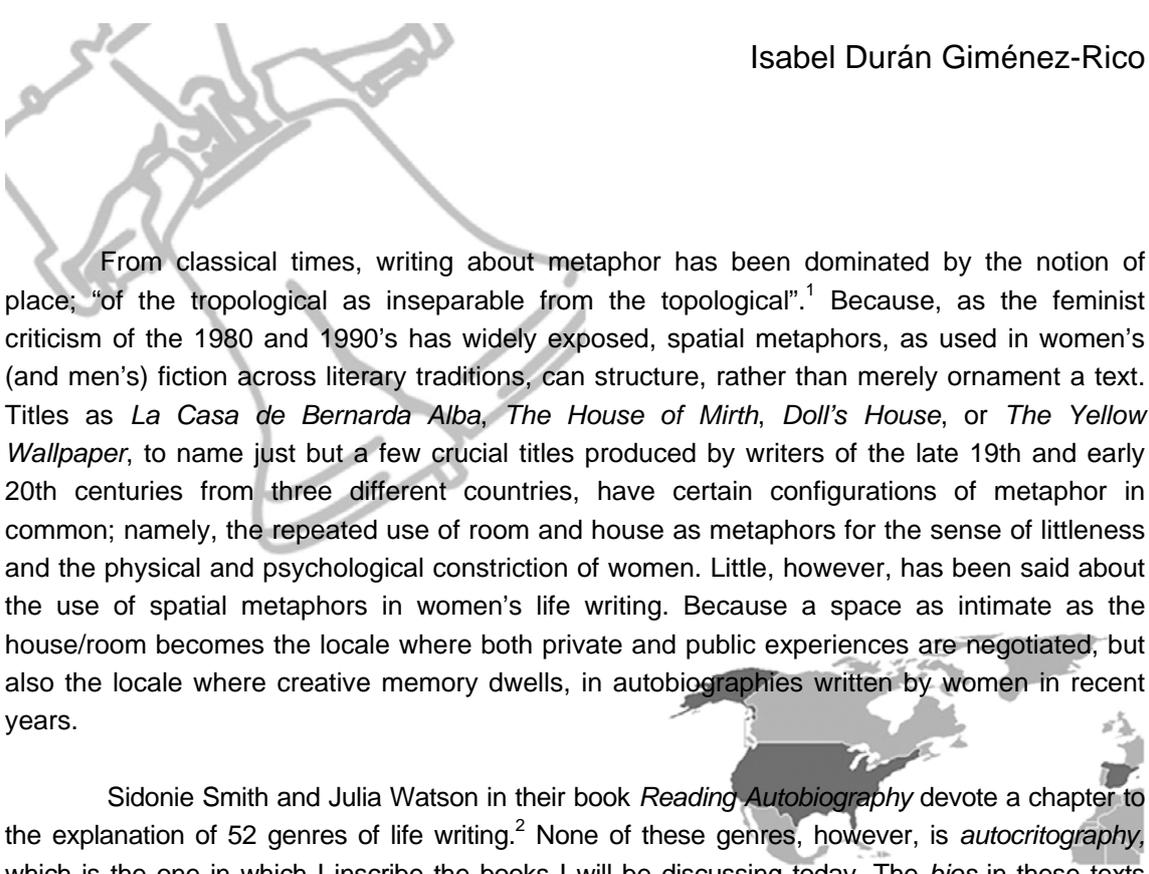


## The Symbolic Houses of Autobiographical Memory: A Transatlantic Comparative Analysis

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From classical times, writing about metaphor has been dominated by the notion of place; “of the tropological as inseparable from the topological”.<sup>1</sup> Because, as the feminist criticism of the 1980 and 1990’s has widely exposed, spatial metaphors, as used in women’s (and men’s) fiction across literary traditions, can structure, rather than merely ornament a text. Titles as *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, *The House of Mirth*, *Doll’s House*, or *The Yellow Wallpaper*, to name just but a few crucial titles produced by writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries from three different countries, have certain configurations of metaphor in common; namely, the repeated use of room and house as metaphors for the sense of littleness and the physical and psychological constriction of women. Little, however, has been said about the use of spatial metaphors in women’s life writing. Because a space as intimate as the house/room becomes the locale where both private and public experiences are negotiated, but also the locale where creative memory dwells, in autobiographies written by women in recent years.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book *Reading Autobiography* devote a chapter to the explanation of 52 genres of life writing.<sup>2</sup> None of these genres, however, is *autocritography*, which is the one in which I inscribe the books I will be discussing today. The *bios* in these texts focuses on the scholarly concerns of the critic or the writerly aspects of the author’s career. Autocritography was first used by African-American critic Henry Louis Gates to describe a book of critical essays, to signify “an autobiography of a critical concept”. It is, in other words, an account of the individual, social and institutional conditions that help to produce a writer or scholar and, hence, her professional concerns.

