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ESSAYISTIC DISCOURSE AS LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FEMINIST CRITICISM IN ROSARIO FERRÉ'S *SITIO A EROS* AND *EL COLOQUIO DE LAS PERRAS*

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IN *Sitio a Eros* and *El coloquio de las perras*, Rosario Ferré turns the traditional Spanish American essay into a most propitious space to investigate issues of gender and, more specifically, writing as a potential vehicle for women's ultimate liberation. In these two books, in which the line between literary criticism and feminist criticism is hard to separate, she joins the ranks of writers such as Gabriela Mistral, Victoria Ocampo and Rosario Castellanos, Latin America's best-known female predecessors in the essay. Gabriela Mistral and Victoria Ocampo, however, wrote at a time when women writers in Latin America received scarce attention from the literary establishment. More than critics with a definite agenda, both of these women were promoters of culture, ambassadors of their respective countries to the whole continent, especially Mistral; and like Simón Bolívar in the nineteenth century, they dreamed of the social integration of the myriad of fragments that made up the Spanish American world: "Though Ocampo wrote facing Europe and Mistral with an eye toward the indigenous world, each in her own way wrote to champion a syncretic America, composed of European and indigenous threads" (Kaminsky 116). Ocampo, the daughter of an affluent Argentinean family, concentrated her efforts on bringing European culture to Latin America and saw herself as a kind of bridge between the culture of Argentina and that of the rest of the world. Mistral, like José Martí and José Enrique Rodó before her, envisaged a unified continent and pushed for the recognition of its indigenous population long before the induction of the concept of the subaltern subject into the theo-

retical horizon of Latin American cultural studies.¹ Both women strove for the equality of women, Ocampo being more intellectually pointed than Mistral.² They wrote hundreds and hundreds of essays which have only recently begun to receive the credit that they deserve. Ocampo alone published ten volumes of *Testimonios*. As Peter G. Earle states, "Ocampo . . . insisted on cultivating the essay with the same intensity that characterizes the essays of Montaigne, Emerson, Unamuno, and her close friend Ortega y Gasset" ("The Female Persona" 91).

In Latin America, essay-writing has been a male-dominated activity and has usually underestimated the female elements of society and culture.³ Accordingly, canonical essays have repeatedly dealt with very concrete aspects of reality such as human rights and persecution, social and economic problems, and the delineation of national character.⁴ In recent decades, however, as the number of women who have entered the public sphere in Latin America has increased, so has the number of women who have turned to essay writing. A putatively male genre, formally speaking it possesses all the necessary attributes that make it an ideal means for feminist critique. Max Bense, one of the first to theorize on the essay as a work of art, pointed to the experimental and critical nature of the genre (418). Of all literary genres, it provides the most auspicious space for criticism even though it differs markedly from the learned article and the theory of literature.⁵ Theodor Adorno, in "The Essay as Form," not only offers one of the most precise definitions of the essay but also seems to be defining certain aspects of *la écriture féminine* when alluding to the formal aspects of this genre since he claims that the essay is a genre whose contours cannot be prescribed (152).⁶ By drawing "the fullest consequences from the critique of the system," this genre does not only constitute but ultimately becomes the best critique of ideology (157, 166). In marked contrast to the great philosophical systems of the Western tradition, the essay often focuses its attention on the ephemeral; it is the fragmentary genre *par excellence* (158-59). Foremost, this open-ended genre "shakes off the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo" (163). Women writers and critics in recent years have begun to appreciate the great potential the essay offers women to express themselves. Aileen Boyd Sivert holds that essayistic discourse would seem "to invite female authors by its very form or lack of one" (57), and Amy Kaminsky asserts that "the potentially transgressive nature of the essay . . . suggests that it belongs in the camp of 'the feminine,' that elusive region of negation and difference" (118).

Most of the essays included in Ferré's *Sitio a Eros* (1980, 1986) were written in the late seventies, when feminist criticism had not yet been formulated as the more inclusive type of criticism it is today. The essays of *El coloquio de las perras* (1992), on the other hand, were most likely written in the late eighties and, not surprisingly, represent a clear movement forward in the development of feminist literary criticism, especially as the influence of North-Ameri-

can as well as French feminist theories has occasioned the interrogation of what a truly Latin American feminist movement should look like. In these two texts Ferré takes the Spanish American essay in a new direction, away from the traditional concerns of male essayists.

The essays assembled in *Sitio* and *El coloquio* revolve around a single topic: the writing of women and the potential of feminist criticism to create a fairer world for all.⁷ The focus in these books, and expressly in the two most prominent essays of the collection – "La cocina de la escritura" in *Sitio* and "El coloquio de las perras" in *Coloquio* –, is the perennial issue of *la écriture féminine*. In these texts the first-person narrative interrogates not only the usual representation of women by male writers, or the practically absent presence of the female persona in the traditional Spanish American essay, as Earle has demonstrated convincingly (in "The Female Persona"), but also the subject of representation itself. This does not mean that Ferré lacks an interest in other aspects of Latin American life such as history and politics; her novels and short stories certainly prove otherwise.⁸ Rather, it means that, unlike the official historians of the continent who have centered their attention on generals and battles, and unlike male Latin American essayists who scrutinize questions of social, cultural and economic inequality in a country or who synthesize the character of an entire people,⁹ Rosario Ferré seeks above all to bring into focus the topic of women's writing. With her the ubiquitous issues of character and national identity cede to the issue of gender in the discourse of the essay. By alluding to her own experience with writing, and especially by inscribing her "self" in her essays,¹⁰ she accompanies and shares – emotionally and intellectually – the precarious experience of women writers in modern society.

