

SIMULTANEOUS GRAMMARS OF DOMINATION: A FEMINIST RHETORICAL STUDY OF ALFONSINA STORNI'S "TÚ ME QUIERES BLANCA"

Rebekah Hoy

Ohio State University—Mansfield

A chief concern of feminist criticism is the positioning and degree of audibility (or visibility) of marginalized groups. One aspect of this discipline that merits examination is the interplay and overlap between cultural domination and sexual/gendered domination. This discussion will focus on how cultural and feminist rhetoric combine in a text, and the implications regarding self-definition and agency arising in a text that describes elements of sexual domination occurring within a culturally oppressive context. This study will primarily employ the use of the womanist critical perspective. According to Sonja K. Foss: "Womanists are women of color who define themselves as feminists and who believe that an understanding of the intersection of race and gender is needed to address the oppression of women of color" (152). It is this intersection that will be the primary focus of the discussion that follows. An examination of an original Spanish text written by Alfonsina Storni alongside my English translation will lend insight into the nature and implications of a simultaneous rhetoric of sexual domination within Latino/a culture. Furthermore, of incidental but pertinent importance is the manner in which feminist rhetoric may be influenced by texts translated from an original language. Alfonsina Storni's poem "Tú me quieres blanca" will function as an example that reveals the correlation between the dialogues of both culturally- and gender-based oppressions. Both the poem and my translation are included in the appendix to this work (all translations are my own).

In order to examine Storni's work in the context of dual marginalization—that is, insofar as it exposes a system of two intertwined grammars of subjugation (culturally as well as gender-based)—it is necessary to investigate the larger context of the work and its rhetor/agent. Feminist criticism requires the identification of the rhetor relevant to the situation to a more immediate and profound degree than do other critical approaches: the identity and position of the agent in feminist discourse is, even from before the inception of any text, fundamentally muted in response to a conventionally oppressive rhetorical climate. To be audible in such an environment is to be in a unique and precarious position that teeters on the fragile boundaries established by the construction of gender within the space of the text.

A Swiss-born immigrant to Argentina and the daughter of Italian-Swiss parents, Alfonsina Storni scandalized the literary establishment of Buenos Aires with a defensive posture in her rendering of women: her recurrent themes of subjugation, figurative imprisonment (with unusual literary conceptions of space), and tone of resentment all led to her rejection of materialism. Her feminist poem "Tú me quieres blanca" (You Want Me White), published in 1918 in a collection entitled *El dulce daño* (The Sweet Pain), is remarkable in that it anticipated other major feminist theory by at least four decades. Before her suicide by drowning in the sea, Storni exposed through her verses the social situation of Argentine and other Latin American women of her day (Chang-Rodriguez and Filer 350). Storni's status as a white woman in Argentina writing about Latin American women adds an intriguing dimension to her work. That Storni occupies a space outside of the cultural domination she comments on will necessarily inform her perspective; it may be argued that her distance from the cul-

tural domination she describes affects her ethos within her discursive realm. Gabriela De Cicco creates an interesting articulation of the idea of Storni's location outside of the space that she observes, naming Storni a *hermana marginal* (marginal sister). This interpretation may lead to an understanding of Storni as outside of a culturally dominating influence, but perhaps also simultaneously marginalized in this very isolation.

For the purposes of this study, feminist criticism will be envisioned in its broadest definition: that is, as a vehicle by which to read all discourses of subordination and attempt to isolate and challenge ideologies of domination. Indeed, feminist criticism, particularly as it evolved in the late twentieth century, has come to represent the mechanism of indictment against not only sexist discourse, but also the discourses of culture and class inferiority. As articulated by Sonja K. Foss: "For some, feminism is larger than issues of gender and is defined as 'a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels'" (151).

As such, a feminist critique may be useful in revealing not only the ways in which *gender* is constructed and maintained through literature and other cultural media, but also how the concepts of culture and nationality are assembled and circulated within society. Widespread circulation causes stereotypical gender/culture constructions to be assimilated and *normalized* within a culture. Certainly, the concept of gender/culture normalization is of central importance in the rhetorical understanding of Storni's text, in that her poem exposes the systematic duplication of attitudes and acts of domination that are repeated and ingrained within the consciousness of a society. The duplicated rhetoric then becomes a sort of ingrained property within society, functioning as a mechanism, to the extent that it becomes almost automatically reproduced, standardized, and widely accepted. The goal of my critique and perhaps of most feminist analysis is to throw light into the dusty recesses of a dominant ideology that has global and historical roots, challenging the normalized models of gender and culture it has erected with the implements of a dominating grammar.

