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THE SUBJECT OF WRITING: LANGUAGE, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND IDENTITY IN THE *LETTRES D'UNE PÉRUVIENNE*

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Recent feminist criticism has begun to rectify the long-standing neglect of Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* by contesting the traditional reception of the novel as a charming sentimental work by a woman author, at best an unoriginal imitation of Guilleragues's Portuguese or Montesquieu's Persian letters. Because it responds to this exclusionary process, the comparative strategy that Nancy Miller calls "reading in pairs," the analysis of the binary production of male and female authored texts, has proved particularly fertile in recent Graffigny criticism. "Intersextual" readings have focused critical attention on the ways in which the narrative strategies of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* diverge from those of its male-authored predecessors.[1] The novel is feminocentric—the first person narrative is in the female voice—and in some respects formulates a more radical cultural critique than Montesquieu's Persian model—the heroine is Peruvian, rather than a representative of a more familiar alien culture, such as Persia. Janet Altman, who has done a great deal to rescue Graffigny from obscurity, has developed this approach by arguing that the text by the woman writer actually provides a clearer *mise en scène* of contemporary philosophical currents than Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* because it attends more closely to the perceptual experience of an individual, gendered body.[2] She argues that feminine writing is philosophical *because* it focuses on the sensory experience often dismissed as "sentimentalism," rather than on the rational abstractions conventionally associated with masculinity.[3] To some extent this depiction recalls the insistence of more contemporary *écriture féminine* on sensory experience sublimated or repressed in speculative philosophy.

This account of Graffigny's epistemology represents a seminal contribution to the study of this text—indeed it has become something of a critical commonplace to contrast the embodiment of subjective experience in the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* to more conventionally rationalistic and abstract Enlightenment strategies for criticizing ethno-

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centrism. I would like to argue that although Graffigny's *Lettres* are indeed marked by philosophical sensualism, it is important to consider another current of the text's epistemology, which carries somewhat different critical implications: the representation of language as the medium of experience. This is not to suggest that feminist criticism, including the work of Altman, has had nothing to say about the representation of language in this novel. The importance of Zilia's coming-to-authorship, which marks a clear progression in the narrative destinies of female protagonists, has been recognized and affirmed. Whereas the Princesse de Clèves withdraws from the world to disappear and ultimately to die, and Montesquieu's Roxane dies in writing and perhaps because she dares to write, Graffigny's Zilia makes the radical lifestyle choice of withdrawing from the world to write about it.[4] However, I would like to examine not only the socio-political resonances of Zilia's authorial position, but also the way in which the writing subject's relationship to language is represented in the novel. I shall argue that language is presented as both the inevitable medium of subjective experience, including the most rudimentary forms of sensory experience, and as an arbitrary and foreign sign-system which is not simply the instrument of the writing subject, but is also constitutive of that subjectivity. This representation of language has several implications. It suggests a modification of our view of Graffigny's epistemology in relation to the philosophical current of sensualism. This in turn prescribes a micrological approach to philosophical discourses and the historical classification of currents in epistemology. More significantly, this representation suggests a more tentative approach to the mapping of relationships between categories of gender and writing, for the reason that the gendered self is represented as a self constituted in a language conceived as a potentially alienating code of signs. This is not to evacuate the political content of Graffigny's writing, its critical relationship to both cultural imperialism and its Enlightenment critiques. The depiction of a self constituted in language as other is not without political implications: indeed, this representation of dispossession, or of exile in language, is central to the critical project of the *Lettres*.

1. Graffigny's Epistemology

In an essay entitled "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology," Janet Altman outlines an epistemological relationship between the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and the Abbé de Condillac's *Traité des sensations*, published in 1754, seven years after the first edition of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. The *Traité,* which for Béatrice

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Didier is "le monument fondamental du sensualisme,"[5] investigates the role played by the senses in the formation of ideas, revising a claim which Condillac made some eight years earlier in the *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* that sight can convey ideas of shape and extension independently of touch.[6] The *Traité des sensations* argues that only touch supplies direct knowledge of the external world. To make this claim, Condillac employs the narrative strategy of a statue which comes to life one sense at a time as a method of exploring the contribution made by each of the senses. Broadly speaking, the sensualist approach to epistemology shifts the priority of the object in Lockean empiricism, and instead emphasizes the role played by the senses in the formation of ideas, marking a first step toward the "subjective turn" of Kantian philosophy. Altman's insightful comparison of this narrative to the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* draws on the close resemblance between the positioning of Condillac's statue and Graffigny's Peruvian woman. Violently transplanted into European culture, she is at first unfamiliar with the objects which surround her, notably such products of European progress and technology as a ship, a horse-drawn coach, a pair of scissors and a mirror, but also French society, institutions, and attitudes under the *ancien régime.* Like Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes,* the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* deploy periphrasis to defamiliarize everyday objects and naturalized behaviors and thus accommodate a perspective of cultural relativism.