Earle is correct in a recent defense of the genre – an ubiquitous genre which has nonetheless become a pariah in the literary republic – to assert that if the essay is not a self-reflecting text it is precisely because that which jumps at the reader is not a text but "la mentalidad y sensibilidad de su creador" ("El ensayo" 2). Due to the narrative "I's" almost aggressive need for expression, the essay could be accused of being an "egotistical" genre. Yet often the ultimate goal of the essayist is paradoxically to create an intimate dialogue with the reader.¹¹ As Michael L. Hall states, "The rhetorical technique of the essay is somewhat dialectical in that it involves both author and reader in an implied dialogue" (82).¹² The essay writer seeks to raise awareness, to problematize reality, as the postmoderns would put it, to direct attention to the stuff of the world. He/she does not "draw something new out of an empty vacuum," as Lukács professed long ago in his classic study of the genre, but re-arranges the order of things in some way (10).¹³

Ferré's *Sitio* and *El coloquio* could have easily fallen into the category of traditional literary criticism had it not been for the presence of the textual "I" in the most important essays.¹⁴ In contrast to the text speaker of the classic

essay *Ariel*, who dedicates his address to “la juventud de América” and who more than likely has in mind a selected group of male university students, the speaker of *Sitio* dedicates her book to her daughter. In the preface-type note to the second edition, moreover, reference is made to the text speaker’s “ideal” real reader: “. . . escribí [*Sitio*] para beneficio de las jóvenes de la edad de mi hija, que tenía 17 años al momento de su publicación” (7). As in the essays written by her male counterparts in Latin America, a sense of mission pervades most of Ferré’s essayistic production. But contrary to José Martí’s *Nuestra América* or to Ernesto Che Guevara’s *El Diario*, for example, the speaker of *Sitio* does not aspire to the formation of an authentic identity or the destruction of imperialism; she aspires, rather, to the creation of what Jean Franco, availing herself of the title of Benedict Anderson’s classic book on the origins of nationalism,¹⁵ calls “an imagined community of sisters” (qtd. in Ferré’s *The Youngest Doll* xi). By clearly positioning herself as a female author writing for a female public, the speaker’s project in *Sitio* resembles the text speaker of Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” in the sense that not only is the content of the text coded as female, but also the text-act reader.

If in her fiction and poetry Ferré’s vision to erect this “imagined community of sisters” crystallizes in the incessant tension between a female self who seeks to subvert the established order and a patriarchal system which opposes her all the way, in *Sitio* the female-authored essays propose the existence of such a community not only via the critical approach to women’s writing or the re-valuation of traditionally-considered female genres such as the diary and the letter,¹⁶ but also through the process of literary autobiography itself. It must not be forgotten that the essay has its roots in confessions and that its closest relatives are autobiographical writings in general, epistles, journals, diaries, in essence so-called “personal narratives.” In the aforementioned note to the second edition, the text speaker offers a kind of justification for what she sets out to do in *Sitio* by asserting that “la literatura es siempre autobiográfica” and “Estos ensayos son a la vez biográficos y autobiográficos” (7). In the self-aware posture of the writing subject that characterizes her essayistic discourse, the speaker proceeds then to frame the fifteen essays contained in *Sitio* within the parameters of medieval *exempla* literature. By conceiving her text as a book of *exempla*, and by classifying it as hagiography, not of conventional male saints but of the lives of women saints for the “[consuelo de] sus jóvenes lectoras” (7), she completely overturns the standard Spanish American essays written by men.

The speaker of Ferré’s essays evolves through the criticism of the works and lives of women who managed to combine literary pursuits with political activism. *Sitio*, the text speaker herself avers, is a tribute to these extraordinary women. Except for the first and last essays, which were later added to the second edition of the text and which are the most autobiographical, the other thirteen constitute what the speaker denominates “‘cuentos’” whose purpose is

to afford some consolation to young women readers (7); of these one is a letter to the late Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos. Ferré also writes about Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Anaïs Nin, Mary Godwin Shelley, George Sand, Flora Tristán, Jean Rhys, Tina Modotti, Alexandra Kollontay, Sylvia Plath and Lillian Hellman.¹⁷ The text speaker of *Sitio* hopes that the "cuentos" of these women, herself included, will provide young women readers "una serie de claves o de soluciones a los problemas que tendrán que enfrentar luego en el mundo como mujeres" (7). No mention is made, however, of why the author writes about writers in order to console young women. Besides, why did she not include in *Sitio* writers such as Alfonsina Storni, or Delmira Agustini, or any other Spanish American woman writer if the intended audience is comprised of Spanish American women?

Indeed, the fact that none of these Latin American women writers is included in *Sitio* surely casts doubts on the feasibility of the speaker's project regarding the liberation of Spanish American women via their reading of hers or comparable texts. Similarly, Ferré's radical position as an essayist might rightfully be called into question. It must be clear, however, that the essays contained in *Sitio* do not constitute a call to arms, which does not mean that they are any less original or innovative. What's novel about Ferré's essayistic production is that she thematizes the topic of women's writing. This had not been attempted before with the same force in Latin America, at least not by canonical essayists. Ferré's merit as a writer resides in her taking full advantage of a genre most appropriate to criticize the predominant ideology. And what a better way for a woman writer to carry out such critique than through the analyses of women writers' lives? For, after all, Ferré is neither a politician nor a revolutionary, as much as she may be attracted to women writers who have played an essential role in the political and social domains.

A cursory look at the women in *Sitio* might lead one to conclude that Ferré is no different from Spanish American intellectuals who in the past have sought their models in Europe or the United States. One might ask, further, if the lives of these women resemble in any degree those of the twice or thrice-removed Latin American real readers of the text. The answer to this question is negative, of course. The lives of the women writers of *Sitio* probably have little in common with the everyday lives of the real readers of Ferré's text. Besides, in the final analysis Ferré herself, like most writers who write from the periphery, is a victim of a literary culture which privileges writers from certain countries while excluding others. This, in turn, is explained by the fact that, to put it simply, some nations have more resources available to invest in the publication of books, creating thus a greater amount of what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital."¹⁸ If Ferré's desire is to create an "imagined community of sisters," it ultimately does not matter which women are incorporated in *Sitio*; what matters is that these women writers symbolize a group which has been underrepresented and marginalized because of its gender. What is cru-

cial, therefore, is not their nationality but their experiences in the world as women (31-32).¹⁹

