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CATHERINE DAVIES

Gender studies

Gender studies is not synonymous with women's studies, feminist criticism, or queer theory though it may encompass all of these. Gender refers to the social and symbolic relations of perceived sexual differences. In literary studies it provides a concept, a category of analysis, that enables us to think about how and why the terms "man" and "woman," and the differences between them, have been produced historically through language. Gendered readings of Latin American novels, therefore, will focus on the constructions of masculinities and femininities in specific texts, the aim being to explore how this category of identification predicated on sexual difference is inscribed discursively in a particular time and place and how it comes to function as a principle of social organization and representation. Such a reading will also involve being alert to textual renditions of sexualities (sexual desires and behaviors) and questioning the heterosexual norm. Inevitably, power is a key issue here; what gendered readings hope to expose is the interplay of gender and social control, the fallacy of the self-contained autonomous individual (predicated on the masculine universal subject set up only by virtue of what it is not), and the exclusion of those identified (by themselves or others) as women or transgendered subjects. Gendered readings should be subversive in that they historicize the gender relations informing the cultural constructions of collective identities and thus unmask and challenge resulting power relations. Attention to the significance of gender has resulted in a sea change in the way the Latin American novel is perceived, interpreted, valued, and produced.

Studies of gender formation and the performance of gender roles in the Latin American novel have concentrated primarily on representations of women and the female body. Studies of masculinity have been more piecemeal and have tended to privilege gay writing and certain geographical locations (Cuba, Argentina). While a large corpus of criticism, mainly psychoanalytical, is available on the work of gay novelists, the sociological and psychosexual significance of other masculinities should also be

examined, particularly hegemonic masculinity. This might explain the preponderance in fiction of certain types of behavior, values (religious, militaristic, family) and assignments of gender roles, particularly in the work of novelists where masculinity is of crucial concern (for example, Echeverría, Güiraldes, Onetti, and Vargas Llosa). These questions will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. This chapter will focus on feminist or woman-centered approaches to the Latin American novel.

Feminist criticism

Since the late 1970s, emphasis on researching women's contribution to print culture has resulted in a radical revision of the commonly accepted version of the development of the Latin American novel. The issue addressed is the exclusion of women novelists from critical history, from the literary traditions with which they engage but from which are often excluded. In this view, a literary tradition is an area of political and intellectual contention. One of the first tasks for feminist criticism is to recover the lost, forgotten, or deliberately suppressed practice of Latin American women's prose writing from colonial times to the present. Another is to critically reassess the works of acknowledged women novelists, often considered second-rate, in the light of new woman-centered priorities. A third is to encourage today's women to write and publish their novels, often put aside for many years, and to promote these works in Latin America and elsewhere. This concerted effort of over twenty-five years has born fruit: these days, novels written by women and feminist literary criticism is a growth industry. Yet standard histories of the Latin American novel still consist almost entirely of novels written by men. A comprehensive reassessment of the development of the novel and a readjustment of the canon itself is still on the agenda.

No less important is the general reevaluation of Latin American novels from a feminist critical approach. Attention may be paid, for example, to the way novels invent women and men and, more importantly, how gender categories are discursively constructed and interrogated in particular contexts. This has led to new interpretations of even the most celebrated novels. The Latin American novel was often considered (selected and critically assessed) in relation to its impact on or response to political issues involving class and race. Once gender politics is brought into the equation a different picture emerges; a novel which may seem radically subversive from a class point of view might be deeply conservative with respect to gender. No one can deny, for example, that Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* (*The Time of the Hero*, 1963) demolishes any trace of credibility the Peruvian military may have had in the 1960s. It is a subversive novel and was for that reason burned

publicly by the cadet training academy it condemned. From a feminist point of view, however, it is a conservative novel: women characters hardly appear and when they do they fall squarely into the categories of domesticated wife or whore. On the other hand, from a gender studies perspective this is one of the most interesting novels of the “Boom” because it deals not only with the military and male bonding per se but the social construction of male subjectivity, from the level of the individual psyche, through the family, to all civil society, on the basis of violence, deception, and the subjection of women. Masculinity is shown to be predicated on the rejection of so-called feminine attributes such as emotion and caring (associated in the novel with homosexuality when expressed among men). Even so, the women characters are portrayed as little more than caricatures who collude with hegemonic masculinity, to the extent that the original cause of the misery depicted in the novel, the trigger for male violence, is the inconstancy of Teresa, the colorless woman at the center of the plot.

