

**(SELF-)CENSORSHIP AND THE IDEOLOGIES OF CRITICISM:
LATIN AMERICAN FEMINISMS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE
ANGLO-AMERICAN INSTITUTION**

by

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*(Self-)Censorship and the Ideologies of Criticism: Latin American
Feminisms within and outside the Anglo-American Institution*

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which the work of Latin American feminist critics affiliated with Anglo-American universities has been marked by adherence to the tenets of mainstream feminisms. As a result, they often ignore the particular Latin American socio-cultural realities they purport to study. The approach to this cultural problematic is by means of the critical analysis of the Latin American dominant feminist discourses in contrast with material from cultural production, which has been “sifted” and discarded by institutional academic practices. The main objective of the dissertation is therefore heuristic-epistemological. It exposes the considerable gaps that exist between two ways of understanding and representing reality. The argument is carried forward using the method of discourse analysis as sociocriticism

The dissertation is divided into two distinct parts in order to emphasize the breach that exists between the academic practices discussed in Part One and the cultural practices described in Part Two. The first chapter reviews the mainstream feminist theories that have most influenced Latin American women authors and critics. The second chapter presents two case studies which illustrate the dynamic of neo-colonization described above. The omissions in the critical works of Sara Castro Klarén (John Hopkins University) and Lucía Guerra-Cunningham (University of California, Irvine) show that their authors are held back by self-censorship and academic constraints. The third chapter discusses idiosyncratic female behaviors that have undermined the totemic value of men in Latin American patriarchal societies. The final chapter discusses the non-Cartesian way of thinking and perceiving prevalent in Latin America. As

an example of these practices, a discussion of women's roles within the ancient cult to the goddess María Lionza, particularly the rituals enacted by women for the domination and submission of men, is included in the second part of the chapter.

The dissertation concludes that Latin American feminist discourses that originate within Anglo-American universities fail to theorize some tabooed "feminine" subjects and social practices. By perpetuating the problem of presenting (self-)censored female subjectivities, these discursive academic practices continue to undermine feminist critical projects more relevant to Latin American contexts .

Dedication

To Andrés and Manuela Sosa

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Introduction

In its remote beginnings this research grew out of my sense of cultural inadequacy as a Latin American student living and studying in the United States and Canada. The first “encounter” dates back to the mid-Eighties, when I was confronted with Anglo-American feminist thought while taking a Latin American film course. Our object of study was the (in)famous Brazilian film Doña Flora and her two husbands, based on the novel of the same title by Jorge Amado. In an analysis of the film’s female protagonist, my classmates openly denounced what they saw in the love scenes as the utter denigration of women, while I perceived, but dared not express, a powerful affirmation of female sexual autonomy. My puzzlement increased when I heard our Brazilian female professor saying that situations like the ones portrayed in the film had nothing to do with everyday life --i.e., women never did behave that way-- and most importantly, that the film’s representation of women constituted only the wildest of male fantasies about women in heterosexual relationships. I strongly disagreed but remained silent.

A second incident occurred in a class on Hispanic culture where the teacher --a Latinamericanist by immersion-- was warning a group of students soon to travel to Spain and Latin America, about the humiliation and degradation women traditionally had to go through on their way to work. The assailing consisted of street compliments, or *piropos*, for which Spanish and Latin American males are so notorious. Drawing a little courage I suggested that she was perhaps looking only at the pitiable side of such a practice --outrageous, debasing comments about women’s appearance-- but that there was a radically opposite side to street-

complimenting; in this other truly poetic and ingenious dimension, rather than humiliating and degrading, the *piropos* were exhilarating and inspiring for many women who often chose to make a sport out of walking just for the sheer pleasure of receiving and returning these compliments.

A much more recent event, which inspired part of Chapter III of this thesis, took place in a course on Latin American women writers. The professor, a Latin American by origin, publicly disapproved of the female image that my comments were portraying: I had postulated in class that in Latin America there was a clear institutionalization of women in their role as lovers (*queridas*) and that this widespread practice constituted, for many women, a means of access to socio-political and economic power. It was very obvious to my classmates that our teacher was intent on disqualifying my observations, and they were right. When the class was dismissed the teacher approached me to state that it was irresponsible to speak of the hard-working Latin American woman in such an undignified manner.

The title of this dissertation, however, was inspired by yet another incident which convinced me that feminist ideology had succeeded in muzzling the aspects of everyday life that were not politically expedient. In a public conference given by a celebrated feminist author, I observed, with a mixture of fascination and awe, how each and every one of the conference participants was intimidated by the speaker's unequivocal ideological posture. One of the participants, a well-known feminist author herself, turned to me and whispered: "I would like to tell her [the speaker] that there is another very pressing side to what she is saying, but I don't want to sound like a good old liberal." This comment was very revealing of the institutional dynamics that were taking place in that conference

room, and made me think (long and hard) about censorship and self-censorship --hence the title of the dissertation.

Aware that I may run the risk of sounding like a “good old liberal” myself, it is imperative that I move on to define the terms that make up the title of the thesis: Censorship is used to qualify the kind of institutional academic regulation (and exclusion) that is not explicit, nor conscious or premeditated; it is rather a kind of unwritten, subtle, but insidious censorship exerted by categorical feminist positions --particularly those of the Anglo-American radical sector-- on the so-called “satellite” Latin American feminists based on the Anglo-American academy. Self-censorship results from the internalization of the above. Ideology is used as the Marxist notion of false consciousness --the representation of a (mis)construed “reality,” which in a synecdochal manner, presents the whole as “nature” proceeding only from partial observations. The unconscious is central to the workings of ideology, so I do not wish to imply that the control exerted by the dominant feminisms on the satellite ones is an open, explicit and conscious move. The radical feminist *doxa* (the most authoritative and binding opinion, the hegemonic truth) has established a series of ideologemes that have been internalized by satellite feminisms, namely, the equation of women with powerlessness; the degradation of heterosexuality and its concomitant anti-phallic campaign; the self-sufficiency of women’s sexuality; the erasing or surpassing of biological differences and the prevalence of constructivist arguments on women’s biology.¹

¹ There are many *doxas* within feminisms. However, this dissertation is mainly concerned with the *doxa* resulting from the theories developed by radical ex- “movement women” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whose ideologemes remain highly influential in the 1990s.

These elements are interwoven into the very functioning of the feminist discourses which establish a unified way of speaking about female experiences and which are regulated by the institution that legitimizes them. A feminist *doxa* is thus imposed and the satellite cultural/literary feminists discussed here are subjected (or subject themselves) to it. The knowledge they produce about Latin America in these alienating conditions, and their subjection to the *doxa*, is ultimately the result of a more or less conscious self-censorship.

The main objective of the dissertation is thus to confront Latin American feminist discourses dealing with Latin American contents and being produced within Anglo-American universities, with experiential data from everyday life in Latin American societies. The gap that exists between the academic texts analyzed here and the empirical observation of those societies constitutes an epistemological problem. Therefore, this dissertation questions the heuristic value of the discourses elaborated by Latin American feminists working within Anglo-American universities. The viability of academic, “scientific/objective” discourse to describe and explain some aspects of female experience, which in our perception are rampant in Latin America, is put to the test. Ideology, veiled academic censorship, and the individual self-censorship that results from the latter, appear to be the elements that prevent the feminist literary/cultural critics discussed here from gaining easier access to, and apprehending their objects of study in all their complexity. Mainstream academic feminisms, and the Latin American critics that adhere to them, seems to be incapable of integrating into literary and cultural criticism some aspects of the experiential lifeworld, and of rendering a more complex (and wholesome)

image of the Latin American women who are so ideologically portrayed in feminist satellite criticism.

The conscious plane of the text has curbed unconscious or semi-conscious elements that threaten to problematize even further the complex image of Latin American women. These elements do not conform to the *doxa* and are therefore absent from the conscious (textual) plane. I have attempted to place myself “at the margins” of the above-mentioned texts, adopting a critical stance toward the functioning of the feminist discourses in question and avoiding, to the best of my ability, to ally myself to any particular feminist or anti-feminist *doxa*.

Within the general problematic described above, it was crucial to impose very clear limits to the objectives of a dissertation which would otherwise become inarticulable given the extreme heterogeneity of the continent’s populations, the enormous differences between and within Latin American countries, between social classes and ethnic groups, and the different degrees of influence exerted from the cultural centers, which vary from one country to the other and from one ethnic or socio-economic group to the other. Postponing all historical considerations for a later investigation, the scope of the dissertation is circumscribed to a synchronic cut that coincides with the moment of effervescence of the Eighties’ radical feminisms in the Anglo-American academy. Given the countless authors and works of criticism and fiction that circulate in academic circles, as well as the proliferation of publications, I decided to limit this study to two representative authors and to project the findings of my two case studies to a more global totality.

My observations and analyses are therefore restricted to the works of two Latin American critics who live, work and publish in the United States,

as well as in Latin America. However, I am mostly concerned with the work they produce in an Anglo-American academic context. The critical texts analyzed here are authored by two of the most visible Latin American feminist scholars working in North American universities: Sara Castro Klarén (Johns Hopkins University) and Lucía Guerra-Cunningham (University of California, Irvine). I analyze three consecutive critical works by Castro Klarén and establish a comparative analysis between a critical essay and four short stories by Guerra-Cunningham which highlights the contrast between academic and fictional modes of representation. The selection criteria was based on the relevance of this corpus to illustrate the position of satellite feminisms *vis-à-vis* the mainstream currents that articulate the *doxa*. However, it should be stressed that the focus of this dissertation is not the thought of the selected authors, but rather the heuristic value of the discourses they adopt.

More than a particular theoretical school in which to entrench the dissertation, I have recuperated and identified specific elements or notions postulated by several theorists whose works illuminate, support and have inspired my own critical positions. I apply the Foucauldian postulate of the “order of discourse” (1972), i.e., the notion that in every society there are socialized discursive formations endowed with the authority of truth. What, when, and how the subject expresses him/herself is regulated by those discursive formations. Consequently, only if a subject expresses him/herself in a specific way, he or she will be “within the true.” Apart from the rarefaction of the subject and the circumstances that legitimate a specific discourse, Foucault emphasizes the taboo of the proscribed object in every discursive formation. His notion of the “subjugated knowledges,” (1980: 82) and, in particular, his postulates of the taboo of the proscribed

object have been crucial in elucidating, especially in chapters III and IV, the “low ranking,” non-academic elements which are stigmatized or distorted by satellite criticism and may not receive a serious “hearing” in feminist circles which strive to be “within the true” (1972: 224). Luiz Costa Lima’s concept of the control of the imaginary (1988), his idea that texts are vulnerable to open or concealed forms of regulation or “taming,” has illuminated in more than one way how hegemony is articulated. Louis Althusser’s concept of the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISA), which he uses to define institutions (school, State, Church, the media, literature, etc.) within which capitalism reproduces its relations of production, is useful in this context to explain how the agency of the academy disseminates values and ideas and subjects individuals --in this case Latin American feminist critics-- to the hegemony of a dominant ideology by means of the institution. All these concepts and postulates have allowed me to undertake a sociocriticism based more on discourse analysis (Gómez- Moriana, 1993) than on content analysis, without forgetting however to contrast the results with the empirical observations of everyday life.

The practice of cultural/literary criticism which focuses on works produced by and about Latin American women has established its credentials within Anglo-American academic institutions. Latin Americanists, by origin, trade, or both, are determined to render cultural practices, artistic manifestations, and life experiences of women from that part of the world comprehensible to Anglo-American or European academic communities in their quest for cross-cultural understanding and in their attempt to undertake a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge. This exchange has not always been as fruitful as intended, and has in fact resulted in an often problematic relationship between the female critic, the

object of her criticism, and the institutional discourses that articulate and materialize this criticism.

Euro-american feminist discourses have produced a gun-powder trail effect in the field of Latin American feminist scholarship which is currently in the process of developing around and within many well-established institutions of the cultural centers. The dynamics of rejection or devalorization of regional and local traditions, and the appropriation and superimposition of new and fashionable critical models that cannot codify these traditions, have taken a toll on the scholars' sensitivity and their ability to perceive and represent the "roughness" of some cultural denominators, belief systems, and practices whose mundanity surpasses the boundaries of hegemonic feminist discourses and schools of criticism, particularly literary/cultural criticism.

Due to their dominant status, these specialized discourses have become virtual keepers --in the manner of *Cerberus*, the guardian dog of the underworld-- of the regions of political correctness set forth by academic institutions, numbing the senses or muzzling the voices of many Latin Americanist scholars. The feminist academic apparatus has thus congealed particular ways of "discoursing" based on distinct ideologemes which impose, as mentioned before, dominant lines of thought and expression --the *doxa*-- and which result in academic censorship, and ultimately, in self-censorship.

The relationship between the critic, her object, and the academic feminist discourses she employs, is thus problematic in more ways than one. The institution acts as a sieve that retains and discards unwanted material, one which is potentially damaging to feminist political agendas, but which often remains, ironically, crucial to the eventual implementation,

viability and ultimate "success" of such agendas. The end-products of scholarly undertakings have thus been purified to the utmost degree of material that remains both alien and threatening to the different causes of dominant feminisms. The resulting critical texts obscure rather than unveil meanings, suppress, simplify or distort utterly rich, complex and sometimes "undignified" situations.

Chapter I, "Voices in Conflict," explores the works of Euro-american feminists who have had an enormous influence on Latin-americanists. Chapter II, "(Self-)Censorship on Academic Grounds," analyzes Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham's works as ideal "case studies" for the illustration of the dynamics and problematic relationship described above. The discussion and analysis of these works is timely and largely justified, given that their wide circulation both in North America and in Latin America has had far-reaching ideological implications.

As a bilingual observer moving freely between contrasting worlds, I have always been astonished by the abysmal and perhaps unbridgeable distance between what is "said" in some of these critical texts, and what is "lived" in the local and regional everyday realities of Latin America. The breach between critical texts and the everydayness of women's lives expands at the same rate and extent that the specialized and esoteric academic language increases its impenetrability and homogenizing faculties. This breach results in the difficulty in transcribing, or rendering intelligible, the popular, the vernacular and the pedestrian aspects of the lives of Latin American women. It would be a gross injustice, however, to say that feminist literary/cultural criticism has not attempted to bring these aspects to the surface; but likewise, it would be an overstatement to say

that feminist literary/cultural criticism has achieved a significant fidelity in its reworking of culture into "reality".

Contemporary feminist discourses appear to swing between periods of total denial or transcendence of the representation of the female body and moments of assigning it critical center stage. Most recently, the female body has not only been highly conspicuous and visible in feminist scholarship, it has also been the object of the most extraordinary critical frenzy. It is now both fashionable and compelling to talk about the female "embodied" subject. The organizing force behind these opposing critical trends of body-denying and body-fetishizing within feminist discourses, whether these be radical, liberal-conservative or outright "anti-feminist" is none other than female sexuality and all its biological, psycho-social, economic, and political implications.

In their adherence to, or questioning of, Euro-american feminist discourses about the female body and/or female sexuality within Latin American texts and contexts, the critical discourses of Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham reflect less an empirical approach to their own cultural heritages than a submission to and acceptance of the dominant canon within the institutions that sustain them or disseminate and publish their works. Until very recently, a tyrannical order of discourse (Foucault, 1972) has been successful in the production of blindfolded, and deaf-mute discourses, full of silences, unanswered questions, smoke screens, ellipses and critical mishmashes, like those of Castro Klarén, in areas regarding the female body and/or female sexuality in Latin America.

I have speculated on possible answers to the questions that these texts --the case studies of Chapter II-- have raised. Chapters III and IV are a search for the material that is obscured by smoke screens, displaced by

ellipses, or hidden under critical pastiches in the aforementioned critical texts.

The transition of Chapter II to Chapter III is a “rough” one; it moves from a formal analysis of critical cultural/literary texts toward a more empirical approach to the “cultural icons” which constitute the material of Chapter III, “Power(less) Totems.” This chapter investigates the cultural currents that run beneath the so-called feminine censurable behaviors which have a lasting effect on sexual politics. I have expanded the meaning of the word *Totem* to describe and to qualify the Latin American males who oscillate between authority and powerlessness. I argue that Latin American men (and possibly men in many other cultures) are totemic in this particular way, i.e., they are at once powerful and powerless, depending on one’s point of view. The central figures of this chapter, however, are the active victims of male culture, i.e., women who despite a position of inequality may manipulate their way out of that position, even when most kinds of manipulation would still imply a subordinate condition. Active victims are perceived as anti-feminist characters. They are often banned from feminist-oriented texts because they “speak the feminine,” i.e., they are considered solely as a construction of male culture. This chapter includes an examination of proverbs and maxims of a rather “low-brow” origin, as well as anecdotal material and popular songs that allude either to the sacralization of motherhood or to the glorification of female sexual power. My analyses are based both on first hand experience and on non-canonic booklets and pamphlets of wide circulation in Latin American countries.

Chapter IV, “*Yo no creo en brujas, pero de que vuelan, vuelan,*” (I don't believe in witches, but they do fly), emphasizes the ambivalent

relationship of Latin Americans with two drastically different ways of perceiving and feeling the “real” or the “rational.” The practices that take place within the context of the cult to the ancient goddess María Lionza may seem rather obscure by Western feminist standards. They constitute paradigmatic examples of what Foucault called the subjugated, disqualified and discontinuous knowledges, which as such, have become easy targets of the trivializing effects of academic feminisms. The description, and discussion of the prayers and rituals practiced by women within and around the cult are the focus of this chapter. These ceremonies include, but are not limited to, conjurations intended to fulfill women’s desires, whether these be to maim the sexual power of a partner, to secure their (and their children’s) means of subsistence, to get a female rival out of the way, and last, but not least, to enjoy sexual exclusivity, or “possession” of the phallus.

The format of the dissertation is intended to highlight the contrast between the functioning of academic discourses and the immediacy of non-academic cultural practices observable in everyday life. Therefore, the study is divided into two distinct and “mutually exclusive” parts. Part One, which includes the first two chapters, analyzes the knowledge represented by academic feminist discourses which adopt an ideologically correct stance regarding Latin American women’s images; Part Two includes the last two chapters and attempts to integrate the material from experiential data which has been “filtered” by institutional academic practices.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Voices in Conflict

This chapter focuses on feminist voices from Latin America which at once are in conflict and converge with mainstream Euro-american feminisms. Women's cultural identity, notions of otherness and gendered politics, arguments around the concepts of constructivism vs. essentialism and sameness vs. difference --both in identity politics and between the sexes-- are still matters of discussion in heated international feminist debates. Latin American feminist critics both depend upon and refuse some of the pronouncements made by well-established Euro-american authors and texts. Before the points of intersection and conflict between dominant and satellite feminisms can be ascertained, I will partially shed light on the context in which these currents have taken shape.

I. 1. Antecedents

It has been said that the seeds of feminism are as old as those of patriarchy, for wherever and whenever alleged abuses of men against women have occurred, these have most certainly been met with strong resistance. However, this resistance --expressed across time in various ways in women's cultural and artistic manifestations and in their daily lives-- began to be intensely and systematically studied only in the second half of the 20th century.

The classification of feminist schools of thought undertaken by scholars and activists is now studied in depth in universities around the world. Professors and students alike align themselves with or against cultural, liberal, or radical feminisms. Other branches of feminism have undertaken the massive dismantling of Marxism, Freudianism and Existentialism, notwithstanding their debt to these philosophies, and perhaps even because of it.

The past thirty years have witnessed an extraordinary expansion of interest in the feminist theories articulated in dominant cultural institutions. The theories that have most influenced Latin American scholars, and the ones with which my research is concerned, are those which emerged from the works of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir during the so-called second-wave feminism. Woolf's seminal book, A Room of One's Own (1929) and De Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) have continued to generate, from their publication to the present day, innumerable polemical and controversial responses in the international academic communities, including those of Latin America.

Virginia Woolf's denunciation of women's financial constraints and their direct relationship to the marring of women's intellectual development, and her belief in the existence of a “female aesthetics” and a particular form of “feminine writing” have influenced great numbers of women. Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir's statements on the patriarchal imposition of women's biological determinism, of woman as man's Other, and of the feminine as an invention of man, have produced countless heated debates. Constructionist versus essentialist arguments, sameness versus difference positions and the concomitant discussion of variables such as race, class and sexual orientation, have at once rendered more fluid and

stultified male-female relations in everyday life. Tensions arising from these discussions have polarized feminist and non-feminist scholars within dominant academic institutions.

The most influential heiresses of Woolf's and De Beauvoir's literary/cultural legacies in the Anglo-American terrain are Elaine Showalter and Kate Millet with their respective works, A Literature of Their Own (1978), and Sexual Politics (1970). These landmarks of feminist culture have overturned conceptual frameworks of thought, generating hundreds of other works ranging from the most liberal to the most radical feminist utopias. Showalter's work provoked a long series of responses that entailed the massive critical revision of the negative stereotyping of women in literature. This was followed by the unearthing of women-authored works that had previously been dismissed as inferior, and which contained a hidden female culture most valuable for the celebration of woman. It is not too far fetched to say that A Literature of Their Own, and other works by Showalter, are responsible for the gynocriticism and gynocentrism (terms coined by the critic) that ensued, which allude to woman as the producer of textual meaning and celebrate woman in Anglo-American feminisms.

Millet's Sexual Politics, one of the most acerbic attacks on Freudianism and on the deep-seated roots of sexism in literature and society, rapidly increased an awareness of the patriarchal biases that kept women both subjected to and subdued by male culture. This book is perhaps also responsible for the extreme views adopted by some feminists on issues such as biological determinism and negative gender stereotyping in what Millet sees as an overwhelmingly misogynist culture.

One of the outcomes of the oppression of women denounced by Millet and many others was a feminist reaction against the conception of "anatomy as destiny," a notion inherited from De Beauvoir. Millet's followers vehemently opposed the control of women's bodies and their sexuality, a reaction that in its extreme forms, implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, denied biological specificity. References to anatomy, biology, or the female body as an area of difference thus became not viable for the institution of a feminist political stance. Biologism would represent a regressive return to the embrace of patriarchal values through which woman's biology was manipulated to men's advantage. It was necessary, and to a certain extent constructive, to devalue --or de-fetishize-- women's biological specificity to the greatest extent possible. Consequently, utopian visions of egalitarian populations inhabited by androgynous/transsexual beings, such as the one presented by Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex (1971) reinforced the dichotomous anti-nature (biological sex), pro-culture stance (socially produced gender) of the feminist international terrain.¹

On the other side of the Atlantic, French feminists such as H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray emphasized the female difference that their Anglo-American counterparts strove to deny. Cixous established a direct connection between the biological specificities of the female body and a particular way of writing by women, which came to be known as * criture f eminine*. The theoretical position of * criture f eminine* upheld by Cixous and other French feminists, challenges the notion of lack by opposing to it

¹ Although Millet's and Firestone's works were written more than two decades ago, the influence of the tenets articulated in their works, as well as in those of Carol Hanisch, Mary Daly, Susan Brownmiller, Ti-Grace Atkinson and many others, should not be underestimated. In the 1990s, we are still seeing the effects, waves, and sequels that derive from the power of these late 1960s and early 1970s feminist theoretical texts.

the positive assertion of female subjectivity. The style known as "feminine" is, according to Cixous, not exclusive to women. It is characterized, among other things, by disruptions of syntax leading to the disturbance of meaning and by claims that there exists a subversive power in feminine sexuality and in feminine texts. Thus, in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1981), Cixous celebrates the decentered eroticism of the female body and its specific physiological functions, urging women to "write with white ink," an allusion to (and a fusion of) maternal milk and the production of textual meaning.

Luce Irigaray's feminist discourse is as insistently physical and sexualized as that of Cixous, stressing the plurality of female sexuality and its connection to woman's language, particularly to a specific way of *parler femme*. For Irigaray as for Cixous, the female body should be repossessed, and its differences emphasized, so as to elaborate alternative forms of female knowledge and subjectivity that could surpass the binary tendencies characteristic of phallogocentrism (Cixous). As we shall see further on, this theoretical position of the new French feminisms stands in direct opposition to the quasi femino-phobic stance advocated by the highly influential sector of Anglo-American feminism.

Alternative modes of signification are also offered in the theories set forth by Julia Kristeva in Revolution in Poetic Language (1974). Here, Kristeva discusses the notion of "the semiotic" (Lacan's pre-verbal imaginary) which is as suppressed and peripheral as the feminine and, as such, is opposed to "the symbolic," the masculine structure of language. As Cixous' *écriture féminine* and Irigaray's *parler femme*, Kristeva's "semiotic" is potentially subversive and disruptive of the male-centered systems of signification charged with the production of binary oppositions

and false dichotomies. Cixous,' Irigaray's and Kristeva's dependence on, and departure from, Freudian and Lacanian theories has been noted by many critics.

Anglo-American and French feminists have maintained what can be seen as a "love-hate relationship."² Despite the points of conflict, they have influenced each other throughout the years and they may have more in common than either group is willing to admit. Satellite Latin American academic feminists have drawn from both sources, the Anglo American and the French, in their search for self-definition. However, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, dominant feminisms --which alienate Latin Americanists from their own quotidian realities-- have led women authors and critics to accommodate their own works to the ideology of the established "feminist truth."

To be "within the truth" and belong to a fellowship of discourses, (Foucault, 1978), academic feminists from Latin America have had to tend towards constructivist over essentialist arguments about women's nature, positioning themselves against the tyranny of women's biology. This is exemplified by Sara Castro Klarén and Lucía Guerra-Cunningham --the case studies of Chapter II-- whose critiques concur with Anglo-American feminist views on biological determinism and other thorny issues of feminist interest world-wide. For instance, Castro Klarén says that woman is first and foremost an "historical event" and the "locus of contending relationships" ("Novelness," 59). Guerra-Cunningham, on the other hand, is bothered by the process of naturalization that the female body has undergone, arguing that "woman is a complex social construction

² For a recent discussion of the partial interpretations of French feminisms by Anglo-American academic feminists see Another Look Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism, ed. Lynn Huffer, particularly Christine Delphy's article, "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move."

structured by a process of mutilation that reaffirms her primary role in life" ("Shadows," 118). In her writings the female body is associated with the notions of a "biological trap," a "textual absence," or a "blank space where masculine desire inscribes itself" (*Ibid.*). The body for the anti-essentialist sector of mainstream feminism is exceedingly problematic and the critical works of Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham clearly illustrate this trend.

The reaction to the constructivist position brought with it a pendulum swing to the essentialist side of the opposition --the celebration of everything female undertaken by Anglo-American scholars, who, perhaps inspired by their French counterparts, celebrated womanness in their own way. Lucía Guerra-Cunningham records this trend in her critiques, suggesting the creation of a new social organization with a "uterine diffusion as a specular image" ("Shadows,"119). She conceives menstrual blood, for instance, as a "sign that possesses the potential to substitute blood in its connotations of death [and] to signify life instead in a society freed of hierarchies and structures of domination" (*Ibid.*,120).

Castro Klarén denounces the structures of domination of imperialistic ideologies and the patriarchal order, reminding the readers, as does Lucía Guerra, that in Latin America, woman is the other of a colonized [male] Other. Another message that figures prominently in Castro Klarén's texts is her suggestion that Latin American women authors and critics should refuse any invitation to join the center. This project, which will be discussed in Chapter II, also directly contradicts her editorial work --with Beatriz Sarlo and Sylvia Molloy-- in the anthology Women's Writing in Latin America (1991), a proto-canonical work devoted to the

unveiling of Latin America's female literary tradition, and conceived much in the manner of Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own.

Castro Klarén seems to be both contesting and recreating absolutes, establishing and debunking canons, creating and destroying unalterable truths. In addition, like Guerra she seeks to pave the way for effecting ruptures with hegemonic currents at the same time that they insert their own within the mainstream. Underneath the layers of palimpsestic critical writing seem to lie the unacknowledged frustrated capability of expressing sentiments, ideas and cultural givens of their own traditions which cannot be named or framed within the hegemonic models they utilize without being trivialized or seen with condescending eyes. Latin American critics are thus caught in the dilemma that Cynthia Ward has observed in the works of African author Buchi Emecheta: "Success in speaking unequivocally in the service of feminism produces a voice that serves neocolonialism; speaking for anticolonialism produces a voice that serves patriarchy" (Cited by Sizemore, 369).

I. 2. Academic vs. Lived Realities

The indisputable clash of Anglo-American mainstream and Latin American satellite feminisms occurs when the theories advanced in their critical texts --which purportedly represent women in literature and society-- encounter the social realities of the activist women's movements in Latin America. The arena of women's social movements constitutes a space where sharp divisions and conflicts between womanist activism and dominant academic feminisms become evident. While the latter has focused mainly on the discussion of gender issues (feminine/feminist, nature/nurture arguments, politics of victimization of women within the

patriarchal order, etc.), the former has struggled for the basic needs for survival.

Latin American feminist activists have therefore repeatedly expressed their rejection of gender issues in favor of more pressing matters of survival. In this scenario the battle between the sexes often becomes overshadowed by the battle of the sexes against the system that oppresses both men and women. In women's views, and despite their assertions to the contrary, men suffer as much as women in oppressive socioeconomic conditions where the discussion of the above-mentioned international feminist issues is nothing short of a luxury. Very often dominant feminist ideologies would not speak to these women, nor would they necessarily lead women to question their traditional roles as mothers or wives. However, organized feminism has re-evaluated the gendered role of motherhood as a source of power with the potential for political transformation. A paradigmatic example of this is the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina.

Latin American women have therefore taken advantage of their gendered roles of mothers and wives to confront the State. They have demanded the improvement of the material conditions of their lives and that of their family members. They lead neighborhood associations, voice their communities' discontent with the lack of basic services (water, health services, public transportation), fight the high cost of medicine by resorting to the use of indigenous medicinal plants to cure the members of their communities, and, as we shall see in Chapter IV, women become spiritual and psychological guides to members of their communities. In so doing they have politicized idealized roles, simultaneously struggling for sociopolitical transformation and maintaining cultural tradition. Social

scientists expect that "active motherhood" will socialize women into struggling not only against class oppression but also against issues that profoundly affect their personal lives such as male violence, reproductive freedom, etc. (Logan, 159).

The expectations of Anglo-American feminists regarding the deep questioning of personal issues by Latin American women of the popular sectors seem too high, especially considering the socioeconomic and political spaces they inhabit. Birth control campaigns or laws that support reproductive freedom are extremely difficult to implement given not only the dismal material conditions of Latin American countries, but also the deeply rooted belief that motherhood empowers women. The imposition of Western agendas in these spaces interferes with the local and regional belief systems. For many women both in urban and rural contexts, motherhood is a superior biological, magical and social state of being. Jacqueline Clarac de Briceño has observed this phenomenon in the Venezuelan Andean region:

The woman, who is single and has not yet borne children still has vagina and uterus empty. If the former is not occupied by the man's penis, and the latter by the children (fetuses), they are occupied then by the *zángano*, [male bee], that odd synthesis of the penis and the fetus, which not only pursues the woman in order to possess her but also, later on, when it has penetrated her, the *zángano* nests in her womb until it dries her up totally, provoking her death. [...] maternity is what gives woman (magically) her liberation (liberation from the *zángano* and from her own mother) investing her with a bio-magical-social status [...]. The woman with child is the Universal Mother Goddess [whereas] the woman who does not give birth or does not raise her children, or kills them,

is the monster-woman. I am persuaded that in Venezuela, the Oedipal complex should be analyzed in relation to the fear towards the mother that kills. She is the *Llorona*, (weeper) the woman who takes the opposite road, who regresses to barrenness because she dried herself up when she killed her child. (My translation) (Clarac, 137-138)³

The *Llorona* myth is in no way specific to the Venezuelan Andes. It reappears in other areas of the country and permeates different social strata, migrating with the centralization moves from rural/provincial sectors to urban spaces. Several other versions of this myth are found in Mexico, Colombia, Perú, and possibly other Latin American countries, a fact which explains in part the difficulties inherent in the institution and implementation of birth control campaigns.

The massive campaigns of empowerment or development undertaken by well-intentioned feminist advisors and feminist organizations of core countries have in many cases been met with the strong resistance of Latin American women. This resistance may not be obvious to the newcomers, but the apparent acceptance of imported feminist terms such as gender may only denote a strategic tolerance for the acquisition of much needed material resources. Empowerment and development are highly problematic notions when moved from so-called First-World to Third-World contexts.

³ "La mujer que, en efecto, es soltera y no tiene hijos todavía tiene su vagina y su útero vacíos. Si no los ocupa el penis del varón y, luego, niños (fetos), los ocupa entonces el zángano, esa síntesis del penis y del feto ya que no sólo persigue a la joven para poseerla sino que, luego, una vez que ha logrado penetrar en ella, anida en su vientre hasta que la seca totalmente, provocando su muerte [...]. La maternidad es lo que [...] le da (mágicamente) su liberación a la mujer (liberación del zángano así como de su propia madre), dándole un status biomágicosocial. [...]. La mujer con hijos es la Diosa Madre Universal, [mientras que] la mujer que no pare, o que no logra criar a sus hijos, o que los mata, es la mujer-monstruo. Estoy persuadida de que el Edipo en Venezuela debería ser analizado en relación con el miedo hacia la madre que mata. Ella es la *Llorona*, la mujer que realiza el camino inverso, que retrocede a ser infértil porque se secó al matar a su hijo."

It must be kept in mind that the structure and functioning of power relations, as well as the understanding of development, respond to a cultural (as well as social, economic and political) coherence that is distinctive of, and specific to, the class, ethnic background and cultural parameters of each country. Thus, the imposition of westernized agendas in these spaces interferes with the etiology of radically different symbolic systems.

Western "interventionist" crusades of empowerment and development are often unhealthy transplants into social spaces where women acquire self-worth and are highly valued for the very functions that are held as the main cause of female oppression in the "developed" world. The majority of women in Latin America are moved into action less by issues of gender equality, sexual orientation, etc. than by issues that are not as crucial in the feminist agendas of Anglo-America or Europe. While the former offer a discursive reality of the situation the latter bring up their most basic needs into the belligerent discourse of activism; they would more readily ally themselves with their men against class or ethnic oppression than fight against them over gender issues.

I. 3. Identity in the Present Latin American Cultural Debate

señores, ¿dónde leíbol mi, plis!
Luz María Umpierre

To speak nowadays about identity in any context is often to enter into a quagmire. The need for cultural self-definition is inherent in the very idea of collectivity. This need, however, appears to become more dramatic at historical moments when attempts to impose a cultural Other are

undertaken. At present, this kind of imposition is aided by the ongoing globalization of the world economy, the reflourishing of dependent capitalisms and the proliferation of cultural interventionist policies extending from the centers of power to peripheral countries. . The imposition of economic and cultural values on Latin America and other Third-World countries, can only be described as a neo-colonial situation, despite the claims of many social scientists and cultural critics who qualify this situation as the post-colonial era.

This technical form of ideological (cultural, political, or economic) penetration of the centers into the margins has paradoxically granted the margins the possibility of self-definition through the means of the "Other." The reaction against this "Otherization" is evident in the margins' attempts to desarticulate the universalizing tendencies of the center, to talk rather than be talked about, and to defend a right to self-determination. In times where the very preservation of subjecthood is at serious stake, given the recrudescence of a universalizing thrust, the subject of Western humanism is fragmented into thousands of groups of subjects who refuse to be labeled --like the Puerto Rican poet cited in the epigraph-- claiming to possess a unique voice and a specific way of world-making.

