BONDED BY READING: 
AN INTERROGATION OF FEMINIST PRAXIS 
IN THE WORKS OF MARCELA SERRANO IN THE LIGHT OF 
ITS RECEPTION BY A SAMPLE OF WOMEN READERS 

DISSERTATION 

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate 

School of The Ohio State University 

By 

Alma B. Kuhlemann, M.A. 

**** 

The Ohio State University 

2009 

Dissertation Committee: 

Approved by 

Professor Laura Podalsky, Adviser 

Professor Ulises Juan Zevallos-Aguilar 

Professor Ana Del Sarto 

Adviser 

Spanish and Portuguese Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a comprehensive study of the fiction of bestselling Chilean writer Marcela Serrano, in order to interrogate her discursive feminist praxis, and to analyze its efficacy in terms of its reception among a sample of women readers by means of a reader-response survey. It is my contention that Serrano’s texts may be described and analyzed as a praxis of consciousness-raising sought through the articulation of a bond of reading between writer and women readers, and among women readers themselves.

In order to discern the praxis of awareness allowed for in Serrano’s works, as well as the connections it may generate, mainstream reader-response theories, including those of Wolfgang Iser and Norman Holland, are first outlined, with the intersubjective reading model found in David Bleich serving as a pivot, shifting focus then to specifically feminist reading criticism, as developed by Judith Fetterley, Anne Berggren, Janice Radway, and Patrocinio Schweickart.
The conceptual tools of Italian feminism of sexual difference, in particular the practice of female genealogy, as discussed by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Luisa Muraro, and Adriana Cavarero, are presented to inform Serrano’s discursive praxis, as it is articulated in terms of the dynamics of how her female characters’ life stories are narrated, offering women readers models for women-affirming-women interactions, enabling readers to connect with these female characters and their life stories through the deployment of narrative voice, and making visible for them the constraining effects of patriarchal gender roles via instances of intertextuality and genre re-elaboration.

As an empirical counterbalance to the more overtly theoretical treatment of Serrano’s fiction, reflections from a sample of women readers of her works are gathered through a survey questionnaire and examined, in order to tap the degree to which such reading can encourage women to construct standpoints of self-definition on the basis of reading bonds, including felt connections with woman writer and female characters, and interactions with other women readers. In light of Serrano’s works and responses to my survey, I derive a critical appraisal of the potential limitations of this discursive praxis in connection with issues of female identity and marginal female subjectivities which are present in Serrano’s writing.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have even taken off without the encouragement of many people, who supported me in my attempt to place feminist reading theory and practice into what I hope may be a fruitful conversation on the potential for empowerment that bestsellers of the type Marcela Serrano writes might have. I am honored to have had the guidance of Laura Podalsky, whose keen comments helped me to clarify and lay out my argument in writing. I also want to thank Ulises Juan Zevallos-Aguilar and Ana Del Sarto for their willingness to accompany me in this project, and Fernando Unzueta for classes which gave me the insight I needed into the cultural production of nineteenth-century Latin American literary foremothers. My special thanks go to Terrell Morgan, who stepped into the breach and made possible the success of my IRB application. For her kind help with Italian translation, Marie Orton also deserves my appreciation.
Incorporating women readers’ perspectives in order to complement the more traditional critic-focused research was a major goal of this study. I am therefore very much indebted to the women readers who have offered me their reflections on how the experience of reading can motivate spaces of female self-definition and bonding among women. Without their generous help and thoughtful comments, my work would have remained at a purely theoretical and speculative level. In this connection, I extend my deep gratitude and affection to my dear colleague, friend, and mentor, Mireya Usera, whose prompt, tireless, and exact efforts were instrumental for obtaining access to this group of women readers in Uruguay.

My debt is also with Diego Barnabé, who kindly helped me track down the right website to find the transcript for his radio interview with Marcela Serrano in Montevideo, which I particularly treasure, since Diego based his interview on comments and questions for Serrano that he had collected and recorded from listeners who were her readers. Without the help of Almita Cárdenes, my mother, my friend, and always my staunch supporter, contacting Diego would perhaps not have been possible, for she traced him from his former position in Radio El Espectador, to Teledoce Televisora Color, where she was finally able to talk with Diego and arrange matters so that the information I
needed came into my hands. On a more nostalgic, yet quietly reverberating note, I will always be thankful for the love and the smile of Fritz Kuhlemann, my father.

To my compañero Tom Stewart, also turned proofreader for this project, goes the deeply felt gratitude and love one can only have for that good-natured friend who cares for and nurtures you and your ideas, day after day, with affection, humor, intelligence, and a great dose of patience, sometimes like a coach at the side of the ring, eyes leveled with those of the boxer, pounding the mat to encourage her to carry on.
VITA

February 24, 1964.............................Born - Montevideo, Uruguay

1988........................................Profesor de Educación Media,
Especialidad: Inglés
(Secondary School English Teacher),
Instituto Nacional de Docencia General
Artigas, Montevideo

1991........................................Traductora Pública en Idioma Inglés
/Public Translator for English),
Universidad de la República, Montevideo

2001........................................Diplom-Übersetzerin für Deutsch und
Englisch
(Translator for German and English),
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

2004........................................M.A. Spanish (Latin American Literatures
and Cultures),
The Ohio State University

1999 – 2000..............................Graduate Teaching Assistant,
Louisiana State University

2002 – 2007..............................Graduate Teaching Associate,
The Ohio State University
PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Spanish and Portuguese
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Translations published to date of the works of Marcela Serrano</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Prologue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Objectives and Significance of Project</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Chapter by Chapter Overview</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reader Theory and Developing Bonds of Reading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Who Responds, and to What?: A Targeted Overview of Reader-Response</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Feminist Models of Reading: Striving for Intersubjective Encounters</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Motivating an Eclectic Approach to Reader-Response Criticism</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Situating the Fiction of Marcela Serrano</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The Context of the Nueva Narrativa Chilena</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The Context of Contemporary Latin American Women Writers of</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bestselling Fiction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Targeted Overview of Serrano’s Novels</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 From Life Stories to Themes, and Vice-Versa</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 Character Types That Invite and Construct Readership</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Creating a Bond of Reading: An Issue of Female Agency</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The Practice of Relationality in Italian Feminism of Sexual</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Steering among Issues of Connection and Autonomy: A Navigation</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart for Women Readers in Troubled Waters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Relating Women’s Life Stories: Models for Female Agency</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.1.1 Examining Women’s Lives in Relation to Hegemonic Mandates ................................................................. 117
4.2.1.2 Constructing New Avenues towards Standpoints of Female Self-Definition Grounded in Female Sociality .... 133
4.2.2 Narrative Voice and the Creation of Bonds between Women Readers and Female Characters ............................. 151
4.2.3 Minding the Gap(s): On Opening Spaces for Reflection through Genre Reworking and Intertextuality .......... 163

5. On the Receiving End: Actual Evidence and Potential Implications for the Reading Bond ........................................ 205
5.1 Into the Hands of Readers: A Survey to Tap Bonds of Reading and Female Empowerment ............................... 206
5.2 Potential Limitations of Serrano’s Textual Praxis of Female Empowerment: A Critical Appraisal ...................... 232

6 Conclusions and Prospect ......................................................................................................................... 251
Appendix: Encuesta sobre respuestas de las lectoras ..................................................................................... 259
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................. 262
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Un libro es en este momento mi mejor compañero.”

“Considero que los libros son amigos incondicionales.”

“[Los libros s]on un tesoro que uno va acumulando durante toda la vida y que resultan imprescindibles.”

1.1 Prologue

The above are some of the answers I received when I asked a sample of women readers from Montevideo, Uruguay, the following questions: “Piensa un poco en tus libros preferidos. ¿Por qué lees libros? ¿Qué es un libro para ti?” They could have just as easily been my own words as well. If I reflect back on my own reading practices, through my adolescence and into my adult life, I arrive at the conclusion that, if I bracket out literary readings performed in academic spaces, I have reached out for a book, for a novel, as I have to a friend: I lived a relationship with it, I got involved with its characters, especially those female
ones who I felt validated my own thoughts and decisions when part of the world around me would perhaps not, and I came to new insights which allowed me, in my concrete experience as a woman in Uruguay during the last quarter of the twentieth century, to explore paths of life, both personal and professional, that were not always in line with the more conventional ones available in the culture. In short, the texts and my personal experiences were interwoven in my reading processes, in such a way that I was reading for a lived-through encounter with my books.

Once in graduate school, as I started working with texts from a “professional” (read predominantly analytical) point of view, I became more aware of the extent to which hegemonic literary conceptions of how and what it is proper to read in academe would exclude some of my reading practices and choices, especially since the latter would sometimes include instances of bestsellers, derogatorily dismissed as sub-literary, “lite lit” (cf. Castillo, “Figuring Feminisms” 166, 168). In this respect, not only were these texts the ones to be chastised, but also, by extension, their readers, who tend to be constructed as the effects of neo-liberal market operations (Eltit, “La compra” 58), i.e., as fundamentally acritical, consuming subjects.
However, the kind of readers dismissed by those critics who are more attracted by neo-avant-garde experiments indeed exist and in large numbers. Because some of these readers’ choices and/or practices may not coincide with the kinds of texts and approaches to reading and interpretation advocated by a number of scholarly-oriented literary critics or, for that matter, with theories of reading which formulate their models of reading on hypothetical readers (the super-reader of Michael Riffaterre, for instance, or the literary competence that an ideal reader possesses, according to Jonathan Culler), rather than focusing on what actual readers really do when they read (e.g., David Bleich and Janice Radway), are we therefore to dismiss these readers’ choices and practices as acritical without examining them first?

What happens when gender is introduced as a variable into the interaction between text and reader? This question arises because the equation between sub-literary bestselling lit lit and women writers made by the dominant literary establishment has been specifically extended to women readers, the “frivolous and/or inadequate readers of mostly inferior texts written for them by other women” (Castillo, “Figuring Feminisms” 160). Therefore, in which terms can the engagement of women readers with bestsellers be more productively described? And, most importantly, how can we evaluate the
potential that reading these kinds of texts has for empowerment in women’s lives? Is it possible for women to draw on them to articulate standpoints of female self-definition?

1.2 Objectives and Significance of Project

In this study, I consider the works of self-proclaimed feminist (Díaz 19; Seibert 139) and bestselling Chilean author Marcela Serrano, whose novels are considered in some academic circles as examples of lite lit (Seibert 140), in order, on the one hand, to interrogate Serrano’s discursive feminist praxis, and, on the other hand, to analyze the efficacy of this praxis in terms of its reception among a sample of women readers by means of a reader-response survey (see Appendix). The corpus I have selected for this purpose includes all of her novels and one of two short stories, namely: Nosotras que nos queremos tanto (1991), Para que no me olvides (1993), Antigua vida mía (1995), El albergue de las mujeres tristes (1997), Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (1999), “Sin Dios ni ley” (from Un mundo raro¹, 2000),

¹ The first of the two stories in this collection, “El amor en el tiempo de los dinosaurios,” has not been included in this corpus, since it is the only work by Serrano not to focus primarily on female characters and their life stories, elements which are relevant in the examination of Serrano’s textual praxis as described below.
Lo que está en mi corazón (2001), Hasta siempre, mujercitas (2004), and La llorona (2008).

Born in Santiago de Chile in 1951, Marcela Serrano has become a potent voice in the Chilean literature of the last decade of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. In 1994, Nosotras que nos queremos tanto won the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, awarded by the Guadalajara International Book Fair. Para que no me olvides won the Premio Municipal de Literatura, awarded by the Municipality of Santiago de Chile, in 1994 as well, and Lo que está en mi corazón was the runner-up in the Premio Planeta of 2001. Serrano enjoys a broad fan base not only domestically but also internationally, particularly in Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, and Spain² (Ossa Budge 54). In addition, her works have been translated into Italian (eight titles), German (three), Dutch (two), French (two), Polish (two), Portuguese (two), English (one), Finnish (one), Hebrew (one), Korean (one), Russian (one), and Turkish (one).

In spite of her prominence as an international cultural phenomenon, however, to date there has been no integrative study of Serrano’s works. Existing

² In addition to her novels and short stories, Serrano has published a storybook for children, El cristal del miedo (2002), co-authored with her daughter Margarita Maira Serrano.

³ Serrano’s works have been marketed under Alfaguara Iberoamericana or Alfaguara Global, a transnational operation launched to promote the diffusion of Latin American and Spanish writers on both sides of the Atlantic (Ossa Budge 54).
studies explore certain aspects of her writing in a limited corpus of her novels, or compare how some of these aspects have been treated by other Latin American and Spanish women writers as well. These partial practices have led to fragmentary readings of her works, and to conclusions that are difficult to sustain if Serrano’s work is read in its entirety, whereby different tendencies can be fully traced and explored in detail. I am therefore offering a comprehensive study of Serrano’s fiction, which examines and interrogates from several perspectives the generation of discursive sites of female self-definition in her writing.

It is my contention that Serrano’s texts allow for a discursive praxis of consciousness-raising, sought through the articulation of a bond of reading (cf. Felman⁴) between writer and women readers, and among women readers themselves. Serrano’s writing appears to be informed by a paradigm of reading understood as an intersubjective encounter among reader, text, and writer (cf. Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves” 52), whereby the woman reader finds herself invited to engage not merely a text but something of the interiority of another

---

⁴ In What Does a Woman Want? Shoshana Felman quotes the following reflection from Simone de Beauvoir concerning the effect that women readers’ reactions to The Second Sex had on her: “But I became a feminist especially after the book was read, and started to exist for other women” (11, Felman’s emphasis). For Felman, the bond of reading enacted by the sharing and exchanging of female stories (theoretical perspectives, autobiographies, and literature, interacting with each other) among women is an act of empowerment which allows women to access their own missing stories (11-19, 126-27, 134, 138-39).
woman, one who seems to show through her writing a knowledge of issues and concerns that middle- to upper-class women typically confront. The bond of reading connects Serrano and her readers in a virtual dialogic relationship of negotiation, rather than a unidirectional dynamic of production and consumption of writing as a mass-market commodity (Radway, “Reading Is Not Eating” 11). In the light of said reading paradigm, my exploration of Serrano’s praxis and the reception thereof on the part of actual women readers—which in turn leads to interpersonal encounters among readers themselves (cf. Bleich, *Feelings* 93-95 and “Intersubjective” 419-20; Radway, “Reading Is Not Eating” 21-25)—evaluates the degree to which these intersubjective encounters performed as bonds of reading both enact the dialectics of communication strived for in contemporary feminist criticism, and encourage the articulation of standpoints of self-definition which contribute to the empowerment of women readers of these works.

1.3 Chapter by Chapter Overview

In order to discern and assess this textual praxis of awareness and the connections it can generate, it is necessary to approach all entities implicated in the bestseller writer-text-reader scenario. Theoretical approaches in these areas,
however, tend to focus attention on one of these aspects, or at most on two adjacent aspects, to the exclusion of the other(s). This simplification may of course serve the practical end of making one’s inquiry more tractable, and in support of such choices a theorist may often present earnest —if not always well-grounded— reasons for ignoring that which s/he sets outside of consideration. The justifications for backgrounding or even denying the relevance of readers, authors, or texts may even end up reified within one’s definition of what the study of literature is “all about.” In this dissertation, I do not propose to coin a grand theory that keeps everything in view at all times, but rather I strive to avoid dismissing “terms in the equation” by rotating through a sequence of analytical perspectives.

Chapter two lays out a targeted and critical overview of mainstream reader-response theories, and then narrows focus to specifically feminist models of reading, so as to establish the tools needed to describe, analyze, and interrogate the fiction of Marcela Serrano in terms of a praxis of consciousness-raising, as well as the responses her works can evoke among women readers. These tools are applied for these purposes in chapters four and five.

Chapter three offers two frames of reference in which Serrano’s works can be placed for their analysis, namely the context of the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena*
and that of bestselling fiction by other contemporary Latin American women writers, and describes how Serrano’s writing relates to these contexts. In addition, Serrano’s textual practice is examined vis-à-vis a number of her interviews in terms of themes and character types. These oral texts are incorporated, not in deference to the alleged “authority” of the author’s opinion on the meaning of her work, but rather to provide a sense of how, in the context of public appearances in support of the release of her novels, she presents her interest in the range of problems that women face under patriarchy, hinting at some possible areas for action and improvement in the conditions of women’s lives, and in general presenting herself to her (potential) readership as a sympathetic and kindred figure whose writing will prove worth buying (and reading). The chapter closes with a description of the target female audience that Serrano seems to have in mind when she writes, induced from recurrent demographic and behavioral patterns found among her protagonists.

Chapter four presents conceptual tools offered by Italian feminism of sexual difference, and maps out their implications for informing a discursive praxis of consciousness-raising through the articulation of reading bonds between women readers and the text/woman writer. This articulation is examined in terms of the dynamics of how Serrano’s female characters’ life
stories are narrated, (1) presenting women readers with a set of models for women-affirming-women interactions, (2) enabling women readers to connect with these female characters and their life stories through the deployment of narrative voice, and (3) making visible for women readers the constraining effects of patriarchal gender roles via specific re-elaborations of particular novels and genres. The above are offered for consideration as invitations to women readers for exploring processes of female self-definition in Serrano’s fiction as well as in their own lives.

Chapter five examines the reception of Serrano’s discursive feminist praxis of consciousness-raising among a sample of women readers by means of a survey questionnaire. This instrument has been designed as an empirical counterbalance to the more overtly theoretical claims posited elsewhere in the dissertation. The survey was intended to tap into whether the reading of Serrano’s fiction can actually open up a relational space of female sociality where women readers feel encouraged to construct standpoints of self-definition on the basis of reading bonds which connect them to the text/woman writer as well as to other women readers. This chapter also offers a critical appraisal of the potential limitations of the discursive praxis of female empowerment enacted in
Serrano’s texts, in connection with issues of female identity and of marginal female subjectivities which are present in her works.
CHAPTER 2

READER THEORY AND DEVELOPING BONDS OF READING

Veo en los personajes la misma educación que hemos recibido las mujeres y los hombres en el transcurrir de la vida. Ya sea desde las abuelas hasta los hijos. Sus valores, su encare de la vida, su romanticismo reflejan los nuestros, reflejan lo pacato de una sociedad y también todo aquello que las mujeres han aceptado por años y o les ha costado ir cambiando. [...] El machismo está presente tanto en mujeres como en hombres, pero así también hay mujeres anticonformistas que cuestionan todo ese mundo que han heredado.

(One reader’s response to my question 5 —see Appendix.)

2.1 Who Responds, and to What?: A Targeted Overview of Reader-Response Criticism

This project has been born from my considerations regarding the issue of female empowerment in relation to the actual choices and practices of reading that different women readers undertake. The questions I started asking myself revolved around the effects texts can have on readers, particularly on middle-class women readers (who are the ones that have mostly surrounded me), as
regards increasing their (and my) awareness of how patriarchal societies have a vested interest in perpetuating submissive gender roles for women, and may do so through the institution of literature as a symbolic practice, and of how important it is to read texts that contribute not only to exposing stereotypical images of womanhood that seek to control women, but more importantly to replacing these controlling images with safe spaces that promote standpoints of self-definition (cf. Collins 95-99, 102-03), which can be discussed and appropriated in the midst of a community of women. In sum, I am interested in exploring how a feminist approach to reading that foregrounds connections among women can be articulated.

The question of how texts affect readers brought me to inquire into theories of reading that privileged not only interpretations offered by trained literary critics, but also the position of “reader-centered critics [who] appeared willing to share their critical authority with less tutored readers” (Tompkins, “Reader in History” 223). In this respect, reader-oriented criticism, with its more democratic valorization of common readers as articulators of meaning, provided me with the theoretical tools I needed in order to analyze the impact of the celebrated bestselling Serrano on her fans because, if you will allow me the pun,
it “promoted readers from their previous role as ‘extra’ to that of ‘co-star’” (Flynn and Schweickart, Introduction ix).

Among critics there is consensus that reader-response\(^5\) theory represents no unified movement or critical position (Guerin et al. 356; Tompkins, Introduction ix; Rabinowitz 606). Reader-response theories can be seen, to a large extent, as a reaction against the formalistic approaches to literature that prevailed in literary criticism for almost half a century\(^6\), which view texts as autonomous artifacts and make them the centers of inquiry, claiming that meaning and value reside in the formal aspects of texts, and rejecting the role of the reader as meaning maker, for fear of falling into subjectivism (Guerin et al. 355-56). In spite of the disparity of opinions among its practitioners, reader-response theory may be characterized as follows: it shifts the attention from the text to the reader, focusing on reading as a process (Leitch 35), and on the reader as decisive for

---

\(^5\) Strictly speaking, the term “reader-response theory” refers to a kind of reader criticism which is more subjective. In this respect, terms such as “reader theory” and “audience theory” could be considered as overarching categories, under which “reader-response theory” would be ordered. However, the latter is the most popular one, prevailing thus in most accounts of reader-oriented criticism (Rabinowitz 606), and therefore it is the one I adopt for this study.

\(^6\) Before this reaction came to happen, however, there was already an interest in the reception of texts present in the works of I. A. Richards in the 1920s, and in those of Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s, for instance. By the 1960s, criticism that focused on the interaction between reader and text started gaining momentum as a movement of sorts and rallied forces against formalism (Guerin et al. 357; Leitch 33; Tompkins, Introduction x). For a general account of how reader theory has developed during the 1980s and early 1990s, see Andrew Bennett’s Introduction to *Readers and Reading*. For a discussion about the different positions of reader critics organized according to topics (i.e., notion of “the reader,” context in which the act of reading is explored, purpose of critical inquiry), see Peter J. Rabinowitz’s “Reader-Response Theory and Criticism.”
literary interpretation (Rabinowitz 606), i.e., on the interaction between reader and text (Guerin et al. 357). In this respect, “a text does not even exist, in a sense, until it is read by some reader” (Guerin et al. 356). Taken to its logical extreme, reader-response theory would imply that there are as many meanings in a text as there exist readers of it or, for that matter, the very impossibility of reading at all, as deconstructive approaches to reading would have it. These implications would then point to the untenability of certain canonical interpretations of texts, which claim for themselves the notion of “right” readings and discard interpretations of “untrained readers” as “wrong” ones. Thus, reader-response criticism may serve as a healthy counterbalance to literary dogmatism (Rabinowitz 608; Guerin et al. 365-66), by virtue of its welcoming of the notion of text value not as inherent in the text itself, but as a product of the social, political, cultural, and historical circumstances surrounding both the production of the text and the context of reading (Rabinowitz 609).

Not every reader theorist is willing, however, to take reader-response theory to its logical extreme, and to tip the balance completely in favor of allowing real readers and their actual practices the sole discretion in constructing textual meanings, thereby disregarding the analysis of how texts may operate to constrain readers’ interpretation. Among those critics is Wolfgang Iser, who, in
spite of his phenomenological approach to reading literature—which focuses on the activity of the reader as s/he perceives and processes the gaps present in the text, in order to create novel meaning out of it—still conceptualizes his reader as a hypothetical one: “the implied reader as a concept has his[her] roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; [s/]he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader” (Iser, *Act* 34). Iser’s theorization of an implied reader whose activity is directed by the text, as shall be discussed shortly\(^7\), is in line with his interest in contributing to the devising of a theoretical framework which could allow for the conducting of empirical studies of reader-response (*Act x*).

For Iser, “the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient” (“Interaction” 20). Although Iser explicitly theorizes the process of reading as an interaction between *text* and *reader*, the *author\(^8\) as

---

\(^7\) The first two subsections of this chapter lay out the frameworks of those critics aligned with reader-response theory whom I have chosen to include in the present dissertation, and indicate the rationale for this choice. Subsection 2.3 discusses in fuller detail how the particular contributions of these critics relate in the application of their frameworks to this study of Serrano’s texts in terms of a discursive praxis of consciousness-raising, and of its reception among a sample of women readers.

\(^8\) Examples of Iser’s recognition of the author’s role are in fact many: references to “the author’s text” and “the author’s techniques” (“Interaction” 21), and his various discussions of particular works are marked with representations of the author’s activity in the text, e.g., “Fielding actually informs his readers that he wants to hold a mirror up before them” (*Act* 218); “Fielding does not describe Lady Booby’s surprise. Instead, he offers schemata, all of which invoke possibilities of description, only to reject them again. Ultimately, by presenting us with rejected schemata of description, he makes it clear to us that description is in fact impossible” (*Act* 144, emphasis added); and Iser even asserts an authorial project in “Fielding’s aim of
such is not wholly absent from his model, since the variety of perspectives offered by the literary work “outline the author’s view and also provide access to what the reader is meant to visualize” (Act 35). This co-presence of author, text, and reader, even in theoretical contexts that have been designed with only a subset of these in mind, are useful in the present study, which characterizes textual elements in Serrano’s novels as virtual invitations that are potentially, but not necessarily, accepted as part of any given woman reader’s response to the texts.

Drawing from psychoanalytical research on the structure of communication⁹, Iser describes the conditions of this interaction by means of positing the existence of “guiding devices” in the reading process which control, to a certain extent, the activity of the reader in his/her operation of sense making (“Interaction” 23), namely “blanks,” “vacancies,” (“Interaction” 21-27) and “negations” (Act 212-25). According to Iser, blanks are “empty space[s] between depicting human nature” (“Interaction” 27). Although this reader-response theorist focuses his discussion for the most part on the crucial role of his implied reader’s mental activity in (co-)creating the text’s meaning, there is no question in Iser as to the presence of the author’s hand in how the structure of the text has come to be as it is.

⁹ In the same way as people are driven to social communication in order to fill in the gaps which arise out of individuals’ having no real way of experiencing how other individuals experience them, the reader, upon experiencing gaps (asymmetry) in comprehension that arise because no text can make itself completely explicit, is also called upon to fill in these gaps (“Interaction” 21-23). In this sense, Iser approaches literature from a functional standpoint of communication: fiction is a means of communicating something, and the text and the reader are partners in this communication process, the effect of the text on the reader, as recipient of the message, being the function of literature (Act 53-54).
segments” (“Interaction” 25) which induce the communicative process of reading by “indicat[ing] that the different segments [...] of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so” (“Interaction” 24). One instance of how this operation unfolds can be found at the level of the story where, for example, a new chapter may denote abrupt changes caused by, for example, the introduction of a new character. Iser cautions his reader to understand these blanks as invitations to the reader to move forward through the text, bridging the gap between the reader’s former viewpoint and a new viewpoint which will enable the reader to meaningfully incorporate the new segment, in this particular example, the new character (“Interaction” 25).

As a reader advances through a text, moving from segment to segment, the reader’s viewpoint adjusts in order to incorporate the new against the background of the previously given, i.e., the reading as experienced up to that moment. As this new segment comes to be incorporated by the reader, it loses its poignant or thematic aspect, thus transitioning into a marginal position or vacancy (“Interaction” 26). Drawing on the above example concerning the introduction of new characters, once a character has been identified and his/her apparent role situated with respect to the developing story, the character becomes naturalized, less salient, and the reader’s viewpoint now includes the
existence of this formerly new entity as one more part of the background when a subsequent segment is encountered.

Finally, Iser’s concept of negation is a textual strategy that works at two levels to challenge norms —e.g., socially and culturally derived expectations (Act 69). By confronting characters (and readers) with unfamiliar and disconcerting transformations of elements and events taken from social systems and literary traditions —what Iser refers to as the “repertoire” (Act 69, 79) of the text—, this negating strategy highlights inconsistencies that expose a norm as obsolete, and calls its validity into question. The effect of such a negation on a reader is of even greater significance. Negation situates a reader between what is found in the text (what s/he discovers) and what the reader him/herself brings to the act of reading (his/her dispositions), giving rise to a tension between discoveries and dispositions (Act 218), which the reader is called upon to resolve, in order to create the meaning of the text. In this respect, the reader, rather than simply adopting new positions discovered in the text, or sticking by his/her previous dispositions, interacts dynamically with the text: “the old conditions the form of the new, and the new selectively restructures the old” (Act 132), creating, from a new standpoint, the aesthetic object. It is important to note that for Iser, the absence of this corrective aspect is a decisive factor for characterizing the type of
fiction considered “light reading,” as opposed to literature. In the case of the former, the reader’s dispositions are confirmed, rather than challenged or disturbed, by the relatively trivial discoveries in such texts (*Act* 219).

By way of example, a character that a reader believes to be subject to particular norms of behavior, but who, without warning, behaves in a manner that undercuts these expectations, serves to disorient the reader with respect to the norms, and to place the reader in a situation that requires resolution. The character is at odds with the reader’s viewpoint, but since the dislocating behavior, as part of the text, is non-negotiable, the reader is required to make the accommodation. The resolution requires that the reader release to some extent his/her dispositions in light of the textual discoveries, and come to a new standpoint that is informed by both, but is equal to neither, whereby tensions are resolved and balance is achieved.

Again, Iser’s focus on the interaction of text and reader merely backgrounds, but does not erase, the influence of the writer in structuring the text for the reader to engage with creatively. In the present study, therefore, without assigning determinative meaning to the author’s (ultimately unknowable) intention, Iserian guiding devices provide the critic with interesting tools to consider the reading process as it is “launched from the author’s camp”: 20
in Serrano’s case, these guiding devices are particularly useful in analyzing how bonds of reading are constructed as invitations to women readers to explore the constraints of patriarchy on articulations of female self-definition, in the light of intertextuality and genre reworking, as is demonstrated in chapter four of this dissertation.

Whereas Iser focuses on literature more in terms of communication, the process of meaning-making taking place as the reader confronts the unknown in the text, psychoanalytic critic Norman Holland places the emphasis rather on literature as a subjective experience that an individual reader has with a text (\textit{Dynamics} xxiii-xxiv), which can be characterized in terms of identification. In this respect Holland, on the basis of ego psychology (Leitch 44) and of studying actual reader responses, theorizes that readers re-create texts in terms of their own personalities (“Unity” 818), which leads him to posit that “interpretation is a function of identity” (“Unity” 816). Holland takes as point of departure that which is familiar to the reader, namely his/her own habits of interacting with the world and his/her experience with certain text types and literary conventions, to create a model of literature whereby the latter “transforms our primitive wishes and fears into significance and coherence, and this transformation gives us pleasure” (\textit{Dynamics} 30). For Holland, this is a bi-directional transmutation (\textit{Dynamics} 30)
which may facilitate an opening of perspective in readers such that they can grow as a result of their experience with the literary text (*Dynamics* 340).

Holland’s evaluation of literary interpretation\(^{10}\) in terms of identity re-creation is a helpful tool in exploring women readers’ involvement with Serrano’s works, in terms of the issue of connection versus autonomy, which runs as a thread throughout her fiction. In this respect, Holland draws on the works of theorists of identity, such as Heinz Lichtenstein, who suggests that in order to describe the personality of an individual, it is necessary to abstract an invariant underlying pattern from the corporeal and conduct transformations processed during the life span of that individual (“Unity” 814). Thus, the individual can be conceived as “living out variations on an identity theme much as a musician might play out an infinity of variations on a single melody” (“Unity” 814). Holland underscores that what remains constant throughout an individual’s life span of transformations are “not the notes themselves but their structural relationship to one another” (“Unity” 815), which may help to deflect charges of essentialism.

\(^{10}\) Unlike Iser, Holland does not distinguish between serious and light literature; instead, he uses the term “literature” to refer to any kind of text that is to be examined by means of close analysis (*Dynamics* xxiii-xxiv).
For Holland, then, individual readers interpret works in terms of these identity themes: “identity re-creates itself” (“Unity” 814), by perceiving and grouping details in the text into themes that are of particular relevance to the reader (“Unity” 814). Holland breaks down this process by proposing his DEFT model of perception, an acronym that stands for Defenses, Expectations, Fantasies, and Transformations. Holland’s model outlines a sequence of reading (or “DEFTing”; Holland & Sherman 227-32) processes: first the reader, having not yet read the text in question, confronts the text as something separate from him/herself. The reader has characteristic psychological defensive tactics for coping with the world (D), and general expectations (E) about how the world works, what books of the genre in question are like, etc. From this frame of reference, the reader attempts to engage the book, seeking in the actual material of the text to “match” his/her defenses and expectations, and to the degree this is successful, trust is built and the reader can begin to project fantasies (F) that generate pleasure and that avoid pain —addressing the concerns of the defenses (Holland, “New Paradigm” 338). This ongoing interaction of reader and text permits the reader to transform (T) fantasies into themes that have meaning for the reader, and thus a reader-specific experience of reading is arrived at, i.e., the reader has re-created the text in the light of his/her own identity.
This psychoanalytical focus in Holland’s framework is predominantly, but not completely, on the reader, however, as can be seen in Holland’s brief considerations of turning the spotlight on writers’ psyches. In “Unity,” Holland plays a version of “guess who wrote this” with an analysis of writings by Robert Frost, explaining the poems’ apparent thematic consistency in terms of Frost’s presumed identity theme (818-20). Holland provisionally raises elsewhere the general applicability of this analytical method to writers, stating “[i]ndeed, how could it be otherwise?” (Dynamics 242) since the author is, just like any reader, a human individual, raised within a particular culture and subject to its characteristic values, hopes, and fears (335). An interesting sidelight that Holland considers on a limited scale is the way that writers can, and hypothetically do, exploit identity themes that they predict their audiences might have in choosing material for their texts. Holland starts with the more overtly manipulative genres of propaganda and advertising, but sees some potential for such experimentation in terms of the identity themes of readers more generally as well (321-24). In the context of Serrano’s fiction, the tension that arises when middle- to upper-class women characters experience the desire to connect with the other and, at the same time, to assert and maintain their autonomy, an issue which pervades her writing, may be read in the light of Holland’s notion of interpretation as a
function of identity. In this respect, the matching of reader desire with identity-thematic fulfillment can account for Serrano’s appeal among her female audience and the personal attachment a number of readers report feeling towards her. In §4.2 the issue of connection and autonomy is addressed as an identity theme that constructs Serrano’s readership, using Holland’s DEFT model to formulate one possible explanation for female readers’ involvement with her works.

The inclination towards abstraction in Iser’s model of the reader and to invariance in Holland are certainly issues which must be reckoned with in using the frameworks these two reader theorists and critics provide in order to analyze the interaction of reader and text. Their lack of commitment to political and communal principles and values is also an important limitation when exploring projects of empowerment. As the following discussion reveals, David Bleich’s focus on intersubjective reading makes inroads towards overcoming these limitations.

Also from the psychoanalytic camp (Suleiman 27), but closer to social psychology (Richter 1166), Bleich introduces the component of the collective into his inquiries of reading, underscoring the relevance of the practice of intersubjective reading by members of a given reading community (Bleich, “Intersubjective” 418-20). Like Holland, Bleich concentrates on the experiential
dimension of literature (Leitch 46), understanding a literary work as a product of the personalities of the readers (Bleich, *Feelings* 4). Unlike Holland and Iser, who focus their attention on the individual interaction of readers and texts, Bleich also makes room for the relationship between the reader, his/her feelings, and other readers of his/her community as a key element of his concerns (*Feelings* 80-95), a framework which informs the analysis of my sample of women readers of Serrano undertaken in chapter five, in the light of the following discussion.

Bleich draws on research carried out with infants to posit the intersubjective nature of mental development (“Intersubjective” 412-18). In this respect, Bleich invokes the work of Margaret Donaldson, who shows that learning occurs in a context of personal relationships, the work of Colwyn Trevarthen and Penelope Hubley, who propose that structures of inter-subjectivity underlie structures of intelligence, and the work of Maureen Shields, who argues that thought is primarily enacted in dialogue, and that the affective nature of interpersonal relations contributes to mental development. For Bleich, therefore, intersubjectivity is the matrix that allows for the interweaving of the cognitive and the affective.

Another source for Bleich’s approach to reading as an interpersonal articulation can be located in the work of Ludwig Fleck, who argues for the
productivity of considering knowledge as originating and developing in personal interaction or a “thought collective” (“Intersubjective” 410), described as “a community of real people with common interests” (“Intersubjective” 411). In this respect, Bleich understands reading as a process that builds from individual affective responses of readers to texts, a process from which a sense of validation of the readers’ own thoughts and feelings may develop, as they feel that these are corroborated by those of the author, and from individual associative responses, which reveal how readers rework texts according to issues of their personalities that are affecting them at the time of reading, whether long-standing issues or punctual concerns and preoccupations (Feelings 33-48). These individual interactions with the text encourage readers to acknowledge and monitor their feelings as they read, and to make personal connections with what they find in their reading, with the goal of achieving greater insights into their personalities and values (Feelings 3-5, 46-48). Bleich’s emphasis on the worthiness of readers’ personal connections to texts offers a suitable framework in which to discuss not only how women readers in my sample perceive their feelings, thoughts, and life stories to be legitimated through the act of reading Serrano’s works, but also how validation can operate as a space of encouragement for
women readers to undertake critical reflections on the limitations hegemonic societies place on their lives as engendered in a female sex.

According to Bleich, individual affective and associative responses set the stage for “interpretation as a communal act,” which implies “developing an ability to learn from one’s peers and to see one’s own knowledge as a sharable item” (Feelings 78-79), and the community —or thought collective— of readers may be embodied, for instance, in families or classrooms. In these settings, the text provides an “occasion for interaction” (“Intersubjective” 418), for a democratic exchange of individual readings and emotions in an atmosphere of “shared personal and cultural values” (Feelings 89), which accounts for the common elements in the responses of groups (Feelings 93). Triggered by the act of reading, affect and thought are connected in an intersubjective exchange that aims at enhancing the well-being of the community (Feelings 95; “Intersubjective” 419). The sharing of reading experiences in the midst of thought collectives can enrich not only a reader’s experience of the work itself, but also his/her own experience of the act of reading, and him/herself in interaction with the other members of the reading community (Feelings 103-05). In this last regard, it is

---

11 Bleich’s concerns have been above all pedagogical. For a full description of his theory and praxis of reading as a subjective process in classroom settings, consult his Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism.
important to bear in mind the desire of human beings to validate their own feelings and thoughts by finding that other members of their own community also possess them, and how reading in thought collectives can provide a setting in which this type of legitimation is likely to take place within the process of generating group opinions (*Feelings* 81, 95). Since my survey of women readers of Serrano reveals a fairly widespread practice of sharing this writer’s books with other women readers, and sometimes of commenting on them together, as part and parcel of family and friendship relations, I can capitalize on Bleich’s theorization of intersubjective reading to examine these budding networks of like-minded individuals as safe spaces where critical consideration of patriarchal constraints can develop at a more interpersonal level, and women readers can derive a sense of validation of their feelings and thoughts as a result of these intersubjective exchanges, all of which may contribute to valuing, strengthening, and enriching bonds among women. The fact that Bleich understands intersubjective reading as “seek[ing] to secure a palpable social basis for continuing reading projects whose collective authority may then approach other communities and wider populations” (“Intersubjective” 419), in an attempt to improve the quality of social interactions, shows the affinity of this critic towards
projects of feminist criticism that make relational politics their core concern. The following section addresses such feminist intersubjective models of reading.