Feminist critical attention has shifted in recent years to nineteenth-century culture and society in order to trace the historical processes that resulted in the consolidation of gender roles and the subordination of women and in post-independence Latin America. This is a welcome development as the nineteenth-century Latin American novel has been relatively neglected. There are few studies of even the most celebrated male novelists of the day, such as Jorge Isaacs, Cirilo Villaverde, or Federico Gamboa (a notable exception is Sommer, 1991). Not surprisingly, women novelists, if mentioned at all, were given short shrift. Recent research, however, has revealed that the incidence of nineteenth-century women novelists in Latin America is respectably high. Some of them (Soledad Acosta de Samper in Colombia, Juana Manuela Gorriti in Argentina) are better known than others (Eduarda Mansilla in Argentina, Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera in Peru), while the work of some women novelists remains virtually unknown (Juana Manso in Argentina, Maria Firmina dos Reis in Brazil). A parallel development has been the recovery of early Mexican American women novelists (for example Maria Antonia Ruiz de Burton, in California, and Leonor Villegas de Magnón, in Texas) by specialists in Chicano literature.

Feminist studies of twentieth-century women novelists have tended to follow in similar directions: to recover forgotten authors and their works (Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta in Cuba, Josefina Vicens in Mexico, Rachel de Queiroz in Brazil); to reassess the novels of recognized authors from a feminist or woman-centered perspective (the novels of María Luisa Bombal and Rosario Castellanos in Chile and Mexico respectively), and, in addition, to promote the novels of women authors today by dedicating serious critical attention to their work (Luisa Futoransky, Ana María Shúa, and Angélica

Gorodischer in Argentina). There is now a long list of twentieth-century Latin American women novelists (especially in Mexico and Argentina) whose works are meeting with increasing critical success: Angeles Mastretta (Mexico), Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico), Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay), Margo Glanz (Mexico), and Patricia Galvão (Brazil). Sadly, not all these authors were recognized during their lifetimes. It was not until 1987 that Diana Marting's *Women Writers of Spanish America* brought together short articles on over fifty Spanish American women writers. Since then there has been an explosion of criticism studying these authors.

Re-righting criticism, rereading texts

Gender awareness challenges received criticism, often leading to new readings of a novel. A good example is Peruvian Clorinda Matto de Turner's end-of-century controversial bestseller *Aves sin nido* (1889), trans. Miss J. G. Hudson¹ and published with the title *Birds without a Nest: A Story of Indian Life and Priestly Oppression in Peru* in London in 1904. Until recently, *Aves* was credited as being the first indigenous novel of Peru, and it was probably the first Latin American novel written by a woman translated into English, selected no doubt on account of its attack on the Catholic priesthood. Yet it seldom received serious critical analysis. The other two novels of Matto's trilogy, *Indole* ("Disposition," 1892) and *Herencia* ("Hereditary," 1895) have been largely forgotten. *Aves* was the fictional version of a particular political discourse associated with the Peruvian industrial elite captained by Manuel González Prada. The fortunes of the novel and the author were caught up in the often violent shifts of political power and attracted harsh criticism from González Prada's opponents.² Matto suffered on account of her political views; her home was ransacked in 1895 and all her work lost; the publication of *Aves* resulted in her excommunication from the Catholic Church; and she spent her final years in exile in Argentina. What strikes us today is the especially virulent, sexist, nature of the attacks waged against Matto, targeting not her writings as such but that the novelist was a woman. In 1910, a year after her death, Ventura García Calderón, a respected author in his own right, referred to her as: "the literary seamstress, genius of vulgarity, who patched up domestic prose in letters, novels – novels like those written by each and every English governess – until death broke the spool of thread and stopped the machine."³ *Aves* was deliberately ignored until the 1920s, when political power shifted once again, but by then it was deemed irrelevant to a Marxist class analysis of Peru's indigenous problem. José Carlos Mariátegui's seminal *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1927) fails to mention Matto or her novels. In 1980 the highly influential Peruvian intellectual

