

Gendered National Bodies & Racial Difference in *A Lady's Ride Across Spanish Honduras*

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Abstract:

This article contextualizes Mary Lester's *A Lady's Ride Across Honduras* (1884) within the overall production of travel narratives and the conceptualization of British Empire identity and gender codes during the Victorian period. First of all, it explains how Lester's narrative provides a "gendered" representation of the Honduran landscape and populations. It also contends that, while Lester's writing does reveal some details about the culture, local people, and socio-political climate in Honduras, it should be interpreted more so as a written manifestation of British identity, gender roles, and values of the era. This argument is evidenced by explicating how Lester was able to negotiate with discursive structures and pressures associated with femininity and (masculine) colonialism and by illustrating how she textually constructed herself as both an exemplary and superior British female subject through her protagonist Maria Soltera. Overall, this essay attempts to bring to the forefront a piece of literature that is mostly unknown and understudied, but that reflects the undeniable interrelationship between travel literature and discourses of gender and colonialism.

Keywords: Female Travelers, Gender, Nineteenth-century Honduras, Imperial Powers, Ideology of Separate Spheres, Victorian Era.

As part of the State's efforts to modernize and populate the young nation of Honduras, the then Secretary-General, Ramón Rosa, signed on May 3, 1879, the Presidential resolution on the solicitation made by a British subject, Priest William L. Pope. The decree conceded to Pope lands and various exemptions to establish in the region of Trujillo a colony of Irish immigrants who would dedicate themselves to agricultural work and other enterprises. These colonists would construct roads as well as build primary and secondary schools, all of which were to be served by foreign instructors.¹ After receiving approval for his solicitation, Pope, widely circulated in Europe a pamphlet that called for workers, including a leading teacher, to migrate to Honduras, help him develop his colony, and in return obtain a generous land grant from the Honduran government.² However, some of the information he imparted to possible interested parties did not correspond with the approved solicitation. Among those was an English educator by the name of Mary Lester, who, after hearing about how Honduras had opened its borders to European and US-American

immigrants and receiving a personalized invitation from Pope, ventured to Honduras during the summer of 1881.

The invitation received by Lester included a guarantee of employment and a concession of land in Pope's proposed colony. According to Lester herself, she was offered the position of head teacher for a school that was to be erected in San Pedro Sula, – for which she would receive a small, but good salary — and was promised the appointment of organ player for the local church so that she may have an additional source of income (Lester 1964, 6).³ The opportunity to continue her profession as teacher appealed to Lester, but the chief motivation for her willingness to immigrate to Honduras was the assured land grant that would allow her to establish a home of her own. Notwithstanding her education and her societal background, a middle-class upbringing, Lester had no assets to speak of; she was poverty-stricken (Lester 1964, 8-10). Unfortunately, Lester's possibility for economic improvement was doomed from the onset because much of the information provided to her was fabricated. Pope's written communication indicated that the proposed colony would primarily be made up of British and French immigrants, rather than the accorded Irish, and that the colony would be established in the city of San Pedro Sula instead of Trujillo, which during that time was far more industrialized than Trujillo and would indeed seem more enticing. More importantly, there was no immediate plan for a school nor an organ at the nearby church. In the end, Lester was left with no other recourse, but to return home to England. Despite her ill-fated journey, Lester kept and published a written account of her experiences in Honduras.

This article seeks to contextualize Mary Lester's *A Lady's Ride Across Spanish Honduras* within the overall production of travel narratives and the conceptualization of British Empire identity and gender codes during the Victorian period. First of all, it explains how Lester's narrative provides a "gendered" representation of the Honduran landscape and populations. It also contends that, while Lester's writing does reveal some details about the culture and local people of Honduras, it should be interpreted more so as a written manifestation of British identity, gender roles, and values of the era. This argument is evidenced by explicating how Lester was able to negotiate with discursive structures associated with femininity and (masculine) colonialism (Mills 1993, 106-107; Mills 2005, 64); and by illustrating how she textually constructed herself as both an exemplary and superior British female subject through her protagonist Maria Soltera, a woman who traveled to a nation whose Bay Islands and parts of the Caribbean coastline were an informal British colony for about two hundred years.⁴ Overall, this essay makes an effort to bring to the forefront a piece of literature that is largely unknown and understudied, but that reflects the undeniable interrelationship between travel literature and discourses of gender and colonialism.

Travel, Gender & Identity in the Victorian Era

In the historical consciousness of many, the Victorian period in England is often associated with restraint, religiosity, a strong work ethic, and family values based on defined gender constructs. Women, upper and middle class, in particular, were expected to uphold those ideals by focusing on domestic matters; tending to the well-being of their family members; and demonstrating a series of

behaviour patterns considered “feminine” and “natural for women”, such as frailty, morality, piety, sympathy, general emotion, and interest in developing relationships. (Mills 1993, 94-96). In other words, during this epoch, women were in large part restricted “in their movement” to the private sphere, as well as socialized by those same discursive limitations that were supposed to define them. These constraints should come as no surprise because although the elements do change over time, women in Western society, have been characterized and circumscribed by “femininity”⁵ (Mills 1993, 94). However, despite these restrictions, some women were able to move into the public sphere, exercise influence in spaces other than the household, and to an extent challenge feminine norm. In opposition and relation to femininity, discourses of “masculinity” also circulated widely in the West and had established a set of roles that men were to follow; they were supposed to be providers, protectors, strong, and active in the public arena. Also, and particular to British men of the Victorian era, “nobleness, bravery, and an adventurous spirit became staples of the loyal, male, [and superior] imperial subject” (Linsley 2012, 2).

