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Affect and Feminist Storytelling in Three Spanish American Novels: Leonora by Elena Poniatowska, De un salto descabalga la reina by Carmen Boullosa, and El infinito en la palma de la mano by Gioconda Belli

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Hispanic Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the portrayals of the female protagonists of three Spanish American biographical novels in an exploration of identity formation within feminist literary expressions. Amidst the resurgence of auto/biographical genres, there has been an effort to revive the stories of the historically maligned, and biographical novels about women have become increasingly prevalent. The movement to recover and revise the stories of women, including those who have traditionally been interpreted within misogynist societies, reaches beyond the written text to influence not only the way a character is seen and understood, but the ways that readers see and understand themselves. As the formation of a biographical novel's protagonist mirrors a person's construction of their own identity, the character's development within the novel provides a precedent from which the reader may interpret themselves and others. Historically, women have been offered limited options in the formation of identity, with female characters often lacking depth in supporting roles and one-dimensional stereotypes. The three female authors of the three novels included here address this discrepancy, fleshing out their female protagonists and providing a view into the changes these characters undergo through their lives.

Employing the integrated-article format, this dissertation consists of three case studies of Latin American biographical novels with a central female character, written by female authors. With one chapter dedicated to the examination of each novel, the study includes Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* (2011), Carmen Boullosa's *De un salto descabalga la reina* (2002), and Gioconda Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008). Considering the

ways in which these novels represent their protagonists, this analysis recognizes the influence of affect – viewed as essential to an understanding of female identity as it was in the past, as it is in the present, and as it could be in the future.

Summary for Lay Audience

Considering the connection between biographical-style stories and the psychology of life narratives, this dissertation looks at feminist Latin American novels which represent biographical, historical, and/or mythical female characters. Reasoning that the well-known stories to which one is exposed influence how a person constructs their own life narrative and personal identity, the three case studies analyze the representations of each character and relate them to reader emotion (affect) and identity creation. With one chapter dedicated to the examination of each novel, the study includes Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* (2011), Carmen Boullosa's *De un salto descabalga la reina* (2002), and Gioconda Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008). These novels are part of a movement to recover and revise the stories of women, including those who have traditionally been interpreted within misogynist societies, with an understanding that these representations reach beyond the written text to influence not only the way a character is seen and understood, but the ways that readers see and understand themselves.

Keywords

Spanish American Literature, Feminism, Affect, Narrative Identity, Carmen Boullosa, Gioconda Belli, Elena Poniatowska, *Leonora*, *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, *De un salto descabalga la reina*

Acknowledgments

I would first like to express my sincere appreciation to my dedicated and remarkable supervisor, Dr. Alena Robin, for her encouragement and support over these many years. Beyond helping me as a supervisor, you have been a mentor and a friend who I deeply admire.

I would also like to thank the thesis examination committee, (Dr. Michael Abeyta, Dr. Vladimir Tumanov, Dr. Marjorie Ratcliffe, and Dr. Juan Luis Suárez) for the time they have put into reading and responding to my work, and for their insightful feedback which has allowed me to improve it.

Thank you to Sylvia Kontra, for her understanding and optimistic encouragement at times when I needed it most.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Ana García-Allen, for her sense of humour and tenacious determination which have made her such a wonderful person to work with over these past 6 years.

To the many professors who have inspired me over the years, and without whom I would not have continued on this path.

In particular, to Dr. Marjorie Ratcliffe, whose dedication to her students goes beyond the call of duty and whose support and encouragement has been very meaningful to me.

Thanks also to Dr. Rafael Montano, whose lectures and classes I would look forward to even as an undergraduate student.

One of the surprises of graduate student life has been the group of wonderful friends I have been lucky to find there and who I would like to thank for being there to celebrate and commiserate during the emotional rollercoaster of graduate school. In particular, Antonio Jiménez, Nandita Dutta, Spencer Moyes, Alba Devo, and Maria Laura Flores Barba, among others. A special thanks to Ana González, who has been a steadfast and wonderful friend since the beginning. Adriana Soto-Corominas also needs an extra-special-thank-you-sentence of her own, so I can thank her for encouraging me to push myself to be better, in part by

simply being an admirable force of awesomeness herself. Thanks should also go to the friends who have provided moral and emotional support along the way, including Sarah Molnar, Diana Pernokis, Dave Poisson, and Blair Ellis.

I am extremely grateful to my family, for being there all along, and even appearing at my thesis presentation to support me. Eytan and Ilan, thank you for being unwaveringly supportive and encouraging. I am incredibly lucky to have such wonderful brothers and role models. Thank you to my Safta, Raia Luxenburg: you are the toughest woman I know, and yet one of the most intensely caring. And, of course, thank you to Imma and Abba, for their love and support throughout my life, and without whom I would not be here. An extra, extra special thank you has to go to my mother, Imma: thank you for always nurturing my curiosity, and for instilling in me a love of learning that has brought me to this point.

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Introduction

“The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.” (Arendt 104)

The 21st century has ushered in a surge of interest in humans as creatures of story.¹

Disciplines across the humanities and social sciences have considered homo sapiens’ ability to create and live their own fictions as the overarching, defining feature that sets humans apart from other species. This recognition of the significance of story has coincided with a return to representations of individual life stories and a torrent of auto and bio-fictional works – with the biographical novel as one of the most popular literary forms.² Amidst this resurgence of a genre, there has been an effort to revive the stories of the historically maligned, and biographical novels about women have become increasingly prevalent.

The movement to recover and revise the stories of women, including those who have traditionally been interpreted within misogynist societies, reaches beyond the written text to influence not only the way a character is seen and understood, but the ways that readers see and understand themselves. As the formation of a biographical novel’s protagonist mirrors a person’s construction of their own identity, the character’s development within the novel

¹ The notion of “story”, particularly in relation to human psychology, will be addressed in depth in section 1.1.2. In regards to literature, it is understood here as “the causal sequence of events suggested by the plot and simulated by authors and readers” (Colm Hogan 184). In terms of function, it may further be understood as a causal sequence of events which guides the reader through a storyworld.

² See Michael Lackey’s *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014), *Biographical Fiction: A Reader* (2017), and “The Rise of the Biographical Novel and the Fall of the Historical Novel” (2016).

provides a precedent from which the reader may interpret themselves and others.

Historically, women have been offered limited options in the formation of identity, with female characters often lacking depth in supporting roles and one-dimensional stereotypes.

The three female authors of the three novels included here address this discrepancy, fleshing out their female protagonists and providing a view into the changes these characters undergo through their lives.

Employing the integrated-article format, this dissertation consists of three case studies of Latin American biographical novels with a central female character, written by female authors. With one chapter dedicated to the examination of each novel, the study includes Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* (2011), Carmen Boullosa's *De un salto descabalga la reina* (2002), and Gioconda Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008). Considering the ways in which the biographical novels represent their protagonists, the shift towards affect, and feminist approaches to literature, I argue that these novels express a neo-romantic feminist sensibility through representations which emphasize the role of affect.

The first chapter outlines the background and context of the theoretical framework that informs the analyses in the subsequent chapters. I consider the significance of story in formations of identity and the resurgence of auto/biofictional forms, including the biographical novel, within the context of the affective turn and contemporary cultural sensibilities. Then, in order to contextualize the feminist approach of the novel analyses, I provide a relatively brief history of feminisms as related to literary studies, Latin American literature, and representations of women in literature as contributing to formations of female identity. My feminist approach corresponds to the biosocial constructionist theory outlined

by Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood, in which both biological structures and sociocultural influences are recognized as significant and integrated in the formation of a feminist perspective, taking a central position in debates on essentialism in feminism. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the influence of affect on our understanding of female identity as represented in the stories by women and about women, written within a Latin American context, which is pertinent to the analyses that follow.

In chapter two, I examine Elena Poniatowska's (1932-) biographical novel *Leonora* (2011), about artist and writer Leonora Carrington (1917-2011). I consider the genre of the novel and the potential for empathetic identification with its protagonist, taking into account current theories on the psychology of fiction from cognitive literary studies. This includes an analysis of the invented scenes and characters included in the work, which are placed alongside the historical, biographical account of Carrington's life in the novel. I argue that Poniatowska's additions and inventions work to highlight particular aspects of Carrington's character, enabling a strong reader connection to the feminist protagonist through both the form and content of the novel. Carrington's life, works, and personality have elicited substantial interest and have been written about in a number of non-fictional works. Poniatowska's novel, while containing many of the same facts and details as non-fictional sources, connects with readers through the affect and empathy fostered by its artistic representation.

In the third chapter, I examine the portrayal of Cleopatra in Carmen Boullosa's biographical

novel *De un salto descabalgó la reina* (2002).³ The novel narrates the story of Cleopatra VII, the last ruler of Ancient Egypt prior to becoming a Roman province, in three non-chronological sections and presented through the perspective of her personal scribe, Diomedes. Boulosa portrays three distinct versions of the historical figure of Cleopatra. The novel begins with Cleopatra's demise, the second part flashes back to her escape from Rome as a young girl, whereas the last section presents the protagonist as a young queen temporarily forced out of Egypt, following her on a fantastical adventure in a land of Amazon warriors before her return to power. This presentation of the character's life eschews traditional methods of representing historical figures, in this case challenging the case of a female historical figure surrounded by legend. I consider the three separate sections of the narrative and the different versions of Cleopatra represented in each part, maintaining the order in which the three portraits of Cleopatra are presented in the novel. Through these analyses, I review how Boulosa's work expresses its feminist viewpoint through the distinct versions of the protagonist and consider how the novel reflects a form of integrated pluralism. This is done while keeping in mind Alison Gibbons's approach to identity which views "both essentialism and postmodernism as unhelpful, but rather than abandon them it argues that the two exist in tension" – an approach which I consider as relevant to the process of female identity formation revealed in the novel, particularly exemplified by the pairing of Cleopatra with the mythological Amazons in the last section of the novel (86). It is also pertinent to a consideration of the substantial attention and high level of interest that has surrounded the figure of Cleopatra since her death, as part of this interest stems from the

³ Boulosa's novel borrows its title from Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BCE), an epic poem written for Cleopatra's enemy Octavian, also known as Augustus.

figure's combination of traits traditionally and stereotypically considered as "feminine" along with those generally accepted as "masculine", revealed to co-exist in the character of Boulosa's Cleopatra.

The final chapter approaches Gioconda Belli's (1948-) revision of the well-known story of Adam and Eve in her novel *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008).⁴ The novel includes the creation of the humans, their life in the Garden of Eden, and their struggles to survive after eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and being banished from paradise. Belli's adaptation combines the "official" accounts found in the Book of Genesis with biblical apocrypha from various sources, along with her own alterations to the story. The result is an alternative creation myth with an emphasis on the subjective experience of Eve's life as the first woman. In my study, I discuss the feminist implications of the Adam and Eve story as it has been interpreted over time, including representations and judgments of the character of Eve which have often extended beyond the myth to encompass all women.⁵ Through an analysis of the representation of Eve and the other characters in *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, I explore how Belli's revision of the Judeo-Christian creation myth expresses a feminist sensibility. While not a biographical novel in the same manner as the other two works included here, as it approaches a religious myth rather than a historical figure, Belli's novel maintains a similar blend of "official" and invented scenes or characterizations of the central figure, altering the well-known myth to suit a feminist stance.

⁴ The title of Belli's novel comes from William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" (1863). The first stanza of the poem appears as an epigraph to Belli's novel: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour" (lines 1-4).

⁵ This includes religious, patriarchal, and feminist readings of Eve's role as she appears in the biblical story.

These three novels were chosen as examples of feminist biographical novels by Hispanic American authors about relatively well-known – as in the case of Leonora Carrington – or ubiquitous female figures – as in the cases of the biblical character Eve and the historical figure Cleopatra. The dissertation articles are organized in reverse chronological order of the central characters, beginning with Poniatowska’s novel on Leonora Carrington and ending with Belli’s revision of Eve. Published in the same year as Leonora Carrington’s death, *Leonora* covers the protagonist’s life throughout much of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. The label of “biographical novel” is most appropriate to *Leonora*, and so the question of genre definition is briefly addressed in this chapter, along with the potential for character identification and reader empathy through the biographical novel. The next chapter considers the more distant historical yet quasi-legendary figure of Cleopatra, and the last chapter moves to the most distant figure of the three, transitioning from historical legend to religious myth through its focus on the well-known character of Eve from the creation story which, shared among the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions, remains one of the most pervasive tales in the Western world. These two chapters are primarily concerned with questions of feminist representation of the protagonists, considering the portrayals in Boulosa’s and Belli’s novels as compared and in response to predominant interpretations of the figures.

Despite an extensive interest in feminist representations of women, many of the studies of the works considered here and others similar to them address these concerns from a postmodern perspective, generally implying or asserting an essentialist or anti-essentialist feminism, while dismissing affect and story. In the cases of these three novels, they have received little

scholarly attention, particularly in comparison to their authors' other works. While Carmen Boullosa's early novels, such as *Son vacas, somos puercos* (1991), *La milagrosa* (1993), and *Duerme* (1994), among others, are the subject of many critical works and dissertations, the more recent novel, *De un salto descabalgua la reina*, is notably absent from these studies. Elena Poniatowska's novels have similarly received critical attention in their treatment of history and biography through fictional forms, particularly her 1992 novel *Tinísima* about photographer and political activist Tina Modotti (1896-1942), but *Leonora* has so far received little attention in this regard.

The three novels included in this study were chosen with consideration of various factors. While there are other novels which could fit into the analysis, I chose to focus on those that have so far received little critical attention, especially as compared to other novels by the same authors. I further endeavoured to cover a variety of central figures, including a recent figure (Leonora Carrington), a historical figure (Cleopatra), and a mythical figure (Eve). However, it is worth mentioning a few of these alternate works, some of which are referred to in the literature review section of the individual chapters. For instance, Elena Poniatowska's novel *Tinísima*, mentioned above and in the literature review section of Chapter Two, presents the life of the feminist protagonist through a novelized account which combines extensive research with the author's imaginative embellishments, comparable to *Leonora*. A more recent example is Poniatowska's biographical novel *Dos veces única* (2015) about Lupe Marín (1895-1983), Diego Rivera's second wife. In another example, Gioconda Belli's novel *El pergamino de la seducción* (2005) follows the story of the 16th century Spanish queen Juana de Castilla, also known as "Juana la Loca", through the frame narrative of a 17-year old Latin American orphan living at a Catholic boarding school in 20th

century Madrid. Similar to Boulosa's *De un salto descabalge la reina*, the representation of Juana de Castilla in Belli's 2005 novel reaches back centuries to revise the account of a maligned female historical figure. From another Latin American author, Laura Esquivel's *Malinche* (2006) revisits the story of the historical figure Malinalli/Marina/Malintzin (ca. 1500 - ca. 1529) commonly known as "La Malinche", who acted as interpreter and advisor to Hernán Cortés and who played a key role in the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Although beyond the scope of the current study, these novels could be of interest to further feminist analyses of Latin American biographical novels by women writers.

Chapter 1

1 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework which informs the analyses in the chapters that follow. It begins with a consideration of the significance of story in formations of identity and the resurgence of auto/biofictional forms, including the biographical novel, within the context of the affective turn and contemporary cultural sensibilities. This is followed by a brief history of feminisms as related to literary studies and Latin America. The chapter concludes with a discussion of affect in stories by women and about women, written within a Latin American context, recognizing the representations of women within the selected literary texts as contributing to formations of female identity.

1.1 Story and Identity

“We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell.” (McAdams et al. 3)

What is it that makes the disparate experiences of a person perceived to be part of a single self? What are the processes by which each of us views our life and identity? Narrative psychologists refer to *narrative identity* as “the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others” and explain that “beginning in adolescence and young adulthood, our narrative identities are the stories we live by” (McAdams et al. 4). In this sense, story is integral to identity which, according to Erik Erikson, has an integrative function, weaving together the distinct experiences of a person’s life (5). Dan McAdams has outlined the life story model of

identity which, following the increase in narrative approaches to human experience, “asserts that people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self” (“Psychology of Life Stories” 100). While narrative is in this case not explicitly tied to literary narrative, there is a significant connection between them. As part of the turn towards the application of story in human psychology, concepts from literary studies were adapted into narrative-style personality theories (100). In his definition, McAdams writes the following:

The life story is a narrative of a person's past, present, and future. The term may refer to either an extended autobiographical account (typically written or told) that a person provides about his or her life or an internalized and integrative story of the self that functions (in the mind and in society) as a person's narrative identity. Life stories vividly convey lived human experience while expressing how people find meaning and purpose in life. [...] Culture provides the master narratives and frameworks of meaning for the construction of life stories. (“Life Story” 1)

McAdams first introduced the life story model in 1985, in his book *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*, drawing from the works of Erik Erikson, as well as theories of personality (in particular Henry Murray’s personology). The life story narrative model has since evolved, with alterations in the role of culture in providing the examples for life story patterns, and the inclusion of complexity in the life narratives people adapt. McAdams’s work has subsequently been incorporated into further studies.

Jonathan Haidt, for instance, further connects these ideas regarding the role of story to the

way that each person views their life within a narrative arc of its own. He has built on the notion of the life story as the third level of personality, and even compares the style of this individual narrative to that of historical fiction. As he points out in *The Happiness Hypothesis*: “The life story is not the work of a historian [...]; it is more like a work of historical fiction that makes plenty of references to real events and connects them by dramatizations and interpretations that might or might not be true to the spirit of what happened” (143). Historical fiction, therefore, not unlike biographical fiction, mimics our own automatic life-story-creation tendencies. Perhaps story has a symbiotic relationship with meaning: both in how we interpret the world, and how we impose our interpretations onto it. In other words, a person ascribes meaning to an event only within the context of the larger, overarching narratives they recognize and accept. This means that the types of narratives to which we are exposed have a meaningful influence on how we view the world and ourselves. The idea of life stories as narratives constructed to give people a sense of meaning, unity, and purpose to their lives is now well-rooted and accepted in academic circles as well as popular culture (McAdams, “Life Story” 3-4). Further, as explored in sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, the recognition of life story narratives in the social sciences, swept in alongside the affective turn, is interconnected to a renewed interest (both in popular and academic circles) in the biographical novel and other similar auto/biofictional genres.

1.1.1 The Affective Turn

Though the necessity of labels is debatable, it is here considered a useful way to contextualize contemporary cultural production and to understand the reasons for the

changes and turns in cultural sensibilities. While any categorization of time periods is subject to variations in definition and uncertain demarcations, postmodernism is particularly resistant to such boundaries. Itself a highly critical and self-aware movement that denies the possibility of definition, postmodernism nevertheless designates the second half of the twentieth century as a period of self-conscious reflexivity in theory and the arts. The postmodern is generally characterized by pluralism, relativism, and skepticism towards any overarching or totalizing explanation of reality, challenging any notion of truth or fact. Jean François Lyotard, in his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir)* tries for a succinct definition: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). While certain aspects of postmodernism persist, there have been calls for a new term, considering the changes since the advent of the movement and label. The Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon, known for her theories on postmodernism, addresses this need for a new term in *The Politics of Postmodernism*:

The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century. (165-166)

There have been multiple responses to Hutcheon’s call for a new term. Among them, in addition to the general but indistinct “post-postmodernism”, there is Gilles Lipovetsky’s

“hypermodernism”, Alan Kirby’s “digimodernism”, and Robert Samuels’s “automodernism”.⁶ In another attempt to label the current condition and the works produced within it, Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen have developed a theory of “metamodernism” – a movement that incorporates various postmodern techniques in its artistic forms, but with a neo-romantic sensibility. Van den Akker and Vermeulen agree with other critics that “the postmodern discourses have lost their critical value when it comes to understanding contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics” and that a new language is needed to describe the current moment (*Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism* 3). Their research and collaborations aim to respond to this need. Broadly, van den Akker and Vermeulen define metamodernism as “a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s and has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies” (4). They understand it “first and foremost as what Raymond Williams called ‘a structure of feeling’: a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural” (6).⁷ In 2009, van den Akker and Vermeulen co-founded the research platform *Notes on Metamodernism*, which brings together a number of scholars for interdisciplinary critical exchange. The two co-founders published an article of the same name in 2010, where they define metamodernism as a neo-romantic discourse which “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy,

⁶ For a summary of each of these terms, see “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010). Also see works cited list for the relevant works in which each term appears.

⁷ Van den Akker and Vermeulen’s use of the term “metamodernism” is not the first. For a brief history of the term, and the similarities and differences from the usage here, see pp. 4-6 in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017).

unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation” (“Notes on Metamodernism” 5-6). In 2017, van den Akker, Vermeulen, and Alison Gibbons edited a collection of essays on the movement, including discussions of metamodernism as expressed in literature, art, film and other media (*Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*). While the specifics vary based on the art form considered, the application of metamodernism acknowledges the postmodern features that appear alongside each work which, contrary to postmodern tenets, reach towards a pragmatic idealism. Luke Turner, an artist and co-editor of *Notes on Metamodernism*, defines the movement as both linked to and different from postmodernism:

Whereas postmodernism was characterised by deconstruction, irony, pastiche, relativism, nihilism, and the rejection of grand narratives (to caricature it somewhat), the discourse surrounding metamodernism engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism. (Turner)

The etymology of the term also retains elements of postmodernism, replacing the prefix ‘post’ with ‘meta’, coming from the Greek for “with or among”, “between”, and “after”, each of which is part of the metamodern structure of feeling (van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Periodising the 2000s* 8). “With or among” refers to the relationships with the past and future, and a structure of feeling which has roots in both. “Between” encapsulates the dialectic aspect of metamodernism, or the oscillation between conflicting positions, and “after” considers the movement’s temporal position in the 2000s, and its development from and displacement of the earlier postmodernism (10-12).

This description of metamodernism reflects what critics have dubbed the “affective turn”, a movement which reconsiders the role of emotion in the arts, returning to an appreciation for the roles of writers and readers, and the affect that connects them.

While Postmodernism in Fredric Jameson’s definition formed alongside “the waning of affect”, some contemporary theorists, including metamodern theorists, argue that recent years have seen a return to affect in tandem with the turn away from postmodernism (Gibbons, “Metamodern Affect” 83-84).⁸ “Affect” appears in various disciplines, but is understood here as “a general term for states related to emotion, including moods, attitudes” and as “either emotion episodes themselves, or subjective motivational tendencies that guide the onset, continuation, or alteration of emotion episodes” (Colm Hogan 176, 39). The return to affect, or the “affective turn”, emerged with technological developments in disciplines related to cognitive studies which enabled a clearer view into brain processes and posed a challenge to the computer model of the mind (17). The computer model analogy failed to explain the influential role of emotion in the mind and so the shift away from this model corresponded to the recognition of emotion and the affective turn (17).

⁸ Eugenie Brinkema begins her 2014 book, *The Forms of the Affects*, with the following reflection: “Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect? Must one even begin an argument anymore by refuting Fredric Jameson’s infamous description of the ‘waning of affect’ in postmodernity? [...] Indeed, the importance of affectivity has been so well documented in the disciplines of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, literary theory, critical theory, feminist and race studies, philosophy, and studies in representation, including film and new media, that several scholars have started asking broad questions about why it is that so many have turned to affect in the first place” (xi).

Metamodernism views this return to affect as a difference in sensibility from postmodernism. As Brinkema explains: “the affective turn in general is resonant with broader strains in what has been dubbed ‘metamodernism’ as a ‘structure of feeling’ that oscillates between modernist sensibilities and postmodern relativisms” (xii). In regards to the arts, postmodernism negates the possibility of meaningful emotion “since the unified modernist self, experiencing internal emotions in response to the external world, is dissolved” (Gibbons 84). The metamodern sensibility, on the other hand, supports the potential for meaning in the arts: “literature – no longer satisfied with reproducing the disaffected irony and language games that long caused readers to characterize postmodern literature as heartless and meaningless – makes its own vehement demand to be read and understood differently” (Holland 1). As Holland points out, the extremes of postmodern theory, including notions of incommunicability and irrelevance, threatened to make humanist goals themselves irrelevant and meaningless, as she explains: “the antihumanist position on language and literature has amounted to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, in its failure to recognize that some of the goals and beliefs of humanism remain worthy and in fact crucial to the continued production of art and literature, and perhaps even to our continued humanity” (4). What van den Akker, Vermeulen, and others have termed metamodernism is part of a movement which aims to “correct an extreme of antihumanism” (6). Though certainly not the only response to the loss of meaning in the humanities’ theoretical approaches, metamodernism maintains the lessons of postmodern critiques within its own humanistic approach. It recognizes and even incorporates aspects of postmodern literature such as irony, pastiche, uncertainty, multiplicity, and pluralism while aiming for meaning and appreciating the significance of

affect. Instead of the either/or dichotomy, choosing one and dismissing the other, the current sensibility seeks to contain both.

The affective turn is thus a turn away from alienating, antihumanist theory. While theories which emerged in the 1960s provided an important challenge to academia and allowed for significant change, both in their questioning of any authority and the inclusiveness of the theories introduced (many of which addressed those groups often forgotten or ignored), perhaps the point has been made and they have run their course. The lessons of postmodernism have been integrated into the humanities and what is left now for those committed to the study of arts is a return to humanism, meaning, and affect.

1.1.2 A Turn to Story

The affective turn has ushered in with it a resurgence in popularity of auto/biofiction. There is evidence to suggest that the growth in this literary form in the late 20th century is linked to the change in sensibility from postmodernism. In his studies, Michael Lackey has suggested that a likely reason for the popularity increase of the biographical novel in recent years relates to its usefulness in exploring the internal subjective world of an individual, rather than the seemingly objective external reality (“Rise of the Biographical Novel” 46). Alison Gibbons, in her chapter in *Metamodernism* on “Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect” argues a similar point, attributing the trend to a shift in sensibility. She connects “the prosperity of the genre to metamodernism as a cultural dominant” and claims that, “while contemporary autofiction incorporates stylistic tropes

of postmodernism, it nevertheless departs from postmodernism's self-serving logic" (118). Gibbons also notes, however, that the contemporary form of autofiction is neither "a straightforward, uncritical return to the affective subjectivity that defined modernism nor is it a complete rebuttal of postmodern disintegration but a vicissitude of both" (119). Applicable to biographical fiction as well, both Gibbons's and Lackey's arguments point to the affective turn as a key influence in the renewed appreciation for the auto/biographical fictional forms.

The return to individual life stories as a popular form has also coincided, though not coincidentally, with a multi-disciplinary recognition of the significance of "story" – the meaning of story here referring to the ubiquitous overarching narratives that emerge in personal and public spheres. The rise of attention to story has pervaded a variety of disciplines, including not only the arts but also business, marketing, psychology, and medicine, to name a few. In some cases, story is considered the defining aspect of being human. In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, historian Yuval Noah Harari places story at the center of humanity's evolutionary success, arguing that every social construct, including, for instance, currency or religion, manages to exist and work because of its reliance on a common fiction. The co-operation of large groups of people in maintaining an economic or religious system is attributed to the human ability and tendency toward what Benedict Anderson called *Imagined Communities* (1983).⁹ Our use

⁹ Anderson was referring to nation states as constructed communities as an explanation of the origins of nationalism, though his terminology has since been used to explain other types of constructed communities.

of language is unique in its “ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all” since “as far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled” (Harari 24). This unique human language allows for a collective imagination that, through stories in the forms of myths, creation stories, and nationalist myths of modern states, among others, enables humans to cooperate flexibly across large populations of strangers (25). As Harari puts it: “There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings” (28).

Harari’s argument follows a current theory in evolutionary psychology which suggests that the human capacity for story was a result of natural selection. Broadly summarized, the idea is that the tendency toward stories was advantageous to humans in some way, so those with the storytelling capacity survived and passed on their genes to give us our current species so naturally attuned to story.¹⁰ In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall examines how humans are addicted to stories, pointing out the many instances of story in our lives. Drawing from research in psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary studies, Gottschall explains how “even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories” (xiv). This pervasiveness means that we often do not realize how much of a role fiction has for us: “story is for a human as water is for a fish – all encompassing and not quite palpable” (xiv). As Gottschall and others

¹⁰ Also see Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2009) for an exploration of art and stories as human biological adaptations.

have pointed out, we do not need to look far to see how story permeates our lives – if we look close enough, we can see it almost anywhere. Yet another ubiquitous source of story appears in the advertising to which we are exposed daily, with marketers well aware of the potential of story and its influence on the human psyche.

While the role of story in these many areas has perhaps not changed significantly, our recognition of it has. After the challenges of postmodernism, researchers in psychology and related fields have begun to explicitly acknowledge and study the many forms of story and its relevance in our lives. In much of this research, theorists emphasize the significance of story through its effects on human psychology and development, while recognizing that it is, in fact, a construct. This renewed view on story accepts and contains the postmodern claims that everything is fiction and, at the same time, insists on the significance of these fictions on many levels. Along with the overarching, systemic-wide stories on which Harari and others focus, there is also a more personal level of story, applicable to the psychology of an individual, as considered in the earlier discussion of narrative identity and the “life story”.

Affect and story are central to what may be understood as the contemporary metamodern sensibility. Gibbons makes this point in relation to a contemporary understanding of identity construction as representative of a distinct sensibility that contains both the awareness of the constructed nature of stories as well as the recognition of meaning within these constructions. As she writes: “we can perhaps speak once more of a hermeneutics of the self, a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate

meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today's social situation in which another affective modality has substituted yesterday's fragmented and fragmenting euphoria" ("Affect" 85). The turn to affect and the turn to story therefore dovetail into a metamodern storytelling approach. Gibbons analyzes the role of affect in contemporary autofiction and employs an understanding of identity that "sees both essentialism and postmodernism as unhelpful, but rather than abandon them it argues that the two exist in tension. Contemporary identity is therefore both driven by a desire for meaningful personal emotional experience while being aware of the constructed nature of experiences" (86). This not only applies to the construction of these experiences, through whichever auto/biographical means, including biographical novels, but also to the readers' exposure to these narratives. That is, it is not only in telling stories that a person ascribes meaning to the events of their life, but also in reading stories of others. Meaning and identity are written into the characters of novels, films, and other media and, in contemporary metamodern works, they are written with a recognition of both the critical self-awareness of postmodernism along with the subjective and affective experience. This is particularly the case in stories of women.

1.2 Stories of Women: Feminisms and Literature

Within the context of the affective turn and at the core of my study is a focus on narratives of women. There are many narratives which fit into this category, but I believe that the current trend toward auto/biographical novels in general is especially evident in the case of central female characters. The subjective experiences of those who have traditionally been set aside as supporting characters, including women, are now of

particular interest. The second wave feminisms of the 1970s ushered in a feminist focus on literary texts, addressing the question of women as both writers and readers, and applications of feminist analyses to literature, considering literature “as a means of creating and perpetuating belief systems” (Tolan 325). This focus on literature would also extend to other media, though that is beyond the scope of this study. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of feminist thought, including but not limited to feminist theorists’ approaches to literature, in order to contextualize my own approach towards narratives about women. The questions guiding this section are: how have different feminist approaches progressed within the past century? Broadly, what can we extract from these approaches and how, within this context, can we define a current feminist sensibility? Lastly, how does this apply to the current study of selected novels about women from the Hispanic world?

1.2.1 A Brief History of Feminisms

The word “feminism” is often used as a catch-all term for a range of political and social movements and ideologies.¹¹ More accurately referred to in the plural form as “feminisms”, it can be daunting to wade into the murky pool of feminisms and all the controversies and divergences that reside therein. Ultimately, as Chris Beasley notes, any definition of feminism that treats it as a single entity will be flawed, considering how “any brief, neat account of feminism is likely to be disputed” (Beasley xii). While the

¹¹ The word “feminism” was first used in 1895, by a book reviewer in the *Athenaeum*, but terms such as “new woman” or “modern woman” were used earlier (Oxford English Dictionary, “Feminism”).

English word “feminism” only came into usage in the 1890s, “women’s conscious struggle to resist patriarchy goes much further back” as feminism has long “sought to disturb the complacent certainties of such a patriarchal culture, to assert a belief in sexual equality, and to eradicate sexist domination in transforming society” (Selden et al 113).¹² Feminism, in a perhaps simplistic definition, may be described as a theoretical framework that involves “a critique of misogyny, the assumption of male superiority and centrality” (Beasley 4). While a comprehensive overview of the ways in which the various streams of feminist thought have developed would be near impossible, it is worthwhile to frame the feminist approach of this study within a larger context of feminisms, past and present.

The recent historical development of mainstream feminist thought, including feminist approaches to literature, is generally categorized in three waves, each of which covers a specific period and is characterized by certain objectives. The “wave” designation, while helpful for definition, maintains that the beginnings and endings of each movement are not easily divisible, considering how the waves overlap and influence each other in their development. Earlier views that reflect what would now be understood as “feminist” can be considered as precursors to the first wave. While proto-feminist works such as Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) or Margaret Cavendish’s Early Modern comedy *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), appeared much earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft’s

¹² The term “patriarchal”, borrowing from Chris Weedon’s definition in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), here referring to “power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organisation of procreation to the internalised norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference” (Weedon qtd in Hodgson-Wright).

1792 *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* is generally considered as the first text of modern feminism (Sanders 15). Wollstonecraft emphasizes education and cultivation of women's rational, moral, and intellectual skills, claiming that women only appear to be inferior to men because of their lack of education (15). An early feminist well-known in the Hispanic world is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648/51-1695), the nun from Colonial Mexico/New Spain who has been considered as "the heroic foremother of feminist writing in Latin America"(Merrim 39). Perhaps Sor Juana's most famous work in regards to her feminist stance is the clever *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (1691), written in response to an open letter from the Bishop of the city of Puebla (but signed "Sor Filotea de la Cruz") which criticised Sor Juana's intellectual pursuits. The *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* is also an auto/biographical work, as the author incorporates details of her life into the argument. Mexican writer and critic Margo Glantz, in her article on "Labores de manos: ¿hagiografía o autobiografía?" (1993), refers to the work as one accomplished with great skill, as she writes that "Sor Juana cumplió con gran maestríañ el resultado es no un escrito edificante más, sino una autobiografía" (33). Sor Juana defends her intellectualism elsewhere as well, as for instance in Sonnet 146 which, addressed to the world ("En perseguirme, Mundo, ¿qué interesas?"), wonders how her pursuit of knowledge rather than beauty and worldly riches could be so offensive. Of her poetry, the *redondilla* "Hombres necios" (1689) also stands out as another celebrated feminist work, as it presents a logical and witty dispute of the double standard imposed on women as "men did their best to seduce a woman, then called her sinful and loose when they succeeded", with points that are (unfortunately) still relevant today (Scott 27-28).

