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Review of International American Studies 4/1-2, 31-35

2009-2010

LETTERS TO THE METROPOLE: THE RHETORIC OF DISTANCE IN SOR JUANA'S POETRY

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There is precious little about the Novohispanic Baroque that could be considered modern by almost any aesthetic standard except those drawn up by the famously casuistic Novohispanic Creoles of the late 17th century who were always eager to prove that they did not lag behind Europe. To make their case, they no doubt would have relied on the etymological definition of *modo* (now or contemporary) and would have stressed their cultivation of an aesthetics of surprise and novelty. Most critics, however, would probably agree with Octavio Paz who leaves the Baroque at the threshold of modernity since it has no real revolutionary agenda and does not attempt to break with the past (Paz, 1998: 19). Paz understands modernity as a tradition of rupture, interruption, and constant new beginning (Paz, 1998: 17). Modernity, he believes, is a sort of creative self-destruction that couples an aesthetics of novelty with rupture (Paz, 1998: 20). Furthermore, Paz makes clear that modernity and its tradition of revolution and rupture can only arise after the French Revolution, which redefines revolution as rupture itself.

Paz's approach to the question is clearly nominal rather than relational and suffers from what Susan Stanford Friedman has noted is the characteristic circularity of the nominal approach to defining modern, modernity, and modernism. When considering, however, 17th century New Spain from a post-colonial, politico-economic point of view, like that developed by Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and Anibal Quijano, among others, the Novohispanic Baroque falls squarely within the bounds of modernism/colonialism. Such a consideration takes into account the relational nature of colonized America vis-à-vis colonizing Europe. Whether or not Latin America was colonial (in the nineteenth and 20th century form of the condition) and whether or not it could be considered as postcolonial (given that its colonial moment was quite different—in terms of purpose, mission, organization—than that of India or Africa, has been quite exhaustively discussed for a decade or more. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel provides a good discussion of this debate in the context of Sor Juana in chapter four of her *Saberes Americanos*.

Though Sor Juana resided in Mexico, the colonial center, and though she associated herself with powerful, influential people born and bred in Spain (vicereines, viceroys, and archbishops), though Viceregal New Spain, to acknowledge Jorge Klor de

Alva's point regarding the difference between Colonial Latin America and other colonialisms, was not considered a colony, à la India, there is in Sor Juana's writings, especially those addressed to Europe, the deployment of a rhetoric of distance and difference characteristic of later colony-metropole relations. Indeed, the few poems where Sor Juana speaks to Europe, she marks and remarks upon the distance in order to vindicate the colonial subject vis-à-vis the metropole.

At the end of the introductory masque to the sacramental drama *The Divine Narcissus* (a masque that recasts the Spanish conquest of Mexico as a dialogue in which the Spanish characters convert the Amerindian characters by using natural theology to argue that their cannibalistic rite allegorically prefigures the Eucharist), the character of Zeal interrogates Religion about her desire to stage a play written in Mexico before the king and queen of Spain. He asks,

But does it not seem ill-advised
that what you write in Mexico
be represented in Madrid?

Immediately before Zeal poses this question, Religion extols the grandeur of Madrid, exclaiming that she is

the Royal Town,/the Center of our Holy Faith,
the Jewel in the Royal Crown,
the Seat of Catholic kings and Queens
through whom the Indies have been sent
the blessing of Evangel Light
that shines throughout the Occident (233).

Both the excess of Religion's praise, which casts Madrid as the center from which justice, mercy, and salvation flow, and Zeal's insistence on propriety serve to mark the colonial/dependent status of the Americas. Religion's response to Zeal's questioning, however, attempts to erase the distance by stating that the play celebrates the Eucharist and traffics in allegory, thus

men of reason [should be able to] realize
there is no distance that deters,
nor seas that interchange efface (235).

The position Religion takes regarding the intelligibility of the play to come—these are allegories, the outward forms matters less than the inner, universal meaning, thus ideas can easily travel—is, at the end of the day, the metropolitan position, especially in matters of religion and governance. However, Sor Juana reverses the direction of information flow—which, as the encomium urbis of Madrid makes known should move from the light-giving center to the penumbral hinterlands.

If in this masque Religion, in order to be heard by Madrid, espouses a universalizing reading that effaces any differences between the colony and the metropole, Sor Juana does not always collapse the distance between Mexico and Madrid and the difference between Spain and New Spain as easily. Indeed in the *romance 51* she takes up the problem of distance and difference in order to argue the exact oppo-

site of this universalizing reading. This poem is something of an *apologia pro vita sua* found unfinished after the poet's death and evidence that the nun returned to writing poetry even after having abjured all literary pursuits under ecclesial pressure. This *romance* marks the distance between the center and periphery, rejects the praise heaped upon the poet by the metropolitan literary establishment as the celebrated, exotic non-metropolitan prodigy, and speaks back to the center in order to assert her freedom. Throughout the poem Sor Juana plays with the rhetoric of humility in order to distance herself from the metropolitan readings/uses of her poetry.