2.2 Feminist Models of Reading: Striving for Intersubjective Encounters

The shift enacted by reader-response critics in working with actual readers implies the acknowledgment that readers are different from each other. In this respect, feminist critics began to raise the issue of gender in relation to reading during the 1970s, regarding whether women and men read in different ways (Leitch 47), and how social and cultural differences of gender, sexual orientation, and eventually class and ethnicity, affect the activity of readers (Schweickart and Flynn, Introduction 10).

The importance of the work undertaken by feminists at the intersection of reader-response criticism may be appreciated, for instance, in how these critics open up the field of literature to political inquiry. In this connection, the emphasis is more towards challenging traditional interpretations that are consistent with patriarchal values and towards making readers, especially women, aware of the implications of such interpretations for gender relations, rather than simply explaining how interpretations arise, while hiding behind a facade of gender neutrality. Practices of reading underscoring women readers’
involvement with texts by female writers which appear to reflect women’s experiences in “real life” are privileged, in the belief that these practices may allow readers to derive a sense of empowerment through connections to female characters who offer more rewarding ways of living. Greater complexity is also ascribed to the interactions that women readers have with mass culture literature than what hegemonic academic interpretive practices are willing to concede. In this respect, (1) women readers are viewed as more than mere passive receptors of this type of texts, vis-à-vis the criteria they exhibit in favoring certain instantiations of mass culture texts over others, and (2) women readers’ enthusiastic sharing of mass culture books and comments on what they read point to the generation of networks among readers with the potential for fostering female self-expression and women-affirming-women activities. In the spirit of upholding dialogic relations of negotiation between women readers and texts written by women, feminist models of reading are proposed that stress the relevance of acknowledging and respecting both the woman writer’s and the women readers’ context of experience. In what follows, these issues are fleshed

---

12 The perils of finding one’s “female identity” in texts is addressed in chapter five in connection with the analysis of women readers’ responses to my survey.
out as they pertain to my discussion of Serrano’s textual praxis of consciousness-raising and of its reception by my sample of women readers.

Locating reader-response in the realm of the classroom, like Bleich, but relevant for her incorporating the political component within a feminist critique of reading, Judith Fetterley makes explicit what she believes to be the potential of literature as a weapon to change the consciousness of readers, in the well-known opening words of her introduction to *The Resisting Reader*: “Literature is political” (xi). According to Fetterley, women readers of US-American fiction written by men suffer the effects of *immasculation*, because “[a]s readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (xx). All of this points to the degree to which “what we read affects us” (viii).

Fetterley understands that feminist criticism has a stake in changing this state of things—and changing the world—by “changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read” (viii), because “[c]onsciousness is power” (xix). In this connection, the proposition “what we read affects us” can be put to use with a positive connotation through the exploration of women’s texts that underscore and validate women’s life stories.
and resistance to oppression (Fetterley, “Reading about Reading” 150-54). In the context of the present study, both the exploration of female fictions that reveal a desire for consciousness-raising, and the reception of such fictions among women readers, can provide insight into the impact that works like Serrano’s might have on a middle- to upper-class female readership in terms of the articulation of standpoints of self-definition which, in turn, may affect how these women relate to other women and contribute to their empowerment. Although this kind of relational politics among women may not rise to the level of the collective dimension of cultural transformation implicit in feminist projects, the triggering of reflections about what it implies for women to function within the framework of modern societies while juggling their own personal issues is a good starting point to stimulate women readers’ critical consideration of ourselves, a necessary condition to change women’s situation in society.

Taking reader-response out of academe and into the hands of professional, middle-class, adult, white women has been a concern for Anne G. Berggren, who conducted interviews with nine women regarding their life-long experiences of reading (popular as well as canonic literature) and what this reading meant to them (172). On the basis of these women’s responses, as well as her own practice of reading, Berggren elaborates on the notion of reading like a
woman\textsuperscript{13}, as opposed to that of reading \textit{as} one. According to Berggren, for female readers who read \textit{like} a woman, the line between their lives and the works they read tends to become blurred. These readers read for pleasure as well as to acquire knowledge about themselves and about how they relate to their environment as women. In this respect, women readers consider their “reading habits as positive, indeed life-sustaining” (168), because these allow them to turn to literature for assistance on how to cope with issues that affect their lives. These women readers feel a sense of personal connection with the works they read\textsuperscript{14} (173), which allows them to use female characters as models for their behavior (174, 182), and as sources of validation and empowerment in order to challenge patriarchal gender roles and to embark on non-traditional paths\textsuperscript{15} (175, 182-83).

\textsuperscript{13} Berggren sees the practice of reading \textit{like} a woman in the framework of “authentic realism” (171), characterized by Sara Mills as a critical approach to reading whose proponents view literature “as a potential vehicle for change in women’s lives, since it can serve as a catalyst for consciousness-raising and a basis for constructing models for other ways of living” (Mills 51; cf. Fetterley above). Authentic realism takes as tenets, among others, that (1) women readers hold some “notion of what women are really like,” which allows them to measure female characters against this notion in order to assess their authenticity (Mills 58), that (2) it is reasonable to make reference to “such a thing as women’s experience,” based on biological and patriarchal constraints on female freedom (55), and that (3) there may well be a close relationship between the author and her female characters that invests the writing of women authors with their personal experience (61). These considerations, as they relate to the reception of Serrano’s works, are revisited and evaluated in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{14} The reports of respondents which Berggren chose to include in her article mention mostly titles by female authors, but also include works written by men.

\textsuperscript{15} Erin A. Smith also addresses this aspect in her reading-response survey on the interactions between detective fiction and the lives of professional, middle-class, adult, white women (only two out of twenty respondents were male) readers; her findings suggest the presence of a component of rehearsal in the reading practices of these women, which is accounted for by the identification of the readers with characters.
In contrast, reading as a woman would imply “setting oneself apart from the reading, regarding the [work] as ‘text,’ and analyzing it from the outside rather than living in it as a participant” (Berggren 171), a position from which Berggren distances herself in her article (172). Berggren’s considerations on reading like a woman provide useful tools to evaluate the reception of Serrano’s fiction among women readers in my sample in terms of how their experience of reading offers a number of participants a sense of validation and insights into themselves, through the connections they make with Serrano’s works. On the basis of this safe space of legitimation, women readers may feel more encouraged to actively whose background or profession resembles their own, thus allowing them to reflect on their own personal or work lives (206-09).

16 Berggren traces the expressions “reading like a woman” and “reading as a woman,” to the fourteenth-century scholar Christine de Pisan, quoted in Susan Schibanoff’s article “Taking the Gold Out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman,” when she refers to the latter term as “involv[ing], as […] Christine de Pisan put it ‘reading as a woman’ rather than ‘reading like a woman’” (Berggren 171). In the spirit of clarifying terms, it is important to note that (1) “reading like a woman” was a term used by Jean de Montreuil and Pierre Col as an insult to Pisan for what they perceived as her misreading or lack of understanding of Jean de Meun’s antifeminist Romance of the Rose, a misreading that stems from female “envy, pride, or foolishness” (Schibanoff 94-95), whereas for Berggren, the expression has a positive connotation, and that (2) “reading as a woman” is used by Schibanoff to characterize Pisan’s response to these two French erudites. In this respect Pisan, from being an immasculated reader and writer becomes, thanks to the debate with Montreuil and Col, a woman reader “who claim[s] her right to reread texts according to her own experiences and knowledge” (97), those of being a woman and therefore “possess[ing] a more authoritative understanding of women than did Jean de Meun” (96), in a way that does not immasculate her. Berggren, referring to less immasculating readings and basing her argument on definitions of the phrases “reading like a woman” and “reading as a woman” that are in fact incompatible with those found in the Schibanoff article she cites, warns of the likelihood of alienation for women readers who remain outside and distanced from texts, as much academic critical practice would require (Berggren 172, 184-85). This is not to suggest that Berggren’s contribution is suspect, but merely that her use of these terms is at least potentially misleading.
engage with the constraints that patriarchal hegemony has placed on their lives, attempting to challenge traditional gender roles.

Janice A. Radway’s ethnographic studies of reading popular culture provide interesting insights for my study because they address the ways in which women readers actually engage with cultural products. Between 1980 and 1981, Radway conducted group and individual interviews with sixteen romance book buyers from a bookstore in a mid-western region of the United States, as well as administered a survey questionnaire to forty-two women customers of said bookstore. Her main informant was a bookstore employee that managed to develop a clientele of up to seventy-five women romance readers, who relied on her advice concerning the quality of the romances published to inform their purchasing and reading choices ("Women Read the Romance" 56). The data facilitated by this informant and her customers led Radway to the conclusion that the act of romance reading has liberating effects for women readers because it allows them to temporarily disengage the frustration they experience at the failure of the institution of patriarchal marriage to satisfy all their needs, by carving out for themselves a time and space of reading during which they can set

---

17 Radway’s respondents were, in general, middle-class adults, with at least a high school diploma, most of them married and with children ("Women Read the Romance" 57, 75).
aside the demands which their roles as wives and mothers impose on them, and to vicariously engage in their fantasies of emotional attention in the arms of loving partners (58-62, 68). This space of pleasurable involvement also allows women readers to experience an increase in self-esteem as they engage, for instance, in learning experiences such as simulated traveling, which provides them with factual knowledge that justifies, both in their own eyes and in those of their families, their reading activities (Reading the Romance 109-13).

In “Reading Is Not Eating,” Radway extends arguments also found in Reading the Romance, exploring how women writers and readers of romances creatively interact among themselves both within and between these categories by means of such cultural artifacts, and the potential these interactions have for social transformation of their daily lives. Radway does so by means of examining the metaphor that likens the process of reading popular literature to processes of consumption, a metaphor which, according to her, has often been used to dismiss mass culture texts (“Reading Is Not Eating” 7) as “record[s] of [readers’]

---

18 Radway acknowledges the ideologically conservative function of romances (for details see “Women Read the Romance” 72-73; Reading the Romance 209-22; “Reading Is Not Eating” 17-18), but challenges the charge of passive and complacent reception of forms of mass culture originally stemming from the Frankfurt School (“Reading Is Not Eating” 8-10; Reading the Romance 221-22).

19 Smith addresses a related aspect in her conceptualization of reading as rehearsal, as she recounts how some of her respondents prepare for traveling to an unknown place by reading mystery books set there. Fiction serves these readers as a mental and emotional preparation for the stay in the unfamiliar location (210-11).
manipulation, domination, and colonization by others who possess the financial and cultural power to create for them” (9). In likening these two processes of reading and consumption, the implications are made that the object purchased, in this case the book, is fully used up in the act of personal consumption, which renders its exchange value nil, and that a mass culture object is ingested, incorporated, and absorbed as “‘predigested’ ‘pap’ or ‘gruel’ which is easily and commonly swallowed whole” (10). These implications deny the complex processes involved in the interaction between people and mass culture artifacts, reducing the perspective on this exchange “almost to a caricature” (9).

Radway’s work provides interesting cases of how these interactions may, to a certain extent, hold a transformative potential for women readers and writers of romance fiction. In addition to the liberating effects noted above, this critic also alludes, for instance, to how the reading and writing of romances can lead to the formation of communities of women (“Reading Is Not Eating” 21). Women readers feel a personal connection with women writers, to the point that they “read authors rather than books” (22), and express this desire to connect with women writers (who in turn are addressing them as women that hold similar world views) by meeting their favorite authors at autographing sessions (22). In addition, women readers also exchange their experience of reading these
authors by engaging in book-swapping or discussion sessions with other women. These instances of collective reflection on female protagonists and characters serve to break the isolation some women live in as a result of focusing on their family lives, and enable them to derive, via the circulation of books among the members of the group, strategies to cope with gender issues that impact their own lives (22-25; recall Berggren above). These female communities stemming from the act of romance reading challenge the metaphorical equation of reading to consumption in the sense of exhaustion, showing that buying and selling is not the whole story for either readers or writers. The fact that Radway’s respondents carefully select their romances, with a marked inclination towards intelligent and independent heroines partnered with gentler and more expressive heroes (Reading the Romance 219-20; “Reading Is Not Eating” 15-16), and with an eye toward shunning “‘bad’ romances”21, also contributes to challenging the

20 Radway extends this conception of reading as an encounter with recognizable characters and hence derivation of coping strategies from them to her analysis of the Book-of-the-Month-Club (BOMC) as a middlebrow phenomenon, whereby she explores how its editors proceed to select serious fiction. For BOMC editors, some books “can simultaneously excite the senses and stand up to aesthetic contemplation and evaluation” (“The Book-of-the-Month Club” 529), but neither the sensational nor the purely artistic should become ends in themselves (537). In this respect, serious fiction must first attract the reader into the world of the work, demanding his/her participation and involvement, and then “provide the occasion for moral and ethical judgments” (537). This dialectic of attraction and reflection is revisited in connection with Serrano’s experiments in intertextuality and genre re-elaboration in chapter four.

21 Radway’s respondents do not accept romances whose plots involve e.g., explicit sexual descriptions, male involvement with several women at the same time, women severely abused by men (“Women Read the Romance” 63-64).
metaphorical equation of reading to consumption in the sense of ingestion and absorption, suggesting that romance readers are not merely passive receptors. Radway’s framework is useful to describe the complexities in the interactions of my sample of women readers with Serrano’s texts in terms of the insights that some of them perceive themselves as gaining through the experience of reading, as well as in the expressions of critical evaluation of Serrano’s thematic and stylistic execution reported. The interactions of women readers among themselves in sharing and discussing books they find meaningful described in Radway’s research also serve to inform my evaluation of participants’ responses, as these point to the importance some of these women find in forming and building on women-affirming-women networks. These aspects are brought forth for analysis in chapter five.

In “Reading Ourselves,” Patrocinio P. Schweickart offers a model for feminist readings of texts written by women which further explores this connection between women readers and women authors. Schweickart draws on Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson,” to illuminate her paradigm of what a feminist theory of reading should strive towards.
Following Jonathan Culler’s survey of reader-response criticism in On Deconstruction, Schweickart begins by discussing models of reading offered by mainstream reader-response theorists, which give the control either to the object (the text) or to the subject (the reader), in order to advocate a dynamics of feminist reading based on connections between women readers and texts written by women (44-48). Schweickart, like Fetterley, understands literature as “praxis,” as “an important arena of political struggle” for feminists in “the project of interpreting the world in order to change it” (39; see Fetterley above), and hence she questions mainstream paradigms of reading on account of their primarily theoretical investment in the interpretation of literature (38-39). In keeping with the political nature of a feminist enterprise, Schweickart revisits Fetterley on the immasculating effects of androcentric literature on women readers (41-43), Annette Kolodny on the androcentric modes of reading that women readers deploy as a result of how they have been taught to read canonic texts (45), and Elaine Showalter on the importance of focusing on the study of woman writers, to underscore that feminist critics need to develop “reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences […] that constitute texts written by women” (45), and to demonstrate how this goal can be implemented through her own reading of Adrienne Rich reading Emily Dickinson in “Vesuvius at Home,” with the
expectation that Schweickart’s reading “anticipates the articulation of a paradigm that illuminates certain features of feminist readings of women’s writing” (45).

According to Schweickart, Rich’s rhetoric in said essay implicitly enacts the way a feminist reader should read a text written by a woman. In this respect, Schweickart highlights the attitude Rich has toward her subject, conceptualizing it in terms of three metaphors. The first is a judicial metaphor: as a woman writer struggling to come to terms with her own métier, Rich expresses her desire to serve Dickinson as “witness” (Rich, “Vesuvius” 178), defending her against a patriarchy that misreads and trivializes her writing (Schweickart 46). The second metaphor is one of visiting: since, in the light of feminist criticism, “a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written” (46), Rich travels from her own time and space to the time and space of Dickinson, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to the poet’s house, to visit her “on her own premises” (46), to make sense of her in the context of the walls where she secluded herself, with the goal of understanding Dickinson’s personal and poetic choices. According to Schweickart, this metaphor of visiting with Dickinson underscores the importance of overcoming the dichotomy of text as object and reader as subject, so as to “construe the text not as an object, but as
the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author—the ‘voice’ of another woman” (47). The third metaphor, one of “an insect, vibrating at the frames of windows, clinging to panes of glass, trying to connect” (Rich, “Vesuvius” 180), alludes to the limits this visit entails: as a woman reader, Rich endeavors to connect with the woman writer, but although “the scent […] is very powerful” (Rich, “Vesuvius” 180), Rich finds “only a text, the trail of an absent author” (Schweickart 47).

According to Schweickart, Rich’s use of metaphors, together with her subjective approach to Dickinson, embodied in her deployment of a personal voice which seeks to establish an affinity (rather than an identification) between the experience of the two woman poets in a patriarchal context, points out that a feminist reading of a female text (1) must respect the integrity of the text, and (2) is “at once an intersubjective encounter and something less than that” (48), because although Rich tries to penetrate Dickinson’s mind, the text is still an object, and “its subjectivity is only a projection of the subjectivity of the reader” (48). Thus, when a woman reads the text of another woman, the subject-object relationship is articulated as “an intersubjective construction,” whereby “the reader encounters not simply a text, but a ‘subjectified object’: the ‘heart and mind’ of another woman. She comes into close contact with an interiority—a
power, a creativity, a suffering, a vision—that is not identical with her own” (52). This encounter, which is of a dialogic nature, aims to recover, articulate and celebrate a woman’s point of view, enabling the author to “live as the substantial, palpable presence animating her works” (51), with the provisos that the writer is read “in light of her own premises” (53) and that the reader also reads in light of her own (53). This enriched perspective for both parties thus amounts to an interweaving of the context of writing with that of reading (53-54), and furthermore serves to motivate the two-pronged investigative

---

22 Schweickart imports the term subjectified object(s) from Georges Poulet’s “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority” (58). While Poulet speaks of the presence of the ideas that he comes to think while reading as mental objects, subjectified by virtue of being thought in his mind: “They [the mental representations] do not seem to be of another nature than my mind which thinks them. They are objects, but subjectified objects” (58), Schweickart resemanticizes the term. For Schweickart the relevant sense of “subjectified” is akin to “invested with something of the interiority of the woman writer” that a reader encounters while reading a text (for Schweickart, the relevant “object”).

23 In this connection, I suggest that it would not be out of place for Schweickart to acknowledge the theory of Hans Robert Jauss, specifically his reference to both the author’s and the reader’s horizons of experience as being equal sources for arriving dialogically at the meaning of a text: “The meaning that a historically distant text can recapture for us does not emerge solely from the folds of the original horizon. It stems to an equal degree from the later horizon of experience belonging to the interpreter” (Question 206); “Literary understanding first becomes dialogic when the alterity of the text is sought out and acknowledged before the horizon of one’s own expectations—with the result that instead of attempting a naïve fusion of horizons, one’s own expectations will be corrected and expanded through the experience of the other” (207-08). Jauss’s project has to do with constructing continuities within a literary history of reception (Aesthetic of Reception 18-20), and thus does not have gender as a particular focus. Nevertheless, the explicit reference to the author’s and the reader’s contexts of experience helps to situate the text and the reading in a way that respects both participants in the dialogue.

24 It is important to note that Schweickart bases her dialogic model of reading on the works of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, whose works suggest that women and men differ in their conception of themselves and their relations with others. In this respect, because women’s more flexible ego boundaries would allow them to conceive of themselves in terms of their relationships with others, this would lead them to favor negotiation when their needs differ from the ones of those surrounding them, rather than interactions of control (54-55). In terms of the interaction between reader and text, this means that in a
approach to intersubjectivity pursued in this dissertation via, on the one hand, an exploration of Serrano’s praxis of empowerment as it emerges in her texts, and on the other, a survey of a sample of Serrano’s women readers whose responses point to the connections that some of these readers feel with the writer, as well as with other women readers (the latter, a case of intersubjectivity in Bleich’s sense).

In the present study, the intersubjective encounter between reader and text is conceived as involving textual invitations which open up spaces of reflection for women readers to examine how patriarchal hegemony constrains female self-definition (rather than relying solely on the initiative of the woman reader for engaging this encounter, as is the case in Schweickart’s model of feminist reading). Schweickart’s theorization of the text as a “subjectified object” allows for the treatment of Serrano’s “presence” in the equation writer-text-reader, in a manner that does not amount to authorial control determining the experience of a passive reader, but rather depends on a reader who is motivated to connect.

Dialogic model of reading, characterized by this need “to connect” of which Rich spoke, the issues of control prevalent in mainstream reader-response criticism are replaced by a “dialectic of communication” (55), whereby the woman reader seeks to relate to the woman writer in the text within a framework of respectful consideration for their respective standpoints of self-definition (55).
2.3 Motivating an Eclectic Approach to Reader-Response Criticism

The present chapter has been in places necessarily programmatic and expository, in the interest of doing justice to the context specific to each theoretical framework. In this section, I lay out relevant issues that are addressed in detail in subsequent chapters, and I show how the reader theories described above work together to treat these issues. Serrano’s writing appears to invite the following reading dynamics:\[25^{25}\]:

1. reading intersubjectively with other women,
2. seeking signs of familiarity (and validation) in what one reads,
3. experimenting with new ways of thinking and acting, in response to textual invitations, and
4. forming an image of the author with whom a connection is felt, and which can also result in the appreciation of new ways of being in the world.

\[25^{25}\] These dynamics are explicitly contrary to the broader concerns of post-structuralist literary theory: (1) intersubjective meaning is found in collective negotiation, as opposed to the multiplicity of interpretations without recourse to an authoritative center, as is characteristic of post-structuralism; (2) post-structuralism trades in defamiliarization and deconstruction, rather than seeking to find identities in texts; (3) guiding devices à la Iser are not reliable constructs in the face of the disruption of the linguistic sign; and (4) the author is dead, and “[he] is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (Barthes 118). In contrast to post-structuralist approaches which highlight the fluidity and unreliability of language, ultimately pointing to the “impossibility” of reading, the reader-response theories presented for discussion in this chapter, by contrast, uphold the possibility of meaning-making in reading. This is crucial in projects of consciousness-raising such as Serrano’s, because it is through the experience of women reading women’s writing that intersubjective connections are fostered between the reader and the text and among women readers themselves.
Each of these dimensions of reading practice may be seen as supporting a paradigm of reading that operates from a perspective of connection and female empowerment, resulting in not only the formation of connections that affirm women readers, but also opportunities for exploration beyond the reader’s comfort zone, enabled by an initial textual groundwork established in the familiar.

The practice of exchanging Serrano’s books and discussing feelings and reactions thereto in the company of other known women readers is consonant with the intersubjective reading model of Bleich and the discussion-group dynamics investigated by Radway in the context of romance readers. In this regard, reading in relation to a group of fellow readers can foster a collective negotiation of truth that is relevant for that particular community. This factor also prompts the treatment of such communally-defined meanings of bestsellers with respect, rather than dismissing them as errors of un(der)trained readers.

Responses to my survey indicate that these women readers tend to seek after the familiar when they enter a new text. Finding what a reader believes to be true and worthy based on her own experience offers her a measure of validation, and encourages the formation of a bond of trust with the characters, and for some readers, with the figure of the author, who is seen as having
provided the occasion for this type of experience. Many of the reading theorists discussed in the preceding sections have a role for familiarity in their models of reading, including Iser’s dynamic of familiarizing the unfamiliar as readers progress through a text, Holland’s DEFT model, Bleich’s emphasis on validation in individual and communal responses, Berggren’s connections that women feel with characters they see as “authentically realistic,” and Schweickart’s model of increasing familiarity of reader with writer as she “visits” the writer on her “premises.” These overlapping senses of the role of the familiar underlie the process of entering and extending into the work of a writer, and provide the basis from which the new and different, even the personally challenging, may be presented to the reader in a position of relative safety.

In order for Serrano’s fiction to succeed in fostering an awareness in women readers about how hegemonic structures naturalize gender roles, and therefore, how these roles are susceptible of being renegotiated, these readers need to be presented with models of thought and behavior that foreground and legitimize women’s life stories and acts of resistance (Fetterley, Berggren). If Serrano’s texts are not to be overly didactic and intrusive in their presentation, they must allow room for women readers to draw connections and detect discrepancies that may be left implicit for the reader to work through (Iser). A
writer may unconsciously invest her writing with the traces of her identity themes, and if these are held in common with readers, the engagement of the reader with the text is facilitated (Holland). Similarly, in an attempt to appeal to a target audience, a writer may deliberately include themes that she predicts will resonate with the concerns of her readers, capitalizing on the DEFT dynamic. In the case of Serrano, writing primarily for an audience of middle- to upper-class professional women with partners and children, the inclusion of the theme of connection versus autonomy, for example, may be analyzable from such a perspective (see §4.2.1).

Lastly, some of Serrano’s women readers report, to varying degrees, a sense of “knowing” (Schweickart) and/or being “understood” by Serrano. Likewise, they express interest and affection with respect to this writer (Radway, Berggren). This impression of kinship, which I believe arises primarily, if not entirely, in relation to a mental representation of the author that readers form by virtue of their reading, is in the case of some of the respondents conducive to motivating them to appreciate or to attempt other life options. In this regard, it should be pointed out that Serrano actively promotes this sense of kinship with her readers through the public relations campaigns launched to market her
novels (e.g., interviews, book signings), in which she takes the occasion to give readers “indications” of how to read her books, as §3.3.1 reveals.
CHAPTER 3

SITUATING THE FICTION OF MARCELA SERRANO

“Leo libros de escritoras latinoamericanas entre ellas Marcela Serrano. Me interesan como mujer, como latina y por ser contemporáneas.”

(One reader’s response to my question 3 —see Appendix.)

“[Los libros de Marcela Serrano m]e han hecho reflexionar mucho sobre mis conceptos de la amistad […], me han hecho ver el valor del encuentro con mujeres, cuánto tenemos en común.”

(One reader’s response to my question 5 —see Appendix.)

3.1 The Context of the Nueva Narrativa Chilena

Between July 30 and August 13, 1997, a seminar on Nueva Narrativa Chilena took place at the Centro Cultural de España in Santiago de Chile, organized in collaboration with the Chilean newspaper La Época (Torres-Dulce 5). This seminar drew from the contributions of writers and critics, as well as editors, executives, and owners of publishing houses, (1) to establish whether the
so-called *Nueva Narrativa* existed as a movement in Chilean letters, (2) to understand its connections within the context of Chilean literature at large, and (3) to determine how selection and marketing decisions were being undertaken concerning the works of these authors, whose writings emerged during the eighties, particularly in the area of narrative (Olivárez, Prólogo 10).

The responses to these different inquiries did not all point in the same direction, however. Whereas a number of seminar participants advocated for the legitimacy of calling the *Nueva Narrativa* a movement in its own right, others insisted on considering it purely the result of marketing operations, initially launched by the publishing house Planeta through its Biblioteca del Sur collection in the nineties, and continued by Alfaguara and Grijalbo (cf. Seibert 45). In the former camp, writer Ramón Díaz Eterovic talks about this phenomenon in terms of a literary generation of fiction writers born between 1948 and 1962, whose production is concerned with topics related to the dictatorship and post-dictatorship periods —which resonate with the interest of readers—, and involves a variety of styles and genres (Díaz Eterovic 124-26), adding that the name *Nueva Narrativa Chilena* had been coined in 1986\(^2\), when he,

---

\(^2\) Díaz Eterovic also adds that this name had been in existence even before 1986, in literary fora or journals (124).
together with Diego Muñoz Valenzuela, prepared the anthology *Contando el cuento: Nueva Narrativa Chilena* (123-24)\(^2\).

For Díaz Eterovic, these writers represent a movement “*que […] existe,* pese a las dudas con las que a veces se le menciona, o a su distorsión al considerarla *sólo* como el resultado de una operación de marketing destinado a promover las obras de algunos narradores chilenos” (123, emphasis added). As can be appreciated from what follows, participant writer Sonia González is more adamant than Díaz Eterovic in downplaying the importance of marketing forces. In the words of González, “*no me parece aceptable una confusión de conceptos en virtud de la cual pueda parecer, para alguien, que fue el mercado editorial el Frankenstein que inventó el fenómeno cuyas piezas hoy tratamos de ordenar*” (S. González 174), advocating the legitimacy of works in which readers can recognize “*los referentes de lo que somos, de lo que fuimos o incluso, de lo que nos gustaría ser*” (S. González 172), and affirming that the novels of the *Nueva Narrativa* would have existed with or without the action of Planeta and other publishing houses (S. González 174-75). Critics Rodrigo Cánovas (“*La novela de la orfandad*” 21) and Patricia Espinosa (“*Narrativa chilena hoy*” 65) also attest to

---

\(^2\) This anthology is a collection of thirty-four short stories by seventeen authors, which include Díaz Eterovic and Muñoz Valenzuela themselves (Cánovas, *Novela chilena* 16).
the Nueva Narrativa as a movement in its own right, offering valuable insights into many of these works, which are revisited in the course of this study.

Among those who consider that the Nueva Narrativa should be examined as “un proyecto publicitario, comercial y editorial,” started by Planeta in 1987, and continued by other publishing houses such as Alfaguara, is critic Soledad Bianchi (“De qué hablamos” 32). According to Bianchi, the reasons for the success of this so-called Chilean miniboom, as well as the nature of its production, cannot be divorced from avid consumer society and free market policies maintained by the democratic governments that followed Augusto Pinochet’s sixteen years of military dictatorship (33). In this respect, Bianchi sees the Nueva Narrativa as “estereotipada […] homogénea, conformista y monocorde; tan homogénea, conformista, deslavada y monocorde como su contexto, el consenso” (34), and refers to Serrano’s Nosotras que nos queremos tanto as quite schematic and easily accommodated in existing categories (33). Novels like this, continues Bianchi, are marketed based on extra-literary aspects, such as the topics they address or the appeal of their protagonists, to access a “comprador segmentado” (33), in this case a target audience of financially secure women, who are able to both identify and entertain themselves with these stories (33). In addition, Bianchi calls into question Antigua vida mía, likening it to the genre of self-help
books, and suggesting that this alleged connection may at least partly account for the book’s bestseller status (31). With this, Bianchi makes clear her opinion about the lack of sophistication of the “comprador[a] segmentad[a]” that reads Serrano’s works, a woman reader who apparently does not aspire to be moved to reflection by what she reads, but rather to find comfort in topics and situations with which she can identify. In a similar vein, critic Raquel Olea, also a seminar participant, agrees with Bianchi on the importance of disregarding topics as extra-literary factors (“La niña sudaca” 40) which appeal to segmented audiences (38). In “La mujer, un tema social de mercado” Olea specifically discusses the incorporation of woman, via the mother-daughter relationship, as a topic in spaces of cultural production, in order to guarantee the consumption of cultural products by female audiences, arguing that the effects of this incorporation respond rather to neo-liberal interests and the corresponding political designs towards women —the maintenance of “significaciones y convenciones aparentemente inamovibles de lo femenino y sus lugares de implicación en el orden social y familiar” (74)—, than to open challenges coming from feminist theory and praxis. Olea visits in particular this incorporation of female topics in relation to her critique of the anthology Salidas de madre (1996), a collection of short stories by twenty Chilean women writers, published by Planeta. In
analyzing the criteria for selection of pieces, Olea finds that “es posible constatar una política editorial de instalación de un producto literario por una operación mercadista que desestima la crítica literaria y la lectura reflexiva como espacios de legitimación cultural” (74). This occurs, according to Olea, because of the very broad and indiscriminate selection of women writers, led by market criteria, and not by considerations regarding textual characteristics and differences with respect to the treatment of the literary among the pieces that comprise the collection. For Olea, the majority of these texts, except for “Consagradas,” by Diamela Eltit, “Juego de cuatro estaciones,” by Lilian Elphik, and “Función triple,” by Lina Meruane, also exhibit the lack of a tension capable of producing a variety of meanings and significations which are necessary for reflection and articulation of social projects (75). An excerpt from Serrano’s Nosotras que nos queremos tanto is included in the collection, and thus falls into Olea’s less-valued category by default, although this critic does, in a previous article, make explicit comments regarding the inability of Nosotras que nos queremos tanto to critically resemanticize “el ser mujer” in the context of an agenda of social transformation (“Más allá de un encuentro” 6).

Among the writers who participated in the seminar and also echo and expand on Bianchi’s and Olea’s perspective about the homogenizing nature of
the *Nueva Narrativa*, elaborating on the powerlessness of these segmented readers, is the above-mentioned neo-vanguardist Eltit. According to Eltit, the literary project of the market sustains the neo-liberal project of the *Concertación*\(^\text{28}\) administrations, in the sense that both enterprises aim at the depoliticization and disciplining of subjects (“La compra” 58-60), and at their transformation into mere “sujetos monetarios” (58). Readers are:

> únicamente el resultado disciplinar de un programa político-económico, dentro del cual estos nuevos lectores, más que leer literatura, lo que garantizan al leer (que en este contexto es una forma de no leer) es su propio habitar en el sistema o, dicho de otra manera, sólo pueden/deben leer *lo que el sistema les propone* para obtener así un espacio legible y confortable en el sistema. (58, emphasis added)

---

\(^{28}\) The term refers to a coalition of center-left political parties founded in 1988 to defeat Pinochet’s plebiscite of that same year which sought to determine whether or not he was to remain in power. In December 1989, Patricio Aylwin, the Christian Democrat leader chosen by the *Concertación* to be its candidate for the presidential election, won, and with his taking office in March, 1990, a period in the history of Chile known as *Transición a la democracia* started. It is important to note, however, that there is no consensus as to whether the *Transición* refers to Aylwin’s administration only, or whether it extends to include the constitutional reforms undertaken under Ricardo Lagos’s government (G. González 1). From a different perspective, Idelber Avelar, who follows Willy Thayer to build on his concept of *transition*, understands that this term should be used to designate the Chilean dictatorship itself, since it was during this period that a transition was made to a transnational market, and not to refer to “the return to parliamentary democracy, free elections, and juridical institutionality” (Avelar 58-59), as the social sciences understand this term. In Avelar’s view, “‘Transition to democracy’ meant nothing but the juridical-electoral legitimation of the successful transition carried out under the military, that is, the ultimate equation between political freedom for people and economic freedom for capital” (59).
And what the neo-liberal Chilean market system offers its readers is not critical and aesthetic works, but bestsellers (58) through which, according to Eltit, the current system unilaterally produces readings and subjectivities that neutralize tensions and conflict, and destroy critical thinking, plurality and difference (60).

In the face of these understandings of the *Nueva Narrativa* as an editorial phenomenon which, for instance, not even publishing houses attempt to deny (Orellana Riera 44), one thing remains indisputable: after the literary drought which occurred during the dictatorship period, Chilean readers in the post-dictatorship were enthusiastically buying and reading Chilean authors (Orellana Riera 46; Marks 19-20; cf. Bianchi, “De qué hablamos” 31), and incidentally, thanks to their purchasing power, contributing to prying open the tight grip of the hegemonic literary establishment and its focus on the canon. Leaving aside the issue of whether the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena* is a legitimate literary movement (a question which exceeds the objectives of this dissertation as outlined in chapter one), it makes sense to inquire into the constellation of themes and styles that resonate among readers, in order to inform an investigation of Serrano’s works in particular.

Rodrigo Cánovas —together with a group of researchers from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile composed of Carolina Pizarro, Magda
Sepúlveda, and Danilo Santos— is one of the few critics to have approached the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena* from a comprehensive perspective that traces and contextualizes thematic tendencies, and examines the formats within which these are enacted, rather than studying different authors and/or works in isolation. In *Novela chilena, nuevas generaciones*, Cánovas proposes a generational approach to the study of the *Nueva Narrativa*, which in his estimation includes Chilean novelists born between 1950 and 1964 in this movement (“Presentación” 9). After examining a corpus of 120 novels (9), Cánovas posits that the subject of the *Nueva Narrativa* is the orphan, a being whose lack has been triggered by the historical event of September 11, 1973 (“Una visión panorámica” 39), i.e., Pinochet’s coup d’état, which overthrew president Salvador Allende and his *Unidad Popular* program’s attempt to create the conditions for a socialist government within the parameters of representative democracy.

Cánovas sees three types of orphanhood in the *Nueva Narrativa*, namely, that of the abandoned child, the war veteran, and the solitary woman. In the first case, the child is orphaned by a father who represents the defeat and loss of utopia brought about by dictatorship. The abandoned child can be either resentful at its father for having abandoned it, thus condemning it to a world of hopelessness, as put forth by Carlos Franz (40, 73-74). It can be nostalgic for, and
hope to reclaim, its father’s utopias of social change that may yet be fulfilled, as is the case in Antonio Ostornol (40, 75), or accepting of the loss of the father (who embodies the truncated political project of social change), but determined to persevere in the emotional commitment of recreating his memory, as developed by Ana María del Río (40, 77). Furthermore, it may be maladapted, as a result of insertion in a society and family setting without values, a situation which gives rise to an orphan child that seeks to fill its void through adopting a US-American way of life in the context of its own neo-liberal Chilean society, as Alberto Fuguet allows his readers to appreciate through the technique of the publicity spot (41, 59).

Another kind of orphanhood is that of the “war veterans,” those who live their lives looking back to the socialist utopia destroyed in 1973, in order to regenerate it. The preferred format to enact this utopian rescue is the genre of detective fiction, the hard-boiled novel, whereby a solitary private investigator conducts an inquiry within a society in crisis, an investigation which in the Chilean context entails a reflection about utopian thought from a position of marginality during the Transición. This kind of detection is carried out, for instance, by detectives Cayetano Brulé and Heredia, of Roberto Ampuero and Ramón Díaz Eterovic, respectively (41-42, 54-55).
A third orphan state is enacted by solitary women, whose condition of orphanhood is tied to their being mothers in a patriarchal society. Despite this constraining force, there emerges from within this space of orphanhood an image of rebirth, enacted through maternal legacies and creative activity linked to writing. This image allows for a rearticulation (albeit fragmentary) of the memory of the female lineage (42-43, 98-99). These novels of orphan women, written by women\(^{29}\), are marked by experimentation with various literary forms and perspectives (43), e.g., the so-called *testimonio rosa* (a variation on the *novela rosa* or romance which, by underscoring the social contradictions of daily life, renders this form polemic) used by Marcela Serrano (56-57), the vanguardist execution of insurgent language in Diamela Eltit (60-61), or the experimentation with a wide variety of narrative voices, as well as the influence of the marvelous and the grotesque in Ana María del Río (43; Pizarro 129).