Antonio Cornejo Polar, pursuing a similar line as Mariátegui, criticized Matto for her “incapacity to imagine collective solutions” to Indian oppression, not only in *Aves* but also in its “dull continuation,” *Herencia*.⁴ He takes issue with her for not providing in-depth social and economic analysis and for privileging instead a moral approach to the problem which, in his view, results in a profound contradiction: the Indian is morally good, but in order to progress must reject his identity. For Cornejo Polar *Aves* fails in that it presents a merely liberal bourgeois solution. The upshot is that even Matto’s role in promoting *indigenismo* is denied; Cornejo Polar states that *indigenismo* did not begin until the 1920s. Cornejo Polar’s analysis is perfectly legitimate in its own terms, but it is gender-blind. It fails to see that the concern of Matto’s three novels is not only the indigenous population of Peru but the redemptive power of Peruvian women across class and race: women of the city and the country, the coast and the sierra, the married and the single, the wealthy and the working class, the indigenous, mestizo, and white. Only from this perspective do the three novels present a coherent argument as a trilogy. *Indole*, the first in the story, attacks the Catholic Church for its manipulation of women through confession and sexual abuse: a priest rapes Indian women and attempts to seduce a wealthy woman through blackmail. In *Herencia*, the last novel in the trilogy, the focus is not on women in rural communities (as in *Aves*) but in the class-divided city. In all three novels, upright women (irrespective of class or race) represent the moral redemption of the nation at a time of institutional corruption and political strife in the public sphere. This reading is immediately apparent when gender (rather than class and race) is privileged as a category of analysis. Further gendered readings of this novel are discussed below. Matto herself was a feminist, as attested by her contributions to two important journals, of which she was editor-in-chief, *El Perú Ilustrado* (Lima) and *El Búcaro Americano* (Buenos Aires), and by her founding in 1892 of “La Equitativa,” a feminist press staffed only by women set up to publish contemporary women’s writings in Latin America.

Some feminist criticism aims to uncover a continuous tradition of women’s writing in Latin America existing parallel to and in dialogue with the literary mainstream authored by men. It is debatable whether women’s novels should be considered as a separate group in a category of their own (as in this chapter) or included alongside male-authored novels in the chronological and generic categories (the regional, Boom, Andean novel, etc.) of which the literary histories of Latin America habitually consist. The latter is the more radical option and involves a major reassessment of the canon, entailing not only the incorporation of women novelists but questioning the very premises on which that selection was made in the first place. But it

is also the case that to identify gender-specific characteristics common to novels written by women, traces perhaps of a woman writer's experiences or perspective resulting from a particular form of socialization according to gender, the novels need to be studied together. Both options are political moves to identify and counteract patterns of oppression.

Redressing selection

It is hardly credible that many histories of Latin American literature fail to mention, let alone study, the novels written by women between the 1930s and the 1960s. Many of these vanguard or "new" novels, often published long after they were written, are gems of the genre, ground-breaking in their narrative techniques and clear precursors of the magical realism of the 1960s. Centering on female characters they draw attention to language as a complex signifying process through which subjectivity is tentatively inscribed; memory, imagination, intimate experience, and perception are rendered in poetic prose that avoids linear and representational forms. Most notable is Elena Garro's masterpiece, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (*Recollections of Things to Come*, 1963). Set in 1920s Mexico, in Iguala, the town of the author's childhood, it tells the stories of the two mistresses of General Rosas who is occupying the southern town to quash the anti-revolutionary Cristero rebellion. In the first part of the novel the radiantly beautiful Julia is whisked off magically by a stranger, and in the second part Isabel, one of the rebels' sisters who has changed sides, is turned to stone. The backdrop is the violence and poverty of rural Mexico. But Garro's novel is distinguished above all by its inventive representation of time, which revolves in cycles or ceases entirely, presenting a version of mythic perfection, associated with indigenous culture, and contrasting with the flow of chronological time that captures the bloody process of Mexican history. This technical virtuosity, resulting in the creation of powerful though passive female characters, also characterizes the two avant-garde novels of Chilean María Luisa Bombal, *La última niebla* (*The House of Mist*, 1935) and *La amortajada* (*The Shrouded Woman*, 1938). Like Garro, Bombal deconstructs reality as we know it, challenging realism, so that dream and consciousness merge in an atmospheric, lyrical, subjective vision of the world. For the women protagonists of Bombal's novels, life is death and death is liberation. *La amortajada*, for example, is narrated by a dead woman who is nevertheless fully aware of everything around her. Her memories, shaped by intuition and sensitivity, are woven into a self-reflective narrative in which she passes from the world of the living to that of the dead. She remembers above all her love-hate relationship with the man who attempted to annul her sense of self, her unfulfilled desires,

and a longing for freedom which can only be articulated as such as she exits life.

