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13. Understanding Gender in Latin America

Sonia Montecino
(Translated by Deborah Cohen and Lessie Jo Frazier)

My commentary poses a question about Latin American mestizo culture that I have been trying to formulate and adjust for years in various texts.¹ Here I simply want to add a new twist: To bring the intellectual production of Latin American women and a discourse about the feminine subject together with theoretical underpinnings from dominant territories (Europe and the United States).

The issue of Woman and, later, of gender has been present in our continent since the decade of the 1970s, conditioned by knowledge coming from the developed world. At an important moment Woman, as a universal category, was a favorable field for generating a syntax to explain the subordination and the resulting negation of Woman as constitutive elements in and of all societies. The notion of patriarchy associated with the category Woman, then, was the bedrock of a current of thought that saw that, with surprising ubiquity, everywhere the same motive operated and resulted in the devalued position of women. This lens brought with it numerous consequences. One of them, of great importance in the "first world," was that researchers embarked upon a systematic study of those negations (lacks), deconstructing existing ethnographic information. Another consequence of this early phase was the ghettoization of women's studies and the discovery that anthropology, as a discipline, was talking and thinking about non-Western societies from both a masculine and an ethnocentric position.

The anthropology of gender, which superseded the anthropology of women, was supposed to bring about a different way of looking at things: Woman, as a universal category, no longer would have the power to displace from view notions of gender and difference nor the specificity through which relations between the feminine and the masculine are

constituted in particular cases. From there have emerged tendencies that emphasize the symbolic or social construction of gender differences. The prolonged debate about the construction of binary oppositions such as nature/culture and public/private gave rise to a never-ending series of investigations and analyses. At the same time, the position of the social construction of differences linked Marxist analyses with the feminine problematic and expanded anthropological studies about this issue in the fields of economics and political science. The last few years have seen the demand for a feminist anthropology that tries to overcome the limits of previous currents of thought to tackle the issue of gender, intertwining with it the categories of ethnicity and class, and including history as an explanatory element of difference.

This brief panorama of the development of ideas in the first world returns us to the question of whether these ideas have or have not experienced a (dis)ortion in Latin America. I say *torción* (*twist*) or *twist* since I am thinking of Latin American subjects as a mixture, as *mestizos*; as such we have always struggled among ourselves between reason (*el logos*) and myth (Arguedas 1978, 1983) as the most pristine expressions of this phenomenon. At first glance we can say that the dynamics of thought about Woman appears in our territory as a copy, a translation of theoretical frameworks from the first world, a noncritical application of the paradigms of patriarchy, subordination, and above all the concomitant themes imposed by the metropole (see the abundant works on women in the economy, employment, and work). Suspiciously, the international agencies that finance studies on women in Latin America are more interested in action than in investigation, and inasmuch as action is accepted, it is required to be about "urgent problems" as defined by dominant discourses. Related to this, one can also appreciate that the issue of Woman in Latin America is conditioned by a global market in issues—for example, when "the youth decade" emerges, studies shift toward young women, when it is "the environmental decade," that relationship becomes pertinent, and so on.

When, as a scholar in the South,² one reads an extensive bibliography from the first world and sees the arguments, debates, theories, and countertheories, one immediately thinks about what happens in our case: We internalize an argument or discussion that we haven't made or worked out. One notes that the tradition of reason existing in the first world has hardly been approximated in our circumstances, with an absence of new texts and as heirs of a tradition that has always been rooted in ceremony and orality.

However, both in spite of and because of the precariousness of material resources, there has emerged in Latin America a specific knowledge about the silenced image of women in diverse spaces, classes, and cultures. I refer

to the birth of life histories, of testimonies, of oral expression, which—transformed into text—tried to bring to light and reveal feminine life. Then studies came along that, although without a clear program, tried to realize the specificity of gender(ed) experience and the constitution of gender through a mythic world, approaching a stance that, grounded in given cultural particularities, could dialogue with and even challenge the universality of paradigms regarding Woman (see Palma 1990; Vega 1986, 1990). However, only in the last few years has there emerged an attitude of doubt and contradiction, a self-inspection that looks for the reflection of difference in its own reflection, a move making audible the critique and the search for new models of understanding. The complexity of our reality, comprised of multiple sounds, requires and demands that intellectuals bring differences to life (*hacer carne*).

What the intellectual production of Latin American women hints at is precisely to make explicit what "by habit keeps you quiet" as Octavio Paz has said (1989, 16). Perhaps it is just those silences—the things not said in studies and reflections—that you would have to tackle as a first step: the lack of a history of gender in Latin America (as Victor Toledo [1993] asserts); the encapsulating of voices on the borders of the disciplines; the necessity of a sensibility that goes beyond a mere compilation of data that corroborates what has already been established as the truth; the overcoming of the tendency to focus our knowledge toward the demands of the market; and, along with those issues, the necessary gesture that specifies who speaks and what is said by the silences, by the prohibitions and denials, and—why not—by culture. Perhaps this movement of thought shows that the fusion (*lo mestizo*) of our identity shapes our emphasis on the subjects that we want to describe, to put on stage, to reveal, and therefore, that the ambiguity that characterizes our knowledge³ might be more of value than disgrace.

What do I mean by *mestizo* thought? Certainly, in the first place it has to do with a semiotic system more than a genetic one, although, as Jorge Guzmán (1991) asserts, the semantic and somatic go hand-in-hand in our Latin American cultures where each of us, "lives in a signifying relation to our body" (21). As Guzmán indicates, another of our community's characteristics is a great resistance to the recognition of *mestizaje*, in spite of which in all of us there is a dialectical interaction between two or more distinct cultures. Thus, Latin American subjects simultaneously operate within the diverse cultural frameworks from which we are constituted, independent of our ethnic origin; and our *mestizaje* entails that, moreover, one of these cultures will be dominant and the other(s) dominated and scorned. For this reason, we circulate "interminably between the ... cultures

and it is not possible to invoke one without, in some form, having the other, that which always has been structured as the opposite, concomitantly invoked" (10). In this sense, when I say *mestizo* thought I refer on the one hand, to a thought in tension due to this oscillation, these hierarchies, and the traditions that coexist in conflict within our ways of thinking.

