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The Crafting of the Self in Private Letters and the Epistolary Novel: El hilo que une, Un verano en Bornos, Ifigenia, Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela, and Cartas apócrifas

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE CRAFTING OF THE SELF IN PRIVATE LETTERS AND THE EPISTOLARY

NOVEL:

EL HILO QUE UNE, UN VERANO EN BORNOS, IFIGENIA,

QUERIDO DIEGO, TE ABRAZA QUIELA,

AND CARTAS APÓCRIFAS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

SPANISH

by

Angelica Alicia Nelson

2016

To: Dean John F. Stack, Jr.
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This dissertation, written by Angelica Alicia Nelson, and entitled *The Crafting of the Self in Private Letters and the Epistolary Novel: El hilo que une, Un verano en Bornos, Ifigenia, Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela, and Cartas apócrifas*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

Renée Silverman

Erik Camayd-Freixas

Kathleen M. McCormack

Maida Watson, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 8, 2016

The dissertation of Angelica Alicia Nelson is approved.

Dean John F. Stack, Jr.
Green School of International and Public Affairs

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Robert Thomas Nelson. His patience and unfailing support, through many days and nights of doubt, gave me the reassurance I needed to complete the long journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Miss Angelica cuentame tus alegrías y tus penas escíbeme no seas ingrata con tu Lila

So begins a letter I received from my grandmother in 1965. Maria Luisa, or Lila, as the grandchildren called her, inspired me to investigate actual letters and epistolary novels written by women. I was stymied on what topic to focus on in my dissertation until I came across the large number of extant letters I inherited from my mother, Francisca Ramírez. The prolific letter writing between my grandmother and mother began when my mother took the first step to leave Durango, Dgo. Mexico for a better life in the United States.

Lila's letters helped to maintain the connecting thread broken only by my grandmother's death. My grandmother's constant letter writing included an on-going correspondence with her grandchildren. This epistolary exchange enabled us to preserve our Mexican heritage. The majority of the letters are written between my grandmother and mother, but I also found letters to my father (Juan Saltigerald), my tío Manuel, my tía Carmen, and others with whom she communicated. Once I began to read the correspondence, I realized the importance of letters in discovering another 'self' or another side of the coin hidden from family members and only exposed to the recipient.

After I decided to attend Florida International University in fall 2013 to pursue my doctorate, I know I could not have survived without the friendships of three wonderful individuals: Frank Otero-Luque, Claudia Battistel, and Genesis Portillo. Their unquestioning support while I ventured down this precarious journey in search of a doctorate degree was invaluable. I cannot forget Linda González from the University of

New Mexico. We began the master's program at UNM in 2008 and have remained friends, encouraging each other in our endeavors.

I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Renée Silverman, Erik Camayd-Freixas, and Kathryn McCormack. The responsibility I imposed upon them lay heavily on my shoulders and served as the motivation to finish in a timely manner.

A special acknowledgment goes to my major professor, Maida Watson. This dissertation could not have been completed without her unflagging support. She was the needle that helped thread the actual letters and the epistolary novels into a coherent body of work. It was her persistence through her many emails, text messages, and the re-readings of my chapters, that kept me on track. I am forever grateful for her support, otherwise I would have returned to New Mexico sans my PhD.

The financial support I received from the Department of Modern Languages through their teaching assistantships since Fall 2013 and the Summer 2016 Doctoral Evidence Acquisition Award were invaluable towards fulfilling my dream.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

THE CRAFTING OF THE SELF IN PRIVATE LETTERS AND THE EPISTOLARY
NOVEL: EL HILO QUE UNE, UN VERANO EN BORNOS, IFIGENIA, QUERIDO
DIEGO, TE ABRAZA QUIELA, AND CARTAS APÓCRIFAS

by

Angelica Alicia Nelson

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Maida Watson, Major Professor

The inherent flexibility of the letter form or epistolary mode of writing frees the writer within the framework of salutations and closings to use vocabulary and language to create, to omit or to invert conventional constraints imposed on women by a patriarchal society. The letter begins as a blank page but becomes the space for writing one's personal thoughts and emotions to the absent other in a communicative effort to minimize the separation.

This dissertation examines the female narrator in actual letters written during the Spanish emigration to the New World in the sixteenth century and four epistolary novels written by female authors during the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries. The female "I" emerges in the selected texts and attests to the writer's ability to inhabit her own writing space. By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Janet Altman's formal approach to the epistolary novel, the epistolary and literary textual creations by women writers challenge the silence and traditional anonymity generally assigned to women. I

explore the cultural enculturation of the transgressive female who loses her “self”, her very being because of her inability to conform to societal norms as outlined by Barbara Creed and Elaine Showalter. In addition, I apply ideas from Linda Kauffman’s study on the transformation of the female writer who metamorphoses from victim to artist through the use of pen and paper. The female ‘self’ crafted by each of the letter writers is studied as they narrate their space, exercise agency, and negotiate the conflicts and contradictions of their domestic and public space.

The epistolary, whether actual or fictional, becomes a textual creation challenging the silence and traditional anonymity assigned to women. The letter, when used as a literary device, is the perfect vehicle to create a narrator who controls his or her own life’s narrative. The writer constructs an implicit recipient linking the addressee and engages the reader in an absorbing story.

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INTRODUCTION

The inherent flexibility of the letter form or epistolary mode frees the writer within the framework of salutations and closings to use vocabulary and language to create, to omit or to invert conventional constraints on women with patriarchal society. The letter becomes a blank space for the expression of one's thoughts and emotions to the absent other in a communicative effort to minimize the separation. The presumed privacy of the letter permits the writer to project personal and truthful sentiments while at the same time offering an illusion of intimacy. This illusion transforms the letter into a fluctuating zone between non-fiction and fiction. This same observation is noted by Charles Kany as to the letter's flexibility to portray or to become "poetic correspondence" (48). The confidentiality of letters engages the reader in a vicarious and voyeuristic identification with the inner life of another person.

Epistolary novels replicate the authenticity of actual letters and re-create a supposedly intimate private realm for the reader to observe other lives. The reader becomes part of the letter writer's world. The outpourings of emotions serve as a means for introspection—to discover or to craft a self—that carries an expectation of being heard. Women writing their own narratives and exploring their inner selves within the boundary of the acceptable and permissible feminine practice of letter writing may or may not transgress boundaries imposed upon them by male society.

The lack of scholarship on Spanish or Latin American women's epistolarity, whether actual letters or epistolary novels, contrasts with the popularity of these studies in other literatures. The span of epistolary novels across the centuries underlines the importance of letters and their appearance in novels. The novel's very plasticity makes it

ideal for the incorporation of all aspects of life since letters reflect an alternative reality as each one unfolds to the writer and the reader.

Preliminary research into the study of actual letters and the epistolary novel would seem to indicate that only English or French epistolary novels exist, as exemplified by the well-known epistolary novels *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson or *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. Kany's 1937 study, *The Beginnings of the Epistolary Novel in France, Italy, and Spain*, offers sufficient examples of the epistolary novel's development from the sentimental novel. Kany traces the use of letters in the novels of fifteenth-century Spain to dispel the impression that the epistolary novel was the sole purview of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England or France.

Nonetheless, the essence of Kany's study concentrates mainly on an epistolary production written by men. Although *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were instrumental in introducing a creative way to tell a story, the interest in reading letters, whether actual or fictional, stems from the engagement of the contents of presumably private correspondence. It is a vicarious and voyeuristic entry into the inner life of another person. The aura of authenticity obtained through the presentation of emotions through this medium provides epistolary novels a space in which to create varying possibilities of reality as an adaptable medium for the illusion of truth.

The epistolary novel traveled to Spain from Italy, according to Thomas Beebee, after the genre arrived in Spain in the form of the *carte messagiere* (letters of messengers) or a collection of tiny epistolary fictions (27). This form contributes to the depiction of realism from the perspective of private expressions. Michael E. Gerli notes "the adoption of this device, the *Proceso* becomes the first attempt in Spanish literature at a fully realistic

representation of the moods and the psychology of love” (478).¹ The protean aspect of the letter contributes to its effectiveness. As Kany says in describing another writer’s use of the letter: “what he created was not the letter form but “a new species of writing”: a simple story and an “easy and natural manner,” with an emphatic religious and moral intent” (viii). However, Thomas Beebee comments in a footnote in *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* that Kany’s contribution is nothing more than a documentation of earlier works of epistolary fiction “without having much to say about them beyond their plots” (207).

Although Hazel Gold acknowledges the existence of letter novels in Spain, she also addresses the paucity of “a systematic study into the Hispanic epistolary novel as a genre, [or a] serious investigation . . . into the fortunes of the Spanish letter novel in the nineteenth century” (133). She makes cursory mention of letter novels written by women but qualifies them as “narrative plots based on the theme of passionate love, and thus setting into play a host of ideological concerns directly related to the workings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society” (135). Gold refers only to Benito Perez Galdós and Juan Valera as the major novelists to use this format.

The innate confessional mode of the epistolary novel made it difficult for the novel to gain a stronghold in Spain in the same manner as the English and French epistolary novels. Patrick Gallagher states that the

association of letter writing with confession, in the context of Catholic-dominated Spain, debilitated its appeal to authors for literary purposes: the

¹ Kany’s serious historical perspective on the epistolary mode brings to light the important contributions of *Proceso de cartas de amores* (1548) by Juan de Segura.

private letter made public was likely seen as an invasion of privacy and a violation of the secrecy of confession. (xxviii)

The apparent verisimilitude of letters in epistolary novels engages the reader's interest in the illusion of reality created by the letter writer. It becomes a stage for personal reflection; for personal expression; and to present a particular "self" dependent on the addressee. The ability to write our "selves" creates another reality shifting between fiction and non-fiction.

This dissertation examines the female narrator in actual letters written during the Spanish emigration to the New World in the sixteenth century and four epistolary novels written by female authors during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The female "I" emerges in the selected texts that attest to the writer's ability to inhabit her own writing space. By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Janet Altman's formal approach to the epistolary novel, I contend the epistolary and literary textual creations by women writers challenge the silence and traditional anonymity generally assigned to women. I explore the cultural enculturation of the transgressive female who evolves into a monster because of her inability to conform to societal norms as outlined by Barbara Creed and Elaine Showalter. In addition, I apply ideas from Linda Kauffman's study on the transformation of the female writer who metamorphoses from victim to artist through the use of pen and paper. Through this medium, the performing voice of women is heard as they narrate their space, exercise agency, and negotiate the conflicts and contradictions of their domestic and public space.

Letters, whether actual or fictional, provide the space for women to write in their own words and to remove the limits of the stereotypes imposed upon them in the novels written by men. As a reaction to the continual objectification of women characters

experienced in novels by men, the epistolary becomes the weapon of choice for women. This common thread connects the actual letters and the epistolary novels selected apart from the fact that they are all written by women.

My dissertation will explore how letters and epistolary novels lend themselves to counter, transgress, or perpetuate stereotypical and patriarchal representation of women. I will study ways in which the self emerges from within the pages of private letters and the epistolary novel. All writing offers the opportunity to delve into the consciousness of another and to juxtapose contrasting opinions for differing effects upon the characters and the readers. The works of women, whether letters or literary texts, document the on-going struggle against constricting cultural practices.

My study will look into the way women negotiated their designated space within the construct of a male-dominated society. How did women navigate through the marginalized, suffocating and conforming social norms imposed upon them to produce letters that expressed personal thoughts, emotions, and experiences, ultimately creating literary works structured around the letter format and crafting a 'self' different from the prescriptive 'self' insisted upon by a patriarchal society? What is the function of the female characters in these works of literature that attempt to re-create real life? How is resistance and expression of agency by women against the male-oriented dicta expressed through the epistolary writings of women? To write a letter in the voice of another gives a certain freedom to the writer – to express opinions that are more acceptable coming from a character in a novel that would not surprise the implicit reader.

The epistolary, whether actual or fictional, becomes a literary textual creation that challenges the silence and traditional anonymity generally assigned to women. The letter's

heterogeneous social uses and its discursive power is the common element that gives the speaking voice of the marginalized a space with which to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences

Chapter one analyzes extant letters written by women from sixteenth-century Spain who are abandoned as a result of the emigration of their loved ones from Spain to the New World. As they wrote letters to their husbands, they charted their own territory, inscribing a narrative based on their own reality. I will focus on the epistolarity of the person who wrote the actual letters. These letters form a small part of the 1,553 volumes that make up the Inquisitional branch of the Archivo General de la Nación de México (The General Archive of Mexico). They were discovered in the Archivo General by Rocío Sánchez Rubio and Isabel Testón Núñez. The epistolary in *El hilo que une* gives an opportunity to view how women negotiated change in their lives that left them further marginalized as evidence in their epistolary performance.

The need to preserve a connection, however fragile, is imperative among all who live separated from a loved one. Anguish, bewilderment, anger, anxiety, loss and pain frame the purpose of letters written to those who are no longer present, whether through their own volition or because of circumstances beyond the individual's control.

The actual letters border the edge of literariness just as the epistolary novel borders the edge of verisimilitude through its effect on the recipient and/or the implied reader. The one-sided dialogues of the selected correspondence from *El hilo que une* address the absent loved ones in their desire for a response to fill the silence of years. The importance of these letters lies not so much in whether they are literature or not but because they give contradict the stereotypes generally promulgated by the male writer. Each letter gives an account of

lives creating a dialogical narrative that borders the literary when its contents strive for an emotional effect.

The epistolary novel *Un verano en Bornos* (1855) written by Fernán Caballero will be discussed in chapter two. Lawrence Klibbe credits Fernán Caballero with a “decidedly innovative technique” (136) in regards to the two epistolary novels *Una en otra* (1849) and *Un verano en Bornos* (1855) but scant critical attention has been given to these novels in comparison to her other novels.² The epistolary novel *Una en otra* is composed primarily of an epistolary exchange between an uncle and his nephew, while in *Un verano*, Fernán Caballero gives the female voices space to articulate their feelings, emotions, sentiments, and thoughts on the life that surrounds them. With this in mind, I agree with Lawrence Klibbe that Fernán Caballero’s use of the epistolary form was innovative. The acceptance of the reliability of letters creates the perfect space in which to propagandize or subvert ideologies of contemporary society. The absence of authorial interjections underlines the letters’ ability to further present an apparent truthfulness. *Un verano* could be an unconscious form of subversion, from a conservative writer such as Fernán Caballero, against the ‘old order’ that places the female in the home as mothers and caregivers.

Fernán Caballero was the masculine pseudonym used by Cecilia Böhl de Faber as a necessary subterfuge to compete in a literary world dominated by male interests. The nom de plume that Böhl de Faber constructed for herself was a shield against the animosity towards women who dared to write. Caballero’s epistolary novel, *Un verano en Bornos*, suggests a certain idyllic realism in the development of middle-class characters, in this case

² *La gaviota* (1849), *Clemencia* (1852), and *La familia de Alvareda* (1856).

the female writers who exchange correspondences, as they write of social and economic crises that affect their lives. Perceiving the letter as an extension of real life, the epistolary novel *Un verano* can be regarded as a colorful palette of an idyllic and romanticized life that glosses over the real events of reality.

In contrast to Fernán Caballero's idyllic portrayal of two young women who achieve acceptable marriage proposals agreeable to all parties involved, chapter three examines the struggles of womanhood in Latin America as illustrated in the 1924 novel *Ifigenia: diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba* by Teresa de la Parra. We come to know the oppressed world of the main character, María Eugenia, a young lady who experiences brief moments of freedom from the rigid patriarchal society of early twentieth century Venezuela. Her life is descriptively detailed in a long letter and personal diary comprising the epistolary novel. The narrative strategy of the epistolary form used by Teresa de la Parra emphasizes the difficulties many young women negotiated within the dictates of societal norms. The long letter and diary entries open a window into the transformation, indoctrination and distortion of a young girl who strives for an independent way of living. These two forms function to move the storyline forward further accentuating the restrictive life María Eugenia is condemned to live. Teresa de la Parra's use of the epistolary form underscores her narrative of the predicament of many privileged Venezuelan young women. *Ifigenia* mirrors the struggles of many female protagonists in literature and the epistolary mode provides a narrative and a dialogic space for Teresa de la Parra to create a reality that conveys credibility.

The first-person narrative structure of the letter and the diary form detail the rebellious and transgressive thoughts of Maria Eugenia. The epistolary novel gives voice

to this fictional character who writes down her innermost thoughts describing the world that surrounds her. Her long letter is addressed to her childhood friend, Cristina de Iturbe, whom María Eugenia believed was her soulmate. Writing becomes the outlet for María Eugenia to express her frustrations and private thoughts. The long letter and diary allows entry into the enclosed environment of early twentieth-century Venezuelan society which maintains a prehensile hold on María Eugenia until she succumbs to its relentless demands. María Eugenia, motherless and fatherless, struggles against the patriarchal dicta and bourgeois respectability that demeans her status as a person. The letter demonstrates the main character's agency and the subversive potential of the epistolary novel which angered the critics of that period.

Teresa de la Parra's narrative choice is the perfect vehicle to break through the facile feminine stereotypes created by male authors in their novelistic fictions. The long letter and the equally long diary represent a survival strategy for feminine discourse by María Eugenia. Similar to the Greek heroine Iphigenia, sacrificed by her father Agamemnon, María Eugenia is sacrificed into a loveless marriage and her final action symbolizes her role as a victim to uphold the old order clinging to a disappearing way of life against the onslaught of modernization.

The twelve letters analyzed in the epistolary novel, *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* by Elena Poniatowska in chapter four are emotional outlets for Quiela as she articulates on paper her struggle to elicit a response from Diego.³ Poniatowska appropriates the voice of Angelina Beloff (a Russian-born artist) in the fictional letters that are a literary

³ Diego Rivera (1886-1957) the prominent Mexican muralist who helped establish the Mexican Mural Movement.

fiction and historical construction. *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* is an epistolary recreation that depicts a woman's struggle against annihilation and her emergence from victim to artist. She bares her soul through an intimate, self-expressive outpouring of shared reminiscences. Quiela regains her footing as an individual as she attempts to persuade and influence Diego through their shared memories. The letters may have failed to elicit a response from Diego but the process of letter writing transforms her into a competent, autonomous individual. She comes to terms with the fate imposed on her and is able to move forward to reclaim her true 'self'. The amorous epistolary discourse becomes a successful journey as she attempts to bridge the physical and emotional distance to write her 'self' back into existence.

Elena Poniatowska successfully blurs the distinction between fact and fiction that underlines the "importance . . . of the letter as a cry for help" for immediacy as she rewrites the fragmented narrative of Quiela accentuating the potential of the letter and the aura of authenticity that it assumes (124). As such, the reader needs to read the text with the understanding that it is a work of fiction even though factual elements interspersed throughout the letters confuse the fictional with reality.

The last chapter, chapter five, studies six letters in *Cartas apócrifas* as cultural indicators that underscore the continual marginalization of women's literary endeavors. Addressing the conference held in her honor in 1998, Gloria Guardia states "Es que, en América Central, la mujer que piensa, lee, reflexiona y escribe suele ser todavía una amenaza para el orden establecido (*Aspectos* 8). Therefore, the women selected by Gloria Guardia are women who have been victimized, silenced, and marginalized by a patriarchal society. The apocryphal letters are written with Gloria Guardia subsuming herself into a

double-voiced discourse with Teresa de Jesus (Spain), Virginia Woolf (England), Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela), Gabriela Mistral (Chile), Simone Weil (France), and Isak Dinesen (Denmark).

The double-voiced discourse found in *Cartas apócrifas* as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin is “the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (324). The technique of appropriating another voice, although a “popular and innovative narrative ploy” utilized in the eighteenth century by male authors, notably Samuel Richardson, is not new since the tradition of rhetorical training exercises cultivated fictional letters as literature.

Female authors from the twentieth century have used the letter format to create their own epistolary novels blurring the borders between the real and the fictional. In *Cartas apócrifas*, Gloria Guardia writes individual short stories that read as letters because of their adherence to the same conventions and expectations of letter writing, as noted previously. The epistolary structure serves as the discourse platform to meld the literary and the fictional. Gloria Guardia subsumes her own voice to speak with the voice of six literary women who have contributed to the literary canon and re-elaborates history through the art of fiction.

The deliberate use of the epistolary form frames *Cartas apócrifas* within the concept of choosing a certain genre to cultivate and as noted by Claudio Guillén when he writes: “Optar por un género y cultivarlo es elegir la literatura” and lure the reader into fictionality (“El pacto” 77). Gloria Guardia’s decision to choose the epistolary format may appear a quixotic choice as noted by Linda Kauffman when “letter writing has practically become a lost art” (*Special Delivery* xiv). Opting for epistolary fiction and likewise with

the novel itself, the reader is able to observe lives of others generally closed to prying eyes. and it is the “thrust of the language, the progress of the writing itself, [that] have been proven to have irresistibly fictional consequences” (Guillén “On the Edge” 5).

CHAPTER 1

El hilo que une: The rhetorical strategies of sixteenth-century women from the Old World to the New World

Señor marido:

Razón sería ya que al cabo de diez y nueve años que se apartó de mí y me dejó preñada, digo parida, un día antes que se fuese a esas partes y con dos hijos, que tuviese carta conmigo y con ellos. Pues vio el remedio que me dejó, aún para criar el que me quedaba a los pechos no tenía. A los cuales dos hijos yo he criado y el uno de ellos se me murió de cuatro años, y a Juan, el mayor, tengo vivo y tiene muy gran deseo de conocer padre. Y él, viendo el poco remedio que yo tengo, que es ya hombre, quiere me dejar e ir a buscar a v.md.

María Gómez desde Sevilla a su marido Juan Escudero.⁴

Muy deseado hijo:

Estamos muy maravillados del gran descuido que habéis tenido de no escribimos tanto tiempo ha, porque desde que entraste en Méjico sólo en una armada nos habéis enviado cartas; aquellas vinieron en el envoltorio que el capitán Francisco Ramírez envió al señor Diego de Cero. Éstas vinieron en el año de sesenta y ocho, y enviástenos a decir en ellas que en EL año de sesenta y nueve nos enviaríais muchas cartas y más lo que vos pudieseis. Más veo, hijo, que bien nos habéis olvidado para darnos a nosotros mayor congoja, y a muchos en el pueblo admiración de ver vuestro gran descuido que habéis tenido.

Francisca Vázquez, desde Belmonte, a su hijo Alonso de Vera.⁵

Señor hermano:

Estoy espantada de la terquedad grande suya DE no escribirme con persona cierta, pues la tenía, el cual era el tabernero de Santa Catalina a donde su hijo estuvo perdido el día de San Juan; me dijo que había estado con v.md. y pasó en su casa quince días. Razón fuera que como le habló de palabra y le dijo que viniese a ver a sus hijos y ver lo que había nacido, si era hijo o hija, quien esta razón tuvo con él, mejor fuera una carta para más consuelo mío, pues sabéis que estábais obligado a ello aunque no fuera más sino que quedaba con dos hijos y preñada de cinco meses. De lo cual parí un hijo el cual se llama Juan Sancho de Bilbao, como vuestro padre, y los he criado con harto trabajo. Juan y Diego son vivos, Rodrigo me mataron, de lo cual quedé harto desconsolada.

No lo habéis hecho como me lo prometisteis como cristiano, sino mostrasteis las obras como si no tuvierais conciencia y habíais de morir. Bien sabéis que por vos perdí mi tierra y mi hacienda y a mi marido y mis hijos y aborrecida de mis hermanos y de mi madre, y he sido corrida de parientes de mi marido después que os fuisteis; lo cual si por don Rodrigo Ponce no fuera, una noche me entraron a matar.

Francisca Hernández de los Arcos, desde Sevilla a su amante Cosme Sánchez de Bilbao.⁶

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<sup>4</sup> *El hilo que une*, Carta 13 pp. 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> *El hilo que une*, Carta 20 pp. 74-75.

<sup>6</sup> *El hilo que une*, Carta 26 pp. 88-90.

A wife, a mother, and an abandoned lover writing to their loved ones with forthright language that expresses anguish, bewilderment, and anger frames the purpose of these letters. In the first letter from María Gómez, close to twenty years have transpired since her husband (Juan Escudero) has left for the New World, only one day after the birth of their second son, and she addresses his lack of correspondence with her and his sons. Francisca Vázquez, in the second letter, dictates a reprimand to her son, Alonso de Vera, for his failure to communicate even though he has promised his family to expect a packet on the next *flota* (Spanish fleet). In the third letter, Francisca Hernández, the rejected or forgotten lover who expresses her feelings with a forceful language in the letter she herself has written: “estas cartas van escritas con gotas de sangre de mi corazón” (89) to underline her dismay at Cosme’s abandonment of his familial obligations. It is important to note the fact that she is a woman who knows how to write, which is unusual in sixteenth-century Spain.

These three excerpts from letters that comprise *El hilo que une: Las relaciones epistolares en el Viejo y el Nuevo Mundo (siglos XVI-XVIII)*, edited by Rocío Sánchez Rubio and Isabel Testón Núñez, demonstrate the female perspective during a period that saw imperialist activity and expansion in the Americas which offered economic optimism. Their letters have a discursive quality, whether written for judicial purposes or personal interests, and provide an outlet to express their indignation and reproaches. The letters become the voice that give an account of feminine lives which breaks from literary stereotypes that generally have no basis in reality. Mary Elizabeth Baldrige makes this point when she compares the writing of the Alfonso Martínez de Toledo’s *El Corbacho*, a misogynistic diatribe and the prayer book written by Costanza de Castilla, which combats the negative portrayal of women.

The letters found in *El hilo que une* offer an opportunity to hear the voices of those women affected by the effects of colonization and in the process left behind in the Old World. As Alison Truelove writes of the medieval letters she studies: “[L]etters can offer unique insight into people’s lives, especially when the writers are no longer able to provide spoken accounts of their experiences” (42). Through these letters we are able to know how their place in society shifts with the emigration of loved ones on whose financial support they depend but is not forthcoming as expected.

### **Statement of purpose**

The effect on women living in a society in flux as a result of social and economic factors influenced by emigration is the thematic focus of the textual interest in the letters. The letters written by women, either as inquiries or demands, allow the reader to perceive the women’s experience in their own words. Even though some may have been dictated, the voice of the female is the one that emerges. The epistolary in *El hilo que une* presents a view of how women negotiated changes in their lives that left them defenseless and further marginalized, in addition to they craft themselves in the letters.

The letter’s ability to merge fiction and reality and to create a believable scenario is the connecting thread between actual letters found in *El hilo que une* and the epistolary novels *Un verano en Bornos*, *Ifigenia*, *Cartas apócrifas*, and *Querido Diego* that are studied in subsequent chapters in this dissertation. The actual letters border the edge of literariness just as the fictional epistolary novel borders the edge of verisimilitude through its effect on the recipient and/or the implied reader. The one-sided dialogue found in *El hilo que une* and the epistolary novels are addressed to male recipients (the exception is



*Un verano en Bornos* where the gender divide is not transgressed) with a desire for a response.

Linda Kauffman states that letters written by women, whether actual or fictitious contain the same constructs, the same tropes and figures of rhetoric to persuade the beloved to return and in each the performative aspects of rhetoric dramatize the similarities in situation and context (*Discourse* 25). In other words, letters become literature and literature is created through the vehicle of letters. The actual or fictional letters serve as the space to learn about the female's experience in her own words. There is much discussion about masculine writing and feminine writing, a point that Linda Kauffman makes when she examines the process and strategies by which these writing women transform themselves into artists, taking control of the production of writing to challenge not just men's representation of them (*Discourse* 22). Mariló Vigil underlines this important aspect in her study of the lives of women during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when she states "La mayoría de los estudios realizados hasta el momento sobre la vida cotidiana de las mujeres españolas en los siglos XVI y XVII, ha sido efectuados utilizando como fuentes la literatura, el teatro y los libros de viaje" (3).

### **Brief historical background**

The discovery of the New World in 1492 and the commercial enterprises that ensued for the glory of Spain's monarchy resulted in changing economic and social factors that left a society in flux. Christopher Columbus' search for an economical route to the Indies triggered a repercussion still felt today. As Rosario Márquez notes:

[P]odemos afirmar que las migraciones a la América española, fueron el primer movimiento europeo de su clase a través del Atlántico. Estos hombres constituyeron la avanzada de una oleada que, a lo largo de siglos, llevaría millones de europeos a América y que no ha concluido todavía.

(237)

The lure of the New World with opportunities to improve their economic situation and social status enticed many and could not be halted. It is not possible to know the exact number of immigrants from the Old World to the New World, but according to Peter Boyd-Bowman's study, approximately twenty-four percent had departed from the city of Sevilla between the years 1579-1600 and the group was clearly dominated by Andalusians (78, 81).

### **Transoceanic transmission of the letter between the Old and the New World**

An important factor regarding the receipt or non-receipt of these letters is their manner of transmission and how this contributed to the palpable anguish conveyed within the text. Unlike modern times where the modes of communication nowadays encompass many forms, i.e. postcards, memos, electronic mail, journals, fax, blogs, etc., with an almost instantaneous response received or expected depending on the mode, letter transmissions during the sixteenth century could conceivably include intervals from one to two years from the time they were written until they reached their destination (Gerber 27). This ultimately required references to previously written letters.

