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Feminist Literary Criticism of Latin American Women's Writing: Context, Approaches, and Analysis of the 1990s and early 2000s

> The woman intellectual cannot claim unproblematically to represent women and be their voice, but she can broaden the terms of political debate by redefining sovereignty and by using privilege to destroy privilege.
>
> Jean Franco, "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private" (?)

Jean Franco's words touch upon an important and ongoing issue in Hispanic literary studies: how—and if—the privileged North American feminist academic can read Latin American texts through the lens of Western theories and still respect the text's cultural, political, and geographic origins.[1] Here I will attempt to outline scholars' concerns in the last fifteen years regarding literary theory and feminist approaches to Latin American texts. The question of whether theory produced outside of Latin America (which I will refer to as *foreign theory*) is applicable to the study of Latin American literature is a central issue in the scholarship I will review. Therefore I will address the potential pitfalls and advantages of foreign theory as well as its role in correcting the gender imbalance in the canon. To give context to the discussion and to aid scholars in related fields I have also included an overview of Latin American feminist critique of the 1970s and 1980s.

Selection of Texts

Rather than mention every relevant critic since 1990, I have chosen to concentrate on several critics who address a particular set of topics: the importance of reinstating women's texts into patriarchal

literary history; the revitalization of the canon; the political role of feminist literary criticism; the need to renovate language for feminist expression; and theories of gender and the female postmodern subject.[2] I have included journal articles and theoretical introductions to studies that recommend feminist approaches to literature written by Latin American women authors. I do not examine, however, analyses of specific literary texts.

This project complements studies like Anny Brooksbank Jones's "Latin American Feminist Criticism Revisited," which looks at several key feminist Latin Americanists from universities in the United States and the United Kingdom.[3] My study includes several of these same critics and adds the work of scholars who write from their countries of origin, such as the Chilean critics Raquel Olea and Eliana Ortega. In this way I hope to heighten awareness of the range of voices participating in the conversation, identify some common goals of feminist Latin Americanists across borders, and arrive at conclusions about how to reach these objectives.

I have chosen 1990 as a starting point because it marks a new era of critique characterized by two currents in feminist studies: gender studies and third wave feminism, a renovation of feminist theory that places class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity at the center of its critique. Both currents seek to include feminist concerns beyond those of white, heterosexual, middle-class educated women and question the platforms of earlier eras of feminism (see Brooksbanks Jones' article for a discussion of third wave feminism in Latin American literary studies). The critiques of gender studies and the third wave have impacted scholarship by challenging mainstream feminism's agendas and rhetoric and by including marginalized groups. While the current era may lack the thrill of new discovery and some (but unfortunately not all) of the problems of prior eras, our challenge is to strive to make our feminist discourse sensitive to a demographically diverse feminist readership while continuing to modify patriarchal systems. The works I have chosen reflect the concerns of these two currents. I will now turn to literary critique since 1970 to show how the field's past informs the present.

Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism of the 1970s and 1980s

Scholars of the 1970s rediscovered texts by unknown women authors.[4] Archival and critical work by pioneers such as Diane E. Marting disseminated bibliographical data and provided feminist introductions to the texts. These bibliographies and anthologies exposed scholars to women's writing and increased the number of studies from a feminist perspective. In regard to the content of these studies, many of them focused on the comparatively more dynamic female characters in women-authored texts vis à vis those of male-authors. The study of patriarchal representations of women in male-authored texts was another common approach (whereas today most feminist literary critique concerns texts written by women). These images-of-women analyses prepared the way for the study of sexuality, power, gender, and language in the past few decades.

As Brooksbank Jones has noted, the publication of Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega's collection of essays *La sartén por el mango* in 1984 was particularly significant in the development of critical theory. It brought up the issue of how—and whether—to categorize literature written by women. This became an important question as "critics . . . turned to precisely how women's knowledge and subjectivity might (or might not) be reflected in their cultural production" and how, in turn, cultural production affected various aspects of society (Brooksbank Jones 202). The contributors to González and Ortega's volume questioned the process of canon formation and the patriarchal criteria that have excluded women writers. In sum, *La sartén* presented a politicized approach to literary texts and raised consciousness about how to balance the structures of power and knowledge.

In the same vein, Franco's 1986 article, "Apuntes sobre la crítica feminista y la literatura hispanoamericana," emphasized a more political standard for feminist criticism. While many critics were rediscovering and valorizing women's texts (Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism), Franco and others proposed a feminist critique that would go beyond the study of theme and character development:

> La teoría feminista analiza la relación entre lo femenino y las instancias del poder y propone la misma pregunta que Derrida al decir: "¿Qué sucederá si tratamos un área de la relación con el Otro en el cual el código de señales sexuales no fuera ya determinante?". ("Apuntes" 33)

By this definition, the feminist perspective serves to disrupt the preconceived notions of power within institutions and systems that regulate the distribution of knowledge ("Apuntes" 32). The field confidently advanced from examining and critiquing women's reality to imagining a utopia—that is, imagining the dissolution of patriarchy and theorizing different methods to achieve revolutionary change through writing and publishing. During this era politically charged studies became increasingly prominent.