On the other hand, I use the term *mestizo* thought in the same context in which I developed my concept of the *bastard*, or *huicho*.⁴ In this sense, it is a thought that grants us "legitimate" filiation within the power of knowledge. Above all, Latin American and Chilean women's writing and reflection, in my opinion, remains suspended under the rein of the "not-tradition." Only recently has there been in place a literary tradition of women's writing in various fields recognized by the academic and public worlds. Therefore, this thought is *huicho*: it started out as "illegitimate" in the realm of masculine traditions enshrined within the lineage of accepted discourses. If we focus our gaze now beyond national borders, it is evident that Latin American men and women share the "illegitimacy" and the *huacheraje* of our thought in relation to the "Occidental logos" and that the circulation of our ideas occupies only a secondary place in the universe of dominant discourses.

So, let us return to the theme of *mestizo* thought and discuss it in relation to texts produced about women and gender in our continent. Authors such as Julieta Kirkwood (1987), Milagros Palma (1990), Marcela Lagarde (1990), and Marra Lamas (Chapter 11, this volume), among others,⁵ construct their theories, their interpretations, using, twisting (*torciendo*), amalgamating ideas, without wedding themselves to any single rigid theoretical framework. It is a weaving that proceeds by intertwining concepts useful for reading the particularity of their reality and, in this sense, it is a form of desalambrar-ing, of tearing down received models and theories. I use the word wedded precisely in the sense of an institutionality that forges parentage, legitimacy. Thus, this refusal to utilize a single referent but to instead mix is a baroque and *mestizo* gesture.

To be sure, there are concessions, there are "embarrassments," there are tensions, there is *genulflection*. But alongside these there appear other illuminating cultural frameworks. That means, for example, that Milagros Palma proposes that the violence against women in Latin America is rooted in the opposition conqueror/conquered and in the lack of a resolution of our past, placing *la Malinché*⁶ as a metaphor for the ambivalence of the feminine in our countries; or that Marcela Lagarde makes us obsessively revisit—mimetically with our culture—all of the possibilities that the mother has—body and sense—in our communities; or that Julieta Kirkwood confronts us with "history's knots" using the allegory of the tree rings—that is

to say, as in the chronology of nature—in order to twist (*torcer*) or turn around the official periodizations of Chilean history. I cannot provide here a complete hermeneutic of *mestizo* thought in the work of Latin American intellectuals because this corpus has yet to be compiled and because here I am only interested in accented a field that should be approached epistemologically from an "other" reading.

By scrutinizing and accepting our *mestizo* identity we can find our own particular "sound" that resembles our position from which our thinking proceeds. Making explicit the mixture of theories and models, and our fragmentary use of them, we can construct an "other" way of knowing; the same goes for valuing our own genres of work, such as literature, myths, and legends. Finally, a scrutinizing of ourselves involves inspecting the outside and inside, complete with their complex determinations and complications. Thus, our colloquialisms encompassed in silences can be transformed into a fertile ground from which we speak for ourselves (make theory) and that can be spoken about by others (tempered by theory) with whom we, without a doubt, have a relation of both tension and solidarity. The interplay between what is ours—our syntax—and the appropriated—the syntax that expresses us—can result in an atmosphere of reflection on gender and constitutes one possible path toward the construction of a fertile synthesis.

The last few years have been fruitful in the sense of deterritorializing, of globalizing. And it seems to me that the movement to rupture the borders has been positive for women and our discoveries made in this rupture nourish us. The networks that supposedly decenter the nuclei of hegemonies do work. Nevertheless, I sense, each time with greater certainty, that the power of knowledge gets reproduced in these networks and that those who are not integrated into them find their "truths" excluded from competition or from even being known. Thus deterritorializing brings with it its own fences.

Even so, I am optimistic that globalization has as one of its consequences the manifestation of diversities and identities. That is to say, the more homogenization—in consumption, in discourses, in knowledges—the greater the longing for singularization. More than ever the tension between the particular and the universal appears on the scene. But also more than ever, we find reproduced the mechanisms and the abyss between the few who possess much and the many who possess little. This is manifested in the possibilities that exist in Latin America for women to obtain economic support to think. This is why the competition in and between countries is patent; it is a competition evidenced in the omissions, in the not-cited, in the frequent making of clean slates of what others on the continent have produced. These negotiations have to do with the struggle for funding and also with the *mestizo* gesture of negating the names of others because they don't have "prestige" or

legitimacy within the realm of those who must be seduced: the agencies, the foundations, the donating institutions, and so on.

To deterritorialize provides us with possibilities to generate more ideas, images, and hypotheses that oblige us to reread, to re-elaborate, that is to say, to make our *mestizaje* even more prolific. However, it also entails the risk of silencing us. I mention this because the power structures and the circulation of knowledge continue to be the prerogatives of the networks of women who have more access to resources or who know how to best "negotiate" or "move" their projects. Nevertheless, I am confident that it also brings with it the possibility of being included in an anthology such as this one, to cross frontiers in solidarity, to form part of a movement that is not interested in having market values—success, competition, individualization—become the values of politics and culture. Down the line we will see whether the gesture of desalambra in the anthropology of gender in Latin America will have transformed "that which by habit keeps us quiet" and replaced silence with knowing and speaking.

