

"Don't interrupt me": The Gender Essay as Conversation and Countercanon

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Like the Sanyasis-Nirvanis of the Vedas, who taught in a whisper in the crypts of the temples plegarias y evocations which were never written down, woman, silent and resigned, crossed the frontiers of centuries repeating, with frightened secrecy, the magic words: freedom, justice.

Victoria Ocampo,
Woman and her Expression, 1936 (p. 246)

The two students walked in looking downcast. They had just come, they reported, from yet another literature course whose syllabus included no women writers. This time it was a course on the Latin American essay. There were, the professor had explained, no women essayists of sufficient caliber to merit inclusion in the course. "Who says?" they asked, "and how do we know it's true?"

Most literary scholars and teachers have been affected in some

way by the *toma de conciencia* ('taking of consciousness') that has taken place in literary studies regarding processes of canonization. Even the most conservative scholars find they must now defend the proposition they once could take for granted: that canons consist of intrinsically great works that have risen to the top by virtue of their greatness, the cream on the milk. This 'naturalized' concept of canons has been thoroughly undermined by literary historians on empirical grounds. Two of their arguments have been particularly forceful: first, they have demonstrated that canons, 'eternal' as they may seem in a given historical moment, are anything but stable over time, that today's masterpiece was yesterday's doggerel, and probably tomorrow's too. Second, critical scholars have explored the ways canons and canonization processes are socially determined, along lines that correspond to lines of social hierarchy. (Even many traditionalists concede this point. Many agree that canons *are* built around the interests and ideologies of ruling classes, genders, and races, and simply argue that these are ideologies which they, as traditionalists, subscribe to.)

Canon-busters, that is, scholars who seek to open processes of canonization to historical scrutiny, often find it useful to distinguish two dimensions of their inquiry: the exposure of canons as *structures of exclusion* and as *structures of value*. The first (the easy one) involves finding works which meet the criteria for inclusion in the canon, but which have been excluded for 'illegitimate' (nonliterary) reasons. This is the case of, say, texts denied canonization because their author is a woman. Such an argument could be made for the fiction of Juana Manuela Gorriti, for example, or most of the poetry of Gabriela Mistral. Often, as in the case of Gorriti and Mistral, the excluded writings were widely read in the author's own time, only to be left behind by androcentric literary historians committed, consciously or otherwise, to maintaining male governance over culture and the literary.

The second inquiry, into canons as structures of value, is more difficult. This is the project of showing that the criteria used to determine literary value are themselves constituted in ways that reflect structures of hegemony in the society. This involves questioning the process through which 'legitimate' literary inclusions and exclusions are made. Texts by members of subordinated or marginal social groups, the argument goes, will always appear, as the professor said, "to lack sufficient caliber to merit inclusion", if they are read through the codes of interpretation and value that produced the exclusionist canon in the first place. Canons, from this perspective, are overwhelmingly self-confirming structures, reproducing themselves through *practices of reading*, in the most basic aspects of literary experience, such as horizon of expectation, genre, subject matter, language or point of view. Readers trained in/on canonical texts, it follows, are by definition unequipped to

evaluate texts by subordinated or excluded groups. They will invariably misread such material, dislike it, dismiss it as illegible or (more likely) trivial in content and form. To evaluate noncanonical writing, this argument goes, you must first learn to read it. To judge it on the basis of *established* literary norms is by definition to pre-judge it, and reproduce the structure of exclusion that marginalized it in the first place. Canons are not just lists of books, but value machines that generate their own truth.

Just as access to literacy, to institutions of writing, and to the circuits of print culture have been socially restricted, so has access to canonicity and the power to canonize. The latter power has rested above all with the academy, traditionally one of the most exclusionary institutions of all. No one disputes that the wave of critical and relativistic thinking about canonization in the 1970s and 80s was itself a result of the steady democratization of universities in the industrial countries after World War II. The transnational crisis of 1968 began, as we all recall, in student movements that initially rallied around the critique of canonical structures of knowledge in the academy. No one disputes the pivotal role played by feminism in opening up this inquiry, and upholding it against harsh and relentless attack.

