

# Dynamics of Change in Latin American Literature: Contemporary Women Writers

Adelaida López de Martínez  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

## Twenty-five Years of Feminism: An Assessment

Making a cultural change in the social economy of gender implies a radical reform of the symbolic or intellectual capital that wholly structures a specific community. It is not merely a question, then, of bringing about concrete changes in legislation, in the economy, or in the peculiarities of gender roles, but also of mobilizing the fundamental attitudes that shape the culture of a community. The internalized abstractions of these attitudes govern their physical expression; in this way, the symbolic subjectivity of the feminine, prescribed by phallocratic power, always capitulates to power . . . the power of discourse . . .

—Damiela Eltit  
“Culture, Power and Boundaries”

The initial, radical feminism of the seventies has run its course. The consciousness-raising that it sought after has largely been realized.<sup>1</sup> The last twenty-five years have witnessed an ideological revolution which has drastically changed the cultural face of the world. By making women visible and endowing them with their own voice—that is to say, by granting them political power, however limited—feminism has brought about a profound transformation in contemporary society. Women are securing the abolition of out-

dated laws in favor of new constitutions, the overhauling of obsolete conventions and protocols, the revision of fundamental attitudes, the overthrow of spurious community values. In this way, feminism is defining the present age and establishing innovative guidelines for the culture of tomorrow. The process of consciousness-raising that was initiated in the sixties has its roots in the Industrial Revolution which made of the human being a valuable instrument of production and thus removed women from the home in order to supply labor for the factories. The last two World Wars confirmed the need, now irreversible, for the contribution of women to the process of economic development. Mechanical and technological advances have modified the nature of the domestic economy: yesterday's artisan producer has become today's consumer; such changes, in most cases, demanded that women find a paying job in order to balance the family budget. Simultaneously a consumer agent and a member of the work force, today's woman works outside the home to satisfy the intrinsic demands of the market, among other reasons. Given that remunerative female labor is vital for the economic development of any nation, no one now denies a woman's right to work outside the home if she chooses to do so. Work, or more specifically paid labor, confers dignity and is wont to awaken the desire for emancipation and autonomy. This is what has happened in the case of modern women.

Great revolutions, especially those as universal as the feminist upheaval of our own era, develop gradually and respond to causes that lie deeper than might first appear. The recognition of women as an integral part of the labor force was undoubtedly the catalyst for the beginnings of the feminist movement; however, the feminist movement is also the cultural manifestation of a change worked on the collective unconscious by the psycho-historical climate of contemporary society. Western civilization, following the path of the individual's search for knowledge, had gradually abandoned the intuitive in favor of the functional rationalism that marks the twentieth century. From the moment Descartes, correcting St. Augustine, equated being not with loving God and understanding His masterpiece (the universe), but rather with thinking, the Western world has privileged the rational. The

Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" made man the subject or point of reference, and reduced reality to a system of representations, thereby eliminating the need to establish a connection between man, the cosmos, and God as the source of all knowledge. That which was not representable by an objective method of conceptualization ceased to exist, thus creating a vacuum where once there stood a hierarchical value system that regulated human potential. Humanity was liberated, but simultaneously deprived of moral orientation and faith in its own transcendence. The secularized, post-Nietzschean world we inhabit lacks a center, a point of reference to give meaning to its system of relativities. The anxiety occasioned by this spiritual vacuum, for which neither reason nor materialism can compensate, has spawned the existential *angst* of our time.

Contemporary psychology clearly explains how the unconscious perceives phenomena before the conscious mind begins to conceive them rationally. More specifically, Carl Jung's essays have shown the intrinsic relationship between historical events and the collective unconscious. The approach of the milenium brings constant reminders of the dangers implicit in privileging the phallogocentric codes of violence for such codes foster rampant terrorism on a personal level just as, in the same anonymous and irrational manner, international conflict menaces the public sphere. This threat affects us all. We know that anyone can become the victim of a madman (as in the New York subway or the Oklahoma City bombings), of a nuclear holocaust (such as Chernobyl), or of an ecological disaster (an offshore oil spill, for instance).

A thousand years ago, humanity experienced an unconscious and collective fear that the first millennium of the Christian era would coincide with the final judgment prophesied in the Apocalypse, and instinctively sought refuge in a maternal womb whose iconographic representation was made concrete in the cloak of the Virgin Mary; hence the great Marian devotion of the High Middle Ages. The secular version of the same process is Modern feminism, whose deepest roots lie in an unconscious and collective need to compensate for the individual and official aggressiveness that in one way or another holds humanity hostage. The postmodern psyche

no longer feels threatened by a divine justice capable of unleashing cosmic forces; rather, our greatest fear is the gratuitous violence that has become a hallmark of our time. This violence is nothing more than a further and extreme indication of the dominant phallogocentric system that for centuries has unilaterally dictated the development of our culture. The collective unconscious, which has always functioned as a dynamic self-regulatory system in search of maximum equilibrium, is manifest in the modern tendency to compensate for this violence by incorporating a feminine perspective—kinder and more compassionate—into the spheres of power.

The collective unconscious, aspiring as always to a perfect (if unattainable) order, is liberating the feminine dimension of the self. The unconscious tendency to seek perfection by integrating the complementary opposites of the male and female principles into one androgynous governing principle constitutes the basis for the socio-cultural movements that currently proliferate at every level, from unisex fads to academic programs promoting women's studies in diverse disciplines. The evolution of fashion in our own century is a concrete indicator of what is taking place in the collective psyche; for example, upon securing the right to vote in the twenties, women shortened their skirts. This seemingly trivial event, modified in its subsequent repercussions—the mini-skirt and bikini of the seventies, the newest topless swim wear of the eighties—all attest to women's ever-increasing assertiveness, exposing the nude female body with no implication of promiscuity or pornography. A woman's body is no longer the locus of ethical or moral strictures, nor is it a requisite subject of male exploitation: a woman may undress at will.

