

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese

**FEMALE AGENCY IN
“EL BAÚL DE MISS FLORENCE: FRAGMENTOS PARA UN
NOVELÓN ROMÁNTICO,” *DREAMING IN CUBAN AND ¡YO!***

A Dissertation in

Spanish

by

Valbona Zylo Watkins

© 2010 Valbona Zylo Watkins

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2010

The dissertation of Valbona Zyló Watkins was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Laurence Prescott
Professor of Spanish and African-American Studies
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Javier Escudero
Associate Professor of Spanish
Special Member

Julia Cuervo-Hewitt
Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese

John Ochoa
Associate Professor of Spanish

Thomas Beebee
Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and German

Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego
Associate Professor of Spanish
Special Signatory

Henry Gerfen
Associate Professor of Spanish and Linguistics
Head of the Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

This study of works of fiction by Hispanic women authors argues that the process of writing serves as a venue for the main female characters to enunciate authority and to voice agency. In Ana Lydia Vega's "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico" (in *Falsas crónicas del sur*), Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*; and Julia Álvarez's *¡Yo,!* the main female characters seek to claim agency through different narrative forms including personal diary, first-person narration, and letters. Each text is framed as a narrative by a woman who writes her story. These narrative techniques are used both to present stories that concern and prompt reflection on the Hispanic Caribbean and its Diasporas—Dominican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican, respectively—and also to help us understand the unique position of the female subject in each text and each context.

The first chapter begins with a discussion of the terms female character, female subjectivity and agency and their application to this study. Female character in this study does not denote personality trait, but rather the fictional representation of the female figures that populate the texts under examination. Further, I view subjectivity as constituted through discourse, and therefore I examine whether the female characters have the power to control discursive vehicles. In the same vein, agency is dependent upon the ability of the characters to act in spite of restrictions, to seize authorship and to counter the traditions to which they are expected to submit on a daily basis. This work is nourished by theories and research on subjectivity, feminism, and post-colonialism presented by Paul Smith, Debra Castillo, Adrienne Rich, Teresa de Lauretis, and Hommi

Bhabha, among others. Their stance on subjectivity, agency, feminism and post-colonialism help inform this study's examination of an array of issues, particularly those involving gender, race and ethnicity.

Ultimately, this study traces a trajectory as the female characters claim agency through their own writing. This trajectory begins with a discussion of Vega's text, where the protagonist uses the diary as a platform to voice, sway and resist her condition in a patriarchal society. I argue that in this work Vega awards the protagonist the narrative of the diary in order to give her a subject position from which to rewrite nineteenth century Puerto Rican history. Next, I continue with García's text, where an array of female characters located in Cuba and in the United States attempt to seek agency, but only a few enjoy the ability for self-narration and self-reflection. I argue that García's agenda is to award agency of first-person narration specifically to the younger generation of Cubans and Cuban-Americans, so that they can resist established beliefs handed down by previous generations. Lastly, this comparative study culminates with Álvarez's text, where all female characters narrate in first-person recounting their stories. In Álvarez's text, I perceive an urgency to seek agency, beginning with the novel's title *!Yo!*, and continuing throughout the text in which all the female characters yearn for and take control of their first-person narration to negotiate agency and authority. Lastly, the conclusion examines differences and similarities within various communities of female figures discussed in the thesis and underscores the ways their recounting brings to light their marginal voices as they search for ways to cope with challenges and deal with their lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION: Female Character, Subjectivity and Female Agency in the Fiction of Ana Lydia Vega, Julia Álvarez and Cristina García	1
1.1 Approaching Hispanic Caribbean women writers	8
1.2 Female Subjectivity and Agency	13
1.3 Narrative Techniques in Female Subjectivity.....	19
1.4 Intersections of gender, race and ethnicity in female agency	23
1.5 Theory and Theoretical Approaches	27
1.6 Overview of chapters	32
CHAPTER 1: Women and Agency in “El baúl de Miss Florence: Fragmentos para un novelón romántico”	39
2.1 Ana Lydia Vega: Her Place in the Hispanic Letters.....	42
2.2 “El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico” –The Short Story	45
2.3 Florence	59
2.4 Susan	70
2.5 Bela	75
2.5 Selenia.....	81
2.6 The trajectory of the male characters	87
2.7 Concluding remarks	89
3. CHAPTER 2. Dreaming Agency in Dreaming in Cuban.....	92

3.1 Cristina García: Her place in Hispanic Letters	96
3.2 <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i> – the novel.....	97
3.3 Celia	105
3.4 Lourdes.....	113
3.5 Felicia.....	118
3.6 Pilar	126
3.7 Other key characters.....	132
3.8 The trajectory of the male characters	136
3.9 Concluding remarks	141
4. CHAPTER 3: Urgency and Anxiety of Female Agency in <i>!Yo!</i>	146
4.1 Julia Álvarez: Her place in the Hispanic Letters.....	149
4.2 <i>!Yo!</i> -the novel.....	153
4.3 Yo.....	159
4.4 The sisters.....	162
4.5 The mother.....	167
4.6 The cousin	172
4.7 The maid's daughter.....	175
4.8 The best friend	184
4.9 The landlady	186
4.10 The trajectory of the male characters	190
4.11 Concluding remarks	195
5. CONCLUSION:	199
WORKS CITED.....	212

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have completed this dissertation without the extraordinary support of faculty, friends and family. First, I am very grateful to God for giving me this opportunity and for sustaining me spiritually until this work came to completion. To my dissertation committee, I am forever indebted. I am grateful to Laurence Prescott, Javier Escudero and Julia Cuervo-Hewitt, whose classes I attended, where I was challenged intellectually, broadening my understanding of Spanish Literature. I am grateful to my long time advisor and committee chair, Laurence Prescott, for answering all my questions, for his careful readings and for setting high standards, which pushed me beyond what I thought I was capable of. This journey was made possible in large part by his kindness and considerable mentoring. Further, I am very thankful to Javier Escudero for identifying parts of the dissertation that needed further clarification. Javier has been a strong advocate of my work, and his unfailing support as a professor and friend has meant so much to me. I would like to thank Julia Cuervo-Hewitt for her invaluable help, extensive comments and continuous support throughout the years at Penn State. Thomas Beebee's comments, assistance and advice also greatly improved this dissertation. I am grateful to John Ochoa for picking up this project at a later date and offering substantial amounts of thoughtful feedback. Last but not least, I am very grateful to Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego for her kind attention to detail when reading the dissertation and for offering positive criticism which shaped this work.

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people who have contributed directly or indirectly to this dissertation. Many thanks go to those friends who have read and provided valuable feedback in different stages of this dissertation: Monserrat Bores Martínez, Robin Leon Kuzu, Nicole Sparling, Sara Scott Armengot, Michelle Smith, Richard Kurt Halsted, Nadia Madruga, Tyler Flynn, and Elizabeth Atkins. I am thankful

to Chip Gerfen, Nuria Zagarra, Bob Blue, Aida Beaupied, Anibal González, Mary Barnard, Loretta Zehngutt, Carol Ritter, Lindsey Estreight, Becky Cross, Laurie Johnson and all other professors as well as my students, for making my life at Penn State so much more rewarding.

I am particularly thankful to my family for their unconditional support. To my parents, Qemal and Kozeta Zylo: you are an inspiration, and without your love of education, I would not be the person I am today. You have encouraged and assisted me throughout my life, even during those moments when I doubted my own ability. Faleminderit mami dhe babi! Jeni të mrekullueshëm! To my beautiful sister Klodiana: words do not do justice to what your love and support mean to me. Your optimism and constant encouragement helped me maintain perspective. I cannot feel any more blessed that I have you as a sister, best friend, and faithful confidant. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Todd Watkins, whose love brightens my day every morning. Thank you for your patience during the countless hours spent at Barnes & Noble or the library, away from you. Throughout the years, you have patiently listened to me and kept me sane. Thank you for your wonderful sense of humor and for reminding me of what is important. I could not have done it without you.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, who helped me pursue my goal.
Faleminderit të gjithëve!

Introduction

Female Character, Subjectivity and Female Agency in the Fiction of Ana Lydia Vega, Julia Álvarez and Cristina García

Everyone needs a strong sense of self. It is our base of operations for everything that we do in life.

-Julia Alvarez

Readers are advised to read in this section as in a recipe book: not beginning to end and top to bottom but picking and choosing at will or at random. I could imagine, for example, taking an author and exploring the possibilities of a single brief text as it depicts an entire repertoire of strategic interventions. The current arrangement...allowed for more variety in our literary diet.

-Debra Castillo, (*Talking Back* 37)

In reading literary works by Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez, one notices that they share similarities in themes—a search for identity, sociopolitical concerns, humor, Diaspora, and borderlands—similarities in one sense unsurprising, inasmuch as these issues affect specifically women of the Hispanic Caribbean. Yet these themes resound beyond their nationalities, geographies, linguistic identities, and gender. Their works most certainly have captured the attention of critics. With regard to Ana

Lydia Vega, scholars have focused mainly on *Vírgenes y mártires* (1981), written in collaboration with Carmen Lugo Filippi, *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio* (1982), and *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión* (1984). María Carmen Zielina and August Puleo note that storytelling and playing with language are two characteristics of Vega's writing. Cristina García's most popular novels, and the ones that have attracted much scholarly critique, are *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). Bridget Kevane observes that García's writing "expands on Cuban identity and the official version of Cuban history" (86). Similarly, William Luis notes that "the political discourse is evident in García's novel" (*Dance*, 222). The same comment applies to Julia Álvarez, that is to say, one sees the influence of politics in her writing, particularly in her response to Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Álvarez has earned much critical attention with *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), *In the Time of Butterflies* (1994), and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000). Laura P. Alonso Gallo contends that Álvarez's novels "dig into the past in order to understand the present of Latin American nations and peoples" (97).

When I first approached Ana Lydia Vega's "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico," included in *Falsas crónicas del sur* (1991), Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and Julia Álvarez's *¡Yo!* (1997), I was impressed by the female characters and how they spoke in ways that paralleled my own life experiences. Initially, I read each text individually and noticed a sense of urgency in how the female character presented her world to the reader. I noted that at times she was submissive and at other times self-aware. Sometimes she was poor and sometimes financially independent. Other times she was sexually assertive or sexually humiliated. Every now

and then the female character rejected love or loved what she could not have. The female characters in these works were very different, and it was precisely this difference that aroused my interest in these representations of women. As an illustration, in Vega's "El Baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico," more often than not, Florence, the protagonist, displays a submissive attitude, echoing Victorian values such as chastity, humility, and obedience to her supposed superiors. By contrast, Yolanda, the protagonist in Álvarez's novel *¡Yo!*, is a more assertive figure. Yolanda hates anything that gestures to what patriarchal Dominican society requires of her as a woman. She is wild and courageous, and her free spirit always gets her in trouble. She hopes to share her strength with the other female characters. Equally strong is Celia, one of the female protagonists of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Celia's strong personality allows her to overcome many obstacles.

On the whole, the female characters in the aforementioned works have qualities that are complex, diverse and conflicting. Given this, I was intrigued both by the characters and by how they claim their own voice. Moreover, when I began researching these three works, I noticed that the existing criticism passes over the representation of the female subject. Critics have dealt primarily with other salient themes in the works of these authors: national identity; exile; collective memory; and the writing of history, language, and culture. They fail, however, to examine the catalyst behind the actions and conflicts, that is to say, the female character. The three narratives have at their centers stories about women addressed to women, which suggests a need to examine the psychological dimension of these female figures. Examining the female characters in these works will illuminate why these three authors have created such specific characters.

I will argue that there is a new articulation of subjectivity and agency of marginal voices, signaling an array of issues, specifically those of gender, race and ethnicity. The narrative forms these female characters employ to express their individual stories are the device by which they affirm agency and subjectivity. Consequently, I perceive a need to fill the scholarly void about the constitution of female character in these three texts. Without a doubt, there is value in exploring the female character who finds suitable aesthetic vehicles for communicating her ideas and views. I unpack these writers' employments of discursive means such as diaries, letters, and first-person narration as ways to enact a particular female subjectivity.

As previously mentioned, all three authors place women at the center of their works. Part of the significance of these characters is their resistance to the traditional female self-paradigm. I propose to focus on the different types of writing that create the female character in the authors' respective narrative avenues, such as the use of fictional autobiography and the confessional mode. More often than not, each writer gives the character the ability to write her own (hi)story by reconstructing the past through letters, diaries, or first-person narration. In fact, the first-person "I" is a key subject in contemporary feminism.¹ I will address important issues such as the language of heroine construction, female agency, subjectivity construction, and the articulation of space and

¹ The use of first-person narration is a powerful medium for creating a close relationship between the writer and reader. The writer, in this case, the female character, uses "I" to make her writing more personal, engaging the reader's emotions. As Susan David Bernstein points out:

"Confessional modes of self-presentation have become crucial in feminist epistemologies that broaden and contextualize the location and production of knowledge. In some version of confessional feminism, the insertion of the "I" is reflective... that shuttles in academic discourse a personal truth. In contrast to reflective intrusions of the first person, reflexive confessing is primarily a questioning mode that imposes self-vigilance on the process of self positioning" (120)

When the author chooses to write in the first-person, the narrator becomes an actor and participant in the work. Furthermore, the use of first-person narration creates an "I" that is personal, ideological, historical and positional.

position. My focus is specifically on the writing of selfhood, that is to say, a subject-in-the-making revealed to the reader. Linguist Emile Benveniste suggests that it is through language that the speaker achieves subjectivity. By using the “I” the speaker puts himself or herself into the sentence. As Benveniste explains:

Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself. (225-226).

Furthermore, through the use of language a consciousness of self emerges that is in constant dialogue with an outwardly asserted “you” that offsets and participates in the construction of the “I.” Subjectivity, the basis of agency, is discursively constructed when the speaker (in this study, the female subject) participates in this dialogue and inserts her voice.

To date, of the three women authors under consideration, only Julia Álvarez has been the subject of book-length studies.² The other two writers, Vega and García, have prompted a handful of book chapters, essays, and a few dissertation chapters. Each of these writers represents a Spanish-speaking island in the Caribbean: Ana Lydia Vega hails from Puerto Rico, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez are part of the Cuban and Dominican Diaspora respectively. The fictional writings of these authors, particularly

² See Silvio Sirias book *Julia Álvarez: A Critical Companion* and Kelli Lyon John’s book *Julia Alvarez: Writing a new Place on the Map*.

those that focus on female characters, whether white or black, constitute a key part of the literature of the Hispanic Caribbean, because they depict important layers of the society. Upon considering the work of this group of authors, one notices that their differences in culture and ethnicity contribute powerfully to each author's unique contribution to Hispanic Caribbean literature.

In light of these observations, the aim of this study is threefold: first, to examine the complex figure of the female characters in the three selected texts and how she seeks to claim agency through different narrative forms including personal diary, first-person narration, and letters; second, to analyze how language, race and gender play important roles in the construction of female agency; and, third, to show the plurality and diversity of women's voices in these works, for instance, the illumination of the lives and subjectivities of women of Hispanic Caribbean as well as African and European descent. I will argue that the selected texts question dominant narratives of ethnicity, culture, gender and sexuality, as well as private and public space. All three writings illustrate the characters' ability to create multiple histories and fictions, blurring the boundaries between past and present, real and imagined.

Of particular importance to this study is the construction of the black female character. The black female character brings narratives filled with diverse language overtones, confrontation, and self-celebration that begin to outline her individuality. Specifically, I propose to analyze the construction of the subjectivity of the black female character in "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico," in *¡Yo!*, and briefly in *Dreaming in Cuban* to show how or if she claims agency. I will examine how black female characters face oppression in three forms—race, class, and gender—

and how such oppressions affect or shape agency, that is, the characters' determination and efforts to control their own lives and destinies.

Furthermore, I propose to examine these texts in light of their individual historical, political, and cultural contexts. The selected texts differ on many levels, including their settings. The action of *Dreaming in Cuban* and *¡Yo!* takes place in the second half of the twentieth century, where the characters find themselves forced to leave their respective homelands in order to escape dictatorial regimes by immigrating to the United States. However, they must deal with a new set of ethnic, racial, and political issues upon their arrival. On the other hand, Vega's text, "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico," takes place in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico and New York City. Florence, the protagonist, is not Puerto Rican, but an English woman who moves to the Caribbean island from her native land to work as a nanny. Though Vega's work differs in setting from those of the previous two writers, women and history are central to all of three texts.

In essence, this study contributes to recent scholarship that advances Hispanic Caribbean female criticism, and offers a new comparative approach that has not been explored previously. This study also contributes an analysis of female characters that are an understudied part of the Hispanic Caribbean narrative and that of its diasporas — Dominican, and Cuban, respectively. Additionally, it continues the work begun by studies that highlight women writers who have not been canonized, especially those studies that focus on issues of female representation. This study offers an overview of the complex race and gender relations in the Spanish Caribbean and their effect on the writings of women from this region. Ultimately, this study contributes to the scholarly

critique of the construction of the subject, which surpasses national identity and geographic boundaries, but in this case offers a deconstruction of the female subject of Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Dominican Republic origin.

1.1. Approaching Hispanic Caribbean women writers

Cristina García and Julia Álvarez live in the United States and write from their respective Diasporas, whereas Ana Lydia Vega writes from her homeland, Puerto Rico. Both García, who was born in Cuba and later emigrated to the United States, and Álvarez, who was born in the United States but lived many years in the Dominican Republic, have published their respective books in English. Vega, born and raised in Puerto Rico, writes in Spanish. One can find these three women authors classified as either Hispanic or Latina writers. In this study, the term Latina applies to those women authors that are of Hispanic Caribbean, including Puerto Rican, Cuban, and the Dominican, origin.

As Susan Oboler rightly points out in her book *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)presentation in the United States*, however, the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” fail to communicate significant political, historical and cultural differences. In other words, these terms blur the cultural distinctions between writers who can be from any of at least eighteen different Spanish-speaking countries and possess any number of racial backgrounds. Oboler explains that the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used by the U.S government during elections; in most cases, if writers were to identify themselves, they would not choose the term Latino or Hispanic.

In general, writers are concerned about the content and readership of their work. For example, when the Cuban-American author Roberto Fernández was asked about his choice to publish his novels in English, he commented: “I write in English so that the future generations of Cubans in the U.S. can read me.”³ Along the same lines, in *Something to Declare*, Julia Álvarez responds with the following statement when criticized for not writing in Spanish: “I don’t hear the same rhythms in English as a native speaker of English. Sometimes *I hear Spanish in English*...I’m mapping a country that’s not on the map, and that’s why I’m trying to put it down on paper” (173; emphasis mine). These excerpts show the uneasiness that some authors feel if confined to a given entity and that, as a result, they produce their own means of locating themselves. Álvarez entitles her novel with the Spanish subject pronoun “Yo,” affirming personal agency and also establishing a close affiliation with the Spanish language. The comments of Roberto Fernández and Julia Álvarez concerning language reflect the complex interaction between ethnic literature and the English literature tradition.⁴

The aspect of language is significant to how authors and critics in general see identity in terms of “difference.” Many authors consider themselves Latinos principally because of their affiliation with the Spanish language; however, they choose to write in English. At the same time, it is important to understand that writing and speaking Spanish was discouraged when these writers were young. For example, in an interview, Julia Alvarez explains: “I came to this country before bilingual education. I was discouraged

³ Commentary by Roberto Fernández, at the annual meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, Orlando, Florida, 6-10, August 1996 (cited by Isabel Álvarez-Borland 155).

⁴ Similar to the previous phenomenon, that is to say, the effect language has on literature, is the debate of a so called “national literature” in the African continent. The most evident component is language, that is, European languages and ethnic languages. See Tanure Ojide’s article, “Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity,” *African Studies Review*, 35.3 (1992): 43-57.

from speaking Spanish with my sisters at school...my advisor said, 'You already know Spanish!' I lost the capacity to really express myself in *my native tongue*' (Birnbaum online interview, emphasis added). As a result of these identity and language conflicts, these authors are often excluded from both the English literature canon in the United States and the Spanish literature canon in Latin American countries.

The relation of the concept "Latino" to ethnicity has generated a debate. On one side are those that are in favor of the term; others see it as a discriminatory concept. Writers of Hispanic origin who write in English or Spanish face difficulties when it comes to placing them amongst other writers. Eliana Rivero, in her essay "From Immigrants to Ethnics: Cuban Women Writers in the U.S.," argues that instead of lumping women writers under the label Latina or "Hispana," one might distinguish between "Native Hispanics" and "migrated Hispanics:"

In discussing the subject of Hispanic subgroups in the United States, I make a distinction between the "native Hispanic" and "the migrated Hispanic." The first category comprises Mexican-Americans or Chicanos, as well as Puerto Ricans who live on the mainland; the second reflects the wave of migration that, for political or economic reasons, have deposited on these shores a vast contingent of Cubans, Central Americans, and South Americans. Most writers who are in the latter category have been born (and often raised) outside the borders of the United States; however, some among them, especially younger individuals, are in the midst of effecting the transition from émigré, exile, or immigrant/refugee categories to that of ethnic minority members. (191)

It is important to recognize that writers like Julia Álvarez and Cristina García are daughters of first-generation immigrants; the writers themselves were either born in the United States or came to the country at an early age. Thus, for both Álvarez and García, English is the language in which they were educated. As stated above, Julia Álvarez was born in New York, though she spent the first ten years of her life in the Dominican Republic, whereas Cristina García was born in Cuba and moved at an early age to the United States. Both of these writers have chosen to write their works in English. Ana Lydia Vega, on the other hand, is a Hispanic writer in terms of both identity and language. The ability to write fluently in many languages (Spanish and French), however, permits Vega to situate herself in different linguistic and cultural settings, specifically in the Spanish and Francophone Caribbean and the United States.

By employing English in their narratives, García and Álvarez educate readers about their diverse culture through the language of the dominant culture. Moreover, by using English as a primary language, both of these writers bring into focus a minority community in the United States, exposing a different Cuban and Dominican identity, one that changes when transplanted outside its traditional geographical location. Similarly, the West Indian scholar Gareth Griffiths asserts in *A Double Exile* that “although the language employed is English, the experience recorded is not” (141). That is to say, the language is only the medium by which the text and message are related to the reader—here, the fact that the writer chose to write in English is not the message.

As a result of the position in which Julia Álvarez and Cristina García find themselves, that is, in-between two cultures, their narratives reflect the effect of that position on the female characters. These narratives describe multicultural environments

where the female character must choose Spanish over English, or vice versa. To make this choice, the female subject has to think about the different socio-cultural categories associated with each country and by extension, language. The subjects in these stories not only question rigid values of “gender” but also the concept “Latino” as an ethnic identity.

At this point, it is important to explain what the term “female character” denotes in this dissertation. First, character here does not refer to personality composition, that is, one’s general personality ethic—good, bad, strong, and so on. Rather, the term female character focuses on the fictional representations of female figures that populate the texts under examination. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1962), E.M. Forster examines the topic of fictional characters like those discussed here. He argues: “they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book” (72). What Forster means is that characters can have some freedom within the larger creations in which they are inscribed. We know, however, as critic Thomas Leitch posits, that any character “is the result of the storyteller’s sleight-of-hand” (162). Specifically, the female characters in this study follow John Gardner’s understanding: “the writer’s business is to make up conflicting human beings and create for them basic situations and actions by means of which they come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader” (15). Following this line of thought, this dissertation examines characters in relation to different conflicts and how they respond to or confront them. While the storyteller presents the story wherein the character is situated, “[a] good fictional character is like an iceberg; nine-tenths of it is below the surface, in the depths, as Hemingway once said in an interview. There is no art without economy, and the reader is bored when nothing is left to his imagination” (Surmelian, 147). Consequently, this study observes, examines,

and interprets the female characters of these three novels as complex characters that are trying to tell their story on paper through various discursive means.

1.2 Female Subjectivity and Agency

The words “subjectivity,” “self,” “individuality,” and “agency” do not evoke to clear and simple definitions. Lately, these words have attracted the attention of scholars who point out how the concepts overlap in one way or another. As a result, rather than apply these terms in a limited manner, I would like to argue that the very broadness of these terms opens a discussion regarding the selected texts, with particular focus on the concept of agency and its importance to the constitution of the female self. I propose, however, to highlight briefly the current theoretical issues surrounding “subjectivity” and “agency.”

Paul Smith, in *Discerning the Subject* (1988), offers illuminating explanations of terms such as “subject” and “agency” (xxxv). The “subject,” Smith explains, is a disciplinary construct constituted by social, cultural, linguistic, and political platforms. Put differently, a person is the product of one’s peculiar social surroundings and cultural life. Theorists have studied subjectivity for some time now, and, while their examination has generated interesting debates, they share to a large extent an understanding of the constitution of subjectivity. For example, subjects are placed in different but overlapping discourses and are never able to find a universal, consistent identity; instead, identities within an individual are continually conflicting and changing. Another aspect addressed by theorists is language, the tool by which the subject positions itself; however, there is not a “true” self to which the subject will or should adhere. Feminist critic Sally

Robinson, in *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (1991), argues compellingly that subjectivity is not a “being” but a “doing,” where both processes come together. Robinson advocates that subjectivity be considered as both a type of practice as well as an outcome of the multiple narratives of various texts.

What determines the subjectivity of the female characters in this study? For the female characters, subjectivity is constituted in discourse, including writing, and determined by whether she has the power to control discursive vehicles. Over the past four decades, scholars have gradually polished and extended the task of challenging sexist writing. Feminist scholars have argued that the power relations in modern societies are dominated by culture and patriarchy, whose effects are evident in women's writing and discourse. In fact, it is through the power of writing that the female character is able to construct a subjectivity of her own. As a result, through the acts of writing we will see female representations that emerge from a constellation of such factors as gender, race, and exile and understand how these factors affect the female characters' subjectivity. In this study, I show that Vega, Álvarez and García are not interested in merely representing their female characters as subject to socially determined symbols, but rather as subjects of new representations that challenge societal norms.

Feminist critic Kathy Ferguson, in *The Man Question* (1993), defines “mobile subjectivities” as those that result from “standpoints of a sort, places to stand and from which to act” (x). What is important about these stances is that they are flowing and numerous: they resist essentialism. As Ferguson further notes: “Mobile subjectivities are too concrete and dirty to claim innocence, too much in-process to claim closure, too

interdependent to claim fixed boundaries” (154). In other words, they shift with no intent or possibility of assuming a fixed position. Further, the notion of mobile subjectivities bears resemblance to Edward Said’s traveling theory in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), where he notes:

First, there is the point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse.

Second, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place. (226-227)

The traveling aspect of Said’s theory applies to the female characters in this study in that some of them possess a transnational subjectivity. Many move from one country to another and find themselves subject to new ideas, new settings, new cultures, and new power relations, as well as new agencies. As a result, their subjectivities also travel and reek of mobility. A thorough examination of this type of subjectivity will promote a better understanding of female agency in general.

The term “agent,” a possible synonym of the term “subject,” can be defined as the place where action begins, a place of resistance or affirmation. Subsequently, agency

involves some type of action, whether that action is generated by the agent or as a consequence of another agent's action. One definition of "agency" in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* is "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power" (40). Agency is usually attached to an entity, that is, an individual, a group, or a social structure.

Agency has increasingly gained attention in humanities scholarship as a means to question sets of standards established by a cultural formation. Two theoretical discourses foreground the concept of human agency. On one side are the liberal humanists, who view the agent as independent. Liberal humanists see agency as transhistorical and independent, the site where action and truth begin. They minimize the role of cultural and social formations in the construction of agency. On the other side, structuralists engage the concept of agency in textuality studies. Both structuralists and post-structuralists focus on how discourse and ideology shape a more fragmented and multiple agency.⁵ However, post-structuralists position the subject in a monolithic discourse, where the subject indeed does not have much space to resist. Responding to this line of thought, Paul Smith analyzes human agency as a result of a multifaceted process and multiple subject positions. According to Smith, agency emerges as a combination of social and cultural formations on the one side and intentionality, personal interest and desire on the other. Smith argues that

⁵ The debate that the subject and agency are dead began to be outlined in the seventies. The group that saw the subjects as autonomous was supported by the American philosopher Richard Rorty, who argues in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) for an ironic distance to social constructions. The structuralists, post-structuralists and constructionists see the subject as determined by social forces. An example is French philosopher Michel Foucault who in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) sketches the reproduction of power through institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons, and institutions that control different organizations of society.

A singular read [read differential] history always *mediates* between the human subject and the interpellations directed at him/her. In short, even though it can be claimed that ideology is a permanent and material feature of social life, ideologies as such are not infeasible in themselves: each of us necessarily negotiates the power of specific ideologies by means of our own history. (37)

In other words, individual histories together with cultural and social formation, make agency obvious. Smith fuses both the liberal humanist and structuralist/post-structuralist positions to provide an alternative approach.

Agency, in this study, is determined by the ability of the characters to act in spite of restrictions, to seize authorship and to counter the traditions that they are subjected to on a daily basis. In other words, I examine how the female characters act when faced with gender oppression, racial inequalities, culture inferiorities, dilemmas of exile and many other issues. Furthermore, agency in these texts is strongly connected to women's discourse and how they use discursive means to highlight oppression, enact confrontation and achieve affirmation. To analyze agency, I look specifically at communicative discursive vehicles and strategies, such as the use of first-person narration, diaries, and letters, among others. When considering agency in terms of exercise, it is important to note that not all female characters attain it. Certainly, this situation mirrors the difficulty women face in their daily lives and circumstances. The difficulty of attaining agency is visible when female characters are not allowed to exercise their full potential. For example, some play the role of the perfect wife, as with Susan in "El b ul de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novel n rom ntico." In other female characters, patriarchal values are still dominant, as is the case with Yolanda's sisters, who judge her for her

many love relationships and insist that she was born to marry and serve only one man. Often Yolanda acts as a social agent when dealing with other female characters in her life. Indeed, throughout the novel *!Yo!*, the different voices foreground the relationship between narrative agency and the inflexibility or fluidity of social identity.

As shown above, the concepts subject and subjectivity, agent and agency have benefited from many interesting scholarly articulations and perspectives. Feminist scholars have particularly enriched the theoretical perspective of this dissertation. The issue of female agency, both its existence and oppression, emerged as a key scholarly focus in the 1990s. Scholars, particularly female scholars, began to look closer at the agency of different women in the world, revealing the power they possessed. Feminist scholars have even argued that a theory of a particularly female subject is needed. For example, in "Changing the Subject," Nancy Miller distinguishes between the female subject and the universal subject. Though postmodern theories have declared that both author and subject are dead, Miller notes that this is not the case for women (6). If it were the case, this would doom the female subject's struggle for agency. Along the same lines, Gayatri Spivak has written extensively about a female speaking subject. Spivak suggests that the act of speaking is a type of strategic performance that the subject should adopt in order to effect political change (53-76).

The different situations and discursive economies these female characters confront are the products of day-to-day situations that are very real to women today. These works describe women as agents who are makers of history and contributors to culture. In a way, the feminine voice is what makes these texts so attractive to readers. In addition, this feminine voice, which is part of a communicative performance, allows the

characters to consciously construct subject positions. In this way, literary practice offers women the possibility to claim subjectivity, especially through writing, and to challenge discursive and gender norms in their writing. By investigating the discovery and application of agency in these works, this study will reveal how the female characters construct different articulations of the multiple positions they negotiate in order to attain agency.

1.3 Narrative techniques in female subjectivity

As outlined briefly above, subjectivity is carved within the deep structure of narrative itself. Teresa de Lauretis notes, in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984): "Subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning and desire, so that the very work of narrative is to engage the subject with certain positions of meaning and desire" (106). Put differently, the subject has a will to speak, to think and represent, which sustains the development of subjectivity. This process is what Judith Butler describes in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) as "the conditions of the subject's emergence and operation" (20). In this study, I use subjectivity as a term to describe an ongoing process, not a fixed identity constructed at a specific point in the female character's life.

Women's language in the texts under consideration is examined through the female subject's writing about herself and her surroundings. She documents her life, labor, physical and emotional pain, all of which contribute to her subjectivity. Writing itself reflects the process of coming into being. The act of writing herself legitimates the character's actions, thereby further enabling the creation of a set of discourses through

which she can define herself and her own subjectivity. Moreover, writing serves throughout the texts as a practice that provides a platform for female subjectivity. Through writing, then, subjectivity is constructed.

The search for subjectivity requires a sense of agency, a sense of being able to say something and act upon the world, a way of charting one's own path in life rather than being controlled by different versions of patriarchal censorship. Within the narrative space, there are instances where a struggle for authority is evident, mirroring the patriarchal social and institutional status quo in which the female characters operate. As such, it is important to note that agency is related to the means of writing, language and discourse. Through verbal communication, the subjects focus on certain situations, bring them into the spotlight, appropriate them, and even try to change them.

The use of first-person narration, diary, and letters allows for the deft cataloging of concrete representations of life that can be seen and felt by the reader. The diary method plays an important role in one of the texts studied here: "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico." Vega's use of diary fiction in this text alludes to the common practice of creating narratives through diaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period in which her fiction takes place. Florence's fragmented diary interconnects with the overarching narrative to augment the sense of the separate interior self, inaccessible from the larger, universal perspective. Florence's diary is a type of "diary fiction," to borrow the terminology of critic Porter H. Abbott. Abbott offers this term in *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (1984) and defines diary fiction as a "fiction cast in diary form" (15). Abbott points out that "[i]n diary fiction of any physiological pretension, the diarist is usually concerned, with greater or less intensity, to

see himself through the agency of his diary” (25). Perhaps for this reason, Vega uses the diary method to give agency to her protagonist, to offer Florence a place where she can construct her own subjectivity and self-representation.

It is important to note, however, that occasionally the female subject does not own these methods—namely, the use of “I,” diary, and letters—and struggles, in spite of these techniques and even through them, to achieve a sense of subjectivity or individual existence. Judith Kegan Gardiner points out that the narrative voice fluctuates often in writing by women authors. For example, the narrative moves between first, second or third person narration, only to later return to its original perspective (357). Of the novels studied here, the novel *!Yo!* in particular contains this fragmentation of voices, with its narration dominated by the voices of those surrounding the protagonist, Yolanda. Yet, for the most part, first-person narrative, diary, and letter-writing serve the characters well in their quests for agential self-representation.

The use of epistolary communication also plays a fundamental role in the characters’ reactivating agency, especially in “El b ul de Miss Florence” and *Dreaming in Cuban*. In the Puerto Rican text, Florence both sends and receives letters, while in the Cuban text Celia uses letters as a means to indulge forbidden desires. The replies to those letters never arrive, yet they still stimulate her fantasy. Moreover, letter-writing provides a type of autobiographical record, even though that is not the explicit purpose of the medium. Many of the letters in these texts operate in a stream of consciousness manner. More importantly, for the female character, letter writing is the textual medium where both self-construction and the assumption of agency take place.

In all three texts, the authors project an autobiographical tone through their primary female character, who reflects experiences similar to those of the author herself. Quite often, the narrative is reminiscent of the *bildungsroman*.⁶ What is more, the female characters become authors of their own histories by re-writing their identities. The texts are presented as personal narratives from the perspective of an English woman living in Puerto Rico, a Cuban-American, or a Dominican-American woman, where memory and autobiographical elements play a major role. This characteristic of describing one's own experience is key to the constitution of subjectivity, since it permits seeing one's life experience in a narrative form as a visible object. In addition, this visibility gives more access to the audience, since it allows the audience to better understand the female subject.

As mentioned above, few of the female subjects in this study are the result of a fictional autobiography. The texts in this study delineate family histories that, while fictional, are often based on the real experiences of their authors.⁷ For Álvarez and García in particular, writing a text that is in large part personal permits them to interpret their experiences. Those experiences are embedded in narratives where the female figure has the opportunity to tell her story. Following the general narrative of a *bildungsroman*,

⁶ The genre of *bildungsroman* is a novel of formation, in other words, a novel that traces the journey from childhood to adulthood. This type of novel has its roots in Germany and, according to Jerome Hamilton Buckley, it emerged as a description of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, published between 1794 and 1796 (9). For further reading, see Buckley's book *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974).

⁷ As Silvia Molloy eloquently notes in *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (1991), autobiography "does not rely on events but on an articulation of those events stored in memory and reproduced through remembrance and verbalization" (5). Indeed, the use of memory and the autobiographical aspect are key factors behind the narratives in these three texts. Memory is a tool that brings back images and recollections of one's childhood and other past experiences to then be converted into literary productions.

these stories have in common the presence of many voices that compete and blend in their attempts to reconstruct a family story. Since the world of women has generally been limited to the contexts of home and family, the latter plays an important role in the construction of the female characters of these texts. Most of the characters whose lives are being written are of middle or upper class status. In general, the heroines are rebellious girls who question their positioning as subordinate to men. Familial relationships play an important role for these female characters, who attempt to attain a selfhood independent from or at least not over-determined by the identities of their parents. The mother is normally the figure with whom the characters most fervently and passionately identify, whom they emulate, or even reject. In fact, the mother is often seen as the antagonist, since patriarchal values are evoked through her life and situation. Likewise, there are instances where the mother also rejects her daughter for being the one who threatens traditional values and beliefs. Indeed, more often than not, the mother represents an image from which the female characters try to distance themselves, and vice versa.

1.4 Intersections of Gender, Race and Ethnicity in Female Agency

As will become evident in this study, many of the female characters in the texts under examination are Latinas. The first pages of this introduction highlighted briefly the usage of the term “Latina” and the effect it has as a label, particularly on one of the authors of this study, Julia Álvarez. Since the Latina female character emerges in these texts as a key component of the narratives, it will be helpful to begin with an exploration of Latina subjectivity. The literary Latina female subject seems to always confront issues

of race, class and gender, and ethnicity. These variables characterize the individual that Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach observe in their essay “At the Threshold of the Unnamed: Latina Literary Discourse in the Eighties.” According to these critics, before “decoding” Latinas’ “discourse,” it is essential to first understand how Latina subjectivity is culturally constructed (1989, 14). Furthermore, these two critics point on the difficulty that a Latina subject faces in constructing her subjectivity. They explain:

In constructing herself as a subject, a Latina must dismantle the representation of stereotypes of herself constructed, framed, and projected by the dominant ideology. Because language and images are key factors in the construction of subjectivity-for they permit full access to the socio-symbolic order- the Latina, a bilingual person, will experience a more arduous task, for the self must be inscribed into two symbolic orders: English, the language of the hegemonic culture, and Spanish, the mother tongue. The positioning of this speaking-I into two symbolic orders signifies that she will constantly be negotiating her alliances with one or both of these orders. (14)

The above paragraph suggests that the person must choose a language, a choice which can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, this diversity celebrates multiple positions and discourses. On the other hand, it can result in a sense of division, subjugation, inferiority and even inequality between the two available languages. Furthermore, we will notice in this study that the speaking subject is often able to articulate herself in both languages, Spanish and English. I maintain that this bilingualism does not devalue the authors or female characters. On the contrary, language is a means

through which female characters cross ethnic boundaries and question and often break old conventions. The female character constantly questions her allotted space and as such feels the need to construct or challenge the mores and ideals of her society. Moreover, she constructs her subjectivity through her use of language and through her search for place and belonging when confronting issues of gender, race and ethnicity.

As I have pointed out throughout this introduction, the theme of difference is especially salient to explorations of subjectivity and agency. Both race and gender can be theorized with reference to biological difference. As we know, many human experiences are coded by gender, which means that subjectivity is necessarily engendered. Gender norms in society influence power relations and can be theorized in relation to standard cultural images of cultural differences. In the selected texts, there are various ways that female characters are victimized and dominated because of their gender, yet the effects of gender are not always predictable, steady or unitary.

