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MODERN AMERICA: GWENDOLYN BENNETT AND VICTORIA OCAMPO CAPTURE THE CONTINENTS

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Dedicated specially to the theme for this *RIAS* issue, my concept-paper outlines an idea-in-progress that I offered for discussion at the Modernist Studies Association conference which took place November 2008 in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. The last paragraph of this paper offers a glimpse of how the concepts under discussion inform the shape of a book that juxtaposes the authors included here with other and non-American modernists.

This discussion explores how *americanidad/american-ness*¹ develops during the early 20th century, in the writings of Gwendolyn Bennett and Victoria Ocampo. Placing Bennett adjacent to Ocampo produces a few effects. A Harlem Renaissance poet/social commentator (generally considered a ‘minor’ figure) next to an Argentinian author/social commentator (generally considered a ‘major’ figure) illuminates how gender, race, and class are variously axiological, constructed and naturalized, in their constitution of *american-ness*. Through their adjacency, early 20th century ‘American Modernism’ emerges more from a continental view than from a perspective based primarily in nation-state identities. For our own appreciation of their works, the juxtaposition of these two authors brings ‘American’ (which almost always signifies the United States, not-Canada, and not-Mexico) and ‘Latin American’ modernities into closer correlation by working with and beyond nation-state and regional identities.

Through, behind, and beneath Bennett’s and Ocampo’s texts is an ‘American’ modernity consisting of a heterogeneity of particulars related to globally operative ideological debates and competitions in the 1930s and 40s.²To broaden the context, this com-

¹ See the visionings of America in the works of Gabriela Mistral, Miguel de Unamuno, Julio Cortazar, and Octavio Paz for a partial genealogy. The philosophies of the Harlem Renaissance surrounding *americanness* remains relatively unexplored; the few analyses that address the ‘American’ nation, culture, and identity filter the idea mostly and only through the construction of blackness.

² See early 20th century international contentions around matters of political supremacy or independence and economic control in relation to mass culture as well as the cult of the individual. See examples that reflect the times, such as C. Noonan, *Chronic Unemployment: A Result of Prolonging Individual Ownership Control and Competition in Industry Beyond Their Natural Age* (Schenectady, N.Y.: [Citizen Pub.], 1914); B. Russell, *Political Ideals* (New York: The Century Co, 1917); E. D. Martin, *The Conflict of the Individual and the Mass in the Modern World* [Colver lectures, Brown University, 1931]. New York: H. Holt and Co, 1932).

parative study of Bennett and Ocampo illuminates how Americans viewed America relationally—to Africa as the source of an integral component of American identity, to Europe as a competing geopolitical concept, and to the rest of the world as the new house of capital power. This competitive idea of America pulled elements selectively from various old and new political ideological systems. In ‘50 Años de Pie’, an essay in *Sur*, Ocampo says,

Digo caricatura grosera al recordar que se me preguntó, con la mayor seriedad del mundo, si mi revista se proponía volverle la espalda a Europa. Sencillamente porque declare que su fin principal consistiría en estudiar los problemas que nos conciernen, de un modo vital, a los americanos. Volver la espalda a Europa? Siente el ridículo infinito de esa frase?

Ocampo’s vision of continental America as facing, speaking directly to, Europe is picked up in more elaborate form in the special *Sur* issue of *La Guerra America* (1941). Bennett’s poem ‘Lines Written at the Grave of Alexander Dumas’ (*Opportunity*, July 1926) was written while she was on an art fellowship in France. Dumas would have been at the cemetery at Villers-Cotterêts.³ The object of Bennett’s poem is not whimsical, personal, or an ordinary salute to a universally recognized figure. Alexandre Dumas’ father (Thomas-Alexandre) was the son of Marquis Alexandre-Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, a French nobleman who was Général Commissaire in the Artillery in the colony of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti); and Marie-Cesette Dumas, a former slave from the Afro-Caribbean. The homage to a European icon is linked to a modern American history through a subterranean Black heritage.⁴

An American-hemispheric study, such as this one of Bennett and Ocampo, can reveal how such notions of hemispheres, and the continents contained in them, are both spatial and temporal ontologies.⁵ For instance, in the symposium ‘Tienen las Americas una historia comun?’ Ocampo says,

Yo creo que cuando escribo, por ejemplo, sobre Emily Bronte o sobre Virginia Woolf, o sobre cualquier otro escritor, lo poco que puedo decir sobre ellos lo digo siempre como americana. Y pienso, además, que la cantidad de americanismo que poseo no disminuye en nada por la pasión que siento hacia Europa, sino que, por el contrario, mi pasión hacia Europa lo enriquece.⁶

Ocampo indicates an intellectual connection as being both spatially and temporally multiple as well as integrated. In the poem ‘Heritage’, Bennett similarly declares, from an entirely different angle,

³ Dumas’s body remained there until November 30, 2002 when it was moved to the Pantheon under Chirac’s orders.

