

Where am I? Who am I? The Problem of
Location and Recognition in Helena
Parente Cunha's *Woman Between Mirrors*

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“Who can recognize the faces of the faces of truth?”
—Helena Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors*

In an article on mirroring and art, Bernice L. Hausman relates the story of Echo and Narcissus. Narcissus, she says, sees his reflection, and inspired by it, speaks before he dies and becomes the “paradigm of man-the-artist” (*Words Between Women* 205). Echo, punished for having said too much, is condemned to repeat what the male says. “In effect, Echo mirrors through speech what is spoken to her and loses the power to generate original text. She can only reflect the words of the male artist and, in her silence, becomes the mirror through which the male voice speaks” (Hausman 205). Women, like Echo,

Become mirrors for men within patriarchal society; denied selfhood, women are expected to reflect the personhood of men. At the same time, however, women also try to find themselves within mirrors, using them to evaluate themselves *within* the community of women, seeing in them patriarchy's vision of the “real woman.” The mirror is a pre-written text, speaking the patriarchal language and inscribed with patriarchal values: in it “woman” is “written,” and to it women must attend in order to reflect adequately what is already there. (205-06)

Hence, the mirror mirrors not the woman herself but social

and cultural images which tell the woman who and what she should be. The woman's desire to "know herself"—an essential self—is forever doubly deflected, first by a patriarchal discourse which demands that a woman reflect male identity and second by the image she sees mirrored in other women, themselves bound by an image "written" for them in Narcissus' gaze.

Hausman's conception of the woman artist's reflection of the male artist's voice corresponds in a very fundamental way with Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser identifies what he calls the "duplicate mirror structure of ideology," which interpellates the subject and guarantees that the subject will not only reflect the appropriate ideological image but also will do so willingly (Rivkin and Ryan 302). The "good" subject not only conforms; she accepts her conformity as part of the natural order of things. She recognizes her subjectivity and is recognized by the "Subject." Althusser asserts that there is a "mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of [herself]" (Rivkin and Ryan 302). "Good" subjects consent to their subjection. However, "this consent must be constantly won and rewon, for people's material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a constant threat to the dominant class" (Fiske 310). Those subjects whose experience teaches them that the "natural order of things" is neither natural nor inevitable are "bad" subjects, and they invite the intervention of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)—family, medicine, religion, the social sciences—which then attempt to correct and conform the "bad" subject into a "good" one. ISAs act as the enforcers of ideology. That they exercise formidable corrective power cannot be doubted; nevertheless, "bad" subjects play a crucial role in what Althusser postulates as a dynamic process as opposed to a static, hopelessly deterministic one. "Bad" subjects, according to Antonio Gramsci in his theoretical enhancement of Althusser, open a gap in the edifice of ideology, a gap which allows for the insertion of a dissenting discourse or a dissenting mirror image, one which the subject can employ to construct an image of herself which resists the call of ideology and issues its own "call" to the subject.

Hegemony . . . posits a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate that makes this interface into an inevitable site of ideological struggle. In hegemonic theory, ideology is constantly up against forces of resistance. Consequently it is engaged in a constant struggle not just to extend its power but to hold on to the territory it has already colonized. (Fiske 310-11)

The problem, for women (and all subjects), then, is one of location and recognition. “Good” subjects locate themselves in ideology and recognize themselves in the images presented to them by hegemonic discourse. “Bad” subjects engage ideology in a struggle to wrest power from ideology and to stake a place for themselves. They take advantage of the gaps and fissures which ideology, like language, cannot wholly encompass or foreclose. Therefore, even though one is never “outside” ideology, just as one is never outside language, one can, nevertheless, make a space within ideology and language which provides, if you will, a “room of one’s own” where the subject can resist the siren song of ideological power. The subject’s struggle to define herself and to resist that normative call is the problem which Helena Parente Cunha explores in her novel *Woman Between Mirrors*; in it, a “good” subject becomes a “bad” one. The woman learns that hegemony can be subverted, but it cannot be entirely escaped; she must learn to negotiate the dominant representations of her society before she can know herself.¹

Standing before her triple mirror, the woman in Helena Parente Cunha’s novel, *Woman Between Mirrors*, cannot locate herself. Confronting her, a triple image, not one of which she fully recognizes. This woman, a true twentieth-century heroine, faces her divided self and begins a quest which will end when she becomes an “I” before her shattered mirrors. But before that can happen, she must author herself, and, in the process of writing herself, she must overcome the demons of location and recognition. In the material sense, the woman must locate herself geographically, historically, socially, and physically. Existentially, she must locate herself as an acting, functioning, speaking, unified “I”—unified, in the sense that she is recognizable “in her entirety”; in order to do that, she must recognize herself in the multiple images of the mirror at the same time as she breaks the mirror images which her society reflect back to her—to be able to say “I” becomes the object of her quest (Ellison and Lindstrom vi).²

