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# "God Must Have Been a Feminist to Make Me": Writings from the Girls of El Hogar la Buena Esperanza

Anna Lapera

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**"GOD MUST HAVE BEEN A FEMINIST TO MAKE ME":  
WRITINGS FROM THE GIRLS OF  
EL HOGAR LA BUENA  
ESPERANZA**

**BY**

**ANNA LAPERA**

**BACHELORS IN PEACE STUDIES,  
GOUCHER COLLEGE**

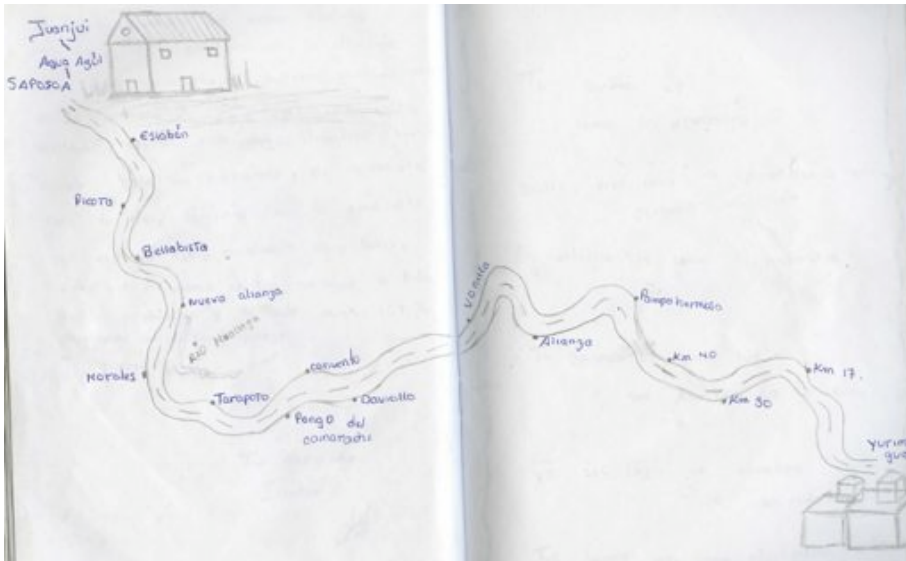
THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
Latin American Studies**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**May 2011**



*Dedicated to Petey,*



Franca, Molly, y las Poetas del Convento

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**By**

**Anna Lopera**

**B.A., Peace Studies, Goucher College, 2008**

**ABSTRACT**

My thesis, "*God Must Have Been a Feminist to Make Me*": Writings From the Girls of El Hogar la Buena Esperanza is a feminist ethnography of a poetry workshop I conducted over three months in el Hogar la Buena Esperanza, a home for under-privileged indigenous girls located within a cloistered Carmelite Convent in the northeastern Peruvian Amazon. Based on seventeen girls and over fourteen different creative writing activities, I explore how their writings reveal particular life histories in Latin America. From reimagining and re-writing stories and memories of their long departed hometowns, re-writing small-town histories; from exploring the cultural borders experienced in the leaving of traditional village life to large town portrait making of multiple identities that show that identities can be many, and form by experience rather than on the geo-political lines that separates one nation from another; from narrating violent political conflict between indigenous political organizations and Peruvian military over land that forced them to leave the convent for a month, from exploring what home and identity mean to indigenous girls in a border-informed paradigm of a Latin America that would

rather neatly place them in one place from exploring the borderland they experience between girlhood and womanhood, and imagining a future womanhood free of constraining patterns girls are expected to live out, and full of love, travel and self-revelation (which they all express the desire to have); from all of these, their writing takes us and them through little known borderlands in Latin American and feminist experience.

In the thesis, I explore the physical and conceptual borderlands they cross in order to arrive at the convent, and how they imagined negotiating these borderlands in the future. Through these activities, they develop both a textual and material relationship with themselves as girls, forcing us, as women, as once-girls and as academics to re-visit and re-work the spaces, architecture, borderlands, bodies, the definitions and work, that both engage and are engaged by Girls.

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## **Introduction**

Today is Madre G.'s 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. She, like Madre I., holds an interesting position within the convent structure. Madre G and Madre I are the only nuns who are not cloistered in the Hogar la Buena Esperanza, a convent in the northeastern jungles of Peru, yet they straddle both the cloistered and the non-cloistered parts of the convent: able to enter the cloister and leave at will, a privilege only the Madre Superiora and the Priora have. Like the 16 girls who are housed in the Hogar, and like the 22 nuns who live inside the cloistered section and who never leave and are never seen, both Madre G and Madre I are indigenous women who have travelled far to arrive here.

Like the girls, they also first arrived here at the Hogar La Buena Esperanza at a young age, and came of age as residents of the convent, both becoming nuns by age 18. Madre I always knew she wanted to be a nun. Madre G, on the other hand, was sent here by her parents at age 12 after being caught drinking an entire bottle of wine and letting loose 200 baby chickens. She said she hated the nuns for trying to control her life. One night however, during sleep, she experienced a transformation. When she awoke the next day, she felt a calling from God to become a nun.

Today is Madre G's birthday, and the party is held in the locutorio- the one room that connects both parts of the convent through double layers of wooden bars. On this night, there is a dance off, where all the cloistered nuns prepare traditional

dances from their native communities (like the girls, all come from distinct native communities), and on the other end of the *locutorio* are all of Madre G's non-religious friends (she has many) as well as the few priests she says she gets along with and don't judge her *alegría*, who were preparing different national dances, such as *Marineras* and *danzas folklóricas*.

Madre G had spent all night in the cloister with the nuns, she said, preparing peach pisco sours. Through the wooden bars, snacks and small plastic shots were passed, as well as slips of paper in which all guests voted on which side won the dance-off: cloistered nuns vs. invited party guests.

Because of the wooden bars, the cloistered nuns cannot be seen too clearly, rather only in glimpses. There is no other place like the *locutorio* that exemplifies how the concept of a borderland could exist not only as a geo-political barrier, but also as a conceptual frontier, even within a small space like this. The *locutorio* is a borderland that exists inside the structure of the convent, dividing convent and cloister, girls and nuns, community and nuns, etc. but within this barrier that divides convent and cloister, there are also many similarities between these worlds separated by wooden bars. For example, many of these girls *want* to become nuns. Although they are not in the convent for the purpose or training of becoming nuns, they soon develop an interest in it, and many, at 18, because of either rejection from universities, an unwillingness to return to a hometown to bear numerous children and work in agriculture, or pure desire and choice, end up as *novicias*.

Thus, this room, the only room where cloister and convent become semi visible to each other, revealing themselves to each other, functions as a borderland. Looking at this space-the entire convent structure as well as this room-through a cultural border theory lens reveals a great deal about girls, and specifically these girls' experience of Latin America.

### **Explanation of Project**

In 2008, I first travelled with friends and educators, Franca and Molly, to Hogar la Buena Esperanza in Yurimaguas to develop a feminist poetry curriculum for a group of girls who are uprooted from far-away indigenous home villages and housed in a convent made up of two non-cloistered nuns and over twenty cloistered nuns, dedicated to providing these girls with clothing, food, shelter and education with the hopes that after completing high school they will have the independence and education and choices to build the life they want. I returned alone for three months during the summer of 2010 with an adapted creative writing curriculum which I developed in the hopes that the activities would allow the sixteen girls to engage with the writing for the purpose of giving them a chance to voice and articulate their experiences.

The main purpose behind these activities was giving voice to the transition between girlhood and womanhood they are experiencing. I created these thirty plus

activities in the hopes that they would open a discussion about cultural borderlands, and give voice to a brief and critical moment in the transition between young womanhood and adult womanhood. I also hoped that the activities would allow girls to engage with and give voice to a space and moment and border for which we have no authentic working definition or: *theirs* and that of girls in a particular Latin American context. The stories and poems produced through these activities bring out what I will discuss in the thesis: the experience and movement through borderlands explored in the girls' writing, and an exploration of what space and borders have to do with their lives and their sense of identity and womanhood. What could an examination of critical border theory explain about a group of sixteen girls uprooted from their home villages to live in a convent far from home?

The activities I created and the heart of this work come from my fascination with girls' coming of age stories and my hope that this could begin the creation of centers dedicated to publishing the work of girls' in marginalized settings. I approach their writing not simply as beautiful and talented works (though they are both), but rather, I look at what creative writing, for *them*, for marginalized genders of marginalized ages of marginalized ethnicities of marginalized communities, can lead us to. A consideration of border theory allows us to view their writing as crossing borders, questioning borders, resisting borders toward a larger goal of feminine liberation in themselves, the region, and beyond.

## Critical Approach

OH patria querida,

Que bonitos son las historias de mis hermanos

Que un día los españoles destruyeron.

-Rocío, 18, "Oda a Mi Identidad"

They became lords and sounds of lesser things,

They passed nations through their mouths.

-Zora Neal Hurston,

"Their Eyes Were Watching God" 1937

Theorist Edward Soja opens his book "Seeking Spatial Justice" (2010) with an epigraph from a letter Martin Luther King wrote in Birmingham Jail in 1963. It reads: " 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere' " (vii). It is telling that Soja opens a book about building a spatially-informed approach to history and culture, with a quote about injustice. Soja believes that at the heart of our interactions, as humans, to both our physical and imaginative geographies, is the constructed, unjust ways in which that geography came to be. Following this idea, we could say that for certain geographies to work for some, it is at the expense of their failure for others. Tension arises, thus, when all parties find themselves in the borderlands of these constructed geographies. Soja's concern of power and injustice around the manifestation of borders reveals the role of these borders in the

marginalization of some identities and the centralizing of others. The awareness of these forces leads us to what he calls a new spatial consciousness:

The geographies in which we live can intensify and sustain our exploitation as workers, support oppressive forms of cultural and political domination based on race, gender, and nationality, and aggravate all forms of discrimination and injustice. Without this recognition, space is little more than a background complication (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 19).

So what does a discussion of geography and space have to do with sixteen adolescent indigenous girls uprooted to a convent in a city in the Peruvian Amazon where they live with the memory of past geographies and come of age in new ones? If we open this up to a discussion of justice, as Soja does, then geography and space are the natural and most critical points from which we *should* begin.

Soja's ideas form part of the theoretical underpinning of what informs my work: Critical Border Theory. Critical Border Theory, like most theories that are motivated by and nurture the idea of justice, arose out of the shifting realities of marginal communities. It is no longer, nor should it ever have been, sufficient to talk about geography as the natural separation and designation of physical space, because there are more and more people who exist within the borderlands of these spaces. Therefore, an indigenous girl who is raised in a traditional village in the Northern Amazon and who is uprooted because of poverty and economic circumstances, to a convent that promises food, shelter and education in a southern

urban mestizo fishing port in the southern Amazon where she comes of age, creates a new conceptual and physical geo-history and forces us to consider new identities and new ways of interacting with the world.

A critical approach to border theory, thus, brings to light those who straddle multiple worlds and multiple identities. From colonization's violent drawing of lines on the African continent into unnatural and purposefully culturally conflicting nations, to the barbed wire fences along the Mexican-American border, to the selling of indigenous-cultivated lands in Latin America to private international enterprises, to gentrification in the United States that causes those below the poverty line to be homeless in neighborhoods that raised multiple generations of their own families, to racial segregation of cities around the world that keep certain communities marginal and certain in the center; these shifting real and imagined geographies, lines and borders, have produced and are producing new identities, new sites of injustice and new sites of *justice-seeking*. For each line, wall and fence built, a new identity forms.

### *General ideas and key theorists*

Border Theory shifts the focus from a consideration of geopolitical borders (lines on a map, fences in the desert) to a consideration of cultural borders, examining how power, inequality, and resistance function in national, cultural, and finally more recently, *gender* identity formation. A critical approach to border

studies has already deeply influenced many social science and humanities fields, pushing them to consider or re-consider, in some cases, gender, spatiality, power, and critical approaches to history. Some key theorists who have influenced the Critical Border Theory are Edward Soja, Clifford Geertz, Américo Paredes, Benedict Anderson, Gloria Anzaldúa, José Limón, Renato Rosaldo, Zora Neal Hurston and Bell Hooks. Their works span the disciplines of Anthropology, Activism, ethnography/folklore and literature.

Soja's most applicable term, "critical geographic imagination" (*Third Space*, 1996) reconceptualizes communities' space and geography as a product of a culture's collective (re)imagining of its history and identity. Geertz is known for creating the interpretive approach, redefining the role of the ethnographer and therefore ethnography itself as a way to critically look for symbols and meanings, expanding the concept of semiotics to a more complicated "thick description" (1973). His work is helpful in allowing me to re-imagine my own role as ethnographer, as well as in understanding the interpretive and dynamic nature of the study of culture. Paredes, a corrido specialist and author of "With his Pistol in his Hand," (1958) defines Greater Mexico as a cultural border in contrast to geographical borders, focusing on identities that form themselves based on shared cultural practices and meanings, rather than on the geo-political line that separates one nation from another. In discussing the relationships between border and nationalism, Anderson asserts the constructed nature of nationhood, examining the



possibilities of creating 'imagined communities' no matter which side of a political border a particular community falls under (1991).

Bell Hooks demands the centrality of race and gender in the discussion of *third spaces*; that is, spaces that reject the binaries and power differences that a traditional discussion of space and geography produces (1984). Finally, Gloria Anzaldúa's canonical text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) galvanized the theorization of borderlands within not only Mexican-American Studies, but in academia in general. As she states, "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25).

Beyond just providing a different lens from which to view our lived and conceptual geographies, Critical Border Theory allows us to consider the role of space in the resistance and expression of these borders. Soja's work especially allows for new dialogues on the historical and the social, and brings us to a new spatial consciousness, saying that the historical and the social are components of space. Returning to the issues of injustice, he says that there is a spatial element to marginalization and injustice in that they are specifically mapped and spaced:

Space...is more than just a physical quality of the material world or an essential philosophical attribute having absolute, relative, or relational dimensions. These physical and philosophical features of space have dominated the historical discourse on space for the past century, especially among geographers. They remain relevant

to our contemporary understanding of the spatiality of human life, but focusing exclusively on them can lead us away from a cogent, active, and critical understanding of human geographies” (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 15)

What is greatly applicable to my project is how the intimate experience that people (girls) have with their geographies, form their and our telling of our life history. Soja speaks to the influence of geography in the way we make sense of our lives:

Although some may think this to be too obvious to mention, the spatiality of human life must be interpreted and understood as fundamentally, from the start, a complex social product, a collectively created and purposeful configuration and socialization of space that defined our contextual habitat, the human and humanized geography in which we all live out our lives. Such socialized lived space, constructed out of physical and natural spatial forms, mentally and materially intertwines with our socialized lived times to create our biographies and geo-histories (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 17-18)

This citation speaks to the creative and conceptual forces that shape our stories; and makes the point that the stories we narrate about our lives also reveal particular stories about space.

Much like Bell Hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa, Soja explains critical border theory not only as a new way to understand the world, but also as a means of seeking justice by and in marginalized communities:

The main impetus for this resurgence and diffusion of spatial thinking and spatial theory came initially from critical human geographers but has been carried forward in recent years by scholars from many different disciplines, ranging from archaeology, art, and anthropology to law, theology, and economics. While the privileging of the historical and the social still persists, perhaps never before in the past 150 years has a critical spatial perspective been so widespread and influential” (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 14).

In this way, looking at things from a critical spatial perspective also begins to redefine and revive social justice as an important part.

Feminists have taken border theory to an even deeper and more radical level. What a feminist approach to border theory does is “relocate us not in the past or in the tacitly built environment of the city, but in the marginality and overlapping psychological, social, and cultural borderlands of contemporary *lived spaces*” (*Third Space*, 1).

Re-visiting the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and especially the fiction of Zora Neal Hurston gives us an even deeper understanding of the feminine experience of borders and space, because they reveal and flesh out not only a new approach to constantly shifting and imposing borders, but the movement between them. It is this movement, this crossing that is most applicable to my work. It is the crossing of these borders that calls into question new geographies, new worlds, new sites of liberation not only in the context of indigenous Latin America, but in revealing the universal femininity of the world.

I turn to Anzaldúa, who poignantly questions not only the borders that she can see in their manifestation of fence and barbwire dividing nations and people, but also in how those borders manifest inside of her (1987).

I want to clarify that beyond being informed by these theorists' and writers' fleshing of the maintenance, dividing, resisting and crossing of these borders, I modeled my approach in this thesis on Zora Neal Hurston's female characters, all of whom share the same experience of my girls of study, in that they leave home at a young crucial age and undergo various forms of transformation, and finally, the climax, in both Hurston's female characters' journeys and these girls' stories, occur at the moment of whether to return home or not, and imagining themselves to be transformed women upon return.

Like the girls of the convent, what is at questions for Hurston's female characters is identity and feminist coming of age; it becomes that which informs the telling of their life histories, and the envisioning of their futures. Janie, Hurston's most famous character in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" returns home after a long journey. She tells her friend, "More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts...love your heart. For this is the prize" . When her friend Phoebe begs her to share her new stories and insights, Janie sums up her journey with saying that she found and achieved "that oldest human longing-self revelation" (1937).

Whereas Soja helps me consider space and geography in new and critical ways and provides a theoretical foundation for which to place the writing that these girls produced, Anzaldúa and Hurston speak to what is at heart of their writing: what is produced and who do we become when we *cross* those borders- both literarily and physically?

### **Border Crossings**

Although I am deeply influenced by Critical Border Theory and the ideas I describe above, in this thesis I focus specifically on the border crossings, negotiation of borderlands and movements between spaces experienced by the sixteen girls whose work I present here. Their work is my main reference point. I do not look at how their works fits into the theoretical framework I mentioned above; but rather, how their work reveals a new expression of borderlands. My framework is better found in the intimacy of these girls' experiences. The space I deal with is home, travel routes, and convent; and the borderlands that exist within that specific trajectory.

From reimagining and re-writing stories and memories of their long departed hometowns, re-writing small-town histories; from exploring the cultural borders experienced in the leaving of traditional village life to large town portrait making of multiple identities that show that identities can be many, and form by experience rather than on the geo-political lines that separates one nation from

another; from narrating violent political conflict between indigenous political organizations and Peruvian military over land that forced them to leave the convent for a month, from exploring what home and identity mean to indigenous girls in a border-informed paradigm of a Latin America that would rather neatly place them in one place from exploring the borderland they experience between girlhood and womanhood, and imagining a future womanhood free of constraining patterns girls are expected to live out, and full of love, travel and self-revelation (which they all express the desire to have); from all of these, their writing takes us and them through little known borderlands in Latin American and feminist experience.

Because the convent is an inherently feminine space, it allows me to assume the femininity of their work and the focus I present. The geography and borders expressed in their writing reveal the convent to be both a place of crossing, and the site of identity formation, allowing me to use this perspective from which to view their space. They cross geographic borders (rivers, towns, rural to urban, home to convent) but in the process, a key and critical transition and transformation occurs both discursively and in reality: that from girlhood to womanhood. Crossing borders, for them, function as more than the crossing of geographic and physical spaces, but also as sites of identity forming and woman-defining. I look specifically at the movement between spaces and negotiation of their borderlands in their writing. These are the border crossings I find in their writing:

*Rural space to urban space-* Each girl has left a rural home villages to travel to a commercial fishing town (Yurimaguas) where she lives and goes to school for an undetermined amount of time with rare visits back home.

*Home to institution-*The girls leave family life and their home situations to live in a convent where they live collectively in a small, shared space with other girls and nuns

*Indigenous to mestizo-* They leave traditionally-run and ethnically indigenous hometowns and communities to Yurimaguas, an indigenous/mestizo urbanized fishing port, creating the main difference between them and the girls they go to school with. They experience being made fun of especially by their teachers and schoolmates who have grown up in a more urbanized setting.

*Indigenous language to Spanish-* The girls' first language is their indigenous language; but when they arrive to the Convent and to Yurimaguas they must switch to Spanish for two reasons: first, it is the predominant language of the City and the school and second, because each girl speaks a different indigenous language so Spanish becomes the only way to communicate.

*Girls and nuns-* Most of the nuns first arrived at this convent for the same reason that the girls arrive here. Almost all of the nuns were first girls housed in this convent that had left their homes, grew up in the convent, and later decided to become nuns.

The girls and nuns are separated by a thin wall that separates the cloistered and non-cloistered parts of the convent.

*Young womanhood to Adult womanhood*- I find this to be the most interesting borderland and it is recurrent in their writing. Each of these girls arrives to the convent at a very young age and throughout their lives in the convent, straddles a borderland between young womanhood and adult womanhood, defining and redefining their transition into female maturity.

One of the border crossings I focus on the most is the border between young womanhood and adult womanhood. This one is particularly manifested in very interesting ways, because their definitions of what keeps them girls and what makes them women is taken directly from their life experiences. Originally, I planned to focus completely on the way young women express this border, but what I found was that this girlhood/womanhood border space is found in so many forms and informs so many other borders they express. I go into great detail later in this thesis, but to give a brief example of what I mean by this is an activity where I asked them to make a chart with two columns where they had to make a list of the things that made them girls and the things that made them women.

Many of the girls wrote that being a woman meant travelling far distances. This is neither traditionally-informed nor modern-city informed. Rather, it is informed by their own lives and by their own experience of crossing borders. On



the other hand, many expressed that what made it obvious to them that they were still girls was that sometimes they miss their parents. This shows that their sense of budding womanhood is informed by their life experiences of the multiple borders they cross. Their womanhood is not just what they think of themselves as women, but what they think of their life from the space of their transition into womanhood.

I want to clarify that I have explained the above border crossings in the same order as they appear in the chapters. I have organized the chapters so that each chapter is an activity that expresses a particular borderland- going from a broader geographical border crossing, to an inner crossing into womanhood.

### **Methodology**

I explore all of these geographic and conceptual borderlands through their writing, which they produced from creative writing, map-making and fiction-writing activities I created that touch on the topics of memory, travel, coming of age and womanhood. The fourteen activities which I include in this project were constructed by me, and some of which were adapted from bilingual “neighborhood poetry” workshops I created and ran from 2007-2008 in Baltimore City with a group of middle-school aged girls in a mostly immigrant and refugee neighborhood. I adapted these to Spanish, as well as to the particular experiences of the girls in the Hogar. Although the themes and depth of what the girls of the Hogar produced was not planned, they emerged from activities that were meant to drawn inward into

how these girls internalize their experiences, rather than providing political or historical commentary on a particular place. In this way, the poems and narratives that speak to their experiences with travel, crossing large geographic distances, and being uprooted from their families to live in the communal setting of the convent illicit distinct and meaningful narratives from each, because I worded the activity in a way that would allow the girls to focus on their own intimate experience with each theme.

Beyond just the activities I created (which I list in detail below), there was also a nightly performance aspect to the writing workshop, facilitated by the fact that two weeks after I arrived in Yurimaguas, all schools in the town of Yurimaguas were on strike, a strike which lasted till the time I left, two and a half months later. This called for more writing activities, and more time to perform the work. The girls requested that after dinner each night that they perform the poems they had written followed by a dance party. They also requested to have popcorn, chips, and *Inka Cola*. The nuns expressed concern that they would be going to sleep too late, but the girls reminded them that their school was on strike indefinitely. Thus, every night around 7:30 after dinner, we would all clean the dishes, sweep the floor, and move the tables to the edges of the room, and bring in the boom box. Each girl would take turns reading her work, and after the last girl performed, there would be dancing.

In all of their works, what is always present is some sort of reference to an original home, an epic journey and to a place symbolic of the convent (with similar characteristics given to the symbolism of the convent). In my exploration of how their work culminates into a self-revelation into their own sense of womanhood and

transition from girlhood, the question I explore is: what is the meaning of *home*, *the journey*, and *the convent*, as metaphors in the narrative constructions of identity and girlhood?

In the pages that follow, I am first going to give an ethnography of my community of study. After the initial ethnography chapter, every chapter is dedicated to a specific writing activity. I order the chapters in a specific way: each address one of the borderlands I list above. Each chapter is structured in a similar way: first I name and describe the activity. Then I present samples from their work, and later I analyze the type of border crossing revealed in their writing.

The following is a list of the activities and chapters:

*Chart of Activities*

<p>Chapter 2</p> <p><i>Mi Poder es Hacer Volar</i></p> <p><i>Casas:</i></p> <p>Collective map from</p> <p>Home to <i>Hogar</i></p>	<p>A map collectively drawn without any reference to existing maps of each girl's home village and travel route from home to convent, including rivers and villages passed along the way.</p>
<p>Chapter 3</p> <p><i>Tu silencio esta como si el árbol no se moviera:</i></p>	<p>An ode to each girls home town, using two words in their indigenous language, one metaphor, one simile, and one reference to a physical space</p>

An Ode to the hometown I left behind	
Chapter 4 <i>Como Llegué al Convento</i> : sensory poems on travel	A poem describing the trip from home to convent, focusing on the sensory experiences of that journey
Chapter 5 <i>Hoy Nació Una Niña Hermosa y Rebelde</i> <sup>1</sup> : Narratives of Transformation	Narratives about a transformation experienced by each girls, written from a fiction-like third voice
Chapter 6 Cuentos de la Huelga	A narrative and drawing about the conflict between Peruvian military and indigenous protesters which caused the girls to leave the convent
Chapter 7 Mything my life: invented myths and legends with female protagonists	An invented myth or legend where each girl had to portray herself as the main character and include a moral at the end

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<sup>1</sup> Antonieta, 14

<p>Chapter 8</p> <p>Menstruation</p> <p>Narratives and other school narratives</p>	<p>Narratives about menstruating in the convent or on a return visit home. Some girls first got their periods in school, leading to other narratives about embarrassing moments in a new school setting</p>
<p>Chapter 9</p> <p>Mi Secreto Profundo</p>	<p>Portraits and narratives about keeping secrets in the convent</p>
<p>Chapter 10</p> <p><i>Soy Mujer, Soy Peruana, y llevo mi hermoso pueblo dentro de mi:</i></p> <p>Poems and Portraits of Identity</p>	<p>An exploration of dual and multiple identities through poetry and portrait-making</p>
<p>Chapter 11</p> <p><i>Que bello es conocer como soy yo misma: Me miro a través del espejo</i></p>	<p>Poems about what girls think they look like now, and what they will look like in five years</p>
<p>Chapter 12</p> <p><i>Mi cuerpo es una maravilla: Ode to Loved and Hated body parts</i></p>	<p>Each girls wrote an ode to her favorite body part, and her least favorite body part</p>

<p>Chapter 13</p> <p><i>Soy la Lluviosa, Soy la Calurosa</i>: Exploring womanhood through poems that begin with “Yo Soy”</p>	<p>Poems that begin with “Yo Soy”</p>
<p>Chapter 14</p> <p>Para Ser Mujer</p>	<p>Poems beginning with “Para Ser Mujer” that explore general definitions of womanhood</p>
<p>Chapter 15:</p> <p>Full Women, <i>Querida Yo</i>: Letters to myself from a future age, and Conclusions</p>	<p>The girls had to pretend they were ten years older than they are now. From that older perspective, they wrote a letter to themselves revealing what they did and who they became</p>

Finally, I present a conclusion where I include the very last activity by the girls before I left the convent: a letter where each girl had to imagine herself ten years older than she is now, and from that perspective, to write a letter to herself at her present age, revealing who she has become and what she has done. I save this last letter assignment for the conclusion because it reveals their goals, their dreams and the way they imagine their future. Whereas the other activities explore the way they crossed or imagined crossing borders from their past, this activities reveals the

way that they imagined they crossed these borders in the future. In addition to presenting this activity in the conclusion, I also return to my initial exploration of critical border theory, looking at how their writing reveals the intimacy of a particular Latin American and feminist context and opens up further dialogue on the importance of girls' experience in understanding and mapping the world.

## Chapter 2: Ethnography



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<sup>2</sup> Picture taken by me, July 2011



<i>ni un rayo de sol</i>	<i>Not even a ray of sun</i>
<i>podría borrar mi forma de ser.</i>	<i>Could erase my way of being</i>
<i>ni el estruendoso río</i>	<i>Not even the river with all its strength,</i>
<i>con su furia salvaje.</i>	<i>With its savage fury</i>
<i>nada.</i>	<i>Nothing.</i>
<i>-Idalia, age 15</i>	<i>-Idalia, age 15</i>

*“Our need for stories of our lives is so huge, so intense, so fundamental, that we would lose our humanity if we stopped trying to tell stories of who we think we are”*

*-Ruth Behar, “Translated Woman” 1993*

“Anita, No sigas al hombre con un pie de animal, o te perderás por siempre en la selva”. I was walking behind Diana, and she lifted her skirt-cotton and fading, thin and pink-just above her knees. Her legs are skinny, and she laughs a lot, sometimes shyly, and other times so loud and room-filling that I imagine a huge mythical woman walking in front of me, leading me to the edge of a river.

“Anita, No sigas al hombre con un pie de animal, o te perderás por siempre en la selva” Anita, *don’t follow the man with one animal foot, or you will be lost in the jungle forever*, she tells me, looking back toward me as she says the last two syllables of An-it-ta; and, as if I’ve lived here forever and alongside her, she asks me if I’ve ever met the Shapingo, the man with an animal foot who transforms himself into an

intimate friend or family member, tricks you into following him, and then leaves you in the deepest parts of the jungle where you never find your way home again.

“¿alguna vez te has encontrado con el Shapingo, di?”

“no sé... ¿quién es?” I don’t know, who is he? I asked her, confused, and shuffling through the archives in my own mind of Guatemalan mythical figures I might have grown up with, but the only thing I can think of is the metaphor of men. But this is not about men, I think, so I say nothing.

“No te dejes engañar, no seas boba. Hay que mirarle una pata. Si tiene una pata de animal y una de hombre, es el Shapingo, y no hay que seguirle, aunque te lo pide”.

*Don't let yourself be fooled, don't be stupid. You have to look at his feet. If he has one animal foot and one human foot, it is the Shapingo, and you should not follow him, even if he asks.*

At exactly half my age, twelve-year-old Rosita is the newest and youngest member at the Hogar La Buena Esperanza, la *casita*- as the girls call it-within a cloistered Carmelite convent in the northeastern jungles of Peru that houses underprivileged girls who come from various parts of the Amazon region. Most come from river communities north of Yurimaguas- Lagunas, Zapote, San Lorenzo, Maranato, San Gabriel de Varadero, Puerto Porvenir, Santa Rosa de Tioyacu, Balsayacu, Jeberos, Santa Cruz, Atahualpa. They come from a mix of Candoshi and Chayahuita Indigenous groups, yet because of location along the river, speak distinct languages (as well as dialects of the indigenous languages), such as Awajun, Shawi, Candoshi and Huanbisa, and quechua in rare instances.

Rosita shares a large room with eighteen other girls who have grown up in the convent for much of their lives, left as forgotten, sent for a better education because there are no schools in their villages, others rescued from child prostitution, others out of love, and others for a safe place to stay. Most of them spend days on riverboats to arrive here, which is a trip often too expensive and too far for most families to afford to visit. Diana's case is different: her hometown is only a two-hour journey partially on rugged roads through the jungle, and partially on a new highway built in 2009. Yet, these two hours will come to represent equally as profound of a conceptual and physical border as the distance between home and convent does for every other girl in the *hogar*, and she will, like most, come of age away from home.

In the silence in between the sound of feet reaching the river, and the lifting of edges of skirts away from the surface line of water, I am getting to know Diana at the same moment that she is getting to know herself.

These girls' journeys to the convent represent distinct histories of travel, like twenty-one year old Victoria. Victoria, a Chayauita Indian, begged her father to find her work in the city of Yurimaguas so she would not have to marry at twelve to a much older man who offered her father liquor from the city in exchange for his daughter. She eventually arrived at the convent years ago after being sent by a woman who feared that the family Victoria cleaned houses for would use her as a child prostitute. She struggles with literacy, but there is a rich wordless story

behind the thick notebook of poetry she has produced. If she could have one power, she writes, it would be to create a wind so strong that she could cause fear in people.

The Carmelite convent is always made up of anywhere between 20-30 cloistered nuns, two non-cloistered nuns, and it houses anywhere from 10-22 girls at a given time. The nuns will tell you that it is an autonomous community with close ties to several intuitions and churches in the Basque Country, such as CARITAS, which sends priests and volunteers to work for the monastery. Most of the priests who reside in the vicariato across the river are either from the Basque country or are local Peruvians. The patron saint of the monastery is la Virgen del Carmen, who, according to Madre G. appeared to San Simón on mount Carmelo in Spain. It was Teresa de Jesus who reformed Las Carmelitas into one that included both men and women. In 1980, the first group of nuns arrived from the Peruvian sierras to live at the San José monastery, funded by María Pilar de Jesus. Seven years later, in 1987 the first group of girls was brought in to live at the monastery.

Since the first year the first group of girls began living in the convent, the procession of la Virgen del Carmen has taken place once a year. This procession has asserted the convent's presence in the town. La Virgen del Carmen, stands quietly in the convent's chapel along the Huallaga river, but once a year she is brought out to be carried on the backs of community members blessing three key places throughout the city of Yurimaguas: the discotheque, the prison, and the monastery. As the Virgin Carmen is taken around the city, people leave their homes to accompany the procession. The girls living in the convent partake in traditional

Peruvian folk dances, which, according to Madre Guadalupe, are a representation of Peruvian culture, with dances from the sierra, the coast, and the Amazon region.

Yurimaguas is commonly called two things: *la ceja de los Andes* (the eyebrow of the Andes) and *la perla de la Huallaga* (the pearl of the Huallaga River), symbolizing its two main entry points: the three rivers that surround it-Shanusi, Paranapra, and the one that leads it to the greater Amazonas, the Huallaga- and the one road that leads to Yurimaguas (the eyebrow). As a fishing port, the River is Yurimaguas' main source of transportation, livelihood, mythology, and in the case of the girls, of arriving at the convent and sometimes, returning home.

Some girls shared stories of being sent to the convent for better educational opportunities, Each girl comes from a different village, indigenous community, language background and place, and although they arrive at the convent at distinct moments in their lives, they share a common experience and a common context of coming of age inside the convent. Many do not know how long they will be here, when their families will be able to afford the long trip to visit, or when they will receive a phone call from home. Some fear the day they finish school, knowing that they will most likely have to leave unless they go to University. However, the tests are hard and the spaces for universities are few. Many stand lined along the

staircase that leads to their rooms while a family comes to pick up their daughter; a moment of sadness and jealousy sits and lingers in the room, but later it leaves and life moves on.

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Rosita says that a woman is like a flower that can open if she thinks she has let someone open her. She says that women are like roses: they are best cultivated by their own hands. Rosita first described her hometown to me as “no hay electricidad pero hay árboles de papaya” *There is no electricity but there are papaya trees*. It was here, on a two-hour journey to the light-less, papaya-full hometown of Rosita that I first saw Madre I’s<sup>3</sup> hair. On this day, I accompanied her and Padre Porfirio to drop off Rosita at her hometown because she was feeling homesick.

In the two hours it takes to drive out of Yurimaguas, Rosita’s hometown is the closest in distance to the convent out of all the other eighteen girls who are housed there. It is humid that day, and the sweat from our hair pressed against our face falls into our mouth, and we are too tired to move it. Padre Porfirio tells Madre I to let air in through her nuns’ habit because it is an injustice that nuns have to dress the way they do. She laughs weakly and sticks her head out the window. We stop by a river because no one can stand the heat. Rosita asks me if I know the story of the man with one hoof who drags you deep into the jungle never to be found again.

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<sup>3</sup> Carmelite nuns are referred to as Madre X. Madre Ines is the nun in charge of the well-being of the girls housed at the Convent.

We walked down to a secluded part of the river, where Madre I, whose amounts of smiles I could count on one hand, looked at me and said “Que me perdone Dios, pero nadar no es pecado” *May God forgive me, but swimming is not a sin.* She lifts a layer of her religious *habit*, a brown cloak worn by all Carmelite nuns, and slowly takes off pins that hold it together, pushing other layers down toward her neck, and light brown hair falls down to her shoulders. She bends over the edge of river, and it looks like she is drinking the legends out of the water, face and miles of hair underneath water. I could have watched her forever, a woman I feared and was fascinated by, cloaked and quiet. I wanted to ask her about her hair, to lose myself in the stories nestled in it, and touch the layers of habit cloth collecting sand and dirt on the edge of the river.

Tears swell up in Rosita’s eyes as she recognizes her father cutting papayas off of trees. Tattoos of doves fill his chest though none are colored in. She sees her grandmother, wrinkled, bent and with a smile that could fill the entire large room where they all live with Diana’s mother, two brothers, two nephews and sister (who had once lived in the convent). They all wait for Rosita to come home.

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Rosita looks up to the older girls at the convent, though they often ignore her and I get the feeling that at fifteen and older, some feel too womanly to talk to such a young girl. I first met Genoveva and Milagros in 2008 when they were nineteen and

eighteen, respectively, when Genoveva used to ask me to accompany her to buy canned milk for the twenty-two girls and two nuns, and thirty other cloistered nuns. Somehow whenever it was Genoveva's turn to pick up milk, we returned with her planned phrase and dramatic apology, "¡ya se terminó!". She asked me to accompany her so I could wait with Milagros on the side of the road while she turned the corner to kiss a boy. I let it happen many times; I wanted to be the last person who would ever prevent love from happening. She'd join us back at the side of the road, and walk back in love-aching silence and deep breaths. She has a huge smile, and her eyes roll to the edge of her head in exaggerated movements and she lets out a deep breath. She asks me if I can tell she's in love. *Enamoradísima*, I'd smile back, craving the sweetness of milk that sits in cans, and secretly worried that the love that she breathed in and out on our walks back to the iron gates of the convent -rusted red iron that separated the town of Yurimaguas from the convent, the girls from the dangers of men and world, among other things- would turn into childbirth and poverty as so many times it does for girls here and everywhere.

Behind the brown-red painted iron, Genoveva and Milagros were best friends. Both were about to graduate high school when they made a pact that they would never become nuns; that when Genoveva returned in December of 2008 from visiting her family in the town of Atahualpa, they would study psychology at the local university and become successful psychologists. Genoveva and Milagros have never spoken to each other since their pact, but they live within inches yet worlds of each other, separated by a wall at times as strong as God.



Milagros will turn twenty inside the cloister, where she has now spent two years without ever having left. She once described herself like an onion, a layered circular mess of God, womanhood and indigenous language, which she drew in detail inside a drawing of a yellow onion with a cross impaling its juice-filled surface. Milagros, who I am not allowed to touch<sup>4</sup> because she is now a cloistered nun devoted to God and Herself, handed me a necklace of la Virgen María she has worn her whole life, through the wooden bars of the most penetrable space in the convent structure: the locutorio, or, visiting room. This room is the site of visits, doctor consultations, and occasionally forbidden love. Sometimes it is the site of tears you can only see if you look closely.

I catch glimpses of her from the locutorio, where images of the world of cloister flash through the spaces between wooden bars like lights through blinds. Genoveva is studying to be a nurse; she shows me text messages from two lovers and says that she just can't decide which one to choose, and why should she? She and Milagros do not speak anymore. I imagine their two-year silence is partly from pain, partly from the strict schedule of cloistered nuns and the short two hours per day they are aloud to speak, and perhaps the walls at times too thick to conceive of.

As I walk back to the Convent and enter through its iron gates, I pass the co-ed prison, and the bodega with the eighty-year old man who sits on the stoop

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<sup>4</sup> Most cloistered nuns are not allowed to touch anyone or be touched.

outside the bodega all day. The nuns have rumored he is the resident “*puto*”. He never fails to yell at me,

“mi preciosa chinita! Con usted me voy a casar”.

I yell back, “es que busco uno mas jovencito”.

We laugh, only to repeat the routine the next day. I pass the large, beautiful motherly Señora who fixes shoes, clothes, sews buttons, and re-charges cell phones. All for *tres soles*, which this week is about equivalent to one dollar.

The girls at the Hogar pass by this street every day when they walk to school. All girls attend the Bolivar school, which is just down the road passed the police station. The younger girls not yet in high school leave as a group at 6:30 in the morning, and return by 12:00pm. At around 12:30pm all the girls, Madre G. and Madre I. have lunch together, and at 1:30 the high school-aged girls make their way to school, and they are back by 6pm. At 6:30 they sweep the chapel, clean the eating area while two girls at a time cook meals for all, and at 8:30 they sit down to watch telenovelas.

Madre I, the nun in charge of the girls and the non-cloistered part of the convent told me that she wants the convent to be an alternative to the machismo that these girls (and all of us) grow up with, and an alternative to an almost absolutism in their lives: that they are only good for sex, to have children (and no sex after that), to cook, and to be aides on their husband’s farms. And not even for this are they valued.

Reading through the sixteen books of poetry and life stories they have given me, I see that they include God in a lot of their writing, but not a God that makes them obedient or loyal. It is a God that makes them beautiful. I am a seductress, one of them writes, because God gave me that power.

As I sat with Madre I in the corner of a large dining room with walls cracked from earthquakes throughout the years since it was first built in 1984, she told me about Deisy. Deisy, one of my best poets and unique characters from the poetry workshop I conducted two years prior, is eighteen and pregnant with her third child. Two years ago, her mother pulled her out of the convent and said she would never become useful if she stayed in the convent. She took Daisy back to their hometown. Two years later, Deisy now has a husband, and is pregnant with her third child.

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I think of the borderlands that is Yurimaguas: as the eyebrow of both the jungle and highlands; where Indigenous meets mestizaje, no formal education meets strict educational structures, and where girls meet each other and themselves, in a space as nuanced as their lives and writing.

I think about the even more complex and profound space that is this cloistered convent, on the edge of a town along a tributary of the Amazon, and in the center of complex and budding womanhood.

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An old blinding man, tenderly known as *el cieguito*, sits under an umbrella with his typewriter, waiting for stories. The town letter-writer. A line of people in front of him: the illiterate, the in-love, and the homesick, with letters on their tongues to be told to him, word for word, line by line. The desperation to tell stories is what brought me back here to collect their stories about God, coming of age, travel, and sexuality. By *here*, I do not mean the Plaza de Armas where *el cieguito* marks off his corner, in between the Catholic coloring book store and the *cremolada* shop; I do not mean the Convent where I've spent five months over the past two years collecting poetry about God, identity and women's sexuality; or Yurimaguas, or even Peru. By *Here*, I mean Latin America.

I think about the loci from which their life histories speak. The torno: revolving door of endless gossip, a bridge between the border of cloister and convent. The locutorio: the site of fathers begging daughters to come out, fathers threatening daughters *if* they come out, site of forbidden love and the temptation to break the vows of chastity. Their poetry is a site of confession and self-revelation. Their maps are explorations of their travel routes in between worlds and borders, from home to convent and girlhood to womanhood. Through the act of telling their life stories, they reveal a more complex history of América Latina, and re-claim its secret and secluded spaces, filling them with life and words.

