

The Subject, Feminist Theory and Latin American Texts

Sara Castro-Klaren
Johns Hopkins University

“The history which bears and determines us has the
form of a war rather than that of a language”

—Michel Foucault, *Power / Knowledge* (114)

“Woman herself does not exist”

—Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality* (144)

“Perforán tu rostro, cegarán tus ojos.”

Por ellos miro, contesté.

“They shall pierce your face, blind your eyes.”

I see through them, I answered.

—Eugenia Brito, *Via Publica*, (16)

Preamble

The purpose of this essay is to examine and analyze the dialogic relation between feminist studies in the North American academy—from which we speak—and feminist literary criticism concerned with Latin American letters. During the last twenty-five years the field has been marked by a tight, if not always comfortable, embrace of theoretical developments in Europe and the United States. Feminism and women’s studies—*Estudios de la Mujer*—in Latin America have developed in close contact with, and perhaps been prompted by, the growing strength and interest in women’s studies here.¹ But feminism in Latin America has also been part and parcel of women’s political activism in several different areas of the

body politic.² This feminist struggle has consciously included the domestic arena. For example, the groups of Chilean women who risked their lives to organize an effective resistance to Pinochet's dictatorship and coined the felicitous strategy and phrase: "La democracia empieza por la casa" 'democracy begins at home,' continue to struggle for the expansion of human and economic rights before the law and in daily life. And this grass roots activism has colored the thinking of Chilean sociologists, philosophers, poets and literary critics. Julieta Kirkwood in "Feministas y Políticas" writes that "se diría que, en el inicio, la reflexión feminista surge desde la reflexión sobre la democracia—incautada—y desde una revalorización y rescate de sus contenidos" 'one would say that, at the beginning, feminist thinking emerges from a critical consideration of a captured democracy and from a revalorization and recovery of its contents' (19).

However, this feminist praxis and bold assertion of the capacity for self agency has not coincided with feminism in the academy, nor has one necessarily taken the other by the hand. This bifurcation between the academy and the activism of the grass roots groups can be revisited in the emblematic scene that took place in Mexico City during the meetings of the Tribuna del Año de la Mujer sponsored by the United Nations in 1975. There, Domitila Barrios de Chungara, a labor organizer in the Bolivian mines, questioned the language and the political assumptions of a highly placed Mexican bureaucrat. Domitila was irritated by the bureaucrat's use of the nominative "nosotras las mujeres" 'we, women.' The Bolivian miner contested the terms of the construction of the "we" with which the Mexican bureaucrat voiced her representation of self (as) and other. From Domitila's point of view the class and life experience difference overpowers the generic similarity:

¿De qué igualdad vamos a hablar entre nosotras? ¿Si usted y yo no nos parecemos, si usted y yo somos tan diferentes? Nosotras no podemos, en este momento, ser iguales, aun como mujeres.

Of what kind of equality can we speak? Don't you see how you and I are not alike, how you and I are so different? We cannot, at this moment, be the same, even as women. (Viezzler, 225)

Domitila's questions go to the heart of the matter for feminism and for feminist theory. How is it possible to assume oneself to be an authorized or a representative speaking subject?

The question of the speaking subject and "his"/"her" relation to (self) knowledge and representation—"¿tiene usted algo semejante a mi situación?" 'are you in any way, in a situation comparable to mine?'—is not only on Domitila's mind. It has indeed become the paramount problem in feminist studies everywhere, including Latin America. Among theorists, Alice Jardine was one of the first to recognize this impasse between theory and praxis. In *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity* (1985), she detects in French theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva a disturbing disarticulation between theory and praxis. And yet, she observes, that those who "have chosen to remain deaf to contemporary conceptual reworking of the 'male' and 'female' in their refusal to listen to their own discourse—"have often evolved practices more reactionary than those of their feminine-minded sisters (260).³

More recently and attesting to the protracted nature of the constitution of the subject and the corollary problems of self-knowledge and representation, the Chilean poet and critic Soledad Fariña unfolds Domitila's concerns into a series of questions, all of which are yet to be resolved: "¿Cómo podré re-presentarme, re-escribirme? . . . ¿Cómo nos pensamos? ¿Dónde van a caer nuestras reflexiones, que no son acojidas por un discurso . . . que nos deja fuera?"⁴ 'How will I be able to represent myself, to rewrite myself? . . . How do we think ourselves? Where does our thinking belong, how is it received by a discourse . . . that leaves us out?'

In this essay Fariña goes on to establish inescapable links between the exploration of self, the search for a (feminine) speaking subject and the appearance of one's body as the baseline problematic. However, upon further meditation, she is compelled to ask, once again:

Pero, ¿qué cuerpo? . . . ¿el social? ¿el mio? ¿el uno como metáfora del otro? Relación demasiado compleja. . . . Se llena la página de balbuceos en busca de una mínima certeza: se mira el cuerpo, se palpa, se escribe, se in-

scribe—o cree inscribirse—utilizando como primer recurso la paradoja de escurrirse de la historia—textual—que va silenciando el cuerpo.

But, which body? . . . the social body? my body? one as the metaphor of the other? This relation is already too complex.

