

Valeria Stabile, *Pues no soy mujer. The Upheaval of Singularity in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2022, pp. 224

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Writing about Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz has always posed a significant challenge. Every scholar approaching her vast and intricate corpus, along with the considerable number of existing critical works, perceives the peculiar sensation that everything has both been said and remains unsaid simultaneously. This is the challenge that Valeria Stabile embraces in her work *Pues no soy mujer: The Upheaval of Singularity in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Genova, Il Melangolo, 2022).

From a methodological point of view, the novelty of this book lies in establishing a dialogue between Sor Juana's work and post-structuralist theories that challenge the omnipotent dimension of the subject's identity stemming from Cartesian philosophy. Stabile aims to demonstrate how Sor Juana, even in the 17th century, presents us with a subject that is semiotic, mutable, and unreliable, alongside a sex that is singular and excessive. This leads Sor Juana to construct a significant politics of the body and singularities that move beyond the metaphysics of presence. Stabile aims to show how Sor Juana constantly evades binary normativity, preferring a fluid subject – *abstracto* as Sor Juana herself often describes it – which can engage in dialogue and contribute to the contemporary feminist critical debates.

The entry point to this book is a title inherently complex: *Pues no soy mujer: The Upheaval of Singularity in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. The first part of the title begins with verse 103 of the poem "Señor: para responderos", where the lyrical

voice responds to a poem received from a gentleman from Peru who asks her to become a man. Choosing such a critical perspective is always risky, as it can lead to an over interpretation of ancient works through categories that did not exist at that time. However, from the outset, Stabile avoids this trap. She is keenly aware of the dangers involved in her choice and, despite the contemporary theories she engages with, maintains a strong attachment to the moment in which Sor Juana's works were written, preserving their specific contextual grammar in a philological and etymological way.

The book accomplishes an appropriate balance between theoretical approaches and textual analysis. Stabile's reading process is not about subjecting the text to a theory but allowing the text to speak first "from within" as she emphasizes (16). Stabile clarifies that her work is not about reinterpreting Sor Juana's writings but re-contextualizing them, thereby creating a bridge that helps us perceive Sor Juana's singularity in her time and understand how her acts of resistance to the norm can enrich today's feminist debate. Approaching Sor Juana's work, Stabile argues, is an act that responds to the "seduction" exerted by Sor Juana's writings (7). This seduction, considered in its dual etymological sense from Latin *seducere*, implies both being attracted by something or someone that undermines our certainties and calling aside, separating to establish an intimate dialogue (7). In this sense, Stabile asserts that her goal is not to unravel Sor Juana's mysteries but rather to approach them as open questions.

In this regard, the central idea of the text revolves around the polysemic and fundamental concept of constructing one's own identity. What kind of "I" is the one from which we speak, what is its sex and its gender, what is the measure of its existence, and from where does it speak? All these questions are striking in Sor Juana's work, especially considering that she wrote in the pre-modern period, before the centrality of the Cartesian subject. Additionally, she writes from a peculiar place, the cloister, at a time when the Mexican nation was barely forming, and its independence had yet to be established. This central question is further explored through four sub-questions developed in the four chapters of the book.

The first chapter delves into the question "Who is the subject that speaks in Sor Juana's text?". Stabile aims to understand the philosophical dimension of the speaking or non-speaking subject in Sor Juana's works, considering the pre-modern context. To accomplish this, she focuses on a close reading of *Neptuno Alegórico* (1680) and *Primero Sueño* (1685-1691). Starting from a discussion about the peculiar literary genre represented by *Neptuno Alegórico*, Stabile demonstrates that although the "I" seems to disappear in the text, it actually becomes fluid in relation to others, specifically Sor Juana's masters whose works are cited into the text. By considering the key repetition of the water motif, that in the Baroque

indicates a substance capable of changing its form, Stabile argues that Sor Juana is bringing the discussion about the subject from substance, something that can be touched, to the semiotic dimension. This means that the subject is actually a sign, an emblem that moves in a very peculiar space such as the labyrinth, a *Dédalo* as Sor Juana names it. If *Neptuno Alegórico* is the representation of a representation, in a metanarrative way the subject operating in this work needs to lose its centrality and resist to the principle of non-contradiction proposed by the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. According to Stabile, this first attempt to dissolve the substance of the subject is then developed in an even more forceful manner in *Primero Sueño*. This is a *silva* that deals with the story of a soul that separates from the body during the night and begins a journey towards universal knowledge. Stabile points out that this approach undermines another accepted characteristic of the metaphysical subject: the fact that it is centred on its own presence and it is this presence that gives it access to knowledge (52). The act of knowledge of Sor Juana's subject, on the contrary, works in the dreams, a space *in between* life and death. Stabile argues that Sor Juana is playing with medieval psychology that separates the sensory faculties of the body from the internal faculties of the soul and puts into dialogue the concepts of mind and soul, which are grammatically feminine names (52). After this journey, the subject resumes its unity and reveals that everything has been just a dream. However, Stabile notes how the discourse shifts from the use of the impersonal voice to the "I" cited only at the end. This undermines another characteristic of the metaphysical subject, which is having no sex. In reading this unprecedented relationship between subject and gender, Stabile engages a dialogue between Sor Juana and Jacques Derrida's most recent works on the definition of *Geschlecht*. As stated by Derrida, the category of gender has a specific polysemy indicating both sexual difference and the fact of belonging to a genus, a species. According to Stabile, the way Sor Juana plays in her texts shows how she knows and resists a form of confinement of the subject as something fixed, unquestionable, and above all endowed with gender (42).

