

“El hilo de la comunicación: Seventy Years of Women Writing in Venezuela”

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Abstract

This paper expands upon Yolanda Pantin and Ana Teresa Torres' notion of an "hilo de la voz" that runs through women's writing in Venezuela. Beginning with Enriqueta Arvelo Larriva, a thread of not only voice, but multi-faceted communication between women writers can be traced from the 1930's until the present day. Through an intentional, collective effort, female authors in Venezuela have used literature, and the spaces provided by the practice of literature to further the process of re-creating the feminine image, fostering intellectual activity through generations of women.

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My mother grew up in rural Ohio and is a woman of many talents. When I was a girl, she taught me to embroider and to sew. While my life now allows me little time to keep up the art of embroidery, I still remember all of the different kind of stitches. French dots to create small knots for eyes or the centers of flowers, satin stitches to create the appearance of smooth surfaces, and chain stitches to create long, seamless lines of thread across the fabric. I was reminded of embroidery as I read Yolanda Pantin and Ana Teresa Torres' critical anthology of women's writing in Venezuela, titled *El hilo de la voz: Antología crítica de escritoras venezolanas del siglo XX*. Just as a chain stitch moves forward across the fabric only to return to pick up a bit of the past before moving forward again, so too do women writers in Venezuela continually reference and connect with those who came before them, creating a long, seamless thread of literary voice.

The metaphor not just of a thread of voice, but a thread that loops back and forth through a fabric of literature is particularly apt in the Venezuelan case, as what becomes clear within a detailed study of women's writing in the nation is a strong and long-running connection between generations of authors. Indeed, different from the traditions of women's literature in other parts of the world, the thread may actually be seen not only as a single strand embroidery floss, connecting each author to the next through the decades, but a whole piece of stitched work, a sampler with women making literary connections through and between generations.

Interestingly, these links between writers in the last seventy years stand in stark contrast to women's literary tradition in the Anglo-American setting. In 1985, feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar proposed what they saw as a "female affiliation complex" in women's writing which springs from a sense of deep ambivalence toward those women who had come

before.¹ Gilbert and Gubar argued that this ambivalence springs from a dual sense of pride in the achievements of literary grandmothers, but also deep-seated feelings of rivalry and anxiety as women compete for the few spaces available to them at the patriarchal table of the literary canon.² This condition can then be exacerbated as women seek to become “one of the boys” and establish their credentials by creating connections not with other women, but with men in the literary establishment, and by emulating male literary antecedents and contemporaries. Gilbert and Gubar take a Freudian view of this process, returning to the idea of women, as they mature, differentiating themselves from the maternal example and turning to the male example to follow.

As Jane Dowson more recently affirms, the complex in Anglo-American poetry has created a situation in which contemporary authors “rubbish” the work of those who came before them. Some of the modern examples that Dowson gives of the ways that women distance themselves from other women and downplay the achievements of others are: 1. the writing of negative and damaging reviews of the work of contemporaries, 2. the referral to predecessors in negative terms, 3. refusal to edit or be included in “women-only” anthologies, 4. the additional refusal to recognize the validity of a tradition of women’s writing, and 5. a general lack of desire on the part of older generations of authors to “project a benign gaze” on younger generations, much less associate with them.³

In this way, Dowson argues, “women poets continue to be homogenized and mythologized in ways which prejudice the perception and self-perception of poets.” She predicts that this will continue: “in the absence of positive role models, women in the twenty-first century will dissociate themselves from their twentieth-century predecessors in the same way that

women at the beginning of the century wrote in opposition to the derided nineteenth century poetesses.”⁴

Now, the limited utility of Anglo-American feminist theory in studying the Latin American literary experience for women is well established. I do not cite the ideas of Gilbert and Gubar, and the examples from Anglo-American literary tradition here to offer an example of the “standard” of women’s literary tradition. Rather, I find the concepts presented by those theorists useful in the way that they present a contrast to the Venezuelan example as I seek to describe it.

While the Venezuelan case may not prove the exact opposite of that predicted by Dowson in her essay, history suggests that the strong tradition of connections between female authors in Venezuela will prove significantly different than the Anglo-American case.

The ongoing network of ties in Venezuela is indeed, complex. (refer to handout- this is only a partial representation of the connections one can perceive through a review of the primary and secondary literature) Perhaps a logical place to start would be with the example of the previously mentioned poet and essayist, Yolanda Pantin. Pantin began writing in the early 1970’s and today is one of Venezuela’s most respected poets and an internationally recognized author and critic. As you can see, the connections Pantin has forged not only link her to her contemporaries, but also reach back to her literary grandmothers, including Enriqueta Arvelo Larriva and María Calcaño, and forward to a new generation of younger writers.

