Science Under the Microscope and Legality on Trial: How Female Authors in Latin America Confront and Challenge the Patriarchal Control of Science and Legality in the Representation of Women

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Science Under the Microscope and Legality on Trial
How Female Authors in Latin America Confront and Challenge the Patriarchal Control of Science and Legality in the Representation of Women

by

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Spanish and Portuguese

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my dear friend Matthew Naegeli, who cheered for stories of female empowerment, including my own. I miss you.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, for it belongs, really, to all of us. To my dad, John, whose pursuit of science has always been pure, whose studies and dissertation paved the way for my own, and whose encouragement towards my goals was never lacking, even when I didn’t believe this was possible. To my mom, Debbie, whose love and care for language has shaped me. At a time when women had to fight for their words my mom was one of the brave who knew her own voice, and she has made it so that I don’t have to fight in the same way. To my brother, Daniel, the true scholar, who knows more than most, and yet is humble and kind in his knowing. To my sister, Rebekah, the hardest worker among us, whose dedication, both to what she does and those she loves, has changed me, even as it has set an example for me. And to my sister-in-law, Carly, who shares our family’s love of learning, and who is a perfect fit for my brother, as he is for her.
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I analyze a selection of works by eight Latin American female authors in order to explore how they represent the process of the social construction of women’s identities and roles in the male-dominated social, institutional, familial, and personal spaces that force women into particular positions of subordination. This analysis will focus, in particular, on how women writers represent the hegemonic systems of legality and science in order to highlight their role in the reproduction of values, practices, and institutions that maintain male control and female exploitation.

Each of the authors I analyze addresses the construction of women’s social roles and identities within the modern institutions of legality and science through their female characters and poetic voices. These authors have a discerning eye on their cultural context and, at times, a biting tongue as they demand social change and project what it could look like.
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Introduction

In the titular scene from Marta Aponte Alsina’s novella *Sobre mi cadáver* (2012), a flashback: Josefina, the character whose mysterious death is at the heart of the murder mystery, stands in the doorway of her young daughter’s bedroom and tells her older brother, Alberto, that he can enter “over her dead body.” Alberto has a history of sexual abuse towards family members, including Josefina, and it now appears that he intends to continue this pattern with his young niece. The story’s twist, however, lies in the fact that her daughter was born out of one of several forced sexual encounters between Alberto and Josefina herself; it’s not just his niece that Josefina is defending from Alberto, it’s his daughter. The point of Alberto’s desire for his niece/daughter, and the point of fulfillment of that desire—only a few short steps away through the threshold of the young girl’s room—would otherwise be soon connected by the mere passage of time if it weren’t for Josefina, her physical body, and her deliberate attempt to break that flow of time, action, and abuse.

Josefina’s bold statement, “over my dead body,” though seemingly melodramatic, is indeed far from it. She has accurately identified the root behind Alberto’s actions and intentions. Since the first time he sexually assaulted Josefina, he has demonstrated that he sees her as less than human, undeserving of any autonomy or subjectivity on her own. His desire is for her death-in-life; for a physical body with no sense of self, no future, and no desires of her own, but one that can still satiate his desires—even, it would now seem, if she satiates those desires by way of the flesh of her flesh, her daughter. Indeed, Alberto’s actions accomplish this sinister plan in Josefina’s life. Josefina foregoes marriage, never leaves her childhood home, and she doesn’t pursue any sort of life
beyond the cell that her home has become at the hands of her brother. She suffers this lot for years until her child’s life, subjectivity, and future are put in the dangerous path of her brother’s evil intentions.

Aponte Alsina’s story reminds us that, oftentimes, the identities and social roles imposed on women are neither innocent, incidental, or harmless, but rather the outcome of intentional, reductive, and violent relations of power in society. Further, as I will discuss briefly below, her enactment of Josefina’s rape, incest, oppression, and final resistance within the core of the patriarchal family raises questions about the unequal position of women within the modern legal and scientific institutions that have not afforded women equal access to the protections of justice and scientific knowledge. In this dissertation, I will analyze a selection of works by eight Latin American female authors in order to explore how they represent the process of the social construction of women’s identities and roles in the male-dominated social, institutional, familial, and personal spaces that force women into particular positions of subordination.

This analysis of the representation of the social construction of female identities will focus, in particular, on how women writers represent the hegemonic systems of legality and science in order to highlight their role in the reproduction of values, practices, and institutions that maintain male control and female exploitation. Although focused in part on the representation of the predicaments of women within national legal systems, my analysis is framed outside of the debates on citizenship. Nonetheless, some overlapping concerns are evident. For instance, Evelina Dagnino has highlighted the importance of a conceptualization of citizenship that goes beyond the acquisition of legal rights to “a radical transformation of the cultural practices that reproduce inequality and
exclusion throughout society” (19). This understanding of citizenship would be defined not by the dominant classes (i.e. granting entrance to outsiders), but, rather, would constitute “citizenship ‘from below’” (22). My dissertation speaks to some of the central concerns beneath the discussion of citizenship, particularly to inclusion, representation, and legal rights. But it does so in the more limited scope of the private realm and everyday practices of female characters who confront the power of the systems of legality and science to (mis)represent, exclude, and curtail the rights of women in the national context. I argue that the authors discussed in my dissertation give voice to forms of women’s resistance and confront specific systems of inequality to thus return agency to their characters.

In particular, this research investigates these questions:

1. What are the instances of social relations (within family, workplace, and other spaces) in which the oppression engendered by systems of legality surfaces?

2. What are the instances of social relations (within family, workplace, and other spaces) in which the oppression engendered by systems of science surfaces?

3. How do such representations open space for resistance and critique by the characters as well as by the writers?

4. How do authors expose and destabilize the dominant constructions of female identity imposed by systems of legality and science in patriarchal societies?

The authors selected for analysis are Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, and Anjelamaría Dávila (from Puerto Rico); Inés Arredondo, Rosario Castellanos, and Adriana González

1 Anjelamaría Dávila spelled her name differently in various publications throughout her life, including Ángela María Dávila, and Angelamaria Dávila. For this dissertation I will be using Anjelamaría Dávila in order to keep consistency.
Mateos (from Mexico); Cristina García (Cuban American); and Gabriela Alemán (Ecuador). Each of these authors addresses the construction of women’s social roles and identities within the modern institutions of legality and science through their female characters and poetic voices. These authors have a discerning eye on their cultural context and, at times, a biting tongue (in the best sense of that phrase) as they demand social change and project what it could look like.

A key theoretical source for this research is *Between Men* (1985) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. It explores representations of women in English literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She posits that women are portrayed in this literature as a type of commodity who is desired and caught in between two male suitors. While it could seem like this would be an elevation of the woman, for she is so desirable, Sedgwick points out how it is really an elevation and celebration of the relationship between the two men. The woman becomes just a pawn in their “homosocial” community. This theory, thus, serves as a basis for my own approach and theorizing that will allow me to better enter into the authors’ worlds of representation as I analyze their works. The male characters that the authors represent subject the female protagonists to a process in which they re-assign the woman’s identity/subjectivity for their own purpose as they pursue a desired state of some sort. I center the analysis of these texts on the development and application of a theoretical model—the Triangle of Desire, to be discussed in Chapter 1—that positions the symbolic process as a mode of representation that is parallel to the process of construction of social identities. In this study, the methodology incorporates textual analyses organized around the two overarching themes of science and legality, and the examination of salient symbols that, in light of the
theoretical model, enable me to elucidate the authors’ representations of the construction of women’s identities within and against the hegemonic systems of legality and science.

These systems and their discourses are created to reify themselves, and they give very little opportunity for the outsider to enter, for the abused to have a voice, or for the oppressed to gain freedom. The far-reaching, unquestionable character of law and science creates spaces and justifications for acts of exclusion and abuse that are not innocent occurrences, but rather intentional, reductive acts of violent power relations carried out against women. The intentional oppression is met, in the authors I study, with intentional resistance and critique, as well as imagined realities of destabilizing gestures. These eight authors confront different impulses within the multifaceted, patriarchal system. They represent the process of the social construction of women’s identities and roles within that system that forces women into particular positions of subordination in patriarchal societies. In doing this, when considered in unison, their collective voice reveals the myriad structures and restrictions that lie within legality and science, exposing their contingent nature, and demystifying their unquestionable universality. By engaging with these structures from a close distance, they are able to subvert the restrictive hold they possess on women’s lived realities and project a future reality when women can claim subjectivity and agency.

**Significance of the Research**

Although research on the construction of women’s identities is quite extensive in the field of literary criticism, the focus on the use and abuse of science and legality as systems of knowledge production, societal control, and social construction of identities is
not as common in the field. These are, however, important systems to consider, especially given their reconfigured and pervasive role in Western society from the Enlightenment onward. Their impact has been equal to that of religion, politics, and nation building. I argue that there is room for deeper explorations of science and legality as constitutive of dominant notions of female identities and subjectivities. From this perspective, my work aims to add to the extensive body of research on the participation and representation of women in literature in Latin America over the last 50 years.

**Primary Texts**

When choosing these texts, I used three main criteria: 1) time - they fit in the time frame I want to examine, that is, the time of proliferation of female voices in Latin America from the late 1960s through present day; 2) theme - they deal with the social construction of female identity; and 3) focus - they represent female characters and poetic voices whose lives are directly affected by the abuses (whether explicit, implicit, imagined or realized) of the patriarchal practices and/or traditions of science and legality in Latin America.

**Relevant Literature**

Since the second wave of feminism and the Feminist Boom in Latin America, there has been a proliferation of research and critique devoted to the study of female authors and female representation through literature. The approaches to this research are varied, spanning the second and third waves of feminism, and not all of them are directly relevant to my dissertation. There are, however, works that are related closely enough to my focus and create, and even invite, a space for my topic. In this review of literature I will begin with works of literary criticism that relate to my dissertation, before engaging in a discussion of works outside the field of literary criticism that were influential in setting the framework for this investigation.

Before commenting on more contemporary texts, I want to include a foundational work in literary criticism with regard to the authorship of women: *A Room of Her Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf. Woolf’s speech-turned-book explores the very practical side of women having access to the pen, while also elaborating on the freedom that comes with authorship; not only for her (the author), but also for the women she is representing.
Woolf casts a vision of a future reality that the authors I include in this dissertation are living out in the latter half of the twentieth century. Her work is also of particular interest to my dissertation because of the narrator’s discussion of the inheritance she gained from her aunt when her aunt died tragically. This legal transaction—which resonates with my analysis of women and the legal system—provides the space within which Woolf can write and be free of a man’s opinion and power.

In the field of Latin American literature, literary critic Jean Franco’s *Plotting Women* (1989) is essential in any study of female authors from Mexico. Franco investigates the varying roles and effects of religion and nationalism in Mexico on women’s access to the pen and self-representation, from colonial times through the twentieth century. Both religion and the project of nation building are systems whose effects are played out on women’s lives in similar ways to science and legality: 1) they are totalizing within the society, and 2) as Franco shows, advancements for women made within these systems often have motives that serve the greater purpose of the hegemonic system. For instance, their right to be educated during the time of nation building had the end goal of pulling them away from the church and towards nationalist intellectual elitism.

Literary critic Juan Gelpí’s *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (1993) takes a political and cultural approach to investigating the restrictions that have been placed on the Puerto Rican canon, including the exclusion of many female authors. He argues that the canonical authors in Puerto Rico from the twentieth century, for the most part, long for a time before the US occupation that was marked by patriarchal fervor, a hierarchy of class and race, and a gender inequality that favored men. Within this canon of biased
nostalgia, women are not only denied a place for their own authorship, but the representation of women by the canonical authors is often two-dimensional as it strives to reinforce those patriarchal ideals. Gelpí touches on a sentiment that I would argue is shared by the Puerto Rican authors in my dissertation as these women aim to create a truer representation of the Puerto Rican woman, and to write their place in the canon, or reject the canon altogether.

Elisabeth Bronfen’s book *Over Her Dead Body* (1992) critiques the portrayal, primarily in art but also in literature, of the aesthetic of female death. In her first chapter she discusses the idea of the scientist’s gaze over the dead female body (Gabriel von Max’s *Der Anatom*) and how this gaze is two-fold: on one hand the scientist desires the body of the young dead woman for himself, he lusts after her, while on the other hand, he desires to dissect her, to cut into her perfect, lifeless body for the sake of his own understanding and his own authorship. Bronfen elaborates an insightful discussion of authorship and the price a woman has to pay for the men around her to realize their own identities. This work is incredibly useful to my dissertation; both to the theory I am devising, which I will expound later on, as well as to the analysis of the scientific gaze/desire/abuse of women.²

While there is much literary criticism that dialogues with, and creates a space for, my dissertation, there are also some important works from other fields of study that I will rely heavily upon for my analysis. This work centers on sociological and historical accounts of science and legality, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean.

² For other resources regarding this issue, see Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* (1986), and Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English’s *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1972).
Three key works inform my theoretical framework regarding science and legality. For the modern history and characteristics of science, I am drawing on Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963). In his book, Kuhn discusses the scientific system as a whole, what he calls “normal science,” as well as the points of vulnerability that allow for revolutions to take place within the institution and shift the paradigm that science sits on. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault discusses modern medical science from the time of the Enlightenment on, and how the change in medical science is indebted to social and cultural feelings and movements of that time. For the legal framework, I rely on J.M. Kelly’s *A Short History of Western Legal Theory* (1992), in which he traces the shift of law and legality from the time of monarchies, through the Enlightenment and into the modern era. His discussion of citizens and citizenship is of particular interest, as I will be discussing the discourse of the law as a point at which it can be reified, but also challenged and changed.

