

Eighty Years After the Nobel Prize: Gabriela Mistral and the Education of the Downtrodden of Latin America¹

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Gabriela Mistral: Some Biographical Notes

Gabriela Mistral was a teacher, writer, diplomat, and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945. She was the first Latin American person to receive this recognition and remains, to this day, the only woman from the region to have done so. Gabriela Mistral is the pseudonym of Lucila de María del Perpetuo Socorro Godoy Alcayaga. She chose it after several attempts to “name herself” as a writer, and began using it after winning the literary contest Juegos Florales in Chile in 1914.

Lucila was born in Vicuña (northern Chile) on April 7, 1889. She grew up surrounded by women—her grandmother, mother, and sister—all of whom had a strong influence on her life and education. Her father was present only through imagination, as he abandoned the family when Lucila was three years old. Her relationship with nature was very important during her childhood. It allowed her to develop sensitivities and ways of knowing linked to ancestral and rural knowledge, which resisted traditional and Western forms of teaching, while at the same time significantly nourishing her self-education. The joy and appreciation she expressed in her narratives about her non-formal and informal education contrast with the narratives of exclusion that were common in Mistral’s reflections on her school experience, her professional training, and her relationship with Chile’s circles of power.

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This is highly significant because the “Nobel Prize Mistral” was formed mainly outside of school, particularly through non-formal and informal education experiences—something that, in many ways, challenges conventional conceptions of education. From a young age, Mistral began writing in regional newspapers about topics considered “unusual” for a woman—provincial and poor—especially in a society and an era marked by socioeconomic and gender exclusions, among others (Manzano, 2008; Pizarro, 2008). According to the author herself, those exclusions made it difficult for her to apply to the Escuela Normal (Teacher Training School) in Chile. Thus, through a distant and complex relationship with formal education, Mistral developed her own strategies to continue learning in alternative ways—for example, by studying alongside her sister, who was a teacher.

In 1922, invited by the Mexican government, Mistral left Chile and became what she called an “autoexile,” a term she used to emphasize the voluntary nature of her departure from her homeland. In Mexico, she lived transformative experiences and became a “citizen of the world.” After her time in Mexico, Mistral lived in various countries, circulating her writing widely—and she never again lived in Chile. Mistral received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945, while serving as Chile’s consul in Brazil. From that moment on, her prestige as a writer grew and manifested, for example, in the efforts of intellectuals and artists to defend her right to the Chilean National Literature Prize, which she received six years after the Nobel. She died in 1957, in New York—as she said in one of her poems—in “una muerte callada y extranjera” (Mistral, 2010, p. 283).

Gabriela Mistral and the Education of the “Downtrodden” of Latin America

Gabriela Mistral coined the term “*abajados*” (the “downtrodden”) to represent the majority of people in Latin America who were, paradoxically, a political minority—those diminished by those in power. As Magda Sepúlveda notes, “la invención de la palabra es notable, solo “*abajada*” nos da esa idea de aquello que es reducido en un intento por hacerlos funcionar solo como “cosa” pequeña, como “nonada”, otra palabra mistraliana, relativa al ninguneo social chileno” (Sepúlveda, 2011, p. 90).

Mistral did not see this category as a generalization; she recognized within it women, children, Indigenous peoples, peasants, workers, and those living in conditions of confinement or deprivation of liberty,

among others. It is also significant that her concern for the “*abajados*” and their education was expressed through the visibility she gave this topic in her writings, through the circulation of her texts in Latin American newspapers containing information she deemed useful for the educational development of these groups, through the valuing of their knowledge, and through the construction of more democratic pedagogical practices. All of this was accompanied by an identity-based reflection that left autobiographical traces in her writing.

A distinctive aspect I recognize in Mistral is that she not only constructed discourses about the education of the “*abajados*,” but also developed practices that, in contemporary terms, we might consider inclusive. I see in her a critical and transgressive attitude toward gender, ethnic, and class models, which often led her to be considered “inappropriate,” as she included, made visible, and gave space to what was usually left unspoken — the stories of the excluded, of those “*abajados*,” as she called them. For Magda Sepúlveda, education — in Mistral’s poetry, and I would say, in her writing as a whole —

no es un traje, algo que se impone a “otro”, sino una experiencia que reside en prácticas a veces no consideradas por la hegemonía. Son visibles, en sus textos, conocimientos que se diluyen en la modernidad, los nombres populares de diversas plantas, la reparación de redes de las pescadoras o el tejido a telar de las andinas. (Sepúlveda, 2018, p. 33).

