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# Writing the Nation: Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos

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A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded, which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."

Mexico entered the twentieth century in a state of revolution. This revolution came about primarily as a result of the desire to change the oppressive, dictatorial regime. A series of reforms were on the horizon and a new nation was to emerge. This meant that Mexico was faced with the task of redefining its nationalism. During the years 1920 to 1940, communism and art were to form the ideological basis of a rebirth of nationalism. It was during these years that "lo mexicano" became associated with the idea of nationalism. In all artistic modes of expression surfaced the conscious and explicit desire to find the proper, distinctive and unmistakable forms of being and appearing from a country which vigorously initiated the process of integrating its people. The plastic arts were the first ones to achieve the fullness of these purposes. The color and figure of the Mexican circumstances began to enrich Mexican patrimony (Castellanos, "La novela" 224). The arts appropriated the term "lo mexicano," stressing the native quality of Mexican painting and the treat-

ment of national issues in literature. But the concept of "lo mexicano" resisted the siege of the philosophers who were trying to reach a definition on the level of clear and distinct notions, Mexican existence, peculiar Mexican conception of the world, and Mexican original behavior (Castellanos, "la novela" 223). In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, Mexico was "writing a nation." The question, however, arises of who precisely was "writing the nation"? Antonio Caso, Manuel Gamio, Alfonso Reyes, José Vasconcelos, and the muralists constituted the 'master narrative' which in its various forms redefined Mexico. Unfortunately, the Indians and the women of the Mexican society remained marginal in their position of contributing to this "writing of the nation."

This study intends to demonstrate the process through which both Rosario Castellanos in her work *Balún Canán* and Frida Kahlo in some of her self-portraits try to redefine the nation from a counter-narrative point of departure, representing the "other" in the Mexico of José Vasconcelos and Lázaro Cárdenas. Through art and its language of self-representation of women, also the *other*, these two women artists substantially contribute to the "writing of a nation." Our first task is to discuss Homi Bhabha's theory concerning the "writing of a nation" and what its counter-narratives entail. We will then illustrate how both Frida and Rosario Castellanos participate in this process.

Homi K. Bhabha establishes nationness as a form of social and textual affiliation. The immanent "subjects" and "objects" of social and literary narratives (including plastic arts)

are created by the complex strategies of cultural identification and discourse that function in the name of "the people" or "nation."

The people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing a nation*. (Bhabha 297)

In other words, the nationalist discourse is forced to convert the people into historical "objects" in order to validate their common origin and thus the subsequent need to group them as a nation. But at the same time, the nationalist discourse must pertain to the present situation, creating an image of continuity and progress. In this discourse the people become active "subjects," and

their everyday life becomes a sign of a national culture. This dichotomy of "object" and "subject" consequently creates that split in the narration of a nation. On the one hand the people are being referred to as historical objects, but on the other hand they are to constitute the subjects of the new imagining of a nation. In the specific case of Mexico, Bhabha's theory is most clearly manifested in the murals, the signs of national culture, where the pre-Columbian figures represent the people as historical "objects" and the modern *mestizo* represents the people as "subjects" of the new identity.

But according to Jean Franco:

Rivera's mural is not only a social message but also a male polygamous fantasy, which objectified his different and conflicting representation of women. The fact that Diego was a revolutionary and was presumably representing an advanced political position makes the fantasy all the more interesting. (106)

Women are hence left out of the true national discourse. In juxtaposition to this male dominated master-narrative we encounter the counter-narrative, which in terms of Bhabha continually evokes and erases the totalizing boundaries, both actual and conceptual, and disturbs those "ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha 300). The master-narrative creates a nation, which creates within its boundaries internal marginality that

provides a place from which to speak of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent . . . . The nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homog-

enized in the 'horizontal' view of society. The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference. (Bhabha 300)

So when the "subject" narrates itself, in this case herself, a new narrative emerges and subsequently, because of its veracity that can not be equated by the master-narrative that treats her as "object," the position of male dominated narrative control is contested. This narrative splitting of the subject is an essential part of the ethnographic act, where ideally the narrating "subject" should also be the "object" of its narration.

