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Minha vida de menina: Rereading Helena Morley's Diary

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In the opening pages of her English translation of Helena Morley's *Minha vida de menina: cadernos de uma menina provinciana no fins do século XIX*, Elizabeth Bishop writes that when she arrived in Brazil in 1952 and asked her Brazilian friends what she should read, "they frequently recommended this little book":

The more I read the book the better I liked it. The scenes and events it described were odd, remote, and long ago, and yet fresh, sad, funny, and eternally true. The longer I stayed on in Brazil the more Brazilian the book seemed, yet much of it could have happened in any small provincial town or village, and at almost any period of history — at least before the arrival of the automobile and the moving-picture theatre. (x)¹

Here and elsewhere Bishop portrays *The Diary of 'Helena Morley'* in idyllic terms. Morley's hometown of Diamantina, Minas Gerais is a "remote" and "provincial" place, set at a distance from the contemporary reader. Bishop's lengthy introduction, written in 1957, echoes a brief 1942 preface written by Alice Dayrell Caldeira Brant, the historical author for whom "Helena Morley" served as a pseudonym. Looking back upon the years of 1893 through 1895 recorded in her youthful diary, Mrs. Brant recalls the "simple existence" of that earlier era.

The English-language reader's first glimpse of Morley's world is through Bishop's nostalgic lens. The lulling effect of the opening pages written by Bishop and the author as an adult stands in contrast to the energy and dynamism of the diary itself and as such, invites analysis of the book's critical reception. If anything, the social relations she

describes in her text cut across very complex familial, racial and class lines that complicate the already difficult labors the young Morley and her family endure. My contention here is that to recuperate the sense of gendered agency central to the diary and to fully recognize the complex and critical views contained in Morley's text, one must scrutinize the distancing and disarming effect of these and similarly nostalgic readings.

Mrs. Brant is both displaced by others and supplants herself as the agent of her only published work. She recalls, for example, that she began to write her adolescent diary at the urging of her father who encouraged her to record her thoughts on paper. And for its publication nearly fifty years later, she credits her granddaughters: "It was their idea, to which I consented, to make a book that might show the girls of today the differences between present-day life and the simple existence we led at that time" (xxxvi). The simplicity and pleasure to be found even in economic hardship, she suggests, serve as a lesson that "Happiness does not consist in worldly goods but in a peaceful home, in family affections, in a simple life without ambition — things that fortune cannot bring and often takes away" (xxxvii). Mrs. Brant, born into a family of restricted means, had become the wife of a wealthy man and could speak with experience of the vicissitudes of fortune.

In a gesture that again distances the writer from her diary, Elizabeth Bishop claims that it was Morley's husband, Dr. Augusto Mário Brant, who undertook "to put together all the old scraps and notebooks and prepare them for publication" (xii). Thus Helena Morley the author tends to disappear behind the will and actions of others who push for the publication of her diary. Subsequent readings of the book have replicated this distancing and often ignore what lies at its center; that is, a young woman's struggle for self-identification through writing.

One of the reasons this text has been devalued as literature, read as a quaint personal remembrance, is precisely that it is a diary written by a young woman. The gender marking of a text via the sex of its author affects how it is received and interpreted by its readers. "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics" is an exemplary study of gender marking and the critical reception of literature in which Carol Ohmann compares reviews of *Wuthering Heights*. Critics who assumed that Brontë was a man praised the novel for its power and originality. One went so far as to imagine the rough-sailor type the

author must have been (908). Reviews by critics who knew the novel's author was a woman focused on her life. One likened her to "a little bird fluttering its wings against the bars of its cage, only to sink at the last, exhausted" (909). Ohmann concludes that there is a strong correlation between what readers ignore/see in a text and their presuppositions about the sex of its author.

Women's writing as a whole tends to be read as personal and therefore of lesser public significance than men's writing. Texts marked as masculine, even autobiographical texts, are more likely to be understood as having public significance than those marked as feminine. The personal when marked as feminine is seen as private.² In Morley's case, the fact that her text is a diary, an autobiographical subgenre associated very strongly with women, compounds this effect.