I always knew that coming back to Latin America would reveal itself in parts, never complete, but in small partial truths spanning years. I pass *el cieguito*, his typewriter and his serpent-like line of storytellers, down Yurimaguas' main street to the convent. I arrive to the world of these sixteen girls and their sixteen notebooks filled with poetry about body parts they love and those they hate; maps and odyssey narratives about their journeys from home to convent and the excitement and loneliness they carried on the boats along the rivers; testimonial narratives about menstruation and transformation; their secrets, photographic self-portraits, life stories and declarations of womanhood.

I put this story, then, in the mouths of these girls and women because it is how I know the stories of Latin America, but also to give birth to the life, image and body of another América Latina: the one of girls who come of age in its convents. The one of girls negotiating its constant borderlands from behind the iron gate as strong as them, a strength I've come to know could only match that of women or God.

Te cuento también que ni ser aún no  
me llamo, no te preocupes por la situación  
yo se como resolverlo. Me hubiera gustado estar  
en la patrona de Agua Azul ¿estubo bonito  
berdad? espero que te ayos divertido. bueno,  
cumple lo que me prometiste, de regreso a  
casa te daré la foto, no te preocupes  
por eso, la estoy cuidando muy bien.  
diles que les mando muchos abrazos a toda  
# la familia y cuidade mucho ¿sí? -  
me despido con un fuerte abrazo  
Te quiero mucho  
Tu hermana

5

" Le pido a Dios que nos  
volveremos a ver "

-Maria-Josefina, 15

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Josefina, 15, excerpt from a letter-writing exercise

## Chapter 2 / Capítulo 2

*“Mi Poder es Hacer Volar Casas”:*

### *Collective Map from Home to Hogar*

*Warm-Up*

*-3 sets of acrylic paint*

*-Brushes of all sizes and textures*

*colores*

*-Two large poster board papers*

*Calentamiento*

*-3 trastes de pintura acrílica*

*-Pinceles de varios tamaños y*

*-2 pedazos grandes de papel*

*Sketch your hometown on a separate sheet of paper, without using any maps as aides.*

*Later, put everything together in a collective map*

*Dibuje tu pueblo natal en un papel separado, sin usar mapas como guías.*

*Luego, juntar todo en una mapa colectiva*

*Mi Poder es Hacer Volar Casas:*

Collective map from Home to *Hogar*

“I think she longed to dwell in the house my siblings and I grew up in all the days of her life, and in some ways, the four of us still dwell in our childhood home, carry it with us, like turtles carry their homes...”

-Pat Mora, “House of Houses” 1997

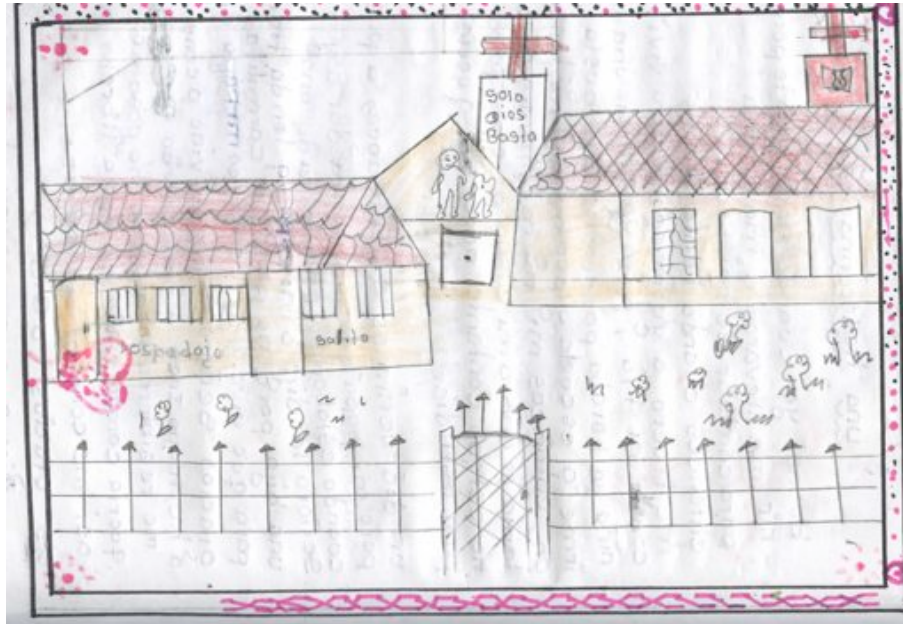
“[geographies] are not just dead background or a neutral physical stage for the human drama but are filled with material and imagined forces that affect events and experiences, forces that can hurt us or help us in nearly everything we do, individually and collectively”

-Edward Soja, “Seeking Spatial Justice” 2010

The literature of those who have migrated, whether regionally or transnationally rarely evoke only one place. It is rarely only about the place arrived; rather, just as present is the place that was left. What are the stories the girls of el Hogar la Buena Esperanza carry into this home? How is this hogar built of many hogares; what are the other rooms, the other beds, the other sounds that make up this room? I begin with the central notion of displacement in that the actual geographic distance from home of origin to this convent is physically and geographically huge. But as huge as that is, the conceptualized geographical



distance and the stories narrated around this journey, are even bigger. Although many of the girls have not been to their homes of origin for perhaps half their life, they remember their home of birth with the same detail as they could describe the convent, perhaps with the help of imagination.



El Hogar la Buena Esperanza is no one's first home; none of the sixteen girls, twenty two cloistered nuns who live inside its walls, or the two non-cloistered nuns were born here or anywhere near here. Yet, the name of this place endearingly plays off what it means, [*Hogar*: home], and among its residents it is called *La Casita*, or, *little home*. All of the girls and women who make up *La Casita* have once travelled far to arrive here, and without their family. Some arrived in order to become nuns, and others arrived at the suggestion of nuns who promised girls'

families free non-religious education, a place to sleep, food, clothes and a safe place for their daughters to grow. Unable to afford their daughters, the families agreed, and every January there are always a few new girls and a few new nuns who will start their life in *la casita*.

### *Rocío and the Guest Room*

The girls know my fear of ghosts, and my hesitancy with sleeping in the one room that faces the outside. “No te preocupes, Anita”, says Rocío, “eres una buena persona, y Jesusito de cuidará”.

Rocío me dijo que si me asusto en la noche, que reze a Jesusito. She told me to pray to the portrait of Jesus above my bed in the room they have placed me in, a separate room, though still inside the convent. In the dining room that floods when it rains, seventeen girls screamed and shrieked to their own stories about the ghosts that roam the convent. They told me that the convent sits on Yurimaguas’ first cemetery. They

47 know this because they see the old Spanish nun



6

kneeled at the first pew on the left...she is headless, and moans. They see her when they take turns to sweep the church at 6:30 at night, just before dinner. They know this because they see the mean, alcoholic father coming to bring his daughter back home. If you pray, he disappears. Rocío said she would be scared if she ever had to sleep in a room alone.

The convent holds a prominent place in the city of Yurimaguas. All the mototaxi drivers know where it is. After a week of being seen on the street with Madre G., buying fresh fish, ahí, toilet paper and other convent necessities, everywhere I walked alone to, I would be stopped by yelling motocar drivers: “Madrecita! Te llevó a las carmelitas!” (Madrecita (term for a young nun), let me take you to the convent). After a while, I stopped clarifying that I am not a nun.

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<sup>6</sup> Drawing by Elena

The convent lies at the other end of the Plaza de Armas, a tiny circle in the center of town with benches occupied by lovers and workers (on the days the city announces a strike, which is often). Padre J, a young favorite priest among the nuns, who offers his chauffeur services whenever the nuns want to take a field trip, told me that the corner of town where the convent is the best of Yurimaguas; that in a small radius, it has anything you ever need in life- the cemetery, the convent, the prison, and the discothèque.

The occasional teenager breaks in to the convent's *huerta*- a large garden with animals and vegetables) while everyone is at church and steals a chicken, or a monkey, but when he is caught, he is usually left in the prison for a few days before a nun tells the guards it is okay to let him go, asking him if he learned his lesson. The room I slept in for most of the time is the room drawn on the left of the drawing above, usually reserved for visiting nuns and the occasional family members who come to visit the girls. The windows are wooden bars, open to mosquitoes, thieves, and the singing prayers of the cloistered nuns at 4:45 every morning.

Las Carmelitas, as the town calls the convent is the place where town folk come to gossip and express worry, complaints, secrets through the revolving window called the *torno*. Madre A, the priora is in charge of listening to all of the above. It is also the place to purchase ice cream- coconut, strawberry, vanilla and chocolate. To buy ice cream it is simple. You ring the bell of the *torno*, Madre A says "ave maría purísima", you respond "sin pecado concebido", you place 50 centavos in the *torno*,

turn it around and say the flavor you would like. The 50 centavitos make the turn, and on the 360 full degrees turn, the small cup of ice cream is on the other side.

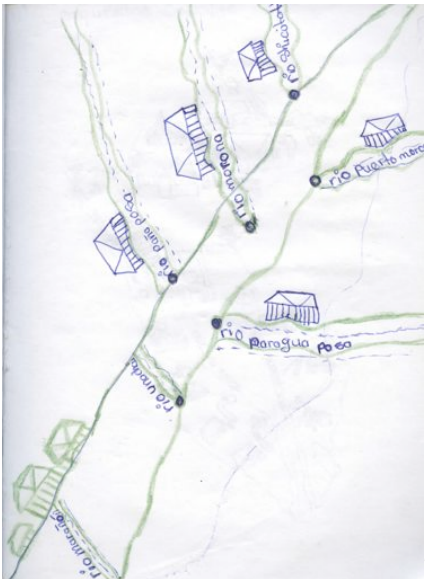
There are seven main areas in the convent: the church, the guest room, the classroom, the kitchen, the huerta, the cloister, and the upstairs where the girls share one large room where they sleep on bunkbeds.

### The Houses

*"Mi poder es hacer volar casas"*

*"I have the power to make houses fly"*

-Xuxi, 12



Women leaving their homes, either by force or by *voluntad*, has always produced epic literature about coming of age and womanhood. These girls' stories are no different- both in that the journey they embark on is epic, and in that it is an experience that they continue to narrate- fictionally and realistically- throughout their lives in different contexts.

There is a rich history of literature by women who have left home. The activities and samples of their writing I present in the rest of this book are all somewhat related to this initial journey of leaving home and coming of age

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing by Marlene

In “Their Eyes were Watching God”, the central character Janie, like the girls of El Hogar, moves from the house of birth: the house of her grandmother and what she alludes to as the house of the legacy of slavery. Janie’s journey and struggle lies in the fact that she tries to construct a home through men. Although she is teased with the taste of independence, it is quickly killed, because in the end, all the houses she moves into with men are men’s houses, built and kept by men. These structures never become *hers*. The only moment she is happy is in the tumultuous, unstable, always moving life she leads with Tea Cake, where poverty and restlessness prevent them from every building a home. Whatever they build that is close to “home” is never completely manifested in a stable house, but it is co-constructed. When they finally settle in a tent in a camp with fellow migrant swamp workers, there is a huge hurricane, where Tea Cake gets rabies, and Janie is forced to shoot him.

It is also after this, that she is able to return to the community of Eatonville, woman alone, to rebuild a life on her own terms; she has experienced true love which Tea Cake’s death has shown that the source of that love is her own self, and she may finally return to build a home of her own.

In this way, she experiences three major movements: leaving the house of her grandmother, the rejection and abandonment of the homes of her husbands to lead a life of romantic homelessness with Tea Cake, and the return to a place where no confining structure awaits her. In this way, the girls of El Hogar la Buena

Esperanza follow a similar trajectory of movement, where they must leave home in order to discover a sense of Self and sense of girlhood and womanhood.

I wonder how many homes are in this Casita; how many rooms are in this room where they gossip until morning, where they hide cell phones they are not allowed to have, where they send texts, fights, fall asleep in this space their share: how do all these homes, all these rooms, all these stories, fit in this room?



The Hogar la Buena Esperanza functions as a home: with all its ghosts, all its wars, all its growing pains, tensions, love, and all its life. But the place they endearingly call *La Casita*, is one they were forced to build; one they were forced to let their life and stories grow inside its walls. They come with the memory of past homes. Yet still, in its small enclosed, cloistered space of 6 rooms, a garden of animals and mud ovens, and a thin wall that separates girls from nuns, cloistered

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<sup>8</sup> drawing by Rocío

anywhere from two weeks to three decades; it is still a place that gives them inspiration, stories, experiences; simple on the outside, yet a labyrinth to move their imagination through from within.

And the stories produced here in the space, are also, like in any community or space of people who have immigrated or moved, the stories of past homes, of places of origin. De cada lugar, hay un origen.



I began the first class with a collective map, where they traced their routes and travel means on two large poster boards. For this activity, I had three sets of acrylic paints, brushes of all sizes and textures, and two large poster board papers, taped together on the back. I told them that their task was to collectively draw a map of

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<sup>9</sup> Picture taken by me, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011



Peru, which would include their home villages, the convent, the rivers they took to arrive at the convent, and any detail they wanted to add. I called it *el mapa emocional*, encouraging them to make the map as personal as possible.

We began with a discussion on maps. I asked them if they thought the maps they saw at school represented them, and if they could see themselves in those maps. A few were silent, and then several began shaking their heads, saying, “no, nos representa”. When I asked why, Xuxi said, “porque no esta la casita de mi abuelita”.



10

The only rules were that they could not use any official map for guidance, and that they had to decide among themselves how to use the small space of two poster board papers.



11

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<sup>10</sup> Picture taken by me, July 5th

<sup>11</sup> July 5th

## The Collective Map



12

*I think she longed to dwell in the house my siblings and I grew up in all the days of her life, and in some ways, the four of us still dwell in our childhood home, carry it with us, like turtles carry their homes...*

*-Pat Mora, "House of Houses"*

El Hogar la Buena Esperanza is not a place of origin for any of the girls or nuns who currently live here. None were born here or even close to the town, and many have experienced a significant journey that led them here. Though many of the girls (and girls turned nuns) would consider themselves to have grown up within the convent walls; it is not their first home. They share the memory of a home of origin, a first home, a home of family; and with that, another geography

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<sup>12</sup> July 4th

than the one the convent sits on. Whether they have arrived through being transitioned from several missionary homes first, lured into the bigger cities by those who search villages for young girls willing to take any job, sent because the family could not afford their daughters, or because their families wanted a better education for their daughters; I begin with a central notion of displacement. They are displaced because political and economic and social circumstances has made it so that the towns in which impoverished indigenous girls are born, cannot hold them, and so other far away places try.

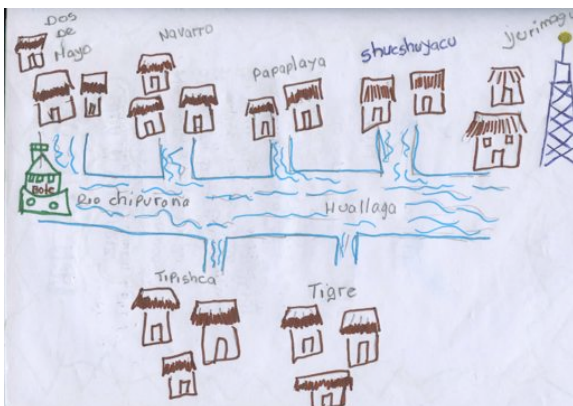
However, the existence of a first home, or place, of origin cannot be merely simplified or condensed down to this term (displacement) of tremendous political weight. Because within this central theme of displacement there exists a hundred different individual reasons, memories and stories that each girl writes of this. If the geographical distance that these girls span from home of origin to Hogar la Buena Esperanza, then the conceptualized distance of these geographies is even bigger, if we focus on the stories that they narrate around them.

Although I wanted them to write as much of their own individual experience, there are certain things that in certain ways make each, part of a collective story of these sixteen girls. In this activity, a collective map of each individual home of origin and travel route taken to the Hogar, visually represents the borders they crossed to arrive at the convent.



13

As I discuss later in this chapter, at the same time that they visually represent their expansive geographical journeys and crossings from home to Hogar, they are also visually representing their journeys into female maturity, because of the links they make between this journey and their transition from girlhood into womanhood. The reason the convent chose to build a house for girls is not because of an emotional pre-disposition to girls; it is because daughters are our most forgotten members, and girls our last oppressed class.



14

How does this collective map, drawn within the cloistered walls of a convent, contribute, form part of, or contest national narratives of history and migration? The collective map gives them

<sup>13</sup> July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<sup>14</sup> Drawing by Manuela

a creative presence in this region, and visualizes the trajectory that led them to where they are now. What is interesting is that memory never fails them; they remember in great detail the shapes of rivers they crossed in length, the names of towns they visited along the way, the lay-out of their native communities, and as one girl pointed out, the way the jungle always changes shape and colors.

Drawn and narrated from the personal perspective of sixteen girls, this collective map gives a different visual of this region, as well as a particular history of girls.

As I mentioned above, young women leaving their homes and communities of birth has been producing beautiful literature all around the world for a long time. Like Janie (the fictional character who inspired me to collect girls' stories in the first place) in Hurston's novel, who has to leave home to find herself, the girls of Yurimaguas use their epic journey, distances travelled and borders crossed as the central plot of their coming of age stories and poetry about womanhood.

Their narratives and map show that when we leave home, we leave more than the walls that enclose us. Leaving home, for Janie, was leaving a generation of freed slaves who still acted like slaves, as Janie explains. Leaving home has never been simple nor reduced to one meaning.

And like these characters, returning home is often difficult and seldom. In the case that they do return home, as these girls both sometimes expect they will and dream they won't; they return after experiencing a transformation (as they

describe it). Some anticipate their return in terms of improving their communities; building clean water infrastructure, helping people know their rights, etc. No girl expressed the desire to return to marry and have children. As one girl said, leaving was a way to show that she wasn't just meant to have children; that she could do other important things first.

In this way, this map and these activities allow them to give meaning to their experiences and give them a space to create their own purposes for themselves. After a few minutes of discussion, Rocío and a few other older girls decided that they would divide the map by those who travelled mostly by river and those who travelled somewhat by land. That way, the group who spent days on riverboats would design the layout of one side, and vice versa.

All of them remembered or imagined their hometowns and travel routes with great detail.



15

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<sup>15</sup> Pictures taken by me, July 2011

I place this activity first because it shows the collectivity of their experience, or of what is produced if we conceive of our experiences as at least partially collective. Shown here are their place of origin, their communities, their early girlhoods, their travel routes and their collective destination to a place that holds a powerful distinct metaphor in the emerging lives of each. There is a rich wordless story on this map, all of which follows this chapter. In their emerging womanhoods, their home towns, experience of travel and convent surge as powerful metaphors, whether writing female-centered myths, menstruation narratives, identity portraits or odes to loved and hated body parts.

More than just the experience of sharing this Casita; they also share the experience of a past home; of leaving one home-one geography- for another. Soja says:

Although some may think this to be too obvious to mention, the spatiality of human life must be interpreted and understood as fundamentally, from the start, a complex social product, a collectively created and purposeful configuration and socialization of space that defined our contextual habitat, the human and humanized geography in which we all live out our lives. Such socialized lived space, constructed out of physical and natural spatial forms, mentally and materially intertwines with our socialized lived times to create our biographies and geo-histories”(*Seeking Social Justice*, 19)

Their geographies: those left, those travelled through and those arrived at, play a large role in their sense of this shared place.

In this way, this collective map represents their geohistories, with elements of memory and imagination toward their spatial past and present. Soja addresses the power of imagination in the creation of geohistories: “Human life is consequently and consequentially spatial, temporal, and social, simultaneously and interactively real and imagined. Our geographies, like our histories, take on material form as social relations become spatial but are also creatively represented in images, ideas, and imaginings” (18).



Yurimaguas 02 de Julio del 2010

Señora: Deisi Mendoza Huadinea

Querida y estimada mamita que te  
en cuentos bien de salud en unión  
de mis hermanas y pasa a contarte  
lo siguiente

Que durante estos meses que estoy  
en el ambiente estoy tranquila y  
me siento como que estuviese en  
mi casa y con las chicas me  
dibiero mucho con ellas juego, río  
y akezes cantamos y comparto  
algunas cosa que te. ese estado  
lo que tiere contar chavvy  
aafa otra obordenida  
te quiero mucho  
atentamente tu  
hija Horibel

“Tu Silencio esta como si el Árbol no se  
Moviera”:

An Ode to the Hometown I left Behind

*Warm-up*

*Calentamiento*

*-1 metaphor*

*-1 metáfora*

*-2 similes*

*-2 símil*

*-2 words in another language*

*-2 palabras en otra idioma que*

*hablas*

*you speak,*

*-Nombrar un lugar físico en*

*tu pueblo*

*-to name one physical place in that town.*

## Hometowns, Convents, and the Rivers in between

“If radical Mozambique speaks Portuguese,  
the significance of this is that Portuguese is the  
medium through which Mozambique is imagined”

-Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities” 1991

The river is a source of life and mythology in this region, and plays a large role in memory and imagination. In the following three main activities- odes to hometowns, poems about leaving home and travelling, and invented myths with the creation of female protagonists-the river almost always plays a central role in the writing. In a sense, it is the one constant between their hometowns and Yurimaguas: the revolving of a community around its river source.

The most important places conjured in these activities are their places of origin, the river, and their places of arrival. The examples from this activity also reveal a hidden story of regional migration; showing their hometowns/origins as a place of nostalgia, and the convent as a place of transition, always with a river in between.

The uniqueness of their situation is that they are not immigrants; yet neither is immigration nor Latin American literature closed and rigid categories. In a sense, what they write has elements of migratory literature and reveal similar sentiments

that immigration produces. Like much of literature of displacement, what is expressed is a deep nostalgia and love of the hometown, as well as a difficulty in returning. They are thus, like most migrants, trapped somewhere in a conceptual and geographic middle: straddling several borders both within and without them. And like most migratory literature, they prove that one can still have a love and nostalgia for a place in more than one language. The girls told me that on the rare and sporadic occasions they return home, they are made fun of for living in “the big city”, yet here in Yurimaguas when they go to their schools, they are made fun of for their indigenusness (even though all the other students are indigenous, but they did not grow up in small villages).

The following activities and the literature they produced speak to indigenous Latin America as well as a regional and gendered Latin American context. Regionally, the river is both what takes them back home, in memory and actuality, and what takes them away from home. It is through the river that they leave home, and through the river that they reconstruct their memory of home and travel. The river is represented not only as a source of travel and life in the poems about their hometowns and memory of travel; but it is also a place of mythical and imaginative transformation in the invention of woman-centered legends. In their invented legends, the mythology and function of the river play a large role in their coming of age and construction of womanhood, representing the river as a great source of knowledge and transformation.

*Tu silencio esta como si el árbol no se moviera*<sup>17</sup>:

An Ode to the hometown I left behind

“Una oda es un poema dedicado a algo que amas tanto que no puedes olvidar”

-Rosita, 12

Rosita told me that one-day she hopes to go back to her hometown, but she has no desire to start a family yet. Her aunt told her that she should become a lawyer, and now she has set her mind to be one. If I go back to my hometown, she says, it will be as a lawyer so that I can help all the people I know.

Whether the girls imagine returning to their hometowns as lawyers, doctors, teachers, or just to visit; they all share that hope: that one day they will return, though as different and transformed people. As Maru said, “Yo sí voy a regresar a mi pueblo, pero cuando sea toda una señorita”. And whether they left their hometowns in desperate necessity or in search of education and shelter, I find a sort of love and nostalgia expressed for the place that raised them. In this way, many of the girls view their hometown as the place that raised them, and the convent as the place that makes them women. Both equally monumental in their lives and in the narratives they create about their lives.

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<sup>17</sup> From a poem written by Luz

Nostalgia especially plays a large role in this next activity, “Oda a mi Pueblo”.

Nostalgia is a feeling that is constant throughout their work, especially through expressing an *añoranza* to return.

The Hogar is the only place where they feel comfortable talking about their hometowns and places or origin, but even this has taken time to build the trust for. The girls are rarely asked about their hometowns at school. They have even expressed embarrassment in talking about where they are from, because they say most people at school will make fun of them and ask them stupid questions. They carry the memory of their hometown almost like a secret; something only to dream about and remember during an occasional phone call from home. Through this process, they say that they also begin to forget the language spoken at home. Despite this, the girls’ distinct hometowns—whether left months ago or years ago—are present in their writing, whether through metaphor or explicitly. The activity today revolved around remembering their hometown and giving it importance in their present life. After reading Pablo Neruda’s “Alturas de Machupichu” (*La Lampara en la Tierra*, 1991), they opened up their imagination and memory of the places and landscapes that they have travelled through and that they come from. I chose Neruda’s poem because of its use of similes, metaphors, and words in indigenous languages used, all of which I asked them to pick out.

After reading the poem and discussing favorite or interesting words and themes, I asked them to write a poem about their hometowns. At a young age, they

make a major journey, not only emotional in that they leave their hometowns, families and languages, but also a physical one, crossing various rivers over days, and crossing several geo-cultural borders. They made a map of their country as they experience it (Chapter 2), including the places they have been, the places that raised them, and the routes through which they travelled. This ode-writing activity focused more explicitly on the home town itself. In the poem, I asked them to use the following:

1 metaphor

2 similes

2 words in another language they speak, and  
to name one physical place in that town.

They seemed a little overwhelmed but excited to write an ode to their hometown. They talked among themselves, giving each other ideas, asking what the other will write, and many copying the first line from Neruda's poem. Yessica, a relatively quiet girl, stood up and said,

“yo voy a escribir, ‘Alturas del Convento’, and they all laughed.

Neruda's poem, though not strictly in ode form, mainly served as an exercise in imagination, not only for its creativity and play with language, but because it provided them as a way to imagine Peru outside of the jungle. Asking them to include words in their indigenous languages was a way to break what they term as the embarrassment of using indigenous languages, to play with literary devices, and as an exercise in memory and imagination as well.

Although these girls are not immigrants (they were all born in Peru), their work and life histories reflect a kind of *fronterizo* or migratory literature, as I mentioned previously, because not only do they cross geographic and ethnic borders to arrive at this convent; they also develop a *fronterizo* identity, both in the negotiation of the borders and transition between girlhood and womanhood, and in the exploration of the complex identity questioning that is experienced at being uprooted away from a traditional setting.

In this way, their work, especially the odes to their hometowns, like in most literature of immigration, exile and displacement, conjure two very important places: the place of origin, and the place of arrival. The hometown is never absent from narratives about the convent, and the convent is no longer ever absent from narratives about home. These two places become intrinsic parts of their identity and the narratives that form around this identity. They can no longer ever be from just one place. These examples, the odes to their hometowns, are the beginnings of a migratory sensitivity I find throughout all their work: the hometown/origin as a place of nostalgia, and the convent as a place of transition.

I asked the class why Neruda wrote an homage to Machu Pichu, and not to a person. Rosita, the most recent member, quiet yet always writing, said, “because sometimes you can love a place as much as a person.”



*Pacaya Samiria*

*OH, Lago de lindos colores y bellos  
Paisajes, que con el alba de cada día  
Das vida a todos los animales y ellos  
Estan agradecidos por tener el lago  
Más hermoso del mundo.*

*OH, lago eres como un manantial  
De hermosas cascadas que parecen  
Esmeraldas, tines los mayores  
Secretos de la selva peruana que  
Parecen tesoros ocultos.*

*Lago de flores hermosas que con tu  
Aroma perfumas el bello cantar de  
Las aves, Lago ingreido que no dejas  
Sacar los bellos animales que viven  
Dentro de ti y yawepi kapakankan.  
FIN.*

*Yawepi: viven  
Kapakankan: felices  
Idioma Shawi*



Their odes to their

hometowns show this kind of

love and a nostalgia steeped in love of origin, in the memory of early girlhood, of playing with the geography that gave them their first memories: the *quebradas*<sup>18</sup>, the rivers; always the water: a source of life, travel and myth.

In Elena's ode to her hometown, Pacaya Samiria, she gives homage to the lake that her town revolves around. In Elena's particular case, she first left her hometown at age seven, when missionaries convinced her parents that she was better off in a

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<sup>18</sup> Small enclaves of water, like a swimming hole, usually with small waterfalls

missionary home in another town, and then two years later to the convent, where she is soon celebrating her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In her poem, the lake and the landscape are seen as a source of life. She describes the waterfall as a holder of all the jungle's secrets. Like in most of the poems, there is an admiration for the uniqueness of the water source, and a sense that there is no place like it. There is also a warning to the lake to not let its animals and life be taken away from it, because they are happy there.



*Alturas de Jeberos  
Por Rocío*

*Misterioso pueblito,  
Muéstranos tu encanto que tienes  
escondido*

*Esta noche saldrá tu  
reina del Jeberos como una  
diosa encantadora esmeralda*

*Jeberos, que bello encanto  
escondes bajo tus extrañas  
es como una joya difícil de  
conseguir*

*En Jebero,  
el aire es como un cucero (word in  
Shawi)  
que nos empieza a templar*

*Los piyapis que llegan  
al lugar conversan con  
un espíritu de alivio*

*Porque Yusparin a ellos  
las maravillas que encontramos  
son el encanto de misterioso pueblito*

*Como dicen los shiwilas*



-Por Lourdes

*Son las plantas sus hojas vuelan  
De ramas.  
Vuela el vacío de sus ramas,  
La planta dura de su vida  
Del bosque  
OH, planta, eres sonores de sus  
Hojas que son hermosos, verdes  
Hojas como una mariposa de  
Colores, eres planta relámpago  
Que tienes colores. Dicen los shawis  
Las plantas se marchitan cuando se  
Le toman, eres como una nipi (shawi:  
hormiga)  
Es lugar que es muy hermoso  
Que hay muchos bosques.  
Es el pueblo shawi*

In the previous two odes by Rocío and Lourdes, both Shawi though from distinct villages, the memory and identity conveyed in both is an indigenous one, talking about the importance of the land and natural resources to the Shawi people. In these poems, the girls, as individuals, share a collective identity with the Shawi people and hold the same values as them too.

For Rocío, her hometown Jeberos is like a hidden jewel. Like Elena's poem, Rocío's poem represents her hometown like an enchantment, or a secret, hidden to those who are not from there. She asks Jeberos: *what wonders do you hide underneath your insides?* She included three words in Shiwilo, the indigenous language of her hometown, and she ends the poem by saying, "como dicen los shiwila, nuestro pueblo es un cofre lleno de encantos"

The inclusion of this last part demonstrates an homage not only to the landscape she

remembers and that raised her, but also an homage and recognition of importance to the traditional local knowledge of place and the sayings of ancestors and community members. At the same time that she remembers and describes her hometown, she also gives voice to the stories of those who still live there and who did not leave as she did.

*Los Hermosos ríos de San Lorenzo  
Por Manuela*

*Soy de la selva  
Como las danzas folklóricas  
Entre las pihta (fiestas).*

*Tus ríos caudalosos que suenan  
Como gritos de los animales  
Que cuando creces arrastras todo  
Que encuentras.*

*Pero eres tan hermoso como un niño,  
Porque nos ayudas a navegar por tu río  
Que nos ayudas, con tus manos no  
empujas  
Hasta nuestro pueblo*

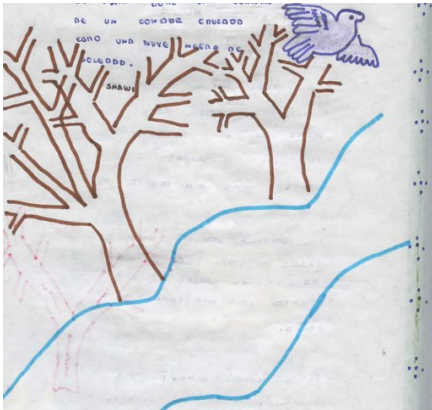
*Y tus alrededores son hermosos  
Porque lo tienes todo los que otros no lo  
tienen  
Tu tienes isha (río) que nos vamos a  
Samitarawe (pescar) en tu isha  
hermoso*

*Eres tan hermoso que existe en  
Un'panuwe (mi tierra), eres  
incomparable  
Te quiero con todo mi corazón*



Manuela writes that she is from the jungle, just like folk dances are from the jungle. Similar to the other odes, Manuela invokes the uniqueness of her hometown with a focus on its landscape. *You have what no one else has*, she says, *and that is why you are beautiful*. Most of her love toward her hometown is toward its rivers, showing that the river is a monumental force in her life and stories, both as a huge symbol in the memory of home, and also as the force that took her (and all of them) away from home.

She says to her river: *you are beautiful like a child/because you help us navigate you/because you help us/and with your hands you push us back home*.



### *Poema de donde vivo*

*-Por Maria Rosa*

*Era una linda y hermosa ciudad de  
Sonrizas, yo te amo con todo mi  
Corazón, porque es mi ciudad de donde  
Yo vivo y me trae mucho recuerdos  
Por donde yo paseaba y por  
Toda la ciudad eres la más  
Hermosa. Te amo tanto por  
Eso te escribo esta linda y  
Hermosa poema que te  
Escribo con cariño y amor  
Por ser la ciudad limpia y  
Ordenada y por que me diste  
La grandeza de ser una chica  
Buena y ordenada para siempre  
Te amo mucho sanamidiza?*

*En la hermosa zona,  
Se oscurece como  
El silencio de un bosque  
Solitario y vuelan los aves  
Como gitanas de*

In Maria Rosa's poem, like in most, the main source of appreciation and love comes from the feeling that this place-the hometown they write about-is what formed a large part of who they are. They think of it with fondness, because they have the memory to do so. She says that she remembers the places she used to walk through. Not only does she think of her hometown as beautiful, but this poem also shows the admiration she has for her own creativity and writing ability. This poem is interesting, because she says it is the place where birds return, but also where birds act like gypsies, travelling from one place to another.



*Las hermosas quebradas  
de santa cruz*

*-Por Maru*

*Altura de las quebradas*

*Sube conmigo, amor peruano  
Ve el agua de mi  
Quebrada de mi pueblo, las  
Plenas aguas de la quebrada*

*Huele el vacio de la enredadera  
Con sus aguas hermosas que  
Admira las personas y la  
Ternura que tienen hacia ti.*

*Eres la werawe<sup>1</sup> para  
Las plantas, animales, y personas.*

*Como las maravillas de los andes  
Que tus aguas es como resbaladero  
De una estrella*



This poem shows not only a fondness of memory toward the quebradas (small enclaves of river, where the water is still, usually where kids play and people wash their clothes), but also an admiration and a love of water as the place that made girlhood fun; as a source of “werawe” (life in Shawi) for everything living.

Most people in the region grow up around the quebrada; it is a place of myth-making, danger warnings, daily cleansing and playing. The reason why water (rivers, quebradas, etc.) are so present in mythology is that they are present in every day life. In this poem, the quebrada is not just a source of folklore but one of essential life and the central physical place that defines part of their experience of Peru.



*El Lago Cuipari  
Por Marlene*

*Es un lugar muy hermoso y atractivo  
Para todas las personas con sus  
aguas  
Que corre corre como una bala y los  
pajarillos  
Cantan sin parar porque son muy  
felices  
Por tener un lugar muy hermoso  
Los habitantes de ese lugar viven  
feliz,  
Toman sus mazatos y comiendo su  
pescado  
Con su vino y platano  
Las flores y los arboles son muy  
Felices y los bosques  
De atardecer los animales vuelven a  
sus  
Nidos.  
Y al anochecer los animales  
nocturnas cantan  
Con alegría.  
Eres lo mejor mi hermoso lago  
cuipari*



*Mi Dulce Paisaje*

*-Por Carmela*

*OH, Pacaya Samiria de  
Dulce paisaje, eres el  
Pulmón del mundo con  
Flora y Fauna.*

*Por eso que existes, en los  
Lagos hermosos  
Que bajan en los isha (rios),  
Las escalas, en un paraíso total.*

*En la carpada zona, tana  
(bosque),  
Verdes, que mantiene los rios  
Vivos como un nuevo sueño  
De alegría*

In Marlene's ode to Lago Cuipari, and Carmela's ode to her town Pacaya Samiria, there is again a love of water, and an admiration of water as a source of life and happiness. Marlene says that the water on the lake she grew up on runs like bullets: always moving. She describes the daily life and routines of those in the community, such as drinking masato (a yucca-based drink made by chewing yucca and chewing the residue into a large pot), and eating *wino* (Shawi for plátano [bananas in this region]). There is a great deal of love and mythology around life on the lake. Her poem ends with a similar metaphor as Elena's in that it evokes an imagery of *returning*: she ends her poem with saying that all animals who live off what the lake provides return to their nests when the sun begins to descend.



In Carmela's poem, she uses the word *river* several times in both Spanish and Shawi. In almost all of these poems, their hometown seems to have a secret to be found, one that only that town knows. There is a heavy feeling of nostalgia to return and find that.

*Sangabriel de Varadero*

*-Por Antonieta*

*OH varadero de lindos  
Paisajes y ríos hermosos  
Y montañas altas.*

*Quiero saber más allá  
De las montañas para  
Quedarme allí y transformarme  
En un salvaje tigre*

*Chiminsarin, y yawepi (muriendose y viviendo  
junto a ti).*



Returning to the idea of nostalgia, in Antonieta's ode we see a desire to return to her hometown, if only just to get to know it better. In this poem, there is equally a desire to *return*, and a desire to *know* something she could not have known before. She wants to know and discover more beyond just the places she played in

when she was younger. Instead, she wants to turn into a wild tiger and explore all she does not know of her hometown.

\* \* \*

Many of these poems depict some sort of metaphor of the convent, and an allegory of leaving their hometown, whether it is in animal form where animals need to return by sunset and want to find the lake or town intact, or stated directly in the form of a girl who waits to return one day. This shows their particular experience with their hometown: a place they left that they hope to one-day return. We see evidence of them conjuring the convent and their experience of travelling to it, in that their odes to their hometowns are not just homages to the town itself, but they are underlined with another narrative: that of wanting to return. But in the evoking of both hometown and convent, there is rarely a distinction of good vs. bad when it comes to them; each holds a special place in their heart and memory, and each have their functions.

Part of their identity is rooted in the physical place that raised them in their young womanhood. The other part is rooted in the convent, which is the mold of their maturity and femininity. While the convent holds great importance and influence in the construction of their adult womanhood, what their odes to their hometowns show, is an intimate nostalgic literary return to this important place they have left. In this way they both demonstrate the physical crossing of borders,

from home to convent/ from village to river, from river to Yurimaguas, from indigenous village to urban mestizo space; and emotional one of re-imagining its stories, its tastes, its sights, sounds and every day life.

What borders does the writing in this activity reflect being crossed or negotiated?

We have the border crossing between home and convent, mainly, but because of the nature of the place from which they write: Yurimaguas, there is also the border between rural and urban. The physical places, the nature, the landscape are super emphasized here, because it is the main geographic difference between village life and city life.

Manuela finished her poem: *you are beautiful like a child/because you help us navigate you/because you help us/and with your hands you push us back home*. This is such a powerful metaphor of her own life and relationship to her hometown. It tells a story of leaving home and arriving somewhere else (“you help us navigate you”), but it also shows the nostalgia of that place (the desire to return), and the imagination of re-crossing that border in a future (“with your hands you push us back home”).

How does being at the convent influence the way they think about their hometowns? Why do some narratives produce sadness or negative feelings about hometowns and families, and why do others evoke nostalgia and yearning? These examples show the multiple images and layers they use in remembering their hometowns and in re-crossing the borders to their hometowns from within the text. What subjectivities and identities are produced in remembering the hometown from the convent? Benedict Anderson says, "If radical Mozambique speaks Portuguese, the significance of this is that Portuguese is the medium through which Mozambique is imagined" (1983) In the same way, the convent is the space and medium through which hometowns are imagined, places are remembered, and insights on the convent are revealed.

What is the tie that binds them all to their hometowns? It is the fact that they all share the reality of not being from here; of having a hometown that is far away.

Yurimaguas 02-07-10  
para: papa Alejandro Tanga ch.  
estimo de papá te saludo  
con mucho cariño y paso  
decirte lo siguientes  
pocas palabras ya que sabado  
esto cumpleaños.  
papi te mando este pequeño  
papel para Felicitarte de tu  
cumpleaño y lo pases muy  
Feliz ya que yo no estoy  
a tu lado pero desde lejos  
te Felicito ya que no tengo  
regalos para regalarte  
solo te mando desde el profundo  
de mi corazón un beso y un  
abrozo, papi papáomejor te  
Felicito Feliz cumpleaños papa  
Alejandro.  
ATTE.  
TU HIJA

19

“Como Llegé al Convento”:  
Sensory Travel Poems About the Journey from  
Home to Convent

*Calentamiento, 4 de Julio*

*Day 14 of classes.*

*Day 2 of region-wide teacher's strike*

\*

*Cuando digo sabor, en que piensas?*

Sangre, humo.

*cebolla.*

*Cuando digo sonido, en que piensas?*

,

*la lisura del cuerpo,*

la madre del torno gritándome...

*Cuando digo tocar y olor, en que piensas?*

,

tocar el suelo sucio, humo,

*tocar un libro,* tocar mi cuello...

\*

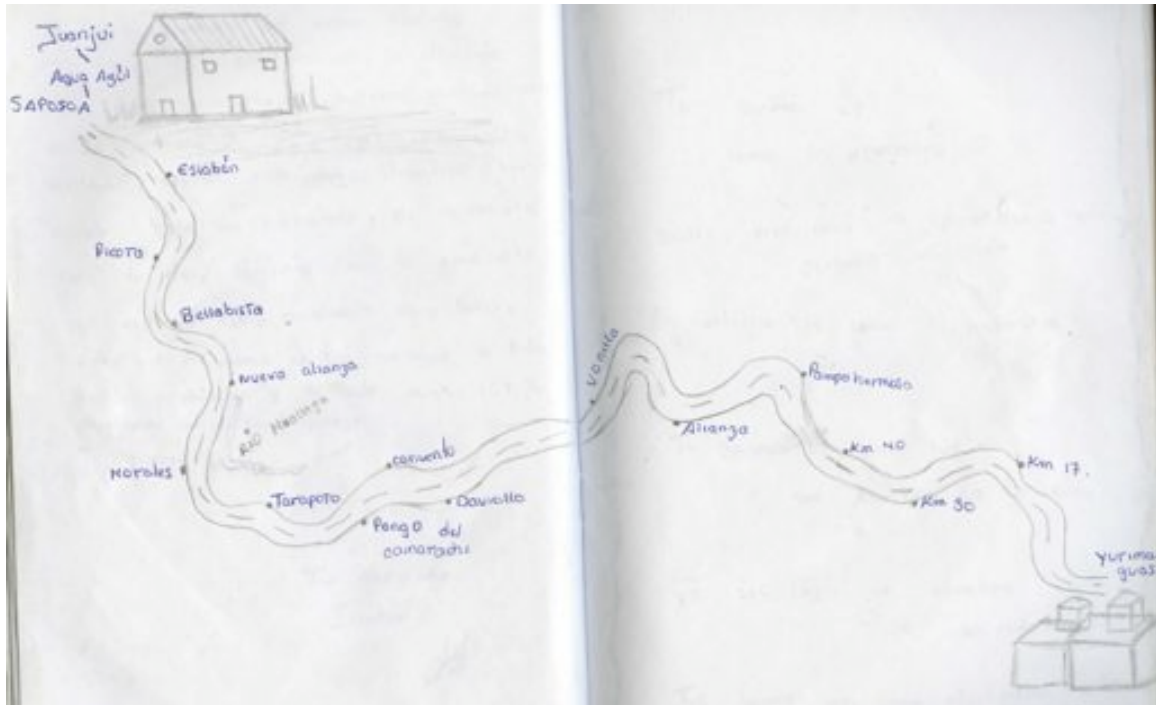
*Piensa en esto, y luego, escribir tu favorito, y tu menos favorito para cada categoría.*

\*

*Ahora, por favor piensa sobre tu primer viaje a Yurimaguas. Piensa en las sensaciones, piensa en los detalles, y en las emociones de ese viaje. Se acuerdan? Luego, escribe un poema sobre tu primer viaje a Yurimaguas. ¿A qué sonaba? A que sentía? A que olía? Que sabor tenía tu viaje? .... Escríbelo en cualquier forma que desees.*

## Como Llegué al Convento:

Sensory travel poems about the journey from home to convent



20

At age 14, Marlene travelled on Río Parapapura, then on Río Amazona and later the remaining hours by road, in order to arrive at the Hogar la Buena Esperanza. She remembers the sound of that trip as: *sha sha sha*. Most of the girls have a memory of a sound they attribute to their journey from home to convent. There is a sense of girlhood that is key to understanding their remembering of this journey, in the sense that their girlhood is largely defined by this major journey, and

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<sup>20</sup> Marlene, 14

also in the sense that they often attribute this journey as the first step in transitioning into womanhood.