In order to bestow credibility upon her venture, the text speaker includes herself in *Sitio's* most significant essay, "La cocina de la escritura." Of all the essays of the text, this is the one in which it is easiest to conflate the identities of author and textual "I" because the writing subject incorporates personal information in her text; she tells the text-act reader, for instance, that only after her divorce was she able to devote herself entirely to writing. Foremost, this autobiographical essay is a confession of what led Ferré to write and why she does it. At the same time, it is precisely the convergence of text speaker and author which makes it the most decisive essay of *Sitio*. Of all the women present in the text, moreover, Ferré is the only one alive; this makes "La cocina" the prime platform for the author's project and the other essays useful *exemplar* for the here and now. The fact that she herself is a writer, and a woman, qualifies her to speak about writing and affords her likewise a great degree of authority as critic of other women writers. "Authority," as Elizabeth Mittman contends, "is intimately tied to the author" in the essay (95).

The title of this essay, "La cocina de la escritura," sets the stage for a voice which is not a "feminine voice" but is instead the voice of a woman speaking from a locus of experience, experience, needless to say, as an authorizing force in both the essay and testimonial literature.²⁰ What distinguishes Ferré's text from most writings which fall within the parameters of testimonial or documentary narrative,²¹ nevertheless, is that, unlike Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, for example, the speaker speaks for herself, without the need of an intermediary. Furthermore, the issue of gender is not always brought up directly in testimonial literature, even if the lives and experiences of women constitute the bulk of most *novelas testimoniales* in Latin America. In "La cocina de la escritura" the speaker gives voice to her own experience as a writer and as a woman; and unlike most narrator-protagonists of the *novela testimonial*, Ferré does not need someone to speak on her behalf. In fact, from the very beginning of the essay she positions herself unambiguously as a female author writing for a female public. "La cocina de la escritura," thus, could be translated into English as literally, "The cooking of writing," or metaphorically, "writing as cooking," cooking being the traditional woman's task *par excellence* but here reclaimed by the speaker as the very locus of woman's creativity. This notion acquires further significance in Spanish because "cocina" also means "kitchen." Tellingly, the essay is preceded by an epigraph from Sor Juana's *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1695), probably the first defense of a woman's right to pursue intellectual concerns in the New World: "Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito" (13). The speaker proceeds then to share with the text-act reader the different stages of her literary career. Each of the four subtitles of the essay, in fact, represents a separate stage in the cooking process. What at the beginning is a series of mixed ingredients in

a cooking pot, becomes in the end what the speaker calls "la verdadera sabiduría de los guisos" (30).

As the process of self-discovery unfolds, the text speaker of "La cocina" becomes a critic of her own and others' literary performance. Directly related to her notion of writing as cooking, she tells the text-act reader that she writes in order to build and to destroy and that, as the *topos* of *utile et dulce* was the dominant aesthetic tenet among classical writers, so it is the driving force of her own writing. She goes on to explain that at the outset of her career, when she still did not dare let the cooking ingredients fall into the fire, she suffered from an acute case of anxiety of influence caused by Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. The former impelled her to avoid writing on love and to tackle instead problems of social and historical import in her fiction; the latter believed women should be objective in their writing, eluding completely the matter of their sex (16-17). At the end of the essay the speaker confesses yielding to Woolf's dictums (with de Beauvoir the most pervasive literary presence in *Sitio*): "Creo que las escritoras de hoy tenemos, ante todo, que escribir bien, y que esto se logra únicamente dominando las técnicas de la escritura" (31).

Essayistic discourse as literary autobiography continues in the essay "De la ira a la ironía, o sobre cómo atemperar el acero candente del discurso," also preceded by the words of Sor Juana. Profiting from Sor Juana's idea expressed in the epigraph that language may be used to attack as well as to defend oneself, the text speaker proceeds to introduce one of the central driving forces of Ferré the writer and feminist critic: rage – against patriarchy, against injustice, against one's abusive husband – conceived as the initial catapulting push in women's writing and irony as its necessary mitigating force. Sor Juana, the Brontë sisters, Mary Shelley, and especially Sylvia Plath – about whom Ferré writes her essay "Las bondades de la ira" (119-46) –, were all moved by rage when they began to write (191). Pointing to *Papeles de Pandora*, her first collection of short stories, she states: "Sin esa ira, sin esa indignación que hoy me parece hasta cierto punto ingenua, no hubiese podido jamás comenzar a escribir" (194). The alacrity with which the speaker of *Sitio* inscribes rage in her poetics not only justifies the inclusion of all the women protagonists of her text but also contributes to framing the writing subject of the essays, and by extension every woman who writes, as literary critics of women's writing *in potentia*. As will be discerned in *El coloquio*, women have no choice but to criticize the writings of other women.

This brings us to one of the most salient aspects of *Sitio*: the presence of literary criticism as a vehicle for feminist criticism. I will argue that if in the essay in general the textual "I" attempts to persuade its interlocutor and, above all, to criticize an existing ideology, then the literary criticism of *Sitio* is nothing more than a pretext to launch a blistering attack against injustices committed against women by a male oriented system. The noun "mujeres," as a matter of fact, is

more prevalent in the essays than "escritoras." In this sense, *Sitio* is similar to de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and comparable ground-breaking texts on feminism. The same ardor, the same frenzy which is displayed in the most politically-oriented Spanish American essays written by men, stands out in Ferré's text. In "La autenticidad de la mujer en el arte," for instance, the speaker repudiates the innumerable obstacles that a successful professional woman encounters on a daily basis. The solution to the problem, however, does not reside in women becoming as aggressive as men. In an obvious move to distance herself from American and French feminists, the text speaker of *Sitio* ties woman's liberation not only to gender but, more importantly, to class and politics. Women should constantly question the operating mechanisms of both private and state capital. But in conjunction with this very political struggle, women, and especially those who write, have to be true to themselves, i.e., "ser mujeres antes que nada, porque en el arte la autenticidad lo es todo" (37). For the speaker of this essay, being a woman means knowing her body intimately and tapping into the recesses of her sexuality. At the same time, it requires embarking on an honest re-examination of the nature of love itself: "¿Qué es el amor, en fin, para la mujer? ¿Qué es ese enorme bien por el cual se le ha exigido renunciar al mundo durante siglos? ¿Es el amor el único fin de su vida?" (37).