In *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America*, Sylvia Molloy points to a lack of attention to autobiography *qua* autobiography in Spanish America, and this assertion holds for Brazilian literature as well. Molloy contends "whereas there are and have been a good many autobiographies written in Spanish America, they have not always been read autobiographically: filtered through the dominant discourse of the day, they have been hailed either as history or as fiction, and rarely considered as occupying a space of their own" (2). From what little critical attention it drew in the first fifty years after its publication, *Minha vida de menina* appears to have been read as fiction. Lately, as I will discuss below, there has been a shift in the criticism toward reading Morley's diary as history.

Though we cannot know how most readers have understood this text, there is no doubt that it has reached a large audience. Fifteen editions of *Minha vida de menina* have appeared since its first publication in 1942. Reviews in papers from the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* to the *New York Herald Tribune* indicate that it has enjoyed a wide English-language readership that was initially drawn to the book, perhaps, due to an interest in the translation by Elizabeth Bishop that is now in its third reprinting. In addition to its translation into English, it was published in French in 1959 and, according to the introduction by Bishop, a Japanese edition exists as well (vii). Given this publishing history, *Minha vida de menina* or *The Diary of 'Helena Morley'* is surely one of the most widely read works by any Brazilian author.

In spite of this broad international audience, relatively few critics have analyzed Morley's text. Among the first to engage it seriously

was Alexandre Eulálio in his 1959 introduction to the diary titled “Livro que nasceu clássico” [Book that was Born a Classic] that appears in all subsequent editions. In 1976 he also wrote the essay “A história natural de Helena Morley: Minha vida de menina” [The Natural History of Helena Morley: My Life as a Girl], published posthumously in 1993. For Alexandre, the diary is “the most colorful and animated diorama of traditional Brazilian childhood,” a work that “emerged a classic” (“História” 36). His depiction of Morley’s text as a straightforward description of the “simple days of a girl of little means, dweller of the periphery of the little city” (41) is a typical response to the diary. Miriam Viviana Gárate also takes up Morley’s text. In her essay “El diario de Helena Morley o de la vida de las mujeres en la Diamantina finisecular” [The Diary of Helena Morley or of the Life of Women in Turn-of-the-Century Diamantina], Gárate argues that the book may serve as an instrument for the recovery of Brazilian history (65), a notion to which I shall return.

In 1996, literary critic Roberto Schwarz published an impressive analysis of Morley’s diary in his book *Duas Meninas* [Two Girls]. He compares the narrator of the diary to Capitu, the female figure in Machado de Assis’s novel *Dom Casmurro* (1899). That Schwarz, one of Brazil’s best-known literary critics, should compare the diary of a twelve-year-old-girl to a classic by Machado, the founding president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and a master of the realist novel, suggests that there is much more to Morley’s text than had previously been recognized. In some degree, Schwarz upends the conventional view of 19th-century Brazilian literature by making extraordinarily bold claims for the diary: “Without prejudice, *The Diary of ‘Helena Morley’* is one of the good books of Brazilian literature, and there is almost nothing of its stature in our 19th century if we leave aside Machado de Assis.”³ Despite its excellence, he says, its position has remained secondary, “something like the perfect gift to enchant curious strangers and little girls who show promise.”⁴

The analysis Schwarz presents of Morley’s text reveals some of the complexity and narrative interest to be found in her work. At present, *Duas Meninas* has not found a wide readership outside the national boundaries of Brazil, and so a few words characterizing Schwarz’s argument are in order. The book is comprised of two essays, “A poesia envenenada de *Dom Casmurro*”⁵ [The Poisoned Poetry of *Dom Casmurro*] and “Outra Capitu” [Another Capitu]. In

Machado's well-known novel, *Dom Casmurro*, Capitu, the poor neighbor of the wealthy Bento, helps him overcome their class difference as they realize their love and respect for each other and marry. Schwarz argues in the first essay that this move beyond class divisions is undone in the latter half of the novel as Bento comes to believe that his wife has committed adultery and that their son is in fact the illegitimate son of his best friend.