First wave feminism (in the Anglo-tradition) began in the late 19th century with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which was largely considered to be the first women's rights convention. Continuing through to the early 20th century, the proponents of this movement were primarily middle and upper-class white women, with the principal objective of women's suffrage, tackling legal obstacles to gender equality, including working conditions, and property and voting rights. Second wave feminism developed after the Second World War and targeted issues of equal rights, including sexuality, reproductive rights, and equal employment opportunities, among others. Influenced by postmodernism and post-colonial theories, third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and was conceived as a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to feminism. In addition to the concerns of second wave feminists, third wave feminists focused further on the issues of non-heterosexual, non-white women and advocated more flexible and varied opinions on central themes as well as a less prescriptive attitude towards women's choices.¹³

1.2.2 The Second Wave

Classic studies of feminist literary criticism and theory generally delineate a continental divide between "Anglo-American Feminist Criticism" and "French Feminist Theory" in regards to second wave feminism. As Jill Lebian notes: "the continental schism, as well

¹³ There are also discussions of a "Fourth Wave Feminism" emerging in the 21st century with the popular use of digital and social media, including the #MeToo movement, among others. For more, see Kira Cochrane's often-cited 2013 article "The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women" and Evans and Chamberlain's "Critical Waves: Exploring Feminist Identity, Discourse and Praxis in Western Feminism" (2015).

as the division between theory and criticism, has had a lasting effect on the view of feminist work in literary studies, playing off the supposedly pragmatic and coherent Anglo-American critics against the esoteric and inaccessible European theorists” (106). By this division, French feminist “theory” has its roots in philosophical traditions, engaging with linguistics and psychoanalysis, and is principally associated with the works of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, although none of the three were born in France and all “are highly ambivalent about being identified as feminists” (Tolan 333). Second wave Anglo-American feminist “criticism”, on the other hand, emerged from socialist protest politics and the Civil Rights Movement, with a focus on equality in representation. It included the recovery of women’s writing and a reimagining of the male-dominated literary canon, exemplified in the “against the grain” readings of male-authored texts proposed by Kate Millet, and the “gynocriticism” elaborated by Elaine Showalter, among others. It is pertinent to note that, while convenient, this division is also problematic. For one thing, it disregards any input from outside of the Anglo and French sources, which theorists would later attempt to rectify with third wave (and “third world”) feminisms. It is also inaccurate in its overly simplistic “binary opposition, suppressing at once the vast diversity of practices within both movements” and further “masks their similarities” (Selden et al. 120).¹⁴ This study retains the Anglo/French division to some degree, mainly for clarity and congruence with other works on the topic, but with a recognition of the shortcomings of such an approach.

¹⁴ As Selden et al. point out, it is also “not a useful *national* categorization (many British and American critics, for example, might be described as ‘French’), and must be understood, therefore, to identify the informing intellectual tradition and not country of origin” (Selden et al. 120).

At the bridge between the first two waves, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is recognized as a foundational text of second wave feminism. Dealing with the central question "What is woman?", de Beauvoir examines the broad history of gender division, considering biological, cultural, historical, and psychological causes for women's place as the oppressed "second sex". Men, she argues, are entitled to "transcendence", whereas women, tied to the roles of child-rearing, are excluded from the pursuit of higher aims for themselves, in a state of rest or "immanence". The expectation is that women should be happy in this role, "on the pretext that happiness consists in being at rest" but that "every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the 'en-soi' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency" (de Beauvoir 84). De Beauvoir asserted that the biological differences could be overcome in order for women to declare themselves the equals of men and abandon immanence in search of transcendence. Later theorists would challenge aspects of this binary structure, including the exemplification of the male position and the notion that the feminine must be suppressed to achieve equality (Tolan 324). Nevertheless, de Beauvoir's insights were revolutionary and would contribute to later studies and essentialist debates.

Also within what is generally referred to as French Feminist Theory, Hélène Cixous's "*Le rire de la Méduse*" (1975), her most well-known and cited work, illustrates the concept of *écriture féminine*. Cixous suggests that women write in a way that is natural to them and refuse the culturally imposed boundaries and limitations of the phallogocentric

tradition. While bemoaning the relative lack of true feminine writing, Cixous simultaneously denies the possibility of clearly characterizing or defining such writing (Cixous 883). In “Sorties” (1975), again with a linguistic focus, Cixous explains how the patriarchal language of binary terms favours the masculine term in each case, with a list of binary oppositions including male/female, culture/nature, activity/passivity, head/heart. She challenges the belief that feminine and masculine are concepts strictly tied to biological sex, with both men and women as potential creators of *écriture féminine*.

While Luce Irigaray agrees that femininity is not well defined within masculine language, she rejects Cixous’s positioning as an outsider, instead proposing to dismantle the structure from within. In *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), Irigaray undermines the binary structure and refuses the singular or unified concept of female:

Whence the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything as individualities. *She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified as either one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no ‘proper’ name. And her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*. (26)

As such, the concept of feminine is not simply placed opposite that of masculine, because doing so still retains the structure, logic, and categorical divisions of masculine language. For Irigaray, female exclusion within the masculine ordered world is inevitable, “and so women should instead exploit their disruptive, anarchistic position on the margins” (Tolan 336). Drawing from the linguistic theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques

Lacan, Irigaray and Kristeva place feminine writing within the realm of the semiotic, as part of the pre-linguistic phase of human development. Language acquired as a child enters into the symbolic realm, representative of the masculine, linear, logical, and authoritative social structure of the world (Kristeva 134). *Écriture féminine* is instead eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent: “behaving like the semiotic, [it] disrupts the symbolic and threatens to unleash chaos where there is order” (Tolan 336). In this way, the chaos of the semiotic, comparable to Freud’s concept of an ultimately irrepressible unconscious, was considered a space of potential from which challenges to the accepted order would emerge.

The works of De Beauvoir, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva focused less on implementable changes, concentrating on the abstract concept of femininity and its effects. The ideas developed in their works, while often embraced in academic environments including Anglo-American theorists in literary and film studies, have also been criticized for their inaccessibility and impracticality. Despite overlaps and influences between the French theoretical and Anglo-American critical traditions, they are viewed as fundamentally different in approach. Second wave Anglo-American Feminist Criticism tended towards a denial of difference in search of equality. In the United States, two main branches emerged: liberal feminism and radical feminism; although both sought change, liberal feminists believed that their goals could be accomplished within the current societal structures while radical feminists believed that revolution was necessary for change (Thornham 32).

Often considered a foundational text of the women's movement alongside de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) renewed a protest on the expectations of societally imposed "femininity". Friedan had carried out a questionnaire of 200 former college classmates fifteen years after graduating and saw how even affluent middle class housewives in the United States were unfulfilled by their roles as wife and mother (Friedan xxi). She writes that "there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique" (xxii).¹⁵ Using the relevant studies and theories she could find related to male and female psychology, Friedan outlines the frustrations of women in what she refers to as "the problem that has no name". *The Feminine Mystique* called for a "drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self" (Friedan 440). Critiques of the work point out how it is concerned primarily with the dissatisfaction of a privileged class of women, ignoring the conditions of many women, including the less privileged ones in the United States. While these criticisms are valid and important, the book, in the same way as much of second wave feminism, nevertheless contributed significantly to the progress that would follow. Betty Friedan herself was the founder of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966, an organization which, as Gail

¹⁵ In her chapter on "The Happy Housewife Heroine", Friedan explains: "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. [...] The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love." (35-36)

Collins points out, “would file court suits on behalf of exactly the kind of average, unglamorous, working women that *The Feminine Mystique* is always criticized for ignoring” (xix). Although written over fifty years ago, and despite the outdated and narrow groups considered, the notion of the feminine mystique as outlined by Friedan in 1963, continues to be relevant. Literature, along with other artistic representational forms, is a display on which audiences, knowingly or not, consider the feminine mystique as it exists today.

The arguments in both de Beauvoir and Friedan share a realization that a state of what de Beauvoir referred to as “immanence” (being at rest) was not the path towards happiness for women. Perhaps counterintuitively, living in consumerist comfort supported by a husband, as in the case of the increasing number of housewives in the post-WWII era in the United States, left women dissatisfied and dependent, and ashamed at their unhappiness with what had been presented to them as an ideal life. Both Friedan and de Beauvoir pointed to the need for women to pursue higher aims, to develop an identity apart from their relationships to others, and to achieve what de Beauvoir calls “transcendence”.

Kate Millet shared the belief that the notion of femininity as it existed in patriarchal society pressured women to fit into the expressed feminine ideal (Tolan 326). However, Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) pioneered Anglo-American radical feminism, dismantling society as patriarchal and oppressive at its core. She was also a forerunner of social constructionism, arguing that differences between men and women are predominantly

imposed by society rather than nature, with subjugation achieved through a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. An enduring aspect of her work was her use of literary works as evidence of deeply embedded power structures. Women, she argued, were subjected to what would become an internalized, psychologically rooted inferiority, re-created and cemented in literature (326-327). This privileging of literature as a source was significant as it “helped to establish writing, literary studies and criticism as domains especially appropriate for feminism” (Selden et al. 121). Millet argued for “against the grain” readings, countering the original text with the reader’s interpretations of latent or repressed meanings written into literary texts (Tolan 327). Criticisms of Millet’s approach argue that it is reductionist, oversimplifying the male-authored texts she studies with extensive generalizations (Selden et al. 122). Nevertheless, as Thornham asserts, “her account of patriarchy as a system of institutionalised oppression maintained by ideological means was crucial in the development of feminist thinking” (31-32). And despite issues with Millet’s own use of male-authored texts, this literary critical approach would endure as well.

With the second wave looking to literature as a source for feminist analyses, alternative approaches emerged. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of their Own* (1977) and “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979) developed what became known as *gynocriticism*, which aimed to increase the number of women writers included in the canon and to make their works more widely available. This movement not only recovered earlier works by women, but the focus on female writing influenced an increase in women’s writing produced and published, including many “feminist engaged novels” (Tolan 329). Showalter argued that

recurrent themes in literature written by women was indicative of the influences and circumstances which the women shared, rather than any essentialist resemblance between the women themselves (329). As in the earlier cases, Showalter's work was important and influential, but not without its issues and critiques. Among these, there was the issue of Showalter's continued use of canon formation and sex differentiation, which critics argued kept women at the margins of a male-oriented system. They insisted that her approach merely incorporated women writers into a system which had already dismissed them (330).

1.2.3 The Third Wave and Critiques of Essentialism

The movements of the second wave set the foundations for feminist development while uncovering some of the issues with their approaches. The third wave of feminism would aim to address the critiques of the second wave theorists' works. The prescriptive qualities, fixed definitions, and limited focus that characterized much of the second wave would be rejected in the works that emerged in the early 1990s. The third wave encompassed a diverse range of emerging feminisms, with an acceptance of the variety of forms feminism and feminists may take. It became clear that no single feminist approach could encompass all women. Many of the movements within third wave feminism promoted women's own personal preferences in how they choose to live. Rather than issuing rules about how a woman should be or behave, women were offered options with judgement-free intentions. "Lipstick feminism", for example, embraced the traditionally feminine aspects of women's appearance such as high heels, push-up bras, and make-up which were generally rejected by early feminists as symbols of male oppression. The

many distinctive feminisms that appeared in the third wave acknowledged the differences among women. This period was characterized overall by variety, as feminists rejected the notion of a cohesive female identity or feminist position.

In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, theorizing on how social identities intersect to create specific challenges and discriminations (Crenshaw 140). In the case of a black woman, for instance, Crenshaw argued that she would be doubly-oppressed, with experiences to which neither a white woman nor a black man could individually relate. This called for research on different intersectional identities, primarily with considerations of race, class, and gender. Intersectional feminism aims to address the overrepresentation of white, heterosexual, upper and middle class women in the first and second waves of feminism.¹⁶ The third wave also recognized the overrepresentation of European and Anglo-American theories in the feminist movements so far, with the urgent concerns of women in the “third world” ignored or overlooked. Even the categorical term of “third world” women was understood as problematic in that it grouped all non-western women together as a homogenous group, not taking into account the varied challenges and differences of women from diverse historical, geographical, and cultural circumstances or environments. The plurality of perspectives that emerged (and continue to emerge), in many cases integrate theories of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, among others. As Selden et al. point out:

¹⁶ For more on intersectional feminism, see *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, edited by Adrien Katherine Wing.

much recent feminist criticism – in the desire to escape the ‘fixities and definites’ of theory and to develop a female discourse which cannot be tied down as belonging to a recognized (and therefore probably male-produced) conceptual position – has found theoretical sustenance in poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking, not least because these seem to refuse the (masculine) notion of authority or truth. (114)

The multitude of approaches under the umbrella of feminism, while addressing a clear need for inclusivity, also raised questions about the meaning of a term with so many interpretations. As bell hooks wrote in her 1984 book on *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: “Currently, feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The ‘anything goes’ approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless” (25).

Despite the breadth of feminist understandings, certain issues have persisted throughout the third wave and current feminisms. This is the case with the question of essentialism and the feminist debates around it, with strong roots in the second wave. Comparable to the centuries-old debate between nature and nurture, essentialists consider that women’s biological nature creates emotional and psychological differences from men, while anti-essentialists, at their extreme, insist that “sexual difference is a consequence of cultural conditioning” (Tolan 323). Whereas essentialist understandings view “woman” as a single construct, anti-essentialist arguments correspond more to the postmodern and poststructuralist theories in their rejection of clear definitions. Along with an attempt at inclusivity, theories in the 1990s included revisions of notions of gender and sexuality as

“deconstructive anti-essentialist feminism had destabilised a notion of essential sexual/gendered categories, offering a range of exciting and polymorphous configurations of sexual identities” (Phoca 53). Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) argued that sexual identity is not natural but instead performative, with the experience of discovering identity merely as fitting oneself into the established categories of ‘man’ or ‘woman’. In terms of the feminist movement, Butler maintains that “feminism has been hurt by its attempt to find an identity that would designate something common to everyone in the movement” (Leitch 2487). Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick furthers this deconstruction of identity as based in biology, reconfiguring classifications of gendered identification to go beyond hetero-normative categorizations and “divests those categories from the received axiom of ‘normative’ versus ‘perverse’ that has historically described the sexual subject” (Phoca 51-52). In “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1991), Donna Haraway uses the metaphor of a cyborg to challenge the overemphasized commonalities between women, as she writes that “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (16). The cyborg, for Haraway, is “a postmodern metaphor for the contemporary subject” (Phoca 52). Anti-essentialist arguments such as those of Butler, Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Haraway, in their rejection of biological influence, intend to free women (and others) from the limitations which biological determinism imposes on them. As Selden et al. explain, “arguments which treat biology as fundamental and which play down socialization have been used mainly by men to keep

women ‘in their place’. The old Latin saying ‘*Tota mulier in utero*’ (‘Women is nothing but a womb’) established this attitude early” (118). And so, accepting any differences with a biological root seemed to inevitably restrict the level of equality women could obtain, or at the very least open the door to biology-based arguments which suggested as much.

The prevailing theories in Women’s Studies, Literature, and other related disciplines tend to maintain the aforementioned anti-essentialist approaches. Nevertheless, there are theories all along the spectrum of essentialism. On the extreme and often controversial side, there are fringe figures such as Camille Paglia. While she defines herself as a feminist, Paglia is known for her verbal attacks on other feminists and the current feminist movement, with arguments which, among other things, glorify male aggression and dismiss issues related to sexual assault.¹⁷ Paglia’s arguments stem from an essentialist viewpoint that credits the influence of nature and biology above all else. Other criticisms of anti-essentialist arguments appear within critiques of postmodern feminism.¹⁸ Less often theorized is the middle ground of essentialism, where both biological structures and sociocultural influences (or ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’) are recognized as significant (Eagly and Wood, “The Nature-Nurture Debates” 341-342). In

¹⁷ In a recent interview, for instance, Paglia claims that women putting themselves in certain situations is akin to consent. She insists that women take responsibility for themselves and while her intention is to empower women, bringing them away from pre-sexual revolution ideas about women having to be protected, her arguments ignore the very real situations in which women find themselves, and the traumas they endure as a result (which, she says, they should simply “get over”). Her arguments, while claiming to allow everyone their freedoms, seem to suggest that men are incapable or unwilling to practice consent. See the 2018 CBC News interview for a quick overview of Paglia’s views on current feminist issues.

¹⁸ Including arguments by Meaghan Morris and Gloria Steinem.

response to this, psychology professors Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood have outlined a biosocial constructionist theory which integrates both and “emphasizes cultural processes that interact with and are built on the ground of ancient selection pressures” (“Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology” 553). In their article on “The Nature-Nurture Debates: 25 Years of Challenges in Understanding the Psychology of Gender” (2013) Eagly and Wood provide an overview of developments in gender psychology, pointing out how and why research has tended to strongly favour either nature or nurture, with few studies recognizing both. As they put it: “nature–nurture debates have remained highly contentious in the psychology of gender, and contemporary researchers only sometimes integrate the two causal influences. More commonly, researchers focus on one type of cause to the exclusion of the other or treat them as competing explanations” (340). In Eagly and Wood’s explanation of their own integrated approach in “Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology: Moving Forward” (2013), they describe how feminist perspectives, despite their diversity, lean towards nurture and socialization with the goal of altering the prescriptive aspects of a patriarchal structure (549). While biology is indeed a factor, they argue that there is also “much evidence [to] support the feminist principle that female and male behavior is shaped in important ways by the social context” (553).¹⁹ Returning to the question of essentialism, Eagly and Wood’s integrative approach brings a firm backing to a central position on the essentialist continuum.

¹⁹ For instance, in regards to the division of labour, Eagly and Wood explain that the “division of life tasks between men and women is flexible, but constrained by gross physical sex differences (female reproductive activity, male size and strength) that interact with the forces inherent in the contemporaneous socioeconomic and ecological environment” (553).

1.2.4 Feminist Literature in the Hispanic World

Considering that issues and emerging responses vary significantly based on the specific contexts of each region, there is no all-encompassing Hispanic or Latin American feminism. There are instead multiple strands of feminisms in varying forms particular to the socio-political circumstances from which they develop. The feminist criticism from the Iberian peninsula and Latin America often borrows from and discourses with French and Anglo feminist traditions, despite the Hispanic regions' own feminist works.²⁰ For instance, in late nineteenth century Spain, Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) wrote fiction and non-fiction which expressed her feminist ideas and worked to support her beliefs through her actions, with a particular focus on women's educational rights. In twentieth century Spain, Margarita Nelken (1894-1968), Rosa Chacel (1898-1994), María Zambrano (1904-1991), Carmen Laforet (1921-2004), and Carmen Martín Gaité (1925-2000), among others, voiced their feminisms through novels, essays, and other writings.²¹

The perceived lack of feminist theory specific to Latin America is, in part, related to the relative scarcity of purely theoretical works, as many of the prominent Hispanic feminist writers chose to express their message through fictional literary forms. As Castro-Klarén points out, “there now exists a good number of texts written by Latin American women,

²⁰ See Roberta Johnson's article on “Feminist Theory Then and Now” (2003) for a discussion of the presence of foreign (and specifically Anglo-American) feminist scholarship in Spanish feminist literary criticism.

²¹ For more on these and other Spanish feminist writers, see Johnson and Zubiaurre's *Antología del pensamiento feminista español (1726-2011)* (2012).

but we still have not elaborated theoretical positions derived from the reading of *those* texts” (263). Nevertheless, Latin America has had its own history of feminist writers. One of the earliest and best-known is the proto-feminist nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz from Colonial Mexico/New Spain.²² Another early feminist writer is Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-1873), whose literature and life opposed accepted female behaviour of the era.²³ As Glantz points out, women who wrote well were generally considered to be masculine or mannish (30-31). In this vein, while Avellaneda received recognition as a great writer during her lifetime, praise of her work included Spanish poet José Zorilla’s offensive assertion that she writes so well, she must not fully be a woman: “Because the woman [Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda] was beautiful, tall, of statuesque contours, shapely arms, and graceful, framed by abundant brown ringlets...: She was a woman, but only because, in a moment of distraction, Nature had clothed the soul of a man in female flesh” (382-383). Having written twenty plays, numerous poems, and six novels, it was her novels, and particularly the controversial *Sab* (1841) and *Dos mujeres* (1842) which “most consistently and overtly expressed” Gómez de Avellaneda’s feminist concerns (Pastor 44). The novel *Sab*, for instance, employs the debate about slavery (contemporary to the author) to argue for social equality and the rights of women, as even the slave character, Sab, points out: “The slave can at least change masters, can even hope to buy his freedom some day if he can save enough money, but a woman, when she lifts her careworn hands and mistreated brow to beg for release, hears the monstrous, deathly

²² See section 1.2.1 for a discussion of Sor Juana’s well-known feminist works.

²³ As Brígida M. Pastor points out, Gómez de Avellaneda “refused an arranged marriage, had a number of tumultuous love affairs, had a child out of wedlock, and supported herself financially” (37-38).

voice which cries out to her: ‘In the grave’” (144-145).

In general, however, Latin American feminisms in art, literature, and elsewhere have received less attention and, in some cases, have been lacking or less visible due to politicohistorical circumstances. In *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano: historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo* (2019), Argentinian art historian and theorist Andrea Giunta outlines the historiography of Latin American feminist art, further situating it in global feminist debates. For Giunta, Latin American feminist expressions in art were relatively scarce in large part because of the difficult relationship between feminism and marxism as well as the repressive dictatorships in South American countries including Paraguay (1954-1989), Brazil (1964-1985), Argentina (1966-1973, 1976-1982), Bolivia (1971-1978), Chile (1973-1990), and Uruguay (1973-1985). The exception, she writes, is Mexico, where the first United Nations world conference on women took place in 1975, though the feminist tradition in Mexico still has yet to be fully recognized (82-83).

A fundamentally influential figure in this realm is Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974), described by Elena Poniatowska as “la precursora intelectual de la liberación de las mujeres mexicanas” (22). Castellanos wrote novels, essays, plays, poems, and short stories and worked as an academic, a journalist, and a diplomat (Finnegan 105). Although she wrote in the time period of the second wave of feminism, and was influenced by the works of Betty Friedan and other second wave feminists, Castellanos went beyond the

concerns of her own class to also address those of the marginalized, indigenous women in Mexico, as well as the tensions between them.²⁴ The most anthologised of her works is the short story “Lección de cocina” from the collection *Álbum de familia* (1971). The short story details a newlywed housewife’s attempt to cook a piece of frozen meat, interspersed with her thoughts on her new life with her husband, with the (eventually burnt) piece of meat serving as a metaphor for the woman’s own metamorphosis. Among her works addressing feminist issues, the 1973 collection *Mujer que sabe latín* (referencing the saying: “Mujer que sabe latín no tiene marido ni buen fin”/“A woman who knows Latin has neither a husband nor a good end”) considers feminist struggles while chronicling the ideas of various female writers and activists throughout the world. The compilation includes essays on the ideas and writings of Simone Weil, Clarice Lispector, Ivy Compton-Burnett, María Luisa Bombal, Virginia Woolf, and others, along with Castellanos’s reflections. In the essay titled “La mujer y su imagen”, for instance, Castellanos outlines how women have been viewed as a mythical figure, a projection of hopes and fears, rather than a human being of flesh and bone (9). She explains how “el hombre convierte a lo femenino en un receptáculo de estados de ánimo contradictorios y lo coloca en un más allá en el que se nos muestra una figura, si bien variable en sus formas, monótona en su significado” (9). Castellanos goes on to describe how ideals of feminine beauty limit and oppress, shrewdly declaring that “el hábitat de la mujer bella no es el campo, no es el aire libre, no es la naturaleza” but rather, “es el salón” (12).

²⁴ As Finnegan notes, Castellanos even wrote an essay about Friedan’s achievements (“Betty Friedan: Analysis and Praxis”) in 1973 (112).

Mexican anthropologist and feminist theorist Marcela Lagarde is another leading figure in Latin American feminisms, known in particular for her elaborations on the notion of “femicide” or *feminicidio*, as she termed it. Proposed by Diana Russel and Jill Radford in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (1992), Lagarde developed the concept and employed it in an analysis of the cases of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez. Additionally, Lagarde’s PhD dissertation and published bestseller *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas* (2005) details a feminist anthropology of women and their status in patriarchal societies, identifying five models of female oppression: *madresposas* (mother-wives), *monjas* (nuns), *putas* (prostitutes), *presas* (prisoners) and *locas* (madwomen). Lagarde has since been active in politics and has further elaborated feminist discourses and worked for women’s equality through her writings and her activism. In *Los cautiverios de las mujeres*, Lagarde writes that women share the same historic condition, though the particularities of their lives and situations differ, as do the degrees and levels of oppression to which they are subjected (34). According to Lagarde, the female condition is structured around two central concepts: “la sexualidad escindida de las mujeres, y la definición de las mujeres en relación con el poder – como afirmación o como sujeción –, y con los otros” (35). Women are in captivity in a patriarchal world and struggle to become autonomous subjects, as Lagarde explains:

También es opresiva la condición genérica por la definición de las mujeres como seres carentes, capaces de renuncia, cuya actitud básica consiste en ser capaces de todo para consumir su entrega a los otros, e incapaces para autonomizarse de

ellos. Esta dificultad de las mujeres para constituirse en sujetos constituye la impotencia aprendida. He llamado cautiverio a la expresión político-cultural de la condición de la mujer. Las mujeres están cautivas de su condición genérica en el mundo patriarcal. (36)

The notion of women as either subjects, as in the case of narratives which focus on their subjective experiences, harkens back to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "other"; the object to a male subject, limited to immanence, rather than transcendence.

Julia Tuñón, another figure in Latin American feminisms, also considers archetypal female figures in Mexican society in her book *Mujeres en México: Una historia olvidada* (1987), as well as the 1999 English-language edition *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*. She includes three figures: Malinche, representing sexuality; the Virgin of Guadalupe, as a representation of maternal selflessness; and Sor Juana, representing the intellect. In the essay collection *Enjaular los cuerpos: normativas decimonónicas y feminidad en México* (2008), Tuñón's introduction provides an overview of debates surrounding the social and symbolic constructions of the female body – which maintains a central role in theoretical understandings of feminist literature in Latin America. In relation to the societal pressures on women, and the intentions and efforts to control the female body in adherence to certain values, Tuñón points out that "las mujeres no sólo deben respetar ciertos valores: deben encarnarlos" (12). The emphasis on female existence as centered in the body has often limited our understanding of women's experiences, as it fails to fully consider the cultural and sociohistorical circumstances which influence the realities of living as a woman. As Tuñón puts it, "las mujeres han sido asociadas, definidas y

confundidas con su cuerpo” (17). This is also reflected in historical medical practices which emphasize the influence of the womb, which was generally viewed as the malignant source of female health problems and, further, of female identity considering that “las mujeres se definen por la matriz” – once again recalling the old Latin saying ‘*Tota mulier in utero*’ (‘Women is nothing but a womb’) (Giberti, “Mujer, enfermedad y violencia en medicina” 74).

Pressures and demands on women are generally integrated into societal structures, in what Eva Giberti and Ana María Fernández refer to as “la violencia invisible” – including, but not limited to, economic and legal obstacles, domestic responsibilities, a lack of education and opportunity, as well as a scarcity of visible feminine figures in public arenas and political spheres (*La violencia invisible* 16). An important feminist effort in this regard is to name these “invisible” violences and, therefore, bring them into visible existence. As Giberti and Fernández explain:

poner nombre, nominar el malestar, no es exclusivamente un acto semántico o un hecho del discurso; la capacidad de dar existencia explícita, de publicar, de hacer público, de decir objetivado, de visibilizar, de enunciar, de teorizar aquello que – al no haber accedido a la experiencia objetivada y colectiva – continuaba en estado de experiencia individual, privada, como malestar, expectativa, ansiedad, inquietud, frustración, representa un formidable poder social; al decir de Bourdieu, los actos de nominación tienen el poder de hacer los grupos, constituyendo su sentido común, sus consensos. (20)

The effort to bring the individual experiences of women to light is a multi-faceted effort

which requires or, at the very least, benefits from a multi-disciplinary approach which might reflect the many facets of female experience, considering “los múltiples y complejos entramados históricos, psíquicos, sociales, políticos, económicos, ideológicos, que se inscriben en la llamada condición femenina” (21). Chilean writer, activist, and cultural theorist Nelly Richard has similarly emphasized the important influence of cultural studies and the arts in implementing feminisms and transforming society. In her article on “La crítica feminista como modelo de crítica cultural” (2009), for instance, she argues in favour of the cultural turn of contemporary feminist critiques as “una orientación vitalmente necesaria para incidir en las luchas por la significación que acompañan las transformaciones de la sociedad” (75). Literary works, including biographical novels, which focus on the lived experiences of women are undoubtedly a part of this effort.

1.2.4.1 Boom and *Boomito*

From the outside, literary production in Latin American has often been viewed through the lens of the *Boom*, when the works of a number of male authors (Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and José Donoso) became internationally recognized, in part due to the efforts of Seix Barral publishing house in Spain (Olivera-Williams 278). While this is a limited view, generally confined to Eurocentric or North American studies, the label of the *Boom* is relevant here in its relation to the comparative popularity of Latin American women writers. Donoso referred to the group of male writers of the *Boom* as “la ‘pandilla’ masculina” in his *Historia personal del boom* (1972) and his wife, María Pilar Donoso, wrote her own supplement

to the 1983 edition of her husband's book, titled "El 'boom' doméstico", in which she "stresses the patriarchal gender divide that underscored the Boom's narrative discourse, as well as its representatives' lives" (278-279). María Pilar Donoso's text describes how "through magical realism, [the Boom's] male authors generated a widely accepted image of Latin America as a 'tropical' continent, where women were the keepers of the authors' homes" (279). Further, the works of women writers contemporary to the Boom in Latin America, including Rosario Castellanos, María Luisa Bombal (1910-1980), and Elena Garro (1916-1998), were overlooked and omitted.

What is generally known as the post-Boom period, however, included what has been referred to as "the women's Boom" or, as Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré classified it, the *Boomito*, including female authors such as Luisa Valenzuela (1938-), Cristina Peri Rossi (1941-), Isabel Allende (1942-), and Elena Poniatowska (1932-) (Olivera-Williams 280). The women writers' *Boomito* presents itself as a "literary aftereffect of the powerful male Boom", with even Ferré's term referring to the movement as a parody of the original "Boom" (287). As Olivera-Williams explains: "On the one hand, they [the women writers] legitimate their writing by dialoguing explicitly and implicitly with texts by their male peers; on the other hand, through parody, their works introduce a corrective mechanism that rewrites the male Boom in a decidedly feminine key" (288). Yet, while the Boom writers were both critically recognized and commercially successful, the post-Boom women writers' works are generally divided into two categories: those with critical merit, and those with "bestseller" status. As Debra A. Castillo points out in her chapter on "Finding Feminisms": "Damiela Eltit is privileged (in the traditionally theoretical realms

of the academy) and marginalized (in popular terms); Laura Esquivel is also privileged (in popular culture and in popular culture studies) and marginalized (in the academy) in precisely the opposite configuration” (368). In some cases, bestsellers by female authors have dismissively been referred to as *literatura light*, as in the cases of Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel. In addition to the characterization of the *Boomito* as playful parody, the women writers in the post-Boom period focus on the importance of affect and women’s subjectivity, with intentions geared towards awareness and social change (198). It is also worth noting here that all three of the authors considered in the following chapters (Elena Poniatowska, Carmen Boullosa, and Gioconda Belli) are associated with the post-Boom. Poniatowska’s *Leonora* and Belli’s *El infinito en la palma de la mano* have received accolades, in the form of both awards and bestseller status, but they are also each lacking in critical treatment – likely due, at least in part, to the reluctance of critics to study popular, bestseller-type works.

1.3 Affect and Feminist Storytelling in Latin America

Mabel Moraña, in her chapter titled “El afecto en la caja de herramientas”, considers the role of affect in the formation of a social conscience and of imagined collectives (456). Affect, according to Moraña, shapes a community’s relationship with its past, connects it to the ways of understanding its present, and enables the projection of possible futures and potential change (456-457). The influence of affect in the stories by women and about women, written within a Latin American context, are thus essential to our understanding of female identity as it was in the past, as it is in the present, and as it could be in the future.

The analyses in the following chapters of this thesis are informed by the theories outlined above and, in regards to feminism, concur with the integrative biosocial constructionist theory outlined by Eagly and Wood. In addition, the selected novels and their female protagonists reflect a return to affect and story, both in the chosen novelistic form and in the choice of female figure as protagonist. The novels I study in the following essays contend with feminist issues related to the central protagonist and, while these differ in every case, each illustrates the struggles of a female character that simultaneously exemplifies and defies traditional or patriarchal aspects of femininity. Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* explores the life of an artist who might have been written off as a muse to her much older, much more famous lover Max Ernst, were it not for the willful tenacity and determination with which she carved out her own path, moving to Mexico to pursue artistic endeavours outside of the Eurocentric surrealist circles. The imagery and surrounding myths of Cleopatra, the subject of *De un salto descabalga la reina*, whether critical or laudatory, often revolve around her supposed fulfillment or negation of feminine ideals. Finally, in a revision of the biblical origin story, Gioconda Belli's alternative portrayal of Eve in *El infinito en la palma de la mano* challenges the traditional condemnations of the Eve from Genesis and redeems the character that is so often invoked in support of misogyny.

The selected novels dissect notions of femininity in female characters who have been chosen in their own societies, for better or worse, as figures to observe and as ones that represent their views, hopes, and/or fears related to women. Further, I argue that the

popularity of these figures in part stems from their conformity to certain traditional notions of femininity in combination with their non-conformist characteristics, activities, and/or attitudes. This ties back to the questions of story and life narratives as the people exposed to these stories consider themselves, and even women in general, in relation to the figures represented. The formation of identity, so influenced by stories and even taking the form of a plot (in the 3rd level of personality, as described by McAdams), is guided by such stories, and the ubiquity of the chosen figures attests to their scope and influence.