NOTES

1. This chapter is a translated and expanded version of Montecino 1993.
2. Editors' Note: We understand the author's use of "the South" to refer to a specific (postcolonial) political category indicating not just Latin America but also Africa, South Asia, and, to a lesser extent, the rest of Asia. Because the author is writing from the position of "a scholar in the South," she uses the pronouns "our" and "we" rhetorically to flag that subject position.
3. See Guzmán (1990) on the fluctuation between the white and the nonwhite in *mestizo* discourse.
4. This is a Quechua concept that designates a founding, but also an emotional state of solitude and abandonment. In Chile the term is used to talk about illegitimacy and the lack of filiation, to designate the ones who have been "domesticated," and to define the solitary and precarious.
5. Among others Camacho (2001), Cavi and Martínez (1994), De la Parra (1996), Fuller (1993), Guzmán (1996), Guzmán and Porrocarro (1992), Hurtado (1993), and Viveros (1998).
6. Editors' Note: La Malinche refers to the indigenous translator and mistress of the sixteenth century Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortés.

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14. Local/Global

A View from Geography

Altha J. Cravey

The research presented in this volume challenges us to conceive of places as uniquely constituted and produced by local inhabitants, their everyday negotiations, and their on-going struggles to shape their lives. Place is thus understood as dynamic and open, constantly recreated through social processes that are, in turn, deeply embedded in particular places. In harnessing *desalarbar*, a verb that is an explicit call to action, to a gendered analysis of power dynamics in specific places, institutions, and ideologies, Huring, Montoya, and Frazier also challenge scholars to reexamine the categories upon which our own intellectual praxis proceeds. I do so here by engaging, as a feminist geographer, in discussion with feminist anthropologists about the nature of place (and the "local"), in the hopes of devising new geographies of feminist intervention.

ETHNOGRAPHIES AND GEOGRAPHIES

Contributors to this volume open up dialogue between feminist geography and anthropology by explicitly linking questions of identity, subjectivity, and culture to everyday lived experience in specific places. These ethnographies demonstrate the power of place in shaping social identity throughout Latin America. The significance of the embeddedness of human experience comes through in the rich details of the accounts, whether the focus is on sex workers (Lamas, this volume), secondary school students (Huring, this volume), rural Nicaraguan women (Montoya, this volume), or female leadership (Cervone, this volume). Using gender analysis, these scholars avoid essentializing social identity or place identity by documenting the openness of both categories. Feminist geographers can benefit from the careful

Guest class WGSX 200
Prof. Joanna Bartow

Intro to Clarice Lispector 1920-1977

A prolific writer of novels, short stories, journalistic essays and children's literature, Clarice Lispector was born December 10, 1920, in Tchechelnyk, Ukraine, as her Jewish parents were enroute to escape the political upheaval in Russia. Later she lied about her birth year and made people think she was born in 1925. Two months after her birth the family arrived in Northeastern Brazil. When she was nine her mother died, and three years later she, her two sisters and her father moved to Rio.

From early on she became a voracious reader of books and the world around her. One anecdote about her interpretation of daily objects is especially amusing, in which she recalls learning the meaning of eternity in her first piece of gum, which she chewed and chewed without its disappearing. At age fifteen she bought her very first book, one by Katherine Mansfield. She thought, "I am that book," and was particularly attracted to the flashes of great sensitivity and uncertainty accompanying identity crises.

From 1939 to 1943 she studied law, during which time she began to work as a journalist. At her journalistic job, she was one of the first women and she later remembered how her male colleagues felt they could no longer use obscenities, so they invented a code of knocks on the table. During law school she published for the first time and married a fellow student (1943), whom she later followed to Europe. Between 1944 and 1949 she lived in Naples, Berne and Paris. Lispector also lived for six months in England and in Washington between 1952 and 1959.

In 1959 she returned to Rio, having separated from her husband. The separation left her in financial difficulties, since she had two sons to support (b. 1948 and 1953), so she reinitiated her journalistic career. Another version of this post-separation period is that she lived comfortably with an apartment overlooking the beach. In 1967 she was severely burned when she fell asleep smoking, and after undergoing several operations, she was left with her right hand impaired. She continued her journalistic career until her death on December 9, 1977, in Rio, of (uterine) cancer.

In 1977 Lispector said, "for the love of God, do not consider me 'a writer,' but rather a person"--a lesson she learned from her father. Even though many times Lispector expressed the desire for critical attention, this statement reflects the very private, sometimes reclusive life she led in Brazil. Her secrecy about her age is just one example. She also avoided talking about literary influences for fear that she be seen as a derivative writer. Olga Borelli recounts an instance when she went to Lispector's house for an interview and Lispector oddly hid for a while in a back room.

Despite the appearance of being a good wife and mother who kept to herself, Lispector was a methodical reader and intellectual not at all isolated from the world around her. Her texts possess a feminist and social relevance that sustains the following statement about Lispector's childhood: "When I was small, I was very much a defender of people's rights." Let me clarify, at the same time, that the feminist and socially critical facets of Lispector's work do not reflect attempts to create a literature based on a certain political agenda, but rather emerge from the natural development of her philosophical concerns with alienation, moments of epiphany and paradox, the creative act, the almost mystic approximation to other beings, and the search for what might constitute the essential elements of existence.

Lispector has been called existentialist, and her preoccupation with essence, existence, absurdity and faith may support that view, yet others have preferred to call her an author of alienation. In any case the complex issues underlying her work make all the more compelling and subversive her explorations of hierarchy and privilege.

Lispector, Clarice. Family Ties. 1960.
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The Smallest Woman in the World

In the depths of equatorial Africa the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came across a tribe of pygmies of surprising minuteness. He was even more surprised, however, to learn that an even smaller race existed far beyond the forests. So he traveled more deeply into the jungle.

In the Central Congo he discovered, in fact, the smallest pygmies in the world. And—like a box inside another box, inside yet another box—among the smallest pygmies in the world, he found the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world, answering, perhaps, to the need that Nature sometimes feels to surpass herself.