Women, Writing, Reading and Latin American Authors

Regarding women’s education, Mistral published in 1906 — when she was about to turn 17 — a text considered pioneering in this field. It was titled “*La instrucción de la mujer*” (“Women’s Education”). In it, she wrote:

Se ha dicho que la mujer no necesita sino una mediana instrucción, y es que aún hay quienes ven en ella al ser capaz sólo de gobernar el hogar.

La instrucción suya, es una obra magna que lleva en sí la reforma completa de todo un sexo.

(...) Instruir a la mujer es hacerla digna y levantarla. Abrirle un campo más vasto de porvenir, es arrancar a la degradación muchas de sus víctimas. (Mistral, 2017a, p. 142).

Throughout her career as a writer and teacher, Mistral was deeply concerned with women's education. She worked as a teacher and principal in girls' high schools (*liceos*) in Chile, published "*Lecturas para mujeres*" (*Readings for Women*) in Mexico in 1923 at the request of the country's Ministry of Public Education, and carried out several initiatives aimed at democratizing women's access to education, among other efforts. Speaking of her experience in Mexico and the *Lecturas para mujeres* project, Mistral said: "Ha sido para la pequeña maestra chilena una honra servir por algún tiempo a un gobierno extranjero que se ha hecho respetable en el Continente por una labor constructiva de educación tan enorme" (Mistral, 1979a, p. 111).

Following Carla Ulloa's *Expansión*, this book "se planeó como un libro temático al cual acudir en caso de necesitar reflexiones, miradas amplias o palabras sabias sobre aspectos centrales para las estudiantes" (Ulloa, 2022, p. 192). Comprising 227 texts (23 written by Mistral), it included expansion by 54 Latin Americans, 18 Mexicans, two U.S. authors, one Asian expansion, six ancient/*Expansión* texts, and 38 Europeans – a total of 101 authors (Ulloa, 2022, p. 192). I highlight Mistral's *Expansión* of Latin American authors because it made visible an expansion not always considered in such compilations at the time. Likewise, her expressed wish that this book accompany the teachers and girls of the school that would bear her name can be interpreted as an invitation to a *Expansion experience* – for example, through the expansion of the literary canon.

Another experience worth noting is that, during her tenure as principal of the *Liceo de Niñas de Punta Arenas* (1918–1920), in southern Chile, Mistral proposed the creation of a library with two sections: one for children and another for the general public. The first would serve the students of the school itself, and the second would serve working women who attended evening courses at the *Sociedad de Instrucción Popular* (Society for Popular Education), with the hope that, as the collection grew, it could also open its doors to students from public schools and to the wider community (Mistral cited in Scarpa, 1978, pp. 141–142).

Childhoods, Teachers and "Recovered Voices"

Childhood and education are deeply present in Mistral's work. She made visible the diversity of childhoods, their complexities, and their experiences. An example of this is the text "*El obrerito*" (1924), in which Mistral defines the lyrical speaker as a child.

Following Norma Ramos, we can highlight how, in her attention to childhoods, Mistral was concerned with the spaces where children should be educated, emphasizing in her prose writings the importance of raising them in harmony with nature (Ramos, 2014, p. 200). According to Ramos, this image created by Mistral contrasts greatly with utilitarian representations that linked children to agricultural labor or to the rationalization of the environment in the name of progress: “Esta relación fundamental, naturaleza-niñez, que plasmó la pluma de Mistral, sintetiza un perfil más del niño campesino equiparándolo con los dones de la naturaleza como la pureza y la vitalidad” (Ramos, 2014, p. 201).

Mistral’s concern for rural and peasant childhoods is evident in her text *“How an Agricultural School Was Created in Mexico,”* published in 1922, where she recounts her experiences visiting the Francisco I. Madero Agricultural School. Reflecting on this experience, Mistral asked: “¿Qué serán estos niños en diez años más? ¿Qué los diferenciará de los otros, formados en las escuelas primarias?” (Mistral, 2017b, p. 265).

She then answers:

Serán eso que es para mí lo más grande en medio de las actividades humanas: hombres de la tierra, sensatos, sobrios y serenos, por el contacto con aquella que es la perenne verdad. Harán una democracia menos convulsionada y menos discursadora que la que nos ha nacido en la América Latina, porque, hay que decir mil veces este lugar común: la pequeña propiedad (que ellos exigirán y que conseguirán en México) aplaca las rebeldías, la dignidad a la vida humana y hace el corazón del hombre propicio a las suavidades del espíritu. (Mistral, 2017b, p. 265).

