



### **Nela Rio, 1938-2022 : “Her wings folded, she soars towards the days”**

The revered Argentine-Canadian poet Nela Rio passed away on November 29, 2022 in Montreal, Canada.

On behalf of the Creative Registry of the Canadian Association of Hispanists, her friends, colleagues and affiliates, we mourn deeply the passing of the great author, scholar and cultural promoter. Nela Rio was the founder of the Creative Registry.

Nela Rio was born in 1938 to parents of Italian descent in Córdoba, Argentina, but she considered the place she spent her adolescence as her place of origin: Mendoza, in the Andean region of the country. She studied literature at the University of Mendoza, where she discovered many Italian, Argentinean and Uruguayan writers. In 1962, she left Argentina for the United States with her first husband, Jorge Hidalgo. There they suffered the immeasurable trauma of their son "Gusi" (Gustavo)'s death. In 1969, they moved on to Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, where Rio completed a master's degree, began working at St. Thomas University, where she met her second husband, Alan Mason (married in 1986) and remained in Fredericton after that. In 2016, for health reasons, she travelled to Montreal to be near her three children and grandchildren.

A Canadian citizen since 1977, Rio taught Spanish language, civilisation and literature at St. Thomas University from the early 1970s until her retirement in 2004. She always maintained close ties with her native country, to which she returned often to see her family.

Rio's research focused on women writers of the Spanish colonial period, including the famous Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the first documented poet in the New World, Sister Leonor de Ovando, who wrote in the 16th century on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic). In her last years of academic work, she was working on a book project on the nun.

Despite the strain of raising three children, Rio was also very active in local community organisations in Fredericton. She worked for peace, women's rights and against violence directed against women. She also helped immigrant and refugee women and joined Amnesty International. In her cultural work, she promoted poetry in the Fredericton community, organizing international exhibitions with poets and collaborating with United Nations cultural organizations. A long-time member of the Ibero-American Academy of Poetry (founded in Spain in 1989), she led poetry events (poster exhibitions, recitals, workshops) in Fredericton on behalf of the Academy and, in 2009, founded the Fredericton Chapter - the only one in Canada - of the Academy, which had ten chapters worldwide. In 2005, Rio also founded the Creative Registry of artists and writers for the Canadian Association of Hispanists, which serves as a promotional tool to showcase and share the work of artists who write in Spanish, as well as literary translators and those who promote Spanish and Latin American culture in Canada.

Rio's writing has been constant throughout her life. She won her first prize for a short story at the age of thirteen and, the following year, she began writing poetry that was published in newspapers and magazines. However, her writing was not publicly recognised in Canada until the mid-1980s, when, after submitting her work to several literary competitions in Spain, she was awarded second place in poetry and shortlisted for international fiction prizes. At that time, her work had not yet been published in English, but it has now been translated into many languages, including, most recently, Slovenian.

In 1989, her collection *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* was published in Spain by the Madrid-based publishing house Orígenes. The collection had been a finalist in the seventh José Luis Gallego International Poetry Competition and includes twenty-four poems, each "respectfully" dedicated to a different woman who suffered from cruelty, violence or vile torture. The material for the collection grew out of Rio's knowledge of the violence in her native country and also from her community work with refugees from Central America. The book was published in two bilingual editions, translated into English by Elizabeth Gamble Miller in 2008 and into French by Jill Valéry in 2010. Referring to the English translation, the Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke called Rio "feminist heir to the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda" (C6).

In 1992, Ediciones Terremozas, also of Madrid, published *Aquella luz, la que estremece*. The book had been a finalist for the VIII Carmen Conde Women's Poetry Prize the previous year.

This rich collection of erotic poetry shows the maturity of the author's craft, tracing with great eloquence the sensuality and desire of the poetic voice through implicit and explicit references. This book was published in English translation in 2003 by Hugh Hazelton, who, three years later, would win the Governor General's Award for Literary Translation for another translation. Alan Mason, Rio's late partner and muse, was the inspiration for this collection of poems.

Fredericton publisher Joe Blades of Broken Jaw Press became acquainted with Rio's work in the 1990s and published several of his works, including the three bilingual collections mentioned above. The first two — *Tunnel of the Green Prow* (1998) and *Cuerpo amado / Beloved Body* (2002)— were translated by Hugh Hazelton. *Túnel de proa verde / Tunnel of the Green Prow* focuses on women's experience of complex situations and their ability to "triumph over the attempt to crush the human spirit," as Richard Livermore put it in his review of the collection. *Cuerpo amado / Beloved Body* turns the poetic gaze towards ageing, illness and breast cancer, concretising how these instances force the questioning of identity and shatter self-esteem. George Elliott Clarke writes that in this book "Rio achieves an intoxicating lightness of style matched with unbearably intense feeling" (C6).



Rio was not just a poet, however. *El espacio de la luz / The Space of Light* (2004), which includes both poems and six short stories, was translated by Elizabeth Gamble Miller and was a finalist for the Texas Institute of Letters' Soeurette Diehl Fraser Award for best book in translation in 2004. To date, this is the most comprehensive source of Rio's short fiction and poetic prose. Standout stories include "El jardín de las glicinas," which focuses on a woman who paints pictures to escape a situation of domestic violence, and "Marietta, en el Ángelus," which explores sensuality in the Argentine countryside. These stories were the subject of a master's thesis in Brazil by Andréia Pires, who also created a website dedicated to Rio.