But, how and why was the ideology of “separate spheres”⁶ promoted by the British Victorians? The answer is not simple; it requires a discussion of the solidification of Britain as a preeminent empire and industrialized nation, and the effect that these changes had on different facets of nineteenth-century British society. British (initially English) imperialism began with the creation of colonies and establishment of ports in the Americas, the Caribbean, and India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the ensuing two hundred years, Britain’s borders and influence expanded to parts of Oceania, Asia, and Africa, becoming the world’s leading commercial and trade entity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Because of this territorial expansion and increase in capital, the British nation saw among many of its advances, an improvement in transport infrastructure, technological innovation in the printing process, and the rise of a middle-class (Mangan 1989, 2). All of this, subsequently, led to “a large-scale movement of its men and women into the wider world on both temporary and long-term bases” (Frawley 1994, 19-20) and an increase in knowledge of these new and “exotic” places and peoples.

Economic gain was indisputably a primary impetus for the many men who traveled to the territories of the expanding empire. Yet, there were also “new” types of men who took excursions as administrators, diplomats, military men, scientists, missionaries, and trained writers who had distinct motivations for their journeys and who, in addition to traveling in a professional capacity, sometimes ventured out beyond the British metropolis for leisure as well (Watts 2009, 775-776). Although the majority of women who traveled did so to accompany their husbands or guardians, some women did so as single females and as a result of their professions (Rodenas 2014, 1-7; Wagner 2015, 175). Nevertheless, whether consciously or unintentionally, both men and women, served in some capacity to legitimate and reified both the spread of empire and the definitions of British masculinity and femininity mentioned above. The success males and females had (or at least claimed to have had) in making tangible gains and contributions to the commercial, ideological or intellectual needs of the society as well as in bringing Christianity and order to nations that were formally or

informally colonized were considered manifestations of the authority and superiority of the British Empire (Thompson 2011, 174-175). In addition, the heroic episodes of “adventuring” and war that were included in official imperial records and personal writings – which, later permeated popular British culture and were utilized as edifying tools for the formation of future “manly” males (Watts 2009, 775) – reflected the masculine nature of these individuals and empire as a whole (Linsley 2012, 2; Woollacott 2006, 59).

British Victorian superiority and masculinity were also realized through the employment of the language of difference. The colonizers usually marked a clear distinction between them, the members of the British race, and the peoples who were subject to their control, in order to classify, form hierarchies, and establish their behaviors, culture and values as the benchmark by which the “Other” should be measured (Hall 2002, 17; Mercer 1999, 148). The British represented themselves as civil, racially-pure, intellectually and physically strong while at the same describing the non-European populations as immoral, lacking in beauty and intellect, weak, and to an extent, female, “thus arriving at their optimistic conclusions about British and Western cultural superiority” (Bolt 1971, 27). Philosophical and religious ideals were used to substantiate these claims, – as they had been used in the past – but during the nineteenth century, Victorians found in pseudo-scientific theories pertaining to both race and gender, further justification for their intervention in the global world. The notion of scientific polygenesis argued that the human species had no single origin, that “innate” biological differences existed among the races, and that these primordial “dissimilarities served as the basis for their hierarchization or place within the scale of civilization” (Jackson and Weidman, 2006, 34–44). Scientific studies that assessed cranium sizes, physical features, and language variation (among other things) served as evidence for the theory of polygenesis and as justification for the hierarchy of the races with the Caucasian “white” race on top of the scale, the African race on the bottom, and the Asian and American races in the middle (Bolt 1971, 208-217).

Many of the scientific discursive practices that were used to dominate the non-European races were also applied to the female sex. The study of female anatomy was employed to show female physical frailty and intellectual weakness. In particular, the examination of the female reproductive system and the conclusions drawn from such study were of great interest because in it men claimed to have found the source that in the eyes of a patriarchal society, both redeemed and condemned women – motherhood and sexual desire (Mercer 1999, 150). Social evolutionary theories found in Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* that noted that “women possessed characteristics of the lower races and the past lower states of civilization” were also adopted to validate male governance (Bandyopadhyay 2014). To this, we must also add that science became another discursive justification for the construction and promotion of defined gender roles. That is why the mobility of Victorian women was restricted; why women of the upper echelons were believed to need protection; and why, although never fully-recognized, women themselves were also a necessary force for socializing other women into limited roles (Mills 1993, 95). In essence, the empire was not only

masculine, but it was also feminine, and this fact was at the crux of much of the growing societal anxieties.