According to Martha Leñero, in this text Mistral speaks of “*recovered voices*.” The scholar notes that Mistral,

además de contar cómo llega ahí, de preguntarse por qué la llevan a ver una de las escuelas más pobres y, luego, de ‘maravillarse’ por lo que ve cuando descubre a los alumnos sembrando parcelas, llama la atención la centralidad que otorga en su texto a la voz del maestro. (Leñero, 2023, p. 117).

Leñero adds that Mistral intersperses the narration of teacher Arturo Oropeza with brief “comments” of her own and, at other times,

cede por completo el lugar de enunciación al maestro, el enorme parecido que este modo de escritura guarda con lo que ahora conocemos como investigación etnográfica en educación, en la que leemos, literal y textualmente, a las y los protagonistas y actores de nuestros trabajos de investigación. Es así como Gabriela inserta un estilo que se convertirá en uno de los requisitos de nuestra forma de investigar en, desde y para la escuela. Pionera, entonces, en múltiples sentidos. (Leñero, 2023, p. 118).

‘ Make My Brick School a School of the Spirit’: Frontiers, Conversation and “Guests”

During her time as principal of the *Liceo de Niñas de Punta Arenas*, Mistral developed a series of initiatives that, in her words, sought the well-being of her students and of the local community in general. Her initiatives included, for example, the creation of libraries, the proposal to establish winter vacations, and the celebration of Christmas.

I highlight Mistral’s recognition of the “apostolic” role of the teachers who worked alongside her. On this, she wrote:

Mis compañeras iban a enseñar al más curiosos alumnado que yo recuerde. Menos defendida del hielo que el hiperbóreo europeo, aquella buena gente- mujeres y hasta niñas-llegaban sacudiéndose la nieve al umbral y entraba a la sala con el hálito hecho vaho, dándonos el rostro rojo y duro que hace el frío parecida al pellejo del pececillo rojo. (Mistral, 1978, p. 370)

In “that land of long night,” as Mistral called it, a solidarity among women began to take shape, leading them to unite in pursuit of greater educational opportunities. Mistral, for example, developed *tactics* (De Certeau, 1994) that made possible new pedagogical forms — one example being the inclusion of “conversation.” As she described:

Después de la hora del Silabario, yo daba otra de “conversación”. Incrédula como hoy de la “pedagogía pura”, receta de maestros entecos, yo me pondría a hablarles de su propia vida, de las contingencias que se trae el vivir entre elementos hostiles -hielo y puelche-, y de la obligación de ver la *unidad*, “contra viento y marea”, a pesar del tajo del mar

enfurruñado y el desparramo loco de islas. (Mistral, 1978, p. 370; emphasis mine)

These “conversation hours,” where Mistral recovered lived experience, its contingencies, and the duty to “see unity,” are both interesting and transgressive, as they represent efforts to build more intimate and human-centered pedagogical forms. I also highlight her recovery of the concept of *experience* and its transmission, which relates to the idea of narration in the *Benjaminian* sense (Benjamin, 1994).

In Mistralian narratives appeared the counsel, the warning, the congratulations—elements so present in the author’s “messenger” narratives. This choice of conversation reveals Mistral’s appreciation for orality, a characteristic element of her narratives, in which, by incorporating sensitivity, she established a distance from traditional pedagogy, from that “pure pedagogy” she distrusted. With this type of pedagogy, removed from absolute rationality, the author reclaimed her rural tradition and approached other audiences—those who had been historically “brought down.”

Gabriela Mistral’s critiques of traditional pedagogy also included a call to teachers to be active and to attentively and permanently safeguard pedagogical truths. As she herself said:

Las viejas verdades pedagógicas son como las del Evangelio: todos las conocemos, pero deben ser agitadas de cuando en cuando, para que exalten los ánimos como el flamear de las banderas y para renovar su generoso hervor dentro de nosotros. Verdades conocidas pero aletargadas, son verdades muertas, fardo inerte. Los maestros hemos de ser en los pueblos los renovadores del fervor, respecto de ellas.

No tenemos derecho, a pesar de las indiferencias que conocemos y de las incomprensiones que nos han herido, a dejar verdades que se enmohezcan en los demás. Somos los que hacemos su guardia a través de los tiempos. (Mistral, 2015, p. 43).

