Preface

by Doris Meyer

This book is the second volume of a project intended to add a new interpretive dimension to the history of the essay in Spanish-speaking Latin America. Traditionally considered a male domain, the essay genre in Latin America since the era of Independence has been associated with an ongoing search for cultural and national identity. Essays written by women, however, were excluded from the canon and were marginalized and devalued along with other literature by women that did not conform to gender expectations. Ample evidence of this can be found in anthologies of Latin American essays, published in Spanish and English over the past half century, in which women's contributions to the genre have been virtually ignored.

In the first volume of this project, entitled Reinterpreting the Spanish American Essay: Women Writers of the 19th and 20th Centuries, twenty-two scholars joined me in an effort to facilitate a revision of Latin American intellectual history, which is largely founded on essayistic writing. As their analyses show, essays by women authors have remained invisible because the dominant discourse ratified and reflected only the vision of a patriarchal society. Critical studies, however, are not enough to rectify this oversight if women's essays remain virtually unknown. Even for those who can read the original texts in Spanish and, in a few cases, French, these essays are frequently inaccessible. Many earlier ones were published in little-known magazines or out-of-print books only found in their country of origin. I hope, with this volume, to bring them to light for a larger community of readers both within and beyond academia.

Although the two volumes can be read separately, my belief is that the authorial "I" and the critical eye will be mutually enlightening for the interested reader. This second volume includes essays by most of the authors studied in the earlier volume along with several other authors not found there. Together, they will help remap the literary terrain of the essay in Latin America to include the unexplored landscapes of women's intellectual discourse.

It is time to reread and reinterpret the essays produced so abundantly over the past two centuries in Latin America. However, our rereading should not be limited to works by women. When the male essay is reread as part of a larger essay tradition—part of an integrated intellectual discourse that includes women's perspective—it too will assume different meaning and proportions. Certainly, the question of Latin American identity will have to be defined anew.

All the essays in this book are translated here for the first time, many by the same scholars who wrote the studies for the first volume. Not only did this afford me the benefit of their advice in selecting the essays to be included, but it also assures the reader that the translations themselves are done by knowledgeable scholars sensitive to the nuances of gendered expression found in the original Spanish.

The order of translations is determined primarily by the date in which the works appeared rather than by the authors' birth dates. Whenever possible, I have selected several examples of an author's writing, but I have also had to balance the urge to add more essays with the desire to include a significant number of writers in the collection. My other major concerns were to represent the various historical periods and the myriad perspectives of female authors from different countries, social backgrounds, and intellectual orientations. Still, these bold, articulate women inevitably represent a privileged minority among the great masses of Latin American women who have been silenced over the centuries by virtue of their sex, race, class, or economic condition.

Many of the essays translated here are already considered classics by scholars familiar with the evolution of women's intellectual history in Latin America. They form part of a reiterated claim to autonomous female expression that can be traced back at least as far as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Mexico in the late 1600s. Among notable examples of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "gender identity essay," one could point to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's "Women," Soledad Acosta de Samper's "The Mission of the Woman Writer in Spanish America," Clorinda

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Matto de Turner's "The Woman Worker and the Woman," Victoria Ocampo's "Woman and Her Expression," Magda Portal's "Toward the New Woman," Teresa de la Parra's "The Influence of Women in the Formation of the American Soul," Rosario Castellanos' "Mexican Customs," Rosario Ferré's "Woman's Authenticity in Art," and Julieta Kirkwood's "Feminists and Political Women." But the volume also contains many essays that are less well known and that bring to light fascinating examples of women's lives and their efforts to make some provisional sense of their time and place in the world. These include, among others, the Countess of Merlin's "The Women of Havana," Eduarda Mansilla de García's "Life on the Pampas," Alfonsina Storni's "The Immigrant Girl," Amanda Labarca Hubertson's "Personal Pages," Gabriela Mistral's "Similarities and Differences between the Americas," Carmen Naranjo's "Cultural Crisis in Costa Rica," Cristina Peri Rossi's "The Fantasy of the Passive Object: Inflatable Dolls," and Elena Poniatowska's "The Last Turkey." The reader will frequently discover issues and concerns that go beyond the experience of gender but that are nevertheless seen from a woman's viewpoint and thus refocus the cultural picture we have been shown in most male-authored essays.

Some women's essays are intentionally transgressive in their questioning of received truths and their plea for new configurations of human coexistence. Others intimately describe the private domestic spaces that only Latin American women knew and in which they found mutual sustenance. Still others reveal panoramas of the female imagination unbound by the frontiers of a vast continent or its varied cultures. From the scrutiny of women's role in the Conquest to that of the blue whales that swim through the texts of Western literature, these essays offer us alternative approaches to understanding the experience of living and writing in Latin America.

In the interest of conserving space and enhancing readability, notes have been kept to a minimum; those not followed by [Trans.] are the author's notes. In a very few instances, passages have been cut in long essays to avoid unnecessary repetitions or digressions; they are indicated by [...]. Throughout, my concern as editor has been to ensure that the translations are both faithful to the original texts and rendered well in English; the reader will notice that each writer has a style of her own, and that descriptive or persuasive prose of the nineteenth century can be quite different from its counterpart in the twentieth. The voices and personalities of these Latin American women writers, unique among

themselves as individuals, come to us across chronological, geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries that literature in translation does its best to negotiate.

To prepare the reader for these differences, each author is briefly introduced in a few pages prior to the translation of her works. Since these introductions were written by various scholars, they vary somewhat in length and content, but they all shed light on the importance of the translated essays to follow. For the reader who wishes to know more about a given author, I recommend the first volume of critical studies, each with helpful bibliographies; a table of contents is included at the end of this volume. An alternate and very useful reference for general information on women writers in Spanish America are the bio-bibliographic volumes edited by Diane Marting.

I am well aware of notable women authors whose essays do not appear in these pages. Limitations of space, in addition to the concerns expressed above, influenced the final selections. As a reader, I confess that personal preferences also figured in the equation. As an editor, my wish list had to be balanced by practical considerations, including the availability of willing and able translators. Ultimately, I am responsible for the contents and shape of this project, but it could not have been accomplished without the dedication and cooperation of the valued colleagues who have contributed to it so generously. I thank them all for their enthusiastic response, collaborative spirit, and the wealth of understanding they brought to this enterprise. The dialogic community of Latin American women writers and contemporary scholars is richly represented in these pages.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to two important sources of support for this project: the R. F. Johnson Faculty Development Fund of Connecticut College for two grant awards, and my husband, Richard Hertz, for the encouragement he gives me and the pleasure he takes in sharing my enthusiasm for Latin America and its cultures.

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NOTE

1. See my introduction to the first volume for an overview of women's essays in Spanish America and their importance in the history of the genre. For a detailed discussion of canons as self-confirming "structures of exclusion" and "structures of value" in Latin America, see Mary Louise Pratt's study, "'Don't Interrupt Me': The Gender Essay as Conversation and Countercanon," also in the first volume.