Female Laborers, Women Writers & The Maneuvering of Conflicting Discourses

The ideology of separate spheres was a “bourgeois” ideal that was not always achieved. The same transformations that brought about numerous advances as well as changes in urbanization and social structure in nineteenth-century Britain, also provided a space, a type of “borderlands”⁷ in which women could both challenge Victorian customs and have a role outside the family. First of all, women worked in the labor-intensive, philanthropic and professional fields because few households were completely economically-dependent on the father figure. Females from the lower-classes would often work for low wages in factories and mills to supplement the male wages (Digby 1993, 204-206). As a result of the promotion of philanthropy as a feminine quality and the increasing educational opportunities for middle-class ladies, some women were able to serve as missionaries, nurses, teachers, writers and even leaders of political and public movements (Watts 2009, 779-781). Although the female presence in the public arena was undeniable, their subversion of the dichotomy of private and public spaces was not always overt. Yes, some women indeed were considered rebellious and even an “aberration” of femininity by Victorians, but many worked within the binary system. Women exercised agency, to an extent, and formed socio-political networks by demonstrating lady or “feminine-like” behavior in public; they educated young ladies by using a curriculum that reinforced the idea of the proper woman while at the same time equipping them with the skills essential to earning a living because women themselves knew that with the exception of a select few upper-class ladies, all would have to work at some point in their lives (Digby 1993, 206-211).

The ability to travel and to write about their journeys during the 1800s were two additional ways in which women could escape the limitations imposed on their gender. Hundreds of middle and upper-class females traveled to territories near and far from the British metropolis and found in them a sense of freedom that they could not enjoy at home (Mills 1993, 2; Wernecke 2012, 2). The distance from the metropolis coupled with the different environments found in the formal and informal colonies allowed women more physical and intellectual mobility – freedom to “accomplish feats of physical endurance and courage that would be inconceivable for a middle-class woman in England” (Frawley 1994, 38). The act of travel bestowed on many of these women a form of “cultural competence” and authority derived from their experiences. Unlike men, they “were able to enter female spaces such as the harem, zenana, or seraglio, and their descriptions of everyday life”, often provided a different perspective from the typical Orientalizing essentialism present in male travel works (Wagner 2015, 175-176). Also, because many of these female travelers were educated, they could record and publish their experiences, and in the process gain public recognition (Frawley 1994, 23-24).

Except for a few “extraordinary” women, females did not write about their journeys until the nineteenth century. The genre of travel writing, as well as the literary market, were largely male-

dominated. Nevertheless, the increase in literacy and rising interest in periodical literature, coupled with improvements in the printing process, provided the conditions for the production of a copious amount of women's nonfiction, which was enormously popular and widely-read by Victorians (Frawley 1994, 7-15). Readers became interested in the female production of travel narratives because through them they could vicariously transport themselves to distant lands, learn about "exotic" cultures, and feel as if they too were participating in the empire-building process. In essence, women's travel writing became a form of "symbolic capital"⁸ that was valued and recognized by citizens, the nation, and institutions such as the periodical presses and publishing firms (Frawley 1994, 29).

The press became one of the most important resources of information for British society during the nineteenth century. It was the principal medium by which people learned about current events and different forms of proceedings taking place within and outside of Britain, as well as a source of both education and entertainment. Thus, it is not surprising that women chose to initially publish the results – images, observations, and thoughts – of their voyages in newspapers and journals (Frawley 1994, 28). As previously indicated, the demand for travel narratives written by and for women existed, but it is important to note that during this period the end product was restricted by established conventions and discursive factors about genre and gender. There were two dominant forms of travel writing, one with a more "factual"/scientific or guidebook structure and the other with a more literary (and romanticized) tone, with the latter considered more appropriate for a female writer (Mills 1993, 84-85). Furthermore, women were encouraged to focus on feminine matters, those concerning the private and emotional sphere, rather than the public or political arena, while at the same time appealing to the public's desire for episodes of adventure and physical accomplishment (Frawley 1994, 18; Wagner 2015, 177). That is not to say that there was no diversity in women's travel writing because there was, given the differences in age, the purpose of the journey and ideological beliefs among other factors (Bassnett 2002, 228-230). In addition, not all women limited their writing to the feminine; in fact, some women challenged these discursive pressures by adopting "male" qualities or a narratorial position deemed "masculine" (Mills 1993, 94-99). Nevertheless, as members of the British empire, female travel writers had to negotiate with these "conflicting discursive pressures" (Mills 1993, 106-107), and we can certainly see this in the works of prominent Victorian authors like Mary Kingsley, Isabella Bird Bishop, and Frances Trollope,⁹ and lesser-known writers like Mary Lester, our focus of study.

