

Transnationalism, Autobiography and Criticism: the Spaces of Women's Imagination

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE TRANSNATIONAL TURN IN AMERICAN STUDIES

Some years ago, Christopher Bigsby began his key-note speech at the Complutense University of Madrid with the following admission: "Since I am a professor of American studies, I thought I should begin with a confession. I really don't understand America. My only consolation is that I don't think Americans do either" (Bigsby 114). Sarcastic and witty as the quote may read, it contains a lot of truth, as does his conclusion that "if we are all Americans, all Americans are us" (Bigsby 126). To prove his thesis that we all live in a global world and that our notions of the defining characteristics of individual countries are suspect, he used examples drawn from food ways, sports, movies, (popular) culture, and language, which prove that "America is a postmodern culture, an immigrant culture whose master story is composed of many other stories. And that is increasingly true of the world" (Bigsby 123). As a matter of fact, we only have to look at the history of the formation of the US to comprehend that "we are all Americans" and that "Americans are us". As Thomas Sowell explains in *Ethnic America: A History*, the peopling of America is one of the great dramas in all of human history. Over the years, a massive stream of humanity—45 million people—crossed every ocean and continent to reach the United States. They came speaking nearly every language and representing every nationality, race, and religion. Today, he explains, "there are more people of Irish ancestry in the United States than in Ireland, more Jews than in Israel, more blacks than in most African countries. There are more people of Polish ancestry in Detroit than in most of the leading cities in Poland, and more than twice as many people of Italian ancestry in New York as in Venice" (Sowell 3).

Once transnational views of America have become part of the core of American Studies, we, non-Americans and Americans alike, are beginning to understand the U.S. less restrictively, and expressions like "American mosaic" (Rico and Mano), America as a "cultural bouillabaisse" (quoted by Reed), international America, or "transnational

America" (Grewal) pervade the scholarly jargon and influence the intellectual thought of most Americanists today. American culture may have become internationally dominant, but America itself has been internationalized; it has become a universal nation (Grey 128).

But what is this transnational turn that permeates American Studies of late? As Alfred Hornung reminds us, the truth is that as early as 1916 Randolph Bourne proposed the concept of a "Trans-national America": counteracting the patriotic Americanization campaign during World War I¹, Bourne rejected the failed concept of America as a melting pot according to Anglo-Saxon ideas, and replaced the idea of nationality by a concept of "trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors" (cited in Hornung 72). Strangely, calls for a transnational approach to American Studies from Academia are only some twenty years old. Ursula Heise describes the transnational turn as the "increasing interest in approaching the study of US culture in a more international framework, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them" (381). The drive to internationalize the study of American culture is not new, but it assumed a new urgency from the mid-1990s on, following "the process of (economic) globalization spearheaded by the Clinton administration, and a world linked by the internet" (Hornung 67). Previous to this transnational turn, during the 1980s and early 1990s, Heise continues to argue, a great deal of literary practice and criticism was dedicated to the exploration of family histories, places of origin, migration, local communities, material contexts, embodied experiences, and situated forms of knowledge. The conceptualization of many of these local subjects as composites of different cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, or national traditions—as in Homi Bhabha's explorations of "hybridity," for example, or Gloria Anzaldúa's portrayal of the borderlands identity of the "New Mestiza"—paved the way for the recent shift from the localized subject within the nation to the one that "reaches across national borders in what has variously come to be theorized as critical internationalism, transnationalism, diaspora, or cosmopolitanism" (Heise 382). And Jonathan Arac takes the argument one step further when he sees the positive outcomes of a more comparativist outlook of American literary history:

¹ Influenced by World War I, Bourne opens his essay with the following sentence: "no reverberatory effect of the great war has caused American public opinion more solicitude than the failure of the 'melting-pot.' The discovery of diverse nationalistic feelings among our great alien population has come to most people as an intense shock" (86).

