

Ambivalence, Modernity, Power

Women and Writing in Mexico since 1980

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1. Auflage

[Ambivalence, Modernity, Power – Finnegan](#)

schnell und portofrei erhältlich bei beck-shop.de DIE FACHBUCHHANDLUNG

Peter Lang Bern 2007

Verlag C.H. Beck im Internet:

www.beck.de

ISBN 978 3 03910 507 6

Chapter One

Place, Nation and History in Sara Sefchovich and Silvia Molina

‘In a country like this’,¹ writes Angeles Mastretta, shortly after the publication of her best-selling novel, *Arráncame la vida* (1985), and so conveys a sense of the frustration, pride, awe and anxiety that so often forms a part of the ambivalent relationship between citizens and their ‘imagined community’.² Emanating from her words also is a distinct awareness of responsibility along with anxiety, felt more widely perhaps by women writers, as they negotiated their place within an intellectual sphere that was only just at the end of the 1980s, beginning to expand its boundaries to admit them.³ In this chapter, I

- 1 Phrase taken from an interview with Angeles Mastretta: ‘Creo que la literatura *en un país como éste* es un lujo y que por eso es una doble responsabilidad [...] tienes todavía más la responsabilidad de contar lo que mucha más gente no va a contar, de recuperar otras voces, las voces de gente que no va a poder hablar jamás’. (my emphasis). Ron Teichman, ‘Angeles Mastretta: Con la precisión del arrebato’, *Nexos* (April 1987), p.7.
- 2 This phrase belongs of course to Benedict Anderson’s now classic thesis on nationalism and national identity, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Much feminist research takes issue with Anderson noting his lack of consideration of gender and the place of women within the symbolic system. See for example, Anne McClintock, ‘No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism’, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge 1994), pp.352–90. See also, Yira Nuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* and Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem (eds), *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 3 Margo Glantz reminds us of the ‘aparición de una vasta producción de literatura femenina’ since 1968. Talking about Josefina Vicens, Amparo Dávila, Emma Dolujanoff, Luisa Josefina Hernández, Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos in the 1950s and Poniatowska, Mastretta, Fernández de Alba, Seligson, Jacobs,

would like to examine novels by two other women writers, who were jostling for authorial position during this period, Sara Sefchovich's *Demasiado amor* (1990) and Silvia Molina's *El amor que me juraste* (1998). Sara Sefchovich is a sociologist and researcher and has published numerous essay collections and three novels. Her first novel, the subject of this study, won the Premio Agustín Yáñez and her second, *La señora de los sueños* (1993) was also a best seller and has been translated into seven languages. *Demasiado amor* appeared in 1990, just at the end of the crisis-ridden 1980s and at the beginning of the tumultuous nineties. Published eight years later, Silvia Molina's award-winning novel, *El amor que me juraste*, is set during 1994 and thus the time-frame of both books is remarkably similar. It should also be pointed out that *El amor que me juraste* is just one in a long line of successful novels published by Molina since 1977. *La mañana debe seguir gris* won the prestigious Premio Xavier Villaurrutia in that year and her other novels, *Ascensión Tun* (1983), *La familia vino del norte* (1987) and *Imagen de Héctor* (1990) were also critical successes. It is clear then that both writers inhabit the Mexican intellectual sphere from the mid-1970s onwards and are active participants in the *boom femenino* in Mexican literature from that time.

As has been explored in the introduction, this time-frame exerts particular significance in this study. It is widely accepted that the oil scare and the devaluation of the peso in 1982 triggered an unprecedented political, economic and social crisis that had ramifications throughout civil society. This led, as Roger Bartra asserts, to a serious erosion of the ruling party, the PRI's popular base and produced serious splits and shifts within the unity of the 'revolutionary family'. It is out of these splits and shifts that the 'women's voice' finally be-

Esquivel, Molina, Boullosa in the 1980s, she asserts, 'la proliferación de la literatura femenina responde a una proliferación de nuevas formas, de cambios radicales en el país. Las infancias han cambiado: las narradoras que tardan de recrearla quizá debieran enfrentarse a lo desverbal, a lo ingobernable, a lo que se desdibuja y trata de configurar otro diseño, cuya lectura sería importante descifrar'. 'Las hijas de la malinche', in *Esguince de Cintura: Ensayos sobre narrativa mexicana del Siglo XX* (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), pp.182-3.

gins to emerge in Mexico, emphatic and determined to explore their very differently-positioned subjectivities with regard to Mexico and *mexicanidad*. This voice resonates throughout the labour market, the intellectual and cultural sphere and even begins to penetrate the formal political spectrum. Women's increased presence in the labour force leads to a disposable income that enables them for the first time to become both consumers and producers of culture. They are, therefore, deeply implicated in the modernisation project of that decade and owe their voice to the gaps created in the traditional make-up of Mexican civil society.⁴ As a result, there is an ambivalence inherent in the nature of the women's voice that begins to emerge, a new freedom that is enabled and empowered through forces that were also in many cases, deeply repressive. This ambivalence haunts the pages of both these texts penetrating content, form, structure and location. It is the nature of this ambivalent relationship to the nation in particular that I would like to examine in this chapter.

I would specifically like to answer the many questions that arise from an exploration of these two novels in the context of discourses about the nation, history and the place of women in 1980s Mexico. The texts lend themselves to discussion together not just because of the ostensible preoccupation with love evident in both their titles. They are written a decade apart and yet share in common an almost obsessive concern with place and its relationship to identity, both imagined and real. In a country, for example where the myth of 'discovery' has been so wholly deconstructed both literally and figuratively, what does it mean to produce narratives that are almost pathologically dedicated to discovering and exposing themselves? Is their frantic attempt to re-inscribe the nation a type of imperialist nostalgia for a glorious past? Furthermore, they both interrogate the

4 As Roger Bartra asserts, 'Faced with the terrible blows of the open economic crisis of 1982 and the symptoms of a latent political crisis, the leaders of the system – especially the technocrats – have proposed a "new" policy that can be summed up in one word: modernisation'. 'The Crisis of Nationalism', in *Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p.107.

nation in innovative ways contesting its systems of cultural representation and women's roles both as boundary and metaphoric limit.⁵ Explored through the discourses of travel writing, it becomes clear that both these texts profoundly rupture the framework of power relations governing the travel genre, subverting its conventions and reinventing the parameters.

Demasiado amor

Demasiado amor tells the story of Beatriz, an orphan of lower middle-class origin who initially works as a clerical worker, but who later becomes a successful prostitute in Mexico City. It uses a fragmented epistolary format that alternates chapters addressed to a male lover with letters sent to the narrator's sister in Italy. The letters to the sister tell the story of the negotiation of the sisters' shared dream of a *casa de huéspedes* by the sea, and also make reference to the various events in her sister's life including her marriage and the birth of her children. The chapters addressed to the lover detail the couple's weekend journeys through Mexico and their experiences of local culture, food, markets and landscape. The story ends as the relationship breaks down and Beatriz's business escalates to the point where she dedicates her life to the service of the many clients who inhabit her apartment, which has been converted into a kind of naturalist paradise and where the clients engage in meditation and conversation. At the end of the novel, the reader learns that the travel sections addressed to 'tú' are actually notebook entries that she has sent to her sister in Italy as a chronicle of her life with this man.

Reading the narrative through discourses of travel writing shows how *Demasiado amor* represents an emphatic break with the

5 See Anne McClintock on women's role within discourses of the nation. 'No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism', in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, pp.352-90.

conventions of that genre. It is this breakdown that ultimately leads the protagonist to the highly problematic utopian otherworld that forms her haven in the closing pages. What remains imperative in any examination of this novel, is an analysis of how the travel sections function and to what extent they interpellate the reader within their ideological framework. The travel sections are largely written in the second person, the narrator describing how 'tú' led her to consume various places, foods, ceramics, monuments and buildings. The sections are in some cases relatively straightforward,⁶ but in other cases, constitute a form of linguistic bombardment of the reader with interminable lists of things and places. In these sections, any notion of realist description is thoroughly deconstructed as the reader wades through an exaggerated enumeration of places typically familiar to an average tourist. Consider the following as an example of the more straightforward sections:

Me arrastraste a Yucatán en la frontera y a Monterrey en la frontera y en todas partes hacía calor, calor húmedo y calor seco. A Veracruz para que viera yo el golfo y a Mazatlán para que nadie me contara del Pacífico y a Cancún para conocer el Caribe y a Baja California donde el mundo tiene su orilla (p.25).⁷

These measured descriptions disappear gradually, the pace of the narrative accelerates and the text becomes quite frenzied:

Fuimos a Chacala y a Chacalilla, a Caleta y a Caletilla, a Iguala y a Igualapa, Tonalá y Tonalapa, Xochimilco y Tochimilco, Michoacán y Mechoacán, Taxco y Tlaxco, Pinotepa Nacional y Pinotepa de don Luis. Fuimos a lugares con

6 In her fascinating reading of the novel, Alicia del Campo analyses the content of the travel sections according to three distinct categories: lo indígena, lo popular y lo moderno. 'Reterritorializando lo mexicano desde lo femenino en el contexto neoliberal: *Demasiado amor* de Sara Sefchovich', *New Novel Review*, Vol.2, No.2 (1995), pp.61–75.

7 All references are from *Demasiado amor* (Mexico City: Planeta: 1991) and will appear after the quotations in parentheses. Much of my argument on the novel is taken from my article, "En un país como éste": Contesting the Nation, Resisting Modernity in *Demasiado amor* by Sara Sefchovich', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol.83, No.4 (2006), pp.367–84.

nombres extraños como Maní en Yucatán, Mar Muerto en Tehuantepec, Purísima del Rincón y San Francisco del Rincón, que se llaman así por estar en un rincón entre Guanajuato y Jalisco, a Polotitlán de la Ilustración en el Estado de Mexico, a San Felipe Torres Mochas, Arista de Luz, Lugar de Cinco Vientos, Espíritu Santo, Flecha de Aire, Marfil y Cañada de Negros (p.104).

As well as detailed outlines of places, there are also lists of things, objects, lavish descriptions and virtuoso linguistic displays that are meticulous and polished:

Me llevaste a visitar alfareros, ceramistas, orfebres, textileros. Me compraste tallados, estofados, moldeados, borados, laqueados, pintados, esculpidos, deshilados, tejidos, decorados, soplados, horneados, cincelados, teñidos, martillados, recortados y picados (p.112).

