

Feminist Criticism and Knowledge: (Literary) History and Its Silences

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Despite the current discourses on transnationalisms and postnationalisms, the national, as an issue and as a category of analysis in the production of knowledge on collective constructions of nationness has received a renewed scholarly interest. The focus on the national has become, for some, a question of how the signs of a national culture have been articulated in the archives of that culture, what cultural discontinuities and ambivalences they make visible, how meanings and values are positioned “as zones of control or of abandonment, or recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing” (Said 225). This is one of the reasons why the past has become of fundamental importance in literary studies, particularly from the perspective of feminist theories. Revisiting the historical and literary narratives that produced structures of symbolical meaning in close alliance with the ideological apparatus that sustained the national imaginary and its power to establish legitimate meanings in the sphere of formal culture has been a movement associated not only to revisions of canonical formations but also to rediscoverings of other agencies and narrations not given validation and recognition.

Literature played a vital role in drawing the symbolical map of modern nations’ cultural identities, particularly in the Americas, during the period of their consolidation in the XIX century. And the novel was the literary genre *par excellence* that had a major impact on the constitution of the public sphere of culture, for it embodied the tensions in addition to the rhetorical ones, attendant upon the project of modern nationhood. As

such, the novel became the domain where affirmations and contestations of ideologemes of the nation were enacted and thus, became a fictional genre that addressed the constitution of what Benedict Anderson's has termed "imagined communities."¹ This figuration of identity was forged and based on the invention of a commonality enforced by the civilizing mission and its logic of conquest and ritual destruction, what meant assimilation and eradication of intranational differences. The fictive nature of this alleged universal national body, an unproblematic unity and particularity of identity and culture that was meant to interpellate the people as one so as to establish nexuses of identification and belonging become clear when we consider the contradictions between that image and the realities of political structures and social organizations which were deeply bound up with the exercise of power, and which produced racial hierarchies, class divisions and gender asymmetries. No need to say that the idea of nationhood was defined as a distinct form of male bonding, in Anderson's words, "a deep horizontal comradeship" from which women were excluded (56). The interdependence of nationhood and the hegemonic form of cultural imaginary that we find in national or foundational narratives² led Judith Fetterly (1978) to use the phrase "the masculine wilderness of the American novel" (viii), when examining the cultural patterns present in American fiction.

Revisiting neglected literary works published in the XIX century that have remained in the shadow of the canon, that is, marginalized or deauthorized in the historical accounts of the institutionalized national culture (high culture as the one with lasting representativeness) is part of this shift in perspective in reading the national. By bringing hegemonic historiography to crisis, this effort opens up a space for change in the signification-function of the national sign-system.³ Today, feminist theories

¹ The expression is taken from Benedict Anderson (1983) in his classical work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

² One work that deserves reference in relation to this topic is Doris Sommer's (2004) *Ficções de fundação: os romances nacionais da América Latina*.

³ I am referring here to Gayatri Spivak's notions (1988) on subalternity and historiography elaborated in the essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography."

and criticism have advanced a whole array of new questions that allow us to probe into the pervasive mechanisms by which patriarchal culture secured the effacement of women in literature, for example. Not only were they assigned a marginal status as subjects in the field of literary production, but they were also silenced in the sense that their works did not count as literature or, at least, good literature, which means that the works were considered lacking literary worth, a judgement of value that served to justify their neglect in terms of academic critical attention. It has been no coincidence that one of the major thrusts of feminist criticism is related to women's literary underrepresentation in national canonical formations. In fact, recuperating women's texts and their narrative agency has evolved into one of the most path-breaking development in scholarship on national histories.

The notion of history, as used here, does not subscribe to a set of truth claims or empirical givens, but to an important argument about history as a discourse that narrativizes culture and, in so doing, it formulates objects and subjects within a complex structuring that constitutes a social formation, which means that narratives that have been legitimized for articulating knowledges about the past can be read for its social and political effects. Thus, if the canon can be regarded as one instance of a nation's past narrative, in which gender – investments in particular constructions of masculinity and femininity – constituted one of the means of male empowerment, it is of utmost historical importance to examine the narratives that have been suppressed and pushed to the nation's margins and, as a consequence, excluded from the field of historical and literary inquiry. To address this problematic in the present means, for feminist criticism, a transformative intervention in the national discourses of culture as much as bringing to the foreground the renarration of history by women has far-reaching implications to the ways we understand how social imaginaries were produced and national identities and traditions were engendered. Rereading texts which were not considered major and that did not count in mainstream literature in XIX century implies an examination of the institutional apparatus of nation-building, including here the role of literary histories and of the critical establishment. Such an examination is couched on the need to challenge the cultural determinations of codes of interpretation and value inscribed in the literary and academic

culture, what means to bring the battle over values and beliefs to bear on the interpretations of the past, both in terms of its politics of representation and on the values that gave legitimacy to some interpretations in detriment of others. In this cenario, the critical intersections of the categories of gender and nation are bound to bring insights that may contribute to pave the way to new literary histories.