...
The page fills up with a stammering search for minimal certainty: the body looks upon itself, touches, writes itself. The body inscribes itself—or thinks that it does—using as a firsthand aid the paradox of wringing itself out of that history—textual history—that silences the body. (46)

However, what lays hidden does not appear with clarity even when the poet writes and peels away layers of previous thinking and writing on “woman.” She wonders if filling the page with words will allow the emergence of a new narrative subject capable of speaking what has remained unnamed. Will such a subject be able to overcome the alienation suffered at the hands of history? Will such a subject be able to rescue its self from the one part that became dominant and repressed all other aspects of the self in order to comply with patriarchal cultural logic?

Indeed, how does a repressed and mutilated speaking subject write a protagonic self? Which is the body, that together with exploding words “quiere comparecer desde su diferencia?” ‘wants to testify from its difference’ (46). Fariña concludes that the speaking subject can only speak in a fragmentary manner and from a provisional sense of self. Writing is then set to the inescapable tempo of the refrain: “¿Pero, es mi palabra, la palabra?” ‘But is my word, the word?’ (46).

Since it is the subject (the other) as elaborated by psychoanalysis which is at the base of the theory/praxis impasse, I will focus my examination of feminist literary criticism on the problem of the subject—the subaltern subject—to be precise. This is the dominant question for any literary critic, and as such, it has exerted a pervasive influence on what has been written on women writers, even though its importance has not been acknowledged by critics who have examined “desire,” “the abject,” “jouissance,” ‘the body,’ “language.” Further,

the subject, as a master category of psychoanalysis, is also now being deconstructed by feminist thought and so an examination of its deployment in literary criticism is even more timely here.

But first, a word on gender and feminist thought. When Gayle Rubin showed that “woman” in the opposition male/female coincided with the nature part of the corresponding nature/culture opposition, “woman” was released from our vocabulary, and we took up “gender.” Despite the fact that this newer category was to remind us of the cultural constructedness of “women,” in the social sciences and to a lesser extent in the humanities, gender has been naturalized, collapsed with the received (biological) notion of women.⁵ The naturalization of gender affects the dialectic discursive place that it occupies. Such collapse provides the basis for an obliteration of historically specific “gender” studies. Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender* (1987) formulates four clarifying propositions concerning gender which restore to this category the cultural edge it has begun to lose:

- 1) Gender is (a) representation. 2) The representation of gender *is* its construction. 3) The construction of gender goes on as busily today as it did in earlier times . . . in the academy [and] especially in feminism. 4) Paradoxically, therefore, the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction. (3)

Because gender is a category of analysis, like class or ethnic identity, it is crucial that it remain under critical consideration in feminist studies. By definition, feminist studies explore the question of the historical subordination of women to men, and as such they radicalize our received knowledge. Feminist studies means also a critical inquiry into all possible topics—not just women or gender. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), identifies five essential positions for a feminist approach to knowledge: (1) an awareness of belonging to a subordinate group; (2) a realization that subordination is not the result of any natural difference, rather, it is socially determined; (3) the awareness of subordination corresponds to a solidarity among those who respond to such group identification; (4) a feminist conscious-

ness searches therefore for an autonomous definition of woman; which (5) may provide society with an alternative vision of the rupture (5). It is within these parameters on gender and feminism that I will explore here the question of the feminine subject and its sub-altern position.

Writing and Difference

A revision of the debate between gynocriticism, now better known as humanist feminism, and the French (anti-)feminist philosophers would serve here as an instructive point of departure on the polemics of subjecthood, subjectivity, and identity. These two distinct theories of the feminine subject have had a widely felt impact on the study of Latin American women writers.⁶ But for reasons of space I must simply refer the reader to Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) and to my own "Literature, Feminism and the Alpha Male: A Search Beyond the Dominance Metaphor" (1994).⁷ Suffice to say here that one of the lasting legacies of the gynocentric paradigm is the demand for authenticity and the concomitant search, by writers and critics alike, for modalities of *la palabra propia*.⁸ In this quest several aesthetico-ideological models have been advanced: "estética del zafarrancho" 'the aesthetic of ravage and destruction,' "la cocina de la escritura," 'the cooking of writing,' la "escritura como costura" 'writing as sewing.'⁹

Madness and Creativity

However, the need to understand women's creativity—undervalued precisely for its attributed lack of rigor and form, for its makeshift working from fragments and leftovers—has led many feminist literary critics to psychoanalysis. This was especially the case as the Freudian "science" experienced a fascinating reincarnation in the writings and teachings of Jacques Lacan.

Freud's theories of repression and anxiety were brilliantly used by Harold Bloom in his reading of the anxiety of influence in English Romantic poetry. This reading made its grand entrance as a theory of female psychodynamics in the widely read *Madwoman in the Attic: A Study of Women and the*

Literary Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The madwoman, a characterization used to emblemize both protagonists and authors of fiction, has its obvious provenance in Freud's portrayal of female hysteria. But the madwoman of Gilbert and Gubar's title is taken from *Jane Eyre* and, as I have remarked elsewhere, the portrayal of the master's wife's hysteria calls for reading beyond Freud if we are to account for the plotting fact that she is a creole on whose money rests the master's fortune.

The cultural specificity of the model notwithstanding, the idea of the anxiety-ridden author proposed by Gilbert and Gubar was quickly imported into the study of Latin American women writers. Anxiety of authorship, claustrophobia, rage, and suicide seem to parallel naturally the lives of authors and characters in *Recuerdos del Porvenir*, *Balum Canaan*, *Se llama Sabina y tiene los cabellos colorados*, the poetry of Alfonsina Storni, and even Sor Juana's reckless charity during the cholera epidemic that took her life.