At first glance, the text seems to have little in common with other travel writing by women so comprehensively examined by Mary Louise Pratt in her study, *Imperial Eyes*.⁸ Absent are many of the characteristics attributed to travel writing by women in the colonial era with their focus on relationships, domestic details and their preference for a 'sentimental' type of narration.⁹ The narrative in the travel sections in *Demasiado amor* actually emerges from the male lover's lead-

8 Pratt's study examines the work of Maria Graham and Flora Tristán in depth and while it clearly deals with writing from a very different time period, many of its insights are relevant to *Demasiado amor*. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), and Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth Century Women's Travel Writing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001). See also Claire Lindsay's excellent discussion of domestic travel writing in Latin America, *Locating Latin American Women Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

9 Indira Ghose asserts that the differences between travel accounts by women and men are not differences of essence but rather of foci and interest, a notion also underscored in Pratt's work. See Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of Female Gaze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Furthermore, the focus on relationships and domestic detail highlighted by Pratt is present in *Demasiado amor* though not in the travel sections *per se* but rather in the letters exchanged between the sisters.

ing of Beatriz, and his showing her the splendours of their native country. Indeed in this way, the book conforms more closely to the type of text attributed to male travel writers. Caren Kaplan observes the close connections between metaphors of travel and (Euro-American) modernism, linking the two notions through the concept of the 'gentleman traveller'. She writes that the 'traveller who occupies a primary place in this formation can be characterised as a Western individual, usually male, "white" of independent means, an introspective observer, literate, acquainted with ideas of arts and culture and, above all, a humanist'.¹⁰ Sefchovich plays with the idea of the 'gentleman traveller' in this text juxtaposing details about his range of cultural knowledge with graphic depictions of his sexual control over the narrator:

Dos días y dos noches que me tuviste desnuda, echada sobre la cama, parada junto a la ventana, a gatas sobre el tapete, debajo de la regadera, sentada en el escusado, subida en el lavamano, volando sobre las sillas para hacerme el amor (p.12).

This description is clearly at odds with Kaplan's notion of the 'gentleman traveller' with its emphasis on the imposition of male sexual power and the wielding of control. The more 'humanist' aspects are nonetheless upheld in other areas of the text:

¡Cuántas historias te sabías! [...] Otro día me contaste de Lizardi y Prieto que escribieron cosas divertidas, de Altamirano que hacía llorar y de Rabasa que hacía pensar. Un día me leíste a Azuela, otro a Rulfo el triste y otro más a Fuentes el elegante (pp.125-6).

In these and other similar passages he is presented as the archetypal bourgeois male subject, both educated and enlightened who plays the role of teacher and educator to Beatriz. He is also searching for an enlightened past: 'Me acuerdo cuando te dio por recorrer los hoteles que algún día fueron famosos y distinguidos. Como si tuvieras una deuda pendiente con el país que fue éste hace cincuenta, hace cuarenta años' (p.7). In some ways, this seems typical of the kind of imperialist

10 *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, p.50.

nostalgia for a glorious past and in particular for the Mexico of the 1940s and the start of the economic miracle which was to last until 1968.¹¹ This lamenting of an era that is gone, ‘tu peregrinar por la nostalgia de años que se fueron hace mucho y de gente que ya se murió pero que algún día fue muy rica?’ (pp.7–8), and more specifically, the attraction of rich people, permeates the text and is paralleled in the letter pages by the protagonist and her sister’s struggle for money. Furthermore, the idea of a debt with the past raises interesting questions in itself about modern Mexico’s ambivalent relationship with the past, an ambivalence that permeates the novel throughout. Indeed as Kaplan points out, ‘the production of “tourist experiences” depends upon a specifically modern world that is marked by an ambivalent relationship to the past’.¹² Dilemmas about modernity thus infuse the novel not least through the dialectical relationship formed between the traveller (and his companion) and the communities to which they travel.

Furthermore, the colonial discourse that is so central to the travel genre, is always present and most acutely perceived through the authoritative male voice who ‘shows’ his female companion her *patria*. This mastery of landscape – so pivotal to early examples of travel writing – is perhaps rather distorted here. Instead of panoramic descriptions of landscape, there are instead exhausting lists of places, monuments, churches and regional cuisine:

Me trajiste por los altos de Chapas y los bajos de Tabasco, por los altos y los bajos del mismísimo Jalisco, del mismísimo Querétaro. Un día te pedí que me llevaras a Puerta del Cielo y me llevaste a Cadereyta, te pedí ir a Tepeji del Río y me llevaste a San Juan del Río. Un día me dijiste que íbamos a Atotonilco y me llevaste a Guanajuato, que íbamos a Atotonilco y me llevaste a Hidalgo, que íbamos a Atotonilco y me llevaste a Jalisco (p.104).

11 See Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer for an excellent overview of this period. *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910–1989*, trans. by Luis Alberto Fierro (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1993.

12 Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, p.58. See also Dennison Nash, ‘Tourism as an Anthropological Subject’, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 22, No.5 (October 1981), pp.461–81.

This bewildering assault on the reader which is repeated continually in the novel clearly indicates mastery on one level – if only over language – but is further compounded by the overdetermined use of the second person singular tense to convey the sense of ‘leading’ and ‘showing’ the way to the beauties and hidden mysteries of Mexico:

Porque tú me enseñaste este país. Tú me llevaste y me trajiste, me subiste y me bajaste, me hiciste conocerlo y me hiciste amarlo. Me llevaste a Guanajuato y a San Miguel de Allende (p.24).

In a later passage, he conquers her, treading the territory in an almost clichéd portrayal of the imperial conquistador, ‘En Jalapa me llevaste [...] En León me compraste zapatos y dijiste que así debía ser. En Taxco me compraste aretes y dijiste que así debía ser [...] Y siempre dijiste que así debía ser’ (p.37). What is more, the alignment between the ability to travel and consume the national territory, and the ability to consume goods is carefully established, consumption being a central trope of the narrative as a whole. What resonates most in these passages, though, is the foregrounding of the *tú* voice, particularly given the cumbersome grammatical form (–aste, –iste) of the second person singular in Spanish. The emphatic ending of the *tú* voice therefore announces with authority and power its own central presence. Furthermore, the to-ing and fro-ing of the syntax and the rhythm of the second person preterite ending also replicates a sense of movement and travelling back and forth. Yet, I contend that by its very definition, the *tú* form complicates its own authoritative status as it always requires the presence of the enunciative ‘I’ for legitimacy. The use of the familiar *tú* form also evokes a sense of intimacy with the other speaker, the female narrator. This draws attention to the dialectic relationship, and even from the beginning punctures the notion of absolute mastery over either text or landscape, a mastery that is thoroughly deconstructed by the end of the novel.

The War between Pronouns

This process of deconstruction begins early in the text and is located primarily in the struggle over and between pronouns, a ‘travelling’ between the *tú* and the *yo* voices that leads ultimately to a radical break with any notion of authority. Initially the conflict is signalled by the disjunction between what ‘he’ sees and what ‘she’ sees, a disjunction that becomes more pronounced as the text progresses. The *yo* voice becomes stronger, however, as the narrative continues: ‘Me acuerdo de la maleza. [...] De todo me acuerdo, de todo. De las velas gordas, perfumadas y de colores de Cuernavaca. [...] De todo me acuerdo. [...] De todo eso me acuerdo, de todo’ (pp.30–1). Here, the female narrator gradually affirms the importance of her memory and inserts herself into the narrative: ‘Siempre supiste cómo me gustaban las tardes [...] De todas mis memorias contigo, las que me conmueven son las de esas tardes llenas de luz, a esa hora en que todo guarda silencio. Recuerdo siempre los sonidos’ (p.36). The brief wielding of control, however, is reversed when the *tú* voice returns for the rest of this section, ‘me llevaste de día a un museo [...] me llevaste de día a oír mariachis [...] me llevaste de día al Zócalo y de noche a oír canciones de amor’ (p.37). These passages at times read like curious sections from a language exercise class in which all permutations of a given idea are rehearsed, as though the rehearsal of all possible linguistic forms, all possible voyages, all possible forms of identity are carefully worked through and then discarded, one by one.

The wavering between subject positions, from *tú* to *yo* to *nosotros* occurs throughout the first three-quarters of the novel. At times we are immersed in the second person narrative, at others we are drawn to her visions, her versions of events. At still other times, the reader is compelled to view them as a single unit:

En todas partes comíamos frutas, mandarinas y mangos, guayabas y guanábanas, mameyes, capulines, y tejocotes, jícamas y papayas, zapotes de tres colores y chicozapotes de color café, membrillos y limas, naranjas, manzanas, plátanos, sandías, piñas y melones. Comimos tunas. [...] Vimos arreglos de frutas y tapetes de frutas [...] Vimos mujeres que cargaban jícaras con fruta,

canastas con fruta, rebozos con bordados de fruta y macetas con dibujos de frutas (p.90).

In passages such as these, the subjects are sutured together and the distinct visions presented in the other passages become fused. The overall impression at first, aside from the exhaustion of wading through the various lists, is the fluidity of the subject position, from his to hers (yours to mine), to theirs (ours) as the reader navigates the heterogeneous, fragmented image of Mexico that emerges, an image that is never fixed, never static but always shifting from place to place. Rather than functioning as an allegorical illustration of the vicissitudes and evolution of their relationship, however, in this case, the journey is the relationship, the 'voyage without objective' reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's travelogues, the frenzied consumption of a nation and its assets. In this sense the narrative conforms closely to Baudrillard's notion of the trip with no end, and firmly locates it within a post-modern framework of travel deconstructed to the point of absurdity:

You have to travel, keep on the move. You have to cross oceans, cities, continents, latitudes. Not to acquire a more informed vision of the world – there is no universality any more, no possible synthesis of experience, nor even, strictly speaking, is there any pleasure of an 'aesthetic' or 'picturesque' variety to be had from travel – but in order to get as near as possible to the world-wide sphere of exchange, to enjoy ubiquity, cosmopolitan extraversion, to escape the illusion of intimacy. Travel as a line of flight, the orbital voyaging of the age of Aquarium.¹³

Certainly the travel descriptions constitute a linguistic line of flight and the text debunks any notion of a uniform aesthetic pleasure to be gained from travel in a way that also seems to invoke Baudrillard's utterly chaotic world. The text resists, however, absolute descent into chaos and thus challenges a purely postmodern reading of its aesthetic vision. I shall return to this link between nation, consumption and language in the concluding section of the chapter.

13 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1981), pp.168–9.

Initially, thus, the wavering subject positions signal a profound discomfort with fixed locations and static images, an unease that is palpable in the many descriptions of the 'emergency situation' that is Mexico at the end of the 1980s. When Miguel de la Madrid took over the presidency in 1982 shortly after the nationalisation of the banks, he delivered a dramatic speech to the nation, a speech that was punctuated by the word 'crisis'. Indeed words such as 'perish', 'paralysis', 'acute' and 'severe', among others reverberate throughout in a way that encapsulates the sense of anxious helplessness pervasive during the time:

We live in an emergency situation. It is not a time for hesitation or feuds; it is the time for decisions and responsibility. We shall not allow ourselves to succumb to inertia. The situation is intolerable. We shall not allow our fatherland to perish in our hands. We will act with decisiveness and firmness.¹⁴

It is little wonder that a text produced during such a national crisis will itself construct such a fraught relationship between protagonists and nation. It is also, however, from out of this emergency, as noted earlier, that new authorities, new 'I' voices emerge to contest the older systems of domination and hegemony. On a parallel level, it is clearly a time of opportunity for real, not just fictional, voices to materialise and explains in part the dramatic rise of women's voices in the cultural arena during this time. In the rest of this section, I would like to document how the new 'I' voice establishes itself within Sefchovich's text.