Approximately fifty-five percent of the letters leaving Spain listed in *El hilo que une* were from women whose only recourse was letter-writing. In the sixteenth century, the

flota was the only means of transport across the oceanic expanse. The letters would be entrusted to those who traveled to the New World for delivery directly to the addressee in the hopes of a response. Instructions such as: “y si escribieseis, venga enderezada a las CASAS de Juan de Vargas, en la calle del Vidrio” (Carta 28) were included. One is left to imagine whether the letter was received. However, Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez stress that the recipient of the letter cannot be held totally accountable for not responding because:

El correo con las Indias llegaba tarde y mal, eso en el supuesto de que lo hiciera, porque el extravío de la correspondencia era más frecuente de lo deseable, tal como constantemente certifican los contenidos de las misivas: ‘yo deseo lleguen estas cartas, porque estoy con mucha pena de lo que a v.md. me dice no reciben todas la que he enviado, habiendo sido tantas’.  
(27-28)

Assistance from friends and family in transporting the letters to the New World was generally the method to secure their safe receipt. The delays and unpredictability inherent in the transmission of the letters made it imperative that each letter contain a reference to previous letters as Leonor Fernández del Río does: “Ya yo os escribí otra vez que era casado, y ahora os escribo que es fallecido...” (Carta 1). Leonor is referring to events that has taken place five years earlier and the past year. Not knowing if the initial news of her sister’s death and the remarriage of her husband has reached the addressee, this information is imparted again. Similarly, Benita López does as she writes to her son Alonso de Ávila of the non-receipt of money he had sent to her: “Ya os he respondido por otra carta a una vuestra, en la cual me enviábais a decir que habíais enviado cuarenta pesos a vuestra prima Maria Lopez. Sabed que es cierto que no los hemos recibido” (57). These references to

previous letters is what Altman says allows one to: “To map one’s coordinates-temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual – in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing” (119).

The many complaints in the letters highlight the tenuous likelihood that these missives would reach their destination. The following refrain repeats itself in many letters: “muy muchas cartas os he escrito, y de ninguna ha habido respuesta” (Carta 1). For this reason, information about where the letters were being sent and how a response to the letter should be addressed were often included in the body of the letter. Such entries can be seen in the following excerpts:

A mi amado hijo Gonzalo de Ávila, en las Indias del oro del mar Océano, en la ciudad de Méjico o en las Zacatecas. (Carta 5)

A mi muy deseado y querido Juan Escudero, barbero y cirujano, en la ciudad de Méjico, en Nueva España, mi señor. (Carta 13)

al muy magnifico señor, el licenciado Juan de Chávez en la ciudad de Méjico, en casa del señor doctor Miranda, oidor de su Majestad. Es mi señor. (Carta 30).

As already noted by the editors of *El hilo que une*, it is likely that the addressee of the letter may never have received the missive:

El comunicarse epistolarmente, en tales circunstancias y con tamaños impedimentos, constituían tarea compleja que los amigos y familiares de los emigrados trataban de mitigar con soluciones más o menos efectivas...el uso del correo oficial se antoja como algo inusual. (28-29)

The safe transport of the letters also depended on nature, as Mark Burkholder and Lyman Johnson note: “winds and currents normally made the trip from Iberia to the Indies shorter than the return voyage” with the use of “small mail boats provid[ing] supplemental service,

but their sailings were intermittent in the sixteenth century and often only two to four times a year in the seventeenth century” (93-4). Due to the uncertain transmission of these letters, one can only surmise whether they were actually received by the intended recipient. Another issue was that, for many who had created new lives, the receipt of a letter/s from home could function as a reminder of their failure to maintain their connection with those left behind in the Old World, or sometimes they would delay writing back until they had succeeded economically. Enrique Otte tells us that “La falta de fracasados y vagabundos se explica por el hecho de que los emigrantes solo escribían cuando habían ya obtenido una situación económica holgada que les movió a llamar a parientes” (14). Alonso de Vera was such an individual as we learn from a subsequent letter in this collection of missives, directed to Francisco González, a family friend, in which he details his financial woes and for that reason “no les pienso escribir” (his parents).

In the case of the letters traveling across a geographic space fraught with many uncertainties, the use of private emissaries was a common practice that many hoped would assure a safe journey to its destination. Although for María Gómez, a private emissary did not guarantee safe delivery: “que un perulero que había venido en esta armada le dio una carta, empero que se la había perdido y no sabía de ella” (Carta 13). In addition, the use of a correo official may not have been a usual practice if it also suffered the same scrutiny that James How discusses on the foundation of the national Post Office in England. As How states, the use of an official mail service may have been initially avoided since, “letters sent by the Post Office were liable to be subject to stops and checks by anonymous officials employed for just that purpose” (4). It is not possible to determine through the letters already examined if this may have been the case in Spain or whether a regular

systematized and well established correo official was available for the regular transmission of correspondence by the public.

### **The epistolary genre in Spain during the sixteenth century**

The survival of handwritten letters is scarce but as noted by James Lockhart and Enrique Otte in their study of letters that originated from the Spanish Indies during the sixteenth century the epistolary genre was well-established among private individuals (ix). In addition, Rebecca Earle confirms that: “letters and letter-writing were not confined to the elite, but also provided means of expression for more marginal members of society” (1). The correspondence that has survived provides a window into the lives and experiences of persons affected by changes not of their making.

Lockhart and Otte publish letters from the Spanish Indies that cover and inform about the years of the Conquest, the founding of Spanish cities, the giving of encomiendas, and the exportation of precious metals. At the time that their book was published, they state of being unaware of correspondence originating from Spain to the Indies: “we know little more than what we can deduce from the replies of the settlers, namely that they contained frequent appeals for money” (x). As to the settlers’ letters, “they are often written with an eye towards recruitment; they praise the opportunities and plenteousness of the new land...” (x) or as commented by two individuals writing to Spain from the Indies, “leave that wretched country, because it is only for people who have a lot of money”, or “don’t make your children endure hunger and necessity” (119, 136). As Henry Kamen writing on the decline of Spain notes:

Emigration helped to intensify awareness of the social problem at home: Contrasting the relative lack of opportunity in their own society with the riches available overseas, emigrants helped to universalize the desire to escape from an impoverished Spain. (29)

The collection of private letters by Lockhart and Otte tell the story from the other side of the Atlantic with reports of the conquest: encomenderos describing their lives, official correspondence, and even a woman settler writing to her brother in Seville. In contrast, the letter collection of *El hilo que une* presents an opportunity to learn about the individuals who were involved in the settling of the Indies from the perspective of those left behind in Spain during a period that experienced economic and social changes as a result of commercial enterprises. The textual construction in these letters highlights the effects of the separation suffered by the abandoned women.

Lockhart and Otte's book concerns letters that originated in New Spain and refers to only three letters from women.<sup>7</sup> In *El hilo que une*, the majority of the letters were written by women from the Old World to the New World and thus offer an experience, as expressed by Jane Couchman:

To hold in one's hand a woman's letter, knowing that it was her hand that wrote the words, is as close as we are likely to come to conversing with her. Even when the letter has been written for her by a scribe, we can, in our imagination, almost hear the inflexions of the woman's voice. (3)

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<sup>7</sup> The editors of *El hilo que une* divided their letters into three sections titled: Correspondencia entre el Viejo y el Nuevo Mundo; en el Nuevo Mundo; y La Inquisición. Their book is written entirely in Spanish while Lockhart and Otte's book has been translated into English.

Reading these letters one can only imagine lives that have been disrupted by the shifting changes in their society and cannot move forward because of the indeterminate state in which they lived. James Daybell writes that “Letters, it will be shown, shed significant light on the nature of women’s social relationships and their complex position within a socially and gendered hierarchical society...” (51). The women in *El hilo que une* are living a different life than they probably had imagined and the letters open a world generally not exposed to the public.

### **The Female Self in Letters in the Sixteenth Century**

Women in early modern Spain were subject to rules and regulations because of their gender, and as noted by Lisa Vollendorf, the majority of scholarship explores how social practices, institutions and laws defined women’s roles (4). The efforts of many to subjugate women because of their supposed moral frailty contrasts with the reality in the contents of the letters in *El hilo que une*. The letters that I analyze offer an alternative view of social realities that have been undermined by the masculine rhetoric of their time.

The study of letters written by women from the sixteenth century permits one to see how women viewed and negotiated their ‘self’ in a world that was heavily slanted towards a male view of the world. As James Daybell notes, in *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450-1700*, these letters serve as social documents: “[they] are useful as indicators of female literacy, the quality of familial and other relationships, and of women’s social interaction in general” (3). These letters are written with the purpose of maintaining a link or connection with their husbands, sons, or lovers who had traveled to the Indies. A



performance is at play with their rhetorical strategies that emphasize not only their economic state but the female self-expression in a permissible medium.

The letters found in *El hilo que une* construct a ‘fiction of the self’ that emerges while the letter writers are writing an account of their lives to those across the ocean who may or may not receive the missives. The image they wish to project is a representation, whether realistic or not, of what they have suffered because of the male absence and their ensuing silence as seen in Carta 13 written by Mariana de Ayala where she admonishes her husband Pedro Román de Hervas: “si las has recibido, tú sólo sabes el por qué, pues no hay peor sordo que el que no quiere oír” (Carta 131).

Hyperbole as a rhetorical device or figure of speech occurs frequently in these letters to not only evoke strong feelings but to create a strong impression as we become aware in Francisca Hernández’s letter to Cosme, the ex-lover who had abandoned her: “Estoy espantada de la terquedad grande” (Carta 26) or as Mariana de Ayala’s opening first lines to her husband Pedro Román: “No sé qué haya sido la causa de haberme olvidado tanto para un tan buen cristiano” (Carta 131). Although anger and wonderment are expressed, the letter writer maintains conventional proprieties associated with the epistolary practice of salutation, exposition and conclusion. By staying within the parameters of the letters conventional structure, it becomes, as noted by Carol Copenhagen, “a perfect tool for exercising one’s prowess within established limits (258).

Some discernable features or common characteristics are social status, age, rhetorical strategies, the addressee, the nature of the communication (request, demand, complaint, compliment, information, declaration of lawsuit, etc.), illness and aging etc. Observation of these features allows a modern reader to attempt an understanding of the

state of mind of women who experienced displacement rooted in the repercussions of the discovery of the New World.

The importance of these letters lies not so much whether they are literature or not but in the fact that they provide another reality to the stereotypes generally promulgated by the male writer of that period. Since letter writers give an account of their lives within limited space, they create a dialogical narrative that Bakhtin describes as a search for an answer. The letters written by women in the 16<sup>th</sup> century are oriented towards an answer they search studied as a contribution their voice makes to their nonliterary output. We can become part of their world: “we ourselves may actually enter the novel” (Bakhtin 32). An incomplete dialogue expressed through the letter becomes a mini autobiography. These letters are written by women who intend to be concise and expressive in getting their message across and yet exercise an agency that is found in their textual production.

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*La emigración y el Rey les arrebatan de continuo el amado, el hermano, su hombre, sostén de la familia siempre numerosa; y así, abandonadas, llorando su desamparo, pasan la amarga vida entre las incertidumbres de la esperanza, la negrura de la soledad y las angustias de una perenne miseria. Y lo más desconsolador para ellas es que sus hombres se van yendo todos, unos porque los llevan, y otros porque el ejemplo, las necesidades, a veces una codicia, aunque disculpable, ciega, les hacen huir del lar querido, de aquella a quien amaron, esposa ya madre de numerosos hijos, tan pequeños que los desdichados todavía no aciertan a adivinar la orfandad a que los condenan.*⁸

Far from expecting their letters to be considered anything other than a familial letter, they tend like any other writings to veer into the fictional or literary in order to dramatize their dire circumstances. Women’s writings, whether literary texts, legal

⁸ Prólogo de *Hojas nuevas* (1880). Rosalía de Castro (1837-1885), a Galician romantic, captures the essence of women’s lives whose husbands left the country during economic periods of duress.

documents or familial letters, are a treasure trove of knowledge that allows the critic to witness the emergence of their voice and irrupts the patriarchal dicta. As Claudio Guillén has noted, the ‘I’ who writes may not only be pretending to act upon a friend... but acting also upon himself, upon his evolving mirror image...shaping his own identity” (Guillén 5). Each sentence conveys the importance of the missive that underlines the urgency of why it was written. One must consider that the process of writing these letters goes beyond random jottings or unpremeditated thoughts to a careful textual construction of the letters written by women in *El hilo que une*.

Their rhetorical strategies include reason, appeals to emotions, and the presentation of the ‘yo’ [their suffering] to emphasize their situation. According to Stanley et al, “the epistolary pact is primarily the agreement to establish or maintain a relationship, and reference to the world is in the service of that relationship” (282). The letters are in the first person or in the case of Francisca Vázquez, a collective first person, and perform a rhetorical function i.e. to inform, to plead, to wonder, to chastise, to convey sentiments. The narrative in these letters permits the modern day reader to see the advantage of the epistolary medium to convey their experiences and at the same time to give an account of their ‘selves’.

Catalina de Ávila

The following letters, written by two mothers yearning to know the whereabouts of their sons, emphasize the effect of distance and time between Old and New Spain. In *El hilo que une* four letters written by Catalina de Ávila to her son, Gonzalo de Ávila,

symbolize the anxiety and uncertainty that many suffered in Old Spain.⁹ Francisca Vázquez is the second mother who writes to her son Alonso, yet she is not suffering in the same manner as Catalina because, as her letter indicates, she speaks for the collective voice of the family.¹⁰ The iterative narrative found in these letters reenacts previously referenced information in the effort to bridge the distance that separates them with the addressee.

Catalina de Ávila, abandoned by her three sons, lives with a daughter. Eighteen to twenty years have passed and Catalina has not heard from her son but still requests that he send her *algun remedio* [monetary assistance]:

En lo demás, me parece que fuera bueno que tuvierais algún cuidado de escribirnos y dar cuenta de vuestra vida en diez y ocho años o veinte años que ha que os fuisteis de esta tierra –pues cada día vienen mensajeros-, y enviarme algún remedio... (Carta 6)

The lack of response and uncertainty leaves her in what appears a state of limbo. In each letter she pleads with her son Gonzalo to write and laments Gonzalo's lack of communication: "son tantas las cartas que os he enviado, que ya no sé qué me decir, y por mis pecados no ha habido respuesta de ninguna de ellas" (Carta 9). Catalina is uncertain whether the many letters she has sent have reached their destination: "tengo entendido que no han ido a vuestro poder, o no sé qué sea-, por la cuales os doy cuenta de mi vida y cómo me dejó vuestro padre en tantas necesidades y deudas que yo no lo he podido sufrir, ni sé que me hacer" (Carta 9). In her letters, she gives an account of her life and how she has

⁹ Catalina de Ávila, desde Almodóvar del Campo, a su hijo Gonzalo de Ávila en la ciudad de Méjico o en Zacatecas. (Cartas 5, 6, 8, and 9; 1560-1562).

¹⁰ Francisca Vázquez, desde Belmonte, a su hijo Alonso de Vera, en la conquista de los Chichimecas. (Carta 20 1570).

been left destitute following his father's death and that she does not know what to do and wonders: "pues no sé qué es la causa DE olvidarme así, que buena madre he sido, por mi no habéis perdido honra, ni bienes, ni otra cosa. Espero en Dios que de aquí adelante lo haréis mejor conmigo" (Carta 8). Catalina is asserting her agency within her sphere of domesticity making her voice heard and demanding that he also have the same care with her that she has had with him.

As a woman she is constrained regarding business transactions and so advises Gonzalo that in the matter of several homes that had been left 'empeñadas' (pawned) by his father, she desires that either Gonzalo himself takes care of this or that he give power of attorney to his brother-in-law Fabián Gutiérrez to recover the homes. Testón Núñez y Sánchez Rubio stress this aspect of the abandoned woman by stating:

Las limitaciones jurídicas y económicas que constreñían el espacio femenino del período moderno, haciendo de la mujer un ser dependiente del varón, marcarán definitivamente su vida cuando éste decide emprender la aventura americana, porque la *mujer sola*, sin esposo, sin padre o sin hijos que la represente y mantenga, tendrá necesariamente que asumir de forma directa su destino, y para ello no estaba casi nunca preparada, ni mucho menos acostumbrada. (95)

This situation can be read in Carta 6 in which Catalina expresses her anxiety and despair over her financial matters:

sabéis que Diego de Escalona...vive en vuestras casas, que se las dejo vuestro padre empeñadas en cien mil maravedís, que no puedo hacer otra cosa. Querría que Die seis orden de quitarlas, que placera a Nuestro SENOR

que os diera gana de veniros a vivir a ellas. Si vos parece BIEN, enviadle poder y recaudo a vuestro hemano [sic] Fabián Gutiérrez, y entenderá en ello.

In contrast, she is able to sell a piece of property which she describes to Gonzalo in the same letter: “ya sabeis que a vueltas de otros bienes que os dejó la de Ávila, que esté en gloria, os mandó la Posada de Lesca, la cual yo vendí [why is she able to] después de muerto vuestro padre por gran necesidad que tenía y por mucho menos de lo que valía” (Carta 6). She requests that Gonzalo also give Fabian Gutiérrez the power to recover this property. Catalina’s letters highlight the difficulties that many women experienced when they were abandoned and dependent on others, for example, she directs Gonzalo to send the necessary documents to Fabián so that he can manage her business transactions.

In Carta 8 Catalina updates Gonzalo about the fate of his brothers, who have also left her and of whom she has no expectations of assistance:

Por amor de Dios, os ruego que os acordéis de mí y, pues Dios os ha dado tantos bienes, miréis que soy vuestra madre y que no es razón que padezca yo necesidades pudiendo vos tanto remediarme, que de vuestros hermanos ninguno está en esta tierra. Todos, por mis pecados, andáis como Dios es servido: Hernando de Ávila, vuestro hermano, está en Puerto de Santa María, que no cura de mí, ni me quiere ver. Vuestro hermano Francisco de Ávila está cautivo en Argel, tierra de moros; no he podido, ni he hallado remedio para lo rescatar, que me piden por su rescate doscientos ducados, y yo no puedo dar un real, que lo cautivaron en una guerra que hizo don

Martin, un caballero de Andalucía. Encomiéndoslo, por caridad, porque no lo deje yo en poder de moros. (Carta 8)

One left for Algiers and has been captured and the other one does not care about her according to what she writes, so she reaches out to the third one, Gonzalo, for help. Gonzalo apparently has done well in the New World. Catalina refers to the fact that she has heard of his good fortune in the New World: “doy muchas gracias a Dios que me ha dejado saber lo que tanto he deseado, que es saber que estais bueno y muy honrado y rico” (Carta 8). One can envision, when reading these letters, a sense of lives frozen by the uncertainty of their loved ones’ whereabouts and the interminably long intervals without any communication.

She also informs Gonzalo that she has managed to marry his sister Isabel de Ávila to Fabián Gutiérrez, thanks to the assistance of Gonzalo’s uncle: “sería bien tuvieseis cuidado que para casar a vuestra hermana Isabel de Ávila, no era menester poco para no bajarla de su igual...fue Nuestro Señor servido ordenarlo así y con el favor suyo y del maestro Ávila, vuestro tío, la tengo casada” (Carta 6). Catalina implores Gonzalo to remember them and to live up to his responsibilities to help out with the repayment of the dowry to his uncle. This assistance enables Catalina to marry her daughter within the same social status as her words indicate *no era menester poco para no bajarla de su igual* [italics are mine].

Catalina portrays herself as a good mother and wonders at Gonzalo’s lack of reciprocity considering that she has maintained his good name even though he has neglected her.

Francisca Vázquez

Francisca Vazquez's letter shows a mother concerned for her son and the expectation that he should not forget about his family in Belmonte. This is an expectation that she clearly states in the opening of the letter: "estamos muy maravillados del gran descuido que habéis tenido de no escribirnos tanto tiempo ha, porque desde que entraste en Méjico solo en una armada nos habéis enviado cartas" (Carta 20). This letter emphasizes Alonso de Vera's absence and the distance that Francisca Vázquez is attempting to bridge with the several imperatives that she issues to him: "hacedme placer que de todo nos deis aviso"; "Enviadnos a dar cuenta qué tierra es esa"; "De todo nos dad aviso"; "Respóndele cuando a nosotros nos escribáis" (Carta 20).

Francisca not only identifies when the letters written by Alonso de Vera were received and the promise contained within to write again: "estas vinieron en el año de sesenta y ocho, y enviástenos a decir en ellas que en EL año de sesenta y nueve nos enviaríais muchas cartas y más lo que vos pudieseis", but she also implores him to write to them about the New World:

Hácame tanto placer de cuanta congoja nos habéis dado, que por todas las vías que podais nos escribáis. Enviadnos a dar cuenta que tierra es esa; como os ha ido en ella; que tan lejos está Méjico, si van por tierra o por mar, y si es ganada o hay manera de ganar. De todo nos dad aviso. Y como lo hizo con vos el Señor Francisco González todo el tiempo que estuvisteis en Méjico. Y como lo ha hecho con vos el señor capitán Francisco Ramírez, porque todo el pueblo tiene entendido que os ha de favorecer en todo lo que

podiere, porque es muy honrado, y no podrá dejar de hacerlo como quien es. Hacedme placer que de todo nos déis aviso. (74)

In her role as mother, Francisca asserts her influence on Alonso de Vera by commanding him to tell them about the area to which he is traveling. Francisca balances this command by telling him how they have been kept apprised of the goings-on in Mexico by el señor Francisco Gonzalez and el señor Francisco Ramirez. Francisca not only takes an interest in the whereabouts of her son but also wants to know about the New World. Francisca informs Alonso de Vera that they are aware of his whereabouts and his involvement in the conquista de los Chichimecas.

A letter written by Gaspar Mejía, a typical soldier fighting in Zacatecas, included in Enrique Otte's *Cartas privadas de emigrantes a Indias 1540-1616*, offers his thoughts on los Chichimecas:

Yo salí de México quince días antes de Navidad, y me entre la tierra adentro...he venido a una tierra que se dice Zacatecas, que están ochenta leguas de México, de tierra despoblada, y de guerra...hierva la tierra de Chichimecas, una generación del demonio...todo esto ningún poblado, y agua de ocho a ocho leguas, y poco y mala, durmiendo en el suelo y con mucha nieve, a cual sintió bien mi herida y cuerpo, y cada noche tocándonos arma, y de día matando los amigos. (15)

This letter from Gaspar Mejía to his wife Catalina Dominguez describes the land and the war taking place in the New World. The letters that Otte studied were primarily those written to Old Spain by the immigrants in New Spain.

In keeping with the epistolary pact of reciprocity, Francisca apprises Alonso de Vera of what is occurring at home:

Hagoos saber, hijo, que lo que pasa en esta tierra es que son los años tan trabajosos que nunca jamás los que son nacidos tiempos tan trabajosos dicen que no han visto, porque la Guerra de Granada tiene destruida toda Castilla, y el mayor mal que en ello hay es que están metidos en aquella sierra, que no tienen remedio los cristianos de ofenderles, y así no hay corte de acabarse. La tierra esta tal que en todo el año pasado llovió, y así no se cogió pan; vale una libra cinco maravedís. Y la mayor hambre que jamás se ha visto tengo entendido que es este año. Ha de acaba de necesidad mucha gente, y nosotros los primeros. (Carta 20)

Francisca Vasquez not only demands descriptive and informative letters from her son, she also reciprocates informing him of what is happening in Belmonte: The Guerra de Granada, the poor harvest, and a hunger not experienced before which will end many lives.

We become aware that Francisca Vázquez has not herself written the letter, as she begins the closing of the letter by stating that it is Pedro de Vera, Alonso de Vera's father to whom she has dictated the letter "Pedro de Vera, el que la presente escribe," (75) does not minimize the voice of authority in her message. In Carta 20, Francisca Vázquez asserts her 'self' in the letter to her son expressing dismay and wonder at Alonso's supposed inattention, while at the same time demanding and expecting that Alonso not forget his family in Belmonte and to send them letters through any means available. She pointedly tells Alonso that just as they have received a letter from Francisco González so can his [Alonso] letters be transported to them "porque como vino la suya [Francisco] vinieran las

vuestras [Alonso]. Carta 20 is “a powerful letter” voicing the expected reciprocity that tells the addressee that his lack of attention affects not only his family but other people in the town of Belmonte. The letter ends with a list of the people who all wish him well:

Pedro de Vera, el que la presente escribe, os besa las manos. Francisco de Vera, el mozo, ni más ni menos; el padre fray Pedro Vázquez y el padre fray Hernando Vázquez os encomiendan mucho; y vuestro tío Antonio Cuello tiene en cuenta de rogar a Dios por vos cada día. Que dicen todos vuestros deudos y no deudos que os besan las manos; y Catalina y sus hijas os besan las manos.

Even though Francisca does not write this letter it is clear that it is her voice that is asserting itself in the written text and in her role as a mother. She endeavors to maintain a strong family relationship with her son, Alonso de Vera.

Although many of the letter writers declare they have not received any correspondence from their loved ones, it is possible to discern they are aware of the recipients’ situation since Francisca Vazquez has written to her son and Catalina de Ávila also informs her son Gonzalo de Ávila of what she has been able to learn of his whereabouts and his economic status in the New World:

Muchas gracias a Dios, que me ha dejado saber lo que tantos años tanto he deseado, que es saber que estáis bueno, y bien quieto, y rico y honrado; todo lo cual he deseado, como digo, desde el día que saliste de esta villa, que no he cesado de preguntar a unos y a otros, y nadie me ha dado razón. Y de un mes a esta parte ha sido Dios servido que he sabido lo que digo. (Carta 5)

As Couchman and Crabb write, “family relationships provided important claims to influence, although the degree to which that influence was effective varied with intimacy, with balance of power between writer and recipient and with the success of rhetorical strategies” (13). Catalina’s language is not as direct as Francisca Hernández’s with her lover Cosme or Francisca Vázquez’s with her son Alonso de Vera, but each one constructs the language to influence and persuade. The role of mother is one of the most effective sources of authorization for women, both being a mother, and ‘performing motherhood’ (Couchman and Crabb 13). Catalina and both Franciscas construct the language in their letters to produce their own form of persuasion.

Conclusion

What do these letters tell us? These letters tell us about the lives of women who with letters as the only medium available to them, attempt to communicate with their loved ones and to persuade them to return to their native land or at least not forget about them. They tell us that many women found themselves in circumstances that were not or could not be resolved easily. Their anguish is palpable, and although many share the same complaints and pleas, each articulates her own story, giving expression with their own voices to their many efforts to reach across a horizon that was unknown to them.

The idea of maintaining emotional bonds, attain intimacy, and to ask for or provide economic resources through letter writing, does not change whether in the sixteenth-century or the twentieth-century; before instant electronic communications; and even with

rudimentary literacy skills (Gerber 37). The need to preserve a connection, however fragile, is imperative among all who have lived as immigrants or for the ones left behind.¹¹

¹¹ During my research, I came across many works analyzing women's letter writing with a focus on medieval English letters or early modern European women, as can be found in James Daybell's or Jane Couchman's works, respectively. Further study of these letters is necessary and will illuminate the feelings and emotions of women who experienced a displacement rooted in the repercussions of the initial discovery of the New World.

CHAPTER 2

Un verano en Bornos: Fernán Caballero and the unconscious subversion of a conservative voice

Introduction

Analysis of Fernán Caballero's literary works and her private letters generally focuses on her novel *La gaviota* (1849), a novel that Susan Kirkpatrick writes is the "most ambitious as a representation and condemnation of the cultural revolution" (*Las Románticas* 246). Nevertheless, Fernán Caballero wrote two epistolary novels, *Una en otra* (1849) and *Un verano en Bornos* (1855), and neither has received extensive critical attention. I argue that through the use of the epistolary novel, Fernán Caballero gives the female letter writer the space to express her opinion as a woman although restricted to the confines of a domestic setting, whether rural or urban. Dóciles, amorosas, y obedientes typify Fernán Caballero's females in her epistolary novel *Un verano en Bornos*.

The epistolary novel in Spain

Research into the epistolary novel, whether written by women or men, consistently leads one to assume that *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) by Samuel Richardson ushered in the beginning of the genre. Although *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were instrumental in introducing a new creative way to tell a story, the interest in reading letters, whether actual or fictional, stems from the engagement of the reader to the contents of presumably private correspondence: a vicarious and voyeuristic entry into the inner life of another person. The aura of authenticity obtained through the presentation of emotions through this medium

provides epistolary novels a space in which to create varying possibilities of reality and at the same time provides an adaptable medium for the illusion of truth.

Charles Kany's study on the Spanish epistolary novel states that the "letter, both in its pristine form and also as a literary device, shows a comparatively unbroken evolution from earliest times" (1). Kany chronologically traces the development of the epistolary novel from ancient times through the seventeenth century, in an attempt to dispel the notion that the epistolary novel was a phenomenon of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. Furthermore, Fabienne Huber Vulliet's study of archival and literary letters from the cuneiform culture (489) supports Charles Kany's contention that the letter is an evolving literary device and not a construction of the eighteenth-century.

The inherent flexibility of the letter form frees the writer to use vocabulary and language to create, to omit, or to invert conventional constraints within the framework of salutation and closing. In addition, the embellishments included by many writers, such as rhetorical exercises, stylistic elegance, and knowledge of the classics, lead to the creation of the epistolary novel derived from actual letters which thus succeeds in blurring the line between the real and the fictional (Kany 49). Kany outlines the use of the letter in fifteenth-century Spain as poetic correspondence, prose love letters, or letters that address religious and love issues, moralizing letters, and friendship letters (48-49).

Even though Thomas Beebee comments in a footnote in *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* that Kany's contribution is nothing more than a documentation of earlier works of epistolary fiction "without having much to say about them beyond their plots" (207), Kany's serious historical perspective on the epistolary mode brings to light the important contributions of *Proceso de cartas de amores* (1548) by Juan de Segura. This

work is an epistolary novel that Beebee acknowledges as the first one written in Spain after the genre quickly traveled to Spain from Italy in the form of the *carte messagiere* (letters of messengers) or a collection of tiny epistolary fictions (27). This genre contributed to the depiction of realism from the perspective of private expressions and as Michael E. Gerli notes: “through the adoption of this device, the *Proceso* becomes the first attempt in Spanish literature at a fully realistic representation of the moods and the psychology of love” (478). The protean aspect of the letter contributes to its effectiveness. As Kany says in describing another writer’s use of the letter: “what he created was not the letter form but “a new species of writing”: a simple story and an “easy and natural manner,” with an emphatic religious and moral intent” (Kany viii).