It would be hard to find a literary corpus more androcentrically constituted than the Latin American essay. Its anthologies (those great mirrors of canonicity) are veritable monuments to male intellectuality, their tables of contents populated by a dozen or so familiar, and worthy, names: Bello, Echeverría, Sarmiento, Montalvo, González Prada, Hostos, Martí, Rodó, Henríquez Ureña, Vasconcelos, Mariátegui, Martínez Estrada, Arciniegas, Reyes, Picón-Salas, Zea, Paz, Anderson Imbert. A brief survey of essay anthologies and criticism in my university library (Skirius 1981, Earle et al. 1973, Vitier 1945, Rey 1985, Ripoll 1966, Urrello 1966, Guillén 1971, Foster 1983) revealed few exceptions to the male monopoly: Chilean Gabriela Mistral, included among 26 authors in an anthology of 20th century essays (Skirius, 1981), and Puerto Rican Concha Meléndez, author of the shortest excerpt in an anthology of contemporary essays (Guillén 1971). A comprehensive history of the Latin American essay (Earle et al.) included brief mentions of Meléndez, her compatriot Margot Arce, and Argentinian Victoria Ocampo. In an innovative and illuminating critical study of the essay that appeared in 1983, North American critic David William Foster raised the question of women's essayistic practice in a brief final chapter on Victoria Ocampo's *Testimonios*, which are most conspicuously characterized, he argues by the insignificance of their subject matter. Foster attempts to argue for reading strategies that would recover a serious intent for the *Testimonios*, yet his analysis remains compatible with the traditional view of women as outside the truly intellectual. One is struck, more-

over, that this critic chose to consider Ocampo's *Testimonios*. Ocampo after all wrote many pages of what are unambiguously essays. Why, one wonders, have they not been candidates for critical studies, course syllabi, or anthologies of the genre? In one of those essays, a three part work titled *La mujer y su expresión* ('Woman and Her Expression,' 1936) Ocampo offers a possible diagnosis for her own exclusion. "I believe," she wrote,

that for centuries all conversation between men and women, as soon as they enter on a certain terrain, begins with a 'Don't interrupt me' on the part of the man. Until now, the monologue seems to have been his preferred form of expression. (Conversation among men is simply this same monologue in dialogue form.) (p.13)

Men, she concludes, "do not feel, or feel only very weakly" the need for dialogue with women ("that other being similar and yet different"):

In the best of cases, he has no taste for interruptions. In the worst case, he forbids them. Hence man is content to talk with himself, and it matters little to him whether anyone listens. As for him listening to anyone else, it scarcely occurs to him. (p.13)

Applying Ocampo's terms, one could say that literary history has construed the essay as one of those male monologues which women have been either discouraged or prevented from interrupting. Ocampo offers a grim account of women's response to the centuries of 'Don't interrupt me.' Women, she says, have "resigned themselves, for the most part, to repeating crumbs (*migajas*) of the masculine monologue, sometimes concealing among them some seeds of her own sowing (*algo de su cosecha*)" (p.13). In what follows, I propose to offer a few observations about the male monologue that has been canonized as the Latin American essay, followed by some remarks suggesting that women's participation in the genre has perhaps been livelier and more coherent than Ocampo saw it – perhaps she had more foremothers than she knew.

The criollo identity essay, that 'centaur of genres'

Let me begin with a generalization borne out by those anthologies and critical studies I mentioned earlier. What has formed the back-