The poem begins highlighting the distance between her Spanish/metropole admirers and the poet's own location, peripheral America. 'Has distance really the power/to magnify my likeness?' she asks. And again later,

What intervals caused by distance
could modulate the sound
of my works, and harmonize
something so wholly discordant? (105).

Throughout the poem, as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel notes, 'the lyric voice establishes an opposition between a "there" and a "here" that resists the idea of a transparent cultural continuity between New Spain and Europe' (93). Consistently the poem presents the 'there' as continually misreading the 'here' where Sor Juana resides, the 'here' which gives meaning to her poetry.

Sor Juana marks the difference between the 'there' and the 'here' with references to the magical powers of Indian witchdoctors and the barren desert land in which the poet was born. Both references serve to mark the distance from the metropole by reinforcing stereotypical ideas about the periphery—it's barrenness and strangeness. She asks

What kind of sorcerer's brew
did the Indians inject —
the herb doctors of my country —
to make my scrawls cast this spell? (105)

Indeed, Sor Juana asserts:

I am not at all what you think.
What you've done is attribute to me
a different nature with your pens
a different talent with your lips.

Borne on your feather-pens' plumes,
my flight is no longer mine;
it's not as you like to imagine,
not what your fancy depicts. (103)

A particularly instructive passage on the problem of misreading that also plays, albeit in a veiled manner, with the center/periphery logic are stanzas 21–23 that casts Europe's reading of the poet's corpus as the sun attempting to penetrate dense, compact

bodies. Though this is a poetic elaboration on the rhetoric of humility, Sor Juana uses it to highlight the violence of the center/periphery relation. 'Whenever the sun attempts/to penetrate opaque bodies/though he wants to be beneficial/he ends up by showing faults' reads Trueblood's translation. However the last two lines 'el que piensa beneficio/suele resultar agravio' literally means, 'that which he thinks to be of benefit, ends up causing harm.' Their reading can only be the result of 'superficial contact' and 'merely gives rise to shadows' (107). The choice of the sun as the metaphor for Europe's reading gaze connects with the image of Madrid as irradiating the beneficial light of civilization and Christianity. The sun's incomprehension of the dark, dense object, product of a rustic and barren land and dark Indian rites, poetically underscores the distance and difference between Mexico and Madrid.

The *romance 51* is not the only time Sor Juana eschews the praise of the European literary establishment. The epistolary *romance 49* that begins '! Valgate por Apolo hombre!' ends with an image of the poet turned into a freak show being and dragged around Europe. The poem is a response to a mock laudatory poem in which a male admirer calls Sor Juana a phoenix and him the adventurer who has found the *rara avis*. Sor Juana, in turn, rejects his designating her a phoenix, because, after all, she is a person of flesh and blood, not a monster and asserts both her independence—by rejecting his reading of her—and her lack of independence—by reminding him that she is a nun in a convent and must obey convent rules. Near the end of the poem, she brings out the exploitative implication of her interlocutor's masculine adventure narrative—that is, she notes what happens when the spoils of conquest are brought back to civilization: they are toured around and shown off as strange, novel items.

The introductory masque and the two *romances* highlight the condition of the ultramarine intellectual. On the one hand there is the need to efface difference in order to establish a conversation with the colonial center and on the other the need to mark the difference between the two in order to remind the colonial center that meaning is highly contextual and not as transparent as the colonial gaze would want it. Meaning, it would seem, is not as easily transported from place to place without distortion.

Excising oneself from the dominating discourse is never easy. Indeed, as the *romance 51* notes, the metropole finds ways to read and revise the colonial subject, to domesticate and tame the colonial other. She of all writers would know this first hand. As Frederick Luciani has noted Sor Juana most likely did not provide the titles for her poems. These, instead, were written by the censor/priest, whose titles often attempt to control the reader's experience of Sor Juana's poetry by proffering a sanitized reading of the poem in the title. *Romance 51* is no exception. The title reads 'To the matchless pens of Europe, whose praises only enhanced her works. Lines found unfinished' (103) The editor's gloss correctly identifies the ostensible purpose of the poem—flattery of the metropole and humble self-effacement—it remains silent, however, regarding what the poem actually does, which is contest and resist all metropolitan readings by insisting on Europe's inability to understand the radical uniqueness and difference of the poet.

At the end of the day, the problematic relationship between the metropole and the colony and the problem of being a colonial writer caught in the tangle of the controlling discourse where one reproduces that discourse while trying to extricate oneself

from it, is not new. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony of the modernity/coloniality of late 17th century New Spain is testified to by Sor Juana being caught on the horns of this problem.

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