

Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica

Number 40

*The Configuration of Feminist Criticism and
Theoretical Practices in Hispanic Literary
Studies*

Article 3

1994

Introduction: The Configuration of Feminist Criticism and Theoretical Practices in Hispanic Literary Studies

Cynthia Duncan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and
the [Poetry Commons](#)

Citas recomendadas

Duncan, Cynthia (Otoño-Primavera 1994) "Introduction: The Configuration of Feminist Criticism and Theoretical Practices in Hispanic Literary Studies," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 40, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss40/3>

This Introducción is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact dps@providence.edu.

INTRODUCTION: THE CONFIGURATION OF FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THEORETICAL PRACTICES IN HISPANIC LITERARY STUDIES

Cynthia Duncan
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

What originally motivated me to put together the present collection of essays was the realization that despite the growing frequency of literary studies on Hispanic texts that might be labeled "feminist," there continued to be a great deal of confusion and debate about the meaning of that term and the critical approach it implied. Students who confronted me with the simple question, "What is feminist criticism?" were met with a puzzled frown, followed by a long silence. The complexity of the issue, which stems in part from the inability of theoreticians to arrive at a universally accepted definition or agree on clearly outlined perimeters for the work they do, is multiplied by the fact that "feminism" refers to many things at once. It is, first of all, a social movement, linked to specific moments in history, which has cast women in the role of rebels as they have attempted to outline a program of change for themselves as citizens and as social beings. Concomitant to this movement, a kind of writing about matters of interest to women has come into being, whether in the guise of political philosophies, social documents, or personal reflections; characterized by diversity, these texts have, nonetheless, provided a loose framework for "feminism" as an ideological platform from which further considerations of women's issues could be addressed.

Written by women and generically termed "feminist" due to their association with the social movement, these texts have, in turn, spawned a kind of writing about women's writing, which has henceforth become categorized under the broad rubric of "feminist literary criticism." It began, in many cases, with an examination of the characterization of women in literary texts, and a realization that the death of women writers in the traditional Canon did not necessarily mean that women had not, throughout history, been writing works

of literary merit. Early feminist criticism often consisted of the unearthing and valuation of texts by women writers that had previously been ignored, unpublished, or underappreciated. They tended to focus on the "image of women" that emerged in female-generated texts, and sometimes contrasted the portrayal of women characters in works by men and women writers. Studies of this type eventually led critics to conjecture about the way males and females use language when writing, and opened the door to the yet-to-be-resolved question of whether or not language can be gender-specific.

As feminist literary theory evolved, ideas borrowed from structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction were interwoven into critical studies whose basic aim continued to be essentially "feminist," but whose "feminist" approach was less overt and direct than it had been in early thematic studies of texts written by or about women. The political nature of feminism as a social movement linked it (at least, in the hands of some scholars) to Marxist criticism, which established a link between the treatment of women characters in fiction, the commercial and critical response to texts written by women, and the historical or cultural conditioning that has positioned women as "inferior" to men. Questions of race, class, and sexual orientation were explored, as it became apparent that women's experiences could vary greatly within a society, depending on the woman's social status. Parallel to the work done on ideology, sexuality, and gender, other feminist critics have explored the notion that women are perceived and represented in literature according to a set of complex cultural and linguistic codes, borrowing their theoretical approaches from the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics. With the growing interest in feminist film criticism and the study of popular culture, some feminist scholars have begun to see literary texts as part of a general pattern that conditions the way we think about men and women, and the way we position ourselves according to binary oppositions based on culturally prescribed but arbitrary notions of gender identity. The overlapping of all of these diverse approaches to literary texts, whose only point of intersection is a concern with some aspect of "women's writing" or the representation of women in language, makes it impossible to say where the limits of feminist criticism might be. Certainly, the whole body of thought that has grown up in the interstices between these various areas of exploration show us that there is no limit, and that any attempt to impose one goes against the basic premise of feminism, itself: freedom from restrictive codes, freedom to express oneself in a multiplicity of ways, and the freedom to redefine oneself or to escape definition altogether lie at the heart of the critical method as well as at the heart of the social movement that brought it into being.

The essays in this collection do not answer my student's question, "What is feminist criticism?" in a direct way, since there is no direct answer to the question. But they, do, hopefully, illustrate my point that there are many different approaches and many different interpretations of what feminist criticism can do in terms of opening up a text for our better comprehension of its

treatment of women or of women's issues. They introduce us to women writers who may not be familiar to us; they invite us to "revisit" others who are well known but perhaps misunderstood, misread, or misrepresented in other critical studies; and they present the work of male "canonized" writers for reconsideration in terms of the way they deal with femininity. There is no single, "right" way to undertake a feminist analysis of a text, and the appearance of a new critical method does not signal the death of older, established ways of analyzing a literary work. What constitutes "feminist" criticism for one author does not necessarily correspond to the notions of other authors in the collection, yet there is between them all a fluidity of ideas and a resistance to closure and enclosure which acts as a continuum of sorts, blending the multiple voices and visions into a harmonic structure that is both complex and elusive.