In addition, feminist rhetorical criticism seeks to open discursive channels through which agency may be restored to the voiceless and/or marginalized: "Although they may go about it in different ways, what all feminists seek is the *assumption of agency* by all individuals, where all individuals are able to make their own choices for their lives" (Foss 154; my emphasis). Foss refers here to the fact that the oppressed and repressed (women, people of color) are often robbed of their potential as actors in their own destinies, a function of the rhetoric of domination that has systematically deprived them of a space of legitimacy, or even existence. This idea manifests psychologically, both within the marginalized group and in the collective consciousness of society as a whole, an apparatus that further perpetuates the exclusion of the subordinated from the realization of agency. In this study, these concepts are particularly applicable and take on special importance due to the added factors of language and translation. Translation raises issues regarding the assignment of agency, in that the translator assumes the responsibility for many rhetorical choices, the assembly of which will affect the study of translated works in one nuanced way or another. Because words do not necessarily convey identical gradations of mood across different languages, it is impossible for the translator, as a rhetor in her own right, to capture each subtle discursive implication. For example, in both the title and the third to last line of the poem in the original Spanish, the word *blanca* has several implications: first, the word implies the literal conception of whiteness, the nonmetaphorical substance of the color white. *Blanca* also takes on another meaning in the context of culture-marginalization discourse, calling to mind boundary lines separating the world of white women from that of women of color. Furthermore, the word may also be construed as a quasi-cognate reminiscent of the English

word *blank*, a subtlety conjuring images of impotence, or, for the purposes of our study, a possible lack of agency, a blank canvas not reflecting autonomy, but instead absorbing the marginalizing ideologies of the subordinating mechanism—society. In other words, a cultural absorption of all of the oppressive modes of the social order can be seen to manifest as the denial of agency to marginalized groups. Society's attribution of woman (the woman of color and the white woman alike) as blank canvas is a repressive instrument that ignores the existence of her organic identity and thrusts upon her an inauthentic, assigned self. This idea can be compared with the concept of colonization, in which a space or body that is to be "settled" or "tamed" is thought to be empty and devoid of uniqueness.

Another issue related to the problematic nature of translation lies in the audibility of the agent's own voice across the cavern of two languages. Here I must clarify that in this text, Storni herself may or may not represent the speaker in the poem. Is the agent's true voice preserved across this translation divide, or is intention transformed, losing authenticity and therefore agency? In this regard, I find myself (as translator) in a situation similar to that of Storni, in that both she and I represent non-native Spanish-speakers who, having been in later life immersed in the language, now occupy a space of close rhetorical proximity to the linguistic implications of Spanish. In my case, my authority as a translator is drawn from three years in an intensive university-level language-immersion program; in Storni's case, she was immersed in the language as an immigrant to Argentina from Switzerland. With this caveat, what follows is an analysis of gender construction in Storni's "Tú me quieres blanca."

In order to effectively analyze the rhetorical implications of this text, one must first examine the discourse and behavior that the text depicts as standard, desirable, and appropriate. Gender for Storni is complicated and multiple because she lives in a Latina context and, therefore, appropriates for herself a critique of male domination and Latina oppression to which she imagines herself connected. In "Tú me quieres blanca," Alfonsina Storni is operating under the defensive assumption that women, particularly Latina women, are subject to the parameters erected for them by their male peers. Indeed, in the historical context and situation in which she was writing, Storni is confronted with the massively oppressive atmosphere and conditions accompanying her status as Argentine female. The poem addresses the normalized, accepted role of women in juxtaposition to men, and illuminates a glaring double standard that exists regarding the appropriate comportment of men versus women. Her words reveal an implicit, assumed expectation that Latina women will remain pure and chaste (*casta*) while at the same time turning a deferential blind eye to the hedonistic behavior that society deems as normal and acceptable for the male population. Examples of this Dionysian permission for excess and promiscuity occur within the poem in images of fruit and honey (*frutos y mieles*) and lips stained from the consumption of wine (*labios morados*). Storni exposes to the audience an inherent dichotomy of opposing strictures of normalization between men and women, representing an important gender division within the realm of gendered rhetoric. The poet, in her rhetorical space, throws light on the submerged position of women relative to men, and depicts a chasm between that which is expected of the two sexes.