I consider it significant to highlight that the author referred to willpower as an important element in people. As she said, if one did not possess eloquence, one possessed will—“ese oro de los pobres, con el cual puede hacerse tanto en el mundo” (Mistral, 2015, p. 44). These conceptions are

what grounded and inspired the creation of “night courses” at the lyceum, oriented toward women who had interrupted their schooling, being, in the author’s own words, the first initiative of its kind in the provinces (Mistral, 2015, p. 44).

This idea of opening the doors of the lyceum to women and to the community in general is understood through the concept of school that the author develops, as she conceives it as a space of “negation of castes” Mistral said:

La asistencia común a una escuela como la asistencia común a un templo de gentes de distinta condición no degrada a nadie, porque la escuela es la negación de las castas si es cristiana de verdad y si educa mujeres de una república de verdad también. (Mistral, 2015, p. 46).

Recalling her work in Punta Arenas, Mistral narrated in detail the occasion when two political prisoners came to visit her in her night course. She said:

(...) una noche vi llegar gente extraña a la sala y sentarse hacia el fondo, familiarmente. Daba yo una charla de Geografía regional; me había volteado los sesos delante de aquella zona de tragedia terráquea, hecha de desplazamiento y de resistencias, infierno de golfos y cabos y sartal de archipiélagos.

Al salir, el grupo forastero se allegó a saludarme. Dos reos políticos del Presidio de Ushuaia habían sabido de ese curso nocturno y tan informal, quisieron ir a verme, y se les sumaron unos chilenos inéditos para mis ojos. (Mistral, 1978, p. 370).

Those contacts with the “brought down,” those people in situations of exclusion – women, political prisoners, and Chileans “unknown to her eyes” – both captivated and challenged Mistral to experiment with new forms of pedagogy closer to the contexts of those who attended her classes. She said:

La masa de un pueblo necesita capacitar, en breve tiempo, a sus hombres y a sus mujeres para la lucha por la vida. Hemos tenido la monstruosidad de enseñar durante 50 años los mismos programas con sólo variantes pequeñas. Durante este

período de tiempo, enorme en relación con los progresos febriles de la época, se han dictado leyes que han cambiado la faz espiritual de la nación; han nacido nuevas ciudades y se han transformado las antiguas, y la enseñanza, que debe iniciar las renovaciones, se ha quedado tras de todas ellas. No es que hayan faltado grandes maestros, ni que la instrucción haya sido insuficiente; nuestros educadores son gloria americana y la instrucción dada ha sido tal vez excesiva; fue el rumbo el erróneo; no ha mirado nuestra educación a las realidades de su tiempo, ha pecado de libresca. (Mistral, 2015, p. 48-49).

Mistral understood pedagogy as welcoming and accompaniment. Proof of this is that she referred to those who attended her “conversations” as guests. Of them, she said:

Mis huéspedes volverían solos después, y traerían a otros más, calculando siempre la salida de las alumnas nocturnas, para hablar a su gusto, mudos que soltaban la lengua perdiendo el miedo y que regresaban para no cortar el relato, por “contar muchísimo más”. (Mistral, 1978, p. 371. Sic).

The image: “ bringing culture to the last stronghold of a mountain range and even to prisons.”

I take up that phrase from Mistral in this title to recognize that one of her concerns regarding the education of excluded subjects was the creation of methodologies; thus, she used conversation and also reflected on the use of the image in education. She considered the image “as a kind of super-word, which avoids all error and convinces much more than the mere written or spoken word” (Mistral, 1979b, p. 204) and highlighted the possibilities its use would offer in rural, remote, or confined contexts, saying:

Es increíble la ignorancia en que viven los pueblos rurales respecto de nuestra época. Aunque llegue a ellos el cine, lo que de él alcanza a las aldeas y hasta a las ciudades pequeñas es un material calamitoso o tonto de amorfos o de crímenes, cuando no son unas necias historias seudocómicas que sólo hacen reír a los niños de las galerías. Ninguna época tuvo como la nuestra ocasión tan preciosa y ancha para educar a las masas haciendo llegar la cultura hasta el último reducto de

una cordillera y hasta las cárceles, donde no se da a centenares de presos la ocasión de aprender un oficio, ni de leer un libro sano, ni de ver una película que les muestre las maravillas que logra el trabajo de los hombres normales y las otras mayores que alcanzan los sabios de nuestra época. (Mistral, 1979b, p. 202).

