LETTERS AS SELF-PORTRAITS: EPISTOLARY FICTIONS BY WOMEN WRITERS IN SPAIN (1986-2002)

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LETTERS AS SELF-PORTRAITS: EPISTOLARY FICTIONS BY WOMEN WRITERS IN SPAIN (1986-2002)

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Lynn Celdrán

Lexington, KY

Director: Dr. Ana Rueda, Professor of Hispanic Studies
Lexington, KY
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

LETTERS AS SELF-PORTRAITS: EPISTOLARY FICTIONS BY WOMEN WRITERS IN SPAIN (1986-2002)

My study seeks to explore the interest that Spanish women authors such as Josefina Aldecoa, Carme Riera, Nuria Amat, Esther Tusquets, Marina Mayoral, Carmen Martín Gaite, and Olga Guirao have taken in the revival of epistolary fiction in recent decades. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century epistolary fiction in Spain was conditioned by social practices and by literary conventions that typically confined its heroines to an amorous plot and women authors to anonymity. I contend that if modern tradition of epistolary practices and other male-discriminatory practices kept women writers silenced or invisible in the Spanish literary world, contemporary women writers sketch themselves back into their texts. Fictional letters function as written self-portraits for them to reflect and tell their own stories, thereby creating a playful mirror effect between the fictional epistolographer and the historical author. By pushing the conventional boundaries of letter writing as a sentimental genre, contemporary women authors take liberty to rewrite female representation and to give the fictional protagonists a new voice and visibility. They revisit the theme of love in epistolary literature to explore refashioned—and often transgressive—discourses on gender, sexuality, and subject identity.

KEYWORDS: Epistololarity, Spain, Fiction
Contemporary, Women/Gender
LETTERS AS SELF-PORTRAITS: EPISTOLARY FICTIONS BY WOMEN WRITERS IN SPAIN (1986-2002)

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August 27, 2013
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when I began to entertain the idea of teaching at a higher academic level. Dr. Paz gave me wonderful feedback and support on ways to be pedagogically effective as I grow in the profession. All of these aforementioned experts have left an indelible footprint in my academic life at the University of Kentucky. I am eternally grateful to each of them for having walked this journey out with me. I recognize that this dissertation is, in some sense, a reflection of their shared ideas, in one way or another.
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Introduction

In my effort to pen an original title for my dissertation on women’s contemporary epistolary fiction, I have found myself battling learned conceptions of sexual and textual discriminatory tropes. Having observed so many classic epistolary book covers in which the woman letter-writer is sitting at her vanity or looking out a window, what immediately comes to mind are the enclosed spaces and literary parameters that have entrapped the woman letter writer. One of the first titles that I considered for this study was related to the symbolism of letter-writing as textual mirrors. After mulling it over, however, the title seemed to curtail the effectual means of agency that the very process of writing enacts. The current title, “Letters as Self-Portraits: Epistolary Fictions by Women Writers in Spain (1986-2002),” wishes to emphasize that the artist comes to recognize her “self” in the text, while it also points to the letter writer’s creative autonomy in the textual production that substantiates her existence.

I also dismissed giving my study a name that represented women’s epistolary writing as a narrative tapestry, because as Emilie Bergmann has so poignantly noted, it was Cervantes who coined the term “narrative tapestry” to refer to a “female-centered context” which also then conjures “Velasquez’s image of bare-armed woman spinning with a playful cat at their feet, overturning a basket and tangling the yarn within the Las hilanderas” [The Spinners] (Bergmann 183). Given that women writers have been immured by the male-inscribed literary text, any metaphorical imagery related to stereotypes of female-centered activites such as weaving, knitting, or sewing, would have been misleading. I was reluctant to draw parallels between narrative tapestries and the gender and sexuality guises for epistolary writing.
Bearing in mind the unique narrative structure that presumably sets epistolarity apart from all other types of genres, that is, the “I-You paradigm” that I will explain in chapter 1, it occurs to me that a title ought to invoke the provocative vision of women’s active participation in their aesthetic enterprise, and the elliptical movement of the writer’s words being received and read by an interlocutor who then returns her words. This notion breaks women writers out of male-inscribed literary traps, or female-centered contexts, in order to do as Virginia Woolf urged: “kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves [women] have been 'killed' into art" (237).

Some time ago I came across Frances Borzello’s Seeing Ourselves: Women’s Self-Portraits in which she appeals to the reader’s visual imagination of the woman artist standing before her canvas exploring ways to represent herself. I immediately drew a parallel between Borzello’s description of the female painters and women writers. I decided this figurative imagery was even more suggestive for the letter-writer who wills control over the execution of her art. In spite of the preconceived notions that male-dominated paradigms cast on her identity, the metonymic connection of the letter-writer sketching her self-representation onto a textual canvas seemed to marry the women artist’s intellectual and creative powers. In any case, while Borzello’s work was the inspiration for my definitive dissertation title “Letters as Self-Portraits: Women’s Contemporary Epistolary Fiction, 1986-2002,” choosing the most fitting title has been a matter of my personal aesthetic and interpretive musings on both classical and contemporary epistolary works.

For Frances Borzello “self-portraits are not innocent reflections of what artists see when they look in the mirror” (17). She evokes the consideration of women’s works as
“painted versions of autobiography, a way for the artist to present a story about herself for public consumption” (19). This is a relevant observation that points to how women artists’ self-portraits have been nearly invisible and how men’s literary control and authority have traditionally influenced women’s artistic professions. Borzello notes that “…women have been there all along, thinking as hard as the men about how to represent themselves in painting” (21). Borzello notes that some believed that self-portraits were naturally a female propensity that reflected their vanity: “for years as a woman looking into a mirror, a female self-portrait is evidence of this female vice” (26). Nevertheless, this derogatory perception was merely a larger reflection on the thinking of women artists, “all stemming from the fact that the female artist was a minority member of the art world with little control over the judgments, view and rules affecting her” (27).

Carrying this idea through to the history of feminine epistolarity, which I feature as a type of self-fiction or autobiographical written art, the same assumptions and critiques become applicable in terms of the masculine-dominated literary scene in Spain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nancy Miller’s essay “Cultural Memory and the Art of the Novel: Gender and Narrative in Eighteenth-century France” (Still and Worton 89), though it does not draw on Spanish examples, serves useful for understanding how the epistolary fictional narrative has been genderized to exclude women since the advent of the novel. She states that

…the literary categories that have served retrospectively to organize the variety of prose fiction within the novel as genre in the eighteenth century have effectively excluded the works of women writers from their historical relationship to the production of literature. Specifically, to designate all
women’s texts as belonging to the domain of the *roman sentimental*

displaces that writing into the margins of the cultural record. (87)

It is important here to consider that romance narratives have contributed to
maintaining hierarchies of social and cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality for
the consumer of fiction, particular for women readers. Furthermore, and in a similar
fashion, earlier women’s epistolary writing modeled feminine altruism, abnegation of
self-fulfillment, and lack of ambitious goals in order to sustain discriminating hierarchies
by men. Indeed the *roman sentimental* stifled and pigeon-held women’s artistic
expression as revolving around emotions and feelings related to the heart and amorous
discourse. This narrative prototype denied women, as Miller observes, “their powers to
read the world, their powers to know and describe the real” beyond this restricted literary
theme (87).¹

Approaching one’s understanding of “self” as artistic expression enhances my
argument of how epistolary writing functions to transform the literary portraiture of the
suggests that contemporary writers may regard letter-writing as a written self-portrait. In
this use, “letters” as Benstock notes, “provide freedom from the claims of reality
precisely because they are private, recording desires necessarily silenced by prevalent
social codes. Letters promise to reveal secrets, examine private passions, strip away the
social mask, and expose the real person. They attempt to create an image of self and are

¹ Miller’s question regarding eighteenth-century narrative, “if all women’s writing tends to be included
in the category of *roman sentimental*, what of men’s writing?” (87) makes the case of how the epistolary
text was a tool for constructing gender and heterosexual power relations. Were men void of emotion, and
incapable of writing about matters of the heart? Miller’s study illuminates how a revisionary recount of the
genre allows women writers to contest gender and sexual performativity by playing on conventions
regarding gender and genre writing in letter fiction.
the effect of such an effort” (91-92). I noticed that today women writers use epistolary writing to represent a new direction and freedom as both cultural readers and writers. Feminine epistolarity symbolizes a textual canvas that allows the writers to renegotiate paradigms that formerly constructed women’s representation and identity in epistolary fiction.

My interest in this thesis topic led me to the following overarching considerations: 1) If the advent of letter writing represented a type of closet writing for women, or a lesser form of art, what would be the artistic value and interest for this type of narrative in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, this being a more democratic and liberal era for writers to explore their own agenda? 2) Why does conjuring up the genre’s historical past prove useful for understanding how women writers challenge the conventions for genre and gender in writing? and 3) How have women writers redefined the textual parameters of the fictional letter from being an erratic woman’s mantra about dispossession in the eighteenth century to one of liberation and a more fluid discourse of gender and sexuality in its contemporary use? It seems uncanny indeed for women to return two centuries later to epistolary discourse as an ideal genre to project empowering self-portraits that contrast with previous representations of themselves as women artists. But this is precisely the challenge that I wish to explore.

Heteronormative amorous expression in contemporary epistolary literature must be traced to the classical and renaissance periods. The highly influential *Arts Amatoria*, in which Roman poet Ovid instructs men and women how to attract the opposite sex, characterizes binary differences between men and women for how each responds amorously to the other. And Ovid’s *Heroides* would also greatly influence the eighteenth
century romanticized epistolary paradigm of the female letter writer grieved by un reciprocated love or abandoned by her male counterpart. In Diego de San Pedro’s Cárcel de amor (1495) the male protagonist, Leriano, is enamored with Laureola. Due to their difference in class status, and Laureola’s unwillingness to jeopardize her royal honor, she refuses to court Leriano. He ends up consuming the torn pieces of Laureola’s letters, adding them to a liquid potion, and dies. Processo de cartas de amores (1548) by Juan de Segura, the first Spanish novel comprised completely of letters and related through prose, further pokes fun at the sentimental exaggerated love between a man and a woman delivered in the epistolary novel as the female protagonist is locked up in a tower of solitude to safeguard her from the perils of love and her potential suitor. These works were the conventional predecessors that represented the female figure as being barricaded in her heart ache and tormented by the “no return” on her sentimental investment, confined to an impossible and unrealized love affair. Other love stories in which letters were a central focal point, or which were the narrative vehicle for telling the story, would impact the direction of Spanish epistolarity as exemplified in Abelard and Heloise, the story of two lovers that has been revamped many times since its first publication in 1616, and translated into Spanish in 1796 by Francisco de Tójar. Abelard’s and Heloise’s illicit desire for each other is lived out surreptitiously and ultimately goes unrealized. These prototypes in epistolary literature would be transported to other historical moments that debase the literary woman’s intelligence and agency through letter writing.

My study seeks to explore how in recent decades, 1986-2002, contemporary Spanish women authors use letter fiction to make a transformation in the literary portraiture of the epistolary heroine that was molded in earlier literary representations. In the eighteenth
century, men’s epistolary writing continued to center on the female figure as the
distressed abandoned heroine, and on into the nineteenth century, women remained
objectified in literature, their textual representation oscillating between the self-abnegated
heroine and the sexually provocative female creature. Through the ancient narrative tool
of letter-writing, contemporary female artists create protagonists that have unequivocal
authority to their individual consciousness, as they carve their individuality back into the
written text. Indeed, it is an outstanding achievement for women artists to craft their
fiction through letter narratives, given that the epistolary archetype of the suffering
woman has been historically and politically alienated, both by the male’s representation
of her, and that of her own. This evolution of a once devalued and limiting narrative
mode equivocally associated with women’s propensity to write letters, leads me to concur
with Elizabeth Goldsmith’s inquiry in her study, *Writing the Female Voice* (1989): “Can
the figure of the woman letter writer be seen as an emblem of changing cultural notions
of both sexuality and textuality?” (vii). Goldsmith’s question open up the possibility that
women’s letter fiction purposely reflects the liberal cultural changes with regards to the
topic of sexuality, unlike earlier historical periods and movements that placed restrictions
on their art and literary expression.

In this dissertation I propose that by pushing the conventional, sentimental
boundaries of letter writing, twentieth- and twenty-first century women writers take
liberty to rewrite not only female representation in epistolary fiction, but to give other
marginalized protagonists voice and visibility. This dynamic process is exemplified in the
new epistolary practices by Spanish women writers from 1986 to 2002 as they revisit the
theme of love in order to probe creatively the literary possibilities of the genre, and
render emancipating discourses on gender, sexuality, and subject identity that challenge the parameters of epistololarity. While epistolary practices might be best seen along a continuum in epistolary history, contemporary works by Spanish female writers reveal a dramatic contrast against earlier conventions. The writers under study—Josefina Aldecoa, Carme Riera, Esther Tusquets, Nuria Amat, Marina Mayoral, Carmen Martín Gaite, and Olga Guirao—design protagonists who use letter writing to release the female entrapped voice and body. By addressing the you or addressee as “a counterpoint” they trace an elliptical movement back to the self, that reinforces the “I” and escapes from the oppressive phallocentrism that robbed female writers of their true expression. In the process, they also complicate traditional expectations and conventions of women’s epistolary writing. I contend that if traditional epistolarity and other male-discriminatory practices kept women writers silenced or invisible in the literary world and confined its heroines to romantic narratives and to an amorous plot at the mercy of others—with notable exceptions, of course—today they sketch themselves back into their texts. Contemporary fictional letters are written self-portraits designed for the letter writer inside and outside the fictional works to explore a sense of self, creativity, and agency through the epistolary mode. Letter writing produces a fluid discourse between women writers’ textual body and her physical existence, and is a literary vehicle from which women as central subjects of their artistic production emerge. That is, the act of writing is a self-reflexive function for both the author and the fictional letter writer.

The works that I analyze use epistolary discourse in a variety of ways and to different degrees. Some works are entirely epistolary novels, others include a letter or an exchange of letters by the protagonist or between characters embedded in a first or third person
narrative, and finally there are short stories and collections of short stories that are written in the form of letters. My study includes nine epistolary works by Spanish female writers: Josefina Aldecoa, *Porque éramos jóvenes* (novel 1986); Carme Riera, *Cuestión de amor propio* (novel 1988); Esther Tusquets, “Carta a mi primer amor” in *Correspondencia privada* (short stories 2001); Nuria Amat, “Carta a Alex” in *Amor Breve* (short stories 1990); Marina Mayoral, “Mi querida amiga” and “Estimada señora” in *Querida amiga* (short stories 1995); Carmen Martín Gaite, *Nubosidad variable* (novel 1992); and Olga Guirao, *Mi querido Sebastián* (novel 1992) and *Carta con diez años de retraso* (novel 2002). These authors’ creative spin on the epistolary genre indicates a new image of the fictional letter-writer and of their own work as artists.

This study examines the epistolary works of writers who challenge conventions of epistolarity through the I-you paradigm of the letter narrative. The unique structural feature of the I-you paradigm draws attention to the act of communicative writing, the power of narrating, and the sense of being heard. Undoubtedly, the effect of the epistolary form of addressee has a parallel in the novel or other genres insofar as writers reach out to their implied readers, desiring to artistically redefine their identity behind their textual canvas for how they wish to be read and interpreted as creators of their own discourse. But therein is the advantage to focusing on letter writing in epistolary novels and short stories: the first-person voice propels narrative agency and creativity through its dialogical appeal to a “you”. Women’s contemporary epistolary fiction resists binary entrapment by patriarchal conventions and appears to be a direct engagement with its

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2 Unless otherwise stated, all title translations, quotes from literary critics and scholars of novels or journals are my own translations. For translation of all passages in Carmen Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable*, I rely on Margaret Jull Costa’s 1995 translation, *Variable Clouds*. I also borrow Barbara Ichiishi’s translation of Esther Tusquets’ “Carta a mi primer amor” [“Letter to My First Love] in *Private Correspondence* [Correspondencia privada].
reader precisely because the authors have found new possibilities within the dialogical structure of the I-you paradigm. A return to the epistolary form allows the female writer to reclaim her body, her soul and mind, but also to experiment with ways to relate the alienation of others who are marginalized. Through the subterfuge of writing to a “you,” their writing reverts back to the self, recuperating and reconstructing the voice and visibility of the epistolographer, and also the lost “I” in the epistolary discourse that stands for all who have been invisible or voiceless.

Each chapter reflects my reading of select Spanish women’s epistolary works and their impact on the transformation of the epistolary genre. Different considerations of the I-you paradigm, which is explained in Chapter 1, articulate each chapter and help frame key issues under discussion. The I-you paradigm can either function as a masked “I”, where the epistolarity requires no exchange (Chapter 2); a writing cure for overcoming obstacles and exploring one’s need to create (Chapter 3); or, as a form of narrative seduction to engage the addressee in issues of gender and sexuality (Chapter 4).

To contextualize my analysis of the works selected, each chapter provides socio-political and cultural paradigms in Spain that reflect especially the female writer in historical periods. As for my theoretical framework, the mix of contemporary epistolary theory, gender and women’s studies, and scholarship on history and culture enrich my analysis as I seek answers to the questions I pose. The combination of a theoretical and an historical approach serves as a useful tool for interpreting what has happened and is now happening to the Spanish literary woman inside and outside of fiction, and how letters, in general, are a vehicle for historical and literary expression.
Chapter 1: “The Epistolary Tradition at a Crossroads: Artistic Constraints and Agency” is primarily devoted to building a historical framework for contextualizing twentieth- and twenty-first century’s Spanish women’s writing. Looking back on eighteenth and nineteenth-century epistolary fiction (its most memorable peak in European literary history was in the eighteenth century), proves to be fruitful for interpreting the importance and relevance of its reemergence in the twentieth- and twentieth-first century literary scene. The chapter also sets up the I-you epistolary paradigm and introduces the feminist theories that help me build my argument on how writing is inextricably connected to the artist’s sense of identity (her subjective, creative, and sexual experience). If amorous struggles once confined women to creating art related to the motif of the abandoned and disheartened love, which casts the female protagonist as lacking agency, women now use letter narratives to invest their artistic energies in a writing that gives them pleasurable returns and a sense of fulfillment and self-love. In other words, the fiction analyzed here points to an act of love. At the authorial level, the writers’ use their fictional protagonists to often echo their need to satisfy artistic desires. Their fiction is thus a long letter to their reader, indicating that what moves them to write is the power of the creative word.

I also include a brief analysis of Abumalham’s ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad? (2001) as a case study of a letter narrative that deconstructs feminine archetypes through amorous discourse. I show how the author uses the letter-narrative to play against the

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3 While epistolary works were dying out in the rest of Europe, there remained a surprising flourish of Spanish novels still employing the letter genre well into 1840, and a few of them—published anonymously may be indicative that the author was a woman—for instance, Cartas de la Reina Witimia a su hermana la princesa Fernandina (1822); La seducción y la virtud o Rodrigo y Paulina (1829). Others have been identified as belonging to women authors: La españolas naufragas (1831), by Segunda Martínez de Robles, and El senador megicano o carta de Lermin a Tlaucolde (1836) by María de las Nieves Robledo (Rueda, Cartas sin lacrar 67).
expected traditional settings of the female epistolographer who writes from the premise of a sexual and love experience with the male recipient of her letters. Abumalham inverts all the generic parameters and expectations behind the epistolary text: a set of letters by Shahrazad, addressed to an isolated man in a remote kingdom and whose letters are not included.

While Abumalham’s protagonist writes outside of an amorous relationship with her addressee, most authors in this study revisit amorous letter-narratives. The array of works demonstrate how difficult it is to mainstream women’s epistolary production as sentimental expression as they often break classic binaries and stereotypes that restrict women’ artistic economy and identity, inside and outside the frame of amorous discourse.

Chapter 2: “Self-Love: Letters as an Autobiographical Manifesto” explores the genre’s potential to create voice and visibility for female epistolographers who grapple with their personal and historical circumstances to express their subjectivization of love—a topic that these writers have chosen to write about. In other words, exploring suppressed memories allows the woman to recuperate her body and her voice, by reinstating herself, thus, ultimately rewriting herself in a history that has silenced her. These novels reveal protagonists who are independent thinkers and capable of finding their agency through their one-sided letter-writing which act as textual mirrors. Since the fictional addressees’ responses do not figure into the storylines of the selected works (only in chapter 2, as chapters 3 and 4 will present a different case), I am specifically concerned with how the I-you relationship in their letter narratives shift to a more solitary quest for self-truth. Therefore, the addressee can be understood as simply a reference point for the author’s internal dialogue to begin. Whether the addressee is explicit or
implicit, the obligatory construction of a “you” serves as a narrative technique “and a consequent distancing that may lead to self-discovery for the writer” (Altman 92). This takes place through the inherent properties of a first-person perspective which allows for self-reflexivity, self-referentiality through textual mirroring the addressee’s reference points. In each of the fictional works for this chapter, I venture to say that the epistolary protagonists write to gain a sense of self, and presence, not for the addressee’s sake, but for their own. Although in some sense the protagonists are physically abandoned and abjected by a male figure, they write as a means of revival and self-affirmation.

Josefina Aldecoa’s *Porque éramos jóvenes*, [Because We Were Young] Annick, the female protagonist, corresponds to David, her lover, over a period of years. After many years of tirelessly awaiting David’s physical return to her, Annick psychologically pulls away. In one of her final letters she writes, “lo que no acepto […] es el error […] mi visión deformada de ti. No me perdono el espejismo” (69). She alludes to how writing creates a textual place for questioning the authenticity of one’s self as a means of refracting from illusioned versions of oneself. Annick’s statement is explained through Irigaray’s theorization for becoming a visible subject. The letter also serves as a metaphorical mirror where Annick’s body materializes and emerges into the subject position of “I.”

In Carme Riera’s *Cuestión de amor propio* [A Matter of Self-Love] Angela writes a letter to an old friend Ingrid, to regain a sense of self-respect and integrity after her latest heart break. Angela has been violated at two levels, sexually and textually. Miguel, a writer, used her in bed and in order to gain material for a fictional story. Angela

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4 [What I won’t accept […] is the error […] my deformed vision of you. I won’t forgive myself of my naïve illusion.]
recognizes that Miguel repeats what many male authors have done before: sexually exploit women writers’ voice and visibility, outside and inside of fictional representation. The self-reflexivity that her letters proffer her, allow her to devise a plan where Miguel “sacará una moraleja misógina” (76). However, what Angela is seeking is not so much revenge as a victim of his manipulative ploy, but to filter through the false lies and misconceptions of who she is as an individual artist. Riera’s protagonist gains a sense of integrity and self-respect through the self-reflexive performance of her letter-writing.

The protagonist in “Carta a Alex” [Letter to Alex] in Nuria Amat’s Amor Breve [Brief Love] (1990) uses letter writing as a self-referential means to evaluate her attempt to being a modern woman, living falsely in an open-ended homonormative relationship that compromises her needs in the end. As she writes to Álex, she gains control of her life and her own desires, by asserting herself into the subject position of “I” of her discourse as Irigaray has suggested must happen for a woman to be a speaking subject, “I who am in this body and tell this narrative” (Van den Ende 144). The epistolagrer concludes that by learning to assert her needs and boundaries of her heart, she exercises self-referentiality as an act of self-love.

Esther Tusquets’s female letter writer in “Carta a mi primer amor” [“Letter to My First Love”; Barbara Ishiichi’s translation] from Correspondencia privada (2001) [Private Correspondence] uses the epistolary mode not only to remember and reflect on the past, but to construct an “adecuado epílogo” (81) of her lived experiences. The female protagonist writes to her deceased lover, Eduardo, to prevent her history and memory of their time together, and of her youth, from being silenced forever. By

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5 [He will learn a misogynist moral.]
6 [adequate epilogue]
reconstructing her memories in the encapsulation of a letter, she rescues them from oblivion. Her letter to her ex-love becomes a rhetorical artifact of her lived experience.

In Marina Mayoral’s *Querida amiga* [Dear Friend] (1990), the two epistolographers, a husband and wife, who each write to a well-known television host, to share his/her side of their life story, challenge the reader to consider how the individual’s painful and/or traumatic memory of his/her life experiences, cannot be reduced to another’s perspective. Mayoral’s epistolographers reinforce the notion that everyone has their individual interpretation of their life narrative and one to which they are entitled to.

Chapter Three; “Carmen Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable* [Variable Cloud; Margaret Jull Costa’s translation] (1992),” demonstrates not just a transition in feminine epistolary, but a novel in which women writers exercise artistic power of their textuality and sexuality, procreating through their words and producing a written manuscript of their lives. Martín Gaite’s novel centers on two former childhood friends, Sofía Montalvo and Mariana León, whose broken friendship over a mutual love interest, is mended after they become reacquainted through a chance encounter. Their encounter triggers an epistolary pact that unravels pleasurably throughout the novel and with erotic overtones. The dynamics of Martín Gaite’s novel inspired the overarching premise for this dissertation and merits a chapter devoted to its analysis. Letter-writing represents a blank canvas for the artist to deliberate over how she wishes to project and see herself through her written expression, creating a fresh self-portrait where the woman writer reflects on love and identity. This process can be effectively observed through Martín Gaite’s epistolographers: Sofía Montalvo and Mariana León break conventional rules for epistolary expression while perhaps subconsciously shedding off years of established and
learned social norms and behaviors. They resort to the I-you paradigm of their letter writing as a therapeutic means to overcome having to live up to false ideals for their feminine expression. Writing to each other allows them to eclipse the sentimental heroine imprisoned in partrihcry’s designs and expectations for women to model. Certainly, Martín Gaite’s work offers a suggestive discourse on how women artists’ use their creative energies to subtly undermine punitive frameworks that have subordinated women’s written expression, inside and outside the text.

Finally, Chapter four, “Olga Guirao and Homoerotic Love: Trangression of Sexuality and Texuality” examines how epistololarity is an elastic form most suitable for experimenting with the generic boundaries of gender and sexuality. The letter narrative becomes a site for questioning conventional modes of writing epistles as a woman and a man through the thematic vortex of sex and gender. In this chapter, I argue that Guirao’s employment of heterosexual and homosexual protagonists, male and female, is a calculated act to delve into perspectives that counter ideas of fixed gender and sexual identity. Marta E. Altisent suggests that contemporary women authors experimentation with “la proyección en un alter-ego masculino que siente la coerción del sistema en su propia esencia sirve para exponer las distorsiones internalizadas por un largo legado cultural opresivo en uno y otro sexo” (306). Furthermore, the author’s inclusion of the male’s perspective points to her quest to creatively understand how a certain alienation and desire to recuperate the lost connection to his/her own body does not exclude men. That is, no one is immune to being alienated by cultural oppression. I go one step further to propose that Guirao’s epistolary fiction opens up discourse on all individuals who have

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[The projection of a masculine male ego that feels the system’s coercion in its very essence serves to expose the internalized distortions of a long oppressive culture in both sexes.]
felt victimized and violated by hegemonic paradigms for living out one’s sexuality and sexual love. At the same time, she also makes a statement regarding how one’s sexuality parallels his/her textuality.

Olga Guirao’s two novels *Mi querido Sebastián* (1992) [My Dear Sebastián] and *Carta con diez años de retraso* (2002) [Letter Ten Years Delayed] reflect the voices of female and male letter-writers who scope out deep heart issues related to paradigms of their learned sexuality and gender identity. The protagonists hash out interesting ideas on how culture, ideology and politics alienate and exclude alternative sexualities through the lens of patriarchal silencing and censorship. Guillermo, a homosexual male, who pens a letter to his former lover Sebastián, does this by recounting how he had to live his sexuality surreptitiously, in constant turmoil and suppression of his sexual desire for him. In *Carta de diez años de retraso*, however, a male-female email exchange exposes how masculine biases and objectification of women constructed and influenced the characters’ heteronormative and homonormative perceptions of expression. By treating both of these novels in tandem, I am able to explore them in dialogical relation and as part of the I-you paradigm. The interrelationship between Guirao’s two novels links the complexities of Spanish culture beliefs on sexuality with the epistolographers’ reflections on their personal beliefs and experiences. Guirao’s novelistic experimentation with the epistolary form allows her to hone in on these relevant issues of identity by creating the illusion of fluidity that the I-you paradigm facilitates.

I would like to clarify that my analysis of contemporary women’s epistolary writing as a trope of self-production is not to sustain female exclusivity for this literary genre. Furthermore, it would be a grave and false assertion given that there are contemporary
writers who do not believe in a “feminine literature” per se in this dawning of a fresh millennium literary market. At the same time, however, Spanish women authors’ generational struggles and legacy in their endeavors for literary recognition should not be dismissed. The sad reality is that women writers confronted obstacles that male writers did not have to face, and those obstacles often influenced them and surfaced in their writing. Literary gender and genre conventions that once limited women writer’s authorial voice and identity in their narratives often pose new challenges to contemporary writers. The authors examined here in this study, playfully experiment and reconstruct new authorial subject identity in their textual creations as confident artists.

In this study of epistolary fiction by contemporary Spanish women writers, I hope to elucidate how political and cultural paradigms in key historical eras have impacted letter fiction and women’s writing. At the heart of this thesis is the question of how twentieth- and twenty-first century women writers use epistolarity as a trope for the fictional writer’s literary projection and evolution. Women’s epistolarity refashions the traditional I-you paradigm to restore authorial voice while creatively exercising a response and resistance to conventional modes of written expression. If women have been robbed of their self-representation through amorous letter fiction penned by men, contemporary women writers overcome their loss through epistolary writing. Letter writing now serves optimally as a textual canvas for the woman writer to create her self-portrait.

Beyond epistolarity, I hope that other fields will benefit from my study of contemporary women’s letter fiction such as cultural studies, women and gender studies, literary and intellectual history, and comparative literary scholarship, where discourses on marginalization and self-representation remain relevant topics, and the examination of
intimate narratives, offer a fluid means to developing, changing, and understanding the presence of oneself, against the past and future.
Chapter 1

The Epistolary Tradition at a Crossroads: Artistic Constraints and Agency

As documented in literary history and criticism (Menéndez Pidal, Aguilar Piñal), Spanish male writers of the eighteenth century such as José Cadalso, José Mor de Fuentes, Luis Fernández Gutiérrez, and Antonio Valladares de Sotomayor set the tone for distinguished feminine epistolary writing in works written by women and men. This is so in spite of the prevailing belief that women were superior in epistolary writing as sentimental expression came “natural” for them. In his 1684 Caractère, La Bruyère asserts that for letter writing, “the fair sex surpasses ours in this genre of writing” (qtd. in Goldsmith 27). Goldsmith argues that La Bruyère is in large part responsible for making a connection “between femininity conceived as emotion and amorous epistolarity” (33). Indeed, it seemed that the genre limited and restrained women’s writing to the expression of emotions, confining the female body and her mind according to the social and political ideals of identity and desire. Masculine control of epistolary fiction appeared to sever the woman’s mind from her writing, relegating it to the realm of pure emotional, irrational expression. Her voice and writing were connected to instinctive feelings, under male control and surveillance, inside and outside of the fictional realm.

The classical topos of “the abandoned lover” by Ovid in the Heroides, served as the ideal literary model to portray sexual hierarchy between men and women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As victims, violated and entrapped bodies, the

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8 Yet, one of Ovid’s heroines, Sappho, who was born on the island of Lesbos (the word Lesbian originates from the name of her birth place), insinuated homoerotic desire and love for other women in her writing. Kay Turner indicates that “it was Sappho herself who first indicated the relationship between women and letters. Turner surmises that in an ancient riddle dedicated to Sappho, she asks: “What creature is it that is female in nature and hides in its womb unborn children who, although they are voiceless, speak
heroines are overcome with emotion as they react to their lover’s abandonment and indifference toward them. This imagery provides the reader with not only an understanding of how the epistolographer was girdled and bound within the text, but a projection of how the woman writer was also perceived. In *Discourses of Desire* (1986) Kauffman has pointed out that “signs of physical pain (usually tears, sometimes blood) deface pages of her letter and testify to her physical as well as her psychic suffering” (36) and “writing comes to signify her life’s blood illustrating her identification with her text” (37).9

The emergence of manuals on behavior and etiquette on letter writing set the bar for how women were to act, write, and feel in amorous letters. In *Cartas sin lacrar* (2001), Rueda enlightens that the eighteenth century

invier en la mujer para desplegar sobre ella una coherción sutil pero constante de restricciones, prohibiciones y obligaciones que la convertirán en un ser de utilidad social. Según esta nueva “mecánica del poder”, el control meticuloso de las operaciones del cuerpo de la mujer complementa el de las operaciones de su organización interna. Un bucle del peinado, un golpe de abanico, una mirada furtiva en la tertulia, una visita, una carta, un libro de tocador, un breviario: ningún gesto es demasiado pequeño,

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9 Kauffman references Susan Gubar’s article, “The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1981), 243-63, as she interpolates female sexuality and textuality and its connection to blood and women’s writing.
Indeed, the embodiment of amorous letters contained an image that in the words of Katherine Jensen “conjures an essential female identity” (22) written and defined by men. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) had a great impact on epistolary fiction and other European countries followed his model. It is interesting to note here that although Richardson originally set out to write a manual for letter writing, his manuals evolved into novels. Fictional novels began to model actual epistolary rhetoric from existing and circulating letter manuals. The rigid parameters established in these letter writing manuals were played out in the fictional epistolary plot, establishing a continuum between both the woman and her body. The existing eighteenth and nineteenth century manuals on letter writing “circumscribed women’s writing within the epistolary domain” (Jensen 11) and also established “a sexual and literary hierarchy that privileges men” (Jensen 21). Katherine Jensen notes that the image of the woman as victim of man’s betrayal and abandonment in letter manuals pointed to woman’s inability as writing and speaking subject (11). This representation of the female letter writer marked the discriminatory hierarchy between men and women: “the lure of the Epistolary Woman and the manuals’ model—was precisely the lure of an essential female identity” (Jensen 22).

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[10] [invests in women to display over them a subtle but constant coercion made of restrictions, prohibitions, and obligation that will convert them into a useful social being. According to this new “power mechanism”, the meticulous control of the woman’s body operations complements the operations of her internal organization. A lock of hair, a wave of her fan, a furtive look at the tertulia, a visit paid, a letter, a book for her dressing room, a prayer book: no gesture is too small and nothing escapes the oversight and the disciplinary methods of tutors, parents, priests, and confessors.]
If in France and England the historical and literary portrayal of women depict them as isolated and dispossessed, the case of Spain in the long eighteenth century is even more extreme, as the novel Las españolas náufragas (1831) [Spanish Women Who Shipwrecked] by Segunda Martínez de Robles illustrates regarding the social position of the woman as continually abandoned and a victim of love (qtd. in Rueda 95).

“Shipwrecks,” a reoccurring trope in eighteenth century literature, gives Martínez de Robles leverage for reversing that image. Rueda states that “si escribir cartas de amor les está vedado a nuestras epistológrafas, no dudan en recurrir a la confidente con el ánimo de encontrar una red de apoyo que canalice…sus sentimientos, y a seres influyentes que puedan revertir su destino de víctimas amorosas” (95).11 Rueda continues, “en suma, hallan en las cartas la interacción que cortocircuita su confinamiento y que las conecta con el mundo. Escribir misivas es su pasaporte para la reinserción en el orden social” (95).12 While there were Spanish women writers such as Martínez de Robles who did attempt to reverse the unequitable representation of women’s letter fiction to that of men’s, the marginalization of women and feminine writing continued to be exacerbated as literature faced severe censorship, demarcating the literary domains to be governed by men and women. The Spanish literary scene reveals that “feminine” epistolary writing was predominantly responsible by men. In other words, men controlled the genre, and women’s voices were subject to patriarchal interpretation inside and outside the text.13

11 [If our epistolographers are banned from writing love letters, they don’t hesitate to appeal to the confidant with the hope of finding a network of support receptive to their feeling and influential people who might be able to reverse their fate as victims of affection.]
12 [In short, they find in the letter exchange a means to short-circuit their confinement and to connect them with the world. Writing missives is their passport for their reintegration in the social order.]
13 In her panoramic study of epistolarity and its history in Spain, Cartas sin lacrar, Ana Rueda proposes that if letter manuals had such a powerful influence on socially accepted conduct, one could foresee how epistolary novels might be produced and read as another tool for social conduct (80).
In the Spanish Enlightenment, the transition to a modern society brought about a magnitude of changes for women and men. Even though women continued to be largely relegated to the private sphere while men had full reign of the public sphere, there were exceptions of women’s visibility and performance. For example, women’s roles in salons and as educators to their children extended indeed beyond the domestic sphere. Theresa Ann Smith observes in *The Emerging Female Citizen: Gender and Enlightenment in Spain* (2006) that “the tertulia provided a wonderful opportunity for women who had gotten a taste for learning early on [...] to foster Enlightenment exchange in a way that supported their own intellectual growth” (45). Nevertheless, during the age of Enlightenment, the feminine figure remained, for the most part, under male control and dominance. In eighteenth-century Europe in general, a woman who wrote amounted to a “letter closet” because she did not pose a threat or danger to the masculine power structure. In spite of the benefits that the Enlightenment project brought to women, epistolary novels were argued by both Katherine Jensen and Ruth Perry, to be a political

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14 Lisa Vollendorf’s study *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* (2005) deliberates over women’s roles in education and political influence during the early modern period in Spain, leading into the eighteenth century. She indicates that “through such organizations as Madrid’s Economic Society, educated middle-and upper-class women oversaw the vocational education of their working class counterparts” (185). Her scholarship seems to support, however, the few exceptions of women that strategically challenged paradigms that conceptualized them as inferior. Again, it is historically well-documented (Martin Gaite, Rueda, Smith) that women, for the most part, were marginalized from the public domain of decision-making and politics, not to mention their limited participation in the literary realm.

15 Smith qualifies the particular function of saliennières in Spain. She notes that while many associates the salons with women’s quest for recognition and power, “scholars now emphasize the importance of these gatherings to the educational and intellectual objectives of both the men and women involved” (42). While her observation dismisses the notion of the salons as a fostering space exclusively for women’s intellectual gains, Smith’s alludes to the equal terms that salons offered to men and women in their thinking and debates regarding art and relevant subject matter of the Enlightenment. Smith indicates that this notion “dismantles[ed] the old portrait of salon women as unfit judges who made a mockery out of themselves in trying to comment on their male contemporaries’ intellectual pursuits” (42).

16 Epistolarity theories commonly use this metaphor to describe letter writing that is secluded from public view. For example, Patrick Paul Garlinger uses the “letter closet” metaphor to describe how homosexual desire is revealed through epistolary writing in his work *Confessions of the Letter Closet: Epistolary Fiction and Queer Desire in Modern Spain*.
tool for keeping the woman figure subjugated and oppressed in both daily life and fictional form.\(^\text{17}\) At the same time, however, one could presume that the mind of readers of fiction was in turn shaped by these cultural manifestations that pretended to emulate real life situations.\(^\text{18}\)

Behind the epistolary novels written by Spanish male authors at this time, there was a plethora of female voices that emerged from these fictional texts, typically portraying their heroines as passive, irrational, love sick, abandoned, and mourning women suffering from unfulfilled desires. *La Leandra* (1797-1807) by Antonio Valladares de Sotomayor and *Cornelia Bororquia* (1799) by Luis Gutiérrez are examples of eighteenth-century novels where male authors disguised themselves behind a female voice, suggesting a literary act that has been referred to as “male ventriloquism” (Rueda, *Cartas sin lacrar* 50). These texts capitalize on women’s suffering and limited agency: innocent Cornelia spends the entire novel jailed by the Inquisition and is eventually burnt at the stake; Leandra has endured the death of several of her suitors. Cornelia’s ability to connect to the outside world via letters is highly restricted. And while Leandra writes incessantly, she exhibits a high degree of self-censorship in what she writes to her confidant Aniceta for all her correspondence is read by her new fiancé, Eduardo.

\(^\text{17}\) I should note that Dolores Fuentes Gutiérrez references 1878 to be a time when illiteracy among Spanish women remained high. Only 9.6% of women were able to read, and these women were obviously of the elite class in Spanish society. Fuentes Gutiérrez obtains this information from *Campo Alange (condesa de), La mujer en España. Cien años de su historia 1860-1960* (Aguilar 1964). My reference to Fuentes Gutiérrez study is to point out that not only were there few women who were literate, those who were learned, were identified with emotional and passionate rhetoric that seemingly came “natural” to their essential subjectivity and identity.

\(^\text{18}\) In the eighteenth century the invocative power of the letter was its ability to recreate everyday reality. Rueda asserts that “las prácticas discursivas de la época permiten un equilibrio entre lo aventurero o fantasioso con lo cotidiano, lo netamente aleccionador con el entretenimiento, lo histórico con lo autobiográfico, borrando más aún la supuesta línea divisoria entre la literatura y la vida real” (30) [the discursive practices of the era permitted an equilibriun between adventure or fantasy with the everyday, the purely instructive and the entertainment, the historical and the autobiographic, erasing even more the imagined dividing line between literature and real life.]. Rueda’s observation indicates that fiction and social conditions mutually shaped one another.
In the nineteenth century, Spain’s political and cultural paradigms for gender and genre expectations continued to infiltrate literature, and affected female authors and their art; women who wrote and published epistolary works, often reproduced love plots that echoed the gender norms and traditions held by the prevailing masculine culture. Fernán Caballero’s (pseud. of Cecilia Böhl de Faber) *Un verano en Bornos* [A Summer in Bornos] (1852) and *Una en otra* [One inside the Other] (1882) exemplify this situation.

At the end of the nineteenth-century Realism and Naturalism perpetuated some of these practices. In his review of Charnon-Deutsch’s *Fictions of the Feminine in Nineteenth Century Spanish Press* (2000), David Gies notes Spain’s political agenda for maintaining a subordinate female: “[by] manipulating the physical representation of women, men managed to associate her with the natural world, family values, domesticity, powerlessness, exoticism, illness, and even death. Why? It was an easy way to contain and control women” (739). Gies states “the feminine body was one of bourgeois society’s most desirable (if uncontainable) sexual objects” (739). This certainly appears to be the case in Juan Valera’s epistolary work *Pepita Jiménez* (1874). Pepita is Don Luis’s object of desire and represents the “evil” that the male letter writer seeks to avoid a moral downfall. The underlying assumption in novels such as *Pepita Jiménez* remains that women either were the seducers, plotting for the evil downfall of men or women or the religious heroines of high morals and edifying ethics for the country. In either case, the traditional strategy of subjecting women to men’s expectations in epistolary fiction persisted.

Rueda mentions Jacinto Benavente’s *Cartas de mujeres* (1893), which contains a series of anonymous letters by women on a variety of subjects, but all of which portray
the woman as the upholder of the moral foundation of Spanish society. While Benavente praises women’s “natural affinity” for letter writing in the prologue, he does what generations of male writers have done before: he speaks for the female epistolographer only to relegate her to anonymity (Rueda 51). But the fin-de-siècle marks a sharp departure from the traditional woman’s role in history as female writers became aware of their subordinate status and the country’s political and religious stance toward them. Indeed, their writing revealed an awareness of having been socially and politically denounced and robbed of expression in Spanish history.

The progressive female thinker Emilia Pardo Bazán, who wrote several epistolary works, speaks to the marginalization of the female writer of letters in *La quimera* (1905). While it is not an epistolary novel per se, the love plot plays out the letters of the protagonist. Zola, the female letter writer, reveals lucid thought and self-reflection, but she isolates herself in a convent after being rejected by Silvio (qtd. in Ana Baquero 158). Here the point is that for men and women there remained a separation of private and public spheres, both physically and psychologically, which filtered into fictional letter writing as topic.