When we incorporate women into the process of "writing a nation," they, then, fulfill the ethnographic historicity in terms of gender through self-representation. Only as women can they observe women and at the same time be part of their observation; they possess the knowledge of the total social fact. But in the specific case of Mexico we must not ignore one essential place of the woman throughout history, the place of the "Malinche." The myth of the "Malinche," similar to the Eve myth, is that of the woman who betrayed her people and thus is made responsible for the bastardization of the Mexicans and their subsequent identity crisis. How then can a woman have an active place in the creation of "lo mexicano"? According to Octavio Paz the woman in Mexican society is considered an instrument not only of the male desire, but also of the roles assigned by law, society and morality. Roles, to which she never consented, but which she passively fulfills.

Prostituta, diosa, gran señora,  
amante, la mujer trasmite o  
conserva, pero no crea, los valores  
y energías que le confían la

naturaleza o la sociedad. En un mundo hecho a la imagen de los hombres, la mujer es sólo un reflejo de la voluntad y querer masculinos. (Paz 32)

It is more than evident that in a patriarchal system like Mexico's the woman's voice is silenced. Albeit, some women artists have been able to find, even if only on a small scale, an audience for their voice. In order to construct a feminine voice which is not instantly equated to the "Malinche," these women artists had to recreate the self by deconstructing the master-narrative, thereby demystifying the "Malinche" myth. Through self-representation, the process by which subjects produce themselves as women within a particular discursive context, women still remain marginal, since only the masculine construct of Woman gives her a central space. The next step is then the implementation of double voice discourse or inversion of the existing patriarchal system of discourse in order to obtain power. Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* calls this entire process the exercising of "subjugative" knowledge, thus creating a power/knowledge discourse.

Both Frida Kahlo in her self-portraits and Rosario Castellanos in *Balún Canán* place themselves in their works, although in the latter's case the self is still a child. Thus both women were confined to "forging an identity in some space that was outside history and the nation" (Franco 105).

To be 'inside' hegemonic representation of gender means to be framed within/by the sexual difference—that is, Woman's difference from Man. To be 'outside,' does not mean to occupy a space that is somehow 'objective,' free from ideology; rather, it means to occupy, self-consciously and critically, a position

of marginality that enables women's self-representation. (Robinson 19)

