



Josefina Niggli
Mexican American Writer

A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

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*for my adored nephew, Bill Coonrod
and for Bill Fisher, a partner on the Niggli trail*



Contents

Acknowledgments		ix
Chapter One: Introduction and Early Life, 1910–1935		1
Selections: “The Goat-Herder’s Song”		24
“The Hills of Mexico”		25
“A Tourist in a Mexican Town”		26
“Monterrey”		27
Chapter Two: Playmaking in North Carolina, 1935–1942		28
Selections: <i>The Cry of Dolores</i> (1935)		70
<i>Singing Valley, A Comedy of Mexican Village Life</i> (1937)		86
<i>The Ring of General Macías</i> (1938)		92
Fragment from Earlier Draft of <i>The Ring of General Macías</i>		110
Chapter Three: Books and Novels and Hollywood, 1942–1953		115
Selections: “Dream I” (1944)		167
“Dream II” (1944)		170
“Salt in the Air” (1947)		171
“A Visitor for Domínguez” (1947)		178
Chapter 7 from <i>Step Down, Elder Brother</i> (1947)		185
“Legend of the Rabbit in the Moon,”		
from <i>Step Down, Elder Brother</i>		194
“Chant to the Four World Quarters” (n.d.)		197
Fragment from Niggli’s screenplay		
for <i>Sombrero</i> (1953)		200

Illustrations		205
Chapter Four: A Final Novel and Teaching, 1953–1983		217
Selections: Excerpts from unpublished novel		
<i>Beat the Drum Slowly</i> , ca. 1950s or 1960s		257
“Sunday: 11:00 a.m.,” a chapter from		
<i>A Miracle for Mexico</i> (1964)		263
Chapter Five: Conclusions: Niggli’s Legacy and Resurgence		278
Notes		291
Niggli’s Works		298
Bibliography		303
Index		311

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Introduction and Early Life

1910–1935

When I was a young kid, starting out as a writer, I had a shining goal. I was going to present Mexico and the Mexicans as they had never before been presented. Well, I did. I made the big time. I even made M.G.M. and Book of the Month. You see, I reached my goal and passed it.

—Josefina Niggli

In the early twentieth century, women artists and intellectuals who wished to create and publish had to swim against the stream. Many young women continued traditionally defined roles, while the more daring intrepidly followed their dreams and embarked on careers, carving a new path for women. They attended college and traveled alone, weaving their way between the fine-line distinctions of scandalous and respectable. The risks they took inspired future generations and rendered such notable figures and trailblazers as photographer Margaret Bourke-White, novelist Pearl Buck, and singer Josephine Baker.

Like them, Josefina María Niggli rose to acclaim in an era when women were neither encouraged to pursue careers nor greatly distinguished. But Niggli is an exception; she was saluted as a world-class playwright in the 1930s, and as a best-selling novelist in the 1940s. And yet, by the late twentieth century, she had been mostly forgotten. Like other great women trailblazers, Niggli was an independent woman ahead of her time. Her passion and life's work was to reveal Mexico, to create understanding of its culture through her stories. Niggli felt that *Mexican* history and its people were greatly misunderstood and even dismissed by Americans. Therefore, she decided to create her stories and plays in English, to inform and educate the U.S. public. Her primary artistic goal was to create a good *story*, with interesting and complex characters. But when publishers told her it had to include an American (U.S.) hero, with Mexicans only as villains, Niggli would not relent. "They would say, 'You don't really think anyone will read this, do you?' [she stated in 1980], but I said, if it's a really good story, I couldn't see why people wouldn't read that. I figured that if I sat down and kept writing until people were aware that there was this beautiful world south of the border, people would see there was something in the world besides their own [experience]. And, it happened. I think that it was when I started doing my thing that the door opened for [what is now called] Chicano literature" (Shirley 1980).

With the exception of a few short-story writers whose work did not see major release, Niggli is the only writer of the 1930s and 1940s who revealed Mexican life and culture from an insider's point of view, in English, and of high creative quality. She exposed the roots of Mexican culture, its myths and lore, and the lives of the *campesinos* or peasants. She also documented, for the first time in creative works in English, the changes brought on by the Mexican Revolution, from feminist ideals to the *mestizo*'s (person of mixed blood) rise in Mexican society.

From the child with a keen eye for observation in her native Monterrey, to the teenager transplanted to San Antonio, Texas, who was asked to write a play for her church theater, to the award-winning playwright and novelist, Hollywood screenwriter, theater director, and professor, Niggli relentlessly pursued her life's passion. In the process she lived a remarkable life and left behind a literary and cultural treasure, one of few women achieving this during the first half of the twentieth century.