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Chapter 2

2 Psychology of a Biographical Novel: Narrative Empathy in Poniatowska's *Leonora*

“I am not courageous. Actually, I am very cowardly. In my life, I have acted because I have been very anguished. Many times I have suffered a lot from fear, from terror and from horror, but I always came through.” (Leonora Carrington qtd. in Grimberg 46)

Life stories have a long history in human societies. Portraits of the lives of religious and political leaders display the heroes and enemies of the people, and, as is usual in an artistic or literary encounter, contribute to the imagined connections within a community as well as the imagined differences between them and others. In Spanish America, auto/biographical works are part of what Sylvia Molloy refers to as the “imagination of self” (3). Molloy also points out the two types of memory at play in these works: individual memory, as in the details of a personal life, and collective memory, having to do with the community to which the individual belongs (9). And so, it often seems that the figures chosen to be represented in these accounts and the ways in which they are represented reflect the values of the society from which they emerge, potentially helping to shape the development of future ideals. The choice of figures can be a source of contention, particularly for the underrepresented as, for example, the written accounts of the lives of influential or memorable women in history are scarce in comparison to those of men. Filtered through written accounts, whether in official biographies or through the often loosely defined stories of novels, life stories, in their many forms, reflect, interpret, and create meaning.

At an individual level, the construction of a cohesive life narrative provides people with a sense of unity and purpose. While this is generally an internal and intuitive process, “individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class” (McAdams 101). There are various sources which inform these processes of story construction, and they include the explicit stories we are exposed to in daily life. Literary works, while only one type of such explicit stories, have the potential to affect the reader and even the reader’s construction of their own life story.

Interdisciplinary analyses in emerging fields such as cognitive literary studies, at the intersections of social sciences and humanities, aim to reach a deeper understanding of the connections between the stories in literary works and the psychological processes of their readers. They further reflect a renewed appreciation for creative works and the stories within them as sources for self-identity formation, following narrative personality theories which “[adapted] concepts from dramaturgical and literary discourses to the psychology of persons” (McAdams 100-101). Of particular interest are works concerned with those types of characters who have traditionally been sidelined in the more conventional stories so prevalent in Western narratives.

This concern has been at the center of the numerous genre-spanning works by journalist and author Elena Poniatowska. Born in France, Poniatowska moved to Mexico with her mother and sister during the Second World War. A prolific and audacious writer, her works include *Here’s to You, Jesusa! (Hasta no verte Jesús mío)* (1969), an account of the adventurous life of Oaxacan woman Jesusa Palancares; the testimonial-based *The*

Night of Tlatelolco (La noche de Tlatelolco) (1971), in which she investigated and disclosed the sinister role of the government in the student massacre of October 2, 1968, even while government-sanctioned newspapers downplayed and diminished them; *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake (Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor)* (1988), which brought together the testimonies of those affected by the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City; *Tinísima* (1992), a novelized account of the life of photographer and revolutionary Tina Modotti; and *Las siete cabritas* (2000), a collection of seven short narratives, each of which focuses on the life of a female writer or artist (at present without an English translation), among others. Through the figures represented in her works, Poniatowska has advocated for the marginalized and disenfranchised, providing “a voice to those without one, to those who are always silent” (Méndez-Faith 73). She particularly focuses on women, giving them what Mexican author Carlos Fuentes describes as “a central but not sanctified role in our society, as few other writers have done” (Fuentes x).

Poniatowska’s novel *Leonora*, published in 2011, with an English translation in 2015, narrates the life of English surrealist painter and writer Leonora Carrington (1917-2011). As someone born to upper class privilege, seldom silent, and not in need of anyone else to speak for her, Carrington hardly seems an ideal example of a marginalized figure. Yet her own struggles against prevailing notions about women, both in her personal life and in the surrealist circles of her life as an artist, along with the playfully dark incisiveness with which she dissects them in her works, have made Carrington into a feminist hero of sorts, as “a beacon for women artists and writers, a model of self-willed dedication to her

gifts, in the face of all the obstacles society set in her way” (Warner xxxiii). Best-known in Mexico, where she lived out most of her adult life and where her artworks are still on display in museums and public spaces of major cities, young Carrington resisted prescribed roles for upper-class women, refusing the life of an English heiress to instead pursue vocation as an artist, leaving Europe in 1941 and ultimately settling in Mexico City. Poniatowska’s novel is a third-person narration of Carrington’s life, based on interviews, research, and stories gathered through conversations with Carrington herself during their decades-long friendship. It includes the well-documented events of her life, including her childhood in Lancashire, England, her integration into surrealist circles in Europe, her hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic, and her life in Mexico, as well as more private and, in some cases, imagined episodes, with artistic liberties taken by the author.

In this chapter, I consider the form of *Leonora*, as a biographical novel, with a focus on the narrative properties and aspects of character development which make the novel effective in promoting character identification and reader empathy. Form, in this case, refers to the expression of genre and discourse, or the way in which the story information is conveyed, including “the provision and withholding of information and the arrangement of that information” (Colm Hogan 153). How does the form of *Leonora* encourage readers to identify with the characters and enable emotional connections between the reader and the protagonist? How might Poniatowska’s biographical novel prioritize a connection with the reader? And why does this connection matter, particularly in writing about women such as Carrington?

I first situate the genre in context, considering critical views on Poniatowska's works, and particularly her earlier works comparable to *Leonora*. I then consider the novel's potential in enabling reader empathy through a brief study of the genre classification of a biographical novel and its implications for a reader, based on recent inquiries in interdisciplinary cognitive literary studies, including those presented by Suzanne Keen and Lisa Zunshine. The following questions guide this section: Where does *Leonora* fit in terms of genre classification, under the umbrella term of life writing? Why refer to it as a biographical novel? Does it matter that this work, despite containing various biographical and historical facts, is presented as a work of fiction? How might the explicit blend of fact and fiction affect a reader? In other words, how does the reader incorporate the information presented in the form of a novel as opposed to the information presented as fact in a more traditional biography? Is it significant on a psychological level that Poniatowska's novel is primarily considered to be fiction? The aim of this analysis is not to evaluate what is or is not 'true', or even what this could mean, but rather to examine how the representation of Carrington in the biographical novel, with its particular combination of documental 'fact' and literary 'fiction' promotes understanding with a reader.

I subsequently examine specific instances in *Leonora* which employ the use of invented scenes or characters—a defining characteristic of the biographical novel—primarily drawing from the arguments in Michael Lackey's *Truthful Fictions*. This section includes various episode analyses, including before, after, and during Leonora's time in the asylum, as well as the last scene of the novel, in which the invented character of "Pepita"

appears. In each case, I focus my analysis on those aspects of Leonora's character which are highlighted in Poniatowska's novel. Guiding this study are the following questions: how are the inventions meaningful in the representation of the protagonist? How do they alter the representation, perhaps revealing internal conflicts, providing a sense of closure to the reader, illuminating features of the character's complexity, or emphasizing those features most likely to induce empathy? And how might this representation of Carrington create more potential for empathetic identification? This analysis aims to further our understanding of the methods of narrative and character development in the biographical novel which provide potential for empathetic identification with feminist figures.

2.1 Classifying Poniatowska's Biographical Novel

As with any type of classification, a genre label inevitably limits the characterization of the work it describes. Yet genre-definition still serves a purpose. The "based on a true story" catch phrase and marketing gimmick that accompanies many works of fiction and that so often appears at the start or end of a film trailer, points to the influence of genre-definition in capturing an audience's attention. A biography written in the form of a novel may be, for the reader, "based on a true story" but, for the writer, a true story written without the restraints of non-fictional genres. Often, writers will evade the question of genre altogether. Examining the form of a hybrid genre such as Poniatowska's *Leonora*, with elements of distinct forms traditionally considered in both fictional and non-fictional classifications, involves a brief tread into the complications of overlapping or conflicting

terms and definitions.²⁵ In many ways similar and interrelated with this hybrid genre, auto/biographical, testimonial, and other works within the realm of life writing theory grapple with the hazy partitions between fact and fiction.²⁶ While these boundary-blurring works are influential and significant in studies of life writing in its various forms, they differ from the biographical novel primarily in their categorization as non-fictional works, the focus here being on aspects particular to the explicitly novelistic form.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay on “The Art of Biography”, writes that “the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” would “destroy each other... Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve two masters, simultaneously” (120). In a more recent example, Mary Evans’s 1999 book *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography* explores examples of how both biography and autobiography are combinations of fact and fiction which only ever produce a partial, incomplete representation of the subject. The postmodern aspects of hybrid or genre-crossing

²⁵ For works that cover the evolution of biography, the novel, and the biographical novel (and the many variants in between), see Michael Lackey’s *Biographical Fiction: A Reader* (2017), and *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014). For a succinct work on the question of truth in biography, see *The Art of Literary Biography*, specifically Richard Holmes’s “Biography: Inventing the Truth” and, from the same collection, Lyndall Gordon’s “Women’s Lives: The Unmapped Country” on the representation of female literary figures in biography. For more on literary biography, the works of Michael Benton are concise and informative, including *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (2009) and *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography* (2015). For a general overview of the history of biography, also see Nigel Hamilton’s *Biography: A Brief History*, which provides a clear overview of the development of biographical works, and an expanded definition of these works, including alternative life portraits within the corpus of biography.

²⁶ For an overview of current discussions in life writing theory, see Chansky and Hipchen, *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. While related to the discussion of genre here, an in-depth or comprehensive consideration of life writing theory is beyond the scope of this chapter.

writings, such as Poniatowska's, have been the focus of various studies. From the essay collection *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, Sharon O'Brien blends theories on literary biography with feminist theories, reconciling the two and outlining a new framework for feminist biographical writing in her article on "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography".²⁷ She reflects on the contradictory expectations of readers and critics, succinctly summarizing the general intellectual understanding of history and biography, as she notes: "Theoretical developments in psychoanalysis and semiotics as well as poststructuralism and deconstruction have led many of us to question (if not discard) beliefs in the transparency of language, in the possibility of objectivity, in the explanatory power of narrative, and in the self as a unified, knowable, and recoverable entity" (123). O'Brien offers some possible models for feminist literary biography, with an emphasis on the effectiveness of storytelling practices, used in a way which accepts that no representation will ever be complete:

I do not think that we need to dispense with the pleasures of narrative or the power of storytelling. Storytelling itself is completely consistent with deconstruction—quite simply, we make everything up—and if we can find ways to tell the stories of women's lives without implying that these stories are inevitable, natural, transparent, objective renditions of other selves, we can retain the

²⁷ For more on postmodern approaches to feminist auto/biography, see Liz Stanley's *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (1992).

satisfactions of traditional biography without succumbing to the genre's troubling assumptions. (131-2)

In the case of *Leonora*, the novel's combination of historical facts along with semi-invented dialogues and details based on Carrington's life follows Poniatowska's particular stylistic approach to the representation of the life of her subject. The author creates flowing dialogue and elaborate descriptions to maintain reader interest while illustrating a clear portrait of the protagonist. In her own words in the acknowledgements to the novel, Poniatowska writes in reference to *Leonora*: "I call it a novel, for it has no pretensions whatsoever to being a biography, but is instead a free approximation to the life of an exceptional artist" (456-457). With this statement, the author concurs with others' classification of her work as an alternative to the rigidity of an explicitly non-fiction or 'factual' book and a more liberated way to share her subject's life story with the readers.

Poniatowska's earlier fictional biographical works, such as *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, on the life of Jesusa Palancares, and *Tinísima*, about photographer and revolutionary Tina Modotti, have received considerable critical attention in regards to form and genre. While *Leonora* has thus far received comparatively little attention in this regard, selected critiques of the earlier novels are relevant context for the discussion here. A number of studies have considered the placement of Poniatowska's genre-crossing works, particularly within the scope of Postmodern Hispanic literature. Lucille Kerr, in a study on authorship and questions of truth in Poniatowska's 1969 novel *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, situates the work within the realm of what she refers to as documentary fiction and

specifically the Spanish American *novela testimonial*. She considers Poniatowska's explanations of how she composed the text based on the testimony of Jesusa Palancares (whose real name later was revealed to be "Josefina Bórquez", disclosed after the informant's death) as well as the problematic generic affinities of the work (Kerr 377).

As in later works, Poniatowska is candid about her writing process and "has emphasized the literary aims and techniques employed to produce *Hasta no verte Jesús Mío*", explaining "how the text was composed, how she suppressed or selected, combined or cut, materials from Jesusa's testimony, so as to construct a *novela testimonial*" (373). Similar to the case of *Leonora*, the author has acknowledged the novelistic aspect of the work, pointing out that, as she is not an anthropologist, her work may be considered a testimonial novel and not an anthropological or sociological document (Poniatowska, "Jesusa Palancares" 10).

Poniatowska's *Last siete cabritas*, a collection of short narratives on the lives of seven female artists and writers, has also drawn attention to the form of the work, particularly in the ways in which the writing style reflects the subject matter and a strong connection between content and form (Erro-Peralta 338). The author's style of interpretation recreates the lives of the women from both an impersonal, objective point of view as well as a subjective and intimate one, combining different sources to do so. As Erro-Peralta explains: "Como cronista cultural, Poniatowska enriquece sus interpretaciones al ofrecer una crónica híbrida que acoge una diversidad de textos que van desde citas de obras creativas, diarios y cartas de las propias mujeres, diálogos reconstruidos, conversaciones

recordadas, además de entrevistas y comentarios a sus coetáneos” (338). In doing so, she creates a multifaceted version of the protagonists, adding depth to the representation of each female subject (339).

In regards to *Tinísima*, the most comparable of Poniatowska’s earlier works to *Leonora*, Poniatowska puts forth a different objective than for *Leonora*. While she commented that *Tinísima* would be a novel as loyal as possible to Tina Modotti’s reality, she also admitted that, due to a lack of documents and information about Modotti’s time in Germany and Russia, the boundaries between fiction and history would be blurred (Jørgensen 268). For example, all of the specifics related to the espionage missions in *Tinísima* was pure invention, though it is known that she was involved with espionage work (268). The reason for the author’s invention here is clearly identified: there is no documentation, so she must invent these scenes for continuity. But the explicit intention of the novel was still faithfulness to the reality of Modotti’s life. Writing *Leonora* appears to have been a more clearly identified recourse to fiction defined as fiction. That is, Poniatowska disengages herself from the intention to follow the route of accuracy and instead molds a work that is more freely in what she considered to be the spirit of the protagonist’s character. In a 2009 article on *Tinísima*, Clary Loisel considers the work as biographical fiction or fictional biography, though she concludes the article speculating that “perhaps *Tinísima* is less a ‘fictional biography’ than a kind of Postmodern magical realism, an enigma as perplexing as mistaking a photograph for the ‘reality’ it supposedly captured” (91). Zaida Capote Cruz, on the other hand, posits that the novelistic aspect of *Tinísima* was a matter of preference on the part of Poniatowska, rather than a result of

necessity. She points out that the material Poniatowska gathered was more than enough for a biography, but she nevertheless preferred to write a novel (Capote Cruz 315). Beth E. Jörgensen, who has written extensively about Poniatowska, also examines the text as a biographical novel in her article “Fotoescritura: Biografía y fotografía en *Tinísima*”, studying the constructed subject as both historical and fictitious, along with the ways that Poniatowska integrates artistic reproductions (in this case, photographs) into the work.²⁸ Magdalena Perkowska, in “La negociación del espacio de la mujer en la historia de *Tinísima* de Elena Poniatowska”, likewise refers to the work as an example of a biographical novel, which she defines as a hybrid genre that emerges from the zone of ambiguity at the boundary between fiction and documentary biography (296-297). Traditionally regarded as a type of text which reconstructs the lives of ‘hombres ilustres’, Perkowska argues that the biographical genre is appealing to someone seeking to fill the gaps in traditional historiography, as it places a life into ‘His-story’. In the case of Poniatowska’s work, “*Tinísima* resquebraja la autoridad de la Historia y su discurso desde su aparente tradicionalismo [...] para subvertir así la metanarrativa que excluye a las mujeres del espacio y del texto de la Historia: His-story en inglés” (Perkowska 311). The traditional focus of conventional biography on the lives of ‘great men’ suggests that a non-traditional, genre-crossing form of writing is more appropriate for a work on the life of a non-traditional subject.

²⁸ Also see Jörgensen’s *Engaging Dialogues: The Writing of Elena Poniatowska* (1994).

Perhaps most often identified are the Postmodern aspects of Poniatowska's earlier works, and particularly of *Tinísima*. Jane Lavery, in a 2007 study of *Tinísima* alongside Tomás Eloy Martínez's novel *Santa Evita*, focuses on Postmodern and New Historical aspects of the representations of the two women. She considers the Postmodern techniques of the novels which characterize the subjects as fragmented and elusive, something that is further "reflected at a textual level, where both texts are notable for their use of multiple and often incongruous narrative techniques and discourses" (Lavery 227). In agreement with other studies of *Tinísima*, Lavery views the works as part of a hybrid genre that shifts between fiction and documentary styles, "interweaving testimonial, biographical, journalistic, and literary techniques". She points out how Poniatowska's blending of official and unofficial sources create a dialogic or heteroglossic text, which "serves to undermine the official historical discourse" of the subject (230). This reading of *Tinísima*, centered in a view of the text as offering a postmodern representation of the protagonist, is a useful backdrop for the current study of *Leonora*. While the two works share certain distinctive aspects, including the blend of fiction and non-fiction discourses, what emerges from *Leonora* contains features of both postmodern and modern sensibilities.²⁹

In one of the few studies which includes *Leonora*, Iliana Alcántar examines the narrative form of *Leonora* along with earlier novel *Tinísima* and suggests that Poniatowska's hybrid narrative reveals a female gaze by emphasizing the subjectivity of the female protagonists. She proposes that the use of the hybrid genre of what she calls either

²⁹ See section 1.1 on metamodernism for more.

biographical fiction or novelized biography in these works is inherent to the author's objective of female empowerment (Alcántar 119). According to Alcántar, it is through the fictional form of the novel that Poniatowska expresses what neither biography nor history can do on their own, bringing the reader closer to the subject through fictional narrative (120-128). Incorporating theories on feminist biography, Alcántar also notes the significance of the connections between the writer and her subject, including the autobiographical aspects of writing a biographical-type work about another person. Bell Gale Chevigny, for example, sees biographical writing as a maternal act in her article on "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography", and Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich describes it as a gesture of friendship between women in "Friendship Between Women: The Art of Feminist Biography" – especially pertinent in this case considering that Poniatowska and Carrington were friends in life as well. Poniatowska herself has recognized the autobiographical component of any type of writing in an interview with Walescka Pino-Ojeda, responding to the interviewer's question of whether her literature takes on autobiographical features, saying: "yo creo que en toda literatura uno parte siempre de uno mismo, de sus propias experiencias, de sus vivencias y de aquello que lo ha marcado o lo ha golpeado" (Pino-Ojeda 21). While there are clear links between the author and each of her chosen protagonists, even beyond the inevitable connections she refers to in the above quote, the over fifty years of friendship between the two women would have affected Poniatowska's writing of the novel and her representation of Leonora. In the acknowledgements at the end of *Leonora*, the author writes that "ver a Leonora ha sido siempre un privilegio y una alegría porque me remite a mi infancia, a mis padres, a mis orígenes, a los países que tenemos en común" ("seeing Leonora has

always been a privilege and a pleasure, for it takes me back to my own childhood, my parents, my origins, to the countries we had in common”), drawing together the influence of their friendship and similar upbringings (Poniatowska 505; 455-456).³⁰ In addition, Poniatowska would have been very familiar with Carrington’s paintings and writings, something that continually comes up throughout the novel, as many of the paintings and subtle references to written works are integrated into the narration of different periods in Carrington’s life. The two friends even collaborated on Poniatowska’s first book, *Lilus Kikus* (1954), which Carrington illustrated.

While other definitions have been suggested, my use of the term “biographical novel” in this chapter maintains the label of “novel” given by the author, while more explicitly indicating the biographical nature of the text. An essential aspect of biographical novels that clearly differentiates them from the related nonfiction genres is the addition of invented scenes, events, or characters into the novel. Considering “the postmodernist claim that fictionalizing reality is inescapable as the art of framing a character or story necessitates a creative shaping of material”, Michael Lackey explains in *Truthful Fictions* how “biographical novelists do something more conscious and strategic” (8). In the case of *Leonora*, the writer goes beyond the necessary fictionalization in writing any story, deliberately constructing a narrative which emphasizes those aspects central to her subject’s character. According to Lackey, “in their effort to represent a structure of consciousness or a historical reality biographical novelists frequently subordinate

³⁰ All English quotations of Poniatowska’s *Leonora* are from the 2015 translation by Amanda Hopkinson.

empirical facts to a symbolic truth” (6). Specifically, biographical novelists “invent stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, or signify human interiors” (8). In the case of *Leonora*, for example, an invention in the form of a young woman named Pepita appears in the final chapter of the novel as the most easily recognizable character not explicitly based on a real person with whom Leonora Carrington was acquainted during her lifetime. In this instance, as in other biographical novels, the author’s choice to add this invention into the otherwise biographically or historically accurate story emphasizes some aspect of their representation of the main figure, in this case providing a sense of closure (to be discussed in section 2.3.3 below). A purpose of Poniatowska’s work in this case is to provide an understanding of the character’s interior life, with hard biographical facts as an often useful but occasionally disposable tool. As Lackey points out, “the biographical novel, which takes into account the surreal dimension of the biographical subject, shifts the focus from the seemingly objective reality of the external world to the subjective reality of the internal world” (“Rise of Biographical Novel” 46). Despite the explicit use of biographical and historical facts, the priority of the biographical novel, with the character at the center, is the story itself and its accessibility to the reader. Lackey further links the rejection of what Jean-François Lyotard describes as meta-narratives or grand narratives to the rise of the biographical novel (Lackey 17). The shift away from ahistorical narratives towards the historically specific stories of biographical fiction reflects the centrality of the “inductive imagination” in this type of fiction, whereby “biographical novelists immerse themselves in a historically specific figure in order to draw a more cross-cultural conclusion” (19). In this way, the story of a particular

individual provides a means for the reader to understand similar though potentially unrelated circumstances:

Instead of inventing a symbolic character or group that exposes and expresses a timeless truth (Mr. Dalton in *Native Son* or the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*), biographical novelists derive a ‘truth’ from the experiences of a concrete historical figure. But the ‘truth’ that they derive is not a traditional universal, which would apply to all people in all places at all times. Rather, it is a cross-cultural and cross-temporal ‘truth’ which we could refer to as a limited or provisional universal. (Lackey 20)

The specific is here a gateway to understanding, however limited, that the reader is able to selectively apply to analogous situations. By appealing to readers’ inclination toward stories, this novelistic format inspires the inductive imagination, whereby the story of a particular individual provides a means for the reader to understand similar situations. In other words, it matters to the reader that something be considered “true” or at least “based on a true story” as it gives the impression that there is a concrete lesson to be extracted from the story, but it is also crucial that the story be told as a cohesive narrative, with emphasis on particular aspects which enhance the characterization of the protagonist. The biographical novel thus seems to offer the “truth” of a traditional biography, while providing the allure and diversion of a well-told story.

2.2 Leonora Carrington (1917-2011)

Leonora Carrington was born into a rich industrialist family in 1917, an only daughter with three brothers.³¹ She evaded the expectations of her father, insisting on studying to become an artist rather than fulfilling a traditional female role. A disobedient child, Leonora was expelled from the convent schools where her parents had sent her, after which they would eventually send her to Mrs. Penrose's Academy of Art in Florence. In 1935, she moved to London to study painting at the Chelsea School of Art and afterwards at the Amédée Ozenfant Academy. Two years later, at a dinner party of one of her classmates at the Academy, she met Max Ernst, 26 years her senior, and would move to Paris soon afterwards. In Paris, she would spend time with the surrealists there, and particularly the then-married Max Ernst, who had become her lover and mentor. The two moved to a small village in Southern France in 1938, in part to escape Ernst's wife Marie-Berthe Aurenche, until Ernst, German-born, was arrested for the second time during the war. Carrington had a mental breakdown after he was taken away, and eventually fled to Spain with a friend, to later be sent to an asylum in Santander. After her experiences in the Spanish asylum, she escaped on route to another asylum in South Africa and fled to the Mexican Embassy in Lisbon to find Mexican diplomat and poet Renato Leduc and ask for help. She married Leduc (mutually agreed upon for

³¹ The biographical information in this section is based on Susan L. Aberth's *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art* (2004), Whitney Chadwick's *Leonora Carrington: The Mexican Years, 1943-1985* (1991), Marina Warner's "Introduction" to *Down Below* (2017), and the articles in the exhibition catalogue *Leonora Carrington: The Celtic Surrealist* (2013) from the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

convenience), moved with him to New York in 1941 to escape the Second World War and, eventually, went with him to Mexico City, where she would live out most of her life. She befriended a group of exiles in Mexico City, including the painter Remedios Varo, with whom she would become very good friends. In 1946, Carrington married the Hungarian photographer Imre Emerico “Chiki” Weisz, with whom she had two children, Gabriel and Pablo. In addition to her paintings, Carrington published short stories in multiple collections, a novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976), as well as a memoir of her experiences in the asylum, titled *Down Below* and originally published in 1944. Her works reflected the artist’s interests in animals, symbolism, and mysticism, which developed alongside her experiences and influences, curating a distinctive style of her own. Carrington died at the age of 94 in May of 2011, just months after the publication of *Leonora*.

From the age of 20, Carrington had associated with members of the surrealist movement, most notably with her mentor and romantic partner Max Ernst. She would continue to be associated with surrealism throughout her life, although she would reject certain tenets of the movement, in particular those related to women. Unabashedly feminist, Carrington objected to the notion of woman as muse, as well as the *femme enfant*, arguing against the infantilizing of women and diminishing of a woman’s role as an artist herself. Multiple interview excerpts, in addition to Carrington’s work, reveal her opinions on the subject, expressing, for instance, how “surrealist men wanted the women in their lives as muses, to look good, and to serve them their wine” (Grimberg 52). Though representative of a surrealist aesthetic, Carrington explained that although she “liked the ideas of the

surrealists, André Breton and the men of the group were very *machistas*. They only wanted us to entertain them as muses, mad or sensuous” (Cherem 20). In Poniatowska’s novel, this appears, for instance, in a scene where Breton encourages Leonora to write about her time in the asylum and her experience of madness. Leonora responds with protests about the painful nature of remembering those recent experiences. Breton insists, seeing potential in regards to his own theories on expressions of hysteria and madness, and the narrative reflects Carrington’s sentiments: “Y por qué no es Breton el de la belleza convulsiva, por qué siempre una mujer? [...] Él lo que quiere es que la mujer regrese del abismo para analizarla y completar su visión del inconsciente” (“So why is Breton himself not possessed of this convulsive beauty, why does it always have to be a woman? [...] What he would prefer is for the woman to return to the abyss, so he can analyse her and so complete his views on the unconscious”) (Poniatowska 276; 247). Having experienced the convulsions for herself, Carrington fittingly challenges the surrealist romanticizing of “convulsive beauty” of madness or hysteria.

In regards to her own role as Ernst’s muse as a young woman, Carrington has commented on how “at that time I still accepted a lot of shit. Being a muse! All it means is that you’re someone’s object” (Conrad 28). The character of Leonora in Poniatowska’s novel freely expresses these same opinions, saying how “No soy una *femme enfant* [...] Caí en este grupo por Max, no me considero surrealista” (“I am not a *femme enfant*. I happened upon your group through Max, but I don’t consider myself a surrealist”) and further, addressing the deification of women by the surrealists: “¡Todo ese endiosamiento de la mujer es puro cuento! Ya vi que los surrealistas las usan como a cualquier esposa. Las

llaman sus musas pero terminan por limpiar el excusado y hacer la cama” (“All this deification of woman is a load of nonsense! I’ve seen how the surrealists use women the same as any wife is used. The surrealists may *call* their women muses, but it’s the women who still end up making the beds and cleaning the toilet”) (Poniatowska 91; 75). In her own works, images of animals replace the women muses of the male surrealists’ works, with nature as intermediary and creative inspiration (Chadwick, “Feminist Consciousness” 38). Carrington was nevertheless accepted into the male-dominated surrealist circles, despite her questioning of the roles generally assigned to women.

Reluctant to associate fully with any doctrine, Carrington was critical of any movement with dogmatic or authoritarian features. In many ways, her attraction to surrealism was related to her fascination with the oneiric and the occult, as well as her connection to the fantastic through her Irish background and upbringing. Less interested in the Freudian psychoanalysis popular amongst the surrealists, Carrington was an adherent of Jungian theories, which considered dreams as a window into the unconscious and as a source of knowledge and understanding. An avid reader, Carrington was interested in science, philosophy, and various forms of mysticism and esoteric thought, including Gurdjieffian mysticism, Tibetan Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Mayan mystical writings, among others (Cherem 19). In regards to psychoanalysis, Carrington has written that “although this science is in its embryonic stage, the lies that we live out show themselves in dreams. There appears ‘the one who knows’ in the unconscious, where it is not confused, and it can emerge into consciousness if emotions are prepared to accept some elements of the truth” (Carrington, “Female Human Animal” 15). However, the feminist movement was

perhaps the only one with which Carrington wholly identified. Her trust in the truth of dreams ultimately extended to the experience of living as women, as she writes, in continuation of the above excerpt:

The idea that our “masters” are in the right and that we owe love, devotion, and obedience to them, is, I believe, one of the most destructive lies that has been instilled in the female psyche. It is terribly obvious what these “masters” have done to our earth and its organic life. If we women continue passive, I think that then there is little hope that life will survive on this planet. (“Female Human” 15)

Carrington became one of the founding members of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Mexico. She designed a poster promoting women’s liberation in 1972, *Mujeres Conciencia* (Figure 1): an image which represents a rejection of the myth of Eve’s original sin, and the sinful nature of women, with a “New Eve (the liberated woman)” handing the forbidden fruit of knowledge back to the “Old Eve (the subjugated woman)” (Grimberg 86).³²

Even prior to any activism, many of Carrington’s paintings and written works dealt with female experience, notably in addressing the question of female creativity and its expression (Chadwick, “Feminist Consciousness” 41). Her works have been the subject of many studies, including examinations of Carrington’s personal symbolism represented in her paintings. Her popularity further extends across borders and the Atlantic, with the

³² *Mujeres Conciencia* was widely distributed, including for a 1995 Conference of Women held in Beijing (Grimberg 89). Also see Susan Aberth’s *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art* (2004), pp. 62-63.

English, Mexican, and Irish all claiming her as their own. In spite of such recognition, Carrington approached her work without pretension to fame, often quoted as saying that she painted for herself: “I never believed anyone would exhibit or buy my work” (40). She was known to be wary of interviewers, tending to avoid the spotlight, particularly in her later years. She resisted analyses of her works, believing that “those who are attuned to the image will receive the information” and claiming that her art is wiser than she is (Grimber 90-91). Carrington was a figure simultaneously immersed in her own imaginative world while keenly aware and critical of the world around her – a sentiment preserved in Poniatowska’s novel.

2.3 Narrative Empathy through *Leonora*

Carrington’s life, works, and personality have elicited interest and are the subject of a number of non-fictional works. These sources contribute significantly to an understanding of the artist, but they unavoidably do so by approaching her as an object of study. Poniatowska’s novel, while containing many of the same details as non-fictional sources, connects with a reader the way literary works connect: through emotional empathy. The role of emotion in literature has long been a point of interest for philosophers and, more recently, psychologists and narrative theorists. In the Western tradition, early interest includes Plato’s distrust of the emotional effects of literature, followed by Aristotle’s response in his discussion of the potential for catharsis of fear and pity through literary works (Colm Hogan 3). As discussed below, the novelistic tendencies of Poniatowska’s work highlight the potential for empathy elicited by the

fictional narrative form.

In “Narrative Empathy”, for instance, Suzanne Keen analyzes the connections between narratives and empathetic responses in readers. Her analysis includes a review of the current studies on narrative techniques and their effects on readers. In a review of the effects of internal perspective, in which readers are provided with the inner thoughts of one or more characters, she concludes that “most theorists agree that purely externalized narration tends not to invite readers’ empathy” (Keen 77). Externalized narration or perspective being most common in non-fiction narratives, including traditional biographies, Keen’s statement supports the idea that *Leonora*’s narrative, in which the reader is provided with internal perspective, is more effective in promoting character identification and readers’ empathy than traditional biography. As Poniatowska’s narrative is more likely to encourage readers to identify and empathize with her characters, it more readily enables emotional connections between the reader and the subject of the text.

Current research also posits that reading literature requires the use of “theory of mind”—a concept that refers to the human ability to attribute feelings, beliefs, and intentions to others. The term is used interchangeably with “mind-reading” by cognitive psychologists “to describe our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” and is one of the cognitive concepts used in literary analyses (Zunshine 6). It has also been suggested that engaging readers’ theory of mind skills through literary works, theorizing about the inner thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and

intentions of the characters based on the information given by the author, essentially improves the ability to do so (Leverage and Mancing 2). In a 2013 study by psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, they demonstrated through a series of experiments that literary fiction improves theory of mind skills, making the readers more empathetic as they are better able to identify and understand other people's mental states (377). It is interesting to note that, in their study, the improvement of the individuals' theory of mind depended on the type of assigned reading material, and popular fiction did not have the same effects as literary fiction. The authors' contention was "that literary fiction, which we consider to be both writerly and polyphonic, uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences" (377). Part of the advantage of fiction, they claim, is rooted in the safety that the world of fiction offers:

Just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration. The worlds of fiction, though, pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. (377)

The cushion of the fictional world offers a psychologically comfortable environment in which the reader is more receptive to representations which challenge their views and beliefs. For Comer Kidd and Castano, literary fiction tasks the reader to shift perspective, placing themselves in the unfamiliar minds of complex characters:

[whereas] many of our mundane social experiences may be scripted by convention and informed by stereotypes, those presented in literary fiction often

disrupt our expectations. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. That is, they must engage ToM [theory of mind] processes. (377)

Additionally, the readers' perception of the text as fiction or non-fiction also influences their empathy in relation to the text and its characters. Keen argues that "paratexts cuing readers to understand a work as fictional unleash their emotional responsiveness, in spite of fiction's historical mimicry of non-fictional, testimonial forms" with her research suggesting that "readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion" (78). Considering Keen's argument, it is clear that Poniatowska's deliberate reference to *Leonora* as a novel and her avoidance of any terminology that could suggest that it might be a biography or any other non-fictional narrative form actually encourages the reader to be more empathetically responsive with the text. In other words, Poniatowska's novel is more likely to strike a chord with readers just by defining itself as fiction.