Several critics have read Graffigny's choice of a heroine from the new world over the popular Orient as being tied to the fact that the radical alterity represented by Peru means that Western culture is more thoroughly defamiliarized than in the *Lettres persanes.* Whereas Montesquieu's protagonists speak fluent French and are *au fait* with many of the material aspects of French daily life, the description of the process by which Zilia's senses readjust entails a veritable reconstruction of empirical reality, conveyed in what Altman terms a sensualist or phenomenalist writing in which ideas are traced back to their origins in the senses.[7]

In fact, this philosophical dimension of the *Lettres* was first discussed by Gianni Nicoletti in his Introduction to the critical edition of 1967 (the first edition to be published since 1835, and the one that launched the critical rediscovery of the *Lettres*). Nicoletti describes Graffigny as "not only empirical, but an empiricist and perhaps a materialist of the Bout du Banc."[8] However, immediately following his claim that Graffigny is an empiricist or even a materialist thinker, Nicoletti states that Zilia's "dramma è tutto linguistico," in other words, that the drama of her story is in fact the drama of language. Nicoletti never follows up

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on this remark, despite the fact that it might be seen to conflict with the view that the author is an empiricist or materialist. He does however cite a text by a contemporary of Graffigny who was able to appreciate the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a contribution to the philosophy of language rather than as a sentimental novel. This is the *Lettera Apologetica* of Raimondo Sangro, Prince of Sansevero, which appeared in 1750. The *Lettera's* controversial project was to re-write universal history, and notably biblical history, as a history of signs. It devotes considerable attention to the Peruvian quipos, providing visual representations accompanied by translations, and repeatedly cites Graffigny's philosophical acumen in tying civilization, and notably the civilization of the Incas, to the institution of a sign-system.[9] Sangro even claims (and this is of course debatable) that Graffigny's account of the quipos' use as love-letters is not as far fetched as literal-minded and eurocentric critics might suppose. It is in the direction of this appreciation of Graffigny's philosophical contribution by one of her contemporaries that I would like to reexamine our understanding of her epistemology as it relates to the process of cultural critique.

2. The Foreignness of Language

We can trace from the first pages of the novel a reflection on language and writing which is sustained throughout the text. This self-reflexive writing about writing repeatedly returns to the fact that although textuality is a cherished medium of self-expression and self-authentification, language is nonetheless a foreign and potentially alienating sign-system. The novel in fact begins as a reflection on the foreignness of language in the most literal sense, because Zilia's abduction from Peru entails her exile from her mother tongue. Spanish captors and Peruvian captive are unable to communicate with each other, and when the French, led by Déterville, overtake the Spanish vessel and take charge of its prisoner, the linguistic barriers remain in place. Needless to say, Zilia finds the French preferable to the Spaniards—she calls them "sauvages bienfaisants"[10] whereas, by a volte face of ethnocentrism, the Spaniards are dismissed as "sauvages impies" and "peuple féroce,"[11] and she decides to learn French. This requires not only the mastery of spoken French, but also of European writing as a sign system, and Zilia's sense of the differences between Peruvian and European languages and cultural practices is reinforced by the fact that their notational systems also differ fundamentally.

In 1752, Graffigny published a revised edition of the *Lettres* preceded by an "Introduction historique," an ethnographic introduction to Peruvian culture which draws on Garcilaso de Vega's *Royal Commentaries*

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(French translation, 1633), but which focuses particular attention on writing in Inca civilization. The Introduction explains that the notational system of the Peruvian language depends on quapas or quipos, combinations of knots of different colors "qui leur tenait lieu de notre art d'écrire" [replaced for them our art of writing]. Like European writing, the quipos signify through a movement of differentiation along two axes: it is the spacing of the knots, as well as their different colors, which creates meaning.

Graffigny gives the following account of the quipos:

> Des cordons de coton ou de boyau, auxquelles d'autres cordons de différentes couleurs étaient attachés, leur rappelaient, par des noeuds placés de distance en distance, les choses dont ils voulaient se ressouvenir. Ils leur servaient d'annales, de codes, de rituels, de cérémonies, etc.
>
> [Cords of cotton or gut to which other cords of different colors were attached reminded them by means of knots placed at different distances of those things they wished to remember. These quipos served them as annals and codes, were used at their rituals and ceremonies and so on.][12]

This discussion of the quipos as a writing system reflects the contemporary interest in ideograms and pictograms as cultural artefacts, to which Sangro's *Lettera Apologetica* also attests. It may also be related to the sensualism of the period, in that quipos create meaning through the arrangement of highly visible and tactile units. One could cite as an example Condillac's discussion of mathematical symbols in the *Langue des Calculs* (posthumous publication, 1789) which makes the pedagogical argument that calculations are most readily comprehended when the difference between units is a visible one.

Discussing the gender politics of language, Nancy Miller has read the quipos as a feminine textuality, a weaving-for-survival in the tradition of Ariadne, Arachne, and Philomela. Indeed, Zilia does write of her *quipos* as "le dernier tissu de mes pensées" [the last strand of my thoughts], confirming this link between textile and textuality. Miller's reading rightly situates Zilia in the tradition of strong heroines who survive everything from abduction, abandonment and deprivation of language, all fates which befall Zilia, by weaving a text. However, there is a dimension to the quipos which resists symbolic and redemptive appropriations of this kind. The Introduction's focus on the multiple uses of the quipos—the fact that they can be used to convey everything from annals and codes to ceremonies and rituals—emphasizes the fact that they are a code or sign system rather than a natural or symbolic language. In this sense, the quipos need to be read as an arbitrary and resistant linguistic system as well as a familiar set of symbols bearing the full charge of sexual difference in the literary tradition. When we consider Zilia's references to the quipos as the medium of expression

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we discover that she is often rather lucid about this potentially alarming fact of language.