It is quite common to think about American literary history in relation to American economic history, American social history, American political history, American religious history, etc., but it is much less common to think about American literary history in relation to Mexican literary history, French literary history, Russian literary history, Chinese literary history, etc. I do not mean that no studies have ever made connections of work to work or author to author, but we have barely begun thinking about how to compare the large literary history of the US to the literary history of another nation. (Arac 2-3)

Likewise, in her presidential address of the 2004 American Studies Association (ASA) meeting, Shelley Fisher Fishkin spoke against the national paradigm of the United States as a clearly bordered geographical and political space, and called for projects that analyze America as part of “a world system, in which the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the iterations of cultures know no borders”(Fisher Fishkin 21). Until recently, she observed, “the world was still divided into “us” and “them,” the “domestic” and the “foreign,” the “national” and “international.” But the complexity of today's American Studies requires “that we pay as much attention to the ways in which ideas, people, culture, and capital have circulated and continue to circulate physically, and virtually, throughout the world”; it requires “that we see the inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international, as interpenetrating” (Fisher Fishkin 21). In her address, Fishkin anticipated “the work of border-crossing authors, artists, and cultural forms”(32); It is one of those border-crossing genres and some of those border-crossing women authors that I will bring into my comparative reading of a transnational flow of ideas and literary forms, in the essay that follows.

2. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

The transnational genre I will focus on has been variously called confessional, personal, or autobiographical criticism; autocritography, or autocritique, to name but a few (Freedman 3). It is not a new literary form, of course: as early as 1906, Stephen Reynolds used the term “autobiografiction” to describe a hybrid genre similar to the ones named above. He defines this genre as a composite where “the three converging lines—autobiography, fiction and the essay—meet”(Reynolds 28). And my

transnational approach to American literature will focus on the critical, "autobiografictional" texts *Rooms of Our Own* (2006), by American professor and critic Susan Gubar, and *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), by Canadian writer and poet Margaret Atwood. A third book, which will have some cameo appearances, is *La loca de la casa*, written by Spanish writer and literary journalist Rosa Montero in 2003. I will thus establish a dialogue between three texts that were produced in different parts of the world but within a time span of only four years (2002 to 2006), and between their authors; three well-known, best-selling women writers and critics in their own countries and internationally. Additionally, there is one further evident feminist and transatlantic dialogue between Gubar's *Rooms of Our Own* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; this is not just a passing allusion, but an engagement with Woolf's work in the truest sense. Moreover, Susan Gubar portrays a truly transnational attitude in the chapter entitled "Global Poetics" when she states that English Literature survives these days because it crosses national divides: "English and American Literature [is] in the process of transforming itself into world literature in English" (145).

The pioneering theorists of the 1950's and 60's were preoccupied by whether or how autobiography could constitute an art, and how to define it generically. But since the 70's and 80's when the field began to grow, these terms of value have been somehow displaced, triggered by the advent of cultural studies, which propelled analyses of popular and mass culture as social, rather than aesthetic formation. Feminist and postcolonial critics, for their part, produced readings of the political and social power of the symbolic self in autobiographies and memoirs. And, finally, psychoanalytic approaches to life writing questioned presumptions of meaning inherent in the linear form of life narrative, while philosophers and deconstructionists like Roland Barthes or Paul de Man raised debates about allegory, mimesis, rhetoric and sign in such texts (see Jensen).

The state of the field today, as Margareta Jolly aptly summarizes, "is a layering over of formalist analyses with historical, psychological and social perspectives on, for example, life writing's role in migration or family, the politics of cultural trade, the psychology of identity or the healing of social and personal ills (quoted in Jensen 304). To sum up, throughout the critical history of life writing, there has been an inherent tension in the genre between the value ascribed to the subjects of life writing—the fluid and multi-faceted "true" self—and that awarded to the objects through which these

selves are communicated: the static art “form”; or, in other words, between subject (*autos*) and object (*graphein*).