Other spaces, where the female figure is being controlled, are just as evident. The writers in this study critique “the materiality of oppression and its operation in structural and institutional spaces” (Walters, 86). They evaluate “institutional practices,” in particular those associated with the home and family, as crucial settings in which female characters are affected by the patriarchal system. For example, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Felicia finds herself pleasing her husband at the cost of degrading herself. Their love relationship is violent and forceful. She is constantly subjected to different types of verbal and sexual abuse, that eventually leave Felicia no choice but to cruelly end her husband’s life. Her decision comes as a result of continuing oppression and sexual and emotional cruelty. Equally, there are moments, in these texts, when the female character becomes a

careful observer, noticing signs of oppression in her surroundings. Florence, in Vega's text ponders the situation of African slaves, whom she sees working, brought to her attention by her friend René. In her diary she writes: "Mi vista recayó fatalmente sobre aquellos torsos escuálidos, aquellas espaldas marcadas, aquellos rostros hostiles y sombríos que parecían salidos de las galeras del infierno" (33). Unfortunately, Florence is too weak to take a stand or to voice her opinion about what she has just experienced. She decides to remain silent before her friend to avoid jeopardizing her status as a white woman. Her social and economic superiors are white as well and use slaves to work their sugar plantations. For this reason she decides to turn her back on the plight of the slaves: "Mañana, cuando venga a preocuparme, Bela habrá de decirle que no estoy" (33).

The female characters in this study are examined through the lens of not only gender, but also of color and ethnicity. This is especially evident in the discussion of characters such as Bela and Selenia in "El baúl de Miss Florence," Sara and Primitiva in *¡Yo!*, and Herminia in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Postcolonial theory, in particular feminist postcolonial theory, is especially relevant to understanding a context in which race, culture and gender are deeply situated and striated. Critic Trinh Minh-ha, in *Woman, Native, Other*, writes about women who are subject to patriarchy and are also colonized and racially marginalized subjects. Trinh Minh-ha calls this type of positioning "a double or triple-bind." Following the problematic of the representation of the female Other, Chandra Mohanty, in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," examines the concept of the so-called Third World Woman as a "singular monolithic subject." She identifies a problem: when all women share the same basic oppressions, they are often assumed to share the same social and cultural makeup.

Mohanty, however, aptly points out that women should be analyzed and examined based on their “particular local context[s]” and taking into account, primarily, the social and historical context (62- 87). Lastly, some of the subjects of this study find themselves away from their home countries. I will analyze the way the patriarchal system is portrayed in these types of settings and how that affects the female characters.

1.5 Theory and Theoretical Approaches

The critical and theoretical foundation upon which this study of the three texts rests is best described by feminist critic bell hook’s phrase “from margin to center.” In this theoretical frame, special attention is given to female characters in subordinate positions who, nevertheless, try to understand and act upon their status. By foregrounding the female character, I propose to uncover a wide range of issues, such as class differences, cultural differences, exile, the practice of African rituals, superstition, and, lastly, machismo, all of which affect the lives of women in various Latin American societies today. This study will mainly employ Latin American feminist criticism, specifically that of critic Debra Castillo, since the three women authors under examination focus specifically on female characters who explore the meaning of living “within a woman’s space” in a Latin American context.

The search for a Latin American feminist discourse began to take shape in the 1980s. Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega’s influential edition *La sartén por el mango* (1985) brought together a diverse group of women authors and feminist critics who would later make their mark on Latin American literature. These women’s perspectives, illustrated in claims like Sara Castro-Klarén’s comment, “todavía no hemos

elaborado posiciones teóricas derivadas de la lectura de estos textos,” indicated a shared concern about the relative absence of Latin American theory. Since then, critics like Jean Franco have focused on how theory, experience and women’s activism are all linked together. In *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (1989), Franco explored the dynamics of power relations between women and men, concluding that the women’s struggle in Latin America is political. In 1992, Debra Castillo published *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*, in which she responded to Castro-Klarén’s concern, arguing in favor of Latin American feminist criticism. Castillo’s stance will guide this study and allows a reading of the three selected texts through a theoretical perspective that takes into account the social and historical plurality of Spanish American women writers.

Castillo does not endorse specific critical models as the best for feminist thought because of “the diverse, shifting and often contradictory voices of Latin American feminist writers” (*Talking*, xxii). Rather, she challenges the universalizing and totalizing of feminist thought and experience. Castillo’s study borrows from a range of theories, including deconstruction, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory, and offers future critics a framework for examining Latin American feminism. According to Castillo:

To consider the particularities of a Latin American feminist practice means to take into account the varying textures of the patches and the decorative stitchery of the quilt, to examine the implications of a heterogeneous culture, and to add to the analysis considerations of class and race. (*Talking* 21)

Since all three texts in this study are charged with issues of class, gender, race and culture, I find that Castillo's emphasis on double voicing, where the female subject is able to shift voices while recognizing the necessity of establishing some form of identity, offers a flexible model that I can adapt for the purposes of this study.

Moreover, Castillo recognizes important traits in women's writing—a key theme in this study—such as “silence” (71-95) and “writing in the margins” (216-259). In her discussion of “silence,” Castillo asserts that it can be either a passive tool, implemented by the dominant social force, or a mode to subvert the feminine realm. This observation can be applied to the female characters in this study. For example, Bela, in “El baúl de Miss Florence,” is silenced in several senses, not least of which is her inability to tell her own side of the story. Another significant observation that Castillo makes is her description of women's writing as “writing in the margins.” She notes:

The particular weight of writing about marginals from a position of marginality, which creates an indissoluble bond of solidarity, is, perhaps, one of the twists Latin American women give to the more general recognition of the cultural and racial diversity of the continent common among Latin American writers and intellectuals. (66)

The power of Castillo's observation is illustrated by the female characters in all the three texts examined in this study. Álvarez, García and Vega describe characters that move into a foreign land, whose marginal position is thus defined by cultural displacement and language and racial difference.

In addition to feminist thought and theory, an analysis of race also informs this study, particularly the connections between race and colonial heritage. This connection is

evident in class structures where white skin frequently symbolizes middle- or upper-class standing and dark skin symbolizes lower social standing. Postcolonial theory provides a helpful framework to interrogate the issue of race. I am aware that postcolonialism is generally based on British colonialism and that differences exist between the British model and the Spanish model of colonialization in Hispanic America as well as between both of these models and later U.S neocolonial influence. However, I find postcolonial theory particularly helpful in analyzing these texts, since it is deeply concerned with the representation of difference in social and cultural relations, where one group is subordinated to another.

In addition, postcolonial theory deals with issues as such as cultural hybridity, racial *mestizaje* and the representation of the subaltern. The case of Puerto Rico and its people is the living example of a twentieth century colonization enacted by the U.S. This experience is relevant to that of Cubans and Dominicans in the United States who are also suffering the postmodern effects of colonization and victimized by linguistic and cultural assimilation imposed by the dominant group. Due to discrimination, Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States at times are prevented from practicing their linguistic or cultural practices. Yet, as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* (1994), “the time for ‘assimilating’ minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed” (175). All three lands -Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic- share a similar history of neocolonial domination by the United States. Though the colonizer has physically withdrawn, the effects are still felt.

Drawing on feminist postcolonial theory, I examine the representation of the female subaltern subject. I find Adrienne Rich’s term, “politics of location,” relevant to

the goals of this study. Rich looks at the female subject, where constant displacement of previous subject positions allows for a rebuilding of her experience and incorporates her past as well as her present. Rich notes that women should see themselves and their experiences as located by race and ethnicity. She exemplifies female subjectivity through the image of the body. Rich explains, in “Notes toward a politics of location,” that “[e]ven to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity” (214). Consequently, I argue that rethinking the female feminist subject must begin with recognizing the bodily roots of subjectivity. The body is a warehouse of different traits such as race, class, sex, age and culture, all of which differ based on one’s own experience and positioning. Moreover, from a feminist perspective, casting light onto women’s bodies calls for the acknowledgment of women’s desire and expressions of sexuality. On a different note, by rethinking the body, the female character articulates her own pain, as the rape of Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban* illustrates. By confronting this pain she gives it a voice, a method for overcoming or driving that pain away.

Lastly, I want to point out that I do not view including theories or theorists who are not of Latin American origin as counter to the goals of Latin American feminist scholarship. For some time now, Latin American critics have implemented, reworked, and built upon theories that do not originate in Latin America. On the subject of including theory not from Latin America, Debra Castillo eloquently exhorts scholars to recognize that this practice

is useful and pertinent and stir that material together with other critical/theoretical approaches that complement it. In such a confection,

the French flavoring will add richness and consistency to the broth without overwhelming or denaturing the soup. (14)

In this study, the reader will notice borrowings from a broad mix of theorists. Given the diversity of this group of texts, a single theorist will not do justice to the abundance of themes, settings, and contexts examined herein.

1.6 Overview of chapters

The first chapter of this dissertation will focus on Ana Lydia Vega's "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico." I will examine four key female characters of the short story: Florence, the English protagonist; Bela, a woman of African ancestry; Susan Lind, the master's wife; and Selenia, a *mulatta*. These four women are essential to the text, as each represents an important subsection of nineteenth-century Puerto Rican society. Some questions I consider are: Why is the story set in the nineteenth century and what is the significance of this choice? How does the diary as a narrative form affect the depiction of the female character? How does the female character use the confessional mode to claim agency? How does the foreigner's viewpoint construct the other female characters? How is the protagonist constructed through the secondary characters? To what extent are the characters in this story national stereotypes? In other words, why might the author have chosen the character types of the English female tutor, the landowner's wife, and the black woman? How do issues of race and ethnicity influence the women's construction of subjectivity? What is Bela's role as a black woman in the text, and what vehicle does Vega employ in order to construct this

important character? Chapter One offers answers to these questions by way of analyzing the creation of the female character in “El baúl de Miss Florence.”

Much of Vega’s text uses Florence’s observations, often recorded in her diary, as a means to expose the varied roles that women play in Puerto Rican society. These roles imply a set of standards and rules to which women must conform. Men view women as their possessions and expect them to behave in a subordinate manner. As in Victorian England, the women in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico must embody humility, grace, and chastity and remain polite under all circumstances. I argue that Vega recreates this historic reality in order to challenge and even correct it by inserting a woman who reshapes, even liberates, herself through composing a diary. Through her diary, Florence discovers a different version of herself, a different identity that stands in contrast to the one imposed upon her by society.

Another character that plays an important role in the text is Bela, a slave living in a country under colonial rule who serves as a fundamental element in the interactions between colonizer and colonized. While Bela is not the protagonist of this short story, her figure embodies the black female character and position her as a colonial subject. I will argue that Ana Lydia Vega uses this character to (re)write the history of Puerto Rico. The story’s ending, in a sense, gives the last word to Bela. She acts, partially, as the narrator, and outlives her slave master, a sign that there is hope for even the most oppressed. Though Bela’s account is narrated through Florence’s diary, it still gives her the power to formulate her own subjectivity. Similarly, Bela uses her memory as a rhetorical sign that points to her black feminine experience.

Lastly, I will posit that “El baúl de Miss Florence” offers a re-writing of not only Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), but also the history of Puerto Rico. To do so, Vega employs a foreign woman’s perspective and focuses on the themes of gender marginalization, race and ethnicity. I show the powers of narrative language as aids to representing the voice of the oppressed black female subject. These structures, I argue, provide familiar templates within which Bela and Florence signify their different identities in relation to each other.

Dreaming in Cuban (1992), by Cristina García, is the focus of the second chapter. This chapter will investigate the creation of the female characters. Since this novel is written from a feminine perspective, it is particularly relevant for a study of the articulation of female character. I am interested in the tools that the female character employs in order to achieve agency. Do letters and the use of first person narration give agency to the female character? In what ways do familial relationships—those of grandmother, mother, and daughter—affect the female character? How does the female character deal with issues of gender and race? How does biculturalism affect the construction of the female character? How do multiple roles shape the construction of female character? These questions will serve as a guide to better positioning and understanding the construction of the female character in this novel. To foreground these issues, I focus on the characters of Lourdes and Pilar. I show that traveling and displacement can be seen as means to deconstruct or create an identity as a speaking subject.

Letter-writing is another important aspect of this text. Celia, the grandmother, writes letters to her long lost lover Gustavo. Her epistolary communication, however, is

not fulfilling, since Celia never receives a response from him. Still, for Celia, however, letter writing is a way of claiming agency in that it allows her to express her innermost thoughts as well as to reflect on her life. Letter-writing and correspondence provides a good autobiographical record, even though it is an unintentional project. Celia's correspondence with Pilar is more pleasing when compared to those with the two men in her life: her husband and her lost lover. Through her letter-writing Celia becomes a storyteller and the protagonist of her own story. She constructs herself in the letters and the reader becomes the addressee.

Chapter Three focuses on *¡Yo!*, by Julia Álvarez. To this point, critics have examined *¡Yo!* specifically as a postmodern text, focusing on aspects of identity, memory and language. This third chapter, however, focuses on the construction of the protagonist through the secondary characters and how or if the protagonist claims agency. Specifically, the chapter addresses questions such as show how the heroine is constructed through the secondary characters. In other words, why is the main female character presented through so many perspectives? Why does Álvarez use storytelling as the main narrative strategy? Why does the female character's point of view shift repeatedly from first- to third-person narration? Moreover, why does Álvarez create distinct autobiographical female subjects in order to transcribe their stories? How do profound and conflicting class and race differences affect the female characters? How do the themes of cultural differences, acculturation and assimilation play a role in the formation of the female character? In addition, how is class antagonism and class conflict portrayed in the female character? Lastly, how do gender and ethnicity shape the female character's claim for agency? These fundamental questions particularly emphasize how Álvarez

revises and re-elaborates the identity of female Dominicans by using a variety of their own fictional voices. As a result, this chapter intends to explore the female Dominican American character, particularly her constitution of subjectivity and agency.

In *¡Yo!*, there is a vast array of female characters who are quite different from each other. This assortment represents the diversity of the female subject in the Dominican Republic and the United States. The heroine of the novel is an assemblage created through the perspectives of the other secondary characters. In this chapter I will provide a brief analysis of Yo, the protagonist of this work. However, I will study closely how the female secondary characters in particular construct the female heroine. Specifically, the chapter on *¡Yo!* focuses on characters such as the maid's daughter, the sister, the cousin, and the mother. Moreover, I am interested in analyzing how their perspectives shift constantly, creating the complex central character, Yo. Each of the female storytellers in the novel has her own opinion of Yo and her own agenda, thus clashing at times with other stories. In fact, Yo is shown to be prone to conflict because of her desire to control and manipulate others' stories. Yo's struggle to forge a voice of her own from a catalog of voices is not an easy task. The female subjectivity that Yo seeks is located exactly in the discrepancy between what others write about her and her own self-analysis. Examining the circumstances of this female storytelling allows for a more thorough understanding of the construction of female subjectivity and agency in this novel.

An important and pervasive issue in *¡Yo!* is cultural displacement and the difficulties of coping with a new culture, language, and identity. I examine how Yo and other female characters, displaced from their native countries, constantly query their in-

between position as Dominican and Hispanic women in the United States. Thus, they negotiate a “split identity” that is positioned between what they left behind and what they find in their new situations, however, in constant search to move away from this split.

Each one of the three chapters has a section dedicated to the male figure, and their relationship to the female character. Lastly, in my final reflection, I offer a conclusion that highlights the major points of the study. I conclude that the variety of female characters studied in this project underscores the diversity of the female self. One significant topos of all of the texts selected for this study is the writing of the female character. For instance, the use of the first person in the form of diary or letters gives the texts an autobiographical tone and gives voice to women that have been hitherto silenced. Each narrative presents issues of class, race, gender, and culture that are crucial to the Hispanic Caribbean reality. Additionally, the disclosure of the dynamics of the female character highlights resistance to the traditional roles assigned women. With respect to the black characters, only a few enjoy the ability to claim agency through first-person narratives. The writing of experiences with slavery, as seen in Vega’s text, counts as both proof of identity and testimony to a lived personal experience. Likewise, García and Álvarez also use female perspectives, voices, and collective memory to highlight women as historical figures.

In the three texts, the women’s experiences make them culturally and historically important, drawing attention to a diversity that rejects a universal Hispanic Caribbean female figure, most notably a portrayal of the female character as submissive to her context. I argue in this study that Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez, who represent the Hispanic Caribbean and its Diasporas—Dominican, Cuban, and Puerto

Rican, respectively—have created characters that bear witness to how patriarchy affects the lives of all generations of women. These authors join other Hispanic women authors, such as Rosario Ferré, Luisa Valenzuela, and Rosario Castellanos, in depicting characters with confrontational attitudes. The texts represent dynamic voices and articulate a female consciousness, as seen in the use of the first-person narrative, diary and letters. I suggest that the female character in these texts defy fixed notions of identity. On the other hand, these are not “free-floating” identities: their identities are grounded in *a place* that each of the three authors hopes to define on paper. Taken together, the selected texts depict female characters that attempt to break the stereotype of the submissive, passive, and domestic *Virgen*. They deny readers the comfort of a monolithic Hispanic Caribbean female character and demand that they recognize the complex intersections of themes and patterns in lives with similar circumstances (gender, neo-colonialism) yet divided by cultural, class, racial, religious, historical, educational and national lines.

Chapter 1

Women and Agency in “El baúl de Miss Florence: Fragmentos para un novelón romántico”

It's human nature, sir, that if you keep a diary, You want to remember things. Why keep it otherwise?

-Graham Greene, (*The End of the Affair* 100)

Hago esas anotaciones en libretas de las cosas que me cuentan. Me interesan los cuentos que me hacen, pero me interesa más el lenguaje en que los cuentan, porque ese lenguaje yo lo quiero integrar a los cuentos y eso es lo que estoy trabajando ahora, algo así como una falsa crónica del sur...va a tener elementos reales, elementos históricos, elementos de leyenda, y elementos de la vida cotidiana de un pueblo que ha sido puerto.

-Ana Lydia Vega, (*Entrevistas* 86)

Ana Lydia Vega's work is firmly situated in the stories and narratives of Caribbean women. Best known for her anti-patriarchal discourse as well as her social and cultural criticism, Vega is one of Puerto Rico's leading short story writers and an advocate for human rights in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean region. Locating herself and her characters in particular Caribbean contexts, her stories deal with the many challenges and injustices that people of her region face daily. Ana Lydia Vega is part of the

community of contemporary Puerto Rican women short story writers for whom, as Jeanne C. Wallace observes in “Social Criticism in the Contemporary Short Story of Selected Puerto Rican Women Writers,” there does not exist any forbidden subject or character. These writers, according to Wallace, reflect upon “their present reality, seeking a better future for themselves and for their homeland” (113).

Vega’s first book, written in collaboration with Carmen Lugo Filippi, is a collection of short stories entitled *Virgenes y mártires (Virgins and Martyrs)* (1981). A bestseller, this text received many prizes and was the subject of extensive literary criticism. In regards to the stories in this collection, Vega notes: “I dealt with women who think they have arrived at a certain level of intellectual and economic freedom, but can’t really exercise it because the society around them hasn’t changed as they have” (Brossy 3). The public eagerly read these portrayals of female characters, and the book was regarded as a Latin American feminist manifesto. Two years later, Vega published *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio (Encancaranublado and Other Shipwreck Stories)* (1983), another collection of brief prose, for which she received the Certamen de Casa de las Américas. A few years later, Vega earned the Juan Rulfo International prize for *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión (A Passion for History and Other Stories of Passion)* (1987). Here she focused on how history can be distorted through the infiltration of the subjective perspective in historical writing. In addition to publishing stories, Vega has also edited a collection of essays, *El tramo ancla: Ensayos puertorriqueños de hoy* (1988). *Falsas crónicas del sur (True and False Romances)* (1991) continued the focus on the construction of history. As a whole, the

book confronts historical episodes in the regional archives of southern Puerto Rico.⁸ The first short story, “El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico” (“Miss Florence’s Trunk: Fragments of a Romantic Novella”), is the focus of this chapter.

Falsas crónicas del sur is Vega’s first collection of short stories translated in English, which was received with positive reviews both in Europe and the United States. In an interview with Manuela Kerkhoff, Vega states the following regarding *True and False Romances* “...los que lo han leído en Inglaterra, les ha gustado mucho y han podido disfrutar de ellos” (577). Since this short story is totally unlike Vega’s other works, we can rightly ask what is she trying to accomplish by using a form and tone different from those previously employed?⁹ I argue that Vega uses the diary and historical setting to explore female subjectivity and claim agency in a previously unexplored fashion in her work that many readers across the globe support and applaud. Despite her laudable efforts, however, the genres of parody and satire often translate poorly into other languages; if Vega is to reach a non Spanish-speaking audience, she must find new ways of conveying her concerns. By examining the use of the diary, letters and self-reflective narratives in this work, I propose that Vega forwards a feminist consciousness, where the female character can articulate her emotions regarding her surroundings.

⁸ These historical episodes are taken from the written and oral history of the Arroyo region, particularly the well-known people or historical events that have laid a mark in this region. We see this, for example, in “El baúl de Miss Florence,” where most of the characters are from the 19th century. Other examples are “Cosas de poetas”, “Un domingo de Liliane” and “El regreso del heroé”, all short stories published in *Falsas crónicas del sur*. In the first, Vega takes her cue from the cultural history of the Guayama region, whereas the last two use the massacre of Ponce, a violent time in Puerto Rican history as the setting for their plots.

⁹ I will use the shortened title of “El baúl de Miss Florence” to refer to “El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico.”

2.1 Ana Lydia Vega: Her place in the Hispanic Letters

Vega's writing encompasses genres such as short stories, reflection pieces where she articulates her own views about culture, the Puerto Rican nation, literary theory, history and Nuyoricans, among other topics. Humor is one of Vega's tools for pointing out the injustices of society in general, as well as her own society. Critic Efraín Barradas, in "La necesaria innovación de Ana Lydia Vega: Preámbulo para lectores vírgenes," rightly suggests that Vega's work displays characteristics such as humor, attachment to the Caribbean, and linguistic explorations (547-56). It is typical of Vega to take inspiration from her surroundings and transform the problems she sees into hyperbolic or violent situations. Vega's writing goes beyond using humor only as an entertaining device. She uses humor to critique super-male and elite egos. Examples of her humor can be seen in the collections *Vírgenes y mártires* (1981), *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión* (1987), and *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragios* (1982). In the latter collection, according to Diana Vélez, the author explores issues of diaspora and borderlands (828). Vélez identifies various strategies in Vega's writing: "vivid and vicious wordplays, radical shifts in linguistic register, onomatopeya, puns, irony, sarcasm and black humor." Along these same lines, Acosta Cruz notes in her article "Historia y escritura femenina en Olga Nolla, Magali García Ramis, Rosario Ferré y Ana Lydia Vega" that Vega's writing is known for "el implacable uso de la parodia y el humor... la irreverencia y la intención humorística" (273). In addition, Diana Vélez observes other themes in Vega's narrative, that is, that of culture and border crossing, presented through the us/them dichotomy, thus exposing conflicted relations with U.S. hegemonic power.

Vega is also known for taking aspects of reality and transforming them in order to critique the society as a whole. All of these critics attest to Vega's multifaceted writing and concerns as a female thinker.

The problem of race in the Caribbean region is another important issue to this woman author. Vega's treatment of race has been briefly analyzed by Augustus Puleo in his discussion of storytelling in her work. Puleo suggests that storytelling helps Vega pay homage to African culture and its influence on Puerto Rican culture (21-25). Specifically, in *Falsas Crónicas del sur*, Vega develops a style of writing that focuses on the historical aspect of events and the enslavement of blacks. In her 2004 doctoral thesis, Maribel Acosta-Lugo dedicates a chapter to "El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico." Acosta-Lugo focuses on the aspects of orality and parody illuminated in this text. Specifically, she examines how parody challenges patriarchal paradigms and "official" history. Acosta-Lugo focuses only briefly on the female characters, as her aim is to examine how Vega uses the novella to parody the romantic novel. In the present study, in contrast, I concentrate specifically on the construction of the female character and the manner in which she claims agency.

One cannot fail to notice how Vega represents her concerns about the female figure, especially when these figures are directly affected by different manifestations of authority. Her writing, however, rejects the super-evaluation of tradition or a common feminist agenda. She is careful to avoid identifying herself as a traditional feminist. In her own words:

Si optas por quedarte en casa, es decir, por rebuscar en el baúl de abuela a ver qué reliquias falopianas encuentras, a los acordes intimistas de un

bolero de Puchi Balseiro, la crítica macha (si se molesta) despacha tu trabajo con frasecitas tipo “fina sensibilidad”, “suave lirismo”, “cordialidad de tono” con lo cual puedes estar segura de que a nadie le van a dar ganas de leerte. La crítica feminista, por otra parte, te martillará los dedos para que acabes de caerte del bote, denunciando airada la reafirmación de los arquetipos sexista de la Sirvienta Nupcial y la *Mater Dolorosa* y deplorando la flagrante ausencia de abogadas, médicas y mujeres de negocio en tu modesta obra. (*Esperando a Loló* 96)

Vega herself does not offer a prescription and is not afraid to point out flaws in the feminist agenda, as the above quote evinces. Mayra Santos Febres has examined Vega’s uneasiness about identifying herself as a feminist writer in her doctoral dissertation, “The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature.” Santos Febres argues that Vega refuses to take a clear position with regards to her writing and her feminist agenda. She posits that, for Vega, “writing is a way of ‘salir a la calle,’ of cruising the streets of literature. Writing in movement (vs. writing in a room of one)... Writing in movement... requires a strategic inclusion and exclusion of diverse attributes of self’ (76).

In all, Vega is a prolific writer who addresses societal concerns and then critically reflects upon them, rejecting, as she does with feminism, any predetermined stance or positioning. With this in mind, I argue later in this chapter that Vega does not simply borrow character types from Victorian texts for “El baúl de Miss Florence,” but rather creates new versions of these characters within a Puerto Rican context. For example, the image of the white woman in this short story resembles the type of woman who as

Castillo explains is “neither passive nor accepting yet may preserve the advantages of distance and silence for her own reasons, using distance to her advantage” (*Talking* 40). Castillo suggests that the condition of silence is, in part, a posture for the female character to reflect on her status quo. Furthermore, it is evident that Vega revisits the binary opposition between black and white females perpetuated by Victorian writing; in doing so, she questions the set of beliefs that insists on a vision of white women as pure, passionless, and respectful individuals, while simultaneously represents their black counterparts as the epitome of passion, immorality and promiscuity.

2.2 “El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico” –Overview of the short story

In an interview with Puerto Rican literary critic Carmen Dolores Hernández, Ana Lydia Vega confessed: “I used to read the Brontë sisters: I enjoyed Wilde’s irony immensely and read Lord Byron avidly. My favorites were those nineteenth-century English novels—especially those written by women—in which you immerse yourself completely” (54). Before completing the collection of stories *Falsas crónicas del sur*, Vega mostly wrote period pieces about Puerto Rico in a satiric and allegorical fashion. In contrast, however, her short story “El baúl de Miss Florence,” included in *Falsas crónicas del sur*, reworks *Jane Eyre* and other nineteenth-century novels. In the story, Vega rewrites history from a woman’s perspective. She focuses particularly on the themes of marginalization and enslavement. I center my attention on this one story

because it deals with important aspects of Puerto Rico's history: slavery and its aftereffects.¹⁰

“El baúl de Miss Florence” tells of a governess-protagonist named Florence, a British woman thrust into nineteenth-century Puerto Rico. Vega's text not only bears resemblance to the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, but also to *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, a sort of sequel to Brontë's work. *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian classic that reads as a fictional autobiography set in the nineteenth-century. It relates the story of an orphan girl, the title character Jane, who struggles with various manifestations of male oppression from childhood to womanhood. Brontë presents a protagonist who is able, in the end, to use her good nature to triumph over poverty and oppression, assert her independence, and find happiness. Rhys's novel builds from Brontë's text, borrowing various elements from the plot as well as rewriting some of the characters. In contrast to its predecessor, *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Edward Rochester from *Jane Eyre* and the Creole heiress Antoinette Mason. Mason is Rhys's revision of Brontë's madwoman in the attic, the counterpoint to Jane's goodness, Bertha Mason. In the novel, Rhys depicts a multi-racial colonial society in the Caribbean. Her protagonist, a white Creole whose voice we never hear (as with Bertha Mason in Brontë's novel), feels the pressure of her preordained fate, which is evident in her narrative, pervaded by doom and predestination.

¹⁰ *Falsas crónicas del sur* consists of eight short stories with “El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico” as the only novella/short story in the collection. Each short story deals with a historical aspect of an area in the southern part of Puerto Rico, such as Arroyo, locations and histories that Vega has researched. An introduction at the beginning of each short story establishes some historical point of reference. Whether written as a chronicle, a romantic novella, or a short story of adventure and gossip, all have a dash of humor.

Besides revising a canonical fictional narrative, Vega also fictionalizes history, namely, the condition of Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century during and after slavery period. This fictionalizing of history is something that Vega is entirely candid about; the collection's title, *Falsas crónicas del sur*, includes the word "false," disclosing the author's intent. Vega makes no apologies for this fictionalization, as this interview excerpt illustrates:

A chronicle is a reflection of a period one has lived through. They are always "false" because the oral tradition imparts a new history each time one tells it ... Everything that you are frames your perspective of history. And that constantly changes. Just as I, too, relate history, this history will change in the process of writing it. (Hernández & Springfield, 820)

The section titled "Crónica de la falsificación," which precedes the stories, allows Vega to present a brief introduction to the collection. Vega's explanation reveals the stories' origin. While Vega points out that she completed much research on the slavery and post-slavery abolition periods of Puerto Rico's history, the result remains a work of fiction.

It is important to consider why Vega is exploring and rewriting history, which is one of the salient characteristics of this collection of short stories. Specifically, "El baúl de Miss Florence" is a fictionalization of historical events, which is a rich tradition in the literature of the Puerto Rican island. In her introduction, "Crónica de la falsificación," Vega writes that the eight short stories were inspired "por la historia, la leyenda y la tradición oral de los pueblos costeros del sur puertorriqueño... Sobre las siempre cambiantes versiones de sucesos vividos o escuchados, construí éstas que ahora someto a la imaginación de ustedes" (*Falsas* 1). Generally speaking, Vega brings together history

and fiction, offering new perspectives of time periods that she believes need to be revisited. This is because Vega recognizes the importance of history as a part of her own writing. In the essay collection *Esperando a Loló y otros delirios generacionales*, Vega comments on the use of history and fiction:

El proyecto de recuperación del pasado no es nada muy nuevo en la tradición literaria puertorriqueña ... Después de todo, historiadores y escritores hemos vivido unas experiencias formativas similares ... Lo cierto es que los narradores compartimos con los historiadores *bona fide* contemporáneos mucha curiosidad, bastante sospecha y un cierto fervor misionero. (103-104)

More specifically, Vega's interest as a writer is to reconstruct Puerto Rico's history by shifting attention to how and where women fit into it, as my discussion of the story will show below.

In "El baúl de Miss Florence," Ana Lydia Vega focuses her attention first on the period when Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain, and second on the moment when Spain abolished slavery on the island. Edna Acosta-Belen studies the history of Puerto Rico in her book *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspective on Culture, History and Society* (1986). Acosta-Belen refers to the nation's colonial period as "a patriarchal, paternalistic, and military oriented society in which the subordination of women to men was almost absolute" (3). Part of Vega's approach is to present female characters that are raised and brought up to be perfect wives, mothers, lovers or servants. Quite often, however, these limited roles are the driving force behind this literary text.

In this story, Vega creates various voices belonging to people who have not been regarded as historical agents and gives them the ability to share their perspectives. Vega feels a need to rewrite history. In an interview with Eugenio Matibag, she offers this interpretation of the importance of Puerto Rican history: “En los países colonizados, en los países dominados por una cultura extranjera hay una búsqueda desesperada de los intelectuales para recuperar un pasado que no se conoce bien” (85). Contrary to a linear progressive of events, typical in historical writing, Vega makes it almost impossible to contain within a linear structure the past events she relates. This strategy allows her a unique vantage point for examining the historical events in question.

Vega’s interest in “El baul de Miss Florence” is not to investigate historical characters; instead, her aim is to create characters that depict her own version of history. Through the writing of the female protagonist, who is an eyewitness of the period, readers are offered a glimpse of the European elite in Puerto Rico, the haciendas, slavery and the treatment of servants. The author has taken on a difficult task: (re)writing the history of southern Puerto Rico from a woman’s perspective. Mary Gosser-Esquilín argues that Vega’s text “will make the position of the marginal (a woman writer from Puerto Rico) work in her favor as the vehicle through which unrecorded history can be best presented” (196). Through the protagonist, readers learn of life on the hacienda, *La Enriqueta*, and are presented with stark portrayals of the lives of women and blacks in this era. Vega gives a British female character the power to rewrite Puerto Rico’s history the way the characters observe it. Regarding Vega’s use of multiple cultures in her short stories, Aníbal González argues: ‘Vega lucha por presentar una solución positiva al problema de la unidad o multiplicidad caribeña ... Vega sueña con unas Antillas libres,

unificadas, y limpias de racismo, pero más aún, limpias de discrimen sexual” (300). In other words, Vega is interested in negotiating the position of women as a part of a cultural dynamic. In doing so, Vega forces us to examine how writing (hi)stories can be subjective and impacted by one’s beliefs and access to the amenities of writing. In the same manner, the perspective of a foreign woman can bring to light facts that have not been explored before.

One of the difficulties with this task is that Vega must contend with the patriarchal canon that has constructed and written history for generations. Vega has separated herself from offering an alternate vision and inscribing the feminine voice in historical fiction. She gives her female figure the subjective experience of living and writing about her life through her diary. In addition, the character’s quest for agency is demonstrated through the pain of denied speech and the exploration of a new speech that allows her to relate her experience from her own perspective. In other words, while in public women cannot voice their opinions, they can do so freely in their rooms and in their diaries. That unleashed voice gives shape to other possibilities, including the power of woman to enunciate her own representations with strength and authority. Thus, the diary becomes the means through which Ana Lydia Vega raises a feminist consciousness, particularly in the protagonist. In “El baúl de Miss Florence,” Vega observes the uncomfortable balance between individual identity and history, advocating that agency is possible when history is told by its makers. Writing, then, is the ideal place to express oneself, allowing the female figure to play both the role of the writing subject and the acting subject.

While women are generally treated as objects in history writing, Vega does not follow this practice. Indeed, she makes her female characters both subject and agent of her historical rewriting. In the same vein, unlike the genre of historical fiction, wherein normally a well-known historical figure is the focus of the work, Vega presents figures that are left out of the official recorded history. This choice of characters argues that these overlooked figures are important in a nation's history. For this reason, each of Vega's female characters is immersed in specific periods of the past, providing a female perspective on that historical moment. Their everyday lives, which at first glance seem dull and ordinary, contain drama and pain that might prove the key to resolving certain social and political problems in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico.

Vega's story tells of an English woman named Miss Florence Jane who sails to Puerto Rico in 1856 to become a teacher/mentor on a hacienda, or slave plantation. She is to tutor Charlie Lind, son of Edward and Susan Lind, the owners of the plantation and members of a very wealthy clan.¹¹ In her times of quiet when she is not teaching her student, Florence gradually discovers the injustices of this slave society, the pressures applied by the Puerto Rican ruling class on the lower classes, and the disturbing role that the Lind family plays in this injustice. Florence remains in Puerto Rico for several years and then travels to New York City to work. After many years in the United States, she returns to Puerto Rico to find that much has changed since she left: slavery is now

¹¹ In the introduction to "El baúl de Miss Florence," readers learn that Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, had in reality, a daughter called Susan Walker Morse, who married Danish slave owner Edward Lind. Morse visited the couple in 1858 and introduced the telegraph in Hacienda La Enriqueta in Arroyo, where Vega's story takes place. Samuel Morse connected his son-in-law's hacienda with his warehouse by way of a telegraph wired system.

abolished, Charlie Lind is dead, the hacienda is dilapidated, and the Lind family is now but a memory. Saddened, Florence returns to New York.

“El baúl de Miss Florence” consists of a diary, letters, and first- and third-person narration. These means of relating the plot offer the space needed to rewrite history. The genre of this work has been identified either as a novella or a short story. I argue that Vega is exploring new writing techniques and at the same time challenging established literary norms by presenting a new model of (hi)story-telling. As Sandra Messinger Cypess writes in “Tradition and Innovation in the Writings of Puerto Rican Women,” when a writer explores a unique type of writing

Their work is characterized by a preoccupation with popular idiomatic language which dissolves the old barrier between “poetic or literary” language and “popular or vulgar” speech. It is not only that the popular idiom is being used, but that language traditionally called “obscene” has also become part of the literary vocabulary of the women writers. The use of such language has generally been acceptable for males, but its use by women writers ruptures established social tabus concerning acceptable speech and in its sociolinguistic dimension, reflects their anger against the system. (83)

Messinger Cypess’s argument is that female writers in Puerto Rico want to move away from the “poetic or literary” literature, by looking to develop a genre that challenges sociolinguistic dimension. While “El baúl de Miss Florence” can be read as a “poetic or literary” work, Vega’s purpose of writing such a text is precisely to review those texts where women are often reduced to living a life of romance and melancholy.

In his essay, “Novella, Nouvelle, Novela, Short Novel: A Review of Terms,” Gerald Gillespie traces the genealogy of the term *novella*. The word “novelón,” he explains, originates from the term *novella*, which derives, in turn, from the Boccaccio era. At its roots, a *novella* offers a brief chronicle of no more than two pages. During the Enlightenment, discussion of the *novella* centered around its identity as poetry, tragedy or comedy. At this point, debate about the structure of the *novella* was not yet a concern for theorists. Later, the romantics developed the *novella* using precepts and rules to tell a physiologically subtle story. German romantic writers such as Goethe, who completed his “Novelle” in 1827 embraced this view in particular. The debate then shifted to the relationship between novel and *novella*. Nevertheless, it was not until French thinkers, especially Charles Baudelaire, took up the subject that the *novella* began to be appreciated for its flexibility as well as its artistic control. As there is no current precise terminology for the *novella*, one can see it as falling somewhere between a short story and a novel (Gillespie 117-127). Despite the presence of the word “novelón” in Vega’s text, it is fair to say that this work bears more resemblance to a short story than a novel. The Real Academia Española defines “novelón” as, “novela muy extensa, popular, y descuidada, y por lo común dramática y mal escrita” (*Rae online*). Indeed, a few of these descriptors are helpful in unpacking Vega’s text. First, Vega often employs irony. In this story, the irony of the title sets the tone for the rest of the text, since Vega’s interest is to parody the genre so commonly used by and written for women in the nineteenth century. Particularly, she ridicules the melodrama encouraged in the reader of these texts. In addition, Vega’s title is also ironic in that this short story does not come close to being an extensive novel, as the nomenclature *novelón* would lead one to expect. While I

acknowledge that its length is unconventional for the genre, “El baúl de Miss Florence” is closer to a short story than a novel. In a different interview, Vega confesses that the short story is the genre within creative writing where she tends to feel most comfortable. In her own words, Vega acknowledges that:

La estructura del cuento es favorable a mi personalidad, mi manera de decir, de ver las cosas, aunque he hecho también *cuentos largos*, como “El baúl de Miss Florence”, por ejemplo, que alguna gente dice que es una novela corta. No me he plantado la necesidad de hacer algo más largo. ...No lo descarto, pienso que a lo mejor algún día lo hago, pero no quiero dejarme presionar por razones editoriales si no surge de mi proyecto.

(Kerkhoff 592, emphasis mine)

It is important to note that, as Carmen C. Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisin-Gebert argue in their book *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam* (1991), the short story “is a genre of unique importance in the Caribbean, with roots dating back to rich Taíno/African folk traditions of which women have often been the custodians” (xii).

The story, as the subtitle “fragmentos” suggests, is composed of fragments, a structure that allows for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. A third-person narrator relates what Florence experienced throughout the time period. The story, however, does not follow a linear structure. In the first section, the perspective shifts as we read Florence’s diary as she herself rereads it in New York. Letters written by Charlie are also part of her diary. Thus, the first section weaves the third-person narration of the modern-day Florence in New York, the earlier diary voice of Florence in Puerto Rico, and the voice of the child, Charlie, also speaking from the past in Puerto Rico. The second

section is also made up of Florence's diary, but this time the action takes place in Puerto Rico twenty-some years later. Here, the presence of a third-person narrator is helpful in relating the events as well as the various characters' reactions to them. The short story concludes with Florence burning the diary along with all the gifts she received in Puerto Rico.

