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**SPANISH AMERICAN FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY:
AN APPROACH THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF WILLING**

BY

MARTHA LORENA RUBÍ

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian
Literatures in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2002

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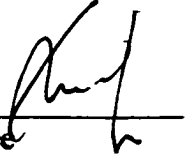
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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Spanish American Feminist Literary Theory: An Approach Through the Concept of Willing

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Literary works written by contemporary Latin American women have contributed new perspectives to literary criticism and theory development. Feminist readings of such works have flourished and have produced, in turn, a need for a comprehensive review of Hispanic women's literary contributions.

Women critics in Spanish America have used North American and European theories to experiment and pave new directions in developing national strategies with regard to women's literary discourses. The dialogues generated confront women and culture, women and society and women and national history, while challenging patriarchal standards.

Each nation's multi-cultural make-up urges a different orientation and approach to feminist thinking. To write from a feminist perspective, in Latin American nations, is considered a political option: contrary to this notion are women who write without feminist concerns in mind. Women who choose to write from this political platform have stimulated the growth of feminist literary criticism and have generated the need for Spanish American feminist literary theories. These theories, in turn, derive from criticism of aesthetic works that express women's representational existence. Women's discourses are pressing for development strategies on class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation derived from Hispanic national realities.

This study proposes to offer a discourse on the concept of Willing, nurtured by women's literary themes. An approach through Willing can enrich the literary experience and broaden understanding of Latin American women's own perspective of self in society. It is based on two premises: 1) that women's lived experiences are valuable referents to literary analysis, and 2) that the action imparted by the work stimulates social consciousness of women's lives and cultural conditioning.

Ten works of literature have been selected, among so many others, to develop and formulate the social concept of Willing in three aspects: Becoming, The Public Sphere and Gender and Nation. The three chosen components stem from topics found in works written by authors from the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America and South America that interact with Willing's own components of experience and action. The ten authors are: Excilia Saldaña, Rosario Ferré, Rosario Castellanos, Sara Sefchovich, Gioconda Belli, Rigoberta Menchú, Ana Istarú, Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit and Alejandra Pizarnik. The three components outlined are formulated through an interdisciplinary approach to feminist thinking with the aid of Hispanic, North American and European theories.

The approach through Willing hopes to celebrate Spanish American women's differences and develop new discourses imparted by the literature women produce.

Preface

To initiate a new discourse on literature written by women is an invitation to open Pandora's box. The evils imagined cannot be greater than those of the anxiety concerning their release. When this new discourse addresses contemporary literature, produced by Latin American women, matters become more complicated. The very idea of formulating an academic parlance made for a culture other than North America or Europe may seem futile as the efforts of Sisyphus. The attempt to produce a different discourse may be met with resistance, distortion and at worst, rejection. The fundamental questions are then, why introduce a new discourse on women's literature, and is one on Latin America necessary?

The first problem is to understand that feminism and literature have different meaning to different people. If the accepted and uncontested definition of literature is one derived from the traditional concept of the western canon, in which male writers and critics have always represented literature monistically, then such a wayward axiom may have forgotten women and their distinct vision of the world.

The question still persists: what is literature? Many have tried to define what literature is, what it is not and even what it ought to be. Amidst many variants, one common ground exists, literature's insistence on artistically portraying the human condition.

The next concern is feminism and, what it means to women living in Latin America and in the United States. The definitions vary and lie within the historical realities of both cultures. In the U.S., one of the major accomplishments of the sixties was

the arrival of the first wave of feminism; a socio-political and intellectual movement forged in the milieu of civil rights. The next decade, the seventies, introduced the second wave and the concept of feminism as a literary standard of analysis. Works by women were now given an advantage. Socio-political consciousness shifted to women's literary view, and set in motion multiple dialogues. The introduction of new themes confronted patriarchy by questioning its validity as the standard by which western society and its institutions understood and evaluated reality. The new consciousness gave rise to a new form of literary criticism, one that included a different standard of measuring, conceiving and interpreting aesthetic works by women: the outcome was the birth of feminist literary criticism. Literature written by women was now becoming more visible, as it was afforded the public space once inhabited only by male writers and critics. The newly acquired literary space offered women the opportunity to write as women; more so, to facilitate understanding of women's writing to critics, enabling them to legitimate their work.

What women wanted was now being answered. Still, the changes women demanded reflected primarily the needs of those living in North America and Europe. Latin American women were not part of the same struggle since their nations faced other survival agendas. The socialist movements and political upheavals of the sixties and seventies gave Hispanic American feminism other dimensions and meanings. These realities have prompted my second fundamental question, formulated in the first paragraph: Is a new discourse on Latin American women necessary?

From the standpoint of two cultures, born Nicaraguan and raised as an American in New York, I followed the strife of culturally different women and a movement that

would become ambiguous and troublesome for Latin Americans living in distinct nations and within different national histories.

An understanding of feminism in the Hispanic region can dispel the myth of a unified movement that has never existed. On the other hand, literary works by women who write from a political standpoint (since to write as a woman is considered a political option by some Hispanic critics) contribute twofold; not only in promoting women's concerns from a socio-historical and cultural perspective, but do so by confronting larger issues not resolved at the national level. Undoubtedly, the more works are written by Hispanic women, the greater is the task of the feminist critic in deciphering patterns based on themes, narrative strategies and meta-narratives imparted by the work. The literature she produces now becomes a blueprint of the writer's thoughts and gender concerns.

As I write, to speak of women's literature as a category, produces quick retortions and wry remarks that proclaim literature's un-gendered nature. At times, women themselves, have met the phrase "literatura femenina" with certain uneasiness that underscores the problem facing literature. Nevertheless, to speak of an "un-gendered" work of art is to deny human nature. The classical definition states that art is a superior activity by which humans create beauty, but humans are gendered! consequently, art as a human activity is gendered. Literature, produced by women, then, has to be gendered. A good example of the existence of gendered art is present in the recent novel by Diamela Eltit, Vaca sagrada (1991). The author establishes her theme through a woman's body. Menstruation becomes the main symbol of violence, an instrument that draws a parallel with state repression. In traditional male dominated literature, this artistic portrayal would not have

been conceived. In the hands of a male critic, a woman's menstrual cycle would not have been perceived as literary material, and the work rejected. I believe women writers and feminist critics are not yet out of the woods. It seems to me, that a dialogue must continue until feminist issues achieve recognition and acceptance, and literature has received an adequate standard of analysis based on two human perspectives: that of women and men.

Moreover, the present study includes two fundamental aspects proposed through the concept of *Willing*: 1) that women's lived experiences in culture and history are taken as criteria to understanding her vision of society, and 2) that the action, imparted by the work stimulates the reader's social consciousness. The application of *Willing*, as the basis of analysis, is instrumental in theorizing Latin American literature by women on women. This conceptual framework derives new insights from literary works, as thematic patterns contribute understanding of socio-political structures and historical time frames that affect women's development in culture. The application of *Willing* to the literary work creates a dialogue between women and the traditional world of patriarchy she inhabits.

I introduce *Willing* as a socio-political concept grounded in history and further develop it with the assistance of feminist thinking. Inclusive are feminist concerns on discourses such as: *Becoming*, *The Public Realm* and *Gender and Nation*, reworked within the concept of *Willing* through philosophic and social thinking. Together both aesthetic works and theoretical discourses interact to establish a sound foundation for a feminist literature and literary theory.

The thesis interrelates the concept of *Willing* with ten chosen works written by Latin American women in the last forty years. The interaction between the two illustrates and supports the main tenets of my work. Although ambitious in scope, the discussion

provides a small glimpse into possible ways of generating theoretical thinking at the national, and regional level. The literary contributions of Hispanic American women must go beyond curiosity and novelty, and must enter permanently mainstream literary tradition, perhaps, through a theory that considers their human and feminine condition; establishing this way, a discourse of *their* own.

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Introduction

Contemporary literature by Spanish American women has become an important area of research in the formation of new approaches to literary theory. Moreover, the increasing importance of feminist criticism, as the general method of evaluation and judging women's works, has given rise to the need for a sound theoretical discourse; one that articulates ideologically women's literary contributions to Latin American social consciousness. The existence of an abundant literary production can only attest to women's presence in society and their use of literature to gain political foothold in the public realm where literature is judged. The interdisciplinary nature of each literary work, itself a product of socio-historical circumstances, becomes the key to nurturing theoretical thinking.

In Hispanic America, gender-oriented literature is a historical and cultural phenomenon searching for authenticity and legitimacy. En masse, women producing literary works have added a much-needed perspective in understanding feminism, nation and the complexities of multicultural realities. The most salient contributions, from this distinctive body of literature, lie in the works produced in the past forty years.

From the period dating 1960 through the year 2000, world events and regional strife, among them: the Cuban revolution, socialism, dictatorships and liberal market democracies have undoubtedly contributed to shaping feminist consciousness in Latin American thought. Through literature and social movements, the last four decades of the twentieth-century have brought women's issues to the public realm. At the heart of thematic works are social and political rights, ontological struggle for self-definition, gender issues, and women confronting national histories. These works, influenced

directly or indirectly by different currents of Anglo-American and European feminist thinking, indicate a strong tendency toward a Hispanic discourse, one produced as an outcome of its complex societies and gender inequities. In this respect, new approaches to Latin American feminist literary theory enriches the analysis of literature by relating social and philosophical concepts to its framework.

By introducing *willing*, as the subject of a new discourse, this project addresses Spanish American feminist literature as a cultural and socio-historical phenomenon and uses an interdisciplinary methodology to express areas of concern to feminist literary studies. *Willing* is an attempt to politicize theory as the continuation of women's political struggles. Theory and social practice provide insights into the creative process, as narratives become the spokes piece for collective action, capable of willing social and political change through the public space provided by literature.

New epistemic propositions in the social sciences suggest that a more profound understanding of gender relations and marginal groups are needed. The formulation of new discourses can lead to new guidelines, a way of measuring existing social structures more adequately. The Hispanic woman, once deemed socially and politically disadvantaged, now reveals through literature, her distinct voice, her thoughts and her stories intended to produce and stimulate a dialogue, inclusive of other socially underestimated groups of women and men in society.

Despite the successful gatherings and organization of international and regional literary congresses devoted to promoting Hispanic women writers, theoretical studies of far-reaching proportions are still absent from the analysis of Latin American women's literature. In an essay appearing in La sartén por el mango (1985) on the status of Spanish

American women writers and feminist literary criticism, Sara Castro-Klarén makes the following observation:

"A good number of texts written by Latin American women now exist, but we still have not elaborated theoretical positions derived from the readings of those texts"(43).

Castro-Klarén wrote her observation in 1985; in 1990 Lucía Guerra-Cunningham continues this thought in her introductory essay to Splintering Darkness:

In the specific case of Latin American literature, there are only partial studies of single authors-isolated critical efforts, which give the false impression that women's text, in general, lack the coherence of historical evolution. In addition, we presently need the systematic effort of a comprehensive study evincing women's literature as both generational and as an ideological corpus, which is undergoing a revolutionary change (Emphasis mine, 8-9).

While feminist criticism, now in the year 2002, is readily available in and outside of Latin American societies, an encompassing, theoretical review of the past forty years' literary corpus still remains to be found.

By seeking alternative, reflexive theoretical discourses based on women's symbolic representation in fiction, new ways of analyzing literary works can emerge and become the yardstick by which critics can contextualize social theories to service literary criticism and feminist thinking.

Theory, then, is conceived as a comprehensive undercurrent that generates thinking and explains the existence of a literary corpus, producing as well a corresponding analytical output.

The basis for establishing the approach to a feminist literary theory is the concept of *willing*; which results from readings in literature and meta-narrative contextual discourses on feminist issues.

The notion of *willing*, which I found in Hannah Arendt's work Willing and Willingness (1974) provides two components of analysis; *experience* and *action* in formulating and constructing an ideological framework inspired by gender-oriented literary works. The Will, as a social proposition, can prove valuable to understanding women's appearance in the public realm of literature.

Shiraz Dossa uses the term "public" in her study The Public Realm and the Public Self (1989) with reference to *willing*, and communicates its place as the sphere where citizens share a wide range of concerns that warrant action on decisions that must be made collectively. Unsurprisingly, *willing* is awarded the highest standard of human excellence in the public realm where its very publicness is its prize.

Women's relationship to the traditional concept of the private realm of the household does not occupy any distinction in *willing* unless the private becomes political and appears in public. Since antiquity, the notion of the private realm has been confined to the space of the home. In this sphere, family life has been linked to privacy and necessity, where biological reproduction has limited and dictated the subordination of women to men. By belonging to the household, women have been excluded from becoming citizens and taking part in the freedom attained only through public acts.

Understanding both the private and the public spheres provide meaningful criticism and the construction of a suitable and just standard of analysis that considers women realistically, within her social and cultural realities, while acknowledging differences among them. Latin American literature on women's issues creates a thematic framework ripe for the development of a social theory on *willing*, enabling works on women to be evaluated fairly. The study examines the viability of *willing* to the literary process by outlining the fundamental character of *willing* and suggests three components that relate to literary analysis and women's ontological, social and national realities. It does not, however, lay claims to or abide by any strict philosophical argumentation or dogmas on the Will. This work makes liberal use of social theory, feminist studies, literary criticism and women's specific use of literature in Hispanic societies.

The works chosen interact thematically with components of *experience* and human *action* proposed by the *willing* concept. In addition, both components, added to three categories of feminist concern: becoming, the public realm and nation and gender, add depth and insight to the literary analysis. The conceptual interaction of *willing* and these topics assist in the interpretation of women's issues, as *willing* fosters new directions in measuring literature's quest to represent women's human condition.

The Will's relevance to feminist literary theory lies in historical *action*, an act imparted by the individual's memory, intellect and lived *experiences*. *Willing as action* pertains to the socio-political realm of history with literature as a social practice.

The interdisciplinary nature and moral value of the aesthetic work allows thematic readings in feminist and social theories. More so, through direct reader

interaction, the literary experience conveys human issues through its mechanism of emotional persuasion. I contend, that, an incursion into the aesthetic process, through social thinking, makes understanding literature less abstract and more pertinent to social issues confronting women in society and culture. As women write, they infuse their works with intellectual and emotional intent, channeling their thoughts and feelings through symbols. Creating new meaning, within national cultures, is the outcome of women writing from their standpoint. Formulating patterns of women's lives, while alluding to and juxtaposing social and historical events, relate literature to the human condition. In this regard, the literariness of social issues present strong impressions on the human psyche and have, no doubt, the capacity to create new thought patterns. It is, perhaps, this humanizing quality of literature its most valuable asset, and its power to convince, its most effective form of educating the public.

Introducing new paradigms generally warrant definitions that facilitate the production of new meaning. For this reason, owing to considerable antagonism and confusion with regard to the term "feminist literature" among women writers in Latin America, it becomes necessary to postulate its meaning suitable to this study.

Henceforth, the use of the terms "feminism", "femininity" and "feminist literature," at times synonymous with gender-oriented works, will adhere to the definitions offered by Pam Morris in 1993, found in her work Literature and Feminism . They have been chosen, amidst many others available, for their association and understanding of literature and social theory. The concept of "feminism" indicates a consciously held ideology:

A political perception based on two fundamental premises: 1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice and 2) that inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender difference (Morris, 1).

The next term, “femininity,” produces confusing notions owing to the development of the female sex, as opposed to the male sex, as socially construed entities. Femininity is, therefore, identified as, “a culturally constructed gender identity communicated to us as a social and subjective sense of self” (2).

From the previous definitions, the phrase, “feminist or gender-oriented literature” refers to literary works, written with political intention, and with the sole purpose of narrating women’s stories, their plight, and issues that have remained unresolved. Feminist themes are, therefore, central to the political agenda and social concerns that prod feminist writers to construct socially responsible works of literature. These texts focus on women’s issues, at times with nation and gender at the center of their identity politics of selfhood.

Writing as Hispanic women, from within their society, communicates a strong, immediate sense of national realities through the feminist notion of *difference*, which accounts for cultural diversity through variables such as class, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation. The subversive character of feminist literature runs contrary to traditional canonical models of high culture, which treat these works as marginal literature.

Authors outlined in the following chapters only represent a selective group of ten, albeit, many other writers who consider women’s issues in their thematics can equally

apply the proposed theory on *willing*. Works considered are: **Balún Canán** (Rosario Castellanos), **Demasiado Amor** (Sara Sefchovich), **La mujer habitada** (Gioconda Belli), **Estación de fiebre** (Ana Istarú), **Yo, Rigoberta Menchú** (Rigoberta Menchú), **Maldito Amor** (Rosario Ferré), **Mi nombre: antielegía familiar** (Excilia Saldaña), **Vaca Sagrada** (Diamela Eltit), **Eva Luna** (Isabel Allende) and **Obras completas** by Alejandra Pizarnik. These writers experiment in all genres and employ pioneering storytelling strategies, that originate from the Hispanic woman's identification with various popular and cultural sources; from romantic and nostalgic lyrics in bolero and tango music, to Hispanic proverbs and national histories. Awareness of issues, pertinent to the development of women and nation derive from these sources, whose thematization can be further enriched through interdisciplinary thinking. The works produced, allow women to become socially accountable and responsible for shaping woman's political appearance and her participation in the public sphere of literature.

Authors selected represent three major ethnic groups of Hispanic women writers: European, Indian and Afro-Caribbean ancestry, two are from Mexico, three from Central America, two from the Caribbean and three from South America. From Mexico come Rosario Castellanos and Sara Sefchovich. Gioconda Belli from Nicaragua, Ana Istarú from Costa Rica and Rigoberta Menchú from Guatemala are representatives of Central America. Two Caribbean authors are Rosario Ferré from Puerto Rico and Excilia Saldaña from Cuba. Isabel Allende and Diamela Eltit, both from Chile and Alejandra Pizarnik from Argentina, represent South America. These authors have been selected based on the following criteria: 1) geopolitical locations, 2) ethnicity (Black, White, Indian), 3) social change as a conscious political objective in their works, and 4) strong feminist concerns

in their writing. The criteria also reflect a wide range of differences among Hispanic women in their culturally and historically specific national boundaries. Their specific works raise awareness of women's search for representation in the realm of the social, that is, the public domain, as notions of the private and the public spheres reveal the pressing role women must assume as citizens.

Writers, spawned by feminist movements in Hispanic America produce national awareness of women's issues through their writing. In order to assess and comprehend the heterogeneous body of literary writers, and the collective action and social change their works can generate, it is peremptory to connect women's literature to social philosophy by explaining *willing* in its active and reflexive modes, and by illustrating how feminist literature can adopt the *willing* principle in thematic discourses.

Creating a common theoretical base through the concept of *willing*, as a point of departure, regional scholarly feminist collaboration can emerge and, perhaps, coalesce into an effective communications network.

As a growing number of Hispanic women become increasingly accountable for their appearance in the public arena of literature, their perception of society, history and culture, and their knowledge and experience in a gendered world adds richness and socio-political thinking to fictional and poetic works. In novels such as Demasiado Amor, Sara Sefchovich confronts national history by structuring the novel as a travelogue in which a prostitute speaks of nation and gender. Diamela Eltit in Vaca sagrada reworks the Pinochet years in Chile by introducing motifs such as menstruation and bleeding organs to create an analogy with marginalia, death, and state corruption that become the work's central theme. In other instances, the radical use of poetry creates public awareness of

other marginalized women in Hispanic societies: Alejandra Pizarnik speaks of the fragmented woman torn between a heterosexual tradition and her true self, the lesbian subject, as Excilia Saldaña gives voice to the culturally displaced black woman in Cuba.

A closer look at women's role, as members of society, can shed light on the need to public power through collective action. As citizens, women share public space through the literary work of art. This is mind; the works produce a public forum in which women can express their common cultural and social interests.

Literature belongs in the public or civic space accessible to a community of writers. It is also a political realm where women become ontological and historical and her public appearance socially valid and legal. The right to action lies in the work she produces; testimony of women's right to public speech and public performance.

The application of *willing* to aesthetic works illustrates that Spanish-American literature is ripe in its portrayal of women with their own experiences and perspectives, as a means of stimulating social change. In this endeavor, literature defines the Hispanic woman both symbolically and politically.

The development of the theory on *willing* presents many challenges. Its broadmindedness encourages the need for multiple dialogues among different Hispanic cultures, and the point of intersection lies in the feminist concerns generated by the works. *Willing* challenges different racial and ethnic communities to join and share their discourses with other women deemed marginal in Hispanic nations. Women's contributions to society and to their historical development have taken place and can no longer be disregarded. The function of *willing* is to raise awareness of women's literary

contributions to society by focusing on discussions that acknowledge their presence in the public realm.

Therefore, it is hypothesized in this dissertation, that a Spanish American feminist literary theory is required to understanding gender-oriented literature, and indispensable in the production of a comprehensive ideological framework for its analysis. Moreover, the concept of *willing* is a viable approach to the formulation of a theory that offers women's experience and action as categories of literary analysis.

Chapter I. The Concept of Willing

To deepen understanding of the specific use of Spanish American women's literature, *willing* can be developed within feminist literary theory enabling discourses that confront women's epistemologies with culture, history and society. I contend that Hannah Arendt's principles of *willing* provide such a basis for the study and analysis of literature through the concepts of *action* and *experience*. Her creative use of *action* can be connected to feminist literary theory by validating the individual's lived experiences in the world, and the action it produces. *Willing* through *experience* and *action* need to interact with other feminist discourses on topics in becoming, the public realm and gender and nation which, I observe are present in the works written by women with a strong social consciousness of women's condition and conditioning in Hispanic societies. These concepts, among many others, make-up a centrality in feminist issues, and with the notions of *experience* and *action* may prove valuable in connecting individual works to the realm of the social.

The second volume of The Life of the Mind¹ contains, perhaps, Hannah Arendt's most significant work, Willing and Willingness. The title draws attention to the dyadic nature of the Will. For a political theorist, such as Arendt, the Will is the most important mental faculty, first in line to memory and intellect. The argument lies in the reflexive position of traditional philosophers, who understand their commitment as interpreters of the theoretical life (*bios theoretikos*). She further believed that the speculative approach of these philosophers prevent them from changing human nature, owing to their interpretation of it. Moreover, she understands that the direct experiences of the Will are founded on *awareness*, *freedom of choice* and *action*. Her method of discourse, strictly

phenomenological, points to the absence of the experiences of the Will from philosophy's theoretical arguments. This bias is attributed, primarily, to the contemplative life espoused by the thinking faculty, and not the life of action (*vita activa*) cherished by the willing ego². In Arendt's deliberations, the Will *is* the love of freedom inspired by the principle of *action*. Suzanne Jacobitti³ summarizes the conflict between thinking and willing in Arendt as follows:

The thinker aims at what is eternal and universal, but *willing* involves the creation of particular projects that may be utterly new inventions (54).

This statement is clearly in line with feminist disregard for Western logocentric tradition, which has excluded women from its method of reasoning. It is, however, particularly refreshing in its approach to *willing* which may hold the key to defining and creating a “new discourse for women” based on the willing faculty and not on the faculty of reason. Arendt's (wo)men of *action* are agents of political freedom, distinguishing the latter from philosophic freedom. Arendtian thinking points to the very nature of change in the world through *action* rather than on its speculation. She quotes Franz Neumann in his introduction to Montesquieu's The Spirit of the Laws to further promote the historical purpose of *willing*:

Philosophic freedom, the freedom of the will, is relevant only to people who live outside political communities, as solitary individuals. Political communities, in which (wo)men become citizens, are produced and preserved by laws, and these laws, made by men, can be very different and can shape various forms of government, all of which in one way or another constrain the free will of their citizens. Still, with the exception of

tyranny, where one arbitrary will rules the lives of all, they nevertheless open up some space of freedom, for action that actually sets the constituted body of citizens in motion...and political freedom can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will (LOM II,123-124).

The dual nature of *willing* is to will or nil. The idea of “awareness” is strategically incorporated as an internal component of Will. Furthermore, she asserts that we choose to act or not to act, once we have acquired knowledge through memory and intellect. In all her writings, *willing* is synonymous with positive *action*. Awareness is given primacy and becomes the willing ego’s experience with the outside and subjective world of the individual through freedom of choice. A sense of power to change events by the sheer act of willing it restores the Will to prominence as a higher order of mental faculty than *reason*. The positive action in Arendt’s dictum “I-will-and-I-can” diminishes this uncertainty when one’s truth is the ultimate quest for change.

For feminist studies, *willing* can offer a way out of the dominant patriarchal matrix, which the philosophic tradition has conferred upon *reason*⁴. The social status of Arendt’s *willing* is a way of developing a political feminist discourse based on collective action and social change.

As a social philosopher concerned with the impact of the Will on political communities, Arendt’s Will is rooted in a historical continuum. She carefully chooses and juxtaposes philosophical speculative argumentation in order to develop and strengthen her own social concept of *willing* as a way of initiating changes in the human condition with regards to social events.

The role of memory and intellect through the individual's experience is contained in *willing* as they prepare *action* through newly obtained knowledge about the world. Before an individual will's action she must have present what Arendt calls "thought-objects". These creations of the mind are gathered through sense perceptions and are stored in memory, to be retrieved later as images and given meaning through the thinking faculty. *Willing* therefore commands both memory and intellect:

The Will tells the memory what to retain and what to forget; it tells the intellect what to choose for its understanding. Memory and intellect are both contemplative, and, as such, passive; it is the Will that makes them function and eventually 'binds them together' (LOM, II, 100).

The idea of the Will as a "spring of action," is borrowed from Kant's premise as a "power of spontaneously beginning a series of successive things or states in the world" (LOM II, 6). Freedom of choice (*liberium arbitrium*) makes the Will free and action possible.

The result, derived from *action*, is the invention of a "new person" through the power of self-determination that Arendt adopts from St. Augustine's reflections on the Will (LOM, II, 91). This new beginning agrees with feminist thinking with regard to concerns on defining "woman," traditionally created as a social construct.

Owing to its autonomy, *willing* warrants responsibility and moral accountability with every action taken. The claim that we are responsible for our actions derives from Duns Scotus "contingency" idea he attaches to freedom (LOM, II, 128). Scotus states that the possibility for something new exists as a result of action taken, although coupled with uneasiness and uncertainty until the project has been completed. *Willing* an act

freely reinforces moral responsibility, i.e. the doer must be made accountable for her actions. As a faculty of “spontaneous beginnings” *willing* embraces the future.

The notion of the “self” begins to emerge, as the doer must be identified by the actions that define her. The concept of identity, of major importance to feminist studies, is closely tied to Arendt’s reflections. Elizabeth Minnich in her study “Hannah Arendt: Thinking as we are” makes the following synopsis of identity in Arendt:

No identity is merely a private matter when what we are (as what is defined by the political realities of our historical era) takes precedence in the world over who we are⁵ (172).

Surprisingly, the inner life of the “self” as opposed to the outer one (construed by society the moment we are conceived) is, according to Arendt, an illusion of what we are. Further to this notion lies the idea that if we do not exist in public, we do not have the right to exist, i.e. one cannot claim an identity if it does not appear and is not accepted in the public realm of political representation.

Willing adheres to building a stronger concept of the “self” based on *experience* and *action*. The undefined “I” becomes problematic if it is not clear who or what the “self” represents. For this reason, an enduring construction of “self” is needed, and to this end, the question of identity must be present in women’s discourse on *willing*.

This brief incursion into the dual nature of the Will through *experience* and *action* can, perhaps, generate a discourse that represents women’s diverse positions and contributions to social thinking. *Willing*, as a criterion of action, has much to offer feminist discourses seeking ways of understanding women’s role in Hispanic societies. For Spanish American feminism, theorizing the concept of *willing* can generate new

discursivity in which Hispanic women construct themselves within their own societies as they begin to incorporate their voices and raise consciousness of their human condition through the public realm of literature.

Although beyond the scope of this work, the two components of *willing*, *experience* and *action* need to be further developed within a Latin American theoretical context. I believe that, at this point, given the enormous task of identifying the concept of *willing* as a possible theoretical construct for literary analysis and its application to ten works, I can begin by introducing three feminist topics on which to expound and explore *willing's* viability in creating a new approach to literature on gender topics. The three categories that constitute Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of literary analysis are: becoming, the public realm and gender and nation.

Women's *experience* in the world as knowledge can situate the socio-historical work intended to explore women's positioning and perspective in culture and national histories. *Willing* does not embrace a universal construct of the Latin American woman but rather introduces a way of creating multiple dialogues and perspectives while parting from a common ground found outside the logo-centric tradition.

Willing also hopes to enrich understanding of the Hispanic woman's presence in literature and society by opening Pandora's box and releasing all social ills that have unjustly and monistically defined and positioned her in traditional patriarchal societies.

The first notion to interact with *willing* is *becoming*, since they both share the topic of identity politics, i.e., the treatment of gender identity constructed socially, historically and philosophically through "logocentrism." The social construction of women by society is perhaps what has prompted feminist philosophers and thinkers such

as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Monique Wittig, among others, to defy traditional concepts of “self.” The subject of women’s *becoming* intersects with *willing*’s own reflections on becoming through experience that construct women.

Notes

¹ Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 2 volumes: Vol 1: Thinking; Vol 2: Willing.

² Shiraz Dossa, The public realm and the public self: The political theory of Hannah Arendt (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989) 45-71. The idea of action or *vita activa* as part of the public realm is central to willing, which, according to Arendt empowers the individual in the political realm and guarantees freedom and a legitimate identity. For this reason, the idea of “becoming” whatever one wishes is only possible in the polis, i.e., in civil society where citizens become ontological in public. The capacity of willing to occupy the political sphere of the social, heralds the importance of the political community over the contemplative and passive life of philosophy.

³ Suzanne Jacobitti, “Hannah Arendt and the Will,” Political Theory ns 16.1 (1988): 53-75.

⁴ One reason, perhaps, why willing can be attractive to feminist discourses lies in its total opposition to logocentrism. Thinkers in the like of Arendt and feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, among others, contend that new discourses on women’s identity cannot be performed against a philosophical tradition that has constructed the “self” universally. Contrary to this notion, willing is perceived as untampered by the “thinking” faculty where reason is prominent. Discourses from within the model of willing is perceived as an alternative faculty where women can speak from their own experiences and action. Willing is considered to be superior to thinking through its action component, which is considered an active and not reflexive way of constructing the self.

⁵ Elizabeth Minnich, “Hannah Arendt: Thinking as we are,” Between Women, eds. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo and Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 171-185.

ChapterII: Three Aspects of Willing

Situating *willing* in the political realm of the social, allows for interaction with feminist concepts in **becoming, the public realm and gender and nation**. These three are chosen due to their constant presence in literary themes by selected authors. Works chosen to exemplify each category are not limited to the analysis of one component; at times they invite all three possibilities. An example lies in the work by Mexican writer Sara Sefchovich, Demasiado Amor which can be analyzed by one or all three applied readings due to its rich and intricate story where becoming, the public realm and gender and nation can be viewed. These multiple possibilities point to the many issues present in the literary work that confront women's role in culture and history, where it becomes virtually impossible to focus on any one single issue. However true this may be, the *willing* theory needs to be tested against concepts central to feminist thinking. Its viability can determine its relevance and assist in deconstructing a male discourse present in traditional literary analysis: reading through *willing* can assist in constructing new approaches to the literary text. A new criterion of analysis is a way of incorporating and making permanent women's perspectives in literary canon-formation.

Willing and Becoming-Woman

The first category to be tested with *willing* is the feminist concept of *becoming-woman* originating from the philosophical project of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze¹ and contested by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray.²

The philosophical schema of *becoming* developed by Deleuze and rivaled by Irigaray can best be described through the feminist notion of *difference*³. Irigaray's position on female *subjectivity*,⁴ a notion committed to the ontological construction of the

self, is inseparable from her concept of “sexual difference.” With the notion of sexual difference, as a way of appropriating the feminist discourse, she attempts to redesign the woman-subject in Western thought according to women’s lived *experiences*, excluded as a criterion from the philosophical tradition.

The univocity of a phal-logocentric tradition has long assimilated woman’s “being” by casting her into individual molds of the universal subject, such as “I,” “man” or “mankind.” Such categories have excluded, silenced or made the gender of “woman” inexistent and alien to the privileges granted to man in culture. A radical transformation of the mental processes, so deeply embedded in patriarchal systems of thought is the task of the feminist philosopher. One such transformation must come through the concept of time.

Julia Kristeva argues that theoretical frameworks inclusive of the process of *becoming* must consider and cover an enormous range of historical time components. It is assumed in feminist thinking that the representation of history, in linear terms, has not adequately addressed female subjectivity, i.e. the way women are judged and perceived throughout history. In “Women’s Time”(1979) Julia Kristeva recognizes the need to link female subjectivity to additional time concepts.⁵ An important point to consider when dealing with the concept of time as a major factor in the construction of the “woman-subject,” lies in its dichotomous existence in Western cultures. Since antiquity, woman has been represented as cyclical time, often synonymous with discontinuous, fragmented, and unconscious time component known as “aion.” Man, on the other, has symbolized the linear and recorded time; *chronos*. This double structure is the site of much contention since Deleuze has taken “*chronos*” to represent man and “*aion*” woman

in his philosophical disquisitions. Irigaray, understanding the tension caused by the speculation of “time” has called upon the concept of “genealogy” whereby women can recover her past through the site of the maternal, outside of man’s discourse.

In the process of “becoming-woman” numerous writers attempt to redraw a foundation of women’s subjectivities. Irigaray and Deleuze understand the need to dissolve the present phallogocentric system of thinking in order that a new female symbolic code may emerge. In his philosophical project, A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze proposes rethinking subjectivity without reference to any one symbolic system. To feminist thinking, it seems problematic to accept this posture given his refusal to acknowledge the importance of “sexual difference” in the creation of a new category of “woman,” one that integrates her internal and external experiences in the process. The new “being,” according to Deleuze, emerges as an outcome of a sexually undifferentiated strategy, one which dismisses Irigaray’s practice of sexual difference as the only means women have in becoming a fixed-female subject with her own identity. Surprisingly, Deleuze’s becoming-woman is not to be understood as a concrete being, i.e., the socially defined woman as we know it, but rather it claims to free her as the subordinate “other” by placing the new person in a dynamic process of multiple becomings; intersecting lines of continuous regeneration, and creation of all potential beings where Deleuze believes insects, molecules and even women can learn to *become*. The problem, as summarized by Rosi Braidotti in her essay, “Of Bugs and Women...”⁶ lies in the exclusion of a becoming-man, which, by its very omission, is not deconstructing phallo-logocentrism only adding to its agenda a new and neutral project where present-day woman cannot construct a political and ontological being since her sex has been erased. Women, as

representation or concrete agents of experience are not considered. Deleuze imagines that the process of decolonizing the thinking subject from the male/female dualism can only be achieved through the disintegration of the sexed identity. If this were accepted, it would mean the dissolution of both the male and the female sex as constructed culturally and sexually. In her defense, Irigaray, offers the incorporation of sexual difference into *becoming*, disavowing the Deleuzian figuration of woman as “bodies-without-organs.” His proposal of a new emerging fluid, rhizomatic or nomadic being is not convincing to Irigaray since it defies and undermines the feminist concern of redefining and empowering the woman subject. Her valid argument rests upon the assumption that “one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted control over” (Braidotti, 118). Surprisingly, both Deleuze and Irigaray indicate their common rejection of the institutionalized and canonized field of philosophy as a repressive force for the concept of *becoming*. The difference lies in Irigaray’s deconstruction of the present system by placing *becoming* and its potentialities in the future. Deleuze prefers to argue on *becoming’s* non-reactive activity by placing it in the present. Inarguably, both are concerned with redefining *becoming* as an activity of thinking, i.e. the logos, whereas the socio-political project of placing *becoming*, a component of *experience*, lies in placing *willing* in the concrete realm of history where women can reclaim selfhood.