There are no doubts that the question of women's authorship, in a diversity of national cultures, is posing vigorous interrogations regarding long-held assumptions of a literary establishment that has traditionally operated under the prerogative of an exclusive male writing culture. One is reminded here of the classical essay by Nina Baym (1986), "Melodramas of beset manhood: how theories of American fiction exclude women authors". A few titles confirm Baym's thesis: *Virgin Land*, by Henry Nash Smith (1950), *Symbolism and American Literature*, by Charles Feidelson (1953), *The American Adam*, by R.W.B. Lewis (1955), *The American Novel and its Tradition*, by Richard Chase (1957) and *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, by Daniel Hoffmann (1961). To question the critical discourses underlying the configuration of literary histories that take canonical formations as bases for their paradigm means, ultimately, to address the question of the constitution of imagined communities of the past.

I would like to point out the importance of studies on how and from what perspective XIX century American women's novels engage in the project of nation/narration and deploy the novel form as a complex textual instance of resistance and identity, from the perspective of the differences of gender and race. In order to do so, I would like to consider briefly, the novel *Ramona*, by Helen Hunt Jackson. It is a novel that has attained wide popularity since its first edition in 1884. With 15,000 copies printed at the time, the novel has inspired innumerable film versions and TV series since its publication (the classical film version was D.W. Griffith's, in 1910) and has, by now, more than 300 English-language editions. Jackson was a poet and a novelist, contemporary and friend of Emily Dickinson, who was well known in the intellectual circle of her time as she joined the company of writers and thinkers such as Henry Longfellow, Margaret Fuller and Lydia Maria Child (the editor of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861). Ralph Emerson had Jackson in high regard as she was, in his opinion, the major American

woman poet and deserved to be included in the collection of American poetry he organized, entitled *Parnassus*. It is worth remembering that Dickinson had not published any of her poems during the period. The editor Thomas Higginson, with whom Dickinson corresponded, had turned down the poems she had submitted with the recommendation that she should correct them. Yet, he favored Jackson whom he considered the most brilliant and impetuous woman of her generation. And in this sense, he was right in his judgment. Jackson's involvement with "the Indian question" emerged in the context of her interest in finding out all about their fate and dispossession after having attended a lecture given by a chief of the Ponca tribe in the Boston lecture circuit. What she heard then, fueled a long standing indignation against the US government's policies towards the Native-American population, which changed her life and her writing. Three years before the publication of *Ramona*, she published *A Century of Dishonour*, the result of her research in government files that proved the government double dealings in regard to Indian land. The book became the strongest indictment of the federal government's disregard for Native Americans.

The fate of *Ramona* in American literary history deserves some comments. Robert Spiller, the main editor of the monumental work *Literary History of the United States* (originally published in 1946, with a third edition dated from 1978), places Jackson among the generation of local colorists, mainly female, of the second half of the XIX century, while acknowledging her reputation by saying it "will last." According to him, *Ramona* fulfilled its role on behalf of the natives as much as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the negroes, "but wound up as a romance about the dying Spanish society of southern California.... there is hardly a library in the land without several copies; it has hit millions in technicolor. Part of the enduring charm is in the principals and in the background and in the theme of thwarted love, but the greatest strength of the novel is *Heath Anthology* the portrait of Senora Moreno, guardian of the old Spanish ways against the encroaching Americans" (869). Defined thus, as a local color novel, which is another way of defining its minor status, according to criteria of values and conventions that rule traditional literary studies, *Ramona* did not merit any reference in the classical anthology by Bradley, Beatty and Long, *The American Tradition in Literature*, first edited in 1956

and, surprisingly, received only a small reference, in accordance with its minor status, in the Introduction of volume two of the *of American Literature*, published in 1998 under the general editorship of Paul Lauter, an anthology considered the best of its kind ever published for its methodology and the representativeness of the literary material included. The critic Valerie Mathes who wrote the Afterword of the 2002 Signet Classic Printing of *Ramona* observes that contemporary reviewers of the novel tend to emphasize its romantic plot – a love story – overlooking completely the condemnation that underwrites the fate of the lovers.

The novel indeed presents a love story between Ramona, a half-white (mixed blood) girl, raised by a Mexican widowed land-owner, and Alessandro, an American indian from a mission set in southern California, a territory under siege by the US government which was determined to bring the downfall of the Spanish Catholic missions and integrate Mexican settlers and Indians into the US territory. The story line follows the painful struggle of the married couple to survive as they were repeatedly driven from shabby land retreats by greedy American settlers and European immigrants (the so-called pioneers) supported by the US government. This was a time when the Indian tribes had their collective land titles withdrawn by the government, a way to force upon them a legal system that turned the Indian into an individual subject to state law (the General Allotment Act of 1887) and liable to taxation, in case he/she were able to own a piece of land. But as private ownership was a prerogative of the white man the law only contributed to the dispersal and the desintegration of many local tribes which had nowhere to go. The dramatic development reaches its climax when Alessandro dies by a shot wound inflicted during an incident of land invasion. Ramona's despair and her decision to cross the Mexican border so as to raise their baby daughter in a soil outside the US jurisdiction makes her the first American born heroine to live in exile by her own will.