Parente Cunha constructs the novel around two questions: “Who am I?” and “Where am I?” and two images: mirrors and windows. Generally, “Who am I?” and mirrors correspond to the woman’s quest for recognition; “Where am I?” and windows correspond to her quest for location. It is impossible, however, to separate the questions and images into neat pairs; they interweave throughout the novel. The mirrors provide a dialectic, not between an essential self and its antagonist but between ideology and its ISA psychology.³ The window provides the subversive antithesis to ideology and its handmaiden and aids in the deconstruction of the mirrors’ dialectic.

The quest for recognition begins before the mirror; actually, the title tells us that the woman is *between* mirrors, not “before” them, even though it is clear that there is someone looking at herself in the mirrors. The mirrors provide two images—the woman who calls herself “I” and “the woman who writes me” (and I will refer to her by that phrase throughout this paper). “The woman who writes me” is a creation of the “I”; she might be called the “I’s” guilty conscience or her rebellious alter ego. Nevertheless, the woman who observes these images is, as Fred P. Ellison and Naomi Lindstrom say in their translators’ introduction to the novel, “determined to see herself in her entirety” regardless of the consequences (vi). The two images engage in a dialogue in which each tries to justify herself to the other and to the reader. The “I” speaks as one who recognizes herself in the dominant ideology of Bahian society—her father, her husband, her sons have determined who she is throughout her life, and she acquiesces to that ideology. When “the woman who writes me” says to her, “Your allure is the sick attraction of a ghastly human rite in which you’re the daily sacrifice,” she replies:

I don’t think life is a ghastly sacrifice. It depends on who does the living. In one person’s case, a wart on a finger can turn into a catastrophe. Other people can be totally mutilated and it doesn’t mean the end of their world. I don’t think it’s a massacre for my husband to want to find dinner ready when he comes home from the office. If I don’t have an outside job, running the house should be my responsibility. My family, my home, my infinity. Keeping things the way they should be, orderly, on time. (*Woman Between Mirrors* 20-21) (Hereafter referred to by page number only.)

The “I” accepts the role of the “angel of the house” as Virginia Woolf put it. “Keeping things the way they should be,” gives her a sense of responsibility for the order of the house, and she accepts her domestic role as part of the natural order of things. She locates herself in what Susan Bassnett and others identify as one of “the arenas of possible power open to women”—the home, the convent, and the brothel (“Coming Out of the Labyrinth” 250). She subscribes to the myth that a woman’s power is exercised within the walls of the home where she “is the repository of all values,” the arbiter of civilized behavior who tames the barbarian impulses of her husband and children. Jean Franco points out that this “rigid confinement of women to private spaces” (the home, the convent, and the brothel) ensured the purity of women:

The privatized and inward-looking Hispanic house and the fact that the virtual confinement of married women to the home had not only been required by the Church but was also intended to ensure the purity of blood that Spanish society had imposed after the wars against the Moors. Thus the mother’s immobility is related to racism and to the protection of inheritable property. The opposite term to the mother is the virgin—that is the nun who is pure and uncontaminated and whose space is the convent. The negation of the mother and the virgin is the whore, whose body is open to all men. (“Beyond Ethnocentrism” 507)

Franco focuses specifically here on Latin American society, but the same rules apply to Brazil, as the novel makes very clear.⁴ Parente Cuhna’s “I” accepts without question her station. Only later does she understand the economic, political, and cultural implications of her confinement.

“The woman who writes me,” to the contrary, has spent her life saying “no” to this order of things and acting out a rebellion against the “I’s” acquiescence. Whereas the “I” accepts her role and her guilt when she fails to fulfill it, “the woman who writes me” responds with:

And aren’t you perhaps entitled to be impatient with your children, with your sons who day by day are killing their mother? And why should you keep cool when your husband’s going after you? Nowadays, for someone to be as subservient as you’ve gotten to be, the only reason is you’ve fallen prey to pathological guilt feelings. You feel the need to punish yourself.