The text speaker of *Sitio* praises those women who, by means of their writings and political activism, transcended romantic love; George Sand, for example, who understood that "el matrimonio indisoluble es la piedra angular de una sociedad injusta" (65), or Flora Tristán, who not only fought for the rights of women but also for those of workers (73-80). Of all the women in *Sitio*, the Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontay is one of the most remarkable and would seem to represent the ideal woman of Ferré's project. In an essay whose title constitutes a paraphrase of one of Kollontay's books,²² "En defensa del pájaro blanco" (105-16), "pájaro blanco" serving as metaphor for woman, the speaker of *Sitio* commends not only Kollontay's indefatigable efforts to transform maternity into a social function protected by the state and her creation of state-run pre-natal care institutions, but also her attempts to legalize abortion. Significantly, the title of Ferré's text, *Sitio a Eros*, is an almost exact copy of Kollontay's book *Sitio a Eros alado* (1923); but the Puerto Rican writer adopts, and adapts, Kollontay's title to suit her own designs. In Spanish the noun "sitio" signifies place, spot, space, and siege. "Eros," in Ferré's as well as in Kollontay's text, is synonymous with erotic love. But "Eros alado," in contrast to "Eros sin alas" which symbolizes nothing more than the basic instinct for reproduction, is parallel to the spiritual love that Kollontay envisioned for the Soviet Union once the fruit of the October Revolution had materialized. In the context of Ferré's essays, consequently, *Sitio a Eros* could be interpreted as the "place of love" or, if we keep in mind the speaker's idea that irony deters rage and passion, as the restraining of erotic love via aesthetic production: the Dionysiac curbed by the Apollinian.

At the beginning of her epistolary essay to Julia de Burgos, the only text reader of *Sitio* addressed directly, the speaker castigates this Puerto Rican poet for having capitulated to the Dionysian forces that led her to love so many miserable men who mistreated her: "Al releer algunos de tus poemas, Julia amiga, me siento a veces invadida por la ira, por la tentación de recriminarte" (147). Toward the end of her letter, nonetheless, she forgives de Burgos by admitting that if in fact it was the power of love that allowed her to write, then there is nothing she can do but admire her (150). In addition to embodying the speaker's major concerns of *Sitio*, this letter represents her boldest attempt to create not only a dialogue with the literary establishment but to transport such dialogue into the public sphere itself. As Anne Herrmann has remarked in her study on Virginia Woolf and the German writer Christa Wolf, "... the dialogic of the epistolary essay lies not only in the inclusion of an addressee but in the dialogue between the letter and the literary, the public and the private, historical and theoretical discourses" (42). "Carta a Julia de Burgos" stands as one of Ferré's most direct endeavors to construct a dialogue between a text speaker and the literary sphere in *Sitio*.²³ It makes thus a fitting introduction to *El coloquio de las perras*, Ferré's second collection of essays which is also a dialogue between a female writing subject and the literary establishment.

Whereas *Sitio* is concerned with European and North American writers, *El coloquio* deals specifically with the literature of Spanish America. Of all its essays, "El coloquio de las perras" (5-43) is, in my view, the most interesting and original. Nevertheless, brief reference should be made first to those essays that bear a direct relationship to literary autobiography and feminist criticism, for at no point ought one forget that Ferré's essayistic discourse evolves mainly as literary autobiography and feminist criticism. As in "La cocina de la escritura," in "Ofelia a la deriva en las aguas de la memoria" (51-63) the text speaker returns to the matter of her own writing. Textual "I" and biographical "I" converge in the very first sentence of this essay: "Hace algunos meses tuve un sueño extraño" (51). Then, in what amounts to a recurrent theme in her essays, she moves on to make an appraisal on writing and particularly on translating her short stories into English. Her preoccupation with whether there is an essential difference between the writing of men and women, continues to be a concern: "Muchas veces me he preguntado si es posible para un hombre escribir como una mujer y viceversa" (62). Other concerns, such as Puerto Rican history and politics and the way in which women writers have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the political sphere, come to light in "Sobre el amor y la política" (73-75) and "¿Por qué quiere Isabel a los hombres?" (77-80). Since Ferré herself is probably the most representative of these women writers in Puerto Rico, mention is made in the first essay to *Papeles de Pandora*, *Sitio*, *Fábulas de la garza desangrada* and her novel *Maldito amor*. The speaker uncovers a direct connection in these works between love construed as a vital force that can change the world, and a psychological and political sys-

tem which prevents the independence of women. Puerto Rico's own dependence on the United States is mirrored in women's dependence on their husbands and lovers.

El coloquio's most powerful essay, "El coloquio de las perras," is modeled on Cervantes' novella *El coloquio de los perros*,²⁴ a picaresque novel narrated from the point of view of Berganza, one of the two dogs of the story. This novel's adaptability to Ferré's *El coloquio*, however, is not limited to the picaresque elements of its structure. Equally important are the constant interruptions of Cipión, the second dog, and the various digressions germane to language and literature in which he and his friend become involved. Like Cervantes' novella, Ferré's text is essentially a work of criticism. But instead of being the criticism of male dogs (men), it is the criticism of female dogs (women) – throughout Ferré's entire text female writers are referred to as "perras" and male writers as "perros." What makes "El coloquio de las perras" more complex than the other essays of *El coloquio*, as well as more complex than Cervantes' novel, is the presence of a narrator even though this narrator does not interfere in the text a great deal. Ferré's essay is dedicated to two women, Ani Fernández and Jean Franco, two literary critics. It is probable, in effect, that these women are represented by the two protagonists of Ferré's essay.²⁵ At the beginning of the text, the narrating subject describes the two female dogs of the story: their names are Fina and Franca, "perras sabias" who love to discuss literary matters as they take long walks in old San Juan (*El coloquio* 5). One, Franca, boasts of being a literary critic and spends much of her time reading the books of her master, an undeniable allusion to Sor Juana, who used to read her grandfather's books and who appears several times in the essay. The other, Fina, brags of being an author of short stories (7). Metaphorically speaking, however, in the text these "perras" give voice not only to the concerns of women writers but to those of women in general. The incentive for what forms the body of "El coloquio de las perras" is produced by Franca's reading of Cervantes' *El coloquio de los perros*. At the beginning of Ferré's essay, Franca calls her friend Fina's attention to "la similitud entre la amistad que las unía y la que había existido hacía ya muchos años entre esos perros también sotos y ejemplarmente sabios, Berganza y Cipión" (7). The dialogue then commences.