Carmen de Burgos’s *Cartas sin destinatario* (1912) and María Martínez Sierra’s *Cartas a las mujeres de España* (1916)—which she published under her husband’s name, Gregorio Martínez Sierra—used the epistolary genre to write political essays. Carmen de Burgos in her first chapter in *Cartas sin destinatario* speaks about borders and how (the division of these borders) “han creado las razas; las razas han creado las patrias” (4).19 Perhaps the writer speaks explicitly about political borders; however, the implicit

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19 They have created peoples; and different peoples have created nations]. Note that the usage of “raza” in this context does not translate as “race” according to the period’s usage.
message is that women cross “literary borders” when they escape the confines of genre and gender writing. In her works, Martínez Sierra treats the inconsistency between men and women in regards to lawmaking. She states, “el Pueblo, es decir, la Nación, está formada por hombres y mujeres, y las mujeres, obligadas a obedecer la ley, como los hombres, no han intervenido en la ‘construcción’ de la ley; la obediencia que en los hombres es voluntad, en ellas tiene que ser resignación” (25). Their use of the epistolary form does not point to writing as an abandoned woman in Spanish society, but as capable intellectuals and instrumental for change. Both Burgos and Martínez Sierra can be seen as pioneers of women’s innovative epistolary practices at the beginning of the twentieth century with lasting influence on women’s artistic autonomy. Nevertheless, most efforts to bolster women’s independence by the Second Republic would be short-lived by Franco’s military uprising.

While epistolary fiction did not appear in many texts during the first half of the twentieth century, the novela rosa seemed to function as another means to subordinate women’s representation in textual form. This sentimental genre, which flourished during the Postwar era, substituted what traditional epistolarity did to the female figure in that it made the sentimental heroine a prototype for women’s fiction. Carmen Martín Gaite states,

En una época como la de la primera posguerra española, donde los modelos de comportamiento ofrecidos a la mujer por la propaganda oficial eran los de

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20 […The peoples, in others words, the Nation, is formed by men and women, and women, being obligated to obey the law, like men are, have not intervened in the construction of the law; in the case of men, obedience is voluntary, but in the case of women, it’s resignation.]

21 It is worth mentioning here that I came across a fictional letter penned by 19th century poet and writer, Rosalía de Castro “Las Literatas. Querida Eduarda” (1866) which some readers mention (Ana Caballé and Felix Hangelini indicated this in their blogs, for example) is directed to her alterego, lamenting the difficulties of a woman writer living in a misogynist society. The letter writer, Nicanora, encourages Eduarda not to publish any of her writing so to avoid her art being accredited to the male literary figure.
restituirla a la pasividad de ‘sus labores’, como reacción a las novedades de la República, si podía encontrarse cierto conato de ‘modernidad’ en aquellas protagonistas femeninas de la Icaza o de las hermanas Linares Becerra que viajaban solas […] Pero el lector estaba tranquilo desde que abría el libro hasta que lo cerraba, seguro de que ningún principio esencial de la femineidad iba a ser puesto en cuestión y de que el amor correspondido premiaría al final de cualquier claroscuro de la trama… (Desde la ventana 90).  

It is noteworthy to mention that while there was not a proliferation of women writers who produced epistolary fiction during the postwar era, there were women authors who employed other self-reflective narratives in their writing, such as the diary form. Concha Espina’s Esclavitud y libertad: Diario de una prisionera (1938), for example, regards her memories of the Spanish Civil War. Other women authors who wrote in first-person genres in their fiction during the postwar period are: Rosa Chacel (Memoria de Leticia de Valle, 1945), Ana María Matute (Primera memoria, 1959), and Dolores Medio (Diario de una maestra, 1961). Nonetheless, while autobiographical narratives forms were not as readily published in Spain as in other countries during the first half of the twentieth century (María-José Blanco López de Lerma 22), they offered a creative outlet for women writers and an ontological connection to their art. On the subject of women writer’s “postwar narrative”, Elizabeth J. Ordóñez contends in Voices of Their Own: Contemporary Spanish Narrative by Women (1991) that the postwar narrative “speaks

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22 [In the beginning of the Spanish postwar, when the official propaganda offered women models for behavior that restored her to passive domesticity as a reaction to the changes of the Republic, one could discover a certain attempt at modernity in Icaza’s female protagonists, or in the Linares Becerra sisters that traveled alone […]. But the reader remained certain from the moment she opened the book until she closed it, assured that no essential moral code for femininity was going to be challenged and that requitted love would endure until the end despite whatever hazyiness in the storyline.]
[...] of the woman’s reinscription of her cultural position into a text she may more fully claim her own. The postwar narrative of female adolescence is thus especially revealing when considered within the framework of doubly coming of age as woman and as a writer. Clearly the culture restrictions of postwar Spanish society in many ways exaggerated the limitations usually associated with being an adult in contemporary society. For a young woman enclosed within a prison house of political as well as gender restrictions, coming of age as a writer could be no easy task” (34).

Upon Franco’s death in 1975, there appeared to be a new social consciousness and an awakening for the Spanish public. The democratization of Spain and its new constitution of 1978 brought about a cultural revolution for women. The new democracy allowed them to explore a wider range of issues within their texts beyond self-abnegation and motherhood. Subsequently, women’s narratives began forming a canon of literature that reflected their autonomy and control of their own written discourse. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the artistic contribution made by former twentieth-century generations of women authors—Carmen Laforet, Elena Soriano, Elena Quiroga, Ana María Matute, Montserrat Roig, and Carmen Martín Gaite, to name a few—must not be undermined as they paved a path for contemporary women writers who would later follow. Cristina Fernández Cubas, Soledad Puértolas, Paloma Díaz-Mas, Carmen Gómez Ojea, Rosa Montero, and Adelaida García Morales are examples of women novelists and short story writers whose assertiveness and centrality to their literary production “disrupt[s] textual expectations that have been internalized” through phallocentric master narratives (Ordóñez 150).
More interesting to this study, however, is that after the mid-eighties there appears to be a heavy use of the epistolary narrative. Ironically, while women’s first-person writing was traditionally associated with being cloistered or away from public view, contemporary’s women literature revealed a need and desire to explore intimate modes of writing in contemporary literature. That said, with the plethora of women’s epistolary fiction that has emerged in the last three decades, I argue that the I-You paradigm in the letter narrative offers the epistolographer an outlet for soul-bearing and getting in touch with her ‘self’. For this reason, the return to the epistolary form showcases not only women writers’ creative spin on the genre, but how women’s epistolary fiction changed beyond the traditional conventions of genre and gender over the last centuries. Ángeles Encinar points out in her essay “La narrativa epistolar en las escritoras españolas actuales” (33-50) that contemporary feminine novelists subvert the traditional epistolary genre by using it as “un recurso que permite a la narradora confrontar su situación actual, reconocer el error cometido al haber subordinado su existencia a la aceptación de otro y, finalmente, reorientar su vida” (39).23 Drawing from Encinar’s insightful conclusion, I explore how women artists engage the letter narrative to undermine the gender and genre boundaries that deny them the fluidity of writing about individual subjectivity, sexuality, and gender.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study reflects an eclectic approach that comprises theories ranging from epistolarity, and women and gender studies, to historical and critical

23 [A recourse that allows the narrator to confront her current situation, recognizing the mistake she made in having subordinated her existence to finding acceptance by others, and, finally, being able to reorient her life.]
perspectives on women writers’ literary enterprise. The varied scholarship offers important angles for understanding how women’s letter narratives both transgress and transcend the limitations of genre and gender at a particular historical juncture. It is imperative to keep in mind that the author’s awareness of her cultural experiences cannot be entirely detached from the creation of her texts. Along these lines, Catherine Davies indicates that for women novelists since the 1990s “…the problem is to elicit the boundaries between the personal and the political through art from a female perspective” (216). For this reason, the convergence of multiple theoretical perspectives casts insight on how women writers engage the first-person narrative to explore the ontological fluidity and agency of the “I”, and the opportunities that this form offers for the configuration of subject identity, both for the literary subject and the author’s voice. The inclusion of epistolary theory is primordial as it illuminates the literary conventions and properties specific to the letter form that affect meaning or how a text is read. Because my selected authors’ works focus on issues of gender and sexuality, it is equally important to include feminist studies (and parts of Robert Connelly’s insights on masculinity in chapter 4), in order to explore how women authors challenge artistic topoi in traditional amorous epistolary fiction and other limitations that relate to her sex and gender. I shall return to this thought later in the chapter when I address the author’s role as a reader of culture and politics and as reader of her own text. Each chapter is prefaced by historical/cultural contextualization and incorporates relevant critical studies.

**The Epistolary I-You Paradigm**

Because it is perhaps the key convention of the epistolary mode, the I-You paradigm will be the main theoretical grid to guiding my study. Epistolary scholars such as Janet
Altman, Ruth Perry, Linda S. Kauffman, Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven, Ana Rueda, Ángeles Encinar, and Ana Baquero recognize the importance of its dynamics in the decoding of meaning. Janet Altman’s Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (1982) remains a classic and hardy work for exploring the genre’s potential as an “artistic form and narrative vehicle” (3). The potential of a mutual exchange between the epistolographer and the addressee is what makes epistolarity fascinating as it “exposes the internal processes of the reading subject” (Kauffman xxii). It is not only the self representation of the “I” utterance that is configured into the text, but the role of the addressee who also “significantly influence[s] the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed” (Altman 4). Altman denotes that it is the anticipated writing exchange, the reciprocated response, which sets epistolary apart from any other first-person writing as it is the “result of a union of writer and reader” (88).

The I-You exchange implicates a particular frame for reading a letter-narrative at both the internal and external level. At the internal level, the I-sender directs his/her utterance to a you-addressee who takes on an important role as recipient. Her/his role should therefore never be undermined in the creation of meaning. On the one hand, the role of an addressee serves primarily to channel the utterances of the letter writer and to reinforce the “I” in epistolary discourse. On the other hand, it is presumed that the “you” to whom the letter is addressed will become the “I” in the response, switching roles with the letter writer in a potentially ongoing exchange. The addressee often gives the illusion of being an effective contributor to the written communication in the I-you paradigm, serving as a stable reference point “the sounding board of the letter writer’s sentiments” (Altman 50), and s/he is essential to the soul-searching of the letter writer’s life.
experiences. That is, the epistolographer feels connected to the confidant, who listens to her, values her words, and allows her to become a speaking subject. At the external level, the I-you paradigm implicates the writer herself and the external reader, whose role is juxtaposed to that of the internal reader. The dynamics between the I-You paradigm in epistolary discourse allows both the epistolographer and the author to explore the notion of letter-writing as a means of self-discovery while having her words channeled by the addressee. The epistolary exchange thus amplifies the interchangeable dynamic roles of the writer-as-reader, and reader-as-writer by doubling the communicative exchange between these roles. Further, the reciprocity between the epistolographer and addressee reinforces the notion of “presence” and “being” in discourse as it also “governs our perception of which characters are to be principal narrative agents” at two distinct levels (Altman 120). For example, the two writers in Carmen Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad* variable, Mariana and Sofia, are a case in point. As writers and readers of their own cultural milieu, and of each other’s life narrative, they decide to rewrite their personal interpretation of their individual stories, packing their letters together in a publishable text. This editorial decision blurs the boundaries between the internal and external level discussed, conjuring the “presence” of the characters and empowering them with a role that exceeds the epistolary exchange itself. I claim that the fictional epistolary texts in this study foreground the complexities of writing and reading as their protagonists negotiate their position of identity by rejecting dominant discourses that rob them of their personal autonomy and their ability to express their own sentiments.

My analysis of each writer’s choice of the rigid yet versatile epistolary paradigm in their fiction allows for an overarching statement about each author’s position as reader
and writer. As reader of cultural discourses and misconceptions, the writer has the freedom to transgress them in ways that are traceable in her text. The author chooses to resist dominant discourses of gender and sexual identity through the lens of sentimental writing to make a statement about how, as a writer, she engages actively with the text. P. Schweickart invites us to consider that the literary canon is androcentric, and that this has an adverse effect on women readers when they come in contact with male-dominated textual discourses. Schweickart refers to Fetterley’s theory, which states that “the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the immasculcation of women by men…women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (42). Male-centered texts have rendered women dependent and vulnerable as they too have often circulated the “male system of values” in their own quest for identity. Fetterley states:

not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified, and legitimazed in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male –to be universal– is to be not female.

(qtd. in Schweickart 42)

Fetterley’s observation points to the profound detriment that androcentric literature has on the woman reader, but his assertion also hints at how the residual effects of male representation of women may work in her resistance to those inscriptions of her. As Sara Mills conveys in Gendering the Reader (1994), I am persuaded that a “text can be site of
resistance to the dominant reading position” where a reader mediates and identifies with social norms that she/he then constructs and refracts from “according to the images that are presented in the text” (26). The works that I analyze in this essay illustrate how the
internal and external letter-writers counter paradigms of social and political intent designed to instill identity through the text. They mediate other interpretive outcomes from their positions as readers, and are designed to extend empathy to others who have been marginalized by their gender or sexual identity. Judith Still and Michael Worton’s argument in *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (1993) enlightens how expectations of one’s identity also provides an artist room for resistance and creativity. As both writer and reader, the artist can test her resistance and explore her creativity in debunking fixed identities. Still and Worton point out that “while theorists from Plato and Aristotle onwards have tended to cast the reader as the passive and therefore ‘feminine’ role, and while most (male) social philosophers until the twentieth century presupposed that women were both marginal and dependent”, the most effective means for challenging these assumptions related to the woman writer is through a “dialectic between construction (reading as being written) and action (reading as writing) in the human subject” (11).24 Still’s and Worth’s assessment of the woman artist fosters her resourcefulness as both writer and reader for interrogating those presuppositions about her identity. Ángeles Encinar notes of twentieth- and twenty-first century feminine epistolary that “la finalidad real de la carta, al ser la narradora asimismo la lectora interna del discurso, es mantener un diálogo múltiple consigo misma—el

24 It is interesting to note that Aristotle’s sister “Arimneste” is a common point of reference when tracing the origins of women’s silence and eradication in literature. In *Voices of Their Own* (1991) Elizabeth Ordóñez makes an allegory of Spanish women writers who have been silenced by men’s canonical textual representations of them by comparing them to “Arimneste” (13). Ordóñez makes the point that few men writers have ever dealt with the same disempowerment of silence as women. Critics of Aristotle’s work note that he scarcely even mentions his sister, and only refers to her as “Nicanor’s” mother (61). In “Aristotle’s Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment” Lawrence Lipking states that it is unlikely that Arimneste even knew that Aristotle in *Poetics* considered her sex as “inferior” (Lipking 67). Aristotle claims: “Silence is a woman’s glory, but this is not equally the glory of man” (qtd. in Lipking 67). Lastly, what piques my curiosity is whether Rosalía de Castro intentionally chose “Nicanora”, the feminine version of “Nicanor” to sign off in her letter to “Querida Eduarda”. See note #20. It seems noteworthy to at least bring to attention this possible correlation, given that in the letter the fictitious writer laments men’s control over women’s literary enterprise.
enfrentamiento entre su yo pasado y presente—que la conduce a un momento de reconocimiento, la anagnórisis Aristotélica, a través de la lectura de su propia escritura” (46). Epistolarity would then be an ideal ground for measuring the writer’s resistance to the literary constructs of her. Exploring suppressed memories allows the woman to recuperate her voice, and as we shall see next, her body, by reinstating herself, and thus, ultimately rewriting herself in a history that has silenced her.

**Body, Text, and the Construction of “Self”**

The body as a medium of patriarchal control and order serves as a trope for textual and narrative practices. Let’s begin with an example. In *Nubosidad variable*, Mariana hints at how women’s bodies have experienced the effects and limitations of patriarchy. Her recollection of the painting *Breaking the Vicious Circle*, in which the woman’s breast is enclosed by barbed wire, symbolizes the common burden that women share: “Nada me consuela tanto en este momento, Sofía, como pensar que puedas conocer ese cuadro” (141). This tradition of women’s sexual objectification, and their bodies controlled by imposed identities of political and cultural hegemonic order makes the fictional epistolographers’ writing on sexuality all the more compelling. Their letter writing draws attention to how women authors can break free from these confining identities through self-representation, defy the confinement of this generic convention, and create a new identity, that is, a place for subjectivity.

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25 [the actual objective of the letter, by the fact that the narrator herself is the internal reader of her own discourse, is to maintain a multiple dialogue with oneself, confronting her past with her present self, which drives her to a moment of recognition, an “Aristotelian anagnorisis” through reading her own writing.]

26 [Nothing consoles me quite so much at this moment, Sofia, as the thought that you might know that painting.] (128). Note: *Breaking the Vicious Circle* is a 1962 painting by Catalan artist, Remedios Varo (1908-1963). During the Spanish Civil War, she moved to Mexico and remained there until her death.
That is, in short, the end results of the two protagonists’ correspondence and mediation of love: to transcend sexual identity as well as textual form. They come to resolve that their sexual identity is no longer a political and cultural commodity. If in classical romance plots the epistolary heroine’s body becomes “the territory to master; female sexuality is harnessed for the body politic…” (Kauffman qtd. in Goldsmith 226), the characters in Nubosidad variable dismiss a political metanarrative that pushes women as “national resource” (226). By this I mean that, if women were formerly represented in literature as the homekeepers, whose life and body remained hidden in the four corners of her private domain, or whose function was as that of “breeders and their ensuing responsibilities as socializers of former subjects” (Kebadze 17), then the two protagonists challenge this patriarchal inscribed identity. They write to understand their deepest essential selves and to break away from the tyranny of oppressive sexual/gender expectations on their performance and identity, and explore themselves through their writing: “Y deseé que estuviera a punto de ocurrirte una aventura bonita, algo que te saque de tu rutina matrimonial y tus problemas de fontanería” (229).

Superimposed external models that produce inequities between men and women—men as subjects and women as objects—are undermined through the protagonists’ resistance to propagate them. Mariana ponders about the couple she closely observes while staying at a beach hotel: “He llegado a la conclusión de que sus relaciones con la mujer objeto—como posiblemente su propia biografía—carecen de todo incentivo”

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27 According to the 1889 Napoleonic Civil Code, “…a married woman was totally dependent on her husband, who was her legal representative, until widowed” (Davies 6). This constitution remained in place and enforced, except for “the brief interlude of the Republic (1931-1939), so this was the legal situation of Spanish women throughout the twentieth century until 1975” (Davies 6).

28 [I hoped that you would be about to embark on a lovely adventure; something that would get you out of your matrimonial rut and away from your plumbing problems.] (216)
Her poignant critique of the gentleman’s objectification of the woman dismantles the glorified role of the male hero, but most importantly, it establishes a direct link between the “mujer objeto” and writing. At the same time, the two protagonists transcend the romantic use of woman as muse by taking charge of their existence as reading, writing, and speaking subjects.

The question of woman’s access to her body occupies a prominent position in contemporary feminist philosophy. The central issue that feminists grapple with is woman’s alienation from her body, and how culture treats the female body as a text to write upon. Renowned French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, endeavor to understand how differences and experiences are lived through the body. This is applicable to the steps that the woman writer must undertake to see her writing as a place of self-recognition. This observation holds even more weight for women’s epistolality as it is a first-person narrative so profoundly connected with the psyche. She must first identify with the subject-position of the “I” in order to recover her voice and visibility. Irigaray claims that the construction of identity or “sense of self” occurs in the mirror stage (van den Ende 143). Irigaray, whose theory is a spin off from Lacan, describes selfhood as a projection of an imaginary body seen in the “mirror stage” at infancy when the image reflected is idealized, “unified” in the presence of someone else. The child who is not capable of speaking is merely a signifier in language, as he can neither be the speaking “I” nor the listening “you” (Van den Ende 143). Luce Irigaray believes that “this process of learning to identify with the subject-position in language is equivalent to

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29 [I’ve come to the conclusion that his relationship with the woman-as-sex-object lacks stimulus, indeed the same may apply to his whole life.] (245)
30 Susan Lanser states that Romantic fiction bound the woman to the male figure: “woman is muse, object or servant of the male quest, source of sorrow or ecstasy” (157).
the process of learning to identify with the mirror stage. Both processes are necessary conditions for a child to develop a sense of self and articulate this “self” (Van den Ende 144).

Hélène Cixous’s theories on women and writing shed understanding on how the female writer’s letters connect with her body. Cixous states in the following statement:

“The body is linked to the unconscious. It is not separated from the soul. It is dreamed and spoken. It produces signs. When one speaks, or writes, or sings, one does so from the body” (qtd. in Cixous and Clement 35). In addition, for Cixous “writing is an act of liberation from social censorship and personal inhibitions” (35). Cixous’s considerations regarding feminine writing are relevant to what is happening with twentieth- and twenty-first century Spanish women writers in their uses of epistolarity as a process of self-discovery. Cixous states in “Laugh of the Medusa”:

To write. An act that will not only realize the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality[…] it will tear her away from the super-egoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn; for having desire, for not having any; for being frigid, for being too hot; for being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing…). We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman. (Signs 880)

For Cixous, women’s sexuality and language are inextricably linked, leading to a “metaphysical fulfillment of desire that goes far beyond (mere) satisfaction […] it is a fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political…” (Cixous and Clement xvii). This
thought places the woman writer in a position of empowerment when it comes to her agency to read and write against the paradigm of women as being the passive subject.

I take the position that the text is a body in the sense that it “embodies” the writer. That is, women’s writing is an inscape of her identity. Desires, happiness, suffering, all must be experienced through the body. Simultaneously, however, the physical letter may represent the absent beloved; the handwriting is a recognizable sign, and the tears shed over the handwriting become a part of the letter. When the letter is received, it may be kissed; this points to the letter’s facility to become a fetish.

As noted earlier, one of the hallmarks for epistolary fiction is that the female body and her material existence have been closely aligned with politics or social issues; men controlled women’s bodies through their textual representation of her thoughts and words as a buffer for shaping a society that would reflect these cultural and political ends. Women and their bodies functioned within the private sphere of the home, and female desires were codified through the patriarchal parameters established for them. In the context of Spain, where women have been censored and subjugated to patriarchal law both inside and outside of fiction, cultural restrictions placed on women’s artistic production weighed heavily and continued to play out in the trajectory of Spanish women’s political and literary history up until the 1970s. For the Spanish woman epistolary writer over the three decades encompassing 1986-2002, the letter is more than a literary outlet for her entrapment; it is the framework for the female artist to project her own self-interpretation. The analogical relationship between the physical letter and the woman letter writer reveals a merging of writing and her understanding of her self.
Contemporary uses of epistolarity represent a space of individual freedom and also insinuate a parallel between writing, reading, and loving, as revealed in Carmen Martin Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable*. Steven Kellman’s interpretive theory in *Love Reading: Erotics of the Text* (1985) confirms that writing and reading can be an act of love-making. For Kellman, writing is an act of love-making: “the creation of a text is a labor of love, not only for want of other wages. And reading, like love, aims at dissolving personal boundaries. Both reading and loving are processes that are betrayed when reified. That all literature […] and of art in general—is analogous to, or even a species of, lovemaking” (4). He insists: “we, too, use our tongues to love. Love is indeed a creature of language; and, if language is a function of love, of a human urge toward liaison, then perhaps, it is reasonable to be in love with, and through, our own words” (4). Roland Barthes also elaborates on this idea in *Le Plaisir de texte*, “Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire…on the other hand; I enwrap the other in my words I caress…” (qtd. in Kauffman 120).

Indeed, love and language are married through the textual experience of writing and reading. Derrida states in *The Post Card*, “This is my body, at work love me, and analyze the corpus that I tender to you, that I extend here on this bed of paper, sort out the quotation marks from the hairs, from head to toe” (Derrida 99). This process is easily conceptualized through epistolary writing, but applies to writing in general.

**Sexuality and Homoerotic Expression**

Although notoriously considered a limited and feminized form of writing, letter narratives prove to be forthright vehicles for both historical and literary expression of
women’s and men’s “material reality”. In addition to epistolary scholarship, I rely on the work of Nancy Chodorow, Sara Heinamaa, and Robert Connell, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Susan Bordo to name a few, whose theories on femininity, masculinity, and sexuality serve to interpret the problematics of the Spanish literary woman, inside and outside of amorous epistolary fiction. Letter writing transmits cultural and historical polarization between women and men as the epistolographer interprets her/his experience into language and fashions it as “a fiction about events in consciousness” (Perry 119). Judith Butler contextualizes the first-person voice as a means for acquiring authorial voice and self-affirmation. In Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative (1997), Butler states: “Within literary and cultural studies recently, we have witnessed not merely a turn to the personal voice, but a nearly compulsory production of exorbitant affect as the sign of proof that the forces of censorship are being actively and insistently countered (197). I concur with Butler in that women writers approach their literary production with the recognition that it is a textual means to conversely turn around their silence and invisibility.

Since the 1980s, women writers have challenged the parameters for female-expression by exploring and addressing sexual topics and norms, once a taboo for feminine epistolary fiction. Marta E. Altisent writes,

En la novela española de la transición, el tratamiento antirromántico de la heterosexualidad va seguido de la exploración de temas del género sexual que desestabilizan la idea fija y esencialista de la identidad génerica y los truismos culturales sobre las emociones y comportamientos sexuales

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31 I borrow the term from Tim Gwinn, who associates “material world” with the external world vs. the individual’s internal perspective or self-awareness.
The reemergence of women’s epistolary fiction in Spanish literature seems to correspond to the writer’s liberation from constrained and codified writing as women use the letter-narrative to probe the confines of not only gender and genre, but heteronormative expression in particular. Kellman’s theory in Love Reading is helpful for understanding the impact that the reemergence of the epistolary genre by contemporary women authors has had in Spain’s literary scene. Kellman observes a seeming correlation between liberal movements in art and progressive political reforms. He notes that a culture that “pretends to a radical egalitarianism of aesthetic forms also tends to be more officially tolerant of sexual possibilities” (23). Certainly this appears to be the case of Spain after Franco’s death in November of 1975.

Women writers who produce epistolary fiction after the Franco era of dictatorship reveal opposition to patriarchal conventions of genre and gender through love and sexuality. They employ male and female protagonists who negotiate their sense of personal meaning, that is, who they believe they are, against what culture constructs them to be through love relationships that often reinforce the conditioning of gender and sexual identity (Chodorow 71). Nancy Chodorow’s Femininities, Masculinities, and Sexualities (1994) states that “sexual love […] is a fulcrum of gender identity, of sexual fantasy and

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32 [In the Spanish novel of the transition, the anti-romantic treatment of heterosexuality is followed by the exploration of topics about sexual gender that destabilizes the fixed and essentialist idea of genre identity and cultural truisms regarding the adequate sexual emotions and behaviors. The erotic effervescence in current feminine writing, with literary openness to subjects and taboo topics, calls for a more perceptive reader in order to understand ambiguous forms and complexities about eroticism.]
desire, of cultural story, of unconscious and conscious feelings and fears about intimacy, dependency, nurturance, destructiveness, power, and powerlessness, body-construction, and even of self-construction” (71). This is pertinent to bear in mind when reading the contemporary epistolary works in this study. As we shall see through the dynamics of amorous letter-writing, or writing on the topic of love, the writers create protagonists who reveal the inadequacy of cultural constructions for determining one’s sense of identity.

It is also important to note that contemporary men writers who have engaged the epistolary mode in their fiction have also crossed generic boundaries in their epistolary production. Most apparent is their inversion of traditional gender and sex roles for men and women. Miguel Delibes’ 1993 novel, Cartas de un sexagenerio voluptuoso [Letters from a Voluptuous Sixty-year-old], is about an elderly male letter writer who exposes his sentimental and tender side to a female correspondent. Looking desperately to overcome his loneliness, Eugenio answers a widow’s ad who is seeking companionship through correspondence. Through a chain of thirty-six letters addressed to Rocío, Eugenio tells his life story, down to the trivial details of his daily life. He writes about his love of food, recipes, and fashion, which are non-conventional gender topics for men. Delibes’ male epistolographer, who projects a warm-hearted genuineness, is opposite of his female correspondent, Rocío; she is not only cold and distant; she emotionally manipulates Eugenio’s sentiments for her own narcissistic ends.

Luis Antonio de Villena’s novel Amor pasión [Love Passion] (1983) plays on the reader’s expectations for masculine sexuality and desire. This risqué fictional work features a male protagonist who provides a one-sided account of his homosexual tendencies for Sexto, an underage male prostitute. In a letter to his former college mate,
the epistolographer describes himself as being obsessively infatuated with Sexto’s beauty and naivety. Ironically, Villena’s protagonist does not perceive his lustful attraction for Sexto to be an indication of his own sexual identity. Nor does any part of his narrative acknowledge his behavior as being anything but an impulsive burning desire that he eventually shares with his open-minded girlfriend. The closing of the narrative is rather anti-climatic; as it turns out, the protagonist alludes to his sexual fantasies for Sexto as a pretext to explore the parameters of his own sexuality and desire. Villena’s novel represents a sexual bildungsroman in the epistolary form.

While Delibes and Villena explore the epistolary mode in an unorthodox way with respect to the literary tradition, the literary challenges that the female writers face are more pressing. My point is that male penmanship has exercised literary jurisdiction when exploring the theme of sexuality, while women writers have been denied or silenced to openly write on erotic love and identity outside of heterosexual expression.

The works in this study suggests a reading against the grain for women’s epistolary fiction. By appropriating the voices of fictional epistolographers who are male and female, and heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, contemporary women writers create protagonists who stand at the crossroads of “multiple intersections of gender and sexuality” (Chodorow 71) and displace the romanticized ideals for feminine identity.

Indeed, the authors selected reveal how paradigms of identity are interrelated complexities of “culture, ideology, and psyche” (Chodorow 71).\(^{33}\) The writers’ epistolary

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\(^{33}\) Gloria Anzaldúa, a chicana lesbian author, uses the epistolary narrative to express herself from the margins of gender and sexuality, from her position as “other”. In her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” Anzaldúa not only deliberates over the topic of identity, but expresses her dialogic desire to interact with her readers about her experiences regarding cultural and political barriers. Being marginalized because of her race, class, and sex, Anzaldúa resorts to the I-you paradigm as an empowering and liberating narrative structure for addressing violations of identity politics. The letter narrative allows her to appeal to a reader,
heroes/heroines demonstrate a strong sense of awareness about the influence of ideological paradigms in the construction of their identity and transmit this complexity in their letter-writing.

Speaking on the twentieth- and twenty-first century’s paradigm for feminine literature, Marta E. Altisent notes that “la deliberada hibridación literaria” suggests “el reconocimiento de una construcción social restrictiva que la imaginación trata de compensar con una fantasía o utopía bisexual” (308). The protagonists in Guirao’s Cartas con diez años de retraso (2002), for example, demonstrate an engaging discourse on identity as they unravel these misconceptions on gender and question sexual hierarchy through their personal lives. Through a tit for tat strategy, Max, a heterosexual male, and Levita, who is lesbian, probe each other on the question of how one comes to love through the lens of gender and sexuality. Guirao’s protagonists dispute about the natural hierarchy of their order (gender and sexuality) and problematize a system of values that assigns universal properties to individuals through the variables of sex and gender. Indeed Guirao’s Carta de diez años de retraso attempts to move beyond difference by deconstructing the parameters of binary thinking.

**Letter Writing as Allegory for the Woman Artist**

Returning to the Goldsmith question posed at the beginning of this chapter regarding whether the figure of the woman letter writer can be seen as an emblem of changing who hears her, writing from the position of a third world woman. In her essay she states, “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy” (172). Anzaldúa uses her writing as a way of resisting barriers to her personal expression.

34 [the deliberate literary hybridity] [the recognition of a restrictive social construction that the imagination tries to compensate by means of a fantasy or bisexual utopia.]
cultural notions of both sexuality and textuality, I wish to consider in the rest of this essay that since the 1980s women’s epistolary fiction is not only a site of resistance, but an allegory for the literary woman writer. By proposing the letter as “an allegory for the woman artist” I wish to convey a symbolic reading of the creative act—not that allegories may be read into the plots or that the texts here analyzed are manifestations of allegories. By means of the figure of woman-as-letter-writer, the texts encapsulate a new truth about the woman writer. If traditional epistolary fiction generated by men was a reflection of women’s imprisonment, contemporary women writers tell a different story in that they use letter fiction to seek self-definition. It is important to retain the concept of allegory as a literary device, because we need to acknowledge that the woman writing a letter at her desk is a demonstrative form of representing contemporary female epistolographers in an extended metaphor. In other words, it is not limited to the fictional letter writer; it extends to the historical author, suggesting that the pictorial instance of a woman writing a letter has a connection to a reality underlying its rhetorical or fictional uses. Thus, the letter embodies the epistolographer and becomes an allegoric form of communication. As a contemporary allegory of the woman artist, the letter also tells a less private story than modern allegories. This shift in contemporary allegory still points to letters as a symbolic representation of the creative act, and has therefore a public dimension that, as we shall see, contemporary women authors explore in novel ways that empower their narratives.

In her discussion of how restraints on gender and sexuality may lead to textual resistance and subversive writing, Kay Turner suggests that letter-writing has the potential to disrupt any conventional boundary for literary expression because it is linked
to the general history of women’s constraint under patriarchy (15). Amorous letter-writing has for centuries been trivialized as a woman’s art while elevated to an art for when authorized by a male writer. Letter-writing became a site of self-invention for women; on the page they expressed a version of the self in excess of what was considered ‘appropriately female’ in a male world (15), or as Benstock expresses in Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre (1991), letter-writing became a site for thinking about the potential subversiveness of women’s letters as “they attempt to create an image of self and are the effect of such an effort” (92). As previously mentioned, for Benstock letters as a “private” form of writing, have the potential to disrupt conventional boundaries for fixed identity and desire, revealing the idiosyncratic self-interpretation of the individual letter-writer.

In this thesis, I am approaching textuality through the lens of sexual identification. Like Still and Worton, I accept the stance that “the construction of self as subject, is, today, a construction as sexed and sexual subject” and that “some of the primary and crucial codes which construct us as subjects are those which shape our sexual identifications” (6). That said, subjects may conform to an identity or deny particular identities of themselves by others and seek liberation from them. Moreover, “this forging of sexual identity is a continuing process—both in social exchange and in intercourse with texts” (Still and Worten 7). For this reason, I can hypothesize that a fictional text represents the individual’s self-interpretation at the interface of her life experiences of the physical, cultural, or social. Texts, as “man-made products,” regardless if they are works of fiction, are invaluable means for examining and communicating human matters (Larmarque 3). Susan Lanser’s The Narrative Act (1981) confirms that a text “is
essentially ideological as well as aesthetic, for the act of writing, indeed the act of using language, is defined, constrained and conventionalized according to a system of values, norms, and perceptions of the world” (64). Writing subjects make sense of the world around them by interpreting their cultural situations and experiences, creating scenarios for themselves and others to easily imagine in their reading and expanding their perception of the world and themselves.

Sherry Benstock confirms the idea of letter writing as emblem for the woman artist. She shows that, in the historical context and development of the genre, women were “separated from male enterprise and worldly activity” but “women established links with others through correspondence; they represented themselves through the written word and substituted the act of writing for the action of living, finding in the blank page the occasion to create an ideal version of themselves” (91). This being the case, women’s epistolary writing seems to represent a trope of their selves as having been historically linked to an amorous heterosexual discourse where “everything that is related to the image of the beloved” [becomes] “the repository of all identity and desire” (Linda Kauffmann qtd. in Benstock 93).

The historical trajectory of women’s letters and the fictionalization of their letter-writing have led to the feminization of the genre, but at the expense of women’s artistic originality. Benstock observes that “the exchange of women’s letters for a literary genre based on women’s letters, initiates a series of substitutions, including the appropriation of female creativity under the guise of heterosexual desire” (92). The idea that female’s literariness materialized through letter-writing, which then becomes a genre of “absolute rigid law,” that limits women’s artistic visibility, is precisely what the contemporary
woman artist challenges in her literary self-portrait. If historically letters have been made to serve the law of the genre, how do women writers transgress epistolary generic laws in order to not only debunk “the generic claims’ of amorous epistolary discourse,” (Turner 90) but to make a statement about their artistic creativity? Montserrat Abumalham’s short epistolary novel is a case in point for how women artistically deconstruct amorous epistolary discourse in order to defy fixed literary binaries between men’s and women’s writing.

**A Case Study: ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad?**

Montserrat Abumalham’s novel ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad? [Do you remember Shahrazad?] (2001) is included here in this theory chapter precisely because she constructs a different literary tradition for epistolarity, a “non-western” tradition that casts the female letter-writer in a position of agency when she directs her stories to a male addressee. This difference aside, her novel is representative of the corpus of fiction that I analyze in this study. Including her work here as a case study helps me prove my theory that there are contemporary women authors — inside and outside of my selected writers for this study — who capitalize on the genre’s I-you paradigm to mask the true intended recipient of a love letter, to explore letters autobiographical manifestos, reflect on love and identity, and perform an act of transgression.

Montserrat Abumalham Mas holds a professorship at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid in the department of Philology. She is a specialist in Arabic and Islamic Studies and has acquired a prolific portfolio as a successful writer and literary critic. Though she is of Lebanese origen, Abumalham publishes most of her works in Spanish. Abumalham
plays on the master/slave archetype in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, in which women are sexually victimized by the hegemonic power figure, the king, except for Shahrazad, who is able to avoid her anticipated sexual violation, and sustains her life by telling the king never-ending stories whose continuity she strategically defers to the next day. In Abumalham’s *¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad?*, however, the author turns inside out the role of her Shahrazad as the protagonist delivers her stories through written letters instead of orally narrating them. She still suspends the narration with the promise of another letter.

Abumalham makes a twist on this classic paradigm of woman as story-teller for historically, in some non-western civilizations, women have been central subjects in oral tradition: “women were not only performers and disseminators of beliefs, cultural ideals, and personal/collective history, but also composers who, sometimes, transformed and re-created an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman-centered perspectives” (Obioma 138). Abumalham plays upon the association of colonized woman and story-teller by reconfiguring her Shahrazad in the context of a written communicator. In doing so, she shifts women’s agency from oral to written mastery. For Mahan Ellison, Abumalham’s work “represents a growing group of authors from Arabic

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35 Richard F. Burton’s study *Tales from 1001 Arabian Nights* (2009) implicates the vast knowledge that Scheherazad (the original spelling of “Shaharazad” is Scheherazad) acquired through her avid reading of poets, scientists and philosophers that gave her prolific creativity for story-telling. This seems relevant to mention as women have been traditionally marginalized even as readers.

36 It is interesting to note in her essay “From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)inscription of Womanhood” (1994) Nnaemeka Obioma indicates that “as the transition was made from oral to written literature, new imperatives for mastery emerged. The factors that legitimized centrality shifted from those based upon age and sex to those based upon knowledge of the colonizers’ languages—English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. The sexual politics and Victorian ideals of colonial education created a hierarchy privileging men by virtually erasing any meaningful female presence” (139). I extrapolate from Obioma’s research to seek application and justification for Abumalham’s inversion and crossing of narrative boundaries as she does through her female protagonist, who writes her stories, unlike her archetypal counterpart, “Scheherazad” in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. 

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backgrounds that choose to write in Spanish and for a predominantly Western audience” (167). Indeed Abumalham’s novelistic endeavor with ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad? resonates her vast knowledge of writing from the margins of “gender and the Other” (Ellison 168). Abumalham’s work counteracts stifling stereotypes of fixed identities as her protagonist continually muses on the question of “other” in her letter-writing. Her act of telling stories in letter form is only her first transgression; her second transgression is writing about herself as opposed to telling stories about others. Further, the author seems to dismiss the constrictive narrative parameters of epistolarity regarding nationality, race, gender, or sexuality that govern and dictate for whom and to whom a woman writes. Abumalham nuances the subversive potential of letter-writing while, at the same time, makes a demonstrative statement about the female archetype for epistolary fiction.

Abumalham’s sixty five-page epistolary novel pivots on women’s expression. The author deconstructs the generic conventions of not only epistolary discourse, but crosses boundaries in the laws of gender and genre. Linda Kaufmann determines these are the discursive laws of “legalities, authority, the proper name, identity and difference” (Discourses of Desire 19) which sustain women’s writing as passive and absent of textual presence. Conversely, Shahrazad presents an epistolary “juego” [play] that lures in her male reader and reveals her authority of her written word. Ellison argues that the author sets out to “effectively exploit the characteristics of the epistolary genre to establish a narrative ambiguity…” (173) and I will further add that the “narrative ambiguity” of Abumalham’s text attempts to challenge absolute truths about gender binaries in language through the letter narrative and the theme of love. Shahrazad defies not only the traditional characterization of herself but also her own. In juxtaposed language, she
poses herself to be one way, but yet another, leaving the reader to interpret meaning from her fragmentation:

Yo, siempre creí ser yo misma. Aunque, la verdad, ¿quién soy, sino un nombre, una palabra independiente y libre, sobre un papel, a la que yo identifico, o tú, como mi nombre? Pero ¿mi nombre soy yo, yo soy un nombre? Si me llamara árbol, sería un árbol o seguiría una mujer? Si soy Shahrazad, ¿soy una mujer, una voz, una palabra, un sueño, una imaginación de tu mente? Soy yo la que te escribe o eres tú mismo quien finge escribir una carta y luego leerla …? (33)

While Abumalham’s novel seizes on the uniqueness of the epistolary narrative act to deconstruct binaries of women and men’s writing, she does so outside the margins of amorous discourse, which is yet another transgression on her part. This demarcates her work from the other Spanish novelists whose works capitalize on amorous topics in order to subvert paradigms that limit women’s literary expression. ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad? illustrates how a female artist can use the epistolary narrative mode to debunk the myth of the female archetype as void of creative writing power as she wills control over the pen and her reader. This reappropriation and refashioning of the archetypal storyteller goes against the conventional confines for the woman letter writer. Benstock describes this kind of inversion of jurisdiction by the woman epistolographer as defying the “dictation of a male author who appropriates her femininity and creativity in the service of a literary genre…” (89).

37 [I have always believed to be me. Although, really, who am I, but a name, an independent and free word on paper which I or you identify as my name. But am I my name or am I a name? If I were called a tree, would I be a tree or would I continue being a woman? If I am Shahrazad, am I a woman, a voice, a word, a dream, a figment of your imagination? Is it me who writes you or is it you who imagines writing a letter and later reading it…?]
Unlike *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the female story-teller in ¿*Te acuerdas de Shahrazad?* is not sexually enslaved through an amorous struggle to her male letter recipient, and neither is her life threatened by her pending death. On the contrary, her letters serve as an act of salvation for the unnamed male protagonist whose own emotional existence is in dire straits as he mourns over his abandonment by the woman he dearly loved:

> Cuando el colmo de la desesperación anegaba ya los últimos pisos de su corazón y él estaba a punto de ahogarse en su propia angustia, abrió el buzón de su casa y encontró una carta. Una letra desconocida le asaltó desde el sobre. (13)

Abumalham counters the stereotype of the epistolary heroine who is abandoned and distressed over her absent love. Instead, the distressed soul is the male figure. The letter-writer tries to cure the broken heart of the male recipient, who intimately clings to her words as she breathes life into him once again: “se sabe que conservó esas cartas hasta el fin de sus días, que murió abrazado a ellas, que desde que empezó a recibirlas no volvió a pensar en aquella otra mujer amada e inaccessible…” (14). Shahrazad’s letters become a physical and accessible love form for him to revive his abandoned heart.

The protagonist’s forty six letters which comprise the novel also revert back to the letter-writer as the man’s response does not figure in the text. Ellison states, “The sad man has no voice; his letters are not included…the effect is that this voice of the Other [the Arab woman] does not wish to silence response, but rather create its own space for

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38 [When overwhelming desperation flooded the lower chambers of his heart and he was about to drown in his own anguish, he opened the mailbox of his house and found a letter. An unknown handwriting jumped out at him from the envelope.]