In 1985, Hazel Gold addresses the paucity of “a systematic study into the Hispanic epistolary novel as a genre, [or a] serious investigation . . . into the fortunes of the Spanish letter novel in the nineteenth century” (133). While Gold acknowledges the existence of letter novels in Spain, she fails to mention Fernán Caballero’s two epistolary novels and refers only to Benito Pérez Galdós and Juan Valera as the major novelists who used this format. She makes a cursory mention of letter novels written by women but qualifies them as “narrative plots based on the theme of passionate love, and thus setting into play a host of ideological concerns directly related to the workings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society” (135).

Granting that Fernán Caballero’s two epistolary novels *Una en otra* (1849) and *Un verano en Bornos* (1855), have received little critical attention in comparison to her other novels, *La gaviota* (1849), *Clemencia* (1852), and *La familia de Alvareda* (1856), Lawrence Klibbe does credit Fernán Caballero with a “decidedly innovative technique”

(136) in regards to her two epistolary novels, but Klibbe does not clarify what he means by “innovative techniques”. In the epistolary novel *Una en otra* is composed primarily of an epistolary exchange between an uncle and his nephew, while in *Un verano*, Fernán Caballero gives the young females a voice with which to articulate their feelings, emotions, sentiments, and thoughts on the life that surrounds them.

The Spanish epistolary novel did not gain a similar stronghold as the English and French epistolary novels because of its innate confessional mode since “the association of letter writing with confession, in the context of Catholic-dominated Spain, debilitated its appeal to authors for literary purposes: the private letter made public was likely seen as an invasion of privacy and a violation of the secrecy of confession” (Garlinger xxviii). With this view in mind, I agree with Lawrence Klibbe that Fernán Caballero’s use of the epistolary form was an innovative technique, but I find it innovative because it disguises a form of veiled subversion from a conservative writer, offering possibilities at the same time for agency and independence.

The acceptance of the verisimilitude of letters creates the perfect space in which to propagandize or subvert ideologies of contemporary society. The absence of authorial interjections underlines the letters’ ability to further present an apparent truthfulness. For example, depending on the reader’s own perspective, Fernán Caballero is either perpetuating the status quo by echoing the “beliefs and values of the feminine ideal and the cult of domesticity” (Aldaraca 234) of nineteenth century Spain or subtly criticizing these same social norms. An example of this ambiguity occurs in Carta XII from Serafina to Luisa detailing a dialogue on religion with Carlos Peñarreal who tells her:

—Con vuestro modo de pensar y de sentir – me dijo Peñarreal – tendréis muchas controversias que sostener.

—Ninguna—contesté—: ni mi edad ni mi estado de soltera me autorizan en sociedad para disputar, ni mi carácter me lo permite, pues me sucede como a la simpática madame de Sevigné, a quien la sinrazón picaba, y la falta de buena fe ofendía; así es que prefiero callar. (177)

One could also ask the question: Is Serafina being subversive or preserving the ideal status for the female? Can she express her opinions in a letter as long as she does not transgress any social codes in public?

The private letter, whether actual or fictional, provides a space for writers to express themselves with a directness not otherwise possible, especially for women. Even so, the practice of letters being read to and by others requires that the writer caution the recipient to be careful with certain information: “Exijo de ti, querida Serafina, que no me contestes una palabra a cuanto te he confiado, porque mi madre se deleita en leer tus cartas, y Carolina Meridal me las arrebató apenas las he leído” (156). Luisa cautions Serafina because the confidential information that she relates would break her mother’s heart if she read the letter. Luisa’s brother has placed a caveat on offering monetary assistance to her and his mother only if Luisa breaks off her engagement to the son of the man who caused their father’s bankruptcy:

Este me escribió que si yo renunciaba al hombre á quien amaba (con el que estaba ya comprometida á casarme) daría una lúcida asistencia á mi madre; pero que, de lo contrario, olvidásemos que teníamos un hijo y un hermano en Cuba. Esto lo hacía, tanto porque comprendió que el padre del hombre

que debía ser mi marido, había sido la causa de la ruina de nuestro padre, como porque arruinado aquel también por las mismas desgracias, su hijo no podía ser una boda conveniente para mí. (155-56)

Both Serafina and Luisa are epistolary confidants, sharing confidential information with an expectation of privacy but still feel the need to insert a reminder: “no le acuses al poeta ni le repitas esta mi opinión, que tú llamarás como sueles hacerlo, una de mis ideas violetas, sin altura, sin garbo y sin brillo” (147).

The construction of multiple voices via the epistolary form presents a diversity of perspectives. Bakhtin says that it is this diversity of perspectives that defines the novel with “individual voices, artistically organized” (262). This exchange of letters enables the interaction of first-person perspectives without the interference of the author’s voice. The only time the author’s voice is heard is at the conclusion of letter writing with a wedding invitation extended to the reader.

Single narrator versus omniscient narrator in Fernán Caballero

“Epistolary fiction dispenses [with the] the omniscient narrator” (Beebee 8) and the letter writers become the narrators of their own lives. Differing points of view are presented based on the experiences of the individual, and the recipient of the letter is placed within the illusory present with the insertion of dialogue to relate their mini narratives. *Un verano en Bornos* (1855) is completely comprised of letters exchanged among friends.

The first letter by Serafina to her friend Luisa describes the travel undertaken to reach Bornos and expresses sorrow over the treatment of the horses: “[N]o quiero ni aun recordar lo que sufrieron los pobres caballos que arrastraban la pesada berlina”. She also

responds to Luisa's desire to know what Bornos is like: "Bornos es un serrano culto y ataviado. . . [C]orona su cabeza con las hojas de la verde encina y con la rosada adelfa de las montañas" (146). Once she completes these introductory paragraphs, Serafina's letter reveals the reason for the trip to Bornos which is her disappointment in her fiancé, Alejandro, and her attempts to reconcile herself to his indifference: "Hoy por fin, después de mucho tiempo, he tenido carta suya; nada habla en ella de volver: ¡hace cuatro años que está ausente" (146). The lack of epistolary exchange between Serafina and Alejandro has affected Serafina's health and is the reason for the summer trip to Bornos. Spatial distance and temporal discontinuity is bridged through the dialogue of the speaking voice which is a "crucial aspect of the letter . . . written solely because the writer cannot speak to the addressee. [Therefore] writing nurtures the illusion of speaking with one whose absence is intolerable" as defined by Linda Kauffman in *Special Delivery* (xix). With respect to Serafina, her distress at the disregard that Alejandro has demonstrated towards her has left her in a state of uncertainty.

In contrast, *Una en otra*, Fernán Caballero's second epistolary novel, begins with an "objective" third person narration that introduces nine characters traveling together in a *berlina* being pulled by "diez y ocho caballos de la bella raza andaluza" (2) and lets the passengers in the *berlina* speak for themselves: "Para dar a conocer estos personajes, bastará dejarlos hablar" (3). The dialogic exchange that follows reveals the different personalities through their own words and forms a personal opinion of each one with the exception of one passenger that the objective narrator describes as "[E]staba sentado un señor de edad, chico y gordo, de ojos pequeños y vivarachos, nariz de loro, cara rubicunda

y satisfecha” (*Una en otra* 3). The reader is therefore prejudiced against this one character and his role in the novel as a result of the author’s description.

Meanwhile, the third person narrator in *Un verano* makes brief, passing interjections in the epistolary novel either to clarify a point or to establish the theme of the epistolary novel.¹² First, there is the dedicatory epigraph to two young girls whose wonderful qualities are reproduced in the letters: “tan cultas, como bondadosas, modestas sin afectación, digna sin altivez, entendidas y sencillas, instruidas e inocentes, hijas amantes y respetuosas” (145). Second, although kept at a minimum and not as extensive, as in her novel *La gaviota*, Fernán Caballero is unable to resist the temptation of inserting her voice in the form of occasional footnotes (ten in total) either to clarify or to define particular points. For example, the first footnote that appears in Carta II explains “Siñigo as a confitero afamado de Cadiz” [a famous Cadiz confectioner] (147). The final letter is directed to the implicit reader of the epistolary novel in the form of a wedding invitation: “. . . deseando merezca su aprobación” (205).

The difference between a first-person perspective narration as in letters and a third-person narrator, or omniscient narrator, is that the letter writer is writing the details of the events as they come to mind or as Elizabeth MacArthur tells us: “[E]pistolary characters describe present events with no knowledge of the larger story in which these events may ultimately play a role” (8). The insertion of dialogue changes the role of the letter writer from a first person narrator into an omniscient narrator and the implicit reader is given to believe that it is a truthful rendition since, as mentioned above, the third person narrator in

¹² See Scott, David. “Signs in the Text: The Role of Epigraphs, Footnotes and Typography in Clarifying the Narrator-Character Relationship in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir*.” *Ma(r)king the text* (2000): 26-34.

Una en otra tells the implicit reader “basta dejarlos hablar” [it is sufficient to let them speak] (3).

According to Joe Bray, who explores the representations of consciousness in the epistolary novel, the “epistolary novel is often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing (1). However, what Fernán Caballero presents are not random jottings by the letter-writers but thoughtful and well written letters, albeit with a conservative bent, that represents thoughts and emotions of middle-class men and women in early nineteenth-century Spain.

The letter narrative contains all of the events of the summer in Bornos. The physical letters are the primary agents in the plot and the entire psychological action is advanced through the letter writing itself (Altman 9). The reported events or dialogues become the framework of a story: “Letters and novels are both acts of self-representation in writing and, as such, may both be taken to begin with, as fictions” (Bodenheimer 6). In his letter to Félix de Vea, Carlos claims that he has faithfully transcribed an event that took place in Bornos: “¡Cómo me he dejado llevar a transcribirle palabra por palabra uno de nuestros coloquios tan profunda e imborrablemente impresos en mi memoria!” (174). However, the novel, as Bakhtin tells us, offers “the possibility of an authentically authentic objective portrayal of the past as the past” (29). So, as the voyeuristic reader, we can choose to believe that it has been transcribed word for word.

As the letter takes shape, the ‘self’ presented depends on the selected recipient of the letter since the letter writer is presenting a ‘self’ based on the perception of the reader. Dialogue through letter writing is a continuum of common memories and common

experiences that take place between the letters (Altman 119). The exchange of letters, as a substitute for conversation, attempts to bridge the geographic separation of two individuals when face to face interaction is not possible. In today's world of instant emails and text messages, it is difficult to envision this situation in which a written letter is the only possible substitute for this kind of contact.

Several techniques in these letters add depth to the narrative and provide a more complex story. In *Un verano en Bornos*, for example, the reader is apprised of events that occur through a dialogue transcribed by the letter writer suggesting a true depiction. The letter writer becomes an intradiegetic narrator—that is, one who relates an interior story based on the letter writer's perspective, claiming that the dialogue is a true “palabra por palabra” rendition, as asserted by Carlos Peñarreal in his letter to Félix de Veá (172). In his letter he recounts the event so that Félix de Veá will grasp and understand Serafina's way of thinking: “[P]ara que comprendas y admires el modo de pensar y de sentir de Serafina” (172). The interior story, therefore progresses through the insertion of dialogue and serves as a bridge between sender and receiver keeping them in communication of the goings-on in their lives whether in Bornos, Cádiz, or Madrid. By adding the dialogue to the letters, Fernán Caballero further creates the sense of immediacy and spontaneity that Altman calls “writing to the moment”, and even though, as Altman tells us, “the epistolary narrative is a fragmented narrative” (169), the author maintains a compensatory continuity through the insertion of the other letter writers.

By using the epistolary medium, Fernán Caballero gives each of these voices its own perspective and validates its own narrative weight within each letter. The reader may decide to read the letters exchanged between the same sender and receiver first, and then

return to read the letter novel as structured by Fernán Caballero to fill in the narrative gaps for a more complete storyline. In both of her epistolary novels, the characters are permitted to speak for themselves through the mini-narratives composed in their letters. The first-person quality of letter writing gives authority and authenticity to the writer because it is the narration of their lives and the events unfolding around them. The omniscient narrator reports what is occurring. Both first person and third person narratives are places for expressing opinions of the events, even though tinged with subjective overtones.

General critical studies on 19th century women and on Fernán Caballero

Although Mark Rahm Malin analyzes *Una en otra* in his 1996 dissertation with an eye towards the self-contradictions exposed in the epistolary novel, a comprehensive analysis of *Un verano* is virtually non-existent. Excellent critical studies have been undertaken on the representation of nineteenth-century women by male- and female-authored novels. The issue of gender formation and the culturally constructed feminine desire is addressed by Lou Charnon-Deutsch in *Narratives of Desire*, who dedicates a chapter on the novels of Cecilia Böhl de Faber, citing her as a precursor of the domestic fiction genre, a genre that according to Nancy Armstrong in her study of nineteenth-century British literature “mapped out a new domain of discourse as it invested common forms of social behavior with the emotional values of women” (471). Bridget Aldaraca’s *El ángel del hogar*, a study of the changing attitudes towards women and the ideal of domesticity with its inherent contradictions of the public and private sphere in the nineteenth-century in Spain, is an important contribution. In addition, Victoria Loree Enders’ and Pamela Beth Radcliff’s *Constructing Spanish Womanhood* offers an exceptional cross-discipline

anthology on modern Spanish women's history from the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

Fernán Caballero's insistence on advocating a particular feminine behavior contrasts starkly to the author's life. José Ramón Prado and María Pilar Moliner Marín's contribution to the 1996 bicentennial tribute to Cecilia Böhl de Faber reiterates what is well known about her contradictory public and private personality which creates bewilderment within feminist literary circles.¹³ This representation is found in the writings of Cecilia Böhl de Faber as Fernán Caballero that advocated two paths for women—marriage or the convent—not only in the actual world but in her novels.

Life for many women during the nineteenth century was fraught with obstacles and societal disapproval as experienced by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Carolina Coronado in their efforts to forge a literary path for themselves during a transitional period that saw many women fighting for the right to be accepted as intellectual beings and not as vacuous, ornamental beings promulgated by the patriarchal social codes of the nineteenth-century.

The pseudonym of Cecilia Böhl de Faber

An author's decision to write in the epistolary form is comparable to the use of a pseudonym since one is crafting prose under the guise of different voices and therefore removes the restrictions imposed upon by gender ideology. According to Carmela Ciuraru,

¹³ See "La representación del sujeto femenino en la producción narrativa de Cecilia Böhl de Faber" in Fernández Poza, Milagros, y Mercedes García Pazos, eds. *Actas del encuentro 'Fernán Caballero, Hoy': homenaje en el bicentenario del nacimiento de Cecilia Böhl de Faber, 1996*. pp 261-273.

“a pseudonym may give a writer the necessary distance to speak honestly, but it can just as easily provide a license to lie. Anything is possible. It allows a writer to produce a work of serious literature, or one that is simply a guilty pleasure” (xv). Cecilia Böhl de Faber, writing as Fernán Caballero, engages in literary fantasy through her epistolary novel *Un verano*, by portraying the lives of two young girls and their expected reward for being *cultas, bondadosas, modestas, e instruidas*. Whether serious literature or guilty pleasure, a pseudonym gives the author creative freedom to expand into other genres or speak as another. By using the voices of different letter writers, Fernán Caballero is able to present diverse opinions without the transgression of gender roles by the main characters—Serafina, Primitiva, Carlos, and Félix.

Carmela Ciuraru’s book, *Nom De Plume: A (secret) History of Pseudonyms*, discusses various well-known authors who hide behind a pseudonym either as a market strategy, as undertaken by Nora Roberts (aka Eleanor Robertson); or to distance themselves from claustrophobic reader expectations that constrain authors from venturing into other genres, i.e. Stephen King, who writes under the pen name Richard Bachman; while others wished to have a respite from public perception as desired by Nobel laureate, and by Doris Lessing. Another reason for many to write under a pseudonym is because “historically, [they] have been lonely outsiders”, as Ciuraru states, and the use of a pseudonym gives them the opportunity to present a different self: “[T]he pseudonymous entity can serve as confidant, keeper of secrets, and protective shield” (xiv). The concealment of one’s identity behind a pseudonym gives the writer freedom from the restrictions imposed upon him or her because of his or her novelistic success and the possibility that the reader’s expectation may be severely disappointed should the writer experiment with a different genre, and that

such experimentation could affect their marketability. On the other hand, a writer's experiment with a pseudonym may release a spurt of creativity not possible under his or her own name. Furthermore, another commonality shared by the authors, as discussed by Ciuraru in her book, is that "[m]ost of these authors had endured childhoods with domineering, neglectful, or cruel parents" (xxiii). Cecilia Böhl de Faber found herself torn between the conflicting ideas of both her parents with respect to the intellectual capacity of women. Therefore, assuming a masculine pseudonym helped Cecilia to negotiate not only the publishing world but, as Colette Rabate writes, "el doble patronímico le permite asumir y armonizar dos facetas de su personalidad: por un lado la mujer, Cecilia, y por otro, la escritora, Fernán" (297). The intellectual struggle between her parents, Juan Nicolás Böhl de Faber and Francisca Larrea, as to a woman's place in society, created a form of bipolar thinking in Cecilia Böhl de Faber.

A masculine pseudonym was a necessary step for many women, not only in Spain but in England: Mary Anne Evans became George Eliot, the Brontë sisters published under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, while in France George Sand was actually Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin. This was an essential step since the writings of women living in the early nineteenth century were subject to ridicule and dismissed as feminine sentimental writing. In the case of Böhl de Faber, her appropriation of a male nom de plume underscored her desire to maintain a "radical distinction between this male personification of her writing activity and Cecilia Boehl, woman" (Kirkpatrick *Las Románticas* 246). Even in the twentieth-first century, suspicions of female achievements continue to plague women writers. As noted in *The Economist*, J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter fantasy

series, hides behind a male pseudonym.¹⁴ Her initials are gender-neutral so as to not detract from the fact that the novel was written by a woman and therefore the Harry Potter novels will appeal to young male readers. J.K. Rowling continues the use of a male-specific pseudonym, Robert Galbraith, to write crime novels.

Cecilia Böhl de Faber's use of a masculine pseudonym (Fernán Caballero) was a necessary subterfuge to compete in a literary world dominated by male interests. As Carmela Ciurara writes, "to a certain extent, all writing involves impersonation—the act of summoning an authorial 'I' to create the speaker of a poem or the characters in a novel" (xiii). The *nom de plume* that Cecilia Böhl de Faber constructed for herself created a shield against the animosity shown towards women who dared to write. In his introduction to his translation of Fernán Caballero's *La suegra del diablo*, Robert Fedorcheck comments on Böhl de Faber and her use of a masculine pseudonym:

As a woman she had to make headway on a masculine stage and survive in a masculine world, and, like George Sand and George Eliot, her contemporaries in France and England, she adopted a man's name as a literary pseudonym, which she used to keep the identity of the woman apart from the artist. (192)

Cecilia Böhl de Faber even talked about herself in the third person as noted in the following citation: "Sin embargo, no dejan de sorprender las señales de un desdoblamiento que la autora vive con más o menos serenidad. Así exclama con humor: "¡Ay!, ¡que el dichoso *Fernán*, a vuelta de buenos ratos, se los ha dado malos, malísimos a Cecilia!"

¹⁴ *The Economist* "Why do some writers use pseudonyms?" Jul 24th 2013, 23:50 by E.H

(Rabate 296). Böhl de Faber's use of a pseudonym was related to the social issues of her day and as protection against any adverse repercussions from the public, but Colette Rabate also tells us that “[s]i el seudónimo consigue ofrecer cierta ‘visibilidad’ y credibilidad a Cecilia Böhl, otra de sus obsesiones es la de conseguir legitimidad como auténtica española y sobre todo como representante del ideal doméstico que pretende defender” (297).

Writing under a male pseudonym, Fernán Caballero became another person in order to maintain a separation between her private life and her public life. Her own upbringing, not only living between two cultures, Spanish and German, but also the tensions provoked by her parents' differing intellectual pursuits and thinking contribute to her inability to reconcile her writing and her identity as a woman (Kirkpatrick *Las Románticas* 291). Her pseudonym is a mask that she cultivates to such a degree that her true personality is difficult to discern.

Cecilia Böhl de Faber / Francisca de Larrea / Mary Wollstonecraft

Fernán Caballero's epistolary novel portrays middle-class characters and problems connected to their social and economic status. Although the letter itself may contain the true emotions, thoughts, and feelings of the letter writer, it could be argued that *Un verano* is not necessarily a paean to the ideal domestic future for young women, but rather a subtle veiled subversion of the social structures that enforced conformity. As Charnon-Deutsch emphasizes, “the domestic novel had to imagine ways to contain feminine agency in order to be compatible with patriarchal family ideology” (18). Cecilia Böhl de Faber's upbringing created opposing and conflicting views and how she saw the world that surrounded her. Her father, Juan Nicolas Böhl, did not object to Cecilia's receiving an

education as long as her intelligence was confined to the home. In fact, he believed that any intellectual pursuit by women would lead to moral ambiguity. Meanwhile, Cecilia's mother, Francisca Larrea, greatly influenced by the feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, urged her daughter to submit her stories for publication. Even though, as Charnon-Deutsch points out, the nineteenth-century female who published was not only an oddity but also had to "convince her reading public of the literary value of her writing" (86), Cecilia avoided this step until economic circumstances compelled her to publish.

Francisca de Larrea's intellectual interest in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft was selective. Carol Tully disputes the view that Larrea was a champion of women's rights in the private or public arena. Larrea's struggle against her husband's view that women could not be men's intellectual equals created the strife that would result in a ten-year separation. According to Tully, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was an essential tool for Francisca de Larrea "to gain the ground she desires within the confines of her marriage in a process of negotiation which would last almost a decade" (Tully 89). Larrea was a selective reader and translator of Wollstonecraft's writings, using them to further her fight against the restrictions Nicolas Böhl de Faber unwisely wished to impose upon her, as when stated: "[C]uando se convierta en humilde, dócil, obediente, complaciente y económica, será recibida por mí con los brazos abiertos" (quoted in Mayoral's *Actas de encuentro* 131).

Francisca de Larrea may appear to be a proto-feminist model for many women, but in reality, Tully argues, it is a misconceived feminism, since she fought for intellectual parity for herself within her marriage and not necessarily for women in general. María del

Carmen Simón Palmer emphasizes this point regarding women's situations in nineteenth-century Spain:

Las escritoras españolas no tuvieron otro remedio que educarse de manera autodidacta, leyendo cuanto cayó en sus manos, y no faltaron los casos en que se hicieron traductoras de otros idiomas sin haber pisado los países correspondientes. Pero, curiosamente, al plantearse el tema de si el resto de las mujeres debía o no educarse sus opiniones no fueron unánimes. (481)

Larrea's desire for her daughter to publish is in keeping with the upper middle-class woman's desire to be on an equal footing with men. Marina Mayoral writes that "Nicolás Böhl de Faber es absolutamente contrario al desarrollo intelectual de las mujeres" (130). Larrea reads Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* but selectively chooses what is essential to support her arguments against her husband's beliefs: "No he encontrado todavía una mujer a quien la más pequeña superioridad intelectual no produzca alguna deficiencia moral" (Mayoral 130). He denied women's right to reason and to participate in any intellectual milieu.

Guillermo Carnero, Carol Tully, and Sally-Ann Kitts address Francisca de Larrea's interest in Mary Wollstonecraft and her writings. Guillermo Carnero discusses the travel diaries that had been attributed to Larrea and argues they were actually a partial adaptation or translation in progress of Wollstonecraft travel diaries: "[U]na traducción, o mejor dicho, una adaptación parcial de las *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*" (Carnero 134) by Larrea. Meanwhile, Tully's argument centers on Larrea's brief engagement with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and says that Larrea's "interest in Wollstonecraft was essentially existential, part of her own

quest for an intellectual voice to equal that of her husband, and not one born, as was Wollstonecraft's own agenda, of a desire to improve the lot of women generally" (89). In addition, Sally-Ann Kitts points out that even though *A Vindication of Women's Rights* was published in Spain by Julian de Velasco, co-editor of the *Diario de Madrid*, receiving favorable reviews, it was done so through a careful selection of Wollstonecraft's radical text so that it could further both his argument and Larrea's struggle regarding women's rights in Spain. Each of them engaged carefully in the selections because of the expected outcry that would ensue in the reactionary Spain of 1792 and of Wollstonecraft's known political agenda. As Carnero points out, "doña Francisca sólo adoptaba con mucha precaución las ideas de su maestra [Mary Wollstonecraft], espantándose ante todo atentado contra el trono y el altar" (Carnero 142). Political struggle against patriarchal oppression was not Francisca de Larrea's goal since she was both a staunch conservative and an ardent Roman Catholic. Cecilia Böhl de Faber (Fernán Caballero) followed in the same vein as her parents advocating either marriage or the convent for women not only in the actual world but in her novels.

The Female Writer in *Un Verano en Bornos*

According to Janet Altman, "In constructing the mosaic of their narrative, epistolary novelists choose constantly between the discontinuity inherent in the letter form and the creation of a compensatory continuity" (69). *Un verano en Bornos* uses a narrative structure with a single plot, linear time followed in strict chronological order and one writer to one addressee. The contents of the letters written by the five female writers in *Un verano en Bornos* offer several perspectives and transgressive behaviors couched within feminine

language. The narrative opens with Serafina's letter to Luisa and after a descriptive rendering of the trip to Bornos, Serafina begins to philosophically muse about "Que es gloria" (146). This musing relates to her engagement to Alejandro and introduces the plot of the novel.

Altogether there are thirty letters in *Un verano en Bornos*; eight letters exchanged between Serafina and Luisa (friends); four letters written by Primitiva to Teresa (friends); six letters between Carlos and Félix (friends); five letters between Luisa and Félix (cousins); four letters between Alejandro (Serafina's fiancé) and his intimate friend, el conde; one letter written by Fanchetta (Alejandro's supposed fiancée) to Alina (relationship unknown); one letter from Doña Mariana (Serafina and Primitiva's mother) to María (her sister, a Carmelite nun); and the thirtieth letter is simply a wedding invitation to the reader.

Fernán Caballero's epistolary novel *Un verano* could be viewed as a dialogic effort to reconcile herself to the tension she experienced between the role of the ideal female who does not transgress the social codes versus the reality that she herself was compelled to experience by publishing her literary work after the bankruptcy and the later death of her third husband, Antonio Arrom de Ayala (1859). *Un verano* could also be described as a dialogue with oneself similar to those individuals who play chess against themselves since Fernán Caballero appropriates the voices of both women and men and thus provides opposing viewpoints and perspectives.

Letters frame the narrative that covers a three-month period with different first-person narrators including both feminine and masculine viewpoints. These are familiar letters exchanged between two correspondents with references to other letters from the

other correspondents. It is not necessary to read the other letters to know what is occurring over the summer and the consequent result of the correspondence.

Un verano en Bornos exudes a sense of authenticity and credibility. As Beebee explains, the “letter reading public had already been conditioned to accept as normal” novels that followed the epistolary form (7). Fernán Caballero’s use of this format gives further emphasis to the desired image of virtuous and submissive women. The one exception to the virtuous and submissive female is Fanchetta who writes a direct and straightforward account of her engagement to Alejandro to her friend, Alina:

¡Y bien, querida Alina, ello es hecho!... ¡Yo me caso! No para vivir como un Catón, sino para gozar de independencia. Me dirás: "¿Es con un príncipe?" ¡*Helas!*, no; en España no hay príncipes como en Italia. Es con un general buen mozo, aunque no tanto como él cree serlo; buen muchacho y más tonto que un ánsar; Pero valsea bien y monta a caballo como Franconi; es, en fin, hija mía, un *pis aller*.¹⁵ (183)

Fanchetta is portrayed as a woman who writes and thinks like a man. She writes without any digressions to Alina that she is accepting Alejandro’s marriage proposal in order to enjoy independence but not to follow the gender ideology prescribed for women. Fanchetta’s strategy or her coping mechanism is to use marriage as a vehicle for freedom and not to be transformed into a domestic angel.

Fernán Caballero’s epistolary novel is a paean to the gender ideology during a period of social and economic changes effected by the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815); the

¹⁵ Una torta a falta de pan. See footnote page 183 in *Un verano en Bornos*.

liberal constitution (1820-23); and the 1814 and 1823 restoration of Fernando VII to the Spanish throne.¹⁶ These changes contributed to more female participation outside masculine domains such as science, industry, scholarship, and politics. Jane Wood describes this separation as a “social prescription” to reinforce the idealization of woman “as the morally pure, passive, ‘angel in the house’” (9). The economic and social dilemmas are manifested by Serafina’s unfortunate engagement to Alejandro, Luisa’s conditional financial assistance from her brother, Carlos’ loss of his inheritance, and the supposed bankruptcy of the house of Villalprado.

Is this epistolary novel an exercise to promote the ideal female, whose educational endeavors are limited to home schooling by a governess, and thus educating the female to accepting the “joys of domesticity” (Charnon-Deutsch 19), or to implicitly criticize the narrowness of their lives through its various digressions? In her study of the female in Victorian Gothic fiction, Alison Milbank states that the aim of her book was to search “in seemingly conservative writers an unsettling and ‘redemptive’ dissatisfaction with the patriarchy they seem to defend” (Milbank 2).¹⁷

Un verano becomes a tribute to young girls who represent the ideal feminine model that follows the rules as Serafina recounts in her letter to Luisa regarding Primitiva’s engagement to Félix de Veá:

Bien guiada y siempre vigilada, Primitiva es, en toda la extensión de la palabra, una joven bien educada; es alegre sin ser frívola; inocente sin ser

¹⁶ See *The Cambridge Companion to the Spanish Novel: From 1600 to the Present*. Harriet S. Turner and de M. A. López, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

¹⁷ See *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction*.

simple; viva sin ser atolondrada; instruida sin pretensiones; bonita y sabiendo que lo es, pero sin ser presumida; vehemente, pero contenida, sobre todo dócil y verídica, cualidades que son la piedra fundamental de toda buena educación. (200)

The letters serve as a desirous discourse in a world of conformity and acceptance that leads to the creation of docile subjects since “disciplines [methods and techniques] operate on the body, affecting behavior, movement, gestures, and attitudes” as detailed by Margaret McLaren (57).