Unlike the aforementioned women artists, Niggli grew up in a country remaking itself following the volatile political struggles of the Mexican Revolution. Her childhood experience was not that of Mexico City, which lured artists and intellectuals by the 1920s, but instead that of the Monterrey valley in northern Mexico, a land of weather extremes and breathtaking natural wonders, a land settled by immigrants whose descendants remain fiercely independent. Even before Texas launched its bid for independence from the relatively new country of Mexico in the early nineteenth century, the region to its south—now the states of Coahuila and Nuevo León—had already made moves in that direction. Once Mexico finally—after three centuries of colonial rule—obtained freedom in 1821 from Spain, the “Spanish” regions far from its capital did not feel protected by centralist politics conducted several weeks’ journey away in Mexico City. Like those in other far-reaching corners of the former colony, they often made decisions on their own. Nuevo León’s capital of Monterrey had more in common with the cities of Saltillo to the east and San Antonio (Texas) to the north, which together formed a triangle of trade and commerce during the late nineteenth century. With the ushering in of a new century, the Mexican Revolution was launched from northern states, and Monterrey became a hub of development and enterprise following this significant civil war. Niggli grew up in this environment.

She is of the Mexican literary generation of Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, Nellie Campobello, and Alfonso Reyes (he was born in Monterrey like her), but Niggli completed her formal education in the United States and embarked on a writing career in English. In terms of her literary track record, Niggli has much in common with Laura Esquivel (two generations later), whose bestseller *Malinche: A Novel* was well acclaimed, translated into several languages, and made into a film that attracted much attention. Second novels in each case were totally different from the first, with a complicated content that was not readily understood, and third novels for each received even less attention, despite the fact Niggli’s was on the iconic figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The depiction of female cultural icons is another aspect connecting Niggli and Esquivel in terms of their later work. Esquivel’s most recent novel is on the infamous Mexican Malinche figure.¹ The region of Niggli’s upbringing, Northern Mexico, is connected to the

rise of Mexican American or Chicano literature in the United States. Several members of the early political movement, originating from the states of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Coahuila, cited their indigenous Yaqui or Tarahumara background in their writings. Due to their great distance from the colonial seat in Mexico City, Northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest were for centuries a connected entity. In fact, they are still connected in music: *Tejano* music in Texas, and Mexican *norteño* rhythms are related. In the literary world, however, little connection has been drawn between the characteristics of northern Mexico life and that of the U.S. Southwest.

Raymund Paredes first brought attention to Niggli's works in 1972, in an anthology published with Américo Paredes titled *Mexican-American Authors*, which included one of Niggli's plays and three chapters from her first novel. He discussed her work in a significant first essay on "The Evolution of Chicano Literature," published in the journal for the study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S. (MELUS) in 1978. He referenced Niggli again in 1980, in an article on the surfacing of a Mexican American literature, published in the *Los Angeles Times*. That same year, a book that was a first in highlighting the ethnic perspective in creative works by women, *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, included Niggli in its section on Chicano writers. Niggli was interviewed that year for an extensive biographical essay published in 1981 in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook* (authored by Paula Shirley). Critical studies since then have not been as extensive; however, contemporary Latino critics consider Niggli a landmark writer of the early twentieth century for evoking the sense of a hyphenated existence. In 1985 (two years after her death) she was lauded for her depiction of women's roles by two women scholars assessing Niggli's intrepid and successful efforts to reveal Mexican culture, as a native who innately understood Mexican life and philosophy. In 1987 Gloria Anzaldúa describes her writing as that of a consciousness caught between borders. In 1995, Tey Diana Rebolledo cites Niggli's frequent themes of alienation, "of being an outsider in Mexican as well as American culture. . . . Many of her characters are of mixed heritage, and struggle with issues that arise from this heritage, [of] being a Mestizo in racially conscious societies" (25). Rebolledo cites from Gloria Treviño's study (1985 dissertation) on three early twentieth-century Chicana or Mexican American

women writers who created “a literary tradition in English [while] also consciously pursuing the creation of a ‘female space’ that ‘articulated the concerns particular to the minority woman’” (24).