Cánovas’s approach to the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena* through the lens of orphanhood as a connective thread enables a fair overview of an otherwise heterogeneous phenomenon, allowing to be brought together disparate narrative styles and projects of ideological evaluation concerning the legacy of dictatorship.

\(^{29}\) The Chilean miniboom is characterized by having a high percentage of women novelists and short story writers in its midst, namely, Ana María del Río, Pía Barros, Alejandra Costamagna, Lilian Elphik, Diamela Eltit, Sonia González, Andrea Maturana, Carolina Rivas, Alejandra Rojas, Marcela Serrano, among others.
and how it is addressed in the Chile of the postdictadura. Issues such as the effects of torture on detainees and their families, the delays in bringing to justice those officials (and civilian allies) who have committed crimes against humanity, the traumatic experience of exile, the continued and nefarious impact of neo-liberal policies, past and current, interwoven with patriarchal designs on citizens, of which women constitute a significant percentage (cf. Espinosa, “Narrativa chilena hoy” 70), strongly resonate not only in Southern Cone countries and the rest of America, but also on the other side of the Atlantic, allowing for the Nueva Narrativa’s international appeal. In the hands of Marcela Serrano in particular, these topics and others, all of which are enunciated from the condition of being (mostly) middle- to upper-class women in a neo-liberal society, have been reworked in the form of a quest for a safe space in which to rethink traditional definitions of womanhood, and to articulate a female standpoint of self-definition, at times with a textuality which resembles a testimonial tone (cf. Olea, “Más allá de un encuentro” 6), and in some cases through a re-elaboration of so-called sub-literary texts. In this sense, Serrano shares with other women writers of the Nueva Narrativa “una voluntad de pertenencia al ámbito de la ‘especie femenina’ que incluye el compartir experiencias como la maternidad […] el cuestionamiento del rol de esposa, madre, hija, creadora; el replanteamiento de
temas como la fidelidad, soltería, [...] o soledad” (Espinosa, “Narradoras chilenas: últimos 17 segundos” 2). According to Patricia Espinosa, these are topics which recur in the first stage of developing a feminist awareness (2), an issue of special concern in the writings of Serrano, as may be appreciated in §3.3.1 and §3.3.2 of this chapter. In this connection, considerations such as those of critic Nelly Richard in “Feminismo, experiencia y representación,” about how literary works written by women which dwell on the “conciencia y experiencia del ser mujer” as a collective and fixed signification offer women readers the possibility of recognizing topics, contents, and female images that have been previously articulated by the hegemonic social discourse, and of validating their common sense knowledge in the light of these stereotypes (743), are critically addressed in connection with the reception of Serrano’s articulation of female subjectivity by my sample of women readers in chapter five. This treatment is undertaken in order to point out that, the above concerns notwithstanding, interactions between women readers and bestselling works need not necessarily replicate the status quo and can be more creative, complex, and empowering than Richard —and also Bianchi, Olea, and Eltit, as discussed above— is willing to concede.
3.2 The Context of Contemporary Latin American Women Writers of Bestselling Fiction

The debate triggered by the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena* as to whether this group of writers constituted a literary movement, or should be understood solely as the effect of marketing operations, has been reproduced to some degree at the continental level in the consideration of women’s fiction. As Debra Castillo discusses in “Figuring Feminisms,” the works of Latin American female authors have been assigned by traditional literary conceptions either to the sub-literary or to the avant-garde space (166). In this respect, the “‘sudden explosion’ of women writers on the Latin American literary scene during the decade of the 1980s” (Castillo, “Figuring Feminisms” 155), and their prolific production of so-called “literatura fácil,” associated with popular women writers such as Ángeles Mastretta and Laura Esquivel (Castillo, *Easy Women* 215), have been regarded by some critics with a dose of skepticism, as Aralia López González points out:

> En general, existe recelo al juzgar la narrativa escrita por mujeres en la década del ochenta, pues su gran cantidad ha constituido lo que ya se conoce desdeñosamente como *boom* femenino. Esta producción hace pensar a los más en un fenómeno comercial y no tanto en una creación de buena ley. [...] Incluso la crítica académica
parece tener dificultades para tratar, en general, las no canónicas producciones de este período. (López González 659-60)

One of these skeptical critics is Jean Franco, who places the bestsellers produced by this *boom femenino*, such as Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus*, Ángeles Mastretta’s *Arráncame la vida*, and Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate*, in the category of “art romance” (following Frederic Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*), to distinguish them from the popular romances published by Harlequin, and Mills and Boon (Franco 227). For Franco, these art romances, “do indeed represent a version of feminism, whether by portraying women’s liberation from victimization or by creating strong women characters” (226). Nevertheless, Franco still finds that such narratives constitute a “literature of accommodation,” whose seductive powers only reproduce the seduction of commodities in a neo-liberal economy, without seeking to challenge the *status quo* (228), in opposition to the radical destabilization of meaning and discursive structures which characterizes the neo-avant-garde literature of such writers as Tununa Mercado and Diamela Eltit, advocated for by critics like Nelly Richard (228-31).

As is the case with the *Nueva Narrativa Chilena*, however, the degree of popularity of works by authors of the *boom femenino* suggests the importance of
taking bestselling works more seriously and engaging critically with them (cf. Castillo, “Figuring Feminisms” 167-68), to gain a deeper insight into forms that may well be more textually complex and ideologically subversive, if perhaps not revolutionary, than generally theorized, forms which in turn may impact the ways in which women readers interact with these works, exploring how traditional gender roles have constrained their personal and professional development, and attempting to articulate standpoints of self-definition, as some of the answers of my survey participants suggest.

In “Hipótesis sobre el tema ‘escritura femenina e hispanidad’” (1990), Susana Reisz argues for the conceptualization of many of the works of the boom femenino, particularly those of Allende, Mastretta, and Esquivel, in the light of “un programa estético basado en una forma muy particular de mimetismo verbal y de dialogismo sutilmente subversivo” which hides behind the appearance of “falta de pretensiones estéticas, falta de sofisticación y falta de originalidad” (201). Reisz takes up Luce Irigaray’s strategy of mimicry, which proposes that women deliberately adopt and imitate hegemonic discourse in order to disrupt, through insistent repetition, its phallocentric logic, to inform her reading of these works. In this respect, Reisz coincides with Toril Moi that strategic female mimicry entails “a theatrical staging of the mime […] to undo the effects of
phallocentric discourse by *overdoing* them” (Moi 140), and that for this to be politically effective, the context of the miming is decisive, so that mimicry can be perceived as mockery, and not as a simple imitation of hegemonic discourse (141-43). Seen in this light, the so-called art romances permit two kinds of readings, namely a first reading which correlates with a love story, characterized by plenty of action, a certain degree of crude eroticism, immersed in a framework of political or sexual violence. A second reading would reveal, however, that these works involve a questioning of the rigid nature of sexual roles in patriarchal society, and of the repressive nature of language as social behavior, which exposes the contradictory nature of these cultural institutions (“Hipótesis” 208). The use of a subtly over-accentuated mimesis —“la imitación con una especie de guiño cómplice” (Reisz, “Scheherazada” 114), “teñida con diferentes matices de ironía” (“Hipótesis” 207)— accounts for an act of resistance articulated from a marginal position (212) which undermines gestures of subjection and accommodation.

Reisz takes the opportunity in “Estéticas complacientes y formas de desobediencia en la producción femenina actual: ¿es posible el diálogo?” (2003) to use the notion of mimicry in her examination of *Nosotras que nos queremos tanto*. In this regard, Reisz focuses on the character of Isabel, who represents the
stereotype of the perfect housewife, mother, and career woman, in order to reveal how the paradigm of the modern superwoman\textsuperscript{30} is destabilized in Serrano’s novel. In blonde, beautiful, elegant, nurturing, efficient, and intelligent Isabel, the impact of gender roles on women’s lives is exposed: this upper-middle-class woman, who bears the brunt of the housework as exclusive caretaker of husband and five children (despite having maids who could aid her more in this enterprise), resorts to alcohol with the same punctuality and precision with which she accomplishes all the other activities that her roles entail (Reisz 338). The fact that the exploitative division of labor is critically addressed through the underscoring of Isabel’s self-destructive coping strategy is an indication, for Reisz, that \textit{Nosotras} can transcend the triviality of the \textit{novela rosa} and its function of reinforcing patriarchal discourse, by highlighting the social contradictions of women’s daily lives under patriarchal hegemony instead (338; recall Cánovas’s reading of Serrano’s works as instances of \textit{testimonio rosa} in §3.1). For Reisz, however, this novel still represents a form of “feminismo blando

\textsuperscript{30} Reisz offers Resa Dudovitz’s perspective in \textit{The Myth of Superwoman}, which accounts for the transformation of popular female fiction in France and United States, giving rise in the eighties to a female protagonist who acquires the dimension of a superwoman, and is thus capable of succeeding in her roles as housewife, lover, and career woman, without questioning the social order that presents the division of labor inside the home as natural. This model of female protagonist is a response to the desire women readers apparently have to recognize themselves in images of traditional femininity but, at the same time, to find strong female characters that allow them to live vicariously through these characters’ successes (“Estéticas complacientes” 336-37).
y cuestionable,” because it does not promote a thorough enough questioning of the system (339)\textsuperscript{31}.

Reisz’s analysis of the production of the Latin American \textit{boom femenino} in terms of mimetic practices provides a useful tool for approaching some of Serrano’s works. Concretely, it allows us to reflect on how Serrano’s experimentation with certain genres such as the \textit{novela rosa}, the hard-boiled detective novel, and nineteenth century US-American domestic fiction may be read as a wink at her audience. In this respect, messages which challenge the \textit{status quo} of contemporary patriarchal society are smuggled under the guise of apparently conservative fiction to a mass readership of middle- to upper-class women who are familiar with the conventions of, and the topics addressed by, these genres. Familiarity with such modes of narration facilitates these readers’ connection to Serrano’s texts\textsuperscript{32}. This writer’s aesthetic reworkings of said forms, however, should be evaluated as invitations to her readers to consider the

\textsuperscript{31} It must be noted that in “Estéticas complacientes,” Reisz revises to a certain degree her enthusiastic reception of the \textit{boom femenino}. Reisz’s use of “complacientes” in the title of her article, to qualify some works by Allende, Mastretta, and Esquivel —as well as the writings of other authors who follow in their wake, such as Marcela Serrano and Laura Restrepo—, points to underscoring that the “programa literario realmente innovador” of yore ceases to be such when writers fall in love with their innovations “y las repiten hasta convertirlas en estilos ‘prefabricados’” (334) —in such a way that mimicry can perhaps no longer be perceived as mockery.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Susan Frenk’s “The Wandering Text” on the topic of narrative modes in Isabel Allende in connection with the empowerment of women readers.
contradictions inherent in a patriarchal system which bases its hegemony on how completely both women and men internalize the traditional roles dealt out to them. If women readers, for instance, respond to these invitations, stimulated by this “unusual packaging,” and look at the issues presented in her texts with a critical disposition, this may lead them, in turn, to consider and attempt changes that will improve the conditions of their own lives, as well as the lives of those other women surrounding them. An examination of these appropriations and re-elaborations, and of how they can operate to trigger awareness in women readers, follows in chapter four.

Considerations about language and referential modes of discourse are other topics addressed by Reisz in “Estéticas complacientes,” as they pertain to the issue of disseminating alternatives to patriarchal values. In this respect, Reisz also questions Nosotras que nos queremos tanto for reproducing hegemonic power mechanisms in its style of narration —linear discourse, chronological presentation of events, and invocation of easily recognizable spaces (perhaps once more a case of a mimicry which loses its political effectiveness?)— vis-à-vis avant-garde styles of narration that subvert logocentrism through the destabilization of signs and disruption of meaning, although she acknowledges the limitations of the latter for reaching a broader readership who perhaps seeks
in fiction some answers to their existential questions. Reisz brings in Julio Cortázar’s reflections on the process of writing *El libro de Manuel*, namely on the importance of linguistic accessibility in the case of narratives written from a contingent perspective, in which a contact with readers is desired and sought. According to Cortázar, “si éste era un libro de nuestro hoy y aquí, es decir de lo inmediato, no tenía sentido mediatizarlo en el plano de la experimentación y la escritura: el contacto más profundo se vería trabado precisamente por los medios puestos en práctica para establecerlo” (Cortázar 19). The Argentinean writer sees the solution to the immediacy of delivering *El libro de Manuel* in the articulation of an “ómnibus lingüístico accessible a cualquier pasajero de cualquier esquina” (20). Notwithstanding her objections to less experimental forms of discourse, Reisz still finds worth in the “ómnibus lingüístico” that emerges in the works of the *boom femenino* for its potential to establish connections with a wider audience of women readers. The importance of this sense of connection comes up in Serrano’s own words, as she explains why she left behind the kind of artistic work she undertook in the framework of the *CADA* (Colectivo Acciones de Arte)\(^3\): “El hermetismo de esos trabajos y de esa época me dejó vacunada para

---

\(^3\) The Colectivo Acciones de Arte or *CADA* was initially formed in 1979 by the sociologist Fernando Balcells, the visual artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo, and writers Diamela Eltit and Raúl Zurita. The art actions by this group, later joined by Luz Donoso, Pedro Millar, Hernán Parada, Patricia Saavedra, and Paz.
siempre, como si me hubiese grabado internamente la consigna: nunca más una expresión artística que no sea comprensible” (Serrano in Ayala 26; cf. Hines, “Signs of (Dis)Content” 43). Viewed from the perspective of a bond of reading between writer and readers, which seeks to raise consciousness among women regarding their private and public status in patriarchal society, Serrano’s discursive praxis of linguistic accessibility when writing from the space of “lo contingente,” as the writer declares in one of the many interviews she is famous for giving (García-Corales, “Nostalgia versus modernidad” 233), translates into a greater readability which, in turn, facilitates the exploration of these issues among middle- to upper-class readers who may not always be well-disposed, from the start, towards ideas which challenge the status quo. However, as the analysis of Serrano’s narratives developed in chapter four demonstrates, an

Errázuriz, among other artists, were undertaken as interdisciplinary creations, with an eye towards a collective renovation of art, which focused on the articulation of the city as a cultural space of convocation, dissidence, and resistance against the Chilean dictatorship. This group was active for approximately five years (Eltit, “Cada 20 años” 157-59). In August of 1980, Serrano herself took part in an art action which involved her being filmed and photographed, by Carlos Flores and Leo Kocking, naked, in a white room, and painting her face and body with white paint. The action ends with Serrano stretching out her hands in front of her and remaining, for a short moment in that position, while the paint is still dripping. An explanation of this art action appeared, together with some photographic material, in a book entitled Pintura en Chile (1981), with the following explanation: “Dicha acción vincula el cuerpo desnudo del artista al cuerpo social y se presenta como una ilusión de desnudo total (mente-cuerpo). La pintura blanca que cubre ese cuerpo desnudo, viene a significar una promesa de cambio, de mudanza de condición. Esto último, apoyado en dos preceptos teóricos (Tapies-Kandinsky) que definen el blanco teórico como el color de lo que está a punto de ser distinto. A punto de sufrir una transformación” (Ayala 23). For an extended reflection on the color white in Para que no me olvides as a metaphor of transformation among other symbolic values, see Birgit Seibert’s Frauenbilder in der postdiktatur (166-67).
inclination towards the “ómnibus lingüístico” does not necessarily imply a lack of sophistication in narrative execution.

In terms of readership numbers, Serrano’s “ómnibus lingüístico” seems to have paid off: eight novels, a collection of two short stories, and a story book, published between 1991 and 2008. *Nosotras que nos queremos tanto*, first published in 1991 by Editorial Los Andes, sold over 50,000 copies in that publishing house alone (Ayala 25). This novel won the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in 1994, awarded by the Guadalajara International Book Fair for the best novel written in Spanish by a woman and has, in addition, been adapted for the stage by a team led by Christian Villarreal, who also directed its opening run at the San Ginés theater of Santiago de Chile in 2001 (“Marcela Serrano debuta en el teatro”). By 1997, *Para que no me olvides*, which won the Premio Municipal de Literatura, awarded by the Municipality of Santiago de Chile in 1994, had sold 50,000 copies, and *Antigua vida mía* had surpassed that number by 10,000 (Ayala 25), having furthermore been adapted for the screen. It is also interesting to note that 100,000 copies were printed for the first edition of *El albergue de las mujeres tristes* (Ayala 23)\(^{34}\), and that *Lo que está en mi corazón* was the runner-up in the Premio Planeta of 2001, second to *La canción de Dorotea*, by Rosa Regàs (“Premios

\(^{34}\) Ayala mentions that in Chile any writer is pleased with 3,000 copies in the first edition (Ayala 23).
literarios”). Serrano’s writings have also been translated and marketed in order to reach readers beyond the Spanish-speaking market, as the following table shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Dutch</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Polish</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Finnish</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nosotras que nos queremos tanto</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para que no me olvides</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigua vida mia</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El albergue de las mujeres tristes</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestra Señora de la Soledad</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo que está en mi corazón</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasta siempre, mujercitas</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La llorona</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Translations published to date of the works of Marcela Serrano.

(Information taken from WorldCat.)

The fact that all of Serrano’s novels have been translated, and that these translations comprise diverse language families, bespeaks this Chilean writer’s prominence as an international cultural phenomenon. The following section examines the themes, characters, and projects of female empowerment developed in Serrano’s works, which seem to attract such a large fan base, both domestically and abroad.
3.3 Targeted Overview of Serrano’s Novels

An examination of Serrano’s textual praxis in her works should not be divorced from a consideration of this author’s oral texts, as embodied in interviews she has given. Unlike Emily Dickinson, as approached by Adrienne Rich (see Schweickart in §2.2), Serrano is alive and very vocal on a wide variety of private and public issues, and her celebrity status could be said to be due, in part, to the myriad interviews she has given, published in newspapers and magazines, as well as in academic journals, and broadcast on television and radio. These interviews, while serving marketing purposes, also function as a forum in which Serrano offers her views on what it means to be a woman straddling the private and the public space in the context of Latin American neo-liberal societies, as well as on the nature of such women’s interactions among themselves and with men. This forum, which allows Serrano to promote the feminist agenda present in her textual practice, is by no means a one-way road, as a 1997 interview which Diego Barnabé conducted with Serrano in Montevideo shows; Barnabé’s incorporation of readers’ comments and questions for Serrano in his interview allows us to see how Serrano’s readers respond to her discursive

35 For comprehensive bibliographies on Serrano’s interviews, see Cánovas’s Novela chilena, Seibert, and also Gloria Gálvez-Carlisle’s “Marcela Serrano (1951).”

36 This interview is revisited in §3.3.1, as well as in chapters four and five.
praxis as materialized in her works, and also to appreciate the readers’ efforts in seeking to establish contact with the author they admire. This surfacing of Serrano the author through oral texts speaks to the relevance of putting her works and interviews in dialogue, in order to explore Serrano’s narrative praxis in terms of themes, character types, and projects of empowerment, as undertaken in the two following sections.

3.3.1 From Life Stories to Themes, and Vice-Versa

Let us first begin with a few established facts. Marcela Serrano was born in Santiago de Chile in 1951, to Elisa Pérez Walker and Horacio Serrano. Serrano’s mother was better known to her readers as Elisa Serrana, the author of, among other novels, *Chilena, casada, sin profesión* (1963), whose first edition sold out in less than a month\(^{37, 38}\). Horacio Serrano, an MIT graduate, was a researcher for UNESCO in India, a minister of agriculture in the government of Juan Antonio Ríos, and also a member of the Chilean Academy of Language (Ayala 24). With these antecedents, comments Serrano, writing came as a natural thing

\(^{37}\) According to Cánovas, Serrano’s *testimonio rosa* can be traced back to the bestselling works of Elisa Serrana and Mercedes Valdivieso, among other writers, in which the female eye renders testimony in a blunt style, resembling journalistic reportage (“Una visión panorámica” 57).

\(^{38}\) Serrano appropriates her mother’s title, to put it in the mouth of Blanca, the protagonist of *Para que no me olvides*, as this Chilean, upper-class, married woman recounts with sadness how her husband pressured her even before they got married to give up her studies of medicine in order to become a housewife (61).
to her: “a los quince ya había escrito al menos cuatro novelas” (Serrano in Ayala 24), adding that she learned “del silencio, de la soledad y de la contención interior, elementos sin los cuales es casi imposible ser de verdad escritor” from her long stays as a child and teenager at her family’s country estate in the south of Chile, a rustic place far away from civilization (Serrano in Ayala 24), which afforded Serrano and her four sisters a space in which to indulge in reading, telling stories, and writing (Serrano in Margarita Serrano 3).

In connection with the south of Chile, there appears in Serrano’s works the theme of the pre-modern space as a *locus amoenus*. This idyllic space functions as a metaphor for the old and traditional Chile, “un país tan encantador en otros tiempos y tan serio, un país de una historia republicana maravillosa” (Serrano in Mafla-Bustamante, “Palabra” 154). This space serves as a repository of Chilean history and idiosyncrasy (Serrano in García-Corales, “Entrevista” 231), in opposition to the modern neo-liberal Chile of the *postdictadura*, or “modernidad […] fragmentada,” as Serrano likes to call it, where wealth and avid consumerism co-exist with poverty, discrimination, and exclusion, enduring military authoritarianism threatens democratic institutions, and oblivion seeks to efface memory (Serrano in García-Corales 228-29; Serrano in Mafla-Bustamante 152-55; Serrano in Pereyra, “Entrevista” 226). This *locus amoenus* of southern
Chile, initially presented in Serrano’s works as a symbolic space of healing, in which women gather to regenerate their spirits and bodies from the impact of a neo-liberal modernity that discriminates against those women seeking to enter the public space and to achieve an equal standing with men, acquires, however, a somewhat slippery tone in her narration; the same austere and wealthy landowners of republican times, who forged the history of the “país tan encantador en otros tiempos y tan serio,” are simultaneously portrayed as squanderers, who are not willing to stoop over to work the land, and who therefore deserve to lose it. The lost paradise has, thus, its foundation on this darker underside, and this allows for tensions to emerge in Serrano’s narrative, which perhaps may be attributed to the convergence of, on the one hand, her upper-class origins (Serrano in Barnabé 3) and Catholic upbringing (Serrano in Margarita Serrano 4) and, on the other, her professed left-wing (Serrano in Pereyra, “Entrevista” 225) and feminist beliefs (Serrano in Díaz 19; Seibert 139), but which she at times resolves with ingenuity at the level of the narrative structure, as is discussed in chapter four.

Serrano later studies art at the Universidad Católica de Chile. In 1973, she marries and goes into exile in Italy, where she stays until the late 1970s. Upon her return to Chile, she continues with her visual art work (recall the art action
described in §3.2), while she participates in political activities of opposition to Pinochet’s regime. In 1981, Serrano has her first daughter, Elisa, with writer and publicist Antonio Gil. The following year, Serrano co-founds the Centro de Formación Técnica Vicente Pérez Rosales, and gradually begins to leave behind the artistic milieu (Ayala 23-24), her last act being a body art project on the extinction of the Yagana women of southern Chile (a topic which she also addresses in El albergue de las mujeres tristes), for which she obtains a prize from the Museo de Bellas Artes (Serrano in Margarita Serrano 2). In 1983, Serrano meets political leader Luis Maira, and four years later, the couple starts living together, and their daughter Margarita is born (Ayala 24).

In connection with a deepening of neo-liberal policies during the Transición, which has resulted in the “modernidad fragmentada” posited by Serrano, coupled with the will to oblivion of a right-wing that does not want to inquire into the vast violation of human rights committed by Pinochet’s military

---

39 It is worthwhile to note, when comparing information provided by Ayala with that from other critical and journalistic sources on Serrano’s biography (Barnabé, Gálvez-Carlisle, García-Corales, Mafla-Bustamante, Pereyra, Seibert, Serafin), that there is no absolute coincidence among critics as regards the “facts” mentioned, e.g., exactly when Serrano graduated from the Universidad Católica, which of her partners she indeed married, how long she worked at the Centro de Formación Técnica Vicente Pérez Rosales. The existence of an uncoordinated body of biographical details, some of which surprise even Serrano herself when brought up in the context of an interview (Serrano in Barnabé 3), together with her disclosure of information that appears to contradict that of these commentators (Serrano in Pereyra, “Entrevista” 228), makes for a provocative example of co-articulation of a public persona, by author, critics, and readers/audience alike, through the circulation of unchallenged feedback, which adds yet another layer of complexity to approximating the cultural phenomenon that Serrano represents.
regime, Serrano comments on a severe state of depression into which she slid, as a result of a lack of mobilization among some sectors of the civil population in the aftermath of dictatorship, and of a loss of the collective referents of solidarity, generosity, and courage which had guided the struggle against dictatorship: “Me enfrenté con un país que no quería saber de la memoria ni de su historia” (Serrano in Ayala 24; cf. Serrano in García-Corales, “Entrevista” 228-30).

According to Serrano, this depression helped her to acknowledge her deep-rooted desire to write and, somewhere along the line, to get started in this métier: “Escribí para salvarme yo,” says Serrano (Ayala 24), adding that her first novel (as an adult) was not intended for publication, but for circulation among her friends in photocopied form, due to her feelings of insecurity as a writer (cf. Barnabé 23). For Serrano, this conceptualization of art as a saving force, which she also discusses in her interview with García-Corales (“Entrevista” 230-31), allows human beings to overcome this atmosphere of triviality and oblivion which surrounds them in the “modernidad fragmentada.” In this connection, the professional engagement of women with creative expression in its broadest sense, e.g., writing, musical performance, fiber arts, is explored in Serrano’s works for its potential to overcome metaphorical orphanhood (see Cánovas in §3.1), as “caminos de salvación individual cuando lo colectivo ya no es
“respuesta” (Serrano in García-Corales, “Entrevista” 230), as well as a grounding force for women’s definitions of themselves, which allows for not only their financial independence, but also the realization of their individual voice, vision, and talents (cf. Serrano in Pereyra, “Entrevista” 224), an aspect which is examined in chapter four of this study.

For Serrano, creative work is a safe space that allows women to gain perspective in order to better understand and deal with the challenges that their socio-cultural environment poses for them. In this light, Serrano believes that women, in spite of the different circumstances that affect their lives when considered individually, still share certain common problems on account of living in patriarchal societies. Among these difficulties are the demands and roles that women are expected to fulfill, regardless of their social class, namely to put the needs of their families (their parents, their partners, and their children) before their own. In an interview with Díaz, Serrano expresses this frustration when she says that “Los hombres […] tienen las 24 horas del día para hacer una cosa y hacerla bien; las mujeres estamos divididas en mil roles, siempre nuestro pensamiento es fragmentado, interrumpido” (19). In her works, Serrano refers to this issue as the fragmented identity of women, and addresses it by showcasing life stories of (mainly but not exclusively) middle- to upper-class women, which
highlight how their psyches and bodies are impacted by the role expectations of neo-liberal but still patriarchal societies. As examples of diseases that affect women, Serrano brings up alcoholism, in connection with Isabel in *Nosotras que nos queremos tanto* (recall Reisz, §3.2), and with Floreana’s dread of loneliness coupled with her fear of merger in *El albergue de las mujeres tristes*. In *Para que no me olvides*, Victoria’s pain and uncertainty vis-à-vis her father’s disappearance during Pinochet’s dictatorship and the impact this has had on her family and her own personal life manifest themselves in the form of stomach ulcers; Blanca’s aphasic silence may be read as a protest against the husband who abandons her, taking away her son, and against the lover who also decides to leave her instead of offering her the support she needs. In a similar vein, Dulce’s cancer in *El albergue de las mujeres tristes* is her response to a husband who leaves her for a younger woman, after all she had invested in making her marriage and family the center of her life. Josefa’s uncontrolled dread of personal and professional failure in *Antigua vida mía* causes her to experience panic attacks, eating disorders, and addiction to psychiatric medication. In *Hasta siempre mujercitas*, Ada’s antisocial personality and Lola’s narcissism are the dysfunctional ways in

---

40 For a discussion on the relation between psychosomatic illnesses and gender in Serrano’s characters see Seibert (151) and Patricia Pinto’s “La sororidad en *Para que no me olvides* de Marcela Serrano” (102).
which these cousins play out their mutual anger as a consequence of fitting into gender roles they perceive themselves to have been assigned. These illnesses and disorders are depicted in Serrano’s works as acts of aggression women perform against themselves as a result of not being able to give voice to the uncertainties, fears, and frustrations they experience on account of the pressure which patriarchal society exerts on them.

With respect to this issue of women’s fragmented identities, Serrano addresses that of motherhood. In this regard, Serrano comments on the deterministic nature of the mother-daughter relationship, brought home to her after reading Nancy Friday’s *My Mother/My Self*, stating that a woman is the product of the women who preceded her. According to Serrano, this genealogy can be seen as a blessing or a curse (Mafla-Bustamante, “Palabra” 156), stating separately on this topic that “[e]s un lazo complicadísimo, y esta transmisión de sexo oprimido a sexo oprimido es muy compleja, con la fuerza que tiene que es la fuerza nutriente pero al mismo tiempo es la fuerza sometida” (Pereyra, “Entrevista” 229-30). In this regard, it is important to note that Serrano does not shun raising ambivalent and uncomfortable issues regarding motherhood, such as the feelings of dissatisfaction and anger women experience when having to juggle their conflicting desires for nurturing their children and for developing
their own professional careers (cf. Pereyra, “Discursos utópicos en la narrativa de
Alina Diaconú, Cristina Peri Rossi, Reina Roffé y Marcela Serrano” 121).

Serrano’s views on the bond between mothers and daughters are addressed throughout her works, in her treatment of both life-affirming and subjugating maternal legacies, and their impact on women’s lives.

In connection with this theme of genealogies, it should be pointed out that life-affirming maternal legacies play a larger and more metaphoric-strategic role in Serrano’s writings than oppressive ones, whose value is more diagnostic (cf. Cánovas in §3.1). Hence, Serrano focuses on images of mothers and mother-figures guiding and challenging their daughters or mentees to seek a meaningful life by developing both their talents and their affections in a dynamic balance. These biological and/or symbolic daughters invoke the strength and support of their foremothers to succeed in their attempts at achieving this balance, and entrust themselves to maternal guidance, since self-sufficiency through work and emotional relationships with a partner are not enough in themselves to fully articulate a standpoint of female self-definition. Chapter four of this dissertation examines the issue of empowerment through vertical female genealogies in Serrano’s works.
Serrano also addresses the theme of horizontal relations among women and its relevance for female empowerment. In this respect, the author has been vocal about the role of patriarchal society in promoting competition instead of solidarity among women: “No nos enseñaron a querernos ni a ser amigas, entonces diría que hay un paso clave, que es el camino a la madurez en que una cambia esa competencia por el sentido de la hermandad” (Serrano in Barnabé 10), an issue which is treated with varying degrees of narrative complexity throughout her works. Serrano understands this sisterhood as a relational network of female bonding which allows for supportive relations, especially in critical moments of women’s lives (Barnabé 11), and enacts this in her textual praxis by modeling life-affirming relationships among women characters for her readers. Within this exploration of sorority, however, in the interest of presenting realistic relationships among female characters, Serrano does not omit consideration of conflict between women deriving from differences of class and outlooks on life, as may be appreciated, for example, in the frank but at times brutal form of interpellation that the quick-witted and sharp-tongued Sofía uses with her sister-in-law Blanca in *Para que no me olvides*41.

41 For a discussion on the importance of female friendships in order for women to acknowledge a shared gender identity which enables them to overcome the divisions created among them by patriarchy in *Para que no me olvides*, see Pinto.
In seeking to construct and make visible life stories of and relationships among mainly middle- to upper-class women, as these interlock with the larger historical, social, economic, and cultural context, Serrano articulates a textual project with an eye towards underscoring the common demands borne on these women characters by patriarchal society. This project is based on her perception that “todas nosotras, de alguna u otra forma, ten[emos] la misma historia que contar” (Serrano in García-Corales, “Entrevista” 232, emphasis added; cf. Serrano in Mafla-Bustamante, “Palabra” 157; cf. Nosotras que nos queremos tanto 16). The fact that many of Serrano’s readers seem to share in this perception, as well as in a feeling of kinship with the author, could be accounted for by, among other factors, the public image which this writer constructs through her interviews. In each of these fora, the views Serrano offers on issues affecting women of a similar social standing to her own are synchronized, to a certain degree, with the issues she addresses in her literary production. In this way, Serrano’s work is rendered more valid in the eyes of many readers, because the author herself appears as an example of a woman coping with the type of problems she as writer reworks at a narrative level. This is not to say that Serrano writes romans à clef\textsuperscript{42} reflecting her own life, but to underscore this constructed aspect of her

\textsuperscript{42} In an interview with Marcia Scantlebury, however, Serrano does own up to the strong presence of
public persona, which also has its own marketing agenda; as long as Serrano claims that what she is addressing in her works corresponds to her “reality,” then the public perception of her claims as true—and of her own life as being the way she says it is in the interviews—is as good as a fact. If the claim treated in her latest book is believed to correspond to Serrano’s “reality,” then it could just as well be relevant to the lives of her readers, who should therefore keep buying her books, and especially the latest one!

3.3.2 Character Types That Invite and Construct Readership

This *misma historia que contar*, which Serrano claims all women have, is told by means of characters, who are both tools with which Serrano attempts to reach her women readers, and conduits through which readers in general may be able to recognize something of themselves and their situations in the texts before them. Therefore, it is necessary to examine just what types of characters are presented for the readers’ consideration.

The female characters in Serrano’s works are not homogeneous, but a demographic survey of these characters can help point towards the kind of

autobiographical elements in her first novel, which she accounts for as an attempt to textually dispose of these elements so as to gain perspective for her subsequent writings (125).
readership that the author believes she can speak to. Among her characters, the age range is fairly wide, ranging between teenagers and senior adults, but the focus is on women from their mid-twenties to their fifties. With respect to their physicality, all heights, complexions, and hair colors and textures are represented (with a tendency to pair blondeness and slimness in more conservative(-seeming) women, which gives them a fairy-tale-like aura, reserving darker complexions, in contrast, for more overtly transgressive female characters), and although there is a recurrent issue of a struggle with weight in several of the novels, the precise weight is less important than the discipline required to comply with the socially-imposed norms of slenderness that are a particular burden upon women. There is a predominance of middle-to-upper-class women, many but not all of whom are married with children. Most of the characters have careers outside the home as well; Serrano presents her readers with urban professionals whose work involves texts (writers, translators, and academics), design and construction of more material structures (architects, engineers, and weavers), administration of goods and people (economists and lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and detectives), as well as the world of performance (singers and actresses). The social pressures and role expectations experienced by this broad spectrum of characters are what make them
recognizable to middle- to upper-class readers, on the one hand, but they are at
the same time the sources of difficulties which spur these characters to attempt to
claim agency and reform, if not reinvent, the conditions of their lives.

Serrano’s female characters, mostly Chilean but all Latin American, enact
a tension between a need for connection and a desire for autonomy. Neither end
of this continuum is inherently good or bad in itself; but rather it is the
embracing of one pole to the exclusion of the other which results in a toxic dead
end for some among her female characters. In this respect, Serrano’s work
articulates a project of female subjectivity as a work in progress, i.e., the need for
women to be actively engaged in the examination and negotiation of their
conditions of life, in contrast with a more or less fatalistic acceptance of
fragmentation and subjugation as the eternal and inevitable norm for women’s
lives. Serrano presents female characters who simultaneously face pressure (both
from outside and in the form of internal mandates) to focus on the domestic
sphere, and discrimination in their efforts to engage the public world, but who
despite these constraining forces manage to develop a growing awareness of the
importance of rejecting the norms through which hegemonic patriarchal societies
attempt to harness women’s minds and bodies to create docile subjects. Thus
these characters act in a world familiar to readers, and through their actions they
model (or fail to model, with less favorable consequences) a strategy of removing their bodies from the environment affecting them, in order to question and rethink traditional gender roles, as an avenue to articulating a female standpoint of self-definition.

The project of removal of the female body in Serrano’s works involves an exploration of different modes of isolation, the choice of which has a direct bearing on the success experienced by the respective characters in terms of healing and gaining strength. While it is not the case that the novels form a steady chronological trajectory in terms of outcomes of removal of the female body, there is an internal consistency that permits a set of generalizations to be identified. A general tendency can be discerned whereby unproductive isolations from difficult conditions involve (1) a general withdrawal from society, as is the case with María in *Nosotras que nos queremos tanto*, and with Blanca in *Para que no me olvides*, (2) a withdrawal from a pre-modern rural space, without having first confronted the destructive effects of the prevailing gender roles on women and their relationships, opted for by Ada and Lola in *Hasta siempre, mujercitas*, or (3)

---

For a treatment of female journeys in terms of searches for sacred spaces and personal feminist utopias in certain of Serrano’s works, see Marisa Pereyra’s “Discursos utópicos en la narrativa de Alina Diaconu, Cristina Peri Rossi, Reina Roffé y Marcela Serrano,” “Discursos utópicos en la narrativa de Marcela Serrano,” and “Utopías locales en nuestra distópica Latinoamérica: una aproximación a Lo que está en mi corazón de Marcela Serrano.”
acting as a free agent to solve one’s problem when a supportive network of
women was available, as in the case of Ella in La llorona. Productive separations,
by contrast, involve either (1) a removal of the body into relatively secluded
spaces mediated by a mentor or advocate, as is the option of Josefa in Antigua
vida mía, Floreana in El albergue de las mujeres tristes, and C. L. Ávila in Nuestra
Señora de la Soledad, or (2) a removal of the body to join collective causes,
undertaken by Sara Alicia in “Sin Dios ni ley,” and Camila in Lo que está en mi
corazón44.

A brief consideration of unproductive and productive separations at the
level of plot may allow us to better understand how Serrano’s project of female
consciousness-raising demonstrates the importance for women (readers
included) of taking “time outs” in a deliberate and responsible manner, in order
to gain the perspective needed to renegotiate the conditions of their lives.
Readers of Serrano, and especially those who read more than one of her works,
are almost certain to pick up on the use of movement as removal. The repetition
of the motif and the variability of motivations, circumstances, and outcomes for
the protagonists may be seen as a narrative invitation to the reader to engage in a

44 Henceforth I will make use of the following abbreviations for the titles of Serrano’s works: Nosotras que nos
queremos tanto = Nosotras; Para que no me olvides = No olvides; Antigua vida mía = Antigua; El albergue de las
mujeres tristes = Albergue; Nuestra Señora de la Soledad = Nuestra Señora; “Sin Dios ni ley” = “Sin Dios”; Lo que
está en mi corazón = Corazón; Hasta siempre, mujercitas = Hasta siempre; and La llorona = Llorona.
virtual journey into the safe space of the novel, where recommendations and
cautionary tales are presented for consideration and possible action. *Nosotras*

presents a very attractive, sexually adventurous, and defiant character, the
journalist María, who withdraws into herself and into her home on account of
her sister’s murder at the hands of Pinochet’s regime, becoming an apathetic and
immobilized woman. In a similar vein, in *No olvides*, Blanca, a conservative
upper-class housewife, withdraws mentally into herself and physically into her
country estate, after suffering a stroke which causes aphasia, brought about by
her husband and her lover abandoning her in rapid succession. Blanca’s removal
is not unequivocally negative, however, because unlike María, Blanca selects a
bittersweet safe space where she and her daughter can enjoy each other’s
affection with dignity until Blanca dies, beyond the reach of the social
expectations and conventions of her upper-class family.