14 *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, p.220.

Mexico Uncovered

Amid myriad accounts of trips in which the descriptions seem to spiral out of control, a turning point occurs with the incisive insertion of ‘no’ into the travel narrative, a ‘no’ that heralds the breakdown, not just of the voyages as they had been unfolding, but of all linguistic and social order. It starts off in a muted and understated fashion: ‘Pero un día las cosas se empezaron a poner difíciles. No quisiste llevarme a conocer los prostíbulos de Ciudad Juárez y yo me enojé. No quisiste llevarme a beber a los antros de Tijuana y yo me enojé. No quisiste ir a bailar’ (p.145). What starts as a logical, if somewhat incongruous series of references to his sudden unwillingness to ‘show’ her the spectacle of Mexico, becomes an irrational and arbitrary series of refusals on his part without explanation:

No entramos a Iguala y no nos quedamos a desayunar en un restorán del camino, no nos detuvimos en Tulancingo para comer en un restorán. [...] No me dejaste comer raspados de colores y camotes en los carritos de las esquinas. No me dejaste montar en Ixtapán ni nadar en el mar abierto de Mazatlán. No me dejaste probar el pozol de los indios de Chiapas ni el chocolate de las indias de Oaxaca ni el pulque de los indios de todas partes (p.147).

His absolute authority is ominously underlined in the text by several references to his violent hobbies: ‘Y yo no quise ir contigo a Yucatán a ver maltratar a los cebúes, ni a Matlapaní a ver degollar a los gallos, ni te acompañé a cazar liebres y venados en Chihuahua, ni a las corridas de toros en las plazas ni a las peleas de gallos en los palenques’ (p.147). The violence of the activities in the above passage further upholds his sense of mastery and the control he wields throughout the travel sections of the narrative. The realism of the narrative such as it existed, unravels as the negatives become more prominent: ‘No pudimos detenernos en todas partes, en tantas selvas que había en el sur y tantos bosques que había en el norte, en tantos desiertos que había en el norte y tantas lagunas que encontrábamos en el sur’ (p.152). But just as the reader starts to become accustomed to what is seemingly a random series of negatives, the reasons become apparent:

No pudimos ir a Mulegé porque los gringos que llegan en sus barcos ocupan todos los hoteles, ni quedarnos en Acapulco porque los gringos que llegan en sus aviones ocupan todos los hoteles ni por lo mismo quedarnos en Huatulco ni en Cabo San Lucas ni en Cancún (p.152).

Thus what starts as a gentle critique of the deterioration of their travel conditions, leads into a frantic indictment of that process of *modernización* partly in place from the beginning of the 1970s, but which was energetically implemented by Miguel de la Madrid from 1982 onwards after the national crisis.¹⁵ Pinpointing the ‘gringos’ as the reason behind the sudden halt in Beatriz and her lover’s activities also poses an interesting dilemma for the/*this gringa* critic (herself a tourist in all these places) who is suddenly converted into the silent accused of the novel. The critiques quickly become sharper:

Y entonces, precisamente cuando las cosas se empezaron a poner difíciles, descubrimos que la blusa deshilada no era de Aguascalientes sino del mercado de Tepoztlán, descubrimos que el rebozo de Santa María no cabía por el aro de un anillo porque no era de seda sino de imitación, que el marco no era de plata sino de latón, el sarape no era de lana sino sintético, el mantel no era del mercado sino de una tienda, el pantalón de manta no lo hicieron los indios sino una gringa de San Miguel, las macetas no eran de mayólica ni las mesas de laca ni la vainilla era pura porque tres veces recorrimos Papatla y no la pudimos encontrar (p.155).

This collapse of the myth of authenticity and purity, the illusion sustained in the previous pages leads in turn to the dramatic eruption of *lo feo* into the previously idyllic landscape:

¿Qué pasaba? ¿Qué nos sucedía? Cuando llegamos al Templo de la Consagración había desaparecido el Cristo de Marfil. Cuando llegamos al templo de Potzontepec habían desaparecido dos coronas de oro [...] Faltaban marfiles en las catedrales, Cristos en las misiones, reliquias en las iglesias, muebles en los conventos, joyas en los museos, libros en las bibliotecas, piedras en las ruinas, faroles en las calles y hasta fuentes en los jardines.

15 This process was, of course, infamously continued by Salinas de Gortari in 1988 which culminated in the signing of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the violent *Zapatista* uprising, of which more in the next section.

Un día llegamos a Tlacolula y había desaparecido el barquito de la fachada. Un día llegamos a Tula y habían desaparecido dos diosas. De Palenque, La Venta, Yucatán y Quintana Roo se habían llevado estelas, monolitos, cabezas, códices, y piedras. Un día llegamos a Actopan y los ricos tiraban el muro del Convento para construir sus casas. Un día llegamos a Guadalajara y los ricos tenían su casa amueblada con lo que sacaron de una iglesia [...] Y yo antes no me había fijado en nada de esto, en nada (p.156).

In the above passage sometimes blame is assigned (to 'los ricos' for example), in others, it seems to have simply happened ('había desaparecido'). The rot also extends to the bodies of the narrators themselves who become diseased:

Y entonces pasó que un día nos dolió la garganta, un día tuvimos jaqueca y otro una infección intestinal. Un día fue una hemorragia, otro una caída, el tercero caspa y el cuarto salpullido. Un día nos dio una gripa muy fuerte y otro un cansancio atroz (p.155).

While this clearly signals, again, the total breakdown of any pretence at realist narrative, it is also a powerful reminder of the diseased body politic of Mexico in the 1980s. The juxtaposition of typically middle-class afflictions (sore throats, migraines) and the illnesses that commonly afflict the poor of a country (intestinal infections from poor hygiene, flu, skin diseases or rashes) reminds the reader of the utter collapse of the lines between middle-class and poor during these years. In fact the presence of the poor is acutely perceived throughout the text as evidenced in this early passage:

Contigo vi a los indios, a los dueños del mundo, los tarahumaras tan flacos, los mixes tan pequeños, los de Cuetzalan vestidos de blanco, los de Janitzio pidiendo limosna, los de Oaxaca con sus ropas bordadas de flores, los de Chiapas tan desolados, los de Guerrero tan sensuales, los que venden serpientes y frutas en las orillas de los caminos, los que veneran al peyote en un cerro, los que tejen, los que amasan, los que rezan en un templo, los que venden en un mercado, los humildes, los agresivos, los enojados, los alegres y los tristes, *los pobres, siempre los pobres* (p.25, my emphasis).

In research concluded in December 1987, Aguilar Camín and Meyer point to the paradox that six years of economic crisis had made Mexican society more egalitarian, in the sense that now Mexicans were

‘more equal in their poverty’. According to their calculations, ‘the number of poor [...] had increased from 40 percent of the population to nearly 60 percent’.¹⁶ This paradox is embedded in the narrative in sections like the one above, confounding realism while confirming collapse and decay. The phrase, ‘un cansancio atroz’, uttered by Beatriz in the earlier passage, aptly sums up the reaction of much of Mexico to the government’s inability to cope with the worst economic crisis of its history.

If the intrusion of the ‘no’ may be read as an emphatic rejection of the power relations inherent in the previous sections, then what emerges to take its place here? What follows is a slow obliteration of the *tú* voice as it becomes subsumed into a solemn united *nosotros*:

Vimos quemar llantas, pescar langostas y ostiones en tiempo de veda, barcos camaroneros encallados, una fuga de amoniaco, corrupción en los ingenios, maquiladoras en el norte y refugiados en el sur, leche rebajada con agua, contrabando de madera, fruta que se pudría en vagones y bodegas y demasiadas cosas más. Todo eso lo vimos y lo notamos, lo sentimos, por primera vez. ¿Por qué? ¿Qué nos sucedía que veíamos lo feo por doquier? (p.160).

Finally *lo feo* erupts from beneath the dazzling linguistic displays of national beauty and the beauty is exposed as illusion and myth. The rot is here defined as modernity, as exemplified in the incidence of corruption, gas leaks, the presence of *maquiladoras*, and the arrival of refugees in the south. For the first time, the narrative emerges from the frozen static time of its landscape descriptions preserved for touristic consumption, to enter into the chaotic modernity of Mexico in the 1980s. The references to ‘real’ elements of Mexico’s present enter the text in force. They include the proliferation of *maquiladoras* on the northern border from the 1970s onwards and the gas leaks, mentioned in this passage (*fuga de amoniaco*) may be read as an allusion to the horrific tragedy of San Juan Ixhuatepec (San Juanico) in 1984 which caused untold death and destruction.¹⁷ In addition, there is also a

16 *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, p.228.

17 Pemex’s official explanation of the tragedy stated that there had been, ‘un estallido como consecuencia de la fuga de gas’. For an excellent analysis of the

reference to the presence of large numbers of Central American refugees fleeing El Salvador and Guatemala, a trend which forced Mexico centre-stage to take the role of peacemaker in the region.¹⁸

Interestingly, it is from the unified perspective of *nosotros* that the filth and rot is contemplated. The position of the master – always under threat in the narrative from the encroaching *yo* and *nosotros* voices is finally, irrevocably altered. Thus the singular, authorising narratorial voice has been forced to contemplate the other side of the idyll and is then disappeared almost completely from the narrative as the *yo* voice takes over:

Empecé entonces a mirar, a notar, las tierras empinadas y agrestes, desgajadas, cortadas. Vi que la tierra en este país, que es el lugar sagrado que da el sustento, que organiza el tiempo, que sirve para trabajar, descansar, fecundar, morir y ser enterrado, era pobre y triste, era seca y pobre. Era ésta una tierra de milpas y chozas, de maíz chaparro y quelites, de frijol y chile, de tunas arrancadas al nopal y leches arrancadas al maguey. Sólo entonces lo vi. [...] Vi los lugares donde nunca llueve y como en ellos se secan la tierra y las gentes y vi también los lugares donde siempre llueve y cómo en ellos se inunda la tierra y se enferman las gentes. Vi la tierra que no alcanza para todos y también la tierra ociosa, sin trabajar y vi la fiebre y el calor, la pobreza, la tristeza y el miedo, la gente que duerme junto a su machete, la gente que cree en brujerías, la gente que vive con fantasmas. Todo eso vi (pp.162–3).

controversy surrounding the San Juanico tragedy, see Carlos Monsiváis, 'San Juanico: los hechos, las interpretaciones, las mitologías', in *Entrada libre: crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (Mexico: Ediciones Era 1987), pp.123–50, p.136.