39 [It is said that he conserved those letters until his last days in which he died hugging them, that since he began to receive them, he never thought about the other inaccessible woman he so loved.]
expression” (171). Along these lines, Ordóñez notes in her study *Voices of Their Own* (1991) that “the Symbolic Order” which has mediated language and culture” (the Law of the Father) has been historically connected to the “narrative text” (18). Therefore, if the “narrative text in its function as symbolic mediator of the culture” governs desire and self-expression, the Symbolic Order, by the same token, may silent the individual’s voice if his/her desires are outside of the restrictions of that structure. Drawing upon this thought, Pedro Martínez Montávez’s prologue of Abumalham’s text indicates that the author inverts the negative connotation of silence so that she may break through the Symbolic Order’s blockage of her expression. Martínez Montávez’s states:

> Si Shahrazad posee la magia y la fascinación de la narración se debe en gran medida a que se ha ido haciendo como criatura de soledad. Shahrazad es maestra en el decir porque es también, y antes, maestra en estar callada y contemplando: hacia dentro y hacia fuera. Si Shahrazad posee el dominio pleno de la voz es porque posee también el dominio pleno del silencio. Shahrazad es Soledad (9).

Montávez’s observation implies that Shahrazad, herself, regulates her words. That is to say, if silence impels her need to communicate, Shahrazad’s mediation of her discourse governs her timely call to silence.41

The other appeal to Shahrazad’s play on voice and silence is the game she wields through her narrative seduction; a game that keeps the internal reader and the external in

40 [If Shahrazad possesses the magic and fascination of the narration, it is due in most part because she is a creature of solitude. If she is the master of speaking, it is because she is first and foremost, master in remaining silent, contemplating inward and outward. If she possesses complete dominion of voice, it is because she possesses complete dominion of silence. Shahrazad represents solitude.]

41 In *La búsqueda de interlocutor*, Martín Gaite states “Me limito a señalar que se escribe y siempre se ha escrito desde una experimentada incomunicación y al encuentro de un oyente utópico” (22). [I simply try to show that one writes and always has written from a felt lack of communication and hoping to find a utopic listener.]
suspense for the continuation of the story. This is important to mention because, again, the traditional Shahrazad seduces her male interlocutor with spoken words, but Abumalham’s Shahrazad does so through letters. Ellison states that “Shahrazad’s demure narration is also a strategy of seduction. By ending each letter in media res, she employs the same element of suspense that the historical literary Shahrazad used to prolong her life” (178). Her words are bewitching and intoxicating for the male addressee, and Ellison points out that her “subtle power play” indeed represents “the personal agency and affective power of the narrator over her audience [reader]” (178).

Yet, Abumalham’s text not only transgresses and breaks down the historical conventions of epistolarity: it also suggests a power play against the Symbolic Order. She does this through Shahrazad’s inquiry of her own nature and existence, emphasizing the authority that the written word holds to represent and create. At one point she tells her male reader, “Solo sé que por la palabra escrita existo y tú existes porque la leerás” (Abumalham 15). And in another passage, Abumalham’s Shahrazad states: “¿Hombre o fantasma de mi imaginación? Aún así, decirte querido no es ninguna ficción. Si existes o no, no tiene importancia. Te amo, porque mi mente te ha hecho, mi escritura de cada día te da realidad, te convierte en un otro al que hablo y concede esa existencia” (62). Shahrazad concedes that the power to create through words challenges authorial representation vested in one gender, sexuality, or culture. Through her words Shahrazad inverts the binary structure of woman as the passive reader and obeyer of the law, and the male as creator and sustainer of the narrative acts. Shahrazad undermines any absolute

\[42\] [I only know that I exist by the written word and that you exist because you will read it.]
\[43\] [Man or phantom of my imagination? Even so, to call you dear is no fiction. Whether you exist or not, doesn’t matter. I love you because my mind has invented you; my writing makes you real day by day, it converts you into other, to whom I speak and concede that existence.]
truth or discourse of law; the letter-writer alludes to an “ambiguity that rejects supreme authority over any grand narrative” (Ellison 181). Writing is not designed to tell stories or to even conjure the presence of the beloved; it is not a vehicle. In the end, the daily activity of writing letters is the edifice on which her self (and the existence of the addressee) stand. She is not granted life by a misogynist king. She preserves herself by creating and recreating herself through writing.

Abumalham’s ¿Te acuerdas de Shahrazad? exemplifies my point regarding the overarching conceptual frame that epistolary fiction offers women writers: a break from their silence and a space for the letter-writer to self-create, destabilizing the transcendental signifier or absolute (read: masculine) truth through a series of paradoxes. Shahrazad tells her addressee, “no es significativo que yo escriba sobre barro, papel, pergamino o con una máquina […] me llamo y no tengo nombre. Escribo y no sé escribir. Soy mujer y no tengo sexo” (21).

Abumalham’s novel, and her protagonist’s letters, figuratively represent textual canvases where the artist stands in front of his/her masterpiece, slowly, deliberately, but carefully carving out a space from her imagination for how she desires to see herself as an artist, and how she wishes to be seen as an artist through “la gracia creadora de la palabra” (53).\footnote{Shahrazad’s writing is a resistance to paradigms of identity and performativity based on one’s gender and sex. In effect, her letters remove the phallic as signifier and stabilizer of her discourse. The epistolographer’s writing clears out a space whereby it becomes a self-portrait. Shahrazad implies that there is a parallel between writing and painting: she comes to realize that language allows for her to recreate a chosen “self” outside of restrictive binary discourse: [the creative grace of the word]}
He estado pensando que me gustaría tener el don de la pintura. Quiero decir, me gustaría que el Creador hubiera dotado a mis manos de habilidad suficiente para dibujar objetos, seres y personas, darles color adecuado y volumen para que parecieran reales. ¿Por qué pensaba esto tan extraño, si con la palabra yo ya puedo dibujar y crear objetos y seres que parecen tener vida? (19)45

Furthermore, Shahrazad indicates that she writes out of a desire to self-represent on textual canvas, a process which is facilitated by the I-you paradigm: “Es posible que seas mi invención y por ello te amo como me amo yo misma. Tal vez no me amo y por eso necesito sacarte de mí para poder amarte y amar en ti lo que en mí se me hace insoportable” (62).46 Shahrazad affirms the power and creativity of her words and regards them as the conduit to finding love and life in another “I”.

Concluding Remarks

Women’s epistolarity is an ideal space for restoring authorial voice while creatively exercising a response and resistance to fixed modes of written expression. The contemporary epistolary fictional works studied in this dissertation intentionally undermine conventional male models of epistolary form where the woman letter writer is represented as manic and corned by the walls of her textual imprisonment. The writers under study—Josefina Aldecoa, Carme Riera, Esther Tusquets, Nuria Amat, Marina

45 [I have been thinking that I would love to have the gift to paint. I mean to say, I would have liked that the Creator gifted my hand with sufficient ability to draw objects, beings, and peoples, giving them adequate color and volume so that they seem real. Why did this strange thought cross my mind, when words already allow me to draw and create objects and beings that would seem to have life?]

46 [It is possible that you are my invention, and for that reason I love you as I love myself. Perhaps I don’t love myself, and for that reason I need to pull you out of me, in order to love you, and to love in you what is unbearable in me.]
Mayoral, Carmen Martín Gaite, and Olga Guirao—design protagonists who use letter writing to release their entrapped voice and body by treating the “you” or addressee as a counterpoint from which they trace an elliptical movement back to the self. This movement reinforces a sense of self that escapes from oppressive phallocentrisms that robbed female writers of their expression.

The act of writing is a self-reflexive function for both the author and the fictional letter writer. The I-you paradigm that is unique to epistolarity, draws attention to the larger communicative act of writing, the power of narrating and the desire to be heard, which is how the elliptical movement escapes incarceration of the self. Undoubtedly, the concentric effect of the epistolary form has a parallel in the novel and in other genres insofar as writers reach out to their readers, desiring to artistically redefine their identity behind their textual canvas for how they wish to be read and interpreted as creators of their own discourse. But there is an advantage to resorting to letter writing in novels and short stories: the dialogical structure of the I-you paradigmpropels narrative agency and creativity in perhaps a more dynamic manner than other genres of intimacy such as diaries or memoirs might allow. The paradigm allows the epistolographer to double up as an “other” or to create another “I”; and it allows the external writer to bridge over to the reader throughout what appears to be an unmediated form of engagement.

Contemporary uses of the fictional epistolary genre explore the body-text metaphor in search of the women’s voice and identity. A return to the epistolary form allows the female writer to reclaim her body, her soul, and mind, and also to experiment with trying to relate to the alienation of others whose voices are marginalized. Through the subterfuge of writing to a “you,” her writing reverts back—elliptically—to the self,
recuperating and reconstructing her voice and visibility— the lost “I” of others who have been made invisible or rendered voiceless. Letter writing produces a fluid discourse between the women writers’ textual body and their physical existence, revealing that letters are the “stuff” from which women emerge as central subjects of their artistic production.

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Chapter 2

Self-Love: Letters as an Autobiographical Manifesto

If only two centuries earlier women were inscribed at the center of epistolarity yet marginalized in voice and visibility, then the revival of its form in Spain in recent decades (1986-2002) elicits questions. Indeed, there seems to be a suggestive parallel between the genre’s reemergence and the redefining of identity that Spain underwent in its transition to democracy. W. Michael Mudrovic claims there is a correlating effect in women’s literature and the transformation of the Spanish nation after Franco. He states that “many Spanish women poets of the post-Franco era avail themselves of the page as mirror, allowing them to delve into issues of identity and subjectivity at the historical moment when the Spanish nation itself is undergoing a radical transformation and redefinition of its identity in the transition from dictatorship to democracy” (15). In the 80s and 90s, women writers also seem to complicate patriarchal conventions for feminine epistolarity that once denied their marginalized voice and self-representation. The question remains, how do they use the same narrative mode to explore variants of selfhood and self-love today? And why do so through epistolary narratives?

Ángeles Encinar rightly suggests that today the rebirth of the genre aligns with postmodern characteristics and tendencies in the novel where the question of identity as a social construct is a pervasive topic (35). Along these lines, Altman indicates that “epistolary fiction tends to flourish at those moments when novelists most openly reflect upon the relation between storytelling and intersubjective communication, and begin to question the way writing reflects, betrays, or constitutes the relations between self, other,
and experience” (212). Since the alternating perspectives of the writer and the addressee generate self-knowledge and self-understanding, letters serve as a therapeutic catalyst to overcome alienation and being objectified. In the process, the letter-writer crafts a subjective and autonomous identity, a portrait of self-love. Of particular interest to this chapter is how contemporary Spanish women writers hone in on the reflexive and elliptical utterance of the epistolary structure in order to address issues related to selfhood and its configuration as self-love.

In the last four decades, many women writers have produced fictional works utilizing the I-you narrative as a discursive strategy for subjective and self-conscious writing. Formally, Laura Freixas’s Último domingo en Londres [Last Sunday in London] (1997) is an epistolary novel that includes exchanges of letters among multiple correspondents. Almudena Grandes’ “Malena, una vida hervida” [Malena, A Boiled Life] in Modelos de mujer [Models of Women] (1996), Carmen Rigalt’s Mi corazón que baila con espigas [My Heart Dances With Sprigs] (1997), and Dulce Chalcón’s Blanca vuela mañana [Blanca Flies Tomorrow] (2002), are all examples of fictional works that intercalate letters within a first or third person narrative. Angela de Irisarri Te lo digo por escrito [I’ll Tell You in Writing] (2006) is a series of uni-lateral letters that the protagonist directs to her lover. These aforementioned works substantiate the growing number of contemporary writers interested in pushing the conventional parameters of the epistolary mode in order to explore the nuances of “self,” subjectivity, and selfhood.

The authors’ works that I explore in this chapter are a combination of novels and short stories: Josefina Aldecoa’s Porque éramos jóvenes [Because We Were Young] (1986), Carme Riera’s Amor propio [Self-Love] (1987), Nuria Amat’s “El relato de Mónica”
[Mónica’s Story] in *Amor breve* [Brief Love] (1995), Esther Tusquets’ “Carta a mi primer amor” [Letter to My First Love] in *Correspondencia privada* [Private Correspondence] (1991), and Marina Mayoral’s “Querida amiga” [Dear Friend] and “Estimada señora” [Dear Ma’am] in *Querida amiga* (1990). These epistolary works denounce an overt transgression of men’s traditional literary repudiation of women writers’ identity. They also play upon the genre’s narrative amorous paradigm, which patriarchal exclusion has traditionally used to misappropriate female subjectivity.

Elizabeth Goldsmith’s essay “Authority, Authenticity, and the Publication of Letters by Women” in *Writing the Female Voice* (1989) clearly denotes that in earlier centuries in European literary history “theorists of the letter were in effect excluding other forms of feminine self-inscription from the space of published writing” (48). Besides the political and cultural restrictions which excluded women from what Goldsmith calls “the orbit of the literary” (48), the reality is that literary patriarchy censored their expression also.

Thus I seek to examine the dynamic transformation of women’s contemporary epistolary fiction by paying attention to how their protagonists regulate issues related to “self” and love of “self” in their writing. My inquiry into this topic concurs with what Marcia Welles alludes to about “being”: it “can only manifest itself in discourse, and the absence of speaking is equivalent to the ultimate non-being of death” (197), a position that aligns with Abumalham’s Shahrazad. By pushing the conventional boundaries of its sentimental mode established by male authors in modern times, contemporary women’s epistolary fiction depart from the romance motif of the individual’s self as subjugated to a male-engineered paradigm of femininity.
Josefina Aldecoa, Carme Riera, Nuria Amat, Esther Tusquets, and Marina Mayoral feature protagonists who need to unearth their “self” in letter writing in hopes of tapping into a part of them that has been held hostage by their past. Therein lies the authors’ creative ingenuity as they resort to a once perceived cloistered narrative style for conveying their letter-writers’ lives. In each fictional work the protagonists are middle-aged to elderly individuals whose disillusionment with love is the motivation for their letter-writing. Whether it results from socio-economic differences, irreconcilable disparities, betrayal or death, each one’s lived experiences have left them questioning their personal truth. In this chapter I examine how these fictional protagonists use letter-writing for the exploration of their past and for crafting subject identity. Most important, through the recounting of short-lived romances or the disappointments of love relationships, the protagonists become comfortable in their own skin, learning to understand and love themselves.

Thus, Aldecoa’s protagonist in Porque éramos jóvenes uses her letter as a textual mirror to refract false images and reflect on her sense of self; Riera’s protagonist in Amor propio uses her letter as a self-reflexive tool to reappropriate her sense of self-value after having suffered from a chaotic and unfortunate love affair; the protagonist in Amat’s “El relato de Mónica” engages in self-referential language as a rhythmic chant to find self-empowerment and courage to break off a fraudulent relationship; Tusquets, representing her persona as a writer, addresses an imaginary letter to her first love as a symbolic artifact of her self-knowledge and subjective experience in order to reconstruct their love story. And, finally, Mayoral’s respective protagonists in the stories selected from Querida amiga write not only to refute the other’s personal recount of the events leading up before
and after their marriage, but to validate the emotional memory and to shake off the trauma embedded in their individual experiences.

The I-you Paradigm as a Masked “I”

I recognize that the constituents of selfhood and identity (i.e., subjectivity, self-knowledge, subject construction, subject identity, etc.), are invariably complex and multidimensional; subject identity is materially conditioned through practices and ideologies of race, class, gender, and language that simultaneously influence and subjugate an individual’s writing. In her study Special Delivery (1992), Linda S. Kauffman states that “identity is situational and relational” (xxi). This means that an individual’s experience is shaped internally as well as externally. And yet, while one’s understanding of “self” may be affected by external elements such as laws and cultural discourses, I place more value on artistic “agents and spheres of representation” (Capdevila-Argüelles 18) that counter hegemonic discourses that enforce identity as there is a strong sense of autonomy imbued in an individual’s textual self-representation.

The epistolary I-you paradigm is ideal for searching one’s subjectivity and self-love as they are crafted through a narrator’s consciousness or a “written interiority” (Elizabeth Goldsmith xii). Goldsmith states: “subjectivity is not an interior something; for the reflexivity of the person grows in proportion to his externalization” (xii). I question the notion of external conditionings as being able to measure the psychological dimension of an individual’s subjectivity for the protagonist speaking “I” breaks through fixed identity through her/his self-awareness. This leads me to inquiries that relate to epistolarity as a
type of self-writing and as a textual site for barricating against imposed expression of love and identity. My argument draws on Felicity A. Nussbaum’s study, *The Autobiographical Subject* (1989) in which she reconsiders the ideologies of eighteenth century autobiography and reexamines the “asymmetries of gender and class” in order to imagine the new construct of subjectivities in the present (xxii). She states that forms of writing considered private (such as diaries and journals) offer a space for “experimentation, revision, and resistance to prevailing notions of identity” (xxi) and that this [“self”] entity becomes subject to its own identity, held within a given self-knowledge—believing that it is free, responsible, and the agent of its own actions” (xi). Nussbaum theory serves well for describing how self-writing disrupts notions of universal self. She states: “it is in and through language that an individual constitutes himself as a subject, the “I” who is uttering the present instance of the discourse: between the agent of speech and the subject engendered in discourse, speaking and spoken. The “I” is a shifter, always changing its referent in time and space” (32). This idea parallels the temporal aspect of epistolary discourse as the “I” in the written act may differ from the “I” that is read.

Like Nussbaum, Joan Scott alludes to the interrelationship between the act of thinking and owning one’s thoughts to gaining self, subjectivity, and identity. She states that “this proprietary relationship guarantees an individual’s independence […] the authority of the knowledge he produces” (Scott 62). Scott’s statement concurs with my findings—that

47 Scott explores the notion of how that “experience” transcends the external factors of one’s own acquired identity in the twentieth century when we consider the individual’s conceptualized understanding of her “self”. That is, “social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception […] Talking about experience in these ways leads us to take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced” (61). I wish to consider this process of subject formation a step further. I argue that writing in the first person privileges the individual’s own unique narrative for self-discovery.
is, material realities are not necessarily or entirely inherent constituents of one’s subject identity and authorial voice, at least in epistolary self-representations on love. Because there is no overt exchange between the correspondent and the intended addressee, which makes the letters uni-lateral, the letter writers in the works examined in this chapter feel free to open their heart to the tacit “you”.

In the selected narratives, the protagonists capitalize on the hallmark of epistolary writing, that is, the I-you paradigm in which the letter writer and confidant anticipate the “I” utterance of the other, for shaping their discourse. The protagonist may choose to write her lover, a close friend, or in the case of Mayoral’s two epistolographers, an individual who has no conflict of interest. Regardless of the given context, each protagonist exemplifies the process of reconstituting a relational “I” in their own written discourse. For the correspondent, the addressee, “you”, whether real or imagined, may function as a masked “I” or as the writer’s sounding board. In this chapter I show that fictional letter writing serves as a textual mirror that draws an elliptical movement whereby the epistolographer transforms and externalizes her inner self and subject identity. That is, the addressee acts as a point of reference to the letter writer that funnels her “I” utterances, allowing her to delve deeper in her self and to project what lies in her interiority.

Robert D. Newman’s study, *Trangressions of Reading: Narrative Engagement of Exile and Return* (1993) sheds light on how the progress of reading is an effective means to self-knowledge and self-discovery. He states that “readers engaged by a text function much like exiles, viewing the narrative as a type of homeland in which they can no longer live” (2). Newman also maintains that “the loss engendered by the invasion of the
Imaginary by the Symbolic Order in the individual’s psyche motivates her through the reading process in an attempt to recover the ideal Imaginary state while narrative memory inevitably recapitulates this loss” (1). The act of reading from the objective stance of the “you” initiates an “alienation from oneself” (Newman 2), which, at the same time, can be overcome by the appeal to the “you”. As Altman already anticipated, rereading one’s own letter entails a switch of perspective—from writer to reader—and a consequent distancing that may lead to self-discovery” (92). Newman’s observation of the reader’s engagement to the text functions much like the letter-writer’s remembering in the background of her missive, and this epistolary mediation, performed through the I-you paradigm, is worth examining. As the narrator performs inventory of her past, present, and future self, self-reading allows her to recreate and imagine a new identity. Janet Altman states that “if first-person narrative lends itself to the writer’s reflexive portrayal of the difficulties and mysteries surrounding the act of writing, the epistolary form is unique among first-person forms in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading” (88).

The writer-as-reader is thus a significant phenomenological point of view for decoding meaning. The writer as reader of his/her own narrative complements an autobiographical experience conceived from the need to express oneself, and to make a transformation after the process. The I-You as a construct for conjuring an ideal interlocutor functions in actuality as a masked “I”. At the same time, this also is suggestive of an intentional transgression by contemporary women authors who do not wish to adhere to certain
conventions of narrative form. The epistolary form is different from the autobiographical writing experience in that it inscribes the prospective reader. Even when the confidants’ letters never materialize within the fictional narrative, it is valid to assume that the authors’ choice of the epistolary mode is a deliberate mediation. In the case of the set of works analyzed in this chapter, I suggest that the addressee, especially in the case of a confidant, serves to reinforce the ego of the letter writer. This falls in line with what Janet Altman states about the confidant performing “as an alter ego who will help prevent alteration of his [the letter writer’s] own ego; yet this confidant who ostensibly is chosen to inhibit forbidden desires actually allows the writer the pleasure of speaking of them” (56). In the case of the works examined here, however, because the addressee does not reciprocate a response, his/her role is to elicit in the letter writer sentiments and information which are geared toward her plotting for self-identity. The addressee thus shapes the writes and helps expand the ontological limits of a first-person narrative.

In conjunction with the epistolary I–you paradigm, I turn to theories on autobiography as a type of self-writing possibly embedded in epistolarity to mediate the construction of identity as self-love. Robert McGill’s essay “The Life You Write May Be Your Own: Epistolary Autobiography and the Reluctant Resurrection of Flannery O’Connor” is insightful for understanding the hybrid relationship between the two forms. While he recognizes that both epistolarity and autobiography are separate literary genres, McGill also argues that epistolarity “inevitably features the sorts of fissures and paradoxes with which critics of autobiography are perennially concerned; binaries such as the public and

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48 Lorna Marten argues in The Diary Novel that “the epistolary novel was the structural ancestor of the diary novel. It initiated a line of development in the narrative technique that the diary novel continued, …one need think only of the ‘dear diary’ convention to realize to what extent intimate diary keeping was influenced by letter writing” (56).
private; self and others; and experience and text blur and tug at one another” (32).

Epistolarity may bear similarity to life-writing where the author wishes to disseminate herself, her life narrative, with the illusion of having an eventual reader. As the title of this chapter, “Self-Love: Letters as an Autobiographical Manifesto,” indicates, there is an underlying declaration of sovereignty by each epistolographer over her/his textual embodiment. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson confirm that “autobiography has been employed by many women to write themselves into history” (5). Feminism, cultural and literary studies all have deliberated on “women’s autobiography as a previously unacknowledged mode of making visible formerly invisible subjects” (Smith and Watson 5). Nussbaum deliberates that

women’s autobiographical writing has most often been seen as a relatively pure form of writing where women could raise their consciousness and define their identity. There they could develop a distinctive voice that reflected their unique historical situation and their exclusion from universal categories of human nature. But in attempting to mark that voice and resist incorporation into generic (male) definitions of self, women have also found themselves caught in the trap of the biologism and essentialism that trivialize the issues of gender and segregate them from the problems of class and race. (129)

Besides epistolary writing, women’s self-narratives, in general, have not been afforded the same attention and autonomy as those of male writers in earlier centuries. As previously mentioned, their voices served as puppets to male discourse, and their writing was either predominantly overlooked or endured intense scrutiny and surveillance.
In Spain, up until the late seventies, and with few exceptions, women’s written expression in general was either silenced or debased as less artistic than men’s, and few women’s novels such as *Nada* [Nothing] (1945) by Carmen Laforet, Ana María Matute’s *En esta tierra* [On this Earth] (1954), and *La plaza del diamante* [In Diamond Square; translated by Peter Bush] (1962) by Mercè Rodoreda, among others, were included among the canonical works of classic Spanish literature. In fact, not until after Franco’s death in 1975 did the Spanish literary market begin to reflect the country’s initial steps toward democracy, creating a broader aperture for women artists’ works and their experimentation with intimate discourse in fiction once again. Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles supports this idea and places it in a context beyond the literary realm of Spain:

In Western literature, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a confessional discourse mixed with theoretical observation that has influenced not only the configuration of the ‘I’, but also the configuration of the authorial voice and the genesis of the text. The result is that the ontological limits of a first-person text have undergone a process of expansion and the solipsistic nature of this writing has been challenged. (8).

Certainly the advantages of different types first-person narratives is that they delve in the self-consciousness of being: “… taking oneself up and bringing oneself to language” (Janet Varner Gunn qtd. in Sheri Benstock 11). The protagonists’ consciousness of their own history coalesce with the characteristics of self-writing—rhetorical language, remembering, self-reflexivity, self-referentiality, etc—allowing for each one to emerge as a subject authority in the retelling of their experience with love and sexuality. Their letter
writing becomes a venue for transgressing canonical authority and for crafting new prototypes in terms of subject identity.

Before I enter into the analysis of each fictional work, it is important to point out that the two generations of novelists studied here reflect a cross-sectional community of Spanish women who explore the question of “self” as a construction always in process. Despite the twenty year age difference between the oldest of the group, Josefina Aldecoa (1926-2011), and the youngest, Nuria Amat (1950-present), and their cultural and linguistic diversity, all writers analyzed in this chapter appeal to the autobiographical impulse behind an epistolary narrative. In doing so, they complicate paradigms, inside and outside of writing, that overshadow women’s expression of identity and self-love. Here it is important to mention that in eighteenth-century culture, self-love or “amor propio” was considered a “vice” (Rueda, Cartas sin lacrar 186). To be virtuous, one had to exhibit empathy for the suffering of others through self-effacing. This very point separates contemporary epistolarity from the genre’s tradition. In this chapter study, the protagonists’ first-person accounts undermine narrow literary modes that once threatened women’s marginalized voices to self-regulate their discourse of life experiences. Love as a human condition, but particularly as a subjective expression reveals itself as a fluid boundary that allows an individual to explore her self and identity in writing. Likewise, the authors of these works suggest both an homage to and a play on the epistolary form based on its ambiguity with regard to who may be the intended reader. In other words, is the “you” really a masked “I”? 
Letter Writing as Mirroring

As I propose in chapter one, letter writing is a “reflective surface” for gazing into one’s soul. The mirror as a trope is effective for exploring the theme of subject identity and subjectivity in epistolary fiction (W. Michael Mudrovic 14). Mudrovic’s *Mirror, Mirror on the Page* (2008) makes a connection between Spanish women writers and their identity in writing as “it becomes a medium for interrogating and defining the self” (16). Mudrovic postulates that the mirror is a semiotic means for the woman artist to “invent, revise, discover, analyze, evaluate, describe, emphasize, reject, deny, celebrate, enhance, affirm, and/or interrogate who she is” (15). The epistolary text as their metaphorical mirror permits women writers to position themselves against the other “you”; or in the case of my chosen works, the “you” as the protagonists’ self. What is important to bear in mind is the semiotic gesture that letter-writing offers for clarity and self-understanding by posing the other as a reference point to define the self.

Textual mirroring enhances the dimensions of epistolarity such as self-reflexivity, self-referentiality that will be addressed in this chapter. Furthermore, and most important, the intent of seeking self-identity draws a suggestive parallel between mirroring and painting. But unlike Melchoir-Bonnect, who observes that

the notions of subjectivity and identity were first established within religious and social realms, where self-portraiture and autobiography, the habitual practices of reflection and of introspection, are first played out. Against this backdrop, one who gazes at himself in the mirror strives to
regain the resemblance that unites man with his creator and the solidarity that links him to his peers… (qtd. in Mudrovic 14)

I propose that the protagonists in this chapter analysis avail *themselves* to being the creative force behind their discovery of their sense of truth and self-identity. They refract culture paradigms and others’ projected ideas of who they are. For instance, Annick, the epistolographer in *Porque éramos jóvenes*, symbolizes what Soledad Puértolas describes as “La mujer del espejo”, [The Woman in the Mirror] who mediates on “self,” and through the textual mirror of her writing she “is transformed by monologue and dialogue” (Bergmann and Herr 7).

Martín Gaite’s essay “Los malos espejos” [The Bad Mirrors] explains how reflecting through othering serves as an effective means for exploring one’s subjectivity and “self”. She surmises that “en la ficción aquellas personas que se fingían otras querían liberarse de la servidumbre de su propia biografía, deponer aquel peso por un día, por diez o para siempre; deseaban, en definitiva, ser otros y no podían serlo si alguien no les miraba como a seres en blanco…” (12).\(^49\) Martín Gaite accentuates the need for freedom of expression to communicate one’s internal and uncensored self. Of course, in this essay, Martín Gaite is referring to fiction as an accessible way for searching one’s subjectivity and “self” through objectification of people, place, and things; and a way for writers to be “queridos por sí mismos” (12).\(^50\) This same phenomenon applies to the act of letter-writing. At least in the temporal present, the writer has that “sed de ser reflejados de una

\(^{49}\) [In fiction those characters that pretended to be someone else desired to be free of their own subjected biography, dispose of that burden whether it were for a day, ten days, or forever. In sum, they desired to be someone else that they couldn’t be if someone did not regard them as a blank page.]

\(^{50}\) [to be loved for oneself]
manera inédita por los demás, la sed de espejo” (13).51 To write to an absent other allows the letter writer to mediate what’s reflected—the bad mirrors—and to refract from what’s less than desirable in their textual canvas of “self”.

It is important to note that the metaphor of mirrors in women’s literature is “an important trope of self-reformation” according to Sandra J. Schumm (20). But while the mirror can function/expand as a metonymy, the substitution for self, it can also represent the critical gaze of “the other” imposed on the woman or marginalized subject. So, the metonymic mirror can be both entrapping and liberating, depending on how the writing subject chooses to use her writing, whereas the good metaphoric mirror can represent the textual space for marginalized writers to “identify themselves as subjects who reach beyond the self, rather than as bare objects” (Schumm 20). Schumm elaborates on Cixous’ mantra of “writing herself”, which enables women to “reclaim that which has been confiscated from her identity” (20). This mirror metaphor is the object of analysis for this chapter.

“Espejismo” or Mirage in Josefina Aldecoa’s Porque éramos jóvenes

Josefina Aldecoa, born March 8, 1926 in la Robla, León, came from a family of educators; her mother and father were both teachers. Aldecoa studied Art and Philosophy at Madrid’s Universidad Autónoma and earned a doctorate in Pedagogy. That said, she dedicated most of her life to her passion for teaching. In 1959, she established Estilo, a private school devoted to stimulating the creativity of children. Before the death of her husband, Ignacio Aldecoa, an important writer associated with the so-called “Generación

51 [the longing to be reflected by others in an novel way, the desire for reflection]
de los 50”, Josefina remained unknown as a novelist (Nuala Kenny 2) only publishing twice before her husband’s death: her thesis entitled “El arte del niño” [The Art of a Child] (1960) and A ninguna parte [Nowhere] (1961), her first novel. In 1983 she began to publish extensively until her death on March 16, 2011. In fact, it was upon Historia de una maestra [The Story of a Teacher] (1990), the first publication of a triology that includes Mujeres de negro [Women in Black] (1994) and La fuerza del destino [The Force of Destiny] (1997) that the author would make a name for herself. Some of her most notable and studied works are: Los niños de la guerra [Children of War] (1983), La enredadera [The Vine] (1984), El vergel [The Orchard] (1988) and Espejismos [Illusions] (1996). Besides having been recognized for her pedagogical achievements and contributions, the author has been a recipient of the prestigious Premio de Castilla y León de las Letras in 2004.

A great part of Aldecoa’s literary focus is on women and issues of maternity and motherhood. However, as Kenny points out in her study The novels of Josefina Aldecoa: Women, Society and Cultural Memory in Contemporary Spain (2002), the author tends to concern herself with “women’s struggle to achieve individuation and create a more inclusive and pluralistic representation of womanhood, removed from the reductionist myths of femininity that have dominated phallocentric culture” (3). Although Aldecoa’s work tends to explore the “feminine psyche” (Pérez and Ihrie 17), she does so through

52 In addition to the previously mentioned works, Aldecoa’s extensive writings include: Cuento para Susana (1988); Ignacio Aldecoa en su paraíso (1996); Confesiones de una abuela (1998); Pinko y su perro (1998); “El mejor” (1998), a short story in Cuentos de fútbol II. “La rebelión” (1999), a short story in Mujeres al alba; “El desafío” (2000), a short story in Cuentos solidarios 2: Fiebre (2000); La educación de nuestros hijos (2001); El enigma (2002); En la distancia (2004); La Casa Gris (2005); and Hermanas (2008).
first person narratives. The author has experimented with creating fictitious memoirs and
diary writing, such as Historia de una maestra (1990), where the female voice is clearly
heard. Porque éramos jóvenes (1986) is her only work in which she uses the letter-
narrative technique in order to enhance the protagonist’s flashbacks and arrive at an
understanding of herself.

Porque éramos jóvenes is an exemplary work for understanding the complexities
involved in the construction of subject identity through first-person writing. The novel is
imbued with multiple perspectives about the absent character, David, whose love affair
with Annick in Ibiza in 1957 is narrated through the unique perspectives of three voices:
1) the epistolographer, Annick, a psychologist who now lives in New York; 2) the
omniscient narrator who tells the story of David’s youth; and 3) the dialogue between his
cold and wealthy surviving wife, Genoveva, and his close friend, Julián. It is Annick’s
letters, however, and the spectral presence of David’s exchange that give an up-close and
intimate portrait of not only David’s life before his sudden death, but Annick’s process to
finding her identity. In the course of her twenty-one letters written over a period of
sixteen years, Annick references cultural and political ideologies that systematically
reinforce and shape her understanding of self. Although the narrators’ voices alternate
throughout the entire work, it is Annick’s perspective which initiates each chapter.
Annick’s letters are “el marco estructural de la narrativa que contribuye a crear una
atmósfera de intimidad y aporta un valor añadido de autenticidad y realismo a esta
perspectiva narrativa” (Ángeles Encinar 36). In the textual mirror of her letters, Annick

[The structural frame of the narrative that contributes to creating an intimate atmosphere and brings
added value to the authenticity and realism of this narrative perspective.]
refracts from imposed and false illusions of subject identity and upholds the rebellious values of their youth that David has let die.

Annick first letter, dated October 1958, sets up the temporal and intimate perspective of David and her relationship. Although David’s letters never surface in the novel, his voice is indirectly heard via the frequent references Annick makes to his active communication. His responses shape Annick’s writing; as her point of reference, David enables her stocktaking of their past and future through the lens of the present. Anchoring her subjectivity through David’s otherness, Annick is able to evaluate her interiority. The trajectory of Annick’s experiences embodied in her correspondence will reveal her gradual shift to emotional autonomy and subject identity as she gauges her pursuit of her illusions for travel and adventure against David’s unfulfilled desires for living out the same dreams.

After completing her studies in Ibiza, where she met David, French-born Annick moves to New York to do an internship in Psychology. Although the onset of her correspondence to David expresses her anticipation of their eventual reunion, her letters are overwhelmingly filled with colorful detail of the people, streets, and lifestyle; descriptions that reveal her youthful passion living in a foreign land. Reflecting on her former homeland and the cultural landscape of her new country, Annick’s first cultural comparison regards the liberties that American families extend to their youth: “Los padres viven obsesionados con la libertad de sus hijos. No quieren reprimir nada en su conducta, en su forma espontánea de producirse. No quieren castrar a sus hijos. Crecen como pequeños robinsones y descubren por sí mismos las de los fenómenos que les
rodean” (18). The observation that she makes of the American youth alludes to her repressed fascination with personal freedom and space, and indeed is an applicable parallel to her own life; this comparison will symbolically indicate that her adventure in the land of opportunities is a flight to her own self-discovery.

As she continues to write, she calculatively draws attention to the different paradigms of gender roles and expectations between her new country and her native land. For example, upon hearing the news of her father’s remarriage she reflects on the meaning of marriage as a traditional institution as it relates to her own familiar past life. She recalls how she loathed when her mother encouraged the idea of marriage and children because it was an expected feminine vocation. In fact, after her temporary move home preceding her mother’s death, Annick determines that “no quería ocupar el lugar de mi madre. No debía quedarme en una casa de hombres al servicio de todos” (84). Referring to her father she writes: “Si me hubiera quedado sería un anciano tierno, dependiente, quejumbroso, que hubiera destrozado mi vida” (84). She recognizes that had she sacrificed her own career pursuits and plans for adventure, “no estaría sola más que por dentro” (85).

Annick alludes to the degree of agency one exercises in her life choices and circumstances. By choosing to abnegate oneself of his desires and dreams, one relinquishes, to a certain degree, happiness and self-understanding. David’s deep loyalty 

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54 [The parents live obsessing over their children’s freedom. They do not want to repress any of their behavior, in the way it manifests spontaneously. They do not want to “castrate” their children. They grow up like little Robinsons and discover for themselves their surrounding phenomena.]

55 [I didn’t want to take the place of my mother. I didn’t need to be at the service of a house full of men]

56 [Had I stayed, he would have become a helpless old man, dependent and complaining, who would have destroyed my life.]

57 [I would only be alone internally.]
for his mother and spiritual allegiance to his country is a smothering point of contention for Annick. She acutely observes how cultural hegemonic ideals reinforce the causes and effects one’s complacency in life. By subtly obligating the individual to forego his/her own personal sense of freedom, these ideological paradigms systematically subject people to expected identities of behavior:

Todo lo que nos pasa obedience a una sucesión inexorable de causas y efectos. Por ejemplo, si yo me hubiera quedado con mi padre sería hoy una mujer rodeada de seres queridos, mis hermanos, sus mujeres, mis sobrinos. No estaría sola. Puede que hasta hubiera construido mi propia familia en torno a mi padre para que él siguiera protegido hasta el fin.

(85)58

As she reflects on how political and cultural hegemonic ideals victimize individuals, Annick feels no need to self-abnegate at the expense of her freedom, unlike David, who not only feels obligated to his family, but to stay behind in order to help rebuild the political stability of his country.

Annick hopes that her new psychology program on the foreign soil of New York will allow her to observe how someone endowed with free-will navigates his/her own internal sense of subjectivity. Her inquiry on “de qué manera funcionan las instituciones creadas para curar a las víctimas de otras instituciones…” (10)59 forshadows her own disillusions with the demands of social organisms such as marriage and family that she will address

58 [Everything that happens to us obeys the inexorable flow of causes and effects. For example, had I stayed with my father, I would have been surrounded by loved ones, my brothers, their wives, and my nieces and nephews; I would not be alone. In fact, I could have even built my own family around my father so that he could remain protected until the end.]
59 [in what way do institutions created to cure victims of other institutions function…]
in her letters. The textual-mirroring she performs in her letters allow her to assess how imposed value systems subjugate and regulate her life direction on both a micro-and macro level. In her micro-analysis of David’s failure to come to America, Annick poignantly asks him: “¿te dejará tu madre?” (19). She recognizes that David’s sense of inherited obligations for taking care of his elderly mother means that he will resign his dreams. Later, in a strategic macro attack of his political stance, she reminds him of the futility of his revolutionary spirit for rebuilding his country, now two generations after the Spanish Civil War: “Era una guerra perdida. Era tu guerra” (46). She strikes a contrary chord when she reminds him of the “lost war” that took place. David responds, “no era mi guerra, Annick. Yo era un niño en la cuna cuando empezó” (46). Annick responds with “…temo que te desvíes en luchas de papel que tú conviertes en batallas feroces” (46).

Annick’s interplay between reflecting and refracting from incongruent value systems through her rhetorical use of memory shows how she internalizes and projects her otherness on to David. Her letters allow her to become gradually aware of her mirage. Yet while letter-writing provides her with more acute clarity each time she writes, Annick determines that David is not able to divert from his abysmal life path because of his self-sacrificing commitment to his family and country. In one of her letters, she fails to identify with David’s fluctuating emotions: “estoy libre de emociones viscerales por la doble lejanía del espacio y de mi condición de extranjera. Y me preocupo de ti. No se

60 [Would your mother let you?]
61 [It was a lost war. It was your war.]
62 [It wasn’t my war, Annick. I was just a baby in the crib when it began.]
63 [I am afraid that you may get off track by turning trifle quarrels into ferocious battles.]
trata de tu seguridad sino de tu pérdida de rumbo” (45). By the second part of the novel, Annick has given up hope on David joining her in America. She states: “…me ha deprimido. No porque te haya perdido, ya que nunca jugué a ganarte […] no te he perdido, pero sí te has perdido” (69). Annick recognizes that the David she knew from Ibiza is not that same confidant to whom she writes now. She is remorsed over her naiveness: “lo que no acepta mi soberbia es el error, mi visión deformada de ti. No me perdono el espejismo” (69).

Annick’s epistolary discourse begins to reflect an evolution. While she recognizes a change in her perception of David, she also acknowledges her own subjective development regarding her desires and identity. Her letters to David allow her to refract from false illusions —“el espejismo” or mirage— of the individual’s “self”. She writes: “Hay tres planos distintos de nuestro yo: lo que mostramos, lo que parecemos a los demás y lo que realmente somos. Rara vez coinciden los tres planos […] se trata […] ser fiel a sí mismo si uno lograse saber quién es ese uno mismo” (128). Encinar’s analysis of Aldecoa’s novel explicates that Annick’s letters to David, and vice versa, cease to have an interdependent function: “Poco a poco la visión del yo o el tú se imponen sin interés alguno de intercambio, reducido cada uno a espacios estancos […] La correspondencia se ha convertido en prueba de la insatisfacción con sus propias vidas y un

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64 [I am free from visceral emotions because of the double distance of space and my condition as a foreigner. I worry about you. It’s not about your safety that I worry but your loss of direction.]
65 [It has depressed me. Not because I have lost you, not that I have ever played at winning you […] I have not lost you, but you have lost yourself.]
66 [What my pride doesn’t let me accept is my error of judgement, my deformed vision of you. I do not forgive myself for my false perception.]
67 [There are three distinct levels of our “I”: the one we show; the one that we seem to others; and the one we really are. It’s a rare occasion that the three planes coincide. It’s a matter of being faithful to oneself if one is ever able to find out who that person is.]
véhicules de escape o terapia personal” (160).  

Annick also recognizes the futility of letter writing when it no longer serves to bridge the I-You: “escribimos para comprobar no que está vivo el otro, sino que lo estamos nosotros mismos. Tus cartas me confirman que existo […] Hemos llegado a hacer de nuestras cartas un tratamiento personal, una terapia, un diario, un testamento. Y un juego” (160).

Annick uses her letters to turn inward, to look within herself to gauge what she represses as true about who she is. Her “I” utterances make a dramatic evolution toward self-understanding. Towards the end, the protagonist’s letters to David are only letters in form. They have become the site of an autobiographical encounter where she arbitrates her own perception of her reality while transcending any imposed identity whose genesis does not stem from herself. She consciously approaches her writing as a place to settle the conflicting and complex sides to her subjectivity. Her “espejismo” of false perceptions of David that she finds herself guilty of is mediated through the textual mirrors of her letter-writing. Despite the metaphorical bridge of their letters, Annick comes to the conclusion that it is the distance between she and David’s differing ideals in life that cannot be fused. Annick realizes that something transformational has happened: that perhaps David and her immaterialized life together is the result of her false perceptions of him and perhaps of her “self”. Significantly, David has stopped being “you” and subsumed under “he” as a third-person reference. By recognizing that she must love her “self” as a prerequisite to true happiness, she also recognizes that self-

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68 [Little by little the vision of “I” or “you” imposes on the other without any interest of exchange, each one reduced to standstill spaces. Their correspondence has become proof of their lack of satisfaction in their own lives and a vehicle of escape and therapy.]

