CATHARINA VALLEJO

THE WOMEN IN THE MEN'S CLUB

WOMEN *MODERNISTA* POETS IN CUBA (1880-1910)

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"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax--,
Of cabbages—and kings--,
Of why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings."

(Tweedledee, from "The Walrus and the Carpenter")
Lewis Carroll, 1871.
Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found there.

This book is dedicated
to the memory of my parents,
Greta van den Ham and Theodorus van der Plaats,
in gratitude and admiration

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PRELUDE

> The critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present Homi Bhabha[1]

As often happens, this book springs from a lack I experienced while researching material to teach in an undergraduate course on *modernismo*.[2] I was struck by two apparently contradictory facts: that very few works dealing with modernismo presented any women's texts but, on the other hand, that a number of these volumes portrayed women on the cover (see *Tables of Anthologies*, pp. 147-150). I then wondered whether the lack of women poets represented was one created by an historical reality (that there were no or few women modernistas) or by a post-facto historical development (that the canon had obliterated those women who had produced modernista texts). It has turned out that I have had to go further than these questions—or around them, if you will. The paradox of female representations on the covers of volumes dealing with modernismo while few women authors were included, is emblematic of the problematical way in which modernismo has been theorized and contextualized historically almost from its beginnings, and of the role women have played in this process. These issues will be explored in **Chapter I.**

In these beginnings of modernismo there were a few women who participated in the general innovative revolution and rebellion in art, in spite of the fact that the development of modernismo, as I hope to make clear in this book, almost guaranteed that women writers could not openly flourish in this atmosphere, a situation subsequently confirmed by literary historiography. On the other hand, I also feel that we can change this perspective by considering modernismo differently, and I thus

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[1] Homi Bhabha 1994, 85.

[2] I will continue to use the term *modernismo*—and its adjective *modernista*—throughout this study to clearly indicate that I am dealing with the Latin-American version of the cultural modernization process—and in contrast to the later, twentieth-century British and North-American phenomenon.

hope this book prepares the way for a revision of this movement from the viewpoint of gender, a revision largely based on recent theoretical concepts.

It is generally accepted that modernismo began (if we can use that verb) in the Caribbean and Mexico (see especially Iván Schulman); the canonized names in these beginnings—José Asunción Silva (1865-1896), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895), José Martí (1853-1895) and Julián del Casal (1863-1893), followed by Rubén Darío (1867-1916)—are from Colombia, México, Cuba and Nicaragua. Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (Mexico) announces some of what will be accepted as the principles of modernismo as early as 1876; the first texts directly related to modernismo date from the early 1880's, and have their origin in Cuba (see also Schulman and Jitrik 1998).[3] Many of the first generation modernistas died before 1900 (Casal, Martí, Gutiérrez Nájera, Silva), but two of the three women I propose as modernistas survived into the twentieth century and continued to publish modernista poetry.

In the main it is (still) accepted that the first 'major' women poets all worked in the twentieth century and thus are generally not considered as modernistas. The quartet of Delmira Agustini (1886-1014), Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938),[4] Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) and Juana de Ibarbourou (1892-1979)—all from South America—appear in all anthologies and histories of literature as modern, and/or postmodernista poets. It is my aim in this study to show that there were others prior to these four; in particular, and with references to the Uruguayans Delmira Agustini, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira (1875-1924) and some others, I will concentrate on three Cuban women who lived and worked mainly at the end of the nineteenth century: Mercedes Matamoros (1851-1906); Nieves Xenes (1859-1915) and Juana

[3] A number of countries vie for being the home of 'the first' modernist poets. See Jiménez Benítez, who claims José de Jesús Domínguez from Puerto Rico as the first (1998, 24-25).

[4] For example, even as early as 1971 Ricardo Gullón included Storni, Agustini and Vaz Ferreira in a list of modernista writers among whom "la muerte está presente obsesivamente" (48). Typically, he only mentions them in relation to their lives, just once, and without any further elaboration.

Borrero (1878-1896). It is further my hope that this study will motivate others to re-explore the *fin de siècle* literature of other areas—Mexico and Colombia, for example—to possibly expand modernismo there into women's texts.

