

past, when Porfirio Díaz and Álvaro Obregón did the same to further their interests in the United States.

The description of certain diplomatic incidents is useful for understanding the roots of the dual nature—both nationalist and pragmatic—of Mexico's foreign policy and its relationship with the United States. In the same way, partisan alternation in office in the United States and the Democratic and Republican Parties' sharing power help us understand their influence in the U.S. drawing closer to or distancing itself from Mexico.

The author analyzes this in the book's middle chapters, where he looks in detail at bilateral relations during World War II and the Cold War. During that period, when convergence and divergence came in waves, Astié-Burgos underlines both countries' positions on regional and world matters. Thus, the study of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's isolationist policy or Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and Luis Echeverría's diversification strategy reflects the vision of the instruments used by both countries in the international sphere based on positions that clearly sought to consolidate Mexico's political autonomy *vis-à-vis* the United States. Curiously, this is where we can begin to observe a qualitative change, in contrast with the *Porfiriato* or the revolutionary period: there is a relative maturation of the legal instruments for managing bilateral relations, but it is perhaps in the following period, particularly after 10 years of confrontation during the administrations of José López Portillo and Miguel de la Madrid,

when we see a significant transformation of the bilateral agenda and the mechanisms for dealing with it.

The 1990s, the decade that concludes the book, show the complex evolution of bilateral relations. As Astié-Burgos himself states, the two nations became more and more interdependent until they reached the level of dependence and integration. Certainly, with the signing of NAFTA and in the wake of the so-called "spirit of Houston," economic ties between the two countries became significantly institutionalized, with direct implications in other aspects of their relations. Despite the new focus for managing relations, even with the emergence of numerous, diverse institutional mechanisms for cooperation, tense *moments* still arose because of each country's focus on issues like drug trafficking or human rights. This made the structural limits of the renewed Mexico-U.S. understanding clear.

In conclusion, despite the fact that the book does not deal with relations after 2000 when more democracy was demanded, but above all when they were highly conditioned by the priority placed on border security after 9/11, Astié-Burgos's work is a useful tool for understanding the vicissitudes of the links between two countries that, despite their increasing closeness, still seem very distant. **MM**

Bibiana Gómez Muñoz
and Roberto Gutiérrez

Femenino/masculino en las literaturas de América. Escrituras en contraste

(Feminine/Masculine in the Literatures of the Americas. Contrasting Writings)

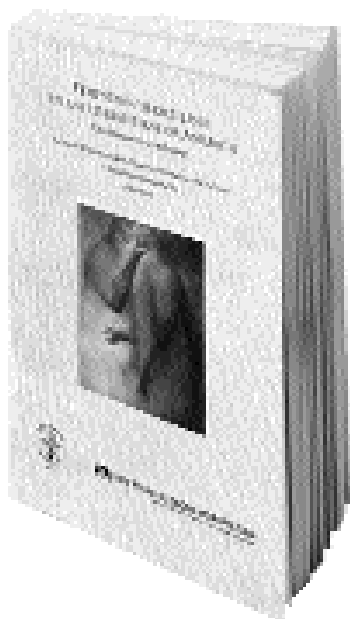
Graciela Martínez Zalce, Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco and Ana Rosa Domenella, eds.

UAM/Editorial Aldus

Mexico City, 2005, 525 pp.

In his book *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom emphasizes the need to maintain the aesthetic, moral perspective while reading to avoid contaminating our critical perception. He also insists on being aware that the so-called

"canon" is an "art of literary memory" into which literary works the world is ready to consider immortal gradually insert themselves. Of course, for him, the Western canon is based mainly on principles of selectiveness which "are elitist only to the extent that they are based on purely artistic criteria." In accordance with this, the selection of the "best" literary works of humanity often include mostly English-speaking European authors (and an American or two), and, in descending order, French, Italian, German and Spanish writers. *El Quijote* barely approaches Shakespeare's grandeur and, aside from this book, it is almost impossible to encounter books in Spanish from Latin America or elsewhere on the list. If you look carefully, you run



across Jorge Luis Borges and, perhaps, Gabriel García Márquez. And that is thanks to the fact that they can be included in what Bloom calls “literature of the imagination.”¹

However, those of us who are located more on the periphery know that other criteria for reading are also justified, partly because our situations demand focuses that are offensive to Bloom or come under the heading of his famous “School of Resentment,” that is, any approach to literary texts that emphasizes political, social or gender issues that is clearly part of the terrible cultural studies, or, even worse, proposes alternative readings of long-established texts.

