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IN SEARCH OF THE FEMININE VOICE: FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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In seventeenth century New Spain, a nun of the Order of San Jerónimo wrote the following well-known redondilla,¹ the first few stanzas of which are as follows:

Hombres necios que acusáis
a la mujer sin razón,
sin ver que sois la ocasión
de lo mismo que culpáis:
 si con ansia sin igual
solicitáis su desdén,
¿por qué queréis que obren bien
si las incitáis al mal?
 Combatís su resistencia
y luego, con gravedad,
decís que fue liviandad
lo que hizo la diligencia.²

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¹ A poem made up of stanzas of four verses of eight syllables each.

² The following is an English translation of the redonilla:

Silly, you men—so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you're alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman's mind.
 After you've won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name,
you still expect her to behave—
you, that coaxed her into shame.
 You batter her resistance down
and then, all righteousness, proclaim
that feminine frivolity,
not your persistence, is to blame.

See JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ, *SISTER, A SOR JUANA ANTHOLOGY* 110-11 (Alan Trueblood trans., 1988). For the most authoritative study of Sor Juana's life and work, see OCTAVIO PAZ, *SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ, O, LAS TRAMPAS DE LA FE* [SOR JUANA OR THE TRAPS OF FAITH] (Margaret S. Peden trans., 1988).

The Mexican nun was, of course, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of the preeminent poets of colonial Spanish America and one of the most important literary figures of Latin America. Sor Juana used this philosophical satire to attack the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard of the paternalistic and closed masculine society of her time. She was keenly aware of the need for the kind of discourse that would accurately express a woman's view of the world, herself, and others. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is also the author of the first American document to defend a woman's right to education and intellectual pursuits. Her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* is an autobiographical letter in which she intelligently explains and defends her thirst for knowledge in all areas, as well as the right of all women to an education and culture, to her friend the Bishop of Puebla, who had objected to her nonreligious intellectual and literary inclinations and studies. In this document she is fighting not only the accusations of her friend and the Church of the time, but the accusation of her society as a whole. It is interesting to note that she bases her defense on illustrious women, Christian and pagan, historical and legendary, real and imaginary, so as to affirm herself through them. Not surprisingly, in 1974, Mexico bestowed upon Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz the title of First Feminist of America.

Knowledge in seventeenth century New Spain was reserved for certain men and priests, but not for women and nuns. Literature, in particular, was not considered a proper activity for women.³ For Sor Juana, who early in life decided against marriage so she could continue her voracious reading, the convent was the only place that allowed her the freedom to pursue intellectual development. Even there she encountered resentment and criticism, and by the time of her death she had completely renounced her writings.

Sor Juana was neither the first nor the only woman writer in colonial Spanish America.⁴ One of the early chronicles was written by Isabel de Guevara in 1556. Many female family members of colonial government functionaries wrote poetry. There are the mystical poets from Sor Juana's times: Sor Francisca Josefa del Castillo y Guevara, known as Madre Castillo (Colombia), Santa Rosa de Lima and Clarinda (Peru), and Jerónima de Velasco (Ecuador). In the nineteenth century, Latin America produced a number of extraordinary women writers including the

³ See PAZ, *supra* note 2, at 45 (indicating that literature was "written by men to be read by men").

⁴ See ELECTRA ARENAL & STACEY SCHLAU, *UNTOLD SISTERS: HISPANIC NUNS IN THEIR OWN WORK* 1, 2 (1989).

Argentinean Juana Manuela Gorriti, author of political novels; the Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, one of the most important Latin American poets of the Romantic period and author of *Sab* (the first antislavery novel in the Americas) in 1841; and Clorinda Matto de Turner, who wrote one of the first indigenous novels of the Americas, *Aves sin nido* (*Birds Without Nests*).