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book entitled *Reading Autobiography* (2001) devote a chapter to the explanation of fifty-two genres of life writing. None of these fifty-two genres, however, is autocritography, which is the one in which I inscribe the books I discuss here. The *bios* in these texts focuses on the scholarly concerns of the critic on the one hand, or on the writerly aspects of the author’s career, on the other. The word “autocritography” was first used by African-American critic Henry Louis Gates to describe a book of critical essays, to signify “an autobiography of a critical concept.” It is, in other words, an account of the individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a writer or scholar and, hence, his/her professional concerns.

Autocritography flourished in the 1990s, but the main rationale behind its practice was expressed by scholar and leading exponent of reader-response criticism Jane Tompkins, in her 1987 essay “Me and my Shadow”:

The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal. Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. ...The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it. (169)

It is no wonder, then, that the mode I am discussing in these lines has raised very contrasting opinions. Whereas some critics discard it as “nouveau solipsism,” (Miller 421), on the more positive side, critic Jeffrey Williams recasts the vogue of personal criticism as a kind of “new belletrism” (417).

Most autobiographical criticism is personal in tone, emotional, and full of concrete particulars, but it’s also theoretically and historically engaged, confronting many of the reigning academic and social debates. Moreover, although it represents a radical shift in academic writing, its variants owe a good deal to the essay tradition, with its writerly freedom, and much to the second-wave feminist tenet that “

the personal is the political” (or the critical, in this case); it owes something to a female psychology that allegedly favors “connected” over “separate” knowing and to a feminist epistemology that sees social location (the nexus of one’s racial, religious, gender, class, geographic, sexual, familial and institutional histories) as necessarily implicated in one’s research (Freedman 8). Finally, autocritography also reimagines the public for criticism, as a “general” audience that wishes to read “letters” rather than a specialist audience immersed in hardcore academic debates over theory.²

I will proceed to suggest some of the motivations the authors may be moved by when choosing this hybrid form. But let us first give a brief description of our two main books, always bearing in mind that they are all experimental texts that eulogize the constant use of allusion, irony, paradox, and pleasure. And pleasure is what a book of essays should give, according to Woolf’s view of “The Modern Essay”:

The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give *pleasure*; ... Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last... The essay must lap us about and *draw its curtain across the world*” (Woolf 1992, 40).

Rooms of Our Own is one of the many books written by Susan Gubar, the co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic* and of *No Man's Land*—two texts that radically transformed feminist criticism in America. Obviously taking Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as her model, in a sort of intertextual game, Gubar weaves a provocative tapestry of fact and fancy, feminist criticism and semi-autobiographical fiction, to trace one year

² Some more generic clarifications, to avoid confusion. The books under discussion do not join in the also ever-growing list of scholarly or “**Academic autobiographies**”, if only because their authors (except for Susan Gubar) are not academics in the proper sense of the word (they do not teach on a regular basis at an academic institution). The so-called academic memoirs, those written by academics with influential scholarship and whose memoirs focus on issues of the academy -such as Elaine Showalter’s *Faculty Towers*, Nancy K. Miller’s (*But Enough About Me*), Frank Kermode (*Not Entitled*), Terry Eagleton (*The Gate Keeper*), Edward Said (*Out of Place*), Alice Kaplan (*French Lessons*), or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*A Dialogue on Love*), have been read as the substitute for the fairly exhausted genre of Academic or Campus Novel, in terms of being a window into the academic’s office. That is not the case of our three hybrid books. I say hybrid because they are a mixture of novel, autobiography, personal essay, anti-theoretical literary criticism, and pedagogical explanation. Their authors evidence that the dominant and established mode of literary criticism has moved from the High Theory of the 1970s and 80s, and from its difficult, more densely philosophical or social-scientific, impersonal tenor, language, and style, to the more experiential, subjective, literary tenor and language of autobiography.

in the intellectual life of a middle-aged scholar caught in complex arguments of pedagogy and politics at an unnamed Midwestern university (that could be Indiana, Gubar's own *alma mater*) in 21st century America (Henke 146). Like Woolf's feminist classic, *Rooms of Our Own* has six chapters but, unlike its predecessor, it includes several pages of "suggested readings", in the fashion of academic monographs. In other words, this is the type of text in which criticism is written *as* fictional autobiography³.