One of the most impressive efforts of both philosophers, in terms of redefining *becoming* on a philosophical scale, lies in their desire to disengage it from any biological design. In *becoming*, Deleuze desires the “de-essentiality” of the body, at present constructed socially and symbolically. This desire to restructure *becoming* philosophically and away from the binary opposition of feminine and masculine is

pointing to the need to go beyond the logos matrix and introduce new areas where women can construct themselves through their own *experiences* in the world.

The ambivalence in Deleuze's *becoming* enables Irigaray to ground her theory on women's historical experiences and practices as a mother, wife, child-bearer, etc. Her fears, perhaps, originate from the idea that a project of Deleuze's design only serves to perpetuate and assert, in a different manner, male superiority and power by desexualizing women without deconstructing man.

Braidotti, as a feminist critic of philosophy, emphasizes that Deleuze assumes that both sexes are symmetrical, i.e. equally psychologically and conceptually, and for this reason, can be deconstructed evenly. Irigaray's response to the asymmetrical condition of the subject lies in the subjective grammatical "I." She understands the subject as a process constantly shifting between levels of power and desire and, therefore, between "willful" choices and unconscious drive. Braidotti examines Irigaray's affirmation by reassessing that the notion of "self," "subject" or "entity" that woman undergo is still in progress:

... (self) implies that what sustains the entire process of becoming-subject is the *will* to know, the desire to say, the desire to speak, as a founding primary, vital, necessary, and therefore original desire to *become* (Emphasis mine, Braidotti, 119).

Irigaray further contends in her work that the process of subjectification in becoming-woman has overlapping complex variables to consider: "sexual morphology, sense of genealogy, cultural identity, age, etc. (122). By acknowledging its complexity she is strategically privileging sexual difference as a practice and as a major component

to be reckoned with when drawing the subconscious map of female subjectivity. Upon considering “sexual difference” in the *becoming* issue, women’s lived *experiences*, even if mimetically represented in textual strategies, is an act of subversion of the established social and cultural modes of expressing women’s lives. It is within this discursive strategy of “sexual difference” in *becoming*, which Irigaray believes allows women to decolonize the male imaginary of the embodied female. She declares: “Women must therefore speak the feminine, they must think it, write it, and represent it in their own terms” (122).

The position presented on these two philosophers on the concept of *becoming* has been incorporated in order to create a stronger argument for *willing*. Women’s participation in culture and history needs to be re-evaluated through her own experiences and desires as she becomes accountable for reconstructing the female subject through personal and historical events that shape and redefine her existence.

Becoming is a vital criterion in *willing* as an alternative to the traditionally fixed binary position of male-female constructions in logo-centric western tradition.

As a metaphor of action, *willing* can characterize subjectivity as an ongoing process of *becoming*, incorporating epistemology, lived experiences and conscious and unconscious desires that define women. For this reason, the project of *becoming* must be placed in the future where women can continuously reproduce their new *becomings*, as part of an on-going process of creating new meaning for themselves as ontological beings. If *willing* to know of one’s experiences sustains the process of *becoming*, then *willing* implies change through its political strategy of *action*. I believe that the freedom to act and choose what you want to become allows for constant reinvention of one’s

multiple selves. *Willing* contains an “awareness” component that activates the reflexive nature of thinking, and commands memory and intellect in its need to act. Empowerment embedded in *willing* alludes to its prominence over reason, and its status as an autonomous faculty, grants the *becoming-woman* self-determination and political representation.

As an integral component of *willing*, *becoming* can be further explored through Hispanic feminist writings on subjectivities which in turn can dialogue with identity politics and feminist positions on women’s moral development, among so many other issues of social, philosophical and historical importance to women’s sense of selfhood. Explorations in *becoming* can muster new understanding of the construction of marginal women’s subjective and historical experiences in culture, and a way of portraying desirable traits and contributions to historical thinking. Women’s once fragmented and untold lives can perhaps be reconstructed by embracing socio-philosophical thinking while exploring her symbolic representation in literature. In this regard, literature can be viewed as an agent of social change for women’s ongoing construction of self.

Willing and The Public Realm

Willing has made its greatest contribution in the public realm. Its action-oriented constituents thrive in public acts. Through creative action, women prepare their public appearance collectively. As Hispanic women recreate their social and ontological realities through literature, they evolve as political and historical individuals capable of pressing for social change through a collective presence. Their public existence enables them to confront gender issues and national concerns. Literature’s social sensibility and

emotional persuasiveness becomes, through its didactic mechanism, an agent capable of changing thought patterns through narrative structure and discourse.

The issue of “identity” is present in each of the ten Latin American authors analyzed. The specific reference to identity contains an individual, subjective presence, but also a public one, reflecting culture, gender and historical themes. The *action* component in *willing* provides a framework for analysis and understanding of what each of these authors contribute to the public sphere, as well as to women’s subjective sense of “self.” It is most surprising, that public identity does not refer to an individual presence but to a social plural sense of “who we are and what we do.”⁷ In the public realm’s political theorizing, not to have public appearance is equivalent to being deprived and stripped of reality.

Political issues in literature are advantageous to understanding complexities in human relationships. Literature, as a means of discovering the world and its multiple meanings, is based on human experiences and perspectives⁸. To this end, to understand the literary approach to human phenomena holds the key to interpreting, creatively, notions on the Will and the public realm.

The relationship between literature and the public sphere lies in the body politic. Mel Topf in his analysis, “Hannah Arendt: Literature and the Public Realm” reaffirms the importance of the “polis” or presence of citizens, that make public *action* possible. Only in the public realm is freedom achieved through speech and *action*.

The pervasive credo in feminist politics, “the personal is political” embodies the concept of identity that ties the public to the private. Susan Bickford recognizes in her study “In the Presence of Others: Arendt and Anzaldúa on the Paradox of Public

Appearance” how public power permeates intimate relations and our sense of self, and how the personal too can be interpreted as an act of resistance.

The tension between the private “who we are” and the public “what we are,” corresponds, not to our individual sense of self but, to the social group which we publicly belong.

Identity politics in the public realm also form part of the debates on difference; the meaning and consequences of differences among women, as members of social groups, delineated by gender, race, sexuality, class and ethnicity. This focus on difference makes it necessary to consider the issue of sameness as well. What precisely it means to belong to a particular social group.

Willing allows for identity to appear in public as an active and interactive agent. Arendt believed that the *willing* identity could only thrive in a political community where others judge us. The new “self,” that emerges in public view, does not confer existence on the individual; rather, it assigns sociological categories of the plural self.

The notion of “self” as a defining category of *becoming* a human person with subjective traits is for Arendt and her existential contemporary Sartre,⁹ a social construction; an opinion shared by most intellectuals nowadays. Ironically, for this reason, feminist thinkers are arduously trying to deconstruct the social self in favor of reconstructing an ontological version through newly proposed epistemologies.

Two views shared by existential thinkers derive first, from the writings of Sartre who understood the “self as a centerless fabrication” that, gained definition through social, economic, racial and historical factors. He believed that each person could construct herself at will, since she has no essence, only social experiences that define her.

The second view of the self, as a social construct, sees the emerging social being as a function of the interplay of history, social conditioning, and the chosen behavior of the individual person. It is evident that, for the existentialists, the self is a product of society where “woman” is a social creation without essence, only possessing social experiences that define and judge her.

Although one may choose to disagree with Arendt’s position on the plurality of the public “who,” it is public speech and action, along with historical circumstances that shape the notion of identity. Focusing on the “what” or those qualities that we share with others must not misdirect our intentions of presenting the “who.” We can agree or not that stereotypes, as expressed by Arendt, emphasize the “what-ness” instead of the “who-ness” of selfhood. Public attention to “who” gets heard by the “what” hiding behind the mask of racism, sexism, class discrimination or homosexuality is the way to filter our true voice through existing political labels.

By presenting narratives on women’s lives or perceptions of it, with all their differences, the “what women are” becomes less abstract. In literature, women speak through different platforms: color, ethnicity, class, gender and race. Through these contexts, the woman protagonist learns to think and speak a language that voices and constructs publicly her chosen “self”.

For this reason, if women speak of identity in the public sphere, and do so in large numbers, they give credence to their call for social change as they politicize women’s lives in the process.

What complicates and challenges public appearance in multi-cultural societies, lies in the diverse social conditions and multiple identities present in different cultural

locations. In this regard, Arendt's plural self turns into a richly complex, multiple-voiced consciousness that resists neat categories of marginal groups. The public self, once identified and defined, becomes an active and conscious creative force as it confronts the status quo through its representative thinking. Once identities are given a public arena, they become political and challenge interpretation while assessing its reception. This indicates that the power to reconstruct women's identities can be achieved by using its very "publicness" to redefine them.

The notion of "sisterhood" is often time used as a means of conjuring alliances that can, through conscious efforts, generate action and change. Political alliances, once formed in the public sphere, move to create individual and new group identities. In this respect, a community of writers sharing the same transformative need to claim "publicly" women's experiences, can do so through the production of narratives. These narratives will be noticed, judged, attacked, challenged or accepted once public action has been willed.

The idea of the "public" as the domain of the "vita activa" of *willing* reinforces the creation of the public woman as a political entity. Arendt ardently espoused the idea that citizens *only* exist through the notion of freedom which public space provides through *action*. Her ideas on the *polis* come directly from ancient models created by the Greeks. Although feminists regard the private domain central to women's development, the ancients held the household in contempt as a place of powerlessness. The private realm, proponents of the public realm will argue, robbed women of courage and respect which public representation can restore. Properly understood, the public realm can afford legitimacy and legal representation to the individual who makes her grievances a public

matter. To this end, debates on the public realm possess an irresistible attraction to modern day intellectuals, precisely for the refreshing new ways of viewing the world and politics, and public acceptance of the individual. To understand the public realm, at the center of social theorizing is to grasp the importance of *willing* and the social change that stems from public creative action.

The concept of *willing* is opened to creative interpretations, for there are no exclusive methodical arguments to accept wholeheartedly. This unorthodox approach and uncharacteristically philosophical display of the Will alludes to the potential *willing* offers theoretical thinking.

Literature, as an art form, endures in the public realm, as it exists to humanize the world. For Arendt, Art is a public and political matter, she assures us that: “the common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world”(BPF, 218). ¹¹

Poetry and the novel are equally powerful in their reaction to society and their portrayal of the “victims of necessity,” as well as literary forms that preserve the public memory.

The “public” in *willing* represents history, and *action* belongs to history. What this implies, is that the public nature of *action* makes the doer a political and historical being. By belonging to the public, women assert themselves. Arendt reasons that of the three fundamental activities belonging to the “*vita activa*”; labor, work and *action*,¹² it is *action* that excels as the most important. This stance is understandable given the nature of political theory, in which the public domain is the true existence of the nation-state. Once again, the public becomes the arena where the citizen sheds her natural condition

and seeks meaning and legitimacy. In the public domain, she can “act openly and become a “public woman,” transcending her private self through *action* which casts her as a political and historical being. Once we choose to become public, our subjective selves, through freedom, become a social event. Inner freedom in Arendt originates from *willing* which selects and executes its choice. If one is to seek and assume public appearance, political freedom that comes with it, can pave the way to new beginnings. The idea that *action* is performed by speech also reinforces the notion that freedom and *action* are one. Contrary to this idea is “speechless action” understood through silence or violence. The importance of going “public,” and the *action* which makes it possible, depends greatly on women’s active, public agenda; the social space that guarantees her individuality and legitimates her political identity.

For the reasons considered, to be public entails being courageous; it is the realm that acknowledges the need to be fully human; a place that transcends the “necessity” stigma tied to the private domain.

Willing in Gender and Nation

In the climate of the sixties, the political misnomer of the term “Latin America,” applied to all Hispanic nations from the Caribbean, North, Central and South America, has been disastrous in its erroneous strategy of grouping nations vastly different from each other. Within these complex, multi-cultural nations, in themselves products of past colonial domination, are strong ties to European, African and native indigenous cultures and traditions. The task of defining them has been further aggravated by the misconception that, since Spanish is, in most instances, the official language, and the historical struggle for independence was against the same aggressor, Spain, that these

nations belong to an homogeneous continent and share the same language, culture and economic and political infrastructures. This inaccurate rendering of Latin American nations could not be farther from the truth given the socio-cultural and historical realities that characterize them individually. National identity and pride in citizenships such as Cubans, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Chileans, Argentineans, etc., is at the heart of understanding the production of national literature. The concept of nation predominates in aesthetic works produced by women.

Modern day preoccupation with the concept of “nation” and the construction of “nationhood” is a global concern. For this reason, any theoretical discussion of “willing” in the feminist analysis of Hispanic American literature would be incomprehensible and, to say the least, incomplete without including gender relations to the project of “nation”.

The first task is to define what “nation” signifies in this study, and then what is understood by “gender” in Hispanic societies.

The word “nation” derives from the Latin “natio” which means “of birth” and relates to the Greek word “ethnos” which refers to “a race, a breed”. The etymological definition would be, “a place where a race or a breed is born”. The group which comprises and, eventually constructs a nation not only shares a specific cultural heritage and historical circumstances with other groups, but also a “common destiny” (Otto Bauer, 1940).¹³ Yet, it is only recent that women are being included in analytical discourses surrounding debates on ‘nation’ that add a gender understanding to this notion. By relating gender to nation one can observe how one category constructs the other, as it explains why and how women are oppressed in society (Yuval-Davis, 1999).¹⁴ An additional factor to consider in this analysis is the category of woman and the relationship

that exists between notions of “sex and gender”. Consideration of what gender means in North American feminism and the problematic Spanish translation of “género” is yet, another way of examining the construction of ‘femininity and masculinity’ in national Hispanic discourses. While the topic of woman’s occlusion from national history frequently appears in Hispanic-feminist literature, the identification with ethnic oppressed collectivities also characterizes this artistic sense of writing the “other.” Among the many issues treated in this kind of aesthetic creativity, are three social issues that constantly connect to these works: women, ethnicity and class. Expanding on these social concerns can assist in understanding why Hispanic men are portrayed as being valued more than women in literature. Feminist writers use this dialogic strategy in order to confront the masculine/feminine social construction at the national level.

The inferior symbolic position of women is mainly embedded in the idea of childbearing and rearing, while men, supposedly, set out to create “culture” in their desire to transcend nature. It is equally important to understand the distribution of power in the social system known as “patriarchy” if the desire for social change implied in literary works are to be fully understood. *Willing*, in its act of transforming reality, must be applied to historical and culturally specific social contexts. In this manner, the *willing* discourse, at the national level, targets specific cultural and historical problems. The tendency to generalize women’s social experiences leads to the creation of unjust stereotypes and misconceptions harmful to women’s ideological development and to their symbolic representation in cultural contexts.

The category of “gender” needs to be closely examined in order to fathom the meaning of cultural difference embedded in it. Amy Kaminsky in her work Reading the

Body Politic (1993) observes that North American feminists have given a specific cultural distinction to “gender” so as to differentiate it from the biological “sex.” As she further explores its translation into Spanish she realizes that it becomes untranslatable, for it evokes different ideas: the grammatical category which identifies a word as feminine or masculine (género gramatical); a literary or artistic genre (género literario/artístico); the human race (género humano) and in countries such as Argentina, the word “género” is commonly used to refer to a “cloth”. Although the translation of gender into “género” has been refuted, laughed at and not accepted initially, as a workable translation, it nevertheless continues to be used by Hispanic feminists for the sake of maintaining certain unity in its usage. One of the reasons the term “gender” has resisted Spanish translation lies in that Latin American nations still consider the term natural and not “culturally constructed.”

Yuval-Davis (1999) has identified four nationalist projects in her studies under which gender and “nation” need to be inter-related in order to grasp the implications of gender on national formation discourses. These projects are “national reproduction, national culture and national citizenship as well as national wars”(3). This study makes use of Yuval-Davis’ four national projects to further explore nation and gender through women’s experiences and their contributions to the concept of nation.

By challenging the private/public divide, present-day feminists have brought to public attention the private, domestic realm of the household, and, by doing so; have opened it up to public discourse. As this study’s aim is to promote “willing” as creative action grounded in women’s experiential representation, it cannot dismiss these four categories of “nation”. Their inclusion in feminist literary analysis and discourse on “willing” will

afford depth and equip the reader to handle topics dealing with fictional representation of national realities, ethnicity, woman, class and race.

Knowledge of women's role in the formation and symbolic reproduction of "nation," as an ideological category, can address issues concerning her subjectivities and social construction. Moreover, an inclusive agenda of woman in a nation's biological, cultural and symbolic reproduction forces women's socio-historical realities to surface. In order to examine women's position and "positionings," i.e. the way women have been placed within a national context; an understanding of the private/public dichotomy of civil society is indispensable.

As previously considered, the public sphere is where power, privilege and identity are legitimized. Pateman¹⁵ (1988) explains in her study on the "social contract" that the public cannot be fully understood in the absence of the private sphere. Spanish American nations have been influenced, as have been other western countries, by Hobbes and Rousseau's model of the "social contract," which has laid the foundations for social and political order in the West. Women's exclusion from eighteenth and nineteenth-century theorizing of the social foundations of modern societies is still deeply felt in Hispanic nations where cultural, historical and religious tensions have tightly structured these societies. Upon reading the social contract, one is taken by the masculinist language present and ingrained in western thought. The "contract" emphasizes man and his capacity to "reason," despite his supposedly, aggressive nature suggested by Darwin's theories of natural selection; delegating man to the public sphere of society. Women, on the other hand, excluded from this rationale, classified as scientific, are ideologically tied

to their biological reproductive capacity, which unjustly leaves them close to “nature” and away from the conquering male.

As a mode of discourse, the notion of gender has been linked to social roles that define community members by their sexual and biological differences instead of their economic positions in ethnic and racial collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 9). In this regard, the essentialist category of “woman” is also problematic in its universal usage since its meaning fluctuates when the issue of “difference” among women becomes a feminist concern. The multi-cultural construction of Spanish American nations further heightens the ongoing dilemma when differences among women arise as a result of their membership to ethnic groups or other “national collectivities”. What is designated national collectivities refers to a group or community sharing a common experiential bond; racial, ethnic, religious, economic or social.

In addition, structures of domination must be examined within the different ethnic groups women belong. A better understanding of power structures can articulate more effectively women’s oppression as members of society and culture to which they are born. To raise public consciousness of women’s subjectivity, ideological and cultural construction within different positionings in national collectivities inspires change of harmful, traditional definitions through public debate.

i. National reproduction

The issue of women’s reproductive rights is, nowadays, quite notably on most national agendas. In many instances, laws have been enacted due to the pressing need to establish guidelines and proper services social workers have fought to guarantee women and their children. In Hispanic nations, the direct intervention of social scientists, mainly

women, has been very successful. Women's concerns regarding basic human needs have brought to national attention improper housing and health facilities that less privileged women lack from ethnic and other "national groups." In most instances, the underprivileged have lived forgotten by the central government. These types of discriminatory practices are deeply rooted in cultural prejudices, where highly structured collectivities living in the periphery of a nation, lack political and social representation. Without a political voice, these marginal communities do not possess a legitimate existence as members of society nor achieve a sense of self-governance within their own communities.

Damaging are propagandistic strategies and campaigns to rally national fervor in women by making the patriotic call to increase the population in times of national wars and conflicts. Yuval-Davis realizes that in many instances, living in squalor and in destitution cause men to lose their dignity and force women to bear children. By using violence or rape, these crimes create a sense of "false empowerment" over women, subordinating them, once more, to sexual domination.

The issue of women as a nation's biological reproducers is extremely complex, for there are many factors to consider that go beyond the scope of this study. In Hispanic works where underprivileged women are a main concern, other factors of social, cultural, class, religious control and sex are used to reinforce the message that women's oppression in Hispanic nations still need to be addressed if political changes are to continue. By using the willing discourse, women's lived experiences as represented in literature becomes more visible as it raises national consciousness of social problems women face at different social levels. Privileged women, due to their economic potential,

who are in the best position to write aesthetic works, also assume the responsibility of writing into their texts the lives of those who do not have a public voice, and in so doing, do not separate one oppression from the other.

ii. National Culture

Yuval-Davis observes that the notions of culture and tradition reinforce each other, i.e., the values of one are passed on to the other. This double binding constitutes a strong emotional tie to the concept of “national identity”. The problem arises when members within a national community share different cultures and different traditions from the ones practiced by the predominant group, which a nation recognizes as the benefactors of the legitimate and official cultural heritage. The “myth” of a united, homogeneous nation begins to unravel, as the battleground for identity becomes a political issue. The hegemony of one collectivity over another presents the world with only one mask of “one” race with common characteristics, traditions, customs, religion and language. In this context, the notions of “racism” and “nationalism” form part of one collectivity’s desire to naturalize and exercise their hegemony over others considered “minorities” within national boundaries. The paradox lies, in many instances, when members of the “majority” group are relegated to the role of “minority,” and the consensual “minority” (the privileged group) is the one with direct access to resources and power in both state and civil society.

Culture, therefore, exercises a significant role in the construction of “womanhood” and “manhood” where sexuality and gender power relations are deeply rooted but can be challenged by women’s discourse on nation where willing change begins the process of reconstructing the concept of nation.

iii. National citizenship

When dealing with the topic of citizenship there are many rules and regulations observed and reinforced by a nation. Issues concerning immigration and naturalization processes are complex and vary greatly from one nation to the next.

In Hispanic countries legislation regarding citizenship for women has not been uniformed. In many instances, even women's right to vote has been granted well into the second-half of the twentieth century.

In a multi-cultural context, the definition of citizenship suitable to a discussion on gender and nation must be broad-based due to its highly complex nature and national issues that surround it. Although T.H. Marshall refers to citizenship as "full membership in the community"¹⁶ (1950;1975;1981) it must also include social, political and civil freedoms, privileges and responsibilities for all its citizenry. Citizenship, along with its privileges, once granted, must be exercised, if not, it must be brought back to the public arena. As a public agenda, debates empower women, without it, women from local, ethnic or other collectivities remain powerless, inexistent and silenced.

Although gender has been a major factor in determining citizenship in Spanish American nations, a present day examination of men's privileges in the public domain and women's location in the private sphere can assist in understanding women's cultural construction as passive and that of men's as active members of society.

iv. National conflicts and wars

Particularly pertinent to national events is an examination of conflicts and wars, which have been the direct result of military coups in Latin American societies throughout the twentieth-century. Women have always participated directly or indirectly

in national conflicts, from the wars of Independence to national liberation and guerrilla movements. In many instances, after serving as soldiers, they have not received the legal, social and political benefits bestowed upon their male counterparts. In socialist movements where recruitment has been crucial (a case in mind is the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979), nations have been particularly keen in strategically emphasizing equality among men and women and the responsibility of each member of society in securing the nation's freedoms. Unfortunately, for women, the reality after national victory or defeat has been a different matter. Forgotten by empty political promises, women return home only to find the same prevailing prejudices and worse yet, a collapsed national economy that considers her rights as an issue that can wait and be placed in the back burner. Any feminist discussion on nation must consider the treatment received by women as citizens before, during and after national conflicts.

Through the lived experiences and action in *willing*, issues of gender and nation in literary criticism of feminist works assume a dynamic character. Through literary analysis, the Hispanic woman's representation in national literature creates women characters whose experiences depict ethnic and racial groupings. Social change becomes the catalyst that sets narrative action in motion.

The three aspects of *willing*, identified in this chapter, are but a small undertaking of the need to continue theorizing issues pertinent to Hispanic women's existence and survival in nation. I believe, that explorations in new theoretical approaches to literature can only enhance both the experiences of Latin American women and enlighten male readers and literary critics who still need to fully comprehend social issues confronting women in society and culture.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987). Deleuze's project, which explains the transformation of humans into multiple stages of becomings, has not been fully accepted by feminists due to its abstraction and preoccupation with a neutral, mechanistic approach to the human subject, feminist thinkers view as another way of neutralizing woman. Chapter 1: Introduction: Rhizome, Chapter 6: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs and Chapter 10 on Becoming are perhaps the most important feminist challenges regarding women's becoming as a possible project in constructing the woman subject in philosophy.

² Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) and Speculum of the Other Woman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Both works state Irigaray's reactive position to western philosophical thinking based on the logos. She addresses women's occlusion from the formulation of the rational subject based on the traditional philosopher's inability to understand sexual difference and women's subjectivities as part of ontological speculations.

³ In feminist thinking, the notion of "difference" strives to overcome a gender hierarchy created through language by reclaiming feminine spaces such as national, cultural and racial differences. The shared belief is that difference can break down the relation of center and margin, and in so doing; also dismantle the neat categories of "man" and "woman." It is a way of denaturalizing a monistic approach to authority. See Kathleen M. Kirby, Indifferent Boundaries (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996) 3-5.

⁴ The idea of "subjectivity" stands in contrast with objectivity, that is, what is understood as personal and sentimental as opposed to what is considered universal and rational. This presumed dichotomy has served to reinforce patriarchal thinking whereby women are defined as emotional and affective and men as intellectuals and rational beings. However, since feminism rejects the logos which has enslaved male and female categories of thinking and feeling, feminist thinkers such as Irigaray resort to reclaiming subjectivity or subjectivities as an extension of women's differences. For example, to speak of a black or lesbian subjectivity has enable feminist thinkers to propose a complex paradigm, i.e., a practice from which women speak from all their racial, ethnic and sexual differences, ensuring this way, the production of new meaning. See Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shahat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 416-419.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" The Kristeva Reader ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 187-213.

⁶ Rosi Braidotti, "Of Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman" Engaging with Irigaray Eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 111-137.

⁷ The idea of "who we are" in public refers to a collective identity an individual represents through the public "I." For this very reason, it is not hard to comprehend that Rigoberta Menchu can speak from a plural I, in which her ethnic collectivity is identified through her own sufferings. Once in public view, the "who we are" challenges the "what we are" and makes it a public debate. In so doing, the public realm brings identity and politics together. See Susan Bickford, "In the Presence of Others: Arendt and Anzaldúa on the Paradox of Public Appearance" Feminist Interpretation of Hannah Arendt Ed Bonnie Honig (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1995) 313-325.

⁸ Louise M. Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1995).

⁹ Leslie Rebecca Bloom, Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 64-65.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Viking, 1968) 28.

¹² Shiraz Dossa, The public realm and the public self (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989) 51.

¹³ Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (London: Sage Publications, 1999) 19.

¹⁴ Yuval-Davis, Gender and... 4.

¹⁵ Carol Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

¹⁶ The idea that citizenship guarantees a full membership in the community implies that a woman citizen also has the right to demand all freedoms and privileges in society. This notion is carried throughout all of Marshall's works. See T.H. Marshall Citizenship and Social Class (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); Social Policy in the Twentieth Century (London: Hutchinson, 1975) and The Right to Welfare and Other Essays (London: Heinemann, 1981).

Chapter III: Willing in Spanish American Gender-Oriented Literature

Willing and Feminism

The dual nature of the Will and its relation to philosophic, feminist and social thinking forms the basis for the construction of an interdisciplinary theory grounded in action and on the experiences of the willing subject. The Will, as a socio-philosophical project, situates the act of “willing” in social praxis. Moreover, the geographical location of Latin American nations, and their multi-cultural and poly-ethnic societies have generated considerable concern over the issue of gender. Due to the vast, cultural and historical differences in national literatures, Hispanic authors have created the need for feminist discourses, a literature both relevant and specific to women’s unique experiential representation in society. The theory of *willing* has risen, therefore, from the socio-political consciousness generated by feminist literature produced in Spanish American countries.

A theory, approached through *willing*, shared and developed by Hispanic literary critics can serve a number of different functions. Such a theory can be used to consider the complementary differences among Hispanic women and reinforce pressure, both symbolic and political; by opposing social and cultural injustices women and ethnic groups have been made to endure. Through women’s literary contributions, *willing* can be used to celebrate the rich cultural tapestry and complexities of each nation. In addition, such common interdisciplinary thinking can help to create a subtext of feminist solidarity from one nation to the next, while at the same time, allowing common interests of each to bolster national pride and recognition of aesthetic writers. A theory on willing can,

perhaps, maintain and strengthen a flow of information that brings together both symbolic and political discourses on women's socio-historical issues.

A literary feminist theory intends to reflect and explain social practices that affect women and, in doing so, expresses its own capacity to link concerns to their realities. Such a theory, intended to reflect Hispanic social realities on gender, must also encompass an understanding of women's social movements throughout Latin America. These movements have served to raise public awareness of gender abuses at the local, institutional and government levels. They have been instrumental at obtaining financial and political backing from local, regional and international organizations in support of struggling grassroots initiatives that pressure national governments to act on promoting women's welfare and guarantee their legal rights.

Feminism in the Hispanic regions does not share the same origins, historical development or immediate objectives as those from North America and Europe. Although Euro-centric feminist concepts have been applied and molded by Hispanic feminists to fit and reflect the social reality of each nation, it is impractical, incorrect and premature, to speak, at this time, of a Hispanic feminist movement in the entire region. The realization, however, that social movements have resulted from political action set in motion by women's movements helps to clarify "willing's" role in these activities. In this context the awareness of feminism has been the backbone in strengthening grassroots organizations and in defending women's rights, mainly those of Indian and African collectivities.

Gender-oriented literature recognizes women's will to change and be considered active citizens. The creation of an alternative reality to the present lies in the ability of

narratives to confront political issues. The postmodern condition of contemporary literature is highly observed in most literary genres: the historical novel, the testimonial, essays, poetry, short stories and theatrical representations. Understanding women's social realities is the first step to formulating analytical discourses which not only adhere to literary standards of analysis but to extra-literary discussions of a philosophical nature and to social justice. The convergence of aesthetic works in opposing and criticizing reality, I believe, has the capacity to influence it and contribute to change.

The relation of feminism to each Hispanic nation is different. For this reason, one cannot compare feminism in Argentina to that of El Salvador. Through *willing* one can examine historical and socio-cultural factors that have warranted feminist consciousness in changing women's reality.

The Need for Gender Strategies

Three vulnerable groups of women are still underrepresented in Hispanic literature: Indian women, Afro-Hispanic women and lesbians. The presence of these three groups of Hispanic women serves to indicate the need to develop strategies in gender discourses that address differences in sexual orientation and in all ethnic and racial diversity that is Latin America. Gender issues pertinent to all women in Latin American societies can be observed from the struggle of these groups.

In countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, where the indigenous population has endured much poverty and discrimination, the issue of gender makes comprehensible women's abuses. In the study provided by a local women's workshop in Mexico, "Los derechos de las mujeres en nuestras costumbres y tradiciones"¹ different ethnic Indian groups set in motion the process of raising women's

consciousness, and that of society, as to the violence and mistreatment Indian women endure at the hands of local authorities and of men in their own ethnic collectivity. Customs and traditions are usually the main source of deeply embedded abuses and codes of conduct women have had to accept. Rising from women's workshops are a list of abuses Indian women have had to bear at the will of their husbands, sons, fathers and by other women who have followed patriarchal traditions. In the same workshop, the first step was to confront the education women received that subordinated them to men, who in turn belong to a marginal group in society:

“ We have been taught from the time we are small to obey, not to protest, to be silent, to endure, not to speak up; not to participate”(7).

The function of these workshops lies in their direct involvement in drawing a declaration of rights based on Indian women's *experiences*. The *action* taken, at times painstakingly, in implementing structures give these organizations political status and a voice to demand social and legal changes in the system. Women's *experiences* and the will to act in order to improve their lots make understanding feminism more viable. The need to feel empowered by being fully informed comes through the education received from these workshops. In the case of Hispanic Indian women, one of the main frustrations comes from the treatment received by others outside their collectivity. The public's ignorance as to ethnic cultures, leads to prejudices and mistreatment. In hospitals Indian women are laughed at, treated as children and made to wait long periods of time for health services. The language barrier between their native tongue and Spanish is the direct cause of much misunderstanding and contretemps. For this reason, they also demand translators. Another major abuse is domestic violence and the lack of a legal

system to protect women. Above all, gender problems reflect a lack of a basic human right such as education.

Another group of women underrepresented in international conferences organized under the designation of a Latin American feminist movement are Afro-Hispanic women.² These conferences, black feminists argue, contribute to theoretical discourses on women's equality but barely satisfy the central issue of "difference". General complaints center on the "universal use of gender" when referring to Latin American feminism that exclude profound differences among women: race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, among others. The lack of proper representation for black women has given rise to an Hispanic Afro-centric feminism capable of constructing discourses that explain the construction and interconnection of Hispanic women's identities in political and epistemological terms. By including pluralism and diversity in their agendas, black feminists have confronted the issue of ethnicity and race since 1983. As a category of analysis, race and ethnicity need to be incorporated in agendas that can justly represent women of different racial backgrounds. Since each nation is different, the tendency is to center on feminist concerns that only pertain to that nation. The general attitude has been to think "those problems are not ours, since we have different issues of gender to address". Yet, one cannot discuss equality for women without realizing what the term "feminism" means to women of different groupings. The ethnic-racial identity component needs to be addressed and included in all international conferences on Hispanic feminism.

In her essay, "The ethnic-racial world inside Latin American feminism" Sergia Galván, a Dominican member of the Women's Identity Movement, criticizes how issues

involving women of Indian and black ancestry have been considered in Hispanic feminist conferences a private matter marked by a “biological or cultural determinism” (34) which creates a position of subordination to the generic “Latin American identity” feminists assume. Racial and ethnic discrimination, as in other social movements, become the basis from which women’s movements are constructed. Galván argues that Latin American feminism needs to confront the issue of race and ethnicity and not ignore it to the point of silence or exclusion. The multi-cultural and poly-ethnic make-up of Hispanic nations is complex and makes international women’s conferences highly political, and discussions on nation and gender highly inflammatory. For this reason, indigenous and Afro-Hispanic movements at the national or interregional level have developed.

Modeled after the North American paradigm of Afro-centrism, black feminists in Latin America have been able to create visibility for their groups by better organizing their agendas, with their interests at heart. Yet, the outcome of feminist conferences like the one held in Argentina in 1990, “The Fifth Feminist Encounter in Argentina” has been used to create and stimulate camaraderie among different ethnic and racial groups. This positive response has lead to another conference held in the Dominican Republic in 1992, “The First Encounter of Latin America and the Caribbean” where 350 women of color from 32 countries met to consider topics relevant to black feminists. The topics considered were: “black identity, racism, violence, health, international cooperation, feminism, communication, afrocentrism, etc”(Galván, 36).