- 18 Aguilar Camín and Meyer elaborate on these key aspects of life at this time including the Central American conflict and the new tensions it generated between US and Mexico. They outline how Mexico attempted a multi-lateral policy with Venezuela, Colombia and Panama in Contadora at the beginning of 1983. They also note the growing integration of the Mexican and US economies including the development of the *maquiladora* industry and the new automobile factories in Saltillo and Hermosillo, the incorporation of the Televisa group into the US communications network as the largest Spanish-language TV network in North America (Spanish International Network), and the recognition of PAN by the Republicans as the force that was closest to embodying the US ideal for its Mexican neighbour. See *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, pp.222–5.

With this betrayal of its people by the earth, the narrative suddenly uncovers the people within it for the first time, not the folkloric classification of peoples presented before, but people who live circumscribed by conditions of poverty, heat and fear that are beyond their control. The narrator questions herself:

¿Por qué entonces empezaba ahora a ver y a notar las cosas feas, las que no funcionaban, las que morían, las que se echaban a perder? ¿Por que empecé a sentir dificultad? No lo sabía, no lo supe entonces y tal vez nunca lo sabré. Pero en mí, algo muy fuerte sucedió, algo cambió (p.165).

It is tempting to read this, of course, as a 'toma de conciencia', a profound *desgarramiento* with the past, and in purely psychoanalytic terms, as the eruption of the repressed into the stark reality of the present. And yet, the narrative anchors itself at this point as a vicious indictment of a system that has broken down and failed in all its aspects: linguistic, political, sociological and telluric. It is this breakdown that triggers the crisis in the relationship and leads to the escape to the utopia that occurs at the end of the novel. In postmodern terms, this is an apocalyptic vision of a world in tatters, where all the grand narratives have been demystified and destroyed. The rejection of the idealised heterosexual love union in 'el gran amor es imposible de soportar' (p.184) is followed by the almost inevitable rejection of God and the organising principle of religion, 'Yo lo había convertido en Dios y al Dios hay que arrastrarlo por los templos' (p.185). Retreat into an orgiastic utopia becomes the answer for the protagonist. Pleasure and intimacy are foregrounded and become the comfort and refuge from a system that has failed: 'Soy un personaje de la vida real porque conmigo se puede gozar, entrar en intimidad, sentirse bien, irse y atreverse a volver' (p.178). The notion of pleasure returns again in the final pages: 'lo que se ve, se huele y se oye son nuestros placeres' (p.182). The emphasis on a different *nosotros* alludes to a world that includes her clients, friends and partners in a veritable paradise world of pleasure. On one level, this is clearly ironic as the central protagonist is a prostitute, the crudest possible example of a modernised system of exchange and demand. And yet, the narrative also resists

this postmodern closure and forms a trenchant critique of the system – the nation – in order to formulate the possibility of resistance.

History, Nation, Voice

This resistance is crystallised metaphorically through Beatriz's frank rejection of middle-class familial relations. These have been parodied throughout the text in the gentle juxtaposition of her unorthodox promiscuous lifestyle with her sister's ultra-traditional life with her husband and children in Italy. The following example contains exclamations that might normally be reserved for reactions to Beatriz's own life but here they are transposed onto her sister's utterly conventional life with ironic effect: '¿Qué te pasa? ¿Hasta dónde piensas llegar? ¿No te parece un exceso?' (p.169). The notion of excess is ironically attached to the sister's conservative lifestyle and yet is strangely absent from the parts of Beatriz's life where it might logically be applied, as, for example, to the list of lovers/clients attended by her (pp.169–70). As the narrative closes, Beatriz reflects on the hypocrisies of bourgeois morality:

Me seguí pensando en lo que dices de la vida estable y de sentar cabeza. ¿Tú crees que yo estoy hecha para eso? Fíjate, tengo un cliente que de plano me trajo a su esposa para que yo le enseñara como hacer divertida su vida matrimonial. Tengo otros que traen a sus hijos para que 'la pasen bien antes de casarse' (así dicen). Veo las caras de mis compañeras de oficina o de las meseras del Vips. ¿De verdad crees que ése es el camino? (pp.167–8).

This attack on the family leads to the envisioning of an alternative familial relationship in which Beatriz and her clients are the principal actors, 'Yo recibo de ellos un gran cariño. Son mis amigos, *son mi familia*, me hacen feliz' (p.182, my emphasis). With this statement, the narrator imagines a new family unit, radically different from the conventional nuclear structure of her sister's family in Italy.

That Beatriz's 'vision' is different from the dominant view proffered through the *tú* voice is clear from early on. In an early description, the gulf between the two opposing world-views is striking:

Por que tú me enseñaste este país. Tú me llevaste y me trajiste, me subiste y me bajaste, me hiciste conocerlo y me hiciste amarlo. Me llevaste a Guanajuato y a San Miguel de Allende donde decías que era la ruta de la Independencia pero yo sólo veía azulejos. Me llevaste a Oaxaca donde hablaste de Juárez el héroe y de Díaz el dictador, pero para mí era sólo un lugar lleno de huipiles y animales de madera pintada. Me llevaste a Orizaba y a Córdoba para contarme de Maximiliano pero yo sólo vi la neblina y los mariscos. Me llevaste a Michoacán por aquello de Cárdenas pero yo sólo me acuerdo de las guitarras y el cobre. Me llevaste a San Luis Potosí a ver un ayuntamiento en manos de la oposición pero yo sólo vi las enchiladas rojas y el agua de Lourdes. Me llevaste a Juchitán por lo mismo pero sólo vi a las mujeres gordas y fuertes que trabajaban sin parar (pp.24–5).

This fascinating passage constitutes an homage to the diversity and heterogeneity of Mexico, a veritable linguistic enactment of what Bartra terms, the crisis in Mexican revolutionary nationalism.¹⁹ Indeed her vision is an almost stream-of-consciousness listing of words, a word association game, connecting up the dots between Cárdenas, guitars and copper, and between San Luis Potosí, political resistance, *enchiladas* and holy water from Lourdes. The language is carefully processed, polished, deliberated upon and the symmetry is almost irritating with each word placed meticulously. A triangular pattern is established, consisting of an 'official' historical figure or place contrasted with two completely contrasting elements. It is difficult not to read this in psychoanalytic terms, as a way of the subconscious or the repressed erupting to the surface to disturb the linear nature of the first concept (person or place). In this way, a bizarre re-working of the surrealist image occurs as further evidence of the surfacing of the subconscious.²⁰ It is also, however, a rather problematic enactment of

19 See 'The Crisis of Nationalism', in *Blood, Ink and Culture*, pp.104–32.

20 The artists of the surrealist movement attached tremendous importance to the perfectly constructed surrealist image. Lautréamont's acclaimed example of the surrealist image *par excellence* utilises this triangular structure: 'beau comme

dual histories, suggesting an opposition between history and *herstory*, a concept central to so much feminist research. In this case it is problematic because it simply reinforces the binary positions so often assigned to male and female: hers is the frivolous sensual memory while his is the logical, rational route of history and progress. Hers is the memory of objects and things and serves as a reminder of how she is deeply immersed in the economy of her country, informally as a prostitute, and formally as a tourist. Her refusal ('pero yo sólo vi') however, to countenance his view constitutes an interesting rejection of official histories and a resolute instatement of an alternative vision.

This fragmentation of Mexico's history, its literal splitting in two with one component in the first section of the image and two in the second, ruptures any possibility of historical continuity as attested by del Campo:

La historia de México se presenta como una sucesión de anécdotas borrosas que no permiten visualizar una continuidad histórica con sentido, sino que se remiten más bien a trozos de información disperses e inconexos. La historia mexicana emerge, al igual que su territorialidad, como una entidad fragmentada desde la cual no es posible hacer sentido o establecer proyecciones futuras.²¹

Does this novel present, therefore, a fluid reconfiguring of the power dynamics inherent in the imagining of a nation? Do passages such as the one quoted above offer a new way of conceptualising the nation or do they simply lock it into a problematic binary relationship? And finally, if we accept that it is fluid, can it possibly be progressive given Beatriz's insertion as the female consumer and consumed?

In fact, Beatriz's different world-view raises many interesting questions about the position of female subjects in relation to configurations of nationhood and citizenship. Yuval-Davis's work on gender and nation leaves no doubt as to the different positioning of

[...] la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre e d'un parapluie', Peter Nesselroth, *Lautréamont's Imagery: A Stylistic Approach* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), p.13.

21 'Reterritorializando lo mexicano', p.68.

female population vis-à-vis the national system.²² In the text, the limits of both the family and the nation are radically called into question. The attack on the conventional family unit is accompanied by an attack on the notion of Mexico itself, a link which has wide theoretical currency. Anne McClintock reminds us that nations are figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space with nations evoked as ‘motherlands’ and ‘fatherlands’. She goes on to outline how the family trope is important for nationalism in at least two ways: ‘First, it offers a “natural” figure for sanctioning national *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests. [...] The family offered an indispensable metaphoric figure by which national difference could be shaped into a single historical genesis narrative’.²³ In Latin America, of course, this ‘familial’ notion of the nation has particular resonance in the quasi-feudal system of land ownership and the relationship between the *patrón* and his tenants. In many cultural and historical constructions of this relationship, the *patrón* is figured as a benevolent father, looking after his family.²⁴ In this text, the only traditional family unit is displaced to Italy and we are left with a series of wandering, eccentric subjects performing various identities. The link between personal and national identity is rendered explicit in the following example in which Beatriz talks about one of her clients, ‘un tipo que se disfrazaba, algunas veces de soldado, otras de cura y otras veces se envuelve en la bandera nacional y se ríe tanto que no lo podrías creer’ (p.169). This constitutes a self-conscious reflection on

22 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

23 ‘No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism’, in *Imperial Leather*, p.357.

24 In Mexican cinema history, this figure is immortalised through the character of the *patrón* in *Allá en el rancho grande* (1936). See also *El compadre Mendoza* (1933). Examples of this kind of construction in literature are too numerous to mention, but Isabel Allende’s Esteban García, from *La casa de los espíritus* and his plaintive insistence, ‘Yo era como un padre para ellos’ underlines how close a link existed between the roles of *padre* and *patrón*. Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1998), p.63. For a good overview of the historical roots of this, see Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution: Porfirians, Liberals and Peasants*. Vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

the performance of national identity as her client dresses up as a soldier and a priest, representing two opposite extremes of acceptable masculinities. As he finally wraps himself up in the Mexican flag to laugh out loud, the reader is left in no doubt as to the target. The derision at the masculinist discourses of power filtered through the problematic and fraught trope of the nation, is finally dismantled. The riposte continues with a gentle mocking of the left in Beatriz's reference to one of her clients, a Marxist professor, 'que me explicó detalladamente en qué consisten los principios de la visión marxista de la estética' (pp.169–70). In this sentence, the ironic charge is all the more acute given his participation in the economic exchange between client and prostitute. Finally, she turns her attention to the gringos, 'lo peor que conocí fue un gringo que hace todo de manera tan aguada que me aburrí muchísimo' (p.170), a gentle but nonetheless sharp deflation of mythologies of sexuality and power as filtered through the relations of domination between US and Mexico.