3. Writing (to) the Self

In her opening letter, Zilia provides an account of her capture: on the morning of her wedding-day she was in the act of writing, in quipos, the story of her love for her fiancé Aza, when Spanish conquistadors stormed the temple and took her prisoner. Zilia does not become a writer in response to the experience of captivity and exile. For her, writing had always intervened in the immediacy of subjective experience. The scene of writing which opens her text, referring back to the earlier text broken off by the attack on the temple, demonstrates that the love story of the two Peruvians was always already a story. By this I mean that it is predicated on the absence, separation and temporal distance which are not simply represented in the narrative but are expressed by the very act of writing.

Although at the start of her captivity Zilia feels that she enjoys a direct, extra-linguistic communication with her beloved, this sense of connectedness is rapidly eroded by the experience of absence, and henceforth her feelings for Aza are committed to writing. Yet despite the fact that all of her thoughts and feelings are addressed to her fiancé, there is clearly a strong sense in which Zilia is writing, not to him, but to herself. At least initially she doesn't know if Aza is still alive, and it is only late in the narrative that she learns that he has been transported from Peru to Spain. Shortly before this discovery, Zilia experiences a moment of despair and isolation because she feels estranged from the French people who have befriended her. At this moment she confronts the possibility that her letters are not reaching Aza, acknowledging that she may indeed be writing to and for herself:

> J'ai cru enfin que le seul moyen de les adoucir [cruelles incertitudes] était de te les peindre, de t'en faire part, de chercher dans ta tendresse des conseils . . . cette erreur m'a soutenue pendant que j'écrivais; mais qu'elle a peu duré! Ma lettre est finie, et les caractères n'en sont tracés que pour moi.
> [Finally I decided that the only way for me to ease my fears would be to depict them for you, to share them with you, to seek in your tenderness the counsel I need. . . . This error sustained me while I was writing, but how briefly it endured! My letter is finished and the characters composing it have been drawn solely for me.][13]

Of course, the fact that Zilia's private correspondence with Aza is subsequently translated and published draws further attention to the problem of address; in reading this novel we must conclude that writing is not simply a channel of communication with others; it is more clearly the medium of self-reflexivity.

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The letter, metaphor, and metonym of absence and separation, mediates the relation to the other, but concurrently articulates the constitution of the self.[14] As Patricia Meyer Spacks has written, the epistolary form intensifies the writer's sense of self by heightening and authenticating the reality it describes. However, as a form of autobiography, epistolarity nevertheless thematizes the fact that coming into being as a linguistic entity entails the splitting of the self, its alienation in a linguistic system.[15]

4. (Re)-Entering the Symbolic Order

This paradox inherent to the symbolic order as the order of identity and representation is given narrative expression in a scene which occurs when Zilia first enters the home of her French captor and admirer, Déterville. Zilia is astonished to see another Peruvian woman in this French setting, and rushes joyfully to embrace her, only to encounter the cold, hard surface of a mirror:

> Quelle surprise mon cher Aza, quelle surprise extrême, de ne trouver qu'une résistance impénétrable où je voyais une figure humaine se mouvoir dans un espace fort étendu!
> [What a surprise, dearest Aza, what a great surprise it was to find nothing but an impenetrable resistance there where I saw a human figure moving about in a most extensive space!][16]

Déterville calms Zilia by illustrating for her the mechanics of the mirror, and she comes to the recognition that the Peruvian other can only be herself, feeling both awed and alienated by the technological achievements of French society.

The episode involving the mirror condenses several different points about the way in which identity depends upon processes of self-identification. Zilia's surprise is attributable not only to her ignorance of European technology, but also to the fact that for her, identity has been predominantly social or intersubjective rather than individualistic. She has not conceived of herself as a "unified whole" existing in an agonistic relationship to her companions in the Temple du Soleil. In this sense, we may read the account of her "mirror stage" as a transcultural critique of the Enlightenment construction of liberal individualism. When Zilia passes through the looking-glass into the bizarre and alien world of European technology, her first encounter is with her "self" as a bourgeois and eurocentrist construction of personal identity.[17] However, on another level, this construction of identity is shown to depend on a process of dispossession. The assumption of a personal identity which takes as its point of departure the strict separation of self and other relies, as in the Lacanian *stade du miroir,* on a

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rite of passage into the alien medium of the symbolic order represented by the mirror.