To speak on this matter, she recalled her experience in Mexico with the “open-air schools” and narrated:

Había una mesita, una radio y un maestro rural de tipo apostólico, que renunciando a su descanso nocturno doblaba las clases diurnas con las nocturnas y esto con paga o sin ella. Yo llamaba esto la “escuela sin horas y sin techos”. Guardo el recuerdo de esas y de otras invenciones geniales del gran reformador José Vasconcelos, quien alfabetizó con la ayuda de los maestros misioneros, del cine y de la radio a millares de campesinos. (Mistral, 1979b, p. 199)

Eighty Years after the Nobel Prize: Some Reflections

I conclude my work with the photograph of the courtyard of an elementary school in Santiago, Chile, during the celebration of the first Gabriela Mistral Day, on April 7, 2025—an official commemoration instituted by Gabriel Boric, President of Chile.



Source: photography by Nancy Vásquez Pacheco.

This photograph allows me to recognize schools and their communities as creative and resistant spaces and subjects, who find in Gabriela Mistral a reference point in times when, as a country, we are deconstructing the dictatorial legacy of Augusto Pinochet.

Analyzing the processes of exclusion and inclusion in the history of education allows us to recover Mistral's experiences as an author who self-identified as "brought down" and who, in her writings, reclaimed the "brought down" subjects of Latin America, coherently including them in her narratives and pedagogical practices. Recovering Mistral's experiences and teachings allows us to reflect on the meanings of our own work.

Finally, I hope that the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of Gabriela Mistral's Nobel Prize will allow us to build spaces for reflection and study of the author. I also hope that we learn to listen to Mistral's *recados* (messages) in order to recognize who the "brought down" are today, and that, inspired by her and her work, we may defend education as a space for the negation of castes.

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Eighty years after the Nobel Prize. Gabriela Mistral and the Education of the downtrodden in Latin America

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Abstract. This text aims to analyze the writing of Gabriela Mistral in order to recognize the presence of those she considered the "downtrodden" of Latin America, and to examine how she made visible and problematized the education of these subjects, including them in her discourses and practices, and committing herself to them from an autobiographical perspective. In light of this revisionist moment, the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of her Nobel Prize becomes an important occasion to discuss the traditional readings of the author and her work—readings mainly constructed during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile—which rendered invisible her work as a teacher and intellectual concerned with those excluded from Latin American modernities.

Keywords: Gabriela Mistral, education, “abajados”, excluded, Latin America

Quatre-vingts ans après le prix Nobel. Gabriela Mistral et l'éducation des opprimés

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Résumé. Ce texte vise à analyser l'œuvre de Gabriela Mistral afin de reconnaître la présence de ceux qu'elle considérait comme les « opprimés » de l'Amérique latine, et d'examiner comment elle a rendu visible et problématisé l'éducation de ces sujets, en les incluant dans ses discours et ses pratiques, et en s'engageant envers eux dans une perspective autobiographique. À la lumière de ce moment révisionniste, la commémoration du 80e anniversaire de son prix Nobel devient une occasion importante pour discuter des lectures traditionnelles de l'auteure et de son œuvre – lectures principalement construites pendant la dictature d'Augusto Pinochet au Chili – qui ont rendu invisible son travail en tant qu'enseignante et intellectuelle préoccupée par les exclus des modernités latino-américaines.

Mots clés: Gabriela Mistral, éducation, « abajados », exclus, Amérique latine.

Ochenta años despues del Premio Nobel. Gabriela Mistral y l'educación de los oprimidos en America Latina.

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Resumen. El presente texto tiene como objetivo analizar la escritura de Gabriela Mistral para reconocer la presencia de quienes ella consideraba “abajados” de América Latina y como fue visibilizando y problematizando la educación de estos sujetos, incluyéndolos en sus discursos y prácticas, y comprometiéndose con ellos a partir de una mirada autobiográfica. A la luz de este momento revisionista, la conmemoración de los 80 años de su Premio Nobel, cobra importancia

discutir las lecturas tradicionales sobre la autora y su obra, construidas principalmente por la dictadura de Augusto Pinochet en Chile, que invisibilizaron su trabajo como profesora e intelectual preocupada con los sujetos excluidos de las modernidades latinoamericanas.

Palabras clave: Gabriela Mistral, educación, “abajados”, excluidos, América Latina.