

Rooms of Their Own: Virginia Woolf, Private Space, and Metaliterature in Martín Gaité's *Visión de Nueva York*

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Abstract: Spanish author Carmen Martín Gaité's collage book *Visión de Nueva York* (2005) is a record of her time spent in New York City in 1980 while teaching at Barnard College. The collages mix media from newspapers and magazines with Martín Gaité's personal photographs and writing, and documents the influence of writers like Virginia Woolf on Martín Gaité's creative process. This essay uses criticism from feminist geography and metaliterary studies to analyze how Martín Gaité's construction of private spaces aids in the development of a metaliterary "I" in her collages. Through an examination of three collages, we see how Martín Gaité dialogues with Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in a complex negotiation of artistic self-creation.

Keywords: Martín Gaité, collage, Virginia Woolf, New York, metaliterature

In the fall of 1980, Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité (1925-2000) arrived in New York City for a teaching position at Barnard College, and began to compile a personal collage diary of her time in the United States. The resulting work is *Visión de Nueva York*, a facsimile of which was published posthumously in 2005. The collages interweave media from a variety of sources: personal photos of Martín Gaité meet clippings of women from magazines, handwritten phrases loop around words cut from newspapers—a mixture of mediums that forms what Martín Gaité calls "cuadernos de todo." Of the genesis of *Visión de Nueva York*, Martín Gaité writes that "se inició con pretensiones de diario y había acabado en una serie de collages subrayados por textos cada vez más sucintos, porque en Nueva York las imágenes corren más rápidamente que las palabras y las desplazan" (11). It is through this union of image and text that Martín Gaité hopes to transmit a sense of the city, and her place in it. Despite her affirmation that image flows faster than words and displaces them, *Visión de Nueva York* contains a significant amount of text, much of it handwritten. Even in a compilation of a highly image-based collage diary, Martín Gaité never leaves words behind. What kind of book is *Visión de Nueva York*? On one hand, it could be considered a personal diary of images and words: Martín Gaité herself is prominently featured in her collages. Some entries are mostly visual, while at times some pages are closer to a diary than to a mosaic of images. On the other hand, certain elements of the book, such as its dedication to her friend Ignacio Álvarez Vara at the beginning, make us question the idea of the book as a purely autobiographical, personal creation.¹

1 According to Debra Ochoa, "A more appropriate classification for *Visión de Nueva York* is Romera Castillo's concept of 'diarísticos diversos [diverse diary materials]' cited by Granata de Egiés in her study of Martín Gaité's *Cuadernos de todo* and *Visión de Nueva York*" (86).

While the visual elements of *Visión de Nueva York* are clearly central to the work, and have been the main focus of past studies of the book, I am particularly interested in the textual elements of *Visión de Nueva York*, specifically those that work to complicate the nature of the book, and Martín Gaité's complex literary-autobiographical identity within it. This essay owes much to previous studies of *Visión de Nueva York* by Debra Ochoa, who has examined how Martín Gaité uses collage to negotiate her relationship to space and gender, as well as how Martín Gaité relates her work to that of Virginia Woolf. Elide Pittarello's study of the influence of Woolf on Martín Gaité, specifically her analysis of the collage "Homenaje a Virginia Woolf," also serves as a foundational text in my argument. Both critics also question how to define *Visión de Nueva York*, pointing to its complex mix of media and imposition of the literary on the autobiographical. While Ochoa and Pittarello examine the construction of Martín Gaité's personal relationship to space in the collages, and her literary relationship to Woolf, neither fully probes the complexities of how Martín Gaité positions herself alongside and within Woolf's writing in her collages. Building off of the criticism of Ochoa, Pittarello, and others, this essay aims to explore how the relationship between the private and the public informs the creation and articulation of a metaliterary "I" in *Visión de Nueva York*. Looking first to the principles of feminist geography and the methodology of collage, this paper examines this interplay of self/space identity in Martín Gaité's collages that center on Virginia Woolf, with a focus on written text. Applying this analysis to three different pages of the book, I propose that, through this negotiation of space and identity, Martín Gaité constructs a vision of herself through the superposition of Virginia Woolf's meta-writing onto Martín Gaité's own artistic production. Through a juxtaposition of public and private, literary and biographical, the written text in union with images in *Visión de Nueva York* serves as a means for Martín Gaité to negotiate metaliterary identity.