In 1950, when Pope Pius XII declared as official dogma the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, he was also responding to the collective psyche's need for completeness. Jung, who was not Catholic and who conflated religion and myth by considering them both to be collective psychic phenomena, interpreted Rome's proclamation as another response to the demands of the collective unconscious searching for perfection in the harmony of plurality (*Answer to Job*). With the integration of "the feminine"—hope and compassion—into the heavenly triad of the Holy Trinity, the divine triangle

was completed and became a quadrilateral: the foundation of the mandala or circle, a form perfect and complete in its absence of beginning or end.<sup>2</sup>

The first *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizens* appeared in 1793, when French women, who had fought alongside men for liberty and equality, set out to win the same rights for themselves. They were ultimately deprived of those rights, however. Their persecution reached its peak with the execution of their leader, Olympe de Gouges, on the third of November, 1793. This humiliation culminated in the deeply chauvinist Napoleonic Code (later unfortunately extended throughout all of Latin America) which prohibited the formation of any kind of women-only society or association in post-revolutionary France (Calvera 147-53). But the seed had begun to take root. The Utopian thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century understood the legal emancipation of women as an inevitable reality. One of them, Charles Fourier, coined the term "feminism" to denote women's protest against an unfair social structure. "Feminism" became a household word in 1892 when the first Congress for the Rights of Women took place under the presidency of Marguerite Durand (Calvera 154).

Today's women can no longer be silenced nor remain invisible. The example of the European Community serves to illustrate, two centuries after the French Revolution, what is happening on both the local and international levels: since its establishment the European Community has demanded equality in the workplace, stipulating that each member state must guarantee the same rate of remuneration for female and male workers. In 1976, directives concerning equal access to employment and equal treatment in training, promotion, and conditions of work were approved. Equal treatment under Social Security was mandated in 1978, and extended to the female rural work force as well. A resolution affirming the right to paid maternity leave was passed in 1992. By 1989, of the 518 Eurodeputies, 107 were women (20.6%). As of 1994, of a total of 567 seats, 147 are occupied by women (Carmen Torres, 18). In Norway, which is not a member of the European Union, women hold half of the ministerial posts as well as the presidency. European women are working vigorously

to consolidate their victories in all spheres of power, as can be seen by the abundance of official and nongovernmental agencies, conventions, and publications that emerge almost daily. The first Summit conference on "Women in Power" (Athens, 1992) brought together more than five hundred European women who now maintain a permanent organization, headquartered in Brussels, lobbying for equal opportunity for men and women.

Every day brings fresh reminders of the consequences that feminism has had here in the United States. Feminism has radically changed the perspective of American society. What once seemed natural or insignificant, such as domestic violence or sexual harassment, is now completely unacceptable; and what was once unacceptable, such as premarital sexual relations or unwed motherhood, is now viewed as natural.

Latin American women have also been both agents and beneficiaries of the radical changes in their own countries. Parliamentary representation increases every day and varies between 4.6% (Uruguay) and 12.2% (Costa Rica). Argentina has just decreed that all electoral lists, both local and national, must include at least 30% female candidates; it is hoped that this law will be in operation for the forthcoming parliamentary election. Uruguay, Brazil, and other countries have similar legislation pending.

Napoleonic laws granting the husband absolute legal control in a marriage have been repealed; for instance, it is no longer necessary for a woman to obtain notarized permission from her husband to travel abroad, to open a bank account, or to buy or sell personal property. Motherhood is now considered a matter of personal choice; divorce has been legalized, and even abortion has lost its stigma.

Among the most important achievements of Latin American feminism are the measures that national and local governments are taking to combat abuse and violence against women both inside and outside the home. It was not unusual for well-to-do young men to seduce lower-class women in order to preserve the virginity of their future wives, and many married men did the same as a means of limiting the number of legitimate children. This situation explains the alarming number of illegitimate children found in these countries. Laws

recently passed in Ecuador address this issue: fathers can no longer disinherit their children, and under the law there is no difference between legitimate and illegitimate children; when estates are divided, all children have equal rights. (Of course, the term "illegitimate child" makes sense only within phallogocentric discourse. What mother would make that sort of distinction between her children?).

Sanctioned or not by the government, the participation of women in public life is unstoppable. Women have been instrumental in the fight against dictatorships and official violence in Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, and most recently in the uprisings in Chiapas. In each of these cases women have appropriated for themselves a physical space heretofore reserved to men: the street. Where before they went in order to attend early morning Mass, or to become late-night prostitutes, women now occupy the street as political candidates, activists, dignitaries, and leaders, fighting for causes they consider just. The paradigm of female street performance to be emulated today is the activism of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina). When recently the Ecuadorian government responded militarily to Alberto Fujimori's senseless invasion, eleven feminist organizations from Peru united with eleven similar Ecuadorian groups to protest the war and to demand a peaceful resolution to the conflict. These women had learned that they were under no obligation to sacrifice their sons to the arrogant *machismo* of a patriarchy that resolves differences by force alone, no matter the cost (*Mujeres en acción*, 1995:7). The slogan of these women, "let us turn arms into bread" goes well beyond traditional pacifism. It includes a program of fiscal responsibility that they plan to impose in the same manner as men do: through public debate.