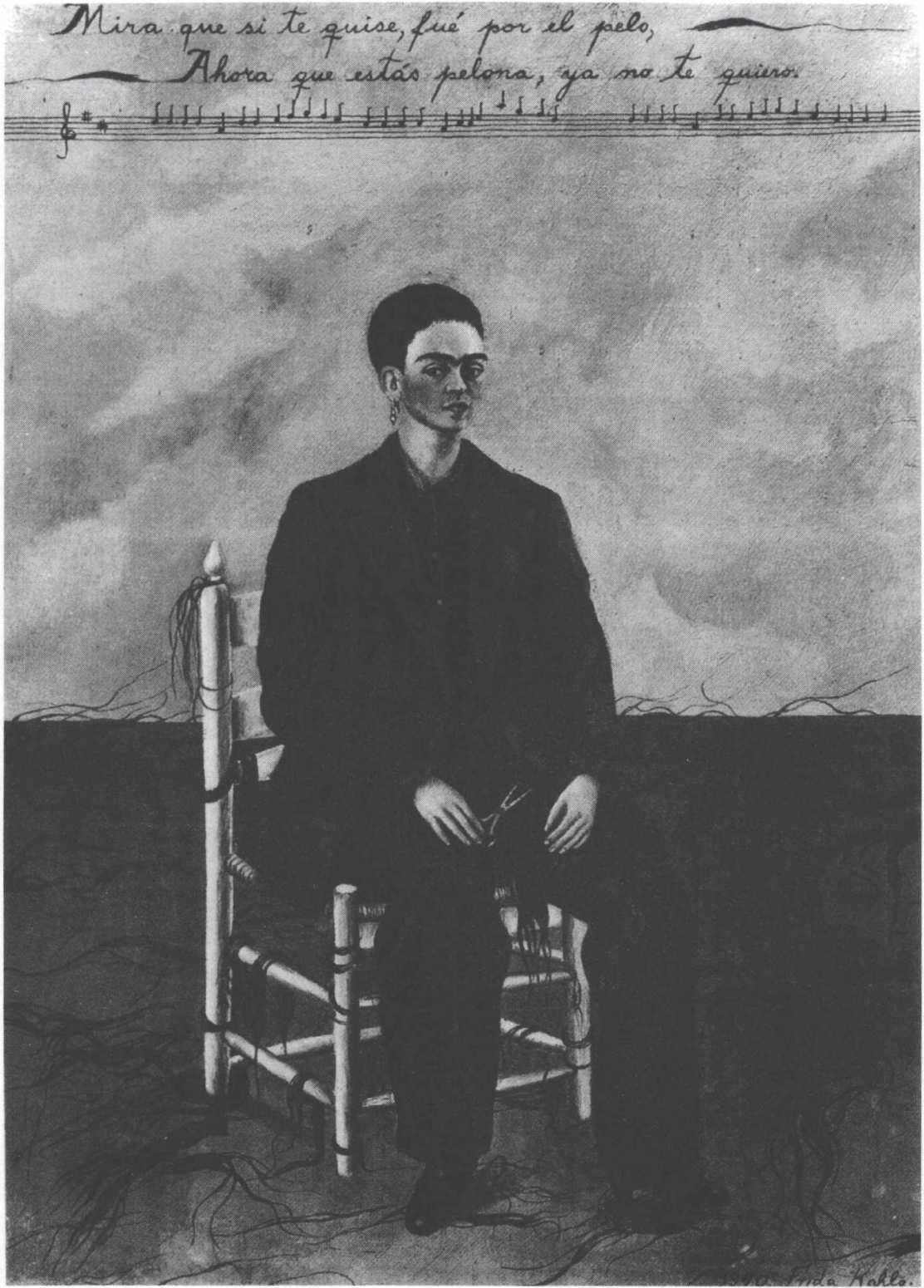
Let us now turn to the specific works of Frida Kahlo. The self-portraits discussed are *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States* (1932), *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), and *The Two Fridas* (1939). The first work reveals an attempt to appropriate the master-narrative, the mural art in this case, manipulating it in order to give it discursive power. The painting itself has by no means the dimensions of a mural but the division of space is very similar. Kahlo paints a microcosm including herself in the center. This is significant because she is basing her artistic discourse on the masculine representation of woman, which converts woman into the aesthetic object placing her in the center. Frida inverts this patriarchal representation, however, by mocking it:

But this is precisely where Kahlo's motive lies: she reinvents history painting as she parodies Rivera's mural. She reduces Rivera's grand symbolism into distilled opposites, thus intensifying the message. (Lowe 43)

It must be remembered that the representation of woman in the aesthetic realm did not intend to produce knowledge of woman herself, rather its goal is to project her as an aesthetic object *per se*. Again, self-representation and the exercising of "subjugative" knowledge by means of manipulation of the masculine discourse, creates the counter-narrative which subverts these principles. Frida portrays herself at first glance as a Mexican doll, dressed in a traditional confirmation dress but instead of a fan, the required accouterment of a lady, she holds a cigarette, a symbol of masculinity. It must be noted that the fact that she appears as a doll, creating a stiff surface for the male

projection of his fantasies, protests the traditional function of the woman as aesthetic object. Kahlo does not only manifest the new image of women in opposition to woman as a mere art object, she also makes very concrete political statements. Using the division of space and the imagery of the mural art, she manifests her apprehension toward American imperialism. The skyscrapers, the Ford factory's smokestacks, the American flag forming out of its smoke and the androgynous machines dominate the space of the present 'imagining' of nation in which they present a threatening image of an impersonal mechanical future and the possibility of American imperialism. The master-narrative could not envision these reservations. After all, Rivera's mural depicts the positive aspects of industrialization and furthermore the example of the American worker as the new hero.