In *Hasta siempre Ada*, a cosmopolitan editor and translator, and her cousin
Lola, a successful economist, provide examples of unproductive isolation
because these rivals for the affection of their only male cousin, Oliverio, leave
their rural family estate in southern Chile (where they spent their summers
growing up, but which the family elders eventually lose through gross
mismanagement of the family sawmill), without first attempting to resolve their
personal issues and interpersonal conflicts brought on by the constraints of traditional gender expectations imposed in that pre-modern space. At the novel’s end, the cousins make an impulsive pilgrimage to the former family property, but this journey results only in sterile confrontation with each other and in an act of revenge against the new owners of their beloved estate. The interpersonal dynamic in this closing episode of the novel is one of desperation and disorientation, rather than of actually coming together as a family. Ada and Lola do not appear to rescue anything from this return into their past “paradise,” and their eldest cousin Nieves, a stay-at-home mother who has been trying to find a more productive way to reframe her life, is not able to snap her cousins out of their (self-)destructive behaviors. In Llorona, Ella, an unnamed protagonist of poor and rural origins, sees an opportunity to reclaim the daughter that was stolen from her at birth and sold to the minister of the Interior and his wife. Although she had for years taken part in a women’s organization that sought to publicize and recover babies stolen for illegal adoption, Ella decides to act alone, impulsively, and against the advice of her compañeras, when she perceives the chance to resolve her own case by stealing back her daughter. The reunion is short-lived, since her retreat to her childhood home in the countryside, together with her daughter, ends with Ella’s death at the hands of the police. Taking
rogue action in pursuit of one’s own justice while steering away from the support of women allies, although understandable, Serrano seems to suggest, here only brings destruction.

Productive separations, on the other hand, are brought about through mediation with the other. In Antigua, Josefa, an internationally-known Chilean singer, has reached a point of crisis because her family life is impinging on her career. She journeys to the Guatemalan town of Antigua, in order to entrust herself to the counsel of Violeta, an architect and her life-long friend. Violeta models for Josefa a self-created safe space in which to express and share her creative vision in a healthy dynamic with her loved ones. In Albergue, Floreana, a historian who has lost her sister to cancer, retreats to the south of Chile, to a community of women under the direction of Elena, a psychiatrist, who seeks to help women overcome depression and trauma. In this context of sharing experiences within a group of women, Floreana is encouraged to reach out to others, and to break her pattern of seeking mental and emotional distance. A third clear example of empowering withdrawal is the case of C. L. Ávila, a detective novelist in Nuestra Señora, who abruptly disappears from her home and family shortly after her only son’s marriage. The escape into an incognito existence in an undisclosed location, with the help of Santiago Blanco, her former
lover and a writer himself, permits C. L. Ávila to reinvent herself and her life, free from her philandering husband and scheming stepdaughter. For C. L. Ávila, this abdication of her celebrity is worth the peace and self-determination that she gains—and is permitted to maintain, because unbeknownst to her, Rosa, the private investigator who was hired to find her, chooses to respect C. L. Ávila’s decision rather than reveal where the famous writer is living.

Yet another source for productive separations is the journey from one’s home environment in order to join oneself to a collective enterprise. In this regard, the adolescent Sara Alicia in “Sin Dios” models for her bourgeois mother the importance of committing oneself to women’s causes. The young woman, who had become pregnant by rape and had been able to have an abortion, leaves home to join up with a group of women protesting in favor of decriminalizing abortion in cases of rape in Guanajuato. In Corazón, Camila, a young Chilean expatriate translator who lives in Washington, DC, faces severe depression after the death of her baby. Through the intercession of her journalist husband, Camila is assigned to report on the state of affairs of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. Once on site in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Camila emerges from her inward focus to engage a group of Zapatista supporters, even at the risk of her life. Her experience among this collective allows her (1) to overcome the pain of her
personal loss, (2) to recover her own estranged roots with her home country and her mother, and (3) to find her creative voice as a writer in her own right.

While the option of physically removing the body and leaving one’s environment and family, as enacted by Serrano’s female characters, is not necessarily a feasible option for every woman reader who is constrained by oppressive gender norms, Serrano’s works emphasize the importance for women readers to take the time to create a space of reflection. Within this virtual space, the reader may become aware of the need to find a balance between total merger with the other and absolute withdrawal into the self, a key component in Serrano’s textual project of encouraging women readers to attend to both personal and social needs. Serrano’s project supports a female subject in these terms —what she refers to in her interviews as “nuevas mujeres” (Díaz 18), in opposition to more traditional women without this consciousness, or “mujeres antiguas” (Mafla-Bustamante, “Palabra” 160)—, on the basis of inviting her readers to reflect upon their existence as engendered in a female sex, and to come together in female sociality in order to acquire the awareness and knowledge that can allow them to modify this reality. The next two chapters subject this project to scrutiny on two fronts: chapter four elucidates the textual enactment of Serrano’s project as a bond of reading which contributes to female agency, and
chapter five adduces evidence from real women readers of Serrano’s novels in order to discern how, and how well, this project reaches its audience through the bestseller format and “hype.”
CHAPTER 4

CREATING A BOND OF READING: AN ISSUE OF FEMALE AGENCY

“Si un libro determinado—en este caso las novelas mías, por ejemplo—pudiera ayudar a una mujer a tener un poquito más de fuerza, a atreverse un poco más de lo que se atrevió el día anterior […] yo creo que estaría cumplida la tarea.”

The above words were Serrano’s response to Mafla-Bustamante’s inquiry as to whether the Chilean writer seeks to promote social change by means of her novels (“Palabra” 162). In this connection, Serrano understands that “[l]os libros escritos por mujeres que he leído me han dado luces frente a mis propios problemas. Y tengo entendido que hay otras mujeres a quienes les ocurre lo mismo con mis obras” (Andonie Dracos C11), a comment which seems to uphold that connections made through reading should be cherished, because they can help women to reflect on their personal situation and to begin to explore other ways of being in the world. This argues for the importance of considering
individual reading practices as factors that may lead to setting off social change
taking place woman by woman.

By invoking both her readers and the women writers she herself reads, Serrano is setting herself as a node in a network of women bound by reading. According to Serrano, this feedback regarding the impact that works written by women can have on women in terms of empowering insights has come to her in the form of multiple letters, which she has received from women readers all over Latin America and Spain. Serrano claims that these written communications have strengthened her belief in the existence of a sisterhood among women from these areas (García-Corales, “Entrevista” 232). Serrano’s claim that such a sisterhood exists may be verified by the voice of one of her Uruguayan readers. On April 24 of 1997, journalist Diego Barnabé conducted an interview with Marcela Serrano on Radio El Espectador (Montevideo), based on the comments and questions he had collected and recorded from listeners who were readers of Serrano. In the course of this program, one female listener stated that “[a] través de sus libros [Serrano] es una gran amiga mía,” adding that “al haberla leído, al haberla entendido, al sentir realmente lo que transmite, se hace amiga de cualquier mujer” (Barnabé 9). The relational potential of reading that surfaces through this comment, reflecting not only a perceived intimacy with the woman
writer, but also pointing to eventual kinship with other women readers, speaks in favor of considering the relevance of female networks of reading —together with individual reading practices— in encouraging women to renegotiate and improve the conditions of their lives, as some of the answers provided by participants to my survey questions have revealed. These dimensions of relationality are useful in order to frame the discussion of Serrano’s textual praxis of empowerment as the enactment of a bond of reading informed by feminist goals. Section 4.1 introduces and describes conceptual tools which may be utilized to examine this bond of reading as well as the framework from which these tools are derived.

4.1 The Practice of Relationality in Italian Feminism of Sexual Difference

According to Serrano, female bonding allows for supportive relationships which are especially valuable in times of trouble. This notion is addressed both in her works (recall §3.3.1 and §3.3.2) and in her interviews: “Quienes te sacan de las crisis importantes y quienes realmente se meten en el alma tuya para ayudarte, son las otras mujeres” (Serrano in Barnabé 11). Such life-affirming female relationships function to support women in their attempts at
rearticulating their lives from a standpoint of self-definition, on the basis of examining their own desires and experiences as women.

These two principles, namely those of (1) starting with oneself in order to rethink one’s life and experiences as a woman in relation to society, and (2) promoting the practice or politics of relations among women as fora where women can reciprocally expose themselves to other women, frame the reflection on sexual difference posited by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (Cavarero, *Who Engenders Politics*” 99-100). This double dynamic is useful to inform the examination of Serrano’s works, because it allows for an ontology in sociality which privileges life stories in their uniqueness (rather than in their exceptionality), emphasizing that each of these lives strives towards a design of unity (rather than towards mere fragments), conferred by the gaze and words of one’s fellow women, as may be appreciated in the course of this chapter. Founded in 1975 by a group of women belonging to the feminist movement in Italy, the Milan Bookstore has provided a public space where gender-marked activities, e.g., meetings, discussions, film viewings, can be undertaken from a political perspective (Bono and Kemp 109; Libreria delle donne di Milano, “Chi siamo” 1).
From the discussions and activities at the Milan Women’s Bookstore has emerged a body of feminist thought that comprises a theory both of sexual difference and of social practice characterized as the practice of sexual difference by its proponents (De Lauretis, Introduction 5). Defined as “an originary human difference” (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 125), resulting from being born female or male, sexual difference implies considering difference from a perspective of duality (Milan Collective 32), without any intrinsic value in itself (149), in reaction to the hegemonic notion of the universal subject, defined in relation to man (38). As Italian feminist Carla Lonzi, a symbolic mother to Italian thinkers of sexual difference, already argues in her 1970 pamphlet “Let’s Spit on Hegel,” “Difference is an existential principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one’s own experiences, goals, possibilities, and one’s sense of existence in a given situation and in the situation one wants to create for oneself” (41). In this respect, sexual difference as the consciousness of one’s reality “is neither only biological ‘sex’, nor only ‘gender’ as it has been culturally created” (Bono and Kemp, Introduction 16), i.e., it is not the cultural difference constructed from biology and presented as gender (De Lauretis, Introduction 13); sexual difference “is the inscription of both of these [sex and gender] in the

---

45 Henceforth Milan Collective.
symbolic dimension” (Bono and Kemp, Introduction 16). For a woman, this inscription can take place when she who experiences “sex” and “gender” begins to signify her being woman. She does this by taking such experience as a starting point for reflection (16), and by acting in a framework of female sociality to transform the pain derived from being born into a social system that negates female subjectivity into self-awareness and knowledge of her given reality so that she can judge and change this reality according to her desires (Milan Collective 141). “[F]emale politics” is the name that the Milan Collective has given to this project (141).

According to the Milan Collective, this female politics should be understood as a practice of female genealogy. This is a practice of legitimation, whereby women signify their female origin by searching for reference points furnished by other women (Milan Collective 25, 27). In this way, women are able to derive the personal strength and social self-confidence needed to articulate a standpoint of self-definition. This female mediation may operate through the reading of other women’s writings, and/or by seeking other women’s words,
thoughts, and counsel as sources of validation for and encouragement of female desires (108-150).6

During the 1970s, women-affirming-women practices in Italian feminism were based on the model of consciousness-raising groups developed by US-American feminists. One particular model was introduced in Italy by Carla Lonzi, who gave this practice the name of _autoscienza_, thereby stressing the aspect of self-directedness in the process of gaining a new consciousness. _Autoscienza_ involved small groups of women getting together to talk about any issues they experienced in common, as long as they did so on the basis of their own personal experience and withholding judgment (Bono and Kemp, Introduction 8-9; Milan Collective 40-42). Since this practice promoted reciprocal identification as a tool for change, once a woman had achieved a new awareness of her sexual difference through the analysis of patriarchal oppression and the

---

6 Italian feminism of sexual difference is heavily indebted to the work of Luce Irigaray, particularly regarding the theme of female genealogies, which initially appears in Irigaray’s 1980 Montreal lecture “Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother,” collected in _Sexes and Genealogies_ (Muraro, “Female Genealogies” 320). In this lecture, Irigaray raises the need for women to assert the relation to the mother, and thus to their own subjectivity, in two regards: (1) with respect to the body of the mother —underscoring the existence and relevance of a female continuum that links the bodies of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers to the origins of culture, a female genealogy which women have been taught to suppress in order to enter a relation with the father and the husband—, and (2) with respect to history —emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the women who have preceded them and have made an impact on the world in spite of the obstacles they have had to deal with. Beyond this vertical dimension, Irigaray also brings up a horizontal connection, the need for women to value their relations with and love for “sister-women,” in order to stop being competing commodities circulated by men in exchange operations (Irigaray, _Sexes and Genealogies_ 18-20; _An Ethics of Sexual Difference_ 108-09).
search for herself in her fellow women, the potential of *autocoscienza* for liberation was ultimately very limited, because it did not allow for differences among women to surface (Milan Collective 43-45). As the Milan Collective argues in their 1983 essay “More Women than Men,” recognizing differences in capability among women (1) subverts the male belief that, with the exception of his mother, women are all the same, and (2) liberates women who feel inferior in relation to men from the need to feel at least equal to another woman (Libreria delle donne di Milano, “More Women” 121-22).

Acknowledging female disparity in the framework of a politics or practice of relations among women that advocates the valorization of existing relationships and/or the cultivation of new connections, to which women entrust the most important issues they face (Muraro, “Feminine Difference” 80), is at the roots of the notion of *affidamento*, or entrustment. This practice was coined by the Milan Collective in order to overcome the issue of reciprocal identification which limited the potential for empowerment in *autocoscienza*. At the basis of *affidamento* lies the liberating effect that these women felt once they came to the realization that they did not need to maintain the fiction of equality among women who were not really equal, and that the acknowledgment of that very disparity or difference among women could contribute to releasing the symbolic power of the
mother as a source for the legitimation of female difference, as that “originary human difference” discussed above (Milan Collective 110-11). With this new aspect of female mediation, “a regime of exchange [was established] to make that plus of female origin circulate,” whereby now women become subjects—rather than objects—of exchange (112).

*Affidamento* as a regime of exchange begins with a relation between two women, a younger one or daughter, who entrusts herself symbolically to an older one or mother, in which “by old is meant having the consciousness that comes with the experience of defeat, and by young is meant having one’s claims intact, the one and the other entering into communication to empower each other in the face of the world” (Milan Collective 123). The relation is an exchange because the “older” woman or mentor, with more knowledge or competence in a given field, offers the “younger” one “the measure of what she [the “younger”] can do and what in her wants to come into existence” (149), in her professional life or any area of public activity (Cicioni 76). In turn, the “younger” woman offers the mentor public and visible acknowledgment for the act of female mediation rendered to her. These elements are what make *affidamento* a social relation, and not merely a personal one (Milan Collective 130). Female freedom derives from choosing to signify one’s belonging to the female sex, through ties
of gratitude and recognition which promote stronger bonds (139), not only between the “daughter” and her mentor per se but also, by extension, among women in social life in general, who choose to enter different dyads and thus contribute to the creation of female networks (Muraro, “Feminine Difference” 80). These aspects are what makes the relational enterprise of affidamento political.

According to Luisa Muraro, Italian feminist, philosopher, and prominent member of the Milan Collective, relationships are at the core of who we, as people, are. Rejecting the autonomous self-reliant subject of the male philosophical tradition, Muraro believes that human beings are who they are because of relations, underscoring the value of the maternal relationship “from which we get life and the word, together” (“Feminine Difference” 80). In this connection, Muraro understands that a practice of relations is better expressed through “the story rather than a reasoned argument” (80). Italian feminist and philosopher Adriana Cavarero, following the work of Hannah Arendt, also revisits the issue of the relational quality of existence in her essay “Who Engenders Politics?” in order to elaborate on a notion of identity tied to the uniqueness of every human being, i.e., to who we are, rather than to an assorted inventory of qualities —social roles, preferences, sexual practices which, when
compiled as an answer, would more likely respond to the question of what we are (92-93). Cavarero’s concern is with reclaiming the who for feminist politics as a means of breaking through the impasse in which the confrontation between the universal, autonomous subject of metaphysics and the multiple, fragmented subject of postmodernism is stuck (88-90). For Cavarero, the who is “the embodied uniqueness of the existing being as he or she appears to the reciprocal sight of others” (99). In the context of the politics of sexual difference and the practice of relations among women, this who is “a woman who is here, in flesh and blood—with a face, a name, a story—who exposes her uniqueness, or rather her sense of her being thus and not otherwise, to other women who are present in the same setting, a shared setting where one stands face-to-face with the other” (100). And this mode of exposition is narrative (91).

According to Cavarero in *Relating Narratives*, biographical narrative exposition is also a mode that characterizes female friendships (62-63). The predilection for this mode stems from the need of the self to materialize a story that gives meaning to what is otherwise a mere sequence of events, thereby exposing a woman’s uniqueness (56-57). In this context, Cavarero’s main focus is on the political value of female relationality through the coming together of autobiographical and biographical modes of narration. In this regard, a woman
who tells her own life story to another woman, and who then hears this story told back to her by her listener, can experience her unrepeatable uniqueness and also the unity of her identity, constituted in relation. This notion that each woman has, by virtue of living a life, a story that is worth narrating, is what Cavarero refers to as a “narratable self” (33). Having a story of one’s own, a strong desire for that story to be narrated, and a female friend who undertakes this enterprise in order to allow for the meaning of that sequence of events to be brought into focus, leads to the potential opening of a space of affirmation and empowerment for women, the political value of which resides in its aspect of reciprocal shared and interactive exposition, following Hannah Arendt’s definition of the term “political” (55-65).

In the absence of a female friend, however, Cavarero posits that autobiographies and biographies written by women can stand in and satisfy the desire that another woman (reader) has for engaging in narratives of a self (Relating Narratives 74-75). The political value of female friendships as narrational is extended in the present study to works of fiction written by and about women, whereby women readers can also be affirmed as to the significance of their own narratable selves when exposed to the narration by women of female characters’ life stories. Within this dynamic, a woman reader can become a virtual friend to
another woman who is disclosing her story—even when it is an imaginary life story, as is the case in fiction. If a woman reader can experience in herself the sensations typically produced by the act of sharing life stories among friends, then the expository function at the core of the practice of relations can be realized in a private and convenient forum. The significance of the chain woman reader/woman protagonist/woman writer gains a political as well as a personal status, because the writing and reading of life stories, and furthermore the sharing and recommending of stories to other women, puts into action key empowering elements of the praxis of relationality in Italian feminism such as the ones described above.

Drawing from the encompassing value of the preceding conceptual framework and its tools, §4.2 addresses the articulation of reading bonds in the works of Marcela Serrano, in the light of certain of the reader-response theorists (Holland, Fetterley, Berggren, Schweickart, and Iser) reviewed in chapter two. This articulation, which foregrounds as a recurring theme women characters’ conflicting desires to connect and, at the same time, to assert personal autonomy, is examined in terms of the dynamics of how Serrano’s female characters’ life stories are narrated, (1) presenting women readers with a set of models for women-affirming-women interactions, (2) enabling women readers to connect
with these female characters and their life stories through the deployment of narrative voice, and (3) making visible for women readers the constraining effects of hegemonic gender roles via specific re-elaborations of particular novels and genres. All of these elements are brought forward for consideration as invitations to women readers for exploring processes of female self-definition in Serrano’s works and also in their own lives.

4.2 Steering among Issues of Connection and Autonomy: A Navigation Chart for Women Readers in Troubled Waters

A reading which includes all of Serrano’s novels reveals an underlying thread concerning the tension that arises when middle- to upper-class women characters experience the desire to connect with the other and, at the same time, to assert and maintain their autonomy. From the psychoanalytic perspective of Holland’s DEFT model of reading (recall §2.1; see also Dynamics 38-57), readers come to texts with their characteristic defenses (D) at hand, so to speak, to ward off threats through strategies of repression, denial, or other types of displacement, allowing readers to cancel, reject, turn aside, or otherwise recast impulses or thoughts that are personally and/or socially unacceptable. Readers also bring to the act of reading their individual (although not necessarily unique
(to them) set of expectations (E), couched in terms of paired hopes and fears, e.g., affection/indifference, success/failure, connection/isolation, autonomy/erasure.

With these —and other— strategies and concerns in tow, readers may begin to project fantasies (F) into what they read. Following Freud, Holland characterizes the concerns of connection and autonomy in relation to developmental phases. In this regard, on the one hand, a reader may project fantasies into a book which concern a continuum of merger experiences, from the impossibility of connection, through benevolent connection, to the point of being overwhelmed, or swallowed up in the other. On the other hand, a reader’s fantasies may have to do, analogously, with the impossibility of self-determination, through the healthy exercise of autonomy, to an extreme exercise of sheer will. These clusters of fantasies clearly interact, in that they both involve dynamics of separation and merger, but pull in opposite directions. As a reader finds her fantasies matched and her concerns addressed in a work, she comes to trust the experience and is able to transform (T) the particular enactments of fantasies that she finds in the works into a personal meaning, an interpretation of the work in the light of her own personality.

As a woman reader approaches Serrano’s works in search of material to project her fantasies onto, she finds woman character after woman character who
is called upon to fulfill an array of prescribed social roles. For example, these characters, like the reader, may come into internal or interpersonal conflict when the responsibilities to support and nourish others demand of them the deferral or renunciation of personal and professional enrichment. A reader may hope for outcomes that avoid extremes, i.e., total loss of self or total isolation, and where women characters are ultimately able to navigate some semblance of a middle way, gaining in agency without becoming disconnected from the other, a reader achieves pleasure and/or avoids pain, and (for some readers) the credit goes to Serrano’s sensibility.

It is not the case that only happy endings have a positive value in Holland’s model, however. Where characters find themselves unable to connect or unable to achieve any degree of autonomy, this too is fantasy material, and a reader may transform the meaning of the story into a call to respond or act in a different way so as to overcome the feeling of incapacity, or alternatively, into a new awareness or empathy for women who are trapped in positions that negate them. Characters who express extremes of merger and separation enact threatening fantasies of loss of the self or of others, respectively. Defensive responses from a reader in this area may include rationalization of a
protagonist’s motives in the context of her particular outcome, turning a character’s failure into a type of cautionary tale, however tragic the ending.

By presenting and working with this identity theme from multiple angles, Serrano demonstrates that she is familiar with the concerns of her readers. Furthermore, this choice of identity theme provides women readers with a safe space to consider the issues and conflicts that concern them, permitting the development of trust on the part of her women readers, who are thus able to extend themselves into the uncharted territory of role-challenging presented in the works. The presence of this tension in all of Serrano’s works holds a double significance: not only may it be diagnostic of a persistent concern on the part of Serrano, but the success of her writing among her target female audience speaks to the resonance of the tension for middle- to upper-class women readers who are able to make personal meaning from these works in terms of their own identity themes.

The issue of balancing connection and autonomy in the works of Serrano occurs perhaps most saliently in the context of family relations. Female characters tend to have an ambivalent relationship with their mothers, their partners, and their children, because their perception of the demands made on them in each of these relation types constrains their possibilities of personal
and/or professional development and expression. In the case of the mother-daughter relationship, Serrano’s daughter protagonists enact the desire for merger with the maternal source of emotional sustenance and protection, and at the same time, the pain of coming to terms with separation and with issues of maturation and increased autonomy as individuals. As regards the relationship with a partner, female protagonists articulate their ambivalence about competing desires for affection and companionship, on the one hand, and for retaining their personal boundaries as well as opportunities for professional development, on the other, voicing their fear that establishing a home under the terms of patriarchy will result into a loss of control and self-determination. With respect to the mother-child relationship, mother characters in Serrano’s works experience the pull between their desire to nourish and support their children, and the frustration they experience when this desire limits their professional and personal development. In each of these ostensibly love-based relationships, the expectation of nourishing and supporting the other competes with the need to nourish and support the self in its full potential for realization. Through the conduit of Serrano’s characters and their life stories, identity themes that may be shared by middle- to upper-class readers are brought up for consideration (cf. Miner 191-92). Indeed, the presence of these themes may at least in part explain
the appeal of Serrano’s books for her readers. By problematizing these
patriarchally-established female roles, however, Serrano’s works invite women
readers to question the naturalness and inevitability of these roles for their own
lives, and to take steps towards renegotiating them.

4.2.1 Relating Women’s Life Stories: Models for Female Agency

Fetterley has brought into the discussion the political potential of
literature as a weapon to change the consciousness of readers (recall §2.2). Her
statement regarding how US-American women suffer the effects of immasculation
as a result of reading fiction written by their male counterparts, “what we read
affects us,” can be put to use productively when considering fiction written by
women writers who claim to pursue an agenda of female empowerment, this
time in order to “affect” women readers more positively by raising their
awareness of how established gender roles work to their detriment. In this
connection, Serrano offers her readers women characters who recount their own
life stories or those of other women, or has a third person narrator presenting
such stories. These life stories model for female readers ways of acquiring
knowledge about the self and one’s environment, and furthermore ways of
confronting and overcoming critical personal and interpersonal situations (recall
Berggren, §2.2). Thus, the connections that women readers develop with Serrano’s works can be understood in the light of *affidamento*, as is raised in the course of this chapter and of chapter five.

Serrano’s larger project of life story narration is foreshadowed in capsule form already in her first novel. In *Nosotras*, these seeds are evident as the character María reflects on the stories of women, some of whom she knows personally, and others who are friends of friends: “¿Cómo hacer un mosaico con todas ellas, congelarlas en el vidrio, y darles vida nueva después?” (163). In Serrano’s project as it unfolds, the writer seems to be attempting to assemble for herself and for her readers a composite of female life stories, whereby a sense emerges of what it means for a woman to experience life in a sexed body. In this respect, indications are given as to how women might proceed in order (1) to examine their lives in relation to the mandates of patriarchal society and (2) to find new avenues towards articulating definitions of the self in connection to female sociality.

4.2.1 Examining Women’s Lives in Relation to Hegemonic Mandates

In connection with the textual indications Serrano deploys to present female characters in the process of (re)considering the “naturalness” of
patriarchal mandates that affect their lives as women, this writer presents scenes of women sharing life stories of women through speech, writing, and image. These narrative bonds allow women characters to understand in which ways their lives are constrained by gender roles which, up until a particular point in their lives, they have taken for natural — to be assumed and not to be questioned.

*Nosotras* presents an example in chapter twenty of women engaged in the sharing of their own stories, or those of friends and acquaintances. This scene could be characterized as an instance of *autocosciencia*, in its presentation of eight women coming together in the apartment of Sara, a civil engineer, to talk about their personal experiences of existing in sexed bodies. One of the four protagonists (and friends) of this novel (the rest being María, Isabel, and Ana, the narrator), Sara has devoted her life to her profession and to her work with feminist organizations in the Chile of the *postdictadura*, after separating from her partner due to his repeated infidelities. This group meeting in Sara’s living room highlights the desire of these female characters to relate through self-narration in a shared setting, in order to give meaning to their particular experiences as women in a patriarchal world (recall §4.1). In this connection, the women discuss an array of topics, e.g., the strains of aging and the waning of seductive powers in women, and the tendency in some men to refuse to take responsibility for
birth control and to refuse to become actively involved in raising their children. Although the women offer ideas on how to cope with these issues, their verbal interaction is somewhat competitive and disorderly, in general marked by an anxiety to take the floor and assert opinions, as is revealed by Sara’s gesture to express her thoughts “antes que le quiten la palabra” (256), or Ximena’s haste in offering her own solutions to the problem of aging with dignity (256). The exchange of this group serves the purpose of venting the women’s anger with uncooperative partners, as the remark “[t]odas se indignaron, pensando en el Francisco que cada una llevaba al lado” (260) reveals, but it does not result in the development of tools for changing their reality, because each woman is more focused on searching for herself in the other women in the group (recall §4.1), establishing a female identity as fellow sufferers. As Cavarero aptly puts it, the question of the “who I am and who you are seem[s] to surrender to the urgency of the question of what Woman is” (Relating Narratives 60). And the answer to the latter, enacted by some of the women in the group, who quickly proceed to highlight their feminine charms, “arregl[ándose] el pelo,” “mostrando sus bellas pantorrillas,” and “pronunci[ando] su escote,” when Sara’s male neighbor shows up at her door (263), is also quite unsatisfying. As a frustrated Sara points out, “Me he pasado la tarde oyéndolas quejarse contra los hombres, como si
realmente los detestaran. Y entra un solo representante de ese sexo, y casi todas ustedes son otras personas. ¿En qué quedamos?” (263), whereby the reader finds an allusion to the tendency towards competition among women which Serrano has identified as something promoted beginning in early childhood by patriarchal society, and which the writer understands must be replaced with relationships based on female solidarity (recall §3.3.1).

A scene of women sharing their life stories in part three, chapter eight, of *Albergue*, exhibits a revealing contrast to the passage described above. In the drawing room of the “Albergue,” a former hotel on the island of Chiloé turned into a retreat for women wishing to temporarily withdraw to a quiet place in order to overcome emotional issues, a group of women gets together to talk about sexuality and men. In this connection, the women characters discuss the impact of female sexual liberation on both females and males, pointing out how this cultural phenomenon has made many men insecure and prompted them to shun emotional commitment to women, and how this has caused an increasing number of women to experience loneliness as a result of not being able to find male partners. What is interesting about this passage, in comparison to the one previously examined, is that the discussion revolves around one topic, developed in a coherent manner, resulting in a conversation in which no
participant is attempting to take over, but rather in which everyone is trying to collaborate, offering examples of what they are claiming, as well as both affirming the experiences of their fellow group members and challenging each other to think about these issues more thoroughly (285-90; cf. Tannen). The fact that the participants remain unlabeled—no names, ages, or professions are mentioned, as opposed to the autocoscienza or consciousness-raising session of Nosotras—privileges their who-ness over their individual what-ness, which in this way does not interfere with what each participant has to offer the group. This more evolved version of autocoscienza seems to overcome the limitations of the one depicted in Serrano’s first novel, because the common identity of women is now articulated more in terms of a strategic shared what-ness (Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics” 101), namely the fact that all of these women are experiencing personal difficulties as beings who live in female bodies. This motivation acts as a force that leads a woman to look for a space of retreat such as the “Albergue,” where she can relate to other women in the political sense of exposing her uniqueness through her life story, rather than merely looking for reciprocal identification and venting her frustration among fellow sufferers. And even though it is evident that most women in the group are in the process of searching for meaningful answers to negotiate the issue of sexual dependency,
which they refer to as “nuestro talón de Aquiles” (290), what stands out here is a shared feminist awareness about how women have been struggling in order to stake out a position of visibility and power for themselves in society, and about how important this struggle is, as the following remark shows: “este fenómeno de las mujeres […] es lo más profundo que ha pasado como revolución cultural en este siglo […] a nosotras no nos pueden cambiar, ni reemplazar, ni derribar” (290)⁴⁷. The female characters involved in this discussion are represented as relatively more empowered agents, who possess a desire to overcome a status of victimization, and who understand that this goal can only be attained in a relational context of female sociality: “Es la cercanía entre nosotras […] lo que nos lleva a hablar así” (290).

When telling life stories orally and face-to-face breaks down, however, the written word can stand in to mediate the sharing of relations. A prominent extended example is to be found in Antigua, between the protagonists Violeta and Josefa. In the context of the balance between connection and autonomy, Violeta enacts an identity theme of merger with and erasure into others, perhaps

⁴⁷ In the course of interviews, Serrano has characterized the attainments of feminism at the end of the twentieth century as a cultural revolution, in comparison to the less dramatic changes that had taken place during the earlier part of the century (Díaz 19; Mafla-Bustamante, “Palabra” 162), underscoring how women are making themselves heard in their efforts to change society (Díaz 19). In this respect, Serrano’s works can be understood as fora where her female characters voice their struggle to the reader, modeling the way in which these changes should be approached from a standpoint of relationality among women.
acting as “mamá de todos” (119), continually reaching out to support and help those surrounding her, e.g., Gonzalo and Eduardo, her demanding and egotistical first and second husbands respectively, and Josefa as well, in the pursuit of their artistic expression:

La musa-madre. Ella pudo pintar, pero gastó sus ojos en los planos que dibujaba en esa oficina italiana para cuidar la pintura de Gonzalo. Nació con la música en los oídos, pero le hizo siempre la segunda voz a Josefa. Las palabras le brotaron como borbotones en la cuna misma. Le brotaron, pero no optó por ellas [but rather she nourished Eduardo’s writing]. (91)

Josefa, on the other hand, while pursuing a very successful solo singing career, has a strong psychological drive toward separation from others, so as to maximize the degree of personal control that she can maintain over her life, shutting herself off from her family and friends:

Era la época en que Violeta me llamaba “Miss No-Tengo-Tiempo-Mi-Vida-Es-Demasiado-Importante”. Yo me reía, un poco molesta. Es que me sentía en deuda permanente. Mi carrera parecía meteórica y cada paso me exigía más esfuerzo que el anterior. La contradicción entre mi vida profesional y mi vida privada me
atravesaba como una lanza envenenada. [...] las llamadas que no he contestado, la gente que he dejado plantada, los requisitos básicos del cariño que no he cumplido.

Llego a mi casa a encerrarme. Tengo que trabajar [...]. Llego a mi casa y ésta ya no me sirve.

Entonces empiezo a pagar cada minuto de soledad. Reparto billetes: al cine todos, o al museo en el radio-taxi con helados a la salida, y cuando se cierra la puerta saboreo el silencio que han dejado atrás. (68-69)

In order to feel loved, Violeta has been practicing merger to the point of self-effacement, although she is able to attend more to her own needs once she reinvents her personal and professional life in Antigua. In order to feel safe, Josefa puts distance between herself and her loved ones, including Violeta, although she also pays for this distance with the guilt she feels for neglecting them. Serrano’s addressing through her characters how these two impulses can impact women’s lives negatively when taken to extremes is likely to be welcomed by women who find difficulties in striking a balance between connection and autonomy. Furthermore, Serrano’s direct spelling out of a mother’s ambivalent emotions regarding child rearing opens up a safe space for
working women, who thus may see that it is perfectly human and valid to experience these types of emotions.

Violeta is a long-time keeper of personal journals, and although she claims that it serves to help her order her mind (19), her writing increases in times of emotional distress, as she herself notes in her diary: “Caigo en cuenta de que uso este cuaderno sólo para las quejas […]. ¿Por qué será que nunca necesito escribir cuando estoy contenta?” (87, italics in original). In her notebook, Violeta registers the psychological neglect she experiences at the hands of her second husband, “Eduardo es […] un total egocéntrico […] Lo que me vuelve loca es que no me escuche. […] ¿Es que sencillamente su yo lo repleta todo?” (88, italics in original). Violeta also records Eduardo’s sexual abuse and the shame she feels in subjecting herself to his treatment:

¿Me habré convertido en una de esas neuróticas del amor adictivo? […]

Eduardo ronca, me he levantado en puntillas a la galería, presa de la angustia. Ha vuelto a suceder esta noche lo de la casa del molino. ¿Cómo tendría que nombrarlo? De un momento a otro se transformó y se volvió un ser brutal. Me opuse y me opuse hasta la inutilidad, hasta que asquerosamente me entregué. Es su faceta obscena la que más me
After Eduardo’s attempt to rape her daughter Jacinta leads Violeta to shoot her second husband in their own home, Josefa collects Violeta’s notebooks more or less surreptitiously from the crime scene, and through reading these texts, she comes to realize how nobody, including herself, who was always too busy with her professional life to genuinely care for her life-long friend, had been listening to Violeta or had actually stepped in to help her during the time of danger and distress she experienced at the hands of her violent husband. Furthermore, owing to the fact that Josefa and Violeta’s lives were so intertwined (21-22), reading the life story of one fundamentally includes elements of that of the other woman. And so it is that Josefa can perceive “something of the interiority of another woman” (recall Schweickart, §2.2), however belatedly, and witness something of her own life story as well, i.e., how Violeta loves her and cares about her, and how Violeta knows her perhaps better than she knows herself (83-85). For instance, as Josefa reads Violeta’s account of one of Josefa’s concerts, the reader (and presumably Josefa herself) cannot fail to perceive the admiration and at the same time the compassion that Violeta has for her due to Josefa’s long-standing stage fright and fear of failure:
Su voz es única; es superdotada [...].

[...]

La ovación que la recibió no modificó en absoluto su postura: siempre
elegantemente estática y distante su forma de pararse en los escenarios.
Nadie podría sospechar que está sufriendo. Su pánico la hace parecer
lejana: es parte de su sello, de lo que el público ama en ella sin percibir que
esa lejanía no es sino miedo, su eterno miedo. Pero nosotros, los que
sabemos, estamos tranquilos, pues una vez que parte cantando, comienza
su placer, su vértigo, y nada ni nadie la detiene. (83, italics in original)

The dysfunction of Josefa that had fairly destroyed their capacity to connect as
friends in the day-to-day can be transcended, at least to some degree, through
the story of herself that Violeta in her diary gives Josefa through their bond of
reading (cf. Cavarero, §4.1).

“Sin Dios” also offers an example of women sharing life stories of women
that is worth taking a closer look at, because it involves the reading of
photographic images more than of the written word. In this short story, Serrano
presents her readers with Laura Gutiérrez, an upper-class woman living in
contemporary Mexico City. Laura Gutiérrez —never referred to without her last
name, which the reader can safely assume to be her married name— is a
conservative woman who is proud of her elegantly decorated home in the wealthy residential area of Las Lomas. The protagonist is equally proud of her refined and expensive appearance, which she produces with the help of “la manicura, la depiladora, la masajista, ese ejército de mujeres que la visitan a domicilio para asegurarle una presencia decorosa” (76). Her conservatism is evident in her adherence to traditional male and female roles expounded in the Epístola de Melchor Ocampo, which she eagerly accepted on her wedding day: “Recuerda [...] el infinito placer que le causó saber que a partir de ese momento ella le pertenecía a otro, constatar que sería eternamente protegida y mantenida, que la ley así lo establecía” (70). Laura Gutiérrez’s conservatism is also enacted in her rejection of women who affirm feminist causes as “[a]ctivistas, terroristas”

48 The 1859 Epístola de Melchor Ocampo is a document which used to be read during civil marriage ceremonies in Mexico. In its first and second paragraph, this document states that:

El hombre, cuyas dotes sexuales son principalmente el valor y la fuerza, debe dar y dará a la mujer, protección, alimento y dirección, tratándola siempre como a la parte más delicada, sensible y fina de sí mismo, y con la magnanimidad y benevolencia generosa que el fuerte debe al débil, esencialmente cuando este débil se entrega a él, y cuando por la Sociedad se le ha confiado.