In broad terms, "El coloquio de las perras" is a critique of the Spanish American literary establishment. A similar critique had been proposed once before as the point of departure toward the formation of a Latin American feminist theory (Franco 32-43). Ferré's text could be said to illustrate almost perfectly that "indeterminate discursive space between fiction and non-fiction" which Katherine V. Synder assigns to the essay, where a writerly self is constructed "who resembles the author's historical self but whose verisimilitude . . . is not beyond question" (24). The fictional aspect of "El coloquio de las perras" has the merit of providing a secure place from which to launch

feminist criticism. Three major characteristics contribute to the creation of this safe haven. On the one hand, the fact that those who launch the attack are not only *perras* but stray bitches forced to roam the streets; paradoxically, authority emanates from a position of marginality. On the other, the picaresque context of the colloquy itself, full of the playfulness that often characterizes essayistic discourse and redolent of the "gossiping" and "chatting" that in women's lives has traditionally served the purpose of subverting Meaning (Sichtermann 91). And finally, the most profound of the three, the polyphonic nature of the writerly self. In "*El coloquio de las perras*" Rosario Ferré, the writer and critic, transmits her message via three perspectives: the narrator, Franca, and Fina. This mixture of textual voices makes it difficult to pinpoint the speaker of the essay; likewise, it is not always easy to know which of these corresponds to the authorial voice. Having made a comparison between the poems of the Puerto Ricans Clara Lair and Julia de Burgos, so as to decide which of the two women offers a more authentic representation of men, Franca confesses that in her own fiction the delineation of male characters at times leaves a lot to be desired (31-32). Afterwards, when their dialogue turns to the topic of the scarcity of women critics who have devoted entire critical studies to the works of women writers, Fina exalts her friend Franca for having had "*la osadía de escribir dos libros de crítica*"; only to add that, unfortunately, "*ninguno de ellos ha sido sobre la obra de una perra*" (35).

In Cervantes' novel, Berganza repudiates and also satirizes his several masters harshly. In "*El coloquio de las perras*" it is the Spanish American male literary sphere that is excoriated. As a result, there is no doubt whatsoever that, at least as pertains to this essay, literary criticism takes the form of feminist criticism. Additionally, it could be safely assumed that the text-act readers are represented both by the authors whose works are criticized as well as by the male and female literary critics of Latin American literature in general. At the very beginning of their dialogue, Franca distances herself from the main consideration of Cervantes' text by affirming, "*No me preocupa tanto el problema de la verosimilitud en la literatura . . . me preocupa más bien la equívoca imagen que de las féminas proyectan hoy en sus novelas algunos de nuestros novelistas más famosos*" (7). Essayistic discourse as dialogue becomes, then, a distinct critique of representation. Very few of the well known Spanish American male authors escape Franca's and Fina's critical onslaught. Borges, "*esa momia sacrosanta que todo perro escritor latinoamericano guarda como un jamón ahumado en su alacena*," is blamed not only for the shortage of female characters in his fiction but also for having kept away from politics during the course of his life (10); Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes are censured for creating a mythical image of women which portrays them as inexorable sacrificial victims in order that men might reach redemption (14); José Donoso is denounced for populating his novels with gossip and ragged women (16). Feminist literary criticism, as practiced in the assess-

ment of these and other authors, including Juan Carlos Onetti, Lezama Lima, Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar, goes hand in hand with critical observations on the situation of women in the world. It comes as no surprise, consequently, that if male writers have failed to provide a genuine picture of women, it is because women themselves in Latin America have been relegated to the domestic sphere, or because male siblings have always had more freedom than female siblings or, finally, because women “a menudo pasa[n] de la casa del padre a la del marido como ovejas sacrificadas, desprovistas de autoridad” (14).

One last aspect of “El coloquio de las perras” that needs to be explored is the prescriptive nature of its content. Spanish American women writers are called on to offer less stereotypical depictions of male characters – male characters different from those found in Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus*, for example, “que se olvidan fácilmente” (29). Women critics, for their part, are summoned to write serious studies on women writers and to put together anthologies that will include writers of both genders, for, asserts Franca, there is no need to build “nuevos ghettos literarios en antologías determinadas por sexo” (34). At the end of Ferré’s text Fina and Franca spot a huge demonstration of “bitches” from all walks of life – doctors, lawyers, politicians, housewives – who are protesting against the physical abuse to which they are subjected in their homes. Leading the demonstration are two Puerto Rican writers, one of whom, Ana Lydia Vega, is well-known. At the end of their conversation Franca and Fina say good-bye to each other and join in the demonstration. This is manifestly the most political moment of the essay, the moment that marks the convergence of private and public that is typical of the essay and also probably reflects a real-life event in Puerto Rican contemporary history. One of the *perras*, a politician, is said to be surrounded by two policemen for fear she may take power away from “nuestro Gobernador, un tímido Bulldog que casi no ladra pero que cuando muerde no suelta” (36). Then, Ana Lydia Vega is praised for rebuking the sexual abuse perpetrated against women in her last collection of short stories (37). The critique of women’s writing has thus become a frontal attack on the patriarchal system.