In Vega's story, the diary not only serves as a literary device to show the readers Florence's inner self, but also plays a larger role as the means by which she expresses herself in contrast to how the male-dominated Puerto Rican society perceives her. Florence's diary asserts that the only way to discover a country's history is through a person's own account of events as she sees, invents, and interprets them. Furthermore, a diary is a recorded narrative of daily events that have already occurred and, in theory at least, is written for the author alone with no obvious wider audience in mind. With regard to this role, H. Porter Abbott notes that "the diary ... is assumed to be transparent," allowing the reader a direct insight into the inner world of the character (55). The word "assumed" is key here, for as we will also see, diaries can serve as vehicles of manipulation, taking advantage of the assumed transparency of the genre. At the same time, Abbot emphasizes that:

The diarist is preeminently alone. This confinement, or the sense of it, is immediately reduced with the intrusion of a participant addressee as in correspondence fiction. In diary fiction, one is encouraged by the form itself to let go of the perspective of the other. We are restricted to a document that emanates from *inside* the story. We sit and read what the

diarist describes himself as sitting at, writing, and often, as we are, reading himself. (25)

Writing in the diary allows an intimate representation of the female character, as it microscopically unfolds parts of reality that are significant to her. The diarist writes a type of retrospective narrative, bringing past events into a new light. At the same time, at least in this case, the diary empowers the protagonist of the short story, the “I” of the female character. In addition, the diary both engages and challenges the protagonist to embark on a journey towards self-understanding. In regards to Vega’s text, Florence uses diary writing to reflect on the Puerto Rican society and to challenge its values.

On the one hand, Vega uses the diary to elicit sympathy for her protagonist, as the readers see events from the protagonist’s perspective and will likely adopt that perspective as the lens through which they interpret later events as they unfold. On the other hand, through the diary Vega reveals certain characteristics of Florence, which depict her in a critical light. For example, Vega ridicules the protagonist for living life as if it were a romance, for passively waiting for her prince. The protagonist is an avid reader of romance novels, and, without realizing it, she shapes her diary itself into this form. Vega clearly critiques this particular method of “writing like a woman” and shows how the patriarchal society can make the romance novel a problematic setting for a woman’s life. Florence is a victim of a culture that supports the idea of the woman as a selfless being who lives for male approval. Florence’s diary becomes a means by which she can separate herself from the world, achieving a degree of assertiveness in a life where she is otherwise unassertive, serving the Linds hand and foot.

As I mentioned earlier, letter writing also comprises part of the narrative. As with the diary form, letter writing also puts the story in a retrospective light. Florence's student, Charlie, sends letters to his mentor. We know, however, that it is a one-way epistolary communication, since Florence's correspondence "por una de esas veleidades del correo o del destino... nunca llegó a manos de su nostálgico ex-discípulo" (61). In general, there is the possibility that the letters will be lost, which is what occurs in this case. Like the diarist, the letter writer enacts a thinking process with its own temporary effects. Jean Paul Sartre points out in *What is Literature?* (1965) that letter writing as an event "is already rethought and explained: the letter always supposes a lag between the fact (which belongs to a recent past) and its recital, which is given subsequently and in a moment of leisure" (138). In other words, at the same time that Florence is not aware of what is to happen in the future, the same is true for Charlie. They both know their pasts, but the future is unknown. What stands out for these two characters, however, is that they are both able to be narrators and to document their lives retrospectively.

While the diary and letters are an important part of the structure of the text, the title of this short story suggests yet another structural quality. There is a correlation between the diary, the *baúl*, and *fragmentos*. *Baúl* is the equivalent of the English word trunk, and a *baúl* is normally used for carrying important or valuable belongings. In this case, the *baúl* is where Florence keeps her most important possession, her diary, along with the letters from her student. She relies upon the *baúl* to conceal what others must not see. Furthermore, she is the only one with access to it, symbolizing her control over her life. The trunk remains Florence's best friend, though it is more of an "ataúd sin muerto," a casket without a dead person, as she describes it (64). At the end of the story, Florence

burns her records, which symbolizes the end of an era and possibly the beginning of a new one. It will not be easy for her, because “el baúl muestra...su fondo desnudo y desteñado;” the empty trunk is an indicator of an empty life, filled with frustrated desires.

The second part of the title, *fragmentos*, as mentioned previously, denotes that the story is not complete, that the reader needs to compile the fragments into a whole. The third part of the title, *novelón romántico*, represents the type of narrative so familiar to women readers of the nineteenth century. Since *romántico* modifies the noun, we can only assume that the text is a romance, a genre Northrop Frye labels as having a “perennially childlike quality ... [characterized by] its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative gold age” (186). As Frye sees it, the romantic narrative is motivated by a wish or a want. This certainly seems to be the case for Vega’s protagonist, who wants to live life as if she were part of a fairytale. This attitude is apparent in Florence’s narrative, where we read and feel her emotions toward her master.

Before analyzing the four female characters, which I read as nineteenth-century Puerto Rican stereotypes, it is important to briefly address the issue of agency in regard to female figures. As noted in the introduction, agency typically refers to the capacity of an individual to act in spite of various potentially controlling forces. Generally speaking, to say that a character displays agency indicates that the individual in question behaves as an active subject. Nevertheless, often times the term “agency” becomes identical to “action,” whether political, social, or ideological, among others. The term agency then serves as a metaphor for double action. Specifically, I argue that “El baúl de Miss Florence” enacts different models for enacting female agency. If one defines agency

solely by physical action, then the female characters in Vega's text articulate agency in only a few instances. Nevertheless, I argue that, by equipping her female characters with linguistic capabilities, Vega has illustrated different possibilities for female agency. The female figures herein examined are marginalized due to racial, gender, and class conditions. For this reason, to borrow Debra Castillo's term, the different linguistic or textual articulations or utterances in this text constitute "writing in the margins," agential action within and commentary upon a dominant discourse (*Talking* 216-260). The agency of the female characters in "El baúl de Miss Florence" manifests itself through writing—diaries and letters—and is symbolized in the use of the first-person narration. These enactments of agency allow the conveyance of important significance. Indeed, one purpose for "El baúl de Miss Florence" may have been to present women as agents of historical process, on the one hand, and on the other as subjects whose agency resides mostly in their self-representations within particular discursive contexts,.

2.3 Florence

A British nanny with a diary in her suitcase, Florence is ready to record her new experiences on the new island. She leaves England in search of something new, since not much was happening in her life back there. In her diary, Florence confesses that, "sólo retengo la larga enfermedad de mi padre, su lenta agonía y, ante el hecho consumado de su muerte, una honda sensación de desarraigo" (12). For this reason, a change is desirable; a move to the small island of Puerto Rico holds the promise of new and exciting adventures.

In the male-dominated world, Florence is, at first glance, timid and inept. But in her diary she reveals herself as assertive, free, and confident. Much of Vega's interest lies in using Florence's observations, recorded in her diary, as a means to expose the varied roles women are asked to play in Puerto Rican society. These roles reduce women to a set of standards and rules to which women must conform. In her outward obedience to these standards, Florence displays the characteristics typical of the nineteenth-century female protagonist. In "Shadows Uplifted," Barbara Christian argues that the heroine of the nineteenth century was:

...beautiful, since physical beauty, at least for a woman was an indication of her spiritual excellence –but not just any kind of physical beauty. The nineteenth-century novel promoted a rather fragile beauty as the norm; qualities of helplessness, chastity and refinement rather than, say, strength, endurance and intelligence were touted as the essential characterizes of femininity. The nineteenth-century heroine not only had to be beautiful physically; she had to be fragile and well-bred as well" (199).

This chapter explores the prescription of these characteristics and Florence's response through an examination of her subjectivity and agency.

According to nineteenth-century societal norms, men possess their women and thus expect them to act in a subordinate manner. As in Victorian England, the women in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico must embody humility, grace, and chastity, and they must remain polite under all circumstances.¹² Florence is a prime example of this type of

¹² Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments on respect to nineteenth-century women literature: "'Story' for women has typically meant plots of seduction, courtship, the energies of quest deflected into sexual downfall, the

woman. Vega recreates these historic demands in order to challenge and question them by inserting into her tale a woman who, through the use of a diary, attempts to reshape herself in ways counter to these gendered cultural imperatives.

The diary is the means by which Florence appropriates a new language and achieves her agency. Through her diary, Florence discovers a different version of herself, a different identity. This identity stands in contrast to that which society has shaped for her to this point. The diary allows her to sketch her own subjectivity, one that results from unsatisfied desires. On many occasions, Florence's voice is persuasive and moving. She gives evidence of her own sense of agency when she writes the following: "En esta reducida alcoba de la segunda planta, desde cuya inmensa ventana se divisan unos cielos espectacularmente crepusculares, me siento, en cierta medida, *yo también dueña* de ese imperio de cañas sembradas a pérdida de vista en el Caribe" (8; emphasis mine). In this passage, Florence recognizes that she is the owner of her own writing, but most importantly, she is also the owner of her own actions. Florence's dedication to quiet thoughts and deep meditation marks her as a reflective woman. These reflections lead her to start a diary, and through her writing Florence asserts her agency and, from there, her rights as a woman.

Florence is an intricate female character in that she is not presented only as an innocent observer and victim of patriarchy; on the contrary, her writing often portrays racial discrimination as well as class prejudice, especially when confronted with people of African descent. At first glance, Florence appears to be the stereotypical angelic

choice of marriage partner, the melodramas of beginning, middle, and end, the trajectories of sexual arousal and release" (15),

female, but her contradictory behavior proves otherwise. For example, Florence is conscious of the oppression and racism that result from slavery, yet she makes the conscious decision not to get involved or voice her own opinion. Her conversations with Dr. René Fouchard open her eyes about the slavery practiced by the Linds. However, Florence prefers to be blind and believes that the Linds' situation does not concern her. As a result, she does not voice an opinion. In her mind, she is merely a British nanny in a foreign country, and her recording of what she is experiencing in Puerto Rico preserves a cold and detached perspective on and approach to the historical reality surrounding her. Her distant and superficial feelings are depicted in her writing.

While Florence remains removed from the emotional recognition of colonial oppression, she is, at times, critical of male authority. On these occasions, Florence demonstrates some personal agency when she voices this criticism in her writing. At the same time, Florence is cautious about how she is portrayed by the male bachelors. She is supposed to act delicate and ladylike. Her upbringing is that of a proper lady who embodies selective strengths that constitute Vega's model of the Victorian female character. This is seen, for example, when Dr. René Fouchard asks to take short walks with Florence. Florence's inner private voice tells us, "No creí prudente aceptar de inmediato la invitación y pedí su posposición para la mañana siguiente" (30). This is just one simple instance of how careful Florence is with any relationship, making sure she is not misunderstood or calling her name and honor into question. Throughout the short story, Florence reveals a strong moral sensitivity that is manifested somewhat unrealistically or inconveniently at times, as the above example suggests.

Yet Florence does not act innocent and submissive all the time; on the contrary, she is strong and decisive when she judges it appropriate. She allows herself to lust over her master even though she is aware of the effect these feelings would have on her student and Susan, if they ever became known. Her superficial sentimentalism is demonstrated throughout the text. For example, when she describes Edward Lind as not being the handsome type of man she is normally attracted to, she admits that he, “posee ... cualidades capaces de impresionar a ciertas damas. Su ruda virilidad, su sonrisa juguetona y su leve acento extranjero se alían para conferirle un no-sé-qué de atractivo” (13). She continues to develop her thoughts about Edward Lind and asks herself, “¿Quién es este ser contradictorio y evasivo, este hombre impredecible que a la vez atrae y repele? ... Su distancia puede ser glacial; su contacto abrasa como el fuego. Si me acerco, se aleja; si lo evito, me busca” (41). While she does not act on her feelings, Florence develops an “imaginary relationship” with Edward Lind, which affects her reasoning. When she comes to terms with the fact that she has fallen in love with Edward Lind—while he continues to run around with other women—Florence decides to “adelantar la fecha de mi partida, escapar para siempre de este invernadero maldito donde se malogran, antes de florecer, los sentimientos” (52). Even after leaving Puerto Rico and being separated from Lind, Florence fosters romantic feelings for him. It is precisely because she has not lost hope that they might yet be together that she constantly dreams of returning to Puerto Rico.

It is not part of the formula for the archetypal Victorian woman to forget the man she loves. In this case, Florence relies upon her diary to nurture her amorous feelings. Consequently, she continues to love Edward Lind for many years, across an ocean in

another country. Her reason for returning to Puerto Rico after so many years of absence is to see if there is any possibility to develop this never-fulfilled love. During all these years, Florence chooses to remain the emotional prisoner of her master and his oppressive and racist behavior. She closes her eyes to his authoritarian, violent and stubborn character so as not to miss a chance of being “loved” by him. These feelings and attitudes, though not displayed publicly, illustrate Florence’s lack of self-appreciation, for her life is dictated by this man with whom she never even had a relationship. In a way, Florence becomes a prisoner of her own romantic feelings and the romantic narrative to which she, as a Victorian female subject, falls prey.

Florence is aware of her multifaceted and contradictory personality. For this reason, she wrestles at times with the nineteenth-century depiction of the good and the inferior female. She is aware of the emotional influence Edward Lind has upon her. However, as the story progresses, “El rostro de aquel que por tanto tiempo había dictado el ritmo y la razón de mis pensamientos iba desvaneciéndose con cada palabra como una sombra privada abruptamente del sol” (80). Finally, Florence recognizes that she has the strength to break free of her attachment to Edward Lind, a relationship that has constrained her all these years.

Florence is able to resist some of the gendered limitations of patriarchal society because her diary provides her the means by which to separate herself from the culture surrounding her. It is a space and realm of safety in which she is able to act and think as she desires. Vega uses Florence as an example of a woman who tries to resist the constraints of a male-dominated society, as a window into a world where women are virtually snuffed out of existence, silenced in almost every way. When in public or with

the Lind family, Florence becomes an object of pleasure which the Linds display like a plaything for the benefit of male suitors or those interested in just observing a model female.¹³ Florence is the subject of the hungry gaze of men as well as the jealous eyes of women. Vega parallels the treatment of women like Florence, subjected to the hungry gaze of men, with the treatment of slaves in the marketplace. One example is when Edward Lind, after displaying Florence to a widower in search of a new wife, announces that she is a strong candidate for marriage, who “no tiene que hablar para justificar su victoria” (46). This manner of being shown off to prospective suitors is a type of emotional torture for Florence. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault writes of torture as public spectacle. Florence’s display among the male suitors resembles Foucault’s description of public torture and spectacle as previous societies’ preferred methods of disciplining their subjects—both those tortured and those spectating—into conformity with societal standards. In “El baúl de Miss Florence,” the audience for the spectacle created by displaying Florence and other available and suitable young women consists of rich men and women.

When Edward Lind declares Florence’s victory in this type of contest, he treats her as a trophy. Though seeming a gentleman by praising her beauty, Edward Lind is really silencing Florence so that he can speak for her, thus stripping her of the power of expression the same way slave owners stripped slaves of their freedom. Just as slave

¹³ In one of Laura Mulvey’s essays, the pleasure vision of man cannot carry the weight of sexual objectification, since this particular role belongs to the woman, according to the patriarchal canon. In other words, “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy unto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. . . . women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact”. (589) Such a concept—associated with *schopophilia*—underscores that the human creature is taken as an object of pleasure subjugated to a controlled and curious gaze. In Florence’s case, she is subjugated to the male gaze as a visual object.

owners placed their slaves on a trading block for display, forcing them to stand silently like cattle up for sale, Edward Lind presents Florence to this suitor as a model servant/wife whose value indeed rests on this subservience, demonstrated in her willingness to let Mr. Lind speak for her. Florence finds this experience agonizing. Nonetheless, it is central to the point of this chapter that Florence is not silenced altogether: she retreats to her diary to express what she does not have the courage to say in public.

Scholars have noted the liberating potential of self-representation. For example, Giancarlo Lombardi comments, in *Rooms With A View: Feminist Diary Fiction, 1952-1999* on the role of a diary for women who find themselves silenced:

In a phallogocentric society which has long founded its welfare on female disempowerment, those women who attempt to escape its constricting *diktat* sometimes come to realize that there is no possibility of reconciling their desire for independence with the order established by their husbands and fathers ... In the privacy of their own rooms, whose walls secretly shelter them from the intrusive male gaze, the female protagonist of these literary works seek to capture, in their journals, their own perception of reality. (14-15)

As Lombardi observes, while the diary can be an escape for women weary of the “intrusive male gaze,” it can also be a form of resistance. The distinction between escapist and resistant strategies is subtle but crucial, and, in Vega’s portrayal, the diary constitutes a victory for the female character.

Vega's depiction of the diary as a means of resistance is clear in the simple fact that Vega gives her protagonist the tools to write history in her text. In her work, Vega demonstrates the power of writing by fictionally changing history, almost as if she were traveling through time to correct the wrongs of a prior day. Vega has recreated the past in order to allow her female protagonist the power to rewrite it and thereby challenge her oppression. Vega's strategy invokes Adrienne Rich's theory of subjects and history. Rich's subject-in-process is being invented and written by the female character's act of "writing as a re-vision." Both Vega and Rich see subjectivity and history as two processes that happen in the discourse. In other words, these authors write female characters that recount past events and put forward a history for that female subject. By articulating in writing what she experiences in the public world, Florence claims a certain power over that outer world and asserts herself by creating a "self" more true to her desires. She writes: "Era absolutamente imposible que de mis labios paralizados brotara una sola palabra... mi poca confianza ... me impide calificar la enigmática sonrisa con la que respondí a mi movimiento" (16, 38). Ironically, while Edward Lind was previously the gazer, it is now Florence's turn to appropriate the look along with its voyeuristic power. Florence's acceptance of the role as passive exhibitionist evokes Castillo's description of agential women who "give the oppressors the response they want to hear but maintain the mental reservation that permits a minimal independence of thought" (*Talking* 41).

Though stifled and silenced in public, Florence regains her confidence while alone and writing. As Castillo rightly suggests: "Silence alone cannot provide an adequate basis for...political action. Eventually, the woman must break silence and write,

negotiating the tricky domains of the said and the unsaid” (*Talking* 42). The diary becomes more than an escape in Vega’s tale, embodying a form of mild resistance as her protagonist asserts herself against social realities. Moreover, in the diary, Florence not only constitutes herself, but also, as previously mentioned, claims agency. She does so, for example, when her status as a single woman is challenged by Mrs. O’Hara, a rich woman and friend of Susan. When Mrs. O’ Hara makes some comedic remarks about her not being married, Florence quickly and firmly responds: “Soy una mujer libre ... y no tengo por ahora razones de peso para dejar de serlo”(12). This type of impetuous comment causes some “miradas traviesamente sorprendidas de Miss Susan y Mrs. Molly” (12). Florence is not a woman without agency. She knows how and when to defend herself when the occasion requires it. Certainly, the above response is an indication of Florence’s firmness in what she believes, but more importantly it demonstrates her strong sense of selfhood.

Yet while the diary is Florence’s strongest weapon, her own personality also helps her to claim agency. By this, I mean that Florence is a very astute woman, for example in choosing to guard her honor very carefully. On many occasions, Edward Lind bestows her with looks that express his physical attraction towards her. Florence is aware that she is attractive and often plays hard-to-get, despite her own strong feelings for Edward. In an elite social outing Florence writes the following about her eyes meeting those of Edward, “No sé si por efecto del vino, de la imaginación o de ambas cosas secretamente aliadas, leí en ellos la misma curiosidad que dirigía los míos” (38). The fact that she is strong enough to control her own feelings and desires designates her as possessing self-ownership and strength lacking in the man she lusts after. Edward Lind continually flirts

with her, though eventually settling for another woman who seems an easier catch than this physically appealing and honorable English woman.

When Florence finds out that Edward Lind and Selenia, his *mulatta* lover, are involved in an affair, an “erupción secreta de ... rabia” begins to take over. Edward Lind’s choice of woman in this case, however, is Florence’s gain. The embodiment of the chaste lady, Florence resents Selenia because of her sexual freedom. As the above passage suggests, she is jealous and angry. For this reason, Florence decides that she does not want to exploit her body for Edward Lind’s use. Keeping her body pure is also a way for Florence to claim agency by, in Debra Castillo’s terminology, “appropriating the master’s weapons” (*Talking* 43). Asserting control over her own sexuality constitutes “an act of hope, a call for transformation of social and political and linguistic and interpersonal relations, a demand for a different reading” (*Talking* 100). I argue that this is what Vega is getting at with the intricate character of Florence. In other words, Vega gives her protagonist credit: although she is vulnerable, she uses her body as the tool to achieve agency.

The message of Vega’s work is that women can resist male power in a myriad of ways, even if they are small and private, as in the example of keeping a diary. Florence recounts such humiliation in her diary, authoring her own version of the events and, in doing so, asserting her agency. In essence, she becomes the author of her own life story, her own narrative, which allows her to counter the power of the oppressive narrative that society, embodied in Edward Lind, attempts to impose on her. Her diary becomes, first, an arena for constructing her own understanding of herself and her life story and, later, an

avenue for reshaping herself and her life. This self-reflective narrative is thus a vehicle for the female figure to challenge oppressive forces in society and claim agency.

2.4 Susan

Susan is the other important female figure in the text who is not of Puerto Rican origin. She moved from the United States to the island of Puerto Rico to accompany her husband, Edward Lind, slave master and owner of the hacienda *La Enriqueta*. The real and the fictional Susan Morse is the daughter of Samuel Morse, who established the first electromagnetic telegraph in Puerto Rico when the island was still a colony of Spain. Vega's inclusion of the North American inventor reminds the reader of the cultural and economic impact of the United States in Puerto Rico. Vega opens the story with a quote from Samuel Morse: "Slavery per se is not a sin. It is a social condition ordained from the beginning of time for the wisest purposes, benevolent and disciplinary, by Divine Wisdom" (4). This quote establishes the view of Susan's father, that is, the colonizer's view, that slavery was justified and sanctioned by religion. In addition, the passage calls attention to the condition of Puerto Rico as a territory of the United States and the corresponding power relations between the United States (the colonizer) and Puerto Rico (the colonized). Vega's conscientious choice to include this quote alongside her short story provokes reflection on the (post)colonialist condition of Puerto Rico at the hands of the United States, a troubled relationship which spans centuries.

Most of the story is set in colonial Puerto Rico and deeply rooted in the relationship of colonizers and colonized. Furthermore, the real Susan Morse establishes, in a way, Vega's purpose in writing the text, which is, arguably, to reflect upon women's

situation when faced with various levels and forms of authority: in Susan's case, that of spousal authority. In this light, Susan's line at the beginning of the short story is significant: "Folks here pity my loneliness but I continue to exist" (4). This quote alludes to a form of alienation, whereby she is a prisoner of a society to which she does not want to belong. In the short story, we learn of Susan's life and trials through Florence's diary or a third-person narrator. The fact that she cannot speak in first-person mirrors her restrictive condition. Florence observes Susan's status and space when she writes, "No podía apartar de mi mente la imagen de la niña triste, crecida demasiado pronto y convertida ahora, por una cruel ironía de la suerte, en esposa igualmente solitaria" (34). Susan is the type of female character that Debra Castillo describes as coping by not speaking much, by keeping secrets and trying to keep much of themselves private and hidden (*Talking* 77). While Florence is able to claim agency through her diary, not all of Vega's characters experience such power. In fact, Susan cannot break away from the influence of her husband and the identity that he imposes on her, which is mediated by male-dominated discourse. She is the romantic heroine constructed through Florence's narration, the embodiment of the woman who is rich, fragile, beautiful, educated and deserving of a happy life. Yet, Susan is more a prisoner than a master in her own house, and her unhappiness dominates her life. Florence notices her misery and, in one of her reflections that more closely resembles novella writing, observes:

¡Cuán absurda me pareció entonces la existencia que el destino le ha deparado a mi patrona! ¡Cuán justificado su *mal de vivre*, su indiferente entrega al tedio cotidiano! Ha abandonado la modernidad, el furor citadino, el fermento intelectual de su crianza para consumirse, como el

sinsonte que le regaló su esposo el día de la boda, en el letargo perpetuo de una jaula dorada. ¡Cuán poderoso ha de ser el imán que la mantiene en ella, debilitando cada día más la fuerza inútil de su aleteo! (21)

The use of exclamatory sentences in this paragraph demonstrates various points. First, the tone of Florence's writing is dramatic and attention-catching. Florence is calling on the reader to read between the lines and become aware of the severity of Susan's situation. Second, this paragraph also bears resemblance to the overly dramatic nature of the typical novella writing of the time. This excessively dramatic tone, however, is one of the characteristics that Vega is critiquing in this text. Thus, Florence's theatrics here are both a genuine cry to notice Susan's fate and a commentary upon the overly emotional tendencies of "women's writing."

In essence, Susan proves unable to adopt a distinct language and her own set of meanings, as Florence does through her diary. When Florence reflects upon Susan's life, she begins to recognize more clearly the constraints of her own situation. For this reason, on comparing her own life compared to Susan's, Florence writes: "Me encuentro, más a menudo de lo quisiera, reviviendo pedazos de existencias ajenas, a veces más intensos, más vivos, más reales que estos vacuos capítulos de la mía" (35). Susan's inability to break free of the limitations that this society places on her, affects Florence; indeed, Florence starts to feel Susan's pain and grief as she surrenders herself to the restrictive milieu in which she finds herself.¹⁴

¹⁴ According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, one dominant definition of woman is as an angel "what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct, the pure 'gold baby' of male brains, a glittering and wholly artificial child" (*Literary Theory*, 597). By sacrificing the luxurious New York life to follow her husband, Susan's act, if we apply Gilbert's and Gubar's claims it "dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life

There are moments in the text where Susan's character reveals a different shade of her own personality. She is portrayed as strong in certain situations, which will be briefly mentioned here. Though Susan has been, for the most part, reduced to a life with no meaning, she is offered some means of developing her own personality through the books in her library. The ownership of a library, another typical theme of novella writing, gives Susan some agency. The books carry knowledge, and knowledge gives Susan an escapist vision. The library thus gives her tools to develop her own subjectivity. In this space, Susan can take refuge: it is a space where she is not told what to do or what to read. An avid reader of British and French literature, her books carry the initials "SWM": Susan Walker Morse. Interestingly, keeping the ownership of her maiden name—she does not assume her husband's last name—indicates Susan's ability to claim some type of authorship, however limited, as well as her own subjectivity. Ironically, one day Florence finds in Susan's library "un tratado de Mary Wollstone-craft sobre la igualdad de los sexos" (21). While Susan does not outwardly display any of the attitudes that the treatise endorses, the fact that she owns this type of literature suggests that she is aware of its existence and might ponder its message

One cannot deny that Susan is a slave in her own house and body, but her fragility and submissiveness to patriarchal power only go so far. She is not, after all, a female figure bereft of all rights and privileges. Besides her well-known name as the daughter of Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, Susan brings wealth, female beauty, and servitude to her marriage. Susan knows that her position as a powerful woman and

that has no story ... is really a life of death" (*Literary*, 602). Certainly, Susan is another prototype of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "madwoman in the attic."

member of the wealthy class in nineteenth-century Puerto Rican society comes with certain distinctions and advantages. This economic and racial privilege allows Susan to claim some type of agency. Consider how Florence describes meeting Susan for the first time: “Mrs. Lind, quien me recibió con la mayor cordialidad imaginable, me rogó con insistencia que la llamara sencillamente Miss Susan, como lo hacen todos sus sirvientes” (7). While Susan, as Florence further notes, does not want to be addressed by her husband’s last name, she insists that Florence address her just as the other servants do. In other words, she makes it clear from their first moments of acquaintance that Florence is, in her mind, on par with the servants in the hierarchy of the household. The title “Miss Susan” lets Florence know that Susan is part of the rich upper class and has authority. This passage and other similar passages demonstrate that Susan is aware of her subject position, that she is not, in every context, innocent and submissive. On the contrary, it evinces that Susan is aware of her positioning among those of both lower and higher social status than her own.

Throughout Florence’s diary, we learn of Susan’s personality, values, morals and life. We learn of her disapproval of the African culture’s influence on Charlie, her only son. Florence observes, in relation to Charlie, that “Miss Susan le tiene prohibida la frecuentación de los cuarteles negros” (10). In a confidential talk with Florence—there are not many—Susan confesses that “Una va perdiendo la sensibilidad a fuerza de no ver más que negros y caña” (34). Susan also clearly dislikes the black female characters, especially those that are young and attractive, and is aware that her husband is having an affair with a *mulata*. Florence describes the *mulata* as “alta, y bien formada y llevaba

suelta y albortada la cabellera crespa de mulata” (26).¹⁵ For Susan, divorce is not an option: society would see this decision as a failure and blame her for being weak and incapable of living up to the image of the devoted wife. Taught to always be understanding and silent, Susan uncomplainingly bears humiliations and betrayals her husband causes her. Because Susan does not have a choice, or at least does not perceive herself as having one, she remains a prisoner in a relationship that makes her feel barely alive. Susan is silenced and cannot voice her unhappiness, both of which demonstrate her inability to counter her oppression. As Debra Castillo states, “Silence is not a response but a condition imposed from outside” (37). Additionally, Susan’s silence is the result of the pressures that the patriarchal society has placed on her. Susan’s fate is similar to that of Bertha, Rochester’s mad first wife in *Jane Eyre*. After Charlie’s death, Susan goes mad, giving her husband even more reason to ignore her presence.

Susan is silenced and reduced to her traditional female role, wife and mother. She cannot escape the choices imposed on her. It is important to note, however, that Susan does display some form of agency, especially when exercising her own privilege over others, her retaining of her own name, or her limited freedom in her library. Even so, Susan remains imprisoned in her fate, and this state causes her to lose her mind. She becomes the madwoman in the attic, too weak to fight her own battles or to find her own voice.

2.5 Bela

¹⁵ Not coincidentally, Florence and Selenia resemble each other physically, which explains Edward Lind’s attraction to Florence as well.

Bela is the third female character I wish to examine in this chapter. In contrast to the other two women, Bela, the trustworthy head servant of the Lind-Morse household, is of African ancestry. In many ways, Bela, the *Mammy* stereotype: enduring, strong yet tranquil, kind and maternal— exemplifies a large black female with enormous breasts. This figure is typically loyal to the oppressive system that negates her freedom. Bela herself is also sexless, religious, and superstitious.

Through her relationship with Bela, Florence comes to understand her own status as a position defined by servitude. Their friendship solidifies when Florence becomes ill and Bela faithfully attends to her. During this time, Florence comes to see that they are similar in their conditions of subjugation. Though Bela, a slave, does not have the means to legally free herself as Florence does, Florence comes to see that the two are both subordinates to their superiors in the household.

Vega attributes strength differently to each of her female characters. Despite her marginal position, rooted in slavery, Bela manifests superior qualities, one of which is the understanding she shows toward others. This quality is a source of her strength of character. Indeed, Bela is depicted as the backbone of all the female characters in Vega's text. First, she is the only black female character to whom Vega dedicates extensive attention. Her name, Bela, alludes to beauty, which could be read a reference to many of Bela's attributes, for example, her beautiful and loyal personality. Florence describes Bela as "una negra sin edad con ojos dulcemente caninos" (8). Throughout the text, Florence tells us that Bela is a caring and loving yet strong black woman who has the benefit of vast life experience. Vega's choice to name this important black female character Bela is not without a purpose; her name connotes that Bela's beauty, rather than

originating from outside, is the result of her beautiful inner self. While many surrounding Bela are weak and indifferent toward others, Bela remains benevolent and spiritually strong in her relationships.

Despite the fact that Bela, Florence, and Susan all suffer from being women in a male-dominated social hierarchy, Vega is careful to draw distinctions between the three characters. Bela is different from the other two because she represents Puerto Rico and the enslavement of Africans, whereas Florence, who is from England, and Susan, who is from North America, enjoy certain privileges due to their race and national origin. Bela's less privileged state is evident in the fact that she seems to adopt the identity of the faithful surrogate mother with Charlie, an action expected by the slaveholding Lind family. It is also evident in the fact that the reader only sees Bela through the point of view of Florence. As a woman of African ancestry, a slave, and a native of a country subject to a colonial power, Bela has the least power of the three women. As a result, she seems unaware of the possibility of having an identity of her own, an identity different from that which society has imparted to her.

As I mentioned earlier, Bela, like the other female characters, has multiple layers. As a black slave who has earned her masters' trust, Bela oversees other slaves and acts as an instrument of Mr. Lind. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), describes how these "governing slaves," like Bela, "are used to convey the master's order to their fellows, and they too enjoy a certain position of honor" (19). The irony of slaves ruling slaves, however, is lost on Bela; she accepts her identity as a colonized subject without any critical reflection. Perhaps this is because she finds fulfillment in being loyal to the Lind family, viewing herself as a worthwhile surrogate mother to Charlie Lind.

Irrespective of the precise reasons, Bela plays the role of the woman and colonial subject who has adopted a false consciousness of sorts, believing herself to be what her oppressors demand that she be.

But all is not lost for Bela or the black female character she represents. For in the end it is Bela who tells Florence what has happened to the Lind family, when Florence returns from her time in New York. In a sense, she has the last word in the family's history and, I would argue it is precisely in these moments that she claims her own agency. Vega uses Bela's telling of the story to rewrite history. She has the key to the past; it is only through her that Florence can get access. Still alive, after so many years as a woman "sin edad," Bela's account of the story will be the last version. Bela's status and importance at this juncture is similar to Susan Tucker's account of the role of black slaves in reconstructing and remembering chapters of United States history:

Black domestics became, therefore, interpreters who explained white life to blacks and black life to whites. Through black domestics, many black children heard firsthand accounts of the ways of the 'white folks,' and many white children heard similar, though usually more censored, stories about the lives of the blacks. (189)

This is true also of Bela, for, in the end, she tells Florence and the readers how Puerto Rico abolished slavery, what was left of the previous owners and masters, and how life has changed for people of African descent on the island.

In part, Bela acts as the narrator who outlives her slave master, which is a sign that there is hope for even the most oppressed. Eager to tell Florence of what has happened, Bela starts off with "¿Lo sabe usted, señorita, que ahora somos gente libre?-

anunció ella con orgullo, y al obtener mi asentimiento prosiguió ya sin más interrupciones”(70). Before telling her version of history, Bela wants to establish her agency in telling her story. Her historical and narrative assertiveness is the key to assessing her degree of agency, the means through which she positions herself with respect to free people. Fresh from slavery’s confinement, Bela still seeks Florence’s approval of the story. Though Bela is now a free woman, her sense of self-awareness, still suffering the damages of slavery, is nowhere near that of Florence.

But Vega chooses to have Bela be the one who tells Florence what has become of the Lind family. She informs Florence that Charlie Lind fell in love with a *mulata* woman and insisted on marrying her. She continues her storytelling by recounting that Charlie’s enraged father could not bear such shame, even though Edward Lind himself had numerous affairs with black women. After many fights and arguments with his abusive father, Bela continues, Charlie became weak, unable to confront his father, and eventually took his own life. Reeling from shock, Susan lost her mind and went mad. Edward Lind brought a black woman into his house, ignoring Susan’s presence or state of mind.¹⁶ Two years later, however, Edward Lind passed away, leaving behind debts that Susan pays off by selling the goods in the house. All of these dramatic events -when told by Bela- cause a breakdown in Florence that lasts for days, a plot point typical of novella writing and Vega’s way of ridiculing the overly sensitive nature of upper-class women who are too vulnerable and fragile to handle misfortune. One of Bela’s roles in Vega’s text, then, is to be the final storyteller, since she is the one that tells Florence about the

¹⁶ Vega uses a similar detail from *Jane Eyre* in depicting Susan. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha, Edward Rochester’s wife, is the madwoman in the attic, while in “El baúl de Miss Florence” Susan, Edward Lind’s wife, loses her senses toward the end of the story.

misfortunes of the Lind family's. Additionally, Bela's position is also that of the guardian of culture and history, whose function is to transmit history from generation to generation.

In her recounting of events, Bela also tells Florence that slavery has been abolished, making Bela a survivor not only of her own private experience with the Lind family but of the whole institution of slavery as it existed in Puerto Rico. Bela establishes her voice as a black woman through Florence's diary. In granting Bela this power of narration, Vega implicitly joins Elsa Arroyo in her view that Puerto Rico has "una historia parcial en la medida en que no recoge la experiencia femenina" (24). Vega allows her main black female character to reconstruct individual, familiar, and national history by inserting her own personal account of that history. By doing so, Vega's text welcomes a voice that was silenced in the colonial and patriarchal system.

In Florence's diary, Bela is writing from the margins, to borrow Castillo's term (216-260). In other words, Bela is not fully in possession of her own voice. Castillo suggests that "[w]omen naturally write from and of, if not necessarily, to the margins" (*Talking* 57). Bela certainly fits the description of the marginal: her status as a woman in nineteenth-century during- and post-slavery Puerto Rico puts her at a gendered disadvantage. Second, she is a woman of African descent who has recently been released from the constraints of slavery and colonization. Vega's job, then, is to give a name to Bela, to give her a place in history and Puerto Rican literature. In other words, Vega offers this marginalized voice acknowledgment and validation.

Through Bela, Vega displays her interest in recapturing the voices of the colonized. Bela's narration, in "El baúl de Miss Florence," is a model of Linda

Hutcheon's argument, in "Subject in/of/to History and His Story," that "to reinsert the subject...into the context of its *parole*, its signifying activities (both conscious and unconscious) within a historical and social context, is to begin to force a redefinition not only of the subject but of history" (79). When Bela is given the agency to retell her own memories, she goes back as far as she can remember, a procedure which entails a self-discovery. Her own recounting of the story allows her to demonstrate her strength and authority. Bela's story is also recorded in her body, the material witness of her experiences and suffering at the hands of different forms of discrimination. Her retelling of past events, moreover, becomes her instrument of self-expression and, I propose, is where Bela claims her agency.

2.6 Selenia

Along with the other female figures previously examined, Selenia is another female figure in "El baúl de Miss Florence" deserving of critical attention. While Selenia only occupies a few scenes in Vega's short story, she portrays yet another female stereotype of the nineteenth century. More specifically, Selenia represents another face of the African presence in Puerto Rico. As a *mulata*, Selenia's position is inherently problematic. Neither black nor white, Selenia represents the fusion of two cultures and stands in for another entire population of Puerto Rican women. Although one of her parents was fair-skinned, Selenia was not born free. As a woman, Selenia suffers at the hands of a society that judges her by white cultural standards based on financial worth and beauty.

Selenia is different from Bela, the other major black female character in this story, Bela, in that her blackness is written as exotic. While Bela is the devoted servant, seen as asexual, Selenia is the epitome of exotic (and erotic) beauty. The two women are constructed in direct opposition to one another: Bela is caring, reasonable, maternal and selfless, while Selenia is irrational, undomesticated and selfish. Indeed, she is depicted as sexually driven, wild, and untamed. Vega writes Selenia as a clear portrayal of the object of men's sexual needs and desires.