Even while more abstract and theoretical approaches were making their way into the landscape of Latin American feminist literary critique, certain scholars published studies that rooted their analyses in historical documentation. Hernán Vidal's 1989 compilation *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism* is significant for providing approaches to feminist literary criticism that maintain a connection to the cultural context of the primary text. Vidal includes socio-historical studies on women in Spain and Latin America to ground theoretical readings in socio-historical archival research. Several critics in Vidal's book, including Elizabeth Ordóñez, Sara Castro-Klarén, and Lucía Guerra Cunningham, voiced concern about the role of foreign theory in the study of Latin American writers, prefiguring the importance of this question in later years.

One may note that feminist literary critique evolved over the last three decades in a process characterized by the following stages: images-of-women critiques in male-authored texts and rediscovery of texts by women writers; analyses of the importance of the female writer in systems of knowledge; the recognition and deconstruction of gendered symbolic systems; and investigations of the socio-historical contexts upon which to perform these advanced feminist literary analyses.

Problems of Language and Foreign Theory

Recent criticism builds upon and expands some of the tasks listed above. Debra Castillo's *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Critique* (1992) and Amy Kaminsky's *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (1993) explore the applicability of foreign theory to Latin American literature and the use of patriarchal language to address feminist issues. Both

critics take a tough love approach to the field: Kaminsky characterizes Latin American feminist literary criticism as "a field of literary scholarship that has been as much a site of conflict as of consensus" and is concerned with scholars' ambivalence about the label *feminist* (xi), while Castillo, playing on Showalter's aphorisms about Anglo and French theory, grapples with the underdevelopment of Latin American feminist literary critique (1). Both works signaled weak points of textual analysis to date and were harbingers of later explorations in this vein.

Castillo envisions feminist critical practice as a recipe: the successful product depends on the skillful combination of various "ingredients." She supports the judicious application of foreign theory to aid in developing studies of Latin American literature but characterizes textual approaches to date as "revolutionary rather than theoretical" and claims that "strategy has been given . . . clear advantage over abstraction" (32). Castillo points out that both theory and strategy are necessary to achieve a more egalitarian intellectual and social community because patriarchy oppresses women on concrete and symbolic levels. Her goals, then, are to:

> explore the theoretical issues involved in the hypothetical construction of . . . specifically Hispanic feminism(s); to discuss some of the strategies of a feminist literary practice in the Latin American context and to offer sample applications of these strategies . . . ; and . . . to suggest some of the difficulties inherent in female readers' analyses of women's writing. (2)

Castillo's development of the terminology of Latin American literary theory and her demonstration of a variety of approaches to the texts were important advancements. She identifies, defines, and examines the following literary strategies in women's writing: *silence*, or ambiguity in writing that is employed to soften the critique of patriarchy; *appropriation*, or viewing Latin American literature through the lens of European or North American literature; *cultivation of superficiality*, or embedding a social message within a text filled with traditional romantic adornment; *negation*, or a refusal to be subservient and marginalized; writing from a position of marginality; and the *subjunctive mood*, or using deconstruction to access "a powerful mode of double-voicing a text, of demonstrating a complex relationship to an oppressive system which allows for both the seductiveness and the hatred involved" (62). Castillo's terms range from the subtle techniques of silence and

superficiality to the bolder and more transgressive modes of contemporary women's writing. Although the subjects of Castillo's analyses are twentieth-century texts, her critical approaches are particularly useful for scholars of literature written before the avant-garde. Early women's writing requires the examination of silence or of cultivation of superficiality because their messages of social protest are subtly encoded to avoid scandal or censorship. In these cases, a critic must look at the proto-feminist subtext that Castillo's methods unearth.

Talking Back achieved the important goal of raising consciousness about oversimplified and romantic appraisals of women's texts, the "idealization of any product of a woman's voice or pen as beautiful and true" (Castillo xviii). Castillo also addressed the problem of "the unsatisfactory recipe of combining Anglo-American and French theory in equal parts and seasoning with a dash of Latin American fiction" (2). *Talking Back* was a timely wake-up call to correct common pitfalls (like superficial readings and whole-scale incorporation of inappropriate foreign theories) that were preventing some feminist critics from producing socially, historically, and theoretically compelling analyses of women's writing.

Kaminsky shares Castillo's preoccupation with the underdevelopment of Latin American feminist critique. An important goal of her study is to highlight the relationship among language, the semantics of patriarchy, and the roles of gender and sexuality in women's writing. She addresses the taboo associated with the word *feminista* by deconstructing the patriarchal myth that the feminist critic and/or woman author is a monstrous man-hater, unnatural, or sexually deviant. Because masculinist discourse has linked feminism with lesbianism in an attempt to undermine the movement, Kaminsky strives to demystify female homosexuality to counter these negative connotations. A main objective of her study is to deconstruct phallocentric language, a global problem for feminist critics who must rely upon the language of the oppressor to correct oppression.

It would seem that looking toward the ways in which feminists abroad have appropriated patriarchal language could help the feminist critic of Latin American literature transgress traditional thought. However, some critics feel that Western feminism is articulated from the perspective of the colonizer and avoid it on that basis. As Kaminsky puts it, "Latin American political and literary theorists . . . have been

painfully conscious of the struggle to create a language that is not subservient to a colonial past and neocolonial present," which may imply the exclusion of foreign theory elaborated by men or women, feminist or otherwise (10). Kaminsky addresses this concern by considering the pros and cons of borrowing thought across borders.