One has to wonder, however, how many of *El coloquio*’s “*perras*,” or of *Sitio*’s “*jóvenes lectoras*” – in great measure the “ideal” real readers of the authorial voice – would truly have access to these texts; in a continent where most people cannot afford books, real readers comprise a very selected minority. In addition, critic Aurea M. Sotomayor Miletti seriously questions Ferré’s selection of women in *Sitio*; by choosing as paradigm women who lived tragic lives, Ferré overlooks the material aspects of women’s lives in Latin America at the same time that she reduces their experience to the exclusive realm of love and passion (12-13). Lorraine Elena Roses, for her part, doubts whether Ferré herself truly believes that women will ever escape marginalization by means of their writing (285).

Furthermore, women's increasing practice of essay writing occurs at a time when many people, both in the United States and in Latin America, read less and have become politically more apathetic. There would seem to be a parallel, in fact, between the marginality of the essay as a genre and the legitimization of what a relatively recent editorial of *The Nation* denominates "corporate culture" (3). In this "corporate culture" milieu, the editors of *The Nation* detect an Orwellian scenario in the United States orchestrated by the "National Entertainment State" – and envisioned years ago by the Frankfurt School, one may add –, which might eventually reach the shores of Latin America as an economic philosophy of globalization that promises to turn the world into a single giant corporation advances undeterred. If, as the editors of *The Nation* asseverate, "more and more the media omit the message, suppress the message, homogenize the message, sensationalize the message or convert the message into entertainment – or worse, 'infotainment'" (3), what chance does the essay have, if any, in the presence of such a behemoth? In such culturally adverse circumstances, can the feminist criticism of writers such as Rosario Ferré bring about the social and political changes that it seeks?

Unquestionably, Rosario Ferré's *Sitio a eros* and *El coloquio de las perras* reveal the existence of a new type of essayistic discourse in Spanish American literature that moves away from the customary grand topics treated by male essayists. In these two books, gender as a critical category supersedes the national character or the psychology of a people. From the beginning, the speaker codes the text-act reader as predominantly female, as criticism of women's writings gives way to feminist criticism. The speaker's goal, ultimately, is the creation of a community of sisters via a critique of traditional ideology in the Hispanic world. She calls on all women who write to study the works of other women writers and to expand the canon by including them in anthologies and histories of literature. Literary autobiography plays a pivotal role in the essayistic discourse of *Sitio* and *El coloquio* because it adds credibility to the speaker's project. As in all essayistic discourse, authority emanates directly from a writing subject who in this case is a Spanish American woman writer thoroughly qualified to criticize prevailing Latin American literary practices. By inscribing her "self" in the relevant essays, and by causing genre differences be the determining factor of her essayistic discourse, the speaker contributes greatly to the thematic transformation of the Spanish American essay. Admittedly, a clearer view of how a Latin American feminist criticism is to develop from now on would have been desirable. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to ask Ferré, who is not a professional critic but a writer and reader, for such a view. The real merit of *Sitio a eros* and *El coloquio de las perras* is that they raise the possibility that feminist literary criticism in Latin America could play a significant role in the transformation of the public and political spheres. Critics interested in such a transformation, especially as it may benefit women in general, ought consider the following factors. A well-defined view of Latin

American feminist criticism would have to take into account, for example, the economic and racial composition of the subaltern subject in the Spanish American continent; in other words, it would have to keep in mind that the majority of *mestiza*, Indian, black and mulatta women in Latin America do not have the same opportunities and privileges in society as white women. Hence, in addition to gender, class and race would have to be incorporated as theoretical factors on which to found a truly effective Latin American feminist criticism. At the same time, attention would need to be focused not only on real readers of women's essays but, more importantly, on the viability of reading as an adequate instrument for political change. Without these considerations, Latin American feminisms in general will not have the necessary leverage to have a meaningful voice in the political discursive practices of the continent.

NOTES

¹ Besides the condition of women and children, the state of "her" Indians, as she often put it, was one of her majors missions. Although Mistral was not enthusiastic about the way politics was practiced in Latin America, she frequently preached for the better treatment of the Indians and the reappraisal of indigenous culture. In her speech "Algunos elementos del folklore chileno," she chastises the *mestizo* for not being more sympathetic toward the Indian and for essentially erasing the memory of a people; she likens this attitude, in fact, to cultural suicide (326). For after all, she states further in the same speech, everyone in Latin America carries the Indian inside (329).

² In "El nombre de la mujer," a letter she submitted to the newspaper *La prensa* which the editors refused to publish, as well as in her essay "La condición inhumana" (1969), Ocampo repudiates a law that establishes that a divorced woman, even with her former husband's consent, cannot keep her maiden name. In her speech "Pasado y presente de la mujer," she calls on women to liberate themselves (1966). And in her speech "El reinado de las institutrices," she castigates a system that thinks that women who are to take care of children be preferably ugly and unintelligent. Mistral, somewhat more conservative than Ocampo, and paradoxically perhaps more politically and socially conscious, assuming the almost innate difference between men and women, calls on the latter to defend the land from development projects in her essay "Conversación sobre la tierra con las mujeres puertorriqueñas" (1931). Herself a peasant woman from the Elqui valley in Chile during the first years of her life, she reiterates the fundamental connection between woman and the land in a speech that already manifests the substantial difference between Latin American feminism on the one hand, and North American and French feminisms on the other: "Antes de los feminismos de asamblea y de reformas legales, 50 años antes, nosotros hemos tenido allá en unos tajos de la Cordillera el trabajo de la mujer hecho costumbre" (in "Breve descripción de Chile [conferencia en Málaga]," 344-45 {1934}).