This is one of the reasons that *Femenino/masculino en las literaturas de América* is so welcome in our milieu. I believe that it is no exaggeration to say that projects like the Diana Morán Workshop for Literary Theory and Criticism broaden our horizons and encourage us to continue exploring the literatures of the Americas from perspectives that foster an interdisciplinary critical analysis which obviously continues to include the criteria of aesthetics. I have been more interested in the study of English-language literature and reading this book has encouraged me for several reasons. In the first place, because it offers me a broad panorama of works and authors from our hemisphere in a format that invites reflection. Paralleling the literary production by men and women breaks abruptly with a schema that usually dominates many critical studies and which is also obvious when looking at canon lists: the complete absence or minimal participation of

women writers. In the second place, *Femenino/masculino en las literaturas de América* allows us to get a clear idea of the most recent production in Hispanic America, the French Caribbean and Canada. It is gratifying to me to see that many of the themes that I feel an affinity for in my English-language reading are precisely those that are also central in the literature of the Americas: the reformulation(s) of the notion of cultural identity based on violent colonial pasts, on the Diaspora of the present and future, on societies made up of a diversity of races, some more native than others, of the imperative need to give voice to the other, to the one from below, to the subordinate, of the need to “sacarse de encima la Historia” (get out from under History) —as Eduardo Belgrano Rawson says— through alternative forms of writing in which memory, oral communication, intertextuality and hybrid composition play a fundamental role.

Jamaican critic and sociologist Stuart Hall, living in England, has analyzed the new post-colonial subjects. We, as Latin Americans, can number ourselves among them, not so much, and not only, because we were colonized (although our cultural and linguistic Spanish-ness is already more than 500 years old), but also because of the impact of a kind of globalization that does nothing but accentuate differences, transform our ways of life and remodel our identities, as the editors of this book point out very adroitly in their introduction.

Among the points Stuart Hall develops, one is pertinent because of its link to the essays in this book. It is his idea that more than conceiving of a single, fixed identity, determined in great measure by a shared history and by the common images that make us into “a people,” the only way to understand and transcend the traumatic nature of “the colonial experience” is precisely through recognizing that, in addition to the similarities, there are also critical points in which profound, significant differences make up what we are or what we have become, since history has intervened and we are in a process of constant transformation.² To do this, we must concentrate not on a process or idea of uniform continuity, but on the breaks and discontinuities that forge our sense of originality. Thus, cultural identity is achieved through the transformation and a permanent “becoming,” in addition to “being.”

I believe that all the essays in this book play with this sense of transformation and this need to explore different but complementary positions with regard to the histo-

ry of our hemisphere. A common thread throughout the work—even if it is not always explicit—is that of the relationship between historiography and fictional narration, the latter seen as an alternative, legitimate version of the so-called official History. This is precisely the power of literature and the power of men and women writers, who, in the place they are speaking from, face and confront the positions of power. And this is also the contribution of the volume I am reviewing. In this sense, the essays by Ana Rosa Domenella, Mónica Szurmurk, Tabea Alexa Linhard, Laura Cázares, Blanca Ansoleaga and Laura López explore the way in which men and women writers use fiction to propose a historical review of their countries' past, from the indigenous of Tierra del Fuego and the Caribbean slaves silenced by colonization to the violence of the dictatorships that have been the scourge of our continent, whose repercussions can always be felt in the form of social instability, drug trafficking, etc. Thus, we have a critical introduction to authors like Sylvia Iparraguirre and Eduardo Belgrano Rawson, Reina Roffé and Sergio Chejfec in Argentina; Laura Restrepo and Fernando Vallejo in Colombia; Rosario Ferré and Luis Rafael Sánchez in Puerto Rico; Julia Álvarez and Pedro Vergés in the Dominican Republic; and Maryse Condé and Patrick Chamoiseau in the Caribbean island of Guadalupe and Martinique.

