

ROSARIO CASTELLANOS AT PHILOSOPHY'S DOORSTEP

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ABSTRACT: Rosario Castellanos is known as a literary author (not a philosopher), even though she studied philosophy and worked closely with *el grupo Hiperión* (the Hyperion Group), an important school of philosophy in mid-twentieth-century Mexico. In this essay I claim that her work—as often happens with female philosophers—has unjustly been kept out of the philosophical canon, largely because of gender bias. I argue further that we ought to approach her literary contributions as valuable albeit untraditional sources of *philosophical* thought. To make my case, I offer a reading of Castellanos's autobiographical novel *Rito de Iniciación*.

Keywords: Gender bias, *el grupo Hiperión*, canonical philosophy.

RESUMEN: Conocida como una autora literaria (no filosófica), Rosario Castellanos estudió filosofía y trabajó en cercanía al grupo Hiperión, una importante corriente del pensamiento filosófico de mediados del siglo XX en México. En este ensayo sostengo que la obra de Castellanos, como la de muchas mujeres en la filosofía, ha sido injustamente dejada al margen del canon filosófico, en gran medida por un sesgo de género. Sostengo que debemos aproximarnos a su obra literaria como una fuente valiosa pero no tradicional de pensamiento *filosófico*, lo que ejemplifico con mi lectura de su novela autobiográfica *Rito de iniciación*.

Palabras clave: Sesgo de género, el grupo hiperión, filosofía canónica.

Despite her many books and essays that examine the role of women in Mexican society and the unjust appropriation of men in all fields of culture, Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974) was left out of the academic philosophical canon and the philosophical conversation of her time, even by her close male friends, something she referred to as feeling *en el umbral* (“at the doorstep”) of philosophy, of culture, of life. Not much has changed since. In this essay, I contend that Castellanos is a significant figure in Mexican philosophy, and that her contribution was not given due consideration during her time—not even by the philosophical movement that became known as *la*

filosofía de lo mexicano (“Philosophy of Mexicanness”)—mainly because of the gender prejudice that she and the women of her generation were subjected to, and because of an equally biased notion that what counted as “real” philosophy was academic, white, and male.

What I defend in this essay is that Rosario Castellanos was unjustly excluded from professional philosophy, and particularly from the Hyperion Group (el Grupo Hiperión), even though she was philosophizing about many of the same themes. I will examine the ideas and philosophical climate in which Castellanos wrote her novel *Rito de iniciación* (*Rite of Passage* 1964), which I claim ought to be considered a portrait of el Grupo Hiperión, a source of philosophical thought, and an example of her rich and original contributions to *la filosofía de lo mexicano*. Finally, I will show that, because Castellanos, like other women in history, was ignored by histories of philosophy, journals, and academic curricula, we must question their reliability as an objective source of canonical works. More strongly, we need a broader conception of philosophy, one that allows us to look at *other* sources (for example, literature), something that challenges us to review our acceptance of the canon, and of the scope and the method of philosophy.

1. En El Umbral

Rosario Castellanos once said, “I have grown accustomed to standing at doorsteps” (Castellanos 2007: 376-379), a surprising statement for someone who wrote so many books, received so many prizes, enjoyed countless readers, and who was a teacher, a journalist, a diplomat, a woman who seemed never to have stopped at the doorstep of anything. But the truth is that her philosophical work has been underappreciated, when not simply ignored, for years. However, she should be read, analyzed, studied, and discussed widely, especially by philosophers interested in feminist philosophy, Mexican philosophy, or Latin American philosophy, not to mention philosophers interested in *la filosofía de lo mexicano* or “Mexicanness,” a movement best represented by the members of the Hyperion Group. In this section, I examine some of the ways in which Castellanos was excluded from this philosophical movement, and thus from *la filosofía de lo mexicano*, despite the fact that its members, *los hiperiones*, were all very close to her.

When Rosario Castellanos moved to Mexico City to study at the university after spending her childhood years in a small city of Chiapas, she quickly became friends with the extraordinary group of brilliant young men who became the intellectual elite of Mexican philosophy in the late 1940s and beginning of the 50s. They were the members of el Grupo Hiperión: Jorge Portilla, Luis Villoro, Emilio Uranga, Joaquín Sánchez McGregor, Salvador Reyes Nevárez, Fausto Vega, and Ricardo Guerra. Most were students of the Spanish refugee and philosopher José Gaos and influenced by the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, and the

historicism of José Ortega y Gasset, but their primary philosophical aim was to combine those European schools with Mexican philosophy (mainly represented by the works of Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, and Samuel Ramos) to provide an ontological account of “Mexican being” in order to analyze Mexican reality and transform it. They are often referred to as the “Mexican existentialists.”

Rosario Castellanos should have been a member of the Hiperión group, which would have given her work exposure in academia, would have placed her works in the middle of the philosophical discussion, and, perhaps, would have made the histories of Mexican philosophy in the past 70 years more inclusive. Also, it would have relieved her from the experience of being left at the doorstep, *en el umbral*, and, perhaps, from depression and the feeling of unworthiness, self-doubt, and anxiety. More importantly, the members of Hiperión got all the credit for the same things that she was also working on: the object of her investigation, her sense of social justice, her work on the self, the question concerning the phenomenology of being a Mexican woman. Even her thinking, her elegant writing, her sense of humor and irony, all tie her in a profound way to the Hiperión group. That there are so many parallels shouldn't be surprising: she belonged to their generation, and was a friend and fellow student to most of them. She even married one of them, Ricardo Guerra. She dedicated one of her most influential feminist texts, *Mujer que sabe latín*, to Luis Villoro.¹ But—as can be seen from the list of members—the Hiperión was an association for men only, and neither them nor their teachers—all men, including Leopoldo Zea, Antonio Caso, and José Gaos—dared to suggest that they include any women in the group. Why? Not because women were not accomplished.