Although the writing in this activity also reveals insights into the significance of home; this activity focuses on this trip as an epic journey in their lives: the day they leave home to travel to the convent, and the (often) days the journey itself takes.

Seen intimately, this activity reflects an epic journey embarked by girls who perceive the trip as their first experience of independence and of becoming women. The reason the journey is hugely important and present in their lives and other narratives is not just because it was fun, but that they are at an age and point in their life where they are defining their womanhood, and part of what they believe makes them women is that they have left their families, thus looking at the journey as a rite of passage toward independence. The girls treat this journey as a rite of passage into womanhood and independence, forever associating the two. This journey has become a powerful symbol in their lives and in the way they think about their future as women both in and of itself, and in the region.

This journey into a new city, a new way of living and new experiences gives another story, another depth to Latin American and feminist experience; another look at how girls become women, another look at how we define literature of migration; another look at coming of age in marginal places.

This activity shows more of the individual and intimate experience each girl had with her own journey. In re-creating this journey, new life stories emerge. In focusing on the sensory experience, hundreds of their own micro-stories were



opened up to them. The activity partially functioned as a way to think about their experiences, and begin to value them, but it also shifted the focus to the body. The examples of their writing are presented below, and each lead us as readers to focus on *experience*-this particular experience- and how it was experienced in and through the body.

I chose the focus on the body and the senses in this poem, because the body is our closest link to making sense of the way we physically experience something. Feminist theorist Sara Castro-Klarén says “What I find most promising in all these [feminist] debates is the return of the woman’s body as a constitutive part of the historical and with it the recuperation of the concept of lived experience” (*Women’s Writing in Latin America*, 15)

I wanted them to use their bodies to remember. I wanted them to see their body as an entity that *can* remember; that *can* produce creativity, knowledge, *memory*... A focus on the body leads us to a deeper understanding of *experience*. Kathleen Canning says, “Indeed, because much of the provocative rethinking and recasting of these terms has taken place outside of history, attempts to redefine keywords in the vocabulary of social history and women’s history-*experience*, *agency*, *discourse*, and *identity*-must be embedded in debates across disciplines” (*Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*, 45). Canning goes on to say that most of the redefining of these words have taken place “outside of history” (45). For this reason, I created an activity that would at the least, produce narratives of experience outside of history in that the central knowledge-maker and focus is the intimacy of senses. What these girls have actually done in re-creating their

memories is battle against pre-established dominant knowledges as well as pre-established dominant borders and ways to cross them. Canning says:

Women's history and feminist theory have long relied on similar notions of experience as mediating between the experiences of sexual oppression and the development of feminist consciousness and as creating the basis for unity or identity among women (49)

Canning sites feminists as using experience as the foundation of new knowledge and new culture (49). Some, however, have criticized the notion of experience, saying it has been used as uncontested evidence, as fact, and one that exploits and objectifies "otherness". But, when we have identities that are established only by the individuals who carry them; whose bodies are otherwise worked and cloistered, then a perspective-a grounding-of experience is very useful. It is useful in this particular project because it is new, it represents stories they have never told, to each other, likely to themselves, and never asked to share it out loud.

Experience, especially in the case of their journeys, the way they've experienced them, and the ways they conceptualize the journeys, is not an account of the factual, linear, raw events of a trip with a start and end point, but a journey into the inner lives of girls and of events outside of dominant patterns of history, as well as outside their own cultures. These journeys are uniquely theirs; and should be theirs to be spoken for.

I draw on the similarities that these journeys had for each girl, mainly, the emotions around independence from their families for the first time in their lives.

At first I decided to make this activity more of a game; because the point, at least for my reason for creating it, was not to remember the exact accounts of travel, but to play with memory and imagination; to play with an experience- a moment- in their lives that is intensively intimate and personal, because they experienced it alone. This trip, for all of them, was a moment that combined a mix of hardship, sadness, dramatic change, and at the same time, adventure.

I believe it is building stories about our lives that allow us to continue living and to struggle through hardship. I wanted them to play with images, with smells, whether real or not. Memory exists on a whole other level, and it is this level, this space, that I wanted them to access for this activity. Essentially, this is their forgotten geography; not even the sixteen girls who share this space share the same travel route; they share a strong similarity, though. They share the long distances, the journey, the leaving behind of a home, and the arrival to this convent. Within these micro stories, however, exist many different rivers, different boats, types of boats, smells, experiences, distances, and different geographies.

Their collective map in the previous chapter shows the actual routes; their memory of their home villages and the imagination it took to map a journey, for some not long ago and others years. The map shows the collectivity they are able to create when asked to, and the distances that these girls have traveled.

All of these activities that have to do with mapping, travel and movement contest the feminist rejection of all linear and binary (to an extent) thinking. These

activities contest it not only because they present new histories, new geographies, new routes, and new stories, but also because they are unique experiences for these particular girls, outside of any traditional pattern of their communities, and because in this activity, they are used as a source of writing creative poems. What they write is material for new subjectivities.

This activity, poems about the sensory experience of their epic journey from home to convent, provided a space, and reason for them to begin to build a relationship with their own journey and how they experienced it. They use their own experience as the material from which to, in memory and writing, return to the site of this major journey, to re-place herself back on a boat years or months before, describing the smells, sights, tastes that she may or may not have smelled, seen, or tasted. What matters here is the way they choose to present their experience of the trip. Their sense of girlhood is key to understanding the way they depict this journey as a rite of passage, because most attribute this journey, their separation from their family, and the independence that comes with it to the departure of girlhood as well.

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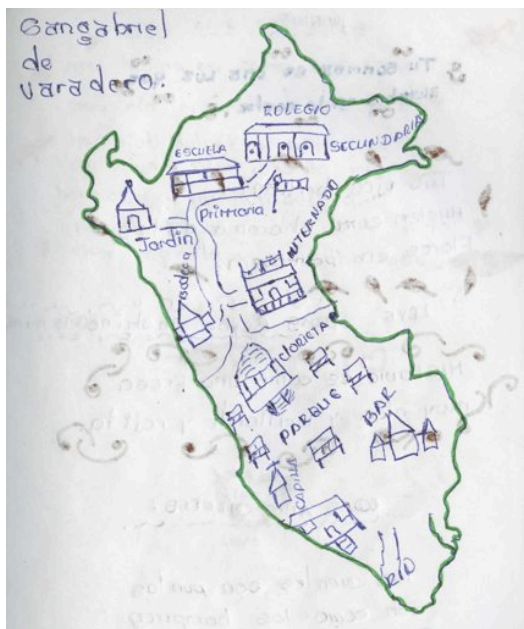
For a warm-up, I asked them to write a simile about travel. They wrote their similes, and shared them in class after ten minutes of brainstorming and writing. Then, in groups of three, they had to think of a mode of transportation, with two rules: they could not name the transportation, and they could not name anything with sight. They could only describe sounds, tastes and smells. Between the three of

them, they had to form a tiny spoken poem describing these sensations, while the other groups had to call out what form of transportation it was.

After this fun warm up, I told them to write a poem about how they arrived at the convent, a travelogue, anecdote, poem where they had to mention at least one color, one sound, one taste, one smell, and to describe in depth the bodily experience of the days or weeks on their mode of transportation.

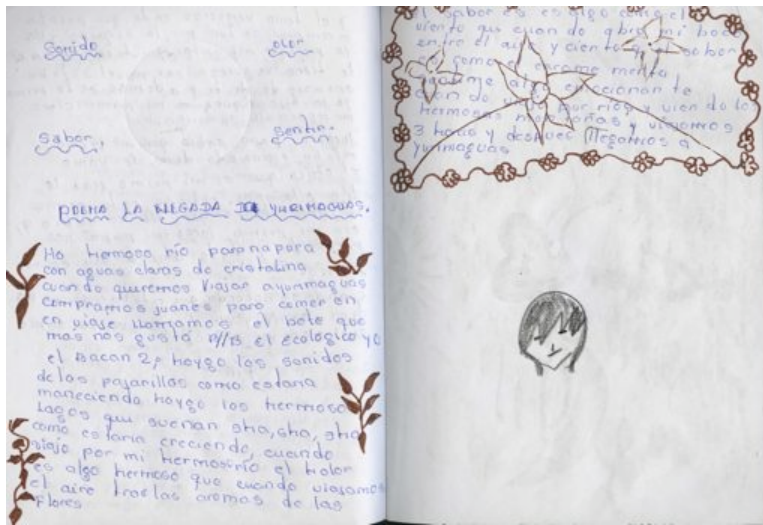
They were very engaged with the writing, first drawing individual maps of where they left from, and then filling it in with the sensory stories.

*Marlene*



Marlene first drew the layout of her town, San Gabriel de Varadero, and then drew the route between home and convent so she could fill it with her poem, or so that it would give her inspiration for her poem. Drawing the town first seemed to be a way to remember the trip.





### *Poema de la llegada a Yurimaguas*

*O, hermoso río paranapura  
con aguas claras de cristalina  
cuando queremos viajar a Yurimaguas  
compramos Juanes para comer en el viaje.*

*Llamamos el bote que más nos gusta.  
Oigo los hermosos lagos  
que suenan a  
sha, sha, sha  
viajo por mi hermoso río, el olor  
es algo hermoso que cuando viajamos  
el aire trae las armos de las flores.*

*El sabor es algo como el  
viento que cuando abro mi boca  
entra el aire y siento el sabor  
como el caramelo menta*

*-Por Marlene.*

*Poema de como llegue a Yurimaguas  
-Por Maru*



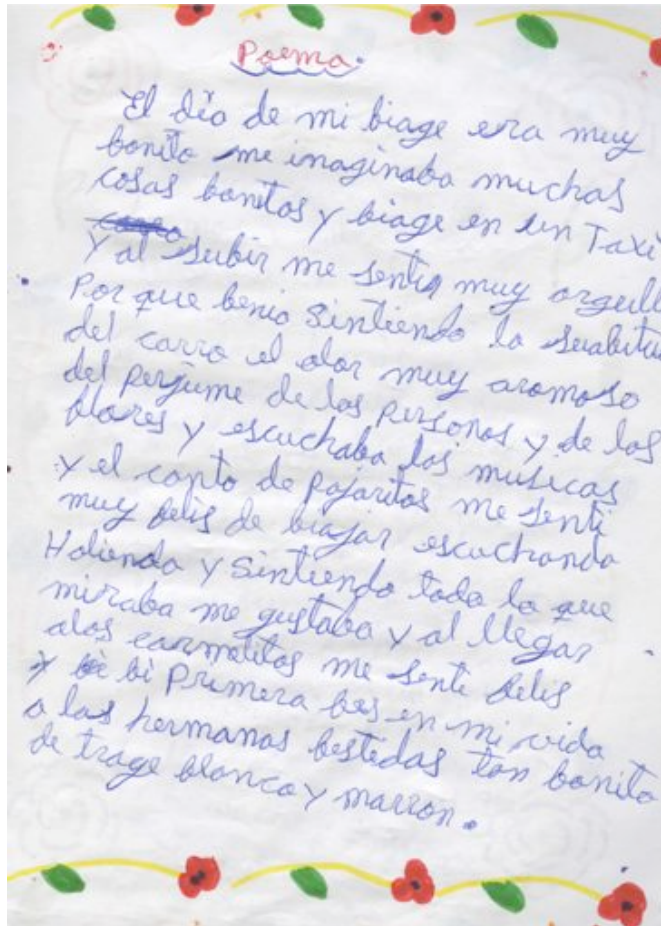
*Mis padres desidieron mantarme a estudiar para vivir en el combento y yo les dije que si quiero irme. Al siguiente dia, mi papa bino a Yurimaguas, y nos dijo que tenemos que viajar. Al dia siguiente nos alistabmos con mi mama, y en la tarde nos fuimos al Puerto a esperar la lancha. La lancha paso a partir de las 3 de la tarde y nos embarcamos con mi mama. Durante que viajabamos, vi en la orilla del río una lancha muy viejita y cuando estabamos más ariba, olía unos olores muy ricos; eran los olores de unas plantas que estaban con flor, y asi seguimos viajando... olíamos muy ricos olores de comido que venden el el Puerto y en la vuelta de la remolina, ya vimos sus antennas de Yurimaguas, y asi llegue a Yurimaguas*

What is unique in this one is that there is a sense of excitement, of a greater purpose beyond the Self, in making this journey. There is a feeling of wanting to embark on this journey, and in visualizing their destination-the convent- as a liberating space that will provide new opportunities and unique experiences. I would make the judgment that this sense of purpose, this consciousness of a purpose or reason, is something that must have development post-journey, in the act of *remembering*, and perhaps not in the actual moment of travel. This concept, or idea open the act of remembering and writing as a very much alive moment and space in which an intricate inner life of an event is revealed not as a mere unfolding of a linear event, but as the unfolding of how that even is experienced, and how that event is folded into the current conceptualization and construction of a girls' identity, life and experience.



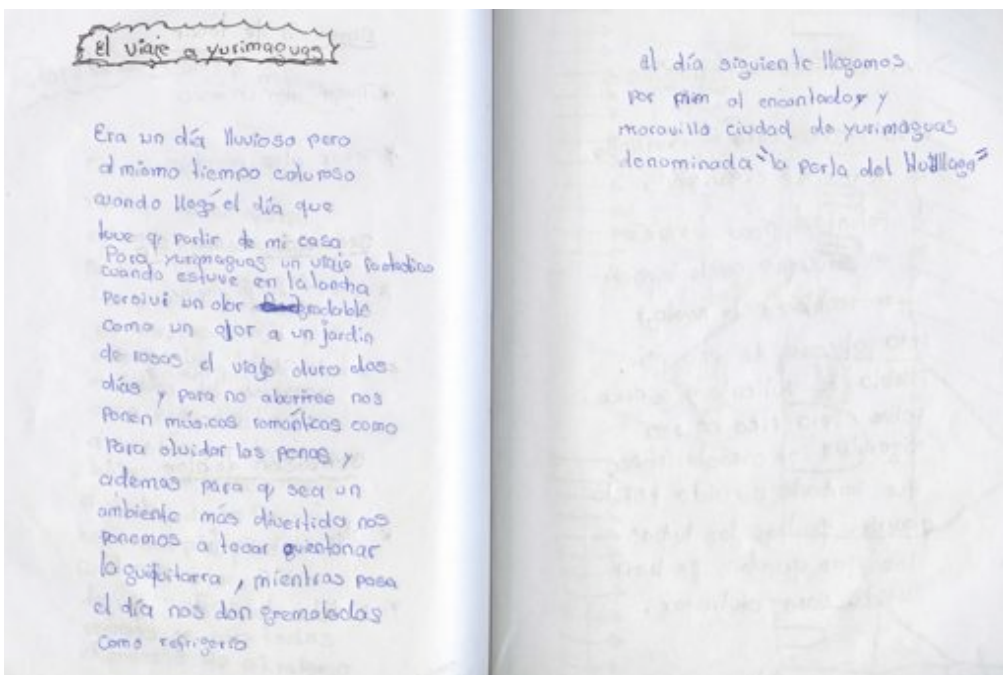
I see how important or how epic this journey was in their particular lives in the degree to which they imagine it. Just the topic of the journey sparked conversation and laughter. Some described out loud the smell of old women and their baskets of fresh fish left in the sun all day, some said it was dizzying, especially mixed with the smells of the gasoline of the motors, or the smell of gasoline if travelling by pick-up truck or bus. In their conversations, they described the other women on the boat or trucks as being very old and their baskets overflowing with huge river trout, rotting in the sun. They laughed at these images they were creating as they spoke. Many talked about the colorful birds and their songs, or the sound of the waves at night. Some said they waited all day till a boat arrived, and even then the boat did not stop others rushed to grab things as the boat neared their edge of village. Then they talked about their favorite and least favorite sounds: the sounds of text messages in their rooms, send quickly so the nuns won't hear the sound, the bells of the church, the two-hour prayer of the cloistered nuns, beginning at 4:45. Maria Rosa said that when it is her turn to cook, she tries to cook without onion, because she hates the sensation of onion residue on her fingers. They all laughed.

In some examples, the journey, this activity, produced a narrative of independence, emphasizing the separation, leaving the family and hometown behind to live in the convent and go to school, and in parts, represents a brief coming of age moment in their lives, such as Rosita's:



Rosita, one of the few to travel by land, recalls the smell of gardens and flowers, and the music that other passengers played in the truck. The main focus of her poem is the excitement and anticipation of travelling to Yurimaguas and beginning her life in a new place. She ends her poem with describing the epic feeling of arriving at the convent and seeing all the nuns in their brown and white habits.

In the following poem, Rocío recalls an overwhelming feeling of excitement when reaching Yurimaguas:



For Rocío, the journey to Yurimaguas was filled with excitement; the smells were like that of a garden, and the music was romantic, which helped to forget about all the bad things. Finally, days later, she arrived to the most enchanting city in the world, as she called it, Yurimaguas.

*Lourdes*

## poema:

Cuando estaba 6<sup>to</sup> grado  
de primario he promocioné  
he pasado Feliz promoción  
con mis ~~mis~~ Familia  
cuando estaba libre en mi  
casa mi tío Raúl se ido  
en mi pueblo mi tío es de  
San Lorenzo conversó con  
mi papá para estudiar yó  
acá a yurimaguas mi papa  
se aceptó mi tío entonces  
mi tío me dijo prima Diana  
ya te promocionaste quiere  
seguir estudiando yo le dije  
si tío de hay he ~~he~~

vedo benido a ~~San Lorenzo~~ yurimaguas  
en ~~bote~~ <sup>lancha</sup> en ~~bote~~ <sup>lancha</sup> yo Olla  
parece choncho había comido  
muy agradable.

gracias mi tío Raúl  
que estoy acá.

In Lourdes' poem, the importance does not refer so much to the actual physical experience of the journey, but in the context of leaving and her feelings at the proposition of travelling to Yurimaguas. We can see this because she focuses more on the event leading up to the journey, not so much the physical journey. She says that after finishing 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she graduated primaria. During celebrations, her uncle came to visit from the San Lorenzo, a port town closer to Yurimaguas. During the party, he propositioned to Lourdes' father the possibility of receiving a better education for his daughter, to a convent he knew in Yurimaguas. Then the uncle asked Lourdes if she would like to continue studying, and she said yes. At the end of the poem/narrative, she takes us on the boat, and describes the smell, saying that on the *lancha* it smelled as if a pig had eaten something tasty.



Lourdes ends it by thanking her Tío Raúl for her being at the convent. Based on what she has written, it does not seem that the physical trip was as important as the events leading up to it, and the conceptualization of her presence in the convent as something good and, I would argue, liberating. In this example, the journey- this moment in her life- seems to be very impactful in how she defines her life and situation. How she links the moment in her young womanhood and education of having just finished the 6<sup>th</sup> grade shows us that she associates this trip-this major event-with her coming of age.

### *Maria Josefina*

Maria Josefina, like Rosita, is one of the few that traveled mostly by land, but her reason for being sent and her journey along the way is no less interesting than those that spent days on water.

### *Viaje*

*Mi viaje era muy bonito,  
Contemplar el paisaje me divertía,  
Escuchar el sonido del canto de los  
Pájaros.  
Me alegraba que  
El carro avanzaba más y más  
Pero el olor a gasolina no me  
Gustaba.  
Me mareaba la cabeza y me  
Dolió el estómago.  
No me gusta el sonido de los vehículos,  
Pero me gusta el olor de  
Las flores.  
Mi viaje es magnífico pasando  
Por un sinnúmero de ciudades,*

*Finalmente llego a Yurimaguas.*

*-Maria Josefina*

Here the imagery could reflect how Maria Josefina felt about the trip. The truck ride itself was nauseating from the smell of gasoline and the sound of other cars, but the smell of flowers made it better. It seems as though the smell of flowers always makes unfavorable situations better for these girls. And, if we remove what flowers represent as cliché symbols we can see a deeper reason for conjuring flowers: the girls spend hours in the *huerta*, cultivating flowers, plants and raising animals; it is the most enclosed space in the convent; even the cloistered part shares a wall with the street. The *huerta* serves as a kind of refuge. Overall, she says the trip was wonderful because she was able to witness all of the cities she passed, until finally reaching Yurimaguas.

All of the girls recalled the trip with great detail, many focusing on the landscape and geographies passed, or the emotional build-up before leaving. Others focused on the negative sensations they felt on the trip:

*Viaje*

*Era una hermosa mañana cuando viajaba  
por una linda lancha y oía un sonido  
muy fuerte como un trueno.  
Me sonaba muy diferente. Olía un olor  
Muy potente que me hizo  
Sentir mal, como un animal engaviado.  
Toque una envoltura y pensé que fuese  
Una galleta pero no era lo que yo  
Pensé.*

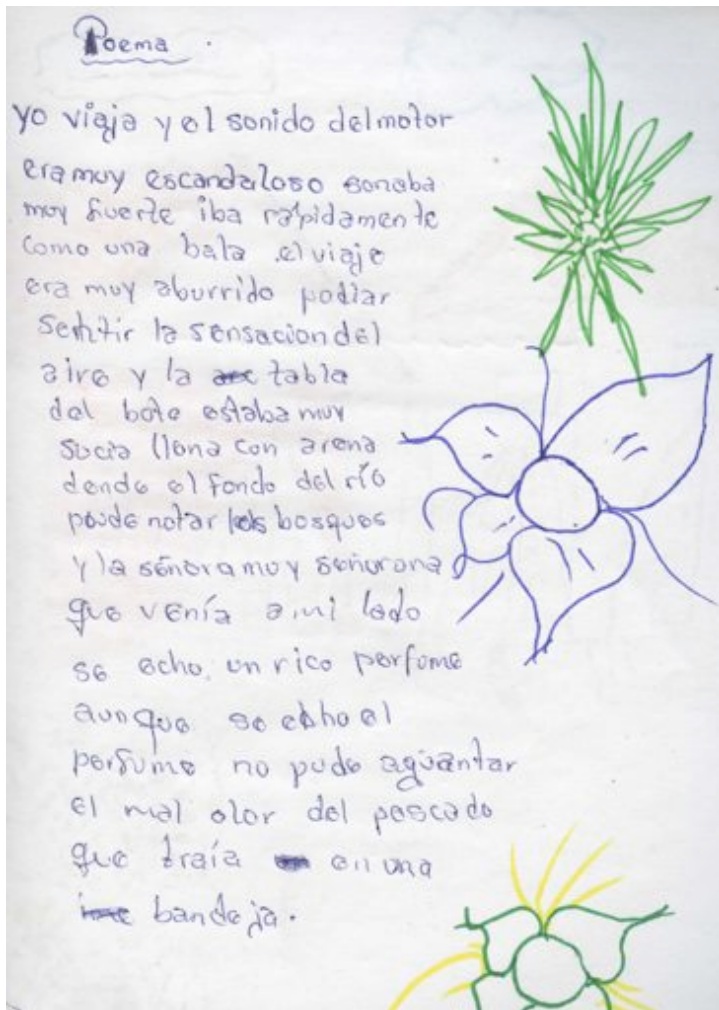


*Como estaba tan oscuro lo quise  
Comer sin olerle pero tenia un sabor  
Muy, muy diferente.*

-Maria Rosa

In this poem, Maria Rosa focuses on the unpleasantness of the trip, and of the disappointment in the awful taste of what she thought was a cookie when she reached into a bag to eat what seemed edible.

Similarly, Antonieta focuses mainly on the sensory details of the trip itself, giving us rich images of travel experiences in the region:

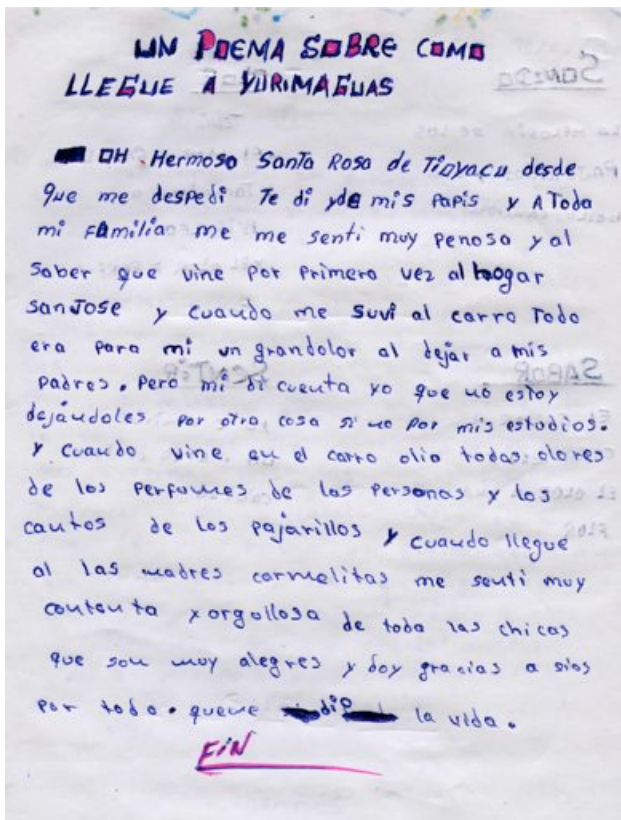


Antonieta, 15, was sent to travel to Yurimaguas alone a few years ago. She remembers the floor of the boat being dirty with sand from the river. Her main image that she remembers is the old woman next to her who drenched herself with perfume, filling the boat with a powerful odor, combining her scent and the bucket of fish she carried for days.

It is interesting that many of the girls focus their detailed descriptions on older women who are on the boats. This could be in their imagination; an image

they use as they critically and intimately define their own femininity or trajectory into womanhood, but it could also be a portrait of those who make these trips daily; the women transporting fish from town to town. The details of skin age, and oldness, or, the opposite of them, are enhanced and very creative.

Some used the poem to describe mainly the emotions of leaving family and home, such as Isabel:

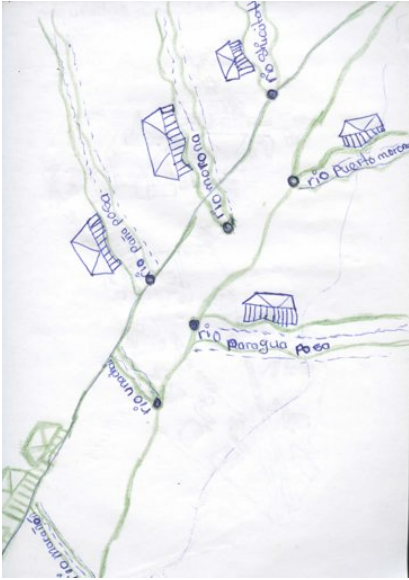


Here, it is almost as if she is saying goodbye to her hometown, but she tells it, as well as her family, to not take it too personally, that there was no other reason for her to leave except to get a good education.

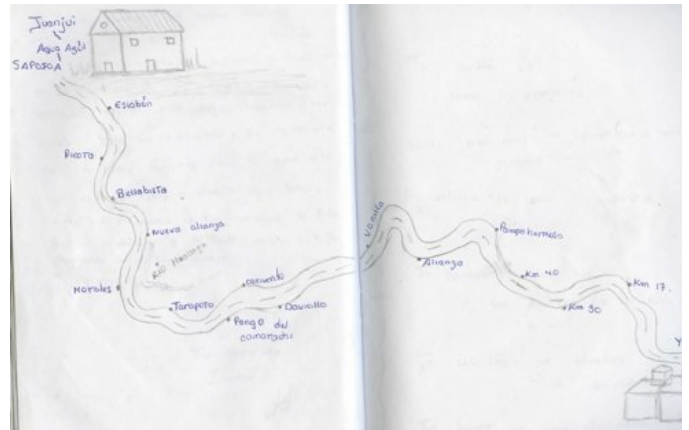
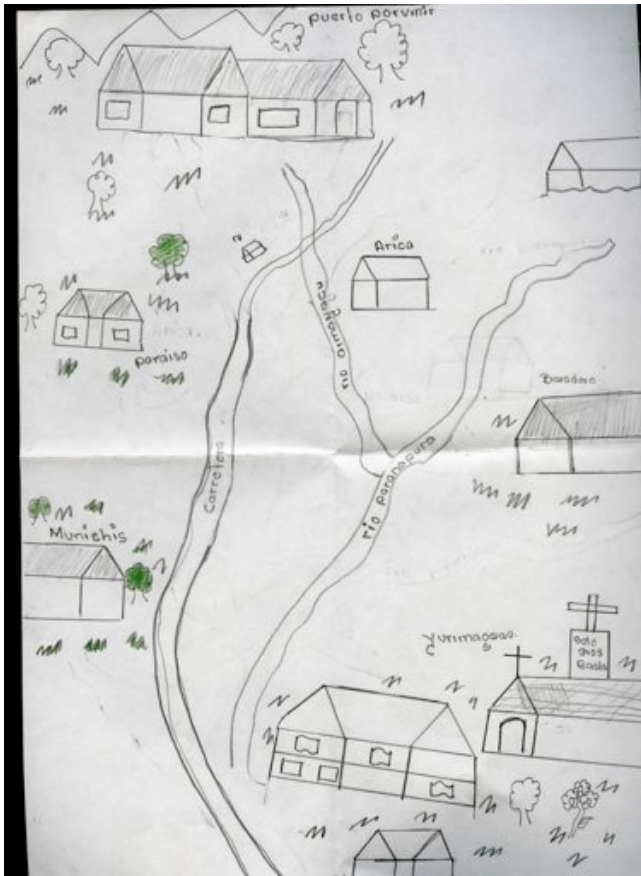
Isabel, like Rosita and Maria Josefina, is from a hometown accessible by land from the convent, except for when it rains, she reminds me.

She describes the sound of birds, and the sweet smell of the perfume of other passengers.

Many focused on the feelings towards the arrival, and like Isabel's poem, on the feeling of entering this convent and seeing the other girls, like Juana:



*Quando yo viajaba escuche sonido  
De campana. Tu eres como sabor de  
cocido,  
Eres como color de flor y tu  
Haces sentir una luz brillante.  
OH ciudad de Yurimaguas, un sol  
Calor muy brillantes,  
Y cuando llegué  
Por primera vez sentí muy alegre y  
orgullosa  
De todas la chicas. Que bonito aquí.  
-Por Juana*



21

This journey from home to convent functions as a rite of passage. The girls describe the convent and Yurimaguas as a place where they will improve, get education, etc; but the convent as a place of imagination and idealization has another layer: there is also a dream and great imagination to return. The imaginings of returning are as prolific and detailed as those of having left. The very thing that separates them from this community is at once geographically what connects them, and at the same time the thing that reaffirms and functions as a signifier in their identities as independent and as women (the river). In that sense, the river is a border to be crossed, negotiated and recreated in different ways.

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing by Annabella

The focus on the sensory experience of this journey also gives voice to the cultural idiosyncrasies of the region and of their experience. It gives voice to the intimate colloquial sounds, sights and smells that no theoretical, historical or political text could depict; it is *their* experience of travelling through this region.

In a sense, their journey experiences exist as symbols because they do not forget what that journey leads them to and has taken them away from. It exists as a symbol both in remembering the past and imagining the future. When they leave their hometowns, those hometowns become symbols that they carry throughout their lives and reveal throughout their writing. The reason the journey is more important and present in their lives and other narratives is not just because it was a fun trip, but because they are at an age and point in their life where they are defining their womanhood, and part of what they believe makes them women is that they have left their families, thus looking at the journey as a right of passage toward independence.

This actual journey into an unknown world and life, a new city, a new way of living and being holds great weight in their thoughts, writing and imagination. Through the multiple images they play with and the flashes of memory they narrative, we get another story, another depth of Latin American literature and experience; another look at how girls become women, another look at how we define literature of migration; another look at coming of age in marginal places.

This chapter speaks to the cultural and sensory memory of the borders they crossed when in between leaving home and arrive at the convent, but it adds another border: memory. David MacDougall, in looking at the intersections of the body and the image says, “Our seeing is already deeply predetermined. Much of the knowledge we gain through vision and our other senses, and the way we direct our seeing, is highly organized...meaning is produced by our whole bodies, not just by conscious thought” (*The Corporeal Image* 3). This exercise has to do with what MacDougall calls “seeing with the body” (4), something that produces much more than just an image or different ways to describe things. “When we look purposefully, and when we think, we complicate the process of seeing enormously”(4), he says. In this way, re-seeing from the convent added a complication, or another layer, because it adds another border, spatially as well as the border of memory. Memory, in this activity, becomes another “eye”, and even another body.

Writing about a very corporeal experience from the standpoint of re-creating it from a distant physical place creates a space where this experience, its symbols and meanings are being constantly negotiated. Though it highlight the borders in place, it also forms this space where new knowledge and relationships to experience are created and expressed:

The boundaries between our firsthand experiences and the ways in which we recall and recreate them are often unclear. These may be the boundaries between sensory perception and memory...or between the corporeal and

incorporeal. Representations of experience immediately create new experiences in their own right (5)

In other words, beyond just the sensory expression of remembering the journey from home to convent, each girl begins to form a new relationship between her Self in relation to the positionality of the convent, and the experience of arriving at this positionality. This activity, which at face value was a playful sensory-based anecdote of travel, became narratives about not only the cultural and geographic borders crossed to arrive at the convent, but how these borders become *other* borders and develop yet *other* meanings and symbols when we use memory and creativity (creation) to bring them to life. Laura Marks says that “senses are capable of learning and encoding memory” (*The Skin of Film* 7) and thus carrying our senses through the creative process of memory, and remembering them and recreating them through writing allows for the remembering of the journey to reflect (or create) the multi-layeredness of the actual experience.



Surimaguas 02 de Julio 2010

Querido y recordado hermanito:

Te escribo esta carta deseando que estes bien de salud en unión de todos los que te rodean.

Te cuento que yo estoy muy bien, estoy estudiando computación en un instituto y me esta yendo muy bien. Tambien te digo q papa vino a visitarme y que esta muy bien.

Tambien me alegro que estes trabajando y que puedes ayudarnos, Mondo saludes a mis primos y demás familias.

Me despido con un fuerte abrazo

chau chau

J. J. J.

22

Chapter 5

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Capítulo 5

“Hoy Nació Una Niña Hermosa y Rebelde”:

Narratives of Transformation

*Warm-Up*

*-Write a simile*

*Yurimaguas*

*Calentamiento*

*-Escribe un simil sobre*

*about Yurimaguas*

*Hoy Nació Una Niña Hermosa y Rebelde*<sup>23</sup>:  
Narratives of Transformation

“Why do certain events become central memories,  
part of the core life story we create about ourselves?”

-Pat Mora, “House of Houses”



24

Today’s activity was to write narratives of transformation. I asked the girls to try and write about a transformation undergone in Yurimaguas, because I was hoping specifically for narratives on transitioning from girlhood into womanhood. What I got instead were multiple-layered narratives where this transition was one

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<sup>23</sup> Antonieta, 14

<sup>24</sup> Pictures taken by me, July 2011

(a very important one) layer of many. Their narratives ended up spanning several places, not just Yurimaguas.

Before just asking them to think about a transformation in their lives, I wanted to see the kind of coming-of-age stories they have or that they would tell about Yurimaguas. I see from their travel poems and from their invented legends, that their move from home to convent was a major transition in their lives, but I wanted to see the kind of coming-of-age experiences they've had since they've arrived.

First, as a creative brainstorming warm-up, I asked them to write a simile about Yurimaguas, because I wanted them to transition from previous activities to start thinking about where they are right now, and also to consider the influence on not only the convent, but on the town itself, in their lives. What they ended up writing was completely different. Only around half wrote about Yurimaguas, and from this half, most wrote about the actual travel from home to convent as the transformation. Others wrote about transformations back home, whether it was realizing a friendship had ended, or other incidents of family life. In all of the examples, however, there are multiple layers of emotions and details conveyed. Reading through all of them again and again, I realize that although they range from many topics, they still reflect girlhood, the tensions of girlhood itself, and transitioning out of girlhood.

Earlier that morning, I walked over to the Nazareth copy center, down two dirt roads that connect the convent to the police station, to pick up the copies of

“Una Santa Noche” (1996) by Sandra Cisneros, a short story about a Mexican-American girl who is in charge of selling the items of the family produce cart. During one of her runs, she is seduced by an older man who tells her stories of being a descendent of Mayan gods. She gets pregnant, and her grandmother sends her back to Mexico, where they had once left because the girls’ mother had been pregnant.

The three boys who run the copy center, all under 18, asked if they could make a few extra copies for themselves, because they really liked the story. I told them to go ahead.

The girls loved the story, although we stopped many times, because they were confused of why there were words in English and Spanish. This started a conversation about language. I asked them if they ever think in their native language if they ever can’t find a word in Spanish, or if they want to think a thought so private that no one else could even guess. Many of them said yes, that their indigenous language mixes in. They were surprised to learn that this happens in a lot of places. I told them about New Mexico- that my classes are often both English and Spanish, and that intrigued them. Rocío pointed out that that is a good thing, and that now there is no way I could ever lose a language. Not like here, she said. There’s only one Shawi class taught, and the teacher doesn’t even speak Shawi. They all laughed. I told them not to worry, that that also happens everywhere.

They were also fascinated by the antagonist- “Boy Baby”, who claimed to be a descendent of Mayan Gods. Rocío, who is older than most of the other girls said “bueno chicas, ahora ya saben que hacer si un chico te dice que es descendientes de los dioses inca...no hay que creerlo!” They joked that if a boy says he is an Inca god, don’t believe him.

In the story “Una Santa Noche”, I did not want to focus as much on the sexually abusive nature of the experience of the protagonist in the story, but rather, how she chooses to talk about her experience, and what kind of transformations she goes through. I asked them to look closely at the young protagonist’s voice, and how she chose to talk about her experiences. First, we discussed whether she did experience a transformation. I asked them to think about the narrative itself, and about girls’ rights to tell their own stories. They all agreed that her story represented a transformation. How? I asked. Does it make you think of your own transformations in life?

There were a few seconds of silence, and Manuela spoke up, saying “Si, antes era una patita, y ahora soy una patasa!”. After we all laughed, Manuela said that she knew many girls who had been abused like the protagonist in the story. This sparked a lot of conversation, where many agreed and said that they also knew many girls who have been abused. Rocío added, “but no one does anything about it”.

As this conversation was starting to trail off, I asked them what they felt was meant to be more important in the story: the events that took place, or her narrative

around the events? I asked them to consider how the protagonist talks about Boy Baby, and they pointed out that she never actually says anything bad about him. Yessica said she thought what was important was her story about it, because she never really expresses an opinion, she just tells a story. I let all the questions sit there, and then I asked them to brainstorm about a transformation they have experienced, and once they have done this, to turn what they have chosen into a short story narrative in which a character goes through that same experience/transformation.

The reason why turning an experience into a narrative was and is so compelling, is that it reveals the fascinating tensions between a person and the way she perceives her own life story to be. Being asked to turn your life history or a specific experience into fiction, or into a short story narrative reveals things that most likely otherwise would not be revealed through, let's say an interview. And, what they chose to write about also reveals a lot about where they stand in their own life at the moment. As I watched them write this assignment, and giggle and compare to each other how revealing or how intimate was the experience they chose to turn into a story, I posed the question to myself: what would I write about? What would I have written about at 12? At 15? And like the question that Pat Mora asks in "House of Houses": "Why do certain events become central memories, part of the core life story we create about ourselves?" (187). How do these short story narratives by these girls form a part of the core life story that they create about *themselves*? What do they reveal more than just a specific incident?

The short narratives they actually wrote show that there in fact could have been a many different routes their stories could have gone; there is no one single theme of each story, and neither is there strictly one single transformation revealed. But what was obvious was the literary narrative tension between each girl/author and the character she made of herself (even in the stories written in the first person). The line was not strict between Self and character. Within almost every example, you can feel the moment when they immersed themselves in another character, and then the moment where her voice was the voice of herself as author. This tension was good, though, and I believe it also comes from tensions in their own lives as girls maturing into womanhood. Turning themselves into characters, or writing this experience as a story, in story-form, is crucial in allowing them to see the many different ways to tell a story, and to also view their life experiences/history as worthy of producing story and literature.

Their narratives of transformation reveal the distinct and unique nature of coming-of-age experiences for each girl. They wrote short narratives about becoming adolescents, coming to terms with neglectful fathers and separating families, on getting used to the convent and having to share a space with so many other girls, on how one character's concept of friendship changed after being sent to live in the convent because her cousin fell in love with her, are among many themes that these girls expressed through short story narratives. They were so fascinated by the way Santa Noche was narrated, that they ended up folding the story into their



own in very interesting ways. “Una Santa Noche” begins with: “*Sobre la verdad*” (1), which is something most of the girls included at the beginning of their stories.

The following are examples of their work:

*Lourdes.*

Lourdes’ piece, entitled “Una transformación que me ha pasado”, begins in first person narrative in her community of Zapote, where she says that every Sunday, her mother would take her to spend time with her grandmother. She describes her grandmother’s house, and says that her weekly visits helped ease her grandmother’s loneliness. She says that now that she is grown, she has realized that she wants to live to help her family. She said that this desire is often difficult when lived out, because although she wants to have many friends, she knows she has to focus on studying and getting a good job so that she doesn’t stay ‘at the bottom’. She says her parents encourage her to study and to make something of her life, and for this reason, she doesn’t think she could ever fall in love, because that would take her away from becoming something in life. She will, however, make sure to have friends. That is how she ends the story.