Zilia's encounter with the mirror is alienating in every possible sense: she touches a cold, reflective surface where she expected to find the familiar warmth of human flesh, to make sensory contact with another Peruvian woman, and this disagreeable surprise intensifies her sense that she is now in an alien environment in which no one in fact resembles her. Yet there is a sense in which the mirror simply "brings into focus" the status of the self as it has always been articulated in the *Lettres*. Like the letter form, and indeed, like language more generally, the mirror as a point of identity is a site of ambivalence. The representation of the self is spatially split, its presence made absent, and therefore temporally deferred, so that the sense of self appears to depend on a process of alienation in an "other" which is foreign to it. If we advance to the point in the narrative by which Zilia has mastered French and therefore feels able, once again, to situate herself in relation to empirical reality, we encounter a similar though less acerbic relationship to the symbolic order. Zilia exclaims with relief that she feels "rendue à moi-même."[18] Here once again, identity emerges as a process of self-identification assured by an external medium which confers selfhood by "giving it back," rendering it to itself.

5. Language and Thought

During the first days of her captivity, the quipos assume tremendous importance as the means by which Zilia is able to preserve her sanity and avoid a dangerous solipsism. Thus she writes that "ces noeuds qui frappent mes sens semblent donner plus de réalité à mes pensées"[these knots strike my senses and seem to lend greater reality to my thoughts].[19] In this passage, expressive of both sensualism and consciousness of language, the sensory experience which allows Zilia's thoughts to take on a more urgent reality is that of the materiality of writing. It is therefore unsurprising that when Zilia is coming to the end of her supply of quipos, she is disturbed that "mes pensées errantes, égarées dans le vide immense de l'absence, s'anéantiront désormais avec la même rapidité que le temps" [my wandering thoughts, lost in the immense void of absence, will henceforth be reduced to nothing with the same speed as time].[20] Zilia experiences anxiety at the thought that without the quipos, her mind will simply erase itself from one moment to the next. In this passage, it is the faculty of memory which assures the continuity of subjectivity. We should also note that memory is conceived as a form of inscription. In the 1754 edition, this conception of memory as inscription can be traced back to the

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opening of the novel, since the Historical Introduction presents the quipos—or signs—as the medium of cultural memory: "les quipos leur rappelaient . . . tout ce dont ils voulaient se ressouvenir" [the quipos reminded them . . . of those things they wanted to remember].[21]

6. Memory as Inscription

This understanding of memory diverges substantially from the empiricist and sensualist accounts in which memory, like language, is presented as a faculty subordinate to sensation and reflection. Memory simply preserves objects pre-organized in perception. Whereas for Locke, perception and memory are both means by which a fully constituted subjectivity internalizes the external world, Zilia's letter suggests that memory is immanent rather than subordinate to identity as well as to perception. Without memory, her mind would be little more than the "theater of perceptions" which is the culmination of Hume's skeptical account of the apparatus of subjectivity (and indeed the logical consequence of radicalized empiricism). The fact that memory is tied to the use of signs represents a further departure from empiricism which subordinates language to memory.

I would like to draw a connection between this understanding of memory and the similar account which we can read in a text written at about the same time, Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines.* In conformity with the empiricist project, the *Essai* undertakes to trace the "origin" of human understanding in sensation. However, the concept of a simple origin such as the sensory impressions which Hume identifies as the basic unit of understanding, is quickly identified as a problem.[22] To be able to differentiate between both concurrent and successive perceptions, the faculties which allow for spatio-temporal difference must already be in place. Rather than anticipating the Kantian model of subjective categories which shape our experience of objects in the world, Condillac has recourse to the faculty of memory to account for our capacity for differentiation. As in the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne,* memory is tied to the use of signs, and both memory and signs are presented as necessary to perception rather than, as Locke had suggested, subservient or secondary to it. In this vein, Condillac claims that whereas for Locke memory "awakens" perceptions themselves, it can really only awaken signs.[23] The *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* goes so far as to imply that memory and the institution of signs precede reflection, citing children's rote repetition of words they do not fully comprehend. These words are nevertheless the premise for making sense of reality, a process which, the *Essai* argues, must be accomplished in language.[24] Here once again,

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it appears that the formal quality of the sign, rather than its semantic dimension, finds itself repeated in memory.

This account of memory as inscription is of course more than a historical variant within empiricism or sensualism, for it anticipates theories of memory central to contemporary critical discourses. An important point of departure for these modern accounts of memory is Freud's discussion of the concept of repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this text, Freud argues that we repeat because we don't remember, and don't remember because experience is never actually present to us, but occurs only *après coup* in the form of repeatable signs. This argument is developed in the short text entitled *A Note on the Mystic Writing Pad* (1925). Here Freud uses the example of the *Wunderblock* or mystic writing pad to metaphorize the structure of human perception and memory.[25] In this model, the material inscription of a sign provides the foundation not only for memory, but also for the conscious perception of ideas. Both Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction have retained the views that memory as inscription "precedes" rather than "follows" the formation of ideas, and that the temporality inherent to language is necessary to the construction of empirical reality.[26]

My goal in drawing a philosophical connection between the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and the *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* is in part to nuance Janet Altman's pairing of Graffigny and Condillac on the basis of a common sensualist epistemology. We recall that Altman compares the *Lettres* with the *Traité des sensations,* the canonically sensualist text which Condillac wrote in 1754, and which pays relatively little attention to the role played by language in sensory experience.[27] This comparison allows us to see Graffigny's epistemology as being in the vanguard of contemporary philosophy, anticipating rather than imitating or popularizing the sensualism of the *Traité.* Yet as we have seen, there are important points of contact between the *Lettres* and the doctrinally opposed *Essai sur l'origine des conaissances hu*maines. The *Essai* appeared in 1746 (the year preceding the first edition of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*) at a time when, as we know from the *Confessions,* Condillac was working closely with Diderot and Rousseau on the origins and functions of language. Several scholars have commented on the collaborative nature of this endeavor, which also culminated in Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751) and Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (published posthumously, 1781). In this transitional phase between the objectivism of empiricism and the subjectivism inherent to the sensualist turn in epistemology, language seems to have been accorded particular importance. This philosophical moment merits a