Mary Lester and the Construction of María Soltera, A Female Subject

Mary Lester was a woman who was a product of her era, and in many ways, an anomaly for a middle-class British lady. Although of English descent, Lester was born in the Pyrenees region and lived in numerous parts of the world, including Oceania, which inculcated in her a natural inclination for adventure, and more importantly, allowed her to acquire an adaptability to distinctive environments as well as a cultural competency, both of which she displayed during her journey across Honduras. She was not a neophyte traveler who ventured out into the world for the

first time, but rather an experienced traveler. In addition, Lester was a strong-willed single female who wielded authority from being the daughter and sister of English soldiers, both of whom had died, and of having been compelled to depend on herself.¹⁰

Lester was fully aware of the expectations and limitations of her gender and cognizant of the need to meet certain established conventions for travel writing. In her semi-autobiographical travel novel, *A Lady's Ride Across Spanish Honduras*, Lester utilized the pseudonym María Soltera to create a distinction between her, the author and historical figure, and the narrator and protagonist of her work. (To adhere to this differentiation and to avoid any confusion by the reader, the author's last name, Lester, will be used when specifically speaking about the author, and Soltera will be utilized when referring to the protagonist/narrator.) Returning to our study: In making this separation, Lester was able to create a female British subject who was able to maneuver both “the power of a patriarchy which acted upon [her] as [a] middle-class woman, through discourses of femininity: and the power of colonialism which acted upon [her] in relation to the people of the country [she] described” (Mills 1993, 18). As the title of Lester's travel log indicated, Soltera was a “lady,” – a term that accentuates social status and femininity (Frawley 1994, 105) — and her voyage was quite an undertaking given the reference to her movement “across” the Honduran landscape. In the end, Soltera accomplished this feat, while providing the reader with a series of cultural and geographical referents of the country and demonstrating the qualities of her gender, class and “superior” British nature.

María Soltera was the protagonist who assumed both masculine and feminine traits. First of all, although motivated by economic reasons, Soltera displayed courage and a sense of adventure by choosing the more difficult of two possible routes by sailing down the Pacific coast from San Francisco to the port of Amapala, Honduras, before commencing her two-hundred-mile mule back ride to San Pedro Sula. Soltera further accentuated her valor and the difficulty of her enterprise by indicating that her trip over “the grand” Honduran mountains was one that “few Englishmen, and still fewer Englishwomen” had ever completed (Lester 1964, 3). The mere fact that Soltera traveled as a single woman and that, except for a muleteer and a servant she hired, she completed her trajectory with minimal assistance and insufficient knowledge of the land, challenge the assumptions about the female need for protection and the frailty of the female body. The latter point was further substantiated by the wear and tear that Soltera's physical body suffered – the mosquito bites, the hunger, less than hygienic sleeping quarters, and the extreme sun that resulted in “the skin of the one side of [her] throat and face peeled away in strips” (Lester 1964, 251).

Because she was a single woman, Soltera also faced incidents in which locals would try to take advantage of her by attempting to charge her exorbitant prices for products and services, and in which Honduran men would often try to speak for her when she was more than capable of communicating in Spanish reasonably well. The ability to speak in Spanish allowed Soltera to both handle difficult situations and to establish her authority by demonstrating to others that she could take care of all necessary transactions and logistics. For example, in Amapala, the main Honduran

port in the Pacific Coast, Soltera stopped all discussions and attempts at being cheated when purchasing a side-saddle, when she interrupted her *mozo* (servant) Eduardo and

walk[ed] into the circle [of people], and said in the best Spanish [she] could command, ‘I will not buy one of these; and, moreover, I will not give more than twelve pesos for the best saddle in Amapala’... and express[ed] her surprise that they should combine to take advantage of a stranger, and that stranger a ‘Soltera,’ [she] added with great emphasis (Lester 1964, 100-101).

Soltera’s strong character was evident to the people. She was also able to gain sympathy from them by emphasizing her status as a single female and economic condition of being poor, a challenge to the prevalent assumption in Honduras that all British were rich and could pay any amount for services. In the end, Soltera was able to purchase a right-sided saddle at the price she sought to pay, but this was only one of many occurrences in which she would be inconvenienced, forced to be stern with the local people or compelled to defend herself for being an English woman. In fact, she faced indirect attacks from both Hondurans and other Europeans who viewed most British as being dishonest, thieves, and most debase for “getting off the natives all they could before returning home and canting about the wickedness of the peoples” (Lester 1964, 38). This view was also due to transnational conflicts over the informal British colony that existed since the eighteenth-century on the Mosquito Coast in the form of a protectorate and on the Bay Islands in the shape of permanent settlements,¹¹ as well as the blame that was placed on the British for the failed interoceanic railroad project of the 1850s that left the country and many local investors in ruin.¹² Soltera did not address the latter reasons for the negative image of the English. She often changed the subject when such topics were broached in discussion, – perhaps because they were tied to politics, and as such, should not be tackled by women at this time – but of the first reason she made it known that she did not disagree with such assessments and that she knew them to be true from her prior travels and from friends she trusted. Having said that, Soltera also made it a point, through the words of a British expatriate by the name of Mr. Cookes, to relay to the reader that the swindlers were “low whites”; they were not representative of the British gentleman of noble breed (Lester 1964, 38-39).

Soltera’s courage was undeniable; it was even recognized by the local men who bestowed on her the title of “brave little lady” (Lester 1964, 191). Her bravery was on full display during an incident in which she and her servants were forced to cross what John Lloyd Stephens called the “tortuous river Juan” (Lester 1964, 193) on mules’ back because there was no canoe for them to use. The danger was even greater due to the flooding of the river, and this was made evident to the reader by its personification. Soltera saw the river and said,

There it was— broad, turbulent, almost defiant... The water leapt and swirled over and about these in all directions. The very sound was a laugh aimed against us, and the solemn dark trees which bordered the side were very far from being an enlivening feature in the prospect...There is nothing for it but sink or swim: the river must be crossed, ford or no ford, and the sooner we go, the better...