Like Castillo, Kaminsky recommends foreign theory only after carefully determining if it fits the scholarly project. In one example she shows how the cyclical notion of time in Elena Garro's novel *Recuerdos del porvenir* (1963) appears to fit the Bulgarian psychoanalyst and theorist Julia Kristeva's theories of time. Upon closer examination, however, the two ideas prove incompatible.[5] In her own study Kaminsky employs third wave feminism's theoretical focus on race, class, sexual orientation, and geopolitics, without losing sight of the need to "keep women firmly at the center of its analysis" (xiii). Both *Reading the Body Politic* and *Talking Back* leave open the possibility for dialogue with an international feminist community of scholars by advocating careful consideration of the applicability of foreign theory to highlight symbolic meaning in works by Latin American women authors.

Managing Knowledge and Power: Canon, Curricula, and Literary History

Currently there is a great deal of concern among feminist critics as to how educational, publishing, and knowledge-imparting institutions can include the perspectives of women and other historically marginalized groups. While the involvement of a greater number of feminist scholars at decision-making levels of academic institutions is certainly one way of effecting change, the process is both complex and multifaceted and it involves such actions as the construction of a female literary tradition, a critical look at curricula, as well as a reassessment of notions of history. This effort to empower women within institutions of knowledge is exemplified by the scholarship I will address in the following section.

The Chilean critic Eliana Ortega's 1996 collection of essays *Lo que se hereda no se hurta: ensayos de crítica literaria feminista* raises provocative questions about feminist literary criticism that encourage the reader to consider how, why, where, for whom, in what way, to what

end, and under what circumstances feminist literary critics write.[6] The impetus for Ortega's work was her political involvement in Chile and the role of feminism in the process of democratization. This social process in Chile was also the context for Raquel Olea and Liliana Trevizán's work, which I will address shortly. As the title of her study indicates, Ortega focuses on an important act for feminist scholars: building a genealogy of women's writing and feminist criticism in order to amend the hegemonic construction of history that has omitted women from its accounts. Her introduction addresses three main themes: her personal evolution as a US-educated literary critic, current tendencies in feminist criticism, and the importance of writing for a general audience—all of which are united by an emphasis on the political urgency of the feminist discursive project.

Ortega's biographical section juxtaposes her work in Chile with work produced within the US academy. She stresses the independent (extra-academic) nature of her intellectual experiences in Chile and its roots, like those of the authors she studies, in the political and social development of Chile. She contrasts her national experience with that in the United States, where, for Ortega and other Latin American feminist critics, economic concerns play too large a role in the production and categorization of knowledge. According to Ortega, the fact that Latin American scholars do not depend on a single institution for financial support translates into greater discursive freedom.[7] Her skepticism about the institutionalization of knowledge in the United States prompts her to reject foreign theory for her project on the basis of its economic grounding and because of its removal from Latin American reality. For Ortega, the lack of correspondence between foreign theories and the actual social struggles of women in a particular nation render outside ideas inadequate to accurately address the authors' themes and preoccupations. Alternatively, she recommends that feminist critics examine their own reality, retrace history, and engage in introspection in order to create an autochthonous critical analysis.

The section of her introduction dedicated to writing for the common reader is part of this overall political project to augment women's literary influence on the general reading public. As part of this goal, Ortega cautions against using jargon and advocates employing everyday language to reach a broad readership and lay the groundwork for the popularization and canonization of women authors.

Ortega's work is noteworthy because it is rooted in recent political struggles for gender equality and embodies the link between the political importance of women's writing and their relevance as part of Chile's literary history. Her historical view of the texts assures that the analysis is engaged with its context. However, by indiscriminately avoiding foreign theory, Ortega limits the multiple possibilities for meaning that theoretical approaches can uncover. Because social struggles transcend national, cultural, racial and linguistic borders, foreign theory can yield nuanced and multivalent readings. It is ultimately the critics' (and the readers') discovery of layers of meaning within literature, often aided by theory, that results in the canonization of texts by the standards of both male and female scholars, students, and reading publics. While I strongly agree with Ortega's political goal of canon reformation and making feminist academic writing more accessible, I believe that using clearly defined theoretical terms would greatly help this project. The incorporation of complex, abstract thought elaborated by international feminist and literary theorists need not discourage or exclude a non-specialist. The works of the French theorists Pierre Bourdieu (*Masculine Domination; Language and Symbolic Power)* and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) come to mind as excellent examples of subtle theoretical thought. Additionally, it is part of the literary critic's obligation to her readers to provide varied and contextually appropriate perspectives on a text, and this may imply interpreting more complex theory with which the reader is not familiar.

Like Ortega, Cecilia Inés Luque, a US-educated academic, now on the faculty of the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Argentina), examines how Latin American women's writing adds new perspectives to phallocentric constructions of history. Her study differs from Ortega's in that she uses foreign theory to analyze this process. In her 1999 article "Subjetividad y agencia: Una relectura feminista de la identidad y la historia en la narrativa de escritoras hispanoamericanas," Luque concentrates on the importance of intimate discourse in the enactment of women's history and subjectivity. She locates her project in the vein of critics who have used postmodern deconstruction to question the modeling of a national identity in Latin America on a master (masculine) narrative (211). Luque characterizes the new narrative of the authors she studies as "oscilante entre la ficción y la no ficción," which adds a stronger social component into the texts (211).