⁴ The *RIAS* call mentions gender and race as critical axes but marks only the latter with double quotes to indicate its constructedness. The poem by Bennett cited in this paper is one of many in which race and culture appear to be primary foci but are consistently grounded in an interaction with implicit or explicit gendered identities that are crucial to the narratives.

⁵ It bears mentioning that the class-based understandings of hemispheres, continents, and worlds during the early 20th century form part of our legacies of understanding Northern and Southern, Eastern and Western today. These perceptions and interpretations, in turn, affect how we construct and naturalize our own racialized, classed, and gendered locations.

⁶ The text of the meeting was printed in *Sur*, 13 October 1941. Margherita Sarfatti, *Mussolini’s Jewish mistress*, participated in this symposium.



I want to hear the chanting
 Around a heathen fire
 Of a strange black race.
 I want to breathe the Lotus flow'r,
 Sighing to the stars
 With tendrils drinking at the Nile...
 I want to feel the surging
 of my sad people's soul
 Hidden by a minstrel-smile
 (Opportunity, December 1923).

The ancient and the modern, chronologically separated, become one in the spatial pastiches of both Ocampo's and Bennett's trans-continental view of America.

Now, I return to the first part of the title for the discussion, 'Modernity's Modernisms.' Jean-Francois Lyotard asserts that modernity is a constant state (Lyotard, 1993). Then one has to ask what is particular about the modernity of the 1920s-1940s trans-American consciousness in Argentinean Victoria Ocampo and Harlem Renaissance Gwendolyn Bennett's essays? Given these specific foci, the question would have to be: what is *this* modernity's modernism? In specifying the temporal location of modernity, one implication arises, namely, that its modernism (its cultural and artistic manifestations) has also to be rendered specific. Literary and cultural academic analyses today argue for period-flexibility, asserting that modernism doesn't end circa 1950, since the same tensions of structure and form, along with critiques and experimentations, exist today. The matter embedded in the question about this modernity's modernism is that of context and consequence (Habermas, 1987). If the same tensions of structure vs. critique of structure existed in the 1920s and 30s as they do later in the past century, then what were salient for Ocampo and Bennett that allow us to maintain perspective and difference? Thus, the question: What is *this* (or *their*) modernity's modernism in their works and their significance? And, in relation to the focus of this discussion, how do Ocampo's and Bennett's 'modernist American' consciousnesses manifest a particularized modernity?

Hegemonic modernities, and hegemonic interpretations of modernities, are comprised of some key features: figurations of a self-aware and reasoning individual, of history as teleological progress, and of the 'now' that is rupture from the old. It is the first two of these that this discussion will address in exploring the bases of Ocampo's and Bennett's modernisms, because it is from the first two that the third element emerges. In their writings, notions of national and continental selves/identities and understanding of self or individual are mutually dependent, and both are crafted out of, and continually responding to, two salient and related contexts. A significant one is the dialectics of mass and individual embedded in competing contemporary politico-economic philosophies that are also cultural philosophies. The other is the range of ideas about contemporary history, defined through these philosophies not only as time but also as a spectrum of old and new spatial perceptions.⁷

⁷ The vocabulary of this essay, and in the larger work, is drawn in large part from Gramscian theories of power, citizenship, and international relations.

To look closely at both Bennett's and Ocampo's circumstances, decisions, and acts—different as those are—is to discover a number of simultaneities that invoke questions about the nature of their (trans) American modernity's modernisms, and how those may bear upon our present. Neither Bennett nor Ocampo abandoned a national (mass or collective) identity, intertwined as that was with gendered and racialized imperial histories and ambitions as well as with gendered and racialized democratic impulses. This claim to a national identity was not, in either case, contradictory to a trans-national consciousness, as some of the extracts above illustrate, explicitly or implicitly.