According to the anxiety-of-authorship thesis, women labor to overcome the patriarchal definitions of self that intervene between woman's self and her emerging self. Female schizophrenia explains and/or reinforces the stereotype of the duplicitous female, of the suicidal manic heroines of the fictions authored by Delmira Augustini, Elena Garro, Adelia Prado, Alejandra Pizarnik, Clarice Lispector, Maria Luisa Bombal and others. In an unusual conflation of text and autobiography, the assumptions in *Madwoman in the Attic* furnished feminist criticism with an image of the woman writer and her textual self-representations which, in hindsight, would seem more romantic than revolutionary. Anger animates the writing power of the angels of the house, and it is the source of female creativity. Real (mad)women, obscured in the text, authorize the truth of their fiction. As in gynocriticism, the model provided by Gilbert and Gubar employs the mainstay of patriarchal individualist criticism: the author stands as the source of meaning in the text.

Feminist criticism thus constituted—a literature of their own enraged, self-identical, and yet alienated selves—would soon have to face the tidal wave of post-modern theory and its radical critique of the unitary subject. Post-modern theorists

not only propose a de-centered subject which is not the subject of consciousness, but they also present us with the death of the author thus depriving the enraged woman writer and critic of her authority.

While both gynocriticism and the anxiety-of-authorship thesis authorized rage and confusion as the result of oppression, neither theory offered an explanation for the historical oppression of women nor, as Jenny Sharpe shows in *Allegories of Empire* (1993), could such assumptions provide a place for reading the relations of coloniality. It was the ready assumption of woman's inequality, grounded in biology or culture or both, that sustained the thesis of the madwoman and the feminist writer. The question of alterity as historical and discursive construct, an idea well developed by Simone de Beauvoir's reading of the objectification of woman by a metaphysical male subject was yet to take on full force and orient critics of Latin American literature to the problematic of the other.

Freud on his Head

By far the most radical critique of Freud is found in the writings of Luce Irigaray, a psychoanalyst and former student of Lacan at L'École Freudienne at Vincennes. In the now classic *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Irigaray shows that, despite his progressive views, Freud's theory of gender differentiation (penis envy, Oedipal crisis) reinscribes the Western misogynist tradition. Using the sharpest of deconstruction and a great deal of irony, Irigaray turns Freud on his head. She shows how woman, castrated and barred from access to civilization because of the lowly pleasures of her body, figures as the necessary negation (speculum) of HIS own erect image. Irigaray argues that Freud's analysis, not unlike Lacan's own version, situates women outside representation. Woman is absence, negativity, a lesser (human) being. Thus Irigaray claims that psychoanalysis elaborates only one sex—the masculine. According to the ontology of substances (penis, penis envy, castration), women can never "be."

Commenting on Irigaray's argument, Judith Butler writes:

Women are also a "difference" that cannot be understood as the simple negation or "Other" of the always-already-masculine subject . . . they are neither the subject nor its Other, but a difference from the economy of binary opposition, itself a ruse for a monologic elaboration of the masculine . . . sex appears within hegemonic language as *substance*, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical thing. This appearance is achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that "being" a sex is fundamentally impossible. For Irigaray, grammar can never be a true index of gender relations precisely because it supports the substantial model of gender as a binary relation between two positive and representable terms. (*Gender Trouble*, 18-19)

The paradoxical foundations and promises of psychoanalytical theory, often not taken into consideration when deployed as interpretative grids for the understanding of Latin American women writers, are brought to the fore from yet another angle by Sarah Kofman's *The Enigma of Woman: Women in Freud's Writings* (1981). Instead of relying on theory as a modality of the truth, Kofman, like Irigaray, uses psychoanalysis as a double-edged sword to analyze some of Freud's own dreams. She describes the "paranoid" origin of his fear of women and the relationship of this paranoia to his later elaboration of the phallic, monstrous mother. Kofman goes on to argue that the fear of the mother is in fact grounded in Freud's own (paranoid) thesis of paternity.

Freud had argued in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) that paternity is a purely social relation, lacking in substance. Kofman reveals that Freud's dreams conceal a fear and resentment of the mother-teacher:

To endow woman with an 'immature' or incomplete sexuality is indeed to castrate the mother, she who for the child is a *phallic* mother, androgynous like that Egyptian goddess Mut who had the head of a vulture: "her body was female, as the breasts indicated, but it also had a male organ in a state of erection." (72)

Kofman contends that the phallic mother is Freud's "solution" to the insecurity of fatherhood. This solution represents the inverse of the fantastic omnipotence that the child confers upon the mother. It is what ought to make it possible to cut the umbilical cord, to triumph over the immediate belief in the senses, "to carry out both the passage from mother to father and the passage from the senses to reason, and thereby to accomplish the 'progress' of civilization—even if the mother's death (or at least her castration) has to follow" (72). But is a little girl to see, fear, and dream of her mother? Does she, as Lacan would have her, remain with her mother all balled up in a non-symbolic universe of feeling and what not "*¿no sé qué?*" 'I don't know what.'