To understand how Martín Gaité constructs public and private space in *Visión de Nueva York*, we must first see how gender is constructed in public space, and can do so via the critical branch of "feminist geography." Forming part of the theory of human geographies, feminist geography analyzes the relationship between space and gender, applying a feminist perspective to society, spaces, and environments. Feminist geography first appeared in the academic sphere during the 1970s with the criticism of Linda McDowell and Joan P. Sharp, and social theories of feminist geography were also transferred to literary criticism. Scholar Debra Ochoa's study on the work of Martín Gaité employs the feminist geography theories of Linda McDowell, Elizabeth Wilson, and Elizabeth Grosz for this very aim. Particularly relevant to this study is the examination of how Martín Gaité, as a woman, explores the discourses of the spaces in which she finds herself in New York. On the way in which the city establishes its social relations, critic Elizabeth Grosz proposes that:

the city organizes and orients family, sexual and social relations insofar as the city divides cultural life into public and private domains, geographically dividing and defining the particular social positions and locations occupied by individuals and groups... These spaces, divisions, and interconnections are the roles and means by which bodies are individuated to become subjects. (250)

Gender and the city have long interacted, creating a complex historical web of relationality. The prevalence of patriarchal norms confined women to the domestic, private sphere, resulting in literary and artistic perceptions of the city that are derived from a predominantly white male perspective. Walter Benjamín identified this figure of the wandering man as the *flâneur*. In their questioning of the city as an inherently masculine space, critics such as Lauren Elkin have developed the idea of the *flâneuse*, the female *flâneur*. This subversive figure challenges the patriarchal hegemony that centers the city around masculinity, instead claiming the city for herself. Regarding this dynamic in Martín Gaité's work, Debra Ochoa maintains that "Martín Gaité questions the assumption that the city is inherently a male space through her consistent portrayal of female presence in New York" (87), a questioning that reveals itself through Martín Gaité's inscription of herself onto the city. In contrast to the strict limitations of Francoist Spain, which confined women to the domestic sphere, Martín Gaité possesses the freedom to both wander and shelter. In one collage, she writes: "Es lo malo de New York, que lo quiere uno todo y que continuamente te salen al paso tentaciones inesperadas. Y yo no sé decir no a ninguna, y ando de acá para allá, a merced de mis pasos, ¡tan feliz!" (156). With these words, Martín Gaité becomes the *flâneuse* of her own work. This interaction between visual images of the city and personal life-writing is precisely the self/city identity that Parsons proposes.

However, part of *Visión de Nueva York* concerns the private sphere, and it is in this portrayal of private space where Martín Gaité engages in much of her textual self-creation within the collages. Martín Gaité's use of the medium of collage allows her to pull from a variety of sources to represent her life and self, and it is this combination of media that complicates a simple reading of the book as purely autobiographical. In considering *Visión de Nueva York* as a whole, it can be difficult to determine the extent to which Martín Gaité's first-person writing and use of personal photos is exclusively autobiographical, or a creation of a separate literary voice that turns Martín Gaité into a character in her own collages. Much like W.J.T. Mitchell's reflections on meta-picture and the insertion of the artist into the work (58-64), Martín Gaité plays with the use of her own image, inserting herself alongside references to fictional characters and women clipped from magazines. Martín Gaité purposefully complicates this distinction by combining elements of pop culture and daily life with references to

literature and art. Political headlines mix with letters, personal photos, magazine clippings, and literary fragments from Martín Gaité's own writing, as well as quotes from others. Majorie Perloff proposes in her article on the invention of collage that such collection of elements is key to subjectivity formation within the medium: "to collage elements from impersonal, external sources...is, as it were, to establish continuity between one's own private universe and the world outside, to make from what is already there something that is one's own" (43). That Martín Gaité selects this medium to make sense of the world around her is a way of writing herself onto the literary, political, and social landscape of a new space. She refers to other published works of hers throughout the collages—one page features a flyer about her presentation at Barnard, with a prominent photo of the author taking up most of the page—but these biographical elements are always interwoven with images from public media. Due to this combination of personal elements from Martín Gaité's "private universe" and artifacts from the outside world, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the autobiographical Martín Gaité and the construction of a literary "I." Where Martín Gaité ends and the literary version of herself begins is, at times, unclear. This lack of clarity between the two is especially evident in her two main collages focused on Woolf, which complicate the relationship between personal and fictional self.