Luque argues that female historical fiction does not depict a national allegory (as do many male-authored texts), but emphasizes the particularities of feminine agency. Drawing on Showalter's and Gerda Lerner's ideas of reinstating women's history into History, Luque highlights the importance of quotidian agency (rather than the feats of hegemonic history) as the means by which women find a place in their nations' social institutions (213). She lends particular importance to authors' use of language and cites Patricia Meyer Spacks's theory of gossip and Barbara Bate's writings on women's conversation to examine how fictional characters become complex subjects through their words (215). Although Spacks's and Bate's critical approaches are not rooted in Latin American experience, they are useful to explaining specific facets of the texts and Luque uses them productively in her analysis. Luque's work reminds us that the construction of national identity is, in fact, constructions of many national identities.

While the critics mentioned thus far in this section tackle canon reformation and notions of history, Castillo takes several steps back to look at systems of knowledge more generally. Her 1996 article "Response Cutting/Edge" is a discussion of pedagogy and the role of the third-wave feminist academic. Her study seeks to reveal the hegemonic bias "of ethics-talk and the ascriptions of agency" in higher education ("Response" 224). Castillo acknowledges the "all too common substitution of a Latin America invented by and for other academics for interaction with the Latin America that lies outside the purview of academic discourse" (215). However she goes beyond this relevant concern to focus on how scholars and institutions in the United States and Mexico each manage their own cultural production.

Castillo first considers the experience of the US poet Adrienne Rich during a trip to Nicaragua. She highlights Rich's feelings of political disempowerment in the United States and the reversal of the scales of power that Rich experiences in Nicaragua, where select national poets are invited to participate in politics and national decision making. Castillo notes that,

> [from] her own particular location, Rich occupies what might otherwise be defined as the traditional space of the Third World intellectual, marginalized in relation to the Anglo-Eurocentric establishment, while the Nicaraguan poet curiously moves to a First Worldish position of influence and prominence." ("Response" 217)

Castillo points to a significant difference in power allotted to intellectuals in the United States and Latin American countries: whereas in the former great writers enjoy literary renown, in Latin America it is not uncommon for literati to become national heroes, diplomats, senators, or presidents.

Next Castillo reflects upon the value students assign to humanities courses in the context of the US university system. She cites statistics on undergraduates for whom "literary studies in particular have become increasingly marginal and unappealing" (219). Her commentary implies that US scholars face challenges in regard to convincing students of the relevance of the Humanities in a capitalist culture that prizes financial success. The result is that literature and cultural studies are relegated to a lower status vis à vis courses that students think will lead to more lucrative careers.

Finally, Castillo cites the cultural gap that Mexican author María Luisa Puga experiences on a national lecture tour of Mexico. Puga's own view of her interactions with rural lecture audiences, paraphrased by Castillo, was that her "series of lectures [was] not only reductive in terms of the curricular machine grinding away in Mexico City; it [was] deeply irrelevant to the provincial towns she [visited] in the north of Mexico" (Castillo "Response" 220). Puga's experience emphasized Mexican educators' challenge of trying to make "national" literature relevant to a community of Yaqui Indians, worlds away from the intellectuals of Mexico City.

"Response" effectively points out that the problem of mismanaging (misinterpreting or undermining) cultural production is unfortunately not limited to North American academics' interpretations and teachings of Latin American literature. The problem is more universal: in the United States novelists, poets, and humanities programs are undervalued while Mexican scholars' must bridge the gap between education in urban and rural communities. Castillo then calls for "the transformation of society and for a more nuanced ideological awareness of educational tasks" based on a "recognition of the value and importance of the Humanities in maintaining and policing the nation's sense of itself and its cultural heritage"—within and among nations (218). Her essay is a necessary corollary to the question of Latin Americanism because it emphasizes that academics' efforts to create solid, culturally sensitive scholarship must go beyond correcting "first-world" norms

imposed on the "third-world." She suggests that Latin American scholars strive to correct the cultural imperialism they impose upon their own sexually, racially, and ideologically marginalized segments, as must we within the United States (220).

Ortega, Luque, and Castillo share with many feminist critics of various national origins and residences this vital objective: the empowerment of women and female perspectives in national institutions of knowledge. The universality of this feminist goal calls into question Ortega's claim that international theory cannot apply to a Latin American reality. While facets of Ortega's project require an eye toward its contextual specificity, it is likely that foreign theory can shed light on reforming the canon, building a genealogy of women writers, or revisiting national identities—objectives held by feminist critics from many different backgrounds. In order to move women's writing from the margins to the center, our published work should be as clear, complex, and insightful as possible; taking advantage of theoretical resources that fit the literary project and defining terminology that can bring us closer to this goal.

Feminist Theories, Gender Studies, and the Literary Text

In this final section I analyze the influence of gender studies, especially their constructionist views of gender and sexuality, in literary texts. The term *constructionist* in this context refers to viewing gender as socially produced rather than innate and natural (an essentialist view). Arguably, the majority of feminist critics today reject essentialism because it has linked women to motherhood, nature, neuroses, domesticity and other "feminine" phenomena, while positing abstract thought, reason, participation in public life, etc., as masculine traits. While all of the scholarship in this study reflects a constructionist view of gender, the critics examined in this section privilege the task of instating subtle and complex ideas of female subjectivity into the symbolic order (i.e. the realm of written language, social, and linguistic signs) through their analyses of gendered language and by highlighting the transgression of masculine/feminine boundaries in narrators, characters, and imagery.[8]