In terms of socioeconomic approaches, Edna Belén Acosta’s book *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History and Society* (1986) addresses the role of politics and labor laws in the lives of women, as well as the role of women in the Civil Rights movement. The discussion of Civil Rights is impossible without a discussion of legal subjectivity. Belén Acosta’s sociocultural and historical angle allows me to situate my literary discussion in the context within which these women were writing.

Similarly, Anna Macías’s book *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (1982) discusses legal classifications that are placed on women, both as citizens and as family members. Though Macías’s investigation covers developments until 1940, she paves the way for a deeper understanding of the laws and traditions that
women in Mexico were living in and women writers were reacting to in their works. As Macías discusses women’s struggles to gain the right to vote in Mexico, it’s clear that, once again, women played a role that was beneficial to the main political players of the day.

Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles’ “Subject People” and Colonial Discourses (1994) is an economic and social study on the construction of the laboring poor in Puerto Rico as criminals and “wayward” subjects under the control of the US in the beginning of the twentieth century. Santiago-Valles interrogates speech and discourse as primary tools of this identity construction, and he exposes the double standard that is employed by those in control of defining the “subjects.” His work informs my historical framework regarding the oppression of scientific discourse in the Puerto Rican context in Chapter 2.

Mimi Sheller’s Consuming the Caribbean (2003) takes a broad scale approach to depicting representation in the Caribbean in general, from the time of Columbus’s arrival to the “New World” through slavery, emancipation, and modern day practices of tourism, Caribbean banking, and the export of images and products from the region. In Sheller’s work, she touches on the representation and treatment not only of the people of the Caribbean, but of the land, flora and fauna, and identity of the region. She argues that the Caribbean as a whole has been codified and exported for Northern Atlantic pleasure, and the discourse of what the Caribbean actually is changes and morphs with the whims and pleasures of the Northern Atlantic people who are consuming it. This argument, although focused on a macro-social level, parallels my perspective on the politics of representation in the specific context of the construction of gendered identities in literary texts.
A Critical Approach to Science and Legality

What the selected authors uncover and give voice to in their writing, I argue, is the idea that the systems of science and legality have indeed provided the far-reaching, rarely questioned cloak beneath which oppression of women can be carried out, accepted, legitimized, and, at times, even applauded. For the purpose of this dissertation, science and legality systems provide the focus of analysis for three main reasons. First, because they are systems that penetrate all areas of society, affecting everyone regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic class. Though they are not the only societal structures that have this power, there is no doubt that science and legality affect all areas of life in a given culture (see Kuhn, 1963; Foucault, 1994; and Kelly, 1992). In reading literature by female authors from Latin America written in the second half of the twentieth century onwards, there is evidence of the writers’ strong sense of the pervasive influence that the hegemonic systems of science and legality have on every aspect of a woman’s life and on life in general.

Second, these two systems are generally treated, uncritically, as universal paradigms of rationality that are to be accepted as if on faith. As such, they are rarely questioned. They are, in fact, seen as good and necessary for the social order. The dawn of the Age of Enlightenment brought an entire paradigm shift when legality and science became central systems of knowledge and authority in Western culture, and with that shift came much centralized institutional power in these fields. Still, these are two systems that are pre-disposed to loopholes and manipulation at the service of the (male) dominant groups that control their operations.
This presents the third reason for locating science and legality as my focusing lenses. When surveying literature written by women from Latin America towards the end of the twentieth century, I noticed a common sense of skepticism among them with regards to the nature of these systems. I’ve drawn the texts I am analyzing in this dissertation from that greater pool of works. As these authors signal, though both science and legality have brought advancements that are undoubtedly positive for humankind, they have also been prone to areas of vulnerability for misuse that conveniently fall into the collective blind spot of the general public, precisely because of their unquestioned nature. Arguably, what many of these female writers depict is not the literal, historic abuse of the systems themselves (though that definitely does exist), but rather the potential for and realization of abuse carried out by way of the seemingly innocent, neutral, rational, and objective systems of science and legality. These authors don’t just focus on the overt use of power but, rather, on the subtle yet systematic control that science and legality exert on everyday life. It is within these widely accepted systems that abuse and gender violence can go unnoticed, unquestioned, and even condoned and reinforced.

Examining science and legality also allows us to delve even deeper into areas of crossover between them. There is much about the nature of science and legality that resonates one with the other: for example, the breadth of their reach and the profundity of their impact on the fabric of societies, as previously mentioned. We can see evidence of this in the story by Aponte Alsina that I cite at the beginning of this Introduction. Alberto’s heinous crimes against his family members go unpunished and, in effect, are un-punishable due to his status and privileges as a wealthy, educated man in a traditional
patriarchy. He is legally in a superior, more credible position than his sister Josefina, leaving her without recourse. Furthermore, the narrator tells us that Alberto keeps scientific books and writings about female sexuality, “pornografía disfrazada como ciencia,” which make him a “curioso con licencia” (Aponte Alsina 32). In a system that values the (male) scientific gaze, Josefina is thus doubly bound by her brother’s positionality and actions, and without the hope of relief from either system.

Still, in spite of areas of overlap, there exist some primary differences between the hegemonic institutions of legality and science that merit their own special examination. For instance, the law’s contingence on outside forces is far less transparent than that of science, since many of those outside forces necessarily fall into submission under the direct domain of the law. On the other hand, even though both are historically situated and conscious of their historicity, the relationship between these two systems and their respective histories differs greatly. While science must adapt to emerging research and justify past scientific thought, whether or not it fits within the bounds of the scientific enterprise at the current time, the law has written into itself the need to not only recognize, but adhere to past legal decisions, expressed in the concept of “precedence.” In this regard, the law presents a paradox: it is very difficult for changes to the law to come from outside of the legal system, but the very nature of the historical rootedness of the law makes it difficult for change to come from within, as well, for the law adheres to that which went before.

Chapter Layout
Chapter 1 is an exposition of my theoretical model, The Triangle of Desire, which relies significantly on Eve Sedgwick’s theorizations in her book *Between Men* (1985). The Triangle of Desire focuses on how women are objectified in order for the male subject to reassert his identity and power over women. As a mechanism by which this objectification occurs, I also include a discussion of the symbol as a literary device, informed primarily by Walter Benjamin, Mari Womack, and Idelber Avelar. The theorization on the symbol that I present holds the proposition that the signifier must pass through a process of metamorphosis of meaning in order to achieve symbolization. I approach that process of metamorphosis of meaning as a process of signification through which we can better understand the parallel process (the re-assignation of meaning) that women are subjected to at the hands of science and legality. Drawing on such theorizing, I aim to develop my original theoretical model about the process of reassigning meaning, akin to the symbolic process, that occurs in the construction of female identities.

Chapter 2 sets the historical and theoretical framework for legality and science that will inform the textual analysis. I trace scholarly discussions that deal with questions about the evolution of these systems since the Enlightenment, highlighting specific moments and characteristics that, I argue, the authors in this dissertation respond to in their works. For legality, I examine the legal subject and the discourse of the law. Both of these phenomena represent the law’s exclusive and oppressive nature, but also the law’s vulnerability to change. I also highlight some specific moments in the fight for women’s legal freedom in Latin America, as they provide context for understanding particular representations and reactions in the texts selected. For the scientific framework, I trace the history of the Enlightenment to chart the transition science took
from being peripheral to central, from incidental to formative in Western society. Although its newly fortified position in society was based upon rejecting the age-old metanarratives, it can be argued that science, itself, became a new type of metanarrative. In light of that, I also discuss Thomas Kuhn’s theory about scientific revolutions (1962) as a way of questioning, and broadening, the scientific enterprise. Lastly, I elucidate scientific discourse and the weight of proof that this discourse imposes. To close the chapter, I examine how the Triangle of Desire can serve as a way to analyze oppressive relations women face within the context of the law, legality, and science as exposed by the authors cited.

In Chapter 3, titled “Patriarchal Inheritances and Legitimate Lines,” I explore how authors engage that which is not only accepted under the law, but also unquestioned: the legitimate versus the illegitimate. The question of legitimacy takes us along lines of inheritances and lineages, lovers and spouses, illegitimate children, and family heirs. This side of the system of legality, which in some ways aligns more with tradition and the unwritten rules of society rather than with codified law at the time these authors were writing, is highlighted and questioned by Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla from Puerto Rico, and Gabriela Alemán from Ecuador. Ferré and Nolla represent the localized, personal and gendered effects that these unquestioned traditions and laws carry with them. Alemán, on the other hand, confronts the system on a broader level, showing the system’s universal effects on women.

While Chapter 3 deals with the unquestioned and the unquestionable in the legal and cultural realms, Chapter 4 addresses the forbidden and the legally taboo. In Chapter 4, titled “The Perverted Uncle,” I examine the blurred lines between family code and the
law. In examining this liminal space, I find that the taboo of incest can be, and is, concealed or written off by distorting, ignoring, or appropriating the legal system. For this analysis, I read closely “La Sunamita,” by Inés Arredondo, and Lenguaje de las orquídeas, by Adriana González Mateos, both Mexican authors, as they venture to speak the unspeakable and expose that which is forbidden.

In Chapter 5, “Motherhood, Menstruation, and Medicine: Two Poets’ Responses to Scientific Notions of Femaleness,” I enter into the realm of impossible societal expectations that are placed on the woman, looking at the cross-section between motherhood, menstruation, and medicine. Part of this scientific, deterministic discourse that persisted and, in some cases, began during the Enlightenment, switched the focus of hysteria from the lovesick male to the crazy woman, from a circumstantial insanity to an inherent one. I analyze two poems by Rosario Castellanos, “Se habla de Gabriel” and “Valium 10,” and three poems by Anjelamaría Dávila, “Ante tanta visión,” “déjenme sola,” and “Luna Cumplida,” for both of these poets confront that deterministic discourse and represent reality as the result of societal gendered expectations, while offering another explanation for the behavior of the twentieth-century woman.

In Chapter 6, titled “The Desire to Reproduce: Engendering Science Through Women,” I explore the symbolic dissection that happens to women as scientists expose and act upon their conflicting desires with regard to them: on one hand, there is a physical desire for the woman’s body, and on the other hand, there is an intellectual desire to reproduce science through the woman’s body. While both of these desires enact violence against the woman, they are not able to co-exist (Bronfen). As I posit, there is not much separation between the desire to understand and the need to control; the woman
becomes just another variable that the scientist controls in his quest for self-actualization and authorship. I focus on two works in this chapter, “La muñeca menor” by Rosario Ferré and The Agüero Sisters by Christina García, as they dissect this long-standing tradition of using the woman as a test subject in the name of science.

My conclusions and final discussions are presented in the last chapter of the dissertation. In the conclusion I review how, in the face of the seemingly impenetrable patriarchal notions regarding women in Latin America and the West, these eight authors choose to write. They are voices of not only their generation, but future generations as well, who expose the violence of patriarchy, carried out through the systems of science and legality, and they resist it; in some cases by just naming it and laying it bare, in other cases by actively deconstructing the system that has long tried to socially construct them as women. These authors dare to imagine a different future, and their writing paves the way for women to get there.
Chapter 1

The Triangle of Desire: A Theoretical Framework

Desires can be deceiving. The object of one’s affection is not always clearly defined, and the integrity of one’s intentions is not always as strong as it may seem. For centuries, women have found themselves caught in triangles of desire. As a point in those triangles, they are essential pieces to the particular game of desire in which they find themselves. As we will discover, however, the idea that women are always the object of affection, the focus of the desire, can be misleading, even when they appear to be at first glance.

Before discussing the ways in which women are caught up in, and made victims of, triangles of desire—an analysis that will be developed in the ensuing chapters of this dissertation—I would like to expound on a theory that I have formulated through and for this project regarding such triangles. My theoretical approach owes much of its inspiration to Eve Sedgwick’s theorizing in Between Men (1985). I also take into account various conceptualizations of the symbol as a mode of representation, influenced primarily by the work of Walter Benjamin, Mari Womack, and Idelber Avelar. In these conceptualizations, the symbolized object must pass through a process of metamorphosis of meaning in order to achieve symbolization. I approach that process (the metamorphosis of meaning) as a process of signification through which we can better understand the subsequent process (the re-assigning of meaning) that women are sometimes subjected to at the hands of such systems as science, legality, and the men who wield them.
Drawing on such theorizing, in this chapter I aim to present my original theory about the process of reassigning meaning, akin to the symbolic process, that occurs in the construction of identities.