Eliana Rivero's essay, "Precisiones de lo femenino y lo feminista en la práctica literaria hispanoamericana," elaborates a theory of the "feminine" vs. the "feminist" in the context of Latin American criticism, with examples drawn from poetry written by women in the 19th and 20th centuries. Rivero presents a brief overview of the debate that has centered around the meaning of the words "feminist" and "feminine" in Spanish America, showing how the "feminine" has often been used in a derogatory way that has led some feminist critics to abandon its usage altogether. According to Rivero, the "feminine" is a needed category, and as a term, has positive value. It should not be used to set women's writing apart from writing in general, or to call attention to the ways in which it differs from mainstream (male produced) literature but, instead, to give a name (and discursive power) to that which is essentially female by nature and by experience. While sensitive to differences of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, Rivero argues in favor of "lo femenino" as a representation of the universal experience of womanhood. She shows ways in which individual poets have created what can be read as "feminist" texts by focusing on the feminine aspects of their existence. These writers work from within a male-dominated tradition, but ultimately subvert it. Rivero contends that women writers can simultaneously question (and sometimes transcend) the limits that have been imposed on them by patriarchal culture, while still producing texts that give a voice to what is essentially "feminine". She sees anti-essentialist theories as being inappropriate for Latin American women, and regards critics who adhere to these theories as "neo-colonists" under the influence of French and Anglo-American schools. Rivero's article is polemic, but solidly presented and firmly grounded in theory.

In "Invasión a los cuarteles del silencio: estrategias del discurso de la sexualidad en la novela de la mujer latinoamericana," Lucía Guerra Cunningham traces the evolution of the treatment and expression of female sexuality in novels written by Latin American women, from the 19th century up through the present day. Guerra points out how patriarchal society effectively silenced and stifled sexuality in women (in the written text and in life) prior to the twentieth

century as a way of keeping women in a subordinate position and promoting the image of female as an ephemeral "Other" who stood in opposition to man's carnal instincts. Women writers in the 19th century portrayed their female characters as mothers or as purely spiritual beings (without a body), in keeping with dominant discursive practices of the times; women's erotic experiences were not voiced, as they were considered "unnameable" and "unspeakable." Guerra outlines how this attitude began to change in the twentieth century, as women became more aware of the limitations that were imposed on them and began to seek ways to subvert or open the system to include them and allow them to voice their sexuality as part of their feminine essence. She divides writers into generations and shows how each group was responding to the socio-historical moment in which they lived; with the growth of the feminist movement in the late 1960s, the exploration of female sexuality and the expression of female desire became an important part of women's writing, and previously held notions about the erotic possibilities of the female were undermined, overturned, and reconstructed to allow women to re-situate themselves, sexually and psychically, outside the control of a phallogentric society. Recent fiction written by Latin American women, according to Guerra, moves away from binary oppositions of male/female, and promotes a sexually ambiguous category that annuls traditional power structures. Guerra sees this trend as an effort on the part of women writers to reject the sexuality that has been constructed for them by men and to explore ways in which they can create a sexuality of their own using more authentically female forms of discourse.

Gabriela Mora's study, "Discurso histórico y discurso novelesco a propósito de la Quintrala," also examines the portrayal of female sexuality, with specific reference to the treatment of the legendary figure, Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, in a history written in the late 19th century by Bejamín Vicuña Mackenna, and *Maldita Yo entre las mujeres*, a recent novel by Mercedes Valdivieso. Using ideas developed by New Historicism, Mora shows how Vicuña's history is a product of his ideological conditioning, and how it relies more heavily on racist and misogynistic notions about women of mixed blood than it does on historical fact. Despite its aim as a historical text, it more closely resembles a novel, due to the author's reliance on supposition, conjecture, and myth rather than on well-documented facts. Valdivieso's treatment of the same historical material is also a product of ideological conditioning. Written after considerable gains have been made by the women's movement in Latin America, it has a strong feminist bent, and attempts to explain why Catalina committed the crimes for which she has become notorious in Chilean history. Its aim is to revise the image of Catalina, to show her as a victim of patriarchal oppression and possible victim of incest, rather than as the prototypical "evil" woman of Vicuña's text. Mora's comparison and contrast of the two books illustrates how the divisory lines between history and fiction are never clear, and points out how the same story can take on entirely different meanings in

different texts, depending on the perspective from which it is told.