Niggli’s 1936 play *Soldadera*—which features a sweet-natured, illiterate Adelita, who becomes a valiant soldier by her act of courage and sacrifice—has received the greatest critical attention. Here Niggli defines class struggle (an issue that would permeate her works) as not only the main conflict of the Mexican Revolution but also an internal struggle over gender differences, which accounts for its interest among scholars. Alicia Arrizón (1998) states that “Niggli uses the drama to explore women’s heroic role in the revolution and to illustrate the personal and ideological motivations that made them active protagonists” (44). While Adelita becomes a martyr in Niggli’s play, other female characters also represent the Mexican woman as strong and heroic, similar to the roles María Félix would portray on the big screen. Niggli is the first writer to bring the “Adelita” image—a symbol of struggle and freedom for the U.S. Chicana—to English-language literature. Whereas in Mexico “Adelita,” along with Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, symbolizes the revolutionary cause, in the United States it signifies a woman’s challenge to patriarchal rules against her, and the espousing of a cause promulgating her rights and status. It was not until many years after Niggli’s publications that a Mexican woman would be represented as a thinking, acting being. The fact that Niggli was a woman is significant for American as well as Mexican letters, for few women of her era attained access to the publishing world or were able to earn a living from literary publications.

Since the 1980s, Chicana writers—who now obtain publishing contracts in great numbers—portray the origins of Mexican culture in the lives of their characters, including themes of a life lived crossing borders, both literally and figuratively. For example, in *Canícula, Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1997), Texas writer Norma Elia Cantú depicts a female’s coming-of-age experience on the Laredo, Texas, border, with occasional trips to see family in Monterrey. And Sandra Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo* (2002), as well as some of her earlier stories, also portray the back-and-forth experience of many Chicanos.

Josefina Niggli blazed the trail for creative works in English with a Mexican topic. Her work is noteworthy for its innovation and lyrical

style, for its revelation of Mexican philosophy and essence in an era that predates Chicano awareness in the United States, and for its superb content—village life, indigenous lore, northern Mexico climate and customs, and mestizo political consciousness. She received major awards and the attention of the New York literary scene and of Hollywood, as well as international fame. She lived in the United States most of her adult life, but her creative spirit never left Monterrey, where her life began.

Monterrey

The heart of the northeastern region of Mexico is the city of Monterrey, created in a valley mostly surrounded by mountains, where settlers discovered a natural fountain, and the flood plain of the eastward-flowing Río Santa Catarina (so named by the Spaniards in 1579). The first Spanish settlers were nearly finished off by floods and original peoples (a mix of Otomíes and Tlaxcaltecs, the latter transported to the area by Hernán Cortés as part of his army in pursuit of gold). The valley was resettled by a contingent of Sephardic-Jewish Spaniards seeking a remote location to practice their faith, and by the late seventeenth century, a stronger settlement emerged, connected to the launching of mining work in the region. The building of the city's cathedral began in 1770, and in 1782 construction commenced for the now significant landmark el Palacio del Obispado, or Bishop's Palace, on a hill overlooking Monterrey. During the nineteenth century, it is rumored that a French contingent became lost in this northern region during Maximilian's short reign, and that this accounts for the blue eyes and blonde hair often found on *regiomontanos*, as people from Nuevo León are called. The French did invade and reside in Monterrey during the mid-1860s, but previously, U.S. soldiers under Zachary Taylor occupied the city for a short period in 1846. By the second half of the nineteenth century, many immigrants from Europe settled in this valley.

Industrialization began in the late eighteenth century with the founding of two landmark businesses: a brewery, Cervecería Cuauhtémoc, and a foundry, Fundidora de Fierro y Acero de Monterrey. Since many of the revolutionary leaders were from northern states, this industrial hub was strategic at the inception of the Mexican Revolution. In 1914, rebel troops led by Pancho Villa overthrew federal forces and occupied

the Bishop's Palace. The Mexican Revolution culminated in victory for the mestizos (those of mixed ethnic-racial heritage, with an emphasis on the Indian culture), ushering in a new era for Mexican society. Until then, the nation had been run by a minority of upper-class white Mexicans and foreigners who owned massive tracts of land, while mestizos and Indians were denied resources and the right to education. The government formed under a new constitution in 1917 exposed the need to review stark differences in class and cultural origin, emphasizing rights for all citizens, including education and landownership—privileges that had not been permitted since Spain's conquest of the Americas four centuries earlier. Such radical change provided rich opportunities for artists, writers, and photographers to document a changing era. Under the new government, Monterrey's social environment would change and its economy would surge; this is related well by Niggli in her second novel *Step Down, Elder Brother*, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

Niggli was born in Monterrey on July 13, 1910—the same year dictator Porfirio Díaz was ousted and the Mexican Revolution was launched. Her family—like many others in this region—greeted the new change, but later fled to Texas when violence erupted between the victors. The first president of the new order, Francisco I. Madero, was assassinated in 1913, and other leaders within a decade. Not unlike other families, the Niggli led a somewhat nomadic life for several years, moving back and forth across the border, giving up their residences to seek safety. Josefina was primarily home-schooled, although she attended third grade for six months in the town of Eagle Pass, Texas (on the border across from Piedras Negras and 75 miles west of Laredo). During the 1917–18 year, her mother required hospitalization, and while she was in recovery in Eagle Pass, Josefina was boarded at Bonn Avon School in San Antonio. At some point, she also attended an American school in Mexico City for a few months.