Woman-centered experimental fiction or anti-novels were important in Argentina (Norah Lange), Venezuela (Teresa de la Parra), and Brazil (Nélida Piñón). Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia: diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba* (*Iphigenia: the Diary of a Young Lady who Wrote Because She Was Bored*, 1924), a poetic account of the attempts of a woman to find herself through self-reflection, was followed by the delightful *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca* (*Mamá Blanca's Souvenirs*, 1929), the fictional memoirs of a girl growing up on a rural estate under the rod of a tyrannical father from whom she eventually breaks free. The genre was developed to new depths of subjective exploration and stylistic innovation in the work of Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector, who published her first novel *Perto do coração selvagem* (*Near to the Wild Heart*) in 1944. Lispector's obsession with inner states, pieced together in broken, abstract language, underlines (like Bombal) the impossibility of coherent communication in life. Her masterpiece, *A paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*, 1964), in which the female protagonist G.H. engages in a conversation with an unidentified interlocutor and absorbs the other into the self by devouring a cockroach, was famously marked out as a model of *écriture féminine* by French feminist Hélène Cixous. Lispector's last novel, *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*, 1977), written while she was dying, secured her an international following. Beautifully translated into English by Giovanni Pontiero and made into a film by Suzana Amaral (1986), this is the story of the hopelessly ignorant and inept Macabéa who wants to be a film star and is finally run over by a yellow Mercedes, killed by her boyfriend. Throughout the novel Macabéa, like the reader, tries to make sense of an uncomprehending and incomprehensible world. Again, poetic prose deconstructs the conventionally familiar, breaking down the barriers of gendered identities and narrative voices, making space for contradiction, meaninglessness, and silence and, like Garro and Bombal, privileging the semiotic. Lispector's novels were published in the period of the Boom and Post-Boom. Does she belong to either? In many ways this question is irrelevant, as her novels seem to be in dialogue with a woman's literary tradition which has, as we shall see, different priorities.

Rethinking traditions

If the Latin American novel written by women is studied as a literary tradition in its own right, what kind of conclusions may be reached? A brief discussion of this question follows, with reference to a representative selection of

novels written by women from the 1840s until today. These novels are all very different and may be classified as sentimental, indigenous, avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, Boom, semi-autobiographical, and so on, but a number of gender-related common features do emerge. They all situate the action of the novel within the family and the domestic space, and they all bring to their readers' attention important, often controversial, social and economic issues. Such social concern might be for the slave (*Sab*), the Andean Indians (*Aves sin nido*), or the Mayan Indians (*Balún Canán*), or for all those oppressed by the Church, the military, and the state, particularly women (the novels of Poniatowska, Valenzuela, Esquivel, Allende, and Eltit). Even in the anti-novel *Jardín*, which also centers on the family and the domestic space, there is a deep concern for a woman's self-fulfillment in life. Most importantly, all these novels address such issues from a woman's point of view.

Sab (1841) by Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda is a feminist abolitionist novel and, as far as we know, the first of its kind published in the Spanish-speaking world; the only other antislavery novel written by a woman in Spanish (though less radical) was Juana Manso's *La Familia del comendador* ("The commander's family," 1854). There were many published by women in English and French. Gómez de Avellaneda was born in Cuba, a Spanish colony until 1898. It was only due to the fact that she and her family moved to Spain that she was able to publish the novel, in liberal Madrid, in 1841. The novel is set on a Cuban sugar estate owned by the distinguished Creole "de B" family. The family's mulatto slave, Sab, loves his white owner, Carlota, but his love is not reciprocated. Instead she makes a disastrous marriage to an Englishman who only wants her money. By the end of the novel all the characters are dead, except Carlota and her husband, who leave Cuba for Europe. The novel includes strong criticism of slavery, racial prejudice, and the subjection of women. As might be expected by its date of composition (1830s) this is a Romantic, sentimental romance, but the love story may be understood in terms of important economic considerations which center on a series of transactions, one of which is the exchange of Carlota herself (as a commodity) in marriage, and the transfer of Cuban wealth and property to capitalist speculators. The novel raises these key economic and political concerns from a moral perspective within the framework of the domestic sphere. The family "de B" represents colonial Cuba in the process of being sold off to Anglo-American commercial interests. All the characters are grouped into families: the "de B" family which includes Sab (Carlota's illegitimate cousin – the incest motif is important); the Otway family; and a third family comprising Sab's adoptive *mestizo* mother and brother. The space inscribed in the novel, then, is the traditional family circle of the white Cuban elite and other associated family dwellings: the beautiful country house, garden,

and estate of the oligarchy; the town house of the foreign commercial classes, and the peasant shack. The old order, the Cuban rural home, is destroyed by modernity represented by global commerce. Its destruction symbolizes the demise of Cuba; there is no place for the younger generation, including the mulatto Sab, who might have represented a new Cuba founded on traditional family values and social justice.