³ This does not mean, of course, that women have not ventured into the writing of essays in Latin America; rather, it means that they have scarcely received

the attention of the critics. Even as early a text as Sor Juana's famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1695), for example, could be construed as a mixture of autobiography and essay. Other Spanish American women essayists include Rosa Guerra in Argentina, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda in Cuba, Clorinda Matto de Turner and Magda Portal in Peru, Teresa de la Parra in Venezuela, Amanda Labarca and Julieta Kirkwood in Chile, Yolanda Oreamuno and Carmen Naranjo in Costa Rica, and Rosario Castellanos, Margo Glantz, and Guadalupe Loaeza in Mexico. In general, it is unfortunately very difficult to find the essays written by these women, especially those published by small or alternative presses that appeared in magazines or leaflets of the nineteenth century. In one of the better-known anthologies of Latin American essayists, *Conciencia intelectual de América* (1966), edited by Carlos Ripoll, not a single woman was included, not even Gabriela Mistral or Victoria Ocampo, the then two best-known practitioners of the genre. And in his anthology, *El ensayo hispanoamericano del siglo xx* (1981), John Skirius only includes Gabriela Mistral. For a comprehensive overview of women essayists in Latin America, see the very useful article by Lourdes Rojas and Nancy S. Sternbach and especially the recently published critical anthology edited by Doris Meyer, *Reinterpreting the Spanish American Essay*, which includes a review of *Sitio a Eros* by critic Elena Gascón Vera ("*Sitio a Eros*: The Liberated Eros of Rosario Ferré" [197-206]).

⁴ Here are a few examples of the most representative essays: *Moral social* (1888), by Eugenio María de Hostos; *Horas de lucha* (1908), by Manuel González Prada; *Ariel* (1900), by José Enrique Rodó; *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934), by Samuel Ramos; *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928), by José Carlos Mariátegui; *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933), by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada; *Indagación del choteo* (1928), by Jorge Mañach; and *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), by Octavio Paz.

⁵ For an incisive treatment on the relationship between the essay and criticism and theory, and especially for how a good dose of the attributes of essayistic discourse could enliven oftentimes dry academic prose material, see chapters four and five of G. Douglas Atkins' book ("Criticism, Theory, and the Essay: Strange Bedfellows?" [45-72] and "The Return of/to the Personal" [73-97], respectively).

⁶ In this study I am using a re-printed version of Adorno's article which appeared in *New German Critique* in 1984. Adorno's original article, "Der Essay als Form," was published in *Noten zur Literatur I* in 1958 and is now contained in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).

⁷ In this sense, Ferré's clearest forerunner is Rosario Castellanos with her master's thesis in philosophy, "Sobre cultura femenina" – one of the first attempts in Latin America to redefine Western philosophical categories that construe women as incapable of intellectual pursuits – and her collection of essays *Mujer que sabe latín* (1973) as well as her posthumously published three-act farce, *El eterno femenino* (1975).

⁸ Ferré's novels and short stories evince a persistent preoccupation with the negative social and economic changes brought upon Puerto Rico by the United States, as well as a strong condemnation of an upper-class completely indifferent to the lot of the poor. Herself the daughter of a wealthy Puerto Rican family – her father was the governor of Puerto Rico at one time – that saw the first signs of its decadence when the sugar cane industry gave way to industrial capitalism at the turn of the century,

Ferré manages to weld in her fictional works her interest in political and economic colonialism with her interest in the colonialism of women by men. "La muñeca menor," her first and indubitably one of her best short stories, is a prime example of this narrative strategy. As María I. Acosta Cruz shows in two of her articles, Ferré deconstructs official history in order that women can furnish their own account of the past. Her novel *Maldito amor*, for example, is a microcosm of the history of Puerto Rico. But as critic Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat correctly observes, Ferré does not offer here a totalizing novel in the tradition of the Spanish American novel of the *boom* (283). Instead of putting forward a single and all-encompassing view of reality, the author wishes to underscore the unavoidable bond between politics, on the one hand, and family and erotic relations on the other in Puerto Rican society (285). The women of *Maldito amor* offer an alternative view of Puerto Rican history by subverting the romantic foundation on which the nation was built (Aida Apter-Cragolino 29).

⁹ As in the case of Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* and Paz's classic *El laberinto de la soledad*, respectively.

¹⁰ The inscription of the "self," of course, is one of the distinguishing marks of the essay. O.B. Hardison, Jr. calls essay-writing "an exercise in self-fashioning" (25). In this borderline genre a first-person singular deposits into an open space thoughts and opinions to be shared by an audience of second-persons. Above all, the essayist wants to share with the reader what is on his/her mind. In contradistinction to other genres, essay-writing does not indulge in covert maneuvers or subterfuges; its prose tends towards transparency. "Unlike novelists and playwrights, who lurk behind the scenes while distracting our attention with the puppet show of imaginary characters – and unlike scholars and journalists, who quote the opinions of others and take cover behind the hedges of neutrality – the essayist has nowhere to hide" (Sanders 31). The practitioner of the essay, as Lane R. Kauffmann puts it, "must declare his intentions" (223). It can thus be argued that the essay is one of the most honest and personal of genres.

¹¹ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Plato's *Dialogues* are the most meaningful classical model of the essay. In his study of the French essay, Theodore P. Fraser notes that Socrates' system of maieutics is the very foundation on which the technique of the genre resides (2).

¹² Regarding the dialectical nature of the essay, Aileen Boyd Sivert avers: ". . . (writers of essays commonly use conversational style and address the reader explicitly within the text). The reader's own lived experience plays a part in a productive reading of the text" (59-60). This is especially true of women essay writers with a feminist agenda such as Rosario Ferré, I may add. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joers, for example, points out that while the essential nature of the essay is monological, essays written by radical feminist essayists contain a clear mixture of monologue and dialogue (154, 156).

¹³ "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," a letter to Leo Popper which serves as the introduction to his book *Soul and Form*.

¹⁴ As I trace the role of this textual "I," I use Mary Lee Bretz's concept of "text speaker," or "speaker," to designate the voice that presents the material of the essay (and who is necessarily not the author [23]), and Robert Spire's concepts of "text-reader," "text-act reader" and "real reader" to establish the difference, where necessary, between the reader who is addressed within the work ("text-reader") and

the reader who stands outside of it and who receives implicitly or explicitly all of the voices within the writing ("text-act reader") but who is probably not the "real reader" (11-12).

¹⁵ *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

¹⁶ In "El diario como forma femenina" (40-48) and "Virginia Woolf, o la muerte bajo las olas" (167-90), respectively.