The elder of the two Indian women now came towards me.... 'The river is so strong – it is very dangerous. You will go; but *'ay di mi,*' you have much courage.' Much courage! Had she felt my throbbing pulse; could she but know kind soul, the struggle that was going on in my proud English heart not to appear to be afraid. True, my words were measured, and I smiled because I felt I must not give way one inch (Lester 1964, 193-197).

In the description above, the human-like qualities attributed to the river add to its formidable and treacherous presence; they made the river a worthy adversary that Soltera had to defeat in order to demonstrate her heroism. In addition, the statement made by the local women about Soltera having “much courage” in conjunction with her resolve not to show any fear by remaining calm further validated her strong nature. To this we must add, that Soltera indicated to the reader that courage, pride and proper restraint are qualities of a true Brit; they are what made the British superior to other peoples. Also, to an extent, Soltera took on the persona of a knight who overcomes obstacles, was “measured,” kind, – by showing generosity to the women who helped her roll up the hem of her dress (Lester 1964, 197) – and Christian, as demonstrated by her gratitude to “the Lord in sincerity and truth” (Lester 1964, 202) for allowing her to cross the river safely. In essence, this episode and others served the purpose of satisfying the Victorian public's desire for reading a travel narrative with examples of “English imperial superiority and control abroad” (Frawley 1994, 106).

Nature was at times an obstacle for Soltera, but it was also something to contemplate and to appreciate for its beauty. Before Soltera's encounter with the “turbulent” river Juan, she found herself “much engrossed by the beauty of the scenery, and in admiration of the glorious country” (Lester 1964, 164). The first time her sensibilities were awakened was by a landscape that was so pristine that it was like looking at a painting. As Soltera argued,

The painter of river scenery can nowhere in the wide world find more charming subjects for his brush than the lovely water-courses of Spanish Honduras. The cascades among the mountains are simply magnificent and deserve to be classed among the finest in any land...My fervent wish for Honduras is that she may ever deserve her name. *Hondo*, being interpreted, means a pond or brook; and the brooks of this fair region are so pure and health-giving, that when the iron hand of progress penetrates here, may its mission be other than that of tainting, for commercial greed, the life of a country. Ah, how many in our own England turn to spirits and to beer, because the only water to which they have access is poisoned by chemical drugs or is made the receptacle of all foul things (Lester 1964, 131-132).

Two things are made quite clear by her words: the first being that, like many of her class, Soltera was influenced by the sensibilities of the picturesque movement¹³ and was cognizant of the interest of the upper classes for scenic references in art and literature (Donaldson et al. 2017, 44); the second, that unlike many male travelers, Soltera's description of the terrain moved beyond the search

for material gain and the typical “imperial gaze,”¹⁴ or authoritative position, and was characterized by a reverential awe. She did not want to see the waters destroyed like they had been in her home country because they are essential to all life source. Soltera criticized the industrialization of her country for having polluted its waters and caused “typhoid fever and blood poisoning... half of the ailments of the English people” (Lester 1964, 131).

Another episode in which Soltera drew on the picturesque to display female sentimentality occurred as she crossed the mountains between Goascorán and Comayagua. Soltera’s representation of the foothills is not without impartiality, (a fact she does not deny) but its beauty is undeniable. She began her description with the following:

Behold the sky! A sea of opal light, upon which floated minute masses of soft pink colour. One of the largest of these rested for a time upon the summit of one of the lower mountain-peaks, as if a rose had fallen thereon and waited to be kissed. A few moments later and the whole of the rosy tufts had faded away like a shower of leaves, and a blue-green light shimmered in their wake, the herald of the sun. He rose at once in the full glory of his strength, enveloping cloud and colour in his golden robe; flushing high mountain and lowly canon with his regal tints, and upon all things making his presence to be felt... My own (weak woman's) tribute was a gush of tears. It could not be restrained, all was so beautiful and so grand; and Nature seemed to greet, with a mother's love, one who was alone in the world... Here, rock, wood, tree, shrub, and water are on a grand scale – all, so to speak, the best of their kind; and the humble wildflowers, adorning the far-stretching fertile valleys which slope between the clefts, are rich in colour, and far from wanting in perfume. The varying lights – the glimmering opal and the deep purple haze alternating with the fairest blue of the heaven and the blackest depth of the cloud – as we passed on our way, presented a scene, the like of which I had never seen before, and never expect to see again (Lester 1964, 156-165)

In ten pages Soltera presented us with images of nature in all of its splendor: its various tones, scents, and movements all in perfect harmony. The rich poetic language and Soltera’s reaction of a “gush of tears” emphasized the idealism of the picturesque environment and created a series of balanced landscape compositions. While we should not discredit Soltera’s reaction, we can argue that this representation is a literary recourse to appeal to the emotions of the possible female readers and to appease the publishers who expected its female writers to both use a more literary (novel-like) rather than scientific discourse, and to focus more on the creative rather than the analytical when speaking about foreign lands (Frawley 1994, 32).