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far more detailed consideration than it can receive here, but it is perhaps possible to claim that the shift from an objectivist to a subjectivist epistemological model focused attention on language as the medium of epistemological discourse, and ultimately, of selfhood. We can perhaps locate Graffigny's narrative in this philosophical stage. This is not necessarily a claim for direct influence in one direction or another, since this epistemological moment can be viewed as structural as well as historical. Tracing a double relationship to the *Traité* and the *Essai* paints a more complex picture of the *Lettres*' epistemology by complementing the sensualist emphasis on sensation and immediacy with a reflection on memory or temporality and language as epistemological agencies.

7. The Internal Critique of Sensualism

Zilia reflects that the only way to make sense of her experience in the alien environment of France is to learn its language.[28] In fact, she seems to pave the way for a critique (*avant la lettre*) of sensualism, as of the empiricist turn more generally when she writes:

> Je savais que la privation d'un sens peut tromper à quelques égards, et je vois avec surprise que l'usage des miens m'entraîne d'erreur en erreur.
> [I knew that being deprived of one sense can mislead in several respects, but I am surprised to see that the use of mine ushers me from one error to the next.][29]

Caught up in the maelstrom of cultural difference and uncertain toward the empirical realities she once took for granted, Zilia comes to the conclusion that sensory experience alone cannot clarify her situation, but rather, fosters continued confusion. This pessimism reflects, and to some degree anticipates, the debate which involved, among others, Condillac and Diderot, over the relationship between the various senses and the errors of judgment that can ensue from the privation of one or more of them.[30] However, Zilia begins to find that even full possession of one's senses does not guarantee knowledge, since she concludes that the senses may always be the source of error. This suspicion towards the senses is not so much Cartesian or rationalist as linguistic, and as a result, Zilia is able to conclude, more optimistically, that "le seul usage de la langue du pays pourra m'apprendre la vérité [use of the language of the land alone will inform me of the truth],[31] predicating knowledge of truth on knowledge of language. Of course, the language that Zilia must learn in order to have access to truth is a foreign language—a language which allegorizes the foreignness of all language. In this vein, when she has exhausted her supply of quipos, Zilia wonders "Si je trouve à présent tant de difficultés à mettre de l'ordre dans mes idées, comment pourrai-je, dans la suite, me les rappeler sans un secours

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étranger?" [If at present I find it so difficult to organize my thoughts, how could I subsequently recall them without some form of outside help?][32] Though the "secours étranger" refers to French language and to the European script which Zilia must master, her question also confronts the hopelessness engendered by the simultaneous necessity and foreignness—or alienation—of all writing.

8. Unlocking a New World

Zilia begins to master French writing, described along the epistemological lines that we have identified as "la méthode dont on se sert ici pour donner une sorte d'existence aux pensées" [the method used here to give a kind of existence to thoughts].[33] This process leads her to conclude that "A mesure que j'en ai acquis l'intelligence, un nouvel univers s'est offert à mes yeux. Les objets ont pris une autre forme" [As I gained understanding of it a new universe presented itself to my eyes. Objects took another form].[34] The implication of this passage is that language as the organ of culture constructs the realm of objects which is therefore not construed as "objective" in the narrowly empiricist sense. Empiricism's prioritization of the natural or objectal world over language is overturned in Zilia's account of her experience, not only in favor of the senses—as in sensualism—but also in favor of language. This problematization of objectivism and its correlate, objectivity, bears an important political charge, for it paves the way for the form of cultural relativism which is the capacity to understand and to accept other peoples' vision of the world.

Zilia soon becomes enthralled with the process of gaining knowledge through language, and develops a love of reading culminating in the acquisition of a personal library. She associates the ability and leisure to read with imagination and liberty, and harshly criticizes the lack of instruction afforded to the majority of French women. When she finds herself confined to a convent in company with Déterville's younger sister Céline, she discovers that the nuns, like her friend, are as ignorant of French culture as she is, having enjoyed no access to sources of knowledge. The similarity which Zilia discovers between herself, a foreigner ignorant of the ways of the state, and the majority of French women, demonstrates that to the extent that women are alienated from the symbolic order they exist as aliens within the state, marginalized in relation to both linguistic and political representations. However, Zilia refuses to accept this marginalization, and turns to books as a source of information. Championing Enlightenment ideals, she sees authors as the true aristocrats of French society. In a moment of polemic, she therefore marvels at the fact that: "Ces

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hommes, sans contredit au-dessus des autres par la noblesse et l'utilité de leur travail, restent souvent sans récompense, et sont obligés . . . de vendre leurs pensées" [These men, unquestionably superior to others by virtue of the nobility and usefulness of their work are often left unrewarded and therefore obliged to sell their thoughts].[35]