Although gender studies have productively challenged feminist studies by radically expanding literary critics' notions of the so-called *feminine*, the tenets of gender theory question feminism's ability to

foster and empower women's growth as complex psychological subjects, especially in terms of women's non-heterosexual sexualities. This censure of feminism comes from Judith Butler's view of gender and role in identity formation, in which feminism's underlying male/female dichotomy restricts women's actualization of the multiple layers of her selfhood in terms of gender and sexuality.[9] In the preface to her 1999 edition Butler clarifies that she wrote *Gender Trouble* "in an embattled and oppositional relation to *certain forms* of feminism, even as [she] understood the text to be part of feminism itself" (vii, my emphasis). Feminist scholars across the globe have commented on Butler's work; some have read her critique as an attempt to undermine feminism as a whole (not just the "heterosexist" aspects of it) and others have seen gender theory as an opportunity to make the movement more inclusive to people of other genders and sexualities. Several Latin American critics have answered Butler's claims with defenses of feminism as well as thoughts on how gender studies can diversify and enhance feminist approaches to literature.

Deborah Shaw and Castro-Klarén (*Narrativa*) defend feminism's reliance on the category *woman* by calling attention to the political necessity of maintaining the male/female binary but also support heterogeneity in the movement. Shaw's discussion of gender and feminism appears in her analysis of Latin American women authors' classifications of their writing; she argues that while categorizing women's writing can indeed be essentialist, to deny the difference of the women writers (vis à vis male writers) altogether is untenable. She reminds us that feminist thought successfully avoids reductionism by considering women's social classes, ethnicities, nationalities, sexual orientations, and other particularities. Within this set of traits, gender is a "a relational term which needs to be studied in the context of particular historical and geographic locations, and in its relationship with other important categories which inform identity, if it is to have any meaning" (171). Shaw posits that third-wave feminism has created a broad (yet definable) notion of the feminine that allows for the uniqueness of each individual's creative production. Similarly, Castro-Klarén references the birth and growth of feminism to show how the movement has drawn its fire from women's opposition to patriarchy, while the third wave continues to productively challenge and expand the boundaries of feminism. She, like Shaw, is concerned that gender theories' dissolution of the male/female binary erases the tension that drives this agonistic

force.[10] Both critics admit the possibility of universals in and among women's writing but stress that critics must "search for these patterns rather than take them as givens" (Shaw 171). That is, they appear to except the critique that feminism should be inclusive to all races, sexualities, etc., but hold onto the category "woman" as the basis for their studies. A proponent of gender theory might respond that the political act of defining "woman" is, in and of itself, limiting. Despite the polemic struggle between feminism and gender studies, Latin American feminist literary studies have benefited from the debates, which have forced open a place for the discussion of marginalized sexualities and deeper questionings of the male/female binary.

Brooksbank Jones and Davies succinctly characterize the interfacing of feminism and postmodern thought:

> [broadly] speaking, feminism finds itself caught between postmodernist critiques of universality and objectivity on the one hand and humanist narratives of justice and progress on the other, while literature strains between the sweep of grand theory and the particularity of historically grounded texts. (1)

For many feminist critics who draw on post-modern theories of gender it is precisely this last part of the puzzle—grounding the postmodern feminist readings in their historical contexts—that produces solid scholarship.[11] This combination of theoretical and investigatory approaches assumes a multifaceted reading of female subjectivity and also locates this reading within a social body that is woman, thereby maintaining the political force of feminist studies. While the critics cited above consider the theoretical implications of gender theory's influence on feminist thought, Raquel Olea and Liliana Trevizán offer examples of gender theory's practical applications to literature.

Olea's *Lengua víbora: producciones de lo femenino en la escritura de mujeres chilenas* (1998) contains essays on eight Chilean women authors.[12] Her study is important for highlighting writers whose work did not circulate during the Pinochet dictatorship and for disseminating ideas of the mutability of gender and gendered language to a Latin American readership. Olea's approach shares with gender theories a subversion of gendered categories. She rejects the term *literatura femenina* because it reduces women's writing to a homogenous grouping. Instead she refers to women's literature as,

> literatura producida por una sujeto otra, compleja, móvil en sus múltiples roles y funciones sociales; heterogénea, cambiante en los desplazamientos de identidades que construyen temporalmente una sujeto aún insuficientemente historizada, aún insuficientemente simbolizada. (31–32)

Olea counters simplified notions of the feminine, but shares with feminist studies the focus on women, evidenced by her choice of texts and the female-gendered neologism "una sujeto otra" (commented upon in Kaminsky's study). Olea's view of women's writing is more radical than Shaw's in that Olea steps outside the parameters of the masculine symbolic order by re-inventing its terminology. Yet Olea is not so radical that she elides women's otherness, as does the thought of Uruguayan writer Cristina Peri Rossi (as Shaw reminds us). Like the critical gestures of the authors she studies, Olea's approach to language is transformative yet politically references patriarchal oppression in opposition to women's artistic production.

Olea imbues language with fresh meanings in her characterizations of the struggles for power in women's fiction. She calls this battle the "invasion" of hegemonic public space. Her word choice lends agency to women's writing; however, because women authors have lacked models, they write from a "no lugar" to try to intervene and modify social structures (22). The writer attains power by revealing the transformational potential of gender within this *space* that is a *non-place*. *Lengua víbora*'s deconstructions of the masculine and feminine attempt to carve a space in male-dominated literary culture (or create an alternative space): "[las escritoras] se articulan a la pregunta por la existencia de otro sujeto sexual y, por tanto, de otro lenguaje, no falogocéntrico" (25). Olea's study focuses on a liminal stage of women's literary expression, one that is both energized to push into the public, yet vulnerable because it has not attained either public status or power.