Cuba is a particularly fruitful area to study for several reasons.[5] The fact that it is an island makes the intellectual environment a self-contained/enclosed space, but it also makes its inhabitants look beyond the boundaries imposed by its natural limits and was thus a propitious space in which to foment innovative discourse. The island's political status was at a critical point after the 1878 Pact of Zanjón which ended the first war of Cuban independence. Until the end of the nineteenth century the territory was still a colony, recuperating from the failed ten-year war of independence (1868-1878); slavery was being abolished—in stages—an industrial revolution was taking place in the production of sugar—the island's largest economic factor—urbanization increased, and plans continued for another attempt at independence—finally achieved to a certain extent in 1898. During this last quarter of the nineteenth century, different views on solutions for a post-colonial status for Cuba—'autonomy,' independence, annexation, status quo, or indeed any combination of these—bred a gamut of splinter groups promoting their views, which were published in a number of political and artistic venues. As well as these 'public' or open manifestations, secret movements towards independence through revolution also

[5] By contrast, it is generally accepted that modernismo did not establish itself in the other Hispanic Caribbean islands, the Dominican Republic (independent since 1844) and Puerto Rico (still under U.S. tutelage) until the twentieth century, although even in the 1960's critics recognized that its precepts and practitioners were known there earlier (see for example Laguerre 1969, 26; see also Manrique Cabrera 1969, 230). Intellectual interests there seem to have been concentrated on positivism, writing on historical matters, and on narrative, though the poetry volume *Huríes blancas* by José de Jesús Domínguez in Puerto Rico (1886) does have clear manifestations of modernismo. It should also be noted that the first modernista poem published in Santo Domingo is generally considered to be "Mi vaso verde" (1903) by Altagracia Saviñon (1886-1942): "Mi vaso glauco, pálido y amado, / donde guardo mis flores predilectas, / tiene el color de las marinas algas, / tiene el color de la esperanza muerta…." Considerable archival research in both islands has failed to turn up any earlier work by women that could be considered modernista.

flourished. In addition, there was movement between the ideas of those still remaining in Cuba and those who had been exiled, or had chosen to live outside of Cuba. The island was in a state of transition, flux, and unrest at every level of communal life: political, social, cultural and familial. As in other parts of Latin America, many intellectuals had embraced positivism and its rejection of religion and philosophy in favor of science in the service of pragmatism,[6] but small groups of intellectuals and especially artists embraced other innovative ways of moving into modernity

In the 1890's, the connection of Cuba to Spain was still strong, but was now resistant to the Peninsula's intellectual tradition and looking for other sources of cultural models and 'authority.' The overarching question in Cuban life at the time can be said to be constituted by the issue of national identity: continue to be a colony, with increased autonomous powers, or cut loose from Spain altogether and become independent? And what would/should an independent Cuba(n) be like? Inspired by the intellectual leadership of the expatriate Cuban José Martí, a new revolution was initiated in February 1895. Although by 1897 Spain considered that the insurrection had been brought under control and the streets were once again busy with traffic and the parks filled with people, resistance continued 'underground,' especially in the countryside (Barcia Z. 2000, 5). At the end of 1897 and the beginning of '98 there were riots in various major city centers, newspaper offices were attacked and burned (Barcia Z. 2000, 57-58). And there were many deaths, including those of numerous children; typhus, tuberculosis, anaemia and other sicknesses were rampant, and hunger and prostitution were pervasive problems. The *reconcentración* practiced by the Spanish military rule (which involved the removal of country people to other areas, isolating them in order to prevent their assisting the rebels) affected some 200,000 persons (Barcia Z. 2000, 12). Because of censorship, newspapers generally only referred to these incidents and conditions peripherally

[6] Positivism—best known through its French origins—is one of the most important trends to flourish in nineteenth-century Latin American thought. It denied the validity of religious and philosophical thought in favor of empirical science as the only source of "positive" knowledge, through the experience of the senses and observation of natural phenomena, and hoped to transform society by applying scientific principles.

and through euphemisms. Freedom of the press was severely restricted, and emigration was massive, especially among the well-to-do and intelligentsia, resulting in fewer opportunities for artistic and intellectual endeavors.