Running to well over one hundred pages, the essay that treats Morley's text is much more extensive than his essay on *Dom Casmurro*. Schwarz names Morley "another Capitu," arguing that her diary corresponds to the narrative dynamics of the first part of Machado's novel. For Schwarz, "the biographical trajectory of Capitu as it were includes and discusses Helena's, to which it is similar for a limited stretch, whose perspectives its ulterior evolution belies."⁶ Schwarz suggests that Helena Morley can possess only a partial perspective when compared to Machado's much more encompassing view. Thus, the second half of *Dom Casmurro* both "corrects" the optimism of the first half of the novel and helps refocus the ostensible optimism and light nostalgia of Morley's diary: "In [the novel's] light, the freer version of the same relations, as we saw it in Helena Morley's *Diamantina*, cuts a figure that is to some extent simple, or unreal."⁷ Schwarz's intertextual comparison tends to privilege Machado's fiction over Morley's "unreal" diary. In his move to compare how Brazilian society is depicted differently in the two works, Schwarz makes the diary seem the inferior register of social reality.

In forming this argument, Schwarz makes a spatial distinction about the effects of Abolition in different parts of Brazil:⁸

Tied to the prominence of coffee, emancipation was not fulfilling the historic promise of incorporating the blacks and the poor into contemporary society, nor can one say that it would civilize those relations that were changing but were not perfecting themselves. The new urban tumult, aside from being modern in its own way, was everything but integrated, renewing the old terms of social dissociation. How to situate the world in which Helena, whose humanity stands out, within this picture? The country is and is not the same.⁹

The “peripheral” world Morley describes is not the “modern” urban one where pre-Abolition social distinctions have already become re-entrenched. Schwarz displaces Diamantina from a central consideration of what Brazil represents. Instead, he evokes its specific economic history in order to sustain his argument about its difference. What to make of this move to separate the town and understand it as both of and not of Brazil? As in prior published readings of the diary, there is a type of nostalgia at work here, a longing for something far off to be as it once was. The world of Diamantina is separated in Schwarz’s vision of the modern in terms of both time and space.

The use of a center/periphery construct should serve as a warning as we seek understanding of the world evoked by Morley’s text. This construct tends, unfortunately, to diminish the experiences of those who are understood to live in the “periphery,” devaluing the significance of their life ways in comparison to the more pertinent and present lives of those living in the center. As center is paired against periphery, urban against rural, the province serves as the metaphor for the metropolis’s other. These pairings carry with them certain assumptions and values. One assumption is temporal: the periphery is still often understood as “behind the times” in relation to the center. As Schwarz says of Diamantina, “it’s a fact that the plenitude that we have described does not erase the mark of relative backwardness, nor the corresponding consciousness of provincialism and the lack of contact with worldwide progress, or even [Rio’s] progress, that is always acute.”¹⁰ It should be noted that Morley herself does not frame Diamantina’s position vis-à-vis the larger world in this way.

I would note that careful consideration of Morley’s text reveals that she does not share Schwarz’s assumptions regarding the value of “progress” over “backwardness.” In fact, the book scarcely makes mention of the world beyond Diamantina and the nearby Boa Vista. More typical of Morley’s attitude is the view she expresses after a conceited dentist from out of town has treated her sister’s broken tooth both poorly and at great expense:

Everyone has the weakness of thinking anything that’s foreign is better than what they have at home. The only doctor who is any good comes from someplace else. In order to make an impression on the girls, a boy has to come from out of town. What we have is worthless; only

things from other places are any good. Even I used to think this way. But from now on I'm not going to. (107)

This view does not support the notion of a Diamantina as inferior to the outside world. Indeed, it contests the notion that there is an “acute consciousness” of the town’s backwardness. Little mention is ever made in the book to such urban centers as the capital city, Rio de Janeiro, and no explicit comparisons are ever drawn between Diamantina and the metropolis. Even the position of Brazil in any kind of international context fails to be registered in the diary.