Rio's trilingual anthology — *Sosteniendo la mirada: cuando las imágenes tiemblan / Sustaining the Gaze: When Images Tremble / Soutenant le regard: Quand les images tremblent* (2004)— was also published by Broken Jaw Press. It was translated into English by Gamble Miller and into French by Jill Valéry. It includes an introduction by Joe Blades and photos by award-winning

New Brunswick photographer Brian Atkinson, whose pictures of Guatemalan women were taken during that country's civil war. The book includes excerpts from testimonies of Guatemalan refugees, as well as poems by Rio inspired by her experience with these refugees.

Still with Broken Jaw Press, Rio published *La luna, Tango, siempre la luna / The Moon, Tango, Always the Moon* (2010), translated by Edith Jonsson-Devillers. This collection speaks of Rio's origins as an Argentinian (she uses the Argentinian dialect for the first time) and deftly combines the immigrant experience in Argentina with her own. Most strikingly, the collection foregrounds the rich symbolism and history of the origins of tango dancing in a way that takes the reader through various sensual rhythms.

More recently, Rio published *On the Threshold of Dusk... / On the Threshold of Dusk...* (2013), translated by Elizabeth Gamble Miller with foreword by Hugh Hazelton and *El laberinto vertical / Vertical Labyrinth* (2014) translated by Sophie M. Lavoie and Hugh Hazelton. *On the Threshold...* is a collection that explores the awareness of impending death while *Vertical Labyrinth* reconstructs the story of genesis from a female point of view. Rio also has several unpublished manuscripts, including *Poetry and Other Rhythms*.

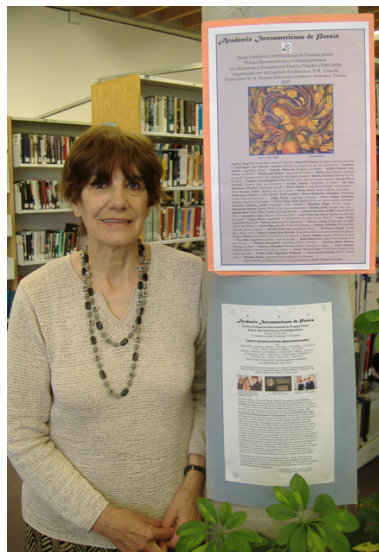
Throughout her career, Rio has also worked to promote the work of other women writers. She has edited an anthology of poems dedicated to other women poets: *El espacio no es un vacío, incluye todos los tiempos*. Published by Broken Jaw, it has more than 600 pages in its eBook version. She also co-edited a bilingual anthology with the great New Brunswick poet M. Travis Lane. *Los Puentes del Río San Juan / Bridges over the Saint John River* (2011) brings together the work of four New Brunswick writers in Spanish translation (Jo-Anne Elder, M. Travis Lane, Lynn Davies and Joe Blades) with four Spanish-Canadian writers translated into English.

In 2008, the Hispanic Cultural Network of Ottawa organised a colloquium on Nela Rio's work at the Canadian campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Writer and translator Gabriela Etcheverry edited a collection of papers from that colloquium and published it as *Nela Rio. Escritura en foco: la mirada profunda* (2012). Rio donated her archives (1967-2007) to the De Golver Library at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Her holdings consist of manuscripts, drafts, correspondence, scholarly papers and projects, recordings, and her correspondence and work for the "Voice and Writing" project.

Rio's works have been included in several anthologies, most notably Hugh Hazelton's seminal work, *Latinocanada: A Critical Study of Ten Latin American Writers of Canada* (2007), which established the existence of the Latin-Canadian genre. Since then she has also been anthologised in *Retrato de Una Nube: Primera antología del cuento hispano canadiense* [Cloudburst: An Anthology of Hispanic Canadian Short Stories, 2013] and *Lumbre y relumbre: Antología selecta de poetas hispano-canadienses contemporáneos* [Lumbre y Relumbre: Anthology of Selected Contemporary Hispanic-Canadian Poetry, 2013], among other works. Rio's poetry has been included in *Writing Toward Hope: The Literature of Human Rights in Latin America*, edited by poet and scholar Marjorie Agosín (2007).

Rio broke new ground when she became the first member of the League of Canadian Poets to be granted full membership status on the basis of books published solely in Spanish. She was nominated for the League's Pat Lowther Award for the best book of poetry by a Canadian woman in 2011. As the first time a bilingual edition was shortlisted, her nomination created a precedent for other Canadians writing in a language other than English. Rio was also the first non-English/French language poet invited to participate in the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's Writing on the Wall project in 2009. Her triptych on one of Dalí's paintings, James the Great, was translated into French and English for the occasion. She also created magnificent digital artworks that she called "visual metaphors."

Rio lived the last years of her life in residences in Montreal, because, after so many years of intellectual work, her mind was asking for rest. Until the last moments of her life, she showed her family her love, endurance and presence. She leaves in mourning her two sons, Federico and Santiago (Chango) and her daughter, Marcela, their partners, her grandchildren, and all her friends and colleagues. As Rio said in an interview: "My family, my friends, my acquaintances and even strangers form the texture and space of my life."



Text adapted by Sophie M. Lavoie from her original text on "Nela Rio" in the *New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia* with the kind collaboration of Nela Rio's children (<https://nble.lib.unb.ca/browse/r/nela-rio>). Photos of Nela Rio by Sophie M. Lavoie.