The *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (reproduced on page 59) is consciously rooted in the "retablo" or ex-voto tradition. The space dedicated on each "retablo" to the inscription giving thanks to a patron saint or Virgin for a miracle, constitutes the narrative space that Frida allocates to herself in her paintings. Although her pictures alone are extremely expressive, the added narrative, often only one short sentence, contributes immensely to the inversion process of the master-narrative. This can be seen in the following self-portrait. The inscription "Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo, / Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero" intensifies the challenging message. Frida's image inverts the traditional expectations of the woman as art object. Where is the dress? What happened to the long hair and the lady-like appearance? Kahlo confronts the traditional *appréciateur* subverting the construct of a female self by using masculine attributes in her self-representation. Wearing a suit, sitting not very lady-like, and holding, not a fan, but a pair of scissors, Frida has contested all those social signs which gender-define the woman in society. The lines from a



Frida Kahlo. *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*.

popular song that fill the narrative space underline the fact that the image of the feminine is a male construct of woman and any resistance or failure to comply is rewarded with rejection on the part of the male. The force of the protest is partly due to the fact that Frida is holding the scissors, meaning that she cut her hair, therefore actively initiating the deconstruction of the male cultural definition of femininity. Finally, Frida usually depicts her face bringing out the masculine traits, such as her heavy eyebrows, her slight mustache and her rather harsh stare. In this particular portrait, it appears as though in contrast to her male disguise, her face lacks the usual harshness and the exposure of an earring interrupts the creation of the complete male image. The constant manipulation of the masculine discourse undermines the traditional object position that woman occupies: "she is a fetish, a foil, the exotic/erotic object awaiting the hero at the end of his quest, but never a subject" (Robinson 22).

As Walter Benjamin shows in *Illuminations*, art through its aura essentially contributes to the self-understanding and self-experience of the individual when his 'free floating contemplation' has been triggered by the art object. The self experienced in the realm of art is of course that of the male subject, while the auratic woman is its necessary object (Rauch 79). This self-understanding and self-experience is shattered when the onlooker is suddenly faced with a mirror image, that is to say, masculine signs rather than the expected feminine ones. Frida, as has become obvious, in her "writing a nation" manages to create a new space for woman not only in art but also in society and politics.

As a final example of the usage of inversion, *The Two Fridas* (1939) projects an interesting and possibly even more revolutionary image of woman. Luce Irigaray, among others, has thematized this aesthetic tradition as bearing the historical conditions for the "anorganic" body of woman. A

body without organs is a dead body, which only functions as an image, a projection of male fantasies. In avant garde art the female body is disfigured with an emphasis on the body's *parts* in order to focus attention on the female body as matrix in the production of meaning. This is not to say that woman no longer occupies the object position; she serves as a dead body in the representational system and as a reminder of the myth of wholeness and the transcendental that is embedded in the experience of subjectivity in the aesthetic realm (Rauch 80). *The Two Fridas* openly counters the dead body representation by superimposing the heart, the most vital organ that ensures life, on both self-representations. The two images of Frida share one and the same circulatory system, they share the experience of life as all women share the feminine experience. Furthermore, the different costumes, one being a traditional Victorian dress and the other a Tehuana skirt, transmit a socio-political message. Logically, the two Fridas could not exist in the same space. As representatives, however, of the Spanish/"mestizo" on the one hand and the Indian on the other, they are together in solidarity. Subsequently, as the *other*, the woman regardless of race shares the same marginal space. For Frida's "imagining" there is no doubt that the "mestizo" and the Indian are equal and should both occupy the same central position. This work is explicitly an example of "writing a nation." It is again a protest against the role of the woman in art and in society, never stopping to identify the Indian marginal position with that of the women.

In view of the analysis of these three self-representations, it has become unquestionable that Frida Kahlo through her openly disputed and rejected masculine discourse invented a new space for the *other* in her contribution to "writing the nation."

Rosario Castellanos, herself, states that the Mexican novel has been a useful instrument to capture the Mexican reality and to

express it, conferring it sense and perdurability (Castellanos, "La novela" 223). *Balún Canán* is Rosario Castellanos' first novel, published in 1957. By this time, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes had already achieved recognition and received critical attention, thus constituting the next generation of the master-narrative. Her work, in contrast, has been considered marginal by the patriarchy and therefore its complexity and valuable contribution of "signs of culture" have been virtually overlooked. The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of the oppression of the Indian by the "ladinos." In our analysis we will point to the focus and attention given to the Indian, but more importantly we will expose the ingenious usage of double voice discourse and inversion, constituting the necessary tools to create a power discourse. This novel, like many of Castellanos' works, is in some form or another a self-representation. Castellanos is known to have continued to play with the art of self-representation in Mexico in her later works. This, then, is her first attempt, and the form of representation she chooses is herself as a child, the narrator of the first and last part of the novel. This girl occupies "the opposite pole of power to such protagonists as Pedro Páramo or Artemio Cruz" (Cypess 4). What kind of authority does that imply for the narration of the girl speaker/narrator? The opening of the text already introduces the work's *leitmotif*, the concept of discourse as power and consequently silence as retreat. The opening words, however, are not uttered by the girl narrator but by her "nana":

-. . . Y entonces, coléricos, nos desposeyeron, nos arrebataron lo que habíamos atesorado: la palabra, que es el arca de la memoria . . . .