In a similar vein, Eulálio’s essay “A história natural de Helena Morley” reflects a parallel tendency to view Diamantina in terms of temporal dislocation. Of the town, he notes: “Everything there seems impregnated with eternity that, no longer existing in the ‘broken world’ of maturity, further accentuates the idea of the disappearance of all things.”¹¹ In a sense, the characteristics of Helena’s own adolescence have been transferred on to Diamantina itself — everything about the town is read as a form of immaturity and adolescence. For Eulálio, this effect creates an “enchanted climate of *temps jadis*” that serves to stimulate for the reader a nostalgic recollection of childhood. It is this nostalgic feeling that helps him explain the diary’s widespread appeal (42). Yet, a close examination of Morley’s text fails to support such a reading. Within Morley’s day-by-day account, the past is not viewed with nostalgia. If anything, the “days of old” are the bad old days when women had no freedom to choose their husbands or to speak their minds. The text is as critical of the past as it is of its present, in some ways more critical. A concern with the position of women in contemporary society forms the dominant discussions in the diary, an idea to which I will return shortly.

In addition to asserting a temporal dislocation, the readings by Schwarz and Eulálio rely on an ontological assumption in which the rural becomes situated as spatially closer to nature. References to the “natural” announced in the title of Eulálio’s essay are common in his analysis, as when he writes, “Halfway between document and fiction, appointment book written at the margin of literature, in a day-to-day calm that adolescence and the province illuminate in a peculiar way, that natural story of a girl from the interior made an impression with its clear qualities.”¹² Eulálio associates a spatial location with the “naturalness” of Morley’s book by configuring the text geographically,

insisting on its place in the “province” and the “interior.” The naturalness of the text is thus associated not just with its geographic setting, which in the imaginary is located apart from the modern urban in the natural rural, but also with Morley’s gender and her youth. Her status as a young woman ostensibly lends her an innocence and naturalness in style and perception.

Incessantly characterized as temporally “behind” and “closer to nature,” the periphery is cast in the role of civilization’s Other. As Catherine Scott notes, such an approach depends upon binary oppositions between “modern-capitalist/culture” and “traditional-precapitalist/nature” that are themselves anchored in essentialized gender differences. Scott finds this binarism across theories of development and revolution: “The ambivalent and powerfully charged opposition of feminized tradition with masculinized public life constitutes a significant underlying theme that informs a seemingly disparate body of literature about development, modernity, dependence, and revolution” (90). Even the dependency model, with its emphasis on temporal simultaneity as it foregrounds the center’s active underdevelopment of the periphery, often produces an Other similar to that produced by the modernization theories to which it is responding. Its critique of those theories leaves their essentialized gender constructs unchallenged.

Many of these same flaws are to some degree evident in Roberto Schwarz’s essay which, nevertheless, provides the richest analysis of the diary to date. His emphasis on a macroeconomic explanation common to dependency theory leaves undiscussed distinct forms of social “advancement” that are not commonly addressed within a global framework. To locate the economic, as Schwarz so incessantly does, as the site and source of social transformation suggests that macro-historical shifts, transformations in the *longue durée*, are necessary for forms of resistance to arise. Economic factors are not the only elements that create moments of freedom, however, and Schwarz’s own view runs the risk of elaborating a nostalgic place free from the influence of transnational economic forces.