69 [We write, not to prove that the other is alive, but that we are. Your letters confirm that I exist […] We have turned our letters into a personal treatment, a therapy, a diary, a testament, and a game.]
abnegation does not fulfill her own needs.70 The act of letter writing is therapeutic, which is reinforced by a psychodrama exercise that Annick acquires through her supervising professor on site. Annick evaluates her subjectivity through theoretical exercises of conceptualization. By the time that she writes her letter in May 1959, she has already reconciled herself to never being with David. She indicates this through a reenactment of the psychodrama. The exercise involves revealing the most personal hidden conflicts that one has and how he/she carries these conflicts into the relationship, and projects them on to the other participant. This exercise allows Annick to weigh in on her own turmoil of subjectivity against David’s alterity. The exercise is effectual in making transparent one’s repressed desire to know and understand her suppressed self. This phenomenon is enacted through her letter writing. She states:

me dices que escriba, que no rompa este hilo que nos ha estado uniendo como un puente. No sé si voy a ser capaz. Ese David adivinado casi y rechazado se confirma ahora como el verdadero o el que ha prevalecido sobre el otro que yo creía el único o al menos el auténtico núcleo del que yo amaba. Sí; ese David existía, pero se estaba transformando a sí mismo.

(70)71

70 It seems that Annick also weighs the polyvance of time as a meaningful factor in acquired lucidity. She realizes that though David may have been this imagined person she was in love with, he may also have changed by cultural values. In her letter addressed on March, 1974 she compares their different life choices toward parenthood: “He deseado ser libre y dueña de mi misma…No quería dejarme arrebatar lo único que tengo, mi libertad, mi independencia, el derecho a vivir y morir como yo quería. Un hijo significa la pérdida de ese derecho. ¿Lo significa también en la paternidad?” (167) [I have wanted to be free and in charge of myself […] I didn’t want to have taken away from me the only thing I have, my freedom, my independence, the right to live and die how I wish. A child means loss of one’s rights. Does it means the same when you are a father?]
71 [You tell me to write, to not break this thread that has been keeping us together like a bridge. I do not know if I can do that. That almost imagined and downtrodden David proves to be the true one, or at least
Annick’s letters give her clarity about the futility of her and David’s future together. While she awakens to the moment of truth about their lack of future, David seems to linger in this illusionary past of who he wanted to be by mirroring Annick’s otherness without grasping his present reality. Annick tells him to stop writing her, “eso puede ser el comienzo de la verdadera lucidez” (176), alluding to her refusal to serve as his mirage of love when she is now feeling emotionally and intimately withdrawn from him. David is perceptively codependent on Annick as he vicariously lives through her life experiences and dreams. Whereas Annick is able to come to a place of self-recognition and self-presence in her writing to him, David remains in denial in regards to where his complacent choices have left him in life. Therefore, David is unable to let go of his past baggage that weighs him down. Annick, instead, uses David’s otherness to objectively reflect on how compromising for others may be at the expense of oneself, one’s desire and love for “self.” Furthermore, she compares him to those “hombres vulnerables, mal tratados, comprados, vendidos…¿Cómo tú? (145). In contrast to David’s position in life, Annick passionately admits that she has no regrets for her desire to “ser libre y dueña de mí misma” (167). Extrapolating further from this same letter, she indirectly suggests that “ese gran amor” for another person, that she felt toward her mother as a child, a good childhood friend in her adolescent years, a boyfriend in her adulthood, etc., is void and empty if one does not come to know and love her “self”.

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72 [This could be the beginning of true lucidity.]
73 [vulnerable men, badly treated, bought and sold…Like you?]
74 [be free and in control of my own self]
75 [this great love]
Self-Reflexivity in Carme Riera’s *Cuestión de amor propio*

Carme Riera was born in Palma Mallorca in 1948. Riera has a diverse heritage as her father was Mallorquin and her mother, Catalán. She has written in a variety of genres, including televisions and radio scripts. Riera is known for publishing both in Catalan and Spanish, the later a product of her own translations. She earned a doctorate in Hispanic Philology at Barcelona’s Universidad Autónoma where she is a professor of Spanish literature. One of the most meaningful positions she has held is her recent appointment to the Real Academia de la Lengua on March 21, 2012. Riera is one of six women to hold a chair out of forty-six available.\(^{76}\) Her position in the academy as a woman writer becomes even more significant given that since its establishment in the last three centuries, only eight women have been elected to the RAE.\(^{77}\)

Among some of her best known works are: *Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora* [I Leave You, My love, the Sea is my Pledge] (1976), *Cuestión de amor propio* [A Matter of Self-Love] (1988) and *Dins el darrer blau* [In the Last Blue] (1994), which has been the first Catalan novel to receive the Premio Nacional de Narrativa.\(^{78}\) Her work *Te deix, amor, la* mar com a penyora was celebrated in *El País*.

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\(^{76}\) According to *El País*, this means that she makes up the thirteen percent of women who have a voice in the instruction of the Castilian language, a sphere from which women have been traditionally excluded. [http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2012/04/19/actualidad/1334856289_692834.html](http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2012/04/19/actualidad/1334856289_692834.html).

\(^{77}\) Her candidacy may come to no surprise for those who read Ignacio Bosque’s essay on “Sexismo lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer,” published in *EL PAÍS* a few weeks prior to the RAE’s elections in which he points out the discrimination between men and women authors’ visibility and recognition (Winston Manrique Sabogal 40).

\(^{78}\) Riera has published extensively. Among many of her other works are: *Je pos per testimoni les gavines* (1977); *Gairebé un conte, la vida de Ramon Llull* (1980); *Els cementiris de Barcelona* (1981); *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* (1981); *Epitelsí tendríssims* (1981); “El reportaja” (1981); *La molt exemplar historia del Gos Màgic i la seva cua* (1988); *La escuela de Barcelona* (1988); *Joc de miralls* (1989); *La poesía de Carlos Barral* (1990); *Hay veneno y Jazmín en tu tinta, aproximacion a la poesía* (1991); *Contra l’amor en companyia i alrets relats* (1991); “Princesa meva, lletra d’angel” (1996). *Tiempo de espera* (1998); “Mon semblable, mon frère” (1998); and *Cap al cel obert* (2000); and *La meitat de l’ànima* (2003).
amor, la mar com a penyora is also conceptually read as a letter narrative in which the author experiments with literary conventions in order to shock the reader about the unexpected outcomes regarding gender relations in her novel (Bettaglio 79). Riera’s Cuestión de amor propio demonstrates that letter-writing may represent a self-reflexive exercise for the individual; one that transforms and projects how one feels about the “self”. Angela, the protagonist of Riera’s novel, is a writer who suffers from the recent heart break of a painful love affair. Feeling like a distressed and abandoned heroine, Angela decides to write to her friend and colleague, Ingrid, about her experience, and most important, to trace the genesis of what went wrong. In the process, she overcomes her antagonistic feelings towards herself and regains her self-esteem.

The novel is short, comprised of Angela’s letter posed to Ingrid. Though Ingrid’s response does not figure into the novel, by the end of the narrative the external reader gathers that Angela’s missive has a deliberate intention: she cues Ingrid through her intellectual and sardonic wit on the course of action she is to play against a misogynist writer, Miguel, at a future writers’ convention. Both the addressee and the external reader can only access Miguel’s version of the story through Angela’s recount of their brief history together and the spectral traces of their love affair that she recognizes in Miguel’s newly released novel.

After the horrific character assault and embarrassment by Miguel, and having learned that their amorous affair was fictitious, Angela writes to Ingrid in order to seek reassurance and validity of her “self”. This is indicated through her pauses and breaks in her story-telling, wondering if she is still holding Ingrid’s attention. Angela often makes similar invocations of her friend “si todavía me lees, Ingrid, si aún no te has muerto de
cansancio”…suggesting her awareness of how self-absorbed she has become with the details of her own narrative. She desperately desires to reinstate her self-worth and self-esteem after having been cast down in her most recent love affair. As she writes, she becomes more lucid about the events that led up to her pain, and in the process she overcomes her state of brokenness.

Significantly, it is their passion for literature and metaliterary ramblings that ignites Angela and her ex-lover’s initial attraction. The story of Angela’s and Miguel’s affair begins at a National Literature conference. Miguel, an aspiring fiction writer, seduces her from the minute he meets her. Angela recalls that their passionate intellectual debate over the romantic motifs for women in nineteenth-century makes their first encounter intense. Angela charges that Leopoldo Clarín’s and Benito Galdós’ tendency to employ “heroínas enamoradas” [love-sick heroines] over the age of thirty as their lead protagonists is the predominant reason why their love affairs are hopelessly unrealized. She theoretically suggests to Miguel that “las convenciones literarias dan por sentado que a partir de la madurez no sucede nada que merezca la pena de ser contado”. She further reasons that “precisamente doña Perfecta canta a mi favor. Es el paradigma del conservadurismo y la estupidez que suelen encarnar los personajes femeninos maduros […] suelen ser, por lo general, malhumoradas, hipócritas, avaras, rancias o se oponen al triunfo de la juventud” (32). Ironically, Angela observes a seeming parallel between the nineteenth century heroines and her own feelings of inadequacy: she is a middle-aged woman who is insecure about her aging body and sexuality. She tells Ingrid: “Tenía miedo, Ingrid, de

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79 [If you are still reading, Ingrid, if you have not yet died from exhaustion.]
80 [Literary conventions assume that nothing happens after adulthood that is worth telling about.]
81 [in fact, that doña Perfecta works in my favor. The older feminine characters are usually the prototype of conservativism and stupidity […] [they] generally tend to be bad-tempered, hypocrites, selfish, old-fashioned or they oppose the plenitude of youth.]
todo o de casi todo. Miedo a mi propia edad, a mi cuerpo no precisamente en plenitudie a mi cara, que el abandono del amor dejaría sin el maquillaje que disimulara el rictus de la boca sin el amparo de las sombras protectoras que enmascararan bolsas, ojeras y arrugas y miedo, además, a precipitar la entrega” (37).82

Through her identification with fictional spinster heroines in Spanish literature, Angela is able to recognize how she feasibly fed Miguel’s imagination of her “self”. After the first and only night of their love-making, she recalls that Miguel made her feel like “las estúpidas heroínas del más siniestro folletín, seducidas y abandonadas por tontas, por no haber tenido un mínimo de perspicacia me convertía en un simple objeto, un plato, un vaso o una servilleta de papel que, tras ser usada una sola vez, va directamente al cubo de la basura” (50).83 And, she deductively reasons the events that lead up to their demise. Yet later, after reading Miguel’s novel and identifying with the details of his fictional abandoned heroine left at the bedside of the male protagonist, Angela is faced with the possible truth that their lived reality may have fed the self-seeking novelist’s imagination for his fictional work. Angela now wonders if “una mujer de casi cincuenta años no tiene ningún derecho al amor, ni mucho menos al deseo físico me pregunto si algo de eso, si mi capacidad de transgredir la ley severa que me aparta no le...
The protagonist’s careful recounting of the minute details of her relationship with Miguel, from the beginning to its end, allows Angela to recognize her own culpability in the painful experience.

By self-reflecting in her letter mirror, Angela mitigates her victimization and recognizes every angle of her own guilt. If Miguel violated her, she somehow permitted it, sexually and textually. Her self-conscious writing elicits three thoughts: 1) Could her earlier debate with Miguel over the unloved nineteenth century fictional middle-aged heroines have been a projection/revelation of her own feelings of inadequacy?; 2) Could she have been living a self-fulfilling prophecy by not believing she deserved love and romance?; and 3) Could her negative expectations have affected the outcome of her and Miguel’s relationship? By reading his novelized version against her own, she can subjectively and objectively reflect on the events that lead up to the disastrous romance.

Still yet, it is the lure of fiction that enables Angela to compare and visualize her life story and find redemption through her own narrative. The blurred lines between her own reality and that of the life of fictional characters in romance novels permits her to self-reflexively confront the psychological damage she committed against herself in the pursuit of the male writer. Upon reading Miguel’s recently published novel, as a form of autofiction, Angela becomes more convinced that Miguel used her sexually and textually. When Angela identifies with one of Miguel’s fictional characters, she realizes that she may have provided him with the ammunition. The familiar details of the

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84 a woman of nearly fifty years of age doesn’t have any right to love, nor even to physical desire […] I wonder if something like that, if my ability to transgress the rigid law that keeps me away from […] scared him away].

85 The term “autofiction” was invented by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. It is a genre that combines both autobiography and fiction. The author may modify particular details, or narrate his/her story in third person as a way to “search for self” (“Autofiction”).
heroine’s abandonment in a hotel are identical to what she experienced with Miguel. She deduces that Miguel manipulated their short-lived romance for writing material, and that perhaps her self-fulfilling prophecy gave him creative power to an aspired fame and potentially earning a lucrative gain, all at the expense of her exploitation.

Instead of harping about Miguel’s abuse toward her, Angela makes an allegation against her “self”: her lack of a “mínimo de perspicacia” (50). Angela’s statement has profound meaning. She knows that the root of the bigger issue is that she trusted Miguel without using her better judgment, all out of her fear that she would miss the opportunity for romance.

 Angela’s textual gazing (writing and reading) of her “self” as the central character of her own autofictional account against Miguel’s fictional protagonist suggests an intertextual connection between their two narrative perspectives. Angela’s mediation of her story against Miguel’s version enables her to invert her objectified “self”. Thus, she creates an ontological game where she can turn around her portrayal as the used and abandoned heroine and his egocentric heroism.

Lastly, through her address to Ingrid, Angela exposes Miguel for acquiring power through his convoluted mirror of narcissism—a “bad mirror, undoubtedly, to use Martín Gaite’s term. Miguel needs her otherness to feed his own narcissistic desire for self-gratification. Angela reasons:

un espejo en el que basó su estrategia de seductor […] con parsimonia ritual antes de que yo aceptara entregarme. Porque es, efectivamente, por

86 [a least bit of shrewdness]
fin, en el espejo de la carne en el que los amantes pueden reconocerse y,
transgrediendo los límites que la piel impone, fusionarse. Y, sin embargo,
en nuestro caso, en su caso, seductor y no amante, a Miguel mi cuerpo
desnudo debió servirle para contemplar únicamente su imagen, mientras
que el suyo no reprodujo la mía.87

To return to the I-you paradigm, besides being Angela’s confidant at the structural
level, Ingrid represents her alter ego. Angela, who is not able to attend a conference
where Miguel will be present, requests her friend’s help to seek revenge against him.
Angela desires that Ingrid teach Miguel “a misogynist moral” by firing at his ego, as he
has the “habilidad de convertir en sí mismo todo lo que toca, de apropiarse con
espontaneidad graciosa de las ideas ajenas [...] intertextualiza lo que le viene en gana [...]”
sacará una moraleja misógina: no hay que fiarse—porque no lo tienen—del criterio de
las mujeres” (76).88

Angela’s last declarative statement is suggestive, and perhaps indicates Riera’s
creative intention, through the interplay of Angela and Miguel, to make a subtle critique
of systematic male-governed paradigms that have violated and exploited women’s self-
representations. Miguel’s exploitation of Angela, sexually and textually, represents how
the male’s monopolization of the pen has been traditionally a powerful and defiling

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87 [A mirror in which he based his seductive strategy [...] in a parsimonious ritual before I accepted to
give in. Because it is actually, and finally, in the fleshly mirror where the lovers can recognize themselves
and transgress the limits that their flesh imposes, fusing into each other. In our case, however, in the case
of Miguel, being a seducer and not a lover, my naked body must have served him to mediate his own image
instead of reflecting mine.]
88 [ability to turn everything he touches into something about himself, to appropriate with a charming
spontaneity other people’s ideas [...] to intertextualize whatever he wants [...] to take away a misogynist
moral: you shouldn’t trust a woman’s judgement, because women don’t have any.]
instrument used against women for exploring their interiority and individuality. The only way Angela can effectively get even is to counter Miguel with her intelligence. Her self-reflexive discourse, what Judith Butler refers to being a “necessary scene of agency,” (qtd. in Strozier 83), allows her to overcome Miguel’s abjection of her. Instead of licking her wounds of amorous sorrow, she disarms his seductive power over her and reconstitutes her self-conception as a strong woman and a successful writer. Riera turns the personal letters into a public form of her heroine’s artistic expression that rivals with Miguel’s novel. Angela redeems her self-love by trusting her inner power of reasoning enabled through the self-reflexive process of her writing. And Riera conquers a literary space through a form that traditionally kept women artists in the private sphere.

Self-Referentiality in Nuria Amat’s “El relato de Mónica”

Nuria Amat, a Barcelonan native, born in 1950, is considered among those writers of the “Catalan Women’s Renaissance” (Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles, 2002). Following the death of Franco, she begins to generate and publish works that reflects her evolution as a contemporary Spanish female novelist. Besides her collection of short stories in Amor breve (1990), some of her most notable works are: Pan de boda [Wedding Bread] (1979); Narciso y Armonía [Narcissus and Harmony] (1982); Todos somos Kafka [We All Are Kafka] (1993); La intimidad [Intimacy] (1997); Letra herida [Wounded Letter] (1998); El país del alma [The Country of the Heart] (1999), El siglo de las mujeres [The Century

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89 In their 1988 No Man’s Land, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose the questions: “Is a pen a metaphorical pistol?” And, “are words weapons in which the sexes have fought over territory and authority?” (3). Angela’s fallout with Miguel does not regard a battle between the sexes or the sexual conflict that Gilbert and Gubar suggest exists in traditional literature; on the contrary, it is about her being surreptitiously exploited by Miguel. It is Miguel’s ego that Angela attacks in order to seek her revenge.
of Women] (2000), and Amor y guerra [Love and War] (2011), to name a few. She holds degrees in Hispanic Philology and Library Science, and has earned a doctorate of Information Science. Her writing has been noted for her lack of committing to any one genre style, though her quest for “literary–subjectivity” and “authorship” is an expectation among her readers (Capdevila-Argüelles 9). The author is known to challenge the conventions of gender and genre in fiction as both are rooted in the politics of representation (Capdevila-Argüelles viii). Amat holds that the writer is a product of all that she has read; she is “a literary self. As such, s/he is nourished by reading” (Capedvila-Argüelles 1). Capdevila-Argüelles proposes that many of her novels are a type of “bildungsroman of the authorial voice using a perspective that transcends expectations of gender and genre” (viii). The author has extensively explored writing as a tool of introspection in her fiction and uses her artistic enterprise to construct a distinct authorial voice and rich literary subjectivity in her fiction.

Amor breve [Brief Love] (1990) is comprised of short stories told through personal reflections, letters, poems, open confessions to reveal “el relato en primera persona de una peregrinación sensual, literaria y sentimental” that reflects the fragmented reality of individuals (Introduction in Amor breve 6). In the fourth story, “El relato de Mónica”, [Mónica’s Story] she highlights the self-referentiality of letter-writing. Amat’s epistolary heroine capitalizes on the I-you paradigm to work up courage to break off her fraudulent bi-sexual relationship with her partner, Álex, whom she met twelve years earlier at a

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90 Amat’s literary opus also includes: El ladrón de libros (1988); De la información al saber (1990); Monstruos (1991); El libro mudo (1994); Viajar es muy difícil (1995); Reina de América (2001); Juan Rulfo (2003); Amor infiel: Emily Dickinson (2004); Deja que la vida llueva sobre mí (2007); and Poemas Impuros (2008).

91 [the first person story of a sensual, literary, and sentimental pilgrimage]
party hosted by mutual friends and instantly were attracted. Álex’s charismatic power and influence over Mónica convinces her to enter into an open sexual relationship with him. Since Álex’s narrative voice never surfaces, the protagonist’s letter highlights her search for voice and agency rather than an attempt to connect with the addresssee.

Mónica’s letter to Álex is self-serving in a literal sense: She writes to ultimately read her “self”, the “self” that has been lost and silenced by compromising her desire for a traditional romance and family. Her insistent self-referentiality through the pronominal “I” allows her to renegotiate the ongoing psychological struggle and isolation that she experiences and to pave out her way to self-discovery. Mónica’s I utterances in her letter-writing are like a gradual crescendo where she builds up agency in speaking her personal truth and a sense of control in seeking ownership of her own story.

On the onset of her address to Álex, Mónica’s direct and aggressive approach reveals her sole intent to break off an unpromising partnership with Álex: “Nuestra historia surgió de un pacto, de una especie de trueque entre perdedores, que bien o mal hemos cumplido” (58). Yet, her admission of the lack of trust she has in her own voice indicates that she is exploring the letter as a narrative vehicle for self-reconstruction: “te acostumbré a esta manía mía de explicarme por escrito como si desconfiara de mi voz, siempre temerosa, discordante, vacua…” (53). Her self-referentiality allows her to explore the potentiality of her letter-writing as a textual mirror to weigh in on her own search for truth. If she can write her “self”, her feelings, the impact that her self-

92 [Our story emerged from a pact, from a sort of trade among losers, that we fulfilled either well or poorly.]
93 [I had you used to this obsession of mine of explaining myself in writing as if I didn’t trust my own voice, always fearful, conflictual, empty…]
abnegation has had on her, she can potentially revert the affect. It’s about Mónica. It’s about her in her position of “I”.

Mónica has spent the last twelve years living in an open relationship with her bisexual partner, Álex, who on most occasions prefers to be with men. Although she once shared Álex’s disdain for societal restrictions and confinement for sexuality within “las clásicas relaciones heterosexuales” and ideals of “la pareja típica en la que uno sobrevive a expensas de la supervivencia del otro”, she has receded in her beliefs (59). She realizes that after many years of putting on the disguise of a “modern woman” whose… “valores eran la bondad, el respeto, el derecho a la privacidad, la libertad, el amor por el amor mismo” (63) she has denied herself what she desires and needs in a partnership, “el trato masculino” (60). She declares “he podido tener amantes y sabes bien que he disfrutado poco de este privilegio. Teniéndolos no te engañaba a ti, pero me engañaba a mí misma” (64). She downplays Álex’s beliefs to highlight her own, referencing how she feels about their co-habitation. It is only her thoughts that count in this final goodbye letter to Álex. Her references to herself put her at the forefront of her new narrative, allowing for her self-emancipation.

Her writing closes the gap between her former stuporous state and now conscious awareness of the dissonant relationship she had with Álex.

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94 [the classical heterosexual relations; the typical couple in which one survives at the expense of the other’s survival.]
95 [values were kindness, respect, the right to privacy, liberty, and love for love’s sake.]
96 [male attention]
97 [I could have lovers, and you know very well that I enjoyed this privilege very little. By having them I did not deceive you, only myself.]
Amat’s protagonist associates sexuality and texuality as either confining or liberating poetics. If conventional genres of self-writing like the epistolary novel censored women’s voice, Amat makes a relevant point in relating self-censored textuality to sexuality. Her heroine who has worn a masked “I” for too many years seizes the moment to bridge the couple’s amorous imbalance suggesting that denying her own “self” is like denying himself of his own homosexuality. She states: “Álex, ¿cómo iba a negarte yo tu necesidad natural de estar con hombres, cuando veinte siglos de humanidad clamaban por una homosexualidad masculina que había sido injustamente reprimida y censurada!”

Yet, in the next paragraph, she declares to be “aceptándote a ti tanto como me estaba negando yo” (66). Her acceptance of Álex’s sexual ambiguity has left her feeling abnegated. She broaches the topic oscillating between the pros and cons of an open relationship, but resolves that it is not what she wants and needs.

By reflecting on the trajectory of their relationship and the radical ideals that brought Álex and her together, she is able to rid herself of the “fantasmas” [ghosts] that once haunted her insecurities of her “self” and love. As Kafka surmises, letter communication brings one closer to “…one’s own phantom, which evolves underneath one’s own hand in the very letter one is writing…” (qtd. indirectly in Altman 2). By the closing of her correspondence, Mónica is able to emerge as a speaking subject; she finds strength to trust her authentic expression and internal voice. She tells Álex, “tu declarada ambigüedad me cansa. Seguir juntos significaría para mí una inadmissible esclavitud de

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98 [How was I going to deny you of your natural need to be with men, when twenty centuries clamored over a male homosexuality that had been unjustly repressed and censored!]
99 [so accepting of you to the point that I was denying myself.]
Mónica’s change of course reflects her liberation from the tyranny of robbed expression. Her desire and needs are the conduits of her mantra or spiritual transformation in that she realizes that the most important value she embraces is her self-definition: she chooses to love her “self” first and foremost.

The self-referential language and foregrounding of her sense of interiority brings her into a state of self-awareness that she denied herself before. And her continual acknowledgement of her experience and self-knowledge is the method by which she constitutes her subject identity. As a result, her self-awareness at the narrative level displaces Alex’s utterances from the I-you paradigm. The assertive “insisto en” [I insist in] (60), “no puedo” [I cannot] (67), “yo creo” [I believe] (59), and especially “yo sentía” [I used to feel] (61), deliberatively forcing the personal pronominal “I”, which is redundant in Spanish unless used emphatically, is a declaration of her own emotions, knowledge, and reasoning. The use of these verbs allows her to acquire a sense of “self” by recognizing her autonomous and individual needs and wants. Julia Kristeva’s expresses that “the practice of writing becomes the edge separating and uniting the subjectivity to which style attests—starting from a sublanguage elaborated where flesh and external reality come together” (110).

Mónica writes from a place of denial and restrained honesty. She has been living a lie to fulfill an ideal that is not her own desire and she finds discursive agency to unearth that desire by writing in the pronominal “I”. What she could not say to Alex in person, she puts into calculated written words in order to make a revolutionary change in her life.

[Your declared ambiguity exhausts me; to continue to be with you would mean for me a profound, unacceptable slavery.]
Kristeva describes this process of writing for transformation as follows: “a process of naming is substituted for this impossible to symbolize the real, whose transformation and future nevertheless allow themselves to be inscribed (in the pronominal device, among others)” (113). By using self-referentiality as a symbolic strategy for acquiring discursive agency, the protagonist imagines the possibility of supplanting her old and new identity and life-style with a new one.

By following the contemporary trends for performing the modern and open-minded woman, the protagonist has made her “self” a victim of her own self-deception. Mónica deromanticizes the idea of independence and fulfillment by cracking at this modern prototype for women to live their lives by. If she is not able to love who and how she wishes, she is committing self-inflicted emotional harm. It’s a conflict of ideologies, the contemporary women who is independent and free of exclusive love, but self-dispossessed, or the modern woman who seeks the traditional heterosexual ideals of the heroine being swept up in passion by her lover. As Mónica assertively writes her truth, she becomes embodied in her text. Her autobiographical narrative within an epistolary domain allows her to daringly reposition a self-understanding and to perform a new identity that suites and nurtures her need to self-love, and to refract from false ideals and desires that are not her own.

Letters as Rhetorical Artifacts in Esther Tusquets’ “Carta a mi primer amor”

Esther Tusquets, born in Barcelona in 1936, right in the initial stages of the Spanish Civil War, was from an affluent Catalanian family. Her family’s socio-economic
influence enabled her to be sheltered from the hardships of the war. She attended the Colegio Alemán in her earlier adolescent and young adult years, and then soon went on to study at both the Universities of Barcelona and Madrid where she studied Philosophy and Literature. Despite her privileged position, the young Tusquets felt deep solidarity with those oppressed and marginalized individuals. The novelist has been known for her “bleeding heart” for those excluded from the same privileges and advantages that her social class has afforded her (Ischiishi 8). Tusquets’ use of literature served as an escape from the harsh realities and truths she grappled with in her existing world (Ischiishi 9). Up until her death in July 23, 2012, she remained actively involved in the Spanish literary circle. She served as the editorial director of the renowned Barcelona publishing house, Editorial Lumen, until her retirement in 2000.¹⁰¹

Her artistic opus includes novels: *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* [The Same Sea as Every Summer] (1979; Margaret E. Jones’ translation) was her first novel, which would later introduce a triology followed by *El amor es un juego solitario* [Love is a Solitary Game] (1979), and *Varada tras el último naufragio* [Stranded After the Last Shipwreck] (1980). Two of her most well-received novels are *Habíamos ganado la Guerra* [We had Won the War] (2007) and *Confesiones de una vieja dama indigna* [Confessions from an Undignified Old Lady] (2009) in which she writes her memories of the Spanish Civil War and Post war era. She has also written and published several collections of short stories and books for children. Among the letter, the 1979 *La conejita Marcela* [Marcela, the Bunny Girl] is one of her most popular short stories, and

¹⁰¹ Barbara F. Ichiishi provides a thorough and sound bibliography of Tusquets and her life and works in her introduction to *Correspondencia Privada.*
“Libros “de lujo” para niños” [Books of Luxury for Children] (1988) is also directed to younger readers.¹⁰²

Many of the author’s works are focused on the psychological slant of the protagonists’ life experiences told through the first-person. The characters tend to hone in on the self-therapeutical nature of writing (Moretti 2). García-Armero indicates that Tusquets’ protagonists “son proyecciones personificadas y simbólicas de las partes del inconsciente femenino personal y colectivo. La tetralogía constituye así una alegoría del proceso de transformación personal del individuo, una búsqueda simbólica del ser cuya estructura circular sirve para destacar el tema del paso de un estado psíquico a otro” (qtd. in Dolgin-Casado 81).¹⁰³ Building on these observations, I will explain how Tusquets interrogates the roles of gender and sexuality and how language upholds those constructs in an epistolary text.

“Carta a mi primer amor” [Letter to My First Love] (2001) is one of four fictional letters from Tusquets’ collection Correspondencia privada [Private Correspondence; Barbara F. Ichiishi’s translation] in which the author “plays with the notion of the quasi-fictitious nature of autobiography itself” (Ichiishi 19). In each of the four letters, Tusquets addresses a prominent and deceased figure from her past, mediating their intimate relationship and “the role he or she has played in her [life] story” (Ichiishi 11).

¹⁰² Other published works include: La nina lunática y otros cuentos (1979); Siete miradas en un mismo paisaje (1981); Para no volver (1985; Barbara F. Ichiishi’s translation); Libro de Moisés: Biblia I, Pentateuco (1987); Después de Moisés (1989); La reina de los gatos (1993); Con la miel de los labios (1997); Ser madre (2000); Correspondencia Privada (2001); Orquesta de verano y otros cuentos (2002); Noticia bomba (2003); Confesiones de una editora poco mentirosa (2005); and ¡Bingo! (2007).
¹⁰³ [They are personified and symbolic projections of the personal and collective feminine subconscious parts. The tetralogy then constitutes an allegory of the individual’s personal process of transformation, the being’s symbolic search whose circular structure serves to reveal the passage from one psychic state to another.]
In “Carta a mi primer amor”, Tusquets, as protagonist and first person narrator, pens a letter to her former professor/first love in order to evoke a sense of his listening presence. The professor’s unexpected death leaves her without any sense of closure, not only with their relationship, but with her own life-narrative. Through her autobiographical recount in her letter-writing, Tusquet, the author, creates a textual album, a bildungsroman of her transitional phases, from her adolescence to her middle-ages, as a record of her “self” and of her authorial voice. Her narrative to her deceased first love serves as a suitable closing to a part of her that would be otherwise lost without her personal reflections. By conjuring the professor’s presence, Tusquets doubles up as an epistolographer who is able to appease her need for self-expression and clarification about a part of her and to bring closure to the perplexing gaps to her side of her life story. Claudia Moscovici states that the need to self-formulate is always negotiating “fluid boundaries, h/er changing perceptions and positions in relation to h/self and others” (29). Therefore, while the epistolographer subjective memories may be evoked through places, objects, and photos, those artifacts cannot entirely satisfy their need for self-knowledge; this can only be done through reflection of their past and present selves in writing. At the same time, I argue that her awareness of the changes in her country’s cultural and political landscape parallels the personal growth of both letter writers. Letter-writing can be equated to a bildungsroman in which the autofictional “Tusquets” charts her independence in relation to her beloved and to specific cultural markers.

The inclusion of Tusquets’ “Carta a mi primer amor” in this chapter pairs well with the other selected works as it sets in motion how one establishes a “self” in relation to other meaningful relationships in one’s life experiences. Because it is as Ichiiishi points
out, in the acting of remembering one’s life events “the ultimate threshold is set by the boundaries of one’s own subjectivity, the limits imposed by one’s particular body, mind, and spirit; as we are all aware, the same event may be experienced and remembered quite differently by different individuals, or by the same individual over time” (20). The fictional letter writer Tusquets, seeks to explore her inner sense of truth so that she may bridge the enigmatic gap between her “past self” and “present self”. By textually reflecting on how her love had changed for the professor, and at what point she became aware of that change, she is able to refract false identities about her past, and make a written record of her journey to her self truth. The epistolographer, now sixty years of age, writes to her elderly high school literature professor, who was the first to awaken her adolescent love. In the opening letter she recognizes that nearly half her life has gone by without keeping in touch with him (45) and surmises that her nostalgic need to reach out is brought on by his absence from the recent centennial celebration of Colegio Alemán [German School], the school where he taught and she attended, before its closing at the end of World War II. Upon hearing the news of his unanticipated death, the protagonist Tusquets’ is inspired to pen a letter just days after they had been reacquainted. After years without communication with him, she has been denied once again the opportunity to settle that vacancy in her heart. The protagonist laments the uncanny circumstance that life has dealt her. Death—another side of life—robs her of the opportunity to review her story with the professor. The protagonist has no control for this final ending of all that was left unsaid other than through her letter-writing and the construction of a “suitable epilogue” (66).
Because Tusquets writes anachronistically, given that her first love has passed away, her letter narrative is designed to resolve a personal internal disjunction and conflict of her “self”. What seems relevant to set forth is that the lover’s response is secondary to the protagonist’s voice; nevertheless, his emulated presence through her rhetorical writing remains pertinent. His conjured presence allows her to chronicle a subjective experience on love into a theatrical structure of two acts and an epilogue as she grapples with her identity as a woman living in a transitioning Spain (59). In doing so, the protagonist redramatizes her narrative in a linear fashion where one event leads to another, building up to the climax of the story, and the final acceptance of fate. The dramatic structure also underscores letter writing as a performative act. In the first act, the epistolographer reminisces on her childhood infatuation with her older professor who dotes on her attention as his young pupil. Soon after she leaves for the university, however, the protagonist realizes that she and the professor’s differences go beyond the age factor; their different values also separate them. In the second act, she regards her adult years. The professor is now married and has a family after the loss of his mother while Tusquets the protagonist is in and out of unconventional relationships and pursuing her professional writing career.

In the first act of her story, Tusquets reflects on her adolescent love for her literature professor during the early Franco regime, a time of repressed expression and Falangist indoctrination for the roles of men and women. She remembers that her professor, being a staunch supporter of Franco, proselytized to his students “los valores sagrados de la religión, la patria y la familia” and “que España era una unidad de destino en lo universal,
que era el hombre portador de valores eternos”. Infatuated with his endearing and traditional ways, she sought his attention and approval by trying to incarnate the ideals and values he upheld. She emulated the exaggerated amorous gestures between the sexes that traditional literature offered in a romanticized version of Spain. She learned to dance the Sevillanas, enjoy bullfights, and engage in readings of Quevedo, Garcilaso, and Machado, all of which encoded ultranationalist symbolism and romanticism for conservative Spain, but ultimately fed her desire “de aproximarse a ti, de compartir tus aficiones, de encarnar el tipo de mujer que se suponía había de gustar” (55).

Through her extraneous excerpts leading into the second part, Tusquet, the autofictional letter-writer, hints at how her youthful admiration for her professor turns dross as their disparate ideals surface over time. For example, when she regards the advent of the birth control pill as a symbolic moment of self-awakening, she reasons that “la píldora anticonceptiva me ortogó el dominio de partes tan importantes en mí como la sexualidad y la maternidad, fue el día en que decidí que no estaba obligada a improvisar una nueva imagen de mí misma, física y mental, ante cada nuevo amor” (55). The birth control symbolically represents her ideals of independence and liberation for emerging as an autonomous self. By the second half of her writing, now a young woman, she reasons that their difference of values and morals goes beyond her professor’s political rhetoric. She realizes that her Andalusian professor incarnates the hegemonic consciousness and the dogmatism of Franco’s Spain. For example, she reflects on the values of religion, fatherland, and family […] that Spain had one common destiny which was universal, that man was the bearer of eternal values…] (52)

[to get close to you, to share your interests, to embody the kind of woman that she imagined would please him]

[the birth control pill gave me control over such important parts of my identity as my sexuality and maternity, which was the day when I decided that I was not obliged to invent a new physical and mental image of myself for every new love.]
rigid gendering of sex roles for women pushed through the institution of the Sección Femenina. Reminiscing on the female subject’s compliance to its mandated service, she calls out its cultural signs in education: “las Tres Marías […] formación del espíritu nacional, religión, y gimnasia” (69). She recalls how in order to circumvent the system she had to solicit the help of the professor. She later realized that he represented a platform that upheld asymmetrical power relations between men and women in Francoist Spain. And it is only during this present time that she comes to the conclusion that their vastly and radical beliefs problematized their relationship. In the process, the internal letter writer has become indistinguishable from the external letter writer, making it impossible for the reader to adjudicate these reflections to either one of the two Tusquets.

Playing against the traditional plot of a sentimental heroine who laments the demise of her and her lover’s amorous union, the autofictional Tusquets rationalizes that the futility of their love affair had nothing to do with their twenty-year age difference; it was their ideologies and lived experiences that separated them. He remained a staunch conservative while she was a free-minded liberal. And furthermore, she would never be self-contained living in the shadow of his glorious and self-abnegated mother.

107 Women’s service to the Feminine Section, spearheaded by the Franco regime, was obligatory, and a necessary process for obtaining a college degree and a passport, regardless of whether or not she gave credence to the regime’s ideology.
108 [The Three “Marys” […] national training, religion, and gymnastics] (59). Under the Franco regime, the “Marías” represented courses in school that young women were required to take, and they were obligatory across all programs of study at state institutions.
109 Regarding the Sección Femenina’s mission, Nino Kebadze notes that “the initial challenge of creating a space for female agency without undermining or threatening male authority came to define the organization’s rhetoric and praxis” (58).
By the end of her letter, the protagonist resolves that her recapitalization of their past is a subconscious need to recover her subjective experience from death. Her letter may be compared to what Leggott refers to as an “archaeological excavation, positing it as a process of digging through the deposits of time to unearth an unchanging collection of facts” (41).

In my analysis of “Carta a mi primer amor”, Tusquets-the epistolographer-merges with Tusquets-the-historical-author as the fictional letter represents a rhetorical artifact to preserve her voice and identity of a past story that would otherwise be forgotten if it were not for the written testament. Tusquets as fictional epistolographer facilitates Tusquets the author to transcend the buried identity of her past, tied in with the memories of the professor and incorporate them to her present self. In this sense, the fictional letter-writer functions more as a “you” in the I-you paradigm, that is, a projection of the authorial self, than as an “I”.

Trauma and Memory in Marina Mayoral’s “Querida amiga” and “Estimada señora”

The Galician writer Marina Mayoral was born in Mondoñedo, Lugo, in 1942. She is both a literary scholar and a novelist. Her interests and works reflect a wide array of areas. Mayoral has researched and paid homage to fellow Galician women writers, Emilia Pardo Bazán and Rosalía de Castro; her doctoral dissertation is, in fact, focused on de Castro’s poetry. She has also compiled various editions of Pardo Bazán’s works, Cuentos y novelas de la tierra [Stories and Novels of the Earth] (1984), Los Pazos de Ulloa [The Pazos of Ulloa] (1986), and Insolación [Sunstroke] (1989). In 1979, Mayoral

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110 I borrow this thought from Leggott’s study, The Workings of Memory as it seems applicable to my idea of letter-writing as a means to preserve one’s authenticity and identity after one suffers trauma or loss.

111 Alborg notes that many critics do not consider Mayoral a “Galician” writer as most of her recent novels are not written in gallego, but translated to that language (179).
made her debut as a novelist upon the publication of *Cándida otra vez* [Gullible, Again] (1979) for which she received second prize in the Ámbito Literario competition. Her accolades for her literary work also include the Premio Gabriel Sijé de Novela Corta for *Plantar un árbol* [Plant A Tree] (1980), the Premio Novelas y Cuentos for *Al otro lado* [The Other Side] (1980), and her placing as a finalist for the Planeta Prize with *Contra muerte y amor* [Against Death and Love] (1985). Also worth noting is that Mayoral was recipient of the 1982 winning of the Hucha de Oro prize for “Ensayo de comedia” [Comedy Essay], one of her most successful short stories. In addition to the aforementioned works, Mayoral has established her literary presence with other works: *La única libertad* [The Only Liberty] (1982), *El reloj de la torre*, [The Tower Clock] (1991), *Tristes armas* [Three Weapons] (1994), *Querida amiga* [Dear Friend] (1995) *Dar la vida y el alma* [To Give Life and Soul] (1996), *Un árbol, un adiós* [A Tree, A Farewell] (1996), *Recóndita armonía* [Distant Harmony] (1996), *Recuerda, cuerpo* [Remember, Body] (1998), *Bajo el magnolio* [Under the Magnolia] (2005)

A common focus in Mayoral’s work is the social inequalities among the characters, although as Concha Alborg points out, the Galician writer stresses that she is “not concerned with social commentary” (180). Liberty, love, and death are recurring themes in all her novels, but death is one which preoccupies her most (181). A highlighted trademark of her novel writing is her traditional narrative techniques, and the author resists pursuing a forward stylistic literary trend (Alborg 191). To date, this is precisely what makes the author stand out among other contemporary female novelists: she holds true to writing and expressing what moves her as an artist.
Mayoral’s characters are always Galician, and their conflicts center around mysterious and uncanny circumstances, a trait common of the detective novel, also a genre which flourished after Franco. Her works include both male and female characters, but her stronger inclination is revealing the “human nature” of the female character: “to the feminist reader, Mayoral’s female characters are of particular interest because they do not follow a stereotypical pattern, each of them having different traits” (Alborg 188). The author typically incorporates the first-person voice among her protagonists in order to demonstrate their “voces individuales, personalizadas, inteligentes e irónicas, que arrastran sus reflexiones por la vida, divididas entre el sentido social del deber y el impulso íntimo del ser, entre la vida cotidiana y la dimensión trascendental de la persona” (Suárez Lafuente 46).

Mayoral’s “Querida amiga” and “Estimada señora” in Querida amiga (1995) share an intratextual relationship; the epistolographers are married to each other. Playing on the cliché “two sides to the same story,” Mayoral challenges her readers to consider the intricate complexities involved in the construction of self-narratives through the ploy of mutually antagonistic perceptions. While each protagonist seeks validation of their own his/her voice, they do so over the other’s narrative autonomy. The protagonists plot her/his sense of subject identity through the shared referential base of trauma and memory. Each letter is a self-contained resource for self-exploration and self-representation, giving voice and visibility to the writer’s interiority.

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112 [individual, personalized, intelligent and ironic voices that bear their reflections on life, divided between social obligation and the intimate impulse of being, between daily life and the person’s transcendental dimension.]

113 Countering the idea that memory is a reliable means for past experiences and self-understanding, Leggott’s The Working of Memory posits memory as a “dynamic and constructed process” where she suggests that one must consider “the impossibility of such continuity of identity” between a “narrating ‘I’
The protagonist in “Querida amiga,” is a seventy-five year old woman who seeks consolation over the death of her childhood sweetheart by writing her story to a well-known writer/public television figure. She states that she needs to “…desahogar con alguien esta pena que llevo dentro! Y no tengo con quién. Con mis hijos, que lo comprenderían, no debo hablar. Y los demás, mis amigas y la gente que conozco, se pondrían a criticarme y a hablar mal de mí, al final de mi vida vendría a encontrarme igual que al comienzo” (11). By choosing to narrate her autobiography to a known and respected public figure, she has a fair chance of setting the record straight about her misconstrued reputation. Her letter is thus a demonstrative attempt to break free from her past subjection and abjection by others. She wants the safety and comfort of knowing that the addressee remains marginalized from her story. She also desires to avoid the risk of her reputation being distorted or violated in any way. For this reason, she shares her story with a public figure with the intent for it to be published and circulated, thereby validating her perspective of truth.