- No me cuentes ese cuento, nana.

-¿Acaso hablaba contigo? ¿Acaso se habla con los granos de anís?

No soy un grano de anís. Soy una niña y tengo siete años. (9)

The word is not only power, it also constitutes memory and thus history. We are instantly made aware of the struggle to obtain a voice. The nana has been deprived of the word, not only by the patriarchy, but also by the girl that competes with her nana to tell the story.

The thematic aspect central in this novel is the discourse relationship between unequals. Even in its own creative process, the novel intends to go against the patriarchal hierarchy that establishes this structure of unequals. The act of speaking, the actual possession of language and the receiving of what is spoken, are key factors in the construct of a power system. Since Castellanos is speaking about herself, her childhood which constitutes her as an adult, she is in some way confessing her inner truths to us the readers.

En México no se considera el confesarse acción de hombres. Se da por sentado que sólo las mujeres se entregan. Los que se abren son cobardes. El mexicano puede doblarse, humillarse, 'agacharse,' pero no 'rajarse,' esto es, permitir que el mundo exterior penetre en su intimidad . . . Las mujeres son las inferiores porque al entregarse, se abren. Su inferioridad es constitucional y radica en su sexo, en su 'rajada,' herida que jamás cicatriza. (Paz 26-27)

According to Octavio Paz, the woman in Mexican society is the only one capable of confession, but it is precisely that fact that makes her suspicious and a traitor in the eyes of the male dominated society. The woman can confess her sins and those committed around her, she can more objectively portray the oppressed since she is an oppressed



herself. But the average reader, conditioned by the system, instinctively considers a novel with a girl narrator "women's literature"; dealing with the childhood memories of a woman, an abundant theme in literature written by and for women. After all, a seven year old girl, twice marginalized as female and child, has no authoritative voice, certainly not in a male dominated society. Castellanos, then, by using a girl narrator as her spokesperson, heavily undermines the master-narrative. Nonetheless, a mere inversion, although it breaks with tradition, does not attach power to the discourse, thus failing to guarantee a serious reception on the part of the readership.

It is not until the reader encounters a rupture in the first person narrative voice (the second part of the novel without previous mentioning is told by a traditional third-person, omniscient narrator) that the overall authority gets established. As stated by the subtitle of the second part, "Esto es lo que se recuerda de aquellos días," an authoritative voice tells the memory, the history, of those days. Due to this sudden change of narrator, the reader finds him/herself distanced. As the narration of the second part continues, the reader is again brought back to the text, being able to follow the "his-story" of the family. This is a classic method of breaking the catharsis, hence bringing forth a more critical and serious reading. More important still is the fact that this new narrative voice is an authoritative one, which lends veracity to the entire work.

The text establishes a series of oppressor-oppressed relationships including the "ladino"-Indian, man-woman, parent-child, brother-sister and Spanish speaker-Tzeltal speaker struggle. The current oppression of the Indians is the result of the fact that they were defeated by the Conquerors and "their word was taken from them." Again, the lack of a voice, silence, is symbolic of retreat, oppression and marginality:

To have the right to use language not only enables you to impose your will on someone else: by directing your words to someone, you enter into discourse and signify your own identity and your independent existence. (Cypess 7)

Overall the novel is an attack on Mexican society and its clearly delineated power relationships. Again it is important to stress the fact that the first and third part of the novel are narrated by a representative of the marginal, oppressed group, conveying in this fashion the "subjugative" knowledge and consequently creating a knowledge/power discourse. This discourse is only a power discourse extrinsically, not however, intrinsically, where the struggle continues. "The structure fits precisely the meaning of the novel, and can be read as a signifier of the restrictive social arrangements signified in the text" (Cypess 6). Through its formal setup, then, the novel demonstrates the inequality of the social structure of Mexico which the class in power wants to maintain at all cost. The proper reading of this novel will allow Castellanos' social protest to surface.