Their female colleagues were impressive in their own right, and there were many: Victoria Junco, Monelisa Pérez-Marchand, Olga Victoria Quiroz-Martínez, Vera Yamuni, Carmen Rovira, Rosa Krauze, Celia Garduño, Elena Orozco, Lina Pérez, Jacqueline Pivert, and Ana Mass de Serrano, to name a few.² A bit older than the rest but very much present, Paula Gómez Alonzo³ wrote the first philosophy graduate

¹ *The Woman Who Knows Latin* (1973) is a nod to the well-known adage in Spanish: *mujer que sabe latín, ni encuentra marido ni tiene buen fin*, which literally means “a woman that knows Latin will not find a husband nor have a good ending.” Perhaps it can be better understood in the light of these two sayings: “good women are rarely clever, and clever women are rarely good,” and “nobody loves a clever woman.”

² Other women philosophers sometimes associated with el Hiperión, like Juliana González (b. 1936), Olbeth Hansberg (b. 1943), and Margarita Valdés (b. 1942) were much younger, and, in some cases, they were students (sometimes becoming wives) of some of the members of the group. Although Graciela Hierro (b. 1928) was just one year younger than Ricardo Guerra (b. 1927), she entered academic philosophy later (1966), when Hiperión had already dissolved.

³ Paula Gómez Alonzo (b. 1896) was born around the same time as Antonio Caso (b. 1883-6), and four years before José Gaos (b. 1900). In 1952, she traveled with Leopoldo Zea to the Popular Republic of China.

dissertation in 1933, titled *La cultura femenina* (1933). Rosario Castellanos's own master's thesis, *Sobre cultura femenina* (1950), was a nod to Gómez Alonzo's text. Also absent from the Hiperión was Zoraida Pineda Campusano⁴ who, as Castellanos once remarked, "was the first and only woman attending the courses of Philosophy at [the old building known as] Mascarones" (Castellanos 1973: 29).⁵

The members of the Hiperión group, or los hiperiones, were surrounded by female intellectuals, but, despite their many achievements, no women were invited to join. Castellanos was no exception. By excluding them from the Hiperión, the paradigmatic example of the philosophical "elite," women philosophers were kept "at the doorstep" both of the group and, in fact, of philosophy itself. In his memoir *Vida y trama filosófica en la U.N.A.M. (1940-1960)* (1989), Eusebio Castro estimates that women were about ninety percent of the total student population in the Department of Philosophy. However apparently unmoved by this fact, in his book he provides the following "colorful" anecdote of what life was like at Mascarones back then for "the girls." He says:

In that literary and philosophical atmosphere (...) we celebrated student elections, concerts, dances, and the crowning of the School Queen (...) The Department of Philosophy stood out (...) due to the attraction (...) posed by the great many beautiful young women there—about ninety percent of all the students enrolled (...) It was not surprising, then, that (...) such an environment, with an abundance of beautiful girls, was the perfect venue from which to choose the School Queen. (Castro 1989: 32-33)

Castro considered the by-no-means-meager female population an "aesthetic element of feminine charm or feminine intelligence that dulcified the atmosphere" (ibid.). But what exactly did Castro mean by "feminine intelligence"?

Castro speaks only in passing of the overwhelming majority of women in the Department of Philosophy (ninety percent of the entire student population!), and singles out *only* three women. The first is Paula Gómez Alonzo. He makes no reference to her many books, or her dissertation (the very first philosophy dissertation!), and instead emphasizes that she is a "faithful follower (...) student and disciple of Antonio Caso" (136-137). He also mentions Rosa Krauze, whom he describes as "a young and lovely student of philosophy who, some years later, would write [the book] *La filosofía*

⁴ Pineda Campusano (b. 1906) was also the author of the interesting volume *Memorias de una Estudiante de Filosofía* ("A Memoir of a Woman Student of Philosophy") (1963).

⁵ The building known as 'Mascarones,' often spoken about in books, letters, and memoirs, was the site of the first Department of Philosophy, where los hiperiones and Rosario Castellanos studied. It also housed literature, theater, and other academic majors. The old school was replaced in the 50s when the university moved to the current "Ciudad Universitaria."

de Antonio Caso (1961)" (30). The third woman Castro highlights is Vera Yamuni, whom he calls his "colleague and friend" (116), and says that she was a "student, disciple and close associate of [José] Gaos and of his philosophical work until his very last days, [as well as] an example of *feminine intelligence*" (110; added emphasis).

We begin to see a pattern emerge.

Castro singled out (only) these three women because they dedicated themselves to studying the works of their *male* teachers. That is exactly what Castro means by "feminine intelligence": women dedicating their intellectual talent to study the work of men as the subject of their philosophical investigation, while 'masculine' intelligence, or simply intelligence (as it obviously doesn't need to be gendered) like the one displayed by los hiperiones, is not linked to any one subject in particular. Of course, Gómez Alonzo, Krauze, and Yamuni went beyond the study of male philosophers (i.e., that which earned them Castro's "praise"), and they published remarkable and original works and essays, given that their actual "feminine intelligence" was certainly not circumscribed to analyses of their male counterparts.⁶ However, Castro's decision to silence those other achievements is useful in explaining why, in the founding of the famous "Round Table of Philosophy" in 1945, as soon as the bylaws were established, "the issue" was raised: Would women be allowed to participate? Castro recounts:

The Zapotec philosopher López was the first to speak. (...) Women? No way!... Others remembered Husserl's words: women are not made for philosophy... Someone else quoted Nietzsche: "short ideas and long hair"... [Schopenhauer:] woman is the deadliest animal of all creation... a bait of Nature to force us into perpetuating the species. (1989:151)

Another example of exclusion can be found in Oswaldo Díaz Ruanova's book *Los existencialistas mexicanos* (1982), in which he writes that, after class ended, "The 'hiperiones' would continue the discussion of the 'a priori' in La Rambla, a Porfirian *cantina* that was famous for its snacks" (Díaz Ruanova 1982: 202).