Several feminists have recently written about the feared phallic mother (of the boy), the ascription of penis envy to the little girl (mother), and the endless alienation from the alienating mother of Lacan's Imaginary. Some of the prominent arguments against the Imaginary come from the post-Freudian school with which Lacan himself often bitterly debated. The work of Nancy Chodorow, to cite only one of the most prominent feminist authors, uses object-relation theory as the base from which to question Lacan's speculations on the mother and her causal relation to the formation of the subject.¹⁰

Chodorow's work is concerned specifically with the dangers of drawing upon fantasy (that is, the Imaginary, penis envy, castration) to inform a theory of politics that would be its corollary. Her clinical and scholarly work attempts to provide a theory of subject formation by which one can envision little girls growing up into self-hood and identity marked by stages that do not correspond to that of boys—a difference made possible by the girl's relation to the mother as the asymmetrical from the alienation experienced by the boy. Chodorow's differential model has given rise to a host of historical and literary studies that focus on the relationships of mothers and daughters—a set of relationships that the Oedipus complex by necessity effaces.

This topic has been independently explored in Latin American fiction—*Cuadernos de infancia* (*Childhood Copybooks*), *Memorias de Mamia Blanca* (*Mama Blanca's Memoirs*)—but

its currency in the United States has facilitated the publication of fiction—*Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*), *La muñeca mayor* (*The youngest Doll*), and critical studies concerned with mothers and daughters. The stories told in Lispector's *Laços de família* (*Family Ties*), Elena Garro's *Recuerdos del porvenir* (*Remembrances of Things to Come*), and Rosario Castellanos's *Oficio de tinieblas* (*Craft of Darkness*), for example, have mapped new territory in which to explore the configuration of daughters in the family. One of the best examples of this renewed interest in family relations is Jean Franco's chapter on *Recuerdos del porvenir* in *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (1989).

The essentialist interpretation of difference—"biology is destiny"—is reconsidered in this polemic between Lacanians and object-relation analysts. Chodorow concludes:

Gender difference is not absolute, abstract, or irreducible; it does not involve an essence of gender. Gender differences and the experience of difference, like differences among women, are socially and psychologically created and situated. . . . Difference and gender difference do not exist as things in themselves; they are created relationally, that is, in relationship. We cannot understand difference apart from this relational construction. (100).

Such an assertion rejects all essentialist views implicit in contemporary feminism. Moreover, this statement demands the specific dismantling of Lacan's theory of separation and gender differentiation and its privileging the point of view of the infant at the narcissistic stage and fixing such a vantage point upon the world. Chodorow maintains that separateness, too, is a relational differentiation:

True separateness, cannot be simply a perception and experience of self—other, presence—absence. It must precisely involve two selves, two presences, two subjects. Recognizing the other as a subject is possible only to the extent that one is not dominated by felt need and one's own exclusive subjectivity. (103)

The Narcissist Subject

It is on the question of exclusive subjectivity (often the illusion of many a writer who fashions himself or herself as the creator of totalities) that Lacan's theories are thoroughly examined. Jane Flax engages Lacan's narcissistic child, and though she tolerates the master's view of desire as part and parcel of pre-cultural drives, she finds it difficult to agree with his own self-characterization and relation to Freud. In *Thinking Fragments* (1990), Flax contradicts Lacan's own view of his work as a "supplement or contribution to the development of feminist theorizing." She argues, instead, that Lacan's work is profoundly misleading as a theory of gender for it is "even more pervaded by masculinists' assumptions" (91). Flax demonstrates that Lacan transforms Freud's concept of narcissism into an ontology; his linguistic turn effaces the complex relations between mind and body—relations which Freud does recognize. Thus historical variables and changes in the relations of domination become impossible to detect in Lacan's static model of entrance into the Symbolic (desiring) Order.

Flax brings the universalist and foundational claims of Lacan under the suspicion of post-modernist thought and proceeds to dismantle his four major concepts of subjectivity, all devolving on an overriding narcissism. The claims that narcissism is an "irreducible" aspect of human "nature"; that language has an invariant, universal structure and always functions to "split" or castrate all "subjects"; that language (the Other) operates as an independent force, and its effects on the subject have no dependence on or interaction with the child's relations with actual "others," especially the mother; and that the phallus is in no way related to or meant to signify the "penis" are devastated by Flax's arguments (92).

Much like Sara Kofman's analysis of Freud via Freud, Flax's critique of the Lacanian universe depends on confining the master to the realm of his own narcissism. The very reading of his texts provides a powerful evocation of the narcissist personality. Moreover, Flax argues, "Narcissistic fantasies and perspectives pervade Lacan's work" (93). Even the opacity of his language can be interpreted as an index of narcissism. Lacan's mirror stage (in which the child engages his own gaze in the mirror rather than the mother's, at whose

breast he nurses) carries the narcissistic position to the absurd since, for the purposes of this foundational scene, Lacan's child might as well be an orphan. Flax adds:

Significantly, for Lacan this I comes into being *alone*. . . . This I already has a paradoxical quality, being both fictional and the most real and permanent aspect of mental life. Lacking an other who *is* truly outside for comparison and reliable control, any narcissist faces a painful, persistent dilemma of the relation of image and reality. The I is fictional because it is composed of a 'succession of phantasies that extends from the fragmented body image to a form of totality.' " (93-94)