In the early part of the twentieth century, the number of women writers increased as a result of more accessible education and the advent of feminism. These writers include Julia de Burgos (Puerto Rico), Lydia Cabrera (Cuba), Juana de Ibarbourou and Delmira Augustini (Uruguay), poet Alfonsina Storni and novelist Norah Lange (Argentina), María Luisa Bombal (Chile), and Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela). These women writers were followed by Rima Vallbona (Costa Rica), Aída Cartagena Portalatín (Dominican Republic), Silvina Bullrich, Marta Lynch, Angelica Gorodischer, Marta Traba and Beatriz Guido (Argentina), Clarice Lispector (Brasil), Rosario Castellanos and Elena Garro (Mexico), Marta Brunet and Mercedes Valdivieso (Chile), Yolanda Bedregal Cónitser (Bolivia), and Gloria Stolk (Venezuela).

During the past several decades, we have also seen very important contributions from writers such as Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), Luisa Valenzuela (Argentina), Julieta Campos (Cuba and Mexico), Isabel Allende (Chile), Lygia Fagundes Telles and Nélide Piñón (Brazil), Rosario Ferré and Ana Lydia Vega (Puerto Rico), Nancy Morejón and Belkis Cuza Malé (Cuba), Margo Glantz (Mexico), Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay), Albalucía Angel (Colombia), Elvira Orphée (Argentina), Gaby Vallejo de Bolívar (Bolivia), Gioconda Belli (Nicaragua), and Rigoberta Menchu (Guatemala). In 1945, Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral was the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in literature. This list should also include English and French-speaking Caribbean authors, Maryse Condé (Guadaloupe), Louise Bennett and Sylvia Wynter (Jamaica), and Nydia Ecury (Curaçao).

Of course, these lists are incomplete. Most anthologies of Latin-American literature include only a handful of the many outstanding women writers. It is difficult to explain the absence of many excellent women writers from the collection of Latin-American literature or their exclusion from the story of the "Boom" and "post-Boom" of Latin-American literature.⁵ In *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labrynth of Solitude*),

⁵ Cf. AMY K. KAMINSKY, *READING THE BODY POLITIC: FEMINIST CRITICISM AND LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS* 28-29 (1993). Kaminsky compares women to persons in exile—both have been rendered invisible by society. She sees this exile as a particular form of presence-in-absence epitomizing the Latin American feminine experience. *Id.* at 29. Although women writers

Octavio Paz points out that Simone de Beauvoir's theory of women as "the other" is particularly applicable to Latin-American society, where women are defined by men and are trapped in traditional images that a rigidly patriarchal society imposes on them.⁶ This phenomena was evident in the written word; women-authored literature was classified as "feminine" and, thus, subject to different criteria by many male literary critics. That approach, however, is rapidly changing as many contemporary women writers, some of them already internationally known and admired, continue to write and create influential discourses that reflect women's perception of literature and the world. This paper particularly concentrates on two contemporary Latin-American women writers who have located such a voice: Elena Poniatowska of Mexico and Isabel Allende of Chile.

Elena Poniatowska, one of Mexico's most important contemporary narrators, is a novelist, short-story writer, critic, playwright, and scriptwriter for television and film. She began her career as a journalist, interviewing prominent Mexican artists and intellectuals. Later, she incorporated her interviewing skills and other journalistic devices into her works of fiction. Poniatowska's best-known work is probably *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío (Until We Meet Again)*. This collaborative autobiography tells the story of Jesusa Palancares, a poor, uneducated, but strong Mexican woman. Through this story of a woman of the lower class fighting to survive in a male-dominated society, Poniatowska sheds light on various aspects of Mexican culture. The author repeatedly visited Jesusa at her home and faithfully recorded their conversations. In the book, Poniatowska skillfully reproduces Jesusa's speech, thoughts, and numerous life anecdotes of her marriage and men, her participation in the Mexican Revolution, her life as a maid in the capital, and her dealings with the supernatural and the occult. In *La noche de Tlatelolco, testimonios de historia oral (Massacre in Mexico)*, Poniatowska successfully combines journalistic and fictional techniques by mixing the narration of imaginary characters with the testimonies of real-life witnesses. It is one of the most widely read accounts of the October 2, 1968, student massacre by government forces in Mexico City's "Plaza de la tres culturas." In *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela (Dear Diego)* Poniatowska recreates, with

have existed in Latin America from the beginning of the colonial period, their literary history has been annulled. *Id.* at 28. Those women writers that are included in conventional literary history are often made to appear exceptional, belonging to a "different" literary category than their male counterparts. *Id.* at 29.