Along the same lines, Brian Richardson stresses the significance of the label of fiction: "When doing narrative theory and analysis, we must recognize the central, crucial status of fiction. No matter how closely it tries to imitate nonfictional discourses, narrative fiction is always a very different kind of speech act. Its functions, intentions, and effects diverge substantially from those of nonfiction" (22). This stress on the importance of authorial intention in writing a work of fiction relates again to Poniatowska's explicitly stated intentions in the acknowledgements at the end of *Leonora* that define the book as

“a free approximation to the life of an exceptional artist” and keep it within the realm of fiction (Poniatowska 457). While it may in some sense imitate nonfictional discourses such as biography, it is above all a fictional narrative.

In *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine also considers the differentiation between fiction and non-fiction labels from a psychological perspective. First, relating to fiction’s potential, she notes that “‘false’ accounts may add to one’s store of knowledge about possible social strategies, physical actions, and types of people, in a way that is better than true, accurate, but boring accounts of daily life” (Zunshine 67). Although this observation is based on relatively preliminary studies and there is still much to be understood, it is significant. It points to the question of a subconscious consideration of text genre identification as either fiction or nonfiction, history or story. Specifically, this concept is referred to as “source-tagging”, meaning that upon learning something new, the brain “tags” or labels the information according to the source that provided it, and in doing so affects how the information is stored. As Zunshine explains, “Our cognitive makeup allows us to store a given representation with a very strong, perhaps permanent, source tag” (72). While this type of differentiation between fiction and non-fiction might seem like a simple question of terminology, Keen’s, Richardson’s, and Zunshine’s arguments suggest that it is much more significant, particularly as it has important consequences for the reader. These studies support the argument that *Leonora* as a work of fiction is a more effective communicative tool than it would be as a traditional biography or other explicitly non-fictional work.

2.3.1 The Depths: Suffering and Return from *Down Below*

Particular events in the narrative of *Leonora* highlight the capabilities of the biographical novel, a fictional form, in contrast with an explicitly auto/biographical or non-fictional approach. Here I will focus on the episode of Carrington's time spent in the mental hospital: an experience which is depicted by Carrington herself in her own written work, *Down Below*, with clear references to the contents of the work seamlessly incorporated into Poniatowska's novel. Additionally, I consider the context of the *Down Below* experiences within the novel, examining how the narrative both before and after these experiences serves to intensify emotional response.

First written in 1942, but later rewritten and revised after the original draft was lost, *Down Below* is Carrington's own account of her experiences during WWII, centered around her incarceration in an asylum in Santander, Spain. In 1939, Carrington suffered a nervous psychotic break after witnessing her partner, Max Ernst, arrested and taken away to an internment camp for the second time during the war. While she initially refused to leave their shared home in Saint Martin d'Ardèche, Carrington was eventually persuaded to flee with an old friend, Catherine Yarrow, and Yarrow's companion to Spain. Carrington's mental state deteriorated rapidly on the journey and, once in Spain, representatives from her father's international company intervened on his orders to have her interned. During her treatment, described in great detail both in her own account and in Poniatowska's novel, she underwent convulsion therapy and three injections of

Cardiazol—a controversial drug used to induce violent seizures to treat psychosis.³³ *Down Below* is written in a first person confessional style, addressed in the first paragraphs to Pierre Mabile, a friend of Carrington’s in the group of refugees in Mexico who had encouraged her to rewrite her experiences after losing the earlier draft (Warner xxv). The work begins with Ernst being taken away for the second time in May of 1940 and ends with a postscript detailing Carrington’s escape from the Imperial Chemicals representatives sent by her father in Lisbon on the way to another sanatorium in South Africa. The title refers to the depths of her madness, her psychological journey ‘down below’ which “echoes mythological and literary descents into hell”, but also to an actual place within the asylum where the worst of Carrington’s treatment—the Cardiazol injections—will stop (Warner xxiv). Carrington also produced a painting by the same title as the written work during her incarceration. While the painting *Down Below* (1941) (Figure 2) has little to do with Carrington’s experiences described in the written work, despite the homonymous title, it does include aspects of the asylum as setting. The painting features four human-animal hybrid creatures, seemingly female, with a horse and dark-haired woman (Carrington) on the far right. In Poniatowska’s novel, the painting is described in detail, with what seems to be the author’s own interpretation of the figures as well, including the mask held up by one of the figures as “una máscara que podría ser el rostro de Max Ernst” (“a mask that could be the face of Max Ernst”) (223-224; 196). In addition to the painting, a drawing, *Map of Down Below* (ca. 1941) (Figure

³³ For a study of Carrington’s account through a psychiatric lens, see Ann Hoff’s 2009 article “‘I Was Convulsed, Pitiably Hideous’: Convulsive Shock Treatment in Leonora Carrington’s *Down Below*”.

3), appears within the written text of *Down Below*, featuring an overhead visual of the asylum as Carrington saw it. She also included a sketched *Portrait of Dr. Morales* (ca. 1941) (Figure 4), featuring Doctor Luis Morales who oversaw her treatment at Santander.

Chapters 22 to 27 in Poniatowska's *Leonora* detail Carrington's time in the Santander asylum, with *Down Below* as a clear source. While the novel closely follows the events portrayed in Carrington's autobiographical *Down Below*, Poniatowska's work expands on certain events and alters others. In general, the novel gives a more contextual representation, describing the settings and circumstances of each scene in detail, whereas the descriptions are more fragmentary and disjointed in Carrington's memories in *Down Below*. However, the novel reproduces the exact wording of its source in various instances. For example, during the second Cardiazol injection, the novel explains how "Leonora organiza su propia defensa. Cierra los ojos para evitar la llegada del más insoportable de los sufrimientos: la mirada de los otros" ("Leonora decides on her own form of defence. She closes her eyes to avoid penetration by the most intolerable suffering: other people staring at her" (Poniatowska 212; 186). In *Down Below*, Carrington writes: "Thereupon I organized my own defence. I knew that by closing my eyes, I could avoid the advent of the most unbearable pain: the stare of others" (Carrington 47). The replication here, and in other cases, demonstrates the extent of Poniatowska's familiarity with Carrington's work. With an understanding of how deeply acquainted she was with the artist's life and works, Poniatowska's alterations or divergences from the source take on a weighty significance. It becomes clear that the slight modifications, amplifications, and omissions are intentional and deliberate.

In another instance, the conversations with the doctors at the Santander mental institution are rearranged and magnified in the novel. A comparison of the two works exposes how the conversations have been altered for increased clarity for the reader, but also to provide a more detailed and comprehensive portrayal of Leonora's state of mind. What appear as small snippets of dialogue in *Down Below* become pages-long discussions in *Leonora*. One such discussion delves into the dynamics of Leonora's relationships, placing at the forefront her difficulties and power struggles with her father, with her much older lover (Max Ernst), and now her doctor. Poniatowska's novel sets the scene for the conversation with Leonora with an interaction between the doctor and the nurse. In response to the nurse's complaints about Leonora's stubborn disobedience the doctor replies with the assurance that they would give her another injection of Cardiazol and electric shock if she continues this way, explaining that "esta paciente no conoció ni la disciplina ni el control, le permitieron hacer lo que le venía en gana, se volvió extravagante y fantasiosa" ("this patient has never known either discipline or control, she has been permitted to do whatever she wanted, and has become extravagant and fantastical in her habits") (201; 176). In the interaction that follows, Leonora's drive to get out from under the power and influence of others is made palpable. In response to the doctor's attempt to soothe her, Leonora declares: "Mire, no creo en Dios, no tengo hijos ni mucho menos patria, y el rey es un imbécil. Espero salir de aquí si usted y su padre me lo permiten" ("But look here, I don't believe in God, I don't have any sons, still less am I a patriot, and the king is an idiot. All I want is to get out of here, if only you and my father would let me") (204; 179). While this quotation was written by Poniatowska, not

Carrington, it suits what is known of her personality and her rejection of patriarchal authorities, in whatever form they may take.

Discussing her own father later in that conversation, she points out how he preferred her brothers “y a mí me hizo a un lado porque soy mujer” (“and sidelined me because I am a woman”) (205; 179). This coincides with what Carrington has said in interviews. For instance, when asked once if she resented being a girl, as an only daughter with three brothers, she admitted that she did resent it, “in the sense that there were things that I wasn’t supposed to do because I was a girl” (Paul De Angelis 33). In the novel, when pressed to consider why she is unable to obey her father, Leonora replies:

Porque tengo adentro algo que lo impide. Cuando le decía que estaba aburrida en casa, respondía: ‘*Breed fox terriers*’, como si entrenar a perros pudiera salvarme, o ‘Aprende a cocinar’, cuando nunca me interesé en saber si en la sartén se pone primero el huevo o el aceite. A él le habría hecho feliz que yo me casara con un rico y que fuera a misa los domingos. (Because there’s something inside me that prevents it. Whenever I used to tell him I was bored at home, he would answer with: ‘Breed fox terriers’, as if training dogs could save me. Or else say ‘Learn to cook’, when I was incapable of showing the least interest in whether you first have to put the butter or the egg into the frying pan. He would have been happiest of all had I married a rich man and gone to Mass every Sunday.) (205; 179)

This conversation is an example of a fictional scene created “in order to express a subtextual biographical ‘truth’” (Lackey, *Truthful Fictions* 17). The scene is not ‘true’ in that the conversation does not appear this way in Carrington’s own work, where very

little detail or dialogue is given.³⁴ Yet the novelized representation reaches an underlying truth regarding the character's frustration of seeking independence under circumstances which restrain her. The therapy dialogue in the novel echoes and exposes Leonora's "growing awareness of the need to escape patriarchal authority—represented by the figures of doctor, father, and lover—and its silencing of women" (Chadwick, "Mundo mágico" 11-12). In fact, the above excerpt from the conversation in the novel is taken almost verbatim from Silvia Cherem's interview with Carrington (Cherem 26). Past a simple difference between the autobiographical *Down Below* and Poniatowska's varying representations, which copy and paste from the multiple sources on Carrington, the novel constructs the narrative in a way which exposes Leonora's character evolution and her self-liberation from imposing and oppressively overbearing influences. As Camacho de Schmidt explains, "the protagonist can certainly be seen as a feminist heroine when one considers her capacity for self-affirmation before her domineering father" even while "like Modotti in *Tinísima*, Leonora willingly depends on some men to take important steps in her life" (13). Carrington's independence-seeking tendencies and rebelliousness are a large part of what make her such a well-studied feminist figure of interest. For this reason, Poniatowska writes the scenes in such a way to highlight these aspects of her personality, even in cases where they may not have been abundantly evident. The autobiographical account in *Down Below* is a description of Carrington's experience of insanity, with a focus on her inner turmoil and singular view of her situation. However, in

³⁴ See page 30 of *Down Below* (1988, 2017) for reference to the conversation that appears in the novel.

Leonora, even these moments become opportunities to display Carrington's feminist tendencies and strong-willed personality.

The context provided by the novel, both before and after Leonora's experiences "down below", emphasizes the sense of suffering in the asylum. In other words, the contrast of the protagonist's life before the war, as compared to her experiences after Ernst is arrested, potentially intensifies reader emotions.³⁵ Similarly, the sections which detail Leonora's fall add a poignancy to her later resilience. Before the episodes of her insanity, the novel details Carrington's early life, teenage rebellions, and joining of the surrealists in Paris. While represented as strong-minded and stubborn even as a young woman, the privilege of Carrington's upbringing, including the copious support she receives from her parents through art school and even afterwards, at first presents her as a less relatable character. Her exploits, while emerging from a creative spirit, do little to portray Leonora as much more than a defiant youth dissatisfied with the demands of her privileged life. Depicted as aloof, uninterested in accommodating her parents or anyone else, she is expelled from more than one boarding school, eventually convincing her parents to send her to art school. According to the novel, her mother continues to financially support Leonora while she is in Paris, and later even buys her and Ernst the house in St. Martin d'Ardèche. Though in regards to the St. Martin house, Carrington stated in an interview: "I forget where I got the money from. Most likely I conned my mother" (De Angelis 36).

³⁵ See Colm Hogan, *Literature and Emotion* (2018), pp. 52-54, for a discussion of emotion intensification through contrast.

In the novel, the reliance on her mother for funds during her early life is made clear. Not needing to work to pay for expenses, she was able to paint all she liked – a privilege of few. Her affair with Max Ernst is also problematic at the outset, shown through the novel's portrayals of Leonora's apathetic indifference to the protests of Ernst's wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, against their relationship. Carrington would comically refer to Ernst's wife as "Max's genital responsibilities", both in the novel and in real life (Warner xviii). As the narrator of the novel points out: "Leonora cree que dejar a una esposa es igual a cambiar de menú. ¿Carne o pescado?" ("Leonora thinks leaving a wife seems as simple as choosing another menu. Meat or fish?") (Poniatowska, *Leonora* 80; 65). The narrator attributes this insensitivity to the situation and to the feelings of the wife being left behind to Leonora's easy tendency to renounce or abandon others: "Para Leonora, dejar todo es lo más sencillo del mundo, puesto que ella se dispone a mandar al diablo a sus padres, a sus hermanos, a Nanny, a *Boozy*, su fox terrier, a Inglaterra e Irlanda" ("For Leonora, leaving everything behind is the easiest thing in the world, given how willing she was to send her parents, her brothers, Nanny and Boozy – her fox terrier – to the devil in both England and Ireland") (80; 65). Marie-Berthe, meanwhile, is characterized as aggressively distraught and mentally unstable, having temper tantrums and following Max and Leonora to demand that Max return with her. After one of Marie-Berthe's public displays of anguish, the novel details her reactions after being brought home by a gendarme: "Max intenta calmarla, la encierra, Marie Berthe rompe sus lienzos, destruye sus herramientas, arremete contra las bicicletas y les ponchó las llantas, desenrolla sus bobinas de hilo, rompe sus probetas para luego pedir perdón a grandes voces" ("Max attempts to calm her down. He locks her indoors, and Marie-Berthe rips his canvases,

destroys his tools, attacks the bicycles and punctures their tyres, unravels twine from its spools, breaks his test tubes, only in order then to beg his forgiveness in her most stentorian tones”) (Poniatowska 102; 85). Ernst, perhaps the least sympathetic of the three characters in this situation, avoids responsibility to either, leading on both women as convenient to him, at times seeming unable or unwilling to choose. At one point, after arriving in St. Martin d’Ardèche with Leonora, Max agrees to leave for three days with Marie-Berthe, who had searched for (and found) them. He leaves Leonora there, telling her to wait for him while he goes off with his legitimate wife (123-125). Leonora at first seems strong in her resolve not to wait for him but later acquiesces and returns to where he had told her to stay. Chapters 14 and 15 detail how, in Max’s absence, Leonora wanders around, drinking too much and obsessively waiting for his phone call. She appears here as a pitiable character, with her world revolving around the narcissistic Ernst, as she waits for him to return, focusing on nothing else. While the situation between Max, Leonora, and Marie-Berthe leaves little room for empathetic identification with the characters, as for the most part each person appears to pursue their own interests without concern for the effects on others, the construction of these interactions sets the scene in a way which helps to intensify later contrasts, after Leonora’s return from the asylum. In relation to Max, Leonora’s later refusal to accede to his requests after the ordeal of her mental breakdown and incarceration is more meaningful with the earlier scene of her waiting for him desperately as context. It displays growth and development in her character.

After Leonora and Max encounter each other by chance at the market in Lisbon, a port of exit from Europe, there is a change in Leonora's view of Max and his behaviour. Both are with other partners at this point – Max with Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979) and Leonora with Renato Leduc (1897-1986). The novel makes clear the disillusionment Leonora feels towards Max, through the dialogues between Leonora, Max, Peggy, and others in their group of artists, as well as the narrative descriptions of Leonora's internal thoughts. When they encounter each other in Lisbon, the narrator points out Leonora's incredulity at how self-centered Ernst behaves: "Leonora no lo puede creer, a lo mejor no lo sabe. Max no le pregunta por ella, por su sufrimiento, por el sanatorio en Santander. Compulsivo, habla de sí mismo" ("Leonora cannot believe it, although perhaps she doesn't realise the implications. Max doesn't ask her about herself, about all she has suffered, or about the asylum in Santander. Max talks about himself compulsively" (237; 209). Later, before leaving Lisbon for New York (Leonora with Renato and Max with Peggy and her group), Leonora once again comes up against Max's narcissism and self-centeredness, wondering to herself: "¿Por qué nunca pregunta por mi encierro en el manicomio? Por qué lo único que me dijo a la hora del reencuentro es que yo había perdido la casa y sus lienzos? ¿Por qué no me escucha y sólo habla de sí mismo? También en St. Martin d'Ardèche la vida giraba en torno a él" ("Why does he never ask me about the time I spent locked up in the asylum? Why was the only thing he asked me when we were reunited how I could have lost the house and his canvases? Why does he only talk about himself and never listen to me? Even back in St. Martin d'Ardèche, the whole world revolved around him" (258; 229). She is at this point exasperated and disenchanted of her previous idealization of Ernst. Beyond simply informing the reader

that the experiences during the war changed the protagonist, the novel provides this internal dialogue to illustrate how it did. Here, again, while the facts of what happened to the characters are generally consistent with interviews and historical accounts, there is a modification in the narrative discourse which provides a more accessible view into the internal subjective world of the character.

In regards to character development, the novel also shows how Leonora herself has developed more understanding or concern for others after the war and her experiences in the asylum through a contrast with the representation of her earlier, younger recklessness. In one such instance, Leonora reflects on the situation between her, Max, and Peggy through the lens of her own suffering. Remembering how she had painfully waited for Max in St. Martin d'Ardèche, she is troubled by the way she sees Max now using Peggy for support, as he had with other women before. She extends the recollection of her own suffering even to recognize that of her earlier rival, Marie-Berthe, reflecting: "A Max no le importa usar a Peggy, él todo se lo merece. De pronto retumban los gritos de Marie Berthe Aurenche en la rue Jacob, el destino de Luise Straus, arrestada por los nazis, el estupor en los ojos de Jimmy" ("Max wasn't bothered by the fact that he was using Peggy, since he felt he deserved whatever came his way. All of a sudden, the cries of Marie-Berthe Aurenche echo back to her from the Rue Jacob; she recalls the fate of Louise Straus, arrested by the Nazis, and the stupefaction in Jimmy's eyes" (281; 251-252)).³⁶ While earlier in the novel Leonora had dismissed Marie-Berthe's protests, she is

³⁶ Luise Straus was Ernst's first wife. Jimmy was Ernst's son with Straus.

herself now more compassionate, having understood to some extent the difficulties of having been romantically and emotionally attached to Ernst. In the process, her own character becomes more sympathetic to the reader as well. There is further a sense of justice afforded to the character as, in New York, Max is the one left waiting by the phone in the hopes that Leonora will be able and willing to see him each day. She often declines to see him and, even when she does, it is made clear that he is unsatisfied with the distance she maintains from him, as the narrator explains: “Max desearía tomarla en sus brazos, ella lo impide. Desde que salió de St. Martin d’Ardèche ya no es la misma” (“Max longs only to sweep her up in his arms, but she won’t let him. Ever since she left St. Martin d’Ardèche she has not been the same”) (266; 237). Earlier in Lisbon, as well, Ernst had suggested they continue their affair since both were in marriages of only convenience, but Leonora had refused, and continued to do so (Grimberg 60). In her memoirs, another source for Poniatowska’s novel, Peggy Guggenheim laments Ernst’s continued attachment to Carrington, both in Lisbon and later in New York.³⁷ As in the novel, Guggenheim points out how Ernst was unable to hide his feelings, seeing his time spent with Leonora as “the only time that Max seemed human or showed any emotion” (Guggenheim 309). Suffering with her jealousy, she was relieved when Leonora moved to Mexico. Jimmy Ernst also points out Max’s attachment to Leonora, writing in his own memoir: “I don’t recall ever again seeing such a strange mixture of desolation and euphoria in my father’s face [as] when he returned from his last meeting with Leonora in

³⁷ Guggenheim refers to Leonora as “Beatrice” throughout her memoir, though it is clear from context that it is, in fact, Leonora Carrington. According to Francine Prose, Guggenheim changed the names of some of those she mentions in her work, acting on the advice of Dial Press lawyers to avoid potential libel suits (7).

New York. [...] Each day that he saw her, and it was often, ended the same way. I hoped never to experience such pain myself” (Ernst 213-214). Despite Max Ernst’s appeals, post-asylum Leonora refuses to acquiesce, and the novel’s representation of the protagonist highlights the role of Carrington’s past suffering in enabling her to do so.

A later interaction with Ernst in *Leonora* further displays Leonora’s development from her experiences during the war and in the asylum. After some time reunited with the group of artists and writers in Manhattan, including Ernst and Peggy, Carrington decides to leave to Mexico. Max is her mentor but “dentro de ella algo o alguien le repite: ‘Si permaneces aquí cometerás un acto de cobardía, te paralizarás a la sombra de Max y a la de Peggy hasta que una de las dos revienta’” (“Max is her maestro but deep inside herself, something – or someone – keeps repeating: ‘If you stay here you’ll be committing an act of cowardice, you will become paralysed in Max’s and in Peggy’s shadows, until one of the two of you gives up’”) (Poniatowska 279; 250). Ernst protests, insisting that leaving to Mexico will be the end of her career and, when she remains resolute in her decision, he claims that she has turned to stone. Leonora counters that “el sufrimiento petrifica” (“suffering causes petrification”) and recognizes that if she does not leave, “volverán a atraparla las reglas, esta vez las de los surrealistas” (“she will once again become trapped by the rules, even if this time it’s those laid down by the surrealists”) (280; 250). As in Poniatowska’s fictitious therapy session in Santander, this interaction in the novel brings the reader into Leonora’s struggle against paternalistic forces. Her choice of risk—moving to Mexico, away from the security of the artistic community she knew, and even further from her family—highlights a self-reliance and

resilience which materialized from the suffering she endured in the war. Poniatowska presents Leonora's independence as a result of those painful experiences: "ella, Leonora, tiene que hacer una apuesta mayor: ésa ha sido la lección de Santander" ("she, Leonora, is obliged to take a greater risk: that is the lesson she learnt from her stay in Santander") (280; 251). Far from her father and from Max, she could remain "leal a su vocación, leal también al sufrimiento del que nadie tiene ni la menor idea" ("loyal to her vocation; loyal, too, to the suffering of which no one else had the least idea") (280; 251). Staying in New York, she tells Max, means that she will never be more than his projection (281). Provided with the empathy-inviting internal perspective here, the reader is exposed to a character who eschews the comforts offered by the familiarity, protection, and encouragement of her artistic circle in New York to carve out a distinct path, choosing to rely on the sturdy support of her own resilience.

The character's concern about being nothing more than a projection of Ernst is not merely conjecture, but based on Carrington's expressed beliefs. She was aware, at least later in life, of the often painful nature of dependency in relationships. In a 1990 interview with Susan Rubin Suleiman, Carrington explained: "I think that a lot of women (people, but I say women because it is nearly always women on the dependent side of the bargain) were certainly cramped, dwarfed sometimes, by that dependency. I mean not only the physical dependency of being supported, but emotional dependency and opinion dependency" (115). With Ernst not only as her romantic partner but also as her instructor and mentor, Carrington is an instance here of opinion dependency, as well as the others. There are differences in her works after she left, which suggest that she was perhaps

better able to form her own style without Ernst's presence and influence, as "a few years later her painting looked quite different: a much lighter palette than before, more of a miniaturist attention to detail, and an entirely new set of images" (Suleiman 115-116). According to Suleiman, "it is only after 1945 that [Carrington] attained her mature style as a painter" (116). Based on this, Carrington's break from Ernst, as she insisted on leaving New York for Mexico, was an important one in her development as an artist, though of course it was not the only factor contributing to these changes, as many circumstances of Carrington's life were altered at this point as well. The representation in the novel puts on display how Leonora's strength to leave someone to whom she had such strong emotional and opinion ties was derived from her experiences in the war. Suleiman has suggested that Carrington already possessed an understanding of dependency and its effect on her, "albeit in an unacknowledged form, even during the most euphoric period of her relationship with Ernst" (115). But, she continues, this understanding and the ability to truly act independent of her attachment would only surface after Santander:

as so often happens in life, the emotional attachment and other undeniably positive effects of their life together kept this understanding in the background. Only after being separated from Ernst, against her will, by the brutal forces of history, and only after undergoing a harrowing experience of mental breakdown from which she emerged perhaps as a different person, did she realize what she must do. (115)

While certain things would stay the same for Leonora throughout her life, such as her interest in painting, or her rejection of the life chosen for her by her family, her character

undergoes a significant transformation in the novel, as in reality. This is evidenced by the above analyses of her interactions with Ernst, but also through her interactions with others. She appears strong and resolved from the beginning of the novel, but later develops a more sympathetic disposition towards others. An example of this appears when Leonora meets the Hungarian photographer Imre Emerico “Chiki” Weisz for the first time at a dinner party. As Chiki details his difficult life, from being left in an orphanage by his mother when he was four years old, to his near-death in a concentration camp, Leonora is filled with admiration for him. She considers how her own situation was of privilege compared to his and feels a connection through the suffering they both endured (Poniatowska 340). She further considers how “un hombre así de integro es lo que le hace falta, un hombre que tiene las mismas raíces, un europeo, alguien que ha sufrido como ella” (“a man of that degree of integrity is what she needs, a man with the same European roots as her, someone who has suffered as she has”) (340; 308). The suffering Leonora endured seeps into various interactions in the novel, as it did in many of the interviews she did. Carrington has herself expressed the subject of her transformation post-Santander, as for instance in interview with Marina Warner, when she remembers how:

After the experience of *Down Below*, I changed [...] Dramatically. It was very much like having been dead. [...] I’d suffered so much when Max was taken away to the camp, I entered a catatonic state, and I was no longer suffering in an ordinary human dimension. I was in another place, it was something quite different. Quite different. (qtd in Warner xx)

Poniatowska's novel gives this experience a weight which reflects the major role it had in Carrington's development. Leonora's fall into the darkness of mental illness and her brutal treatment and suffering at Santander is also made particularly potent by the contrast of these experiences with her earlier life, intensifying the contrasts between the Leonora of before and the one of after the war. The depths of her suffering, represented in considerable detail in the novel, are what make for an interesting and empathy-inducing character arc. While Leonora physically journeys across Europe and, later, across the Atlantic, it is her inner journey and emergence from the depths which make for a sympathetic and engaging character.

2.3.2 Sidhes to Surrealism: Creativity and Resilience

The representation of suffering in the novel, along with its contribution to character development, further emphasizes the role of creativity in Leonora's life. This includes how her creative compulsions are tied to her resilience in the face of mental anguish, with roots in her childhood and connections to surrealist art circles. Poniatowska's writing includes scenes with a surrealist spin, with a focus on the characters who accompanied Leonora into her creative world, such as Mary Kavanagh ("Nanny") and Remedios Varo. The author's presentation of the character Leonora in the novel this way underlines the protagonist's ability to withstand the suffering she experienced by turning to creative expression.

The link between Carrington's movement towards surrealism and her background in Irish fairy tale has been addressed in various studies. Alcántar, in relation to Leonora's

fantastic imagination reflected in the novel, has pointed out how the surrealism which attracted Leonora was a movement compatible with the imaginative games Carrington had started playing as a child and carried through adulthood (120). She found in this movement the strategies of resistance “que le ayudan a articular no solamente una estética propia en la pintura y la escritura, sino a sobrevivir en instancias adversas y en sus peores momentos de inestabilidad mental” (120). Leonora’s attachment to dream-like twists on reality have deep roots in her upbringing. Camacho de Schmidt points out the narrative focus on Leonora’s maternal Irish background, with her mother and her nanny, “who entertained the children with tales of magical creatures and otherworldly lore” (13). These early influences connected Leonora from a young age to “the mythical world where a child’s imagination thrives” and, further, “the double maternal Irish roots foreground the unconscious as the source of survival, redemption, and ultimately art” (13). Carrington’s son Gabriel has also explained how Ireland attained a mythical stature for Leonora, saying that: “some important part of my mother’s being was always in Ireland” (Weisz Carrington 13). Marina Warner identifies the influence of Carrington’s maternal side of the family and Irish nanny as well. Along with the stories from her nanny and other Irish influences, Carrington “also absorbed the English and Scottish nursery blend of nonsense, fabulism, comedy, and mysticism” (Warner xvi). In a 2013 interview with Dr. Alena Robin and her students, Poniatowska points out this same connection, as she responds to the question of whether she considered *Leonora* to be a surrealist novel, saying that Carrington “era una mujer que tenía un mundo interior que les atrajo muchísimo a los surrealistas” and that “ella tenía el mundo de su niñez que era un mundo irlandés. Ella pensaba que debajo de la tierra, ahorita donde estamos, hay

muchos seres pequeñísimos que nos están escuchando y que son nuestros amigos [...] Entonces ella tenía ese mundo, que claro, casaba muy bien con el surrealismo” (Vera López and Zambrano 140). The connection between the surrealist movement and Carrington’s Irish roots further goes beyond her personal family history. Ireland, in fact, was “viewed by the surrealists as quintessentially surrealist, not unlike Mexico”, Carrington’s home for most of her life, which André Breton referred to as the “surrealist place *par excellence*” (Mahon 133; Chadwick 40). The artist’s associations with both reflect the inner world she reveals in her works. Leonora’s world of Sidhes and other magical creatures is a fundamental aspect of her life and art, and it is given this central space in Poniatowska’s novel.

Specific scenes within the novel further embrace a blurring of the line between reality and imaginative creation, with dream elements presented the same way as biographical details in the narrative. In St. Martin d’Ardèche, for instance, while waiting for Max to return after leaving with his wife Marie-Berthe, Leonora smokes and, when inhaling has little effect, consumes the Curls of Miralda or *rizosdemiralda* flowers (Poniatowska 130). This is followed by a hallucinatory scene which involves other characters in a village banquet at Alphonsine’s café, where Max and Leonora had been staying. After several strange events following the (non-)logic of a dream, with allusions to Carrington’s own fiction sprinkled in, the festivities end with an execution of a man whose severed head in a basket of lilies bears Leonora’s likeness (132). In the style of the surrealists, there is a blending of reality and imagination, following a dream-logic which weaves the two together without a clear, intended purpose. Along with the other dream elements, the

character “Drusille” mentioned in the episode has links both to a real person who is introduced in an earlier chapter as the eccentric daughter of Viscount Cyril de Guindre, living in a castle on a mountain near St. Martin d’Ardèche, and to a character in Carrington’s short story “The Sisters”. In the final chapter of the novel, “Drusille” is also the name of Pepita’s dog, chosen by Pepita for its reference to Leonora’s story.

A later scene following the same dream-logic also explicitly references a short story Carrington wrote during that period of her life. In the chapter titled *Conejos blancos* (*White Rabbits*), Poniatowska weaves Carrington’s story “White Rabbits” into the narrative, presented as a dream she has which would inspire her to write the story. Seamlessly integrated into the narrative, the images from “White Rabbits”, of a leper with sparkling skin who welcomes Leonora into her and her husband’s apartment where they feed rotten meat to hundreds of carnivorous rabbits, is further linked to Leonora’s choice to leave New York: “Leonora escribe ‘Conejos blancos’ y lo vive como una premonición. Si se queda en Nueva York, adquirirá la lepra porque Peggy Guggenheim contagia a todos los conejos que giran en torno de ella” (“Leonora writes ‘White Rabbits’ and relives her dream as a premonition. If she remains in New York, she will catch leprosy. Peggy Guggenheim infects all the little rabbits who circle in her orbit”) (268; 239). Leonora’s dream-world and imagination are emphatically connected to every choice she makes in the novel, framing the protagonist’s motivations within the influence of her surrealistic dreams and visions.

The presence of the Mary Kavanagh or “Nanny” character is amplified in the novel as well, linked to Leonora’s imaginative games from the beginning. As in the later case with Remedios Varo, Poniatowska picks up on the significance of the character and its role in developing a detailed portrait of Leonora’s psychological state. This amplification of Nanny’s presence in the novel is made clear in the scenes based on Carrington’s *Down Below*. While Carrington’s own work, on which these scenes were based, only briefly mentions Nanny’s arrival at the Santander asylum, this is expanded in the novel, even including a chapter titled “Nanny”. *Down Below* is brief but succinct in its description of Nanny’s arrival. Sent by Leonora’s parents, Nanny arrives “in great exaltation, after a terrible fifteen-day journey in the narrow cabin of a warship”, and Carrington describes how Nanny “had not expected to find me in an insane asylum and thought she was going to see the healthy girl she had left four years ago. I received her coldly and mistrustfully” (52). Carrington goes on to recount how she felt hostile towards Nanny as an emissary of her parents, and how this hostility in turn made Nanny nervous (53). Poniatowska’s representation of Nanny’s arrival reflects these points, writing, for instance how “Leonora que sabe ser hiriente, la recibe con desconfianza” (“Leonora, who knows how to be hurtful, receives her mistrustfully”), but further explores the psychology of Leonora and Nanny’s close relationship, adding in various scenes where Nanny expresses how much she is being hurt by Leonora’s callousness, which results in Leonora rejecting her even more (214; 188). These scenes in the novel are constructed based on the little information given in *Down Below*, including the few direct quotations from Nanny and Leonora included in Carrington’s work.

The additional interactions between Nanny and Leonora in the novel add a layer of meaning to Leonora's situation, as they situate her within the context of her earlier life with Nanny as her accomplice in her fantastical exploits. The opening scene of the novel introduces both characters within the warmth of Nanny's imagination, as she persuades the young Leonora to eat her porridge, despite her disgust, by telling the young girl that she will find Windermere Lake in the center of her bowl. Leonora responds well to this imaginative reframing, and the novel explains how "la niña, cuchara en mano, come la avena desde la orilla y empieza a escuchar el agua y mira cómo pequeñas olas se frisan en su superficie porque ha llegado al Windermere" ("the girl, spoon in hand, eats the porridge from the outside edge inwards, beginning to hear the sound of water and see how tiny waves ruffle its surface as she nears Windermere") (9; 1). This first scene sets up the significance of creativity in Leonora's world, as its role is placed at the center from the start of the novel, with Nanny as its first emissary. She enables Leonora's fantastical exploits throughout the first part of the book. As such, Leonora's later betrayal and rejection of Nanny, the woman who essentially raised her, becomes all the more poignant.