With Selenia, Vega alludes to the fact that the position of the *mulatta* is one of fragmented consciousness, derived from her double marginalization, her repudiation by both black and white cultures. Selenia's job is to serve food in the Linds' household; she is a servant, just like the other black people living on the hacienda.¹⁷ However, her servitude includes the burden of embodying the erotic and the sexual. As a female subject in this text, her body serves as the platform for male desire. Her *mulatta* beauty is sexually arousing, making her more striking in the eyes of her pursuer, Edward Lind. In Florence's first reflections on Selenia, she writes the following: "... Era alta y bien formada y llevaba suelta y alborotada la cabellera cresa de mulata. Callada y de mala gana, permanecía sentada frente a la ventana de mi pequeña alcoba bajo la corriente de aire salobre que alzaba las frisas" (26). Edward Lind quickly notices her beauty and makes her his mistress, developing a private and clandestine relationship that is initially unbeknownst to his wife, Susan. Not only does Edward Lind own Selenia as one of his slaves, but he also owns her sexuality. Certainly, the story of white men exploiting slave

¹⁷ As a female character, Selenia bears some resemblance to the protagonist in *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde. Both women are beautiful, light-skinned *mulatas* who fall in love with an upper-class white man.

women sexually, often leaving them pregnant and disavowing the resulting progeny, is not new. The sexual relationship between Selenia and Edward Lind leaves her pregnant. This pregnancy is announced to Florence by her pupil, Charlie, when he says: “Sepa usted, aunque prefiera no saberlo, que Selenia tiene la barriga hichanda y no precisamente de aire” (40)

In Florence’s diary, Selenia is not painted as a very pleasant person: she possesses an almost evil nature. When Florence is sick, Selenia and Bela are left in charge of her, and Florence writes and reflects when she is left alone in Selenia’s care: “... esbozaba una sonrisa de satisfacción y me enfriaba el alma con la indiferencia glacial de su mirada. ¿Cómo es posible tanta belleza y tan poca compasión en una misma cara? ¿Será cierto, como dice Mr. Lind, que esta raza híbrida de las islas ha nacido sin alma?” (26). In this paragraph, Selenia is depicted as cold, emotionless, and detached. In Florence’s eyes, Selenia does not even appear as a human being with her own identity, only as a statuesque beauty. The reader, of course, also notes Florence’s jealousy of Lind’s infatuation with Selenia. Whatever the other mitigating factors, Florence’s insinuation that Selenia has no soul indicates her own acceptance of racist stereotypes: since Selenia is a *mulata* and is more black than white as far as Florence is concerned. In all, Florence sees Selenia as the embodiment of sexual allure and wickedness. Critic Claudette M. Williams presents us with extensive research on the role of the *mulata* in Spanish Caribbean literature in *Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature* (2000). Williams examines what it means to be a black or *mulata* female in the Spanish speaking Caribbean. One of Williams’ argument is that the *mulata* is the:

hybrid product of the sexual liaisons between European men and African women, represents that Creole middle group, but is tainted racially, and, by extension, morally. Therefore she can only be the provider of those taboo sexual pleasures that would tarnish the "fair lady." (1-2)

Williams recognizes that the black female figure has been written according to her aesthetic and physical features; that is, the black woman is both sexual and sexless, exploited and exploiter.

As the example of Florence would suggest, the other female figures mentioned do not show any feelings of camaraderie toward Selenia. Instead, all three female characters previously examined side against Selenia because of her elevated yet morally questionable status as the *mulata* mistress. In particular, the reader notes how strongly Bela dislikes Selenia, almost declaring war on her. Selenia poses a challenge to Bela's position in the Linds' household, in part because of race, in that Bela is black, while Selenia is half-black and half-white. Bela establishes her authority through her blind devotion to the family. Conversely, Selenia constitutes her authority through her sexuality and, in part, her lighter skin.

Owing to her own internalized racism or her recognition of the practical benefits of lighter skin, Selenia wants to reject her black ancestry and claim her whiteness. Selenia's perceived racial advantage over Bela is compounded by her intimate relationship with her owner. Frantz Fanon has examined the desire of the black woman for a white man. Specifically, in his chapter "The Woman of Color and the White Man," Fanon explores the black woman through *Je suis Martiniquaise* by Mayotte Capécia and *Nini* by Abdoulaye Sadj. In these texts, he argues, the black woman is read as an object

with exchange value, value that to some extent can be negotiated through relationships with the opposite sex:

For, in a word, the race, but not in the sense that one might think: not “preserve the uniqueness of that part of the world in which they grew up,” but make sure that it will be white. . . . It is always essential to avoid falling back into the pit of niggerhood, and every woman in the Antilles, whether in a casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined to select the least black of the men. (47)

He distinguishes between what he calls “the Negress” and the mulato. The Negress, Fanon points out, “has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white.” The mulatto, on the other hand, “wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back” (54). From this perspective, Selenia’s sexual relationship with her white owner is a way to climb up the social ladder. For this reason, perhaps, Selenia does not see anything wrong with her illicit affair. At the same time, the *mulata*, according to Barbara Christian, is viewed as the loose black mistress who “ensnares men with her body rather than uplifting them with her beauty . . . the loose black woman is the quintessence of an aspect of woman that men feared, the power of sexual allure that might waylay even the best men’s minds and spirits” (192). Edward Lind is the epitome of the macho man; toward the end of his life Selenia’s sexual allure controls his state of affairs. She becomes the “reina” of the house as Lind tries to come to grips with the loss of his son (78).

The scant focus on Selenia in the text makes it hard to know her thoughts. Nevertheless, this lack of detail is indicative of her liminal space in a society where she is a slave and a *mulatta*. Vega inscribes an inescapable fate for Selenia: over time, Selenia

is impregnated by her white master and forced to leave the hacienda, the revenge of her master's wife, Susan. The latter, in discovering her husband's unfaithfulness, is enraged and screams at Selenia: “!Que se vaya ahora mismo! !Que recoja sus trapos y se largue al cuartel de los negros de campo!” (39). In the end, both women are victims of Edward Lind's manipulation with Susan betrayed and Selenia abandoned. Predictably, Florence sides with Susan's pain, and not much is said about the aftereffects on Selenia. Edward Lind sees Selenia in terms of her sexuality and as his possession. Thus, Selenia's subject position is that of the semi-servant in a grand patriarchal household; her sexual appeal plays a large, even defining, role in her status in the household. We know, however, that Bela is afraid of Edward Lind's reaction once he finds out that his mistress has been banished. Bela voices her concern and fear, asking, “Pero, Miss Susan, ¿qué dirá Mr. Lind cuando se entere?” (39). This statement further affirms the chokehold that Lind, the man responsible for breaking the hearts of two women and terrifying a third, has on the fate of the women around him. Despite Selenia's un-sympathetic personality, one thing remains certain: her destiny and that of her child are completely determined by a male member of the rich white class, while she herself has no control over her own life or that of her child.

Vega's inclusion of such a female character illustrates that the figure of the *mulata* in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico mostly involves playing the role of sexual object to white man's desire. However, Selenia is also aware that her physical attractiveness awards her power over the older and less attractive, darker skinned slaves. For this reason, Selena displays some agency in her attempt to be assimilated into the white culture. But this means of exercising agency is limited and negative, because her

assimilation causes her to deny her blackness, resulting in the punishment of being cast out from the household. Lastly, Selenia's somewhat limited agency rests upon a freedom of movement between inferiority (toward her master) and superiority (toward the darker skinned slaves), a flexibility that affords her some autonomy.

2.7 The Trajectory of the Male Characters

While Vega's purpose in writing this short story seems to have been the inscription of women in history, men also occupy an important role in the text. As mentioned above, "El baúl de Miss Florence" explores binary identity positions in both male and female characters. So far we have examined characters that are white or black, rich or poor, benevolent or wicked, moral or immoral. The same binary patterns are at work in the male characters. Two male characters, whose names have already surfaced in this chapter, are central to the text: Edward Lind and his son, Charlie.

Edward Lind's authority and control manipulate all four female characters examined up to this point in this chapter. A striking detail which we encounter in "El baúl de Miss Florence" is that Vega borrows the name Edward from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. There are clear parallels between the two men: they share the same class status, and the female protagonist is in love with them. On the contrary, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys chooses not to name the main male figure Edward but to leave him nameless. In Vega's text, Edward Lind symbolizes the white European descendent male voyaging to Puerto Rico in search of wealth and power. In his single-minded pursuit of these ends, Lind displays cruel, racist behavior. His manners are unrefined and he displays prejudice toward both women and people of dark skin. He embodies the merciless colonizer and

racist head of household. For Edward Lind, whiteness is the ideal, and he lives a life of white supremacy where blackness is coded as undesirable and black and white people represent two different species. The clearest single indicator of this worldview is his work in the slave trade and plantation slavery. In terms of gender, Lind sees his wife Susan and his mistress Selenia as his property. Nevertheless, the women occupy different roles. For Edward Lind, his wife is the bearer of his lineage, while Selenia represents the working black woman who satisfies his sexual hunger and to whom he is not required to be emotionally attached. Vega's somewhat one-dimensional depiction of Edward Lind suggests that, more often than not, the elite white man of nineteenth-century Puerto Rico was an oppressor and colonizer of both white and black women.

Charlie Lind stands in stark contrast to his father. Vega pays considerable attention to Charlie, portraying him as a kind, gentle human being, embracing societal ideals drastically different from his father's. Charlie symbolizes the new generation, born of colonizers, who choose not to follow their parents' system of beliefs. Educated in France as a painter, a profession often scorned by his father, Charlie is a free spirit who sees goodness and beauty in all things, despite differences in color. Unlike his father, Charlie was born in Puerto Rico. He is the epitome of the country's "new man" and a revolutionary at heart. His view toward blacks and slavery is far from his father's: he abhors many of his father's racial (and racist) views. Charlie associates easily with black people, for he too feels imprisoned in his own home. This "imprisonment" is apparent in a poignant scene where Charlie locks Florence in a closet for several hours, only to free her with this stunningly brash comment: "Perdóneme, Miss Florence: sólo quería hacerle comprender lo que es la vida para un prisionero" (23). Though supposedly just a game,

this scene conveys a grave reality: the imprisoning effect of colonialism. As part of the younger generation of Puerto Rico raised among young blacks, Charlie does not display a hostile or racist attitude toward those of African descent. Charlie's game, however, is a small picture of the spatial confinement that he—as well as the female characters analyzed earlier—experience under patriarchal and colonial rule.

2.8 Concluding Remarks

In this short story, the reader finds women who experience oppression and subjugation in a variety of ways. Vega offers this array as a sampling of the kinds of imprisonment that women experience in life, both in the past and in the present. I suggest that her ultimate goal in doing so may be to provide a road map for how a woman may free herself from suffocating social realities.

In general, the female characters in this text find themselves in a restricted space, such as the home. Florence uses her room within the home as the space where she rests with her thoughts. Susan, on the other hand, has no choice but to be Edward Lind's perfect wife. As a result, the house is where society tells her she belongs. Susan is the image of a wife who acts to bring a name and decorum to the house. Even so, she chooses to live a life of uncomfortable existence; any other choice would cause her to lose her economic and social status. Bela's space, on the other hand, is that of the home and overseeing its territory. Bela is colonized and confined to her owner's house. In a way, however, Bela has the advantage of occupying a space that many black characters do not have access to: before slavery is outlawed, while her peers are confined to living together as a group, Bela is fortunate to enjoy the privilege of caring for her owners within their

house. Lastly, Selenia's space also changes throughout the text. Initially she lives with the rest of the slaves. However, as the relationship progresses with Edward Lind, and his wife is no longer mentally sound, Selenia takes over Susan's role as wife. All in all, the home as the choice of location for these women is an indication of the space where patriarchal society placed women; it is a space where, whatever their varying roles, women remain controlled by and subjugated to men. This short story suggests that the female characters are engaged in a discourse whose terms are dictated by colonialism and patriarchy. Nevertheless, this chapter demonstrates that, inside the walls of this home, a cry of rebellion is being heard, a diary is written, and history is being retold.

Ultimately, the female characters that Vega presents in this text are national stereotypes of Puerto Rico. Furthermore, Vega draws attention to the mix of cultures that make Puerto Rico. In "El baúl de Miss Florence," Vega connects all the various cultures, races and ethnicities. This link echoes *El país de cuatro pisos*, by José Luis Gonzáles, which distinguishes four cultural and racial developments that make up Puerto Rican society. For Gonzáles, the first Puerto Ricans were the the black Puerto Ricans or "criollos," that were born in the new country, the descendents of African slaves. According to Gonzáles, the most important group "por razones económicas y sociales ...es la Africana" (19). Together with the Spaniards and the Taínos, the Africans constitute the first floor of the Puerto Rican nation, and this last group was the most silenced of the three. Extending the argument further, he notes "that Puerto Rico must acknowledge its mulatto heritage in order to move into the future" (132). We encounter the same topic of national mixing not only in the four main female characters of "El baúl de Miss Florence," but also in "Encancaranublado." In the latter, which bears resemblance to the short story examined

in this dissertation, Vega chooses three characters—a Haitian, a Dominican, and a Cuban—who find themselves in a boat sailing to the United States. What is interesting about this particular story is how Vega draws attention to a Caribbean understanding of Puerto Rico as a mix of many colors, races, and ethnicities. The same applies to “El baúl de Miss Florence,” where Vega represents four female characters that stand in for racial, national, and cultural archetypes, alluding to the pastiche of cultures that form the island of Puerto Rico: the North American, the European, the African, and the *mulata*. These women represent different layers of Puerto Rican society, and “El baúl de Miss Florence” introduces these figures as part of the cultural identity of Puerto Rico. For example, Florence represents the European woman who settles in Puerto Rico in search of a new life and more income. Susan, on the other hand, symbolizes the North American woman who lives in Puerto Rico but never associates herself with the country, feeling detached from any cultural association with it. Susan also embodies the Victorian standard of the good wife and mother. Bela symbolizes the *Mammy* figure, known for her strong maternalism and significant power within the household. Moreover, Bela represents all those black women who, although born in Puerto Rico, never truly felt a part of the country. Selenia symbolizes the tragic *mulatta*, whose inescapable fate is the result of unstable racial categories. All in all, Vega’s purpose is to replicate and rewrite conventional female stereotypes in Puerto Rico, which in themselves embody complex meanings. It is apparent, nevertheless, that Vega’s short story attempts to grapple with the problems facing Puerto Rican people by inserting the feminine voice into Puerto Rican history. Her success in this venture marks Vega as an effective social critic.

Chapter 2

Dreaming Agency in *Dreaming in Cuban*

...They struggle with dual identities and with two different political systems. Moreover, they struggle with the past and the present in an acute way within the Cuban context...I develop the characters from my own imagination, but they have to have their own logic. No matter how extreme or crazy they seem, they have their own internal logic.

-Cristina García

Cristina García belongs to a generation of Cuban writers who write their fiction from a position of exile. Like García herself, the author's characters are typically situated between two cultures and constantly express concern about the possibility of both finding one's identity and recovering Cuba's roots. García is known to the scholarly community as an author of:

textos autobiográficos o semi -autobiográficos, que enfatizan el valor de la memoria como espacio desde el cual se mantienen lazos o se establecen puentes simbólicos con la cultura de origen, y por ellos, es tal vez inevitable establecer cierto contacto afectivo con las historias y autoras en cuestión, más aún si se ha vivenciado una experiencia similar o existe una historia familiar de desplazamiento y migración. (Walas vii)

In García's text we observe a search for identity provoked by a tense struggle between Cuban and North American cultures.

Born in Cuba in 1958, Cristina García immigrated as a two-year-old to the United States, a family decision motivated by Fidel Castro's ruthless and authoritarian regime.¹⁸ García went on to study International Relations at Barnard College and began a career in journalism with *Time* magazine. Later on, she decided to devote her life to fiction, a genre that allowed her to chronicle her concerns as a Cuban American and seek her lost cultural roots. Her Cuban American experience and search for her Cuban cultural inheritance influence a body of work with an unusual focus on displacement. As García explains: "The displacement comes from navigating many borders –personal, cultural, narratively, mythically- that are perforating, shifting unpredictably. I don't trust (purported) omniscience, authorial or otherwise" (qtd. in Abani 37).

Cristina García's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), is her most highly acclaimed work to date. Its widespread popularity resulted in a nomination for the National Book Award. Upon its publication, the treatment of the novel in scholarly criticism and in literature classrooms situated it amongst other famous Latina works. Unlike *Dreaming in Cuban*, which takes place after Castro's regime took power and illustrates its lasting consequences, *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), García's second published novel, showcases pre-Castro Cuba before the decade of the 1950s. This second major work tells the story of two estranged sisters; one, a successful electrician, lives in Cuba and supports the Revolution, while the other lives in the United States and adapts to the

¹⁸ The reader might well note that Cristina García's childhood resembles that of Julia Alvarez. Both escaped dictatorship, and, as a result, the aftermaths of these personal and political upheavals are apparent in each author's writing.

new culture. Interweaving the lives of these two women, García tells a story of generations and cultural displacement, the effects of Cuban politics. *Monkey Hunting* (2003), García's third novel, explores an interesting aspect of Cuba's history: the plight of Chinese immigrants during the nineteenth-century. Encompassing five generations and a multiplicity of characters of Chinese origin, the narrative mixes these personal trajectories with historical events. García's goal is to give voice to a community that has played an important yet under-acknowledged role in Cuban history and culture. García's most recent novel, *A Handbook to Luck* (2007), further expands on the theme of cultural displacement, including such countries as Iran and El Salvador as locations in which characters must settle and adjust.

Though much has been written about *Dreaming in Cuban*, scholars have yet to examine the female characters in depth. In general, the focus of the scholarship has centered on salient themes, such as exile and the effect of the Cuban Revolution. Nevertheless, since the novel offers a feminized account of these events, it is worthwhile and useful to analyze the female characters, the catalysts behind the text. For this reason, then, this chapter specifically examines the female figures and the tools they employ in order to achieve agency. As in the previous chapter, I will explore the use of first-person narration as well as the inclusion of letters as a means by which the characters achieve agency. By examining familial relationships in the novel, I unpack how female characters situate themselves regarding culture, gender and race. The main questions that this chapter will explore are whether the different female characters attain agency and how

their quest for agency is presented throughout the text. Specifically, I explore these two questions in relation to four principal female characters.¹⁹

More often than not, each chapter in the novel revolves around one of these four female figures, focusing on different aspects of their lives. The author traces their lives from youth to maturity, as they face their daily issues and struggles. Each female subject features a different layer of what it means to be Cuban or what constitutes a cultural nation. There is no one story or character that stands out more than the others. The main female characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* are Celia, the grandmother; Lourdes and Felicia, Celia's daughters; and Lourdes's daughter, Pilar. These characters represent three generations of women and are all very different individuals, yet remain connected to each other.

I find that each female character chooses different venues to acquire agency. For example, Celia uses letters and dreams, prompting emotional growth. Lourdes, on the other hand, has only access to dreams but no possibility of claiming agency, since she is always trying to fill a void. Her sister, Felicia, uses methods such as Santería and the mystical to escape her loneliness. Lastly, Pilar uses first-person narration, telepathy and dreams to acquire agency. Pilar's character goes through a journey of self-searching that echoes the author's personal search.²⁰ Before we begin to examine these female subjects in depth, it is necessary to frame this discussion by reviewing Cristina García's role as a Hispanic Caribbean writer as well as literary critics' approach to *Dreaming in Cuban* thus far.

¹⁹ It is difficult to determine whether the novel has one primary female protagonist, even though many scholars have argued that Pilar is the female figure that the author mostly develops in this text.

²⁰ Pilar is also the name of Cristina García's daughter.

3.1 Cristina García: Her Place in Hispanic Letters

Forced to leave Cuba at an early age, Cristina García is a writer whose native country remains a constant point of departure for her work.²¹ García is careful to distinguish herself from the stereotypical nostalgic Cuban who envisions a possible return to the homeland. Despite her strong connection to the United States culture in which she was raised, García avoids taking sides or picking a favorite between the two countries. Cristina García's positioning as Cuban and Anglo American is what Gustavo Pérez Firmat labels "life on the hyphen," in his work by the same name. According to Pérez Firmat, biculturalism implies a condition that is neither Cuban nor American. Moreover, the critic adds that being "Cuban American is a balancing act," where the individual must constantly ponder questions of identity (6). Significantly, García's writing underscores her concerns with her bifurcated identity, something in between Cuban and American. As William Luis argues, in reference to García, she "struggles with her Cuban identity and presents both sides of the Cuban question without appearing to privilege one point of view over the other" (216). These cultural tensions are noticeable in Bridget Kevane's interview of García, where the author voices some uneasiness regarding how others position her writing in terms of her identity. In particular, when Kevane asks the author for her thoughts on Cuban identity, García responds:

²¹ Castro's regime had mixed reviews by those that left their native island. Exile, as a condition, has caused many writers to reflect on their own situation and that of their country, and thus the Revolution in Cuba generated a boom in exile literature. Writers such as Reinaldo Arenas, Antonio Benítez Rojo, and Gustavo Pérez Firmat, as well as Cristina García, are just a few well-known figures in Cuban Diasporic literature. For further reading, see "'The Golden Exiles': Cuban Immigration, 1959-1970" in *Cuban Americans: From trauma to Triumph* by James S. Olson & Judith E. Olson.

The thing I hate most in the Cuban context is this attempt to limit what it means to be Cuban. Not too long ago at a reading I gave in Puerto Rico, a man stood up and said, “You can’t be Cuban because you write in English.” The point for me is that there is no one Cuban exile. I am out here in California and may not fit in anywhere, but I am Cuban too. I think I am trying to stake out a broader territory. (75)²²

These words reflect a cultural positioning that is multifaceted and hard to define and makes identity a constant negotiation.

Recognizing flaws in both identities, Cuban and American, García is careful to avoid privileging either one in her writing. For example, she cautiously explains that, rather than viewing her as a writer who can only belong to a particular group, the reader must adopt a broader deterritorialized perspective, one more pertinent to her work.²³ Without a doubt, the female subjects that Cristina García depicts do not belong to any dominant ideology. For subjects located in this type of “in between” position, Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach remind us, “the construction of the self is a far more complex negotiation” (15), as we shall see is the case for the four female characters analyzed later in this chapter.

3.2 *Dreaming in Cuban* – the novel

²² Cristina García’s remarks about her identity in Hispanic letters bears much resemblance to interviews given by Julia Alvarez. See chapter 3 for further discussion.

²³ The role of language and geographical specificity is a common theme in Caribbean Diasporic literature, especially when it concerns either living on or being absent from the island. Other scholars, like Silvia Spitta, point out that the island more often than not becomes fetishized, with nuances of melancholy, making the loss hardly possible to transform.

Recent criticism has examined various aspects of *Dreaming in Cuban* in detail. In particular, scholars have analyzed this work in light of themes such as exile, history, personal and national identity, and nostalgia, among others. For example, Elena Machado Sáez, throughout her article “The Global Baggage of Nostalgia in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” highlights a persistent nostalgia flowing throughout the novel. This nostalgia emerges as a yearning to reconnect with past memories. In the process of exploring this nostalgia, Sáez argues, the author presents an alternative history. Another critic, Ivelisse Santiago-Stommes, among others issues explored, has interpreted the women in the novel from a political standpoint. In her article “Nación, cultura y mujer: la identidad nacional y las relaciones entre hombres y mujeres en *Soñar en cubano* de Cristina García,” Santiago-Stommes underscores the novel’s questioning of concepts such as nation and identity and its debunking of models of construction of nations and national identity. At the same time, Santiago-Stommes highlights some of the stereotypical norms re-enacted in the novel which ultimately confine women.

This novel, rich in complex experiences and conflicting perspectives, has been the recipient of favorable reviews since its publication. Much of the criticism has focused on the salience of the effects of the Cuban Revolution and of exile. García herself explains why the Revolution features prominently in her works: “In terms of the Cuban experience, the Revolution is 34 years old-as old as I am. We’re in a unique position to tell the story of exile in a way our parents couldn’t because they were too scared and busy remaking their lives” (Smith, 26). Likewise, Josefa Lago-Graña too investigates the concept of nation and identity, specifically the relationships between the characters and their respective countries of origin. She concludes that the cause of these unusually

intricate relationships is the Cuban Revolution, whose effects continue to be felt even after the maturing of the first and second generations, those that left the country during the Revolution and those born during the Revolutionary period. In the same vein, the task of remembering, at least as interpreted by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera in "Women and the Revolution in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*," causes the characters to intertwine the political themes of Revolution, exile, and betrayal with their own lives (69-91). In his book, *Dance between two cultures*, William Luis dedicates part of a chapter to García's novel. Luis reads *Dreaming in Cuban* in terms of the complex layers of Cuban history, politics, literature and culture. He attends to some of the characters and their position in the story and concludes: "Although Pilar, or García, looks at Cuba from a romantic point of view, one of a visitor not committed to staying permanently, it is certain that Cuba is a part of her" (234). Luis analyzes the novel in its historical context, extracting issues such as Cuban history, Santería and the effect of exile on the three generations represented in the novel. Another recent critic, Maribel Acosta-Lugo, argues in her doctoral thesis that through the novel García proposes a model for Cuban identity via the metaphor of family-country. Acosta-Lugo observes that García problematizes the concept of Cuban identity by focusing on the family as the representative of her native country. Likewise, Philippa Kafka dedicates a chapter to *Dreaming in Cuban* in her book, *'Saddling La Gringa': Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers* (2000). Kafka offers a close reading of the novel, which provides a good summary of the text, and looks at how the female characters of Cuban descent face discrimination in the United States. Current scholarship offers important insights as to the political and cultural dimensions of the novel. However, no study has yet examined the construction of the female character

or the role of agency in the text. Overall, the existing scholarship has explored issues that provide valuable interpretations to García's novel.

At the heart of *Dreaming in Cuban* are three generations of women living apart from one another, a consequence of the Cuban Revolution and its politics. The narrative is structured through a third-person narrator, letters, and first-person accounts by a few of the characters, resulting in a multitude of voices. This community of narratives is one of the characteristics that García carefully and intentionally applies in her writing, as she explains: "I use a multiplicity of voices to tell my stories. I don't trust (purported) omniscience, authorial or otherwise" (Abani 37). *Dreaming in Cuban* is arranged in three sections and divided into seventeen chapters. The first section, titled "Ordinary seductions," consists of seven chapters, two of which are letters written by Celia, one of the four women I will examine in detail. The second section is titled "Imagining winter," and consists of eight chapters. As in the first part of the novel, two of the chapters in this second section are letters written by Celia. The third and last section is titled "The language lost" and consists of two chapters. The final chapter ends the novel with Celia's last letter, dated 1959. The action throughout the three sections takes place in Cuba and the United States.

It is hard to say that the novel has at its heart a protagonist, though one can argue that Pilar is the character who comes closest to occupying that role. I contend that, by not having a protagonist, the text makes it difficult to identify the principal focus of the novel. Even so, the novel foregrounds women's personal relationships and quests for happiness and explores several recurring themes regarding familial relationships. Specifically, the mother-daughter relationship is one of the most important in the novel.

This relationship is comprised of division and unity, rejection and acceptance, love and hate. Nevertheless, other issues are just as pressing, making the text a microcosm/macrocosm of personal and public space. In particular, themes such as exile, cultural displacement, the Cuban Revolution, and historical recovery, among many others, are what immediately stand out as problematics driving the text. Other important themes worthy of mention are failed romantic love and maternal loss. The first of these, romantic love, generates other subsequent themes such as betrayal, abuse, and rejection. Maternal loss, on the other hand, applies to the mother-child relationship and also to the Cuba-exile relationship, wherein Cuba is depicted as the mother of those exiled from the country. In this sense, both aspects of maternal loss result in ambiguous ethnic and cultural identities. As we will see, these ambiguities of identity, in turn, play a major role in the female characters' agency and subjectivity.

It is clear, when reading García's novel, that the characters live in a crossroad of two worlds: the communist dictatorship of Cuba and the democratic United States.²⁴ These countries are opposed to one another in many ways. For Cuba, the United States represents the enemy, ready to attack, as demonstrated by the 1961 Bay of Pigs incident. The United States is seen as the land of private property, where democracy is proclaimed and the overabundance of things is a commonplace. For the United States, Cuba represents the land where politics and loyalty to Castro's regime dictates the fate of its citizens. Cuba is seen as the land where people live on food rations and have no choice but to accept their status quo. The opposition of the two nations is communicated largely

²⁴ This constant in-betweenness is also a characteristic of Julia Álvarez's female characters, as we will see in the following chapter.

through the opposition of the female characters residing in the two nations. Specifically, in the novel, the female characters that live in and represent Cuba are Celia and her daughter Felicia. The female figure most closely associated with the United States is Lourdes. Specifically, Lourdes's life in the United States illustrates a world of wealth and abundance: her character represents the fanatical capitalist. Conversely, her daughter Pilar stands between these two worlds, that of communist Cuba and the democratic United States. In the novel, García depicts how these two worlds clash and how those that are in between struggle at the crossroads. Significantly, another example of the juxtaposition of two worlds is when the female characters live and fluctuate in between the real and the unreal. The world of the unreal is exemplified through magic realism, particularly the acts of dreaming and communicating through dreams.

Dreaming is an important element of the novel. Indeed, throughout the text, the reader feels herself part of a dream-like story, a fusion of reality and fantasy. One recurring sign of this fusion is the fact that many of the events in the women's lives are predicted ahead of time or seem to permeate others' consciousness. For example, Jorge, Celia's late husband, appears frequently to his daughter, Lourdes, after his death. In many of their conversations, he tells her of his past occurrences that she never shared with anyone. Another example is when Celia prophesizes that Pilar will tell the story of her family's life in Cuba, even though Pilar herself leaves Cuba at the age of two and does not return until she is twenty-one. The intimation of these and other instances that reveal knowledge of the future and the past is that the female characters correspond with each other through the act of dreaming. In the sections to follow I will explore how dreaming specifically and personally affects each of the four main characters.

Whether as a result of their positioning between nations or between reality and fantasy, the characters examined here demonstrate characteristics of what might be called “in-between” identities. Because the position of “in-betweenness” is so central to the novel and the focus of this chapter, it is helpful to review scholarship concerning this position. The idea of “in-betweenness” in García’s work stems mostly from the location of the Cuban female subject living in the United States, a deterritorialized position. This subject position calls to mind the concept of “hybridity” as introduced by Homi Bhabha in “The Third Space.” Hybridity, for Bhabha, is a place where selves are negotiated, constructed or deconstructed. This space calls for new formations of cultural identity. More specifically, Bhabha argues that “[t]his process of hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). Further, this concept of the “in-between” space also recalls the important work of Gloria Anzaldúa. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa departs from the assumption that being “in-between” two cultures stifles reflection and agency. Significantly, she maintains that these “borderlands” offer room for movement and change, motivated by the interactions of different cultures in a person or a space. While such positions do not offer a stable positionality, Anzaldúa suggests, they do present a conflicted space necessary to prompt movement and change for the female subject.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind the historical context that the novel draws upon. The events take place before and after Fidel Castro’s regime, with characters living in Cuba and the United States. The novel discusses the effects of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, whereby Fidel Castro established his ruthless and isolationist dictatorship.

During the Castro regime, Cuba cut its ties with the United States and established a close relationship with then Soviet Union. In addition, all privately owned properties, land and businesses were confiscated and made part of the government's capital. As a result, the Cuban people began to feel economic pressure, a consequence which led to protests against Castro's reforms.²⁵ In the end, many Cubans left their native country and became exiles in different parts of the world, most notably the United States, Europe and various Latin American countries.²⁶ Many of the key events in Cuba's history are represented in the novel, including the Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961); the Family Code (1975), which implemented new laws regarding marriage and divorce; and the Family Reunification Program (1978), which allowed Cuban exiles to visit their family members back on the island.²⁷ Lastly, the novel concludes with the takeover of the Peruvian embassy in 1980, a site from which many Cubans tried to leave the island, now popularly known as the "Mariel Boatlift."²⁸ This exodus demonstrated that many Cubans wanted to leave the island, a clear rejection of the government's policies.

Perhaps because of the interweaving of these historical events with the novel's narratives, *Dreaming in Cuban* has also been interpreted as a fictional autobiographical novel. Cristina García herself quickly dismisses the topic of the alter ego, asserting:

"Maybe an alter ego is not quite accurate. I think I identify to some degree with

²⁵ In García's novel, this reaction is seen with Rufino Puente, Lourdes' husband. His family belonged to the rich class of landowners whose property was confiscated by Castro's regime and later redistributed.

²⁶ With Fidel Castro's assumption of power, many changes began to occur in Cuba. All private businesses were confiscated, which resulted in national and personal economic hardship. Unhappy with the Revolution, many Cuban citizens were exiled in different parts of the world, seeking political asylum. Generally, Fidel Castro was seen as the liberator for by those of the lower class and the oppressor of the elite, since he robbed them of their property

²⁷ This is apparent in the journey Lourdes and her daughter undertake to visit their homeland.

²⁸ This historical aspect is represented by Ivanito, Felicia's son, a third generation of the del Pino family. Lourdes and Pilar help him to enter the Peruvian embassy and later rescue him and take him back to the United States.

everyone” (Kevane Interview, 75). Yet the narrative does share some marked similarities with Cristina García’s own life, particularly in the case of the character Pilar. On a broader level, scholars suggest that the position of exile, which García shares with her female characters, makes the interweaving of personal and national histories and events central to a search for identity. In the novel, the characters undergo a process of recalling past experiences and memories. As Amy Kaminisky writes in her book *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (1999): “For postexiles, national identity is very much about individual identity, forged in exile and in resistance to ‘othering.’ The reconciliation of self under these circumstances is a complex task; the postexile who does not return is always an outsider. As is the one who does return.” (29). The “reconciliation of self,” to use Kaminisky’s terminology, is highlighted in the novel, particularly through Lourdes and her daughter Pilar, whose identity in exile is being transformed, modified and even altered.

3.3 Celia

Celia is the perfect Cuban citizen who enthusiastically supports the Castro regime and, in a way, feels that she is married to the cause of the Revolution. She is proud of her Communist life and is a faithful devotee of Castro’s doctrine. For example, one of her jobs is to be a civilian judge, following Castro’s code of beliefs. In general, Celia offers a picture of what life can become under the patriarchy of dictators such as Batista and Castro. Despite this broader application, the novel focuses mostly on life under the Castro regime and its consequences for the people. Through this female character, the reader learns many details about life in Cuba during this time and other historical events on the

island. In the analysis that follows, I explore the communicative tools García grants Celia in order for her to claim agency.

Celia is married to Jorge del Pino. At the start of their relationship, Jorge leaves Celia in the care of his mother and sister, so that he can provide for the family as a whole. While living with her in-laws, Celia experiences severe isolation and emotional abuse at the hands of her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. She is never accepted as a member of their family. Before marrying Jorge, however, Celia's heart and emotions belonged to Gustavo, a Spanish lawyer. Though Gustavo has returned to Spain, Celia continues to nurture her feelings of love by writing letters to him over the course of her life as a married woman. In fact, one of the reasons Jorge purposefully leaves her with his family is to punish her for still loving Gustavo. Despite not being able to banish her feelings for Gustavo, Celia learns to love Jorge in her own way.

In García's text, epistolary narrative plays an important part, since Celia maintains epistolary communication with her lover. The letters to Gustavo are spread throughout three chapters, spanning a period of over twenty years. The first group of letters covers the years 1935 to 1940, the second 1942 to 1949 and the third group 1950 to 1955, although the final letter is dated January 11, 1959. The letters do not follow a chronological order, a structural move that opens the door for readers to construct the sequence of happenings for themselves. Critic Linda Kauffman points out that letter writing "blurs the lines between fiction and reality, by including morsels of information" so that the writer can "transform the passive reader/spectator into an active one" (205)

While the letters imply some degree of privacy, they are meant to be addressed to another person, which in a way begs for an audience. At the same time, when the letter is

sent, it leaves space for another mind to enter. Nevertheless, Celia's letters are also unique in that they do not have an actual recipient: Celia never sends them to Gustavo. For Celia, her lover is just a dream and his imagined presence provides a platform for her to express her feelings or anything else that she cannot articulate to others. Gustavo is present in name only, since he never receives the letters addressed to him. Through her letter writing, Celia realizes how she really feels about her husband when Jorge has a car accident. In one of her letters to Gustavo, Celia writes:

Jorge is a good man, Gustavo. It surprised me how my heart jumped when I heard he'd been hurt. I cried when I saw him bandaged in white, his arms taut in midair like a sea gull. His eyes apologized for having disturbed me. Can you imagine? I discovered I loved him at that moment. Not a passion like ours, Gustavo, but love just the same. I think he understands this and is at peace. (54).

In addition to the agency granted by reading, Celia is given the possibility to claim agency when she writes Gustavo using first-person narration. However, the only letter Celia receives is from her estranged husband, after his death. The following passage describes the confusion caused by the arrival of the letter:

Celia fingers the sheet of onion parchment in her pocket, reads the words again, one by one, like a blind woman. Jorge's letter arrived that morning, as if his presence extends even to the irregular postal service between the United States and Cuba. Celia is astonished by the words, by the disquieting ardor of her husband's last letters. They seemed written by a younger, more passionate Jorge, a man she never knew well. But his

handwriting, an ornate script he learned in another century, revealed his decay. When he wrote his last missive, Jorge must have known he would die before she received it. (5-6).

This experience causes feelings of incompleteness in Celia that almost amount to those of a personal loss. Equally, letter writing invites a type of monologue where Celia can dwell on her own emotional stress and shape her own narrative.

Letter writing presents a story, but at the same time it is a reflection of the self. In fact, critics Amanda Ligroy and W. M Verhoeven, in *Epistolary Histories, Letters, Fiction, Culture*, underscore that lately critics have interpreted letter writing as “a cultural institution with multiple histories (4). Celia’s letter writing is important as a means to provide a historical background, a context for the novel as a whole. Through Celia’s letters we experience how romance, politics, and history are all interrelated. The epistolary practice generates chronological episodes, which recreate events and situations in process, where Celia serves as both storyteller and protagonist of her stories.

Additionally the letters stimulate Celia’s right to self-articulation and subjectivity. In the act of letter writing, Celia finds a space where she owns expression. She writes of her past and also of her present. The letters function as an autobiographical narrative, in which Celia shares an account of her own story that is not publicly available. In the letters, we read only Celia’s point of view and she becomes the agent of her own voice. In addition, the male figure, her lover in this case, is the passive figure, while Celia is active and reflecting. It is important to observe that one of the ways García uses Celia’s letters is to provide information about Cuba before and during the Revolution. Celia’s last letter to Gustavo corresponds with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Through

the content of Celia's letters, the reader learns of Cuba's previous dictatorship under Fulgencio Batista. As Bridget Kevane aptly points out:

the letters furnish the reader with a much-needed history of the genealogical beginnings of madness in the del Pino family...At the same time, the reader witnesses through Celia's eyes the turbulent years of the Batista regime, the poverty and corruption that assailed the island during Batista's last years, and the excitement and mobilization that led to Castro's Revolution. (88)

While Celia feels that she is free in Cuba and can exercise power through her role as a civilian judge, she is aware that her freedom only goes so far. The chapters about Celia leave the reader with the impression that Celia's life is not complete. She herself realizes that following Castro does not fill the voids in her life. She lives alone, while all her loved ones seem to have abandoned her. Her husband is with her oldest daughter Lourdes in the United States, and her son Javier is in Czechoslovakia, leaving only Felicia, her second daughter, with Celia in Cuba. Separation from her loved ones causes Celia's notable detachment from life in general. A third-person narrator describes Celia's solitude:

Celia enters her kitchen and warms a little milk on the stove, then sweetens it with a few lumps of sugar. How is it possible that she can help her neighbors and be of no use at all to her children? Lourdes and Felicia and Javier are middle-aged now and desolate, deaf and blind to the world, to each other, to her. (117)

Celia cannot deny the void in her days, even to herself. Even aligning herself with a force as large as the Revolution cannot assuage her loneliness. One notes Celia's attempts to fill her days with meaning when the narrator explains that, in quiet moments: "she doesn't like to admit to herself that, despite all her activities, she sometimes feels lonely" (119). This inability or unwillingness to communicate opinions, feelings, or preoccupations is present throughout the novel in other characters as well, especially in Celia's exiled daughter, Lourdes. In the same vein, those characters that remain in Cuba under the Castro regime find it hard to voice their differences with the regime. Seemingly, as both groups lose contact with loved ones--either by staying behind to witness the new regime or by fleeing to new opportunities in a strange land--both experience this same curtailing of communication and self-expression.