This was a radical novel and could not have been published in slave-holding Cuba. Copies shipped to Cuba were confiscated and sent back to Cadiz. The novel did not make an impact or find a space in either the Cuban or Spanish literary canons. When Gómez de Avellaneda later became famous, as a poet and dramatist, she omitted the novel from her complete works and it was largely forgotten for over a hundred years and not translated into English until 1993. At the other end of the century, as we have seen, Matto's *Aves sin nido*, though widely read, was censored in a similar way. *Aves* is a realist, not a Romantic, novel informed by positivism, and whereas in *Sab* there is ambiguity as to the merits of commerce and progress, in *Aves* there is no doubt as to the desirability of modernity, associated here with the professional urban middle classes. Like *Sab*, the novel is set mainly in the countryside, in a small Andean town named Killac. Again, most of the action takes place in the domestic sphere: in the house belonging to newcomers, the progressive Marín family, the protagonists of the novel; in the luxurious home of governor Pancorbo, representing the corrupt old order, and in the Indian huts. The novel attacks and ridicules the rural oligarchy, the Church, the Judiciary, and the State, which are shown to be absolutely corrupt and evil. The victims of the novel are the Indians who are manipulated, abused, and brutalized by the white men in power. Like *Sab*, the plot centers on the fear of incest in the family. The two young lovers, Manuel and Marcela, want to marry but cannot because they share the same father: the local bishop. Matto's main target is the enforced celibacy of priests and the rampant sexual abuse of defenseless women representing, ultimately, corruption at all levels of civil society. The family, once again, stands for the nation as a whole. The middle-class family and their adopted Indian daughters cannot remain in the sierra and must return to Lima to survive. In the final chapters, following the family's journey to the city, the setting switches from Killac to a train compartment and a modern hotel. The train, whose driver is North American, is derailed as it crosses a weak Peruvian bridge. But thanks to his ingenuity everyone survives and they are soon on their way. Modernity, driven by foreign investment, is shown to be risky when exported to Peru but absolutely necessary for progress in that it leads the enlightened away from the rural backwaters to the progressive urban coast. This urban/rural polarity is reinforced by a gender polarity between women and men. All the

women are good irrespective of race and class; they embody the moral fiber of the nation. Like *Sab*, then, the novel emphasizes the centrality of domestic politics and morality in the national political economy.

Balún Canán (*The Nine Guardians*) published by Mexican author Rosario Castellanos in 1957, seventy years after *Aves*, also condemns the exploitation of the Indians, in this case the Maya-Quiché of Chiapas in southern Mexico. It is set, like *Sab*, in the “big house” of the landowners, the Argüello family, during the 1930s Tzeltal rebellion. This is a semi-autobiographical novel, referring to events occurring within the Castellanos household when Rosario was a child. The traditional Mexican family is shown to be not only dysfunctional (the tyrannical patriarch, César, bullies his wife and their two children, the anonymous girl-narrator and her brother) but also the seedbed of authoritarian rule in society at large. The gender discrimination and sexual abuse practiced by the white male oligarchy in the domestic space is extrapolated to all sectors of society leading to rigid social stratification, widespread racism, and class exploitation of both Indians and poorer whites. César’s wife colludes with this regime and in her turn oppresses the children’s Mayan *nana*, who also remains nameless. From the point of view of feminist criticism the most interesting parts of the novel are the two-thirds that are set in the home narrated from a young girl’s first-person point of view; the central chapters revert to a more conventional realist perspective and the field of action extends to the ranch and other outdoor locations. Thus a clear distinction is set up between a more historical and purportedly objective account of events, and how these affect and are perceived subjectively by a girl socialized into subordination. As the daughter grows up she realizes the extent to which her family exploit the Indians. The strong bonds that tie her to the *nana* place her in the impossible position of wishing to identify across race and class with her non-biological indigenous mother. Unlike *Sab*, which never describes the inside of the slave quarters, *Balún Canán* includes scenes set in the Indians’ miserable space where, it is confirmed, Indian women – dominated by white men and women and Indian men – are substantially more oppressed than the white women in the “big house”; the most badly treated character in the novel is the wife of the Indian Felipe. Although the outcome of the novel is pessimistic, woman-centered bonding is presented as a possible future solution to the intractable social problems of Mexico. As in *Aves*, the Catholic Church and its nefarious manipulation of women is a target of censure while progressive reform is associated with the city and the enlightened middle classes.