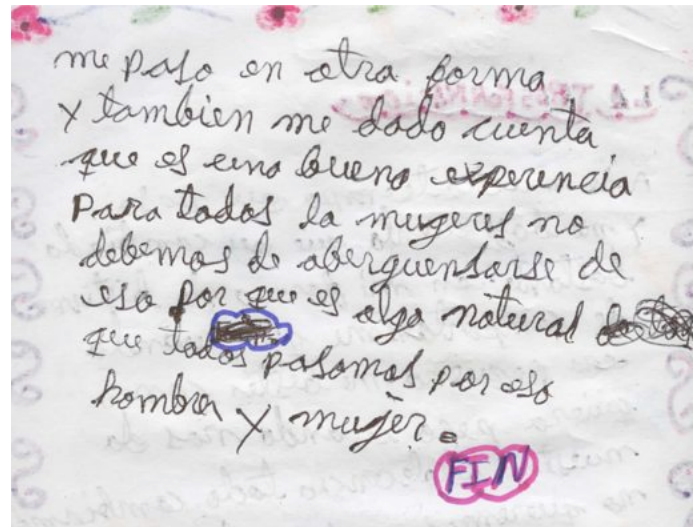
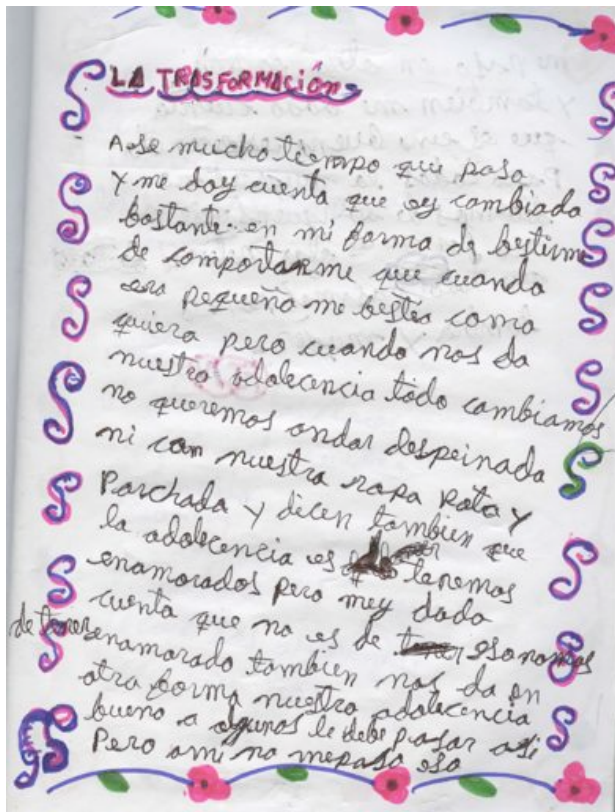
*Rosita*

Rosita, who is the youngest member of the convent, at twelve years old, writes hers in the first person narrative. Her story is about a young girl who is

becoming an adolescent, and the story takes us through all her changes. In other words, her biggest transformation as she thinks of it at this point in her life, is something very present, whereas the older girls choose ongoing things or things of the past. Rosita sees herself as going through a transformation right now.

However, she says that the transformation she is about to tell happened a long time ago, and that she has changed so much since then. She is talking about her transition into adolescence.

When someone becomes an adolescent, she says, everything begins to change. For example, we don't want to be seen with our hair uncombed, or wearing clothes with holes in them. One of the major changes, she says, is one that she has heard from others: that when one enters adolescence, one begins to fall in love and to have boyfriends. She has discovered, however, that that is not necessarily true; she has not fallen in love yet, so that proves that adolescence can come in many forms. She says that her transition into adolescence has been different than most, but still, she recommends it for everyone, and she says that women should not be embarrassed about this transition, because it is natural and we should be proud of it.



Marlene

Marlene's short narrative is entitled "Mi cuento un día en mi pueblo".

Marlene's own story is very interesting because she had already been living in Yurimaguas before coming to live in the convent. She is the only girl who did not move to Yurimaguas specifically to live in the convent. Her father is a teacher who travels around many towns. She begins her story about when she was four years old, her father decides to move to Yurimaguas so that Marlene could go to a good school and to have a permanent place where Marlene and her mother could live while her father travelled temporarily. When she was 12, they decide to move back to their hometown. Marlene focuses on the descriptions of her friends whom she had not seen since she left at age four. She writes about a boy coming up to her and

asking her if she was allowed to play. She said yes, and they spent all day together exploring the town.

She describes being in a town festival, when the same boy came up to her and asked her to dance. She resisted, saying she didn't know how to dance, but he eventually convinced her. In the course of the few hours of dancing, she says that he fell in love with her. However, it could not end happily, because they soon realized that they were cousins. After this incident, Marlene's father decided it was best for her to return to Yurimaguas, where she now lives in the convent.

This story is interesting, because there are many transformations, and it is not quite clear exactly which one she is focusing on: realizing the boy in love with her is her cousin, returning to her hometown after so many years, or her second move to Yurimaguas.

### *Maria Josefina*

Maria Josefina's story shares similarities with Marlene's story. Her story is more of a loss of innocence and coming of age into adulthood, and of having to deal with things oneself. She begins her story by saying that in her hometown, she developed a very close relationship with her cousin. They played together, and eventually they became best friends. They confided all their secrets to each other, and their friendship grew tremendously. One day, she says, something horrible happened. He fell in love with her. Maria Josefina writes that she was appalled at

this, and that she began to hate him. When her parents found out, they were very upset, and made it so that they are no longer in each other's lives.

She then shifts the narrative to talk more about her life in her hometown, and about the small trips and adventures she took with her family. She says she was very happy, and she had many friends and a good relationship with her family.

Everything changed, she said, when she was sent to the convent to study. She says she was very sad when she was sent away, and that she still has not gotten used to it, but that she puts in all the effort she can.

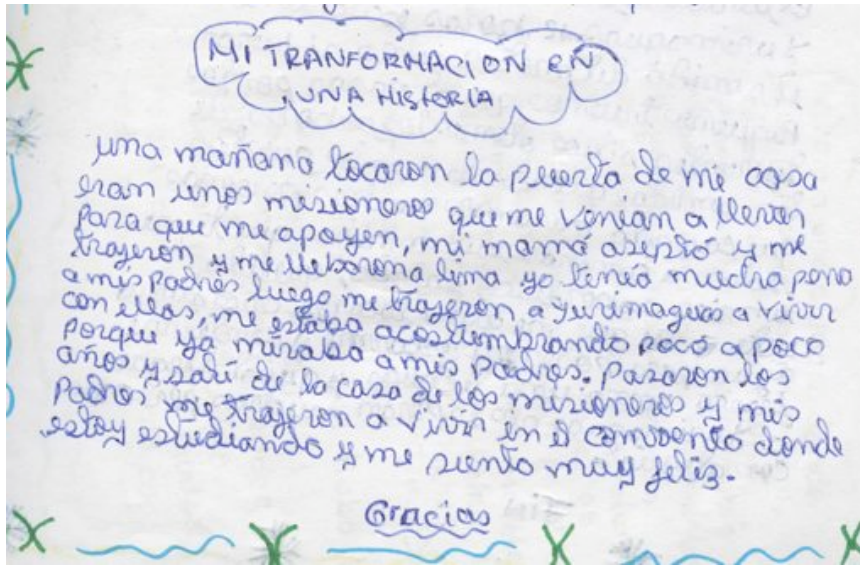
### *Isabel*

Isabel tells a transformation story that takes place during a time before the convent, but it is about the first time she was sent to live away from home, in a town called Tarapoto- a town 3 hours away from Yurimaguas. She titled her story "Una transformación de mi vida", tells that one day, when she was 10, her parents sent her to live at her cousin's house in Tarapoto, which is a much bigger city with more opportunities, compared to her hometown. Isabel insisted that she did not want to move to Tarapoto and live with her cousins and aunt and uncle, because she was not used to them and did not want to have to adapt to a new city. Her father left, leaving Isabel with her extended family. She continued to insist that she wanted to go back home, that she was used to living with her parents and that is whom she wanted to live with. She threatened to return home by herself if her parents did not pick her up soon. She spent some time in this house, but the whole time, she wanted to

transform into a bird, and imagined herself as one, until finally her father returned to pick her up. She ends by saying that she remembers that time as cold and difficult.

### *Elena*

Elena wrote hers more in story form. She first added a little epigraph/excerpt that explains that the story she is about to tell is taken from an authentic experience of hers. Elena turned eighteen a few days after the activity. She has been in the convent since age eleven; since the age of seven, she has grown up between missionary homes and the convent, and even been around when some of the current nuns were young adolescent girls like her. In the information before her story, she says that she remembers very well that at seven, she was sent away to live in a house with missionaries. Four years would pass before seeing her parents again. She said that she cried and cried from happiness of seeing her parents. Now that she is older and more mature, she says, she has more control over her emotions, and she has learned to deal more with the circumstances of life. Her story follows:



Elena's story is

interesting, because she left her home at 7, and in a 4 year transition, spent time living with missionaries. At age 11, she finally saw her family again, but that year they took her to the convent so that she could get an education. It is very rare that she has seen her family since then.

Many of the girls express a need to continue the struggle, to keep on living and to look ahead at a hopefully bright future. This does not imply that all the transformation narratives have negative character to them; no, some are written as an exciting event, such as Rosita, who talked about the exciting and uncertain transition into adolescence. But still, there is a sense, and message that the particular transformation that the girls experienced leads toward a feeling that it is necessary to look ahead, and to keep what happened in the past, there exactly: the past. Luz, as I mentioned previously, writes extensively on her parent's separation- whether it is inventing stories about an epic loving relationship, or confessing in a letter that she resents him; much of her writing has to do with either making

amends with a past tumultuous family situation, or re-constructing a story in a way she would rather it have taken its course. Her narrative of transformation is about a moment of overcoming the past:



For Luz, her transformation was in attitude, which I think also is one of adult maturity, of the context that her life gave her. Her transformation wasn't one incident or event, but the passing of a harsh reality and her decision to live her own life. She signals the convent, though as the place where that change in maturity (and identity) occurred. Though her past is one that is worth forgetting, she says,



she has changed her attitude and way of thinking that allows her to move on and to live her own life, the way she wants to.

### *Maru*

Maru just turned fifteen and she is one of the newest members of the convent, so the trip to the convent is fresh in her mind, and she identified that as her main transformation story. Hers is interesting because it does not mark a clear transformation into adolescence, but rather speaks to the tensions of knowing that one *should* act like a mature adolescent, but at times feeling like a child, and not wanting to let your guard down where there are so many new people whom you are getting to know. However, it wasn't starting her new life at the convent only seven months before writing this that propelled the transition into adolescence; that, she tells us, happened at twelve. Adjusting her life to the convent has challenged the strength of that new female identity, and what has been most challenging is acting strong when she misses her family and home so much:

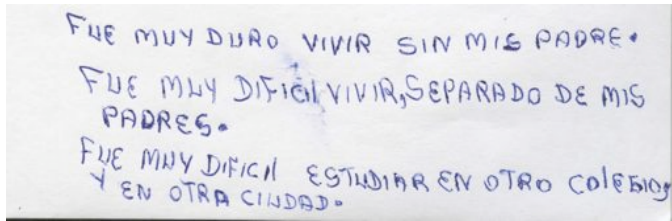
La Transmision  
sobre la bebe  
Han pasado siete meses desde que  
sali de casa de mama y de mi  
pueblo y ~~de~~ no estoy acostumbrada  
a vivir lejos de mi familia,  
abes me siento triste y abesos  
alegre cuando pienso en ellos.  
Han pasado dose que me a pasado  
la nines y soy una adolecente  
ahora, pero me siento como  
una niña que necesita el  
amor de su padre  
y desde que vine a vivir en  
el internado  
y lo que te estas contando nunca  
se lo he contado a nadie excepto  
a Anita.

What is revealed most, is the tension of growing up, of becoming a young woman, and suppressing the side of her that needs her parents.

This is also something like a secret, because she feels she has to act a certain way around the other girls to appear stronger. She has never told this to anyone, she says, except for Anita.

### *Carmela*

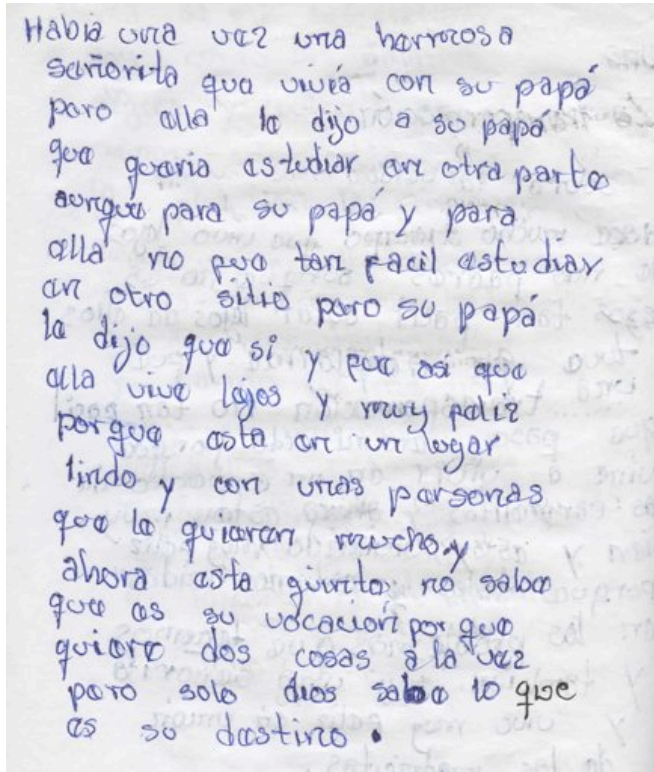
Carmela looks back at the actual travel to the convent and starting her new life here as the major transformative turning point in her life. It's been 1 year and 6 months, she says, since she arrived at the convent. She was very sad to leave home and it has been difficult living without her family, who she misses very much and cries often when she thinks about their separation. She says that as more and more time passes, she gets more used to her new life. She ends her narrative with:



FUE MUY DURO VIVIR SIN MIS PADRE.  
FUE MUY DIFÍCIL VIVIR, SEPARADO DE MIS  
PADRES.  
FUE MUY DIFÍCIL ESTUDIAR EN OTRO COLEGIO  
Y EN OTRA CIUDAD.

### *Manuela*

Manuela also signaled her moving to the convent as a major transformation in her life. She says that it is always difficult to be away from your family, but that she realized it was something that must happen, so she has accepted it, and is happy living with nuns. The nuns are good to her, she says, and it is nice living with so many other girls her age because they can all face their problems collectively and be there for each other. It is also the place, she says, where she is now *una señorita*. In her writing, she chose to fictionalize herself:



Habia una vez una hermosa  
señorita que vivía con su papá  
pero ella le dijo a su papá  
que quería estudiar en otra parte  
porque para su papá y para  
ella no fue tan fácil estudiar  
en otro sitio pero su papá  
le dijo que sí y por así que  
ella vive lejos y muy feliz  
porque está en un lugar  
lindo y con unas personas  
que la quieren mucho y  
ahora está guinda no sabe  
que es su vocación por que  
quiere dos cosas a la vez  
pero solo Dios sabe lo que  
es su destino.

The fictionalized nature of this story is very interesting. In her story, she is a beautiful young woman who lives with her father. What is interesting is the reason she gives for the events that would become the major transformation. Whereas most narratives about leaving home deal with parents sending their daughter, or other community members suggesting the convent, in this story, the beautiful young daughter initiates the move. She tells her father that she wants to study in another city. Although this was not an easy thing to do, her father helped her achieve this, and now she lives far away, but she is happy, and studies a lot. She expresses uncertainty in her future, and says that now the time is nearing when she has to choose what to do, she is confused, because there are two vocations she wants at the same time.

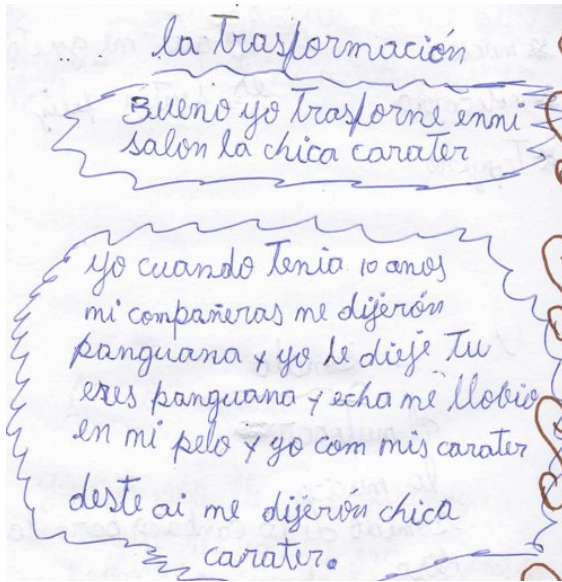
In the end, she leaves it up to God, she says, because God is the only one who truly knows her destiny. This reveals transformations not only past, but also those to come, and also shows that although many girls would identify their arrival to the

convent as a place of transformation in and of itself, but also as ones that propel and inspire other transformations. The convent, as they experience it, is not a stagnant place, it is not an end: it is a propeller of their life into womanhood, and it contains a future, which, as Manuela explains, only God knows.

Many of the girls view leaving home and their families to go to the convent as a major transformation in their lives. Yessica and Maria Rosa also write their narratives about leaving their families and how this is the onset of leaving childhood and entering adolescence, or leaving girlhood, and entering young womanhood. It proves that moving to the convent holds major weight in their lives, but also reveals the uniqueness of the journey as a life-changing transformation.

### *Xuxi*

Xuxi's transformation has been the most obvious among the other girls, as well as to myself, since I met her when she was ten and barely spoke a word to anyone. Now, at twelve, she seems like a completely different person, and she is proud of her newly found confidence. She marks this transformation though, to an incident in her classroom. "Bueno, yo me transformé", she says, "en mi salón":



### *Marlene*

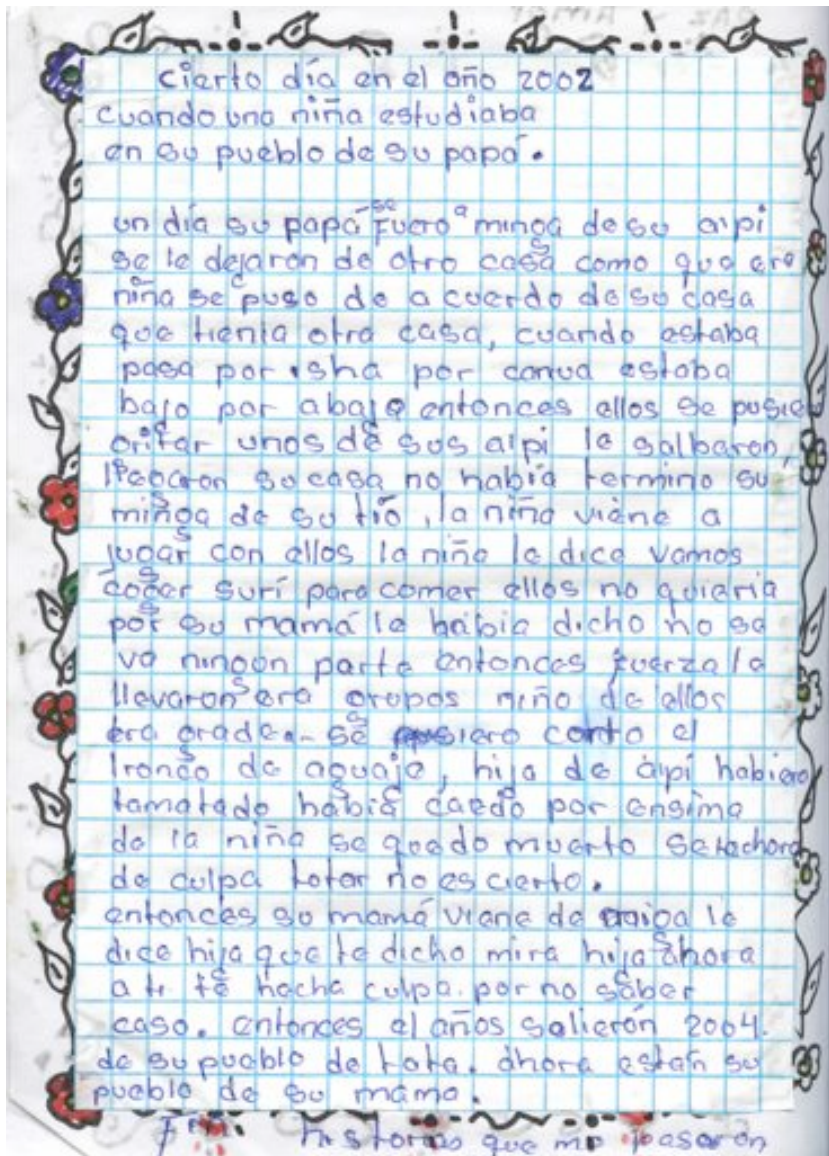
Marlene's narrative reveals a lot about how she feels about the convent as a place where she will grow. In her story, the major transformation was moving to the convent. She says that in her hometown, she did not feel herself. She had a hard life, she says, and she didn't feel like she could relate to the other girls in her town. She embarked on a journey to the convent because her parents wanted her to have a better education, and when she met the girls at the convent, she felt like she fit in. It is interesting that she feels like she fit with these girls- because as I have stated before, they come from very different places different languages. Perhaps it is the common shared experience of having to live in the convent that unites her to them.

In the end, she feels like she can be herself in the convent, because they are protected and it is a place full of happiness.

## *Annabella*

Annabella's story is the most elaborate. Hers is a heartbreaking coming of age story from her home village. Entitled *A certain day in 2002, when a girl was studying in her father's town*, it follows the story of a young girl who is travelling by canoe to visit her father's other house. Throughout the story, there are many Shawi words mixed in. When they arrive at her father's other house, the young girl asks another girl to play with her. They go to hunt Suri, a grub commonly eaten in the region, said to have a lot of protein and even cure cancer. On their hunt for Suri, they decide to cut a few *aguage* trees so that they could take the fruit back home. In the process, a tree falls on the other girl, killing her. When her mother arrives on the scene, she blames her daughter and tells her that it is her fault for not having obeyed her:





Although the actual story ends here, Annabella adds a conclusion with the title: “eres importante no lo olvidas” *you are important and don't forget it*, where she talks about how important it is to have a close relationship with your mother. She tells a short story of two friends who are having a conversation about their mother. She says that she used to avoid speaking with her mother, but that recently she has realized the importance of having this relationship. If you don't, she warns, you will have a void so big that a flower will eventually grow in it.



Eres importante no lo olvides

Nunca en esta vida te des por vencidos  
nunca digas no puedo porque si puedes  
en esta vida hay obstaculos para vencer  
un día dos amigas se fueron a tomar  
café. una de ellas le dijo a su amiga yo  
ya no se que voy a hacer mi mamá  
me llama para hablar tu ya sabes los  
viejos, siempre hablan lo mismo  
una y otra vez" y siento que me  
averguenza. la otra le respondió  
yo si converso con mi mamá  
cuando estoy triste me voy  
a ella, le cuento mi problema,  
reímos y nos divertimos mucho.  
tristemente ella le dijo yo  
siempre me voy a visitar  
a mi mamá en la flores  
porque ella hace  
años que murió

yo también era como tu siempre me  
quejaba de mi madre me aburría  
no hagas lo que yo hice  
cuando tu lo necesitas  
a la madre muy  
tarde gara.

y en tu corazón tendrás un hueco que  
nunca podrás sacar de tu vida  
lleno de rosas.

What stories do we form about places of origin when we are in a new place?  
Pat Mora asks: "why do certain events become central memories, part of the core  
life story we create about ourselves?" (187) Why did many girls choose to re-create  
a transformative event in the hometowns they left behind, and why did others re-  
create one in Yurimaguas? Through these stories, what we see is a glimpse into how

these places function in a key transformation that they continually conjure: the transition into womanhood. In this activity, they produced fictional and autobiographical stories, but what are behind these stories?

In these stories, there is an underlying narrative of diasporic experience, because beneath the stories are multiple other narratives: leaving home, travel, glimpses of home life, and in the case of those whose stories took place in Yurimaguas, of how they perceive of this new place where their lives are forming.

But in this space of the *hogar*, there is not just one hometown that is evoked and brought to life; there are many; because each experience, although forms part of a collective experience, is independent of the others: with its own hometown, its own travel route, and its own experience of the place arrived.

It is through story forming that new knowledges about both place and self are produced from an intercultural and multi-layered space as the convent. These narratives of transformation are about the stories that lie beneath meta-stories; they are about the stories that are traced when we cross borders. In writing these narratives about specific moments that they have identified as *transformations*, they are drawing on specific histories, or, they are creating a historical trajectory in the place of one that has excluded or failed them. What is hugely important in engaging these narratives is the understanding that they are written from a form of diasporic reality or situation that that these girls face. From the position of a sort of displacement at the convent and in the space of two hours, they use memory, imagination, fiction and life story to return to this, or to a moment in Yurimaguas to tell this story.



Yurimaguas 02 de Julio 2016

Querida

Querida amiga

Te escribo esta pequeña carta esperando que te encuentres bien de salud.

Te cuento que yo estoy bien de salud aunque no tan bien por <sup>un</sup> nuestra familia está pasando por un mal momento porq' paso una tragedia en nuestra familia pero ~~es~~ estamos recuperando pero gracias a Dios que nos encontramos bien de salud

Espero que me contestes esta carta

Se despido tu amiga  
con un fuerte abrazo

25

Chapter 6 / Capítulo 6

Cuentos de la Huelga

## Cuentos de la Huelga

*Just as none of us is beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings*

*-Edward Said, Culture and imperialism, 1993*

*Caminé por horas, y sólo comí dos naranjas*

*-Maria Josefina*

In 2006, the Peruvian and United States governments signed a Trade promotion agreement, which led to a 2008 law in Peru, in which indigenous lands became available for purchase by international private enterprises.<sup>26</sup> The law encouraged the Peruvian government to acquire lands in the jungle region that were formally under communal ownership. Before this international agreement, the government had a deal with indigenous leaders that any activity done on this land would have to be consulted with the communities, activities included logging, and other natural resource extraction. Indigenous political groups and leaders protested, and Alan García's government warned Peruvians not to go to the jungle region, commencing a massive discursive war and campaign against indigenous people as terrorists and as opposed to Peru's economic recovery.

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<sup>26</sup> (Ley 28852)

With huge protests going on, major roads and river ways were blocked. This affected Yurimaguas severely, in that the markets were left with no food, because neither were dried goods allowed in to be transported from the one road that connected Yurimaguas to the rest of Peru, and the fishermen and women were on strike, so no fish were coming in. The girls were left in a familiar situation: uprooted once again, forced to make a trip back home the convent could barely afford. Some girls tell stories of walking for thirty hours to towns with food; others made it on boats back to their hometowns; some told stories of communities standing along the river's edge with arrows pointed toward the boats, intimidating potential foreigners, military or resource extractors.

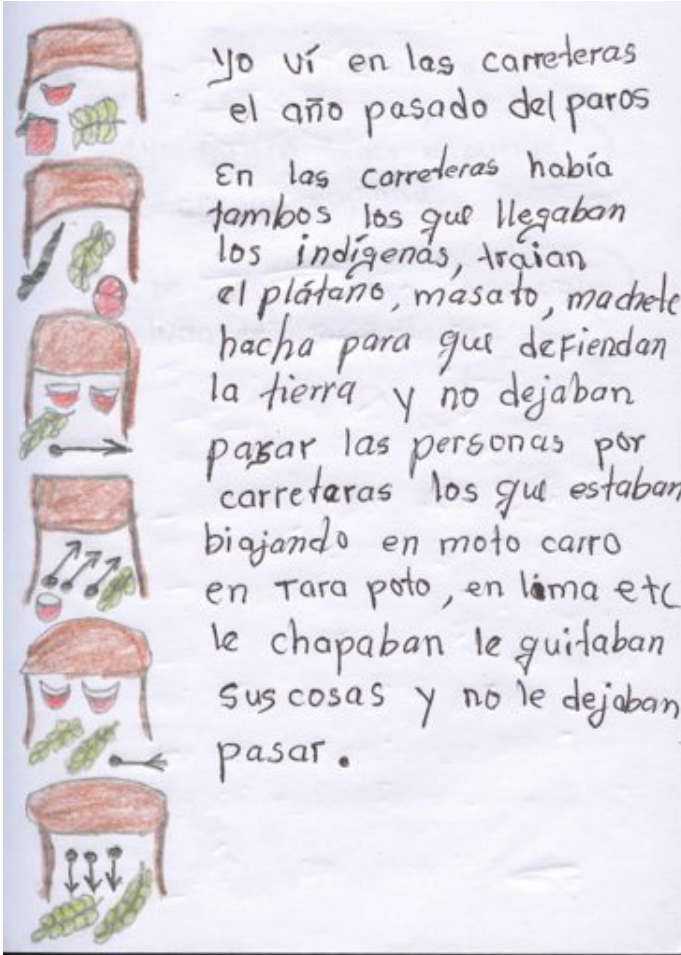
For this activity, I asked the girls to write a narrative about their experience of *la huelga* (the strike), and to illustrate where they were when they experienced it. The following are the stories and illustrations of what they remember seeing and what they experienced between June-August 2008:

*Lourdes*

Loudres' drawing represents the images she remembers from the protests. She remembers having to walk miles outside of Yurimaguas and seeing tents that indigenous people put with plantains, mazato (a drink made of fermented yucca and spit), and machetes for defense.

The drawing on the left hand side of her narrative illustrates these tents.

She also uses her imagination to describe the situation in places she has not been to, describing other places as going through the same experience.



Yo ví en las carreteras  
el año pasado del paros

En las carreteras había  
tamboos los que llegaban  
los indígenas, traían  
el plátano, masato, machete  
hacha para que defiendan  
la tierra y no dejaban  
pasar las personas por  
carreteras los que estaban  
biajando en moto carro  
en tara poto, en líma etc  
le chapaban le quitaban  
sus cosas y no le dejaban  
pasar.

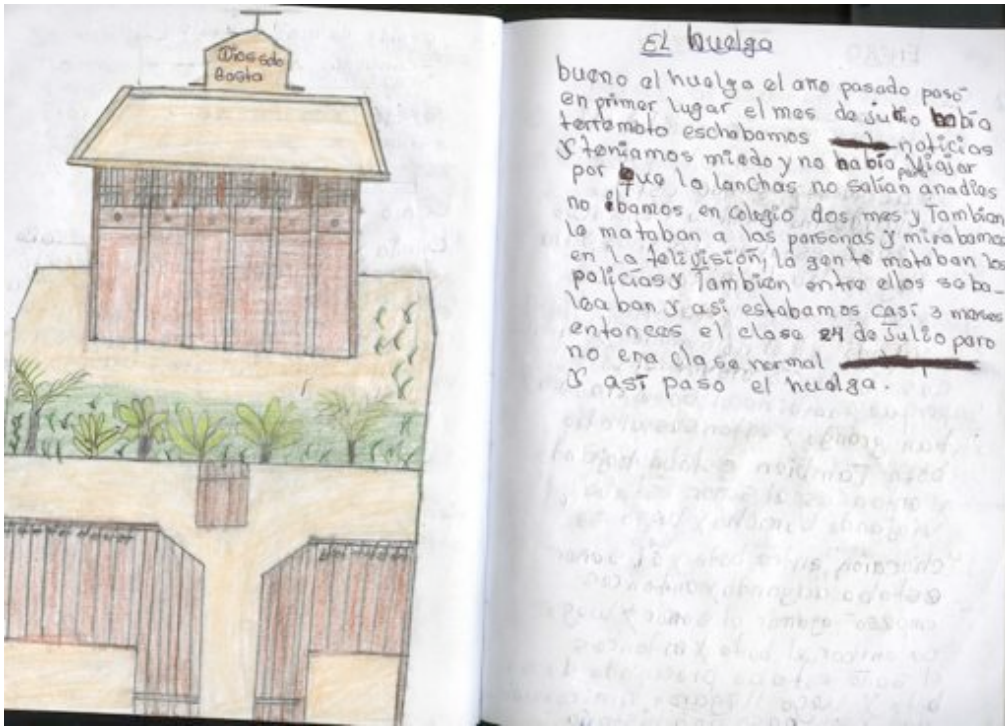
*Maria-Josefina*





Maria Josefina says that the conflict started because her indigenous brothers and sisters were defending their right to live on their own land. She says that because of this, however, they blocked the one road that connects Yurimaguas to other land, and therefore no food was able to come in. Her father managed to arrive to Yurimaguas before the protest got more violent, but on the walk back home, they had to walk 30 km. Maria Josefina describes feeling extremely hungry, thirsty and that she would never arrive back home. She ends her narrative by saying that she sustained herself on two oranges.

*Juana*



Juana's narrative and memory of the *huelga* is interesting, because she is one of the few girls who was not able to return home, and so she stayed in the convent. That is why she draws the *Hogar*. Another interesting thing is that she writes it from the perspective of how it affected school. She writes that she was scared because she had heard that the indigenous people were killing those who tried to travel and that there was an overall feeling of fear. The most impactful part of the *huelga* for her is that she could not get to school for three months. Finally, she says, on July 24<sup>th</sup> classes started again. She ends it: and that is how the *huelga* happened.

Elena



Elena, like Juana, stayed in the hogar during the *huelga*. Like many of the other narratives, she focuses on the lack of food in the markets. She said many indigenous people arrived in Yurimaguas to block the roads, which they held up with machetes, arrows and guns. She said on some days many people were killed. This narrative raises an important borderland, one that underlines an indigenous experience; and that is the border of information. The discursive war against indigenous communities by the Peruvian government was just as powerful as the physical attacking and robbing of lands. Radios, televisions and other media echoed the phrase: terrorists, backwards, savage, etc. The rhetoric was often echoed by indigenous people themselves. She says, the indigenous people did not respect the police. However, what she says at the end demonstrates the crossroads she is in:

she acknowledges that the *huelga* happened because the President stole indigenous land and we cannot agree with that.

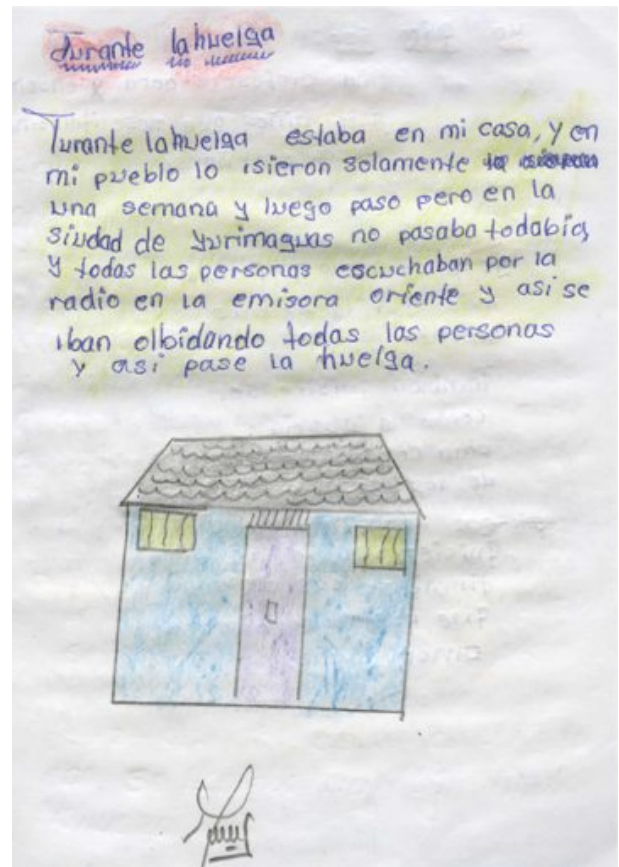
Luz



The most impactful part of la huelga for Luz, like Juana, was being out of school and not being able to return home. She describes a feeling of sadness because school was out, and also because her mother was not able to pick her up like she thought.

## Maribel

Maribel experienced the huelga from home, because she recently arrived at the convent in 2009. However, she incorporates Yurimaguas into her remembering of the huelga. She said that there was a strike that lasted about a week in her hometown but that Yurimaguas had not experienced it yet. She says at first her entire town listened to *Emisora Oriente*, a regional radio station, to hear news of the travelling huelga, but slowly less and less people listened and everyone began to forget. Illustrated is her house from which she listened to the radio.





Marlene



En mi pueblo hubo una huelga por que mi presidente de mi país quiso vender las tierras amazónicas.  
Dentro de esa huelga que hubo había muchas peleas, muertes y los pobladores fueron afectados. Yo lo pase en el internado con algunas chicas mientras la huelga jugamos, bailamos, limpiamos vimos muchas cosas más.  
Cuando paso la huelga todo se volvió a su normalidad los pobladores volvieron a trabajar en sus puestos volvimos al colegio y las personas que vinieron de los pueblos, caseríos a luchar por las tierras volvieron cuando se resolvió el problema de la huelga y así paso el tiempo.

Marlene's narrative shows a deep understanding of the political context of the huelga. Marlene traveled to her hometown during the huelga, and in her narrative, like Maribel, she imagines the effect of the huelga on Yurimaguas, even though she was not in Yurimaguas. Like most, she places an emphasis on the fact that once the huelga was over, they could finally go to school again.

\* \* \*

This activity revealed the complexity of the way borders have functioned in the girls' lives. Their *huelga* narratives represent multiple crossings of existing borderlands; and they represent re-crossings of borders they have already crossed: home to convent. Now, they are forced to leave again and in the cases of those who cannot, they are forced to wait around the convent, with no school and not enough food. The main focus for all of them seems to be the closing of the school. The concern for the closing of the school and the boredom of not being in school shows how these are narratives about the *huelga* from the perspective of young girls who do not have close homes to go to when major conflict occurs in Yurimaguas. This conflict- inherently over geography- is represented through a unique perspective of the geography of the conflict itself; revealing the borders they had to cross and re-cross because of outside circumstances.

The writing activity itself presents a unique borderland in that the event on which they are narrating is what foremost places them in a sort of cross-roads, borderland space. Most of the girls were forced to return home, a place many had not been to in a long time. A few however, like Juana, Elena and Luz wanted to go back home but were not able to, revealing a tense negotiation of borderlands: those they could cross, those they could not, and those they were forced to re-cross.

They have been uprooted from their hometowns to live in a place that has promised them education, food, shelter and essentially to become independent and

strong women. Almost all of these, except for the last one, were taken away during the months of violent conflict. What happened was that they were once again uprooted, because the convent, due to outside circumstances was not able to provide them with what the function for: food and shelter. Even more complicated: the convent did not have the funds to send all the girls home; many of the families had to come up with the money to travel to the convent in order to deliver money for the girls to travel, therefore travelling all back together as a family. In the situations where that was not the case, many girls tell stories about walking for days in groups to different family homes. The girls were stuck in a unique political and geographic borderland in this situation: all were on the side of the indigenous protesters because the issue of land is something that is heavily felt by their own families. Yet at the same time, because of the protests, they could not receive the essential things to survive, like food and shelter. Therefore, without money and in a borderland anyways, they were forced to leave, be uprooted, once again.

An indigenous narrative of this violent conflict was missing; national response was racist and discursively and physically violent, investing huge amounts of money in ads that linked indigenous communities to international terrorist activities and subsequently, the newly implemented law as part of the West's War on Terrorism. Peruvian media was dominated by heavily edited visuals of indigenous protesters throwing rocks at "innocent" soldiers. The experience of this conflict by these particular girls reveals a more complex function of geography in



this region. It reveals how this group of girls write themselves into a history and discourse of an international conflict. Klarén says:

The problematic relation of women intellectuals [women who write] and the terms of public discourse has also been given attention to by scholars who have examined the way in which women appear in the writing of history (25).

These narratives and illustrations allow them to “appear” in this particular history and event, where they focus on the intimacy of their experiences, and revealing the way this conflict affected the institutions and populations otherwise ignored at international and national levels: schools, convents, and them.

Turimaguec 02 de Julio del 2010

Sr: Eliferno Macahuachi Sanchez.

Estimado papacito:

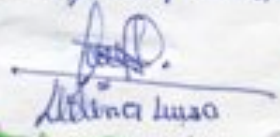
Espero que tes bien y te encuentres mejor con tu nueva familia. Y paso a decirte los siguientes.

Ahora siento que fu fieta mal padre con migo; pero asi mismo te lo agradezco aunque no haga nada por mi. Papá cuanto lo siento lo ocurrido; ahora que estoy grande no puedo sentir lo que antes me acariciabas cuando tenía un año; desde ese día senti que no tuviera un pátre a mi lado. Papá te deceo la mayor suerte en tu vida, papá ya no tienes nada que hacer porque yo ya no te siento si fueras mi padre, porque tu desde que te separaste de mi nunca te acordaste a darne un abrazo. Ahora yo soy una chica estudiante y no me siento feliz sin padre.

Papá te quiero mucho aunque estas lejos de mi. Saludos a mi madrastra y a mi hermanas.

Papá te amo; y te quiero mucho con toda mi alma.

