

MARIANNE MOORE'S MULTICULTURAL POETRY: A CASE OF RESISTANCE

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(Resumen)

En este ensayo se pone de manifiesto que la obra de la poeta modernista norteamericana Marianne Moore (1887-1972) es fruto y síntesis de un estudio minucioso de la diversidad cultural. Su voz poética surge descentrada a través de una prolija erudición en campos tan distantes y diversos como la historia, la geografía, el arte, la música, la zoología y otras disciplinas. La ingente variedad de datos y propuestas culturales que muestran las obras de Moore son un manifiesto poético de resistencia al llamado "sueño insular" de los Estados Unidos. A través del análisis de obras tan carismáticas como "Sojourn in the Whale" (1917), "The Labors of Hercules" (1921), "Virginia Britannia" (1935) y "Tom Fool at Jamaica" (1953) se descubre, por un lado, una profunda crítica femenina sobre el aislamiento cultural y, por otro, una visión integradora de los elementos enriquecedores que aportan otras culturas a la sociedad norteamericana.

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The experience of reading Marianne Moore's poetry is, undoubtedly, an enriching and complex cultural adventure.¹ The extraordinary erudition Moore displays of other cultures proclaims, overtly, her resistance to reproduce certain inherited values of the American culture she belongs to. Throughout her active life of poet and suffragette, Moore manifested her refusal of authoritarian attitudes and of the preponderance of the materialistic spirit in all facets of life. In a 1945 interview, the poet was asked on the aspects she most disliked of the American society to which she replied:

I detest our tendency to glorify American virility and our unwillingness to sacrifice comfort in small ways. —our demanding luxurious food, clothes and commodities, and our unwillingness to save materials for the war.²

1. The American Modernist poet Marianne C. Moore was born on November 15, 1887, at the manse of the First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, Missouri. She died in New York City on February 5, 1972. For further information on Moore's biography, see Charles Molesworth's *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*, 1990. This is the first serious attempt to research and write on every component of Moore's biography and papers, even though Molesworth did not receive permission to quote from the unpublished correspondence of Moore and her immediate family.

2. Marianne Moore, "WNYU Brooklyn Public Library Interview" broadcasted on January 30, 1945 in the Rosenbach Museum and Library. In 1969, Marianne Moore arranged the transfer of her literary and personal papers to the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia. In addition, she planned a bequest to the Rosenbach of her livingroom furnishings. Upon her death in February 1972, this unusually complete collection found its permanent home.

Obviously, the interview was broadcasted a few months before World War II was over, and Moore was visibly concerned about one of the paradoxes this international conflict revealed: on the one hand, the struggle for survival in almost all European countries, and on the other hand, the abundance and waste of goods which characterized American society in a historical period of scarcity and suffering. Moore's commentary is a profound critique on American society's incapacity to abandon a policy of "excess" but, especially, on the values represented by an authoritarian and masculine society. When Moore manifests her abhorrence of the "American virility" she is also claiming other radically different social tenets which privilege values like solidarity, tolerance and cultural diversity.³

Marianne Moore's poetry is the artistic representation of the values she wielded all her life. Her poetical voice emerges as a culturally decentered one, allowing her immense amount of research on art, biology, history, geography, philosophy and popular culture to resist the insular dream of American society. Moore's claim of cultural authority allows her to analyze, to assess, to appropriate all culturally active representations of women and men. The exploration of other cultural milieus enables the poet to consider marginalities parallel to the female with pervasive allusions to race, exiles, ethnicities, and stereotypes which appear posed in class terms (Piñero 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999). Moore's depicting of the ignored or the outcast, as valuable and powerful, shows her commitment to the "otherness" of society. This poetical interest in the social pariahs was deeply intertwined with Moore's own vision of herself when she was young female poet: "I was rather sorry to be a pariah, or at least that I had no connection with anything" (*A Marianne Moore Reader* 260). The feeling of alienation which can be inferred from Moore's words has nothing to do with her internal awareness of not belonging to any particular poetical movement but to the external assumptions which implied that an artist had to belong necessarily to a specific movement to validate his/her work.