bone of 'the Latin American essay' as a canon has been a particular strand of intellectual inquiry, which I will call the *criollo identity essay*. (*Criollo* here is used in its Spanish meaning, denoting the class of Spanish Americans who identify themselves as of European descent, and who after independence composed the ruling elites of most Spanish American countries.) I propose this label 'criollo identity essay' to refer to a series of texts written over the past 180 or so years by criollo (i.e. elite Euro-american) men, whose topic is the nature of criollo identity and culture, particularly in relation to Europe and North America. The textual series reflects an ongoing problematic. How, the identity essay asks, are criollo identity and culture to be defined and legitimated in the post-independence era? How might criollo hegemony represent itself to itself? What is, or should be, its social and cultural project? Most students of Latin American literature can readily list many members of this essay canon. It is sometimes seen as beginning with Bolívar's Jamaica letter or the prologue to Bello's *Grammar*; its first undeniable monument is Sarmiento's *Facundo*, followed by Martí's *Nuestra América* ('Our America'), Rodó's *Ariel*, Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* ('The Cosmic Race'), Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* ('Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality'), Henríquez Ureña's *Seis ensayos en busca de nuestra expresión* ('Six Essays in Search of Our Expression'), Paz's *Laberinto de la soledad* ('Labyrinth of Solitude'), Retamar's *Calibán*. There are of course many other candidates for this list.

Now obviously the texts enumerated above differ a good deal among each other. Some were written as books, some as polemics, some as journalism; some originated as speeches delivered in public (not to mention Bolívar's letters or Bello's Prologue). Some pose the identity issue at a national level, others from a continental or hemispheric perspective. Whatever the differences, it seems a matter of empirical observation that the criollo identity essay was (as they say in Hollywood westerns) no place for a woman. (Skiriús (1973:9 and passim) poetically titles it 'that centaur of genres.') The explanation is no mystery. By definition, women are one of the populations that the criollo identity essay undertook to exclude from full social identity. The speaking subject of that canon, in other words, is male (and white) in a directed, exclusionary way. It is the figure of the *pensador*, the thinker, proprietor and producer of *el pensamiento*, from which women were by their nature excluded. As culture, citizenship and criollo hegemony were ongoingly mapped and remapped by Latin American intellectuals, men (elite, Euroamerican men, in fact) privileged themselves as the full bearers of culture, citizenship and hegemony. The exclusion of women from this sphere of power was an intrinsic part of the project. Women were to be disempowered from speaking *as citizens for all citizens*.

Needless to say, this discursive situation reflected women's legal and juridical status under nineteenth century republicanism. Historians have described the processes by which women (along with many other sectors of society) were denied full citizenship in the American republics, denied such powers as property rights, voting rights, reproductive rights, education, access to public office (even to public speech!) and equality under the law. Fortunately, women's access to literacy, print culture and the public sphere were established in principle *before* the republican era; they could not be silenced completely. If they were to speak and be heard, however, they were to speak *as women*. And that, as I shall discuss below, is what they did.

Women intellectuals and the 'gender essay'

To the extent that the criollo identity essay IS 'the Latin American essay,' there indeed will be no women essayists in the canon: this is how canons ongoingly reproduce their own truth. It is equally a matter of observation, however, that women intellectuals continually refused to heed the reverberations of what Ocampo called the 'Don't interrupt me.' Right from the beginning, within their restricted access to education and to print, criolla (Euroamerican women) writers sought to assert themselves as social subjects, as agents of history, and as *pensadoras*. In fact one can readily identify a women's countercanon to the criollo identity project. Running parallel to the male-based identity essay, criolla intellectuals generated a tradition which could accurately be called the *gender essay*. As a label, I use this term to denote a series of texts written over the past 180 years by Latin American women, whose topic is the status and reality of women in society. It is a contestatory literature that aims, using Ocampo's terms once again, to interrupt the male monologue, or at least challenge its claim to a monopoly on culture, history, and intellectual authority. As with the men's identity essay, the full corpus of women's writing on gender would comprise hundreds of texts and thousands of pages. A few examples by some better known women writers include Gertrúdis Gómez de Avellaneda's "La mujer" ('On women,' 1860), Juana Manso's "Emancipación moral de la mujer" ('Moral Emancipation of Women,' 1858), Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's "Influencia de la mujer en la civilización moderna" ('Influence of Woman on Modern Civilization,' 1874), Clorinda Matto de Turner's "Las obreras del pensamiento en América Latina" ('The Workers of Thought in Latin America', 1895), Soledad Acosta de Samper's *La mujer en la sociedad moderna* ('Woman in Modern Society', 1895), Alicia Moreau de Justo's *El feminismo y la evolución social* ('Feminism and Social Evolution,' 1911) and *Socialismo y la mujer* ('Socia-