Tu hija Helina Lisa Macahuachi Lomas

  
Helina Lisa

Chapter 7

/

Capítulo 7

*Iluminando el mundo/me convierto en Pájaro:*  
Invented Legends with Feminist  
Protagonists

*Warm-up*

1) *Writes about one power  
tienes*

*You have*

2) *Write about one power you  
would like to have*

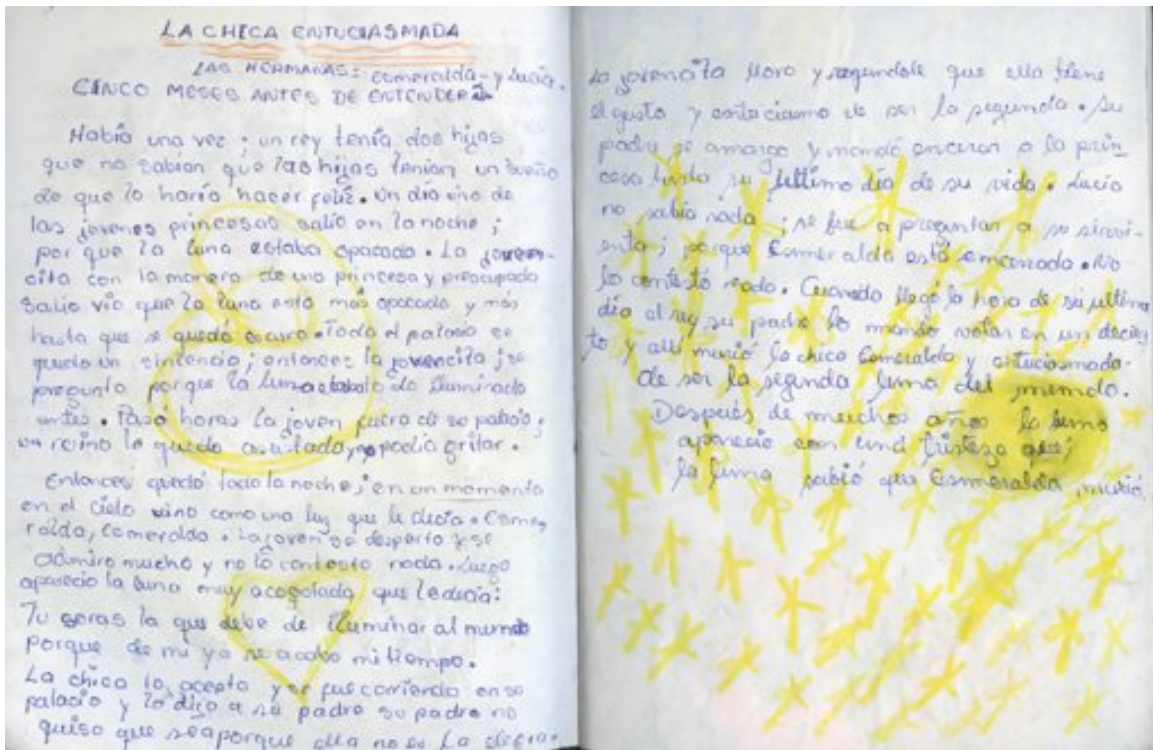
*Calentamiento*

1) *Escribe un poder que*

2) *Escribe un poder que te  
gustaría tener*

*Iluminando el mundo/me convierto en Pájaro:*

Invented Legends with Feminist Protagonists



"La Chica Entuciasmada"

By Luz

*There was once a king who had two daughters. Esmeralda was always curious; much more curious than her sister, Lucía. One night, Esmeralda noticed the moon was less bright, so she set off to explore the land on which her castle was built, walk*

*through the town, and ask the moon why its light grew dimmer. The more she walked, the more the moon lost its light, until finally, the entire palace was dark and the people of the empire grew concerned. Esmeralda found her way back to her room, into the bed next to the window that normally would have had a view of the moon, and there she went to sleep. She awoke to a weakened moon at her window calling her name:*

*“Esmeralda”, “Esmeralda”.*

*She stared at the moon, in admiration, and finally, asked the moon what she wanted.*

*The moon, bent and tired, said:*

*“Esmeralda, it is now your job to illuminate the world, because my time has ended”.*

*Esmeralda accepted. She ran to her father, the king, to tell him about her new duty to illuminate the world. The King, however, was upset and said she is not the right person for this.*

*Esmeralda cried and cried, tried to convince her father, the king, that she had what it takes to illuminate the world and to be the world's second moon.*

*The King grew bitter, and sent Esmeralda to be locked in a room until the last day of her life*

*...*

*The morning of the last day of her life, her father, the king, sent Esmeralda to die in a far away desert.*

*Years later, the moon returned, weak and dim, and found out that the girl who would be the world's second moon died in a far away desert.*

This story was told to me by Luz, where she sat, as always in the desk at the farthest left corner of the classroom in the *Hogar*. She writes quietly, always enthusiastic at the chance of illustration. This story, “La Chica Enthuciasmada” is what she produced when she was asked to invent a legend or myth where she had to turn herself into the main protagonist. The day before, she had written and illustrated what she claimed to be the most well-known myth in all of the Amazon and all of Perú, and one that originated in her village community.

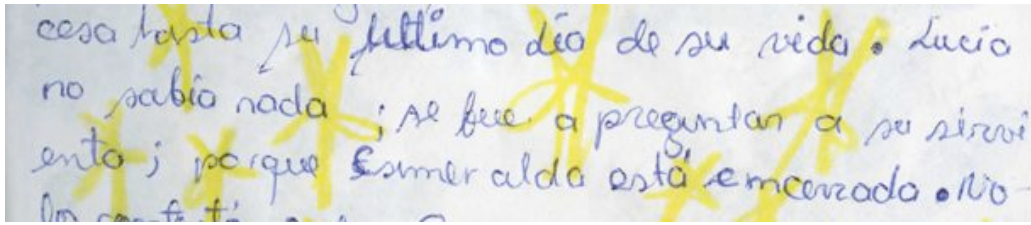
Luz, who is fifteen and has been in the convent since she was eleven, writes her own legend where she reconstructs the love story between her mother and father, referring to them as mythical god-like people who created love in the region. I discovered, through her letters home, that her parents are actually divorced, and she resents her father for having another family. She says she does not remember her father before she was one year old; she only knows that that’s when everything changed.

She writes, “ahora siento que tu fuiste mal padre con migo; pero así mismo te lo agradezco aunque no hagas nada por mi...ahora que estoy grande no puedo sentir lo que antes me acariciabas cuando tenía un año; desde ese día sentí que no tuviera un padre a mi lado”. *Now I know that you were a bad father. Nevertheless I thank you even though you have done nothing for me...now that I am grown, I can’t remember what it felt like when you used to hold me when I was one year old. Since that day, I have always felt as though I don’t have a father by my side.*

Many of Luz's stories are full of epic love plots. She has invented them to reconstruct her own parent's relationship: through fiction, she becomes witness to a love that she could not have possibly been witness to before she was born or before the age of one. But who is to say that she was *not* witness to it? It is obviously the way she has experienced it; she has even constructed a whole narrative around an event she does not remember. Looking at the meeting of fiction and "truth", I see how Luz has used fiction as a way to re-write her own life story, as well as her parent's. Consider the events, experiences and "facts" of Luz's life: abandoned at one, lived with her mother until eleven, sent to the convent at eleven where she has spent four years receiving an education in the town in which the convent sits, and contributing to the daily chores which she shares and rotates among seventeen other girls. The legend that Luz has invented reflects not the chronological, causal and linear events of a young girl's life, but the inner creative imagination of how she experiences this life. Myth and legend creation become mediums of autobiography, filled with metaphor, fiction, and character-creations. The invented legend becomes the medium-the space-through which factual autobiography and mytho-poetic production intersect and produce a life history.

Within the legend/myth that Luz has invented, there are metaphors and signifiers from the events of her own life. In the world of factual autobiography, we know that Luz's father left at age one and that she resents him for having another family. In her invented legend, she creates two sisters- one of which continues to live in the palace and has not sacrificed a father's love. This other sister is voiceless

and relatively agency-less; she only speaks up to ask the servant where her sister has been placed- but even this question is narrated, rather than placed in dialogue:



This other sister, protagonist Esmeralda (Luz), is punished for wanting to be the world's second moon, and for wanting to illuminate the world in the place of a dying moon. As punishment, she is locked in a room until the last day of her life, where her fate will then be decided. Upon the morning of the last day, her father sends her to die in a desert, sacrificing the light of the world and leaving this mythical task of illumination to be left up to an already-dying moon.

There are many mythical elements in this story, proving the ancient concept that human experience is myth-making. Luz does not create a sense of time in her myth, and of how much time takes place in between being locked away where we know nothing of her life, to when the door is unlocked on the last day of her life, and she is sent to die in a far away desert, when, metaphorically, a light is killed. In this invented legend, we find two main themes: the theme of a girl searching for the reason and cause of her movement- in this case, being sent and locked away in a room, or sent to a far away desert only to die. There is also the theme of being ordained with a special task- in this case, a very imaginative and mythical task of illuminating the world- becoming a moon.

Ruth Behar, in her poetic search for Esperanza's life history, said that as a young anthropology student, she travelled to a small rural town in Mexico to collect



Esperanza's story. She narrates that upon meeting Esperanza, she realizes that Esperanza had already produced a life history before their encounter; that she was in fact constantly producing her life history, whether to her children, or to her clients who bought the products of her cart. She writes: "Before my arrival, Esperanza had already thought about her life as a text, telling and retelling her life story to her children..." (Behar 1993). Behar's idea of the fluidity and creativity of autobiography stresses the belief that autobiography can take many forms, and, in the case of inventing legends, that fiction can be an autobiographical tool.

I agree with Behar that we cannot look for people to tell the stories they way we know how to receive them. This idea creates awareness that whatever story someone is telling, she is telling her own story. In considering the creativity of the forms that autobiography can take, we do not have to ask the question, is this true or not true? Like Behar's story stresses, we cannot assume that people do not already have some sort of text of a story we ask them to produce. The text of someone's life is not necessarily written, and we can read a life text in whatever form it is given to us. Behar says that Esperanza first began to develop her life story at five, when she witnessed her mother being abused and beat by her father. Behar's critique of the Anthropological way of collecting life histories expresses the idea that when one as a researcher sets to collect a person's life history or story, one can't assume that this person does not already have a life story. Esperanza's life story had already taken a thousand diverse shapes and textures before Behar arrived to collect it through one medium. What Behar's work and my experience collecting creative writing from seventeen girls has revealed to me, is

that I should read someone's life text in the form it is presented. Texts can take many forms, similar to the way one can read a piece of music as text, read film, etc. and pull out a story.

The problem with western autobiography is that we take people's lives too literally. I reject the assumption that an autobiography has to take the form of a chronological, factual, personal life event. Autobiography should not be seen as a medium that just speaks to real events, that it is truth, or that there is even a truth to be told. The linear events of our lives are not where creativity lies. Who is to say that Luz's invented legend is not real? Who is to say that she is not living out this myth she has created?

### *Human experience and myth*

The legend that Luz wrote came out of an activity where I asked the girls of the Hogar la Buena Esperanza to write a legend or myth where each writer was the main protagonist. What was produced during this activity touches on the idea that human experience is myth-making. What myths do they produce? Which ones do they live out? Which ones do they contest? In the same way that Esperanza had already created a rich textual life of her life history, Luz and the sixteen other girls who wrote beside her, have a rich and dynamic life text.

There are common themes that emerged in all the seventeen invented legends produced, of which I identify three:

1. Travel and epic journeys
2. A border (and border-crossing) as a mythical space, and one of power

### 3. Seduction

As I will explain later, equally important as what the texts say (fictional and non-fictional aspects/travel/sexual agency/modern love stories), is also what do they *do* (create camaraderie, collectivity, performance, confidence).

In inventing myths and legends with themselves as protagonists, they both share their life stories and at the same time explore a sense of self. The legends they produced tell stories of epic love affairs, masterfully crafted seductions, abandonment and survival, the need to find a greater truth, travel and self-transformation. Most involve a young girl as the protagonist, and in the stories where travelling informs the plot, the protagonist is usually the same age as the author at the age she left home and arrived at the convent.

In assigning this activity, I cared less about the theoretical implications that their work has, but the implication it has on their lives and their ideas of what it means to become a woman.

In returning to the idea that we experience our lives as myth and our myths as our lives, and that autobiography is neither about the recovering of plausible experiences nor the quest for truth; I think it needs to be acknowledged how truly innovative their legends are. To begin to speak of the rich creativity in their legends and the space of encounter and intersection they create (among them: fiction vs. truth, indigenous vs. modern, oral vs. written), it is important to begin this story with how they began their story: the creation of herself as protagonist.

*Becoming a protagonist*

*“Our need for stories of our lives is so huge, so intense, so fundamental, that we would lose our humanity if we stopped trying to tell stories of who we think we are”*

*-Ruth Behar, “Translated Woman” 1993*

*“the four of us still dwell in our childhood home, carry it with us, like turtles carry their homes”*

*-Pat Mora, “House of Houses” 1997*

The creation of oneself as a protagonist can be liberating. A chance to re-write one’s story, to tell it, to produce something creative, is liberating: and in their case, it demonstrates the process of maturing into womanhood. This is the life story they tell: they speak to a space relatively voice-less, to a space in which they as young, they as women, they as indigenous, are never asked to produce anything but the agriculture on which the country sustains itself.

My main interest in exploring becoming a protagonist is in what the invention of a protagonist means for the construction of girlhood, and how the experience of that protagonist reveal both the inside and outside elements of their context as young indigenous women housed in a Carmelite convent, away from tradition, from family, from oral culture, and forced to come of age in a product of modernity. Theorist Jean Franco says that in the Latin American literary imagination, there are two paradigmatic figures: “the chronicler/storyteller, whose skills derive from orally transmitted culture, and the superstar of mass culture production” (*Critical Passions* 147). This paradigm also illustrates the paradigm at

function in these girls' literary production both in the form through which they become/invent protagonists (legend and myth-making), in the literary and traditional tensions this invention reveals, and in the encounter of cultures that takes place.

Franco states that from this paradigm in Latin American literary history, there emerged three figures: "author, narrator and superstar" (147), figures that were born from the tension of indigenous oral culture and modernity. The authors of these legends all come from an indigenous, orally transmitted culture. For them, myth-making is not relegated to the exotic category of folklore, but they make up the daily stories by which life is explained, experienced and lived. Franco talks about this historical encounter of indigenous orality and capitalist modernity through both a time-space and literary space. In a sense, the production of these legends by these girls within this convent's walls, demonstrates a real example of how this encounter is experienced.

Coming from oral tradition, they are exposed to the daily soap operas of nuclear families, of families of two or less children, of dog-owning, dog-walking, of rich girls, of seduction; all of which make it into their myths. What their own myth-writing proves is that these things *are* myths, they function as myths, and they make their way into their own imagination. For example, one girl illustrated her legend with a mother waving at her hard-working husband, with two kids by her side, smiling by the front door.



Franco focuses on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's mythical yet real place: Macondo, where Indigenous oral tradition and modernity intersect and come into conflict, resisting capitalism. She says that oral culture is powerfully conservative, yet resistant, and that "with print culture, collective and individual memory split apart". She says, "History records public events and makes individual memory personal and irrelevant to posterity" (148). For this reason, placing the writings of these girls on a historical timeline only works against them, because it is precisely history that has sewn their mouths and fingers as young indigenous women. So how does inventing and writing a legend where you are the main protagonist, liberate? How does it explore the self yet create collectivity?

Franco says that literature, or the printed text, is very divided from history. Speaking from an historical perspective, she speaks to the immortality of print: "Print offered a new kind of immortality, the immortality of survival long after the disappearance of the empirical person who had once born a name. So Shakespeare would promise that 'His beauty shall in these black lines be seen / And they shall live, and he in them still green'" (149).

Franco is alluding to the idea that because of the emergence of print, not only the protagonist, but also the author becomes immortal, ripping him/herself out of history, and out of paradigms and structures that give some power and let others die in silence. How, then, through becoming both protagonist and author of her own life story, does she invent a new world founded on feminine and indigenous experience, on new sites and definitions of authorship, and on the blurring of authorship and orality, rather than its strict and literal separation? How is this small classroom-placed like a valley between their bedrooms, the wall that holds the cloistered nuns on the other side, and the door with the double bolted lock to the outside world- like the mythical and real town of Marquez's Macondo? How is this classroom, of donated desks, religious books, artisan crafts made by their hands, pictures sent and autographed by past missionary-volunteers- "We will never forget you!"- like Macondo? Franco, in talking about how fiction depicts the Latin American historical struggle of a society moving away from oral culture and collectivity, and of the separation of imagination and history says:

Thus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* enacts the process of founding a new kind of society unknown to Western culture, traces its pathos, and shows its ultimate impossibility. The limits of Macondo trace a social allegory, showing that the energies which are frustrated in the reality of Latin America can be released in fiction and that fiction can stave off the taboos on which society is founded. But it is fiction of a peculiar kind. Just as alchemy fused science and religion, theory and practice, before their separation in the modern age, so *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seeks to revive the chronicler

for whom things as they are and things as they might be are not yet distinct (152).

As the following themes and examples from the girls' writing demonstrates, *things as they are, things as they might have been, and things as they could be* are masterfully blurred and contested, revealing the inner life of girls, the mesmerizing and relentless hope and the way they experience their life.

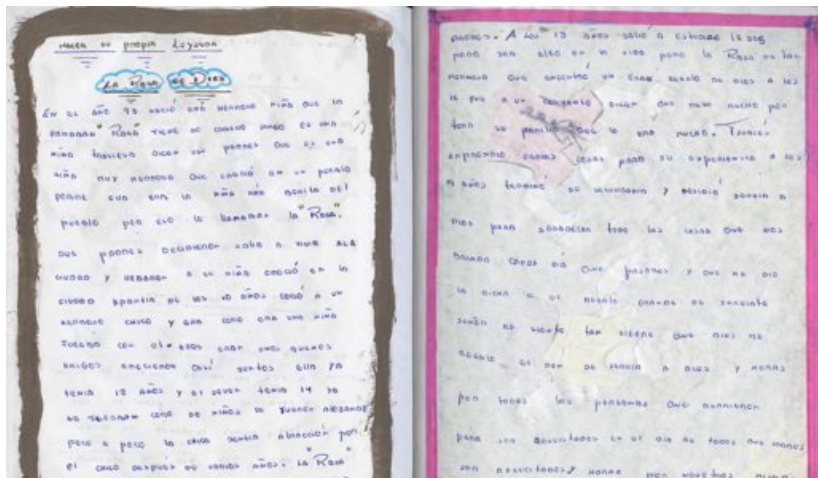
### *Epic Journey/Travel*

*"How many times can you keep going back? I don't think you need to go back anymore."*

Ruth Behar, "Having to say bye to Baba" (2007)

In Behar's essay on returning to Jewish Cuba, she responds to her family's questioning of *why return?* Behar has written on the many ways to return to a place, and the many meanings of that return. In some of the invented legends, a common theme emerged of a young girl being given a duty to travel. While evoking travel, they also reveal this concept of return. By recreating journeys that parallel their own journeys, they often make their characters return home, or at least create a plot

in which a character is sent far away and dreams of returning home.



Maria Rosa, 16, writes a story called "La Rosa de Dios". She narrates that in 1993, the most beautiful girl was



born in a poor, small town in the Amazon. She was born with long beautiful hair and a naughty personality. Because the town was so poor and desperate, and because she was so beautiful, her parents named her Rosa, a flower that brings hope and beauty.

The story continues that at the age of ten, her parents moved to a bigger city, where she met a handsome boy. At twelve, however, they stopped being children, they stopped playing, and they grew apart. However, her attraction for him grew.

According to her story, Maria Rosa's protagonist, Rosa, was the most beautiful and intelligent girl in the whole village that respected and valued her parents. Her parents were worried that she would not make anything out of her life if she stayed in this city, so at thirteen, she left far away so she could go to school so that she could make something of her life. Instead, she found a gift from God. At sixteen, God came to her one day and told her to travel to a convent far away. That is when she found God. Fictional Rosa now lives in the convent where she works to find God and receive an education in order to fulfill her duty to return to her town and make it a better place.

In Maria Rosa's legend, she invents a protagonist named Rosa who is given a specific duty to get an education and improve her town, but it is not necessarily a duty imposed on her; rather, it is one she finds through paying close attention and through developing an intimate closeness to God. So what could be viewed as inhibiting and conservative in a postmodern, liberal perspective is actually liberating, intimate, provoking and adventurous. Her legend is an example of a theme found in other legends where travel was evoked: exploration or an invention

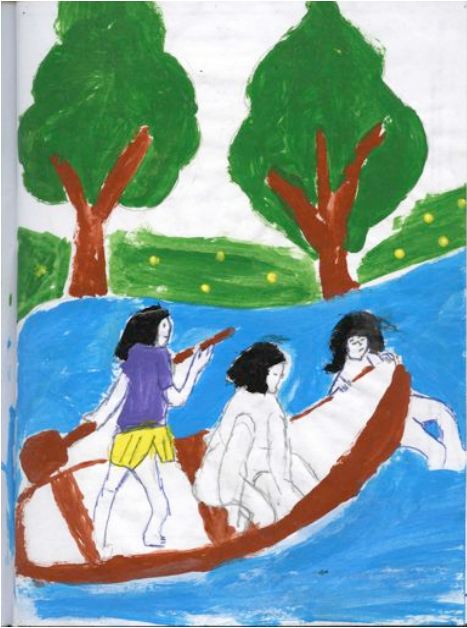
of the reason for travel. In these same legends that share this theme, there is without fail always a place where the young female protagonist is sent. This place, though sometimes directly named as the convent and other times not, is actually their metaphorizing of the convent. So, through their legends, they actually give themselves a reason, an explanation, a cause for being sent away. What was once a source of pain becomes an epic cause through fiction.

Maria Rosa's story demonstrates her own search for the cause of her being at the convent. For Rosa the protagonist, it is to get a better education, because God has given her a duty to return to her town to improve it. How are they sure of why they are sent away? What are the reasons? The reasons don't actually matter- what matters is the story they tell about it.

I had begun with a principal notion of displacement- that these girls, for various reasons, are sent or choose to travel far from home to live in a convent. Travel, in some form or another, is depicted in their stories. There are multiple levels of travelling. Some express epic journeys of crossing multiple rivers over a significant period of time (which are the ones most close to their real life histories). Others express travel more in the sense of movement and transcendence, such as becoming a mythical creature, seducing humans and forcing their captives to live under water (which still reflect life histories because it demonstrates the influence of myth-making and legends on their lives). Others express travel in smaller geographical scales, but epic quests- like searching for a healing tree deep in the jungle, or venturing through overgrown gardens to find a flower of hope. In this section, I focus more on the first expressions of travel- large-scale geographical epic

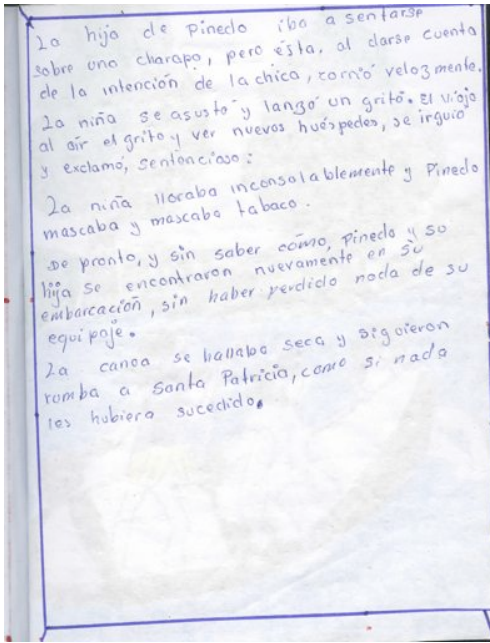
travel.

In the stories of travel, it is not a rite of passage that causes them to travel, but much like in their real life experiences, it is circumstance. The focus, however, is the journey.



Yessica who is seventeen, moved to the convent when she was nine years old. She titled her invented legend “El Yacuruna”. She narrates the story of El Indio Noe Pinedo (Noe Pinedo, the Indian). Noe Pinedo is an Indian man who is travelling down the Amazon River with his nine year old daughter.

On a canoe to el fundo San Yessica. Pinedo sees a naked woman who is trying to sink the canoe. Noe Pinedo and his daughter find themselves in a house



under water made of sand. The walls are made of river snakes and the benches are made out of beautiful naked women with their bodies intertwined together. An old man sits atop a bed. The Indian Noe Pinedo's daughter wants to sit, but when she approaches the bench made of naked women, she realizes the intention of these women out of which the house is made, and she begins to run, trying to escape. The old man yelled, ran them off, and they found themselves once again on the canoe, heading toward Yurimaguas, to el Fundo Yessica.

Yessica constructs a character at the age of 9. She is actually seventeen at the time of writing this, but the reason why the number nine is so important is that nine is the age when she traveled to the convent, so she chose to construct a character that reflected a big transformative moment in her life- and the reason we know that she conceives of this journey as transformative is that the plot through which this constructed protagonist moves is that exactly: an epic journey to the convent, full of adventure and mythical archetypes, and wildly imaginative images.

I do not want to ignore the brilliant creativity of these images. There is almost no analysis to be done, but what is required is to simply admire such a haunting and creative image and story. This legend is an example of the infinite images we use to create meaning and to conceive of our existence as humans and as women. This legend is very interesting in that it combines both an epic journey as well as very interesting feminist mythical images. It is also fascinating because it makes a clear distinction between girl and woman. She, the girl, is the only clothed female in the story. She is a little girl who is frightened of these naked mythical women who attempt to trap her and her father under water. It is Yessica, the girl, and not Noe Pinedo who save them and allow them to continue their journey.

Their depicted journeys parallel their own quest of female identity. Through these depictions of young girls travelling and encountering wildly imaginative situations, they are also encountering themselves. Theorist Cristina Santos says that literary expression contests one's cultural context (2004). In this case, the invented legends do represent struggle in their own social, cultural and economic contexts, whether by criticizing male suppression of female ability, by inventing a plot where her town was going through an epidemic and she had to travel far in order to be educated and return to save the town, or by inventing a situation where a food shortages and hunger was reversed by a mermaid fulfilling a repressed sexual desire. However, these creative inventive legends do more than represent struggle; they *invent*. The depiction of struggle in these legends lies not in protest but in creation. Santos says:

Literature is one of a number of expressive modes that not only constitutes a

people's response to life but also shapes their community. And consequently, the foundational premise for this book is that literary history is considered to be part of the collective memory of identity. Taking this into account, if literary history is to be effective it should approach the literary past by interpreting it as part of the present, but without the deception of purporting to be the past recaptured (*Bending the Rules 2*).

This idea, that literary creation expresses the collective memory of identity, has to be complicated in the context of their situation, because what can we consider collective in the context of their experience? What constitutes as memory here? Where do we locate memory? And even more complicated: what could possibly be considered collective memory *here*?

In this way, the invented legends they wrote reflect their desire to *create* collectivity, proved in the fact that ever single one of the legends produced expressed some sort of travel, and some sort of real or metaphoric depiction of the convent. It is necessary to wonder, what if one of the girls was given this same assignment in a random classroom in their public schools (which is a space acceptable for the production of collective memory)? Would they be quick to name the convent? Would they create narratives of travel? Most likely not, because that is not a memory they would have shared with the students around them who have all been raised in this town. Why is it that every girl names or creates a metaphor of the convent?

*Re-thinking the Convent*

*Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as  
snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a  
nunnery, go.*

*-Hamlet, Act.3 Scene1*

In evoking the convent, both as metaphor and as literal, their work shows their view and experience of the convent as a liberating space. The narrative of experiencing a cloistered space as liberating exists in so many cultures and contexts. Anthropologist Rebecca J. Lester's book, "Jesus in Our Wombs" (2005) explores nun life in a rural Mexican convent. She explains that the (mostly) young women who enter the Siervas congregation give up sex, family, money, and independence, but she explains:

I want to be clear that I am not interested in psychoanalyzing these women or discovering what deep-seated conflicts might have prompted them to give up sex and comfort for a life of bleak austerity and sacrifice. Rather, I propose an answer in terms of a transformation of subjectivity. I saw that, through the engagement of the specific daily practices of convent life, new entrants to this congregation underwent a shift in sensibilities, perceptions, interpretations, dispositions, and memory- a transformation of subjectivity that the sisters understood as the progressively acute discernment of their true vocation according to God's plan (4).

Her argument is that these young women entered the convent life in order to explore and deal with the tensions about being women in a modern state. She explains that they neither saw themselves as domesticated, traditional, obedient women, but neither did they see themselves as the wild, value-less women of Latin

American soap operas. Lester's brilliance of her theory lies in her exploration of how convent life is really an intense exploration of womanhood and God, an exploration that at its core is sensual and liberating. She explains that the average age of when these women claimed they felt God's calling was around thirteen years old, "significant in that this is the age at which young girls are often entering puberty and beginning their transition into womanhood" (11). Whatever one may think of convents, the fact is that every year, more and more young women in Latin America are entering convents, as Lester explains, and this merits more careful exploration. How can we leave behind our western notion of cloistered spaces and view them as intensely liberating spaces? How do the girls of El Hogar la Buena Esperanza do this?

There are many examples in their invented legends of how this convent is liberating. Rosa, for example, has to leave her town in order to return a stronger and more educated woman who will transform this town. It is the convent that functions as the space where this transformation is going to happen. This shows how the convent is liberating not in the strictly literal sense of *freedom*, but in the critical moment of reflection, when one is able to look at one's own life, and create a story out of it. So, in this case, the convent is liberating not because it is the place that gives her freedom, but the place that gives her knowledge and power: the place that gives her the opportunity of return, of exploration, and of dreaming. This idea conveys an indigenous polytheistic psychology (even though Rosa conjures a Christian God). This should be analyzed not as Rosa being converted to monotheism, but simply and interestingly as these are the images she is give and



with which she is playing with. What I mean by this is that the convent is the encounter where all these images interact. It is also the container. What makes it liberating is that it is the place where their indigenoussness encounters the western world.

The western notion of liberation is the western notion of everything: literal. If their invented legends took on a western notion of autobiography, then their life stories would be nothing more than major events. For this reason, if they are asked to tell a story, then an autobiography rich with creativity is produced. In the western psyche, one does not live in her imagination. This is why such a unique event as living in a cloistered convent, in a western autobiography, would be the central all-important event; it would be the central thing that creates meaning, whereas in their legends, the convent is but one thing: it is simply a space from which stories are emerged through and around it. What is of importance is how this convent is imagined and how it is experienced.

The convent being imposed on their lives is not a form of imperialism, of the west eating the non-west, because the convent becomes a space where reflection is possible. It is a space for teaching and learning, which inherently has a meaning making quality to it.

The actual events of their lives are just surface, and in this surface is not where meaning happens. They might go out to live the same life, events wise, but that is not creative. Creativity doesn't exist in the surface events of one's life, but in the moments of reflection.

### *Travel as transcendence*

Maria Josefina writes the legend “Una valiente princesa”, which narrates that there was once the most beautiful and mysterious princess in the world. When the princess was fifteen, she lost her mother in front of her very eyes. The king tried to make her happy, but to no use. She was lonely and sad, and she walked around her garden. One night, she walked out to the garden, looking at the beautiful flowers and the beautiful blue sky, and she lied down on the grass. The king went to go look for her, and found nothing, except the most beautiful rare flower anyone had ever seen, growing in the garden. It is said that the beautiful flower is the princess transformed, and it is said that people transform in order to save others from pain, because the flower is more than a symbol of beauty, but of love and fidelity. “Fidelity” is used in an interesting way, it has an interesting function. Here, fidelity is toward the love of her mother.

### *Border as power*

*“I have the power to make houses fly”*

*-Xuxi, 12*

The following, “El Anciano y La Sirena,” written by Isabel, is an example of an invented legend where the theme of a borderland as a space of power emerges:



Isabel narrates that along the border of a river, an old man walked aimlessly. Sad, hopeless, he walked on land too dry to give food. On one of his walks, a beautiful mermaid appeared before him. "Do not fear me", the mermaid tells the old man. "I know why you are scared". She tells him not to be scared, she will give him many fish, under one condition: the tail or penis of the fish must be given to the son. The old man asks why? She said so that he can grow tall and fast so that she can manifest her love for him. And so, when he grew, she took him, and the old man was left very sad. Because of his sadness, he then lived very few days.

The mermaid does not leave her river. She dominates her lover by manipulation, by cunningness. She gains agency, and does not fall into the

categories of woman. Not necessarily a “good” character, there is no man, no greater power, no natural world order that punishes her. She lives happily ever after, because she says so.

In another invented legend, “La Sirena y el Principe” Antonieta narrates the legend of a young beautiful mermaid who lived in the ocean on a rock. On land, there was a young man who would walk against the edge of the ocean everyday with his dog. His dog smelled the mermaid, and for days, he the young man searched for her. One day, he fell into the ocean, and when she caught him, she “tried him”. When he awoke, he was underwater, and had not choice but to marry her, where he became a mermaid and they lived happily ever after.

### *Performance*

In a sense, the legends and myths that they wrote and the stories that they tell are about who they think they are. They undergo transformations as their characters undergo transformations. As humans, we invent characters, we call it fiction, to create a space in which we may talk about our lives, speak of things unspeakable, and bring to textual life that which we have never shared. In this portion of the activity, more than in any other, I, and we, were witnesses not only to what the text can say, but what it can do. There was the writing, and there was the *performance* of writing. The writing and sharing of stories created a sense of camaraderie in this small room of tiny desks and buried books, of donated computers that don’t work, and a small television that we sit in front of every night at 9pm to watch “Al Fondo Hay Sitio”, a soap opera about class differences in Lima.

It gave the girls a chance to fictionalize what they are at times too shy to confess. In a way, the writing of these legends, wild and imaginative, became confessional and self-revealing texts, where the girls not only had the chance to share their life stories to the girls who have grown and will grow up alongside them, but to share their life stories to *themselves*.

How are these invented legends mirrors of their lives? How are they metaphors of their own epic journeys? How are they fictionalized accounts of their own struggles, their own self-revelation? How do they carry their own stories like “turtles carry their homes”? (Mora). In the development of these three central themes, there are other things that intersect. Mainly, the rich wordless life of the actual writing of the activity, the way they construct the convent, themselves, and the way they reveal this activity as the intersection of indigenous and modern, fiction and truth.

Although I do not see their writing as strict folklore, I agree with Richard Bauman that folklore and oral literature is rooted in social events, and that it is in fact a social process (1986). What this means is that, as I stated previously, equally important as the text produced, is the text around the actual event. In other words, it is important to look at the place and event of narration as part of the social process of text-creation. There is the writing itself, and the event of the writing: the poetry of the two hours it took to write this; the rich wordless story in the sound of pencils, the sound of erasing, the meticulousness of girls’ writing, the sound of laughter, of frustration, of hands lifting to the page to hide the story-in-process from the wandering eyes of other girls, and my own. There is poetry in the event, in the

scene, and in the sounds. There is a rich wordless story in the performance of writing.

The actual process of writing these legends acted as a vehicle for a crossroads, where the individual and social come together: in creating a story about themselves, they are also telling a social story; demanding that we consider a new social question. In considering what they text not only said, but what it did; there is also a relationship exchange: I gave them a chance to write creatively, and they taught me about their legends. Most of all, there is a rich and detailed performance in the actually writing of these legends, and especially in the performing. While they wrote their legends, most covered their notebooks, even though they knew that it would be shared later that night.

When it came time to reading their legends, they would get very nervous. Most of the time was spent giggling, hiding behind doors, forming smaller groups of girls around the next reader, whose job it was to soothe this reader out of her nervousness.- They giggle, they take deep breaths, they run to another corner of the convent and call some of the other girls to come read it and tell them it is okay.

There is the performance around actually getting to read it, and then there is another element of performance in the preparation of the event of reading it. They wanted the actual sharing of these legends to be formal. They wanted it to be in the biggest space of the convent: the dining room, where we must move the tables to the outermost walls, and temporarily remove the large statue of St. Francis from a smaller table, so that it does not get knocked down and shatter during the dance party that will always take place after their formal performances. They requested

Inca Cola, Coca Cola, popcorn, and candy. They fought over who got to accompany me to the market to carry the liters of coke and Inca Cola; because this provided one of the only chances to leave the convent walls (besides walking the mile to school, but schools were on strike starting that day and would last until one whole month later, so this was really their only chance).

Then there is also the element of storytelling among girls, a task neither relegated to girls, nor present among girls. There is also the performance within the initial exchange I mentioned before. They opened my mind about what poetry could be; about what it could do; about what it could look like. Poetry was MY way of building my own *feminist architecture*, and I could share it, with intimacy and genuineness, and passion...but what was THEIR way? This became their favorite activity, yet it was the one I had been most hesitant of. It taught me to listen to them. Part of the reason it was their favorite activity is that they got to pull from their oral cultures into a modern framework.

These invented legends give voice to a feminine and feminist identity, but also to a feminine and feminist experience. Santos speaks to the “inherent struggle for the power of expression” in the recovery of feminist texts by women writers. She also says that the universal cultural context (specifically in Latin America) requires women to have very silent roles, and that literature can be a medium through which women find “authentic self-expression” (7). At the same time that there is a dynamic and rich Latin American literary tradition that these girls’ writings fall within, it also falls within the silenced and subjugated context of

women within that tradition. Santos says that women recover and write their sense of an authentic Self “within a social context that expects selfless female subjects” (8).

Santos speaks to the power of the text in exploring female identity:

“Language is the construct through which narrativity is attained and it is also the method by which reality is produced. More importantly language is not only the medium through which individuals established themselves as subjects, but also the basis on which reality is founded. Thus, through language these subjects search to establish themselves in their own reality” (12). While this quote is a valid and powerful statement, it undermines the role of intentional fiction. It undermines the *intent* to fictionalize, and the rich process it requires.

*Epic love story/seduction, feminist revision.*

*One cannot discount that, historically, men’s experience has stood as the measuring stick for all human experience*

*-Cristina Santos*

Santos claims that an authentic feminine sense of self is when a protagonist recovers a sense that is not foreign to herself. In other words, she says that historically, women-in literature and outside of literature- disassociate from their own self, their own expression, and their own experience.

Maru, 15, wrote “La Rosa Roja,” where she narrates that a family lived in an ancient garden. Because of work, the family had to move far away, where they



worked over the years. One day, they decided to return to the ancient house with the ancient garden. When they returned, the garden was huge with weeds and tall, because no one had cleaned or kept it. They decided to do that fix the garden and to restore the way it had been. During this time, the daughter found a beautiful red rose in the middle of the garden. Since that day, her family called her the red rose, la Rosa Roja. The moral of her story is that the girl grew up very happy, using the new name her parents gave her.

In *“La Catawa (árbol de la selva)”* by Marlene, 14, she narrates the story of a village that is dying out de to an epidemic. Families are leaving the villages and migrating to other places. One particular family forgets their daughter at home, leaving this abandoned daughter while asleep. When the abandoned daughter wakes up, she begins to cry. Crying and lonely, she grabs a machete and ventures into the jungle to cut the leaves off the Catawa, an Amazonian tree. She collected the leaves, cooked them and drank them, after which she fainted. When she awoke she became a beautiful bird named Shansho.



That is why, she says, when people from the jungle are sad, they kill Shanshos and eat them, and this restores their happiness and strength.

This story involves elements of both a life history of conceptualizes her experience of the convent as abandonment, as well as the traditional healing power

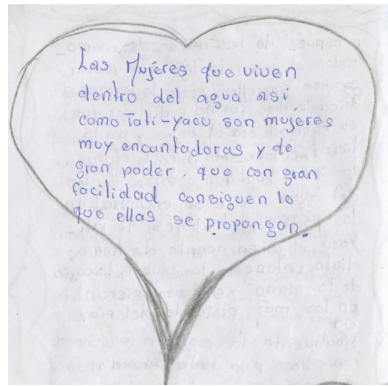
of plants, and transcendence: of becoming a sacrificial mythical bird. She, however, lives on, because although the moral goes that these birds must be killed, placing it in myth makes it immortal. She is not one bird; she is many.

*“Tati-Yacu” by Rocío*



Rocío, 18, narrates the legend about a beautiful woman named Tati-Yacu, who seduces anyone who crosses her path. She sunbathes every day so that young men may notice her, but she only allows half her body to be seen. One day, she falls in love with a young man, and invites him to her home under water. He declines the first time. Then, every day after 4pm for three months they meet at her place. He wants to marry her, but she says no, her home is under water, and his is land. She proposes he live under water so that her family can be present when they marry. Some time passes and they get married. The boy never returns to dry land.

The moral of the legend is that women like Tati-Yacu who live in the river are seductresses. With huge powers and with great ease they achieve what they set out



to achieve.

What is at the heart of their writing? Is it the expression of femininity? Is it about a feminist revision of the world? My original intent for assigning this activity was simply that: I wanted the girls to have an opportunity to create a feminist revision of history, and I chose the legend form because that is a tradition they are familiar with. What I found in the two hours that this activity took, however, was that this is beyond “revision”.

The legend of Tati-Yacu repeats imagery found in many of the invented legends: women who live under water and who seduce men to leave their homes and geographies and enter theirs. There is an element of deception in this legend too, because half of her body is always hidden. I want to stress the importance of femininity that the invention of female protagonists (especially in this legend) expresses. Rocío confessed to me that she feels pressure to find a job or go back home after she graduates high school this year, but that she has a great secret building inside. I asked her what that was, and she led me to the back of the convent, away from the curious ears of other girls and nuns. Looking around to

make sure that no one was listening, she whispered in my ear that her biggest secret was that she wanted to become a nun.

Although in her legend she expresses a desire to seduce, to marry and to explore her sexuality, there are two narratives going on: first, these desires expressed are neither far nor opposing to how these girls view God or the convent, and second, this secret which she claims is building inside of her, is expressed through the moral of her story: that women like Tati-Yacu will achieve what they want as long as they set their mind to it. Going back to theorist Cristina Santos, she says: "As long as we have the capacity to engage in dialogue we have the potential for discovery of something new, and as long as the literary text provokes the reader to surpass the semantic impertinence of discourse we can imagine what was before unimaginable"(12).

What their work and this idea speak to, is the open-mindedness of text that Behar expresses. The Invented legend activity opens up new ways of conceptualizing their life history, but it does more than that. The deconstruction of what autobiography could look like is no longer exciting nor innovative, because it has already been done. The wave of deconstruction has past, and there is nothing I could contribute to it, except to take it to another level: to argue that that their particular life histories speak to new concepts of liberation. They speak to female liberation and they speak to the spaces and places where female liberation takes place.

Chapter 8

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Capítulo 8

“¡Que *Verguenza!*”

Menstruation and puberty in the convent

## “¡Que Verguenza!” Menstruation and puberty in the convent

Even in a room full of girls, the topic of periods still brings on laughter, embarrassment and shyness. Manuela says that when she gets her period, that is when she doesn't like being a woman; she doesn't know why God made women have periods and not men.

Because of the young age that they leave home, menstruation and getting their period for the first time is sewn into the process of coming of age in the convent. For this activity, I wanted them to recall the exact moment of this little talked-about yet intimately monumental event. I asked them to describe the first time they got their period through a narrative that focused on the event itself, as well through an illustration of their first time. I was hesitant to ask them for an illustration, thinking perhaps it would cause confusion and no one would do it, but I was completely wrong. Most were quick to draw before writing, adding in details, place and expression. All of the girls first got their period after they had already moved to the *hogar*, yet there was a mix of narratives about first getting it in their classrooms at school, on a visit home, or in the convent. No matter where the place, however, all somehow lead to how the convent functions in their transition from girlhood to womanhood, from childhood to adulthood, and from family life to independence. Below, they reveal funny portraits of the tensions, moments and complexities of coming of age in this convent.

Menstruation has always played an important role in coming of age stories for girls; so I wanted them to get a chance to write about theirs. Their narratives of

getting their periods reveal an intimate portrait of coming of age within the convent's walls, as well as how they reveal the borderland between girlhood and womanhood. Their writing reveals not only their thoughts on what it means to become a woman, but also, in some cases, their views on undergoing this intimate experience when they are away from home.

Their menstruation narratives are interesting because most get their period after arriving at the convent. The convent, therefore, plays a big role in how they perceive menstruation within their own coming of age. Whether they first got it in school—a place where they have already felt isolated; whether they got it at the convent and had to tell the nuns, or whether they got it on a rare visit back home and had to tell their families; their telling of this event reveals an intimate portrait of how they view the tensions, humor, cultural boundaries of coming of age from school, home, and convent.

Many stories were verbally told before any of the girls started writing, like Juana who said that she had always heard she would get it one day. The nuns showed her the pantry where the pads were kept for when the time came. However, she did not get it in the convent, but during a week she travelled home to visit a sick family member. She explains that she felt different, a little nauseous, and she knew that she had gotten her period. She had not seen her family in a while, and was embarrassed to tell them. At that moment, she wished she were back in the convent, because then she wouldn't have to tell anyone; she would just know that the pads are in the pantry. And even if the other girls saw her go in there, she could

always just pretend she was getting soap. Below are their menstruation narratives, divided by those who got it in school, those who got it at home, and those who got it in the convent.

