

Julia Roth

Occidental Readings, Decolonial Practices

A Selection on Gender, Genre, and Coloniality in the Americas

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In memory of my grandmother
Dr. Lieselotte Roth
(1926-1969)

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I. Introduction:

Three Modes of Intervention

Prelude

1. Victoria Ocampo's Essayistic Interventions

In her 1936 essay »Woman and her Expression« Argentine author Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) reflected that, »for centuries all conversation between men and women, as soon as they entered a certain terrain, begins with ›Don't interrupt me‹ on the part of the man« (Ocampo 1936a: 127). Ocampo's writings point toward gender inequalities as well as the inequalities that existed between North and South. She wrote in hopes of building a bridge and starting a dialogue between the Southern American intellectual ›periphery‹ and the European/US-American ›center‹ of cultural and political discourses. In her essay »Palabras francesas« [French Words] (1931c) Ocampo complains of having to constantly explain herself to Europeans who consider her culture to have no history:

Si no hubiese sido americana [...], no experimentaría [...], probablemente, esta sed de explicar, de explicarnos, y de explicarme. [...] Aquí, por el contrario, cada cosa, cada acontecimiento, es sospechoso y sospechable de ser aquello que no tiene traza (Ocampo (1931c: 40), translation JR).

[If I hadn't been American, I would probably not have experienced this thirst to explain, to explain us, to explain myself. [...] Here, on the contrary, each thing, each event, is suspect and susceptible to being something that has no trace.]

As editor of *Sur* magazine, Ocampo initiated the translation of important texts from the European and US-American context, making them accessible to a Spanish-speaking public for the first time. Throughout her lifetime, Ocampo voiced her opinion in ongoing cultural-political debates, for which the essay was her preferred genre. She published ten volumes of essays, titled *Testimonios*, many of which are written in the form of letters or fictionalized dialogues with her contemporary intellectual and literary protagonists from diverse contexts. By relating her life and her writing to other well-known authors in this way, Ocampo positions Argentina and herself as part of the South American as well as the international ›establishment‹.

However, Ocampo's role is largely reduced to the image of the editor, patron and glamorous society personality and her critical essayistic texts are most often neglected in favor of her autobiography. Even in Argentina, Ocampo's essay collections are out of print and only available second-hand. Only a few of her essays have been translated from the Spanish.

2. Frida Kahlo's Painted Diary

One page of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo's (1910-54) painted diary presents an ostensible self-portrait with the words »Yo soy la DESINTEGRACIÓN ...« [I am the disintegration/breakdown] (1995b).¹ Many of Kahlo's works negotiate different concepts of gender and binary gender roles and the possibility of coherent representation. By contradicting and queering traditional images, boundaries and role expectations, Kahlo's *oeuvre* transgresses established genre boundaries, and she creates her own combined forms. In her »painted diary«, Kahlo sketches out private thoughts and political views, combining pictorial, poetic and graphic elements.

»Manhattan will be more Exotic this Fall!« was the commentary underneath Kahlo's »Self-portrait with Monkey« with which the *New Yorker* advertised a 1990 exhibition of Mexican art that presented a significant number of Kahlo's paintings in the United States for the first time and contributed significantly to her cult status in the US. Today Kahlo's self-portraits adorn handbags all over the world and Frida Kahlo cooking books and day planners are available in every well-equipped bookstore. The famous Strand bookstore in Manhattan even sells Frida Kahlo Barbie dolls and »Frida Kahlo Sticky Notes«.

Hayden Herrera's influential 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo, and the internationally-successful Hollywood movie *Frida* (2002) present Kahlo's work psychoanalytically as the expression of both her life-long physical suffering resulting from a traffic accident and her unconventional marriage to Diego Rivera. The 1988 collection *Frida Kahlo. Das Gesamtwerk* (1988) edited by Salomon Grimberg, Andrea Kettenmann and Helga Prignitz-Poda has become something of a standard reference work for Kahlo scholars and critics. The collection includes a selection of photographed letters and diary pages and opens with an essay by Grimberg titled »Frida Kahlos Einsamkeit« [Frida Kahlo's Solitude]. Most of the few works reference her diary as a document or source of information about Kahlo's »real life, despite the extensive theoretical work on the genre regarding it as the staging or regulating of an individual's interior world.

3. Rigoberta Menchú's *Testimonio*

Guatemalan Human Rights activist Rigoberta Menchú (*1959) opens her *testimonio* titled *I, Rigoberta Menchú* by emphasizing the communal character of her text:

It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life [...]. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people (Menchú 2009 [1984]: 1).

1 Frida Kahlo kept her diary from 1944 until her death 1954. The facsimile version was first published in 1995 (1995 a and b).