Evelyn Picon Garfield analyzes the relationship between history and fiction from a different angle in her study, "La historia recodificada en el discurso de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda." Here, Picon Garfield focuses on Gómez de Avellaneda's attempts to decenter, recodify, and reconstruct historical episodes treated in literary texts produced by men. Picon Garfield provides a detailed analysis of the drama, *Egilona*, and of the leyenda, "El cacique de Turmequé," as examples of Gómez de Avellaneda's treatment of historical subjects. *Egilona* retells the old Spanish legend of don Rodrigo and the history of the Moorish invasion of the Spanish peninsula, but it shifts the attention away from the traditional protagonist of the story, Rodrigo, and highlights the previously ignored figure of Egilona, Rodrigo's wife. Gómez de Avellaneda creates a more personalized history, one which focuses on the powerlessness and subjugation of women, rather than on the national and patriotic concerns that were traditionally at the core of male-produced texts dealing with the historical event. She rewrites (and at the same time deconstructs) the myth of Rodrigo to show that the struggle between Christians and Moors was not the only battle being fought in medieval Spain: men and women were also at cross purposes, and the power structures which characterized political events of national importance were also at work on the private and individual level. "El cacique de Turmequé" carries a similar message. Picon Garfield compares it to Juan Rodríguez Freire's *El carnero o conquista y descubrimiento del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, and shows how the texts approach the same historical subject matter from radically different points of view. Again, Gómez de Avellaneda enlarges the role played by a female character, Estrella, in order to show how oppression in colonial times affected women to an even greater extent than it did men. Picon Garfield points out Rodríguez Freire's misogynist attitudes and shows how Gómez de Avellaneda's text provides a counterpoint to the original chronicle. While the former blames Estrella (and women in general) for the evils of colonial society, the latter portrays females as victims of a corrupt society that denies them not only personal liberty but condemns them on the basis of their gender. Both *Egilona* and "El cacique de Turmequé" represent, according to Picon Garfield, an attempt on the part of Gómez de Avellaneda to reconstruct patriarchal codes that determine what is said / what is silenced in history, and to break down the hegemony of canonized discourses.

In "Sub/In/Di-verting the Oedipus Syndrome in Luisa Josefina Hernández's *Los huéspedes reales*," Sharon Magnarelli offers a response to readings of the play as a contemporary version of the Electra complex. Magnarelli shows that reading, as well as writing, are conditioned by phallogocentric practices that privilege the masculine, and that attempts to impose an Oedipal structure on Hernández' play may blind us to a number of sites of resistance in the text. As Magnarelli observes, *Los huéspedes reales* is a work that structures itself around the visible and the invisible, the spoken and the unspoken, on a number of levels.

While it may appear on the surface that the father's phallus is the central object of desire in the play, this notion is immediately diverted, inverted and subverted by the manner in which the play's female protagonist rejects the phallus and all that it represents. As Cecilia grapples with the rites of passage that will take her from childhood to adulthood, the models held up by society of "normal" and "natural" interpersonal relationships are examined and interrogated, and ultimately found to be lacking. In one way or another, all of the characters in the play prove unable or unwilling to fulfill society's expectations about gender-specific roles. While some critics see this as proof of the character's flaws or shortcomings, Magnarelli posits that it may just as well prove the shortcoming and inadequacies of the roles themselves. Cecilia's rejection of marriage can be seen as a rejection of the subjugation of women to men, of the double-standards that reward or praise men for behavior that is harmful and demeaning to women, and of the seemingly endless cycle of rigid gender assignation as each generation of men and women reproduce themselves. In this light Cecilia's decision to return to her childhood home, the traditional center of matriarchal influence and a clearly defined area of gynocentric power, is not so much an attempt to "replace" her mother in the father's bed as it is an effort to avoid the trap that led her mother to the father's bed in the first place. The conclusion of the play, marked by the absence of the father and other male characters, signals not only an end, but a beginning as well: it is from this point that a new relationship between Cecilia and her mother will be forged. Because the newly configured relationship between mother and daughter goes against what has been considered the "natural" flow of time and challenges society's imposition of phalocentric models, it stands outside the text as a non-spoken, in-visible and amorphous future that has yet to be defined.

Denise DiPuccio's essay, "*Siete lunas y un espejo* New Texts to Live By," is similar in approach. Focusing on the use of intertextuality in Albalucía Angel's play, DiPuccio shows how the appropriation and reconstruction of female literary figures and historical personages from different epochs, different countries, and different backgrounds, leads us to examine and question the patriarchal norms that have informed their lives. DiPuccio illustrates how the seven female characters of the play all, in one way or another, rebel against the texts that have made clichés of their lives as they attempt to replace the canonized version of their identity with one that is more authentic and more of their own making. George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, Alice of Wonderland, Shakespeare's Juliet, and an unnamed "escritora" engage in a series of conversations which focus on the role of woman as writer/creator versus her role as text/creation. Three recognizable types of literature are specifically brought under scrutiny: the fairy tale, classical theatre, and Greco-Roman myths. As DiPuccio observes, these three forms of discourse encode forms of behavior based on gender-specific roles that teach females to assume a passive position and subordinate their identity to that of a male "hero."

In a similar way, historical and religious treatises have functioned to keep females in the background, as secondary characters or as bit players in dramas acted out by males. Although Angel's characters are aware of the ideological underpinnings of the literary and historical canon that contains their lives and they actively encourage one another to undertake a revision to it, the task is not an easy one. They are threatened, stymied, and sometimes paralyzed by the sheer force of patriarchal influence in Western culture. It is unclear, as the play ends, whether or not they will ultimately succeed in their battle to assume control of their own identities, for as DiPuccio points out, the need for resolution and closure is, in and of itself, a reconfirmation of patriarchal structures. Angel leaves the action of her play suspended, quite literally frozen in place, with no clue as to what the outcome will be. In this manner, she avoids the identifiably masculine structure of conventional drama, and creates an open text in which the characters remain free of the bonds they have, in the course of the play, struggled so hard to break.