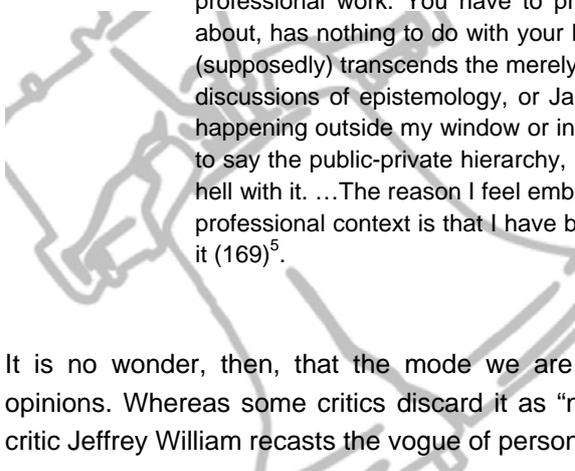
Those books are *Rooms of Our Own* (2006), by American professor and critic Susan Gubar, and *La Loca de la casa*, written by Spanish writer and literary journalist Rosa Montero in

<sup>1</sup> Horner, A. and S. Zlosnik. *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women’s Fiction*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990: 5.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, S. and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2001.

2003<sup>3</sup>. I selected for my transatlantic analysis two texts with some chronological vicinity, in order to be able to ascertain some global but also generational tendencies. As a matter of fact, both texts were produced in different parts of the world (USA and Spain) but within a time span of only three years, and their authors are well-known, best-selling women writers and critics in their own countries and internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Personal criticism or autocritography-- flourished in the 1990s, but the main rationale behind its practice was expressed by scholar and critic Jane Tompkins in her 1987 essay "Me and my Shadow":



The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal. Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. ...The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it (169)<sup>5</sup>.

It is no wonder, then, that the mode we are discussing today has raised very contrasting opinions. Whereas some critics discard it as "nouveau solipsism"<sup>6</sup>, on the more positive side, critic Jeffrey Williams recasts the vogue of personal criticism as a kind of "new belletrism"<sup>7</sup>.

Let us first give a brief description of each of the two books. *Rooms of Our Own*, the last book published by Susan Gubar, the co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic* and of *No Man's Land*, two books that radically transformed feminist criticism in America. Obviously taking Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as her model, in the form of what we teachers like to call "intertextuality", Gubar weaves a provocative tapestry of fact and fancy, feminist criticism and semiautobiographical fiction, to trace one year in the intellectual life of a middle-aged scholar caught in complex arguments of pedagogy and politics at an unnamed Midwestern university (that could be Indiana, Gubar's own *alma mater*) in the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Like Woolf's classic of feminism, *Rooms of our Own* has six chapters but, unlike its predecessor, it includes several pages of "suggested readings", in the fashion of academic monographs. In other words, this is the type of text in which criticism is written as fictional autobiography.

Rosa Montero's volume, on the other hand, belongs to the tradition of books written by novelists about the writer's profession. In other words, it is a case in which autobiography is

<sup>3</sup> Gubar, S. *Rooms of Our Own* (Urbana: The U of Illinois Press, 2006); Montero, Rosa. *La loca de la casa* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of respecting the transatlantic spirit of this essay -and of our Research Project- I will not translate Montero's original Spanish text into English.

<sup>5</sup> Tompkins, J. "Me and my Shadow". *New Literary History* 19: 1 (Autumn 1987): 169-178.

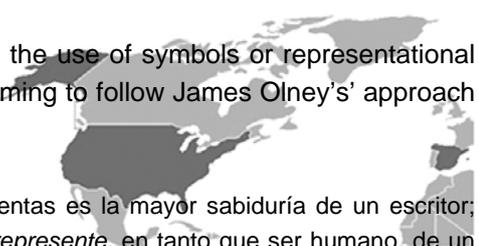
<sup>6</sup> Miller, Nancy K. "But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?" *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13.2 (2000): 421.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, J. "The New Belletrism," *Style* 33:3 (Fall 1999): 417.

written, partly, as criticism; a tradition that has been very fruitful in the literary world. So, her book belongs to that lucid self-reflexive tradition, to which she adds a new freshness and passion in her very personal and subjective revelation of the mysteries of literature; since she is really exploring her own personal mysteries. So, why autocrigraphy instead of classic autobiography? Our two writers give us very specific answers that explain their choice. The reason is no other than what the American master of the autobiographical genre, Henry Adams, was seeking in his third-person autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams*: distance, even if their narratives are written in the first person.