From the 1950s until the mid-1970s *Balún Canán*, although relatively successful, was considered, like *Aves*, another second-rate *indigenista* novel written by a woman. Castellanos herself was dissatisfied with the result

and wrote a later version in a more conventional realist style, *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962). Thanks to several incisive studies, however (primarily by women critics), Balún Canán is now acclaimed as a profoundly subversive feminist-indigenous novel informed by Castellanos's feminist ideas expressed explicitly in her doctoral thesis on women's culture and in her short fiction, notably *Album de familia* (1971).

Another largely neglected Mexican novel, set this time in Mexico City in the 1940s, is *La "Flor de Lis"* (1988) by journalist Elena Poniatowska, better known for documentary novels and testimonios, such as *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (*Until We Meet Again*, 1969) and *La noche del Tlatelolco* (*Massacre in Mexico*, 1968). *La "Flor de Lis,"* like *Balún Canán*, is semi-autobiographical and related mainly in the first person through the eyes of a young girl, Mariana, who attempts to understand the world around her. The novel's setting is, again, the "big house," located not in rural Mexico but in the wealthy French quarter of the capital. Mariana's family, an offshoot of the French-Polish aristocracy, is representative of the *haute bourgeoisie* living in splendid elitist isolation. But the family is just as dysfunctional as the family in *Balún Canán*, not on account of a domineering father of the family (who, in this case, is weak and indecisive) but due to an aloof mother and an unscrupulous father of the Church. The main target of criticism therefore, as in Matto's and Castellanos's novels, is once again, the Catholic Church. *La "Flor de Lis"* shows how this corrupt institution manipulates and oppresses rich women highlighting especially the sexual transgressions of the clergy; the villain of the novel is Padre Teufel (meaning devil in German). Like her counterpart in *Balún Canán*, as Mariana grows up she becomes increasingly aware of the hypocrisy and social injustice perpetuated by the class to which she belongs but is powerless to effect change. *La "Flor de Lis"* and *Balún Canán* are Mexican novels of *concienciación* that trace a growing feminist critical awareness grounded in personal experience; in fact, both authors went on to address social injustice later in life and took active parts in social reform. Reminiscent of the avant-garde novels mentioned previously, *La "Flor de Lis"* is written in an idiosyncratic style, comprising disconnected fragments of hauntingly evocative poetic prose. Yet it has still not been translated into English and is seldom studied in literary histories of the Latin America novel.

Jardín (1951) by Cuban author Dulce María Loynaz was also largely ignored, for some forty years, perhaps because Loynaz, like Poniatowska, was identified with the white elite or because her novel also displays stylistic experimentation (the novel was finished in 1933). In addition *Jardín* does not raise any obvious social problems, other than the utter dereliction of an individual woman. None of these factors would have made it acceptable

to the post-revolutionary Cuban literary establishment, but its neglect elsewhere is nevertheless surprising. This is a poetic Gothic novel located, as expected, in a “big house” and its garden. Like *La “Flor de Lis”* and *Balún Canán*, it is semi-autobiographical narrated in the first person from a young woman’s point of view. The house, modeled on one Loynaz knew as a child, is situated in the elegant Vedado district of Havana with a huge wild garden running down to the sea. The strange, psychological plot involves a girl, but it is difficult to explain what happens exactly. The protagonist belongs to a family, although their existence is only vaguely felt in the novel – there are no tyrannical parents or exploited servants. Usually alone in the house or the garden, in dialogue with the past and the future, the garden, perceived as a living, threatening presence throughout her life, finally devours or strangles her. It is as if she were suffocated by her very family roots. On one level *Jardín* is a love story, culminating in an encounter with a ghost from the past. But in the middle section the protagonist leaves the self-imposed confines of domestic space and travels round the world with a sea captain. The episode is rendered as a short flirtation with modernity, a temporary escape from self-absorption. Inevitably, however, the ghost pulls her back to the garden. There is no escape from this menacing male presence which possesses her and to which she is fatefully attracted. It functions as the male other which absorbs the female self, obviating the development of female subjectivity. While in other novels of the period written by men, such as Rivera’s *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*, 1924) and Gallegos’s *Doña Bárbara* (1929) in which the characters, male and female, are devoured by the vast South American landscapes, the jungle and the plains, in *Jardín* it is an overgrown garden, jungle-like but bounded, that functions in the same way. *Jardín* has not yet been translated into English and it is only since Loynaz was awarded the Cervantes Prize for literature in 1992 (at the age of ninety) that her works, including *Jardín*, have been published in modern editions which are now finding a place in the Cuban literary canon. There are clear links between this novel, with its interrogation of inner states, psychological and existential processes, and those mentioned previously by Garro, Bombal, and Lispector. Together they represent the carefully crafted writerly novel continued, as we shall see, in the work of Luisa Valenzuela and Diamela Eltit among others.