Olea anchors her analysis of alterity in a historical reading; her texts are in battle and dialogue with the male-dominated military authority of their time. Her goal is to correct women's historical omission from the public symbolic space and their relegation to the private sphere. Olea makes the distinction between published writing and *power*, which she defines as: "el poder de la palabra y sus potencialidades de producción simbólica y de generar sentidos de la historia, de la cultura" (22). Like Ortega, Franco and others, she emphasizes that

publishing is not enough; *public reception* of the texts is the way to reverse the marginalization of women's symbolic production (21).

One element missing from Olea's work is how it fits into current theories of gender. Like Ortega, Olea does not consider foreign theory; she calls her own critical discourse "un discurso crítico 'otro'" (12). Yet her thought appears to share elements of Butler's theory of performativity and Alice Jardine's *Gynesis* in its view of gender as continually in flux, regularly interrupted, in which traits of both sexes are combined, yet still mutable, within the individual:

> Si comprendemos lo masculino y lo femenino como intermitencias permanentes, podemos jugar, en el pensamiento, con la construcción de identidades basadas en la movilidad de los dos términos . . . Para construir nuevas identidades es necesario pasar por un proceso de (des)generamiento de otros órdenes y de otras relaciones entre los términos de la oposición masculino/femenino. (32)

For Olea and Butler women's experiences are the catalysts that actualize these gender conglomerates. If Olea compared her thought to Butler's and/or Jardine's, it would clarify the Chilean critic's views on gender for a broader intellectual community (a critique outside the scope of the study at hand). Olea avoids theory in order to break from *traditional* notions of the masculine and the feminine, but it would be useful for her readers to know how recent, *non-traditional* notions of gender fit into the study. Overall, though, her innovation of terminology in the Spanish language and the application of her thought to fiction by contemporary women writers is an essential contribution to the field. Her work also provides a map of how gender theory can be incorporated into a feminist approach that maintains the agonistic tension between the feminine and the masculine.

Like Olea's *Lengua víbora*, Liliana Trevizán's 1997 *Política/sexualidad: nudo en la escritura de mujeres latinoamericanas* is a study of women's fiction informed by the military dictatorships of the 1980s. Trevizán's study differs, however, from Olea's in its scope and theoretical approaches. Trevizán covers women writers from across Latin America and uses foreign and Latin American theory to reveal similarities among writers' struggles for self-expression, power, and representation. I include Trevizán's book in my discussion of gender studies because her critical process highlights the complexity of women's subjectivity by examining the multiple perspectives (sexual, racial, political, social)

from which women viewed and communicated their realities under dictatorships—and how women positioned themselves as complex subjects within those realities. Trevizán's method is significant because it is an example of how a critic can use foreign theory to elucidate her thought without allowing the theory to overpower the author's voices or distance the literature from its national context. She draws on certain aspects of French feminist theory and on Derridean deconstruction to revisit binary oppositions and to open up the texts to polyvalent readings. As her title indicates, her study traces the intricate "knots" women writers have woven from elements that traditional thought has neatly juxtaposed as opposites.

Trevizán finds Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* useful to better define her own views on the "feminine practice of writing" that "exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system" (Cixous in Trevizán xii). Unlike Cixous, she does not make any claims for a biologically-based (essentialist) understanding of women's writing in the overall context of the analysis (see Naomi Lindstrom's discussion on *écriture féminine* [46–49] and Shaw's article on women's writing). Her use of Cixous, then, is not to propose a completely new feminine language, but rather to assert, like Olea, that women may use existing language in radical ways to suit their expressive needs. Trevizán's definition of women's writing, like that of Cixous, is based in its political force:

> [es] un discurso estructurado que responde a ciertas coordenadas y tiene cierta capacidad de influencia social, no meramente de una cantidad de libros escritos por mujeres. La escritura de mujeres supone una textualidad capaz de influir la cultura vigente y poner su sello en el nuevo discurso democrático que se está tejiendo en nuestro continente. (131)

This definition shares Olea's and others' principles of the political power inherent in the act of public writing and its potential to gain a degree of social and cultural influence. Trevizán makes the following case for her use of foreign theory:

> [a] mi parecer la escritura de mujeres en América Latina es un texto que muestra el pastiche y propone el mosaico como expresión propia; aun con todo lo que pueda tener de 'extranjero' o importado, pero que sigue siendo la forma compleja en la cual la mujer latinoamericana impulsa la salida de sus deseos y las organiza tácticamente frente al sistema de prohibiciones vigente. (17)

For Trevizán the complexity of women's writing is best highlighted with an approach that also draws on a variety of sources. Trevizán is careful, however, to point out to what degree foreign thought is useful and to supplement its shortcomings with her own interpretations based on the literary texts.