In "Gender, Reading, and Intertextuality: Don Juan's Legacy in María de Zaya's *La traición en la amistad*," Catherine Larson examines the way *La traición en la amistad* enters into dialogue with Tirso's *El burlador de Sevilla*, with special attention given to the treatment of relationships between men and women and between reading and writing in the two texts. Larson notes that the two plays are most alike when they deal with the social issues of love, sex, seduction, and friendship; yet, she observes, the different manner in which the writers deal with these issues may point to some important differences between male and female generated texts. Zayas clearly emphasizes relationships between and among women, using the connectedness of female friendships as the essence of her play. She portrays women who assume active roles, who act with authority, and who assume control and power over the male suitors of the play. Furthermore, unlike Tirso, Zayas eschews the use of a phallic, unified "I" as the central focus of her drama, and chooses, instead, to highlight the interrelationships between multiple female characters. Whether her play is indeed a "female-inscribed alternative text," or simply a feminine reworking of traditional *comedia* devices is a question Larson examines in some depth. As she illustrates, the goal of most of the female characters in Zayas's play is marriage; although they are more "liberated" than many other female characters of the Golden Age, they are still bound by the honor code and punished if they do not ultimately give in to the system that seeks to contain them. How we choose to read the play is often conditioned by our expectations about the way women should be portrayed in literary texts, as Larson shows us through a number of simultaneously contradictory readings. By tracing critical reaction to Tirso's Don Juan and studying the implications of those readings on our readings of Zayas's female characters, Larson illustrates how the texts interact with one another and condition us to find exactly what we expect to see.

In a similar vein, Kirsten Nigro discusses the deeply ingrained cultural

patterns that inform our readings of texts in her essay, "Reading Feminist": Re-reading *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* and *La revolución*." Here, Nigro examines some strategies of resistance to readings that encode the feminine in negative terms. Nigro reexamines *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* by Carlos Fuentes and *La revolución* by Isaac Chocrón, and shows how gender issues can be overlooked or misread by critics who have not approached the plays from a distinctly feminist point of view. Following one of Fuentes' suggestions for the staging of his play, *Orquídeas* has sometimes been performed by men pretending to be women, thereby creating for the spectator an extremely complex work that appears to break down clearly defined gender lines. Chocrón's piece deals more openly with the notion of cross-dressing, and also seems to go against the grain of traditional male/female roles in the initial reading of the play. Nigro examines each work, pointing out how it appears to open a space for serious reconsideration of the presentation of gender on the surface, but how, upon closer examination, it actually reinforces pre-existing notions about masculinity and femininity that stigmatize the feminine as inferior, irrational, and unstable. Nigro re-reads Fuentes seemingly postmodern text as one that is fundamentally modernist at heart: she sees it as a parody (rather than a deconstruction) of what it presents, and shows how its discourse on women deviates very little from the long-standing and culturally acceptable traditions of the male-dominated literary canon. She suggests that it is a text which plays with and jokes about gender, but does not permit gender to be reformulated or reconsidered in a new way. Rather than mock the notion of a "paradigmatic female," Fuentes reaffirms it by creating a text that depends upon the stereotypical, "essentialized" qualities that are culturally associated with femininity in Mexico as the butt of his joke. Just as his characters, Dolores del Río and Mar'a Félix, align themselves along binary oppositions that echo traditional heterosexual relationships and cast them as a sort of "odd couple" in the culturally determined roles of "female" or "male," so too do the gay male characters of Chocrón's play. Gabriel and Eloy become a paradigm of the romantically linked couple whose dynamics depend on each one carrying out the role culturally assigned to the masculine or the feminine. As in the case of Fuentes' play, *La revolución* also relies heavily on the archetypal female pose of weakness and passivity. Any attempt to break out of this culturally defined role ends in the transgressive female's banishment or punishment, as Nigro's reading of Gabriel's death reveals. While *La revolución* appears to resist heterosexuality as the "norm" for males, it is not as subversive as it appears on the surface, for despite its gay subject matter, it continues to reaffirm and support the notion that the male is superior to the female. As Nigro sees it, the danger in reading *La revolución* as a text that liberates us from culturally-determined gender roles is that this reading obscures the strong anti-feminist (or anti-feminine) message of the play. Nigro encourages us to resist texts of this type, and to continue to search for new paradigms through which gender issues

can be addressed in a more positive way.