Margaret Atwood's and Rosa Montero's volumes, for their part, belong to the tradition of books written by novelists about the writer's profession. In other words, they are cases in which autobiography is written, partly, as criticism; a tradition that has been very fruitful in the literary world. We have two new cases of that lucid self-reflexive tradition of writers' views on writing, to which they add a new freshness and passion in their very personal and subjective revelation of the mysteries of literature; since they are really exploring their own personal mysteries.

In Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, we find a very similar layout to that of *Rooms of Our Own*. It consists of six titled chapters which include end notes⁴, bibliography, acknowledgements and index. It, thus, follows the formal strictures of an academic book, since it grew, like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, out of the series of Empson lectures that Atwood gave at the University of Cambridge in 2000. The book title points at the fact that all writers learn from the dead, from the work of writers who have preceded them. So, writers will have to deal, sooner or later, with those from previous periods of time; they must "negotiate with the dead". If Susan Gubar "negotiates" with Virginia Woolf but also with all the women writers to whom she has devoted her scholarship (Jane Austen, the Brontës, Mary Shelley, etc), Margaret Atwood also devotes many pages to personal ruminations on a wide range of authors, from Dante to American novelist and screenwriter Elmore Leonard. Significantly, transnationalism bridges every line written in these two samples of autocritography.

So, why have these women writers opted for autocritography instead of classic autobiography?⁵ Our writers give us very specific answers that explain their choice.

³ This is not the only incursion into life writing undertaken by Susan Gubar. In 2012 she published *Memoir of a Debulked Woman: Enduring Ovarian Cancer* (Indiana UP), where she explores the physical and psychological ordeal of living with ovarian cancer, a disease she was diagnosed with in 2008.

⁴As many as 227 notes (not many doctoral dissertations have such number of notes). Moreover, some of the notes are of the "for more on this subject, see..." type, which gives the essays an even more academic appearance. But just an appearance.

⁵ See Durán for more on the personal essay as autobiography

The reason is no other than what the American master of the autobiographical genre, Henry Adams, was seeking in his third-person autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams*: “distance,” even if their essays are written in the first person.

In the last chapter of *La Loca de la Casa*, Rosa Montero tells us a story about a cloistered nun and a woman who lived opposite the nun’s convent, on the third floor of an apartment building in an unnamed Spanish town. After thirty years, the cloistered nun leaves her convent and knocks on the door of the third floor apartment asking, “Could I sneak a look from your balcony?” The two women stood out on the balcony for several minutes, staring down at the convent. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” remarked the nun; afterwards she returns to her convent, never again to abandon it (Montero 270)⁶.

This story may not appear to explain the longest voyage a human being can embark upon; but, for Rosa Montero, it is the perfect symbol for what happens when one writes. Writing a novel or any kind of autobiographical narrative implies daring to cross that monumental path that distances you from yourself and allows you to observe yourself from afar, as if from a balcony. And, once one has done this supreme effort of self-understanding; once one has touched for an instant the vision that completes and fulminates, Montero proclaims, “we unwillingly return to our cell, to our enclosed individuality, and we try to accept our own death”⁷ (Montero 271). Distance, then. Which is also achieved through the use of symbols or representational synecdoche. As Montero stresses again and again, seeming to follow James Olney’s’ approach in his book *Metaphors of the Self*, to reach the largest distance possible between you and what you tell is the wisest position for a writer to adopt; the writer must assume that what she narrates only *represents* her as a human being, in a deeply symbolic manner⁸, “but all of that has nothing to do with the anecdotes of your little life”⁹ (Montero, 267).