Stemming from this simultaneity and also contributing to it is, in both cases, an effort to craft an identity in the context of mass politics that is mobilized in contrary ways by liberal capitalist nations on the one hand and socialist movements on the other. As both Bennett and Ocampo experienced directly in their strategic adoption of liberal and socialist politics, the privileged universal cosmopolitan contrasted with the cosmopolitan proletariat respectively.⁸ Within the contexts of community and individual self-determination, Bennett and Ocampo negotiated differently a gendered identity contextualized by racial-national legacies and (dis)affiliations from 'the masses.' Each also aspired, at the same time, to a supra-national consciousness that preserved their identification with a 'human' who was not confined by these moorings.

Running through these aspects of individual and community representation in Bennett's and Ocampo's works, an important element is that of the present-that-is-also-the-future. Their writings convey an overwhelming sense of present-ness that breaks from an imagined and constructed past, of which 'the primitive' serves as their counterfoil. This element of newness or modernness (and the two are often used interchangeably) has, of course, been noted in numerous academic analyses of 1920s and 1930s modernisms as demonstrative of the agendas of modernity. In my reading of early 20th century modernist America, these constructions of past and present-future have a particular salience when interpreted in relation to capitalist and communist perspectives on global power, as Ocampo's and Bennett's works addressed them. Within, against, and alongside this (trans) American context, in my readings of Ocampo and Bennett, the new is not merely about the linear passages of time but of its manifestations—the modern woman, the modern nation, the modern world. In other words, I am implying that each of these is not only a manifestation of philosophies of identity-in-space or identity-as-space but as expressions of time. So, for example, the matter of nation is a matter of not only space but also time; claiming national identity signaled (and signals today) a stepping into the present-future as a recognized entity, a macrocosm of the individual being recognized by virtue of its temporal as much as by its spatial demarcations.

To expand the original question then: who is, or how does one construct, the inhabitant of *this* modernity's modernism? And how does one account for *their* modernity's modernism? (Both of these questions, each dependent on the other, occupy

⁸ For example, the New York World-Telegram printed an article titled 'Carver School Name Called Red Negro Ruse' (November 1943) in which Bennett is interviewed about the Washington Carver School for Democracy; she is quoted as saying that 'The school will be supported by the community.'



us today as well.) Modernisms that are comprised of the suturing of elements in Bennett's and Ocampo's practices towards complex socio-political belonging, elements that hegemonic political and cultural practices aim either to separate repeatedly and forcefully or use strategically in combination in particular contingencies. The 'modern', as Ocampo's and Bennett's works reveal, is not a clean break from or counterposition to the past nor from its perceived residues in their present. For both, their amalgamation is connected to their (dis)affiliations with past and present-future subjectivities that are slotted in terms of race, gender, and class. These (dis)affiliations stem from Bennett's and Ocampo's processes of reconciling their own public and private identities with formally political structures/ideologies across the Americas.⁹

Gwendolyn Bennett and Victoria Ocampo are two examples of what I term the new indigenous inhabiting early 20th century American modernity. Their works are accounts of the numerous and seemingly contradictory impulses of past/present-future, continent/world, nation/supra-nation, mass/individual, and (wo)man/supra-(wo)man. Bennett's 'To a Dark Girl' exhorts the titular persona to

[k]eep all [she has] of queenliness,
Forgetting that [she] once [was] slave,
And let [her] full lips laugh at Fate!

Even as she calls on an always-emerging African identity, she turns to

[t]he red men, the black, the white,
Lying end to end
Beneath cities and towns,
In river-beds... I died,
Building America

aligning her own self with the mixture that makes America appear in her essays as in her poems. Ocampo, in a discussion on Mary McCarthy's essay 'America the Beautiful' ('Norteamérica, La Hermosa') notes her view at the onset, in parentheses, debating directly the author's imagination of America and presenting her own in a dialectical relationship with Europe. In the course of noting her initial points of contention, she observes:

No creo, por ejemplo, que sea especialidad de los europeos el imaginar que el dinero hace la felicidad, mientras que los americanos (y me refiero al Continente entero, en toda su longitud) se han curado de esa ilusión.