The narrative structure of *Un verano en Bornos* reflects nineteenth-century society’s efforts to segregate the male and the female. There are no crossovers in the correspondence between the letter writers in *Un verano* and, therefore, no opportunity for epistolary amorous discourse— “the denial of the reality of separation, the desire for contact, despair at the master’s silence, and finally, resigned desolation” (161)—, as identified by Linda Kauffman. The epistolary novel serves as an appropriate vehicle to endorse the feminine social codes of her time and to further retain the gender boundaries separate without transgressions. As noted by Kirkpatrick, Fernán Caballero maintains the social construct of gender ideology in her epistolary novel as she insisted in real life: “[T]he secret of her personal identity proved impossible to keep, she insisted that correspondence about her work be addressed to Fernán and refused interviews and public appearances in the name of Cecilia Boehl” (*Las Románticas* 246-47). The correspondence in *Un verano* consists of an epistolary exchange strictly between the young girls with the exception of the letters exchanged by the cousins, Luisa and Félix de Veá.

Bornos as a refuge as well as a prison: Gothic overtones in domestic fiction

Generally, the settings attributed to the Gothic conjure images of haunted castles and imprisoned females. It is the seemingly idealized rural setting of Bornos that functions not only as the locus for the construction of a supposed happy ending but also to reinforce and support the representational hegemony of the nineteenth-century.

According to Diane Hoeveler, the female gothic novel represented women who appear to be conforming to their acceptable roles within the patriarchy, but who actually subvert the father's power at every possible occasion, and then retreat to studied postures of conformity whenever they risk exposure to public censure (5-6). Unlike Mary Wollstonecraft, who herself defied and transgressed the codes of behavior for women and created female characters who suffered miserable consequences, Fernán Caballero presents terrors and horrors that are found in the ordinary and the everyday.¹⁸ The letters by the female writers detail their thoughts and emotions against the burgeoning male efforts to enclose them within certain parameters. The opening quote of the epistolary novel sets the tone and purpose of *Un verano*: “Lo que debemos pedir a los eventos de cada día no son *sensaciones*, sino *enseñanzas*” (145). Even though Robert Hume agrees that “both terror and horror can be established in an ‘ordinary’ setting”, he claims that it would not fulfill the “Gothic novel's need to escape the interference of everyday standards and moral judgment” (Hume 286). I contend, though, that what we see in *Un verano* are the effects of the ‘ordinary’ setting on women because they cannot escape the everyday ordinariness of the expected standards and moral judgement.

¹⁸ *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women*.

The idyllic setting of Bornos as described by Serafina in her first letter to Luisa represents the ideal place for the recuperation of one young girl's health. In addition, it becomes the site that completes the transformation of her sister, Primitiva, the principal character in *Un verano*. We also learn, as Serafina continues in the same letter to Luisa, of her improved health since arriving in Bornos:

A mí me ha sentado muy bien: mis insomnios son menos y mi desgana igualmente; los baños, sobre todo, han calmado mis nervios y desterrado mi dolor convulsivo de estómago; he embarnecido, he perdido la palidez romántica y el aire lánguido que han inspirado tantas composiciones en el mismo género a nuestro poeta Efigenio. (Carta 1)

The references to the pastoral setting of Bornos, in contrast to the urban settings of Cadiz or Madrid, is the constant theme running through the letters of Serafina. Through the process of idealizing the domestic setting, whether of brick and mortar or mental boundary restrictions, the ideology of the nineteenth century began its incursions into the transformation of females into mute subjects. Fernán Caballero accomplishes this through the domestic isolation that Bornos represents.

Nancy Armstrong makes the point that novels about and by women contributed to the process of feminization that began in the later eighteenth century: “[D]omestic fiction mapped out a new domain of discourse as it invested common forms of social behavior with the emotional values of women” (471). Although the novel itself was considered dangerous, especially romance novels, Regina Martin points out in her analysis of *The Female Quixote* by Charlotte Lennox that “popular eighteenth-century rhetoric surrounding romance exhibits an intense aversion to the genre, characterizing it as a danger

to feminine sensibility and a threat to social stability” (150). Domestic fiction became the tool with which to further the conservative viewpoint that advocated either marriage or the convent for women. During this period, Spain was undergoing political, economic, and regional differences, and “the image of the naturally domestic, virtuous, and submissive woman seemed to become particularly important as a shared cultural norm that preserved traditional gender–and class–hierarchy” (Kirkpatrick *Las Románticas* 291). Fernán Caballero bolsters the burgeoning male-dominated thought that the female should be enclosed within certain parameters that restricted her intellectually.

Even though Fernán Caballero’s novel defines the rural setting of Bornos as the ideal domestic space, it actually creates an artificial border around a false sense of freedom. Fernán Caballero effectively uses the epistolary format with its first-person perspective as the appropriate vehicle for the observation of a reality that wished to mold women into submissive subjects in nineteenth-century Spanish society. *Un verano en Bornos* as an epistolary novel is ideally suited for an analysis to determine if Caballero is subtly criticizing certain aspects of a domestic ideology that offers only marriage as a suitable outcome, or if this novel is simply a paean to woman’s place in society. The examination of this ideal domestic space highlights the contradiction found in Böhl de Faber’s own life. As Fernán Caballero, the writer, she is transgressing the very space that she advocates as the ideal in *Un verano*. Serafina and Primitiva, though writing freely and liberally, restrict their opinions to the private space that concerns them.

In addition, Lawrence Klibbe misses the point in his criticism of the epistolary novel as a story with a happy ending, given that the idyllic domestic space that awaited young girls was fraught with uncertainty and tension. It is perhaps not coincidental that the

epistolary narrative closes with an invitation to the reader to the upcoming weddings of Serafina and Primitiva, since Cecilia Böhl de Faber's own three marriages serve as examples of uncertainty and are tension-ridden; each one left her a widow and, in addition, the last marriage left her in financial straits. It could be conceived that it is the rose-colored glasses that Cecilia Böhl de Faber placed on Fernán Caballero as a shield against real life that made Marina Mayoral wonder: "[O] quizá haya que decir que doña Cecilia cubrió con una venda rosada los ojos de Fernán Caballero para que no pudiera ver la hondura de los sentimientos y las pasiones que hicieron rica y llena de interés la vida de Cecilia Böhl de Faber" (139).

Domestic fiction began the literary narrative that influenced women into accepting marriage and family life as the ideal. According to Margaret McLaren, it is the effect of a societal power that defines women's roles through social norms and practices, laws and institutions by promulgating the home as the ideal space for females (59). The subjugation of the female becomes not only the purview of the patriarchal authority but also "una defensa ferviente del *status quo*" (Prado Pérez and Moliner Marín 264) by Cecilia Böhl de Faber under the guise of Fernán Caballero. It is a subjugation in which she willingly participated and which in turn maintained and supported patriarchal authority.

According to Hume in his revaluation of Gothic versus Romantic, the reader contemplates the "exterior actions of the life around him" through the realistic novel, the novel of manners, and neoclassical poetry, but contends that "[i]n sharp contradistinction, Gothic and Romantic writing usually lead the reader to consider internal mental processes and reactions" (288). Fernán Caballero, through the epistolary form, combines not only the

Gothic and the Romantic but also the three types of writings, since the implicit reader is privy to the exterior and the interior concerns of the individual (288).

It is possible to detect terror and horror as metaphors for the anxieties expressed within the letters and that “the Gothic”, although not easily defined, concerns itself with fear as proposed by Ellen Moers.¹⁹ *Un verano* cannot be read as and is not a Gothic novel, but episodes described by Serafina and Primitiva in their letters underlie a fear they feel and can express only through their epistolary correspondence.

An example is found in Carta VIII written by Serafina to Luisa. Serafina describes her poor health and the cause: Alejandro’s lack of communication with her during his four years of military service. Serafina tells Luisa: “No podrías creer qué estado de sufrimiento habían producido en mí mis males porque nunca me queje de él [de Alejandro], considerando que lo producía mi imaginación y a ésta culpaba mi razón” (Carta VIII). In this letter she describes in detail to Luisa her mental anxiety and even terror that she suffers not only because of Alejandro’s neglect but the recurring nightmare that she suffers similar to “los delirios de una calentura y una gota de agua pueden engendrarlo” (Carta VIII). For Serafina the nightmare or horror that she experiences results from what she saw hidden in a drop of water: “[U]n monstruo velludo con garras como tenazas . . . [E]nseguida apareció otro aún mayor y más horrible; apenas se vieron cuando se lanzaron uno sobre otro para pelearse y devorarse; ¡parecían hombres, Luisa!” Serafina interprets this nightmare as an act of transgression for wanting to know more than she, as a woman, should know. The drop of water that caused her considerable agony, as she tells Luisa: “[M]il veces me

¹⁹ See *The Female Gothic* edited by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (2009).

arrepentí de haberme dejado arrastrar por la curiosidad a escudriñar lo ignorado . . . [E]sa gota de agua que cae del cielo pura, y que en su contacto con la tierra se impregna de horrores” (163).

Understanding Serafina’s nightmare requires reading her next letter (Carta XII), where she begins with “Luisa mía: [H]e recuperado mi salud en Bornos y, no obstante, hubiese preferido no venir” She prefers the rural setting of Bornos to the urban setting of Madrid: “[H]e de extrañar mucho volver a encerrarme entre escuetas piedras después de haberme apegado a este hermoso campo; oír aquel ruido monótono y cansado de una ciudad populosa que fatiga”. Although she complains about city life, her ailments relate to Alejandro’s neglect. She also realizes that “el profundo sentimiento que tengo, Luisa mía, y que oculto a mi buena madre cuanto puedo es el estar comprometida y casarme con un hombre que no sólo no me ama, sino que tan poco aprecia mi cariño y mi persona” (Carta XII). Serafina acknowledges that Alejandro’s interest in her is solely monetary: “¡Triste es confesarlo! . . . Pero a la vista está que sólo tiene apego al dote que me da mi buen padre”. Although Serafina understands her situation, as she tells Luisa “lo que está hecho, hecho está” and she is resigned to her fate stating that “no seré infeliz unida a él [a Alejandro], *según el mundo*” [italics are mine], this does not stop her from confessing to Luisa the following: “¡Ay Luisa! ¡Cuán distinta hubiese sido mi suerte si hubiese conocido antes a [Carlos] Peñarreal! A él sí que se puede aplicar lo que dice Balzac de que “las almas grandes siempre están dispuestas a hacer de una gran desgracia una gran virtud” (176).

The epistolary novel *Un verano* appears to be an innocuous exchange of letters over a three-month period, but in actuality it is a novel of anxieties suffered by young girls who must navigate, compromise, and accept the middle-class social order to which they belong.

In the Gothic novels, “[t]he settings were often castles or monasteries equipped with subterranean passages, dark battlements, hidden panels, and trapdoors” (Bertsche 16), but with the advent of domestic fiction, the home became the new horror, made more so because of its ordinary setting. This ordinary setting; as represented within the epistolary that serves as the space to express opinions, thoughts, emotions, and fears under the patriarchal umbrella; actually underlines what Ellen Moers defines as female gothic: the “coded expression of women’s fears . . . within the domestic” (Smith and Wallace Intro 1).

The epistolary novel as a 19th century conduct manual

At first reading, *Un verano en Bornos* appears to have all the aspects of a conduct manual, detailing the perfect outcome for young girls who do not offend “paternal or patriarchal law” (Kirkpatrick *Las Románticas* 255). However, after a re-reading of the letters written by Serafina, Primitiva, and Luisa, it is possible to detect the presence of slightly deviating messages from the norm. Within the epistolary exchange, the comments of others are included and through these comments reveal differing opinions as when Primitiva tells Teresa the reaction of Don Pío to her *casamiento*: “Don Pío puso mal gesto, diciendo: ¡Que!... ¡Se casa! ... ¡Muy niña es usted para casarse!” (Carta XXVIII).

Serafina’s description of Primitiva, in the last letter she writes to Luisa, is a homage to the construction of the ideal woman and to the careful upbringing that has been given to Primitiva: “Para conservar la niña, Primitiva no ha sido acostumbrada a ir a las diversiones; tampoco se la ha privado de todas, para evitar tanto el engreimiento como el no dar lugar al incitativo de la fruta prohibida; pero las ha disfrutado escogidas y con moderación” (200). However, Primitiva’s letters to Teresa contain an air of independent thought that

allows her lively personality to shine through when she responds to Teresa's pique that Primitiva has not written to her: "[M]e ha leído Serafina lo que le escribe Luisa sobre estar tú muy picada conmigo porque no te he escrito" (148). Primitiva reminds Teresa that she was looking forward to the trip to Bornos as an opportunity for complete relaxation away from the strict educational schedule imposed upon her by Carolina de Meridal, her governess: "El mayor encanto que tenía para mí el viaje que íbamos a emprender era proporcionarme un completo divorcio con las lecciones, plumas, mapas y libros, tiranos de que he sido víctima desde mi más tierna infancia, gracias a nuestra aya Carolina de Meridal" (148). The expected reciprocity from Teresa is not included in the epistolary novel. The reader is simply aware that Primitiva is responding to Teresa, first because of what Luisa has written to Serafina and next, when Primitiva writes "Debo mi existencia, y tú esta carta" (158). Teresa's voice is never heard and therefore the "epistolary pact", as defined by Altman as the "call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" is non-existent (Altman 89). In effect, Primitiva's four letters are inserted in strategic places that move the plot forward by filling in narrative gaps left by the other letters and actually do not differ greatly from a journal or a diary.

Primitiva is a young girl who has not suffered the vicissitudes of love in the same manner as her sister, Serafina, and throughout her letters to Teresa, she is quite pleased with her writing and goes on to declare to Teresa:

Ya ves que adelanto que es una maravilla en el arte de expresar mis ideas, las que después de escritas me parecen mejor que mientras están en embrión en mi caletre. ¡Y yo que creí que las ideas eran el monopolio de unos cuantos que las dan a la prensa! ¡Que bobada! ¡Cuántas ideas buenas se

quedan como perlas en el fondo del mar y cuantas malas suben, como la espuma, a la superficie! (160)

A criticism is carefully phrased against both the idea that there is a monopoly with respect to gender and an actual difference between women's writings and men's writings. It does not deviate from the "socio-sexual gender and writing" that would leave one open to public exposure for non-conformance to "proper biological role" (Bieder 99). Fernán Caballero has inserted a critique on this issue and makes the point that the idea of feminine and masculine difference in writing is not exclusive to the male consciousness of what constitutes 'good literature'. As Maryellen Bieder writes "it is a commonplace of nineteenth-century critics . . . that Carolina Coronado's poetry is 'feminine', whereas Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda's writing is 'masculine', with all the ambiguity this boundary violation carries with it" (99). Of course Primitiva has not violated this boundary because there is no advocacy in her statement for a woman to publish, but the value that she places on her writing is noteworthy. Fernán Caballero's use of letter writing, considered a safe and appropriate practice for women, becomes a conduit for framing viable subjects and demonstrates how the domestic space is negotiated in the lives of women by the strategic rhetoric that women employed. As noted by Kirkpatrick in *Las Románticas*, Cecilia Böhl de Faber was a walking contradiction. Her opposition to women's participation in literary production becomes a conflicting and unresolved issue within herself, as financial necessity forces her to earn a living. Although she availed herself of the inroads made by women in the literary world in search of economic stability, she believed in the ideology of "feminine subordination and restriction to the domestic sphere" (245-46).

The next independent thought that Primitiva writes about is related to a near-death incident brought on by her momentary transgression. The letter begins dramatically with the exclamation: “¡Oh, qué evento! ¡Estremécete!... La vida de tu amiga ha estado en peligro eminente. Debo mi existencia, y tú esta carta a un héroe que, con un valor, una generosidad y una fuerza nunca vista me arrancó de las garras de la muerte” (158), which immediately commands the reader’s attention. Who is this hero and what happened that her life was in danger? She promptly disabuses us as to who the hero is “[E]ste héroe es un perro”. But then attempts to distract the reader and create suspense by stating that she needs to relate the events of the day in order: “El orden está al orden del día” (158). Disconcertingly for the recipient and the outside reader, Primitiva proceeds to describe other items of interest to her.

Letters that comprise an epistolary novel are not random jottings, although may appear to ramble or deviate from the initial topic purposely to create suspense for the reader (both implicit and explicit). At this point, the very emotion of curiosity is stimulated. The reader will continue reading the next paragraphs that Primitiva writes filling in the narrative gaps left by Serafina’s letter to Luisa by recounting the first chance encounter with Carlos Peñarreal. These narrative gaps are a re-created dialogue that informs the reader on the background into the Peñarreal family.

Finally, Primitiva arrives at the heart of the story that began the letter and the temptation that lures Primitiva to disobey her mother and the resulting consequences: “Frente de nuestro baño una zarzamora me tendía sus largos brazos, cubiertos de su fruta, por la que tengo pasión” (161). Rather theatrically, Primitiva prepares herself for swimming in the ‘choza anfibia’, a cabana constructed on a pier that also formed a safe

swimming area since it was known that the river had whirlpools and her mother had forbidden her to enter. She wears a large tunic that resembles a vestal virgin: “[P]oniéndome y luciendo como una vestal mi larga túnica o peinador de franela blanca — que he guarnecido con una greca celeste para parecerme aún más a una imponente romana—” (161).

Elaine Showalter has written that madness was seen as a resistance against traditional gender roles, against "the constraints of a narrow femininity" (4). Primitiva, not experiencing madness but a desire to rebel against the restriction imposed upon her, and to taste an unreachable fruit, justifies her actions by comparing herself to a caged canary: “[A]provechando una distracción de mi madre, me salí de mi cautiverio, acción que ni a mi madre ni a Carolina Meridal debe asombrar, puesto que su inocentísimo canario hizo lo mismo el día que le dejó abierta su jaula” (161). Primitiva’s momentary transgression of disobedience reflects her awareness of a desire to feel free and escape, much like the caged canary. What immediately occurs exemplifies the consequences that a woman suffers for even the slightest deviation in thought: “Apenas me acercaba a la rama incitadora, cuando perdí pie y me hundí en el agua tan repentinamente que ni aun pude dar un grito” (161). The Eve/Ave dichotomy was the rule that women had to follow. If she followed the exigencies of the patriarchal society (especially at the bourgeois or aristocratic level), she was considered the good woman – Ave. If she exhibits any conduct that transgresses the role assigned her she is not a good woman – Eve. According to María Alicia Langa Laorga, “en Fernán Caballero cualquier transgresión de la norma es motivo de graves problemas para los personajes que no embridan sus emociones y las someten a una disciplina moral y jerárquica bien definida por las reglas sociales” (53). Primitiva’s small act of disobedience

and a desire for the zarzamora almost leads to her drowning, as her foot slips and she is plunged into the swirling waters, only to be saved by Triton, the dog owned by Carlos Peñarreal.

The fleeting moments of independence that Primitiva experiences change drastically once she realizes that Félix de Veá, Luisa's cousin, has fallen in love with her. Félix sends her a letter requesting permission to speak with her father, and is expecting a response from her. Primitiva, a young girl full of life and outspoken, as demonstrated in her letters to Teresa, becomes almost irrationally mute, as her mother chides her:

[A] que se había gastado tanto dinero en su educación y mandado venir una aya de Francia, si a la primera ocasión que se le presentaba de escribir una carta salía diciendo que no sabía hacerlo, que la respuesta no corría prisa, y que era necesario que una joven, para dar el sí, no se mostrase tan apresurada. (202)

The 'self' that she presents to Teresa in her letters contrasts with the shy, demure and voiceless person she becomes upon learning of Félix de Veá's marriage proposal.

Acknowledgement of an approved engagement constitutes the suitability to write to each other as in Serafina's letter to Luisa when she tells her "hoy por fin, después de mucho tiempo, he tenido carta suya" [Alejandro's] (146). Otherwise, a direct letter exchange would not be possible between Primitiva and Félix de Veá until his wedding proposal is accepted. Even after Félix de Veá declares his good intentions to Primitiva, she continues incapable of writing and pleads with Serafina to write her acceptance in response to his request to speak with her parents. Serafina acquiesces and explains to Luisa: "Espero

que Félix será bastante delicado para apreciar ese velo de modestia que el mismo amor tupe y borda con perlas” (202).

It is my contention that a subtle tension, even subversive, exists in this epistolary novel against the separate sphere advanced by the Spanish patriarchal society in Fernán Caballero’s novels. This is similarly questioned by Leslie Kaiura in her analysis of *Clemencia*: “Does she subtly undermine traditional ideology, or does she simply reproduce gender ideals such as the “angel in the house,” which exalted women as guardians of morality even as it confined them to a life of abnegation and obedience (17). The blossoming romance in *Un verano* along with the happily ever after is the result of a fruitful summer in Bornos, but the inclusion of doña Mariana’s letter prior to the wedding announcement signifies a distance between the illusion of domesticity and actual reality in the society of Fernán Caballero’s time. One can assume that this novel, written in the epistolary mode, gives freedom to Fernán Caballero to present the female voice in a subtle subversive tone even though at the same time it reiterates aspects of a patriarchal Spanish society of her time. But as noted by Channon-Deutsch:

The very fact that the domestic novel went to such great lengths to neutralize women’s worldly ambitions and to make home life seem beautiful, fulfilling, or at least tolerable and instructive, signals that something was amiss in bourgeois family life, as Emilia Pardo Bazán often argued. (17)

Therefore, the reader is able to see a novelistic approach of a world that attempts to reconcile the female protagonist and the reader to a gender ideology of cultural strictures.

Doña Mariana’s letter to her sister, the Carmelite nun, is letter number twenty-nine and is inserted before the wedding announcement. This insertion can be construed to be

written by a woman who understands the difficulties of marriage and prays that all goes well. In point of fact, when she asks her sister, the letter underlines the insecurity and doubts that worry a mother who is cognizant of the fact that not all marriages offer Cinderella endings: “Pídele a Dios, hermana mía, que tengan acierto en su elección y que sean felices en su matrimonio, como, gracias al Señor, lo he sido yo” (204). The letter written by doña Mariana is a letter by a mother who has been an exemplary role model for her daughters in the reproduction of the feminine ideal: “Es muy triste que después de haber criado a sus hijas con todo esmero, y cuando van pagando los cuidados y desvelos que han costado, venga un señor con sus manos lavadas... ¡y se las lleve!” (204).

To contrast doña Mariana as an exemplary role model and her daughters as good girls, Fernán Caballero juxtaposes their letters against the single letter from Alejandro’s new fiancée, Fanchetta, who writes to her friend, Alina, cynically relating her reason for getting married: “Mi noviazgo me fastidiaría de muerte si no hubiese en favor de mi futuro consorte un secreto dramático, una Ariadna abandonada, la que, según dicen, ama con extremo a su Teseo; este amor que llora ha dado al general algún valor a mis ojos” (183). Her letter is filled with the superficial concerns of a woman who does not conform to the ideals of femininity.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that the selection of the epistolary genre is not only the perfect vehicle for the expression of one’s own personal view and thoughts on social and political concerns, but I also argue that through the epistolary novel *Un verano en Bornos* Fernán Caballero gives the female letter writer the space to express her opinion as a woman

even though the female is restricted to a domestic landscape, whether rural or urban. In addition, the social perception of letter writing as appropriate for women provides a space, even though the ‘sphere of separation’ is maintained, for a veiled subversion.

Aside from the dedicatory paragraph to the *señoritas*, we are instantly drawn into the epistolary world of the characters with a brief description of the journey from Cadiz to Bornos. We have neither a fictional editor nor an omniscient narrator. All we have is the particular perspective of the individual letter writer and the events as written that move the story forward, which, as Beebee writes, become “narrations when “overheard” by the reader of the novel” (8). The reader as the silent voyeur reads the mini-narratives written by each character and vicariously enters their lives observing and interpreting the unfolding plot based on his/her own subjective reactions to what is written. The epistolary novel underwent a transformation from letters of seduction to letters between friends in the nineteenth century, as studied by Barbara Zaczek in *Censored Sentiments*. This transformation then functioned as a narrative device to explain, comment, and clarify, rather than to deceive or to dazzle. The separation of genders further emphasizes Fernán Caballero’s adherence to the gender ideology of the private and public spheres.

The nineteenth century has been examined as a critical turning point on the ‘brainwashing’ of women into believing their rightful place was the home, marriage, and family life. Many women experienced difficulties in their fight against the patriarchal dicta imposed upon them not only by men but women themselves. While studies abound on the woman, culture, and gender representation of the nineteenth century, the Spanish epistolary novel itself suffers from a lack of critical studies to the point that it is almost non-existent. The study of Charles S. Kany in 1939 helped to document the presence of the epistolary

novel in Spain and countered the view that Samuel Richardson fathered the epistolary novel by crediting *Proceso de cartas de amores* (1548) as the first epistolary novel in Spain. Additionally, and more importantly, Ana Rueda continues with a comprehensive study of the Spanish epistolary novel from 1789-1840. She contributes valuable insight into a genre that appears to have been forgotten by literary circles. The brief paragraph that appears in Lawrence Klibbe's study of Fernán Caballero on *Un verano en Bornos* is dismissed by him as being too digressive without authentically portraying the reactions and impressions of the individual, and claiming that *Una en otra* is more skillfully drawn and "has moved into the area of the murder mystery" (137). Toni Dorca's study *Volverás a la region* devotes an entire chapter to *Un verano* and counters Klibbe's opinion by stating that *Una en otra* lacks the sophistication of *Un verano* with its pastoral characteristics and its idealization of romantic love.

The letter provides a plurality of awareness beyond a single objective world that is not reduced to the reality of the author's voice but the reality as perceived by each character. Through the first-person narrative, where the voice of the letter writer narrates events to the addressee, the story is told from the perspective of that narrator. It is understood that the first person rendering of events is a subjective view while the omniscient presence is supposedly objective. Fernán Caballero as the author provides authority to each letter writer.

The inherent expectation of privacy that a letter can provide to its creator, whether fictional or actual, can also be what a pseudonym provides to authors who select this option. A pseudonym gives an established writer the opportunity to experiment with another genre without aggravating his/her readership. In the nineteenth century it acted as a cover for

women who ventured into the public male domain of publishing. A pseudonym was indispensable whether in Spain, England or France. As noted earlier, Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot, the Brontë sisters published under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, while in France George Sand was actually Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin.

One needs to put into context the female situation during the nineteenth century in England and Spain. Many strategies that women engaged to gain intellectual parity were generally a battle against the restrictions imposed upon them within the confines of marriage. Mary Wollstonecraft's radical text *A Vindication of Women's Rights* proposed educational improvements [with a political agenda] that was anathema to both Cecilia Böhl de Faber and her mother, Francisca de Larrea in view of their staunch conservatism and ardent Roman Catholicism.

The epistolary novel maintains a strict gender divide between male and female and the text serves as a conduct handbook for the young girls addressed in the epigraph. By using the epistolary genre, Fernán Caballero demonstrates the agency that letter writing gives to women, providing an emotional outlet but at the same time reinforcing the status quo. The structure of *Un verano en Bornos*, comprised of twenty-nine letters plus a wedding invitation, gives voice to sincere communication between friends and providing a first-person perspective on the lives of middle-class individuals. The exchange of letters strictly adheres to a male/female correspondence with the exception, as noted earlier, between the cousins Luisa Tapia and Félix de Veá.

Un verano, despite displays of dissatisfaction, contributes to the domestic fiction that flourished and was embraced by many women. The pastoral setting of Bornos and the perceived Gothic overtones in *Un veranos* can be an indirect attempt to emphasize the

interaction and difficulties experienced by women and the challenges facing them as a result of changing social and political environments in nineteenth-century Spain.

Why study the epistolary novel and why Fernán Caballero's *Un verano en Bornos*? Aside from the scarcity of critical studies on the Spanish epistolary novel and despite the work that has been done by Charles Kany (historical), Thomas Beebee (genealogical), Linda Kauffman (discourses of desire), Janet Altman (the epistolary form), what is lacking are studies on the epistolary by Hispanic women, whether actual or fictional, no matter the century.

The female characters in *Un verano* are permitted to speak for themselves through their letters but it is a passive femininity that reinforces the prevailing notions of male-female relationships. As María del Carmen Simón de Palmer and Lou Charnon-Deutsch have stated, echoing many others, the women-authored texts of the nineteenth century colluded with the emerging bourgeois to keep women within the prescribed roles as a social control against any incursive attempts to enter the male purview.

CHAPTER 3

Ifigenia: Transformation, Indoctrination and Distortion of María Eugenia

to gag her pretty mouth,
to silence her words with calm but wordless force,
to keep unseemly cries from polluting her family.
(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*)²⁰

“Y dócil y blanca y bella como Ifigenia, ¡aquí estoy ya dispuesta para el martirio! Pero antes de entregarme a los verdugos, frente a esa blancura cándida que ha de velar mi cuerpo, quiero gritarlo en voz alta, para que lo escuche bien todo mi ser consciente” (*Obras* 310) exclaims María Eugenia, as her diary entries come to a close, exhausted by her effort against the social demands that have triumphed against her. María Eugenia is a young lady who had a brief taste of independence while in Paris before her return to early twentieth-century Venezuela and the rigid patriarchal upper class society of which she is a member. We come to know her through the use of two mediums: the personal letter and a diary, each one functions as a complement and a mirror of each other.