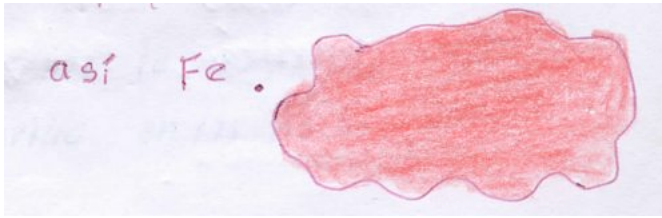
*En el colegio...*

Antonieta describes a day at school when she could sense that her body was changing. She says outside was raining, but it was recess time so all the school children had to go outside too. One of her friends was calling her name, begging her to hurry up and walk outside. Finally, Antonieta walked down the steps into the playground, and all of a sudden everyone was laughing and pointing at her because she had a big stain on her pants. At that moment, she says, she wished she could crawl in a hole and never come out.

Isabel says her most embarrassing moment was when she got her period in front of the whole school. She had been chosen as her class representative during the folk festivals in Yurimaguas, for which she had to prepare a native dance in front of the whole school. She was already shy, she says, so she did not want to get up and dance, but her friends convinced her to get up. As she stood on the stage, she noticed everyone was laughing. That's when she realized she had gotten her period.



*Home*



Lourdes travelled by boat to her village to visit her family and to help them on the *chacra*. While she was working, she felt an ugly sensation.

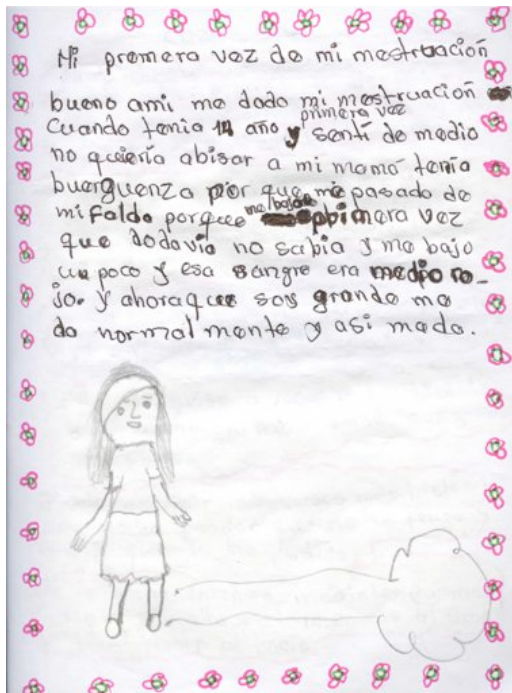
Diana says she looked like a ghost.

Her mother asked her:

“¿Qué tienes, Lourdes? Porque no trabajas? Porque estas así bien asustada? Dime, quiero saber que problemas tienes”

Lourdes tells her mother, “Mami, porque me bajo sangre de mi vagina”.

Her mother tells her not to worry, that she got her period. She took Lourdes inside to put an ointment on it, and that is how it happened.



Juana says she first got her period when she was at home. She writes that she was scared and did not want to tell her mother. “Tenía vergüenza por que me pasado de mi falda”. She writes that she did not know it had gone through her skirt, because she did not know what it was until it completely went through. She says she remembers it being somewhat red. At sixteen, she no longer gets embarrassed: “Y ahora que soy grande me da normalmente y así nada”. *Now that I am older, it comes naturally and as if nothing*”

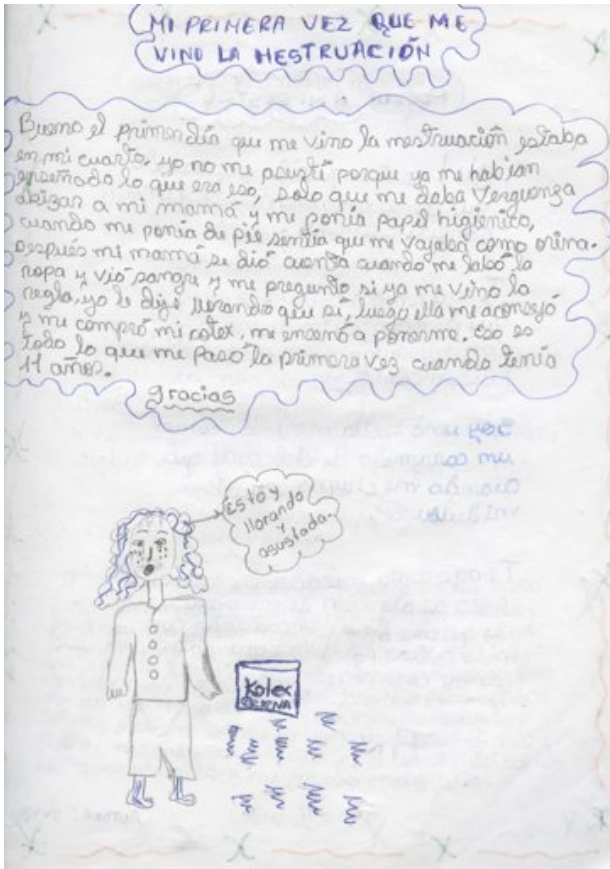
Rocío narrates a story about how it is important to listen to your mother:

## mi primera menstruación

cuando entre en la etapa de la Pubertad, mi mamá me empezó a hablar acerca de la menstruación yo no sabía q era eso, a mi no me importaba nada y no tome mucha importancia en lo q mi mamá me decía.

y un hermoso día cuando estábamos almorzando senti ganas de orinar me fui al baño y me di cuenta que mi ropa interior estaba manchada me asuste mucho y me senti que me iba a desmayar, ese rato no tuve ganas de volver a comer mi mamá me pregunto que tenía y yo le decía que no tenía nada.

Paso un día y no tenía protector y solo usaba PH. y cuando ya no aguataba el dolor empecé a llorar y no salía del cuarto y ~~me~~ ahí cuando supo mi mamá, en ese momento me compró toallas higieicas y algunas pastillas para el dolor, pero ahora ya es normal porque el deber de toda mujer es que todo los meses tiene que pasar por eso.



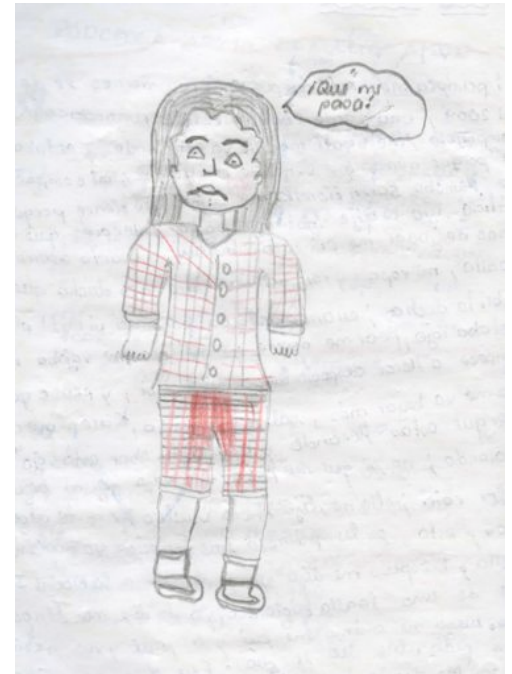
Elena first got her period on a visit home a few years after being sent to live with missionaries in another town. She remembers that she was in her room when she first got it. Her mother walked in the her room and found blood, and then asked her if she got her period. Elena said yes, and they went to go get kotex. She describes feeling very scared.

Convent

Luz

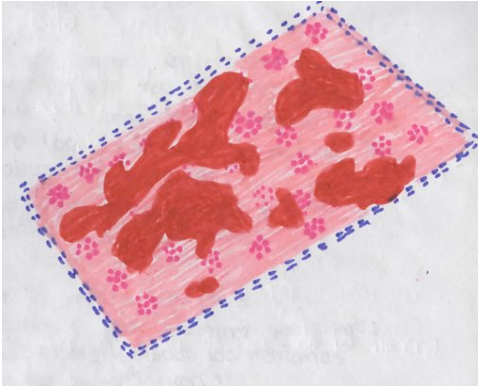
## mi primera menstruación.

mi primera menstruación fue aquí, un viernes 22 de marzo del 2008, una tarde cuando estaba jugando con un compañero; me sentí mojada yo dije nada y estaba asustada porque nunca me sentí de esa forma; mi compañero que se llamaba Karen Fiorella me dijo: ¿qué tienes porque estás pálida yo le dije: no tengo nada; después que terminamos de jugar me fui corriendo subi al cuarto agarré mi toalla, mi ropa y ropa interior entre en lo duchio que de pronto abrí la ducha; cuando estaba bañando vi en el piso agua estaba roja, peor me asuste y sentí que me rogaba más y empecé a llorar despacio luego me cambi, y pensé que ya no me va bajar más, salí de lo ducha, Karen me dijo: porque estás llorando y además tu shor está rojo; le dije llorando; no se que me pasa me vaje igual agua pero color rojo; ella me dijo ahora vuelvo; pero te digo una cosa, esto es tu primera menstruación, yo no entendí nada. Después me dijo me a decíto a la madre Ines, que te de una toalla higienica; yo le dije no tengo vengues. Luego me animo me fui y le pedí y no sabía como le a pedir. Me dio 11 días. Fue una pesadilla para mí. Me dio en el patio del convento.



Manuela





Manuela first got her period when she was sleeping in the hogar. She said she felt a warm sensation and just thought it was urine. When she awoke, she realized the bed was full of spots of blood. She shyly called in Madre I. to show her. Madre I brought her kotex and showed her how to put it on. Manuela describes being scared and worried, but Madre I. reassured her not to worry; that this happens to all women. After that, Manuela said she felt better and like a woman, and doesn't comprehend why she was every scared.

Whether the girls got their periods in the convent, on a visit home, or in school, all reveal the intimate negotiations that go on around departing girlhood, and the convent's role in this transition. Whether it is Juana who went home and wished she was in the convent because she knew exactly where the kotex were, or Luz who got it in the huerta of the *hogar*; all reveal the intimate relationship between the convent and becoming women, and just as importantly, it reveals the borders they cross and *do not* want to cross in the process of getting their periods.

Though the focus is how they interpret their womanhood once in the convent, there is much significance in the ones that occurred at home. The significance is that it reveals family life, and it also repairs and re-writes early relationships and ties to mothers and home villages.

After about thirty minutes of writing, and Rosita walking around the room to read everyone's narrative, she finally raised her hand. She had a sad look on her face, and asked: *What am I supposed to write if I haven't gotten it yet?* At that moment, I felt unprepared and realized that I had not even thought that maybe there was a girl who had not gotten her period yet.

After a moment of silence, I told her that she could write about what she imagines it will be like. At that moment, the other girls put down their pencils and offered Rosita suggestions and words of advice. "No te precoces, Rosita, no va estar tan mal" (don't worry, Rosita. It won't be that bad").

As the girls tried to console Rosita and offer womanly advice, Rosita began to draw, looked up, smiled, and said, "Yo creo que va ser una cosa muy hermosa".

Chapter 9 / Capítulo 9

*Mi Secreto tiene sabor a manzana, a veces lo guardo, a veces lo cuento:*

Keeping Secrets in the Convent



*Mi Secreto tiene sabor a manzana, a veces lo guardo, a veces lo cuento:*

### Keeping Secrets in the Convent

In one big room, the girls' bunk beds line up. Each girl gets a small squared cupboard to put her stuff in- clothes, toothbrush, and any personal items they may have. This activity reveals how they interact with each other as girls and in the collectivity of the convent. It reveals the borderlands they have yet to cross and want to. It reveals the experience of living communally and in this context.

In the telling of their secrets and how they keep them, they also reveal an element of daily life at the convent. The secrets reveal not just their secrets, but in general, the ways in which they interact with each other as girls. Narratives about keeping secrets have an underlying narrative to it: that of coming of age; the things we choose to tell and the things we'd rather not. It also reveals: how DO you keep secrets in the convent.

I want to give importance to their secrets, and how they carry their secrets in the convent. Their secrets are about love, about wanting to become nuns, mainly; things that reflect their coming of age.



Marlene

Mi secreto:  
Mi secreto es muy importante,  
El secreto que tengo es el  
Más bonito y más hermoso



Maru

Mi secreto  
Mi secreto es muy difícil de  
guardar, porque aquí vivimos  
varias.  
Mi secreto tiene sonido al mar,  
Tan alegre al amanecer.  
También es como el sabor  
De la manzana



Maria Rosa

Mi secreto  
Mi secreto es difícil de  
Contarlo porque somos  
Varias  
Y a veces sentimos mucha  
Vergüenza contarlo.



Manuela

Mi Secreto

Mi secreto es fácil guardarlo porque  
Las chicas nos cuentan su secreto porque  
confían en nosotros y nosotros tenemos que  
guardar su secreto y no decirlo a nadie.

Mi secreto suena como el relámpago.

Rocío  
Mi secreto:

Quiero ser monja

Luz



**EL SECRETO DE MI ALMA**

Este secreto tiene el ritmo de una desesperación que como si un rayo quemaría mi angustia, el olor me mata con el tocar mis párpados de mis ojos a las fragancia de frutas amargas. Si tuviera más fuerza cambiaría el ritmo y el olor de sentir mi alma que se acerca lentamente de mi cuerpo que se va como la melodía de una música que los dulces son que calma mi dolor.

Has una alma llena de claridad llena el gusto con rocas que los paisajes sean preciosos y los sonidos sean paz.

Annabella

Mi secreto

Mi secreto siempre esta en mi  
Corazón no lo puedo sacar  
De mi pecho



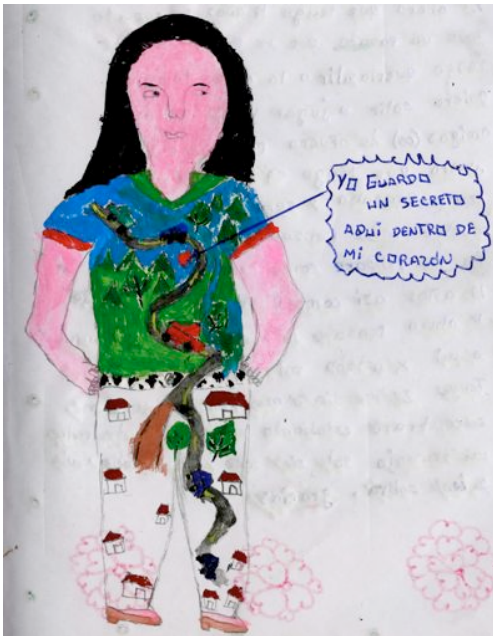




Antonieta

Mi Secreto:

Tengo enamorado



Isabel

Mi secreto

Mi secreto es muy difical guardlo en el convento



Maria-Josefina

Mi Secreto

Mi secreto huele a tierra húmeda

Mi secreto sabe a naranja

Mi secreto suena como música romántica



Xuxi

Mi secreto

Mi secreto suena como la lluvia

Mi secreto es como tocar una palomita

suave



Carmela

Mi Secreto

Mi secreto suena ¡trac trac! cuando se sabe el secreto.

Mi secreto esta en el convento

The secrets reveal daily life of the convent, and also about their interactions with those they share an intimate space with: each other. Not only are these also narratives of adapting to a new life, but they reveal something about borderlands too. They reveal the borderland between young womanhood and adult womanhood; and between girls and nuns.

Writing about secrets revealed more than just the personal intimate secrets of adolescent girls, but it illustrates, in some cases, girls' relationship to the convent, girls' relationships to cloistered spaces, to their own imagination, as well as girls' relationships to the dreams and imaginations of their own future. They reveal where they see their lives going, despite or because of their past; they break barriers, such as Rocío wanting to become a nun against her family's wishes that she become a mother. These secrets are what make up and pass through the walls that divide the convent, the stories that connect the girls and a blueprint of the things



that make up girls' lives; the things they feel contain them, and those they feel that liberate them. Within these walls there are thousands of secrets, like the nuns who've admitted that cloistered life is lonely; those who have left because they've fallen in love; those who entered the cloister to escape sexual abuse, and those who imagine entering the cloister for an opportunity to be free to learn, read and grow.

Chapter 10

/

Capítulo 10

*Soy Mujer, Soy Peruana, y llevo mi hermoso  
pueblo dentro de mi:*

Poems and Portraits of Identity

*Warm-Up*

*-Write down every identity  
tiene*

*Calentamiento*

*-Escribe cada identidad que*

*that you have*

*Soy Mujer, Soy Peruana, y llevo mi hermoso pueblo dentro de mi:*  
Poems and Portraits of Identity



“Some of us keep coming back. Some of us love, and some of us hate, some of us both love and hate our borderlands. Some of us remember, some of us forget”

-Norma Elia Cantú, “Canícula” 1995

“More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts...love your heart. For this is the prize”

-Janie, in “Their Eyes Were Watching God”

The girls of the *hogar* experience many *identidades fronterizas*; they are neither in one place nor the other.

Their identity is formed through several symbols and referents, defining itself and redefining itself in different situations. As we see in their stories about their hometowns where they use their memory and imagination to recreate and remember stories that take place in the hometowns they left behind; in their poems about leaving home and travelling the epic geographic and conceptual journey to the convent; we see the metaphors and the signifiers of their forming identities. For example, the convent is always there as metaphor or as fact.

Because of their unique experience, because they are uncategorizable creative beings, they express borders that are not necessarily geographical but cultural. They are discouraged from expressing their indigenous identities. What is interesting is that not a single one claims an indigenous identity in this activity, but in a way, they DO because they claim their native communities. They draw their native communities on their bodies, sharing it with either their identities as students, or as women.

These girls, because of their context, the nature of their experience, straddle several identities. They are both girls and women, Peruvian and indigenous, small village and large town, etc. As a warm up, we talked about the different identities that exist, and how many identities one person could have. Some said that it wasn't possible to only have one. I asked them to write down every identity they could think of that they have. They brainstormed identities that were outside of the general categories of gender and nationality, and showed the complexities and depth of these identities in the illustrations that accompanied the poems.



## Oda a mi misma

Oh hermosa y tierna niña,  
Que eres como una  
Rosa hermosa.  
Que tambien eres como  
Una carta muy cerrada  
Que guardas tus sentimientos  
En tu pecho  
Pero cuando lo recuerdas  
Lo cuentas a tus amigas  
De tu hermoso pueblo  
Que le llevas dentro del  
Pecho con tanto amor  
Y cariño que le tienes.

-Por Maru

Here, Maru identifies herself mostly with femaleness- girlhood and womanhood. She celebrates her girlhood, and says it is like a beautiful rose. It is also like a closed letter that keeps its feelings inside her chest. We see from her drawing on her chest that her hometown is implicated in, and forms the sense of womanhood she is maturing into. Whereas womanhood can blossom on the outside, in public view; the love, memory and nostalgia of hometown blossoms only on the inside and only rarely is it shared. The secret, the emotions kept, thus, are the existence of a hometown far from the convent, and are represented in the drawing on the middle of her chest.

There is an incredible nostalgia for her hometown, but it is a nostalgia kept within, withheld, not only because she is far from home, but also because no one

else in her current immediate life at the convent or at school shares this hometown.  
So she withholds it almost like a secret.



### Oda a mi dibujo

Me hice esta tarde  
Un hermoso dibujo  
Es el medio del  
Cuerpo de una  
Sexi mujer sobre  
Los piernas dibuje  
Las aguas y una  
Canoa y unas  
Casas.  
Sobre las dos  
Piernas esta  
Dibujado un  
Hermoso paisaje  
Esta tan hermoso mi  
Dibujo.  
Es verdadero, es  
Lo que siento  
Por mi mitad  
De mi cuerpo

-Por Marlene

Like Maru, Marlene combines womanhood and hometown as her two main identities and the ones that best describe her. She takes great pride in her femininity, explaining that she chose to draw her identity on top of two sexy legs. The bottoms of her legs are drawn like rivers, and on the hips is a village with small houses. There is also a bird, which is a recurring symbol in several of Marlene's

poems. A lot of her stories and poems are influenced by the mythology of the mythical Shan Sho bird. The inclusion of this bird makes it obvious that the town she depicts is her hometown. She describes this town as having beautiful landscape; and the canoe, river, and houses lie on the legs of a beautiful woman.



### Mi Identidad

Yo soy la niña  
Sincera  
Me siento alegre  
Los días  
Que el cielo se pone azul

La mitad de mi cara  
Es un  
Paisaje

Soy maravillosa

Soy fiel  
Y  
Alegre

Estoy echa una mujer  
Tengo el cabello negro

Quisiera ser un cerro  
El más alto

Mientras tanto quisiera  
Seguir siendo una  
Niña alegre

Maria Josefina focused more on her identity as a woman. However, her sense of womanhood is not isolated. Like in some of the

other examples, she links the past and present, hometown and womanhood to talk about her identity. She is a total woman, she says, and she wants to be the tallest mountain depicted in her drawing, but meanwhile, she wants to continue being the happy girl that she is.



### Oda a mi dibujo

¡OH! Mi hermoso dibujo  
que representa mis lindo  
paisaje que das  
el aire puro  
eres como si fuera  
el única que existe en el mundo.

Me gusta los  
Colores que te pinte  
Mi lindo dibujo  
Porque nos das tu lindo  
Paisaje y adorados  
Ríos y árboles

-Por Carmela



Carmela's poem and drawing represents more of her hometown, which she draws on the left half of her body. Although she does not name exactly what the other identity is; there is still a half unnamed, yet existent. In a sense, this could represent an identity waiting to be filled and still developing; it represents an unnamed present. Important to this unnamed half is the half that she fills with images of her hometown.

She describes a sense of purity about this hometown, and nostalgia of what it is like. Beyond a feeling of nostalgia, there is pride in its uniqueness and depth in its memory when she says that she feels like her village is the only one that exists. She thanks her village for the rivers and trees that everyone loves.



## Oda a Mi Identidad

Soy Peruana de corazón y me Siento orgulloso por tener una Comunidad tan bella, tu que te Sientes dichosa de tener unas casas Hermosas, nunca te des por vencida, Siga progresando y veraz que lo Lograras, tu que me diste una Buena enseñanza y en mi corazón Llevo la insignia que me identifica Como buena estudiantes. Tu puedes.

Fin.

-Elena

With Elena's poem and drawing, begins an identity that makes a more obvious connection of their current life in Yurimaguas to their identity. Here, her identity spans both past/nationality/hometown, to the beginning of her life as a student when arriving to the convent. She begins the poem by saying that first she is Peruvian, and proud to be from such a beautiful village. Her village is drawn on the left hand side, and like most of the other girls' villages, is depicted with a few small houses close together, and with canoe sitting in the river. Although she is talking about her village, she refers to the village only as "Peru". She says, Peru, you must be proud to have those beautiful houses. She says that Peru (her village) will never give up and that it can achieve anything if it fights for it.

At the end of the poem, Peru then becomes not her village, but her present context of living and going to school in a bigger city (Yurimaguas). She says, Peru,

who gave me an education: that is why I draw my school symbol on the right side of my body. Peru, for Elena is all of this. It is the community that brought her to life, the community of small houses, *chacras* and canoes that take one on the rivers that connect Peru; the community that missionaries entered to recruit young girls at, and finally, it is the convent whose nuns found her and decided she would be better off getting an education than being a missionary. Elena's identity spans a large geographic and emotional area and depicts not only the reality of the context of her life, but of a certain Peruvian context largely ignored, but also which these sixteen girls live with.



### Oda a mi patria dentro de mí

Oh, patria querida  
 Tu me viste crecer  
 Eres para mi una  
 Cuna lleno de recuerdos  
 por recordar.

Ahora que sigo creciendo  
 Voy descubriendo  
 El encanto de nuestros  
 Ancestros, que bonito  
 Son las historias  
 De mis hermanos que  
 Un día los españoles  
 Destruyeron.

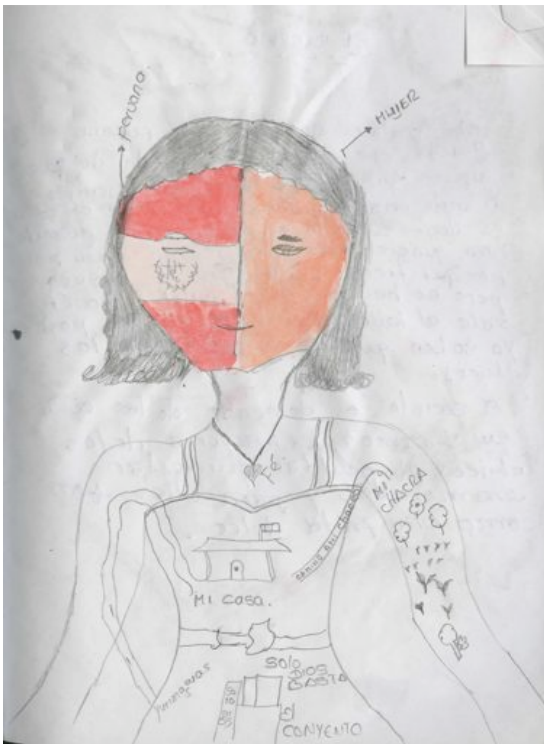
Oh, patria querida en  
 Mi profundo corazón  
 Te llevo con mucho orgullo  
 Por que en tu seno me  
 Sostiene, como sostiene  
 Un nido a un pajarito

Te amor Perú

-Por Rocío

Like Elena's identity poem and drawing, Rocío's does not make a nationalist distinction between her village and current life in the big town. Peru, her *patria querida*, is at once the village that saw her grow like cradle full of memories she

wants to remember (lleno de recuerdos por recordar); and at once all of indigenous Peru. She says, now that I mature, I am in the process of discovering the beauty of our ancestors. She continues: how beautiful are the stories of my people that the Spanish destroyed. From her drawing, we know the other half of her identity is a student, the place where is maturing. At the end of the poem, she compares her relationship to Peru like a nest that nurtures a bird.



Derramaron la sangre  
 Por salvar a nuestra bandera

OH      Mi identidad  
           \*Soy mujer  
 Perú    \*Soy bien peruanita  
           \*Soy estudiante  
 que     \*Soy yurimaguina y varoderina  
           \*Loretana

Oda a mi patria y a mi rostro

Tus lindos colores q son

Rojo y blanco

El rojo significa

Que muchos

Peruanos

Y el color blanco

Es la paz

Para todo el mundo.

Antonieta's poem is much more about nationalist identity. There is much more about her feelings toward Peru in the actual writing, but her drawing is more personal, adding in the identity of *mujer* and drawing her life story on her body. Not only is she a *mujer peruana*, but a woman with two homes an expansive national and geographic identity, as the travel route from casa/chacra to convent is drawn on her body. Her casa and chacra are made to look like they are just up the road from the convent, represented with the large iron sign: "Solo Dios Basta" *God is all you need*.



#### La Tierra esta sufriendo

La tierra esta sufriendo  
Porque no la cuidamos y  
Tiramos la basura y contaminamos el  
Mar que mas podemos esperar  
La tierra esta sufriendo por que  
Talamos los árboles y porque  
Matamos a sus animales.

FIN.

-Por Xuxi

Here, Xuxi decided to write more about the treatment of the land as a way to talk about identity. Although she does not write specifically about herself, there is a metaphor in this poem about the overall treatment of indigenous communities in this region. A mistreatment of land in this regional is synonymous with a mistreatment of people. Xuxi has watched her own family suffer. After all, most of

the girls in this convent are here because their families cannot afford their daughters, and with the recent selling of community and indigenous-owned lands under a new Peruvian law backed by the United States, they no longer own the lands they have spent generations working on.

\*\*\*

The conversation around identity was mostly quiet, until they actually started drawing and listing their identities. Many of the girls, especially the younger ones, maybe felt that they had to depict a nationalist identity that they perhaps did not feel, but they saw the other girls depicting this. Diana, the youngest and the one who most recently left her village, presented her identity as such:

Oda a mi identidad  
Soy una mujer peruana  
Llena de ternura que tiene  
Todo. Vivo en una casita  
Hermosa llena de cosas y  
Tengo un cuerpo elegante  
Que por eso  
La escogi esa parte  
Que me gusta más  
De todas las partes y por  
Que es encantadora  
-Rosita

Rosita wrote this quickly and was obviously unsatisfied with it, perhaps because the drawing too closely resembled other drawings. She was also unsatisfied with what she wrote, scratching out every line and tearing pages from her notebooks and putting her head face down on the desk. Finally, she asked me, “¿Señorita Anna, si yo pienso que soy hermosa....eso puede ser mi identidad?”

Although it wasn't exactly what I was looking for, I realized that it was not about what I was looking for. I said, “claro que si”.

These are all the identities that they straddle and negotiate, and they are pulled from their life experiences. This is not necessarily about the identities they choose, but all of their identities, and how they negotiate between all of them. Their identities are informed by their experiences.

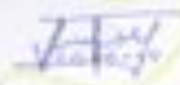


Primeramente quiero saludarte en  
este unio . que estes bien con  
con tu familia

yo se que tienes 21 años pero  
mas adelante cuando tengas  
27 años estaras profesional quien  
sabe este mundo nadie sabe  
o quedaras una de esas victorias

victoria tu eres una chica muy buena  
en tu amigos yo quiero que seas  
siempre asi no cambies de tu  
vida que eres buena

yo se tu papa quiere que los saques  
adelante por eso te hace estudiar  
por que eres hija mas querida  
de tu familia pero no te olvides  
de los cielo que esta arriba

me despido con mucho amor  
que te cuides bien  
con fuerte abrazo  
chau 

28

*Borderland between young womanhood and adult womanhood*

One day before an activity where I asked them to write poems that began with “Yo Soy”, *I am*, I asked the class informally what the body would say if it could speak. Tatiana, in a low voice, as if it were coming from somewhere else, responded, “Quiero ser un cuerpo completo”. Everyone laughed.

In thinking about the evoking of their native homes, the journey from that home to the convent, and finally, the convent, I find at its depth a struggle to define and *become* women. There are many elements to the exploration of the borders and space between their girlhood and womanhood, from giving their opinions on love, to making a chart where they separate the things that makes them women and the things that keep them girls, to writing odes to loved and hated body parts and writing poems starting with “Para Ser Mujer” (In order to be a woman..).

I think about Rocío’s joke often, and what it could mean to be a *cuerpo completo*. Although what she said was meant as a joke to make all the other girls laugh, there is something very real and very telling in what that could mean: to be a complete body. Many of the girls have been sexually abused before arriving to the convent, all have been separated by their families under complicated and hard conditions, and all express a desire that when they leave the convent to become independent women and to not have to marry and have many children at a young

age. In other words, their fears, desires, imaginations, plans can be located to the body.

The topic of the body is huge in their conversations, writings, and jokes, because they are at an age when they are exploring it and explore it easily in an inherently feminine space like the convent. Their exploration of their body is a prominent element in the exploration of their overall womanhood and their identities; and we see its importance even in the activities not specifically meant to extract a narrative of bodies or womanhood, such as the Invented Legend where most invented female protagonists possessed some sort of bodily power that, through fiction, re-wrote emotionally difficult events in their actual lives. Therefore, returning to the evoking of homes, journeys and the convent; these three are evoked not only because they form part of each girls' experience, but because these three elements have given them a space with which to play with the meanings of them too. They form profoundly influential parts of how they choose to narrate the stories about their lives; at their core always a question about womanhood.

Although the previous chapters have more to do with geographic, cultural, language and space borders; they are all informed by their forming sense of womanhood. Even though they negotiate the borders between home and convent, rural and urban, indigenous language and Spanish, family and nuns, etc. guiding that is their own coming of age into womanhood: a transition defined and informed by these other borderlands and vice versa.

The last part of this thesis is dedicated to poetry, stories and narratives that have to do with the transition from girlhood into womanhood.

I want to give importance to the unique place where this transition is happening: an inherently feminist place: the convent. It is in these chapters that the convent plays its most important role, because just as we reach the last samples of writing, many of them are also reaching the moment when they must decide what path to choose. Some will choose to become nuns.... Some imagine themselves as nuns AND falling in love one day and getting married. Some imagine themselves as nuns and travelling the world. Some imagine returning to home, educated and prepared to lead their communities. No one imagines a mediocre life. Perhaps because they are girls and because they are young...but none submit to what they have expressed are the constraining patterns they are expected to live out.

The following chapters speak to the various ways they express the transition from girlhood to womanhood; from revealing their secrets about wanting to become nuns; from what they have to say about secrets and the perils and kinks of keeping it in the convent; from what they have to say about their bodies through odes to the most loved and most hated parts; and what they have to say about their own female identity through poems that begin with “yo soy”, and then what they think about womanhood in general in poems that begin with “para ser mujer”, and how their own experience fits into that. All of these activities reveal how their experiences have molded this transition.

\* \* \*

Rocío asked me to follow her to corner of the convent because she wanted to tell me a secret. She told me that she wants to become a nun. It must be so nice, she says. She asks me if I've thought about becoming a nun. She was surprised when I said no, never. "Pero ha de ser tan lindo, Anita. Poder viajar, conocer gente de todo el mundo, tener tu propio cuarto, poder leer". I was shocked that she said she wanted to be a nun. The only thing I could ask her was: but don't you want boyfriends, relationships, love? "Si", she told me, "Pero eso es para mientras". *Yes, but that is in the meantime.*

What the following chapters do, beyond just reveal their thoughts on womanhood, is also give voice to the transitions and tensions of the border between young womanhood and adult womanhood. Like the stories about hometowns, leaving those hometowns, and arriving at the convent that are filled informed by their budding womanhood; the following chapters directly about womanhood are filled with the metaphors of home, travel and convent. Their transition into womanhood is defined by their sense of their life experience.

As a quick warm up one day, I asked them to make a chart with two columns that separated "niña" and "mujer", and I asked them to write down what made them girls and what made them women. In the following activity, I asked the girls to make a chart with two columns dividing "Niña" and "Mujer". The purpose of this activity

was to see how they gave voice to their transition from young womanhood to adult womanhood; what in their life would they use to define that transition? I also wanted them to use the chart as a way to talk about their girlhood or womanhood in their own terms, and to see what they name or reference to define their girlhood and what they name or reference to define their womanhood.

Most of them said that the moments that made them women were when they thought about their future, when they thought in womanly ways, or when they felt responsible. Most of them said that the moments they felt like girls were when they missed their parents, or when they cried, when they played with other little girls, or when they missed being home.

They define their womanhood, or transition into womanhood by the experience they have had through journeying. In their villages, it is not necessarily tradition to leave your family when you become a woman; homes are shared by large families. They search their experience for the way they identify themselves. For example, Rocío says that she is closer to being a woman, because she has already separated from her family. This shows that they also view their journey to and life at the convent as a form of independence and maturity into womanhood

What is interesting is that their sense of girlhood, womanhood, and the fluid transitions between both are not just generic definitions and attributes associated with each, or even a focus on changes in the body, as I would have expected. Instead, they are taken directly from their lives. The following chapters: (Chapter 11) Poems about mirrors, (Chapter 12) Odes to loved and hated body parts,

(Chapter 13) Poems that begin with “Yo Soy”, (Chapter 14) Poems that begin with “Para Ser Mujer” that explore what it takes to be a woman, and (Chapter 15) Letters written to themselves from a future age; all speak to the borderland between young womanhood and adult womanhood, the passing through it, and the hopes and imaginations of what womanhood will be.

Chapter 11

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Capítulo 11

## Espejos

*Warm-up*

*Calentamiento*

*-Write 5 words that*

*-Escribe 5 palabras que*

*you would use to describe*

*usarías para describirte*

*yourself*

*a ti misma*



## Espejos

“Quiero ser un cuerpo completo”

Rocío, 18

The following activity was planned as a warm-up. Each girl received a small artisan mirror, which was placed facedown on her desk. Before using the mirror, the lesson began with the reading of the following two poems, the first by Idea Vilariño, and the second by Charo Fuentes.

### CUANDO COMPRE UN ESPEJO

Cuando compre un espejo para el baño  
voy a verme la cara  
voy a verme  
pues qué otra manera hay diceme  
qué otra manera de saber quien soy.  
Cada vez que desprenda la cabeza  
del fárrago de libros y de hojas  
y que la lleve hueca atiborrada  
y la deje un reposo allí un momento  
la miraré a los ojos con un poco  
de ansiedad de curiosidad de miedo

o sólo con cansancio con hastío  
con la vieja amistad correspondiente  
o atenta y seriamente mirareme  
como ese extraña vez –mis once años–  
y me diré mirá ahí estás  
seguro  
pensaré no me gusta o pensaré  
que esa cara fue la única posible  
y me diré esa soy ésa es idea  
y le sonreiré dándome ánimos.

- Idea Vilariño (2004)

### **DE CÓMO LISI SE MIRÓ AL ESPEJO Y VIÓSE ROSA**

El espejo me enfrenta en unos ojos  
duros y tiernos como mi mirada  
la boca retraída, la amplia frente  
plena de surcos e interrogaciones  
la afilada nariz, los circunflejos  
arcos que enjuician y que peinan canas.  
Esa soy yo, con mi rizado pelo  
que antes fué negro y ahora es negro  
la amplia sonrisa, el lunar redondo  
y arrugas de expresión, dulce eufemismo

(puedes hacerte un lifting) ¿cuántos siglos  
perezosa grandísima que no vas al gimnasio?  
¡Estragos de la vida o de tu vida!  
Que nunca más será Itálica,  
famosa,  
ya lo sabes.

- Charo Fuentes (1997).

After, we read the two poems out loud as a class, I asked them to circle the words or phrases that stuck out to them, and later we discussed their feelings of the poems. There was one line that stuck out to several of the girls: “pues qué otra manera hay diceme/qué otra manera de saber quien soy?” (Vilariño, lines 4-5)

They found this interesting because they said it asks a pretty good question. Just as women leaving home has inspired rich literature, so has the act of women looking in the mirror; so much so that we see the metaphors of mirrors everywhere.

The *encuentro* of a woman with her own image in the mirror is a monumental thing; we have read examples and anecdotes of these meetings: from Gloria Anzaldúa’s obsidian mirrors (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 1987), to Hurston’s Janie seeing her reflection in the pear trees (1937), mirrors and their metaphors have functioned as a way to pass, a meeting, and an exploration of something deeper than just the image (yet also the depth of the image itself).

To see what could be produced, literarily, when sixteen girls confront their own image, I started with: sixteen tiny mirrors, a few good similes for inspiration, the two poem above to loosen them up and to demonstrate what an ode is, and two hours to write. After discussing the poems, I asked them to write 5 words they would use to describe themselves.

While they brainstormed and carefully chose and erased words from their notebooks, I asked them how much they think about their bodies. Their response was obvious: all the time, because we're always in them.

*A: ¿Si tu cuerpo podría hablar, que diría?*

*R: Quiero ser un cuerpo completo*

For five minutes, they answered this question as a warm-up, considering their relationship to their own body, what they like, what they dislike, how their body feels to them, etc.

Then, I asked them to write down the first five words that come to mind that they would use to describe themselves.

Among the words were:

<i>Buena</i>	<i>Respetuosa</i>	<i>Toda una mujer</i>
<i>Respetuosa</i>	<i>amable</i>	<i>Toda una señorita</i>
<i>Inteligente</i>	<i>cariñosa</i>	

*Bonita*                      *responsable*

*Sincera*                    *hermosa*

After this, I asked them to answer the question posed in the first poem: How else is there to know oneself but to look in the mirror? After considering this question, I then asked them to grab their mirrors, and to find a space in the convent where no one else can see them. I asked them to write down everything they see, physically and not physically. I asked them to treat the mirror the way that the poets in the examples we read use their mirrors, how *they* see themselves through their mirrors. I asked them to consider the things that perhaps only they can see.

They were very nervous and excited to pick up the mirrors, and they wanted to hurry up and go use them. When I gave them the assignment, they all shot up at once, but as they were about to run out the door, I reminded them that they needed their notebooks, so they all ran back, stumbled on each other to grab their notebooks.

After ten minutes of close inspection, I asked them to switch and to write about what they will see in five years. When they returned, around 20 minutes later, embarrassed and laughing, not able to put the mirrors down. Some girls insisted on sharing their observations at once. They were shouting over each other, saying that that they would see white hair and wrinkles. Some said their nipples would change shape, and that they would be professionals, and in love. Always in love.

Xuxi, who normally has to be pleaded with to share anything, stood up, and read her observations from her notebooks:

*Como me veo*

*Yo me veo con mi cara*

*Morena y mi cabello largo y*

*Mis ojos pequeños*

*-Xuxi*

Then Elena read her observations:

*Como Me Veo*

*Con unos cabellos largos y*

*Hermosos, tengo una sonrisa*

*Brillante, mi cara es redonda*

*Tengo unos ojos pequeños y me*

*Veo diferente*

*-Elena*

Everyone else was feeling too shy to share, but finally, after the other girls begged her to, Luz stood up to share her observations in a very soft voice:

She read off her notebook:

*En mi rostro observo:*

*Sejas negras*

*Ojos redondas de color marron oscuro y un punto*

*Negro. Mi nariz un poco largo*

*Mi labio es de color maron y la una parte*

*Es de color rojo.*

*Tengo el cabello negro*

*Tengo dos lunares en la cara*

*-Luz*

After they settled down a little from whispering over each other's observations, and editing their own after hearing the three volunteers, I asked them to start their first poem: to write a poem about what you see in the mirror, and your reaction to your own image, like the poets in the examples we read.

While the girls wrote, they did the usual, covering their desks with full bodies, restricting wandering eyes from other girls. While they did this however, they wrote, re-wrote, edited, tore out pages, filled pages, turned pages filling more pages, and as they did this, they asked their neighbors for ideas of what else could

be seen in the mirror. "I don't know", one would respond, "I didn't look into your mirror", and the question would be repeated: "Yeah, but I want to know what YOU saw in YOUR mirror...I'm just curious".

In this activity, they were especially private. On a few occasions, Madre I would walk by, and then Padre J. would walk by to ask what they were writing about, and they would all yell in unison, "NADA!!!" and then giggle, and just so that the nun and priest would not think I was making them write anything they would find inappropriate based on the reaction of the girls, I was quick to explain that they are writing a poem about their image in the mirror.

I reminded them that we would save 30 minutes to read all of the poems and later discuss them, as they requested to share them only to the class, but not in the elaborate performance setting, which was being done for previous assignments.