While others, including Max, would connect with Leonora in a dream-like world of surrealism and creativity, the Spanish painter Remedios Varo would be the one to reach through the barriers Leonora had set up in her mind after her experiences in the asylum. After moving to Mexico with Renato Leduc and feeling out of place amongst him and his friends, Leonora runs into Varo and is brought to a group of exiled European artists, also including Kati Horna (1912-2000), a Hungarian photographer, and others. They would

spend their days together from then on. Leonora and Varo had an intense bond from the beginning, despite Leonora's tendency at the time to keep people at a distance.

Poniatowska recognizes the connection between the two artists, pointing out how: "Desde que salió de la clínica de Santander, Leonora aprendió a guardar distancias pero Remedios derrite su armadura. Apenas pisa el departamento, recobra su seguridad. Remedios la arropa, la protege, la adivina. Nunca ha tenido una amiga así de cercana" ("Ever since she left the clinic in Santander, Leonora has learnt to keep herself at a distance, but Remedios succeeds in piercing her armour. Scarcely does she set foot in the flat before her sense of security is restored. Remedios supports her, protects her, comprehends her. She has never had such a close friend") (325; 294). Remedios also has a chapter named after her in *Leonora*, and she appears as Leonora's co-conspirator, with them exploring together, and even writing a play and other works together. Finding Varo and being once again part of the surrealist, imaginative world provides relief to Leonora, and she is able to engage with artistic creation. No longer feeling isolated and uninspired, Poniatowska details how Remedios's friendship was "para Leonora un patio abierto, el jardín verde en torno a Hazelwood Hall, la certeza de que para ella se ha ido la soledad. Remedios la complementa, termina las frases que ella inicia, su sonrisa la cubre, es su hermana gemela" ("like an open patio to Leonora, as was the green garden that surrounds Hazelwood Hall. She knows that, for her, solitude is now over. Remedios is her ideal foil, she finishes the sentences she can only begin, her smile embraces her, she is her twin sister" (310; 279-280). When Varo passes away, Leonora suffers greatly, chain-smoking and screaming at night as the death of her friend "hace que retorne con más fuerza una vieja conocida: la angustia" ("causes her to revert all the more strongly to her old

acquaintance: anguish” (441; 404). She also turns to her creativity for refuge, spending more time in her studio, completing paintings and writing her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (440).

Leonora’s move towards artistic production in response to the pain of her friend’s passing is not the only time she turns to creativity for comfort. She does the same in the time when she writes stories after Max leaves her waiting in St. Martin d’Ardèche and in the asylum, when she is given paints and materials, to mention just a few instances. She even painted more productively with the birth of her sons (364). Poniatowska’s work thoroughly highlights the connection between Leonora’s emotional pain and her creations, as well as to the characters who embrace her fantastic world, such as Varo and Nanny. The narrator explains how Leonora is seeing a psychoanalyst because she falls into a depression between each painting and how “la pintura es su bálsamo, como lo fue el opio para Joë Bousquet” (“painting is her balsam, as opium was for Joë Bousquet”) (399; 364). When her painting beckons her amidst her anguish, Chiki points out that “a lo mejor es tu angustia la que te hace pintar” (“it could well be that your anguish is what makes you paint” (364; 331). Similarly, Pablo would later tell her that moving to England, as she wanted to, would not cure her depressions and, echoing what Chiki and other say earlier in the novel, “tu angustia es tu aliada, es la que te hace pintar” (“your agonies are your allies, they are what keep you painting” (427; 391). So, while suffering plays a large role in the novel in terms of audience engagement, creating a sympathetic character in Leonora, it is also explicitly tied within the novel to Leonora’s creative impulse and resilience in the face of anguish. Additionally, her strongest emotional ties

are to those who join her in the surreal world of Sidhes, and they are also the characters with strongest links to her experience of suffering.

The idea of imaginative creation as an instrument of resilience is not only Leonora's approach, but also Poniatowska's. The refuge that Leonora finds in her fantasies is something that the author recognizes and embraces as an effective strategy in the conveyance of her story and of the subjective experience of her protagonist. Throughout *Leonora*, the central character is an avid storyteller, engrossed in both her own stories and in others'. In addition to her explicit fictions, that is, the stories in her paintings and writings, Leonora is creating narratives throughout the novel in her daily life. The beginning of the novel, where Leonora as a child is imagining Windermere Lake at the center of her bowl of porridge, sets the tone for the rest of the narrative. Finally, the ending brings it back to the imagination fostered at Crookey Hall with the appearance of Pepita, once again reinforcing the central role of creativity in *Leonora*.

2.3.3 Invented Closure: Pepita's Ending

In the final chapter of the novel, titled "What is death like?", a young woman bursts into Leonora's home, declaring that she is her greatest fan and has read all her books in addition to all those she had mentioned. This young woman –an invented character– is Pepita, one of the few characters in the novel without a clearly identifiable real-life counterpart. Poniatowska has explained her reasoning behind adding in the character, which she readily admits is an invention (Vera López and Zambrano 140). Thinking of Leonora being alone in this period of her life, Poniatowska decided to add in "una especie

de hippie” (a kind of hippie) and so Pepita arrived (140). Connecting the invented character’s personality with Carrington’s, Poniatowska further acknowledges that Pepita could be another version of Leonora, her alter ego, or the new Leonora (140). Appearing in the novel as an aggressive fan, Pepita insists on following and helping Leonora with her errands. At first wary and skeptical of this overenthusiastic devotee, Leonora warms to her quirkiness and treats her as a companion, allowing Pepita to lead her around the city. Despite Leonora’s reclusive disposition in her advanced age, at 94 years old, Pepita’s curious personality and audaciousness inspire Leonora to confide in her. The conversations which ensue situate Pepita as a character which Poniatowska has inserted into the narrative to function as a motivating force for Leonora to reminisce:

Al cabo de los días, mientras Pepita la conduce de un lado a otro en el coche verde, Leonora le dice:

“A mi temperamento le va mal recordar pero no sé por qué a ti quiero contarte todo lo que pasa por mi cabeza.”

La muchacha retiene la respiración para que la pintora no pierda el hilo de sus recuerdos. A medida que habla, Leonora también va poniendo las cosas en su lugar y el pasado olvidado regresa en oleadas. (487)

(After a few days, while Pepita drives her from one place to the next in her green car, Leonora tells her:

‘With a temperament like mine, I don’t always want to remember, but—I don’t know why—I like to tell you things, whatever passes through my head, in fact.’

The young woman holds her breath, so the artist doesn't lose her train of memories. As she speaks, Leonora is setting things in their proper place, and the forgotten past returns in surging waves.) (445)

The interactions between Leonora and what Poniatowska has referred to as her alter ego also bear a similarity to the exchanges of an interviewer and interviewee. This rewriting, interview-style, of the last chapter of Leonora's life provides the reader with a type of therapeutic closure, as it creates the conditions for Leonora to express her final reflections on the more contentious issues in her life. As in the earlier case of Leonora reframing her suffering in the asylum as an experience which ultimately strengthened her resilience, here she considers her tenuous relationships with authority figures as something which ultimately strengthened her resolve. In regards to her relationship with her father, she acknowledges the motivating factor of her opposition towards him, finding that he was not such an enemy "porque a pesar de él pude hacer lo que quise" ("because I was enabled to do what I did in spite of him") (487; 445). This conciliatory tone towards her father is introduced earlier in the novel, once he has passed away and Leonora has children of her own. In a conversation with her son Gaby, who has chosen an artistic path of writing, Gaby points out how "uno siempre escribe para otro" ("one always writes for someone else") and asks for whom his mother paints (452; 414). Leonora replies: "Para mi padre, nunca creí que me dolería su muerte y hasta hoy me doy cuenta de que al inicio de cada cuadro pensaba en él" ("For my father. I never believed his death could cause me pain, and it's taken me until today to realise that I've started every picture with him in mind") (452; 414). This strained relationship, introduced from the beginning of the novel

at Leonora's childhood home in Crookhey Hall, is here shown to have served a purpose, having had an influence on Leonora's artistic production.

While not as openly conciliatory, Leonora also mentions Max Ernst and their time in St. Martin d'Ardèche in her conversations with Pepita in this last chapter. She recounts to Pepita a dream she has of Ernst who appears "entre pájaros que le tienden sus alas" ("in the midst of birds extending their wings to him") and St. Martin d'Ardèche as the place where she discovered "lo que las conserjes de París llaman *folie à deux*" ("what the concierges of Paris call a *folie a deux*") (489; 447). Although Leonora says relatively little about Ernst here, she was known to say little to nothing on the topic in her later years, evidenced by her reactions to questions on the topic. Marina Warner, who has interviewed and studied Carrington and her works has pointed out that "Leonora would become angry when fans—like myself—showed intense curiosity about that early phase of her life" (xiv). In one instance, Carrington sent Warner an angry letter in response to the photograph of her with Ernst "leaning, blissed out, eyes closed, on her shoulder" which appeared alongside something Warner had written (xv). Carrington resented what she felt was an intention to turn her into gossip, declaring that "it's missing the point of anybody to make them into gossip" (Carrington qtd in Warner xv). Susan Rubin Suleiman as well, in her article on Carrington and Ernst, recounts an interview with Carrington in which the artist responded with frustration to the interviewer's inquiry related to Ernst and the similarities of imagery in the two artists' works. According to Suleiman, after some deflections or avoidance of the topic, Carrington exclaimed: "Those were three years of my life! *Why doesn't anyone ask me anything else?*" (Carrington qtd in Suleiman 105).

Later during that same visit, Carrington admitted to Suleiman that she was resistant to talking about her past, saying “I just realized talking to you that I have not gotten reconciled –that is why I don’t want to talk about my past” (105). Poniatowska as well, in the acknowledgements of the novel, mentions how Leonora would ask about her love life during their visits but “had no desire to discuss her own, and when I asked her whether Max Ernst had been the love of her life, she answered: ‘Every love is different, let’s not get too personal’” (455). Poniatowska makes Carrington’s reluctance to share her private life clear in the novel. For instance, when describing how Leonora had become an attraction to visit in Mexico, the narrator points out that she would receive all the fans, art critics, and gallery owners politely, despite her preference that they leave with their burdensome homages (Poniatowska 471). With the memory-inciting character Pepita, however, Leonora relates to Pepita how she and Max had spent their time in St. Martin d’Ardèche, and even goes so far as to recall the trauma of Ernst being taken away—something which she often avoided discussing in real life (489-490). Here, as in other instances, the invented character allows for an ending with a sense of closure.

In this last chapter, Pepita and Leonora’s outings include visits to art museums, which allows for a reappearance of Leonora’s critique of contemporary art. With the subject brought up organically through her interactions with Pepita, the novel closes with a return to Leonora in the world of art. The beginning chapters of the novel detail her visits to museums as an inspirational, favored activity of the young artist. At the conclusion of the novel, Poniatowska adds in the character of Pepita to reflect the youthful enthusiasm of Leonora as a young woman, while accurately portraying Carrington’s opinions on

contemporary exhibitions. The author has pointed this out herself, as in the interview with Dr. Alena Robin and her students, where Poniatowska describes Carrington's distaste for installation-type artworks saying how "se tirara una bacinica en un rincón y se dijera: 'Mira, ahí está el arte' o un niño sentado en una banquita todo solito y diciendo: 'Éste es arte.' A ella no le gustaba eso nada, decía que estaba de la patada" (Vera López and Zambrano 140). Pepita was in part used as a foil for the older Leonora—an artist no longer a fan of the artistic productions on display. Her opinions on contemporary installations are presented earlier in the novel as well. For instance, in a discussion with Octavio Paz, Leonora expresses these same opinions, criticizing Marcel Duchamp's approach to art (Poniatowska 416). Paz maintains that Duchamp's works are audacious, while Leonora insists that, while she has given many "patadas" ("kickings") in her lifetime, she knows what constitutes art, and that, for her, these works were an attack on her faith in painting (416). To Carrington, who dedicated her life to painting, the acceptance of an art which, in her opinion, demonstrates little to no skill, is offensive. In her mind, art must be revered, not treated as a meaningless diversion. Poniatowska picks out this genuine aspect of Leonora's character and showcases it at the end of the novel to emphasize the unquestionably significant role of art in her life.

In the very last scene, Pepita takes Leonora to an aquarium, where the dolphins speak to her, in line with the recurrent theme, both in the novel and in the artist's own life and work, of Leonora's connections to and communications with creatures—real or fantastical. Pepita is aware of the communication between the artist and the animals, assuring Leonora that the dolphins are speaking to her, appreciating her bravery (494). Yet again

revealing the summative purpose of this character, this exchange prompts Leonora to reminisce about the animals from her childhood and later life, and even to respond to the dolphins, which she perceives as horses, her spirit animal and “a recurrent figure of release and power in her imagery” (Warner xii). Pepita abruptly transforms into a feathered equine animal and Leonora herself transforms into what Pepita describes as “un pequeño caballo blanco que acaba de rodarse y está moribundo” (“a small white horse that has just tumbled over and is dying”) (495; 453). This image of a small white horse relates to imagery which repeatedly appears in Carrington’s own works. It also alludes to what Carrington refers to in *Down Below* as a vision she had in the Santander asylum the night before she was injected with Cardiazol:

The place looked like the Bois de Boulogne; I was on top of a small ridge bordered with trees; at a certain distance below me, on the road, stood a fence like those I had often seen at the Horse Show; next to me, two big horses were tied together; I was impatiently waiting for them to jump over the fence. After long hesitations, they jumped and galloped down the slope. Suddenly a small white horse detached himself from them; the two big horses disappeared, and nothing was left on the path but the colt, who rolled all the way down where he remained on his back, dying. *I myself was the white colt.* (Carrington 43)

The scene with Pepita further alludes to the above excerpt from *Down Below* as Leonora asks Pepita if they are in the Bois de Boulogne, followed by Pepita’s description of “dos grandes caballos negros atados el uno al otro” (“two great black horses, yoked together”) next to Leonora (495; 453). Finally, the small, fallen, and dying white horse as Leonora

herself. Transformations abound in Carrington's works, particularly human-animal ones, with a recurrence of horses and hyenas.

All while incorporating allusions to Carrington's written works, paintings, and previously mentioned dreams, this scene concludes the novel (and life) of Leonora with an appropriately imagined surrealist death. Though, as Pepita suggests, in line with Leonora's way of creatively interpreting these types of situations, she is not about to die but rather about to enter "un pasaje oscuro del que saldrás transfigurada" ("a dark country from where you will emerge transfigured") (496; 453). Pepita's role as a conversational prompt constructs these last scenes in a way that ends the novel with a summative sense of closure. This episode and final chapter works as a conclusive interview, providing the character, the novel, and the reader with a sense of reconciliation. The invented character allows for a return to themes particularly relevant to Leonora's life, operating as a conduct for a clear, cohesive life narrative. However, it does so while still following Carrington's recourse to playfulness and imagination, not only through Pepita's youthful personality, but through the inclusion of such an invention. The appearance of this character, along with the other instances of invention in the novel, adds to the imaginative aspect of the work, contributing to its designation as fiction. In Suleiman's interview with Carrington in 1990, she had mentioned the new biography written about her good friend Remedios Varo, and Carrington replied with "I don't want anyone to write my biography" (Suleiman 100-101). Poniatowska, through the invented Pepita, moves the novel even further from the biographical genre. The Pepita character not only provides opportunities to allude to Carrington's other works, including the examples above, but the

character and episode also reflect the style of Leonora's own stories, bringing the novel to an ending that Carrington herself could have written. Further, by concluding with a death that encapsulates the artist's fantastical beliefs and playful approach to what are generally considered the most serious aspects of life, the novel gives readers an ending appropriate to the life and character of the protagonist. As in earlier examples of fictional conversations, this final scene did not actually occur in Carrington's life, but it reaches for a deeper truth of Leonora's character and her fantastical approach to both life and death.

2.4 Conclusion

In the same way that humans craft their life stories and identities through fictionalized narratives, so too does Poniatowska weave the story of her protagonist in *Leonora*. She sheds the unattainable goal of providing a completely accurate account of Carrington's life and embraces the fictionality of her own writing along with the potential that such fiction offers. While biographical narratives generally stay within the limits of what the biographer could possibly know, Poniatowska completely disregards these limits. As evidenced by the aforementioned studies on the psychological aspects of fiction, *Leonora* is a narrative written in tune with the mental constructs of the reader. The dialogues and internal perspectives provided in the novel are not only more appealing to the reader on a superficial level, but are also more likely to engage their sense of empathy, emphasizing certain aspects of the protagonist's character and making her character more identifiable and available to the readers. In regards to the significance of storytelling practices, this concerns the loftier implications of biographical fiction, chiefly in relation to the

development of human insight into the subjective experiences of others. Poniatowska's writing techniques, along with the refusal to adhere to guidelines of non-fiction, make her work more psychologically accessible to readers, and makes it more likely to promote interest and encourage empathetic identification with the subject. This psychological accessibility allows for a better understanding of the depth and particularities of a character's subjectivity. As a lack of empathy widens the space between two individuals, the cultivation of empathy through literature, with stories that give readers a view into the interior world of another, is particularly significant in the representations of individuals from underrepresented groups. At its best, a story can help narrow the imagined gap between ourselves and others. While any empathetic connection might be considered positive, the choice to make Leonora Carrington into a knowable protagonist has a purpose beyond entertainment. Carrington's intense ambition and self-reliance is fittingly revealed through a novel which reflects her personality, both in form and content. Explicitly freed from a mission of biographical truth, Poniatowska's *Leonora* aims for the fractured, complex interior—unapologetically using whatever novelistic devices necessary to do so. The altered or imagined scenes in the novel each have their specific purpose in connecting the protagonist's interior life with that of the reader, but overall what they relay is a stark sense of Leonora's resilience and how every time she emerged “más limpia del fuego hasta convertirse en una delgada varilla de metal precioso” (“purified by fire, until she became a slender rod of precious metal”) (Poniatowska 505; 456). The novel exposes the inner and outer worlds of a woman who relied most on her own strength to survive and succeed, with the harshest, most difficult experiences of her life serving only to strengthen her resolve.

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Chapter 3

3 Portraits of a Queen: Cleopatra in Carmen Boullosa's *De un salto descabalga la reina*

Ubiquitous even in the 21st century, the story of Cleopatra is reimagined in Mexican author Carmen Boullosa's 2002 novel *De un salto descabalga la reina*.³⁸ The novel narrates the queen's story in three non-chronological sections, beginning with the end of Cleopatra's life. The first part of the novel takes place in Cleopatra's mausoleum in the Temple of Isis, with the queen's dictation to her scribe focusing on her relationship with Mark Antony, Triumvir of Rome, as he lays dying. The second part flashes back to Cleopatra as a young girl, who escapes from her father at the age of twelve and goes in search of allies in order to secure the throne of Egypt. The final section presents the protagonist as a young queen on a fantastical adventure in a land of Amazonian warriors and, manages to regain her temporarily lost power. The narrative is presented through the perspective of her personal scribe, Diomedes, who recognizes his distrust of his own writing throughout the book. Through these layers of narrative, Boullosa challenges traditional methods of representing historical figures, and particularly in the case of a female historical figure surrounded by myth.

³⁸ As mentioned in the introduction, the novel borrows its title from Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BCE), an epic poem written for Cleopatra's enemy Octavian (referred to as "Octavio" by Cleopatra in the novel, and here as "Octavius"), also known as Augustus. A version of Cleopatra features as the character Dido in the work.

In this chapter, I examine Carmen Boullosa's portrayal of Cleopatra in *De un salto descabalga la reina*, considered as a feminist biographical novel, with a focus on the formation of the protagonist's female identity in the work. I begin with a brief overview of selected critical studies on four of Boullosa's novels, with a particular focus on themes relevant as context for *De un salto descabalga la reina* and the current study. In my analysis of the 2002 novel, I consider the three separate sections of the narrative and the different versions of Cleopatra represented in each one, maintaining the order in which the three portraits of Cleopatra are presented in the novel. Through these analyses, I review how Boullosa's work expresses its feminist viewpoint through the distinct versions of the protagonist and consider how the novel reflects a form of integrated pluralism. This is done while keeping in mind Alison Gibbons's approach to identity which views "both essentialism and postmodernism as unhelpful, but rather than abandon them it argues that the two exist in tension" – an approach which I consider as relevant to the process of female identity formation revealed in the novel, particularly exemplified by the pairing of Cleopatra with the mythological Amazons in the last section of the novel (86). It is also pertinent to a consideration of the substantial attention and high level of interest that has surrounded the figure of Cleopatra since her death, as part of this interest stems from the figure's combination of traits traditionally and stereotypically considered as "feminine" along with those generally accepted as "masculine", revealed to co-exist in the character of Boullosa's Cleopatra.

3.1 Carmen Boullosa: Life and Works

Carmen Boullosa was born in Mexico City in 1954 as one of eight children in a Catholic family. She studied literature at the Universidad Iberoamericana and at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and has also taught at a number of institutions, including San Diego State, Georgetown, and La Sorbonne. Primarily known as a novelist, Boullosa is a prolific writer, having published dozens of books, including eighteen novels, fifteen poetry collections, four plays, as well as essays, and short stories. Though she explores a range of topics, there is a feminist thread running throughout Boullosa's works, some of which have been recognized with awards such as the literary prize *Premio Xavier Villarrutia* in 1989 for her novels *Antes* (1989), *Papeles irresponsables* (1989), and the book of poetry *La salvaja* (1988) along with the *Premio Café Gijón* in 2008 for *El complot de los románticos* (2009). Considered part of the *Boom femenino*, Boullosa witnessed the burgeoning of women's literature in Hispanic America. As Inés Ferrero-Cádenas points out, "Boullosa's fantastic imaginary and experimental writing can be seen as a product of the counter culture that emerged in Mexico in the 1950s and bloomed during the 1980s" (4). While Boullosa's work has received considerable critical attention, so far much of it has focused on her earlier novels, including *Son vacas, somos puercos* (1991), *Llanto: novelas imposibles* (1992), *La milagrosa* (1993), and *Duerme* (1994). While few specifically address *De un salto descabalga la reina*, similar themes related to feminisms and the representation of women in history appear in the earlier novels and their analyses.

3.1.1 Rewritten Histories and Postmodern Feminisms

The 1991 novel *Son vacas, somos puercos* is based on the Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin's *History of the Buccaneers of America* (1684), a well-known sourcebook on 17th century piracy (Chorba 302).³⁹ Boullosa recreates the story with her narrator Jean Smeeks, who in the first chapter declares that Smeeks is in fact his real name (as opposed to Exquemelin), looking back on his life from when he was kidnapped at age thirteen in Flanders and sold into slavery in the Caribbean. Referring to Smeeks, Maria Akrabova describes the "fluid identity" of this character, specifically in one chapter where "the narrator declares that everything that has been told up to this point, is in fact quite different and contradicts the veracity of the story" (282).⁴⁰ Additionally, while Smeeks acts as the primary narrator, other characters occasionally take over. For instance, this is the case with the misogynistic pirate L'Olonnais (or "Nau") narrating his own capture, dismemberment, torture, and death – an employment of multiple narrators and multiperspectivity typical of Boullosa's novels.⁴¹

³⁹ First published in Dutch as *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers* in 1678.

⁴⁰ A similar situation develops in *De un salto descabalga la reina*, as discussed in section 3.3.1.

⁴¹ "Multiperspectivity" here refers to:

a mode of storytelling in which multiple and often discrepant viewpoints are employed for the presentation and evaluation of a story and its storyworld. [...] the perspectival arrangements in multiperspective narratives may fulfil a variety of different functions; mostly, however, they highlight the perceptually, epistemologically or ideologically restricted nature of individual perspectives and/or draw attention to various kinds of differences and similarities between the points of view presented therein. In this way, multiperspectivity frequently serves to portray the relative character of personal viewpoints or perspectivity in general. (Hartner)

Llanto: novelas imposibles (1991) revisits the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the death of Moctezuma II, with a complicated novel structure consisting of four different sections and multiple narrators (including dust particles) from different time periods, leading Ferrero-Cádenas to conclude that “it is not simply one novel, but at least four” (163). In addition to the use of multiple narrators, the novel contains fragments of different historical versions of the death of Moctezuma, as well as a number of fictional authors describing their struggle in writing the narrative (163).

In the 1993 novel *La milagrosa*, the protagonist is a young woman with supernatural gifts, including the ability to alter reality through her dreams. The work follows a private detective hired to discredit her as a supposed miracle worker and the political plots that surround them. As in many of Boullosa’s novels, the story is presented by unreliable narrators. Maria Akrabova, in her article on “The Intertext and the Paradox: Revisiting Carmen Boullosa’s Early Novels (*La Milagrosa* and *Son Vacas, Somos Puercos*)” (2010), describes Boullosa’s writing as “both evocative and haunting, it makes explicit the suppressed (the subconscious, the erotic, the marginal, the body), and brings forth sensibilities associated with postcolonial perspectives and gender issues” (273). In reference to *La milagrosa* in particular, Akrabova describes the work as “indicative of a polymorphous body: it appears to be a detective novel, but it lacks an explicit narrative center—it is composed, instead, of nine, discursively distinct segments. Each segment both adds to the story and undermines it, leaving it open to different interpretations” (274).

Lastly, the 1994 novel *Duerme* follows a French female pirate in disguise, Claire Fleurcy,

who leaves Spain dressed as a man to avoid becoming a prostitute like her mother. She arrives in sixteenth century New Spain, where she is kidnapped by a Spanish earl to be used as a replacement for him on the gallows. Claire is later aided by an indigenous woman who discovers that the cross-dressed Claire is a woman and performs a ritual which protects her from death. The work explores the complexities of identity and hybridity, particularly through the protagonist who “literally and figuratively incarnates the protean quality of postmodern hybridity, as she crosses gender, racial, temporal, and narrative boundaries with the unfolding of her story” (Pirott-Quintero 388).⁴²

Each of these works contains elements that appear again in Boullosa’s later novel, *De un salto descabalga la reina*. Studies of these and other novels by Boullosa often consider her works as postmodern feminist writings. In many cases they further focus on them as historiographic metafiction (particularly in the cases of *Son vacas, somos puercos* and *Llanto*), considering how they represent historical events while problematizing the notion that it would be possible to do so accurately. Coined by Linda Hutcheon in the 1980s, first in “Beginning to Theorize the Postmodern” and further developed in later studies, including *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History” (1989), historiographic metafiction is described by Hutcheon as a particular type of postmodern fiction:

⁴² Laura Pirott-Quintero further explains that “because the setting is colonial Nueva España, the reader gets a first-hand glimpse into to the workings of the imperial bureaucracy. Racial, caste, and gender categories of the period are represented faithfully, only to be undermined and confounded by the transgressive Claire. Her body’s ‘hybridity’ becomes a strategic trope to reconsider Mexican colonial history” (388).

The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it “historiographic metafiction.” The category of novel I am thinking of includes *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Ragtime*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *The Name of the Rose*. All of these are popular and familiar novels whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least. (Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction” 3)

The term is easily applied to Boullosa’s historical and metafictional novels. Carrie Chorba’s article on “The Actualization of a Distant Past: Carmen Boullosa’s Historiographic Metafiction” (1995), for instance, considers *Son vacas, somos puercos* and *Llanto: novelas imposibles* as historiographic metafiction, building on the theories of critics such as Hayden White. Chorba explains how Boullosa’s choice of historical narratives “has enabled her to create upon a historical basis, to surpass historiography with her imagination, to continue a history's intertextual discourse, and to enshrine a new version – one which is grounded in past documents, but has a decidedly new perspective or optic” (302). In a similar vein, Cynthia Tompkins applies Hutcheon’s theories to Boullosa’s 1991 novel in her article on “Historiographic Metafiction or the Rewriting of History in *Son vacas, somos puercos*” (1997), demonstrating how the author incorporates postmodern strategies, and particularly parody, to rewrite the history of pirates from the

perspective of the slaves and women commonly depicted as “Other(s)” in Exquemelin’s *History of the Buccaneers of America* and additional sources on 17th century piracy.

In “(Re)Constructions of Memory and Identity Formation in Carmen Boullosa’s Postcolonial Writings” (2009), Oswaldo Estrada focuses on Boullosa’s representation of the problematic conquest and colonization of Mexico, as her works aim to “expose and contest Mexico’s (and therefore Latin America’s) permanent state of *coloniality*” (146). Estrada considers how Boullosa’s revisions of historical events in *Llanto*, *Duerme*, and *Cielos de la tierra*, employ history “to raise unresolved identity questions” through “an intelligent articulation of language, multiple narrators, and fragmented structures that require our active participation and interpretation” (136). Anna Reid also centers on Boullosa’s rewriting of the Mexican conquest and death of Moctezuma in *Llanto* which “se pone en relieve la imposibilidad del saber histórico, donde la estructura fragmentaria de la novela refleja la fragmentación del saber histórico” (4).

The multiple, fragmented voices in the narratives of *Son vacas, somos puercos*, *Llanto*, *La milagrosa*, and *De un salto descabalgó la reina*, among others, generally work to provide uncertainties and contradictions in their historical or biographical representations. Boullosa describes her approach to history as fiction in a 2001 interview with Rubén Gallo, saying:

I needed to transform history into fiction: characters and events had to be worked throughout, elaborated, fine-tuned and adapted to the imaginary world of the novel [...]. My novels use historical scenarios, but they’re not at the service of

history: they are neither memoirs, nor testimonies. Like all novelists, I like reality, and I also like to betray reality by correcting its flaws, ultimately by reinventing it. (58)

Interested in the unofficial stories of her characters, Boulosa often brings to the forefront the unreliability of authorities and of their traditional narratives in communicating history and representing historical characters. In Margarita López's dissertation on "Las voces subversivas en la novelística de Carmen Boulosa" (2007), she writes the following in reference to Boulosa's historical novels:

las "Historias" son yuxtapuestas con referencias textuales en que tanto la "Historia" como la realidad representadas en la narrativa son (re)interpretadas constantemente para presentar ante el lector una multiplicidad de versiones que se resisten a la clausura y desestabilizan las nociones tradicionales de la autoridad. Se exploran las fronteras borrosas entre la dicotomía realidad/ficción adscribiéndose a la narrativa historiográfica de alteridad y apertura. (83-84)

This problematization of historical veracity and a multiplicity of interpretations contained within a text appears throughout *De un salto descabalgó la reina*, further highlighted through unreliable narrators and fragmented narrations.

3.2 The Legend of Cleopatra

The historical figure generally referred to as simply "Cleopatra" was Cleopatra VII Philopator, born in 69 BCE, a descendant of the Ptolemies (also known as the Lagids). While she was born in Egypt and known as an Egyptian queen, the Ptolemies were in fact Macedonian Greek and traced their origins back to Alexander the Great's general

Ptolemy I Soter (Southern 43). Although the Ptolemies had acted as pharaohs, Cleopatra was supposedly the first of them to learn the Egyptian language of their subjects (Burstein 11-12).⁴³ She ruled Egypt for twenty-two years, and died at age thirty-nine, at which point her kingdom became a Roman province. She has been the subject of innumerable works since her death, both ancient and modern. As Stacy Schiff points out at the start of her biography, *Cleopatra: A Life* (2010):

Many people have spoken for her, including the greatest playwrights and poets; we have been putting words in her mouth for two thousand years. In one of the busiest afterlives in history she has gone on to become an asteroid, a video game, a cliché, a cigarette, a slot machine, a strip club, a synonym for Elizabeth Taylor.

Shakespeare attested to Cleopatra's infinite variety. He had no idea. (1)

Yet little is known for certain about the last queen of Egypt. The authors of the most comprehensive sources on Cleopatra's life, such as Plutarch (*ca.* 45 CE to 120 CE), Apian (*ca.* 95 CE to 165 CE), and Dio Cassius (155 CE to 235 CE), were born decades to centuries after her death. They were also Roman historians, as were nearly all the authors of surviving sources. After Augustus's victory over Antony and Cleopatra, he controlled the narrative of his defeated enemies and so, "even in the years immediately after her death her memory was condemned by those who had defeated her, thus tainting the ancient sources" (Roller 1). Or, as Schiff puts it, Augustus "delivered up the tabloid version of an Egyptian queen, insatiable, treacherous, bloodthirsty, power-crazed" (6).

⁴³ The Ptolemies had learned "to set themselves up as Egyptian god-kings if they were to seduce the Egyptians into accepting them, embracing all the baroque regalia, hard-to-balance crowns, and archaic rituals" (Cooney 255).

The fact that she was a woman (and one with power) further contributed to the negative press she received: “Like all women, she suffers from male-dominated historiography in both ancient and modern times and was often seen merely as an appendage of the men in her life or was stereotyped into typical chauvinistic female roles such as seductress or sorceress, one whose primary accomplishment was ruining the men that she was involved with” (Roller 1-2). In these sources, her political and economic successes were more often attributed to her feminine wiles and lack of emotional restraint than to her intelligence and political prowess. None of Cleopatra’s own writings survive, and the Roman historians’ works are, in addition to their obvious biases, not known for their historical accuracy.⁴⁴ As Schiff explains, “classical authors were indifferent to statistics and occasionally even to logic; their accounts contradict one another and themselves. Appian is careless with details, Josephus hopeless with chronology. Dio preferred rhetoric to exactitude” (6). With no agreement on even some of the most basic facts of her life, the figure of Cleopatra has become more legend than history (8).

Many of the subsequent works depicting Cleopatra would maintain similar approaches, as in the case of William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607) – perhaps the most popular literary representation of the Egyptian queen. In *The Dangerous Sex: the Myth of Feminine Evil* (1964), Hoffman Reynolds Hays devotes a chapter titled “The Serpent of

⁴⁴ Regarding Cleopatra’s writing, Schiff specifies that “we have, perhaps and at most, one written word of Cleopatra’s. (In 33 BC either she or a scribe signed off on a royal decree with the Greek word *ginesthoi*, meaning, ‘Let it be done.’)” (6).

the Nile” to Shakespeare’s portrayal of Cleopatra. Hays outlines how, despite gains in women’s stature and the “many lively, intelligent and independent females” depicted in the theatre of the time, the character of Cleopatra is cemented as a female archetype:

the girls and women who speak for themselves in the Elizabethan plays are not faceless symbols of evil or fantasy images of male self-indulgence. [...] One character, however, draws on elements of the ancient misogyny and at the same time is a stereotype, an image, which becomes a part of Western culture – Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, the embodiment of the *femme fatale*. (159)

The portrayal of the Egyptian queen as a *femme fatale*, responsible for her lover’s downfall, would continue for centuries, only relatively recently subjected to feminist reinterpretations.