My research is specifically concerned with the ways of world making and ongoing attempts at self-definition and identity formation undertaken by Latin American feminist scholars within the Anglo-American academy. While establishing women's identities in their cultural and literary critiques, these scholars have found themselves in the midst of the already mentioned dilemma of serving either a neocolonialist or a patriarchal agenda.

The discursive colonization of the material and historical heterogeneities of Latin American women carries with it an authorizing signature that facilitates the emergence of a satellite discourse *vis-à-vis* a dominant one, a process in which the latter is the legitimizing instance that imposes limits on the former. Critics like those who will be discussed in Chapter II have needed both to internalize and to resist discursive strategies as a precondition for inserting the Latin American female subjects into cultural/literary identities within discourses of the center, thus perpetuating the pattern.

This task has proven to be a daunting one, for in their “putting into discourse” of the Latin American women in critical essays, these critics have suppressed the representation of traits and experiences of women that have been deemed not acceptable to the feminist *doxa* on which they depend for the dissemination of their views. It appears that to fictionalize without condemning (either in critical or literary discourses) the questionable female behaviors described in Chapters III and IV --i.e., “feminine” values which cater to patriarchal rules, or beliefs that do not fit the positivistic, rational worldviews, would still be frowned-upon by a vigilant academy where these non-feminist aspects of female experience threaten to undermine agendas for transformation and change.

The reluctance to represent female characters of “ill-repute” in critical and literary texts is evidenced by the scarcity of works that criticize or fictionalize, for instance, the paradoxical personas of female prostitutes, of women as phallus-worshippers and exploiters of men, of women as *brujas*, practitioners of magical and esoteric beliefs, and in short, of women as “active victims,” a construct discussed in Chapter III. It appears thus that Latin American critics and writers are still ostensibly held back

by academic censorship (and individual self-censorship). In addition to the restriction of the feminist *doxa*, the pressure of psycho-social taboos and the critics' limitations of class, one could perhaps add other obstacles that prevent the free flowing of those sanctioned female images, behaviors and beliefs into the symbolic level of representation. Latin American cultural texts by women (critical and literary) remain thus largely unconscious of these female images.

In light of long-standing patriarchal prejudices about women's inability to be rational, and in view of the pressures exerted along the same lines by the dominant feminist imaginaries --except perhaps, more recently, those of New Age eco-feminisms-- Latin American critics and writers seem intent on proving not only their objectivity and ability to be politically correct, but also their rationality. Luisa Valenzuela, one of the most respected Latin American women authors, deplors the existence of irrational superstition in Argentina. She says that her caricature of López Rega in Cola de Lagartija (Lizard's Tail) --the authoritarian sorcerer whom Juan and Isabel Perón used as an advisor in occult sciences and astrology-- was written only to come to terms with the reasons why “a supposedly intelligent and sophisticated people like the Argentines had fallen into the hands of this so-called sorcerer” (cited by Jehenson, 73). In just one sweeping statement, Valenzuela dismisses, trivializes (and silences) such a common and generalized practice, not only in Argentina but also in other Latin American countries where alternative belief systems and “superstitions,” constitute, in the context of the Anglo-American academy, a mark of radical difference across class and ethnic borders. By claiming and presenting (within the frame provided by the identity debates) a self-censored subjectivity that caters to the feminist *doxa*, Latin American

feminists are reproducing sameness instead of producing difference, which is their stated objective.

The process of producing sameness rather than difference is contained in the notion of the "control of the imaginary" posited by Luiz Costa Lima. For Costa Lima, imitation and mimesis are, respectively, ways of producing sameness and difference. In this process, the satellite feminist ideologies absorb and appropriate the values of the dominant central ones. This mimetic process, predicts Costa Lima, has two possible outcomes:

In the first, difference does not advance and the pattern of similarity takes on so much power that the new individual becomes a copy, albeit an imperfect one, of the chosen model. The outcome of copy or imitation is a pathological product. The "normal" resolving process has an opposite profile: "the imitator" becomes autonomous --that is, he or she assumes the mark of his or her difference. The real path of mimesis, therefore, supposes not copy but difference. Rather than imitation, mimesis is the production of difference. (Costa Lima, viii)

We can use Costa Lima's assertion to explain the dynamics of appropriation at play in the production of critical and fictional texts by Latin American women writers published by, and circulated within, the Anglo-American academy. To be admitted by the hegemonic feminist circles, the writer has to accept, or at least be assimilated to, the discourse of her Anglo-American counterparts. In other words, she must become a "pathological" copy of her model, in Costa Lima's sense. Since the characters she creates must be plausible or at least functional within the hegemonic imaginary and the radical feminist's agenda, the writer must consciously or unconsciously produce "pathological" constructs, not conflictive reflections of her social

reality. Consequently, to be embraced by the fellowship of hegemonic discourses, the writer must engage in the production of sameness, not of difference.

The symbolic representation of women bearing a mark of difference is more likely to be created within the frame of literary fiction, as the short stories of Lucía Guerra show in the chapter that follows. Although literary texts may also impose a *doxa*, they allow for a greater possibility for the subversion of fixed ideologies and sectarian politics:

In this manner the literary text, working upon the language, contributes to the evolution, not only of the literary system or the sub-system or genre to which it belongs, but to that of all the practices of interaction, verbal or non-verbal, artistic or non-artistic, of the society that produces it and consumes it. (My translation) (Gómez-Moriana, 1990: 15)⁴

The dialogical spaces that transcend literary systems or subsystems contrast dramatically with the monological discourses of dominant and satellite feminisms who conform to a *doxa* and strive to be within its strict limits, regardless of their veracity or falseness. The function of these works seems to be, as Foucault points out in another context:

[...] to preserve or to reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community, according to strict regulations, without those in possession being dispossessed by this very distribution. (Foucault, 1972: 225)

⁴ "C'est ainsi que le texte littéraire, en travaillant sur la langue, contribue à faire évoluer non pas uniquement le système littéraire, ou le sous-système ou genre auquel il appartient, mais toutes les pratiques d'interaction verbale ou non-verbale, artistiques ou non artistiques, de la société qui le produit et le consomme."

North American dominant feminisms "constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules," as Foucault has noted on the subject of the functioning of discourse (*Ibid.*, 224). The reactivation of rules undertaken by the feminist *doxa* muzzles paradoxes, and usually prevents any dialogue with antagonistic elements or differing interests. Within the institution, Latin American feminists reluctantly conform to a *doxa* that labels them and prevents them from depicting aspects of female experience that do not reflect or denounce women's oppression or those that are not sufficiently empowering. This explains in part the strategic mimicry that critics like Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham have developed, and which will be discussed at length in Chapter II.

Within Latin America, there appears to be a breach between the lines of communication in a triangle formed by the writer of literary fictions, the critic that comments on her work, and the social reality that they both reflect and comment on. When the writer comes face to face with flesh-and-bone women, there seems to be an obstacle that interferes with the symbolic representation of (anti)heroines. The cultural/literary critic, on her part, does not seem to find any empty spaces to be filled by these narratives and therefore, does not "report" any voids back to the writer. The third side of the triangle, i.e. social reality, appears therefore to flow into literary/cultural texts through an ideological sieve that retains and discards anti-feminist images, or patriarchal images of women of problematic and paradoxical representation:

[...] art, the law, and modern institutions all face a reality that speaks like ideology, and ideologies that look like reality; this becomes the normative context for the unequal relationship between art and reality, what is often called the loss of art's representational capacities. (Zaslove, 73)

There is a systematic absence, in artistic cultural/literary texts by women authors, of female characters who prostitute themselves in order to feed a family or to improve the quality of their lives; of women who compete in beauty pageants to achieve economic independence from authoritarian fathers and/or facilitate their appointment to prominent political positions; of women who are respected, glorified or vilified for their “illegitimate” liaisons with Heads of State; of women known as *aguantadoras* (holders or keepers) in charge of hiding the goods stolen by their children and their men in the shanty towns of Latin America; and of women (*brujas*) who train other women of different social strata in the arts of men's seduction, domination, and control.

The representation of the types described above would entail the consistent opening-up, and the deeper problematization --by women critics and writers-- of institutions such as prostitution, beauty pageants, *barraganismo* (*barraganas* are women who, as mistresses of powerful men, may achieve more political power than ministers and even presidents), organized crime (or rather the active role of women within it), and last, but not least, women's roles in alternative religions or systems of beliefs.

However, it appears that recently, with the ever-increasing popularity of the Latin American *telenovelas* (soap operas), some of the above-mentioned female “villains” are making their way into the powerful

mass-media. The *telenovelas*, more than any genre, have far-reaching influence in the psycho-social spheres. It seems plausible to assert that television's incidence in society, and vice-versa, is far more significant than the incidence, for example, that a novel or a short story could ever have. Only a small percentage of Latin American populations can read, but the great masses watch television. Women script-writers have taken a more active role in the creation and production of *telenovelas*, allowing for the representation of other women of "ill repute," as viewed exclusively by the female gaze. Thus, the dynamic relation or exchange between the writer of *telenovelas*, the communicator, the audiences, and the everyday realities represented in the genre, seems to flow substantially easier than between the triangle formed by the literary/cultural critic, the writer and the everyday reality the latter records.⁵

In the radically different economic and philosophical systems of Latin American countries, the meanings and values attached to the institutions of prostitution or *barraganismo*, to name only two crucial ones, must necessarily be re-evaluated. Admittedly, these institutions exist within an overwhelmingly patriarchal ideological frame, but even patriarchy and *machismo* within it takes on different meanings in Latin American contexts. Patriarchy can be as plural as feminism. Neither is a monolith with a sole inscription on it. Different patriarchies generate different forms of feminisms or anti-feminisms, and vice versa. Here is where the Latin American critics' position --Castro Klarén's and Guerra-Cunningham's among them-- about the Otherization of Latin American

⁵ For a thorough analysis of the role of women in the *telenovela* phenomenon, and the different types of female "villains" represented in the genre, see Sonia Chocrón's "Mujer de Telenovela."

men requires the examination of a whole different dimension, as does the complex notion of power inequality between the sexes.

Radical feminisms have set forth a monolithic idea of power that belittles women and often renders them powerless. Power, however, is arguably a relative value. To speak about power in the context of male-female relations in Latin America (or in any context) is to walk a tight rope because power consists largely of what people believe it to be. If women --*brujas*, beauty queens, *barraganas*, or *aguantadoras*-- are socialized into and insist on viewing their trade or way of life as an exercise of/towards power, and if they articulate it in their own idiosyncratic ways, then what they articulate as power is surely what they and those men and women who surround them or consult with them believe it is. Whether they speak from a place of opulence or from one of utter poverty is irrelevant: the discourse is, as Foucault has suggested, "the very exercise of that power." This is why empowerment campaigns may provide beleaguered women with important resources, but they will not easily convince them otherwise regarding their power, or lack of it, simply because these crusades more often than not disown the opinions that women hold about themselves, their self-perception, thus effacing their self-proclaimed identities in the name of empowering them.

Latin American women are beginning to promote new forms of subjectivity that undermine the ones imposed on them by Western feminisms. The debate over identity manifests itself in many fronts through unrelenting struggles against cultural interventions. In the Latin American feminist foreground strong controversies may be starting to crack the surface under which the monolithic construct of the victimized woman lies buried.

I. 4. Sameness over Difference between the Sexes

The feminist views that have most influenced feminisms world-wide, including those of Latin America, are examined below. Playing down the differences, biological or otherwise, between the sexes is a particularly problematic notion to introduce in so-called Third-Worldist contexts, where sex roles, and differences between men and women, are well-wrought in the deepest layers of the social imaginaries.

Historically, biology has been used to assign social functions based on the category of sex, and the power-systems have resorted to biological explanations of the masculine and the feminine "essences" in order to devise powerful ideological tools for the relegation of women to second-class roles in society. Recent feminist scholarship has thus strived to demonstrate that sex differences are rooted more in the social than in the biological *per se*. But constructivist arguments that dismiss the biological configuration of the female body and privilege sameness over difference between the sexes see anatomy as the root of all oppression, and paradoxically fall into the trap of biological determinism.⁶ The urge to transcend sexual difference in favor of neutral sexuality seems to be in direct contradiction to that of asserting woman's sexual specificity or desire, which is one of the main objectives of all feminisms. Theorists who deny the existence of any sexual difference may be engaging in a more subtle form of discrimination which will ultimately reiterate and reinforce women's subordinate position in society. Many observers have noted that

⁶ Catherine McKinnon broadly discusses this aspect of constructivist arguments in Towards a Feminist Theory of the State, 54-59.

women run the risk of being absorbed into a new neutral model that grants them no specificity.

The feminist theoretical pronouncements that will be examined here have overturned the conceptual framework of Marxist thought. They assert that the basis of all exploitation lies not solely in class differences and in the economic, social, and historical conditions that generated them, but rather in man's power over woman's sexuality. As the works of Shulamith Firestone, Nancy Holmstrom and Catherine MacKinnon show, the nature/culture dichotomy is far from being resolved. The issue has been, and remains, the control that patriarchal society exerts over women's bodies.

Simone de Beauvoir's axiom that "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one," has led some theoreticians to assert that woman is first and foremost a social construct reflecting men's desires and anxieties. Some of these constructivist arguments underplay the biological basis of woman and femininity, two constructs that should not be defined by anatomy or in terms of physiology. Instead, the main way of identifying women and the one commonality they share as a group is the ironclad rule of their oppression by men. The negation of any biological specificity, which is necessary to claim that sexual difference is a social factor rather than a natural one, has led to the rejection of **all** difference as a mark of inferiority and therefore oppression. Women personify difference and otherness, and as such they are doomed with this mark of inferiority. Masculine power presents itself as the norm, the paradigm against which woman is measured. Difference and otherness are reduced to essentialist and deterministic notions.

References to anatomy, biology, or the body as an area of difference are thus not viable for constructivist political stances; they would certainly represent a regressive return to the embrace of patriarchal society, which has manipulated woman's biology to its advantage. It has been therefore necessary to devalue or de-fetishize women's biological specificity to the utmost degree.

For De Beauvoir, for instance, woman's misfortune was to have been biologically destined for the repetition of life. Other critics, who have elaborated on De Beauvoir's pronouncements, have seen women's natural functions as an "inherent structural vulnerability," or simply as "biological inequity" (Brownmiller and Johnston cited by MacKinnon 1991: 56-57). But in a radical attempt to do away with the vestiges of women's biological atavism, Shulamith Firestone has argued that any means available should be used to free women from the tyranny of their biology and that childbearing could be taken over by technology (Firestone, 233).

In Firestone's feminist utopia, problems such as the fact that "men and women were created different and not equally privileged" (*Ibid.*, 57), would simply cease to exist. (Are women under-privileged because they lack a penis?) In this utopia, technology (supposedly a gender-neuter technology) would be engaged in the reproduction of equally privileged human beings. We could elaborate on what Firestone means by equally privileged and perhaps speculate that her post-gender, egalitarian population will be composed of androgynous/transsexual beings who, living in perfect harmony in a paradise on earth, will have transcended the very human drive of the will to power.

Firestone's utopian speculation of a non-hierarchical, alternative sexuality points toward the abolition of binary differences, among them,

sexual differences. In the utopia of The Dialect of Sex, society is not driven by any kind of power, given that it is composed of a polymorphous/multiple, fluid sexuality without any trace of sexual difference. Utopically, then, we would return (or advance) to a state in which incest would cease to be a taboo, without having to qualitatively regress (or progress) in our own process of evolution. The radical transformation and changes proposed by Firestone imply not only the re-arrangement of nature but also the shattering of the classical Western concept of sexuality, i.e., the existence of two sexes, the male and the female. The acceptance of alternative sexualities has proven to be a painfully difficult task, one that continues its struggle to overturn traditional categories of thought and continues to bring about tremendous conflict in the psycho-social spheres.

A less systematic but equally deterministic approach to the homologation of the sexes is the one set forth by Nancy Holmstrom. The importance placed on the body as an area of difference, meaning negative, leads this theorist to assert that "nothing is a given fact of nature" and that "physical similarities between men and women are greater than their differences" (Holstrom, 80). Holmstrom argues that by definition, "any sex-differentiated nature would be more limited than one not so differentiated" (*Ibid.*, 86). What is puzzling about Holmstrom's argument is, firstly, the lightness with which she dismisses "givens" of nature, such as physiological experiences specific to women --menstruation, pregnancy, parturition, lactation, menopause-- or women's physical configuration. It is one thing to explain the connection of these differences in terms of gender oppression in society, and quite another to dismiss their existence altogether. Secondly, she does not explain what "not so differentiated"

means, or why this kind of nature would be less limited than one that is more sex-specific. Like Firestone, she seems to be positing the idea of a future in which male and female sexual natures could be changed and sexuality would become more fluid and less constrained.

The necessity to reject difference or to transcend gender, which is crucial in the theorizations discussed above, should be understood as a rejection of the system of domination and social hierarchization which conceives of difference as a corollary of oppression. The excesses and the militant tone of Firestone's utopia are challenging and thought-provoking and clearly reflect her unwillingness to comply with what she sees as a timeless social injustice committed against women; she is in fact shaking the very notion of sexed identities. However, the arguments set forth by Firestone and Holmstrom are not devoid of a sort of neurosis which manifests itself as an identity problem connected with a rejection of the feminine and an over-identification with the phallic. Paradoxically, however, the fundamental issue for these thinkers is the need to express a non-phallographic sexuality for all of humankind.

The biological determinism inherent in De Beauvoir's line of thought (of which Firestone and Holmstrom are heirs) is criticized by Catherine MacKinnon in her influential book, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State. As opposed to the above-mentioned theorists, MacKinnon advocates that woman's body is a rationalization or a locale for oppression and not the root of that oppression. She is questioning the social, not the biological. Likewise, she condemns De Beauvoir's notion of woman as the other of man and hints at woman's acquisition of subjecthood:

Why did the tasks on which woman spent her strength not give her supremacy over man or

equality with him? Why was woman's relation to life's mysterious processes seen as bondage while his (hunting, for example) was interpreted as conquest of nature? Why wasn't death, which comes to them equally, as mysterious as life?...Why isn't man 'other' to woman? (MacKinnon, 1991: 55)

MacKinnon posits here a reversal of De Beauvoir's categorization. According to this view, it is now man's turn to relinquish supremacy and to change his relation to "life's mysterious processes." It is, in short, time for man to become the other and for woman to become the one. Her questions, rhetorical or not, imply on the one hand an appeal to social equality between the sexes, despite their biological differences, and on the other a simple dialectical reversal of the *status quo* in favor of women.

Although MacKinnon has stated that she does not "elevate difference over sameness" between the sexes (*Ibid.*, xiii), an elevation of the former category is implied in her above-cited rhetorical questions. Unlike Firestone and De Beauvoir, she believes that the social blends into the biological not because woman's body determines her social being as a pre-social matter but rather because societal forces impose a meaning to woman's biology (*Ibid.*, 54-55). But on the other hand, Mac Kinnon, like De Beauvoir before her, reiterates that woman and her sexuality are placed at the negative pole of society:

Women, who are not given a choice, are objectified [...]. To be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used [...]. In this approach, male power takes the social form of what men want sexually [...]. Masculinity is having it; femininity is not having it. (*Ibid.*, 131)

MacKinnon is clearly criticizing socially imposed meanings, but in so doing she also nullifies women's sexuality and desire. The issue here continues to be the eternally used and objectified female body. According to this view, women have always been and continue to be the powerless victims of male sexual power, objectified non-entities whose femininity, however this may be defined, is inevitably reduced to negativity and lack --femininity is not having it--. She is certainly placing a positive value over masculinity and a negative one over femininity. Even though sexual oppression is what MacKinnon seeks to deconstruct, assertions of this nature, reinforce the values of the very system that is being criticized.⁷

Attempts to move beyond the condemnation of the socio-biological construct of women as different, meaning "inferior" or "lack," have been undertaken by many feminists who have redefined sexual difference in a more positive fashion. Among them, Adrienne Rich emphasizes the importance of the embodied nature of the female subject and the specificity of female corporeality. In Of Woman Born she writes,

To "think like a man" has been both praise and prison for women trying to escape the body-trap. No wonder that many intellectual and creative women have insisted that they were "human beings" first and women only incidentally. The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and

⁷ In Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers, Amy Kaminsky -- a Latin Americanist by immersion-- reflects MacKinnon's position. Kaminsky emphasizes the dichotomous terms of sexual politics (men in the negative pole and women in the positive one) putting the weight of women's oppression on men in the Latin American political left or right, who reject feminist analyses in order to "comfortably retain the material advantage of male supremacy (access to women's sexuality, the personal service of wives, mothers and girlfriends[...]) while maintaining their radical credentials (Kaminsky, 9). Analyses such as this continue to capitalize on polarization of men as oppressors and women as the oppressed, echoing the feminist position prevalent in many of the Anglo-American Women Studies Programs.

travel as a disembodied spirit. But this reaction against the body is now coming into synthesis with new inquiries into the actual --as opposed to the culturally warped-- power inherent in female biology, however we choose to use it. (Rich,39-40)

Rich's ideas constitute a more positive reaction to the crisis of sexual identity which is fully problematized in the works of Firestone, Holmstrom and MacKinnon. Her assertions are a direct response to the feminist femino-phobic stance that shrugs-off the female body as a mark of inferiority.

The synthesis to which Rich refers in the above-cited passage may be contained in the idea that the female body can neither be circumscribed to the biological nor bound by social contingency. Instead, the female body embodies a woman's immediate situation in everyday life, and as Rosi Braidotti puts it in another context, "it is an interface, a threshold, a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces; it is a surface where multiple codes of power and knowledge are inscribed" (Braidotti, 219).

I. 5. Conclusions

The theorists discussed above advance a significant modification of the functions and roles that women are expected to fulfill in society in order to elaborate alternative forms of subjectivity and knowledge which would radically transform and change cultural givens.

Despite the resonance that constructivist arguments on the nature of women's biology have had within international feminist circles, the contention that "anatomy is destiny" is still very prevalent in many societies world-wide, including those of Latin America, where it remains

uncontested in popular rural and urban spaces alike. In this sense, the reality portrayed by cultural/literary critics and authors is often very dissonant when seen against the background of the combative voices of the women's movements of Latin America. The bio-magical-social status accorded to women as mothers, and its opposite pole, the *Llorona* myth, consistently undermine the establishment of Westernized empowerment campaigns.

The control exerted by a feminist *doxa*, as well as the obstacles that prevent the free flowing of censored female images into criticism and narrative, have impoverished the reality that is represented in these works, a reality that is currently overflowing the spaces opened by the mass-media phenomenon of the Latin American *telenovelas*. With many exceptions of *telenovelas* that reproduce traditional women's roles, it could be said that in the more fluid confines of this genre, women authors and producers are beginning to overcome the processes of imitation and the creation of "pathological copies" prevalent in the satellite cultural/literary criticism, and have begun to exercise a more mimetic appropriation of their psychosocial realities and of the different roles of women and gender relations in those realities.

CHAPTER TWO

(Self)Censorship on Academic Grounds

This chapter sets out questions of critical ideology and self-censorship in several texts by two well-established Anglo-American-based, Latin American-born feminist critics. Both Sara Castro Klarén and Lucía Guerra address important issues which have influenced academic women world-wide. These issues are represented in the literature and culture they write about, and their essays balance critical analysis with cultural debates which have generated no easy Manichean answers. The works examined here deal with concepts and problems that continue to be pertinent to the institutional aspect of critical theories, literature, culture, and of the discourses that articulate them.

II. 1. i. Discerning the Discourses of Sara Castro Klarén

Sara Castro Klarén is originally from Perú; she is one of the most cited westernized Latin American scholars among those who contest the canon of theoretical postulates on women and/or the colonized other. Her comments on the abundance of literary texts by women writers and the lack of feminist theorizations based on those texts in Latin America have prompted critical responses from Latin Americanists working in the Anglo-American academy. She is also well-known for her critical work on Peruvian Boom writers, Mario Vargas Llosa and José María Arguedas, and together with Beatriz Sarlo and Sylvia Molloy, Castro Klarén has introduced the most comprehensive anthology to date on Latin American women's writing in translation to the Anglo-American academy and

public. Castro Klarén's critical essays have been selected for analysis because, in my opinion, they are an extreme case of metropolitan feminist theory purporting to represent a Latin American based feminism.

In this section of Chapter II, I discuss three of her most widely disseminated critical texts, which address the Latin American feminist question: i) "La crítica literaria feminista y la escritora en América Latina,"¹ "The Novelness of a Possible Poetics for Women,"² and the "Introduction" to Women's Writing in Latin America. An Anthology.³ In my analysis of these texts, I will appropriate, some of the postulates that Castro Klarén has used to criticize other works, and, when applicable, I will support my own position with theoretical pronouncements from the sources that inform her work. It seems appropriate to start by using some hints provided by Castro Klarén's comments on Elaine Showalter's work:

Showalter's article restates the dilemma which results from the essentialist search for Woman, posited in a-historical terms and above all without embedding the agent of the search (the scholar) in the web of his/her ideology and in the creation of his/her own strategies of containment. ("Novelness," 99)

In the discussion of "Crítica," "Novelness," and "Introduction" I will explore the dilemma of Sara Castro Klarén as a scholar whose conception of the Latin American woman is problematic for the same reasons restated

¹ In La sartén por el mango, 27-46. Further references to this text will be made to "Crítica." All translations are mine.

² In Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luzo Brazilian Feminists Literary Criticism, 95-106. Further references to this text will be made to "Novelness."

³ Further references to this text will be made to "Introduction."

in Showalter's article.⁴ In order to assess these reasons, it is necessary above all, as Castro Klarén suggests, to undertake this critique by embedding the scholar, i.e. Castro Klarén herself, in the "web of her ideology" and in the "creation of her own strategies of containment."

The scholarly production of Sara Castro Klarén is inserted in the ideological web of a legitimized epistemological framework, her strategies of containment accommodate values and opinions which are consonant with those of hegemonic feminisms. As a Latin American critic based in a North American university, she has strategically submitted to a divergent institutional frame, such as that described by Raúl Bueno:

[...] the Europeans and North Americans live the new theoretical-methodological currents from the inside, i.e., from within their own epistemological frame, from their scientific paradigm, whereas we are almost as if subsidized by them, i.e., we live them more or less from the outside. We are thus trying to benefit from something that circulates vertiginously and more potently in another place; we are trying to uproot it from that place and serve ourselves of its fruit. (My translation) (Bueno, 11)⁵

The possibility of generating new and distinct paradigms for Latin American feminist cultural/literary criticism continues to occupy many scholars who, like Sara Castro Klarén, have borrowed not only a language

⁴ Castro Klarén refers here to Elaine Showalter's "Woman's Time, Woman's Space; Writing the History of Feminist Criticism."

⁵ "Las nuevas corrientes teóricas y metodológicas las viven los europeos y norteamericanos desde dentro, es decir, desde su propio marco epistemológico, desde su paradigma científico; mientras que nosotros estamos casi como pensionados a ellas, es decir, las vivimos más o menos desde fuera. Estamos pues tratando de sacarle provecho a algo que circula de modo vertiginoso y más potente en otro lugar; tratamos de arrancarlo de su sitio y servirnos de su fruto."

other than their own,⁶ but also, and perhaps more importantly, who have adopted a way of perceiving, knowing, thinking and articulating their views within a culture other than their own. As we shall see, Castro Klarén's works illustrate the dynamics of many works by Latin American cultural critics. These critics, as Raúl Bueno suggests, are subsidized by an epistemological frame and ascribe to scientific paradigms which alienate them from their own epistemologies and paradigms.

For instance, Castro Klarén devotes more than three fourths of "Crítica" to a discussion of Euro-american mainstream feminist theories, i.e., Anglo-American and French, which provide the base and structure for her discussion of Latin American female authors and women in general. Similarly, the point of departure and arrival of "Novelness" is marked by the theories of Western hegemonic feminisms. Castro Klarén's critical commentaries are thus entirely informed by metropolitan parameters:

[They] begin in the West and it is Western theory that provides the conditions of possibility for her project. When Castro Klarén begins to address Latin America, when we would expect her to finally engage the specific problematics of Latin American women writers and Latin American feminist thought, she does the opposite. (Den Tandt, 2)

The discursive devices that function within the texts examined here carry the authorizing signature of prominent Euro-american feminists. These devices are a sort of discursive shields, which help Castro Klarén explain the achievements and/or expose the fissures of mainstream feminist blocks. They are at once combative and defensive devices. As combative

⁶ The three works analyzed here were originally written in English.

devices, they enable the assailment of Anglo-American critical models, or of feminists whose views are not adequate by this critic to explain Latin American realities. As defensive devices they obscure, and often conceal, Castro Klarén's own critical stance, to such an extent, that it is often complicated to elucidate her position. Her pronouncements remain opaque and sheltered behind those of well-established feminist authors in the Anglo-American academia. Thus, her own disagreement with the existence of a specific female imagination, with the issue of *écriture féminine* or that of feminine aesthetics surfaces frequently in an indirect fashion through the statements of established critics such as Peggy Kamuf, Shary Benstock or Elaine Showalter. Similarly, her views about the sense of the feminine subject in Kristeva emerge circuitously through the statements of Alice Jardine ("Crítica," 34-36).

Instead of context-specific criticism, Castro Klarén's critical works offer an excellent summary of the latest theorizations on feminist issues, without fully exploring their suitability, or lack thereof, to the (con)texts of Latin American authors or to the life experiences of women in general. In addition, her own position regarding these crucial issues for international feminisms, and their applicability to the contexts of Latin American female realities, is postponed. The discursive shields allow Castro Klarén to invest her own words with the authority of those of other scholars who are *dans le vrai* (Foucault 72: 224).

Sara Castro Klarén does not have to speak the truth but rather to be within the true. She has had to accommodate her discursive organization to that of the institution that offers the conditions of possibility for the circulation of her works. She does not (can not?) bring the Latin American women to the surface, or tackle any aspect of women's real life

experiences in any degree of complexity. This operation would entail the unveiling of material which could be met condescendingly by her fellow academics, material that speaks a truth which could have a dubious reception in dominant feminist circles. Foucault explains this situation of institutional control in his account of Mendel's ⁷ reception in the nineteenth century:

Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not *dans le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse: it simply was not along such lines that objects and biological concepts were formed [...]. It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive policy which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke. (Foucault, 1972: 224)

It may seem far-fetched to compare the predicaments of a scientist and a feminist cultural critic so distant in area of interest, time and space, but some interesting parallels could be drawn between them: Had Castro Klarén engaged in an in-depth, context-specific criticism in “Crítica” or in “Novelness,” she would have been speaking the true in a void, since her subjects/objects would not be formed along the lines that mainstream feminist objects and concepts are formed. As such, they would be undeserving of the institutional frame that supports her critical writing, for she would not be within the true of the contemporary feminist discourses that exert the control over her own perspectives. Therefore, she would seem to be disobeying the rules of a discursive policy, much like Mendel

⁷ Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884) was the Austrian botanist and Augustinian monk whose breeding experiments with peas laid the foundation for modern genetics.

did in his own time and was relentlessly disqualified by the institutions that held the control system and fixed the limits in the production of discourse.

Castro Klarén's own remarks about Latin American Colonial writers are perhaps more suitable than those of Showalter or Kristeva's on issues such as female imagination, feminine aesthetics, or *écriture féminine*, to describe her own criticism of these issues as envisioned in Latin American contexts. If the critical exercise of Colonial writers is expressed "in strategies of concealment, simulations that give way to the production of [critical] palimpsests" ("Crítica," 43), it could as well be argued that both "Crítica," and "Novelness" are palimpsestic in style: the surface concerning Latin American writers and their specificities is at the bottom, underneath the top layers of the palimpsest, which are inscribed with prescriptions on Euro-american key feminist tasks, such as the need to go beyond gynocritics and gynesis,⁸ the necessity to overcome women's feuds over theorizing, the re-writing of the history of literature and criticism, etc. The discussion of Latin American women (either authors, fictional characters, or everyday life women) is announced but constantly deferred through a lengthy portion of "Crítica." She offers to comment on the specificities of Latin American women: "Later on, I will make some comment on our creole madwoman in the attic." ("*Luego haré unos comentarios sobre la loca criolla en el ático*") ("Crítica," 35), but little information regarding the Latin American "madwoman in the attic" is delivered. The *loca criolla* is an allusion to S. Gilbert and S. Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), a book Castro Klarén has criticized for its reliance on patriarchal categories of analysis and for its globalizing

⁸ Gynocritics is considered as the Anglo-American historically grounded approach to the study of women's texts, and gynesis refers to the presumably a-historical study of the constitution of the female subject in language. Both critical currents were thus categorized by Anglo-American feminist scholars.

formulation of women's identity and writing. The adjective *criolla* (creole) refers to local Latin American women, as opposed to Gilbert and Gubar's North American or European women.

This Anglo-American literary prototype alludes to the deranged and secluded romantic heroine of 19th century proto-feminist fiction, or to its subsequent equivalent --Virginia Woolf's classification of "Shakespeare's sister"-- the wandering woman gone mad, unable to express her creativity in a male dominated world. However, the *loca criolla* in the attics of Latin America, remains a vague construct in "Crítica." It is unclear whether this category refers to Latin American canonic writers such as Poniatowska, Castellanos, Ferré, Molloy, and Lispector ("Crítica," 32), to their characters, or rather to a generic Latin American woman who, given her double marginality, has to struggle not only against prejudices of gender but also against race and class discrimination ("Crítica," 43).

Neither the work of the afore-mentioned canonic Latin American women writers, nor the category of the Latin American *mestizo* woman as a subaltern figure, (i.e., the other of a colonized [male] Other) is sufficiently broken down, explained or elaborated in Castro Klarén's texts. The female authors she mentions do not fit this mold, and the reality (sexual, social, psychological, etc.,) of the *loca criolla* as a subaltern *mestizo* woman, and even as her bourgeois counterpart is perhaps too complex, backwards, or politically incorrect to be compared to that of the Anglo-American "madwoman in the attic." As such, the *loca criolla*, being the heterogeneous and unstable category that she is, remains conspicuously absent from "Crítica." By avoiding its discussion, Castro Klarén falls into the same predicament which she criticizes from other

dominant feminist critics, i.e., she engages in a globalizing formulation of women's identity and/or writing.

Perhaps at the time "Crítica" was written putting the madwomen in the spotlight would have entailed the exposure of controversial feminine behaviors, unfit for the standards of hegemonic feminists. Madwomen from Latin America possess low ranking values and knowledge, if these are measured against those discussed by Anglo-American feminist critics, knowledge of the kind that Michel Foucault believed could be produced only by marginal and subjugated beings. In the chapters that follow I examine some of the idiosyncracies of Latin American "madwomen," their culturally specific behaviors and their marginalized worldviews which escape the rigors of the feminist radical tenets.

II. 1. ii. Institutionalized or Subjugated Knowledges?

In "Crítica," originally a paper given at a colloquium on the definition of a specifically Latin American *écriture féminine*,⁹ Castro Klarén ascribes to Foucault's different categorizations of knowledge, in particular the kind of knowledge that is subjugated for being naive, local, and differential ("Crítica," 38). In Power/Knowledge, the text that informs "Crítica," Foucault alludes specifically to two kinds of knowledge which have been disqualified. One is the knowledge held, for example, by the nurse, or the psychiatric patient, in relation to the institution of medicine. The other, however erudite, is the knowledge that has fallen into disuse and does not occupy the top layers of the hierarchy of knowledges and sciences. What the disqualified or disused knowledge have in common, Foucault

⁹ This colloquium took place in November 1983, in the five college area of Massachusetts. The papers read therein were compiled in 1984, by Patricia E. González and Eliana Ortega in La sartén por el mango. Encuentro de escritoras latinoamericanas.

argues, is that they both are concerned with a historical knowledge of struggles wherein “lay the memory of hostile encounters which even up to this day have been confined to the margins of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980: 83).