### Mirror Poems

Lo Que Vi en el Espejo:

-Por Elena

*Como me veo*

*Me veo una persona*

*Professional, con un*

*Buen corazón con ganas*

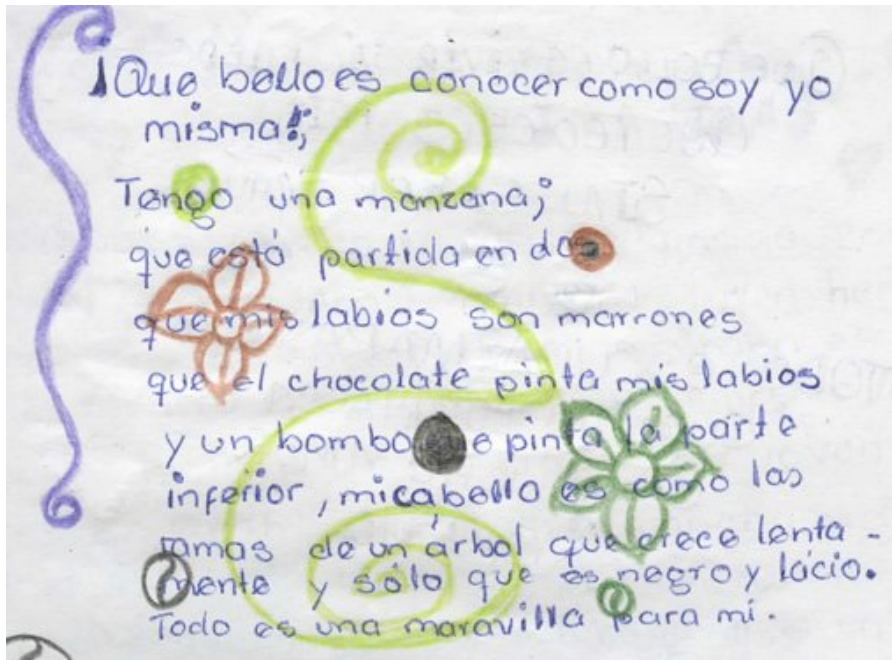
*De seguir viviendo, veo*



*Una humildad en mis ojos*

*Con una tierna Mirada*

\*\*\*



Here, Luz talks

about the feeling of marvel and awe when looking at one's own image and observing its different parts. She begins by saying, "How beautiful it is to get to know myself!" She says her image is like an apple cut in half, her lips are brown, and it looks like chocolate paints them. Her hair, she says, resemble tree branches.

What is interesting about these is that, though I meant for the assignment of writing about what you will see in 5 years as physical, what is revealed in these examples of how they see themselves as women in their communities. Before they started writing this second poem, I asked them to brainstorm what they think will be different about them, physically in 5 years. Lourdes said she would be taller, but

that her nose would be redder. *Why would it be more red?* I asked her. Her answer was simply...that she'd be older, más señorita. However, Elena added that though the nose thing could be true, the ears are the one constant of women's bodies that don't change.

*How does everything else change?* I asked.

There were several responses, the body begins to change and take form, your nipples change shape and color... and people start to notice you more, that's how you know you are changing.

They told me that in 5 years, most of their changes will probably already be in place, but for the young ones, they might be just starting.

For example, Xuxi writes the poem:

*Cuando Compre mi Espejo*

*En cinco años cuando compre mi*

*Espejo, bueno ahora tengo 12 años, y*

*A los 16 años cuando me mire*

*Al espejo se que eh*

*Cambiado bastante. El rostro se*

*Hizo más señorita,*

*Tender el cuerpo bien formado, y*

*Con profesión de profesora de primaria.*

Elena was insistent that she wanted to share her poem, but it took a while for her to gather the courage and contain the laughter to do it. Finally, she read it:

*Como me veré en cinco años*

*Me veré una persona mayor,  
Con un poco de arrugas, todo  
Una mujer, y con ganas de  
Seguir adelante.*

Here, Elena expresses a sense of struggle and triumph when imagining the person she will see in a mirror 5 years from now. In the few examples that I have of them imagining their image in 5 years, it is mostly dramatic physically. Although they say that they will have become women, and they will have a profession and be doing something else, they also say that they will have wrinkles.

Luz Writes:

*Mi vida se irá avanzando lentamente  
Y me saldrá arrugas en el rostro;  
Mi cabello sera corto, no lo sé...  
Lo que más me vale ser es tener paciencia  
En verlo cómo sera en los cinco años  
-Luz*

This warm-up activity revealed a lot about what the girls thought about their bodies, self-image and future. It reveals how they played with mirrors as metaphors of both confronting their own image, and also *crossing*, in the sense that they predicted their images and lives in the future. It reveals the funny ways in which girls imagine womanhood.

## O Barriga Querida:

## Odes to Loved and Hated Body Parts

*Warm-up**Calentamiento*

1. *En una hoja de papel, escribe la primera parte de un símil original al tope de la hoja, y luego termine el símil en el último espacio de la hoja.*

Tu sonrisa es una luz  
que alumbro en la noche.

Tu pelo huele como el chanchito

Mis ojos son Azules  
como el agua del mar

Mis ojos son claros como la  
luna, mis ojos son magníficos

Tus labios son como el cristal de la  
esperanza.

Mis ojos como el  
~~corazon~~ del mar  
Porque es hermosa.

Mis ojos es como una uva.

Mis ojos como el  
~~corazon~~ del mar  
Porque es hermosa.

Mis ojos es como una uva.

2. Corta la hoja en medio, separando las dos partes del símil, y escribe #1 atrás de la primera parte, y #2 atrás de la segunda parte
3. Boca abajo, mezcla todas las de #1 y todas las de #2, y escoge uno de cada uno y lea lo que te sale

**Tus labios son / COMO EL REPOLLO (Your lips are like cabbage)**

**Tus senos son / como pestañas de chanchos (your nipples are like pig's eyelashes)**

*Tu cabeza es / como el rio amazona* (your head is like the Amazon river)

*Tus pestañas / **son como los chanchos*** (your eye lashes are like pigs)

*CUANDO MI PELO ESTA SUCIO / es como la estrella* (when my hair is dirty, it is  
like a star)

*O Barriga Querida: Odes to Loved and Hated Body Parts*

“How much does our body know that we know not. Can it be cajoled to reveal its secrets?”

-Pat Mora, “House of Houses”

“Mi cuerpo es una maravilla.

Gracias a Dios que me dio

la fuerza para seguir a conocerla mas”

-Luz, 15

Madre I, Madre G. and I hurried to a room with a more stable roof when it began to rain so hard that the dining room was going to collapse. “Este techo no esta estable, con la lluvia se va caer”. I remember hearing this two years prior, and though it has never actually fallen, the threat remains. The girls were at their last day of school before the announced strike that was scheduled to begin tomorrow, so I was alone with Madre G. and Madre I. I had become close with a girl named Marcia who dreamed of becoming a lawyer. Her father had sexually abused her and she eventually went to live with her aunt before coming to the convent in her early teens. I thought about Marcia while Madre I. and Madre G. looked over their finances to see how possible it was to build a school one day so the girls would never have to leave the convent.



The thought of that went to my gut; it seemed like an awful idea- school is there only chance to leave the convent, why would they give them that? I asked why they wanted the girls to have their own school. “Noy hay cosa que no les pase en esos colegios” said Madre. G. She said some of the girls have been sexually abused at home before arriving at the convent, and then they learn to put up with it in school. The school housed inside the convent would be a way to try and prevent this pattern of abuse, giving them the freedom to learn and read, work and dream about their future. It struck me how much this space and the space the nuns are trying to create with barely enough money is, at its heart, for the liberation of girls.

At its core, this architectural blueprint of classrooms, new desks, chairs, books, teachers, seemed like a revolutionary project being led by two nuns who were once girls in the same hogar; and the fight for an alternative life for girls’ minds, creating spaces that will allow them to live lives of creativity, of the mind, of work that is theirs, of liberation, and of happiness, has so much to do with the body.

The convent, the cloistered and secluded nature of this space provides girls with the opportunity to know and to explore their bodies. But the colonizing force that has prevented women from being conscious of their own body and sexuality is so strong that there need not be a single man in this convent for this legacy to be alive and well.

The following samples of writings comes from an ode-writing activity, where I asked the girls to write odes to (1) a body part they love and (2) a body part they hate, though giving homage and life to both.

Below are samples from this activity:

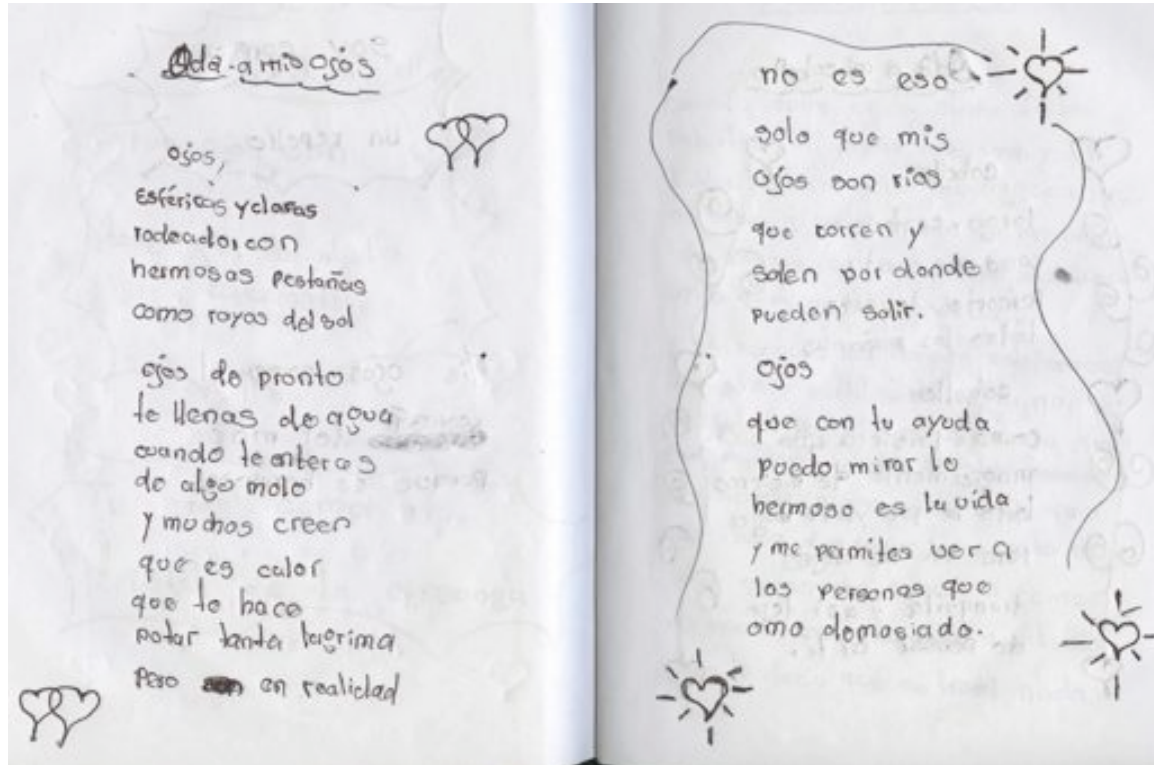
### **Oda A Mi Parte Favorita**

“Yo soy como una flor,  
muy hermosa en su jardín”

-Rosita

Rosita never really followed the assignments, though the actual assignments would, I think, inspire her to write things of her own creation. She did not write a full poem for any of the odes. Instead, she wrote over 20 similes about herself. She writes a lot about gardens. In this garden which she brings up in almost every single page of her notebook, she says she is a flower, waiting to grow, or a butterfly, beautiful and trapped, or because of her beauty, helping other flowers to grow. In all of the odes, especially in the odes to their favorite body parts, there tends to be a place where this body part flourishes, or grows. It is a place where this body part functions, but it usually follows a metaphor of flourishing. Rosita has chosen and claimed the garden as her space, but the other girls claim spaces as well in which these body parts move through: the river, the field, etc. These body parts become important, their importance is demonstrated.

“Oda a Mis Ojos”, por Rocío

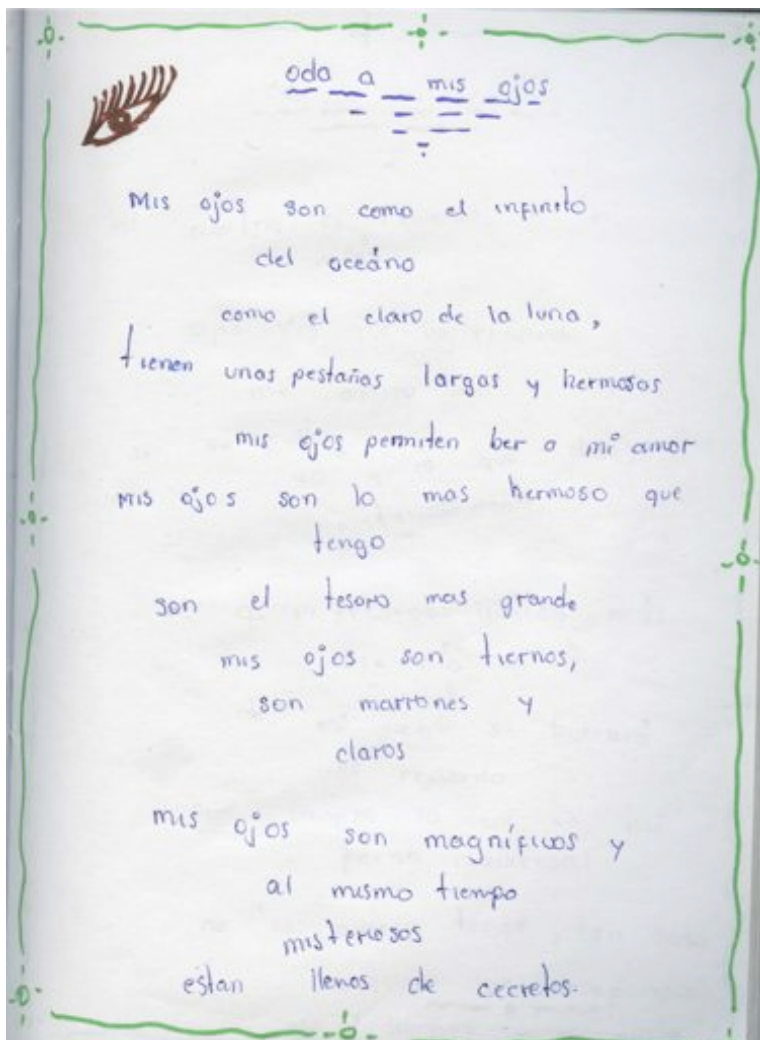


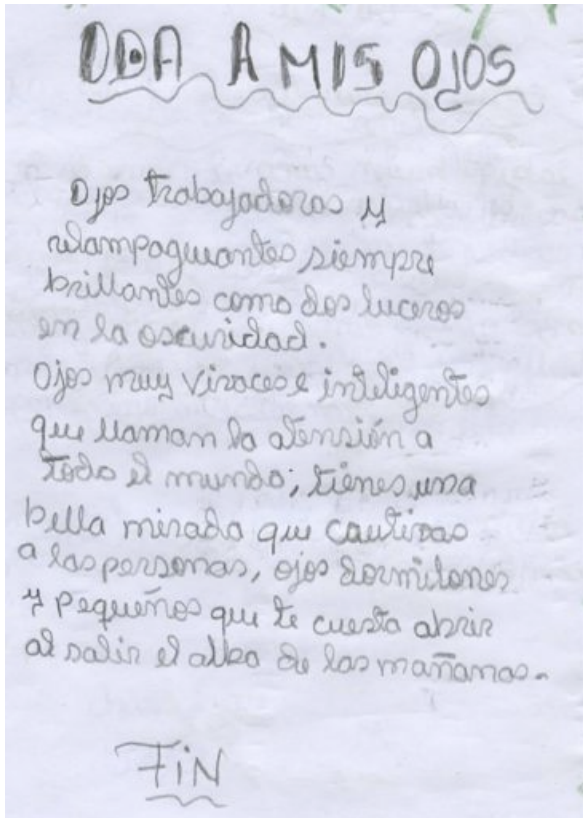
Here, Rocío begins by describing her eyes as beautiful and round. There is something very interesting in this poem, because she describes her eyes as hiding a very important secret, which only she, and the reader know. She is easy to cry, but her eyes help her to conceal this. People see her cry, but they immediately assume that it must be the heat, or something else. What they don't know, she says, is that her eyes are like rivers that enter and exit wherever they can. In the end, she gives an ode to her eyes because her eyes are what allow her to see the beauty of the world, and to see those she “loves too much”.

Maria Josefina also writes about her eyes as a container of secrets in her ode,  
“Oda a Mis Ojos”:

Maria Josefina and Rocío both write about their eyes as both holders of secrets, and as what lets them look at those they are in love with. The theme of the eyes as the most beautiful and mysterious part of the body is seen in several of their poetry.

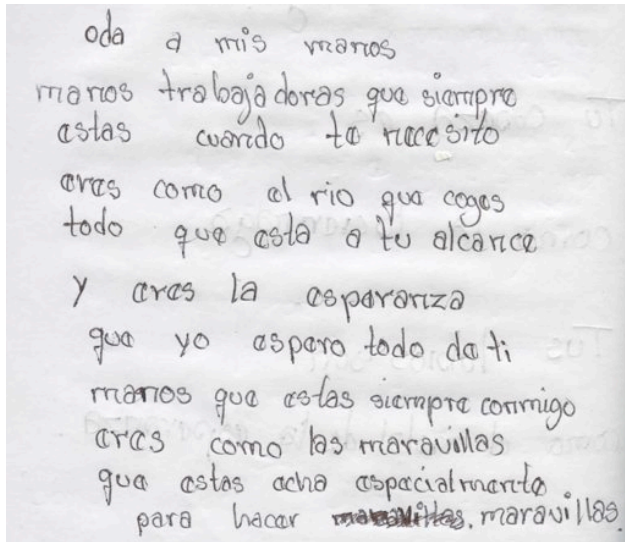
Juliana shares this in her “Oda a Mis Ojos”:





Like Rocío's and Maria Josefina's ode to their eyes, Elena's's eyes play multiple roles in her life. Similarly, they are meant to seduce and captivate, and to see those she loves, but they are also hard working, revealing something strong: *relampagueantes*.

The theme of the body parts as being hard working are seen in other odes to body parts, like Manuela's:



Here, there is the repeated metaphor of the river, showing how these girls use the geography around them to fold into similes and metaphors of their bodies. Here, she says that her hands are meant not only for working hard, but to make *maravillas* of all kinds.

Indefinable, and as strong, though, as the river that grabs everything in its reach. Power.

Xuxi, Rosita's best friend and closest in age, at almost 13, also tends to disregard the assignments. In this case, both got stuck at the similes. Xuxi eventually wrote an ode to her hair, which she has told me is the pride of who she is, but she edited several times, first writing a series of similes:

"Mis senos son como un limon jugoso y una naranja muy rica,  
y mi corazón es como la manzana roja".

Xuxi, at 12, is the most shy, and she is constantly made fun of for her shyness. So when the other girls read these last similes, there was a lot of giggling, and Susana quickly scratched it out and wrote this one:

*“Mi pelo es brillante y*

*negro, y cuando me baño,*

*le labo vien.*

*Por eso es lindo, y*

*Le peino a cata rato.*

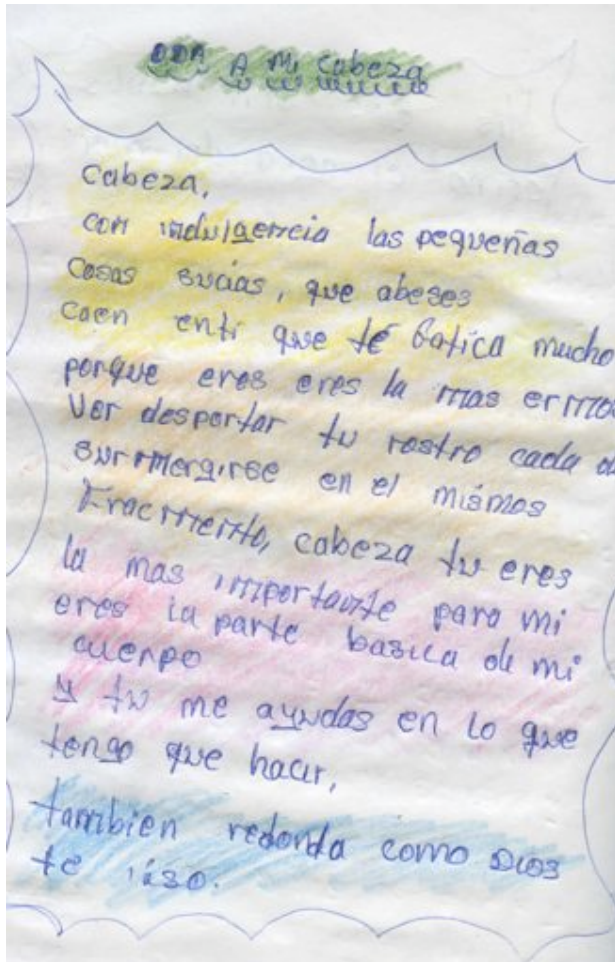
*Le pongo cachos y le hecho*

*Crema, para que sea mas*

*Brillante.*

*Fin.”*

In Maru's ode, she gives homage to her head, due mostly to its perfection in shape, and its rationality:



*Head, she says, you are round like God made you.* Maru had discussed her choice of body part with the rest of the girls. Why the head? I asked Maribel. *Because it does my homework, it thinks, it knows things that no one else knows, and it chooses to tell or not.* There was a pause, and the other girls laughed at the profundity of such a comment. Maribel buried her head laughing, and continued to write, covering her sheet.

Maria Rosa is usually one of the quickest to write, and she writes with incredible detail. She tends to draw a lot of attention to herself, and when I asked them what they thought they would write about, she immediately started naming



her body parts and saying why they stood out from everyone else's. When the writing started, she was having a hard time choosing a body part. I sat down with her and asked her to describe each of her body parts, not just why she thought they were beautiful, but why they were unique, why they were interesting, why they were weird. I don't know why I tried to get her to focus on the weird, perhaps because I thought it would be a good challenge. In the end, she could not choose one single body part, so she wrote an ode to her whole body:

*OH, lindo y hermoso cuerpo, sin*

*ti no seria tan bella.*

*Que todos quieren tener pero*

*Es solo mío y nadie podrá*

*Tener un lindo cuerpo como*

*El que yo tengo.*

*Soy como una princesa sentada*

*En su trono,*

*Que me traten con amor y paciencia.*

*Te admiro lindo cuerpo, eres*

*La belleza que tengo*

*En mi cuerpo y el inigualable.*

*Te amo mucho por ser*

*El afortunado de ser mi*

*Lindo y adorable cuerpo.*

I want to bring attention to this last poem by Maria Rosa. Although it may seem over the top, like an over indulgence in one's own looks, we should focus on the love expressed toward one's own body. In a way, the message conveyed in this poem is also resisting el *tratamiento* usually given to girls' bodies. There are places throughout the poem that express feminist concerns, such as knowing and recognizing one's own body. Though it could seem as though she is saying that other girls want the body she has, there is no specificity who she is actually talking to: it could be toward potential lovers, husbands: "Que todos quieren tener, pero e solo mío". A few lines later, she writes, "que me traten con amor y paciencia" (treat me with love and patience).

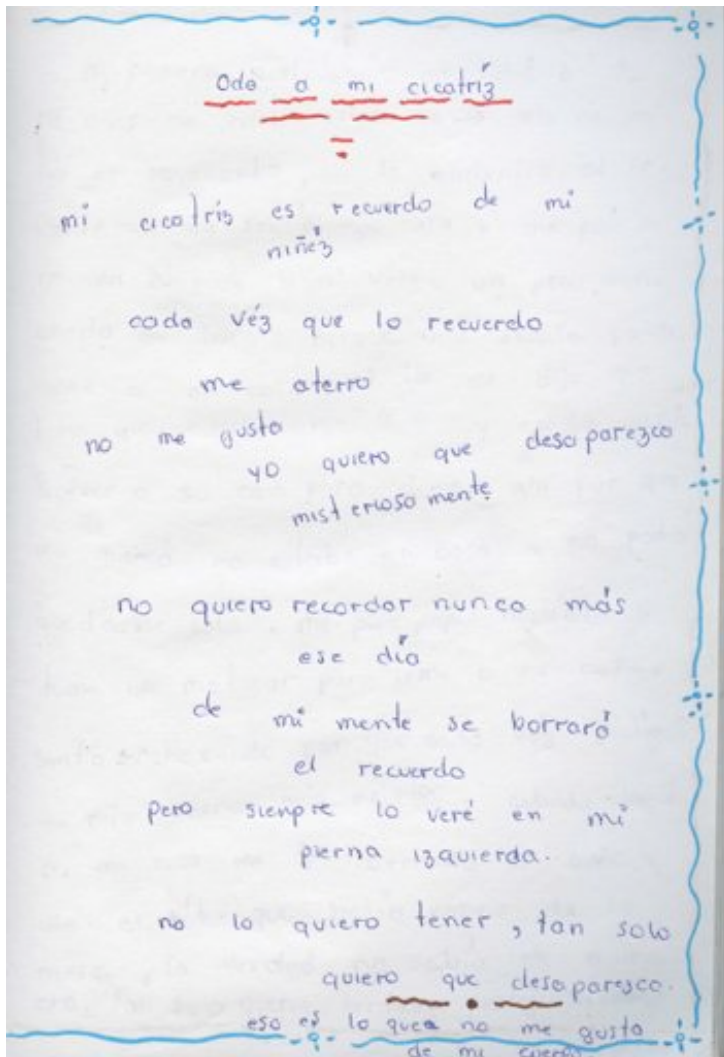
### **Oda a la parte de mi cuerpo que no me gusta**

"Tu pelo huele como el chancho"

-Lourdes, 15

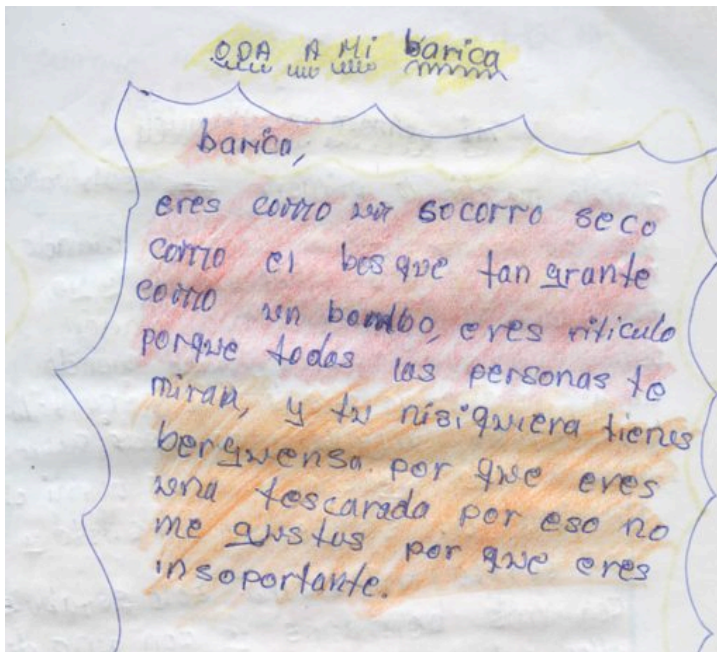
The girls had more fun writing about disliked body parts than about loved body parts. They have often expressed to me concerns of theirs: hair falling out, a crooked tooth, freckles from the sun, a belly, hair legs, etc. and when it comes up in random conversation, it is usually not a topic of amusement. In this part of the activity, they got to bring out all their insecurities about their bodies on the table, and essentially, play with them through writing. In most cases, they actually ended

up exaggerating the characteristics of this hated body part. If a few hairs were falling out in reality, then in the poem, bald patches covered the head. If there was a little belly in reality, then in the poem, the belly was like an oasis in the desert. Some, though, like in the odes to loved body parts, revealed the body (or body part) to be once again, a holder of secrets, like Maria Josefina's:



In this poem, Maria Josefina says that she wishes her scar would go away, because then maybe the memory of that day would go away as well. The scar on her left leg is a memory of her childhood.

Maru had written about her head. The poem was relatively conservative, revealing the rationality of the shape and function of the head. For her ode to a disliked body part, she chose her stomach:



“Belly”, she writes, “you are

like a dry oasis, like the huge forest, like a *bombo*. You are ridiculous because everyone looks at you, and you have no shame, you are a *descarada*, and that is why I don’t like you, because you are unbearable”.

*Elena*

“Nariz respingada y fea  
dichosa tu al ser así,  
tienes el don de oler cosas  
desde muy lejos.  
Cuando te da la gripe  
Te pones muy delicada  
Y llorona”

*Rocío*

“Oda a mi Cabello  
largo y castaño  
como me cuesta  
peinarte, lavarte  
todas las mañanas.  
Cabello,  
Como quisiera que  
Mágicamente te hicieras  
Todo lo que yo te hago  
Para así me dejes  
Tranquila y así de  
De pensar en ti”

Here, Rocío also reveals the every day routine of getting ready for school, and the routine of the other girls as well.

The following short odes by Lourdes and Manuela show the uncomfortablness of changing bodies, and puberty:

“Oh Nariz,  
olor de cebolla,  
porque tengo espinillas,  
huele como el mantequilla”

*Manuela*

“Oda a Mis Orejas  
Orejas largas como el conejo  
Que estas siempre conmigo  
En cualquier lugar que me encuentre  
Eres muy largo como la carretera  
Tan largo como el infinito,  
Que eres incontrollable.  
Y que no te puedo esconder  
En ningun lugar de la tierra”

These odes show the relationships of the girls with their body parts. Valeria Badano, says: “El cuerpo en efecto, no nos pertenecía hasta los años del siglo que pasó. Aun ni suponíamos un hacer no meramente reproductivo con él” (*Historia de Mujeres*, 2009). This feeling is nearly ancient; it echoes what Sor. Juana Ines de la Cruz said about her own decision to be a nun and the limitations that the world presented on her mind and body. Centuries later, we still can barely imagine a body outside of reproduction; a body that contains knowledge, pleasure, power...produces knowledge, pleasure, power... and a centuries later, girls who have never even read Sor Juana, who have never read feminist texts, who have seldom been directly asked to consider a different and liberated future for their minds and bodies, are producing feminist texts concerning their own bodies. The struggle to liberate is not a learned thing; it is natural. The body knows when it is being oppressed; our minds are just often too oppressed to liberate it.

Badano writes, “se mira y no se toca” (9). *She looks at herself, but she does not touch herself.* Through writing, especially through fiction, we can reach these points of encuentro, of touching, that our lives as contexts prevent us from doing, or from being conscious of doing if we have done it. Much like racial repression, the most effective repression of women has been to separate women from their bodies. The cloister provides a secluded space where we may begin to rebuild that sensual and intimate relationship with our own bodies as women.

The body comes up a lot as a prominent theme, because the girls are exploring their bodies, and in a sense, they have the freedom to do so in the convent.

When I asked them if living here has allowed them to explore their bodies more, they said that in their hometowns, they would most likely be having children right now.

Growing up, my favorite poet was Pablo Neruda; probably because I thought he should be my favorite poet. In his poems to women, I thought he made them beautiful, interesting, dangerous, quiet. But in all of these poems, the women exist for one thing, to be eaten alive, part by part, and in the quietness of this type of death is this beauty. So if women wrote odes to their own body parts; if women compared themselves to onions (like Neruda does), would they be layers that peeled and revealed things? Would they be “*pan, recostado y Redondo*”? Would they be “*pan comocintura, boca, senos, colinas de la tierra, vidas, sube el calor, te inunda la plenitud, el viento de la fecundidad, y entonces se inmoviliza tu color de oro, y cuando se preñaron tus pequeños vientres, la cicatriz morena dejó su quemadura en todo tu dorado sistema de hemisferios. Ahora, intacto, eres acción de hombre, milagro repetido, voluntad de la vida*” (*Odas Elementales*, 24). Would they exist as fragmented parts of bodies, useful in their lifelessness?

Alicia Borinsky in her chapter on women’s relationships to their bodies in literature says that women’s senses of experience and sexuality comes from relationships to men, and that a masculine-defined pure and passionate love and sexuality requires the silence or death of women:

“La pregunta de Huidobro ‘¿irías a ser muda que Dios te dio esos



ojos?', la certeza de Pabo Neruda cuando asegura que 'me gusta cuando callas porque estás como ausente', la ironía de Borges al decir en el *Aleph* que la muerte de Beatriz Viterbo le permitía dedicarse a amarla sin el riesgo de ser humillado y el culto hiperbólico del amante enlutado en *La Amada inmóvil de Amado Nervo* suponen que el silencio de las mujeres puede ser interpretado como un capítulo elocuente del vínculo amoroso" (*Historia de Mujeres*, 185)

Male writers have had a monopoly on the theme of women's bodies. Latin American women's literature about their bodies, breaks away from a canon of men, who in the literary declarations of sex and love, have essentially eaten and killed women's bodies; they have made them eternally dead, revived only to be compared to bread, an onion, "un pan de cada boca" (Neruda, *Oda al Pan*)

\* \* \*

Though it may seem simple to just have them write an ode to a body part, it is not so simple if we consider the historical trajectory of those individual bodies presented as poems here. Not so simple if we consider the expected future of these bodies, and if we consider the exploration of a girl and her body to be a truly revolutionary moment. The poems presented here about loved and hated body parts, exist in that revolutionary *encuentro*; they are boundless in it, as they should be.

What new knowledges do they find in exploring the body in new ways; in surveying, through odes that play with multiple images, the experience of the body and *their* experience with *their* body? These odes to body parts are written from

marginalized spaces though the experience of these bodies are centrally important for these girls; they are written from engaging these in-between spaces where new knowledges are found. It is in engaging these spaces of crossing that the border-full parts of the body are rendered border-less, dynamic, and alive through these poems. These poems provide much more than just new ways of saying things; much more than new words to use; but entirely new bodies and new relationships that could be carried into womanhood.

Chapter 13

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Capítulo 13

*Soy la Lluviosa, Soy la Calurosa:*

Exploring womanhood through poems that begin

with “Yo Soy”

*Soy la Lluviosa, Soy la Calurosa:*

Exploring womanhood through poems that begin with “Yo Soy”

*No hay buenas y malas palabras.*

*Sólo hay palabras. Y ellas sirven de mascara para el yo*

*(los ‘yoes’) que habitan a la mujer*

-Valiera Badano, “Historia de Mujeres”

*And if going home is denied me then I will  
have to stand and claim my space, making a new  
culture-una cultura mestiza- with my own lumber,  
my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist  
architecture*

-Gloria Anzaldúa, “Borderlands/La Frontera”

In all of the activities presented in this project, what is central and emergent-beyond exploring an indigenous origin, beyond stories that require the use of memory and imagination in re-creating moments in their far-away hometowns, beyond speaking to the spaces and experiences where girls come of age, and beyond new interpretations of geographic identities and travel routes-is a forming and developing “Yo”. Whether that “Yo” is expressed through the invention of female protagonists who follow a similar life experience as the author, or who undergo a transformation, or whether it is expressed through narratives that re-create travel

experiences from memory and imagination, or reveal how secrets are told and kept at the convent; there is always a 'Yo' that is strongly present, forming, and emergent.

This particular activity- to write poems that begin with "Yo Soy"- focuses specifically on these "Yoes". This activity reflects how authors negotiate all of their identities, focusing on *all* of the *Seres* they feel that they are or that they have experienced, through playing and experimenting with sensory words and objects. And while the 'Yo' emerges in all of the activities in different forms and contexts, it is purposefully explicit in this activity.

Like their borders- the ones they have crossed physically and metaphorically as well as those yet to cross- their 'yo's' are constantly negotiated, as well as their identities. The 'Yo'- the center of autobiographical writing-is what is being negotiated in the poems they wrote for this activity. The activity began with reading the following poem by Eilish McArt as a warm-up, used as an example for the girls to see the structure of the repetition of "Yo Soy".

## **Yo Soy La Mujer**

Soy mujer

Soy todas las mujeres

Soy una fuente de creatividad

Soy una fuente de maravilla

Soy una fuente

Soy muchas partes de una persona

Soy el epitome de dolor y placer

Soy pura y preciosa

Soy un fenómeno

Soy un espíritu libre

Soy felina y agresiva

Estoy llena de temor

Soy una fuente de temor

Soy sensual

Estoy succulenta de carne

Soy una sirena subreal

Soy sudor – Soy la serpiente

Soy el ritmo de la cólera

Soy el ritmo del ciclo

Soy el refugio

Tengo un apetito voraz

Soy una realidad rítmica

Soy la joya en creación

Soy mujer

Estoy aquí

Soy

Yo

After circling the words they found interesting, we had a discussion about dualisms, where I asked them: is it possible to be two things at once? Four things at once? Two opposing things at once? Their answers were: *yes*. We talked about this for almost thirty minutes, where many of the girls said that it is possible to have and exist in dualisms because often women feel many things at once and therefore it is possible. I asked, *why only women?*, and they arrived at the consensus that it is because we are just more complicated and we think more. I asked them what they thought it meant to *own* those identities, and what that could look like? Rosita pointed out that people think girls are so simple, but that sometimes in class, she could be sad and happy at the same time, and no one really understands that. Many agreed.

After this discussion, I asked them to brainstorm about all the dualisms they have, but to consider especially elemental things, like the things they encounter every day, be it in the kitchen, their rooms, on their walk to school, at church, in the *huerta*, etc. and furthermore to consider the characteristics that these things have. I wanted them to bring to life and give importance not to metaphors, elements and symbols that exist only in famous poems or in other peoples' experiences, but the ones that exist in *theirs*. I wanted them to use what they have and touch, to make narratives and poems out of these things; and I wanted them to begin to look more

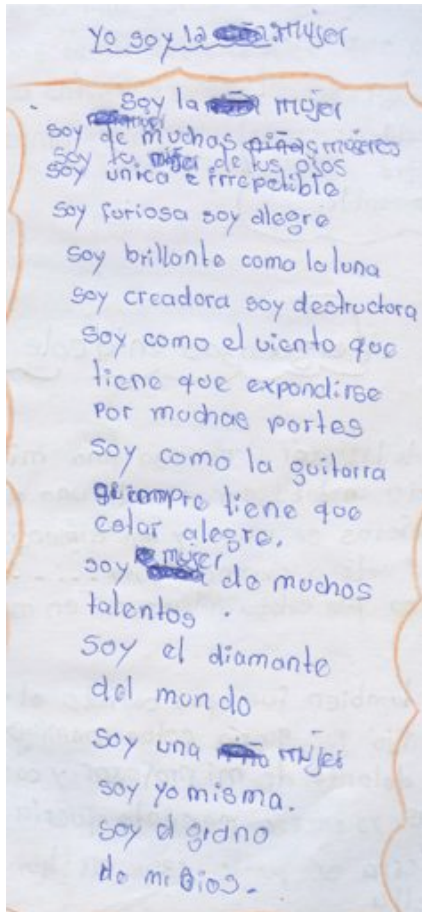
closely and look creatively (something they already do) at the things and senses they interact with on a daily basis, in their daily chores and routines.

Walking around the room, some wrote that they were at once yucca roots and at once onions, at once a hot day and at once a cold one, at once a butterfly and at once *tierra*, among others. After a few minutes of brainstorming, I asked them to write all of their identities, dualisms and characteristics under a poem titled, similar to Eilish McArt's, "Yo Soy".

Below are samples of their poems:

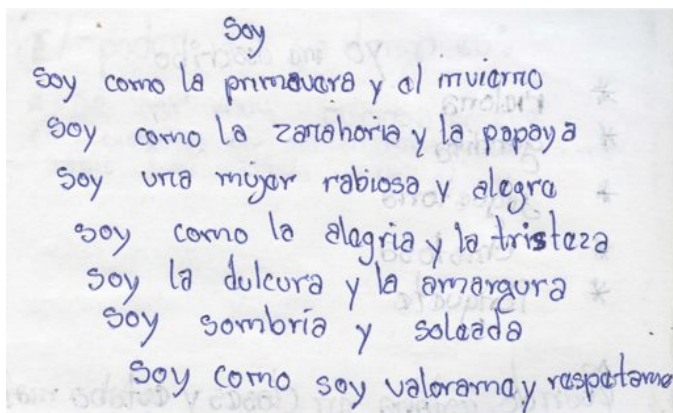
*Rocío:*





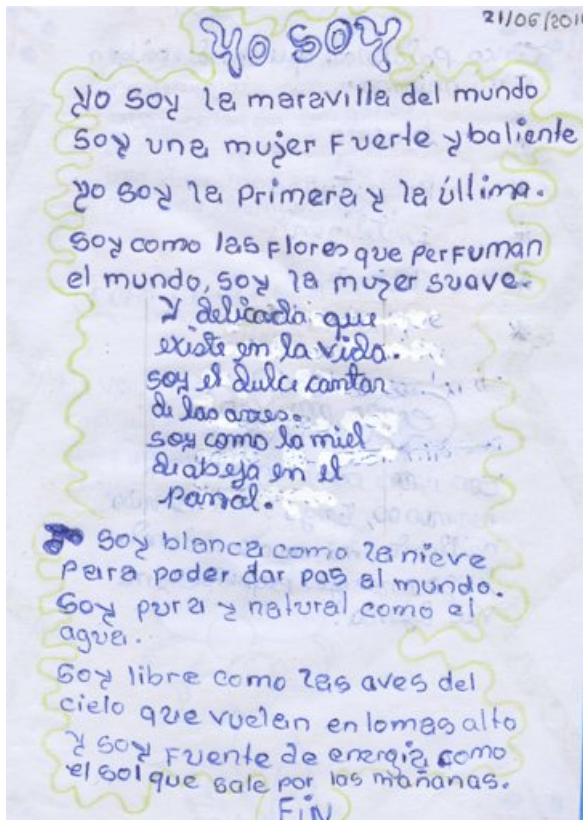
-Rocío began her poem with a short epigraph. She says that being a woman is like a beautiful religion that destiny blasphemises. Rocío's, like most of the other poems in this activity, expresses a unique and *irrepetible*-ness in her selfhood/womanhood. She also compares herself to natural things, but the uniqueness of that 'Yo' is what stands out. She says she is the diamond of the world. They express a centrist uniqueness that they don't express in other situations. For Rocío, her womanhood is in her relationship to God, as well as her uniqueness to herself as a person and herself as a woman

*Manuela:*



Manuela compares herself to the spring and winter, and says she is both; she is both sweet and bitter, sunny and shady. She says she is feisty and happy, and that is just who she is.

Elena:



Elena says that her main dualism is that she is both full of warmth, yet rainy at the same time.

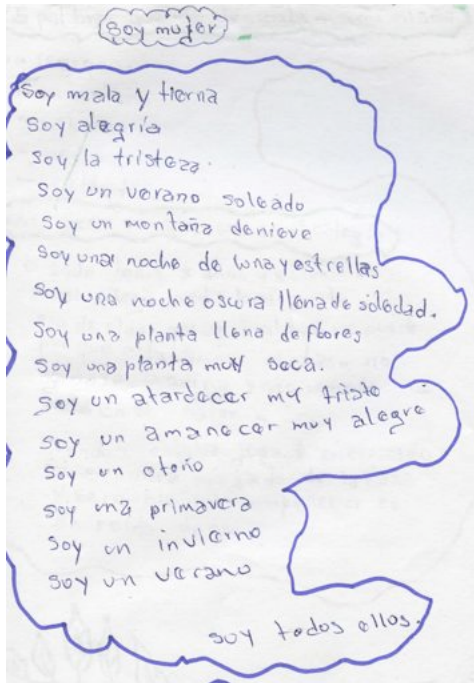
Like in many of the other examples, Juliana writes about a flower. A similarity I find in much of their writing is that there is a metaphor of a flower- perhaps this also demonstrates their understanding of dualism, after all, what has more dualism than a flower? She also says that she is pure, but in the sense that she is like water. So there is metaphor of water, birds and flowers.