⁶ See OCTAVIO PAZ, *EL LABERINTO DE LA SOLEDAD [THE LABRYNITH OF SOLITUDE]* 31-38 (Lysander Kemp trans., 1982).

poignancy and from the woman's point of view, the love affair between the Mexican painter Diego Rivera and his Polish mistress through a series of imaginary love letters from her to him. In *De noche vienes* (*You Come at Night*) Poniatowska uses a variety of narrative techniques to offer us the lives and thoughts of women from different social backgrounds. Her autobiographical novel *La "Flor de Lis"* (*The "Fleur de Lis"*) tells the life story of Mariana, the narrator and a duchess of mixed parentage—French father and Mexican mother—from her infancy in France until World War II. The war forces her to flee with her mother and sister, first to Spain, then Cuba, and finally to Mexico where the family is eventually reunited in the place that becomes Mariana's (and is Poniatowska's) motherland. In *Los cuentos de Lilus Kikus* (*Lilus Kikus's Stories*), the central character is Lilus, an isolated but intellectually curious little girl, separated from other children due to her aristocratic European background and her intense personality. Lilus wonders, questions, and comments on various facets of Mexican life.

Isabel Allende's works seem to fall into the category of the neo-feminist novel.⁷ The neo-feminist novel documents a woman's struggle against the oppression of a patriarchal society in an effort to develop her own personhood.⁸ It is a historical novel that focuses on female strength and influence.⁹ This history is often recreated through the stories and experiences of the author's own female ancestors.¹⁰

In Allende's first three works, *La casa de los espíritus* (*House of the Spirits*),¹¹ *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadow*),¹² and *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (*The Stories of Eva Luna*),¹³ she does not pretend to faithfully reproduce Latin-American or Chilean reality and history. The narrative discourse generates an imagined textual reality which displaces

⁷ See Ellen Morgan, *Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel*, in *FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON THEORY, POETRY AND PROSE* 272, 274-75 (Cheryl L. Brown & Karen Olson eds., 1978). Neo-feminism is used to define the correct feminist movement. *Id.* at 277.

⁸ *Id.* at 272, 277.

⁹ Morgan, *supra* note 7, at 275. The heroine of the neo-feminist novel is not an "exception to the rule of her sex . . . dissociated from other women by beauty or superior endowments." *Id.* at 277. Rather, she is an average woman whose courage and strength are celebrated and who conveys "images of transcendence and authenticity for women." *Id.* at 274.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 275.

¹¹ ISABEL ALLENDE, *LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS* [THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS] (Magda Bogin trans., 1985) [hereinafter ALLENDE, SPIRITS].

¹² ISABEL ALLENDE, *DE AMOR Y DE SOMBRA* [OF LOVE AND SHADOW] (1994) [hereinafter ALLENDE, LOVE AND SHADOWS].

¹³ ISABEL ALLENDE, *CUENTOS DE EVA LUNA* [THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA] (1992).

extra-textual social or historical reality. It is obvious that Allende's imagination is fed by Latin-American history and reality, especially that of her own country. In her first two novels, there are numerous historical referents that we can link with the regime of Salvador Allende and the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, but since these Chilean historical figures remain unnamed, fiction and history are easily intertwined.¹⁴

The world that Allende recreates in her first two novels is a violent, corrupt, patriarchal world where women are among the most abused citizens, with very little power and almost no control over their destinies.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, therefore, Férula Trueba, Esteban's sister in *The House of the Spirits*, would have preferred to have been born a man and Pancha García, the young campesina raped by the future Senator Trueba, lowers her head as a form of submission in front of the "macho" Trueba, thus sharing the same "destino de perra" (a bitch's destiny) that her mother and grandmother suffered before her. Nevertheless, while men hold the political and economic power in *The House of the Spirits*, the leading female characters receive the responsibility of writing history and thus are the rescuers of the past and the makers of the future. These female characters are different from women found in the traditional masculine novel. Allende rejects the false stereotypes of women that are reinforced by western tradition and creates new images that transcend the generic stereotypes. Women cease to be the traditional pre-text of masculine discourse and instead become the text itself.¹⁶

It is obvious that Allende clearly identifies with some of her female leading characters. Allende herself has admitted that her mother and grandmother served as the major influences in her life and that sometimes it is difficult for her to separate her own story from the destinies of her characters. For example, when Allende was a little girl, her mother gave her a notebook to record life ("anotar la vida"). She received this gift at an age when other little girls still played with dolls. Clara del Valle, the leading character of *The House of the Spirits*, fills numerous life notebooks over a period of fifty years and, in so doing, saves the happenings of her time from oblivion.