It is important to note that Celia is also an admirer of art and poetry. One of her favorite poets is Federico García Lorca, the Spanish writer who was murdered in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. In the novel it is noted that Celia met Federico García Lorca at a Havana lecture series in 1930.²⁹ David Cowart notes that *Dreaming in Cuban* promotes the art of allusion—in the form of epigraphs and poetry—marking art as a tool for developing imagination (86-100). I would take this claim a step further and suggest that the art of imagining, or reading poetry, awards Celia some degree of agency. Indeed, in addition to Celia, her daughter Felicia and granddaughter Pilar also rely on reading poetry as a way of escaping their problems. Poetry, then, becomes a language by which

²⁹ Lorca's poems are known to depict elements such as loneliness, sorrow and grief, always capturing a soul who is suffering some type of emotional pain. During the last few years of Lorca's life, the poet went into a depressive and disillusioned state of mind. See for example *Poeta en Nueva York* (1930). In Lorca's writing, Celia finds comfort: the poems mirror her own emotional situation.

they can understand themselves and one another.³⁰ This artistic expression serves as a safe refuge away from the drama and the void these women experience in their lives.

Toward the end of the novel, Celia realizes that the Revolution is not what she had imagined. After being blinded for so long by its doctrine, she finally acknowledges that the Revolution itself is the cause of her family's separation. Upon grasping this truth, Celia commits suicide. Throughout her life, Celia lived amidst the confines of her unfulfilled relationships, unable to communicate with those close to her. She never failed, however, to search to understand the language of others. This commitment persisted in no small part because, throughout her life, Celia's main interest was to find ways to help others. She felt helpless and alone in the country she celebrated. Celia yearns for her granddaughter to take care of her, yet once she realizes that Pilar will return to the United States, Celia loses faith in her country and can no longer find meaning in her life.

Despite Celia's sense of her own weakness and desire to depend upon her granddaughter, García uses the act of dreaming to allow this female character to seek agency. Celia experiences different types of dreams, all of which represent aspects of her life. They range from political dreams, to dreams about family or romance. Her idealism, her sense of community and her selflessness for great causes run throughout the novel and are evident in her dreams. In a political dream, Celia imagines that Cuba has had a successful Revolution. She "has devoted herself completely to the Revolution," for she is an enthusiastic believer of the principles the Revolution (111). Her political dreaming

³⁰ Lourdes, Cecilia's other daughter, does not read or like poetry and therefore does not understand the bond the other women share with one another through this type of language.

includes a vision of Cuba becoming a rich country, as in the dream about Cuba exporting sugarcane to other countries, such as Russia and Poland.

Celia's dreams are composed of a recipe of romanticism mixed with politics. For example, early in the novel, Celia dreams that Gustavo returns to rescue her. Later on, however, with the coming of the Revolution, she realizes that her letter writing would necessarily be different. For example, "she remembers the gloomy letters she used to write to Gustavo before the Revolution, and thinks of how different the letters would be if she were writing today" (111). She is no longer the hopeless romantic, for her heart belongs to something else, something even bigger than Gustavo. At the same time, in her dreams, Celia employs her love of poetry; she lets her thoughts come out as they will, without a particular structure. She also encounters her husband in her dreams, specifically after he has passed away. While they could not say their goodbyes because of the distance between them, Jorge meets her in her dreams, giving closure to their life together. Despite the emotional growth prompted by Celia's dreams, the novel emphasizes that they are still just dreams, drawn in sharp distinction to the real world where such things could not take place. Celia recognizes this: her "dreams seem to her mere sparks of color and electricity, cut off from the current of her life" (119). While any form of agency is better than none, the agency of dreaming proves to be limited. Celia's dreams do not give her full agency: they are only indicators of buried hopes or deep aspirations. Dreams for Celia are a series of ideas and emotions that occur in the mind, involuntarily, and never play a role in her real life. Ultimately, Celia is aware that her dreams are unrealistic and cannot change the lived situation of herself or her family.

On the one hand, part of the reason why Celia's agency never seems to come to full term is because most of her life is narrated from an omniscient point of view, except when she writes the letters. This detached perspective suggests that Celia belongs to a generation in which articulating one's thoughts is not possible. She lives in a society that dictates her thinking along approved lines and follows a doctrine that forbids her to question these boundaries, or to be an agent for herself.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, García bestows a different means of acquiring agency upon Celia. For example, while her past lover seems to be a particularly powerful and confidante figure, Celia does share her thoughts with another female character, her granddaughter Pilar. The two women share a unique relationship and communicate together telepathically, mostly in the evening, despite the distance that separates them. Pilar left Cuba when she was two years old, but she remembers conversations with her grandmother. The narrator recounts that Celia "closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night" (7). Their relationship is revealed through literary techniques of magical realism, as the two women communicate throughout their lives in their dreams. The reader learns that, "for many years, Celia spoke to Pilar during the darkest part of the night" (119). In a way, Pilar becomes the Spanish lover Celia could never have. Celia finds in her granddaughter someone to share her most intimate thoughts with, and, more importantly, someone that can continue telling her story and that of her family. Celia's role in *Dreaming in Cuban* represents the connection between past and present forged with the next generation.

3.4 Lourdes

Lourdes is Celia's oldest daughter and is introduced as a female subject in Chapter Two of *Dreaming in Cuban*. In this chapter, we learn that her father's death and that Lourdes now lives in New York with her husband, Rufino, and daughter, Pilar. Throughout her life, Lourdes is close to her father, Jorge del Pino, who takes Lourdes with him to New York, where he seeks medical treatment for himself. Father and daughter adore each other and despise Castro's regime. Their hatred toward Fidel's government seems, in large part, because they feel it has alienated them from Celia. In addition, Lourdes hates Castro's regime because her past experience with the Revolutionaries has left her physically and emotionally scarred. In Cuba, Lourdes was raped by members of Castro's army who subsequently cut her on the stomach, leaving vivid scars as a reminder of this painful experience. William Luis cogently suggests that this specific moment in Lourdes' life signifies "the memory and pain of the Cuban family trauma" (216). In fact, throughout the novel we encounter repeatedly distinct images of patriarchal oppression and violence toward females, as we shall see especially in the case of Felicia. We cannot help but perceive courage in Lourdes, a quality which will help her to move forward. Although she is not able to tell her story using first-person narration, Lourdes personifies the heroic woman who, despite suffering one of the most brutal forms of abuse at the hands of Castro's soldiers, is able to recover herself. She demonstrates a strong attitude while living in the United States, particularly when she decides to join the police force. In this case, Lourdes is not only the agent but also the actor of her life. She assumes both roles, agent and actor, and overcomes the painful memory of the past by defending herself and others. Significantly, Lourdes's strength is represented in her control of her own actions in deciding to break away from the

stereotype of the female victim of male dominance who relies on other men for protection.

Specifically, Lourdes demonstrates what living in the United States can mean for all those exiled from Cuba. Lourdes owns a pastry shop, called Yankee Doodle. She wears a size 26 and has a love for food, sex and sweets. Later, Lourdes' interest in food wanes, a change in desire that marks her biggest transformation as an immigrant. In fact, she abruptly loses more than 118 pounds, a change that she is eager to show off to her daughter.³¹ Lourdes represents the capitalist who takes full advantage of the opportunities of her new country. This is evident, for example, when Lourdes opens her own bakery as well as in the fact that she can eat anything she wants, without any concern for rationing. As Ellen McCracken suggests in *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (1999) "García critiques the excessive appropriation of U.S. economic and cultural models by the fanatical Cuban exiles in a series of parodical images that foreground the gender issue of the eating disorder" (25). Lourdes is clearly one of these parodies.

Further, Lourdes depicts the immigrant, who becomes a consumerist capitalist in the United States, whose love for things results from wanting to fill a void. In many respects, this void can be understood as Cuba itself, since much of what she does in her life is a response to what she could not have back in her homeland. We see this, first, when she opens her own store, something that she could not do in Cuba, or when she eats big amounts of food, an abundance in stark contrast to food rationing in Cuba. Lourdes

³¹ Abuse of the woman's body is seen not only through patriarchal oppression, but also in the female figure herself. In particular, Lourdes abuses her body by eating excessively and experiencing an eating disorder, a concern linked in the popular imagination with United States' culture.

seeks to fill this emptiness, one that stems from her separation from Cuba which has clearly resulted in an identity crisis. Furthermore, she tries to fight her desolation with food, but to no avail; she feels less complete than before she allowed her body to go through such drastic changes. Lourdes's quest to fill this void is displayed further when she seeks power by becoming an auxiliary policewoman, "the first in her precinct" (127). However, even the wooden nightstick, her only weapon, will not take away this void. Finally, she turns to her husband for sexual fulfillment. Regarding their sexual relationship, the narrator writes: "Rufino's body ached from the exertions...he begged his wife for a few nights peace but Lourdes's peals only became more urgent, her glossy black eyes more importunate. Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (21). Yet even this approach fails to fill the void inside Lourdes; the wounds of exile cannot be healed. As Kathleen Brogan argues in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1988): "Lourdes will never again be fully 'at home' in her own body... or, for that matter, in her native tongue. When she finally returns to Cuba toward the end of the novel, she finds that the Cubans 'can't understand a word I'm saying'" (99). Despite Lourdes's severe changes, each the consequence of her attempts to find herself, this search is far from being complete.

The relationship mother-daughter is salient in this female character, that is, mother- Lourdes-daughter. First, Lourdes and her mother have a very interesting love-hate relationship. They do not understand each other's problems and do not speak the same language in many ways. Critic Philipa Kafka, in *Saddling La Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers* (2000), rightly argues that in her behavior

and attitude towards Lourdes, Celia “is projecting...her deep-level feelings of rejection and abandonment, invalidation, worthlessness, and self-hatred” (64). In fact, when Lourdes was born, Celia experienced a feeling of rejection toward her daughter, an event which resulted in Celia’s institutionalization.

Conversely, Lourdes’s relationship with her daughter Pilar mirrors that of Celia and Lourdes.³² It is a tumultuous relationship, where both mother and daughter are often disrespectful of each other. This tension is primarily due to cultural and political clashes, to the result of their different views on Castro’s regime. Often times, Lourdes displays an overbearing nature, causing fights that stem from their opposing perspectives on Cuba and life in the United States, as well as a generational gap. Indeed, William Luis observes that “generational opposition is also exemplified by the lack of communication within the Cuban family, which continues to be manifested in political and personal terms” (225). Both Lourdes and Pilar represent two sides of the same coin of the Cuban exile, an opposition that causes the lack of understanding between the two. Lourdes does not want to associate herself with what Cuba represents, while Pilar wants nothing more than to remember and idealize the years she spent in Cuba. Referring to this tension between exiled parents and their children, Maria de los Ángeles Torres has observed that these parents “were caught in a very contradictory position. On the one hand, they wanted their children to follow ‘Cuban ways’ but, on the other, they opposed their children’s desire to return to Cuba, even for visits” (46). Lourdes is central to García’s text, for her journey

³² Josefa Lago-Grana argues that both Lourdes and Celia, while very different in temperament, share a few similarities. Lago-Grana reminds us that “Las forman parte del cuerpo de voluntarios de vigilancia, cada una en su país. Mientras Celia vigila la costa en busca de enemigos, Lourdes patrulla el barrio para mantenerlo libre de delincuentes. Las dos intentan acercarse a sus hijas sin resultado, y se equivocan una y otra vez en su aproximación afectiva” (169).

shows how ethnicity and assimilation, as well as a search for cohesiveness, are key factors in the lives of Cuban exiles.

Lourdes's subjectivity emerges in conflict with a sense of otherness as well as with the male subject. The otherness, in this case, is Cuba. While she hates to admit it, her ties with Cuba are both necessary and problematic.³³ In a way, she cannot live without her homeland. Despite the fact that, in the beginning, Lourdes did not want anything to do with Cuba, the trip to her homeland corroborates many of her assumptions about the progress of the Revolution. In the end, she realizes that she feels most happy in the United States, although memories of her relatives in Cuba will always persist and, to some extent, trouble that happiness. Facing images of her past and present, Lourdes has no choice but to deal with her own self-division. While her American self rejects all things Cuban, her Cuban self provides a sense of sensitivity. She realizes that she has to accept and deal with her multiple experiences from both countries as she faces her daily reality. Until she can do so, the novel suggests, Lourdes will remain incapable of self-narration.

3.5 Felicia

Felicia is Lourdes's younger daughter, the only one of the del Pino children who lives in Cuba with their mother. Of all the female characters, Felicia seems to have the most unfortunate life.³⁴ As I shall point out in this section, Felicia is in search of

³³ For this reason, even though Lourdes and Pilar feel alienated from each other, the two decide to embark upon a journey to Cuba after living for almost two decades in the United States. Both Lourdes and Pilar wrestle with the question of where they belong, always feeling the urge to return to their homeland.

³⁴ Ironically, Felicia's name, which means happiness, turns out to be more a curse than a blessing, since she never achieves happiness in her life.

communication, a language means to easily express her thoughts. García uses this particular female character to examine whether venues such as dreams or living in a dream-like world can help a woman in such circumstances to achieve agency.

In many respects, Felicia is the antithesis of her mother, Celia, in that she does not support the Revolution. In fact, she abhors the regime and what it entails for its followers. Because she senses that her parents love her “second best,” Felicia has a primal need to compete for attention and approval. When she was young, Felicia felt ignored by her parents: her father favored Lourdes and her mother favored her brother, Javier. This early lack of attention is portrayed as the cause of Felicia’s lack of luck with the opposite gender throughout her life. Indeed, the men with whom she surrounds herself fill most of her adult years with various betrayals. Her first emotional and physical encounter with the opposite gender determines her life’s destiny and initiates the downfall of her whole being, sentencing her to become a very disturbed individual.

Felicia’s first love is Hugo, a man of lower class and darker skin, to whom she gives herself the very same day of their first encounter. Soon after, they marry, and their subsequent meeting occurs seven months later, when Hugo returns from his sea voyage. By this time, Felicia is pregnant. Hugo’s abusive lovemaking and violent ways are representative of his entire personality and his class. The narrator relates the following scene from their first night as husband and wife:

Hugo settled into the sofa and stared straight ahead, saying nothing.

Felicia finally approached him.

“If you want, I can tie you up the way you like,” she offered.

Hugo pressed his fist under Felicia's chin until he choked off her breath, until she could see the walls of her living room behind her

“If you come near me, I'll kill you. Do you understand?” (81)

Hugo abuses Felicia physically—practically leaving her blind at one point—and constantly betrays her when working away at sea. During a trip to Morocco, he is infected with syphilis, which he then passes on to Felicia. From this relationship, three children are born: a set of female twins, Luz and Milagro, and a boy, Ivanito. This relationship sets the tone for the rest of Felicia's life, resulting in disturbed relationships with her children as well.

Felicia's mental state begins to worsen, triggering hallucinations, visions of death and fire. She feels alienated, worthless, physically and emotionally abused. All of these factors culminate in Felicia's decision to murder Hugo. Rather than murdering him directly, however, she chooses to burn him instead. Her justification for this action is that she is taking revenge not only for herself, but also for other women in the world who have endured and are still enduring various abuses at the hands of men. The description of the burning scene resembles nothing so much as a horror movie:

She lit a match and approached her husband, asleep on the couch...Felicia carefully brought the blue flame to the tip of the rag. She smelled the quick sulfur...She watched until the delicate flames consumed the rag...Hugo awoke and saw his wife standing over him like a goddess with a fiery ball in her hand. “You will never return here,” Felicia said and released the flames onto his face. She laughs when she recalls her

husband's screams... The fire ate the flesh on Hugo's face and hands, and the stench remained on Palmas Street for many months. (82)

This particular episode does not cause Hugo's death. On the contrary, the two divorce, and Hugo appears again, a few years later. In the meantime, Felicia's first marital failure does not stop her from wanting to marry again. In fact, she marries twice more.

Ironically, these two men die—quite literally—fiery deaths.

Felicia's second husband, Ernesto after they marry in a restaurant dies in a fire just four days after. The relationship with her third husband, Otto Cruz, is recounted in more detail, yet seems to have occurred in a blur. Felicia herself does not remember much of how she came to marry him, or what became of her life while with him. As the narrator describes: "...Felicia began to assemble bits and pieces of her past... She charts sequences and events with colored pencils, shuffling her diagrams until they start to make sense, a possible narrative. But the people remain faceless, nameless" (157). The reader, however, senses that Otto has genuine feelings for Felicia. One of his wishes is that they go to Minnesota, a hope not shared by his wife. At this point, Felicia has lost all her senses and believes that any disagreement on the part of her husband warrants a death sentence. One day, as Felicia and Otto are spending the day in an amusement park, they decide to ride a rollercoaster. Felicia throws Otto off the car, where he is electrocuted, and his body is reduced to ashes.

Ultimately, Felicia's body stops welcoming and tolerating the bodies of her husbands; her mental state has descended into insanity. Ivelisse Santiago-Stommes rightly argues that Felicia "sufre a manos de los mismos patrones que rechaza duplicando y reflejando al igual que los otros personajes las contradicciones y ambivalencias que la

mujer enfrenta al resistirse a los patrones establecidos.” (105). So bad is her suffering that in addition to her crimes against her husbands, Felicia also considers committing suicide and murdering her son Ivanito, the only one of her children who is faithful and loyal to her. The government considers her an unfit mother and places Ivanito in a boarding school, which is a sad time for Felicia. However, she is aware of the intense bond she shares with Ivanito, and believes that he is the only one who understands her trials.

Certainly, Felicia’s character, more than any other in this novel, evokes the trope of the “madwoman in the attic.”³⁵ She could be Bertha, from *Jane Eyre*, who is trapped in the attic, trying to escape from within her own self. Felicia is depicted as a crazy woman, a murderer, a merciless and unfit mother. Nevertheless, García complicates this female figure by not subscribing to one master perspective on the truth of Felicia. For example, García introduces Felicia’s best friend, Herminia, who paints a rather different portrait of the troubled Felicia.³⁶ Felicia looks for refuge in voodoo rituals and practices of Santería. Through Herminia’s narrative, the reader realizes that, while Felicia is present and physically lives in this world, her mind is in another place. In fact, Herminia tells the reader that Felicia “adapted to her grief through imagination” and “stayed on the fringe of life because it was free of everyday malice” (184). Working by day and attending voodoo ceremonies by night, Felicia searches for a new language for her life, one that allows for the inclusion of the supernatural. She is eager to understand and learn what she does not know. For this reason, she begins to follow some of the rules required to be a santera by only eating coconut, which, according to the voodoo religion, connotes control and

³⁵ See the brief discussion about “Madwoman in the Attic” in the first chapter on “El baúl de Miss Florence.” For further reading, refer to Gilber and Gubar’s essay of the same title.

³⁶ Just as in Alvarez’s text, García introduces other female characters to help create a benevolent portrait of the main female figures.

cleansing, or by turning off the electricity in her house, because light attracts evil. Her superstition becomes stronger every day. The santeras and the oracles attempt to save her spiritually, but their efforts are futile: she is stretched between two worlds, one that is real and one that is fantasy. Like her mother, Celia, Felicia turns to dreaming as her way of understanding the world and herself. However, her topsy-turvy dream world is suggestive of her confused emotions and inability to function in her surroundings.

Felicia is, in every sense, out of touch with her daughters, who have nicknamed her “not-Mamá” and feel imprisoned in Felicia’s “alphabet world” (121). Felicia is not able to communicate coherently or linguistically with either one of her children. They do not understand each other’s languages. As a female character, she defies what Castillo would call “the idealization of the mother in traditional terms as the nurturing, desexualized woman whose only agency is found in abnegation” (*Talking* 23). Despite their father’s disfigured face, scarred by the burning, the girls experience moments of happiness in his company. They find comfort in their less than perfect father. Using first-person narration, one of the twins recounts: “In his sagging eyes we found the language we’d been searching for, a language more eloquent than the cheap bead necklaces of words my mother offered” (124). This moment of bliss, however, does not last. The theme of maternal loss is dominant in this female character, because Felicia never recuperates her relationship with her daughters or finds a language that can channel her pain to the outside world.

To this point, the reader develops a general portrait of Felicia that is disturbing, to say the least. This type of disturbance bears resemblance to other female characters in Hispanic literature. One example of this is Bela, the protagonist in the novella “Fourth

Version” of *Cambio de Armas* of Luisa Valenzuela, who shows signs of a woman gone mad and in a state of almost hysteria. Debra Castillo’s analysis of Valenzuela’s female character finds similarities with Felicia, in García’s novel. Referring to Bela in “Fourth Version,” Castillo says that she:

flees mentally from the drama of life, takes no part even in routine domestic affairs and, in a way, through her insanity has perhaps already achieved a perverse triumph over her tormentor...The insanity that derives from helplessness can convert itself into...empowerment. Refusal to recognize the other’s weapons becomes in its own way a weapon.

(*Talking*, 114-115)

Persuasive as a such a perspective may seem, I would like to argue the opposite. It is not lost on the reader that Felicia’s insanity and her obsession with Santería cause her own death. I contend that her death is read as a surrender and loss of power to those who caused her madness in the first place—her male tormentors. To her dismay, Felicia has fallen into a vicious whirlpool that cannot allow a happy ending.

Felicia is unable to claim agency in the real world, for she belongs to a world that is ignorant of her soul. Although she dedicates herself to Santería, Felicia does not have the possibility of transcendence: even the oracles are aware that she is out of their reach. Her spiritual and emotional suffering is transferred to her mother, who, after seeing the state of her daughter, lashes out at the santeros: “Witch doctors! Murderers! Get out, all of you!” (190). Whatever anyone else in her family thinks of her new worldviews, Felicia feels more comfortable in this aspect of her life, for it is here that she feels free to think and do what she wants. For this reason, to help herself to cope with her life, Felicia

creates a “florid language,” as she calls it, borrowed “freely from the poems she’d heard, stringing words together like laundry on a line, connecting ideas and descriptions she couldn’t have planned. The words sounded precisely right when she said them, though often people told her she didn’t make any sense at all” (110). Even though she lives in a dream-like state, she is able to recognize that the outside world is not able to understand her transformation from the real world to that of the unreal. For this reason, she searches to construct her own language, even if it means speaking in a language that does not make sense to the rest of the world. Through this unique type of communication, Felicia is free to express herself without trying to make sense. Just like the other female characters examined thus far, Felicia represents the constant struggle between two worlds—here, the real and unreal—within a subject position notably more unstable than firm.

As the novel progresses, Felicia stops creating her own language, as a result of the deep scars her husband’s abuse has left upon her. Reading the narrator’s account, we learn that even “her voice is mute to her” (81). Her life is depicted as dreamy, with Felicia in an almost spellbound state, where nonrationality characterizes her whole existence. The dreamy state turns into a nightmare of action, where Felicia has no coherent sense of agency even through her florid language, since she is not able to understand cultural expectations of what is a “right” behavior. Further, she denies personal responsibility for her own actions. García writes a character such as Felicia to portray how the supernatural, the spiritual and the magical can affect one’s thinking. Though Felicia courts the magical and the unreal, they ultimately overpower her, so that

she can no longer take control of her own life. Even in her journey into the supernatural realm, Felicia cannot claim control of her life and is therefore unable to achieve agency.

3.6 Pilar

With Pilar, the tone of the novel changes, as García grants this female character the power of first-person narration. Pilar represents the new generation of Cubans, exiled with their families in the United States and living between two ethnic identities.

Especially in the character of Pilar, the author depicts a female subject whose life on the hyphen—to borrow Perez Firmat's term—is a strong presence throughout the text.

Having left Cuba when she was only two years old, Pilar is convinced that she would be happier if she lived in Cuba. As Guillermina Walas points out in *Entre dos Américas:*

Narrativas de Latinas en los '90s (2000):

Pilar es la nieta que no solo recordará sino que escribirá la historia de la familia, de sus raíces, justificando de alguna manera el surgimiento de una identidad nueva: la de los cubanos que se aceptan como tales al mismo tiempo que reconocen su pertenencia al espacio cultural norteamericano... donde la memoria sirve como puente conciliador entre espacios ideológicamente enfrentados. (131)

At the end of the novel, Pilar is left with the responsibility to tell her family's story. Her storytelling will focus on home, family life, and exile, and through this creative process a transformation will occur, the result of Pilar's search for her own identity. The novel insinuates that Celia's letters to her Spanish lover are her legacy of the written word.

Pilar, taking up this legacy, will reconstruct history, unravel memories, and eventually reveal lives that are more problematic and complex than they seem.

Pilar's search to understand her identity begins at age thirteen, when Pilar plans to escape to Cuba, unbeknownst to her mother. Though this plan is never enacted, Pilar is a mixture of two worlds, and thus constantly questions her identity. On the one hand, she represents the American teenager who loves her freedom and is not afraid to experiment. On the other hand, she represents the Cuban exile who constantly yearns to return to the country of origin. Pilar is interested in finding her own identity and establishing her own relationship and connection to Cuba, despite the imposition of her mother's values and beliefs.

Through Pilar's first-person narration, we follow her as she unfolds events before our eyes. Her prose uses phrases such as "I see...I look...I hear, etc"). During these moments, Pilar narrates her experience of her environment. On the other hand, there are instances when Pilar takes the subject position of an observer outside the story that she is describing. When this happens, there is a type of retrospective narration, which opens the possibility of a broader perspective. For example, Pilar narrates: "My mother told me once that I slept just like her sister" (221). In another instance, her grandmother talks to her as she paints: "She tells me that before the revolution Cuba was a pathetic place, a parody of a country" (233). Both of these reflections allow Pilar the opportunity to present thoughts, persons and objects from a distant perspective. Moreover, such techniques allow her to reconstruct first-hand observations and recount thoughts or events that are not her own or that she did not experience: in this case, Felicia, whom she never met, and Cuba before the Revolution, which she did not witness. When Pilar takes a

retrospective view, often she allows for other forms of speech to enter her first-person narrative, such as direct discourse. Here is one of many examples during Pilar's trip to Cuba to see her grandmother Celia: ("*Ay mi cielo*, what do all the years and the separation mean except a more significant betrayal?"...I can't understand what my grandmother tells me. All I hear is her voice, thickened with pain) (240). This passage offers two perspectives, those of Pilar and Celia. Pilar records and reports this event, offering a commentary on her grandmother's quote, but also granting the reader direct access to Celia's words.

Growing up in the United States, Pilar is allowed to develop her own thinking about different issues that affect women. On the one hand, through her first-person narration, Pilar hints that she is conscientious about class structure and embraces the same type of feminism as portrayed by her grandmother. Furthermore, she challenges the content of her teachers' lectures and is concerned with not being able to find the feminine perspective represented in what she reads. On the other hand, Pilar does not follow her mother's extreme political stance, which holds that they should absorb the American culture and deny their own cultural heritage. On the whole, Pilar is more critical of the United States than Cuba. This can be seen, for example, in her depiction of the Statue of Liberty, which she paints for her mother's bakery. William Luis cogently suggests that "Pilar's Lady Liberty is a prisoner of society and has in recent years been denied her true identity" (219). While Pilar's muse is the Statue of Liberty, she modifies this important icon of American culture and inserts her own interpretation of the symbol. Taking her cue from the lady's gender, she paints the torch as if it were hanging free, while her hand is on her chest, exemplifying the singing of the national anthem. What's more, Pilar paints a

safety pin in the nose of the statue, a gesture towards the culture of the younger American generation. In the end, this particular chapter of the novel—besides depicting Pilar's revenge—illustrates Pilar's interpretation of different cultural symbols. That said, she is not interested in being a mere observer, but would rather shape and create her own cultural identity.

Pilar shares neither her mother's love for politics nor her aversion to returning to Cuba. Pilar hates it when her mother implies that Cuba is not what she envisions, pointing out all the negative aspects of socialism and Castro's regime. Contrary to her mother's point of view, Pilar sides with her grandmother and decides to judge her mother's presumptions for herself during their trip to Cuba. In a way, she creates an idyllic vision of Cuba based on how she regulates her recollection of her past years in Cuba. The Cuba in her mind is a mixture of reality and fiction. She combines her memories of Cuba with dreams about her grandmother, a method that allows her to construct her own Cuba. Raysa Amador Gómez-Quintero and Mireya Pérez Bustillo point out that "Pilar and her grandmother share common traits, for both are seeking to reaffirm themselves in Cuba. For Celia the ideal is to remember the past and not to alter it, while, for Pilar, the need is to create a future memory by which she would remember Cuba" (96). In part, due to this shared identification with Cuba, Celia entrusts her granddaughter with her letters so that she can continue telling her family's legacy. There is almost a supernatural tone to this handing over of stories. In Pilar's voice we read: "I feel my grandmother's life passing to me through her hands. It's a steady electricity, humming and true" (222). What is more, Pilar's surname "Puente" draws attention to her

role as a bridge between past and present, between her family in Cuba and the United States.

Pilar's narrative continues the theme of maternal loss and breakdown of communication that we have seen in the other female characters. In particular, Pilar continues the theme of resistance and conflict with the mother, as in Celia and Lourdes' relationship. Pilar is angry at her mother for never appreciating her achievements or recognizing her struggles to live in-between two cultures. On the one hand, there is a sense of desperation because Pilar yearns for her mother's love and acceptance. On the other hand, Pilar's first-person narration emphasizes that she and her mother are not the same, that she needs her own strong voice. The experience of immigration as lived by Lourdes and Pilar deftly captures the themes of exile, loss, and separation, which result in psychic and emotional loneliness, as well as linguistic loss. All of these are issues that Pilar confronts as she is growing up. Throughout her life, she experiences what Paul White has described so clearly in "Geography, Literature, and Migration," as mixed feelings

... towards the past and the present: as to whether things were better "then" or "now." Ambivalence towards the future: whether to retain a "myth of return" or to design a new project without further expected movement built in. ... whether to cling to the old or discard it, whether to compromise via symbolic events whilst adhering to the new on an everyday basis. (3-4)

Pilar's dream of visiting Cuba is finally fulfilled at the age of twenty one, and, as she expected, the trip transforms her completely. Nevertheless, when she returns "back to the

source,” she is more able to discriminate between the two cultures, more able to see positive aspects of the United States and troubling sides of the Castro regime in Cuba. Pilar’s trip to Cuba begins a process of self discovery. As Antonia Dominguez Miguela argues in *Evolving Origins, Transplanting Cultures: Literary Legacies of the new Americans* (2004): “the temporary return to the island becomes a healing process against the disease of nostalgia that the previous generations had endured” (272). By visiting Cuba, Pilar begins the process of self-healing. As she records personal details of the trip, Pilar remembers her past and entwines her memories with these new experiences.

Finally, the overarching problem of linguistic loss is a constant issue for Pilar.³⁷ Of all the female characters, only Pilar achieves agency through a multiplicity of forms. First, using the power to narrate her story and employing her own voice, she constructs her own identity by relating her collection of past memories to her present. Second, Pilar is an artist who employs painting as a means to express her own problems and the obstacles she must overcome as a teenager and young adult in the United States. Third, she acquires agency through her telepathic communication with her grandmother. Of all the people close to her, Pilar feels closest to Celia. The language she uses with her grandmother is non-verbal: they communicate through dreams, as I discussed in a previous section of this chapter. Her grandmother’s presence in her life helps Pilar to cope with her nostalgia about her past in Cuba. In addition, Pilar’s quest for agency reveals itself time and again as truly a quest for a language that can help her to better understand her hybrid identity. Her ability to use her own personal voice and write

³⁷ Pilar favors Spanish over English in different situations, although her Spanish is not as fluent. In particular, she uses Spanish to speak to her Peruvian boyfriend. As she writes: “We speak Spanish when we make love. English seems an impossible language for intimacy” (180). She distinguishes between the two languages, making Spanish her language of emotion.

anything she wants gives her the chance to insert her own voice into the feminist script, for example, that she advocates.

Lastly, there is a will to power in Pilar's use of "I," in the sense that she wants to be the author of her own story and of those sharing similar experiences. Moreover, her use of first-person narration depicts a woman growing into herself by confronting head-on the challenges associated with that growth. Her desire to possess the authorship of her own "I" gives her a means of empowerment: narrative agency. Pilar seeks to define her place and her identity geographically in her writing. I argue that, after her journey to Cuba, Pilar realizes that she does not belong fully to Cuba or the United States; rather, her place is in a space of in-betweenness. Ultimately, Pilar's narrative calls for a self-reflexive debate regarding previously held beliefs. We get a glimpse of Pilar's future role in Celia's final letter to her lover Gustavo, where she writes: "She will remember everything" (245). We are led to believe, then, that Pilar and exiles like her will continue the role of remembering for and beyond Cuba.

3.7 Other key female characters

Besides the main female characters already examined, there are a few other female characters from *Dreaming in Cuban* worth discussing: Luz, Milagro, and Herminia. Though their narration does not constitute a large part of the text, these characters deserve examination because they use the device of first-person narration. Their use of first-person narration signifies that they are agents of their own stories. Each of these characters connotes a sense of subjectivity that brings to mind Adrienne Rich's "subject-in-process:" they are immersed with the history of their own writing. Each of the

above subject positions is “made up of heterogeneous and heteronymous representations... an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists upon as a strategy” (de Lauretis’ “Feminist Studies” 9). All of these female subjects are interested in telling their own stories, and they use the strategies of first-person narration, to search for ways to cope and deal with their lives.

Just as Pilar represents the younger generation of Cubans exiled in the United States, Luz, Milagro, and Ivanito (Felicia’s children) represent the younger generation remaining in Cuba. These three young adults share concerns different from those preoccupying their cousin in the United States. Yet while Felicia’s children seem quite different superficially, under the surface their dissimilarities are revealed as more closely related than they appear, despite their geographical distance. García awards Felicia’s children the power of first-person narration, a choice which allows additional insights into their thoughts and ideas. For Pilar, as we have seen, life is a constant struggle and search for a sense of belonging. On the other hand, Luz, Milagro, and Ivanito’s lives are mainly concerned with finding a way to communicate with their parents. Through their first-person narrative, these characters offer a glimpse of Cuban reality on the island, particularly the poverty and strict beliefs that shape their lives.

The dominant theme in the twins’ writing is the mother-daughter relationship. Like Pilar, Felicia’s daughters reject their mother and feel closest to their grandmother, Celia. Condemning their mother for the horrible act of burning their father’s face, Luz and Milagro care for what is left of their father. In Luz’s own reflection, she writes: “My father had been a handsome man. I have the picture to prove it. It was Mamá who destroyed him” (120). As this passage suggests, another important theme in the characters

of Luz and Milagro is the father-daughter relationship. Unlike their cousin Pilar, however, who is disappointed in her father for betraying her mother, Luz and Milagro choose to hate not their father, but their mother. After many years, the twins begin to build a relationship with Hugo. While they find Felicia's florid language meaningless, they consider their father's communications reliable. There is an understanding, however, that each of Felicia's children desperately wants their mother's and father's love, despite their anger toward a mad mother who cannot function in society. Conversely, it is not lost on the reader that the sisters are troubled and confused by having a mother and father such as Felicia and Hugo. Both sisters struggle for a sense of belonging in spite of their unsuitable parents. Consequently, both sisters look for an escape to the confining domestic condition of their mother's house.

In the text, their point of view is narrated mostly using the plural first-person subject pronoun "we" ("We found," "we like," etc). However, there are instances when the first person narration shifts to Luz's subject position. Of the two sisters, Luz is the stronger. As their names (translated in English as "Light and Miracle") suggest, the girls evoke a sense of hope. We see this sense of hope in Luz's reflection: "Abuela Celia tells us that before the revolution smart girls like us usually didn't go to college...I'm glad we don't have to worry about that. I am going to be a veterinarian...Milagro...wants to be a mycologist specializing in tropical fungi" (121). In this text, García reserves the right of first-person narration for the younger generation, so that they can defy the traditions handed down to them by previous generations. Thus, all of the del Pino cousins have something in common: they decide their own course of action.

I briefly mentioned Herminia—Felicia’s Afro-Cuban best friend—in my analysis of Felicia. Herminia also has the opportunity to narrate in the first-person and, thus, the opportunity to achieve agency. Initially, Herminia is present in the story so that she can recount much of Felicia’s journey into Santería.³⁸ Through her narrative we learn that Felicia had a gentle soul and cared for her friend in some of her most difficult moments. Another surprising insight offered by Herminia is when she describes Felicia as being color blind, as not differentiating people by the color of their skin. The issue of race in *Dreaming in Cuban* has been discussed by William Luis, who notes that “García’s recreation of Herminia’s narration speaks to the success with which on the surface the Revolution has been able to devalue the race issue at home and abroad” (228). Herminia reflects extensively on Felicia’s character, and it is through Herminia that we get an inside look into Felicia’s troubled soul; her account draws the reader in with its simplicity in telling the story. Through the third-person narrator we learn that Felicia experiences her search for the supernatural as “a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds” (186).

In a broader sense, Herminia’s character stands as the sole representative of the Afro-Cuban population and their historical repression. On one occasion, Herminia points

³⁸ William Luis has offered a good summary about Santería in Cuba. He notes: “Santería, originally practiced by Yoruba slaves brought to Cuba, and mixed with Catholicism, represents an important part of Cuban culture on the island, but also abroad. In Cuba, Santería has been woven into the fabric of Cuban society. After the Castro takeover, it was banned as another religion opposed by scientific Marxism...Cuban policy changed, and in 1989 it became legal for Cubans to practice religion, including Santería” (227). Regarding *Dreaming in Cuban*, Luis asserts the following: “During the time of the narration and in the present, Cuban officials adhere to Marxist ideology. But in private many worship Afro-Cuban gods. It is widely known, as García writes, that Castro himself has been initiated into Afro-Cuban religion; he is the son of Elegua, the god of the road” (227).

out that Cuban history has not been kind to people of color. She writes, referencing the war of 1912:

I would know how our men were hunted down day and night like animals, and finally hung by their genitals from the lampposts in Guáimaro. The war that killed my grandfather and great-uncles and thousands of other blacks is only a footnote in our history books. Why, then, should I trust anything I read? I trust only what I see, what I know with my heart, nothing more. (185)

In this paragraph, Herminia makes reference to the unjust treatment of blacks in the country, not only during the war, but also subsequently, through the erasure of their lives from the written history of the country. Another role Herminia serves in the novel is to shed light upon the use of Santería. One can read Herminia's narrative itself as a precise critique of the Cuban culture, suggesting that written Cuban history has not included the facts, the perspective, or the voices of the black presence in Cuba. For this reason, Herminia's telling of these events, coupled with her applications of Santería practices as an integral part of the black culture, provides both a sense of personal agency and a larger contribution to Cuban culture. Ultimately, the presence of these additional characters—Luz, Milagro, and Herminia—and their use of first-person narration adds to the pattern of self-determination.

3.8 The trajectory of the male characters

In the previous sections, we have caught a glimpse of the men's roles in the lives of the female characters examined herein. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the male figure is

largely portrayed as an adulterer, a betrayer, or an abusive husband, a character misled and dominated by the patriarchal tradition who causes irrevocable psychological and emotional damage and destruction in the female characters. About the role of the male in Cuban society Íbiz Gómez-Vega writes that: “Cuban men are not willing to change a way of life that has worked well for them” (82). We notice that they only show little signs of growth or change. I will comment briefly here on those male subjects that are in constant contact and conflict with the female characters in this text. In one way or another, each female figure seems negatively affected by her relationship with the opposite gender and wronged by an unjust world. In this section, I examine three male figures: the figure of the husband; Fidel Castro and his soldiers; and, lastly, the figure of the son, specifically his relationship to his mother. I determine that change in male mentality is brought about by the younger generation, who associate more with the plight of their mothers and other female figures close to them.