The nostalgia attached to Morley’s text often relies on the valuing of a simpler life that revolves around the feminized space of the home. Schwarz’s neat separation of social/economic spaces on a macro level leaves unexamined the space of home as a complicated and contested site. Recent criticism across the disciplines has shown that, in contradistinction to this nostalgic tendency, home is often a

complex site of numerous social struggles. As geographer Doreen Massey puts it, “that place called home was never an unmediated experience” (164). Furthermore, identity is not solely linked to home through socio-economic connections. A reading of the diary that takes into account the local rather than the global may render additional insights and trace other forms of resistance. Other locations of struggle, contradiction, and conflict may come into focus. After all, as much recent criticism makes clear: “Ethnicity and gender, to mention only the two most obvious other axes, are also deeply implicated in the ways in which we inhabit and experience space and place” (Massey 164). The diary may tell us another story when seen from a different perspective, one that takes care to erase neither the complexities it elucidates nor the complex role played by its author.

The density and complexity of the social relations Morley describes are presented in Schwarz’s *Duas Meninas* as evidence of a moment of greater social flexibility to be found in Diamantina in an era of profound economic transformation. I argue that in addition to this socio-economic dynamic, the diary’s “relational density” might very well be ascribed to other dynamics evident in Morley’s understanding of her world as revealed in the pages of her diary. She proves herself to be a bright young woman, struggling with her sense of self and subjectivity at the turn of the last century. Her sense of self is as much inflected by her social standing as a woman as anything else in the text. Miriam Viviana Gárate, for one, suggests this conclusion when she locates Morley within a family network. She traces the lives of the female relatives across three generations in her 1991 essay “El diario de Helena Morley o de la vida de las mujeres en Diamantina finisecular” to underscore the value of the diary as a historical document. The book is full of women’s stories: “Stories that circulate from mouth to mouth until they find the pen of a narrator who takes them in, reconstructing an abbreviated panorama of the feminine situation in the interior of Brazil in the last decades of the 19th century.”¹³ Emphasizing change across generations, Gárate notes Helena has more personal freedom than do her female elders.

Britta Fischer attributes this greater freedom to the fact that Morley herself is living a period of adolescent transition from child to woman (175). In “As experiências de liberdade de Helena Morley,” Fischer takes up Schwarz’s reading of the 1890’s as a historical period

of transition in Brazil and makes an analogy to the changes occurring in Morley's life as she writes the diary.

Gárate and Fischer provide compelling readings, but they nevertheless require a supplemental point. Morley makes anyone who inspires her — including individuals outside the family — into a model (either positive or negative) for personal identification and self-possession. It is evident from the outset that her diary is concerned with the nature of human agency. The first entry, dated Thursday, January 5th, 1893, reflects upon the morality involved in making one's own choices. Morley, her mother, her siblings, and a servant walk to a river where they perform tasks including scrubbing, bleaching, rinsing and drying clothes, gathering firewood, cooking, fishing, and trapping birds. The sentence that introduces this labor-intensive weekly ritual and opens the diary is, "Today is the best day of the week" (3). Here and elsewhere in the book, the author stresses her love for the outdoors and for manual labor. At a later point, finding herself confined to the house after injuring her knee, she writes, "I only want to get better and rush out into the fields" (92). Though she is sorely aware that women perform labor all the time and often complains of being tired out by her physical efforts, Morley associates the ability to perform manual labor with the ability to take care of oneself — a quality she admires in everyone.¹⁴ Because she places such a high value on self-sufficiency, her identification with those who assume a sense of control over their material conditions is not bound by gender, race or class limits.

One effect of this identification is that Morley gives humanity to recently freed Afro-Brazilians at a time when most writers do not. Though Abolition came in 1888, writers and intellectuals of the period avoided the subject. Most were more interested in the quest to consolidate and define a national identity and were not comfortable recognizing slavery as constitutive of the nation. Those who did address the question of race often resorted to scientific racist theories emanating from Europe to explain racial difference. This reliance on European thought meant that they could not evoke the subjectivity and agency that Morley can in her own narrative. Her description of a party held by an ex-slave, Joaquim Angola, at her grandmother's house exemplifies her ability to come to terms with racial Others directly:

I gobbled up my dinner quickly and went to the *senzala*. I swear I never saw such a wonderful party. There are only three Negroes at the *chácara* now who came from Africa: Benfica, Quintiliano, and Mainarte. They sang songs from their own country, turning round and round and clapping their hands and then bumping bellies with the women. The negroes from here are jealous of the old ones who know the African songs and who dance with more spirit. Then they all sat down at the table like us and drank toasts. They all had on white trousers and shirts. Joaquim Angola was bursting with joy. (176–177)

While she often complains about other boring family functions, Morley is clearly full of enthusiasm for this party held by ex-slaves still living on her grandmother's property. The vitality of her narration, the liveliness of her description, the vivid evocation of Joaquim Angola's delight in the African songs and dances makes evident the author's own excitement. By referring to the African ex-slaves by their names and describing them as individuals here and elsewhere in the text, Morley humanizes and personalizes these socio-economically marginal characters. Her diary lends them depth and roundness, lavishes narrative attention onto characters that other texts of the era deign not to consider worthy of representation except in the most abstract (and often abject) ways.

The mimetic powers of Morley's text are not solely responsible for the evocation and evaluation of individual actors, regardless of their gender, race, or age. The significance of her representations is due not simply to their vividness or similitude to reality. Rather, Morley's diary is significant for two reasons. The book traces the contours of a historically specific social world. It also simultaneously recounts the compelling search by a young woman to find adequate role models who can help guide her in developing an empowered and independent sense of self and subjectivity. There is, in short, a moral as well as mimetic quality to the diary that is worth considering.

Morley, always attentive to those who find their own solutions to difficulties, admires any and all who can make their way in the world — especially when this involves the transformative power physical work can have on the self:

A Negro girl named Magna is married to a Negro from Africa named Mainarte. *She is very smart*. She didn't want him to live in idleness in back of the vegetable garden in the way he was living, so she arranged for a little farm in Arraial dos Forros for the two of them. She works around as a cook, and she makes Mainarte work for other people. He collects manure to sell for gardens; he brings around barrels of water in the mornings and evenings; gets sand in Almotolia for people to scour their houses with; and gets straw from the drovers to stuff mattresses. And they get along that way. (30 my emphasis)

Magna eventually takes her zeal for work too far and beats and nearly kills her husband for his laziness. Despite her violent behavior, Morley admires Magna's intelligence and her industry as opposed to Mainarte's idleness.

Unlike Magna, her wealthy relations who live off family money do not particularly impress the author. "I think God punishes well-brought-up people. I've never seen my uncle bring home even a catfish. My boy cousins hunt for birds and don't even get a sparrow. But when we go to the country, Renato and Nhonhô [her brothers] bring home catfish and shad to eat and sometimes enough to sell, and never let a linnnet or any other bird get away" (29). Morley's clear preference lies with people like Magna and her brothers whose example she tries to follow: "Everything that my brothers do, I want to do too, and I can't rest until I've done it" (92). In her preferences for "Negro" parties and the efforts of those who work for a living, Morley elaborates an alternate, non-hierarchical community in which she engages with others and finds models of personal agency.

Minha vida de menina is impressive, then, not just as a document that registers the social climate of its time. In it, Morley foregrounds herself as a writing subject in relation to her social world. The relational quality of her diary may very well be ascribed to the fact that women's role within patriarchal society is always in relation to others. Indeed, that she was focusing on such issues is evident in Morley's concern with her own independence and her attempt to emulate her Aunt Madge rather than her mother, whose constant refrain she registers:

I hardly ever come home without mama's saying:

A woman and a hen

Shouldn't go out walking;

A hen gets eaten,

A woman sets folks talking. (197)

Morley strains against the limitations that social convention, based on gender, imposes on her personal freedom. This struggle becomes especially clear when her mother insists that girls should stay in the house in order to ensure their purity and, therefore, their marriageability. Her mother often tells her that she and her sisters (Morley's maternal aunts) were sought out for marriage by men from far and wide because they had a reputation for being homebodies.