The second chapter addresses the subsequent question: What is the sex of this subject, what is its gender? Here, Stabile reintroduces a fundamental aspect of re-contextualizing Sor Juana's work, namely, reinstating the distinction between gender/genre as it existed in the 17th century. Instead of focusing on Sor Juana's letters, as critics typically do, Stabile chooses to analyze the poem "Señor: para responderos," where Sor Juana responds to a Peruvian gentleman's suggestion to eat clay in order to become a man. This was a practice that women used in imperial Spain to inhibit the menstrual cycle and make their skin appear whiter. According to Stabile, in this poem Sor Juana builds a powerful discourse: firstly she tells the gentleman that she cannot be considered a woman because from the place where she is, the cloister, she does not act like a woman. So,

according to Sor Juana sex is an act and not just a characteristic. At the same time, she does not accept becoming a man and “muddying” her being, making it dirty by virilising it. Sor Juana tells the gentleman from Peru that she does not want to become a man not for the obvious reason of being a woman, but precisely because her sex cannot be verified. To explain this peculiarity, Stabile takes advantage of the category of “sexistence” coined by Jean-Luc Nancy. The term indicates an unpredictable sexual existence, which moves by attraction, by desire for itself, continually becoming what it is not yet (66). Sex for Nancy is intimately related to language and is essential in the life of the speaking animal. Stabile claims that for Sor Juana, sex functions as a form of resistance to gender considered as a homogeneous group, as a *genus*. Her resistance is thus precisely a *sexistence*, a form of resistance to a binary type of normativity. Sor Juana is constantly proposing a form of singularity that claims its existence despite the sphere of being, of the verifiable. It is not that she cannot be a man because she is a woman, rather she cannot be a man because becoming one is an act of violence against a sex that no one can verify. As Stabile underlines, this does not want to deny that Sor Juana is fighting for women's rights to study and write, but only the fact that she does it “from within” from her being a woman (83). What Stabile asserts instead is that Sor Juana is rather pointing to, showing, from the Latin *monstrare* the rights of women. In this sense, Sor Juana can be considered the actual monster that points to, that shows.

From this point, Stabile moves to the third question: to what extent does this subject exist and in what way does it become a true ‘being’? Chapter three is dedicated to answering this question by introducing and discussing the monstrous figure of the Phoenix, a creature without genealogy because it generates itself. Stabile explores how Sor Juana plays with the morphology of this masculine common name attributed to her in “¡Válgame Apolo por hombre!” (1962). In this poem, the poetic voice responds to an anonymous poet who comes from Europe to New Spain in search of this rare bird, namely, Sor Juana. Stabile emphasizes how Sor Juana manipulates the morphology of the Phoenix, affirming that while her gender is male, her signifier does not necessarily have to be male. This subtle game allows Sor Juana to avoid taking a precise position, as she always asserts that it is the poet who declares her the Phoenix. She accepts without explicitly accepting. She affirms without affirming. For Stabile, this split between grammatical norm and the sex of the Phoenix constitutes an act of *sexistence*. The Phoenix embodies an existence outside the normative dimension of being a human male or female, veering towards the non-human. Its measure of being is linked to its material body, composed of feathers, hence an “abstract body” (88). Using Derrida’s concept of “Life Death,” Stabile demonstrates how the Phoenix inhabits a space of both life and death simultaneously, further

undermining the principle of non-contradiction that confines the subject to a clear identity. If the nature of the subject is "phoenixed," meaning it generates itself, establishing its genealogy or genus becomes impossible.

Having understood how Sor Juana navigates the monstrosity of the Phoenix, we are left with the final question, developed in the fourth chapter: where does this subject exist, and from where does it speak? Stabile examines two prologues that introduce Sor Juana's national discourse, discussing the conquest of Mexico and the supposedly monolithic vision of the New World: the prologue to the play *El Divino Narciso* (1691) and the prologue to the play dedicated to Saint Hermenegildo (1962). This approach allows Stabile to pose the ultimate question: is it possible to canonize Sor Juana's work? To which canon does it belong?

Sor Juana's treatment of the political dimension of belonging in the loas analyzed by Stabile reveals a constant interplay between two worlds: America and imperial Spain. Stabile draws upon María Lugones' theories about the action of *cuajar*, an intersectional practice of resistance, and Anzaldúa's revision of the Mexica concept of *nepantla*, "in between". According to Stabile, Sor Juana operates in a political space "in between," where a fixed origin cannot be identified. However, this does not imply that this subject operates in a fragmented space; rather, it is coagulated, or "cuajado," as described by María Lugones. This is evident in the way Sor Juana uses language, appropriating Mexica identity and incorporating words in Nahuatl, Basque, and Spanish. In this way, Sor Juana challenges the view of America as a *tabula rasa*. As Stabile highlights, Sor Juana interprets Columbus's expedition within a divine design but reverses America's subordination to Spain by emphasizing the riches taken from America and how the Empire goes mad when it cannot do without this greatness. By positioning herself in a spatial and conceptual *nepantla*, Sor Juana's work resists normative canonization. Each attempt to confine her to a canon results in a loss of her specificity, and this is the ultimate resistance her work offers against the concept of colonialism today.

This is where I see the significance of Valeria Stabile's work extending beyond Sor Juana's writings. By reconsidering the notion of canon in light of what *nepantla* signifies – both a place and a non-place – the solution to making marginalized writings visible is not to force them into a canon, which is another form of violence, but to highlight their existence and non-existence within the canon simultaneously. It is about "showing," or "pointing" precisely to their resistance. Readers can benefit from Stabile's provocative idea of the *phoenixification* of knowledge as an act of resistance against ancient and modern forms of colonialism.