lism and women,' 1946), Amanda Labarca Hubertson's *Adónde va la mujer?* ('Where are Women Going?', 1934), Teresa de la Parra's *Influencia de la mujer en la formación del alma americana* ('The Influence of Women on the Formation of the American Soul,' 1930/1961), Victoria Ocampo's *La mujer y su expresión* ('Woman and her expression', 1936), Magda Portal's *Hacia la mujer nueva* ('Towards the New Woman,' 1933), Rosario Castellanos' *Sobre cultura femenina* ('On Women's Culture', 1950) and *Mujer que sabe latín* ('Woman who Knowes Latin,' 1973). The above catalogue is emphatically NOT proposed as a potential canon, but only as an index of the large, continuous and unexamined body of essayistic production by women around the question of gender.

Though it does not always say so outright, the gender essay contests the disenfranchisement of women implied by the criollo identity essay, and indeed by all the official institutions of politics and culture in modern state societies. Historically, it can be read as the women's side of an ongoing negotiation in Latin America as to what women's social and political entitlements are and ought to be in the post-independence era. Ideologically, its discussions of womanhood are eclectic, operating both within and against patriarchal gender ideologies. Like the criollo identity essay, the gender essay continues to be a productive genre today. Alongside the outpouring of scholarly writings on women, texts like Julieta Kirkwood's *Ser política en Chile* ('To be a Political Woman in Chile,' 1986) and Heleieth Saffiotti's *A Mulher na sociedade de classes* ('Women in Class Society,' 1969) have their roots in the tradition of public discourse I am trying to identify here.

I described the gender essay as running parallel to the identity essay in Latin American letters. Both are associated with the figure of the public intellectual who writes fiction and poetry and also engages actively in journalism and public affairs. Often, as with the male tradition, gender essays began as public oratory. One of the many instances is Matto de Turner's "Workers of Thought," originally delivered at the Academy of Buenos Aires to a huge and affectionate public there to welcome her following her exile from Peru in 1895. Teresa de la Parra's "Influence of Women on the Formation of the American Soul" originated as a series of acclaimed public lectures she delivered in Bogotá in 1930. There was Amanda Labarca's address on women to the UN General Assembly in 1946. And of course there are the radio talks by Ocampo, where she sounds much less the elitist than she is usually made out to be.

Obviously the parallels between the criollo identity essay and the criolla gender essay does not mean the two can be read or analyzed in the same way. Reading habits for the gender essay have not been widely developed among scholars of Latin American literature and intellectual

history. Indeed the most basic kind of scholarly mapping has yet to be performed on this body of texts. One or two generalizations can be risked at this point, however. To begin with, as the titles above suggest, the gender essay typically draws very little on the categories of the *national*, at least until the post World War II period. Though overwhelmingly concerned with defining women's citizenship, its writers tend not to speak either *to* or *as* subjects of particular nations. They are more likely to be concerned with the status of women in modern nation-states in general. Secondly, among the materials I have examined, at least two conspicuously different generic models seem to be at work in the gender essay. On the one hand, many of these texts take the form of a *historical catalogue*, in which the writer enumerates examples of women who have made significant contributions to society and history. Analytical commentary on woman's social and existential condition is interspersed among the vignettes. Matto de Turner's "Workers of Thought..." takes this form, enumerating a panorama of women creative writers of her day. Acosta de Samper's *Woman in Modern Society* (1895) is an astonishing book-length instance, cataloguing the contributions of dozens of women revolutionaries, charity workers, missionaries, moral thinkers, doctors, politicians, artists, writers and educators throughout Europe and the Americas, from the French Revolution to her present. The contemporary vitality of the historical catalogue is attested by such recent encyclopedic volumes as Lydia Sosa de Newton's *Las argentinas ayer y hoy* ('Argentine Women Yesterday and Today,' 1967) or Angeles Mendieta Alatorre's *La mujer en la revolución mexicana* ('Women and the Mexican Revolution,' 1961).