Marcia Welles takes a fresh look at the representation of femininity in the works of three Spanish masters in her essay, "Goya, Ortega, and Martfn-Santos: Intertexts." She examines the complex workings of intertextuality in Martfn-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio*, showing how the reference to Goya's famous painting, *El aquelarre* (or *The Witches' Sabbath*), in the novel provokes a series of ruminations on the part of the protagonist, Pedro, which leads to an implicit criticism of Ortega and Gasset's philosophical treatises on "the problem of Spain." At the primary level of narration, the painting functions as an intertext, through which Martfn Santos lays bare the weakness of the philosopher; at the secondary level, it ironically exposes a concealed subtext in the novelist's fiction, where women (as perceived and imagined by men) threaten to subvert the rational order. Welles examines the unconscious processes at work that link Pedro's contemplation of *El aquelarre* to Freud's conception of "the uncanny." She shows how Goya's witches become the embodiment of sexual evil, a concept which allows us access to the latent level of irrationality that exerts pressure on the rational surface level of narration in both the painting and the novel. In the portrayal of women as witches, as those who covet the phallus and threaten castration, both the painter and the author retain traditional male/female gender assignments, using woman as a metaphor for that which subverts the "natural" order and destabilizes the social fabric. As a defense mechanism against the inherently dangerous (sexualized) female, males adopt an attitude of general denigration toward women and perceive them as inferior beings, confined to the world of the flesh. Through this dialogue on women as markers of irrationality, anti-structure, inferiority, and abjection, the novel and the painting open a space for the re-examination and deconstruction of Ortega's ideas about Spain. The Spanish/Germanic dichotomy envisioned by the philosopher parallels the female/male or irrational/rational models outlined by both the novelist and the painter. Just as Freud had defined female sexuality in terms of the "lack" of something given positive value (the phallus), so too does Ortega define Spain vis-a-vis her northern European neighbors. By allegorical extension, Martfn Santos conjures up a devastating image of Spain on her knees, poised in the most servile of feminine sexual acts, seeking to gratify a powerful (phallic) Northern Europe. While he reduces Ortega's conception of Spain to a bitterly satiric level, Martfn-Santos ironically re-confirms one point made by the philosopher and underlines what both writers have in common with Goya: all see women as creatures who submit to the will of others, who lack reason and intelligence, and who are unable to control their own carnal desires. Even as the three texts play off and against one another, parodying, teasing, contesting and reconfiguring one another, they ultimately converge in their underlying message: if man finds himself unable to transcend his own mortality, they tell us, it is because woman is there to remind him of his body, to undermine his rational forces, and to drag him back down to earth. By pointing out the implications of

the complex metaphorical field of the novel, Welles makes us aware, as readers, of the depth of the misogynistic tradition in Spain.

Debra A. Castillo undertakes a similar task in "Meat Shop Memories: Federico Gamboa's *Santa*." Reading against the grain of Gamboa's novel, Castillo shows how the interstices and ellipses of the text produce a feminine "equivoice," or countervoice to patriarchal discourse, which calls attention to the way in which the male author evades the question of female sexuality and de-centers the very subject of his narration. Although the novel deals with prostitution, the demands of propriety and the author's own sense of aesthetics prevent him from naming Santa's profession in the text; he explicitly removes her from the socially acceptable category of "woman," only to leave her dangling in a vaguely titillating yet morally upstanding kind of linguistic void. She becomes something that cannot be spoken or written, an empty sign without a signifier, to be consumed by her clients and by the readers of her tale. Gamboa portrays her both as an aesthetic object (to be re-created by the writer, or the artist who will mold her and shape her being), and as a de-aestheticized commodity (to be consumed by her clients and by the readers of her tale.) These two roles are brought together through the metaphor of the meat shop, which stands in for the brothel. Castillo carefully traces the way in which an equation is established between human beings and meat for consumption, the work of art and the piece of trimmed meat, the artist's desk and the butcher's table, the reading public and the prostitute's client. By calling attention to the ways in which female sexuality is commodified for consumption, the brothel becomes an extended metaphor for other industrial-age institutions, such as factories and schools, which function in a similar manner to produce "bestias humanas" to be consumed by society at large. As Castillo points out, the reduction of female sexuality to an unspoken, unwritten abstraction in the text presents us, as readers, with an intriguing paradox: we are asked to "consume" the author's portrayal of Santa's tremendous sexuality, despite the fact that we are left with little or no understanding of it. It is through this kind of fissure that revisionist readings take place. In her examination of Gamboa's novel, Castillo opens a space for the further interrogation into the question of women's sexuality, and the manner in which female sexuality can be represented in fiction.

In "*Baldomera* y la tra(d)ición del orden patriarcal," Michael Handelsman studies Alfredo Pareja Diezcanseco's novel *Baldomera*, pointing toward inconsistencies and contradictions in the novelist's treatment of the female protagonist. While other critics have read *Baldomera* as a strong, independent woman who breaks free of the limits imposed by patriarchal society, Handelsman shows how she is, in effect, coopted by the system and is forced to speak for the author, who voices misogynist notions about the character and role of women. *Baldomera* functions as a symbol of the oppressed and the downtrodden, as a representative of Ecuador's working class in the 1930s, but Handelsman argues that she is little more than a stereotype, a mythical re-creation of woman, and

that she does not, as other readers have proposed, represent a trend toward the creation of emancipated female characters. Handelsman illustrates how the initial portrayal of Baldomera as an unusual (outstanding) woman is quickly undermined by Pareja Diezcanseco, as he brings her under the physical domination of a male character, re-casts her in the male-sanctified role of "self-sacrificing mother," and ultimately has her speak against women who break the patriarchal codes imposed upon them. Handelsman cautions against simplistic readings of the text which view Baldomera as a spokesperson for women's rights; he urges us to see the anti-feminist underpinnings of the novel, and to understand that Baldomera speaks not for herself and for other working class women of color, but for her white male author, who consciously or not, stands up for and defends the very system he purports to condemn.