Although Soltera did espouse masculine characteristics under certain conditions, she was and foremost a lady. Soltera’s femininity is stressed through her use of a side-saddle; her decorum, dress, and sentimentality; her knowledge of the picturesque; and through the relationships she developed with other women. It is also through Soltera’s interaction with other women that we are privy not only to mores that developed in Honduras but also to her values as a middle-class British woman. Two women, both European, in particular, she found to be quite pleasant and

hardworking: Victoria Berlioz, known by locals as Madame Victorine and Madame St. Laurent. Berlioz was a “nice-looking [French] woman” who provided Soltera with lodging in her comfortable and clean inn while she passed through Comayagua, the colonial capital of Honduras. Although Berlioz claimed to be unable to entertain her properly because she and her sister were departing for France, Soltera showed that despite Berlioz’s impending departure, Berlioz was very hospitable and that her abode was comfortable, clean, and decorated in the European style. Lester dedicated numerous pages to the conversations between Berlioz and Soltera – some of it in French, so as to show that like many educated women, Soltera was fluent in the French language – and a few to the food that was consumed in the Berlioz household, which Soltera found to be “very luxurious” given most foods she consumed prior to her arrival in Comayagua. Soltera was given pigeons, rice-pudding for supper and had both cognac and wine to drink.¹⁵ Berlioz was a woman with a sophisticated palette, but what most impressed Soltera was her self-sufficiency and work ethic, a quality that Victorians valued (Lester 1964, 208-229). According to A. Curtis Wilgus, Berlioz was a woman who had instituted a sugar cane mill, developed a small coffee plantation, established a large store and held many properties in Honduras, all of which allowed her to amass great wealth and to conduct business with high powered officials. Berlioz’s wealth was so abundant that, on numerous occasions, she even loaned the Honduran government hundreds of thousands of pesos (1964, xxx).

Like Victoria Berlioz, Madame St. Laurent of Potrerillos was a successful businesswoman who owned a hotel and whose husband was the “head-man” of the town. Soltera indicated that Madame St. Laurent and her husband were quite courteous and generous; Madame St. Laurent was especially “agreeable and friendly, and...a woman of advanced education” (Lester 1964, 264). In addition to the pleasant conversations Soltera shared with her, it was Madame St. Laurent who informed her that William Pope was not a priest at all, but a former Protestant minister who had tricked the Honduran government and several Irish small farmers “of a respectable class” into supporting his proposed colony. The land was provided, but Pope was no more than a drunk who wanted to live off the colonists’ little money and hard work. That is why many colonists had returned home or decided to settle elsewhere, and why Soltera was left with no prospect of settling in Honduras (Lester 1964, 265-267).¹⁶ Despite the unfortunate news, it was at Madame St. Laurent’s home where Soltera was again able to bathe and dine comfortably and able to contemplate the beauty of a garden that Madame St. Laurent had created. In doing so, Soltera once more demonstrated her understanding of aesthetics. In addition, Soltera stressed the relationship between an appreciation for beauty and western superiority when she indicated that Madame St. Laurent’s garden was proof of the way the French, and Europeans in general, could both make use of space and bring beauty to “unsightly places” (Lester 1964, 268).

Mrs. Francisca Ramos, locally known as Chicamos was another woman whom Soltera described as both physically handsome and affluent. Chicamos was a white Creole woman of Spanish descent who had established in the city of San Pedro Sula an inn, a billiards hall and a salon where many social events took place (Lester 1964, 282-283). In fact, a day after Soltera arrived in San

Pedro Sula, the mayor, a Scotsman by birth, hosted a ball in honor of the city. Soltera attended the ball as a guest of the mayor and was impressed by the invitees' decorum and appreciation for culture. For example, during the playing of a selected classical piece, the guests listened "with marked silence to the end, [which Soltera] could not help contrasting this politeness with the rude inattention which [she] ha[d] seen displayed in circles of far higher pretension" in England (Lester 1964, 296). Soltera also described in detail the *Lanza* dance, a Honduran national dance, which was adapted from the Lancer Quadrilles that was very popular among Europeans and elites in the colonies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lester 1964, 297-298). Overall, Soltera was not only pleased to have attended such a "dignified" ball but also pleasantly surprised by having witnessed a second major example of the development of culture in Honduras. The first having occurred in Goascorán where she not only observed but participated in an intricate ribbon dance known as the *ronda* of the muleteers because the women and men "mazed between the quadrupeds, waltzed back, formed a ring in the center" all while being surrounded by mules. The *ronda* was preceded by a reenactment of the Spanish tradition of the running of the bulls and followed by a waltz dance (Lester 1964, 151-154).