Maru:



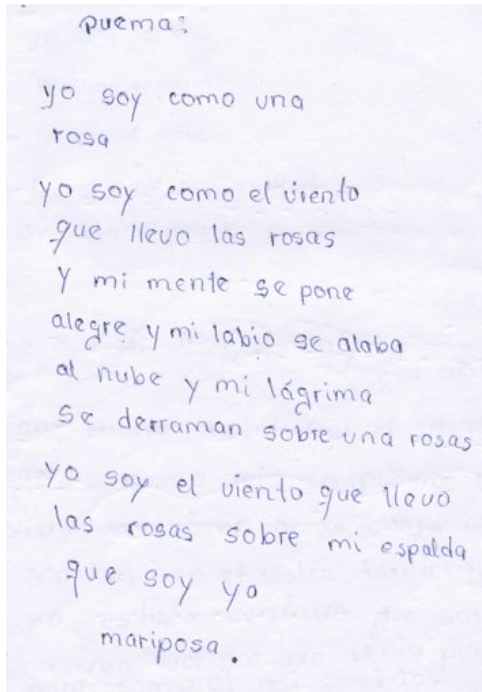
Maru thinks of herself as very beautiful. Like almost all, she compares herself to a flower. She also says that she is the source of all life, a claim that is at once religious, feminist and creative.

Marlene:



Marlene's poem had a lot to do with the dualities of life and death, birth and age. She compares herself to skies that are so dark they are lonely, yet also a night full of stars. She says she is both bad and good. In the end she says she exists within all of these

Lourdes.



Lourdes says she is the wind. Her dualism is somewhat mythical, saying she is both earth and wind, both something that grabs everything in its reach, yet also the rose that gets crushed. But, when she is the wind, she carried the roses on her back, like a butterfly.

There are common themes in all of these poems. Mainly, their sense of who they are revolves around the uniqueness of their life experience. Even in the conversations, and especially in the writing, we see their life history unfolding in a way they had not yet expressed or explored it: through the negotiation of gendered “Yoe’s”. Although the the poems were not directly or purposefully about girlhood and womanhood, they ended becoming that.

For these girls, who are far from home and who are living and coming of age in an *identidad fronteriza*, their sense of womanhood unfolds along the way, in their own terms. This sense of womanhood and identity is created along the way, and in a collected experience of living in a cloistered convent. In the samples shown above, there is an explicit tension between girlhood and womanhood; a desire to define and declare their womanhood. However, what is also present is the space where they are in the middle of these two identities. Womanhood is not the only idea or identity expressed, though; there is also a negotiation of how these identities move through the spaces in which they live.

Through the expression and narrating of dualisms in “Yo Soy” poems, they also reveal their experiences going to school in Yurimaguas, or their identities in relation to their origins in their hometowns. In some instances, the “Yo Soy” form allows the girls to define two very prominent identities and spaces: womanhood and convent. An example of this is Rocío’s poem, where she defines her growing sense of womanhood, but ends the poem with saying, “Soy el grano de mi Dios”, *I am the grain of my God*, a line which situates that identity in her current location: the

convent. A sense of womanhood, then, is hugely influenced by their life in the convent.

Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to the space that dualisms create, especially for women. She calls this “La Nueva Mestiza” (*Borderlands/La Frontera*) as one where the ways in which our identity as women are formed happens through multiple ways and is constantly shifting. “The new mestiza constantly migrates between knowing herself,” she says and exists within and moves through “her multiple subjectivities” (100). I find Anzaldúa’s radical feminist approach to identity formation and identity-existing useful in the negotiation of identities experienced by these girls because like the women Anzaldúa speaks of, these girls are marginalized in many ways, and not just through gender. And whereas Anzaldúa called this new knowledge “shared imagination” (*Borderlands/La Frontera*), she left out the voice of women *below* her border, crossing other yet similar borders.

The “Yo Soy” poems speak to this space where a third culture, a third gender, third identities are negotiated. Though the other borderlands are not too explicitly revealed here, we see them, once again, through metaphor or symbol. The most emergent identity in the “Yo Soy” poems, is the feminine “Yo,” and it is a ‘yo’ defined through major experiences in their life history, such as leaving home, travelling, and life in the convent. That travel; that journey, which the first part of this work was dedicated to, is an intimate and important signifier of their transition into adult womanhood; working as both metaphor and as literal. The metaphor of the epic

journey is found throughout much of their work. Even when travel is not named directly or literally, it is present. For example, if they say they are women because they have left their family and live in the city of Yurimaguas; it is not the city of Yurimaguas that has provided them their womanhood (because to Yurimaguas, they are just considered the indigenous orphans at the Carmelite convent); it is the journey embarked alone, leaving one world for another, one identity into another, and into an exploration of womanhood they had not yet experienced. It is not Yurimaguas that gives them this sense, but the epic journey. In this way, their life histories exist within a pendulum between the home/journey and the convent.

At its most simple, these poems reveal a discussion on womanhood; demonstrating what they thought of womanhood and of themselves as women and not in what being a woman meant to their community, their school, the convent, to their families, etc. but what being a woman meant to *them*. In some poems, the “Yoe’s” were defined by their sensuality, like Maria Rosa’s poems. Maria Rosa compares her womanhood to rain, because it cries, she says. After she compares herself to several natural elements, she says she is a very sensual girl. For her, her girlhood is defined by her likeness to rain and flowers, and to her free spirit and sensuality.

The convent plays a major role in their negotiation of “Yoe’s”. Does its cloistered nature allow them to grow? Does its cloistered nature give them this sense of sensuality, or did that surge because I asked them to focus on elemental things,

sensual by nature? In many of these, there is a shared theme of God and of having a higher purpose. Elizabeth Lester, author of “Jesus in Our Wombs”, who I mentioned in Chapter 7 talks about the sensual identity formation that having a relationship to God may bring. Although mestizo Mexico City and indigenous Peruvian Amazon are not the same, her exploration of the reasons and mediums through which young women choose a relationship with God in a Latin American context is critical for the understanding of these young women. In this way, I see the function of the convent not as claustrophobic space, but as one that allows for a more liberating coming of age into womanhood. Although this work is not about nuns, (nor are any of these girls nuns yet), but a critical look at the convent and God is necessary because many become do end up becoming nuns, and many express this desire, leading us to the question: What is a nun? A nun is having a special relationship with god. And whether the “Yoe’s” expressed in these poems are being written before becoming nuns or not; they speak to that space in the *middle, in between*, where girls are defining who they imagine becoming.

The myth of wanting to become a nun, the relationship with God, and the life they imagine as nuns, is liberating, because in a sense, it is outside the structure of religion. When the notion of cloister is taken literally, of course it is oppressive but when it is taken as a creative relationship with something bigger than you, it is liberating, as we see in these poems.

Taking these girls in, the convent functions as a family as well as provides a place for girls to come of age in. It provides a space for a unique sense of



womanhood to develop, away from family, away from tradition, away from origin. In the concrete absence of each, they create their own. And although they have left the structure of their own families and communities, they enter another one, in which the nuns collectively raise them in the borderland of convent and cloister.

This activity, a poem that begins with “Yo Soy”, *I Am*, speaks to all of their identities forming in this convent, revealing which ones they favor over others. These poems speak to identities that are formed and negotiated from the nurturing, enclosing walls of the convent, revealing its intimate safeness yet its powerful borders.

Chapter 14

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Capítulo 14

*Así podría ser la*

*exacta mujer en que soy*

*y la que quisiera ser:* Poems about what it takes

to be a woman

*Así podría ser la*

*exacta mujer en que soy*

*y la que quisiera ser:* Poems about what it takes to be a woman

Annabella, at twenty-one, is starting her first year of high school. She is the oldest of twelve siblings. She has been at the *hogar* since age twelve or so, and she told me that many of the cloistered nuns were once girls like her who arrived at the convent at the same time. I asked her if she has ever tried to speak to them through the walls or in the visiting room with the wooden bars. She said no, but that sometimes when she is about to go to sleep, she remembers that they used to be on the same side as her, whispering and wondering about the same things.

Annabella had already travelled to Yurimaguas before entering the *hogar*. When she was eleven, an older man in his 40s had come to her village and asked her father if he could marry her. Annabella claims that she begged her father to send her to the city she had heard about-Yurimaguas- where she could work and send money back and maybe even go to school. Her father agreed, and made the days-long trip with her to Yurimaguas. She said she began cleaning houses for a family in the town, but that is where the nuns' story picks up. A woman from Yurimaguas, vigilant of the situations some girls find themselves in when they arrive from small villages, approached the nuns of the Hogar and expressed a concern that the family Annabella was working for wanted to prostitute her. At twelve, Annabella arrived at the Hogar, and her sister Xuxi, eleven years younger, arrived a few years later.

Annabella's parents and youngest siblings came to stay at the convent for a few days en route back home from agricultural work they found in a nearby town. Madre I. was talking to Annabella's father, convincing him to send one of his daughter's here- Annabella and Xuxi's ten year old sister who was recently promised to be married off to a forty year old man travelling from Tarapoto who gave their father a bottle of liquor in exchange for this daughter, although the man requested that the family save her for him till she turned eleven or twelve.

As this conversation was going on, Madre G. pulled me to the side and said that the reason Vicki's mother did not say a word is not that she doesn't understand Spanish- it is that in their community it is discouraged for women to learn Spanish, preventing them from travelling beyond the village.

I followed Madre G. to a large area behind the cloister where construction workers were making cement. She showed me the blueprint for the school they started to build until they found out they did not receive the government grant they applied for. The construction, then, has had to go slowly because they are now depending on donations, whenever those come through, which, in a town as resource-rich and economically poor as Yurimaguas, is not often.

I asked Madre. G why they wanted the girls to go to school inside the convent walls; that wouldn't it be best for them to go to school in the community and not be so isolated? Madre G. said that that would be ideal, but that horrible things happen to them in those schools. Unfortunately, she said, many girls have had to leave because they get involved with boys who pass them cocaine or get them pregnant. That's the irony, she said: they leave home looking for better opportunities, and they

meet worse ones in schools no one respects them. Madre I and Madre G's solution, then, was to create a school within the hogar where they could be educated, free of abuse, free of bad influence, free of unwanted pregnancies.

School, at the moment, is the only chance they have to leave the hogar; yet in the safe haven that the hogar and its strong walls provide, if looked at more critically than just something that isolates or confines or provides "safety", there is something more unique.

The convent- in both its philosophy in providing girls a space to become educated and healthy women in a safe environment, and in its practical function: a space where sixteen girls spend an enormous amount of time together, imagine together, eat together, share a room together, pray together and dream together away from home and family-provides a unique space for girls to develop their sense of womanhood.

And while the poems from the last chapter, "Yo Soy," reveal their own sense of selfhood, womanhood, complexities that make them who they are and narrate a "Yo" that is situated in their experience of who they are, the poems of this activity, entitled "Para Ser Mujer" reveal their views of a general universal definition of womanhood where they combine their personal experience of womanhood as well as their universal perceptions.

Feminists scholars have written about critical moments: "new moments of inscription" (Canning, 57). These poems represent, in a way, a new moment of inscription in their lives as women. Because here, they think about womanhood in a way they say they have never thought before.

These poems document moments in which they believe they have become, or that they will become, women, revealing the transition as a form of transformation. Many of them identify this transformation in concrete examples of what make women; the transformation being not so much an inner emotional one, but one found in the body and in their likes and dislikes.

Some take their general definition of womanhood from their own life experiences. For example, Rocío says that girls become women when they leave their family; something found in neither traditional village life nor in Yurimaguas nor globally, yet because that has been her experience, it becomes her sense of how womanhood is reached. She says that her transformation into womanhood began when she stopped missing her family that much. Therefore, for Rocío, her sense of womanhood is rooted in her (and their) unique experience and context of being uprooted from her family and community and coming of age in her present context. At this age, their view of what is required to become a woman is not a general definition of womanhood, but taken directly to their lives and current state of mind. Their lives are their theory base; their lives are the pools of knowledge from which to express their feeling of womanhood.

They were very inspired by the poem, "Para ser mujer" by Ana Istarú, which touches on the negative aspects of being a woman in the world, and whose title I told them they could use. "me dieron mis dos brazos de mujer", says the poem, "y no me dijeron como romper los cerros" (*Para Ser Mujer* lines 1-2). I chose this poem not only because of the themes it brought up, but because it located the subjugation

of women in women's bodies, and used body parts creatively to tell a personal and universal story about being woman.

In their versions of the poem, "Para Ser Mujer", I asked them to choose at least three body parts to talk about in the poem and to link that with their definitions of what it takes to be a woman, or of women's experience in general.

Annabela chose to write a personal one of why she thinks she is a woman already, identifying the transformation, as I mentioned, in real experience.

Soy Mujer

Soy mujer como virgen maría

Yo me siento feliz

Ya soy muy señorita porque

Tengo derechos qPue decir

Algo.

A veces cuando digo algo,

Lo digo como mujer.

Por eso me siento señorita,

Y cuando estoy con mis

Papas, porque soy la mayor

De mis hermanos.

*-Por Annabella*

*Marlene:*

Soy Mujer

Por que tengo sensualidad

Me dieron los brazos

Para destruir las malas

Cosas.

Me dieron piernas

Atractivas para hacer

Sufrir.

Me dieron cabello largo

Para parecerme más

Sensual y atractiva

Soy mujer sensual

Y atractiva

*Maria Rosa:*

Me dieron estas manos de mujer

Pero no me dijeron como manejarlos,

Pero,

Como era inteligente,

Supe como manejarlo



Ahora es muy hermoso

Saber como manejar

Mis propias manos

*Luz:*

Para Ser Mujer

Me dieron mis ojos

De mujer

Y me dijeron como mirar y comprender

Mi vida.

Y ahora que he aprendido a

Conocer el mundo

Entre mis ojos oscuros y tiernos

Me quitan la claridad .

Llevo la angustia en mi corazón,

Si algun día

Yo pudiera tener las fuerzas y

El valor de seguir

Sin derumbe

Como mujer,

Seré fuerte y feliz,

Llena de orgullo de ser mujer.

*Rocío:*

Dios me dio todo lo q

Soy y en especial mis

Ojos y para así poder

Ver el misterio que el

Me tiene preparado

Y además la inteligencia

Que gracias a ello puedo

Comprender el amor que

El me tiene.

Si yo pudiera compartir

La inmensa felicidad que

Llevo por dentro les

Diría que soy la mujer

Más feliz del mundo

*Isabel:*

Me dieron mis

Cabellos de mujer

Y no me dijeron como mantenerlo

Y ahora que me  
He transformado en una  
Verdadera mujer

Que con mi boca sonrío  
Y hago alegres a la gente,  
A los tristes huérfanos y con  
Mis manos acariciarlos  
Y ponerles en mis brazos

Y así los niños se llenarían  
De alegría y así podría ser la  
Exacta mujer en que soy  
Y lo que quisiera ser.

This last poem speaks more to the daily routines of girls; the maintenance of hair, etc. and in a sense, could also speak to the fact that the convent for all that it provides and all that it is, does not provide a space on being a girl. It has many other elements as well though. At one point, she also says that with her smile she could make orphans happy, and that her hands could comfort them and hold them and make them happy. If that were the case, she says, if she were free as a woman to do that with her hands and smile, that she could be the exact woman she is and would like to be.

*Carmela:*

Para Ser Mujer

Me dieron mis orejas

Para poder oír

Los cantos de los

Pajaros y las voces

De las personas.

Ser mujer es

Sentir la ternura que

Tienes.

Ser mujer es lo mas

Bella que tenemos

*Manuela:*

Para ser mujer,

Me dieron mis piernas

Para andar por un buen camino.

Me dieron mis ojos para

Mirar las cosas malas  
Que hay en este mundo.  
Me dieron mis manos  
De la esperanza para  
Hacer las cosas con amor.  
Dios me dio todo lo que  
Una mujer quiere y lo que  
Debe tener, para ser mujer  
Hay que ser mucho más  
Mujer sin temos, vergüenza,  
Y ser una misma  
Y una mujer verdadera.

Here, Manuela expresses the need to be true to herself, and oneself as a woman.

That is what makes a *real* woman, she says.

*Maria Josefina:*

Para ser mujer tengo  
Alma y corazón.  
De mujer y  
El mundo quiere  
Que se diferente  
Pero yo soy debil y frágil.

Si algún día yo pudiera ser libre,  
Caminar por las anchas calles,  
Sentir la compresión del mundo.  
Si yo pudiera reacerlo todo,  
Vivir a mi manera, y  
Devolverle el verdor al árbol caído  
Se me alegraría el corazón y  
Con mis brazos de mujer  
Abrazaría a mis amigos, y  
Mi cuerpo de mujer se llenaría de alegría

*Elena:*

Para Ser Mujer

Me dieron un cuerpo para poder  
Romper las paredes y murallas y todo  
Obstáculo que hay en nuestras  
Vidas.

Me diste un cerebro para poder  
Pensar las cosas mejor y con  
Calma y así vivir en un mundo  
Donde exista libertad.

Para ser mujer necesito la

Suficiente fuerza para romper  
Todo mal que nos destruye.

Quiero ser pies para caminar  
Todo los lugares sin poder  
Cansarme y tener unos pies  
Buenos para correr y salvarnos  
De nuestros enemigos.

These poems speak to the borderland between girlhood and womanhood/or young womanhood and adult womanhood. Yet underneath this main theme several other borderlands are revealed. In these poems they are not only talking about themselves; they are also revealing their feelings and thoughts on womanhood in general; creatively expressing how they fit in or do not fit into that image. Do they base their own womanhood on what they think about womanhood in general?

\* \* \*

### *La Nueva Fiscal Escolar*

It was Rocío's and Maria Josefina's turn to cook the night after this activity. They were cooking early and fast- frying 20 eggs and about 50 plantains. Rocío received good news today- she was selected out of everyone else in her year to be the "class

lawyer”, in a program started by three lawyers in the region who wanted young people to be trained to be aware of domestic abuse and to report it. Her job would be to interview her classmate’s families on their family life, as well as be trained in the steps to report suspected abuse if she knows of a classmate being abused. Rocío told me that her job was very important. She explained to me that there is abuse at all levels of society, and she thinks that if the lawyers just spend time in their offices, then they don’t know if a sixteen-year-old girl in her class is being abused. Rocío told me about her dedication to ending violence against women everywhere, but that it is necessary to start in the classroom. “mis compañeras estan atrapadas en sus problemas”, she told me.

We was quiet, hurriedly flipping the plantains on the frying pans so that they could make it to church in twenty minutes. She then told us that she grew up with a cousin who was repeatedly raped at five years old by her uncles. Her cousin never said anything until she turned eighteen.

\* \* \*

#### Margarita and Yurimaguas’ New Domestic Abuse Law

Throughout my stay, I became good friends with Madre A., the priora, which is one step down from the Mother superior. Sometimes she allowed me sit inside the *torno*, where I pretended I was the Piora as people come to share their gossip and ask for advice. The bell rang. “Ave maría purísima” . “sin pecado concebido”. It was



funny, until Margarita came, beat up and with her three year old daughter in her arms. Madre G. told me that Margarita used to work for the main bank in town; that she was well known and made a lot of money. Then, she said, she fell in love, and he made her quit her job. *No te cases, Anita*, she interjects. Now, he beats her every once in a while, and she comes to the torno for help. Because domestic abuse has become such a big problem in Yurimaguas, the city made a new law that states that men can go to jail for up to a year if they hit a woman *twice*.

\* \* \*

The hopes, dreams and images that the girls imagine womanhood to be, in a way reject the negative experiences of femininity that they have witnessed in their lives. The way they imagine the transition as well as *being* of women, develops within an intersection of resistance to what they have witnessed and an expression of the type of women they hope they will become.

## Full Women, 'Querida Yo' Desde el Futuro, and some Conclusions

*"A veces eres mujer sin saber"*

*(sometimes you are a woman without knowing you are a woman)*

*-Manuela*

*"The memory of oppressed people cannot be taken away. And for such people revolt is always an inch below the surface"*

*-Howard Zinn, 2005<sup>29</sup>*



<sup>30</sup>In this inherently feminine space, away from family and places of origin, the seventeen girls of El Hogar la Buena Esperanza are creating something beyond just notebooks filled with writing. In the production of these myths, fiction pieces and poetry that they both write as well as live out, they reveal a certain Latin American and feminist experience that both negotiate and transcend this border-informed place. In some cases, their writing reveals a struggle to give their uprooting to the convent a higher purpose and reason, such as Luz: In chapter 7, Luz invented a myth where a girl by her same name was given a special task to illuminate the world in the place of a dying moon. Her father, the King, is angered

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<sup>29</sup> Zinn, Howard. "A People's History of the United States" 2005

<sup>30</sup> Various drawings taken from girls' notebooks

by this and sends her to die in a closed and locked room far away where she must remain until the last day of her life.

In this way, Luz is living out the myth she has created; this is the story she has formed around why she is here. She is creating narratives around the circumstances of her life and consequently imagining a different future, one that plays out in her terms.

Whether it is through myth-creation or Poetry, the stories that these girls have produced speak to just that: the right to tell their own story through the multiple voices, lenses and layers they use, and the imagining of a borderless and alternative future, where they take their life histories and narrate them to fit their dreams and hopes.



Benedict Anderson raises the question: what kinds of spaces do we create when we imagine them? Far away from an indigenous home and family and uprooted to a cloistered convent in a mestizo town, what identities do they form? In discussing the relationship between borders and national identity, Anderson asserts the constructed nature of nationhood, allowing us to examine the possibility of “imagined communities”. The borders, spaces and communities that these girls experience provides the discussion of “imagined communities” with more layers of depth, in that not only does their condition allow us to examine the constructedness of geography, identity and borders that have led them to this shared space, but they, through writing, are engaged in a dynamic exploration of their own imagined

community, redefining and reconstructing their space as they make the transition from young womanhood to adult womanhood.



They also take this discussion to a more profound level in that they are dealing with many imagined communities. I began this work by asking, *how many homes are in this Casita? How many rooms make up this one large room that they all share? How many hometowns make up this new place, el Hogar?* The

answer to all of these is *many*. They carry their hometowns and their journeys with them, nurturing them in this place that has made their experience collective, re-writing and re-imagining the way their journeys have played out and the way they imagine that they will play out. What communities are being created that transcend this wall between convent and cloister- at once so thick and at once so thin- that separates nuns and girls, both of whom share a history separated only by a single choice: those who have chosen to become nuns, and those who have not yet made a choice? But as we see, many stories fill this question.



I began this with a consideration of critical

border theory because of the new spaces and voices that are created when we challenge and defy the constructed maps, geographies and identities we are born into simply by the nature of our experiences and the way we choose and are moved to narrate them. What communities do they construct upon the ones they have left behind? The sixteen girls and twenty-two cloistered nuns, from the moment they embark on this journey that they define as a coming-of-age moment of independence, begin to develop what Soja calls the “critical geographic imagination”, which reconceptualizes communities’ space and geography as a product of a culture’s collective (re)imagining of its history and identity.

These girls’ movement through the borders take this concept to a higher level, bringing femininity into a stronger question and presence in the



reconsidering of not only the way women move through borders, but in the way, as Anzaldúa says, that these borders move through *us*. They lure this into a higher level also in the immediate presence of their experience: their historical references are their immediate pasts; the places they remember and re-write with intimate and imaginative nostalgia are the places they left only a few years or a few month ago and the identities they are narrating are being created as we speak, informed not by



tradition but by their own creation.

The girls of El Hogar la Buena Esperanza carry their womanhood on this journey, forming it along the way, and they continue to form it within the convents' walls; some imagining future life in the convent; others imagining a higher purpose of returning to their hometowns, and others imagining further travel into unknown cities and lives.

The following few examples come from the last activity, conducted the day before I left Yurimaguas, and they speak to the borderlands yet untouched in this thesis: those they have yet to cross and those they imagine crossing in the future.

In the final activity, I asked the girls to write letters to themselves from a future age (ten years older than they are now). When I had previously asked them to imagine themselves five years from now, they mostly wrote that they would be old, wrinkled and wise, playing with their imagination of the future (Chapter 11). In this last activity, however, they confessed to themselves the people they would become and the things they would do. They revealed an intimate life story yet to happen. Rosita, from an imaginary age of 22, wrote to 12 year old Rosita telling her

to sit back and listen to the story she is about to tell. She tells her 12 year old self that she lead an interesting and beautiful life, beginning in the convent where she realized what she was meant to do in life: to become a lawyer. At the convent, she dreamed of having a profession and being successful. Now, at 22, she says, she sits in her office and works with young girls who come in and need help. *These girls remind me of myself*, she says, and looks back at her life and the wonderful story it has been.

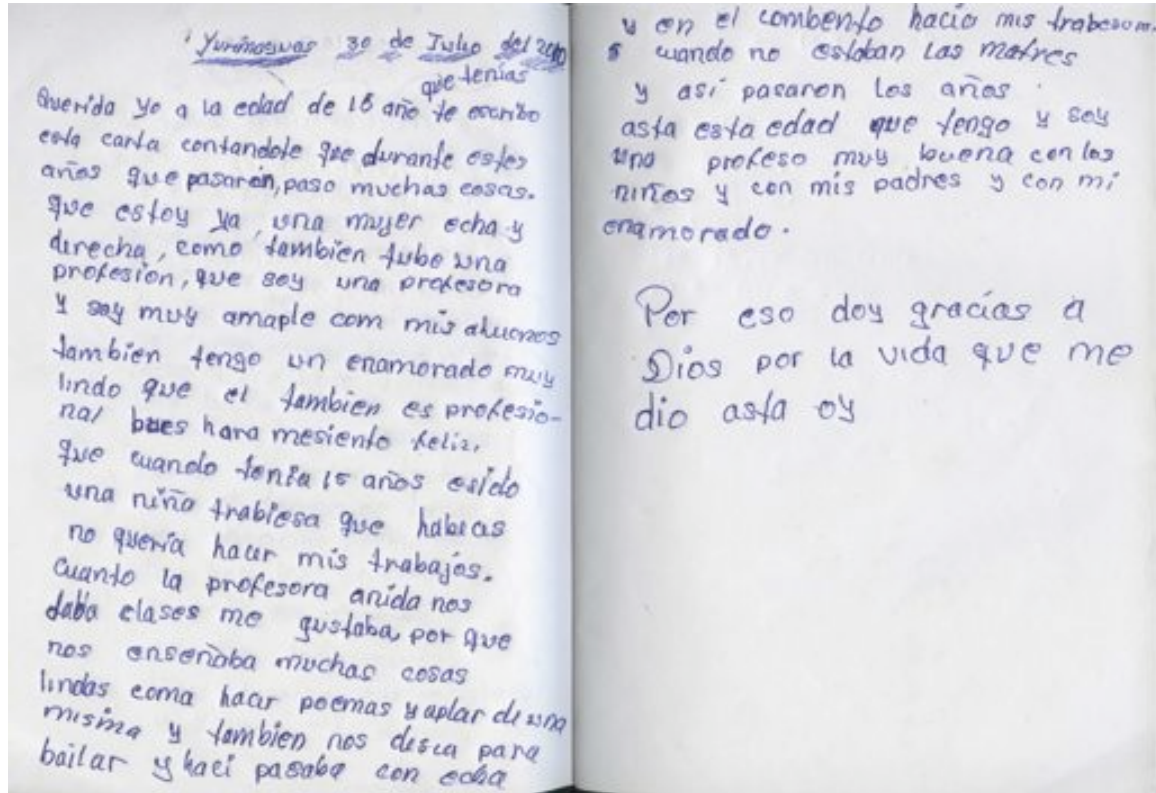
Rosita, like all of these girls, are at a moment in their lives where they are defining themselves. I am getting to know them at the same time that they are getting to know themselves, and that they are choosing creative ways in which not merely to document their lives, but to explore them on their own terms. What is important here is not just the larger hope that their lives and experiences are taken into consideration when we build the institutions that girls go through, or when we plan the curriculums that are supposed to prepare young women. Rather, it is in these smaller moments of self-revelation.

The meaning of these three things- leaving home, travelling, and coming of age in the convent (home, journey, convent) is that their experiences have informed the way they view their future and they show up consistently, either literally or through metaphor in almost all of the activities.

Their journeys of moving through these borderlands have led them to imagine a borderless future in their lives as women.



Maru writes:



Maru, at the future age of 25 is a teacher who loves her students. She is a full woman, she says, and she is happy. She says she will always remember when she was fifteen, when she was a *niña traviesa*, living in the convent and when she learned how to write poetry and about how to love herself.

Almost all of the girls look back at their hometowns as places that nursed and raised them, and all of them envision returning in their own unique way. There are a thousand ways that this *return* looks like in their writing: for some it is wildly imaginative in the form of invented legends. Some re-write and imagine a cause of having left the hometown, such as through the invented legend where Tani brings to



life a mythical bird who must fly far away for a few years in order to discover new herbs that will cure a pandemic affecting her town. Maria Rosa brings to life a young girls' character that is forced to travel to a far away town in order to get education so that she may return to her hometown and improve it. Luz creates a young girls' character who has to choose between acceptance from her father or following divine order from a moon who told her she must travel far in order to become the second moon and take over when the moon's time is done. Beyond expressing a strong desire to be in control of their life decisions, and re-writing the circumstances that brought them here, these show the creative forms in which they have crossed borders or have negotiated borderlands in their life histories and experiences. And while these stories speak to borderlands crossed and negotiated; others speak to those yet to cross. There is much to be said about how they imagine crossing certain borders in the future, and the relationship of this and the many ways they imagine returning home.

In imagining crossing borders in the future, some imagine re-crossing the initial border from home to convent, such as Rosita who says that she is here to become a lawyer so that when she is older, she can return and help the people of her town and teach them about their rights. Some imagine crossing the border of girls and nuns, saying that one day, after she falls inlove, studies, and maybe even becomes a business woman, her ultimate destiny will be to become a nun, where she will fulfill the desires of God. Whatever the border, all imagine an epic transformation guided heavily by their presently forming womanhood.

A week before leaving Yurimaguas, I sat outside with Rocío- the girl who

“ama demasiado”, who dreams of travelling far, falling in love, becoming a business woman and eventually a nun- and she asked me,

“Anita, tu nunca piensas ser monjita?”

*(Anita, you’ve never thought about becoming a nun?)*

Honestly, I told her. NO. I wouldn’t last. She laughed.

*Well, I want to be.*

I was completely caught by surprise.

*“De verdad?!”* I asked. *“Porque?”*

I stopped myself. This was Rocío, who is “too in love”, as she writes on the edges of her notebook. Rocío, who writes love notes in the corners of her notebook. Rocío, who keeps all the books of ‘poesía escandalosa’ under her pillow and reads it...wants to be a nun.

“Creo que Dios me llama, creo que eso es mi vocación”

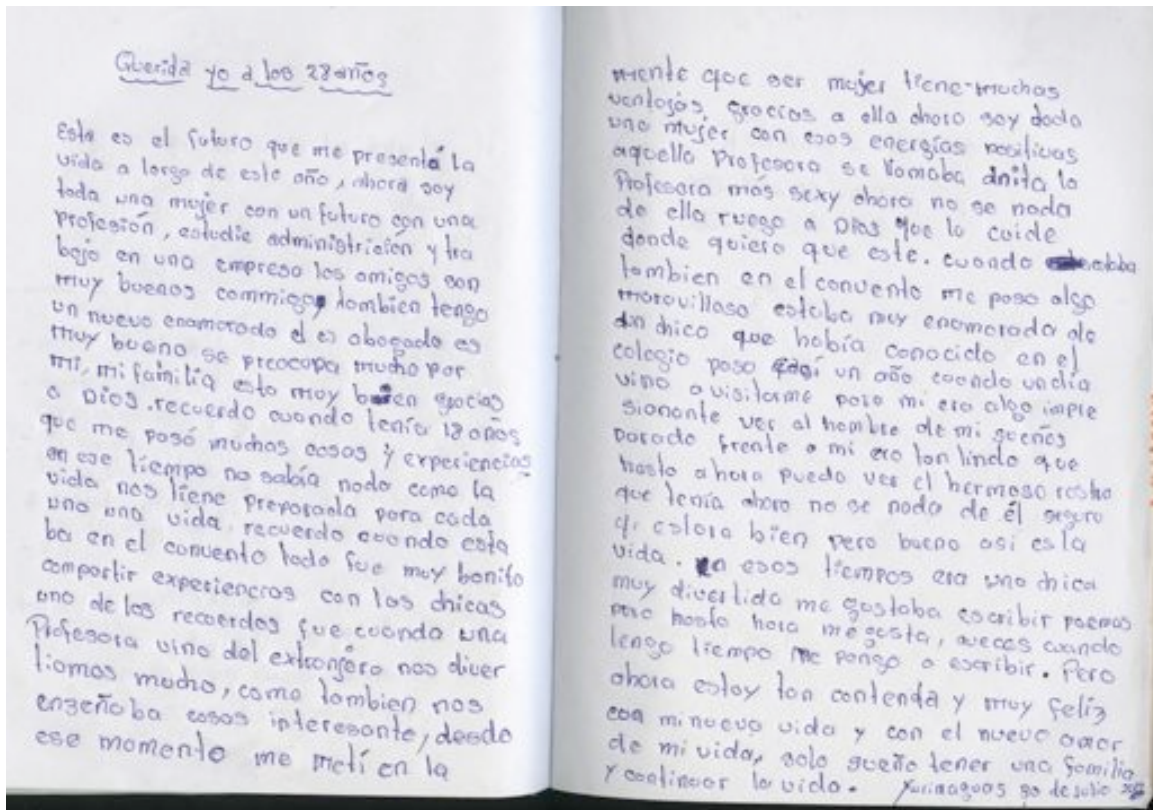
*God is telling me to be a nun. I like the life they lead, she tells me. They go places, they meet people, they live.*

*But don’t you want boyfriends???* I joked with her.

*Yeah, she said. Those are for ‘para mientras’ (in the meantime).*

For this last activity, I was expecting funny stories about growing old and being married. Instead, I got stories that revealed the thousands of ways going home, womanhood and life could look like; the multiple ways they could conceive of the geographies they have passed through and those they have yet to experience; the multiple borders they have and are presently negotiating in the imagining of a borderless future.

The letter Rocío wrote to herself, beyond making me cry at the thought of leaving this place, made me question my own womanhood and the way I conceptualize my own geographies and borders, as well as the possibilities that writing and creation can give in improving the lives of girls.



Rocío writes to herself at eighteen that in this future age of 28, she is a complete woman, with a future and a profession in business, and a boyfriend who treats her well. She remembers when she was 18, she says, and all the experiences and things that happened to her leading up to that age. She knew nothing about life, she says, but she carries the memories with her of living in the convent. One important memory she says, is when a foreign teacher came to teach all the girls. From that moment on, she says, she learned that being a woman was a very special thing. Because of her class, she says, she is now "toda una mujer", a complete woman. She says that sometimes she falls in love and sometimes she doesn't, sometimes she writes and sometimes she doesn't, but that when she writes she remembers me and the class

and wonders where I am. She has not heard from me in a long time, she says, but that she prays to God that I am doing what I want to be doing.

When I read this, the word liberation came to my mind; what it means and what it could look like. Rocío had made me think of my own border-full past and borderless future, and how my own life played into understanding the geographies we are born into and the ones we create. What symbols do we carry with us when we narrate our life stories?

All of their past experiences and the symbols they use in their writing—the hometown, the journey, the convent...function as symbols and metaphors for which they imagine new borders to cross in the future; a way to liberate themselves from what is expected of them.

When I left the convent, the hogar, la Casita where I had stayed for three months barely leaving its walls, it felt as if my heart and ideas weighed thousands of pounds and dragged like huge anchors next to me. When I think about these girls, about their writing, about their art...I think about what Janie said about self-revelation. The problem is that most definitions of this word include a caution: that self-revelation is very often "without deliberate intent". In the case of the girls of the Yurimaguas Convent, they reveal themselves to themselves with every physical, earthly and wild intention. And much more beautiful than revealing yourself to someone else, or expressing love or anger or poetry to someone else, is the moment when you reveal it to yourself; the moment they reveal their own poetry to their

own selves and their own bodies, because it produces an auto-love and discovery that lasts much longer and nurtures itself much deeper than any other one.

This idea, the idea that if girls loved, re-created, revealed and discovered themselves, that they could create huge cities (to be metaphorical), and entire worlds (to be realistic), has made me feel like I have a 1000 pound mural of hearts that I drag around everywhere, that keep me here, and grows another limb each time I come back and each time I leave. I dragged this thing on the three day boat ride I took the day I left, a few weeks back, and in the hours I spent reading and re-reading their writing, in the details I missed, and crying more than I ever thought I could cry. The night before I got on the boat, I said bye to everyone, and literally, very literally, cried all night. The image that has stuck with me is of Rocío writing that most days, she remembers a time when she learned that being a woman was quite probably the most amazing thing in the world. More amazing than this though, was "ser una mujer total". Complete. Mujer total.

I thought for days about what it meant to be a complete woman. Even some men in the town had ideas about this. Felix is the older man who owns the six telephone cabins down the street. We became friends toward the end of my trip, and I would visit him on my way back to the convent every day at 5:30pm. He claimed that he knew much more about women than women did, but that women would one day know the truth. Naturally, I was interested, so he gave me wise advice every day for two weeks.

The last advice he gave me before I left, was that women's biggest mistakes were to control their wild hearts. Sabes, he told me, "yo puedo ver a una persona y saber como son". "Tu", he told me, "tienes un corazón errante, tienes que aprender a escucharla". "You have a nomadic heart, and you have to learn to listen to it".

Felix's advice was like Janie's, who, on her long walk back to her hometown, she sits down at Phoebe's porch and says "more than your life-holding womb and life-giving private parts, love your heart- for this is the prize". This made me think about a heart, and about the ability to feel it, not as a metaphor, but as a mess of blood and substance, of wild and self-revealing things and moments.

They re-created cities, communities and stories out of this, wild and overwhelming architectures which they shared in this small place made of many walls, rooms and stories. They began to find a type of knowledge that comes from



the most sensitive and real of places: the body, and the imagination that comes from knowing that you are in your own, and the self-revelation that takes its place.

What is the purpose of these activities? These activities do not give all the answers; after all, they were created and inspired out of my own experience as a woman and as a woman that works with other women, and my own experience with the questions of feminism. But they reveal something, for sure, and if anything,

allow girls to confront in several different forms, ways and mediums, the questions they've been trained to not ask and to imagine lives the way they're trained to not imagine: on their own terms- whether to become a nun, a lawyer, a business woman, a mother- always, on their own terms. Writing in this space gives them an opportunity to imagine a life within and without motherhood. It allows them to see the collectivity of their experiences, yet the uniqueness in the solitude and independence in which they have carried out the experiences that unite them- leaving home, travelling, coming of age.

I've thought about my method- and what is required to come out of this. If someone were to ask me what the method is, I'd say that it is a method that is true to their lives and experienced, and to their complex and nuanced selves. I consider it a fluid and creatively constructed method. No variables to name, no groups to be allocated into categories. Simply and complexly the sixteen girls who have spent a crucial period of their lives-their girlhood- in a Carmelite Convent far from home. It is an account of their creativity-of what they create if you just ask them to. Their background, reason for being here, history, identity- are threads which can be found in their writing, but it is not about that.

This is about what they imagine and construct out of their own creation, by their shared and individual girlhood. What borders do they cross *through* text? What national borders? What cultural borders? In crossing these borders, they are creating new borders yet also rendering them border-less. They are writing from marginalized spaces, with voices rarely taken into account as female, indigenous,



rural and poor. In engaging these spaces (and in the process creating new ones and dismantling old ones), they challenge the continent's and the world's notions of maphood and nationhood. We cannot separate the form from the geographic, cultural, historical and gendered conditions in which these pieces are produced. Engaging these spaces, not only do they dismantle the borders that have kept them oppressed, but they create these relationships between themselves as girls and the spaces they inhabit. Writing is what provides the medium through which to imagine and create these new relationships, not only because of the structure of the class which allowed them the time and space, but because of the mix of fiction, testimony and poetry as the multiple forms available to them to tell these stories. Their work is pure creation.

In the three months that I spent in the *hogar*, I wrote to a friend to try to get ideas of how to treat their writing. And like most ideas and theories that I get from the girls and women in my life, she said something that made me re-think this whole project.

She said that this project does not and should not fall into most poetry projects that claim that poetry keeps girls safe, that it keeps them from getting pregnant. Poetry was always meant to provoke.

The point, she said, is to give them a chance to "explore themselves before they get explored- like a kind of pregnancy that doesn't mean having to buy bigger pants". I doubt that this would work its way into books of feminist theory, but like most radical and marginalized movements, like womanism, it did not start as things written in books, but things whispered in church.

This project has everything to do with the chance to explore oneself. The nuns tell me that many of these girls get abused before they actually know the opposite of that. They go through what many girls and women go through- by the time they have their first "sexual experience" (including abuse), they do not really know themselves- sexuality and any sexual identity is given to them (by the least qualified people).

What does this convent represent as a space of liberation? What are its possibilities- what can be, and is, created and imagined within it and without it? And the point of poetry, then, is not to keep them from getting pregnant, as Michelle reminded me. The point of poetry is not as a catharsis, not as an over-used "empowerment mechanism". The point, as Michelle said, is to explore your body before someone else does, to create a life story and future on their own terms, with their "own lumbar, my own bricks...and my own feminist architecture" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*)

I have often thought; if only women's first experiences were with other women...imagine the kind of women they would already *be* without having to *become*. But at the same time, this becoming is what poetry is all about. Their writing provides a way to rethink the body, rethink the convent, and rethink the institutions, travel routes and spaces that occupy and are occupied by girls.

Rosita, the youngest, has less endurance in writing; or perhaps she says no more than she considers necessary. I know she is finished when she slams her pencil down, plays with the items inside her desk, walks around the room instigating and provoking the other girls, and then sits back down, in preparation to ask me a question out loud.

“Anita, cuanto ganan las feministas?” (*How much do feminists make?*) I tried to explain to her that “feminist” wasn’t a profession, per se. That one doesn’t “make money” doing it; that there are feminists in all kinds of work: there are feminists in school, feminists who write, feminists who cook, feminists who teach, feminists who are lawyers, feminists who stay at home, feminists who are business women.

Though what I have presented here is partly a creative writing curriculum for girls, along with samples of their writing and an exploration of the depth that feminist experience can give us in border theory, my hope is that it is the beginning of the blue print for creating institutions specifically for the liberation of the last oppressed groups- girls. Rosita’s question demands that we rethink the institutions, maps and spaces that fail girls.

I never gave Rosita a clear answer to her question, but I have re-asked myself the question in many ways. On a larger universal scale, this project is toward the hope that one day prostitution will not be the only profession where women make more than men; or that girls grow up engaged in the womanhood they once described as girls, and on a more intimate scale, toward the hope that if, like Janie in

“Their Eyes Were Watching God”, they return home, that they return “with that oldest human longing: self revelation”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Hurston, “Their Eyes Were Watching God”.

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