It was believed that reading novels was detrimental to young readers, as noted by Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven: “there was a pervasive sense that the novel was a debased form, mad, bad, and dangerous, particularly for impressionable female readers” (147). Teresa de la Parra, her life cut short prematurely by tuberculosis, is principally known for her literary success with two novels: *Ifigenia: Diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba* (1924) and *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca* (1929). *Ifigenia* initially published in newspaper installments, caused a polemic outpouring from critics who perceived the novel as critical of Venezuelan society and the institution of marriage.

²⁰ See Powell, Barry B. *Classical Myth*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.

Teresa de la Parra uses the epistolary form to tell the story of a young girl subjugated by the forces of the patriarchal society into a loveless marriage. The narrative structure of the epistolary form emphasizes how the letter can be used by women to portray female thought. The epistolarity itself is seen as feminine and in general the addressees have been men or as Patrick Paul Garlinger writes that the “link between letter writing and femininity remains fundamentally dependent upon men. The erotic activity of writing letters is construed as inherently heterosexual, where men must be the addressees of women’s love letters” (33). In contrast, what Teresa de la Parra does with the epistolary novel *Ifigenia* is to give voice to a fictional character, María Eugenia who writes down her innermost thoughts describing the world that surrounds her but addresses her letter to a female friend. It is what RoseAnna Mueller has written, “a new voice and a new narrative structure” (55). The new voice and narrative structure details the rebellious and transgressive thoughts of a young upper-class girl. The letter demonstrates the main character’s agency and the subversive potential in the pages of the novel which angered the critics. Elizabeth Campbell’s study of epistolarity in novels by contemporary women authors also states that the letter acts as “a mirror in which they not only seek themselves and/or another but attempt to change their lives to reflect the mirror image” (Campbell 332).

The novel is divided into four parts. Part one is a singular long letter subtitled: “Una carta muy larga donde las cosas se cuentan como en las novelas” (*Obras* 7). The long letter that Maria Eugenia mails to Cristina four months after her arrival in Caracas details the suffocating world that has enveloped Maria Eugenia and she names it “¡el Fastidio, Cristina! . . . ¡el cruel, el perseverante, el malvado, el asesino Fastidio!” (*Obras* 38), recalling

the subtitle of the novel, *una señorita que escribía porque se aburría*. Her letter to Christina is an effort to (re)connect with someone from her past. The letter becomes Maria Eugenia's means to vent her repressed feelings. She herself validates the letter's intrinsic ability to perform as a vehicle of authenticity when she writes: "Yo, que sé mentir bastante bien cuando hablo, no sé mentir cuando escribo, y como no quería por nada del mundo decirte la verdad, que me parecía muy humillante, había decidido callarme" (*Obras* 7). Initially Maria Eugenia did not want to divulge to Cristina her actual situation: "durante un mes entero he vivido presa dentro de mi amor propio como dentro de las cuatro paredes viejas de esta casa. Quería que tú te imaginarás maravillas de mi existencia actual, y recluida en mi doble prisión callaba" (*Obras* 8).

The second, third, and fourth parts of the novel are diary entries divided into chapters that relate the events of her life and manifest Maria Eugenia's disillusionment upon reading Cristina's letter that has finally arrived. Before the arrival of Cristina's letter, Maria Eugenia finds herself continuing to write but only in her diary: "Pero la carta fue tan larga y duro tanto tiempo, que se hizo en mi una costumbre el escribirla" (*Obras* 82) indicates that writing has become habitual and the diary has become a letter with no intended recipient. Her diary entries are directed to no one but herself and the implied reader. Maria Eugenia's letter to Cristina was written under secrecy and she continues being secretive since it is her only outlet, her only form of entertainment as she tells us: "Y es que en esta vida de reclusión que llevo, mi único entretenimiento, mi único ejercicio, y mi único sport, consiste en hacerlo todo, absolutamente todo, a escondidas de Abuelita y tía Clara" (*Obras* 82).

María Eugenia is living in her grandmother's house subjugated by the exigencies of a patriarchal Venezuelan society and lacks the wherewithal to defy the restrictions imposed upon her by her family in Caracas. The opening exclamation indicates not only her total surrender to the ideology of the good wife but the triumph of the controlling forces surrounding her. María Eugenia is a lone female subject struggling against societal pressures that drain her intellectual, physical, and emotional strength. The long letter and the diary in the novel describe and develop this phenomenon. Marriage is the only option for María Eugenia in a society whose expectations for women are limited to behavior that did not undermine masculine power. This behavior is described by Margaret Annen as “el hecho de que ella [la mujer] hará lo que el hombre quiera y le convenga a él, que no siempre es exactamente lo que ella quiere o le conviene a ella” (109). In a patriarchal society, the male is associated with the public sphere, and the female is relegated to the domestic sphere.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in Venezuela, the home was the only approved space for women. As observed by Joan Torres-Pou “el hogar... se muestra como un ámbito idealizado, una variante cotidiana del Edén, evitándose los pormenores que podrían desmitificarlo” (77). In bourgeois society, the female's existence is reduced to the narrow domestic space where the husband had the right to direct his own life and the life of his family and his wife. Male-centric thinking of the day did not permit the female to benefit from “las múltiples oportunidades que teóricamente le ofrece la vida, la mujer debe circunscribirse solamente a los límites de su espacio doméstico” (Annen 111).

María Eugenia, entrapped in the claustrophobic home of her Abuelita, can only mitigate her anxiety through the act of writing and in her case she chooses the only two

mediums available to her: the letter to her best friend and the diary with herself as the only recipient aside from the implied reader. The function of writing in general is analyzed by Susan Kirkpatrick who summarizes: “Writing served as an intimate private realm that permitted an outpouring of emotions and fantasies...writing was a medium for introspection – to discover the self and the individual” (3). The act of writing serves the same purpose for María Eugenia in her effort to maintain a sense of self.

The long letter that begins the epistolary novel *Ifigenia* implies the assumption and expectation of a response. It is implicit when one writes a letter with the ‘I’ representing the ‘you’, but María Eugenia’s long letter becomes the victim of a broken epistolary pact. Janet Altman explains that the epistolary pact is the “call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world” (89). Cristina’s response does not contain a mutual reciprocity and she has failed to retain María Eugenia’s confidence because her letter does not inspire the continuation of the epistolary correspondence. Altman asserts that what is critical to epistolary narrative or literature is “[t]he confidant who inspires, wins, or loses trust is an essential figure in epistolary literature, called into existence by the need of every letter writer to have a ‘friendly bosom’” (50). Cristina has lost María Eugenia’s trust in their friendship. The disillusionment that María Eugenia experiences causes her to reflect upon their relationship that began when they both attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart. The closeness that María Eugenia considered had made them soulmates leads her to think bitterly: “carta, tan íntima, tan mía, Cristina contesta apenas. Esboza unas cuantas frases alusivas a mis conflictos y desilusiones. . . en un tono de advenedizo que trata de deslumbrar a todos con el aparato de su nueva dicha” (*Obras*162). The distance is not

bridged by María Eugenia's outpouring. Both she and Cristina are living a different reality as noted in Cristina's response:

. . . No puedes imaginarte lo feliz que soy. Mi novio es guapísimo; me adora y solo vivimos el uno para el otro. Al casarnos, sacaremos el título de condes que a él le pertenece. Papá me dota a mí con doscientos mil duros. Nos regala además un hotelito en San Sebastián y el automóvil que queramos escoger. . . . (*Obras* 162)

The response exemplifies what Stanley et al describe as “a speaking silence and absence” (273). Cristina has not only distanced herself from María Eugenia but effectively silenced her.

The diary as a substitute for the letter

María Eugenia bares her soul to Cristina Iturbe with the expectation of an empathetic response: “Recibe, pues, esta porción de mi espíritu, y no olvides que aquí, desde su soledad, sumida en el silencio de su <<huerto cerrado>> espera a su vez que vengas” (*Obra* 80). In the long letter she reveals that she is at a loss: “sentía que me faltaba algo muy grande y muy indispensable” (*Obras* 82). María Eugenia, understanding she could not write indefinitely to Cristina and in order to combat her social isolation decides to write in her diary to fill the emptiness she experiences after posting the long letter. This is a habit María Eugenia will continue after receiving Cristina's letter that María Eugenia interprets as a rebuff to her heartfelt outpouring detailing her unfortunate circumstances. The narration of María Eugenia's travails changes from an epistolary narrative with a particular *I-you* discourse to a diary narrative whereby the specific *you* becomes

anonymous (Altman 117). Unfortunately, Maria Eugenia's epistolary experience is curtailed and the diary becomes simply an autobiographical account directed towards the outside reader. The essential "I" and "You" character of the letter has been broken by the non-reciprocal aspect of Cristina's response to Maria Eugenia's long letter and leaves no alternative but for Maria Eugenia to continue with her diary entries.

María Eugenia dismisses the personal diary "Considero que es una gran tontería y me parece además de un romanticismo cursi, anticuado y pasadísimo de moda, el que una persona tome una pluma y se ponga a escribir su diario" (*Obras* 81). Women were discouraged from writing or making any incursions into masculine purviews and the previous quote is a sardonic characterization of the two basic forms of writing permissible to women. This critiques the notion that women's role was to be simply decorative and concerned only with the domestic sphere.

The expectation of receiving a letter from a loved one is always an emotional seesaw. The many questions that are asked of the addressee can never be completely answered. The recipient who responds and therefore becomes the addressee with his/her own questions. The letters in a mutual epistolary exchange that can span years and never completely bridge the distance and absence but do create a presence of closeness. María Eugenia is confident that she can confide in Cristina. First the distance allows for an uncompromising account of the four months that she has spent in Caracas entombed in her grandmother's house. Janet Altman reports that "a necessary step in seduction... is gaining the confidence or becoming the confidant of the person to be seduced" (48). María Eugenia is attempting to seduce Cristina by descriptively portraying the world that she has entered after her father's death. We later learn in the diary that Cristina fails, in María Eugenia's

estimation, to maintain an interpersonal tie of understanding “Esboza unas cuantas frases alusivas a mis conflictos y desilusiones” (*Obras* 162). Cristina’s life has progressed on a path diametrically opposite of Maria Eugenia’s. Cristina has accomplished what will be denied Maria Eugenia: a successful marriage and monetary sustenance underpinned by the fact that Cristina married the person of her choice.

The rejection of María Eugenia’s outpouring to Cristina leaves her further isolated with only her diary as a means of expressing herself and that becomes autobiographical in light of the unsatisfactory reciprocity from the long letter. “Es la desgana y tardía contestación a mi pobre carta-protocolo... todo ello muy elegante, muy correcto, y horriblemente doloroso en su inconsciencia y en su trivialidad” (*Obras* 162). The disillusionment experienced by María Eugenia is palpable as she describes her feelings after reading the letter. Margaret McLaren writes that “Confessional narratives take many forms: traditional religious confession, autobiography and... therapy. Confession, the articulation of one’s desires and thoughts, ties one to one’s identity” (146). María Eugenia herself confirms McLaren’s statement when she writes: “Yo, María Eugenia Alonso, voy a escribir mi diario, mi semanario, mi periódico, no sé cómo decir, pero en fin, es algo que al tratar sobre mi propia vida, equivaldrá a eso que en las novelas llaman “diario” ... (81). After the epistolary pact is broken as a result of Cristina’s response that brooks no desire for further exchange, María Eugenia’s only recourse is to write in her diary to detail her frustrations perhaps in the hopes that the outside reader’s response will be more empathetic. Thus Maria Eugenia’s diary entries become the only medium of expression available to her. It becomes a form of writing with no expectation of an answer or solution to her

situation. The diary becomes Maria Eugenia's outlet in her effort to grasp and experience her own sense of being and as therapeutic release from the life she is forced to live.

Teresa de la Parra, in a conference in Colombia, underscores the theme of *Ifigenia* when she explains her observations regarding the condition and education of the *señorita bien* in Cuba:

La "señorita bien" habanera, la rica heredera, jugadora de tenis y de bridge, vestida por Patou, propietaria de un automóvil que dirige ella misma, salida a veces de conventos y de medios muy austeros es en general preciosa, muy elegante, de trato fácil y encantadora. (*Obras* 475)

De la Parra contrasts this woman to those who were from "la clase media" and "trabajan y estudian sin haber perdido su feminidad ni su respeto a ciertos principios y tradiciones" (*Obras* 475). In de la Parra's opinion, the education and cultural upbringing of the *señorita bien* is insufficient in preparing young women to cope with the changes occurring outside the enclosed environment in which they exist and is "muy inferior a la de la muchacha disciplinada por el trabajo" (*Obras* 475). María Eugenia becomes the perfect means to underline the differences between the *señorita bien* and the *muchacha disciplinada* in Teresa de la Parra's novel *Ifigenia* where the only recourse for the character is to lament and detail her sufferings through writing, first in a letter and then in a diary.

Letters or diaries, whether fictional or non-fictional, open a window so the voyeuristic reader can perceive the feminine experiences written in their own words and not distilled through the idealistic version many men expect of feminine behavior. These feminine experiences will not only be colored by the first-person perspective but will also have a fictional aspect as is noted in the beginning of the novel: "una carta muy larga donde

las cosas se cuentan como en las novelas” (*Obras* 7). It is an ironic twist to the criticism applied to the novel *Ifigenia* but also to women’s writing. During the initial publication of *Ifigenia*, response was critical of the subject matter since it was seen as a criticism of Venezuelan society. The derogatory way to talk about female writing usually means that these critics know it is the truth they are reading and cannot give credit where credit is due.

The single aspect of both the letter and the diary that ties them together is the first-person narrative. The first-person narrative lends “authority to the individual perspective of lives that challenge the silence and traditional anonymity of women (Villanueva 303). The reader feels a certain empathy towards María Eugenia’s journey and her impossible escape from the intransigent social codes imposed upon her. In accordance with Margaret McLaren’s reading of Michel Foucault: “disciplines produce subjects, discourses produce subjects, [and] subjects are the effect of power (59). The manipulation of the female population works as a means of discipline with which to control their behavior. The regulatory force that is in place that will be implicitly applied to María Eugenia by her grandmother begins as narrated by her in the novel: “Abuelita posee la firme convicción de que una mujer «honrada y de su casa» debe dominar entre otros conocimientos, la ciencia o arte del calado, en sus diversas fases o variaciones” (*Obras* 99). Abuelita’s efforts at changing Maria Eugenia’s behavior meet with resistance but she maintains her status as the matriarch of the family as she tells Maria Eugenia with a:

voz severa que se sostuvo todo el tiempo imponente, reposada y majestuosa:
—María Eugenia, hija mía: ¡es preciso que domines tu carácter! Eres de una independencia que me tiene verdaderamente alarmada. Tienes independencia de ideas y tienes independencia de conducta. (*Obras* 135-36)

After a two-year hiatus from writing in her diary, we learn of the effect of Abuelita's words when Maria Eugenia continues in her diary "¡Sí! los progresos morales y materiales realizados por mí en estos dos últimos años, son inmensos y son numerosísimos" (*Obras* 187). She lists them as follows: now she uses a different lipstick shade *Rouge vif de Saint Angel* instead of *Rouge éclatant de Guerlain* "cuyo tono es muchísimo más suave", she does not sit on tabletops but "las mecedoras, sofás, sillas o taburetes", she stops humming and whistling "canciones picarescas, que son indecencias propias de café concierto", desists from utterances such as "saprísti" [in French], and in Spanish "¡canastos!", "¡caray!", or "¡caramba!" claiming they simply hide other meanings, she remains standing while speaking with Gregoria instead of lying down on top of tío Enrique's trunk, she doesn't read novels about heroines and their lovers (188). Maria Eugenia labels these as all negative aspects of her character. On a positive note according to Maria Eugenia, she can now embroider admirably, can operate a Singer sewing machine, is familiar with three forms of lace-making, can bake la Chipolata, la Moka o el *Gâteau d'Alsace* with excellent results, waters the ferns, applies Elliman's Embrocation on Abuelita's knees, can give injections, recites the rosary with tía Clara, and even has a boyfriend. Maria Eugenia is conscious of the process to transform her into a señorita bien. The subtle manipulation is the patriarchal power structure at work under the guise of the prehensile familial bond.

As outlined by Lisa Vollendorf, the "majority of scholarship explores how social practices, institutions, and laws defined women's roles" (4). In contrast, feminine writing, whether in letters or diaries serves to inform, as stated by María Eugenia in her letter to Cristina "es esta tesis la que voy a desarrollar ante tus ojos, relatándote minuciosamente ay como en las auténticas novelas, todo cuanto me ha ocurrido desde que deje de verte en

Biarritz.” (35) This presents feminine experiences written in their own words and not distilled through the expectations of being the ideal woman. But what is also seen is María Eugenia’s naïve assumption that she is making progress.

It can be said that María Eugenia is in search of her ‘self’ through letter writing in an effort to find and maintain her own identity. María Eugenia’s mental state gradually begins to descend into madness as a result of the pressure to conform placed upon her by the patriarchal society that is turning her into a docile subject. As discipline and punishment change across the centuries, with public corporal punishment having been the norm, social control begins to manifest itself differently. Women begin to use other forms of discipline to adapt to the demands of a male-dominated society.

María Eugenia reflects upon her own writing in the letter that she sends to her friend Cristina. Thus the letter becomes not only a means for her to express herself since she states that Cristina will understand everything “Estoy segura de que mi relato te interesará muchísimo” (*Obras* 10) but the vehicle through which she becomes conscious of herself and begins to gain self-knowledge. She says in the ‘borroneadas cuartillas’ written during the first months of her arrival in Caracas which she had abandoned for two years “que gracias a su [propia] lectura he podido comprobar los inmensos progresos realizados por mí, en esta ardua y florida cuesta del bien” (*Obras* 187). Her re-reading leads her to believe that she has made immense progress when she exclaims “¡Sí! ¡los progresos morales y materiales realizados por mí en estos dos últimos años, son inmensos y son numerosísimos!” (*Obras* 187). This progress is of great interest to her psychologically but actually creates a self-deception. Yes, she may have made progress but not sufficiently to help her fight against the dominant societal forces that are in place and will succeed in

controlling her in the long run. She may consider herself intelligent, "... como mi inteligencia brilla de continuo y no es posible ponerla en tela de juicio" (*Obras* 8), but her intelligence will not succeed in combating the forces at play against any real progress in her psyche.

In the novel *Ifigenia*, the author speaks through the voice of a young girl who details her disillusionments. Her inheritance has been embezzled by tío Eduardo. It is an inheritance that might have given her a modicum of independence, at least enough to be able to make a marriage based on love and not necessity. As a result, she becomes completely dependent on her uncle and is forced to remain in her grandmother's house existing in a reality that has no relation to what is occurring in the world around her. In addition to the situation in which she finds herself, the response she experiences to her letter to Cristina "a mi larga carta, tan íntima, tan mía, Cristina contesta apenas..." (*Obras* 162) further intensifies her disappointment at the total disregard the baring of her soul elicited and the beginning of the disintegration of her mental state.

María Eugenia's sense of loss because of Cristina's act of silence in response to her emotional outpouring in the long letter written leaves her with the only option available: writing in her diary. The epistolary pact, as previously mentioned, has been broken and writing in the diary replaces the experience of a self-consciousness and liberation obtained from the epistolary form. The diary becomes an extension of the letter, since now she realizes that there will be no answer from Cristina. She is writing to herself about herself, an activity that she finds difficult at first because of its monotony. It begins to gain interest when she writes about the plot between tío Pancho and Mercedes Galindo for María Eugenia to be introduced to Gabriel Olmedo.

Mirror, mirror on the wall

An important element in *Ifigenia* are the mirrors and the act of mirroring that influence not only her self-concept but show what Elizabeth Gackstetter considers as “the formative experiences of a young girl in the intimate family space of a Venezuelan household” (177). Her first act of mirroring begins with Cristina’s arrival to the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Both girls are eight years old and Maria Eugenia becomes enthralled with Cristina as she reflects about their friendship:

Cristina, la niñita de nieve, me pareció la encarnación misma de la sabiduría, la admire con toda mi alma, y admire sobre todo sus dos ojos azules, en los cuales veía yo la representación gráfica de la ciencia y los pozos donde yacían las soluciones de todos los problemas. . . (*Obras* 169)
. . . En vista, pues, de que no era posible imitar los ojos de la niñita de nieve, mi admiración se dedicó a imitarla en todo lo demás. (*Obras* 170)

This is the beginning of her trajectory of mirroring others and going through a journey to find herself but this imitation of Cristina is on a superficial level as we continue to learn:

Y Cristina, que me había comunicado su amor al estudio, me comunico también su soberano desprecio por las pompas y vanidades mundanas. Yo la seguí en este camino como la había seguido en todos los demás, pero a decir verdad la seguí sin convicción, porque mientras dejaba sin polvo mis mejillas, vestía mi cuerpo con trajes lisos, y ponía sobre mi cabello tirante la inmensa mariposa de moaré, en el fondo de mi alma, llevaba siempre conmigo la nostalgia de las vanidades mundanas. (*Obras* 171)

Cristina represents Maria Eugenia's first attempt to transform herself, to copy and to resemble the person whom she admires at the moment.

The mirror or the act of mirroring continues throughout the novel. Maria Eugenia never misses an opportunity to catch her reflection in the mirror and to view herself as a new character, as seen in the following example: "miré frente a mí en el espejo del vagón y que vi mi pobre carita tan triste, tan pálida... tuve por primera vez la conciencia intensa de mi soledad y abandono. Me acordé de las niñas asiladas y me pareció ver simbolizada en mí la imagen de la orfandad" (*Obras* 36). Maria Eugenia's habit of imitating either other females or reassuring herself of her existence does not extend to everyone. The reflection that she encounters in the mirror and appears to portend her future is portrayed in the novel when she says:

Instintivamente volví la cabeza para mirarme al espejo, y en efecto descuidada como estaba, me encontré pálida, sin vida, ojerosa, casi fea, y me encontré sobre todo un notable parecido con la fisonomía marchita de tía Clara. Dado el estado de pesimismo nervioso en que me hallaba, aquel parecido brilló de pronto en mi mente como la luz de alguna revelación horrible, recordé la escena de la madrugada frente al espejo de mi armario, y recordé también aquella frase que había oído decir muchas veces a propósito de tía Clara:

—«Fue flor de un día. Preciosa a los quince años, a los veinticinco ya no era ni la sombra de lo que había sido . . .». (*Obras* 301)

María Eugenia's references to her reflection in the mirrors allows the reader to experience the changes that she herself is undergoing throughout the novel. Another

mirroring act is when she is in the carriage and admires her traveling companion who accompanies her to Paris “Madame Jourdan, aquella señora distinguida, de pelo gris. . .” (*Obras* 37). María Eugenia arrives in Paris and under the misconception that she has been given spending money for her stay in Paris decides that the reflection that is looking back at her is of a plain and timid young girl. She decides that she can “*epatee* a toda mi familia de Caracas con mi elegancia parisiense” (*Obras* 40). Throughout the novel, María Eugenia continues to construct herself differently depending on the situation.

Her preoccupation with mirrors and seeing herself mirrored against others becomes a necessity in her attempts to not become invisible. In her first encounter with Mercedes Galindo she is overwhelmed by Mercedes beauty and self-confidence. She has a different concept of herself when she speaks to Mercedes via the telephone and is free of the timidity she exhibits in Mercedes presence believing, as she contemplates that “Yo entonces, me vería obligada a creer que su casa era como los severos y desnudos claustros de los conventos en donde los monjes acaban por olvidarse de sí mismos a fuerza de no mirarse nunca en los espejos” (92).

Her ability to obsess over her reflection in the mirror reveals a superficiality that she is unable to overcome and that manifests itself even as a young child. Her father, recognizing that “mi ignorancia es absoluta y [lo] averguenza” (*Obras* 163) enrolls her in the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Changes in María Eugenia are slowly manifesting themselves as María Eugenia’s personality has the chameleon quality of adapting to her circumstances.

María Eugenia lacks a strong female model who could be the exemplary mirror/reflection for her to emulate. Instead María Eugenia must flounder on her own in

her efforts to mature as a woman. Madame Jourdan's observation of María Eugenia summarizes the problem: "¡El mundo es un rompecabezas sin arreglar! . . . ¡Las piezas andan sueltas sin encontrar quien las encaje! . . . ¡Yo entro en el desierto de mi vejez tan sola porque se fue mi hija, y usted se marcha a esa gran batalla de la juventud sin el amparo y sin la sombra de su madre!" (*Obras* 11).

The letter and the diary are populated with characters that Maria Eugenia meets along the way to her eventual submission but these individuals have only a momentary influence on Maria Eugenia. The lasting effect on her 'self' will be the submissive role that will lead her into the abyss of nothingness that was firmly engendered by those who were in control. The role models in her life are fleeting and in all three cases relate to her stay in Paris: Madame Jourdan, la señora Ramirez, and Mercedes Galindo. Madame Jourdan agrees to act as chaperon for Maria Eugenia on the way to Paris, la señora Ramírez in Paris "que había vivido muchos años en Nueva York, me dijo que durante el tiempo que permaneciéramos en París, no veía inconveniente en que saliese sola" (9) [an act that is later found out by tío Eduardo] and Mercedes Galindo who has lived in Paris and has been the sophisticated image of a Parisian lady.

Paris is a reminder of the brief idyllic interlude Maria Eugenia experienced and informs her ideas of what it is to be chic, independent and sophisticated as she reminisces:

Me preocupaba muchísimo la idea de mi partida, pensaba con tristeza que aquel París que se mostraba conmigo tan amable, tan afectuoso, era menester abandonarlo un día u otro, como a ti, como a Madame Jourdan, como a todo lo que he querido y me ha querido en la vida. (*Obras* 15)

The memories of Paris are moments of anguish for María Eugenia when she realizes that she will never be able to repeat the three months she spent in Paris. Naomi Lindstrom writes that

The novel's characters often refer to Paris in moments of stress. In particular, those figures associated with "free ideas" treasure their remembrances of Paris as an elegant, modern place in which they at one time took more pleasure in life than they now do in straitlaced Caracas. (234-35)

In contrast, the Caracas that presents itself upon her arrival no longer bears any resemblance to her memories: “¡Ah! ¡sí! . . . Caracas, la del clima delicioso, la de los recuerdos suaves, la ciudad familiar, la ciudad íntima y lejana, resultaba ser aquella ciudad chata. . .” (*Obras* 32). Paris takes on another dimension when viewed through the lenses of nostalgia and freedom while Caracas is a strait-laced tradition bound city with areas forbidden to María Eugenia.

The mirror allows us to see how the character of the female is defined and interpreted through the external surfaces and activities of the body. María Eugenia represents what continues to be an issue in Latin American countries as noted by Elba Birmingham-Pokorny in her article on Gloria Guardia's *El ultimo juego* “the connection between the national body and female body. . . [it]explores and recreates the ways in which woman's struggle for possession of her own body, image, and identity and for her constitution as a Subject mirrors and coincides with the on-going desire for social change at the core of the project of nation-building” (33). The female figure in literature has generally been written by men who write the female as an object of desire for the male

characters. According to Sherry B. Ortner “women are seen ‘merely’ as being closer to nature than men. . . even if women are not equated with nature . . .they represent a lower order of being” (73). Therefore, women tend to function as symbols and not as authentic characters in the story. In contrast, Teresa de la Parra has written a character that produces a strong reaction from the public and principally from male critics. The narrative recreation of María Eugenia’s ongoing struggle within the walls of Abuelita’s house to define her own identity is representative of women from the same social class unable to break from tradition to forge paths of their own. Although it appears that de la Parra has created an empty headed young girl, in fact it indicts the system that treats women as objects and under the “initiatives of men” (Bueler 12). The epistolary form becomes the supplemental place for Maria Eugenia to gain an understanding of the process at play on her person that eventually leads to her subjugation to the system.

As Michel Foucault states, once the mechanisms of power are in place within society, any deviations (race, class, gender) from the norm can be conceptualized as a threat to society and, therefore, retaliation is exercised (26). In the case of María Eugenia, the retaliation that she experiences is first with Cristina’s allusive non-response to the detailed difficulties that María Eugenia had so trustingly confessed. María Eugenia’s honest reporting of her life through the epistolary form became a considerably lengthy letter that was not easily digestible for Cristina. Cristina is following the mechanisms of power of a society who viewed women as simply ‘pretty’ appendages. Margaret McLaren states “Women engage in a variety of disciplinary practices including weight control, cosmetic surgery, and applying make-up” (59). These are disciplinary practices of beautifying oneself for the male gaze. These methods continue the domination of the body through

discipline whereby “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (*Discipline* 26) María Eugenia’s fate is to become a productive body and a subjected body that will continue the functioning of society through the control of her activities with rules and regulations that become the norm and any deviation is subject to discipline. Rules and regulations are imposed upon individuals as a form of social control. In times of crisis, once rules and regulations are enacted they tend to remain in place and continue to exert control over individuals.

María Eugenia’s presence in the front window of the house becomes the object of desire for Cesar Leal. The habit of sitting in the front window was for Abuelita a form of pleasure instead of the actual ritual of selling herself to a possible spouse: “¡Hay que gozar de la juventud!” (*Obra* 192). It is a ritual that leads María Eugenia to compare herself to luxury jewelry exhibited in the windows of the jewelry store: “mi persona adquiriría un notable parecido con esos objetos de lujo que se exhiben de noche en las vidrieras de las tiendas para tentar la codicia de los pasantes. (*Obra* 192). This leads María Eugenia to murmur quietly to herself: ¡Estoy de venta! . . . ¿quién me compra? . . . ¿quién me compra? . . . ¿quién me compra? . . . ¡Estoy de venta! . . . ¿quién me . . .” (*Obras* 192). María Eugenia exclaims as she begins the daily ritual of sitting and being on display at the front window of Abuelita’s house. In agreement with Naomi Lindstrom, “Eugenia [Abuelita] is almost obsessed with situating her granddaughter’s body in the right part of the house and the correct posture” (240).