Trevizán productively re-reads the dichotomies of body/mind, sex/politics, knowledge/instinct, and private/public in women's writing. Her deconstruction of the private/public dichotomy reveals a compelling reversal; she finds that the public sphere is portrayed as the "violación de la privacidad de la mujer" in many of the authors she studies, rather than the desired masculine space of power and freedom (xi). She asserts that the "ejercicio libertario de gobernar su propio cuerpo es la invasión de lo privado en la política" (xi), suggesting that masculine power has pervaded and corrupted both private and public space, but that women are able to render the public desirable by reclaiming their sexuality in a public way, through writing. The reader must look beyond the sexual/political dichotomy to understand this discursive gesture because the sexual *is* the political in this reading. Trevizán implies that reclaiming the sexualized female body by exposing its role in politics empowers women and allows them to overcome metaphoric and literal rape; it is through this sexual/textual reclaiming that women gain agency and liberate themselves from the symbolic and literal oppression of the military dictatorships.

Trevizán fleshes out the significance of this alternative, bodily space of knowledge by invoking the historical figure of La Malinche, the indigenous guide, interpreter, and mistress of Hernán Cortés. In *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) Octavio Paz uses the coupling of La Malinche and Cortés as a metaphor for colonization where Mexico (the native female body) is ravaged by Spain (the European invader). Paz's view reinforces traditional binaries—male/female; aggressive/passive; violent/violated—and leaves a Spanish American no choice but to "despreciar a nuestra madre y odiar a nuestro padre" (132). Trevizán reminds us that La Malinche's role as a go-between placed her in a privileged third space between the indigenous people and the Spaniards, a space in which she possessed the knowledge of both cultures, which granted her a more complex gaze. Trevizán's illustration shows that her authors recognize the ability of women of marginalized ethnicities to see society from multiple perspectives, because these marginalized subjects simultaneously participate in hegemonic culture, sexually marginalized

culture, and racially marginalized culture. Trevizán's reading of these multiple subject positions within a Latin American historical framework is a good example of how critics can draw on postmodern theories of the subject and still ground their work in autochthonous cultural context.

Conclusions

Since the 1980s, when Castro-Klarén was one of the few critics focused on the problem of the application of foreign theory to works by Latin American authors, Latin American feminist literary criticism has branched out beyond the (still relevant) acts of recognizing women's texts and images-of-women analyses. Critics have developed the field with compelling studies on the political power of women's writing, the need for reconstructing/deconstructing the canon, analyses of gender and sexuality, and the deconstruction of patriarchal models. The force of their scholarly writing comes from acute insights into the mechanisms of hegemonic power's oppression of women, and women authors' discursive attempts to counteract them. Throughout the past two decades international theories of gender and their attention to the problem of "heterosexism" and third wave feminism's push to include ethnically diverse voices have aided the advancement of Latin American feminist literary theory by forcing it to consider a broader range of perspectives on and within literary texts and to highlight the creative work of women from marginalized groups.

Some of the possible pitfalls regarding foreign theory noted by critics working in Latin America and in the United States are: its perceived economic impetuses, its potential inapplicability to the project, the obfuscation of literary texts by the theory used to analyze them, and the cultural/racial/national/political distance of foreign theory from the original context of the texts. Some are skeptical of foreign theory for these reasons, but do not reject the idea altogether. María del Mar López Cabrales, for example, values ideas adapted from theorists outside of Latin America, but voices a strong preference for a more autochthonous critical discourse:

> Intento utilizar un discurso que no esté alejado del núcleo del problema analizado: la escritura de mujer en Latinoamérica. Algunas teóricas

> literarias feministas occidentales pierden contacto con la realidad en su método de análisis y crean un metadiscurso elitista y patriarcal. (209)

According to Cabrales, the Latin American critic and/or reader can feel marginalized by the very discourse aimed at combating hegemonic oppression when the theoretical language excludes those whose particular concerns did not inspire that vocabulary. On a parallel note, Castillo warns that to,

> appropriate theories foreign to Latin America for a Latin American feminist practice is not in and of itself a negative act; too often, nevertheless, the indiscriminate or weakly motivated French or American or British theory can continue the kind of destructive stereotype described by Franco [that Third-World texts are subordinated to First-World theory]. (3)

These, clearly, are challenges that critics in the field must work to overcome by including relevant and specific socio-historical material appropriate to the project.

If the international nature of the feminist movement has enabled it to gain recognition and power (albeit not without productive contention as well as division), then avoiding theoretical thought that fits the intellectual project can undermine that power. Here I find relevant the thoughts of the transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who views the challenges to so-called Western feminisms as a way of revolutionizing the movement and forcing the inclusion of marginalized groups of women:

> Any discussion of the intellectual and political construction of 'third world feminisms' must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of hegemonic 'Western' feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies . . . unless these two tasks are addressed simultaneously, 'third world' feminisms run the risk of marginalization or ghettoization from both mainstream (left and right) and Western feminist discourses. (51)

Mohanty recognizes the importance of working within/against an existing feminist structure in order to form a new body of theory that speaks to its original context.[13] The essential strength that results from this effort is that feminist theory as a larger area of study expands to include new perspectives, refining existing thought. The positive effects of this

process can be noted in the case of feminist literary theory originating in Latin America and abroad: the critique of Latin Americanism has challenged the way that critics at institutions outside of Latin America analyze texts. Nonetheless, the language of this critique must remain in dialogue with current theoretical approaches and recognize the worth of applicable foreign theory if it is to continue to do so.

While scholars cited in this study seem to be saying that current theory may not adequately address national feminist concerns, the critical act of *showing how existing theory falls short* allows feminist literary theory to remain inclusive and continue to make positive change. In this way, the feminist critic of Latin American literature can pursue the timely effort to reveal feminist readings of male-authored texts and shed new light on texts by women authors that deserve recognition, continuing to bring female voices into a male-dominated canon.