When she reads, Zilia finds that "Les douceurs de la liberté se présentent quelquefois à mon imagination" [Freedom's great sweetness enters my imagination at times].[36] Imagination and liberty enjoy an epistemological connection in that it is the faculty of imagination which allows the mind to escape from the pressure of the objective world; in Zilia's mind, this escape from things and events is facilitated by reading. This same connection is articulated in the *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines,* in which imagination and liberty are directly tied to the institution of a sign system. Condillac claims that the use of linguistic signs alone "commence à retirer l'âme de la dépendence où elle était de tous les objets qui agissent sur elle" [begins to release the soul from its former dependence on all the objects which act upon it].[37] In Zilia's case, this "independence" will ultimately help her to survive the psychological trauma of Aza's betrayal. Despite the fact that her faithful love for him has been a source of emotional sustenance throughout the narrative, she is ultimately able to console herself over losing him by reading (Letter XL). Zilia's passion for literary pursuits can also be related to her rejection of Déterville's romantic advances—she elects to remain independent, a reader and writer, rather than to replace Aza by marrying her French suitor.

9. Translation and the Language of Exile

Towards the end of the novel, Déterville and Céline invest the Peruvian treasure captured along with Zilia in order to buy her a country house. Acquainted with her passion for reading, they ensure that it is equipped with a library-study. Jack Undank has called this a "room of one's own," pointing to the fact that long before Virginia Woolf, Graffigny, generally short of money and consequently peripatetic, recognized the importance for women writers of a private place in which to read and write. Fortunately, Zilia's economic status makes this independence a possibility for her.[38] The library is the room in the house most cherished by Zilia, and we can speculate that it is in this private space that she translates and prepares her correspondence for publication.

The *Avertissement* to the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* reminds us that the published text that we read is not the original text of Zilia's letters, but a translation. This is an obvious point, since the French reader is presented, not with a facsimile of Zilia's quipos, but with a translation,

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which, as the *Avertissement* states, could only have been undertaken by the author herself. The declared purpose of this preface is to insist on the authenticity of the correspondence. Graffigny gives a political twist to the conventional eighteenth-century protocol requiring that fictional letters be declared original, by claiming that any refusal to recognize their authenticity will bespeak eurocentric prejudice, a blindness to the achievements of other cultures or their status as "civilizations." The editorial voice reminds us that this prejudice appears all the more unjustified when we consider the European frenzy to despoil Peru of its treasures. Because of this emphasis on authenticity, a discussion of translation is required to account for the process by which the letters have been published in French.

However, the question of translation is complicated by the fact that the preface alludes to an act of translation subsequent to the author's. The second translator or translators (designated by the pronoun "on" and obviously not Zilia), is said to have edited out "un grand nombre de figures hors d'usage dans notre style" [many figures of speech not in use in our style].[39] The edition of 1747 had the somewhat incongruous "expressions et comparaisons orientales" [oriental expressions and comparisons], echoing the *Lettres persanes,* in which the editorial voice similarly claims to have expunged tiresome oriental compliments. The Preface thus seems to acknowledge that the linguistic and cultural specificity of the voice of the other, the Peruvian woman, is being erased. The linguistic specificity tied to the use of the rhetoric or metaphors, the "figures," "expressions et comparaisons" which ground national identities, are sacrificed to an assimilable and purportedly neutral French discourse.

This reference to editorial changes also means that the text of the letters now appears as the translation of a translation, and thus as the product of a repeated movement away from the "original" language. The use of the term "originales" to signify authentic draws our attention to the question of translation, or to the way in which the original text seems to be lost in the process of translating it or rendering it readable and assimilable. The original text is itself lost as it is translated or metaphorically recuperated as meaning, its figural specificity erased. In this sense, the translator's note draws our attention to the fact that in this text which deals with issues of cultural conflict and exile, self-expression is constantly alienated in a language which we might call the language of exile.

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10. The Stakes of Feminine Writing: Subjectivism and Truth

The history of the reception of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* eloquently recounted by recent feminist critics tells a familiar story of prejudice against women writers, condemned as imitative and sentimental, confined to domestic issues and unable to think in terms of political or philosophical universals. It is appealing, and perhaps necessary to invert these signs in favor of women authors. In Graffigny's case this has involved locating philosophical sensualism and its political correlate—a specificity which recognizes and affirms subjective experience—in feminine writing. However, this critical process is not unproblematic, for it may mean that we continue to locate difference in authorial gender. As a result, we risk perpetuating the more-or-less binary approach to sexual difference in relation to writing which nourished the motivated misreadings which excluded the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* from the literary canon for over two centuries. Graffigny's novel does provide a narrative account of the sensory experience which is the foundation of knowledge in an individual, gendered body, and Zilia's story can be read as a testimony to the "lived experience" of alienation which is subjectivist and corporeally grounded. However, as we have seen, the *Lettres* represent the experience of alienation as something which goes beyond the context of cultural imperialism and the socio-political oppression of women. The self that finds itself exiled from the home culture was always already estranged from itself, constituted in a language which, however familiar, is nevertheless foreign to it. My concern here is therefore not simply to modify our understanding of the epistemological project of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* or to re-situate it in regard to the philosophical movements of the eighteenth-century. Rather, I would like to make a point which brings out the literary modernity and theoretical complexity of the work.