New York was where Martín Gaité first read Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), an essay that aided in expanding her interpretations of her own identity relative to space and place. *Visión de Nueva York* reveals that Martín Gaité is highly aware of both herself and the ways in which her literary production interconnects with other texts, specifically those of Woolf. One of the main focuses of my analysis is a collage completely dedicated to Woolf, dominated by handwritten text. The first thing we see in the top left corner is Martín Gaité's colored-pencil drawing of the cover of the 1957 American edition of Woolf's text, setting the tone and environment of the page. Under the cover's prominent title is a room featuring a larger-than-life fountain pen, a blue flower in the center, and a green chair, all under a yellow circle that seems to be both the sun and a ceiling light. Martín Gaité wants to give us a visual copy of her own paperback, a personal artifact that she re-inscribes onto the collage in her own hand, making it her own. Examining Martín's drawing of the book cover, Elide Pittarello writes: "A Carmen Martín Gaité no le basta poseerlo, necesita estrechar gráficamente el vínculo representando su imagen en lo alto y a la izquierda: una posición preeminente... [n]o evoca una época pasada, archiva el momento presente" (241). Pittarello's observation that it "archives the present moment" touches on the layers of narrative present in the collage: Martín Gaité re-creates the present moment of her reading through her drawing, while evoking the past—and past readings of Woolf—through the nostalgia of the 1957 cover. The collage contains a handwritten paragraph in which Martín Gaité discusses the text: "Ahora he comprado *A room of one's own*, que he terminado de leer este fin

de semana en New Haven y que me congenia con la Woolf ya definitivamente. Porque ella, cómo yo, entendía de interiores” (145). This understanding of interiors, of their solace and necessity, is echoed in *Desde la ventana* when Martín Gaité describes her apartment with language linked to femininity and maternal protection: “las cuatro paredes de mi refugio provisional no solo no se me caían encima, sino que me arropaban maternalmente” (12). The intimacy of this space lies in its womb-like containment and safety, a gestational environment for subjectivity as Martín Gaité writes and self-fashions within it.

Other textual elements in the collage that further emphasize this intimacy include a newspaper clipping that reads “she had a lifestyle all her own.”² Martín Gaité’s selection of this particular headline serves to underline Woolf’s central message in *A Room of One’s Own*, affirming the construction of independent feminine subjectivity. The collage also includes an image of a woman’s hand cut from a magazine, pasted among the handwritten text, which is forced to curve around it. Ink emerges from a finger to form the words “automne 1980.” It fixes us in the present moment of Martín Gaité, and ties us to her via the image of the hand. While the hand does not belong to her, the placement of its inky fingers recalls the act of hand-writing the text around it, centering us in the moment of creation. While it attempts to suspend the abstract figure of Martín Gaité, it inevitably “archives the present,” to reiterate Pittarello—a present that immediately becomes the past, and moves beyond the act of personal creation to stay fixed on the page. Furthermore, this juxtaposition of text and image creates, according to Juan Senís Fernández, a “nueva significación con la cual se integran en la narración de las experiencias neoyorquinas de la autora y por tanto palabra y texto en conjunto redundan el nivel superior de la diégesis, de manera que necesita dos códigos para entender esta” (253). These two codes, visual and textual, bring Woolf into the contemporary moment of the autumn of 1980 and contribute to the process through which Martín Gaité reinscribes Woolf on her own literary self, fashioning a literary “I” that is both fictional/literary and autobiographical. While there are no images of Martín Gaité, she is clearly “visible” as a self-aware creator, especially in relationship to her own work. Martín Gaité mentions her recent translation of Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*: “Me acuerdo de todas las horas que le dediqué en El Boalo, de las resonancias que allí, en el despacho de papá, me traía ese texto (Hace solo mes y medio)” (145). Given that act of translating implicitly involves the re-imagining and re-writing of the text by the translator, it is clear that Martín Gaité relates to Woolf on both a personal and artistic plane, and the use of text in this collage page aids in expanding the intertextual conversation between Martín Gaité and Woolf.

The next page in *Visión de Nueva York* is mostly comprised of text, with barely any images: several handwritten paragraphs detail the relationship between

2 Elide Pittarello identifies this fragment as part of an article on Greta Garbo from the *New York Post* from September 17, 1980 (253).