In the larger work, I indicate that the new indigenous include Virginia Woolf, Grazia Deledda, and Cornelia Sorabji. They are partially representative of the many modernist subjects that inhabit our studies of modernisms and modernities. As Bennett's and Ocampo's works demonstrate, the American new indigenous maintains selective alignments with the imagined or constructed indigenous-made-primitive that function as the anonymous mass in the background of the modern individual. She thus

⁹ By 'formally political structures', I mean political parties and governments that are only some formations of the political.

muddies the supposed (modernist) rupture of the new from the past. The new indigenous holds as natural her particular national identity while striving to claim the continent as its expanded form; at the same time, this new indigenous also claims the universal as a position of intellectual and emotional power beyond gender and race.

The question of who inhabits modernism (and how, when, and where) itself as well as my response might appear to return the liberal humanist individual to view, and to focus on Bennett and Ocampo as 'extraordinary' individuals who become the model of a flexible, but nevertheless contained subjecthood. Even the response, in offering the figuration of the new indigenous, only appears to resurrect an individual subject. In recent modernist scholarship, the early 20th century dialectics of the deconstruction of the individual as an effect of power-structures and the fetishization of the individual has been largely abandoned in favor, largely, of a heavy dependence on the latter. New forms of this dialectic, between effects/issues and personages, continue to tilt in favor of the latter—one only has to look at some examples to declare that they are comparative, and see that they have only placed individual modernist figures as bounded subjects who speak separately on common topics. The concept of the new indigenous, or hybrid native, attempts to capture a relational methodology—of approaching individuals as effects of prevailing ideologies as also individuals who grapple with those same ideologies.

Describing Bennett and Ocampo as the new indigenous also allows for a discussion of a number of assumed positions in modernist studies scholarship, i.e., in the reception of a period called Modernism and a style called Modernist. One is the ascription of the status of 'cosmopolitan' to prominent and mobile modernist figures who appear to gain universality by apparently being anchored nowhere. The notion of the new indigenous acknowledges the complicated sense of material and political belonging, claimed even by those aspiring to or granted universal status. Another is the desire to remain resolutely lodged in fragments (read and repeated as modernist experimentation) or arrive at wholes (read and repeated as the project of political modernity). Both fragments and wholes are structures that we assign retrospectively to many of the contradictions of early 20th century modernity's modernisms. The new indigenous, as a concept and a practice, allows for the fractal relationships that cannot be reconciled or explained completely, yet still function meaningfully in the lives of those modernist figures.

My discussion at the MSA and for the *RIAS* draws out some aspects of the new indigenous through examples from Bennett's and Ocampo's experience and writings. For example, Bennett's education in New York and Paris, her career in Harlem and the Jefferson School for Democracy, and her cultural vehicle, *The Ebony Flute* in the magazine *Opportunity*. And Ocampo's education in Buenos Aires, primarily in French, her career across the Americas and Europe, particularly her intellectual relationships with Waldo Frank, Andre Breton, and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as some of her essays in her own cultural vehicle, *Sur*.

This particular comparison is the basis of an exploration of the legacies of Bennett and Ocampo on the issues of modernity's modernisms across the Americas, and follows the lines of affiliation as well as dissonance from the early 20th century into more recent understandings of the same. These diachronic hemispheric mappings aim to



contribute to our own contemporary discussions of American-ness as that is informed by prevailing and historically modulated concepts of race, class, and gender in relation to nation. In other terms, as deployed in daily life, American-ness is fraught with debates about the varying status of native, citizen, and immigrant (in relation to equity or patriotism, for example) as those are interpreted and enacted in late 20th century transnational and global late capitalist modernity. One only has to think briefly about the rhetoric of patriotism in the recent presidential campaign to reflect upon how American-ness arises. The studies of Bennett and Ocampo, and of the concept of the new indigenous, hope to contribute to analyses and reshaping of our own political and cultural practices.

The book-project, of which this particular comparison of Bennett and Ocampo is a part, expands a study of the new indigenous by juxtaposing Virginia Woolf (England), Grazia Deledda (Italy), and Cornelia Sorabji (India). The geopolitical relationships between the Americas and these nations/continents, through their use of political ideologies, form the backdrop to the study of the authors' works. The discussion of (trans)American-ness is part of the first chapter that is titled 'Genes' and that addresses issues of authenticity and belonging based on racial, gendered, intellectual and national 'genes', i.e., the inherited material that enables an instinctive as well as constructed sense of belonging.

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