Also new is the spirit of international solidarity developing among women even when their countries are at war, an echo of the domestic solidarity that is overcoming the differences of class and race and bringing women together in their common cause: equality and "democracy in government and at home." Such was the demand Chilean women made of Pinochet and of the entire patriarchy of their country. Councils on women's rights, institutes overseeing the advancement

of women, conferences, official governing bodies, and an ever increasing number of nongovernmental organizations proliferate every day testifying to the visibility of women in all of the enterprises through which Latin America will venture into the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> Looking at the balance of Latin American feminism over the last twenty years it is obvious that, although much hard work lies ahead, the scale tips positively with the weight of “groups of women growing and flourishing, advancing from shouting denunciations to writing proposals, formalizing verbal protests into documents sealed with thousands of signatures, from working in neighborhoods to local positions of power, and from there to the campaign trail and to Congress” (Magly Pineda, founder and director of the Center of Investigation for Feminist Action of the Dominican Republic. *Mujeres en acción*, 2-3, 1994: 64).

#### Feminist and Feminine Literature

What we women will do, and are now doing is to effect a radical change in the electric charge of words. We are inverting their poles, making them positive or negative depending on our own need and not following the rules of inherited, phallocratic language

—Luisa Valenzuela,  
“The Word, That Milk Cow.”  
(Meyers and Olmos, 96)

Just as it has unsettled every aspect of modern life from fashion to dogmas of faith, feminism has changed the codes of communication in every language. And it is only natural that it be so. Language—that is, the faculty of speech—creates and defines the reality of that which we call “the world.” The very existence of a conscious reality depends upon the existence of a system of symbols capable of abstracting and classifying it. That system is language. However, “all images and all signs are modellings that correspond to a specific perspective” (Guerra, 143), which accounts for the enormous power of linguistic signs to transform the socio-cultural order. It is precisely this dynamic that is pressuring feminism to deconstruct that order’s codes. Let the following example

illustrate what I mean. The linguistic sign *man*, which in Spanish, in English, and in many other languages, had served as the signifier of the entire human species, today is reserved almost exclusively for the male. In jest and in all seriousness, one must now specify "women and men" to indicate the human race. The codes of communication have been altered because fundamental attitudes have changed, and reality, in turn, is viewed from a different perspective.

In this revisionist mode feminist literature is proliferating. It received its initial impulse from the feminist movement and from that movement also comes its extraordinary vitality. Committed to the destruction of the thematic and formal stereotypes that had falsified its codes in the past, feminist literature subverts the linguistic, syntactical and metaphysical conventions of patriarchal writing in order to seize the totality of the feminine experience (social, spiritual, psychological, and aesthetic) in texts that run the gamut from angry denunciation to lyrical intimacy. Contemporary female writing breaks with the *status quo* and creates universes that encompass the perspective of women, their values, and their biology. The result is a new canon in literature: an image of reality seen through women's eyes and portrayed by female discourse. Women's image of reality was never entirely absent in literature but now it is depicted in an abundance of texts that constitute "a corpus with its own context, voice and vision [that] should be judged on its own merits" (*Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* 6).

The astonishment at the explosion of feminist writing published throughout Latin America over the last twenty years is subsiding. We are now entering into a moment of reflection and analysis. An international dialogue is beginning to take place among critics and creative writers, seeking points of concurrence and divergence between feminist Latin American literature and other literatures (including literary theory) in both the First and the Third worlds. This is no easy task, but the effort has indeed begun. Given the globalization prompted in the twentieth-century by easy travel and highly developed systems of communication, it is no longer possible to marginalize societies that until recently seemed distant and exotic. This is how and why the textual praxis of Latin Ameri-

can writers has transcended their place of origin, contributing their own experience to the formation of a new aesthetic.

The revision of the canon that feminist Latin American literature is effecting coincides with the emendations made by female literatures written in other languages, embracing previously proscribed themes such as women's sexuality, the denunciation of patriarchal oppression, the search for identity—all that is involved in the process of writing for women in the modern world. Latin American feminist literature differs from other literatures by including Third World problems such as colonialism, silence brought about by political terror, and ecological rape. Expression and thematics, thus expanded, rouse the hegemonic discourse, enriching it with new and hitherto unheard of codes.

I now offer some considerations which I hope will help clarify, on the one hand, the unique character of feminist Latin American literature and, on the other, the historical dynamics driving this literature.

The defining element of Latin American feminist literature is undoubtedly its diverse and multidimensional cultural specificity, spread among nineteen countries that differ profoundly in racial makeup, historical development, and socio-political structure. The feminine experience in the Andean countries, with its high incidence of poverty and large indigenous populations, differs from that of the Southern Cone, marked by political victimization, tyranny, and censorship; these, in turn, are distinct from the Caribbean experience of Cuba or Puerto Rico, countries decisively shaped by their African legacy and by their equally important power relationship with the United States.<sup>4</sup> Lucía Guerra believes that the contribution of Latin American feminism is rooted precisely in its emphasis on heterogeneity, "never far from historical process. [It] is also Latin American heterogeneity that has permitted the exploration, from a new feminist perspective, of an imaginary of *mestizaje* in which women are represented with an autonomy and power that distinguishes them from the images constructed in European culture."<sup>5</sup>

Bearing in mind the underlying diversity in the experiences that inform Latin American feminist literature, I will attempt to define here the thematic, structural, discursive, and critical characteristics that unify it.

a) Latin American feminism has allied itself with independentism, a movement that has had two fundamental consequences in literature.<sup>6</sup> First, a foundational (Spanish) colonialism and a cultural and economic (European and North American) neo-colonialism have been incorporated thematically from the perspective of the conquered, that is to say, as a metaphor of subjugation. Fiction, as well as poetry, is profiled as a journey in space and time, a suitable strategy to contrast the metropolis with occupied territories. The re-evaluation of the indigenous is effected through the creation of heros and mythic spaces with pre-hispanic names and female characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Second, European and Anglo-American feminist critical theories are being sharply rejected because they are recognized as unworkable in the study of "mestizo" or "criollo" literature.<sup>8</sup> A conscious effort is being made to formulate a critical theory germane to the reality that informs Latin American literature.