Let's pause here to underline that in Mexico women were legally banned from cantinas until 1981, which usually posted a sign on the door that read: *No dogs, women, indigents, men in uniforms, and minors allowed.*⁷ So, members of the Hiperión could

⁶ Gómez Alonzo published at least five books between 1933 and 1966 and many newspaper articles; see: https://divcsh.izt.uam.mx/cefilibe/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Gomez_Alonzo_Paula.pdf. Krauze wrote at least four books between 1961 and 2004, in addition to many newspaper articles; see: https://divcsh.izt.uam.mx/cefilibe/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Krauze_Rosa.pdf. Yamuni published at least three books between 1951 and 2000, apart from several articles in newspapers and journals; see: https://divcsh.izt.uam.mx/cefilibe/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Yamuni_Tabush_Vera.pdf.

⁷ Even now, in 2022, there are cities as allegedly 'cosmopolitan' as Monterrey that have men-only admission to cantinas, despite the Constitutional law that prohibits (and penalizes) the banning of any

discuss the “a priori” to their heart’s content, but they invariably did it in the absence of the “lovely” señoritas.

In 1950, Rosario Castellanos graduated with a dissertation that she would publish that same year with the title *Sobre cultura femenina*, which is reminiscent of the influential work *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, as it also surveys what male philosophers have written about women throughout history. Castellanos’s dissertation is written with her characteristic sarcasm, and although reportedly throughout the examination laughter was heard coming out from the room where she defended her thesis, Ricardo Guerra would eventually disclose that the members of the jury in her exam were “furious because they said women did not need to think, and much less speak openly.”⁸ In any case, and despite all the laughing that her sharp wit easily provoked, Castellanos, just like De Beauvoir, was always quite serious about how women had been viewed in history by male philosophers. And yet, after graduating, Castellanos began to drift away from academic philosophy which, as was becoming clearer every day, did not welcome female philosophers. In *Mujer que sabe latín*, she recalls: “the philosophical language was inaccessible to me (...) and the only concepts that I could grasp were those disguised as metaphors” (Castellanos 1973: 205). Yet, with a *different* philosophical language, perhaps more akin to the “literary” kind, she would produce several magnificent essays, like those she wrote about De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Simone Weil, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Jean Paul Sartre, among many others. It is no surprise that she even went on to say in her article “Poetas filósofos”: “The boundaries between philosophy and poetry are so intimately intertwined that it is difficult to determine the limits and the extents of each discipline” (Castellanos 2004: 40).

But it is easy to see why the kind of philosophy that dominated the old school of Mascarones at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 50s would have seemed “inaccessible” to Castellanos: language itself, particularly the language of philosophy, *was spoken in the masculine*. But let’s say with more precision, it *still* speaks in the masculine. In *Sobre cultura femenina*, Castellanos would courageously call out an enclosing horizon:

person on the basis of sex, gender or sexual preference from commercial establishments. For an example of this, see: <https://www.opinion51.com/p/romandiamujerescantina>

⁸ In her Introduction to *Sobre cultura femenina*, Gabriela Cano reports that the session “was inundated by laughter (...) The members of the committee—professors Eusebio Castro, Paula Gómez Alonso (sic), Eduardo Nicol, Leopoldo Zea and Bernabé Navarro—could not refrain from bursting into laughter (...) The audience also laughed loudly,” (FCE, Mexico 2005:31) whereas Ricardo Guerra had a different recollection of that day. In an interview, he said: “cuando ella presentó su tesis (...) [r]ecuerdo que el jurado estaba furioso porque decía que la mujer no tenía por qué pensar, y mucho menos hablar libremente” (https://www.cronica.com.mx/notas-ricardo_guerra_cuenta_su_amor_y_vida_con_rosario_castellanos-1094812-2018.html).

[t]he world that remains tightly closed to me has a name: it is called Culture. Its inhabitants are all male. They call themselves Men, and Humanity is the name they have given to their ability of residing in the world of culture and to accommodate themselves in it. (Castellanos 2018:82-83)

It is that world that emanates from the written works of los hiperiones. They, who were so interested in studying *el ser del mexicano* (“Mexican being”), who wrote books and essays analyzing Mexican intellectuals, philosophers, indigenous people, or the meaning of “relajo,” all wrote in the masculine, and from a *male point of view*. They turned the masculine into the “universal,” and they received praise and recognition in return.

2. Rito de Iniciación

In Spanish, unlike in English, gender is written into the ending of words. Someone might point out that the Royal Spanish Academy, which largely prescribes our use of Spanish in Mexico, has determined that using the two plural formulas, as in “*todos* [male form] y *todas*” [female form], instead of the single male form “*todos*” [universal form] goes “against the principle of economy of language and is based on extra-linguistic motives,” so that referring to a group as “*todas*,” even if the group is composed of, say, one million five hundred women and only one man, is “incorrect.”¹⁰ But the Royal Spanish Academy fails to acknowledge that accepting the male plural as the *universal* form of the plural is nothing but a linguistic convention that privileges the male form over the female form—as when someone refers to the “history of *man*” when they mean the “history of *humankind*”—and that it is preserved *only* in the name of tradition or conservatism; that is, on the basis of “extra-linguistic motives.”