Mechanisms of cooperation and coordination have been possible through networks of Afro-Caribbean women and Afro-Latin American groups. As these social

movements suggest, race and ethnicity become central issues when applied to gender in a region where diversity and plurality is a main concern.

A third group of women who, perhaps, have felt the most silence and omission in Hispanic cultures, are lesbians. The topic of sexual difference is not openly discussed in Spanish American countries where the dominant religion is Catholicism. Women's sexuality repressed through religious control, culture and a colonialist past, poses a big challenge to feminism.

In her study, "On Silence and Omissions: Being Lesbian in Latin America" Fefa Vila Nuñez,³ a sociologist and lesbian rights activist recalls the total repression and persecution of homosexuals under military rule. While lesbians and gays celebrated sexual difference in North America and Europe in the seventies, South America was going through a period of state repression. Although acceptance of homosexuality has found a moderate public platform, still legal and social homophobia persists. The topic of sexual difference is still repressed in Spanish American countries, and most writers have avoided creating literary works that may never see the light of publication. For this and many more reasons, lesbian writers have had to go abroad to publish, and many have done so in North America⁴ and Europe.

In major cities, in countries such as Puerto Rico, Mexico and Argentina, where the middle class is evidence of a certain degree of industrial development, the gay and lesbian communities have created organizations to fight against homosexual oppression. Many movements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean exist and continue their struggle to press for lesbian and gay rights.

As previously observed, women's social movements have been crucial to the development of feminism in Latin America. Women have taken direct participation in social action in order to ensure political and legal rights. Their direct involvement is causing ideological changes and creating new thought patterns at the collective and national levels. Women's social movements are replacing the negative image women have long tolerated culturally with one that is active, strong, resolute and empowering.

An incursion into the existence of social movements paves the way to the need that exists for a comprehensive theoretical review that focuses these collectivities in society and literature.

Willing and Literary Feminism

A feminist literary theory based on *willing* explores women's social and historical experiences in Hispanic cultures. *Willing* stimulates different readings of women and their literary constructions. Its comprehensive scope invites the critic to read as a "political woman", i.e. to understand gender as a social construction, and in racial and ethnic groupings. The application of *willing* to literary texts assists the reader in creating more critical analysis of women as complex human beings in search of definition and recognition. What makes this theory perhaps unique is its origin. It wasn't conceived or selected from one particular theory found in a specific discipline, and then applied to literary texts. Rather, the approach has been the contrary; the readings of feminist literary works from different geo-political regions indicate the need for its existence. Even with an outpour of critical literary analysis on gender issues by Hispanic critics, still no comprehensive theoretical review of gender-oriented works exist. Yet, the publication of anthologies on Latin American women's writing, in the United States alone, is further

evidence that enormous interests exist on recognizing the importance of Hispanic women's literary contributions. The challenge for critics lies in discovering trends in thematic development and narrative strategies that make women's writing in Spanish America unique in its cultural appropriation of the text.

Hispanic women are writing now, more than ever, and sharing gender concerns in multiple manifestations and producing public awareness of women's presence in contemporary literature.

The appearance of the Will in its active and reflexive mode is present in diverse aesthetic works of feminist concerns. The will to change social structures and be accountable is strong among works that display gender issues. The feminist technique of consciousness-raising creates not only an awakening through recognizable patterns of behavior and women's shared *experiences*, but participates in creating a sense of *action* within the text. The work itself, as a social product, functions as an instrument of thought capable of instilling change and stimulating public opinion through its hyper-textual mechanism.

I contend, that *willing* assists feminist literary discourses through meta-textual critical thinking. The viability of a *willing* theory lies in its interdisciplinary scope that invites feminist issues to interact with women's symbolic representations and socio-political praxis. The participation of the Will in social practice becomes a tool capable of situating a feminist discourse within a socio-historical context.

The feminist challenge, to writers of aesthetic works within national boundaries, is multifold. Through their own experiences in Hispanic cultures women are confronting stigmas and voicing unjust treatment of other women from different ethnic collectivities.

With a theory on *willing*, the need to understand women's social realities can enlighten the reader, and the literary critic, to meet the challenges Hispanic activists and feminist writers are setting at the social and literary levels of representation.

Willing and Narrative Creative Action

Storytelling, as a human activity, is everywhere. It is also a cognitive and fundamental instrument of power and control.⁵ With the literary capacity inherent in human cognition, the reader can construct meaning by juxtaposing and combining the story told with new projections. It is generally assumed that literary narratives maintain the status quo of society and institutions by perpetuating existing mores and myths. The contrary can also be postulated: the literary work may be a liberating, progressive and disruptive force to the existing social order. The oral and written forms of narrative operate through individual and collective memory. It is perhaps, the narrative faculty in human mental processes that enable the facile construction and reconstruction of the individual in relation to her world. Through imagining narrative, women are able to construct, project, plan and predict the future (Turner, 1996). Literature transmits the desire for change by continuously blending one story with another close to human experience and understanding of the world. Historical memory, in particular, best relates social and political events through narration.

The willing factor in narrative action is a substantive force that prompts cognition to interact in its fullest potential. Stories narrate action. As an instrument of control, the narrative's ability to create new power by counteracting an existing one, does so, by questioning the legitimacy of the power structures it wishes to displace. The story becomes a testing ground, appropriating the existing power with newly perceived human

needs that eventually replace the established with the new. As a plan of action, the narrative becomes the blueprint for laying new foundations of human behavior. An untold story has the advantage of relating narratives never before conceived.⁶ Women's particular use of language, their different images of perception, different narrative techniques and specific gender oriented themes construct a reality she wishes to procure. *Willing* change through creative action is perhaps another way of reliving the story of Shaharazad. The continuous confabulation of tales of The Thousand and One Nights offers substantial insights into the inner workings of a story. By perceiving the story as an act of executing a plan, the storyteller narrates the plan of action that conceives and anticipates a future reaction.

Willing in Latin American Feminist Literature

Latin American feminist literature has transcended cultural norms by enriching and constructing new traditions where conceived stories no longer omit or mute women's different viewpoints or those of long silenced ethnic groups. Recounting stories of sexual and racial abuse, for example, is a consciousness-raising strategy that brings the public in contact with prevalent social problems. For this reason alone, feminist literature, written on a large-scale, is empowering to women as it works to diminish and discourage social practices both damaging to the well being of a nation and to its women members.

The woman-centered form of narrating is, perhaps, the feminist work's most notable contribution to creative action. For Ross Chambers⁷ (1984) the act of narrating is an instrument of self-assertion that converts historical weakness (for those who never possessed power) into discursive strength. In feminist narrative, the result of sequential story-telling assists in the creation of patterns that trace the thematic and structural

development of related stories, further strengthening solidarity, feminist ideology and political aims for women.

A feminist work's ability for creative action must first address existing and oppressive power relations in society and culture, primarily that of patriarchy. This existing form of gender control is the first step in recognizing one group's dominance over the other. In the case of gender-oriented literature, the value of creative action lies in its insistence on denouncing the harmful effects of society and culture on women's development. Creative action correlates to willed *action* that accounts for the work's impact on the reader and its didactic concern in changing collective thinking on the written subject. Collective power in creative action can demonstrate the strength mustered by a community of creative feminist writers sharing common goals. By acting in concert, this creative ability to will change through writing, serves to stimulate changes in social thinking. Toril Moi⁸ (1986) emphasizes feminism's goal in rejecting current power structures and by doing so, asserts that feminist consciousness transforms the very concept of power itself.

When analyzing literature, narrative creative action can be understood at two levels of textual interaction: the contextual and hypertextual environment of the work. In the first instance, contextualizing existing problems women face in society and culture, makes the aesthetic work more responsive to human needs and tribulations. Although literature does not propose to find solutions to problems it fictionalizes, it nevertheless, manipulates the individual reader through its persuasive and emotional mechanisms.⁹ In the second illustration, the historical and cultural codes of reference, present at the time of the work's publication, situates the narrative within human events and existing social

structures. Through this prism of multiple readings, the reader needs to approach the literary work. Feminist texts construct, often time, multiple meanings, sometimes fragmented, other times in palimpsest structures through narratives that correspond to untold stories. By subverting traditional literary standards, patriarchal modes of thinking are questioned and challenged. Writers and their women protagonists, introduce feminine perspectives and preferences into the structural design of the work. The line of argument is now perceived within new modes of writing by which women's lived experiences are heightened. An example lies in the doll motifs in Rosario Ferré's stories where she constructs women's lives in traditional Puerto Rican culture to recount their stifling, muffled and controlled existence; while the melodramatic rhythm of the Latin American bolero intensifies the drama from the outset of the novel, Maldito Amor. The kitsch of pop culture as seen in romantic paperback "novelas" or the sweeping effects of romantic Hollywood films on Latin American women's lives do not escape the protagonists in Isabel Allende's Eva Luna or Gioconda Belli's La mujer habitada. The creative action in these works and others of feminist construction create parallel worlds between the work and women's actual lives.

History and Narrative Action

The relationship between literature and history is a close one. The narrative base in both of these fields of human activity allows fiction to incorporate historical knowledge into literary production.

The proximity of fiction to history allows for constant interaction, resulting, at times, in a combination. Narratives, in Latin American nations have always been regarded as complementary sources to understanding national events. In countries where

the official history has been distorted or made unavailable, works of fiction have been the source of filling gaps. In his work, Nation and Narration (1993), Homi Bhaba refers to the foundational novels in Latin America as an outgrowth of resistance and disdain for the past, given its Spanish colonial rule. He further observes that romance novels of the nineteenth-century acted as a means of constructing national identity since official documents contradicted and distorted events. Doris Sommers, in her article “Irrestible romance: the foundational fictions of Latin America,” included in Bhabha’s text, stresses the extra-literary value of Latin American historical and romantic novels. She further points to the political and social sub-themes present in the works that nineteenth-century politicians used to their advantage in swaying public opinions. In the twentieth-century, postmodern fiction tends to incorporate technical innovations with political commitments. Stories, told by a woman’s perspective anticipate conscious future reactions. Whichever theme she chooses to elaborate, and however she chooses to construct her story, contributes to social and political change. In the book The Power of the Story (1994) Michael Hanne postulates that the interaction of literature with other metanarratives, primarily history, political texts, etc, complements the socio-political action the work receives as impetus. In the novel by Sara Sefchovitch, Demasiado Amor, art and ideology become inseparable. The swirling travelogue style of narrating the Mexican geography, history and culture, seen through the eyes of a prostitute, turns into a rich tapestry of political struggle both at the national and personal level of identity.

Storytelling, whether in prose or poetry recount stories of human *experience*. In and outside of literature, stories serve to reflect on politics with its ability to ground representation found in the world of *experiences*. Hannah Arendt herself used storytelling

techniques in her political essays in order to enhance the cognitive, ethical and political values of her conceptual thinking. The public function of storytelling is to provide the reader with historical experiences that merit attention to rethinking the future. Experience and memory as main cognitive agents permeate the structure of the story with the power to offer critical perspectives of modern living. Narratives can, therefore, play a unique role in countering prevalent ideologies.

Literary narratives also communicate patterns of human action by considering alternatives to harmful social behavior. The opposite effect is also worth noting: the lack of action by a victimized protagonist is symbolic of a devastating and unchanged future. The liberating effect of creative action cannot come with final solutions only prescriptive ones based on extraliterary knowledge of the world.

Feminist literature weaves through storytelling the Hispanic woman's *experience* in culture, family, a nation's history and her desire to be accountable in shaping a more equitable society. Imagining new realities in fiction forms mental patterns that connect the present to future events.

The past forty-years of women writing literature in Hispanic countries has introduced marked changes in social thinking ushered in through feminism. Women's once untold stories become central to confronting stigmas women have endured under patriarchal western cultures. By disclosing violence against prostitutes, mistresses or other women deemed "loose" by men in Mexican culture, Debra Castillo addresses gender boundaries assigned to women in national cultures. In her study, Easy Women (1998) the transgression of these boundaries is the main focus to understanding how society has deeply ingrained these stigmas. Female behavior and its cultural coding is the

point of departure for social action and a topic, which Sara Sefchovitch develops in her novel, Demasiado Amor.

The concern over women's literary history in Latin America accounts for the need to establish a literary tradition that has forgotten women's contributions. The nineteenth-century Hispanic wars of Independence is a period of literary effervescence in which women from neighboring South American countries voiced their political realities. The desire of many Argentine women writers of the twentieth-century, in establishing a link with the past, is the primary concern of historical novels written on exceptional women who influenced directly nation building. In rewriting the past, feminist narratives intend to reconstruct a historical perspective lost to patriarchal dominance whose presence has dictated its own version of nation.

Willing change is imbedded in literary works feminist writers set in motion to reform past and present gender inequities. Challenging the established literary canon is yet, another aspect of willing change through creative action. In this regard, the value of literature by women derives primarily from the incessant preoccupation displayed by feminist literary criticism. It's multifold task from establishing new standards of analysis to continuously appraising feminist literary works, past and present, is creative action at its best in changing social thinking on writing by women. As a practice, rising from the social feminist movements of the sixties, feminist literary criticism has taken a creative and political stance in challenging claims exercised and reinforced by the traditional canon on what it considers "great works of literature to be." By questioning and opposing ill-conceived perceptions of women's writing as "minor literature,"¹⁰ Spanish American feminist criticism has brought new perspectives to literary studies. In its unyielding

conviction to changing literary institutions, such as criticism, book reviews, publishing and literary studies in academia, the feminist literary critic insists on changing this predominant male-oriented enterprise.

In chapter two of Literature and Feminism Pam Morris develops and illustrates how changing male-oriented aesthetic judgments, long embedded in the literary canon, can alleviate women writing literature from gender blindness. Altering male criticism to include women-oriented approaches to literary analysis is to press for changes. By challenging the canon, feminist literary critics raise problems women writers and their works confront. Male critics who do not readily consider works by women continue to reinforce dominance over the canon. Even worse, Morris observes, is the treatment literary works by women receive as if they were a biological extension of the writer. The answer is indubitably not to create a double standard by which to critique separately books written by men or women, but to formulate new standards of analysis that do not ignore women's achievements. To regard writing on women's issues as a special case is not only detrimental to women's contributions, but a sure way of marginalizing creative writing. The need to define and develop a criteria based on a gender-free aesthetic is to allow creative freedom on the basis of merit and not gender. To insist on more representation of women in anthologies and on revising critical works on canon forming is only two directions in curbing male literary dominance. Unfortunately, since a just standard of analyzing women's literature does not exist, women's use of non-canonical literary techniques and discourses go unexamined although these works exist to challenge traditional standards of analyzing works of art.

Feminist literary critics understand their task is to identify ways in which writers encode women's experiences different from those of men, and judge the literary text on this basis. A versed critic in feminist topics who can impart judiciously her/his analysis on the literary work must recognize women-centered approaches to literary criticism. Willing change in creative action is not only the task of Latin American women writers and feminist literary critics, but also a literary approach that needs to be extended and incorporated into all areas of learning and publishing.

This first half of the study on *willing* introduced the concept, its origins, its components and viability, as a possible comprehensive theoretical construct, and as such, has been proposed to further stimulate women-centered discourses found in contemporary gender-oriented literature from the Americas.

The first initial step has been, therefore, to present a theoretical discourse that can engage many others into a central paradigm. The second part is *willing's* application to gender-oriented works.

Notes

¹ "Mujeres indias: vida, derechos y tradición" Africa América Latina 19 (1995): 7-13. The workshop, "Los derechos de las mujeres en nuestras costumbres y tradiciones" was held in Chiapas in May 1994 and was organized to raise the consciousness of local women from ethnic Indian collectivities as to their rights in the community both at the local and national levels.

² In 1981 an international conference called "The First Encounter of Latin American and Caribbean Feminists" brought ethnic and racial concerns to a feminist forum, which had never considered afro-centric issues. Many more have followed since then. See Sergia Galván, "El mundo étnico-racial dentro del feminismo latinoamericano" Africa América Latina... 33.

³ Fefa Vila Núñez, "Sobre silencios y omisiones: Siendo lesbiana en América Latina" Africa América Latina... 61-65.

⁴ Although some Hispanic nations participate in Lesbian and Gay movements, homosexuality continues to be a non-topic. Writers who have attempted to publish works dealing with lesbian topics are usually omitted through silence. In many instances, Latin American lesbian writers need to leave their countries and publish in the U.S. or Europe.

⁵ Mark Turner, The Literary Mind (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996). By taking the Shahrazad story, Turner explores the many ways narratives manipulate the reader through literary inventions that form mental patterns with the reader's knowledge of the world.

⁶ Michael Hanne, The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1994). Hanne believes that storytelling, in its social transmission of culture, perpetuates established mores, and has the power to create new understanding through the story of the "other."

⁷ Ross Chambers, Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction (Minneapolis: Manchester and Minneapolis University Presses, 1984) 74.

⁸ Toril Moi, Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (New York: Routledge, 1985).

⁹ The idea of literature's emotional mechanism is shared by thinkers who believe in the literary work's power to sway opinions: Chambers (1984); Hanne (1994); Rosenblatt (1965:1995); Turner (1996).

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). The idea of a minor literature as one constructed by a minority within a major language derives from Kafka's own problems when writing his works. In the case of women's writing, labeled minor literature, by a traditional canon, shows the character of rebellion in works that go against the grain of a codified tradition by analyzing literature in patriarchal societies. Deterritorialization is the first step in deconstructing a language, albeit literary, that has not considered women's strategies in its design.

Chapter IV: *Becoming* in the Works of Rosario Castellanos, Sara Sefchovich, Gioconda Belli, Alejandra Pizarnik and Excilia Saldaña

The concept of *willing* presupposes a bipartite structure: 1) the individual's lived experiences in the world and 2) the action taken in changing her human condition. Experience and action are the essential constituents that determine a subject's legitimate existence in society, culture and history. Along the same lines, women's literary narratives, as social and cultural products, relate women's condition and conditioning throughout history. The theoretical application of *willing*, through the concepts of experience and action, assists to situate women's story and her evolution in a larger socio-historical context.

Willing's components of experience and action become pivotal to understanding women's participation and formation of socio-cultural and historical thinking. By opening up to discourses that connect women to issues and concerns that enrich and broaden social understanding, women effect historical changes. *Willing* thus, contributes to women's evolution and participation in social development by introducing and intersecting with other components that strengthen and initiate new discourses: *Becoming*, *The Public and the Private Realm*, and issues of Gender and Nation. The combination of willing with these components generates feminist and social discourses that enrich the analysis of gender-oriented narratives. These works are specifically approached from a woman's viewpoint, making her story political within a specific socio-cultural context. This chapter focuses on *willing's* first component of *becoming*. As an analytical category, *becoming* introduces themes that Spanish American women writers develop in their literary works. By re-telling women's story within a specific

socio-historical context, Latin American writers discourse, dictated by their own experiences, as they suggest new directions in theoretical thinking.

These directions can project new areas of literary analysis by connecting aesthetic works to issues concerning women's development. The component of *becoming* can be approached from different angles such as: national and gender identity; topics of national economy and prostitution; the social construction of self; women's subjectivity and cultural hybridity. Among many possible works, the following have been chosen to exemplify these new directions: Balún Canán (Rosario Castellanos); Demasiado Amor (Sara Seftchovich); La mujer habitada (Gioconda Belli); Obras completas (Alejandra Pizarnik) and "Mi nombre: antielegía familiar" (Excilia Saldaña).

Part 1. - *Becoming* in Bakún Canán by Rosario Castellanos

Becoming is an empowering and defining act. As such, it warrants a multivalent construction¹ of the female subject. To *become* means to connect at different levels of human development with new information, vital to understanding and to constructing and defining change in the individual. Literary women *become* as they narrate about themselves and others through storytelling, a creative and engaging activity that interprets human behavior and desires. The narrative used is the mechanism by which the becoming-woman² of literature unfolds in myriad possibilities, imparting new epistemology regarding her development in culture and history³. Stories of *becoming* abound in contemporary Hispanic literature; examples lie within the ten works selected in this study⁴. Through literary writing, the woman narrator can reconstruct her past, interpret the present and project the future, as she builds it through newly found subjectivities, understood as multiple ways of constructing herself as she broadens her vision of the world. The *becoming* process begins when the narrator interprets the world according to women's individual experiences and collective knowledge she shares with members of society⁵.

Certain literature produced by women has been identified as "gendered ". I use this label to point to the writer's assumed political stance on issues affecting women's condition, a work that marks the topic of *becoming* as the objective of the story.

Becoming comes with the awareness of change we need to produce within ourselves, in relation to the outside world of events. The action of willing imparts consciousness-raising as subjective experiences of "who we are" contrasts with the "what we are" dictated by outside events and public consensus⁶. Awareness is the first step in

becoming, the second, *action* that completes the cycle of transformation; if women choose to act or not to, the action produced can have an impact on her construction or deconstruction of the subjective developing self.

In the analysis of Rosario Castellanos' novel Balún Canán (1957) the concept of becoming explores the issue of identity, first through consciousness and ultimately through action.

When women act publicly they define their existence by altering their status in the private realm of the home. To break away from previously defined modes of existing implies changing women's fixed social construction. Gender consciousness, embedded in the dialogic narrative structure of the literary work, paves the way Hispanic women participate in the process of "self-definition". Within this context, *becoming* is a topic embracing identity: personal and national, historical and cultural, subjective and relational. The topicality of becoming is at the center of Hispanic writing where the boundaries of the private and the public construction of the self begin to fuse.

Pluri-ethnic nations such as Mexico, where government policies of European structures have had longstanding conflicts with native Indian interest groups, are often time the site of a Diaspora. Living in the periphery of one's own nation does not erase the identity of national ethnic groups who struggle to maintain ancestral languages and cultures in spite of centuries of Hispanic colonialism. Women authors within these nations address, alongside feminism, the marginality women and ethnic groups have endured under the categories of class, race and sexuality.

Through experimentation with concepts such as *becoming*, Castellano's work opens up and connects to infinite possibilities of expression and interdisciplinary

knowledge and discourses (from feminist theories, sociology, philosophy and political theory) that enrich literary exploration. As Hispanic women participate in the process of self-definition, they reterritorialize literary writing, and do so, through the aesthetic work's capacity to connect and multiply itself through hypertextual readings, for example, the way the literary work contextualizes feminist theories enriches and deepens appreciation of thematic development. *Becoming* is yet, another way of inserting gender issues within the work's social concerns.

Willing to *become*, as a category of analysis in Balún Canán is manifested through the portrayal of a ladina girl (Spanish and Indian ancestry) who is also the narrator of the story. Other female characters, belonging to indigenous groups, also attest to the need for change in women's cultural and social conditioning⁷. The desire to transgress assigned destinies and unchanging subaltern roles in a Hispanic patriarchal society and within traditional ethnic groups is met with defiance and punishment.

The novel echoes the will to *become* in a twofold analysis: through the girl-narrator's memory and through her will to act and produce change by writing herself in the dominant male discourse. The construction of a "new woman," liberated from existing cultural and socio-historical constraints is produced through a feminist rendering of *becoming* that originates from women's lived experiences and the changes she produces through the public act of writing. *Becoming* is an act of survival. The new woman achieves this status when she transgresses cultural stereotypes, stigmas and labels derived from existing power structures.

In Mexico, a multi-cultural nation, the hybridity caused by strong historical and cultural uprooting, is perhaps, the discursive strength from which Latin American women

can reconstruct the “self” within historically determined geopolitical sites. Three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule (16th–19th century) has resulted in Mexico’s complex evolution that attests to its richly diverse ethnic identity based on historical and cultural heterogeneity.

One way of emphasizing the discourse of women’s *becoming* in Balún Canán is through the Malinche syndrome, introduced in the analysis to deepen understanding of a historical dilemma that has given rise to a national image both despised and misrepresented in Mexican culture. It is my contention that the process of *becoming* cannot take place in a void. The future promises a new beginning as present events are set in motion. However, it is the past that locks human experience and forms patterns of human behavior. Awareness of the past produces consciousness-raising that leads the individual to act in producing change or not. In highly codified and stratified societies, power relations that dictate cognitive authority shape knowledge. Women’s act of *becoming* need be rooted in history in order that social consciousness may be political. Grounded in history, the concept of Willing⁸ bears witness to historical events that mold cultural thinking and restrict the process of *becoming*. Women cannot become if the past validates and dictates her present socio-cultural conditionings and continues to subjugate her future *becomings* to psychological and morally devastating racial and sexual scarring.

For Rosario Castellanos and other critics, the new construction of the Mexican woman starts with the deconstruction of a negative, destructive myth known as “La Malinche”⁹. Literary critic Debra Castillo asserts the Malinche metaphor has been used to reinforce Latin American male sexual superiority based on the “loose woman”¹⁰ syndrome whereby divorced women, widows, mistresses and prostitutes, are regarded as

transgressors in patriarchal post-colonial societies where the male counterpart is often praised and glorified. The act of becoming a Mexican woman in Balún Canán implies the act of confronting, challenging and questioning moral codes of behavior, affixed to women's cultural stereotypes.

Biological superiority is no longer the basis for legitimate justification of women's social disadvantage; postulated in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex (1942) and extended to include moral theories in Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice (1982). Despite such strides, the myth of the Latin American male persists. Deeply imbedded in psychosocial behavior, male superiority continues to be of topical importance for feminist literary critics such as Debra Castillo, illustrated in her work Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction (1998).

Other feminist literary critics and writers, continue to deconstruct the Aztec woman Malintzin, a long silenced symbol in Mexico's past. To give La Malinche a poetic voice is to assist in restoring to justice her long besmeared image. Rosario Castellanos and Mexican-Chicana writers (Carmen Tafolla, Naomi Quiñonez, Lorna Dee Cervantes¹¹) believe that by appropriating Malintzin's misogynist symbolization, and by using her configuration as a site in reconstructing the new Mexican woman, their poetic rendition of Malinche can weaken and eventually alter the negative image of national self-hatred that her image represents. The shared assumption, among Mexican and Chicana writers is that a new Mexican woman cannot *become* if she is still subjected to destructive and harmful cultural and historical representation. By using Malinche as the discourse of the other, in which to challenge the existing dominant male voice, her body becomes a

symbol in which to explore, expand and develop disquisitions on sexism, racism, language and other ideological constructions of unchallenged patriarchal authority.

An understanding of La Malinche's negative image in Mexican culture and history can provide considerable cultural awareness when contextualizing the *becoming-Mexican* woman of literature. The symbolic presence of Malinche, extended to include women in general can shed light to understanding the lives of female characters in Castellanos' novel and the formation of national culture. Becoming woman in the novel is achieved through the tainted and wrongful memory of a cultural image, portrait of a national history.

Malintzin known historically as La Malinche or Doña Marina, was Hernán Cortés' translator, guide, advisor and lover. Her participation in the struggle between the Aztecs and the Spaniards, during the conquest of Mexico (1519) was considered instrumental. Official history books write of her betrayal and participation in the violent, victimization and destruction of the Aztec empire, and ideologues in the tradition of Octavio Paz, El laberinto de la soledad¹² (1950) have used her image to represent Mexico's negative national identity and in reinforcing women's sexual perversity at large. One way of counteracting the violence and repression against the "loose woman" image is by addressing it through what has been referred to as "literature contestataria" (retortive literature) by the canon establishment. These gender-oriented texts undertake serious considerations on the problem of national and gender identity and do so, at times, through role reversals.

Castellanos' work takes an introspective look into the construction of the Mexican woman while situating her within a broader retrospective, historical framework of

nationhood. Women *become* through consciousness-raising and confrontational experiences with outside events that drive the individual to act and change her lot.

The title of the novel sets the tone and establishes the search for national origins. “Balún Canán” derives from the language of the ancient Mayans and translates as nine stars or nine guardians¹³. It occupies the geographic location of Chiapas a Mexican state situated in Comitán, considered one of the poorest areas of Mexican territory. Plurilingual Indian groups who live in this region struggle for political representation. The novel is concerned with a double marginality: that of women and Indians. The work’s double structure alternates with the narrative voice of a seven year-old ladina girl and that of an omniscient narrator, interspersed with voices of other characters in the story. The blending of voices is clearly a technique Castellanos uses to display the heterogeneous and multiple character of Mexican society. The child/narrator is part of the Arguello family, who represent the oppressive, dominant class of Comitán’s landowners. The extratextual connection linked to the work lies in the historical events that allowed Indian groups to resist social changes under Lázaro Cárdenas presidency (1934-1940). Mexican Indians were granted the right to integrate in society. In the story, the girl’s affection for her Indian nana indicates the problems she faces and the tragic end that will result in choosing one class and ethnic group over the other that nurtured her.

Castellanos draws on three aspects of gender issues women face in Mexican society: class, ethnicity and gender domination. The work opens with the death of a male Indian and ends with the death of Mario, the girl’s brother; ending the cycle of the Arguello male domination, leaving the girl-narrator without any inheritance and with an uncertain future. Although the presence of a cultural dialogue exists between the child

and her Indian nana, it is also evident they are women from different worlds made to co-exist due to socio-historical and cultural circumstances. Both come from opposing classes and ethnic groups, but share a common bond; they experience gender injustices and discrimination within their respective groups. The young girl represents the new breed of women, the bridge Castellanos constructs between the white dominant group and the Mexican Indians.

Applying the concept of *becoming* in the girl's development into adulthood one can observe that she is not free to *become* who she wants to be, given Castellanos' bleak ending: the girl must negate the Indian group she endearingly remembers if she is to survive within a failed Mexican political project of integration. The lack of freedom in *becoming* is also affected by outside events. Castellanos is perhaps one of the early feminists in Latin America who anticipates the importance of the feminist movement of the sixties in Europe and in the U.S. Although the girl is trapped in a corrupt system there is hope, the action she has produced: the ability to write herself in history. The writing is a product of her memory, her lived experiences and those reflecting the condition of women in her family and culture. The girl's experiences become the memory of injustices endured by women in her family. The Arguello women are not privileged as individuals, since they are considered property, belonging economically to the dominant male class. Zoraida, the girl's mother, conscious of her subordinate position to her husband's social class, is despised and made to bear humiliation at the hands of her own spouse; she, in turn, conveys to her daughter the subaltern position the girl must adhere, given her brother's cultural and gender privileges -the inheritance which belongs to him as the male in the family. The girl's aunt, Matilde, faces gender discrimination although she belongs

to the same class as the girl's father. Disgraced and disinherited, Matilde is punished for her transgressive amorous relationship with Ernesto, a bastard son, clearly not of the same social standing. Later, the abortion Matilde seeks from an Indian "curandera" or witch doctor, symbolizes the punishment for crossing social lines. Seen as transgressors, or as women who break away from strict codes of behavior, assigned by society, the women portrayed in Balún Canán are made to bear psychological and physical abuse. All Arguello women are subaltern figures subjected to male power structures that exclude them from holding a position equal to their men-folk. The Indian women are no less different in the treatment they receive from their own group. To *become* is linked, in this regard, to Luce Irigaray's notion of sexual difference, whereby women must define herself not biologically to men but rather through her body-politic. By first appropriating women's bodies from male domination and through its redefinition, the girl character learns that the future, although bleak, is about to become her greatest challenge.

Becoming is an act that brings epistemic advantages. New knowledge can replace old patterns of thought and behavior. The socially disadvantaged Indian women in Castellanos' novel deserve more critical attention other than the male-female paradigm of superiority-inferiority discourse. Ethnic women living within national boundaries also shape, in part, the existence and thoughts of socially advantaged groups. The subjugating politics of gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality are strong and worthy factors to consider when analyzing a stratified society with a colonial past. Castellanos conveys that the subaltern can break the "silence" by reading and writing their existence in history, albeit through the language of the dominant group. Breaking the silence is also a way of

ending injustice since one takes action in the process of writing and becoming an historical being.

Indian women in the novel do not become until their groups are recognized politically. Juana, the wife of Felipe Carranza Pech, an Indian of the Arguello hacienda is an example of not becoming as she must struggle against a triple victimization: gender, race and sexual discrimination. She is an abused wife both physically and psychologically for not being able to bear a child. Juana's childlessness is punishable by her husband's physical violence, which in turn marks her own subordinate position within an already subaltern group. Another case where a woman is not allowed to become is witnessed through the victimization of the nana by her own peers. At the beginning of the novel, she appears with a bruised knee, a punishment inflicted by her tribe for having crossed ethnic and class boundaries. The three women outlined have been punished for not observing the strict codes of conduct assigned to them. It is within a triple marginality of class, ethnicity and gender restrictions that the girl-narrator is forced to become her own person.

Through the act of writing the girl learns to survive and reconstruct herself, and she does so through the only inheritance she is entitled, her memory. After the big fire destroys the Arguello fortune and property there is no male inheritor or inheritance left. The girl is conscious of her new role in creating a dialogue between both worlds. Her own hybridity as a historical and social being compels her to recreate herself through writing, her public claim to legitimacy.

Bearing witness to life's altering events, the girl quickly grasps that her memory of what and who she is, will determine the action of becoming a new woman. Her

memory becomes the conduit of collected and collective experiences women in her culture face. She lives her otherness alongside subaltern groups culturally and economically deprived of legal and legitimate representation. Although the ending reflects the year 1957 and the political milieu in which the work was written, that of a failed political agenda of national integration, it proclaims the power oral societies and women have in defining their future through the written word.

The topic of becoming does not only mark a new beginning for the girl-narrator but includes the Indian groups who learn to write their existence, albeit in Spanish, the language of the colonizers. Empowerment is the result of *becoming* as the power to write makes the protagonist's existence legal and historical.

For Castellanos, the power of women lies in the act of creation and reconstruction of her "self" that can be achieved through the power of writing. To *become* implies consciousness brought about by historical circumstances that women characters must be made to explore. It is, as if Castellanos warns us that a woman can only *become* if she is willing to be part of the process of writing herself in history.

Part 2. – *Becoming in Demasiado Amor* by Sara Sefchovich

The novel *Demasiado Amor* (1990) by Mexican writer Sara Sefchovich inescapably links the concept of *becoming* with Debra Castillo's notion of the "literary prostitute"¹⁴ and the book's consciousness-raising journey of self-discovery.

The resounding success of the work, a best seller in Mexico, addresses a female audience and takes an introspective look into the topic of gender and national identity. Mexico's neo-liberal market economy is the framework Sefchovich selects to convey the power of tourism and consumerism as symbols of middle class aspirations¹⁵.

Paradoxically, Beatriz, the main character, represents a sexually transgressive middle-class woman who chooses willingly to become a public figure; albeit through her newly found profession as a "sex worker."¹⁶

Beatriz embarks on a journey of discovery as she awakens from a state of self-abnegation to one of fulfilling her desires and choosing her own destiny. At first, she explores her nation's geographic and cultural patrimony, seen through her lover's eyes, and later, discovers through her own experiences that she must redraw the boundaries of the private/public domain.¹⁷ Castillo extracts from the following excerpt written by Jonathan Culler, the image of the prostitute in nineteenth-century English literature; an image she finds pertinent to Sefchovich's text:

Literary prostitutes (1) make visible the effects of modern capitalism, especially threats of social disorder accompanying the emergence of a proletariat on the edge of misery; (2) fascinate writers as a source of plots; (3) are scandalous both for their display of artifice and for their ability to pass as decent women; (4) represent the co modification of feminine erotic

power; and (5) illuminate the role of the modern writer, who, like a prostitute, offers himself for sale (Culler 1995, 204).