Storni draws attention to the sexual double standard by revealing an ingrained social metaphor that assigns hierarchical significance to various colors. She implicitly acknowledges and contends with an arbitrary cultural tendency to recognize color hierarchy in everyday language. By arbitrary, I mean to suggest that there does not exist in any person an inherent "whiteness" or "Latina-ness," nor does one's status as such *define* oneself in entirety. However, society has developed the tendency to associate racial identity with the core of personal identity, to the exclusion of many other aspects of the persona. Persistent reference to color throughout the poem illustrates not only the assimilation of

a metaphor of color hierarchy, but also the dichotomy of acceptable modes of identification of self. The male audience in the poem is associated strongly with the ownership of color: "your lips stained purple," "You, who in the black gardens / of Deceit, / dressed in red." Conversely, the female voice in the poem is relegated to a space of color *absence*; she calls attention to the stipulation that she *abstain from* color ("imagine me like snow"), the assumption that she will make herself into a blank slate *upon which* the male may reflect any variety of colors at his discretion. In this way, the speaker is not afforded free access to determination and ownership of self-identity, but is subject to represent the absence of color, of autonomy. The absence of color therefore entails a rhetoric of privilege. I argue that color acts as a vehicle of agency within this context.

Storni's positioning of the male audience is a feature deserving close examination. Throughout the poem, the author addresses a silent, unseen male figure, using the Spanish informal *tú* form of the pronoun "you." This address is loaded with implications: Storni has made an important rhetorical choice in the selection of the familiar *tú* over the formal *usted*, positioning the female voice in an unaccustomed space of relative equality to that of the male. An argument can be made that this represents a subtle attempt to subvert the widespread cultural narrative of Latino male domination over Latina female. Regardless of intent, Storni's choice of pronoun functions to effectively engender a defiant mood, beginning with the very title of the poem. This word selection may be read as an address to Argentine men, Latino men in general, or the entire male population, as a reaction against her society's imposed parameters aimed at domination through the device of language.

The question of agency is a crucial feature in any feminist rhetorical analysis. To what extent does the author invest herself in the text in the role of agent; to what extent does she direct her own fate in the rhetorical situation? I would argue that throughout the course of the poem, Storni's female voice undergoes an augmentation in its degree of agency, and in the fourth and fifth stanzas, even begins to issue her own commands to the male audience who receives the address. Again, these commands are articulated using the equalizing pronoun *tú*, a device that may be seen as elevating the female voice to a more decisive, balanced position of audibility. One strategy she employs to this end is the use of second-person voice, speaking directly to her possessor. She is actively addressing he who would submerge her identity/agency rather than merely passively describing her situation, thereby defining her own role within a system of physical and rhetorical domination. Because the poem was published in Spanish, the poem's audience necessarily includes, but is not necessarily limited to, Latino men.

Storni makes another crucial rhetorical move in an attempt to subvert the situational imbalance of power and claim a measure of agency: while acknowledging the unequal assignment of agency, she takes it upon herself to begin placing *conditions* on the manner in which the male presence may regard and identify her. I argue that this is an underhanded sort of "permission-granting;" the speaker acquiesces to her placement as inferior subject, but limits and defines her own oppression. She begins to issue commands:

Flee to the forest;
go to the mountain;
wash out your mouth;
live in the huts;
touch with your hands
the wet earth;
feed your body

with bitter root . . .
and when you have put
your soul in it . . .
then,
good man,
you *may*
claim me as pure,
imagine me like snow,
have me pure (my emphasis).