In the last chapter of *La Loca de la Casa*, Rosa Montero tells us a story about a cloistered nun and a woman who lived opposite the nun's convent, in the third floor of an apartment building in an unnamed Spanish town. That woman (let's say she was called Julia) used to buy cookies from the nuns every Sunday, so that she became friendly with the porter nun, although, of course, she never saw her face. Thirty years went by and one afternoon Julia's doorbell rang. It was the porter nun, the visitor announced with a voice that sounded very familiar. "Querría pedirle", said the nun, "que me dejara asomarme a su balcón". A very astonished Julia walked the aged nun to the balcony, came out with her, and both women stood there, several minutes, staring at the convent. "Es hermoso, ¿verdad?" said the nun; after which she went back to her convent, probably not to abandon it ever again (Montero 269-70). This story may serve to explain the largest voyage a human being can embark on; but, for Rosa Montero, it is the perfect symbol for what happens when one writes. Writing a novel or any kind of autobiographical narrative implies daring to cross that monumental path that distances you from yourself and allows you to observe yourself from afar, as if from a balcony. And, once one has done this supreme effort of self-understanding; once one has touched for an instant the vision that completes and fulminates, Montero proclaims, "Regresamos renqueantes a nuestra celda, al encierro de nuestra estrecha individualidad, e intentamos resignarnos a morir" (Montero 271).

Distance, then. Which is also achieved through the use of symbols or representational synecdoche. As Montero stresses again and again, seeming to follow James Olney's' approach in his book *Metaphors of the Self*:



Alcanzar la distancia exacta con lo que cuentas es la mayor sabiduría de un escritor; tienes que conseguir que lo que narras te *represente*, en tanto que ser humano, de un modo simbólico y profundo... pero todo eso no debe tener nada que ver con lo anecdótico de tu pequeña vida" (Montero 266-67)<sup>8</sup>.

That is a second key, I think, to their motivation in choosing the essay form: following in the tradition of Montaigne, our four writers do not wish to be confessional or testimonial; nor are they interested in seeking the events of their "little life". They are only interested in exploring what *represents* them; be it specific writers and writing in general, or feminist criticism. A third reason might be freedom. If one of the demands expected from an autobiographer is that she

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<sup>8</sup> Which is what Olney also said over thirty years ago in his *Metaphors of the Self* (Princeton UP, 1972) if in a more theoretically-oriented manner.

tell the truth, Susan Gubar, openly disobeys the autobiographical pact when she clarifies in her first chapter that

I will... make use of the license of novelists letting lies proliferate so as to tell a fictitious story about one year of events which shaped my belief that especially those women with sufficient money and rooms of their own face bewildering but unprecedented prospects today (Gubar 6).

A quote that sounds strikingly similar to that provided by Virginia Woolf at the beginning of *A Room of One's Own*:

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here (Woolf 14)<sup>9</sup>.

Similarly, Chapter eight of *La loca de la casa* is devoted to the narration of an (apparently) autobiographical event of Rosa's childhood. When she and her twin sister Martina were eight years old, Martina disappeared one day while they were playing in the street, and was missing for no less than three days. When she re-appeared, no one gave Rosa any explanations; and the mystery of that disappearance remained silenced and obscured to this day. So, when the reader has naively assumed that Martina exists and that Rosa Montero the author has a twin sister, we read, that Martina *may be* the fictional sister of the fictional "persona" Rosa: "supongamos por un momento que he mentido y que no tengo ninguna hermana", says Montero (266). In a very "un-pactly" game with the reader, Montero only hints that she *may have invented* the whole incident of the mysterious disappearance. At that point in the book this reader felt tempted to become a truth-searcher and discover if Rosa Montero really has a twin sister called Martina. But I gave up immediately, when I read:

Pues bien, aún así, ese capítulo de la ausencia de mi hermana y del silencio familiar sería el más importante para mí de todo este libro, el que más me habría enseñado, informándome de la existencia de otros silencios abismales en mi infancia, callados agujeros que sé que están ahí pero a los que no habría conseguido acceder con mis recuerdos reales, los cuales, por otra parte, tampoco son del todo fiables (Montero 266).