La mujer, cuyas principales dotes son la abnegación, la belleza, la compasión, la perspicacia y la ternura, debe dar y dará al marido obediencia, agradó, asistencia, consuelo y consejo, tratándolo siempre con la veneración que se debe a la persona que nos apoya y defiende, y con la delicadeza de quien no quiere exasperar la parte brusca, irritable y dura de sí mismo propia de su carácter. ("¿Qué dice la Epístola de Melchor Ocampo?" 1)

Although the compulsory reading of this text, contained in article 15 of the Civil Marriage Law of 1859, was formally derogated with the approval of the Civil Code of 1870, the Epístola was still being read in a number of Mexican states (i.e., Oaxaca, Tabasco, Aguascalientes, Baja California, Colima, Jalisco, Puebla, and Sonora) during civil marriage ceremonies. In April of 2007, the Mexican Senate requested that the governors of the above-mentioned states eliminate this text from civil marriages, and replace it with one that reflects the principles of equality between men and women established in the Mexican constitution ("Gaceta del Senado" 1-3).
And one of the causes Laura Gutiérrez most vehemently rejects is that of abortion.

The daily newspaper, however, will precipitate Laura Gutiérrez’s reconsidering these beliefs. On page 20A of the August 7, 2000, issue of Reforma (García and Alegre), the protagonist sees the photo of a woman taking part in a public protest in Guanajuato against a reform to the state penal code that instituted punishment for women who obtain abortions, even in cases of rape, with prison terms. The woman in the picture, with a confident and calm expression, is holding a home-made sign that reads: “Soy mamá de Paulina, embarazada a los trece años por violación” 49 (61-62). As Laura Gutiérrez “reads” this photo of a mother, publicly fighting for the rights of her adolescent daughter and women in general to be upheld, it triggers in Laura Gutiérrez unease, fear, and a sense of impending invasion, such that the dark ink from the story might even spread to cast her precious home into darkness, finally reaching her

49 For her fictive short story, Serrano makes use of the case of Paulina del Carmen Ramírez Jacinto, a young girl from Mexicali, in Baja California, who was raped twice by a heroin addict on July 31, 1999, after he broke into her home to rob her family, becoming pregnant at age thirteen as a consequence of these rapes. Since Paulina did not want to have the child, she and her family denounced the incident before the corresponding authorities, which issued an order to Mexicali General Hospital to perform an abortion. Nevertheless, the hospital director refused to comply with the order from the State Prosecutor’s Office, saying that not one single physician on his staff was willing to perform the operation, and he also told María Elena Jacinto Rauz, Paulina’s mother, that her daughter could become sterile or die as a result of an abortion. In addition, Paulina was visited in her hospital room by two women who claimed to represent the National Agency for Family Development (DIF), who showed her the anti-abortion film “The Silent Scream.” Paulina was also taken to see a priest who threatened her with excommunication (Lamas and Bissell 11-13).
adolescent daughter Sara Alicia, “su princesa” (64). This last remark allows the reader to sense that Laura Gutiérrez’s daughter might have been subjected to the same traumatic experience that Paulina was. The protagonist reacts by burying the newspaper under a pile of magazines and leaving the house whose silence she feels is suffocating her (64), in the same manner she feels the feminist “terroristas” are threatening her traditional way of life (65-68).

The following day another photograph, this time on page 4A of Reforma (Mayolo López and Hidalgo), catches Laura Gutiérrez’s eye. It is a picture of Paulina’s mother Elena, accompanied by her daughter Paulina and her baby grandson50. Laura Gutiérrez cannot understand why Elena and her family do not appear miserable, given what has happened: “todos se ven risueños en la fotografía, todos contentos, y [Laura Gutiérrez] se desconcierta, porque se supone que para Paulina y su madre está vedada la alegría” (73). The fact that this photograph appears much earlier in the newspaper than the image from the preceding day serves to indicate that Laura Gutiérrez’s urge to suppress what makes her uncomfortable cannot be maintained. As she continues looking at

50 A comparison of these two photographs in Reforma (García and Alegre; Mayolo López and Hidalgo) does not allow one to conclude with utmost certainty that the woman who appears in the second photograph is indeed María Elena Jacinto Rauz. In her short story, the narrator notes that Paulina’s mother looks very different in the second photo. What is most important for the story, however, is that Laura Gutiérrez sees this as a picture of Elena.
Elena’s photo, she starts to compare herself to this other mother who, although different physically and socially from Laura Gutiérrez, loves her own daughter as much as she herself loves Sara Alicia (76-77). From this point in the story, Laura Gutiérrez experiences a traumatic flashback and it is revealed that Sara Alicia had also been raped around the same time as Paulina. The difference between Laura Gutiérrez and Elena, however, is that Elena has stepped forward to publicly demand Paulina’s legal right to an abortion, whereas Sara Alicia’s mother has hidden all the evidence, worried that her daughter will lose future social possibilities: “en la desgracia no existe ni Dios ni ley, sólo se puede recurrir a sí misma y a la fuerza propia” (78). Although Laura Gutiérrez does not appear to be othering Elena as much as on the day before, but rather to be having a measure of sympathy for her, the protagonist is firm in her conviction that such a public display of protestation (and images?) would be detrimental to both her and her daughter’s social standing (76-77).

On the third day, the continuing story of protests against penalizing abortion is not accompanied by a photograph (Alegre and García). Laura Gutiérrez skims through the article and finds out that the mass protests of women have been successful in pressuring the state government of Guanajuato to overturn the recent decision to penalize abortion in cases of rape. With the
realization that times have indeed changed and that feminists are no longer marginal figures, comes the admission that what she considered her perfect life is a fraud:

¿Dónde, dónde se encuentra la zona acogedora de la existencia? ¿No había sido su hogar aquel sitio? La casa vacía con sus muebles antiguos y finos, tan inmóvil todo lo que la rodea, pesado, opaco, hijos que llegan como a un hotel, marido para quien ella resulta invisible, aburrido de su esposa hace ya varios años, conversación sólo anecdótica. (86)

Laura Gutiérrez, who has devoted her life to being the perfect bourgeois wife and mother, is confronted by the obsolescence of her chosen path and everything she believes in. The photographic images that tell the life story —however fragmentarily— of her unlikely counterpart Elena and her daughter in the newspaper articles, together with the silent tension and quiet desperation she is living in her own home, bring Laura Gutiérrez to try to reach out to connect with the daughter she protected. Sara Alicia, however, who instead of acquiescing to her family’s values has been following the issue in the Reforma paper all along, presents her mother with the following decision: “Adiós, mamá, me voy a Guanajuato” (94), i.e., to connect with the collective. Although it is far from likely
that Laura Gutiérrez will join her daughter in this collective action, she is now in a better position—due to the memory jolt caused by her “reading” of the newspaper photos, which activates possibilities for reflection in her—to take stock of her life and to question, if she so wishes, the gender roles she had previously so readily accepted. And so, perhaps, are those of Serrano’s readers who share with this protagonist a similar social biography, and who accept the invitation extended through this short story to seek out these images (however constructed they may be) in the issues of Reforma (clearly identified in the story by date and with page numbers; García and Alegre, Mayolo López and Hidalgo, and Alegre and García, respectively), and to appreciate the life stories and struggles of women whose concerns may very well touch their own.

4.2.1.2 Constructing New Avenues towards Standpoints of Female Self-Definition Grounded in Female Sociality

Laura Gutiérrez could have used a mentor to help her articulate new, more creative and satisfying definitions of herself in relation with other women. In this connection, Antigua presents the reader with an example of a relationship of entrustment between women which may be analyzed under the rubric of affidamento (recall §4.1). In the last one-third of the novel Josefa, who has been
experiencing a wide range of personal and professional distress, realizes how much she needs Violeta’s counsel after her friend sets off for the lovely colonial town of Antigua, upon having been released from prison for shooting Eduardo: “Hoy llego a la sorprendente conclusión de que soy yo quien depende de ella [Violeta], y no al revés, como pensé muchas veces” (195). After experiencing and reflecting on the abuse at the hands of her second husband, Violeta is now operating from a position of much greater security within her reinvented life, the “second life” —after Eduardo’s death— that a fortune teller had once predicted for her when she was a child (166). This experience enables Violeta to take up a position of symbolic mother to the “younger” Josefa, as the following discussion shows.

Violeta offers Josefa “the measure of what she [Josefa] can do and what in her wants to come into existence” (recall §4.1). She does so by sharing with her best friend her insights into how it is possible to obtain the peace of mind and spirit that Josefa so badly needs and lacks, because she has been too busy pursuing fame. Violeta’s advice to Josefa in a time of desperate disorientation is: “Compone, me escribió Violeta, cuando estés desesperada, compone, aprovecha la desesperación. El trabajo es lo único que se la lleva. Créeme, Josefa, es lo único. No hay nada que el trabajo no se lleve, hasta la peor de las sensaciones” (243, italics in original).
Sitting in a plaza in Santiago de Chile, Josefa follows this advice and immediately writes what she considers her best song (243).

Josefa experiences a severe mental breakdown, with loss of concentration, dizziness, a complete creative block, and relationship problems with her husband Andrés (252-55). Her psychiatrist prescribes that she cancel her upcoming concert tour and remove herself from her stressful environment, in order to recover her health (255-56). Josefa decides to take Violeta up on her standing invitation to come to Antigua and goes to see her friend. Violeta, who in the interim has worked to become an accomplished tapestry maker, seeks to encourage Josefa to recapture her joy in creation, by sharing her passion for her own art: “¡Es el goce, Josefa, el goce que nadie conoce mejor que tú! Mis tapices son como tus canciones. ¡Somos un par de privilegiadas! ¿Te das cuenta de la cantidad de pasión que ponemos en nuestros quehaceres? Y las dos sabemos bien que es la pasión la que genera las energías. ¡Benditas somos!” (301). Josefa understands that Violeta believes creative work to be what permits the distance necessary to deal with the world surrounding us (301). So much does Josefa take her friend’s words to heart, that after a healing time spent with Violeta, she feels ready to go back to Santiago and face her family and career situation: “Me siento preparada para trabajar, y con criterios distintos de los que antes usé. Es eso lo que
me da fuerzas. Supongo que lo de Andrés vendrá por añadidura” (354, emphasis added). This does not occur, however, before Violeta escorts Josefa to a public concert of Guatemalan folk song, which manages to cut through Josefa’s stale state of mind and brings her back in touch with the joy of creation: “Miro a Violeta y ella me devuelve la mirada, ¿esperanzada? Sabe lo que está a punto de sucederme, es más, sospecho que lo planificó para que me sucediera” (342). The “criterios distintos” mentioned above do not involve the single-minded pursuit of success for success’s sake (328), but rather the deep satisfaction that arises from engaging your creativity in order to earn your living (cf. Cánovas and female rebirth through creative activity, §3.1). The energy to interact with the world in a productive equilibrium derives precisely from this source (300-01).

Visible acknowledgment for the act of female mediation rendered is a necessary component of *affidamento* (recall §4.1). Earlier in the novel, while Violeta was in jail, she wrote some lyrics for Josefa to set to music. Josefa did so with enthusiasm and haste, because her purpose was to release this album, which she entitled *VIOLÉTA DASINSKI, o una historia de añoranza*, before Violeta went to trial, in order to publicly support her friend by acknowledging the bond between them (204-205). Towards the end of the novel, however, Josefa and Violeta have occasion to discuss the significance of this public act. Although at
the time the album was released, it may have seemed solely as a gesture of solidarity from the “older” Josefa to the “younger” Violeta in jail, from the later viewpoint of these women in Antigua, the act acquires a deeper dimension, namely that of Josefa’s gratitude to Violeta for a lifetime of supporting and encouraging her musical talents:

Recuerdas el título del último [CD], hace tres años, verdad?

Se inclina desde su silla a la mía y me abraza.

¡Qué importante me sentí, Jose! Es lo más grande que alguien haya hecho por mí en la vida.

[...]

Era lógico hacerlo, Viola. Al fin y al cabo, nadie ha alentado tanto mi música como tú.

¡Qué alegría que lo reconozcas! Yo siempre lo he sabido, pero es distinto oírtelo decir. (356)

With these expressions of gratitude, the regime of exchange is complete (recall §4.1), because both friends have profited from one another’s disparity: Josefa has derived the self-confidence she needed in order to cement a career now based on the pleasure her creativity gives her, and to improve her estranged relationship with her husband and children. Violeta, in turn, receives the recognition she has
never had before and, most likely, “recovers” Josefa as a true friend, who will also be there for her unconditionally, and not just when her demanding professional life gives her a respite. Although the relative timing of the acts of assistance and gratitude prevents this exchange from matching the precise definition of *affidamento*, the practice of entrustment between Josefa and Violetta models vertical relations of assistance between symbolic mothers and daughters, which may be read by women as indications of new and refreshing strategies to help them overcome personal and interpersonal crises, as lived in sexed bodies, by making recourse to female sociality.

Another strategy that Serrano models for her readers is how to read “properly.” In this connection, the feminist paradigm of reading proposed by Schweickart (recall §2.2) is useful to inform the reading of *Nuestra Señora.* Reading properly in this context involves capitalizing on the “dialogic aspect of the relationship between the feminist reader and the woman writer” (Schweickart 52; cf. Serafin 155). This novel enacts the search for C. L. Ávila, a famous woman writer of detective fiction, who travels to the Miami International Book Fair, never to return to her home in Santiago de Chile, where her husband Tomás Rojas is awaiting her. This search is undertaken by Rosa Alvallay, a woman private detective, and whereas the prototypical search in detective
scenarios is one intended to locate and bring under control a disruptive element, in the hands of this woman detective, the quest is transformed from one of control of a fugitive into one of connection with a fellow woman. Key to the progress of the search for C. L. Ávila is Rosa’s decision to look for something of the subjectivity of the other woman in her writing. On the assumption that C. L. Ávila’s choices of plots, characters, and locations in her novels are too specific to be without significance (89-90), Rosa invests her own money in compiling a complete collection of the author’s works (34-35), and sets about reading them, sifting for clues, aware of the fact that a male colleague would most likely not adopt this perspective: “si Exequiel —mi compañero de trabajo— estuviese a cargo del Archivo C. L. Ávila, en este momento se dispondría a dormir, o a darse una ducha para salir con la novia de turno y jamás se tumbaría en la cama a repasar una novela de la escritora desaparecida pues no supondría que podría encontrar claves allí” (71). Rosa’s reading of C. L. Ávila’s Un mundo raro (which is, by the way, the title of Serrano’s subsequent —though non-detective— work) supports her belief that fiction can help her find the missing link to the writer’s subjectivity: “¿Cuánto hay de propio en lo que escribe un autor? […]. El personaje de C. L. Ávila es una investigadora y se dedica al crimen. ¿Tiene algo que ver con ella? La respuesta más obvia sería: aparentemente nada. Sin
embargo, es su *alter ego*, es la voz que ella no tiene por sí misma” (90). In this connection, Rosa’s reading of *Un mundo raro* in the light of C. L. Ávila’s belief that writers do not merely recreate events and situations that have already happened, but rather anticipate these (53), offers the detective important clues which, together with an extended interview given by the famous writer, help Rosa to intuit what C. L. Ávila’s motives for disappearing might be and the place to which she has removed herself (51-53, 109-24).

This approach to searching for the author in the text is consistent with Schweickart’s observation that a “feature of feminist readings of women’s writing [is] the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author — the ‘voice’ of another woman” (Schweickart 47). The texts do indeed lead Rosa through a geography and biography of the author, complete with a range of associates and intimates, such as her philandering husband, her jealous stepdaughter, their maid, and a number of friends, only some of whom are forthcoming with information on the writer, but ultimately her research brings her within sight of C. L. Ávila’s new residence in the Mexican city of Oaxaca, the writer’s “premises” (Schweickart 46).
The detective’s engagement with the figure of C. L. Ávila is more than a little reminiscent of the feminist model of reading that Schweickart examines in the case of Adrienne Rich reading Emily Dickinson. Rosa seeks information on the author quite literally “on her premises,” in order to understand the context C. L. Ávila is coming from, not only by examining the writer’s novels, literary notebooks, and interviews, but also by breaking into what appears to be her new house in Oaxaca to search for clues that verify that the completely made-over woman who poses as a Colombian citizen in this city is indeed the famous detective fiction writer, although Rosa does this with the ambiguous license of the private detective —for example, she refuses to look into the underwear drawer, on the grounds that this would cross a line of basic respect (202-03). In addition, Rosa narrates the story of this other woman from the position of “witness” (Schweickart 46). Although initially hired as a witness for the prosecution, as it were, as she gets closer to C. L. Ávila’s life and to developing a sense of this writer’s subjectivity, the detective gradually transforms into a witness for the “defense,” in the end seeking to uphold C. L. Ávila’s decision to remove herself from patriarchy and also to justify her own decision as a detective to betray her mission, rather than to betray the writer’s new life:
Y ella [...] luego de haber desdeñado la gloria, ejecutó su último baile. Como un elegante faisán de plumas doradas bailó con un movimiento válido: el de encontrar el camino a casa. Me pregunto acongojada quién soy yo para interrumpir sus pasos. [...].

 [...] yo no quisiera que algún día otra mujer me delatara si en mí se llegara a aventurar la esperanza. (246)

To carry out the investigation as Tomás Rojas defined it, Rosa would be forced to impose her own career interests to the detriment of the other woman, unilaterally invalidating C. L. Ávila’s hard-won escape, materialized in her productive removal of the body into a new context, one in which she will no longer be a celebrity displayed for visitors at her husband’s dining table (29), but someone whose agency extends to the world beyond her writing (237).

This novel is also the story of Rosa’s growing consciousness of being a teller of women’s life stories. By narrating the story of her collecting intelligence, e.g., her interviews with all of C. L. Ávila’s associates, both supporters and detractors, and by including her personal reactions to what she learns through this process about the writer and her rationale for making such a revolutionary change, Rosa is able to synthesize her context of reading (metaphorically, investigating) with C. L. Ávila’s context of writing (metaphorically, living her life
story), a desired characteristic of Schweickart’s dialogic model of feminist reading (Schweickart 53-54). Rosa is thus able to produce a written account of her interpretation of the case that draws on the affinities she has with the writer — some preferred detective fiction writers, and Mexican fiction in general (38-39), their common love for Mexico, where Rosa had spent her exile during the dictatorship period in Chile (131-32), and living in sexed bodies under patriarchy (128)— and that respects the other woman whom she has encountered and has come to understand through the dialogic process of reading C. L. Ávila’s texts — her novels and the extended interview — and of “reading” C. L. Ávila herself — the traces of her life in her living quarters, and direct observations of her in her new milieu. In this way, Rosa narrates with an implicit claim to validity, acknowledging a connective bond with this woman writer (Schweickart 56). The solidity of this connection may be appreciated in the detective’s destruction of the last part of the report she is to submit to her boss at the detective agency, in which it is confirmed that the Colombian woman living in Oaxaca is, in fact, C. L. Ávila, thus protecting the connection that she has built: “Me levanto de mi asiento con el cuaderno aferrado a las manos y me dirijo al baño. Separo las páginas a partir de mi llegada a Oaxaca, las rompo lentamente en trozos y las tiro por el depósito de papeles; que el aire los deshaga en su furia y su velocidad”
This point raises the question of exactly what the text of *Nuestra Señora*, as narrated by Rosa, represents. Rosa’s final remark at the beginning of her flight back home from Mexico:

> No debo inquietarme, tengo siete horas por delante —no sólo para escribir de verdad la primera entrevista a Santiago Blanco— sino para inventar yo esta vez una novela negra.

> Y después. Después, lo que sea. (247)

indicates that she will use this Mexican writer’s false testimony, that C. L. Ávila had died, in support of the official report that she will submit to her employer. Furthermore, it alludes to the fact that Rosa will have to fabricate some details in finalizing this report, thereby initiating a path as a *de facto* fiction writer herself. Since the text of *Nuestra Señora* is clearly not the text of the official report, and since it would not make sense for Rosa to publicize the fact that she is lying to protect the disappeared writer, the novel must represent a distinct private written communication with some audience that Rosa believes will faithfully keep her and Ávila’s secret (cf. Henager 140-41).

The last sentence of Rosa’s final remark, an appropriation of Alfonsina Storni’s poem, “La loba,” speaks of a new vista for this woman who had become a detective not because of a vocational calling, but rather “por una cadena de
fracasos consecutivos” (38). In this connection, it is not unlikely that Rosa may attempt to transform her life and explore writing. The issue of creative work as a source for a woman’s attainment of emotional balance, analyzed above in relation to Antigua, thus seems to reappear in Nuestra Señora. From reading C. L. Ávila’s extended interview, and talking to Ávila’s best friend Jill, Rosa comes to understand this woman’s need to write in order to be “dueña de algo. De algo legítimamente mío” (120). For this half-Chilean, half-US-American woman writer, who has experienced orphanhood both at the hands of parents that abandoned her as a child (110-11), and at the hands of a Transición that traded in oblivion at the cost of memory and justice (105), and who has sought in failed relationships with men an antidote against this feeling of abandonment (233-34), “[c]ualquier cosa bien hecha, desde escribir hasta bordar, cantar o cocinar, puede cambiar[…] la vida […]. Que hubiese una pasión que actúara de motor: eso la haría independiente” (60). In this respect, Rosa finds in C. L. Ávila’s life story the inspiration necessary to perhaps reinvent her own life.

Through Rosa’s character, Serrano presents her readers with the characteristics that a relational model of reading, i.e., a women-affirming-women way of reading, should possess. The bond of reading enacted in Nuestra Señora aims at overcoming the boundaries of the novel itself, seeking to transcend
passive reception, and upholding for women readers the importance of offering assistance to projects of female self-determination, including perhaps Serrano’s own literary one. In addition, this reading bond models for women readers potential new avenues for articulating self-definitions. In this sense, the relationship between the woman reader and the book may be viewed as one of affidamento: the reader entrusts herself to the feminist mode of reading supported by the text and, in turn, is shown “the measure of what she can do and what in her wants to come into existence,” always in the spirit of female sociality (recall §4.1).

Corazón goes a step forward, in indicating how a woman may approach the process of writing another woman’s life story. In this respect, the novel underscores the relevance of starting from one’s own experience which, in the case of protagonist Camila, is that of orphanhood. Camila has been orphaned in many ways. Perhaps the most shattering experience of orphanhood has been the loss of her baby boy to heart disease (25). In addition, Camila feels estranged from her mother Dolores and her own roots back in Chile. Dolores, who has been active against Pinochet’s regime (21-22), and who is quite disenchanted at the political left’s betrayal of utopic values and its embrace of pragmatism in Transición times (124, 154-55), overwhelms Camila—a fairly conventional and
politically uncommitted woman (122) whose guiding principal is “la seguridad [de] navegar sólo en aguas lisas y ligeras” (28)—with her moral stature and strength of character: “Mi madre es una gran mujer y yo soy una mujer corriente. Esto me genera sentimientos ambivalentes; entre mi admiración y mi rechazo por ella se instalan una gran cantidad de pequeños sentimientos, llenos de matices, y no todos muy recomendables” (29). This ambivalence leads Camila to a temporary withdrawal into herself and alienation from her mother (a move which she later on in the novel regrets), refusing her mother’s comfort during the mourning of her son (29), a combination of losses which can be viewed as an utter disconnection of Camila from the genealogical chain.

Apart from viewing herself as rather mediocre at the personal level, Camila also finds that her profession as a technical translator is not particularly creative (120). So when her husband Gustavo, tired of seeing Camila curled up on her bed like a ball of yarn (26), comes home with the news that his friend Peter Graham, the editor of a US-American magazine, is offering Camila the chance of traveling to Chiapas in order to write a report on the state of the Zapatista rebellion on its sixth anniversary, Camila, who has been specifically advised by Graham that the magazine is not seeking a specialist but rather “una mirada fresca de los acontecimientos, distinta” (52), at first nevertheless
approaches her work, guided by Gustavo, from a more conventional perspective, contacting an academic (53), an NGO lawyer (77), and a nun and a priest (50, 105-106). The one contact, however, who will help Camila capture the fresh look that Graham wants, comes from her mother’s side (53). A Uruguayan woman, Reina Barcelona, who had been active as a student in the struggle against the Pinochet regime (in the context of which she met Dolores), and as a guerrillera in a Guatemalan insurgent army group, later on moving to Chiapas to embrace and support the Zapatista cause, will be the one to inspire Camila to write “lo que está en mi corazón” (165), i.e., her truth (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 2).

Reina is an orphan, too. In her case, though, the cause for her orphanhood is a deranged mother who ends up in a mental hospital. After a long period of suffering at the hands of this demented figure, Reina leaves her country in search of a place where a utopia of social justice could be made to come true (246). First she joined the struggle in Chile, then Guatemala, and finally San Cristóbal de las Casas, where enemies of the Zapatistas wound her fatally. But no matter how self-confident Reina is as a public figure, when she shuts off from the world to sleep, she too, like Camila, is “un cuerpo aterrado, durmiendo en posición fetal, llorando en el sueño” (23, 45-46), namely an orphan.
The fact that Reina has made Dolores her symbolic mother (21-22) brings Camila closer to her biological mother and her beliefs (54). In this connection, Camila accepts an assignment from the collective by delivering a package to a Zapatista liaison in Ocosingo. Although she completes her mission successfully, Camila is kidnapped shortly thereafter by opponents of the Zapatistas. During her captivity, she invokes images of her new friends in San Cristóbal, including Reina, to keep her sanity. Of all these images, the one she finds greatest kinship with is the one of Reina saying: “Salgo tanto fuera de la ciudad, podría haberme perdido tu visita. Y no me lo habría perdonado, Camila. Donde quiera que fuese, Dolores me cuidaría, ¿cómo no me voy a preocupar por ti?” (239, italics in original). In this way, Camila is starting to re-establish her connection to her female genealogy.

When Reina dies from her wounds, Camila is released from her captivity (265). Instead of returning directly to her husband in Washington, DC, she decides instead to try to connect more substantially with Dolores who is now a symbolic mother to Camila, in addition to being her biological one, and so she flies back to her native Santiago. In the home space of the mother, Camila retrieves that nourishing and life-affirming maternal relationship she had once shunned, which will enable her to better write the Zapatista story she owes to Peter Graham and to herself: “Le ruego [to Dolores] que me cuide del mundo
exterior, que no permita que nada me interrumpa y que más tarde me lleve un café, como cuando era estudiante” (276). Enriched by her experience of having joined a collective cause instead of centering her focus on her individual pain, and by her reconnection to her maternal genealogy, Camila this time discards the notes she has collected —the words of the Mexican academic, the testimonies from indigenous workers in the coffee plantations she read at Café Museo, as well as the ch’ol legends she has heard during her stay in Chiapas (274-76). For Camila, the only possible way to write this report is from her experience of orphanhood. And thus she starts her story by writing: “‘Había una vez una mujer que al dormir transformaba su cuerpo en un ovillo y se tragaba el llanto. Su nombre era Reina Barcelona’” (276), namely what is in her heart. This writing will likely help her to redefine her relationship to herself, her lost child, her mother, and other women and men, thereby bringing the impulses to merger and to separation into balance, perhaps for the first time.

Starting from oneself and rethinking one’s experiences as a woman in relation to other women are tenets of Italian feminism in whose light the life stories of female characters in Serrano’s works acquire a richer dimension. These stories point to new avenues which women readers may choose to explore as a
means towards finding a standpoint from which to define their own lives to and for themselves.

4.2.2 Narrative Voice and the Creation of Bonds between Women Readers and Female Characters

In order for the female protagonists’ experiences with navigating issues of connection and autonomy to translate as models to women readers, it is necessary that readers be able to form relations with these characters. In this regard, the deployment of narrative voice is a key tool for inviting Serrano’s readers to establish such relational bonds. Within Serrano’s works, one may identify primarily, first person narration, secondarily, combinations of first with third person narration, and less frequently, instances of third person narration. An aspect held in common for all of these modes of narration is an affection for, and often from, the women narrated, which creates in these works an ambiance of connection and empathy as the following discussion elucidates.

Ana, the self-appointed narrator in Nosotras, is a relatively minor character overall, but she serves as the organizing principle for collating the stories of her friends María, Isabel, and Sara, and some of their friends and associates, all women. Ana addresses her readers conversationally (e.g., 15-16, 17, 42, 93, 132),
in a way that is designed to build a common frame of reference. The task that Ana has carved out for herself in registering all these life stories is fraught with difficulties, because she casts a broad, shallow net around a considerable volume of details and voices, which more than allowing for their interiority to emerge, places these female characters on display in a kind of rotation. Ana’s omniscience is also problematic, as Bianchi (“Exitosa novela” 104), Pizarro (124), and Serrano herself (Barnabé 23; Scantlebury 124) have pointed out. Nevertheless, because Ana treats the life stories of her friends seriously and with affection, a reader can take from these narrated selves a sense that her own life story is just as valuable as those in the novel.

The narration of Rosa in Nuestra Señora is similarly a first person account of another woman’s life story, but only one (that of the writer C. L. Ávila), which contrasts sharply with the above sense of character display. Rosa shares considerable details about her own history and current situation (e.g., 125-28), and walks the reader through her investigative reasoning as she closes in on the motives and whereabouts of her quarry. As Rosa takes care to assemble a thorough portrait of C. L. Ávila through the at times conflicting versions afforded to her by friends and family of the disappeared writer, the novels by Ávila, an extended publicity interview (109-24), and the writer’s own premises in
Oaxaca, the reader is invited into the thoughts of one woman pursuing and bringing to light the interiority of another woman. The narrator’s indications that she is addressing an audience (e.g., 17, 66-67, 242, 243-44) and the informal tone, somewhat self-effacing and humorous (e.g., 126), with which she narrates her investigation, permit the formation of a connection with Rosa such that by the time the reader discovers that she is not along for the ride in a classic detective story, but rather is being sworn to secrecy, the reader is likely to join this conspiracy willingly.

A first-person narrator with an investigative mission, liberal use of excerpts from interviews, and a propensity to make asides to her reader is likewise encountered in Camila, the narrator-protagonist of Corazón. Her standing as a journalist and foreigner causes Camila to take some distance as she recounts her daily interactions with EZLN collaborators in San Cristóbal de las Casas in a memoir-like format, but her attempted professional reserve is broken through on a number of occasions by her personal affective concerns (her child, her mother, and Reina). The revelation of this more vulnerable side of Camila serves to humanize her and open her up for the reader to empathize with. In the latter portion of the novel, a strategic shift to the narrative present tense during Camila’s incarceration at the hands of Reina’s assassins brings the reader into the
eternal present moment that she suffers in solitary confinement, beaten, blindfolded, and disoriented (213-53). As Camila fights to overcome this erasure, the reader can follow her strategy of ordering her mind and her memories to recover (or discover?) who she is by checking herself against conjured images of people, especially women, she can feel a connection to. This narrator acts as a lens, filtering the presence of all other characters through their significance for and connection to her, and this in turn tightens the reader’s reliance on her perspective. As Camila benefits from her experience of adventure and engagement with a collective movement, the reader accompanies her out of the dark time of mourning and estrangement and into a set of new life options, reconnecting with her genealogical line and renewed in her confidence in her own abilities.

*No olvides* also features a first person narrator experiencing loss (in this case, of language), but who will end up withdrawing permanently from society, unlike the protagonist of *Corazón*. Blanca’s story is narrated from the perspective of her present state of aphasia. Her account of her linguistic isolation is interspersed with memories of very recent or long past events, and with the voices of others directed towards her in past conversations. As regards the latter, a number of complete chapters are given over to monologues by her friends Sofía
and Victoria, providing Blanca with biographical and critical testimony which helps her to make sense out of her experience, for better or worse (cf. Cavarero, §4.1). The sequence of chapters is assembled in an order which is based more on a stream of semantic associations between episodes than on strict chronological sequence. This flowing dynamic is used to intense effect at the novel’s close, as Blanca registers her moment-by-moment feelings and thoughts during the stroke that will take her life (251-52). The rapid-fire sequence of sensory experience and fearful imagery, in a counterplay of dark dread and bright nothingness, from which, despite everything, silent words of affection for her daughter Trini surge, allows the reader not only full access to Blanca’s interior state as she finds herself slipping away, but also the possibility of experiencing Blanca’s demise together with her.

Similar to No olvides (and to a degree, Corazón) in presenting a first-person narrator undergoing a limit experience of loss — this time of her baby daughter — and withdrawal from the world, and in the intensity with which she is giving testimony of her life story, Llorona is Serrano’s initial attempt at presenting a lower-class woman in a lead role. This narrator puts forth her who-ness in the interest of gaining her (fellow woman) reader’s understanding for her radical actions to retrieve her daughter. This bond is achieved through a style that
simulates a personal and frank conversation with the reader (e.g., 12, 37, 53, 57, 62, 67, 76, 115, 141, 143), making frequent and affectionate references to her missing child, that serve to enlist the empathy of her listener for a woman who is not a victim but a fighter. Under the structural pretext of corresponding to a set of four notebooks that Ella, the unnamed protagonist, had started filling with her life story while interned at a psychiatric hospital, the narration is divided into sections, each named for a woman character in the story. The first bears the name “Ella,” and the other three sections are each dedicated foremost to a woman who has provided mentoring, support, and advice to Ella over the course of her search for her daughter. Section two is entitled “Olivia” after the lawyer who, in a relation of genuine affidamento, directs her expertise towards helping lower-class women (whose newborns have been stolen from them at hospitals) to become organized for action. This section also contains an example of a woman giving back to another woman her hard-fought biography. In an exceptionally intimate passage, Ella reworks a nursery rhyme with the important turning points that narrate her compañera Flor’s life journey (85-86; cf. Cavarero, §4.1). In the same fashion, section five, “Hoy,” shifts narrative voice to the third person, to complete Ella’s (auto)biographical account, as the protagonist takes her daughter with her to her mother’s home in “el campo” for what becomes a final
confrontation with the police. This empathetic narrator presents tender but not saccharine vignettes of Ella and her daughter with a rhythmic pattern that resembles a song’s refrain. The hope that this sequence raises in the reader is inverted dramatically in the chaos of the arrival of the police and Ella’s falling to the ground. The narrator brings the reader to Ella’s side, where one feels one could reach down, take her hand, and understand why she has done what she has done.

The reclaiming and upholding of a female genealogy, which is evident in No olvides and Llorona, emerges powerfully in Antigua. The image of weaving and layering that is enacted in Violeta’s tapestries is furthermore to be found in the narrative structure of the novel (cf. Cuadra 21-22). The book’s three sections permit three distinct patterns of women’s interwoven existence. In section one, what begins in the voice of Josefa, as first-person participant-narrator, alternates with chapters which consist partly or even entirely of excerpts from Violeta’s first-person journals (ch. 3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 14), not only demonstrating Violeta’s internal life and crises, but also presenting Josefa with a measure of her own story as well, as she surfaces in the recollections and commentary of her long-time friend (recall §4.2.1.1). Violeta’s journals were not necessarily written with Josefa in mind as reader, and they are therefore the most honest and intimate
thoughts of Violeta’s most troubled times. Since this writing represents Violeta’s autobiographical viewpoint, however, she is limited at times in her ability to gain a sense of the meaning of what she is going through; Josefa, in contrast, is able to appreciate Violeta’s exposure of her narratable self from her perspective as friend (cf. Cavarero, Relating Narratives 34-41). At the same time, a number of chapters are narrated by a voice of female collectivity, which introduces itself as “Nosotras, las otras,” in a ritual opening to each such chapter (ch. 5, 7, 10). Thus, the reader is offered Josefa’s perspective as she moves closer and closer to psychological crisis, Violeta’s thoughts and feelings as she approaches the breaking point of abuse from her husband, and the omniscient perspective of Nosotras, las otras, by virtue of their timeless and pervasive presence, and their witness to women’s lives and motives. The weaving of voices and the life stories of women, present and past, situate Josefa and Violeta with respect to each other, to their foremothers, and serve to open for readers the interiority of the protagonists as individuals and as friends, within the context of female sociality and genealogy. In the second section of the novel, Nosotras, las otras, maintains narration throughout, reaching back two generations into Violeta’s past, in order to trace the conditions of women’s existence in Violeta’s family, and the heritage from mothers to daughters. In this mode, Nosotras, las otras, resists falling into an anachronic
collage, calling attention to the need to maintain a unidirectional chronology in order to respect the way that the living remember (161, 169). The third section of the novel begins and ends with short narrative sections by Nosotras, las otras, superimposed, as it were, by Josefa’s account of coming back to life from near-complete collapse, in both her family and career life. In narrating this difficult time, Josefa exposes her dark thoughts and insecurities, and this permits the reader to get closer to Josefa than her distant manner and celebrity status allow anyone else to get. The spiritual figures that underlie and frame the life stories of the protagonists and the women of their lineages represent a venture for Serrano into the supernatural, something that most of her other more realistic writing steers clear of. If a woman reader accepts the presence of the spirit-narrators, or is at least willing to suspend her disbelief for the duration of the novel, the reader may find herself interpellated into a female genealogy that stretches across space and time, and that links together women who are disposed to attend to such connections.

The one other occasion in the works of Serrano which involves some narration by a supernatural entity is to be found in Hasta siempre. This book, which significantly reworks Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, is divided into six major sections, which rotate in focus among four female cousins. Four of the
sections are narrated in the third person in a way that provides very close access to the thoughts of the protagonist(s) in focus. In particular, the chapter devoted to Nieves, the eldest of the cousins, follows her so tightly that the line between third person narrator and this character’s internal speech is blurred, building up to something like a narrated monologue (e.g., 17, 30), which allows the reader to perceive Nieves’s tremendous sense of insecurity and loneliness. The narrative perspective is quite different in the chapter in which Luz, the third of the cousins, describes her life story and philosophy. This wide-ranging first-person narrative recapitulates the biography of a woman who is dying young and so needs to reckon her accounts. Luz, who was always put in last place by her cousins, seizes the opportunity to display her value in first-person. At the novel’s end, her spirit re-emerges to narrate her cousins’ reunion at what had been the family’s rural estate, the novel’s climactic conclusion. During this intense moment, her self-appointed mission as guardian angel to her older cousin Ada is to encourage her to be brave and reveal a long-standing deception. In her privileged position as a now-omniscient first-person narrator, this tutelary spirit hears the interior thoughts of all her cousins at once, permitting readers access to the significance of the ensuing conflict for each one, a perspective which otherwise would be lost in the outward expressions of anger and recrimination. The familiarity and
affection that this particular narrator has with respect to the women whose stories she presents make her more suitable for narrating this tale of struggle within a generation of women (as opposed to omniscient third-person, for example), and can offer to women readers an incentive to invest in horizontal relations with other women, and to overcome estrangement where it exists.

