Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature

Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature

Edited by

Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature,
Edited by Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3627-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3627-2

To my father, always.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

WOMEN'S BODIES, IDENTITIES AND THE (POST)COLONIAL AND THE BURGEONING OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN SPAIN

DAVID WALTON

As president of the Iberian Association of Cultural Studies (IBACS) it is a great pleasure to see María Isabel Romero's collection of essays in print. The reasons for this are not only to do with seeing colleagues accomplish a well planned and executed book but also with the particular geographical space in which this has been accomplished. Thus, in this brief preface I shall try to put this contribution into the context of the development of cultural studies on the Iberian Peninsula (or, more particularly, in Spain).[1]

There has been no lack of interest by academics working in Spain in terms of feminism, gender studies, race/ethnicity and themes centred on and around colonial and post-colonial studies. These themes have been of particular interest to colleagues working in literary studies and literary theory. What helps to mark out the present volume is that it is more self-consciously a product of scholars with a particular interest in cultural studies. Of course, there is a great deal of crossover between so-called literary and cultural studies and it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other and it would be out of place to explore the reasons here. Here it is more a question of *allegiances*, which does not solve the ontological question of identity but emphasizes strategy, struggle for full

[1] Some of the points I make here are based on my "Producing Unofficial Knowledge(s) in Spain: the (Cultural) Politics of Exclusion" in David Walton & Dagmar Scheu, *Culture and Power: Ac(unofficial)knowledging Cultural Studies in Spain* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 17.

recognition and commitment – and it is to these notions that I shall now turn.[2]

In order to contextualize this volume I shall offer a thumbnail sketch of how it fits into a sporadic but slowly developing tradition of cultural studies in Spain. As some readers may be aware there is not a single department of cultural studies in Spain but this does not indicate that there is no interest in the area (or what I have called "a contested *space* in which a very diverse set of analytical practices take place.").[3] Its existence is one that is much less easily defined, it being manifested institutionally in a variety of ways (see below). Prior to 1995 cultural studies in Spain was, according to Hand and Cornut-Gentille "a kind of non-area."[4]Prior to 1995 this "non-area" was limited to a small group of scholars (working in English departments –which have been the main breeding grounds for cultural studies in Spain) who were trying to get the area off the ground. These efforts culminated in 1995 with the first Culture and Power conference which took place at the Autonomous University in Barcelona. Culture and Power was the name which defined (and, to some extent still defines) the principal effort to promote cultural studies in Spain, reinforced by a series of Culture and Power volumes which had their basis in these conferences.

Prior to 2001 Culture and Power was held together in an informal way through friendships, mutual interest in promoting the area and loose alliances (a very effective combination) but, in what Hand and Cornut-Gentille described as "downright hostility" against the area[5], it was felt that these coalitions and efforts should be consolidated in a more formal way. Thus, IBACS was discussed in the late 1990s and officially formed in 2001 to provide a more solid basis for the promotion of the area through the organization of conferences and regular publications.[6]

---

[2] For the identity of cultural studies in Spain and what it should be, and what it might become see Hand & Cornut-Gentille 1995; Cornut-Gentille 1999a & 1999b; Jordan, 2000; Martín, 2001 and Walton, 2002.

[3] David Walton, *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning Through Practice* (London: Sage, 2008), 291.

[4] Felicity Hand & Chantal Cornut-Gentille, eds., *Culture and Power* (Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1995), acknowledgements page.

[5] Ibid., 40.

[6] For a full description of its aims and ends see http://www.cultureandpower.org/aims-and-scope-of-ibacs.html. It might be noted that the IBACS/Culture and Power tradition is not the only site for analysis and debate (other associations like the Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular (SELICUP) should not be ignored but it has been the main forum for cultural studies and fundamental to the establishment and recognition of the

At the undergraduate level, the fate of cultural studies in Spain has been conditioned, to some extent, by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture which has allotted a minimum number of credits dedicated to the history and cultures of the English-Speaking Countries for those studying for a degree in English.[7] This has helped to stimulate interest in "culture" but it has meant that, on the one hand, there is considerable freedom for departments to interpret the "geographical, historical, artistic and cultural aspects of the English-speaking countries"[8] in their own ways but, on the other, this liberty is connected to the lack of any clear methodological or conceptual basis. This is reflected by the work published by the group of academics who have been instrumental in establishing forms of cultural studies in Spain – multi-disciplined work which has been influenced by approaches associated with the main areas represented within English Studies within the Spanish university system: those of Language, Linguistics, and Literature, the latter which often includes courses dedicated to gender studies, post-colonial literature and history, as well as the minor sub-area of culture (the most under-represented group in terms of taught courses and the area with the fewest number of tenured posts).