The figure of the husband in this novel embodies patriarchal male hatred for the female gender. The figure of the husband is depicted as macho, aggressive, and cruel toward his wife. A prime example is Hugo, Felicia’s husband, who beats her constantly and expresses his emotions through violence. Hugo represents the ultimate macho man, brutal and revolting. It takes Felicia’s burning his face to cause a drastic change in his behavior. After the “accident,” he becomes a pathetic shadow of a man who makes love with a mask, hiding his disfigured face. Because of his appearance, he loses his macho attitude.

Another husband figure, not violent yet no less honest with his wife, is Lourdes’s husband, who is, unbeknownst to his wife, an adulterer. His mistress is described in

Pilar's words as "huge, and blond and puffy... [a] beauty queen gone to seed... [with a] waxy, bloated face" (25).³⁹ Along the same lines, not violent or aggressive, but nonetheless misogynistic, is Jorge del Pino, Celia's husband. Jealous of Celia's platonic relationship with Gustavo, Jorge leaves her with his mother and sister for the majority of their life together. Both women abhor Celia, abuse her emotionally and disapprove of Jorge displaying any affection towards her. In the beginning of their relationship, as if his female relatives' daily abuse were not enough, Jorge sends Celia to a mental asylum. Sometime after, a remorseful Jorge confesses to Lourdes the pain and hurt he fears he caused his wife: "I told the doctors to make her forget. They used electricity. They fed her pills ... she told me to turn on my electric brooms and then laughed in my face...I couldn't bear her gentleness, her kind indifference" (195-196). Íbiz Gómez-Vega rightly argues that "Jorge del Pino's admission of his attempt to destroy his wife reinforces the notion that the malaise of Cuba's past is deeply rooted in the Cuban man's treatment of women, in the Cuban society's silent acceptance of male dominance" (80). The reader learns of much of Celia's treatment at the hands of Jorge del Pino through his communication with Lourdes from beyond his own death, as he reminisces with his daughter, regretting how harshly he treated his wife. Through this communiqué, made possible by magical realism, Jorge asks Lourdes to mend her relationship with her mother and tries to convince Lourdes that her mother loved her, which she finds hard to believe.

³⁹ Her father's affair leaves Pilar with a sour taste about men and affects his daughter's attitude towards the male gender. It is reasonable to assume that some of Pilar's feminist passion comes from this early disappointment in the most important male figure in her life. The motif of betrayal, apparent in the narratives of Lourdes and Felicia, continues with Pilar, who, in turn, also betrayed by her Peruvian boyfriend in college.

Despite Jorge's remorse, in general, the figure of the husband in this novel stands out as the symbol of infidelity, violence, and abandonment.

Other male characters that have a violent impact on the lives of the female characters are the soldiers serving under Fidel Castro who come to represent the political and physical impact of Castro's regime. In my analysis of Lourdes, I mentioned that, in her youth, she was assaulted by Castro's soldiers. They not only raped her, but also left a scar on her abdomen, a personal and physical reminder of the patriarchal and political oppression characterizing the regime as a whole. Fidel Castro himself stands as the male symbol of defiance, violence, and hatred. On the one hand, Lourdes, Felicia, and Jorge associate all the problems in Cuba, as well as their own struggles abroad, with Castro's regime. Castro's regime is the reason behind the division of the family and the many political and generational conflicts in the novel. By embracing or rejecting his doctrine, female characters are nearly stripped of their right to communicate with one another. On the other hand, there are times where Castro is not depicted negatively, particularly in the account of his faithful devotee, Celia. She and her son Javier adore Castro, particularly because they associate him with his fight against the capitalist system. The novel's overarching ambivalence toward the Cuban leader reflects the conflicted opinions of Cubans living in Cuba as well as those living abroad about the doctrine that Castro's government instills. Castro's presence in the story is embodied by the effects of the Revolution and his regime on families divided physically and emotionally.

The figure of the son, particularly Felicia's son, Ivanito, plays an important role in García's text. Ivanito is the only male subject in the novel that tells his story in his own voice. As a young male character, Ivanito is very sympathetic toward the female gender.

He is loved and adored by his own mother, his grandmother and, later on, his aunt and cousin, and he is the only male character who generates sympathy. Before going to school, Ivanito's life is enveloped by Felicia's trance-like existence. He does not understand his sisters' language and, in a sense, rejects outward reality. Initially, Ivanito is only able to speak and understand his mother's florid language. His sisters love him, though they abhor the closeness he shares with their mother. Through the help of his aunt and cousin, he is able to escape to the United States and enjoy a new beginning, one free of judgment from outsiders that allows him to think and express his thoughts without restraint. The end of the novel insinuates that Ivanito has a positive and happy future ahead of him.

The disconnect between mothers and daughters is not found between mothers and sons. García underlines the mother-son relationship, in the depiction of Ivanito. In fact, this second relationship has various shades of affection. For example, Ivanito's bond with his mother does not escape the insinuation of an incestuous relationship. The same can be said for Celia and her son, Javier, and Jorge del Pino with his mother, Berta Arango del Pino. Indeed, there are insinuations that Jorge's mother Berta shares an infatuation with her son, almost to the point of insanity. For example, in a letter to Gustavo, Celia writes the following:

Even on her deathbed, Berta Arango del Pino cursed me. ... Jorge asked me to go with him to Palmas Street because his mother swore she wanted to make her peace with me. But when I arrived, she threw a decanter that shattered at my feet and stained my hem green with absinthe. "You stole my husband!" she screamed at me, then she reached for Jorge, stretching

her arms pathetically, her fingers moving like worms. “Come here, my lover. Come to my bed.” (161)

In all these cases, the mothers are very devoted to and protective of their sons, confusing their son’s position with that of a lover. In all, these mothers look to their sons for a loving relationship that they were not able to attain with their husbands.

Male characters are generally depicted as conveying images of violence and machismo, subjecting female characters to a position of inferiority and shame. As a result, the female characters herein examined have been fooled or betrayed by men in some way and used for relieving sexual desire. For the most part, the male figure is seen as an insurmountable mechanism that uses various methods to frighten women through violent acts. Less often, when he is not depicted as violent, or macho, the male figure plays the role of the confidante or lover. As in the novel as a whole, the hope for the male figure, embodied in the character of Ivanito, lies in the next generation.

3.9 Concluding Remarks

The multiple individual chronicles that constitute the narrative of *Dreaming in Cuban* represent different female portraits, all affected by some type of male authority. The reader becomes acquainted with these female characters either through third-person narration, letters, or, most importantly, through the character’s use of “I.” All these types of narratives offer diverse sketches of the characters populating García’s novel. *Dreaming in Cuban* is a text characterized by frustration and failure, but García seeks resolution in the end by shifting her focus to the new generation: Ivanito escapes Cuba in search of a better life, and Pilar inherits the task of rewriting her family’s story.

Behind each story lurks language: its promise and its shortcomings. In general, the characters have lost their ability to communicate verbally. Instead, the characters rely on less common means of communication: dreams, telepathic communication, or even a language all their own, as with Felicia's florid language. This lack of verbal communication is exemplified in the novel's fragmentary and shifting approach to writing—the layers of stories directly or indirectly told—that gives the novel a postmodernist flavor.

The female subject is at the center of the story, struggling with the dismemberment of her family as a result of the Castro regime. Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach suggest one reason why women must be at the center of such texts:

In Latina writing, the entire extended family of women –mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, cousins, godmothers, lovers, neighbors, fortune-tellers, *curanderas* (healers), midwives, teachers, and friends, especially girlhood friends- makes up a cast of characters... Since many of these women are from immigrant or exile families- a condition that often causes the split of a traditional nuclear family- the writers have often displaced a central patriarchal figure, replacing it with a woman headed and woman populated household. (12)

Throughout the novel, each female character displays a sense of detachment from reality, almost alienating herself. They all seem to be split, politically as well as emotionally, making their relationships as human as possible in spite of differences of class, race, religion, and so on.

However, there is also a sense of collectiveness these female figures. In one way or another, each female voice intertwines with other female voices, creating a kaleidoscope of female portrayals. In the same vein, I argue, each female figure goes through her own self-searching, a process wherein past and present fuse interchangeably. Thus, each female character has a unique journey, through they all appear to want a change. Specifically, Celia wants to change how her family is so far apart; Lourdes feels the need to change Cuba's political situation; Felicia wants to drastically overhaul her own life in exchange for her loneliness; Pilar wants to change her biculturalism, never feeling whole, and, finally, Pilar, Luz and Milagro feel the need to change their mothers and their destiny.

Furthermore, the experiences of the female figures living in Cuba and those living in the United States are not so different, in the sense that disorder and a sense of unrest dominate their lives. In this novel, Cristina García presents the two sides of Cuba's coin, portraying life in the island as well as following the Cuban community abroad. Likewise, the author recognizes the diversity in the Diasporic community and its connection to the homeland. In other words, through Lourdes and Pilar's experiences, the reader comes to see that:

...the Cuban-American "community" contains a few assimilated members...a group whose size is fervently debated, that forms an "exile" community, which is committed to the overthrow of Cuban communism and to a physical return to the island; and a diasporan fraction which is active in political and cultural representation, and cares about maintaining

contact with Cuban and Cuban communities in other countries. (Tölöyan 17-18)

At the same time, throughout this chapter we noticed that the theme of failed romantic love is a constant not only in Cuba, but also for the generations of immigrants in the United States. All the different generations experience some form of disenchantment with love, as we saw in the examples of Celia with her lover and husband, Lourdes and her husband, Felicia and her multiple husbands.

I argued that each woman in the novel displays a distinct way of dealing with her own traumas. Likewise, the female characters studied in this chapter reconstruct their own pasts and histories by preserving and highlighting the elements that are important, for instance, *Santería* and storytelling. Of particular importance to this second chapter was the role of the diaspora and exile in shaping the subjectivity of the characters. The novel's narrative reads as a provocative study of these issues. Moreover, the experience of exile is a sign not only of loss, but also of new, personal, and social acquisitions.

The female figures are all multifaceted, all affected by the past, and move through their lives in a daze, frequently obsessed with dreams and memories. They all undertake, by necessity or desire, a spiritual quest in order to understand themselves. Through methods such as magical realism, *Santería* and the mystical, the women in the novel go in their search of their selfhood, a first step toward facing their dilemmas. Those female characters awarded the use of first-person narration—mostly of the younger generation, Pilar, Luz and Milagro, Ivanito, and Herminia—enjoy the possibility of presenting their stories through different lenses. Ultimately, there is an allegiance among these women:

while they are all so different, they share the condition of marginality as daughters and granddaughters under various shades of patriarchal authority.

Chapter 3

Urgency and Anxiety of Female Agency in *¡Yo!*

I am not a Dominican writer. Nor am I a norteamericana. That's why I describe myself as a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term. I'm mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper.

-Julia Álvarez, (*Something to Declare* 173)

Most readers of contemporary Dominican literature will quickly recognize Julia Álvarez's name. This renown is attributable to the author's standing as a leading novelist, poet, and essayist and as one of the most widely read writers of contemporary Latin American literature. Álvarez's best-selling first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), which garnered widespread attention in newspapers and magazines, is highly acclaimed among both the general public and scholars. Nevertheless, Álvarez only truly made a name for herself as a Dominican American writer with the publication of her third novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995), a work about the process of researching and unearthing history, later nominated for a National Book Critics Award. After this success, her popularity grew widely, resulting in the adaptation of *In the Time of the*

Butterflies as a feature film starring Salma Hayek and Mark Anthony.⁴⁰ A few years later, Álvarez published *!Yo!* (1997), which continued the story presented in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In 2000, Álvarez produced yet another novel, titled *In the Name of Salomé*. In addition to her prominence as a novelist, Álvarez is also known for her poetry, which she describes as her first love. Her published collections of poems include *The Housekeeping Book* (1984), *Homecoming* (1984), *The Other Side/El otro lado* (1995), and *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004). Álvarez's insightful book of essays, *Something to Declare* (1998), consists of autobiographical pieces tracing her journey as a writer from childhood to adulthood, and has also contributed to her increasing celebrity.

As an author, Álvarez is constantly experimenting with genres. *The New Family Cookbook* (2000), written with her husband William Eichner, is a collection of cooking recipes fused with reflection pieces. On the other hand, in *A Cafecito Story* (2001), a modern fable, Álvarez explores a wide range of topics from coffee growing to teaching farmers how to read and write. Another genre that Álvarez has cultivated is literature for children and young adults, specifically *Secret Footprints* (2000) and *How Tía Lola Came to Visit* (2001). The latter narrates the lives of a young brother and sister whose Aunt Lola helps them to cope with their parents' divorce, in part by exposing them to their Hispanic heritage. Another contribution to the genre of adolescent literature, Álvarez's *Before We Were Free* (2002), tells the story of Anita de la Torre, a twelve-year old girl who uses her diary as a refuge after her father's arrest. Álvarez's novel *Saving the World* (2006) relates the stories of two women who belong to different centuries yet live parallel

⁴⁰ *In the Time of the Butterflies* is the story of three sisters who rebel against the dictatorial regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, when he was assassinated. The story revolves around the effect of his dictatorship on the Dominican people and the fear, torture and revolt against this oppressive regime.

lives.⁴¹ In 2007 Álvarez published *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the U.S.A*, which explores the phenomenon of the “sweet fifteen,” a Hispanic celebration of female coming of age. Álvarez’s most recent book is *Return to Sender* (2009), another novel for young readers, which tells the story of a young boy from Vermont who befriends the daughter of an undocumented Mexican worker. In this last novel Álvarez raises issues about the Mexican immigration experience, and puts a face to an uncommon friendship that develops beyond borders. Without a doubt, Julia Álvarez is an accomplished writer with a great ability to mine important issues of Hispanic life and culture.

Álvarez’s *!Yo!*, which continues the stories of the characters in her first novel, is the focus of this chapter, which discusses the construction of secondary female characters within the novel. In particular, I contend that Álvarez presents female characters—the maid’s daughter, the sister, the mother, the cousin, the best friend and the landlady—who express an urgent drive to represent themselves on paper. In addition, each of these female figures embarks on a journey to recreate her own story in an attempt to redeem her own voice as a woman. I argue that the plethora of distinct autobiographical female subjects unequivocally attempt to locate a sense of subjectivity. Further, I suggest that these characters, through their urgent desire to write testimonial accounts, display a powerful need to validate their accounts and thus to claim agency.

This search for subjectivity and agency, illustrated via the female characters’ efforts to present and control their own stories and storytelling by use of first-person

⁴¹ Isabel, one of the two key female characters of this novel, bears a resemblance to Yolanda of *!Yo!* in that she is a Dominican American writer who finds herself absorbed by the lives of others.

narration, determines the narrative structure of the text. By offering a wide array of points of view, each individual secondary character contributes to the construction of a complex central protagonist. The female characters herein examined invoke Debra Castillo's description of Rosario Castellanos's female character: "she is not single, not a word-woman, but a woman of many, and contradictory, words" (*Talking* 222). The aptness of this observation will become apparent throughout this chapter, particularly as I examine the diversity of each character. To begin, I explore the ways these female characters are affected by conflicts of class, gender, and racial difference. I analyze their frequent shifts in perspective, as well as their perceptions of Yolanda, the text's protagonist and title character. I argue that, in this novel, the female characters' points of view shift repeatedly, resulting in conflicting views of the protagonist. I explore whether these shifts help the female characters' quests for agency. Álvarez writes female Dominican characters, both in their native country and in their country of exile, giving them a fictional voice in their quest to express themselves.

4.1 Julia Álvarez: Her place in Hispanic letters

As we mentioned, Álvarez has published poetry, short stories, reflection essays and novels. Most of the scholarly criticism on Julia Álvarez deals with works such as *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the time of Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*. In contrast, *¡Yo!*, Julia Álvarez's third novel, has not attracted much scholarship. To date there are only a handful of critical articles and essays on *¡Yo!*.

Ellen McCracken points out in her brief article, "The Postmodern Self of Julia Álvarez's *¡Yo!*: Identity, Memory and Community," that "Álvarez draws readers almost

effortlessly into delightful postmodern epistemological and ontological questions that engender complex thinking about identity and representation” (226). McCracken focuses on the text as a postmodern work and views Latino immigrant identity as multi-dimensional. Little attention, however, is given to the creation of the female subject. Kelli Lyon Johnson’s work, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a new Place on the Map* (2005), offers an extensive study of the Dominican author. Johnson sees common themes in all of Álvarez’s texts, such as collective memory, language, negotiation of genre and gender, and magical thinking. When focusing on *¡Yo!*, Johnson analyzes two aspects of the novel: language and improvisation. Her aim is to examine the effect of Yolanda’s writing upon the rest of the characters. Reflecting upon Álvarez’s position as a writer, Johnson notes: “Álvarez seeks to write women into a postcolonial tradition of literature that has historically excluded women, particularly in writings of exile” (viii). In all, while Johnson does touch on certain discursive and compositional techniques, her work says little about the effects of these techniques on the construction of the female character or how she claims agency, particularly related to *¡Yo!*.

As a member of a group of writers who have revised the notion of what it means to be a Dominican American writer, Álvarez herself, perhaps in an attempt to protect and represent her two identities, does not subscribe to any particular definition.⁴² Álvarez claims that her writing is where she is best defined. Her writing strongly mirrors her personal world. Like many of her characters, she moved from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Because she herself is a product of two identities—Dominican and

⁴² This is also the case for Ana Lydia Vega. See the discussion in Chapter One on Vega’s unease with being labeled a feminist.

North American—her writing revisits and explores a wide range of topics and territories. Yet the question of how Álvarez situates herself in Dominican and American letters persists. In 2006, in an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Álvarez explains how she understands her origins:

...When I tell people about my Dominican background, it's a way of explaining my roots, where I come from...I'm originally from the Dominican Republic. So, I let people know straight off that I once came from somewhere else...I can still hear in a conversation where someone is putting me in an ethnic cubby hole and that's where I get my elbows up, because I feel like once they do that they are closing me down in a title box that won't allow for all the complexity of who we all are.

(Interview)⁴³

Having lived in two different cultures, Álvarez always queried her in-between identity, and it is precisely this unsteady position which many of her female characters embody. For example, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!* are both novels in which female characters struggle to find their subject position. Like the author herself, Álvarez's female figures are immersed in contradicting identities due to their simultaneous interactions with multiple cultures.

Born in the United States, Álvarez lived there for only three months and then moved with her parents to the Dominican Republic. William Luis, in "A Search for Identity in Julia Álvarez's: *How the García Girls lost Their Accents*," writes that

⁴³ Álvarez's context bears striking resemblance to Cristina García's own perspective as a writer of two nationalities. See Chapter Two for further discussion.

“Álvarez ... now dissociates herself from North American culture and identifies with the Dominican one” (845). Based on Álvarez’s previous quote, I would have to disagree with Luis’s claim about how Álvarez identifies herself. The author shies away from critics that position her in a “title box”—as she calls it—for she herself is still trying to find out who she is.⁴⁴ In fact, Álvarez has worked to link these two worlds, without favoring either. Her childhood years were spent on the Caribbean island, and the experiences she had while growing up in her parents’ country molded her character as a woman and as a writer. So too is the experience she had in the United States where she spent her teenage and adult years. In her own words: “What finally bridged the two worlds for me was writing” (*Something* 167). Álvarez’s texts fluctuate between her past and her present, the Dominican Republic and the United States.

In her works, especially her novels, Álvarez writes about topics such as migration, loss, exploration of memory, and retelling history, themes particularly salient in novels dealing directly with negotiations of bicultural identities. As Lucía Suárez rightly contends: “The discrepancies between what is true and not true, known and unknown, seem to haunt Álvarez, resulting in a body of literature that, despite its light-hearted exposition, interrogates Dominican American Latina identity from her particular perspective” (118). Moreover, as a writer of Hispanic origin, Álvarez is always concerned with debunking the dual aspect of the identity she shares with many of her characters. As is evident in most of Álvarez’s characters, they experience feelings of “in-betweenness.” To use Gloria Anzaldúa’s phrase, such hybrid characters, residents of the

⁴⁴ Also, to read Álvarez’s own definition of where she locates herself, see her collection of autobiographical essays “Something to Declare.” The first quote in this chapter clearly presents the author’s position as belonging to a place “that’s not on the map,” but to which she hopes to give coordinates.

“borderlands,” are “plagued by psychic restlessness” (78). Álvarez’s interest lies in depicting hybrid characters whose complex mixture of identities becomes fused and confused with intersecting cultural intricacies. Through such depictions, Álvarez, like other ethnic writers, portrays the impossibility of living completely on one side of a hybrid nationality or ethnicity.

Álvarez’s fictional work mirrors, to some extent, her own journey and negotiation of her position as a woman who is the product of two cultures, Dominican and North American. Álvarez’s works employ two languages in the attempt to detail and comprehend these characters. In considering the narratives of Álvarez’s hybrid characters, Julie Barak accurately suggests that these stories “will never be simple, linear narratives; they will always be complex spirals pulling in and twisting together the conflicts of present lives in the U.S. and the fragments of their island pasts” (176). Works such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *How Tía Lola Came to Visit*, and *¡Yo!* reflect Álvarez’s struggle with her own identity. Ellen McCracken asserts that Álvarez “uses formal and thematic transgression to reveal identity to be an unstable category, undergirded by gender, ethnic, and class ‘trouble’” (6). Her female characters, especially Yolanda García, whom many read as Álvarez’s alter ego, evolve as the result of what might be loosely termed a double identity.

4.2 *¡Yo!*- the novel

Unlike Álvarez’s other novels, *¡Yo!* has not generated much scholarly criticism. The aspects that scholars have examined thus far are language, style, and different philosophies about the protagonist’s life, scholars have focused with particular attention

on the main character of the text—Yolanda—and her fixation with self-representation. My analysis, however, will focus on the anxiety of the secondary female characters who are in search of self-definition. The criticism on this work lacks a thorough examination of all of the varied female narratives in the text. In order to better understand them, it is necessary to analyze their methods of storytelling and their need for agency.

As mentioned above, most of the female characters herein examined also appear in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. This earlier novel describes the exile of the García family from the Dominican Republic to the United States, who like many other Dominican families fled the Trujillo regime. The novel chronicles the difficult journey the family had to endure and their adjustments to the new culture, language, and community. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* focuses primarily on the García daughters and their various experiences, especially their years as young female immigrants in US American schools. As Hispanic immigrants, the girls are frequently faced with discrimination both in and beyond school. Nonetheless, the García family is well off economically, for the father is a medical doctor with a good income. Over time, all the family members adjust well and, immersing themselves in the North American culture, almost forget their Hispanic heritage.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents starts and ends with Yolanda's story: her search for the past becomes the novel's focus. As mentioned previously, the novel bears much resemblance to the life of its author. Indeed, many have argued that Yolanda García is the alter ego of Julia Álvarez. Throughout the novel there are multiple narrative voices, from the use of the first person singular "I" to the first person plural "we," which represents the voices of the sisters collectively. In both novels chronicling the García

girls, Álvarez reworked the experiences of her own life into her fictional chronicles of the lives of the García girls.

¡Yo! continues the story of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, but with an interesting twist. *¡Yo!* is a collection of sixteen voices, which together create a novel that amounts to a reconstruction and compilation of the female heroine, Yo. The multiplicity of voices provides various and yet conflicting accounts of the same events. These voices create competing concrete images of the protagonist. In a way, the account of Yolanda's story, a collage of these competing versions, makes the protagonist herself confusing or puzzling, and difficult to pin down.

Due to its fragmented and ambivalent nature, *¡Yo!* does not fit the mold of the traditional novel. It is divided into three parts, each with a prologue and five chapters. Each part begins with a chapter narrated from the point of view of the sisters and closes with the point of view of the father. This way of structuring the novel, beginning and ending with the family, generates an interesting unity. The novel thus reads like a series of stories. Each chapter, however, is a separate story in itself, where we read one person's autobiographical, first-person narration and interpretation of events, suggesting autobiographical themes of individual interpretation.

¡Yo! is a novel that constantly raises and grapples with issues of agency and subjectivity. The author has given the power of writing to sixteen different characters, each of whom feels a strong need to claim newfound agency by speaking and writing. Additionally, each character feels that her agency has been taken away from them in some fashion in the past. Without a doubt, I argue, this novel can be read as testimonial literature, where the female figure must overcome certain parameters—home, social and

racial conventions—and begin to take control of her freedom and destiny. While Yo is the novel's heroine, each member of Álvarez's cast acts as the protagonist of the chapter they narrate. In other words, the novel is comprised of sixteen different accounts, and, in each chapter, a character tells a story and describes her or his relationship with Yo.

Each chapter title consists of two parts, the first part of which the title refers to the chapter's narrator, while the second elucidates the genre or literary aspect employed therein: for example, "The sisters-fiction," "The mother-nonfiction," "the wedding guests-point of view," and so on. Álvarez's narrators are defined by their relationships to Yo: sisters, mother, cousin, maid's daughter. Though Álvarez's novel is a fictional creation, within the novel she assigns a literary genre or aspect to each character: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, report, romance, point of view, and so on. This strategy communicates that individual lives are canvases filled with various versions of individual stories, not all of which will be told, defined, and determined by the individuals themselves. In *¡Yo!*, each story that these characters write contributes to the larger puzzle of the protagonist herself.

Álvarez alludes to the complexity and ambiguity of the novel by entitling it *¡Yo!*, a word subject to multiple interpretations. If Álvarez wrote only in Spanish, one could interpret this monolingual decision as a prioritization of her Hispanic readership. By mixing English with Spanish, however, Álvarez alerts the reader that in her stories one will find precisely this mix of identities. Álvarez's blend of Spanish and English does not prioritize one language over the other. On the contrary, it is a union that should be accepted as it is, without any imposition of fixed, immovable meanings or definitions, for she, like many of her targeted readers, is a product of bicultural experiences. Using a

Spanish word for her title is one way that Álvarez locates herself and her novel within the tradition of Hispanic letters. Álvarez's Dominican origin and her decision to write in English have raised much disagreement about how her writing fits within Spanish American literatures. This debate may have prompted her to name her text succinctly with the Spanish pronoun "yo." This pronoun, however, is important not just because it is Spanish, but also because it is the first-person subject pronoun, implying agency and authority. In this way, then, Álvarez refutes those critics' claims with the only Spanish word that carries ownership in the first-person singular. Simultaneously, Álvarez not only identifies her work with a Spanish word, but also, by placing it between both inverted and normal exclamation points, emphasizes the pronoun itself and its meaning as well as its Hispanic connection or identity. Inverted punctuation is a feature unique to the Spanish language, giving the title and its ethnic connotations additional emphasis. Moreover, the use of the exclamation points gives Álvarez individuality among other writers, particularly as a woman writer.

Before analyzing the female characters that populate this novel, it is important that the reader remembers that until now we have analyzed two texts where the female character had the ability to express herself in the form of letters, diary and first-person narration. However, both Vega's and García's texts also employed an omniscient narrator as part of the text's narrative. In this chapter I present a novel wherein the female characters only speak from their own perspective, using first-person narration. The analysis of female agency in my project thus logically culminates with a work like *!Yo!*, where female characters speak entirely in their own voices and offer the only account of events, without the interruption and authoritativeness of a third-person narrator. Indeed,

as I will show in this chapter, there is a persistent urgency in the female voice as she strives to claim the right to her story.

First, it will be helpful to review briefly what acquiring agency and subjectivity means for the female characters examined in this chapter. Sally Robinson observes that subjectivity is as much a matter of “being” as “doing.” This notion is applicable to each of the female figures in *¡Yo!*. The “doing” of their subjectivity concerns the activity in the narratives of the text, comprised of first-person narration. Following this line of thought, then, subjectivity is constituted in the character’s writing and in her discourse. Specifically, in each female self-portrayal the women use the “I,” giving their subjective point of view and emotions control over the account. Thus, the authority of writing awards female characters the powers of subjectivity and agency.

Subjectivity and agency go together in this novel. Agency, in Álvarez’s text, is demonstrated when the female character has the ability to act against or in spite of different restrictions, be they gender-based, racial or cultural constraints. Particularly, agency almost always involves some type of action, referring to the ability where female figure effects, using her personal voice, different shades of authorship and to her attempts to confront or affirm herself. In the same vein, agency here applies to the female character’s relationship to writing, and, thus, to language and discourse. As I argue later in the chapter, there is an urgency felt by each character to present her own version of the story through her first-person narrative. This drive is seen in the form of the novel, where each chapter is dominated by one of the female figures who insistently seizes the moment, the opportunity to unfold her own account of the events. In this novel, then,

agency and subjectivity go hand in hand due to the presumed power of sharing one's own subjective perspective through writing.

4.3 Yo

As mentioned, Álvarez's choice of name for her protagonist is a figurative one begging for examination. In reference to the character of Yolanda in both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and its companion novel, William Luis suggests that "she is a multiple being...she is Carla, Sandi, Sofia...she is Yolanda and not Yolanda. This idea is present in the novels by the multiple names used. She is Yolanda, Yoyo, Yosita, Yo" (846).⁴⁵ While she is many characters in one, she is also Yo, a distinct female character. In the Spanish language, as previously mentioned, "yo" is the first-person pronoun, translated in English as the first-person subject pronoun "I." In the novel *¡Yo!*, Yo does not have a voice and thus is unable to tell her own story. Instead, the multiple voices of her family and friends narrate her stories and her character. In addition, the other characters have the additional opportunity of developing their own identities even as they reveal the heroine to the reader. According to the novel, since Yo had the opportunity to tell her own story previously in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, she must now hand over the power of the word to her family and friends.

Nevertheless, Yo does feel underrepresented by all the characters of the novel; her nickname is a way to assert authority within the different accounts. She has been banished from the role of storyteller, but the subject pronoun "Yo" gives her a subject position in the text. Yo is looking to find a voice, but she finds that her present cannot

⁴⁵ From here on, I will refer to Yolanda as Yo.

exist without the past. Therefore, to create the “I” of the present, she has to reference multiple versions of past experiences and stories. In this way, the use of the nickname gives her a current location in the writing.

One thing the reader does learn about Yo is that she has remarkable ability as a storyteller. Storytelling involves chronicling events and stories. In her life, Yo took advantage of any opportunity to insert her own version of events, though not necessarily the true one. As a result, her storytelling skill has designated her the habitual liar of the family. Indeed, throughout the course of the novel, the reader encounters various occasions where Yo is described as a manipulative liar. This characteristic causes clashes with her family and others around her. The other characters, however, lie to one another in similar fashion. Indeed, lying is used to protect the family from anything they are not used to, either as repatriates in the Dominican Republic or as foreigners in the United States. In the first chapter, Fifi writes: “I don’t know what to believe anymore except that everyone in our family is lying” (13). This line is indicative of the fact that Yo is not the only one who lies in her stories; rather, her family members are equally guilty of such charges. In order for the Garcías to function as a family, they must tell lies. Lies essentially compose some part of any of the given accounts. When applied particularly to Yo, her lying is often a vehicle to make her storytelling more believable. Consequently, a rampant lack of honesty emphasizes the need to acknowledge and accept multiple versions of a storytelling.

While each of the sixteen accounts has its own chapter, Álvarez does not give Yo the ability to write her own version of the story; her voice is heard through the narrations of the other female characters. In a way, Yo’s voice is filtered through the other voices,

so that the reader hears their version of the story first. Because the unique structure of *Yo!* does not follow a linear series of events, the reader is faced with multiple explanations of reality, various individual accounts and memories of past events, and the responsibility to assess each character's credibility.

Each character's perspective on Yo differs, in part because of their respective relationships with her. For this reason, Yo is never a stagnant female character, which fits well with her changeable personality. Many of the characters emphasize that Yo's life is sustained by enabling fictions. They are critical of Yo and denounce her for living in a sort of daze, infatuated with her memories. Nevertheless, as we shall see, not all the characters' portraits of Yo focus on her negative traits. The reader encounters a soft, sensitive, and endearing Yo also, marking her personality as strikingly multi-dimensional. In particular, it is hard to reconcile the Yo that seems sensitive, insecure, with the stronger, assertive Yo. On the one hand, she is very attentive, insightful, emotional, and vulnerable towards those who require someone to speak for them. This aspect of her personality is especially apparent when Yo helps an old Dominican woman write a letter to her daughter, an illegal immigrant in the United States. On the other hand, the reader encounters a firm and strong-minded version of Yo when, for example, she encourages Mary, her landlady, to confront and separate from her abusive husband. As we will observe later in this chapter, Mary discerns in Yo a strength that she herself cannot achieve: "I have never seen a woman look like that before, though I have seen plenty of men with them surefire eyes" (162). Certainly, this is the self-image that Yo embraces and hopes to project through her writing and speech; once again, control of

language is shown to be the key for achieving agency, in this case, control over one's perceived identity or personality.

Yo's construction as a female figure recalls Debra Castillo's insights regarding María Luisa Puga's female characters in *Las posibilidades del odio* (1978). Castillo describes the characters in Puga's work as "set in motion on a field, like paired marbles that intersect and collide with other marbles, creating a shifting portrait of an evolving society" (*Talking* 256). The reader experiences a similar sense of individuality within community when considering the collective impression of the various characters in Álvarez's text. Although there is a multiplicity of voices, there is still a narrative coherence, with all the multiple narratives bound and linked by their shared locus: Yo. Lastly, as discussed above, Yo is a highly ambivalent character: fragmented, neither here nor there. Thus, it is significant that readers can only access her character through the voices of relatives, cousins, students, rivals, and a stalker, all of whom recount Yo's conflicting behavior and personality. Given this structure, her character in the novel is both exposed and sensitive to criticism. More often than not, the relationships of the female characters with Yo are characterized by painful and unsatisfying experiences. Nonetheless, even when a character offers a negative picture of Yo, one cannot help but feel sympathy toward her. Through each viewpoint, the reader pieces together the general characteristics of Yo as a female figure: from her physical attributes to her personality. Álvarez allows the reader to encounter Yo through sixteen accounts that together paint a striking image of the heroine.

4.4 The sisters

The novel opens with a prologue outlining the sisters' perception of Yo as a whole.⁴⁶ By beginning the book with the sisters, Álvarez insinuates a type of shared or common experience among the female figures. Also, in this initial prologue with the word "fiction" in its title, the author sets the tone for the text as a fictional story told in an autobiographical mode. The narrative of the sisters is designated "fiction" because they are the ones that feel "fictionally victimized" at the hands of Yo and have chosen to use the same venue, narrative fiction, to strike back and channel their anger (6). From the beginning, then, the novel toys with the reader's sense of reality and fiction, creating an atmosphere, for the particularly savvy reader, where fictional artifice and similarities to the author's life, make the beginning of this text even more intricate.

The novel starts with Fifi, one of the sisters, telling the readers that Yo has just published a bestselling novel. In the novel, the family's secrets have been revealed to the public, and Yo is consistently on talk shows promoting her book, thereby exposing her family to public scrutiny. The family members are irritated and upset as they feel forced to live their lives as famous fictional characters. Because of Yo's increased popularity, her family and many of her acquaintances can only reach her through her agent. Yo's inaccessibility is yet another source of irritation. Through Fifi's first-person narration, the reader feels the family's pain as they read their life fictionalized in print, and the ability to narrate the first chapter gives Fifi the self expression and agency she so urgently seeks. Additionally, Fifi's account underscores a pressure to express her own observation of the

⁴⁶ The topic of sisterhood occupies an important role in Álvarez's fiction, especially in novels such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent*, *In the Time of Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*.

García family, since her younger sister, Yo, is persuading the public using her own selective memory.

As compared to other members of her family, Fifi is the one who tempers the general anger towards Yo. In the course of Fifi's revealing more about herself and the family, Álvarez uses this character to highlight certain themes and events. One such event is the pregnancy of Sandi, another one of Yo's sisters. When Fifi finds out that Sandi became pregnant through artificial insemination, she quickly realizes that Yo could benefit from hearing this news. Her sister's forced pregnancy is worthy of storytelling. In the novel, Sandi tells Fifi not to mention the news about the baby to Yo because she does not want the baby "to become fictional fodder" (7). Though happy for her sister, Sandi, Fifi explains: "I also kind of see my sister's point—it's not just the baby, but the rest of the story will probably find its way into that slim novel: single motherhood, artificial insemination, sperm brought up from the D.R. from an area of the country where hopefully there aren't many first cousins" (8). Both sisters feel cheated by their sister's writing: Yo has granted public access to their secrets. In this passage, through Fifi, Álvarez highlights single motherhood, a delicate topic that has been much explored by women writers in the last decades. Álvarez's point is that, given today's scientific progress, women are independent enough to raise a child and do not need to rely on sexual relations with men to conceive children. Through this story of a woman of Hispanic origin who avoids the model of the housewife and ideal mother and instead chooses to raise a child alone as a single working woman, Álvarez emphasizes the complex transformations in the process of motherhood that result from new scientific possibilities

As Joan Hoffman argues in her article about the sisters: “It is not surprising that of all the sisters Yolanda should be the one to take the lead in areas of self-expression. In this family, she is the frustrated writer, the crafter and manipulator of language: words are the keys to the essence of a thing, the very building blocks of identity” (27). In fact, Yo’s ability to invent stories and articulate her thoughts serves as a means to both escape the trauma she left behind in the Dominican Republic and cope with the difficulties of immersion as a young teenager in a new culture. Yo looks for agency in her storytelling, which helps her to deal with her fears. As she reinvents the past, she revisits her memories and comes to terms with her own personal dilemmas about her identity. Conversely, the sisters are disturbed that Yo becomes successful at the expense of their life stories. In a sense, Yo’s agency is dependent upon her sisters’ lives being interesting and controversial, so that they will make compelling subjects in her fiction.⁴⁷

When the time comes for the family to welcome the birth of Sandi’s child, Yo’s absence is omnipresent. She is the person they love to hate, but their hatred is impossible to carry out. All members of the García family recognize that their family as a whole is not perfect, and thus they do not ostracize Yo totally. Indeed, Sandi herself calls Yo to inform her of the birth of her son. In a fashion suggestive of the general deceptive trends

⁴⁷One significant example of a controversial decision is Sandi’s choice to become a mother via unconventional means. Unlike Sandi, Yo decides to remain childless, though she constantly wrestles with this decision. Both Sandi’s and Yo’s decisions are a slap in the face of tradition, especially Latin American cultural traditions which are generally characterized by a macho male attitude that compels women to marry and have children. In her essay “Imagining Motherhood,” Álvarez writes: “Being childless—by choice—is tantamount to being wicked and selfish. Marriage is a sacrament for the procreation of children, how many times have my old tías told me that?” (99). Creating a female character like Sandi perhaps is Álvarez’s way of arguing that her own choice should be considered acceptable in a continually evolving society. Álvarez has herself battled with the issue of motherhood.

of the family, Sandi's phone call seems to try to make up for not informing Yo of her pregnancy from the start. In Fifi's words we read: decision

It's as if Sandi is filled with nine months' worth of news that she's going to deliver now that she's finished giving birth to her son. And she's talking to a machine, for heaven's sake! I suppose it's her one chance to say all she wants without someone in the family cutting in with their version of the story (18).

Despite their anger, the sisters find it hard to exclude Yo from the García household's events. They cannot deny the bond of sisterhood, even when their sister has aired their dirty laundry to her multitudes of readers.

Though Fifi has the power of authorship over her first-person narration, she often narrates using the pronoun "we," merging her other sisters' voices with her own. In a way, she carries the weight of representing the collective experience of the rest of the female siblings. Conversely, though they do not claim agency, as Fifi does through her narration, Carla and Sandi are still able to express their shared anger. Throughout the chapter, Fifi's first-person narration is speckled and intertwined with other first-person narrations, namely those of Sandi and Yo. The prologue, however, is entitled "the sisters" rather than "the sister," suggesting that all the sisters—Carla, Sandi and Fifi—must have their say about Yo's demolition of the family's privacy. When the perspectives of the other sisters are related, Álvarez moves the narrative from first to third person. Although just one sister acquires near complete agency, the voices of the others are heard, nonetheless.

4.5 The mother

Laura, Yo's mother, joins forces with Fifi and is just as angry with her daughter for creating a fictional character out of her personality and re-writing her life story without permission. Consequently, in this second part of the novel, the reader encounters another female character that undertakes to reclaim her own story and agency by use of first-person narration. Through written communication, Laura persuades those that read her story to believe her version of accounts, undoubtedly making the reader an active participant.