The male plural as the universal plural, and the use of the word “man” to refer to “humankind” is what Castellanos—and every woman around her—found in the writings of los hiperiones. And, even if we grant that they were only obeying the semantic rules and tradition of the time, and did not subscribe to gender bias, what explains why they failed to cite any of the many books written by the women whom they knew personally, or any other women, for that matter?

If language was not a faithful reflection of the misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy that dominates every linguistic and extra-linguistic order of life, *real life*, perhaps not only would los hiperiones have included women among its members, but maybe their writings and language would have reflected gender plurality. However, the essays of Rosario Castellanos, whose themes, such as auto-gnosis, self-knowledge, and

⁹ Jorge Portilla, another of the hiperiones, wrote *La fenomenología del relajo* (“The Phenomenology of *Relajo*”). *Relajo* is a word that describes disorderly conduct, rebellious and jesting, which, for Portilla, was a Mexican state of being.

¹⁰ <https://www.rae.es/espanol-al-dia/los-ciudadanos-y-las-ciudadanas-los-ninos-y-las-ninas>

transformation—all wrought with irony, humor, deepness, a critical eye, social sensitivity, etc.—substantially overlapped with those written by los hiperiones and which were known to them, were never cited by her “close” male friends, who seemed to prefer to keep them at a safe distance, just as the male-dominated history of philosophy had done with Sor Juana’s amazing philosophical works, which were relegated to a literary category, “women’s writing,” which has the ring of “women’s work.” Rosario Castellanos saw clearly that, for a woman:

(...) from the moment that she is born (...) education starts to work on the given material to mold it into its destiny and transform it into a morally acceptable being, that is, a socially useful being. Thus, she is stripped off her spontaneity to act, she is prohibited from the initiative of making decisions; she is taught to obey the commandments of an ethic that is completely foreign to her, with no justification and rationale but that of serving the interests, purposes, and ends of others. (Castellanos 1973: 14)

The way of “adapting” the given material—*i.e.*, the woman—Castellanos goes on to say, is to expel her from the “religious congregation, the political agora, the university classroom” (9). That is why someone like her will have to search, almost painfully, for “another way of being (...) human and free” (Castellanos 2014:213).¹¹

Castellanos was kept “at the doorway” of philosophy because the academy did not welcome women, did not acknowledge the contributions of women, and did nothing to highlight the accomplishment of women in the histories of philosophical thought or in the classroom, like teaching about women philosophers present or past. Nevertheless, she must have believed that a decade after, in the 60s, perhaps Mexico had changed enough for her to give philosophy a second chance because she began to write *Rito de iniciación*, a kind of memoir of her years as a student of philosophy with many of los hiperiones as her classmates. During a conference in 1964, she announced that she had finished the novel; but later, in 1969, she told a journalist that she had decided to destroy the manuscript. When, finally, the book was published (posthumously) in 1997, the publisher Eduardo Mejía explained that, at the time when she was writing the novel, Castellanos held a job at UNAM, and that she had read some passages to her fellow workers. But “one unfavorable, devastating opinion (...) made her afraid of the response of her colleagues [to the book, so she] collected the copies from her friends and the publishing house, and destroyed them” (Introduction to *Rito de iniciación*, Alfaguara 1997: 371). Mejía explains that only the original manuscript that she had kept survived, which was how the novel was finally preserved.

¹¹ *Otra forma de ser* is a verse from the poem *Meditación en el umbral* (“Meditation At the Doorstep,” included in the book *Poesía no eres tú*, 2014: 172).

Castellanos was usually a courageous writer, so one can only speculate that a deeply-ingrained fear of the censure of the (predominantly male) opinion and the (predominantly male) philosophical academy dissuaded her from publishing a finished book that delved too intimately, and too critically, into the philosophical environment at the UNAM, which, incidentally, has barely changed.¹² Perhaps, apart from the censure, she also feared for her job, on which she depended financially.

The experience of being a man or a woman in Mexico is very different. Central concepts of Hiperión member Emilio Uranga such as accidentality, *corazonada* (“intimation”), *zozobra* and *nepantla* were used by him to reflect philosophically on the (male) Mexican being.¹³ But for us Mexican women (and I shall return later to some of these concepts in the context of Castellano’s novel), “accidentality” is substance; *corazonada* is what we are accused of having, instead of logical reasoning; and *zozobra* is not the ontological achievement as los hiperiones conceived it, but the condition of our being in a country in which we seem to be fully, and simply, *nepantla*, “in-between.” This is a social fact. Just ask Sor Juana.¹⁴ Or ask Rosario Castellanos—something we can’t do by exploring her archives, because they do not exist.¹⁵ So our only option is to examine her literary writings, keeping in mind that literature was perhaps the only way in which she found the liberty to express her philosophical thoughts. As Polish-born author Samuel Gordon—who was a student of Castellanos in Jerusalem—said:

We must remember (...) that Rosario Castellanos graduated as a student of philosophy, **not** literature. Maybe that is why the program she submitted for the second year [at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem]—1972-1973—belonged more to the universe of Mexican philosophy than to that of Mexican

¹² This, at least, is what the group Mujeres Organizadas de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras argued when they occupied the Department of Philosophy in 2019. The list of their petitions can be seen at: <https://archivodemujeres.omeka.net/exhibits/show/tomaffyl>

¹³ I follow Carlos Sanchez in his book *Emilio Uranga's Analysis of Mexican Being. A Translation and Critical Introduction* (Bloomsbury Academic, London/New York, 2021) which translates ‘corazonada’ as “intimation,” but chooses not to translate ‘zozobra’ and ‘nepantla.’