b) Another important theme of Latin American feminist literature is that of the female struggle for life (which often turns out to be mere survival). Intimately linked with political denunciation and protest, this theme has generated a literature committed to social reform that is now being canonized as essentially Latin American to the point of being designated, even in other languages, with the Spanish term: *testimonio*.<sup>9</sup> Testimonial literature takes its cue from documents, often collected on cassette tapes, that have contributed to the revitalization of that ancient art of recording history and fiction: oral storytelling in feminine voices. In a clear display of solidarity, prominent writers have lent their pens to render the vision of those women doubly marginalized by poverty and illiteracy, in texts already recognized as classics: *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, *Si me permiten hablar*, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. The genre of testimonial literature has captured the imagination of the continent, perhaps because, as Doris Meyer suggests, it is the type of writing with the longest tradition in Latin America, and because, according to Victoria Ocampo, it is the most apt to explain what it means to be Latin American.<sup>10</sup> Cultivated by both men and women, the *testimonio* signals the final break from the "Boom," but its leading models are found in women's

texts that have captured for literature not only the perspective of the oppressed and the marginalized but also their speech: "Numerous works published during the 1980s follow one of Poniatowska's literary models in representing the points of view of lumpen or impoverished working-class characters in an approximation of their own language. The writers may label their works 'chronicles,' or else 'short stories' or 'novels,' but it is often difficult to tell from their discourse which label is more appropriate; that is, whether the characters are actual people who have told the writers their stories (and if so, to what degree the text has been modified by the writer) or whether they are fictional characters based loosely on real people, as in a traditional novel or short story" (Steele 12).

Along with its explanation of the Latin American condition, the great contribution of testimonial literature, or of literature written as *testimonio*, is that, by means of the personal stories of eyewitnesses (real or invented), it fosters a subversion of the "official story" put forth in contemporary political propaganda or in the versions of history canonized by phallocentrism. The fifth centenary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, which has prompted a substantial production of historical novels, has also turned our attention to the chronicles of the conquest and colonialization, launching a feminist revision of the testimonial tradition. This time, however, literature corrects History by refuting the established version of the conquest as found in the archives. Stories that could have been written by Malinche [Cortés's lover and translator] or by other indigenous women are invented, reclaiming for literature the view of the forgotten, the marginal, "the other" Thus, a more accurate record of history is attained. The patriarchy stands corrected in its distortion of the past as well as in its attempts to falsify the present with dictatorial discourse.<sup>11</sup>

c) Parallel to this neorealist current of openly testimonial literature, the Southern Cone has produced a corpus of fictional texts which Monica Flori calls "the novel of censorship." Among the most distinguished exponents of this literature are Luisa Valenzuela, Isabel Allende, Alina Diaconú, Reina Roffé, Alicia Steimberg; their novels escape censorship by thematizing the effects of repression through frag-

mented, puzzle-like structures, with riddles and with a metaphoric, symbolic, and elliptical discourse that demands active participation on the part of the reader. Madness, suicide, and other forms of alienation must be understood as expressions of the fear inspired by dictatorial persecution and torture.<sup>12</sup>

d) As in feminist literature written in other languages, Latin American writers have taken possession of peripheral spaces, especially the domestic scene, proclaiming it the symbol of female Self, power, and writing. As early as 1969, Rosario Castellanos described herself in terms reminiscent of the *moradas* (dwelling places) of Santa Teresa: "I am a wide patio, a grand open house:/ I am a memory" ("Toma de conciencia," *Materia* 28-30). The succulent "gastrotxts" of Laura Esquivel, Rosario Castellanos, Amparo Dávila, Patricia Elena González, and the other writers cited by Debra Castillo in *Talking Back* were born in the kitchen. There is no doubt that culinary language, elevated to the status of literary language, has generated a pattern of detailed discourse, rich in olfactory and gustatory references, until now untapped.

e) Because of its originality, humor in contemporary Latin American feminist literature deserves a separate study. I venture to say that—along with irony—humor has been the most efficient literary means of subverting the patriarchy. By appropriating them intertextually in wonderful parodies, Latin American women writers have challenged and denounced the clichés of moralistic essays, fairy tales, dime novels, romantic songs, and proverbs, which for centuries have kept women caged in absurd stereotypes. Titles such as *La última noche de Dostoyveski*, *Mujer que sabe latín . . . El coloquio de las perras*, *Virgenes y mártires* or the envy of the maternal womb felt in *Cola de lagartija* by the almighty Brujo supermacho, possessor of *three* testicles, determined to conceive and give birth to his own sister, are suggestive and hilarious. Humor has always been an ingenious and effective way of transforming social codes.<sup>13</sup>

f) The other stereotype condemned by Latin American women writers that has acquired specific cultural nuances is that of the mother figure. Women writers in other languages have also dismantled the myth of motherhood as the sole per-