At times the historical catalogue aims simply to assert the presence and participation of women in history, culture, and public life. Often, in the celebration of *mujeres ilustres* ('illustrious women') it provides little more than a distaff version of criollo class privilege. This is perhaps a literature more of fact than of ideas, yet its task must not be underestimated. Under the aegis of positivism, women's subordination is often by what are claimed to be objective observations about their 'natural' capacities and limitations. Obviously it has been essential to combat such ideologies with empirical evidence of what women in fact have done on the social stage. At the level of the social imaginary, the historical catalogue also insists on the reality of women as *agents* of history, a role denied them by official historiography. Within the hegemony of positivist thought, these essays often make the argument for women as agents of progress or human evolution, rather than as regressive elements that need to be patronizingly brought up to par. In what is one of the richest instances of this genre, Teresa de la Parra's "Influence of Woman on the Formation of the American Soul" (1930) combines the historical catalogue with a profound meditation on the process of reco-

vering submerged histories through fact and imagination.

From a feminist perspective, the vitality of the historical catalogue in contemporary writing is scarcely a cause for unambiguous rejoicing. Historical catalogues of women's achievements are still being produced because the basic gesture they make is still necessary. In the face of overwhelming androcentrism in the official institutions of knowledge, it is still necessary to assert over and over again, the simple fact of women's social agency and their capacity for purposeful activity.

A second discursive practice within the gender essay is the *analytical commentary* on the spiritual and social condition of women. Here women writers challenge men on the intellectual terrain that has always been considered the domain of the essay, the terrain of *pensamiento* ('thought'). Among the texts I have mentioned, Gómez de Avellaneda's gender essays exemplify this mode, as do those of Manso, Moreau de Justo, Labarca, Portal, Ocampo and Castellanos. Rather than seeking to reproduce male *pensamiento*, however, the analytical gender essay often proposes alternative forms of intellectuality that challenge the male prerogative to define what counts as thought. Gómez de Avellaneda's tripartite essay on "La mujer" supplies an interesting nineteenth century example of this intervention. Here the main project apparently is to strategically construct an alternative epistemological foundation from which to refute both the supremacy of secular rationality and the relegation of women to maternity. She opens her essay by distinguishing herself from "an elegant Spanish publicist" who has authored a recent volume on "the history of the fair sex." "The idea does not enter our mind," she asserts,

to accompany him over the vast terrain of his philosophical exploration, nor to lend him new and unknown data to enrich and support his theories. (p.285)

Rather, she says, she will begin with the subject of *sentiment*, an area in which, she argues, the supremacy of women remains unchallenged. To clear a space for her own authority, she admits certain forms of male superiority – but only provisionally:

We concede without the slightest reluctance, that men received from nature a superiority in physical strength; we will not even dispute in the space of this brief article the intellectual superiority which he so immodestly bestows on himself. The conviction suffices us, and we say so sincerely, that no one can in good faith deny our sex the supremacy in ... the immense sphere of sentiment. (ibid.)

Lest her readers devalue sentiment, Avellaneda immediately insists that lofty sentiments are the key to *all* great souls, particularly the capacity for sacrifice, which women possess most fully. In an obvious response to the secular rationalism that underwrote male intellectuality, she goes on to anchor women's social and intellectual authority in two entirely different sites: the Bible and the body. The pain of childbirth establishes the divine right of woman as "queen ... of the vast dominions of sentiment" (287). The monarchic vocabulary here challenges the republican values that disenfranchise women. Men, Avellaneda asserts, corrupt the divine right of women: only by reproducing *on her own* could Mary produce a divine child, in contrast with Eve, whose relations with Adam produced "descendencia corrompida" ('corrupt descendants'). The "bloody pages of religious heroism," Avellaneda argues, readily dispel any notion of women as weak or unequipped to participate in public affairs. She returns to the Bible and offers what today would be called a feminist reading of the story of Christ. Through textual commentary she presents a dialectic, juxtaposing male obtuseness with female wisdom. While Jesus moves around Judea performing miracles and converting the poor, she observes:

The doctors of the law pursue and accuse him of disturbing public order.