One of Moore's early poems which shows her commitment to discuss marginality by means of identifying the foreign as feminine is "Sojourn in the Whale" (1917). This quasi-autobiographical work associates historically the colonization of Ireland with that of the female, and explores the feelings of the poet exiled from the masculine literary tradition, as well as the difficulties faced by those who have to struggle against domination and exploitation. The poem is articulated in an indirect dialogue between the feminine Ireland "you" and the masculine Britain. In my view, the "sojourn in the whale" is a literary and a social manifesto represented as a metaphorical voyage with those who are deprived of freedom:

love better than they love you, Ireland—
 you have lived and lived on every kind of shortage.
 You have been compelled by hags to spin
 gold thread from straw and have heard men say:
 "There is a feminine temperament in direct contrast to ours,
 which make her do these things. Circumscribed by a

3. Marianne Moore elaborates these ideas in what has been called her "War Poems" which include, "Light is Speech" (1941), "In Distrust of Merits" (1943) and "To Military Progress" (1915). For a brilliant analysis on Moore's war poems see Susan Schweik's "Writing War Poetry Like a Woman," in *Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Routledge, 1989) 310-332.

heritage of blindness and native
incompetence. she will become wise and will be forced to give in
Compelled by experience. she will turn back: (90)

In the last stanza of the poem, Moore poses a proud and subversive assertion of the real force of the feminine by the ironical smile her fictive persona, Ireland, shows when the metaphor of the water in motion demonstrates the unavoidable truth of its power:

water seeks its own level":
and you have smiled. "Water in motion is far
from level." You have seen it, when obstacles happened to bar
the path, rise automatically. (90)

Marianne Moore's resistance to accept the racial clichés, which were rather prevailing in the America of the Jazz Age, was one of the most important poetical concerns she contended when she moved from the small town of Carlisle in Pennsylvania to the glamorous city of New York in 1918. Moore's attitude is, undoubtedly, a critique on the important reappearance of racism and xenophobia, which arose as a violent reaction against the mass immigration to the United States and the vast migration from rural areas to the city. The decade of the 1920s was very fruitful for the young artist and her allusions to other cultures pervades almost all the poems written during this creative period. One of the most interesting works which manifests her commitment to denounce America's awareness of Anglo-Saxonism is "The Labors of Hercules" (1921). This surprising poem shows Moore's determination to denounce the traditional racial stereotypes of the conservative America:

to teach the patron-saints-to-atheists
that we are sick of the earth.
sick of the pig-sty, wild geese and wild men:
to convince snake-charming controversialists
that one keeps on knowing
"that the Negro is not brutal.
that the Jew is not greedy.
that the Oriental is not immoral.
that the German is not a Hun." (53)

The obstacles a woman poet faces, when trying to dismantle the hackneyed statements mentioned in the poem, are depicted by such an expressive title as "the labors of Hercules." In other words, eradicating prejudicial stereotypes is a task of heroic proportions for the young poet.

It is essential to point out that the last four lines of the text were uttered by Reverend J. W. Darr in a sermon—as Moore's note to the quotation explains. The textual strategy of quoting other people's words displaces Moore's poetical authority as her allusions to other cultures disperses her cultural authority as well. In "The Labors of Hercules," Moore brings to the text oral utterances that provide her the opportunity of unmasking the profound racism which lies under the commonly heard expressions she undermines in her poem. Cristanne Miller analyzes,

in her seminal book *Marianne Moore. Questions of Authority*, Moore's use of the literary allusion in terms of authority, and she correctly contends that "Moore speaks as compiler, for and from a community of heterogeneous voices, as herself a reader and listener of extraordinary intensity and interest rather than as 'author' or personal authority.... She prefers the stance of grateful, enthusiastic, and judicious collector. She arranges texts, or voices, to assert her own" (5-6). In a sense, therefore, Moore's poetical voice becomes an invisible one in the middle of what she called her "flies in amber," referring to her quotations⁴. The effect of this polyphony is fundamental to achieve Moore's poetical vision about the complexity of articulating the exterior world in her poetry, particularly, in the depiction of the complex interaction of different cultures in the United States. In her early poem "In the Days of Prismatic Color," Moore claims that "complexity is not a crime, but carry / it to the point of murkiness / and nothing is plain" (41). Clearly, the poet is broaching the perils of oversimplification when approaching representation, and in the case of her peculiar multicultural poetry, she posits a poetics of complexity to bring into play the subtle and intricate aspects of culture.