sonal destiny of women, one whose non-fulfillment would turn them into frustrated monsters or incomplete human beings. Latin American women writers have witnessed the emergence of a new maternal role created by the tyranny of anti-democratic and repressive regimes. After having fulfilled their biological reproductive function, many Latin American mothers have inscribed their bodies into the text of History as they denounce the horrors of dictatorship. Lucia Guerra (181) says that the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are the modern equivalent of the *Mater Dolorosa*, but I see a fundamental difference: the submission and silence of Mary at Golgotha have been replaced by the body-word and the written word of Latin American women marching in protest for the disappearance of their children. The fictitious camp followers depicted in Mexican *corridos* (folk ballads) as women at the sexual disposal of the soldiers they followed, have likewise been replaced by flesh-and-blood officers marching at the head of guerrilla armies. No longer objects of invention or subservient hangers-on, Latin American women have become subjects of history and of literary creation. The responsibility that motherhood brings, inasmuch as it is a private act with consequences for the entire community, troubles other mothers: those who, from the pages of literary texts, wonder what sort of social deficiencies could have changed the sweet little baby they once nursed into an instrument of torture and destruction.<sup>14</sup>

g) Although not the exclusive domain of contemporary Latin American literature, the textualization of the female body is indeed prominent in all of its genres. Woman defines herself as textual subject and relates her story, independently of previous stories invented by men. The result has been an uninhibited erotic literature in which desire, passion, fantasy, the subconscious, and the sexual are codified with a striking predominance of tactile metaphors. In many cases, as in that of the Argentinean writer Griselda Gambaro's *Lo impenetrable* (translated into English as *The Impenetrable Madame X*), the conventions of decorum in traditional feminine discourse are openly defied, to the point of bordering on pornography.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the mutiny has been most fierce and prolonged in this area because it is where the greatest and most unjust repression had been felt.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from eroticizing it, feminist Latin American literature touches upon another dimension of the female body by thematizing sexual violence wielded against women. This is a very significant development; only recently has Latin American society, influenced by the consciousness-raising that this matter has prompted in North America, begun to think about the possible legal implications of rape or sexual harassment, practices still sanctioned by custom.<sup>17</sup>

h) The telluric relationship of women to the planet is a distinctive characteristic of Latin American literature, absent in the literatures of other European languages. The violated body of the indigenous woman from the time of the Conquest onward has become the archetypal image of Mother Earth, whose body, rich and bountiful, is continually assaulted by all manner of fortune hunters.<sup>18</sup>

i) With the conversion of the feminine body into the locus of writing, the symbolic constructions of language have changed signs.<sup>19</sup> The following example will illustrate how the symbolic value of language is transformed by a change in perspective. In traditional literature, blood has always suggested violence and aggression; but in the modern feminine imaginary, the blood of the menstrual flow, absent in traditional literature, functions as a metaphor for fertility and creation. Another example is found in the tearing of flesh during childbirth (often appropriated by patriarchal discourse as an image for the "labor" of writing) now textualized as a symbol of a divided identity: "abyss between that which was her own and is now irreversibly separate" (Guerra 172): "this body that is mine and that is not my body."

j) Rhetoric is acquiring a marked oral quality, in poetry as well as in fiction: in poetry, through a tone of protest, evocative of indignant and anguished shouting; in fiction, through the confessional tone of [pseudo]-personal stories (autobiographies, memoirs, journal and letters) whose fragmented structures and scattered points of view preclude the presence of an omniscient narrator.<sup>20</sup>

k) The use of parody to promote the intertextualization of popular culture is privileged in today's Latin American literature. The linguistic codes found in contemporary Latin American women's writing are so varied that it is impossible to list them all. They include publicity announcements and

beauty formulas, recipes, verses of popular songs and romantic poems, old proverbs, ancient superstitions, graffiti, placards, political harangues, newspaper reports, interviews, official declarations, dime novels, science fiction, and soap operas.<sup>21</sup> This is an essential characteristic of Latin American literature written by women: the oral quality of the discourse, indicative of a culture that lives by proverbs and narrative accounts. Latin American patriarchal discourse, even that of the youngest writers, has not freed itself entirely from the academic, theoretical, and conceptual tendencies that characterized the discourse of the "Boom." The broad-reaching polyphony of feminine discourse greatly accounts for the dynamic, elliptical, and syncopated nature of female writing, which has been as effective in deconstructing the stereotypes of phallogentrism as in subverting the censorship imposed by dictatorships.<sup>22</sup>

l) By controlling discourse, women act as their own agents. As such, in the political arena, they help to shape history with a new ethic, and, as writers, they remain conscious of the fact that self-representation requires the invention of new literary strategies. The theme of the feminine condition includes the idea of textual praxis. From the newly discovered perspective of their gender, Latin American women writers are deconstructing patriarchy's conventional poetics while encoding their own ideology of writing. Contemporary Latin America feminine discourse also constitutes a unique form of metawriting.

m) Like their counterparts to the North, scholars of Latin American feminine literature have tried to establish a matriarchal literary tradition, with the intention not of supplanting, but rather of completing the tradition of the patriarchy. Their work of recovery is bringing to light the full history of Latin American literature, a literature that unfolds like a fan opening little by little with the passage of time. Leaving aside pre-Columbian poetry, problematic because of its exclusively oral production in indigenous languages, the handle of this fan of literary history is held, unquestionably, by the heroic figure of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-95), the first American poet of note to write in a European language.<sup>23</sup> The daughter of a Spanish father and a *criolla* mother, Sor Juana is a

symbol of that which emblemizes our culture and our race: *mestizaje*. For those of us women who think, read, and write in Spanish, this symbol is of paramount importance because Sor Juana is also the first American feminist, whose writings attest to the fact that women possess the creative potential to overcome the hostility of any phallogocentric system.