The text resolves itself with a complete reversal of its opening dependence on the *tú* point of view:

Te odié [...] Te odié [...] Te odié [...] Te odié porque por tu culpa olvidé yo mis sueños, por tu culpa me olvidé yo de mí, por tu culpa pasé noches en vela [...] Te odié por tantas iglesias, y tantos hoteles y tantos parques, paisajes, soles, lluvias, noches, mercados, jardines, caminos (p.171).

In these sections the voice of *tú* becomes almost one with the country he is revealing to her. At other times, they are kept separate:

Te odié porque me enseñaste este país con toda su tristeza, con todo su dolor, con sus ríos muertos y sus selvas destruidas, con sus tierras flacas, con su gente pobre y con su hambre, con los ojos enormes de sus niños (p.172).

The final words have a piercing clarity: 'Pero sobre todo te odié porque nunca me preguntaste nada de mí' (pp.171–2). The statement reverberates with the resentment at being left completely out of constructions of the nation and her determination to insert herself back into an alternative vision of how that should look. The alternative vision takes the form of total escape from modernity and an idyllic immersion into a sensual otherworld:

Esos días todos estan encantados, viéndome pasear por el lugar. Hay veces que me quedo todo el tiempo acostada, entre las sábanas blancas y ellos vienen a mí. En otras ocasiones camino por la casa y los voy atendiendo donde estén, en el piso del comedor o de la sala, en el baño, en los pasillos o las escaleras del segundo piso. Y es que los vecinos se han ido todos y los departamentos están sin ocupar. Yo pago las rentas. Muchas veces son tantos los clientes que esperan, que no alcanza el lugar en la casa y entonces se meten a esos sitios vacíos. Allí, algunos esperan de pie, otros sentados, fumando, meditando o dormitando, haciendo el amor entre sí. [...] Y aquí estoy yo, dispuesta siempre. [...] Sólo se escucha el aleteo de las mariposas que se posan en una oreja, en el pelo. Sólo se ve la neblina del incienso densa y perfumada. Sólo se huelen nuestros cuerpos, nuestros líquidos, nuestros deseos. Lo que se ve, se huele y se oye son nuestros placeres. [...] Te escribo para decirte que por fin se ha cumplido mi sueño de tener una casa de huéspedes y de escuchar todo el tiempo el sonido del mar (pp.182–3).

Clearly, this vision is deeply problematic on so many levels in that it fixes her position as the ultimate object of consumption by her voracious clients. That it should be problematic, however, should not surprise us. How can a subject escape from a modernity in which she is so wholly implicated? Beatriz is painstakingly constructed as a modern figure *par excellence* – a tourist who consumes the country aggressively pursuing its ceramics, its cuisine, its monuments. In this way she functions as the quintessential agent of modernity as outlined by Kaplan. What is portrayed as her independent decision to earn her living as prostitute is also presented as a progressive grasping of economic opportunity:

¿Y sabes qué es lo mejor? ¡Que ya no hago ese horrible trabajo de oficina que me traía a la casa en las noches para acompletar! Así como lo oyes, ya no necesito eso, estoy ganando más con los señores que atiendo. ¿Qué te parece? ¿Verdad que está bien así? (p.56).

Her lifestyle is clearly presented as a choice, a way of retaining financial independence in a manner more satisfactory than her clerical work had allowed her. The section in which she outlines her decision functions as a perfect example of the complicitly ambivalent position into which so many women have been placed as active participants in the globalised labour market:

El tipo lo hace despacito, sin prisa, sin fogosidad, sin alterarse, a su ritmo. Yo sólo le sirvo de trinchera pero a mí eso me da igual. Lo que sí estuvo un poco feo es que cuando se iba y le pedí el dinero, se molestó, pero finalmente sacó la cartera. ¿Por qué será que algunas gentes tienen tanta dificultad en desembolsar un poco de dinero? ¿Por qué será que les gusta recibir pero no dar? ¿De verdad creerán que tienen derecho gratis a una mujer a la que acaban de conocer? ¿O imaginarán que ella lo hace por su linda cara? No se darán cuenta de lo difícil que es tener que hacer esto? En fin, así es (p.46).

In this passage, a tension is set up between the illusory control she imagines she wields over her own decisions and the fact that she is so immersed in a ruthless system in which she is totally commodified. Perhaps the most interesting feature of life in the utopian otherworld is how the money exchange has almost completely disappeared. After so much careful attention has been paid throughout the text to the financial exchange between prostitute and client, what emerges is a kind of orgiastic type of existence in which the guests have sex with each other as they meditate, smoke and sleep. Her need for material goods/money is absent and she presents herself as fulfilled in her dream of listening to the sound of the sea. In this way, the final picture presents a strangely amodern (as opposed to pre or post modern) world in which the notion of consumption has certainly been diminished but which continues to anchor women in an almost clichéd position of passive/dominated object of pleasure. As Roger Bartra notes in his discussion of changing female positions in the 1980s:

this apparent dispersion of domination does not of course eliminate it: on the contrary, the new spread of functions is a faithful, enlarged photograph of the polarity underlying domination. The stage has changed, and the actors have multiplied, but the tragedy reveals the same wounds, and they are still bleeding.²⁵

25 'From the Charismatic Phallus to the Phallocratic Office', in *Blood, Ink and Culture*, p.136.

El amor que me juraste

Silvia Molina's best-selling, prize-winning novel, *El amor que me juraste* was published in 1998, and shares much in common with *Demasiado amor* by Sefchovich. This book, like Sefchovich's, bears testimony to the impossibility of lasting love. Like *Demasiado amor*, it is also a travel narrative, albeit superficially a much more conventional one than Sefchovich's, and it too makes use of the epistolary format.²⁶ It is set against the tumultuous political backdrop of Mexico in 1994, as the forces of globalisation converged in the signing of NAFTA, and the grassroots exploded in the form of the *Zapatista* rebellion in Chiapas. These, and many other events from that year, are discussed and integrated into the plot of the novel. Both books are centrally concerned with how women confront and challenge the ways in which male power is exercised in their lives and thus raise crucial questions about authority – literal, figurative and narrative – and women's place within the frameworks of national, cultural and political hegemony. As in *Demasiado amor*, the concept of women's complicity in the uneven processes of modernisation in Mexico is also pivotal in this text, and is explored primarily through the trope of the family.

As the promotional paragraph on the back of the English edition states:

26 The epistolary format has long held fascination for women writers and feminist researchers. Its 'intimate' and more 'personalised' nature was seen as an appropriate form of expression for women. Indeed Juan Bruce-Novoa notes in a discussion of Elena Poniatowska's text, *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* that, 'Beloff's unanswered letters are a metaphor for the history of women's literature in the male-dominant culture', 'Subverting the Dominant Text: Elena Poniatowska's *Querido Diego*' in Susan Bassnett (ed.), *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America* (London: Sed Books, 1990), pp.115–31, p.128.

Marcela the heroine of the novel, is a modern, professional woman in her forties sifting through her disappointment after a brief but intense, extra-marital affair. As the novel opens, Marcela is in the town of San Lázaro, the home town of her forebears, not only to pick up the pieces of her life, but also to discover the secret past of her parents. Set in Mexico in 1994, Mexico's last elections, the Mayan insurrection in Chiapas and the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio serve not only as backdrop, but they also parallel the emotional vicissitudes in Marcela's own life.²⁷

Based on the stalest of conventions, therefore, the notion that travel helps one 'find oneself' and come to terms with the past, Molina embarks on her own narrative 'journey'. As will be seen, however, this is no clichéd tale but rather a dynamic and energising voyage that questions, like *Demasiado amor* before it, its own status as novel and the subject positions of its protagonists.

Applying characteristics of travel writing to Molina's narrative seems to reveal a relatively conventional example of the genre, with panoramic lyrical descriptions of the landscape:

Por el hueco que había quedado entre las cortinas del cuarto, entraba ya la luz de la mañana. Me levanté y las descorrí. Miré la bahía: el mar turquesa estaba quieto como un estanque. Los barcos camaroneros habían salido y sólo unas cuantas barcas y lanchas seguían allá, atadas a los muelles, tripuladas por gaviotas.

Hacia el lado del Parque Principal había muy poco movimiento, aún no abrían los almacenes de ropa y abarrotes ni las tiendas de artesanías; solo los meseros de los restaurantes sacaban las mesas a las aceras y las iban vistiendo para el desayuno con manteles de colores brillantes y llamativos como el naranja y el amarillo. La calle estaba casi vacía, excepto por los hombres que barrían el parque y uno que otro caminante.

Vi las cúpulas de mosaicos azules y blancos de las iglesias de San Gabriel y San Juan, y los laureles de la India de la Plaza de San Fernando. Los tordos habían partido temprano, como los pescadores. A veces una que otra familia de gaviotas cruzaba el cielo, y alguna audaz bajaba de pique al mar (p.56).²⁸

27 *The Love You Promised Me*, trans. by David Unger (Connecticut: Curbstone, 1999).

28 All references are to *El amor que me juraste* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1998) and will appear after the quotations in parentheses.

There is also ample evidence of the ‘manners and customs’ approach so characteristic of early examples of travel writing but which is also central to the ethnographic tradition of *indigenista* writing in Mexico.²⁹ The simplicity of the language, along with the lyricism and vivid nature of the evocation, resonate here with effect:

Habíamos desayunado en el mercado municipal, tacos de cochinita pibil y horchata de arroz. Era un lugar inmenso, limpio y oloroso a fruta, a oregano, a laurel, a achiote, a cebolla morada, a mar.

Todavía ahora, a pesar de las cadenas comerciales de autoservicio, los indígenas bajan al Puerto para llevar al mercado fruta y hortalizas, y ponen sus tendidos de chile habanero, frijol, arroz y maíz sobre mantas blancas, y los venden por cuartillos de litro y no por kilo. Las mujeres te hablan de ‘tú’ en su medio español mientras amamantan a sus niños: ‘¿Tú lo llevas un cuartillo?’ (p.154).