The ignorant women follow him, blessing the womb that conceived him.

The Pharisee who receives him does not offer him water for the required ablutions.

The sinful woman arrives to wash his feet with her tears.

(p. 288)

The juxtapositions go on. Pilate orders Jesus beaten; Pilate's wife, "disturbed by mysterious presentiments," sends messengers begging for his life. The chosen (male) disciples disappear (all but one) at the crucifixion, while three women remain to become the privileged witnesses of the resurrection.

It is worth underscoring here that Avellaneda's tool for legitimating woman's social and epistemological authority is her literary power as a reader and interpreter of texts, in this case the Bible. The high point of her argument is a purely textual observation (note again the monarchic image):

Woman! here is your son says the Redeemer to Mary, symbolizing all men in Saint John. Note it well: he does not call her his mother, because the Queen of the martyrs does

not represent simply the august Mother of the Messiah; she represents woman – the rehabilitated woman, the sanctified woman, woman the co-redeemer, whose great heart can contain the maternity the universe. (p.290)

Though the point is easily lost on contemporary readers, Avellaneda's argument is a radical one in the context of dominant views of women and citizenship in her time. Her reading insists on an absolute separation of *womanhood* from *motherhood*. The former, she insists, must be privileged over the latter – the Bible itself says so. Implicit is an aggressive repudiation of republicanism's highly successful program of defining women's social value solely in terms of maternity.

Part Two of the essay takes the challenge a step further, addressing the question of whether there are any grounds for considering women weaker than men, and whether women's superiority in matters of the heart necessarily implies their inferiority in matters of intelligence and character. Eventually, Gómez de Avellaneda openly lays claim to the domain of *pensamiento* ('thought');

Not only are we disposed to declare, with Pascal, that great thought is born from the heart, but we are struck by the idea that the most glorious deeds ... have always been the work of sentiment. (p.293)

This argument provides the basis for Part Three which arrives at the heart of the matter, the capacity of women "to govern peoples and administer public interests." Avellaneda's interest is not, and never was, to establish an alternative sphere of action for women; what she seeks are alternative points of entry into spheres of over which action men were illegitimately claiming a monopoly – such as the Spanish Royal Academy, from which she was excluded solely on the basis of her gender.

Some seventy years later, in *Woman and her Expression* (1936), Victoria Ocampo likewise begins by evoking and enacting a gender-conscious female intellectuality distinct from the male tradition. Unlike Avellaneda, however, Ocampo seizes possession of the key term *pensamiento* right from the first sentence. "Lo primero que *pienso* al hablaros," (emphasis mine) she begins ('The first thing I *think*' on addressing you):

is that your voice and mine are conquering my great enemy, the Atlantic ... I have always seen the Atlantic as a symbol of distance. It has always separated me from beloved people and things. If it was not Europe, then it was America that I was missing. (p.9)

When she returned from the United States via the Panama Canal, she “gave thanks to heaven” that the long separation imposed by the Pacific had also been “defeated.”

In complete contrast with the Americanist and, in this period, frequently nationalist identifications of the identity essay, Ocampo poses herself as a resolutely global subject for whom the mediation of distance is a primary task. Lest anyone think she is speaking only of geographical and not social distance, Ocampo’s oceanic image leads into an anecdote about a transatlantic phone call she overhears in Berlin. An Argentine businessman calling his wife in Buenos Aires begins the conversation with the phrase “No me interrumpas” (‘Don’t interrupt me’). This anecdote leads into the discussion of male monologue quoted above. Ocampo’s female *pensadora* (‘thinker’), on the other hand, knows the world through dialogue and mediation. “Interrupt me,” she says to her listeners. “This monologue does not please me. It is to you I wish to speak, not to myself” (p.12). She poses women’s expression as a struggle first and foremost against the enforced male monologue, and against women’s conditioning to “offer herself as a holocaust.” Nowadays, says Ocampo, the woman on the other end of the phone call is daring to say:

This men’s monologue does not relieve me either from my sufferings or from my thoughts. Why resign myself to repeating it? I have something else to say. Other sentiments, other pains have torn my life, other joys have illuminated it for centuries. (p.14)

Like Avellaneda (and de la Parra), Ocampo’s preamble leads into a three part essay, the first on women’s subjectivity, the second on maternity and social reproduction, and the third on public and national life.