3.3 Identity of a Queen: Three Portrayals

Carmen Boullosa’s novel contains the writings of the fictional character Diomedes, Cleopatra’s personal scribe. While she is sure to have had a personal scribe, there are, as explained above, no extant papyri from such a scribe, or from any of Cleopatra’s company. Boullosa’s Diomedes is, in some ways, yet another male historian writing Cleopatra’s life, but his loyalty and respect for her, expressed throughout the work in the scribe’s interludes, sets this fictional narrator apart from the Roman historians and poets who famously despised Cleopatra. In the “Author’s Note” to the English translation, Boullosa names a number of the ancient authors that she used as sources for her novel. This includes Virgil (70 BCE to 19 BCE), Propertius (*ca.* 50 BCE to 15 BCE), and Cicero (106 BCE to 43 BCE) – all Cleopatra’s contemporaries and enemies (Boullosa,

Cleopatra Dismounts 223). She also borrows from Greek myths and poetry, which are weaved into the narrative through invented scenes and characters. Diomedes's account is presented in three sections: "El cadáver" ("The Corpse"), "La huida" ("On the Run"), and "De un salto descabalgó la reina" ("The Queen Dismounts with a Single Leap"), each of which gives the reader a distinct perspective on the character of the queen. The novel begins with Cleopatra's demise, continues with a movement back in time to when she was a young girl, and concludes with the longest chapter, which depicts Cleopatra as a young Queen displaying her talents and political prowess. The interludes of the scribe Diomedes provide context throughout the work, introducing and occasionally interrupting the different sections.

3.3.1 El cadáver

The novel begins with the end of Cleopatra's life, setting the stage for her to narrate her history to the scribe Diomedes, whose work is the text the reader holds in their hands.

The initial scenes feature the queen holding the dying Mark Antony, lamenting the events that had led to their ruin.⁴⁵ The tone changes throughout the novel, and even within the first section. This section, as later revealed, is the least accurate portrayal of the queen.

The scribe admits his own unreliability as a source, explaining how he had become a "traitor" during his time spent in an enemy city in Rome after Cleopatra's death, forced to tell lies about the queen on behalf of Octavius/Augustus's Rome. Similar to unreliable

⁴⁵ While Cleopatra was said to have committed suicide after Mark Antony, this does not appear in the novel. There are, as with most details of her life, doubts about the details of her death, with perhaps the most popular (though unlikely) legend being that she was poisoned by an asp or other poisonous snake (Schiff 306).

narrators in Boullosa's other novels, the narrator informs the reader partway through *De un salto descabalgó la reina*: "después de tantas décadas de maltratarla y torcerla, no he dado en cómo enderezarla, y si comencé fingiendo la voz de Cleopatra, a las pocas frases ya sonaba a la de Propertio, que la odió, o a la de Cicerón, que no podía verla ni en pintura, o a la de Virgilio, que la vituperó" ("After so many decades of lies and distortions, I can find no way to set the record straight. If I begin imitating the voice of Cleopatra, within no time at all I am sounding like Propertius, who hated her, or like Cicero, who couldn't even bear to see her portrait, or like Virgil who cheapened her") (74; 80).⁴⁶ While the plot is not contradicted in this case (as it is in Boullosa's earlier novel *Son vacas, somos puercos*, for instance), the voice of the central character represented up to that point is seriously questioned. With this confession, Diomedes recognizes the imposition of the already formed representations of the queen by ancient authors who despised her – Propertius, Cicero, and Virgil – and the difficulty of accurately representing the queen as he personally knew her. And so, even with a fictional narrator, Boullosa retains the inescapable uncertainty of the queen's life (and death) in her narrative.

Diomedes's appearance after the first chapter to bemoan his failure to capture the voice of Cleopatra reminds the reader of the impossibility of an accurate history, especially in the case of a queen with no written versions left of her side of the story. It further

⁴⁶ All English translations of *De un salto descabalgó la reina* are from *Cleopatra Dismounts* (2005), translated by Geoff Hargreaves.

emphasizes that the Cleopatra introduced here is the one known to history. This tainted version of Cleopatra is distraught about the death of Mark Antony and the loss of her kingdom, while also concerned about the false images and accounts of her that she imagines will proliferate after her death. She insists that they will never exhibit her alive, “como una esclava, encadenada al carro de quien se ostentará triunfador por las calles de Roma” (“chained like a slave to the chariot of the man who will delight in parading his victory through the streets of Rome”) and predicts that they will publish an account of her as “esa Cleopatra falsa cuya imagen Octavio ha favorecido para ocultar la guerra civil contra el triunviro Antonio” (“[that false Cleopatra], manipulating her image to disguise the truth about a civil war Octavius waged solely to settle a score with his fellow-triumvir Antony”) (18; 15). She also mentions “los viles seguidores de Octavio y de quienes se han creído todas esas estúpidas habladurías atribuidas a una Cleopatra que ni soy yo ni se me asemeja” (“Octavius’s vile minions and others that have believed the stupid chatter he attributes to a Cleopatra who is neither I nor anything like me”), suggesting that Roman propagandists had already presented an inaccurate portrait of her for their political purposes before her demise (20; 17). This image-conscious version of Cleopatra simultaneously protests the image that Octavius and Roman propaganda makes of her while admitting that oblivion, or having nothing written about her at all, would be worse than these fabricated images of her (25).

As the queen grieves for Mark Antony and the imminent end to her own rule, Diomedes sees a prophet outside next to those mourning for Cleopatra and Mark Antony, reciting verses blaming Cleopatra for the death of Egypt. Diomedes notes that the prophet’s

shouts are drowned out by the mourners but he does not hear them: “en trance, no las oía. Se creía sus mentiras de cabo a rabo, había olvidado que decía falsedades” (“in a trance, he did not hear them. He believed his lies from beginning to end. He had forgotten he was proclaiming falsehoods”) (30; 28). With a wording that foreshadows Diomedes’s own later confession to proclaiming falsehoods he no longer believed to be untrue, the narrative comments on how a false history becomes the official account. That is, if the same story is told for long enough even the writers forget that it may never have been true to begin with – an idea applicable to history, but particularly to the representations of women in history.

This first section also introduces the reader to Cleopatra’s reflections on her own identity, as the narrative revolves around her struggle to set herself apart as unique and worthy of praise, despite her imminent downfall. She makes constant references to her ancestry, as the last of the Ptolemies and as a descendant of Alexander the Great.⁴⁷ This repetition of details related to her lineage suggests an insecure, self-doubting character over-compensating through grand proclamations of her royal pedigree – a self-doubt that appears most prominently in this first section, while the later ones reveal a self-assured, confident woman. Here, however, the negative opinions of her, expressed by the people, take over much of the character’s focus.

⁴⁷ “Yo, Cleopatra, la última de los Lágidas, faraona de Egipto, descendiente de Alejandro el Magno, de las diodas Filadelfa, Arsinoe, Berenice, de los dioses Soters, Adelfos y Evergetos” (Boullosa 24). Although this direct relation to Alexander the Great is indicated throughout the novel, she was in fact a descendant of one of his generals (Ptolemy I Soter), as noted in section 3.2.

In one display of the queen's struggle with negative impressions of her, she sees a message on the wall in the streets of Alexandria, after finding out about Mark Antony's marriage to another woman. Already vulnerable, Cleopatra dissolves into tears in the street, bemoaning her status as a nobody with nothing unique to set her apart (50). The message she sees on the wall takes a particular aim at her lineage, as it contains phrases such as: "No nací mujer ni hijo de rey ebrio" ("I wasn't born a woman nor the child of a drunken king") and "ni fui, ni seré, ni quiero ser Lágida" ("I wasn't, I won't be, I don't want to be a Lagid") (50; 51). In reality, Cleopatra's identity was an important influence on the mythic quality she developed in historical accounts. Schiff explains how she would have seemed especially menacing to the Romans: "Cleopatra was twice suspect, once for hailing from a culture known for its 'natural talent for deception,' again for her Alexandrian address" (5). Despite her Macedonian Greek heritage, she was viewed as exotic and threatening to the Roman way of life: "a stand-in for the occult, alchemical East, for her sinuous, sensuous land [...] she hailed from the intoxicating land of sex and excess" and, in terms of historical interpretations, "it is not difficult to understand why Caesar became history, Cleopatra a legend" (5). This scene brings to the fore the question of Cleopatra's identity and legacy, both of which appear to be threatened in this first portrayal. The depiction of a weeping, insecure woman at the edge of her demise bridges the Roman historical representations of the queen with Boulosa's revision in the remainder of the novel.

3.3.2 La huida

Following the difficulties in capturing Cleopatra's voice in the first section, Diomedes explains the reasons for his erroneous representation. The reader learns that the scribe had been interrogated and eventually his point of view and memory was weakened, to be partially replaced by that of his tormentors, and altered by the Romans in power after Mark Antony's and Cleopatra's deaths. As he explains, his words "fingen contar lo que Cleopatra fue, dicen que lo harán, lo intentan con sinceridad, pero terminan soportando la versión creada por César Augusto" ("pretend to describe the real Cleopatra; they even believe their own pretence, but they end up reinforcing the version created by Caesar Augustus") (64; 67). The Cleopatra of the first section appears as highly volatile and emotional, which may be appropriate given the circumstances, but is contradicted by the more nuanced representations in the second and third sections. Diomedes's interjection and confession here, as earlier, presents the popularized dramatic version of Cleopatra as one curated by her Roman enemies who focus on one aspect of her personality, "al encasillar a su persona en una que mira solamente con los ojos nublados del corazón: jaula indignante para alguien de su energía, complejidad y violencia" ("representing her as a creature who saw life through eyes blurred by her feelings. An insulting straitjacket for a woman of her energy, complexity, and violence") (64; 67). The representation of the queen as overly emotional, with her view clouded by her feelings, broaches the challenges faced by women rulers in response to the stereotype which regards them as leaders ruled by emotion rather than logic. Diomedes's question of whether this might apply to Cleopatra ("¿Sería la gran Cleopatra una de ojos llorosos por malestares afectivos?"/"could she be this weepy weakling?") referring to the version of her in part

one, is answered by his own subsequent descriptions of the queen which suggest otherwise (64; 67).

An aspect of Cleopatra which has received substantial attention over the years has been her physical appearance. While many may picture an Elizabeth Taylor-esque beauty after the success of the 1963 film *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, the sources on the subject suggest that the queen was not extraordinarily attractive. Schiff notes that, “while the Romans who preserved her story assure us of Cleopatra’s wanton ways, her feminine wiles, her ruthless ambition, and her sexual depravity, few raved about her beauty” (41). Plutarch, for instance, wrote that:

her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence [...] was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching. (475)

Diomedes’s description of Cleopatra’s attractiveness follows Plutarch’s and others’ emphasis on her way of moving and speaking rather than her appearance. In trying to rectify his earlier portrayal, Diomedes explains that the queen had a confident and rapid manner of speech that was difficult to capture in writing (Boullosa, *De un salto* 63). In giving the reader a more accurate image, he also points out that she was “baja de estatura, con extraordinaria belleza en su cuerpo y gracia en sus movimientos, ágiles y elegantes como los de una ninfa” (“short in stature but possessed an extraordinary physical beauty and grace in her movements, as agile and elegant as an animal or a nymph”) (63; 65).

More than a simple question of appearance, the focus on Cleopatra's other traits as key to her charm lend the character a measure of seriousness, with more credit given to her intelligence, wit, and grace than to superficial beauty.

The narrator's move away from the focus on Cleopatra's physical appearance also challenges the image of her as frivolous and preoccupied with superficialities. An example of this appears with the narrator's mention of the volumes of beauty and cooking tips attributed to Cleopatra. The idea that the queen would have spent her time on these was, according to Diomedes, a lie intended to reinforce "la imagen de la Cleopatra que los romanos insisten en representar, la coqueta y caprichuda, la enamorada, la ligera" ("the image of her that the Romans want to convey of Cleopatra as a flirt, a mistress, a trivial housewife given to fits of pique") and it was likely that these volumes of beauty tips, recipes, and party-detailing ideas were likely compiled by the maids, not the queen herself (67; 70). The destruction of Cleopatra's own writings was also considered a part of this attempt to lessen her reputation as a strategic and capable ruler. Augustus/Octavius had everything but some statues destroyed in order to confine the queen to "su peinado y atuendo de mujer, desprovista de ideas, tramas y estrategias, porque esas piedras, el bronce y el oro con que fueron hechas, no son de los que piensan" ("to her fancy hairdo and in her woman's robes, void of ideas, plans, and strategies, for those stone effigies with their bronze and gold adornments are unthinking objects") (69; 73). Although she would be the last ruler of Egypt before it became a Roman province, Cleopatra managed to greatly increase Egypt's assets through her investments and business dealings, as

detailed in the novel and in other biographical works.

Following Diomedes's characterization of a self-possessed Cleopatra as leader is the portrayal of her as a young girl with her father Auletes, who was exiled to Rome. At twelve years of age, the young princess plots with her maidservants to escape, leaving her father a letter explaining that she was going to find allies along the rebel coasts of Cilicia (85). They sneak away with a group of gladiators, one of whom (Apollodorus) continues with them, dressed as a woman. In one scene, young Cleopatra and Apollodorus are riding in a cart on their way out of Rome and she scratches "Queen of Kings", the young princess's ambition for herself, into the cart plank with a sharp-pointed stone. This contrasts starkly with the scene in part one of the novel, where a devastated Cleopatra finds a message on the wall in the street insulting her and referring to her as a "wretched queen". Here she appears full of potential, motivated to become queen, and the next day she and Apollodorus carve the phrase "Queen of Kings" into the entire cart.

3.3.3 De un salto descabalga la reina

The engraved cart makes a triumphant reappearance in the third section of the novel, when the queen is fleeing Alexandria. She had been deposed and then invited back into what turned out to be a trap, so she and her troops flee to allies in Ascalon, where she planned to recruit an army. Before they arrive there, however, Cleopatra sees the old cart with the engraved phrase "Queen of Kings" and she is brought back to the memory of that journey when she was a young girl: "Los recuerdos de aquel viaje me cegaron. Estaba yo muda. ¿Qué hacía de este lado del mar, cerca de las siete bocas del Nilo, el

carro que los marinos contrataron para ayudar a escapar de la vergüenza a la princesa niña? Aturdida, no me hice esta pregunta, casi durmiendo en sueños de otros tiempos” (“The memories of that journey blinded me. I was speechless. What was it doing on this side of the waters, close by the seven mouths of the Nile, the cart the sailors had hired to help the child-princess escape from her shameful condition? I was too overwhelmed to seek an answer to the question, swamped by dreams of other times”) (121; 130). While she stands by the cart, transfixed, a strange odour is emitted by one of the bulls harnessed to the cart, which then invites her onto his back and carries her away, across the sea, and into the land of the Amazon women.

The third part of the novel, in which the mythical Amazon warriors are the principal feature, leaves behind the historical focus of the first two sections and presents a fantastical portrayal of Cleopatra’s time among the Amazons. In Ancient Greek mythology, the Amazons were a group of mysterious warrior women from the east of unknown origin: “Scythia, Thrace, Asia Minor – all had seen their incursions, and tombs of their great queens marked even wild landscapes” (Martin 131). Some of the popular myths surrounding the mysterious women suggested that they despised men and that they removed one of their breasts to shoot their arrows or throw their javelins with better control. As Richard P. Martin notes, “it was not true that they hated men – they simply had little need for them, and lived in all-female encampments” (131). The myth of the removed breast is generally attributed to the possible etymological origin of the word *Amazones* as “the most popular explanation claimed that *Amazones* was a derivation of *a*, ‘without’, and *mazos*, ‘breasts’ [...] The idea that Amazons cut or cauterized their right

breasts in order to have better bow control offered a kind of savage plausibility that appealed to the Greeks” (Foreman).⁴⁸

In Boullosa’s novel, the Amazons appear as female warriors of various origins and races living together in a utopian community. Cleopatra describes them as “indómitas, elegantes, radiantes de hermosura, con una libertad y un aplomo en sus movimientos que sólo se encuentran entre los más privilegiados de los varones. Pero no eran en nada varoniles” (“indomitable, elegant, glowing with beauty, with a freedom and confidence in their movements, found only among the most privileged males. But there was nothing masculine about them”) (130; 141). The descriptions of the Amazon women in the above quotation and elsewhere in the novel reject disparaging interpretations of the female-led army and community. This includes the myth of the removed breast, as the Amazon queen, Hippolyta, explains to Cleopatra: “los que nos odian dicen, para vituperarnos, que nos falta un pecho, como si comer carne cruda, dormir al aire libre, ser diestras en las armas nos hiciera menos mujeres” (“those who hate us vilify us by saying we lack one breast, as if eating raw meat, sleeping outside, and being skilled in weapons made us less than women”) (164; 178). The Amazons, like Cleopatra and other female leaders, struggle against the popular belief that women are unsuited to warfare and/or leadership and that, if they are successful in those areas, it is because they are not fully women. The

⁴⁸ In her article on the possible origins of the myth of the Amazon Women, Foreman explains that “Myth or fact, symbol or neurosis, none of the theories adequately explained the origins of the Amazons. If these warrior women were a figment of Greek imagination, there still remained the unanswered question of who or what had been the inspiration for such an elaborate fiction. Their very name was a puzzle that mystified the ancient Greeks”.

characterization of the warriors as a united, unified group is highlighted in the description of their communal bed, where they formed “un solo cuerpo” (“one [single] body”), challenging the image of conflictive Amazons “que representan los artistas” (“portrayed by artists”) (164; 178).

Cleopatra also encounters a group of poets and musicians who live alongside the Amazons, working for them, and who share with Cleopatra their insights into the group of female warriors and their queen. Acusilaus, one of these elderly men, describes the Amazons’ society as one which follows the principles of *maat* – the ancient Egyptian concepts of truth, justice, order, and harmony, described by Acusilaus as “el estado ideal del universo que sólo consigue un buen monarca” (“the ideal condition of the universe that only a good monarch can bestow”) (138; 150). This characterization of the female-led utopian existence of the Amazons, along with the Amazon queen Hippolyta’s guidance, form the novel’s third version of Cleopatra and her development into her role as an inspired monarch and leader. Hippolyta explains to Cleopatra that human beings rebel against those who intend to rule them wisely:

Contra nadie se levantan más que contra aquellos en quienes noten intención de gobernarlos con cordura. Que haya un tirano egoísta, que este dispilfarre las riquezas colectivas, desaprovechándolas, malgastándolas, sobornando al pueblo con embelecos y violencias, se adorarán su estupidez y desgobierno. Que en cambio administre, sea justo y gobierne: le devolverán el injusto pago de la rebelión, los levantamientos. (131)

(Human beings [...] rebel against only those in whom they detect an intention to rule them wisely. Let a governor prove an egoistic tyrant, who robs their wealth, abuses them, exploits them, and corrupts them with bribes and violence, and they will adore his stupidity and misrule. Let his government be just and prudent, they will pay him back with insurrections and defiance.) (142)

The Amazon queen then welcomes Cleopatra as a wise ruler, declares that the pause in Cleopatra's reign is only a temporary result of "la mala imposición de un padre, porque una mujer no necesita de hermanuchos para legitimar su trono" ("her father's poor choice, because a woman does not need the aid of a weakling brother to authorize her possession of a throne") and predicts that once she regains the throne, she will be adored as a goddess (131-132; 143). Despite the Egyptian queen's eventual demise, these predictions are confirmed as Cleopatra then successfully raises an army, returns as queen, and maintains Egypt's valued independence from Rome until her end. Contrary to the insecure, weakened queen in the first section, and more advanced than the fledgling princess of the second section, this section provides a portrayal of a Cleopatra forging her identity as a woman and a ruler, near the height of her success.

3.4 A Stranger to the World

While many of Boullosa's novels approach subjects close to her own context, often taking place in Latin America, Cleopatra is both geographically and temporally distant from the author. This may, in part, be an explanation for the relative lack of critical and popular attention given to the novel. It also raises the question of Boullosa's decision to write about the historical figure of Cleopatra. The multitude of works depicting and

studying the Egyptian queen suggests that there are many possible explanations for the author's interest, including Cleopatra's status as one of the most (in)famous women to have lived, and one with significant influence at the height of her power (Schiff 1). But, while the figure of Cleopatra has elicited plenty of interest over the years, an additional reason for Boulosa's choice of protagonist potentially stems from her interest in what she refers to in an interview as "strangers to the world" (Boulosa, "Interview with Rubén Gallo" 57).

Boulosa first uses the phrase in reference to her fascination with pirates, which appear in her novels *Son vacas, somos puercos*, *Duerme*, and even briefly in the second section of *De un salto descabalgó la reina*. She describes them as "foreigners everywhere they went", and includes not only pirates in this designation of "strangers to the world", but also children and many of her other characters. The historical character of Montezuma in *Llanto: novelas imposibles*, for instance, is also included, as Boulosa suggests:

"Montezuma did have something in common with pirates: after the arrival of the Spaniards and the siege of his city, he too quite suddenly became a stranger in his own world. A man who had ruled an empire, who saw himself as the center of the universe, found himself defeated, and expelled from the world" ("Interview with Rubén Gallo" 57).

The author further attributes her inclination to write novels to her interest in "strangers to the world", saying: "I like placing myself in the shoes of strangers, foreigners, and all those who exist outside the world – perhaps that is why I write novels" (57). Cleopatra could also be considered a "stranger to the world", and a foreigner in her own. Living as an Egyptian queen of Macedonian Greek descent, with strong ties to Rome and its leaders

(both politically and, in the cases of Caesar and Mark Antony, romantically) – she was in many ways an outsider to both.

In the Author's Note to the English translation of the novel, Boulosa explains her reasoning behind the addition of the Amazons to her story of Cleopatra, as she explains that "both Cleopatra and the Amazons – and that's one of the reasons I paired them in this book – choose to live a life 'unfaithful' to their 'nature'", referencing a passage from Ancient Greek dramatist Menander about the Amazons and admitting to her "mischievous use of some classical texts, inverting their intentions" (224). Boulosa includes the passage from Menander, in a translation by Marguerite Yourcenar:

Reste fidèle, femme, à ta position

De femme, à l'intérieur de la maison. L'infâme

Seule hasarde le pied au dehors. C'est au chien

Qu'est la rue, et jamais à la femme de bien. (Menander qtd in Boulosa 223)

Boulosa writes that both Cleopatra and the Amazons "like 'infamous persons,' live 'a dog's life,' to put it in Menander's terms" (224). Like pirates, the Amazons reject all social conventions and create their own female-led society. The author's inventive pairing of the Egyptian queen and the group of female warriors also suggests that Cleopatra, similar to the Amazons, was a match for her male counterparts. In Greek mythology, the Amazons were known for their military prowess, an overwhelmingly male domain, while Cleopatra was known, even by her detractors, for her political prowess – another typically male domain. Further, Boulosa's text suggests that in neither case do the women renounce their feminine characteristics, proudly maintaining their

status as women while asserting themselves in majority male domains.

While the Amazons have their roots in Greek mythology, there have also been representations of Amazon women in popular culture, with the most prevalent being the figure of “Wonder Woman”, created by psychologist William Moulton Marston. In addition to being the creator of the Wonder Woman comics, Marston was active as a researcher and academic, with his work including a series of experiments conducted with Elizabeth Holloway, Marston’s wife and collaborator, studying sex differences. An outspoken feminist, Marston was explicit about his intention in writing the comics about the Amazonian superhero. In an article he wrote on “Why 100,000,000 American Read Comics” (1943), he explains his intentions in writing the Wonder Woman comics, using a medium which would rouse the emotions – that is, by appealing to affect – intended as a way to disseminate his feminist vision (Marston 37). He writes that “not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power” (42). Marston was certainly not the first to make the connection between the Amazons and feminism, and even early feminists “shared an obsession with Amazons” (Lepore). Boullosa’s Cleopatra and the Amazon women she meets similarly embrace force, strength, and power, while maintaining what Marston referred to as “feminine tenderness and allure” (43). Additionally, in a revision of the Amazonian Wonder Woman, Boullosa’s pairing of Cleopatra with the Amazons responds to the shortage of female characters represented as both strong and feminine, while suggesting that the portrayal of the Amazons infers significant parallels with the Egyptian Queen.

Beyond the characterization of the specific Amazon characters, Boullosa's portrayal of the female-led society as a potential expression of the ancient Egyptian principles of *maat* further ties Cleopatra with the Amazon community. The poet Acusilaus informs Cleopatra soon after her arrival that she would benefit from an alliance with the Amazons, emphasizing the utopian aspects of their society. Acusilaus depicts the Amazon society as harmonious, despite their militaristic exterior: "Entre ellas, Cleopatra, no hay ni robos ni saqueos. No se golpean, no desobedecen, viven con armonía ejemplar. Les es imposible cometer adulterio. Ninguna es capaz de acción vil o vergonzosa" ("Among themselves, Cleopatra, there is no stealing and plundering. They don't hit each other, they don't disobey orders, they live in exemplary harmony. Of course, there's no question of adultery. Not one of them is capable of a vile or shameful action") (138; 150). The poet further describes how he and the others are able to write what they want and to say what they mean as "contrario a los monarcas que se han enemistado con algunos de nosotros, las amazonas no nos piden que les escribamos loas" ("unlike certain rulers who have turned against some of us, the Amazons don't request us to write poems in their praise") (137; 149). The other poets agree, explaining that the Amazons dislike laudatory writing as they prefer that the poets write the truth rather than seek favours through praise. In addition to reflecting the significant role of truth for the ruling Amazons, this contrasts the novel's depiction of Octavius and his propagandistic efforts to sabotage his enemy (Cleopatra) and legitimize his own rule with little regard for the truth.

Though she feels out of place among the Amazons at first, Boullosa's Cleopatra soon finds that their beliefs align with her own – suggesting that, under alternate

circumstances, she too might have worked towards a society following ideals of harmony, justice, order, and truth. After hearing the hymn of the Amazons, Cleopatra asserts: “será himno de las amazonas, pero es mío, es el motivo por el que estoy yo aquí, es personal. En mi caso se aplica de cabo a rabo” (“it may well be the hymn of the Amazons, but it’s mine as well. That’s why I’m here. I agree with its outlook completely”) (159; 173). Boullosa’s revival of the Greek myth of the Amazons and her inclusion of this society of women in the novel creates a world in which her protagonist is no longer a stranger.

3.5 Conclusion

Employing techniques introduced in her earlier novels, including an unreliable narrator (the scribe Diomedes) and multiple segments with varying interpretations of the same subject, Boullosa manages to portray three distinct versions of the historical figure of Cleopatra. The first attempt at describing the queen falls short, tainted by the admittedly unreliable narrator’s time spent in Rome among Cleopatra’s enemies after her death. This first depiction of the queen, at the threshold of her demise and at the end of Egypt’s independence from Rome, reflects the type of leader suggested by Roman sources, and many of the later historical sources, in efforts led by Cleopatra’s enemies. Here the insecure queen obsesses over her looks, her lover, and her legacy, focused on all that she has lost. The second section, leaving behind the tragic figure of the first part, travels back to a time when the young princess has everything to gain. Full of potential, the intelligent and adventurous young woman depicted here bears little resemblance to the dying monarch in the previous representation. The most fantastical portrayal, also recognized

within the novel as the most accurate, is of the queen in the last section of the three, securing her identity as she secures her allies and her rise to victory.

The third section not only represents the idealized utopian world of the Amazon women, but also reflects an idealized feminist icon, even while recognizing the unlikelihood of such a figure. The novel takes a postmodern approach to the unknowability of history, portraying a single character in multiple, fragmented parts, and a neo-romantic sense of unity, as exemplified through the final portrayal of the character among the Amazon women. The tension of the two sensibilities emerges alongside the protagonist's formation of identity, which similarly exists in an unresolved form, reaching at the end towards a hopeful unity, with the character nearing the heights of her power.

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Chapter 4

4 Revisiting the Creation Myth and the Creation of Woman in Gioconda Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008)

The creation story of Adam and Eve, shared among the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions, is one of the most ubiquitous tales in the Western world. Taking its name from the first stanza of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (1863), Gioconda Belli's novel *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008) rewrites the Genesis myth, conserving some aspects of the well-known tale while revising others.⁴⁹ Most of the novel takes place after Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden, detailing their struggles as they learn to survive outside of paradise. In writing the work, Belli combined the "official" account found in Genesis (which itself has varying versions, to be discussed later) with biblical apocrypha, along with her own alterations. In doing so, the author composed an alternative myth of the creation of humankind with a focus on the experience of Eve, the first woman. The novel has received much critical acclaim, being the recipient of the Biblioteca Breve and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz awards, though there have been relatively few critical analyses of the work.

In this chapter, I examine the novel and its representation of Eve and other characters as

⁴⁹ The full first stanza of Blake's poem is "To see a world in a grain of sand / And heaven in a wildflower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour" (lines 1-4).

they relate to the original myth and relevant works. I begin with a brief background on Gioconda Belli as well as an overview of selected critical studies on the author's novels, particularly considering those relevant to the current study and themes related to *El infinito en la palma de la mano*. I then consider the original myth on which the 2008 novel was based, addressing questions of the story's origins and how it came to be a part of the book of Genesis. Throughout the study, I focus on the feminist implications of the Adam and Eve story as it has been interpreted over time, with an emphasis on representations and judgements of Eve which in many cases extend beyond the myth to encompass all women. This includes, but is not limited to, religious, patriarchal, and feminist readings of Eve's role as she appears in the well-known myth.⁵⁰ I then analyze the novel itself, keeping in mind and referring back to these earlier readings as applicable, considering that many of these works were familiar to Gioconda Belli while writing the novel.⁵¹ The analysis focuses primarily on the representation of Eve, but also deals with questions related to Belli's versions of God, Adam, and the Serpent. With these analyses in mind, I explore how Belli's revision of the Judeo-Christian creation myth expresses a feminist sensibility.

⁵⁰ There are also multiple works in the literary realm which revisit the myth, from Milton's well-known *Paradise Lost* (1667) to revisionist texts written in a similar vein to Belli's novel.

⁵¹ In addition to the works Belli mentions in the Author's Note introducing the novel, she appends a brief bibliography at the end which includes several sources related to interpretations of the myth and to apocryphal works.

4.1 Gioconda Belli: Life and Works

Gioconda Belli was born in Managua, Nicaragua in 1948 to a wealthy, upper-class family of Italian descent. She was sent to boarding school in Spain, graduated from the Real Colegio de Santa Isabel in Madrid, studied advertising and journalism in Philadelphia, returned to Nicaragua, married young, and had her first daughter at age 19. Troubled by the poverty and political oppression in her home country, Belli became involved with the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution. She joined the movement in 1970 and was forced into exile five years later, fleeing to Costa Rica and Mexico. She returned to Nicaragua in 1979 and worked within the Sandinista party (FSLN) until 1993, when she became outspokenly critical of Daniel Ortega. Belli currently splits her time between the United States and Nicaragua, living in both Los Angeles and Managua. A prolific writer, Belli has published multiple books of poetry, including *Sobre la grama* (1972), *Línea de fuego* (1978), *Truenos y arco iris* (1982), *De la costilla de Eva* (1986), *Poesía reunida* (1989), *Apogeo* (1997), *Fuego soy apartado y espada puesta lejos* (2006), and *En la avanzada juventud* (2013). She has written eight novels: *La mujer habitada* (1988), *Sofía de los presagios* (1990), *Waslala: memorial del futuro* (1996), *El pergamino de la seducción* (2005), *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008), *El país de las mujeres* (2010), *El intenso calor de la luna* (2014), and *Las fiebres de la memoria* (2018); and a memoir: *El país bajo mi piel, memorias de amor y de guerra* (2001); as well as essays

and children's books.⁵² Three of Belli's novels have been widely translated and she has received numerous awards for both poetry and fiction.

4.1.1 Literature, Revolution, and Feminism

Belli's works are recognized for their feminist approach and representations of female experiences. Her 1988 novel *La mujer habitada* is the most well-known and extensively studied of her works. Belli's much more recent novel *El infinito en la palma de la mano* has not yet received such critical attention although, as mentioned earlier, it has received significant accolades. In regards to critical analyses, there are relatively few which deal specifically with *El infinito en la palma de la mano*. However, in some cases the insights from studies of Belli's other novels apply to *El infinito* as well. In "Gioconda Belli, un universo de mujeres", for instance, Gema Lasarte Leonet considers the representations of female figures in three of Belli's novels: *La mujer habitada*, *Sofía de los presagios*, and *El pergamino de la seducción* but only mentions *El infinito* in passing. This author's choice of novels centers around the dual personalities of the selected protagonists: Lavinia/Itzá in *La mujer habitada*, Sofía/Xintal in *Sofía de los presagios*, and Juana/Lucía in *El pergamino de la seducción* (Lasarte Leonet 1087). Nevertheless, Lasarte Leonet's argument that the three female protagonists she studies "anulan los estereotipos creados por los autores masculinos y vienen a proponernos una representación nueva de la mujer", is easily applicable to the representation of Eve in *El*

⁵² The 1986 poetry collection *De la costilla de Eva* contains similar feminist themes related to the figure of Eve that were further developed in the novel *El infinito en la palma de la mano*.

infinito en la palma de la mano as well (1082). The stereotypes of women in this case would refer to representations in Biblical sources and (generally male) interpretations. Lasarte Leonet also points out the ubiquity of maternal themes in Belli's novels as all her protagonists, with the exception of Lavinia (who dies young), are mothers (1092). This again applies to *El infinito*, in which the theme of motherhood emerges during and after Adam and Eve are banished from Eden.