That is a second key, I think, to their motivation in choosing the essay form: following in the tradition of Montaigne, our three writers do not wish to be confessional or testimonial; nor are they interested in seeking the events of their “little life”. They are only interested in exploring what represents them; be it specific writers and writing in general, or feminist criticism. I would suggest a third motivation, besides distance and

⁶ "Quería pedirle que me dejara asomarme a su balcón.... Es hermoso, ¿verdad?". All translations into English of Montero's quotes are mine

⁷ “Regresamos renqueantes a nuestra celda, al encierro de nuestra estrecha individualidad, e intentamos resignarnos a morir”

⁸ Which is what Olney also said over forty years ago in his *Metaphors of the Self*, if more theoretically oriented

⁹ "Pero todo eso no debe tener nada que ver con lo anecdótico de tu pequeña vida"

representation. And it has to do with autobiography and ethics. In his book *The Ethics of Life Writing*, Paul John Eakin explains how life writing, in the information age, has meant the transmission of more and more personal information often quite intimate, with less and less restraint. At the same time, he identifies some “transgressions” for which self-narrators have been called to account, the most outstanding of which are: misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth, and failure to display normative models of personhood. So, telling the truth, and “displaying normalcy” (whatever “normalcy” means), are two of the prerequisites for telling a life story. If narrative is indeed an identity content, Eakin proceeds to suggest, “then the regulation of narrative carries the possibility of the regulation of identity—a disquieting proposition to contemplate in the context of our culture of individualism” (Eakin 2001, 113-14).

If that is the present situation, it seems that our women essayists have decided to avoid problems vis à vis the ethics of life writing and have chosen different paths where they can feel free from having their identity “regulated”. Susan Gubar, for example, openly plays and puns with transgression number one, “misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth”, when she clarifies in her first chapter:

I will... make use of the license of novelists letting lies proliferate so as to tell a fictitious story about one year of events which shaped my belief that especially those women with sufficient money and rooms of their own face bewildering but unprecedented prospects today (Gubar 6).

A quote that sounds strikingly similar to that provided by Virginia Woolf at the beginning of *A Room of One's Own*:

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here (Woolf 1995, 14)

No theoretician of autobiography could have put it more eloquently: sometimes our imagined fictions are more real than autobiographical “truth”.

If we now focus on Eakin’s second infraction, the failure to display normative models of personhood, we read that it refers not so much to a question of what one has done but to what one *is*: one is judged by others to be lacking in the very nature of one's being. In our present academic world, it seems that political and academic correctness prescribes certain ethical postures for autobiographers, concerning the group identity

they “represent”; certain ways of “being” in the world. It would be considered “the norm”, for example, for certain groups of readers that a woman writer write as a feminist. Group-identity politics imposes its regulations and punishes its deviations from the norm. But, again, our three writers have their own rules, and the personal essay form provides them with the freedom to express their very personal point of view, regardless of what “normalcy” in their own spheres would indicate; thus perhaps the impact of transnational influence might be discovered here.

We could provide many examples of their rejection of “normative models of personhood”, but let us restrict the scope to the feminist issue. In her chapter entitled “Temptation”, on the moral or social responsibility of the writer, Atwood (well-known for her feminist ideas) directly touches upon this issue. So, while at one point she seems to adopt a stance of what could be called “feminist normalcy”, explaining to her readership how

Women writers weren’t included in the Romantic roll-call, and never had a lot of Genius medals stuck onto them; in fact the word “genius” and the word “woman” just don’t really fit together in our language, because the kind of eccentricity expected of male “geniuses” would simply result in the label “crazy”, should it be practiced by a woman (Atwood 100).

At another point she uses a detached, sarcastic tone when talking about what she calls the “F-word” and describes at length what she considers the characteristically “women writers conundrum”:

If you are a woman and a writer, does the combination of gender and vocation automatically make you a feminist, and what does that mean exactly?: that you shouldn’t put a good man into your books, even though you may in real life have managed to dig up a specimen or two?” (Atwood 107).