**Three-Pointed Desires: A Theoretical Base**

In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick expounds on René Girard’s idea that desire takes the shape of a triangle. In such a model, a man’s pursuit of a woman is as much based on his competition with his rival suitor as it is based on his desire for the woman herself. In fact one could argue that the point of connection between the two male rivals (their side of the triangle) is stronger than the point of connection between either of the men and the woman (21). This dynamic tension is part of what Sedgwick conceptualizes as homosocial desire. Sedgwick describes this phenomenon as the continuum that encompasses “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). She notes that this continuum for men should include homosexuality as well as “male bonding,” but there is a disruption in the continuum for men, as much male bonding is often marked by homophobia (1). In either case, for Sedgwick, a holistic understanding of homosocial desire refers to “men’s relations with other men” (2). These relations are intended to promote men’s interests in the society (3). Still, in spite of that, a woman is necessary in the triangular relation because if it weren’t for the woman, the men’s connection would be non-existent or a moot point at best: “no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (1).

In Sedgwick’s book, she signals how Girard has also conceptualized triangular desires in his work entitled *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961). Girard, in fact, is the
one who claims that the link between the two rivals is stronger, or in Sedgwick’s words, “more heavily determinant of actions and choices,” than the bond between either of the rivals and the woman (21). That is, perhaps, the strongest point of agreement between Sedgwick and Girard’s theorizing before Sedgwick expounds on their differences. Importantly, Sedgwick breaks with what she dubs Girard’s “transhistorical clarity,” or the symmetry of his triangle (22). The symmetry that Sedgwick notes in Girard’s triangle rests on his assumption that the three points could be easily substituted by subjects of either gender, “in the sense that its structure would be relatively unaffected by the power difference that would be introduced by a change in gender of one of the participants” (Sedgwick 23). In order to resist this line of thinking, Sedgwick proposes approaches that take into account the distribution of power in a given society, in addition to the “radically disrupted continuum” between sexual and non-sexual male bonds, and the ways that can affect the shape of a triangle of desire (23). She also urges her readers, knowing the existing argument for transhistorical clarity, to engage tools for historical measure (22).

This is an important distinction for Sedgwick to make, and it holds true for my own theory as well. Because of the dynamics of gendered power and knowledge production, it is almost impossible to assume that two women could be in the powerful, active position of rivals in the triangular desire. The woman’s role is often predetermined (Sedgwick 21). I would maintain that if she were ever able to assume that

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3 Sedgwick’s theory also extends to question the symmetry of triangular desire with respect to non-heteronormative subjects as well, who, given the moment in history that one might study, have also lacked access to systems of power and knowledge production. This won’t play a role in my dissertation, but it is another important point of departure from Girard’s symmetrical triangle and worth further investigation.
position of power in the triangular relation, she would, at most points in history, have to
do so by embracing a patriarchal method; by assuming the role and actions of the male.
History has left very little space for women to enact a power that is truly female. While
the Triangle of Desire that I propose could most certainly expose a male victim and/or a
female perpetrator, the fact that the historical context, and the continuing gender power
imbalance, has not afforded women, collectively, the power needed to exert this type of
control means that the abuse that is illuminated by the Triangle of Desire is less plausible
for a woman to enact. The systems, like those of science and legality, are stacked against
her.

Sedgwick’s triangle is, for the most part, spatial and emotional. It speaks of the
distance, physically and relationally, between the three participants: two men coming
together to fight for a woman; one man drawing close, physically, to the wife of another
in order to spite him, etc. It is also spatial insofar as the men in question, the rivals, are in
a play of positioning for hierarchical advantage. Though the shape of the game is a
triangle, the attempt, socially, is to gain vertical ground. The woman finds herself
wedged between the two men who are vying for her affection, vying for the right to claim
her as their own and, perhaps most importantly, vying for the right to be able to publicize
the conquest.

Using this idea as a model, I would argue that a different triangle of desire exists
as well. My triangle is a point of departure from Sedgwick’s. Not spatially situated, this
proposed triangle is instead temporal. In the place of three total subjects, that is, two
parties struggling for social status, symbolized in the possession of another person, this
triangle supposes just two people whose interactions are spread out over the course of
time. Instead of “between men,” the woman finds herself between moments and desires (both latent/frustrated and realized) in the life of one man (or entity, for they need not only be men or only be human). Much like Sedgwick, my triangle is a critical tool to uncover the modes of establishing the male’s masculinity. It also, however, has a strong focus on the female’s constructed identity, showing how the two are not only in relation to each other but also intimately tied together in lock step, with the establishment of the male’s masculinity fully dependent on the female’s constructed identity. Similarly, my triangle doesn’t take into account social status, but rather societal permissions that perpetuate such behavior.

Thus, the three sides of the triangle are constituted by three different processes of identity construction (of the female) and identity reification (of the male): 1) the woman is displaced from the plane of subjectivity by way of the destabilizing of her subjectivity and identity (the metamorphosis of meaning mentioned above); 2) the woman’s identity is re-assigned to fit the need of the man; and 3) the man’s identity is reified by way of his realized desire. The woman, having been re-signified, is the point that connects the moments in the life of the man, eventually facilitating the realization of the man’s initial latent desires. As such, she gives the man a continuity with himself (the strongest side of the triangle) that she herself does not have, reinforcing his identity while seeing her own fall by the wayside.

The focus of my theorization is on the representation of male-dominated relations that intentionally oppress women through objectifying and destabilizing the woman’s subjectivity and agency. That isn’t to say that every act of constructing female identities is intentional. My focus is on the instances of social relations in which there is intent,
and a means for carrying out that intent. These relations are centered on a temporal
desire (i.e. a desire whose realization can only be enacted over time), and their locus is
situated, at first, in the man’s identity and self-actualization. The desire is internal, but its
realization, over the course of time, lies in the body and subjectivity of the woman,
leading to the destabilization and re-assignment of her meaning.

Consider the following diagram of my proposed Triangle of Desire:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1**

In this formulation, a woman is the necessary point of connection between the man’s
frustrated state of latent desires, and his fulfilled state when his desires are realized.
Without the woman, he would indeed move along the temporal plane, but his latent
desires would remain unfulfilled. In this model, the man’s identity is not static, existing
in one fixed locus in time; the man’s current identity relies on his future self. Though
time is always progressing, and the man is clearly not in two temporal moments at once,
the connection between the man in his frustrated state, and the man in his fulfilled state is
actually the strongest, similar to Sedgwick’s triangle. In this case, the man destabilizes
the woman’s identity, displacing her from the plane of subjectivity, only to reassign her
meaning in a way that allows him to use her in the realization of his desire. As the man
fulfills his desire, he reinforces his former self and validates his former desires, reifying
his overall identity. Even before realizing his latent desires, the connection with, and pursuit of, his desired state of fulfillment is still the driving force in his actions and the strongest side of the triangle. It is that connection that propels the relationship with the woman, since the woman is just the necessary vehicle for realizing the man’s desired state and reinforced identity into existence. This is a dangerous foreshadowing for the woman, however, since the man “constitutes himself as surviving, analysing and writing subject only in relation to the other dead objects” (Bronfen 8; emphasis added).

Because of that, the woman cannot bridge the gap between the man’s latent and realized desires if she is to exist on the temporal plane, which can be read as the plane of subjectivity, akin to what Jacques Lacan dubs the Symbolic Order. If she were to remain there, she too would have desires to realize, goals to achieve, a life to live, and texts to author. As a point on that plane she would, quite literally, get in his way. Instead she must be displaced from that plane before she can enable, albeit unwillingly, the man in his pursuit.

The act of displacing a subject from the plane of subjectivity is in no way easy and in no way accidental, whether enacted symbolically by way of representation, or through social practices. It must necessarily be a deliberate action that is meticulously planned, even if it appears innocent, for it aims to achieve and sustain two contrasting, yet harmful, realities: 1) destabilizing the person’s subjectivity (their sense of identity), while 2) keeping that subject physically alive. It is like a death, though a death is much less complicated (obviously, not less traumatic) in that it eliminates both the being and the physical body at once. Destabilizing a person’s subjectivity, on the other hand, requires a re-signification of the subject; rewriting the old meaning of who they were with a new
meaning which is necessary in order to accomplish the man’s self-serving plan and secure his desire. The end result of this destabilizing gesture is a subject who eats, breathes, and lives, but whose meaning is determined by someone else. This new identity does not reflect the subject’s independent sense of self, but it does now define her to others. It is only when that is achieved that the female identity can be appropriated for the use and fulfillment of the man’s desire. Elisabeth Bronfen notes how, in art, depicting the dead body becomes a “signifier for the survival of the gazing and painting artist” (48). Furthermore, “the production of signs the corpse will in turn engender are his (the artist/author) own writings” (6). An example of this, that I will examine in Chapter 6, is the character of the natural scientist Ignacio, from Christina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*, who maintains that one has to kill something in order to understand it; haunting words when the reader discovers he has, indeed, killed his enigmatic wife.

The fulfillment of this symbolic death is often articulated through social systems, domains of knowledge production, and logics that rationalize and justify male domination and female subjugation. I argue that the authors I analyze in this dissertation demonstrate how science and legality can provide both the means and the justification for this process to occur. As systems of knowledge production and practice, science and legality enable cultural and societal constructions of identities based on appropriation of female subjectivities. I will discuss some of the unique characteristics of science and legality as domains of knowledge and practice that lead to their propensity to engender oppression in Chapter 2.

*The Symbol and its Functions*
In art and literature, theorizations of the symbol prove relevant to the discussion of female identity construction. According to the *English Oxford Dictionaries*, a symbol is defined as “A thing that represents or stands for something else” (“Symbol”). This “standing in for” something else, however, encompasses myriad other conditions and qualifications that also define a symbol. The dictionary definition adds that a symbol is often derived from something material that comes to represent something abstract. Lastly, the definition notes that there is a distinction between the value and identity of that which is symbolized, and the symbol itself. In her book *Symbols and Meaning* (2005), Mari Womack adds: “the meaning of symbols is arbitrary. That is, the meaning of a particular symbol is culturally assigned rather than inherent in the symbol” (5). She argues that while “symbols appear to be ‘logical’ or ‘natural,’ the selection of attributes to be symbolically emphasized is culturally determined” (6).

In the case of the transition from a material subject to an abstract identity, a symbol opens up the original (material) object to infinite meanings, no longer just one fixed meaning. Womack explains this phenomenon when discussing the nuance between a sign and a symbol:

The sign ∞ indicates that the topic under consideration has no numerical limitation. On the other hand, the image of ouroboros, the snake swallowing its tail, also conveys the concept of infinity, but in this case, the infinity referred to has no finite designation [. . . ] it is a concise expression of concepts that cannot be stated precisely. (3)

The unfixed, imprecise meaning of a symbol signals a propensity for it to change or be reinterpreted. Taking this feature of the symbol as a mode of representation in my
theoretical model of the Triangle of Desire, I posit that once a woman is removed from the plane of subjectivity, she can also be opened to an infinite number of meanings or significations, resisting a “univocal interpretation” (Saporiti 21). I propose that in following the logic of symbolization and the metamorphosis of meaning that must happen for a symbol to be constituted, we will be able to see the intentional process that is employed, both in literary representation and in lived experience, to successfully destabilize a woman’s subjectivity. The Triangle of Desire thus helps analyze the representational practices by which the woman is subjugated.

A symbol is also peculiar because it seems to embody a reversal of the order of the natural world. This natural flow can be described as such: intangible thought to audible word to tangible reality. We see this flow of the natural order in a number of different fields. The Bible tells us: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” If we read on, we see that He did this by conceiving and then speaking the heavens and earth into existence (English Standard Version, Genesis 1:1-27). In the field of philosophy, Jacques Derrida posits that meaning is deferred as words and meanings bounce back and forth between objects and through time. The flow of the word/meaning/understanding is essential for the object to exist and be known. Furthermore, it is commonly accepted that the written word doesn’t just represent the reality of the tangible world; it projects it. A symbol, on the other hand, represents an alternate process: it takes the object from tangible reality to conceived idea to constructed identity, which is then captured in a word or image.

Still, in spite of its divergence from the natural order, the aim of making the tangible intangible isn’t a new pursuit. Derrida points out how since the epoch of the
ancient philosophers, there has been a quest to understand and dominate within the mind that which is tangible and material. The realm of metaphysics is vast and at times has held a central position in our world. In this logocentric model, that which the mind can conceive of, an idea, is the purest, finest state in which something can exist. “That tradition sought a basis for determining truth in the operations of the mind or *logos*. The mind’s ability to grasp the presence of an object or of an idea was the gold standard of truthfulness” (Rivkin & Ryan 300). From the moment that an idea is spoken and/or carried out into practice, the idea becomes stained and imperfect. If it is written down, it becomes even more imperfect. As Derrida explains, in writing the idea becomes “a mediation of a mediation” (qtd. in Rivkin & Ryan 308). The moment the idea leaves the mind it becomes tainted and susceptible to any and possibly all things tangible.

It is one thing to value an idea above all materiality, but this line of thought would actually aim to take the material and change it into an idea: “In a symbol, Hegel argues, the reabsorption of the conceptual element into its aesthetic actualization is such that the separation between the two [. . .] is bridged” (Avelar 6). And what’s more, as noted above, the desire to attain that conceived idea becomes justified. In the case of the ancient philosophers, it is justified by the moral value assigned to it of being more truthful than it’s tangible counterpart. The integrity of this idea becomes compromised, however, when you realize that the person defining what is more truthful is often the force behind the process in the first place. It is in no way a disinterested act.