Few women took public/published stands on the political issues, whether they favored annexation to the U.S., autonomy from Spain as part of a 'commonwealth'-type structure, or outright independence. A number of Cuban women did write of their historical situation, but mostly in a traditional manner.[7] Two of the three women I consider to be modernista did not travel outside Cuba, but they were evidently concerned with the circumstances of their *patria*—however defined. As they started inserting themselves as active participants into their own contemporary history, Cuban women who wrote on these public issues entered a new space. In effect, they made their own space in this history, different from that of men who wrote about their times. Thus, women contributed to the intellectual environment and began modernizing gender practices in several ways.[8]

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[7] It should be noted that Cuban women were active in war-related efforts: Aurelia Castillo de González (and later María Luisa Dolz) was director of the Asilo de Huérfanos de la Patria in 1898-99, and was involved in soliciting funds for same (Vinat de la Mata 2001, 25 and 118). Concepción Boloña (pseudonym "Coralia") donated 20% of the proceeds of the sale of her book *La mujer cubana* to the Asilo (*ibid.*). Lola Rodríguez de Tió spoke in the Club Emilio Núñez, with Maceo, Martina Pierra de Poo and Esteban Borrero (Juana's father, a poet himself) (Vinat de la Mata 2001, 76). On the other hand, women's clubs in exile (there were about 85 of these [González Pagés 2003, 37], especially in New York and Miami) allowed women there to participate in (semi-) public spaces where the future of Cuba was being debated. Where other cities in America experienced phenomenal growth at the end of the nineteenth century, Havana suffered a loss of population—as did the rest of Cuba—as a result of the war, decreasing by 28,000 in 12 years, to 424,000 in 1899 from 452,000 in 1887 (Vinat de la Mata 2001, Annex I). As a point of interest, we note that Spain in the 1890's was beset by anarchism: in 1892-93 more than 20,000 people were arrested in preventive measures re anarchist trials, and in Latin America the First International emerged in late 19th century, including the Caribbean (Zavala 1992, 111-112).

[8] Aurelia Castillo de González, for example, contemporary with Xenes, Matamoros and Borrero, was innovative in other ways: her travels and published records of these visits to the 1889 Paris and 1893 Chicago World Exhibitions, and to Mexico in 1893, are also innovative for women of the time

It is interesting to consider that men of different political, intellectual and artistic persuasion collaborated together in intellectual ventures such as *tertulias, academias*, magazines and other publications. Many of the publication venues were eclectic in the sense that they dealt with politics and art, society and discourse, as a concrete manifestation of the idea that all these aspects together make up a culture. Cuba was, in fact, a heterogeneous, diverse, productive, contradictory, 'gap' itself, a dynamic manifestation of difference in which innovation struggled with tradition. José Martí's poetry—tending towards the national, the political, the American and the universal—and Julián del Casal's—concentrating on Beauty, urbanism and the exotic—exemplify the main tendencies of modernismo as it expanded throughout Spanish America.

Both the (positivist) traditionalist Enrique José Enrique Varona and the (positivist) progressive Aurelia Castillo de González claim that feminism was not active in Cuba towards the end of the nineteenth century (Castillo [1895], 1913-1918, vol. I, 173-182). This study will show, in part, that a few Cuban women writing modernismo do, indeed, bring feminism to the island, by breaking with the traditional patriarchal past and promoting women's perspectives and expression. It was a small group of women poets who took advantage of, or produced, a gap that allowed for innovation, allowed for *women's* voices to be heard and for *women's* perspectives to be focused on *women's* concerns. A number of poems very evidently manifest this female voice-as-gap. The 'presence' of this 'gap,' a textual strategy characterized by absence, and by which women express their view on their contemporary history, on women's bodies and on passion, but in which their voices are not present directly, will be fully explored in **Chapter II.** Where women did speak in their own voice, and on topics generally considered to be modernista—and feminine—such as art, love and beauty, they did so from a still perceptibly different space or position than other (male) modernistas. Again, they operate in a signifying space that was different from the canonized (male) poets of modernismo. Thus, in **Chapter III** the

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(see Vallejo 2004). I have not included her as modernista since she does lack the interest in discursive innovation and difference.

discussion will center on the body as *objet d'art*, on a new way of writing the *blasón* portrait,[9] and of the consciousness women acquired of a way to express the needs of their own bodies, of women as the subject of enunciation. In every one of these aspects there is innovation, rupture with the past, and a consciousness of style—all characteristics defined as modernista.