As a tradition and a praxis, the gender essay is inextricable from the vast journalistic literature on women and the gender system that has formed a conspicuous and continuous aspect of Latin American public discourse throughout its history. Few themes have a more continuous presence across the vast range of Latin American periodical literature. For many women writers, from Clorinda Matto de Turner, Delmira Agustini to contemporary novelist Isabel Allende, short journalistic pieces on women were their point of entry into print; for many, from Juana Manso and Juana Manuela Gorriti, to Marta Brunet, Alfonsina Storni, and Rosario Castellanos, such writing was an ongoing source of income and a way to maintain a public presence in print. Rosario Castellanos’ noted *Mujer que sabe latín* (‘Woman Who Knows Latin’) is a compilation of such journalistic articles; so is Amanda Labarca’s 1946

Feminismo Contemporáneo ('Contemporary Feminism'). (I will be discussing men's contribution to this literature below.)

Contextualizing countercanons

As with any effort to read marginalized writing 'into' a discursive field monopolized by a canon, there is a strong momentum to read the gender essay strictly *as a response* to male intellectual authority in general, and to the criollo identity essay in particular. I would like to suggest, however, that such a move should not monopolize the interpretation. Moreover, such a move is justified only *if it runs both ways*. The criollo identity essay, that is, must also be read *as a response* to the demands of women (and other marginalized groups) for full inclusion in society. This may seem a radical notion, and perhaps it is. It requires reading the claims of the criollo essayists not as *sui generis* expressions of a particular imagination, but as *contested* claims arising out of a profound and ongoing legitimation crisis. "Do I really have to think about women when I read the Jamaica letter, *Ariel*, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*?" the reader asks. Yes! You do! You have to (learn to) think about Bolívar's letters in the context of the ones Manuela Saenz wrote, where she assumed a political and historical authority that were later denied her. You have to demand that Rodó's *Ariel* and Retamar's *Calibán* explain themselves to Miranda and to Sycorax. You have to think of the problem Magda Portal and Alicia Moreau posed for Mariátegui. You have to ask Paz what he was afraid of when he reduced Mexican women to the role of La Chingada, and what Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos have had to say about that. Hegemonic writing, so the argument goes, must be seen as constituting itself in response to the counterhegemonic claims of those it subordinates, just as counterhegemonic writing must be read in relation to hegemony. The difference is that the hegemonic writers do not always have to name their others (in this case, women) in order to constitute a discourse, whereas subalterns usually must do so in order to challenge the institutions of knowledge, often on their own terms.

Three adjustments are required to prevent the argument here from being excessively reductive. First, the two categories I proposed at the beginning, the gender essay and *criollo* identity essay, obviously do not begin to exhaust the essayistic production of either sex. Both men and women in Latin America have written about everything under the sun. This fact is much better known about men than about women, however. As women are read back into the literary and intellectual histories which have elided them, their overall intellectual production

must be read, sifted, and thought about.

Second, though women are absent from the canon of the criollo identity essay, it would be a complete mistake to say that women writers never wrote on the criollo identity question or never undertook to speak for the social whole. They did, though they were rarely canonized as legitimate interlocutors on such matters. Where but in the literature of identity are we to put Gorriti's *Panoramas of life* (1876) or Matto de Turner's *Four Lectures on South America* (1985/1909)? Or Mistral's *Messages: Telling about Chile* (1957)? Or Sosa de Newton's biographical essays on the generals of the independence wars? Or short pieces like Marta Brunet's article "Americanismo también es obra femenina" ('Americanism is also the work of women') in *El Repertorio Americano* in 1939?