The theme of motherhood is at the core of Laura Barbas-Rhoden's study. She devotes the second chapter of her book on *Writing Women in Central America* (2003) to Gioconda Belli's novels. In the chapter titled "The Quest for the Mother: Women and Memory in the Novels of Gioconda Belli", Barbas-Rhoden points out the common concerns in Belli's first three novels (those published as of 2003) and her memoir, stating that the protagonists in these works "lack a female tradition, a memory of their mothers or female antecedents, that will center them and enable their empowerment" (48). Each of the novels, she argues, encapsulates the protagonist's search for maternal roots. In *La mujer habitada*, Belli "reaches beyond the immediate past to find an indigenous antecedent for the twentieth-century protagonist" in the fictional Faguas (56). In addition to creating a "mythico-historical, female antecedent to serve as a guide for women in a struggle for personal and national liberation", the novel also "explicitly recuperates women's history [and] implicitly reveals the difficulties of doing so" (58). Both Belli's next novel, *Sofía de los presagios*, and the following one, *Waslala*, feature female protagonists searching for their parents. In *Sofía de los presagios*, for instance, Sofía is abandoned by her parents at a young age and years later searches for her mother while she becomes a mother

herself, again concerned with female or maternal history in a post-revolutionary context (56). Barbas-Rhoden argues that in both *Waslala* and *Sofía de los presagios*, “Belli manipulates Oedipal and quest narratives to serve a feminist agenda”, placing female protagonists and their maternal connections at the center and modifying the hero quest and *bildungsroman* formulas (70). She further suggests that “the recognition of the lack of a female tradition and the imperative of its creation for women’s subjectivity is arguably the most salient characteristic of Belli’s writings, despite the widely commented political commitment of her earlier works” (54). It is worth noting that, although Barbas-Rhoden wrote this in regards to Belli’s early novels, it is also applicable to her more recent ones, including *El infinito en la palma de la mano*. The emphasis on motherhood and female tradition is in part a response to what Debra Castillo describes as “the mother’s lack of access to subjectivity” in Boom literature of the 1960s and 1970s (Castillo 23). Barbas-Rhoden further considers this tendency to replicate stereotypes of maternal characters as “a modern variation, perhaps, of matricide” and argues that Belli’s novels “actively seek to reclaim the mother: to give her textual presence and a voice” (Barbas-Rhoden 73-74).

Unsurprisingly, considering Gioconda Belli’s active participation in the Sandinista Revolution, the subjects of revolution, social hierarchy, and political resistance appear in most studies of her work. This is in some cases aligned with Belli’s feminist approach, considering how the writer questions and challenges the accepted norms or status quo in both political and social realms. In an article examining Gioconda Belli’s poetry, Pilar Moyano does just this, focusing on the revolution-related aspects of Belli’s work

alongside the revisionist in regards to representations of women in a revolutionary context and considering how the representation of the Sandinista woman in Belli's poetry extends the perception of motherhood to encompass a revolutionary soldier (82). Rather than negating the traditional perceptions of motherhood, her poetry encompasses it as "woman's so-called instinctive pull and capacity to create life, to give, to nurture, continues to be emphasized. In fact, it is perceived as the origin of her strength and energy. It is motherhood that provides her with protective feelings, capable of reaching not just her own children, but all those of a society in crisis" (89). Her poetry thus aims to revise what is often oppressively considered "natural", in terms of gender roles, on both social and political levels. As Barbas-Rhoden puts it in reference to the women writers she includes in her book, these authors "question the human social arrangement at its most basic levels: the relations between men and women; the nature of roles assigned according to gender; and the place of women and other marginalized people in the memory of the modern state" ("Disrupting the Thread" 6). Hélène de Fays's article on "The Revolutionary Empowerment of Nature in Gioconda Belli's *The Inhabited Woman*" (2005) references the two overarching themes of political and social revolution in Belli's work but further considers the element of nature in the novel. De Fays views nature as a character itself, noting how the author "empowers nature as a speaking subject and restores the important relationship between society and the natural world" (96). In the case of *La mujer habitada*, this is primarily presented through the indigenous woman, Itzá, who inhabits the orange tree in Lavinia's garden. Nature, however, appears as a speaking subject in *El infinito en la palma de la mano* as well, predominantly through the character of the serpent.

In one of the few studies which includes *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, María Caballero Wangüemert compares Mark Twain's humorous retelling (or supposed "translation") of the Genesis story in *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* (1906) with Belli's novel. Regarding Belli's receipt of the *Biblioteca Breve* award, Caballero Wangüemert notes the significance of her receiving such a prestigious award for her feminist vision of original sin and the origins of humankind (319). This feminine/feminist vision, Caballero Wangüemert argues, resembles that presented in Belli's earlier poetry, particularly in the 1986 collection *De la costilla de Eva* (319). Caballero Wangüemert further addresses how, while there are similarities between the novel and Belli's poetry collection, the earlier work, published over 20 years before *El infinito*, presents a more militant approach, as "es la mujer quien lleva la batuta, el mundo sale de su costilla y se constituye día a día través del amor y la guerra, del eros y la actitud combativa, revolucionaria y solidaria" (319). According to the author, Belli had read Mark Twain's fragmentary novel about Adam and Eve and, in addition to the novels' differences, Caballero Wangüemert notes the feminist qualities contained in both representations of Eve (321). The Eve in Twain's work, for instance, is more mature and intelligent, and even appears as the one who names the other creatures, despite aspects of her representation which are more in line with patriarchal attitudes (324). Similarly, Belli's Eve is "la inquieta, la de las preguntas inconformes [...] quien toma las riendas en las decisiones" while Adam "es desválido, indeciso, más débil, se lamenta una y otra vez" (329). Caballero Wangüemert also considers the weight of the notion of utopian paradise in the collective subconscious, as it appears in Belli's earlier works and in relation to

Hispanic America in general (317-321).

While it is generally acknowledged that Gioconda Belli's works are feminist, there is little consensus on the type of feminism her novels express. Maria Odette Canivell relates that Belli "considers herself to be beyond a 'feminist writer'" and that her writings aim "to create a new wave of feminism (a fourth wave), where women are women, and not a woman playing at being and acting like a man" (29). In her 2011 PhD dissertation, Tanya V. Varela explores the change in Belli's feminist approaches from her early works to her later ones, namely *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, contextualized within Hispanic American feminist theory. Varela argues that the interactions between the female protagonist and male characters in Belli's first novel, *La mujer habitada*, oscillate between constructivist and essentialist feminist representations, particularly through the subversion of traditional gender roles in addition to the expression of internalized acceptance of the supposed differences between the genders (35). *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, on the other hand, turns more towards essentialist notions of the feminine, as Varela explains: "Aunque, sin duda, posee cierta discursividad subversiva, esta novela no logra evitar enteramente la reproducción de una perspectiva esencializante acerca del género femenino: la mujer como sujeto intuitivo, maternal, cuidador del hogar, emotivo, curioso, etcétera" (86). Further, Varela asserts that the later novel is representative of a change in Belli's feminist approach: "una literatura contestataria y problematizadora de los roles femeninos, como la que Belli planteara en los ochenta, se percibe notablemente erosionada en su manifestación actual" (86). In another dissertation, *La retórica del placer: Cuerpo, magia, deseo y subjetividad en cinco novelas de Gioconda Belli* (2012),

Miriam Rocío Urzúa-Montoya also considers how Belli's novels challenge traditional gender roles in Hispanic American societies, primarily through the subjectification of women's experience through the female body. In the case of *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, Belli reimagines the female experience which does not appear in the original texts, "enfatisando los temas relacionados al cuerpo de la mujer y su sexualidad como la menstruación, el embarazo y la lactancia" (Urzúa-Montoya 160-161). Rather than viewing what Varela considers the essentialist aspects of the female characters (intuitive, maternal, etc.) as a more traditional representation of women, Urzúa-Montoya argues that these aspects illustrate the centrality of the female body and the subjective experience of women in Belli's novels. While it may be true that the Eve character in *El infinito en la palma de la mano* is in some ways portrayed with traditionally "feminine" characteristics in what might be considered an essentialist representation, the intertextuality of the work in relation to the Genesis origin story and Belli's revision of Eve within this context suggests a more insightful and complex representation of the character. For instance, there is an emphasis on Eve's more intuitive, emotional, and empathetic nature in comparison to Adam, as evidenced, among other things, by her refusal to kill animals or eat meat after they have been expelled from the Garden of Eden and must provide for themselves.⁵³

⁵³ For further discussion of Belli's representation of Eve's traditionally feminine traits, see section 4.3.2.

4.2 The Myth

Common to the three major monotheistic religions, the story of Adam and Eve is perhaps the most ubiquitous tale from the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. Further, it is one of the most familiar stories in the Western world, despite the fact that it fills only a page or two of most bibles (Greenblatt 5). As Bruce A. Boggs puts it: “Perhaps no single narrative has come close to generating such a vast amount of interpretational writing and speculative energy as has this pithy tale of desire and authority, of loss and exile” (viii). Writers often note the story’s tendency to linger. Many studies have also considered the gender politics of the well-known myth. For instance, in Merlin Stone’s influential 1976 book *When God Was a Woman* she describes how, while she had rejected most of the tenets of organized religions by the time she had reached adolescence, “there was still something about the myth of Adam and Eve that lingered, seeming to pervade the culture at some deeper level” with the story appearing as the source of poems, novels, high art, fashion, and even Sunday comics (7). For Stone, as for many others, what stands out is the portrayal of a woman tempting a man with sin presented as the defining image of the two: “women were inherently conniving, contriving and dangerously sexy, while gullible and somewhat simple-minded at the same time. They were in obvious need of a foreman to keep them in line—and thus divinely appointed, many men seemed quite willing” (Stone 7).

At its most basic (without getting into the specifics just yet), the myth consists of the creation of Adam from the earth, followed by the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. The couple lives peacefully among the animals in the Garden of Eden until Eve, with the

serpent's suggestion, eats the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and encourages Adam to do the same.⁵⁴ Once they have both tried the fruit, they gain consciousness of their nakedness, cover themselves with fig leaves, and God sends them out of the Garden for disobeying him by eating from the forbidden tree.⁵⁵ The serpent, the woman, and the man are then each given their punishments.

The creation myth has a complex history, with roots in Babylonian mythology and differing versions of the same story appearing in Genesis as well as in the biblical apocrypha.⁵⁶ Information related to when the bible was first written down are speculative, but most scholars date the compilation of the Pentateuch (or the Five Books of Moses) around the 5th century BCE and the current form of the creation story about a century earlier (Greenblatt 22). Although the Hebrews had relied on oral tradition for a thousand years or more, they brought together a written text while living in exile under another culture's rule. As Greenblatt suggests, "the trauma of exile, along with the threatened loss of cultural memory, may well have triggered the key determination to bring together the stories and the laws with which the Hebrews defined who they were" (33). The creation myth that appears in chapters 1-3 of Genesis includes at least two

⁵⁴ Simply referred to as a fruit in Genesis, it often appears as an apple. However, there are also many depictions, including Belli's, which portray the fruit as a fig. For an analysis of the fruit's iconography, see Hilário Franco Júnior's "Between the Fig and the Apple: Forbidden Fruit in Romanesque Iconography" (2006).

⁵⁵ While the fruit is unnamed, the leaves they use to cover themselves are specified as fig leaves (עלי תאנה).

⁵⁶ For instance, the first chapter refers to the creation of humankind in a way which suggests that men and women were created simultaneously, while in the second chapter Eve is created from Adam's rib.

strands from different sources which had been brought together with the clearest difference in the reference to God, who is referred to as “Elohim” in the first chapter and “Yahweh” in chapters 2 and 3 (36). There are significant similarities between the Genesis story and the creation myths of the cultures contemporary to the Hebrews and to the writing of the Pentateuch, including the *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh (55-57). The clear parallels to polytheistic myths highlight the differences in the monotheistic creation story in Genesis, which worked to challenge the popular religions’ belief in multiple gods.

This movement towards monotheism also involved the suppression of female deities with a movement away from goddess worship, though some would reappear in modified forms, such as Asherah, Shekhina, and others.⁵⁷ The solitary, seemingly male “Elohim” or “Yahweh” as he appears in Genesis also has antecedents in earlier myths, such as the Babylonian storm god Marduk (Greenblatt 26-27). As Raphael Patai points out, “gods are rarely invented or discovered; rather they are taken over by one group from another” (31). However, the placement of the first woman, not as a goddess nor as a complete equal but as a human, and one created as a companion for the first male human created, is a new and distinctive aspect of the Adam and Eve story. As Pamela Norris explains in her book on Eve: “Genesis is unique among the creation myths of the Ancient Near East. It begins by reversing the natural order of creation: a male god speaks the universe into

⁵⁷ See Raphael Patai’s *The Hebrew Goddess* for detailed analyses of the goddesses and variations which appear in Jewish texts.

being and the first woman is ‘born’ of man” (2). However, much of the creation myth is still open to interpretation, and many have taken up the task of interpreting or revising the story.

4.2.1 The Story of Eve: Interpretations and Revisions

Gioconda Belli’s novel is certainly not the first to reinterpret the myth of Eve. While it is beyond the scope of the current study to review all or even most interpretations of Eve in the creation myth – religious, literary, or otherwise – there are some notable examples. Within patriarchal societies, primarily those subscribing to the monotheistic belief systems which maintain the Adam and Eve origin story, Eve’s role in the expulsion from paradise has often been used to explain or justify human suffering, and particularly women’s suffering. In doling out punishment to Eve, the god in Genesis proclaims that he will “make [her] pains in childbearing very severe” and that her husband will “rule over” her (*New International Version*, Gen. 3.16). The man is told he must work hard through “painful toil” for sustenance and live with the burden of mortality (Gen. 3.17-3.19). As Norris explains, Eve becomes synonymous with all women while Adam and his male descendants are comparatively blameless: “Eve/Woman stands accused of vanity, moral weakness and sexual frailty, while Adam/Man’s role in the transaction can be summarized by the familiar defence: ‘She led him on’” (5). This is clear not only in the unequal penalty, as Eve is given a punishment specific to women, while Adam receives a punishment that realistically applies to all humans, but also in the treatment of the characters in many of the Judeo-Christian interpretations of the story.

In the New Testament, the First Epistle to Timothy, which was written around the 2nd century CE, expressed a burgeoning misogyny and fear of female sexuality within Christian policy (Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman* 59-60). A focus on female appearance, encouraging “quiet and modest” dress, is followed by the condemnation of women on account of Eve: “A woman ought not to speak, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin” (1 Timothy 2:13, qtd in Armstrong 60). Diatribes against women’s efforts to look attractive would become fairly common in religious texts, following the same set of ideas introduced in 1 Timothy (Armstrong 61). Tertullian’s 3rd century CE treatise *On Female Dress* is often cited as another early example, where Tertullian’s censure of women advises that a woman should dress in penitence in order to “expiate what she has inherited from Eve: the shame [...] of the first sin, and the odium of human perdition” (*On Female Dress* I:i, qtd in Greenblatt 122). He continues with an attack directly addressing the female reader, saying: “And do you know that you are each an Eve? [...] *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack” (I:i). In case that were not enough, Tertullian blames Eve and, by extension, all women, for human mortality and the death of Jesus, among other things. Connecting the story of the first humans to what they considered to be women’s current evils, Tertullian and others tie this to women’s dress, arguing that women adorn themselves in a way which, like the forbidden fruit, calls men to sin (Armstrong 61).

Of the many religious interpretations of the Genesis story, Saint Augustine of Hippo's (354 CE - 430 CE) works have been some of the most influential. This emerged in large part from his understanding of Original Sin in the Catholic tradition: "no one had given it the power and the doctrinal importance it assumed in the works of Augustine" (Greenblatt 109). While the saint had initially treated the origin myth as an allegory in one of his earliest Christian works (*On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*), with Eden as a spiritual experience rather than a physical place, and Adam and Eve as symbolic, spiritual figures, he would later change his approach, viewing the story as a literal account of the creation of the first humans and embracing the concept of Original Sin (110-111). With its emphasis on Eve's sin, this approach contributed to the fundamental role of the myth and its ripple effects. As Greenblatt explains: "by making the story of Adam and Eve the central episode in the drama of human existence, Augustine opened the floodgates to a current of misogyny that swirled for centuries around the figure of the first woman" (121). Despite earlier Christian traditions, whatever may have been Augustine's intentions, and rabbinical as well as Qur'an traditions focusing elsewhere (or blaming both equally), "many other authorities, both inside the church and out, were happy to assign responsibility almost entirely to Eve" (121). This pattern of blame would come in handy for later condemnations of women, with Eve as the model for insubordinate and wayward women.

One consequence of this hostility towards women emerged in the 15th century and onwards through the accusations of witchcraft and subsequent trials, tortures, and punishments. Dominican friars Heinrich Kramer (c. 1430-1505) and Jacob Sprenger

(1436/1438-1495), in their influential 1486 book *Malleus Maleficarum*, generally translated as *The Hammer of Witches*, claimed that women were more drawn to the practices of witchcraft because of their natural, evil inclinations as females, with implications that they were not fully human (Greenblatt 132-133). Women's supposed defects went back to the source of the original woman, in this case not only through her sin of eating the forbidden fruit, but also through her creation or birth from Adam's rib, being "formed from a curved rib, that is, from the rib of the chest that is twisted and contrary, so to speak, to man" (Kramer and Sprenger qtd in Greenblatt 132). These beliefs in female deficiencies would have consequences for centuries, as "innocent women continued to die for what was imagined to be an innate propensity to evil that was traced all the way back to mother Eve" (133). The witch hunts are a clear example of the very real repercussions of these negative beliefs.

In response to the many condemnations of Eve, feminists have generally either suggested alternate interpretations of the creation myth, or accepted the traditional interpretations and then rejected the story and representation of Eve entirely. In an early example of an alternative representation, the nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) wrote "a scathing indictment of the cruelty that led to the misery that she and others like her suffered and an indictment too of the lies men used to justify this cruelty" in her posthumously published book *Paternal Tyranny* (1654) (Greenblatt 134). A seventeenth century nun not about to reject the truth of a biblical story, Tarabotti proposed an alternate interpretation of the story, arguing that the first woman is superior to the first man, Adam having been formed of clay while Eve was formed from the "nobler substance" of the human body and within

paradise itself (134). She further asserts that, rather than a result of pride or foolishness, Eve ate the fruit out of a thirst for knowledge, which was “hardly a blameworthy desire” (Tarabotti 108). More recently, feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has similarly challenged the prevailing interpretations of Eve in her article titled “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation” (1973), in which she argues that the narrator in fact portrays Eve as assertive and intelligent. The man, on the other hand, is portrayed as passive and inept, following Eve’s initiative and her decision to eat the fruit (40). Many women’s rights advocates, including Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone, were known for their use of biblical quotations to counter misogynist interpretations. The first part of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s two-part work *The Women’s Bible* (1895/1898) introduces a revisionary biblical commentary on the works of the Pentateuch, including the origin myth in Genesis. Sarah Grimké (1792-1873), considered the mother of the women’s suffrage movement in the U.S., took a unique approach to the problem by arguing that even if the original account of Adam and Eve were true, with the blame placed squarely on the woman, perhaps it was time to move on and forgive the sin of our mother? In Grimké’s words:

Woman, I am aware, stands charged to the present day with having brought sin into the world. I shall not repel the charges by any counter assertions, although as was hinted, Adam’s ready acquiescence with his wife’s proposal does not savour much of that superiority in strength of mind that is arrogated by man. Even admitting that Eve was the greater sinner, it seems to me that man might be satisfied with the dominion he has claimed and exercised for nearly six thousand years, and that more true nobility would be manifested by endeavouring to raise

the fallen and invigorate the weak, than by keeping women in subjection. I ask no favours for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks. (qtd in Stone 231)

Neither rejecting the story outright nor backing down from her feminist stance, Grimké's approach allows for staunch followers of the original myth to maintain their beliefs while she challenges the current continued suffering of women. She writes in a way that makes it clear that neither gender is blameless, reasoning with the believers and oppressors, and prioritizing the current fight for equality over an insistence on shifting the blame from Eve.

Tarabotti, Tribble, Grimké, and others with conciliatory interpretations of the myth work within the confines of Eve's portrayal in the original religious texts to provide a diplomatic solution to the traditional misogynist readings of the myth. The prevailing feminist approaches, however, tend to reject the myth and its patriarchal overtones in its entirety. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792) is an early example of this, as Wollstonecraft criticizes the story's implication that woman was just another being created for the man's convenience, pleasure, or entertainment and consequently discards the harmful myth (Wollstonecraft 17). In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millet points out the intention of the upheld myth, reasoning that "to blame the evils and sorrows of life – loss of Eden and the rest – on sexuality, would all too logically implicate the male, and such implication is hardly the purpose of the story, designed as it is expressly in order to blame all this world's discomfort on the female" (53).

Merlin Stone also belongs to this second group with her treatment of the problematic representation of Eve, created by a male deity as an afterthought to the creation of man, as summarized in her 1978 work *When God Was a Woman* (xi). Stone describes how the Eve story influenced her (and presumably others) as a young girl, being taught about the foolish and gullible woman's sin and every child-bearing woman's punishment and required reverence to the men who are to rightfully rule over them as her "penitent, submissive position as a female was firmly established by page three of the nearly one thousand pages of the Judeo-Christian Bible" (Stone 6). Supporting these negative beliefs about Eve and, by extension, all women, the origin myth allowed men to maintain control, as "the Bible was brought out over and over again to 'prove' that their position was beyond question" (233). Like Millet and others, Stone reasons that not only does the story portray Eve and women negatively but also that it was purposely designed to do so. Arguing that the subordinate role of Eve is intentional, she realized as she explored the goddess religions that "the Adam and Eve myth, most certainly a tale with a point of view, and with a most biased proclamation for its ending, had actually been designed to be used in the continuous Levite battle to suppress the female religion" (198). This was accomplished in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, with some telling parallels to the preceding female-centered religions.

4.3 Women, Serpents, and Goddesses in *El infinito en la palma de la mano*

The Eve in Gioconda Belli's 2008 novel combines both feminist approaches to the Genesis origin story. Similar to the religious feminist interpretations, Belli's work maintains the basics of the story, but it does so without a discernible allegiance to the

original. That is, Belli includes many aspects of the prevalent myth while unapologetically altering the story as she sees fit. The author borrows from both religious and secular sources to do so, applied with her own creative approach to the story. In the “Author’s Note” of the novel, Belli describes how she inadvertently came across the apocryphal text *The Life of Adam and Eve*, which dates back as far as the ‘official’ version of the Bible and details the story of the first humans after they are expelled from Eden (11-12).⁵⁸ As Belli notes, she was raised in the Christian tradition and thus well-acquainted with the story of Adam and Eve from a young age. She had not, however, been familiar with the plot of *The Life of Adam and Eve*, as well as the other apocryphal and interpretive texts which she would explore and incorporate into her novel, including the Nag Hammadi scrolls, the Dead Sea scrolls, and rabbinical midrash (12). Although none of the works are explicitly referenced in the text itself (aside from in the Author’s Note), which Belli maintains to be a work of fiction, the representations of Eve and the other first humans in the novel create a dialogue with the apocryphal and interpretive texts.

El infinito en la palma de la mano begins with creation of Adam, taking his first breath and beginning to name everything he sees. The man senses the gaze of “el Otro” (“the Other”), who remains unseen throughout the novel, though his presence is felt at times by the characters and, in some cases, speaks to them through visions, dreams, or other

⁵⁸ Although apocryphal texts such as *The Life of Adam and Eve* did not make it into official versions of the Bible, they were often used in rabbinical commentaries or *midrash*.

indirect methods. Once the man has finished all he needs to do, he feels lonely. He falls asleep and the narrator describes how he later recalls his body opening up, “el tajo dividiéndole el ser y extrayendo la criatura íntima que hasta entonces habitara su interior” (“the split that divided his being to release the intimate creature that until then had dwelled within him”) (Belli 19; 5).⁵⁹ This description of Eve’s birth already manages to combine multiple traditions, addressing one of the points of contention in regards to the distinct descriptions of her creation in the official Genesis story. As mentioned in section 4.2, it is generally accepted that the Genesis chapters combine at least two strands from different sources. The first chapter, which refers to God as “Elohim”, suggests that the humans were made simultaneously, while the second and third chapters, which refer to “Yahweh”, relate the story of Eve’s emergence from the man’s rib. Belli’s text combines the two, adopting explanatory texts which consolidate the potentially conflicting strands with the explanation that the humans were, in fact, made simultaneously, but the woman resides within the man until he becomes lonely and she emerges. Having the woman be created simultaneously with the man, though not brought to life in human form until later, deals with the problem of the woman’s creation presented as an afterthought. Belli’s description also gives the first woman a more detailed presentation into the newly formed world than the first man, as Adam’s creation is described with the simple “Y fue” (“And he was”) (17; 3).

⁵⁹ All English quotations of *El infinito en la palma de la mano* are from *Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand* (2009), translated from the Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden.

From the start, Belli's Eve displays her curiosity, wanting to know everything. When she asks Adam about their creation and existence, he tells her that "el Otro" would be able to explain (20). While both had sensed the presence of the Other, neither had directly seen or spoken to him, and so Eve decides they must go searching for him. In their search, they find the Tree of Life and, next to it, "otro árbol idéntico elevándose frente a ella, extraño y cómplice" ("another, identical, tree rising before her, strange and complicit"): The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (24; 10). The second tree is presented as the darker twin of the Tree of Life: "cuanto era claro en el primero, era oscuro en el segundo; púrpura el anverso de las hojas, verde el reverso, los frutos, higos oscuros. Lo envolvía un aire denso y una luz opaca y sin brillo" ("everything that was light about the first tree was crepuscular in the second: purple on the back of the leaves, green on the reverse, the fig fruit dark. It was wrapped in dense air and a dull, opaque light") (25; 10). The man hears Eve speaking to someone beside the darker tree, and identifies a voice different than that of the Other which, light as air, "tenía la cualidad de resonar dentro de su pecho" ("had the quality of resonating inside his chest") (25; 11). This voice, on the other hand, "era como un líquido deslizándose por la tierra como si arrastrara pedruscos" ("was like liquid slipping along the earth and dragging stones as it went") and, when he hears it laugh, he notes that it laughs like Eve (25; 11). The conversation he overhears between the woman and the creature reveals that the Other is referred to as "Elokim" and that both Elokim and this creature have been observing the humans. The creature is pleased to see that they had decided to look for the ones watching them, seeming to delight in their curiosity. In response to Eve's questions on the reason for their existence, the creature explains that only Elokim knows, but that they themselves could find out if they eat the

fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, though they would also lose their innocence and die (26).⁶⁰

Much like the aforementioned interpretations of Eve which insist that she is, in fact, the one who takes initiative in the humans' partnership, Belli's version of Eve drives the plot of the story. She begins the search for the Other, she finds the trees, and she speaks to the creature, which is soon specified to be the Serpent. Eve's curiosity, rather than being presented in a negative light, makes her a thoughtful and compelling character. In this initial meeting, she asks the creature about their reason for being and about what exists beyond the Garden of Eden. The creature's response: "¿Para qué quieres saberlo? Tienes todo lo que necesitas" ("Why do you want to know? You have everything you need") emphasizes Eve's thirst for understanding (26; 12). Given everything they could need or want in the Garden, she nevertheless insists on finding out the underlying significance of their creation. Adam, on the other hand, is often wary of this bold inquisitiveness, in her and himself, although he continues to follow her lead for now. Eve considers early on how Adam would not have found the trees without her, as he himself admitted while admiring "su curiosidad, la intuición que la guió hasta ellos" ("her curiosity and the intuition that had guided her to them") (32; 17). Adam expresses this type of admiration for Eve at various points in the novel, where he appears both anxious and appreciative of her strong personality.

⁶⁰ "Elokim" is a variation of "Elohim", generally used as a way to avoid saying the deity's name.

After Eve's first meeting with the Serpent, Adam decides that he needs to keep her away from the tree but wonders how, considering her character: "¿Cómo haría para mantenerla alejada del árbol? La docilidad no estaba en su naturaleza. Lo mejor de ella era su incapacidad de estarse quieta, la vivacidad con que miró e interrogó todo desde el principio" ("What could he do to keep her away from the Tree? Docility was not in her nature. The best thing about her was her inability to stay still, the vivacity with which she examined and questioned everything from the start") (33; 18). Here he simultaneously worries about Eve's defiant nature in regards to the possible consequences of her acting on these instincts, while appreciating her inability to stay still or be compliant. This admiration responds to religious critiques of Eve's disobedient curiosity, highlighting this as a positive trait, despite the risks of her acting on it. The reframing of this characteristic as admirable rather than punishable extends beyond the novel and into interpretations of the origin story which, considering Eve as representative of women in general, decipher it as a cautionary tale about the potential threat of female insubordination.

Following her first conversation with the Serpent, Eve recognizes that she has the option to choose either eternity – not eating from the Tree of Knowledge and living forever in the Garden – or eating the fruit and gaining the knowledge and understanding she has been pursuing. In Merlin Stone's work, she describes how "Eve was considered to be foolishly gullible. My elders explained that she had been easily tricked by the promises of the perfidious serpent" (5). This popular interpretation of Eve is clearly challenged in Belli's work, as she has Eve, neither foolish nor gullible, discuss and consider the potential ramifications of her choice before choosing to eat the fruit. Essentially, the first

woman chooses knowledge, but she also arrives at the conclusion to eat the fruit only after a thorough rationalization.

Before eating the fruit, Belli's Eve has a dream and vision of the humans' potential future, seeing generations of their descendants and realizing that this future is only possible if she eats the fruit. Based on the information she gathered from the Serpent and elsewhere in the Garden, she further intuits that the Other, or what the Serpent referred to as Elokim, was likely as curious about this possible future as well. In her vision, she sees how, if she ate the fruit, "harían la Historia para la que habían sido creados: fundarían una especie, poblarían un planeta, explorarían los límites de la conciencia y el entendimiento. Sólo ella, usando su libertad, podría darle a Elokim la experiencia del Bien y del Mal que Él anhelaba" ("they would initiate history, do what they had been created to do: they would found a species, they would people a planet, they would explore the limits of consciousness and reason. Only she, using that freedom, could provide Elokim with the experience of Good and Evil he so desired") (39; 23). Belli presents Eve as the chosen one to make the decision to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Rather than an introduction into sin, this action is presented in the novel as the initiation into human history. Considering how "the myth of the Fall licences man to blame woman for all his ills, make her labour for him, exclude her from religious office and refuse her advice on moral problems", it is clear that a different angle on the consequences of eating the fruit has an important effect on the treatment of women (Graves and Patai 81). The perspective offered in the novel alters the view of the woman as initiator of the fall and removes

some of the weight that comes with it.

Belli's Eve also realizes the potential repercussions of her choice, and determines to eat the fruit despite these hesitations. She decides not to tell Adam of her decision, reasoning that he had not seen the visions of their future and "sin ver lo que ella le había sido dado contemplar, Adán no comprendería ni los juegos del Otro ni la determinación de ella" ("since Adam had not seen what she had been allowed to observe, he would not understand either the Other's games or her determination") (39; 23). Further, she considers that, given the option, Adam would perhaps choose the eternity in paradise and deter her from eating the fruit. Determined, she realizes she would need to do it alone (39). Eve's vision, along with her extended decision-making process in the novel again stand contrary to condemnations of Eve's seemingly thoughtless choice. Instead, Belli presents a thoughtful and philosophical Eve who rationalizes the choice on her own based on the information she has received. Rather than the foolish and near-sighted subject of a cautionary tale, Eve is here represented as the subject of the first instance of critical, independent thought.

One of the apocryphal texts found in the cache known as the Nag Hammadi Library, dated around 350-400 CE, was the *Apocalypse of Adam*. Written in the voice of Adam speaking to his son, the text depicts a version of the myth where the humans become superior to the god that created them and, as Greenblatt explains, "the creatures become stronger than God, God grows increasingly jealous and fearful, and man depends upon the courage and wisdom of woman. Eve is the real hero, for it was she who boldly

grasped for herself and for all humanity the knowledge that the envious Creator had been withholding” (66). Belli does not specifically reference the *Apocalypse of Adam* as one of her sources, but she does mention that her search through apocryphal texts included the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library, suggesting that she most likely did encounter this work.⁶¹ While Belli’s version of the story does not go so far as to make the humans more powerful than God, it does retain the representation of Eve as the protagonist, with her courage and insight as drivers of the humans’ progression, both inside and outside the Garden. This type of representation again counters the suggestion that Eve’s actions were punishable, rather than admirable. Stone’s objection to the teachings she was exposed to from childhood which insisted that “because of Eve, when I grew up I was to bear my children in pain and suffering” and “as if this was not a sufficient penalty, instead of receiving compassion, sympathy or admiring respect for my courage, I was to experience this pain with guilt, the sin of my wrongdoing laid heavily upon me as punishment for simply being a woman, a daughter of Eve” (5-6). In the *Apocalypse of Adam*, Eve is admired for her courage, which is more easily appreciated without the negative repercussions of eating the fruit. In this way, the apocryphal text corroborates feminist interpretations of the story. *El infinito en la palma de la mano* similarly brings this admiration for Eve into the picture, though it retains the well-known expulsion from the Garden and the introduction of human suffering as a result of her decision to eat from the

⁶¹ For the history of the Nag Hammadi Library, including the burial and later discovery of its texts, see Chapter 4 of Greenblatt’s *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (2017).

Tree of Knowledge.

The expulsion from Eden and punishments to the humans and the Serpent, which are retained in Belli's novel despite other changes, also have precedent in other apocryphal and ancestral texts of the origin myth. In the epic of *Gilgamesh*, there is a similar creation of man from clay, among other parallels.⁶² However, while the movement into understanding and worldliness was represented as the original human sin in Genesis, it was represented in *Gilgamesh* as an initiation. In both stories, this initiation is marked by the use of clothing, as Enkidu in the Babylonian myth is dressed before going into the city after living naked in the wilderness and Adam and Eve use fig leaves to cover themselves after eating the fruit when they become aware of their nakedness. But, in the Babylonian story, "the clothing is not a response to a feeling of shame, nor even an adaptation to the environment. It is a mark of the movement from nature to culture" while the Genesis version of the story "rewrites initiation as transgression" (Greenblatt 53-62). Belli's novel then rewrites transgression (eating the fruit, becoming aware of good and evil) back into initiation, emphasizing that this "transgression" is in fact what made them human and gave them freedom.

⁶² See Greenblatt pp. 39-63 for a full description of the *Gilgamesh* myth, as well as an in-depth analysis of the texts and a thorough comparison of the *Gilgamesh* and Genesis stories which, among other things, alter what was a male-male friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in *Gilgamesh* to a male-female relationship between Adam and Eve in Genesis.