The protagonist, who only offers the first initial of her name “V,” generously gives details about the conditions of her childhood town. The process of remembering the social and culture context of her former years not only paints a backdrop for the addressee to imagine how she grew up, it indicates how those conditions shaped her identity, ultimately affecting her choices for love and marriage. As the protagonist recounts her memories, she reveals that she was victimized by societal expectations. The

and the ‘I’ who is the subject of the narrative” (42). Further, there is a “concomitant inevitable split between the two voices—that is, between the past and present self” (42).

114 [I have such a need to unload this pain I have inside of me. I don’t have anybody to do that with. With my kids, who would understand, I shouldn’t. Nor with everyone else, my friends and the people I know, for they would criticize me or talk bad about me, and by the end of my life, I could find myself right back where I started.]
challenging obstacles of socio-economic incompatibilities and class struggles—familial pressures and a series of life events—inevitably caused her and the son of the town’s gelder, whom she courted from youth, to abandon their love. He was by birthright afforded opportunities that contrasted with her inherited social status: “su padre quería que fuese a vivir al valle, al pueblo, con el maestro, porque quería que fuese veterinario y no capador como él, y quería que se relacionase con señoritas y con la gente de dinero que vivía en el pueblo” 115 (14). After he moves away to study, she complacently marries an older military officer, and eventually migrates to the South. She alludes to having married an often uncouth and insensitive man because she did not have the option of marrying whom she deeply loved.

V’s reconstruction of memory is essential to understanding how the psychological underpinnings of the past relate to her present life. V hints at how she remains psychologically bound and imprisoned by society’s projection of her as less than privileged and worthy despite her physical beauty. She recognizes that while her good looks were a desirable asset, they reinforced her abjected “self”: “pensaban que como era montañesa podían echarme piropos sin ofenderme. Y así era” (13).116 The sexualized objectification that she endured by village men is only able to be destabilized through the new “self” that she generates in her writing. Andrienne Rich’s essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” proposes how language carries power to destabilize abstract and objectified identity. She uses the definite article “the” and the personal pronoun “my” to illustrate. “The” connotes the “abstract”…the “categorical” while “my” conveys the

115 [His father wanted him to go live in the valley, the town, with the teacher because he wanted him to be a veterinarian, not a gelder, and he wanted him to socialize with the ladies and people with money living in town.]
116 [people thought that, because I was a mountain girl, they could make flirtatious remarks without offending me. And they were right.]
“particular”, the “self-referential” (qtd. in Wittig 52). This is central to understanding how Mayoral’s protagonist reconstitutes her subjectivity through her own letter-writing “by having to name the ground we come from” (Leggott 219). The configuration of her present “I” against the memory of her past “I” allows her to weigh in on false myths and misconceptions of the former V. While she was forced to comply with the social law that violated and marginalized her because of the fissured relationship with the gelder’s son, it is through her textual voice that she resists any imposed sexualized identity that is not her perceived self-essence.

V’s repressed truth is realized through her first-person narrative. In the process of writing out her newly gained knowledge, the protagonist gains her subjectivity. By putting into written words her memories of what happened, she affirms her life experiences. Robert Scholes’s words illuminate this process: “We are subjects constructed by our experience and truly carry traces of that experience in our minds and on our bodies” (qtd. in Leggott 218). V’s self-knowledge corresponds to the commitment she made in her heart. In spite of others’ identification of her as sexually promiscuous and vulgar, she holds true to her pledged eternal love and sovereignty to the “son of the gelder”: “a mí sólo me gustaba él, siempre el mismo, desde niña, que pienso que estábamos hechos el uno para el otro”¹¹⁷ (14). By safe keeping his poems and his letters she preserves her self-integrity:

Esos versos y las cartas que me escribió aquel primer año desde Brétema es todo lo que conservo de él. Los lei tantas veces, están tan gastados de besos y de lágrimas que ya casi no se ven. Pero no importa porque los sé de memoria. Son versos muy bonitos y muy tristes, que parece que él ya

¹¹⁷ [I only liked him, always him only, since I was a young girl. I thought we were made for each other.]
presentía lo que iba a pasar y porque decía que no me olvidase de él y que su amor sería más fuerte que la ausencia y que la muerte. Yo no sabía escribir cosas así, pero le decía que él era el único al que yo quería y que lo había de querer siempre. Y no le mentí. ¹¹⁸ (19)

Now in the aftermath of her lover’s death, what threatens V is that her memory of her first love will betray her if she does not write about her subjective experience. The “you” might rob her presence and self-representation unless she constructs herself as subject in her story to the “Querida amiga”. Sarah Leggott enlightens the process of memory as one of “continuous revision, reshaping, and reinvention” that will allow each protagonist to create a “fictive self” (41). According to Leggott, “the self and past of the autobiographical text are not remembered, but constructed, with the partial evidence available through memory” (41). If V can tell her story, she can redeem part of the past as she subjectively perceives it. The letter writer’s dilemma is either to continue to keep her love and memories of the gelder’s son buried in the deepest recesses of her being to avoid criticism or pain to others, or to be vulnerable, yet true to her “self,” by actually sending the letter to the addressee.

V’s story is countered by that of her husband’s in “Estimada Señora”. He pens a letter to the same writer/public figure after finding the published narrative in which he recognizes some of its details. He confronts the addressee for not weighing in on his own

¹¹⁸ [All I have left of him are the verses and letters he wrote me that first year from Brétema. I read them so many times and they are washed away with kisses and tears to the point that they are no longer readable. But it doesn’t matter because I know them by heart. They are very pretty and very sad verses. And it seems that he knew what was to happen because he told me never to forget him and that his love would be stronger than absence and death. I didn’t know how to write that way, but I told him that he was the only one that I loved or would ever love. I didn’t lie.]
side to the story before publishing his wife’s narrative. This is meaningful as it remains unseen whether he too was seeking publication or only needing to set the record straight with the authorial editor of V’s narrative. He writes to her using a formal form of address, “Estimada señora,” and identifies himself: “Yo soy el sargento de la Guardia Civil que se casó con la montañesa guapa” (139). His direct demeanor is affirmed in the second paragraph when he confronts the editor: “No sé de dónde sacó usted lo que cuenta. Seguramente fue mi mujer quien se lo contó, pero a mí me parece que un escritor serio no puede dar crédito al primero que llega con chismes. En estas historias hay que oír por lo menos a las dos partes, vamos, digo yo” (139). Here he calls the writer on the carpet for publishing a story that lacks objectivity and one that he did not authorize.

The question of credibility and “truth value” is raised by the husband’s account of the same story (41). Yet, the sergeant’s challenge of his wife’s credibility reveals his need to tell his own story. Leggott’s definition about life-writing as “a form of writing that lays claim to factuality; it is by nature a process of creation that involves the seclusion and shaping of a life story” (41). And as Susannah Egan further theorizes, life stories are “unable to lift anything out of life and into art without transforming it [life stories]” to create “…a fictive self to narrate the events of his life and a fictive story to contain those events” (qtd in Leggott, 40). This “fictive self” is what V’s husband claims that he reads into his wife’s account regarding her complacency in her marriage and the love story with the “hijo del capador” or son of the gelder that never materialized. He further suggests that if the son of the gelder didn’t return after completing his obligatory military service

119 [I am the Guardia civil [Civil Guard] sergeant that married the pretty mountain girl.]
120 [I don’t know where you got your story. Most likely, it was my wife who told you it, but it seems to be me that a serious writer shouldn’t give credibility to the first person who comes to her with gossip. In these type of stories you have to consider both sides, at least that’s what I think.]
to the village to be with V, it is because “lo más seguro es que estuviese con otra novia” (140). His letter is filled with posed questions, as if he were deductively making a case against his wife’s memory. The continuous rhetorical question and answer exercise that he performs throughout his letter not only attempts to rescue his character from any negative way in which he was portrayed; it mines his wife’s autobiographical recollection. He reasons: “si él tuviese intención de casarse, cree usted que me dejaría el campo libre de aquella manera? […] “Si ella [the son of the gelder] no volvió a ver al hijo del capador, fue porque no le dio la gana, porque en estos tiempos que corren y disponiendo de dinero y de tiempo como ella tiene, ¿quién le quitaba de ir a la aldea cuando sabía que él estaba allí”? (144).

The husband’s most poignant contention against his wife’s narrative is when he dismisses her sincerity and sacred keeping of her sweetheart’s love poems. He states: “mucho leer aquellos versos y mucho besar aquellas cartas, pero era a mí a quien se abrazaba por las noches, y les aseguro que no lo hacía obligada, que muchas veces era ella quien me buscaba […] me cabrea que usted y todos los que lean lo que escribió piensen que yo la llevé a la fuerza toda la vida. Y no fue así” (143). The sergeant’s case is well taken. If his wife held her lover’s words so tightly, how could she then betray them by lying next to her husband night after night? He speculates that his wife’s embellished memory of her childhood love and her lover’s poetry prompted her to

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121 [chances are that he had another girl friend.]
122 [If he [the son of the gelder] had intended to marry her, do you think he would have left the field open to me in any way? […] If she never again saw the son of the gelder, it was because she didn’t want to. Given the times and the money and time available to her, who was going to stop her from going back home when she knew he was there?] 123 [Yes, she may have read his poems and kissed his letters over and over, but it was me that she snuggled with at the end of the day, and I assure you it was her who wanted me […]. It angers me that you and her readers will think I forced her to be with me. It wasn’t that way.]
romanticize this “fictive self” and “fictive events” that she never experienced due to her socio-economic status. What she loved was the fantasy of chivalry and romance: “Si yo supiese, se lo diría en versos, porque parece que eso es lo que ella estima más” (148).124

Let us now turn to the protagonists’ dueling conflicting viewpoints as they have far reaching implications when we examine the process of women’s subject construction through life-writing. Although my chapter’s focus is on the construction of individual subjectivity and finding self-love as opposed to analyzing women’s collective memory and shared experiences, it is worth mentioning, as Leggott substantiates, that “women’s autobiographical production has been neglected and denigrated” and that “women’s memories have been, and continue to be, largely absent in the process of the construction of cultural memory” (43).125 This certainly applies to the situation of literary women during traumatic moments in history, and Leggott’s analysis can shed light on the individual woman who has been historically denied authority, published under anonymity, that he had no control over her epistolary domain. And this thought certainly suggests a counterpoint to the sergeant’s earlier argument that he was not a controlling husband as she portrays him.126

124 [If I knew how, I would express myself in verse. That seems to be what she appreciates most.]
125 [It is also relevant to mention that Christina Dupláa has worked extensively on the subject of history and memory. Her works, La voz en Montserrat Roig: Estudio cultural de los textos (1996), and Memoria sí, venganza no en Josefnia R. Aldecoa: Ensayo sociohistórico de su narrativa (2000), present self-writing as a powerful tool for recovering one’s past. Certainly, women’s voices have been omitted perhaps for political reasons. Reconstructing one’s self-identity on paper is an empowering exercise indeed that has cultural and historical ramifications.
125 Nancy Miller’s “I’s in Drag: The Sexuality of Recollection. Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation” (1981): 47-57 serves useful when considering that the 18th-century epistolary heroine was subjugated to men’s interpretation of her passion. Katherine A. Jensen further notes that “nothing precludes her return to the scene of her seduction and its aftermath of victimization. She has internalized his unreciprocated desire and made herself responsible for the amorous imbalance, legitimizing her betrayal again and again” (35). In contrast, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century men violated epistolary women through unauthorized publication of their texts or by grossly misrepresenting them in fiction.
While the sergeant feels wrongly treated and misrepresented, V is able to appropriate her own story and consents to its publication, transcending the masculine authorization of her husband. Mayoral’s creative inversion of this traditional violation against women is intriguing. Moreover, the sergeant is able to respond to his wife’s story as counter viewpoint in order to set the record straight.

Their letter writing affords them both the opportunity to become their own agents of production within the realm of self-representation. While V addresses the public figure to create a self-narrative, the sergeant as the other “you” who haps upon the published letter, writes to challenge his distorted characterization by V. Mayoral’s male protagonist acknowledges that he has no control over her epistolary domain, and has no influence over his wife’s story as a publication. And this certainly extends to how he is portrayed through her. By establishing a dual perspective that pitches one’s subjectivity against another, Mayoral proves that epistolary writing is an effective tool for validating one’s own self-knowledge and understanding of self as both letters to the editor attest. Furthermore, confessional writing enables the exorcism of inner-demons; it also allows one to find a place of inner peace and self-love in spite of the trauma that they caused. Indeed inner peace and self-love are not confined to the realm of the private as epistolary practices may, at any moment, become public.

**Concluding Remarks**

Twentieth- and twenty-first century women’s fiction uses self-writing to aggressively interrogate paradigms of imposed and genderized identities. Women artists engage first-person narratives within the I-you paradigm as a way to remap boundaries and
relationships of power that relate to their subjectivity and identity. Luce Irigaray illuminates this idea when she states: ‘I’ symbolizes the threshold between ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’. “I who am this body and tell this narrative” (qtd. in Van de Ende 144). First-person narratives delivered through epistololarity or autobiography, or even a hybridity of both, are reemerging in contemporary fiction as textual places where women and other marginalized voices can confront conventions of genre and gender that have restricted their desire for self-knowledge and understanding and that have divorced them from self-love. This also takes place through the inherent properties of a first-person perspective and textual mirroring that open up for self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. The elliptical movement of the “I” as writer and reader of cultural paradigms and personal experiences suggests letter-writing as an autobiographical manifesto where the protagonist crafts and celebrates love for her “self.” In the process, the “you” or the addressee is reduced to a minor participant, but an indispensable conjured presence.

In this chapter I have explored the genre’s potential to create presence and visibility for female epistolographers by treating their letters as textual mirrors. Annick in Porque éramos jóvenes alludes to how her “espejismo” deformed her clarity and lucid awareness of her sense of truth. Her letter writing permits her to engage in an psychological interrogation of her own authenticity by refracting from David’s false illusions about the future. The letter serves as her metaphorical mirror where she materializes and emerges into the subject position of “I.” In Riera’s Cuestión de amor propio, Angela’s self-reflexive engagement to her writing permits her to regain a sense of self-respect after having been violated by Miguel, sexually and textually. By textually mirroring or recognizing herself in the nineteenth-century literary heroine and Miguel’s fictional
scorned women, Ángela is able to refract from stereotypes for female identity. In the end, whether or not her plotting for revenge against Miguel succeeds does not matter; what matters is her self-dignity and knowing her truth.

Amat’s protagonist in “El relato de Mónica” continually employs self-referential language which gives her the gumption to resist any lived out expression of sexuality and love that is not her own. She takes agency so that she may redeem her bad choice to settle for Álex in order to fit into the contemporary discourse for a modern woman who openly engages sexual values that are not her own. The autofictional Tusquets in “Carta a mi primer amor” doubles up to combine a fictional and an authorial “I” voice. The device of creating an epistolographer named Tusquet is designed to plot an effective ending to her history with the professor, not necessarily for closure, but rather to rescue Tusquets’ forgotten self. There remains a part of her youth that was overcome with such infatuation and illusion for her older professor. By writing to her deceased lover, she puts her latest life events into perspective as she reconstructs her autofictional memories.

Finally, the two epistolographers in Marina Mayoral, “Querida amiga” and “Estimada señora” challenge the reader to evaluate the nature of subjective experience, and the uniqueness of the individual’s storytelling of his/her life experiences through a shared addressee. As conveyed at the end of each of their narratives, Mayoral’s two protagonists are entitled to their centrality and presence to their own historical interpretation of their life stories. Nevertheless, the wife exercises her right to make her story public and therefore capitalizes on this important dimension of epistolarity.

These selected works illuminate for the reader the empowering impact that letter-writing plays in the textual image that projects one’s self. The epistolographers are
clearly the protagonists of their own narratives; they are both subjects and objects of their letter writing. This confirms Michael Foucault’s statement that “the letter that one writes acts, through the very action of writing, upon the one who addresses it, just as it acts through reading and rereading on the ones who receives it” (214). This connection of letter-writing with the preservation of one’s self and one’s self-discovery is the creative appeal the literary form has for the artists and explains the artists’ choice of the letter-narrative for their fictional works. Through the appeal to a “you”, their conjuring words symbolize a missive from the writer to the reader on how they imagine themselves to be constructively read and received.

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127 Foucault draws a connection to the classical Greek term, Hypomnemata which indicates a note written for public record in order to not be forgotten (The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982).
Chapter 3

Carmen Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable*: Reflections of Love and Identity

As outlined in the beginning of this thesis, the influence of letter manuals and conduct materials served as a tool for social and literary control in transitional moments of Spain’s political history. Specifically, in eighteenth-century Spain, letter manuals not only instructed female readers on how to compose letters (e.g. Antonio Marqués y Espejo’s *Retórica epistolar*, 1803; Marqués y Espejo’s *Cartas matrimoniales y amor honesto* in the same volume of his *Retórica epistolar*), they also implored the continual vigilance and safekeeping of women’s amorous discourse (Baquero Escudero 139). Feminine letters, edited and published into epistolary novels by men, marginalized the woman writer, imposing upon her expression of love and identity.

Even though the epistolary genre was not the most popular literary trend in the first half of Spain’s twentieth century, novels with romantic fictional plots continued to underscore women’s displacement and subjectivity. As I mentioned in chapter one, during the postwar period, the production and reception of *novelas rosa* [sentimental novels] despite their illusion of fantasy and escape for women readers, were intended for female exemplarity: “these normative expectations were expressed in women’s literary representation through structures of romance and bildung” (Kebadze x).

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128 In her panoramic study of epistolarity and its history in Spain, *Cartas sin lacrar*, Ana Rueda proposes that if letter manuals had such a powerful influence on socially accepted conduct, one could foresee how epistolary novels might be produced and read as another tool for social conduct (80).

129 Janet Gurkin Altman and Katherine A. Jensen, who both study the literary letter in France, offer also relevant and applicable and insightful studies for understanding male literary supremacy in Spain. While Altman attributes male domination of women letter writing as a means to position the woman “in the nonliterary social domain or in private erotic space” (qtd. in Elizabeth Goldsmith 28), Katherine A. Jensen states that it “uncovers a tension in the male, monarchical, supremacist position…[B]y presenting women’s letter models and offering through them a social or sexual thematic for imitation, male publishers may have been addressing this anxiety by attempting to limit women’s access to the literary” (Jensen 28).
Icaza’s *Soñar la vida* (1941), for example, politicized an ethos and image of women whose aspirations for a happy ending could only be achieved through marriage and motherhood (Kebadze 83). Similar to the *novelas rosa*, the epistolary mode has been traditionally associated with the isolated and confined woman. Since its rebirth in the postmodern era, however, women writers like Josefina Aldecoa, Ana María Navales, and Isabel-Clara Simó have experimented with the letter narrative as a liberating vehicle for expressing love and identity (Encinar 36). It seems paradoxical that female writers would entertain a genre that had traditionally oppressed them through its patriarchal ideologies of romantic love. The revival of feminine epistolary in Spanish fiction in an era of relative political democracy may be interpreted as a reflection of women authors’ resistance to the encroachment of models that infringe on their liberties as writers; particularly, models of how to write on love and identity.

This comparative observation between early modern and contemporary periods of Spanish history and literature that restrained women writers’ artistic expression is provocative. Because men controlled the Spanish literary market in earlier historical moments, women’s narratives have not been impervious to the political and cultural practices imposed upon them. Women’s self-representation and style of writing were circumscribed, inside and outside a fictional context; romance narratives were a means to censor women’s expression of selfhood and womanhood, at least in the surface of their texts, as they served as exemplary narratives for both women writers and a female readership. Sentimental writing, which summed up the female experience as configured in isolation, not only limited the writer’s visibility, but insinuated that the female artist had no voice or mind of her own in the mediation and creation of her art. Both epistolary
love plots and *novelas rosa* presented women as unable to be a writing and speaking subject.¹³⁰

Today, as I consider the situation of the contemporary Spanish female artist in relation to her text, I draw from Ruth El Saffar’s inquiries: “When, other than in the present century, have women in such relatively great numbers been able to discover a text within themselves? … for texts have generally been products made by men. Is something in the very nature of woman disturbed when she enters the realm of the text?” (x). If the proliferation of male texts and their censorship of women’s writing created a bereft through a literary and sexual hierarchy privileging the male writer (Jensen 19), how do contemporary women artists implicate themselves, as both readers and writers, in the process of creating meaning and interpretation of their own discourse? And, to extend this thought, can one posit that their writing functions as a creative ground against a predisposed feminine position on love and identity? How are love and identity inscribed in contemporary epistolary texts when the female writer discovers a text within herself? These questions inspired me to dedicate this chapter to Carmen Martin Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable* (1992).

The story for *Nubosidad variable* takes place in the late 80s and early 90s when two former friends, Mariana León and Sofía Montalvo, become reacquainted at a gallery hop in Madrid. Although they move in the same socio-economic class, they hold different statuses. Mariana remains single and is an accomplished psychologist, while Sofía is a

¹³⁰ Jensen explores how “femininity predisposes women to write of their love and suffering for men. While women’s love letters in the collection manuals are not presented as stylistically inferior to men’s love letters, femininity determines generic boundaries of women’s epistolary representation: women’s writing is limited to writing of love”. I suggest that Jenson’s comment on epistolary novels is also applicable to *novelas rosa* (qtd. in Goldsmith 30).
complacent housewife married to a money-hungry lawyer, and mother of three adult children. The two women’s unexpected encounter initiates their epistolary pact to become reacquainted in each other’s lives; and they hope to resurrect some of the taunting memories from their past, one of which is a former college sweetheart, Guillermo.

Thirty years before, the two friends had had a falling out over Guillermo. They later confess to each other that Guillermo was only a pretext for mediating their false ideals of love associated with fictional romances and cinematic characters (for example: Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Carmen De Icaza’s sentimental heroines, among many others). They come to realize that these fictional romances were pretentious and unrealistic standards by which to live their life. The abnegating heroine who sacrifices her love even at the expense of denying her own desires is an ideal that neither letter-writer will now uphold. Sofía reflects: “Mariana opinaba que me estaba envenenando con tantas historias de amor literarias y que aquellas pistas falaces de las novelas y del cine me iban a despistar cuando intentara aplicarlas a mi propia historia” (247). The protagonists discuss women’s self-denial as propogated through cultural iconic female figures and fictional heroines. Their letter writing conjures and weighs in on suppressed or dormant desires in their search for identity while denouncing hegemonic femininity and masculinity through the act of remembering and rewriting their lived experiences through their letters, which, as I have been arguing, operate as textual mirrors.

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131 [Mariana was convinced that I was poisoning myself with all those literary love stories and that the false trails laid by novels and films would confuse me when I tried to apply them to my own story.]
My primary focus in this analysis is to explore how the female writing subjects (both the author and the female protagonists) mediate desire, creativity, and identity: the female protagonists to each other, and the author to the external reader. Hence, my analysis will be conducted at the two levels of the I-you paradigm. In the sections titled “The Eclipse of the Sentimental Heroine” and “Spectral Presence of Erotic Discourse,” I show how the fictional letter writers mediate the lives of sentimental heroines and the relationships of those around them as a fantastical escape from the disappointments of their own love affairs and reality. The process of writing enables them to actualize their desire for healing and freedom, and to become independent creative subjects. In the section entitled “Nubosidad variable as Palimpsest of Sentimental Narratives” for the figure of the artist,” I examine Martín Gaite’s own artistic mediation of sentimental genres, feminine epistolarity and novelas rosa as literary and cultural artifacts that once restricted the female artist’s expression. Essentially, the author seizes the political and historical moment of a more egalitarian Spanish literary market to parody feminine exemplary narratives. She turns inside out the fundamental conventions and characteristics of these sentimental genres to reshape the woman artist as an autonomous writing and reading subject. Martín Gaite’s fictional female epistolographers jointly achieve a jouissance experience that transcends fixed parameters for gender and genre writing in relation to love and identity. Thereby, Nubosidad variable becomes a palimpsest for the situation of the contemporary woman artist in twentieth- and twentieth-first century democratic Spain.
The Subversive Art of Carmen Martín Gaite

Carmen Martín Gaite (1925-2000), one of Spain’s most prolific and prestigious authors, is among a group of writers categorically identified as “los niños de la Guerra” as they were children during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) (Cabayo Abengózar 22). The author’s work spans the periods before and after Franco’s dictatorship, and the country’s progress toward democracy. Her repertoire of published works consists of short stories, children’s literature, novels, essays, poetry, and theatre. One of the author’s greatest accomplishments is her international acclaim as a novelist. Her eminent novels include: *Entre visillos* [Behind the Curtains] (1957; translated by Francis M. Lopez-Morillas); *Ritmo lento* [Slow Rhythm] (1963); *Retahílas* [Strings] (1974); *Fragmentos de interior* [Interior Fragments] (1976); *El cuarto de atrás* [The Back Room; translated by Helen Lane] (1978); *Nubosidad variable* [Variable Cloud; translated by Margaret Jull Costa] (1992); *La Reina de las Nieves* [The Snow Queen] (1994); *Lo raro es vivir* [Living’s the Strange Thing; translated by Anne McLean] (1996). During her lifetime, the author was awarded several literary prizes. *El balneario* [The Spa] (1954), her first published novella, received el Premio de Café Gijón, and was followed by *Entre visillos* (1957) for which she received the Premio Nadal, a literary prize that Carbayo Abengózar claims launched Martín Gaite’s career as post-civil war writer (51). Higher honors bestowed to her name include: the Prince of Asturias Award in 1988; the Premio Castilla y León de las Letras in 1992; and the Premio Acebo de Honor for her life work. As a Spanish author of the postwar era, the accolade that merits most attention is the Premio Nacional de Literatura for which she was the first woman recipient. If for years she mulled over the ideas of Virginia’s Woolf’s in *A Room of her Own* (Carbayo Abengózar
49), certainly as a female artist who made her name in a predominantly male governed literary field, this award alone speaks highly of her achievements.

The artist’s penchant for literary diversity in her writing parallels the span of nearly fifty years. Many critics take liberty in making taxonomy of the themes and styles of her writing that correspond with specific historical and political eras. Carbayo Abengózar, for example, casts Martín Gaite’s artistic opus in three phases. She observes that in her earlier writings, Martín Gaite explores the question of female identity and the conventional role of wife and mother during Francoism (22). In the second phase, the author’s novels critically examine binarisms that stereotype men and women (24). And, in her post Franco phase, her works are often read as textual resistance to subvert canons and forms imposed by the official culture (25).

Despite her claim to being antifeminist, many of Martín Gaite’s works highlight the female experience in a male-dominated world. One of the recurring motifs in the author’s works is the exploration of identity. Her strong female characters often project an intense, internal conflict between their restricted identity and their ability to become writing and reading subjects. The latter, however, is rarely compromised in her later works. Martín Gaite’s female protagonists faithfully reflect and uphold the author’s artistic creed, which is the underlying notion that all narratives are conceived from the need and authority to tell one’s own story. In La búsqueda de interlocutor, the author states: “Cuando vivimos las cosas nos pasan; pero cuando contamos, las hacemos

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132 For further reading regarding the author’s views of how women and men write differently, see Lisette Rolón-Collazo’s 2002 study of Martín Gaite, Figuraciones. She recalls the author’s surprising confession to being antifeminist at a Women’s literary conference coordinated by American Universities some years back. Also, Martín Gaite writes in detail about her antifeminist stance in Desde la ventana (31).
pasar…” (*La búsqueda* 18). Martín Gaite considers many of her female characters from this perspective: the need to find a narrative voice and authority through the act of telling their personal experiences, which include topics such as “routine, the loss of childhood innocence, the lack of communication, the disjunction between reality and desire, and the fear of freedom…” (Davies 233). In her *Cuentos completos*, Martín Gaite reasons that her inclination for female protagonists is to probe women’s consciousness regarding their life experiences: “the marks left, especially on women, by the inability to match desires with life experience, because women are more affected than men when love is lacking, and they are more tormented in their search for an identity which they hope will be appreciated by others as well as by themselves” (trans. and qtd. in Davies 234).

As a historical and literary scholar, Carmen Martín Gaite was aware of the hegemonic cultural and political standards which promoted an essentialist female identity, inside and outside of a fictional context. She has written historical and theoretical essays, critiquing extensively the influence that external forces have had on women’s writing and subjectivity. In her 1983 study, *Usos amorosos de la posguerra español* [Courtship Customs in PostWar Spain; Margaret E. Jones], she specifically examines the reciprocity between political and cultural ideals and fiction, and its influence on how women projected their ideals of love and identity in their lived experiences. These literary and cinemagraphic models of female conduct related to love, more often than not, reflected the political and cultural propaganda circulating during the postwar era. The interplay between cultural ideals and the influence of images from fiction and cinematography foreground an ambiguous and conflicting representation of

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133 [As we live, things happen to us, but when we tell them, we make them happen.]
female identity as well as the production and reception of their texts. Martín Gaite states: “era un requisito casi indispensable dentro de la noción confusa y exaltada del amor que la mujer elaboraba, apoyándose en modelos literarios y del cine” (52).134

Many of the author’s fictional works reveal women’s conflict of interests between society’s expectations and their desire for freedom. Her characters struggle between “a social determinism on the one hand and the autonomy of the individual of the other” (Servodidio and Welles 10) and often resort to fantasy to transcend the external reality (Welles 202). Implicit in many of Martín Gaite’s writings is her characters’ incessant quest to master their own fate through their creativity and writing.135 Retahílas (1974) and El cuarto de atrás (1978) are examples where the author’s female protagonists lend themselves to fantasy, “in an effort to escape every day. Reading, fiction, came to be associated in their world with the erotic, the forbidden, the secretive” (El Saffar, “Liberation and the Labyrinth” 187), providing an illusory escape from oppressive realities. Marcia L. Welles’ surmise of fiction indicates that it allows the woman artist “to become master of our own fate by transforming reality and creating a new one more to our liking” (202). Thus, fiction used as a creative game to transgress fixed identities and genre roles proves to be an effective source for self-exploration and finding autonomy.

Carbayo Abengózar states that Martín Gaite’s goal throughout her use of fantasy and writing is to subvert and create: “Subvertir es revolver, trastornar, pegar y despegar, tirar

134 [It was almost an indispensable requirement within the confusing and exalted notion of love that the women would elaborate after literary and cinemagraphic icons.] (52). Note that pagination might vary from cited passages from Nubosidad variable due to my reliance on Margaret Jull Costa’s English translation of the text.

135 Welles states that “being can only manifest itself in discourse, and the absence of speaking is equivalent to the ultimate non-being of death” (197).
y volver a crear. Y contestar” (Carbayo Abengózar, “Buscando un lugar entre mujeres”). Her subversive tendency is revealed in her artistic approach and in the structure of her narratives. Below, the author reflects on her literary rebellion within her narrative:

Yo, quizá, lo que me ha pasado siempre es que he tenido una rebeldía muy poco agresiva, pero muy profunda, algo difícil de explicar, pero siempre he sido más rebelde de lo que he parecido y me han podido atribuir las personas que me conocen sólo superficialmente […]. Yo no sé si es táctica, pero procuro rechazar lo que veo que no me gusta, rechazándolo dentro de mí pero no levantando una bandera y gastando pólvora en salvas […] es que soy modosa, muy modosa (Aznárez 1981: 14 qtd. in Carbayo Abengózar).  

John W. Kronik notes that Martín Gaite’s most outstanding literary persona is that her “self –conscious text is enslaved by no laws of mimetic composition,” (52), instead, she resorts to a “playful invention of expressive modes” (52). Yet not only is literature a game for the artist, Martín Gaite carves the way for her female protagonists to explore their own identity and voice. Nubosidad variable as well as other works from the author’s later fiction feature strong female individuals who become self-actualized writing subjects via their own creative processes. Martín Gaite “openly associates herself with that bevy of modern artists who suffer no sense of shame or erosion of purpose when they view art as a game” (Kronik 52). In the process, Martín Gaite reinscribes

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136 I perhaps have always had a bit of an aggressive rebellion deep in me, something that is difficult to explain, but I have always been more rebellious than what I seem or what people attribute me to be. My rebellion is not about making a fuss, I am very Galician in that way, I mull over everything and manage doing what I want without screaming […] I don’t know if it is a tactic, but I try rejecting what I see that I do not like, refusing it in me…but not raising a banner and wasting time and energy […] I am modest, very modest] (my translation of Aznárez’s interview with Martín Gaite in 1981:14).
herself as a creative epistolary writer along the historical continuum of this literary tradition.

Martín Gaite remains faithful to many of the recurring themes and narrative elements that she takes up in her vast production of essays and fictional works. In *La búsqueda* and *El cuento de nunca acabar* she invites and challenges the reader to reevaluate the process of narration, inferring that the reader’s participation is a part of the narrative strategy, and crucial to its meaning. Martín Gaite’s work involves the reader’s active role in order to sort through the multi-layers and intertextual references. Carmen Martín Gaite’s affinity for “reading and telling strategies” casts “light on the frequently unconscious absorption of textual codes taking place in contemporary culture and posing the acute necessity of questioning the origins of our tropisms, the nature of the banal” (Welles 182). Let’s now turn to her use of the I-you paradigm in *Nubosidad variable*.

**I-You Paradigm as Writing Cure**

Although the novel’s most defining generic features are those that relate to epistolarity, *Nubosidad variable* is not limited to the categorization of one exclusive genre. Iñaki Torre Fica suggests that the novel is a case of

- autobiografismo, exploración psicológica, confesión en diálogo
- trascendente con el otro, metanovela, testimonio de la condición femenina en nuestra sociedad. Pero, sobre todo, ejemplo, a través de ese serse en la escritura, del *bildungsroman* femenino: indagar en las coordenadas

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137 Ana Rueda’s essay “Carmen Martín Gaite: Nudos de interlocución ginergética” for instance, is an insightful and thorough reading of the author’s adoption of an interlocutor as a ludic structuring device in the fictional works.
existenciales, meditar acerca de la propia identidad lleva a las mujeres, en este proceso de concienciación, a rastrear en su pasado para comprender su presente y roturar cauces de afirmación y de identidad en el futuro (1).

As Torre Fica points out, Nubosidad variable falls into a range of thematic topics, all of which deal with the women characters’ firsthand accounts of the psychological impact that their lived experiences have had on their love and identity. Further, I would argue that Martín Gaite was conscious of how sentimental genres, as literary models of conduct, held women to a particular experience and expression of love. As Cruz-Cámara points out, “Irónicamente, el ansia de confidencia de la mujer de posguerra que, según Martín Gaite constituía una reacción a la repressión de la sexualidad femenina, se despoja en Nubosidad variable de todo romanticismo evocador de las novelas sentimentales al trasladar su escenario al diván psicoanalítico de Mariana” (53).

138 [autofiction, psychological exploration, confession in transcendental dialogue with “the other”, metanovel, testimony about the feminine condition in our society. But, above all, an example of the feminine bildungsroman: to explore the existential coordinates, to think of one’s identity takes women, in this heedful process, to search their past in order to understand their present and to harrow channels for affirmation and identity in the future] (1).

139 Regarding this notion of gender and genre in Martín Gaite’s work, Patrick Garlinger’s study of El cuarto de atrás points out that the Real Academia Española’s definition of the word “Género…also carries as one of its definitions ‘any type of cloth’” (qtd in 38). Garlinger notes how scandalous it was for a fabric to be recognized by the wrong name as C., the protagonist, recalls: “C.’s comment on cloth underscores the ways in which cloth, like gender, is a form of normative categorization; women of her age and class are expected to make such distinctions or suffer the consequences of a social faux pas. C. learns the conceptual need for classification through the names of cloth. As in gender and genre—género—are tied to the act of remembering, and in her attempt to recall the names of fabrics, C. points to the transgressive and ultimately scandalous act of forgetting, deliberately or not, the names of géneros and consequently crossing borders” (38). I extrapolate from Garlinger’s analysis that Martín Gaite is allegorically undermining gender and genre association of feminine writing. Torre Fica’s open-ended description of Nubosidad variable concurs with Garlinger’s analysis of the author’s disdain toward fixed “géneros” for fiction.

140 [Ironically, the Postwar woman’s yearing to confide according to Martín Gaite, that constituted a reaction against the repression of feminine sexuality, strips Nubosidad variable entirely of evocative romanticism in sentimental novels by transporting the scene to Mariana’s psychologist couch.] (53)
The protagonists’ use of letter writing is a mediating function to find meaningful identity and freedom from the banality and disappointments of their lives, and mostly those rooted in their psychological struggle of love and identity. As Altman points out, “a confidential exchange is motivated by psychological need, and the letter writer’s own emphasis on that need” (61). Their conflict of interest is the onset of many failed personal relationships and unfulfilled desires that the two of them experience after Guillermo exits their lives. Mariana and Sofía recognize that their psychological needs must come first, and the authentic way to mediate healing is through their therapeutic exchange, through the palpable unguent of letters. Remembering her husband’s Eduardo’s forceful insistence that Sofía visit a psychiatrist, she states: “Ahora no me lo tiene que descubrir Eduardo ni enterarse de que lo he descubierto yo...Yo elijo mi propio psiquiatra, porque me da la gana... Ya lo he elegido” (119). Sofía defies Eduardo’s opinion as the final authority of her mental state. She takes matters into her hands by choosing to write to an old–Mariana– acquittance and accepts writing as her only cure. Their epistolary communication as a substitution to a psychiatrist’s couch is indicated when Sofía informs Mariana’s practice partner, Dr. Carreras, that she is indeed being treated by Dr. León, “a kind of long distance treatment” (139). In an interview with Martín Gaite, the author too suggests that writing is a substitute to psychiatry: “si uno pudiera encontrar el interlocutor adecuado, tal vez nunca cogiera la pluma” (27).

Mariana, whose professional life centers on fixing others’ relationship problems, ironically alludes to being incapable of helping herself in this area despite her expertise in

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141 [I don’t need Eduardo to tell me this time; he doesn’t even have to know that I’ve found out for myself...I will choose my own psychiatrist, because that’s what I feel like doing. I’ve already chosen her.] (107)
142 [If one were able to find an adequate interlocutor perhaps she/he would never pick up the pen.] (27)
the field of psychiatry: “Ya era hora de que me enterara y de que se me bajaran los humos. Yo estoy necesitando de un psiquiatra más que todos mis pacientes juntos” (70). Her patients, who continually circumvent their issues of identity and love by focusing on how society has victimized them for their assumed emotional and sexual dysfunctions, need what Sofía, who is overseeing renovations in her house, describes as issues involving “the plumbing of the soul”: “Se obstruyen los conductos de la tubería y se va almacenando por dentro mucha mierda, aunque no lo sepamos porque tarda en oler. Lo malo, además, de esas tuberías del alma es que se localizan mal y que no sirve cualquier fontanero, tiene que ser uno muy especializado” (25).

Derrida’s reading of “Plato’s Pharmacy” is relevant for understanding how Sofía’s and Mariana’s letters as therapeutic writing can be advantageous, but futile to their healing if not treated with caution. Derrida reasons that writing is a pharmakon, a remedy and benefit (97), but it can also be maleficent because of its limitations and its hypnotic effect. While the protagonists’ letters seem to be a good medicine for their internal healing, addiction to letter-writing can have the pejorative effect of jading the process. For example, if in writing to each other they become codependent in their recovery, the possibility for finding their authentic voice and owning their independent life experiences may become lost. If, however, the two modern-day heroines use letter-writing as a means to an end and not an end in itself, i.e., to search and know what is true from within themselves (Derrida 103), then their letter writing serves its purpose: to aggressively treat their infectious past.

143 [It was, I realized, high time that I got taken down a peg or two. I need a psychiatrist more than all my patients put together.] (59)
144 [The tubes get blocked up and a lot of crap gets stored up inside, although we’re not aware of that, because it takes a long time before it starts to smell. Even worse, the plumbing of the soul is difficult to locate and you can’t just use any old plumber, you have to get a specialist.] (15)
The epistolary topos for women’s psychological suffering as a result of the betrayal of their lover and the inefficiency of letter writing as a means of psycho-affective treatment, is set forth in Ovid’s classic, *The Heroides*, and other works following in its shadow. Typically, the sentimental heroine exercises no agency in finding a cure to her amorous and suffering obsessions through writing. In traditional models of amorous epistolarity the heroine’s letters often serve as an ultimatum to her lover, or the “penultimate gesture” before her self-inflicted death (Jensen qtd. in Goldsmith 26). In *Lettres portugaises* (1669), for example, Mariane, the Portuguese nun, ceases to write in order to facilitate her healing (Jensen qtd. in Goldsmith 26). In *Nubosidad variable*, Martín Gaite’s letter writers do the opposite. Their letter writing does not primarily focus on their expressions of suffering in their failed amorous relationships, but provides them with agency to heal and move forward. Martín Gaite parodies and subverts canons of traditional genres that once restricted women’s writing to a plot of the hopeless and abandoned heroine, while she also capitalizes on the intimacy of heartfelt expression associated with sentimental genres. The epistolary properties inherent in and peculiar to letter writing are what the characters hone in on: confession and carthartic rescuing of their respective souls via the interchanging roles of narrator and interlocutor implicit in the I-you paradigm. Their intertextual mediations of fictional romance heroines who, consumed with passion for their lovers, have compromised and abnegated their own expectations for love and self-identity reveal the two characters’ truths and disappointments. The protagonists’ mediation of iconic love through letter writing challenges restricted parameters for gender and genre, which in turn enables them to become self-actualized and autonomous writing subjects.
The novel is framed in sixteen titled chapters which consistently alternate between
the two characters’ perspectives. Sofía’s intimate narrations, however, often oscillate
between a letter narrative and the structure of a diary. The hybrid narrative is a crucial
part of “the [epistolary] novel’s signifying system” (Altman 56) as it provides a frame for
how to read and interpret the protagonists’ epistolary exchange (Altman 4). While Sofía’s
address to Mariana simulates an emotional and physical bridge between the two of them,
her diary mode allows her to create a psychological distance from perhaps the memory
she painfully forbears in the letter form. Sofía evokes a sense of immediacy for interior
monologue and self-understanding in her diary narrative.\footnote{Mariana and Sofía are
profoundly aware that their choice of narrative modes are artifices that allow them to take
stock, communicate “their ‘état present’ in terms of what they have already done, where
they are now, and what they fear, hope, plan for the future” (Altman 122). Sofía puts
down letter-writing temporarily in order to reflect and examine her personal life
experiences: “lo epistolario lo dejo en reserva, porque nunca se sabe si hará falta volver a
echar mano de él para algún adorno, pero de momento no me sirve […] como necesito
imaginar, aunque sea aproximadamente, tus puntos cardinales, mientras aparejo los
bártulos para la pesca de esta historia esquiva que a las dos nos concierne por igual”…
(150).\footnote{Notwithstanding, the oscillation between the two narrative forms still evokes
the sense of an interlocutor in her private discourse. Martín Gaite’s theorizes:}

\footnote{The external reader also gathers that “One of the greatest advantages of the diary lies in its
confinement of the reader to the internal world of a single ego” (Porter Abbott 24).}

\footnote{[I am going to keep the epistolary style in reserve, because you never know when you might need it as
a flourish, but for the moment it’s of no use to me […] since I need to imagine your cardinal points,
however approximately, while I sort out the odds and ends I need for this elusive story that concerns us
both in equal measure.] (138)}
El paso del ‘tú’ real al ‘tú’ inventado tiene su correlato literario en la transformación del género epistolar al pasar a otra modalidad también muy grata a la mujer introvertida: la del diario íntimo […] entre las cuatro paredes de un recinto cerrado donde la mujer se encuentra más a sus anchas para ensayar, libre de trabas impuestas por la vigilancia ajena, un desagüe a sus capacidades expresivas. (Desde la ventana 48)  

Although *Nubosidad variable* simulates an authentic epistolary exchange through the intertwining of Mariana’s and Sofía’s narratives, Martín Gaite’s creative venue for the structure of the novel reflects her own personal belief that all narratives are born from the need to communicate one’s own story. Carmen Serven Díez suggests of *Nubosidad variable*’s structure that its alternating snippets between the two perspectives “va construyendo la novela que es por tanto la suma de dos relatos homodiegéticos intermitentes” (204). Their homodiegetic perspectives put the letter-writers at the center of their textual creation and their approach “to becoming” self-fulfilled and independent subjects. 

