

From the President

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Yet Again, the Threshold

I've been at Cornell University a very long time, long enough that when Allan Bloom, who once taught at my institution, returned to campus to give a talk about his controversial and much-discussed 1987 book, *The Closing of American Mind*, I was already around to be in the massive audience for his lecture. Lest you are misled by the book's title, let me hasten to remind you that the "closing" Bloom was talking about, the way he saw higher education as failing its students, was that it was becoming too open to new ideas and approaches, too unstructured, too leftist, too distant from the best that has been thought and said—the "Great Books" of the West. Perhaps the most controversial thing he said that afternoon, among many hotly contested points, was his response to a question about his work's universalizing claims, in the face of its curious lack of attention to thousands of years of Chinese art and literature. As I remember it, Bloom's response was straightforward: when the Chinese produce something worthy of the world's attention, then he would gladly pay attention to it. Meanwhile, he stood by his defense of the Western canon.

Around the same time, a senior colleague of mine in the Spanish program made a parallel comment when I asked him (on behalf of a group of students who came to me and asked me to speak to him) why there were no women writers in his survey course on Latin American literature. He responded gently (he was a gentleman) that he had no prejudices at all, and would be happy to include a woman in his syllabus when there was one able to write at the same level as the other great authors included in his course.

Signs of the times, you might say. Ancient history.

I love the hoary Great Books—it's hard to imagine becoming a scholar without finding these magnificent works irresistible and feeling goose bumps when returning to them again and again: "En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme . . ."; "Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo"; "Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo." Still, you can see how it came about that I have dedicated much of my professional career to writing and thinking about exclusions in Latin American literary and cultural history, and to questions of exclusions based specifically on gender and sexuality, mostly wishing I could write myself out of that job, imagining a day when such a history might, indeed, become ancient and irrelevant, and finding to my dismay that the exclusionary practices remain all too persistent, and deeply rooted.

In her much-cited 1972 poem, "Meditación en el umbral," Mexican Rosario Castellanos captures vividly and unforgettably the sense of potentiality and frustration that might be said to define the early days of second-generation women's rights and cultural work, her struggle with the often-unwritten codes of institutional and social exclusion that she fought against, in poem after poem, essay after essay, book after book. There will be an end to tokenism and exclusionary social practices, she intuits, and she can imagine crossing the threshold but can't yet see what is on the other side:



Debe haber otro modo que no se llame Safo

ni Mesalina ni María Egipcíaca
ni Magdalena ni Clemencia Isaura.

Otro modo de ser humano y libre.
Otro modo de ser. (316)

For Castellanos, and for many other activists of her generation (and mine), that struggle was punctuated by still-potent names like Tlatelolco, the Sorbonne, and Kent State, in a way that echoes, for me, how the Occupy/Indignados movement has swept through nations and imaginations across the globe more recently. Castellanos's struggle, which is still our struggle today, was to put human rights on national and international agendas: to raise consciousness about issues relative to wage work, domestic labor, motherhood, the body, reproduction, race, identity, sexualities, violence. Hers was the effort to promote recognition of women's creativity and women's claim to the life of the mind.

The literary/academic side of this struggle against continued exclusionary practices was on the first level a labor of rescue (to identify authors and reissue works by women, LGBT individuals, indigenous people, and Afro-Latin Americans) and evaluation (to integrate these "marked" categories into the largely heterosexual, male, dominant cultural understandings of national and international literary projects). Concomitantly in Latin America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries there was an explosive growth of presses, galleries, exhibitions, and performances; of

grassroots activism, position papers, and theoretical writings; of creative work and multiplatform media projects. These exchanges were further instantiated in the creation of gender studies programs in many countries throughout the hemisphere and in the sharing of information and resources through NGOs and increasingly complex websites, action networks, and social media outlets.

Then came the backlash. The case of the *testimonio* is a particularly evident one: identified with underclass political activism and women testimonialists, this was one of hottest genres for analysis in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it seems obsolete now, to judge by our course syllabi and scholarly production. In a few years, people like Rigoberta Menchú and Domitila Barrios became celebrities, their works made ubiquitous in academic courses across many fields, and in quick succession they were canonized, absorbed into the mainstream, decried, had the potency of their message diluted, and are now almost ignored.

What, to use Castellanos's term, is the current threshold for scholars and creators who are concerned about the history and implications of exclusionary practices? In an environment where it seems that two steps back are taken for every difficult step forward, activists like Rosario Castellanos, for good or ill, continue to set the agenda for contemporary thinkers. I confess, I find cause for renewed optimism in some of the exciting, transnationally engaged writers like Cristina Civalé, Cristina Rivera Garza, or Belén Gache (all of whom comfortably inhabit cyberspace as well as more traditional paper forms), and the many authors with bases in the United States, Europe, or Asia as well as Latin America: Lina Meruane (Chile and New York), Mario Bellatin (Mexico, Peru, and an

imaginary Japan), Giannina Braschi (Puerto Rico and the United States), Anna Kazumi Stahl (U.S.-born of Japanese-German descent, she lives in Argentina and writes in Spanish). Less overtly militant than their activist mothers, their gender consciousness often seems more integral. They use parody and pastiche to show, between the lines, the association among power, knowledge, and gender.

There is another book that is getting a lot of attention in the U.S. press lately, William Deresiewicz's suggestively red, white, and blue enrobed *Excellent Sheep*, with its nostalgic championship of traditional humanities and its worry about the future of elite education. The best and brightest thinkers, more or less the same folks familiar to us from Bloom, are, in Deresiewicz's world as well, all that stands between us and what one reviewer calls "a corps of academic zombies." There have been enough critiques of Deresiewicz's own elitism that it is unnecessary to add to the flood of print. I can only sigh despondently when curricular discussion once again turns on, and returns to, the usual white male subjects. The lesson from literature, Deresiewicz writes, is that "Mailer wanted to be Hemingway, Hemingway wanted to be Joyce, and Joyce was painfully aware he'd never be another Shakespeare." And no one, apparently, aspires to be another Rigoberta Menchú.

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