Throughout Marianne Moore's work, it can be perceived that for the artist the act of writing poetry involved a double and challenging task: on the one hand, the re-vision of tradition and on the other, the retrieval of women's experience in history. In Liz Yorke's *Impertinent Voices*, the author argues that one of the subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry is, precisely, that of re-inscription of the old narratives, stories, scripts and mythologies. She also asserts that women poets have to re-write their experiences, their bodies and that means the construction of a new relation between women and men:

I argue that re-visionary mythmaking, as a poetic of disruption, involves a thoroughgoing critique of established definitions, values and ethics relating to the representation of women—in theory, as in artistic representation. Through its women pleasurable rehabilitation of what is heterogeneous to patriarchal systems of meaning, poetry can be thoroughly undermining to the logic of the social contract. (2)

Liz Yorke's assertions refer to contemporary women poets and Moore was, so to say, a modernist writer. Nevertheless, we regard Moore's poetry as radically contemporary in its commitment to a re-visionary poetics and its definite search for a feminine writing.

In "Virginia Britannia" (1935), Moore's particular re-vision of American history, the poet examines once again the issue of race by means of the ironical observation of the foundational myth of the United States from the colonial period. Needless to say, Moore explores deeply the first confrontations the Anglo-Europeans had with the native Americans but she states explicitly that the latter did not possess the land; on the contrary, they were part of it. The representation of an Indian princess surrounded by an astonishing variety of flowers and animals points out the perfect symbiotic relationship these aboriginal peoples maintained with

4. Marianne Moore was asked about the quotation marks in her poetry and she answered: "'Why the many quotation marks?' I am asked. Pardon my saying more than once, when a thing has been said so well that it could not be said better, why paraphrase it? Hence my writing is, if not a cabinet of fossils, a kind of collection of flies in amber. Marianne Moore, *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber & Faber 1986) 551.

their natural environment:

... Even the gardenia-sprig's
dark vein on greener
leaf when seen
against the light. has not near it more small bees than the frilled
silk substanceless faint flower of
the crape-myrtle has. Odd Pamunkey
princess. birdclaw-ear-ringed: with a pet raccoon
from the Mattaponi (what a bear!). Feminine
odd Indian young lady! Odd thin-
gauze-and-taffeta-dressed English one! (109)

The repetition of the word "*odd*" three times focuses the description of the female Indian princess and the English lady on the cultural relativity and its complex value assessments. It also presents the concept of difference by the double vision we are given on the conventions of clothing.

"Virginia Britannia" depicts, through the fauna and flora catalogues, the impressive exuberance the first pilgrim fathers saw for the first time.⁵ This paradisiacal vision of harmonious coexistence between the American Indians and nature contrasts ironically with the arrogance of the colonial imperialism which transformed that paradise in a mirror of the European societies:

The live oak's darkening filigree
of undulating boughs. the etched
solidity of a cypress indivisible
from the now aged English hackberry.
become with lost identity.
part of the ground. as sunset flames increasingly
against the leaf-chiseled
blackening ridge of green: while clouds. expanding above
the town's assertiveness. dwarf it. dwarf arrogance
that can misunderstand
importance: and
are to the child an intimation of what glory is. (111)

The last image of the poem is an echo of William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807).⁶ The evocative vision of the child

5. In general terms, Marianne Moore's use of the catalogue verse follows Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855) technique of recording the names of several persons, places, animals, or things in the form of a list. Nevertheless, whereas Whitman celebrates the inherent variety of the United States, Moore incorporates an endless list of voices, objects and diverse elements of "other" distant cultures.

6. Marianne Moore acknowledged the allusion to Wordsworth in a lecture she gave at Sarah

refers to the innocence of an age which collapsed with the advent of the colonial rapacity. But though the image of the child's innocence concludes the poem, it may be inferred that it has been the main metaphor on which the description of the paradisiacal colonial Virginia has been developed.

Moore explores the problem of imperialism and its consequences not only from a historical past but also from the standpoint of its importance as a contemporary political issue to be analyzed. Similarly, the poem poses the human conflicts derived from the colonial abuse, significantly, through the early victims of the Anglo-European imperialism: the American Indians and the African Americans. For the latter, Moore offers a rather idealistic commentary in "Virginia Britannia." "...the Negro, / inadvertent ally and best enemy of / tyranny" (109). These words confirm Moore's resolution to stand firmly by the side of those who are segregated by the mistakes of history and her efforts to overturn racial stereotypes that dominated intellectual and political thought around the turn of the century.