The Serpent is another compelling character in Belli's version of the myth, bringing up questions of representation and symbolic roots. As this character is introduced, Eve wonders about its appearance:

Su piel era diferente a la de ellos, iridiscente y flexible, compuesta por pequeñas escamas, como las de los peces. Era alta y sus formas fluían curvas y gráciles hasta rematar en piernas y brazos largos y flexibles. En su rostro liso, casi plano, sobresalían, dorados y vivaces, los ojos rasgados y la recta hendidura de la boca fija en una expresión de irónica complacencia e impavidez. En vez de cabello, su cabeza estaba cubierta de plumas blancas. (27)

(Her skin was different from theirs, iridescent and flexible, composed of small scales, like the scales of fish. She was tall, and her body, curving and graceful, flowed into long, flexible arms and legs. Two golden, sparkling, almond-shaped eyes protruded from her smooth, almost flat face, and the straight slit of her mouth was fixed in an expression of ironic compacency and composure. Instead of hair, her head was covered with white feathers.) (12)

Here the Serpent is described as a graceful creature with arms and legs, seeming to stand tall like the humans, though part of the serpent's punishment when they are exiled from Eden is that it must crawl on the ground. While not specifically described as female in the original Spanish, both words used to describe it (*la criatura* and *la serpiente*) are feminine. In the English translation by Margaret Sayers Peden, without the gender contained in the word, the Serpent is nevertheless explicitly referred to as female throughout the novel – a choice which almost certainly would have been approved by the author.

The gender of the Serpent becomes especially significant when considering the creature's role in relation to the God in the novel. While Elokim is distant, sensed but not seen, and only obliquely communicative, sending messages through visions, dreams, the phoenix, and other methods, the Serpent appears in the flesh, offering information and advice. Though cunning, the Serpent is also helpful. Even after the expulsion from the Garden, she offers bits of information at crucial times, although her help is not unequivocally good. The Serpent seems to exist to contradict Elokim but also as a type of companion for him, leading Eve to theorize that the Serpent is Elokim's Eve. She explains that when they spoke in the Garden, the Serpent told her that she had seen God "hacer constelación tras constelación y luego olvidarlas" ("create and forget constellation after constellation") through eternity (Belli 79; 60). With Elokim portrayed as a restless, all powerful being who quickly bores of his creations, the Serpent appears as a creature that has accompanied him and often judged him, in some form or another. Gioconda Belli has acknowledged in an interview that the God in her novel is an absent one: "es un Creador que no le importa su creación, que su gozo es haber creado", which supports this fallible characterization of Elokim in the work (Cosme Montalvo 241). The author also says that she had based this absent deity, relatively disinterested in the affairs of humans, on the Greek gods who allow humans to figure things out for themselves, as compared to the strict, law-giving God of most of the Pentateuch.

Regarding the Serpent, Gioconda Belli corroborates Eve's theory that the Serpent is Elokim's counterpart and identifies it as her own: "Para mí la serpiente era importantísima y se me fue haciendo un personaje que era como el alter ego de Dios.

Porque también otra cosa, ¿cuál es el mal?, ¿qué es el mal?” (Cosme Montalvo 241). The Serpent appears as God’s alter ego in the same way that the Tree of Knowledge appears alongside the Tree of Life, or good and evil. This question arises throughout the work as, for instance, when they are expelled from the Garden and Eve complains of the pain she feels, for the first time, wondering if this pain is death (Belli 69-70). Adam replies that this pain is rather the indication that they are alive, saying: “La muerte es lo contrario de la vida [...] sientes todo eso porque estás viva” (“death is the opposite of life [...] you are feeling all this because you are alive”) and pointing out that this is what the knowledge that she chose (by eating the fruit) provided: “Querías el conocimiento. Esto es el conocimiento: el Bien y el Mal, el placer y el dolor, Elokim y la Serpiente, cada imagen tiene su reflejo contrario” (“you wanted knowledge. This is knowledge: good and evil, pleasure and pain, Elokim and the Serpent, each image has its opposite reflection”) (70; 51). Belli’s novel does not, however, present the Serpent as necessarily evil, as done in religious interpretations which suggest that the Serpent is Satan in disguise, but rather as a representative of ambiguity in and uncertain distinctions of good and evil. And if the Serpent guides the humans more than does the absent Elokim, which one is good and which is evil?

There is precedent to Belli’s portrayal of the Serpent, including *The Testimony of Truth*, written from the perspective of the Serpent and found in the Nag Hammadi Library (which is also listed in Belli’s brief bibliography at the end of the novel). In this interpretation, the Serpent is regarded as the hero of the story “for championing the acquisition of knowledge denied to humans by a jealous god”, pointing out the flaws of a

God who forbids humans to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (Greenblatt 16). As Greenblatt explains, the Serpent reasons that “a truly loving Creator would surely have fostered knowledge, not forbidden it to his creatures” and so “the God of Genesis is not our friend. It is the serpent who, in this version of the story, was the humans’ great benefactor” (66). In Belli’s novel, neither the Serpent nor Elokim is the hero, but the Serpent and her influence on Eve is presented as the beginning of human history. The novel makes it clear that Elokim may have created the world and its creatures, but it is not until the actions of the Serpent and Eve that the history of humanity as we know it begins.

The Serpent in the novel comments on the future blame both she and Eve will have to endure, explaining to Eve that “A ti te culparán las generaciones por venir, pero, a medida que tu descendencia adquiera más conocimiento, recuperarás tu prestigio. En cambio nadie abogará por una triste serpiente. Me convertirán en la encarnación del Mal” (“future generations will blame you, but as your descendents acquire more knowledge, you will regain your prestige. In contrast, no one will be the advocate for a pitiful serpent. I will be made the incarnation of evil”) (163; 139). While both characters will be victims of blame, the actions of the Serpent and the interpretations around it are inexorably linked to those of Eve, and so a more positive view of Eve benefits from the portrayal of a more helpful Serpent. Historically, misogynistic interpretations of Eve have linked her to the Serpent as an ally and/or lover, or with suggestions that the woman herself is in some way the Serpent. An example of the former appears in 11th century Benedictine St. Peter Damian’s vitriolic attack on women, in which Eve has become man’s enemy and the

cause of humanity's ruin and, further, "the woman is not merely Satan's ally; she is his lover, joining her body to his in filthy rites" (Greenblatt 131). In the case of the woman herself identified as the Serpent, some commentators have highlighted the similarity between the Hebrew name for Eve (Chavah/חַוָּה) and the Aramaic word for snake although, as Greenblatt points out, "the misogynists did not need philology to lead them in this direction" (131).⁶³ However, despite the potential negative implications of being linked to the Serpent, particularly in many of the Judeo-Christian interpretations of the origin myth, there is more history to this connection between woman and snake.

Serpents have commonly been used as symbols in different religions and mythologies throughout the world. In the Near and Middle East, a number of female deities were either represented as or appeared with serpents related to wisdom and prophecy, including, for instance, Ishtar, Tiamat, and their later versions (Stone 199).⁶⁴ In Merlin Stone's exploration of the symbolism of the pre-Judeo Christian religions, she points out that the extensively developed theological structure of the Goddess religion may have included the symbols "such as serpents, sacred fruit trees and sexually tempting women who took advice from serpents" which appear in the biblical creation myth. However, the intentional changes to these symbols have a purpose: "in the Paradise myth, these images

⁶³ Pamela Norris explains the etymological roots in more detail: "Scholars puzzling over the etymology of this term have linked it with Aramaic *hiwyā*' and Arabic *hayyatun*, both of which mean 'serpent', an association which the Rabbis had toyed with, but which did not become current in religious exegesis until the Middle Ages, when the tradition was established by the scholar Peter Comestor (died 1179)." (318)

⁶⁴ See pages 198-223 of Stone's *When God Was a Woman* for an overview of the evidence of specific female deities and related imagery.

may have explained allegorically that listening to women who revered the Goddess had once caused the expulsion of all humankind from the original home of bliss in Eden” (198-199). The placement of these same symbols in the Genesis myth were thus intended to undermine the beliefs of the female-led religion in which women’s roles differed significantly from those that would follow in the patriarchal revisions written into the Adam and Eve myth. As Stone explains:

It can hardly have been chance or coincidence that it was a serpent who offered Eve the advice. For people of that time knew that the serpent was the symbol, perhaps even the instrument, of divine counsel in the religion of the Goddess. It was surely intended in the Paradise myth [...] that the serpent, as the familiar counselor of women, be seen as a source of evil and be placed in such a menacing and villainous role that to listen to the prophetesses of the female deity would be to violate the religion of the male deity in a most dangerous manner. (220-221)

While serpents are commonly featured in representations of deities throughout world mythologies and ancient religions, the serpent in the Genesis myth was, according to Stone, a deliberate and direct response to the female deities of the goddess religions.⁶⁵ As outlined above, the character of the Serpent is connected to female deities and to Eve – both in Belli’s novel and elsewhere. And so, the question that Belli’s Eve poses to Adam about whether the Serpent might be Elokim’s version of Eve, considering her position opposite him as contrarian, curious, and connected to the earth, is pertinent. It

⁶⁵ Although not a source for the Genesis creation myth (as were the Goddesses of the Near and Middle East), it is worth noting that serpent deities were also common in the author’s cultural context of Hispanic America, and Central America in particular: for instance, the Mexica earth goddess Coatlicue.

relates both to the possibility of the Serpent as a representation of the opposing goddess religions and as a creature which identifies with Eve herself. In her biography of Eve, Norris explains that “Eve’s association with the serpent became one of the most fruitful strands in the many fantasies that proliferated about her, branching off into multiple stories about reptilian monsters as well as snaky seductresses, manifestations of the female in her most repulsive and alluring forms, but having in common the troubling notion of menacing carnality” (319). Further, the association of women with the Serpent – and specifically Eve’s relation to it, as the supposed mother of all women – reflects these societies’ way of viewing “the threatening feminine”:

One way to cope with female sexuality was by rigid social hierarchies and rules controlling women, such as the Jews and Greeks and Romans imposed; another was by inventing stories in which its fearful aspects could be contained or exorcized. The monstrously productive woman and the alluring temptress are two of the fantasies through which societies have come to terms with the threatening feminine for literally thousands of years; both are expressed through the image of woman as a dangerous reptile. (320)

Intertwining the serpent-related deities of the goddess religions with the negative or threatening associations of women with serpents, the Serpent character in the original myth encompasses both. Belli, familiar with these associations, characterizes the Serpent in her novel in response to them and returning to earlier perceptions from within the goddess religions.

4.3.1 A Hunger for Knowledge

One of the intentions of the Genesis myth and its rejection of the female deities was to silence women. As Merlin Stone explains: “Woman, as sagacious advisor or wise counselor, human interpreter of the divine will of the Goddess, was no longer to be respected, but to be hated, feared or at best doubted or ignored” (221). The demand for women’s silence endorsed in the Genesis origin myth was tied not only to the Serpent and, of course, Eve, but also to the Tree of Knowledge. This, further, relates to questions of female education and women’s roles in society.

As in the examples of the other characters and creatures, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the myth has precedent in the female religions of the Near and Middle East. Considering mentions of a sacred tree in various records, Stone asserts that the Tree of Knowledge described in the Genesis story would have been a fig tree, as it appears in Belli’s novel.⁶⁶ This has roots in ceremonies and symbolism surrounding the Egyptian Goddess Hathor, alternately known as “the Eye of Wisdom”, “the Serpent Lady”, and “the Lady of the Sycamore” as well as related Goddess figures (Stone 214-216). The tree and its fruits were thought to have been part of the ceremonies of these female deities, leading to Stone’s supposition that the tree was included in the myth to warn of the dangers of taking part in these rituals: “it would not be too surprising if the symbolism of

⁶⁶ “This tree is actually the Near Eastern *ficus sicomorus*, the sycamore fig, sometimes denoted as the black mulberry. It differs from the common fig tree in that its reddish colored fruit grows in large clumps, something like a cluster of grapes” (Stone 214).

the tree of forbidden fruit, said to offer the knowledge of good and evil, yet clearly represented in the myth as the provider of sexual consciousness, was included in the creation story to warn that eating the fruit of this tree had caused the downfall of all humanity” (217).⁶⁷ With this contextual information, the image of the feminine Serpent leaning against the Tree of Knowledge in *El infinito en la palma de la mano* takes on the quality of a reimagined Goddess figure, positioned opposite the invisible God/Elokim and the patriarchal beliefs his presence represents in the myth.

The concept of knowledge and what is gained from eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge is central to Belli’s portrayal of the Eve character. As discussed earlier, a defining feature of Eve in *El infinito en la palma de la mano* is her curiosity. Even while provided with everything a human requires on a functional level, which is enough to satisfy the other animals in the Garden, and to a certain extent the human male as he is represented in the novel, Eve is overwhelmed by the desire to understand the reasons for their existence. Her inquisitive nature may be seen as commendable, as it is in the feminist interpretations of the Genesis myth which defend Eve’s actions. However, the commonly accepted view within Judeo-Christian societies has been that it was a punishable sin. The negative assessment of Eve’s actions reflects a society that values obedience over critical thought – with disobedient curiosity as the original sin of humanity. Characterizing Eve (the representative and mother of all women) as the

⁶⁷ The fruit, “described in Egyptian texts as ‘the flesh and fluid of Hathor,’ may even have been eaten as a type of ‘communion’ with the Goddess, perhaps giving rise to the custom of the communion of the ‘flesh and blood’ of Jesus, taken in the form of wafers and wine even today” (Stone 216).

original sinner indicates that women, who prioritize their own curiosity and desire over their obedience to a higher power, are not to be trusted – especially with knowledge.

Extending these “lessons” of the myth to society, it is hardly surprising that women have had to fight for accessibility to knowledge or equal access to education. Belli’s work seems acutely aware of the repercussions of this punitive aspect of the myth towards women, and alters her work to remedy it. The novel displays the human struggle for knowledge and the stubbornness often required to pursue it, as Eve eats the fruit and chooses the potential for knowledge despite warnings against it. As the Serpent tells Eve in the novel, the humans are kept ignorant so that they will remain “tranquilos y pasivos, como el gato y el perro” (“tranquil and passive, like the cat and the dog”) (Belli 27; 12). Once they have eaten the fruit and been expelled from the Garden, Eve describes the feeling of acquiring knowledge as a slow process, rather than the sudden torrent of understanding she had imagined: “el conocimiento, pensó Eva, no era la luz que ella imaginó abriría de pronto su entendimiento, sino una lenta revelación, una sucesión de sueños e intuiciones acumulándose en un sitio anterior a las palabras” (“knowledge, Eve thought, was not the light she had imagined would suddenly suffuse her mind but a slow revelation, a succession of dreams and intuitions that accumulated in a place that predated words”) (98; 78). The Serpent, appearing to Eve to advise her on how to feed her newborn twins, remarks that “el saber y el sufrir son inseparables” (“knowledge and suffering are inseparable”) as they discuss the choice to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (163; 140). This sentiment is also expressed by Adam, who often laments the loss of the Garden. While recognizing the gradual process of knowledge and

understanding, however, Belli's Eve continues to defend her choice to eat the forbidden fruit.

4.4 Eve

As mentioned in section 4.1.1, some critiques of Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* take issue with the emphasis on differences between Adam and Eve in the novel. Eve is represented as more intuitive, emotional, and empathetic in nature than Adam as, for instance, she is demonstrated to have a stronger connection with the earth and with the other living creatures. In the process of discovering how to survive outside of the Garden, they live on fruits and edible plants until Adam learns that the other animals kill each other for food and does so himself. Eve, however, refuses to kill for food, responding to the dead rabbit Adam brings to her with horror: “donde él veía alimento, ella vio un animal yerto y sangrante. La mujer dio un grito y se tapó los ojos” (“where he saw food, she saw a bloody, inert animal. She screamed and covered her eyes”) (109; 88). After confirming that the animal is in fact deceased, Eve incredulously asks “¿Esto es lo que quieres que coma, la muerte?” (“This is what you want me to eat? Death?”), rejecting what she views as unacceptable (109; 88). She tells him “no debes matar. Me lo dice todo el cuerpo” (“You should not kill. My whole body tells me that”), while Adam considers his less sensitive response to killing for food a result of their differences, saying to her, “quizás no te toque a ti matar. Quizás por eso seamos diferentes” (“maybe it isn't up to you to kill. Maybe that is why we're different”) (110-111; 89-90). The differences he refers to here are both physical and emotional, as he is naturally larger and physical stronger, and also less sensitive to the act of killing the animals for food – a delineation of defined roles for the two characters and a potential source of contention in discussions of

essentialism. Tanya Varela also points out the clearly defined roles in Adam and Eve's sexual encounter, with Adam as the active force and Eve as the passive one (88).

However, while the physical attributes of the characters and some of their interactions with each other do follow traditionally feminine/masculine divisions, Belli's overall characterization of Adam and Eve is more complex. The case of Eve's passive role in their sexual encounter, for example, is tempered by the active, leading role that Eve takes in general throughout the novel. Similarly, the sensitivity Eve exhibits in refusing to kill for food presents another aspect of Eve's strength as she tolerates discomfort and hunger in defense of her ideals. Accordingly, Belli's Eve does not easily correspond to simplistic dichotomies, and is rather granted a balanced portrayal and depth of character which deflect any oversimplified essentialist interpretation.

The author does not, however, ignore or dismiss the differences between the two central characters, and the centrality of Eve's subjective experience, as she endures the havoc of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, places the female body at the center of the affective narration of these events. The vivid descriptions of Eve discovering her body's capabilities draw attention not only to the subjective experiences of Eve as a woman, but also to the difference from Adam's relatively simpler physical existence. In the case of motherhood, for instance, Eve notes that, "a ella la maternidad le afirmó no solo los contornos, sino la conciencia de un poder más allá de la fuerza" ("in addition to setting the lines of her body more firmly, maternity had brought her the awareness of a power in her that was beyond physical strength") (171; 146). There is also a revision of the notion of childbearing as a punishment through Eve as she considers the joy she

experiences through motherhood. After realizing that she is pregnant for the second time, Eve observes how:

A diferencia de la primera vez, no tuvo miedo. El dolor se olvidaba pronto. Lo borraba el asombro de ver otros seres desvalidos empezar a ser ellos mismos, el enigma de que fueran impredecibles, y sin embargo tan extrañamente parte suya. El llanto de ellos, su hambre, su frío le pertenecían. Y sin embargo, nada había perdido de sí misma. Echada con los niños que se alimentaban de ella, a menudo encontraba sosiego. [...] ver el jolgorio de sus ojos y sus pequeñas manos cuando se aproximaba hacía que le fuera cada vez más difícil continuar pensándose víctima de un arbitrario y desproporcionado castigo. (171-172)

(This time, unlike the first time, she was not afraid. The pain had soon been forgotten. It had been erased by the amazement of seeing those frail beings beginning to become themselves, and by the enigma of how they could be so unpredictable and yet so strangely a part of her. Their wailing, their hunger, and their cold were a part of her. And yet no part of her had been lost. Lying with the children as they nursed, she often found peace. [...] to see the jubilation in their eyes and their little hands when she came near, made it increasingly difficult to think of herself as the victim of an arbitrary and disproportionate punishment.)
(146-147)

Despite the pain of childbirth, Eve finds that the experience of motherhood outweighs the suffering she received as supposed punishment for her decision to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Here, as elsewhere, Belli's focus on the affective experiences shared by many women is neither prescriptive nor dogmatic, as the

patriarchal versions of the tale were, but rather are inclusionary to the possibilities of female experience, and to what are often the obligations of being born a woman. Though the physical experience of Eve as a woman is a significant element in Belli's portrayal, the character is far from being reduced to a walking uterus. As made clear throughout the novel, Eve is not simply the biological mother of homo sapiens, but the catalyst for human society as we know it, as she chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

4.5 Conclusion

In her analysis of Gioconda Belli's earlier novels, Laura Barbas-Rhoden argues that "as she confronts questions of identity and history, Belli creates new images of women to replace those constructed and assigned to them by male authorities" (52). By returning to the Judeo-Christian origin story of humanity, Belli revised a crucial relationship with the figure considered to be a portion of the world's symbolic mother. The figure of Eve has been condemned for centuries as the model for insubordinate and wayward women, having disobeyed the one rule in the Garden of Eden to not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The meaning assigned to Eve's action has varied over the years, but has generally been of service to misogynist readings of the myth and the consequential suppression of women's rights and roles in society. Belli's novel, in the tradition of feminist texts defending Eve, absolves the character, presenting her choice to eat the fruit as an action done with foresight, critical thought, and a thirst for knowledge, rather than foolishness, gullibility, or ill-intent. Recognizing that the varying interpretations of Eve, the Serpent, and others depend on the attitude towards knowledge within the text, with curiosity either lauded as a virtue or punished as a vice, the novel

supports the laudatory representation of Eve as curious and intelligent. While the prevailing feminist approaches to Eve's portrayal in the original text have tended to reject the myth and its patriarchal overtones in its entirety, Belli maintains a conciliatory approach to the figure, in a move which allows the story to preserve its foothold on the human psyche, while reclaiming the origins of the story in earlier sources of female deities and their symbols. It enables a more empathetic response as the novel exposes Eve's rich, inner life and the nuanced ideas she develops through her experiences in the story.

As noted earlier, the title of the novel, *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, references William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" (1863). This connection to the late 18th to mid-19th century movement of Romanticism, in which Blake was an influential figure, opens the novel with a lean towards the sentiments of the Romantic movement, and of a neo-romantic sensibility in the novel, primarily expressed through the focus on the narrator's subjective experience of the world, and the weight given to this experience. In addition to the conciliatory approach to the figure of Eve, Belli skilfully incorporates evolution into the biblical origin myth, suggesting that present day humans evolve from one of Adam and Eve's daughters in the novel. Their daughter Aklia, who from her birth appears to resemble the other primates more than her parents or siblings, leaves with a group of other primates at the end, and the Serpent informs Eve that Aklia is a return to the innocence of the Garden, and history is to continue through her – through evolution. *El infinito en la palma de la mano* presents a conciliatory, unified, and nuanced story to explain the roots of humankind, consolidating distinct approaches to the well-known

myth. In reference to Belli's earlier novels, Barbas-Rhoden writes that "in creating female antecedents for her protagonists and woman-centered texts for the reading public, Belli supplements the story of the nation" (50). In the case of *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, it is no longer the Nicaraguan nation, as it is in her other novels, but the 'nation' of humanity as a whole, as Belli returns to the "original" woman and mother to rewrite and supplement the origin story of humanity.

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Conclusion

The last decades have seen significant developments in feminist thought and an expansion of our understanding of what feminism, in its many forms, entails. Among these developments, postmodern feminist movements, in the third wave and beyond, have launched a much-needed recognition of the unique and often overlooked challenges of diverse groups and social identities. A side effect of this expansion has been the fragmentation and disagreement between the distinct feminist streams that have emerged. In the case of feminism, the division within the movement is often visible in the opposition of essentialist and anti-essentialist feminisms. While differences and debate are an indispensable part of a multi-faceted movement such as feminism, the 21st century has ushered in a renewed interest in story and affect, acknowledging the significant connections to the human psyche.

While the term bio-social constructionist feminism, where both biological structures and sociocultural influences are recognized as significant, is not yet well-known, it marks a position that is likely shared by many. As Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood explain in relation to the nature versus nurture debates in psychology, there is a discrepancy between what researchers agree upon (ie. that both nature and nurture are significant) and the biases towards one over the other which their studies tend to express. It seems that feminism has suffered from something similar. There is a strong bias towards anti-essentialist feminisms in academic studies and feminist theory, with the well-intentioned goal of rejecting biological influence and the limitations which biological determinism may impose. However, this has distanced theoretical discussions of feminism from the

realities of female experience, as well as other academic disciplines, and has potentially limited feminist theories' societal influence. Meanwhile, the relatively few feminist scholars who do accept some form of biological essentialism tend to fall on the other extreme, dismissing many central feminist concerns with a view that excuses behaviours as simply a result of biology.

As new sensibilities have emerged in the 21st century, incorporating aspects of postmodernism while moving towards a neo-romantic structure of feeling, feminism has also evolved to encompass both essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches, as exemplified by Eagly and Wood's research. In literary writings about women, this emerging feminism is expressed through works which, like the novels included in this study, appeal to affect and reader empathy. These works provide relative closure and a sense of unity while maintaining a critical distance from overly simplified binaries and often incorporating characteristics of postmodern works, such as irony, pastiche, uncertainty, multiplicity, and pluralism.

As outlined in the first chapter, the turn away from postmodernism has developed alongside a return to affect in response to a loss of meaning in the arts. A resurgence in the popularity of auto/biographical fictional forms has accompanied this shift in sensibility, as suggested by Michael Lackey in his studies of biographical novels and by Alison Gibbons in her chapter on "Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect" in *Metamodernism* (2017). The popularity of individual life stories has further coincided with a multi-disciplinary recognition of the significance of storytelling in connecting with

others and in understanding human psychology. On a more personal level of storytelling, personality theories relating to narrative argue that people “provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self”, constructing their own life stories to make sense of what would otherwise be a disjointed series of events (McAdams, “Psychology of Life Stories” 100). As Jonathan Haidt has argued, an individual’s personal life story is comparable to a work of historical fiction, rather than the work of a historian. This suggests that auto/biographical fiction and the like mimic our own automatic, personal, storytelling tendencies in relation to our own lives. It also means that the stories and characters to which we are exposed in literature and elsewhere contribute to the narrative we construct around ourselves. Many of the most well-known female characters, including those of historical legend and religious myth, have been viewed through a limited and often misogynist lens, leaving women with few options from which to construct a positive life story. Feminist movements have sought to correct this imbalance, with strong movements towards more varied representations of women in literature and other media.

In Latin America, as elsewhere, feminist movements have had to work towards a recognition of women both as capable writers and worthwhile subjects. As Margo Glantz has pointed out, women’s writing was once considered “manual labour”, while men’s writing was considered intellectual labour (“*Labores de manos*”, 28). Women who wrote well were generally considered to be masculine or mannish, as in the case of Gertrudis Gómez Avellaneda, who was recognized as a great writer and, in the words of Spanish poet José Zorilla, “she was a woman, but only because, in a moment of distraction,

Nature had clothed the soul of a man in female flesh” (382-383). In addition to being overlooked as writers, women were also overlooked as subjects. Working with an alternate definition of “edificar”, here meaning to exemplify through a life or “dar buen ejemplo con su vida”, as in the case of the edifying writing of hagiography – or that of auto/biography – Glantz reflects on the lack of recognition for women as writers and as subjects of auto/biographical works (21). In this way, for centuries women in Latin America have been limited on both ends of literary production: they were considered neither worthy of writing nor of being written about in any substantial form.

Marcela Lagarde’s illustration of the female condition as one of captivity in a patriarchal world emphasizes the struggle to become autonomous subjects, as she writes that “esta dificultad de las mujeres para constituirse en sujetos constituye la impotencia aprendida [...] Las mujeres están cautivas de su condición genérica en el mundo patriarcal” (36). Lagarde’s arguments expand on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), including the limitations imposed on women as even they consider themselves as the object and the “other” in relation to the “I” of the male subject. These pressures and demands, well-integrated into societal structures in what Eva Giberti and Ana María Fernández refer to as “la violencia invisible”, limit women’s potential and exclude them from the possibilities of transcendence or self-actualization. In addition to economic and legal obstacles, domestic responsibilities, and a lack of education and opportunity, the scarcity of visible feminine figures in public arenas and political spheres is identified as an element of this oppressive system. The selection of female figures as the subjects of biographical novels in Latin America is part of a movement which addresses the

insidious oppression of a scarcity of visible feminine figures, as in the novels selected here, each of which subjectifies its female protagonist, and in some cases reacting to and revising the accepted portrayals of ubiquitous female characters. These Latin American biographical novels provide readers with models of female potential which defy long-held beliefs and the resulting limitations of patriarchal systems. They further do so through an appeal to affect which, as Mabel Moraña and others have pointed out, maintains a significant role in the formation of a social conscience and of imagined collectives (Moraña 456).

In the first case study of this dissertation, I examined Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* (2011), focusing on the potential for character identification and reader empathy through the biographical novel's narrative. The approach employed in this chapter was suited for the analysis of a novel based on the life of a relatively current figure, with many details of her life available in a variety of reliable sources, including her own autobiographical works. The most extensive of the three content chapters, my case study of *Leonora* considered the biographical novel alongside non-fictional works related to Leonora Carrington as well as the artist's own writings and artworks. It also acknowledged the distinct terms related to biographical fiction and the potential effects of labeled distinctions, borrowing from cognitive literary studies to do so. My analysis found that the representation of Carrington in Poniatowska's biographical novel potentially appeals to reader emotion more than a traditional biography would, particularly through the invented scenes, events, and characters unique to the novel. Poniatowska's writing techniques make her work more psychologically accessible to readers, and makes it more

likely to promote interest and encourage empathetic identification with the subject. The author's inventions and the psychological accessibility of the work further allow for a better understanding of the depth and particularities of the protagonist, in a narrative which expresses the spirit of the protagonist's character and in some cases even reflecting the style of Carrington's own fictional stories.

In the next chapter, the focus moved from a 20th-21st century artist to the historical figure of Cleopatra in Carmen Boullosa's *De un salto descabalga la reina* (2002). More legend than history, Cleopatra is well known throughout the Western world and has been the subject of a multitude of artistic representations and written works since her death. These works were primarily based on what had been written about Cleopatra by her Roman enemies after her death, as none of the queen's own writings remained. Boullosa's imaginative approach to the story of the Cleopatra portrays the queen at three different points in her life, beginning with the most historically substantial, and ending with a fantastical invention as the queen is paired with the mythological Amazon warriors. Considering the three distinct portrayals of Cleopatra's character along with the formation of her identity throughout the novel, and particularly in this last imaginative pairing in the novel, the analysis suggested that the nuanced representation of Cleopatra in Boullosa's novel reflects an idealized feminist icon, even while recognizing the unlikelihood of such a figure. The narrative expresses a postmodern approach to history through an unreliable narrator and the multiple, fragmented portrayals of the protagonist, while it reaches towards a neo-romantic sense of hopeful unity in the final section, particularly as Cleopatra is given a like-minded community among the mythical

Amazonian warriors.

The final chapter shifted from history to myth in a revisionary portrayal of the figure of Eve from the biblical story of the creation of humankind in Gioconda Belli's *El infinito en la palma de la mano* (2008). As in the previous two case studies, the author combines the accepted versions of the story as well as her own inventions to create an alternative with a focus on the female character from a feminist perspective. In this case, Belli also includes biblical apocrypha and implicitly engages with the interpretations of Eve which have for centuries extended beyond the myth to encompass all women. Having examined the novel's representation of Eve and other characters as they relate to the original myth, its predecessors, particularly in female religions of the Near and Middle East, and selected relevant works, this analysis found that the novel reframes the characterization of Eve and the others in the work to remedy the negative assessment of Eve's choice to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Instead of punishing her disobedience, the narrative presents Eve's choice as rational, carried out with foresight, critical thought, and based on a thirst for knowledge. Rather than a transgressive act, it is interpreted as the initiation into human life outside the comforts of a paradise. While the prevailing feminist approaches to Eve's portrayal in the biblical text have tended to reject the story in its entirety, Belli maintains a conciliatory approach to the myth and the figure of Eve.

As detailed in the conclusions of each chapter, the fictionalized representations of historical or mythical female figures in the selected Hispanic American biographical novels reveal a neo-romantic feminist sensibility that has emerged within the affective

turn towards meaning and story. This feminist sensibility conveys a central position on the essentialist continuum, aiming towards a unified, integrated pluralism. It also reflects a return to affect and a recognition of the significant role of human emotion in identifying with a novel and its characters. Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* fleshes out the life of an exceptional artist and a personal friend, giving her a complete story, including a surreal death scene that could have been written by Leonora Carrington herself. Carmen Boulosa's novel revisits a well-known but little-understood historical female figure whose life was originally documented by men who despised her, and gives her a place among the Amazons' community of powerful women. Lastly, in a novel that rewrites one of the most pervasive stories of the Western world, Gioconda Belli extracts Eve from the hands of her misogynist detractors and presents a conciliatory work to defend the figure presented as the mother of humankind.

These are only a few of the biographical novels of the 21st century expressing this type of neo-romantic feminist sensibility from within Hispanic America, including those mentioned earlier, such as Elena Poniatowska's *Dos veces única* (2015) about Lupe Marín (1895-1983); Laura Esquivel's *Malinche* (2006), which revisits the story of the historical figure Malinalli/Marina/Malintzin (ca. 1500 - ca. 1529) commonly known as "La Malinche"; and Gioconda Belli's *El pergamino de la seducción* (2005) about 16th century Spanish queen Juana de Castilla. As each novel contains its own particular expression of feminist sentiments, these would be worthwhile areas of exploration in further analyses. Additionally, there are biographical novels from outside of Hispanic American literature which similarly express this sensibility and would be of interest in

further studies. To mention just a few, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997), Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde: A Novel* (2000), Kate Moses's *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (2003), and Rebecca Kanner's *Sinners and the Sea: The Untold Story of Noah's Wife* (2013) would be worth considering within this theoretical framework.

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Figure 1. Leonora Carrington, *Mujeres conciencia*, 74.9 x 49 cm, gouache on cardboard, 1972.



Figure 2. Leonora Carrington, *Down Below*, 40 x 59.7 cm, oil on canvas, 1941.



Figure 3. Leonora Carrington, *Map of Down Below*, 32.4 x 25.1 cm, ink on paper, ca. 1941.

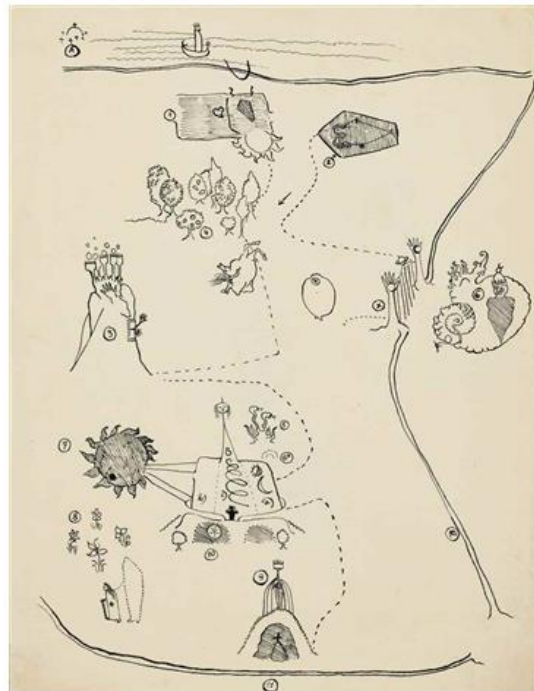


Figure 4. Leonora Carrington, *Portrait of Dr. Morales*, ink on paper, ca. 1943.



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