Moving to the contemporary scene, many recently published novels by women share the characteristics noted so far. Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*, 1989), adapted to film in 1993 by Alfonso Arau (to whom she was married), is a Mexican bestseller. Set in the “big house,” on a ranch in revolutionary Mexico, it centers on a traditional landowning family in which the youngest daughter, Tita, is expected to

remain single to look after her mother. She rebels when she falls in love, and thus begins a love story which follows the formula of sentimental romance. For this reason, unlike Castellanos's and Poniatowska's novels, *Como agua para chocolate* is light-hearted, humorous, and deliciously ironic. It is lifted out of its violent historical context by episodes of hyperbolic magical realism and immerses the reader in the world of women, using food and cookery, literally and metaphorically, as an unspoken form of communication in a censored environment. Tita uses the gender role forced on her against itself, to subvert the old order from within. In the end, though, like Bombal's heroines, her self-fulfillment is only possible in death. Isabel Allende's first novel, *Casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1982), as the title indicates, was set in a Chilean "big house," the home of authoritarian patriarch Esteban Trueba, who, like César Argüello before him, attempts to control the women of his domestic fiefdom. But here the women resist and forge an alternative way of being by rejecting the values associated with the masculinity Trueba upholds. Their nonconformism in the domestic space spreads out to encompass the police state. *Casa de los espíritus* clearly continues in the woman-centered novel tradition discussed above: it is set in the home, focuses on the lives of women, raises controversial social and political questions, and is told by the female protagonist. However, a shift in this pattern may be detected from the mid-1980s.

In Allende's second novel, *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadows*, 1984), the domestic space is left behind. The heroine's house and family are important, but more significant are her trips on a motorbike with her boyfriend, to the countryside, to the caves of Lonquén where she discovers the bodies of the "disappeared" killed by the military. The protagonist, Irene (signifying "peace"), is no longer constrained by the family. She is a professional journalist, controls her life, and is politically involved. This pattern, where the strong female heroine carves out a space for herself, and hence for the novel, is developed in *Hija de la fortuna* (*Daughter of Fortune*, 1999). Allende, who now lives in the United States, is without doubt the most successful bestselling woman novelist writing in Spanish of all time. She is a celebrity and a millionaire. Bookshops all over the world display copies of her novels. *Hija de la fortuna*, published in Barcelona by Plaza y Janés, was translated into Danish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, German, and Italian. *Casa de los espíritus* was translated to many languages including Czech, Farsi, Finnish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Japanese, Norwegian, and Turkish. *Hija de la fortuna* is featured on the Internet, with links to reviews, discussion questions, and an interview with the author. This is the face of twenty-first century globalization: the publishing industry advertises a novel as a commodity for purchase, consumption and, once used, for

disposal. To be profitable, Plaza y Janés, at the time one of the two most powerful publishing houses in Spain (the other being Planeta), needed to market multinationally, targeting Mexico, Chile, and of course the USA. *Hija de la fortuna*, an adventure story appealing to Chilean, English, and US readers (especially Hispanics and Chinese-Americans in California), fits this commercial bill. Moreover, its strong feminist protagonists appeal to women across the world. The most striking aspect of this novel is that the female protagonist Eliza does not remain at home but travels across the Americas, from Chile to California. In a way, her traveling mirrors the international public space increasingly occupied by several Latin American women novelists. The phenomenon is recent, post-1980, and parallels the development of gender studies and feminist criticism. These novels, upbeat sentimental romance for the modern woman, clearly create and meet popular demand. The formula is successful: a blend of love and politics from a woman's perspective coupled with semi-exoticism and easy reading.

The novels of Diamela Eltit, Allende's Chilean contemporary, could not be more different. These are challenging, experimental works for an elitist public, yet Eltit is also a bestselling author. Unlike Allende, Eltit did not leave Chile during the horrific Pinochet regime. Her first novel, *Lumpérica* (*E. Luminata*, 1983), written in powerfully surreal poetic prose, sold 7,500 copies, and its second and third editions were published by Planeta. *Lumpérica* radically breaks with the parameters noted above in relation to novels written by women. There is an anonymous female protagonist, but she has no home, house, or family. She is placed instead, alone and at night, in a park, a kind of wasteland or concentration camp where she is observed by spectral figures and an illuminated advertisement. The family patriarch has been replaced by an all-powerful "big-brother" whose ubiquitous presence is felt at all times. Unlike Allende's characters, this woman does not travel. Instead she is trapped and, apparently, tortured; her words are incoherent. There is no clear plot. Eltit and *Lumpérica* are closely associated with the Chilean neo-avant-garde, and there are many points of comparison with the novels of Garro, Loynaz, Bombal, and Lispector mentioned above which inscribe not only the socialization of women into gender roles but also articulate the emergence of frustrated female subjectivity through stream-of-consciousness and other disruptive techniques privileging psychological insight. These novels interrogate the very concepts "man" and "woman," separating the biological body from consciousness, and communicating the violence that the imposition of gendered identities produces in the human psyche. In Eltit's *El Cuarto Mundo* (*The Fourth World*, 1988), for example, the narrators are a boy with a girl's name, María Chipia, and his twin sister. The novel is set in a dysfunctional family and the boy never manages to