The magical, bewitched, and atemporal world of Allende's work is the

¹⁴ See ALLENDE, *SPIRITS*, *supra* note 11; ALLENDE, *LOVE AND SHADOWS*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁵ For a more expansive discussion of this topic, see Alina Camacho-Gingerich's *La mujer ante la dictadura en las dos primeras novelas de Isabel Allende (Women and Dictatorship in Isabel Allende's First Two Novels)*, 9 DISCURSO: REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS IBEROAMERICANOS 13 (1992).

¹⁶ See NANCY MILLER, *THE HEROINE'S TEXT: READINGS IN THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH NOVEL, 1772-1782*, at 155 (1980).

exclusive realm of her feminine characters. In *The House of the Spirits*, Rosa la Bella (Rosa the Beautiful), with her perfect beauty and shining green hair, lives a separate life, floating among those merely mortal. Her clairvoyant sister Clara possesses the ability to see the future, interpret dreams, and read people's minds. She is capable of, among other things, making chairs dance around the house and playing Chopin on a closed piano. Clara obviously does not fit the female stereotype. She ignores domestic chores in favor of her *espiritista* activities and her many causes to benefit the poor and downtrodden. She is capable, however, of abandoning magic and facing reality whenever it is required, as when an earthquake destroys the family hacienda.

When Senator Trueba finds out that his daughter Blanca is sleeping with Pedro Tercero García, he blames his wife Clara for raising their daughter "without morals, without religion, without principles, like a libertine atheist."¹⁷ This charge comes from a man who raped several women in his youth. When Clara protests and points out to her husband that he had raped other women as a young man, he hits her. Clara punishes her husband for his violence with silence, the most powerful weapon within her reach.¹⁸ She never speaks to him again. Silence allows her to escape an unbearable situation and provides her a space within the patriarchal society in which imagination can be given free reign. Imagination, writing, the supernatural, and silence are tools which these female characters use to obtain certain autonomy or control over their destinies. Clara's supernatural powers and long-lasting silence are comparable to the supernatural culinary powers possessed by the protagonist of Laura Esquivel's novel *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*).¹⁹ The basic theme of that Mexican novel is neither food nor love, but power. Food, specifically family cooking, a traditional female occupation, is used to empower women within the rigid limits set by a patriarchal society.

In *The Female Imagination*, Patricia Meyer Spacks concluded, after studying more than eighty books written in English by women writers from the seventeenth century to the present, that women control their personal experience by imagining it and giving it form by writing about it:

Their imaginative versions of themselves as supporters of the social

¹⁷ ALLENDE, SPIRITS, *supra* note 11, at 171.

¹⁸ See Marjorie Agosín, *Isabel Allende: La casa de los espíritus*, 35 REVISTA INTERAMERICANA DE BIBLIOGRAFÍA 448 (1985) (discussing use of silence in THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS).

¹⁹ LAURA ESQUIVEL, COMO AGUA PARA CHOCOLATE [LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE] (1992).

structure, guardians of the species, possessors of wisdom unavailable to men—versions derived partly from the arrogance of anger—in effect recreate the “mighty female deity.” In their exact recording of inner and outer experience they establish women’s claim for attention as individuals.²⁰

Spacks, however, claims that women writers have not yet created important fictional heroines that find great personal satisfaction in their accomplishments and actions. Allende’s heroines clearly dispel this contention.