Castro Klarén uses this particular Foucauldian categorization in “Crítica” to qualify and explain the subjugated knowledge of the indigenous people of Latin America before the arrival of the Iberian conquistadors, a knowledge, she seems to imply, that could have been made visible had the historical inequities of the Conquest occupied the top layers of the production-of-knowledge-machine. She contends that the recovery of these suppressed Latin American events, or contents has been attempted by essayists such as Fernández Retamar, Manuel González Prada and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and by novelists such as Clorinda Matto de Turner, García Márquez, Rulfo or Cortázar, to name only a few. According to her, this recovery, just as Foucault’s subjugated knowledges, is situated at the margins of society:

[It] happens in the margins, and always against the grain, marked by and framed within a roughness [...]. These acts of writing have constituted a tradition of unwriting, a dismantling of semantic groupings, which positioned in another place, were showing a break with what was established by the dominant discourse, in order to originate the place of a new word. (My translation) (“Crítica,” 39)¹⁰

¹⁰ “Se da desde la marginalidad y siempre a contrapelo, marcada de y enmarcada en la aspereza [...]. Estos actos de escritura han constituido una tradición de desescritura, de desmantelamiento de agrupaciones semánticas, las que posicionadas en otro lugar [...] acusaban una quiebra de lo establecido por el discurso dominante para originar el lugar de una nueva palabra.”

The historical process of rejection, dismantling and new origins undergone by the above mentioned Latin American writers, argues Castro Klarén, is alien to the experience of Anglo-American feminist authors such as Gilbert and Gubar, who universalize a concept of feminine writing based on an analysis of a few Anglo-American texts. She adds that the denial of woman by a dominant system expressed by Gilbert's and Gubar's, or Patricia Meyer-Spacks' rhetoric of sexual oppression, has its parallel in the rhetoric of oppression practiced throughout history against many and different groups:

If the patrist ideology is founded on the presence/absence of sex in order to deny woman a place within the circle of power, that same ideology, by displacing the look from the genitals to the cage of the senses, is capable of encountering facial features, and even better, the absence/presence of reason as an indicator of its inclusion or exclusion from power. It was the ability to be "rational", that is to say, the ability to articulate in more than one level of the dominant group's language, what was put to a test almost immediately after the arrival of the Europeans in the New World. (My translation) (*Ibid.*, 40)¹¹

Castro Klarén's rhetoric reveals her preoccupation with the correlation of knowledge, writing and power, a reality that is evident in her own processes of exclusion and their relation to the dominant critical apparatus. She demonstrates keenly that she is able to articulate her views "in more

¹¹ "Si la ideología patrista se funda en la presencia/ausencia del sexo para negarle a la mujer un lugar en el círculo del poder, esa misma ideología, desplazando la mirada de la zona genital a la jaula de los sentidos, es capaz de encontrar rasgos faciales y mejor aun la ausencia/presencia de la razón como índice de la inclusión o exclusión del poder. Fue la capacidad de ser "racional", es decir de articular en más de un nivel del lenguaje del grupo dominante, lo que se puso en juego casi inmediatamente después de la llegada de los europeos al Nuevo Mundo."

than one level of the dominant language” when she is put to the test. But her ability to be irrational has been censured and silenced. In other words, her ability to contest the rationality of the radical feminist viewpoints is hampered and she herself unknowingly suppresses the representation and becomes the censor of Latin American madwomen in her works.

The corollary of power, knowledge and writing is therefore contained in the mottoes that fuel the critical texts of Castro Klarén. In the search for a feminine authenticity more specific to Latin America, she appears to distance herself from Anglo-American critics, arguing persuasively that because of the special condition of her alterity, the Latin American woman could have some sort of advantage in the articulation of subjectivity: “I believe that her condition as a Latin American (dependant and/or suppressed) offers her unexpected possibilities” (Crítica, 43). This contention seems to imply that Latin American women writers should not accept any invitation to join the mainstream, mainly to avoid diluting the revolutionary or subversive potential of all discourses that are produced against the grain. Here, one encounters an ambiguity similar to the one that surrounds the category of the *loca criolla*: it is unclear whether Castro Klarén refers to Latin American female authors or to the critics that assess the production of those authors. There is no elaboration in “Crítica” on the unexpected possibilities that Latin American women have over Anglo-American or European women as subjects of discourse.

In order to realize the unexpected possibilities offered to Latin American women, she argues that:

Perhaps one could avoid repeating formulations and experiences from the metropolis (London, Paris, New York), which today can be clearly

seen as historical errors of isolated middle classes,
in formulations such as the feminist aesthetic.
(My translation) ("Crítica, 43)¹²

Made in a short footnote, this comment is perhaps a Freudian slip of the pen: Castro Klarén obviously did not mean to say the feminist aesthetics but rather the feminine aesthetic, the heuristic device that some Anglo American critics have inherited from Virginia Woolf. Her slip from the word "feminine" to the word "feminist" is Castro Klarén's only explicit, though not necessarily conscious, rejection of a feminist set of laws and principles to adequately explain Latin American female experiences. The homogeneization inherent in the concepts of feminist aesthetics, feminine writing or female imagination are anathema to Castro Klarén, at least at the explicit level of the text. However, it is far-fetched to suggest that her works are avoiding formulations from the metropolis.

In "Crítica," a text which purportedly deals with Latin American women writers, there are only passing references to towering figures, not marginal writers, as women of another tradition who write against the grain of a dominant feminist canon, and who our critic contrasts to the women writers discussed in some of the major texts of Anglo-American feminism:

[...] if we oppose "other" feminine texts, feminine texts from "another tradition," let's say, Hasta no verte Jesús mío, Retrato de Familia, Papeles de Pandora, En breve cárcel y Lazos de familia, I doubt very much that the "feminine imagination" --that is to say, a sensitivity that would reveal

¹² "Tal vez se podría evitar el repetir formulaciones y experiencias de la metrópolis (Londres, Paris, Nueva York) que hoy es posible ver claramente como errores históricos de clases medias aisladas en formulaciones tales como estética **feminista**." (My emphasis).

itself through specific images of women, or that the different role of woman as a motivator of images and patterns-- could produce coincidences between English women writers from the eighteenth and seventeenth century, and [Latin American] women [writers] such as Elena Poniatowska, Rosario Castellanos, Rosario Ferré, Sylvia Molloy or Clarice Lispector. ("Crítica," 32)¹³

The point here is to undermine the concept of female imagination as an absolute category. However, whether or not one can find similar images or patterns in these particular feminine texts of different traditions across time and space --which in fact could be possible-- is irrelevant. What is important to note here is that Castro Klarén is not contrasting canonic English women writers with marginal women writers. The Latin American women writers included in the above citation are far from marginal. In fact, they belong not only to an internal Latin American canon, but also, and most importantly, to the international canon established by European and Anglo-American academic feminists. Thus, one can observe a move towards centralization, which starts in "Crítica" and is closed, full-circle, in the "Introduction" to the anthology on women's writing in Latin America. In this anthology, other processes of inclusion/exclusion are brought to light.

The inclusion of a satellite canon within a dominant one sets the whole argument apart from the Foucauldian postulate of the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, to which Castro Klarén had adhered earlier in the

¹³ "Si oponemos 'otros' textos femeninos, textos femeninos de 'otra tradición,' digamos, Hasta no verte Jesús mío, Retrato de familia, Papeles de Pandora, En breve cárcel y Lazos de familia, dudo mucho que la imaginación femenina --es decir una sensibilidad que se revele a sí misma a través de imágenes específicas de la mujer, o que el rol diferente de la mujer como motivadora de imágenes y patrones-- pueda producir una coincidencia entre las escritoras inglesas de los siglos XVIII y XIX y mujeres como Elena Poniatowska, Rosario Castellanos, Rosario Ferré, Sylvia Molloy o Clarice Lispector."

same article. Foucault wrote about an altogether different kind of knowledge:

[a knowledge] opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of a science, but to the effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse [...] it is really against the effects of the power of a discourse that is considered to be scientific that the genealogy must wage its struggle. (Foucault 1980: 84)

It would be interesting to reflect which theoretical-political avant garde is being enthroned in "Crítica," "Novelness," or "Introduction," in light of this particular Foucauldian statement, so as to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of knowledge that circulate about it. Regardless of her criticism of Anglo-American critical models, Castro Klarén invests these models and those critics who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in the production of organized scientific discourse. In other words, her attempt at inscribing Latin American writers and texts in the hierarchical order of power associated with "an organized theoretical discourse" is not, as Foucault says, an "attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from subjection, to render them capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (Foucault 1980: 85). Nor is there in these works an inclination towards the reactivation of local or minor knowledges "in opposition to the [scientific] hierarchization of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power." The unexpected possibilities that, as Castro Klarén previously suggested, Latin American women have to articulate their experience from the margins is perhaps an idea that remains valid only at the explicit rather

than the deeper structural level of her critical works, where the dominant feminist ideologies are at work.

Institutionalized rather than subjugated knowledges are entertained in "Crítica," and, as we shall see further on, in "Novelness," and also in "Introduction." As co-editor of an excellent anthology of Latin American women writers, Castro Klarén pumps-up the dominant feminist canon. This move alone is far removed from the Foucauldian thesis she had at first entertained. She certainly ascribes to Foucault's theses but accepts at the same time a series of critical parameters and methodological principles that contradict his postulates, and probably betray her own.

II. 1. iii. Feminist Poetics or Critical Pastiche?

Ten years later, and intended as a continuation of "Crítica," Sara Castro Klarén publishes "The Novelness of a Possible Poetics for Women," originally conceived as a talk given at another conference in 1993. In "Novelness," a poetics for the study of women's works --which had great potential in "Crítica"-- is in this second article, only a remote possibility, perhaps even a fashionable novelty, as the title word "Novelness" seems to imply. The Latin American female subject, the madwoman in the attic of "Crítica" is perhaps more inobtrusive in its sequel "Novelness," despite the fact that the article is included in a volume on cultural and historical grounding for Latin American feminist literary criticism.

According to this statement, women are enclosed in a double, if not triple, marginality: In spite of this, in "Novelness" she postulates the fusion of the Latin American female and male subjects, since she views colonized women as others of a male colonized Other. This fusion or levelling of alterities implies a change in the degree of otherness of Latin American

women and men, as measured against the norm for otherness discussed in first-worldist contexts. To a certain extent, this fusion produces a de-genderizing of the Latin American female subject, which previously had a strong hold in "Crítica."

In the sequel to "Crítica" the word "novelness" evokes something that tends to wear out rapidly, something that has an ephemeral character to it. Novelness also brings to mind the word novel, a direct reference to the realm of fiction. The word possible is only one step in the gradation towards the certain, implying not certainty but only probability. The phrase "The Feminist Literary Criticism," part of the title of "Crítica," is downgraded in "Novelness" to a "novelty," perhaps a mere fiction. A poetics for women, and feminism for that matter, "is not a methodology for literary criticism. In fact, that is what it lacks," argues Castro Klarén ("Novelness," 103). However, the following statement illustrates both a contradiction in this argument, as well as another attempt at hierarchization:

Feminism, like Marxism or deconstruction, is in fact a broad and complex cultural critique [...]. Like Marxism and deconstruction [feminism] is, therefore, an ideological inquest which reaches well beyond the bounds of any given discipline as currently constituted in the Anglo-American academy. ("Novelness," 103)

Regardless of the validity of such comparison of feminism, Marxism, and deconstruction this assertion reflects a tendency to transcend and to integrate, to place banners, to label and to invest feminism with the powers linked "to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse," in this case, the scientific discourse of Marxism, and the

scientism that the Anglo-American intellectuals accorded in the Eighties to Derrida's technique of deconstruction.

Paradoxically, however, Castro Klarén agrees with Nina Baym that "if one is part of a system one cannot, at the same time, aspire to revolutionary change" ("Novelness," 103). Notwithstanding this explicit critical allegiance, feminism is placed along side two legitimizing systems linked to the organization of discourse, Marxism and deconstruction, however disparate their predicaments. The positioning of feminism *vis-à-vis* a poetics for women, and of feminism in relation to Marxism and deconstruction show a vulnerable spot in this critical argument.

In "Crítica" Castro Klarén had suggested that in their search for feminine authenticity, Latin American women are not only others to their European and Anglo-American counterparts, but also others to a colonized male other. As such, they undergo a whole series of problems in the process of recovering historical contents which have been subdued by dominant systems:

If the search for a feminine authenticity --the search for a space from where the word could be articulated-- has to be effected through the recovery and re-inscription of woman's experience as a subject, within and against the grain of patriarchal order, then the struggle of the Latin American woman continues to be based in a double negativity: because she is a woman and because she is a *mestiza*. ("Crítica," 43).¹⁴

¹⁴ "Si la búsqueda de la autenticidad femenina, la búsqueda de un lugar desde el cual se pueda articular la palabra, se ha de llevar a cabo en la recuperación y la re-inscripción de la experiencia de la mujer como sujeto a contrapelo en y del orden patriarcal, entonces la lucha de la mujer latinoamericana sigue cifrada en una doble negatividad: porque es mujer y porque es mestiza."

The rotating critical stance towards the concept of otherness in general, and otherness in Latin America in particular is problematic. The female subject's otherness is melted into that of the Latin American male colonized other, the implication being that men and women from that continent are at great odds not only with one another, but also with external standards. It is almost as if they were united in their otherness, a fact that puts them at a disadvantage with more privileged groups. It becomes clear, then, why she sets herself sharply against the position of critics such as Elaine Showalter and Alice Jardine, for whom any move into otherness or alterity is exclusively a movement into a female space. She argues persuasively that these critics ignore some historical facts:

In the historical constitution of the West's imperial hegemony, other groups --blacks, Indians, non-Christians-- have also been repressed, kept outside of the tight circumference of consciousness and when represented, they have also been situated in the space accorded to the Other. ("Novelness," 97)

Up to this point in her analysis, Castro Klarén deplores Showalter's and Jardine's historical shortsightedness, but her stance regarding otherness in the context of Latin American intellectual history reveals another contradictory argument:

It is bemusing, in the context of Latin American intellectual history, and in the contexts of the spaces opened by Borges and Lezama, Arguedas and Cortázar, to read Showalter quoting Jardine, who in turn is of course quoting French thought, on the presence of the Other in Western consciousness. (*Ibid.*)

It is also bemusing, in the context of a volume on cultural and historical grounding for Latin American feminist criticism, in which "Novelness" is included, to read Castro Klarén quoting Showalter who in turn is quoting Jardine who in turn is, of course, quoting French thought --the views of which are also being echoed by Benstock and Stanton-- on the presence of the Other in Western consciousness. Furthermore, neither Borges nor Cortázar or Lezama epitomize the portrayal of otherness in Latin America, at least not the otherness entertained in "Novelness" (blacks, indians and non-Christians). Divergent views on otherness, continue to be expressed with intervals of just one page:

I believe that the late recognition on the part of Gynesis of Woman as other, is almost ironic in relation to Latin American Literature and literary studies, where, if not always hanging on Lacan's latest word, we have learned to posit an entire discourse, even the discourse of the national dominant classes, as the discourse of the Other. ("Novelness," 98)

This statement contrasts with the previous one made about how, for Elaine Showalter and Alice Jardine, a move into alterity was always a move into a woman's space, a position which Castro Klarén sharply criticized for being class and race blind. Now, however, she criticizes gynesis for opposite reasons, i.e., for being too late in recognizing woman as other. Moreover, she clearly disagrees with a particular view of Latin American otherness in which we are always hanging on Lacan's latest word. Inadvertently perhaps, she describes her own situation. She has learned to

posit an entire discourse, even that of dominant feminisms, as the discourse of the Other, despite her adherence to Bakhtin:

We can begin to conceive of each one of our most basic categories as novelistic texts in Bakhtin's sense. Authorship, the subject, the Other, story, language, would all cease to be unified, closed concepts [...] the heteroglossia of Bakhtin's novelistic text would, in its dynamism, open up sufficient cracks as to enable us to re-draw the figure of women/men in history. History will of course have to be rewritten. ("Novelness," 105)

Another polemical issue in "Novelness" is the feminist psychological literary criticism and its treatment of the phallus. Castro Klarén is, "astonished at the obsessive contemplation regarding the ownership, location and allocation of the phallus which has informed the kind of psychological literary criticism examined by Nina Baym" ("Novelness," 102). But the reasons for this astonishment remain in the shadows, and once again, the argument is postponed, "for cultural reasons which could bear discussion elsewhere" ("Novelness," 102).

A discussion of the ownership, location and allocation of the phallus is not exclusive to Anglo-American psychological feminism. As an ideological surrogate for power, the phallus, both in the symbolic and the physical realm, occupies center stage in Western feminist theorizations. Perhaps the cultural reasons which postpone the discussion of phallic obsession for textual space other than "Novelness" could shed some light on the reasons for the conspicuous absence of the phallus (or the vagina, for that matter) as a trope discourse (White, 2) in critical texts by and about Latin American women.

Latin American women scarcely emerge in "Novelness." Woman is discussed in more general terms, in an abstract scenario:

Woman, whether she is to be re-constructed in philosophy, biology, theory of evolution, or textual reading, could be considered the locus of contending relationships. Woman would be a construct and not a given. Women would emerge rather than be a pre-condition, in the examination of power relations such as discourse, income, division of labor, biological reproduction, etc. Women as a multiple text need to be expanded in the way Jameson would expand a text in preparation for a totalizing reading capable of dealing not only with difference but also with contradiction. ("Novelness," 104))

This statement advocates the constructivist arguments of woman's nature, so prevalent in feminisms of the second wave; and the one that follows, is a contrast between the male and female subjects, which also caters to the the feminist *doxa*:

Women, like men, are at best contingent categories, --Sartrean situations. One is loaded down in silence, it is true, the other is contorted and malformed in the tangles of its own discourse, of its history and thus his quest for power. ("Novelness," 104)

Castro Klarén endorses the dissolution of genre, the re-periodization of literature as presently understood, the re-plotting of texts, and the rewriting of literary history in Latin America, objectives which are allegedly in the realm of the possible. However, some critics would disagree as to the viability of such enterprises, especially those who

acknowledge the difficulties that most Latin American writers have to go through, in order to produce and publish their work. Antonio Cornejo Polar explains the extenuating circumstances under which intellectual production takes place in Latin American countries:

What happens is that intellectual production also requires some material bases, which range from a laboratory to a modest library [...] in Latin America we have been left without material bases for the construction of culture. To produce a book in the United States or in Europe is certainly a difficult task, but it is a part of professional life and does not represent an ordeal. To produce it in Latin America is an ordeal. (My translation) (Cornejo Polar, 25)¹⁵

Arguably, Latin America is ripe for the rewriting of its literary history ("Novelness," 105). However, the difficulties that such an enterprise entails will still have to be confronted. Apart from struggling to obtain the bare essential material bases on which to "build a culture," as the above critic puts it, many writers are often hopelessly functioning within the so-called "pilot-fish system."¹⁶ In this system, the big fish is usually a well-established writer, to whom a bunch of little pilot-fish --lesser known writers-- must cater in order to be published. Whimsical big-fish abound in the circles of culture-production in Latin American countries. Thus, in addition to the economic obstacles stated above, one should add those inherent to the power dynamics of some intellectual elites.

¹⁵ "Lo que pasa es que la producción intelectual requiere también de ciertas bases materiales, que van desde un laboratorio hasta una modesta biblioteca [...] en América Latina nos hemos quedado sin bases materiales para la construcción de una cultura [...]. Producir un libro en Estados Unidos o en Europa es ciertamente difícil, pero es parte de la vida profesional y no resulta una hazaña. Producirlo en América Latina es una hazaña."

¹⁶ This image was brought up in a conversation with the Venezuelan literary critic, Alicia Perdomo in Caracas in 1991.

II. 1. iv. An Anthologized Map of the Self

A proclivity towards hierarchization is still prevalent in the "Introduction" to the Anthology of Women Writers of Latin America. However, this tendency is explained here as a search for a "modest place" for Latin American women writers within the institutional Anglo-American (read universal) feminist canon. Castro Klarén's previous advice for Latin American women to stay at the margins, in order to write "against the grain" of the established canon has explicitly been replaced by the need to produce an anthology that "doubtlessly responds to a historical necessity, calling attention to texts too long deprived of canonical status in their countries of origin and too long denied adequate translation and dissemination abroad" ("Introduction," xi).

Explicit, as well, are the objectives of the selection of texts for this anthology:

[These texts will be] laboring to create bonds and promoting awareness, the better to rescue a tradition of Latin American women's writing that has been too long belittled or denied [they will] make demands of their own, ask to be scrutinized in detail, prompt a reflection on contexts [...] in short, invite the reader to recompose Latin American women's very complex scene of writing [...] and invite the English reader to dwell on the implications of the double marginality of Latin American women and to consider that double marginality in its very difference instead of dissolving that difference with a homogenizing (albeit generous) glance. (*Ibid.*, xii)

Homogenization, according to this statement, is an act of generosity, while differentiation --although explicitly encouraged-- is perhaps neither generous, nor desirable. That is the implication. For the remainder of this section, I briefly discuss, not the authors, the texts or the excerpts chosen for inclusion in this anthology, but rather the background politics of exclusion, which respond less to a so-called historical necessity for the production of the anthology, and more to the relationship of the critic and her co-editors to the ideological apparatus of the academic institution.

The refurbishing of a dominant canon has less to do with difference and more to do with the general processes of intellectual canonization, totalization, exclusion, and mastery. These processes entail a "tendency to go global, to universalize the contingencies of [their] own unexamined particularity and thereby disappear the experiences and realities of the many into the unified consciousness of the one of western civilization" (Finn, 132).¹⁷ It would utterly unfair to downplay the achievements of the anthology, in which there is a conscious effort to introduce and place together, in its first part entitled "Women, Self and Writing," such disparate women authors as Gabriela Mistral, Julieta Campos, Diamela Eltit, Elena Poniatowska and Domitila Barrios de Chúngrara. However, Castro Klarén's "exploration into the constitution of a map of the self in language" fails to be, at the same time, a more scrutinizing interrogation of that self. The absolutizing categorization of that self is problematic. The selves that should be interrogated are the selves portrayed --be it in a fictional, essayist, or testimonial fashion-- by the women authors selected to introduce the anthology, from whom Klarén draws her seven conceptual

¹⁷ Geraldine Finn, Why Althusser Killed his Wife. Many of the questions that I raise about Castro Klarén's "Introduction" to the anthology have been inspired by Finn's book.

models of women's writing in Latin America. These models "suggest a field of tensions and conflicts yet to be resolved" ("Introduction," 24). The problem is that there is too much left unsaid about the individual circumstances and historical contexts that surround these women writers, these selves and these texts.

The prescription of embedding the female author in the "web of her ideology" and in her own "strategies of containment" seems to have been abandoned. More often than not one can perceive an essentialist search for woman, a tendency Castro Klarén has consistently challenged in Anglo-American feminist critics, and which sharply contrasts with her avowed intention of treating woman exclusively as a historical event. For instance, she does not situate the authors within a social context organized by and for systematic inequalities of power, nor does she mention the relationships of these authors to the practices and effects of colonization. Perhaps a tendency to go global prevents her from examining the authors contingencies, their specificities. The political effect of this tendency is not "the promotion of difference and change or the disturbance of a 'culturally suspicious trouble-making reader'" (Finn, 134).

Any Latin American student attending an Anglo-American university can attest to the dangerous effects of letting these foreign texts speak for themselves, especially in a Women's Studies class environment, without providing a more adequate contextualization for the feminist English-speaking reader. These texts will most likely acquaint the reader with the harshness, the backwardness or perhaps even the exoticism and sophistication of difference. This process, however, will not necessarily ensure a fruitful dialogue between culturally suspicious readers and the Latin American women (and men) portrayed by the authors included in

this anthology, for it will most likely elicit the condescension of the readers. C. Mohanty accurately describes this possible scenario:

Third-world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read "not progressive"), family oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights"), illiterate read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward") and sometimes revolutionary (read "their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they--must fight!)(Mohanty, 72)

Probably the most politically dissonant and revolutionary Third-Worldist voices mentioned in Castro Klarén's "Introduction" to the anthology are compartmentalized under the three seemingly hierarchical rubrics proposed by her co-author, Beatriz Sarlo: the politics of reason, occupies the top of the scale, for it "describes the emphasis on a searing search for the word;" the politics of passion comes second in line, and encompasses writers known for their "*engagé* feminism" (and this includes Rigoberta Menchú!). At the bottom of the hierarchy is the blending of passion and action achieved by Eltit, Domitila and Rigoberta. In a wink, Castro Klarén throws together in one bag, a woman who has apparently mastered the craft of writing and achieved the highly valued domain over the realm of *technos* (Eltit), which "opens the door to freedom from the former silence;" and two women who have been given voice by others with a "more thorough command of the technology of writing" (Domitila Barrios and Rigoberta Menchú). In other words, Castro Klarén blends one "intelligent" unmediated novel with two direct but heavily mediated testimonies. Eltit, introduced as a Guggenheim fellow whose novels are experimental and extremely intelligent and whose novelistic strategies

"range from the mimetic mode and psychological realism to sharp epistemological inquiry" ("Introduction," 101), is placed side by side with Domitila Barrios and Rigoberta Menchú, without any mention whatsoever of the complexities and the severe questioning that the testimonial genre in general and these two testimonies in particular were already undergoing.

One of the most passionate critics of mediated testimonies is the scholar Beatriz Pastor. In a discussion session on Latin American literature, criticism and identity, Elszbieta Sklodowska criticized (or rather invalidated) the methodology, the political stance and the professional style of Rigoberta's transcriber, Elizabeth Burgos, on the grounds that her approach was not ethnic enough. When one of the guest speakers dismissed Sklodowska's critique as being too ruthless, Pastor strongly disagreed saying that, on the contrary, she had not been critical enough:

I have to close the session saying that it seems to me that Elszbieta has absolutely not been hard as regards the testimonial novel. I believe that one can be even harder [...]. I believe that we should not let ourselves be trapped ethically or morally, by the fact that there isn't any other way. And the lack of alternatives can not be used, in any moment, as an argument to block the criticism of problems, which, for me, are extremely serious, and which testimonial literature has always posited. (My translation) (Pastor, 101)¹⁸

The extremely serious problems alluded to by Pastor are worth noting and scrutinizing in the context of a symposium on Latin American

¹⁸ "Tengo que cerrar la sesión diciendo que a mí me ha parecido que Elszbieta no ha estado dura en absoluto frente a la novela testimonio. Creo que se puede ser aún más duro [...] yo creo que no debemos dejarnos atrapar ética o moralmente por el hecho de que no hay otra cosa. Y la falta de alternativas en ningún momento se puede esgrimir como argumento para bloquear la crítica a unos problemas que, para mí son gravísimos, y que ha planteado siempre la literatura testimonial."

new critical trends, but not even worth mentioning in the introductory remarks, in the secondary sources provided, or in the paragraph that serves to introduce either Rigoberta's or Domitila's testimonies to English speaking students. Klarén adds in her closing remarks that a "critique of discourse itself [can be] found in Eltit's, Menchú's and Domitila's affirmations of experience as given in their own historical specificity" ("Introduction," 24). But the historical contextualization of this kind of testimonial literature will really depend on the ideological whims of a professor, who will in turn perhaps suggest a comparison of a testimony from Latin America with one from North America as a paper topic to her/his student. The student will then write in a vacuum, and very little will be said about the social, political, cultural, and economic factors that propelled those testimonies, and much less about the inherence of the United States and other core countries on these specific situations.

This tendency is profoundly ideological for it "mystifies reality by presenting partial truths as if they were the Whole Truth" (Finn, 135). Even if it is claimed that this anthology "offers an entry into a partially charted but no longer ignored domain of human history" ("Introduction," 24), the cognitive mapping (Jameson, 188) presented by Castro Klarén, no doubt with a pedagogic and didactic intent, undermines the possibilities of radical cross-cultural dialogue. Therefore, the political effectiveness and the relevance of the texts introduced in the anthology will most likely be subjected to the rigours of "consumer capitalism with its image-saturated culture and cooptive powers" (Jameson, 189). The anthology should also be seen as a personal dialogue and as a conversation of three readers who enjoy, love, and have been marked by these texts, which represent "a consciousness of being in the world," and that such "broadly conceived

self-consciousness emerges as the counterpart of silence." However, it should be remarked that it may very well sink these texts in a silence, less fertile perhaps than the one they experienced before they entered the English speaking arena; I refer to the stifling silence that grows with each layer of misreading of these texts of otherness and difference, by students and professor alike within institutional feminist circles.

II.1.v. Conclusions

"Crítica," "Novelness," and "Introduction" reflect and refract the conflictive and often contradictory position of Latin American intellectuals who attempt to open new spaces and paths for the articulation of critical discourses more resonant with meanings of Latin America, within the dominant and often silencing Anglo-American academy. This conflictive position manifests itself, within the texts examined here, in a sort of ideological shuffling of mainstream authoritative theories and theoreticians, creating a smoke screen that distorts both the scholar's critical perspective and the objects and objectives of her criticism.

Most striking in the workings of the texts examined here is a peculiar analytic strategy which involves a simultaneous enthroning and dethroning of Anglo-American and French feminist criticism, and by extension, of its exponents. Possibly, the use of this textual gesture reflects Castro Klarén's own process of critical self-definition, a task that necessitates the neutralization of mainstream currents as a means to come up with an eclectic and particular synthesis of marxism and feminism, which is considered more appropriate for the analysis of cultural texts from Latin America.

Castro Klarén's adoption of Foucault's thesis in the first article, and its invalidation in the second, signals on the one hand, a ten-year reflection on important issues, and on the other, the fluid ideological bases of her positions towards otherness and difference, two categories that, like the above-mentioned Euro-american critical tenets, undergo an analogous process of affirmation and negation from one article to the other.

The critical shifting viewpoints that can be perceived from their reading, is perhaps indicative of an initial stage towards critical self-determination. It seems adequate to return to the beginning of this chapter and reflect further on the views on theories and methodologies, expressed by Raúl Bueno in in a debate on new critical and literary trends in Latin America:

I was asking myself, why it is that for some time now, we Latin Americans are, to a certain extent, implicitly confessing our ineffectiveness to come up with our own currents and our own critical models? Aren't we, maybe, in a position to propound these currents and models under distinct and perhaps new epistemes? (My translation) (Bueno, 11-12)¹⁹

The consensus of the debate seemed to be, largely, that Latin American scholars have the right to use any critical tool they please as long as these are reworked for their application to Latin American texts and situations. But Antonio Cornejo Polar called the attention of his other colleagues to what he considered to be the most basic problem:

¹⁹ "Me preguntaba ¿por qué desde hace algún tiempo estamos los latinoamericanos, en cierta medida, confesando implícitamente nuestra ineffectividad para plantear nuestras propias corrientes y nuestros propios modelos críticos?; ¿no estamos, acaso, en condiciones de proponerlos bajo epistemes distintas y quizás nuevas?"

The problem is not so much that we are an object of another subject, that we apply models which we have not created and that we do this sort of applied criticism with foreign theories, etc. I believe that the problem is deeper, in some way more dramatic [...] it is not a problem of concepts, of theory, of imitation, of identity; it is simply that in the course of a specially unfortunate moment of a history that we may call history of colonization, ultimately, if one wants to use that word, Latin America has seen how its material possibility of producing sufficiently solvent cultural discourses, is drained out. (My translation) (Cornejo Polar, 25)²⁰

The implication is therefore, that those scholars seeking to produce sufficiently solvent cultural discourses originating in Latin America may have to attempt to do so in a space that offers the material conditions of possibility for the production of those discourses. The paradox is that in such a space, culturally solvent discourses seem to be an impossibility, or rather they become solvent within an institutional frame that devoids them of their particularity, through a process of homogeneization complaisant with the *status quo*.

Sara Castro Klarén could ideally be in a position to produce a culturally solvent critical discourse. She could perhaps effect a rupture, or establish a dialogue, with the feminist critical trends that haunt her, in order to encourage the discussion of the awaited *loca criolla* or of some local and differential material which could really increase the potential for cross-cultural understanding. However, the texts examined here are

²⁰ "El problema no está tanto en que seamos objeto de otro sujeto, de que apliquemos modelos que no hemos creado y que hagamos esta especie de crítica aplicada con teorías ajenas, etc. Creo que el problema es más profundo, de alguna manera más dramático [...] no es un problema conceptual, de teoría, de imitación, de identidad, es simplemente que dentro de un momento especialmente desdichado de una historia que podemos llamar de colonización, finalmente, si se quiere utilizar esa palabra, América Latina ha visto cómo se succiona toda su posibilidad material de producir discursos culturales suficientemente solventes."

paradigmatic of the gap that exists between academic truths and the day-to-day cultural practices of individual Latin American women. As these critiques show, it is perhaps more feasible, obviously less tortuous, and ultimately less challenging to speak within the true rather than speak the true, whichever the latter may be.

II. 2. i. Lucía Guerra and the Shadows of Critical Writing²¹

mi discurso ha sido feminista pero no femenino, claudicación estratégica que hoy día se hace necesaria para abrirse un espacio en los centros institucionalizados.

Lucía Guerra

Simone de Beauvoir could barely have envisioned the critical turmoil that her famous sentence "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one," has generated over the years, especially in the critical tenets of the radical feminisms of the second wave after the 1960's, both in Europe and North America. De Beauvoir's maxim is perhaps directly responsible for the never ending argument of sameness over difference between the sexes, which has led many feminists to assert that the basis of all exploitation does not lie solely in class/race differences and in the material historical conditions that generated them, but rather in man's power over woman's sexuality. The culture/nature dichotomy is still very much alive and the issue remains the control that androcentric society exerts over women's bodies.

Denying women's biological specificities has been necessary to assert that sexual difference is not naturally but socially constructed.²² All difference is thus synonymous with inferiority and, as a corollary, oppression. In the feminist discourses that echo De Beauvoir's axiom, women have become "the other of the same," as Luce Irigaray has pointed out, and, as such, they are defined by inferiority. Masculine power presents itself as the norm, the yardstick with which women are measured;

²¹ A shorter version of Guerra-Cunningham's section was presented as a paper in a conference of the Canadian Association of Hispanists held in Calgary, Alberta, in June 1994.

²² A good example of a deterministic approach to the homologation of the sexes is Nancy Holmstrom's "A Marxist Theory of Women's Nature," see especially , p. 80.

femininity, difference and otherness are enclosed within the realms of determinism and essentialism.²³

This second part of Chapter II examines the epistemological tenets of radical feminisms which are centered on the paradigm of binary oppositions. The validity of such binary schemes has been questioned because they result in the creation of comfortable taxonomies and in the oversimplification of utterly complex situations. However, neither side of oppositions such as culture/nature, social/biological, sameness/otherness, constructivism/essentialism nor feminist/feminine are embraced in my analyses because they are part of a Manichean, binary scheme of thought. The above-cited epigraph is a fragment extracted from the article, "Las sombras de la escritura. Hacia una teoría de la producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana," ("The Shadows of Writing. Towards a Literary Production of Latin American Women Writers") by Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, a Chilean author and literary critic.²⁴ She is the author of several works of criticism and fiction, and she translated the works of the Chilean writer María Luisa Bombal into English. She has received several prestigious awards for her critical and fictional works, both in the United States and Latin America.