In order for something that is material to become an abstract idea, as the definition of a symbol states, it must pass through a process of transformation; for how else can that which is fit into the mind to become that which is conceived? The process of
symbolization (i.e. the process of re-assigning significance, from now on referred to as the process) that I am proposing provides one such avenue. In the course of passing through the process, an object must be subjected to a metamorphosis of some kind: the material object must enter a death-like state and/or have its true identity fall into oblivion while still maintaining its physical form. This death, though not a homicide, is still very violent. Bronfen shows how authoring a body into a text leads the author, as a spectator, to focus on the signifiers rather than on the subject they are depicting and re-writing. To do this, to focus “on the aesthetic rendition of violence severed from any real body, makes one blind to the concrete physicality of someone else’s dying” (47). It requires an active, intentional erasure of the identity that once existed. Walter Benjamin comments on this essential characteristic of a symbol when he notes: “in the symbol destruction is idealized.” He posits “the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption” (166).

**The Appeal of the Symbolic Process**

Some of the best examples of this metamorphosis (enabled by the death of the object’s original identity) can be found in poetry. In Gabriela Mistral’s poem “Pan,” for example, the loaf of bread that is sitting on the kitchen table quickly transforms as it opens a passageway into the poetic voice’s past. Within a couple of verses, the reader is not even cognizant of the bread, as it has come to represent something else. “Dejaron un pan en la mesa / [ . . . ] pero volteando su miga, sonámbula,/tacto y olor se me olvidaron. / Huele a mi madre cuando dio su leche” (Mistral 137). Having passed through the
symbolic process, the original loaf of bread has been lost and has become intangible; it has become memory, maybe even nostalgia, but not bread.

The appeal of the symbolic process can perhaps be attributed, in part, to the allure of the infinite. Something material is bound in both time and space. It can never transcend its intrinsic expiration date. On the other hand, the intangible can escape the confines to which the material world must submit. “The symbol privileges timeless, eternalized images;” it represents the endless present (Avelar 4). The control of the symbolic process that a poet such as Mistral exercises opens up the tangible world for her appropriation. What she produces with her words will then live on, even after the inspiration for those words, and indeed the author herself, have passed. As far as we know, Mistral’s pen is capable of transforming anything material into an abstract idea or existence. And in doing so, she increases understanding of the world. These transformations, poetic or not, can come to shift the entire paradigm on which the original object sat. The flag of a country, for instance, will possibly never again be thought of as just a piece of cloth. That particular piece of cloth has been forever changed and immortalized as any number of ideas: nation, patriotism, oppression, identity, and so on, but not cloth.

On the other hand, it is arguable that the appeal of the symbolic process – when one has no intention (or isn’t in the business) of actually symbolizing something – can be attributed to a desire for control, rather than a genuine desire for understanding. It would be, in essence, reclaiming an idea (or a person’s identity) that was not theirs to begin with, placing oneself in the position of a god. As the tangible morphs into the abstract, and the possibilities for signification are opened into perpetuity, it goes without saying
that the one who controls the process would control the new meaning(s) as well: “the
texts the anatomist will produce as a result of this experience of death signify both the
corpse and his inscription of it” (Bronfen 12). The one who subjects the woman to this
life-draining process is the same one who will assign the new signification to the
“corpse” that is left.

**Separable, Inherent Values vs. a Natural Association of Meaning**

Though almost no one will look at a flag and lament the cloth’s loss of its former
meaning (or that of a loaf of bread, for that matter), this process can have extensive
repercussions when applied to a human subject. The abstract idea will begin to absorb
and even devour the identity of the subject that once was; leaving, at best, only traces of
the subject. The construct, therefore, transcends not only time and space but also
transcends its own material source, fixing a new paradigm in which to place the tangible,
now made intangible.

This paradigm shift indicates an explicit fissure between the original subject’s
sense of self and the new meaning ascribed to them. As we see in the definition of a
symbol, the connection between the two is not intuitive or naturally occurring. This is
ture even if, after some time, the original subject and the constructed idea begin to be

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4 It is important to note that a subject’s identity is constructed in the crucible of
(patriarchal) society, whether someone intentionally enacts this construction or not.
From the womb, there are norms that are exerted over a subject’s identity which lie
outside of her control (this is actually true for male and other gender identities
as well). The process that I propose doesn’t assume a subject who has had complete
control of their identity up until the point of oppression that is revealed by the Triangle of
Desire. Rather, I highlight a moment in which the subject, constructed as their identity
already is, goes through an intentional re-assigning of her meaning, separating her even
further from her sense of self.
seen as synonymous. As Avelar describes, the symbol rounds “up a closed totality in which image and meaning, sign and concept are indistinguishably unified” (6). In this transformation, the human subject is taken beyond objectification to conceptualization; a person made construct, or idea. Though in poetry this abstract idea opens up the symbolized object to exciting and endless definitions, that infinite horizon of possibility is much more of a threat when a subject is conceptualized and re-signified in that same way. Instead of controlling its own heterogeneous plurality of meanings, the subject is trapped by the process in the homogeneous confines of the one who originally subjected them to that process. The possibility of meaning is at once shifted into the control of the other. As such, the original subject becomes a type of intellectual property of the mind behind its transformation, coming into being by their doing, and adopting a new meaning only when they so choose.

The dangers that lie in this transformation are manifold. The longer the identity of a subject is portrayed as something different than what it is, outside observers will begin to believe that the abstract idea is, in fact, biologically or naturally determined. When this type of determinism occurs, and even onlookers accept the newly constructed identity as unquestioned and unquestionable, then the process would seem to be complete; the subject’s original identity passes away into oblivion, along with any future versions of itself that could have been. Just as the identity of the original object must be erased either by death or complete amnesia, the subjectivity transformed by the process passes through this type of total erasure every time someone believes that the constructed idea is the subject’s original self. It can then lead to a perpetual death in life for the subject. In the context of the Triangle of Desire, when this happens the female subject is
forced farther and farther into the confines of her intangible state and definition, distancing her even more from her independent sense of self. Alternatively, when the man achieves that connection between his latent and fulfilled desires, his identity is, in fact, reinforced and his motives reified.

Conclusion

I believe that the Triangle of Desire is a tool that will allow us to better enter into the authors’ worlds of representation as we analyze their works. The male characters that they represent force the female protagonists through a process in which they re-assign the woman’s identity/subjectivity for their own purpose as they pursue a desired state of some sort. My claim is that the authors I research draw attention to this process – that is enacted time and time again against the woman – in order to highlight it, and in highlighting it, to confront it and destabilize it as well. As Idelber Avelar notes when writing about memory in post-dictatorship Latin America in the introduction to his book *The Untimely Present*, “the vanquished, those who were defeated so that today’s market could be implemented, cannot afford to have their tradition relegated to oblivion” (2). This is true for the identities of the female characters I will analyze in this dissertation.

Like any type of systematic oppression, this process of re-assigning the meaning of a subject is complex and can take various forms. The different authors I study approach it, represent it, and confront it in a variety of ways; some, like Inés Arredondo, confront it by suggesting it and portraying its adverse effects; others, like Rosario Ferré, show how the patriarchal system has crucial blind spots that make it vulnerable for a subversive attack, and then they attack it; still others, like Gabriela Alemán, subvert it by
laughing at the short-sightedness of the system that man has set in place with humor and sarcasm. Regardless of the method, the authors I study here know full well that the process of re-assigning the female’s meaning is not innocent or harmless. It cannot be ignored; it must be named.

My theoretical model is based on patterns of representation and discursive tactics I observed in the works I am analyzing by female authors, as well as other critical sources. My argument is that the Triangle of Desire can be used as an analytical tool to trace the representation of patriarchal patterns of oppression that the authors I examine evoke in their work and see play out in the world around them. When writing of the fight against patriarchy, Celia Amorós notes: “given that the power of patriarchy is to make itself invisible, we have to assume the burden of proving it exists” (110). As such, I argue that the aim of these authors is, in part, to expose, depict, and name that oppressive pattern, and at times to break it down altogether.

It is also important to point out that while my theoretical model is seemingly fatalistic at points, as I conceptualize the potential full extent of the harm that can be done within the Triangle of Desire, this process is not always carried out to the full extent of the man’s desire. What’s more, when it is carried out as such, it is not necessarily final or irreversible, namely because of the blind spots and vulnerabilities that often plague patriarchy’s oppressive schemes. In its most basic form, this theory is meant to shine light on one of the ways that men in a patriarchal society act and manipulate certain systems, like law and science, for their own gain. But I also propose it as a way to show how these authors confront patriarchal patterns and break down this triangular cycle from
within, at the very least exposing it for what it is while also, in many cases, returning agency to their protagonists.
Chapter 2

Hegemonic Systems in Patriarchal Societies:

Theoretical and Historical Context for Science and Legality in the West and Latin America

There are specific systems of knowledge production, discursive domains, and institutional practices that strengthen and legitimize dominant patriarchal notions and ideals that perpetuate patriarchy’s hold in society. Legality and science are two such systems heavily embedded in Western society. Their reach is both deep and wide, affecting everyone across gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic bounds. These two systems are perhaps some of the most pervasive in any given society. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical and historical contextualization that informs my approach to both legality and science as a way of situating the literary analyses in the forthcoming chapters, where I explore the engagements that the selected authors establish with them.

This chapter is divided into two over-arching sections: 1) a framework for the history and theory of legality in the West, and 2) a framework for the history and theory of science in the West. In both of these sections, I discuss some central tenets and markers of these systems, placing the Age of Enlightenment as a key historical point of reference. The Enlightenment marks a significant turning point for both legality and science in the modern era. The term legality does not refer here to the formal judicial branch of a government and the goings on within it but, rather, to ideas and ideals of legality, legitimacy, and rights that exist both in written code and unwritten tradition. The spirits of rational thought and revolt against the pre-modern narratives of the Church and monarchical systems of government carried enormous implications for legality and
science, and in many ways that spirit still exists today, albeit in varied forms. Furthermore, it seems fitting to have the Enlightenment as a point of comparison for what these authors are doing. Just like many thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, these authors are rebelling against the conventional wisdom of the age. The irony, however, is that in calling for their own sort of revolution, these authors are breaking with some of the revolutionary changes in thought and practice that were carried on by and/or instituted during the Enlightenment. I conclude this chapter with commentary on the need to engage literary analysis in the confrontation of the very practical, tangible effects of legality and science in a patriarchal society.

My frameworks for these two systems are in no way meant to be comprehensive. This is a literary analysis and, as such, the thrust of the discussion focuses on literary approaches. That being said, this chapter is meant to give a broad context in order to facilitate the understanding of the dominant social systems and ideologies within which the authors, at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, were writing. I also touch on some specific socio-historical scenarios in Latin America, where the invasive reach of either legality or science showed itself to be abusive, oppressive, and harmful. I will provide additional contexts for the theory and practice of science and legality within the analytical chapters as they fit with and enhance discussion of the theme of each chapter.

**The Legal Framework**

The system of legality, in general, is institutionalized and all encompassing. This hegemonic system has provided advancements that bring both liberation and reductive
restrictions, as the “law limits as well as enables political and social reform” (Bartlet 2). However, as untouchable as the system of legality can seem, the law, as an institution, can be questioned. The law is not completely autonomous from the context in which it is situated; it can be molded, flexed, and changed. The paradox is that, because of the social character of the legal system, when citizens and subjects under the law demand change, those changes almost always must come by way of the law itself. This is necessary, for if the law does not condone the changes, then they would fail to be accepted as legal, and would, therefore, not be binding throughout the entirety of the law’s jurisdiction. As we discuss some of the unique characteristics and history of the law in this chapter, it is necessary to keep in mind: first, that the law is, by its very nature, contingent and not autonomous, and second, that the authors we will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 are engaging with that nature and exposing the ability and need for the law to be molded, flexed, and changed. They are, in fact, some of the change-makers.

In this section I propose to 1) expound on certain unique characteristics of the law and legal history, as I explore the historical moment that brought traditional systems of law into the modern era. I will then 2) discuss the idea of the legal subject in the modern era. This is necessary in any discussion about the demand for legal change since the definition of the legal subject is often a point at which the law is brought into question. I will go on to 3) discuss specific legal moments with significant impact on women in Mexican and Puerto Rican history that have highlighted that tension of the classification of subjects. Lastly, I will 4) discuss why the Triangle of Desire is a useful instrument in analyzing the primary literary texts.
A Historical View of Legality

In order to understand the ways in which the legal system has opened itself up to being appropriated for oppressive uses, it is necessary to examine the historical trajectory of lawmaking, leading to its manifestation in the twentieth century. Historically, the law has existed in various forms for millennia. In the modern era, the understanding of the legal system passed through a moment of metamorphosis during the eighteenth century. J.M. Kelly, in his book *A Short History of Western Legal Theory* (1992), notes that it is during the eighteenth century when “ancient European structures of authority and legitimacy were irreparably fractured by the French and American Revolutions” (244).