¹⁴ Although ‘nepantla’ is a philosophical concept used by Uranga, meaning the ontological state of “being in-between” or “in the middle,” which points to what Castellanos meant by being “*en el umbral*,” interestingly, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born in the actual town called [San Miguel de] Nepantla, which can be interpreted in a way that the “in-between-ness,” or being ‘nepantla,’ is, in fact, the ontological fate of women philosophers in Mexico. Apropos of the term ‘Nepantla,’ José Emilio Pacheco quoted another famous writer, Carlos Monsiváis, when he said that with “Rosario Castellanos began the literature of Mexican women; she made possible that the walls of Nepantla—the middle land, no-one’s land—that had been since Sor Juana’s times both the home and the prison cell of our women writers, started to crumble down. It is thanks to Rosario Castellanos that Mexican women found their voices.” (Castellanos 1974: 7)

¹⁵ Unlike the archives of many male philosophers that are guarded jealously in public universities and libraries.

literature (...) Rosario Castellanos (...) chose to teach a remarkable course about the essence of Mexicanness, that began with Samuel Ramos' *El perfil del hombre y la cultura* [Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico] and ended with Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo*. (Gordon, 2013)

Other women in philosophy, notably Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, also rejected seeing their writing as philosophical. De Beauvoir said of herself: "... Sartre is a philosopher, and I am not, and I never really wanted to be a philosopher. I like philosophy very much, but I have not created a philosophical opus. My field is literature. I am interested in novels, memoirs, essays, such as *The Second Sex*. However, none of these is philosophy" (Beauvoir 1979: 338). And Arendt protested against being considered a philosopher when she said in an interview: "I don't belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher nor do I believe I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers."¹⁶ Rosario Castellanos was in good company.

As remarkable—and significant—as it was that Castellanos used philosophical books in her course of Mexican literature in Jerusalem, the fact that she included many women writers with the men was just as unusual, remarkable, and significant. She examined the works of Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro, and Josefina Vicens (who wrote under a male pseudonym), alongside the male household names: Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, and of course Luis Villoro, and Emilio Uranga, among others.

In the next section, I will examine *Rito de iniciación*, which is in a way a memoir of her student years and a reflection on the phenomenon of identity, 'otherness,' the transformation of the sense of 'self' in the woman protagonist,¹⁷ and a call to expand the canon of philosophy and *see women's literature as a form of philosophy*.¹⁸ Furthermore, I believe that the book is also a declaration of principles against the way in which it had come to be accepted to silence, make invisible, delegitimize, and subordinate women to men in the world of academic philosophy: the protagonist's journey through the night is a symbolic transformation (or 'rite of passage') to stop 'revolving' around what other people choose to think, or do, and instead making herself her own nucleus or center.

3. Otras Fuentes

Because Castellanos, like most women during her time, was virtually banned from philosophizing professionally, we should not expect to find in her works the regular structure of, say, a philosophy treatise, or even a 'paper.' As I have argued elsewhere

¹⁶ <http://www.arendtcenter.it/en/2016/12/11/hannah-arendt-zur-person-im-gesprach-with-gunter-gaus/>

¹⁷ For example, see Patricia Zúñiga's "Rito de iniciación. Un caleidoscopio de realidades" (2003: 6-9).

¹⁸ Here I quote Carlisle (2022).

(Del Río 2022: 82-83), in order to access the philosophical writings that have been excluded from the canon, it is useful to remember the lesson of Miguel León-Portilla's 1956 foundational book *La filosofía náhuatl: estudiada en sus fuentes* (or "Nahuatl Philosophy, Studied in Its Sources"). León-Portilla wrote against the common allegation that pre-Hispanic thought was not philosophy, but rather poetry with literary but no epistemic value. León-Portilla knew that if he was to demonstrate the philosophical content of Nahuatl thought, he would have to turn to non-traditional sources. When we explore the philosophical contributions of women, we must do the same, because their voices have been silenced, invisibilized, by excluding them, first, from the philosophical discussion in groups, like the Hiperión group, and then from the histories of philosophy and the curricula in academic philosophy. So, we need to look elsewhere, in *other* sources—such as newspapers articles, letters, testimonies, interviews, literature, etc. That is what I propose we do with the novel by Castellanos.

Rito de iniciación can be described as an example of the Hiperión movement, which, although it was labeled as "Mexican existentialism," had some major differences with the rest. It was a movement characterized by a hopeful quest for (A) self-discovery, and (B) cultural emancipation, and, in that sense, it was a contrast with the pessimistic 'mood' of European existentialism and its accompanying anxiety, nothingness, and sense of the absurd. That same hopeful quest was very much present in Castellanos's novel, especially when, in the ending, the long journey of the protagonist through the night, ends with her discovering herself as a "new being." However, Hiperión was blind to the predominant culture of sexism, which was, and still is, particularly serious in Mexico, and that is where Castellanos brought in her own voice, which could have enriched the movement. For that, I will add it as the element (C) of Mexican existentialism that she brought to the table of philosophy: her novel is unique in that the main character is a woman whose individual quest for liberation speaks to that blind spot of the Hiperión. In Castellanos, Mexican existentialism metamorphoses into feminism, and that is one of her great contributions to Mexican and universal philosophy. Another woman writer, Elena Poniatowska rightly said that, with her dissertation (1950), Castellanos established the intellectual point of departure for the liberation of the Mexican woman" (Castellanos 1974: 7).¹⁹ Indeed, Castellanos went on to reflect on feminism in most of her books and articles, and in *Rito de iniciación* she seems to return to that which was her first published philosophical text, where, almost fifteen years before, she wrote:

Abstract thinking, objectivity, the ability to project beyond oneself, to identify with others through the art of literature, seems a gift that has been denied to the woman that writes [...] Perhaps after a deliberate effort, after a long

¹⁹ See also Lamas (2017).

discipline, the gift of objectivity will be conquered [and then, we can only hope it will be aimed towards] her inner self [...] once that bottom core (*that tradition ignores or distorts, that the usual concepts do not reveal*) has been reached, she will be able to bring it to the conscious surface in order to liberate it through expression. (Castellanos 2018: 213-214. My emphasis.)