Interest in domestic detail is central to the narrator’s evocation of San Lázaro but nor is her account free of the colonial discourse so intrinsic to the genre. In the discussion on *Demasiado amor*, it was clear how much this kind of writing is infused by questions of domination, mastery and appropriation, questions that are very much alive in this text as the narrator surges through the territory, appropriating it for her own personal fulfilment:

No me reconocía en ninguno de esos fantasmas sino en lo que de veras pude palpar: me entendía en las calles de San Lázaro, en ese paisaje, en ese viento que vuela el pelo a las mujeres, en ese calor que sólo se soporta bajo el ventilador, en las aguas inmóviles de la bahía, en el salitre de las paredes de las casas, en el mármol de los pesos, en las tejas de Marsella. No era la gente lo

29 See Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism*. For an excellent overview of the *indigenista* literary tradition in Mexico, see Joseph Sommers, ‘Changing View of the Indian in Mexican Literature’, ‘Novels of a Dead Revolution’, ‘Literatura e historia: las contradicciones ideológicas de la ficción indigenista’, ‘El ciclo de Chiapas: nueva corriente literaria’, and ‘La novela mexicana, la revolución y la Alianza para el progreso’. Full details of these may be found in the bibliography. This ethnographic tradition was made famous in the modern era by Oscar Lewis’s *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961).

que me daba sentido, sino el lugar. El abuelo no desheredó San Lázaro, pero yo lo recuperé con el sentimiento de una exiliada que vuelve a su patria. Si mi padre hubiera vivido, le habría descrito, demasiado cambiada, la ciudad que dejó (p.163).

Here colonial discourses begin to penetrate the writing as it deploys an authoritative narratorial presence that articulates and names the landscape with masterful words that take upon themselves to describe both the people and the place of San Lázaro. The power to represent, initially conceptualised as a scopic power (in that it describes the position from which she sees the landscape), raises many interesting questions about the power that inheres in the ability to name, list, describe. From the start, Marcela contemplates the powerful past of her family with a mixture of disdain and admiration:

Mi visión de la familia paterna no era idílica sino más bien inasible. Me costaba trabajo imaginarla caminando por las mismas calles empedradas y limpias que yo recorrería al atardecer, cuando el sol bajara; me parecía increíble que hubieran vivido en aquellas casonas coloniales del centro, las que seguían de pie a duras penas, como la del número 57 de la calle de Hidalgo (p.53).

She recalls their grandeur and wealth but also their arrogance:

Veía a las mujeres altivas (mi madre lo decía: ‘los Souza eran altivos’) con sus vestidos incómodos subir al carruaje tirado por caballos o tomar el tranvía jalado por mulas para ir de paseo, o regatear a los indios el precio del agua de lluvia; y con el bisabuelo, el menú para la cena a la que iría el gobernador (p.53).

Much of the narrative concerns Marcela’s need to come to terms with her dead father’s betrayal of her family. It was discovered only after his death, that he had another family and children, information that comes to light from the various archives she consults and, most importantly, through the sense of him and his family that she perceives on the streets of San Lázaro. We learn that Marcela’s forebears are descended from the powerful Souza family, originally from Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands. This information about her grandfather and great-grandfather is filtered through the prisms of nobility (the street name, *Hidalgo* is, of course, a reference to the

glorious ‘father’ of Mexican independence), prestige and power. After reading some of the archival data concerning her great-grandfather’s sending for a wife from the Kingdom of Aragon, there follows an italicised passage marking the incursion into her thoughts of her ex-lover Eduardo’s memories of his own landowning past:

Me pedís, señora, que os cuente cómo es esta villa a la que he venido a dar y quiero traeros. Cuenta para vuestra devoción con las iglesias de Jesús, San Joseph, San Andrés y la iglesia y convento de San Francisco de suyo antiguo. Paralelas al mar tiene las manzanas de casas de españoles construidas de cal y canto, muy dignas de verse por sus herrerías, el labrado de sus canteras y el trabajo de sus puertas, que aquí hay oficiales en esas materias muy entendidos y os aseguro, señora, que ni en todo vuestro pueblo encontraríais muebles como aquestos que visten estas casas pues llegan de todas partes de Europa en los barcos que aquí atracan (p.55).

This extract from Eduardo’s correspondence with Marcela conveys a breathtaking sense of privilege and wealth and gently underscores the colonial past and European heritage of the places they now revisit. Because of its slightly disjunctive positioning, the reader is jolted from the evocations of San Lázaro and drawn on a journey through the life of another privileged member of the country’s elite.

Marcela continues to outline her family’s descent from grace, their decline in fortunes as their children left to study in Spain, France and the United States. Her shame is clear:

Gracias a él, me avergonzaba de los tatarabuelos porque explotaron a los indios en las plantaciones de maíz, arroz, caña de azúcar y palo de tinte mientras sus mujeres ingenuas y obedientes o arrogantes y soberbias rezaban las vísperas o las novenas o el rosario en la Parroquia de San Andrés, la misma que seguía llamando a los fieles a misa: taaaaannnnn, taaaaannnnn (p.56).

This personal history of power, domination and, as she learns later, injustice, causes a further jolt to Marcela’s attempts at reconciliation with her past.³⁰ Her sense of complicity and contamination by this past

30 This sense of injustice stems from the fact that her mother worked as a maid for the Souza family, through whom she came to meet her future husband. She was initially ostracised by his wider family due to their perception of her as inferior.

is underlined in the text at various points but most forcefully in her tour of the 'real' San Lázaro during which, led by Miguel, she is accused of not wanting to see the other side, 'Es lo mismo que te pasa con tu familia. No quieres verlos como son. Te da miedo' (p.129). The link drawn here most explicitly between place and people, is the link she actively tries to disavow, and the second element in the opening passage of this section that merits further reflection. In this next section, I shall explore the relationship between self and place through a reading of discourses on tourism and modernity.

'Finding Oneself'

Marcela's emphatic, 'No era la gente lo que me daba sentido, sino el lugar' (p.163) suggests that she has distanced herself from the more shameful aspects of her Souza background. It also, however, evokes the rather clichéd notion of finding oneself through travel, which could be described as the appropriation of place for an enhanced sense of identity and which is of central concern to much of what has been written on the phenomenon of tourism in the modern era. While Marcela's travel narrative is not unaffected by the colonial discourse which has long infused travel writing, the novel is also a thoroughly modern tale of the quest for personal identity and fulfilment. MacCannell's work on the modern tourist notes that the increase in leisure time accorded to the middle classes from the 1950s onwards was a major factor. Kaplan points out:

The tourist confirms and legitimates the social reality of constructions such as 'First' and 'Third' Worlds, 'development' and 'underdevelopment', or 'metropolitan' and 'rural'. Created out of increasing leisure time in industrialised nations and driven by a need to ascertain identity and location in

a world that undermines the certainty of those categories, the tourist acts as an agent of modernity.³¹

While *El amor que me juraste* clearly works as domestic travelogue, it certainly derives much of its rationale from the idea that Marcela escapes the metropolitan, heart-breaking existence to find solace and peace of mind in the rural idyll of her ancestors. Kaplan's assertion that the tourist acts as an agent of modernity is an interesting notion when applied to Marcela, who frequently crosses boundaries between past/present, metropolitan/rural, lover/husband on a soul-searching journey for the self. Not only does she negotiate the fraught divisions between private and public, past and present, but in the process, becomes intricately enmeshed in the process of *modernización* in Mexico, in which tourism played such a crucial role. Alicia del Campo attests to the importance of tourism as a principal source of income in Mexico citing President Díaz Ordaz's contribution to a book on the theme: 'Todos los estados progresistas del mundo están interesados en el turismo. Líderes políticos e industriales, han casi universalmente reconocido las ventajas económicas (si no sociales) del turismo'.³² Like Beatriz in *Demasiado amor*, she is deeply involved in processes she actively tries to undermine in other ways and thus her position is one of profound ambivalence.

But before examining that ambivalent positioning, it might further shed light on the complexity of her subject position to examine the ways in which Marcela conforms to certain assertions about the modern tourist made by Dean MacCannell and Donald Horne. Horne argues that tourists look for new meanings in locations, landscapes, cities and social customs other than their own, and that as part of this process they all search for markers of 'authenticity'. MacCannell describes the search for authenticity as a response to the generalised anxiety of modernity, an anxiety that is palpable throughout this text. MacCannell, in his fascinating characterisation of how this authenticity is staged in travel discourse, describes a series of six stages that

31 *Questions of Travel*, p.58.

32 'Reterritorializando lo mexicano', p.70.

the traveller attempts to 'get behind' and isolates stage six as the 'ideal, uncontaminated back region'.³³ MacCannell argues that tourists long to enter this sixth space, what he describes as a glorious location of 'authenticity'. I would contend that it is precisely the entrance into this sixth 'authentic' space that enables Marcela to acquire the sense of peace and tranquillity that has eluded her.

In the closing stages of the novel, just like Beatriz before her, Marcela is forced to confront the rot of modern Mexico. Led by the hand by Miguel as he declares authoritatively, 'Te voy a llevar al malecón para que se te baje la borrachera, y luego vas a conocer el San Lázaro de noche' (p.136), she witnesses the other side of life in San Lázaro, far removed from the colonial mansions of her forebears:

Del cerro de San Marcos, me llevó al San Lázaro exclusivo, el que rodea la ciudad, donde vive la gente adinerada en casas con vista al mar. Fraccionamientos de lujo con nombres pretenciosos: Residencial Náutico, Fraccionamiento Bellavista, Rinconada del Mar, y después recorrimos un San Lázaro al que la luna alumbraba distinto, uno que yo no sospechaba y me sorprendió por la miseria. El contraste entre las colonias de lujo y las populares era grosero. Pasábamos por una serie de barrios sin servicios, allá donde ningún turista podría descubrirlos. Como había llovido tanto, las veredas estaban inundadas y a muchos lugares no pudimos ni siquiera acercarnos.

El verdadero San Lázaro está escondido tras las lomas que rodean la ciudad amurallada. Allá vive la gente que tiene otros rostros, otra mirada, otra manera de vestir y de caminar, la que huele a maíz y a sudor, la que llega del interior del estado en busca de trabajo. Por los charcos y el calor, las calles despedían un tufo a podrido, a descomposición: eran ciénagas, fangales, pantanos (p.128).

The start of Marcela's descent into the underworld of San Marcos and her exposure to the other side of life there, constitutes a section of the novel that rather strikingly corresponds to MacCannell's notion of the ultimate stage of authenticity, the emotional high of the traveller. The new vista she contemplates, far removed from the picturesque beauty

33 See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp.91–107. Also, Donald Home, *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

of the earlier descriptions, like in *Demasiado amor*, is a vision of rot and decay:

Aunque tuvieran distintos nombres, los asentamientos se parecían: casuchas hacinadas, *llenas de lloridos de niño*, amontonadas en los cerros calcáreos, construidas con malos materiales, a los lados de unos senderos estrechos y en pendiente por los que iban y venían perros famélicos. ¿Dónde la alfombra de pasto, las palmeras, los aguacates, los mangos, los almendros, los jabines de las fincas, de las haciendas, de las mansiones de los fraccionamientos elegantes que acabábamos de ver? – Ya vámonos de aquí – le pedí (p.129, my emphasis).