These revolutions took place within, and as a result of, the Enlightenment. This new way of thinking, inaugurated by the Enlightenment, “prepared the ground” for such political revolutions by philosophically equipping those who led them (Kelly 244). In terms of impact, though, Kelly notes that the Enlightenment was even more important than the revolutions:

> Even to call the Enlightenment a ‘movement’ may be misleading, it was more a shared mood or temper, or attitude to the world, in which the dominant note was one of profound skepticism towards traditional systems of authority or orthodoxy (especially those of religion), and a strong faith in the power of human reason and intelligence to make unlimited advances in the sciences and techniques conducive to human welfare. (249-50; emphasis added)

Indeed part of the Enlightenment’s strength lay in the very fact that it was, in many ways, founded upon intangible values and principles, allowing it to transcend historic movements and moments.
The Enlightenment represented an entire paradigm shift of thought on a massively broad scale. Long-standing traditions were “replaced with simple rules that were based on reason and natural law” (Kelly 251). It was during this time, in fact, that the relativist idea that laws should be, and indeed are, contingent rather than conformed to a pre-established universal code began to circulate (Kelly 251). This contingency stood as the basis for questioning pre-existing systems, as it still does today. In order to question those systems, however, the thinkers of the Enlightenment did not “work within the system,” as Bartlett claims is now necessary. Rather, they attempted to throw all established order out, “willing to sacrifice traditions with a history of a thousand years to the mere theories of the day” (Kelly 251).

One of the main results of this enlightened impulse was a reappraisal of the classification of who constitutes a subject and what constitutes a government. These terms were reconsidered, as was the relationship between the two. Discarding monarchical and hierarchical approaches, different models of this new, re-envisioned relationship between subject and government came about, many of them being collective in their approach. All of them, however, rested on the principle that subjects should have some measure of power within the governing system in which they live. These new projected visions for the functioning of the government had everything to do with the subjects’ legal rights. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s “Social Contract Model” was widely accepted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When speaking of this model, Austrian professor Karl Anton von Martini specifies that “by their contract of submission [. . . ] the people do not surrender their rights finally, nor does their appointment of their
ruler entitle him to exercise any more power than is necessary for the social purpose he is charged with achieving” (qtd. in Kelly 255).

This proposed system of interactions between citizens and government represented a two-way flow between the two entities. Unlike the divine rule of monarchs, in this modern system the ruler came to that position by the citizens’ appointment, and exercised his power for the citizens’ established purpose. There were checks and controls that could be exercised by both. No doubt, the law, at this moment, passed through a filter of equality previously unseen. This did not destroy positions of power, but it did bring the two previously polar ends of citizens and aristocracy within the social strata closer to each other. In this model, one such citizen could not only decide upon that power, but could also possibly come into such a position itself. It was a significant historical step towards social equality and Western democracy. Whereas before the Enlightenment, monarchs and the religious elite often held unquestioned control and power over the people, now the people had a voice. The problem, of course, had to do with the limitations on who legally fit into the group labeled “the people.”

*Defining the Legal Subject*

This newly envisioned system of government sparked an entire discourse centered on the formation of the (democratic) state. Kelly notes that for Immanuel Kant, state formation is “the act by which a people constituted itself into a state as an original contract, in virtue of this contract each individual surrendered his external freedom, so as then to resume it again as a member of the commonwealth, i.e., of the total community considered as a state” (258). In this conceptualization of the state, the legislative power
belonged to the collective will of the people. The limiting factor, again, had to do with the definition of who constituted the people. According to Kant, the subjects were defined as “persons of independent economic substance” (Kelly 258). This, of course, excluded any poor or wage-earning man, and it also excluded anyone who, legally, could not own property like women, minors, and many of the ethnically diverse groups. This left these certain groups of people stuck in a perpetual paradox: it was by force of the law that these groups could not own property or attain independent wealth which, consequentially, kept them from enjoying legal status or a legitimate role within that very legal system.

The irony of a newly founded system of equality that could, in turn, deem certain subjects as unequal reverberated throughout the years, and the effects are still palpable today. What was established in place of the traditional society was an unquestionable (or hard to question) era of legal patriarchy. Celia Amorós describes this phenomenon:

Patriarchy tends to implant wider and wider spaces of equals who are equals insofar as, as family heads, they control women as a whole [...] Historian Viana Müller has pointed out how, when state societies first institutionalized patriarchy, the rulers literally designed men as family heads (imposing their control over women and offspring) in return for their giving some of the tribal resources to the new rulers. Fathers make each other Fathers. (112).

The contract, as Rousseau called it, or the pact, as Amorós refers to it, was universal as long as it was extended to men (of a certain ethnicity and social standing). While it was definitely an advance for democracy, and an open door for future advances, the post-Enlightenment woman found her inferior legal position codified in new ways.
The Discourse of the Law

Not unlike other hegemonic systems, legality constitutes a practice as well as a discourse. The law is wholly dependent on language, and while it is a system that intrinsically resists change, one of the main entry points through which change can be made manifest is precisely through the discourse of the law.

While the image of the law presents itself as being unbiased, objective, and general, the legal discourse itself is an entry point for questioning and potentially destabilizing its bias. One method that has been implemented to question the law is that of post-structural deconstruction, “a process of examining allegedly neutral, universal concepts and principles to expose their constructed, contingent nature and the power relations lurking behind them” (Bartlett 9). Those questioning the law often employ the very thing that allows for their oppression, discursive strategies, in an attempt to redefine terms and language in order to enact change from within.

It’s important to note that since the revolutionary moment of the Enlightenment, many groups of people have found themselves outside the definition of legal subject, their status being denied either blatantly or through caveats in legal discourse. As a question of scale, this dissertation focuses solely on women; but that is not to say women are the only demographic affected. While the scope here is limited, there is no doubt that struggles led by different groups for human rights in Western democracies have overlapped and even reinforced each other in their respective fights.5

The Law in Latin America

5 An example might be the support of gay rights in Argentina by those who witnessed or experienced the general denial of rights during the Dirty War of the ‘80s.
Kant espoused his views on the exclusion of women from legal citizenship in Europe and western society at the end of the eighteenth century. The reality of women’s legal limitations in citizenship, however, persisted in Western societies well into the twentieth century. Though obviously not an absolute marker of women’s rights, the right to vote implies a legal affirmation of the citizenship status of women. It represents a chance for women to have a shaping voice on their country’s life, and therefore serves as one important indicator of legal change for women. While the right to vote does not mark the inception of the female voice and her participation in society, it is the moment that her voice gains a broad scale legal validity that she was previously denied. In this section I will examine that moment of change in Latin America, as well as tangential efforts for the rights of women in Mexico and Puerto Rico as a representation of the region at large.

The right for women to vote was established at different times in different countries within Latin America. Kathryn A. Sloan gives a chronology of important dates for women in Latin America in her book *Women’s Roles in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2011): Ecuador was the first Latin American country to grant all women the vote in 1929. That is the same year that Puerto Rico granted the right to vote to literate women, opening that status up to all women in 1936 (Acosta-Belén 8). Mexico, coincidentally, didn’t grant women the right to vote until 1946, one of the last Latin American countries to do so. What’s more, women didn’t actually get to vote in a major election in Mexico until 1954, receiving full political rights as citizens in 1958 (Macías 145). This statistic, however, though very important, is not fully representative of the
efforts or progress of the fight for legal status for women in Mexico during the turn, and the beginning, of the twentieth century.

*Legal Rights for Women in Mexico*

Anna Macías speaks to this point in her book *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (1982). On one hand, she notes that suffrage movements didn’t start in Mexico until much later than in other countries because of the “long rule of Porfirio Díaz” (Macías 152). His was a rule that lasted over thirty years and presented further issues and turmoil that were centered more on class rather than gender, and took precedence over the feminist struggle. The oppressive force of the *Porfiriato* was played out on a socioeconomic/class level and felt by both men and women alike. On the other hand, Macías observes how Mexicans were forerunners for women’s movements at the start of the twentieth century, in spite of their late start. Throughout her book, she draws attention to the isolated incidences when women fought for, and gained, the right to vote in certain local elections. Early feminists, led by Hermila Galindo de Topete, were claiming their voice, and finding an audience who wanted to listen. Furthermore, it was in the 1930s, when other countries were granting women the right to vote, that Mexican women had the verbal support of President-elect Lázaro Cárdenas.

In his 1935 message to the nation, Cárdenas “recognized the ‘right of Mexican working women to vote and enjoy other privileges of citizenship’” (Macias 141). In his address to the nation two years later, Macías notes that, “true to his word [ . . . ] Cárdenas told the nation that awarding Mexican women full political rights was an act of ‘intrinsic justice’ that could no longer be delayed” (143). Macías traces how an amendment that
was proposed to the Mexican Congress in 1937 concerning women’s rights for citizenship was passed in 1938, and by 1939, “all that needed to be done was for Congress to formally declare that [...] it was now in force” (143-44). This didn’t happen. There is a definite air of mystery regarding the Congress’s refusal to pass the amendment; the factors that caused this refusal include the end of Cárdenas’s term as president as well as the Congress’s fear of the next president elect. In the end, Macías notes “the establishment in early 1939 of a well-financed Feminine Idealist party [...] appears to have been the decisive factor in the defeat of the woman suffrage amendment” (144). This particular group of women proved to be influenced by the conservative stance of the Catholic Church. Though the majority of feminists in Mexico were in support of the left-wing government at the time, the majority of women were not necessarily aligned with the feminists. President Cárdenas had pushed forward many progressive reforms, “urging workers and peasants to unite against the propertied classes.” In doing this, he alienated large swaths of the population (144). The Feminine Idealist party supported the right-wing candidate, and the fear of the left-wing Congress was that opening the vote to women, considered to be more conservative than men in general, would jeopardize their chances. In an attempt to maintain his party’s control of the presidency, Macías says, Cárdenas put forward a candidate who was more moderate than Cárdenas’s other choice, a candidate who would not push for women’s right to vote (144).

The irony of an “act of intrinsic justice” that is contingent upon the conformity of those receiving said justice with a certain political view is self-evident. Because of the (male) congress’s assumption about what the potential female voters would do and how
they would respond to this newfound power, they made a decision that, according to Cardenas’s own words, would deny the women justice. The decision confirms what Amorós argues when she says that in the world of interpretation, women are neither the interpreters nor the interpreted: rather, women are “pre-interpreted” (116-17). “The reasons why she is not the subject or object of interpretation are, deep down, the same: patriarchal ideology has already constituted her as a topos, or commonplace” (Amorós 117). The woman is then relegated to a totalizing area of violence; she is first constituted as a place of violence (in the case of Mexico, she represents a perceived violence towards the political party in power), and she then becomes the victim of violence carried out against her (she is denied justice in the political and legal processes of Mexico). “So, an intimate link exists between violence and interpretation because only interpreters recognize each other [. . .] Woman is of course not an interpreter” (Amorós 117).

This political positioning and delayed justice, at the expense of Mexican women, was not representative of the fight for women’s rights in Mexico. Similarly, it was not the determining factor in women’s participation in society. From being active participants in the Revolution to gaining an education, joining the labor force and having breakthroughs in the arts, women in Mexico were gaining ground throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The right to vote and to be full citizens, however, legitimized women in a way that was previously omitted.

**Legal Rights for Women in Puerto Rico**

In the case of Puerto Rico, Edna Acosta-Belén notes that there was an absence of a feminist movement on the island throughout the Spanish rule, up through the nineteenth
century when other countries saw a trigger in feminist action. “This situation was evidently the result of the low educational and employment levels of the vast majority of the female population” (Acosta-Belén 3). Like in Mexico, however, this did not imply that women were not making contributions to society. Acosta-Belén notes how the nineteenth century did see some discussion regarding the rights of women among certain men who were “liberal intellectual elites” (Acosta-Belén 4). There was also a small effort on the part of a few educated women to found schools for girls during the nineteenth century in an attempt to reduce the rates of illiteracy and equip women to participate in society.

The twentieth century, however, gave birth to a budding feminist movement in Puerto Rico that was “characterized by two major trends: the petit bourgeois and the proletarian” (Acosta-Belén 7). The petit bourgeois feminists were mainly responsible for the suffragist movement on the island. Their efforts eventually helped women gain full rights by 1936. Puerto Rico was only the second country in Latin America to extend these rights to women. The proletarian feminist movement, however, was a part of the labor movement on the island, often joining with male workers in social struggles.

The turn of the twentieth century in Puerto Rico was marked by the power shift from Spanish colonial to the U.S. imperial rule. With this shift came massive economic changes as U.S. corporations eventually gained control of almost all land and industry in Puerto Rico. There was an overwhelming need for capable bodies looking for work, and during that time more and more proletarian women took to the work force and joined in the struggle for social justice.
The vanguard of the women’s emancipation movement was to be found within the ranks of the Free Federation of Labor which also waged legal battles in favor of universal suffrage and against the detrimental working conditions faced by women and workers in general during this period. (Acosta-Belén 8)

A prominent and important figure in the world of women’s labor movements was Luisa Capetillo. In her work *A Nation of Women: An Early Feminist Speaks Out* (1907-1917), Capetillo espoused ideas of emancipation and equal rights long before the women’s liberation movement took a firm hold towards the end of the twentieth century. While it is widely accepted that the approach to women’s rights in Puerto Rico was two pronged, represented by the fight for labor rights and the suffrage movement, I would argue that Capetillo helped create and occupy a third and important arena in the fight for rights, the right to participate in intellectual and philosophical reasoning.