Throughout the diary, we see her mother attempting to train the young author to be less active and less visible. Morley's response entails a humorous rejection of this exemplum: "I always answer, 'You were homebodies because you lived in Lomba. And besides, the reputation was the pot of diamonds that Grandpa found. Homebody — doesn't the Senhora see that nobody could have that reputation? How? If nobody saw you?'" (197). These disagreements with her mother and comments on the lives of other women, particularly her aunts and her grandmother, show Morley's drive to control her own actions and her resistance to gendered limits on her behavior.

The relational quality of Morley's diary — the comparisons and evaluations in which she engages — while certainly a product of its socio-historical moment, also stems from the author's search for her own identity. As such, her writing is most interesting when she is viewed as a writing subject within a social world. We can then understand the book through a double lens: as both a document of a particular historical moment, and as a record of a young woman seeking an empowered sense of self.

Written by a young woman — a relatively disempowered and marginal subject — Morley's diary falls into a "lesser" genre, one often associated with women and the realm of the "private." Indeed, her diary remained invisible to the world for decades. It is only as a wealthy, older woman, publishing the text as a quaint recollection of a lost time after years of literary silence, that Alice Caldeira Dayrell Brant can publish *The Diary of 'Helena Morley'* and give her(self) voice. Significantly, only within the interpretive framework of the text as domestic

and private, an innocent representation of the provincially quaint and colorful, did it find mass distribution and mass popularity.

Helena Morley the author disappears within this interpretive framework. The diary from this view serves to still Morley's pen and silence her voice. Miriam Gárate notes that diaries are written precisely to keep women's thoughts confined to a non-threatening, non-public space:

To learn to dominate oneself, to be discrete . . . to be quiet. Isn't that the objective of the masculine order that has wanted to impose this disciplinary practice designed to conserve a certain *status quo*, and where the acting roles are distributed according to still familiar stereotypes? In a certain way one could say that if the intimate diary exists, it is precisely to guarantee that the private does not leave its orbit, to ratify the division of the languages.¹⁵

And Morley struggles to confine her thoughts to her writing. As the young writer comes into herself, the practice of keeping the diary — suggested to her by her father — precisely serves as a means of self-control. After all, he pressed her to begin writing in order not to discuss her thoughts and problems with others: “Since [taking] my father's advice about only talking to my notebook, my life has grown worse and I think I'm getting even thinner” (172). Expressing herself within the silent confines of her diary's pages drains Morley, removes her from the realm of social intercourse, and casts her as a victim of what one might be tempted to call a proto-anorexic condition.

How, then, to re-position this work? Despite her marginal status as a young girl writing a personal diary in a small Brazilian town at the turn of the last century, Morley's writing stands on its own. Her diary bears little resemblance to the works of her literary contemporaries. Caught up as they are in the struggle to define the national literature, to establish themselves as author(ities), to engage with the “modern” social and aesthetic theories emanating from Europe, these authors are mired in explanations of natural law. They tend to ignore day-to-day social conflict and cannot, for the most part, create literary scenes of convincing realism. Morley can.

Writing in the privacy of her bedroom, far from the raging intellectual debates over Brazilian cultural identity, she never tries to call

up the literary linguistic codes of the day, *les belles lettres* of “high” Brazilian literature. As a result, there is a directness to the voice of the narrator. She can show the complexity of daily life without having to worry about being accepted by an imagined reading public concerned with style and European narrative form. Morley expresses directly and forcefully the power imbalances present in her social world from her perspective as an adolescent female writer.

The circumstances of the production of *Minha vida de menina* as a young woman’s diary and the fact that it is now read completely outside its original context generates new meanings and readings, a re-visioning of what was once “private.” Returning agency to Morley as an author provides one with an intriguing story. She is a girl on a quest, interrogating the gendered subjectivities allowed her, seeking out a model by which to construct an empowered identity. Her narrative gives special attention to those who possess some agency in the world, even those who are socially at the margins of power. To fail to recognize Morley’s voice as an embodied voice, to consider it instead some disembodied articulation of social change, results in a partial reading of her work. The diary is not significant only because a young woman wrote it. By the same token, it is not insignificant that a writer like Morley could produce such a powerful and engaging text.