Let’s start by tracing the link to Enriqueta Arvelo Larriva. As early as the 1920’s, Arvelo Larriva also sought to reach out to other women both through her poetry and in her literary life.

Living outside the bright center of Caracas literary existence in the rural town Barinas, Arvelo Larriva wrote poetry that threw a barbarous voice out into the world.

Indeed, for women in Venezuela today, Arvelo Larriva continues to inspire for her famous call in her poem “El pugnante llamado”: “entremos en lo bárbaro con el paso sin miedo.”⁵ Within the poem, this is an invitation, a call in the first person plural to other women to join her quest to find a unique voice. Throughout the poem she uses both direct and indirect commands to communicate the urgency of the project and the firmness of her position as she seeks allies: “Desnudemos nuestras toldadas lámparas / e iluminemos parajes y conciencias”⁶

The struggle is not easy for Arvelo Larriva however, as other pieces of work show, time limits the examples I can give here, but her frustration shows in poems like “Suma de la voz aislada.”⁷ The effort remained, however.

Arvelo Larriva was hampered in her desire to find, in the words of the poem, “una voz compañera,” by her geographical isolation and the political instability in Venezuela.⁸ This did not, however, keep her from seeking and maintaining contact with women writers outside the nation. During her years in Barinas, Arvelo Larriva corresponded frequently with both Juana de Ibarbourou in and Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral in Chile.

Beyond this however, is Arvelo Larriva’s continuing importance to succeeding generations of Venezuelan writers. Returning to Yolanda Pantin, Arvelo Larriva has proven a foundational “grandmother” and her call to “entrar en lo bárbaro” has not gone unheeded. As Pantin notes in her essay on women’s writing in Venezuela titled, “Entrar en lo bábaro: Una lectura de la poesia venezolana escrita por mujeres,” “Cuando leo hacia atrás buscando razones,

sentido para lo que personalmente hago, veo alzarse vigorosas las figuras de dos disimiles poetas, Enriqueta Arvelo Larriva y María Calcaño.”⁹ This type of observation stands as significantly different from the Anglo-American experience. As Dowson recounts, in 1994 when a group of eight female British poets were asked to name their influences, three of the women cited only male poets, four cited only one woman and only one cited only women.

Pantin’s statement about her poetic influences forms part of an affirmative declaration that begins her essay: “Creo que este ensayo sobre poesía escrita por mujeres en mi país tiene sentido solamente en la medida que. . .soy continuadora de una tradición literaria que espero de alguna forma exponer ante Uds.”¹⁰ Again, for contrast, let’s look at that statement in comparison with one cited by Dowson from the British poet Anne Stevenson: “to hell with a conglomerate women’s tradition.”¹¹ The quote by the British poet, succinct and to the point stands in sharp contrast with what we know already about the example of Yolanda Pantin: her willingness to embrace the concept of a women’s literary tradition both overtly in the article and more subtly through inclusion in women-only anthologies,¹² through editing the previously mentioned women-only anthology together with contemporary novelist Ana Teresa Torres, and through further editorial work, which we will discuss in a moment.

Before moving forward, however, we would be remiss if we did not mention another key influence for Pantin and others in the genealogy of women’s literature: Antonia Palacios. Beginning her writing career in the 1940’s, Palacios was mainly self-taught, family circumstances prohibiting her formal education. In the early 1930’s, however, Palacios had the good fortune to meet several influential writers and intellectuals, including the leading journalist María Teresa Castillo. Castillo and others fostered Palacios’ hopes of becoming an author,

encouraging and mentoring her in her early career. Through the middle portion of the twentieth century, this support led Palacios to become one of Venezuela's most well-read and respected authors, both as a novelist and a poet.

By 1978, Palacios was ready to return the favor done for her in her early career. In 1978, she opened a *taller literario* at the *Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos*. In the great tradition of Venezuelan *talleres*, the workshop gave Palacios the opportunity to mentor young authors (both men and women) as she herself had received guidance in the past. The highly successful *taller* at the center then evolved into a literary group called *Calicanto* which met at Palacios' home. The group served as both a workshop and idea center for a whole new generation of writers, and published a journal *Hojas de Calicanto*, edited by Palacios herself.

