INDIGENOUS WOMEN SPEAK TO POWER: PARADIGM SHIFTS IN INDIGENOUS STUDIES

a review by Mae Miller Claxton

Melissa D. Birkhofer and Paul M. Worley, Editors. *Teresa Martín & Luisa Menéndez: Indigenous Women from Appalachia in the Spanish Colonial Record.* University Press of Kentucky, 2025.

MAE MILLER CLAXTON is a Professor at Western Carolina University, teaching classes in Southern, Appalachian, and Native American literature. She is the editor of *Conversations with Dorothy Allison* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012) and co-editor of *Conversations with Ron Rash* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), with Rain Newcomb, and *Horace Kephart: Writings* (University of Tennessee Press, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* Winter 2025), with George Frizzell. Read her essay on Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle's nonfiction in *NCLR* 2023. Her scholarship has also appeared in *Mississippi Quarterly*, *South Atlantic Review*, and *Southern Quarterly*, among others.

MELISSA D. BIRKHOFER and **PAUL M. WORLEY** are white settler scholars working and living on the ancestral lands of the DhBÖ^ (tsa/LA/gi – Cherokee) and the yeh is-WAH h'reh (Catawba). Both on the faculty of Appalachian State University, Birkhofer is an Assistant Professor of English, and Worley is a Professor of Spanish and Chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures.

At the heart of this groundbreaking book is a text from 1600 that has implications for Appalachian studies, Latine/x studies, Latin American studies, and scholarship of the Native South/Indigenous studies. The contributions to this book illustrate the complexity and richness of this document and its relevance for future scholars. As Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle claims in the foreword, the scholarship included in the book "represents a complete paradigm shift" (x) for the way we think about the history of the US Southeast, early Indigenous literature, and global contexts.

In 1600, the governor of a region called "La Florida," Gonzalo Méndez de Canzo, received a letter from the King of Spain requesting detailed information about land in the interior before sending an expedition to La Tama, thought to be forty leagues from the garrison at St. Augustine and two hundred leagues from New Mexico. This official request had several goals. Officials in Spain wished to find out about mineral wealth, trading routes to their settlements in Mexico and what became the US Southwest, food resources, and, interestingly, information about "English Settlement." Created in St. Augustine, it is a written recording, a "relación," of the oral testimonies of several people, two of whom are indigenous women who have special knowledge about the region called La Tama, an area (debatably) extending from the foothills of North Carolina to Virginia. The text, while requesting information about a local area, connects to global history because it links "La Florida" to Latin America and Europe. One of the copies resides in the archives in Seville.

Several years ago, I became aware of Melissa D. Birkhofer and Paul M. Worley's scholarship on an archival document from 1600 with the testimony of an Indigenous woman, Teresa Martín, from the Appalachian region. Even before they published any of their findings, I was fascinated by the implications for Appalachian and Cherokee scholarship for the region of Western North Carolina. Following Kimberly C. Borchard's book *Appalachia as Contested Borderland of the Early Modern Atlantic 1528–1715* (2021), Birkhofer and Worley's archival work showed Appalachia as being at the center of an imperial tug of war between European nations and the Indigenous people who already inhabited the Americas. Previous histories of the Appalachian region often began with a narrative of Anglo-Europeans moving down the Great Wagon Road in the 1700s. This scholarship opens up the history of settlement before English was spoken, when Spanish-speaking soldiers, traders, and officials came to the Southeast looking for trade routes, for mineral wealth, and for food from the interior to supply coastal settlements.

Birkhofer and Worley note in their introduction that their claim of officially recorded "testimonios" as "Indigenous literature" "may seem strange to students and scholars of US literature schooled in the dominant, Anglophilic US canon" (11). However, such a text would be common for Latin American literary scholars. In addition to opening up new understandings of early exploration in the Americas, this document acts as a complex rhetorical text, telling us much about relationships between the Indigenous people and the Spanish officials. In their article "She Said that Saint Augustine is Worth Nothing Compared to her Homeland: Teresa Martín and the Méndez Cancio Account of La Tama" (first published in *NCLR* in 2023), Birkhofer and Worley focus on these early oral "testimonios" by Indigenous women and what they can tell us about culture, language, relationships, and rhetorical power. What pressures did these women feel as they were called to testify before the governor and the notary? How did these women use their linguistic agency to influence the officials who recorded their words?

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BY MELISSA D. BIRKHOFER AND PAUL M. WORLEY

SHE SAID THAT SAINT AUGUSTINE IS WORTH NOTHING COMPARED TO HER HOMELAND: Teresa Martín and the Méndez Cancio *Account of La Tama* (1600)

At the beginning of the book, Birkhofer and Worley include extensive information about the document, its historical significance, and the time and place in which it was created. In addition, Kimberly C. Borchard provides further context with her article "Spanish Appalachia: The Canzo Inquiry in the Context of La Florida." Birkhofer and Worley then include transcriptions and translations of the document in both Spanish and English. Thus, their book reminds readers that we are only recently an English-speaking country. During this time, the inhabitants spoke many Indigenous languages, along with French, Spanish, Dutch, English, and various African languages.

Other articles in the volume explore further scholarly implications of the text. For example, Rachel V. Briggs, Christopher B. Rodning, Robin A. Beck, and David G. Moore write "Indigenous Women and the Un/Making of Spanish Men in Northern La Florida, 1540–1568." As the wives of Spanish soldiers, and as indigenous women, Martíne and Menéndez occupy particularly tenuous roles in the community. At the same time, the authors suggest that because indigenous women historically controlled food resources and cooking in their communities, they possessed a great deal of power. The Spaniards did not have secure food sources and were thus forced to appeal to indigenous communities to survive.

Other contributors to the volume discuss Native American women's leadership roles in their communities and the erasure of these voices in Anglo-European narratives. Several contributors read this text in the context of past and future. Dolores Flores-Silva and Keith Cartwright claim, for example, "Certain narratives challenge us and seem to speak from gulfs between us. They speak from a time beyond our accustomed timelines and from a space and set of perspectives outside our maps. These narratives pull us into unacknowledged pasts, have us listening to submerged histories and voices, pointing out otherwise unimagined futures" (138). Gina Caison, in her article "Here, Now: Mapping Southeastern Indigenous Literature across Time," sees the text as an early example of Indigenous women's literature stretching across time and space, "writing home" in the ways that women have always contributed to the tribalography of their communities, whether in "glyph texts, material cultures and craftwork (including baskets, pottery, and beadwork), earthworks, and oral storytelling traditions" (186). She traces a line from Teresa Martín and Luisa Menéndez to contemporary poet Joy Harjo, a poetics reflecting, as Clapsaddle notes, "new understanding regarding the diaspora of the Americas – an understanding critical to the future of Indigenous sovereignty" (x). ■

ABOVE **Header (designed by *NCLR* Art Director Dana Ezzell) of the chapter of this book first published in *NCLR* 2023, which featured Native American Literature of North Carolina (The authors received *NCLR*'s 2023 John Ehle Prize for this essay.)**