develop a sense of who he is. But Eltit probes even further; a large portion of the novel takes place not in the family as such but inside the mother's womb. The unborn boy narrates these parts too; he is a speaking embryo – in fact, he speaks even before he is conceived.

In Argentina, Luisa Valenzuela pursued a similar narrative strategy during the “Dirty War.” Her multilayered anti-novels explore the power of language to engender identities and impose social control. The experimental prose of *El gato eficaz* (“The Efficient Cat,” 1972), connecting women to cats and language, was intensified in the overtly political novel *Cola de lagartija* (*The Lizard's Tail*, 1983). This novel ridicules a former government minister (under Isabel Perón in the mid-1970s) who is shown to be so full of his own self-importance that he literally implodes. Related by the fictionalized Valenzuela, the novel intertwines myth and history, memory, imagination, and social commentary in highly inventive language, demonstrating that avant-garde techniques can be as politically subversive as realism.

It could be said that the two Chilean authors, Allende and Eltit, represent the extreme polarities of women's novel writing in Latin America today: popular/historical romance on the one hand, and neo-avant-garde experimentation on the other. Together they provide a two-pronged attack on patrocetric political oppression, especially that of the violent military state. Cultural critic Jean Franco shows how bestsellers employ romance (either “art romance” or the popular romance of the Mills and Boon/Harlequin variety), while neo-avant-garde novels reject the manipulative techniques of romance, according to which women achieve power by means of seduction and guilt: romance “reproduces the seduction of commodity culture under neo-liberalism.”⁵ Market values and concepts such as “nation” and “community” may be challenged only by repoliticizing the esthetic. What needs to be exposed is the way gender is implicated in social control, how power and rights intersect with masculinity and femininity. For Franco, the women writers of the neo-avant-garde position themselves at the limits of the gender system, so that their work fragments rational narrative into the language of the marginalized, “women, the mad, the outcast, or the child.”⁶ Franco, quoting Chilean cultural theorist Nelly Richard, refers to this as the “refractory aesthetic.”

Yet the Latin American bestsellers, like the sentimental novels before them, are not entirely collusive: they are also powerful texts which move readers on social and political issues. One of the most distinctive sub-genres in Latin American women's novel writing is the political love story. As this brief overview has shown, Allende's novels are the latest versions of a long Latin American sentimental-romance tradition: romance set in a political context to gain readers and raise awareness. Women writers in nineteenth-century

Latin America employed this strategy to encourage readers to empathize with the marginalized: the slave, the Indian, the poor. They too challenged public-centered liberal thought by giving voice to those excluded from the nation-state. The shift from sentimental romance to bestseller over 150 years mirrors the process of modernization in Latin America from the emergence of a market economy to global capitalism. But to what extent can the novel-commodity undercut the global market it sustains? Unlike the early novels, today's bestsellers are themselves a central component of the global market economy, and even if they partially subvert this system's social organization of sexual difference by questioning gender roles, unless they adopt disruptive techniques they do not get to grips with the more crucial concern, the psychosexual constitution of the gendered subject through language.

NOTES

1. "La inteligente escritora educacionista Miss Hudson," Clorinda Matto de Turner, *Viaje de recreo: España, Francia, Inglaterra, Italia, Suiza, Alemania* (F. Sempere: Valencia, 1909), p. 109.
2. Efraín Kristal, *The Andes Viewed from the City: Literary and Political Discourse on the Indian in Peru 1848–1930* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 93–126.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
4. Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Literatura y Sociedad en el Perú. La novela indigenista* (Lima: Lasontay, 1980), p. 39. This view was repeated in the "Foreword" to John H. R. Polt's translation of the novel, *Torn From the Nest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxxix.
5. Jean Franco, "Afterword: From Romance to Refractory Aesthetic," in Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies (eds.), *Latin American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 228.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

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