In addition to their work on the identity question there exists of course an enormous and largely unexamined corpus of social and civic writing by women in Latin America. History, education, religion, and morality were all areas of general social inquiry on which women intellectuals regularly wrote. In the nineteenth century, in addition to her articles on women, Peruvian Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera wrote book length studies on Cuban independence and on *The Influence of the Arts on the Moral and Material Progress of Peoples*. Her compatriot Clorinda Matto de Turner wrote a collection of *Pencil Sketches of Illustrious Americans*. In addition to her essay on "The liberties, rights and duties of women," Puerto Rican socialist Luisa Capetillo wrote books on *Humanity in the Future* (1910) and *The Influence of Modern Ideas* (1916). Magda Portal wrote essays on "Latin America in the face of Imperialism" and "In Defense of the Mexican Revolution" (1931). The list is endless, and so far little read. Women writers were also prolific in the genre of civic poetry ('poesia civil'), while their autobiographical works, from Gorriti's *Peregrinaciones de una alma triste* ('Wanderings of a Sad Soul,' 1876), to Eva Perón's *La razón de mi vida* ('My Reason for Living,' 1951) often offer decidedly alternative visions of national reality and the national good.

The third corollary is that men did, of course, write essays about women and about feminism. In fact they did so endlessly, perhaps obsessively. They had to! In the face of women's activism, their sheer numbers, and the manifest contradictions between democracy and gender inequality, an intense, ongoing propaganda effort was required to uphold women's subordination and to control their place in the social imaginary. This was particularly so during the 1920s and 30s when the level of participation in all manner of women's organizations escalated enormously, and women's political activity began to focus on the demand for suffrage. During these decades, published writing by men about women became prolific. A few male intellectuals more commit-

ted to democracy than to their gender privilege wrote in support of women's equality and emancipation. It remains to be determined what male writings would fall into the category of the gender essay as I have specifically it. While Hostos' "Scientific Education of Women" (1873) is the only essay on women that has entered the essay canon, scholars have now begun to attend to the writings of Sarmiento and Echeverría on women (Garrels 1989), the gender manifesto that is Mármol's essay on Manuela Rosas (Masiello 1992), Gonzalez Prada on "El problema de la mujer," (Kristal 1987), Vaz Ferreira *Sobre feminismo* (Moraña, s.d.) and others. In three recent books examining debates on gender in Colombia (Jaramillo et al. 1991), Argentina (Carlson 1987) and Chile (Santa Cruz et al. 1978) respectively, the bibliographies show about a fourth of the books about women published between 1910 and 1940 written by men. Needless to say, this literature runs the full breadth of the ideological spectrum, from Jesuits defending the Catholic order to socialists envisioning a gender revolution.

Here too, then, is a large corpus of writings needing to be sorted, sifted, and incorporated into scholarly accounts. Men's writings on the gender system, it seems, have been forgotten for the same reason women's have: women and gender have not been regarded as significant subject matter for real *pensamiento*. But of course this reason overlays the workings of the patriarchal imagination, which seeks always to posit a normative male subject. In their encyclopedic treatment of major male essayists, Earle and Meade (1973) completely elide all mention of their writings on women. No matter which gender does it, apparently, writing about gender remains "women's work"! And of course indifference and neglect in this instance mask the unconscious momentum preventing the question of gender inequality from becoming a central item on the intellectual agenda and in the process of social understanding.

These bodies of largely unexamined essayistic literature suggest that an important dimension of Latin American intellectual history has been omitted from academic awareness. The debate on gender, as carried on by women and men, across the ideological and social spectrum, and across the whole of Latin American history, should hold as central a place in Latin American intellectual history as the identity debate does. It should be recognized as absolutely central to the ongoing self-creation and self-understanding of Latin American societies. The gender essays of such writers as Gómez de Avellaneda, Ocampo, Labarca, de la Parra, Kirkwood, Castellanos and others should be in the essay anthologies and on the syllabi alongside those of their male contemporaries. Women should be present as both the objects and subjects of *pensamiento*. It is a matter of both recovering the work, and learning how to read it.

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