Recent research demonstrates that the greater part of colonial feminine literature has been preserved because it developed in convents. This explains the prevalence of ethical-religious themes. The gender of the authors accounts for the familiar, domestic discourse found in this writing which, more often than not, takes the form of chronicles or autobiographies. In their splendid anthology, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Words*, Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf document an extensive female conventual literature.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of recognized female writers (still only sporadically published), who did not always approach feminine issues from an openly feminist perspective.<sup>24</sup> This is no longer the case. The first generation of twentieth century Latin American female poets (Mistral, 1889-1957, Agustini, 1886-1914, Storni, 1892-1938 and Ibarbourou, 1895-1979) earned admittance to the prevailing canon in spite of the tone of feminist denunciation and protest permeating their works, thus revealing yet another panel of the unfolding fan.

The eruption of Latin American female literature really begins mid-century and is supported by the Mexican-Argentine axis represented by Rosario Castellanos (1925-78) and Elena Poniatowska (b.1933) in the North, and Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) and Griselda Gambaro (b.1928) in the South. The writers of this generation are the direct precursors of a literature that in theme and discourse can be called truly feminist.<sup>25</sup>

The seventies witnessed a plethora of books published by women. This is not the moment to compile a list of titles or to try to separate out what is literature—metaphor, suspense, mystery, epic—from what is only personal anecdote or political pamphlet. Neither can we ignore the fact that, as Peggy Job (Steele 14) has documented, in Mexico alone more than fifty female authors have published novels and collections of

short stories in the last twenty-five years.<sup>26</sup> If we add to this figure the names of poets and of women writers from other Latin American countries, the total is staggering.

What is evident is that Latin American women writers have paid into the canon and transformed it. Although the generation of the "Boom" includes no women, two of the six articles selected by the distinguished Hispanist Donald Shaw for the 1995 special issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* on post-"Boom" literature, dealt with women novelists. Even more significantly, in the introductory article defining post-"Boom" aesthetics, Shaw supports his theoretical hypotheses with texts and critical opinions of both male and female contemporary Latin American writers.

n) A literary theory that is singularly Latin American does not yet exist although there is a clear awareness of the need to formulate one. Critical reflection is not in short supply, but it often takes the form of analyses of individual texts or studies of generational groups or national traditions. There have been attempts at inquiry into this area, such as the theory of dependency developed by Angel Rama through his study of the connection between Ruben Dario's *modernista* (turn of the century) aesthetic of luxury and the international economy of the end of the 19th century. However, at this moment most theoretical propositions continue to issue from the more developed societies.<sup>27</sup> This void in Latin American literature points clearly to the need for collective self-examination as the only means of salvaging our precarious sense of identity, which continues to be threatened by new forms of colonialism. We took a step forward when we admitted that there are no neutral readings, but the construction of a feminist theory based upon the double otherness of Latin American women writers still remains unrealized.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, we have now begun to move beyond the initial outburst of feminist protest that, as in all true revolutions, was necessarily strident. We have now indeed changed the world—albeit minimally—and we have directed the eyes and ears of contemporary society toward women's words and actions. It is now time to frame our agendas and serenely present our demands. There is a long road still to travel, but new generations can only go forward.

Such is the context in which Latin American feminists are writing; they are reinventing themselves as they invent men, and are discovering hitherto unexplored sectors of the human psyche and of human existence. In the process, Latin American women writers today are finding new signs with which to communicate their unique perception of the universe; they are liberating discourse from patriarchal taboos, and inscribing their ideology of emancipation in their texts. They are changing history by writing in consonance with the most intimate rhythms of their female bodies.

Feminist literature, directly committed to reforming the structures of political power, plays a critical role in contemporary society. In this sense, modern Latin American feminist literature is a response to a challenge to the continent best expressed by Octavio Paz: "The most urgent matter is that the 'Third World' recover its essential Self and that it confront its own reality. This requires a rigorous and merciless criticism of ourselves and of our relationship to modern ideas. These ideas have many times been mere superpositions; they have not been instruments of liberation but only masks. As with all masks, their function is to defend us from the gaze of others, and through a circular process that has been described many times, from our own scrutiny. While hiding us from the world, our mask hides us from ourselves. This is why the 'Third World' needs, more than political leaders—an abundant species—something much more rare and precious: critics. We are in need of our own Swift, Voltaire, Zamiatine, Orwell. And, since hypocritical and pedantic puritanism rules nowadays in the ancient kingdoms of the Dionysian orgy and of erotic knowledge, we also need a few vernacular Rabelais and Restif de la Bretonne" (*Corriente alterna* 216).

I predict that the Swifts, the Voltaires, the Orwells, and the Rabelais of the twenty-first century will be Latin American, that they will write in vernacular Spanish and that they will have a woman's name.

## Notes

1. The high degree of visibility that women have acquired in the last several years is undeniable. One need look no further than the publicity given to the 1995 Women's Conference, held in China under the sponsorship of the United Nations. The first conference of this type took place in Mexico City in 1975 with a much lower attendance, and passed almost unnoticed. At the 1995 Conference, women's rights were granted the same status as human rights in general. Both the Vatican and the totalitarian Chinese government were forced to adopt a conciliatory tone. The seasoned activist Betty Friedan took the opportunity to channel the feminist movement in a new direction by encouraging an alliance with men in order to fight together for the implementation of economic policies that protect both sexes equally.

2. Lucia Guerra (84-86) objects that Jung's distinction between "the feminine" and "the masculine" as categories of Being "ontologizes aspects that do not exist except as cultural constructions subject to historical change." Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the contribution of Jung's theories to the understanding of the cultural evolution that has culminated in the feminist movement of our time.

3. Carmen Torres (*Mujeres en acción* 1995) says that "as a result of the various demands from NGOs and of the women's movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, something is happening. In 1994 four organizations (UNICEF, the Inter-American Development Bank, The United Nations Fund for the Advancement of Women, and the Inter-American Women's Commission) began a program to support women leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean. The program, implemented by national organizations specializing in women's issues, offers short-term courses, conferences, and seminars to help women in positions of social and political leadership achieve their goals."