Structurally, the reciprocation of their exchange appears to maintain a bilateral flow between the protagonists’ discourse, and Mariana’s and Sofía’s desire to be each other’s confidante is in the end self-serving. Their writing to each other serves, as I have been arguing, as an elliptical movement to recover their “I” discourse. In the novel, Carmen Martín Gaite frequently revisits the art of narrating, and theorizes on the narrative act as a

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147 [The step from the real ‘you’ to the invented ‘you’ has a literary parallel in the transformation of the epistolary genre into another form that is very pleasant for the introverted woman: the intimate diary […] between the four walls of an enclosed room where the woman finds more room to write, free from being held back from the imposed ideals, draining her expressive capabilities.]

148 […slowly build the novel, which becomes the sum of two intermittent homodiegetic stories.] (204)
solitary adventure born out of the need to “contárselas uno a sí mismo, antes de que se presente la necesidad, que viene luego, de contárselas a otro” (2).^{149}

Carmen Martín Gaite defines writing letters as a solitary indulgence. Epistolary scholarship illustrates how separation and isolation is a classic trope of epistolary relationships. Ruth Perry states: “What the characters enact in their seclusion and self-perpetuation process of emotional self-examination gathers momentum and ultimately becomes more important than communication with anyone outside the room in which one sits alone writing letters” (117).^{150} In chapter eight, entitled “Solitary Striptease,” Mariana alludes to her ultimate motive in addressing Sofía,

Tu nombre y tu recuerdo me sirven de soporte para largar amarras, pero en cambio no me veré obligada a demostrarte que pienso en ti y en tus problemas [...] Y es una decisión liberadora. ¡Qué descanso confesarme a mí misma sin rodeos que este vicio epistolar [...] es, como casi todos, un vicio solitario! (128) ^{151}

Sofía transmits the same message. After not hearing from Mariana, she decides: “…yo, por mi parte, lo que he sacado en consecuencia es que escribirte a tus señas de aquí sin saber cuándo vas a volver no merece la pena. Esta carta, pues, ha dejado de serlo y pasará a engrosar mi cuaderno de deberes. Que todo en él—como verás algún día—va en

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^{149} [to tell things [experiences] to one’s self, before the need comes to tell them to another.] (2)

^{150} Although Perry’s chapter analysis of “Separation and Isolation in Epistolary Fiction” is particular to epistolary lovers whose self-reflexivity is symbolic of a self-cathartic process, the same paradigm is applicable to Mariana’s and Sofia’s need to communicate through letters. The two women treat their isolation and separation as a plot for subjectivity.

^{151} [Your name and your memory serve as a mooring post for me but, on the other hand, I don’t feel under any obligation to demonstrate that I’m necessarily concerned about you and your problems […] It’s a very liberating decision. What a relief to confess to myself quite openly that this epistolary vice […] is, like most vices, a solitary one.] (116)
plan de ańicos de espejo” (152). Mariana’s turn to self-reflexivity points to one of the most outstanding features of autobiographical writing, and as Ansgar Nünning points out in his essay on metanarrative: “self-reflexive references are an integral component of everyday narration” (12). The narrative phenomenon of self-reflexivity is comparable to what Martín Gaite refers to as “narración egocéntrica” (Cuadernos de todo 327). She alludes that the “narración egocéntrica” is a result of that dark and dreary time, prior to the narrating act when the individual has his back to the world, finding the courage to recuperate the “I” in her discourse that is overshadowed by the presence of others (326).

Reciprocal communication, inherent to epistolary writing, and a narrative structure that Martín Gaite frequently employs in her fiction, functions as a narrative elliptical movement to becoming a writing subject. This proves especially useful when we consider women’s writing as marginalized behind conventional genres on love and identity. Imploring and drawing in the internal reader as an interlocutor is critical “to transform those intense silences and ‘experimentada incomunicación’ into words and threads that break down the barrier between the self and others” (Gould Levine 162). The role of an interlocutor, even if invented, validates the writer’s sense of authority of her own narrative, and her advent as a writing subject. She is “both creator and creation” in their bipartite textual production (Spires 145). Martín Gaite refers to Padre

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152 For my part, I’ve come to the conclusion that writing to your address here, without knowing when you’ll be back, is a complete waste of time […] this, then, has ceased being a letter and will simply be another addition to my homework exercise book. As you will see for yourself, one day, it’s really just a collection of shards of mirrors.] (140)

153 Carmen Martín Gaite states in her essay La búsqueda de interlocutor that “la capacidad narrativa, latente en todo ser humano […] encuentra una satisfactoria realización en la conversación con los demás” [the narrative capacity, latent in most humans, finds satisfaction and fulfillment in conversation with others.] (2)

154 This idea is borrowed from Robert C. Spires’s analysis of the interlocutor’s role in Martín Gaite’s El cuarto de atrás. Spires goes on to say that only by means of the activity of the production of texts through discourse does either exist (145).
Sarmiento’s quote in which he states that “la eloquencia [...] no está en el que habla, sino en el que oye…; si no precede esa función en el que oye, no hay retórica que alcance” (qtd. in La búsqueda 20). The author supports Sarmiento’s premise when she asks:

¿existe ese mismo condicionamiento para la narración escrita?...

Evidentemente, no; y en eso consiste la esencial diferencia entre ambas, en la distinta capacidad que ofrecen al sujeto para el ejercicio de la libertad. Es decir, que, mientras que el narrador oral […] tiene que atenerse, quieres que no, a las limitaciones que le impone la realidad circundante, el narrador literario las puede quebrar, saltárselas; puede inventar ese interlocutor que no ha aparecido… (qtd. in La búsqueda 21)

In my view, the mutual dialogic participation between writers and readers is the most outstanding narrative device in many of Carmen Martín Gaite’s novels. Narrating a story involves the listener’s participation and enjoyment for the story to continue. The author insists: “Me limito a señalar que se escribe y siempre se ha escrito desde una experimentada incomunicación y al encuentro de un oyente utópico” (El interlocutor 22). Martín Gaite explains in Desde la ventana: “si desaparece o no ha existido nunca ese tú ideal receptor del mensaje, la necesidad de interlocución, de confidencia, lleva a inventarlo. O, dicho con otras palabras, es la búsqueda apasionada de ese “tú” el hilo

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155 [Eloquence [...] is not in who speaks, but in he who listens…; if the role of the listener is not considered first, rhetoric will have no impact.] (indirectly qtd. in La búsqueda 20)

156 [Does this same condition exist for written narrative? Evidently, no; and, in this consists the essential difference between the two, the distinct capacity that they offer the subject to exercise her liberty. That is, while the oral narrator [...] abides necessarily by the limitations that the surrounding reality imposes, the literary narrator may break them, skip them; she may invent the interlocutor that has not yet appeared.] (21)

157 [I merely point out that an individual writes always have written from a lack of communication and the need for an ideal listener] (22)
conductor del discurso femenino, el móvil primordial para quebrar la sensación de arrinconamiento” (47).158

Carmen Martín Gaite’s discourse on the search for an “oyente utópico” [ideal confidant] stems from the need to communicate. Borrowing from Janet Altman’s terminology, Mariana’s and Sofía’s respective roles of confidant that they extend to each other, allow them to share and tell their passions and sentiments regarding their failed romances and betrayals, but also to choose to dismiss them to the unimportant category, foregrounding an authoritative control over their own narrative discourse about their life experiences. Mariana’s love affairs from Raimundo to Manolo, and, of course, Guillermo, whom they both share, and Sofía’s husband, Eduardo, serve only as reference points to reconstruct their lives. Mariana urges Sofía to write Eduardo out of her anecdote as he is no longer of interest. And later, both friends confess that the presupposed scenario of Guillermo, the man initially implicated in their fractured friendship, is in truth of minimal importance. At one point the friends confess that they lacked passion for him. Their confidential exchange permits them to maximize “the epistolary mode’s essential level of communication” (60). Each friend invites the other to inhabit her memories, thus empowering the writer with her pleasure and authority to speak of them.159 The two friends’ epistolary pact thus allows them to become what Altman describes within the dynamics of epistolarity as “the I of a new statement” (122).

158 [if the ideal receiver of the message, disappears or has never existed, the need for dialogue, for confiding, leads to its invention. Or, in other words, the passionate quest for that ‘you’ is the catalyst for feminine discourse, the primordial motive to break through the feeling of enclosure].
159 Janet Gurkin Altman approaches the role of the deemed epistolary confidant as a consciously chosen position by the writer. The confidant is bestowed the role because of trust, but, she also reciprocates the trust; thus, allowing for the writer/confessor to freely confide her innermost reflections.
Acting as an alter ego to the letter writer, the external writer ensures that her authentic expression is not compromised. The protagonists’ letters establish a metonymic relationship between their writing and their emotional healing. To accomplish this, they set their own rules for writing. In their continuous references to details on how, what, and where to write, the two protagonists defy compliance to any voice or textual mirror that is not their own. Their control and authority of their written discourse on love and identity hold preeminence for recuperating their sense of identity. Mariana recalls Sofia’s epistolary rules: “Podría romper estos dos folios últimos, en vez de pedirte perdón por ellos, pero me frena acordarme de otra de tus reglas epistolares, la séptima y última: Nunca se tachará nada de lo escrito, a no ser que se trate de una rectificación gramatical o de estilo” (28).

If letter-writing is indeed an elliptical movement, as I have been arguing, then the end purpose of writing is for the women to gain dominion over their own discourse on love and identity.

Martín Gaite’s insistence in the desire to write as borne from the need to find a recipient of her words proves especially useful when we consider women’s writing as traditionally marginalized behind the conventions of epistolarity. If women have been robbed of voice and artistic authority, then Martín Gaite indeed creates a way of giving authority to the female voice. The author plays upon the image of women as victims of the pact for physical distance between the two friends is what Altman describes of Sidonie Gabrielle Colette’s novel, Mitsou, ou comment l’esprit vient aux filles. Direct contact is delayed between the characters in order to bridge a physical gap across which the two can gradually reveal to each other their inner selves and their daily existences “before the shock of physical contact would render such spiritual communication impossible” (27). Although Colette’s novel centers on the amorous relationship between Mitsou and the Blue Lieutenant, it is applicable to Mariana’s and Sofía’s pact to emotionally heal before they can meet physically.

[Instead of asking your forgiveness for them, I could just tear up those last two pages, but then I remember the seventh and last of your epistolary rules: Never cross out anything you’ve written except to make a correction of grammar or style] (18).
men’s betrayal through sentimental love plots on what Jensen denominates as “the lower end of a literary hierarchy that privileges men” (11). In Nubosidad variable Martín Gaite deconstructs this notion of an “essential female identity” (Jensen 22) inside and outside of fiction. Imploring and drawing in the reader as an interlocutor is critical “to transform those intense silences and ‘experimentada incomunicación’ [experimented incommunication] (22) into words and threads that break down the barrier between the self and others” (Gould Levine 162). The role of an interlocutor validates the writer’s sense of authority of her own narrative and her advent as a writing subject, appropriating her own voice. Thus, Martín Gaite brings together the historical and theoretical dimensions of reading and feminine desire for access to the world outside of the interiorized one in which the woman letter-writer lives. Nubosidad variable is a collective experiment between the writers and readers for the creation of its text: “The circular structure of her open works assure the reader the potential for participation in the never-ending story” (qtd. in Cruz-Cámara 59).

The Eclipse of the Sentimental Heroine

One of the many underlying issues that Mariana and Sofía challenge is an essentialist paradigm of womanhood. Their history and identity in twentieth century Spain, their psyches and the social context in which they live, cannot be separated in terms of the weight they play in their formation and in their understanding of physical space, and of writing as a space to escape. As middle-aged women who grew up under the influence of totalitarian ideologies, they are conscious of “a strong dichotomy between public and private life in postwar Spain […] the public space which is oppressive and the private
which is liberating for women” (Davies 240). However, living in the Spain of the 90s is at odds with the Spanish legacy of social and cultural formation that they acquired at an earlier age. Sofía remembers:


While it is a factor, entrapment by moral codes and public institutions is not what limits their discourse as much as their lack of sense of “self,” as I have been arguing.

The characters’ observations and writing about the patriarchal parameters that used to limit their movement and expression, is, however, an intrepid act that subverts sexuality and gender performativity on various levels. In their routines, both exercise self-constraint and censor their visions for other possible realities. First, to daringly challenge men’s versions of literary and cultural heroines reveals a feminist advocacy on their part; and second, to reclaim their words, memories, and life experiences in written discourse reveals the pursuit of a democratic voice that challenges biases toward

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162 [They weren’t optional. A pass in being a daughter. A pass in courtship. A pass in household management. A pass in conjugal relationships and doing one’s duty by the in-laws. A pass in childbirth. A pass in smoothing over difficulties, in finding a place for everything and in putting a good face on things. A pass in active motherhood, although this subject, being the most difficult, is liable to continual revision. Such subjects, especially the last, can prove fascinating. It depends how you look at them.] (105)
women’s written expressions on love and identity. As previously mentioned, Sofia represents the world of domestic life while Mariana represents the ambitious professional who moves freely in the public sphere. At the same time, Mariana and Sofia bridge the gap between their two worlds, dismissing the infringement of external forces on the internal space of creative freedom. In their epistolary exchange, they mock heteronormative expectations of domestic romance and the cohesive nuclear family; in particular, the role of marriage as a public social institution. The numerous images evoked through the telling of their experiences and relationships are venues for trespassing confining sexuality and gender roles. Their writing represents a place of emancipation from solipsistic and self-referential discourse, a literary adventure that, as we shall see, breaks the solitary confinement of the iconic cloistered woman who writes about the matters of the heart from her letter closet.

In a parallel fashion, the author extends this argument about the confinement and restrictions for gender roles and identity in social spheres to the literary realm: “Martín Gaite makes the private public, thus attempting to reconstruct the Spanish female subject in relation to a less structured context and a more fluid discourse” (Davies 243). If the private sphere once symbolized domesticity and belonged to the woman, as opposed to the public world of men, the external reader is now invited to deconstruct these rigid gender boundaries through the cooperative venture of reading the heroine’s letters. Sofia’s altruistic role as mother and wife has kept her constrained and compliant to others’ expectations of her. Her sense of futility is projected when she questions how to justly express Eduardo’s treatment toward her: “Reconozco, además, que la alusión a malos tratos estaba expresada en términos incorrectos, según el código matrimonial,
porque Eduardo no había pasado de dar algún portazo, pero la mano no me la había levantado nunca” (282).  

Sofía feels inadequate, especially measuring herself against Eduardo’s mirrors of condescendence: “me relegó en su mente al reducto de las amas de casa adocenadas y carentes por completo de sentido estético” (17). Eduardo’s assignment of her as ordinary leads her to challenge the privileged status quo of males in her world.

Both protagonists are well aware of male monopolization and manipulation of even the aesthetic world as they creatively undermine the male sense of superiority over them in matters of style. Sofía’s own critical review of Gregorio Termes’s artistic work further supports this thread: “Pero la adjetivación me resultaba sospechosa. De un tiempo a esta parte son tantos los fuera serie que triunfan de la noche a la mañana, que no puede uno por menos de preguntarse si no serán artistas en serie, atentos a las expectativas de mercado que les marca una computadora” (17). Mariana states: “te aviso, eso sí, que voy a cambiar de estilo, ya que me has dado carta blanca para que elija libremente” (138). Mariana’s semantic word game with the expression carte blanche reinforces the idea that their writing of societal roles of identity and experiences of love represents a textual canvas, a clean slate to write the history of themselves.

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163 [I realized too that, according to the matrimonial laws, I had used the wrong expression when I said I felt I’d been treated badly, because although Eduardo had occasionally slammed the door, he had never raised his hand to me.] (269)
164 [he relegated me in his mind to the category of ordinary housewife, entirely lacking in any aesthetic sense.] (6)
165 [I felt suspicious of the adjectives used to describe his work [...] these days there are so many overnight successes described as being ‘real originals’ that you can’t help wondering if they are, in fact, that original, or if they’re not simply artists with one eye on market forces pinpointed for them by the computer.] (7)
166 [I’m going to change my style since you’ve given me carte blanche to choose.] (138)
*Nubosidad variable* purposely deconstructs the fixed parameters of gender and sexual identity through an intimate discourse of womanhood and selfhood that embodies the protagonists’ selves. Bringing their disdain of assigned gendered roles and sexuality out in the open reveals their ontological need for understanding themselves within a cultural system that defines them. Their letters serve as the catalyst for this process. In their letter-writing they address social expectations as imposed metaphorical mirrors where they must reflect the desires of institutions and cultural paradigms—desires that are not necessarily their own, whether it is in Sofía’s familiar role or Mariana’s professional endeavors. Sofía remembers when her children lived at home: “yo era un espejo de cuerpo entero que los reflejaba a ellos al mirarlos, al devolverles la imagen que necesitaban para seguir existiendo, absueltos de la culpa y de la amenaza, un espejo que no se podía cuartear ni perder el azogue” (40). She recognizes how she became lost in her domesticity, she was hindered from knowing who she was: “A lo largo de una serie de años […] mi equilibrio mental estuvo supeditado al logro de recetas de cocina apetitosas y de un comentario aprobatorio por parte de los duendecillos reflejados en mi espejo”.  

In turn, Mariana confesses that writing to Sofía enables her to refract from the codependent relationships that she has acquired with her patients, whose “espejos amargos” (133) contaminates everything and everyone around her (120). She now pursues her own altruistic motives; she mediates on how to not become implicated in that

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167 [I was a full-length mirror that reflected them back when they looked at me, returning to them the image they needed in order to go on existing, absolved of guilt and fear, a mirror that could not crack or tarnish.] (30)

168 [For years […] my mental well-being was dependent on coming up with delicious recipes and on getting the approving comments of the little imps reflected in my mirror.] (31)

169 [bitter mirrors] (120).
traditional iconic love story, “aquella historia de amor” (134) that is not her own: “De momento tenía que burlar a aquellos dos carceleros [Ramón and Silvia, her two patients] y elaborar mi plan en frío” (134). The need to learn who she was is one defining reason for her choice to write to Mariana. Sofía and Mariana both use their writing as a means to this end.

The final chapter, “The Persistence of Memory”, in which Sofía’s deceased mother, Encarna, awakens in the “refuge,” the house that her children have inherited, is perhaps the capstone of Nubosidad variable. The external reader soon discovers that the mother’s ghostly presence is evoked through Sofía’s subconscious dreams. Her mother’s narrative voice provides the reader with a historical account of the conflicting social expectations and entrapment of the Spanish woman through her mnemonically review. Here, Martín Gaite playfully twists the narrative perspective, offering a proliferation of points of view. This chapter is crucial as it evaluates the political and cultural values, myths, and ideals of Spanish womanhood that for years served as the matrix for feminine identity in and out of literature. The balance of history and memory is carefully delimited in Carmen Martín Gaite’s previous works, for example in El cuarto de atrás. The female protagonist of that earlier novel, states: “…desertaba de los sueños para pactar con la historia, me esforzaba en ordenar las cosas, en entenderlas por miedo a naufragar” (El

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170 [It was just a question of shaking off my two prison guards and calmly plotting my escape.] (122)
171 Martín Gaite employment of memory and history is a familiar narrative strategy in her fiction. Herzberger also identifies these strategies as classic techniques among writers of social realism, a category that characterized a phase of the author’s earlier works. It’s “the belief that objective reality is available to the writer and translatable into a story; the perceived coincidence between the sign and its referent; the assertion that to narrate life is to re-present it in the whole of its authenticity; the faith that literary engagement can transform the world into something other than it is” (36).
Sofía’s dreams surface from a repressed state of mind in order to enter the realm of history—her history. Bringing these memories to mind is the immune system’s mnemonic way of subverting patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies and identities. For Sofía, to remember is to transgress and to unveil silence.

Encarna’s revived ghostly presence marks what Herzberger refers to as a particular “subjective remembering” (35), a first-person narration which examines political mythology and cultural status quos to question “adherence to a pattern of discourse that eschews equivocation and ennobles all that is fixed and unvaried…” (35). Encarna’s reference to Salvador Dalí’s painting, The Persistence of Memory (1931) which lends its title to the chapter, suggests that dates and time are only illusions that “serve no useful purpose” (340) for measuring the profound and meaningful memories that enable one’s subjective identity. At the same time, there is a parallel to be made between dates and times in relation to sexuality and identity. Regarding her position as dutiful wife, Sofía’s mother reveals her deep awareness and true sentiments: “… mientras seguía pendiente de pasar bandejas y rellenar copas, a aquellas mujeres con las que había que converser a la fuerza sobre temas sin fuste, mientras ellos discutían de sus negocios, mujeres que no dejaban huella, igual que no la dejaría yo […] tan idéntica a ellas, resentida, tan sola” (348). Her recollection of non-memorable events are constructed and sustained through the process of narration, not fixed dates and times. Here it is interesting to

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172 “…I deserted dreams to agree on terms with history, made an effort to order things and understand them for fear of failure.] (55)

173 [I was handing trays and filling glasses, while the men talked business, I would have no option but to exchange banalities with the wives, wives who left no impression whatsoever, just as I would leave no impression … I was just another resentful, lonely wife.] (332)

174 It is significant to mention that Dali was famous for refuting to be limited or confined to a particular style or genre. I bring this up in relation to my premise that Nubosidad variable and its writers defy fixed generic parameters for the expression of identity.
note that the absence of dates extends to Sofía and Mariana’s correspondence. Unlike the conventional epistolary practices of dating a letter, here the protagonists choose to skip this tradition.

Sofía’s mother’s reference to Sarte’s words, “somos semi-víctimas y semi-cómplices de lo que nos pasa” (358) alludes to female oppression as a generational affliction in Spanish society in which women are partly responsible. That is, remaining silent and following the status quo, in some sense, makes them accomplices to predominant discourses that impose their ideologies and laws. Such discourses include the traditional literary ideals where women remain primarily the objects of men’s romantic quest, renouncing their own desires. Sofía’s mother admonishes her daughter to not fall into the same trap as she had, “al mirarte en este espejo ya sin lustre, decidieras firmemente hacer lo que sea para acabar como yo” (351), and “que lo que te haga sufrir lo descartes, hija” (358). Her mother urges her not to take inventory of her domestic duties (ironing and cleaning) but to make memories that count, and above all, get rid of anything that makes one suffer pain. This advice allows Sofía to realize that self-sacrificing one’s happiness is a dated ideal, and perhaps it’s what Mariana alludes to when she tells her friend to leave Eduardo out of her stories. Conversely, the power of their internal memory and narrating enable the agency of writing one’s own history.

Writing gives Sofía and Mariana clarity to sort through the contamination in their lives, getting rid of anything that has stifled their self-consciousness. Thus the textual mirrors of their letters manage to eclipse the iconic sentimental heroine as an inauthentic

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175 [We are all the semi-victims and semi-accomplices of what happens to us.] (333)
176 [you could look into this dim mirror and decide once and for all to do whatever was necessary not to end up like me.] (335) and […]if something causes you pain, get rid of it.] (341)
representation of their contemporary life experience of love and identity and place them on their way to recovery from the “bad mirrors.”

**Spectral Presence of Erotic Discourse**

As Sofía and Mariana reflect on the iconic sentimental heroine that was modeled for them through cultural and political indoctrination, they also identify with its oppressive sexual/gender performance and identity constructions. To advance their potential as autonomous subjects, they must challenge the limitations of sexuality and identity by openly bringing its repression to the surface and rejecting the heteronormative standards and their contradictions. Their defiance and destabilization of the patriarchal parameters regarding their social roles as women, leads them to ruminate on the taboo topics of homoeroticism and bisexual identity. Sofía, for example, alludes to the men in her life and their sexualities—her brother, Santi’s suspected homosexuality, and her son, Lorenzo’s possible bisexual tendencies—as having disguised identities because they do not fit into the mold of man as “hero” and “conqueror” of women’s sexuality as prescribed by traditional cultural and literary norms.

One of many disdains that Sofía conveys in her letters is the pressure of heteronormative standards that often results in the individual forging her or his right to live a happy life. She indicates this when she speaks to Lorenzo’s friend, Antonio, who feels a sense of pressure to procreate in order to placate his mother. Sofía tells him to reject choices that do not benefit his happiness and own desires, thereby encouraging him to make his own decisions regarding what’s best for his life. Regardless of his decision or his mother’s desire for grandchildren, being colonized by others’ wants for him and
abnegating one’s own happiness will lead to a life of despair and misery (354). Later, Mariana psychoanalyzes that sexuality, when used to colonize another individual’s desire and identity, results from fear of the erotic. In fact, it is Raimundo, a patient as well as “part time” lover, and with whom Mariana has a complicated relationship, who alludes to fixed identities as being symbolic prisons which restrict his “coming to agreement with [my] soul” (81). Raimundo tells her that eroticism is a daring and risky adventure, to which she acknowledges that they are “…por su propia esencia contradicción y oscuridad” […] “y a esos pozos de oscuridad no me digno bajar porque me da miedo” (108).177

These tidbits of reflections between the two women’s letters hints at two larger questions that Martín Gaite sets before her reader: the notion of amorous epistolality confined within a heteronormative framework, and also the subtle play on the spectrum of eroticism. If sentimental genres may be read as critiques of cultural constructions of heteronormative expectations for sexuality and identity, then to subvert the language of women and men as sexual signs—male as power, and woman as passive—proves that *Nubosidad variable* trangresses canonical sentimental genre and gender writing. Although literature may serve as an ideological device that enables the state to construct and polarize subject and identity, it may also be framed as an androgynous and transsexual narrative to deconstruct patriarchal conventions. Such is the case according to my analysis of this novel.

177 [essentially dark and contradictory by nature; I wouldn’t deign to descend into these wells of darkness because I’m too afraid.] (97)
The suggestive thought that Nubosidad variable transgresses the heteronormative framework for amorous discourse is not a novelty in Martín Gaite’s fictional works. Though my reading of same-sex desire remains cautious, Garlinger applies the same idea to El cuarto de atrás. Garlinger states, “If lesbianism runs the risk of being ‘unread,’ its spectral presence alludes to something that, because of its ineffable quality, cannot merely be dismissed” (52). In that novel, C.’s conversation with the man in black suggests exploration of sexual oppression and identity. At one point he outright asks C. if she is a lesbian, thus making explicit the possibility. Garlinger also adds that the man in black usage of the past tense indicates a type of sexual repression (50). Even more suggestive, however, is his comment, “The thing is that I understand literature and know how to read between the lines” (Martín Gaite El cuarto de atrás 200), which may indicate his perception of her sexuality. The same notion is possible in my analysis of Nubosidad variable as it is undeniable that both Mariana and Sofia explicitly talk about both heterosexual and homosexual love and desire. I argue that the ‘confidante’ (which is part of the discourse on friendship) merges subtly with the lover’s discourse. Nubosidad variable then becomes a hybrid of these two utterances.

As a reader of Tzvetan Todorov, the author inscribes her love for fantastical literature in many of her works. El cuarto de atrás is the most famous of her practice of fantasy in literature. Nonetheless, Nubosidad variable reveals many of the same fantastical elements and techniques that characterize her style. Just as in El cuarto de atrás the written pages under the hat “turn” into the novel that the reader has in his hands, in Nubosidad variable Sofia and Mariana’s correspondence “turns” into the manuscript for the novel. This same playfulness is weaved throughout the exchange of the two protagonists’ letters and their
numerous double-entendres. The game of ambiguous and symbolic discourse keeps the external reader continually guessing at the nature of their friendship and their writing. If women in traditional Spanish narrative were restricted to particular paradigms of heterosexual amorous discourse, then Martín Gaite’s game with the origins of fiction is even all the more compelling with regard to deconstructing ready-made assumptions on sexuality and identity in women’s writing. Could the two female protagonists’ letter exchange perceivably go beyond a Platonic state of friendship and to a sensual one, thereby creating a suggestion of seduction and foreplay between the two of them? Contradictory perceptions and double meanings indeed transmit a subtle homoeroticism. It is this spectral space of an amorous discourse between the two friends that validates an alternative reading to Nubosidad variable. At the very least, the novel could be read as a discourse regarding the exploration of the protagonists’ own sexuality and identity, and consisting of multiple interpretive possibilities.

The numerous references to eroticism and love may not be overlooked by the reader. The intertextual citings of romantic heroines in fictional novels, Mariana’s essay on eroticism, and some of the protagonists’ relationships with other characters, intertwined with their own writing, incite the voyeuristic imagination. In Ruth Perry’s chapter on sentimental friendship and epistolarity, she states that “whether consciousness stands symbolically for sex or sex stands for consciousness, the fact is that the connection between consciousness and sexuality is very close in this genre where people are

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178 Steven G. Kellman speculates with regard to how politics and literature often parallel that “it is possible that eras in which sex is utilitarian, in which pleasure in it for its own sake is discouraged […] are also periods of exclusively functional art” (23).
embodied in their correspondence” (130). This observation certainly seems applicable to the two friends’ epistolary exchange. Moreover, Mariana’s references to her essay in progress on eroticism, in particular, serves as a reflective counterpoint to the amorous and homoerotic discourse.

Janet Altman’s notion that “the letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its emphasis on separation and reunion” (14) is an outstanding requisite of the two friends’ reconnection; they are adamant about writing to each other before meeting again in person. This initiates the lure of a seductive foreplay. Altman states that “the epistolary romance is a slow-motion affair, in the same way that an exchange of letters is a dialogue ritardando” (21). Futher, “the seducer’s art lies in his very ability to keep the dialogue going” (148). Their “taking it slow” to rekindle their friendship in letters in lieu of meeting up implies a slippery textual insinuation; yes, their epistolary exchange seems to suggest a seductive ploy to transgress genre and gender in amorous discourse, but perhaps the slippery textual insinuation applies to the nature of their friendship too.

Mariana writes: “¿Te acuerdas de cuánto nos gustaban las historias de reencuentros? [...] conviértelo en aventura romántica, depende de ti, vas hacia lo imprevisto y lo imprevisto es lo más divertido…” (328). “Going with the flow” with unexpected life happenings gives more context to Mariana’s earlier metaphorical allusion of overwhelming passion: “Y aquí sí que vendrían a cuento mis apuntes sobre el erotismo, que ya empujan para ponerse en primer plano, ansiosos de romper diques y engrosar el caudal de esta carta, si

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179 [Do you remember how much we liked stories of reencounters […] turn it into a romantic adventure, it depends on you, go for the unexpected, the unexpected is more fun.] (328)
es que puede llamarse así a un discurso que, al haber nacido destinado a desembocar en la carpeta azul, más bien se convierte en afluente del otro” (142).

This intertwining and imaginary juxtaposition of Mariana’s essays and her correspondence to Sofia strongly suggests an erotic intertextual connection. Her new-found interest in the subject of eroticism, along with her recent reconnection with Sofia, and their letters merged into the same blue folder, becomes an intertextual experience. This intermingling of erotic material with letters feasibly comprises a Platonic narrative dynamic between the two of them. Likewise, Sofia conjectures that the ultimate reward for their writing is their reunion: “El único final un poco feliz de estos cuentos incompletos será el de podérselos entregar algún día a alguien que sonría entre lágrimas al recibirlos” (305). While Sofia ruminates over heterosexual happy endings in sentimental genres, her desire for creativity and fantasy prompts her to entertain alternative ones. Sofia writes, “quiero llorar contigo a rienda suelta una pena de amor tal vez irrelevante, pero que arrastra muchos anteriores, lágrimas y suspiros abortados…” (315). The language of painful love affairs and stillborn tears—tropes of epistolary writing—leaves an ambiguous opening for other possible reasons in their anticipated reunion: “But just as some of the most interesting plays are those that lie on the generic borderline between tragedy and comedy and therefore can play off our expectations of one against the conventions of the other, so some of the most intriguing epistolary works

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180 [My notes on eroticism would really come in useful here: they’re impatient to be brought into the foreground, anxious to burst through dams and swell the waters of this letter, if you can use that term for a discourse which, though originally intended simply to flow into the blue file, is now more like a tributary of it.] (130)

181 [the almost happy ending these incomplete stories will be being able to hand them over to someone who will smile tearfully upon receiving them.] (290)

182 [I want to feel able to weep freely over a possibly irrelevant but painful love affair that brings with it many previous sorrows, stillborn tears.] (299)
blur these distinctions between the associated pairs *confiance-amitié and coquetterie-amour*” (Altman 70).

The most outstanding intrigue in the author’s game occurs in the novel’s epilogue. As the protagonists joyfully gather their letters to organize them in the form of a book, one of the pages of the two friends’ manuscript letters escapes into the wind during the prevailing storm. A raindrop blurs the first of the two words, *Nubosidad*, from the title page, suggestive of the tear drops that fictional sentimental heroines frequently shedded over their writing of a painful amorous affair. The symbolism of tears has been described as “the simulated words of love that stain the page on which the heroine records the anguish of her soul (a topos ubiquitous in classical elegy)” (Margaret F. Rosenthal qtd. in Goldsmith 11). Linda Kauffman states that “tears are powerful signifiers in lover’s discourses: they guarantee the authenticity of the sentiment, they are material signs of the heart’s intentions, manifested in the body’s responses” (98).183 Indeed, Martín Gaite substitutes the tear drops with rain drops possibly washing away the pain associated with this literary tradition. The symbolic yet subtle gestures requires extra attention on the part of the reader to these literary topoi as the author challenges the borders of fantasy and reality to explore other possibilities of meaning and interpretation for fiction.

Homoerotic desire in Mariana’s and Sofía’s subtle inferences points to the spectral presence of an erotic discourse undercurrent, as Garlinger suggests about her prior novel, “*El cuarto de atrás*. He states that the author exposes the ways in which homoeroticism between women during the Franco years is erased and rendered unintelligible except to

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183 Kauffman makes a footnote that tears represent “signs of physical pain (either tears or blood) frequently blot the lover’s letters in the *Heroïdes, The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, and *Clarissa*” (98).
the subtle eyes of readers of lost love letters” (54). This same reading may be applicable to Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable*, where the heterosexual normative and framework for traditional feminine epistolary is dismantled. It is noteworthy to mention that *Nubosidad variable* follows fourteen years after Martín Gaite’s *El cuarto de atrás* (1978). Although *El cuarto de atrás* is not an epistolary novel, the “spectral space” (xiv) of the torn blue letter that appears throughout the novel becomes a focal point of interest and a visual threshold for viewing how unconscious desires come to the surface within a letter. Private correspondence as an outlet for outing gender and sexual oppression of one’s identity provides insight into the historical oppression of women and other marginalized groups in the public sphere. Within the suggestive spectral space of a letter, its written content makes gestures toward homoerotic desires, and also subtly makes visible the increasing curiosity toward the growing gay and lesbian Spanish communities (Garlinger xiv).

The author leaves the prevailing theme of eroticism open to interpretation. Nevertheless, if eroticism has typically been connected to letters and understood to be a binary relationship, as men are to women, Martín Gaite rewrites the ideal model of desire as a harmonious unity between bodies, knowledge, and power. Mariana confirms this very notion: “En el fondo, no se ama ni se habla ni se escribe para convencer a nadie de nada sino para convencerse uno a sí mismo de que sigue en forma y aún puede permitirse acrobacias que pongan a prueba el cuerpo, la mente, y sobre todo la relación acompasada entre uno y otra. Milagroso equilibrio…” (142).  

Further, Mariana confesses:

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184 [Basically no one loves or talks or writes in order to convince anyone of anything, but rather to convince themselves that they’re still in good shape and can still perform the acrobatics that test both mind and body and, in particular, the measured relationship between them: a miraculous balancing act... ] (130)
quebrar las barreras que me pedían decirlo abiertamente, me permite avanzar con más holgura por un territorio que define al elegirlo, a medida que lo palpo y lo exploro, lo cual supone explorarme a mí misma, que buena falta me hace. Porque ese territorio se revela y toma cuerpo en la escritura. Mejor dicho, es la escritura misma tal como va segregándose y echando corteza plasmándose en los perfiles que la mirada descubre y trasiega en palabras; con ella engendro mi patria indiscutible, aunque sujeta a mudanza. (130) 185

Mariana’s confession reveals how she becomes literally embodied in the exploratory discourse of her own writing. She thus transcends the imposition of binary conditioning through social expectations and literary practices that have restricted her creative and sexual freedom.

Martín Gaite’s subtle discourse of eroticism and desire possibly serves a greater purpose: to channel internal desires and eroticism as an intellectual endeavor. The transformation of homoeroticism into an aesthetic passion is no novelty for epistolary writers or critics. Janet Todd approaches her analysis of Fanny Hill much under the same notion: “The friendship of Fanny and her correspondent is one of reserved intimacies, in which the written word is forced to do duty for the sexual act” (73). By writing, and thus retelling of their sexual experiences and encounters, Mariana and Sofía

185 [breaking down the barriers that used to stop me saying it openly, allows me to advance more easily through a territory which I define and choose at the same time as I touch and explore it, which involves exploring myself, something I certainly need to do. For this territory is revealed and takes shape as I write. Or rather, it is the writing itself as it is revealed and becomes concrete, like pieces of bark, finding expression in the shapes that my eye discerns and transforms into words; with my writing I create my own homeland […] albeit subject to change.] (118)
yield to each other’s curiosity in an artistic libidinal way, and metonymically achieve auto-gratification (Todd 73). It is through the fabric of their words, the allusions in their written discourse, and the intimate correspondence of expressed sentiments and loveless relationships that they are redeemed. Their narratives of their sexless or sexual lives to each other come to form an erotic counterpoint in which they both are able to access their inner “self” and satisfy their need for artistic and sexual fulfillment.

Kellman confirms that “the erotic and the aesthetic modes are akin in their detachment from practical functions, whether procreation or propaganda. If sexuality divorced from its natural goal of reproduction is potently artifice, then perhaps art freed of its utilitarian origins is no less erotic” (12). Along these lines, “Roland Barthes’s anatomy of textual pleasures, Le Plaisir du text, virtually concedes that the term “erotic discourse” is a tautology. The poet and the lover are of imagination compact, and where they come together is in what they would do with us. The creation of a text is a labor of love, not only for want of other wages. And reading, like love, aims at dissolving personal boundaries. Both reading and loving are processes that are betrayed when reified” (qtd. in Kellman 4). Mariana insinuates this notion when she tells Sofía: “Añoro tu próximo entrega, la espero impaciente, trate de lo que trate, ya venga en plan flash back, en primera persona o en endecasílabos” (33).^186

By the end of the novel, both letter writers come together, intellectually and spiritually. They mediate the lives of sentimental heroines and the relationships of those around them as a fantastical escape from the disappointments of their own love affairs.

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^186 [I long for your next installment, I await it impatiently, whatever the subject, whether it’s in flashback, written in the first person or in hendecasyllables.] (23)
and reality. But their true desire to narrate on love and identity is to mediate their own love for literature and writing; to compile their letter writing as an offspring reflecting their artistic endeavor. In the epilogue of the novel, both protagonists come together to compile their letters and notebooks and prepare for publication. In short, the protagonists become the authors of their own discourse. Because the two women have felt robbed of their voice, they transform their writing into a public circulation. Their novel is not just an ‘epistolario’ or collection of letters. Their written word, as a byproduct of their love, indeed does duty for the sexual act. John Hall Wheelock also points to the sexuality of artistic creation, internalizing the muse and contending that writing a poem is a form of autoeroticism—“making a poem is like having a love affair with yourself” (qtd. in Kellman 14). For this reason, Mariana’s reference to Bataille’s quote: “La vida humana—dice—tiende a la prodigalidad” (108) makes a case against the limitations of physical and sensual desires which are likened to “una hoguera que consume lo mismo que va creando y encendiendo” (110) if it is not channeled through the act of writing. The need for Mariana and Sofia to be creatively satisfied is not only an aspirational artistic endeavor, but it is also a desired love affair that they act on through their letters.

The female epistolographers’ transcendence of parameters for gender and genre writing on love and identity enables them to achieve a jouissance experience. Mariana surmises that “stimulus” as a sexual passion remains unquenched if it is not transformed into an artistic and intellectual endeavor, much as Ruth Perry notes: “It is clear enough that the letter writing in epistolary novels quickens infatuation quite as the passion

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187 [Human life—he says—has a tendency to prodigality.] (98)
188 [a fire that consumes as it creates and grows] (99)
inspires the writing” (123). Mariana’s observation to Sofía that “lo que necesitas es un estímulo, y ahora no me da la impresión de que tengas muchos” (29)\(^{189}\) may be an indirect reference to how writing to each other substitutes for the “lack of stimulus” in each of their lives. Here, “stimulus” is an interesting choice of words based on its semantic implications. If stimulus refers to anything that elicits a physiological or psychological rouse, then Mariana hints at a double meaning. In her letters Mariana stimulates Sofía’s passion for writing, and thus “possessing her sexually” would be as Ruth Perry describes “possessing her thoughts, her words” (131).\(^{190}\)

It is the act of writing that brings ambiguous subliminal yearnings and desires to the threshold of consciousness. Yet I would like to nuance the connection that I have made regarding Mariana and Sofía’s achievement of autonomy and subject identity through their jouissance experience. The revision of the romantic feminine archetype, whose subject identity is trapped “in the crosscurrents of the conflicting discourses of gender ideology and Romantic poetic individual” (Kirkpatrick qtd. in Cruz-Cámara 20), is in fact downplayed in *Nubosidad variable*. And Cruz-Cámara argues that the two female characters exercise their defiance of fixed roles of gender and genre identity by choosing to write their own “patrón rosa” (46). The two writing subjects overcome their identity as romantic heroines who surrender to a state of self-abnegation, but does this mean that persistent cultural patterns can be simply wiped out? Of course not. While Mariana retrieves the glory of the idealized image of the prince who revives the sleeping princess

\(^{189}\) [what you need is stimulus and I get the impression that, at the moment, you don’t get much stimulus at all.] (19)

\(^{190}\) Altman states that “as a mediator of desire in the communication process, the letter functions on two figurative levels. On the one hand [...] the epistolary situation in which one writes to an absent lover fosters the generation of substitute images of the lover [...] on the other hand [...] the letters as a physical entity emanating from, passing between, and touching each of the lovers may function itself as a figure of the lover...” (19).
with a kiss, she ambiguously subverts this classic fairy tale paradigm in romance novels by suggesting that the act of writing incarnates this same desire. Mariana describes her recent renewed awakening as “the resurrection of Sleeping Beauty” (17). The point is that while the epistolographers’ letters may metonymically represent themselves as well as each other, letter writing is invariably equated in the novel to the love making act.191

Furthering this analogy, Mariana compares her stationery box to Sleeping Beauty’s coffin that is kissed when her interest and desire to write are revived (13).