For this reason Clifford Geertz's portrayal of cultural studies as a "blurred genre" seems tailor made to a description of the area in the Spanish context.[9] In making this point I am not claiming that this "blurred," inter- (or multi-) disciplinary character is, in itself, a weakness – as I have said elsewhere, its flexibility, variety and sense of multiplicity may well be seen as its greatest strength, and it is something that characterizes "cultural studies" in many parts of the world.[10] The point I want to make here is that this "blurred" character is all the more intensified in the Spanish context. The recent publication (by IBACS members) in Spain of a number of key essays by Lawrence Grossberg (2010) is part of an attempt to "unblur" the area and give it some coherent

---

area in Spain. See José Manuel Estévez-Saá & Mercedes Arriaga Flórez, eds., *Literatura y cultura popular* (Sevilla: Arcibel Editores, 2005), 18.

[7] At the postgraduate level courses associated with cultural studies are often offered but up to now no cultural studies' M.A. has been successfully established. However, the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) is now offering an M.A. that might change this.

[8] My translation of the Ministry's rubric for undergraduate culture courses.

[9] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

[10] David Walton & Dagmar Scheu, *Culture and Power: Ac(unofficial)knowledging Cultural Studies in Spain* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002).

direction.[11] It is this overall situation that helps to explain the importance of books like the one María Isabel Romero has edited because it is this new generation of Spanish scholars who are carrying the cultural studies' torch and helping to define its character and limits.

The present volume relates to a number of dominant themes developed in cultural studies which have generally been discussed under the rubric of the politics of identity and representation.[12] However, while there has been some criticism of this approach (in terms of a certain overemphasis) these studies are by no means considered redundant.[13] The essays selected here bring this approach up to date by limiting the historical context to the second half of the twentieth century and the thematics of cultural studies is firmly rooted in an interest in the way women writers and scholars have rewritten history and culture with relation to the concepts of the colonial and post-colonial. Yet the essays demonstrate very effectively how the present is always implicated in the colonial past which often allows a double vision where post-colonial present and colonial past constantly interweave in ways which complicate neat geographical boundaries and hegemonic constructions of identity and time.

The broadly Foucauldian focus (mediated through multiple forms of feminist and post-colonial approaches that centre on the representation of women's bodies in literary and historical discourses) enables the writers of these essays not only to reflect on the body in terms of the production of knowledge but as a site of discrimination, violence and abuse. This general approach allows the contributors to reflect an impressive range of themes which consider the female body in terms of sexuality, healing, race/ethnicity, hybridity and gender performance and situate it as not only

---

[11] IBACS financed the Grossberg translation and this could be said to be an important symbol in the development of cultural studies in Spain. John Storey's *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1993) was translated into Spanish (in Spain) in 2002. This has helped those who do not read English to get an idea of what cultural studies might look like in the English-speaking world. However, most of the translations into Spanish of key cultural studies texts have been done outside Spain by editorials like Amorrotu editors (Buenos Aires).

[12] Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is that All There Is?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (London: Paul Sage, 1996) and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996a).

[13] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Stuart Hall, "Who Needs "Identity?"," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996b).

the object of regulation and control but as repository of memory, history and victim of stereotyping, sexual exploitation and murder. Yet the essays go beyond this to show how challenges to traditional representations of women yield new possibilities for identities and contestation.

This brief overview does not exhaust the scope of the essays collected together here. However, to say more would be to anticipate the editor's own introduction so I will conclude by saying that it is my belief that readers interested in the ways feminism(s), post-colonial theories, literatures and histories intertwine will find in this book a minefield of stimulating reflections that does credit to the growing tradition of cultural studies in Spain.

Bibliography

Cornut-Gentille D'Arcy, Chantal, ed. *Culture and Power IV: Cultural Confrontations*, Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 1999a.

—. "Cultural Studies or the Study of British Culture(s): The Personal, the Political and the Academic." *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 6 (1) (1999b): 61-84.

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattarri, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Estévez-Saá, José Manuel & Arriaga Flórez, Mercedes, eds. *Literatura y cultura popular*. Sevilla: Arcibel Editores, 2005.

Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.

—. "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is that All There Is?". In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay. London: Paul Sage, 1996.

—. *Estudios Culturales: Teoría, Política y Práctica*, edited by Chantal Cornut-Gentille D'Arcy, trans. by Elena Oliete Aldea. Valencia: Letra Capital, 2010.

Hand, Felicity & Cornut-Gentille, Chantal, eds. *Culture and Power*. Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1995.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996a.

—. "Who Needs "Identity?"." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay. London: Sage, 1996b.

Jordan, Glenn. "Where Is Cultural Studies Today?," *Aedean* (November 2000), Madrid: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia.