Throughout the twentieth century, the women’s movements in Latin America, exemplified in Mexico and Puerto Rico, confronted the laws of their respective countries in myriad other ways beyond the fight for the right to vote. These movements advocated for rights within marriage and to divorce, for rights to property and for labor rights. In Mexico, a defining moment came in 1927 when the civil code was reformed, and “nineteenth-century discriminatory restrictions against single and married women were progressively erased” (Macías 104). In Puerto Rico, though women’s “inferior status was reinforced by juridical inequality” (much like in all of Latin America), 1976 saw a breakthrough in the reform of both labor and family laws for women’s equality (Acosta-Belén 3). Progress did not always come quickly, but the struggle for women’s rights was most certainly not fought in vain.
**What the Fight for Women’s Rights Revealed**

While these advances came on the backs of many women of different social strata, it’s clear that, as with the legal system today, the change had to be supported by those within the system. From the liberal men who sympathized with the women’s movement in Puerto Rico, to President Cárdenas and his progressive ideas about women’s right to vote in Mexico, all evidence points toward the destabilizing force of the law ultimately relying on internal forces, like men in charge of legislative power, as well as external ones, like suffragists who demand change.

It’s no surprise, then, that in the fight for women’s rights, women have had to come intimately close with, and even engage and enter into, the legal system that has long excluded them. I would suggest that this level of personal interaction has given women a unique knowledge of legality and legitimacy that only an up-close examination of such a system could reveal. Through the movement for women’s rights, women have been exposed to the law’s broad strokes as well as its minute details, and to its discourse as well as to the lived reality that is created by that discourse.

**The Distinct Attributes of the Law**

I posit that in their close examination of the legal system, the authors analyzed in this dissertation reveal one of the over-arching characteristics of legality: the way in which the law folds back onto itself, securing the law and those protected by it in increasing measure while pushing those who are already on the margins further adrift. In the introductory chapter, I discussed some of the similarities between the systems of legality and of science. One of the unifying factors of the two systems is this point
precisely: their ability, and necessity, to reify themselves. This attribute leads both systems to a position in society that, over time, becomes more and more ensconced by the very nature of their existence and the qualities of their characters.

Though these systems work in some similar ways, the law stands apart from science given the centrality of the legal concept of precedence. The operation of this concept can serve as a microcosm of how legality works to uphold power. Precedence is defined as “a prior reported opinion of an appeals court which establishes the legal rule (authority) in the future on the same legal question decided in the prior judgment” (“Precedent”). Precedence demands that the law look back upon itself with an acquiescing gaze rather than just a critical one (which is the case with science, as we will see). In a sense, it is arguable that the idea of precedence also serves as a metaphor for the actions of those within the system: predisposed to look at their prior decisions and determinations with an acquiescing gaze; growing their group – not necessarily in numbers – but in strength.

Although precedence doesn’t make the law ahistorical, it does bind the law to its historic self in a sometimes compromising way; it does not explain away its past, it interprets it and relies on it to hold up in the present and future, as well. The reason for precedence is to give stability to such a far-reaching institution (temporally, socio-culturally and spatially), which is understandable. But as such, the political, economic, social, and even personal histories that are bound up in the law’s past still have an effect on, and manifest themselves in, its present. That influence is not absolute, of course, for lawyers and judges of the present day are still required to interpret that law, thus forming a point of entry for contemporary experiences (political, economic and social) to
influence the current institution. This doesn’t negate the fact, however, that there are pre-established limits to many of those influences.

Because of this established order and the reifying nature of the law, like that found in the idea of precedence, legal reform is incredibly difficult. As Katharine T. Bartlett signals in her introduction to *Feminist Legal Theory* (1991), feminists seeking legal reform are met with a paradox: while the law guarantees equality, giving women a voice, “the mechanisms of legal reform are self-limiting, allowing change only to a point” (2). The law does not just reify itself by an intentional act of those within the system (as is the case with science); rather, it has no other choice but to reify itself because of this preset condition that is embedded in the very fabric of its existence. The law is always taking past law from a different socio-cultural climate into account, and giving it legal legitimacy in the current one. Past laws are viable until actively overturned. However, if left unexamined, they stand unchanged in perpetuity.

This does not mean that the law is impenetrable or that legal reform is impossible, but Bartlett does note that social movements are often more successful in implementing change than legal routes; though “the conservative force of the law is powerful [. . . ] as a tool of reform, law is often weak” (3-4). That, however, doesn’t change the reality that the “law is power,” and it must be engaged with in order to gain opportunities for the marginalized (Bartlett 4). What it does mean is that the institution of legality is so insulated by its own laws and traditions that legal reform almost always comes from within. The extent of the law is such that even though laws regarding legitimate heirs, spouses, children, and lineages lost strength throughout the twentieth century, many of the traditions are still pervasive in society and have a continued residual effect on the
lives of women, as many societies have “historically conformed to religious and patriarchal models” (Htun 1). This creates significant difficulty for those who are situated under the law, but not inside the law, to make changes. It also presents a paradox: the person(s) seeking change must necessarily engage with, and in doing so strengthen, the very institution they strive to destabilize or alter (Bartlett 3).

The predicament presented by the law is unique because of where and how the law is situated within a given society. There is no doubt that other institutions, like science, as we will see below, also exert power over the lived realities of the people within the society where they exist. The law, however, stands as a filter through which everything else within that society must pass. It legitimizes, or doesn’t legitimize; it proclaims judgment over all things and all people. Even science falls under submission to the law.⁶ For this reason, when speaking about attempts at legal change (within feminist discourse and practice) Bartlett can say in the same breath that while “the depth and scope of transformation needed to end women’s oppression cannot be achieved through law alone” (4), “legal reform [. . . ] may not instantaneously improve women’s lives, but it is a necessary precondition for meaningful social change” (4). Again we are presented with a paradox: legal reform is indebted to social change, but any social change relies heavily on legal reform for its legitimacy. Anyone who strives for changes in the law and legal tradition would have to be willing to endure this cycle and, perhaps, expose it for what it is. Still, in spite of the law’s intrinsic armor, its position in society demands that it be reckoned with in the arena of social change.

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⁶ Evidenced, for example, in the legal implications on issues dealing with cloning or medically ending one’s life.
The Scientific Framework

Scientific practice and discourse are fluid. They are changing, and they are, in their very nature, contingent upon the people who practice science, the culture in which it is practiced, and the social and political climate of the time period in which it is carried out. It bears stating this from the outset of this framework because the very fact that women writers in Latin America would take the risk of questioning and subverting abuses of such a system is necessarily rooted in the contingent nature of science, its dependence upon outside forces and factors, and its ability to change and be changed. Through various metamorphoses over time (whether scientific, political, social, etc.), science eventually has become a hegemonic system: strict, rigid, pervasive, and seemingly unquestionable. As we will see, however, the authors I analyze in Chapters 5 and 6 in this dissertation are not hindered by science’s strong façade, and they do confront and question it through their work.

Over the course of this section, I will track several important aspects of the theory and nature of science, as well as some of the historical moments that have marked significant changes in this institution in the modern era. This is not a comprehensive study of the system of science, and it has been edited to focus on elements that are essential to the work of this dissertation. First, I examine the idea that science is something that is willfully maintained by those within the system. Next, I discuss how science, though decidedly set on maintaining its image and resisting change, can change. Often, this comes at the hand of new advances from within the field that open the way for more comprehensive work; but sometimes, as Kuhn observes, change happens because of the intentional acts, both internal and external to the system, found behind scientific
revolutions. Then, I examine the historical moment that further ensconced science’s position in the Modern Era and, lastly, I approach the discourse of science as both powerful and exclusive. After the discussion about the history and nature of science, I discuss the role that science has played in Latin America during the last century, particularly through the lens of US – Puerto Rico relations.

The Image of Science

To establish a historic view of science is to understand and celebrate the institution of science with its long and far-reaching traditions, and to problematize that very institution at the same time. Arguably, a historical approach to the hegemonic system of science reveals the reality that much of what once was legitimately considered science has passed through moments of change. Though that change isn’t all encompassing, it’s no secret that some scientific beliefs and practices have morphed over time, even if they still carry a resemblance of their original state. Other beliefs and practices, however, have been debunked entirely; thrown out for new proof, new practices, and a new way of thinking. An almost cliché example of this is the view that the earth is flat instead of spherical; something science declared only later to have it refuted. To trace broad strokes of Western science’s history is to expose these changes and, more importantly, to highlight that propensity for change. It’s evident, because of this, why those within the system work hard to maintain it, sustain it, and protect it from potential threats.

While many within the system want to preserve it at all costs, others see the value in exposing it and opening it up to change. In spite of the risk involved in establishing
this type of historical view, scientist and scientific historian Thomas S. Kuhn maintains that a historical view that recognizes the fluid nature of science is necessary and “could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed” (1). This attitude is enlightening, not only because it comes from someone within the system, but also because it confirms that science is not based solely on unchanging, ahistorical facts. On the other hand, it also confirms that the image of science has an impact not only on science itself, but also on society. This would indicate that, established though it may be, science is not free from the powers of perception, which in turn can create reality.

The image of the institution of science is, without a doubt, important to scientists. So much so that it factors into their scientific discourse as a way to legitimize the field even more. Kuhn indicates that scientific historians have, at times, had difficulty in faithfully pursuing historical data while maintaining that current image:

The more carefully they study, say, Aristotelian dynamics, phlogistic chemistry, or caloric thermodynamics, the more certain they feel that those once current views of nature were, as a whole, neither less scientific nor more the product of human idiosyncrasy than those current today. (2; emphasis added)

Contrary to what may be commonly believed, science is neither objective nor autonomous. It is as thoroughly given to transformation as the very material it studies. “Human idiosyncrasy,” as Kuhn calls it in the quote above, plays a part in this; as new scientists replace former scientists, their views, contexts, and agendas vary. Willful intent plays another part. Kuhn points out that an otherwise arbitrary element “is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given
time” (4). It’s significant that he refers to the element as “arbitrary,” because regardless of what it is, these beliefs precede it, at least in terms of their presence in that community’s consciousness. The intent is to maintain and preserve those beliefs. Therefore, elements, arbitrary though they may be, are chosen and studied with the pre-existing beliefs in mind, driving the use of that element and, arguably, the outcome of the study.

**Scientific Change and Revolutions**

When speaking of scientific change, it bears mentioning that there is a category of change that is accepted and even encouraged by those within the system. Built into the heart of the scientific institution is a desire for science to produce more science through research and experimentation. In this sense, when new advances within the field open the way for more comprehensive research and understanding, they are celebrated. By its very nature, the technology of science, as well as progressive ideas and innovations, are constantly advancing. Foucault illustrates the changes that can take place with the advancement of technology in his book *The Birth of the Clinic* (1994, originally published in 1963).

In his book, Foucault expounds on the drastic effect of innovative and technological advances in medical science. He demonstrates how exponentially more effective observation became as doctors who once just looked at a body from afar decided at one point to touch the body, thus seeing, in a sense, what lay directly under the surface. That touch was further advanced with the invention of the stethoscope, extending the doctor’s vertical gaze into the body even more. The culmination of these
manners of observations came, according to Foucault, with anatomical pathology, as doctors now had the ability to cut into a human body and literally gaze upon its interior. This new vertical path for the scientific gaze progressed from the surface to the hidden, from the symptom to the tissue (Foucault, Clinic 135). In this regard, medical observation wasn’t just enhanced; it was altogether altered, for pathological anatomy didn’t just come to constitute one method but, rather, now formed an essential stage in the pathological process (Foucault, Clinic 131).

The change or metamorphosis that comes from such advancement as a stethoscope, for instance, poses no imminent threat to the scientific institution but quite the opposite. Naturally, if derived from the very scientific institution itself, it most probably will be used to drive science even further in the direction it was already going. The change isn’t a veering off course; it is an extension of the course that went before. When considering the image of science, such progress actually fits the image quite well, as it shows the accomplishment of what science set out to do in the first place.

While advances in technology and scientific practice that blossom from existing practices are deemed acceptable, changes that come at the hand of rebels and, perhaps, visionaries (whether inside or outside of the canonical institution) can pose a threat to the system. If acceptable science leads to more science, that is considered good. But if one were to interpose something that does not come from the scientific canon, that is not “normal science,” as Kuhn describes it, it could disrupt the whole system, making it vulnerable.

Kuhn’s argument, as well as Foucault’s for that matter, situates an institution that went through a process of advancement and legitimation during the Enlightenment—as
part of the collective rejection of pre-modern metanarratives that had once bound society in a rigid way—to expose it as a new type of metanarrative. The “truth” that was once bound by religious belief traded hands and became bound by scientific thought and reason. In exposing it, I would argue that Kuhn’s theory about scientific revolutions is to the state of science in the mid twentieth century what scientific reason and positivism was to the religious institutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Europe. Clearly, Kuhn’s argument is on a much smaller scale but, like the Enlightenment, it is rooted in the spirit of questioning the norm that is presented as absolute, innocent, and unquestionable. Science became so ensconced in Western society, and so inherently protective of itself, that change could only happen with a scientific revolution.7

As a new Metanarrative, the problem that science has to face, then, is the question of how to classify its past, that which went before in the name of science. As mentioned above, however, the accepted history of science could very well be what makes it the most susceptible to unwanted change in the present. The issue, then, is as follows: when looking at the evolution of science chronologically, we find theories, practices, and beliefs that are no longer considered valid, but that still fit into the official history of the institution. If these aspects of science are accepted as part of scientific history while still being debunked in the scientific present, this problematizes the validity of that which is considered scientific in the present. Kuhn expands upon this problem:

If these out-of-date beliefs are to be called myths, then myths can be produced by the same sorts of methods and held for the same sorts of reasons that now lead to scientific knowledge. If, on the other hand, they are to be called science, then

7 It’s hard to ignore the role of political and social revolutions in the Enlightenment.
science has included bodies of belief quite incompatible with the ones we hold today. Given the alternatives, the historian must choose the latter. *Out-of-date theories are not in principle unscientific because they have been discarded.* (2-3; emphasis added)

Paradoxically, if the science that is being decided upon and acted out today is to truly be given credibility as science, then that which went before and has since been discarded must necessarily be considered science, too. Though both ways of dealing with its past taint the desired image of science (as precise and infallible), discarding past theories and practices altogether would, *a priori*, destabilize, as a matter of principle, any current science that has the potential to also be refuted at some point in the future.