In this manner, the artist unmasks the two most important and visible elements of social discrimination, that is race and gender. According to the critic Cristanne Miller:

Moore marks race and gender in two ways: through a directly political attempt to overthrow widespread hierarchical stereotypes (generally through negation: "The negro is not brutal"), or through an indirectly political (occasionally romanticized) attempt to create new space or recognition for stigmatized people and qualities. (1989: 807-808)

An outstanding example of Moore's multicultural and anti-stereotyped poetry is the poem "Tom Fool at Jamaica" (1953). The main problem this work poses is the apparent lack of connection between the four statements, which are unfolded while the author, introduces elusive commentaries in order to link them. The poem elaborates these four thematic sequences, which are fully documented by the accurate description of its sources offered in the final notes. The first statement of "Tom Fool at Jamaica" is Jonah's biblical story whose relationship with the rest of the thematic sequences is established by the meaning of the words "statesman" and "detain" introduce:

Lawrence College in May 1940: "I did not care to use the word 'intimation' because it suggested to me Wordsworth's Ode, INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY and one naturally respects first rights, but after rejecting it a number of times, I still came back to it and felt I must, so I finally kept it. This in itself is of no importance, but it suggests to me what does seem to be important—that one must overcome a reluctance to be unoriginal and not be worried too much about possible comparisons and coincidences." Typescript headed "Sarah Lawrence College, May 1, 1940," in the Rosenbach Museum and Library Archives in Philadelphia.

7. For another reading of "Virginia Britannia" see John Slatin's "Advancing Backward in a Circle: Marianne Moore as (Natural) Historian," *Twentieth Century Literature* 30.2-3 (Summer-Fall 1984): 273-326. Bonnie Honigsblum comments in her annotated bibliography of works about Moore that Slatin shows how, like such writers as Hawthorne and Whitman, Moore acknowledges the fall from innocence that threatens to undermine the idealism underwriting this experiment in an immense new "garden of Eden." See Bonnie Honigsblum's "An Annotated Bibliography of Works about Marianne Moore: 1977-1990," in *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet*, ed. Patricia C. Willis. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1990.

Look at Jonah embarking from Joppa, deterred by
the whale: hard going for a statesman whom nothing could detain,
although one who would rather die than repent. (162)

If we re-read Jonah's story in the Bible we will discover that the Old Testament prophet considered himself infallible and manifested a systematic opposition to God's wisdom. As a consequence of his behaviour, Jonah was cast overboard during a storm sent by God and later swallowed by a big whale and finally vomited up after having spent three days in its belly. Therefore, line three of the poem—"hard going for a statesman whom nothing could detain"—confirms Jonah's arrogance as destructive, and it contrasts dramatically with the second statement of the poem: the Spanish schoolboy story which is valued as a model to be followed:

Be infallible at your peril, for your system will fail,
and select as a model the schoolboy in Spain
who at the age of six, portrayed a mule and jockey
who had pulled up for a snail. (162)

The narrative Moore reports in the previous stanza has to be carefully analyzed because it has deep political implications, as we will see. First of all, it would be illuminating to read Moore's note to the Spanish schoolboy's story which also includes the drawing: "A mule and jockey by 'Julio Gómez, 6 años' from a collection of drawings by Spanish school children. Solicited on behalf of a fund-raising committee for Republican Spain, sold by Lord Taylor; given to me by Louise Crane" (248).

The naive drawing shows a mule reigned in sharply by a jockey boy to avoid a tiny snail. The image expresses more than the words because it is a visual metaphor that indirectly alludes, as well as Jonah's story, to the political episode that occasioned the Spanish Civil War.

It is well known that General Franco's military rebellion overthrew the democratic government of the Spanish Republic, which eventually caused the fratricidal civil war. Moore was not aloof from the socio-historical debates of her time, on the contrary, she was ideologically involved in artistic and historical issues as her declarations in a 1938 interview show: "I am for the legal government and the people of Loyalist Spain; against Franco, against fascism; against any suppression of freedom by tyranny masked as civilization" (*Writers Take Sides*, 43).