Martín Alegre, Sara. “Cultural Studies and English Departments in Spain: Margins and Centres.” *Links & Letters* 8 (2001).
Storey, John. *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
—. *Teoría Cultural y Cultura Popular*. Barcelona: Octaedro, 2002.
Walton, David & Scheu, Dagmar. *Culture and Power: Ac(unofficial) knowledging Cultural Studies in Spain*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2002.
—. *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning Through Practice*. London: Sage, 2008.

For information on IBACS and the Culture and Power group see: http://www.cultureandpower.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

INTRODUCTION

RE-WRITING OUR BODIES AND OUR IDENTITIES

MARIA ISABEL ROMERO RUIZ

The present volume seeks to explore issues connected with women's bodies and women's identities which have their points of reference in the colonial past and find expression not only in the literary productions of that past, but also in the reformulation of these issues in contemporary literature and current analysis of historical facts.[1] Therefore, the book contains a number of essays that pretend to be a forum of discussion of the history and culture of colonial and postcolonial women, having their bodies at the centre of debate, both as sites of abuse, discrimination and violence on the one hand, and of knowledge and cultural production on the other. Traditional stereotypes about women's bodies and their identities will be contested through the analysis of female bodies as repositories of history and memory, as performative of gender, as the object of regulation and control, as victims of sexual exploitation and murder, but simultaneously as healing bodies, as migrant and hybrid bodies, and as maternal bodies, creating new identities for women that defy traditional essentialist ones.

Various theoretical frameworks and approaches will be found in the different texts, based mainly on the discourses of post-colonialism, making the reading of this volume an enriching experience which can provide scholars with the power and the tools for the analysis and the creation of a new epistemology. This new epistemology would allow women to rewrite their history through their bodies and identities, walking towards a future of equality within the context of multiculturality, multiethnicity and

[1] The editor wishes to acknowledge the support provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Research for the writing of this volume (Research Project FEM2010-18142).

globalization that presides our present, "which has women's autonomies and determination at its core."[2]

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a commitment on the part of women writers and scholars to revise and rewrite the history and culture of colonial and postcolonial women, taking those who have been traditionally discriminated because of their belonging to an inferior class, their skin colour, or simply because they were part of a colonized society, to the fore. As far as history is concerned, and according to June Purvis, women's history consisted basically in two kinds of texts: "the lives of "women's worthies" and the biography of an individual woman, often a political or religious figure of some importance."[3] However, in my opinion, this assertion does not invalidate the fact that women's biographies and, in particular, women's autobiographies, like the ones discussed in the chapter by Valèrie Baisneé, are a valid vehicle of expression of women's identities and their selves. Both Janet Frame's and Lauris Edmond's autobiographies written in New Zealand in the 1980's are examples of how this genre can be not only a discourse for women's spirituality to be conveyed, but also a means to make visible something which has been traditionally invisible: the female body; in the case of Edmond we find the maternal body, and Frame scrutinizes the social forces that cause the female body to be regarded as abnormal.

Later, history began to focus its attention on the working-classes, and their women began to call the attention of historians towards the end of the nineteenth century, but it was mainly a discipline conducted by white, heterosexual, middle-class men, so women were either invisible or presented in stereotyped ways.[4] However, in the 1960's and 1970's a new history known as "women's history" began to be written which "takes women as its subject matter and may be written by men […] and women alike."[5] Words like patriarchy and subordination in relation to women began to appear "to challenge the silencing, stereotyping and misrepresentation of women prevalent in malestream academic fields,"[6] taking into consideration

---

[2] Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvi.

[3] June Purvis, "From "Women's Worthies" to Poststructuralism? Debate and Controversy in Women's History in Britain," in *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945, An Introduction*, ed. June Purvis (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-2.

[4] Ibid., 4-5.

[5] Ibid., 6.

[6] Ibid., 10.

other aspects of women's subjectivity like "race," "ethnicity," "social class," "sexuality," etc. to construct a new version of the traditional history that takes into account the women's view and interpretation of the world.

This is the case with the history of black women and the perception of their bodies. In her contribution to this volume, Manuela Coppola talks about bodily archives, using texts of several Caribbean women poets. This conception of black women's bodies as repositories of memory becomes a crucial element in the rewriting of the history of black women. Black female bodies have been conventionally seen as strong reproductive bodies, apt for the hard work in plantations, representing the opposite of the weakness and delicacy of the white female body.[7] Simultaneously, black female bodies at the time of the slave trade and later, were associated with primitiveness, savagery and sexual deviancy, inviting to "both sexual and colonial conquest."[8] But their bodies were also the instruments for the reproduction of the slavery system and colonization movement: they were especially fit for maternity, putting forward their fertility through their big breasts and bottoms, so that blackness in women became synonymous with ugliness, but Coppola's women poets claim the female black body as beautiful and desirable.