4. Laura García Moreno (*Diacritics* 77) sees "narcotraffic, the external debt, soap operas, and economic negotiations" as the forces that still bind Latin American countries together as some kind of entity, although she agrees with Nelly Richard when Richard (157) points out that "the physiognomy of the 'we' implicit in the term 'Latin America' is so dissimilar that it fragments the subject of enunciation into incompatible parts."

5. "Other societies do not share our magical, mythic past, nor the colonial character of our cultures, subjugated by more powerful nations, first through the Latin alphabet, then by language, both articulations of imported power. Undoubtedly, to interrupt a tradition, a way of talking, of naming or defining an object of knowledge or of experience is never an easy task. In Latin America we work at the crossroads of two directions:

our colonial past and our neocolonial present” (Iarregui, Wichita). There is a clear awareness throughout the continent that this is the case: “Latin American literature today continues to exhibit its dual origins. It is informed by its own Third World reality while responding to the influences of the First World. That is to say, Latin American Literature is distinct from, but still carries the unmistakable stamp of the other culture” (da Cunha). Many similar statements could be cited, but I will end here with the words of an assiduous observer of Latin American culture, Naomi Lindstrom: “The fact that Latin American authors depend on European languages assures that the region’s literature can never be free of European influence.” The double marginality of Latin American women writers has undoubtedly dictated their thematic options and molded their discourse.

6. There is nothing unusual in the fact that feminism has found solidarity with other oppressed groups. English feminists in the first half of the 20th century followed the lead of the suffragists, while North American women had allied themselves with the abolitionist movement. In the case of Latin American women writers, political alliance has transcended literature. Here, Mexican women have been in the vanguard. Two good examples are Rosario Castellanos, who saw a common purpose in feminism and the pro-Indian political movement, and Elena Poniatowska, whose pen has given public voice to the plight of illiterate women. The actions of these writers predate Julia Kristeva’s theory of the revolutionary potential of discourse.

7. There are many instances of contemporary Latin American writing in which anti-colonialism and feminism are fused: *Entrada libre* by Inés Manilow (Argentina); *Colombina descubierta* by Alicia Freilich (Venezuela); The drama *Prehispanic Cabaret* by Jesusa Rodríguez (Mexico); The poetry, and the novel *La mujer habitada*, of Gioconda Belli (Nicaragua); *La niña blanca y los pájaros* by Rosario Aguilar (Nicaragua); *Por la patria* by Diamela Eltit (Chile), and the poetry of Rosario Ferré and Giannina Braschi (Puerto Rico).

8. “Mestizo” indicates a racially mixed individual with one Indian and one Spanish parent. “Criollo” stands for purity of blood as in an individual born in the New World of immigrant Spanish parents.

9. Elzbieta Sklodowska (63) recently argued that “by early 1980s *testimonio* was canonized as a super-genre of sorts that was seen to have changed forever the paradigm of subaltern (under)representation in Latin America.” Doris Meyer (*Review*, 59) corroborates:

The testimonial genre—from the chronicles of the conquest to the protest of indigenous voices today—might qualify as the most au-

thetically Latin American literary expression. The subjective imperative that informs testimonial literature is the need to explain, directly or indirectly, the condition of being Latin American. Victoria Ocampo realized this and saw it as the compass point of all her writing. In her first volume of *Testimonios*, in an essay entitled "French Words," written in 1931 (the same year she began *Sur*), Ocampo confessed: "If I hadn't been American, after all, I probably wouldn't have felt this thirst to explain, to explain us and to explain myself. In Europe when something is produced, you could say it is explained beforehand; each event gives the impression of carrying an identity tag from the time it occurs and it is appropriately shelved. Here, on the other hand, each thing, each event is suspicious and suspected of being something without precedent. We have to examine it from top to bottom to try to identify it, and sometimes when we try to apply the explanations that analogous cases would receive in Europe, we find that they don't fit. Then, here we are, obliged to close our eyes and advance, gropingly and hazardously, toward ourselves; to try to find out to what extent the old explanations can be applied to new problems. We hesitate, stumble, deceive ourselves, tremble, but continue obstinately along. Even though, for now, the results may be mediocre, who cares? Our suffering isn't. And that's what counts. This suffering must be so strong that someday someone feels the urgency to overcome it by explaining it."

10. See what Victoria Ocampo says on this subject in note #9.

11. The Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet consistently referred to political dissidents as "non-Chileans" and to his supporters as "patriots" and "true Chileans."

12. In an interview with Monica Flori in 1987, Alina Dianconú explains the fragmentary structure of her novels: "They are puzzles that I use to achieve a plurality of voices. My novels aren't linear stories, and the use of this technique is part of the puzzle that I present to the reader. It also has to do with achieving the active participation of the reader" (Flori, 137).

13. The extensive use of gastronomic language is not always humorous or ironic. Elena Poniatowska uses the following metaphor to talk about the effects of the earthquake that devastated Mexico City in 1985: "Frightened, I lie down. I am inside a cocktail shaker, agitated by the masterful hand of a bartender whose energy grows by leaps and bounds." (Translated by Schmidt and Schmidt. Steele, 3).

14. Such is the case of the protagonist in Griselda Gambaro's *Ganarse la vida*: "Which of these two? They were born together, cried out at the same moment. Oh, if only it were possible to know! But nothing is really under-

stood in this great unknown—what a marvel it is!—the mystery of life” (quoted by Hortensia Morell, *Revista Monográfica* 188).