These stanzas represent perhaps the most important in Storni's campaign for reclamation of agency. Of particular interest are the lines "and when you have put / your soul in it." This move may be construed as a strategy by which female agency may be realized: in requiring the male to invest more of himself (his *soul*) in the cause of her agency reclamation. She demands more of her male counterpart in the way of accountability for the imbalance of agency his actions have engendered. By defining stipulations that must be followed before the male can demand that she be pure, *blanca*, the female voice succeeds in balancing, in equalizing the power struggle within the situation; she attains a degree of authority supplemented by her acknowledgement of and defiance toward her previous position of ineffectuality. Thus, the rhetor's agency culminates in a fantastic final stanza wherein she accomplishes the previously untenable: she grants "permission" to her male listener to imagine her as "white," "like snow" and "pure." There is perhaps no greater realization of agency than the act of assuming this type of influence: to take it upon oneself to *own*, to *possess* the authority to acquiesce; furthermore, the rhetor is granting consent to the previously dominant presence *to continue to dominate her*, but in a conditional and limiting manner. Once she has realized the authority to articulate conditions and to sanction the male to possess her, she will forever retain the right to reassert her agency. Because she has harnessed the device of *language* to this end (language being a resource she will never exhaust), the capacity for agency realization will always be at her disposal. Storni is utilizing a subversive rhetorical device in this respect, one that speaks to the way in which the text isolates, defines, and challenges the dominant ideological system.

Following an analysis of how gender is constructed in this text, it is now appropriate to discuss the overarching implications of these constructions within the body of rhetorical theory itself. The first task is to examine the extent to which the artifact answers the following question: How is agency claimed in this text through the use of rhetoric? As previously discussed, in the final stanzas Storni assumes the role of the dominant presence in her co-opting of situational control through the act of assigning conditions and granting limited permission to her male audience. Rhetorically, this is a technique that holds potential for use by all rhetors who are women and women of color, inasmuch as the rhetor may defiantly realize a position of relative power through decisive psychological and rhetorical tactics. Agency may therefore be seen not as a mirage, constantly out of reach, but as an attainable commodity, available through the subversion of position. I argue that this amounts to a sort of rhetorical "turning of the tables" upon the grammar of domination; indeed, the very use of language enables the agent to assume a circumstance of self-determination. To annex a grammar of command—that is, to take up the authority of directing focus—is to align oneself with the power that accompanies the assumption of agency.

Additionally, this text may also function to reveal how the rhetorical process sustains, and possibly overthrows, a construction of gender. As noted, Storni initially reveals the model of the sub-

missive Latina who is subject to expectations of chastity and silent tolerance. Rather than demurely accepting the prescribed template of the Latina's role in relation to her male counterpart, the rhetor challenges this pattern by calling attention to the faulty standards employed by an ideology of sexual domination within Latino/a culture. Instead of *sustaining* and *cultivating* the model of idealized Latina, the text stages a mutiny against this construction by shifting focus from the *expectations* for female comportment to the *actual behavior* of men in Latino/a culture. To deliberately redirect emphasis from these normalized patterns is to curtail their continuation. The result is a mood of discomfort, in which the double standard employed in many discursive settings with respect to the appropriate behavior for women and men is exposed as absurd.

The concept of identity is essential to the feminist method of criticism and to this study in particular, in that women's agency is the element that has been diluted by the strength and pervasive nature of the dominant ideology. What has served thus far as female identity must necessarily evolve within a discourse in which that ideology is being challenged; the female's conception of herself will adjust according to the new language adopted by a literature of resistance. As observed by Gwen Kirkpatrick: "It is as if the female voice in Storni's poetry speaks from (and against) the vision of the woman embodied in a male discourse" (386).

The rejection of the old identity is crucial if new space is to be created for the implantation of the seeds of new identity. To this end, a language must be developed that will replace the old language of marginalization. Storni accomplishes this by bestowing on her agent the astute ability to identify the inconsistencies in the acceptable parameters for both male and female behavior, and beyond that, to subvert the standard and create a new, more powerful identity. This new self-identification employs as its language a grammar of commands: the voice in the poem shifts from one that merely observes the plight of the Latina to one that assumes control over the rhetorical situation. Initially, argues Kirkpatrick: "The *tú* she addresses is the full possessor" (387). Indeed, he is at first the possessor of individual identity, voice, color, sexuality, and self-determination, but this relationship of possessor/possessed is undermined by the rhetor's adaptation of language in order to foster the growth of a newly envisioned and empowered female identity.