Nonetheless, black female bodies can also be seen as potentially subversive sites of memory and resistance, laying claim to the past. Following Satya P. Mohanty, personal experience is socially and theoretically constructed and emotions play an essential role in the process of identity formation; also, "women's experiences are often significant repositories of oppositional knowledge,"[9] that is, they can provide us with

---

[7] Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 12.

The Cult of True Womanhood which was so widely spread in England and America in the 18th and 19th centuries established that women should have the cardinal values of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, and were relegated to the private sphere of the home and family. This could not be applied to black women in the case of America, or to working-class women in the case of Great Britain. In Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego, Beatriz Domínguez García and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, "Women's Identities and the 'Cult of True Womanhood' in Colonial and Postcolonial Britain and America," in *Aedean XXXIII*, ed. Rafael Galán Moya (Cádiz: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz, 2010), 149-151.

[8] Ibid., 26.

[9] Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity. On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," in *Reclaiming Idenity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula Moya and M. Hames-Gracía (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 33-39.

a view of the past that differs from the traditional mainstream one. The experience of women as victims –of sexual abuse, male violence, work exploitation, human trafficking- can give us a valuable knowledge of that past.

Discourses of the "other" are present in the conceptualization of black women's bodies and identities as well.[10] They were perceived as different by the colonizer's gaze and the plantation owner, and, as a consequence, attracted the white man's attention. This lure spread to the tragic mulatta stereotype that can be found in the characters that Silvia Castro examines in three nineteenth century African American texts. The mulatta character had the physical attributes of the white race with her light skin and her straight hair, but she also represented a threat to white society, embodied in the fear of miscegenation. This fear of racial mixing, both present in Europe and North-America, was more a cultural fear than a social reality; in fact, the purity of the white breed was preserved in the colonies,[11] and the mulatto offspring born out of the sexual encounters between plantation owners and black women workers were kept out of the scenery as legitimate heirs of the white man. However, two of the writers Silvia Castro analyses were mulattas themselves, and with their writing they tried to reproduce the acts of subversion and resistance performed by black women's bodies and their identities, appropriating the discourse of the "other" for themselves as long as they exemplify that liminality, that in-between position, from which to produce a hybrid culture.

Despite all this, the history of the black race is deeply associated with commodification and cultural trauma, as Wang Lei discusses in her contribution to this volume. Ron Eyerman uses the idea of cultural trauma to situate slavery in the formation of African American identity. A cultural trauma, according to him, is "a collective memory of some overwhelmingly negative situation experienced by members of a particular social group."[12]

---

[10] The "other" in the sense of different, colonized, primitive, lascivious, inferior, Eastern, childish, etc.
Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), xxiv-xxv.

[11] Tyler Stovall, "The New Woman and the New Empire: Josephine Baker and Changing Views of Femininity in Interwar France." *Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight, S&F Online*, Double Issue, Vol. 6, Nos. 1-2 (Fall 2007/Spring 2008), http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker (accessed January 31, 2011).

[12] Phillip Smith and Alexander Riley, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 244.

In the case of black women, it is clear that it was slavery that marked them and their descendants as a traumatic experience. This is the idea that Proffesor Mae Henderson tries to transmit when she talks about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in relation to the experience of slavery.[13] But, similarly, she argues that the black female body is the locus of commodification and fetishization connected with black women's sexuality and their role in the marketplace as objects and agents of desire.[14] In this sense, it is essential to bear in mind that "the market economy thrives on difference and is dependent on the production of desire," and that "sexuality is produced and mediated by culturally specific historical and social processes."[15] In other words, black female sexuality has been traditionally defined as deviant, as we have seen, and the lure for the white man comes from that difference socially and historically constructed, as Wang Lei argues in her chapter.

The concept of diaspora is present in many chapters of the book. Initially this idea was interpreted as the scattering of the Jews in the Old Testament, but Paul Gilroy uses it as a theoretical tool to understand the complexity of black identity. More distinctly, he uses the term "Black Atlantic" to refer to "a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean or British, but all of these at once; a Black Atlantic culture

[13] She states that PTSD "is typically characterised by a delayed response to a catastrophic or traumatogenic event," and then continues to say that following trauma theorists, "the effects of trauma are transmitted to the survivors and descendants of the victims." She also mentions the Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) and the Post-traumatic Slave Disorder (PT Slavery D) to describe "the wounding at the 'primal scene' of slavery" that "becomes imprinted on black bodies, internalized in the black psyche, and passed down to subsequent generations." Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "About Face, or, What Is This "Back" in B(l)ack Popular Culture?: From Venus Hottentot to Video Hottie" in *Cultural Migrations and Gendered Subjects: Colonial and Postcolonial Representations of the Female Body*, ed. Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 147-149.