Like Beatriz, Marcela poses a series of questions about the beauty of the previous visions, a beauty that has now been irrevocably destroyed. Unlike Beatriz, who wriggles from the grasp of the male representer of Mexico to confront the rotten landscape of modernity herself, Marcela is dependent on Miguel to reveal the ‘real’ San Lázaro to her. On one level this is symptomatic of the more conventional nature of Molina’s narrative vis-à-vis the experimental nature of the Sefchovich text. In the case of Marcela, it is the ‘rural’ teacher who must educate her as to the authentic and genuine state of her people and her place, a relationship that replicates the active-passive, male-female dichotomies that were so shaken in Sefchovich’s text. However, they are shaken here too, just in a different way. As the reader begins to comprehend the expanse of life on view in San Lázaro, the views behind the tourist lens, Marcela’s ambivalent subject position is thrown into sharp focus.

The nature of this ambivalent position is illustrated by a series of dichotomies that structure Molina’s text from start to finish. The ‘Metropolitan/rural’ binary opposition is filtered through Marcela’s relationship with San Lázaro and the men in her life, both of whom are deeply attached to rural concerns in different ways. Eduardo cherishes his relationship with his rural background and Rafael is deeply involved in political events in Chiapas. The second binary relationship involves the opposition between public and private and is seen through her illicit private life as Eduardo’s lover as against her very public life of wife to Rafael. Third, the past is established in constant opposition to the present, where it ruptures the harmonious contemplation of contemporary reality. This duality is signalled in the

text by Marcela's simple admission, 'No sabía que hubiera otro San Lázaro' (p.131), having witnessed the degradation and misery of many of its citizens' lives. The opposition between contrasting poles serves as a structural framework that defines Marcela's interstitial positioning between so many opposing worlds. Her precarious balancing on the boundaries between past and present, metropolitan and rural, public and private, render her unstable and unreliable both as a mediator of her own reality and as a narrator of the text. This ambivalence about her positioning is directly underscored in the text by the narrator's continual disavowal of her tourist status. Consider the opening lines in which she describes the scene in a passage utterly typical of travel writing of this nature, but establishes critical distance between herself and the 'tourists':

Los graznidos de los tordos anunciaban la caída de la tarde, cuando miré el Puerto desde la terraza. Allá estaban, cercando el Parque Principal, la iglesia de San Andrés, el ayuntamiento y los hoteles: el San Carlos, el Soledad y el San Francisco. Bajo la arquería de los portales, en los restaurantes al aire libre, los turistas bebían cerveza o merendaban antojitos de pescado o tamales de hoja de plátano mientras los vendedores de artesanías les mostraban con insistencia sombreros de jipi y vestidos y blusas bordados con punto de cruz. *Las extranjeras sucumbían como yo* ante el colorido de las flores azules, anaranjadas o rojas o amarillas en los ribetes del cuello y las mangas (p.11, my emphasis).

This ability to slip from one enunciatory position to another, illustrated first, by her observation of the tourists from afar, adopting a supposedly more authentic subject position, and second by her admission that she has been seduced, as they are, quite literally by the 'local colour', suggests her fluid textual mobility. This textual mobility is connoted literally in the text by her real ability to travel about the country unhindered and unmolested, a freedom few women, even those from the privileged ranks of the upper middle classes, enjoy uninhibitedly today in Mexico. This disavowal is present at a later point too: 'No me dio ningún detalle histórico del lugar *ni me tomó como una turista* con la que debía lucirse, y se lo agradecí' (p.128, my emphasis). And yet this is exactly how she consumes San Lázaro, as a tourist, eagerly seduced by the vibrancy and energy of the local, and then gradually lured to the back rooms, to those hidden from view

initially, to be exposed to the total performance of authenticity as choreographed by Miguel. This strategy of disavowal, temporary alignment and then estrangement operates as an apt metaphor for the protagonist's ambivalent, fluid and ultimately unfixed relationship with the realities of modernity that she confronts in San Lázaro.

1994: The Past/Present Collision

Further evidence of this ambivalent positioning is to be found in the persistent eruptions into her life of a modern Mexico of which she is undoubtedly a part but with which she cannot be reconciled. Her complicity in what she witnesses cannot be denied, her poignant question, 'También me he preguntado si no fue el ejemplo de mi papá lo que se me metió en el cuerpo sin que me diera cuenta' (p.145), shows that she is not oblivious to her own role in the creation of the inequalities she witnesses on her trip. Her vain attempt to divorce the people from the place simply serves to underline the inextricable links between the hidden horrors of the San Lázaro she now confronts and her family's direct role in creating them. The haunting image of the children screaming eloquently underlines the sense of pain involved in her search for a self with which she can be at peace.

Aside from the stark confrontation with the dark side of the tourist industry in San Lázaro, exemplified by the extremes of poverty she witnesses, the text is also punctured with other 'encounters' with modern Mexico. The first occurs by way of background information at the start of Chapter Two:

Conoci a Eduardo en su consultorio, en 1994, cuando la situación política del país era un caos y la violencia y la inseguridad surgían en todas partes. Cada día, a partir del primero del año, nos despertamos con acontecimientos insólitos: el conflicto armado en Chiapas; la muerte del candidato del PRI, Luis Donaldo Colosio; el suspenso de la lucha por el poder entre los priístas; la movilidad de Manuel Camacho Solís, que un día era regente, otro secretario de Estado, otro más comisionado para la paz en Chiapas, y otro más dejaba entrever que se lanzaría como candidato a la presidencia de la República; la apar-

ición del subcomandante Marcos, el guerrillero poeta que estaba en todos los medios de comunicación; el destape de Ernesto Sedillo, sucesor de Colosio; la lucha por la reforma electoral; el debate en la televisión de los candidatos del PRD, del PAN y del PRI a la presidencia; el nombramiento de José Francisco Ruiz Massieu como secretario general del PRI; el asesinato de José Francisco Ruiz Massieu; el desfile de comisiones y fiscales especiales para esclarecer los asesinatos de Colosio y Ruiz Massieu, y de procuradores para dar seguimiento a la procuración de justicia en torno de esos asesinatos; el secuestro del banquero Alfredo Harp Helú; la desaparición del diputado Muñoz Rocha (p.21).

I quote this passage in its entirety in order to properly pose the question – what function can a passage like this possibly have in this narrative, other than, to quote the promotional paragraph again, ‘parallel the emotional vicissitudes in Marcela’s own life’? Given that even the most tumultuous love-life ever could hardly be said to parallel kidnappings, disappearances, assassination and armed rebellions, are they simply there to remind the reader of the Mexicanness of the narrative, serving only to stamp the local on a text that mostly reads as a quintessential liberal middle-class feminist quest for empowerment and understanding? What this passage clearly does, as in *Demasiado amor* before it, is to anchor the narrative to a particular historical moment (in this case a most specific year) in Mexican history. And yet, many of the subsequent digressions about the current political situation, while they happen at pivotal moments of the narrative are staged almost ironically:

Llegué a Nueva York por la mañana, al Hotel Beacon en Broadway y la Calle 75, cerca del Parque Central, el día que terminaba el congreso al que había ido Eduardo. Eso fue dos semanas antes del primer intento de ruptura y tres del segundo, y un poco después de que encarcelaran a Raúl Salinas de Gortari como presunto asesino intelectual de José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, por lo que había un gran revuelo en la política del país (p.121).

In this passage, her break-ups with Eduardo are almost comically aligned with the political assassination of Massieu, a parodic inter-

linking of the public life of the nation and the emotional upheavals of her own life.³⁴

The series of dialectic relationships, mentioned earlier between public-private, past-present, and urban-rural is further explored through the eruption into the text of the armed uprising in Chiapas, an event of momentous significance for Mexico in that it marked the first formal rebellion against the previously unopposed forces of neo-liberalism espoused by the technocratic governments led by Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari.³⁵ In many ways, the *zapatista* uprising did more to unsettle the onslaught of *modernización* in Mexico than any other event since the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. Chiapas thus is integrated into the text as though an essential element of any narrative about Mexico in 1994. Integration is achieved by way of the character of Marcela's husband, Rafael, who is originally from Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas, and who represents many *chiapanecos* through his law offices in the city. As Marcela baldly states, 'El despacho y Chiapas eran por esos días las obsesiones de Rafael' (p.139):

Los Chiapanecos buscaban a Rafael para pedirle sus consejos o sus servicios por las demandas interpuestas a los campesinos por invasión de tierras; o a los caciques de siempre por ocupar las posesiones de los indios desplazados de sus comunidades. Lo llamaban cuando había alguna detención ilegal o un desaparecido, porque tiene buenas relaciones y puede no sólo investigar sino mediar (p.139).

She goes on to outline his total immersion in the standoff:

Cuando Rafael regresaba de Chiapas, venía cansado y deprimido y discutía con sus paisanos sobre sus teorías de la Guerra: la lucha de la Iglesia de derecha,

34 This echoes Angeles Mastretta's novel, *Arráncame la vida*, in which she adopts the same kind of strategy: 'Ese año pasaron muchas cosas en mi país. Entre otras, Andrés y yo nos casamos' (Barcelona: Bolsillo, 1990), p.7.

35 See Roger Bartra's discussion of technocracy, 'The Crisis of Nationalism', in *Blood, Ink and Culture*, pp.104–32. See also, Aguilar Camín and Meyer on the aggressive neo-liberalisation of the economy from López de Portillo onwards. *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, pp.251–69.

muy conservadora, y la de izquierda, a la que llamaba el sector progresista, el que trabajaba en las comunidades. Hablaba del sincretismo religioso que sostenía el espíritu de lucha en las comunidades por las influencias espirituales de su idiosincrasia. Deliberaba sobre el desarrollo desigual de los chiapanecos, y decía que los campesinos que se habían unido a la guerrilla ya eran indígenas con cierta educación autodidacta y que habían aprendido mucho con las políticas rurales de autogestión; reflexionaba sobre los grupos maoístas que no prendieron ni fueron aceptados por los indígenas, y sobre los guerrilleros de la generación de Marcos, según él, marxistas creativos (p.138).

Again I quote this passage at length to draw attention to how much the narrative itself digresses into this ‘other’ Mexican story and also to highlight the debate it generated about the left in Mexico, a debate that continues today. What is perhaps more interesting from our discussion’s point of view, however, is Marcela’s response to these treatises. She chooses to respond to his theories about the crisis by repeating the religious retorts of her mother:

Oíd: salió el sembrador a sembrar, y al arrojar la semilla, parte de ella cayó a lo largo del camino y vinieron las aves del cielo y se la comieron; otra parte cayó en pedregales, donde no encontraron tierra [...]

– Las semillas de este Marcos – le decía un poco en broma y otro tanto en serio a Rafael – cayeron en tierra de pobres y se desarrollaron (p.139).