I have selected Lucía Guerra's essay because it challenges, albeit modestly, the neutralizing discourses of hegemonic feminisms, which in the pursuit of economic and socio-political gains, have had to "shrug-off the body and travel like disembodied entities" (Rich, 39-40). In "The Shadows

²³ See Catherine MacKinnon, Towards a Feminist Theory of the State, 131. Although MacKinnon broadly discusses constructivism, she falls into the trap of determinism herself and rates masculinity well above femininity.

²⁴ Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, "Las sombras de la escritura. Hacia una producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana" in Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Theory. Page references to this article are made to "Shadows". All translations are mine.

of Writing” Lucía Guerra attempts to escape from the silencing effects of institutionalized feminist criticism, notwithstanding her mimicking of the latter. Guerra’s article has narrow openings with sparkling clues which could lead to determining the issues being left out of literary and critical texts written by Latin American women. It establishes an association between institutionalized feminist criticism with institutionalized masculine criticism. At the same time, “Shadows” blurs the borders between the abstract categories of the "feminine" and the "feminist," i.e., between the idea of woman as an object of patriarchal culture, and that of woman as a subject within that culture.

The statement made in the above-cited epigraph encourages me to take up where Guerra left off. It is necessary to elucidate the contours of the shadows of her critical writing given that it is precisely there, in those shadows, that the raw material for critical speculations may be found. I will focus specifically on pronouncements made (or not made) about highly contentious issues, all of which converge on the female body as the point of intersection of the natural and the cultural, and which are related to some aspect of women's sexuality. I will comment on Guerra’s analyses of several works by Latin American women writers, in which she hinted at aspects which at that time did not meet the standards of institutionalized Anglo-American feminisms. The last paragraph of Guerra’s essay, part of which I chose as my epigraph, is a provocation. It should be kept in mind that Guerra-Cunningham is working and/or publishing in an Anglo-American academic milieu and that her article has been included in a volume which is widely used in classes with Hispanic American literature content. The epigraph is an ironic wink at her own critical exercise, a clear

sign that she has complied with something she disagrees with, or is at least very ambivalent about:

[...] the very discourse of this essay has been enclosed within borders that are typical of a traditionally masculine critical practice, my discourse is feminist but not feminine, a strategic surrender that nowadays becomes necessary in order to open a space for oneself within institutionalized centers. (“Shadows,” 159) ²⁵

This explicit provocation is an invitation to challenge feminist discourses which dread being identified with the feminine, a frivolous and treacherous notion that appears to have been condemned to eternal quarantine by many feminist critics. The quotation marks that must always accompany “the feminine” within any feminist text reflect not only the deep revision that the term is undergoing in feminist criticism but also the heavy irony that is attached to it.

II. 2. ii. Feminine vs. Feminist Elements in Academia

In order to be published and be taken seriously by academics, Latin American critics like Lucía Guerra avoid the discussion of tabooed feminine subjectivities. Failing to do so would have rendered such critics vulnerable to accusations of colluding with the notions of subordination, passivity, weakness, irrationality, insatiable sexuality and perhaps even evil, to name only a few within feminist circles. All these feelings and states should be understood exclusively as male fears, anxieties or desires that

²⁵ “El discurso mismo de este ensayo ha estado cercado por fronterizaciones típicas de un quehacer crítico tradicionalmente masculino, mi discurso ha sido feminista pero no femenino, claudicación estratégica que hoy día se hace necesaria para abrirse un espacio en los centros institucionalizados.” It should be noted, however, that Guerra’s most recent critical work (published in Chile), *La mujer fragmentada: Historias de un signo*, (1995) elaborates further on the restrictions imposed by radical feminist scholarship.

have been projected on the eternally objectified women. In their militancy, radical feminists get dangerously close to the articulation of a feminist absolute a notion purged of any vestiges of “feminine” impurities.

The feminine and the feminist elements cannot be considered in such simplistic and dichotomous terms, nor can the feminine be conceived as a space completely molded and defined by the whims of capricious and wicked men. Unspeakable as it may have become, the feminine seems to be a space of active resistance, a space where women subject/objects have devised ways to contest the place assigned to them by male culture. Silvia Vegetti Finzi “speaks the feminine”:

If speaking the feminine presents itself as an “endless lingering,” it means that something remains unresolved, that the question is never closed once and for all. Feminine desire, which works by provoking in the other the question ‘What does the woman want?’, makes her exist as a subject despite her position as an object. The feminine enigma, the ‘black continent,’ to use Freudian metaphors, functions as an interrogation which disrupts the hierarchy of pre-established positions, investing them with the dialectic of desire [...]. Interpreted thus, the feminine, instead of a place of continual dispossession, is configured as a site of unpacifiable tensions, as a constant bid to put opposites in relation with each other. (Vegetti Finzi, 130-131)

In some radical feminist discourses, the “feminine” lacks this complexity; it has been placed at the negative end of the opposition and stifled by politically correct discourses of victimization that sometimes border on the melodramatic:

Feminist consciousness is consciousness of victimization. To apprehend oneself as a victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force outside of oneself which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women. For some feminists, this hostile power is "society" or "the system"; for others is simply men . (Bartsky, 15)

Or by one that borders in the quasi paranoid:

To apprehend myself as a victim in a sexist society is to know that there are few places where I can hide, that I can be attacked almost anywhere, at any time, by virtually anyone. (Bartsky, 17)

The melodramatic and paranoid overtones that may be perceived from these two excerpts can be explained (or even justified), as an extreme position that feminist cultural critics have taken as a means of creating a deep social and political awareness of the situation of women in society. However, expressions such as an "alien and hostile force" as something that exists out there, something that is external and inorganic to women, can sound disturbing. This kind of narrative contributes not only to perpetuate the image of women as minors and mere instruments, incapable of taking responsibility for their actions. It also emphasizes the perception that women are creatures of boundless goodness victimized by a sexist society of rapist men.

Disturbing are as well the narratives that uncritically idealize matriarchal societies, or those that sing to the greatness and all-encompassing power of the feminine, where woman is likened to nothing less than the ancient Earth Goddess. The following excerpt is illustrative of an extreme swing of the pendulum in the definition of the feminine:

She is the power of fertility and generation; the womb, and also the receptive tomb, the power of death. She is the body, and the body is sacred. Womb, breast, belly, mouth, vagina, penis, bone and blood. The Earth Goddess is also air and sky [...] ruler of things felt but not seen. She can never be grasped or penetrated; the mind is drawn ever further in the drive to know the unknowable, to speak the inexpressible. She is the inspiration that comes with an indrawn breath. (Starhawk cited by Stephen Martin, 17)²⁶

This is one example among many of the essentialization and glorification of feminine qualities that have identified women with the mysterious or unknowable ("She can never be grasped"), or with the intuitive and sensorial ("ruler of things felt but not seen"), and certainly with an unlimited and all-embracing power. This female being contrasts wildly with the powerless one rendered in the above-cited feminist discourses of victimization. Thus, the two extreme positions exemplify discursive practices that in the process of opposing each other become extremely polarized, lose sight of their object of study and present only a part of this object as if it were a whole. Middle grounds are perhaps the most challenging positions to articulate and defend precisely because they escape institutionalized ideologies and discourses --and knowledges that serve specific interests-- and can therefore "disrupt the hierarchy of pre-established positions" or become virtual battle grounds for "unpacifiable tensions" (Vegetti Finzi, 130).

²⁶ The ideas expressed in this passage of Open Form and the Feminine Imagination are less suspicious than the context in which they have been placed. They are included under the cataclysmic section entitled "The Collapse of Patriarchy and a New Beginning," 15-50.

The unpacifiable tensions that remain in the shadows of Lucía Guerra's critical article are perhaps too unacademic, or simply do not serve the interest of feminist hegemonies that are attempting to re-educate and empower women through Women Studies courses. Lucía Guerra has thus departed from mainstream feminist ethics only covertly and her disagreement, lurking underneath an official lingo, surfaces oftentimes in a mildly dissident note. Her writing oscillates between two critical poles, one in which she acquiesces to what she is expected to say, the other in which she undermines, albeit cautiously, the feminist logic, either by pointing towards a forbidden path that invites deeper analysis, or by not naming this path at all, perhaps as a sign of resistance to the imposition of more hegemonic discourses. This sort of double writing, the feminist readable one and the feminine one that remains in the shadows is, according to Guerra, the mechanism that operates in the texts of many Latin American women writers, one that can be applied to her own critical exercise. She explains this writing in terms of movements:

[...] two antagonic movements of surrender and subversion. And it is from this basic displacement that aesthetic phenomena such as the silence and the void, the palimpsest and the diglossia of the feminine can be understood. The text produced through this complex process that fluctuates between the hegemonic and the marginal makes evident a feminine collective conscience that is only beginning to be elucidated. (My translation) ("Shadows," 143-144)²⁷

²⁷ "Dos movimientos antagónicos de la claudicación y la subversión. Y es a partir de este desfase básico que se pueden comprender los fenómenos estéticos del silencio y el vacío, el palimpsesto, la diglosia de lo femenino. El texto producido en este complejo proceso que fluctúa entre lo hegemónico y lo marginal pone en evidencia una conciencia colectiva femenina que recién empieza a ser delucidada."

The feminine consciousness that Guerra-Cunningham alludes to here cannot be named, described or represented within the symbolic universe that hegemonic feminisms erected for themselves. To do so would have represented a transgression of the feminist order of discourse; it would also represent a sort of acquiescence to the masculinist order of things because the feminine, as noted before, purportedly pertains to everything that reflects the fears, anxieties, fantasies and desires of men who have objectified women, depriving them of any sort of subjecthood. This probably explains why Lucía Guerra warns us that her discourse is marked by frontiers that are typically and traditionally masculine, and that hers is a feminist discourse, not a feminine one. The direct correlation she makes between masculine and feminist discourses is inescapable. Many of her claims against the patriarchal powers that be are equally applicable to some feminist hegemonies, especially when these are used to explain the embodied conscience of the Latin American feminine subjects, their social specificities, and historical locations.

II. 2. iii. The Anti-Phallic Crusade

When Lucía Guerra discusses feminine desire in the works of María Flora Yañez, María Carolina Geel, María Luisa Bombal, and others, she notes how in their novels the female body experiences erotic pleasure when in contact with the natural elements, thus escaping a masculine economy of compulsory heterosexuality and phallic penetration:

[...] not only is phallic penetration not seen as the only transcendental event but the deterritorialization of the feminine sexual activity also occurs, erasing the phallus, and expanding the limits of women's sexuality toward a cosmic

sphere intimately united to the feminine.
("Shadows," 146)²⁸

The female body represented in the works of Yáñez, Geel and Bombal may have invaded a cosmic sphere intimately united with the feminine, as Lucía Guerra suggests; but these authors and their critic leave out the representation and discussion of great numbers of Latin American women of all walks of life, different classes, races and creeds who not only have not erased the phallus, but rather may worship and fetishize it. The phallus, at the symbolic level of the imaginary, and men at the concrete level of reality²⁹ are perceived as a means of access to political, social and economic power by a vast majority of women. Phallic worshipping, whatever form it may take, nurtures a femininity that seduces while it empowers women at one level and disempowers them at another. These women from everyday realities are not being represented by other women, as often as they deserve. Considering that in Latin America a great majority of women may achieve and exercise their power indirectly,³⁰

²⁸ "No sólo se produce la negación de la penetración fálica como único evento trascendente sino que también se desterritorializa la actividad sexual femenina borrando el falo, ampliando sus límites a una esfera cósmica íntimamente unida a lo femenino."

²⁹ I refer both to the pleasure-producing male organ and to the Lacanian phallus of power, authority and "the word", as discussed by Gwendolyn Díaz in her article "De Hegel a Lacán: El discurso del deseo en Cambio de Armas de Luisa Valenzuela" However, this author has too quickly adopted Lacanian theories without considering the numerous feminist revisions these have undergone; a relatively recent and notable one on the Freudian and Lacanian phallic imaginary is Judith Butler's Bodies That Matter. On the discursive Limits of "Sex." especially chapter two on "The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary," 57-91. On the other hand, I differ from Díaz's unproblematic reading of "De noche soy tu caballo" where she interprets the female protagonist's position exclusively as that of the slave who is utterly dominated by the male. The female character "Bella" of the short story "Cuarta versión" is a literary version that comes a bit closer to the women from everyday life I am referring to here.

³⁰ Here, I distance myself from a monolithic idea of "power" as domination and repression. I ascribe to the Foucauldian notion that power "would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress." See Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977, 56. For a tracing and succinct analysis of the notion of Foucauldian power in several of his works, see G. C. Prado, Descartes and Foucault, especially his comments about the complexity of the concept: "In saying that a certain individual or group 'has' power over others we abstract from a highly complex situation, in which the person or group said to have power is equally, though perhaps in a very different and subtle manner, constrained by those over whom that person or group is said to have power," 143. I am well aware, however, that an appropriation of the concept of Foucauldian power needs to be put under the scrutiny of

through men who seemingly grant it, this misrepresentation, or rather underrepresentation, is a significant oversight.

And where are those women for whom the act of phallic penetration is not synonymous with rape, victimization, domination, exploitation or a source of constant laceration, but an utterly pleasurable act that is closer to a communion with themselves and others, and possibly even the transcendental event that Lucía Guerra so rhetorically disqualifies? They are rarely given voice in the feminist discourses of the Eighties and early Nineties. It is commonplace knowledge that women writers of the past could not openly trespass the limits of a textual space of sexual desire, because this space was largely dominated by men. More recently, however, phallic penetration and any other heterosexual fantasy derived from it has become a transgression of the radical feminist code of ethics.

Latin American poets have also been either disqualified and/or celebrated for subverting or allying themselves to this code; a recent example of this tendency is the feminist critical perspective entertained in “A place for Eve in the revolution: Gioconda Belli and Rosario Murillo,” by Nissa Torrens. In this analysis of the works of two Nicaraguan poets, one of Belli’s most erotically charged poems is “disconcerting in its dependence upon male activity, even violent male activity” (Torrens, 181). The poet herself “resembles a Freudian case history in hysteria” (*Ibid.*, 182). Belli is at a loss when she is compared to Murillo who instead possesses an inherent “strength and conviction of the revolutionary ‘new’ woman who recognizes even in her own menstrual cycle the manifestation of revolutionary rebirth.” (*Ibid.*, 183). Thus, heterosexuality is ridiculed

feminist/feminine thought, and contrasted with differing ideas on the concept by thinkers such as Weber, Gramsci, Derrida and Habermas to begin with, a task that is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

and sometimes equated with sadomasochism, the sadistic streak being attributed to the masculine element, and the masochist, of course, to the feminine one.³¹ Reliance on women's own biological processes, lesbianism and homoeroticism are less of a taboo in the feminist contemporary critical and literary discourses, and in fact have become unavoidable *loci* of contending discussions.

The heterosexual act, anchored in the monolithic phallus, has been deferred, degraded, or erased; it escapes codification and is therefore underrepresented and unrepresentable. Lucía Guerra herself notes how Sylvia Molloy has defied bourgeois morality by portraying a lesbian triangle in her novel En breve cárcel. She also notes how writers such as Albalucía Angel, Armonía Sommers and Griselda Gambaro have opposed patriarchal repression by "describing rape so explicitly that they have shocked conventional readers" ("Shadows," 153). Allusions to any form of heterosexual union that is not rape or that is not more or less degraded constitute the shadows of the novels discussed and of the critical article in question. Lucía Guerra herself qualifies the monolithic phallus as simply "one-dimensional, if not boring" ("Shadows," 158), thus alluding to the alleged superiority and higher versatility of the sexual capacity of women, or at least to their sexual self-sufficiency. It is tempting to speculate here that Lucía Guerra's degradation of the phallus is an example of the bitextuality that she alludes to in her article. Asserting that the phallus is

³¹ See Bartsky, especially the section entitled "Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," 45-62, where the author suggests that feminists should struggle to align their sexual practices with their principles in order to arrive at a more "'politically correct' sexuality of mutual respect" (Bartsky, 45). She also implies that not only sexual behavior but also sexual desire and sexual fantasy should be altered to achieve the end of aligning them with feminist principles of equality. I personally perceive some fascistic overtones underlining her "Story of P" --a feminist activist who is "ashamed" and confesses that she regularly has sadomasochist fantasies-- and so must have the women of Samois, an organization of and for sadomasochistic women who qualify themselves as lesbian and feminist. The existence of such an organization is regarded with awe, not only by Bartsky but also by Trask, who sees Samois not as a part of the liberation of the feminist Eros, but as its poisoning (Trask, 175).

one-dimensional, if not boring, is perhaps a misleading gesture on her part, one that implies hiding herself, transcending the very limits of her femininity to avoid disclosing the structures of desire imposed by patriarchy, which lay bare women's subservience to the very system that overpowers them; Perhaps Lucía Guerra deems it necessary to avoid unearthing the darker, more subordinate and shameful side of the feminine structure of heterosexual desire, to which the most primitive impulses and reflexes are attached and which women have internalized thanks, among other things, to the dynamics of seduction and the pervasive erotization of domination and subjection undertaken by patriarchal systems of thought, and their concomitant phallic supremacy.

Lucía Guerra's omission of a heterosexual union worthy of talking about is perhaps a deliberate concession to the crusade against phallic imperialism undertaken by the majority of feminisms, especially the so-called radical ones. It is understandable that in part this swing of the pendulum must be necessary to prove Freud wrong, to assert that, contrary to his beliefs, women do not need men to achieve sexual maturity, nor do they suffer from penis envy.³² It is important to note, as we did in Chapter I, that in these passionate politics of opposition, some feminists have articulated versions of female sexuality and genitalia that are dangerously close to those expressed by Freud. For example, it has been said that women possess an "inherent structural vulnerability," that they suffer from "biological inequity" (McKinnon, 1991: 56-57), or that "men and women were created different and not equally privileged" (Firestone, 233).

³² In Women Studies courses the anti-Freudian sentiments may at times take extreme forms. It is not uncommon to hear in a course on Feminist Psychoanalytic Theories anti-Freudian statements such as: "that (Freud) s.o.b (!) should be banned from these courses forever. I don't understand why women bother with him anymore."

Should one assume then that women are underprivileged because they lack a penis? Maybe not. Perhaps a more positive position would be to take these extremes as reflective of the need to define a woman-centered sexuality or feminist Eros, such as the one beautifully expressed by the poet Sue Silvermarie:

In loving another woman I discovered the deep urge to both be a mother to and find a mother in my lover [...]. Now, I treasure and trust the drama between two loving women, in which each can become mother and each become child [...]. It is most clear during lovemaking [...]. When I kiss and stroke and enter my lover, I am also a child re-entering my mother. I want to return to the womb-state of harmony and also to the ancient world. I enter my lover but it is she in her orgasm who returns. I see on her face for a long moment the unconscious bliss that an infant carries the memory of behind its shut eyes. Then when it is she who makes love to me [...] the intensity is also a pushing out, a birthing! She comes in and is then identified with the ecstasy that is born [...]. So I too return to the mystery of my mother, and of the world as it must have been when the motherbond was exalted. (Trask, 168)

This lovemaking scene reflects the will to reclaim and explore the female body. Here, two women experience a rebirth from each other into a utopian female space without the interference of the male. This feminist Eros is violently opposed to the destructive power perceived from the heterosexual system by Haunani-KayTrask:

[this system] has been perverted by men's subjugation which leads women to be vengeful, or masochistic, and which leads men to rape and murder. The resulting sexual system [...] is a

mutual covenant based on exploitation and abuse. In this kind of world, those who choose not to exploit will in turn be exploited. There is not other alternative. (*Ibid.*, 173)³³

Lucía Guerra has arranged her critical essay in such a way as not to antagonize the two dominant positions in mainstream feminism: the assertion of a self-sufficient women's sexuality and the denigration of a heterosexual desire that does not entail violence against women, or their domination and subjection. The former trend is expressed in her choice of novels and her discussion of a feminine cosmic sphere, and in her dismissing of phallic penetration as the transcendental event. Although she doesn't go as far as qualifying the phallus as the sole perpetrator of the domination and subjection of women, she does go as far as suggesting that it is simply one-dimensional and boring.

II. 2. iv. Prostitution

Domination and subjection play a crucial role in the dynamics of prostitution, another institution discussed by Lucía Guerra in reference to Blanca Sol, a novel by the 19th century Peruvian writer, Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, in which the prostitute, conceived as the anti-model of the virtuous wife-mother, displays the moralizing drive of the novel and its author. Lucía Guerra, like Engels, De Beauvoir, and many other theorists before her, notes that matrimony may also be seen as a veiled form of prostitution accepted by society. The shadows and blank spaces of this section of her article are enticing they avoid projecting on the reader

³³ This passage expresses the author's very personal interpretation of the views set forth by María Barreno, María Horta and María Da Costa in The Three Marias, one of the most erotically charged, sexually explicit and therefore extremely controversial books by three Portuguese women who were jailed after its publication.

another kind of veiled prostitution that permeates all the social strata of Latin American countries, one that is pervasive and, yes, still another manifestation, or rather a consequence of the phenomenon of phallic worshipping that allows women to conquer spaces of official or perceived power. Lucía Guerra avoids references to the kind of prostitution practiced in the upper spheres by first ladies and presidential lovers, the two logistic angles of the institutionalized presidential triangles, by now famous in many Latin American countries. She avoids, as well, speaking of the kind of prostitution practiced in the middle and lower spheres of society by ministerial white and blue collar female employees, by the *queridas* (lovers) of the military and the police, by women in the shanty towns and the *favelas*. The former group of women partake in the looting of national budgets with presidents, ministers and the like. For the latter group of women this form of access to power, has become a sort of informal economy that sustains many families. These particular forms of access to power will be discussed in Chapter III.

The paradigm domination/subjection is put under siege and further complicated in light of these practices, for although it is undeniable that the law renders female prostitutes more vulnerable to exploitation by johns and pimps, it is also true that within particular contexts prostitution takes on other meanings. It becomes part of a set of strategies that allows women to step in-and-out of the capitalist/patriarchal system, and cannot therefore be seen only as "one of the most graphic examples of men's domination of women."³⁴

³⁴ Pateman's article is a response to the controversial article by L.O. Ericsson, "Charges against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment." For a differing view on prostitution see Laurie Shrage's "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?" in the same volume. Shrage documents the existence of COYOTE (Cut Off Your Old Tired Ethics), a civil rights organization with the task of shaking the grounds of the sex industry and pursuing economic gains and more decent working conditions for prostitutes. It

The women I refer to above are utterly complex characters who are systematically absent from the horizons of Latin American women writers and literary critics, perhaps because the representation of this "darker" side of women in a brighter vein would appear to corroborate and reinforce their masculine stereotyping as "money suckers" and ruthless whores, and should therefore be suppressed from texts and spaces that need to be politically correct in order to serve as examples for the malleable minds of young women (Pateman, 201).³⁵

II. 2. v. Bodily Fluids

Equally suppressed in Guerra's article are the different perceptions of the functions of bodily fluids, such as menstrual blood and male sperm, and of the use made of these fluids in the feminine circles across different socio-economic strata in Latin America. She says that menstrual blood (taboo in so many patriarchal cultures) "has the potential to substitute the signifier 'blood' in its connotations of death, territorialization and domination, for those of life in a society free of hierarchies and structures of domination" ("Shadows," 58). Emphasizing the life-giving aspect of menstruation is another strategic move on Lucía Guerra's part, for in doing so she joins the rapidly growing lines of women who have begun to rethink and celebrate menstruation in their path towards a revalorization of everything female.

Adrienne Rich exemplifies this trend:

may be worth further inquiring about this organization for the exchange of ideas that could be adopted and implemented in the programs of the incipient houses for battered women (*casas de mujeres, centros de ayuda femeninos*, etc.) in Latin America.

³⁵ Curiously enough, the above-cited article by Laurie Shrage, which presents a rather interesting vision of prostitutes not as degraded beings or sexual commodities but as some sort of "chiropractors," was not included in the reading list of a course on Feminist Political Thought even though it was part of a cluster of articles on the subject in the same book.

I would suggest that if women first created a menstrual taboo, whether from a sense of their own sacred mysteries or out of a need to control and socialize the male, this taboo itself must have added to their apparent powers, investing them with the charisma of ritual. (Cited by Trask, 166)

Rich's statement actually confirms many of the views on menstruation entertained by numerous traditional cultures.³⁶ Robin Morgan's incantatory poem builds up on the ritual character ascribed to menstruation by Adrienne Rich:

This cup, this chalice, this primordial cauldron of real menstrual blood the color of clay warm with promise, rhythmic, cyclical, fit for lining the uterus and shed for many, for the remission of living. (*Ibid.*, 167)

But menstruation is not only a sign of power and life, as Rich, Morgan and Guerra assert; it is also, as Simone de Beauvoir said, an untidy affair, and a constant reminder that "woman's misfortune was to have been biologically destined for the repetition of life" (Cited by McKinnon, 54).

What remains unsaid in the shadows of this section of "Las sombras de la escritura" is that menstrual blood is used by women both as an antidote against and as a potion for male domination. Diluted in water or any other beverage, menstrual blood acts as a powerful tool, an elixir to harness men's sexuality; it works as a sort of chastity belt for men devised

³⁶ For anthropological and ethnographic data on these views see Peggy Reeves Sanday's *Female Power and Male Dominance. On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. In the chapter entitled "Blood, Sex and Danger," 91-110, the author undertakes a lengthy discussion on the virulence of the power attributed to menstrual blood, which can sap male strength, undo the supernatural powers of any shaman, endanger the whole community, and weaken nursing children.

by feminine ingenuity. Men who "drink the water,"³⁷ known as *agua de no sé qué* (water of who knows what), are expected to be compelled to perform sexually only with the woman whose water they unknowingly drink. *Agua de no sé qué* is the title of a very popular song that goes, "My *compadre* has lost his wits. They are feeding him water-of-who-knows-what. They give him frog legs and tails, they give him beef jerky night and day. Hey *compadre*, what's wrong with you? Don't you realize that that woman is feeding you water-of-who-knows-what?" (My translation) ³⁸.

Male sperm, on the other hand, is buried with pubic hair under several layers of soil not only to circumscribe men's sexual desire to one woman but also to secure her descendants and the means to support them. These are two well-known practices that illustrate the feminine way to appropriate men's body and labor in ways that are perceived as dramatically real by women and men alike. These modern versions of witches and castrating women who make potions and dominate phalluses are two of the favorite masculine projections on women throughout the ages. As such, they are consistently muted in feminist spaces that obliterate the darker side of the victimized woman, or rather of the "active victim," a construct that will be further discussed in Chapter III.

The flat, one-sided character of the woman-victim should gradually loosen its firm grip of textual spaces and give way to a refurbished, more active victim to whom it is compelling to give voice and put into discourse.

³⁷ This practice has been recorded by Joann Martin in "Motherhood and Power: The Production of a Women's Culture of Politics in a Mexican Community." See specifically p. 479 where the author discusses how women attribute a man's inability to resist bureaucratic corruption to the fact that he is "drinking the water."

³⁸ "A mi *compadre* lo tienen casi bobo, lo alimentan con agua de no sé qué. Le dan patas the sapo, colita de una rana; le dan lomito seco de noche y de mañana. Ay! *compadre*, ¿qué le pasa? ¿No ve usted que esa mujer le da "agua de no sé qué?" Other related practices used by women to attract or subdue men have been recorded by the Guadaloupan writer Maryse Condé, in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. This historical novel narrates the story of the only Caribbean black woman who was allegedly executed in the witch trials of Salem.

Victims capable of exercising "good and evil, of life-giving and life-taking, of boundless rage and all-embracing love" (Reeves Sanday, 218), are badly needed in literary and critical texts written by Latin American women. Perhaps feminist literary/cultural critics could look into insights long absent from their own Westernized societies to find inspiration not in the dichotomic moralistic constructions of right or wrong like those found, for example, in some of the New Age Goddess religions being revived in North America and Canada, but rather in the words of a goddess³⁹ possessing a dualistic nature, such as the one described below:

I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore, and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the mother and the daughter [...]. I am knowledge and ignorance, I am shameless; I am ashamed. I am strength and I am fear [...]. I am foolish, and I am wise. I am godless, and I am one whose God is great. (Cited by Reeves Sanday, 57)

Latin America offers a fertile imaginary peopled with Indigenous and African cults having female (and often androgynous) figures as their central deities. Examples are the mighty Obatalá, Ochún, Yemayá and Changó, four of the seven marine potencies that Latin Americans have inherited from the Yorubas. These deities are venerated throughout the Caribbean, including Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela as well as Uruguay and Brazil. Another case in point is the cult of María Lionza in Colombia, Panamá and especially Venezuela, which will be the object of Chapter IV.

³⁹ Among other works, in *Je, Tu, Nous. Toward a Culture of Difference*, Luce Irigaray advances the theory that women should start looking for a female divine. Also relevant to the issue of a female divine is a book by the Uruguayan feminist theologian, María Teresa Porcile Santiso, *La mujer, espacio de salvación*, where she looks at the mission of women in church from an anthropological perspective.

In Latin American contexts, (and surely in many others) the female body is a site where these opposites coexist. Our mixed mythologies have generated hybrid-evolving cultures that express these internal contradictions: joy and torture, peacefulness and violence, triumph and defeat, opulence and utter poverty, submission and domination. Mainstream feminisms based in North America, which treat the female body only as the locus of all oppression or as the representation of unlimited superiority, and not also as a possible source of power, are not typically characterized by their interest in historical and local differences, and consequently cannot perceive these realities.

The obliteration of the mixed mythologies that nurture these hybrid-evolving realities is in part a product of the insidious European rationalism that has taken firm hold of academic feminism reducing women to Manichaeic constructs. Latin American feminist critics should start combining the adoption of imported feminist values with a mobilization of the zones of impermissible experiences more often, in order to search for other enduring meanings in their cultural heritages. Perhaps this would be a safe way to challenge academic political correctness, and, at the same time, play some dirty tricks on Reason.

II. 2. vi. The Feminine Unleashed in Fiction

As noted earlier, the feminine lacks legitimizing paradigms within the contexts of the hegemonic feminisms that frame Lucía Guerra's essay. However, when we move from the essayist mode to the realm of narrative fiction, the feminine takes on a biological/hormonal quality and becomes the most important zone of Guerra's fictional writing. The imagination, and the fictive element that defines narrative, is the protective cloak under

which she gives license to narrators who explore and describe experiences of the feminine at the social level, and especially in the domain of the erotic. As we shall see in an analysis of two short stories of her collection, Frutos Extraños⁴⁰ (Rare Fruits), the phallus has ceased to be boring and women are no longer the sexually self-sufficient beings she discussed in her essay “The Shadows of Writing.” In Frutos Extraños Guerra’s (anti)heroines luxuriate in the phallus, and the heterosexual union is portrayed from the perspective of a female subject whose sexuality is not stifled by passivity, and, in some cases, whose persona is not mortified by perverted or unorthodox sexual practices.

La pasión de la virgen (“The Virgin’s Passion”) narrates the story of an old maiden who does not quite remember the time when she stopped associating the word “virgin” with a Madonna and Child and began instead to understand its meaning as “not being yet” (*no ser todavía*), i.e., a woman who has not yet acquired her womanhood and even her personhood only because she remains a virgin. The loss of virginity became for the old maiden the turning point of an otherwise insignificant existence:

[...] as I accumulated details about the loss of virginity, I began to desire pain and blood with all my soul. (Blood stains in the nuptial sheets [...] a cyclone penetrating the womb and destroying the inside walls of the uterus [...]). Then, the sword that the prince receives ceremoniously from the hands of his father seemed to me to be a faint image compared to this other initiation of vagina and throat, this way of becoming with the whole body. Nailed to me was the desire to become a woman through that rite of blood and kisses, to

⁴⁰ My analysis of the stories I have selected for discussion will be restricted to an examination of the mode of representation of the female subject, as indicated above. All the excerpts selected for citation are my translation.

open-up like a flower under the penetrating shaft of a man who would forever be the astral sun of all constellations. (Guerra, 1991: 12)⁴¹

In the eyes of the old maiden of “The Virgin’s Passion” the ritualistic and timeless *leit motif* of a father acknowledging his son’s coming of age, maturity and wisdom, pales in comparison to the feminine experience in a heterosexual union. This union is incarnated, almost tangible in Guerra’s fictional writing. It has the power of a sacralized ritual that must be re-enacted, either physically or through imagination and memory, to exorcise life of a senseless routine. The act itself must be recorded and made concrete in writing in order to re-live it *ad infinitum*. Moreover, it is also through the heterosexual union that a woman allows a man to “give birth” to her, as the protagonist suggests:

My bodily entrance into true life had to be a text written and sacred, an intimate testimony which, in time, I would re-read like the sacred scriptures are read, making of my reading a ritual that would allow me to re-submerge myself in the crimson night of my true birth. (*Ibid.*)⁴²

If the narrator recreates love and passion in every ritual reading of her intimate testimony, Lucía Guerra undertakes in “The Virgin’s Passion” a subversion of the feminist ritual discourses that traverse her essay “The

41 “A medida que iba acumulando detalles sobre la pérdida de la virginidad, empecé a desear con toda el alma el dolor y la sangre. (Manchas en la sábana nupcial [...] ciclón que penetra el vientre destrozando las paredes del útero [...]). Entonces, la espada que el príncipe recibe ceremoniosamente de manos de su padre me pareció una imagen desvaída frente esta otra iniciación de vagina y de garganta, este llegar a ser con todo el cuerpo. Y se me clavó el deseo intenso de convertirme en mujer a través de rito de sangre y de besos, de abrirme como una flor bajo el rayo penetrante de un hombre que sería, para siempre, el astro solar de todas las constelaciones.”

42 “Mi entrada corporal a la verdadera vida debía ser un texto escrito y sagrado, un testimonio íntimo que, con los años, yo releería como se releen las santas escrituras, haciendo de su lectura un ritual que me permitiría sumergirme en la noche púrpura de mi verdadero nacimiento.”

Shadows of Writing,” where a radically different conception of the heterosexual act is rendered.

“The Virgin’s Passion” is, furthermore, a story that infringes on the propriety of moral and social standards. As a young girl, the protagonist engages in sexual play with Antuco, a man her senior who worked as the gardener of her well-to-do family. The sexual play scene blurs the limits between what is generally considered to be sexual abuse and simple seduction. It is a first person narrative by the protagonist who reminisces about the summer *affaire* that as a child she had with the gardener:

And unbuttoning his pants he began to show me, slowly, a chunk of pink flesh, like a newly born rat, which he began to caress; first, very softly, and later, making it leap furiously in between his thighs[...]. Rubbing my back and neck with his hardened palms, he made me fall into a lethargy of sun, of fruits and of tenderness which was repeated during the remainder of that summer. (*Ibid.*, 14)⁴³

The image of the phallus as a newly born rat is interesting in its ambiguity. The sight of such animal can be repulsive and threatening, but it can also elicit tenderness, like any creature, human or animal, in a newly born state. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, there is no trace in the protagonist’s narration of a perception of violence done to her, and in fact there is a sharp contrast between the content of what is being narrated and the tone being used in the narration. Furthermore, in the portrayal of this situation there seems to be a glorification of the abominable, and an abomination of

⁴³ “Y desabotonándose el marrueco me fue mostrando de a poco un trozo de carne rosada, como una laucha recién nacida, que él comenzo a acariciar primero muy suavemente para luego hacerla saltar con furia entre sus muslos” [...]. Frotándome la espalda y el cuello con sus palmas callosas me hizo caer en un letargo de sol, de frutas y de ternura que se repitió durante el resto de ese verano.”

the glorified which does not cater to the feminist *doxa*. In this regard, Erin Ferris in her the excellent article, “*Le Nom de la Mère* in Lucía Guerra’s ‘The Virgin’s Passion,’” cuts-off the rough edges of the controversial and threatening aspects of the story --such as the “molestation” scene described above-- which is portrayed by Ferris as “an Edenic seduction scene ‘that initiates the fall,’ and banishes woman from paradise imprisoning her in the earthly ‘hell’ of deforming patriarchal definitions and prohibitions in which her sexuality is implicated.” (Ferris, 123).