It is evident from the above accounts that Soltera had espoused the common-held-belief that European peoples were characterized by certain bodily and behavioral traits: physical beauty, proper etiquette, and attention to both hygiene and culture. Soltera emphasized these characteristics in her descriptions of the European women, and men to a lesser extent, she met to reify them as racial markers, to illustrate difference, and to establish them as the standard by which the "Other" should be measured. Although Soltera did not directly describe the natives as "aesthetically-unpleasant," she curiously did surround herself and hire workers whom she considered to be more handsome and concerned with appearing presentable. For instance, the initial impression Soltera had of her *mozo*, Eduardo, was that he was "nice-looking," and "that *rara avis*, a very clean-looking lad" (Lester 1964, 82). In addition, Soltera was pleased with his work ethic, his presentability as indicated by his "clean shirt" (Lester 1964, 108) and his attentiveness with always providing her with clean water, which helped to ensure her tidiness (Lester 1964, 141). Similar to Eduardo, Soltera found the Indian wife of an Italian doctor who had settled in Goascorán to be "pretty" and having good manners. According to Soltera, the Indian woman was a gracious hostess for providing her with the best possible sleeping arrangements and meals she and her husband could offer, and someone who had truly "touched" her for recognizing in her voice kindness and innate beauty. Also, their interactions were marked by respect and "woman's sympathy." The latter sentiment was especially present in Soltera's criticism of the way the "white" Italian doctor had never given his wife her rightful role as mistress of the house because she was racially inferior to him (Lester 1964, 161). While we can assume that the empathy and concern that Soltera showed for this Indian woman were genuine, we should not forget that their relationship was not of equality. What may be interpreted as an act of solidarity with the "Other" cannot be dissociated from the "discourse of philanthropy which

circulated through the nineteenth century and involved middle and upper-class women” like Soltera (Mills 1993, 96-97).

Soltera’s “systematic play of difference” (Hall 2002, 18) was more pronounced in her depiction of the one Black individual she met and the American women she interacted with on board the boat to Amapala. For example, Soltera described the American consul’s cook at Amapala, locally-known as the “captain,” as a black man who was a brute, ugly in appearance and manner, and “smelt of fish and black man strongly.” In essence, according to Soltera, this cook not only lacked all the superior qualities of Europeans but also had a particular scent that characterized his race (Lester 1964, 106-108). Even though Soltera was careful not to appear blatantly racist, we can infer that she transferred her intolerance and that of the Honduran people to the town dog, Lobo, who had scared off the captain because Lobo “had a special dislike to black people and the ‘captain’ in particular” (Lester 1964, 108). She also agreed with the consul’s (Mr. Bahl) assertion that the cook was a strong worker, for she, like many Europeans and US Americans, believed that the Black race was naturally conditioned for hard labor (Lester 1964, 109). Soltera did not portray American women in a positive light either; She described Mrs. C, a lady from the US who was on her way to the coast of Guatemala with her daughters after incurring debt and evading her tradespeople in San Francisco, as a “demi-semi-gentlewoman” whose manners and appearance were both “very unfortunate.” Mrs. C. was also a brazen woman and, like her daughters, had a loud and shrieking voice (Lester 1964, 43-44).

It is important to note that while Soltera did use the “language of aesthetics” (Bohls 1995, 242) to mark difference and race, she refrained in large part from making overt statements about the non-European races or any nationality but her own in order to not contravene “the discursive positions established for women” (Mills 1993, 97). Since “race” was considered a “masculine” topic, it was the male characters who spoke directly about the considered “innate” characteristics of African, indigenous and mixed-race populations. As mentioned above, it was Mr. Bahl who made the correlation between physical labor and Blacks. It was also Mr. Bahl who referred to the Indian race as “apt to be idle” (Lester 1964, 95), a characteristic that had made everything slow or late “a custom of the country” (Lester 1964, 110), and ultimately resulted in Honduras’ underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure and corrupt local governments. Don Graciano, the Italian doctor, also shared this sentiment because he too referred to the indigenous and mixed-race muleteers as idle (Lester 1964, 144). Nonetheless, the most prejudiced comments were produced by the US doctor on board the boat to Amapala who described Mexican “indigenous” men and women as “too lazy to walk in even if the door were opened to them”, as having “no brains” or “usefulness.” He also considered the women as aesthetically inferior, as “dirty” and having “glaring, beady, black eyes without intelligence” (Lester 1964, 15). It is obvious from the descriptors the doctor used that he had racialized the Mexican people in hygiene, body, and manner, and he had done so in order to legitimate the imperialist attitude that not only he, but many US nationals, had towards Mexico and Latin America in general since the nineteenth century. Soltera was aware of the politics of the time as well as the conflicts that had existed between Britain and the United States over American

territories, but because politics, like race, was not a subject appropriate for Victorian women, the references to the US desire to annex parts of Mexico and Central America were all uttered by males (Lester 1964, 14). Overall, the more “feminine” and “sentimental” elements dominated the narrative, but like in most, if not all, travelogues produced by Westerners during the era of imperialism, discourses of race and politics were also present.