Within the frame of the obliteration of the mother, theorized as the unrepresentable object by Kristeva, Lacan's subject appears split by the impersonal operation of an ahistorical language rather than by a dependence on an actual m/other. The narcissist considers any and all loss a crisis, for it amounts to the loss of omnipotence and a threat to the unity of the self. Thus relations with others entail the release of aggression and paranoia. Such a narcissist concept of the self produces an "I" incapable of reciprocity. Any failure by the other to meet the demands of the "I" are experienced as betrayal and loss. Flax's reading of Lacan emphasizes his elevation of these narcissistic dilemmas to ontological "truths" about human nature, and his failure to see them as consequences of his own conception of the nature of human demand (95).¹¹ Above all this theory of the subject as structured and subjugated in language exert a compelling call on all attempts to deal with questions of the constitution of subjectivity.¹²

Critics of the split subject resist not only the narcissistic fixation in the elaboration of the subject's relation to language but also the formulation of the mother's castration. A formulation in which she lacks the penis on which the little boy erects his entrance into civilization projects onto the mother fears and desires which correspond to the little boy's gaze upon his own body. The mother is here imperfect and incomplete because she is seen as having a hole instead of a penis. According to the boy's fantasy, she desires the phallus in order to relieve her own "narcissistic injury. The mother cannot

(like the boy) possibly be satisfied by anything 'real' a baby has to offer" (98). However, the phallus exists only in the economy of the Symbolic Order, a realm to which she does not belong. Here we find that the castration of the mother does not really refer to anything biological. It is "an effect of language and desire, not anatomy or physical injury" (98). The formation of the split subject stands as a circular argument which moves from the biological to the Symbolic in order to efface the first term and result in a masculine monopoly of all terms of the argument.

Endowed by the name of the father, the child leaves the pre-cultural realm of the mother and enters the Symbolic Order which the phallus inaugurates. Women, as we have seen, by definition lack access to the phallus. They remain consigned to nature, or the out-side of meaning. In Lacan's master narrative, "there is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words." Faced with women's displeasure and desire, Lacan explains:

There is one thing they themselves are complaining about enough at the moment, it is well and truly that [women are excluded by the nature of words] only they don't know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me. It nonetheless remains that, if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what phallic function designates of jouissance, a supplementary jouissance. Note that I said supplementary. Had I said complementary, where would we be! We'd fall right back into the all. (*Feminine Sexuality*, 144-45)

Therefore, without the separation which produces the split subject and language, without the relegation of women to the outside, where would paternity be? Culture (the appropriation and the subordination of women) would be an impossibility.

Once Again the Body

No matter how hard we try to escape anatomy and however much it is claimed that the phallus is a signifier without the penis as its referent, the body, as the concretion of agency,

reasserts its presence. Whether a woman's body is thought of as the site of a lack (castration) or the place of excess (clitoris, womb), its materiality is the source for the myriad metaphors that try to stand for the history of her subordination. Gayatri Spivak asks of herself, but also of the field: "What has been the itinerary of my thinking during the past few years about the relationship among feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction?" (*In Other Worlds*, 77). Spivak steps away from the pitfalls of universalizing sciences or philosophies and assumes the dissolution of the man/woman dichotomy. Consequently, one can speak only in *provisional terms*.

But even if one is to speak of woman only provisionally, one must try to break out of the assumptions of patriarchal discourse. In this case it is necessary to break out of the Lacanian corporeal (Symbolic) economy and recognize that woman's body differs not so much because it lacks a penis, but rather because it has a clitoris and a womb. Penis envy meets its deconstruction in womb envy. Womb envy circulates a new energy, not only in Freud's own Oedipal theory, but also in Lévi-Strauss's social economy of object exchange. The womb occupies the center of the material and social reproduction of humanity. The link that Spivak articulates here, between the production of discourse and the production of social order, brings into question not only Freud's theory of femininity but also the production of other subject/m(other) relations in the work of the great masters. For those of us interested in Latin American cultural history, one narrative in need of questioning is the Catholic construction of the mother's virginity and its corresponding *mater dolorosa*, herself always linked to the absence of the biological father. The "sagrada familia" 'holy family' should replace, for us, the romance of the Freudian family, for it is Mary's story that best represents Spivak's contention regarding the material and cultural appropriation and occlusion of the womb.

Spivak moves feminism from a fictional, theoretical realm into the politics of interpretation. This calls for a subject capable of much more than the semiotics of poetic language or the impossibility of the real. Implicit in her deconstruction of psychoanalysis as science is a questioning of the heretofore sexed subject. Her critique goes beyond the production of Freud's masculine sovereign subject and calls into question

the romanticization of the bourgeois family as a socio-economic historical unit responsible for the production and reproduction of patterns of domination that have privileged the discourse of some subjects at the expense of others. Spivak wishes to place psychoanalysis and some feminist theses under a general concern for the cultural conditions within which colonial discourse is produced (*In Other Worlds*, 82). Indeed, we may ask here, what is the place of psychoanalysis in neo-colonialism? How is the discourse of race and ethnicity, as constitutive of difference, to be related to differences spelled out by the Oedipus complex or the Ur-object (phallus)?