The title of the mother's chapter, which awards some degree of trust to this account, is "mother/nonfiction," in contrast to the sisters' "fiction". In fact, the mother's chapter begins in this manner: "*To tell you the truth*, the hardest thing coming to this country wasn't the winter everyone warned me about – it was *the language*" (21; emphasis added). Two points are worthy of analysis here, both of which set the tone for the mother's chapter and for my analysis of this character. The first point is that, from the beginning, Laura devotes her account to "telling truth" to the reader, a move that indicates that we are to ignore the previous stories and accept her version as the credible one.⁴⁸ The second point to highlight is her use of the word "language." While speaking of language here, Laura refers to the difficulty of learning English her comment also foreshadows her struggles with other varieties of language communication. For example, Yo has taken away her mother's own voice and inserted her own in its place. On the whole, the beginning of this chapter that Laura is interested in owning her first-person

⁴⁸ It is important to reiterate here that, for the García family, lying is a part of the family dynamic.

narration and in using her voice and language to assert and make dominant her version of the story.

The reader is drawn (as in Fifi's narrative) to the mother's first-person narrative and its persuasive and convincing voice. The reader is swept up in a journey into the inner truth of Laura's life in the Dominican Republic and the United States. Laura's compelling passion results from her desire for vindication and self-validation after the public circulation of the untrue (in her opinion) account of her life in her daughter's book. Though Laura believes she is not a natural-born storyteller like her daughter, the power of her narrative suggests otherwise. While much of Laura's narrative revolves around her relationship with Yo, she pays considerable attention to her entire family's collective experience as emigrants from the Dominican Republic.

Through Laura's account, Álvarez touches on the topic of exile, particularly during General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's dictatorship.⁴⁹ Trujillo brutally governed his country from 1930 until 1961, when he was assassinated by his own military. During the regime, Trujillo exercised power with an iron hand, particularly against those who opposed his views, and prevented people from leaving the country. Nevertheless, many Dominicans escaped the island and sought political asylum in other countries, especially the United States. Such was the narrative of the fictional García family, who sought political exile in the United States during Trujillo's tyrannical rule. Yo's father, in particular, had been part of the revolutionary underground, working to overthrow

⁴⁹ Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina was born on October 24, 1891 in the Dominican Republic and died on May 30, 1961. During the United States occupation, Trujillo was trained by United States marines and quickly became the commander in chief of the Dominican Republic. During his reign, while the economy of the country grew, Trujillo sanctioned individual freedom. He tortured and killed all those that opposed the dictator and his policies. For more, see *The Militarization of Culture in the Dominican Republic, from the Captains General to General Trujillo*, by Valentina Peguero (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004).

Trujillo's government. Fearing for his life as well as those of his loved ones, Yo's father made the decision to flee to the United States.

Laura is, importantly, the only female character who touches upon the topic of the dictatorship, albeit briefly. She paints a picture of fear despite relative safety, wherein memories of Trujillo's dictatorship remain stark and haunting even in the midst of life in the United States. In telling her story, Laura ponders:

Isn't a story a charm? All you have to say is, *And then we came to the United States*, and with that *and then*, you skip over four more years of disappearing friends, sleepless nights, house arrest, narrow escape, *and then*, you've got two adults and four wired-up kids in a small, dark apartment near Columbia University. Yo must have kept her mouth shut or no charm would have worked to get us free of the torture chambers we kept telling the immigration people about so they wouldn't send us back.

(28)

In a way, storytelling becomes a means for Laura to justify her life. In the last sentence of the previous passage, Laura emphasizes how she has to make up stories of torture chambers in order for her family to remain in the United States. Communicating her own necessary awareness of the importance of storytelling, Laura shares how her family's life and fate depended on a story.

Additionally, in the previous paragraph, while Laura recounts some possible scenarios during Trujillo's regime, she is aware that in recounting them the process of storytelling emerges. Taken a step further, the family's fate is dependent on how each individual manages the use of language. Like her daughter, though arguably for more

noble ends, Laura uses her imagination to invent stories to secure her family's stay in the United States. At the end of the chapter, Laura wonders about Yo's intelligence and her gift of telling stories. In a moment of insight, she realizes the role that writing plays for her daughter: "And suddenly, I am feeling such envy for my daughter, who is able to speak of what terrifies her. I myself can't find the words in English –or Spanish. Only the howling of the bear I used to impersonate captures some of what I feel" (34). I argue that what Laura does not realize, however, is that her daughter's book, which prompted this opportunity for Laura herself to write a counter-narrative in response, is ironically itself the key for Laura to overcome the insecurities and trials of her life through the same power of writing that her daughter exploits.

Another example of how Laura employs stories is when she uses storytelling to discipline her children, incorporating the now-familiar García methods of lying and manipulation. Her ability to story tell gives her the opportunity to insert her own voice. She achieves agency precisely by telling and owning her stories. For instance, Laura uses a mink coat to tell a story and at the same time to discipline her children. The coat reminds the García girls of Cuco, the Haitian boogeyman, whose purpose is to take them away if they act up and do not listen to their mother. All the girls truly believe that Cuco is behind the fur coat. Unfortunately, Yo has a bad experience with the mink coat one day as she is locked unknowingly in the closet. She is scared and fearful for her life. While in the closet, she comes across a gun that could incriminate her father and possibly put their lives at risk. The family's fate, according to Laura, depends much on Yo. Laura learns that she has to watch what stories she tells her daughters, because the consequences of her stories, as in the case of Cuco, are so apt to spin out of control.

Storytelling, as a form of a language communication, is Laura's way of inserting her own voice. Laura is very aware of what she wants to tell the reader. As she reflects about what story to tell the social worker who is at her house investigating stories told by Yo at school, Laura writes: "...people only know the parts we want to tell about ourselves" (34). This excerpt suggests that she is aware and in control of how she communicates her thoughts. In this way, Laura intentionally chooses and selects the elements she deems important and necessary. Her conscious and potentially manipulative selection of information creates some skepticism on the part of the reader, but at the same time emphasizes that these same techniques of telling or writing a story can save lives. Yet, she does so without realizing that her daughter's model of storytelling has helped her to justify her life and provide a venue to release her fears.

Finally, Laura's role is important to this text for its approach to issues of exile, particularly the language barrier, that is, Laura's difficulty of learning English. Álvarez uses this mother character to highlight and comment on the social conditions facing immigrants, particularly female immigrants in the United States. While Laura's social status does not change, even in a foreign country—her husband continues to practice his medical career in the United States—her narrative underscores the idea that she has escaped a life of fear in the Dominican Republic. Through her conscious and compelling storytelling techniques, and the ability to self-reflect using first-person narration, Laura is able to own her story of exile and trials between nations. By the end of her narrative, Laura has achieved agency, because she has received strength from her own writing. Laura replaces painful images of the past with images of a prominent future for her family.

4.6 The cousin

Lucinda is Yo's cousin from the Dominican Republic, and her tale continues the focus on Yo. The daughter of a prominent man who ran for President of the Dominican Republic many times, Lucinda is quick to insert her own first-person narration, beginning her story: "Don't think I don't know what the García girls used to say about us island cousins" (36). From the start, she paints a rather negative portrait of Yo and her sisters. The critical tone continues throughout of this chapter in an accusation aimed at the García sisters, beginning by mocking and attacking their perceptions of young Dominican girls during their family's summer trips to the Dominican Republic. Lucinda's family, sent her to high school in the US fearing that, in the Dominican Republic she might rashly marry someone of a different social standing.

Lucinda's tone quickly evolves from accusatory to defensive. Her cousins guide Lucinda to think critically about a life lived purely for the achievements of glamour and feminine perfection. Nevertheless, readers quickly notice that she is not the typical spoiled, rich girl. She narrates:

I don't deny I looked around me once I was trapped here for the rest of my life. I saw the women in their designer pantsuits loaded with gold, the little rounds of teas and parties. I saw the older tías with their daily masses and novenas, praying to ensure the family a good place in the next life while their husbands went off on business trips with pretty mistresses they pretended were wives. I saw the maids in their color-coded uniforms working way past overtime. (37)

Without wanting to admit it, her cousins have helped Lucinda realize that there should be more to a woman than wearing designer clothes or maintaining a fake family image. Accused of being concerned only with their physical appearance, particularly their hair and finger nails, women in the Dominican Republic, as seen through the eyes of the young García girls, seem insensitive to the plight of the poor. Though harboring largely negative feelings towards the summer visits of the García girls, Lucinda herself recognizes the faults in the lives of elite Dominican women.

Of all the female figures in the book, only Lucinda poses a threat to Yo for two reasons. First, she is also a writer, and second, they have the same love interest during their teenage years. Unintentionally, Lucinda challenges Yo in her strongest suit: writing. In one of her high school English classes, Lucinda writes a poem. Thinking Lucinda's efforts worthy of publication, the teacher submits the poem to the school's literary magazine. Once published, Lucinda's reputation changes. In addition to being popular among boys, she is now praised for her schoolwork. In response to her cousin's literary success, Yo feels threatened, and the seeds of jealousy are planted. Lucinda becomes aware of Yo's jealousy and quickly realizes the threat she poses for Yo. She reflects: "It was as if I'd trespassed into her creative ken by making a big splash with my pen" (44). As surprised as Lucinda is at this gift of writing, she begins to feel happy and reflects on this experience as the one that "convinced me that I had a brain" (45). She manages to do well in her classes, which prompts the school's headmaster to encourage her to apply for college. Although it is uncommon for girls in the Dominican Republic to pursue a college education, Lucinda convinces her parents to allow her to attend. She is aware that education brings independence along with intellectual growth and will grant her the

ability to think. In other words, by being educated, Lucinda will be able to form her own opinions, not just accept those that society imposes on her.

The second part of this chapter's title is "poetry," taking its cue from the poem that Lucinda wrote in high school. In an act of revenge for Lucinda's usurping her position as the family writer, Yo falls in love with Roe, Lucinda's boyfriend. Yo's anger festers as she takes stock of her unhappiness through her journal, in which she writes about Lucinda's relationship with Roe. When Laura discovers her daughter's journal, she immediately informs Lucinda's parents of their daughter's relationship. What follows next comprises a heartbreaking end to Lucinda's dream of attending college in the United States. At this point, the possibility of continuing college and remaining in the United States is extremely remote. Lucinda's parents withdraw her from school and take her back to the Dominican Republic. Because of the extreme consequences in Lucinda's life, Yo feels guilty of "betrayal" toward her cousin and yearns for forgiveness. By this point, of course, the reader is aware that inventing stories is Yo's specialty. Both Yo and the reader are aware that much of her cousin's fate was the result of the stories Yo made up in her journal, themselves the result of Yo's jealousy over her cousin's instant fame.

Like the other female characters, Lucinda, too, authors her own version of the story, using first-person narration. Having lived in the Dominican Republic and the United States, Lucinda's character feels both an outsider and simultaneously an insider in the two national spaces. For this reason, Álvarez uses Lucinda's character mainly to raise issues of ethnicity and gender facing immigrants in the United States, while also facing the possibility of return to the home country. Once back in the Dominican Republic, Lucinda rejects the traditional model of female passivity and refuses to feel sorry for

herself. Though one can interpret Lucinda's end as negative, the opposite can also be argued. While Lucinda never has the chance to see how her life would have turned out in the United States, back in the Dominican Republic she develops a strong sense of self and is highly independent and ready to act to fulfill her needs, while fully understanding her circumstances. She is aware that her life could have been different, less challenging, as is apparent when she lists her accomplishments as follows: "wife, mother, career girl—I've managed them all—and that's not easy in our *third* world country" (52). In the end, Lucinda pities Yo because she has not found happiness. The chapter started with an accusatory tone, but ends with a verdict: "you are the haunted one who ended up living your life mostly on paper" (53). Like the stories of the previous female characters examined thus far, Lucinda's story centers around her owning her account of story. This process opens the door for her to claim agency.

4.7 The maid's daughter

Sara, or Sarita—the maid's daughter—is one of the main characters of the novel who deserves close attention. Through this complex, strong, female character Álvarez raises issues of race and class, with which Sara struggles as she works towards a sense of her own identity. In her narrative, readers notice the deep and conflictive social differences that exist in the Caribbean and in the U.S. She is the daughter of Primitiva, the García's maid, who also leaves the Dominican Republic to work for the family. Before moving to the United States to join her mother, Sara lived with her grandmother in one of the remote villages of the Dominican Republic. Both she and her mother were born out of wedlock. While at the boarding school in her homeland, Sara is surrounded

by “dark-skinned girls, many of whom had light eyes and good hair on account of they were the illegitimate daughters of maids and the young or old dons of important families” (55). Therefore, Sara believes that she too attends the school because she is the daughter of one of the family’s favorite maids.

Sara’s account of her younger life is filled with rage and resentment. At her mother’s request Sara moves to the United States, where she is told by Yo’s mother that a school for black kids would be the most comfortable place for her. This remark illustrates the constant imprinting on Sara of the emotional scars of racism as she is growing up. In the end, however, Sara attends the same school that as the García girls, at the expense of the family. During this period, Yo is in college. In one of her trips back home, Yo accompanies Sara to school every day so that she can write a report about her acculturation, “as a way of understanding her own immigrant experience” (62). During this process, Sara feels that her life and privacy have been invaded by Yo’s creative writing and that her life is a canvas waiting to be written by the rich daughter of her mother’s employer. We learn that Sara’s classmates do not know much about her origin; they believe she is the daughter of a mysterious rich family. Predictably, when Yo unearths this detail of Sara’s life in the United States, she is captivated. Yo elaborates on this anecdote in one of her fictional stories. Like the intimate experiences of Yo’s sisters, Sara’s life has now been publicly revealed, albeit in a fictional form, making it impossible for her to continue at the school. Upset by the report, Sara tries to steal it, causing a big commotion in the house and disrupting Yo in particular. When Yo learns of Sara’s thievery, she ignores the negative impact of her writing on Sara, the motive for the

act. As has happened before and will happen again, Yo's inventive storytelling has elicited a negative emotional response.

In the García household, Sara feels herself the victim of constant discrimination, even though the young García girls try to embrace her as one of their own. To them, Sara represents a type of trophy: someone that can be easily molded. She becomes the canvas on which they can practice the lessons they have acquired from their new culture, incorporating aspects of United States culture along with those of their native country. Sara reflects on her own version of events: "those girls treated me like a combination of favorite doll, baby sister, and goodwill project" (57). Their "sisterhood" and attempts to help Sara are, more than anything, a sign of a pity, which in itself reflects their scorn and prejudice. They cannot see beyond Sara's skin color and role as the maid's daughter. Lucinda, in her narrative account, recounted how the García girls allowed her to question the versions of domination she witnessed in the Dominican Republic; conversely, in the chapter that Sara narrates, the sisters are themselves perpetrators of such acts in the U.S.

As the daughter of a maid, Sara is aware that she can be perceived among her friends. Her mother's status conveys the image of the uneducated, a person attached to rural practices, associated with food preparation and housework, and so on. In response to her situation, Sara defies all the attributes that her mother's identity brings to her, making it her goal to break away from inherited historical and ideological archetypes. What is more, she feels the sting of racial and class discrimination, especially when Yo refers to her mother as "Primitiva." Sara knows very well the meaning of this word, the nickname the family gives to María Trinidad, Sara's mother. The nickname Primitiva is so engraved in the maid's mind that she has forgotten her real name. In conversation with

Sara, she tells her daughter: “I’m used to it mi’ja. At this point, I’d get all confused if someone changed it. Lord knows my old head has enough trouble remembering who I am as it is” (66).

While the reader is not told the origin of the nickname, the name Primitiva itself says much. In a way, she barely exists; she is primitive and marginally able to function. The name does not sit well with Sara, who is enraged at this discrimination. Primitiva’s situation can be conceptualized as one living with a colonized cultural mindset. Primitiva is aware of her subordinate status, as the above quote suggests; however, she is unable to act to change it. Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), draws on the Algerian people’s struggle against colonialism and writes: “Individual experience, because it is national and because it is a link in the chain of national existence, ceases to be individual, limited, and shrunken and is enabled to open out into the truth of the nation and of the world” (200). If we apply Fanon’s thought to Álvarez’s text, this quote suggests, then, that Primitiva’s situation is not experienced only by her in all the Dominican Republic. In fact, today there are still many Primitivas who live this reality as someone’s maid. Álvarez writes a female character with Primitiva’s characteristics and subject position so that she can bring to light this type of subjugation, one still common in today’s culture.

The reader does not fail to grasp that Laura, Yo’s mother, has brought a maid all the way from the Dominican Republic to the United States to work for her. Primitiva’s continued service to the family in a foreign land indicates that servitude and discrimination have no borders and no limits. While servitude is illegal in the United States, the García family feels above the law. Cynthia Steele has examined the

wife/servant relationship, suggesting that the presence of the maid allows housewives not to confront their husbands about the sexual division of labor in the household (297-328). Critic Debra Castillo reflects on Steele's point of view and writes: "The maid buffers and displaces institutional critique, while well-to-do women retain a vested interest in conserving the class distinctions for the very purpose of ensuring themselves the advantages of a fragile feminist rhetorical position within and outside the home" (*Talking* 12). In a way, Primitiva's role as the García's servant is to perform duties that Laura herself cannot or will not do.

At home, Primitiva's basement sleeping spot suggests yet another layer of class and racial prejudice. Sara reflects upon her mother's condition in the United States and writes the following in her own testimonial account:

Mamá had been there five years, and she said she still didn't know anyone in the houses around ours. The only people Mamá ever saw were the patients that came next door to see the psychologist, who had an office in her house...I felt all the more grateful to Mamá for what she'd been through for five lonely years, *imprisoned –that's the way I thought of it...*" (60; emphasis mine).

Although only a young teenager, Sara quickly realizes that her mother's existence is close to that of a prisoner whose life is reduced only to domestic affairs. In Álvarez's text, Sara finds it hard to understand her mother's silence, which I read as a means of self-protection. Unlike her daughter, who is given a voice to narrate her story, Primitiva's voice is left unheard, though her daughter speaks on her behalf. The maid herself does

not achieve agency, the reader is led to conclude, because she knows and experiences nothing but discrimination.

Furthermore, Primitiva lives a life of silence imposed by others, or brought on by the isolation of her job. Sara's purpose in her testimonial writing, then, is to translate her mother's silence into an important part of her own written discourse. Silence can only go so far, as Debra Castillo points out, since one needs communicative means to create change (40-41). The topic of silence has a long history of examination and interpretation over the centuries. One of the key female writers and thinkers in Latin America, who reflected a great deal on silence is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,. In *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, she writes:

Casi me he determinado a dejarlo al silencio; pero como éste es cosa negativa, aunque explica mucho con el énfasis de no explicar, es necesario ponerle algún breve rótulo para que se entienda lo que se pretende que el silencio diga; y si no, dirá nada el silencio, porque ése es su propio oficio: *decir nada* (828; emphasis added).

Critic Josefina Ludmer analyzes this passage in "Tretas del débil": "the 'no decir' and 'no saber' are two premeditated actions. Sor Juana chooses not to say what she knows and knows what she should not say" (47-54). Neither of these two forms of reflection stands as superior to the other. Rather, these passages suggest that, often, silence speaks louder than words. Through silence, Primitiva realizes that her life is destined and planned; silence gives her a space to reflect and understand the inner part of her life.

Primitiva has humbly accepted how others view her status, even to the point of internalizing the degrading name that the family assigns her. In response to her treatment,

she displays only feelings of gratitude and submission to the García family, for she knows that if she were to do something about the painful class struggle, her future, and particularly that of her daughter, would only suffer as a consequence, as the following quote suggests: “One false step and we will be sent back” (57).⁵⁰ Primitiva places much responsibility upon Sara. Significantly, she constantly tells her daughter not to make too much of the García’s affection, because, no matter what they say or how they treat her, she is only the daughter of a maid. This advice suggests that Primitiva is more aware of her situation than her passivity suggests, although she is unable to change it.

The second part of the title of Sara’s chapter is “report,” which, as noted above, is the cause of Sara’s conflict with Yo. The report, which in theory carries veracity, is ideally a non-fiction document that details an account of an event. In Yo’s case, however, a report is just another platform through which to practice her storytelling. She plans to observe and record Sara’s process of acculturation in the United States, which thus marks this text as an ethnographic report. In terms of knowledge and expertise, it seems that Yo has more credibility to speak of her own acculturation rather than that of her maid’s daughter. In addition, Sara has not been assimilated fully to the new culture, nor has she felt the same degree of cultural displacement as Yo, precisely because she has had less contact with the new culture.⁵¹ Nevertheless, I argue that Álvarez had her reasons for choosing the word “report,” despite the ways in which the genre seems to not fit the chapter. In other words, Sara’s role—in the narrative of the novel—is to report on another

⁵⁰ Primitiva’s attitude calls to mind Ana Lydia Vega’s character Bela, who is discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Both women feel grateful to their “owners”; their gratitude surpasses feelings of submission. Subsequently, both Bela and Primitiva’s position reveal the hidden past.

⁵¹ During the school year, Sara’s routine consisted of living at home and going to school. After school, her mother picked her up at the bus stop with her classmates. The latter, for this reason, believed the mother to be Sara’s maid.

layer of the experiences of Dominican women whose voices are often left unheard: the colored serving class, specifically Primitiva. In this vein, then, Sara's reporting and exposure of the life of the Dominican woman of color is her way of inserting her voice and asserting her agency. Furthermore, the title "maid's daughter-report" also alludes to the misconceived notion that women of the poor and lower classes in Dominican culture, who are predominantly black or *mulatta*, were ignorant and unintelligent and could not be educated. That Sara writes a *report* of her life conveys that she has become an educated young woman, defying those images that associate the children of the poor with confinement to the space of the home.

Sara is aware of the injustices that her country's regime perpetuates against women of low social status. This rage against injustice pushes Sara to aspire to possibilities beyond what is expected for a maid's daughter. Indeed, Sara defies everyone's expectations by becoming a famous doctor. Unfortunately, her mother is unable to see her achievements: she dies before Sara completes her education. Silvio Sirias, in *Julia Álvarez: A Critical Companion* (2001), observes of Sara: "In spite of her considerable achievements, Sara will always belong to the lower class in the eyes of her fellow Dominicans—particularly in the eyes of the de la Torre clan" (102). Unlike Sirias, I find that the adult Sara has achieved that which proves the opposite view. Her medical career marks her as middle or upper-class woman and places her as an intellectual and privileged woman in society.

She also has the chance to prove her new status to Yo, who visits Sara in the clinic where she works as a renowned doctor. While Sara gives voice to the

socioeconomic discrimination she felt while growing up, the reader soon realizes that her social status has changed. Describing the encounter she notes, as Yo is about to leave:

I put my arms around her. I can feel her dry skin against my cheeks. She's the first to pull away. "I better go," she says, looking over her shoulder.

Laughing awkwardly. "your boss is going to get on your case for keeping your patients waiting."

"I am the boss," I say, smiling straight at her.

"Just like predicted!" (72)

Yo leaves the clinic unfulfilled, while Sara has a lifetime to enjoy a future that she was told not to imagine. We sense, too, in the above excerpt, that Sara exhibits the same need to display her accomplishments to Yo that Lucinda felt earlier. She declares that she does not form part of a social or employment class anymore where others can exercise any control over her.

The reader sees Sara as—a woman of color—belonging to a group that is often negated or forgotten entirely when it comes to representation. She is the "café-con-leche with long, black hair and hazel eyes" (58). Debra Castillo's commentary about this type of underrepresented woman describes, in my opinion, Álvarez's concern with Sara. Specifically, Castillo asserts: "One of the jobs of the woman writers is to probe delicately at the edges of this official indifference, to force the dominant culture to recognize these regions, to unleash their dominant power, to impinge upon official consciousness without inciting it to even harsher reprisals" (*Talking* 58). Álvarez's portrayal of Sara is not that of the exotically different or romanticized heroine. In fact, as Sara's writing takes us through her life, she clearly embodies qualities to which all women might aspire, such as

freedom of thought, self-confidence, and disregard for social conventions. While Primitiva's voice cannot be recuperated, Sara's achieving of agency is an indication that racial discrimination can be overcome. In this chapter, Sara is able to achieve agency by narrating her own life in her own words. Moreover, her narrative breaks free from the forms of domination or suppression that characterized her life under the care of the Garcías. As she grows up, Sara realizes that she is nobody's subordinate. On the contrary, she writes that she is the one in charge and that, in these days, neither Yo nor anyone else can discriminate against her as the maid's daughter. She is an important character, particularly in this text, because through her Álvarez illuminates important issues of race, class, and gender both in the culture of the Dominican Republic and in that of the immigrant Dominican community within the United States.

4.8 The best friend

This next chapter marks the beginning of a change in the atmosphere around Yo that has been constructed by the narratives of the previous female figures. To this point, Yo has been described as intrusive, selfish, and interfering, sacrificing other characters' understandings of and attachments to their lived experiences in order to produce her fiction. It is not until the account of her best friend, Tammy Rosen, that the reader discovers a different approach to Yo and that her seemingly one-dimensional personality is called into question. Unlike the previous female characters, Tammy's storytelling does not carry any feeling of anger or resentment toward Yo. In fact, her portrait of her Dominican friend is sensual and compassionate.

At the time of her first encounter with Yo, Tammy is recuperating from a marriage to an abusive husband. She meets Yo at a women's therapy group composed of writers, musicians and painters. At the center of the group's talks is the topic of the muse. Each woman comes from a different background and, "at the back of every bland canvas, empty notebook, tin-ear composition book is an ex-husband or soon-to-be-ex-husband or a bad lover or an unresponsive lover" (132). Afflicted by some type of man situation, and inspired by that experience to create her art, each woman attempts to lessen the power of men over women creatively and symbolically.

Through Tammy's first-person narration we read about her life and learn that she is seeing three men at the same time, a choice that helps her to feel power and control over the opposite sex.⁵² For some time, Yo lives in Tammy's house, which brings them even closer. Although the reader might assume at first that there is a sexual attraction between the two women, their actions quickly dispel any such assumption. Over time, their closeness is explained in terms of their similarity and mutual need to rely on each other's strength. More than anything, that Tammy's sharing of Yo's passion for writing and poetry is what binds them together. Both women are engaged in a journey of self-discovery. Moreover, they find that by writing and reading poetry they can resolve their problems. In fact, every night Tammy and Yo share their poetry. Thus, it makes sense that it is in the space of poetry as well as in the writing of her narrative that Tammy achieves agency.

⁵² In Tammy's chapter, we learn that Yo, contrary to her best friend, has opted for celibacy, in order to, at least, feel in control of herself.

Motivation, as part of Tammy's storytelling, is another characteristic that unites these two women. Since both are in the process of rediscovering who they are, they act as steadfast teammates for one another. The two women are critical yet thoughtful in approaching each other's problems. For example, Yo gently suggests that Tammy does not need men in order to complete her life or feel good about herself. In one of her talks with Tammy, Yo sits her friend down, holds her hand, and shares her true thoughts on Tammy's choices: "Okay Tammy Rosen, now I'm going to level with you. What I've seen going on in this house is not popularity or friendship or anything that's going to keep. You're running away from men just as fast as I am. And sure, you're still writing great poetry, but your personal life stinks!" (141). These words are a moment of truth and establish merit for Tammy. She becomes conscious that men cannot fill her emotional void; happiness must originate from within. As the second part of the chapter's title suggests, each woman motivates the other to renegotiate womanhood in her own way.

Tammy's narrative underscores the similarities and differences between the two friends' personalities and socio-cultural categories. Though their origins differ—one is Dominican, while the other is North American—Tammy's narrative suggests similarities among women who confront oppressive situations through artistic endeavors. For Tammy and Yo, writing and reading poetry is a means to gain strength and really hear each other's voices. Additionally, Álvarez's analysis of these two female characters emphasizes that agency, for single women, is achieved through becoming independent and accomplished.

4.9 The landlady

Mary, Yo's landlady, is the last of the six female characters whose narratives populate the novel. Mary's portrayal of herself throughout her chapter is what Teresa de Lauretis describes as a "subject in two senses of the term: both subject-ed to social constraint and yet subject in the sense of the maker as well as user of culture, intent on self-definition and self-determination" ("Feminist Studies" 10). Mary comes from a poor background and struggles with her sense that she is overweight. She is uneducated and dependent on her husband Clair to support her financially. Her marriage resembles Tammy's in that Clair not only abuses and insults Mary, but is also unfaithful to her. Because Mary does not think much of herself, she believes she is unable to survive without her husband. Mary's self-deprecation forms part of a group of women that "often participate in and actively promote their own victimization," which Debra Castillo and other feminist thinkers view as a "puzzlement and embarrassment" for all women (*Talking* 23). In fact, Mary would prefer the beating and insults to being alone. Mary writes of her relationship with her husband: "I'm getting pushed around a lot more, and I'm feeling it a lot more as I've started to take off the weight. Gets me to thinking maybe I put on those eighty pounds as padding against his fist coming at me" (159). She is taught to always accept her situation and patiently bears her husband's beatings, deception, and betrayals.

Indeed, her writing underscores how she perceives her life as a place of struggle and subordination. However, Mary's ability to write and reflect upon the physical and verbal abuse of her husband in the end gives her the strength to resist. Mary's narrative begins with the image of her inside her home. The reader learns that home is the space where she feels confined and experiences alienation from the world. Her status in the

domestic realm brings to mind Adrienne Rich's comment that, "for mothers, the privatization of the home has meant not only an increase in powerlessness, but a desperate loneliness...house-bound ...isolated" (*Of Woman Born* 53-4). Such is the case for Mary, who feels herself trapped and imprisoned in her own home. Mary feels victimized by her husband and the domestic sphere to which he and his needs have assigned her. Her self-esteem is barely existent at this point, as her words testify. It is clear, however, that Mary is frustrated with the situation and realizes that her life needs a change. She writes: "I start making this plan in my head that I'm going to get me a job and pay her that security myself and then move out on her tail...But it's all daydreams for now, cause I won't even go out of this house till I have enough of this weight off where people aren't going to stare" (165). This possibility of a change begins to create a new outlook for her future. The above self-reflection makes apparent that Mary knows the severity of her situation, but does not have the strength or knowledge to confront it—not yet.

Nevertheless, the second part of the title of Mary's chapter is "confrontation," the precise action that must occur in order for Mary to achieve agency. Mary needs to confront her situation, so that she can change it. As the end of Mary's narrative approaches, the reader senses that her voice has become stronger and more in control. This is evident in the scene where Yo helps Mary throw her husband's belongings out in the front yard, something she would never have thought of, much less carried out, on her own. This act of dumping anything that belonged to her husband is a symbol of self-awakening and of letting go of the past. Such actions of confronting one's situation, says Debra Castillo, point out that women in general have the ability to confront their fears.

Castillo emphasizes that “[e]ventually the woman must break silence and write, negotiating tricky domains of the said and the unsaid” (*Talking* 42). Álvarez has provided the medium for Mary to write her story in her own first-person narration. As Mary reflects, she experiences a change of consciousness and uses writing as the optic by which she will overcome the scar of her husband’s abuse during those years.

In addition, it is precisely in the process of her writing that Mary goes through a journey of self-discovery and self-definition. Writing in the first-person allows her to achieve the agency of speaking, a useless action in the presence of her husband. Further, by being able to vent and tell her story the way she experiences it, she will be able to define her life the way she wants to, overcoming the husband’s control over her. She knows, however, that it will not be easy: “Every once in a while I get this sinking feeling, wondering how I’m going to keep going, but all I got to do is pass the girls’ bedroom and I get new gasoline” (168).

Yo is an important companion for Mary, helping her to realize the injustices in her life. Like Tammy’s account, Mary’s narration also paints a caring and kind portrait of Yo. Yo initially remains distant from her landlady’s situation, though always hinting at the unfairness of Mary’s relationship. When Yo’s writing notebooks are lost, however, she angrily runs to her landlady to vent her anger. Ultimately, this encounter will lead Mary to leave her husband. This event, coupled with her husband’s affairs, is the last straw that makes Mary incapable of tolerating any more. Devoid of anger or resentment, Mary’s chapter depicts Yo as strong yet fragile, outspoken yet careful to avoid hurting the feelings of others. In Mary’s eyes, Yo represents the type of woman who inspires others and deserves admiration. Often Yo points out that Mary deserves a better life and a

better husband, and these words of encouragement are what Mary needs to heal her self-esteem.

In Mary's self-writing, I argue, the reader views a subject in the making, different from the other female figures examined in this chapter. There is a sense of immediate presence, as if what had just happened is actually happening in front of our eyes. There is also more emphasis on the use of the present tense in Mary's writing, suggesting that this process of empowerment is just beginning, that the readers are seeing this change unravel before their very eyes. Lastly, as already noted, Mary started her writing by locating herself inside her home. However, as she continues the process of self-discovery, Mary chooses to end her narrative with the image of her sitting on the porch, a location suggestive of moving away from the inside of her home with a newfound sense of freedom and destiny.

Through the exploration of Mary's quest for agency, Álvarez investigates the theme of poverty, especially as it relates to abusive relationships. Mary is the domestic embodiment of poverty, unjust relationships, and lack of self-esteem. In order to redeem this female character, Álvarez has given her the ability to conquer the domestic space to which she has been confined. In addition, through her own voice Mary channels expression and defies the grip of the patriarchal system. By authoring and taking control of their lives, women can overcome silence and victimization, and, like the rest of the female characters herein examined, Mary likewise achieves agency and transformation by getting to know herself through her writing.

4.10 The trajectory of the male characters

This discussion of the novel *¡Yo!* cannot end without some mention of the many male characters in Álvarez's text, characters that serve to highlight complex power relations via the placement of women and men in the story. Álvarez portrays the same variety in the depiction of her male characters as she does with the female characters. Just as there was a duality in the representation of female characters, where one group sided with and one group against the novel's heroine Yo, *¡Yo!* depicts male characters whose relationships to Yo and to the female gender are based on violence and abuse, and other male figures who appear compassionate, caring and sympathetic. Specifically, the most notable men in the novel are the husband figure, Yo's father, the teacher, the student, Yo's husband, and the caretaker.

One cannot mention patriarchal violence in this context without touching upon the topic of machismo, displayed in the behavior of some of the male characters described above. Throughout Álvarez's text, machismo is seen not to be a phenomenon strictly related to Latin American culture. On the contrary, it pertains just as much to North American culture, where female activities are limited strictly too, to childbearing and maintenance of the home. Many of the men that Álvarez presents in the text are the embodiment of machismo, wherein dominance over women is considered a natural thing.

Briefly, the figure of the husband, in general, represents the patriarchal abuse affecting the female figures of this text. This abuse is displayed in the beating of women of different classes, whether women from middle-class North America or the lower class of the Dominican Republic. Often the husbands in the novel beat their wives for reasons of jealousy, uncontrolled anger, or simply to demonstrate their superiority. These kinds of physical abuse are seen in the chapters written by the best friend, the landlord and others.

In Tammy's chapter, we read the following reflection about her ex-husband: "Pete's a sneak and a bully, that's the only way to put it. And it's amazing I've come out of this marriage with a full set of teeth." (133). Similarly, Yo's landlord's husband also fits the description of Tammy's husband. Clair is always "chasing after little girls and coming home drunk to beat up on his wife and kid," leaving Mary with bruises and a swollen face (157). It is precisely the continued abuse she has experienced while married that defines her future relationships with men. Tammy feels that, by seeing multiple men at once, she can exercise control over the opposite gender. With the help of Yo, she ends one such unhealthy relationship: "in a great burst of coming-clean resolution, I break things off with my Israeli, my activist, my computer guy" (141). It is Yo's intervention which helps the long-suffering wives, mothers, and friends to overcome their ingrained blindness to gender oppression.

Similarly, the figure of the father also plays an important role in this novel. Particularly, Yo experienced patriarchal violence in her childhood, as her own father gave her a severe beating for her creative storytelling. In a way, it was precisely this one fight that unleashed Yo's attitude of sympathy and understanding toward those that suffer under men's oppression. Recalling this scene, Yo's father narrates:

We took her into the bathroom and turned on the shower to drown out her cries. "Ay, Papi, Mami, no, por favor," she wailed. As my wife held her, I brought down that belt over and over, not with all my strength or I could have killed her, but with enough force to leave marks on her backside and legs. It was as if I had forgotten that she was a child, my child, and all I could think was that I had to silence our betrayer. (307)

Throughout the novel, the problem of patriarchal violence is closely related to problems that arise within families, whether between husband and wife or father and daughter.

As mentioned earlier, not all the male figures are portrayed negatively. A few have a caring and compassionate attitude towards women, though, arguably, all seem to be multifaceted, capable of being compassionate in one situation and brutally unaware in another. This complexity, which clearly also applies to the female characters, is the result of Álvarez's status of in-betweenness.⁵³ In other male figures, such as the teacher and the student, I argue, Álvarez presents male characters that are not clear and simple opponents of the female gender. On the contrary, they illustrate primarily men who are also capable of treating women as equals, a relationship that is predominantly modeled largely by Yo and Doug, her last North American husband.

The teacher, Professor Garfield, stands out for his continuous support of Yo's education and writing career. For him, she is the student that comes once in a lifetime and will be impossible to forget. He introduces Yo to the reader as a very adventurous spirit, never taking life seriously and quick to make life decisions, tendencies which often result in failure or, at least, unintended consequences. Professor Garfield stands out because through him Álvarez raises the issue of homosexuality and how wrestling with same sex affects familial dynamics, specifically when one of the spouses suddenly reveals a change in sexual preference. Indeed, in this chapter, male and female figures take a sharp turn. Garfield's wife is portrayed as the one that "had the coarse, foul mouth of a hussy when she had been drinking" (76). Yet the relationship of Garfield and his wife appear to be more complex than that of a hussy wife and an upstanding husband. She lives a life of

⁵³ For a brief discussion on in-betweenness, see Chapter Two, 96-97.

disaffection towards and distance from her husband, a situation eventually resulting in marital betrayal. For Garfield, the divorce is accompanied by the surfacing of feelings toward the same gender, something he experienced with his first boyfriend, Timothy Matthews, a junior faculty member of his department. Unfortunately, this relationship did not last, as Matthews died of HIV. What stands out in Garfield, as a male character, is his personal struggle to discover himself and his sexuality.

Lou, the student, is another compassionate male character. He is Yo's student, enrolled in one of her creative writing seminars. Lou depicts a Yo who has, in a way, abused his trust in her as his teacher. Particularly, she uses one of Lou's short stories for one of her published books, adapting it to a Hispanic setting. Upset and disappointed, Lou initially feels the urge to report the plagiarism to Yo's department at one of his college reunions. Nevertheless, like many of the other characters, he feels drawn to his former teacher's captivating character of the fragile yet boisterous hippie. While stories of men abusing women abound, Lou's narrative depicts the opposite. His relationship with women is positive, as is also demonstrated in his healthy, respectful marital relationship. Lou's experience with his teacher is that Yo abused his trust and creativity for her own self-interest and gain.

Overall, however, the novel depicts a variety of male characters who strive to control the lives of their wives and daughters. Silvio Sirias points out, in his discussion of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*: "Álvarez does provide a sharp contrast between the conditions of women on the island -and by extension Latin America- and the condition of women in the United States" (49). Along these lines, though the gender differential seems stronger in the Dominican Republic, one cannot help but notice that

men exert their power over women regardless of race and ethnicity. It is this message that Álvarez highlights in *¡Yo!*: machismo does not recognize borders. In fact, looking closely at the book, one notes that Álvarez deals most often with machismo and patriarchal violence in the case of female characters of North American origin, as the example of Yo's best friend and the landlady demonstrate.