But the clearest departure from “normalcy” that autocritography provides Susan Gubar is her departure from theory. Atwood hurries to clarify that from the introductory pages, when she states: “I am a writer and a reader, and that’s about it. I’m not a scholar or a literary theoretician, and any such notions that have wandered into this book have got by the usual writerly methods, which resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests” (Atwood, xix). However, it is not that logical that one of the best known and most respected feminist scholars in the Anglo-American academia should produce a book that reads

like an open proclamation against theory. In the second chapter of *Rooms of Our Own*, aptly entitled “Theory Trouble”, Gubar makes fun of the jargon used by theorists when she states “If I had never understood structuralism, how could I possibly grasp the utility of post-structuralism”? (40). And, in a very playful and mocking tone, she imagines a phantom Professor De M (Paul de Man, maybe?), who symbolizes the French philosopher, writing a book called *The Indeterminacy of “Sexual” Difference* and whose work involves:

“disrupting” or “unravelling”, “subverting” or “sabotaging” those “hegemonic dualisms” of “phallogocentrism” that had created an illusion of natural phenomena out of the interplay of “undecidable” signs” (Gubar 45).

Although her book reads like a novel, Gubar’s Table of Contents reads like a critical theory monograph with titles that parody famous theory texts, like “Theory Trouble” or “Institutionalization and Its Queer Discontents,” thus it is the narrator’s interior monologues on these subjects which share the distinctly interruptive quality of Woolf’s prose, that interweave the abstract and the material in strands which are both elegant and funny. Although the book’s target is to investigate a set of literary or cultural texts and theoretical concepts, it deliberately avoids the normative style and manner of theory in a literary experiment with critical style, including also many of the pleasurable ingredients of narrative fiction (such as the use of rhetorical devices, a setting, characters, dialogue, and a story with a beginning and an end).

Gubar often uses Virginia Woolf’s technique of browsing through book shelves in a library (albeit, this time the “Library” is no other than *Amazon.com*) and the bibliographical discoveries she makes serve as the starting point for her argumentation. In one of these occasions, for example, when she is trying to find books that help her understand how the terms “sex” and “gender” have shifted, she “randomly” comes across the myriad of recently published books about “masculinity”. The distance provided by autocritography allows her to be ironic and humorous again about it, when she says:

For centuries... women have been the most discussed animal in the universe, but now, it seems, teachers and psychologists, journalists and essayists have provoked a tsunami of serious and prophetic, moral and hortatory words about boys, brothers, husbands, fathers, bachelors and uncles” (Gubar 42).

All of this, of course, cannot be read as serious theoretical discourse set against “men’s rights” movements or the like. On the contrary, its expressive sarcasm makes us laugh but, as we laugh, Gubar’s sentences also lead us to reflections on the many evolutions in feminist criticism that she is discussing with the readers. The critique here also suggests that across all boundaries, women should share the concern of whether their lives have been upstaged by the latest trend. Our three texts, then, seem to invoke another institutional turn from Theory to a hybrid style of personal writing where the politics are not “theoretical” but intensely “personal”.

Over twenty years ago, Barry Olshen proposed the use of three terms in theoretical approaches to autobiography: “subject” (or 'autobiographer'); “persona” (the textual signifier or literary subject, entirely constituted by discourse); and “self” (a kind of subjective structure maintaining the subject's sense of her own identity). Usually, in autobiography, subject, narrator and persona bear the same name. And usually, in critical essays, there is only one almost invisible presence; that of the critic. But our books use complex narrative strategies that resemble fiction or experimental autobiography. “Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or any name you please”, says the narrator of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (6). And “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please--it is not a matter of any importance),” says the narrator of Susan Gubar’s *Rooms of Our Own* (14). So, the autobiographical narrator and persona in both cases is an imaginary Mary whose shifting identity gives her a more universal and transnational voice; the voice of any woman writer or scholar. Moreover, if, as Gubar says in her book “‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being” (14), then, who is, really, the “I” that lives and tells the stories in these women’s books? Are they “I’s” of their own? Again, we have to return to what Virginia Woolf said in her own version of autocritography, long before the term had been coined:

But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar; a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'. (...) Back one was always hailed to the letter 'I'. One began to be tired of 'I'. Not but what this 'I' was a most respectable 'I'; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that 'I' from the bottom of my heart. But... the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist (Woolf 1995, 104).

Only when I re-read this paragraph describing the authoritative voice of the masculine first person pronoun did I realize that Maxine Hong Kingston, fifty years later, borrowed this idea and expressed it in strikingly similar terms in her now classic autobiography *The Woman Warrior*. The difference being that this time the “hard as a nut” “I” does not represent the male subject, but the American citizen, as opposed to the minoritized Chinese-American immigrant

The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American 'I', assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight [...] I stared at the middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it? (Kingston 150).

These two quotes prove how a classic of British feminism such as *A Room of One's Own* has transnationally influenced not only an American hybrid text in an intertextual game (Gubar's book), but also a classic of Chinese-American feminism, such as *The Woman Warrior*. And they also lead us to open the question of how minority writers have embraced the puzzle of identity between their use of the individualist “I” and the collective “we”.

3. CONCLUSIONS

I initiated the second part of this essay saying that I would be describing a somehow unusual genre; all the more unusual and unconventional since I have provided several different names to describe it. The authors themselves are very aware of the peculiar and hybrid nature of their own books, described as “*mestizo*”, by Rosa Montero (180), as a “critical bildungsroman” by Gubar (218), and as a “labyrinth” by Atwood (xiii). Whatever name we wish to give them, it is clear that this recent mode of personal critical writing we have named “autocritography” is not that recent, after all, since its practitioners have “negotiated with the dead”, and have followed the trail left by the masters of essay-writing. Nor is it only an Anglo-American “fashion”, but rather a global one that travels across the Atlantic as my comparative approach has shown. It is, rather, a renewed kind of *belletrism* that downplays previous claims of quasi-scientific theoretical research, and reasserts, precisely, the distinctive value of the literary, as yielding not practical results but spiritual or aesthetic enjoyment.

It is true that one of the greatest strengths of autocritography is its potential effectiveness. Autobiographical elements incorporated into a critical argument become staged events, intended to produce a sincerity of effect. Moreover, personal criticism has unsettled the firm dichotomies of expressivism and objectivity, *petit histoire* and *grand récit*, celebrity and invisibility (Veeseer xxii). But let us not be naïve: as we have perceived in our analysis, there is always a hidden agenda, a calculated effect; and even the apparently most innocent autobiographical narrative conforms to a motivated program of self-representation (Lang, 50). In any case, this is a new trend in life-writing studies that will, undoubtedly, continue to arouse the interest of critics. As we move forward towards a future in which instant, first-hand, visual and digital life-story telling is valued over distanced reflection, such open-mindedness and ability to speak with clarity about our concerns, as well as to listen to the new and emerging discourses we see and hear around us will be more necessary than ever (Jensen 311).

To finish, let me go back to the initial purpose of this comparative analysis across continents and historical periods. As Fisher Fishkin proclaimed in her presidential address of 2004, "as the transnational figures more prominently in American studies, we will welcome studies that probe the cultural work of American literature outside the United States for insight into the non-U.S. cultures—as well as into the American texts themselves". (Fisher 32) This essay, as part of this volume project, then, constitutes a species of "critical internationalism"; a contribution to the internationalization of American studies through greater attention to the work of Americanists from outside the US, that ultimately aims not so much to reconfigure the object of study itself as to bring "a different range of institutional, disciplinary, and cultural perspectives to bear on it" (Heise 382).

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