light of the roles denied to them in patriarchal societies, one might prefer to look at speculative fiction, at utopias or dystopias, usually in futuristic or fantastic settings. The benefit of studying uchronias is, in contrast, less easy to see. However, alternate histories offer a unique opportunity to combine the advantages of studying both historical and speculative fictions. They allow for an in-depth exploration of the past as it was, with all its limitations for the expression of womanhood, but also of historical scenarios that might have been different for women but never came to pass. Uchronias invite readers (and scholars) to compare the fictional past with our historiographical reality, to evaluate the divergences, and to look at the unexpressed potential, i.e., at how history might have turned out if certain events – small or big – had occurred differently.

Moreover, the fictional pasts of the novels analyzed here have a less than comfortable relationship with the present, both at the moment of their publication and at the time of writing this book. Some of the restrictive roles taken up by women in the uchronias, for instance, echo images of womanhood still found in some contexts today, and in many cases, it becomes clear that things have not improved in the way that the feminists of the 1960s had hoped for. Sometimes, on the contrary, the uchronic pasts of some of the novels seem to be more progressive than the actual present, for example, with a woman president of the United States as early as the 1950s in *Eleanor vs. Ike* (2008), or with same-sex marriage legalized in Britain in the 1980s, as described in one of the timelines of *My Real Children* (2014).

---

1 For the particular purposes of this research, the terms 'alternate history' and 'uchronia' are used as synonyms. For further explanation, see the section "The Genre: Uchronia or Alternate History?" in the "Theoretical Framework".

The potential of uchronic fiction for raising readers' awareness of both limiting and liberating constructions of femininity has long remained unrecognized. Like other genres of speculative fiction, uchronias have for a long time been a means of creative expression mainly for men, who were only rarely concerned with women's issues. Only in the last two decades has there been an upsurge in uchronias written by women, and not all of them explicitly dealing with the representations of womanhoods. As a consequence, and echoing Lerner's words, while women have been "fully claiming their past" as historians and as authors of historical novels since the 1970s, it is only recently that they are finally "shaping the tools by means of which they can interpret it", in this case, by understanding the potential – perhaps extraordinary – that only alternate histories seem to be able to offer.

Womanhood(s) in Uchronian Narratives

In 1966, Barbara Welter published the article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860", a critique of the dominant nineteenth-century value system that defined the ideal of American womanhood. There, Welter drew particular attention to what she called the "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (1966: 152). This set of 'virtues' responded to – and largely sought to conceal – an asymmetrical and pervasive framework of power relations based on women's submission to male authority, which included the suppression of female sexuality, the compliance with the roles of mother and wife, and the confinement to the private sphere. Other traditional definitions of womanhood, especially those based on religious grounds, simply equated it with the stage of female sexual maturity, i.e., as a state "solely or primarily defined by the ability to have and raise children" (Stasson 2021: 122). However, these assumptions of femininity never reflected the realities and true aspirations of women, but rather the social expectations and impositions upon them, grouped into unrealistic archetypes that were usually devised by men.

Although this so-called true or traditional womanhood may be categorised as a myth, it has been decisive and influential enough – like many other myths – to effectively shape realities, permeate different social dimensions (including the arts), and transcend time, in this case, well into the 21st century. As an example, the novels analysed in this book, all published between 2006 and 2015, largely deal with the enforcement of 'traditional womanhood' from several perspectives, including the stigmatization of female leadership, the demotion of women through indoctrination, the instrumentalization of women's bodies, or the various manifestations of the private/public dichotomy. At the same time, however, these narratives are also concerned with aspects that transgress the myth of true woman-