Although one can criticize the patriarchal system, we need to be conscious that María Eugenia behaves somewhat vacuously and condemns herself with her own words:

“tanto la palabra “ignorancia” como la palabra “inteligencia” encerraban... conceptos vagos, aburridos e inútiles a los cuales no les concedí jamás la menor importancia” (*Obras* 267). As noted by Lindstrom: “the author [de la Parra] is thematizing frivolity as an aspect of the personality of a very young protagonist” (236). It also highlights that María Eugenia is presented by de la Parra as impossibly egocentric. The enclosed world in which Teresa de la Parra has situated María Eugenia has created a tremendous egocentrism in this character manifested through her writing. At the same time, it needs to be taken into account that the eighteen-year-old protagonist has received a superficial education, her father has died, and she spends three months in Paris, a *chic* city, with adults who take their responsibility lightly as María Eugenia’s chaperones. Therefore, her character is magnified to the extreme. She is a young girl with ideas of liberty and independence but without the resources to know how to maneuver the outside world around her but sufficiently skilled to express a limited agency in the pages of her diary.

Foucault also discovered that the construction of the ‘subject’ can be obtained without resorting to force for human beings to observe societies rules” (202). The Eva/Ave dichotomy has been used to judge women’s behavior as long as they did not transgress. If she followed the social norms of the patriarchy, especially the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy, the female was considered a good woman – Ave; but if she dares to transgress – Eva. Any indiscretion or the appearance of rebellion was viewed with alarm, as we can see when abuelita scolds María Eugenia:

Estás indigesta de lecturas, y me pregunto angustiadísimamente que va a ser de ti con ese maremágnum que tienes metido dentro de la cabeza y que aumenta más y más todos los días. (*Obras* 225)

Nineteenth-century Latin American and Spanish literature is full of characters who reflect the bad results of women's reading too many novels, especially French ones. Kristine Byron writes that "many believed in the nineteenth century that young ladies should be dissuaded from reading or learning of nearly any kind (355) since this would fill her head with romantic illusions and she would become dissatisfied with her lot in life. This reaction against women's reading habits is reflected in the words of María Eugenia's grandmother when she says "No te sigo enseñando; mejor es, vete, vete a leer novelas, y sigue cultivando la ociosidad, que obtendrás con eso "¡muy buenos resultados!" le dice la Abuelita (*Obras* 134). But the effort to mold María Eugenia is ceaseless as she describes the discussion and disagreement over her marriage prospects that take place between Abuelita, tía Clara, tío Eduardo, and tío Pancho. María Eugenia becomes aware of this occurrence only in her role as an eavesdropper which she describes in her diary

me llegue a la puerta del saloncito que esta próxima al corredor de salida, y una vez allí, entre en conocimiento de que asistida por tía Clara, tío Eduardo y tío Pancho, Abuelita celebraba consejo de familia, y que era esta mi persona el tema que se hallaba en discusión sobre el tapete. (*Obras* 195)

In this manner María Eugenia becomes aware that the conversation centers on the marriage proposal that tío Eduardo brings to the house declaring that he is "comisionado por él [Cesar Leal] a anunciarles «que está firmemente resuelto a casarse cuando María Eugenia lo acepte, en el día y la hora que nosotros fijemos»" (*Obra* 198). Abuelita declares that she intends that María Eugenia makes a suitable marriage but is not exactly elated by the only prospect that has appeared in the horizon but understands that since "en Caracas no hay mucho donde escoger, y cada día es más difícil encontrar un hombre que no tenga

vicios. ¡Lástima que esos Leal no pertenezcan a nuestro mismo círculo, es decir . . . a nuestro mismo grupo social! (*Obra* 199). María Eugenia quietly listens and silently protests against the opinion that tío Pancho expresses “. . . encerrada en estas cuatro paredes donde la tienen ustedes, ha perdido el sentido crítico, esta desorientada, y no posee la noción de lo mejor ni de lo peor porque carece de puntos de comparación (*Obra* 197). The assertion by tío Pancho that Maria Eugenia is unable to think critically and has no point of reference to form sound opinions is validated by María Eugenia herself. María Eugenia becomes annoyed over the discussion of her education, her lack of experience outside the walls of Abuelita’s house, and her desire to escape first Abuelita’s house through marriage and then deciding that she will not marry Cesar Leal after all. Although Abuelita and tío Eduardo appear to agree that the decision will be left up to Maria Eugenia, María Eugenia will not have a choice in the matter.

The consequences for daring to transgress the restrictions placed on women can manifest itself in sickness. Elaine Showalter analyzes the illnesses or maladies that affected English women of the nineteenth century in her book *The Female Malady*. An excellent example that she cites is the case of Florence Nightingale, known for her work in military hospitals during the Crimean War, and her pioneering work in professionalizing nursing roles for women. According to Showalter, Nightingale wrote about how she felt and thought living in an oppressed environment imagining herself a monster since she did not think like other women. Her efforts to follow the public image of an obedient daughter caused her mental anguish (62-63). Nightingale also used writing to relieve her feelings of oppression: “[channeling] all her immense energy, thwarted ambition, anger, and despair into a vast literary project, drawing heavily on her own experience to describe a society in

which both mothers and daughters were confined in “the prison which is called a family” (Showalter 63). Florence Nightingale’s literary project is based on Greek mythology with a similar ending as *Ifigenia*: “she [Cassandra] tries to emulate the life of Christ, to become the savior whose suffering will awaken other women from their thrall” (63). With the ambiguous ending that Teresa de la Parra gives to *Ifigenia*, the reader could deduce the same about María Eugenia. In the examples that Showalter offers, Florence Nightingale compares the confinement of women to the confinement of the asylums: “... the image of monstrosity was related to her anger and discontent and to the necessity of concealing her drives for any desires for independence, work, and power” (62).

María Eugenia expresses the same anger and discontent when she exclaims the following:

— ¡No es al culto sanguinario del dios ancestral de siete cabezas a quien me ofrezco dócilmente para el holocausto, no, ¡no! . . . ¡Es a otra deidad mucho más alta que siento vivir en mí; ¡es a esta ansiedad inmensa que al agitarse en mi cuerpo mil veces más poderosa que el amor, me rige, me gobierna y me conduce hacia unos altos designios misteriosos que acato sin llegar a comprender! (*Obras* 493)

According to Byron: “María Eugenia realizes that she has become a tragic heroine and that, in spite of all her performative efforts, she cannot escape the literary script implied by the novel’s title page” (372). On the other hand, María Eugenia’s reference to “...a otra deidad mucho más alta que siento vivir en mi...” can be the other self that has made every effort to not be crushed, and through which has tried to escape the prehensile bonds of patriarchy.

The mirrors which appear earlier in the novel continue to play a role when María Eugenia decides to accept Cesar Leal's marriage proposal. Just before resigning herself to accepting Cesar Leal's marriage proposal, she once again catches a glimpse in the mirror: "Instintivamente volví la cabeza para mirarme al espejo, y en efecto descuidada como estaba, me encontré pálida, sin vida, ojerosa, casi fea, y me encontré sobre todo un notable parecido con la fisonomía marchita de tía Clara" (*Obra* 480). Fear enters her thoughts as she thinks of the future awaiting her. She will be the new tía Clara. This fear propels her to accept marriage with Cesar Leal:

Dado el estado de pesimismo nervioso en que me hallaba, aquel parecido brillo de pronto en mi mente como la luz de alguna revelación horrible, recordé la escena de la madrugada frente al espejo de mi armario, y recordé también aquella frase que había oído decir muchas veces a propósito de tía Clara —Fue flor de un día. Preciosa a los quince años, a los veinticinco ya no era ni la sombra de lo que había sido . . . (*Obras* 301)

In agreement with Laura Mulvey:

[that] woman...stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (586)

Man is free to cast his gaze upon women while the woman must conceal her gaze. Teresa de la Parra precedes Laura Mulvey's theory when she has Cesar Leal declare to María Eugenia:

que en su opinión, la cabeza de una mujer era un objeto más o menos decorativo, completamente vacío por dentro, hecho para alegrar la vista de los hombres, y adornados con dos orejas cuyo único oficio debía ser el recibir y coleccionar las órdenes que éstos les dictasen. (*Obras* 222)

María Eugenia's habit of imitating or mirroring other people's expectations of her begins with her accommodating herself to Cesar Leal's decrees. Elaine Showalter has shown that "biographies and letters of gifted women who suffered mental breakdowns have suggested that madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated culture" (4). Supposedly *Ifigenia* ends on an ambiguous note and is open to interpretation. María Eugenia is descending into madness when she begins to exhibit schizophrenic tendencies. Feminist criticism allows, according to Showalter, that schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor to define the woman who has dared to express ideas or to exhibit independent thought:

expressive of women's lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (213)

Cesar Leal's misogynistic pronouncements regarding women and their place in society "Que odiaba los romanticismos; que odiaba las recitaciones; y que odiaba todavía más las mujeres como yo, que pretendían ser sabias y bachilleras;" (357) begins to have their effect on María Eugenia as she writes:

Me afligía... el pensar que yo había trabajado sin tregua leyendo y estudiando... y adquirir así un nuevo adorno o atractivo, el cual en lugar de

ser tal adorno o atractivo, resultaba de repente... una condición desventajosa, feísima y chocante en una mujer: «¡la mujer bachillera!». (Obra 222)

Nevertheless, the novel includes some men who hold opposing opinions on the state of women in society. Tío Pancho expresses his disagreement with the marriage arrangement being contemplated for María Eugenia with Cesar Leal: “era un disparate el que María Eugenia vaya a casarse dese ahora sin haber visto el mundo. ¡Que salga primero de estas cuatro paredes! (Obra 317). Tío Pancho believed that María Eugenia should express herself and travel before she marries. María Eugenia disagrees with her uncle because she begins to see her marriage to Cesar Leal as a form of escape. She believes: “¿Crees que voy a renunciar a casarme así, nada más porque tú lo dices, cuando esta idea de casarme es precisamente la única que me preocupa...” (Obras 200)? The idea of marrying Cesar as an alternative to her current life confirms that not only is she becoming unraveled but is adapting to her circumstances without thought to her actions. She does not love Cesar and reacts only to the moment. Her concept of obtaining freedom through marriage is flawed and only after accepting Cesar Leal’s marriage proposal does she become aware that she has simply exchanged one cage for another.

The moment has arrived where she concedes defeat and accepts the exigent demands that represent the imbalance of a patriarchal society. How can the ambiguous ending be interpreted when María Eugenia takes on her final role of the mythological Ifigenia and sacrifices her being? Is it a complete submission or has María Eugenia gone mad? Barbara Creed’s analysis of the unmarried female role in the film *Fatal Attraction* observes that she is “transformed into a monster because she is unable to fulfill her need

for husband and family” continuing that “woman’s violent destructive urges arise from her failure to lead a ‘normal’ life in possession of friends and family” (122). Like the female in *Fatal Attraction* María Eugenia suffers and this suffering leads to a psychotic or hysterical episode. As a method of resistance against the social and patriarchal forces: “hysteria was at best a private, ineffectual response to the frustrations of women’s lives” (Showalter 161). The hysteria could be seen as a temporary hiatus from the impotence and silence overcoming María Eugenia. The analysis that Creed applies to the female in *Fatal Attraction* does not differ from María Eugenia’s situation. Both are victims of a system that insists that women’s place is in the home. Both are left frustrated and look for vengeance against society. María Eugenia becomes a monster as she delivers herself to the patriarchal system: “¡No es al culto sanguinario del Dios ancestral de siete cabezas a quien me ofrezco dócilmente para el holocausto, no, no!... Es a otra deidad mucho más alta que siento vivir en mi...Espíritu del Sacrificio . . . , único Amante mío” (*Obras* 310). María Eugenia constructs herself based on her surroundings, even though she complains because abuelita insists that she learn the womanly art of embroidery: “Abuelita quiere a toda costa que yo aprenda a calar... que soy una ociosa, y que la ociosidad es la madre de todos los vicios... Bueno, para complacerla me puse a aprender con ella, en un mantel de granité que tiene ahora entre manos” (*Obras* 189). Embroidery becomes a symbol of traditional female values, represented in the image of the domestic angel. Women writers in the nineteenth-century wanted to replace the needle, associated with the traditional female role of seamstress, with the pen and thus open avenues of possible sources of income as well as means of selfexpression and to exorcise the social stigma on women writers.

Conclusion

The diary narrative becomes the dialogical re-construction of the restrictive world that surrounds María Eugenia since her long letter is effectively silenced by Cristina's failure to reciprocate. The outside reader becomes the only witness to the indoctrination and distortion of María Eugenia's distinctive personality.

María Eugenia, unable to overcome the societal expectations that frame her life and restrict her pursuit of other possibilities, begins to craft her "self" into the image of her destiny - a non-entity. María Eugenia once again mirrors another personality and becomes *Ifigenia* invoking the "otra deidad mucho más alta que siento vivir en mí" (310) and performs a metaphorical suicide. Margaret Higonnet's statement when discussing Emma Bovary's suicide corresponds with the ending of *Ifigenia* in the sense that María Eugenia's capitulation is a symbolic suicide as a result of "the victimizing effects of a society that imprisons young women in convents and then in traditional families and perverts their hopes for individual self-fulfillment through an ideology of romantic love and bourgeois consumption" (77). Although it appears that María Eugenia's desires for an independent life have a superficial basis since she is not prepared to create a separate life it also reflects on society's insistence that women belong in the domestic sphere and not interacting in the masculine world.

Teresa de la Parra's narrative choice breaks through the facile feminine stereotypes created by male authors in their novelistic fictions. As noted by Marcia L. Welles in her study of the first person technique in the works of María Luisa Bombal, Elisa Serrana, Silvina Bulrich and Marta Lynch, the fusion of a first-person narrative structure "prevents the static presentation of an objectified female character" (281). *Ifigenia* represents the

struggle against the imposition of a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy and the difficulty of the female in navigating an uncomprehending world. The choice of a long letter and diary entries that express feminine sensibility serves as a survival strategy for María Eugenia.

María Eugenia's efforts to continue her education are stymied at every turn: the loss of her inheritance, the derogatory references to her literary inclinations, and the continuing efforts of her social milieu define and limit her possibilities. Writing letters and in her diary becomes the only outlet available to her to express her frustrations until her capitulation to the patriarchal dicta. Maria Eugenia – the motherless and fatherless character finally succumbs and gives her final performance as a victim of the old order that clings to a life that is disappearing against the onslaught of modernization.

CHAPTER 4

Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela . . . from victim to artist.

Thomas Beebee points out that since the “epistolary fiction dispenses [with the] omniscient narrator” (8) the power of the letter lies in the illusion of truth that it conveys. This power is found in the epistolary novel when it fulfills the same expectations that real letters have with the reader. John Berry refers to an anecdote related to this element in the novel *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* that underscores these expectations within the shifting boundary of fact and fiction:

In 1985, an art gallery in New York invited “Angelina Poniatowska” to exhibit her paintings there, thereby changing the author's profession, as well as replacing her first name with that of the novel's protagonist. Perhaps such a blurring is understandable given the nature of the narrative. (47)

The blurring between fact and fiction accentuates the potential of the letter and the aura of authenticity that it assumes. As such, the reader must read the text with the understanding that it is a work of fiction even though the factual elements interspersed throughout confuse the fictional with the actual.

The letter, when used as a literary device, creates a narrator who controls his or her own life's narrative. The writer constructs an implicit recipient and uses the letters to link the addressee and the recipient through the written word. Letters, in order to communicate with the one who is absent, offer an inherent plausibility. The function of the letter, according to Janet Altman, is to “map one's coordinates-temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual” (119). Letter writing is an attempt to engage the absent loved one in an

interactive written dialogue and within this space to transgress, subvert, and/or resist exclusion from the master narrative.

Contents within the letters can serve as a tool to transform the letters themselves, as noted by Claudio Guillén, “It [the letter] can develop a fictional voice, a fictional selfimage, and fictional events within the everyday world of addresses and other readers. It is fiction within non-fiction or...within the illusion of non-fiction” (5). When, in addition, the letter is written completely by a woman it becomes a subversive dialogical text that attempts to exorcise the feminine/female tendency to set aside one’s own ambitions or importance. The epistolary novel serves to reveal a new landscape; a feminine horizon previously hidden behind masculine power.

The epistolary novel written by women about women breaks with the traditional focus of male on male experiences, the objectification of women as plot placers and their exclusion as active literary characters. This is a point that Irvin Solomon discusses in Carlos Fuentes novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*: “The female figures in Artemio's life are presented along this time line primarily as adjuncts in support of, if not as outright foils to, the lead character” (71). In contrast to men’s writings, the construction of a letter by a woman opens the blank space for the emergence of the ‘self’ because as Bakhtin writes: “[she] sees and knows in [her]self only the things that others see and know in [her]” (35). Thus the female experience projects a text that empowers the female writing voice to break from the expected role of implicit antagonists.

Querido Diego, is an epistolary novel comprised of twelve imaginary letters in which Elena Poniatowska re-creates discourses using the voice of Angelina Beloff, a

Russian artist and former wife of Diego Rivera.²¹ Elena Poniatowska's fusion of truth and fiction frames her epistolary novel *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* (1978) and vests the letter fragments with the voice of the protagonist in rebuttal to Bertram Wolfe's skewed portrayal of Angelina Beloff. Poniatowska tells Krista Ratkowski that the impetus for writing *Querido* was her reading of *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (1963) written by Bertram Wolfe:

De repente, me detuve en el capítulo de Angelina Beloff y me identifiqué totalmente con ella, y ya no seguí leyendo el libro. A partir de ese momento escribí todas las cartas que yo pensé que Angelina Beloff le hubiera escrito a Diego Rivera, basándome en los datos que daba Bertram Wolfe. (37-38)

Elena Poniatowska chooses the epistolary mode, since she believes that Bertram Wolfe did not evaluate Angelina's letters correctly. Given Poniatowska's propensity to write about the forgotten and the silenced it is not surprising that she would respond in like manner. Wolfe uses Angelina Beloff's letters as a plot placer in the biography in order to enhance the importance of Diego Rivera which continues the tradition that Solomon criticizes not only in Carlos Fuentes' placement of women in his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* but in the perpetual "images of male-dominated and male-controlled 'spheres' of work, duty and respectability" (74) in literature.

Elena Poniatowska's epistolary novel provides a truer version of Diego Rivera and Angelina Beloff's relationship that counteracts Wolfe's careless depiction of Angelina

²¹ Bertram Wolfe qualifies Quiela's use of 'wife' by adding the following footnotes: "As in French with the word *femme*, so in Spanish the word *mujer*, is used both to mean woman and wife. In addition, Wolfe explains that Quiela was the pet name for Angelina when he states in a footnote: "Pet name for Angelina" (124).

Beloff. Poniatowska re-imagines Angelina's correspondence to Diego and thus provides a personal genuineness creating the effect of immediacy and a presence of real time. The letter, as also observed by Berry, is an appropriate vehicle to reflect upon her own concerns, feelings and preoccupations, and work out some of her unresolved fears and conflicts, just as we may confront our own through her text" (53). It is, after all, a description of Angelina's private life and her personal relationship with the man with whom she had spent ten years that she believed counted for something considering all the hardships they endured and the loss of their son.

The act of letter writing allows Quiela to become the protagonist of her own life as she struggles through emotional and physical abandonment. The language of amorous epistolary discourse helps Quiela break the paralysis of denial which she had experienced as a result of the silence and rejection which she had received from Diego. Anne Bower ascertains that "When authors choose the letter form they tacitly but necessarily take a stand on a woman's "right" to own her discourse and her story" (6). The feminist aspects of *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* (1978) are evident in the transgressive act that Quiela commits through her letter writing in her attempts not only to negate Diego's abandonment of her but to reject the marginalization imposed upon her through the discursive strategies of the female first person narrative. In addition, the first person narrative aspect of the epistolary genre gives Poniatowska the opportunity to subvert and transform the letter fragments into a dialogical space. As noted by Juan Bruce-Novoa, despite Poniatowska's attempts to minimize her presence in the text either through testimonials or the use of the epistolary novel that employs the first-person narrative, she inserts her own ironic subtexts.

An approach to reading *Querido Diego*

The shifting boundaries between fiction and nonfiction; the discourse of desire and the creation of meaning found within epistolary fiction are the elements to be considered in the epistolary novel, *Querido Diego* that attest to the writer and the “problems and conflicts of being a woman in their own time” (Meyer 7). In applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories to the epistolary novel, I am indebted to the study by María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem on the novels of certain female authors from the 1920s to the 1990s and the development and evolution of women’s writing and feminine expression.²² According to Medeiros-Lichem: “Feminist dialogics benefits from Bakhtin’s concept of a multivocal speech to integrate the marginalized voices into discourse and challenge the dominant (univocal) word” (16). The specific characteristic of dialogism in *Querido Diego* is Quiela’s search for her own identity which counteracts the perception of her as a female whose personality and art cannot compete with Diego’s art and the issues that concerned him. John Berry states that “both in Poniatowska's novel and in real life Rivera was too busy with ‘justice,’ global politics (the Mexican Revolution, World War I, the rise of Lenin), and with artistic self-expression to answer even one of the letters from the woman he once loved and who had borne his child” (49).

Not only feminist critics but any active reader of literature can discern that female characters are largely portrayed in marginalized positions and/or as objects of desire for male protagonists. This is related to women’s relationship to nature. According to Sherry B. Ortner, in her studies of the universal problem between women and men in patriarchal

²² See Medeiros-Lichem, Maria Teresa. *Reading the Feminine Voice in Latin American Women’s Fiction: From Teresa de la Parra to Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela*.

systems, “women are seen ‘merely’ as being closer to nature than men...even if women are not equated with nature...they represent a lower order of being” (73). As Lois Bueler points out, this position is “necessarily responsive to the initiatives of men” (12).

The letter becomes the private space that women can use to script their own female voice in order to be able to move beyond the subordinate position that male-dominated societies impose on them. According to Margaret McLaren, embodied subjectivity and self-transformation take place by working on changing the self, and involve what Michel Foucault calls techniques of the self (47).²³ Quiela’s letter-writing enables her to become familiar with the particular nature of her ‘self’ and in the wake of abandonment by Diego Rivera to re-experience what she had been before being subsumed by Diego Rivera’s “gran corpachón”.²⁴ For instance, Michel Foucault states, “the self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity” (10). Therefore, as a reaction to objectification, the epistolary can be a weapon for women against patriarchal dicta. Indeed, as Doris Meyer points out in discussing the “feminine” in the writings of Teresa de la Parra, Maria Luisa Bombal, and Victoria Ocampo, writing was the tool with which “to make order out of chaos, to communicate – even if only with herself – in order to understand... [and it becomes] a form of surviving in an uncomprehending world” (12). In addition, as noted by Anne Bower: “In the private space of letters, women, so often silenced in public life, have personal freedom in which to rewrite the self and even, sometimes, to rewrite others” (5).

²³ Techniques or technologies of the self, as defined by Michel Foucault, are practices and methods individuals effect on themselves as a means of transformation in their search “to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (2-3).

²⁴ According to Bertram Wolfe, Diego Rivera had a colossal body that filled a room with his presence. He was six feet tall ... weighed three hundred pounds... had an attractively ugly face with good-natured froglike features and protruding dark eyes (44).

The uncomprehending world that Doris Meyer mentions treats women as secondclass citizens and devalues any incursions into the masculine purview. An important point that Sherry Ortner believes contributes to women's dilemma, is that "...woman's consciousness – her membership, as it were, in culture – is evidenced in part by the very fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view" (76). Even though this may be true for many women who accept the patriarchal system, the use of the epistolary mode and its 'feminine writing' dispels the notion that woman accepts her own devaluation. Although it may appear that Quiela devalues herself when she writes "Si no vuelves, si no me mandas llamar, no solo te pierdo a ti, sino a mí misma, a todo que pude ser" (55), she is actually engaging in the introspection that Foucault tells us has been "well established and deeply rooted [from the time] when Augustine started writing his *Confessions*" (10). Even though Quiela's statement can be considered part of the "tropes of female weakness and fragility [written] for strategic effect" (3) that James Daybell states are found in sixteenth-century letters from England, Foucault writes that the "letter is the transcription of that examination of conscience [because] it stresses what you did, not what you thought" (12).

Authors such as Elena Poniatowska, and Gloria Guardia discussed in the subsequent chapter, provide alternative or possible realities through the letter genre that serve the purpose of a review of one's life or the lives of women who have suffered at the hands of men who represent the patriarchal structure. Bakhtin makes this point when he writes: "Reality as we have it in the novel is only one of many possible realities... it bears within itself other possibilities" (37). Not only do we have another possible reality but we encounter a performance by the letter-writer who transforms herself in the process from

“victim to artist” (Kauffman *Discourses* 26). Quiela uses the letter writing process not necessarily to bring back her loved one who had promised to send for her once enough money had been saved but to exorcise “ciertas cosas” [certain things] (69). She is perceived as a clinging female, as the pitiful forgotten victim who is “defined by the lover she addresses” (Kauffman *Discourses* 35). The act of letter writing offers Quiela the outlet that facilitates an introspection that allows her to take her struggle beyond the role she was willing to accept, if and when Diego returns or sends for her, to become a competent autonomous individual once she comes to terms with the fate imposed on her.

Behind the façade of privacy inherent in letter writing, Poniatowska constructs an imaginative and creative interpretation of the fragments of Angelina Beloff’s letters to Diego Rivera as documented in *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*. The fragmented discourse is an inherent aspect of letter-writing since letters cannot give a complete picture of life at the moment of writing. As Altman points out: “Epistolary narrative is by definition fragmented narrative. Discontinuity is built into the very blank space that makes of each letter a footprint rather than a path” (169).

The intervals or interruptions of time serve as references that place the narrative in the real time in which it occurs. Patrizia Violi states that

What appears characteristic of the letter is that the (real) time of writing emerges directly in the text in forms which either refer back to the time of narration, or to the narration’s fragmentation of time, or to the relationship between the ‘real’ time of writing and the time of the story. (154)

Unlike the manipulation of Angelina Beloff’s story by Bertram Wolfe who dismisses her as “poor Angelina”, Poniatowska manipulates the fragments of the letters to create a first-

person dialogue that moves beyond the text and becomes what Claudia Schaefer describes as a “repertoire of certain characteristic elements or formulas that she [Poniatowska] can exploit to construct new textual possibilities for the exploration of women’s egos...” (69). Quiela is searching for her ego that had been consumed by the presence of Diego Rivera in her life. As asserted by Schaefer “Poniatowska inverted the emphasis from ‘outside’ events to ‘inner’ life as she took a marginal text – marginal at least in its accessibility to a vast field of readers – and turned it into publicly available narrative” (65). The selfreflexivity of letter writing opens a world of voices that are generally omitted from literary discourse. The female voice in the epistolary allows the reader to bridge the distance that brings the past to the future.

. The first-person introspective focus inherent in letter writing permits public consumption of a private epistolary exchange that allows the voices of those marginalized by a male-dominated culture to emerge and subvert the dominant text by choosing the epistolary form. The epistolary form offers a space in which to conduct a dialogue with those with whom you have a need for communication. Juan Bruce-Novoa states that Poniatowska’s combination of literature and its social functions is an attempt to avoid misrepresentation through a “reportage-style medium” (115) and, as mentioned earlier, is in keeping with the tradition of social protest literature. One must remember, in agreement with Elisabeth Guerrero, that “although Poniatowska's writings signal the social injustices of the Mexican polis, she does not present her characters as victims” (193). The use of the epistolarity genre with its inherent privacy continues Poniatowska’s mission of bringing to the forefront the lives of those marginalized by the dominant forces in society.

Elena Poniatowska (1933) was born in France to upper-class parents. Her father was of Polish and French descent and her mother a French-born heiress whose family fled the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. In 1942 at the age of nine, Poniatowska moved to Mexico, with her mother and sister, to escape the outbreak of World War II. The uprooting and displacement she experiences contributes to her empathy with individuals marginalized by social and political issues.

Elena Poniatowska began her literary career as a society columnist for *Excelsior*, the Mexican newspaper, and is well-known for her ability to let the Other speak in texts such as *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969), *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), *Tinísima* (1992), and *Gaby Brimmer* (1979). Poniatowska's literary strength lies in her talent to capture the voice of the Other and to subsume herself within the narrative so as to not interfere with their message. This is an ability that Claire Brewster says enables Poniatowska to give the accounts of the voiceless the opportunity to speak and in this way "she ensures that their thoughts and experiences will forever resonate" (114). Juan Bruce-Novoa believes that Poniatowska writes in the tradition of social protest literature and that through her writing choices, whether as a journalist, a novelist, an essayist, or short-story writer she enables accounts of the voiceless to enter the dominant culture.