Clara’s granddaughter Alba, born “feet first, which is a sign of good luck,”²¹ actively fights the dictatorship established after the coup d’état by risking her own life to help the persecuted. When she is arrested by the military police and questioned about the whereabouts of her boyfriend Miguel she refuses to give them the information they want. She is raped, tortured, humiliated, and mutilated by her bastard half-brother Colonel García. Neither Alba nor her prisoner partner, Ana Días, however, confess or lose their dignity. When the police punish Alba in “la perrera” (the dog house), her grandmother appears to her in a vision and suggests she write, not with paper or pencil but with her thoughts, to escape the brutal treatment.²² Her writing would serve as the testimony that would expose the terrible lie they were all living. This writing saves Alba from certain death or insanity. At the end of the novel, Alba realizes that her job, as it was for women before her, is to rescue history from oblivion by writing it.

Irene Beltrán, the heroine of *Of Love and Shadow*, is a reporter by profession and a product of the Chilean bourgeois. Beltrán develops a social and political conscience when she and her boyfriend begin to investigate the disappearance of Evangelina Ranquileo, a young, lower-class woman possessing special kinetic powers. She discovers that Evangelina is only one of many dead and missing in the Mine of Los Riscos under the military dictatorship. There is no turning back for her; risking her life by using her professional tool, writing for the press, she exposes the guilty. The final results of her efforts, however, are futile. Since there is no justice under a dictatorship, she is forced into exile where she hopes to return and continue the struggle. In *Stories of Eva Luna*, the female narrator displays an impressive imagination and an uncanny ability to tell a story. The heroine learns not only the commercial value of words,

²⁰ PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS, *THE FEMALE IMAGINATION* 322 (1975).

²¹ ALLENDE, *SPIRITS*, *supra* note 11, at 223.

²² *Id.* at 351-52.

but their magical and alchemical power to influence people. All three Allende novels contain female characters who make literature and influence history.

Allende's leading female characters generally do not fit into any traditional mold. The lives of these eccentric, rebellious, and imaginative characters offer new alternatives for women in a patriarchal society. The rebellion and eccentricity of the heroine in fiction written by women increase as the heroine develops as a person and adopts an independent posture within the patriarchal system. As Annis Pratt states in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*:

The greater the personal development of a hero, the more true she is to herself and the more eccentric her relationship to the patriarchy. A quality of consciousness that is essentially antisocial characterizes the most admirable heroes. . . . Women heroes turn away from a culture hostile to their development, entering a timeless achronological world appropriate to their rejection by history, a spaceless world appropriate to rebellion against placelessness in the patriarchy.²³

Male critics often claim that García Márquez influenced Allende's novels. While the presence of this great Colombian author is easily detected and Allende admits to it with pride, there is a fundamental difference between García Márquez's and Allende's female characters. Both authors create strong female characters (e.g., Ursula Iguarán in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*)²⁴ who hold the real power behind the facade of authority. In García Márquez's novels, however, the women are the solid, sensible, feet-on-the-earth characters who hold the family together. Despite García Márquez's protest to the contrary, these values are the values of a patriarchal society. Allende's female characters are not limited to those values. Full of imagination, her heroines are also assigned the responsibility to write, to create, or to change history whenever necessary. Allende's female characters look to fulfill themselves as full human beings, not just as women. To be truly free and autonomous, an individual cannot be limited by gender stereotypes. Roles are interchangeable: female characters can be active, male characters, passive. In that sense, Allende's heroines are androgynous. Writing itself is androgynous. As Julieta Campos has said: "Creativity frees very archaic images and themes of humanity and in those depths the feminine and masculine are interwoven and blurred. . . . That is the magic

²³ ANNIS PRATT, *ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS IN WOMEN'S FICTION* 169 (1981).

²⁴ GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, *CIENT AÑOS DE SOLEDAD [ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE]* (Gregory Rabussa trans., 1970).

of words: to reconcile opposites as in the alchemists' retort."²⁵

²⁵ EVELYN P. GARFIELD, WOMEN'S VOICES FROM LATIN AMERICA: INTERVIEWS WITH SIX CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS 95-96 (1985). For further discussion on Allende's androgynous characters in her first novel, see Mario A. Rojas' study *La casa de los espíritus de Isabel Allende: Un caleidoscopio de espejos desordenados*, 132-33 REVISTA IBEROAMERICANA 917-25 (1985).