Sylvia Molloy has argued that in Latin America, “Women’s family tales, both in poetry and prose, are hardly havens of security” (“Introduction” 121). Such is clearly the case in *Minha vida de menina*. For with her critical and reflexive attitude, Helena Morley contradicts the stereotypical view of woman as the “angel in the house.” Despite the ways in which her text has been sentimentalized, her own writing is not sentimental; nor does it prettify social relations. Written through a traditionally gendered form, one that emphasizes a retreat from the public and the published, Morley nevertheless creates a decidedly untraditional and dynamic text.¹⁶

Notes

1. The introduction was written in 1957. This quote is from the 1995 edition of the translation that also includes a preface by Bishop dated June, 1977.

2. See Sylvia Molloy's discussion of autobiography, biography, and history in chapter eight of her *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* for further elaboration of this public/private divide in the Latin American context.

3. "Sem favor, *Minha vida de menina* é um dos livros bons da literatura brasileira, e não há quase nada à sua altura em nosso século XIX, se deixarmos de lado Machado de Assis" (47). All translations unless otherwise noted are mine.

4. "algo assim como um presente certo para encantar estrangeiros curiosos e mocinhas que prometem" (47).

5. Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, *Dom Casmurro*, 1899.

6. "Assim, a curva biográfica de Capitu como que inclui e discute a de Helena, a que se assemelha por um trecho limitado, cujas perspectivas a evolução ulterior desmente" (98).

7. "A sua luz, a versão mais solta das mesmas relações, como a vimos na Diamantina de Helena Morley, faz figura até certo ponto simples, ou irreal" (98).

8. See Kim D. Butler's *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* in which she revisits abolition and its aftermath and highlights the choices and initiatives of African descendants during this period.

9. Ligada à predominância do café, a emancipação não cumpria a promessa histórica de incorporar à sociedade contemporânea os negros e os pobres, nem se pode dizer que civilizasse essas relações, que mudavam mas não se aperfeiçoavam. A nova barafunda urbana, além de moderna à sua maneira, era tudo menos integrada, renovando os termos da dissociação social antiga. Neste quadro, como situar o mundo em que vive Helena, cuja humanidade salientamos? O país é e não é o mesmo (73).

10. "é fato que a plenitude que descrevemos não apaga a marca do atraso relativo, nem a correspondente consciência de provincianismo e de falta de contato com o progresso mundial, ou mesmo fluminense, sempre muito aguda" (76).

11. "Tudo lá parece impregnado de eternidade, que, já não existindo no 'mundo quebrado' da madurez, acentua ainda mais a idéia de perecimento de todas as coisas" (42).

12. "A meio caminho do documento e da ficção, caderno de apontamentos escrito à margem da literatura, num calmo dia-a-dia que a adolescência e a província iluminam de modo peculiar, essa história natural de uma menina do interior impôs-se pelas claras qualidades" (36).

13. "Historias que circulan de boca en boca hasta encontrar la pluma de una narradora que las recoge reconstruyendo un abreviado panorama de la situación femenina en el Brasil interiorano de las últimas décadas del siglo XIX" (76).

14. See "The Traffic in Women" by Gayle Rubin for a discussion of the often overlooked mutual interdependence of sexuality, economics, and politics.

15. Aprender a dominarse, a ser discretas ... a callar. ¿No es ese el objetivo que el orden masculino ha querido imponerle a esta práctica disciplinar destinada a la conservación de un cierto *statu quo*, y donde los papeles actorales se distribuyen según estereotipos todavía familiares? De cierto modo podría decirse que si existe el diario íntimo es justamente para garantizar que lo privado no salga de su órbita, para ratificar la división de los lenguajes (71).

16. An earlier version of this essay was published as "The Angel in the House: A Memorialist Reconstruction in *The Diary of 'Helena Morley.'* Siglo XIX (1999): 135-147.

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