4.11 Concluding Remarks

In *¡Yo!*, Álvarez engages female characters and explores the ways in which they can achieve agency. The novel reads as a collection of short fictional autobiographies that disclose, in one way or another, multiple oppressions experienced by the various female characters. Furthermore, it presents a multitude of women narrators who are strongly affected by different systems of power: machismo, racial prejudice, class differences, employment discrimination, and other oppressive situations. These multiple points of view, as Amy Kaminisky aptly suggests, acquire “a new urgency as a manifestation of the unsteady ground on which reality rests” (99).

In response to the various forms of subordination they confront, Álvarez offers female characters the ability to write and express their own accounts of the intimate details of their life. What happens with the characters in Álvarez's text is what Anne McClintock points out as characteristic of some of Frantz Fanon's texts: namely, that “there is a *designated* agency- an agency by invitation only” (366). That is, most of the characters examined in this chapter are given the right to express themselves, are invited to function as agents through the communication of their personal narrative, which then opens a discussion about negotiating elements of oppression and overcoming externally

imposed limitations. All the female characters who use first-person narration control the facts through the now well-known technique of alternating all the “I’s” present in the text. The characters’ storytelling confirms their creative presence as well as their capacity for acquiring agency. Through her employment of multiple female narrators, however, Álvarez rejects the traditional assumption that a unitary, synthesizing narrator can control her own narrative or responsibly share the lives of others. Nevertheless, it is obvious that behind each female character herein examined, the catalyst motivating their change is Yo. While she does not have direct power over the kinds of decisions they make, she does help them to release their frustrations at their different restrictions.

In addition, all the female characters in this novel strive to take responsibility for their lives, specifically by taking control of their narrative and destiny. The ability to voice their subordinate condition, as is the case for the maid’s daughter and the landlady, liberates their fears and insecurities, which gives them control over their own lives. The six female narrators evince persistence by critically examining issues such as race, ethnicity, class and gender from a minority standpoint. On the one hand, issues such as race and class discrimination are more salient for the maid’s daughter and the landlady. On the other hand, issues such as ethnic inequality are stronger in the accounts of the sisters, the mother, and the cousin. Significantly, the best friend and landlady are situated so as to demonstrate the impact of gender-based abuse. Therefore, one can rightly assume that Álvarez is interested in not offering one sole account of a subordinate female class, but rather in presenting multiple identities, variously tinted by these intersecting variables. Finally, each of the female figures highlights an anxiety to be self-represented, Álvarez’s constant personal quest.

At its heart, *!Yo!* explores the fraught relationship between reality and fiction. All six narratives aim to reinvent the past in order to recover and construct a sense of their author's own being and identity. Each female character narrates her story using the first-person as a means to define her personal and social self. The majority of the female characters portrayed in the text seek to escape a confining condition such as a certain gendered role or social institution. Through issues such as gender, class and race, the narratives of these female characters raise the questions and filter the notions of subjectivity and agency. By authoring their narratives, the characters signal an acute consciousness of women's positioning in their societies. In Álvarez's text, the female characters represent, to an extent, her own struggles as a writer of Hispanic descent.⁵⁴ As in this chapter, the female figures correspond to the women that Debra Castillo illuminates in her essay "Finding Feminism," where "their works, like their lives, are marginally fictionalized" (355).

While most of the characters voice a rather disappointing view of the protagonist, it is significant that it is Yo's writing that challenges them to write back. There is a sense of a dialogue between Yo and the other female characters, since these two parties write as a means to react or respond to the other. Therefore, the construction of subjectivity is dialogic, and agency is explained through the relation of the "I" with the other. The continuous presence of the protagonist in the narrative helps the women to discover their own inner selves and achieve agency. In other words, Yo's presence in their lives unleashes their deep anxiety to reinvent themselves; the protagonist helps them to initiate

⁵⁴ Álvarez's heroine, Yo, resembles the real life of the author. In *¡Yo!*, for example, in the chapter about the landlord, we read through Mary's writing, how Yo is undergoing tenure in the college she is teaching.

this process of change. Characters such as the maid's daughter, the best friend, and the landlady are only a few who, in the process of examining their histories, realize that they are not, in fact, doomed to live their lives as victims of machismo tradition or objects of patriarchy. Healing, for these women, is achieved in writing itself. This chapter aimed to underscore that the female characters that emerge in *!Yo!* are not stagnant. In fact, they tell many truths, telling stories about each other marked by ambivalence. Specifically, the different female portrayals operate in a space where changing and often conflicting social influences operate. Agency, for each of these six women, is produced via the discursive formations that are opened to them through the avenue of personal narration. Put differently, the first-person narration serves as a metaphor for female self-understanding, which then translates as female agency.

Conclusion

I come from a culture where women were not encouraged to speak...[Instead, they are encouraged] to keep their mouths shut...to be the guardian of the stories...I have a voice and I'm saying things about women and women's experience which are not nice. That women have mouths and needs and bodies and problems and breakdowns all of the stuff that is not nice to admit.

-Julia Álvarez (Interview www.salon.com)

In *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (1992), Simon Gikandi indicates that the emergence of Caribbean women writers has not gone unnoticed. He adds that:

whereas male discourse in the Caribbean was previously obsessed with the Prospero/Caliban dialectic and the slave's inheritance of his master's language, women writers strive to underscore the converse process—the absence of the female subject and its silencing in the master/slave dialectic. (199)

Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez among others have begun to remedy this absence by writing female subjects who bear witness to personal and historical situations. Through the pages of this dissertation, I have examined an array of female characters that were the guardians of their own stories, but who were willing and able to

share them through their writing. What I hope to have highlighted is that while these female subjects are different from one another in terms of personality and life choices as well as national and cultural make-up, they do share an unrelenting awareness of self and agency negotiated through their writing. This dissertation concentrates on women's writing, particularly the use of diaries, letters, and first-person narration, as a means to achieve authority and agency. I showed that all three Hispanic Caribbean writers explore the power of discourse and choose to empower their female characters by bringing to light their marginal voices, perspectives traditionally contained by patriarchal societies.

Much of this dissertation was based on a close reading of how this community of female characters negotiates agency and subjectivity. The purpose of this project was not simply to address whether and how these women claim agency through narrative discourse, but also to stop and reflect on how their stories speak to readers on a variety of topics. What the female characters in these three texts have in common is that three Hispanic Caribbean writers have projected them out of the margins. The female subject, through the use of "I," conveys that she needs to bear witness to her life, through the means of telling her story. As she writes, she remembers her past, and a fragmented discourse emerges wherein she unleashes stories that have been silenced. Ana Lydia Vega's female characters are nineteenth-century Victorian characters in Puerto Rico; Cristina García's female characters mostly exist in a status of 'in-betweenness' oscillating between Cuba and the United States; and Julia Álvarez positions her female characters, living in the Dominican Republic or the United States, through a multitude of subject positions that race to claim agency and authenticity.

The female character and how she constructs herself, or is constructed through others, bears a resemblance to Teresa de Lauretis' definition: "...a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language: ... an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy" (1-19). That is certainly the case for both Lourdes and Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Lourdes, a first generation immigrant, finds herself in between two cultures: the one she left behind and the one in which she currently lives. With her mother still in Cuba, Lourdes' attachment to her Cuban identity remains strong. Her daughter, Pilar, born in the United States, feels she and her grandmother have some type of spiritual connection. Likewise, in the end, it is Pilar, despite her mother's strong objection, who takes a trip to Cuba to get to know her ancestors. This trip is important for Pilar: she embarks upon a search for herself. In a way, Pilar's desire to know Cuba helps her to negotiate her own subjectivity. Similar themes apply to female characters in "El baúl de Miss Florence" and *!Yo!*

Ultimately, this dissertation traces a trajectory of the female characters claiming agency through their writing. In other words, I began with a discussion of the diary in Chapter One, analyzing Vega's "El baúl de Miss Florence." In this chapter, I concluded that the female figure uses this narrative device as a platform to express the injustices that surround her. Furthermore, I argued that the use of the diary opened the door for the voice of the female character to be heard, giving her a place in history, Puerto Rican history, in particular. Next, in Chapter Two, I examined *Dreaming in Cuban*, where some of the female characters sought agency through the act of dreaming. I explored the act of *dreaming* as a space of possibility where women can break free of their social, gender,

and ethnic confinement. I concluded that dreaming in this novel, ultimately, can only serve as a platform for hope and aspiration, not for action. I continued the dialogue from my work on Vega's text with the idea that agency rested in the ability of the female character to write in her *own* voice, to tell her story from her own perspective.

Specifically, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, this self-narration displays itself through Pilar, Luz, Herminia and Invanito. The female search for agency culminated in Chapter Three with *¡Yo!*, where the female characters demonstrate an urgency and enveloping drive to express their stories using first-person narration. The narrative voices jostle for narrative control as each female subject constantly evaluates and re-evaluates the novel's protagonist, Yo. In *¡Yo!*, the different female subjects had control over the facts they chose to include, emphasize, or omit in order to recount their life stories. These strategies for storytelling resemble the narrative of *testimonio* literature, where each female figure tells her own story, and in the process, defines and shapes her identity. While Yo was, in the novel's predecessor, the one that controlled the lives of her family and friends through her own written representations, it is now their turn to determine the way they narrate in their own stories.

Through a community of discourse, these novels illuminate female subjects in the making. Some of the female subjects display a sense of urgency to write autobiographical accounts using first-person narration. Such female figures are not only the subjects of their stories, but also objects of literary creation. For others, however, the discursive tools defined as necessary for any real agency were, unfortunately, not provided. This discrepancy mirrors the difficulties women face every day as they strive for agency in contexts that rarely allow them to speak their minds and voice their opinions.

Clearly, the female subjects in the texts examined in this dissertation present stories that concern and prompt reflection on the Hispanic Caribbean context. In no way am I arguing that these three texts and their female subjects represent the Hispanic or non-Hispanic Caribbean women in a totalizing manner. Their stories, however, form part of the microcosm of the societies in which they find themselves situated, that is to say, the Hispanic Caribbean or the United States. What I hope to have demonstrated in these chapters is that these female characters are worthy of analysis. The texts present us with multiply positioned female subjects who confront ideologies and hierarchies of domination in their journeys as women. Each text, in some shape or form, frames its narrative as a woman writing her story. Furthermore, the texts in this study could be read as voices in a perpetual dialogue. This dialogue consists of the voices of women speaking back from the margins.

One final justification for grouping these texts and their dominant female characters is that many of those characters recreate part of the past or reclaim parts of history that have been denied to them as individuals or members of a minority community. In other words, the women demonstrate a need to affirm their own agency by telling their (individual or communal) history of repression. Some examples of this trend are Bela in “El baúl de Miss Florence;” Herminia in *Dreaming in Cuban*; and Sara and her mother, Primitiva, in *!Yo.!* These female characters are the products of writers preoccupied with writing narratives that form part of a reality and a history. For example, Ana Lydia Vega’s text, “El baúl de Miss Florence,” is concerned with inscribing stereotypes of nineteenth-century literature, but within a Puerto Rican context. Specifically Vega uses four important figures in Anglo-American literature—the English

nanny, the master's wife, the *Mammy*, and the *mulatta*—and exports them to Puerto Rico, thus reworking both Anglo-American literary tropes and the Puerto Rican past. Just as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where Bertha Mason, the dark female subject, is symbolically the fair Jane Eyre's double (360), in Vega's text the slightly dark Selenia is the double of the white Florence. Selenia and Florence have similar physical traits and the same interest in men.

In this dissertation, I closely examine three genres—a short story, a novel and an array of fictional autobiographies united in what we might call a postmodern novel.⁵⁵ The authors, Vega, García and Álvarez, and their texts are representative of a Hispanic Caribbean narrative invested in giving voice to a feminine perspective on experiences of import to their respective islands—Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. These women writers belong to a group of authors whom Carole Boyce Davies describes as follows: “A substantial number of women writers, living both at home and abroad, have emerged, giving different shape and voice to this literature and challenging the preeminence of the largely male writers whom we used to think of as ‘Caribbean literature’” (59). These three authors present women in the process of searching, and there is a sense in these texts that most of the character-narrators become the stories they tell. In a way, storytelling is one of the defining characteristics of these texts, which translates to the female characters' need to write themselves. As readers progress through these texts and experience the female characters' storytelling, they are invited to bear

⁵⁵ For a discussion of *!Yo!* as a postmodern text, see Ellen McCracken's article: “The Postmodern Self of Julia Alvarez's *¡Yo!*: Identity, Memory and Community.”

witness to the textures of their lives, since many of the female characters express dire urgency to tell their life story.

It was important to take note of gendered relationships in the texts studied herein because they were central to understanding female agency. In all the texts, these relationships (whether between people of the same gender or of different genders) form a significant factor in regard to questioning or attaining agency. As a whole, there were different modes of relationships between the same gender or with the opposite gender. I want to begin by reflecting briefly on the relationships between the female characters, which were as diverse as the characters themselves. One mode of the female relationship is that some of the female subjects search for and find strength through their relationships with other women, a sort of combined opposition to the patriarchal oppression in their lives. Often times, the female subjects are surrounded by or dependent on other women. Specifically, in *Dreaming in Cuban* Celia and her granddaughter Pilar constantly seek each other in dreams as a platform to look for answers and rewrite their life stories. Likewise, in *!Yo!*, there is a great sense of solidarity among the female characters, evident particularly in the characters of Tammy, Mary, and Yo, the protagonist. These three women rally together to help and inspire one another, to let go of a life that is written by abuse, pain, and self-deprecation.

Another genre of female relationships is relationships in conflict. Two types of female relationships stand out in this category. The first is exemplified in the case of Bela and Selenia, both women of color, a relationship defined by the women's rivalry for the master's attention. Bela, the image of the moral Mammy figure, and Selenia, the prototypical erotic mistress, are slotted in roles that pit them, inevitably, against one

another. Additionally, there is also the relationship between Susan, Selenia and Florence, which also exemplifies the relationship in conflict. Both Susan and Florence feel threatened by Selenia, whose sexual allure attracts the attention of the man they both love. Susan's way of dealing with Selenia is to have her removed from her home. Florence, on the other hand, is only able to exhibit signs of jealousy, is unable to exercise any form of authority over Selenia.

The second type of conflictive relations between women is familial relationships. Familial relationships between women are most evident in García's and Álvarez's texts. In particular, *Dreaming in Cuban* illustrates the multifaceted ties between mothers and daughters. In this novel, mothers reject daughters, and daughters reject mothers. These conflicts stem in part from the female subject taking a stand in reference to the Cuban political regime, whether their stance consists of support or opposition. Álvarez's novel *¡Yo!* demonstrates some of the same rejection within familial relationships, though with a much softer tone. For example, while Laura expresses anger at having been turned into a fictional character in her daughter's novel, in the end the women achieve a sense of forgiveness and understanding. Altogether, by exposing these different relationship patterns, these three authors offer an interpretation of female relationships through non-patriarchal lenses. My reading of these texts is that all three authors challenge different modes of female relationships, admitting to the conflicts of sisterhood, among others, yet also celebrating female camaraderie.

Just as these novels explore the complexity of female characters' relationships, they do the same for male-female relationships. The first mode of opposite gender relationships involves those male characters that are cast as deviant, violent and/or

dangerous to women, who view women as the enemy, the adversary, or the other. Male subjects that displayed most of the aforementioned characteristics are prominent in each text examined. Specifically, in “El baúl de Miss Florence,” Edward Lind is the epitome of the selfish, rude, abusive and racist nineteenth-century male colonizer. Next, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Hugo is the archetype of the macho Hispanic man who establishes his authority through abuse and violence. Álvarez’s text prompted the conclusion that abuse and violence does not recognize borders, since the same type of male subject is exemplified in Clair, the landlady’s husband. Clair’s mistreatment of his wife and his use of demeaning words leave her emotionally and physically wounded. In general, the texts evince a space of female narrative activity: all three authors, Vega, García and Álvarez, hint or even state explicitly that they and, consequently, their female characters are fighting against patriarchal structures. While these novels display different degrees of abuse, the message remains the same: women are capable of fighting perpetual abuse at the hands of their husbands, lovers, fathers, masters, and employers either by acting to change the situation, leaving the problematic relationship, or telling the story of their abuse in their own words.

Not all the male characters in these texts, however, are cruel, violent or insulting toward women. Some male figures display comradeship and understanding toward the opposite gender. For example, these two characteristics are prevalent in Charlie of “El baúl de Miss Florence,” who represents the “new man” emerging in Puerto Rico at the turn of the nineteenth century. Charlie is sympathetic to the women surrounding him, both those who are white and those of color. He does not apply the racist attitudes toward women so common at the time, since the woman he chose to love and marry is a *mulatta*.

Dreaming in Cuban's Ivanito is, even at a very young age, compassionate towards his mother, standing by her side even in her time of madness. Equally, in *!Yo!*, the figures of the teacher and student display attitudes of thoughtfulness and helpfulness toward the novel's protagonist in her journey as a writer. Clearly, the male-female relationships in all three texts are just as diverse and complicated as those between the female gender. I argue that Vega, García and Álvarez are not interested in displaying a totalizing view of these relationships, but instead present different rapports between characters of the same gender or those of the opposite gender. Moreover, Vega, García and Álvarez foreground the need for multiple alliances to highlight the differences of race, gender and ethnicity.

One of the chief aims of this dissertation has been to analyze discourse, specifically the use of personal narratives as a means to achieve agency and subjectivity. Through the use of diaries, first-person narrative, and letters the female subject studied here becomes an architect who deconstructs her surroundings and then constructs her imagined realities. Those female figures who enunciate authority through the use of diaries, letters, and first-person narration employ discursive strength to resist traditional power relationships. These discursive narratives have a great influence on the female subject, since, to some extent, the female subject herself is also a linguistic entity. The theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation are eclectic. My take on these female subjects, however, somewhat mirrors that which Paul Smith describes in *Discerning the Subject* as a "colligation of multifarious and multiform subject positions" (32). Smith argues that the subject is always in process and always looking to understand its conflicts—that it is constituted through different ideological positions. In addition, he posits that "What is produced by ideological interpellations is contradiction" (37). In

other words, since ideologies are not absolute, the subject is able to change and resist different ideologies that are presented, sometimes forcefully, to the subject as natural or inevitable. Consequently, the subject that Smith theorizes has the possibility of acquiring agency and offering resistance

Had this study relied solely or primarily on one critical theory or theoretician, it would have suffered from that limitation, that shortsightedness. Rather, I embrace a flexible style composed of different ingredients (to borrow Debra Castillo's metaphor) to create a much tastier recipe. Throughout this dissertation I examined female subjects that appropriated their own discourse in their own unique mode. Each of the female characters confronted different dilemmas, whether those of abuse, trauma, racial discrimination and gender hierarchy. It is important to recall this fabulous array of female characters—Florence, Bela, Celia, Pilar, Sara, Tammy and Mary—who use discursive configurations as a means to assert their subject positions, and from there, their agency. When they appropriate the “I” of the discourse, they become both subject and object of their writing. The female figures gaze upon themselves in their writings, allowing readers to insert their own interpretations of these acts of writing and the women behind them. Just as, through the use of speech, a politician persuades influences or sways her audience, so, too, these female characters produce their own discursive narratives to influence their readers. In the process, simultaneously, they construct their subjectivities and achieve agency.

This dissertation contributes to existing scholarship by proposing a new reading of the female subjects of the three texts I examined. Further, this analysis enters conversation about agency and its relation to various narrative devices, specifically for authors of Hispanic Caribbean literature. Insofar as this comparative study of these three

authors is the first of its nature, that is, the first to study Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez in relation to the female characters they have created, I hope to open a door and extend an invitation for further analysis. These female characters question and investigate through their own narratives the very patriarchal structures in which women are more spoken of than speaking. In other words, by beginning to recuperate and understand her own voice, the female subject unravels issues of identity, class, race and gender. I believe that my exploration, through focusing on the female subject, will generate other readings; this dissertation is surely not a comprehensive study of the whole of these texts. However, the present study reveals one method of analysis for examining and exploring the catalysts of these works, that is, the female characters.

In the end, by looking in depth at these female figures, I was able, ironically, to see up close one issue that plays a role in my own life. Specifically, I became more aware of my own struggle with my ethnic identity. Indeed, I realized that I constantly query what space I now call home. Through these female subjects I found allies who share my bi-cultural experience and sympathize with my attempts to come to terms with it. For this reason, as long as Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez generate female worlds that re-write history or simply imagine a different reality, their female characters will always offer readers an enhanced sense of ourselves. These female writers have given the power of the word to their female subjects by creating a bridge out of seclusion into a world where women can share their aims. Without a doubt, these portraits of female figures contribute to and work change in the Hispanic Caribbean and North American social milieu. Through these depictions of this community of female characters the authors expose a search for personal voice that must recuperate a past in order to

move toward a future. When the female subject is able to own their “I,” she is able to articulate her perspective. Through this process, she demonstrates her capacity to control her own selfhood and engage in self-conscious shaping of her life and herself. In this dissertation, I showed that when the female subject is the owner of her writing, she emerges fully empowered and alive. My project joins these texts in celebrating the communicative strength whereby the female subject—whether author, character, or researcher—can express herself through a reinvented and reinvigorated discourse.

Work Cited

- Abbott, Porter H. *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984.
- Acosta-Belén, Edna, ed. *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History and Society*. New York: Praeger, 1986.
- Acosta Cruz, María. "Historia y escritura femenina en Olga Nolla, Magali García Ramis, Rosario Ferré y Ana Lydia Vega." *Revista Iberoamericana* 59.162-163 (1983): 265-77.
- Acosta Hess, Josefina. "La emigración como factor subversivo en la experiencia femenina: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* y *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Alba de América: Revista Literaria* 20:37-38 (2001): 221-28.
- Acosta-Lugo, Maribel. "History as an (Im)Possibility: Memory, Oblivion and Power in Julia Álvarez, Cristina García, Ana Teresa Torres, and Ana Lydia Vega." Diss. U of Connecticut, 2004.
- "agency." Def. 1. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 1993. Print.
- Alonso Gallo, Laura P., and Antonia Domínguez Miguela, eds. *Evolving Origins, Transplanting Cultures: Literary Legacies of the New Americans*. Huelva, Spain: Universidad de Huelva, 2002.
- Alonso Gallo, Laura P. "The Good, the Brave, the Beautiful: Julia Álvarez's Homage to Female History." Gallo and Miguela 89-100.
- Alvarez-Borland, Isabel. *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998.

Álvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1991.

---. *¡Yo!*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1997.

---. *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998.

---. Julia Álvarez. 20 January 2009. Sienna M Potts. 27 March 2009.

<<http://www.juliaalvarez.com>>.

---. "Julia Álvarez." May 2006. *Identity Theory*. 2 December 2007.

<<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum171.php>>

---. "A Clean Windshield." *Passion and Craft: Conversations with Notable Writers*. Ed. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998. 128-124.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.

Ashcroft, William D. "Intersecting Marginalities: Post-Colonialism and Feminism." *Kunapipi* 11.2 (1989): 23-35.

---. "Modernity's First Born: Latin America and Postcolonial Transformation." *Ariel* 29 (1998): 7-29.

Barak, Julie. "'Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre': A Second Coming into Language in Álvarez's *How the García Lost Their Accents*." *MELUS* 23. (1998):159-76.

Barradas, Efraín. "La necesaria innovación de Ana Lydia Vega: Preámbulo para lectores vírgenes." *Revista iberoamericana* 51.132-133 (1985): 547-56.

Benitez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and Post-Modern Perspective*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992.

- Benveniste Emile. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Miami: U of Miami P, 1971.
- Bernstein, Susan David. "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's "I" got to do with it?"
Hypatia. 7. 2 (1992): 120-147.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity, Community, Culture and Difference*. Ed. J.Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.207-21.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1988.
- Brossy, Julie. "Ana Lydia Vega." *San Juan Star*. San Juan 24 Jan. 1988: 2-5.
- Bruce-Novoa, Juan. "Deconstructing the Dominant Patriarchal Text: Cecile Pineda's Narratives." Horno-Delgado 72-81.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Castillo, Debra. *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- . *Redreaming America: Toward a Bilingual American Culture*. New York: State U of New York P, 2005.
- . "Finding Feminisms." *Narrativa femenina en América Latina: Prácticas y perspectivas teóricas. Latin American Women's Narrative: Practices and Theoretical Perspectives*. Ed. Sara Castro-Klarén. Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2003. 351-371.

- Castro-Klarén, Sara. "La crítica feminista y la escritura en América Latina." *La sartén por el mango: Encuentro de escritoras lationamericanas*. Ed. Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega. Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1985. 27-46.
- Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Christian, Barbara. "Shadows Uplifted." *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt. New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Cowart, David. *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006.
- Cypess, Sandra Messinger. "Tradition and Innovation in the Writings of Puerto Rican Women." Davies and Fido 75-86.
- Davies, Carole Boyce and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Trenton: Africa World P, 1990.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. "Writing Home: Gender and Heritage in the Works of Afro Caribbean/American Women Writers." Davies and Fido 59-73.
- . *Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Davis, Rocio. "Back to the Future: Mothers, Languages and Homes in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *World Literature Today* 74.1 (2000): 60-68.
- Den Tandt, Catherine. "Tracing Nation and Gender: Ana Lydia Vega." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 28.1 (1996): 315-24.
- Cruz, Sor Juana Inés de la. *Obras completas*. Mexico: Porrúa, 1985.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

---. "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts." *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 1-19.

---. "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness." *Feminist Studies* 16.1 (1990): 115-50.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.

Esteves, Carmen C., and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. "Introduction." *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam*. Ed. Carmen C. Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991. xi-xxvi.

Falcón, Rafael. "Aleluya a la caribeñidad: Los cuentos negristas de Ana Lydia Vega." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13 (1994): 41-44.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Groove Press, 1967.

---. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Groove Press, 1968.

Feracho, Lesley. "Ana Lydia Vega, True and False Romances." *Reading U.S. Latina Writers: Remapping American Literature*. Ed. Alvina E. Quintana. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 181-96.

Ferguson, Kathy E. *The Man Question*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite. "From a Woman's Perspective: The Short Stories of Rosario Ferré and Ana Lydia Vega." *Contemporary Women Authors of Latin*

- America*. Ed. Doris Meyer and Margarite Fernández Olmos. Brooklyn: Brooklyn College P, 1983.
- Ferré, Rosario. *Sitio a Eros: 13 ensayos literarios*. México: J. Mortiz, 1986.
- Forster, Eduard Morgan. *Aspects of the Novel*. London: Penguin, 1962.
- Foucault, Michelle. *Discipline and Punish*. London: Allen Lane, 1977.
- Franco, Jean. *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine, 1992.
- . *Soñar en cubano*. Trans. Marisol Palés Castro. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1994.
- . "Imagining Motherhood" in *Something to Declare*. New York: Plume, 1999.
- . Interview with Ylce Irizarry. *Contemporary Literature XLVII.2* (2007): 175-94.
- . "At Home on the Page: An Interview with Cristina García." *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*. Ed. Bridget Kevane. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2000.
- . Interview. *Bomb* 99 (2007): 34-37.
- . Interview with Patricia Smith. *Boston Globe*, 18 July 1993: 26.
- Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "On Female Identity and Writing by Women." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 347-61.
- Gardner, J. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage, 1985.
- Genova, Pamela A., ed. *Twayne Companion to Contemporary World Literature: From the Editors of World Literature Today*. Vols. I and II. New York: Twayne, 2003.

- Gikandi, Simon. *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. "The Madwoman in the Attic." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell, 1989.
- . *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Gilroy, Amanda and W.M Verhoeven, eds. *Epistolary Histories, Letters, Fiction, Culture*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2009.
- Gillespie, Gerald. "Novella, Nouvelle, Novela, Short Novel: A Review of Terms." *Neophilologus* 51 (1967): 117-27.
- Goldman, Dara E. "Out of Place: The Demarcation of Hispanic Caribbean Cultural Spaces in the Diaspora." *Latino Studies* 1 (2003): 403-23.
- Gómez-Quintero, Raysa E., and Mireya Pérez Bustillo. *The Female Body: Perspectives of Latin American Artists*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2000.
- Gómez-Vega, Íbiz. "The Journey Home: Defining Identity in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Voces* 2.1 (1997): 71-100.
- González, Aníbal. "Ana Lydia Pluravega: unidad y multiplicidad caribeña en la obra de Ana Lydia Vega." *Revista Iberoamericana* 59.162-163 (1993): 289-300.
- González, José Luis. *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos*. San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 1980.
- Gosser-Esquilín, Mary Ann. "Ana Lydia Vega's *Falsas crónicas del Sur*: Reconstruction and Revision of Puerto Rico's Past." *A Twice-Told Tale: Reinventing the Encounter in Iberian/Iberian American Literature and Film*

- Ed. Santiago Juan-Navarro and Theodore Robert Young. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2001. 193-209.
- Graña, Josefa-Lago. "Despertar de un sueño: exilio, familia y hogar en *Soñar en cubano* de Cristina García." *MaComere* 4 (2001): 165-72.
- Greene, Graham. *The End of the Affair*. London: Heinemann, 1951.
- Griffiths, Gareth. *A Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing between Two Cultures*. London: Marin Boyars, 1978.
- Henao, Eda Biviana. *Nation, Culture and Identity: The Colonial Subject's Search for Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez, Rosario Ferré and Ana Lydia Vega*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen P, 2003.
- Herrera, Andrea O'Reilly. "Cristina García, *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Reading U.S. Latina Writers: Remapping American Literature*. Quintana 91-102.
- Hoffman, Joan M. "She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now: Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review* 23 (1998): 21-27.
- Holmes, Amanda. "The Spatial Self: Remembering the Caribbean Diaspora in Esmeralda Santiago, Jamaica Kincaid and Cristina García." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 30 (2005): 109-28.
- Horno-Delgado, Asunción, et al. *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Subject in/of/to History and His Story." *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986):78-91.
- Johnson, Kelli Lyon. *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2005.

Kafka, Phillipa. "*Saddling La Gringa*": *Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary*

Latina Writers. Westport: Greenwood P, 2000.

Kaminisky, Amy. *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*. Minneapolis: U of

Minnesota P, 1999.

---. *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*.

Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Kauffman, Linda. "Not a Love Story: New Epistolary Directions," in *Epistolarly*

Histories, Fiction, Culture. Ed. Amanda Gilroy and W. M Verhoeven.

Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000. 198-216.

Kerkhoff, Manuela. "Entrevista con Ana Lydia Vega." *Torre: Revista de la*

Universidad de Puerto Rico 9 (1995): 573-610.

Kevane, Bridget. *Latino Literature in America*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2003.

---. "Latinoamericana: Cultural Identity and the Latina Caribbean Novel as Seen by

Julia Álvarez, Cristina García and Rosario Ferré." *Monographic*

Review/Revista Monográfica 17 (2001): 268-82.

Lago-Graña, Josefa. "Despertar de un sueño. Exilio, hogar y familia en *Soñar en*

cubano." *MaComère: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers*

and Scholars 4 (2001): 165-72.

Lagos, María Inés: "Reconstrucción del estereotipo hispánico en narraciones de Julia

Álvarez, Cristina García y Esmeralda Santiago." *Studies in Honor of Myron*

Lichtblau. Ed. Fernando Burgos. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2000. 195-

214.

- Leitch, Thomas M. *What Stories are: Narrative Theory and Interpretation*.
University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1986.
- Leonard, Suzanne. "Dreaming as Cultural Work in Donald Duk and *Dreaming in Cuban*." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 29 (2004): 181-203.
- Lombardi, Giancarlo. *Rooms with a View: Feminist Diary Fiction, 1952-1999*.
Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2002.
- Lopez, Kimberle S. "Women on the Verge of a Revolution: Madness and Resistance in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Letras Femeninas* 22 (1996): 33-49.
- Ludmer, Josefina. "Tretas del débil." *La sartén por el mango: encuentro de escritoras latinoamericanas*. Ed. Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega. Río Piedras, PR: Huracán, 1984. 47-54.
- Luis, William. *Dance Between two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1997.
- . "A Search for Identity in Julia Álvarez's: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 839-44.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- McCracken, Ellen. "The Postmodern Self of Julia Alvarez's *¡Yo!*: Identity, Memory and Community." *Gallo and Miguela* 223-28.
- . *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999.

- Miller, Nancy K. "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader." *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*. Ed. Elizabeth Weed. New York: Routledge, 1989. 3-16.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Women, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indianapolis: Indianapolis UP, 1989.
- Mohanty, C. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-88.
- Molloy, Sylvia. *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell, 1989.
- "novelón." *Diccionario de la lengua española*. 2001. Real Academia Española. 11 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.rae.es>>.
- Oboler, Suzanne. *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)presentation in the United States*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.
- Ojaide, Tanure. "Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity." *African Studies Review* 35 (1992): 43-57.
- Olson, James S., and Judith E. Olson. *Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph*. New York: Twayne, 1995.
- O'Reilly Herrera, Andrea. "Women and the Revolution in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Modern Language Studies* 27.3-4 (1997): 69-91.
- Ortega, Eliana, and Nancy Saporta Sternbach. "At the Threshold of the Unnamed: Latina Literary Discourse in the Eighties." *Horno Delgado* 2-26.

- Pacheco, Carlos and Luis Barrera, eds. *Del cuento y sus alrededores*. Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1993.
- Pascual, Nieves. "Dos bocados de cardenal: Cristina García y Ana Menéndez." *Guayaba Sweet: Literatura Cubana en Estados Unidos*. Ed. Laura P. Alonso Gallo and Fabio Murrieta. Cádiz, Spain: Aduana Vieja, 2003. 153-67.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen. The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1994.
- Peepre, Mari. "Home, Hybridity and the Caribbean Diasporas." *Bridges Across Chasms: Towards a Transcultural Future in Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Bénédicte Ledent. Liège, Belgium: Université de Liège, 2004. 221-31.
- Porter, Abbott H. *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984.
- Puleo, Augustus. "Ana Lydia Vega, the Caribbean storyteller." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 15.2 (1996): 21-25.
- Quintana, Alvina E. *Reading U.S. Latina Writers: Remapping American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Notes toward a politics of location." *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. Ed. Adrienne Rich. London: Virago, 1987.
- . *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1986.
- Rivero, Eliana. "From Immigrants to Ethnics: Cuban Women Writers in the U.S." *Horno-Delgado* 189-201.
- Robinson, Sally. *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. New York: SUNY P, 1991.

- Rosado, Marie Ramos. *La mujer negra en la literatura puertorriqueña*. San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 1999.
- Sáez, Elena Machado. "The Global Baggage of Nostalgia in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *MELUS* 30.4 (2005): 129-47.
- Said, Edward W. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Santiago-Stommes, Ivelisse. "Nación, cultura y mujer; la identidad nacional y las relaciones entre hombres y mujeres en *Soñar en cubano* de Cristina García." *MaComere* 4 (2001): 101-07.
- Santos-Febres, Mayra. "The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature." Diss. Cornell U, 1991.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Harper, 1965.
- Smith, Paul. *Discerning the Subject*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Sirias, Silvio. *Julia Álvarez: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2001.
- Spitta, Silvia. "Transculturation, the Caribbean and the Cuban-American Imaginary." *Tropicalization: Transcultural Representation of Latinidad*. Ed. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silvermann. Hanover: UP of New England, 1997. 160-80.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Marginality in the Teaching Machine." *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 53-76.
- Steele, Cynthia. "The Other Within: Class and Ethnicity as Difference in Mexican Women's Literature." *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso*

- Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Hernán Vidal. Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989. 297-328.
- Suárez, Lucía. "Julia Álvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5 (2004): 117-45.
- Tate, Julee. "Maternity and Mobility: The Search for Self in the Novels of Julia Alvarez." *Proceedings of the 23rd Louisiana Conference on Hispanic Languages and Literatures*. Ed. Alejandro Cortázar and Christian Fernández. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2003. 195-200.
- Tölöyan, Khachig. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora* 5.1 (1996): 3-37.
- Torres, Maria de los Angeles. "Encuentros y Encontronazos: Homeland in the Politics and Identity of the Cuban Diaspora." *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy, and Society*. Ed. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres. Malden: Blackwell, 1998. 43-62.
- Tucker, Susan. *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988.
- Vásquez, Mary S. "Cuba as Text and Subtext in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* 20 (1995): 22-27.
- Vega, Ana Lydia. *Falsas crónicas del sur*. Rio Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991.
- . *Esperando a Loló y otros delirios generacionales*. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1994.

- . Interview with Eugenio D. Matibag. *Hispanamérica: Revista de literatura* 22.64-65 (1993): 77-88.
- . "A Sense of Space, a Sense of Speech: A Conversation with Ana Lydia Vega." *Hopscotch: A Cultural Review* 2 (2000): 52-59.
- . Interview with Elizabeth Hernández and Consuelo Lopéz Springfield. "Women and Writing in Puerto Rico: An Interview with Ana Lydia Vega." *Callaloo* 17 (1994): 816-25.
- Vélez, Diana L. "Pollito Chicken: Split Subjectivity, National Identity and the Articulation of Female Sexuality in a Narrative by Ana Lydia Vega." *Americas Review* 14.2 (1986): 68-76.
- . "We Are Not in This Together: The Caribbean Imaginary in 'Encancaranublado' by Ana Lydia Vega." *Callaloo* 17.3 (1994): 826-33.
- Villaverde, Cirilo. *Cecilia Valdés*. México: Porrúa, 1986.
- Walas, Guillermina. *Entre dos Américas: Narrativas de Latinas en los '90s*. Lanham: UP of America, 2000.
- Wallace, Jeanne C. "Social Criticism in the Contemporary Short Story of Selected Puerto Rican Women Writers." *MACLAS* 3 (1989): 113-23.
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- White, Paul. "Geography, Literature and Migration." *Writing Across Worlds*. Ed. Russell King, John Connell and Paul White. New York: Routledge, 1995. 1- 20
- Zielina, Maria Carmen. *La africanía en el cuento cubano y puertorriqueño*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1992.

VITA

Valbona Zylo Watkins

EDUCATION

- 2003-2010: Ph.D., Hispanic Literature, *The Pennsylvania State University*, PA
Dissertation: *Female Agency in "El baúl de Miss Florence: Fragmentos para un novelón romántico" Dreaming in Cuban, and !YO!*
Committee: Laurence E. Prescott, Javier Escudero, Julia Cuervo-Hewitt, John Ochoa, Thomas Beebee, and Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego
- 2001-2003: M.A., Spanish Literature, *St. John's University*, NY
Master Thesis: *La relación entre la literatura y el cine: Un acercamiento a Como agua para chocolate, La ciudad y los perros, y Pedro Páramo.*
Committee: Alina Camacho-Gingerich, and Marie-Lise Gazarian
- 1996-2001: B.A., International Studies/B.S., Spanish Education, *Lock Haven University*, PA

CONFERENCES AND PUBLICATIONS

- 2007: Rev. of *The Albanian Affairs*, by Susana Fortes. *Illyria* 17.1638: 6. New York, NY.
- 2006: Poster presentation. "Construction of Female Agency in the Works of Ana Lydia Vega, Cristina García and Julia Álvarez." March 25, 23rd Annual Graduate Research Exhibition. *The Pennsylvania State University*, PA.
- 2005: "Women and Writing in "El baúl de Miss Florence" by Ana Lydia Vega," May 12, for the 25th University of Cincinnati Conference on Romance Languages and Literatures, *University of Cincinnati*, Cincinnati, OH.
- 2005: "La Malinche de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda: Carnavalización del mito mexicano" presented for the GRAPHSY Conference, *Georgetown University*, Washington D.C.
- 2002: "Éxodo por el Adriático" and "Mi país." *Entre Rascacielos*, Vol. 3 (2002): 46-47. St. John's U P, New York.

SCHOLARSHIP AND AWARDS

- 2007: Graduate Research Grant, Pennsylvania State University
- 2006: Edwin Erle Sparks Graduate Fellowship Award, Pennsylvania State University
- 2001-2002: Diploma for excellence in Spanish Literatures, *Spanish General Consulate*, New York City, New York.

TEACHING EXPERIENCES

- 2008-present: Spanish Instructor, Portledge School
- 2003-2008: Spanish Instructor, *Pennsylvania State University*