This historical view of science vastly broadens science’s chronological reach to include that which went before, whether it is still accepted as true in the current day. As such, this historical view invites the question: if the chronological reach of science can be broadened, perhaps its conceptual and practical reach in the present can also be broadened. That is to say, if past science has to be included in a framework that currently excludes its practices or findings, where does that leave other scientific ideas or practices that, like sciences of the past, are not currently accepted by the hegemonic, positivistic system of science? This vulnerable grey area is where scientific revolutions find their entry point and fertile ground in which to take root. Though the possibility of a scientific revolution might seem to weaken the established hegemonic system of science as we currently know it, it could actually strengthen lived and practiced science as a whole through heterogeneity and diversity.
There is a major roadblock, however, to this potential amplification of the institution of science. While the science that has gone before must be mediated and dealt with in some way, since it is already documented in accepted scientific annals, new scientific ideas and ideals that have yet to be proven could, theoretically, disappear if ignored long enough by the right people. Their precedent is not yet established, making it easier to justify ignoring.

Normal science [. . .] is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like. Much of the success of the enterprise derives from the (scientific) community’s willingness to defend that assumption, if necessary at considerable cost. Normal science, for example, often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments. (Kuhn 5; emphasis added)

This is the nature of the scientific “enterprise;” it protects itself by defending everything within from that which is without. It intentionally reifies itself in order to maintain its image and the image of the world that it projects, and in order for those within the enterprise to exercise (absolute) control over those two images. Normal science “does not aim at novelties of fact or theory” (Kuhn 52); newness does not fit the agenda.

Science, then, is at least partially a result of biased decisions, not just objective observations. “Nevertheless, so long as those commitments retain an element of the arbitrary, the very nature of normal research ensures that novelty shall not be suppressed for very long” (Kuhn 5). Kuhn’s book is focused on what he calls “scientific revolutions.” These are the moments when novelty can no longer be suppressed, anomalies no longer ignored; “they (scientific revolutions) are the tradition-shattering
complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science” (Kuhn 6). They are revolutions because they are, by nature, revolutionary. A revolutionary new theory or method doesn’t just slightly alter that which has gone before; if that were the case, these novelties wouldn’t have to be defended against, for they would pose no real threat to the established norm. Instead, they radically subvert and change the very base upon which the scientific institution stands. At their strongest, they can shift the entire paradigm.

Though rare, these revolutions are possible; and what’s more, they are necessary. They signal the fluid nature of science, a nature that is indeed contingent and not autonomous. The scientific institution is, as stated above, historically, socially, and politically situated, and the observation of arbitrary elements is never carried out in an airtight vacuum. The novelties that spark scientific revolutions are “produced inadvertently by a game played under one set of rules, their assimilation requires the elaboration of another set” (Kuhn 52).

The irony of the situation that Kuhn describes is that these novelties within the field of science are not necessarily outside forces; they are often subversive in nature, found within the existing system but ignored and suppressed by it. When they can be ignored no longer, either because future science depends on them, or because the voices of those who advocate for them grow too loud to silence, normal science falls into a state of crisis that leads to a paradigm change. The effect of the change, however, is undeniable and enriching for science as a whole: “After the discovery (of certain revolutionary theories) had been assimilated, scientists were able to account for a wider range of natural phenomena or to account with greater precision for some of those
previously unknown” (Kuhn 66). Even though science resists revolutionary changes, when they happen, it is stronger for it.

**Science in the Modern Era**

The paradigm-changing revolutions that are played out in the scientific enterprise are, as mentioned previously, historically situated. Science, as we know it in the modern era, underwent a major revolution around the end of the eighteenth century, much like the law. The societal value on science didn’t begin then, of course. During the Renaissance, science, observation, and exploration came to a forefront of Western culture, paving the way for centuries of scientific advancements, including those that would be ushered in during the Enlightenment. In *Las palabras y las cosas*, when speaking of the natural sciences, Foucault highlights the assessment of historians: “dan crédito al siglo XVII y sobre todo al XVIII de una nueva curiosidad” (126). This new scientific curiosity led to unimaginable change in the scientific institution: “les hizo, si no descubrir, cuando menos ampliar y precisar hasta un grado inconcebible antes las ciencias de la vida” (126).

This time period corresponds with the period of The Enlightenment; a time when traditional methods of thought were questioned, as we noted above, and a high value was placed on the scientific method and reason. As Foucault states, it was a time of conflict between two poles: “una teología que aloja [ . . . ] la providencia de Dios [ . . . ] y una

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8 My translation – “credit the seventeenth century and more importantly the eighteenth century with a new curiosity.”
9 My translation – “it made them, if not discover, then at least amplify the life sciences and make them more precise than was formerly conceivable.”
It was the age of reason, and philosophers like Descartes, Voltaire, and Rousseau proposed a view of the world that rested on that reason. However, it was also a time of side-by-side growth in otherwise conflicting fields of science: “es muy posible que una ciencia nazca de otra; pero una ciencia nunca puede nacer de la ausencia de otra, ni del fracaso, ni de los obstáculos encontrados por otra” (Foucault, *Las palabras* 129). Foucault further states that the same episteme that made natural history possible also made Descartes’s rational mechanism possible. Though the different branches within science varied, what was more important was a change in attitude that situated science in a more central position within society.

Foucault signals various reasons for this new centrality of science in post-Enlightenment societies. On the one hand, there were new technologies that opened pathways to more profound investigation and study. Representative of this new technology are, for instance, the microscope and the stethoscope, which changed natural science and medical science irreversibly. On the other hand, Foucault notes that many changes came by way of economic, political, philosophical, and social changes. In the case of natural science, for instance, there was an economic interest in agriculture combined with a curiosity for exotic plants and animals. This was matched with a high ethical value placed on nature that led to a more in-depth look at flora and fauna, and a well-funded base for more studies in natural science (Foucault, *Las palabras* 126).

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10 My translation – “a theology that bends [. . . ] to the providence of God [. . . ] and a science that was looking to define the autonomy of nature.”

11 My translation – “it’s very possible that one science could be born from another; but a science can never be born from the absence of another science, nor from the failure, nor from the obstacles encountered by the other.”
In the case of medical science, Foucault traces the long process of transformation that took place leading up to the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century in *The Birth of the Clinic*. “The great break in the history of Western medicine dates precisely from the moment clinical experience became the anatomo-clinical gaze”¹² at the end of the eighteenth century (146). As with natural science, there was an amalgam of influences that molded this moment of change. Part of this change is very much rooted in the heightened importance of the “medical gaze” (Foucault, *Clinic* 13). According to Foucault, the gaze shifted from being mathematical to qualitative (*Clinic* 13); from being directed at groups to seeing the individual (*Clinic* 15); from looking for normality as a baseline not to dip beneath, to looking at what defines healthy as a standard to achieve (*Clinic* 34); and from focusing on the disease as the scientific object to focusing on the patient carrying the disease (*Clinic* 136).

There were, however, also political questions involved: Should the state have control over the medical establishment? Who should fund clinics if they are not state funded? Should there be a health court to police the medical institution and those practicing within it? Economically, some believed in a “militant medicalization of society” (Foucault, *Clinic* 32). This would be free of charge, serving the body as the church serves the soul. Didactically, there was a push throughout the eighteenth century to educate. The medical institution not only made observations and pronounced judgment and knowledge, but there was a proposal for a central executive group who would prescribe books and decide what would be published (Foucault, *Clinic* 30-31).

¹² “Anatomo-clinical gaze” here refers to anatomo-pathology and the use of dissection.
The utopian ideal of a world that is so medically educated that doctors would no longer be necessary started spreading (Foucault, *Clinic* 34).

The change was also philosophical. Again, using medicine as an example, Foucault situates the clinic at the center of this change in Western medicine. He notes that the clinic, though opposed to systems and theories, has a kinship with philosophy, as it is the “first application of analysis” (*Clinic* 104). “The clinic is a field made philosophically ‘visible’ by the introduction into the pathological domain of grammatical and probabilistic structures” (*Clinic* 105).

**The Discourse of Science**

The Enlightenment marked an age of change across societies, culminating in the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, which inaugurated one of the biggest political and social changes of the modern era. Though science was a central theme during this time, an incredibly important part of this shift was autonomous of, although central to, the scientific institution itself:

Lo que se ha deslizado entre estos teatros y este catálogo no es el deseo de saber (for this desire already existed from centuries past), sino una nueva manera de anudar las cosas a la vez con la mirada y *el discurso*. Una nueva manera de *hacer historia*. (Foucault, *Las palabras* 132; emphasis added)

There was an incipient correlation that was starting to be introduced between science (the desire to know) and other areas of society. This correlation demanded a form of communication between those areas of society, and with that demanded a language with
which to communicate, a discourse from which to operate. Thus, a new discourse was formed with which to “make history,” as Foucault indicates.

Foucault, in Las palabras y las cosas, elaborates on the interrelatedness of science and the rest of life, and the role that language plays in that relationship:

Todo conocimiento se enraíza en una vida, una sociedad, un lenguaje que tienen una historia; y en esta historia misma encuentra el elemento que le permite comunicarse con las otras formas de vida, los otros tipos de sociedad, las otras significaciones. (361-62)

Language cannot be separated from science because of its fundamental position in any given society and culture; that is to say, every aspect of culture hinges on language. The effect, then, that the political, economic, social, and philosophical climate of the eighteenth century had on the progress of the scientific institution at that historical moment is evidence, yet again, of the contingent nature of science, as well as of the power of language over science.

This scientific discourse, cultivated as a language for communication between science and the distinct areas of society, has, since the turn of the nineteenth century, maintained its significance. While the advancement of science was due in large part to the political, social, and philosophical notions of the day in the eighteenth century, it soon came to be that those other areas of society (political, social, philosophical, etc.) became contingent on science and scientific discourse themselves. The very phenomena that paved the way for science to come into such a central position in society now came under the influence of science and the weight of scientific discourse.
According to Foucault, while necessary for the trajectory that science was taking, scientific discourse is unique among discourses in that it implicitly carries with it the weight of scientific proof. This discourse goes beyond the bounds of mere communication for mutual understanding, and into the realm of epistemic production of knowledge and power struggles. As a system within which classifications are generated, scientific discourse seems to often have the upper hand. Science defines. From that definition, the discourse mandates. In this way, over the years, scientific discourse has taken on attributes of a prescriptive nature, establishing norms that carry the weight of science and reason.

One of the problems is that these norms have traditionally not been solely based on objective reason, but also on personal, political, and social bias backed by self-interested scientific proof. As Kuhn points out, the system of science tries to preserve itself. During the time of the Enlightenment, the members of that system were few and privileged. Their assumptions were left largely unchecked for there was no one else to check them. These norms, rooted in stereotype and greed, quickly became oppressive and reductive in nature. The scientific discourse on hierarchies of race, gender, and class were assumed to be unquestionable because they were scientific, established within a system that was becoming increasingly ensconced in Western societies. In the aftermath of the scientific Enlightenment came a wave of essentialist thought and determinism, a type of taxonomy with which to classify human beings, backed by a now highly revered scientific reason. Because of science’s relation to all areas of society, this prescriptive treatment of certain subjects went well beyond the clinic or the laboratory and had far-reaching effects on their politically, economically, and socially lived realities.
Scientific Discourse in Latin America

These effects have reached far into Latin America in a number of ways. Perhaps one of the most widespread effects of the scientific discourse in Latin America over the centuries has had to do with ideologies of race. Since the time of the conquest, miscegenation has inspired the scientific desire to classify. One prominent example of this is the caste system based on racial categorization that was created in Mexico during the colonial period and whose effects still resonate throughout that society. “These sharp social divisions, so strongly emphasized during the colonial era, shaped social class relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Camp 69). This is quite remarkable in that the pseudo-scientific pronouncements of the Colonial era carried tangible, societal effects through the twentieth century, some three hundred years later. These effects were political, economic, social, and more.

Perhaps a modern-day microcosm of this reality in Latin America is the specific case of Puerto Rico because of its ongoing connection with a nation that prides itself on science, the US. While most countries in Latin America gained their independence during the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico did not. Rather, it went from being subject to Spanish Colonialism to colonialism under US Imperialism. The fact that Puerto Ricans never gained their national independence meant that Puerto Rico was never freed of the US political hold and, with it, subjected to the often-oppressive U.S. scientific discourse, which had repercussions for Puerto Rico throughout the twentieth century.