[14] Ibid., 135-136. Mae Henderson discusses the process of commodification and fetishization of the black female body in relation to Josephine Baker and her scenification of the "other" on the Paris stage of the 1920's and 1930's. In particular, she refers to the process of empowerment that allows the so-called "Ebony Venus" to counteract white male dominance, making her performances subversive, and challenging binary constructions of gender. She manipulated the spectatorial gaze by receiving and returning the look, thus becoming "visible" in the colonizer's eye.

[15] Debra Curtis, "Commodities and Sexual Subjectivities: A Look at Capitalism and its Desires," *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 1 (February 2004), 95.

whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new and, until now, unremarked."[16] He is talking about the black diaspora, but this concept can also be applied to other people of colour, like the Asian-American writer whose work Stefanovici Smaranda examines in her essay. Diaspora people are always on the move, and their cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past."[17] These identities are not fixed but have a role in the play of history, culture and power; they are based on difference and negotiation, and they are enhanced by an enriching experience. The notion of diaspora is inextricably linked to the idea of hybridity defined by Homi Bhabha; hybridity "exists at the borderlines and intersections of national narratives and self definitions."[18] It is a powerful instrument to combat "dominant discourses and structures of power" and "works to transgress existing discourses and reveal the incomplete and contingent nature of nationalist ideologies."[19] An example of this is the postcolonial migrant.

This is the case of the protagonist of "A Wife's Short Story," included in the volume *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1999), written by the Asian-American female author Bharati Mukherjee. In her essay, Stefanovici Smaranda examines this story, focusing her analysis on the migrant female body as a "bicultural body" and doing away with the "ethnic body," which means the oppression of Indian women of the diaspora. Bicultural bodies are the result of the immigrant experience and identity formation, and are in fact hybrid bodies in the process of "acculturation," that is, bodies that become sites of both cultural preservation and change. As a consequence, women's sexuality transforms itself into a vehicle of liberation making the naked body free from colonization and constraints.

Female sexuality is also the main issue of the chapter written by Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli. In it, she discusses the role of the female character Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wild Sargasso Sea* (1966). The story pretends to be the completion of Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), but this time told by the creole girl (Bertha), who is incarcerated by Rochester in the attic of Thornfiled Hall. Her carnality and sexual appetite allows to classify her, according to nineteenth century Victorian standards, as

[16] Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W-W-W Norton and Company, 2001), 2553.
[17] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.
[18] Phillip Smith and Alexander Riley, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 237.
[19] Ibid., 237.

deviant, and consequently as a lunatic. This is very much in accordance with Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power that he claimed appeared in the eighteenth century with the creation of different institutions such as hospitals, prisons, schools and asylums where to inter those individuals who did not conform to the norm. He called this system of power which "examines and watches over all subjects and punishes deviants as "the carcereal.""[20] Sexual deviancy was associated with colonized people, and the fact that Antoinette enjoys bodily pleasures makes her savage and the object of surveillance and control by Rochester, who is the male authority and colonizer. This is in reality the expression of the fear of the "other" and a process of reification of the female body. Bertoli even goes further by arguing that the male power exercised over the woman protagonist is so fierce during sexual intercourse that she is reduced to the state of a corpse through orgasm, which was known in the nineteenth century as "little death." Nonetheless, Rochester represents self-control and civilization.

Not only female colonized bodies were the object of observation and control, but also working-class women's bodies were the target of middle-class and state regulation in Victorian times, as Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz points out. Both the Social Purity Movement and the National Vigilance Association were created to observe and control working-class women's sexual behaviour, defining new public spaces for women to enforce certain moral values through them, using those "capillary forms" Foucault mentions in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Also, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed in 1885 favouring repression as a means to control "deviant women," making them "docile bodies." Similarly, he relies on the notion of discourse in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1975) to assign various bodies to different categories, and "various actions are designated in relation to norms as praiseworthy, deviant, punishable, or criminal."[21] Therefore, promiscuous women, prostitutes, homosexuals and other social deviants, were categorised as criminals and were subject to punishment. However, the role of middle-class reformers was to rescue these deviant elements of society, transforming their identities in order to include them in mainstream society again.

But things have not changed so much as it is prostitutes' bodies that become "the other of the other," according to the two twentieth century novels object of discussion in Beatriz Domínguez García's contribution to this edition. She claims that these bodies can be defined as "grotesque" in

[20] Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W-W-W Norton and Company, 2001), 1471.
[21] Ibid., 1472.

the Bakhtinian sense of the word, because they are the victims of sexual exploitation and of man's –the coroner's- exploration and inspection after death. They lose their identities as women under patriarchy, and their corpses are examples of "the utmost of abjection," following Kristeva's notion. Nonetheless, she argues that prostitutes can be seen both as sexual victims and sexual agents, introducing the idea of performativity. This idea is very clearly expressed by Judith Butler's words in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990): "For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the anticipated agency, of a female "object" who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female "Other" suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory."[22] And this is the case with prostitutes and other women who try to become "visible."