María Inés Lagos takes up the politization of the feminine from another angle in her essay, "Familia, sexualidad y dictadura en *Oxido de Carmen* de Ana María del Río." In her study of this Chilean novel, Lagos shows how the private functions as a metaphor for the public sphere, and how repression of sexuality and difference at the family level parallels the repression of personal liberties and human rights at the societal level. Lagos uses theories taken from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* to explain how characters in Río's novel uphold the hegemony of their class by restraining and punishing "abnormal" sexual practices (incest, homosexuality) and promoting the status quo in hopes of maintaining their position of power. The female protagonist of the novel, Carmen, is brought under the domination of her Tía Malva, who despite her gender, speaks from a phallogentric point of view. Malva has been absorbed into the patriarchy and voices its laws: it is she who makes Carmen aware of her "sins" and drives the young woman to suicide. By effectively silencing the deviant member of the family, order is restored, and the family continues to present a "clean" image to the outside world. Lagos contends that although the novel appears to deal with private lives, it is also a mirror image of the repressive society in which the characters lived. The military dictatorship, like Carmen's family, represses and punishes those who transgress the norm. Lagos shows how repeated words and images dealing with torture, imprisonment, martyrdom, silencing and disappearance function on both levels, to describe Carmen's situation in her home and to suggest the political environment of Chile in the 1970s. While the socio-historical setting of the novel is not immediately obvious, Lagos contends that it emerges through an examination of the private sphere, and that in *Oxido del Carmen*, the private is political.

Andrés Avellaneda studies the culturization processes at work in the construction of femininity in "construyendo el monstruo: Modelos y subversiones en dos relatos (feministas) de aprendizaje." Here, he looks at the relationship between the Bildungsroman tradition in literature and the socio-historical background in which texts are produced, with emphasis on the novela

de aprendizaje in Argentina. After presenting a general background, Avellaneda examines in detail two novels written by women: *Nada que ver con otra historia* (1972) by Griselda Gambaro, and *Si yo muero primero* (1991) by Susana Silvestre, showing how the texts address feminist concerns through the appropriation of a traditionally male-dominated sub-genre. Gambaro's novel is a re-writing of the English Gothic work, *Frankenstein*, but Gambaro makes the monster the narrator of his own story, and focuses on the process through which he develops and changes from monster to human. Growth (*aprendizaje*) becomes reduction (on the physical and psychological scale) in this ironic work, and the search-for-the-father motif so common in the masculine Bildungsroman becomes, in Gambaro's novel, a rejection-of-the-father. Frankenstein recognizes his own condition as orphan, rejects patriarchal authority, and searches for a means to establish his own identity and power, independent of that of his maker. Avellaneda puts forth the theory that Gambaro's work has a political sub-text; written during the military dictatorship in Argentina, it is a veiled commentary on the abuses of power and the monstrous conditions in which humans were forced to live. *Si yo muero primero* deals with the political sphere in a more open and direct way, but addresses social issues through a minute examination of individual lives. Silvestre portrays a working class family, specifically focusing on the sexual awakening of the female characters. Avellaneda reads the work as a counterpoint to the traditional **novela de aprendizaje** written by males; Silvestre's female characters are self-sufficient and have strong ties to other women. They reject patriarchal authority and (like the orphan Frankenstein of Gambaro's novel) learn to define themselves alone, without the help of a father or male protector. They do not become incorporated into patriarchal society, but learn to exist on the margins of it, making a space for themselves that corresponds to their own needs as women.

In my own essay "An Eye for an 'I': Women Writers and the Fantastic as a Challenge to Patriarchal Authority," I offer an overview of some of the narrative strategies employed by women writers of the fantastic, who contest the notion there is some kind of universal truth, some absolute knowledge, or some inherently correct way of perceiving the world that determines the limits of human experience. By calling attention to the eye behind the "I" who speaks, writers like Silvina Ocampo, Elvira Orphee, and Elena Garro show how our gaze is manipulated and conditioned to see what we expect to see. Whether the narrator is male or female, a child or an adult figure of authority, an omniscient voice associated with logic and reason, or an unreliable character in the tale, our expectations about what we will see and what we will read in the text ultimately derive from a social conditioning that privileges the patriarchal norm. Fantastic narratives written by women often play against the readers' preconceived notions about what is possible and real, and present alternate ways of seeing, thinking, feeling and speaking as viable models for emulation. While these texts seldom address radical feminist concerns in a straightforward manner, they

nevertheless can be considered feminist works, for they provide, at least temporarily, the marginalized and muted members of patriarchal society a voice with which to speak. In this way, they contest the limitations imposed by the rationalizing discourses that have characterized so many of the "Great Works" produced by male writers, and open our field of vision to encompass that which has previously been unspoken, unwritten, and unseen.