Querido Diego – the journey of Quiela from victim to artist

The novel, first published in 1978, was rejected by the feminist publishing journal *Editions des Femmes* because they considered that an epistolary novel about a woman whose only identity or sense of self is achieved through having a man by her side did not

meet their criteria. As Elena Poniatowska notes, the *Editions des Femmes* rejected *Querido Diego* because it did not conform to the feminist canon:

Desde luego, es una actitud que todas las feministas rechazarían. Es un libro que no puede considerarse feminista, porque una. Si uno sólo existe a través del amor del hombre o porque el hombre lo quiera a uno, jamás llega a adquirir personalidad propia. En las *Editions des Femmes* en Francia lo rechazaron porque dijeron que no cumplía con los cánones feministas y entonces lo publicó otra editorial que se llama *Actes Sud*. A las feministas les parece un libro deplorable. Bueno, quizá exageré un poco. (Ratkowski 39)

It is ironic that the author's creation of a character such as Quiela who bares her soul through 'private' non-reciprocal correspondence and by doing this helps to break the hold that rigid patriarchal expectations have on her failed to meet the expectations of French feminists' equally rigid views and who refused to publish the novel. Bruce-Novoa also points out the negative response *Querido Diego* received and the lack of critical attention. He states that "she [Quiela] seems the epitome of bourgeois decadence, hardly a desirable image worthy of perpetuation" (118). But as noted by Anne Bower: "Although not necessarily mightier than the sword, the pen can arm any writing self or character with special offensive and defensive possibilities for moving unsatisfactory relationships into more satisfactory states" (5).

In contrast to novels written by men who express intimate and personal thoughts e.g. *Cárcel de amor* by Diego de San Pedro and *Los siete libros de Diana* by Jorge de Montemayor, female discourse when it attempts to express intimate thoughts also is

disregarded. At the same time, women's attempts to express themselves may suffer from derision, condescension, or simply dismissed. This is an additional point that Doris Meyer makes in her study of the works of Teresa de la Parra, Maria Luisa Bombal, and Victoria Ocampo:

The private, the personal, the intimate are realms generally associated with the female condition, yet literary history proves that as many men as women have turned to various forms of autobiographical writing, from St. Augustine to Rousseau or Proust. One can only surmise that when a man wrote about himself in an intimate way he was taken more seriously simply because he was a man. (6)

Not all literary works by men are or can be considered better than a women's written work. As Nina Baym succinctly comments: "The content of the text written by women should be examined not necessarily to consider them great but to acknowledge that women wrote and also to know more about the culture" (89). Well-written texts need not be marginalized based on the author's gender. The feminine text (written both by and about women) suffers from derision by male criticism, therefore the overwhelming body of criticism leans towards describing the feminine text as too emotional. In similar fashion, as noted by Anne Bower [in her dissertation], "*The Color Purple* is a female – authored novel that, while seeming to present certain stereotypes of black women allows the women writing characters to deconstruct those stereotypes and to regenerate themselves through their writing" (141).

Elena Poniatowska takes the letter fragments written by Angelina Beloff and reconstructs an amorous discourse that defies the stereotypical view of a hysterical female

and becomes a novel of awakening that captures what Ratkowski calls “la esencia de la vulnerabilidad, el amor y el dolor a través de su hábil representación psicológica de Angelina” (37). In addition, Poniatowska’s pen brings the voice of Angelina Beloff into a position of authority, that incorporates heteroglossia which Bakhtin tells is “*another’s speech in another’s language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” [emphasis in original] (324).

Elena Poniatowska’s twelve fictional letters in *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* (1978), date from October 19, 1921 to July 22, 1922 that cover a nine-month period. As in the nine-month period when the infant grows in the mother’s womb, Quiela’s gestation from an abandoned and wounded woman to the heroine of her own text allows her to be re-born. The inspiration for *Querido Diego* was the anecdotal insertion by Bertram Wolfe of an incident between Angelina Beloff and Diego Rivera in his biography *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*. Poniatowska refutes the cavalier dismissal of Angelina Beloff by Bertram Wolfe, even though he dedicates a chapter to her, and motivated by this false and careless depiction, she gives a more complete version of Beloff’s story through her novel. The result is the epistolary novel that Pablo Brescia describes as follows:

Poniatowska redacta una especie inusual de biografía que no apunta necesariamente a la veracidad sino a la subversión de la imagen que Wolfe había plasmado de Beloff; al hacer que Quiela (la Quiela ficticia/real de Poniatowska) sea la que escriba las cartas, también plasma un relato autobiográfico que, bajo el manto de la correspondencia, se acerca mucho a la tipología del diario íntimo, sobre todo a partir de la no respuesta del receptor de los mensajes. (61-62)

In the interview with Ratkowski, Elena Poniatowska explains: “la anécdota que a mí me impresiona mucho, que Diego Rivera, después de muchos años, fue a Bellas Artes y pasó por el corredor y ni siquiera la reconoció, también era falsa, de toda falsedad” (38). As noted by Nicolas Gardner: “Poniatowska is most interested in demonstrating the value of the often neglected female subject” (2).

In the case of Angelina Beloff, her art focused on the mundane and the private in contrast to Diego Rivera’s monumental mural art which reflected the 1910 Revolution and often overshadowed her art. She describes her own art in self-effacing terms as: “Mis colores no son brillantes, son pálidos y los más persuasivos son naturalmente los azules en sus distintos tonos” (51). Regardless of this description, Beloff is a strong female who awakens from the paralysis engendered by the silence, which Bertram Wolfe described as eloquent. Susan Schaffer notes that under the careful attention of Poniatowska, Angelina Beloff becomes more than just a “painter’s cook, maid, and guardian than as his wife” (79) and should not be seen as the stereotypical wronged woman simply yearning for an egotistical man. Schaffer examines the palimpsestic strategies employed by Poniatowska to unearth the woman that Bertram Wolfe had portrayed as a hysterical female unable to accept Rivera’s abandonment: “Poniatowska, through masterful use of parody and revision, fashions in *Querido Diego* a potent counterdiscourse that elevates Beloff’s experience to a position where it may be fully examined and reassessed” (76).

Elena Poniatowska refracts the image of Quiela that is given to us by Bertram Wolfe through the “double-voice discourse” that Bakhtin claims is “always internally dialogized” (324). Poniatowska’s appropriation of Angelina Beloff’s voice creates a double voice dialogue that plays against the narrative silence of Diego Rivera by inscribing Angelina

Beloff's voice with the particular "I" of the epistolary in search of a discourse with the explicit and implicit *you* and a desire for a response (emphasis added). The reader discerns not just Poniatowska's and Quiela's voice but as Altman tells us "the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and to contribute as such to the narrative" (89) and as such an epistolary pact is formed with the letter writer.

Considering that an epistolary correspondence is generally between two people and carries an expectation of reciprocity and privacy, John Berry wonders "Who really is writing the letters, to whom is she [Poniatowska] writing to?" (47). I contend that Poniatowska simply gives voice and power to a woman whose letters to Diego are carelessly described by Bertram Wolfe as being undated and in an undefinable order.

Letters are a narrative written with the expectation of a response but the fragments of Angelina Beloff's actual letters that Wolfe cites in his biography of Diego emphasizes the masculine dismissal of a female incapable of understanding an artist like Diego Rivera.

The very concept of the epistolary leads the reader to suspend disbelief and to accept what is written as the true thoughts of the letter writer, unlike the novel where the term itself tells the reader that what lies between the pages is a fictional narrative. As noted by Claudia Schaefer in her discussion of both epistolary novels *Gaby Brimmer* and *Querido Diego*, "The use of letters is a tempting and quite appropriate one in this instance, since most critics and writers alike agree on the openness of the genre, both in terms of authorial voice and fictional interpretation. . ." (66).²⁵ Elena Poniatowska captures the speaking

²⁵ "The book is a chronicle of the life of Gabriela Brimmer, a victim of cerebral paralysis which left her permanently crippled and unable to speak" (Scott 416).

person of the novel giving us an “artistically represented” amorous discourse (Bakhtin 332).

The active reader should read the epistolary novel with the understanding that it is a creative composition and not fall under the spell of emotional outpouring that engenders the illusory truth. John Berry emphasizes this point that the “text's blend of fact and fiction, presented through a series of letters written in an unadorned, intimate language, blurs the distinction between narrator and author for some readers” (47). The reader needs to read carefully so as to not to be seduced by Poniatowska’s expert intertwining of fact and fiction in the small 72-page novel. Nathaniel Gardner tells us that it is the “delicate and hybrid mixture of fact, fiction, history, and interpretation that creates this singular piece of Mexican literature” (6). The novel, a work of fiction based on historical elements, must not be confused with the writings of an actual person. Quiela is a strong woman who through letter writing stabilizes herself in the wake of abandonment by the man who would become Mexico’s most recognized painter, but she is after all a fictional character in a novel.

The reclaiming of the ‘self’

“soy rusa, soy sentimental y soy mujer”

Querido Diego is an effortless and successful intertwining of fact and fiction to the extent that readers accept the verisimilitude of the imaginary letters. Angelina Beloff and Diego Rivera met in Paris and lived together for ten years. As a response to the off-handed patronizing manner in which Bertram Wolfe regarded Angelina Beloff’s letters:

Poor Angelina! Love cannot be compelled by pity. After years of intimate life with Diego, did she not know him well enough to perceive that all was

over? Had he not refused to tie again the bond which had broken with the death of their boy? (127)

Poniatowska gives voice to an individual who had been overshadowed but at the same time, in agreement with Berry the “text also can be decoded as Elena Poniatowska writing one long letter, expressing her personal wishes and fears (47) which Poniatowska herself underlines, as noted earlier, when she states “me identifiqué totalmente con ella” (Ratkowski 38). The self-identification with Quiela also affects the outside reader through the emotional outpourings of a woman who writes more than a simple amorous discourse letter to an individual who abandons her. The effect of the epistolary novel is for the reader to know the letter writer. It is “a novel, a letter, a biography, and an autobiography” all rolled into one (Berry 50).

Poniatowska, through Quiela’s letters, attempts to bridge the physical and emotional distance that has left Angelina Beloff voiceless and powerless. The character of Angelina, according to Bruce-Novoa, “logically fell victim to a woman’s typical prioritization of life: love is more important than art has internalized the norms” (123). The twelve letters directed towards the absent Diego cover a period of nine months which metaphorically bring her back into existence. Nina Scott also suggests that Poniatowska’s dating of the letters from October 1921 to July 1922 is an “ironic gestation period of a stillborn relationship” (415) by which time Beloff is convinced of Rivera’s definitive abandonment of her. Quiela slowly faces her new reality as she journeys throughout this painful stage of her life. This journey takes her through denial, isolation, anger, depression, until she reluctantly comes to term with Diego’s silence. I contend that the letters represent

a watershed moment in Quiela's life and through letter-writing she is able to work through her losses: the death of her young son and Diego's desertion.

Silence is the only response that Quiela receives from Diego and after the last letter she is resigned to his silence. Despite all her efforts to reconnect with Diego, what does arrive for her in the mail is what Stanley et al describe this is related as a "speaking silence" (273) that is more powerful than words as she points out to Diego: "Recibo de vez en cuando las remesas de dinero, pero tus recados son cada vez más cortos, más impersonales y en la última no venía una sola línea tuya" (43).²⁶ Although Diego has in effect performed a disappearing act, literally and artistically, he does send money accompanied only with short, impersonal statements, "Estoy bien, espero que tú lo mismo, saludos, Diego" (43) and which Quiela attempts to dissect for meaning, in order to "adivinar algún mensaje secreto" (43). Diego is disinclined to respond to her many pleas, and his silence keeps her in a state of paralysis as noted by Quiela when she writes "mientras no tenga noticias tuyas estoy paralizada" (32). Her work schedule and her passionate desire to hear from him have been the focus of her letters. She may feel paralyzed in a metaphorical sense, but she moves forward with her artistic career with each letter she writes. In the last letter she finally comes to terms with his silence and his rejection of her: "Si te dijera que hubiera preferido una línea al dinero, estaría mintiendo solo en parte; preferiría tu amor es cierto, pero gracias al dinero he podido sobrevivir" (69). The discourse of desire for the man has been supplanted by the need for monetary assistance and the pragmatic acceptance of life without him.

²⁶ See Stanley, Liz and Andrea Salter and Helen Dampier. "The Epistolary Pact, Letterness, and the Schreiner Epistolarium."

Quiela's letters depict a woman who attempts to persuade Diego, through her letters, to return or to maintain an epistolary pact and in the process recaptures her 'self' and her life in the wake of his abandonment. According to Altman, the function of the letter is to "map one's coordinates-temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual" (119) – and inform the addressee not only what has occurred since the last letter written but what was shared in common.

Quiela's amorous discourse transforms her from victim to artist where, in her final letter, she pleads with Diego "Sobre todo, contéstame esta carta que será la última con la que te importune" (71) but cannot resist adding a postscript: "¿Qué opinas de mis grabados?" She may have accepted the end of the personal relationship but she is still an artist. Although Altman tells us that the "epistolary experience, as distinguished from the autobiographical, is a reciprocal one" (88), the non-reciprocity Quiela experiences turn her letters simply into an autobiography. Elizabeth Campbell, on the other hand, suggests that "in open epistolary fiction, the process of writing, the attempt to be heard, is more important than working toward an ending, than imposing closure" (333). *Querido Diego* is Quiela's singular attempt to be heard in order to elicit a response because as she writes in the last letter "Cuando te fuiste Diego, todavía tenía ilusiones" (71), but her letter writing carries her towards a journey of acceptance. Her last letter has lost its pleading tone and is replaced with a matter of fact tone devoid of the emotional content expressed in the previous letters. She has accepted that he will not respond as she writes to him "es inútil pedirte que me escribas, sin embargo deberías hacerlo" (71) even though it is what he should do considering the ten-year history that binds them.

Elena Poniatowska takes the act of letter writing and shows how it can be subverted by a forsaken woman to use it as her journey towards an acceptance of circumstances beyond her ability to change. Although Quiela anxiously waits for a response from him, interspersed throughout the letters she begins the journey towards reclaiming herself. She remembers and writes about her achievements, her talent, and her ability to survive: “Desde que salí de San Petersburgo, siempre supe arreglármelas sola...mis padres me enseñaron a bastarme a mí misma” (65). Despite many setbacks in Paris as a result of Diego’s abandonment, Quiela is quite capable of surviving. Elizabeth Goldsmith considers that the “appropriateness of letter-writing by women is actually another form of subjugating the female and restricting her to the domestic sphere” but in effect it becomes a healing process that allows Quiela to write her ‘self’ on the blank space in such a way that it reflects her own experience.

Additionally, Quiela evokes their shared past in an attempt to remind Diego of their mutual experiences during their ten years together in Paris: “Se inicia un invierno crudísimo y me recuerda a otro que tú y yo quisiéramos olvidar” (11). The winter she refers to is the winter both would prefer to forget since it is the winter their two-year-old son Diego died of meningitis. The ‘recuerdos’ related in the letters become Quiela’s reference points with which to situate her life with Diego and the shared memories of their ten years together. As defined by Janet Altman: “. . . epistolary dialogue-common memories and common experiences” (119) connect the discourse in order to maintain the tenuous link that she believed despite everything “seguían firmes esos profundos vínculos que deben romperse definitivamente, que todavía ambos podíamos sernos útiles el uno al otro” (71). *Querido Diego* is a coming to terms, a regaining of oneself, through the nine-month ‘trial’

that will reflect an affirmation of her femaleness and a self-sufficiency as a woman and an artist who must release through writing the debilitating emotions that have her in a state of uncertainty.

Quiela is not constructing a 'self' but healing the 'self' that had been overshadowed by her own subjugation to Diego and his art. Linda Kauffman questions the epistolary genre in the context of an amorous and elegiac mood situated in the aftermath of abandonment where the "heroine" reenacts seduction, confession, persuasion and [by] relating the actions within the text she "writes in the mode of amorous discourse" (26). It is not difficult to perceive, as one begins reading the letters, a pitiful yearning emitting from the words formed by Quiela. Her journey to move beyond the listlessness and depression produced by Diego's abandonment requires a gestational period that will permit her to renew and recapture her sense of 'self' that she had willingly subsumed to the masculine power.

In the interview with Krista Ratkowski, Elena Poniatowska asserts "Si uno sólo existe a través del amor del hombre o porque el hombre lo quiera a uno, jamás llega a adquirir personalidad propia" (39). One needs to come to Quiela's defense, even as she writes:

No tengo en que ocuparme, no me salen los grabados, hoy no quiero ser dulce, tranquila, detente, sumisa, comprensiva, resignada, las cualidades que siempre ponderan los amigos. Tampoco quiero ser maternal; Diego no es un niño grande, Diego solo es un hombre que no escribe porque no me quiere y me ha olvidado por completo. (41-42)

According to Louise De Salvo: "writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail *and* how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of

writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health” (25). The twelve letters that comprise the epistolary novel are a turning point in Quiela’s life that allow her to cope, grieve and move beyond the state of limbo in which she finds herself.

Quiela is an artist who specializes in *naturaleza muerta* [still life] so it is not surprising that she maintains the studio filled with commonplace objects Diego left behind, as if in preparation for his return: “En el estudio, todo ha quedado igual, querido Diego, tus pinceles se yerguen en el vaso, muy limpios como a ti te gusta” (9). Diego’s presence is preserved as a still life that suspends the reality of abandonment as she continues to write to him in her letter dated November 15, 1921: “tu gran corpachón llenaba todo el estudio. No quise descolgar tu blusón del clavo en la entrada: conserva aún la forma de tus brazos, la de uno de tus costados” (15). In the letter dated December 29, 1921, Quiela reflects upon her life as a young art student in Paris where she would lose “la noción del tiempo, de los demás, de las obligaciones, de la vida diaria que gira en torno a uno sin advertirla siquiera” (37). She desires to be able to immerse herself in her art but realizes that “No solo he perdido a mi hijo, he perdido también mi posibilidad creadora; ya no se pintar, ya no quiero pintar” because as she tells Diego, speaking of herself in the third person: “Adios Diego, perdona a está tu Angelina que hoy en la noche, a pesar del trabajo de *Floreal* que espera sobre la mesa, esta desmoralizada” (40).

What identifies *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* as an epistolary novel? The only salutation is the title itself. None of the twelve letters gives a further salutation so it can be assumed that, although they read as letters, it can also be presumed that what is being written is a soliloquy by Poniatowska who is appropriating the voice of a marginalized and abandoned woman. The allusion to the epistolary form and its approximation to the

conventions and expectations of real letters calls for the implicit reader to establish empathy and identification with Quiela in her search for acceptance and equanimity in her life and her struggle against abandonment. Elena's voice, although well hidden behind Quiela's pen, comes through with her own desire to be heard as she adapts "novelistic conventions to give expression to her own preoccupations and concerns" (Berry 47). Elena Poniatowska becomes the voice of Angelina Beloff in order to give more power to the dismissive manner in which she was treated by Diego Rivera and his biographer. Gloria Guardia, discussed in an earlier chapter, does likewise with six women from different geographic areas who had success as writers but experienced marginalization from the masculine literary canon.

The reader is intrigued by what can be found between the space after the comma and *te abraza Quiela*. The dated letters simply reflect the passage of time. There is an allusion to closure when Quiela finishes each letter with a form of endearment such as "*Te besa una vez más Quiela*" (10) in the first letter and with the final letter includes the verb 'terminar' "*Para terminar te abraza con afecto Quiela*" (71). Even so, she still ends with a question P.S. *¿Qué opinas de mis grabados?* (71). Although Quiela has accepted that Diego will never respond she still wants his opinion about her work.

Postscript

The main character in the novel must accept the new reality imposed upon her by the abandonment of Diego and the realization that he would never return. Quiela, a strong female, has been sidelined by the death of her son and the lack of support from Diego: "*siempre quise tener otro, tú fuiste el que me lo negaste. Sé que ahora mi vida sería difícil,*

pero tendría un sentido. Me duele mucho Diego que te hayas negado a darme un hijo” (18).
Diego is a man who is consumed by his art and cannot be sidelined by another person.

To further complicate the illusion of truth in the epistolary novel, Poniatowska ends with the following anecdote:

Bertram Wolfe, a quien estas cartas le deben mucho de su información, consigna en *La fabulosa vida de Diego Rivera*, que solo en 1935, es decir, trece años después, impulsada por pintores mexicanos amigos suyos, Angelina Beloff logro ir a la tierra de sus anhelos. No busco a Diego, no quería molestarlo. Cuando se encontraron en un concierto en Bellas Artes, Diego pasó a su lado sin siquiera reconocerla. (72)

The author inserts herself at the end of the novel with a short note that appears to update Quiela’s reality. The inclusion of this note further confuses the shifting boundary between fact and fiction since nowhere in the twelve letters does Poniatowska refer to Diego’s surname. A student of Mexican literature and art will deduce from the title that Diego refers to the Mexican artist, Diego Rivera. Angelina Beloff, on the other hand, would require some investigation since her work has been overshadowed by Diego Rivera’s.

The lack of the expected reciprocity so desired by Quiela changes the letters in the epistolary novel *Querido Diego* from letters into an interior monologue and we never know about Diego’s reaction to the letters other than according to Bertram Wolfe: “The cool spaces that lay between the lines of his dispatches of money should have told her” (128) that he had grown indifferent to her. Quiela’s words become her salvation as she alternates between a self-abnegation she is willing to undergo when she proclaims “tú has sido mi amante, mi hijo, mi inspirador mi Dios, tú eres mi patria; me siento mexicana, mi idioma

es el español, aunque lo estropee al hablarlo. Si no vuelves, si no me mandas llamar, no solo te pierdo a ti, sino a mí misma, a todo que pude ser” (55) and results in a successful journey that transforms her from victim to artist.

As noted earlier, John Berry wonders to whom Poniatowska is writing, and a response to his question is that Poniatowska does not write to anyone in particular but instead attempts to break through the passive silence preferred which the patriarchal cultural norms demand from the marginalized. To quote Juan Bruce-Novoa: “she [Poniatowska] . . . clears a small space for Beloff to reappear from the shadows of oblivion and the stereotypical representations she suffered” (128). The letters become a correspondence with oneself with only the implicit reader able to respond to its contents. As noted earlier, letter writing can be “another form of subjugating the female and restricting her to the domestic sphere” (Goldsmith 48) but Quiela’s feminist text in *Querido Diego* engages the reader during her struggle against the silence and oppression that surrounds her as she journeys towards acceptance and revitalization of her ‘self’. It becomes a “fusion of subject and object” (Berry 47).

When a woman decides to write, no matter the genre, her writing is ridiculed as being feminine or too emotional. Some feminists believe that another language needs to be created that speaks for the female and values them as much as men. Luisa Valenzuela, the Argentinian novelist, claims that “we must therefore defend the eroticism of our literature and stop being the mirror of men’s desires” (97). In agreement with Elizabeth Campbell, epistolary writing tends to be viewed as “a revolt against the dominant culture, it should not be surprising that most epistolary literature from Ovid’s *Heroides* to present-day novels has been written in a woman’s voice and usually by women writers” (333). Therefore, the

negative criticism that dismisses a woman's attempts at writing, simply because it is written by a woman reflects an endorsement of the passive silence preferred by patriarchal cultural norms.

The important aspect of *Querido Diego* is how Elena Poniatowska re-fashions chapter twelve of Bertram Wolfe's biography and gave voice to Quiela to represent her side of the story within the twelve letters. She bares her soul through an intimate, selfexpressive outpouring of shared reminiscences with which she attempts to persuade and influence Diego. The reader comes to know how Quiela regains her footing as an individual by writing letters as a healing process and how she reclaims her identity and most importantly is able to continue her artistic work as a watercolorist and illustrator.

CHAPTER 5

Cartas apócrifas: Gloria Guardia's double voice and desire for discourse

Introduction

My purpose in this chapter is to examine the double voice in the epistolary novel *Cartas apócrifas* (1997) by Gloria Guardia. This double voice or interweaving of fact with fiction results in the production of an illusory truth and a desire for discourse. Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that the "boundaries between fiction and nonfiction [and] between literature and nonliterature...are not laid up in heaven" (33) produces a working elasticity between genres. Why did Gloria Guardia choose the epistolary format, considering the statement by Linda Kauffman that "in the 1990s it may seem quixotic to study 'epistolarity'²⁷ when letter writing has practically become a lost art, supplanted by telephones, fax machines, computers, camcorders, and tape cassettes (video as well as audio)" (xiv). Gloria Guardia's choice of the epistolary form is answered by Claudio Guillén when he states:

que la adscripción a un género, por parte del escritor, es un hecho decisivo a la hora de considerar la especificidad o peculiaridad de determinada escritura epistolar; y el más decisivo en cuanto a su literariedad virtual.

Optar por un género y cultivarlo es elegir la literatura. ("El pacto epistolar" 77)

The deliberate use of the epistolary form frames *Cartas apócrifas* within the concept of opting for a certain genre and to cultivate it is to choose literature. In addition, Gloria

²⁷ Defined as the theory and practice of writing letter fiction. See *Epistolarity: Approach to a Form* by Janet Altman.

Guardia presents six different perspectives and creates meaning through the “structures and potential specific to the letter” theory of Janet Altman (4). Additionally, the status and power the letter had acquired in society enabled the construct of fictional letters giving them an air of authenticity (Beebee 3-4).

In contrast to the underlining pedagogical emphasis of Fernán Caballero’s *Un verano en Bornos*, as described in a previous chapter, Gloria Guardia’s epistolary novel gives each woman her own voice through the epistolary form. Even though any expected reciprocity will not be forthcoming from the fictional addressee, the epistolary pact – defined by Janet Altman, as the “call for a response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world– can only be sealed by or with the outside reader. In creating an epistolary pact with the outside reader, Maria Roof tells us that Gloria Guardia, “crea textos ausentes que abren los parametros críticos a nuevas lecturas” (Roof “Gloria” 22). The voice and visibility of each letter writer through the double voice technique Gloria Guardia uses is heard and forms an epistolary pact.

The women chosen by Gloria Guardia have been victimized, silenced, and marginalized by a patriarchal society. This affirmation is made by Gloria Guardia herself while speaking on the “Aspectos propios del quehacer literario en América Central” at the 1998 Conferencia on the problem of marginalization and silence of women:

Hoy como ayer, la mujer que escribe en Centroamérica corre muchos riesgos. A su urgencia de ser reconocida se suma el temor a la censura extrema e íntima, causado por un acondicionamiento cultural en que la ‘inferioridad’ se plasma en la ‘definición artística. (“Aspectos” 8)

Gloria Guardia, a Panamanian writer with an extensive body of works to her name, deftly threads historical events into her literary work as exemplified by her epistolary novel

Cartas apócrifas

The apocryphal letters in this novel written by Gloria Guardia represent the voices of Teresa de Jesús (Spain), Virginia Woolf (England), Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela), Gabriela Mistral (Chile), Simone Weil (France), and Isak Dinesen (Denmark). All of the letters comprise the epistolary novel *Cartas apócrifas* (1997). Gloria Guardia's insertion into these women's lives captures the double-voiced discourse, as stated earlier, is defined by Bakhtin as "the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author" (324). Cecilia Balcázar de Bucher's questioning "¿Cómo no leer el yo de Gloria que reinscribe su vida...en el texto de las otras?" (90), underlines Guardia's mix of the characters' voices with her own by subsuming her own voice into fictional letters by women who have contributed to the Western literary canon. The complete immersion into the lives of these women from different countries has enabled Gloria Guardia to demonstrate not only the difficulties other women have experienced within their respective societies but also to show how they transgressed the strictures imposed upon them by adopting and adapting "their own versions of *decorum* in shaping their letters to the recipients and to the situations" (Couchman and Crabb 7).

In her role as a feminist and influenced by the philosophies of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Rosa Maria Rodriguez Magda, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig and Catherine Clement, Gloria Guardia has creatively given a new twist to epistolary fiction. This new twist is succinctly defined by Guardia herself in an interview with Maida Watson when she

says “Con ellas [the contemporary feminists previously mentioned] como conmigo, se trata de “pensar,” “ser” y “actuar” en femenino; ya no, como parte del discurso del hombre, de *lo definido por el otro* [italics in original] (“Una nueva relación” 425). To think, to be, and to act separately from masculine discourse that defines one as the Other enables one to write, which becomes a form of survival that Doris Meyer claims is “a search for identity which comprehends an awareness of the basic conflict in being a self and an other” (7). In the act of composing a letter, whether fictional or actual, one becomes not only conscious of oneself but also is aware of one’s own myriad selves. The new fiction that Gloria Guardia creates melds the literary and the fictional and “funde crítica y creación...a través de la ficción” (Watson “Una nueva relación” 418). The contents of the letters follow Louise De Salvo’s thinking that writing serves as a catharsis but only if we write “in a way that links detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings – then and now – about what happened” (25). Virginia Woolf’s letter appears to follow this dictum when she tells her husband Leonard first that “Yo insisto, Leonard, en que no estoy enferma” (44) but then she admits their mutual acceptance as to the root of her illness:

Y aceptemos...que fue George quien inculco en mi la relación ambigua que hoy mantengo con este cuerpo mío que tú no has logrado jamás despertar y que durante estos años no ha sido capaz de cumplirte, obedecerte, guardarte, aquietarte. . .” (52)

The act of writing a letter becomes an action that leads us to be conscious of ourselves. Both Claudio Guillén and Joe Bray highlight this aspect of letter-writing by stating, respectively, that “to compose a letter is to become better conscious of ourselves and that “the epistolary novel is rarely assigned a prominent role in the history of how the novel

developed ways of representing consciousness” (“Edge” 5, 1). The self-representation of the epistolary gives additional significance to the captured key moments of the selected women writers.

In discussing the letter’s ability to bridge the distance between distant points as seen in *Cartas apócrifas* where the “epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge” (Altman 13) the letters are written to a confessor, a husband, an exlover, a deceased friend, a mentor, or to our multiple selves, in an effort to bridge the impediment of distance that interferes with the spoken word or physical contact. In *Cartas apócrifas*, a reciprocal exchange is wished for and expressed in the letters because otherwise, as Janet Altman states:

If there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of the letter. A desire for exchange is visible in each of the letters and this is the epistolary pact that Altman defines as the “epistolary pact - the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world. (89)

In this epistolary novel, the only expected response that would form the epistolary pact can come from the present-day reader. This connection that the text makes with the voyeuristic reader is bridged across the temporal distance that forms the epistolary pact. There may be a desire expressed in the letters for the intended recipient but “we can know only indirectly, for example, what ‘reading’ the recipient of unidirectional correspondence has given to the letters he receives” (Altman 88). The purpose of the epistolary pact is to affect the implied reader, and the absence of replies in *Cartas apócrifas* does not hinder its epistolarity since these apocryphal letters contain the fragmentation and multiplicity of the epistolary self

that Claudio Guillén lists as the “appearance of interpersonal ties, of intersubjectivity, [and] of the pertinence of the other to the writer” (Guillén “On the Edge” 8). This is a pertinence that is noticeable and expressed by Teresa de la Parra in her letter to Gonzalo when she talks about: “el recuerdo del afecto puro e íntimo que nos ha unido” (66).