For, as Susan Bordo states, women's bodies can be defined as "texts of culture," that is, "different bodies are assigned to different locations, are represented differently in prevailing cultural codes, and are accorded different authority as producers of knowledge."[23] As a consequence, women play an active role in the construction of their identities and challenge dominant representations in respect of different categories such as "ethnicity," "gender and sexuality," and "disability." They have a say in what can be considered as "normal" in the process of globalization in which they are taking part.[24] Women can then build their identities in a post-positivist fashion, as "theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways" because "in them and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments, we give texture and form to our collective futures."[25] So, we have to talk about "feminist praxis in global contexts," that is, contexts that involve a change in cultural relations from the local, regional, or national level to the world

[22] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xxx.

[23] Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W-W-W Norton and Company, 2001), 2360. Susan Bordo uses this terminology especially to talk about gender differences and how they shape the appearance and physical activities of bodies. She argues that bodies do not have "a fixed and enduring nature; bodies are plastic and change in response to the social demands placed on them," and so do female bodies.

[24] Nick Stevenson, ed., *Culture and Citizenship*. (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 4-5.

[25] Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity. On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," in *Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula Moya & M. Hames-García, (Berkeley: U. Of California Press, 2000), 43.

intercultural one.[26] We have to aim at decolonization, a process which "involves thinking oneself out of the spaces of domination, but always within the context of a collective or communal process."[27] Through this and in this process, women can have agency, as Manuela Coppola and Wang Lei argue in their chapters, understood as "the reproduction of the terms of our existence, while taking responsibility of this process,"[28] and this agency leads to wholeness, reclaiming black women's bodies, deviant bodies and colonized bodies as producers of knowledge and speaking subjects through their identities.

Bibliography

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

Castro Borrego, Silvia Pilar, Beatriz Domínguez García y Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, "Women's Identity and the 'Cult of True Womanhood' in Colonial and Postcolonial Britain and America." In *Aedean XXXIII*, edited by Rafel Galán Moya, 147-157. Cádiz: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz, 2010.

Curtis, Debra. "Commodities and Sexual Subjectivities: A Look at Capitalism and its Desires." *Cultural Anthropology* 19, 1 (February 2004): 95-121.

Hall, Stuart, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222-237. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

Henderson, Mae G. "About Face, or, What Is This "Back" in B(l)ack Popular Culture?: From Venus Hottentot to Video Hottie." In *Cultural Migrations and Gendered Subjects: Colonial and Postcolonial Representations of the Female Body*, edited by Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, 125-156. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

[26] Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvii.
[27] Ibid., xxviii.
[28] Ibid., xxviii.

Jacqui Alexander, M. & Talpade Mohanty, Chandra, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures.* London: Routledge, 1997.

Leitch, Vincent B., ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: W-W-Norton and Company, 2001.

Mohanty, Satya. "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition." In *Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, edited by Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García, 29-66. Berkeley: U. Of California Press, 2000.

Purvis, June, ed. *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945, An Introduction.* London: Routledge, 2002.

Smith, Phillip and Riley, Alexander. *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009.

Stevenson, Nick, ed. *Culture and Citizenship*. London: Sage Publications, 2001.

Stovall, Tyler. "The New Woman and the New Empire: Josephine Baker and Changing Views of Femininity in Internar France." *Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight, S&F Online*, Double Issue, Vol. 6, Nos. 1-2 (Fall 2007/Spring 2008), http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker (accessed January 31, 2011).

CHAPTER ONE

BODIES REVISITED? REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EMBODIED SELF IN JANET FRAME'S AND LAURIS EDMOND'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

VALÉRIE BAISNÉE

Janet Frame and Lauris Edmond, two major New Zealand female writers, both published their autobiographical trilogies in the 1980s: Frame's first volume, *To the Is-land*, was released in 1982 and Edmond's *Hot October* in 1989. Although both were born in 1924 and trained as teachers, the former in Dunedin and the latter in Wellington, their life stories, writing and literary careers differ widely as well as their response to the autobiographical genre and the inscriptions of the body in it. While Edmond's body remains absent from her discourse, except as a maternal body, Frame underlines the social forces that shaped the perceptions of her body, causing it to be regarded as abnormal. My aim in this paper is to examine what informed those corporeal descriptions, and what functions they fulfil. I will argue that the different roles assigned to the body in both autobiographies correspond to the positions held by their authors in language and postcolonial society. Before approaching the texts, I will point out several issues surrounding the analysis of the body in self-narration. Then I will compare and contrast the two autobiographies.

Taking the body as an object has always been a double-edged sword for feminists, for women have traditionally been defined as the body. Over the mind/body opposition that informs our thinking has been superimposed the male/female dichotomy, so that mind is associated with male and body with female. Other dualisms (race, class etc.) also add force to this phallocentric reading of the body to make it a powerful form of social control. By focusing exclusively on the body the feminist discourse risks reinforcing these dichotomies. A reading of the body in literature may then

be a means of reasserting traditional roles for women, and therefore be used as a tool of subjection against them.