15. William Foster establishes an interesting relationship between pornography and Argentina’s dictatorial policies of repression: “Alejandra Pizarnik’s *La condesa sangrienta* was published in final book form during the military regime preceding the Proceso, one year before Pizarnik’s suicide in 1972. However, it too became a clandestine classic, being reissued in 1976 and read, despite its immediate reference to a seventeenth-century Hungarian noblewoman, as an allegory of lawless, arbitrary power, shaded by the morbid fascination of the relationship between torture and sexual excitement. Griselda Gambaro’s *Lo impenetrable* (*The impenetrable Madam X*, 1984) while ostensibly a spoof of male-centered, pseudo-eighteenth-century pornography, also explores the restructuring of public morality made possible by the return to democracy: the decentering of male hegemony represented paradigmatically by sober and brutal military institutions, in terms of female sexual initiative, with appropriate openness toward lesbian opportunities, is an emphatic recasting of the restrictive social culture authorized by a dictatorship driven by concerns other than those of individual rights” (*Violence in Argentine Literature* 10).

16. Until the period of the “Boom,” literature written in Spanish, both by men and women, had exhibited an excess of modesty. For example, whenever the plot seems to call for the description of an erotic scene, Galdós puts an abrupt end to the chapter and moves on without comment. Unamuno declared himself incapable of resolving this type of situation and confessed that the only mildly erotic scene in his novels (the one between Augusto Pérez and Rosarito, in Chapter XVIII of *Niebla*) was copied from Felipe Trigo.

17. A conscientious and systematic review of news reports, both in print and on television, reveals the almost total absence of information about cases of rape or sexual harassment. The immunity that men enjoy regarding these issues is made possible by the class system still in place throughout Latin America. Indian women as well as maids and other low-paid women working in urban areas, have been culturally conditioned to accept sexual abuse as the birthright of their employers.

18. Examples of the intensity of this telluric relationship in modern Latin American feminine literature are found, among others, in the poetry of Giocanda Belli (Nicaragua) and the narrative of Nélide Piñon (Brazil) whose *The Republic of Dreams* was declared the best novel of 1983 (Josef, *Review* 47).

19. For a clear and concise explanation of the significant relationship between the body, language systems, and female writing, see Lucia Guerra’s *La mujer fragmentada* (152-155).

20. Fernando Reti's statement about the fiction of Alina Diaconú (quoted here by Monica Flori) can be extended to include the majority of modern Latin American narrative: "By eliminating the omniscient narrator and replacing him with the protagonists' voices, the narration denies authoritarianism."

21. As may be expected, there are many instances of the type of discourse that is distinctive of autobiographies, intimate letters, and personal journals. However, these are more structural than ironic in nature.

22. For example, by its very nature, testimonial literature demands a fragmented or "syncopated" discourse. Debra Castillo's analysis of the elliptical quality of feminine discourse as a stylistic characteristic of Luisa Valenzuela's narrative is most convincing. Gloria da Cunha-Giabai, in her study of Ana Teresa Torres' fiction, explains how the new Latin American feminine novel creates a "different" literary discourse by blending a wide variety of literary styles.

23. Pedro Henríquez Ureña has identified a pair of aboriginal poets in the Caribbean region, and Gladys Ibarregui has documented the existence of Pre-Columbian women in Mexican territory who excelled in the arts of storytelling, drawing, and weaving. Those women include a great storyteller known as the "Lady of Tula" who was also the concubine of Nezahualpilli; a distinguished poet, the princess Macuilxochitzin; and a codex painter, Cihuatlahcuilo. See also: Patrick Johansson's book, *La palabra de los aztecas* (The Aztec Word).

24. The task of rescuing the history of female literature continues, supported mainly by university research centers such as the Colegio de México and its counterparts in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries. Among the most outstanding successes is the work of Ana Rosa Domenella and Nora Pasternac in *Las voces olvidadas: Antología crítica de narradoras mexicanas nacidas en el siglo XIX*. This research is complemented by the North American academy, which has produced works of reference such as Diane Marting's dictionaries, *Spanish American Women Writers. A Bio-Biographical Source Book*, and *Women Writers of Spanish America. An Annotated Bio-Bibliographical Guide*. Jean Franco's *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, and Francine Masiello's *Between Civilization and Barbarism* also emphasize the rich contribution of Latin American women writers of the 19th century.

25. Here the list becomes notably longer and attempts to write it run the risk of including only those writers already endorsed by the canon. Some of these writers have attracted the attention of even distinguished male critics. Such is the case of Griselda Gambaro and Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1973) amply studied by David William Foster.

26. For a particularly clear periodization of modern Mexican literature, see Cynthia Steele's excellent monograph, *Politics, Gender and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988*.

27. It is, paradoxically, in North American universities that interest runs highest in the articulation of a Latin American feminist poetics germane to its unique cultural context. My list of works cited includes the works of magnificent hispanists such as Amy Kaminsky, Debra Castillo, Doris Sommer, Sara Castro-Klarén, Jean Franco, Patricia Elena González, Eliana Ortega, Gabriela Mora, and Karen Van Hooft.

28. This justifies Debra Castillo's conclusion that "Theory following from rather than guiding, practice, it may be argued, is the only authentic Latin American way" (32). "[A] refusal to make a rigid discrimination is in keeping with a general tendency in Latin America, where the relationship between the writer and the critic tends to come unstuck, and so many of the best writers are also the best critics and theoreticians" (xxii). And finally: "But unfortunately for those of us who would like to imagine a new, neatly distinctive category, although many works of Latin American feminist bent have appeared in the United States and in various countries in Latin America in recent years, no particularized, clearly innovative theory has yet emerged" (1).

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