It is interesting to note that Ferris overemphasizes that hers is an analysis made “from a feminist perspective,” a phrase that is reiterated more than twice. Additionally, this critique undercuts the hyperbolic glorification of the phallus and stresses instead the **equality** (my emphasis) between the sexes: “thus, the story unveils a ‘new’ transcendental signifier in which the clitoris and the phallus equally and explicitly share a place” (Ferris, 127). Antuco, however, does not pass the test. He is seen as an obviously deranged man for having mistaken the protagonist with the virgin. In this sense, Ferris’ text misreads and downplays one of the most transgressive aspects of “The Virgin’s Passion.”

The protagonist appears to feel more violated by the social conventions that constrain her, and by her family’s perception of her as a stereotypical old maiden and patient aunt. These are the values and the stance that truly torture her, muzzling her voice and enshrouding her body:

They did not know, could not know, that underneath those atavistic clothes -true straight jackets of my body- throbbed a flow of organic voices, of runaway horses that made me moan in

my dreams, and the languor of a tide of fruits at midday. (*Ibid.*, 15)⁴⁴

This reference to her first encounter with the gardener under the fig trees reveals that Antuco is the quintessential object of her desire. She is overwhelmed by a passion “for that other angular body that harbors muscles made by God, so that they can rest in the rounded and pulpous flesh of a woman.”⁴⁵ Whether in the realm of her imagination or in the real world of her existence --and this ambiguity is maintained throughout the story-- her passion is consummated many years later when as an older woman she is reunited with Antuco, and says:

“I am still the virginal child of those days under the fig trees.”[...] [Antuco] nodded and whispered: “Hail Mary, Mother of God,” and began to creep up my body in an ardent kiss that made the scales of the long-hated serpent shriek. At last I was now the Lady of all dawns and while I write the last words of the testimony of my true birth, I hear outside the steps of Antuco who returns to me forever. Solemnly, he made me lie in a berth that smelled of algae and sea water, and at last my thighs enfolded him in a cadence of blood and moistened wax. (*Ibid.*, 18)⁴⁶

Antuco’s veneration of his virginal lover is saturated with eroticism. Any trace of the purity associated with the cult to the Virgin Mary is replaced

44 “Ellos no sabían, no podían saber que bajo esos atavíos --verdaderas mordazas de mi cuerpo-- palpitaba un vocerío vegetal, caballos desbocados que me hacían gemir en sueños y el peso de una marea de frutos a mediodía.”

45 “[Con esta pasión] por ese otro cuerpo anguloso que cobija músculos hechos por Dios para que reposen en la carne redondeada y esponjosa de una mujer.”

46 “Aún soy una niña virgen como aquellos días bajo la higuera [...] él, asintiendo con la cabeza susurró ‘Santa María madre de Dios’ y empezó a ascender por mi cuerpo en un beso ardiente que hacía chirriar las escamas del reptil odiado durante tantos años. Solemne me hizo yacer en el lecho con olor a algas y agua de mar y mis muslos por fin lo alojaron en un pulsar de sangre y cera húmeda.”

here by carnal adoration. On another level, but still consonant with the eroticization of religious discourses in this story, ambiguity reappears in the image of the phallus, no longer portrayed here as a “newly born rat” but as a “long-hated serpent.” However, for the passionate old maiden this hatred seems to respond both to a lack of, and a longing for her ultimate object of desire, which in its paroxysms had turned this desire, this love, into hatred due to its prolonged absence over the years. On the other hand, the above-cited scene, which closes “The passion of a Virgin,” reverts the concept of *hieros gamos*, that is, the sacred union of a woman with a male divinity: Antuco the gardener, kneels down to kiss the woman’s feet and crosses himself upon the apparition of the old maiden turned divinity.

The story “Of Witches and Martyrs” (*De brujas y de mártires*) maintains, and perhaps exacerbates, the tenor of pattern reversal common to the majority of stories in the collection. Here we are presented with a triangle: a gentle native Indian woman who tames the savage and lecherous Spanish conqueror who abuses and rapes her, and his wife, a fanatical, demented Spanish woman, presumably initiated in the arts of witchcraft by way of witnessing the confessions of female witches condemned by the Spanish Inquisition. The setting of “Of Witches and Martyrs” is Guatemala, but it could be any and all Latin American countries during the time of the Conquest.

The phallus and the heterosexual union between a man and a woman of unequal status are here as conspicuous as they are in “The Virgin’s Passion.” The prominence of phallic images is evident from the very first scene:

Lying sideways on the soil, the woman feels once again the stiff flesh that penetrates her from

behind. She dreads that slimy and poisonous stalk that drill her once more, slithering up the docile walls of her vulva, splintering her moisture with its alien texture [...]. Helpless, she turns her head and sees the lustful eyes of the enemy, of that man covered with sweat who was intent in invading her motherland and is now determined to possess her body. (*Ibid.*, 33)⁴⁷

The brutality of Pedro de Alvarado, a conspicuous figure in the history of Guatemala and other Latin American countries, stands in sharp contrast with the meekness and pliability he shows while living with the Indian woman, Niniloj, the victim of the rape scene described above. His wife, Doña Beatriz, out of her wits and painfully jealous of the couple's nightly sexual pleasures, notes this drastic change in her husband's disposition:

[Doña Beatriz] would never forget the first time she saw don Pedro caressing [Niniloj] with his eyes [...]. With her head down, [Niniloj] began to undo his boots and all trace of a bitter gesture disappeared from his face as if by magic. Not for a second did he stop contemplating [Niniloj] with a delicate smile and balmy eyes, which Doña Beatriz had never before seen in him. Never, never had he looked at her in that way, not even in those days following the wedding ceremony. Which pacts had that heretic Indian woman made with the devil, to tie him up to a charm that had turned him into a saccharine dove? (*Ibid.*, 42)⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "Yaciendo de costado sobre la tierra, la mujer vuelve a sentir la carne rígida penetrándola por detrás. La espanta ese tallo venenoso y resbaladizo que comienza nuevamente a horadarla reptando por los muros dóciles de su vulva, desgarrando la humedad con su textura ajena."

⁴⁸ "Doña Beatriz nunca olvidaría la primera vez que vio a don Pedro acariciándola con la mirada. [...] Con la cabeza gacha empezó a desabrocharle las botas y del rostro de él desapareció, como por encanto, todo trazo de gesto adusto. Ni un solo segundo dejó de contemplarla con una leve sonrisa y unos ojos blandos que doña Beatriz nunca antes le había visto [...]. Nunca, nunca la había mirado a ella de esa manera, ni siquiera en aquellos días que siguieron a la ceremonia de bodas. ¿Qué pactos con el demonio habría hecho esa india herética y contumaz para ligarlo en un hechizo que lo convertía en palomo azucarado."

Whether Niniloj's sexual powers over her husband were achieved through magic rituals, or by natural means, they trigger Doña Beatriz' jealousy and desire for her husband's sexual favors. However, in her machinations the now widowed Beatriz alternates between burning desire and utter contempt for the phallus, and accordingly performs the conjurations and ritual practices she learned from the witches' testimonies of the Spanish Inquisition:

I slide my tongue along your back, along your thighs and through the unnamable member, so that you live under my dominance, so that you cannot sit in any chair, nor lie in any bed, without wanting to come to me. (*Ibid.*)⁴⁹

"Look here, Indian of the devil, how I burn the replica of your lover, ha, ha, see how the flames are devouring that filthy limb that penetrates your guts every night. Cry, cry and scream, because your martyrdom will be to wallow, alone, in your sheets, while ardour and desire drive you insane. (*Ibid.*, 43)⁵⁰

Through conjurations and magical obscure practices Doña Beatriz achieves her long-awaited end. Her husband is killed in battle while Niniloj gives birth to his only child. As a Great Spanish Inquisitor the widow concocts a plan to burn the undesirables beneath the tree that grew by the oratory.

"Of Witches and Martyrs" is a story of projections and reversals. Lucía Guerra's women make significant pronouncements about feminine

⁴⁹ "Yo te paso la lengua por la espalda, por los muslos y por el órgano innombrable para que vivas bajo mi dominio, para que en silla alguna puedas sentarte ni en lecho alguno puedas acostarte sin desear venir a mí."

⁵⁰ "Mira, india del diablo, como quemo a la réplica de tu amante, ja, ja, mira como las llamas le están consumiendo ese bulto asqueroso que te penetra las entrañas todas las noches. Lloro, lloro a gritos porque tu martirio será revolcarte sola entre las sábanas mientras te enloquecen los ardores."

experiences which are rarely touched upon in fiction or criticism by Latin American women authors and critics. Doña Beatriz, a woman whose explicit primary wish in life is to become a Saint, becomes the true victim, a raving madwoman who murders his husband in a delusion of spite and desire. For the deranged and self-righteous widow, Niniloj is a projection of her innermost fears, of all the “lower” passions and aspects that she censures in herself and which have to be destroyed. For the stern widow, Niniloj is an abortion of Purgatory, a witch, and a dirty Indian with a putrid vulva, who must be expunged from the face of the earth in a rite of purification of the sins of humanity. The triangle presented in this story reveals unsuspected twists, gingerly achieved by an uncensored narrator: A Spanish conqueror that is conquered by the Indian woman he rapes; a saintly wife turned into both murderous witch and Great Inquisitor.

Frutos extraños is rife with female characters whose lives are overwhelmed by the power of their own sexuality and by their libidinal investment on a phallus they yearn to possess and want to be possessed by. This investment turns them into figures that are as powerful as they are vulnerable. A salient example is Mamá Virginia, the black grandmother of the short story that bears the same title of the whole collection. She is a corpulent ebony goddess, serious, solemn and irascible, who has the privileged voice of wisdom (77). Her task in life is to enlighten the weeping women who flock to her door to complain about mischievous or abusive husbands and lovers:

after raising the index of her right hand in a ritual gesture [Mamá Virginia] invoked the grace of God and uttered her verdict [...]. “When he dies,

that man will burn in hell. But while he is on earth it is you who must punish him. Aaaamen. God created the scented flowers, the birds that cheer us up with their song, the stars that give us light from the skies; as well, God created woman, the only honey in the bitter life of men Aaleluyaaa! Take your honey back, my girl, take all your nocturnal honeys away from him and he will wallow in rage in his sheets, because even if he wrestles with you and rapes you, he will yearn for your ardor, like the pilgrim of the desert yearns for the waters of a crystalline fountain.” (*Ibid.*, 78)⁵¹

The black matron is associated with the knowledge that teaches women to dominate sexually. She is mythified with wisdom and has the power to control men through the women who blindly follow her advice. But most importantly, she has a direct access to God because she transmits messages “from the King of Heavens himself” (77).

The women of Frutos Extraños objectify men and the sexual pleasure they provide. In some cases this objectification takes precedence over other crucial aspects in their lives, even over some of the loftiest political ideals. In *Rehenes de oscuros atavíos*, (“Hostages of Dark Attires”), a story set at the onset of the Chilean dictatorship that ousted socialist president, Salvador Allende, Clarice sacralizes one night of love-making with a stranger she meets in a night club. Carlos, described by Clarice as an erotic traffic-light, turns out to be one of the torturers of the bloody dictatorship. She learns of his true identity some time after their night of

⁵¹ “Después de levantar el índice de su mano derecha en un gesto ritual invocaba la gracia de Dios y daba su veredicto [...]. ‘Cuando muera, ese hombre se quemará en los infiernos. Pero mientras esté en la tierra es a ti a quien te corresponde castigarlo. Aaamén. Dios creó las flores perfumadas, las aves que nos alegran con su canto, las estrellas que nos alumbran desde el firmamento, también Dios creó a la mujer, única miel en la vida amarga de los hombres. Aaleluyaaa! Quítale tu miel, niña mía, quítale todas tus mieles nocturnas y él se revolcará de rabia en las sábanas porque, aunque te forcejee y te viole, echará de menos tus ardores como el peregrino en el desierto añora las aguas de una fuente cristalina.’”

perfect love, which in Clarice's memory --the space where she lavishes in their encounter-- was nothing short of a miracle. She refuses to disclose information in an act of defiance that is based not only on political ethics and solidarity with her friends, but on her absolute conviction that Carlos would remember their night together with the same intensity she did, and would therefore never harm her. Her desire for him knows no boundaries. Regardless of the fact that Carlos represents something she abhors, she yearns for him and to the stupefaction of Sonia, her best friend, she says: "I wish he'd rape me!" (*Ojalá me viole!*) (55). She risks her life and that of Sonia when she deliberately provokes Carlos in front of his soldiers. Thus, even at the moment she is being confronted with Carlos' callousness and with the imminence of her death or her friend's death, she lacks fear and is overconfident in the power of her sexuality:

"[Carlos] will not dare to shoot us," she says to herself, feeling once again, in the wet bed of her tongue, the member of that young man while she whispered into each crease of that skin, that what was happening between them was a miracle. (*Ibid.*, 56)⁵²

Miraculously, Carlos does not kill Clarice but he shoots her friend Sonia and walks away, while Clarice's howls slid off his back (56). To some extent, Guerra's narrator problematizes the stance taken by Carlos, who more than an executioner is, like Clarice, a "hostage of dark attires," i.e., a hostage of his own military uniform:

⁵²"No será capaz de matar a ninguna de las dos', se dice volviendo a sentir el miembro de aquel joven en el lecho húmedo de su lengua mientras ella susurraba en cada surco de esa piel que lo que estaba ocurriendo entre ellos dos era un milagro."

[Carlos] takes the jacket and muffles the wailing he hears from afar with two vigorous movements of his arms, which he thrusts into each sleeve, stuffing the lifeless fabric and pouring himself into it, definitively. (*Ibid.*)⁵³

In a caustic indictment of the military institution, the narrator presents us with a man totally devoid of any trace of individuality. In this sense, Guerra relativizes Carlos' character by shifting some of the blame from the character as an individual to the character as an automaton, a lifeless marionette attired in the dark guise of a bloodthirsty dictatorship.

In her essay "The Shadows of Writing" Lucía Guerra says that when it comes to the organization of discourses, women are immersed in a particular situation which is dictated by the patriarchal structure that permeates all human activity:

Woman, thus, finds herself in an ambivalent discursive situation [...] that of the phallogocentric discourse of "liberal" and "humanist" roots, which uphold the ideals of freedom, self-determination and rationality; and the turbid flux of a feminine discourse tainted by subordination, diffusion and fragmentation. ("Shadows," 136)⁵⁴

The lurid images rendered in the short-stories discussed above are part, above all, of the feminine turbid flux she names above, a flux that sharply contrasts with the discursive organization of her essay, *Las*

⁵³ "Toma la chaqueta y ahoga los lamentos a lo lejos con dos movimientos vigorosos de los brazos que se incrustan en cada manga rellenando la tela muerta y él vaciándose definitivamente."

⁵⁴ "La mujer entonces se encuentra en una situación discursiva ambivalente, entre dos aguas, la del discurso falologocéntrico de raíces 'liberales' y 'humanistas' y que defienden como ideales la libertad, la auto-determinación y la racionalidad y el flujo turbio de un discurso femenino marcado por la subordinación, la difusión y la fragmentación."

sombras de la escritura. The organization accomplished therein is dictated not by the patriarchal structure as she suggests above, but by the *doxa* that has permeated the feminist anti-phallic, anti-heterosexuality ideologies in the Anglo-American academy. The women of Guerra's Rare Fruits utter and portray a "marginalized feminolect" ("Shadows," 136-137) that erupts in the midst of cosmopolitan feminist theories and that remains a perturbing sign and signifier of the feminine.

II.2.viii. Conclusions

The essays of Sara Castro Klarén and Lucía Guerra analyzed above bring to the fore thorny issues of feminist ideology, which remain latent and intermittently engage the interest of Euro-american academic critics, and to a lesser extent, that of Latin American women authors and critics. As critics who operate within dominant modes of feminist criticism, but who seek to represent some cultural attributes shared by other women in their countries of origin, Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham write from a space where the subtle schemes that are constantly at work contrive their critical perspectives.

Castro Klarén makes very few references to female experiences in Latin America, and her views remain concealed behind a powerful rhetoric which duplicates the very problematic she criticizes. Her indirect analytical style comes close to a critical ventriloquism that muffles her voice and obscures her critical stance through a complex mechanism that simultaneously enthronizes and invalidates the dominant models and critics. This mechanism produces a disorienting effect in her reader, constraining and organizing her texts in ways that allow only for a partial, vague and

ambiguous representation of Latin American female subjects and their everyday realities.

Lucía Guerra's essay echoes and caters to topical questions and issues entertained by the feminist hegemony. However, she manages to insinuate, through the interstices and shadows of her critical writing, paths that lead to nodal points in the terrain of intercultural feminisms. The thought-provoking remarks she makes in the final paragraph of her essay, her confrontation of the feminine and the feminist categories, is a transgression of academic feminist discourses which has gone largely unnoticed by Latin American women critics. This short paragraph made me select Lucia Guerra over many other critics, mainly because it spells out, very explicitly, the dynamic this dissertation is concerned with. The seemingly unobtrusive paragraph confirmed for me that the institution --and within it, a feminist doxa-- was regulating what and how things were said, and where they could be published in order to be "within the true." Upon reading Guerra's short narrative, one realizes that tabooed feminine images are unleashed in her fiction. This fact alone reinforced my selection of her critical and fictional works for comparison and contrast, showing that the fictional code gives her a license that the feminist critical essay does not. The feminine aspect she claims to suppress for strategic reasons in her essay *Las sombras de la escritura*, is released with a vengeance in the licentious realm of fiction, where she recreates some real life material which would perhaps be sanctioned by some sectors of the radical feminist *doxa* only as the articulation of an excessive erotization of violence.

PART TWO

CHAPTER III

Power(less) Totems

This chapter explores the conditions that may allow for the pervasive double-standard and secret *modus operandi* practised by women across class and race in the paternalist social systems of Latin America. In addition, it examines some of the reasons that account for such internalized female behaviours, which are generally understated by feminist literary/cultural critics and underrepresented in the fiction of wide circulation within the Anglo-American academy. An analysis of female-based concepts of power, sexual power in particular, of the virgin/prostitute ambivalence, and of the complex cultural systems of *Machismo* and *Marianismo*, as well as a tracing of Mariology, the theology of Virgin Mary, attempts to explain the reasons why some day-to-day practices may “empower” women while they weaken the totemic value of men. At the same time, the clandestine character of “unofficial” female power --which is attached to submerged beliefs, desires, dreams and fears and is profoundly steeped in the Latin American imaginary-- seems to make women subservient to paternalist social structures, and can either advance or undermine their socio-political gains.

III. 1. Feminine Double Standard

Women and the feminine, as Sara Castro Klarén has suggested, are “nothing other than an historical event that would have to be placed

constantly in a dialectical relation to the masculine, itself another historical event" ("Novelness," 95). The socially and politically dialectical interaction in Latin America of these two "historical events" has taken place in an uneven terrain. The totemic character of men and their dominance within the public spheres is one of the most important triggers of the secret feminine codes established in the cultures of Latin America (and in others) by women who apparently collude with systems that oppress them, creating thereby a resistance strategy, and perhaps even finding a way out of such oppression.

As we have discussed previously, feminist critics have denounced the patriarchal power-system that has relegated and circumscribed the female body to its primary role. Lucía Guerra-Cunningham explains it:

Woman is staticized and restricted within an exclusively biological identity. Her body --tied to the reproduction of the species-- is considered a reflection of the cyclical and repetitive, which is opposed to the invention and creative action of man in his civilizing impulse; and, in the same way that Nature is subordinated to Culture, woman --a synonym of the former-- is subordinated to man as an agent of any cultural project. (My translation) ("Shadows," 132)¹

Women, Guerra seems to suggest with many feminists, have thus been denied not only agency but also subjectivity. Historically, the male imaginary has projected, both in society and in literature, images of women that reflect male anxieties and desires. These images have in turn been institutionalized by the powers that be (State, Church, etc), and are

¹ "La mujer se estatiza y restringe en una identidad exclusivamente biológica. Su cuerpo --atado a la reproducción de la especie --es considerado un reflejo de lo cíclico y repetitivo que se opone a la invención y acción creativa del hombre en su impulso civilizador y, de igual manera como la Naturaleza se subordina a la Cultura, la mujer --sinónimo de ella-- es subordinada al hombre como agente de todo proyecto cultural."

internalized as a "nature." In the male gaze, women have been, and still are, those obscure, mysterious and undefinable others who conceived them, bore them, nursed them and reared them; they are those others against whom they have had to redefine themselves to achieve individuation. The reality that all human life is "of woman born" (Rich) seems to have generated both anxiety and fear in the opposite sex. These feelings have resulted in preconceptions about femininity, expressed in cultural stereotypes that have glorified women as virgins, mothers, or saints, and idealized them as romantic heroines, perfect wives, etc., or debased them as the witch/bitch, the castrating mother, the gossiping spinster, etc.. These social imaginaries are firmly attached to a collective unconscious that has either praised or condemned femininity. Thus, women are traditionally placed above or below men, but rarely at their level. It has been essential for the preservation of the species and of the institutionalized social order to suppress female subjectivity and to maintain woman as muse, wife, mother or mistress, indeed as an object to be either venerated or castigated.

Any subject in a position of inequality would most likely manipulate his/her way out of that position, and, transitively, most kinds of manipulation necessarily imply a subordinate condition. It is within this dynamic that women have internalized and re-enacted the cultural stereotypes and adopted alternative coping strategies. The dynamics of apparent submission to the *status quo* are extremely difficult to eradicate, given the contradictory attitudes that women continue to adopt in changing times. In Latin American cultures, as in many other cultures, women (and men) desire and reject change, they contest and embrace tradition, they struggle tirelessly against sociopolitical injustice and are often overwhelmed by a total lack of faith in the political will and agency of

their countries' governments. Feminist activists of empowerment from core countries rarely assess these conflictive reactions in a systematic and sensitive way, mainly because they work within cultural codes that disown, dismiss, or underestimate the enduring power of the cultural codes in which the women they wish to empower are immersed. More often than not, these empowerment campaigns fail to account for the complex give and take between the male and female cultures of Latin America. The male cultural system of *Machismo* and the female cultural system of *Marianismo*, which will be discussed further on, appear to reciprocate and complement one another: men and women share collective imaginaries (ritual practices, memories, symbols, etc.), which break down into distinct and specific social imaginaries. There is, however, a constant tension and precarious equilibrium evident in the relation between the sexes. Both men and women are either socialized into, identify with, or contest and challenge the culturally specific roles, ways of thinking, acting and behaving resulting from their shared social imaginaries, which are in many ways radically different from those of Anglo-American societies.

The international women's movements and feminist critiques have begun to overturn the realities of female (and male) cultures, offering the conditions of possibility to recover women's subjectivity. However amorphous, fragmented or multifaceted, feminisms have arrived at the consensus that women should talk and not be talked about. This shift from a position of object to that of subject has manifested itself in all areas of everyday life, in the psycho-social spheres, in literature and art, in critical writing, and in many other societal symbolic practices.

A good portion of the women have now read or heard that they should question both their roles in society and the laws that define these

roles, and that women are a social construct as much as they are a biological one. However, women are still in a difficult and continuous process of unlearning what they have learned about themselves through the ages. If in the psycho-social spheres women are torn between the roles imposed on them by the male imaginary on the one hand, and those dictated by their true innermost desires on the other, and as subalterns they oscillate between the two, in criticism and literature they have exercised a critical use of that imaginary.

Feminist authors of the Seventies and early Eighties gradually left behind the angel/devil stereotype reminiscent of most 19th century fiction, in order to vehemently denounce, enthrone and legitimize a full-fledged, passive victim construct embedded in the stereotype of the silenced, oppressed, deranged woman in a way that has not, could not perhaps, be conceived, represented, discussed, or analyzed by the male imaginative consciousness. In North America, women's newly acquired subjecthood has exacerbated their objectification of women belonging to cultures other than their own. As discussed in Chapter I, latent examples of this tendency can be seen in the non-specific, race/class blind First-World analyses of so-called Third-World female cultures and literatures.

In the imposition, proliferation, and dissemination of these kinds of feminist analyses, we have witnessed still another dialectic between center and periphery, between hegemonic and marginal modes of signification. A new cycle of control of the imaginary (Costa Lima) has been initiated: not one of male over female, but rather one of women over women. In the late Seventies and throughout the Eighties, the rationality of the new feminist imaginary harshly censored any corroboration of the male stereotypes of women as terrible mothers, witches/bitches, etc., stamping a

taboo label on the representation of these images, which are ultimately manifestations of the real life woman who develops strategies to counteract the effects of a system that victimizes and oppresses her, the active victim, the one that remains in the shadows, the passive victim's film in the negative.

In the academic milieu, the legitimized and institutionalized passive victim stigmatized the more active one and imposed limits to the latter's subjectivity. Thus, we have witnessed an ironic, if not paradoxical, turn of events, in which a movement that is devoted to granting women a long-lost subjectivity has at the same time partially obliterated it. The equation of undesirable proclivities in the female persona in womens' fiction or criticism was censored by professors and students in the Women Studies courses of many North American and Canadian academic institutions, as an insidious character which could undermine the ideological bases of feminist teachings.²

In day-to-day life, however, these so-called sly and malevolent female creatures who, among other things, can manage their male counterparts dexterously and efficiently on their way to power, be this real (official) or perceived (unofficial) power, certainly exist, but as figures of obscure reputation they have been, for the most part, banned from feminist literature and/or criticism, or branded as anti-feminist role models. Feminisms have attempted to transform the world by reconstructing self-image and self-esteem of women. In this massive project of consciousness-raising, activist women have understandably privileged either a

² Several texts have recently challenged the heavily ideological position of Women Studies courses and the radical position of some types of feminism in North American campuses. In this regard, see Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge's Professing Feminism. Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies; Cristina Hoff Sommers' Who Stole Feminism, especially chapter five, "The Feminist Classroom," 87-117; and Katie Roiphe's The Morning After. Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus.

denunciatory literature/criticism, focusing on women's victimization, or a literature/criticism of empowerment in which an ideally strong, over-achieving, or heroic woman is represented. But the active victim's absence from feminist representations has threatened the transformative powers of the favored passive victim construct as well as that of the heroine. These two favorite constructs militated against the first one (the active victim) postponing the massive representation by women writers and critics of such complex and paradoxical characters as *Celestinas*, *Doña Bárbaras*, *Mamá Grandes*, *Medeas*, *Salomé*s, *Cleopatras* and *Wives of Bath*, to name only a few favorite male literary types. Thus, the female persona in fiction and literary criticism remained, for the most part, not a wholesome historical object or subject, but rather a historical being in a relation of abjection with herself.

III. 2. Alternative Power Strategies

Feminist fictional or critical works by and about women in the North America of the Seventies and Eighties dealt massively with one aspect of female experience: the injustice perpetrated against women throughout ages of patriarchy. During the Nineties, however, we have begun to witness the proliferation of critical works, as well as films and mass-media programs, that deal with so-called deviant women, anti-heroines and anti-role models, such as the prostitute, or the women advocating sadomasochism.³ But the fictional or critical texts most widely circulated in the academic world rarely deal in a non-judgemental manner with the

³ See Shannon Bell's *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*; Mandy Merck's *Perversions*; Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen's *Female Fetishism*; Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry's (eds.) *"Bad Girls"/"good girls": Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties*; and Kate Fillion's *Lip Service: the Truth about Women's Darker Side in love, Sex and Friendship*, all of which are "reactive" works which challenge the feminist "politically correct" stance.

representation of women who use alternative power strategies which the active victims have developed within patriarchy.⁴ This is a blind spot of academic feminisms, one that should lead to the formulation of questions about the structure of female subjectivity and to the development of strategies of analysis capable of exposing a more conflicting and paradoxical female personhood. In the light of long-standing patriarchal prejudices about women's inability to be rational, it is not far-fetched to say that feminist critics/writers are advocated to proving women's rationality and objectivity by claiming and presenting a self-censored subjectivity.

If it is undeniable that male hegemonic discourses have traditionally silenced or tamed fragmentary female voices, it is also true, as we have illustrated in the preceding chapters, that dominant First-Worldist feminist scholarship "discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women of the so-called Third World, thereby representing/producing a composite, singular 'third-world woman' --an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (Mohanty, 53). This authorizing signature facilitates the appropriation of a peripheral/marginal discourse by a central one, legitimizing the latter and imposing limits on the former. This is largely the case with the Latin American feminist critics discussed in the preceding chapter, who have, to a greater or lesser extent, uncritically or strategically adopted hegemonic analytical models.

⁴ A recent anti-heroine model is portrayed by the Argentine author Alicia Borinsky in her novel Mean Woman. Rosario, one of the protagonists, devises her own alternative way of attaining power: "In this world the bed is a passport to power. I am going to eat men with knife and fork, very slowly, licking my lips." Another character, Cristina, sweet-talks her partner "curled up like a little cotton ball between his life and the bed," 10.

III. 3. Feminine Code of Ethics

Attempting a homogeneization of Latin American realities would be a ludicrous move. However, it could be said that in most Latin American societies there has been a traditional alliance between the State and the Catholic Church. These two overwhelmingly male institutions have safeguarded the hegemony of patriarchal order, a great generator of active victims who are at once public perpetuators of the very system that overpowers them and silent, subversive elements that undermine it. This practice is epitomized in a very cunning feminine behavior, that of women's apparent submission to, and acceptance of, the superiority of the male:

I was not and I am not anything more than a humble woman, a robin in an immense flock of robins. And he was and is the giant condor that flies high and confident amidst the mountain peaks and close to God. That is why neither my life nor my heart belong to me, and nothing of all I am or possess is mine. All I am, all I have, all I think and all I feel is Peron's [...]. I do not forget nor will I ever forget that I was a robin and that I continue to be one. If I fly higher is because of him. If I am amidst the peaks is because of him. If at times I almost touch heaven with my wings, is because of him. If I see clearly what my people are, and I love them and feel their love caressing my name, is only because of him. (My translation) (Perón, 10)⁵

⁵ "Yo no era ni soy nada más que una humilde mujer, un gorrion en una inmensa bandada de gorriones. Y él era y es el cóndor gigante que vuela alto y seguro entre las cumbres y cerca de Dios. Por eso ni mi vida ni mi corazón me pertenecen y nada de todo lo que soy o tengo es mío. Todo lo que soy, todo lo que tengo, todo lo que pienso y todo lo que siento es de Perón [...] no me olvido ni me olvidaré nunca de que fui gorrion ni de que sigo siéndolo. Si vuelo más alto es por él. Si ando entre las cumbres es por él. Si a veces toco casi el cielo con mis alas, es por él. Si veo claramente lo que es mi pueblo y lo quiero y siento su cariño acariciando mi nombre, es solamente por él." Eva Perón, *La razón de mi vida*, p. 10.

The belittlement of the self so strikingly and strategically constructed by Eva Perón appealed and catered to values and images about femininity which were then, and continue to be today, part of shared social imaginaries. It should be recognized that it was partly owing to the selflessness so explicit in her writings and speeches that Eva Perón achieved many gains, including perhaps that of Argentine women's right to vote. However, it is well known that Evita's position of power then, and her status as an international revered, mythic figure today, transcends the influence exerted by her powerful husband.

Nowadays, Latin American women do not always need the influence and endorsement of powerful men in order to become leading political figures, or to participate directly and aptly in the political arena of their countries. However, their agency in political decision-making is still very restricted. Women with significant official power are an overwhelming minority in Latin American countries where a great majority of women continue to resort to alternative power strategies.

Nearly four decades later, Eva Peron's words can still find an echo in those of another very cunning political consort in Argentina, though this time, less subtly and graciously stated:

My husband is very *machista*, and so am I. I believe that we should let men go in the foreground. After all, from behind the scenes we always do what we want to do. We have to be intelligent, because almost always, those who have the upper hand are us, the women. (My translation) (Cited by D. Castillo, 9)⁶

⁶ "Mi marido es muy machista y yo también. Creo que a los hombres hay que dejarlos ir adelante. Total, desde atrás nosotras siempre hacemos lo que queremos. Hay que ser inteligentes, por que casi siempre las que manejamos todo somos nosotras, las mujeres."

This is an illustration of the feminine stance adopted by real life women who apparently relinquish the foreground and accept their subaltern position to accommodate the project of their superior. This tactics, seen by Latin American feminist critics as a manipulative and distastefully sly practice (Castillo, 9), is a deeply ingrained and commonplace practice entertained by women across class, race and age in Latin America, and perhaps in many other cultures. In this group are included, not only First Ladies and other women who come close to official power through their association with a husband, a lover or any male in a position of socio-political power, regardless of the degree and scope of that power.

Feminist campaigns of empowerment and Latin American academic cultural critics have been slow in coming to terms with the reality of this generalized behavior among women. In an attempt to pair Latin American women with their Anglo-American and European counterparts, academic feminist critics have been mainly advocated to the vindication of notable female figures in history or literature, whose achievements have been overlooked in academic circles by the overwhelmingly male power systems. A case in point is a widely circulated volume Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America, edited by E. Bergmann and others, in which there is only a very brief mention of the quintessential political and iconic figure of Eva Perón. A discussion of Perón's autobiography, La razón de mi vida (The Reason of my Life), is flatly dismissed as an "officialist memoir [...] couched in working class, saintly and feminine terms" (Greenberg, 137). Writers such as Victoria Ocampo, placed in relation to Eva Perón at the opposite end of the feminist spectrum, are understandably

given preeminence in critiques such as the ones included in this volume, which deservedly insert several Latin American canonic authors in the international arena. However, it should be stressed that these critics deal with a very small minority of privileged women, one which bears no relation to the vast majority of women who rarely hear the utterance of the word feminism. Women from a non-academic milieu where this word is circulated would most likely reject the label, for it represents a threat to an institutionalized order in which they recognize and assert themselves as sacrosanct mothers on the one hand and alluring sexual beings on the other. Feminisms may neutralize women in the social hierarchy, as Eva Perón put it back in the 1940's:

I confess that the day I was faced with the possibility of taking the feminist path I was a bit scared. Expose myself to ridicule? Become part of a nucleus of women who are bitter with other women and men, as is the case with feminist leaders? I was neither a spinster nor an old lady, and on the other hand I wasn't so ugly as to occupy such a position [...]. The immense majority of the feminists of the world constitute a rare species of woman [...] which never seemed to me to be a woman at all! Everything I knew about feminism seemed ridiculous. Not being led by women but by "that" which hoping to be a man, stopped being a woman, and was nothing!, feminism had taken the step that goes from the sublime to the ridiculous. (My translation) (Perón, 265-267)⁷

⁷ "Confieso que el día que me vi ante la posibilidad del camino feminista me dio un poco de miedo. ¿Caer en el ridículo? ¿Integrar el núcleo de mujeres resentidas con la mujer y con el hombre, como ha ocurrido con innumerables líderes feministas? Ni era soltera entrada en años, ni era tan fea por otra parte para ocupar un puesto así [...]. La inmensa mayoría de las feministas del mundo constituían una rara especie de mujer [...] que no me pareció nunca del todo mujer! [...] todo cuanto yo conocía del feminismo me parecía ridículo. Es que, no conducido por mujeres sino por 'eso' que aspirando a ser hombre, dejaba de ser mujer, y no era nada!, el feminismo había dado el paso que va de lo sublime a lo ridículo! "

Evita conjures up and commands the ideals of femininity that were then deeply steeped into the female social imaginaries. However, her highly prejudiced views about feminism are surprisingly prevalent in the thoughts and actions of a cross section of women in the Latin America of the Nineties. For these women, feminists may not only be ridiculous but they are also suspicious, hybrid beings who openly (and therefore, unwisely) confront the patriarchal order and overwhelmingly fail in their attempt. In their view, feminine women are real women who, through cunning and ingenuity, succeed in using the odds of the system to their advantage. They exercise their power "behind the scenes," be it those of the President, the politician, the white collar worker, the blue collar worker, the community policeman, or the rural patriarch.