Since her untimely death in 1974 (she was 48 years old), there seems to be a slow but growing consensus to finally consider Castellanos as a philosopher in her own right. A recent example of this can be found in a recent presentation by Manuel Vargas where he talked about her affinity with the Hiperión group. However, by way of caution, Vargas warns us against another form of epistemic injustice, perhaps that which Linda Martin Alcoff has identified as the problem “of speaking for others” (Alcoff 1991-1992):

Although it is undoubtedly true that Castellanos is interested in gender in the Mexico of her time, it is unclear how much Castellanos viewed herself as responding to or critiquing the project of her friends and teachers, and indeed, how much the existentialist and phenomenological concerns of the Hyperion Group were her concerns. (Vargas 2021)

More importantly, Vargas believes that, despite the striking parallels with the concerns of both Mexican and French existentialists, we “might worry that in reading her as essentially engaged in a project of philosophy *de la mexicana*,” we risk projecting “alien, self-serving concerns on to her, making her compliance with our interests and values a condition of the visibility and relevance of her work.” Caution is in order, he says, because her first (and main) philosophical text, *Sobre cultura femenina*, “has no citation of Heidegger, Sartre, or Beauvoir.”

Although I consider Vargas’s (and Alcoff’s) reservations important, I believe there is no risk of projecting “alien, self-serving concerns” (Vargas) onto Castellanos, therefore affecting the “meaning and truth” (Alcoff) of her work, provided that we keep two things in mind. The first is that rather than a lack of interest or identification with De Beauvoir, Heidegger, or Sartre, the absence of quotes responds to the time factor: *The Second Sex* was not available in Mexico in 1949, and the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre was introduced to the Mexican philosophical discussion by the Hiperión group, which was barely being formed in 1948, so she could not have incorporated citations of their texts in her dissertation. Other than that, she did subscribe with the objectives of doing a philosophy “*de la mexicana*,” which brings us to the second thing to keep in mind: as I have argued, Castellanos was very much invested in the same philosophical concerns as los hiperiones, with one big exception: *the gender issue*, which—as she points out in the quote above—“*tradition ignores or*

distorts, (and) the usual concepts do not reveal." But that is precisely the originality of her contribution to the movement of "Mexicanness," for which she never got credit.

What happens when we use other concepts (instead of the "usual" ones), and a different canon (one that questions and dismantles the tradition that "ignores or distorts" the gender issue), is that it becomes possible, just as Castellanos hoped in 1950, for the bottom core to emerge to the "conscious surface" to be "liberated through expression," an expression not confined to the 'literary' kind, but that reaches into philosophy.

Rito de iniciación is edgy, at times cynical and ironical, and always intelligent, analytical, dazzling, and—to top it all—beautifully written. Above all, it is the personal testimony of a young girl from the provinces who arrives in the big city with her heavy luggage full of prejudices, ghosts, and fears, and transforms into *una mujer de palabras*, "a woman of words," as Castellanos described herself in the poem *Pasaporte* (Castellanos 2014: 221). But how does she achieve this? First, by shifting her "center of gravity" from the others onto herself (A=self-discovery); then by shifting the foreign cultural models (for example, her literary heroines) to an identification with Mexico, represented by the "City" (B=cultural emancipation); third, by liberating herself from sexism (C=gender emancipation). So, the novel achieves the two big goals shared with el grupo Hiperion, A and B, and even surpasses them by adding C. Los hiperiones, and by extension, the world of philosophy in general, were blind to this, or at least they never acknowledged it in their works.

Rito de iniciación is also a wonderful fresco of the period, in which Castellanos portrays the students, who prefer to "waste time talking in the corridors or the cafeteria" rather than reading in the library (Castellanos 2016: 96); the old professor, who opens his house to the students and lets himself be worshipped, reclining, with studied naturalness, in the cushions of a chaise longue and talking without pause while his sister—who could also very well be his wife, his secretary, his servant, his slave, or his nurse—goes around serving refreshments in silence; the elderly female writers, united by a history of loneliness, envy, and frustration; and Susana, whose only aspiration is to find a husband. Cecilia, the protagonist, asks Susana a rhetorical question aimed really at herself: "Do you think it's worth to write a book?" to which Susana replies: "I don't. There are so many books already" (Castellanos 2016: 268). But Susana does what women were expected to do: look for a husband, and settle.

Instead, Cecilia could be seen as Rosario Castellanos's alter ego. Like her, Cecilia cannot adapt to the family, the place or time in which she was born. Castellanos described her own infancy in these words: "I was a child who lived in Comitán, Chiapas, in the middle of the sixteenth century." (2007: 267. My emphasis.)