Maria B. Clark expands my argument in her essay, "Feminization as an Experience of Limits: Shifting Gender Roles in the Fantastic Narrative of Silvina Ocampo and Cristina Peri Rossi," by providing a Lacanian analysis of the fantastic elements in Ocampo's "Hombres Animales Enredaderas" and Peri Rossi's "Los juegos." Clark traces the manner in which both texts undermine the discourse of a fixed gender identity through the language of the fantastic, which in turn dismantles the notion of masculine/feminine as binary oppositions. The fantastic, as a language of the impossible, subverts antithetical structures like mind/matter, language/essence, and culture/nature. It interrogates gender difference through a structure of hesitation and, in the case of these two stories, through a deconstruction of the authority of the first-person male speaking subject. The active/passive positions associated with gendered identity are thus exposed as constructions of an ideological process, and the question of feminine subjectivity or feminine writing is problematized as each story, in turn, explores the limitations of language and of gender-assigned roles. Ocampo's "Hombres animales enredaderas" appropriates the fantastic for a self-conscious treatment of language. It undermines the concept of a gendered speaker as the source of the text, and addresses the problematic inherent in the concept of feminine writing as an expression of an essential difference by decentering the gendered subject as locus of truth and meaning. "Los juegos" by Peri Rossi explores femininity and its relation to narrativity. The game referred to in the title becomes a play with gender roles, as well as a play on the classic Ariadne myth. Through familiar themes of metamorphosis and decomposition of the speaking subject, both stories appropriate the fantastic for a self-conscious treatment of language as the site where gender identity is created and, therefore, can be contested. Although the notion of "feminine difference" or a specificity of feminine writing does weave its seductive thread through the two texts, Clark points out how both stories resist this reading. In each, the masculine subject in crisis ultimately surrenders or loses authorial control of the tale he has set out to tell and, as a result, he experiences a role reversal in which the feminine triumphs. While we may be tempted to read this inversion as an example of an "écriture féminine" or expression of feminine "jouissance," Clark reminds us that it is not masculinity, *per se*, which is being deconstructed in the stories, but rather the hierarchical terminologies of "masculine" and "feminine" that patriarchal society has constructed for us.

Patricia N. Klingenberg also takes a look at the feminine fantastic in her essay, "Silvina Ocampo frente al espejo." Here, she studies the mirror motif in

Ocampo's work, with emphasis on the way the mirror reflects the author's psychological preoccupations. Klingenberg contrasts and compares Ocampo's fascination with the mirror with that of her famous friend and colleague, Jorge Luis Borges. She points out that both writers are obsessed with mirrors in their writings, but Ocampo's vision is different from her male contemporary's in the way that she rejects the representational quality of the mirror image. Even in her earliest work, there is a disassociation between the subject and the image of the subject as reflected by a mirror. This inability to be represented by the mirror functions as a metaphor for the amorphous and de-centered nature of individual identity. According to Klingenberg, Ocampo regards the concept of self to be a false and arbitrary thing; human beings have a broad spectrum of different identities which overlap and intersect, but which can never be captured in a single image, whether visually in the mirror or verbally in the written text. Klingenberg offers analyses of a number of short stories and poems by Ocampo which illustrate this theme, and she devotes special attention to the works in *Cornelia frente al espejo* (1988), Ocampo's most recent work. Klingenberg shows how the title story of the collection, replete with intertextual references to earlier works by Ocampo, functions as a mirror for the writer's entire opus. By re-examining old preoccupations and long-standing philosophical concerns, Ocampo reaches the conclusion that art is the only accurate means of defining individual personality.

L. Teresa Valdivieso's essay, "Mujeres en busca de un nuevo humanismo," is one of the more polemic ones in the collection, as she deconstructs what some would regard as the main intent of feminist writing. She offers a semiotic analysis of the novel, *Por persona interpuesta*, by Carmen Riera, using theories developed by Greimas in an effort to show that feminism does not imply a rupture with man as a human being, but rather sets as its goal the analysis of how and why part of humanity is subjected to oppression. She contends that women writers, like Riera, are interested in a new humanistic vision of the world, and that feminism is, in the hands of these writers, a new way of perceiving the world, using women's eyes, women's voices, and women's notions of time, identity, and reality to construct texts that can be read on several different levels simultaneously. Valdivieso studies the manner in which the political and the personal interconnect in Riera's novel, and how the search for truth becomes intertwined with the act of writing fiction. Riera's interest in humanity in the broadest sense of the word, in man as an individual oppressed by a system larger and more powerful than himself, and in a world disentangled from false appearances and lies makes her a feminist in Valdivieso's understanding of the term: she does not seek equality only for herself and for other women, but for everyone, regardless of their gender.