This type of behavior, which is still very prevalent in Latin American Societies, appears to be a complicitous sexual-social ritual in which each of the parties involved acquiesces to a mutual manipulation: man's virility is often goaded and his *machismo* exacerbated by the subtlety of woman's shrewdness and her feminine charms. This "sly practice" (D. Castillo) may be more or less widespread in other cultures around the world, but it is important to recognize that in Latin American countries, women of all classes and races are nursed within this form of ritualization, which is transmitted from one generation of women to the next. Grandmothers advise their daughters and granddaughters against openly confronting men, and to agree with them and carry-out exactly the opposite behind their backs: "Be smart. Say yes and then do as you please," they often tell the younger women.

Latin American feminist critics who have been highly influenced, or are censored by some factions of puritanical and self-righteous Anglo-

American feminisms, cannot appropriately recognize the enormous popularity that such seemingly non-confrontational behavior enjoys in the Latin American female circles. Nor have critics accounted for the fact that great numbers of Latin American women across class and race boundaries appear to support and continue to vote for presidents and political or public male figures who run the countries aided by their First Lady and/or wife on the one hand, and their mistress on the other. The former is a dutiful wife and mother and a frequent visitor of orphanages, single mothers centers and hospitals and the latter is usually a woman to whom unlimited sexual powers are attributed; both are equally respected and catered to by the population of men and women voters in many Latin American countries. Just as for the Medieval and Renaissance imagination, the Virgin was a mediator between men and God, so too the First Lady, and more poignantly, the mistress, become the mediators between the male and female populations and those in political power in Latin American countries.

The Presidents of several Latin American nations are well-known for their extramarital affairs and for the imposition of their *queridas* (lovers or mistresses) on the social and political scenarios of their countries. Brazilian President Collor de Mello had to be called to order by his powerful father-in-law regarding his public affair with a well-known lady. Mexican President López Portillo was the object of constant pranks and public commentaries and jokes for his affairs with women other than the First Lady. Others, like Argentinian President Menem, publicly display behavior not befitting his high rank. During his mandate he made an appearance in an opinion television program of the highest rating in Argentina. At the end of the broadcast he was escorted, amidst jokes,

giggles and smiles, to the delight of the audience present in the studio, and most probably, to that of the Argentinian general population, by two sex symbols wearing g-string bikinis. Menem's *savoir faire*, no less than that of his sexy escorts, rekindle the images of the womanizer and the *buena hembra* (the good piece of tail), both of which are profoundly ingrained in the collective imaginaries of Latin America, and admittedly in many others.

The above-mentioned sexual typologies are only a few of the most recent and conspicuous examples of "illicit" relationships and dubious behavior, which are instituted and consolidated in the highest spheres of political power. However, these examples pale in comparison with those of past and present Venezuelan presidents and their mistresses. Two of the most notorious and recent cases are those of presidents Jaime Lusinchi and Carlos Andrés Pérez. In Venezuela, many of the complex national problems, many of the most important international negotiations and the destiny of high officials both civil and military, have been deliberated, decided and executed under the influence exerted over the presidency by Blanca Ibáñez and Cecilia Matos, the most powerful presidential concubines in Venezuela to date. Ibáñez, however, has no precedent in the history of the country. President Pérez and President Lusinchi, like many other chiefs of State in Latin America, have had to balance the utterly complex task of governing their country with that of fulfilling the demands and vindications of their First Ladies and *queridas* alike.

Wife and mistress share a social, economic and political power, the balance of which inclines more towards the latter than towards the former. The presidential concubines aid their partners in matters of the state, in social events, in the inauguration of public works, in diplomatic missions,

etc. Blanca Ibáñez is a paradigmatic case in point: like Manuela Saenz, Simon Bolivar's lover before her, Ibáñez has been decorated with the highest honors of the country, and is catered to by the civil society, by the military, and last, but not least, by the ecclesiastic authorities. During Lusinchi's mandate (1984-1989), many of Ibáñez's family members and friends were granted billionaire contracts and/or positions of official power in the Government. Mrs. Ibáñez's gynecologist was appointed Minister of Health; one of her university professors occupied a key position in the Ministry of External Affairs; her 20-year-old son was handed a very important position in the Ministry of Defense; and during her office as the private secretary of the President the participation and preeminence of women in Government institutions achieved its highest point in the history of Venezuela (Capriles, 120-121).

Relevant questions regarding Ibáñez's rise to power still linger in the Venezuelan political scene:

Who was the fool? The party? Who is more guilty? Blanca Ibáñez ended up being more cunning and more intelligent than all the [male] leaders of [the political party] *Acción Democrática*? [...] What bears no discussion is that this woman's presence "as a humble secretary" of the President in [the Government Palace of] *Miraflores* knocked-over the most inalterable principles of the Venezuelan family, and promenaded herself in the soul of many of the highest circles, which under the influx of her power and at the side of the good-natured President, opened their doors to her and, through shameless concessions, became salons for her praise. Those who should have imposed the rules of the game in favor of the decency and the principles of the nation, became docile "little

lambs” in her hands. (My translation) (Dobles, 120)⁸

It is amusing to read the outspoken journalist Isa Dobles pontificating about the so-called inalterability of principles of the Venezuelan family, as if the double-standard morality which is attached to the Venezuelan social imaginary were non-existent.⁹ Despite Dobles' angry accusations and those of many others coming from different sectors of the country against Ibáñez and Matos as partners in crime with the President in the looting of the country, to date Ibáñez has not been indicted, and there are enough reasons to believe that she never will be. The impunity, and immunity, with which women like Ibáñez and Matos conduct themselves in society has undoubtedly contributed to the establishment and consolidation of a “concubinary power” (Capriles). The message has gone loud and clear into the ears and eyes of observant generations of young women across class/race boundaries.

In addition to the angry accusations against Ibáñez, there is also the generalized conviction of her boundless sexual power over the President. In a trip to Venezuela, following the political sex scandal involving the President, the First Lady and Ibáñez, the (in)famous triad, I questioned men and women of different age range and socio-economic strata, on the reason why they thought the President had almost sold out the country and lost his grip on foreign affairs. Intellectuals and taxi drivers, old and

⁸ “¿Quién fue el tonto...? ¿El partido...? ¿Quién es más culpable...? [...] ¿Blanca Ibáñez resultó ser más viva y más inteligente que todos los líderes de A.D [...]. Lo que no tiene discusión es que esta mujer atropelló, con su presencia en Miraflores ‘como humilde secretaria’ del presidente, los más inalterables principios de la familia venezolana y se paseó en el alma de muchos círculos encopetados que al influjo de su poder al lado del bonachón presidente le abrieron las puertas y en concesiones vergonzosas se convirtieron en salones de halago. Los que debían haber impuesto las reglas del juego a favor de la decencia y los principios de toda la nación, eran dóciles ‘corderitos’ en sus manos.”

⁹ The Venezuelan journalist Isa Dobles is well-known, both in Venezuela and in Cuba, for her alleged hot love affair with Fidel Castro.

young, men and women had arrived at the consensus that the President's temporary insanity was due to the fact that his mistress had the ability to perform *cangrejas* during their sexual encounters.¹⁰

The representation of the concubine, the *querida* or the “other woman” as a powerful sexual subject, a conspicuous character in society and as a cultural value is long overdue in the fiction of Latin American women writers. Literary and cultural critics who have been influenced by mainstream feminisms rarely address the colossal significance of this real life woman, and the tolerance and prestige she enjoys in many social circles where the co-existence of the *casa chica* with the *casa grande* (the mistress' house and the wife's house, respectively) is widely accepted.

Not unfrequently, the lover or *querida* is enabled and sustained by the wife/mother; they co-exist and share the private (and often public) sphere with the male, whom they launch into the power-driven public domain in order to use his achievements for their own and their family's individual needs. Three well staked-out and mutually exclusive territories have been institutionalized, if not sacralized by the powers of the State: a totemic male figure who holds the political and economic power and is mythically thought to possess great sexual potency; the powerful mother/wife to whom the most virtuous qualities and total unconditionality are ascribed; and the *querida* who is not only believed to have the shrewdness of a fox but also an unbridled sexual power, as well as a great ambition for other kinds of official power. The participants in this *menage à trois* embody the three poles in which contrasting qualities can be observed: for the immorality of the male there is the purity and the high

¹⁰ *Cangrejas* is a localism describing the involuntary orgasmic vaginal contractions which retain the penis and are believed to cause extreme pleasure.

virtue of the mother/wife, which in turn contrasts with the unlimited sexual power attributed to the *querida* (Stevens, 93). It should be remarked, however, that more often than not, the male's immorality is not considered to be such, for within the culture of *Machismo* being a womanizer is a positive attribute, not only in the perception of men but also in that of women.

The graphic representation of this tri-partite structure would be an equilateral triangle: the top angle representing the political and economic power, and the two bottom ones providing the logistic support for the articulation of that power. However, the influence of the mother/wife and the *querida* in the public domain should never be underestimated, for many a serious (and sometimes fundamental) economic and sociopolitical decision is subjected to the approval of either one or both women of this triad, undermining in more than one way the judgement of men, who in such instances become power(less) totems.¹¹

It appears then that within the framework discussed above, women will resort to the male totemic figure in order that he mediate for them in the public sphere, having to exercise their clandestine power through the influence they exert on the man. This tactic, which from times immemorial has been viewed as the most commonplace female/feminine position in power relations (i.e. woman as the power behind the throne, or the old saying behind every great man there is always a great woman) is dismissed by Latin American feminist critics as a manipulative and

¹¹ A conspicuous case of a mistress approving socio-political decisions was that of Isabel Perón, President Peron's second wife. The influence of Isabel over Perón, first as his mistress and later as his wife, is a matter of common knowledge. Isabel was Peron's most influential "unofficial" advisor and the Argentinian people seemed to be aware of her power over him. She succeeded Perón as President of Argentina upon his death. Isabel Perón launched the economic plan that led to her ousting in the early 1970s; that very same economic plan is being implemented during the current mandate of President Menem.

distastefully sly practice of no cultural importance, if its mentioned at all. However, women advocated to the study or representation of other women and female spaces and experiences in literary/cultural criticism cannot continue to ignore this deeply engrained and commonplace practice, which, it should be remarked, does not respect class or race boundaries. The achievements of Westernized feminist agendas are hampered in more than one way when this specific female behavior is ignored, or not taken into account in their programs. Field researchers could perhaps idealize their informants less and read more between the lines of their assertions regarding culturally based gender power relations. Although this kind of dynamic has been discussed emphasizing its place within the political class (presidents, political figures, First Ladies, presidential concubines, prominent public men and women, etc.) its practice is in no way restricted to women of that class, who obviously enjoy many more privileges than the great majority.

The presidential lover/concubine is a key figure in the power structure of the State for she usually becomes the mediator between the people and the President in office. Church authorities, upper-class elites, and, most likely, upper and middle-class feminists who mobilize working class women in Latin America will not only have to cater to the First Lady but also, and perhaps even more so, to the current lover/concubine, if they want their concerns to be expedited and eventually approved by the Head of State or his appointed agents. The concubine has thus the hidden unofficial power to veto petitions, or to grant them. She is no longer an illegitimate and mysterious figure that is kept behind the lattices of windows¹² just as the role of mother/wife has been politicized, so too has the lover/concubine

¹² Presidential lovers have been decorated with the highest military honors.

role been institutionalized and legitimized by the State. The difference between them is that the former has the potential for sociopolitical transformation whereas the latter has generally, so far, been more self-serving, less community oriented than the former.

Latin America is a fertile land for the Gordon Wilsons, the Ted Kennedys or the Gary Harts, for no politician has, so far, been removed from office or had his political career ruined because of an extra-marital *affaire*. Quite to the contrary, this is not only prestigious but also desirable, and is certainly part of the package of male political practice.

The female protagonists of presidential extra-marital affairs, who are thus legitimized by the power of the State, have become effective role models for women of younger generations who have internalized that through intelligence, cunning, sex and an eroticized body, they can succeed in using the odds of the system to their advantage. An explosive combination that validates the balance of mind and body and not the prevalence of one over the other, has become a means to power for women in Latin American countries. The groups that engage in such unlovely manipulations (Debra Castillo, 9), include not only First Ladies and presidential concubines, whose visibility only helps to institutionalize the practice, but also mothers/wives and lovers of the upper, middle and lower classes or the urban sectors. Among them, the wives and *queridas* of ministers, entrepreneurs, white and blue collar public employees, the police, etc., who always hold the upper hand in the official power, regardless of the degree and scope of that power.

The unorthodox, unofficial power described above is of a kind which Anglo-American feminists, and some Western-educated Latin American feminists, qualify as a "sell-out to the enemy" (men) or as sheer

prostitution that nullifies the intellectual potentialities and real achievements of women. The acquisition of a foreign code is a necessary pre-condition for an eventual dialogue and a more faithful representation by Westernized feminist critics of real life Latin American women who engage in the exercise of clandestine power. The chances of such a dialogue seem dim indeed for the well-intentioned social scientists who travel to Latin America to do field research, and undertake their projects with the specific goal of empowering women on their own (westernized) terms. These fixed agendas override all other cultural considerations. On the other hand, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty noted, Third-World difference is always confronted with First-World superiority, and that fact alone precludes any possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

Until very recently, Latin American feminist critics and authors favored the representation of the masked self-sacrificing victim to the detriment of the more complex and paradoxical persona of the active victim. A possible explanation for this omission is that Latin American women writers and critics are still ostensibly held back by self-censorship and by the pressure of internal taboos (Mora, 67), or that they have remained largely unconscious of the "darker" side of the victim. There still seems to be a veto on the deconstruction of the so-called unlovely manipulations of women who access power through their men, and who have become strong role-models for a large cross-section of the female Latin American populations.

It appears that to represent, both in critical and literary works, this kind of alternative route to power is not only a transgression of the solid restrictions, regarding proper and dignified female behavior, but also a plunge into an aspect of female experience which is still undesirable within

feminist circles. It should be granted, however, that the late Eighties and early Nineties mark the beginning of an amazing proliferation of works by and about Latin American women that deal inquisitively with deeply ingrained cultural denominators. The fact that feminism, a label with such heavy ideological burden attached to it, could be viable for visible change is still in the process of deliberation. Women's complicity with or opposition to the *status quo* demands the analytical views of specialists in all areas of expertise in the humanities and social sciences. In this section I have merely underlined a very small, although visible, aspect of female behavior and experience which is a direct consequence of the overpowering paternalist system, and which is very often underestimated by feminist critics and writers. The kinds of alternative quests for power described above, if left unrecognized, will continue to hinder the success of feminist agendas which are oblivious to, or judgemental of, such culturally specific values and codes.

III. 4. *Marianismo* and *Machismo*: Two Sides of the Same Coin¹³

In "Under Western Eyes" Chandra Talpade Mohanty says that the political and intellectual construction of non-First-World feminisms should consider both "the internal critique of hegemonic 'Western' feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies" (Mohanty, 51). Critical works by Western-educated Latin American scholars dealing with the analysis of feminine strategic behaviors in Latin America are conspicuously absent

¹³ My discussion of this section owes much to two articles: "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America" by Evelyn P. Stevens, and "Literary Archetypes and Female Role Alternatives" by Jane S. Jaquette, both articles in Female and Male in Latin America.

from the syllabi distributed in Women Studies courses. These culturally grounded behaviors, particularly those tied to the way women perceive and exercise power, appear to resist feminist projects. Perhaps the poor dissemination of those works is due to the fact that the specific ways in which power is understood by Latin American women contrasts dramatically with the concepts of power entertained and legitimized by Anglo-American hegemonic feminisms. Exposing in a non-judgemental manner the concealed feminine power mechanisms of Latin American women would most certainly put critics like Castro Klarén and Guerra, and perhaps many others, in a position to be negated, excluded, and even ridiculed. Perhaps Latin American feminist critics rarely deal with the discussion of such mechanisms in order to avoid being de-legitimized by the "network of Western academic and policy-making discourses on the backwardness of the non-Western, non-Modern world" (Chow, 93).

In the two sections that follow, I will explore the ways in which women conceive power, especially in their roles as wives-mothers and as sexual subjects/objects. The categories of wife and mother are hyphenated because these roles are virtually imbricated, usually wives enact the mothering not only with their children, but also with their husbands or partners. These two roles should be clearly differentiated from a third one: woman as sexual being. The discussion of female sexuality is strictly limited here to some of the mechanisms that invest women with sexual power in Latin American societies.

An analysis of female-based concepts of power is crucial to the understanding of female cultural behaviors and to the ensuing articulation

of Latin American feminist theories. The virgin-prostitute ambivalence,¹⁴ permeates the roles of woman as wife/mother and sexual entity, and is paramount to understanding the two interdependent cultural phenomena known as *Marianismo* and *Machismo* in Latin America. I will situate these "cultures" historically and examine some of the ways in which they can both advance and undermine women's sociopolitical gains.

The concept of *Marianismo* is defined as a "secular cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens, 90). This notion, used by social scientists and cultural critics, particularly in scholarly work on Latin America, assumes a critical stance regarding the consequences that the religious cult of Virgin Mary has had in the perception of women (and men) throughout the centuries. *Machismo*, the male counterpart of *Marianismo*, is known as a cult of virility which assumes an "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male to male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male to female relationships" (*Ibid.*). Like *Marianismo*, *Machismo* adopts a critical position regarding a type of male behavior, which many social scientists assume is endemic to Hispanic America.

Roger Lancaster notes that the term *Marianismo* is only an analytic category, a heuristic device proposed by social scientists, not a term that originates in Latin America. He adds that the complementarity or

¹⁴ The virgin-prostitute ambivalence is found in many cultures around the world. Its earliest recording dates back to saint Justin's *Dialogue avec Tryphon* (circa 155) where a parallel between Mary and Eve was established: "Eve, vierge et intacte, ayant conçu la parole du serpent enfanta la désobéissance et la mort; la Vierge Marie ayant conçu foi et joie, quand l'ange Gabriel lui annonça que l'Esprit du Seigneur viendrait sur elle et que la vertu du Très-Haut la couvrira de son ombre, en sorte que l'être saint né d'elle serait Fils de Dieu, répondit: Qu'il me soit fait selon votre parole." (Guitton, 95) Saint Ireneus established yet another parallel between the fallen and the blessed virgins: "De même que la première Vierge fût séduite et s'éloigna de Dieu, ainsi l'autre se laissa persuader de lui obéir, en sorte que la Vierge Marie devint l'avocate de la vierge Eve" (Guitton, 95-96).

reciprocity suggested by the coupling of *Machismo* and *Marianismo* hides the inequality that permeates the female private sphere measured against the male public sphere in Latin America. However, in his predicament, Lancaster, and the critics he makes reference to, is mixing the concepts of *Marianismo* and *Machismo* with the everyday realities these heuristic devices seek to illuminate. Ideas of femininity and masculinity are not static, they are complex and shifting conceptions which change according to historical moments and to several other variables, and cannot therefore be homogeneous or monolithic. Latin American women do not necessarily call themselves marianistas, or believe themselves to suffer from a *marianismo* complex. Employing one or both sides of the equation *Marianismo/Machismo* as tools to explain particular aspects of Latin American reality does not necessarily imply that women "mistake their status for elevated purity" (Ehlers cited by Lancaster, 310) or that women share equality with men in the socio-political and economic realms. However, it must be recognized that despite the accelerated processes of industrialization and modernization which have reached many corners of Latin America, women have been and continue to be socialized into the role of self-sacrificing (not necessarily virgin) mothers. Men, on the other hand, have been and continue to be socialized into the role of the *macho*, not only by their fathers, but also, and perhaps even more so, by their mothers. Thus, as was suggested earlier, the shared values and perceptions regarding gender roles is reproduced socially through a reciprocity of perspectives upheld between the alleged dominators (men) and the dominees (women), regardless of the fact that this reciprocity of perspectives is constantly questioned and subverted.

Jean Guitton has traced the historical development of Mariology, the Virgin Mary's theology in Christianity and particularly in the Roman-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, from the Gospels to contemporary times. John the Evangelist, whose writings are generally considered to foreshadow Mariology, portrays Mary in her role of mediator between mankind and God. Mariology as such was developed primarily in two Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: in Ephesus (Guitton, 431), where the Church's position regarding the *Theotokos (Dei genitrix)*, i.e. Virgin Mary not only as the mother of Jesus but also as the mother of God was defined; and Chalcedone (Guitton, 451), where the role of Mary in the Incarnation was further developed. Mary's virginity was the object of theological debate through the centuries, until the celebration of the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople III (Guitton, 680-681) where Mary's perpetual virginity was established and she was forever stripped of any claims to her own sexuality.¹⁵ Guitton notes still other important facts that are as representative of the cult of the Virgin nowadays as they were in the Middle Ages, much as the affirmation of her maternal involvement in the redemption of humanity, her rapport with sin and original sin, her relation with human frailty, and her supreme power of intercession (Guitton, 112).

The position of the Protestant Church regarding Mariology is radically opposed to that of the Catholic Church, regardless of the beliefs upheld by the early reformers, which were consonant with those of the Catholic theologians and faithful. These conflicting positions are important to keep in mind in any discussion of Mariology, or Marian devotion in Anglo-American societies, which are mostly Protestant, and in the largely

¹⁵ For a detailed and comprehensive reference of the Ecumenical Councils in which the Marian dogma was discussed, see Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*.

Catholic Latin American societies. Mariology underwent an involution under Protestantism, so much so that the development of Marian dogma, was invalidated, especially after Ephesus and Chalcedone. According to Guitton, the anti-Catholic polemic upheld the Marian cult, among other things, as a deviation from piety and a return to Paganism (*Ibid.*,185-186).

In the Middle Ages Mariology takes the form of love. Virgin Mary is linked to a feeling of platonic chivalric love which had woman as the central object, and surely, an inaccessible one. In this sense, Guitton notes:

In order for femininity to be enveloped by a religious atmosphere, it was necessary that woman, although conceived as an equal, be placed in a distant, more dreamed of than known sphere. This implied a sufficiently complex civilization where woman occupied a summit in the hierarchy, and was separated from those around her by degrees and strata, like in a Byzantine court [...]. This decentralization of power allowed in the Middle Ages for the proliferation of reigns, and with them, of the courts and courtisans. It created the conditions favourable to that *courtly love* that often developed at the margins of conjugal love [...]. Love was then loved for its own sake, like a passion that was enjoyed for the suffering it procured. The sentiment of Christian peoples for the Virgin, for the Lady, was fixed right at that moment in Western countries. (My translation) (Guitton, 110-111)¹⁶

¹⁶ "Pour que la féminité fut entourée d'une atmosphère religieuse, il fallait que la femme, tout en étant conçue comme égale, fût placée dans une sphère lointaine et revêue plutôt que connue. Ceci impliquait une civilisation assez complexe, où la femme occupe un sommet de hiérarchie, séparée de ses proches par des degrés et des étages, comme dans une cour byzantine [...]. La décentralisation du pouvoir multiplia au moyen age les reines et avec elles les cours et les courtisans. Elle créa les conditions favorables a cet *amour courtois* qui se développait souvent en marge de l'amour conjugal [...]. L'amour y était aimé pour lui-même, comme une passion dont on jouissait jusque dans les souffrances qu'elle vous procurait. Le sentiment du peuple chrétien pour la Vierge, pour *la Dame*, fut fixé a ce moment-la dans les pays occidentaux."

The worship of the beloved lady of courtly love was thus fused with the cult of Virgin Mary and with the concept of the ideal in Platonism; Virgin Mary remained chaste, unattainable and adored because of her purity and perpetual virginity.

In Spain, from the 12th to the 16th centuries, the image of *Nuestra Señora*, (Our Lady, *Notre Dame*) was everpresent in the works of painters, sculptors, poets and writers. A salient example of 12th century Marian devotion in literature is *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora* (The Miracles of Our Lady), a book of poems dedicated to the Virgin by Gonzalo de Berceo (c.1180-c.1246), a secular priest at a Benedictine monastery, and the earliest Spanish poet known by name. These works proliferated at the same rate of the *Libros de Caballería* (Romances of Chivalry). A later example of woman's personification as the Medieval central, unattainable object is found in the character of *Dulcinea*, the peasant girl turned by the knight's unbridled imagination into the lady love of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes's novel (1605, 1615).

The vision of Virgin Mary changes according to the evolution of societies and their forms of Government, a trend that continues during the periods of the Conquest and Colonization of Latin America. During the time of the absolute monarchy in France, for example, the view of Mary, is not so much that of the *Theotokos*, or that of her rapport with men as sinners, but rather that of a Queen, or the mystic wife of God. In the Spanish Empire of the 16th and 17th centuries, Mary is referred to as *La Emperatriz* (the Empress).

The cult of the Virgin Mary was transported to Latin America by the Iberians. Shortly after the Conquest, the image of the Lady began to appear in different Latin American cities and villages and from a religious

symbol, Virgin Mary gradually turned into a powerful figure that supported nationalistic propaganda. An illustration of this is the use made of the image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* in the Mexican Revolution,¹⁷ as well as in many other countries where virgins are used by the State and the Church to advance particular political platforms.¹⁸ Upon its arrival via the Conquest, the Marian cult was blended into many other indigenous and African cults that were as keen as the European one on having a female figure as their central deity. The supposedly less civilized goddesses celebrated femaleness in a way that the mother of God did not, i.e. not only for its reproductive potentiality but also as a powerful sexual force.

The mythology of Latin America is rich in female characters of this sort. The myths of Creation of the Northeast, for example, present deities like the young virgin *Coadidop*, grandmother of the days, whose virginity does not preclude her eroticism and life-giving force; or *Romi Kumu*, the mother of the sky and of all people, who has the power of spontaneous regeneration. At dusk she becomes old and at dawn she recovers her youth. There is fire in her vagina and her urine is thought to be the rain that nurtures the earth.

The region known as the *Gran Chaco*, which includes parts of Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Paraguay, is famed for female deities that combine qualities of good and evil with equal strength, women well versed in the arts of love and procreation and who are as much the betrayers of their people as they are their saviors or benefactors. A case in point is

¹⁷ In this regard, see Chapter 22, "A la Chingada," in Roger Bartra's *The Cage of Melancholy*, where the author discusses the "exchange" of the European image of the virgin and the Indian woman Malintzin, the lover that Hernán Cortez took shortly after his arrival in Mexico.

¹⁸ During the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela (1951-1958) more than two thousand shrines were built throughout the country. Each state had its own virgin(s) which reinforced the alliance between the State and the Church.

Tsémataki, the deity who causes earthquakes to happen but from whose ashes many birds that contribute to peoples well-being are born. She is known as the Mother of Birds as well as other creatures, such as the howler monkeys, which aid the birds in shamanic practices.

Tsémataki, *Coadidop* and *Romi Kumu* are only three of hundreds of mythological virgin/mother/ogress/creator constructs, whose sexual attributes enhance their divinity, and who abound in the cosmogonies of the Far South, the Northwest, the Central Andes,¹⁹ in the Mexican and Central American cultures, and the Afro-Caribbean religions of the Caribbean basin.

If the cults of female deities associate divine with tellurian elements, the culture of *Machismo* is associated to the concepts of honor and shame, which are in turn tied to the notion of virility. These attributes, however, are perhaps exacerbated in the culture and literature of classical Spain. The exaggerated characteristics which in North America have come to be associated with *machismo*, cult of virility, aggressive sexual behavior, etc., seem to be a degeneration of 16th and 17th century attitudes toward the concepts of honor and shame.

The culture of *Machismo* appears to have made its way to America with the soldiers and adventurers who participated in the Conquest, which "drained Spain from these individuals and provided them with a more propitious atmosphere in America in which they flourished and assumed the importance which they have today" (Stevens, 91). However, it is historically inaccurate to state that the ease with which the *conquistadores* practiced their *machismo* was dictated by the power they had over the

¹⁹ For a comprehensive and succinct revision of South American mythologies see John Bierhorst's [The Mythology of South America](#).

vanquished Indians or exploited Blacks, or that these groups were, by nature, prone to be socialized into this *Machismo* culture.

The cultures of *Marianismo* and *Machismo* are equal, opposing and dialectical forces that describe gender-based behavioral patterns and shed light on the expectations men and women have of each other. These forces have generated particular social behaviors that are deeply rooted in cultural convictions, and as such, they are extremely difficult to eradicate. The State and the Church have played an instrumental role in socializing women and men into behaviors that conform to the idealization/association of the female with motherhood, saintliness, spirituality, chastity, inconditionality and of the male with fatherhood, patriotism, pride, honor, shame, etc. (Stevens). The female qualities provide the ground on which the male ones firmly stand and are articulated, and the reverse is also true. The roles and qualities ascribed to each sex clearly separate the female private sphere from the male public domain. The State and the Church have not only essentialized and colonized the notions of female and male, but they have also created a sort of political chasm between them. Consequently, as the equal, opposing and dialectical forces that they are, *Machismo* and *Marianismo* sustain and enable one another.

In order for Virgin Mary to be invested with the power of sacred motherhood and divine mediation in the religious plane, the Christian dogma had to disempower her on the carnal plane; hence her defeminization and de-sexualization, her perpetual virginity. This extraordinary and paradoxical concession --that of motherhood without sex-- has historically taken its toll in women's lives, especially in eminently Catholic societies like those of Latin America where the mixed mythologies and religions which blended into the Catholic faith, are laden with earth

mother-goddesses. However, it is perhaps due to the omnipresence of highly sexualized and pleasure-seeking goddesses in these syncretic cultures that the Christian model of the saintly and asexual mother has generated in society a parallel female figure that exudes carnal knowledge and unrestrained sexuality. This model, which goes beyond the Christian Eve-stereotype, contrasts dramatically with that of the sacred mother. However, it shares with the latter, and perhaps even surpasses, the power of mediation between God and his people which has traditionally been ascribed to the Christian model.

The cult of the Virgin, and of its opposite model, is thus paralleled in Latin American countries by a veneration of women in the psycho-social spheres. It should be granted, however, that such a veneration often has more to do with an idealized image than with reality. The fact that women are magnified in these two opposing (and often intertwined) roles does not prevent them from discriminating and being discriminated upon, from exercising a clandestine form of power as opposed to an official one, and from exploiting men or being exploited by them.

The subliminal assimilation of women into the culture of *Marianismo* has had a two-fold effect in Latin American countries. On the one hand, the idealization of the role of motherhood has officially confined women to the tasks that befit this role in addition to the ones expected of them in the labor force. On the other hand, the politicization of the mother role has aided women to intercept the public sphere in order to articulate their needs as heads of the domestic space.

III. 5. The Power of Motherhood and the Power of Eroticism

That the role of motherhood is a source of power and that it has the potential for political transformation should come as no surprise in a continent where the phenomenon of *Marianismo* has "socialized women to assume motherhood as their primary adult role and identity", and where mothers are "culturally idealized, if not necessarily always venerated in practice" (Logan, 152).

Latin American women have therefore taken advantage of their roles as mothers (and wives or partners) to confront the State. They have demanded the improvement of the material conditions of their lives and that of their family members. In so doing, they have politicized two idealized roles, while simultaneously struggling for sociopolitical change and maintaining cultural tradition. Social scientists expect that active motherhood will socialize women into struggling not only against class oppression but also against issues that profoundly affect their personal lives, such as male violence, reproductive freedom, and others (Logan, 159).

Anglo-American academic expectations having to do with the certainty of a deep questioning of personal issues by women in Latin American countries seem too high in the impoverished economic spaces they inhabit. Arguably, these predictions originate in analyses made or directed by well-intentioned First-World social scientists, which are perhaps too optimistic. The making of laws that would protect women from their husbands' or partners' violence, or laws that grant them the right to choose abortion are slow in being issued and implemented. In Perú, for example, regardless of sustained feminist struggles, rapists may still be condoned and walk free if they agree to marry their victims. In

other Latin American countries. up until very recently, men who killed their wives in a crime of passion could easily plea momentary insanity and avoid incarceration. However, this was not the case when a woman killed her lover or husband under the same circumstances. The predictions of Anglo-American social scientists will start to materialize in a significant scale only when and if the subconscious symbolic structures that sustain the cultures of *Machismo* and *Marianismo* are systematically attacked and dismantled. The re-structuration of symbolic systems takes a very long time to settle down. This task is a titanic one, because despite the existence of numerous social movements and feminist groups, in Latin America women maintain a complicitous relationship within a social imaginary that upholds these cultural systems, and, as is very often the case, women's material conditions of existence do not allow for a continued questioning of their own symbolic structures.

Marianismo and *Machismo* are thus in-grown in Latin America's social imagination. Laws against male violence may be issued with much difficulty in present day social realities but their implementation is constantly undermined by women themselves. Women are still socialized into believing that they can endure more pain than men, or that they possess the spiritual stamina that allows them to transcend and forgive physical abuse. *Marianismo* has taught them inconditionality and strength in order to support their men who, according to many, may only be reproducing at home the kind of class/race oppression, or the socio-economic exploitation they are suffering in the public sphere.

Birth control campaigns or laws that support reproductive freedom are as well extremely difficult to implement in the Latin American sociopolitical structures. *Marianismo* has also established that motherhood

empowers women. According to the Marian code, a woman has not fulfilled her mission in life, or she is not a real woman until she produces the children that will legitimize her and grant her the respectable social status she aims for in the community. Laws that threaten to challenge woman's alleged moral superiority or her reproductive capacities would divest women of feminine qualities that invest her with power and authority in society and within the home.

It is often said that the Latin American home is erected on four walls: the lateral walls support the seniors and the children, the front wall has a built-in revolving door that facilitates the permanent entrance and exit of the man of the house; and the fourth wall, the central one, has the figure of the mother/wife engraved on it. Women are therefore, the primary care-takers of the other members of the family, and, as such, they have an enormous influence not only on the senior men but also on male and female children. Latin American women across class refuse to relinquish their mothering and housekeeping jobs even if this means maintaining a double-shift work day. In addition, many women in grassroots movements are fighting, not to share domestic responsibilities with their men, but to have access to basic services that would alleviate the burden of housework. This does not imply that women are content with the double-shift work day, but rather that they are reluctant to delegate their domestic functions to men. That men are not emotionally well-equipped to replace them in these tasks seems to be an understood ironclad rule or a given of nature.

The family is undoubtedly a source of power and influence for women; it is the space from where the *Marianismo* and *Machismo* cultures are reproduced socially. Women teach other women the ability to

appear to be submissive to men, exercising or rather representing self-denial and patience because "men must be humored for, after all, everyone knows that they are *como niños* (like little boys) whose intemperance, foolishness, and obstinacy must be forgiven because they can't help the way they are" (Stevens, 95).