The narration in *Albergue*, by contrast, involves a third person observer with a limited omniscience, whose focus is confined to a single character, the protagonist Floreana. This sympathetic narrator presents not only the protagonist’s thought processes in all of their ambivalence and tension, but also the narrator’s own evaluation of these, showing at times a measure of frustration with Floreana’s decisions and preoccupations, but also encouragement not to take herself too seriously in her reluctance towards embarking in romantic relationships (124-25). Floreana’s conflicting impulses towards protecting herself from relationships with men (separation) and opening herself with her defenses down (merger) are enacted by means of a duo of voices that address and, in a way, converse with Floreana —and at times, with each other— when she is hesitant or naive in this regard (e.g., 78-79, 134, 149, 320). At the novel’s close, the tension between these two voices resolves into one voice of staunch support,
almost cheering as Floreana overcomes her fear of being hurt, moving decisively, but not naively, towards the possibility of a new love (393).

The short story format of “Sin Dios” requires that a great amount of exposition be telescoped into a limited framework that is built around the headlines and photos of three newspaper articles referencing the struggle of women in Guanajuato to decriminalize abortion in the case of rape. From this center point, the character of Laura Gutiérrez is constructed in opposition to the newspaper photos mentioned above by means of a very close but matter-of-fact third-person narrator, who creates a portrait of a woman in a marginal position that she had never anticipated occupying (recall §4.2.1.1). This marginality is revealed from the very beginning, as Laura Gutiérrez’s mood is juxtaposed with violent, stormy weather and images of encroaching darkness, silence, and suffocation, which contrast with the superficial shine invoked by the expensive cars, style magazines, and fashionable places which constitute the protagonist’s shallow habitat (65). The mirror effect of the photos shows that Laura Gutiérrez’s code of silence is more personally destructive than Paulina and her mother’s unseemly visibility in pursuing collective justice. These images force Laura Gutiérrez to revisit the solitude and emptiness of her life, inadvertently intensified by her efforts to protect Sara Alicia’s reputation while neglecting to
attend to her daughter’s humanity. Laura Gutiérrez’s marginality is underscored by the fact that her daughter responds to the same photographic images not with unease but with the conviction to leave home in order to join the cause of the women in Guanajuato. The play of oppositions and inversions, together with compact exposition and access to how Laura Gutiérrez feels her individualistic, bourgeois value system to be undercut, permits the reader of “Sin Dios” to experience with the protagonist the emptiness and disconnectedness that lurk behind attention to surfaces only.

4.2.3 Minding the Gap(s): On Opening Spaces for Reflection through Genre

Reworking and Intertextuality

The problem of balancing connection and autonomy enacted in the life stories offered by Serrano’s works may also be examined through the lens of textual re-elaborations, which can function as invitations for women readers to consider the potential that traditional definitions of womanhood have for constraining their personal and professional development. In this respect, Serrano’s appropriation of so-called sub-literary bestselling works and genres⁵¹

⁵¹ A range of studies that focus in detail on Serrano’s reworking of the detective genre in *Nuestra Señora* is already available in the existing literature. For example, both Quinn and Rosell treat this novel as an example of Tani’s anti-detective fiction. Quinn in “Private Detectives, Private Lives,” focuses on Serrano’s
provides a framework in which to explore how her textual reworkings may serve to open up a space of discrepancy which can challenge women readers’ more conservative dispositions, instead of confirming them the way that lite lit characteristically does (recall Iser, §2.1).

Reisz’s idea of using the Irigarayan notion of mimicry in her exploration of Isabel’s character to inform her study of the differences between Nosotras and other forms of popular art such as the novela rosa in “Estéticas complacientes” (recall §3.2) can be productively appropriated and extended in examining Serrano’s evocative choice of title, Nosotras que nos queremos tanto, for her first novel. This title, which alludes to Cuban composer Pedro Junco’s famous bolero “Nosotros,” may initiate mechanisms of pleasurable recognition and identification in readers familiar with Junco’s melody and lyrics. Serrano, however, “winks” at her audience by reclaiming the feminine form “Nosotras” attention to marginal female subjectivities and her treatment of a form of detection based on empathy, intuition, and the personal yet elusive value of truth. For Quinn, this approach to detective fiction underscores the complexities underlying individual lives, and thus constitutes a break from variations on the hard-boiled, as undertaken by Ramón Díaz Eterovic and Roberto Ampuero, because the novels of the latter two address more systematically the legacy of dictatorship and the Chilean Transición, depicting a world in which some measure of truth and justice can be attained. Rosell in “La detectivesca femenina posmoderna,” investigates how detective fiction written by women and with women detectives as protagonists subverts the patriarchal nature of the detective genre, revealing in the process the impact of power mechanisms on gender relations and the positioning of women in contemporary society. In addition, Serafin in “Giallo il colore della verità” carries out an analysis of how Serrano’s novel resembles and differs from established forms of detective fiction —puzzle-like classic British mystery, hard-boiled detective story— as regards narrative techniques and the concept of truth it upholds. In addition, recall §4.2.1.2 above, which explores the relationship between the woman detective and the “object” of her inquiry in Nuestra Señora as the enactment of a feminist model of reading based on an intersubjective encounter between reader and text.
for her title, and completing it with “que nos queremos tanto,” the verse that follows “Nosotros” in the bolero’s refrain. This slight yet conspicuous title variation—which is of course to be expected in a novel whose four protagonists are women—is underscored by Serrano’s narrative re-elaboration of the bolero’s text to highlight her own thematic concerns. First, Serrano appropriates a text marked by hegemonic overtones which reinforces relationships based on inequality—the speaker informs his partner (presumably a woman) that their relationship is over and they must part, for this partner’s own good and without offering any explanations as to why. Then, Serrano rewrites this text in a way that reinforces the practice of relationality and solidarity among women—the narrator Ana informs the reader over the course of her racconto that although her friends Isabel and Sara are leaving the research institute where they all worked together to begin employment with the Transición government, she supports their decision but also will be ready to welcome them back if they decide that their new positions are not what they expected (Nosotras 17-18). Reading Serrano’s invocation-with-a-twist of Junco’s song in the light of Irigaray’s writerly strategy of mimicry opens up possibilities for critical consideration of the novel, pace Bianchi52 (cf. Knights 213, 220). However, it must be noted that the

52 In “Emociones y best-sellers,” Bianchi contends that Serrano uses song titles for Nosotras que nos queremos
ending of *Nosotras*, in particular of Isabel’s character, evokes to a certain extent the fairy tale resolution that is characteristic of the *novela rosa* (Erhart 95): “El alcohol ha disminuido. Todo parece marchar en la casa de las Condes” (*Nosotras* 355). Together with the tendency towards linearity and stereotypical characters already identified critically by Reisz (recall §3.2), this denouement at least partially decreases the novel’s ability to disrupt phallocentric discourse. Such flaws may be interpreted, however, as symptomatic of *Nosotras*’s being Serrano’s first novel, something which the writer herself acknowledges in her interviews with Barnabé (23) and Scantlebury (124), and not so much as stemming from a desire for reformist accommodation within the system (Reisz, “Estéticas complacientes” 339; Femenías 79-80). Serrano’s depiction of formerly defiant María at the end of the novel, waiting for her otherwise very supporting partner to return to her, after having shunned him completely by withdrawing into herself on account of her sister’s assassination, underscores this character’s tremendous insecurity, bewilderment, and pain at not knowing how to handle the delicate balance between connection and autonomy (*Nosotras* 356-58). Serrano’s construction of the final scene, in which Ana embraces María without *tanto* and *Para que no me olvides* in order to secure her readers’ emotional identification instead of their critical distance.
words, because “[t]ampoco yo estoy muy segura de nada ni tengo verdades que ofrecerle,” and walks to the door with a knot in her throat, as María asks her to close the door because the world can be so cold outside (358), strikes me more as a diagnostic critique of how patriarchy destabilizes and disciplines women into complying with traditional roles of merger, rather than as evidence of the novel’s endorsement of a restoration of hegemonic social order, as Femenías (77) and Hines (“Signs of (Dis)Content” 49-50) have proposed. A global evaluation of Serrano’s textual project, based on an analysis which has taken into account the entirety of this writer’s works, in order to offer a more coherent perspective on whether her fiction contributes to reinforce the status quo or not, as well as the survey responses of thirteen women readers of Serrano, follows in chapter five.

The appropriation and re-elaboration of forms of popular art, only barely worked through in Nosotras, are more clearly enacted and sustained in No olvides. This novel shares the characteristics of a novela rosa in that its plot, when regarded at a superficial level, may be viewed as a love story revolving around a beautiful and naive heroine, Blanca, who is blond, graceful, and innately elegant, an equally blond and handsome man, “el Gringo,” who resembles “un vikingo o un guerrero romano” (69), and the melodramatic obstacles they face in pursuing their love. The couple appears to those surrounding them as “príncipes de […]
cuentos” (70), a description which adds a fairy tale component to the story (cf. Pizarro 126; Seibert 147). The popular format of the novela rosa is mimicked in a deliberate manner by Serrano (cf. Cánovas, “Una visión panorámica” 94), who after inviting identification through the familiarity of the reader with the pathos typical of this genre, alluded to from the very beginning in the novel’s title—an appropriation of a bolero song based on the poem “Oración para que no me olvides,” by Oscar Castro, and set to music by Ariel Arancibia—then proceeds to subvert this identification.

Set in the Chile of the postdictadura, at the time of the inquiries and investigations undertaken by the Comisión de Verdad y Reconciliación, No olvides presents the reader with a protagonist, Blanca, the narrator of the story, an upper-class woman, married and mother of two children. From early childhood, Blanca received a highly regimented and puritanical upbringing: from prescribed

53 For studies of this novel which focus on the interplay between the question of silence and oblivion in post-dictatorship Chile and the silencing of women’s voices in patriarchal systems see Seibert, Gálvez-Carlisle, and also Marjorie Agosín’s “Travesía de la memoria: Para que no me olvides de Marcela Serrano,” Cecilia Mafla-Bustamante’s “Construcciones alegóricas feministas en la narrativa de mujeres latinoamericanas: 1980-2001,” Patrick L. O’Connell’s “The Voice of Silence in Marcela Serrano’s Para que no me olvides,” and María Esther Castillo G.’s “Apelación a la memoria: Para que no me olvides, de Marcela Serrano.” The historical context of memory and oblivion in the postdictadura, enacted through the characters of Victoria and “el Gringo,” allows Blanca to understand and acknowledge the plight of the disappeared, and their families and friends, at a personal level. Blanca’s connection with these characters remains personal, however, since Blanca does not seem to be in a position to extrapolate this situation to a more political level. Therefore, I find that an allegorical reading of No olvides, whereby the public history of Chile is conveyed through a private story would, on the one hand, background the importance of Blanca’s Bildungsroman, reducing the complexities of her story to a mere didactic means and, on the other hand, shortchange this period of Chile’s history through a narrative elaboration that lacks much of the necessary historical, political, and social specificity to address this topic.

168
table manners (117) and forms of expression (171), to the clothes she was allowed to wear (171), the way she was supposed to behave in presence of the opposite sex (171-72), every action of hers strictly controlled by her mother, so as to increase her commodity value in the marriage market by erasing any possible “flaws” her daughter could develop. As a young adult, Blanca is persuaded by her affluent family and, in particular, by her future husband Juan Luis, to abandon her medical studies: “¿Para qué quieres ser profesional si te casarás conmigo?” (61). Later on, when Blanca and Juan Luis marry, the mandate she receives is to devote herself to her husband, children (42), and charity work (91). Blanca is equally encouraged to ignore the historical context around her, the majority of her family insisting that nobody “disappeared” in Chile (42-43). In short, Blanca is disciplined to forgo any desire for emotional and professional autonomy. Happiness is marriage (cf. Erhart 95), and children are a confirmation of future domestic bliss (cf. Amorós 35), the basic plot of the novela rosa.

However, when Blanca meets Victoria, the daughter of disappeared Bernardo, and becomes involved with this other world that had never before touched hers, she realizes it is difficult for her to continue ignoring the contradictions present both in the space of collectivity her country should but does not represent, and in her private domestic life. The new realities she is
encountering with each succeeding day force this “princess” to confront and question not only her privileges, but also the fact that these are a trade-off for submission to the mandates imposed by patriarchy on “[l]as mujeres de mi especie” (159-61). As Blanca meets “el Gringo,” the last mandate, “[n]adie se casaba dos veces” (34), is seriously put into question. But when both her husband and her lover abandon her, and she suffers a cerebral infarct which renders her aphasic, alexic, and agraphic, the “romance” can no longer be sustained. From her present situation, which she equates to a “cárcel en blanco” (21), Blanca reflects on her condition of living without language —the total absence of linguistic expression, and thus, of communication with others. In her reflections, the account of her increasing isolation revolves around the gross and painful materiality involved in trying to produce sounds which result in guttural noises (49-50, 126, 220), the degradation experienced when even her phonoaudiologist mistakes her inability to communicate for an inability to think (32), her frustration at not being able to map written symbols onto sounds and words (54), the fear of not being able to retain words or phrases she has heard (133) and even of accessing meaning due to her prolonged inability to speak (242). Blanca’s sustained reflection causes her to delve into her relationship with phallocratic
discourse, opening up for questioning and challenge those spaces of compliance which she has been socialized to inhabit.

An example of how *No olvides* employs greater narrative sophistication to treat the issue of how social roles as defined by patriarchy constrain women’s potential for personal and professional development can be appreciated in the novel’s deployment of a family of metaphors related to spaces and the filling of these (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 29-30, 43-45). This dynamic of emptiness and fullness is enacted in how Juana, a childhood friend, takes advantage of Blanca’s aphasic silence to confide in her uninvited. Juana, who is herself pitied and dismissed by her social circle, particularly by its males, on account of a physical deformity, tries to create a bond of fellow victimhood with Blanca by visiting her compulsively and pouring out her personal hopes and concerns, irrespective of what Blanca desires to listen to: “Le está yendo estupendo a Gregorio. Si pudieras hablar, sé que me preguntarías por él, así es que te pondré al día” (126). Blanca rejects this attempt of Juana to construct her silence as an empty space to be filled, by showing her revulsion at Juana’s invasive gesture (126). The interaction between Blanca and Juana points to how women in patriarchal society are conceptualized as containers for other’s words, needs, and demands.
The feelings of resistance that Blanca expresses in her narration of Juana’s behavior are summarized in her reflection on the poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s use of white space as an integral part of his writing, rather than as the more typical assumption of writers that blank paper is empty and waiting for the written words to give it meaning: “Los blancos de Mallarmé, los espacios en blanco en su poesía como espacios llenos, no el blanco como espacio a llenar. El blanco como lenguaje en sí. ¿Sería que los blancos se entendían como espacios ocupados?” (129). Blanca’s reference to Mallarmé’s theory of writing allows for extending the metaphor of emptiness and fullness in another direction: in the same way that the writer does not need to fill the blank page with words in order for the page to have meaning, women do not need to uncritically fill the gender roles that patriarchal society presents them with as natural, in order to feel that their existence is meaningful and worthy of validation.

In a similar vein, a more illuminating instantiation of the container-filling metaphor occurs when Blanca relates her pleasure at rescuing from obscurity a set of her grandmother’s clear canning jars, and repurposing them as flower vases (130). Blanca appreciates the visibility of the flowers’ stems through the clear glass, and contrasts this with the ornate and opaque decorative vases that are more characteristic of upper-class floral arrangements. At the symbolic level,
in both the clear and the decorative vases, there is a container with water whose function is to support a living thing, representing a particular gender role that a woman may enter (or be placed in). In the case of the clear vase, a woman stands in a recognizable position, and her individual qualities remain visible; in other words, she does not disappear into the role she performs, be it mother, spouse, professional, etc. In the case of the “floreros pensados para floreros” (130), however, the elaborate and socially-valued colors and designs of the container, i.e., the tightly prescribed form of the role, hide the individuality of its contents and thus, the woman in her entirety is reduced to that which is visibly extending from the top of the vase (the pretty blossom). In this connection, Blanca expresses her desire “[q]ue la flor no sea sólo su superficie, que lo transparente permita mirar el fondo, verlo entero” (130). Fulfilling a strict social role, therefore, hides the who behind the what (recall Cavarero, §4.1), whereas the clear container version of the role, while providing a less defined and perhaps less traditionally valued exterior, permits the who to come through without doing away with socially recognizable relations altogether. Blanca’s rather abrupt and unforgiving awakening to the very possibility of redefinition and renegotiation in how one is to relate to the others in one’s life is the narrative trajectory of this novel, and the extreme measures that Blanca must take in removing herself from the city and its
social elite stand as markers of how tightly she had merged with the decorative vase(s) that she had grown up in and that she had allowed to define her. By the time Blanca perceives that there are other ways to be a mother, a partner, a friend, she is linguistically incapacitated and psychologically alienated and fragmented. The reader of this complex journey from discontented “princess” to woman with consciousness, however belated and depressed, can see that Blanca’s real tragedy was the conspiracy of expectations targeted at “[l]as mujeres de [su] especie” (159-61), expectations that she was complicit with, consciously or not, and which she had come to perceive as only natural. The discrepancy between Blanca’s existence in a supposedly privileged position and the healthier modes of relationships with herself, her daughter, and her environment that Blanca anticipates and experiences when she leaves her life of conventions behind and moves to her country estate, opens up a space for Blanca, and for women readers, to reconsider and re-evaluate the validity of established gender roles, and the ways that these roles prevent them from realizing their full potential. This discrepancy is brought full circle by the novel’s de pragmatization of Castro’s and Arancibia’s lyric enterprise at the very end of No olvides. The relation of how a presumably male “I” will forever haunt a former love so that she is never able to forget him comes up in the novel in connection
with a lover that disappears from Blanca’s life but who will remain in her memory as a lost chance for happiness —“el Gringo” (195). To conclude the novel, however, Blanca invokes lines from the bolero as she tries to say goodbye to her young daughter Trini in the midst of confusion and fear brought on by the stroke that presumably will kill her (251-52). This last instance subverts the patriarchal hegemony of the source text by underscoring the mother-daughter relationship instead. In the middle of Blanca’s linguistic chaos, she grabs on to familiar formulaic chunks of language (cf. Cerebral Localization of Production Deficits in Aphasía; Kempler 70), such as the lines of a song, and relates them to the person with whom she has had the closest emotional and communicative tie, her daughter.

Another productive case of Serrano’s appropriation and re-elaboration practices is realized in her novel Hasta siempre, mujercitas. This work is an example of how a particular nineteenth century bestselling domestic novel can be reimagined by using the literary conventions of the Gothic to expose the darker underside of apparent domestic bliss. Serrano’s novel problematizes four upper-class women’s desire to recreate their former locus amoenus, the Chilean rural south in which they were the privileged landowners. This Arcadia, which is possible now only in their memories, appeared to offer the four Martínez cousins
the benefits of social status, personal and financial protection, reliable—albeit conventional and constrictive—gender roles, and the prospect of unlimited security and prosperity. Serrano’s counterplay of domestic fiction and Gothic, however, exposes the flaws of this apparent rural paradise, which had never been perfect to begin with, not only because it was forged on the bodies of campesinos—who were not thrilled at being forced to contribute to the wealth and well-being of their patrones—but also because of the impact this socio-economic constellation has had on the four cousins’ lives, by locking them into roles which promote extremes of merger or separation, as the following analysis reveals.

From the genre of Victorian domestic fiction, Hasta siempre takes as a direct source Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women. The front cover itself of Serrano’s novel indicates that Hasta siempre is an experiment in what Gérard Genette calls “hypertextuality,” whereby one literary text shows a significant relation to an earlier text (5). In this case, Hasta siempre functions as a “hypertext” in relation to the “hypotext” Little Women (cf. Genette 5; Allen 107-15). The foregrounding of such a relationship on the front cover serves to create a set of expectations that guide, to some extent, the hypertext’s reception on the part of the reader, on the condition that s/he is already familiar with the earlier text. The front cover of the
hypertext *Hasta siempre* shows not only a copy of the Spanish translation of the hypertext *Little Women*, namely *Mujercitas*, open and lying face down, as if someone were in the process of reading it, but also the iconic presence of a piano, which alludes to the character of Beth\(^{54}\), the third of the March sisters. The juxtaposition of the Spanish version of Alcott’s novel in the center of the cover and Serrano’s title, *Hasta siempre, mujercitas*, at the bottom of the cover, serves simultaneously to invoke and negate the repertoire of this nineteenth century domestic novel (recall Iser, §2.1), as the following discussion shows.

In referring to *Little Women* or *Mujercitas*, the genre expectations of Victorian domestic fiction and the details and associations of this novel in particular are imported as background which informs the reading of *Hasta siempre*, including submissiveness and self-denial as female roles\(^{55}\), a utopic family harmony as a shared goal, and an idyllic space away from urban temptations as a preferred domestic milieu (Fetterley, “*Little Women*” 372-75; Saxton 4-5). According to Iser, such familiar materials drawn from a social and literary repertoire undergo a change in a new context: “the norms —often

\(^{54}\) Referring to Beth, who died, is more ominous for this novel than the figure of any of the other sisters would be.

\(^{55}\) It is important to note that *Little Women*’s “overt messages” promoting Victorian womanhood are subverted, to a certain extent, by its “covert messages” (Fetterley, “*Little Women*” 370-71) enacted, e.g., in Jo’s ambivalent struggle against growing up and becoming a “little woman” (379).
selected from very different systems— are removed from their original context and set in a new one. So long as they are effective in their social context, we usually remain unaware of them as norms, but when they are de pragmatized, they become a theme in themselves” (Act 212). The reader of Hasta siempre must synthesize a frame of reference including not only the perspective of Alcott’s Little Women and the reader’s own context of experience and dispositions but also, it turns out, a Gothic sub-text.

Serrano partially negates the world of Little Women as she subliminally capitalizes on a literary connection that comprises an authorial double life of Alcott. The Concord author, whose writing included “realistic hospital sketches” and “tales of virtue,” also produced so-called “blood-and-thunder tales” (Stern, Introduction xiv) since, in her own words, “my natural ambition is for the lurid style” (xxvi) and she was “tired of providing moral pap for the young” (xxvii). Whether a reader of Hasta siempre is aware of this connection in the career of Alcott or not, the professional ambivalence that Alcott herself experienced when her writing of Little Women typecast her to the detriment of her interesting and, for her, more stimulating Gothic fiction (Saxton xi-xiii, 8-9; Fetterly, “Little Women” 369-70; Stern, Introduction xii-xxviii) mirrors the potential negating
power that the Gothic genre could have for the worldview embodied in the domestic genre.

In *Hasta siempre*, Serrano offers four female protagonists —this time cousins, not sisters, as in *Little Women*— whom readers are led to map onto the March girls, according to the successive chapter breaks, as follows: Nieves/Meg, Ada/Jo, Luz/Beth, and Lola/Amy. The four Martínez cousins had grown up spending each summer together in “el Pueblo,” the site of the rural family estate in southern Chile (28, 36). This welcoming *locus amoenus*, which here stands in for the Concord, Massachusetts, of the Marches, is apparently paradise for the four cousins (37), but is clouded, however, by Ada and Lola’s persistent feud over their step-cousin Oliverio, a conflict that both reflects and contributes to the darker underside of this apparently blissful domestic milieu.

One of the textual indications that encourage readers of *Hasta siempre* to consider this novel with *Little Women* in mind is the epigraph opening the Chilean hypertext, directly⁵６ imported from the very opening paragraphs of its hypotext, and followed by a Spanish translation thereof:

---

⁵６ Please note that Serrano’s importation of Alcott’s text differs from the 1915 version published by Little (used for comparison purposes in this dissertation), in regards to punctuation marks relative to quotation marks, which have apparently been changed to follow Spanish usage. Serrano’s text also introduces two lexical changes, i.e., “plenty” has been replaced with “lots,” and “anyhow” has been added after “and each other.”
“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents”, grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor!”, sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all”, added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

“We’ve got father and mother, and each other, anyhow”, said Beth, contentedly, from her corner. (Hasta siempre 7; cf. Alcott, Little Women 1)

Together with the remainder of Little Women’s chapter one, this epigraph, whose presentation in English suggests a bond with “select” readers, namely those who have received a bilingual education and/or upbringing (and who have probably read Alcott’s novel in school or at home)57, functions to encourage readers to

---

57 The fact that the English version is followed by a Spanish one (as is the case with all of the quotes from Little Women in Serrano’s novel) indicates that readers of Spanish who do not have English are not excluded from the “club.” The question remains as to whether Mujercitas has also been such a bestseller among Spanish readers as Little Women among English readers — the latter version sold three million copies in 1929 (Saxton 4). If this were not the case, the Spanish translations of the English quotes may very well be understood as invitations to Spanish readers who have never read Alcott’s novel to seek out the Spanish translation in order to make a richer sense of Hasta siempre. A plausible explanation for Serrano’s choice of the Spanish version for the front cover of her novel lies in the linguistic and semantic interplay by augmentation afforded by the juxtaposition of the titles Mujercitas and Hasta siempre, mujercitas as an indication of the invocation and negation of the repertoire mentioned above. Alcott’s title in English would have reduced the effectiveness of this interplay.
view the four Martínez cousins as women who feel, to at least some degree, oppressed by their assigned gender roles. In the case of Alcott’s characters, the March sisters are oppressed by the Victorian mandate of female self-denial: Marmee, their mother, expects her daughters to each sacrifice their Christmas dollar and send it to the men fighting on the front lines of the Civil War in the United States, instead of getting themselves items they have longed for during the year. In a similar fashion, the lives of the Martínez cousins are constrained by equally pernicious mandates bequeathed to them by their Peruvian ancestors, sor María Trinidad and her destitute cousin Verónica de las Mercedes, revealed after the epigraph quoted above, in chapter 0 of Serrano’s novel —the peculiar chapter number selected for presenting these mandates is an indication of the lens through which to view this novel. These mandates originated in the gendered division of labor established by sor María Trinidad, an aristocratic woman who entered a convent in Arequipa, Perú, in the eighteenth century, in order to conceal an illegitimate pregnancy. The young aristocrat brought her cousin Verónica to live with her at the convent and presented her destitute relative as the mother of the newborn baby boy —baptized at random as José Joaquín Martínez— abandoned by her husband, a Chilean merchant. In this way, a “Martínez” dynasty without a real Martínez as forefather was created, which
established itself in the south of Chile, with the help of sor María Trinidad’s money and Verónica’s body, but which was grounded on a story of appearances and deceit. From this legacy derived the family myth, whereby Nieves and Luz claim, each in their own way, the role of destitute cousin Verónica, i.e., one of suffering and self-denial. The Verónica role provides two strategic advantages, despite its negative conditions: it allows Nieves and Luz to justify their attitudes of merger with husband and family, and with mankind in general, respectively, and it can also serve —although less successfully— to shame Ada and Lola, whom Nieves and Luz both characterize as aligning with sor María Trinidad, a role which implies a focus on the self and its needs, to the exploitation or even utter exclusion of others.

The title of each of the remaining section breaks or chapters follows this peculiar format: **NAME OF MARCH SISTER / OR / NOUN PHRASE / PLACE / DATE**. These section titles work as guiding devices in the Iserian sense, because they provide a frame that invites and orients the reader to focus on the story of each new character, in this case each one of the cousins, in the light of the corresponding March sister, with the other three characters functioning in supporting roles. In *Hasta siempre*, these guiding devices are meant to help readers bridge large blanks between segments of the novel, i.e., to adjust to the new point of view and
narrative focus in each succeeding section, because the perspective taken, while related to the preceding ones, is quite distinct with regard both to the lead protagonist and to the time and setting of the action. This technique is not necessary, by contrast, in the more linear plot of *Little Women*, where the blanks between segments are quite close (predictable?) and easy to bridge. It is important to note, however, how the noun phrase—and the epigraph that precedes each chapter, quoted directly from *Little Women*—contextualizes and undercuts the reference to the corresponding March sister, thereby subverting the *locus amoenus* which Concord, and “el Pueblo” by extension, allegedly represent.

Chapter one, the lead protagonist of which is Nieves, is entitled “MEG UNA CONFERENCIA SOBRE LA SOMBRA (según J. Donne) / Santiago de Chile, setiembre de 2002” (13). This title invokes John Donne’s poem, “A Lecture upon the Shadow,” which can be understood as an attempt to explain the nature of love via the behavior of the shadows produced by two lovers as they walk through the day. In the course of the morning, these shadows shorten as the sun climbs, thus representing the initial illusions and fantasies of lovers regarding the blissful nature of their love—being in love with love, and blinded by love, so to speak—, and how these are gradually replaced with reality; at noon time, when
the sun stands above the lovers’ heads, the shadows disappear and no illusions blind the lovers; as the sun declines to the west and the shadows begin to grow in the opposite direction, however, the lovers begin to conceal their lives and actions from one another, blinding and alienating each other (Donne 123-24). The title of Donne’s poem, which may be constructed as a textual invitation issued to the reader to seek out this poem, thereby enriching his/her reading of Serrano’s novel, is followed by a date and place which sets the narrative in the diegetic present: Nieves is waiting for Lola to pick her up in her small apartment in Santiago, in order to go to the airport together to meet Ada, who is coming from France.

Nieves’s chapter, like all of the remaining ones, is preceded by a quote from Little Women, in this case from chapter eighteen, that serves as an epigraph to the section: “I wish I had no heart, it aches so” (Hasta siempre 15; cf. Alcott, Little Women 200), spoken by Meg on the occasion of Beth’s severe illness. This epigraph serves as a thematic announcement, and in conjunction with Donne’s poem, it presides over a chapter in which the reader is presented with Nieves’s life story, a story that, like Meg’s, revolves around her beauty, her influence over the younger girls in her family (who admire her feminine ways), her marriage and devotion to her husband and children, in short, her being a “little woman,”
but which takes a different turn. After being “[el] puntal” of her cousins in “el Pueblo” (23), rushing to marry very young because “su verdadera vocación era el matrimonio” (18), and transforming her four children “en el centro mismo de su vida” (27) to the point that she is “más enamorada de la maternidad que de sus hijos” (27), Nieves gradually begins to leave behind this romanticized version of love, marriage, and family, which requires her to merge into the needs of her loved ones. Her family takes her for granted and does not seem to appreciate how she sacrifices herself for their well-being (32-33), making Nieves feel heartsick, because she feels she has been good all her life, and now that her husband and children do not seem to need her anymore, she is disenchanted and unfulfilled.

Eventually Nieves reaches a point where she begins to reject the role of Verónica de las Mercedes, namely self-denial. Concealing from her husband and children her new passion for reading and analyzing crime reports in newspaper articles becomes part of her daily routine: “cuándo llegará el día en que sus hijos se casen y pueda confesarle a Raúl su gran pasión y se inscriba en la Escuela de Investigaciones para convertirse en una detective real” (57). Ada’s suggestion to Nieves and Lola that they join her for a trip to their former family estate, on the occasion of the funeral of Pancha, a faithful family servant, provides Nieves with
further opportunity for reflection on her life, acknowledging with sadness that “no me ha pasado nada en la vida” (275). As that verse of Donne, “‘[y]a pisamos nuestras sombras, y todas las cosas están bañadas en intrépida luz’” (285), suddenly comes to her mind, Nieves utters it like a prayer for that lost paradise, where “todo era un regalo, las casas grandes, el calor de las chimeneas y los braseros, la fruta, la miel y las masas horneadas, el comando perfecto de tía Casilda sobre los que allí vivían y trabajaban […]. La vida misma era un regalo […] eternamente protegida sería la vida” (17), with the understanding that her life as innocent, beautiful, and domestic Meg idyllic Concord is now gone forever, and that she herself must set up the conditions for a new and more productive way of life. As Luz, whose double function as a narrator and as a spirit of support for her cousins’ quests is foregrounded in chapter six, undertakes a balance of Nieves’s account, she concludes that “[l]a bella y doméstica Nieves con fantasías negras y policíacas; al menos fue original y no centró su imaginación en lo consabido: el amor. Sin embargo, cabría preguntarle a qué o a quién se siente infiel para mantenerlo como un secreto tan preciado” (256). In this light, Nieves’s attempt to overcome Meg’s fate is positively underscored, but not so her waiting for her children to leave home in order to pursue her desires.
In chapter two, the lead protagonist is Ada. This section is entitled “JO O LA MANZANA PROHIBIDA / Tánger, setiembre de 1996” (61). The section title’s reference to the forbidden fruit contains at least two layers of meaning. This title can be understood as a textual indication of how to read Serrano’s novel. In this respect a passage in this section —placed between parentheses directly after a description of Ada’s unfeminine behavior— refers to how the cousins’ grandfather cuts four beautiful apples from a tree whose fruit only his wife was meant to enjoy and placed them in a basket close to the girls, to see what they would do. Ada, of course, was the only one to disobey her grandfather and bite an apple (86-87). A reader familiar with Alcott’s biography—or one who takes on this textual invitation to investigate any references to this incident— will appreciate that this episode is not related to Jo in Little Women but to Alcott’s own life. Her father, Bronson Alcott, liked to perform “moral experiments” on his daughters Anna and Louisa to measure their capacity for self-control (Saxton 90). Since the girls were fond of apples, he left one where they would notice it. The result of this experiment showed an unrepentant Louisa whose answer to her father’s question as to why she had taken the apple without permission was a clear “I wanted it,” accompanied by a big smile on her face (90-91). Bronson resented Louisa’s strong will and temper, her
rebelliousness, and lack of self-denial, in short, her display of “male” characteristics and her refusal to become a little woman (89-90), unlike Jo March, who in the end accepted this role, relinquishing her writing career to settle down with Professor Bhaer—an alter ego of Bronson Alcott—and surrendered her independence to his direction. This tension between what are considered to be female and male characteristics is recreated in Serrano’s novel, particularly in her depiction of Ada.

In Hasta siempre, whereas Nieves and Lola are portrayed as happy to embrace their “condición femenina” through stereotypically feminine appearance and behavior (85), Ada is depicted from early on as aware of her transgendered status: “¿No habré nacido hombre y por equivocación me metieron dentro del cuerpo de una mujer?” (87). Eager to undertake such “male” activities as “manejar un tractor,” “arreglar una llave o un enchufe,” “encender fogatas,” “escalar árboles y […] pescar,” and “fumar a escondidas” (85-86), behaviors which shock her two more “feminine” cousins (86), Ada nevertheless becomes infatuated with her cousin Oliverio, who is Luz’s half-brother. On the one hand, Ada is viewed by Nieves as a sor María Trinidad figure: unlike Nieves, she has scoffed at financial dependency on a man and has made a life and a career as a critic and editor (78-79), and ultimately, as a writer (275) in
Europe —where she went into exile after she managed to avoid arrest at the hands of the military (94-99). On the other hand, Ada’s obsession with Oliverio, whom she constructs as her “manzana prohibida,” in a neurotic fantasy of incest, causes her to view herself, at least transitorily, as a Verónica de las Mercedes figure in relation to Lola, the sor María Trinidad who has finally succeeded in getting Oliverio to marry her (80). In this respect, Ada’s answer to the epigraph which precedes chapter two, the first of the two chapters dedicated to her in Serrano’s novel, “Wouldn’t it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in them?” (Hasta siempre 63; cf. Alcott, Little Women 151), spoken by Jo, after which the March sisters and their friend Laurie proceed to speak about their wishes and desires for the future, namely “viajar y poseer miles de libros” (79), is gradually revealed to be insufficient for this woman who “había hecho una renuncia a la convención de la dependencia sin certeza de haber alcanzado una nueva identidad” (232) —which is the thread that runs through this novel, as well as through Serrano’s other works. Ada seems to have given up her personal fantasy of “el Pueblo” as a safe (but illusory) space where she could be united with Oliverio, in order to embrace an autonomy that she hopes can cure her from her obsession with her cousin. Her departure from “el Pueblo,” however, only functions to substitute for
confronting her unresolved emotions and her desire for a safe haven in which to live them out, i.e., she achieves separation but not genuine autonomy.

“BETH O EL ESCASO MAÑANA / Kampala, Uganda, setiembre de 1982” (113) is the title of chapter three, whose main protagonist is Luz, the third of the cousins, and the narrator of her section. Luz, like Beth in chapter forty of Little Women, is getting ready to die. Unlike Beth, however, a domestic and religious being condemned by early death to remain a little woman in the minds of those surrounding her, Luz chafes under the role of Verónica de las Mercedes which she feels has been handed to her with respect to Lola, “invencible e inmortal,” and which makes Luz regard herself as “siempre insegura” (117). The section devoted to Luz adds an adult dimension to her character that Little Women’s Beth lacks by laying out the reflections Luz makes on her choices and coping strategies, analogous to ones which Beth might have come to develop, had Alcott allowed her to live.

From early childhood on, Luz has constructed her position within the constellation of cousins in reference to Lola, which has in turn caused in her a severe inferiority complex: “Ella [Lola] era hermosa y fuerte, y de una enorme presencia física; a su lado, mi existencia parecía menguarse” (117). This complex and her extreme shyness has blocked Luz from attempting to undertake mature
emotional relations with a partner, for fear others may sense her sexual needs and reject her: “si [...] los seres humanos demuestra[ñ] su hambre, los objetos del deseo escaparán lejos, no por premisas morales, no, sólo por lo fea que es la necesidad. Por tanto, escondí mis carencias” (148-49). Luz decides to go out into the world, fighting an inferiority complex with one of superiority: in Uganda, she can try to overcome her own lack by helping victims of the civil war (123-25), in what could be characterized as a megalomaniacal endeavor: “Se me puede acusar, con toda propiedad, de tener aspiraciones un poco arrogantes, y mi defensa sería: ¿existen los puros que a su vez no convivan con la arrogancia? Quizás Francisco de Asís, quizás sólo él” (129).