The work of Spivak and others writing about subaltern subjects and colonial and post-colonial discourses brings these concerns to both the universalizing tendencies embedded in psychoanalysis and the feminist positions anchored in it. Throughout her collection *In Other Worlds*, Spivak argues that it is time to move beyond the texts privileged by the French (anti-)feminists and to recognize their critique's association with the "'specificity' of other discourses that spell out and establish the power of the patriarchy" (150). The strategy to break out of masculinist theory and ideology entails also the recognition that male and female sexuality are asymmetrical. Male orgasmic "pleasure 'normally' entails the male reproductive act" while the female does not necessarily (80); "The clitoris escapes reproductive framing." Spivak writes:

In legally defining woman as object of exchange, passage, or possession in terms of reproduction, it is not only the womb that is literally "appropriated"; it is the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced. . . . Clitoridectomy has always been the "normal" accession to womanhood [and] it relates to every move to define woman as sex object . . . with no recourse to a subject-function except in terms of those definitions or as "imitators" of men. (151)

Return to Agency

This effacement of the womb and clitoris brings to the fore once more and recasts the question of the body. In what way

is the biological political? In what ways do the constructions of gender and race intersect?¹³ In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler brings to bear the question of power in discursive formations. Her argument assumes that gender is but one such formation, and her inquiry into the ideological conditions under which knowledge of sexual identities is produced shows two things clearly: sexual identities are culture-power constructs, and heterosexuality is the ideology by which the male/female difference is rooted in “nature.” In dismantling the metaphysics of substance, Butler posits regulatory practices as the point of constitution for gender identities. Thus, identity is not predicated as an a priori construction of anatomical features. The same regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity: “In other words, the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (17).¹⁴ She argues further that the “cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (17).

If regulatory practices can be identified with the effect of compulsory heterosexuality, Butler cautions that it is not one single regime of power which produces concepts of gender in a phallogentric discourse. Once again, the spectrum of French (anti-)feminism and the post-modern challenges to the binary hegemonic discourse that produces woman as the point of silence rather than subversion’ provide good examples of the problem feminist theory encounters when the psychoanalytical Law of the Father is not read through the tissue of regulatory practices.¹⁵

Thus:

power, rather than the law, encompasses both the juridical (prohibitive and regulatory) and the productive (inadvertently generative) functions of differential relations. Hence, the sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law

itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity. (*Gender Trouble*, 29)

Butler extends Foucault's notion of a productive power which "doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that . . . traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (*Power/Knowledge*, 119). Power can inadvertently mobilize subjects that exceed and/or expand the bounds of the culturally intelligible. Subjects can constitute the site of subversion, the exit place from a claustrophobic phallographic production of identity. This seems to be the case with the recent phenomenon of testimonial literature coming out of Latin America.¹⁶

This argument runs counter to the utopia of "a room of one's own." The most logical strategy left to feminists is the rethinking of the subversive possibilities of sexual identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination (*Gender Trouble*, 30). Butler's stance precludes going back to the humanist concepts of presence, person, individual author, and feminine writing, for gender is not the representation of fixed substances or essences.¹⁷ Gender emerges as the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time" (*Gender Trouble*, 33). The body itself is constituted within a repertory of cultural meanings and as such it is but a set of boundaries, social and individual. It is politically signified and maintained in a series of enactments.

Butler provides a return to praxis in which it is possible to envision feminine agency, but such agency is no longer tied to any a priori "self"; it is instead to be discovered in the praxis. Gender attributes do not express an inner identity, rather they are socially performative (*Gender Trouble*, 141). Butler closes with a cautious contribution to the clamor for agency evident in the writings of women theorists underscoring the disjuncture between Euro-American feminisms and the subject positions of women in other and "othered" societies.¹⁸ She suggests that the question of agency should not be addressed

through recourse to an "I," for the substantive "I" appears through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own working and to naturalize its effects (*Gender Trouble*, 145). Her suggestion is instead to take full advantage of the deconstruction of gender identity:

Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. . . . Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition. (*Gender Trouble*, 147)

If neither agency nor "identity" can be assumed to correspond to authentic or unified subjects—the subjects of gynocentrism—the question of woman as a subordinate in search of a place from which to speak (act) and therefore constitute herself as a provisional subject of knowledge can perhaps be approached within the concept of the local. Foucault distinguishes between the "universal intellectual," an offspring of the jurist, and the "specific intellectual," a descendant of the biologist and the physicist. This distinction seems to reinscribe the old separation between humanists and scientists; but Foucault also says that:

the intellectual *par excellence* used to be the writer: as a universal consciousness, a free subject: . . . *writing*, as the sacralizing mark of the intellectual, has disappeared. And it has become possible to develop lateral connections across different forms of knowledge and from one focus of politicization to another. (127)

In the same interview, he points out that a global process of politicization of intellectuals is underway. Extending Foucault's views on the taxonomy of knowledges, one can see how the concept of local knowledges can include not just biology but also other knowledges produced in other locales and under different rules of formation.