Furthermore, representations of the body are scarce in autobiographies. Although the body is central to development and is considered as the core of subjectivity, the Western tradition of autobiography has established itself as a spiritual discourse, leaving bodily experiences aside. In an artist's autobiography, the emphasis is placed primarily on the construction of an artist's identity. Therefore, the body is often repressed or silenced. According to Shirley Neuman:

> A tradition of autobiography that identifies the genre with spirituality leaves the potential woman autobiographer in the position of either not writing at all, or of having to invent a self that is female and noncorporeal, which is to say, in the impossible position of inventing a self outside western cultures' inscriptions of femininity on and through her body.[1]

The autobiographical discourse is thus caught in a postmodern dilemma: on the one hand, it is empowering, allowing women to take control of their own stories, on the other hand it may be an ideological trap, subjecting women to conventional expressions of the body and/or obliging them to leave aside complete aspects of their identities. Moreover, if inscriptions of bodies in autobiographies are produced by ideology, they are in turn producing ideology, as writers tend to "naturalise" bodily experience.

One way to circumvent those difficulties is to approach the body as part of a system of relations, that is, to undertake a social mapping of the autobiographical female body. The body can be defined as a space, registering and representing various social and discursive relations. A powerful model to read the body in a postcolonial society like New Zealand is to consider the woman's body as a synecdoche (pars pro toto) for the whole social body. The physical body thus represents the body politic. For anthropologist Mary Douglas,

> The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different

[1] Shirley Neuman, "'An Appearance Walking in a Forest the Sexes Burn': Autobiography and the Construction of the Feminine Body," in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, edited by Kathleen M. Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 294.

> parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.[2]

According to this definition, the body may symbolize a society, and the dangers facing a society can be compared with the dangers threatening the body. Sidonie Smith notes "The body categorized as abnormal, for instance, becomes associated with those forces threatening the stability of the body politic. It becomes a pollutant."[3] This analysis is especially relevant to Janet Frame who was considered as insane in New Zealand. Similarly, the different modes in which the female body is made visible or invisible are a reflection of a woman's status in society.

Societies, however, are not static structures. Power relations also pervade them. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of multiple power/knowledge relations. These are part of the spatial relations that assign a specific "place" to the body according to its gender, class and race, using a code of binary oppositions. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault offers a model of power relations that is not reduced to the oppressor versus oppressed model. Foucault's model of power is spatial. Power is exercised in multiple and complex ways, what he calls its "capillary forms:" no single group or individual yield power; rather, they occupy various and shifting positions of power and resistance within a network of relations. Within that model, the body is the primary site on which power is exercised. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault argues that power over the body has assumed different forms within different historical modalities: power has moved away from targeting the surface of the body through direct violence to disciplining its actions through knowledge (psychology, psychoanalysis, medical discourse, etc.) and institutions (prisons, hospitals, schools etc.) Since the nineteenth century, disciplinary power has thus become the most efficient and economical way of producing docile and useful bodies. This theory of power has been hugely influential among feminist theorists who have attempted to "sexualise" it. Judith Butler, in particular, proposes a performative theory of genre that undermines the categories and the connections between bodies, sex, gender and sexuality. The links between bodies, gender, sex and sexuality are not fixed. Moreover, these categories are constructed by different

---

[2] Mary Douglass, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 116.

[3] Sidonie Smith, "Identity's Body," in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, edited by Kathleen M. Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 270.

discourses. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler defines the construction of the body as "constitutive constraint:" "…bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas."[4]

Finally, the autobiographical text/space may also be seen as a body whose boundaries have to stay tight in order for the speaking subject to remain in control of the story. What have the autobiographical subjects allowed themselves to say? What are the boundaries of confession? I have chosen two texts to illustrate the notion of body as space traversed by different forms of power/knowledge. These texts, as the bodies of the protagonists represented in them, raise the issue of boundaries, which are experienced either as lost or as threatened. As such, they mirror the status of the two writers in New Zealand society.

Lauris Edmond's three volumes of autobiography, *Hot October* (1989), *Bonfires in the Rain* (1991), and *The Quick World* (1994), were also released in a slightly abridged single volume entitled *An Autobiography* (1994). The second part recalls the years after Edmond's marriage (1946) until the publication of her first collection of poems in 1975. She describes how she fulfilled the social expectations of wife and motherhood, which left her with no independent sense of self. A sense of loss dominates the account of these years: The volume was written over the body of the husband who died during its completion. The narrative ends with the breaking of her marriage and the death of one of the daughters that raises many unanswered questions. The ending also coincides with the publication of Edmond's first collection of poems, which marks the birth of her identity as an artist. Thus, loss and sacrifice are the other side of her public recognition. Edmond's account of marriage and motherhood takes place in this ambivalent context.