Woolf's ideas of individual space and Martín Gaité's own life. The only image is a clipping of an invitation to a Barnard College cocktail party welcoming Martín Gaité, set for Tuesday, September 23rd at Milbank Hall. The handwritten text to the left of the invitation reads "(Acabo de volver de un party que me han ofrecido en Barnard College) Y yo con mi abanico" (146). Before even reading about Martín Gaité's experience at the party, we see how she already demarcates herself as distinct from the Americans in the room: "Y yo con mi abanico" conveys her separation both linguistically, with the use of a sentence fragment beginning with "and," as well as symbolically, her fan standing in as symbol of her Spanish identity. She is presented with a flourish, apart and distinct. While there are no images of Martín Gaité on the page, we are able to picture her by how she sets the scene with her words. Below the invitation, Martín Gaité recalls the experience of the cocktail party and relates it to Woolf's writing. Reflecting on the party relative to *A Room of One's Own*, Martín Gaité writes, "Y no estoy segura de que las mujeres americanas, ni las de ningún lado, acaben de conquistar la libertad y el estar-en-sí que Virginia Woolf deseaba para ellas, ni que acaricien ese sueño de tener una habitación propia, o que sepan habitarla en soledad una vez que la han puesto" (146). Martín Gaité's observations of other women and their apparent inability to achieve what Woolf had hoped for them are tied up in this question of a room of one's own. The "estar-en-sí" that Martín Gaité references is inherently linked to the privacy and solitude of an individualized space, a space onto which Martín Gaité places great symbolic weight.

It is noteworthy that Martín Gaité differentiates herself from the women who have yet to achieve Woolf's goals, referring to them as "ellas," not the collective "nosotras." There is a clear divide here. This dialogue with Woolf forms part of what Elide Pittarello terms an "alianza intertextual e intermedial" (244) between Woolf's work and Martín Gaité's life-writing. Martín Gaité continues this "intertextual alliance" in her paragraph:

Yo, aleccionada por este libro, que tanto coincide (en la forma sobre todo) con alguna de mis solitarias retahílas, con mi afán por abarcar lo concreto y lo abstracto al mismo tiempo, me esforzaré por no echar las pelotas fuera de banda y estar lo más posible en este apartamento neoyorkino donde, a lo tonto, llevo ya viviendo quince días, sin haberle sacado por ahora todo el fruto a sus posibilidades de retiro e independencia. (146)

It is clear that privacy and personal space are fundamental to Martín Gaité, to the extent that she must force herself to leave the sanctity of this space to explore "todo el fruto a sus posibilidades" of New York City. Her writing demonstrates her search for that which is intimate and individual, despite the "retiro

e independencia” that the public sphere offers, but also interfaces the events of Martín Gaité’s own life and her identity as a writer with Woolf’s work. Martín Gaité positions herself as a living example of what Woolf hoped for women to explore, putting herself directly into conversation with Woolf. While not directly comparable, Martín Gaité’s musings here serve a similar meta-function to that of the narrator of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf’s essay is written from the perspective of a first-person narrator who is not precisely Woolf, but whose language blurs the boundary between essay lecture and personal account. The essay opens with Woolf’s narrator addressing the audience: “But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what, has that got to do with a room of one’s own?” (4). Beth Boehm, in her analysis of Woolf’s metaliterature, remarks that “Woolf’s self-consciousness about the boundaries between fictional and factual genres (and about the ways genre and gender are intertwined) in... *A Room of One’s Own* align her with postmodern writers of metafiction” (196). Similarly, Martín Gaité engages in meta-reflection, positioning her own identity and writing within Woolf’s, using it to magnify her own ideas and orient herself relative to her gender and space.