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Among the mosquitoes and the trees moist with humidity, among the luxuriant vegetation of the most indolent green, Marcel Pretre came face to face with a woman no more than forty-five centimeters tall, mature, black, and silent. "As black as a monkey," he would inform the newspapers, and she lived at the top of a tree with her little mate. In the warm humidity of the forest, which matured the fruits quickly and gave them an unbearably sweet taste, she was pregnant. Meanwhile there she stood, the smallest woman in the world. For a second, in the drone of the jungle heat, it was as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly arrived at the end of the line. Certainly, it was only because he was sane that he managed to keep his head and not lose control. Sensing a sudden need to restore order, and to give a name to what exists, he called her Little Flower. And, in order to be able to classify her among the identifiable realities, he immediately began to gather data about her.

Her race is slowly being exterminated. Few human examples remain of their species which, were it not for the subtle dangers of Africa, would be a widely scattered race.

Excluding disease, the polluted air of its rivers, deficiencies of food, and wild beasts on the prowl, the greatest hazard for the few remaining Likoualas are the savage Bantus, a threat which surrounds them in the silent air as on the morning of battle. The Bantus pursue them with nets as they pursue monkeys. And they eat them. Just like that: they pursue them with nets and eat them. So this race of tiny people went on retreating and retreating until it finally settled in the heart of Africa where the fortunate explorer was to discover them. As a strategic defense, they live in the highest trees. The women come down in order to cook maize, grind mandioca, and gather green vegetables; the men to hunt. When a child is born, he is given his freedom almost at once. Often, one must concede, the child does not enjoy his freedom for long among the wild beasts of the jungle, but, at least, he cannot complain that for such a short

life the labor had been long. Even the language that the child learns is short and simple, consisting only of the essentials. The Ikkoualas use few names and they refer to things by gestures and animal noises. As a spiritual enhancement, he possesses his drum. While they dance to the sound of the drum, a tiny male keeps watch for the Bantus, who appear from heaven knows where.

This, then, was how the explorer discovered at his feet the smallest human creature that exists. His heart pounded, for surely no emerald is so rare. Not even the teachings of the Indian sages are so rare, and even the richest man in the world has not witnessed such strange charm. There, before his eyes, stood a woman such as the delights of the most exquisite dream had never equaled. It was then that the explorer timidly pronounced with a delicacy of feeling of which even his wife would never have believed him capable, "You are Little Flower."

At that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where one never scratches oneself. The explorer—as if he were receiving the highest prize of chastity to which man, always so full of ideals, dare aspire—the explorer who has so much experience of life, turned away his eyes.

The photograph of Little Flower was published in the color supplement of the Sunday newspapers, where she was reproduced life size. She appeared wrapped in a shawl, with her belly in an advanced stage. Her nose was flat, her face black, her eyes deep-set, and her feet splayed. She looked just like a dog.

That same Sunday, in an apartment, a woman, glancing at the picture of Little Flower in the open newspaper, did not care to look a second time, "because it distresses me."

In another apartment, a woman felt such a perverse tenderness for the daintiness of the African woman that—prevention being better than cure—Little Flower should never be left alone with the tenderness of that woman. Who knows to what darkness of love her affection might extend. The woman passed

a troubled day, overcome, one might say, by desire. Besides, it was spring and there was a dangerous longing in the air.

In another house, a little five-year-old girl, upon seeing Little Flower's picture and listening to the comments of her parents, became frightened. In that house of adults, this little girl had been, until now, the smallest of human beings. And, if this was the source of the nicest endearments, it was also the source of that first fear of tyrannical love. The existence of Little Flower caused the little girl to feel—with a vagueness which only many years later, and, for quite different reasons, she was to experience as a concrete thought—caused her to feel with premature awareness, that "misfortune knows no limits."

In another house, in the consecration of spring, a young girl about to be married burst out compassionately, "Mother, look at her picture, poor little thing! Just look at her sad expression!" "Yes," replied the girl's mother—hard, defeated, and proud—"but that is the sadness of an animal, not of a human."

"Oh Mother!" the girl protested in despair.

It was in another house that a bright child had a bright idea. "Mummy, what if I were to put this tiny woman in little Paul's bed while he is sleeping? When he wakes up, what a fright he'll get, eh? What a din he'll make when he finds her sitting up in bed beside him! And then we could play with her! We could make her our toy, eh!"

His mother, at that moment, was rolling her hair in front of the bathroom mirror, and she remembered what the cook had told her about her time as an orphan. Not having any dolls to play with, and maternal feelings already stirring furiously in their hearts, some deceitful girls in the orphanage had concealed from the nun in charge the death of one of their companions. They kept her body in a cupboard until Sister went out, and then they played with the dead girl, bathing her and feeding her little tibbits, and they punished her only to be able to kiss and comfort her afterward.

The mother recalled this in the bathroom and she lowered her awkward hands, full of hairpins. And she considered the cruel necessity of loving. She considered the malignity of our desire to be happy. She considered the ferocity with which we want to play. And the number of times when we murder for love. She then looked at her mischievous son as if she were looking at a dangerous stranger. And she was horrified at her own soul, which, more than her body, had engendered that being so apt for life and happiness. And thus she looked at him, attentively and with uneasy pride, her child already without two front teeth, his evolution, his evolution under way, his teeth falling out to make room for those which bite best. "I must buy him a new suit," she decided, looking at him intently. She obstinately dressed up her toothless child in fancy clothes, and obstinately insisted upon keeping him clean and tidy, as if cleanliness might give emphasis to a tranquilizing superficiality, obstinately perfecting the polite aspect of beauty. Obstinate removing herself, and removing him from something which must be as "black as a monkey." Then, looking into the bathroom mirror, the mother smiled, intentionally refined and polished, placing between that face of hers of abstract lines and the raw face of Little Flower, the insuperable distance of millenia. But with years of experience she knew that this would be a Sunday on which she would have to conceal from herself her anxiety, her dream, and the lost millenia.

In another house, against a wall, they set about the exciting business of calculating with a measuring tape the forty-five centimeters of Little Flower. And as they enjoyed themselves they made a startling discovery: she was even smaller than the most penetrating imagination could ever have invented. In the heart of each member of the family there arose the gnawing desire to possess that minute and indomitable thing for himself, that thing which had been saved from being devoured, that enduring fount of charity. The eager soul of that family

was roused to dedication. And, indeed, who has not wanted to possess a human being just for himself? A thing, it is true, which would not always be convenient, for there are moments when one would choose not to have sentiments.