By conceiving a plot that weaves a story of suffering, defeat and homelessness, the structure of which materializes, on different levels, a set of social and historical markers, Jackson discloses the enormous institutional violence that attended the history of territorial conquest and colonization, the annexation of people and land according to the terms of the social contract which brought into alliance state policies and capitalist expansionist

interest. The revolt against the degrading revisions of land titles given to Mexican settlers is voiced by Señora Moreno, the resilient landowner who bears witness to the darker side of what has been celebrated as one of the most important myth and symbol of the American culture: the west frontier: "Any day, she said, the United States Government might send out a new land Commission to examine the decrees of the first, and revoke such as they saw fit. Once a thief, always a thief. Nobody need feel himself safe under American rule. There was no knowing what might happen any day; and year by year the lines of sadness, resentment, anxiety and antagonism deepened on the Senora's fast aging face" (13). In comparison with the remarkable characterization of Señora Moreno, Ramona's characterization as a typical romantic heroine seems to place her in the shadow of the former. Yet, as the story unfolds, her stature changes as she grows into a strong, self-determined woman who bears the burden of her mongrel blood and fights for her dream of happiness against all odds. She endures the wasteland that threatens to engulf her life and the life of her daughter and resists assimilation as a racialized other by choosing to leave US land. Ramona figures thus, a radical alterity, an unassimilated, suffering but resistant other, forced into nomadism and exile by the dispossession of home and identity.

The novel may be regarded as a counter-narrative of identity, in as much as the intertext that shapes its narrative logic disturbs and displace canonical representations of the national subject whose identity is predicated on the domestication/erasure of differences. It performs an intervention at the level of a critical reinterpretation of historical facts that destabilize the official discourse of American freedom and democracy by exposing the farce of its universalization in the narratives of progress, civilization and bourgeois enlightenment which only produced subjectivities compatible with the project of nation-building. From this perspective, its textual politics interrupts the pedagogical discourse of nationness based on the romantic integration of land and people under the principle of the land of the free. Some twenty years later, in 1903, Jackson's novel would find a resonance in the words of a representative member of the black intelligentsia, W.E.B. Du Bois who, in his book *The Souls of Black Folks*, stated: "Freedom is to us a mockery, ... and liberty a lie" (51).

Jackson's novel is one example of how women's writings produce different signs of identity and meaning, other interpretations of belongingness

and sociality that contest the production of hegemonic subjectivities engendered by the mechanisms of interpellation present in master narratives of nationhood.⁴ The fact that she was a white woman might raise the question, delicate from the standpoint of contemporary theories, of her narrative's place of enunciation regarding the other who is the object of her narration. In her favor, we might argue that she spoke about the other but never intended to assume the place of the other or speak from this position. Her subject positionality as an interested narrator is articulated through negotiations between self and other. Her narrator makes clear where she stands and never blurs the boundaries of differences, which does not prevent her, however, from assuming ideological affiliations that underscore her compassion and solidarity towards the American Indian nations. This was, by all means, no minor achievement for a middle class white woman in the context of XIX century American culture.

Considering all that *Ramona* stands for, it comes as no surprise the fact that it has not deserved serious academic treatment or a better place in the construct of American literary history. The challenge for feminist criticism is to affirm the importance of *Ramona*'s textual liminality in relation to the American canon and to restore, to the present, the buried text of the culture's fundamental history, what has been repressed and pushed to the zone of oblivion and forgetfulness and lies dormant as its political unconscious. Tracking down lost and neglected narratives that were published but have remained marginalized or deauthorized in the historical accounts of the institutionalized national culture is part of feminist criticism's effort to intervene in hegemonic historiography. This is to say that, by engendering new insights and building other knowledges

⁴ This is a reference to the notions developed by Homi Bhabha (1994) in his *The Location of Culture*. In his theoretical proposal of the nation as narration, Bhabha argues that the concept of the "peoples" emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement that articulates the tension between representing the people as an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object, and constructing the people in the performance of narrative, its "enunciatory" present. According to him "the performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's *self-generation* by casting a shadow between the people as 'image' and its differentiating sign of Self" (147-48).

on the past, feminist critique challenges the ideological premisses that has maintained the institutional apparatus of nation-building and the cultural determinations of codes of interpretation and value judgement inscribed in the literary and academic culture. Such a move means, ultimately, to bring the battle over values and beliefs to bear on the genealogy of national narratives, both in terms of its politics of representation and of the values that gave it legitimacy.

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