Now Luz is dying alone in a run-down hospital in Kampala, without the support of her family, whom she does not wish to summon, unlike Beth in her death bed. Like Nieves, however, who has constructed her life through roles that defined her as a wife and mother, to the point of self-effacement (recall Cavarero’s discussion of who we are versus what we are in §4.1), instead of accumulating or building up experiences that allow her to define herself in her own terms, Luz has embraced the role of universal caregiver, renouncing all intimate experiences of emotional connection which she could have drawn from to make a richer sense of her life: “Mi cuerpo ha gozado poco, tiene pocos
placeros impresos en él para ganarle al dolor, no posee la acumulación suficiente, no cuenta con recuerdos que le hagan el peso” (118). As her poor body, “escamas en la piel,” “aliento nauseabundo,” “dolor sordo de cada miembro,” lies ready to die, Luz realizes that her universal love has turned into bitterness (150). The epigraph to this cousin’s section, “Jo, I’m anxious about Beth” (Hasta siempre 115; cf. Alcott, Little Women 342), spoken by a Marmee deeply worried about her daughter Beth’s melancholy, now acquires a new meaning, becoming the words Luz would want somebody to utter for her.

“AMY O LA CONSENTIDA / Caracas, setiembre de 1994” (151) is the title of chapter four, which revolves around Lola. The epigraph which precedes this section, “If I can’t have it as I like, I don’t care to have it at all” (Hasta siempre 153; cf. Alcott, Little Women 274), corresponds to Amy’s obstinate answer, as Marmee tells her daughter that a simple lunch for her upper-class schoolmates is more appropriate than spending money the family does not have on trying to provide them with an elegant one. In order for this epigraph to fully depict Lola, however, it should read instead “I will have it as I like,” for Lola truly can be viewed in the light of sor María Trinidad: she knows what she wants, and moves strategically to obtain it. This chapter, however, shows the motivations and
complexities behind the persona of the “privileged” cousin, a stunning beauty and a successful economist.

Like Amy, Lola is perceived as a “consentida.” This is not without justification in Lola’s case, because she has, indeed, taken much of her good fortune for granted (173-74). Lola’s own perspective on the matter, however, tends to highlight her own struggles and efforts in achieving what she has, as her reply to a lover who calls her a lucky woman reveals: “¡Mucha suerte! Claro, como si yo no me hubiese forjado la vida que tengo. He invertido en ella centímetro a centímetro, minuto a minuto, peso a peso. ¿Cómo te atreves a hablar de suerte?” (161). An unforeseen occurrence sends Lola into an extended reflection on her life story that reveals to the reader Lola’s long-standing conflict with her cousin Ada as a motor for her drive to prove herself.

During a business trip to Caracas, Lola sees a woman commit suicide by throwing herself from the top of a building adjacent to her hotel. Immediately before jumping to her death, the unknown woman looks directly into Lola’s eyes. The more information Lola gathers about this woman, the more she imagines this woman’s distress, and the more she starts reconsidering where her own life is leading her (156-59). The form that these reflections take is a “statement of accounts,” first recapitulating her nostalgia for “el Pueblo” as an idyllic site of
nourishment and affirmation (175-76), then tallying up all the insults and humiliations she suffered at the hands of Ada—who boasts of her “masculine” intelligence and belittles Lola’s blond “femininity” (178-85)—, and finally vindicating her strategy of playing the “feminine” art of seduction to plant the seed of desire in Oliverio and win him for herself over Ada’s strategy of attracting him through “male” camaraderie (188-89). The audit of her personal story, triggered by the woman’s suicide, reconnects Lola with her sources of motivation, namely “having things as she likes,” and anger at being belittled by her cousin. Lola emerges from her existential crisis with a resolution: to travel to New York and to take Oliverio for herself (200-01). At this point, Lola is no longer the little woman displaying her femininity and waiting to be “loved and chosen by a good man” (Alcott, *Little Women* 105). “Sor María Trinidad” knows what she wants and goes to claim it. Her motivations and actions exhibit more complexity than those of either the youngest March girl or the Peruvian nun of the Martínez family myth. Nevertheless, these motivations and actions are still guided by the drive to focus on the self, with total disregard for the needs or feelings of others.

Chapter five is entitled “JO O LA LEJANA TIERRA MÍA / Le Luberon, setiembre de 2001” (203). The title, a reference to a song written by Alfredo Le
Pera and composed by Carlos Gardel, foreshadows Ada’s attempt to return from the south of France, where she had been sharing the abode of her friend Jaime, to an illusory past in “el Pueblo.” The epigraph which follows this popular culture reference, “God seems so far away I can’t find Him” (Hasta siempre 205; cf. Alcott, Little Women 195), corresponds to Jo’s words as Beth’s condition gets worse and she becomes delirious with fever. Like Jo, who is desperate because she has nobody to turn to for help and consolation, Ada feels the need to seek refuge in her roots again, particularly during a time—September of 2001—in which the world has become so insecure (205-07, 210, 213, 235-36).

This second chapter devoted to Ada functions as a mirror image to the previous one, which revolves around Lola, evoking parallels in terms of presentation and themes. These parallels serve to enact their rivalry by showing the degree to which each sees the other as her nemesis. Similarly to Lola, Ada makes a accounting of her life, beginning by recalling “el Pueblo” in terms of a space from which to draw nourishment, “la placenta […] las aguas tibias y protegidas” (206), as if she were an infant. These reflections remind her, however, of how much the memories from this lost paradise (209)—the competition with Lola to win Oliverio— and her defeat in losing him to her youngest cousin (224) still haunt her. Like Lola, she is afraid of asking herself
existential questions, and opts, instead, to feel superior to her cousin vis-à-vis the choices she has made in her own life, i.e., rejecting what she feels is Lola’s strategy of apparent dependence on men, “la supuesta feminidad de Lola” (231-32) and embracing her own emotional independence from them (231-32).

Ada’s desire for autonomy, however, is fraught with feelings of insecurity, for her activities as an editor and critic are means Ada resorts to in order to prove her intellect, but strictly in more contained and derivative projects, all the while delaying what she is terrified of doing for fear of failure: becoming a creative writer (90-91). As is the case with Lola, a death that smacks her in the face is a catalyst for change. Jaime challenges her to write a novel, concretely, a remake of *Little Women*, that would allow Ada to write about her self-declared topic of interest, “la pérdida del mundo rural” (239), in connection with the impact that the mandates she and her cousins received as girls born during the fifties and sixties in Chile have had on their lives as women (239-40), the latter an idea also suggested by Jaime. Jaime’s tragic death moves Ada to take up creative writing seriously, honoring the promise she had made him to consider his words. Unlike Jo, who gave up writing her “sensation stories” because Professor Bhaer did not consider such stories suitable for young people (*Little Women* 378-79), and even gave up writing novels after she married him (518), Ada finds in Jaime a mentor
who encourages her to conquer her fears and to undertake writing the kind of novel she has always wanted to write, thus becoming more connected to herself and her desires, in this sense more autonomous. The chapter ends with the words “Compañero del alma, compañero,” a reference to the poem of Miguel Hernández, “Elegía a la muerte de Ramón Sijé,” which pays homage to Ada and Jaime’s relationship. The two lyrical references that open and close this section highlight Ada’s alternative views of her life, the first representing a return to an illusory past which revolves around her unilateral obsession with Oliverio, the second alluding to a more mature outlook on life, based on a relationship of mutual support with Jaime. The ambiguity enacted in the tension between these two options is left, however, unresolved at this point.

The title of chapter six, “MEG, JO Y AMY, O LAS DESHEREDADAS / Sur de Chile, setiembre de 2002” (243), foreshadows the failure of the Martínez cousins’ attempt to recapture their childhood paradise. The epigraph that follows, “[a]nd yet your life is very different from the one you pictured so long ago. Do you remember our castles in the air?” (Hasta siempre 245; cf. Alcott, Little Women 522), read together with the general affirmation of the status quo found in Alcott’s work suggests, however, that a new understanding of the social and historical conditions that shaped the lives of the cousins —raised as they were
within a system of land ownership that depended on the subjection and exploitation of the campesinos, “con un sueldo miserable... como en todos estos campos, sobrevivían porque la tierra les daba comida” (262), and that produced a stratum of landholders who only sat about in idleness, living off mortgaging the family sawmill (39)— would be more productive. The conjunction “O,” however, which is present in this as well as in five of the section break titles, points to the tension between continuity and change that permeates the novel. This tension underscores the problems experienced by the four women in overcoming this impasse, a situation which they have contributed to worsening by delaying confrontation with their past: “Dirían a la vez en el Pueblo que el error de las primas Martínez fue confundir el duelo por la vieja Pancha con el propio, postergado el luto tantos años” (245).

Ada comes back to “el Pueblo” with the separate (and for her, primary) mission of confessing to Lola and Nieves that Eusebio, the young man she had led her entire family to believe had raped her —and who, when he entered the army at the time of Pinochet’s coup d’état, spitefully took revenge upon them, particularly on Oliverio— had not in truth forced her (280). The fact that Eusebio, now the new owner of the sawmill, which he converted into a modern lumber enterprise, is not wholly to blame for this incident does not prevent Lola from
wanting to carry out her plan to burn the former family property down to erase the painful memories (269-70). Ada, who continues to approach life as if she were a literary character, agrees to Lola’s proposal, answering that “[u]n incendio sería […] como de Daphne du Maurier, muy literario” (270). Although all three feel cut off from their lost paradise due to the changes modernization has introduced to it: “la imagen [of the felled poplars which guarded the family property] las enmudece, como si sintieran que algo las cercena, […] la punzada […] del miedo de ser desalojadas de la realidad misma” (268), Nieves is the only one to reject these ideas of revenge, a stance which leaves her caught in the cross-fire of her cousins’ rage.

The reference to Daphne Du Maurier invokes the Gothic undertone of Serrano’s novel. Hasta siempre is permeated by Gothic features that serve to negate the Little Women-inspired repertoire with horror and threat: grotesque situations such as the gruesome slaughter of a lamb staged for Lola to witness by the daughter of the local grocer (278), scenes of imprisonment and torture, such as that of Oliverio at the hands of Eusebio (95-96), the large manor house at “el Pueblo,” with its long hallways and sealed bedrooms of family members who had died (40), the cousins’ decadent uncles, who inhabit the house as virtual ghosts (40), the presence of a servant class unconditionally faithful to their
masters (54, 88, 97, 146), and a cataclysmic fire that ends the novel with moral ambiguity and an uncertain fate for all protagonists (285-86), are all in keeping with recognized Gothic devices which function to highlight for the reader’s attention the darker side of this “país tan encantador en otros tiempos y tan serio” (recall Serrano’s interview with Mafla-Bustamante, §3.3.1). It is not to the author of *Rebecca*, however, that the reader has to look in order to understand the cousins’ attitudes and motivations for action. Once again, Alcott’s “blood-and-thunder tales” provide a better lens through which to examine character development in *Hasta siempre*, for the Concord author performed considerable work in terms of introducing strong-minded female protagonists characterized by their pride, passion, wit, anger, and desire for revenge —consider for instance Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask”— into the Gothic genre, whose signature protagonist is rather the submissive heroine (Stern, Introduction xiv-xix).

Ada’s and Lola’s reciprocal anger is in part the product of a model of interactions bred precisely by the “protective” habitat they have both yearned for, but they displace their anger against each other and turn it against Eusebio, the sawmill, and “el Pueblo” of their past, all of which they now desire to erase. In this regard, a distinctive (and psychological) strategy that distinguishes the Martínez cousins from their March counterparts is an example of what Genette
calls “motivation,” i.e., the elaboration and fleshing out of the drives and attitudes of one or more characters in a hypotext with respect to those of the corresponding character(s) in the hypertext (Genette 324-25). In Hasta siempre, Serrano takes aspects of each March girl’s personality and pushes these towards mental illness. Ada, although willful and tomboyish like Jo, shows behaviors that are symptomatic of antisocial personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association 701-06), including emotional abuse of Lola (184-85), destruction of her youngest cousin’s property (181-82), extreme impulsivity (63-73), cruelty to animals (86, 267), and an inability to assume responsibility for her own behavior (281). Lola is selfish and ambitious like Amy, but goes beyond childish egocentrism to something more like narcissistic personality disorder, with evidence of a number of its diagnostic symptoms (American Psychiatric Association 714-17): Lola has a grandiose sense of self-importance (117, 255); requires excessive admiration (17, 24, 173, 175-76, 185); has a sense of entitlement—she “deserves” what she has (161, 276); shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes, and lacks empathy (255). Luz matches Beth’s shyness and self-effacement, but extends her giving nature to a masochistic martyrdom, refusing to ask for help for herself in the direst of circumstances (117, 127). Finally, Nieves mirrors Meg’s domesticity and family orientation, but suffers from anxiety, in the
form of panic symptoms of overwhelm, concerning transitional scenarios, e.g., as she travels from the countryside back to her home in urban Santiago (42-43), or when the day transitions into night (265). In each case, a psychological potential in a March is amplified in a Martínez, to the detriment of the individual and her relationships with her fellow protagonists. Given all of this psychological intricacy, the resulting dynamic among the reimagined characters is perhaps destined to be fraught with dysfunction.

The dysfunction brought about by the acceptance of assigned gender roles, in conjunction with these women’s psychological makeup and their social upbringing, are underscored in Hasta siempre. The novel brings together at a thematic level the familiar demand to balance one’s own needs and well-being with the needs of others that one might nurture and support. The characters in this novel, however, serve to show how to “get it wrong,” so to speak, by virtue of clinging to, and thereby replicating, the mythic and strictly hierarchical roles of Verónica de las Mercedes and sor María Trinidad. Acts of separation lead Ada and Lola not towards healthy autonomy, but towards competition and isolation, whereas acts of merger bring loss of self to both Luz and Nieves. The romanticized domestic and sentimental familial contentment that the surviving March sisters display in the closing chapter of Little Women (522-24) is nowhere
to be found in the narrative and moral ambiguity that pursues Lola, Ada, and Nieves as they speed through the approaching flames emanating from the sawmill fire. It is in fact unclear which one —Lola and/or Ada— set the fire, and whether any of the Martínez cousins will live to see the world after “el Pueblo”’s erasure. It may be that in seeking to purge the past that haunts them, they have participated in their own demise.

The particular constellation of genre reworking and interweaving, hypertextuality, and carefully designed guiding devices to open each chapter that appear in Hasta siempre de pragmatizes expected literary norms, and thereby creates for the reader in its potential for destabilization a complex of invitations to reflect on problems and imagine possible solutions for issues faced by women oppressed under patriarchal regimes, both across generations and across the equator. The cousins have tended throughout Hasta siempre to postpone confronting their desires and decisions, and they fail to the degree that they do not look inside themselves, explore their hidden motives, challenge the roles assigned to them, and acknowledge their inherited privilege and the exploitation of the servant class that they have thereby been party to. Women readers are enabled, through this novel, to compare the protagonists’ actions not only with their own, but with those of Alcott’s protagonists as well. In saying “hasta
siempre” to the world conditions of the Marches and Concord, and in turn
discovering the uncertainties and perils of the Martínez cousins and “el Pueblo,”
Serrano’s novel challenges women readers to forgo assigned social roles that
tend towards unhealthy extremes of merger and separation, in order to
experience growth and self-definition.
CHAPTER 5

ON THE RECEIVING END: ACTUAL EVIDENCE AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE READING BOND

Éste es un libro de mujeres, de amigas y de lugares.

Hemos intentado iluminar lo cotidiano con nuestro soplo de luz y con lo pequeño, poco a poco, armar un todo que tenga sentido.

Que nuestra carga sea cada día más ligera.

(Handwritten personal dedication found in a friend’s copy of Antigua vida mía, that she in turn lent to me.)

Having investigated in chapter four how invitations are proffered in Serrano’s fiction that encourage women readers to explore paths towards self-definition in the context of female sociality, this chapter examines a sample of survey feedback from actual women readers in §5.1, in order to gather a sense of what types of connections may come into being or be reinforced in the process of reading said works, and furthermore in order to gain insight into what such
connections may accomplish for the women readers themselves in terms of their empowerment. In §5.2, I analyze some potential limitations to the praxis of female empowerment enacted in Serrano’s works, by means of placing Serrano’s texts in dialogue with the discourse of readers responding to my survey, so as to probe for dichotomous and reductionist frames of reference underlying these works that may in fact run counter to the establishment of more inclusive female networks.

5.1 Into the Hands of Readers: A Survey to Tap Bonds of Reading and Female Empowerment

In *Antigua vida mía*, the signification of female origin by searching for reference points furnished by other women, a practice referred to by Italian feminists of difference as female genealogy (recall §4.1), comes visibly to the forefront in the relationship of entrustment between Josefa and Violeta (recall §4.2.1.2). In this regard, Serrano’s third novel enacts diverse aspects of female genealogies, one of which consists in the act of reclaiming the relation of women to the mother by underscoring the relevance of a female continuum that links daughters, mothers, and grandmothers (recall Irigaray, §4.1, fn. 46). The novel’s closing pages depict a ceremony of female mediation in which Violeta and Josefa,
joined by their respective daughters, invoke their foremothers to derive from them the strength and support they need in order to achieve a healthy balance between connection and autonomy in their lives (365-66). Their ceremony brings full circle Josefa’s initial thoughts as she reflects on how most faithfully and meaningfully to tell Violeta’s—or for that matter any other woman’s—story: “Una mujer es la historia de […] cada mujer que fue alimentada por la anterior para que ella naciera: una mujer es la historia de su sangre” (21).

Josefa’s above reflection is a restatement of Adrienne Rich’s “Poem of Women,” itself an adaptation of Kadia Molodovsky’s work (Rich, Fact of a Doorframe 90-91, 330). As Violeta, who struggles with an ambivalent maternal legacy—a mother who has loved her deeply but who has also left her behind in order to follow her lover to Guatemala—reads Rich’s poem, she copies the following verses into her notebook: “MY LIFE IS A PAGE RIPPED OUT OF A HOLY BOOK / AND PART OF THE FIRST LINE IS MISSING” (147). The bond of reading between Violeta, Rich—herself a major reference source in Italian feminism (Cicioni 75; Bono and Kemp, Introduction 13; De Lauretis, Introduction 2-3)—and, albeit indirectly, Molodovsky, is consecrated as Violeta follows up her inscription of Rich with these words: “‘Esto fue escrito para mí, lo sé. Debo encontrar esa primera línea que falta’” (147). Thus, Antigua vida mía emphasizes
another aspect of how female mediation can operate within the practice of female
genealogies: women can find validation for and encouragement of their desires
in reading other women’s writings.

The dedication that opens the present chapter, written by a woman in a
copy of Antigua vida mía which she gave to another woman as a token of
affection, is a testament to how connections between women may be sustained
through the reading of female life stories in a genealogical context. The writer of
this dedication takes in Serrano’s text through the lens of her own experience and
offers this book to her friend with words that highlight the focus on “lo
cotidiano” as a general female way of being in the world, from which women can
derive the meaning of their existence, as is discussed further below. The
following passage from Antigua, however, also seems to support a more targeted
reading of the role of the quotidian, concretely as a source of and basis for female
acts of expression:

Las mujeres no se dan cuenta de que su creatividad nace de lo
pequeño, de lo caído. Sus inspiraciones, pequeños soplos de luz en
la tiniebla de lo cotidiano. Nunca la grande, total, la sublime
iluminación. Paso a paso, interrumpida, ribeteada de pequeñez,
como sus horas diarias, ésa es la creatividad de las mujeres. [...]
This passage resonates strongly with Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” an essay in which Walker reflects on the origins of her own creative spirit, tracing these origins back to her mother and to all those female ancestors who, in spite of racial, economic, and gender oppression, managed to keep the artistic spirit in themselves alive and to pass this legacy on to their children. In a similar manner as Walker’s mother fought the drudgery and poverty of her life by growing beautiful flower gardens that made people marvel because of their color and design (Walker 320-21), “[o]rdering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” (321), Serrano’s characters, although not generally intersected by oppressions of race and/or class, are encouraged to tap creatively into the resources afforded to them by their daily lives, in order to carve a space of meaningful self-definition vis-à-vis the fragmentation and dilution of female subjectivity brought about by patriarchal demands and roles (recall §3.3.1). An example of this creative engagement with the quotidian is enacted through Violeta’s realization of her voice and talent in the art of tapestry
making, so as to realize her hope that, in this artist’s words, “mi carga sea cada día más ligera” (Antigua 268). Furthermore, Violeta passes on to Josefa her vision regarding the value of creative expression as a means to overcome extremes of merger or separation, by sharing her passion with Josefa for her own art (recall §4.2.1.2).

The woman who wrote this dedication in my friend’s copy of Antigua may perhaps not have been thinking about the importance of the quotidian as regards female creative expression in particular. Nevertheless, in reading the novel and reworking the words and thoughts that spoke to her and her life story, she has articulated her own understanding of how to signify female origin: for her, Antigua “es un libro de mujeres, de amigas” and, by extension, women characters and women readers alike —joining forces, as the phrase “[h]emos intentado” attests— compose a meaning of their own existence from the small, yet valuable pieces of daily life mediated through their experience of being women. The writer of this dedication seems to perceive such a bond between her own life and the pages of the book, and she offers Antigua to her friend so that she too may find in another woman’s words and thoughts the encouragement to attempt an

---

58 For a discussion of Serrano’s recourse to the metaphor of the arpillera in Antigua vida mía to explore the intersection between the life stories of her female characters and the issue of oblivion in the Chilean postdictadura, see Ivonne Cuadra’s “Hilando la historia política y personal: elementos de la cultura popular contestataria en Antigua vida mía de Marcela Serrano.”
understanding of herself as a woman which involves mediation through the quotidian.

In order to gain insight into how connections among women such as the one mentioned above are engendered through the written word, and what these connections may accomplish for women in terms of their empowerment, I propose to examine the reception of Serrano’s works among a group of women readers in the light of the reader-response theory presented in chapter two. In this respect, I first devised a survey instrument consisting of ten open-ended questions (see Appendix), which I distributed among a sample of thirteen female readers of Serrano\textsuperscript{59}, the purpose of this instrument being to tap into whether

\textsuperscript{59} This survey was carried out among female subjects residing in Uruguay, subsequent to obtaining approval from The Ohio State University’s Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research conducted with human subjects, and in compliance with IRB regulations (Protocol #2008B0128). In order to inform prospective subjects about the availability of this research, an individual who is not affiliated with OSU collaborated with me, providing women known to her, either as social acquaintances or as part of a literary workshop she attends, with an information sheet about participation in the survey. This unaffiliated non-engaged individual—as defined by the Office of Human Research Protections, non-engaged individuals merely inform prospective subjects about the possibility of research and provide them with written information concerning the research, but do not obtain their formal consent to participate in the research nor act as a representative of the researcher—then received prospective subjects’ permission to pass their contact information to me. I subsequently secured written consent from each potential subject and then sent each participant the survey instrument. The subjects of this research are eighteen years of age or older, native speakers of Spanish residing in Uruguay, and have previously read at least one work by Marcela Serrano. Some of their answers, as may be appreciated from the analysis that follows, point to the existence of a regional bond of female readers, revolving around a perceived collectivity of being women with specific gender-related experiences in contemporary Latin American societies. If it is possible to attribute at least a certain degree of enabling power to this type of transnational female reading collectivity, as this study purports to demonstrate, this would underscore the relevance of giving forms of mass culture a more balanced and nuanced treatment in scholarly discussions (cf. MacCabe 8-10).
such bestselling works actually have a potential for encouraging their readers to articulate standpoints of female self-definition.

The responses that I received from my survey participants suggest that the experience of women reading the works of Marcela Serrano engenders three types of connections that an individual woman reader may respond to: (1) with the female characters, (2) with the author, and (3) with fellow women readers. When initially asked to briefly reflect on their favorite books and to say why they read in general, eight respondents coincide on the value of books as invitations to acquire knowledge (1A, 1B, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1I, 1J, and 1K; cf. Berggren 176-79). For instance, one of the respondents states that books are “una forma de transmisión de conocimientos, comunicación, aprendizaje” (1E), adding that “[i]ncorporamos en la medida que leemos todo tipo de saber, otras culturas, otras formas de pensar, de vivir.” The importance of taking in experiences and situations other than our own through the act of reading may be appreciated in how some women readers feel that female characters in fiction can model behaviors and situations that may furnish readers with knowledge about themselves and assistance with issues affecting their own lives (cf. Berggren, §2.2). For instance,

---

60 Arabic numerals (1-10) are used to identify survey questions in the order in which these questions appeared on the survey instrument (see Appendix). Each respondent is assigned a particular roman alphabet letter (A-M) which allows for her answers to be mapped onto her throughout the survey while maintaining her anonymity.
K feels that learning can happen not only on the basis of kinship with characters through similarity, but also through the spaces of discrepancy that behaviors different from one’s own can bring into focus: “vivo y siento historias de otras personas que pueden o no tener algo en común con mi vida, con mis experiencias. Aprendo de otras experiencias, me sorprendo de sus emociones, acciones” (1K). Participant E appears to share K’s experience of having come to perceive through reading options that had not previously been visible for her: “A través de la lectura he visto y entendido diferentes posturas ante la vida, ante la familia y ante la sociedad” (6E).

On the whole, however, the answers of respondents have revealed that the basis for their initial connection with Serrano’s texts lies rather in the similarities they perceive between the female characters and situations they find in these works, and elements of their own life stories and of those of other women surrounding them, a feature which is consistent with Mills’s review of authentic realist reading strategies (recall §2.2). Respondents comment on how Serrano’s characters remind them of people they may find in their own families: “En sus familias [the characters’ families] veo personajes que encuentro en las mías” (3E); in their circle of friends: “En Antigua vida mía, por ej. uno de los personajes me recordó a una amiga en muchos aspectos” (8E); in their places of
employment: “[Serrano creates] personajes que te los podés encontrar en tu trabajo” (4K) and “Lo transgresor que tiene una de las mujeres en Nosotras que nos queremos tanto me hizo recordar a una de mis compañeras de trabajo, cosa que también le comenté. Mis hijas opinaron lo mismo” (8E); and in other locations they may visit on a regular basis, such as “en el club, o en cualquier lugar que frecuentes” (4K).

One respondent’s opinion, namely that “[e]stos libros apelan al alma femenina, a compartir experiencias que sólo nosotras podemos entender” (10B), may very well come from this perceived authenticity of characterization, enacted in “personajes [who] reflejan conflictos, vivencias que son también los nuestros” (3E). Participant K particularly values what she perceives as the books’ focus on daily life: “Los libros de Marcela Serrano tienen mucho de la vida cotidiana, a veces no existe una historia extraordinaria, sólo se desarrollan historias de vida, como la mía” (3K; cf. Cavarero, §4.1). Furthermore, participant D finds worth in the experience of establishing connections with characters who lead life stories she can identify with at some level —an attribute which forms part of Serrano’s broad appeal. For D, “[e]s tan diverso el espectro femenino que presenta que es difícil no sentirse identificada con alguien o por lo menos algún aspecto de un personaje” (5D). Drawing on perceived similarities between certain characters
and herself, D claims to be able to profit from these connections by obtaining insights regarding herself. As D explains, “[s]e tiene una visión externa sobre esta identificación que a veces puede llevar luz a algo no comprendido o conocido de uno mismo” (5D). At times, D continues, these insights may come about when, too quick to judge certain behaviors displayed by characters, D realizes that she herself would perhaps engage in comparable behaviors without the mediation of reflection, thus bringing this double-standard into sharp relief: “También es fácil juzgar alguna conducta y ese juicio puede sorprendernos comparado con alguna conducta propia” (5D). This process of working from similarity to open up a space of self-knowledge demonstrates how readers, in this case D, do not necessarily “swallow whole” objects of mass culture such as bestsellers, but rather interact with them in a potentially complex manner (cf. Radway, §2.2).

“[N]o me imagino en un diálogo con Marcela Serrano, […], sin embargo con sus libros estoy con ell[a]” (1H) is a comment which reflects how closely connected some women readers feel to the writers they admire. A further elaboration of this comment is expressed in one respondent’s understanding that “un libro es el pensamiento, los sentimientos, los conocimientos de una persona que permanecen escritos trascendiéndola” (1I), a perspective which resonates with Schweickart’s intersubjective encounter between the reader and the “heart
and mind of another woman” (recall §2.2). This encounter is prompted, in the view of another participant, by the perception that “las mujeres […] tienen mucho más para decírmelo que yo siento en general” (2K). Other respondents ground this perception in the particular sensibility of the author, stating the belief that Serrano “conoce profundamente el alma femenina, sin duda es mujer de gran sensibilidad” (5F), and that she “tiene un magnífico conocimiento del mundo femenino. Leyendo sus libros se nota cómo ha estudiado y comprendido el alma, la conducta, los sentimientos femeninos” (3D).

Some participants, however, seek a connection with Serrano the author at a more specific level than that which comes through an appeal to “the feminine” alone. In this regard, G is interested in the Chilean author, among other Latin American women writers, because of the demographic aspects that they share with her: “Me interesan como mujer, como latina y por ser contemporáneas” (3G). For C, Serrano’s feminism is a particularly attractive point for connection: “Marcela Serrano es una feminista, yo siento que para mujeres resalta el papel central de la mujer en el mundo moderno” (10C). Participant M concurs in this assessment: “[Marcela Serrano] es una mujer comprometida con la realidad y defensora de las reivindicaciones feministas” (3M). Whereas these participants seem to perceive their connection as being located at a geo-political level, other
respondents establish what they consider to be an interpersonal type of relation, as is suggested by the following discussion.

As part of her writing practice, Serrano embeds her opinions on topics ranging from issues of global significance for women (e.g., abortion rights, legalization of divorce, constraints imposed by marriage and maternity) down to what seem to be indicators of her own personal tastes, such as names of artists and their works (e.g., in the fields of literature, music, film, visual arts). These insertions apparently serve as invitations to readers to join her in creating shared experiences, a process which is characteristic of friendship relations. In this regard, M dwells on the strategic value of these references, viewing them as “elementos que ayudan a que el lector se interne en la obra” (4M), which points to the importance of familiarity in getting some readers on board. The value of these insertions, however, does not end here. For instance, it is interesting to note how D detects and further processes these names, accepting, in a manner of speaking, Serrano’s invitations: “los registro cuando son conocidos y comparto su [Serrano’s] opinión con la mía. Cuando es alguien o algo desconocido trato de averiguar quién o qué es” (4D). Respondent I, for instance, values Serrano’s use of literary references in particular, because she feels that these spur her on to further reading and learning experiences.
Marcela Serrano usa citas de Shakespeare, de Sancho en el Quijote, de Octavio Paz y muchos más escritores como de otros artistas. Los integra muy bien al texto dando la oportunidad de leer frases conceptuales dentro de una lectura amena. Esta característica suya me despierta el interés por conocer y aprender más. (4I)

In J’s case, this woman reader interprets Serrano’s references in terms of what this practice says about the author herself: “A través de esas múltiples menciones, reconozco en ella a una mujer a la que le importa dar a conocer sus gustos personales, su manera de vivir, de ver el mundo, de situarse en él” (4J). Respondent J does not stop there, however. As she continues with my survey, she proceeds to offer a provisional psychological analysis of the Serrano she feels she knows: “tomo conocimiento de sus opciones de vida, de su clase social y la veo como una persona con una formación muy rígida, muy reprimida y que tiene necesidad de sacar para afuera sus sentimientos, sus ataduras, sus conflictos, las telarañas que la envuelven” (5J).

My respondents’ answers have also brought to the forefront the establishment of connections among women readers themselves in the act of sharing the written word —an activity likewise modeled by María in Nosotras (155), Blanca in No olvides (90), Violeta in Antigua (306), Elena in Albergue (70),
Ninoska in Corazón (69, 149), as well as Ella and Jesusa in Llorona (69, 77). These interactions reveal that far from being used up in a single reading (recall Radway, §2.2), Serrano’s books continue to have value for subsequent readers as these women deliberately and enthusiastically seek to offer their own invitations to create shared reading experiences with women they know and care about.

A perceived naturalness of engaging in a circulation of personally valued reading material surfaces as a subtext in the answers of many participants when asked whether anybody had recommended that they read Serrano’s books or whether they themselves ever recommended her works to others, and in both situations, why: “Porque solemos intercambiar libros que nos gustan” (7C); “He leído sus libros […] que circulan, […] que nos prestan los amigos” (7J); “No recuerdo si he recomendado, sí definitivamente sé que he prestado alguno de sus libros a familiares y amigos porque les interesa la lectura como a mí y también porque suelo intercambiar mis libros cuando valen la pena” (8D); “En general no recomiendo a mis amigos qué leer, sin embargo intercambio y comento libros con ellos” (8J); and “siempre presto mis libros […] En general los recomiendo por su sensibilidad en tratar los temas de nosotras” (8K).

The act of sharing books is thus a well-established and readily-acknowledged part of life for these women readers, and as the details of their
exchanges of Serrano’s works show, the sharing not surprisingly follows these women’s social networks along established paths of interpersonal connection. The form that these invitations to a common reading experience take can vary from verbal recommendation (7A, 7G, 7I, 7K, 8B, 8F, 8H) to lending (7B, 7C, 7E, 7J, 7M, 8C, 8D, 8G, 8I, 8J, 8K, 8M) to personal gift giving (7E, 7I, 7M, 8H, 8I), but in nearly every case mentioned in my sample, the giver had herself already read the work, and made a decision to attempt to connect the known work to a known woman. For example, there is the passing of books between mothers and daughters (7E, 7I, 7M, 8B, 8E, 8G, 8M). In one case, the daughter was the first to discover Serrano (7E). These works also serve sisters as opportunities for shared experiences: “Siempre presto mis libros, […] a mi hermana. Y si bien tenemos cosas en común cada una tiene vidas bien diferentes” (8K; also 7A and 7B). Female friends and co-workers are also frequently cited in such interactions (7A, 7B, 7C, 7G, 7I, 7K, 7M, 8B, 8H, 8K). The reasons for extending these invitations are varied, and range from a personal desire to strengthen and enrich relations with other women: “lo [a book by Serrano] he entregado como una ofrenda de cariño a una gran amiga a la que quise regalar la oportunidad de emocionarse” (8H), “es para vos” (7K); to an attempt at making a connection across generations: “[I recommended Serrano’s books] a mis hijas y a alguna amiga de
ellas, para que los disfruten tanto como yo pero visto desde su edad” (8B), “[I have recommended Serrano’s books to] mi hija cuando era adolescente para que conociera puntos de vista femeninos novelados” (8G); to a more ideological link of feminist awareness: “Amigas feministas que reivindican el lugar de la mujer [have recommended Serrano’s books to me]” (7G).

As a result of the participants’ sharing of Serrano’s books, her works provide an opportunity for an intersubjective exchange among women with similar interests who see their feelings, opinions, and insights on the reading as knowledge worthy of being shared (cf. Bleich, §2.1): “varias amigas [recommended Serrano’s works to me] y en general la recomendación viene con comentarios como [...] ‘léelo y después me contás’” (7K), “En la medida que uno lee comenta lo que le ha gustado del libro” (8E), and “he insistido en que los [the books by Serrano which I have lent and given as gifts] leyeran pues a través de la lectura conocemos lugares, formas de vida, la lucha del día a día, la difícil vida de las mujeres con muchos hijos, mucho trabajo y todavía sometidas al mundo masculino” (8I). Participant M recounts the development of her own collective of women readers, as she comments on how she got to “meet” Serrano in the first place:
En realidad yo conocí a Serrano en mis paseos por las librerías. Luego me regalaron [Nosotras]. Me gustó mucho. Días más tarde a mi hija le prestaron El albergue de la mujeres tristes. Las dos lo leímos, mi hija María Eugenia primero, y coincidimos que era una buena escritora. Compramos después Antigua vida mía y lejos de defraudarnos, como pasa a veces después de leer varios libros de un mismo escritor, nos encantó. Luego fue común entre conocidos compartir sus escritos; Ximena, mi hija mayor, Ana, una íntima amiga, [...] y otros. (7M)

The journey of discovery enacted in M’s words points to a network of women reading together, in a sense, that is growing both in size and cohesiveness. This community’s life story, albeit abbreviated, prompts the following examination of what social good such shared experiences of reading Serrano can accomplish in terms of empowering women readers.

The importance of connections for women readers may be appreciated in H’s response, when asked in which ways Serrano’s books have influenced her relationships with other women: “He nacido y vivido en un mundo familiar de mujeres y M[arcela] S[errano] me ha ayudado a revisar y valorar mis relaciones con ellas. Las quiero y las necesito” (5H). H’s acknowledgment of her
appreciation, respect, and need for her own female genealogy strongly resonates with Violeta’s and Josefa’s assertion of a female continuum in the invocation of their foremothers to support them as they navigate their respective projects of life in the spirit of female sociality (recall Irigaray, §4.1, fn. 46), described at the beginning of the present chapter. Whereas H underscores the vertical dimension of female genealogies as regards the relation to the biological mother, K seems to focus more on the value of horizontal connections among women in her response to the same question:

En relación con otras mujeres lo que realmente me aporta es en lo relacionado con la amistad, la verdadera. Siempre distingo las amigas de las compañeras, es decir le doy a la palabra amistad su real valor. Las mujeres de Marcela Serrano viven la amistad desde lo honesto, lo profundo, lo que nos conmueve y nos compromete. Muchas de ellas son mujeres comprometidas con la vida. (5K)

Respondent K’s reply not only shows an appreciation for the model of female friendship based on loyalty and commitment she finds in Serrano’s works, but also highlights how her own theory of friendship among women is in accordance with the one she perceives to be propounded in Serrano’s fiction, thus obtaining validation for her own position vis-à-vis this issue (recall Bleich, §2.1).
Participants A and I appear to transition into more politically oriented aspects of female genealogies in their responses. For A, Serrano’s works “[m]e han hecho reflexionar mucho sobre mis conceptos de la amistad, de las relaciones profesionales, me han hecho ver el valor del encuentro con mujeres, cuánto tenemos en común” (5A). What appears to be the strategic value of encounters among women on the basis of perceived commonalities also surfaces in I’s answer regarding whether Serrano’s books have had any impact on her way of thinking or acting: “[Serrano] me confirma la necesidad del apoyo que las mujeres debemos darnos entre nosotras” (6I). These reflections on the potential for empowerment that women coming together may possess point to how the statement “what we read affects us” (recall Fetterley, §2.2) can be put to a productive use; the dyad woman reader/woman writer can ultimately become a network of women-affirming-women, dedicated to promoting knowledge and awareness of women’s gendered reality so that they are in a better position to start changing this reality (cf. Milan Collective on female politics, §4.1).