"I'll bet you if she lived here we would finish up quarreling," said the father, seated in his armchair, firmly turning the pages of the newspaper. "In this house everything finishes up with a quarrel."

"You are always such a pessimist, José," said the mother.

"Mother, can you imagine how tiny her little child will be?" their oldest girl, thirteen, asked intensely.

The father fidgeted behind his newspaper.

"It must be the smallest black baby in the world," replied the mother, melting with pleasure. "Just imagine her waiting on table here in the house! And with her swollen little belly."

"That's enough of that rubbish!" muttered the father, annoyed.

"You must admit," said the mother, unexpectedly peeved, "that the thing is unique. You are the one who is insensitive."

And what about the unique thing itself?

Meanwhile, in Africa, the unique thing itself felt in its heart—perhaps also black, because one can no longer have confidence in a Nature that had already blundered once—meanwhile the unique thing itself felt in its heart something still more rare, rather like the secret of its own secret: a minute child. Methodically, the explorer examined with his gaze the belly of the smallest mature human being. It was at that moment that the explorer, for the first time since he had known her—instead of experiencing curiosity, enthusiasm, a sense of triumph, or the excitement of discovery—felt distinctly ill at ease.

The fact is that the smallest woman in the world was smiling. She was smiling and warm, warm. Little Flower was enjoying herself. The unique thing itself was enjoying the ineffable sen-

sation of not having been devoured yet. Not to have been devoured was something which at other times gave her the sudden impulse to leap from branch to branch. But at this tranquil moment, among the dense undergrowth of the Central Congo, she was not applying that impulse to an action—and the impulse concentrated itself completely in the very smallness of the unique thing itself. And suddenly she was smiling. It was a smile that only someone who does not speak can smile. A smile that the uncomfortable explorer did not succeed in classifying. And she went on enjoying her own gentle smile, she who was not being devoured. Not to be devoured is the most perfect sentiment. Not to be devoured is the secret objective of a whole existence. While she was not being devoured, her animal smile was as delicate as happiness. The explorer felt disconcerted.

In the second place, if the unique thing itself was smiling it was because, inside her minute body, a great darkness had started to stir.

It is that the unique thing itself felt her breast warm with that which might be called love. She loved that yellow explorer. If she knew how to speak and should say that she loved him, he would swell with pride. Pride that would diminish when she should add that she also adored the explorer's ring and his boots. And when he became deflated with disappointment, Little Flower would fail to understand. Because, not even remotely, would her love for the explorer—one can even say her "deep love," because without other resources she was reduced to depth—since not even remotely would her deep love for the explorer lose its value because she also loved his boots. There is an old misunderstanding about the word "love," and if many children are born on account of that mistake, many others have lost the unique instant of birth simply on account of a susceptibility which exacts that it should be me, me that should be loved and not my money. But in the humidity of the jungle, there do not exist these cruel refinements; love is not to be de-

voured, love is to find boots pretty; love is to like the strange color of a man who is not black, love is to smile out of love at a ring that shines. Little Flower blinked with love and smiled, warm, small, pregnant, and warm.

The explorer tried to smile back at her, without knowing exactly to which charm his smile was replying, and then became disturbed as only a full-grown man becomes disturbed. He tried to conceal his uneasiness, by adjusting his helmet on his head, and he blushed with embarrassment. He turned a pretty color, his own, greenish pink hue, like that of a lime in the morning light. He must be sour.

It was probably upon adjusting his symbolic helmet that the explorer called himself to order, returned severely to the discipline of work, and resumed taking notes. He had learned to understand some of the few words articulated by the tribe and to interpret their signs. He was already able to ask questions.

Little Flower answered "yes." That it was very nice to have a tree in which to live by herself, all by herself. Because—and this she did not say, but her eyes became so dark that they said it—because it is nice to possess, so nice to possess. The explorer blinked several times.

Marcel Pretre experienced a few difficult moments trying to control himself. But at least he was kept occupied in taking notes. Anyone not taking notes had to get along as best he could.

"Well, it just goes to show," an old woman suddenly exclaimed, folding her newspaper with determination, "it just goes to show. I'll say one thing though—God knows what He's about."

table his face was watching her. By coincidence or intentionally? The rascal. A fellow, to be frank, who was not unattractive. She shrugged her shoulders.

And when above the roundness of her low-cut dress—right in the middle of Tiradentes Square! she thought, shaking her head incredulously—that fly had settled on her bare bosom. What cheek!

Certain things were good because they were almost nauseating . . . the noise like that of an elevator in her blood, while her husband lay snoring at her side . . . her chubby little children sleeping in the other room, the little villains. Ah, what's wrong with me! she wondered desperately. Have I eaten too much? Heavens above! What is wrong with me?

It was unhappiness.

Her toes playing with her slipper . . . the floor not too clean at that spot. "What a slovenly/lazy bitch you've become."

Not tomorrow, because her legs would not be too steady, but the day after tomorrow that house of hers would be a sight worth seeing: she would give it a scouring with soap and water which would get rid of all the dirt! "You mark my words," she threatened in her rage. Ah, she was feeling so well, so strong, as if she still had milk in those firm breasts. When her husband's friend saw her so pretty and plump he had immediately felt respect for her. And when she started to get embarrassed she did not know which way to look. Such misery! What was one to do? Seated on the edge of the bed, blinking in resignation. How well one could see the moon on these summer nights. She leaned over slightly, indifferent and resigned. The moon! How clearly one could see it. The moon high and yellow gliding through the sky, poor thing. Gliding, gliding . . . high up, high up. The moon! Then her vulgarity exploded in a sudden outburst of affection; "you slut", she cried out, laughing.