Concluding Remarks

Lester’s *A Lady’s Ride Across Spanish Honduras* was published in magazine format in *Blackwood’s Magazine*¹⁷ and in book form by Blackwood & Co in 1884. The reviews of her travel manuscript, in general, commended Lester for her entertaining and pleasant style and underscored the protagonist’s courageous nature and ability to overcome numerous obstacles. Ironically, Lester was criticized for focusing too much on personal relationships and domestic topics, such as the household and food, and not providing much detail about the native population or landscape.¹⁸ The incongruity of the reviews rests on the fact that the narrative’s emphasis on the “feminine” was the result of patriarchal forces and discursive limitations, based on the ideology of separate spheres, which were extant during the nineteenth century. Lester was critiqued for the topics she was restricted to and expected to write by the periodical presses, publishing firms, and society as a whole. Given the period, the reception of Mary Lester’s work is to be expected. However, we cannot deny how in her work Lester interweaved various disciplines and discourses such as ethnography, gender, geography, politics, and romanticism; negotiated between conflicting frameworks, those pertaining to femininity and colonialism; and how through her protagonist María Soltera she self-fashioned herself as an adventuress, an observer, a multi-faceted discursive persona, and a model British lady. In all, we hope to have underlined in this article the significance of *A Lady’s Ride Across Spanish Honduras*: how this text provided us with both a glimpse of Honduras during the late nineteenth century as well as numerous textual representations of British societal standards and values and identity and racial ideologies that were prevalent during the Victorian Period.

Endnotes:

1. The resolution signed on May 3, 1879, titled “Acuerdo sobre la solicitud del Presbítero Guillermo L. Pope,” appeared in the official government newspaper, *Gaceta de Honduras* No. 45, on May 9, 1879, 4, <https://tzibalnaah.unah.edu.hn/handle/123456789/3679>.
2. Among the periodicals to publish Pope’s pamphlet/letter was the *Longford Journal* on the 15th and 29th of November 1879. On both days, Pope emphasized the opportunity for a land grant, a home and education. Furthermore, Pope exaggerated the supposed salubrious Honduras environment and underlined the lack of diseases that were common in Europe and the United States. Copies of the newspapers were accessed from the British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
3. Although Mary Lester’s narrative was originally published in 1884, I will use and cite from the 1964 edition of *A Lady’s Ride Across Spanish Honduras* published by the University of Florida Press.

4. For the most complete historical analysis of the British presence in Honduras, see Robert A. Naylor, *Penny Ante Imperialism: The Mosquito Shore and the Bay of Honduras, 1600-1914: A Case Study in British Informal Empire* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989).
5. See Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*, (New York: Lindon Press, 1984) for an extensive discussion of the conceptualization of the concept of femininity.
6. An extensive discussion of the concept of “separate spheres” can be found in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), a seminal work on British middle-class society during the nineteenth century.
7. In her essay on Victorian values and women, Anne Digby uses the term borderlands to refer to the flexibility or to an extent porous nature of gender roles. “Victorian Values and Women in Public and Private” in *Victorian Values: A Joint Symposium of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the British Academy, December 1990*, ed. T.C. Smout, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 195-215.
8. See Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work, *Outline of A Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
9. For a detailed analysis of the writing of these three women see, for example, Tamara Wagner, “Travel Writing” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Writings*, ed. Linda H. Peterson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 175-188.
10. Because very little is known about Mary Lester, the woman and author, most autobiographical details come from her travel narrative of her journey through Honduras.
11. See Troy S. Floyd, *The Anglo-Spanish Struggle for Mosquitia*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970).
12. See, for example, Sharon Hartman-Strom, “‘If Success Depends Upon Enterprise’: Central America, US Foreign Policy, and Race in the Travel Narratives of E.G. Squier,” *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 3 (2011): 403–443 and Charles L Stansifer, 1966. “E. George Squier and the Honduras Inter-oceanic Railroad Project,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46 no. 1 (1966): 1-27.
13. For a detailed explanation of the picturesque movement by one of the initial exponents, see the artist and theorist, William Gilpin, *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772: On Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland*, (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1788).
14. See the seminal work by Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992).
15. Although Soltera was careful not to appear ungrateful to her non-European hosts when presented with meals and indicated that she did enjoy some the fresh fruit found in the country, food was clearly a marker of difference. For instance, of the local food, she said the following: ‘The soup, called chicken-broth, was nothing better than drowned hen; and the meat, cut in strips, looked like leathern sandals from the remotest antiquity. Everything that could be chopped up was chopped up; vegetables which would have passed muster had they been served whole, were tormented into squash, and little black beans in yellow dishes were the only edibles which, owing to their small size, had escaped the universal carnage’ (Lester 1964, 90).
16. Even though we do not have the exact number of Irish who immigrated to Honduras in an attempt to establish a colony under Pope, we can infer from records provided in the section “West Indies” of the *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, dated March 31, 1880, 2; and in the section “South America” of the *Evening News and Star*, dated April 3, 1880, 4; that at least sixty-three individuals sailed to Honduras from Ireland. Both records were accessed from the British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

17. Lester's manuscript appeared in Volume 135 of the magazine in the following issues: No. 819, January 1884, 115-142; No. 820, February 1884, 185-197; No. 821, March 1884, 291-309; No. 822, p. 452-468; No. 823, p. 582-604. <https://archive.org/details/blackwoodsmagazi135edinuoft>.
18. See, for example, the reviews included in "A Lady's Ride Across Spanish Honduras" of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, December 5, 1884, 4; "Literature" of *The Morning Post*, January 13, 1885, 3; "New Books" of *The Standard*, April 3, 1885, 2. All newspapers were accessed from the British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

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