To the triple disgrace of being born a woman, in Mexico, in the "middle of the sixteenth century," Rosario/Cecilia must add the tragedy (and guilt) of the death of a brother who, being male, was of course deemed irreplaceable. Rosario/Cecilia will seek

shelter from a harsh reality in the parallel universe of literature, “because the world (...) gave me vertigo” (2016: 186-187). But what was able to alleviate that vertigo? *Las vocales* (“The vowels,” 2016: 192). In the novel, literature is not so much an escape as it is freedom from a world in which Cecilia simply does not fit. Yet, in order to become a writer, Rosario/Cecilia will have to face, and defeat, a prejudice that is present in the novel, even if the concept had not yet been coined: the “impostor syndrome.”²⁰

Once in college at Mexico City, Cecilia meets Sergio, who becomes a close friend because both feel a bit like “outsiders”: he is a closeted homosexual in *machista* Mexico of the 1950s, and she is socially awkward and far removed from the idealized heroines that she idolized in her youth: “There was no escaping that limbo through a heroic destiny (...) Her own personal tragedies would never amount to much more than a run in her stockings, a bad date, a missed opportunity to use a good pun” (2016: 80).

At the University, Cecilia/Rosario discovers the frivolous intellectual atmosphere that lies under the insecure, yet patronizing eyes of her male teachers and colleagues.²¹ Years after writing the book, Castellanos would point out that “(...) as a girl, one had to play the fool in order to be accepted by the male students. They could not stand even the slightest competition [and they had] a medieval idea of what a woman ought to be like” (Poniatowska 2004).

In her desperate quest for a better fate than being in the “in-between-ness” of nepantla, Cecilia/Rosario will initiate a relationship with Ramón Mariscal/Ricardo Guerra, which is interrupted when he accepts a scholarship to study in Europe. She then expressed something she had not felt before:

Cecilia wished she could be him in order to leave, to go far away, anywhere in the world, never to return. But Cecilia was not him, she was only herself, and she never would be anyone but herself, and this certitude produced in her a sadness that she was unable to conceal [...] what had saddened her, even terrified her, was, perhaps, to have discovered [that he was] her gravitational center. (2016: 268)

After they break up, Cecilia falls into *zozobra*, which (exactly as Uranga wanted) she will eventually transform into something else, a present open to possibilities: Now that Ramón is leaving, the prison cell crumbles, and I am set free. Yes, nothing and no one can force me into obeying a rule, or follow a concept. I can forget myself, who I am, what I want (...) I can dissolve, evaporate. I can die. (278)

²⁰ The notion “impostor phenomenon” was introduced by Clance and Imes (1978).

²¹ Zoraida Pineda Campusano also portrays that same environment in her memoir (cited above).

But slowly Cecilia begins to realize that this means to 'die' to the cultural demands of learning "the art of being agreeable" (200). By this death, she will find (B) the coveted "cultural emancipation" (reivindicated by the Hiperión group) symbolized in the procurement of a new "identity card" (279), to "live on her own" (282). She will then be able to (A) find herself, take the pen "like a bullfighter takes killing instruments," (283) but first she needs closure, to say goodbye to all who have travelled with her along her pilgrimage. To Sergio, who with his "siren call" had asked her to agree to a marriage of convenience; to Ramón and his invitation to spend one last night together; and to Susana and Alberto, with their "perfect couple" farce.

Cecilia says goodbye to Ramón, and refuses to let him accompany her. She tells him, "If I am to become accustomed to loneliness, I better start now" (307), and heads down the empty street that leads to a public square where "the urban dimensions, seemingly huge in the light of day [now, at night] had diminished to the perceptual scope of the senses, and the synthetic exercise of intelligence" (ibid.). It is then that Cecilia can turn inward: "This is my circumference, and it ends here, where my fingers touch, where my footsteps stop, where my eyes reach (307).

Cecilia then makes a decision: "This city and I will be friends," and just like that she engages in the search for the "real face" of a Mexico that exists beyond the "Babylonian figures underneath which it hides to preserve the privacy of its core, its secret" (308), and, along with her development into an "autonomous entity," in that same measure she becomes able to "contemplate, face to face, the gorgeous, naked, unarmed, linear creature" that no longer hides under its "arbitrariness, unpredictable, inevitable inconstancy," but instead strips itself of artifices in order to reveal that, behind the appearance of a hostile chaos, "there is an underlying order, and law" (308). Cecilia realizes that the City has become a teacher:

From her I will imitate the art of infinite metamorphoses and ultimate immutability, which is not a contradiction or even a conciliatory pact, but two ways of having access to the same object: the way of those that do not transcend the spinning of vertigo and keep going round and round, and the way of those that find themselves in the beyond, in the now, in stillness. (308)

The City opens its arms to Cecilia, as if to a long-lost child returning home after many years. Immersed in the City, Cecilia can now sing a song of freedom: "Joy, joy of being myself":

This is how this miracle, the perfect synchronicity between us two, takes place: Do you see how I manage to mirror that which surrounds me? From my own identity, I respect limits, admire, and identify with the rest (...) I am strict, and

concrete, but, just like the atmosphere, I am newly born to enrich the universe by placing in its reality a being that was not there before. (309)

In that materialization of her “new” being, in the celebration of her discovery of the City, and of herself, Cecilia begins the final, most radical of returns:

(...) resting an elbow on the handrail of acceptance, I look back to find that nothing of what I have had and nothing of what I have not had, nothing of what I have been given and nothing of what has been taken from me was ever unnecessary. (ibid.)

And it is this moment that leads to the revelation: the “epiphany of language” (315) that will open the consecutive doors of the kingdom:

... one after another (...) so that I may be the marvelled, thankful, joyous guest (...) and so there is no more of this you and me that presently constraints and divides us. For the moment to consummate is not yet here, that moment when—just like when the reins of the horses that stamp the floor with impatience are released—the final obstacles are overcome, the moment of reconciliation, the unique moment toward which the entire universe is readying itself and flowing into. (316)

Cecilia prepares to turn her sacred, symbolic ship in the direction of that reconciliation when, without warning, she is interrupted by the hissing voice that every single Mexican woman has been startled by at least once during their life: “Where are you going all alone, *mamacita*? Someone might kidnap you” (ibid.).