It has sometimes been stated that Graffigny's novel prefigures a number of post-colonial novels in its approach to issues of difference, most notably in its attempt to inscribe questions of gender alongside questions of ethnicity. As a number of critics have remarked, Graffigny complicates and radicalizes the critical alterity represented by Montesquieu's Persians by representing a writing subject marked by the difference of sex as well as that of race or culture. Many of the contemporary attempts to mediate between the competing demands of these two categories of personal and social identity reflect a turning away from the theoretical moment which interrogates the meaning of difference and its socio-linguistic instantiation, towards autobiography, for the reason that lived experience appears as the only mode of discourse

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which can fully accommodate the multiplicity of difference. In one of the interviews recorded in *The Post-Colonial Critic,* Gayatri Spivak comments on this process, making a statement which, I believe, is highly relevant to the issue of the embodiment of difference and the representation of self in the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*:

> If one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: how subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth. During these same centuries, the Native Informant [was] treated as the objective evidence for the founding of the so-called sciences like ethnography, ethnolinguistics, comparative religion and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self.[40]

Because Zilia is a fictional character, it seems unlikely that she would be perceived as a "native informant." Yet this is precisely what happened when, in the *Encyclopedia*'s article on "Quipos," the Chevalier de Jaucourt cited Zilia as though she were a native authority on Peruvian writing. The article gives the following account of quipos which at points directly cites Graffigny's Historical Introduction:

> . . . des cordes de coton d'une certaine grosseur, auxquelles cordes ils attachaient dans l'occasion d'autres petits cordons, pour se rappeler par le nombre, par la variété des couleurs de ces cordons, et par des noeuds placés de distance en distance, les différentes choses dont ils voulaient se ressouvenir.
> [. . . cords of cotton of a certain thickness, to which they occasionally attached other little cords, in order to recall by means of number, by the various colors of these little cords, and by means of knots placed at different distances, the different things they wanted to remember.] (my translation)[41]

There is no mention of Zilia until after this citation, and even when the surprising use of the quipos by "l'ingénieuse Zilia" is evoked and her letters cited, there is no reference to the fact that she is a character in a novel by Françoise de Graffigny.

This scientific appropriation of Zilia's testimony is amusing but perhaps also symptomatic. By this I mean that to recent critics the Peruvian's subjective position has seemed to provide direct access to a mode of truth absent from the objectivist formulation of a cultural critique of European imperialism in masculine Enlightenment discourse. Yet here we encounter the problem of the autobiographical tendency of Post-Enlightenment discourse which is identified by Spivak. Graffigny's novel is frequently identified as a feminist critique of universalizing Enlightenment cultural strategies, articulated through a narrative strategy which deploys a single, ethnically other, female protagonist whose intimate account of her intellectual and physical experiences differs strongly from those of Montesquieu's multiple and somewhat depersonalized Persians. However, following Spivak I would

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suggest that this focus on subjective immediacy not only runs counter to our modern sense of the fragmented and decentered self alienated in the socio-linguistic order, but also offers up the possibility of converting individuality into universalism, such that "lived experience" constitutes a feminized, embodied form of objectivity.

Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* actually avoids these potential philosophical (and political) pitfalls by showing that the "native informant" or "person who is known" also has a "problematic self." This is accomplished by portraying the gendered and racially marked body as a representational space. There is no primordial, pre-linguistic identity in this novel, but rather, identity emerges through processes of negation and displacement in language which is always and everywhere the language of the other. This narrativization of the "exile" of the self in language must in and of itself be read as a critique of "masculine" Enlightenment strategies, for we can state that when Graffigny borrows the "master's tools to dismantle the master's house" it is to remind us that the tools do not belong to the master to begin with.[42]

NOTES

1. Cf. for example, Janet Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology," in *Writing the Female Voice,* ed. Elizabeth Goldsmith (Boston, 1989); Nancy K. Miller, "Men's Reading, Women's Writing: Gender and the Rise of the Novel," *Yale French Studies* (1988), 75; Julia V. Douthwaite, *Exotic Women: Literary Heroines and Cultural Strategies in Ancien Régime France* (Philadelphia, 1992), and "Relocating the Exotic other in Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne,*" *Romanic Review* 82:4 (November 1991):456-74. Altman and Miller in particular have written extensively on this work and this list is in no way exhaustive.

2. Cf. Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology."

3. Cf. Miller, "Men's Reading Women's Writing " on the gesture which essentializes the literary production of eighteenth-century women authors as "sentimental" and then excludes them from the literary canon.

4. Cf. Joan de Jean's Introduction to the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (New York, 1993), xvi. All subsequent references are to this edition.

5. *Histoire de la littérature française du XVIIIème siècle* (Paris, 1992), 275.

6. Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (Paris, 1821), 233-56.

7. Altman, 187.

8. The literary salon which Graffigny began in 1745 with her lover Drumgold, and which was frequented by Duclos, Crébillon, Diderot, and Rousseau. Cf. Gianni Nicoletti, "Introduzione," *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (Bari, 1967), 35.