Love

Feeling a little tired, with her purchases bulging her new string bag, Anna boarded the tram. She placed the bag on her lap and the tram started off. Settling back in her seat she tried to find a comfortable position, with a sigh of mild satisfaction.

Anna had nice children, she reflected with certainty and pleasure. They were growing up, bathing themselves and misbehaving; they were demanding more and more of her time. The kitchen, after all, was spacious with its old stove that made explosive noises. The heat was oppressive in the apartment, which they were paying off in installments, and the wind, playing against the curtains she had made herself, reminded her

that if she wanted to she could pause to wipe her forehead, and contemplate the calm horizon. Like a farmer. She had planted the seeds she held in her hand, no others, but only those. And they were growing into trees. Her brisk conversations with the electricity man were growing, the water filling the tank was growing, her children were growing, the table was growing with food, her husband arriving with the newspapers and smiling with hunger, the irritating singing of the maids resounding through the block. Anna tranquilly put her small, strong hand, her life current to everything. Certain times of the afternoon struck her as being critical. At a certain hour of the afternoon the trees she had planted laughed at her. And when nothing more required her strength, she became anxious. Meanwhile she felt herself more solid than ever, her body become a little thicker, and it was worth seeing the manner in which she cut out blouses for the children, the large scissors snapping into the material. All her vaguely artistic aspirations had for some time been channeled into making her days fulfilled and beautiful; with time, her taste for the decorative had developed and supplanted intimate disorder. She seemed to have discovered that everything was capable of being perfected, that each thing could be given a harmonious appearance; life itself could be created by Man.

Deep down, Anna had always found it necessary to feel the firm roots of things. And this is what a home had surprisingly provided. Through tortuous paths, she had achieved a woman's destiny; with the surprise of conforming to it almost as if she had invented that destiny herself. The man whom she had married was a real man, the children she mothered were real children. Her previous youth now seemed alien to her, like one of life's illnesses. She had gradually emerged to discover that life could be lived without happiness: by abolishing it she had found a legion of persons, previously invisible, who lived as one works—with perseverance, persistence, and contentment.

What had happened to Anna before possessing a home of her own stood forever beyond her reach: that disturbing exaltation she had often confused with unbearable happiness. In exchange she had created something ultimately comprehensible, the life of an adult. This was what she had wanted and chosen.

Her precautions were now reduced to alertness during the dangerous part of the afternoon, when the house was empty and she was no longer needed; when the sun reached its zenith, and each member of the family went about his separate duties. Looking at the polished furniture, she felt her heart contract a little with fear. But in her life there was no opportunity to cherish her fears—she suppressed them with that same ingenuity she had acquired from domestic struggles. Then she would go out shopping or take things to be mended, unobtrusively looking after her home and her family. When she returned it would already be late afternoon and the children back from school would absorb her attention. Until the evening descended with its quiet excitement. In the morning she would awaken surrounded by her calm domestic duties. She would find the furniture dusty and dirty once more, as if it had returned repentant. As for herself, she mysteriously formed part of the soft, dark roots of the earth. And anonymously she nourished life. It was pleasant like this. This was what she had wanted and chosen.

The tram swayed on its rails and turned into the main road. Suddenly the wind became more humid, announcing not only the passing of the afternoon but the end of that uncertain hour. Anna sighed with relief and a deep sense of acceptance gave her face an air of womanhood.

The tram would drag along and then suddenly jolt to a halt. As far as Humaitá she could relax. Suddenly she saw the man stationary at the tram stop. The difference between him and others was that he was really stationary. He stood with his hands held out in front of him—blind.

But what else was there about him that made Anna sit up in distrust? Something disquieting was happening. Then she discovered what it was: the blind man was chewing gum . . . a blind man chewing gum. Anna still had time to reflect for a second that her brothers were coming to dinner—her heart pounding at regular intervals. Leaning forward, she studied the blind man intently, as one observes something incapable of returning our gaze. Relaxed, and with open eyes, he was chewing gum in the falling light. The facial movements of his chewing made him appear to smile then suddenly stop smiling, to smile and stop smiling. Anna stared at him as if he had insulted her. And anyone watching would have received the impression of a woman filled with hatred. She continued to stare at him, leaning more and more forward—until the tram gave a sudden jerk, throwing her unexpectedly backward. The heavy string bag toppled from her lap and landed on the floor. Anna cried out, the conductor gave the signal to stop before realizing what was happening, and the tram came to an abrupt halt. The other passengers looked on in amazement. Too paralyzed to gather up her shopping, Anna sat upright, her face suddenly pale. An expression, long since forgotten, awkwardly reappeared, unexpected and inexplicable. The Negro newsboy smiled as he handed over her bundle. The eggs had broken in their newspaper wrapping. Yellow sticky yolks dripped between the strands of the bag. The blind man had interrupted his chewing and held out his unsteady hands, trying in vain to grasp what had happened. She removed the parcel of eggs from the string bag accompanied by the smiles of the passengers. A second signal from the conductor and the tram moved off with another jerk.

A few moments later people were no longer staring at her. The tram was rattling on the rails and the blind man chewing gum had remained behind forever. But the damage had been done.

The string bag felt rough between her fingers, not soft and familiar as when she had knitted it. The bag had lost its meaning; to find herself on that tram was a broken thread; she did not know what to do with the purchases on her lap. Like some strange music, the world started up again around her. The damage had been done. But why? Had she forgotten that there were blind people? Compassion choked her. Anna's breathing became heavy. Even those things which had existed before the episode were now on the alert, more hostile, and even perishable. The world had once more become a nightmare. Several years fell away, the yellow yolks trickled. Exiled from her own days, it seemed to her that the people in the streets were vulnerable, that they barely maintained their equilibrium on the surface of the darkness—and for a moment they appeared to lack any sense of direction. The perception of an absence of law came so unexpectedly that Anna clutched the seat in front of her, as if she might fall off the tram, as if things might be overturned with the same calm they had possessed when order reigned.