To conclude, **Chapter IV** will briefly explore how women writers have fared in the modernista canon. From their evident absence, and after examining texts by a number of women, it should be clear that the time to recognize women modernista poets has come; let us open a space for them in the canon according to modernismo's own episteme, and renovate, reform the long-immobile list of male-authored texts which has set the complexities and riches of the period—especially as it refers to gender—into parameters long accepted and now seemingly unchangeable. The signifier 'woman' must be restored to heterogeneity, her expression as innovative should be accepted, and allow for modernismo to be truly seen as "toda una época de revalorización, transformación y reforma" (Schulman 1968, 48n), a *revaloración. . . toda* which should also include both genders.

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In the long preparation of this book I have had much support. Concordia University provided an initial grant to begin preliminary research and has always provided material and resources. The Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council granted a large award that allowed me to travel to be able to accomplish the necessary archival research and to employ a number of research assistants. To these, a succession of my students, I especially extend many thanks for their unfailing promptness to fill myriad requests for material, photocopies and proofreading. Especially involved in this project were Yuzo Otani (early bibliographic searches), Ana-Maria Kerekes (search and

[9] The *blasón* was a recognized form of poetry starting during the Middle Ages, in which the elements of a woman's body (eyes, ears, cheeks, mouth, neck hands, waist, feet, etc.) were described in metaphor or simile. The form persisted and was popular again during Romanticism.

copying of material) and Yazmet Madariaga (proofreading and bibliography). Students in my classes have also been invaluable through their continued curious and intelligent questioning of modernismo and of my proposals. Among my colleagues I especially wish to thank Bradley Nelson who helped out with ideas on theory, and saved me from falling into too many contradictions myself. Concordia University's Interlibrary Loans office and its personnel once again deserve my gratitude for always coming up with the right document from somewhere obscure.

To all those in Havana, at *Casa de las Américas* and the *Programa de Estudios de la Mujer* (and in particular its director, my friend and colleague Luisa Campuzano), the *Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística,* the *Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* (and especially those in the *Sala Cubana*), without whom this book could not have been written—*¡un millón de gracias!* Parts of earlier versions of some sections of this book have previously appeared in publications; all of these have been reworked substantially (see Bibliography, Vallejo 2002, 2007a and 2007b).

Finally, but most of all, I thank my husband Dr. Rafael Horacio Vallejo, for his long and continued support of my academic activities, which so often have taken time away from our life together and yet have constituted much of this togetherness.

CHAPTER I. ABSENCE. "THE TIME…." MODERNISMO AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

> The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Karl Marx
>
> It is not without irony that the literary movement so often acclaimed as the first concerted reflection on Latin-American cultural identity—…—should have excluded women. Sylvia Molloy
>
> Modernismo was "a literary men's club"
> Nancy Saporta Sternbach[10]

Tradition, built on practices and documentary history, constitutes a legitimating factor of cultural values; it is a bearer of meaning and sets the parameters to understand the present. By agreeing for almost a century that modernismo is one of Spanish America's important intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century, critics have established the movement as a key cultural era in the region's long road to modernity. Debates in the contemporaneous press indicate a clear conscience on the part of intellectuals about the presence in Hispanic culture of different perspectives on life and art, and abound with discussions on the importance, the differences, the characteristics, and the merits of positivism, symbolism, decadentism, naturalism, exoticism, and even the English Pre-Raphaelism—all often tinged with moralistic evaluations. By 1896 "modernismo" was well-known and classified as a literary tendency,[11] and it should thus be seen in a wide context, as a

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[10] Sylvia Molloy 1991, 109; Karl Marx (1852) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon.* www.marxists/org/archive/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01; Nancy Saporta Sternbach 1988, 53.