You know quite well that you didn't like your mother. You were jealous of her. (14)

The "I" rightly points out that "the woman who writes me" has fallen prey, herself, to a dominant ideological construct—psychology. When "the woman who writes me" accuses the "I" of having "pathological guilt feelings" and subconscious jealousy of her mother, she is mouthing the corrective discourse of a patriarchal ISA which "corrects" and "analyzes" its subjects so as to help them conform to the ideology and to fit more willingly into the image it projects. "The woman who writes me" diagnoses the "I's" malaise. "The woman who writes me" also acts out the rebellions that the "I" perhaps only imagined. But, her rebellions conform in many ways to behaviors prescribed by the dominant ideology. Leaving the house, she becomes the stereotypical "whore"; she escapes the confinement of the house, dresses inappropriately, and flirts with boys. Whether or not she is, in fact, a whore, the "I" identifies "the woman who writes me" as one, aping her father's judgment. When the "I" retreats to her room to escape her family's oppression, where she imagines that she is free, she sees two images of herself—both of which are assigned to woman by patriarchy—the wife and the whore:

Who is that sultry provocative woman in the mirror? It's not me. She looks like her, the woman who writes me. I keep on dancing, in my red dress, clinging, plunging, slit up the side. I hardly recognize the image that jumps out at me from the mirror. It is she? It is me? Which one is for real? This one, breaker crashing, facing me in the mirror, wouldn't blink at jumping into bed with a man she'd met just hours before. Which is the real woman? Which is flesh, which is blood? The one who looks at me from the mirror, a smile from the other shore? Or the one on this side, the good housewife and perfect mother, modestly dressed, just a touch of make-up? Where's the mask? On the scrubbed clean face or on the one daubed with false colors? When I pile on the make-up, am I taking off my mask? Or am I putting on my mask, when I wash my face? . . . Who is she? Who am I? (25-26)

Her freedom is an illusion; she recognizes herself as her father, husband, and sons see her, on the one hand, the demure housewife, on the other, the whore—neither identity holding the respect of the men who define her, for, as Bassnett points out, "the mother

is perceived as a figure to be adored even though she is simultaneously despised for her femininity" ("Coming Out of the Labyrinth" 250). She will not and cannot become an authoring "I" until she both recognizes and rejects these images as something imposed from without. To do so, she must first locate herself in the mirrors, understand that the images reflected are constructed images, and then turn away from the mirrors, open the windows onto alternate discourses, and see herself for who and what she is.

When the woman—the "I"—sees herself as both the demure housewife and the slatternly rebel, she is located in the only space she can call her own—her corner of her bedroom in her husband's apartment. Here, she keeps those material objects which she considers make up her unique identity. Most are mementos of her childhood in Rio Vermelho; she says of them:

These things are always there—here, inside me. Other things come and go. When I shut myself in my room, I shut myself inside my things, my belongings, things in my personal care, my notebooks of poetry and stories, the sketch of a novel, a few thoughts, no diary, I threw it away. Among my things, I'm really me. My space and my time, with no ruler and no clock. Inner time frames of infinite extension. My chance to be free, when I am free. Near the window that opens to what is closed in. And I remain suspended where I live. (50)

In her room she believes, as we have seen, that she is free to "be" herself. However, her room, like her body, which her husband crushes with his revolting love-making, is not her own; it is not safe from violation. Her husband and sons invade it with impunity, just as her father had violated the privacy of her room in Rio Vermelho and taken and read her diary. Her father's violent response to her diary (he beat her nearly to death) finds its counterpart in the boys' having found and read one of her notebooks: "one day one of the notebooks got into the hands of one of the boys, they all saw it, they all read it, even the boys' friends, at first my husband thought it was funny, then he got offended, he doesn't like my keeping anything from him, otherwise he can't trust me, how can he?" (56). Her unique and private self is of no account, just as her private belongings are objects of ridicule to be paraded before her sons' friends. She does not "own" anything—least of all herself; she is the property of

her husband and her sons; they may dispose of her and her material possessions as they wish. Any attempt on her part to have a “room of her own” meets with fierce retribution. She must mirror their values; she must prove herself trustworthy and hide nothing from her husband. She must not have a private place in her husband’s house.

Even the windows in her rooms are not her own to open and look out of. In her father’s house, she remembers, “If my father wouldn’t let me stand at the window watching the street and the people going by, often I’d start crying, and get punished for it” (58). Her father’s house she recalls as a house of fear, and she was frequently forbidden to look out of the windows. The same might be said of her husband’s house and the window in her room that she often goes to for relief from the guilt and fear she feels. When she goes to her room, she says, “This window is not the window of my room, in my father’s house. It’s the window of my corner, in my husband’s apartment. This window opens me onto what’s closing in. Like the other one. They’re the same window. This one, on the seventh floor of an apartment building in the Vitória district. That one, in the townhouse in Rio Vermelho” (69). For so long as she has no room or house of her own, she remains a captive of the power of ideology (which I take to be the “what’s closing in”). She must look out the windows secretly, and the price of secrecy is guilt.