The episode of the small Julio and the snail exemplifies the power of adaptation and flexibility against the obstinate arrogance and inflexibility that provoked Jonah's failing and indirectly serves as a subtle authorial commentary on the attitudes that precipitated the Spanish Civil War.

The third statement in the poem is the description of a race horse, Tom Fool and its jockey Ted Atkinson. Through metaphor and metonymy, the race horses and their riders are depicted in terms of qualities to which the competitive struggle, and its result in victory or defeat, are irrelevant.⁸

8. See Marie Borroff, "'Tom Fool at Jamaica' by Marianne Moore: Meaning and Structure," *College English* 17 (1955): 468.

Tom Fool "makes an effort and makes it oftener
 than the rest"—out on April first, a day of some significance
 in the ambiguous sense—the smiling
 Master Atkinson's choice, with that mark of a champion, the extra
 spurt when needed. Yes, yes, "Chance
 is a regrettable impurity": (162)

Tom Fool's description focuses the story on the surprising characteristics of a splendid race horse instead of portraying the whole image of a race which includes, obviously, the jockey. The stanza ends with a cryptic quotation from the alluring book of the *I Ching* —an ancient Chinese text that has fascinated Chinese and Westerners alike.⁹ The inclusion of an aphorism from this book that remarks, "Chance / is a regrettable impurity," introduces to the poem a thinking process which was one of the main characteristics to the *I Ching*. That is, this divination book expressed its philosophy with a thoughtful-provoking language, thus allowing the reader a great freedom in interpreting its significance. The inclusion of the Chinese proverb signifies, at this point, a poetical declaration because it expresses the same idea which has been developed throughout the poem: that is to say, the flexibility in interpreting the aphorism and in the concentrated thought which is behind the opposing images. In this light, the Americanist and Sinologist scholar, Lina Unali, points out that Moore "makes the whole of Chinese culture explain its meaning with softness. She grasps both its secrecy and its epiphany. She is also ready to forget her cultural insights and discoveries, to turn to something else, never to fix herself on concepts which do not carry life within. Miss Moore's attitude to life and art always seemed to favor the following indications: 'Adopt no absolute position. Let externals take care of themselves. In motion be like water. At rest like a mirror. Be subtle as though non-existent. Be still as though pure'" (212)

Moore closes the poem with a quick mention to the play of porpoises about the prow of a ship, the acrobatics of Lippizan horses and a monkey riding a greyhound¹⁰. Following these concise images the work's final statement is the fleeting description of three black jazz musicians who were remarkable for their unconformity as great improvisers:

Of course, speaking of champions, there was Fats Waller
 with the feather touch, giraffe eyes, and that hand alighting in
 Ain't misbeavin'! Ozzie Smith and Eubie Blake
 ennoble the atmosphere: (163)

The depiction of the Afro-American musician Fats Waller presents, once again, the issue of racial prejudice in so far as this outstanding pianist could not develop a classical music

9. See David Hsin-Fu Wand, "The Dragon and the Kylin: The Use of Chinese Symbols and Myths in Marianne Moore's Poetry," *Literature East and West* 15 (1971): 470-484.

10. For a detailed study of Marianne Moore's bestiary see Chapter III of my dissertation titled "'Imaginary gardens with real toads in them': la antiespecularidad del jardín zoológico de Marianne Moore" (1995: 276-337).

career due to his race, as it has been suggested.¹¹ But Moore tributes an homage to jazz music and to its versatile musicians who sometimes were not given the intellectual credit of the so called classical music, even though it was probably the best expression of the vernacular American music.

The juxtaposition of the different statements in "Tom Fool at Jamaica" is a testimony of Moore's artistic compromise to incorporate radically different visions of culture which have been traditionally ignored or neglected. For Moore the Jonah-story, the Spanish schoolboy's drawing, the race-horse, the jazz musicians, the *I Ching*, and the Circus animals are connected in so far as they represent cultural diversity and resist an archetypal vision of American culture.

In conclusion, Moore's poems "Sojourn in the Whale," "The Labors of Hercules," "Virginia Britannia" and "Tom Fool at Jamaica," among others, demonstrate, with a clear and critical resistance to a culturally hegemonic society, her search for other cultural sources and images to identify with. Therefore, Moore's multicultural poetry is a locus of diversity and complexity where all the margins of society converge in a decentering and enriching process.

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11. See the short article on Fats Waller's biography in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 527.

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