**Nubosidad variable as Palimpsest of Sentimental Narratives**

The protagonists’ adventure to tell their own story classifies *Nubosidad variable* as a palimpsest of sentimental narratives in its own right. I argued that the protagonists are aware of the patriarchal ideals that have silenced their voices and creative energies and challenge them through the act of telling and becoming in their writing. *Nubosidad variable*’s also ruptures traditional paradigms for feminine writing. These paradigms include feminine epistolary fiction and *la novela rosa*, which restricted women’s voice by fuelling the rhetoric of female abnegation and the typical pattern of happy endings or suffering women.192 The protagonists continually buck the patriarchal ideals conveyed in sentimental genres which sell women as defeated and victims of their own inferiority and

191 Commenting on Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* and Derrida’s *The Post Card*, Kauffman asserts that their writing on love partakes in a dialogic discourse: “They each write of love and to literature in order to displace the false canonical hierarchies that relegate love letters to the margins of discourse” (96).

192 Susan Lanser observes in *Fictions of Authority* that before the 1840s, during Europe’s age of Romanticism, no woman author who was “deeply involved both with Romantic thought and with men who were constructing the kind of subject-centered narratives” represented a woman as a romantic hero, and never “published a novel written exclusively in the female hero’s voice” (162). Furthermore, Lanser suggests regarding women’s narrative voice and Romantic subjectivity that “the nonachievement of female autodiegetic voice” is not due to “hegemonic authority or subjectivity but rather as a historically situated struggle with contemporary social values and literary forms” (157). Either case, the lack of female voice due to particular literary forms that dismissed their narrative voice ensures Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable* likeness to a metafiction and/or metanarrative, as I propose the novel to be, and makes it all the more intriguing.
denounce classical amorous discourse where men are conquerors and women the objects of their conquest. Martín Gaite’s artistic mediation of sentimental genres, feminine epistolarity, and novelas rosa parody “feminine exemplary narratives” but also cleverly undermine them in a new fictional game. Thus, Martín Gaite brings together the historical and theoretical dimensions of reading and feminine desire for access to the world outside of the interiorized one in which the woman letter-writer lives. Nubosidad variable is a collective experiment between the writer and reader in the creation of meaning. As Linda Kauffman points out, “any study of the female voice in epistolary literature, […], must examine male ideas of what it means to write like a woman, along with the writings of real women” (vii).

This is one of the concerns that preoccupies Martín Gaite most in Desde la ventana, where she regards the confining entrapments of women protagonists who are robbed of narrative authority. The author states:

Más de la mitad de las novelas del mundo están basadas en los problemas que se le plantean a la mujer al enfrentarse con el descubrimiento del amor, reactivo de temores y emociones que la trastornan y transfiguran, que la convierten en protagonista de una aventura más interior que exterior […] La mujer enamorada siempre está trabada por las repercusiones de algún patrón literario, que a su vez suele hacerse eco del sistema moralista vigente. Pero el amor mismo, como experiencia personal, la mujer lo vive de forma inédita y secreta. (43)\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{193} [More than half of world’s novels are based in the problems that women encounter upon their discovery of love, their reaction of fears and emotions that torment and transfigure, that make them...
*Nubosidad variable* sets itself apart from the conventional plots of a male archetype in which the woman’s destiny is dependent on the typical fate in the quest romance. Although the two women idealize happy endings, the only one that becomes reality is the happy ending they achieve together as they creatively write their own life story. Their internal adventure becomes externalized as it unfolds in the pages of *Nubosidad variable*. Their stories are no longer entrapped in their memories and regrets. As Gould Levine surmises about the female protagonists in Martín Gaite’s novels, they “journey through their own looking glass toward a literary autonomy faithful to [their] own experience…” (Gould Levine 166).

In Spain, contemporary women’s sentimental writing reflects an image and expression of female love that centers on the “self” above other considerations. Vance Holloway analyzes “a growing body of more affirmative feminine quest-romances” that began to appear in the 90s (qtd. in Cruz-Cámara 154). This new trend for quest-romances highlights the contemporary adult female’s search for inner peace: “her goal is to integrate her self with herself and not with a society she has found inimical to her desires” (qtd. in Cruz-Cámara 136). Lisette Rolón-Collazo suggests that the author’s play on sentimental genres is to exploit the asphyxiating and oppressive propaganda that has delimited women’s lack of voice and autonomy: On Martín Gaite’s fiction Rolón-Collazo states:

> la literatura de evasión, vista desde la producción de Martín Gaite, se perfilá como un medio de denuncia al contexto cultural. En el caso de los protagonize an internal adventure rather than an external one […] The woman in love is always held back by the repercussions of a literary mold, that at the same time, usually echoes the current moral system. But love itself, as a personal experience, is lived unedited and secretly.] (43)
tiempos de posguerra esta obra critica la represión y los modelos de mujer monológicos [...] una vez que muere el general Franco, la autora desvela sus estrategias narrativas y censura frontalmente, desde la ficción y la historia, las instituciones y los organismos que perpetuaron la representación de la mujer española como alegre, ordenada y sumisa. Las locas, frescas y ligeras son reinvindicadas como heroínas y la evasión es rescatada a través del ejercicio mnemónico como signo de resistencia. (136)

Martín Gaite’s romance narratives, married to the structure of sentimental genres, initiate a fertile polemic terrain for considering the female literary figure, and in particular, the position of the female artist, whose expression on love and identity has been traditionally tailored to placate the fears of male authors and readers.

*Nubosidad variable*, as a novel in the form of letters with resonances of *novelas rosa*, breaks down male literary conventions for female-authored texts. The two protagonists autonomously mediate the process of their own writing. Rueda analyzes:

Esta inveterada práctica editorial [insertar correspondencia femenina y auténtica por mujeres desconocidas en manuales de cómo escribir cartas] debe tenerse en cuenta para entender el impacto del ‘Epílogo’ de *Nubosidad variable* (1992), de Carmen Martín Gaite, en el que las

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194 [Evasive literature, seen in all of Martín Gaite’s production, is characterized as a denouncement of the cultural context. In the case of the postwar era, this work critiques the repression and models of monologic women […] once Franco dies, the author unveils her narrative strategies and censors head on fiction, history, and institutions and organisms that perpetuates the representation of the Spanish woman as happy, ordered and submissive. The crazy, young, and easy are vindicated as heroines, and the evasion is recovered through mnemonic exercises as signs of resistance] (136).
epistológrafas se reúnen para revisar sus propias cartas y componer con ellas un libro, el que el lector tiene en sus manos. El epílogo puede leerse como una revisión crítica y creativa de dicha práctica; una reclamación de los negados ‘derechos de autora’ aún pendientes en nuestra historia literaria. (footnote 84 in *Cartas sin lacrar* 168-9)\(^{195}\)

Sofía and Mariana exercise agency by making their private matters public. This subversive act on their part is a demarcated contrast to previous sentimental genres in Spain’s literary tradition, as already discussed.

Thus, Martín Gaite brings together the historical and theoretical dimensions of reading and feminine desire for access to the world outside of the interiorized one in which the woman letter-writer lives. *Nubosidad variable* is a collective experiment between the writer and the reader in the creation of meaning: “The circular structure of her open works assures the reader the potential for participation in the never-ending story” (qtd. in Cruz-Cámara 59). She also prescribes that, “las buenas novelas no deben definir al personaje sino llevar al lector por los intrincados y contradictorios vericuetos en que se ve metido, asomarle a las cosas distintas que hace para que trate de conocer, sin juzgarla, su alma fragmentaria donde se espejan a cada momento estímulos diferentes” (247).\(^{196}\) The need for literary autonomy and the desire to create one’s story demonstrates Martín

\(^{195}\) [In order to understand the impact of ‘the epilogue’ in Carmen Martín Gaite’s *Nubosidad variable* (1992), one must recall this well-established editorial practice […]. The two epistolographers reunite to revise their own letters, compiling them in a book, the one that the reader has in her hands. The epilogue can be read as a critical and creative revision of such practice; reclamation of the denied ‘rights of the female author,’ still unresolved in our literary history.]

\(^{196}\) [Good novels should not define the characters, but lead the reader through the intricate and contradictory twists and turns in which she/he has become involved, and show the reader the different things he/she does in order to try to know, without judging, their fragmented heart that constantly mirror different stimuli.]
Gaite’s “artistic creed” to capture the creative processes involved in the production of a text.

Martín Gaite decenters her novel from a fixed categorization: the writing protagonists deconstruct the rhetoric that socializes individuals into fixed roles and behaviors, and find liberation as writing subjects. Likewise, they grapple with the notion of fixed truths about identities. While *Nubosidad variable* may be regarded as a palimpsest of the protagonists’ life stories, Kathleen Glenn asserts this same thought about the novel itself: it is “a palimpsest in which the imprint of previous works by Martín Gaite is constantly visible” (297). “Palimpsest” is a term with a multi-layered definition, yet an applicable characterization of this author’s epistolary work *Nubosidad variable*. Palimpsest may be understood as a collapse of narratives of intimacy: letters, diaries, novelas rosa, personal essays—all subsumed under the rubric of the “novel”. The epistolographers’ narrative act of their lives represents a *carte blanche* to remove and rewrite, and reflect the writer’s own voice and history as an epistolary author that structurally mirrors the stance of her protagonists. As Sandra J. Schumm alludes, writing as a textual mirror has the “propensity for a continual process of identity formation, as there is always the possibility that past reflections can aid in strategems for the ever-changing present situation” (137). If sentimental genres allowed for one to read about the cultural constructs and these were “a univocal tool of the state,” the liberation of the female artist voice and creativity “from the shackles of historical narrative” (Spires 147) should indeed allow her to create a new discourse. In her observations about *El cuarto de atrás*, Elizabeth Ordóñez provides a forceful commentary on what constitutes a successful text by and about a woman, especially the woman writer: “a proud acceptance
and vindication of the female or communicative principle in life and art […] and most importantly, an unswerving faith and confidence in the transformative power of the word…” (183). Hence, the female’s creativity and autonomy are underscored when she enters into the realm of her fiction as both artist and protagonist of her own story. The process of reading and writing allows her “to recover true experience from its entrapment in fiction […] the word from its deep complicity with death” (Ordóñez 187).

What may be concluded about the artist is that her opus is a collage of thematic and narrative styles that she uses to experiment and create. Yet, the conduit behind her writing is to stimulate a dialogical exchange through writing, and therefore an allusion to the need of being heard. This is particularly important in her parody of sentimental genres, which have limited women and portrayed them as “trapped in their one-dimensional role” (Gould Levine 165) of love and identity. The reader is drawn to participate in her game of fiction and to create a new characterization of the female artist and her art: “throughout her fiction she has been working to bring the interlocutor into the ambit of the lover. That would indeed produce her as the liberated woman: the woman freed from the twin dangers of ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ that have so regularly delivered her into the hands of despair” (El Saffar 192). If women writers have been ‘trapped in’ and ‘enclosed’ by the mirror of ‘the male-inscribed literary text,’ as Susan Gubar and Susan Gilbert would infer (qtd. in Gould Levine 166), the author’s indictment of female authors’ sentimental writing as a lesser form of art makes a forceful statement regarding “the complex institutional framework which authorizes, enables, empowers and legitimizes [literature]” (qtd. in Henseler 1).
Shulamith Firestone states in her *Dialectic of Sex* that “the crude feminine novel in the nineteenth century, leading to the love story of our day […] may be the crude beginnings of a female art” (qtd. in Spires 166). Women as reading and writing subjects “at least until the Romantic period […] did not exist as such, they were man-made by men, they were the reflection of what literature portrayed’ (qtd. in Davies 245). If sentimental genres like *novelas rosa* and feminine epistolary fiction were ‘limited by artificial devices and far-fetched tales,” (166), never allowing for the characters to reach self-actualization and autonomy, Martín Gaite’s art may seek to not only subvert male’s monopoly of their identity inside and outside of fiction, but to capitalize on these dated genres “to enrich and multiply the many levels of her creation” (Spires 166). Martín Gaite’s reflection on the production of writing and creating may well stem from the desire to be reflected in another, but in an uncensored and unedited way, allowing for the emergence of her own authentic subjectivity: “esa sed de ser reflejados de una manera inédita por los demás, la sed de espejo” (*La búsqueda* 13).197 Certainly the need for an “espejo” or mirror is implied in Sofía’s and Mariana’s narratives in *Nubosidad variable*. The letter writers’ thirst to find their own reflection in their textual mirrors, to break away from the “mirror of the male-inscribed literary text” (Gould Levine 166) of written codes that limit and enclose women.

**Concluding Remarks**

As readers of romantic fiction, Mariana and Sofía are aware that literature provides models for social and literary mores that they can either adhere to, or turn away from,

197 [The thirst to be reflected in an uncensored way through others, the thirst for reflection.] (*La búsqueda* 13)
seeking alternative ones by which to gauge their lives. In *Nubosidad variable* the protagonists’ mediation of canonical female literary figures and authors of romance novels convert their writing into a codified game in which the external reader must trace their intertextual clues to resolve their profound thoughts and the state of their heart. The ambiguous nature of fiction, as “un juego” [a game], and letter-writing as a seductive solitary strip-tease, applies to the author and protagonists alike. By subverting conventional hegemonic expectations for feminine literary themes and sentimental expression, styles, and gender roles, the epistolographers become both creator and creation of their own texts. They rescue themselves from the iconic fate of the despondent fictional heroine which was the former paradigm for women writing on love and identity.

Through the epistolographers’ textual procreation and the novel’s intertextual references, *Nubosidad variable* codes for the external reader how to filter the compendium of the two protagonists’ experiences and histories, and make each of them a reading text as well. Their own reflections are alternative accounts of cultural and literary paradigms of identity to those imbued through social codes of behavior and modeled through romantic heroines in film, fiction, magazines, etc. that Mariana and Sofía have read and seen. Literature as a network of meaning is woven into the protagonists’ letters. The juxtaposition of their writing in the final product of a novel project—*Nubosidad variable*—incorporates an intertextual process as well. On the one hand, the two protagonists in *Nubosidad variable* find autonomy and subjectivity through their writing, in spite of their mutual interdependence. On the other hand, their discourse is a self-reflective and solitary adventure, an alternative to the cultural and political grids
for how and what a woman is to write. Also, as they both remind each other quite frequently, each one represents a coordinate and reference point in the other’s life, yet their individual writing is for finding solidarity with her ‘self’.

Carmen Martín Gaite’s strong credence in fiction is due to the verbal and literary possibilities of its playful expression “el juego más consolador que se haya inventado nunca […] en cualquier caso de nuevo empeño literario, encontraremos juego en su raíz” (qtd. in Glenn 149). So, the ultimate reason behind the employment of the epistolary genre is for the pure “pleasure of the text and not a sense of duty that impels a writer to take pen in hand” (qtd. in Glenn 149). Literature as an elusive game offers the contemporary artist a blank canvas to explore the imagination and create a new self-portrait for the woman writer. These self-portraits reflect her own expression regarding love and identity, but most important, they enter the public realm to offer new cultural and literary paradigms for women writers.

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198 [the most comforting game that has ever been invented […] and in every new literary endeavor, you find game at its root.] (qtd. in Glenn 149)
Chapter 4

Olga Guirao and Homoerotic Love: Trangression of Sexuality and Texuality

Olga Guirao, born in 1956, is a native of Barcelona. Among the author’s professional achievements is her earned law degree from La Universidad Central [Central University]. Her varied career includes a stint in the legal field from which she retired because, as she states, “me temo que celebrar juicios y escribir novelas son actividades bastante obsesivas, lo que las hace casi incompatibles […] motivo por el cual acabé dejando la abogacía” (Lynn Celdrán, personal interview, August 20, 2012).\footnote{[I believe that to perform justice and to write novels are quite obsessive activities, which makes them almost incompatible […] which is the reason why I ended up leaving the legal field.]} Currently, Guirao holds a position in public administration which allows her to also pursue her novelistic endeavors. Despite her Catalan origen, she claims that “[mi] lengua madre es el castellano”,\footnote{[mi] mother tongue is Castilian.} therefore she writes and publishes her fiction in Spanish which, as she suggests, makes her work more visible to the reading public (Celdrán August 20, 2012).\footnote{Olga Guirao’s interview is informative regarding the distinction that Catalan writers may have among themselves. Some may consider Castilian their first language, while others maintain that Catalan is their native tongue. The disadvantage that Guirao forsees for those writers who write in Catalan is “por tratarse de una lengua minoritaria con un público potencial de poco más de unos diez millones de personas total” [because it is a minority language with a potential audience of less than ten million people all together.]} Though the author claims that her novels do not necessarily share aesthetic tendencies or characteristics of other women writers who emerged in the early 1990s, I believe her fictional writing does reproduce works impacted by postmodern elements such as the preeminance of subjectivity, the quest for finding an identity, fragmentation, intertextuality, discursiveness, etc. (Celdrán August 20, 2012). Since the early 1990s Guirao has enjoyed the success of four published novels: *La llamada* [The Call] (2011);
In this chapter I focus on Guirao’s two novels, *Mi querido Sebastián*, her earlier novel, and *Carta con diez años de retraso*. I grapple with the notion of how the author’s epistolary novels represent her artistic need to reconcile the constructions of sexuality and identity. Guirao presents marginalized protagonists who tenaciously question and subvert the representation of hegemonic identity within Spain’s gendered social fabric. Through the act of remembering and rewriting their lived experiences the protagonists are able to unravel hegemonic social expectations on love and identity.

In *Mi querido Sebastián*, I show how the constants of silence, surveillance, and censorship imposed on the epistolographer’s physical existence are transferred over to the textual body of his writing. In his letter writing, Guillermo confronts his years of oppression by coming clean with his own hypocrisy in remaining silent and compromising love by hiding under the heteronormative expressions for sexual identity. In *Carta con diez años de retraso*, I look at how Guirao’s protagonists, Max and Levita, disrupt fixed categories for gender and sex through the reciprocal movement of their correspondence. At the end of their polemical debate, they resolve that whether or not their differences are social constructions, their deeper need to love and be loved are
human conditions that they mutually share. They turn gender and sex into unstable defining signifiers for whom and how one loves, leaving the nature of their own friendship ambiguous to the reader.

**Homoerotic Expression in Love Letters**

Because Guirao’s fictional characters refer to specific cultural practices and time periods of Spain’s history that frame their lives, I view it necessary to give a brief overview of how those paradigms may affect their projection of identity. I also observe a suggestive intertwining between the development of gender and sexual identity and the history of Spanish epistolary fiction as literary scholars contend that the literary form is a historical product that has evolved alongside of politics and identity. I draw from Patrick Garlinger’s study, *Confession of the Letter Closet*, in which he examines that the “shifting terrain of sexuality” from the nineteenth-century until the present that reveals a parallel between letter writing and identity politics (xix). Indeed letters represent a textual space for the marginalized individual to explore his/her voice and visibility. As Garlinger asserts, “letters are a site of contestation between the social and the psychic, between the subject’s private desires and the social categories used to apprehend them” (xi).

Garlinger connects the invisibility of homoerotic expression and desire in fictional letter writing with its usage as an “instrument of disciplinary power” in earlier literary periods for maintaining the domains of heterosexual gender and sexual relations and acceptable norms for decorum (xvii). Therefore, in the nineteenth century, letter writing was not the “repository of individual consciousness”; rather, it represented a repository of
social, political, and moral consciousness instilled in the individual through letter manuals and other conduct material. To this end, Garlinger poignantly argues that “the need to codify and exemplify the proper modes of address and the correct use of language implies that there are improper modes of address or epistolary relationship for which the guides offer no examples” (xx). Garlinger suggests that it was not that the potential for homoerotic expression was nonexistent, but that it was avoided or eliminated from the fictional letter text as it could lead to sexual transgression.

In the second part of nineteenth century Spain the epistolary genre was closely tied to writing on impure sexual desire as a means of confession and seeking repentance. Unlike foreign epistolary novels, where the act of seduction takes place through letter-writing, that is, letter-writing is the conduit in the act of seduction, “Spanish novels recount the seductions through letters” (Garlinger xxx). Spanish literature steered away from the influence of foreign epistolary models for their seemingly immoral tolerance of sexual transgression. Valera’s Pepita Jiménez first published in 1879 is a case in point. The young seminary student writes a confession to his uncle about his illicit sexual attraction to Pepita, his father’s female friend, but avoids the details of a seductive plot.

Novels enforcing heterosexual normative would remain in place even after the turn of the twentieth century. Jeff Zamostny’s study, “Faustian Figures: Modernity and Male (Homo)Sexualities in Spanish Commercial Literature, 1900-1936” departs from mainstream criticism and states that during Spain’s era of modernization from the

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202 Garlinger observes that the “association of letter writing with confession, in the context of Catholic-dominated Spain, debilitated its uptake by 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” (xxviii). This is significant to mention as it indicates that the letter was substituted for confession in order to monitor moral behavior.
beginning of the twentieth century up to the Spanish Civil War, commercial literature reveals “male (homo)sexualities are a crucial point of constellation for these conflicting anxieties” in the process of modernization; further, “concerns about consumer capitalism, urbanization, fluctuating class hierarchies, and scientific reason converge upon hustlers and blackmailers, queer seducers, and chaste inverts” (3). Returning to earlier epistolary writing, however, amorous discourse was demarcated by its support of heterosexual norms for behavior and expression through the abjection of homosexuality and homoerotic desire, or undertones of homophobia.

There is, in fact, evidence of a textual awakening to homoeroticism girdled in homophobic intonations in earlier fictional works. According to Garlinger, Francisco Muñoz y Pabón’s epistolary work, *Amor postal*, published in 1903 regards the correspondence between Carlos Vergara and Concha Lasso. Carlos writes to Concha with the anticipated outcome of forging an amorous relationship with her. He presses her to meet, but Concha exercises prudence and decorum as she tries to delay their encounter. When she learns through one of Carlos’s letters that he refuses to go to confession as he sees it demeaning to reveal one’s sins to another man, Concha is aghast. She tells him confession is a prerequisite if they are to establish a relationship outside of their correspondence. Shortly afterward, Carlos will learn that the person that has been corresponding to him all along is not Concha, but her uncle the priest Don Pedro Lasso. Carlos is repulsed. The priest begs for Carlos’s forgiveness. Although there is no same-sex love exchange between the two of them, there remains a hidden desire for naming homosexuality and thereby rejecting it (Garlinger xl). The objective of the novel is to use the plot as a warning message to the reader on the potential danger of sexual subversity.
And there are other earlier epistolary works which cannot be ignored for their subtle exploration of homoeroticism and sexuality. One example is Unamuno’s epistolary work *La novela de Don Sandalio, jugador de ajedrez* (1933). Garlinger notes that “wives are never mentioned, family relations are deliberately ignored, sons and sons-in-law are dismissed out of hand. The novel’s use of the epistolary form to shed light on an individual’s private thoughts allows the reader a glimpse into the world of a man whose most profound emotional attachment is not to his wife or family but to another man” (7). In this early twentieth century work, the female is not the object or struggle of his desire as is so typical in amorous epistolarity; in fact, she is absent from the narrative altogether. Ironically, according to Garlinger, “while epistolarity is linked to women in nineteenth-century Spain, the anxieties around male sexuality do not produce a comparable body of works concerned with queer desire among women. Female desire—whether in epistolary fiction or in letter-writing manuals—remains circumscribed by men” (xxxi).

While the Franco era between 1939-1975 propagated Spain’s image as an homogenous state, impeding any diverse identity outside of the heterosexual framework, the transition to democracy ushered in a “new cultural scene” where literature held a “defining role” in transforming the cultural politics of the country (Martín-Estudillo and Spadaccini, *New Spain: New Literatures* ix). During the initial stages of its democracy, the country was more concerned with the issue of equality than the identity politics

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203 It is also relevant to mention that Rueda’s interpretation of Unamuno’s work, “*La novela de Don Sandalio: Un tablero epistolar para jugar con Unamuno*” (1999), differs from Garlinger’s approach. Rueda examines the parallel between chess playing and epistolarity to point out that Unamuno is more concerned with the existential crisis of man as he urges his readers to consider “el problema de cada uno de nosotros” [what is an issue for each one of us]: the gamble of our lives (555).
platform. As such, “the equality of men and women, the minimum legal age for marriage, and decriminalization of abortion” often overshadowed the emancipation of homosexuals (Garlinger 120). As Garlinger points out, “homoerotic desire ran the risk of disappearing or being recuperated within heterosexuality at the same time that it nevertheless persisted as a spectral presence within a largely heterosexual movement of democratic emancipation” (120).

Garlinger further tracts the visibility of gays and lesbians in Spain as having been a relatively recent phenomenon (120). He recounts the 1986 public scandal of two women, Arantxa and Esther, arrested for publicly kissing. This merits attention in terms of the contradictory nature of Spain’s tolerance of homosexual expression and identity that prevailed even after the revoking of the 1970 “Ley de Peligrosidad Social” [Law of Social Danger]. Therefore, contemporary writers’ use of amorous letters to underscore sexual dissonance and political dissidence is all the more meaningful during the so-called “Transición”. Hegemonic culture and political laws that impose gender and sexual constraints on individuals makes writing about their marginalization through letter narratives even more effective; epistolary writing reveals an uncanny parallel to individuals who have been discriminated against by essentialistic paradigms, inside and outside of fiction. Marta E. Altisent writes,

En la novela española de la transición, el tratamiento antirromántico de la heterosexualidad va seguido de la exploración de temas del género sexual que desestabilizan la idea fija y esencialista de la identidad génerica y los

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204 By “visibility,” I refer to the political visibility of gays and lesbians, not their sexual visibility. Although, as Shimizu Akiko observes in Lying Bodies (2001), “there would be no struggle if literal visibility of sexuality were visible in the first place” (97).
Besides Olga Guirao, there are many other women writers who have challenged the parameters for gender and sex. It is worth mentioning that Lisa Vollendorf’s *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* (2005) sets forth the notion that women writers in Spain’s early modern period cultivated fictional stories around the theme of sexual female desire. Vollendorf interprets María de Zayas “Amar sólo por vencer” [“Love for the Sake of Conquest”] (1647) as a story of “female homoeroticism” as the women protagonists reveal their deceptions with heterosexual relations and the social interaction among women is strongly depicted and emphasized (62). Marta E. Altisent points out that since the post civil war in Spain there have been women novelists who addressed themes of secret bisexuality and homosexuality in their fiction such as *Fiesta al Noroeste* (1952) by Ana María Matute; Ana María Moix’s *¿Walter por qué te fuiste?* (1970), and Rosa Montero’s short story “Paulo Pumilio” (1982), in an effort to denounce homophobia. Esther Tusquets, Ana María Moix, Rosa Montero, Ana Rosetti, Almudena Grandes, and Mercedes Abad are among the female writers who challenge the parameters of the expression for the female figure and other marginalized subjects in amorous discourse. In doing so, they purposely underscore sexual polarization between men and

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205 [In the Spanish novel of the transition, the anti-romantic treatment of heterosexuality is followed by the exploration of themes of the sexual gender that destabilize the fixed and essentialist idea for gender identity and cultural truisms for appropriate sexual behaviors and emotions. The erotic effervescence in today’s feminine writing, with its literary openness to taboo topics, implies the presence of a well-informed reader [male or female] for understanding the ambiguous forms and complexities of eroticism.]
women. Olga Guirao’s inversion of male ventriloquism is even all the more intriguing and suggestive as she may be the first known Spanish author to do so through the epistolary narrative.

In addition to the sexual transgression revealed through her characters, Guirao subverts male-contrived conventions of traditional epistolarity that portray the female as utterly distraught over the abandonment by a male lover. Guirao counters this textual image of the female victim by appropriating the male’s voice. This unconventional twist on classic amorous epistolary fiction allows for Guirao to take the epistolographer’s transgression a step further: the author is able to play on the alienation and victimization of not only female figures, but all marginalized individuals who live in “an oppressive cultural system that imposes socially determined gender roles on both sexes” (Glenn 793). Indeed, the author’s works tend to explore the oppressive categorization of all writing subjects whose identity is alienated by political and social conditions. Guirao uses the epistolary narrative to counter paradigms of heterosexual romantic love that affect both male and female subjects. Her protagonists’ letters reveal the inner working of their conscious experiences and an awareness of their desires that disrupts a heterosexual identity, whether it is through familial ties or romantic/erotic relationships.

Sexuality and Textuality

As we have seen, the subject’s act of inscribing his/her psychological and physical constraints of sexuality through epistolary writing turns letters into literary sites for identity and a catalyst for the expression of sexual love. Scholars such as Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, for example, grapple with how an individual’s sexuality and identity become embedded in textual form. If the body, as Bordo metaphorizes, is a ‘swamp’ a
‘cage’, a ‘fog’ which “devalorizes authentic identity” and “traps the essential mind” (qtd. in Anne Cranny-Francis 2), then certainly a subject who has lived under rigid parameters of culture and social law may transpose his/her experiences into textual form when the trap is released. By probing into the flexible boundaries of amorous letter writing, which once served as the textual apparatus for instilling and monitoring gender and sexual identity, writers may now create a fluid expression on gender and sexual ambiguity.

Amorous epistolary discourse bears rich nuances of historical meaning related to sexuality and identity, but generic conventions are not fixed and have changed over time. Garlinger draws from epistolary scholar Linda Kauffman who articulates how an individual understands his experiences and “self” as a combination of language, material experiences, and the individual’s own will (xi). In Special Delivery Kauffman persuasively argues for the deconstruction of amorous literature that totalizes any human discourse as an exposition of binary totalities of “unrequited love” that reinforce misogynistic stereotypes of femininity (xiv). In her analysis of Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse and Derrida’s The Postcard, she observes that heterosexual love in traditional amorous epistolarity is turned upside down as he makes a playful interrogation into the generic conventions of the letter narrative. The inversion of these conventions illustrates

The inherent instability of identity in letter correspondence: because gender is a linguistic function in letter writing, gender is always capable of being manipulated or misinterpreted…consequently, the epistolary performance enacted in both authors’ works wavers between homosexuality and heterosexuality, between male and female addressees.

(Garlinger xl)
Both Barthes and Derrida upset the reader’s expectations for amorous epistolary fiction, “particularly in terms of the beloved’s (gender and sexual) identity” by leaving it as an ambiguous subject (Garlinger xli). Contemporary epistolary writing offers a resistance to fixed identities which resonates with the reader. Kathleen Glenn points out that “this instability and opaqueness are disturbing to those who prefer stable, transparent, authoritative—even authoritarian—narratives” (2). The transfer of one’s human experience to the textual body of letters acts to defy misconceptions about one’s identity and knowledge that may inhibit the expression of love. Carmen Perilli states that

En el tránsito del cuerpo-carne al cuerpo-texto explora los diversos modos de simbolizarlo. Su ubicación es clara, su lugar de enunciaciún es su propio cuerpo, territorio ambiguo y heterogéneo que acepta el reto de imprimir la huella del cuerpo en el texto y tolerar la huella del texto en el cuerpo. (Cranny-Francis 106)

Perilli points to the interrelationship in letter–writing between sexuality and gender identity. The textual body represents a carte blanche for the writer to creatively express his own story and to present a textual resistance to master narratives by relating her/his own human experience. An individual continually deliberates over the diversity of life experiences in his/her inner sense of identity. Epistolary writing is similar to this process; epistolarity, like sexual and gender identity, can subvert “the dichotomy between center/margin” (Kauffman 96). In other words, epistolary writing can be a resistance “to

\[\text{In the movement of the body-flesh to the body-text, she explores the diverse ways to symbolize it. Her location is clear; her place of enunciation is her own body, an ambiguous and heterogeneous territory that accepts the challenge of putting the mark of the body in the text and to tolerate the mark of the text on the body.}\]

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canonical hierarchies that relate love letters to the margins of discourse” (96), revealing a sexual and textual emancipation of the writing and reading subject as he resists fixed parameters for sexual behavior.

**The I-You Paradigm as Narrative Seduction**

In this movement from sexuality to textuality, it is important to understand that discourse is a prerequisite of being and that “in order to seek the truth of the self, a battle must be waged constantly against the ‘Symbolic’, against the societal order into which the individual is necessarily thrust. This is presented as an ordering, stifling imposition, a sterile and alienating material reality” (Welles 204). As we shall see in this section, it is through writing and reading as reciprocal acts of recognition, that the subject is able to resist constraints of hegemonic symbolic order. The transforming power of the written word to convey and understand one’s sense of truth is the primordial yearning of individuals who feel the need to narrate their story through the linguistic function of the “you.”

In epistolarity, the role of the internal reader is paramount to the narrative action. Altman states: “the epistolary is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator) […] and is a determinant of the letter’s message” (88). In fact, regardless of whether the internal reader’s response figures into an intercommunicative exchange with the letter writer, the epistolographer feeds off of his addressee, gaining momentum through the narrative seduction of his confidant. At the same time, this narrative seduction may be extended from the author to her reader, where the author attempts to lure her reader into the consumption of her
fictional story. Indeed, Guirao’s fictional art makes a poignant statement about how the narrative act may seduce the reader “where story after story depicts not only efforts to seduce or the results of seduction but also the connection between narrating and seducing” (Brooks qtd. in Glenn’s “Desire and Seduction” 792). Peter Brooks states that Narratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots; and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire; the need to tell as a primary human drive seeks to seduce and subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the thrust of desire. (qtd. in Glenn 729)

In both her novels, Guirao plays upon the connection of reader and writer so specific to epistolarity because it duplicates internally the illusion of a communion between the two roles: the epistolographer’s words are received and being read by the addressee; still yet, the epistolographer’s letter seems aimed at regaining his/her dignity through self-disclosure. Guillermo’s uni-directional letter to Sebastián suggests a seductive ploy to subvert any potential adversity that he might feel as a result of his friend’s recent discovery. *Mi querido Sebastián* (2002) centers on a middle-aged homosexual male’s story, beginning in postwar Spain until the present moment in which he begins his letter, and focusing his struggles with his sexual identity living in an oppressive homophobic society. Guillermo India emotionally oscillates between not having lived up to the cultural and patriarchal expectations of his gender and sex, to lamenting his cowardice for not outing his gay identity in his earlier years. In his confessional letter, to his former lover, Sebastián, the conflicted protagonist admits to a form of sexual perversion that all societies would condemn as taboo: his pursuit of an incestuous relationship with his estranged daughter, Elena. Being able to recount his story uninterruptedly represents a
Guilermo intends to engage his reader’s full attention of the psychological trauma that has lead to his alternative lifestyle.

Unlike the case in *Mi querido Sebastián* that features one letter narrative directed to an intimate friend, Max’s and Levita’s exchange of emails in *Carta con diez años de retraso* insinuates a dialogic yet equally dynamic interaction where the characters may present their arguments free of any constraints. The two friends in *Carta con diez años de retraso* reveal email exchanges built around an intimate friendship that developed out of pivotal point in their lives; both had suffered hurt and pain from previous relationships. In the last ten years, they both have made each other privy the details of their closely personal love affairs and of the professional work. Their communion through their correspondence plays on this fine line between being each other’s “confidant and lover”…becoming an instrument of literary complexity” (Altman 83). The author hones in on the mutual participation of both writer and reader of letters in the act of resisting and destabilizing paradigms of identity and performativity through a tour de force between writer and reader, epistolographer and addressee.

Guirao’s epistolary narratives are an aesthetic attempt to disrupt the master narrative regarding male and female sexuality and love. She seduces the reader into reconciling, sexually and textually, that identity is not fixed or made of stable constructs. Guirao suggests that in order to refute these stifling archetypes, one has to exercise his/her cause through the dialogic engagement of both the writer and reader. In Kathleen M. Glenn’s interview with Guirao, the author emphasizes the importance to always bear in mind the reader’s response and engagement with the fictional text. She insinuates that a writer is like a good lawyer who must anticipate the reading subject’s knowledge and experience
of living under the control of cultural paradigms. When I asked Guirao whether having
been a lawyer influenced her a a novelist, she stated:

Sin la menor duda. Supongo que cuando los profanos ven actuar a un
abogado, les suele parecer un tipo muy dogmático, pero es un efecto
óptico: en realidad, un buen abogado no sólo debe tener en cuenta sus
propios argumentos sino también, y muy especialmente, los de la otra
parte; ha de haberlos valorado con mucho detenimiento, sopesando los, e
incluso anticipándolos, imaginándolos, para poder confrontarlos con la
ley, que es algo equivalente a asignarles un valor; si no procede así,
dificilmente podrá rebatirlos con eficacia. (Celdrán August 20)207

Guirao’s novelistic endeavors in creating strong narrators who argue their platform of
identity and desire require the active engagement of the reader; someone who can play
the role of confidant/lover, and is knowledgable of the hegemonic institutional practices
that infringe on the epistologist’s free will of choice and intrapersonal understanding
of who she is; someone who can enter a dialogical relation with the writer. Let’s turn to a
closer analysis of the novels to understand how the characters are able to break from
hegemonic-inscribed paradigms of identity that entrap them.

207 [Without doubt! I suppose that when inexperienced individuals see a lawyer perform, he usually
seems to them be the dogmatic type, but it is an optical effect. In reality, a good lawyer should not only
consider his own arguments, but also, and especially, those of the other side. He should assess them with
much care, weighing them, and even anticipating and imagining them, in order to confront them with the
law, which is something equivalent to assigning them a value. If this does not happen first, it will be
difficult to refute them effectively.]
Surveillance, Censorship, and Silence in *Mi querido Sebastián*

Reminiscing on the traumatic experience when he was discovered in his first sexual deviant act in parochial school, Guillermo conjures up the fear invoked in him for having transgressed. The protagonist states that had he and Sebastián been caught in their sexual act, “Cuánto menos infeliz hubiera sido si el padre prefecto nos hubiera sorprendido cualquier otro día, un poco después; probablemente me habría ahorrado treinta años de silencio y mentiras” (99).

This event foreshadows the self-censoring and cryptic lifestyle he would lead. In his journal review to the author’s work, Ernesto Aylana-Dip states “Olga Guirao ha concebido una obra de ficción en la que se nos narra harto convincentemente no sólo todo lo crucial que le sucede a su héroe sino también la material moral y psicológica que justifica su existencia” (qtd. in Glenn 3).

Guillermo’s larger confession however, also accentuates the psychological burden of his cowardice and own silence that he has allowed to be inflicted upon himself. Guillermo’s psychological dilemma reveals how the encroachment of patriarchal paradigms for identity lead to his betrayal of his own sense of love. And, finally, I concur with Kathleen Glenn in that, *Mi querido Sebastián* is as much about the “betrayal of self as about betrayal by another” (793).

Silence as a spectral presence in Guirao’s novels emphasizes the alienation of the individual. Kathleen Glenn notes that it is a narrative technique often incorporated in contemporary women’s literature in order to “emphasize the lack of voice of marginal

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208 [How less unhappy I would have been had the prefect caught us any other day, shortly afterward. I would have probably saved myself thirty years of silence and lies.]

209 [Olga Guirao has conceived a fictional work in which she very convincingly narrates not just everything crucial that has happened to the hero, but the moral and psychological material that justifies his existence.]
beings and to highlight sexual, socio-economic, and political inequalities” (2).210

Guirao’s novel captures well the extent of her protagonist’s alienation through the epistolary choice. Guillermo’s dislocated voice is the only one that emerges; his one-sided letter to Sebastián indicates a cathartic need to break out from underneath the oppression of his silence, and also the culture of silence that has oppressed him. This notion weighs in on his life journey as a victim of patriarchal authority figures who have denied him self-justification and acceptance. His letter-writing allows him the space to construct a new persona of himself that deviates from his past mirroring of hegemonic masculine identity (MacArthur 119). But there’s more to it. This idea is inevitably reinforced by Guillermo’s decision to provide Sebastián with a written explanation for the questionable nature of Elena’s and his relationship. His letter serves as a barricade to fortify his position and protect himself from Sebastián’s possible objections.

In the beginning of the letter, Guillermo acknowledges to his former lover that it was he who called and immediately hung up in the middle of the night. Unlike Peter Brooks, who views Guillermo’s resort to letter-writing as a way of doing damage control, I suggest that Guillermo opts to write knowing that having a two-way “conversation” with Sebastián might loosen his narrative boundaries and provides a sense of validation for telling of his own experience. If Guillermo has lived in continual judgment and disapproval for not meeting the expectations of his gender and sex role, then writing about his more severe transgression against unnatural love, away from the oppressive and

\footnote{210 It is worth mentioning that the historical context for Guirao’s novel is based in a time when Spain was under dictatorship, and, consequently, experienced rigid censorship. During this time, Barcelona was even more politically isolated and unrecognized for its difference. In fact, under Francoism the governing political state deprived many Catalans from communicating in their language, a symbolic construction of culture identity. The parallel of Guillermo’s censored identity and willful silence is an uncanny parallel to what Catalan endured during post civil war Spain.}
immediate voice and gaze of Sebastián, allows for him to escape psychological
surveillance and censorship of his personal story. At the same time, however, Guillermo
teeters the intimate parameters of his and Sebastián’s friendship. While Guillermo feels
the need to share with his former lover the latest evolution in his life, Sebastián’s role as
confidant is only a pretext for the epistolographer to justify his secret relationship with
Elena.

The long history of control and authority figures in Guillermo’s life begins at an early
age. Living in Spain in the 50s, the letter writer recalls the ever presence of censorship
and surveillance he had around him through masculine figures of authority: priests at his
religious school, his father’s business and political affiliates, Josep and other male
workers on his father’s land continually project a panoptic gaze that seeks to instill
hegemonic ideologies as the rite of passage to acceptable masculinity. Guillermo notes:
“Tengo la impresión de haber sufrido una larga condena. Me he hecho viejo bajo la
mirada de improvisados carceleros que me espiaban” (29).

Guillermo’s continual awareness of the prevailing suspicions of his homosexuality is realized in the passage
where he describes his awkward encounter with Josep, the caretaker of his father’s
property: “Cualquier cosa hubiera sido preferable a aquel silencio sin inocencia que
resonaba como un clamor en la soberbia quietud del encinar” (27).

Most immediate of
censors is his father,
who suspects his adolescent son’s sexual difference early on.
Furthermore, Guillermo alludes to his father as being culprit to his sexual complexity and
own sense of inferiority and disappointment in himself: “este episodio no empezó el año

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\[I\ have\ the\ impression\ of\ having\ suffered\ a\ long\ sentence.\ I\ have\ become\ old\ under\ the\ gaze\ of
improvised\ wardens\ that\ spied\ on\ me.\]

\[Anything\ would\ have\ been\ preferable\ to\ that\ silence\ without\ innocence\ that\ resonated\ like\ a\ shout\ in
the\ superb\ calm\ of\ the\ oak\ grove.\]
pasado ni el otro; es casi tan viejo como nosotros y tiene mucho que ver con nuestra niñez. En realidad fue mi propio padre quien lo desencadenó hace más de veinte años. Eso es, precisamente, lo paradójico” (14). Guillermo recalls the first time that his father took him to a brothel in order to sexually consummate him to a heterosexual identity: “con toda naturalidad se sentó a esperarme en una salita mientras aquella muchacha […] se aplicaba en enseñarme, a ti, a mí –y a otra media docena de estudiantes…” (14). Anything that does not measure up to his father’s expectations of his ideals for manhood sets Guillermo up for failure; this also adds to his father’s disappointment and embarrassment of him.

The protagonist’s perceived effeminate ways are realized from even the smallest to the more significant details of gender performance. For example, Guillermo’s inclination to pursue music instead of following in his father’s career path, his obsessive preoccupation with cleanliness, and later on, his financial codependency on his father’s support. Indeed, the later will eventually lead to Guillermo’s adamant rebellion against not only his father’s authority, but all authority.