The stereotypical powerful mother-figure around whom other members of the family revolve may have been inspired on the old Spanish concept of the *santa madre* (saintly mother),²⁰ the towering figure that strengthens and preserves the spiritual bonds of the family, dictates social sanctions and regulates sexual behavior (Jacquette, 19). Two stanzas of very popular Spanish poems have depicted the aura of the saintly mother in no uncertain terms. In the first one the male speaker sings his beloved regarding his expectations of a life together:

How beautiful would it have been
to live under that same roof
You and I always united
You and I always loving each other
You, always in love
I, always satisfied
together, one soul
together, one heart
and in the midst of us
my Mother, like a God²¹
(My translation)

In the stanza that follows, the male speaker scorns a woman who dares question his mother's purity and unremitting affection:

I consent everything of you
But an offense to my mother

²⁰ Until very recently, men could often get a fine waived, or avoid being incarcerated, if at the moment of the offense the authorities could verify that they were accompanied by their mothers.

²¹ "Qué lindo hubiera sido, vivir bajo aquel techo, los dos unidos siempre y amándonos los dos. Tú siempre enamorada, yo siempre satisfecho, los dos una sola alma, los dos un solo pecho, y en medio de nosotros, mi madre, como un Dios."

For a mother cannot be found
And you [...]I found in the street²²
(My translation)

The preponderance of the mother in the Latin American cultural spaces is not to be taken lightly. The institution of the saintly, self-righteousness, and, as discussed previously, the immaculate mother/wife shares the scene with equally formalized institution of the mistress or *querida*, who caters to men in a way that the wife/mother should not.

The structure and functioning of the power relations described in this chapter respond to a cultural coherence that is distinctive of female experiences in Latin American and many other countries. The argument that women form part of the developing world and are consequently at an earlier state of civilization is not tenable, for even if we visualize an utopic future with a developed Latin America in the horizon, power relations will still be different, not inferior or backward, only different, and certainly, not as restrictive as those upheld by Anglo-American feminisms. The production of Third World specificities situated in the context of Western feminist writing is problematic, as Mohanty rightly points out:

It is here that I locate the colonialist move. By contrasting the representation of women in the third world with Western feminisms's self-representation in the same context, we see how Western feminists alone become true subjects of this counterhistory. Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their "object" status. (Mohanty, 71)

²² "Todo te lo consiento, menos faltarle a mi madre. que una madre no se encuentra, y a ti te encontré en la calle."

Object-subject relations are shifting and utterly complex notions. It is not surprising that, under Western feminist eyes, Third-World women can only be seen as objects of unflagging male oppression, for Anglo-American feminists themselves have particularly confined women of their own cultures to a debilitating object status, granting an all-mighty and unlimited power to the male oppressive/repressive subject. If they have divested Anglo-American women of any sort of subjectivity, a colonialist move towards a female culture which, according to their standards, epitomizes difference and otherness, is clearly to be expected.

It would be particularly difficult to convince modern Latin American women of their lack of sexual subjectivity, especially today when women seek to embody the opposite prototype of the Marian saintly matron and want instead to display a sexual demeanor, which to the eyes of many radical feminists would appear to be a consequence of patriarchal sexual exploitation. To these seemingly exploited women, the female body is not an accident of nature associated with inferiority and lack, but rather a locus for the expression of power and desire. As discussed in the "Introduction" of this thesis, some of the tenets of radical hegemonic feminisms are not too far removed from the very Freudian ethics of lack which they seek to overturn.

The flamboyant, and perhaps even aggressive, sexual demeanor that can be observed in Latin American city streets, public and private clubs and social gatherings, grants the female and male body a central place in the power relations between the sexes. Women have acquired an awareness and a mastery of their own bodies through the effect of an investment of power in the body (Foucault, 1980: 56) carried out by the mass-media and the State. Whether or not the eroticization of the body is imposed on and

internalized by women as a power mechanism, an issue that has been noted by many scholars, is irrelevant. What is important to emphasize here is that hegemonic structures may have inadvertently generated a mechanism of liberation rather than oppression, as Michel Foucault explains:

Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression in the manner of a great Super-ego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If on the contrary power is strong, this is because as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, organic knowledge of it became possible. (Foucault, 1980: 59)

I do not wish to imply that Latin American women have a complete physiological and organic knowledge of their bodies, and much less, that they have an uncomplicated sexuality, that they are not exploited sexually, or that they have achieved reproductive freedom. However, it can be said that in Latin American societies women often act, either openly or covertly, as if they were the sexual subjects *par excellence*, and men their objects. The eroticization of the female body can generally go unquestioned because it is not necessarily interpreted as a sexist representation of femininity or as its prostitution. It rather amounts to the reification of woman as a powerful sexual subject/object. The implementation of laws against sexual harassment seems almost an impossibility at this point in time, for in a way, these too would divest women of their feminine ability to handle difficult situations involving

their sexuality in the workplace or in the streets. In view of the lack of laws that regulate sexual behavior, women have taken the law into their own hands: Unwanted sexual advances are dealt with using methods that are devastating for the reputation of the offender in the workplace or in the community.²³ Women have resorted to these strategic behaviors for lack of an infrastructure that offers them the conditions of possibility for the creation of laws against sexual harassment.²⁴ On the other hand, one should also reflect on what effects these laws will ultimately have in contexts where street compliments and sexual advances --whether unwanted or not-- are received as praise and not as insult.

III. 6. Conclusions

Modernization and dependent capitalism have been two crucial factors in the modification of female and male social behaviors. However, the incidence and intertwining of women's Catholic models in society, the the roots of *Marianismo* and *Machismo* and the feminine double standard are still deep and widespread, and firmly attached to the social imaginary of the Latin American cultures.

Feminist projects more in tune with the countries of Latin America would have to assign a crucial importance to the fact that the celebration of femaleness there is something quite distinct from the idealization of femininity undertaken by Anglo-American cultural feminism,²⁵ and more

²³ These include allusions to virility, the size of the penis and sexual impotence in the form of graffiti on the walls of men's and women's lavatories, or in the city walls, and more recently, in the Internet.

²⁴ Statistics on rape are very unreliable. Rape is a capital offense and it is often dealt with through personal *vendettas* that may even include the emasculation of the offender, as justified by *machista* notions of honor and shame, especially in rural settings.

²⁵ I refer to nineteenth century Cultural Feminism which strived for a broad cultural transformation, searching beyond the rationalist and legalistic thrust of Enlightenment liberal theory. Cultural feminists of the time --not unlike present day feminists-- resorted to stressing the role of the non-rational, reasserting

recently, by feminist New Age Goddess-religions. The former was not speaking of/to a syncretic culture, and in fact, did not include the female native cultures in the celebration. Therefore, although it is true that the Marian cult was an imposition of the dominant culture, it is also necessary to acknowledge that, upon the arrival of the *conquistadores*, Latin America already offered the supportive infra-structure for the blending of the above-mentioned native (and subsequent African) female deities into the European cult of Virgin Mary. This kind of syncretism will be discussed more at length in Chapter IV with the analysis of the nationalist cult of Queen María Lionza which originates in Venezuela and extends to the neighboring countries of Colombia and Panama.

Western feminisms will hardly become healthy transplants in Third-Worldist social spaces where women acquire self-worth and are highly valued for the very functions that are held as the main cause of female oppression in the developed world. While motherhood and sexuality grant women ascendancy in Latin American communities, in North America they have been generally viewed as an obstacle to achieving public and official power. It is very unlikely that Latin American women can be convinced of their powerlessness in these spheres of female experience, and it should be entertained whether or not a feminist theory more specific to Latin America can be articulated without implementing, or at least initially considering a womanist²⁶ (perhaps even essentialist) thrust as a pre-

“feminine” qualities that could become sources of power and strength for women. See “Cultural Feminism” in Josephine Donovan’s *Feminist Theory. The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*.

²⁶ See Alice Walker’s “Definition of Womanist” as well as Tuzyline Jita Allan’s *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics: A comparative Review*, and Emile M. Townes’ *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*. For a *mujerista* (womanist) approach to *Latina* cultures, see Ana Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers*.

condition to the establishment of more politically and economically oriented plans.

Another obstacle that a feminist project in Latin America cannot avoid is the heavy ideological burden attached to the label of feminism, which is still almost a swear word for many activists, academic or non-academic women, who continue to see it as yet another form of imperialist penetration which "de-womanizes" women.

Current cultural manifestations commonly reinforce the beliefs held by Eva Perón in the speeches she delivered to the women of the *Partido Femenino Peronista* (Feminine Peronist Party) in the Forties; Popular manifestations, such as proverbs and maxims of "low-brow" origin lay bare the virgin/prostitute ambivalence that is engraved on the psyche of men and women alike: "All women are whores, except my mother who is a saint" and, "a cunt hair has more pull than a team of oxen." The former alludes to the sanctity of motherhood, the latter to the glorification of female sexual power.

There are as well countless examples in popular culture that praise and/or castigate the sexual power of women, a force capable of maiming the power and ascendancy of the male as a cultural totem. Regardless of how powerful he may be, he is always on the brink of being defeated, overwhelmed or betrayed by the power of female sexuality. An examination of any of the lyrics in Caribbean *boleros*, Mexican *rancheras* or Argentine *tangos* included in popular *cancioneros* (song books) will attest to the prominence of this aspect of gender relations.²⁷ On the other hand, women, as well as men in search of female companions, waver

²⁷ Caribbean *Boleros*, Mexican *rancheras* and Argentine *tango* easily trespass class, race, gender and age boundaries and are by far the most widespread popular forms in Latin America. Their performance and reception reach the most hidden corners of the Continent.

continuously between the archetypes of Virgin Mary and Eve, which split women into idealized mothers/wives and tempting whores. These two female archetypes are, intertwined, however, in one of the most popular songs of the Hispanic Caribbean. The profane stanzas are reminiscent of the deflowering scene in Lucía Guerra's La Virgen, discussed in Chapter II:

Virgin of Midnight
Virgin, that's what you are
Tear-off your blue robe
So that I can adore you whole.
Lady of Sin, moon of my song
Look at me, kneeled by your heart
Incense of kisses I give you
Listen to my supplication of Love
Virgin of Midnight, cover your nudity.
I will bring the stars down
To illuminate your feet.²⁸
(My translation)

The ways in which women have conceptualized and experienced power in Latin America are reflective of their material history. Like their Anglo- American counterparts, they have devised alternative strategies that respond to their cultural specificities, to their socio-economic realities, and to the pressure exerted on them by oppressive paternalistic systems. A maternalistic attitude on the part of Western feminists will not contribute to cross-cultural understanding. The discussion of gender oppression must necessarily be accompanied by an analysis of world politics and the ways in which these affects or interfere with class/gender oppression in Latin

²⁸ "Virgen de medianoche; virgen, eso eres tú. Para adorarte toda, rasga tu manto azul. Señora del pecado, luna de mi canción; mírame arrodillado junto a tu corazón. Incienso de besos te doy, escucha mi rezo de amor. Virgen de medianoche, cubre tu desnudez; bajaré las estrellas para alumbrar tus pies." This song was made immensely popular by Daniel Santos, a celebrated Puerto Rican composer and singer.

America. Discussing, and having a realistic, and less optimistic perhaps, approach to world economics, power-structures and dependent capitalism in a global scale is as important a pre-condition for cross-cultural dialogue as the tolerance and understanding of the deeply steeped cultural behaviors discussed in this chapter. Otherwise overly optimistic results and agendas that take their informants at face value, without questioning the motives behind their assertions, will continue to hinder an understanding between North and South regarding the articulation of gender power imbalances in Latin America.

CHAPTER IV

“Yo no creo en brujas, pero de que vuelan, vuelan.”

“I don’t believe in witches, but they **do** fly” goes the old proverb that reverberates in the shared imaginary of Latin American societies. This maxim reflects the persistent ambivalence of mentalities which are as infused with Western rational thought as they are estranged from it. As a result, communities are incessantly caught between radically different values. This chapter presents a case study that attests to the clash, the adoption, and the interaction of opposite belief systems. The adherence of the previously discussed literary/cultural critics to the Anglo-American academy is further explained in terms of the concepts of mimesis and appropriation. The spirit possession cult of the goddess María Lionza shows how the living and the dead are reunited in a theatricalized existence where issues of gender, politics, love, misfortune, envy, illness, and power are re-enacted daily. Women from everyday life and different social strata metamorphose into high priestesses, doctors, mediums or simply into the makers of their own destiny. The rituals which take place in the complex space opened by this cult --especially those of sexual dominance of men enacted by women-- raise questions about the univocal notions of power upheld by international feminist circles.

IV.1. Mimesis, Appropriation and the Rational Control of the Imaginary

Before addressing the issues raised by the subtitle, which deal with the problematics of appropriation and mimesis as they relate to this research, I

must inform the reader that I took important preliminary measures: first, I lit a red candle, then a white one. The red one, which helps dispel the spirits of dark light and their negative energy, was placed on the floor as far as possible from my head and heart. The white candle, which will invoke the spirits of a brighter light, is placed behind me, aligned with my head. After lighting the candles, I anointed my forehead with a concoction made of soil, organic materials and the ashes of wise men and women, in order to improve my ability to think and express myself clearly. As a last step, I invoked the power of the Great Sorceress of Meditation and offered this chapter to the Spiritual Court of Wisdom.

At this point in your reading, you may have already disqualified my short ritual as a joke of bad taste, inappropriate in a scholarly context. Coming as they do from someone writing a dissertation in a university milieu, where supposedly educated rational minds are, my reader may interpret my conjurations as a trendy post-modern attempt to unsettle the established order of academic discourses. Unless my reader has already dismissed my writing as coming from a Third-World/third-rate scholar attempting to secure a position within the order of discourse through questionable means, rarely will s/he accept as a possibility the veracity of my statement and the authenticity of my beliefs. Whatever the case, s/he will refrain from voicing any criticism that could brand her/him as a politically incorrect scholar.

If my reader were a Latin American academic feminist, she would perhaps dismiss my statement as one that distorts the image of, or misrepresents Latin American women in general. Silencing as these anticipated reactions against my preparation ritual may be, what remains to be mentioned is the agony I must have surely gone through while I began this chapter with the description of my preparation ritual, knowing that I was

risking disapproval at best and disqualification at worst. Thus, censorship and self-censorship are the main problems that anyone in a similar position would expect to confront within a context and a space where rituals of this sort are neither acceptable nor codifiable in an appropriate and/or positive light.

In the scholarly context of a doctoral dissertation, and especially in light of hyper post-modernist styles whose underlying agenda is that anything goes, this ritual could be seen as a post-modern little piece, a sample of the culture of hybridization so much in vogue these days. It is probable, as well, that it could be interpreted as a resisting microcosm that gravitates, counter-clockwise, around a central macrocosm, or even more accurately, as the alternative *doxa* of a feminist woman upholding the beliefs of the resurfacing Wicca religion. All these descriptions and theorizations miss the point of my ritual. They may describe it but they cannot penetrate its truth. Even I can't turn its truth inside out, and I don't know if I want to. Why should I? So called pre-logical, primitive subjects run the risk of being appropriated by logical and civilized ones. As a subaltern practice, the kind of irrational, magical-religious behavior described in the invocation challenges the hegemonic value system, but does it subtract or grant more authority to that system? Most likely it does the latter.

The authority of a feminist ethnographer or anthropologist will be reinforced if she approaches my preparation ritual with the distancing stance expected from a serious scientist, a producer of objective truth. She will seldom dare to go beyond that truth for fear of falling into the trap of producing an unscientific analysis. Her position will be that of the scientist that records what s/he sees, and discards, or avoids discussing what cannot be seen, understood, or explained. Whatever cannot be perceived or proved does not exist. Similarly, out of sheer embarrassment, the stance of a Latin

American academic feminist could be that of denial. She would perhaps contend that magico-religious practices happen only within the less privileged social strata or in ethnic minority contexts, or that they are ancient practices inherited from the Old Continent, and cannot be said to be specific to Latin America. Similar practices can be recorded even in the most advanced nations of the First World, she would argue, adding that it is dangerous to brand Latin American women with such naiveté (read, ignorance).

The modes of reception outlined above serve to illustrate the dynamics of mimesis and appropriation that relate to this research: it is difficult even to determine who or what has appropriated, or been appropriated by whom or by what, who or what is mimetically reproducing a model, or is being mimetically (re)produced by it. Robert Weimann's notion of appropriation (207-208), intersects with that of Costa Lima's mimesis: they both conceptually involve some form of alienation and/or self projection. In my conjuration, have I appropriated the magical-religious discourses in order to use them for my academic endeavors, or has such a discourse possessed/appropriated me? By the same token, have I been so appropriated by the Western feminist discourse that I cannot escape it? Am I so paralyzed by (self-)censorship that I will be unable to articulate, to translate my material and at the same time protect its core from misconstructions or banalizations? Walter Benjamin writes:

Commentary and translation stand in the same relation to the text as style and mimesis to nature: the same phenomenon considered from different aspects. On the tree of the sacred text both are only the eternally rustling leaves; on that of the profane, the seasonally falling fruits. (Benjamin, 1986: 68)

Whatever material it is made of, the core of the falling fruits bears the mark of difference, and as such it disrupts the established academic/ideological order. A transgression of this sort brings with it the unavoidable outcome of isolation and/or co-optation. What I have just exposed attempts to describe the dilemma in which critics like Sara Castro Klarén and Lucía Guerra are immersed. These critics would avoid bringing into the academic feminist discourses arena material that does not fit set standards. In the case of Latin-americanists, the representation in critical discourse of the so-called magical-religious thinking entertained by women of all classes is conspicuously absent, regardless of its preponderance in Latin American cultures. As discourses which regulate power, knowledge and perception, those of the feminist *doxa* have generated a sort of censorious perceiving and thinking in the critics who have internalized them. Foucault speaks of this "inspecting gaze:"

[...] a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that [s]he is [her]his own overseer; each individual thus exercising the surveillance over, and against [her]himself. A superb formula, power exercised continuously. (Cited by Gamman and Makinen, 175)

The functional structures and cultural idiosyncrasies of "less civilized" women around the world are reflected in traits that have been firmly attached to social groups allegedly at an earlier stage of civilization, i.e., women who are still in the process of developing. The *mise en discours* of Third-World idiosyncrasies by Western feminisms is more than problematic, for it is there that appropriation strategies are most successfully effected. As we suggested already, Chandra T. Monhanty rightly points out that Anglo-American

academic women who apprehend the realities of their Third-Worldist counterparts, will most likely become the subjects of the latter's counter history.

To avoid being objectified by the "subjects of that counter history," Latin American cultural feminists have adopted the afore-mentioned protective strategic mimicry. Just like the butterflies that take on the external appearance of a branch in order to avoid being devoured by a Mantis, so too scholars from Latin America mimic the accepted discourses to avoid being devoured by the Anglo-American academy. Thus, they become mock subjects, Costa Lima's pathological copies of that counter history.

It appears, however, that the conditions of possibility for effecting changes in this particular history (and counterhistory) are beginning to allow the representation of alternative, dissonant, or deviant materials, thus loosening the tight fist of feminist censorship. As already discussed, feminists from the First-World are objectifying each other, and even disqualifying other feminists as New Victorians, obsessive puritanical women, etc. These internal struggles enable the inclusion of materials previously censored for their kinkiness or deviousness, which were deemed to be too disruptive of the moral order of the feminist *doxa*. The mandate of the so-called backlash feminism seems to be the practice of subversion, at whatever cost.

These apparent breaks in the feminist front, together with the increased permissiveness towards the inclusion of subversive and/or transgressive material in academic writing, could perhaps establish the conditions of possibility for Latin American feminists to abandon their strategic mimicry. A breathing space could be opened where the symbolic representation of subversive material (or one that bears the mark of difference) would be within the established norm. Thus, a new cycle of mimesis and/or appropriation will

have begun in the international feminist scenario within the frame of a *fin de siècle* aesthetics, reminiscent of so many other *fin de siècle* aesthetics. These reassessments of dominant feminisms may be paving the way for the production of works (theses, books, narrative) within a less restrictive, less dogmatic "fellowship of discourses." (Foucault, 1972)

Parallels can be drawn as well between the problematics of mimesis and appropriation in the terrain of feminist interventionist activism and that of the academic fellowships of discourse. The relationship between Anglo-American campaigners (Mohanty's real subjects of Third-World counterhistories) and their objects (the women to be empowered) is becoming increasingly unstable. The clash between the theoretical approximations of the former with the dramatic social realities of the latter are indicative of the shortcomings that the intellectual appropriation of the world may sometimes face. The collisions between First and Third World feminists lie in what Robert Weimann, in another context, has qualified as:

[...] the depth of the gulf between what represents personal consciousness and what is represented in public ideology, and the fact that in view of this gulf the traditional public representations have become problematic, in the sense that they are no longer respected as "genuine or adequate" and that they no longer serve the discursive process of discussion, insight, and consensus. (Weimann, 207)

The ability to arrive at a consensus among feminists around issues of gender relations and sexuality, for instance, has been seriously impaired. Overwhelming proof of this is the adamant opposition voiced by women of peripheral countries against the imposition of westernized agendas on these issues during the 1995 International Conference of Women in Beijing. These

disagreements are manifest as phenomena similar to those that Weimann describes as "the instability in the relation between what represents [appropriates] and what is represented [appropriated] in language was vitally affected by [an] erosion of authority [whose] traditional significations now appeared as undefined, unexamined, unapplied" (Weimann, 208).

However, in spite of the fact that hegemonic significations of gender and sexuality may have exhausted their capacity for legitimation, it is still necessary for many leaders of Latin American women's movements to practice a rather opportunistic form of strategic mimicry: their public endorsement of feminist agendas may be just that, a strategy for the acquisition of material resources, but may have nothing to do with changing their beliefs or basic needs. These women, however, can voice their disagreements in the belligerent spaces of political praxis, in ways that Castro Klaren or Guerra, and several other critics, for that matter, may not, in the more censored textual spaces of the Anglo-American feminist circles. In my particular case, it remains to be seen how (or if), working from within the still restrictive space of academic feminism, it will be possible to escape the traps that I have just exposed without falling into one myself. It also remains to be seen if I will be capable of bringing into academic discourse rustling leaves and falling fruits without fossilizing them into yet another rhetorical strategy.

In what follows I examine the cult of the ancient female deity where the visibility of women as healers and mediators is outstanding. The far-reaching influence of this cult attests to the fact that social relations in Latin America are, despite attempts at modernization, still very much embedded in the so-called magical thinking, a sort of knowledge in which history and memory interact. Michael Taussig qualifies it as an "implicit social knowledge

[considered to be] an essentially inarticulable and imageric nondiscursive knowing of social relationality" (Taussig, 1987: 369).

IV. 2. i. Dynamic of Domination and Submission in María Lionza's Cult.¹

Look, in all confidence I tell you, that when one has been dried up of love and withered by loneliness, the remedy is to pray to the Queen, to her who's all embracing love; pray that she brings your loved one back to you, once and for all; that if he has eyes, these will only look at you; that if he has ears, he'll only listen to you; that if he has lips, he'll speak only to call you...One conjures-up the spirits so that the evil forces that are dispossessing you of your man or woman, can be revoked. The power of the Queen brings harmony to the couple.

María Teresa Blanco

Well, brother, I tell you that one practices a quiet and confined faith in the church, where there are spirits of elevated light, which are God and the Virgin and all the Saints; but one also has a swinging and loose faith. And if in the church one promenades virgins and saints in processions, in the Mountain one parades the spirits along the altars and caravans. We all go greeting each other fraternally in dances and prayers with flowers and drinks. And if I carry the Queen María Lionza, and you carry Bolívar, the Liberator, and someone else carries Negra Francisca, it is because Venezuelans were born to wiggle their saints, and that's why San Juan is danced and San Benito is danced and boozed, because I tell you that if they take our swinging and loose faith away from us, they'll kill us right on the spot.

Anonymous pilgrim
Sanctuary of María Lionza

¹ This section was read as a paper in the conference "The Theatricality of Rites and Celebrations in Hispanic and Hispanic American cultures," at the University of California, Irvine in February, 1996. It was later published under the title "Ritual Practices in Venezuela. The Dynamics of Domination and Submission in the Cult of María Lionza." in a Monographic Issue of the theater journal GESTOS, 1996, 127-144.

As we have seen, the cult of María Lionza is a hybrid configuration of alternative belief systems, politics, issues of national identity and politics and gender relations. Furthermore, within the space opened by the María Lionza cult, practices relating to the exercise of authority and power, especially women's unorthodox power over men, are widespread, thus raising questions about the restrictive conceptualization of power entertained by Anglo-American feminists when they become the sole subjects of Latin American female counterhistories.

The mountain of Sorte, situated within the limits of the Venezuelan state of Yaracuy, hosts the spirit of María Lionza, a Queen Goddess who inspires perhaps the most important cult that a pagan deity currently exhibits in Latin America. Sorte is a national pilgrimage place and for the followers of María Lionza it is mainly “the mountain that moves the faith,” notable for its powerful, mysterious allure, as one of the cult followers put it:

One enters the mountain of Sorte in a cold and cloudy morning, and feels the silent weight of the atmosphere that strains one with reverence at the sight of that raw miscegenation of pagan and religious ritual in the midst of Nature. [Sorte] is a testimony of another popular power in Venezuela, where ancestral impulses are mixed with traditional religions, where a spirit descends right in front of you and talks to you, where you don't know when reality and magic begin or end. Here one understands that man made symbols out of a vital necessity to dream and believe; to believe in himself and in a superior power, which is nothing else than to choose one's own hope. (Díaz, ix) ²

² All translations of Díaz's María Lionza: religiosidad mágica de Venezuela into English are my own.

In search of that hope, thousands of *marialionceros* (cult followers and practitioners) climb the sacred mountain every day in order to communicate with María Lionza through her mediators, the mediums or *materias* and the *bancos* (masters of ceremonies, male or female, who assist the *materia* while in trance) to pray for solutions to their ailments of love, health and money. The *marialionceros* may choose to invoke one or many of the different members of María Lionza's adjunct courts.

Throughout the years the cult of María Lionza has opened up to different magical-religious influences, such as spiritism, esoterism and Cuban *santería*, which have become conversant with the cult's primarily Christian symbolism. The invocation of the *Gran Poder de Dios* (the Great Power of God) invariably initiates the *séances* where the spirits of characters belonging to Venezuela's historical past, and to its formative aboriginal and black cultures, are conjured-up to be consulted by Venezuelans on a wide variety of matters.

The image of María Lionza, mostly depicted as a white queen, representing the country's Iberian ancestry, is escorted in the numerous altars found in Sorte and throughout Venezuela, by the brave aboriginal Indian chief Cacique Guaicaipuro, who died fighting against the Spanish Conquistadors, and by the rebellious Negro Miguel, a slave who participated in the wars of the colonial period. The syncretic trilogy of María Lionza, Guaicaipuro and Negro Miguel has come to be known as *Las Tres Potencias* (The Three Powers), an arrangement reminiscent of the Seven Powers (*las Siete Potencias*) of Cuban *santería*, the seven deities of afro-Cuban origin, and perhaps even of the Christian Trinity. In addition to the aboriginal and black powers that flank María Lionza, she is assisted by several "courts" that include the spirits of renowned medical doctors, such as José Gregorio Hernández, of

Simón Bolívar, *El Libertador*, as well as a considerable number of historical figures of national and international prestige. The inclusion of historical characters in the courts at specific historical moments is reflective of social, economic and political fluctuations that take place during the periodical crises of the country.

I will discuss here the power dynamics of domination and submission that are staged both in the interaction between the Venezuelan State and the cult and in the complex realm of sexual politics as these are expressed in testimonies and ritual practices that the *marialionceros* perform. I have used, for lack of more organic concepts from within, some westernized concepts that help to illuminate the dynamics of the cult from an external perspective.

IV. 2. ii. The State Within the Cult, or the People Against the State?

The game between the Liberator and the Queen mimics the State's voice within the people's voice. The State needs and uses the magical power of a cult in which primitive figures, Indians of the Americas and black slaves are given new life. This movement attempts to reconstruct history on the basis of a future free from oppression by the magical force of the return from the dead. (My translation) (Taussig, 92: 491)

To read the contraposition of María Lionza, a mythical and magic-religious towering figure, and the State's patriotic symbol *par excellence*, Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, only as a manipulative antic on the part of the State to exalt the fusion of magic and patriotism to its ends, is to have a partial

and unilateral view of the State/cult interaction, and to underestimate the voice of the people within the State's voice.³

The mountain of Sorte, as well as any of the thousands of altars erected for the worship of the *Tres Potencias* and their numerous courts, throughout Venezuela and beyond its national borders, in public places or private homes, are symbolic spaces where people of different colors, creeds and socio-economic strata search for solutions to their individual problems, and collectively assert racial and cultural identities, express dissatisfaction with official policies and resistance to the hegemony of the Catholic Church, among other things. The cult is therefore a good indicator of both the country's socio-political and economic critical scenarios and of the extent of the discontent expressed by Venezuelans against the State policies that generate these problems. The cult cannot be understood only as a national religion promoted by the State to create an *aura* of legitimate and irrefutable power, or as a compendium of rituals where people practice a form of liberating alienation. (Taussig, 92: 494)

The *marialionceros* are far from alienated from the national realities that affect them as citizens of Venezuela. A liberating form of alienation is quite a misleading label to describe the political involvement, belligerent socio-political protest and the physical and psychological self-healing, which manifests itself as an act of love and surrendering to the powers of María Lionza, that take place during cultic performances, which could be more accurately seen as an active form of "disalienation." These cultic performances go hand in hand with spiritual and esoteric practices that are geared to

³ My position regarding the State/Cult dynamics was inspired by Daisy Barreto's forthcoming critique of Michael Taussig's work on the cult: "Michael Taussig and the Cult of María Lionza: a Pilgrim Trapped between Rites and Politics, History and Representations."

achieving the people's general well-being. A psychologist describes the atmosphere that surrounds some of these ritualistic practices:

There is [in Sorte] a mixture of knowledge and mystery, of what we call the collective unconscious, which is there, in all those people who share a preoccupation for change, in all those people who await changes for the better. I believe that this is what endows this place with a sacred ambiance, an ambiance that is sacred not only in the religious sense. (Mariano Díaz, 144)

Collective and individual, socio-political and personal problems are thus dealt with in an atmosphere of magical religiosity that speaks to the people infinitely more directly and with more immediacy than any political candidate, or medical doctor can.

The *materias* and the *bancos* receive the spirits of historical /religious icons that the State or the Church have used to colonize the social imaginary to their own ideological ends. But a boomerang effect has taken place whereby the people have creatively transformed those very figures that the institutions have iconized to exalt a false nationalistic ideal or a quiet and confined faith, into incarnate spirits endowed with magical power to discern the future and overturn evil. The resurgence of Bolívar, Guaicaipuro, Negro Miguel and, more recently, of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez⁴ in the ritual performances of Sorte reflects not so much the people's belief in the aureole of institutional power and patriotism that surrounds these icons, but rather the people's will to develop an unmediated relationship between these powerful figures or their

⁴ Venezuelan dictator for the longest time in the history of the country (1908-1935). Gómez had absolute power over the country's human and natural resources. He never married but it is believed that he fathered a hundred children. In recent years, the spirit of Gómez has been invoked to help unmarried or lonely men to find women. The frequency of Gómez's invocation in Sorte and the inclusion of his image in the altars may be a reflection of the country's disillusionment and hopelessness with a democracy so corrupt and a country so unsafe, that some people have begun to hope for a new dictatorship.

reincarnated spirits and their individual and collective experiences of the present.

The power attributed to the dead to help the living, which manifests itself daily in the cultic performances that honor María Lionza, operates in the form of dialectical images rendered in a sort of surrealistic montage. These images “defamiliarize the familiar and [shake] the sense of reality in the given order of things, redeeming the past in the present in a medley of deconstructive anarchical ploys.”⁵ For any outside observer to see and hear Simón Bolívar, the epitome of patriotism and nationalism, being appropriated through representation by any *marialioncero* in a trance or possession-like state is certainly an anarchical and transgressive vision. In this ingenious appropriation of Bolívar, an otherwise unapproachable figure latent in the popular imagination, the hero is resurrected by the medium or materia in a sort of activist acting.⁶ Walter Benjamin accurately describes this kind of intrusion of the historical past into the present:

To articulate the past does not mean to recognize it “the way it was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. (Benjamin, 1969: 255)

Driven thus by a mimetic impulse of appropriation, the common man or woman overpowers, and is magically empowered by, the authority that emanates from the *aura* of figures of such might.⁷

⁵ In “History as Sorcery” Taussig applies these concepts, which he attributes to Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno, to the cultural contexts of the villagers of the Sibundoy Valley (the “Huitotos”) in Pasto, Colombia. I find them useful to describe this aspect of the power dynamics in the María Lionza cult.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89. Following Benjamin, Taussig sees any shaman involved in a similar practice as a “dialectical magician” whose wand can awaken material that awaits “the copula of the magician’s touch.”

⁷ For an enticing (though often sensationalist) examination of the State’s inherence in the Bolivarian cult, see Taussig’s latest book, The Magic of the State, particularly Part Two, “The Liberator’s Court.”

IV. 2. iii. *Aura, Mana and Maga* as Hinges of the Cultic

Walter Benjamin defines the *aura* of a work of art as a unique phenomenon of a distance that denotes the cult value of the work of art in space and time perception. The work of art surrounded by the *aura* is unapproachable and distant, regardless of its closeness to the beholder (Benjamin, 1969: 243). A close relative of Benjamin's *aura* is the concept of *mana*, explained by Freud as a distinct quality intrinsic in a person possessing mysterious powers or magical influence, that generate certain classes of taboo (Freud, 19). And perhaps under the *manaist* influence of Freud, Weston La Barre believes that all the concepts of *mana* "derive from the same universal familial source --the child's fear and awe toward the father [Bolívar for Venezuelans] symbolized as his maleness, generalized, reified and projected into the supernatural unknown, but representing a very archaic stage of ego differentiation" (La Barre, 366). To complement the above Indo-European definitions of *mana*, there is the Iranian concept of *maga*, which alludes to "intellectual power, magnitude, magic wisdom and wizardry [...] with secret magic or cosmic medicine-power" (*Ibid.*). Despite the obvious limitations of these westernized concepts to explain some of the cult's realities, a counterpoint of some specific qualities pertaining to the three concepts defined above is a useful tool to illuminate, from an external perspective, the kinds of interaction --the power dynamics-- that take place during the rituals performed in the exuberant natural stage of Sorte mountain.

The *aura* of the spirits that come to life in Sorte is substantially different from the *aura* they possessed as living beings. The energy of their *aura* or *mana* has been transformed into one that is less awe-inspiring, more

approachable and attainable, and yet infinitely more revered for the power they instill in the *materias* they possess. These reincarnated spirits, that once held supreme authority (paternalist like Bolívar's, tyrannical like Gomez's) have become part of ordinary life in a space where there is no hostile projection or taboo against the dead (Freud, 63).

The belief systems that structure the cult of María Lionza in Sorte may be animistic or mythological. They are also deeply religious and with strong claims to scientific truths. In the cult of María Lionza "distance is of no importance in thinking --since what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act. The world of magic has a telepathic disregard for spatial distance and treats past situations as if they were present" (*Ibid.*). Thus, the *marialionceros* show an irreverent disregard for the historical space and time in which figures like Bolívar, Gómez, Negro Felipe or Saint John the Baptist, to name only a few, are inserted. The *aura* or *mana* of these people has both decayed and increased in their new natural setting in Sorte, for to their everlasting cult value should be added the use value they have acquired as healers, confessors, simple interlocutors and general consultants on personal, political, social and financial matters for thousands of Venezuelans.