While Palacios to this day is widely respected as an author (her novel *Ana Isabel, una niña decente* is considered a classic of the Venezuelan canon), she is also remembered and constantly referenced as a nurturing, guiding force in the lives of many women writers in Venezuela, including Elizabeth Schön, Elisa Lerner, and Yolanda Pantin- who was one of the first to pass through the *Calicanto* workshop. When I interviewed Pantin in Caracas for the first time, I remember that one thing she wanted to make very clear was the debt she owed to Palacios for the guidance she received early in her career.

This is a sentiment repeated often, for Palacios seems to have forged not only effective but affective bonds with younger generations of women writers. In a tribute to Palacios published in the literary section of the newspaper *El Universal*, María Elena Ramos begins her tribute by directing her remarks to "Querida Antonia,"¹³ demonstrating the affection that Palacios engendered. In the newspaper *La Hora*, upon the occasion of Palacios' death in 2001,

author Elisa Lerner noted “Ella fue una presencia muy cercana para los escritores de mi generación. . .Puedo dar fe de su generosidad por el estímulo permanente que me ofreció. Me sirvió de inspiración para mi primera obra de teatro, titulada *La bella inteligencia*. Su presencia iluminó la pieza.”¹⁴

Just as Antonia Palacios repeated the guidance she herself received to a new generation of young women writers, Yolanda Pantin (who attended *Calicanto*) and others continue to support and encourage younger authors in their turn. In 1989, together with three other authors, Pantin created an editorial house dedicated to the publication of Venezuelan and world poetry. The editorial board, which consisted of Pantin, along with the poets Blanca Strepponi, Verónica Jaffé and Antonio López Ortega, published nearly one hundred collections of poetry, both Venezuelan and world authors, including collections authored by more than twenty women. The editorial also afforded Pantin and Jaffé the opportunity to publish co-written essays together on the editorial’s website, making the publishing house an example both of inter-generational and intra-generational cooperation among women writers.

Pantin, Jaffé, Torres and Strepponi are well-established and proven authors, well-read in Venezuela and successful. They are exactly the type of “senior generation” that Jane Dowson chides in her article for not supporting younger authors. However, in the case of Venezuelan women, we can see that the trend is to continue to maintain strong ties between generations through publishing, workshops and editorial work.

Appearing on the literary scene in Caracas early in the year 2000 was a new group of authors who called themselves *Texto Sentido* (represented on your sheet by Medina, Meneses and Octavio). The founding members of the group, which included two men and six women,

came together after attending a *taller* with established poet Juan Antonio Calzadilla. The group planned and executed a literary radio program for several years and continues to publish interviews, essays, and works of fiction and poetry on its website.

On the website, the group publishes the works of the members of the group as well as the work of contemporary female authors, both in and outside the nation. Poetry and prose appear side by side with glowing reviews of the work of national and international women writers. In the section dedicated to “plumas célebres,” for example, along with the work of Yolanda Pantin and Ana Teresa Torres, one can find an essay by the Colombian poet and short-story author Nana Rodríguez Romero dedicated to the Uruguayan poet Graciela Genta. The essay, titled “Graciela Genta, o la vida hecha poesía” recounts the encounter of the Colombian poet not only with the Uruguaya “en compañía de un vino o un mate” but also the effect that the poetry of the older writer, “de gran fuerza evocadora” has had on the younger as well.¹⁵

So *Texto Sentido* interests us today not only for the six founding female members of the group, who show the same willingness to work together as Pantin, Torres, Jaffé and Strepponi, but also for the way that *Texto Sentido* offers space for long chains of interaction between generations of writers, again both within and outside the nation. Ana Teresa Torres and Yolanda Pantin have given radio interviews to the group, and Torres and Pantin have both published poetry and essay on the *Texto Sentido* website. In addition, as we just saw, the website offers space for the publication of other Latin American authors who reach out to women and form connections from generation to generation across national boundaries.

So why does the Venezuelan example offer such a contrast to the dark Anglo-American observation of Germaine Greer that “each generation spawns its scores of women poets who will

be dumped by the succeeding generations, even before they are dead?”¹⁶ I do not have one hard and fast answer, but may suggest several reasons that this does not happen.