The collage on the page following is titled “Homenaje a Virginia Woolf”: dominated primarily by images, it nevertheless contains text that reveals further connections between Martín Gaité and Woolf. This specific collage has already been the subject of critical investigation, in particular by Elide Pittarello, and features images of women of various ages, clipped from a variety of newspapers and magazine adverts. Bolded, underlined words clipped from a newspaper declare “because I want to be alone” (147). The words are separated: “because” sits on the right side of the page, “I want to” placed on the left, with “be” and “alone” disjointed and descending towards the bottom of the collage. Here, Martín Gaité clearly echoes the desire for solitude expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, both in the words she has chosen and in their placement on the page; most words are cut away from the others in the phrase and scattered. The words themselves seek their own space on the page, intentionally isolated from each other. Beneath the word “alone,” Martín Gaité has handwritten a quote from Woolf’s aforementioned text: “To absorb the new into the old without disturbing the infinitely intricate balance of the whole” (147). Martín Gaité writes Woolf’s words in her own handwriting, personalizing them. The function of this personalization recalls the characteristics of the collage as elaborated by Perloff: Martín Gaité takes elements from the external world and establishes continuity with her own life. Woolf’s writing is incorporated into the intimate framework of Martín Gaité’s collage. Martín Gaité continues this trend in another handwritten quote along the bottom: “Women never have an half hour they can call their own” (147). Pittarello explains: “Es metanarrativa. Virginia Woolf la había sacado de un texto de la luchadora Florence Nightingale para hablar de Jane Austen, quien escribía sus novelas a escondidas en el cuarto de estar. Vuelve el tema de

la habitación propia en esta cita de una cita” (255). The boundaries between the personal/private and the impersonal/public are also blurred through the way Martín Gaité arranges the images of women on the page: there are few physical borders between them; they overlap and encroach on each other.

Aside from a few clues around these women about their environment, the women seem to exist in a nebulous mix of both public and private spaces. In her analysis of *Visión de Nueva York*, Debra Ochoa focuses on the use of windows in Martín Gaité’s collages, and purports that “the absence of windows in ‘Homenaje a Virginia Woolf’ represents a spatial obstacle that Martín Gaité removes in her collage to be able to depict women that can move freely between public and private space” (94). Martín Gaité possesses the freedom to choose the spaces in which she spends her free time, a freedom that is represented in the collage through the collection of diverse spaces into which women are placed. Although Martín Gaité does not appear in any of the photos in “Homenaje a Virginia Woolf,” the text “because I want to be alone” centers a first-person declaration of desire for intimacy and privacy. In turn, Martín Gaité demarcates her personal identity in her tribute to Woolf, again re-inscribing herself into Woolf’s literary production and social consciousness. For Martín Gaité, being alone is a tremendous luxury. Commenting on her experience reading Woolf’s essay for the first time in her own room, she writes: “Nunca como aquella tarde me he dado cuenta del privilegio que supone para una mujer tener un cuarto solo suyo y habitarlo cómo liberación, no cómo encierro” (12). This privilege and the subsequent personal freedom it confers on Martín Gaité is the means by which she is able to inscribe her own literary/artistic self into Woolf’s oeuvre. As we can see, Martín Gaité’s time in New York City and her apartment on 119th Street is key to this reconceptualization of her own identity within the context of various public and private spheres. Here, Martín Gaité surpasses the autobiographical, writing herself into a canon of women’s discourse of space and identity.

The combination of Woolf’s writing, the new environment of a foreign city, and the ability to play with visual and textual elements all coalesce to form the final product that is *Visión de Nueva York*. In it, Martín Gaité is able to combine media from sources both personal and public to create a space in which she can enact subjectivity. Through her use of Woolf’s texts as a literary frame of reference, Martín Gaité is able to transform herself into a literary subject within her own collage. She employs the collage as a means of gaining a more intimate knowledge of herself within the private space of her apartment, and at the same time she is simultaneously inscribed in the broad panorama of discourse on women and space. Whether or not she accomplishes the full creation of a metaliterary “I” is up for debate, especially since the collage book was published posthumously, as a complex, multi-media work defying easy categorization. There is no one clear way to define the text, or Martín Gaité’s

place within it—one that the author herself debates within her handwritten passages. Returning to “Homenaje a Virginia Woolf,” Martín Gaité’s reflections on her drawing of the cover of *A Room of One’s Own* are particularly revelatory of how she was still working through her metaliterary pursuits—“el libro cuya portada he dibujado más arriba, lidiando con las reflexiones que me deparaba” (146). The verb “lidiar” reveals her struggle, an admission that “no consigue argumentar de manera satisfactoria sus desvelos metaliterarios” (Pittarello 245). I believe that we can think of *Visión de Nueva York* as a fertile, experimental space that allows for the exploration of the self, precisely due to its ambiguous nature. What better way to explore personal and literary identity in a space that is once personal and public, autobiographical and literary, written and visual? All told, the processes of literary and visual creation that Martín Gaité enacts in *Visión de Nueva York* are key to her future writing, proving the importance of this “estar-en-sí” in a room of one’s own.

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