What she called a crisis had come at last. And its sign was the intense pleasure with which she now looked at things, suffering and alarmed. The heat had become more oppressive, everything had gained new power and a stronger voice. In the Rua Voluntários da Pátria, revolution seemed imminent, the grids of the gutters were dry, the air dusty. A blind man chewing gum had plunged the world into a mysterious excitement. In every strong person there was a lack of compassion for the blind man, and their strength terrified her. Beside her sat a woman in blue with an expression which made Anna avert her gaze rapidly. On the pavement a mother shook her little boy. Two lovers held hands smiling. . . . And the blind man? Anna had lapsed into a mood of compassion which greatly distressed her.

She had skillfully pacified life; she had taken so much care

to avoid upheavels. She had cultivated an atmosphere of serene understanding, separating each person from the others. Her clothes were clearly designed to be practical, and she could choose the evening's film from the newspaper—and everything was done in such a manner that each day should smoothly succeed the previous one. And a blind man chewing gum was destroying all this. Through her compassion Anna felt that life was filled to the brim with a sickening nausea.

Only then did she realize that she had passed her stop ages ago. In her weak state everything touched her with alarm. She got off the tram, her legs shaking, and looked around her, clutching the string bag stained with egg. For a moment she was unable to get her bearings. She seemed to have plunged into the middle of the night.

It was a long road, with high yellow walls. Her heart beat with fear as she tried in vain to recognize her surroundings; while the life she had discovered continued to pulsate, a gentler, more mysterious wind caressed her face. She stood quietly observing the wall. At last she recognized it. Advancing a little further alongside a hedge, she passed through the gates of the botanical garden.

She strolled wearily up the central avenue, between the palm trees. There was no one in the garden. She put her parcels down on the ground and sat down on the bench of a side path where she remained for some time.

The wilderness seemed to calm her, the silence regulating her breathing and soothing her senses.

From afar she saw the avenue where the evening was round and clear. But the shadows of the branches covered the side path.

Around her there were tranquil noises, the scent of trees, chance encounters among the creeping plants. The entire garden fragmented by the ever more fleeting moments of the evening. From whence came the drowsiness with which she was

surrounded? As if induced by the drone of birds and bees. Everything seemed strange, much too gentle, much too great.

A gentle, familiar movement startled her and she turned round rapidly. Nothing appeared to have stirred. But in the central lane there stood, immobile, an enormous cat. Its fur was soft. With another silent movement, it disappeared.

Agitated, she looked about her. The branches swayed, their shadows wavering on the ground. A sparrow foraged in the soil. And suddenly, in terror, she imagined that she had fallen into an ambush. In the garden there was a secret activity in progress which she was beginning to penetrate.

On the trees, the fruits were black and sweet as honey. On the ground there lay dry fruit stones full of circumvolutions like small rotted cerebrums. The bench was stained with purple sap. With gentle persistence the waters murmured. On the tree trunk the luxurious feelers of parasites fastened themselves. The rawness of the world was peaceful. The murder was deep. And death was not what one had imagined.

As well as being imaginary, this was a world to be devoured with one's teeth, a world of voluminous dahlias and tulips. The trunks were pervaded by leafy parasites, their embrace soft and clinging. Like the resistance that precedes surrender, it was fascinating; the woman felt disgusted, and it was fascinating.

The trees were laden, and the world was so rich that it was rotting. When Anna reflected that there were children and grown men suffering hunger, the nausea reached her throat as if she were pregnant and abandoned. The moral of the garden was something different. Now that the blind man had guided her to it, she trembled on the threshold of a dark, fascinating world where monstrous water lilies floated. The small flowers scattered on the grass did not appear to be yellow or pink, but the color of inferior gold and scarlet. Their decay was profound, perfumed. But all these oppressive things she watched, her

head surrounded by a swarm of insects, sent by some more refined life in the world. The breeze penetrated between the flowers. Anna imagined rather than felt its sweetened scent. The garden was so beautiful that she feared hell.

It was almost night now and everything seemed replete and heavy; a squirrel leapt in the darkness. Under her feet the earth was soft. Anna inhaled its odor with delight. It was both fascinating and repulsive.

But when she remembered the children, before whom she now felt guilty, she straightened up with a cry of pain. She clutched the package, advanced through the dark side path, and reached the avenue. She was almost running, and she saw the garden all around her aloof and impersonal. She shook the locked gates, and went on shaking them, gripping the rough timber. The watchman appeared, alarmed at not having seen her.

Until she reached the entrance of the building, she seemed to be on the brink of disaster. She ran with the string bag to the elevator, her heart beating in her breast—what was happening? Her compassion for the blind man was as fierce as anguish but the world seemed hers, dirty, perishable, hers. She opened the door of her flat. The room was large, square, the polished knobs were shining, the window panes were shining, the lamp shone brightly—what new land was this? And for a moment that wholesome life she had led until today seemed morally crazy. The little boy who came running up to embrace her was a creature with long legs and a face resembling her own. She pressed him firmly to her in anxiety and fear. Trembling, she protected herself. Life was vulnerable. She loved the world, she loved all things created, she loved with loathing. In the same way as she had always been fascinated by oysters, with that vague sentiment of revulsion which the approach of truth provoked, admonishing her. She embraced her son, almost hurting him. Almost as if she knew of some evil—the blind man or the beau-

tiful botanical garden—she was clinging to him, to him whom she loved above all things. She had been touched by the demon of faith.

"Life is horrible," she said to him in a low voice, as if famished. What would she do if she answered the blind man's call? She would go alone. . . . There were poor and rich places that needed her. She needed them. "I am afraid", she said. She felt the delicate ribs of the child between her arms, she heard his frightened weeping.

"Mummy," the child called. She held him away from her, she studied his face and her heart shrank.

"Don't let Mummy forget you," she said. No sooner had the child felt her embrace weaken than he escaped and ran to the door of the room, from where he watched her more safely. It was the worst look that she had ever received. The blood rose hot to her cheeks.