The idea of local knowledges—geopolitically dispersed knowledges—themselves traversed by a set of power contingencies offers in the eyes of some feminists (this one included) a possibly though not entirely safe ground for the elaboration of interpolations of specific naturalizations of the dominance metaphor.²⁰ Although it is not a panacea, and although it is a construction, the concept of the local (denigrated and occluded subjects and knowledges) offers feminists and other othered subjects a starting point for an interpolation of the power/knowledge matrix.²¹ *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, by Donna Haraway, on one end of polar extremes, and *Una pasión prohibida (A Forbidden Passion)* by Cristina Peri-Rossi, and Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (I call myself Rigoberta Menchú and so was born my consciousness)* at the other end, provide examples of contestatory knowledges which at once risk reinscription into the ontology of the Western subject and yet subvert the existing order of discourse and power. The women in the Taller "Lecturas de Mujeres" in Santiago de Chile seem to have developed a theoretical position of their own which accounts provisionally for subject production. They use the term *comparacer* to signal the emergence of a feminine "mestiza" 'configurations of othernes' subject. As Olga Grau writes, *comparecer* would mean more than the presentation of one's body for proper identification when summoned by the the power of state. *Comparecer* means more than presence, more than to bear witness in oral or written deposition before the law. *Comparecer* is to break the silence and establish subjectivity in the presence of the other:

Comparezco ante ustedes armando palabras, apropiándome de este espacio por un momento. Mi decir es posible en el silencio de ustedes. El silencio de los otros es siempre lo que sostiene el habla del hablante, y lo que crea un hueco

de poder a éste. Si es interrumpido, vilependiado o cuestionado, se pondrá a prueba si es un sujeto de poder o, dicho de otro modo, el que pueda extender su propia habla al pensamiento de otros.

I appear before you brandishing words, in order to take charge of this space, for one moment. My word is possible in your silence. It is the silence of others that sustains, always, the word of the one who speaks and what makes a possible power airpockets for him. If he is interrupted, questioned, or reviled, his status as subject of power will be questioned. In other words, his power to extend his thinking to the thought of other subjects will be tested. (58)

Thus the subject of the women of the *taller* appears in the interstices of its power relations with the law, that is the public, discursive manifestation of the State and all other aspects of social exchange.²²

Notes

1. It is striking to note that the publication of books and even the operations of "centros para el estudio de la mujer" are supported by US and European foundations. For instance, the Center for Latin American Social Sciences (CLACSO) sponsored the "Primer Concurso Latinoamericano de Investigaciones y Formación Sobre la Mujer" (1987-88). It also supported the publication of "Mujer y Sociedad en América Latina," Buenos Aires, 1991. Likewise, the "Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristán" published the proceedings of two workshops that took place in Mexico City (1983) and Lima (1985) with funding from the Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation. The Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristán published *Mujeres latinoamericanas: Diez ensayos y una historia colectiva* in Lima in 1988. The editors of the volume see it as a first attempt on the part of women intellectuals to engage with the political struggle that other women are carrying on in other—deprived and oppressive—institutional or para-institutional settings.

The very active La Morada: Centro de Estudios de la Mujer in Santiago de Chile carries out many of its functions, including health outreach programs and radio broadcasts, with funds from various NGOs. Finally, the Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer at the Colegio de México is closely modeled on North American women's studies centers. This program and its counterpart at the University of Concepción, Chile,

are probably the only two degree granting programs in all of Latin America. But the lion's share of feminine and feminist writing, as well as feminist studies, has taken place in the field of literature in the United States. Besides a plethora of anthologies, translations, critical books, and articles published on nuns, travelers, and educators, the best measure of the vigor of the field can be taken in the annotated bibliographies that have appeared here in the last ten years. Sandra Cypess's *Women Authors of Modern Hispanic South America* and Diane E. Marting's *Spanish American Women Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook* are excellent examples of the well-developed state of the field here. The lopsided comparison with women's studies in Latin America cannot be missed.

2. See the chapter on exile in Amy Kaminsky's *Reading the Body Politic*. Besides the well-known cases of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, Kaminsky also studies the life stories and the writing of the women who had to seek exile because of their controversial politics. In this regard, it is also worth noting the appearance of "testimonios" given by women engaged in regional, ethnic, and national political struggles. The most successful example of these life stories is, of course, the narrative of Rigoberta Menchú's life. For her struggle and her ability to represent it, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

3. Debra Castillo, in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*, notes a similar theory/praxis impasse. She also feels that the refusal to engage theory does not save us from the impasse but rather prevents women from listening to their own patriarchal-founded discourse. Castillo sees in this refusal to engage theory the continuous growth of a "debilitating theory deficit" (33).

4. Soledad Fariña. "En busca de la palabra. Reflexiones en torno a la emergencia de una escritura femenina." In *¿Y nosotras latinoamericanas? Estudios sobre genero e raza*. Sao Paulo, 1992.

5. Gynocritics directly influenced much of the existing scholarship in search of the women forgotten by the patriarchal record of history. Thus, single-author studies have proliferated and in doing so have posed a challenge to the canon. Good examples of this renewed interest in neglected authors are Hernan Vidal, *María Luisa Bombal: La femeneidad enajenada*; Lucía Guerra Cunningham, *La narrativa de María Luisa Bombal*; *Una visión de la existencia femenina*; Marjory Agosin, *Los desterrados del paraíso, protagonistas en la narrativa de María Luisa Bombal*. Also see Maureen Ahern, *Homenaje a Rosario Castellanos*.

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7. See Domna Stanton's chapter, "Autogynography: Is the subject different?" in *The Female Autograph*.