There are various concrete examples in the text illustrating the marginal space assigned to women. The narrator's name is never given, whereas her brother, *hijo varón*, is specifically identified on the first page as Mario. This superior treatment of Mario is explicit throughout the work, and it is this treatment that causes the girl narrator to attempt to assert her own superiority. As older sibling she feels she should have authority over her younger brother:

Y a mi hermano lo miro de arriba abajo. Porque nació después de mí y, cuando nació, yo ya sabía muchas cosas que ahora le explico minuciosamente. . . . Mario se

queda viéndome como si el mérito no me correspondiera y alza los hombros con gesto de indiferencia. La rabia me sofoca. Una vez más cae sobre mí todo el peso de la injusticia. (9-10)

A further example of male dominance, and this is crucial to our study, is the scene where the girl is punished for having read the family history, always considered exclusively a male discourse. Her mother, who has accepted the submissive role designated to women, denies her access to the male dominant discourse. "No juegues con esas cosas. . . Son la herencia de Mario. Del varón" (60). Furthermore, it becomes apparent that the family history is in part made up of the Indian tribe's previous generations of "writing the nation." The opening words are: "Yo soy el hermano mayor de su tribu. Su memoria" (57). The girl narrator has managed to find access to the forbidden history not only by writing/telling her own but also by reading, therefore uttering, the tribe's history. Since history is a form of establishing tradition, women have to break the course of tradition to find a space in "writing the nation." If women have no access to history, how then can they contribute to "writing the nation"?

If we take the girl to be a representation of the self as a child, then we must relate the external structure of the novel to this quest for a voice that originates in childhood:

Las mujeres necesitan construir su propia imagen, redactar el alegato de la defensa, exhibir la prueba del descargo, hacer un testamento a la posteridad (para darle lo que se tuvo pero ante todo para hacer constar aquello de lo que se careció). (Salgado 66)

Rosario Castellanos as a woman and thus as the *other*, has found a way to create a counter

narrative and, through inversion, a power discourse. Due to the narrative inversion, bringing in an authoritative voice, the author has been able to construct a serious text, which in its entirety constitutes a rather harsh criticism of the male dominated power system of Mexico. Castellanos views with hesitation the so-called land reforms of Cárdenas, presenting them in their real context as a power struggle. The position of women in society on paper had improved, but again theory and practice did not seem to coincide. Most importantly, Castellanos gives us an example of the failure of the master-narrative's "writing a nation." At the end of the novel, one essential element required for the site of "writing a nation" is eliminated. Through the death of Mario there no longer exists the continuous, repetitive element, putting an inevitable end to the master-narrative and patriarchal tradition. Thus on another level it has been the daughter, the female, that has added to the family history, that has contributed to the "writing of a nation" but from a marginal, counter-narrative position. Castellanos has left us her testimony/confession, always very much aware of the patriarchal elements still needed in her writing to lend it authority.

Cuando llegué a la casa busqué un lápiz. Y con mi letra inhábil, torpe, fui escribiendo el nombre de Mario. Mario, en los ladrillos del jardín. Mario en las paredes del corredor. Mario en las páginas de mis cuadernos. (291)

Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos both came up against the fact that there could be no liberation within the symbolic order in which woman always represented the fictional *other*. Both were painfully aware of the fact that the master-narrative had to be used, since there does not exist a feminine narrative *per se*. Frida contested the male

depiction of woman as a dead body, a mere aesthetic object, and Castellanos exposed the power discourse hierarchy which rules her country and deprives the oppressed of their language. Using the tools of masculine discourse and then inverting them, these women denounced the one-sidedness of the "writing a nation," the lack of hegemonic representation. Rosario Castellanos and Frida Kahlo implemented the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation of the reader in order to break catharsis and thus transform the reader into a "social critic," hoping in this way to counter the male dominated "imagined community." Sadly, neither of them accomplished the ultimate goal of creating a stable space that is no longer in the margins for women and consequently for the *other*. Still, we can not ignore the valuable contributions both of these women made to the understanding of women's self-representation and the precedent they set for the use of counter-narrative as a means of fighting for a voice in a still male dominated world.

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