The windows, as her husband and father suspect, also provide, however, the means by which she can locate herself, for they open out onto a world she does not know and has never experienced. What she sees from her window is a sacred mango tree, and a black boy; what she feels is the soft breeze which carries on it the sensual smell of mangoes; what she hears is the sensual beat of the Xangô drums. The “call” from the world outside which comes on the breeze through her windows tells her that there is another material experience, perhaps even freedom for her. That “call” threatens the security of ideology’s power. Her cloistered existence—her material experience—tells her that conformity to ideology leads to slavery, and at about the midpoint of the novel, she has what can only be described as an epiphany. Her husband and sons have abandoned her. She is left alone looking out the window:

I’m at home alone, looking out my window, night is falling amid the last reflections of the sun on the panes of other windows of other

buildings, mirrors making up their own red suns, here at the window where night is falling far from the violence of clocks and dates, my window above the sacred mango tree, who am I, the one who hid away from the hours and the years? who am I here at the window, unable to see things as they are, does my window open onto what has been closed for all time? mirror in the dark, with its memory of images that never knew the light. (74)

From this vision, she knows that she must face the truth, that she has hidden from the truth of her situation for her entire life, that “the woman who writes me” has lived an equal lie, and that she must do something to gain a self that she has never had. She says, “My slavery, useless. Her freedom, also useless. Nothing led to anything. The mirrors are more and more being cleared of images. Useless reflections that go skimming coldly over the smooth glass, vacuously. Nothing led to anything” (77-78). She has become a “bad” subject.

Through an ironic twist, the “I” gains her freedom through her father’s inheritance. She inherits enough money to purchase her own apartment—a true “room of her own” because she has not only a space of her own, but she also has the income to support it. That she gains her freedom through her father’s inheritance serves to remind us that she is not, indeed cannot be, entirely freed of the power of the dominant ideology. Nevertheless, as a “bad” subject, cognizant now of the power of the images she has been confined by, the “I” gains a degree of autonomy. She begins the process of locating herself, not in her husband’s or her father’s houses, but in her own space. Her trials are not over, however; having located herself in a space from which she can begin to speak as and for herself, she will begin to author herself so that she may recognize herself in all her aspects. Her first act is to declare her independence; she says:

I’m going to come back down to earth. From now on I’m going to be free of any sort of preconception. I need to enjoy the life I’ve been banished from. I’m going to continue creating my reality of independence in the same way I invented my submission. . . . I refuse to consider myself tied to a total psychological coherence and I proclaim the union of opposites. (83)

Her first act of recognition is to “become” “the woman who writes me”—with a difference. She rejects psychology; she rejects guilt. She

embraces her body and its appetites. But she is, like “the woman who writes me” still under the power of the male’s image of a woman. Her first lover turns out to be her husband’s business associate and friend, and although he is a more attentive and physically attractive lover than her husband, he is just another version of the husband—he wants to keep his wife and have his mistress safely tucked away on the side—she must remain enclosed in her apartment. She quickly learns her lesson, and for the first time in her life, she asserts herself, leaves her home and goes out on the town, makes friends in the artist community, and expands her horizons. Although she is enacting the role of the “free” woman, she learns from this experience; she discovers her body; she discovers a community of artists whose interests reflect her own, and she discovers the seamy side of life. She begins to frequent “places people used to avoid in [her] father’s and [her] husband’s time as only fit for riffraff, blacks, drunks, scum, that is, people of no account. Young ladies of good family and self-respecting women have to know their place,” and stay away from such places (109). But, she asks, “where is my place?”