First is the strong overall tradition of *talleres* and group work in Venezuelan literary history. Since nearly the founding of the republic, it has been the habit of authors, both men and women to work together in groups. Starting with the literary group *Cosmópolis* in 1894, continuing all the way to *Texto Sentido* it has been the rule, rather than the exception for authors in Venezuela to attend *talleres* and *salones*, form associations, write a manifesto stating a common goal, and work together for a time artistically. These groups have traditionally been formed of both men and women, like *Texto Sentido* or *Tráfico* in the 1980's of which Yolanda Pantin was a member. They may suggest, however, an overall willingness to reach out and form connections not found in other literary traditions.

Beyond this general predisposition to form literary bonds, perhaps another explanation may be found by returning to the failure of the Freudian model. You may recall that Gilbert and Gubar saw part of the reason for the “female affiliation complex” in the Freudian model of women’s “mature renunciation of the mother” and a turning “to the tradition of the father.”¹⁷ This suggestion led Gilbert and Gubar to believe that women then resent and feel rivalry to other women and stand alone in their work. While this paradigm may fit the Anglo-American case, other work in women’s studies may be more illuminating for our purposes in Venezuela.

Carol Gilligan, in her work *Making Connections*, suggests that women, rather than making an either/or choice between the mother or father and between men or women, tend to see “a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection.”¹⁸ Indeed, Gilligan argues that in a young woman’s development

there is a “ethic of caring and connection” that is necessary in order for women to succeed.¹⁹

This perspective on development seems certainly more descriptive and accurate in the Venezuelan case than the Freudian vision proposed by Gilbert and Gubar.

Indeed, as an example, the critic Renée Hausmann Shea used Gilligan’s paradigm to examine the work of several contemporary Caribbean Women Writers and found it of great use. In an example of the importance of connections between women in the process of writing in the Caribbean case, Hausmann gives an example straight from a Belizean novel:

A central event in the novel is Beka’s entering and winning an essay contest. . . although she writes the essay and can ultimately and rightfully be called its author, her writing process is truly a collaborative one: Granny Ivy suggests a local man to interview, Beka’s mother provides her with an elegant fountain pen and exercise book in which to write and Beka drafts her essay sitting on the floor surrounded by her family.²⁰

Whether this example can be further extended remains to be seen. Certainly, the model of collaborative, rather than combative literary production seems to fit the Venezuelan mold as it does (at least in the opinion of Hausmann Shea) in other Caribbean settings. Not an expert in the literary traditions of other Latin American nations, I would be much interested to know how the experience of women in Venezuela compares to that of women in other Latin American nations, whether indeed, the *hilo* that connects so many women through the decades in Venezuela also extends through the fabric of women’s literature in the rest of Latin America.

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Notes

¹ Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. "Forward into the Past: The Complex Female Affiliation Complex." *Historical studies and Literary Criticism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 240-265.

² Gilbert and Gubar. 245-246.

³ Dowson, Jane. "Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things: Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex." *Feminist Review*. 62 (1999): 11-12.

⁴ Dowson, Jane. "Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things: Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex." *Feminist Review*. 62 (1999): 7.

⁵ Arvelo Larriva, Enriqueta. "El pugnante llamado." In Pantin, Yolanda and Ana Teresa Torres. *El Hilo de la voz: Antología crítica de escritoras venezolanas del siglo XX*. Caracas: Fundación Polar, 2003. 143.

⁶ Arvelo Larriva. 144.

⁷ Arvelo Larriva, Enriqueta. "Suma de la voz aislada." In Pantin, Yolanda and Ana Teresa Torres. *El Hilo de la voz: Antología crítica de escritoras venezolanas del siglo XX*. Caracas: Fundación Polar, 2003. 147.

⁸ Arvelo Larriva. "Suma de la voz aislada." 147.

⁹ Pantin, Yolanda. "Entrar en lo bárbaro: Una lectura de la poesía escrita por mujeres." In *Literatura venezolana hoy: Historia nacional y presente urbano*. Karl Kohut ed. Madrid: Vervuert, 1999. 305.

¹⁰ Pantin, Yolanda. 305.

¹¹ Qtd. in Dowson, Jane. 11.

¹² For example, Julio Miranda's anthology *Poesía en el espejo: Estudio y antología de la nueva lírica femenina venezolana (1970-1994)*. Caracas: Fundarte, 1995.

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¹⁷ Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. 242.

¹⁸ Gilligan, Carol. *Making Connections*. Ed. Carol Gilligan et. al. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989. 29.

¹⁹Gilligan. 29.

²⁰ Hausmann Shea, Renée. “‘Crisis of Connections’: Contemporary Caribbean Women Writers.” *The English Journal*. 81 (1992): 3