In "Nubosidad variable: Carmen Martín Gaité and Women's Words," Janet Pérez provides an overview of Martín Gaité's fiction, with emphasis on her most recent novel, *Nubosidad variable* as a palimpsest on which traces of

earlier writings can be seen. Pérez focuses on the ways in which specific themes, motifs, narrative strategies, character types, and structural patterns unite Martín Gaité's work, and shows how *Nubosidad variable* is a self-reflexive text which foregrounds its own creation through the use of metafictional techniques and intertextual references to other fictional pieces by the author. According to Pérez, Martín Gaité's work is characterized by an unwavering preoccupation with women's voices, women's listening and reading, woman as creator and as interlocutor, and the rescue of women's words from silence. These preoccupations, notable in the author's early work, become more pronounced in *Nubosidad variable*. By focusing specifically on the repressive educational system during the Franco years in Spain, the restrictive patriarchal values governing feminine socialization, and the frustrations inherent in traditional male-female relationships, Martín Gaité shows how women have developed among themselves unique forms of communication that allow them, if not to escape the oppression to which they are subjected, at least to confront it, analyze it, and attempt to come to terms with it. While Martín Gaité has rejected the term "feminist" for herself, Pérez offers a convincing feminist reading of the author's work, and provides a panoramic vision of critical response to Martín Gaité's writing to date.

Cynthia Steele's essay, "María Escandón y Rosario Castellanos: Feminismo y política personal en el 'profundo sur' mexicano," is an unorthodox and highly personal inquiry into the nature of "truth" in literature, and the relationship between author/subject matter/literary critic or scholar. Using Rosario Castellano's article, "Herlinda se va" as a point of departure, Steele traces how her initial impressions of Castellanos' writing about her servants, María Escandón and Herlinda Bolaños, deconstruct themselves as she comes into contact with one of the subjects of Castellano's discourse, María Escandón. Steele discovers through personal contact with Escandón that Castellanos' publicly voiced solidarity with her maids on the basis of gender issues was nothing more than a literary pose. Castellanos' written claim that all women, regardless of race and economic class, are on an equal footing because they are subjected to male domination stands in stark contrast to Escandón's recollection of their lives together. According to Escandón, she was exploited by Castellanos, and the supposed "sisterhood" that existed between them was an invention on the part of the writer. The exploitation did not end when Escandón left Castellanos' service, for in the years since Castellanos' death, many researchers, like Steele herself, have visited Escandón in hopes of gaining information about her famous employer, and have used Escandón's momentos, photographs, and recollections as a basis for their publications which would further their own academic careers. Steele points out the injustices of the system which make one woman famous and cast another into oblivion, and seeks in her article to give voice to the silenced partner in the long-lived Castellanos-Escandón relationship. She recounts how she came to know Escandón; she describes the

woman, her work, her home, and her interaction with friends; and she repeats the words spoken by Escandón as they discuss Castellanos and the past. Steele's focus shifts from the written text and the voice behind it (Castellanos) to the unwritten text and the voice that has been silenced through illiteracy and poverty (Escandón) as she becomes aware of the exclusionary practices at work in traditional literary scholarship. By allowing Escandón to speak for herself, Steele attempts to open the field to include those who have been marginalized by critical discourse in the past. Through her article, she re-textualizes Castellanos' essay, "Herlinda se va," and shows us that feminist criticism is not merely concerned with famous women writers, but with creating a space in which women's voices can be heard, regardless of their class and race.

Antonio Martínez's essay, "La textualización del cuerpo femenino en la poesía de Ana María Fagundo," closes the collection, as it utilizes the approach that is, perhaps, most familiar to us. Here, Martínez provides us with an overview of Fagundo's poetic texts, with the aim of showing how the female body is converted into the written word, and how the act of creating poetry is, for the female writer, similar to the act of giving birth. Martínez contrasts and compares Fagundo's poems to those written by Angel González to illustrate what he perceives to be differences in "masculine" versus "feminine" writing. He conjectures that the male poet maintains more of a distance from the text and uses the pen as a phallus, to shape and mold the words, whereas Fagundo views herself and the poem as one, and sees the written text as an extension of her own body. According to Martínez, Fagundo does not question or fight against the erotic connotations and images of sexuality that have been handed down to her by other poets; instead, she incorporates them into her own work and uses them in a way that reconfirms her own identity as poet and woman.

Although there is no commonly held notion about what feminist criticism is or should be, some general ideas can, nevertheless, be gleaned from the essays presented here. One constant we have noted is the desire of women writers to subvert or invert the traditions that have, up until now, determined discursive practices. They constantly seek to break free of the barriers that have been constructed by patriarchal society; whether on the thematic, structural, or semiotic level, they examine the limits that have been imposed on language, literature and, by extension, women in general, and call attention to the inconsistencies and injustices inherent in a system that has sought to exclude them on the basis of their gender. They have struggled to revise the Canon and make a place for themselves in it, just as they have taught us to see with a more practiced eye sexism in texts that previously might have struck us as neutral or natural treatments of women. Above all else, they have made us aware of the dangers involved whenever one person or group of persons attempts to speak for another. To appropriate words and impose a fixed meaning on them, to rework and reword, even when done with the best intentions, is to de-authorize and disempower the original text. As I write summaries of the essays presented here,

it is with the clear knowledge that I am committing an anti-feminist practice, usurping and transforming the words of someone else through my own (far from neutral) reading practices. Although we are all, at one time or another, conspirators in patriarchal practices, feminism allows us to constantly revise ourselves. Let me, therefore, reverse the process I have just set in motion, and give the words back to those who use them so effectively and intelligently in the articles that follow.