In the move toward connecting women readers and women writers in such supportive relations and networks, however, some women readers may first need to feel more welcomed and affirmed in their reading, before they engage with potentially challenging propositions. In this regard, the text
functions as a safe space (cf. Collins 95-99, 102-03; Sánchez 142) where readers can garner a sense of validation of their own experiences to the degree to which they feel that these are corroborated by the experiences that the work presents (recall Bleich, §2.1). For example, it appears that for K, the value of her own life story as such is elevated because “[l]os libros de Marcela Serrano tienen mucho de la vida cotidiana, a veces no existe una historia extraordinaria, sólo se desarrollan historias de vida, como la mía” (3K). In E’s experience, “me siento comprendida en muchos de sus pensamientos [i.e., those expressed in Serrano’s books]” (6E). The joy found in the discovery that other people also think and feel like we do also emerges in I’s comment with respect to Serrano: “Creo que pensamos y tenemos un modo de sentir bastante similar. Leyéndola confirmo mi punto de vista sobre lo que ya he visto y vivido. Quizás por eso me gusta tanto” (6I). Respondents E and I’s statements regarding their coincidence with the thoughts and feelings they find in Serrano’s works, when considered out of context, might indicate that these women do not feel challenged to reflect critically. Further comments from these same participants (quoted below) reveal, however, that they do indeed appreciate the fact that different life options for women are presented in Serrano’s works. If one considers in this light that the “universal wish to validate at least some of our own feelings by discovering
them in others is at the root of the collective establishment of values” (Bleich, *Feelings* 81), then involvement with the text through experiences of legitimation seems, for at least some women, to be a necessary pre-condition for the possible formation of reading bonds.

Further responses from participants E and I indicate, however, that validation is not the end of the road for them. Together with other respondents, these participants reveal an awareness of hegemonic dynamics and a desire to engage with them critically, apparently as a result of reading Serrano’s work (cf. Fetterley, §2.2). For instance, E voices a recognition that the society presented in Serrano’s novels is familiar to her, but at the same time problematic and susceptible to being changed:

> Veo en los personajes la misma educación que hemos recibido las mujeres y los hombres en el transcurrir de la vida. Ya sea desde las abuelas hasta los hijos. Sus valores, su encare de la vida, su romanticismo reflejan los nuestros, reflejan lo pacato de una sociedad y también todo aquello que las mujeres han aceptado por años y o les ha costado ir cambiando. […] El machismo está presente tanto en mujeres como en hombres, pero así también hay
Thus, E appreciates the presence of strong female characters in Serrano’s works who challenge traditional gender roles. Her appreciation is not that of a passive observer (recall Berggren, §2.2), as the following comment makes clear: “A través de la lectura he visto y entendido diferentes posturas ante la vida, ante la familia y ante la sociedad. Se me abre un abanico de opciones” (6E). This metaphor of opening up new knowledge is taken up by M in her more writerly appreciation of Serrano’s works: “Me gustan los libros con contenido, buena redacción y mejor lenguaje, pero sencillos, sin recovecos y que abran los ojos a quienes aún los tienen cerrados” (3M). Respondent M’s comment affirms Serrano’s pursuit of an aesthetic of linguistic accessibility in her writing in the interest of facilitating her readers’ engagement with and exploration of gender relations which patriarchy has sought to naturalize and render unquestionable (recall Serrano in Ayala, §3.2).

In a fashion similar to E, participant I appears to derive from the reading of Serrano the encouragement to confront the uneven division of labor inside the home into which many women have been socialized: “Sus libros me confirman que he evolucionado como casi todas las mujeres. […] Es una lucha diaria pues
muchas veces en pequeñas cosas siento que en el hogar la mujer es la que cumple la mayor parte de las tareas y a mi edad es difícil romper con esas rutinas. Sin embargo, no me doy de baja” (5I). Participant I’s desire to challenge established forms of power does not restrict itself to the private sphere but extends to a more global perspective: “He estado varias veces en Guatemala. Lo que ella [Serrano] dice sobre las diferentes etnias lo vi muchas veces. La pobreza en América Latina y el deber que tenemos todos en colaborar para mejorar la vida de aquellos que la sufren. Educación, salud, vivienda, trabajos dignos, basta de discriminación” (6I). Participant I’s strong call to social action seems to have been strengthened as a result of her having read Serrano’s works, but at the same time it draws nourishment from the specific concerns of this reader, beyond what is found in the texts themselves.

The answers offered by my respondents to the reading survey, which have been presented and described in this section, allow me to posit the existence of female connections that come about through the act of reading. These connections or bonds appear to be informed by a paradigm of reading characterized by intersubjectivity. The nature of this intersubjective encounter is twofold: (1) it reflects the woman reader’s wish to connect with the feelings and thoughts of Serrano in her capacity as woman, Latin American, and
contemporary, and to learn from the connection achieved in reading, in the understanding that this awareness brought about by reading is mediated through the recognition of affinities among women, which leads the reader to reflect on her own particular set of circumstances and the possibility of acting upon them, as well as to value the importance of female sociality for achieving these changes; (2) it also points to how women readers seek to establish connections with other women readers through verbal recommendations, lending, and gift-giving of Serrano’s books, actions which contribute to the creation of female networks in which interpretation of these works is enriched in collectivity.

The intersubjective aspect of the answers provided by my sample of women readers is also present in some of the reflections of female radio listeners which Diego Barnabé collected and recorded for Marcela Serrano to comment and expand on during the course of the interview he conducted with her in April of 1997 (recall §3.3.1 and the introduction to chapter four). One of Barnabé’s listeners highlights the value of *Para que no me olvides* in its potential as a source of knowledge on how to interact with disabled individuals, knowledge which has relevance both for herself and for others, and which is therefore worthy of being passed on for them to read and appreciate too: “Sobre todo, creo que es
una verdadera docencia de lo que no hay que hacer frente a un enfermo próximo. A mí me sirvió mucho, porque a dos personas que estaban en esa situación les pasé el libro y les ayudó mucho” (20). This listener also exhibits a desire to connect with the author as well, by raising the debate of memory and oblivion in Uruguay, and then inquiring about Serrano’s reactions to this issue as it unfolded in Chilean society: “Yo quisiera saber, Marcela, como chilena, como escritora y como testigo de tu época, cómo viviste tú todo el proceso de la Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación en Chile y su veredicto” (20). Serrano is deft in responding with a personal connection, describing the devastating impact that this topic has had on her sister, a psychologist who treated many relatives of the disappeared in Chile, and also in reinforcing the political connection by underscroing the similarity in the reactions of Chilean, Uruguayan, and Argentinean society to this issue, namely either to forget dictatorship’s legacy of horror and move on, or to attempt to investigate the disappearances and murders, and to judge the perpetrators, in order to be able to close this chapter of Southern Cone history with a measure of dignity and respect for the victims of repression and their families.

Friendship among women is also a topic which offers an opportunity for intersubjective encounters in Barnabé’s interview with Serrano. Two listeners
focus on how Serrano’s books are a “canto a la amistad” between women (9, 20), whereby one of them expands on how she feels Serrano has become, by virtue of her books, a great friend of hers, and potentially, of any woman (9; recall the introduction to chapter four), adding that the Chilean writer “es la escritora que llega más a la mujer” because of “su sentido de la amistad, por su sentido de la vida, por todo lo que transmite en cada párrafo de sus libros” (9-10). Serrano is quick to reciprocate this listener’s claim to virtual friendship by remarking on how she had had the occasion to talk about the importance of female friendships with some of her women readers over the signing of one of her books (10), adding that younger girls need to be encouraged to replace the relations of competition among women which they have been socialized into with connections that foster solidarity and support among women (10-11). Evidence for intersubjective encounters and female empowerment is thus also found to emerge organically from discussions with and about Marcela Serrano and her writing, and not only in the specialized context of targeted questionnaires.

In conclusion, respondents answering my survey attest that their reading of Serrano’s works allows them to gain more insight into their own actions and behaviors, validates their thoughts and life experiences, encourages them to attempt a more equitable division of labor inside the home, and makes them
aware of social injustice and their own duty to improve social conditions on a more global scale.

5.2 Potential Limitations of Serrano’s Textual Praxis of Female Empowerment: A Critical Appraisal

The positive and constructive feedback that I received from my respondents concerning the effects of reading Serrano’s works on their lives notwithstanding, there are threads among the answers that raise the need for taking a closer look at the discourse of these women readers in relation to textual evidence for the assumptions that underlie Serrano’s writings. The focus on comfort and validation that derives from a sense of rapport with female characters and their life stories has the potential to be a double-edged sword, as the following discussion reveals.

Respondents’ answers making explicit reference to Serrano’s in-depth understanding of “el alma femenina” (3D, 5F, 10B) motivate an interrogation of how this writer represents “the feminine” in her works and of its possible impact on women readers as they seek to articulate a standpoint of female self-definition, because of its power to install as valid a sign “Woman” and to naturalize and replicate traditional gender valuations. For example, in Antigua,
Violeta explains to Josefa that when she started her sentimental relation with Bob, a journalist from the United States whom she had met during a trip to Mexico (78-79), she did not wish to deny the differences between men and women, “éas [differences] insoslayables que ya sabemos,” adding that she “[d]eseaba solamente una nueva forma de vivir esas diferencias” (296). While Serrano presents a more equitable model of partnership, based on an exchange of intellectual and emotional respect and support, in the characters of Violeta and Josefa (114-15, 202, 265, 296-97, 334, 352), the perceived fixity of these differences between the sexes, whose constructed and conventional nature Serrano does not problematize, raises a red flag as to the potential of Serrano’s project of female empowerment. This signal cannot be easily dismissed, particularly in the light of Violeta’s letter to Josefa, in which she tells her friend that “Antigua me ha devuelto mi identidad de mujer” (226, italics in original). According to Violeta, this overarching identity is something worthy of being upheld and preserved: “Una cosa es renegar del rol, otra de la identidad” (226, italics in original).

Throughout her works, Serrano presents her readers with instances of this “identidad de mujer,” regarding such diverse topics as women’s more exclusive relation with the domestic, their remarkable resilience in times of trouble, their emphasis on connection in their approach to sexuality, and their unique capacity
for honesty, as the following passages reveal in the voices of various women characters: “en nuestro fuero interno sabemos que es sobre nosotras, y solamente sobre nosotras, que recae la responsabilidad de toda la vida afectiva” (Antigua 216; also see Serrano in Barnabé 12 and in Díaz 18); “la vitalidad femenina [...] tan única y específica, de [...] volver a empezar cuando uno ya ha tomado conciencia” (Nosotras 168; also see Serrano in García-Corales, “Entrevista” 230); “El sexo con Ricardo es la fuerza [...]. Con Pedro es la sensualidad, es de los pocos que no entienden el acto como el solo resultado, le da tanta más importancia al proceso; en eso es más femenino que Ricardo y por lo tanto, mejor” (Nosotras 112); “se me hace evidente [...] la honestidad entre las mujeres. Cuando se juntan, ninguna acalla verdades, ninguna disimula ni fanfarronea” (Albergue 107; also see Serrano in Barnabé 14). While it is important to note that Serrano does allow for the nurture side of the debate, as Josefa’s musings show: “Las mujeres nacimos —¿o fuimos criadas así?— atentas al acontecer de los otros, y muy poco al propio. En el lenguaje de lo no dicho, siempre pendientes, preparándonos para ‘el otro final’: la maternidad” (Antigua 217; also see Díaz 18), the novels’ insistence on the characterization of women’s spaces with the expression “desorden femenino” (Albergue 52; Corazón 50), in addition to other uncontested claims of female specificity such as the ones presented above,
should raise resistance in women readers as to the “given” nature of these qualities and behaviors. This tendency becomes disturbingly salient in some characterizations of female modes of discourse which showcase women using language in a somewhat erratic fashion. In *No olvides*, for example, a scene is presented in which Blanca is discussing with Sofía and Victoria the constraints that patriarchal society imposes on women. As Sofía responds to Blanca’s concerns, Victoria interrupts the former with the following comment: “Mmm..., me encantan esos zapatos, Sofía, ¿dónde los compraste?” (178), and quickly retakes the conversation. A while later, the friends are focusing on the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship, when Sofía suddenly leans forward to check out Blanca’s woolen sweater with a gesture of approval (178-79). This aspect of discontinuity in female interaction, offered as a given in the exchange above, is revisited in *Hasta siempre*, this time in a more qualified manner. Nieves, in the midst of an existential crisis, discloses to Ada and Lola how empty and unproductive she perceives her life to have been up to that point, after which she simply takes hand cream and begins to rub her hands with it. Luz, the spirit-narrator comments on the nature of this exchange: “Es típico de nosotras: pasar de lo cotidiano a lo trascendente y luego volver sin transición alguna. [...] Así nos hemos relacionado siempre. *Me pregunto cómo lo harán el resto de las*
mujeres, cómo interactúan entre sí” (277, emphasis added). This qualification contributes, to a certain extent, to lessen the reductionist depiction of woman that surfaces in Serrano’s works, and which her comments in interviews seem to reinforce. The dichotomous frame of reference that underlies Serrano’s works, however, has a potential for negatively impacting women readers in that it serves to uphold prescriptive criteria of what a woman should be. A woman reader could perhaps experience this prescription as an immobilizing force that discourages her from rehearsing, let alone pursuing, more alternative and radically different forms of being in the world which deviate more widely from the “naturalized” feminine norm. In addition, the affirmation of and insistence on particular “feminine” values may also alienate those women readers who do not share them.

This feminine/masculine dichotomy is developed from time to time in the works as a division that all people have within them, but that requires attention and effort to bring out in a balanced way. In Albergue, for example, this compartmentalized model of gender is more explicitly referred to by one of the women residing at the retreat, as she paraphrases director Elena’s teachings: “Elena cree que el día en que los hombres dejen aflorar su lado femenino, que indudablemente tienen, como nosotras el masculino, las cosas cambiarán” (349
also see Serrano in Andonie Dracos C11). A foretaste of this theoretical position is
found already in Nosotras, as Sara discusses with Ana and her husband Juan her
fear of pain related to romantic relationships and her focus on work as a safe
space: “No quisiera arriesgar un minuto de mi tranquilidad, ¡la necesito tanto
para trabajar bien!, por un romance” (283). In response to Sara, Juan offers,
somewhat apologetically, that she seems “casi masculina en ese terreno” (284).
Sara does not take offense at his words, but rather finds them complimentary,
taking pride in being able to “ocupar [her] lado masculino” (284). While Sara
foregrounds the advantages that her focus on work gives to her ability to succeed
in projects she does with women (284), the novel makes clear that Sara uses this
same approach as a defense mechanism to fend off the risk of failure and pain in
her romantic life, suggesting the importance of attending to balance. Hasta
siempre also takes up this notion of an androgynous subject in the character of
Ada and her mode of experiencing sexuality. Whereas Ada finds sex to be
natural and healthy, and is characterized in this regard by the narrator as
“intensa pero desapegada a la vez” (223), her cousin Lola gives voice to
traditional perspectives on female sexuality in a remark designed to discipline
her cousin: “¡hasta para eso eres masculina!” (223). Serrano’s attention to gender
transgression in Ada’s resolute self-definition illustrates a stepping away on the
author’s part from the patriarchal linkage of biological sex with gendered behaviors, and thus serves to at least make visible another way for a woman to live in her sexed body.

Even in this less deterministic approach to gender in some of Serrano’s works, however, there remains little questioning of the origin of the gender valuations of particular attributes and behaviors; these aspects simply exist and people possess them to the degree that they are able to develop their alleged masculine and feminine sides. By referring to a quality as masculine, for example Violeta’s ability to concentrate while working (Antigua 122), the inference is invited —albeit unintentionally— that said quality may be seen as the natural domain of males; this in turn may end up casting women who show such abilities as “the other,” and men who do not as equally deviant. This categorization of behaviors into masculine and feminine serves to reinforce stereotypes, both limiting characters’ options and compromising the various works’ ability to empower readers. One thing is to acknowledge the existence of stereotypes by working with them critically; another is to leave the assumption in place that these are valid and binding.

Serrano’s discursive praxis does in fact reveal a tendency to operate from this assumed “identidad de mujer,” which leaves problematic dichotomies such
as the one between feminine and masculine uncontested, with the resulting potentially negative impact suggested above. In this connection, critics like Bianchi, Eltit, Olea, and Richard reject bestselling works such as Serrano’s for rendering this more homogeneous image of woman via a narrative model based on mimetic reproduction, and tend to regard their readers as acritical consuming subjects of bestsellers who are the mere effects of neo-liberal market operations (recall §3.1).

It is true that Serrano adheres to a more realist aesthetic of representation, setting characters and events in spaces that readers may readily recognize. Her first novel, in particular, is guilty of presenting a considerable number of female characters—a supporting cast to the four protagonists—in a one-dimensional mode, to the extreme of appearing caricaturesque: “Ximena, una sicóloga de unos cuarenta años, con orgullo de mujer asumida que no se tiñe las canas por principio y con modales un poco estudiados” (254), “Carla, antropóloga de treinta y tantos” (254), “Julia, seguramente entre los treinta y siete y los cuarenta, abogado, más elegante y buenamoza que el promedio y con una cierta seguridad emanando de su cuerpo” (256). This telegraphic labeling and parading of female figures before the reader’s eyes, in the interest of shorthanding character development in a crowded scene (recall autocoscienza passage in §4.2.1.1), almost
inevitably requires a reader to invoke types or stereotypes in order to make sense of the characters’ interactions. Although not quite as extreme, these shallow executions of character development tend to persist in Serrano’s works (in a style that evokes the “tell,” to the detriment of the “show”), with the salient exceptions of Blanca in *No olvides*, Josefa in *Antigua*, Rosa in *Nuestra Señora*, Laura Gutiérrez in “Sin Dios,” Ada, Lola, and Nieves in *Hasta siempre*, and Ella in *Llorona*, all of whom are worked in such a way as to give the reader access to their interiority.

As the examination of Serrano’s intertextual and genre reworking experiments has revealed (recall §4.2.3), however, this Chilean writer’s texts are not necessarily devoid of a narrative complexity which, in an ideal case, may contribute to the opening of spaces of discrepancy in which women readers can perceive and evaluate the constraints that hegemonic gender roles place on female characters —and perhaps on themselves. Although the answers of my respondents do not indicate an awareness of how Serrano negates the repertoire (an issue which could have been tapped by means of a more or less leading question in my survey), they do acknowledge, however, that Serrano’s fiction moves them to thoughtful consideration of themselves —and in some cases to action— mainly, though not exclusively, through recognition of affinities they share with respect to female characters and their ways of existing in the world.
Such motivated reflections are not compatible with the articulations of readers as acritical consumers presented by the critics mentioned above. It is interesting to note, in this regard, how some of these women readers have also exercised their critical powers in evaluating Serrano’s discourse. Participant G finds that Serrano “[d]escribe el mundo femenino muy íntimamente, a veces en forma exagerada para mi gusto” (5G). When invited to offer any additional comments about the experience of reading Serrano’s books at the end of the survey, this respondent dwells on what she perceives as a tendentiousness on the writer’s part: “a veces siento que es muy sesgada y que se repite, pero vale la pena conocerla” (10G). In regard to this same question, Participant D indicates that “hay ciertos pasajes de sus libros donde la escritora parece filosofar sobre sus personajes con comentarios que pueden resultar muy largos. A mí personalmente […] a veces esos pasajes me ‘sobran’” (10D). These critiques could be construed as exhibitions of cultural capital, but are ultimately not wielded as such because each judgment is cast as an individual preference. When viewed together with the potential for female empowerment that the participants report as a result of their reading, the above critical opinions suggest that women readers of bestsellers are not mere passive receptacles of mass culture production and
furthermore, that their voices are worthy of being taken into consideration by literary and cultural critics.

What these voices seem to coincide on, if we listen to what they have to offer, is that Serrano’s appeal lies in the construction of female characters whose life stories they appreciate and with whom they experience a sense of kinship. Perhaps like the readers themselves, these characters weather the impact of hegemonic social evaluations and roles on their own lives, as well as on those of women linked to them. Serrano’s texts can thus be understood as invitations to women readers to embark on similar journeys of self-definition, whereby the life stories of female characters who have refused to be passively branded by these impositions and have taken steps to resist them, can serve both as encouragement and as models of agency for women readers so that they can attempt to negotiate the conditions of their existence. In this connection, M’s evaluation regarding the feminist quality of Serrano’s works, “[m]e gustan los libros […] que abran los ojos a quienes aún los tienen cerrados. Marcela Serrano cumple con esas condiciones, es una mujer comprometida con la realidad y defensora de las reivindicaciones feministas” (3M), would serve to underscore how Serrano’s praxis has reached its target in the minds of her readers (affirming, at the same time, this reader’s differential standing as a subject in
possession of privileged knowledge). This point, together with C’s understanding that “Marcela Serrano es una feminista, yo siento que para mujeres resalta el papel central de la mujer en el mundo moderno” (10C) and G’s comment that she has read Serrano’s books on the recommendation of “[a]migas feministas que reivindican el lugar de la mujer” (7G), reveals women who believe themselves to possess a feminist awareness. However, it also raises the question of the scope and inclusivity of this feminist consciousness, because the respondents’ answers appear to presuppose a particular version of reality which coincides with the one they know, in which women have the potential to gain a central role within the terms of modern capitalist societies. These replies furthermore bespeak a locus of enunciation from which a range of more marginal female subjectivities would seem to be excluded. What follows is a critical look at the female subject articulated in Serrano’s works in the light of these limitations.

Serrano’s female subject is constrained in her capacity for agency by the parameters of hegemonic patriarchal society. Although this subject is dissatisfied with such terms, she does not attempt to overthrow the system she is inscribed in, but rather to find the balance between isolation and loss of self. Caught among the demands of various social roles, e.g., spouse, mother, daughter, she
withdraws from these impositions in order to gain space for reflection, in the
course of which she makes connections with other women, primarily, but not
exclusively, of her own class, at an individual and collective level, from which
she draws the support she needs to start changing her life. This withdrawal does
not amount to an act of escapism since the female protagonist, when she is able
to re-enter society, does so from a more focused and strengthened standpoint of
self-definition. In those cases where protagonists choose not to rejoin a society
the terms of which are impossible for them to accept, such as Blanca in No olvides
and Ella in Llorona, the female subjects succeed in reclaiming a genealogy with
the daughter as a most precious life connection going into the future, one that
needs to be modeled for their children. In any case, the female subject in these
works takes initiative to focus on identifying what she needs and how to realize
the change.

Serrano’s female subject shows a number of salient limitations. This
subject is overwhelmingly white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, formally
educated, (self-)employed, and with children (recall §3.3.2). The focus on the
viewpoint of this type of subject contributes to backgrounding other women’s
marginal positions and to naturalizing the existing relations and power
structures that differentially affect these “others.” As the following discussion
reveals, the subjectivity of female characters whose class and/or race is other than those of Serrano’s typical subject is almost without exception less critically articulated in her narrations.

The depiction of women characters who work in domestic service offers an example of Serrano’s lack of sophistication when narrating the “other” with respect to class. In contrast to their more upper-class employers, maids are presented in ways that compromise the appreciation of their interior complexity and that naturalize the socio-economic conditions of their existence. If these characters talk at all, they rarely have more than one sentence of connected speech, oftentimes demonstrating folk wisdom. In general, they are “told about” by the narrator, in the mode of tales of admiration of mother-like figures and/or tales of subjection of these “others.”

In the first mode, maids are presented as nurturing angels. No olvides offers an example in the character of Honoria, who is Blanca’s housekeeper. As Blanca suffers her first cerebral attack, it is Honoria who immediately realizes what is happening to her and intuits the reason why, rather than Sofía and Victoria (17, 33). Blanca reciprocates Honoria’s concern and love for her by claiming to be her daughter when it makes a difference for Honoria’s receiving prompt medical care after being hit by a car (198). However, what is focused on
in the treatment of Honoria’s character is the protective and supportive functions that this lower-class “other” performs for the affluent subject —including having kept Blanca’s affair with “el Gringo” secret from Juan Luis (206)—, rather than the exploration of this mother-like figure’s desires, motivations, or circumstances.

In Nosotras, the character of Morelia, who works for María, is on the one hand a beloved maternal figure for her employer (75), but on the other hand this does not prevent María from subjecting her maid, moving her like a chess piece from Morelia’s own home to María’s residence in the capital, without really considering Morelia’s opinion on the matter, as María’s conversation with her niece Esperanza shows: “Cuando volví del exilio, ¿sabes lo primero que hice? Fui al pueblo de Las Mellizas donde vivía Morelia, luego que se había cansado de soportar a mamá y ya había criado a sus dos hijos, y me la traje a Santiago. Es la única persona con quien siempre me ha gustado vivir” (75-76). Serrano’s depiction of María’s behavior does not inflect this exercise of power over another’s life in a critical manner. The existence of such a class divide is not put into question, but merely softened by the relatively “human” treatment that “progressive” María dispenses to her maid/mother.
The treatment of race in the works of Serrano is primarily seen within the context of indigenous women. In this regard, the racial “other” is depicted as the possessor of a predisposition towards persistence vis-à-vis the bleak conditions of her daily existence, from the time she is a child through adulthood. In Corazón, María del Carmen, a six-year-old street vendor from San Cristóbal de las Casas, is trying to coax Camila into buying some trinkets: “Como si ya conociese la paciencia inconmensurable, se planta a mi lado a pesar de mi desinterés por comprar su exigua mercancía” (104). This apparently genetic disposition is seen in its full bloom in the “paciencia milenaria” (16) with which a group of indigenous women passively wait, together with their children, to receive news about their loved ones in the emergency room (16-17), an attitude which contrasts with Camila’s agency in securing information about Reina’s condition, stemming from the fact that Camila’s skin is “suficientemente blanca” (17). The narrator Camila’s insistence on this reductionist image of female resilience points to a passive indigenous subject with the modest goal of survival. The co-existence of this image with her comments about the abject conditions in which the indigenous population of Chiapas lives (33, 178) appears to indicate that any potential solution to the issues of poverty and discrimination in the region will have to come from outside. In this context, it is difficult not to recall respondent
I’s earlier quoted reference to “[l]a pobreza en América Latina y el deber que tenemos todos en colaborar para mejorar la vida de aquellos que la sufren. Educación, salud, vivienda, trabajos dignos, basta de discriminación” (I6), which seems likewise to touch on externally-defined criteria for what constitutes improvement.

The indigenous female subject does not always remain at the level of passivity and abstraction outlined above. A case in point, again in Corazón, is Paulina, a Mayan woman who works in Reina’s bookstore. Paulina has become a Zapatista operative in San Cristóbal, after being wounded at Ocosingo during the EZLN’s 1994 uprising. Camila learns directly from Paulina of her life of poverty and her rejection of a sexist division of labor affecting the lives of women in her own community, and of her migration into the mountains of Chiapas to claim a space of female redefinition within the Zapatista struggle. This narrator seems to recount from Paulina’s story only those issues that interest her, e.g., the oppression of gender in indigenous communities and the attempts on the part of the EZLN to address gender rights of women in their ranks (161-65). The narrator’s focus on gender oppression in these communities reflects the novel’s approval of the efforts of Zapatista women in organizing themselves against discrimination (165). Operating in her capacity as foreign journalist on
assignment, Camila’s fact-oriented, schematic summary report dilutes and appropriates the expression of Paulina’s who-ness —Camila, despite her fondness towards Paulina, manages to effectively put her own by-line on her subject’s life story. Corazón, however, seems to withhold full endorsement for the Zapatista project in its entirety, leaving the reader under the impression that the revolutionary option from within is only a partial solution at best.

The risk of essentialism that the critical discussion above points out, in both Serrano’s works and the discourse of my survey respondents, must surely be acknowledged. These potential pitfalls notwithstanding, however, Serrano’s works need to be considered in the light of their strategic value: they serve to make women’s life stories visible (a feminist act in itself), and to facilitate intersubjective encounters among women, whereby these come together and bond through reading women’s words and women’s lives. The effects of female empowerment which may be traced back to the reading of Serrano’s narratives emerge in the voices of her women readers as collected in the present survey and in the radio interview conducted by Diego Barnabé. By virtue of their reading, the women readers are connecting with (1) the female characters in the books, whom they encounter in the midst of the characters’ life stories, (2) the author — in a mediated fashion, but connecting nevertheless—, and (3) with other women,
enacting a network of bonds of reading that may result in women-affirming-women actions. Not to be overlooked in all of this, of course, is the individual personal reflection that these women engage in as readers. Serrano’s project of empowerment as it emerges in her works is successful only when the act of reading can encourage a woman to take a “time-out” in order to gain the necessary distance which will allow her to evaluate her own life conditions for what they are, and then, with the support of textual models and real-life women, embark in the complex process of renegotiating—or perhaps reinventing, if this is not too idealistic—her own life story.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECT

My dissertation has set forth to provide a comprehensive study of the works of Marcela Serrano that allows for the description and analysis of this Chilean woman writer’s fiction as a discursive project of consciousness-raising sought through the articulation of reading bonds between woman writer and women readers, as well as among women readers themselves. In this respect, Serrano’s literary enterprise of opening up spaces for female self-definition was examined in terms of the dynamics of how female characters’ life stories are narrated, for the purpose of presenting readers with a consistent set of models for interaction among women. In the same vein, instances of intertextuality and genre re-elaboration in the works were investigated, which also contributed to demonstrating that Serrano’s works deserve to be distinguished qualitatively from lite lit. These explorations enabled me to evaluate the potential contributions and limitations of Serrano’s fiction for encouraging women readers
to reflect on the constraints that patriarchal gender roles impose on them, and on how these roles may be renegotiated from a standpoint of self-definition. In the interest of assessing these contributions and limitations, I designed a reader-response survey which I administered to a sample of women readers of Serrano, so that my work as a critic would not remain at a purely theoretical and speculative level, and also to gain a more nuanced understanding of how women readers interact with bestselling works of the sort Serrano writes, which revealed that this type of reader need not be an acritical receptacle.

In order to evaluate the nature and scope of Serrano’s textual praxis of female empowerment, I have laid out conceptual tools offered by Italian feminism of sexual difference. This framework provides a particularly useful lens through which to read Serrano’s works in the intersubjective terms stated above, because it ascribes a political value to the practice of relations among women. In this regard, the model of female genealogies articulated in Serrano’s fiction exhibits a potential for transcending the boundaries of the texts themselves, pointing women readers to new avenues for pursuing self-definition in the context of women-affirming-women relationships: women readers can entrust themselves to the models of female sociality and agency supported by the texts, and in turn act as mediators or symbolic mothers to other women by sharing
with them Serrano’s texts and commenting on the insights that the act of reading these works has afforded them.

Reader-oriented theory, with its willingness to share critical power with readers by incorporating their perspectives as meaning makers, has served to inform my research into possible types of interactions that women readers may have with Serrano’s texts and the effects that these activities may have on them. Iser’s paradigm of reading as a communicative exchange based on readers’ actualization of guiding devices was useful in order to describe Serrano’s experiments with intertextuality and genre reworking in *Hasta siempre* — which present familiar points of reference while at the same time undercutting or reorienting conventional literary, cultural, and social expectations — as textual invitations designed to open up spaces of discrepancy where reflection can take place on how gender roles have been naturalized. Invitations to traverse uncharted spaces extended within a framework of familiar signposts can facilitate the basic cognitive process of analogy-building, whereby one moves from a known pattern and assumes it as a working hypothesis for approaching and coping with a new stimulus or situation. On this account, Serrano’s appropriation and re-elaboration of genres that typically affirm the status quo (including the novela rosa, for example) may perhaps be more effective for
reaching a relatively conservative audience than vanguardist-oriented experiments, because through the familiarity of generic conventions and topics, readers are, in a gradual way, drawn out of the more narrowly constrained worldview that constitutes their comfort zones (also recall §3.2 on mimicry and linguistic accessibility), whereas radical disruptions of the signifier would perhaps end in readers experiencing alienation and thus rejecting such texts.

Holland’s approach to literary interpretation in terms of identity recreation has furthermore allowed me to identify (probably on the basis of my own identity theme) the tension brought about by the conflicting desires to relate and, at the same time, to assert and maintain autonomy, as an underlying thread in Serrano’s works, a theme which I hoped might explain the sense of connection that most of the women readers in my sample have with these texts. In this respect, however, I must say that the answers of my respondents do not show overt evidence that they have interpreted Serrano’s works in terms of connection/autonomy as an identity theme.

Reader-response critics (feminists in particular, but not exclusively) who share a belief in the potential of literature for increasing readers’ recognition of the conditions of their lives and how these may be renegotiated have proven more productive for informing the analysis of the data that I collected through
my sample of women readers. In this regard, respondents have confirmed that “what we read affects us” (Fetterley), by triggering critical considerations without which no change would ever be imaginable. The affinity that some women readers perceive themselves as sharing with female characters and their life stories allows them to gain insight into themselves, and/or to appreciate, and/or to attempt to pursue, a broader range of life choices as women (Radway, Berggren). This type of affinity, grounded for some in an intersubjective encounter with the woman writer (Schweickart), and/or in a “felt collectivity” (MacCabe 9) of being women with specific gender-related experiences in Uruguay and Chile, offers respondents in general a sense of validation of their own feelings, thoughts, and life stories through the act of reading (Bleich). From these responses I am led to conclude that the combination of affinities and validation operates as a safe space of the personally familiar where women readers may feel more encouraged to engage critically with the constraints that patriarchal hegemony has imposed on their lives, and perhaps to travel new avenues of self-definition.

Also reported in these surveys is a fairly widespread practice of sharing Serrano’s books with other women readers as part and parcel of family and friendship relations, which contributes to valuing, strengthening, and enriching
bonds among women. Intersubjective encounters between women readers and woman writer may then become intersubjective encounters among women readers, as respondents perceive the worth of sharing with other women the knowledge and insights they have acquired through reading (Radway, Bleich), giving rise to networks of women readers in which the potential for women-affirming-women activities to flourish through the practice of female genealogies is certainly stronger than if these women readers limited their engagement to the book itself (Milan Collective).

Going forward, I would consider the present examination of the reception among women readers of Serrano’s praxis as articulated in her works as a pilot study which can serve to provide me with guidelines for future investigation in the field of reader theory, but which should be refined in terms of the research design. Instead of relying solely on a single survey instrument, I envision a four-stage investigative protocol (cf. Radway, Reading the Romance 47-48): (1) a preliminary open group discussion with a short list of prompting questions that might prove a fertile source for generating and refining a survey instrument, (2) individual administration of the survey questionnaire thus derived, (3) individual follow-up interviews with respondents both to permit feedback which facilitates clarification (for both researcher and subjects) and to provide an
opportunity for further questions (which may emerge more organically in the course of the exchange) to be addressed on the spot, and (4) a reconvened group discussion informed by the preceding process.

To the degree that the above would result in an ethnographic description of respondents’ concrete reading practices, it is also appropriate to collect a range of relevant demographic details in future studies, since the categorization of women readers in terms of social variables such as age, education level, occupation, socio-economic status, marital and parental status would indicate whether Serrano is reaching her “target” audience as constructed in the demographics of the female characters she presents (recall §3.3.2). Such information from readers would also permit the identification of sub-regularities among the responses as they might correlate with social factors. Tapping exactly which of Serrano’s works a given participant has read, a detail which is only sporadically perceptible in the present survey results, would allow effects that are particular to individual works to come out. Furthermore, this more refined methodology could be replicated not only in Uruguay, but also in Argentina and in Serrano’s home country, as part of a comparative study, in order to explore the potential for political action along the lines of a felt collectivity of women readers in post-dictatorship, neo-liberal societies across the Southern Cone. All of these
considerations will surely increase the sophistication of any reader-response study I attempt in future.
APPENDIX

ENCUESTA SOBRE RESPUESTAS DE LAS LEITORAS
Encuesta sobre respuestas de las lectoras

**Instrucciones:** Las siguientes preguntas tienen que ver con tus opiniones y experiencias como lectora. Si hay alguna pregunta que no deseas contestar, la puedes saltar. Tú decides cuánta información quieres incluir en tus respuestas. Se estima que contestar esta encuesta lleva 30 a 45 minutos en total.

1. Piensa un poco en tus libros preferidos. ¿Por qué lees libros? ¿Qué es un libro para ti?

2. ¿Sueles leer libros de ficción escritos por mujeres? Si es así, ¿por qué?

3. ¿Qué significan los libros de Marcela Serrano para ti? ¿Por qué lees sus libros?

4. En sus libros, Marcela Serrano tiende a mencionar nombres de marcas y nombres de escritores, músicos, actores, directores de cine, etc., y sus obras. ¿Estas referencias producen algún efecto sobre ti durante el curso de tu lectura? Si es así, describe estos efectos.

5. Los libros de Marcela Serrano, ¿qué cosas te ayudan a descubrir sobre ti misma y sobre tu historia personal? ¿Qué cosas te ayudan a descubrir sobre tus relaciones con otras mujeres? ¿Y sobre tus relaciones con los hombres?

6. Los libros de Marcela Serrano, ¿te llevan a cambiar tu modo de pensar? ¿Te llevan a cambiar tu modo de actuar en tu vida diaria? Dame ejemplos, por favor.

7. ¿Hay alguien que te haya recomendado que leas libros de Marcela Serrano? Si es así, sin darme nombres, ¿me podrías decir qué relación tiene esta persona contigo, y por qué te los recomendó?

8. ¿Has recomendado libros de Marcela Serrano a otra persona? Si es así, sin darme nombres, ¿me podrías decir qué relación tienes con esta persona, y por qué se los recomendaste?
9. Si conoces a alguien que ha leído algún libro de Marcela Serrano y sabes que le ha gustado, ¿qué otra escritora latinoamericana le recomendarías que leyera?

10. Si hay algo más que quisieras comentar sobre la lectura de los libros de Marcela Serrano, por favor hazlo.

¡Muchísimas gracias por tu ayuda!
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources (arranged chronologically):


Critical, Theoretical, and Other Relevant Sources:


Alcott, Louisa M. “Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power.” By A. M. Barnard [pseudonym]. Stern 1-104.

———. Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Boston: Little, 1915.


Berggren, Anne G. “Reading like a Woman.” Schweickart and Flynn 166-88.


———. “La compra, la venta.” Olivárez 57-60.


———. Introduction. Flynn and Schweickart ix-xxx.


---. “This Sex Which Is Not One.” *Warhol and Price Herndl* 363-69.


Miner, Madonne M. “Guaranteed to Please: Twentieth-Century American Women’s Bestseller.” *Flynn and Schweickart* 187-211.


———. “La niña sudaca irá a la venta.” *Olivárez* 35-41.


Orellana Riera, Carlos. “¿Nueva narrativa o narrativa chilena actual?” *Olivárez* 43-51.

Ossa Budge, Carlos. “Seminario nueva narrativa.” *Olivárez* 53-54.


273


Smith, Erin A. “‘Both a Woman and a Complete Professional’: Women Readers and Women’s Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction.” Schweickart and Flynn 189-220.