No theoretician of autobiography could have put it more eloquently: sometimes our imagined fictions are more real than autobiographical "truth".

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<sup>9</sup> Woolf, V. *A Room of One's Own*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995 (1929).

## Domestic Metaphors

Having dealt with explanatory generic issues, let us now go to an exploration of the domestic metaphors in these two books. In general terms, I do not agree that men and women write differently, technically speaking. However, I do think that there are certain themes that are more specific concerns of women -domestic details, family relations, body issues, for example- and thus tend to appear more often in their writing. One only has to look back and marvel at the hundreds of novels written by women and labelled as “domestic fiction” that, more often than not, were neglected in their own time as scribbling women’s entertainment. The Mary Beton of Virginia Woolf’s book observes that

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop—(Woolf 80).

And the Mary Beton of Susan Gubar makes the same observation fifty years later:

Hadn’t the exclusion of women writers from the canon of Great Books told me that so-called neutral aesthetic criteria could be biased, rating works about the hunting of a whale or rafting on a river over those about courtship and child rearing? For I had begun my own work with the conviction that male critics had unfairly deemed works about war and sports “important”, books about housekeeping “trivial” (Gubar 175-76).

Given this reality, Virginia Woolf decided to turn upside down the negative connotations of domestic space, and sent to the world the uncontested message that every woman needs a room of her own, as a symbol for many larger issues, such as privacy, leisure time, and financial independence, each of which is an essential component of the countless inequalities between men and women. Woolf predicts that until these inequalities are rectified, women will remain second-class citizens and their literary achievements will also be branded as such. Almost one century after Woolf wrote her essay, we, women, have *rooms of our own*, Susan Gubar asserts in her title. But, if everything has changed about woman’s material and economic situation in the modern world, not enough has altered in terms of the power structures and hegemonies that continue to dominate her consciousness.

We have another domestic space in one of our titles. Montero explains in her book that when she was in the initial stages of her writing, she had thought of writing about literature, about her profession, about narrative. But when St Teresa of Avila’s quote “La imaginación es la loca de la casa” crossed her mind as a possible title, she discovered that, in fact, she was writing about imagination, and about madness (as fantasy); the kind of madness that every writer must entertain in order to be creative (Montero 235-6). So, contradicting traditional, negative symbolic representations of the domestic space, our women essayists present the house as imagination; the room as independence; the convent as one’s sense of authentic self. One could perhaps bring forward the back room of Carmen Martín Gaité’s *El cuarto de atrás* or Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* as the places where memory dwells.

But Virginia Woolf and Gubar not only use domestic space metaphorically. They also deliberately dwell in domestic scenes, as a political and feminist act. As we know, Woolf's argument constantly returns to the concrete material details of the situations she describes: the food that was eaten, the money that was spent, or the comfort of the accommodations. Her strategy is designed to convince the reader of the deep relevance of these physical conditions for the possibility of intellectual and creative activity. One of those concrete material details is meals. Much has been written about Mrs. Ramsay's dinner scenes in *To the Lighthouse*, but little attention has been given to the description of luncheons in *A Room of One's Own*. Let us recall those meals. When the two-day adventure of Mary Beton at Oxbridge college begins, she is witness, in one of the men's colleges, of the serving of the male students' luncheon. She describes the elaborate lunch that was served, consisting of soles à la crème, succulent partridges, pudding, and lots of wine, all of which create an overwhelming sense of abundance and optimism. Later in the day she goes to the women's college and describes the meal she is served there, which compares but poorly with the grand luncheon earlier in the day: gravy soup, the quintessential British beef with greens and potatoes, plain prunes, and no wine. She feels uninspired. "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine," she writes, "does not light on beef and prunes." (Woolf 27) Everything looks grimmer from this perspective, and we see that with reduced privilege comes a corresponding atrophy of one's sense of power and possibility—"that is the dubious and qualifying state of mind that beef and prunes at the end of the day's work breed between them." (Woolf 28)

Again, in an intertextual gesture, Susan Gubar devotes many lines to the description of a dinner party she holds at her house for colleagues, after a Conference on Gender she has organized. And the food that she herself prepares and serves leads her to more high-minded ruminations:

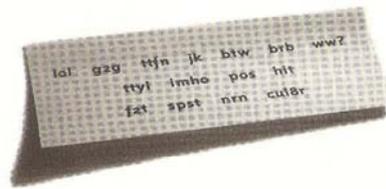
I wanted the prospect of sawing veal knuckle bones and blanching a calf's foot to chase away all thoughts of the presentations ... Yet the advocates of gender (alone) and the fewer but fervent advocates of sex (alone) advanced arguments as sticky as the humidity, and the menu hardly seemed suitable.... Wouldn't a cold baked salmon ... look more appetizing? I worried (37-38).