The rituals performed by the *marialionceros* in Sorte mountain at once repudiate, readopt and readapt human beings, and elements of the establishment, religious or otherwise, overturning the hierarchies much in the manner of the transgressive carnivalesque rites of antiquity. Thus, the spirits of Simón Bolívar, the essence of honorable virtue, or Juan Vicente Gómez, the tyrannical and autocratic dictator famous for his sexual potency, are received, re-invented and appropriated on earth by modest people, in a sort of travesty operation, in order, for instance, to comment and give advice on the

deplorable situation of the country or on matters of the heart, Bolívar is thus turned into a political commentator and Gómez into a dignified pimp, a procurer of women for lonely men. Their *aura* or *mana*, however, remains transformed, accessible, “democratized,” almost tangible. It has ceased to be a “projection of awe at the spectacle of the holy, the unreachable other” (La Barre, 368). A similar situation can be observed in the treatment of San Benito, a saint that is danced, shaken and boozed-up at will in the rites and processions of Sorte and elsewhere. This seemingly irreverent practice is a necessity for some cult followers. A *marialioncero* explains it as follows:

Between the proposals of official Catholicism and the spiritual needs of our people there has always existed an abyss. A space orphaned by faith which cannot be filled-up by a religion that postpones salvation, purification and enjoyment for the future, for the “other” life, and that obstructs the channels of exchange between divine omnipotence and the impotence of the poor. (Hernández cited by Mariano Diaz, 170).

The situation described above is ideal for a flexible application of Benjamin’s concept of *aura*, for there is certainly an insurmountable distance between the way in which feelings and religious practices are lived and experienced by the popular sectors of Venezuela and the principles, precepts and behaviors established by the abstract, hierarchical and *auratic* theological Christianity.

The Iranian concept of *maga* is perhaps the best to describe the persona of María Lionza. The *mana* generates taboos and the *aura* imposes an unbridgeable distance between the object and the beholder; as such, the qualities ascribed to these concepts are not functional to describe and explicate the phenomena (e.g., mainly those related to love, health and money) surrounding the pagan figure of the goddess and her link with the

practitioners of her cult. Like many pagan goddesses, María Lionza embodies the qualities inherent in the concept of *maga*: intellectual power, magnitude, magic wisdom, secret magic and cosmic medicine powers, all of which María Lionza performs directly, or through her numerous courts of spirits. The cult's response to religious unification and to the persecution of other belief systems and ways of world making may manifest itself in the form of an "oblique resistance" (Barreto, 1995) or categorically, against the religious hegemony existing in Venezuela, as a cult follower puts it:

To God made man, the pillar of Christianity, our popular religion has given a God made woman, mistress and lady of an overflowing nature, which permanently communes with all the species; a virgin that parades her mature sensuality through mountains and rivers, and who now, become spirit, distributes generously immediate solutions to concrete problems of the earth. (Díaz, 172)

As a pagan deity, María Lionza is bound to the earth and is integrated into the natural world through animal sacrifices, offerings and certain animal taboos. One such animal is the feared large water snake Anaconda, a *leitmotiv* in Amerindian mythologies, which, not surprisingly, anthropomorphizes into María Lionza:

This profound and characteristically pagan ritualization of nature is linked to the belief of life after death and instills life into the spirits, who are responsible for causing illness and misfortune, but also for removing them. (Barreto, 1995)

The followers of the cult establish an inextricable link between their goddess and the earth (Sorte) as a giver and taker of life, and judging by the testimonies of many *marialionceros*, the most powerful magic emanates from

the mountain itself. A believer says that the mountain was elevated by the “sacred and powerful earth that bestows energies and annuls them, that yields fruits and disintegrates them.” Sorte mountain is also seen as a “sacred natural temple where one can pray from within to eradicate evil influences, to avoid self-consumption and to talk with the spirits so that one can be charged with their light” (Toyo cited by Mariano Díaz, 103).

The creative imagination of the *marialionceros* has structured this mythical place, not as a utilitarian response to anxiety and thwarted desire, but rather as a vehicle for the expression of their innermost fantasies and beliefs that are deeply connected to an ancestral magic, which creates and recreates itself ad infinitum, as Michael Taussig sensitively defines it:

Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby change its destination. (Taussig, 1980: 15)

IV. 2. iv. Love and Eroticism in María Lionza’s Cult

Explosion of language during which the subject manages to annul the loved object under the volume of love itself: by a specifically amorous perversion, it is love the subject loves, not the object.

Roland Barthes

The belief in supernatural beings and events has historically been connected to the notion that deities could be satisfied either by an intensive cult of Eros or by the opposite extreme, asceticism and self-denial. (Wellesley,

189). The erotic force intrinsic in the figure of María Lionza allows only for the former to take place. The sensuality that emanates from her figure is a reminder and a permanent invitation for her followers to indulge in the arts of love. The magic and supernatural powers of María Lionza propose a pagan world view that subverts the official order in more than one way.

The queen-goddess exercises her powers, gives advice, and depending on the circumstances, unites or separates lovers with the help of many spiritual emissaries. Among these, Negra Francisca is one of the most cherished and popular spirits of the cult. She was born in 1884 and grew up in a number of different plantations. According to the legend, Negra Francisca “likes roses, sweet things and peace. She loves the color red, and her “light” is also red. Her triad is composed of a bottle of huasinga,⁸ a cigar in her mouth and a drum in her hand” (Vilma Castillo, 9). The explanation for Francisca’s love of the color red is that it is a “warm color associated with throbbing blood and fire, with ardent sensuality and with passion and feelings” (*Ibid.*).

According to the *materias* that receive the spirit of Negra Francisca in Sorte and elsewhere, her quest in the earthy plane is to strengthen the ties of love between couples, as described in her code of love:

The ultimate goal of true love is the destruction of dualism, the dissolving of separation. It is the convergence into a combination that originated in a mystical center found, for instance, in a rose, in the heart, and in places that preserve a hidden center. But the rose, the heart, are not physical places; they are states produced by the overcoming of separation. The very act of love-making expresses a yearning to die embraced by what is desired, to melt into what has been

⁸ Hard-core *aguardiente* liquor obtained from the fermentation of sugar cane.

fused...Amorous desire and its satisfaction represent the clue to the origin of the world. Love disappointments and their ensuing revenge contain the secret of all evil and egotism that exists on earth. (Vilma Castillo, 10)

The ideas of complementarity and completeness contained in the love creed of Negra Francisca connote a balanced wholeness that is at the heart of the cult to María Lionza. One cannot speak, however, of ethical prescriptions when it comes to the concrete, everyday life experiences of the followers of her cult, for as a pagan deity, María Lionza incarnates and exercises the powers of good and evil with equal force. In this sense, the cult is an eccentric system of beliefs that challenges religious Manichaeism. Let's not forget that María Lionza is not only a Goddess, she is also the Queen (*La Reina*), the creator of law and order within the cult, and that all good and evil comes from her and returns to her; destiny itself is subordinate to her principles. María Lionza may at times display her negative forces when dealing with the defense of her followers' needs and desires, which in essence will preserve the wholeness alluded to in Negra Francisca's love creed, no matter how subjective its interpretation.

The recipes that follow deserve to be cited in their entirety: first, because they illustrate the moral ambivalence that permeates some ritual practices which lead to the exercise of domination and submission, and ultimately to the exaltation of completeness in love, that fall within a code of ethics that many outsiders, especially some feminists,⁹ would find questionable; and second, because they constitute rich samples of one-act, one-actor dramatic performances, that stand for themselves and that are highly

⁹ Although these practices are very common in many countries of Latin America, notably the Caribbean region, they are underrepresented in the feminist studies (both locally and abroad) dealing with Latin American female culture.

representative of the rituals that take place in natural stages and private altars of the cult.

Recipe to keep your man at home

Make seven knots to a pair of your man's socks while you utter the following words: "it's not the socks that I'm tying up, but your steps, so that you'll only find paths that lead you to no other house but mine." You should rinse out his clothes with essence of tranquillity balsam, elixirs of "stick to me" and "dominance". Spray his side of the bed with these essences. Light a red candle for Negra Francisca and for Don Juan of Dominio (control) and Don Juan of Love. Keep your man's knotted sock under the pillow where you rest your head at night. (Vilma Castillo, 60)

Recipe to attract and dominate the man you love

Take a red candle and carve out five holes in the shape of a cross. Introduce one clove in each hole. Write the name of the man you wish to attract and dominate five times downwards. Bathe the candle with oils of attraction and dominance, love, tough-guy-tamer, (*amansa guapos*), thoughts, follow-my-steps, come to me, cinnamon, red essence, honey and urine. Offer the five candles to Negra Francisca and when you light the candles you should utter these words: "the five cloves are the five senses of (say the name of the man) who I am dominating. The rest is for him to come to me, humiliated, vanquished and in exasperation at my feet. Pray five "Our Father who art in Heavens..." to the live spirit of the man you wish to dominate offering them to Negra Francisca. (*Ibid.*, 23)

Recipe to separate couples

Take two black figure candles (male and female), write the names of the man and woman you want to separate, one upwards, the other downwards. Use a black ribbon to tie up the figurines back to

back, facing outwards. Bathe them with oil essences of separation, hatred, boredom, quarrels, black pepper, hot pepper and exasperation. Prior to lighting the two figure-candles, these should be illuminated with black candles offered to “Don Juan del Odio” (Don Juan of Hatred), “Don Juan del Desespero” (Don Juan of Exasperation)¹⁰ and to Negra Francisca. Do this operation for a period of nine days after which the two figures must be lit and the wax thrown in the river while you utter the following words: “It’s not the wax that I’m throwing away; it is the spirit and soul of (say the names of the couple) so that they separate. Pray one “Our Father who art in Heavens...” and offer the candles to San Alejo before you throw them away. Finally, place a red candle to thank Negra Francisca. (*Ibid.*, 22)

The images and symbols present in the rituals of domination and love described in these recipes are pure lurid sensuality. The rituals are imbued with and confer authority to the speaker that utters them. The words used in these rites possess an incantatory resonance that stimulates the fantasy of the speaker/practitioner. The conjurer progresses from a sphere of make believe into one of sheer conviction and unshakable faith. Desire and attainment of the love object are a simultaneous (f)act during the conjuring-up of the spirits, no matter how removed from reality or distant in time the fulfillment of that desire may be.

The recipes of Negra Francisca are a dramatic staging of the power of ritual discourse, through the decree uttered by the practitioner/performer the request is automatically granted, and the fatum altered. They are also virtual decrees of possession executed with the implicit consent (and complicity) of

¹⁰ There are 101 Don Juan’s, each representing the 101 needs of men and women, among which are included those of health, love, hate, money, drinking, etc.

God, Jesus Christ, the saints, and the telluric spirits of *María La Onza*;¹¹ with the concoction of holy water and urine, and with the blending of love and humiliation. Francisca's recipes are as well the staging, or rather the simulation of an act of unlimited possession¹² in which "the object is placed in the center of the stage and there adored, idolized, taken to task, covered with discourse, with prayers (and perhaps surreptitiously with invectives)" (Barthes, 31). This trend is illustrated in the powerful amorous invocation contained in one of the many *oraciones del tabaco* (cigar prayers):

This is the body of that Son of a Bitch. Satan, in you I believe, [stomp three times with your left leg while making a cross with the cigar ashes] and repeat : Son of a Bitch, come to me; Son of a Bitch, come to me; Son of a Bitch, come to me! I conjure you up from head to toe, part by part, joint by joint of your body until I reach your member, so that your nature will not develop with any other woman and so you will feel no pleasure until you come under my power. (My translation) (Anonymous, Conjuro del tabaco, 7-8).¹³

The love object is thus victimized by the power of the word, the ultimate goal being that of breaking his will in order to (dis)integrate him into the persona of the conjurer. Domination and submission of the loved or coveted one, at whatever cost, even if it implies (self)delusion, justify the means to the ends.

¹¹ When exercising her negative forces, the queen-goddess is associated with the 'onza,' a South American tiger considered to be the most powerful of all animals.

¹²One of the most popular and powerful conjurations is: "Con dos te miro, con cinco te ato, el corazón te quito y el alma te parto." ("With two eyes I look at you, with five [senses] I tie you down, your heart I take away, your soul I shatter." This conjuration was found in 1639 amidst the personal belongings of Juana Ana Pérez, a woman from Valencia, Spain, who was sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition for her witchcraft practices against a loved one. See Da Camara, 159.

¹³ "Este es el cuerpo de ese Hijo de Puerca. Satanás en voz [sic] creo." [Se dan tres golpes con la pierna izquierda donde se hará la cruz con la ceniza] y se dice: "Hijo de Puerca, venid; Hijo de Puerca, venid; Hijo de Puerca, venid. Yo te conjuro desde la cabeza hasta los pies, parte por parte de tu cuerpo, coyuntura por coyuntura hasta llegar a tu miembro para que tu naturaleza no desarrolle con ninguna otra mujer, ni sientas placer ninguno hasta que no vengas a mi poder." The word "nature" (naturaleza) refers interchangeably to male sperm and sexual potency.

Seemingly, it is desire what is desired and the loved being is no more than its tool (Barthes, 31).

The exaltation of desire, love, and eroticism in the cultic performances and rituals that take place in public and private altars is an exhilarating affirmation of autonomy and power enacted from a space of resistance to and liberation from moral norms imposed by the social and religious institutions of Venezuela. María Lionza has incited numerous legends, including one that refers to a particular coital position inspired by *La Reina*. The prayers to María Lionza are known by many as “bed heaters” and aphrodisiacs, and many illustrious Venezuelans periodically return to the state of Yaracuy in search of renovated physical and spiritual energies (Salazar Leidenz, 1985).¹⁴

IV. 2. v. Conclusions

The cult of María Lionza is a complex system of beliefs that cannot be reduced to the notion of contemporary cultic practices as developed by Weston LaBarre in the concept of crisis cult.¹⁵ Although diverse crises (personal, social, political, financial, etc.) are expressed in the cultic performances that take place in Sorte and elsewhere, the anthropological evidence of the myth and cult of María Lionza date back to the seventeenth century and have undergone several transformations since: this cult is really a cult to Venezuela’s cultural ancestors (Barreto, 1995).

The worshipping of the goddess and her spiritual courts transcends nationalistic ideals, remaining nonetheless connected to age-old aboriginal

¹⁴ Misael Salazar Leidenz, *Geografía erótica de Venezuela*. Salazar Leidenz assures that the current president of Venezuela, Rafael Caldera, is one among many illustrious people who pay frequent visits to Yaracuy and to the sacred Sorte Mountain.

¹⁵ The notion of “crisis cult,” as developed by LaBarre in the chapter on Shamans and Societies of *The Ghost Dance*, is not applicable to explain the dynamics between the priests or priestesses and the followers of María Lionza’s cult.

beliefs and rituals that continue to enrich the collective imaginary of the country.¹⁶ The cult in itself, however, began to be studied and researched systematically only from the Sixties on, particularly by anthropologists, and is presently sparking the interest of scholars from the fields of sociology, psychiatry, politics, psychology, medicine, etc., who are just beginning to understand the intricacies of the cult's structure. Artists and intellectuals, on the other hand, are inspired by the heterogeneity of the cult's choreography.

A relentless campaign to Christianize the pagan figure of María Lionza was initiated by the State and the Church during the 1950's. The response of the cult to the interventionist measure was simply to add to the sculpted image of the goddess a small crown, similar to the one that is placed on the saintly head of the Virgin of Coromoto, the patroness of Venezuela. This act of resistance to institutional intervention initiated the mythification and aesthetization of the figure of María Lionza by artists and intellectuals, and the ensuing expansion of her worship in the entire country (Barreto, 95). The attempt of the State and the Church to manipulate the people through the subjugation of the cult was effectively counteracted by the cult's manipulation of the official iconography.

The State and the Church overlooked the fact that one of the most salient characteristics of a syncretic religion is the eagerness with which it absorbs other figures of worship, regardless of their provenance. From the Fifties on, a refurbished Queen-Goddess reigns over a number of newly incorporated courts of spirits, which have increased at a considerable rate. Bolívar, Guaicaipuro, Negro Felipe or Gómez, and more recently, even President Kennedy, are just a few of the most prominent figures that became

¹⁶ For ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence of the myth and cult see Daisy Barreto, María Lionza, Mito e Historia, and "Perspectiva Histórica del mito y culto a María Lionza."

the epitome of official historical appropriation by the cult. Escorted by these illustrious individuals, the figure of María Lionza matured into a symbol of racial mixture, transcending historical dimensions. Likewise, the Goddess accepted the presence of Catholicism in her Celestial Court (*corte celestial*) which include several of the most popular saints in Venezuela (San Juan, San Benito, San Alejo, Santa Clara, etc.). The cult and the establishment, therefore, feed one another for the production of utterly contrasting ideologies that have survived in a paradoxical symbiosis through the years.

I have used the concepts of *aura* and *mana* to explain, from a Westernized perspective, the aureole surrounding institutionalized historical figures used (and “abused”) by the cult. The *aura* of unapproachability ascribed to historical figures by the hegemonies has undergone a transformation in the space opened by the cult; it has been exorcised of the intimidating weight of history, reducing an abysmal distance between object and subject and allowing for a more intimate, almost amorous relationship between the glorious spirits integrated into the cult and the followers of María Lionza. Thus, let us say, the transposition of Bolívar or Gómez, among others, from official history into this powerful magical-religious phenomenon should be seen as an instance of cult value and use value combined, working together towards the well-being of the *marialionceros*, and not to the advantage of the State or the Church.

The qualities inherent in the more inclusive Iranian concept of *maga* (magic wisdom, intellectual power, cosmic medicine powers, etc.) are useful to explain, again from an outsider’s perspective, the multifaceted nature of the Queen-Goddess and her link to earthbound forces. Unlike the concepts of *aura* and *mana*, which are helpful, within limitations, to explain the hieratic distance interposed between objects and subjects, the concept of *maga* can

more suitable be attached to the persona of María Lionza in order to describe the qualities that explain the intense bonding that opens up a privileged space, where *La Reina* and her followers interact in a personal manner. A wide range of feelings and passions are possible within this licentious dimension of the relationship. The compensation received (or perceived) by the followers from their goddess creates the possibility of restoring the individual and/or collective self-esteem in ways that are liberating, not alienating. In turn, the followers perform a virtual act of amorous embracing of the goddess. It is in this affectionate give and take that lies the magic wisdom surrounding María Lionza's cultic power.

The increasingly sensualized representation of María Lionza is in part a consequence of the aesthetization undertaken by artists and intellectuals during the Fifties, when the ideals of femininity, fertility, sexual powers, nature and the mastery of earthbound forces were condensed in a monumental sculpture of the goddess that became a national symbol.¹⁷ All the earthly attributes condensed in this sculpture are contained, fused, and emitted, with diverse degrees of intensity, in a ritualistic and pagan type of logic that works harshly against the grain of the religious, ethical, social and political *status quo*, and that permeates many of the cultural manifestations of the country.

The sacred and profane ritual performances described here in the form of recipes for love, domination and separation are just a few examples of a myriad of similar practices that put a tremendous weight on the fulfillment of love and the celebration of sexuality and eroticism, in all its forms, and that are an integral part of the life of women (and men) of both the popular sectors and the upper strata of society in Venezuela. The combination of natural

¹⁷ This sculpture is erected in the main artery of the capital city of Caracas. It depicts María Lionza as a fiercely voluptuous naked woman, proudly holding a pelvic bone in her raised hands, and astride a South American tapir that is stepping over the head of a large snake.

essences and oils, the props and the ritual discourse of conjurations have been transmitted from legendary formulae and secrets. As an observer/participant of a few cultic séances with rather heterogeneous groups of *marialionceros*,¹⁸ I was struck by the unwavering faith and unfaltering conviction that the cult followers ascribe to the sexual and erotic power of María Lionza.

The power dynamics of domination and submission that take place between State/Church and cult, between mighty historical figures and *marialionceros* and between common women and men, whose complexities I have only begun to describe here, are reflective of an idiosyncratic national construct of difficult access for the uninitiated. Critical-theoretical discourses become, in the specific case of the cult of María Lionza, helpless, mediatizing fictions that end up by invalidating, and mutilating its complexity. Any researcher who approaches this sort of object of study in an academic setting is faced with a serious problem: the ability to describe some hidden or occult parts of an esoteric reality and the inability to access the semantic matrix, the endometrium of that reality.

¹⁸ These groups included writers, biologists, and artists of the more privileged classes, as well as people from the lower strata of society.

Conclusion

This dissertation is the result of an effort to understand the separation between two kinds of knowledge: one is represented in the academic feminist discourses analyzed in Part One; the other is embodied in the non-academic experiential lifeworld of Latin American societies described in Part Two. I have selected paradigmatic authors who have made lasting interventions in the field of Latin American feminist literary/cultural criticism. However, I postulate that the alienating conditions in which both Castro Klarén and Guerra-Cunningham work result in a (self-)censorship which is conditioned by the academic order of discourse. Their works yield a feminist critical ideology which eschews those aspects of female experience that run against the grain of the feminist imperatives they are subjected to. Nonetheless, each author expresses this subjection in differing ways.

Sara Castro Klarén's critiques often owe a great deal to the theorists she refutes. Her analyses are characterized by a rhetorical construction which at times obscures the logic of her position. Moreover, Castro Klarén herself commits the errors for which she faults Gilbert and Gubar. For example, her construct of the indigenous *loca criolla*, (madwoman in the attic) does not escape the pitfall, the abstract and universalizing categorization, of the original Anglo-American construct she criticizes. Furthermore, she employs Foucault's notion of the subjugated knowledges, but only to apply it to Latin American canonic authors whose work does not necessarily "live down" to the Foucauldian concept. She reminds Latin American women that revolutionary potential lies in the writings that

remain at the margins, but then, in a canonizing impulse, she edits and introduces an anthology of Latin American women writers to the English-speaking world. Although this anthology is certainly the most comprehensive work on the subject to date, the introduction of the writings contained therein is articulated in such a way that differences are erased or minimized, and in some cases, exoticized, so as to provide a less rugged cultural transition. This design in turn makes those works more translatable and readable to the Anglo-American feminist constituency. In another context, but still relevant in explaining the canonizing move in question, Nelly Richard explains the dynamics that often characterizes the integration of the differences of the margins into the center:

The fact is, however, that no sooner are these differences -- sexual, political, racial, cultural-- posited and valued than they become subsumed into the meta-category of the "undifferentiated" which means that all singularities immediately become indistinguishable and interchangeable in a new, sophisticated economy of "sameness." The "other" [is integrated] back into a framework which absorbs all differences and contradictions. The centre, though claiming to be in disintegration, still operates as a centre: filing away any divergencies into a system of codes whose meanings, both semantically and territorially, it continues to administer by exclusive right. (Richard, 468)

Castro Klarén's drifting critical viewpoint of the concept otherness and of the notion of a "poetics for women," as well as her startling reversals from one critique to the next, are perhaps reflective of an unavowed discontent with or a veiled rebelliousness against a framework which has been formulated elsewhere and against the feminist norm to

which she is subjected. Critical hesitation may signal a challenge to or a lack of conformity with the established order.

Lucía Guerra-Cunningham's position regarding the established feminist order is much less opaque than Castro Klaren's, despite the former's apparent concurrence with some elements of so-called radical feminisms. Her provocative gesture in the disclaimer of the last paragraph of her article is all the more subversive and radical for what it says: a feminist discourse is, in her critical text, just a strategy to claim a space in the institutionalized centers. To my knowledge, she is, to date, the only Latin American literary/cultural critic and author who has dared spell-out so explicitly this manifestation of the order of feminist discourses. Guerra-Cunningham argues that her discourse is not a feminine one, calling our attention to the rejection of the feminine element --a male-oriented female construction-- still *de rigueur* in many feminist-oriented critical texts. Her short fiction instead provides an ideal space for feminine ethics to thrive. The stories examined in the second half of Chapter II have the potential to undermine, or at least threaten, even the most liberal feminist ethics and morality. Lucía Guerra does not shrink away from female images that evoke both horror and fascination, and more importantly, images that are not only projections of any writer or reader, or mere literary creations, but rather female images that pertain to the "real." These characters differ from the image of female sexuality and subjectivity defined and enthroned by radical feminist ethics.

The banning of the feminine, as a phallogocentric construction, not as the creative space proposed by French feminism, hinders the viability of feminist projects developed with Latin American women in mind. If structural transformations in the representation of different forms of

female subjectivity in literary/cultural criticism and fiction are to take place, they will be contingent not only on the practice of radical feminist theories, but also on the strategy of “speaking the feminine” not only the feminine notion contained in Kristeva's *semiotic*, Irigaray's *parler femme*, or Cixous's *jouissance*, but also in the notion of the feminine advanced by patriarchy from time immemorial, which is congealed in the realm of the imaginary and by extension, in the realm of the social. Prescriptions to set the patriarchal/androcentric system aside completely, in order to create a totally new system with women and female experiences as the measure, are suspicious. A feminist project that does not include and which does not problematize this latter notion of the “male-constructed feminine” will confront, head-on, the problem of repressed female subjectivities, which are structured and created in criticism and fiction to cater mainly to radical feminist ideologies. This tabooed notion of the feminine is contained in excess in the fiction of Lucía Guerra, a author and critic who, in our view, constitutes an original voice both in narrative and in criticism by Latin American women.

Keeping in mind that Latin America's gender imagery "can be seen to balance precariously between the imaginary and the naturalization, or essentialization, of the meanings of the imagined, [and that] it is the very fixation of an image as 'natural' which lends it its power," (Melhuus and Stolen, 1), Chapter III focuses on fixed male and female images that nurture a reciprocity of perspectives between the sexes. *Marianismo* and *Machismo* may be seen just as categories of socio-cultural analyses divorced from women's self-perception as *marianistas* or men as *machistas*. In lived reality, however, and despite some surface changes effected by modernity, both women and men are still being acculturated *en masse* into

these powerful, opposing, and dialectical currents. The male totemic figures, the Madonnas, and the *queridas* can still conform the triad that negotiates power in some Latin American psycho-social spheres. Power, however, is not being used in the strict Anglo-American feminist sense of economic independence, freedom of choice, equal rights, etc., or as a force that women lack and men monopolize. Neither am I suggesting a reversal of the *status quo*, men are powerless, women are powerful. I have rather attempted to relativize the very meaning of the concept and to include in this relativization, the effects that women's resistance, subordination, or complicity have on the totemic male power in Latin American contexts.

The feminine double standard and the strategies to access power through the manipulation (economic, sexual, emotional) of men in different socio-economic strata is the feminine behavior most easily observed in Latin American societies. Because they lack systems of legal and economic support, women live through networking and have become ingenious improvisers: they put the knowledge and conventions of their cultural contexts to "good" use. They have taken advantage of the aura of sanctity attributed to motherhood in the image of the Madonna, or of the glorification of female sexuality which allows them to negotiate power and have things their way. We have seen how Virgin Mary had to be devoiced of her sexuality in order to become a powerful mediator between god and humanity. However, we have also seen how women's sexuality may become not only the means of access to power but also a powerful tool of mediation between presidents, politicians, policemen, and other less prominent male figures and the rest of the urban, or rural populations in Latin American communities. This is, in many women's (and men's) view, a system that works.

Latin American feminist literary and cultural critiques, or Anglo-American feminist campaigns that disown, downplay, or do not grasp this very powerful cultural denominator, are self-defeating; their theorizing lacks empirical evidence. Latin American women are very hard workers. They achieve miracles with meager resources, often without any help at all. It is no small wonder that researchers from the United States and Canada often idealize these women. They have been able to ascertain the way in which they struggle against all odds and sometimes achieve, with insignificant resources, community goals that women in the so-called developed countries, ironically, do not accomplish even with all the resources they possess. A few most notorious examples are the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the leaders of neighborhood associations, or the healers (*materias, curanderas, hierbateras*) in the public markets or in the context of cults such as the one discussed in Chapter IV.

Many Anglo-American researchers en route to Latin American countries are perhaps beginning to question their expectations of empowering women in the popular sectors and have themselves been empowered by their experience in Latin America. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that despite the complaints and tensions between the sexes, and regardless of the disparaging of their men, women place their fairweather husbands or partners at the center of their lives, notwithstanding men's prolonged or intermittent absences, their alcoholism, their violence. The totemic male is expected to impregnate woman, provide them with sexual pleasure, represent her in the community, defend her against crime and against the rage of former lovers who return to stalk her, and provide her with means for survival for the extended family. Men, on the other hand, often live under the threat that

women are tying (*amarrando*) or bewitching (*embrujando*) them, and are wary of these female powers. Studies of social anthropology often identify these practices and beliefs as typical of the popular (less privileged) sectors of Latin American societies. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that these phenomena occur equally in the upper classes. Upper and middle class women, as well as politicians, and intellectuals, may not become celebrated *brujas*, *curanderas* or *hierbateras*, but they most surely consult these specialists on a regular basis and often will not make important decisions without their approval. One of the main differences between upper-class women and their popular sector counterparts in their use of these resources is that the former would rarely admit to the fact that they engage in practices which include, for example, "works" (*trabajos*) undertaken to snare and keep a man, as well as those to "break the will" of a female rival, as the recipes and conjurations presented in Chapter IV suggest.

North American and Canadian N.G.O. campaigns have provided invaluable material resources to women's non-governmental organizations in Latin America. They have contributed, among other things, to the creation of *casas de mujeres* (battered women's centers), and to the installation of clandestine abortion clinics; to the present date, abortion has never been legalized in any Latin American country. Nevertheless, feminist researchers usually undergo rough awakenings when they realize that power is an all-together different matter over there. The possibility of empowering women by Western feminist standards in that part of the world, entails nothing less than transposing the naturalized images attached to the symbolic plane, a goal that, so far, has been possible only in the realm of utopia.

Chapter IV aimed to show a small yet substantial sample of the many contemporary magical-religious rituals which demonstrate a persistent non-Cartesian mode of thinking, perceiving and representing reality in some countries of Latin America, and which invest women with a meaningful, albeit unorthodox form of power. Prayers, potions and conjurations used by women to subjugate and dominate men are fascinating and puzzling enough to warrant further investigation. The resonance of these practices in Latin America is recaptured, for instance, in two works that have crossed linguistic and cultural frontiers: Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate, and Isabel Allende's The House of the Spirits, both of which have had world-wide success. However, the magical-religious rituals presented here, and those included in many popular pamphlets, are less publicized than those portrayed in Esquivel and Allende's works. They are at once fierce and gentle, prosaic and poetic, morbid and erotic and they appear to have powerful and far-reaching psychological and social implications across class lines. The preponderance that such ancient practices have in contemporary Latin America has been overlooked by feminist literary and cultural critics.

The cult of María Lionza has been selected for discussion for important reasons: first, the potentially liberating space it offers for women as popular healers and spiritual guides (read: therapists); second, the blending of nationalism and the female divine (María Lionza shares the stage, and overshadows, none other than the almighty figure of the Liberator, Simón Bolívar); and third, her cult integrates two of the most salient and contradictory aspects of the female divine, woman as Witch and woman as Goddess. The first aspect would require the examination of texts by the New Spain chroniclers Motolinía, c.1530-1540, or Sahagún, 1559-

1569, who dealt with women's "occult powers" dating back to pre-colonial times. An analysis of these writings would show the workings of discourse as the chroniclers attempted to isolate this aspect of women's alterity. I anticipate that a parallel could be drawn between these chronicles and the critical works analyzed in Chapter II. Regardless of their distance in time, Colonial and Contemporary authors have been subjected to the rigors of a *doxa*, the former to that of Catholic faith, the latter to that of feminist ideology.

For an exploration of the aspect of woman as Goddess, it would be interesting to establish a comparison between the complex syncretic cult of María Lionza and one of the many neo-Pagan, New Age cults that associate witchcraft to Goddess religions in Canada or the United States. These cults appeal to the idea of "the goddess within each woman" and encourage the growth of women's spirituality as a way out of patriarchal oppression. However, as opposed to the pagan pre-Hispanic female deities, who are capable of doing good as well as evil with equal force, the neo-Pagan deities being revived by the feminist spiritual movement in North America are saccharine deities. They reflect the tendency of some feminisms towards representing only the good side of female subjectivities. Moreover, their cultic rituals often take place in a purified, death-fearing atmosphere where politically correct language is encouraged, veganism preferred, and no wine permitted out of consideration for recovering alcoholics.

The saccharine goddesses and the pristine and aseptic environments of these cults have ideological implications that require further investigation. For example, it would be interesting to inquire into the reasons why, in the syncretic Goddess cults widespread in Latin America, there appears to be an ethics of scandalous pleasure, which opposes the

morality of the scandal of pleasure maintained in the Manichaeic spaces opened by the Westernized neo-Pagan cults described above. On the other hand, a comparative study of cultic practices would assess the extent to which feminists from core countries resort to the pre-Hispanic obscure rituals and pagan mythologies that Latin American feminist critics working in those countries have disowned. A historical and comparative approach on the subject of the Female Divine in contemporary feminist ideologies will enable a better comprehension and exposure of the pendular movements of history, the trappings of ideology, and the power dynamics involved in the processes of colonization and neo-colonization, so-called post-colonial thought.

In the already too vast field of Latin American feminist literary/cultural criticism, one can find many authors who have fallen prey to ideological trappings. However, it should be reiterated that both Lucía Guerra, and especially, Sara Castro Klarén constitute paradigmatic examples of an adherence to the radical feminist tenets, albeit in the differing ways discussed earlier. Their critiques are consummate examples of the complex relation that takes place between the critic, her object of study, and the institutional discourses that materialize this object. In their analysis of literary works by women writers who transgress in serious ways the dominant feminist ethics, feminist literary critics tend to tame and appease the roughness of the fiction they interpret. These insurgent works of fiction need to live up to the feminist canon, or simply be challenged or disqualified when they subvert it.

Although I have made an effort to place myself at the margins of the works discussed here, I am well aware that my own critique of these works assumes a particular interpretive position, one that highlights another of the

many sides that both complicate and integrate the international debate on female subjectivities. It should also be recognized that I am speaking of and about an extreme diversity of women as a group and that some of the gross generalizations attempted in this investigation are based more on long years of detailed empirical observation and cultural code-switching than on descriptive sociological or ethnographic works. This mode of approaching an object of study emerges from the widespread belief, attributed, among others, to Mark Twain, that there are three ways of withholding the truth: one is plain lying, the other is slandering, and yet another is the science of statistics. Following this unorthodox approach, some of my assumptions are based on gossip, rumors, jokes, anecdotes, proverbs, conversations, prayers, conjurations, *séances*, tongue-twisters, and on the lyrics of the strident songs that animate the public taxis and buses of the Latin American capitals. I posit that these low brow cultural forms come in handy in a continent where statistics are often unreliable, if they are available at all.

My analyses conclude that the lack of representation of tabooed feminine elements in critical texts perpetuates the problem of presenting female self-censored subjectivities. Perhaps the exploration or deeper problematization of the female social practices and typologies discussed in chapters III and IV, at the conscious level of critical texts like those analyzed in chapters I and II, could be part of a feminist critical project more in tune with Latin American contexts. This exploration would produce, at the institutional levels, a feminist theory that could perhaps avoid being so divorced from the experiential lifeworld.

The observations made about the male and female cultures of Latin America may find echoes in many others, including those of developed countries, since they do not claim to be unique to that part of the so-called

Third-World. This dissertation has attempted to avoid falling into the dichotomizing position of privileging the authentic over the imported, the peripheral over the central, or the traditional over the new. Rather, my emphasis is placed on an analysis of the whimsical and capricious functioning of discourses in the production of knowledge within the institution, as well as on the role of the latter in the perpetuation not only of the established modes of inscribing patriarchy, but especially, in those of reproducing a feminist hegemonic thought.

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