The quoting of her mother, along with her own interpretation of Marcos as ‘alguien religioso’ (p.139), points to the almost old-fashioned recourse to religion as a way of ‘explaining’ what was happening. Her commentary on the omnipresent, ‘Todos somos Marcos’ slogan to state that, ‘Yo no, yo no era Marcos, ni me sentía Marcos: él era un luchador: “Deja todo y sígueme”’; y yo, a pesar de mi nombre, no era una guerrera’ (p.140) is also significant.³⁶ On one level this is

36 Latin America’s tradition of liberation theology, of course, saw an explicit alignment between religious salvation and social progress. Latin American revolutionary discourse is suffused with religious imagery and iconography. For a useful overview of the connectedness of the concepts, see ‘Religion, Ideology and Revolution in Latin America’, a special issue of the journal, *Latin American Perspectives*. Issue 50, Vol.13, No.3 (Summer 1986). I am indebted to Lorna Shaughnessy for emphasising these links.

explained, again, by her guilt at her colonial roots ('Cuando sepa que eres finquera, no te va a aceptar en sus filas' p.140), but her recourse to religion indicates her retreat into the past, into the old answers and the old solutions where logical, rational opposition is absent. Just as in Sefchovich's text, Marcela's eye and thus her world-view is aligned with the irrational, the sensual, the telluric. This escape into religion confuses the modernity of the text by affirming the mythical power of the grand narratives and constructing a new narrative in which the power relations are remarkably unchanged.

Rafael's subsequent disillusion with the situation in Chiapas underscores the sense of political failure in the region:

Había dejado de ir a Chiapas. Estaba harto y desilusionado de la situación. Enojado por tanta intolerancia de ambas partes, por tanta invasión de tierras, por tanta violencia por abajo del agua. Se enojaba contra la Iglesia, contra los líderes zapatistas y no zapatistas que envalentonaban a los indígenas no sólo a invadir las tierras, sino contra los desplazados de sus comunidades por haber abrazado otra religión, contra todo. Era un drama tocar el tema de Chiapas.

– Por prender el cohete, m'hijo, saliste chamuscado – le decía su mamá. No es invadiendo las pinches tierras – así decía: 'pinches tierras' como se puede lograr la justicia. No van a recuperar las tierras invadiéndolas [...] Tienen que firmar los acuerdos, sentarse a la mesa a negociar (p.168).

The intrusions of Chiapas into the text and into Marcela and Rafael's narrative of frustrated love, point to concerns about the current problems in Mexico that somehow make their presence felt, despite their seeming irrelevance to the actual plot. What is clear, however, is that, contrary to the promotional paragraph already cited, Chiapas is not a simple backdrop that parallels the emotional vicissitudes in her life but an emotionally charged issue in which she becomes immersed to debate its relevance and question its role.

The insertion of the female subject into the debate about national identity is, in itself important, but the debate also functions as yet another vehicle through which she tries to find 'herself'. This is reflected on a wider level in contemporary society as the *zapatista* struggle becomes almost a playground within which the various fighting factions of the Mexican middle classes set up camp and pit their strengths. In this way it functions as an almost too con-

venient mechanism for the liberal middle classes to explore their own individual quests for empowerment. Allegorically, the eruption of Chiapas into their narrative of frustrated love parallels the eruption of Chiapas, the disappeared and forgotten south, into the metropolitan consciousness of modern Mexico. Chiapas is figured as the central axis around which the dilemmas and frustrations of modern Mexico – the position of the Church, the situation of the left, the vexed indigenous question – attach themselves and are endlessly debated. In the text, these debates are referenced explicitly and Marcela's ambivalent positioning offers an effective example of the dilemmas created by the increasingly intractable 'problem' in Chiapas. She rejects her husband's rational dissections of the problem, preferring instead to quote her mother's favourite passages from the bible. She sees the problem (and Marcos) as an almost biblical situation (a rich versus poor argument), in which religion emerges as solution and comfort. She also refuses to fight, thus again creating distance between herself and the people she encounters – tourists, *Zapatistas* and her relatives. Indeed the discussion about Chiapas is filtered through her husband and the long passage, quoted earlier, about the tumultuous political events of 1994 is recounted from New York at some distance from Mexico. Her insertion into the debate is clear but her subject is both distanced and yet immersed, irrational and yet strangely removed, a telling reminder perhaps of how too often women have been one step removed from political debate. The recourse to religion and the escape into the old solutions, the old explanations, offer further evidence of the complexity of her subject positioning – involved and yet distanced, engaged and yet removed.

And so the narrative concludes and yet, unlike *Demasiado amor*, there is no lofty utopia and no escape from a modernity that envelops the nation, the text and the protagonist. After her meeting with Eduardo's daughter, Elizabeth, she says:

No quiero hacer obvio lo que siguió a aquella tarde. Una vez, hace tantos años que no me acuerdo cuándo, le llevé una pieza de piano, cortita, a la maestra María González, la mejor que tuve en la escuela de música. Le di el papel pautado y lo leyó con paciencia delante de mí, luego me hizo tocarla varias veces.

– Otra vez.

– ¿Otra?
 – ¿Qué, hablo en chino?
 – Al cabo de varias repeticiones me preguntó:
 – ¿No le notas nada?
 – No.
 – Le sobra algo– me dio la pista.
 ...
 –Algo muy obvio, muy muy obvio.
 ...
 A ver, otra vez.
 No lo noté hasta que ella tocó la pieza, y yo la oí como si fuera de alguien más:
 – El final, ¿verdad?
 Si le quitas todo esto – me señaló las notas donde volvía a repetir la melodía –,
 si acaba aquí – hizo el ademán que hace un director de orquesta cuando indica
 fin, punto, se acabó –, no arrastras el final, lo haces rotundo. Mira.
 Repitió el último acorde y oí la diferencia.
 Creo que aprendí la lección; por eso, las páginas que siguen están en
 blanco, llenas de silencio y de intimidad (pp.169–70).

It could be argued that it is through Molina's refusal to close the narrative that Marcela's resistance to the distinct forms of domination that have structured her life may be located. In this invitation to silence (a time-honoured trope of feminist literature)³⁷ and intimacy, the reader is invited to recognise the limitations of language in evoking the lived realities of the novel's protagonists. Unlike the disappearance of the fluid subject in *Demasiado amor* and the sub-

37 This emphasis on the silences, the so-called blank pages of feminist literary tradition, have been explored in various ways but particularly by female authors to show how women have been defined symbolically as lack, negation or absence. 'The Blank Page' refers to Isak Dinesen's eponymous story that tells of the displaying in a public museum of the matrimonial sheets of princesses complete with bloodstains offering visible proof of their virginity. That one of the canvases is blank provokes particular fascination in its spectators. Interpreted as an act of radical subversion because it suggests an alternative form of story, 'The Blank Page' is, in turn, no story but every story. Rosario Castellanos was interested in the concept and wrote an essay entitled, "Por sus máscaras los conoceréis..." Karen Blixen – Isak Dinesen' in her final essay collection, *Mujer que sabe latín...* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973), pp.51–6. The original story can be found in *Last Tales* (New York: Random House, 1957), pp.95–105.

sequent escape into utopia, here the refusal to be fixed at the novel's end constitutes an open challenge to go beyond the limits of narrative and fiction and it is here that the political charge of the text can be realised. As with *Demasiado amor*, it should hardly surprise us that this solution is problematic. The invitation to the reader to create, the text's inability to fix or to close remains the quintessential trope of high modernist literature, a project that while often uniquely male, was also inextricably bound up with the forces of economic and political *apertura* that the text so critiques. It should come as no surprise thus, that the text cannot escape its own limitations, while it does, at least attempt to offer a way out for the reader. As with *Demasiado amor*, even with an ambivalently positioned fluid subject like the narrator in this case, it is difficult to find a space outside of modernity, when modernity is so much a part of what she has become.

Conclusion

Could it be possible to assert that both *Demasiado amor* and *El amor que me juraste* constitute 'counter-narratives of the nation' in the way that Bhabha imagines when he talks of a narrative that, 'evokes and erases the totalising boundaries of the nation disturbing those intellectual manoeuvres through which "imagined communities" are given essentialist identities?'³⁸ It is certainly clear that the texts stage an attack on the totalising narrative of modernity and thus contest the limits of the modernising project in ways that enlighten, entertain and resist. One could argue, of course, that as powerful masculinist discourses, travel writing even when undertaken by women, can only be instrumental in the construction of yet another rationale for power and control. In this way, these women writers' adoption of travel writing bear testimony to Audre Lourde's famous formulation, 'For the mas-

38 *Nation and Narration*, p.302.

ter's tools will never dismantle the master's house',³⁹ and the narratives inexorably lead to the creation of yet another oppressive set of hierarchies. Roger Bartra defines modernisation as 'a proposal for making the system functional again'.⁴⁰ In this way, it is a profoundly conservative strategy designed to reinscribe the system, albeit modernised, in a way that enables power relations to function in ways remarkably similar to the mechanisms of political power in place beforehand. In texts like these, the tourist/traveller becomes not just an agent of modernity, but a witness to its breakdown and reconstitution. 'In a country like this', therefore, to return to Mastretta, women writers play the unhappy role of witness, but they also participate in reconstruction. In these final reflections, I would like to invoke Roger Bartra's notion of modernisation – 'dismothering' – as a way of conceptualising these texts' approaches to the totalising boundaries of the nation that structure them.

According to Bartra's formulation:

we can no longer critique Mexican culture in the name of modernity, of a liberal-inspired modernity that raises up the banner of 'progress'. We have to critique modernity from the standpoint I call dismodernity, or better yet – taking a cue from *desmadre*, Mexican slang for disorder – dismothering.⁴¹

In this fascinating passage, the blocks used to fashion a critique of modernity in Mexico are already feminised – disordered (in a state of *desmadre*), dismothered, dismoderned. This coding of resistance as feminine has extraordinary potential for the development of feminist critical tools with which to attack the modernising forces of Mexican political, economic and civil life. In this way the 'dismothering' that emerges from these pages; the chaotic encounter between the ambivalent female subject and the forces of *modernidad* points to the

39 *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), p.121.

40 'The Crisis of Nationalism', in *Blood, Ink and Culture*, p.107.

41 Bartra, 'The Mexican Office: Miseries and Splendors of Culture', in *Blood, Ink and Culture*, p.9.

pivotal role played by women (acting as agents, travellers, tourists, writers and readers) in opposition to the neo-liberalising technocratising forces of modern Mexico. Taking my cue from Bartra, thus, I choose to read these texts not just as a critique of male power – though they are that too – but a vicious attempt to narrate the tortuous processes of *modernización* and to bear testimony to its many casualties, primarily the poor, but which include others also on the margins, such as prostitutes and the indigenous communities of Chiapas. In this way, the texts strike at the heart of Mexican *modernización* and the very forces of ‘progress’ that so limit the lives of its people.