As Woolf and Gubar know very well, the allegorical meaning of beef and prunes or of cold baked salmon can be as eloquent as that of a raft or a whale.

There is one last narrative strategy I would like to comment on, which we could ascribe to the domain of the "professional-domestic". While Susan Gubar's Mary Beton is reaching for a book on her colleague's desk, she finds a yellow Post-it stuck to the book's cover. This is how the narrator describes what is written on the Post-it:

On it, under the capitals "IM" appeared two strings of signs that looked something like this:

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It turns out that "IM" stands for Instant Messaging and that all the signs are abbreviations that the students use in their exchange of text messages with their mobile phones. The inclusion of these fragmented sentences allows the narrator to imagine what they could mean if they were used by a feminist scholar like her. So, for example, "WW" becomes, in her imagination "Where are the Women?", or, as she ponders on the thought that she has to interrupt her work and leave for a meeting, "G2G" becomes "Got to Go". The use of this narrative trick serves, it is my contention, a threefold purpose.

On the one hand, it refers to a woman's fragmented every-day life in which we are always sticking post-its on the refrigerator, on our desks or office doors, as reminders of the many duties to be performed before the end of the day. Gubar's point is to argue for the validity of those characteristics that are typically consigned to irrationality and the feminine: fragmentation, constant interruption, feeling, and subjectivity. On the other hand, I like to think that "IM" could also symbolically stand for *I'm*, and would refer to the conundrum of discovering who I am --after all, the aim of every autobiography: something as *familiar and yet indecipherable* as the signs scribbled in this Post-it. Finally, in a postmodern gesture, Gubar is also incorporating into her autobiographical experiment the latest trends in life-writing studies. She is, in other words, theorizing about the genre she is somehow disrupting. Because the forms of life writing have multiplied, diverged, and developed in the new millennium, with Twitter and Facebook, blogs, You Tube, devised performance, graphic memoirs, reality television, and mobile phone diaries, signalling the widespread cultural embrace of the first-hand account as a means of communicating both

general and personal concerns or conflicts<sup>10</sup>. And all these new forms, Susan Gubar seems to contend, must also be incorporated in life-writing studies.

## Conclusion

It is clear that this recent mode of personal critical writing we have named autocritography is not that recent, after all, since its practitioners have negotiated with the dead and have followed the trail left by the masters of essay-writing. Nor is it only an Anglo-American “fashion”, but rather a global one that travels across the Atlantic as my comparative approach has shown. It is, rather, a renewed kind of *belletrism* that provides a new rationale for discussing literature and even critical theory; a rationale that downplays previous claims of quasi-scientific theoretical research, and reasserts precisely the distinctive value of the literary, as yielding not practical results but spiritual or aesthetic enjoyment and fulfilment. Moreover, it claims to abandon its specialist focus, for a renewed address to what Woolf called “*the common reader*”.<sup>11</sup>

Am I defending this sort of autobiographical criticism? I am not so sure. Because I do not renounce theory. On the contrary, I think that it is precisely abstraction and formalization that render accessible to a wider audience certain subject problems that might, if left in a casual personal form, appear too purely idiosyncratic and therefore remote or uninteresting to all but a few. On the other hand, this turn to personal criticism may be perpetuating the traditional view of the male as the thinker, the theorist, versus the unintellectual, pragmatic female, for whom abstractions seem foreign and irrelevant to her sphere of activity.<sup>12</sup> In any case, what cannot be denied is that our two authors have brought autobiography, literary history and criticism, pedagogy, and political thought into tension, they have affirmed the reality that not all writing fits into neat generic packages, and, in the process, they have expanded the boundaries of the autobiographical mode, putting it at the service of cultural and literary criticism.



<sup>10</sup> Jensen, M. “Separated by a Common Language: The (Differing) Discourses of Life Writing in Theory and Practice”. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 24.2 (2009): 306. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Woolf, V. *The Common Reader*. Mariner Books, 1984. Print.

<sup>12</sup> See Lang, C. “Autocritique”. Veese, Aram, *Confessions of the Critics*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996: 49. Print.