¹⁷ This list of women should not leave us with the impression that Ferré has not written about the works of Spanish American women writers. Her essay in *Coloquio* "El pie del cañón del lápiz" deals with the poetry of Edelmira Agustini, Alfonsina Storni and Gabriela Mistral, precursors in Latin America of what is later subsumed under the term feminism. In *El árbol y su sombra* (1992), a collection of critical essays, she includes a very incisive assessment of Sor Juana's *retratos* ("Los misterios de los retratos de Sor Juana" [15-41]). She has also published a book on Puerto Rican women fiction writers (*Aquí cuentan las mujeres: muestra y estudio de cinco narradoras puertorriqueñas* [1990]) as well as two studies on male fiction writers (*El acomodador: una lectura fantástica de Felisberto Hernández* [1986]) and (*Cortázar: el romántico en su observatorio* [1991]).

¹⁸ In *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

¹⁹ In "La cocina de la escritura," the first (autobiographical) essay of *Sitio*, the text speaker contends that there is no innate difference between the writing and literature of women and that of men (30-32). To concede that there is in effect a "voz femenina" and a "estilo femenino" is yet another myth created by men, she argues further in her essay on Sylvia Plath (119).

²⁰ In *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, for example, Menchú seeks to share her personal experiences with an interviewer (Elizabeth Burgos) who in turn transforms her words into a text for public consumption; so do Esteban Montejo in Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* and Jesusa Palancares in Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Essay writing, however, differs from documentary fiction such as the testimonial novel in that it lacks a mediating voice. Barnet's, Poniatowska's and Burgos' texts resemble the interview more than the essay, even if the interviewers never appear in the narration. Furthermore, if quilting has been frequently employed as a metaphor to represent testimonial literature in Latin America, and if varying manifestations of feminist discourse have appropriated the metaphor of the body in relationship to women's writing, cooking is the predominant metaphor in Ferré's text.

²¹ For useful descriptions of testimonial and documentary narrative in general, consult Beverly, Foley, Foster, González Echevarría (110-23) and Jara & Vidal.

²² *The Dragon and the White Bird*.

²³ A similar occurrence of this procedure is found in what I believe to be Ferré's best book of poems to date: *Fábulas de la garza desangrada* (1982). In the last essay of *Sitio* ("De la ira a la ironía, o sobre cómo atemperar el acero candente del discurso"), the speaker establishes a connection between *Sitio* and *Fábulas* by arguing that the theme of the two is the same, the only difference being that in the latter such a theme has been transformed into symbol (196-97). While I find it personally difficult to demonstrate such a facile link between these two texts, I do recognize that in *Fábulas* the lyric voice carries out a species of revisionism of classical literature as well as a

demythologization of women such as Antigone, Daphne, Ariadne, and others, certainly not in order to divest them of their mythical aura but to invest them with the necessary authority to recount their own stories. It is in this context of re-appropriation of the historic-mythical account that the lyric voice of *Fábulas* dedicates a poem to Julia de Burgos simply entitled "A Julia." The chief discrepancy between this poem and "Carta a Julia de Burgos," is that toward the end of "A Julia" the lyric I incorporates two letters, one purportedly written by Julia and addressed to her sister Consuelín, and the other, placed on the same page and next to Julia's own letter, supposedly composed by Julia's lover, referred to as "X" in her poems, addressed to his brother. Aside from these two letters, the body of the poem is divided into five sections. The lyric or narrating voice in this case, addresses Julia directly and narrates her unfortunate story in sections one, two, four and five: "te oreaste de su brazo por el parque y por la plaza. / te reuniste con las damas a bordar sus iniciales" (*Fábulas* 66-67), etc. But in section three it is Julia herself who appropriates the lyric voice by alluding to her own tragic saga: "nadie me ve pasar, nadie me oye. . . / . . . hoy por fin habré de revelar en acto / lo que tantas veces intenté decir en verso" (*Fábulas* 66). The lyric voice of this section becomes the speaker who addresses a text reader in the letter to her sister. Less poetically but no less strongly, she comes back to the subject of her life: "Hago una vida más puritana que la más puritana de las momias femeninas . . . manteniendo mi posición de 'esposa' mojigata y respetable. Adoro a X y él me adora a su manera . . . Quien diría, hermana querida, que tu Julia acabaría resignándose a tanto menosprecio" (*Fábulas* 67). In contrast to the speaker of this letter, the speaker of X's letter to his brother states that he has decided to terminate his relationship with Julia and that he committed the most terrible mistake by having introduced her to Cuban high society (*Fábulas* 67). At the very end of the poem, however, in what appears to be a final gesture of vindication, the lyric voice consoles Julia by telling her that all memory of X will disappear from the face of the earth (*Fábulas* 67).

²⁴ One of the more literarily intricate of Cervantes' twelve *Novelas ejemplares*, in *El coloquio de los perros* the subject of verisimilitude, explored theoretically in all its ramifications in *Don Quijote*, plays a fundamental role. *El coloquio de los perros* is in turn enclosed in *El casamiento engañoso*, one of the twelve novels. Thematically, both works treat the problem of deceit versus enlightenment. In *El casamiento engañoso* Campuzano, one of the protagonists, relates to his friend, the bachelor Peralta, how he was deceived by Estefanía, a prostitute, whom he himself first tried to fool when she made him believe that she was a wealthy lady. He then proceeds to tell him that he knows many more stories that not only exceed imagination but even contravene nature. Peralta's desire to hear these stories becomes stronger the longer Campuzano delays telling them. What ultimately ensnares him is a manuscript in Campuzano's power which describes a dialogue between two dogs. Peralta is not aroused so much by the truth of the story as by the manner in which it was told. After both friends are done eating and Campuzano decides to take a nap, Peralta begins to read a manuscript entitled *El coloquio de los perros*.

²⁵ The similarity between Jean Franco and Franca is evident. Ani Fernández, for her part, could be Fina if we read her name backwards: Ani F.

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