[11] In Cuba, the periodicals *El Fígaro*, *La Habana Elegante*, *La Habana Literaria*, *La Revista Cubana, La Ilustración de Cuba* and others, in addition to promoting the local talent, all printed poems by what are now known modernista authors—canonical and marginal—from Spanish America, and who by 1895 were identified as modernistas. Besides Silva and Darío, they included Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Dario Herrera, José Santos Chocano, Manuel

rebellious cultural component in the midst of growing scientism and lingering Romanticism, during the period of transition in the desire towards modernity, fully assumed by Latin-American avantgarde artists later in the twentieth century. Modernismo's main features can be said to be the following (and see Gutiérrez Girardot, Jrade, Schulman, Zavala and others for more complete descriptions): Interested in the renovation (modernization) of culture and linguistic expression against tradition, modernismo's roots sprang from European and North American artistic tendencies and intellectual figures, such as French Symbolism and Parnassianism, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, distancing itself from contemporary Spanish peninsular influences in its continuous search for a Spanish-American identity. It was characterized by its use of colors, gems, light, musicality of form, the search for the exact word in a given context (*le mot juste*), and its distancing from materialism towards exoticism and dreamworlds with idealized landscapes and figures. Inextricably related to the new conception of the world (particularly and specifically with respect to time, space, bodies, and subject), there was a renovation in the representation and artistic creation of this world. The "fantasy-loaded rustle of modernist language"—swans, princesses, minotaurs and centaurs—helped redefine a family of concepts: self, speaker, nation, independence, liberation, future frontiers (Zavala 1992, 195). This reactualized language was used to map new social, political, and cultural values, as the modernizing spirit of modernismo went beyond literature and art in its conflictual relationship with the bourgeoisie and with capitalism.[12] The representation of the female was an important part of this process of renovation and included the secularization and stylization of the body in artistic representations, fashion and marketing for the female body, its transitory and fragile nature—all seen from the dominant perspective, which though still masculine, was now in constant flux.

Gutiérrez Nájera, José María Vargas Vila and others, as well as French symbolist poets.

[12] At this point it might not be amiss to remember that the 'natural' and accepted status of the "deber ser" of women was their submissiveness to men, still emphasized in all conduct manuals and educational material of the era.

These components have been recognized by modernista historiography. However, literary critics have not taken the next step beyond the 'representation' of women to include writerly agency as part of the innovative practices that were taking place at all levels of culture and society. Women have been seen only as 'subject to' (i.e. object of), and not as themselves 'subjects of,' or agents participating in the process. All these factors are interrelated in diverse ways, and have only now become visible to us from a distantly temporal perspective that should offer a broader outlook. Sylvia Molloy's words quoted at the head of this chapter sum up the impulse, foundation, and refutation this book hopes to provide: to show that there were, indeed, women writing in modernismo from its beginnings.

As a protest discourse against the dominance of reason, materialism and imperialism that emerged during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, modernismo originated in the Caribbean, especially in Cuba, Colombia and Nicaragua, gaining in strength with the Cuban-Spanish-U.S. war around 1898, and counting José Martí (1853-1895) and Julián del Casal (1853-1893) in Cuba, Rubén Darío (1867-1915) in Nicaragua, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895) in Mexico and José Asunción Silva (1865-1896) in Colombia among its early practitioners, now all canonized—a process which is itself essentially masculine.[13] Iris Zavala reminds us that at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the most important periodicals included poetry, short stories and translations written by women, and mentions the following: Adela Zamudio (Bolivia), Esther Lucila Vázquez, Juana Borrero, Mercedes Matamoros, Emilia Villar Buceta (all Cuban), Laura Méndez de Cuenca, María Enriqueta Camarillo, Gertrudis Tenorio Zavala (all Mexican), Clorinda Matto de Turner (from Peru), and Carmela

[13] There is no woman from Nicaragua or Colombia currently known to have produced modernista texts. Rafaela Contreras from Costa Rica (and first wife of Rubén Darío), is yet another forgotten writer; her works will be referred to in this volume. Several women were active writers in Colombia at the time, among them the prolific Soledad Acosta de Samper (1833-1913). This writer, however, clearly favored positivism; she wrote a large number of narratives and essays but, as far as is currently known, produced no poetry. One of the generally unacknowledged precursors was Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who in several of her poems shows modernista traits.