The joyous hymn of life is stopped abruptly. Perhaps the City has turned its back on Cecilia by allowing those repulsive, sibilating words to be uttered. These are words that have arisen from that male-dominated culture from which she seeks to be liberated: *mamacita* is used by many Mexican men as one of the most abject of sexual “compliments.” By reproducing it, Castellanos also introduces a national characteristic in a larger concept, “sexual harassment” (a term that had not yet been coined),²² and in doing so she points to another concept that would only be developed much later by feminist philosophy, which is the idea of “situatedness” (Harding 1992). The whole sentence, *Where are you going all alone, mamacita? Someone might kidnap you*, has a multiplicity of philosophical connotations. Of course, as just words they might seem ridiculous in a public place in the light of day, but to a woman alone in the middle of the night in a deserted square, in a country where seven in every ten females over the

²² The term was introduced in 1975.

age of 15 has been a victim of gender violence,²³ and an average of ten women are murdered every day,²⁴ they are something different: a warning that her life is actually in grave danger. Unlike to the man who speaks them, for whom they are a prelude to a “testimony of virility, an advertising of his aptitudes as a seducer, a springboard for more audacious enterprises to come, of greater shine, of more advantage” (285).

Cecilia, however, manages to get a grip on her fear. She refuses to let herself be intimidated. Instead, she accelerates her pace and goes inside a dark, abandoned tunnel, thereby untying “the ropes that yoked me to shore” (318). That is how she recovers from the initial shock:

I close the ears to his shouts and calls, I shut my eyes, I stand alone. In my spine still reverberates the shudder that seized me in the face of danger (...) and I ignore if I am now closer or farther from danger, if I was able to ward it off or instead I triggered it further and this will culminate in a cataclysm. [But perhaps I could] go back, even if I have come so far? Not anymore. (318)

No, there is no going back. Not anymore. The “birth tunnel” is:

the true one, that which was not the result of a fortuitous combination of coincidences, the blind clash of instincts (...) or the response to someone else's appetite, but the one which is my own, for which I am accountable, responsible, and obligated to comply. (ibid.)

On the other side of the tunnel, Cecilia can see the dawning of the new day. She has defeated the night, fear, and fatigue:

Occupying almost the entire length of the street, the huge sweeper machine advanced slowly, and noisily. Next to it, the fast, silent bicycles zigzagged snubbing the straight line and taking joy in their undulating movements with a boast of balance and skill. Behind them came the milk truck. And then other trucks that transported perplexed bricklayers and early-rising office workers. From her spot, Cecilia watched the movement like behind a cloud of mist, behind a veil of tears. She felt distant, overwhelmed, and utterly happy. (322)

The metamorphosis is complete; the cocoon has transformed into a butterfly, and the young, provincial, awkward girl has become “a woman of words.”

²³ https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2022/endireh/Endireh2021_Nal.pdf

²⁴ https://www.observatoriofemicinidiodemexico.org/_files/ugd/ba8440_9a5cdf1db02f497e9e6b62c007163d3b.pdf

4. Conclusion

Rito de iniciación is only one example of a mature text with a feminist message, as illustrated by the fragments here quoted. But it is also a profound reflection that brings philosophy down from the ivory tower where it has so often resided to remind us that, in its ancient Greek origins, philosophy was actually born as poetry, their boundaries so “intimately intertwined” that it proves difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. By confining a poet like Rosario Castellanos to the (peripheral) world of ‘literature’ (or even worst: of *women’s literature*) and excluding her from the philosophical canon, philosophy cancels itself, forgets itself, and strips itself from the opportunity “to enrich the universe by placing in its reality a being that was not there before.” And wasn’t the goal of the “Mexican existentialists” the construction of a new Mexican being and a new Mexican identity, in order to achieve decolonized cultural emancipation? Yet they too ignored the struggle, the fight of women for equality, even when it was in the voice of Rosario Castellanos, someone they appreciated and cared for as their colleague and friend.

One of los hiperiones, Luis Villoro, once wrote that the goal of a philosophical reflection should not be to formulate answers, but to formulate new questions.²⁵ If that is the case, this novel and most of Rosario Castellanos’s writings are indeed *philosophical* reflections regarding identity, otherness, self-discovery, cultural emancipation, colonialism and sexism, and the only explanation as to why she is not counted among Mexico’s most influential philosophical minds of the twentieth century is that, as I have shown, then as much as now, our categories of what counts as philosophy, and of what matters in philosophy, are still gender-biased, exclusionary, prejudiced, sterile, and inoperative. The works of Rosario Castellanos, and in particular her personal testimony in *Rito de iniciación*, guide us in the right direction to question the canon and the scope of what we call philosophy. It is, indeed, time to reexamine our philosophical assumptions, and to discard all that does not lead to an accurate and fair reflection of women’s (as well as other discriminated groups) real contributions to the history of human thought, even if that means we have to dig them up from sources other than the ones we are familiar with and which have been mainstream until now.²⁶

²⁵“For a philosophical reflection does not stop when it finds an answer but when it’s capable of formulating a new question” (Pues una reflexión filosófica no concluye cuando formula una respuesta sino cuando es capaz de plantear un nuevo interrogante)” (Villoro, 1960: 40).

²⁶ An earlier version of this essay was read in the *II Coloquio Internacional sobre Emilio Uranga y el Grupo Hiperión*, organized by Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in August 27, 2021.

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