8. See Susana Reisz. "Hipotesis sobre el tema 'escritura femenina e hispanidad.'" *Tropelias. Revista de teoría de la literatura y literatura contemporánea*. Zaragoza. No. 1, 1990, 199-213. In her unpublished essay "Conflictos de 'genero' (y de 'genero') en la poesía de nuestro fin de siglo" read at the Congreso del Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana in Pittsburgh (6/1994) Reisz advances the notion that writing against the grain from a position of "falsedad, ficción, robo o plagio" 'falseness, fiction, theft, or plagiarism,' the young Peruvian poets she studies, question the subjectivity of the European lyric and establish themselves in a "poética del zafarrancho" poetics of utter destruction.'

9. See also Patricia González and Eliana Ortega, *La Sarten por el mango*. In trying to advocate a theory drawn from both the local praxis of women writers and current theoretical trends in the North American academy, Debra Castillo makes use of the cooking metaphor as a method suitable to attain women's goals of self definition; see *Talking Back*.

10. For an example of Freudian theory in the interpretation of Latin American texts see Kemy Oyarzun, "Edipo, autosugestión y producción textual: Notas sobre crítica literaria feminista." In Hernan Vidal, ed. *Cultural and Historical Groundings*.

11. Speculation on the primary stages of the "I" has made Lacan's theory of the subject the center piece of any discussion on interpretation and meaning. In "From Love to Libido," he writes "I is the subject who, alternately, reveals and conceals himself by means of the pulsation of the subject unconscious, we apprehend only partial drives . . . the subject as such is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language. Through the effects of speech the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing more than half of himself . . . [For] the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other, the subject proceeds from this synchronous subjection in the field of the Other. That is why he must get out, get himself out, and in the *getting-himself-out*, in the end he will know that the real Other, just as much as himself, to get himself out, to pull himself free" (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, 188).

12. Soledad Farina notes how frustrated the Taller de Lecturas de Mujeres grew with the problem of the subject and the search for "su palabra, su representacion en el discurso" (49).

13. For an empirical study of how sex and race intersect in the web of colonial power, see John Russell-Wood, "La mujer y la familia en la economía y en la sociedad del Brasil durante la época colonial" in Lavrin, *Las mujeres latinoamericanas*.

14. The idea of sexuality as a form of intelligibility is grounded in Foucault's subtle and complex opposition between sex and sexuality and its relation to power and the law. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault explains what he means by sexuality exceeding the notion of prohibition: "Now, I believe, setting up this opposition between sex and sexuality leads back to the positing of power as law and prohibition, the idea that power created sexuality as a device to say no to sex. My analysis was still held captive by the juridical conception of power. . . . Now there is a trait that is fundamental to the economy of the pleasures as it functions in the West, namely that sex acts as a principle of measure and intelligibility. . . . These two notions, that sex is at the heart of all pleasure and that its nature requires that it should be restricted and devoted to procreation, are not of Christian but of Stoic origin. . . . Sex then became the 'code' of pleasure. Whereas in societies with a heritage of erotic art the intensification of pleasure tends to desexualize the body, in the West this systematization of pleasure according to the 'laws' of sex gave rise to the whole apparatus of sexuality" (190-91).

15. "The feminist appropriation of sexual difference, whether written in opposition to the phallogocentrism of Lacan (Irigaray) or as a critical relaboration of Lacan, attempts to theorize the feminine, not as an expression of the metaphysics of substance, but as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion. . . . As [Jacqueline] Rose points out very clearly, the construction of a coherent sexual identity along the disjunctive axis of the feminine/masculine is bound to fail; the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed reveal not only that 'identity' is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 28).

16. See Doris Sommer, "Rigoberta's Secrets" and George Yudice, *Testimonios*.

17. Though not exactly informed by the thorough critique deployed in *Gender Trouble*, Amy Kaminsky's study of writing done by women in Latin America, *Reading the Body Politic*, Debra Castillo's *Talking Back*, and Emilie Bergmann et al.'s *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin*

America: Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America, make substantial contributions in the direction of reading woman as a set of regulatory practices embedded in a power matrix. However, still suspicious of the ontology of the Western subject, Nancy Hartsock in "Foucault on Power" points to several outstanding difficulties with Foucault's theory of power. Implicit in his theory she sees the Left Colonizer's political ineffectiveness. Hartsock is concerned with Foucault's explicit "attempts to limit the power of his critique by arguing that unmasking power can have only destabilizing rather than transformative effects"; thus, she calls for a theory of power that will enable women, as subjects, to understand the power which oppresses them, to transform the existing set of social relations and to build a different world (165).

18. See for instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Also see Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation*.

19. Foucault states that the political economy of truth is characterized by five important traits: "'Truth' is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement . . . it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption . . . it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses . . . lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation" (*Power/Knowledge*, 131-32).

20. Elspeth Probyn has analyzed the question of local (locale, location) knowledge in relation to feminism. She writes that for Foucault, "It is therefore through a process of location, of fixing statements in relations to other established statements, that knowledge comes to be ordered. It is through this process that knowledge produced in locale are denigrated as local, subaltern and other. Foucault's complex model of power suggest that these subaltern knowledges are not directly oppressed but are merely occluded" (85).

21. See, for example, Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

22. For further reading on the question of feminism, Latin America, and the "public" see Jean Franco, "Going Public: Rehabilitating the Private."

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