Culler's comments reflect the fascination with and emergence of the literary prostitute. By drawing a parallel between modern writers who sell their stories for money, to services provided by a sex worker, he is forcing us to re-focus on the need to study closely the repression produced by codified social behavior. Sefchovich has selected the topic of prostitution and women's need to fulfill and choose her own destiny to address national identity issues in the global market economy. By considering such a taboo subject matter, the author has introduced topics on women's construction of self and the desire to become free from social constraints; a topic which opens up many social, cultural, moral and legal discussions on identity.

Both issues of national identity and gender are cleverly reworked in the alternating binary structure of the text; the private journal Beatriz keeps of her national travels through the Mexican landscape and the letters she writes to her sister in Italy.

The problem of national identity presented in Demasiado Amor reinforces and problematizes women's concerns regarding the social construction of gender identity. To fully comprehend the nuances created by the topic of *becoming* it is relevant to emphasize Castillo's quote of Jean Franco's comments with regard to Mexico's problem with national identity. Franco attempts to address Octavio Paz's appropriation of the Malinche image in his efforts to define the problem of Mexicanization:

The problem of national identity was thus presented primarily as a problem of *male* identity, and it was male authors who debated its defects and psychoanalyzed the nation. In national allegories, women became the

territory over which the quest for (male) national identity passed... Under these circumstances, national identity could not but be a problematic terrain for women novelists...How could they plot themselves into a narrative without becoming masculine or attempting to speak from the devalued position? (Franco 1989, 131-32).¹⁸

The concept of *becoming*, applied to the novel raises questions about the process of social construction and women's struggle to define themselves within these parameters. Sefchovich's handling of the topic of prostitution is treated lightly through Beatriz's naiveté, that makes the work function as a delightful romance novel, keeping its freshness and originality, while posing larger national identity issues that warrant women's involvement.

The whirling melodramatic and cartographic structure of the journal, written in a litany-style dialogue, is directed to an anonymous and absent lover. The emphatic, obsessive manner of addressing her lover in the Spanish second person singular pronoun "tú" underlines Beatriz's patriarchal and passive education as her lover territorializes both her body and the Mexican geography. This form of gender domination is the work's most distinctive trademark. Structured as an epistolary dialogue the work is reminiscent of ancient epistles, such as Ovid's *Heroides*, whereby the interlocutor addresses an absent lover in a familiar style. Ironically, the first half of the text presents Beatriz as a passive and subdued woman whose main function is to quietly obey her companion while satisfying his sexual appetite. At this point, Beatriz does not exist as a person, she does not seem to possess her own personality and worse yet, is not conscious of her needs as a woman. The one-sided, all engulfing obsession to please her lover ends suddenly as she

emerges as a conscious being that enters into a voyage of self-discovery. Her *becoming* woman erupts in the same whirling fashion as her travels through Mexico. Upon discovering the joys, pleasures and monetary rewards of “love-making,” Beatriz realizes she can be economically rewarded and converts her sex drives into a service and a lucrative business. As an utopian fantasy, the work creates an anti-heroine, or perhaps, a new literary woman heroine never before considered in romance novels.

The emblematic and controversial topic of prostitution can be considered an extension of what Sara Castro-Klaren sees as the “bifurcation between Latin American grassroots activism and academic feminist theorizing.”¹⁹ Sefchovich albeit, is not stating that her character, Beatriz, has turned into a happy prostitute in the process of *becoming* woman. In reality, and here it contrasts with fiction, an impoverished and uneducated Mexican woman who prostitutes herself for the sake of survival, will not share in Beatriz’s exaltation, given all the strict socio-cultural codes that control her life. I believe, the novel works at the theoretical level, in that it creates a fictive world (a utopia) where there are no social pressures in the heroine’s decision to become a sex-worker as she lives happily and unscathed by the social establishment. By incorporating the concept of *becoming* in women’s development, the work problematizes the identity issue present in gender studies and forces re-examination of the social infrastructure that need be constantly re-addressed in women’s identity discourses.

The challenge in offering the *becoming* concept, lies in its ability to analyze and address women’s positions in nation, society, culture and history. Becoming has a multiple capacity to develop dialogues among women who live vastly different lives within the same nation.

As a sociologist and as Mexican woman, Sara Sefchovich interprets the feminine subject to be intricately tied to the problem of nationhood. *Becoming* generates multiple discursive strategies by incorporating, in the work, a sense of heightened feminist praxis and theory.

Consciousness-raising is the first sign in *becoming* and it too needs to be categorized by its function in order to be understood as the first step in women's realization of the self. Gerda Lerner in her work The Creation of Feminist Consciousness²⁰ (1993) offers five turning points when considering a feminist approach to consciousness:

- (1) An awareness of belonging to a subordinate group: (2) a realization that subordination is not the result of any natural difference, rather, it is socially determined: (3) the awareness of subordination corresponds to a solidarity among those who respond to such group identification: (4) a feminist consciousness searches therefore for an autonomous definition of woman; which (5) may provide society with an alternative vision of the rupture (5).

In the first half of the novel, the character only exists to establish the traditional, passive education women accept, before consciousness, derived from her personal experiences, reveal the emergence of a new woman.

In developing the concept of *becoming*, one cannot elude Irigaray's position that a gender discourse on identity must be based on sexual difference. Women's appropriation of her body, once at the forefront of the feminist revolution of the sixties, continues to be present in the discursive formation of identity. Judith Butler warns us in Gender Trouble

(1990) that sexual identities are drawn from culture power constructs and promote heterosexuality as a male/female model of human behavior found in nature. Gayatri Spivak, however, in her work, In Other Worlds (1987) urges that breaking away from a masculinist theory, entails an ideology that recognizes male and female sexuality as being asymmetrical (Castro-Klaren 286). *Becoming* must consider the question of women's body and existing power structures that immobilize the feminine subject from fulfilling her sense of self. To this effect, *becoming* constitutes the site of subversion in women's writing, a strategy that enables us to rethink sexual identities.

In the first part of the work, the massive accumulation of regional and cultural artifacts Beatriz receives from her boyfriend symbolizes his sexual domination over her and responds exclusively to the lover's desires and needs. When Beatriz gradually becomes disenchanted with her nameless lover, all the cultural items amassed during the courtship become insignificant. Her awakened consciousness prompts her to act quickly as she proceeds to discard all objects given to her, thereby freeing herself from her lover's ownership. The spiraling descent is now accentuated through the appearance of the first person singular pronoun "yo". In the process of liberating herself from male domination, Beatriz begins the process of deterritorialization of her body and nation. Her assertive new image now emerges. She has appropriated her body and her desire to please herself sexually. Moreover, she outwardly dismisses the boyfriend, who leaves quietly, when he learns of her newly found profession as a "sex worker". Her apartment, once a haven from the outside world, now becomes her new creative space where she erases the boundary between home and brothel. Sefchovich is undoubtedly concerned with questioning the social spaces women have been assigned and confined. The dichotomy

between decency/indecency, wife/prostitute, private/public space and the home/the outside world becomes pivotal in the deconstruction of the social imaginary and the reconstruction of the female self; a woman free from the chains of fixed social codes of behavior. The discursive methods used, in the tradition of two literary genres, the journal and the epistolary, both associated with women's writing, contextualizes the fragmented position of the female subject. By inventively juxtaposing both forms of writing, Sefchovich allows Beatriz to go beyond existence as a passive conduit of male desires to an active participant of her own destiny. Her transformation is totaling and marks a new beginning, one the heroine has chosen.

In Latin America, the topic of "prostitution" considered an almost exclusive female activity, performed by women labeled indecent, and illegal under civil law, promotes the "loose woman" syndrome, extended to include and applied to all women who transgress social codes of behavior designated in a patriarchal society. For this reason, Debra Castillo retorts in her study, Easy Women (1998), that poor single women in Mexico who work in unskilled labor, or those who have no husband to protect her socially, are an easy target for sexual harassment and physical punishment, at times leading to death (3). The double standard of the public man and the private woman is challenged in Sefchovich's novel. Women's *becoming* is clearly the work's main objective.

Mexico's topography is reworked in the novel to draw a parallel between man's territorialization of both geography and women's body; in this manner borders are mapped out by man's public domain.

The inscription of the feminine subject in the discourse of nation allows Sefchovich to articulate a new narrative form that places *becoming* in a bilateral discourse, at the center of construction and deconstruction of the concept of nation and the gendered self fixed by society. The implications of a bi-optic look at Mexican identity has lead Javier Durán to consider an analysis of woman and nation in Demasiado Amor²¹. The discourse on a nation's construction and the tension it has created with the topic of women's *becoming* has made the novel a challenge to traditional, masculinist models of nation. The author's joint articulation has enabled Durán to make the following observation:

... Sefchovich logra plasmar una visión de la nación inclusiva (y crítica) al reinventar la participación de la mujer en el desarrollo de una historia que desafía y juega con los estereotipos de la amante y de la prostituta en su narración (Durán 51).

...Sefchovich achieves in her narrative in shaping an inclusive and critical vision of nation while reinventing women's participation in the development of a story that challenges and plays with the stereotypes of the woman lover and the prostitute (Durán 51).

Beatriz ventures out into public space with her boyfriend and explores the territory mapped out by the lover. She begins the process of transforming herself when she decides to frequent club-bars (VIPs) a place where she finds sexual gratification with other men she encounters. At once she begins to explore the new parameters of her lucrative profession as a sex goddess, and discovers that her body, and more specifically, her vagina, is the site that replaces the dream house she once aspired to own with her

sister in Italy. In the study proposed by Alicia Campos, the critic explores the metaphor of the vagina as the place where entering and leaving the body is analogous to exploring the national territory as a hospitable touristy attraction; a main source of national revenue.²² In such a tourist-oriented economy, national identity is sold through the production of cultural and regional artifacts. The multiple sensations Beatriz experiences from living the Mexican culture, history and geography through sight, smell and taste are analogous to the pleasures she derives from sharing her body with men, clients willing to pay a price to experience her. The title, Demasiado Amor refers to quantity, that is, too much love of anything and everything. Saturation and insatiability become key words in unraveling the excesses expressed through the boundaries of national territory and woman's body. The consumerist enumeration of all sorts of items, whether local foods, clothing, pottery, basket weaving and tourist sites, all associated with a Mexican vacation brochure, inscribes the meaningless acquisition associated with a to-do list, totally disconnected from cultural reality. The fragmented territory can be extended to interact with a fragmented history that has not allowed for total integration and national unity. By appropriating the national territory and incorporating it in the discourse of the Other, the "sex worker", Sefchovich is able to rework two themes, simultaneously, that of a nation prostituting itself for the sake of revenue and that of a woman's body which does the same for economic survival.

Beatriz, ultimately shuts herself off from the outside world and turns inward to the "temple of love" she has created in the private sphere of the home. The ending indicates a beginning dialogue where the public and private boundaries blend and become one indistinguishable unit of existence. The mythic ending, in which her male guests have

come to revere her as a love goddess, is reminiscent of ancient altars, once the central meeting place and site of pilgrimage, welcoming all who come with offerings. Symbolically, the vagina becomes the site of the mythic place where a new beginning is possible; the circular and cyclical beginnings where myth and history can be reconstructed.

Although the novel is a fantasy that raises the question of national identity and assigned gender roles, the Malinche metaphor of the “sexually perverse woman” can be reworked to problematize the ethical validity of the “loose woman” stigma ; a category inclusive of all women who transgress socially rigid codes of behavior, further subordinating her to patriarchal institutions.

The *becoming* concept is wholeheartedly addressed in the work, through the call for social action stressed in the theme. The tension created between discovering what a nation is and self-discovery in the process, opens up endless possibilities regarding women’s participation in the construction of herself and her nation.

In Talking Back (1992), Debra Castillo urges the development of innovative theories in Latin American feminist literary criticism. After closely examining the dual message of the novel, one can immediately grasp the challenge proposed by the work as it confronts issues of nation and women’s *becomings* while breaking away from fragmentary, maternalistic and impressionistic representations of women in literature.²³

A feminist concept of *becoming* can fulfill the need to develop national and gender strategies by creating a dynamic link between issues of nation, culture and history into Latin American gender identity discourses.

Critical formulation of Latin American feminist theories are entreated earnestly by critics such as Elena González/ Eliana Ortega²⁴, Lucía-Guerra Cunningham²⁵, Debra Castillo²⁶, Sara Castro-Klaren²⁷ and Cristina Piña²⁸ among so many others. It is paramount to consider the complexities and multiplicity of women's voices and experiences that Latin American cultures represent.

The concept of *becoming* can re-connect feminist theory with women writers in their attempt to participate in producing culture and new traditions through change they emulate in their works.

Part 3. – *Becoming* in La mujer habitada by Gioconda Belli

The dynamic process of *becoming* in Gioconda Belli's La mujer habitada²⁹ (1988) reveals a dialogic tension between women's moral and social construction of self.³⁰

The novel raises important issues on women's development of the autonomous self and the conflict produced by a socially defined gendered self.

Belli's work is a fictionalized, romantic chronicle of the Nicaraguan national revolution of the seventies. It combines the realism of the historical moment and the struggle for national liberation with the psychological and moral development of the main character, Lavinia, in the process of *becoming* a new woman.

The strategy of consciousness-raising is again at the center of feminist epistemology. In the story, Lavinia is the subaltern feminine subject who must first negate her patriarchal upbringing before entering a journey of self-discovery; she connects her *becoming* woman to her nation's revolution and social injustice. The triple discourse of woman/nation/ethnicity is inevitably linked to the character's decision to become an active agent in her country's political struggles. The concept of *becoming* enriches understanding of the text through feminist conceptual interaction with mainstream views of the moral self.

The notion of autonomy has engaged philosophers in various discourses regarding women and men's development of self.³¹ In her study "Autonomy and Social Relationships,"³² feminist critic, Marilyn Friedman understands personal autonomy as an act of self-determination. Identifying self-determination as a component of autonomy, allows this notion to converge with *becoming's* criteria of action. Women choose to act from lived experiences that dictate her personal expression of self. By analyzing the

feminine subject's *becoming* through self-determination, Lavinia's autonomy is coherent and complete when connected to the interpersonal relationships she establishes with her lover Felipe, with friends and marginal countrywomen.

Belli traces the character's psycho-social transformation from an unconscious young woman, whose uncontested education is based on a traditional male logos, to the dynamic reconstruction of a new emerging self in the process of *becoming*. Lavinia's psychological and moral indoctrination begins with a life, programmed and mapped by a traditional patriarchal system. She begins redrawing a blueprint of her new consciousness at the moment of self-awareness. Lavinia's *becoming* is put to the test as she submits herself to a series of self-questioning that forces her to reflect and examine values that have been instilled in her as a woman from an upper class background and from a patriarchal Nicaraguan culture.

The novel is composed of multiple layers and numerous readings. It can be interpreted within different contexts: historical, feminist, political, autobiographical, mythical and romantic. The multiple intertextual character of the work highly suggests the different directions the literary work can assume; connecting, creating and multiplying different realities and theoretical thinking that link literary, social, political and metaphysical extra-textual discourses.

If we examine the breakdown of Lavinia's consciousness-raising, we discover three main factors that act as catalysts: 1) social injustice witnessed through the extreme poverty and sickness her local Indian cleaning woman bears silently;

2) conversations sustained with Sarah, her childhood friend, regarding women's role in society and culture; and 3) discussions, arguments and debates engaged with Felipe on the topic of men and women's social and moral differences.

These three decisive factors compel Lavinia to action and completes her metamorphosis through a sense of social responsibility. Her moral self is molded through personal relationships and historical events.

Lorraine Code's work, What Can She Know?,³³ points to the traditional aspiration of moral philosophy which idealizes men's moral achievements while promoting interpersonal distancing and elevating reason over emotion and desires (Code 199). Judith Butler also challenges mainstream moral theories and the concept of autonomy in Gender Trouble. For Butler, autonomy presents a major problem in its presentation of a universally stable and coherent identity, one that conflicts with the fragmented and unstable positions of the subject in postmodern discourses.³⁴ Marilyn Friedman's position of the autonomous self, is inclusive of women's relational nature. In the narrative, Lavinia's self determination does not ignore social relationships as the basis of her decision to become a revolutionary woman, nor does it negate the social nature of women as nurturing and mothering. Through considerations of moral autonomy, the concept of *becoming* is broadened to include women's relational nature in the act of self-determination.

Leslie Bloom remarks that whenever there is ambivalence or rejection of incorporating feminist consciousness in women's writing, there is compliance with cultural silence.³⁵ This form of social and cultural silence reinforces male strategies by reproducing stereotypes of female selfhood. Autonomy connects to Bloom's idea of a

non-unitary approach to women's self. The critic observes that writing a woman centered discourse where marginalization is central to the story, allows feminist values and ideologies to be reinforced (63). The *becoming* woman is further strengthened through the autonomy concept that compels women writers to experiment with alternative uses of language in representating women's fragmented and conflicted self in constant flux.

In the story, Lavinia's return to Nicaragua, during the country's political upheaval and social transformation is the background Belli creates to address her character's *becoming* into a revolutionary Nicaraguan woman.

The character's prestige as an architect and her apparent economic independence is juxtaposed to an anguishing reality that surrounds her nation's history and survival. This conflicted background sets in motion a series of questioning on the existence of poverty, social injustices, class indifference and the condition of women in society. Lavinia's metamorphosis is completed within the cycle of one year, which mirrors life's circularity in the Mayan calendar. Belli juxtaposes Lavinia and Felipe's relationship and superimposes the tragic love story of the Indian Itzá and her lover Yarince, who perish while fighting the Spaniards during the Conquest. Belli is able to reproduce, embody and duplicate the heroic and tragic legend of the Indian lovers using their story as catalyst. As her ancestor before her, Lavinia takes up arms in a national conflict in order to liberate her country from local dictatorial rule and hegemonic influence.

The novel has a double structure: the parallel story of two revolutionary women: one contemporary and the other ancestral. The narrative style, although linear in progression, establishes circularity in the chronotope of the story, which allows Lavinia to appropriate her cultural heritage. With Itza's presence and mythic voice as narrator of

the story, Belli has embodied the narrative voice of her ancestor and has given both a voice.

Lavinia's *becoming* is continuously active as she engages the lover in her new consciousness, once she learns of his secret involvement in the Sandinista insurrection. knowledge of Felipe's involvement draws her to participate in Nicaragua's socio-political plight. The confrontation between lovers puts the autonomy issue back into the argument of women's *becoming* as an act of self-realization. Felipe and Lavinia debate her role as a woman in society; an idea embedded in the traditional male/female binary model of gendered behavior. The social construction of gender marks the division and reduction of the autonomy issue into the classic debate of reason vs. emotion.

Lavinia's *becoming* derives from personal and relational experiences and new knowledge of existing in the world. The character's reconstruction of her new self begins the moment she commences deconstruction of her past vertical reality, the traditional logos, imposed and controlled by a unilateral education, alien to her *becoming* woman. The responsibility of *becoming*, however, comes with a price: Lavinia knows she must react against her upbringing and face ethical dilemmas that imparts being autonomous.

Belli pays tribute to Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own by reinforcing a woman's right to earn a living through a chosen profession. Lavinia's true rebellion, however, occurs when she witnesses the lot of poor women's lives. This incident alone stimulates her desire to participate in the liberation movement. Lavinia reevaluates her purpose in life as she becomes directly involved in improving the social and political conditions in her society.

The dimensions of *becoming* have antecedents in the pioneering contributions by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nancy Chodorow (1985)³⁶ who refer to the autonomy discourse in moral development and argue against a gendered selfhood restricting women to childrearing practices. Autonomy, traditionally linked to reason, has ingrained in the male logos of selfhood the fear of intimate relationships and the perception of others as threats (Chodorow 1985). In the realm of cognitive moral reasoning, Gilligan contributes her findings on autonomy and evaluates traditional views of moral development in girls and boys and challenges such views. Gilligan and feminists alike, retort that a cultural and social model of male/female behavior and thinking is reduced to an abstract and falsely universal mode harmful to women's understanding of her moral and cognitive self. *Becoming*, along with the relational nature and self-determination principle in women's autonomy, construes a more individualistic approach to the moral self. Friedman emphasizes that it is women's relational nature that embraces the social context in her realization of autonomy (4).

An understanding of *becoming*, through the autonomy issue, delivers a critical feminist reading of Lavinia's life, from a once organized, predictable and unconscious existence, to one that involves a vital program of cross-examination and metaphysical debates on the nature of being a woman. Her desire and will to change, to *become* a concrete and well-defined being based on her multiple experiences, takes Lavinia to another level of understanding self-realization.

In the process of *becoming*, Lavinia meets Flor, a revolutionary underground participant determined to change the status quo, imposed by social injustices and accepted as the norm. It is during secret outings that Lavinia learns to connect one reality

to another and does so with total vitality, conviction and self-determination. Her choice to act is an outcome of a newly acquired perspective of self, in relation to historical events taking place around her.

The characters that serve as stimulus in Lavinia's psycho-moral odyssey are Felipe, her lover, who teaches her to understand social injustice, and Sarah, her best friend, who represents self-denial, a woman totally shaped by patriarchy.

The formation of the new woman-subject, shaped by the will to *become*, is the result of a dynamic process of transformation Lavinia experiences, at different stages of conscious development.

Belli artistically associates the becoming woman with nature's dynamic process of constant renewal. In her poetry anthology, *El ojo de la mujer*³⁷ (1990), in particular, her poem "Metamorphosis"(6), the rhizomatic process or multiple levels of construction a woman undergoes, impels the poet Belli to plant her own roots. For her, the tree in nature is a symbol of vitality and fertility, contrary to the belief of the tree as a symbolic referent in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari³⁸ who associate it with masculine power. In the novel, the tree is the symbol of transformation as it transmits its spiritual message; it is a feminine symbol. The spirit of Itzá, Lavinia's ancestral counterpart, inhabits the orange blossom that grows in the middle of her home. From the tree's perspective, Itzá observes and transmits to Lavinia her rebellious spirit and instills the determination to join her lover in battle against social injustice. The text itself, serves as an intertextual rhizome that connects the novel to other literary works, to history and to films.

Becoming, in a broader context, can be considered an integral part of the ideological revolution Latin America has witnessed in the last forty years of feminism.

Consciousness-raising induced by socio-political events, such as the Sandinista revolution, has raised awareness of double standards regarding women's representation in judicial and legislative systems of government. Historical events of national liberation have been quick to praise the patriotic duties of women in battle, but have done very little to recognize their merits during times of national reconstruction. The *becoming* event in La mujer habitada problematizes the autonomy issue by exposing its double standards that divide and reduce gender back to the traditional and unequal models of social construction. Latin American women who participate in their country's radical changes are both agents and beneficiaries. To this effect, critic López-Martínez writes in her assessment of contemporary women writers that life-changing events in Latin American nations are the new symbols of solidarity among women.³⁹ In addition, it also echoes differences in class and race and brings women together in their common cause (19). The writer's contributions to women's *becoming* are also an event of great proportions. According to Lucía Guerra, La mujer fragmentada,⁴⁰ language is the system of thought that takes images and signs and models them to suit a specific purpose (143). For López-Martínez, *becoming* is also the task of the writer:

The very existence of a conscious reality depends upon the existence of a system of symbols capable of abstracting and classifying it (20).

And further adds:

In this revisionist mode, feminist literature is proliferating. It received its initial impulse from the feminist movement and from that movement also comes its extraordinary vitality (21).

Becoming is a theoretical construct with an epistemic advantage derived from its multiple and generative discourses. Belli's story underscores Lavinia's *becoming* by connecting her lived experiences to the issue of autonomy in her construction of identity. For Nelly Richard, the importance of theory⁴¹ for women and feminism lies in its capacity to transform reality by undoing fixed conceptual paradigms and reformulating and reinventing new epistemology.

Belli's novel is concerned with the construction of a feminine Latin American identity and questions its legitimacy with the presence of a foreign (U.S.) hegemony within its borders. The idea of including a Latin American experience in the construction of *becoming* adds an epistemological and not ontological concept of experience.

Becoming produces a discursive tension between the self in its formation of subjectivities⁴² and the epistemic advantage generated from experience.⁴³ To this effect, Richard alludes to the importance of theorizing Latin American women's experience in the production of identity and difference as active and changing variables (739).

Becoming is, therefore, a transgressive and transformative concept that addresses the issue of women's double marginality in Latin American as depicted in literature. The idea of double marginality considers women subaltern subjects and their geographical positions as Latin Americans the main factor in determining a discourse based on difference.

The concept of *becoming* invites an array of issues to converge on women's concerns regarding representation in society and culture. The title of Belli's novel La mujer habitada (The Inhabited Woman) highly suggests Latin American women's search for selfhood. Further to the topic of identity is the study by Irenne García. The critic

points to problems of women's representation⁴⁴ in Latin American feminist literary theory. She blames the lack of a general cohesive theory to the narrow focus of literary criticism, which prefers to analyze individual works. The urgent task of rescuing women's writing from oblivion and restoring them to the literary tradition, has prevented a more legitimate approach to Latin American feminist literary theory.

Nattie Golubov considers that a Hispanic woman's theory is needed based on a diversity of social experiences that assist in a feminine subject formation. Golubov refers to the notion of difference that enables the writer to create from a determined historical and social positionings.⁴⁵

In Belli's novel, the construction of self has united the *becoming* concept with the moral issue of autonomy. Ileana Rodríguez⁴⁶ attributes revolutionary narratives with bringing to the fore, the tension between conservative models of patriarchal systems of government with the emerging collective "I", as well as the inscription of the subaltern subject of woman and ethnicity. Rodríguez suggests that radical changes in government bring about new subjectivities. The idea of the "new man" is a collective notion that must address the individual's transcendence from old individual selves to new collective identities. It is from the subaltern position that women and ethnic groups must present "otherness" within the new radical *becoming*. For feminist thinking, women's *becoming* within national struggles problematize women's new subjectivities, i.e. the construction of a new political self engendered by the historical change within a nation. Negating women's construction of self puts into jeopardy a nation's rebirth. Rodríguez observes that Belli's text re-inserts the feminine space within an established masculine space and does so by questioning the domestic (home) sphere in negating the public space of the

state (patriarchy) (771). Lavinia's resistance also symbolizes that of the indigenous collectivity, creating a double dissident space of woman/ethnicity in revolutionary feminine narratives. Belli's work develops the feminine "I" and re-inscribes it in the process of becoming woman and nation.

In the analysis of La mujer habitada, the notion of autonomy has enriched the concept of *becoming* by questioning women's construction of self along the lines of woman, nation and ethnicity.

Part 4. – *Becoming* in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik

The application of *becoming* to feminist readings of Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry⁴⁷ contributes understanding of the fragmented, displaced and complex woman subject in search of self.

The desire to recreate an emerging ontological self, not defined by a western philosophical tradition, drives the poetic voice to incite feminist thinking on subjectivities.⁴⁸

Of the many subjectivities that exist, one has been chosen to interact with *becoming*; mobile subjectivity.⁴⁹ To define the term subjectivity is the first step in explaining this interpretive theory; I have borrowed Chris Weedon's definition⁵⁰ which best explains this phenomenon: "Subjectivity is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world"(32).

Through the concept of subjectivity, Pizarnik's poetry reconnects to feminist thinking on women's construction of self.

The concept of "mobile subjectivity," introduced by Kathy Ferguson, is an alternative to Hegel's male-oriented view of identity⁵¹. Its on-going motion or "mobility" refers to women's constant changing perception of self, her multiple and, at times, ambiguous use of the personal pronoun "I". In Pizarnik, the constant shift produced by the unstable poetic "I", unfixed and undefined, fluctuates into the "other", the marginalized woman in search of identity.

Ferguson reminds us that the very creation of the concept of mobile subjectivity has risen from unconventional models of rethinking the self in women, such examples

can be found in Donna Haraway's cyborgs⁵² Teresa de Lauretis' eccentric subjects⁵³ and Gayatri Spivak's discourses on third-world subject formations.⁵⁴ Within these parameters, Ferguson posits the flexibility of her model in reconfiguring the poetic "I" within an ethical, political, ontological and epistemological context. The multiple voices within mobile subjectivity reject the dual position concerning women's bodies: her reproductive capacity and sexuality. By deconstructing rationality, Ferguson's model expounds on the desire to *become* by transcending fixed notions of women's self.

Pizarnik, the anthological poet, creates a feminine poetic voice in constant danger of falling over the edge and into darkness. Influenced by existentialism, the poet brings a tragic view of a fragmented subject in search of self, one defined and constructed by society as she searches, through the sheer power of words, for the undefined woman she hopes to reconstruct.

Several poetry anthologies come together in Pizarnik's complete works that offer rich examples of motifs that trace her psycho-social development as a woman. Her autobiographical poetry is political and personal, offering numerous readings in women's identity discourses. The poet writes herself into the poems and converts the autobiographical "I" into multiple visions of the inner self she represents.

Very rarely, if at all, are the poems of Pizarnik approached through a feminist reading on subjectivity. Given her much publicized suicide and bouts of manic depression, poetic interpretations have largely focused on the destruction of the self. Critics of Pizarnik that elaborate themes of death and absence found in her poetry only too quickly reinforce and conform to the much-sought analysis of her dark and destructive side. Topics of a new emerging self, her poetry anthology abundantly

displays, goes unheralded and unexamined. The poet's identity crisis, explored through themes of displacement and exile are often time linked to love's tragic perspective; the search of a lover's union. The will to *become* a new being; the changing self within poetry's creative space offers the pervasive "yo"(I) a whole new direction in writing the feminine subject.

Becoming in Pizarnik can be considered two-fold, it offers a theoretical discourse on subjectivity to explain the deconstruction of the social self and a glimpse into the recreation of a new woman-subject in constant flux, dictated through lived experiences and emotional development. Writing a woman-centered discourse liberates the poet from social conventions and allows her to experiment the self in multiple ways; thereby assuming political action in her poetry.

Although much analysis of Pizarnik's poetic creation centers on her direct influence from existentialism, her compulsive fascination with the self is in line with contemporary feminist thinking. Her poetic composition equally affords feminist readings on the *becoming* woman through positions explored in the use of personal pronouns; I, she, someone, they, etc.

Fragments of well-known poems are taken to outline the evolution of her consciousness, and strongly display the *becoming* self in rupture. Verses selected connect thematically from one anthology to the next. The poet's central preoccupation with the process of writing depicts her obsession with the written word, her need to exist through the very mechanics of writing that will create and define her.⁵⁵

The complex construction of the self in Pizarnik can be understood through a series of connecting motifs such as night/day, the mirror, the double self, the other, the absent lover, displacement of the self and life/death metaphors.⁵⁶

If we take certain motifs in Pizarnik's poetic odyssey, we can begin to understand how the "I" contemplates its multiple existence.

Reference to the "night" is recurrent, and represents the generating space that drives the self to contemplate its own existence. In Pizarnik's symbology, the night is positive, it is a time of comfort away from the gaze of the day's onlookers, who make us exist through a mirror creation of themselves.⁵⁷ The duplication of the self as others want us to exist is in constant tension with the incomplete "I". A sense of alterity is no doubt present in the idea of being constantly "looked". The idea of feeling different is carefully elaborated and rests on the notion that we do "not exist" when others observe us. Pizarnik warns that once we are seen, it changes our true subjective selves.⁵⁸ Here the poet alludes to the fixed conception society has of the female subject. For this reason, only the night can liberate her of the day's gaze, allowing her to reconstruct her true, erotic self. In the poem, "La noche" from *Las aventuras perdidas* (1958) the night allows the poet to blend in with the hope of becoming: "Alguna vez volveremos a ser"(46) ("One day we will become"). The night is also synonymous with light, its darkness diffuses hope, it is the only time we can become naked with our true subjective selves. Through this utterance, Pizarnik reveals to us that, for her, the day represents a negative state of being, as the sun turns into the very symbol of death. The political struggle to exist during the light of day disappears at night, as comfort and freedom to roam freely gives the poetic "I" flight and different dimensions.

Although Ferguson stresses motion and not multiplicity in her model of subjectivity, I believe, that the multiple self is inclusive in women's constant changing nature. Mobile subjectivity allows the poet to explore her other selves in different settings; her different ways of *becoming* correspond to experiencing her other image in the mirror, at nighttime, and in erotic encounters.

Another aspect of the self, mobile subjectivity promotes, lies in the concept of difference. As a major component of women's identity construction, difference embraces, affirms and celebrates precisely the differences that exist between women: racial, class, erotic or geographical circumstances (Ferguson 159). Implied in the concept of difference are the identities women assume that delineate specific circumstances. Mobile subjectivities offer an interdependent way of existing in the world. A woman's identity is multiple in its geographic, cultural, class, ethnic, religious and sexual orientations. This view on difference deconstructs the essentialist version of women's identity for one that is multiple within us. Difference in mobile subjectivity allows for the exploration of the many selves alongside identity. Ferguson suggests mobile subjectivity can guide in altering the social construction of women:

Women who are aware that factors like race, class, gender, and erotic identity may be held against them are less likely to invest themselves completely in any single dimension and more likely to be attentive to the multiplicities within them (161).

The mirror is yet another motif found in Pizarnik's poetry and refers to the duplicated self. The very notion of committing suicide in front of the mirror implies taking consciousness of one's own alterity; the idea of being replicated is produced

through angst. To experience seeing your “other self” implies recognition of the temporal self (the untrue one) against a new image, the split: the object which projects is the one that “was” and through the mirror searches for the other, the essence.⁵⁹ The mirror equally implies confrontation with the self. The “who-am-I” conundrum of existentialism points to the metaphysical and social preoccupation of one’s being, a major concern in Pizarnik’s poetry. Poem #14 from El árbol de Diana (1962) recreates the fear of looking into the mirror. The image reflected is that of a woman, who appears constructed by a sexist culture and who is faced with the possibility of recuperating her lost sexual self: “miedo de ser dos/camino del espejo:/alguien en mí dormido/me come y me bebe”(75) (“the fear of being two/ I walk away from the mirror/ someone within me, dormant/ eats me and drinks me”).

In El deseo de la palabra (1975) consciousness of a fractured self is produced through anguish as it begs for existence; the poet longs for the other self to exist, and to do so, she must negate the untrue one: “serás la otra que temes ser”(110) (“you will become the other one you fear”).

Throughout Pizarnik’s poetry the presence of the double or multiple self is inescapable. By using the pronouns, “she”(ella) and “someone”(alguien) the poet manifests the division of the “I”(“yo”). By establishing a distance from the poetic self or the existing “I”, any reference to the other as “she” or “someone” is done to personify silence. In the poem “Los ojos abiertos” (“Eyes wide-opened”) from Los trabajos y las noches (1965). The first person singular pronoun becomes the indefinite pronoun “someone”: “Alguien mide sollozando/la extensión del alba./Alguien apuñala la almohada/en busca de su imposible/lugar de reposo”(107) (“Someone sobbing,

measures/the duration of the dawn./Someone stabs the pillow/in search of her ideal/a place of rest”).