I fit within many situations, I overflow in many directions. The light from off the crystal chandeliers fills my head with prisms, wraps my words in cellophane. Primitive rhythm slips off my ancient bonds, releases me from earlier prisons. Little by little, I’ve been untying a knot, loosening a noose, unmeshing a net, finally there’s nothing to tie me down. My limitless liberated body rushes out in unimaginable rivers, hurtles over barriers I’d never even known were there. (109)

Having escaped confinement and definition in her husband’s house, she experiences excess—she “overflows”; she exceeds the frames of the mirrors. She recognizes herself in others—others whose blood mingles with her own—the Africans. From her childhood on, she has been mysteriously attracted to the mango tree and the young black boy who stood beneath it: “El niño negro no solo representa lo prohibido . . . la libertad . . . el valor . . . sino también representa la sexualidad, como casi siempre se ve asociado con los mangos maduros, succulentos y jugosos” “The black boy not only represents the forbidden . . . liberty . . . valor . . . but he also represents sexuality, which is also seen as associated with the ripe, succulent, and juicy mangos’ (Beard, “La Sujetividad Feminina” 302). Now she recog-

nizes the relationship that her father and her society have denied. Caught up in the freedom of the dance, she knows what she's always intuited—her dark skin comes “from a whitening of the colors from Nigeria [and] the hot winds breathed out of Guinea” (111). Her discovery and recognition of her African slave heritage, that secret history which permeates the Bahian society into which she was born, precipitates the untying of the knot of which she speaks. Recognizing her history frees her in a very fundamental way from the lie which has been her life. She undergoes initiation into the rites of Xangô; she chooses the ecstasy of the moment of union with the god Xangô; she revels in her “limitless body [which] rushes out in unimaginable rivers, [and] hurtles over barriers” (111).⁵

In the meantime, “the woman who writes me” after having given up her rebelliousness and become a docile, obedient housewife, leaves her husband. But neither the “I” nor “the woman who writes me” can free themselves entirely of the “natural” order. Their solitude and freedom are destroyed when the woman's son is shot and killed while trying to invade his mother's home, believing she is sleeping with the black priest of Xangô. The radio reports interpret the events: “A deranged young man, from one of the old-line families of our city, defending his mother's reputation, has lost his life. The police have no clues. An appeal to the young man's parents to come identify the body” (131). The threat to the dominant class must be resisted; the radio report reinforces the dominant ideology and reflects the image of a woman whose “reputation” has been threatened by a member of the lower, black classes. The report has its desired effect; the mother and “the woman who writes me” are incapacitated by guilt. Finally, they “recognize” themselves:

Our guilt brings us together. The rat smell drives out the scent that comes from the ancient mango tree. My face in the mirror is her face. I'm her. She's me. We are one. Shoulders sagging. Eyes to the floor. The intersection of me-with-her turned into me-with-me. We are one. Me and me. Me. ME. Dead center. The mirrors give off an intolerable glare. Frozen. I see more than I see. Eye to eye. Bedrock. I write what I write. I. (132)

The price of trying to forge an identity outside of ideology is very high; one might think too high. But in order to write “I,” the Woman

Between Mirrors had to face herself in all of her identities. She had to recognize herself as a product of ideology; she had to find her place in the ideology, and she had to find a way to carve out a space for herself in opposition to that ideology. In order to do that, she has to accept responsibility for herself and her actions; she must accept the guilt she feels for her son's death—after all she is responsible. She must also accept that she cannot be entirely free of ideology; it is too pervasive. Nevertheless, she does author herself, and the novel ends with release.

Suddenly a lightning bolt streaks across the dark sky. The mirrors shatter into a thousand pieces. On the floor, shards of mirror wet with blood. Wet with rainwater. A flicker of fire shoots skyward. I see an entire face in the shard of glass. A single face. I can't identify the smell coming in on the wind. The face. Me. The gentle wind from out of the heavy storm. (132)

All births are accompanied by blood and water. The birth of the "I" in *Woman Between Mirrors* is no less violent and no less symbolic. In fact, the entire novel, with its repetitions that give a ritual quality to the narrative, might be seen as a rite in which the "I" "calls up her own being—however fragmentary and faceted. Laura Beard has observed that "The protagonist's endless submission and patient acceptance are drawn out in the structure of the text—I accepted, I accepted, I accepted—a litany evocative of a catechism [sic] lesson in church" ("The Mirrored Self" 107). The litany Beard identifies—that of the Catholic Church—represents yet another of the patriarchal discourses—an Ideological State Apparatus—that called the woman between mirrors to conform. But her acceptance gives way to another kind of litany—the litany of the drums, the wind, the mango tree. The beating of the drums conveys the rhythm of an incantation and the casting of a spell. In the trance induced by the "son of Xangô," she repeats, "I know where I am" (122-23). Having found herself, she understands that she must undergo an initiation or die: "If you don't want to die, you have to begin your initiation. Or you'll pay for it later. Your fate, the road you'll take. You begin your initiation. Or you'll die. My fate, the road I'll take" (123). Once she has chosen, "Xangô readies his lightning bolts" (129). The crash of lightning which breaks the mirrors followed by cleansing by water, I suggest, breaks the spell cast by ISA's and inaugurates the

new woman.⁶

Her birth shatters the mirrors of hegemonic ideology, but each shard remains, nevertheless, a mirror, and she will know ideology's influence and seductive power always. Rosario Castellanos, in "Woman and Her Image," has described this terrifying process:

The feat of *becoming what one is* (a feat belonging to the privileged whatever their sex or condition) not only demands the discovery of the essential features beneath the spur of passion, dissatisfaction, or surfeit, but above all the rejection of those false images that false mirrors offer woman in the enclosed gallery where her life takes place.

Smashing to bits the facile composure of features and actions; tossing our reputations to the dogs; affirming our authority over disgrace, scorn, and even death, such is the road that leads from the strictest solitude to total annihilation.

But there was a moment, a decision, and an act in which woman managed to conciliate her behavior with her most secret desires, with her truest forms, with her ultimate substance. And in that conciliation her existence was inserted at the point in the universe befitting her, proving herself to be necessary, and resplendent with meaning, expression, and beauty. (Ahern 244)

Heretofore, the woman's definition of herself has depended entirely upon male recognition—her father's, her husband's, her sons', her lovers'—"in the enclosed gallery where her life takes place." However, through a process of smashing those "false images that false mirrors offer a woman," she has learned to define herself as writer, mother, lover, woman—a flawed human being beset by doubts, passions, fear, and guilt. Laura Beard rightly says of the novel's ending:

Existir es juntar los pedazos—cada persona está constituida de muchas partes. [Parente Cunha] reitera las afirmaciones de la protagonista . . . que cada persona tiene muchas voces, muchos lados, muchos silencios.

To exist is to unite the fragments—each person is constituted of many parts. [Parente Cunha] reiterates the affirmations of the protagonist . . . that each person has many voices, many sides, many silences. ("La subjetividad femenina" 304)

Both “I” and “the woman who writes me” must take possession of their many facets, including their guilt. But the novel does not end in guilt; it ends in birth and a gentle wind. The “bad” subject has taken on the mirrors of her society; she has inserted her existence into a small gap in the edifice; she has learned to say “no” to the demands that she “be” the images reflected to her; she has learned that she must take responsibility for all of her faces; she knows that the truth has many faces, and she has forged her own, fragmented, identity.

Notes

1 Laura Beard, Naomi Lindstrom, Melissa Fitch Lockhart, Khadija Safi-Ed-dine, and Michael Hardin, among others, have addressed Parente Cunha’s interest in contemporary theory and have examined the influences of Lacan and the mirror stage, Judith Butler and gender identity as performativity, and the French feminists and writing with the body in their analyses. I have chosen the political approach which employs Althusser’s concept of interpellation as yet another way to approach this complex novel.

2 Ellison and Lindstrom refer to the “I” as the “heroine”; she clearly is on a quest, and the number of references in the novel to fairy tales (Snow White, Rapunzel [70], and Sleeping Beauty—“wall of thorns” [55 and *passim*]—), give credence to the idea that this woman is a questing heroine.

3 Clearly, I am not asserting that an “essential self” is achievable or desirable. As Laura Beard points out:

En el posmodernismo el sujeto tradicional ha cedido paso al sujeto “descentrado” o a la idea de que no hay sujeto, solo un sistema de estructuras lingüísticas, una construcción textual, un juego de diferencias en el sentido de Jacques Derrida. Muchas teorías feministas reconocen la sujetividad como un posicionalidad relativa siempre cambiante. In postmodernism the traditional subject has yielded to the “decentered” subject or to the idea that there is no subject, only a system of linguistic structures, a textual construction, a play of differences in the sense of Jacques Derrida. Many feminist theorists recognize subjectivity as a relative positionality which is always changeable. (“La sujetividad femenina” 299)

4 For the Brazilian reception of *Mulher no Espelho*, see Lúcia Leiro, “A Recepção Crítica das Produções de Helena Parente Cunha” <www.amulhernaliteratura.ufsc.br/8lucialeirobh.htm>.

5 The issues of race and racism have been addressed by Joyce Carlson-Leavitt and Cristina Sáenz de Tejada.

6 Her initiation is overwhelmingly sexual, as her orgasmic “scream beyond all” indicates (125). Melissa Fitch Lockhart examines the ways in which eroticism subverts and “deconstructs the various layers of patriarchy” (5).

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