Ironically, however, the rejection he feels from his paternal figure, combined with his lack of knowledge and experience with maternal primordial relations, enhances his inability to conceal his anger and intolerance of women. Up until he is reintroduced to Elena, Guillermo continually discriminates against women by treating them as less than human. He subconsciously sees and treats women as inferior to him. In his behavior

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213 [This episode didn’t begin last year or the year before. It is as old as us and has a lot to do with our childhood. In reality, it was my own father who condemned it more than twenty years ago. That is precisely the paradox.]
214 [Very naturally, he sat in a waiting room while that girl applied herself to showing me all the things that she showed us, you, me—and half a dozen other students.]
toward women, physically and verbally, he alienates them for having human traits; having human traits are equated with being a man. He writes:

Pensé que si mi madre no hubiera muerto mucho antes de que yo fuera capaz de recordar cualquier pequeño detalle sobre ella, sin duda la hubiera reconocido en la actitud de Leonor. Siempre he imaginado que el consuelo materno debe ser así, un poco estúpido pero incondicional, básicamente ineficaz pero con un indudable efecto sedante. (62)

Guillermo’s description of his wife Leonor is based on his only recollection of his mother and grandmother, which is held in binary opposition to masculine qualities. They are hollow beings whose only function is to serve to men, “tan semejantes las tres en el olvido de todos” (16).

The awkwardness between Leonor and him are realized in the initial stages of their marriage through the heaviness of their cumbersome silence. The epistolographer observes that “la escisión entre el mundo femenino y el masculino era tan profunda y desalentadora” (29). His misogynous ways reveal his contempt of women even more as he too is trapped between the symbolic hegemonic world and his knowing deception of his own sexual inclination. This is indicated when he acknowledges that by choosing an orphaned Leonor, he avoided any intrusion of female comradery: “que quizá elegí a Leonor porque no tenía una madre en la que mirarla, de modo que era posible hacerse

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215 [I thought that if my mother had not died way before I was able to remember any little detail about her, no doubt I would have recognized her in Leonor’s attitude. I have always imagined that maternal comfort should be like that, a bit stupid, but unconditional; basically ineffective but, without a doubt, having a sedating effect.]

216 [So similar the three of them, entirely forgotten]

217 [The division between the feminine and masculine worlds was so profound and disheartening.]
Guillermo finds himself tritely narrating their differences in material and performative ways just as his father did to him. For example, Guillermo encourages Leonor to play the “ama de casa” or housewife, caring for the appearance of the home, picking out the decor and furniture, passively enjoying the company of her lady friends, while he comes and goes as he pleases. This also demarcates the perceived difference in gender and sex domains which is hierarchized through patriarchal law: his space being the public and hers the private sphere.

The letter writer’s complacent attitude toward marriage only fuels hypermasculine performativity in his role as husband. In his intimate sexual relations with his wife, Guillermo exaggerates his masculinity, which is his coping mechanism with living in a fraudulent heterosexual marriage. He becomes violent and abusive while having sex with Leonor. Keith Pringle’s study *Men, Masculinities, and Social Welfare* (1995) posits that under hegemonic masculinity men understand themselves according to their relations of power, and possessing power is performed through heterosexuality. Those prevailing characteristics associated with heterosexuality are “the need to control, to exercise power over others, to fear emotions other than anger, to avoid closeness in relations, to objectify human beings” (208). Guillermo violently forces Leonor to undress, and then he confesses that “como no podía desear el cuerpo virginalmente aterrador de Leonor, tuve que desear restituirle la humillación que me infligía el mundo a través de ella” (50).

Guillermo objectifies women’s physical difference as something inferior to his own sex. Upon seeing Leonor nude, he states: “los artificios habían quedado a los pies de la

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218 [Perhaps I chose Leonor because she did not have a mother in which I could see her, that way it was possible to look forward to the future.]

219 [Because I was not able to desire the terrifying virginity of Leonor, I had to want to restore to her the humiliation that the world inflicted on me through her.]
cama, resultaba que [las mujeres] no eran los seres etéreos …sino criaturas asombrosamente prácticas, espiritualmente pequeñas, a veces ínfimas” (29). He alludes to men’s superiority over women, and reinforces hegemonic ideals of masculine qualities as holding power over women’s bodies. It is not just that effeminate qualities are of less value, but that he equates those qualities to being lesser to those of men. Robert Connell asserts that psychologically, burying or denying young adolescent boys the freedom to express their inner feelings leads to more serious binary treatment and abuse of women by adult males. Connell notes: “Emotional repression […] may crystallize as misogyny […] and feeds the objectification of women” (30). This process is evident in a few of Guillermo’s recollections of his sexual encounters with women. For instance, María, the prostitute whom both he and Sebastián frequently visit, is described as “ni inteligente ni distinguida, pero tenía ese aspecto devastado y conmovedor que sólo puede encontrarse en las mujeres maduras” (30).

Connell’s scholarship stresses how that hegemonic ideal, for masculinity and femininity, is a construction against which all individuals, men and women, model and measure themselves. This holds true in the case of how Leonor relates to her presumed femininity and the differential power between her and Guillermo (91). Leonor felt defrauded by the conjugal expectations for a heterosexual marriage. The epistolographer realizes that “Leonor no esperaba de mí la satisfacción física del deseo o del amor, sino que se sentía defraudada en su legítima expectativa de ver cumplido el débito conyugal”

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220 [The artifices had stayed at the foot of the bed; as it turned out, they [women] were not the ethereal beings […] but astonishingly practical creatures, spiritually small, sometimes insignificant.]

221 [Neither intelligent nor distinguished, but she had that devastating and emotional aspect that only can be found in older women.]
The portrayal of Leonor as “the other,” illuminates Guillermo’s alienation and inability to relate to her. Yet he hints that Leonor may have felt that profound alienation from him too: “posiblemente fue entonces cuando me convertí en su enemigo, pero no a causa de mi violencia o de mi frialdad, sino a causa de mi condición de hombre” (51). At the same time, however, he alludes to her compliantly accepting herself as inferior to him: “aceptaba humildemente su derrota, del mismo odio que, desde la niñez, había aceptado que su cuerpo era impuro y estaba manchado por un pecado original inexplicable” (51). Guillermo realizes that the exercise of hegemonic power in essential masculinity alienates him too. He is able to empathize and identify with her projection of emptiness: “no podía tolerar la imagen de mí mismo que me devolvía su carita inexpresiva, tan anestesiada por la ausencia” (59).

Guirao’s novel provides the reader a more lucid perspective on the damaging effect that hegemonic sexuality has on individuals. The reader gathers the psychological trauma that Guillermo has experienced in his life. Guirao’s employment of a male homosexual narrative point of view hightens the individual’s experience of living through discriminatory hegemonic ideologies of sex and gender identity. Marta Altisent points out that:

Al reproducir desde una sensibilidad masculina los rasgos que se le han asignado como inmutables y quintaesencialmente femeninos (pasividad,
inmanencia, benevolencia, inmadurez, conexión con la naturaleza, inconsciencia, alienación, etc.), el lector/a toma conciencia de la dificultad de trascender estereotipos muy arraigados en el imaginario colectiva que perpetúan el mutuo desconocimiento entre los sexos […]. La elección colectiva de sujetos de disminuida autoestima y vacilante identidad, o de patologías masculinas sojuzgadas a la opresión patriarcal, puede asimismo prestar a la escritora un reflejo agravado del ‘natural’ sometimiento y derrotismo femeninos. Las ofensas y humillaciones de estos alter-egos proyectan a escala épico-trágica vejaciones femeninas que corren el riesgo de ser banalizadas cuando pasan a ser materia literaria subversiva. (305)

Michael Kimmel argues that not only are women defined and stereotyped in opposition to men, since hegemonic masculinity is a “particular variety of masculinity to which others—among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men—are subordinated” (91). Guillermo does not only discriminate against his wife’s weakness, but against his father’s moment of vulnerability too. It is a sobering realization when the character realizes that this authoritative figure sitting before him is weak and fragile. Guillermo is even more perplexed in his identity crisis as he witnesses the contradictory and unexpected reaction from his father for his noncompliance to follow through with his own paternal responsibilities dictated to him through dominant discourses for masculine

226 [By embodying in a male sensibility, feminine characteristics that are assigned as fixed and quintessential (passivity, immanence, benevolence, naivety, connection with nature, oblivion, alienation, etc.) the reader discerns the difficulty of transcending stereotypes that are very rooted in the collective imaginary that perpetuates the mutual ignorance between the sexes…The collective choice of subjects with crippled self-esteem and uncertain identity, or masculine pathologies subjugated to patriarchal oppression, may themselves lend the writer a heightened reflection of feminine subjugation and defeatist attitudes that pass as natural. The offenses and humiliations that these alter-egos project as feminine mistreatments of an epic-tragic scale run the risk of being trivialized when they become subversive literary matter.]
gender and sex roles. His father’s breakdown has a crippling effect on his son’s sexual identity. The moment in which he sees his father emotionally decompose, Guillermo antagonistically observes: “De ordinario nada me parece más excitante que la debilidad […] y sin embargo, el llanto de mi padre me resultaba intolerable, me revolvía el estómago con la misma eficacia que una cucharada sopera de mierda” (94). His repugnance of his father’s grotesque and paradoxical behavior of masculinity indicates a compromise of androgynous masculinity; at this point, the epistolographer’s understanding of phallic order and patriarchal authority becomes distorted.

Guirao creates a vivid parallel between Guillermo’s world of control and patriarchy to Spain’s political and cultural situation in the 50s. Within the patriarchal parameters for gender roles and sexual orientation there were no outward subversive protests against the law without the individual suffering the consequences of ostracization or being exiled from mainstream society. Living in a homogenous culture and political state called for the individual to conform to symbolic hegemonic identities, or flee patriarchal oppression. Spain’s Catholic-dominated society held a hedge around the political landscape of the state to keep the citizens protected from foreign influence of immoral and unconventional gender and sexual behavior. In the novel, Guillermo’s gender and sexual performativity of the law indicates that he conforms only outwardly to the cultural and moral values of his heterosexual society; the only way for him to escape the hegemonic oppression is to travel abroad, which he does. Guillermo describes his flight from his oppressive environment as: “necesitaba escapar de aquella atmósfera, de los brazaletes negros en el traje oscuro y del estado de perpetua somnolencia en el que vivía”

227 [Ordinarily, nothing seems to me more exciting than weakness […] and, yet, the cry of my father seemed to me intolerable. It turned my stomach with the same effectiveness as a tablespoon of crap.]
Yet, while his flight may indicate freedom and liberation from Spain’s dominant heterosexual demands for men, it also indicates transgression.

Upon his return to Spain in 1955, Guillermo claims: “¡Qué apoteósica llegada! […] volver del extranjero era sinónimo de haber pecado mucho” (79). Going abroad or choosing self-exiliation only is a band aid for his psychological and traumatic suffering as he will be expected to live up to the patriarchal demands for his fatherly inherited responsibilities. Years later, upon learning about Elena’s recent expel from school due to her anarchist activity of propagating communist ideals, Guillermo is obligated to take her in; for the first time, Guillermo is able to connect with his daughter. He writes: “Mi hija empezó a existir para mí en aquel preciso instante en que Alberto, con su voz más lúgubre, me anunció que le habían echado del colegio”.

Guillermo identifies with his daughter’s rebellious disposition before authority and the law as a poetic justice to his own sentiments toward the discrimination he has incumbered because of patriarchal law and order.

Being reintroduced to Elena also reintroduces him to the ever-present surveillance of the legal system. Elena is a law student, works for a law office, and is in trouble with the law. Guillermo’s reacquaintance with Elena corresponds to a revival of an anarchic spirit within him that seeks a revolution for his own emancipation. Indeed, that may be the greatest factor that attracts him to his daughter. His love relationship with his daughter indicates his own narcissistic endeavor of retaliating on the law that has subjugated him

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228 [I needed to escape from that atmosphere, from the black armbands in the dark suit and from the perpetual somnolence in which I lived.]
229 [What an amazing arrival! Returning from abroad was synonymous with having sinned a lot.]
230 [My daughter began to exist for me in that precise instant in which Alberto, with his sinister voice, gave me the news that they had expelled her from school.]
to living in secrecy. By loving Elena, he also ignites an arduous need to subvert the law of nature that has denied him the freedom to sexually love how he wants. Perhaps this is what he insinuates at the end of his narrative to Sebastián about the visibility of his and Elena’s incestual love: “Desde entonces ha pasado poco más de un año y todavía tengo miedo; me siento continuamente en peligro” (190).231 Guillermo alludes to an autoerotic arousal he feels by living in a potential discovery of his extreme perversion.

In her interview with Glenn, Guirao states: “no es un incesto, es una paradoja. Al forzar su naturaleza, es interés de cierta moral” (311).232 She explicates: “Guillermo acaba viéndose abocado a la más tremenda de las transgresiones […] Yo diría que es consustancial a toda clase de relación de la índole que sea: una especie de contradicción irresoluble. Es verdad que ‘el infierno son los otros,’ y también lo es que no hay nada fuera de ese infierno, porque todo, hasta nuestra propia identidad, sucede en su interior” (311).233 The incestual act not only highlights the protagonist’s psychological turmoil having lived in a system that has silenced him, it portrays Guillermo as a victim of a much bigger system; it’s not about good or evil, but rather that the disorder represents a certain class of violence that has been inflicted upon his very nature. Guillermo’s relationship with Elena represents the rebellious and anarchist attitude of the youth culture who seeks to transgress social norms. The new youth cultural aversion to old

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231 [A little over a year has passed since then and I am still afraid; I feel continually in danger.]
232 [It is not incest, it is a paradox. Upon forcing nature, it is a certain moral interest.]
233 [Guillermo sees himself as being headed to the most dreadful of transgressions. I would say that it is intrinsic to any kind of relationship: a kind of unresolved contradiction. It’s true; hell is other people, and it’s also true that there is nothing outside of this hell, because everything, even our own identity, happens in our interior.]. Though Guirao does not claim to cite Sartre, though she is fond of him, the expression “el infierno son los otros” [hell is the other people] is coined by Sartre, the philosopher of essentialism. His philosophical musings on human existence brought him to the conclusion that anything painful that cannot be controlled outside of the human represents hell. Man is not anything other than what he creates himself to be.
ideals and antagonistic paradigms of identity is turned upside down. Elena is one of the many voices that revolt against imposturous laws that rob individuals of freedom and equality. The new political air in Spain invites fresh ideas about identity. Guillermo indicates this when he states: “Tengo la sensación de vivir en una época que ya no es la mía” (190). He also states that “yo pertenezco al pasado y ella pertenece al futuro, y este tiempo que nos pertenece a ambos, tiene toda la belleza de la incertidumbre” (190).

While there are a number of ways for interpreting the conclusion of Guillermo’s letter to Sebastián, I argue that Guirao invites her readers to consider the confining boundaries for the order of love. The author challenges them to reconsider the law of nature and order, and how certain impositions lead to further transgressions. Mi querido Sebastián represents a “springboard for parody” to patriarchal demands of gender and sex identity and to predisposed notions of love and desire that are tied to heterosexual normative expressions. The male letter-writer fulfills a narcissistic need of self-gratification by speaking into Sebastián’s silence from the margins of his deviance. Guillermo’s letter is an endeavor to make sense of his life disorder and feeling of inadequacy for not reflecting the hegemonic ideals for masculinity. Not only is his letter writing cathartic for his soul, it is a chance for a new beginning for him. He indicates this in the closing of his letter “…yo no puedo imaginarme ninguna otra [vida] y eso me evita la penosa impresión de

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234 [I have the feeling that I live in a time that is not mine.]
235 [I belong to the past and she belongs to the future, and this present time that belongs to us both has all the beauty of uncertainty.]
236 I borrow this term from Alfred Appel, who analyzes Nabokov’s novel Zoo as a “springboard to parody,” however, I use the term differently. I associate Guirao’s making of a “springboard of parody” with Guillermo’s deep seated need to rebel against the patriarchal law as he too has been victim of its volatile markings on his mind and body.
haber elegido mal” (190). Guillermo musters up the courage to not only confess to his amorous ties to Elena, his daughter, but to live out openly his homosexuality. Twenty years later, he lives in a different Spain, a different Barcelona. The male letter writer alludes to the fact that if political and cultural eras evolve, individual identity may also.

**Sexuality as Political and Social Construct in *Carta con diez años de retraso***

Guirao’s *Carta con diez años de retraso* (2002) makes a twist in her previous use of the epistolary mode. Rather than offer an individual’s one-sided account about the effects of culture oppression as it relates to identity and existence, she creates, through the form of electronic correspondence, a dialogic exposition between two middle-aged novelists, Max Arté and Levita Boser. It seems relevant to point out that *Carta con diez años de retraso* is published ten years after *Mi querido Sebastián*. Though at surface value their email exchange seems to pertain to a recent misunderstanding over their sexual attraction for another young female, Martina Velasco, the two protagonists’ psychological musings on the cultural privileges that men have over women, gradually lead to the topic of what love is and means to each of them. Guirao’s appeal to different dimensions of epistolary discourse, from a one-sided physical letter to an electronic exchange between two correspondents, seems to project the author’s progressive challenge in engaging the epistolary form in both print form and in cyberspace.

Guirao’s choice to frame the two protagonists’ interaction through an electronic exchange indicates her awareness of the influential impact that technology has made in human interaction and the individual’s perception of time and space. The transformation

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237 [I cannot imagine any other [life] and that saves me from the painful impression of having chosen wrongly.]
in the forms of communication resonates with the writing subject who knows that he/she can have immediate access to the other’s words and thoughts, and effectively may delay or dismiss the other’s message in the temporal abyss of insignificance. Linda Kauffman’s research establishes that “one of epistolarity’s central motifs” is that “letters are repeatedly lost, withheld, seized, misdirected, or misplaced” (195). *Cartas con diez años de retraso* counters this traditional motif by highlighting the subject’s ability to more closely micro-manage his correspondence in electronic form. Levita wishes to delay her response to Max as a means of exercising her self-control over her emotions and discourse. She urges Max to do the same, as his erratic emails are upsetting.

For this reason the time and date variables involved in this medium form are not to be dismissed. The digital hour of each one’s email and response to the other enhances the delay or continuity of their involvement as both reader and writer of each other’s discourse, and of their own, creating presence against absence, bridge to barrier, highlighting their sense of urgency to communicate, and yet their need to distant themselves from the narrative event. This is indicated particularly through Levita. In fact, Max, who desperately wants Levita to pick up the phone so that he can regurgitate his state of confusion and emotions, is met with Levita’s cool-headed approach, who would rather allow their point of contention to simmer before meeting or speaking in person. Levita tells Max: “No tengo la menor intención de humillarte y […] si no he contestado a tus mensajes telefónicos ha sido por pura precaución […] por favor, no insistas, porque no pienso coger el teléfono hasta que se me haya templado el ánimo”
(16). It is relevant to point out that Levita’s response is antithetical to traditional epistolary fiction that depicts the heroine as the erratic and impulsive communicator.

Guirao makes a indictment on the binary attributes configured in women’s and men’s identity through Max’s and Levita’s own epistolary roles. The elliptical “quid pro quo” movement of their discourse allows for Max and Levita to exercise control over their imagined roles within the textual space of their emails. Their alternating exchange makes more acute and visible to the reader’s imagination the semantic inversions of gender and sex roles and behaviors that they deconstruct in the progression of their discourse. For example, Levita defies Max’s supplication to speak with her, claiming that it is an imposition of her own personal boundaries. She tells him, “cada vez que llamas, no sólo tratas de imponer tu voluntad a la mía, no sólo expresas una falta de respeto por mis opiniones y deseos, sino que también me infliges una considerable violencia” (20). Levita’s assertion of her individual rights plays down the female role as doormat to the beckoning will of male chauvinistic behavior. Still yet, however, Max’s “considerable violence” extends into other personal boundaries of Levita’s life.

The fictitious editor’s note to the reader proves significant as it foreshadows the direction that the protagonists’ communication will take at the end of their email exchange. The editor, who with permission, collates Max’s and Levita’s email correspondence into a novel, laments that due to the advent of telephones, readers no longer have the privilege of vicariously identifying with heartfelt experiences from the

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238 [I don’t have intention of humiliating you […] if I haven’t answered your telephone messages it has been purely for precaution. Please do not insist, because I do not plan on picking up the phone until I have calmed down.]

239 [Each time that you call, not only do you try to impose your will on mine, not only do you express a total lack of respect for my opinions and desires, but you also inflict me with considerable violence.]
intimate communion the individual has with his soul letter-writing. Two things are worth mentioning here regarding the editor’s allusions. First, Guirao, through her fictitious editor, seems to invoke the traditional practice of respected authors who found support for their artistic endeavors and retreat from their fictional worlds by corresponding to loved ones or other writers/poets in the literary profession. Secondly, it also seems that Guirao plays upon the common knowledge that at one time, writers were often violated by unauthorized publication of their actual letters. In this fictional case, however, both Max and Levita concede to the editor’s wishes.

The editor’s interest in obtaining the two professional authors’ private emails results in his belief that the genesis of all good literature comes from the ability to tell a good story; to relate to the reader by exposing a common ground, the human condition. He states: “es frecuente que la realidad, oculta en su desorden, cobre sentido al transformarse en literatura, pero en este caso ha pasado justamente lo contrario” (12). The editor’s observation suggests the corresponding shaping that fiction and reality have on each other. Indeed the fine line between reality and fiction is blurred in the two writers’ intimate emails as they frequently reference each other’s works. Their email exchange suggests itself as a mise en abyme of their overall life story, and of the “writer-reader relationship” to use Altman’s term, that they sustain between the two of them (212). Altman notes that “epistolary fiction tends to flourish at those moments when novelists most openly reflect upon the relation between storytelling and intersubjective

240 I am reminded of Pedro Salinas’ actual letters that he penned while courting his wife, Margarita, whose epistolary collection was eventually published and titled, Cartas de amor a Margarita (1912-1915). In turn, Salvador Dali’s and Federico García Lorca’s letter exchange has been published into a book titled, Sebastián’s Arrows (2004).

241 [Often, reality, overshadowed in its disorder, makes sense when it is transformed into literature. In this case, however, the exact opposite has happened.]
communication and begin to question the way in which writing reflects, betrays, or constitutes the relations between self, other, and experience” (212). The fact that the two writers’ personal lives would become material for a novel insinuates the fluid boundary between fiction and reality.

Though Martina Velasco is the catalyst for their argument, Levita reminds him that he violated her trust by attempting to court other past lovers, “Camila, Gloria, Eugenia… y Lula, claro, ¡cómo no! (28). This accusation invokes a deeper significance that will carry the narrative to another dialogic level: Max’s prejudices toward women and Levita’s double-standards. Max indicates that while she censors his sexual behavior, accusing him of treating her friends like “putillas” [little whores], she holds her own female friends to another standard. He is baffled that “durante años he creído que vivíamos en el mismo mundo y en la misma longitud de onda, pero ahora ya no sé qué pensar” (34). He insists that he is not responsible for their compliance: “No significa No” (32). Max denies that he would cross Levita’s “territorio” [territory] or invade her “harén” [harem] (37). But in the binary and discriminatory language that he uses in his defense, he commits double-injury on Levita by demeaning her amorous relations as an act of objectification, a stereotype of masculinity where men in patriarchal societies are taught to see women as objects and possession.

The vast gulf of the characters’ misunderstanding indicates how polarized they are through their learned assumptions about each other’s gender and sex; this becomes more evident in their contrasting phenomenological positions on one’s identity. Max holds an

242 [Camila, Gloria, Eugenia… and Lula, of course, why not!]
243 [For years I have believed that we lived in the same world and were on the same wavelength, but now I do not know what to think.]
244 [No means no]
essentialist view on gender and sex, attributing absolute values to masculinity and femininity that are in opposition to each other. In contrast, Levita rationalizes the body as a social construct, embedded with patriarchal ideologies that instill gender and sex normative. Their point of contention, however, is that Max gives credence to patriarchy as the stabilizer of man’s human nature, while Levita understands it to be the panoptic gaze in the reinforcement of fixed identities.

Now, living in a post era of patriarchy, Max regrets that patriarchy is disappearing. Max explains to Levita that “ese orden patriarcal que yo extraño y que a ti te inspira tanto desprecio, ante todo era un orden humano, es decir, lo opuesto a un orden natural” (102). For him, patriarchy justifies those essential differences between men and women which are indisputably related to their nature. He continues to contrast men’s natural instincts with those of women, which are of “otra orientación, más conforme a sus cometidos biológicos, es decir, porque carecen de esa pulsión que sería inútil en su ciclo reproductivo” (102).

Max upholds beauvorian essentialism for justifying the difference between men and women. In her classical study, The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir claims the woman figure is historically viewed through the masculine perspective “negatively, as she appears to men” (175). She contends that women’s primordial existence is based in their child bearing activities and that “her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body; to the feminine body, and to the child” (740). The male “sees his body as a direct and normal connection

245 [that patriarchal order that I miss and that evokes disdain from you, more than anything was a human order; that is, the opposite of natural order.]
246 [another orientation, conforming more to their biological purpose; that is, because they lack that urge that would be useless in their reproductive cycle.]
with the world, which he believes that he apprehends in its objectivity, whereas he regards the body of the woman as weighed down by everything peculiar to it, as an obstacle, a prison” (15). Max resolves that patriarchy is not the enemy of women, instead “… el enemigo de las mujeres es la naturaleza, y no son los hombres (104). He insinuates that the onset of a new democracy that allows for equal privileges and rights does not necessarily allow for a society to progress as it goes against man’s nature, leaving him lost and disoriented:

Llevo años oyendo que los hombres, desorientados por la pérdida de su privilegios, ya no saben cuál es su lugar […] Las desorientadas son ellas, siempre a mitad de camino entre la amazona y la doncella. En las últimas cuatro décadas yo no me he movido un ápice de donde estaba; a mi alrededor todo ha cambiado, pero yo sigo allí, donde siempre estuve, donde estuvieron mi padre y mi abuelo y donde habrían estado mis hijos varones si hubieran llegado a nacer. (53)

He concludes that men, in their nature, are privileged and women will never be able to change men’s instinctual need for promiscuous sexual activity: “los hombres son polígamos…SON IRREMEDIABLEMENTE POLÍGAMOS…porque lo han sido siempre y

247 [women’s enemy is nature and not men.]
248 [I have been hearing for years that men, disoriented by the lost of his privileges, no longer know their place […] The disoriented ones are them, always half-way between the amazon and the damsel. In the last four decades I haven’t moved a peck from where I was, everything around me has changed, but I am still there, where I always was, where my father and grandfather were, and where my sons would have been if they had been born.]
siempre lo serán” (101).\(^{249}\) Yet, in his closed-minded thinking, Max continues to subjugate Levita in his androcentric approach to their differences.

Levita counters Max’s narrow-minded and obstinate philosophical views by using them against him. She uses her own life experiences to buck his views on the female figure as the passive contenders of man’s morality. She rebutts with: “¿Qué crees tú, en definitiva, que pretendía decirte tu padre cuando te advirtió que las mujeres no estaban ahí para joderte sino para protegerte de ti mismo…? (112).\(^{250}\) Her sarcasm indicts Max for his naiveté in believing women are hollow beings, and merely exists for man’s pleasure; it also cautions that his construction of “el Jardín de Alá puede tomar un tono carcelario” (113).\(^{251}\) She reminds Max that she too lived among “silencios y medias palabras y también tuve un padre […] contradictorio” (83).\(^{252}\) She experienced that dense phantasmal presence of silence, lies, and many contradictions in her homelife and in her secrecy: “era otro peso […] un plus de silencio, de mentira sobre la mentira” (93).\(^{253}\)

Levita’s philosophical view on men and women aligns with Butler’s scholarship. Butler views women and men as socially constructed beings in patriarchal society, and that by repeated practices of hegemonic sexuality and gender, identity becomes embodied in the individual. This is how patriarchy maintains “sus asediados paraísos […] tales paraísos […] sumamente infernales” (94).\(^{254}\) Levita alludes to how a marginalized individual who does not fit into the patriarchal ideal for sexuality and gender is rendered

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\(^{249}\) [men are polygamous...THEY ARE INEVITABLY POLYGAMOUS….because they have always been and they always will be.]

\(^{250}\) [What do you believe then, that your father tried to tell you when he warned you that women weren’t there to screw you but to protect you from yourself…?]

\(^{251}\) [the garden of Alá can take on an imprisoning tone.]

\(^{252}\) [silences and minced words and also I had a father [...] who was contradictory…]

\(^{253}\) [It was another weight…an extra silence, lie after lie.]

\(^{254}\) [Its besieged paradise […] extremely hellish.]
powerless by what Butler calls “symbolic hegemony” (16), a visible means to control the bodies through gender and sexual performativity.

Butler’s theoretical positioning also gives insight to Max’s ambivalence toward Levita’s sexuality since “the abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to lie in the shadowy regions of ontology” (277). In Max’s framework of understanding there are only two contingents of gender sexual identity and performativity, in which they act in polarization from one other. Max is not able to treat Levita’s homosexuality without polarizing the hegemonic strategic for heterosexual relations. In other words, if she is lesbian, then she either performs as the Butch or Femme in the relationship.

Levita accuses Max of not being capable of seeing gender and sexuality on a continuum. For him, an individual either performs as a man or woman, and all identity is weighed against this axis of stability. Furthermore, Levita observes that Max, because of his misogynistic tendencies, compromises for her lack of heterosexuality, by treating her as if she were another male friend. In other words, because he does not relate to her lesbianism, he subconsciously prescribes to Levita traits commonly associated with heterosexual males’ performativity. While Max may not intentionally objectify his lesbian friend, in his effort to interact with Levita, he renaturalizes her as a male counterpart.

In Levita’s following admonishment to Max, she frames her difference outside of this ontological binary trap:
Diría que me he pasado la vida entera cercada por la sospecha de no ser una mujer y te confieso que, en ocasiones, hasta yo misma he terminado por preguntarme si lo soy. Por desgracia, los homosexuales no tenemos muchos referentes; yo no puedo mirar hacia el pasado para reconocerme en él, porque pertenezco a un linaje de proscritos cuya historia no consta. A menudo, desde esta tierra de nadie en la que habito, la realidad resulta más compleja, más ambigua y más confusa también. Pero hay algo de lo que estoy totalmente segura, Max: yo no soy un hombre; quizá no sea una mujer pero, en cualquier caso, tampoco soy un hombre. (38)

The eventual revelation that develops from their laborious debate leads to Levita’s confession that her truest and most profound sense of love and fulfillment was in an amorous relationship with an homosexual middle-aged man, a friend of her father’s. This is the preamble to leaving behind their very different philosophical views on sex and gender. They begin to deal with their rawest sense of humanity, the need to love and be loved.

Nancy Chodorow’s study, *Feminities, Masculinities, Sexualities* (1994) is informative for analyzing *Carta con diez años de retraso.* Though she states that “gender is an important ingredient in how men and women love, and all men’s and women’s love fantasies, desire, or practices are partially shaped by their sense of gendered self,” she

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255 [I would say that I have spent nearly my whole life under the suspicion that I am not a woman, and I confess to you that on certain occasions, even I have ended up asking myself if I am. Regrettably, homosexuals do not have many referents; I am not able to look in the past to recognize myself in it, because I belong to a lineage of outlaws whose history is unknown. Often in this no man’s land in which I live, the reality becomes more complex, more ambiguous, and more confusing also. But there is something that I am totally sure about, Max: I am not a man; perhaps I am not a woman but, whatever the case, I am not a man either.]
also argues that “this sense of gendered self is itself individually created and particular, a unique fusion of cultural meaning with personal emotional meaning that is tied to the individual psychobiographical history of any individual” (91). In essence, this is what Levita pleads from Max: she asks him to take his mask off, and dig into his most primordial relationships in order to understand the moments when he felt loved and gave love to another human being without circumventing through the paradigmatic values of gender and sex value “porque sólo el amor es capaz de dar verdadero sentido a la vida” (116). This initiates their building of trust and establishes their relationship as confidants. In the progression of their email exchange, they do more than just evaluate their lived experiences of cultural and political paradigms; they begin to build a relationship of confidence. They establish a fundamental trust between each other, a safe place to be lured into, and a codependency that draws them to the other’s narrative account of his/her life story. To recall Altman, this is a phenomenon that often takes place through the epistolary plot: “generic borderlines…blur these distinctions between the associated pairs confiance-amitiè and coquetterie-amour” remaining ambiguous (70). This becomes evident as it is played out through Max’s and Levita’s communication, leading up to the climatic moment of discovery: Max declares his amorous love for Levita, and confesses to the letter that he had written ten years earlier, on the advent of their friendship.

The title Carta de diez años de retraso references the spectral presence of an unsent letter that Max had written to Levita upon meeting her years back. The mention of the surreptitious letter in the midst of the two friends’ misunderstanding and discord points to

256 [Because only love is capable of giving true meaning to life.]
their avoidance of an unaddressed issue between the two of them: the intimate love that they feel for one another. Yet the intrigue of Guirao’s novel is not the delayed revelation of the letter’s existence, but rather the ambiguous nature of the protagonists’ present relationship, which is conveyed by the sudden mention of the suppressed letter of ten years. This is precisely what Levita tries to convey to Max:

> no hay nada más ambiguo que la vida […] de hecho, es tan ambigua que cuando tratas de reducir su ambigüedad todavía resulta más ambigua; y por esa causa pueden crearse extraños lazos entre una jovencita lesbiana y un homosexual de mediana edad; y, aunque parezca mentira, de semejante caos puede surgir un hogar irreemplazable. (126)²⁵⁷

Levita adverts to Max: “Lo relevante es que nos hemos cargado un mundo sin tomarnos a molestia de construir otro, que hemos demolido la vieja casa porque era incómoda y nos hemos quedado a la intemperie” (95).²⁵⁸ Levita’s statement refers to the internal quest of the individual to look for a safe, trusting, loving “hogar” [home] in communion with another being. Even though Levita’s sense of belonging and feeling loved was a need conditioned through silence, as it was something she could not talk about, it was nevertheless the only thing that made sense of her existence, being able to love without conditions or expectations in terms of sex and gender. Antonio loved her unconditionally and without boundaries—simply for her.

²⁵⁷ [There is nothing more ambiguous than life, Max. In fact, it is so ambiguous that when you try to reduce its ambiguity, it still becomes more ambiguous. And for that reason, a young lesbian and a middle-aged homosexual male can build strange bonds to each other; and though it may seem hard to believe, an irreplaceable home can spring forth from so much chaos.]

²⁵⁸ [The relevant point is that we have destroyed a world without bothering to construct another; we have demolished the old house because it was uncomfortable and we have left ourselves out in the cold.]
Individuals can be given gender and sexual value that weighs into society’s labeling of them, but the deeper issues of love come from the heart. “¿Acaso crees que hacía literatura, Max?”

Levita asks Max rhetorically. Yet literature facilitates her seduction. Levita tells Max that she has been able to identify with his soul upon reading many of his novels. She points to an intertextual link between their lived experiences and the fictional lives of their protagonists in their art. She thus reminds Max that, even though they are both readers of cultural paradigms, the power of their creative and artistic energies is anchored in love. Perhaps, this is why both of them concede to having their letters made public; the realization that their email exchange is written in love, and by the same token, literature is inspired by love.

**Concluding Remarks**

Olga Guirao’s choice to use the epistolary mode to narrate two novels, *Mi querido Sebastián* and *Carta con diez años de retraso* is a provocative gesture to the reader. Guillermo’s uni-directional letter implies a breaking from silence. He is a homosexual male who has been censored by surveiling culture and political paradigms that have also inhibited his amorous and sexual expression for his past lover, Sebastián. By using the letter to open up and come out with his incestuous love for his daughter, Elena, he transgresses laws and proper decorum for his sexual behavior. This is important to keep in mind, as traditionally private letters were oftentimes in imminent danger of being censored for potential sexual transgression, and in earlier centuries letters commonly represented a confession to carnal desires. In this case, Guirao’s epistolographer’s transgression of homosexuality has moved to a moral hell, incest with his daughter Elena.

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259 [Do you think I was writing literature?]
If in Guillermo’s past patriarchy censored him on how to love and who to love, his
confession to Sebastián now represents his total insubordination to paradigms for sexual
expression.

In *Carta con diez años de retraso*, Guirao marries technology and the epistolary
narrative in order to analogically represent the twenty-first century’s facility to transmit
and disseminate discourses on human nature through the conceptual framework of gender
and sexual politics: within the new conventions of epistolary, her characters challenge
false representations of themselves and of each other in the societies they live. Finally, I
am convinced that the overarching premise that Guirao proposes to her readers through
these novels is that in the twentieth- and twentieth-first century epistolarity remains an
appealing narrative form to release entrapped desires and silenced expression. It is a
means to resist and break with confining narratives that are inextricably tied to societal
pressures.

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Conclusions: Women Artists’ Unsealed Missives

This dissertation examines women writers’ contemporary use of epistolarity as a means to effectually upset traditional paradigms of control and representations of women’s literary confinement in the context of amorous conquests. The traditional association of the woman letter writer as infinitely connected to her emotions, paired with the fact that her letters are a depository for those emotions, raises issues with regard to how to read fictional letters by contemporary women writers who, unlike men, have been subjugated to more adverse and subaltern representation. The writers examined here, Josefina Aldecoa, Carme Riera, Nuria Amat, Esther Tusquets, Marina Mayoral, Carmen Martin Gaite, and Olga Guirao, are perhaps some of the most prominent Spanish authors who capitalize on the fluidity that the letter narrative allows for soul-searching on issues of identity and sexuality. I argue that fictional letters in contemporary Spanish literature allow for the constructions of self and feasibly represent an allegory for the woman artist. Letters allow women writers agency to explore subjectivities, creativity, and the many sides of gender and sexuality through the topic of love. Indeed, letters are the textual canvas for women to refashion discourses on gender, sexuality, and subject identity that transform old paradigms.

Approaching this study through the theoretical lenses of historical and political contexts, epistolarity, gender and sexuality allows me to examine the multifaceted dimensions of identity that emerge through letter writing. It is paramount to bear in mind that the I-you paradigm which is particular to epistolarity, allows for the fictional protagonists to not only voice themselves, but to simulate the presence of the “you” as “other,” as part of the performative act of being heard. For this reason, each chapter’s
theme has evolved from the I-you paradigm of letter-writing that allows for the exploration of selfhood, artistic creativity, gender and sexuality.

The first chapter “The Epistolary Tradition at a Crossroads: Artistic Constrainst and Agency” serves as a theoretical frame for the rest of the chapters, which then develop particular aspects of the epistolary I-you paradigm and feminist theory further: letters as mirrors and autobiographical manifestos (Chapter 2), letters as healing and erotic artifacts (Chapter 3), and letters as transgressive sexual acts (Chapter 4). Montserrat Abumalham’s ¿Te acuerdas de Sharazad? serves as a case study for cross-examining those key notions. By unfolding the ambiguous nature of amorous discourse and deconstructing its confining boundaries, Shahrazad’s letters to her addressee are, in the end, love letters to herself. Through Shahrazad’s many transgressions with regard to the epistolary and oral traditions, Abumalham’s novel regulates language, wields control over her discourse, and points to the power of the written word.

In chapter 2, “Self-Love: Letters as an Autobiographical Manifesto” the I-you paradigm represents a textual mirroring for the epistolographers’ self-discovery and allow them to explore variants of selfhood and self-love. The self-reflexivity and self-referentiality of letter writing reinforces each protagonist’s autonomous voice as they write life narratives about their lived experiences and amorous relationships.

Chapter 3 “Carmen Martín Gaite’s Nubosidad variable: Reflections of Love and Identity” examines the female epistolographers’ personal journeys to finding love and identity through letter writing. The two protagonists are able to mediate their life stories, creating them into a work of art as they publish their letters and journals together for
public consumption. By writing to each other, the two women are able to cure themselves from the toxic mirroring of others’ expectations for them.

Chapter 4 “Olga Guirao and Homoerotic Love: Transgression of Sexuality and Textuality” reconciles sexuality and identity. In other words, the marginalized protagonists, who have been victimized by political and cultural norms for sexual expression, find voice and visibility through the textual space of letters. Guirao’s protagonists use their letters as a narrative tool for confession to their social adversity and defiance to their oppression.

The questions that guided this study are based on the epistolary fiction’s reemergence in Spain contemporary literature between 1986 and 2002. I examined why women artists would resort to the epistolary tradition, a genre that in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stifled women’s artistic expression, to address issues on selfhood, literary creativity, gender, and sexuality. What would be the artistic advantage for employing this type of narrative in contemporary fiction, now that the literary market is democratic and egalitarian for men and women? Drawing from Susan Lanser’s Fictions of Authority in which she states that “gendered conventions of public voice and of narrative self-reference serve important roles in regulating women’s access to discursive authority” (15), I examined how the gendered and segregated spaces of men and women have impacted their expression of sexuality and love by women. If women have been robbed of personal expression and creative power by the word through patriarchal prescriptive images that once reinforced discriminatory and essentialist paradigms for interpreting women’s literature, contemporary Spanish female authors subvert the culture’s dominant ideologies through their amorous epistolary fiction. I have argued that the woman artist
redefines the textual parameters for the fictional letter and capitalizes on the genre’s form to create a more fluid discourse about subjectivity, gender, and sexuality, while at the same time, make a statement about her own artistic creativity. The reemergence of the letter narrative in the twentieth- and twenty-first century presents a literary portraiture of the female artist, both at the internal level (the epistolographer to her addressee), and the external level (the historical author to her reader). The strategic I-You paradigm in letter fiction proves ideally suited for regaining a renewed sense of self today for a wide range of (fictional) epistolographers. The use of the genre is an effective means for the epistolographer to break with confining ideologies and aesthetic tendencies that falsify one’s understanding of who he/she is. Women’s contemporary epistolary fiction offers pertinent commentary regarding the search for expression and a sense of textual space that goes beyond confining heterogeneous cultural experiences that encase them as marginalized victims of male-dominant discourse. Contemporary women authors seize the opportunity to revive a genre that had denied them textual autonomy and self-representation.

Epistolary fiction opens up a venue in our postmodern society for evaluating the effects of literature on individuals’ lives where one’s own desires are measured against others’ expectation. My findings from this study reveal that letters functions as a means for the marginalized subject to recuperate expression that has been denied to him/her by culture and political paradigms. By writing through amorous discourse, my authors attempt to overcome cultural oppression that forbids their subjective, creative and sexual expression. Therein is the link between sexuality and textuality: letter narratives allow one to interrogate the private and public self by yoking together one’s desire to self-create
as a dialogic interaction between writing and being read. Women become embodied in their written words; their textual production becomes a metonyme for self-representation.

The connection of sexuality and textuality is one of the strongest points to be made about the contemporary use of letter fiction in the cohort of women authors’ texts that I have chosen for this study. One of the observations that I have made about their epistolary fiction is the seemingly analogous relationship between their textual work and the trajectory of women artists’ literary history. Going beyond conventional motifs for epistolary fiction provide unbiased alternative representations. These writers also challenge characteristics typically associated with men’s expression. For example, Mayoral and Guirao both employ male protagonists to counter the image of epistolary heroines as the only victims. Mayoral’s male protagonists experience emotional love and alienation by his wife while Guirao’s are victims of oppressive cultural systems for gender and sexual performance. In short, while letter fiction may be an allegory for the women artist, it may applicably describe other marginalized individuals who use their art to find solace and identity.

As writers and readers of cultural paradigms, the individual artist is able to capture her self-interpretation on the textual canvas of her own writing through the appeal of a confidant or a lover. This is what is unique to the epistolary fiction. Meanwhile, however, as literature undergoes historical change, other first-person narratives that focus on intimacy offer variables for exploring identity as they share transgeneric properities with the letter form. Indeed, intimate narratives such as diaries, autobiographies, and autofiction are advantageous for exploring one’s self-representation within the text.
Furthermore, the infinite possibilities involving technology and first-person writing, such as blogging or tweeting, are worth examining. The explorations of first-person genres are promising for recuperating the individual’s sense of loss through the imaginative and dynamic exchange between a writer and reader, and merit further research as notions of self are subject to historical change.
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