Reference to the inner “I” as “someone”, an indefinite construction, far from the concrete “she”, implies the strangeness of being the other “I”, as it further distances itself twice by splitting the subject into different entities; one subjective and one socially constructed. This ambiguous use of personal pronouns not only creates tension between multiple ways of existing, but done in a subtle way as the split of the subject symbolizes the fragmented woman who desperately tries to reconstruct her lost self. In other instances, see poem #6 El árbol de Diana (1962), the use of the concrete “she” becomes the double voice of the “I”, it is the direct reference to the other being within the emerging self: “... ella se desnuda en el paraíso/de su memoria/ella desconoce el feroz destino/de sus visiones/ella tiene miedo de no saber nombrar/lo que no existe”(71) (“she becomes naked in paradise/from her memory/ she is unaware of the ferocious destiny/ of her visions/she is afraid of not knowing how to name/what does not exist”).

The sense of expansion in mobile subjectivity gives multiple dimensions to the process of *becoming* woman. As the poet acts out her multiple “I” she is rigorously addressing the need to explore and reconsider ways of representing women’s unstable identity. The poetic “I” in Pizarnik is multivocal and refuses closure as it moves toward trying to negotiate ways of constituting the many selves in *becoming*. It is no coincidence that Ferguson’s model of mobile subjectivity is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray’s debates on the rhizomatic action of women’s becoming. The rhizome in Deleuze is also in constant motion as it interconnects different levels of experiences that

keeps constructing and reinventing the incessant *becoming*. Both mobile subjectivity and Deleuze's model of *becoming* are ontological paradigms that offer creative ways of rethinking the woman subject. They both seem to share the notion that the subjective self does not need an "immutable core to have coherence, continuities or patterns". By understanding identity as a fluid source that springs into action, connecting and changing direction, its vitality and expansive range avoids a fixed *becoming*.

Love, is another theme found in the poet's search; *becoming* one through the union shared between lovers.

The absence of love becomes an obsession as the poet searches for a love-union, which will complete her fragmented, erotic existence. The experience of a new love pushes her double to subside and wait until she is needed to return. The erotic woman, for a while emerges, full of passion as she lives three stages of Eros: ecstasy, silence and destruction. At the third stage, she returns to silence, absence and abandonment; Eros becomes Thanatos.⁶⁰ It is during the love encounter that the ever present "I" is given a physical form, a body. Now the poet speaks through the body and inscribes it as the vital-erotic "I". In "El deseo de la palabra" ("The desire for words") from the anthology El infierno musical (1971), the poetic voice believes the climax for becoming woman comes with the experience of having lived that erotic ecstasy: "Ojalá pudiera vivir solamente en éxtasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo" (156) ("Oh, if I could only live in ecstasy, writing the body of the poem with my body"). Pizarnik is aware that a woman can only exist through consciousness of her own body.⁶¹ By writing the erotic self into her poetry, she makes a woman's sexuality the core of her existence. The poet becomes a concrete being through her erotic encounters; her body becomes her identity. The tragedy

of love in Pizarnik is revealed through absolute silence that follows. In the poem “Silencios” from Los trabajos y las noches, the double self returns to haunt and question the poet’s elusive self: “La muerte siempre al lado./Escucho su decir./Solo me oigo”(105) (“Death, always at my side./ I hear her utterance./I only hear myself”).

The idea of the displaced self is further heightened by the spatial fragmentation of her poems. The poet’s creative use of space derives from her talents as a painter. Her poems are visually designed to impact as much as the words themselves, and convey the emotional emptiness found in her poems. The philosophical and metaphysical content of her work allows interdisciplinary readings of feminist concerns regarding identity. The dialectical interplay between personal anguish and broader universal themes of human significance makes reading her works more resonant and receptive to issues on “otherness”. In the poem “Sólo un nombre”(“Only a name”) from her first anthology, La última inocencia (1956) the poet writes herself in the discourse of the “other”: “alejandra alejandra/debajo estoy yo/alejandra (31) (“alejandra alejandra/I am below/alejandra”).

An important antithesis throughout Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetry is the dialogue between life and death. A sense of fear, ongoing anguish and fathomable longing to free herself from *becoming*, makes death more attractive, a friend who can end her tension and self-contradictions, her ultimate liberator. The poet’s outer and inner conflicts compel her to reject the day as a source of light and life. In the poem, “El corazón de lo que existe” (“At the heart of what exists”), from Los trabajos y las noches, it is the night which belongs to her poetic space where she comes in touch with her personal self and to whom she cries out: “no me entregues/tristísima medianoche,/al impuro mediodía

blanco" (105) ("do not surrender me/over to the impure white day/oh wretched midnight").

In the agonizing voyage of discovering who the poet is or wants to be, the reader feels helpless and anguished, realizing the poet's demise, is perhaps due to the promise death offers: finding her true self beyond the physical world. The "I" shattered into multiple selves, searches for the one true self in the process of *becoming*. The richness of Pizarnik's poetry deserves more than the existential analysis it has amalgamated.

Becoming though mobile subjectivity can provide a probing analysis into the discourse of "otherness" and "difference" within feminist readings in subjectivity, and can enrich the poetic experience of Alejandra Pizarnik's legacy through further experimentation.

The application of *becoming* in Pizarnik's poetics has been an attempt to open another avenue in the discourse of the poetic "I". By tracing women's emotional and conscious experience through the formation of the woman subject, the anguish and tension produced by the social construction of self, becomes the center for feminist thinking. In Pizarnik *becoming* is the objective of the ontological search, and the only escape from an untrue, assigned social identity. The emerging and fluid self is tied to many levels of existing as a new feminine subject and *becoming* is once more a category of analysis in women's symbolic representation.

Part 5. - *Becoming* in the Poetry of Excilia Saldaña

The will to *become* rises from women's experiences and desire for change, as it addresses issues of cultural identity and difference, at the core of Hispanic women's sense of self.

At times, in poetic works by Afro-Cuban women poets, a fragmented identity emerges from a double consciousness, resulting in cultural and gender alienation.⁶² Upon examining the poetry produced by black women in post-revolutionary Cuba,⁶³ the reader is, at once, struck by the complexity and richness of content. Given the specific historical transculturation⁶⁴ of Spanish and African peoples who make up the Cuban nation, any attempt to speak from the platform of the "black woman experience" derived from African American feminist theories⁶⁵ is to devitalize the "cuban-ness" of national poetry.⁶⁶

The poet Excilia Saldaña testifies, in her autobiographical poetry,⁶⁷ that cultural hybridity and difference have determined for her an identity imposed by a culture that suffers from complexities of a colonialist history and hierarchical social structure.

Lucía Guerra understands cultural silence as the main deterrent of issues on racial and ethnic discourses. Her study on cultural identity and the problem of self in narratives by Latin American women⁶⁸ focuses on the notion of cultural identity in women-centered discourses on difference. Guerra understands the term "cultural identity" as one that derives from European thinking and based on a rational and logocentric tradition. Cultural identity also promotes the idea of sameness that does not procure a unified subject, less a fixed identity.

Becoming, through the concepts of cultural identity and difference, is challenged and problematized as it must answer to a social, cultural and historical construction of self. To *become* Cuban implies an assigned identity based on a political, regional and socio-historical grounding.

Defining identity as a social practice is, perhaps, one way of understanding what or who identity represents. Pierre Bourdieu offers a definition that divides the “social world” into regions, cultures and languages. In his analysis “Identity and Representation”⁶⁹ Bourdieu introduces the concept of “identity” as an object of mental representations:

... that being-perceived which exists fundamentally through recognition by other people---concern the imposition of perceptions and categories of perception...explain(s) the decisive place (identity),... holds in all regionalist and nationalist movements (224).

Becoming faces a conflict through the search for mental representations of the self since future images must be disconnected from harmful socio-cultural identities that prevent the *becoming* woman from realization. Awareness of ethnic and cultural identity can be a strategy in the development of new mental perceptions of *becoming* within a social and cultural context.

Further to cultural identity issues is the work Woman, Native, Other⁷⁰ (1989) by Trinh Minh-ha who emphasizes a consciousness of difference as a way of generating a “sense of specialness”(86). Minh-ha defines special as: “when one figures among the rare to emerge above the anonymous crowd and enjoys the privilege of preparing the way for one’s more ‘unfortunate’ sisters”(86). *Becoming* considers the “specialness” in difference

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Saldaña's poetry emulates as it searches for identity in racial origins and familial ancestry.

The component of difference considered in *becoming* also raises issues of Hispanic women's social representations and her desire for redefinition. The emergence of oppositional national identities from marginalized ethnic groups procure for the *becoming* concept new grounds for discussion; outlining new discourses on Hispanic women's sense of self.

In Latin America, the contradictions over what and who comprises "Hispanidad"⁷¹ opens discussions on "black Latin America," according to Josaphat Kubayanda:⁷²

... desire and the quest for a genuinely plural reality are at the heart of minority discourse. The African presence in the New World, ... not only undermines mainstream monolithism but also makes possible, theoretically at least, a unique multifacetedness, which admits to collective, or multiple existence in America. (120)

Difference in Latin America must deliberate on the multi-cultural and racial composition Spanish America represents, in its heterogeneity, hybridity and constant changing national cultures. To include difference as a category of analysis in *becoming*, helps to conceptualize cultural and historical differences among women of Hispanic descent. When addressing difference we need to examine and incorporate the three major racial groups that comprise Hispanic nations: African, European and Native Americans. Through the strategy of difference in *becoming* one must de-essentialize a

fixed construction of ethnic groups and revindicate them through new discourses of self that emphasize uniqueness and ethnic contributions to national cultures.

Amaryll Chanady in Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference⁷³ points to Latin America's hybridity of cultures as a model of identity since the heterogeneity produced is constitutive of Latin America.

In this regard, theoretical perspectives that can enhance the uniqueness of the historical and cultural baggage that constitutes a Cuban writer, who is also a black woman, must validate her own experiences as a Hispano-African within a national context. Paradoxically, the very idea that race, color, class and gender, as analytical categories, have not generated much public debate in Latin America, need not indicate that a black woman writer is free from social stigmas, either racist or sexist. In Hispanic cultures, in general, race is a non-topic, at least publicly, and is destined to silence or quickly dispelled from conversation. The ill feeling that arises from addressing such themes and the need to avert it from national consciousness, has much to do with the complexity, injustices and historical blindness, nations with a colonialist past tend to erase from memory. In addition, public discourses of ethnic and class discrimination are not the norm in countries where economic problems are the main priority on national agendas.

Many are the voices of Cuban poets, but Excilia Saldaña incites, in her unique and personal odyssey, discourses on class struggle, gender and cultural hybridization, which her poetry poignantly addresses. Given the socio-cultural-Hispanic reality of a black Cuban woman, the application of theories of a post-colonial nature are more appropriate

to her social reality than those offered by African-American feminist criticism (Davies 1996: 179).

In order to publicly *become* in her poem “Mi nombre”, Saldaña has chosen poetic action to relate her personal and cultural experiences of dissociation and difference, intrinsic to her Cuban cultural conditioning. Confessional autobiographical poetry is therefore a source of wealth of personally lived experiences women convey through emotional development. Excilia Saldaña, as her chosen name Excilia (“Exile”) strongly indicates, bears the mark of “homelessness”⁷⁴ which is prevalent in her poetic composition, “Mi nombre: antielegía familiar” (My Name: A Family Anti-elegy,” 1991). In this poem, consciousness of an historical and cultural hybridization is inscribed into the black female body. As the poet-child maps the domestic sphere of the family home, we realize that it is an extension of her society. It is at this intersection where the borders of the private and the public realm become blur.⁷⁵ Davies (1996; 183) explains that in a post-revolutionary, socialist and patriarchal society, matrifocality is the site of the black Cuban home where the father is absent. In “Mi nombre,” the mother is also absent and it is the grandmother who assumes the homebody location in the poet’s memory of the household. In this regard, the traditional, bourgeois, Catholic family structure of white Cubans, clearly, does not pertain to black Cubans who have never forgotten their African roots, and whose social displacement is the result of uprootedness suffered from the days of the slave trade.⁷⁶

The notion of “otherness” is present as the extended family constitutes the mother-daughter-grandmother matrix. In a post-colonial context, especially one originating from Cuban socialism, the concept of the nation as mother, ideologically

endorsed by a Marxist doctrine, perpetuates the notion of society as the extended family. For this reason, if the father figure is absent, it is the state, supposedly, that assumes the role of mother-nurturer-provider. If this idea of the state, as extended family, is contextualized in the poem, the domestic sphere becomes politically charged and enriched through socio-historical construction. *Becoming* embodies racial differences distinctly produced through cultural hybridity.

A strong awareness of African tradition and female nurturing and bonding is imbedded in the poetic process of the poet's journey of self-definition. The will to *become*, where lived psycho-socio-historical processes have defined women from transcultural societies, is explored through Saldaña's search of her own identity. "Mi nombre" is written in the first person female voice and dedicated to the memory of the grandmother. Although the voices of the father/grandfather's are absent, their presence looms over the domestic space, inhabited by the child/woman narrator. As the poet attempts to reconstruct past family life, it appears that for her, the sense of "homelessness" emerges through metaphors of fragmentation. In Saldaña a home without a family is problematic in the reconstruction of self. The female subject in the poetic text is in crisis as she lives the split-self image created by the non-space of the home.⁷⁷ The image of the elusive home can be expounded through the instability of the metaphor of nation/home that does not ensure the existence of a centered subject, that is, the realization of an ethnically empowered woman. A sense of uprootedness in the home is synonymous with a national history wreaked with inconstancy. The omnipotent nation, its history and cultural hybridity is embedded in the poetic body, and acts as the agent behind the deconstructed, incomplete, non-spatial woman bordering on psychosis. In "Mi

nombre,” the home becomes a place of family oppression and identity repression. Double consciousness of what she is and who the child/narrator wants to *become* decenters the female subject who speaks through her multivalent reality, as she summons her sexuality, gender and racial roles through African rituals:

“Ejerzo otro idioma. Convoco otra dimensión
 Indago
 por esta sangre
 de ahora y de aquí,
 por esta piel
 a trechos
 manchada y áspera,
 a trechos
 fina como un madrigal
 o
 el suspiro de una niña “ (Saldaña 1991, 4)

I use another language. I summon another dimension.
 I search deep
 into this blood
 of here and now in this skin
 in parts
 stained and sour
 in parts
 as fine as a madrigal
 or
 the sigh of a girl (Davies 1996, 188)

The search for the ontological self, through the maternal line is drawn in anguish as the girl/poet is caught in a vortex, and struggles to *become* her own person amidst the presence of two strong women, that of mother and grandmother. Her position between the two, creates tension, it splits the poetic subject in two, as she desperately tries to escape the maelstrom:

Mi madre y la madre de mi padre.
 Y yo en el centro.
 Giran y rueda.

Y yo en el centro.
 Gimen y sufren.
 Y yo en el centro.
 Todos se asoman. Todos las miran.
 Y yo en el centro.
 ¿Dónde buscar cerrajero para esta reja?
 (Saldaña 1991: 8-9)

My mother, and the mother of my father.
 And I in the center.
 They spin and turn.
 And I'm in the center.
 They suffer and moan.
 And I'm in the center.
 Everyone takes a peek. Everyone stares at them.
 And I'm in the center.
 Where can I get a locksmith for these bars? (Translation mine)

The process of becoming Excilia Saldaña is painful and dangerous. It is worth noting that the poet's given name "Excilia" belonged to the grandmother. Her identity has been duplicated as she grounds her existence on the memory of the "other," thereby perpetuating the life of another woman through herself.

Alterity is also present in difference and manifested through the colonized body, where three races intersect; Spanish, African and mulatto; this last one represents the miscegenated race that entraps and enthralls her at the same time. In "Mi nombre" the poet conveys the hybrid body through the site of the sugar cane plantation where the split subject originates, but, nevertheless, a body that holds fascination and sensuousness in the very pain it embodies:

"A través de la mulatez del melado
 oteo un cuerpo:
 me regodeo
 en el cañaveral inédito del pubis,
 en el penacho de la cabeza,
 en el desmocho de las axilas
 en el breve trapiche de los pechos,

en las piernas espesas,
 en el tacho de bronce del ombligo,
 en la centrifuga de los ojos,
 en los dientes refinados.”
 (Saldaña 1991: 15)

Through the dark sugar-cane mixture
 I look over a body:
 I take delight
 in the unpublished sugar cane fields of the pubis,
 in the haughtiness of the head,
 in the clippings of the armpits
 in the brief sugar mill pressing of the breasts,
 in the thick legs,
 in the bronze sugar pan of the navel,
 in the centrifuge of the eyes,
 in the refined teeth.(Translation mine)

Although the hybrid female body is regarded, in the case of Cuba, a synthesis of a colonialist history, miscegenation, and socialist political system, it is primarily a body in search of an identity; an ontological and social self in the process of definition. What one finds intriguing is the closing of “Mi nombre” as the poet uses her own name, Excilia, in an attempt to conceptualize it through her wandering self. The panegyric composition also suggests that both female subject and nation are in crisis, both are inscribed into one another:

Mi nombre
 de pie y camino,
 mi nombre.
 Mi nombre
 de yagua y cieno,
 mi nombre.
 Mi nombre
 de grasa y humo,
 mi nombre
 (Saldaña 1991: 31)

My name
 made of foot and path,
 my name.

My name
made of palm leaves and mud silt
My name.
My name
made of grease and smoke,
my name (Translation mine)

What is most prominent in Saldaña's poetry is the need to identify with the home and the grandmother, her personal source of vitality and true cultural and ethnic identity. As other Cuban poets,⁷⁸ Saldaña draws pride and strength from her African ancestral roots, which sustain and nourish her own identity. The *becoming* issue in Saldaña's poem is truly hybrid in its ramifications as it searches to ground her identity through maternal, ancestral, national, racial and historical discourses.

As the will to *become* is synonymous with action, it is through creative action, social responsibility and the need to will change, that Saldaña has acted publicly, through poetry. For the poet, the process of writing is a matter of survival; of writing women's consciousness and of voicing the imposing vision of cultural identity and social division pertinent to national reality. Through *becoming*, poetry by women of ethnic groupings can be discussed as a product of a socio-historical and ideological evolution in the Americas: it can illustrate the concerted efforts women writers are formulating in the process of defining themselves through culture and ethnicity.

Notes

Part 1. *Becoming in Balún Canán*

¹ The idea of a woman's identity as multiple is central to feminist thinking on subjectivities, see Kathy E. Ferguson, The man question: Visions of subjectivity in feminist theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Equally important regarding feminist narratives is Bronwyn Davies, Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience, ed. Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1992. 53-76.

² The notion of "becoming-woman" is found in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophical project, A thousand Plateaus. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. This concept has been highly refuted by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray and feminist critic Rosi Braidotti who see the model as another male project that misrepresents woman's identity by excluding her from the idea of "sexual difference", central to feminist thinking. See, Rosi Braidotti, "Of Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman," Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 111-137.

³ Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson deliver a convincing argument on the shifting importance of the narrative from "representational to ontological narrativity" in their study, "Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity," ed. Craig Calhoun, Social Theory and the Politics. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994. 37-99.

⁴ *Becoming*, as a topic dealing with women's identity, is found in all the works analyzed: Balún Canán by Rosario Castellanos; Demasiado Amor by Sara Sefchovich; La mujer habitada by Gioconda Belli, Poems by Alejandra Pizarnik, "My name: A Family Anti-Elegy" by Excilia Saldaña; La estación de fiebre by Ana Istarú; I, Rigoberta Menchú by Rigoberta Menchú; Eva Luna by Isabel Allende; Maldito Amor by Rosario Ferré and Vaca sagrada by Diamela Eltit.

⁵ Craig Calhoun points to the importance of the subaltern's experience, also referred to as particularisms, as a way of debunking universalistic truths. See, Calhoun's, "The Standpoint of Critique? Feminist Theory, Social Structure, and Learning from Experience," Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995. 162-192.

⁶ Hannah Arendt links the concept of action to the public realm where political beings define their existence and share collective power. See Shiraz Dossa, The public realm and the public self: The political theory of Hannah Arendt. Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 1989.

⁷ Sandra Harding argues how socially disadvantaged individuals can create a more epistemic advantage if their lives were examined through paradigms of power along with those belonging to the dominant group. See Harding, "Standpoint Epistemology (a Feminist Version): How Social Disadvantage creates Epistemic Advantage," Social Theory and Sociology: The Classics and Beyond, ed. Stephen P. Turner. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996. 146-160.

⁸ The philosophic concept of the Willing faculty is not new. However, if grounded in History, as I believe to be the case of Hannah Arendt's political-social theory, Willing and Willingness (1974) then it has an enormous potential as a category of analysis that can benefit both feminist thinking and feminist readings in gendered -oriented works by Hispanic women.

⁹ Elba D. Birmingham-Pokorny, "La Malinche: A Feminist Perspective on Otherness in Mexican and Chicano Literature," Confluencia 11.2 (1996): 120-136.

¹⁰ Debra A. Castillo, Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 4.

¹¹ The idea of empowering women as the “other” is examined through the historical presence of Malinche. Her poetic voice can be found in poems such as Rosario Castellanos’ “Malinche”; Carmen Tafolla’s “La Malinche”; Naomi Quinonez’s “Trilogy” and Lorna Dee Cervantes’ “Baby you Cramp My Style” found in the analysis by Birmingham-Pokorny (Confluencia, 1996).

¹² Octavio Paz, El laberinto de la soledad (1950; Madrid: Cátedra, 1993). In this work Paz confronts the controversial theme of national identity and gives a critical interpretation of Mexico’s historical reality.

¹³ The search for national origins is Balún Canán’s quest. Priscilla Meléndez alludes in her study that the mythic socio-historical journey into the past is associated with patriarchal and imperialistic structures of power. See her article, “Genealogía y escritura en Balún-Canán de Rosario Castellanos,” MLN 113.2 (1998). 339-363.

Part 2. *Becoming* in Demasiado Amor

¹⁴ The concept of the “literary prostitute” can be regarded a subversive image embedded in the narrative structure of Sefchovich’s novel and, one that re-examines the relationship between traditional literary heroines and new ones, constructed by the writer to confront social taboos and institutions that promote and condemn prostitution while making full use of its image to fix women’s social construction. See Debra Castillo, Easy Women : Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 215

¹⁵ Alicia del Campo points to the socio-cultural framework of the text and believes that Mexico’s dependent liberal-economy is responsible for further problematizing its national identity. Mexico’s status as a nation that sells its identity for money is liken to the profession of a prostitute. See Campos, “Reterritorializando lo mexicano desde lo femenino en el contexto neoliberal: Demasiado Amor de Sara Sefchovich,” New Novel Review 2.2 (1995). 61-73.

¹⁶ Castillo, Easy Women 223. By using the term “sex worker” Castillo steps outside stereotypical roles assigned to women who transgress social codes of female behavior. She attempts to refocus on a profession by women who market sex as a commodity, in exchange for income. Castillo attempts to open discourse on the psycho-social dilemma facing women, whose bodies have been morally and legally defined by men and social institutions .

¹⁷ *Becoming* in public, as presented in the work, runs contrapuntal to the notion that a public act empowers women as it does man. The contradiction is clearly drawn between what society considers being “a public man” and a “public woman”, the latter refers exclusively to the socio-cultural image of a “prostitute”. See, Jonathan Culler, “Lyric and History: Prostitution and Les Fleurs du Mal.” Manuscript 1995.

¹⁸ Jean Franco, Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico. New York: Columbia University Press. 1989. 131-132.

¹⁹ Sara Castro-Klaren, “The Subject, Feminist Theory and Latin American Texts,” Studies in 20th Century-Literature 20.1 (1996): 271-302.

²⁰ Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. (5). The five points are present in the study developed by Castro-Klaren, Studies in 20th Century Literature (275-276).

²¹ Durán, Javier “Mujer y nación: la (de)construcción de imaginarios nacionales en la novelística contemporánea de mujeres en México” Feminaria XI. 21 (1998): 50-53.

²² del Campo, “Reterritorializando lo mexicano desde lo femenino...” (68).

²³ Debra A. Castillo, Talking, Back. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. (1)

²⁴ Elena González and Eliana Ortega, La sartén por el mango. Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1985.

²⁵ Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women Writers. Minneapolis: Hispanic Issues, 1994.

²⁶ Castillo, Talking Back

²⁷ Castro-Klaren, Studies in 20th Century-Literature 271-302.

²⁸ Cristina Piña, ed. Mujeres que escriben sobre mujeres (que escriben). Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1997.

Part 3. *Becoming* in La mujer habitada

²⁹ Gioconda Belli, La mujer habitada. Managua: Editorial Vanguardia, 1989.

³⁰ The debate over women's social construction and mainstream moral theories of self is ongoing, even among feminist thinkers of different schools of thought. Belli's work allows us to connect women's consciousness-raising with the concept of self-determination and women's relational nature to the concept of autonomy, which in addition, develops the concept of *becoming*, central to the analysis of the novel by Gioconda Belli.

³¹ Jean Paul Sartre, Search for a Method. New York: Vintage Books, 1963. Sartre understands the self to be determined by situations presented in life... "factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being" (91). The socialization of the self is further expressed in Leslie Bloom's work, Under the Sign of Hope (65). Life experiences in the present are crucial to analyzing past experiences and "the interpretation emphasizes the individual's experiences as a journey of becoming."

³² Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique," Feminists Rethink the Self. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. 40-61.

³³ Lorraine Code, What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. 199.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, "Subject In/Of/To History and His Story," A poetics of Postmodernism. New York: Routledge, 1988. 158-177.

³⁵ Leslie Rebecca Bloom, Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 63.

³⁶ Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982 and Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, relation, and difference in psychoanalytic perspective," The Future of Difference, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985.

³⁷ Gioconda Belli, El ojo de la mujer. Managua: Editorial Vanguardia, 1991.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. 3-25.

³⁹ Adelaida López-Martínez, "Dynamics of Change in Latin American Literature: Contemporary Women Writers, Studies in 20th Century Literature. 20.1 (1996): 13-64.

⁴⁰ Lucía Guerra, La mujer fragmentada: historias de un signo. Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1994.

⁴¹ Nelly Richard, "Feminismo, Experiencia y Representación," Revista Iberoamericana. LXII (1996): 176:177.

⁴² According to Chris Weedon, Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, subjectivity can be defined as follows: "subjectivity is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (32).

⁴³ Richard, "Feminismo, Experiencia y Representación," Studies in 20th Century Literature. Richard is an advocate of theorizing experience from a feminist perspective, and more so, from a knowledge position of a subordinate geographical location in relation to international power. She further believes, and I tend to agree, that the Latin American experience in subject formation is a way of re-inscribing culture back into theory and feminist praxis (739).

⁴⁴ Irene García, "Teoría literaria feminista: el problema de la representación: el problema de la representación," Debate feminista. 9 (1994): 114.

⁴⁵ Nattie Golubov, "La crítica literaria feminista contemporánea: entre el esencialismo y la diferencia," Debate feminista. 9 (1994): 116.

⁴⁶ Ileana Rodríguez, Women guerrillas and love. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Part 4. *Becoming* in the Poetry of Pizarnik

⁴⁷ Alejandra Pizarnik, Obras completas. Ed. Cristina Piña. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1994. All quotes used in the present analysis belong to Piña's edition which include: Las aventuras perdidas (1958); Arbol de Diana (1962); Los trabajos y las noches (1965); El infierno musical (1971); El deseo de la palabra (1975). All translations of poetic passages into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴⁸ Amina Mama affirms that the main criteria for theorizing subjectivities is its existence in the world of experiences. See Beyond the masks: Race, gender and subjectivity. London: Routledge, 1995. 98. Many subjectivities exist: mobile subjectivities (Ferguson 1993, 154); migratory or Black female subjectivity (Davies, 1994, 36-37); non-unitary subjectivity (Robinson, 1991, 11), etc. The existence of many subjectivities in women's discourse implies that the issue of women's self has not been resolved. The idea shared by feminist theorists, that it is produced through contradictions and conflicts makes fragmentation central to its production and to women's marginal representation in history. For further readings in migratory subjectivity see Carole Boyce Davies, Black women, writing and identity: Migrations of the subject. London: Routledge, 1994. For additional readings in non-unitary subjectivity see Sally Robinson, Engendering the subject: Gender and self-representation in contemporary women's fiction. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

⁴⁹ Kathy E. Ferguson, The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 153-183. The notion of mobile subjectivity, I believe converges with Deleuze and Irigaray's understanding of the concept of becoming: the idea of women's active and multiple levels of self in constant motion and connection.

⁵⁰ Chris Weedon, Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

⁵¹ G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind. Trans. J.B. Baillie. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

⁵² Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." Socialist Review 15 (1985): 65-107.

⁵³ Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness." Feminist Studies 16 (1990): 115-50.

⁵⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds. New York: Methuen, 1987.

⁵⁵ Alicia Genovese, "La viajera en el desierto", Feminaria VIII.16 (1996): 10-11. For Genovese, Pizarnik's search for self is also the search for a language in which to write and shape her own subjectivity.

⁵⁶ Florinda F. Goldberg, Alejandra Pizarnik: Este espacio que somos. Gaithersburg, MD: Ediciones Hispanamérica, 1994. This book is an excellent source of analysis for the recurrent motifs in Pizarnik's poetry.

⁵⁷ Cristina Piña, La palabra como destino: un acercamiento a la poesía de Alejandra Pizarnik. Buenos Aires: Botella al mar, 1981. Piña explores main motifs in Pizarnik's poetry and attributes the night with symbolic elements that incorporate the poet's experiences: thirst, silence, solitude and journey into the self.

⁵⁸ Clelia Moure, "Alejandra Pizarnik: una grieta en la razón occidental", Mujeres que escriben sobre mujeres (que escriben). Ed. Cristina Piña. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1997. 113-148. Moure emphasizes that Pizarnik's poetic language can be interpreted as a "symbolic artifact" that opposes western logic and linguistic control.

⁵⁹ Francisco Lasarte, "Más allá del surrealismo: La poesía de Alejandra Pizarnik", Revista Iberoamérica XLIX (1983): 867-877. I tend to agree with Lasarte on his observation that Pizarnik's transcendental poetry has less to do with surrealism and more with the innovative use of language to introduce a new discourse on self.

⁶⁰ Cristina Piña, "La palabra obsena." Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos Supplement 5 (1990 May): 17-38. Piña explores the relationship of the erotic and the sense of destruction in the poet's imagery and carefully chosen words.

⁶¹ Reminiscent of Hélène Cixous' écriture feminine, the poet situates women's body as a textual strategy. See Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine. University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

Part 5. *Becoming* in the poetry of Saldaña

⁶² Catherine Davies, "Cross-Cultural Homebodies in Cuba: The Poetry of Excilia Saldaña", Latin American Women's Writing. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 179-200. Davies points to the hierarchy of society and ethnicity as the cause of fragmentation and alienation in Caribbean writing, and further adds that it is stronger in the writings by women from racial and low income background that deviate from the dominant power group.

⁶³ Catherine Davies, "Writing the African Subject: The Work of Two Cuban Women Poets", Women: A cultural review 4.1 (1993): 33-48. Davies believes that post-revolutionary Cuba is the site or crossroads for studies in nation and difference where the sense of "otherness" emerges with the appearance and application of cultural and post-colonial theories.

⁶⁴ The difference in meaning between the process of "acculturation" and "transculturation" must be clearly understood. In acculturation there is culture assimilation: one culture remains dominant while the other inferior to it. The position of the "other" is that of the subordinate group. In transculturation there is constant interaction between two or more cultures: its end is the creation of a third, product of the racial mix. The third entity in transculturation is produce through miscegenation, or the new race as a result of racial blending.

⁶⁵ Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. London: The Women's Press, 1984. 211-212. Walker's visit to Cuba in 1977 revealed to her that a black woman's experience could not be universal but rather examined from the regional, cultural and historical context it derives.

⁶⁶ Nancy Morejón, Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén. Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1974. 46. Morejón, herself a Cuban poet, quotes Nicolás Guillén in the need to search for national poetry and not one considered black or white but a product of an Hispanic and African ancestry.

⁶⁷ Excilia Saldaña, Mi nombre: antielegía familiar. Havana. 1991. This autobiographical poem is exemplary in its richness of African ancestral identity and social fragmentation in Saldaña's experiences and her household seen as an extension of the Cuban nation.

⁶⁸ Lucía Guerra Cunningham, "Identidad cultural y la problemática del ser en la narrativa femenina latinoamericana", Discurso Literario 6.2 1988: 361-389.

⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "Identity and Representation," Language and Symbolic Power. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991. 220-228.

⁷⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

⁷¹ The concept of "hispanidad" or what constitutes a Latin American identity, has produced many debates, among them Julio Ortega's in his book entitled Crítica de la identidad: La pregunta por el Perú en su literatura. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988.

⁷² Josaphat Kubayanda, "Minority Discourse and the African Collective: Some Examples from Latin American and Caribbean Literature." Cultural Critique 6 (1987): 113-130.

⁷³ Amaryll Chanady, Ed. Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

⁷⁴ Davies, Latin American Women's Writing. Saldaña's sense of homelessness is best understood by the concept of the "unhomely" proposed by Homi Bhaba in The Location of Culture. London and New York, 1994.

⁷⁵ Davies, Latin American Women... 184. The idea of family life in Cuba is unstable as home and nation become blur, creating an inbetween space where the true home exists for the displaced black woman subject.

⁷⁶ Nancy Morejón, "Race and nation", AfroCuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture. New York: Latin American Bureau, 1993. Black Cuban identity can best be understood if the process of transculturation is grasped as the mixing of two cultures into a third with the indigenous component eliminated and replaced by African slaves. The national spirit stems from the miscegenation produced.

⁷⁷ Davies, Latin American Women's Writing... (179-200). Davies' analysis of Saldaña's poetry looks to postcolonial theories in offering new interpretations of Caribbean poetry by black women.

⁷⁸ Other contemporary Cuban women poets of African descent are: Nancy Morejón, Georgina Herrera and Soleida Ríos, among others.

Chapter V: The *Public Realm* in Ana Istarú, Rigoberta Menchú and Isabel Allende

To achieve the public domain is to exist.¹ For many theoreticians of the public sphere, speech is achieved through action that empowers the individual. The will to act is at once redeemed through public deeds, as representation and definition of who we are or who we want to be, become the reason for claiming space in the political public realm of civil society. For women, this implies that the concept of *willing* is a positive act that guarantees them a voice and the freedom to mold their existence legitimately and morally. Since *willing* is composed of experience and action, the act of willing change puts women in a position to enter the public domain. Conversely, the private realm of the home has been conceived, since the time of Ancient Greece, the Roman Republic and much of the twentieth-century, as a place of subordination for women. The private household, long associated with ideas of powerlessness, necessity and reproduction, has been the site where women hold no representation, and, for this reason, remain non-existent in the public realm. Traditionally, the home has been regarded, as yet, another space where men have extended public control over the property they own; women included. It is within this binary distinction of private/public spheres that women's body has been defined as part of the household property men have claimed, as masters of the house.