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NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Naomi Lindstrom and Lisa Moore for their insightful feedback on early drafts of this article.

[2] The UNAM-based (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) anthropologist Marta Lamas deserves mention as the best-known example of a critic doing feminist and gender studies at a university in Latin America. I do not analyze her work here because she is not a literary critic, however her theory and research on feminist and gender studies is relevant to feminist Hispanists from many different areas. Lamas is the editor of the collection of essays on gender *Para entender el concepto de género* (Quito, Ecuador: ABYA-YALA, 1998).

[3] In the conclusion of her study, Brooksbank Jones offers a concise yet nuanced list of the concerns in regard to the Latin American feminist debate, which include:

> a desire for an appropriately and specifically Latin American and more broadly materialist critical theory, but also a questioning of identity and appropriateness/appropriation in this context; a rejection of binary oppositions but also of the over-hasty metaphorization of material and social bodies in such notions as hybridity; an acknowledgement of both the inevitability of theoretical mediation and the need for greater openness to innovative local practices which might otherwise be dismissed as

> theoretically naïve; a concern for the social and material other but also for the status of distinctions between the other and the same, the material and the theoretical, critical theory and social practice. (213)

[4] For a history of feminist literary criticism in Latin America and a bibliographical listing of anthologies and criticism see Lindstrom's 1989 review article "Feminist Criticism of Hispanic and Lusophone Literatures: Bibliographic Notes and Considerations." For a bibliography of women writers see Diane Marting's *Spanish American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book* (Greenwood, 1990). For a broader discussion of the history of feminist approaches to literature I recommend Toril Moi's *Sexual Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985).

[5] Kaminsky demonstrates the limitations of Julia Kristeva's notion of cyclical women's time in the analysis of a novel that seems to portray such a notion of time as stagnant, but, ultimately, privileges linear time as that in which women are agents of the text.

[6] Ortega studied at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She was co-editor with Patricia González of the collection of essays *La sartén por el mango* (1984) and has published and taught in both the US and Chile. To contextualize to her views, Ortega writes about her background as a feminist and as a literary critic in Chile. Regarding Latin American women's uneasiness with the label *feminista*, it is noteworthy that Ortega identifies herself as a feminist, but mentions that she has had to defend to skeptical female friends her desire to focus only on women authors.

[7] While faculty positions consume much of US scholars' time, Latin American scholars often teach for a university as well as engage in free-lance writing for journals and newspapers, and/or work in non-academic organizations. Ortega's perspective from the US academia of the 1980s does not consider the more prominent role feminist scholars play currently in professional conferences, university administration, etc.

[8] A brief explanation of gender studies may be useful to the reader. Auslander defines gender studies as "research and teaching on formations and differences of gender, sex, and sexuality; gay, lesbian, and queer social/political movements and theories; feminisms and feminist theories; and men's movements and theories of masculinity" (16). I would add to her definition the psychological and medical studies of transgender and, per Franco's 1997 study as well as Judith Butler's work, transvestitism. So, while the field of gender studies is concerned with theorizing the sex and gender of men, women, and transgendered people, feminism is more specifically focused on reversing the oppression of women in phallocentric society across racial, class, and ethnic lines. Compared to feminism, gender studies encompass a wider range of questions regarding sexuality and the social construction of sex and gender vis à vis an individual's biological sexual organs and include studies of all genders and sexualities. In many scholarly writings and teaching, gender studies extend feminist questions to the study of men and problematize the very notion of binary "natural" gender.

[9] Judith Butler's key contribution to gender studies is her theory of performativity (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990), which proposes that gender is a fluid, artificial, performed construct that has little to do with biology. For an answer to Butler's critiques of feminism see Naomi Schor's "Feminist and Gender Studies" (1992).

[10] Toril Moi draws on Alison Jaggar's definition of *agonistic* from Jaggar's book *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. For Moi and Jaggar, the agonistic definition of feminism is "the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. Such an oppositional definition posits feminism as the necessary *resistance* to patriarchal power" (Moi "Feminism" 5). One example of Moi's reading of the excessive breakdown of the category woman can be found in her 1988 article "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States" in a review of Alice Jardine's 1985 work *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*.

[11] Toril Moi, Flax, and Castro-Klarén, among others, advocate a historical basis for postmodern inquiry in order to avoid overgeneralizations and a "simple celebration of difference" (Nicholson in Castro-Klarén *Narrativa* 13). Castro-Klarén refers to Moi's reading of Beauvoir in *What is a Woman* and finds that "[in] this scheme woman is always being made . . . thus 'identity' can never only amount to or coincide with a fixed identity of difference nor the proliferation of performances" (20).

[12] Although Olea has worked in the US as visiting professor, she now lives and works in Chile on the faculty of the Universidad de Santiago in Chile and is an associate of La Corporación de Desarrollo de la Mujer la Morada.

[13] The validity of this point is evidenced by the success of third-wave feminism in the United States, where feminism's internal rumblings and morphing have been happening since the early 1980s with the help of scholars like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mohanty, bell hooks, and many others. The important point is that these scholars are in dialogue (and, at times, battle) with the restrictive or culturally inapplicable ideas of "mainstream" feminism and as a result their perspectives, previously unheard, are now considered and taught in literature, feminist theory, and Women's Studies classrooms.

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