Even if the mature Edmond considers her younger self as having no separate sense of self, she is keen on justifying what she calls her "first life" as a wife and mother, and the unusual late start of her "second life" as a poet. In an article entitled "Only Connect: The Making of an Autobiography," written after the publication of her autobiography, she challenges the perception of motherhood as life in limbo. "Life Number One," as she names it, represents the precious years she spent bringing up her family in country towns: "I strongly (though privately) resisted the assumption, which I could see many people made, that Life Number One

[4] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi.

had merely been a matter of waiting around for Life Number Two to take over."[5]

She also advocates more visibility for these accounts of motherhood in autobiographies, which she claims women writers often self-censor. As she starts writing her own account, she realizes there is a gap in representation:

> … as I came closer to it I began to realise that the experience of a woman spending her days with young children, either in city suburbs or in country towns as mine had been, was insufficiently and often unfairly documented. Writers avoided it.[6]

Thus, Edmond's autobiographical discourse is highly ambiguous: on the one hand, her personal account claims to be political, highlighting the daily life of Pakeha mothers in small towns while challenging perceptions of isolation, boredom and frustration. On the other hand, under the influence of her feminist readings, notably Betty Friedan's *The Female Mystique*, it is the anguished account of the slow surrendering of her artist's self, dramatically exposed in one epiphanic episode, when she realizes that she only exists for the others.[7] The narrative wavers between these two viewpoints, often leaving it up to the reader to decide: "Was there a kind of loneliness in spending almost all one's time with small children, delightful as they were? […] Was my marriage doing what good marriages should do — whatever that was? Who could tell."[8]

Edmond's alienation of self is often presented in terms of loss of boundaries between herself and her family, and conveyed by images of invasion and/or fusion: "My own family now filled almost every part of me; like a full tide it had come in, spread over and through me."[9] Her self is represented as a space that has lost its limits, as motherhood is viewed as an activity that covers the inner and the outer self, the psychic and the social. Her autobiographical narration is partly an attempt to reclaim this separate sense of self. Although most of her account is psychological, the physiological lurks behind. Her alienation of self is closely linked to the alienation of her body, as her account of childbirth evinces.

---

[5] Lauris Edmond, "Only Connect: The Making of an Autobiography," *Landfall* 188 (1994): 248.
[6] Ibid., 248.
[7] Lauris Edmond, *An Autobiography* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1994), 243.
[8] Ibid., 192.
[9] Ibid., 226.

Literary accounts of childbirth are a fairly recent phenomenon: they do not occur before the twentieth century, which suggests a cultural repression of the pregnant woman's body. Tess Cosslett argues that: "Childbirth, as an experience belonging to the private sphere of womanhood, has long been marginalised as a subject for public representation."[10] There are stories of hospitalised childbirths in Doris Lessing's *A Proper Marriage* (1954) and A. S. Byatt's *Still Life* (1985), which are fairly similar to Edmond's autobiographical account, inasmuch as they tend to present the female body as a docile object in the hands of male doctors. Indeed, sociologist Ann Oakley points out a fundamental paradox in the contemporary politics of reproduction: "The management of reproduction has been, throughout most of history and in most cultures, a female concern; what is characteristic about childbirth in the industrial world is, conversely, its control by men."[11] This is due to the fact that most childbirth cases now take place at hospital in the industrialised world and are supervised by male doctors. Hence Janet Frame notes with pride that a female obstetrician delivered her at the start of her autobiographical narrative. The medicalization of childbirth, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, intensified throughout the first half of the twentieth century in many Western countries. By contrast, home birth came to symbolize poverty, and was associated with the working class and the racial minorities. As a result of the medicalization of childbirth, the perception of the pregnant body changed: it became abnormal through its association with the sick world of the hospital.

Unsurprisingly, all of Edmond's six children were born in New Zealand hospitals in the 1950s. This was the norm for New Zealand women at the time. The choice of the hospital as a place of birth is not even discussed in Edmond's account: it is taken for granted, which suggests an acceptance of medical birth. Yet, around the same time, a movement for natural childbirth started in New Zealand. The Natural Childbirth Association was formed in Wellington in 1951. The movement advocated rooming in, breastfeeding, home confinement and permissive methods of childcare. It aimed at giving more control to the parturient, and at fostering relationships between women and children. Before the birth of her first child, Edmond reads Grantly Dick Read's book, *Childbirth without Fear*, which introduced the notion of natural childbirth to the world. (The protagonist of Byatt's *Still Life* also reads similar literature).

---

[10] Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 1.
[11] Ann Oakley, *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women and Social Science* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005), 152.