Confined to the home, women have been separated from the becoming multiple selves the public sphere confers on individuals who possess the power of speech. Further to this dichotomy, lies the notion that only the public domain is political. Moreover, and to a large degree, the emergence of the social in the public realm, has given rise to the

private domain as a political space which women have appropriated in hopes of erasing the boundaries between private and public.

Literature, as a social and cultural product, exists in the realm of the public through creative action, and as such, ensures women a public voice in the process of narrating her story. By placing writing in the public sphere, theoreticians can draw from social concepts especially those of feminist politics and use it to create dialogues and insights into the social value of the aesthetic work.

Three Hispanic women writers have been selected to interact with the concept of the public realm found in their works. Ana Istarú's poetic anthology, La estación de fiebre (1991) is the first work used to confront the issue of the private domain in the realm of the public. Her political use of erotic poetry defies sexual oppression women bear in a sexist, patriarchal, post-colonial society where Catholicism is deeply embedded in traditionally determined values. The second author, Rigoberta Menchú, brings the public domain into the Guatemalan ethnic discourse of "other" and does so through her testimonial, I, Rigoberta Menchú (1983). The third work, Isabel Allende's novel, Eva Luna (1992) calls upon the need for women to exist and define themselves in public. Her character, Eva, reaches a human form with definite characteristics as her public identity makes her legitimate.

The will to act in public defines women, as their personal experiences or private matters become public issues through the power of writing. Achieving the public domain is to exist and the act of writing is the determining factor in producing social consciousness.

Part 1. - *The Public Realm* in Ana Istarú's La estación de fiebre

Poetry, long associated with the public sphere, provides contemporary women with a forum in which to voice gender concerns and seek political representation through art.²

In a novel way, Costa Rican poet Ana Istarú turns poetry into a public forum, making full use of women's erotic language while politicizing the private space of the bedroom. The poet defies and dispels misconceptions surrounding women's sexuality by confronting myths that have been culturally, historically and religiously determined. Istarú attempts to redefine women's sexuality through poetic space, and does so, in a convincing and assertive use of sexuality as a political discourse.

The poetry anthology, La estación de fiebre³ relates explicitly women's perspective and their active participation in the lovemaking ritual. Erotic poetry is at once turned into a vehicle of contestation as poetic space becomes a political zone where women's sexual desires and their politicized bodies confront social, cultural and religious taboos. Istarú's poetry challenges the boundaries of male erotica as it draws a parallel between women's socio-cultural oppression of their bodies and political repression in Latin American societies.

The theme of sexual love in Ana Istarú's erotic poetry compels the poet to take a stance in connection with a politically charged private domain. The much taboo subject of sex, although considered a private matter by patriarchal standards, becomes a struggle vitiated by power and control in the private sphere.

Sexuality, central to feminist politics, converges with poetry as it resonates with tribute of Hélène Cixous' La jeune née⁴ as a first step toward writing women's

consciousness, and Julia Kristeva's call⁵ of liberating women's body through awareness of the unconscious, and the use of evocative language to achieve it. By inscribing women's own discourse on sexuality, the poet attempts, through various acts of sexual love, to decolonize women's body⁶ from male erotica. To achieve this end, Istarú introduces four different forms of gender control in her poetry: sex, politics, religion and culture. Her poems first disavow sex as a taboo, then, make a political link between desire and power by connecting the private to the public domain.

The thematic development of Istarú's poetic text creates an extra-textual dialogue with social, cultural and religious institutions, while delivering a unique poetic odyssey of a sensorial, emotional and conceptual undertaking.

In traditional Costa Rican erotic poetry, women are embodied by male desire and defined according to male fantasies. In her poetry, Istarú gives women a voice and the occasion to rise and to assert their femininity and their equality to men through pleasurable accounts and diverse sexual positions, as the introduction of new gendered perceptions offer new discourses. For Margarita Fernandez-Olmos the sense of heightened affirmation derives from the positive effects generated by Latin American women's use of eroticism in creative writing.⁷ Critical analysis can be derived from inventive ways women construct the literary text. Eroticism, as a literary topic, is often time used strategically to confront larger social issues, and expose dominant social structures that impose strict codes of conduct on women not conferred on men. For this reason, writing the erotic is one way of confronting inequality between women and men and religious institutions that have created the virgin syndrome in Latin America to further suppress sexual freedom in Hispanic women. Seen in this light, erotic

representation, thus, becomes a dynamic and political affirmation of women's identity and a way of creating new public discourses that assist in understanding women's psycho-social development.

In La estación de fiebre, Istarú's poetic rendering of sexual love appears unorthodox for a Central American woman to express publicly, yet it stems primarily from her resistance to strong patriarchal institutions such as Catholicism and the Hispanic culture. The Catholic prohibition and repression of sex, inscribed in her poetry, illustrates how sexist and harmful religious dogmas perceive women, not only as reproductive receptacles, but also as obedient virgins, human beings who do not merit public nor private recognition of sexual gratification bestowed upon their male partner.⁸

In Latin America, womanhood has been linked, traditionally, to symbols of subordination, through the Malinche and Virgin Mary syndrome. These two images of women are, perhaps, the greatest myths so deeply embedded in Catholicism and the Hispanic culture. The Aztec Malinche and the prostitute are conceptually conceived as synonymous and wield moral and psychological control over women transgressors who do not comply with strict social codes. The rise of the Malinche syndrome can best be explained through the cult of the mother, which Latin American societies deeply propagate through culture and religion. For this reason, Marianismo, or the cult of the Virgin Mary is so prevalent in Hispanic societies. Mary is the symbol of purity, a being, who, miraculously conceives without a male partner. Sex is therefore a taboo that subjects Hispanic women. Since sex is part of bearing offsprings, women are tainted and sinful in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church. Deconstruction of these harmful images

is contemplated in Istarú's contestation, as she negates women's symbolic representations of men's ideals.

The fascination with the topic of sex in western cultures, privileging male domination, is deeply embedded in the male ethos of Latin American patriarchy. Sexuality is, perhaps, one of the greatest unexplored cultural myths in Spanish America,⁹ and for this reason, any attempt to undertake problems and analysis in this area can assist in contextualizing women's psycho-social conditions and conditioning within her cultural setting. In Istarú's text, the very idea of writing about women's participation in an active sexual role is confrontational. Traditionally, erotic literature has been considered a male agency and a male domain. Although Hispanic women have participated sporadically in erotic poetry with literary names such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (17th Century); Mercedes Matamoros (19th Century); Ana Roqué, Delmira Agustini, Clementina Suárez, Carilda Oliver Labra, Rosario Ferré, Julia de Burgos, Rosario Castellanos, Alejandra Pizarnik, Luisa Valenzuela, Albalucía Angel, Isabel Allende, Matilde Daviú, María Luisa Mendoza, Cristina Peri Rossi, Cecilia Vicuña, Rosa María, Roffé, Alicia Steimberg, Liliana Díaz Mindurry (20th Century)¹⁰ it is only in the twentieth-century women writers have become active participants in the production of erotic literature, given the changing socio-historical status of women in western society.

Ana Istarú's deliberate and evocative use of genitalia in her lyrical compositions, both female/male, disrupts any prevailing or unilateral stance male writers have adopted in past erotic literature. If men once controlled the private bedroom encounter and defined women's body and her role according to his erotic discourse, it is now the woman

poet who creates a dialogue with him and with social institutions that have defined her own body and passion.

Through amorous activities, the poet begins to unveil her partner not as a sex object or possession but, interestingly, as a subject in equal rapture and standing.

Women's public participation in discourses on sexuality addresses and, at the same time transgresses fixed social and religious moral codes damaging to women's psychological development. To go public on private issues implies initiating countless discussions on power, freedom, social justice and morality, as women search for novel ways of defining themselves.

Through her poetry anthology, Istarú creates an intratextual dialogue with the erotic work of Costa Rican poet Jorge Debravo, Devocionario del amor sexual¹¹. Her work consists mainly of 33 poems, all thematically connected to the temporality of different lovemaking rituals. Istarú's insistence on sexual discourse is a constant reminder that intimacy is also a public issue since men's dominion has prevailed, up till now, in the private and public realms. The specific use of erotic language in her poetry stems primarily and strategically from bodily organs: the mouth, during foreplay (Poem II); the erected penis (Poem XXVIII); the wet clitoris during climax (Poem XI); and the tranquility achieved after sex (Poem XXVII). The erotic metaphors provide whole new referents in semiotic discursivity, as it breaks down the mythic conceptualization of women in Catholic societies. For instance, in Poem III, Istarú publicly denounces sexual repression by which Hispanic women are subjected in patriarchal, Catholic countries:

Este tratado apunta/honestamente/que el pudor y su sueño/no encuentran
mejor dueño/que el rincón apacible/de la vagina/y me destina/a una paz

virginal/y duradera./Esto el tratado apunta./Por ser latina y dulce y
 verdaderamente inclinada/a una casta tensión de la cadera./Y no lastima/al
 parecer/las intenciones puras/de tantos curas./El novio se contenta,/el
 padre alienta/que en América Central/siempre se encuentra/ su hija virgen
 y asexual./Este tratado enseña/cómo el varón domeña/y preña/en la
 América Central.../Y de esta fállica/omnipotencia/mi rebelión de
 obreras/me defienda./Porque tomo la punta de mis senos,/campanitas/de
 agudísimo hierro/y destierro/este himen puntual/que me amordaza/en
 escozor machista/y en larga lista/de herencia colonial./Yo borro este
 tratado de los cráneos,/con ira de quetzal/lo aniquilo,/con militar sigilo/lo
 muerdo y pulverizo,/como a un muerto ajado e indeciso/lo mato y lo
 remato/con mi sexo abierto y rojo,/manejo cardinal de la alegría, desde
 esta América encarnada y encendida,/mi América de rabia, la Central.”¹²

This treatise honestly declares/that modesty and its dreaming it/do not find
 a better owner/than the gentle corner/ of my vagina/ as it destines me/to a
 virginal and lasting peace./This is what this treatise declares./ For being
 Latin and sweet and truly inclined/ to a chaste tension of the hips./And it
 doesn't damage/apparently/the pure intentions of many priests./The
 betrothed is content,/the father is relieved that in Central America one will
 always find his daughter, virginal and asexual./This treatise shows how the
 man subdues/ and impregnates/in Central America./And from this
 phallic/omnipotence/may my working class rebellion/defend me./Because

**I take the nipples of my breasts,/little bells/of strong steel/and I exile/this
convenient hymen/that silences me/in burning machismo/and from a long
list/of colonial inheritance./I erase this treatise of craniums,/with the anger
of Quetzal/I destroy it /with military concealment/I bite and pulverize
it,/as a shriveled, undecided corpse/I kill it and kill it again/with my sex
open and red,/ a cardinal handful of joy,/from this America incarnate and
inflamed,/my America of fury, Central America. (Translation mine)**

**Poem III, used in its entirety, discloses many issues of paramount concern to
Hispanic women in their struggle to confront formidable social, historical, cultural and
religious barriers. The reader is induced in deliberating on issues of: virginity, religious
control, male domination, colonial inheritance and the right of women to define their own
identity through their bodies. The attempt to classify this poem as a treatise, postulates
the pressing need to address women's sexuality in a systematic discourse. Istarú's
position is not lighthearted, but rather enraging and confrontational. When disapprobation
is cause for change, she wills action through her working class rebellion and her desire to
annihilate all harmful myths imposed on women, ethically and symbolically. The poet
proceeds by first liberating herself sexually. Through sexuality she becomes wholesome,
and as she reappropriates her own body, her voice resonates with confidence and
determination.**

**Istarú's cultural identity is clearly Central American and it is from this platform
that she speaks politically and historically. Her resolution to erase the harmful
conditioning of women in her culture is rendered through the first person singular**

pronoun, “yo”, and with it evokes her ancestral indigenous anger to help her rid of damaging minds that have composed harmful treatise to subordinate women. The poet’s will to become a woman publicly can only start in the most private of sexual encounters, where self-definition starts with asserting one’s sexual freedom.

With the celebration of life, as its main orientation, the use of erotic poetry conveys a direct and powerful message of the need to re-construct women’s identity through the body, as pleasure and life converge.

Costa Rican amorous poetry has been traditionally conservative in their view of sex, and women as men’s counterpart, as he perceives love as the salvation of the world and, in even broader terms, as an ontological continuation and a nostalgia for harmony¹³. Margarita Rojas studies how Istarú transgresses men’s universal vision of love by creating a dialogue with Debravo’s own erotic poetry. By publicly producing a confrontation of two viewpoints on sex, a new poetics is born, whereby men and women speak jointly through eroticism.

By willing change, women’s personal accounts or lived experiences, turn private agendas into public debate as poetry connects emotionally and politically to the public sphere. Istarú’s textual strategy, i.e, her selection of poetry over prose, illustrates the impact and psychic density poetry generates through a codified, condensed language. The poet’s conceptual rendering of sex is purposely used to create a dialogue with patriarchal institutions. Consuelo Hernández, in her study on “Femininity and Feminism in the Poetry of Ana Istarú”¹⁴ exemplifies the use of poetry in stimulating public debate. Hernández believes that there are three instances when Istarú’s erotic anthology transgresses women’s social conditioning: 1) in the first instance she stresses the need to

have the same equality as men and rebels against “authority, patriarchy, tradition and phallo-centrism”; 2) the second occurs through consciousness-raising of gender difference and women’s need to define herself through the body; and 3) the third reflects on the womb as the site for negotiation and fusion: both bodies come together in the womb to form a union. An example of the first instance can be seen in poem IX:

“Si del sexo te acuerdas/ que ondea bajo mi manto/de vello y azabache,/he destruido el lamento/ final de los obispos,/a puñados olvido viejas recomendaciones,/los afectos pasados,/séquitos de dolores, /soy la tierra/ y el rayo para tu sexo erguido” (61-62).

“If you remember my sex/ that oscillates under my cloak/ made of black pubis,/then I have destroyed /the final lament of the bishops,/ I have stamped out old recommendations, /past affections,/ the followers of pain,/ I am the earth/ and the ray for your erected sex.” (Translation mine)

The second instance is an awakening. The celebration of the feminine body emerges through an exploration of passion, pleasure and the articulation of a new sexual language. The deliberate use of genitalia embraces the liberating effect of a new erotic revolution. An example can be found in poem XI:

Mi clitoris destella/ en las barbas de la noche/ como un pétalo de lava,/como un ojo tremendo/ al que ataca la dicha, / al que el placer ataca/ y contraataca /con zumos delicados, /enfebrecidas salamandras...

My clitoris sparks/ in the night's beard/ as a petal of lava,/ as a gigantic eye/ that attacks good fortune, / that pleasure attacks/ and counterattacks/ with delicate juices, / enfeverished salamanders... (Translation mine)

In the third instance, the womb appears, as the center of women's climactic sexual activity and as a life-giving location:

... ahora que la piel/ de las paredes se palpan/ varón y mujer/ sin alcanzar el mirto,/ la brasa estremecida,/ ardo sencillamente,/encinta y embriagada./Rescato la palabra primera/ del útero,/ y clásica y extravagante/ emprendo la tarea/ de despojarme,/Y te amo (Poem IV 53-54).

... now that the skin/ from the walls palpitate/ man and woman / without reaching the myrtle,/ the quivering red hot coal,/ I simply burn,/ pregnant and intoxicated./ I rescue the first word/ that comes from the womb,/ its classic and extravagant/ I undertake the task/ of undressing myself, /And I love you. (Translation mine)

A reading of Istarú's poetry strikes at the heart of gender domination. The poet conveys in explicit sexual terms, the pressing need to address social, cultural and religious practices that conceal women's subordination through sex; practices that contribute to men's domination over women.

Poetry, in its public use, reveals that art and politics can, together, stimulate social consciousness and brings recognition to women's contributions in society. It is through awareness of feminist politics that Istarú is able to use the private realm in unmasking structures of gender subordination. The emergence of women's consciousness in

aesthetic works is vital to raising questions on the impact of social thinking in literary writing, and its reflexive effect on the reader. Perhaps, what is important to consider is what Castro-Klarén views as “the question of an ideology of writing,”¹⁵ i.e. women’s ideology in textual reconstruction of identity.

Ana Istarú’s erotic poetry is highly political as it stands to bring the social back to the public realm and private matters to the emporium.

Through the effective strategy of poetry, women are bringing to public scrutiny highly charged topics such as sex, and introducing gender oppression in the home as an extension of patriarchal societies. By revealing women’s private experiences and action through poetic representation, words become the catalysts that guarantee women public appearance and the right to a public voice.

Part 2: The Public Realm in Rigoberta Menchú's I, Rigoberta Menchú

One aspect of the public realm is government. An authoritarian government, in particular, contrary to a democratic system, casts a different power discourse onto the public sphere.

In life-threatening circumstances, where the public realm is under seizure by a corrupt government that denies the individual citizen fundamental human rights, breaking the silence to end abuse is the only alternative.

In Latin America, the literary genre known as *testimonio* encourages the oppressed to speak up, they are often time women of different ethnic backgrounds than that of the dominant culture. The *testimonio* or testimonial acts as a spokes piece for women of subaltern groups, and affords them the opportunity to publicly denounce the harmful effects of the dominant culture in their private lives, as they act to preserve their ethnic identity and their endangered indigenous cultures.

Willing the public realm urges marginal groups in society to bring social consciousness of their particular situation to the collective community. Experience, as acquired knowledge of the human condition, is legitimized when action promises legal and political change; the will to act converts experience of the private realm into public knowledge.

The notion of "experience," as a meaningful category, on which to reflect the existence of the "other," i.e. ethnic groups omitted from traditional national history, can be helpful in construing a history of difference.¹⁶ From a historical viewpoint, "experience" allows a subaltern subject to recount her private story as acquired knowledge, and as evidence of existing in the world.

Defining “experience” is, perhaps, not an easy task, given its alternative status to History’s foundational discourse that affords explanation of human events through pre-established and uncontested categories of analysis. Inserting experience, a flexible, albeit evasive category in historical accounts implies introducing a critical approach to the construction of a subaltern’s reality. It is the individual’s subjective and objective experience that constructs past events as new historical consciousness.

As a main component of *willing*, “experience” gives the subject visibility and authorizes action, which in turn, politicizes and legitimizes events being recounted. If one understands experience to be subjective and objective knowledge of past events, and accepts its capacity to raise new consciousness,¹⁷ then experience, as a component of *willing* is indispensable to imparting new knowledge to the public sphere.

The sixties introduced in Hispanic America the *testimonio* as a new narrative genre, developed alongside liberation and radical movements. In the seventies, the genre was bestowed upon the prestigious literary award, “Casa de las Américas” granting it full literary status. This public event consecrated and legitimized *testimonio* as a pragmatic literary account of universal documentary value where the personal becomes political. Notwithstanding, the much generated reality component of the work lies in the assumed orality of the speaker who, upon lacking writing skills in the dominant culture, seeks the assistance of an intellectual writer in transcribing her story. It is this sense of immediacy, which allows the reader to experience the speaker and the events that unfold.

The testimonial, understood as a written documentary of an oppressed individual’s life-experience assumes many textual forms¹⁸ and is narrated in the first person by a member of a subaltern class who is also the main protagonist in the events

she recounts. I, Rigoberta Menchú¹⁹ is a testimonial or the transcription of a Guatemalan Quiché Indian woman's oral history into a document of novel-length by the anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. Perhaps, what makes the *testimonio* innovative as a literary genre, is its multiple appeal: its non-fictional acceptance, its collective form of addressing social issues of human rights and survival through a plural "I" that represents both the author's socio-cultural experiences and that of the marginal ethnic group she embodies. A noteworthy achievement ascribed to this literary genre and fostered by it, is the direct involvement and representation of marginal groups in literature. The will to come forth with stories of human injustices, torture, murder, and other atrocities committed by non-democratic regimes, challenges silence and institutional control of subordinate groups and raises public consciousness of their psycho-social repression. In Rigoberta's account, she symbolizes and speaks on behalf of an entire community through her own experiences of social injustice and violent acts committed on her family and Quiché group. In this manner, the collective "I" is of plural significance and assumes no hierarchy or patriarchal status. Rigoberta's public appearance, acquired through an activist position, instantly grants her indigenous group public recognition of their sufferings at the hands of social and government structures, that deny them human rights to exist. Her plight also makes known the proud heritage and traditions Guatemalan Indians have silenced in order to preserve their ancestral past, their language and traditions.

The word *testimonio* derives from testimony or an eyewitness account by a subject who has participated in public/private events not conducive to the psycho-social well being of the individual and others like her. The new class of participants in the

public sphere is, for the most part, women who seek legal and political representation for their particular social cause. Women who participate in narrating their story of oppression place themselves in a public space where they transgress the domestic sphere. By going public they leave behind their confined, traditional roles dictated by a double patriarchy, one belonging to the dominant group and the other to their ethnic community. Willing to act gives subaltern women a voice, and in return, representation that empowers their marginality. By appropriating the public space, Rigoberta speaks in a plural “I” and acquires, in the process, a new public identity that reflects her culture, gender and social issues of major concern to the survival of her people. The “what we are” publicly, as a group, begins to define the personal “who we are”²⁰ as freedom of speech, action and legal status grants the group legitimate public existence.

In Jean Franco’s chapter “Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private,”²¹ shifting knowledge between the private/public sector of society is a way of bridging the aesthetic, the political and the ethical, categorically assigned as feminine/masculine realms. Testimonial literature,²² although not foreign to Latin American soil, has taken a new collective approach to contemporary writing. The once personal, “I” prevalent in autobiographical prose has disappeared in favor of the “we” it represents. By no longer defining *testimonio* as an individual account, the genre becomes a socio-historical phenomenon.²³ Rigoberta Menchú, in her testimony, appropriates Spanish, the language of the oppressor, and uses it as a tool to challenge ethnic repression. Communicating publicly, through the dominant language, allows the subaltern’s silence to be broken as the individual becomes accountable for change.

The public attraction of the testimonial lies in reading the narrative as a live account belonging to real people. This type of narrative derives from a marginal position, from characters that live in the periphery of society and tackle hegemonic institutions. It is, perhaps, the “reality effect” embedded in this new form of cultural and literary expression that gives this genre its “protean and demotic” form.²⁴

The very existence of *testimonio* as a document of both literary and documentary value throws into public scrutiny the function of literature in modern societies. Erasing both authorial presence and nonfictional characters in a literary work, forces the concept of literature to redefine its parameters and stress its social and human function. The pragmatic end of literature may, therefore, lie in its human determination. The sense of ethics and justice in Menchú’s *testimonio* engages the reader into compliance, which the genre emulates in order to make the reader identify with the speaker.

Burgos-Debray, the compiler of Rigoberta’s life story establishes in the prologue of I, Rigoberta, her relationship with the speaker and the manner in which she recorded and edited the testimonial, further declaring that the events and speaking patterns of Rigoberta to be unaltered. This scientific approach to a literary work heightens the human quality of sisterhood in its immediate task of denouncing systems of oppression. The story Rigoberta relates takes on delightful and playful qualities when she speaks endearingly of her family, later to be tainted by the painful memory and personal experiences of the torture and murder of her father, mother and brother at the hands of the Guatemalan military. By using storytelling techniques in the narration, the transcriber Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, as John Beverley remarks, creates the illusion of a “real popular voice” and uses *testimonio* as a discursive medium in which to express

Rigoberta's ideology and memory of past events.²⁵ By speaking from the platform of "experience," Menchu offers evidence of her historical past, and present condition as a social pariah. Personal knowledge and vision of society and her own Quiché culture provides the reader with an untold historical perspective. Communicating in writing her own oral culture documents a life of exploitation and repression which then becomes public memory.

The interplay of the real and the imaginary is, perhaps, what gives *testimonio* its public appeal. The affirmation of Rigoberta's beginning speech establishes her identity and purpose:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty- three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life; it's also the testimony of my people. It is hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people also. My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people (Menchu, 1)²⁶

Rigoberta's will to speak and act publicly, on behalf of her community is deeply felt and firmly established from the moment she pronounces her personal story. Social changes take place the moment her story begins. Her speech and act of willing change gives her tale public existence. Menchu's testimony recreates the period of the seventies and eighties as a decade of crisis in Guatemala. The clash between military backed land

development projects and Indian interest groups resulted in ensuing massacres, which that's family and Quiché group endured. The narrator's version of the events are also seen from an Indian woman's perspective as she narrates them with a complete and complex richness stemming from her traditional Indian upbringing, steeped in ceremonial rites and cosmogonic way of perceiving the world. The context of Menchu's *testimonio* is connected to real events. What unfolds is a public condemnation of the "internal colonialization"²⁷ that still exists in a country once victimized by Spanish colonialists. Rigoberta also denounces publicly any system of government that does not facilitate inter-cultural contact; not only between the dominant culture and her Quiché group, but most important between Indian groups who do not share the same language:

... what I found most distressing was that we couldn't understand each other. They couldn't speak Spanish and I couldn't speak their language. I felt so helpless. I'd ask myself how was this possible? It's a division, which they have kept up precisely so that we Indians cannot unite, or discuss our problems. And how effective a barrier it has been! (Menchu, 161).

Rigoberta further punctuates the government's alienation of her people by excluding them from radio programming. This exclusion does not invite ethnic groups to listen or have access to the airwaves:

...And the system feeds this situation. It separates the Indians from the ladino. The radio, all the radio stations speak Spanish. Indians have no access to radio (Menchu, 168).

Other topics revealed in her declaration are the rites of birth, marriage and death and the sense of “machismo” still prevalent in both her Indian and the ladino (mestizo) cultures. Her decision to learn Spanish, although through memory, hence her inability to write it, enables Menchu to challenge the dominant culture which has long silenced her people and has tried to destroy her indigenous identity through the process of acculturation.²⁸ Surprisingly, she remains reluctant to sharing secrets, which she believes, if known publicly, can prove detrimental to the safety and survival of her culture, her group and Indian identity. Marc Zimmerman observes that Menchú sees her testimony as a “culminating life ceremony.”²⁹ Her testimonio serves as a last testament or final Will of her people where she celebrates their life and commemorates their death. From Menchú’s perspective, the testimonial takes on a ceremonial appearance, a Mayan ritual that represents and announces the transformation of her Indian culture in the modern world.

One important criterion of the testimonial is that it must represent real protagonists and real events they have experienced. For women, the testimonial is a way of connecting the subaltern to a social movement, at a time their nation has ceased to grant them assistance or protection of their right to life and social well-being. The outcry of social abuses point to public denunciation in the hopes of rallying support. Although critics (Beverly, Franco, Zimmerman) of *testimonio* agree that it is not another form of the novel and clearly not a mutation of it, what remains open is its importance and power as a work of literary social action. Rigoberta Menchú’s public telling of her group’s ordeal brought her public acclaim and a Noble Peace Prize. Her work illustrates the power of her efforts in bringing change to her people. On the other hand, as *testimonio*

goes against a traditional literary style, it becomes aesthetically pleasing and politically engaging.

In Menchu's testimony the will to act in the public sphere starts in the private realm. The private individual, who wills change and decides to act publicly, redeems the Will's capacity for positive action. This notion can best be understood in Mary Hawksworth's feminist study of Hanna Arendt's public sphere.³⁰ Arendtian politics address the public space as a place of power, contrary to the private realm as the site of powerlessness and non-representation. To lack public access, where opinions and actions reveal the complexities and moral agency of the doer, is equivalent to reducing the masses to indistinguishable units of social categories without human identity. According to Arendt's vision, the doer assumes a public form granting her individual characteristics and equality before the represented collective community. One must recall that Rigoberta Menchu's speech and action publicly discloses her plight and assures her a legitimate forum in which the "vita-activa" and that personal experience becomes her only defense in seeking political and social rights for herself and her group. According to this assumption, the individual is constructed in the public sphere through binding categories of identity.

For marginal women, the public realm offers more than a sense of empowerment, it creates a political framework that encourages women to address gender concerns deeply embedded in both dominant and ethnic cultures to which they belong. The shift from the household to the public domain bridges traditional female activities with the formation of an emerging emancipatory consciousness. Becoming public articulates the power of the individual through collective representation. Menchu speaks in a plural,

collective “I” as her experiences and the exploitation of her people become one unified voice. In this regard, the public realm knows no gender boundaries. This is not to imply that the boundaries between private/public have disappeared. The more the public realm is seen as a place of power and legal representation, the wider its acceptance as a place of plurality where the politics of difference, diversity, solidarity and equality constitute the formation of the public person. To conceive the private as political raises the importance of the social in the public sphere. For this reason, the *testimonio*’s public function lies in its political approach.

Riddled with so many interpretations as to its literary/non-literary form and its function, the Latin American testimonial stands between a traditional concept of literature as strictly representational and fictive, and a new emerging literary form, which is yet to be defined and accepted by an elitist canon-establishment.

In Spanish America, the testimonial novel is hybrid in nature and reminiscent of the picaresque tradition and the chronicles. At a glance, the *testimonio* is caught between a realist tradition and a diary, it does not, however, focus on an individual but on a collective experience. This elusive genre, however, is highly controversial in its public attraction and equally attracts and repels those of popular and literary inclinations. The testimonial’s objective is to go public and divulge a private and oral history by using a narrator who is also part of the events being retold. These stories are not joyous, but have a despicable nature, abuses and atrocities of an institutional character.

As art undergoes uncertainty and public scrutiny as to its function in modern societies, both Beverly and Zimmerman seem to agree that the existence of *testimonio* is signaling the transformation of literature, by its mode of national production and its

support of social causes and new social formations. Those to benefit from its ambiguous form are likely to be the exploited and underrepresented middle sector of society. The most valued asset of *testimonio* is its public function.

Part 3. - The *Public Realm* in Isabel Allende's Eva Luna

Storytelling is another means of accessing the public realm. Writing narratives enables the storyteller to possess control over the fictive reality she creates and the discourse she prepares publicly. The fictional narrator transforms her personal and collective experience through the manipulation of a literary language. Properly understood as a body politic,³¹ literature revives the fundamental premise of the political.

The public realm as a place of action and deeds is revealed through words and speech. For this reason, storytelling exists in the public sphere and in the presence of others. The literary work affords a space of appearance and, as a cultural product, is considered by such political theorists as Hannah Arendt,³² the highest activity of human production. Not surprisingly, in antiquity, poetry was considered the highest expression of human dignity and was granted public appearance for its pursuit of human greatness. The “publicness” of literature endures through written memory and its prominence prevails through its own durability. Seyla Benhabib contends that in the process of writing, the storyteller’s metaphorical use of language actualizes thinking by making art a public and political matter.³³

Willing the public realm through literature empower those who write. Women, in particular, and as a community of writers, become a force to be reckoned through the public production of their own literary corpus. A narrator who chooses to write from her own perspective or from the perspective of a gender group she represents, is preserving a sense of women’s past and an identity that reveals who we are and our relation to the world we inhabit. In this sense, narrativity is constitutive of identity. By integrating the past to the present, we can reevaluate and reconfigure the ontological conditions of

womanhood and question how we perceive ourselves to be. Storytelling, as a human activity, is fundamental to the creation of a world we envision. By (re) inventing the past, the present and the future, the narrator is actively participating in questioning all social and moral institutions that have unfairly hindered women's appearance in the public sphere of society.

In Isabel Allende's Eva Luna,³⁴ the theme of writing is central to the notion of the construction of self. More than a craft, the act of writing becomes the main character's survival tool, capable of creating different levels of reality and multiple readings in the construction of woman. Eva Luna, both protagonist and narrator of her own story, continually recreates herself by inventing her own life, past, present and future, which remain an open book. The dynamic structure of Eva's story closely resembles the episodic series of a soap opera. Creating a story in which the role of the protagonist continuously changes, confronts the issue of multiple subjectivities in women's psycho-social construction. Allende's novel is enriching as it causes self-reflection through the act of narrating.

In retrospect, one can allude to the novel's modern development in the 19th and 20th centuries which gave rise to its public appearance as an entirely social art form; one which reflects the new ethos of the household.³⁵ Perhaps, one of the most innovative narrative techniques of the novel is the P.O.V (Point of View) or polyfony³⁶ that offered multiple reactions in society, as it imparted knowledge of a newly constructed world. With this technique, women's point of view became the new consciousness of society. The novel's public appearance implied new critical analysis; a new story told by a woman and from her own perspective. Perhaps, the dual nature of the novel or its close

relationship between the fictional and real world can best describe this literary genre as a social art form of universal and particular appeal. What this implies is the transmittal of the work's vision onto the reader's real live experiences. Literature's ability to reflect on the human condition safeguards its importance as social art that values human experience.³⁷

The structure in Eva Luna's storytelling, first oral and then written, runs equally parallel to the story of Scheherazade of the The Thousand and One Nights. Scheherazade understood that in order to survive the Sultan's execution each night, she had to weave endless tales to his satisfaction. Early in life, Eva too, learns that creating stories has a value beyond entertainment since she can exchange them for food and shelter.

Isabel Allende's story resonates of women's survival through their wits. The craft of writing in public further empowers them to shape reality and events that suit their desires and interests. To write is to construct a new and legitimate reality. Eva Luna, as agent of her own destiny, deftly learns that reading and writing is liberating; a process that transgresses limitations, especially those imposed on her by society. She quickly realizes that memory and past events can be altered if the transformative power of words deems it.

The public life of a woman storyteller is, perhaps, what Eva Luna is all about. More so, as an active narrator, Eva constructs herself in the process of creating her stories. As the child Eva matures into a woman, her tales become more vivid, dynamic and complex, underlying, this way, the stages of her physical and mental development. Eva matures in the public eye of her readers.

The language Eva integrates in her writing stems from various popular sources: radio, television, movies, romantic novels, etc, all mediums that have constructed the image of Latin American Women's sense of self.

Upon reading Eliana S. Rivero's article "Scheherazade Liberated: Eva Luna and Women Storytellers", one realizes how Spanish American women are using narratives to speak to other women, and do so in a familiar and cultural gendered voice. If the narrator opts to write as a woman, considered in Latin America a political option, then she complies with feminist politics in a conscious effort to relate women's experiences. Writers relate stories of women who love, hate and give birth, debunking this way, traditional male perspective of Hispanic women as whores or Virgin Marys. Eva Luna is, in its own right, a story of women encouraging other women to define their existence publicly through tales of personal and vital experiences, refusing, in this manner, the canonical approach to masculine norms of storytelling.

The major emphasis of the novel is the capacity women have to nurture one another. From the outset, Allende is not interested in Eva Luna's paternal lineage. The father is completely absent from Eva's life. Consuelo, the mother, who, early on disappears from her daughter's life, transmits to Eva the gift of storytelling. The mother teaches the daughter to love words and to use them to transform her environment and herself. This early transmission of the magical power of words reflects ancient cultures, which conveyed wisdom through oral stories. Eva remembers Consuelo in the following passage:

Mi madre era una persona silenciosa, capaz de disimularse entre los muebles, de perderse en el dibujo de la alfombra, de no hacer el menor alboroto, como si no existiera; sin embargo, en la intimidad de la habitación que compartíamos se transformaba... Cuando ella contaba, el mundo se poblaba de personajes, algunos de los cuales llegaron a ser tan familiares, que todavía hoy, tantos años después, puedo describir sus ropas y el tono de sus voces (27).