However, saying that only these essays propose the relationship between historiography and fictional narrative would not be exact, since, as the editors point out in the introduction, the historical context and surroundings are the basis for all the works analyzed in the book. I know that I am simplifying Bloom's position, but it is true that the committed viewpoint of this volume's essayists would earn them the soubriquet of "resentful" used by another unfortunate social science, cultural criticism. Nevertheless, in my reading of any literary text, for me it is fundamental to have a comprehensive view of it, a view that, of course, incorporates the work's aesthetic side, its different textual levels, its subtexts. But this cannot be done if you do not also reflect on what surrounds the work, the very biography of the authors (whether men or women), their immediate surroundings and their family background; in short, their history, that of their family and their country.

Precisely one of the saddest consequences shared by colonized countries is the continual Diaspora, an exile

that breaks with any simplistic notion of belonging and national identification. Rather, what prevails, as post-colonial theory points out, is a conflictive relationship between a feeling of rootedness that we all seek and a permanent feeling of uprootedness, of not belonging, of exile that can be geographical, but is also often internal. As we read in these pages, people even go the extreme of being uprooted, displaced, torn from their place of origin, rather than being silenced, oppressed, made to disappear or jailed in their own lands. These extreme situations demand new forms of literary expression, a break from established values and the narrative recovery of characters who, in other times and other situations, would not have had a voice. As the essays of Mónica Velásquez, Cecilia Olivares, Margarita Tapia, Luz María Becerra, Graciela Martínez-Zalce, Regina Cardoso Nelky and Gloria Prado demonstrate very well, the historical-political context sustains and sparks writing in which transgression, subversion and perversion are underlying themes that serve as a catharsis in the face of wrenching realities. In these cases, the literary modes include the testimonial novel (this is the case of Costa Rican José León Sánchez's *La isla de los hombres solos* [The Island of Solitary Men]); plots that break with linear narrative structures and with the trustworthiness of the narrative voice (such as in the works analyzed here by Diamela Eltit and Augusto Roa Bastos); cinematographic adaptations that express homo-, hetero- and transexuality; novels sustained by gender subversion and the use of the erotic as a metaphor for the wrenching caused by dictatorships and repression, as happens with the creation of characters like Madama Sui by Roa Bastos,³ with women writers recognized as writing "like men" (as Juan Rulfo said of the Colombian Fanny Buitrago) or with female characters who break with social norms like the protagonists of Nicaraguan writer Carmen Naranjo, Chilean Marcela Serrano or the Peruvian Carmen Ollé.

In the essays by Rose Lema, Luz Elena Zamudio, Ute Seydel, Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco, Maricruz Castro, Claudia Lucotti, Elena Madrigal, Berenice Hurtado and Nora Pasternak, cultural diversity, the consequences of exile, constantly being uprooted are all shown by two themes that take on a typical dimension of the Americas, post-modern and post-colonial, thanks to original, daring strategies in the texts: on the one hand the narrative and poetic presence of love for the homeland, the value of

family and a literary reconstruction of one's origins; on the other hand, experimentation, a liking for the grotesque and the carnivalesque, the presence of intertextuality, the varied use of oral communication and even the lyricism to deconstruct not only the realistic modes imposed by authoritarian governments, but also the traumatic realities created by colonization, dictatorships and globalization. From Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Cazares and Julio Cortázar to Nicolás Guillén and Nancy Morejón; from Silvina Ocampo, María Luisa Bombal and Cristina Peri Rossi to Nicole Brossard, Michel Tremblay and André Lagier; from María Virginia Estenssoro and Oscar Cerruto to Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke and Alfredo Bryce Echenique, textuality turns into a discursive game at the same time that it is an expression of resistance.

Femenino/masculino en las literaturas de América is a unique opportunity to explore the new —and not so new— literatures of our hemisphere, hand in hand with the academic demand of each of the essayists, but also accompanied by their emotional affinities. The only thing

left for me is to rejoice in the perseverance of this research group and in the constant production of books like this one. **MM**

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NOTES

¹ For Harold Bloom's ideas, see "An Elegy for the Canon," in *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994).

² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

³ Madama Sui, the protagonist of a novel by Roa Bastos, lived in Paraguay in the 1960s and 1970s. Her image remains in the country's collective memory. She was an eccentric young girl, a mix of Japanese and Creole descent, whom nobody can be indifferent to. She died at the age of 20 and was an admirer of Eva Perón, the favorite of a dictator and the scapegoat of a group in power that found in female prostitution the most effective method for corrupting. In love with a man hunted by the regime, Madama Sui personified the clash between unbridled sensuality and the purest form of love. [Editor's Note.]