In analyzing this text through the lens of feminist rhetorical perspective, several conclusions emerge that serve to expand knowledge of feminist rhetoric in general. First, it becomes clear that the concept of *address* is of vast importance. The rhetor's method and tone in addressing an audience (either implicit or apparent) is a crucial component affecting the ways in which gender constructions will be understood and sustained within the discursive setting. The use of a frank, familiar voice will begin to erode the established authority of a dominant presence, and will place the rhetor in a more viable position in which to assume agency. Second, agency itself must begin to be regarded as an attainable goal in order for the dominant ideology to be challenged and resisted. Through the construction of a new and defiant grammar, agency may be reclaimed via the use of command and demand. According to Kenneth Burke, agency hinges largely on grammatical structures: the observations of "what is" versus "what shall be" are two different modes of articulating action within a situation, with two very different consequences (1340). This represents the difference between defining a situation and *creating* that which is to be defined. To arm oneself with the authority to make active declarations rather than passive observations is to empower oneself in the face of ideological and rhetorical domination.

Alfonsina Storni's feminist poem "Tú me quieres blanca" represents a radical departure from a more typically demure brand of poetry, particularly given its early entrance into the realm of feminist

discourse. Storni must thus be held up as a true pioneer in the arena of feminist thought. By flexing a defiant rhetorical muscle, Storni is able to call attention to the various ways in which Latina women are subjected to a mechanized and ingrained metaphor of gender expectation, a cultural narrative she challenges through her use of stark imagery and strength of voice. The text is useful in a feminist rhetorical application in that it illuminates the ways in which gender and behavioral norms are constructed through language, as well as the ways in which these constructions may be challenged and overthrown.

APPENDIX

Tú me quieres blanca

Tu me quieres alba;
me quieres de espumas;
me quieres de nácar,
Que sea azucena
sobre todas, casta
De perfume tenue.
Corolla cerrada.

Ni un rayo de luna
filtrado me haya,
ni una margarita
se diga mi hermana.
Tú me quieres blanca
tú me quieres nivea,
tú me quieres casta.

Tú, que hubiste todas
las copas a mano,
de frutos y mieles
los labios morados.
Tú, que en el banquete
cubierto de pámpanos,
dejaste las carnes
festejando a Baco.
Tú, que en los jardines
negros del Engaño
vestido de rojo
corriste al Estrago.

Tú, que el esqueleto
conservas intacto,
no sé todavía
por cuáles milagros

(Dios te lo perdone),
me pretendes casta
(Dios te lo perdone),
me pretendes alba.

Huye hacia los bosques;
vete a la montaña;
límpiame la boca;
vive en las cabañas;
toca con las manos
la tierra mojada;
alimenta el cuerpo
con raíz amarga;

bebe de las rocas;
duerme sobre la escarcha;
renueva tejidos
con salitre y agua
habla con los pajaros
y lévate al alba.

Y cuando las carnes
te sean tomadas,
y cuando hayas puesto
en ellas el alma,
que por las alcobas
se quedó enredada,
entonces, buen hombre,
preténdeme blanca,
preténdeme nivea,
preténdeme casta.

You Want Me White

You want me as the dawn;
you want me frothy;
you want me like mother-of-pearl,
That I would be a lily
above everything, pure.
Of fine perfume.
Closed petals.

Not a moonbeam
has filtered through me,

not a daisy
is said to be my sister.
You would have me white;
you would have me white as snow;
you want me pure.

You, who had all of
the goblets in your hand,
full of fruit and honey
your lips stained purple.
You, who in the banquet were
covered with leaves,
you left the meat
celebrating Bacchus.
You, who in the black gardens
of Deceit,
dressed in red,
ran to ruin.

You, whose skeleton
you preserve intact,
by which miracles
I still don't know
(May God forgive you),
you claim me to be pure
(May God forgive you),
you imagine me as the dawn.

Flee to the forest;
go to the mountain;
wash out your mouth;
live in the huts;
touch with your hands
the wet earth;
feed your body
with bitter root;

drink from the rocks;
sleep upon the frost;
renew tissues
with saltpeter and water;
speak with the birds
and rise up at dawn.
And when the flesh

has been returned to you,
and when you have put
your soul in it,
which because of the bedrooms
remained entangled,
then, good man,
you may
claim me as pure,
imagine me like snow,
have me pure.

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