My mother was a very silent person, capable of hiding behind furniture, of hiding behind the design of the carpet, of not causing the slightest commotion, as if she didn't exist; however, in the intimacy of the room we shared, she transformed herself. ... Whenever she told me stories, the world was inhabited by (all sorts of) people, some of which became so familiar; that even today, after so many years, I'm (still) able to describe their clothes and the tone of their voices. (Translation mine)

As a public work, Eva Luna goes well beyond women's traditional portrayal of motherhood and removes the woman protagonist from the constraints of marriage; Eva emerges as a newly liberated woman capable of realizing her full potential. The novel deconstructs women's traditional roles by reconstructing a more vital and positive image of women as creators of their own destiny. Eva appropriates her body as she develops into a mature storyteller. The sub theme of sexual liberation is transmitted through the matrilineal. Eva's mother, Consuelo rebels against her own marginalized status as a maid

and as a woman in order to witness sexual pleasure that sets her on the path of independence. The act to free herself transforms Consuelo from a subordinated woman to one who takes risks and initiates action. Consuelo's disobedience saves her from a silent existence. Eva, the narrator sees her own liberation through her mother's:

(Consuelo) sacó la cuenta de que en sus treinta y tantos años no había conocido el placer y no lo buscó, convencida de que era un asunto reservado a los protagonistas del cine. Resolvió darse este gusto y de paso ofrecérselo también al enfermo a ver si partía más contento al otro mundo (22-24).

(Consuelo) looked back over her thirty-odd years and realized that she had not experienced pleasure, nor sought it, convinced that that sort of thing only happened in films. She resolved to have a taste of it herself and to offer some in passing to the sick man, to see if he would depart this world in a happier sense³⁸

Consuelo's empowerment through rebellion is transmitted to her daughter, along with the pleasure and the power behind storytelling. As sole and complex narrator of Eva Luna, Eva is completely in command of the discursive power behind the stories she narrates.

Willing transformation through storytelling dismantles the male authoritative discourse on women's construction of self as the woman narrator strengthens her own identity alongside her main character's journey in search of her own identity. By reasserting Eva's autonomy, the novel strengthens women's discursive practices through

writing. Eva Luna is a novel that speaks straight to a woman audience while educating the public at large on the need to reconstruct positive gender roles in society.

It is of no surprise that Eva, like her mother, truly believes in the ability of the transformative power of the narrative in changing reality. At the beginning, the narrator-protagonist remains herself undefined. Paradoxically, Eva vividly brings to life all her characters, Elvira, Riad Halabí, Zulema and Rolf Carlé, among others. As her writing becomes an acute and mature activity associated with discovering the world, Eva's body begins to acquire human contours. By writing herself into her own story, Eva becomes an official being, who Halabí, her protector, fully guarantees through a false birth certificate he acquires for her. Eva, from this moment on, exists in the public realm. By acquiring literacy and legitimacy, the narrator defines herself and the right to lay claim to her life. Her conscious power to mold reality is further heightened in Eva's interest in reading:

Yo devoraba los libros que caían en mis manos ... Sospechaba que nada existía verdaderamente, la realidad era una materia imprecisa y gelatinosa que mis sentidos captaban a medias ... Me consolaba la idea de que yo podía tomar esa gelatina y moldearla para crear lo que deseara... no una parodia de la realidad... sino un mundo propio, poblado de personajes vivos, donde yo imponía las normas y las cambiaba a mi antojo (187-188).

I devoured books that fell into my hands... I suspected that nothing really existed, reality being an imprecise and gelatinous matter that the senses captured half way... The idea that I could take that gelatin and mold it in order to create what I desired consoled me... (it was) not a parody of

reality... but a whole world, inhabited by live characters, where I imposed the norms and changed them at my whim. (Translation mine)

Transformation takes place as Eva's writing progresses; the reader begins to perceive that the narrator/protagonist emerges as a conscious and concrete being. The power of writing is further manifested through the use of grammatical tenses. In the beginning, the future writer sets out to explore her environs, and she does so, by narrating in the past tense. The moment Eva understands the implications of writing she begins to exist in the world. She becomes further defined in the present tense, as she affirms it in the following example:

Poco a poco el pasado se transformaba en presente y me adueñaba también del futuro, los muertos cobraban vida con ilusión de eternidad, se reunían los dispersos y todo aquello esfumado por el olvido adquiría contornos precisos (249).

Little by little the past was becoming the present and I took charge, as well, of the future, the dead were brought alive with the illusion of eternity, those scattered were reunited and all that (once) vanished through oblivion was gathering precise contours (Translation mine).

The historicity of Eva turns her into a writer with a past, present and future. Her stories continuously transform her and define her existence. She compares her own formation of her future self to episodic soap operas. She writes:

Yo escribía cada día un nuevo episodio, inmersa por completo en el mundo que creaba con el poder omnímodo de las palabras, transformada en un ser disperso, reproducida hasta el infinito, viendo mi propio reflejo en múltiples espejos, viviendo innumerables vidas, hablando con muchas voces (293).

I was writing everyday a new episode, totally immersed in the world I had created with the all-embracing power of words, transformed into a dispersed being, reproduced into infinity, looking at my own reflection in multiple mirrors, living numerous lives, and speaking through many voices. (Translation mine)

The magical power of words allows the writer to create reality in the public realm through the space she has granted herself. It is generally believed that women, as active storytellers, create female characters with much more complexity than those invented by male writers. As women portray women, more relevant issues and topics concerning maternity, menstruation, virginity, sexuality, rape, etc. begin to emerge. Eva Luna is a book that encourages other women to write and tell their stories as it publicly fosters different ways of defining gender and reality.

In Latin America, women's romantic conception of love is essentially construed through different mediums, such as movies, soap operas, romantic songs, popular novelettes, beauty magazines and the radio which publicly produce patterns of behavior, at times counterproductive to women's conception of self. By writing in the female mode, Allende urges women to create their own reality through writing which promotes their personal experiences and sensitivity while challenging established masculine norms

of canonical works. By revealing the untold story, the desire to become public embodies the work's message. The redeeming power of the written and spoken word is crucial to public representation.

Unforgettably, Eva Luna is the creation of a woman, a sexual woman under constant self re-invention. By constructing the self through language, the text becomes an extension of Eva's body. No longer silenced by limitations society imposes on her gender, Eva reclaims the right to define her own body as she writes her text. Literature, in its very act of narrating, imparts official, public attention to a new reality it proposes, by the sheer power of willing it in the public sphere.

Storytelling, in its right to be public, introduces whole new referents, a new possible and legitimate way of writing and existing in the world, albeit in the feminine mode. Through the power that writing exerts, the storyteller creates a feminine public space with new areas of expression and knowledge. The transformation of reality through words is captured in the narrator's ability to manipulate language and narrative time. Self-reflexivity is perhaps the true function of literature, as it creates an emotional and participatory alliance with a community of readers. The engaging power of the story lies in its redemptive value as it entralls the reader and converts her into an active agent involved in molding the outcome of the tale. Eva's constant re-invention lies in the continuous re-construction of stories that will please the reader, as did the tales of Scheherazade in appeasing the Sultan's wrath.

Willing to go public with a new story introduces the existence of complex characters never before identified. As women become vital components and complex heroes within a story that manifests her *becomings* and desires, new identities get forged

in the public eye. Another aspect of storytelling is the social transmission of cultural values. Michael Hanne in his book, The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change³⁹ believes that literary works have a measurable effect in shaping political attitudes and events. Perhaps, if understood in terms of fictional and historical writing can we think of literature's political role in countering "ideological thinking." Nevertheless, one must realize that the function of a story is didactic in its role of persuading and educating the public on different levels of human issues. The causal effect of a story, although one may find it difficult to measure, does allude to public interaction with the story, bringing to public view hidden agendas and human personas hidden and forgotten. As women write about women they do away with traditional stereotypes of womanhood and introduce a more vibrant and wholesome social being capable of complexity and depth.

Although a cognitive instrument at best, narratives bring attention to social problems that need to be resolved and discussed publicly. Upon narrating the human experience, the storyteller invokes the power of social memory in recounting events long passed. At times, as in the case of Eva Luna, storytelling has a positive influence; it inverts the existing social order and power structures that prevent social change and introduces a positive construction of women, as active contributors and members of society, long misconstrued in fiction.

Perhaps, one of the claims made on behalf of storytelling by political writers such as Hannah Arendt lies in the story's ability to rethink a community's history and goals.⁴⁰ The idea that literature has the capacity to connect a political community's ability to think about a world from which it has been alienated, points to the cooperative action

embedded in the literary discourse. This may translate as the work's capacity to connect to the political existence of social and legal institutions that serve to empower and disempower individuals within pre-constructed social power structures. For Arendt, living in a shared world implies thinking in the public realm. Stories emulate our human experiences in a social context and as such, introduce our individual identities as part of discursive action.

Narratives also lay claim to the social formation of "other" as explored in the writings of Somers and Gibson. The sense of self-identity, as a collective project, is also embedded in the concept of narratives.⁴¹ According to Somers and Gibson, social scientists are concerned with narrative studies since they explore the epistemological framework of the "other." The marginalized "other" in which women have been cast in literary narratives, for example, implies that literature as a form of social work is no longer concerned with the representational but rather with the ontological in the construction of human identities. Studies and understanding of the ontological in social theory can deepen critical analysis of how writers produce and perceive the changing attitudes regarding the subaltern. The storyteller's role in constructing more complex and vital human portraits that question and perhaps, replace harmful stereotypes that have only served to silence the public appearance of marginal groups in the public realm, needs further research.

According to the premise of the ontological in narrativity, "experience" constitutes the identity component in the narrative and is central to the story's message. By linking the concepts of action and identity in reframing narratives, social scientists find that social action cannot be understood if ontology and identity are absent from

narrative studies. The social constitution of identity is of primary concern in our interpretation of the “other.” The marginalized female “other” is Allende’s central concern in Eva Luna. The ideals of selfhood and social action are considered ways of counteracting patriarchy’s simplification of human types that enter its hierarchical structures. Studies in ontological narrativity question the validity of pre-established social values that constitute woman in her search of her own identity and not one assigned to her by a society that has not fully granted her a public voice. Seen in this light, narratives offer new forms of action in which the woman subject chooses her own destiny and her own way of defining her existence. If one applies feminist identity politics to Eva Luna, the shift will not be on the representational but rather on social concepts that emphasize women’s relational and nurturing roles.

Storytelling from a woman’s perspective, and for an audience sensitive to women’s psycho-social development, approaches action from an ontological view point as it sets out to redefine womanhood and promote new social roles, far from man’s abstract ideals of what women are and represent.

Willing to act in public has been explored in the literary works of Ana Istarú, Rigoberta Menchú and Isabel Allende. These three authors claim the public right to define themselves and their women characters through their own experiences and on their own terms. All three have chosen the public space of literature to bring forth issues concerning women’s psycho-social development in Hispanic cultures, and have resorted to the creation of literary works to speak on women’s issues, primarily her role in society. Their efforts to discuss issues largely ignored in traditional literature by men, on women, grant them the public space and legitimacy this space provides.

The craft of storytelling and its relationship to the public realm is not new in its efforts to explore and bring the human condition to the attention of the collective community. Its “publicness” makes it a didactic instrument in which to educate the community at large. The social concerns of the subaltern’s existence serves to empower those who share the same political agendas, and in the process introduce new changes in social behavior through narrative action.

Part 1. *Public Realm* in Istarú

¹ This statement reflects the opinion shared by most well-known theoreticians and philosophers of the public sphere: Nietzsche, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib and others. See Joan B. Landes, *Feminism: The Public and the Private* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

² In western thought, the public sphere has been a place of power and action, achieved through speech, which confers on the individual “appearance” or legitimacy. By far, Hannah Arendt is a staunch defender of literature and its power to achieve the public realm, particularly poetry that she sees as a form of political art. Following the model of the Ancient Greeks, Arendt defends the political arena of human life that art represents. See Landes, *Feminism*, pg. 146.

³ Ana Istarú, *La estación de fiebre (y otros amaneceres)* (Madrid: Visor Libros, 1991).

⁴ Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 10.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” in Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 187-213.

⁶ The female body as symbol of a conquered land (the colonialization of America) has long been extended as a metaphor that includes women as men’s conquest: the territorialization of women’s body. Given the colonial context of Latin America, Istarú alludes to a colonial discursiveness to unveil women’s double oppression.

⁷ Margarita Fernández-Olmos, *El placer de la palabra: Literatura erótica femenina de América Latina*. (México, D.F.: Planeta, 1991).

⁸ Margarita Rojas G. “Transgresiones al discurso poético amoroso: La poesía de Ana Istarú,” *Revista Iberoamericana* LIII. 138-139 (1987): 391-402.

⁹ Fernández-Olmos, *El placer* xi.

¹⁰ The list of Latin American women writers are but a handful among many others who have not been thwarted in expressing the relationship between sexuality and the socio-historical period in which they live.

¹¹ Jorge Debravo, “Devocionario del amor sexual,” *Milagro abierto* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1969) 102.

¹² Istarú, *La estación*, Poema III 51-52.

¹³ Margarita Rojas, “Transgresiones al discurso poético amoroso: La poesía de Ana Istarú,” *Revista Iberoamericana* LIII. 138-139 (1987): 391-402.

¹⁴ Consuelo Hernández, “Feminidad y Feminismo en la Poesía de Ana Istarú,” *Alba de América* 20. 37 and 38 (2001) 209-220.

¹⁵ Sara Castro-Klarén, Sylvia Molloy, Beatriz Sarlo Eds. *Women’s Writing in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 4.

Part 2. Public Realm in Menchú

¹⁶ Joan W. Scott, "Experience" in Feminist Theorize the Political Eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992): 22-40.

¹⁷ This definition, offered by Raymond Williams, is an alternative meaning of "experience" rendered in North American historical analysis. In addition, this new sense of experience, he believes, and so do I, affords Historians a critique in which to interpret language and culture in new meaningful settings. See Raymond Williams, Keywords (NY: Oxford University Press, 1983) pp. 126-129.

¹⁸ Certain textual forms of the *testimonio* fall under "autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-testimonio, non-fiction novel or factographic literature". See John Beverley The Real Thing (1996): 24. The much controversial forms of the *testimonio* are questioning, challenging and changing contemporary society, and our concept of literature. The use of the "referential" grants it an authentic appearance, as the subaltern's oral history assumes a written autobiographical character and becomes a document of human and social value. Not conceived originally as a woman's genre, the *testimonio* subscribes to many agendas of social significance. Jean Franco believes in the *testimonio*'s ability to empower subaltern women. See Jean Franco, "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private" On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992): 65-83.

¹⁹ Rigoberta Menchu L. Rigoberta Menchu Ed. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (London, New York: Verso, 1984).

²⁰ The socio-political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, is a firm believer of the public realm. For her, the private domain holds no representation; it is a place where the individual has no real say as to his/her identity. Through action, deemed a public act, the individual attains a true identity by leaving the "whateness" of the private, or biological realm of necessity to become a "who" achieved through acting in public. See Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity" in Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 140.

²¹ Franco, On Edge. Pg. 65-83.

²² The discursive structure of the Latin American *testimonio* is reminiscent of the chronicles, written as eyewitness events by a learned individual who recorded accounts of atrocities, injustices and daily practices during the conquest of the New World. The collective character of modern-day testimonials brings silenced and personal ordeals to the public sphere. The once fragmented or non-existent subject now becomes a public figure in a common collective struggle. See Lillian Manzor-Coats, "The reconstructed subject: Women's testimonials as voices of Resistance" found in Lucia Guerra Cunningham, Ed. Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women Writers in Search of Themselves (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1990): 157-171.

²³ As a socio-historical phenomenon, the *testimonio* formulates its modern appearance as a collective document through the eyewitness account of the plural "I". The publicness of its collective appeal communicates urgency of an unbearable situation in its attempt to confront and tackle hegemonic institutions. The marginal position of the informant, gives the oral account of an illiterate narrator legitimacy as a linguist or anthropologist who understands indigenous cultures transcribes it. See Manzor-Coats, Splintering Darkness, 158-159.

²⁴ The reference made by John Beverley, as to the changing nature and mass appeal of the *testimonio* makes it increasingly difficult to define and to accept this genre of low-culture by an elitist canon-forming establishment. See John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio: (Testimonial Narrative)" found in George M. Gugelberger, Ed. The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 25.

²⁵ One of the major problems facing the testimonial today lies in the illusion it creates of a real, marginal voice in control of the story being recounted. Beverley reminds us that the controversial and indefinable nature of testimonio is problematic as a literary genre since it introduces a character real in nature, but non-fictional to be considered fictional. See Beverley, The Real Thing 36-37.

²⁶ The scientific approach of Menchu's eye-witness introduction gives the impression she's in control of describing events and in control of the Spanish language. What is highly critical is the apparent, authentic appearance of a documentary-based story in a fictive-narrative. One must remember that the chronicles of the 15th and 16th century colonialist period had the same ambiguous form of relating "real events" by an eye-witness that described every detail without being present. The historical novel is next to kin in its apparent fictive/non-fictional appearance. Rigoberta Menchu's introduction is found in Burgos-Debray's, I, Rigoberta Menchu (1984): I.

²⁷ Not surprisingly, the phrase "internal colonialization" refers to a system of government that maintains a colonialist structure, and keeps indigenous groups subjugated to the dominant culture. Rigoberta questions the legitimacy of the "written culture" which excludes those who do not write or speak the Spanish language; i.e., the language of the oppressor.

²⁸ In Latin America, the term "acculturation" as opposed to "transculturation" refers to the assimilation of the subjugated group into the structure, culture and language of the conquistador. This implied total erasure of the group's past, language, religion and identity. Transculturation, on the other hand, can best be understood within a Cuban context whereby the African slave groups were allowed to co-exist with the dominant culture, retaining this way, an ancestral lineage. Rigoberta and her Indian Quiché group learned that one way of avoiding acculturation, since the second was not an option, implied sharing an oral history and keeping a tribal language and tradition alive through secrecy and silence. See Guillermina Walas, "Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú: una voz desde la subalternidad" in Celebris: Revista del Centro de Letras Hispanoamericanas 4:4-5 (1995): 11

²⁹ The testimony, understood as a testament of a people's Will to celebrate publicly their life story is, perhaps, the pragmatic and political value of this literary genre. It functions not only in uncovering government abuses and bringing them to public attention, but it re-covers the lost, cultural heritage of a nation. See Marc Zimmerman, "Testimonio in Guatemala: Payera, Rigoberta and Beyond" found in Gugelberger's The Real Thing (113).

³⁰ According to Arendt to will or to nil are the binary options of the Will. When the individual decides to act in the public realm then the Will converts experience into positive action. The *vita activa* or life-as lived-experience embodies action through speech. See Mary Hawkesworth, "Arendtian Politics: Feminism as a Test Case," Journal of Women's History 8. 1 (1996): 161-171.

Part 3. Public Realm in Allende

³¹ Literature, considered a body politic that can be grounded in such political practices as feminist theory, allows for the category of gender and the strategy of feminism to become analytical tools in literary analysis. See Amy Kaminisky, Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

³² In Hannah Arendt's political theories on the public realm, poetry stands out as the noblest form of literary production; the highest expression of human achievement, and as such, merits "appearance" in the public sphere of civil society. See Shiraz Dossa, The public realm and the public self: The political theory of Hannah Arendt (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989) 1-15.

³³ Benhabib believes that the storyteller's symbolic use of language serves to actualize thinking as the political use of literature creates and stimulates public reaction to social issues. See Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative" in Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays, Eds. Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (Albany: University of New York, 1994) 111-135.

³⁴ Isabel Allende, Eva Luna (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés Editors, 1991) All pages cited in this analysis refer to this edition.

³⁵ Literature, as a body politic of words and action, reveals the writer's humanity and contributes to the sense of freedom to pursue other public endeavors. Mel Topf explains that for Hannah Arendt literature is an act of creation, which grants freedom to become that we want to be through public action. The idea that the novel is the new ethos of the household derives from its social and behavioral characteristics while underlining the economic aspect of a cultural product consumed in private and public in its appearance. See Mel Topf, "Hannah Arendt: Literature and the Public Realm," College English 40:4 (1978): 353-363.

³⁶ The multiple perspectives of the modern twentieth century novel have been developed in the light of existing theories, such as Bakhtin's. His writings emphasize the creation and connection of multiple reactions from different sectors of society through a plurality of consciousness embedded in the dialogic discourse of the novel. See Pam Morris, The Bakhtin Reader (London: Glossary Edward Arnold, 1994).

³⁷ Louise M. Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1995) 121-172.

³⁸ Susan Frenk, "The Wandering Text: Situating the Narrative of Isabel Allende," Eds. Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies, Latin American Women's Writing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 70.

³⁹ Michael Hanne, The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1994).

⁴⁰ The idea that narratives serve a public function lies in its consideration of human experience as political phenomena. See Shari Robin Stone-Mediatore, "Hannah Arendt, Experience, and Political Thinking: Storytelling as Critical Praxis," diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1997, 13.

⁴¹ Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, "Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity," ed. Craig Calhoun, Social Theory and the Politics of Identity (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994) 37-99.

**Chapter VI. *Gender and Nation* in Rosario Ferré's Maldito Amor and
Diamela Eltit's Vaca Sagrada**

The topic of gender and nation in contemporary Latin American literature reveals many issues confronting women writers in their continued discourses on gender identity, both at the national and cultural levels. Hispanic narratives written from a woman's perspective are often time concerned with integrating the concept of nation, as they speak from the platform of the subaltern. In so doing, these narratives introduce new perspectives that call for radical changes in society, mainly those concerning equity for women, in particular women from different social classes and racial groups other than the one represented in the dominant culture.

Two works analyzed in this chapter Maldito Amor¹ by Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré and Vaca Sagrada² by Chilean novelist Diamela Eltit share similar preoccupations; to bring women's perception of nation and their views on social issues to public consciousness.

The concept of *willing*, I contend, validates women's lived experiences: objective and subjective, historical and personal, cultural and social, private and public by introducing this category as an analytical component in addressing gender issues in Hispanic cultures. To achieve this end, *willing* integrates women's personal account of their experiences in the formation of nation within a socio-historical context. In the case of the novel, a work of fiction creates a meta-narrative dialogue with established institutions and social structures by situating knowledge of social issues present in the aesthetic work. Through women's epistemologies, experience becomes a valuable category by which to fathom the literary work, as it serves to raise the reader's social

consciousness while introducing new standards of literary analysis. As more women write on the topic of nation, they appropriate narrative techniques, introduce thematic patterns and create new storytelling strategies that affect the way the public views their work: the novel, once in the public domain, makes the personal a political issue.

To emphasize nation from women's multiple and multi-cultural experiences, (inclusive of such categories as class, race, ethnicity and sexuality) offers innovative styles in narrativity as it proposes to address the need for social change that affect and reflect women's lives. Recounting personal experiences allows the narration to draw a political dialogue, one created by women and transmitted by their need to inscribe themselves in stories that display the harmful, psychological effects of patriarchal traditions in nation-building. Works such as Maldito Amor question the legitimacy of centuries of ingrained masculine values that impinge on women's personal and legal rights in Hispanic nations. Ferré's text displays polyphony of voices that confront and disclaim the legitimacy of traditional Puerto Rican male thinking. To a large measure, the often time undisputed male supremacy in Hispanic Caribbean cultures, derives from strong social codes pursuant to the period of Spanish colonial rule in the Americas. Social injustices women have had to endure in nations, whether Puerto Rico or Chile, among others, are symptomatic of a deeply codified cultural history. On the other hand, Eltit's Vaca Sagrada deliberately uses the motif of women's menstruation and carefully juxtaposes it to state repression in order to achieve a malaise that comes from a sense of defilement. The disquieting, nauseous-producing sensations and cold sweat, usually experienced under conditions of intense fear, is Eltit's way of constructing an atmosphere conducive to the existence of dictatorial regimes and their

tactics of state and individual terrorism. By strategically using sex and bodily functions to stimulate issues of national defilement, Eltit raises social consciousness of problems facing national histories while delivering powerful statements on corrupt government oppression extended over to personal and sexual oppression in the Chilean society of the seventies.

Action, the second component of *willing*, is generated through experiences women relate first hand, i.e. their decision to act or their incapacity to engage in any agency. The literary work's dramatic action is tied to the story's development. The repression, oppression or suppression of the woman protagonist's sense of action is reworked in the theme of the literary work. The reader's interpretive knowledge of the social and the historical intersects with the woman protagonist's self-realization, or with the paralysis caused by unchanging political structures.

Willing, through women's experiences and action, confronts nation-building from its groundwork to suggest a closer look into social and cultural issues that affect the survival, existence and representation of women at the national level, with particular emphasis on ethnic women or racial groups who have long been ignored by the dominant culture.

Part 1. - *Gender and Nation* in Rosario Ferré's Maldito Amor

The structure of the novel Maldito Amor by Rosario Ferré strongly outlines the social hierarchy drawn in Puerto Rican national history: men of Hispanic Creole ancestry claim legitimate power; white women are the chosen official wives while concubines belong to mestizo, mulatto and black racial groups. The disadvantaged clearly occupy the lowest scale of the social ladder economically, culturally and sexually.

In an effort to narrate nation, a topic once considered a male domain, writers like Ferré infuse it with women's voices and their cultural experiences. She questions Puerto Rican women's assigned maternal, submissive and sexual roles, which surface once they themselves break the silence of male dominance and mystique.

In an effort to examine the concept of nation as an extension of the home, María Elena Rodríguez Castro traces its ideology to concerned Puerto Rican intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth-century³. At this time, the emergence of new social sectors and military confrontations with North American imperialism on the island made the topic of national identity a strong patriotic call. The survival of the island-nation from foreign industrial capitalism and exploitation of its sugar cane industry prompted the publication of two classical essays: Insularismo written by Antonio S. Pedreira in 1934 and El país de cuatro pisos by José Luis González in 1980.

Rosario Ferré uses multiple voices strategically, in an effort to reproduce and draw a parody of the once accepted "novel of the land" genre⁴. By first introducing the island's undisputed archaic power structures she proceeds to demythicize them.

Acknowledging the existence of a Creole patriarchy at the center of power allows the character Don Hermenegildo, the intra-diegetic narrator, to be the first to speak, as he proceeds to defend the historical legitimacy of the patriarch Don Ubaldino De la Valle, a man who embodies the values of the Spanish Conquistadors. Don Hermenegildo hopes to perpetuate and consecrate this man's existence by writing an epic novel on him.

At once, it is clear that two systems have been at work in molding the island's power structures: the "cacicazgo" or ruthless illegitimate power by an elite or established landowner and Catholicism as the official religion that legitimizes and consolidates the Creole's power. Knowledge of past events, begin to sow the seed of future actions.

By establishing a tight power reign in the first part of the novel, Ferré returns to the cultural foundations of Puerto Rico and does so through a family saga. The cruelty displayed by the De la Valle clan is reinforced through the patriarch's domination over women and other marginalized racial characters. Even Doña Elvira, the woman owner of the Central Justicia, the sugar mill industry that has made the De la Valle clan a fortune, is considered no more than an erotic property, liking to that of a horse, which can be broken, mounted and penetrated. Male power is first established through women's sexual domination, setting the social mechanisms of nationhood in process.

The first part of the story, ironically, emulates the established power that later reinforces the brutal values of the island's patriarchal landowners at the outset of the twentieth-century.

The second part of the novel is recounted by yet another male narrator, Aristides De la Valle who continues to promote patriarchal values as set forth by Don Hermenegildo in the first half of the story. The difference lies in the emergence of a new female voice, Gloria, who represents the raped land, “la tierra,” a feminine symbol. Strategically, the second part of the narration is constructed to answer the first. This retortive technique in narratives, allow women, once a subaltern subject, to confront and condemn a nation that has excluded women from the formation of nation. In this segment Ferré gives voice to three women: Titina, Doña Laura and Gloria. At once, the topics of writing and orality become the *modus operandi* of the narrative discourse. Each woman gives a version of her own story under De la Valle’s domination that demystifies and destroys “the truth” of the first narrator. The action taken by these three women is oral. Yet, it is not until all three voices blend fluently and willfully, on the topic of gender injustices made against them by the “ruling family” that the action to dismantle the myth around the patriarch is accomplished.

Women’s collective memory is the source and strength from which action springs and proceeds to alter events. Voicing personal experiences unite Titina, Laura and Gloria and transform their passivity into active participation, which eventually changes their destiny and those of others. They represent the marginal groups in Puerto Rican society: Titina, the black servant, Laura the mestiza woman and Gloria the mulatta. By uniting the voices of all three forgotten women in the narration of nation, the ruling system is denounced, the past is erased and the future becomes the preoccupation of the present. For these three women radical changes in society become the only answer.

The hypnotic power of the strategy of orality in the story draws the audience to side with those who speak and break the silence of abuse. Perhaps, as Martha Gonzales suggests, this is the confessional tone of the polyphony that induces a sense of secret participation. The complicity is reaffirmed as we listen and sympathize with the women interlocutors. Ferré creates a dynamic and vivid dialogue by introducing low cultures and popular voices to confront the pompous language of the higher classes.

The baroque style of Don Hermenegildo's manner of speaking evokes the grandiloquence that predominated during the Conquest; a rhetorical device used in evoking a grandiose sense of belonging to a great nation. His interest on preserving the purity of the bloodline, controlling the subaltern by exploiting them, and his support of the Catholic Church are all indicators of his need to maintain the existing male power structures intact. By contrast, the women who speak against social and sexual injustices do so, in a simple language, a familiar popular tone accompanied at times with colloquial and proverbial expressions. They are the voices of the underclass, the underprivileged and the powerless.

Once in the public realm, it is collective memory that gives the three women the right to act. The plaintiffs recount every abuse; physical and emotional they were made to endure. The will to action is born of individual and collective need for change. Ferré uses oral power in a unique way to achieve this end. By introducing each speaker in a fragmented discourse, the listener/reader learns to piece the fragments into a unifying whole. The women from different ethnic groups and social

classes consolidate their voices to produce the social changes that will alter the course of their island's history; its past, present and future.

Ferré's novel attempts to generate a discourse on nation where women and the marginalized sectors are also the cultural producers of a new history, active protagonists who are in the process of defining themselves and their participation in nation-building. The ones to bring change are the oppressed. Doña Laura's De la Valle's decision to destroy the legacy woven around the de la Valle clan comes at her deathbed when she assumes an active role. It is in the process of dying that she realizes the liberating effect of freeing herself from a burdensome past, as she constructs a new future for others; her legacy is an example of her will to act. Ferré makes a transcendental statement by fashioning Doña Laura, a mestiza-mulatta woman, as the one who clamors for radical change in society. By selecting her to break the pillars of established power, she is suggesting that one must recognize equality among all sectors of society.

The other woman character granted a voice, however close to the novel's denouement, is Gloria who implicates the presence of Titina in her conversation. As a mulatta woman, Gloria represents the new order, a product of two cultures and racial groups, the European and African. She is perhaps, a synthesis of the Puerto Rican woman and the one responsible for instilling in Titina the will to act. Yet, it is Gloria, the mulatta, who truly destroys the legitimacy of the De la Valle by shredding the family testament and later burning the Central Justicia, the symbol of corruption and unjust legal power. The very act of destroying the documented, legally unjust past, gives her a sense of empowerment as she proceeds to illegitimize the past. Ultimately,

the effects of the fire brings her a sense of cleansing as it purifies in its destruction a baleful existence of the old established order. She regains her right to exist through the power of speech. Liberation and a sense of living is restored with her decision to will changes for her and herself and her son Nicolasito De la Valle, who will inherit the new order, the one she helped to forge.

From its title, the message of Maldito Amor lies in its condemnation of a wrongful type of love. It is also a danza, a music composition by Juan Morel Campos and signifies “hateful love.” From the outset, the title of the novel transmits to its reader a melodramatic message of revenge and of psychological and emotional harm, one in which the loved one is wronged by a condemned and doomed love.

Interestingly, most contemporary bolero songs, equally melodramatic in nature as the danza, are sung and composed by men who construct women as the malicious culprits of their pure love and blame them, equally, for their incapacity to love again. As a narrative strategy, Ferré toys with the way the Spanish language is constructed, and demonstrates how deeply ingrained are songs in the Hispanic culture. Boleros, generally speaking, form part of the national psyche and serve to enhance the “machismo” image at the expense of women. At the end, it is Gloria, as her triumphant name indicates, who brings redemption to a land built on the myth of ruthless male, colonial power.

Ferré seems to implicate in her novel that a new nation cannot be constructed if gender inequality persists. In Talking Back⁵ Debra Castillo reflects on the idea that Ferré makes full use of the concept of “emancimatríz” in her writing, i.e., the emancipation of the womb; a term describing George Sand’s recognition of women’s

power and control over her sexuality. Maldito Amor goes beyond this idea by implicating that sexual emancipation must go together with the revolution of a socio-political nature, one where the nation-state must be reconstructed with the participation of the subaltern citizens if it is to survive in a new world order.

The topic of nation is also Ferré's way of introducing women's testimony to nation building. National history and cultural identity are inseparable and serve to reinforce each other through "mythmaking." The introduction of silenced voices in national discourses deconstructs official national history as it neutralizes the existing power structures whether legitimized through historiography or through Catholic dogmas that consecrate its existence. Ferré's testimonial technique of bringing women characters into the discourse of "other" and nation is exposing past claims and debunking the "founding fathers" of a nation which have built their power on gender and racial injustices.

Perhaps, it is Ferré's feminist approach to literature that is refreshing and confrontational. She offers a woman's perspective on the issue of revising national histories, and does so by writing a parody of the nineteenth century Latin American novels that portrayed a romantic life in the hacienda where men ruled with absolute power. Ferré traces the socio-historical evolution of the island and its transition from the nineteenth and twentieth-century and emphasizes how different sectors in society have been deeply affected by its feudal system of unequal power, economically, legally, religiously and sexually.

Ferré positions Don Hermenegildo in the first part and carefully makes him deliberately narrate a false but official history. As a historian, Hermenegildo begins to

change his version of history as a woman, Titina, is introduced to question his allegations. As he investigates her claims he becomes confused and begins to change his own original version. Deirdre Lashgari suggests in her work, Violence, Silence and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression⁶ that the falsity of the plural "we" Hermenegildo adopts begins to betray him, as it becomes clear that the nation's history was forged on the myth of a corrupt land-owning family that controlled the island's main wealth. Unable to claim legitimate authority, Hermenegildo loses ground as women begin to occupy the narrative space making their grievances known in public. By erasing the master's narrative, the existence of the "other" in national history begins to emerge. Lashgari observes:

...Gloria's version of the family history represents the vengeful energy of those affected most negatively by racial, gender, and class abuses, because as a lower-class mulatta this family uses her for their competing political purposes. Gloria declares the end of Hermenegildo's novel, rejects the will, and burns the hacienda. She insists on a narrative authority that is independent of any interest in the burden of patrimony (Lashgari 75)

A gendered understanding of nation is one aspect of nation-building Ferré's novel promotes. The feminist approach to writing nation into her text deconstructs the official, patriarchal version whereby the subaltern has been omitted. A closer look at Nira Yuval Davis' written work, Gender and Nation is important to understanding how women's cultural experiences can be instrumental in closing the gap on gender blindness inherent in theories on nation-formation.