Gloria Guardia effects an epistolary pact with her novel, *Cartas apócrifas*, and the pretense of the letter being read by the addressee will actually be read and reread as Claudio Guillén tells us by “others, by a third person, by other persons, by a particular class or public or by another public at another point in historical time” (“On the Edge” 7). The private exchange of letters between addressee and recipient written for public consumption removes the inherent “for your eyes only” aspect of the letter. An epistolary novel removes that aspect but at the same time creates the illusion of privacy, so that the reader becomes drawn into this epistolary exchange with permission by the author.

Fiction or non-fictional, the dynamic with the letter "creates not 'simple amorous subjectives' but complex, 'divided' one" since no other type of novel has been more successful in capturing “the human form” (Bray 43, 137). The apocryphal letters are a mimesis of the lives of women that are given voice by Gloria Guardia. The expressive freedom that the letter format implicitly gives to the writer permits the articulation of a personal voice. Robert Day makes this point when he writes: “The mere use of letters as a means of communication between lovers, however essential to the plot the author may make it, does not constitute a letter novel. But if the letters tell us much about the emotions and reactions of the sender, the story gains a new dimension” (11-12). The epistolary narrative – as presented by Gloria Guardia goes beyond simply recounting events but gives a look into key moments of six women dealing with either petitions, reminiscences, or

loneliness, or attempting to reconcile themselves to their situation. There is an intimacy that is not possible to display in public and in agreement with Robert Day: “The reader need not be told directly what a character thinks or why he [she] does something, but may be invited to participate in the creative work of the story by finding out for himself, so that the fictional impact on him gains in vividness and comprehensiveness” (6).

According to Robert Day’s loose characterization, epistolary fiction is “any prose narrative, long or short, largely or wholly imaginative, in which letters, partly or entirely fictitious, serve as the narrative medium or figure significantly in the conduct of the story” (5). Taking this loose definition into account, *Cartas apócrifas* can be seen as individual short stories creatively using epistolary fiction and its protean nature to fuse the literary with the everyday practice of letter writing that serves the purpose to “analizar el papel de mujeres involucradas en estos eventos” (Watson 420). This is a literary fusion that Maida Watson argues is reflected in Guardia’s work, whether essays, short stories or novels, and that incorporates the political with philosophical ideals that form a universal literature. Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author’s voice, *Cartas apócrifas* contains a plurality of consciousness, each with its own world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears from a first-person narrative that is the purview of the epistolary.

Critical Studies on Gloria Guardia’ literary work²⁸

Gloria Guardia’s novels incorporate geographic, cultural, and historical characteristics that represent a feminine Panamanian literature and the reality of the Central

²⁸ Gloria Guardia was born in Venezuela to a Panamanian father and Nicaraguan mother in 1940. She graduated from Vassar College in 1963 and earned an MA from Columbia University. A novelist, essayist

American region. Her novels intertwine the fictional with the historical and serve as background to explore the search for a national identity. Elena Grau-Lleveria explores the estranged narrative strategies of Guardia's novel *Libertad en llamas*, while Frances Jaeger examines the power of metaphors in the same novel. Meanwhile, Magdalena Perkowska focuses on the post-national aspects of *Libertad en llamas* while María Roof looks at how Gloria Guardia re-elaborates historical facts with fiction to underline the selective memories of bourgeois society in *El último juego*. In addition, the house as a microcosm for the nation in the trilogy *Maramargo*, serves as the site for the female's search for selfknowledge, independence, liberty, and acceptance as an equal to man according to Maida Watson ("Casa" 74).

Critical studies on the epistolary novel, *Cartas apócrifas*, comprised of six letters by six different women, are sporadic and focus on one or two of the letters. For example, Seymour Menton discusses the Gabriela Mistral letter, "Recado de Estocolmo" and considers it a historical short story, although he does give more space to the other letters included in *Cartas apócrifas* in his article "La búsqueda de la identidad nacional en el cuento panameño". As stated by Seymour Menton, Gloria Guardia succeeds in the fusing historical facts with literature and her epistolary novel *Cartas apócrifas* exemplifies his theory that the national identity of the Panamanian short story is a synthesis of geography, ethnicity, and history as well as having a cosmopolitan and international character (404). For him this synthesis paradoxically complements Panamanian national identity.

and journalist, her literary awards include the Ricardo Miro Prizes in 1966 for her novel *Despertó sin raíces* and in 1976, the Premio Centroamericano de Novela for *El último juego* (1977).

María Roof's analysis focuses on the letters written by St. Teresa de Jesús, where she states that Gloria Guardia "crea una nueva precursora para la tradición de la escritura feminista contestataria" and with Gabriela Mistral's "Recado en Estocolmo" and the other apocryphal letters included in *Cartas apócrifas*, she rescues "la viva fuerza de la mujer creadora que no se callara ante el poder patriarcal en sus diversas manifestaciones" (25, 28). These two observations underline the continuing struggle for women to be heard in the literary world, universally and regionally. Even though Cecilia Balcázar de Bucher addresses the six women in her article "Las cartas apócrifas de Gloria Guardia" she ends without a conclusion. On the other hand, Elizabeth Otero-Krauthammer, analyzes the manuscript form of *Cartas apócrifas* before publication. The unpublished version contained epigraphs, a dedication, and biographical information after each letter, plus an introductory section and a postscript. In addition, the manuscript also included two additional letters, one by Madame de Sevigné (France) and one by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Mexico).²⁹ Otero-Krauthammer – aside from a semi-fictionalized first-person narrative that gives detailed background information as to the provenance of the apocryphal letters —focuses on three of the fictional letters of: Teresa de Avila, Virginia Woolf, and Isak Dinesen. All in all, the six letters that comprise Gloria Guardia's epistolary novel *Cartas apócrifas* have not been given a thorough analysis.

A Letter or a Short Story

Although Seymour Menton refers to Gabriela Mistral's fictional letter "Recado desde Estocolmo" as a short story, what characterizes a short story? A short story should

²⁹ In the 1997 published version, *Cartas apócrifas* contains only a prologue, a dedication, an epigraph, and six letters. The letters by Madame de Sevigné and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz have been omitted.

surprise – “It is ‘story’ that creates the tension that keeps...the reader reading” (Newland and Hershman 166). A well written letter can be considered a short story as long as it has the following elements: character, an economy of setting, a simple plot, a concise narrative. The letters with their air of authenticity, as with the novel, re-create a plausible reality. In addition, in many short stories an expectation of surprise is fundamental, while in letters the author represents events and adds his or her own representation of events. Similar to the short story, letters can also be read in one sitting, i.e. under two hours. However, some letters may extend beyond the two hours as Simone Weil points out to Thibon that she fears her letter is quite extensive and will likely take several weeks to read and that he should not feel obligated to read it in one sitting: “cuenta con varias semanas para leerla y, ¿quien sabe? acaso releerla” (117).

***Cartas apócrifas* – epistolary novel by Gloria Guardia**

The interest in reading letters, whether actual or novelistic, stems from the engagement of the reader in the contents of a presumably private correspondence which results in a vicarious identification with the inner life of another person. The presentation of emotions gives the letters their own authentic reality.

Instead of writing an epistolary novel where the letter moves the plot forward towards a happy ending similar to *Un verano*, whose purpose is to show the rewards that would come to a ‘good’ girl who followed the rules of society, Gloria Guardia shows how the letter allows a freer expression in thought and emotions, in the depiction of women known for their literary works but by giving an account of themselves in a believable fashion. Each of the letters offers a sense of place that contributes to giving them a

convincing credibility in the shifting boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. In the words of Maida Watson, “la autora continúa empleando la multiplicidad de voces literarias que caracteriza sus obras anteriores. La autora cambia de tiempo y de narrador constantemente” (“Una nueva relación” 420). Gloria Guardia’s versatility is apparent not only in the multiplicity of literary voices but in the self-reflexive aspects of the letters. The first-person narrative leads the reader to believe in the verisimilitude of the letter.

We the readers are able to observe other lives that generally are closed to prying eyes through epistolary fiction, and particularly the epistolary novel. As noted by Bakhtin, the change from the larger epic forms to the closed private life places the reader in the position of spying and eavesdropping since the “literature of private life is essentially a literature of snooping about, of overhearing ‘how others live’” (123). Gloria Guardia’s use of the epistolary format creates an irresistible experience of reading letters meant for someone else while at the same time experiencing the individual style of each one of the six women.

The title of Gloria Guardia’s novel, *Cartas apócrifas*, forewarns the reader that the purported letters found within are imaginary. The novel is comprised of fictional letters from six well-known women whose voices Gloria Guardia has creatively appropriated. The shifting boundaries within these letters, between fiction and non-fiction, result from Guardia’s skillful intertwining of historical “international events that they experience” (Menton “Message” 29). The first-person narrative inherent in epistolary fiction permits the reader to observe the lives of others. Like our own lives, epistolary fictions contain no narrator, since the letters written are simultaneously elements of the plot, and only become narrations when “overheard” by the reader of the novel (Beebee 8).

In *Cartas apócrifas*, Gloria Guardia writes individual letters which border on the line between letters and short stories but which nevertheless follow the same conventions and expectations of letter writing. The epistolary structure serves as the discourse platform in which to meld the literary and the fictional. Gloria Guardia subsumes her own voice to speak with the voices of six literary women who have contributed to the literary canon and re-elaborates history through the art of fiction that shows the problems and conflicts they suffered, endured, and navigated. This re-elaboration is accomplished by capturing “poetically key moments in each one’s life” as indicated by Seymour Menton (“La busqueda” 31) that defined their sense of self and place.

These key moments are easily identifiable for each of the letter writers. For Teresa de Jesús, it is her desire to found a new convent and discuss her mystical experience. Meanwhile, Virginia Woolf writes in defense of her ‘self’ by denying that she is ill “yo insisto, Leonard, en que no estoy enferma”. Teresa de la Parra’s letter begins on a playful note that camouflages the seriousness of the letter’s content, while Gabriela Mistral’s bittersweet response to being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature underscores her loneliness. Simone Weil’s forced exile from France for being “calificada de *judía*” is described in her letter to her friend Thibon. Isak Dinesen letter becomes an interior monologue on the three stages of her life.

All six letters are self-reflexive letters that point out the different stages in the lives of these six women and the complexity that made them who they are and their continuing influence on readers. What is interesting about all of these six women is the strong reactions their writing and their lives evoked during their lifetime that continues to the present.

Guardia's creative epistolary technique becomes a form of biography as noted by María Roof: "una nueva forma de biografía, no contenida dentro del marco del realismo" and in accordance with "la manera femenina de conocer y comprender, asume una actitud de gran simpatía hacia el objeto de estudio para unirse con él y poderlo elucidar desde su punto de inserción en el mundo" (22). Each letter serves as a recounting of key moments imbued with the emotions and reactions, and the letter becomes a story.

Gloria Guardia not only intertwines fact with fiction but also the boundaries between herself and the letter writers. As previously mentioned, even though Cecilia Balcázar claims "¿Cómo no leer el yo de Gloria que reinscribe su vida, activamente, en la vida, en el texto de las otras...?" (90), the reader is left navigating the ambiguous territory between fact and fiction. The composite of reality and invention created by Gloria Guardia instills a "fascinación por el apretado tejido de los discursos superpuestos" (90). In epistolary fiction, the separation of author from the text cannot be severed and it is how Gloria Guardia inserts herself in these letters. The incorporation of her voice into these fictional letters constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse* that serves to "express authorial intentions but in a refracted way (Bakhtin 324). The individual one-way conversations in *Cartas apócrifas* displace face to face interaction and the pen and paper dialogue engaged the reader on a personal level.

Even though we know *Cartas apócrifas* is an epistolary novel, a form that Nina Scott defines as a fragmented narrative (414), and therefore has no claim to authenticity, Gloria Guardia has imbued each one with an individual style. Guardia's thorough engagement into the lives of these women and her ability to imitate their writing style has enabled her to present not only the difficulties other women have experienced within their

societies but also to show how they transgressed the strictures imposed upon them through their letter-writing. In her own words, Gloria Guardia's assertion that "la mujer que piensa, lee, reflexiona y escribe suele ser todavía una amenaza para el orden establecido (*Aspectos* 8). Although she referring to the writing female in Central America, this assertion applies to all women.

The ability to imitate their writing style erases Gloria Guardia's authorial presence and the epistolary discourse of *Cartas apócrifas* represents a continuous present. Although they range from 1554 to 1962, the reader can be transported to that period to the point that one is engrossed in the 'writing to the moment' aspect.

The grammatical errors found in Teresa de Jesus' letter do not codify her ignorance of the *manuales epistolares* that provided examples of epistolary style rules to ordinary citizens (Mujica 53). Gloria Guardia's inclusion of 'teologia' in the phrase "creo que lo llaman mística *teologia*" [emphasis mine] (35) underlines not a misspelled word but a rhetorical strategy that serves to disarm the intended addressee. Teresa de Jesus's writing doubled as working documents in her pursuit of reform within the Carmelite order. The working documents addressed to spiritual authorities, superiors, and benefactors would be written in an ingratiating manner as the following example shows: "Poco íbame a imaginar entonces que vuestra paternidad habría de retorna a esta ciudad en agosto...habría de visitarme favoreciéndome y consolándome con palabras plenas de el espíritu de Dios" (26). As for the letter written by Gabriela Mistral, "Recado de Estocolmo", Seymour Menton sees this as a letter that does not "concentrate on the protagonist's personal problems" ("Message" 31) and therefore has a "less dramatic and less emotional character" ("Message" 29). But Elizabeth Horan and Doris Meyer note, the

...contradictions and peculiar silences that characterize Mistral's life and work overall are reflected in [the actual letters written between Gabriela Mistral and Victoria Ocampo] but also, they point out, that Victoria Ocampo had noted that Mistral's letters have an air of distraction from "human contact by her own heartache and despair. (3)

Menton's criticism of Mistral's letter as less emotional than the others can perhaps be attributed to Gloria Guardia's capturing her style – a passionate voice behind carefully selected words that deflect intrusions into her life.

Mistral's desire to emphasize the differences between Sweden "país de civilidad tan ejemplar como Suecia" where the "niños son mimados, adorados, desde el vientre" and the contrast to "los niños de nuestro Continente" who are assailed by the poverty, illiteracy, congenital and infectious disease that exist in her own country, Chile, serves as a juxtaposition of what is the reality of her country and the "utopian image of Sweden" (Menton "Message" 30). It also contrasts with the criticism by Francisco Ayala's of the "superficial representations of Mistral as a mother figure" (Horan and Meyer 3). Nonetheless as the title suggests, "Recado de Estocolmo" is not a letter but a message that has been inserted within other letters. The personal side is perhaps hidden in the mentioned letter "van adjunta unas letras que inicié hace días, donde hallará usted un recado sobre el premio que me acaban de conferir y que llegó tarde, demasiado tarde..." (91). Gloria Guardia has cleverly hidden the personal feminine of Gabriela Mistral in this message to Stefan Zweig. It serves as a posthumous self-reflective conversation with a Stefan Zweig who had committed suicide two years earlier.

Epistolary Closure

Despite the fact that most letters usually close with a variation of “yours truly”, a letter is a fragment of discourse, a communication sent off before the whole story is known (Bower xi). It is incomplete because within the body of the letter questions are usually inserted for the recipient, which therefore, implies an expected response. This is evident in Teresa de Jesus’s letter but it is done so indirectly, as when she seeks permission to open a monastery similar to the Discalced Carmelites: “Por ahí inquietame más y más el gusanillo de hacer un pequeño monasterio como a manera de las Descalzas de San Francisco, en reformando la Regla que se guarda agora” (36). Although it is not an outright request, it has been inserted and the expectation of reciprocity is planted. She couches this request by first admitting to him that she hopes, if God is willing, to meet again since she is in need of advice from him: “Sea bandito por siempre y plega a Dios podamos otra vez encontrarnos, pues he de necesitar sabios consejos” (35-36).

The epistolary genre gives a narrative twist to the auto/biographical accounting of oneself. We know the implied author is Guardia and that she brings to life the voices of these six women and as Otero-Krauthammer succinctly writes:

En *Cartas apócrifas*, la autora implícita, Gloria Guardia, re-crea la experiencia subjetiva individual de cada autora, al mismo tiempo que las interconecta entre sí, atravesando los límites espaciales y temporales, para poner en evidencia la existencia de una conciencia femenina de carácter universal o arquetípico. (123-24).

This is what Gloria Guardia has accomplished with *Cartas* – evidence of a universal feminine consciousness. Although most of these women may not be well-known to many

outside of literary circles, the letter form gives us their voices behind the pen of Gloria Guardia.

The craftsmanship displayed by Gloria Guardia in her appropriation of the voices of others is manifested by her ability to lure the reader into the story, to make one believe that she is hearing the voice of that individual, as noted by Walter Benjamin: “This...is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled” (91). According to Benjamin, the art of storytelling is being usurped by the short story but Gloria Guardia’s use of the epistolary form deflects this usurpation because, as Thomas Beebee describes: “letters, like dialogues, construct a narrative that is destined to the one absent and the writer is free to write her own narrative on the blank page and “never in relation to a single, masterful Narrator” (6). So the epistolary form continues the interweaving of fact with fiction in order to produce the illusion of truth and with this sense of truthfulness the reader becomes absorbed within the contents of the letter permitting a suspension of belief for the moment while in the process of reading the story they have to tell. Is the epistolary method essential to this novel? Or is it Gloria Guardia’s method to create an intimacy that is more personal because of the first-person narrative found in the epistolary.

The creative entanglement of fiction and non-fiction in *Cartas apócrifas* effects a plausible fusion of the contents principally because of the author’s choice of the epistolary format. What purpose does this format serve? Gloria Guardia inserts her voice and herself into the worlds of the six women whom she has chosen as the fictional authors and their style of writing gives us a glimpse of their worlds. The mutability of the letter, or its protean format, permits Gloria Guardia to tell a story through the pens of Teresa de Jesus, Virginia

Woolf, Teresa de la Parra, Gabriela Mistral, Simone Weil, and Isak Dinesen. One may ask again, why the epistolary mode? The epistolary highlights an individual's life narrated through her own particular perspective as she recalls memories and events that profoundly affected their lives.

All the letters, with the exception of Teresa de Jesus's, serve as an introspective look at their lives. Teresa de Jesus' "unas palabritas" underscore the rhetorical strategy that she engages in when writing her letter. Her purpose for writing is to express her desire to open a convent therefore she is looking towards the future: "Sea bandito por siempre y plega a Dios podamos otra vez encontrarnos, pues he de necesitar sabios consejos" (3536). Bárbara Mujica likens her to a general "strategizing, maneuvering, and striking from a distance" (68). The other five are sending letters with a closure where reciprocity will either not be possible or is not expected no matter the desire. For instance, Gabriela Mistral's letter is presumably sent posthumously to her dead friend: "Rotos los terribles amarres de lugar y tiempo, he podido, al fin, conversar con usted, maestro amado... (112).

On the subject of closure, Janet Altman writes that the "closing lines [in any work of literature] can be a privileged moment for emphasis, summary, retrospective illumination, or simply a playful punch line" (145). How each of these letter writers ends her letter indicates the level of intimacy shared with the recipient. Teresa de Jesus' letter ends formally "Indigna sierva de vuestra reverencia" followed by her full name *Doña Teresa de Ahumada*. Virginia Woolf's final paragraph foreshadows her suicide twelve years later:

Y si naufrago mañana, no te defraudaré, no. Mirare largamente las aguas del río, presa de la fascinación que despierta en mí todo lo desconocido, lo

incierto. Entonces, daré un salto al vacío y zozobraré, Leonard. Me hundiré...con mis banderas flameando. . .” (59)

Virginia Woolf’s closing can be construed as the letter writer’s decision to no longer be an inconvenience. She has expressed a desire to see him but is resigned understanding that she has crossed the line: “Que he sobrepasado la raya” (59). Teresa de la Parra’s closure accepts her fate and that time alone will write the last line: “El tiempo se encargará de escribir la última línea” (85-86) and that not only the letter but life and love will cease: “Te dejo mi paz. Te entrego mi amor. Siempre tuya” (86). The finality of Gabriela Mistral’s letter with an Adios tells the reader there is no more to say. Simone Weil expects a response to her letter: “Sea magnánimo y cuando pueda escíbame unas líneas e inclúyame en sus oraciones” (141). She ends with hope in their continuing pilgrimage towards a transcendence beyond the material world. The good-bye written by Isak Dinesen concludes her letter with the statement: “Ha llegado el momento de abrir la página en blanco, esparcir las piedras y también de callar” (202).

The writings by men have taken precedent over the many attempts by women, whether in letters or novels. Nonetheless, research has shown that women bring another dimension to the act of writing, even though criticism by male critics of their writing is hidden behind language that diminishes their literary value. The fictional letters presented here are literary creations that permit the character’s own female narrative voice to subvert and/or transgress the reality that appears to each character. The reader will travel a feminine network, spanning five centuries, linking each letter writer through the illusion of a fictional narrative.

María Roof says that through the epistolary form “Gloria Guardia plantea con sutileza una reaproximación a la vida y obra de Santa Teresa” (23). As will be seen, the same subtle approximation is applied to the other letters. The epistolary form articulates their isolation but is also a weapon of interiority they use to defend themselves. The realization of the evocation of a shared past and no shared future enhances the keen sense of sadness in their letters. Teresa de la Parra considers Gonzalo her “más grande y mejor amigo” (76) and because of this feels comfortable discussing her health with him. Gabriela Mistral’s message “usted y los que mucho he amado se han marchado y me han dejado huérfana en este valle inmenso” (91) stresses her loneliness since the deaths of her loved ones.

The selection of these six women from diverse backgrounds and geographic spaces enables Gloria Guardia to emphasize how she believes it is unnecessary to be defined by a place of origin i.e. “panameña, centroamericana, o iberoamericana as told to Roy C. Boland Osegueda in a 2012 interview. She leaves this need to identify or classify a person to the critic who reads, analyzes, or studies her literary work (*Antípodas* 23). The six women who Gloria Guardia has fictionally appropriated to give them voice are women who suffered, physically and mentally, but are still able to use the written word to express themselves and to leave a body of work that continues to provoke strong feelings for or against what they wrote. Guardia’s choice of the epistolary format takes us into a private and intimate world and beyond making us feel that we are spying or eavesdropping we are invited into their private life. All letters begin and end at a certain point and are basically incomplete, since letters themselves are objects of inconclusiveness. An interesting comment that Thomas Beebe includes from a 1797 *Monthly Review* issue speaks to Gloria Guardia’s success in

the appropriation of the voices of these different women in her epistolary novel *Cartas apócrifas*:

The epistolary style is of all others the most difficult to sustain with spirit and propriety. As each person has a peculiar character of thought, and manner of expressing himself, it is necessary for an author to command a sufficient variety of style, suited to the different actors whom he employs.

(168-69)

Each of these six letters is a letter of love, a contemplative dialogue with the addressee and their shared past. History is not only told through the lens of the victor but the individual's interpretation of historical, cultural and social representation of circumstances and events that have affected them. This is what the epistolary novel offers, whether based on actual letters or fictional letters, the personal perspective of that individual and their interpretation of events on their lives. Gloria Guardia's choice of the epistolary to present the personal voice of not only one but six women who left their mark on the literary world with a perspective that challenged the perceived view of many male critics who denigrate any woman who dares to subvert the dominant text.

CONCLUSION

The actual letters and the epistolary novels examined in this dissertation are important vehicles in the study of female authorship and the dispersal of feminine thought into literary history. Feminine writing in the form of letters is usually seen as a harmless activity of random thoughts jotted down. Any value they may contain is either ignored or ridiculed. The process of writing transforms itself into a un/conscious mode to transgress and subvert. A well-written letter can engage the reader with its contents through the writer's ability to execute an interesting story. The letter's continued use in contemporary literature, as *Querido Diego* and *Cartas apócrifas* attest to, emphasizes what Anne Bower says is possible to detect: "features with special affinities to aesthetic, critical, and philosophical issues of our day" (10).

The letters and epistolary novels were chosen because they were written by women. These type of texts offer a window for the public reader to understand how women negotiated their space within the male dominant social order of their time. Whether women's writings are literary texts, legal documents or familial letters, they become wealth of knowledge as witness to the emergence and crafting of their self. Letter writing is an opportunity for their own personal voice to be heard. The interest in reading letters, private or fictional, stems from the vicarious and voyeuristic element of entering the inner life of another and the presumable private correspondence.

The letter, when used as a literary device, becomes the perfect vehicle to create a narrator who controls his or her own life's narrative. The writer constructs an implicit recipient and uses the letters to maintain a link with the recipient. Letters, in order to be able to communicate with the one who is absent, offer the inherent plausibility of

verisimilitude. The function of the letter, according to Janet Altman, is to “map one’s coordinates-temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual” (119) – The letter informs the addressee of events that have occurred since the last letter was sent and bring together that which is shared in common.

The letter’s presumed verisimilitude carries the power to immerse the reader into the individual’s life as the events are retold by the individual. It is the vulnerability Bakhtin discusses when he states: “we encounter the specific danger inherent in the novelistic zone of contact” (32) as the reader enters an alternative reality and believes it to be true. The danger of substituting the adventures of fictitious others into our own lives is a notion magnificently portrayed by Miguel Cervantes’ don Quixote and his *novelas caballerescas*.

The voice of the women in the sixteenth century is recovered from the dusty archives. They find themselves on the edge of literariness when they describe their anguish, complaints and pleas. They are conscious of who they are as they describe their lives since the loved has left. They articulate clearly and forcefully their position and the troubles they have undergone during the absence of their loved ones. Francisca Hernandez dramatically tells her lover the letter is written with her drops of blood. Letters, therefore, are a tool whose contents reflects who is writing and to whom they are written. Are they truly seeking reciprocity or is it a need to write to assuage their discontent or grief? These letters remain important because they demonstrate women knew how to express themselves on paper to describe disrupted and displaced lives.

Fernán Caballero’s epistolary novel consists of an epistolary exchange that adheres to a strict gender ideology. The only cross over of gender boundaries is between two cousins, Luisa and Felix. The epistolary novel is a lively exchange of correspondence

between two friends, Luisa and Serafina. The novel spotlights their dilemma and the means to express their thoughts which may consciously or unconsciously reveal a subtle subversion or discontent. As I argued in chapter one, *Un verano* is not necessarily a conduct manual for young women but a space for a freer expression. The innovative literary device Lawrence Klibbe attributes to Fernan Caballero permits a platform to present the female view of a woman's place in society.

In contrast to the idyllic pastoral setting described in the letters of *Un verano*, Teresa de la Parra's decision to write in the voice of one young lonely female emphasizes the isolation and frustrations suffered by women living in early twentieth century Venezuela. Her epistolary novel consisting of a long letter and diary is written by a single narrator. Maria Eugenia has no other manner to express herself other than through a long letter to her best friend whose reciprocity was unsatisfactory. Her only other alternative is to continue writing in a diary to alleviate her loneliness.

Meanwhile, Elena Poniatowska re-imagines the fragmented narrative of Angelina Beloff in chapter twelve of Bertram Wolfe's biography of Diego Rivera. Poniatowska writes twelve letters in *Querido Diego* deflecting the patronizing treatment by Bertram Wolfe. *Querido Diego* gives the reader a continuity to Quiela's story. These fictional letters express the same sentiments that are found in the letters from the sixteenth century as they suffer the same outcome: no response.

Gloria Guardia displays equal craftsmanship as Elena Poniatowska. Guardia immersion in the six letters found in *Cartas apócrifas* effects a plausible fusion of fact and fiction. By choosing the epistolary mode, Guardia draws the reader into the interior lives of six interesting women. The reader is interested and immerses himself/herself into the

story each letter has to voice. We gain a better knowledge of their position in life and their own personal view of their society. *Cartas apócrifas* becomes a contemplative dialogue of their particular circumstance and the events affecting their lives.

The glimpses we see of each letter writer during crucial turning points in their lives makes for good reading. Each and every one of them found themselves in circumstances unable to communicate with their loved one other than the written word. Writing letters and/or diaries are forms whose mutability to fuse fact with fiction allows the writer the space to express thoughts and insights of the surrounding world they inhabit. The actual and fictional letters in this dissertation become literary creations when the voices subvert and/or transgress their individual reality.

The letters written by women in the sixteenth century and the continued use of letters in the epistolary novel through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributes to the study of voices forgotten or ignored. The shifting boundaries between fiction and nonfiction and the novel's development through the use of letters, diaries and the inherent verisimilitude draws the reader into their world to become subsumed into another reality.

These letters and epistolary novels act as bridges across time allowing the reader access into the interior lives of women. The modern day reader is transported into a female world whose words and thoughts offer another way of seeing lives that are hidden or forgotten. They are a link to a narrative of women providing a multitude of differing perspectives. The first person narrative of the epistolary provides an aura of authority and authenticity with an expectation of truth. The female narrative, whether in personal letters or memoirs, whether written by educated women or dictated to another person, does not

minimize the importance and value of its voice. The very act of writing is a transgressive act since it provides the freedom to express views contrary to existing social thought.

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