Her father helped found a new plant in the town of San Nicolás de Hidalgo (founded in 1828 as Villa de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, but often shortened to simply “Hidalgo”). The small town is among a cluster of five villages in a valley just west of Monterrey, flanked by high-peaked mountains that cradle a beautiful canyon called El Potrero Chico. Early biographical accounts state that Josefina grew up on a *hacienda* (likely a country home) in Hidalgo. This country home, identified on a website

as *Casa de la gerencia* (the manager's home), was built by Frederick Ferdinand for his new bride. This town has established monuments to the men who worked at the beginning of the cement industry founded here, as well as to two Mexican heroes, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and President Lázaro Cárdenas. Josefina enjoyed growing up here, but the political instability and intermittent violence of the war years forced the need for safety and departure from the area. She and her mother left to establish a new home in Texas when she was fifteen. Josefina would return regularly for visits once she was an adult.

In a desire to separate the powers of church and state, decrees under the new government led to the outlawing of priests and religious ceremonies, which was too radical a move and led to the Cristero War.² In addition, the revolutionary leader from the north, Pancho Villa, had been assassinated in 1923 (and Emiliano Zapata in 1919).

In San Antonio, Josefina completed high school and embarked on advanced studies. Her father continued working in Mexico (all sources show him continuing to work there until near the time of his death). It is apparent they kept two homes into the 1940s; Josefina regularly made visits to Monterrey and Mexico City, visiting family, godparents, and other friends. From 1925 her primary residence would be in the United States, but Mexican culture and a strong sense of its roots would influence and imbue her work. Josefina celebrated her fifteenth birthday—the traditional *quinceañera*—at her original home, a fact mentioned in her 1980 interview (Shirley). Such coming-out parties included a gala affair with prominent members of society invited. Niggli stated that the governor of Nuevo León was present and asked her what she would like for a present. She said, “all of Monterrey,” an unusual comment in itself for a teenager. The governor's response, however, was cut off at the end of the tape.

Mexican by birth and upbringing, and American through her parents, Josefina María Niggli became one of the earliest Mexican American writers with a predominant theme in her works of life lived between two cultures and two nations. Although fully bilingual, she chose, like many other U.S. Hispanics or Latinos, to write in English. She is one of the few women writers of the early twentieth century to distinguish herself in a variety of literary genres.

Although her first name was originally spelled “Josephine,” she

was often called “Josephina,” phonetically more appropriate to Spanish. Occasionally in the late 1930s, and by the 1940s, she made the switch to “Josefina.” Print sources did not always pick it up the same way, therefore her professional name is at times spelled with an “f” and at other times with a “ph” (in fact, research on databases needs to be pursued under each spelling or some items will be overlooked). Her Texan and Mexican friends always called her Josefina, and her name appears as “Josefina Niggli” on her headstone.

Her Peers

Sister Mexican artists Anita Brenner and Frida Kahlo, born in 1905 and 1907 respectively, have in recent decades received greater attention for their artistic contributions than Niggli. They reached their heyday in the same era as she, but by the mid-1950s Brenner faded from the limelight and Kahlo had died. In that era Niggli also retreated to the quiet life of a professor in a remote corner of the U.S. South. But she did not stop writing.

Born in 1910, Niggli is more appropriately a “child” of the Mexican Revolution, as Kahlo declared herself, citing her year of birth as 1910 in solidarity with the Mexican struggle for social equality. Born in Mexico City, Kahlo is known for her unique and innovative art, created throughout a lifetime struggle with chronic pain, and for her independence of spirit despite marriage to the famous Diego Rivera. Brenner, born in Aguascalientes—the capital of a small state by the same name southwest of Nuevo León and south of Zacatecas—shared with Niggli the experience of leaving her home for Texas at various intervals when revolutionary fighting heated up. Brenner also attended high school and college in San Antonio, and then began a writing career in English as a journalist, historian, translator, and modern-art critic. Although she launched her career a few years earlier, Brenner’s principal writings—on Mexican art, history, and culture, including Mexican folk tales—were published in the same two decades as Niggli’s, the 1930s and 1940s.

Another Mexican artist, Dolores del Río, was born in 1904 in the northern state and city of Durango, which her family was forced to flee in 1910. While her father left to work in the United States, she and her mother settled in Mexico City with relatives. She married at