She sank into a chair, with her fingers still clasping the string bag. What was she ashamed of? There was no way of escaping. The very crust of the days she had forged had broken and the water was escaping. She stood before the oysters. And there was no way of averting her gaze. What was she ashamed of? Certainly it was no longer pity, it was more than pity: her heart had filled with the worst will to live.

She no longer knew if she was on the side of the blind man or of the thick plants. The man little by little had moved away, and in her torment she appeared to have passed over to the side of those who had injured his eyes. The botanical garden, tranquil and high, had been a revelation. With horror, she discovered that she belonged to the strong part of the world, and what name should she give to her fierce compassion? Would she be obliged to kiss the leper, since she would never be just a sister. "A blind man has drawn me to the worst of myself," she thought, amazed. She felt herself banished because no pauper would drink water from her burning hands. Ah! It was

easier to be a saint than a person! Good heavens, then was it not real, that pity which had fathomed the deepest waters in her heart? But it was the compassion of a lion.

Humiliated, she knew that the blind man would prefer a poorer love. And, trembling, she also knew why. The life of the botanical garden summoned her as a werewolf is summoned by the moonlight. "Oh! but she loved the blind man," she thought with tears in her eyes. Meanwhile it was not with this sentiment that one would go to church. "I am frightened," she whispered alone in the room. She got up and went to the kitchen to help the maid prepare dinner.

But life made her shiver like the cold of winter. She heard the school bell pealing, distant and constant. The small horror of the dust gathering in threads around the bottom of the stove, where she had discovered a small spider. Lifting a vase to change the water—there was the horror of the flower submitting itself, languid and loathsome, to her hands. The same secret activity was going on here in the kitchen. Near the waste bin, she crushed an ant with her foot. The small murder of the ant. Its minute body trembled. Drops of water fell on the stagnant water in the pool.

The summer beetles. The horror of those expressionless beetles. All around there was a silent, slow, insistent life. Horror upon horror. She went from one side of the kitchen to the other, cutting the steaks, mixing the cream. Circling around her head, around the light, the flies of a warm summer's evening. A night in which compassion was as crude as false love. Sweat trickled between her breasts. Faith broke her; the heat of the oven burned in her eyes.

Then her husband arrived, followed by her brothers and their wives, and her brothers' children.

They dined with all the windows open, on the ninth floor. An airplane shuddered menacingly in the heat of the sky. Although she had used few eggs, the dinner was good. The chil-

dren stayed up, playing on the carpet with their cousins. It was summer and it would be useless to force them to go to sleep. Anna was a little pale and laughed gently with the others.

After dinner, the first cool breeze finally entered the room. The family was seated round the table, tired after their day, happy in the absence of any discord, eager not to find fault. They laughed at everything, with warmth and humanity. The children grew up admirably around them. Anna took the moment like a butterfly, between her fingers before it might escape forever.

Later, when they had all left and the children were in bed, she was just a woman looking out of the window. The city was asleep and warm. Would the experience unleashed by the blind man fill her days? How many years would it take before she once more grew old? The slightest movement on her part and she would trample one of her children. But with the ill-will of a lover, she seemed to accept that the fly would emerge from the flower, and the giant water lilies would float in the darkness of the lake. The blind man was hanging among the fruits of the botanical garden.

What if that were the stove exploding with the fire spreading through the house, she thought to herself as she ran to the kitchen where she found her husband in front of the spilt coffee.

"What happened?" she cried, shaking from head to foot. He was taken aback by his wife's alarm. And suddenly understanding, he laughed.

"It was nothing," he said, "I am just a clumsy fellow." He looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes.

But, confronted by the strange expression on Anna's face, he studied her more closely. Then he drew her to him in a sudden caress.

"I don't want anything ever to happen to you!" she said.

"You can't prevent the stove from having its little explosions," he replied, smiling. She remained limp in his arms. This after-

noon, something tranquil had exploded, and in the house everything struck a tragicomic note.

"It's time to go to bed," he said, "it's late." In a gesture which was not his, but which seemed natural, he held his wife's hand, taking her with him, without looking back, removing her from the danger of living.

The giddiness of compassion had spent itself. And if she had crossed love and its hell, she was now combing her hair before the mirror, without any world for the moment in her heart. Before getting into bed, as if she were snuffing a candle, she blew out that day's tiny flame.

The Chicken

It was the chicken for Sunday's lunch. Still alive, because it was still only nine o'clock in the morning. She seemed placid enough. Since Saturday she had huddled in a corner of the kitchen. She looked at no one and no one paid any attention to her. Even when they had chosen the chicken, feeling the intimacy of her body with indifference, they could not tell if she were plump or thin. No one would ever have guessed that the chicken felt anxious.

It was a surprise, therefore, when they saw her spread open her stubby wings, puff out her breast, and in two or three attempts, fly to the backyard wall. She still hesitated for a second—sufficient time for the cook to cry out—and soon she was on

Guest class WGSX 200
Prof. Joanna Bartow

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Some contemporary or mid-twentieth-century Latin American women narrative writers in Spanish to explore in translation: Carmen Boullosa (Mexico, also a poet), Rosario Castellanos (Mexico, also a poet), Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico), Angélica Gorodischer (Argentina), Sylvia Iparraguirre (Argentina), Carmen Naranjo (Costa Rica), Carmen Ollé (Peru), Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay-Spain, also a poet), Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), Laura Restrepo (Colombia), Cristina Rivera Garza (Mexico), Mayra Santos-Febres (Puerto Rico, also a poet), Luisa Valenzuela (Argentina).

If you venture into translated poetry of the twentieth century: Dida Aguirre García (Peru), Delmira Agustini (Uruguay), Marjorie Agosin (Chile), Claribel Alegría (El Salvador), Pía Barros (Chile), Julia de Burgos (Puerto Rico), Gabriela Mistral (Chile), Nancy Morejón (Cuba), Olga Orozco (Argentina), Alejandra Pizarnik (Argentina), Alfonsina Storni (Argentina)