Willing through experience and action embraces womanhood as a relational category and can well extend into the concept of nation. Maldito amor is clearly a narrative in search of such a dialogue.

Albeit not new, Yuval-Davis argues that traditional concepts of nation have been constructed as an extension of kinship. This hegemonic approach to the theorization of nation has been problematic given traditional views on women's participation in the private sphere of the home and her invisibility in the public realm of national ideology.

Women as biological, cultural and symbolic reproducers of "nation" need be situated within a larger epistemological framework that recognizes knowledge as situational⁷. This approach rejects the idea of patriarchy as a distinct social system and recognizes the need to validate women's experiences in theory formation. By relating women's oppression to social relations of power and material resources in society, the categories of gender, ethnicity and class become ways of measuring and articulating new social discourses. The more knowledge is gained from a feminist perspective, the richer become literary interpretations.

In Hispanic narratives, women who tend to write from a political standpoint do so with the credo that to write as a woman is a political option. Further to this notion is the inclusion of marginal groups in the same subaltern discourses on the empowerment of the "other." The fact that women have been occluded from national ideology formation is more so the reason for seeking ways to include her experiences through such strategies as collective memory. This technique based on women's psycho-social experiences in national cultures is clearly employed by Ferré to

empower her characters in the public realm, as they unite in breaking the silence of oppression. The subaltern's memories of past injustices turn into collective action.

The topic of men's sexual domination over women reinforced through archaic male colonial power structures is questioned and contested, suggesting the need to reformulate the concept of nation if the island-state is to survive in the new world-order.

Maldito Amor is also about orality versus writing. Although one may argue that both are powerful mediums of human expression, orality is used to empower the underclass. As marginal groups act together in order to prevent another false retelling of history, they consolidate their grievances and efforts by altering future events. Unity in difference is perhaps the story's most attractive aspect given the diverse racial groupings and class divisions to which the women belong. Gender oppression does not belong to one group of women but to all who have been victimized by the absolute power of the patriarchs.

Another component of nation-building is present in the mythic construction of national history. The one-sidedness has traditionally belonged to the conqueror leaving the conquered to accept the master's version of nation, however consolidated and legitimate the power structures may appear. The historical experience of the "other" can only be realized through the appropriation of the official history. The feminist credo, "the personal is political" acknowledges women's personal experiences as a valid historical category in the public realm where true power resides in political representation.

The reproduction of culture through the empowerment of marginalized groups such as blacks, Indians and women forces theorists to rethink national culture and identity politics. Ferré's final message, although seemingly triumphant for the subaltern groups in the symbolic destruction of the much despised Central Justicia, remains an open book of possibilities and new uncertainties.

Viewed as a counter novel to the nineteenth-century version of the "novel of the land" genre, Maldito Amor problematizes the question of cultural representation of racial differences that can no longer be read from a one-sided official, master narrative. Class and gender also form integral parts of the discourse on nationhood. The colonial question of unjust feudal power deeply ingrained in the island's national psyche surfaces through subaltern participation. By giving voice to the de-centered image of the colonial periphery, the island confronts its past and begins to rewrite its future. The topics of racism and sexism are joined in denouncing the official discriminatory power on which a nation has been built.

Situating a colonial discourse in the novel allows the reader to rethink what is meant by national culture. In his discourse on colonialism, Homi Bhaba emphasizes the need to re-orient colonial theory through strategies of "individuation and marginalization."⁸ Ferré upon writing her novel acknowledges the need to recognize the existence of the "other" by letting their story reach the public domain. The psychodrama implied in the novel creates a metanarrative national discourse, one not afraid to confront what Edward Said puts forth in his work, The Question of Palestine (1980) as "the disturbing memory of colonial texts that bear witness to the trauma that accompanies the triumphal art of Empire"(Bhaba, 149).

Writing race and gender within the thematic of nation is also a way of reconstructing the colonial subject through individually lived experiences. The novel, in its objective to articulate the condition and conditioning of Hispanic peripheral women, sets out to create a political and epistemological space in which the identity and existence of the *other* becomes a historical event. Racial, cultural and historical “otherness” has a face, a voice and a history that Ferré embraces in her work. Upon deconstructing the male centered patriarch, the novel raises consciousness of the existence of the very stereotypes that the culture itself embodies in proverbial expressions, music and sexism. The stereotypes of the submissive and abnegated mother, the concubine and the prostitute are all images with sexist and racist overtones Hispanic nations have undergone as colonial nations.

The struggle for representation and equal sharing in power is also embedded within a nation’s constant threat of invasion by another. In the case of Puerto Rico, Ferré constructs the marginal groups right to exist and their right to a public identity long denied as an extension of the island-nation’s own right to govern itself and rid itself of hegemonic, imperialist power, that of the U.S. The multi-leveled stories and the problem with history are perhaps the *raison d’être* of this novel that brings oppression and suppression of power to the subaltern and to the dominant groups that can no longer survive on their own.

The double-edge structure of Ferré’s literary work, mainly the island-nation’s survival and its cultural identity is first confronted with its own historical memory and the hidden identities of racial groups that have long been denied legitimate and rightful existence.

Historical writing and social identities have been, for the most part, relegated to those in power. Through the category of experience, historians in the twentieth-century are undertaking the task of confronting traditional historical discursive practices in the hopes of incorporating personal stories of the subaltern in the writing of national history. By considering the construction of gender and ethnic honor, new historical writing promotes individuals dispossessed from the official national versions. Ferré's novel questions power and economic autonomy as aspects of masculine identity that history writes while forgetting the existence of subjugated beings as objects of man's control. Social identity must write gender into the narration of nation and the subjective story of ethnic groups long forgotten by the official history.

Perhaps, what is confrontational in Ferré's work can be summarized by Ana María Alonso⁹ observation:

The relationships between popular and official discourses, like those between subaltern and dominant groups and classes, are not fixed but constantly negotiated. Produced on a shifting terrain of control and conflict, popular culture reproduces dominant signification and also transforms and contests them (418).

Ferré's work, examined through the prism of women's lived experiences, in particular those of marginal groups, guarantees a much more enriching exploration of the human condition as the work raises social consciousness brought about through new epistemologies.

The concept of willing, through its representation of individual experience and action needs to be further explored in the development of new discursive practices on topics of gender and nation.

Part 2. - *Gender and Nation in Diamela Eltit's Vaca Sagrada*

Gender and nation appear in Vaca Sagrada associated with the female body, through the motif of menstruation. In Diamela Eltit's narrative,¹⁰ the act of defilement is not to be understood as a biological function, but rather a symbolic representation of a cultural map from which women can speak of nation. The use of menstruation, traditionally associated with defilement, is a metaphor that serves to question state morality and institutionalized fear induced by state-terrorism. The trickling down of women's blood during the menstrual cycle turns into a symbol of violence, synonymous with state repression and violent behavior produced by a corrupt military regime. The female body, as a cultural site, and its bodily functions are constructed as innovative narrative techniques; a way of experiencing horror and abjection never before considered in literary works.

Willing, through the notion of *experience*, in this case subjective and biological, attempts to redraw the boundaries between political persecution and bodily sensations. Women's biological experience with the malaise and discomfort of the process of ovulation is creatively enmeshed with the sensations of intense fear institutionalized oppression renders its citizens. Diamela Eltit, who lived under Pinochet's military regime in Chile, summarizes the symbolic need to speak from the standpoint of the body:

Como metáfora, como hecho simbólico, parto de la menstruación; pero más que referirme a este tema desde la perspectiva biológica, me interesa...ver ahí qué miedo detona, qué imágenes, qué fantasías... Me parece que el cuerpo es uno de los territorios más ideologizados por la

cultura, y se ha transformado especialmente en un territorio moral del cual no se libra nadie.¹¹

My starting point is menstruation, as a metaphor or a symbolic fact; but rather than to refer to this topic from the biological perspective, I'm interested... to see there what fear is detonated, what images...I believe that the body is one of culture's most ideologized territories, and one that has been transformed especially into a moral territory in which no one can be liberated. (Translation mine)

To speak of the social body through a physical one is the artist's way of constructing a political dialogue and an analogy that brings both subjective and objective experiences to direct confrontation. State horror, explored through the inscription of the female body, can be creatively understood through Julia Kristeva's notion that a social body compels the way a physical body is perceived. The opposite has also been postulated, i.e. the physical body experiences and perceives what the social puts into motion (Labanyi, 86). In Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1982) Kristeva¹² explores the concept of "writing the body," central to French feminist theory, as a way of writing the political. The idea of defilement, as a source of body pollution, becomes an expression of the social body's malaise; a state obsessed with controlling the mental state of its citizens.

Throughout Vaca Sagrada one does not fully acknowledge the existence of its characters, but rather, the sensations of abjection, persecution and abomination caused by an individual sense of dejection and emotional paralysis. The marginal state of a person

under constant vigilance is projected through the body's expulsion of waste from its orifices.

A look at Jo Labanyi's essay, "Topologies of Catastrophe: Horror and Abjection in Diamela Eltit's Vaca Sagrada"¹³ gives us a better understanding of the term "abjection" which Kristeva derives from psychoanalysis. It stands for abomination, that which is expelled and produces horror and repulsion. Taken a step further, Labanyi interprets that it can be an action whereby "one abjects and is abject." This signifies that abjection is the end result of passivity. The title Vaca Sagrada or sacred cow links sacredness or cleanliness of the body to defilement, that which is dirty and debased. The title evokes the image of a sacrificial animal given as an offering in a ritualistic ceremony to appease or worship an almighty supernatural force. A reading of Vaca Sagrada through Kristeva's concept of abjection raises the question of women as a precarious being, one socially constructed and defined through the body, a body that searches for purification and meaning. Women's relation to men is also extended to the city she inhabits. For Eltit, abjection is the embodiment of a political reality and it is woman, its protégé, who is made abject by a nation who is supposed to protect her. Within this context, we can explore the construction of gender in nation and proceed to explore a dangerous liaison between a marginal subject and state repression. Eltit reminds us that the articulation of nation through a woman's body has been done to see the feminine as truly marginal. She states:

Si lo femenino es aquello oprimido por los poderes centrales... podemos, por ejemplo, pensar lo étnico, las minorías sexuales e incluso a países completos, como lo femenino.¹⁴

If the feminine is that which is oppressed by the central system of domination... we can, say, think of ethnic groups, sexual minorities and even whole countries as the feminine (Lobanyi 91).

The concept of *willing* written into the discourse of the abject configures the feminine body as a political zone from which women can write their own experiences lived in the social and historical realms. The body's need to cleanse itself from social contaminants such as state corruption, police repression and genocide manifests directly through the individual's psychotic state and convulsive bodily sensations; the need for well-being comes through the expulsion of waste. The inability to act through one's experiences and knowledge of events leads to a conscious state of paranoia and psychological persecution.

In the narrative, the search for open space, a place of refuge and escape, is an illusion. The lack of spatial orientation present at nighttime makes the novel sinister and dangerous. The constant fear of disappearing and being accosted in the dark constricts action, which the illusion of day alleviates. There are two physical spaces present; the city and "el Sur" (South). The city, however, is the very symbol of violence and emotional anguish, while the South is alluded as the ideal location where freedom resides. We, however, find that this is not true.

The main protagonist is a woman whose name is withheld in the beginning, for her true identity lies in her body. The need to escape the city and seek the idealized location of the South is hampered when Francisca, whose name is now given, realizes

that that is the place where horror resides; the place of the disappeared. It is her body, and more intimately, her sex, that speaks of political instability.

The phobic obsession with the body turns into self-exploration of the narcissistic kind. Since the outside world is precarious, the experiences of the body become the boundaries from which women observe the splitting of the self into two parts; the active and passive. Fascination with the self turns the body into subject and object. Polarity induces inward activity away from external passivity. Unable to liberate herself from urban persecution, Francisca learns to put all her attention on exploring the space of the body, as the violence of a woman's cycle turns into an extension of her nation. As object, she becomes passive as her lover gazes and explores her naked body:

El parecía esperar algo, pero en verdad no era ella la que estaba allí, era alguien que hacía poco había llegado hasta su cuerpo. Sintió la necesidad de un espejo y se levantó silenciosamente a buscar su imagen. (1991:160-161)

He seemed to be waiting for something, but in reality, it wasn't she who was there, it was someone, who, until recently, entered her body. She felt the need for a mirror and silently got up to look for her image.

(Translation mine)

Writing the political through the body allows Eltit to directly experiment with gender issues and produce strong discourses in which social structures are out of control. In *Vaca Sagrada*, state seizure of the public realm eradicates freedom to act. For this reason, looking inward, in search of the "other," within us, becomes Francisca's journey. To seek the "other" through a mirror image, however, proves futile, as it further serves to

divide and fragment the self, suppressing a sense of wholesomeness. The story itself is divided into multiple narrators: Francisca, Ana and an unidentified interlocutor who speak, often time, without any identification, giving a sense of confusion. The idea of voices without identities reflects the chaos and instability of a homeland under siege.

Human relationships also become perilous, on the verge of disintegration and destruction. Francisca's attraction to Manuel is masochistic and perturbing. Achieving an orgasm through male violence, further reinforces the violent acts of patriarchal behavior that women comply with. Rough sex, or violence over women, along with the victim's enjoyment, allows Eltit to voice her belief that women too reinforce social injustices against them.

Another type of action the work alludes to lies in the search of horror itself; by confronting the fear produced by an unstable political climate, the victim is ambiguously submitting herself to torture, although confronting terror at the same time. In one scene, Francisca is pursued by a man who wants to blind her, and sick of the persecution, offers him her vision in exchange for peace. This conflict, an outcome of one's own fears, addresses women's need to defy the very structures that subordinate and control them. The abjection, brought about by a police state makes the body ill. A sick body politic is reflected in her own.

Eltit's strategy is to raise the discomfort level in order to suggest that change starts from within us. Although a police state makes it impossible for women to act, since all its citizenry is under attack, the search for change starts from defining ourselves through a body that society and culture have previously bordered.

A fixation with the menstrual cycle, or the inability to create new life, comes across through the discharge produced by the unending blood flow, the very symbol of death.

The act of constant vomiting is yet another recurrent motif throughout the novel. Again the body is the site of convulsions, this time through food, the very element that sustains it. Bulimia is induced and considered an extreme way of cleansing the body's pollutants. The journey inward, into the inner workings of the body, produces a stark parallelism with the precariousness of the nation-state. Expulsion of the military, as parasites, is the only way to restoring a healthy and stable working body politic.

Fascination with the inside of the body is symbolic of a cultural map of a nation defiling its own people who depend on its survival. Lack of state nurturance and protection induces self-punishment as a means of purifying the abjected self. The symbolic use of the body in Kristeva can be understood in the following description where waste also holds fascination, it is the need to keep the body from collapsing:

The body's inside shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent... gave way before the dejection of its contents.

Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its 'own and clean self' (1982: 52)

Bleeding and vomiting of the female body are images conjured up to address the symbolic repression that the Chilean nation transferred onto its citizenry.

Other motifs are used for example, birds appear with a triple meaning throughout the narrative. Although traditionally birds are symbols that represent transcendence, the soul or the ability to enter a higher state of consciousness, in Eltit they represent death or freedom. The third idea of the bird lies in Chilean Spanish and refers to the penis: “No me quieres esta noche, no quieres a nadie, pájaro ensimismado.”(101) (“You don’t love me tonight, you don’t love anyone, you pretentious bird.”) Connecting birds to the night produces horror that only serves to reinforce the intense fear of persecution: “Hubo una noche extremadamente hostil, una bandada de pájaros enloqueciendo” (102) (There was an extremely hostile night, a flock of enraged birds.”) The horror of being blinded by these birds adduces to Alfred Hitchcock’s film, The Birds. In another instance, birds remind Francisca of redemption, a kind of heavenly connection: “...lanzaban...graznidos de placer...un graznido público tan lícito que transformara ese vuelo cobarde de los pájaros en una epopeya redentora” (183) (Their cawing was a sign of pleasure...a public cawing so legitimate that it transforms the cowardly flight of birds into a redemptive epic.”)

The image of a woman’s sexuality or more directly her reproductive capacity, as the center of political discourse is a powerful strategy employed by Eltit, it forces us to focus on the unspoken. Women’s idealized body by male erotica turns into the site of ideological contention.

To experience nation from the female body, opens innumerable discourses on social control and women’s territorialized beings. It’s as if Eltit warns women that an undefined body cannot take a political stance. However bleak and pernicious the novel may seem, at the end, Francisca assumes ironically a sense of social responsibility by

taking part in a workers' demonstration. This act, although a manifestation of one's right to act publicly, is a derisive gesture given the limitations of freedom by a nation under siege. The act of solidarity only heightens the problems of social history since the protagonist intends by this action to form a collective project, and its futility lies in her powerlessness as an agent of social change.

The city, especially the center of town, is a place of vigilance that makes Francisca uneasy as Sergio mocks her for not being the Francisca he remembers:

Le adjudicó a su nombre un cuerpo saturado de historia. Al principio pensé que Sergio se burlaba, pero cuando miré su cara comprendí que el pasado le había consumido toda su energía (52).

He adjudged to its name a body saturated with history. At first I thought Sergio was mocking me, but when I looked at his face I realized the past had consumed all his energy. (Translation mine)

The idea of recuperating the city's history while living fragmented lives and turmoil, only heightens the shattered images that disconnect the past from the present. The need to reconstruct a new history urges Francisca to rethink her inactivity. The constant reminder of blood through metaphors of menstruation, dogs giving birth, of life and death, is the life force the body needs to exist, the blood needed to stimulate change. Eltit is aware of her strategy and realizes the importance of the blood flow in keeping the body alive. The provocative use of blood, while witnessing a dog giving birth, draws her attention to the condition of the bleeding female, as she too gives birth. The use of animals comes of no surprise, given the title sacred cow. Francisca witnesses the sad and

cruel testimony of a sick and old dog giving birth, as the animal lies dying. She sees herself in the pathetic ending of the bleeding canine and realizes the suffering women endure in the process of giving birth:

De manera imperceptible mi mente fue ocupada por otra imagen. Vi sangrar a la perra, la perra estaba sangrando y aullaba. No, no aullaba, emitía un sonido delicadamente parejo, mientras sangraba (44).

In an imperceptible manner, the mind was occupied by another image. I saw the dog bleed, the bitch was bleeding and howling. No, not howling, she emitted a delicately even sound while she bled. (Translation mine)

In the following description between a dog and a woman lies the strong bond the female species share in the process of giving life. Women's traditional lot in society appears analogous to the fate of dogs:

La perra ya estaba vieja y, así vieja como estaba, arrastraba la barriga dejando destilar un hilo de sangre. Ya había empezado a sangrar antes de parir...gimiendo igual que una mujer herida (44).

The bitch was already old, and old as she was, she dragged her stomach, oozing a thread of blood. She had started to bleed before giving birth...moaning just like a wounded woman. (Translation mine)

Alluding to women as animals: a dog (bitch) or a cow, however sacred, as the title of the work indicates, pushes feminist discourse to develop strategies in which to discuss and confront, on the one hand, the female body's violent treatment of its sexuality and, on the other, its sacredness defined through male standards.

Experiences derived from bodily functions, therefore represent the social malaise; a nation's sickness whose military abominations and terrorizing practices on the civilian populace restricts the freedom to act. The image of the bleeding female becomes the symbol of death itself, as infertility and abjection is the only way the body continues to survive. Action in the novel is an inward activity. Observing the body's movements becomes obsessive. When the bleeding stops, Francisca is forced to look outward again. Feeling trapped by the passive activity of the body, now a void, her outward sense of paralysis now needs to be confronted. The discomfort and fear the state has produced becomes the reason she begins to write. This outward action stimulates her to rewrite the story of her nation. The need to break the silence of oppression drives her to put her experiences into writing, where she is in control of events. The idea of creating a new history enables Francisca to become an active participant in the future of her nation's history, one that empowers her.

The body as text, in which a new history emerges, is the space Latin American women begin to deterritorialize and reclaim through the use of her own language and on her own terms. Her journey inward becomes a cultural map of the present, as her body awakens her to the realization that she had been all along an extension of the corrupt condition of the state. The inward-outward tension produced between the physical body and the body politic creates consciousness. Francisca realizes her condition toward the end of the novel:

Ya no sangraba. Supe que ya no sangraba cuando dejé de esperar la llegada de la sangre. No la esperaba pues su descenso no me producía el menor atisbo de estupor. Sangraba sí, seguía sangrando, pero únicamente

como el deber físico que me imponía una repetición biológica desprovista de toda utilidad. Por inercia y desde un signo monótono me había uniformizado con los otros cuerpos que estaban obligados a acusar los signos de una herida, el costo de un nacimiento inmemorial (178) .

I was no longer bleeding. I knew I no longer bled when I stopped waiting for the blood flow. Since I didn't expect it, its descent did not produce in the least, the suspicion of stupor. I was bleeding, of course, I went on bleeding, but only as a physical duty, as a biological repetition lacking any usefulness. Due to inertia and repetition, I had become like the other bodies, obliged to acknowledge the wounds, the price of an ancestral birth.
(Translation mine)

In the essay “Vaca Sagrada: el cuerpo a borbotones de escritura” Schulz-Cruz¹⁵ perceives the female body as moral territory that encloses cultural values. The idea of power flows through it and rests on it. The territorialized body is the center of patriarchal and feminist encounters.

A newly found consciousness produces in the protagonist a sense of action empowered through the agency of the Will. Women's body, used in discourse as a tool for writing, confronts patriarchy with a newly created language as seen in motifs such as menstruation that defy the phallic order. At once, the double intention of Vaca Sagrada is to confront patriarchal values by shocking and creating a discourse derived

from an unspoken area of female sexuality, and the other, to criticize the inhuman and horrific acts of violence by a government against its own people.

The idea of inventing whole new referents in literature through menstruation is a strong indication that patriarchy and its harmfully ingrained values must be revised, altered or reconstructed to include women in the discourse of nation.

The male symbolic order is castrated through abjection. We see this connection through the narrator's association with sexuality. She remembers the bleeding male body as she recalls her childhood and the first penis she ever saw, a man exposing himself to her with bloody diseased legs.

The act of writing is Francisca's way of confronting the reality that surrounds her. Once she leaves "el Sur," the true place of horror where the disappeared are said to be, she realizes that the city, although a place of repression and chaos, is the space where she will prepare and organize her writing of lived experiences.

Eltit's understanding of women's lives and their ideological representation adds to her vision of the world. Traditionally seen as symbols of the erotic and, as life-giver, women have always been viewed as marginal subjects in culture. By writing herself in painful analogies of the woman-animal she deconstructs stereotypes of women and prevailing male prejudices. Writing through the aesthetic of the blood, Eltit uncovers the myths of women's sexuality as she tries to place the woman subject at the center of discourse and in her nation's writing of history. The end of the novel points to the beginning of social change and a woman's need to act:

Cuando levanté la cabeza, comprendí que escribiría sobre ellos. Un poco decaída entendí que me internaba por un camino riesgoso, pero supe que lo haría porque mi corazón estaba congelado y necesitaba con urgencia un poco de calor.

Inicié el angustioso viaje tras mis propias pistas abriendo un jeroglífico por los extramuros de mi mente. Suspendí los temas que podrían haberme aportado mayores beneficios para dejarme caer en una historia cuya forma era, en extremo peligros (187).

When I lifted my head, I realized that I would be writing about them. A bit dispirited I understood that I was penetrating a risky terrain, but I knew I would do it since my heart was frozen and needed urgently a bit of warmth.

I started the anguished journey through my own leads opening the hieroglyphics of the mind. I cancelled topics that would have been able to greatly benefit me in order to let drop a history, whose form was extremely dangerous. (Translation mine)

A woman's experience in culture and her vision of the world, compels her to defy traditional perceptions of her role in society. The more defined she becomes by willing action, the more concrete is her experiential participation in the formation of a new history and a new nation. Vaca Sagrada is not doubt a work about women's capacity to act despite horrific national conditions, and, equally strong, in its novel approach to writing women's body into the discourse of repression.

Notes

Part 1. Gender and Nation in Ferré

¹ Rosario Ferré, Maldito Amor y otros cuentos (New York: Vintage Español, 1998) 17-85.

² Diamela Eltit, Vaca sagrada (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991).

³ María Elena Rodríguez, "Las casas del porvenir: nación y narración en el ensayo puertorriqueño," Revista Iberoamericana ns 162-163 (1993): 33-54.

⁴ This term derives from the romantic novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries where the hacienda was the absolute property of the landowner who owned it both economically and ruled it according to his whims. The foundational novels were clearly a way of building a national image as the island-state sought to free itself from Spanish colonial rule.

⁵ Debra A. Castillo, Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 157.

⁶ Deirdre Lashgari, Violence, Silence, and Anger (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1995) 72-77.

⁷ Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender & Nation (London: Sage Publications, 1993) 2.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," Literature, Politics and Theory, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diana Loxley (London: Methuen, 1986) 149.

⁹ Ana María Alonso, "Gender, Power, and Historical Memory: Discourses of Serrano Resistance," Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Part 2. Nation and Gender in Eltit

¹⁰ Diamela Eltit, Vaca Sagrada (Bs. Aires: Planeta, 1991).

¹¹ Juan Andrés Piña, "Diamela Eltit: Escritos sobre un cuento," in Conversaciones con la narrativa chilena (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Los Andes, 1991) 249.

¹² Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹³ Jo Labanyi, "Topologies of Catastrophe; Horror and Abjection in Diamela Eltit's Vaca sagrada," in Latin American Women's Writing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 85-103.

¹⁴ Piña, Conversaciones, 240.

¹⁵ Bernard Schulz-Cruz, "Vaca Sagrada: el cuerpo a borbotones de escritura," Hispanófila 123 (1998): 67-72.

Conclusion

In the first part of the thesis, the concept of *willing* provided a framework for the formulation of a Spanish American feminist literary theory. *Experience* and *action* were presented as *willing's* main components of analysis, from which to articulate and draw gender discourses that confront culture and history. The main objective of *willing* has been to establish a comprehensive ideological review that draws from Hispanic women's differences, multicultural realities and gender concerns in Hispanic cultures, and to provide women's existing, abundant literary corpus with a standard of analysis that comes from an interdisciplinary approach to *willing*. Three concepts have been borrowed from feminist studies, the social and political sciences to interact with *willing*: Becoming, the Public Realm and Gender and Nation. Among others, they have been selected to reinforce women's issues, as they appear in the public realm.

The application of *willing* to ten literary works by women has exemplified the capacity of *willing* in literary analysis. With interdisciplinary thinking, *willing* has stimulated, and has contributed to literary appreciation of gender-oriented works through conceptual analysis that enrich creative writing.

The concept of *willing* has been offered as a theoretical paradigm from which the Hispanic woman's experience in the private and public realm of society, history and culture can be addressed and become part of a greater continental dialogue that recognizes women's contributions in literature and society in general. The application of *willing* to literary works has generated new analysis. By carefully listening to issues present in the ten chosen works, I have proposed an approach that considers gender-oriented literature. *Willing*, or the action present in the Will, constitutes women's

experiences while action legitimizes their human condition. My initial inspiration and impetus came from Hannah Arendt's last work, Willing and Willingness. Although her disquisition has stirred much controversy from philosophers, political thinkers and feminists alike, it is Arendt's metaphorical and literary discursive style of writing that has paved new interpretations in rethinking the woman subject. I argued, that the Will, through the components of *experience* and *action* serve to launch a broadminded Spanish American feminist literary theory, based on the category of experience in which women can address their cultural, historical, sexual, racial and ethnic identifications and differences while aspiring to reconstructing the Latin American woman. Experiences women share and address in literary works validate and embrace women's multi-cultural identities and discourses, by bringing to the public realm their untold stories. The *willing* subject who wishes to become public does not follow a concrete theory from which to quote Arendt directly, instead, the *willing* concept I present is loosely based on the two premises outlined: 1) human action as the outcome of 2) human experience. My approach to *willing* has been interdisciplinary. I have borrowed from philosophy the concept of *becoming* that feminist philosophers use to reconstruct the woman subject, previously fixed by social and cultural patriarchal codes. I have also taken from the political and social sciences the notions of the private and public realms in which to problematize women's experiences in the private space of the household, introducing the home as a political area of representation. Once "the private becomes political" women enter the public sphere where identity becomes legitimate in the public and collective eye. The third notions, nation and gender, have come from readings on the interrelationship of gender to nation in hopes of demonstrating the latitude of *willing* as it

relates to these topics. In all and foremost, the feminist approach to *willing* is made comprehensible through the discipline of women studies that empowers the concept of *willing* to act as a feminist discourse.

What I have found most refreshing and useful has been Arendt's attempt to remove *willing* from its philosophic tradition and placing it in the political realm of the social, that is, in history. This move has given me much breadth and scope to establish the thesis and test its components within feminist theoretical thinking.

A social theory, by its very nature, speaks of the human condition and social practices present in socio-political structures. The issues of human concern, embedded in theory, are examined through oppressive structures that keep them un-resolved. A feminist theory, I believe, can propose a discourse in which to address, expand, relate and explain Hispanic women's condition and conditioning in national cultures.

The way the world views Spanish American nations is what is central to the construction of the *willing* concept. It is a way of defining new parameters of theoretical thinking. Its application to the ten chosen works, I believe, has further enriched literary explorations of feminist readings of these texts. Since literature interprets human symbols, new knowledge needs to be continuously introduced to enhance the work's human and contemporary significance. As with other prescriptive epistemologies, movements and periods that have contextualized the literary text, feminist readings are essential to works written by women on women, it is another tool in gaining new perspectives of the world they live in and reconstruct.

The credo "to write as a woman is a political option" is still highly observed by most authors who choose not to publicly disclaim their feminist positions for fear of

never seeing their works published. I believe the power and usefulness of theories serve to give social dilemmas visibility and create new traditions while introducing new thought patterns; a way of stimulating social change through the consistency of human discourse. Above all, if anything, theory should aspire to permanence as it benefits women's psycho-social development, through issues and concerns that affect her life and that of all future generations. What women want is, therefore, to access the same rights and privileges bestowed on men by society.

The concept of *willing* has been a way of creating a broad-based theoretical discourse that explores and offers dialogues grounded on Hispanic women's experience in culture and history and the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by their own societies.

A feminist approach to the symbolic representation of women in literature is one way of developing national and inter-regional awareness of women's issues, while probing into and stimulating new approaches to analyzing the aesthetic work.

Although many feminist theories exist, that can be applied to women writing on women, Hispanic women critics have used them to treat individual works. To date, no theory has been fully developed that speaks of the Hispanic experience in culture and one capable of addressing an array of women's issues at the national level. A comprehensive theory is what *willing* offers as it quietly awaits participants to interact and expand its parameters.

The dynamics produced by a rich dialogic interaction can diffuse international confusion and misgivings of Hispanic American nations. At a time when developing nations and thinkers are offering new groundbreaking theories as to the existence of

“third worldly knowledge,” as Spivak would say, within a global market economy, Latin America is ripe with its own ideological evolution in progress.

I have also demonstrated that a feminist literary theory can draw strong imprint from literature, and its hyper-textual discourses. Contemporary Spanish American women’s contributions to literary history has shaped and opened new analysis as women’s concerns confront society, culture and national histories. The ten works analyzed have shared women’s experiences in society, and individual actions derived from active participation; they have introduced their voices in nation-building. The writers selected have brought gendered perspective to the study of literature through feminist readings. The concept of *willing* through the components of *experience* and *action* rendered valuable insights into women’s condition in the world and strengthened its analysis through interdisciplinary thinking. *Willing* has embraced both women’s lived experiences in society and their determination to be accountable for appearing in the public realm of literature. Their stories vary from author, country and ethnic and racial groups. The stories narrated have made Hispanic women visible and their life experiences political. Difference is what *willing* celebrates as it takes into account the multicultural and poly-ethnic societies that comprise the Latin American continent.

Focusing on works that have been published in the last forty years has enabled the reader to attest the power of women as witnesses of their nations historical existence. The presence of a remarkable literary production is also an indication of the changing tides in social thinking Latin American women have struggle to produce. This historical and cultural phenomenon has been at the center of attention to North American, European and

Hispanic literary critics who see the emergence of new patterns of thinking and ways of constructing literature in the Americas.

Although Hispanic women have never been part of a continental feminist movement, due to different economic and political national agendas, they have followed closely feminist theories; although developed by other nations, have been tested and re-contextualized to fit their own national and cultural needs.

One of the problems facing the formulation of a Latin American literary feminist theory in Hispanic nations has risen from each country's individual sense of nation. The way a nation views its own list of feminist issues is not, perhaps, the way another may view theirs. Each country presses to raise awareness of its discourses and expectations, making an international conference on Latin American feminism a difficult topic to handle. Given the multicultural and poly-ethnic groups that comprise each nation, these conferences better serve to bridge the gaps produced by differences among women from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. For this reason, to speak of a Latin American feminism is next to impossible. However, while Hispanic nations view their own national realities, and rightly so, there exists another perspective citizens from these nations must realize, i.e. the way we, as Hispanics, are viewed by the non-Hispanic speaking world.

The way the world judges Hispanic cultures lies in the unjust label known as Latin America. The misnomer has caused much confusion, and has unfortunately, served to group many nations with practically not much in common, other than a colonialist past and the Spanish language, which, in many instances, although the official one, is still not spoken by marginal groups.

I argued, that while national feminist criticism insists on analyzing individual works by women authors, within a national context, the goal to have literature by women enter mainstream literary practices can be better achieved if feminist theories come together and offer a more comprehensive approach to Hispanic women's literary contributions. This, however, does not imply that a literary movement exists, quite the contrary, since movements slowly fade-away, rather, it is a way of maintaining permanence in historical thinking which can ultimately pave the way for social change. A comprehensive theoretical discourse on *willing* is inclusive of all Hispanic women's differences and contributes to a more equitable representation of women in society and in literature.

What this study recommends for future treatment of *willing* is further elaboration of the concept of nation and points of intersection among different ethnic cultures in Latin America. *Willing*, as a theory, is a strategy that proposes to develop a Hispanic discourse, inclusive of multiculturalism, while addressing issues of national concerns. *Willing* urges social equity and the development of a more complex theory where multiple ethnic perspectives have a platform and serve to promote national identities, a product of multiple racial mixing.

In conclusion, the concept of *willing*, proposed and tested as an ideological framework for women's literary discourses, has equally served as an analytical category of literary analysis in its application of gender-oriented works. *Willing* creates new perspective on women's representation in literature, as their untold stories reach the public realm.

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