9. *Lettera Apologetica* (Napoli, 1984).

10. Graffigny, 275.

11. *Letters from a Peruvian Woman,* trans. David Kornacker (New York, 1993), 257. All English references are to this translation.

12. Graffigny, 255; Kornacker, 13-14.

13. Graffigny, 99; Kornacker, 103.

14. Epistolarity metaphorizes the absence of the addressee, but also, since letters pass between writer and reader, forms a metonymic link between the two which is expressive

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both of absence and of presence. Thus, when Zilia finally receives a communication from a friend of Aza's (letter XXV) she pours over the paper, imagining that her lover may have seen or touched it.

15. Cf. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and the Novel in 18th Century England* (Cambridge, 1976). Spacks suggests that the epistolary form authenticates reality only by fictionalizing it, a point which is parallel to my argument that in the *Lettres,* the self is only constituted in language at the cost of its own alienation or dispersal into the linguistic system.

16. Graffigny, 50; Kornacker, 51.

17. The concept of personal identity originates in Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding,* II, 27, which for the first time differentiates identity in general from the species of identity which pertains to persons. This conception must be tied to the conception of property, of the proper, which Locke elaborates in the second *Treatise of Civil Government.*

18. Graffigny, 78.

19. Graffigny, 36; Kornacker, 37.

20. Graffigny, 77; Kornacker, 79.

21. Graffigny, 13; Kornacker, 13.

22. Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature,* 1739, radicalizes the empiricist account of what Locke termed "sensation" to isolate its most basic unit as the "impression" which forms the kernel of every "idea."

23. Condillac, 57.

24. Condillac, 183.

25. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1961), 18:1-65; *A Note on the Mystic Writing Pad, SE* 19:227.

26. Cf. for example, Paul de Man's "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* (1982), which articulates a difference between two models of memory conveyed in the distinction made in German between *Erinnerung,* the internalization of external events, and *Gedächtnis* which de Man, through a reading of Hegel, presents as memorization dependent on inscription and the rote repetition of a set of arbitrary signs (8).

27. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Traité des sensations emerged as the canonical representative of Condillac's work, as of sensualist thought more generally, while the *Essai,* and Condillac's contribution to linguistic theory, ceased to be widely accredited. It is true that in 1752 Condillac wrote to Maupertuis, thanking the scientist for his comments on the *Essai's* discussion of signs, and agreeing that they were accorded too much importance in that work. Several Condillac scholars hold the view that the *Traité* modifies this emphasis by stressing the very early, pre-linguistic stages of perception. Cf. for example, Laurence L. Bongie, "A New Condillac Letter and the *Traité des sensations,*" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (1978):16. In *L'Archéologie du frivole* Derrida argues that it is impossible to dismiss the problem posed by the representation of signs in this work with the teleological claim that Condillac changed his mind later on. In this vein it should be noted that Condillac added passages of linguistic importance to the *Traité* after its publication, and that later texts such as the *Logique* return to linguistic concerns. Cf. on this point, Nicolas Rousseau, *Connaissance et langue chez Condillac* (Genève, 1986), 23.

28. Graffigny, 52. This decision to learn the language of the conqueror might be construed as evidence of cultural assimilation: although it certainly reflects Graffigny's problematic opposition of benevolent French and oppressive Spanish imperialism, it should be noted that at other points in the narrative, Zilia resists the unproblematized identification of France with knowledge and progress, and unlike Aza, never embraces Christianity.

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29. Graffigny, 48-49; Kornacker, 50.

30. Cf. for example, Diderot's *Essai sur les aveugles* and Condillac's *Traité des sensations.* The foundation for this debate is laid in the distinction made between primary and secondary qualities in Locke's *Essay.* In the *Lettre sur les aveugles,* Diderot discusses the role of the senses by evoking the debate on blindness inaugurated by his predecessors Molyneux and Locke and pursued by both Berkeley and Condillac. Following Locke, literary and philosophical texts influenced by empiricism, including Hume's *Enquiries,* Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge,* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* emphasize the predominance of sight and visual evidence of "reality" while at the same time problematizing the status of sensory evidence.

31. Graffigny, 52; Kornacker, 53.

32. Graffigny, 72; Kornacker, 74.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Graffigny, 78; Kornacker, 80-1.

35. Graffigny, 90; Kornacker, 93.

36. Graffigny, 164; Kornacker, 170.

37. Condillac, 88.

38. She receives the keys to her new property in a bucolic scene in which she is surrounded by the local peasants who have assembled to welcome their new landlord. One wonders whether the novel's lucidity regarding issues of gender and economic dependence extends to these marginal protagonists.

39. Graffigny, 4-5; Kornacker, 5.

40. "Questions of Multi-Culturalism," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues,* ed. Sarah Harasym (New York, 1990), 66. This "autobiographical turn" at its most persuasive can be read in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, 1989).

41. *Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers,* 2nd ed. (Geneva, 1778), t. 28, 174-75.

42. Nancy Miller concludes her introduction to the MLA's edition of the *Lettres* with this citation of Audre Lorde's phrasing of the paradox surrounding feminist strategy and male discourse (Graffigny xxii).

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