Puerto Rico’s political connection to the U.S. (since 1898) has opened the door for widespread oppression that is justified by, and carried out in, the name of science and progress. In his book “Subject People” and Colonial Discourses (1994), Kelvin A.
Santiago-Valles details the first 50 years of the US occupation of Puerto Rico and the situations, both historical and textual, that led to native populations being re-written as both savage and effeminate, lawless and needy. This paradoxical social classification is derived from, among other things, the discourse of scientific superiority. Santiago-Valles quotes Shiv Visvanathan: “‘The West as modernity obtains the mandate of power and responsibility over this world left behind by history. It is science as the modern man’s ‘gaze’ that brings the primitive and the archaic back into contemporaneity’” (qtd. on pp. 83). During the beginning of the twentieth century the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, and the land itself, were under the strong gaze of US economic and political interests that deemed Puerto Ricans wayward, unruly, and in need of outside, Western (i.e. advanced and orderly) intervention (Santiago-Valles 20).

The dilemma, as Santiago-Valles points out, is that the rise in “wayward and unruly” behavior was mostly caused by, or a direct result of, the very group that takes it upon itself to correct it: namely, the US occupiers. This is perhaps most evident in the way the US occupation of Puerto Rico led to an intentional, widespread dispossession of land, jobs, and autonomy for the Puerto Rican people. The tension continued because US officials would take action against such behavior, when they themselves used behavior that, if carried out by a Puerto Rican, would be punishable by their very code of conduct:

This maneuver omits or excuses the very real violence and brutality inherently present in many of the legal, systemic and/or exonerated practices of hegemonic elements: The State, capital, and the propertied and educated classes and individuals in general. Such officially condoned violence is mostly relocated
outside of the epistemological and administrative terrain of the criminal justice system altogether. (Santiago-Valles 15)

This double standard went unchecked, of course, because of the supposed virtue of the task at hand. Puerto Rico, like so many other regions of the world, had been grouped into a particular “discursive cluster” that “fashioned entire regions of the world as problems to be solved and as stretches of (empty) land to be seeded by the ‘advanced races’ who embodied the highest stage of cultural, economic, technological and social evolution” (Santiago-Valles 25). In reality, in the eyes of the US, Puerto Rico hardly counted in the arena of progress as a player. Instead, Puerto Rico was a problem, and the real contest was between the US and “the oldest of Europe’s empires”:

Given the results of the War of 1898, this sociotextual universe centered the North American republic as having a greater command of science and of modern technology [ . . . ] the teleology of modernity and the liturgy of science positioned the United States as the culmination of the West. (Santiago-Valles 26-27)

It’s arguable here that Santiago-Valles implicitly recognizes the way science (as part of modernity and progress) has taken the central place that religion once held in the West with its teleological and liturgical elements. As the dominant player in the field of science, the US had the control to situate Puerto Rico at its convenience.

While Santiago-Valles details the specific social construction of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans during the first 50 years of US occupation, Mimi Sheller’s important book *Consuming the Caribbean* (2003) takes a broader approach as she explores trends in the construction and representation of the region over the course of 500 or so years, since the time of Columbus’ first arrival. Her overall thesis is that the treatment of the Caribbean
(which Valles signals on a smaller scale) doesn’t actually start with the US occupation of Puerto Rico or with modernity in general, but rather with what she calls the “North Atlantic countries’” occupation of the entire Caribbean since 1492. She claims that what we have seen over the last century (the desire for Caribbean beaches, alcohol, bodies, bank accounts, etc.) has its roots in modes of representation and appropriation that began almost as soon as Europeans set foot on Caribbean shores: “The Caribbean has been repeatedly imagined and narrated as a tropical paradise in which the land, plants, resources, bodies and cultures of its inhabitants are open to be invaded, occupied, bought, moved, used, viewed and consumed in various ways” (13).

The idea that the Caribbean has been “narrated” suggests an outside voice that has spoken it into existence. One of the principal justifications of this centuries-old tradition is science. From studying the Caribbean’s exotic specimens, to devising medicines (for healing Western bodies) from her flora and fauna, to taxonomically categorizing the race of her people, Sheller argues that the Northern Atlantic countries have consumed the Caribbean: “consuming the Caribbean occurs first through its displacement from the narrative of Western modernity (decontextualisation), followed by its recontextualisation as an ‘Other’ to serve the purposes of Western fantasy” (144).

When read in that context, we can see how the imbalanced political relationship with the US, along with the American political and economic agenda on the island, allowed the US to create an image of the Puerto Rican population that relied heavily on the dominant scientific discourse; on the notion that Puerto Ricans were test subjects without history. This view opened the Puerto Rican people up to abuses of power that were political, judicial, and social while officially classifying them as inferior. Although
the discourse of the day (redacted through letters, reports, etc.) claimed that this was for the good of the Puerto Rican population, it had obvious effects on their lived realities on a daily basis as many people within the country suffered hunger, unemployment, loss (of both loved ones and property), and depression.

Still, the negative effects that science and scientific discourse have had on the people of Puerto Rico, and throughout other parts of Latin America, aren’t just implicit by-products of the scientific system. These negative effects have been explicitly carried out by way of science, as well. For example, Puerto Rican women have found themselves in particularly vulnerable situations as they sit at the intersection of two scientifically inferior axes: gender and race/ethnicity. Various authors, including Santiago-Valles (1994) and Iris Lopez (2008), have written about the US scientific gaze upon Puerto Rico, which has led, in some cases, to actual scientific experiments on the population. Perhaps the most extreme of these experiments include testing out early samples of birth control pills on Puerto Rican Women in the middle of the twentieth century. At the time, the US Food and Drug Administration did not yet approve the pill, and its components were significantly stronger than the final, approved version of the contraceptive. This left women sterile or otherwise physically affected with no reason or explanation given by the medical researchers, let alone an apology or acknowledgement of the wrong done to them. In another instance, while the US was trying to control the Puerto Rican population, Puerto Rican women were encouraged to undergo la operación, a procedure that was claimed to be reversible, but that effectively sterilized the women, oftentimes without their knowledge or consent. This experience has been analyzed and
documented in López’s *Matters of Choice*, Ramírez de Arellano and Seip’s *Colonialism, Catholicism, & Contraception*, and the film *La operación*.

This type of scientific testing and experimentation, horrible though it is, isn’t the root of the problem. The underlying issue is the discourse that gives the scientific and political establishments unquestioned permission to carry out such an experiment on certain people. This process of “decontextualizing” them as people, to borrow from Sheller’s vocabulary, and then re-contextualizing them as “subject people,” as Santiago-Valles calls them, must be met with a project of re-humanization. This is the real work to be done, not just stopping one specific scientific act.

*The Many Forms of this Work*

The scientific discourse and ideas about linear progress that emerged from the Enlightenment Revolution, which strove to question and break with seemingly irrefutable tradition, eventually had to be resisted. While political power had shifted, and the elite sectors of society were perhaps different, this new way of thinking and writing history also needed to be challenged. Thomas Kuhn was writing around the time when challenges to scientific ideals gain renewed vigor, in the 1960s and ‘70s. The Civil Rights Movement, the Second Wave of Feminism, the student and worker protests across the West, all took aim at destabilizing established norms that stemmed, if only indirectly, from the biased discourses and ideals that were bolstered during the time of the Enlightenment. While some marched, and others sat, and others rode in protest, the authors we are studying in the following chapters wrote; they added their voices and their
subversive actions to the international cry for change in the second half of the twentieth century.

**The Law, Science, and the Triangle of Desire**

The feminist argument against the law does not imply a desire to abolish the law, quite the opposite. The law is essential to a society. The same is true for science and technological progress. The use and abuse of the law and science as a weapon against others, however, is latent within these systems, and it doesn’t just happen by accident. It has to be meticulously crafted and pre-meditated. It also requires at least some understanding of the law, science, and their tradition. The theory of the Triangle of Desire is a useful tool to chart the pre-meditated, malicious intentions to re-signify subjectivities in the interest of power. Likewise, it also highlights the vulnerabilities within the law and science that are exposed by those who abuse and manipulate the systems.

At its very core, the Triangle of Desire reveals the intention behind the attempt, whether successful or not, of destabilizing the subjectivity of a person. Furthermore, it uncovers the will to reclassify, whether legally, taxonomically, or just in one’s own economy of identity, certain subjects for one’s own use and purpose. Though desire may exist on a subconscious level, The Triangle of Desire applies to cases where perpetrator cannot claim ignorance; they know what they are doing and they do it willfully. As we will see, however, sometimes that willful intention is built into the system itself.

**Conclusion**
As I have already mentioned, in order to displace, or attempt to displace, the female subject from the plane of subjectivity, a symbolic tool of some sort is necessary. Since the action is traumatic and extends beyond the mere physicality of the woman, the mechanism is to empty the woman’s sense of self in order to use her as an object, a second-class citizen, or a test subject of sorts. In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine the responses of female authors from Latin America to the uses and abuses of the law, legitimacy, and legal traditions. I do this by examining two specific types of social relations stemming from law/legality/legitimacy. In Chapter 3, I address questions of lineage and the legitimate vs. the illegitimate subject; and in Chapter 4, I focus on the blurred lines of legality and family code found in the perverted uncle trope. In Chapters 5 and 6, I analyze the responses of female authors from Latin America to the uses and abuses of patriarchal scientific discourse and practice as the tool with which to destabilize the woman’s identity. I do this by examining two specific types of social relations stemming from scientific discourse. In Chapter 5, I elucidate the over-arching patriarchal scientific discourse that situates women as inferior beings, and the resulting interactions that put women in the category of crazy, chaotic, and controllable. In Chapter 6, I focus on the social interactions that serve science’s need to not only preserve itself, as Kuhn states, but to reproduce itself.

Why a Literary Analysis on Legality and Science?

The primary texts for this dissertation do not center on specific laws, legal movements or legal traditions in Latin America, nor are they scientific case studies, models or theories. My goal is to examine the literary texts selected for the
representations of and responses to the overarching systems of legality and science offered by female authors writing in the 1960s and through the present day. In doing so, I understand the system of legality as being inclusive of the written laws as well as the embedded legal traditions that surround, emanate from, and sometimes pre-exist those laws. This definition will be extended to include the ideas of legitimacy and legacies that are, if not always codified, social practices derived from and tied into the legal history and tradition. This inclusive definition is important to maintain as I analyze the literature that engages legality and tradition. Likewise, the system of science that I analyze in this dissertation includes practice and discourse, though not necessarily specific theories or experiments. Far from writing based on a survey of legal cases or of scientific hypotheses and models, effectively separating out the “mystery from the manners” of the world around them—as Flannery O’Conner warns against—the stories analyzed start in the author’s eye (30). Fiction is a tool that allows these authors to enact the lived reality of those within the world that law and science govern, and not just the texts produced by and about the institutions of law and science.

Literature provides a unique lens that reveals the transcendent nature of the law and science as self-sustaining and self-reinforcing systems. This type of revelation is essential in the fight for women’s rights. Otherwise, if left unchecked, the inclination of these systems is toward keeping those on the margins indefinitely marginalized. What’s more, I propose that the field of literature allows these authors to expose how individuals appropriate law and science and use these systems as a personal tool of abuse across different dimensions of everyday life. This power, deployed against those lacking legitimacy within the dominant system, makes their exclusion both systematic and
personal, both public and private. In effect, these authors are able to shine a light on the nature of law and science as systems susceptible to being used maliciously by those deemed legitimate and superior, while also exposing the intentions behind those who have the power to wield them as a weapon. Fiction has the capacity to reveal the power of both law and science, and the character of those who misuse them and of those who are victimized by them. The distinct features of these two hegemonic systems and the abusive intention of certain subjects who misuse them, is uniquely exposed through these works of fiction. Furthermore, fiction has the power to move readers to imagine alternatives beyond the apparent surface and seek avenues for social transformation.

The writers that I analyze in this dissertation share a similar critical lens and build a strong case against the abuses of patriarchal legal and scientific traditions. They represent different instances of social relations engendered by legality and science. They also expose a predisposition within these two systems to allow misuse and abuse. In doing this, these authors expose the problem of legality and science as being two-fold: 1) the problem with the system, as it is predisposed to privilege men while granting female subjects fewer rights and less agency, thus making them more vulnerable to exploitation, and 2) the problem with the individual perpetrators, particularly those with capital and agency to use the system maliciously for personal gain.
Chapter 3

Patriarchal Inheritances and Legitimate Lines:
Discourses on Legality and Legitimacy in the Domestic Space

One dimension of social relations that has engendered oppression towards women is that of patrilineal lineages and inheritances. The web of laws and social conventions that dictates rights and access to inheritance, and determines the legitimacy of family lineages is vast and complex. The question about legitimacy goes beyond issues of having children out of wedlock, for the illegitimate spouse or child are not the only ones who are at risk of being exploited. The question is multi-faceted and has repercussions on the lives of women across the board; whether they are the acceptable wife or the forbidden lover; whether they are the mother of the family heir or the mother of the love child; whether they are shunned by virtue of being illegitimate or shunned by virtue of being (though legitimate) a daughter when the parents wanted a son.

This chapter focuses on ways in which patriarchal tendencies are made manifest and reinforced through discourses and social relations surrounding lineages and inheritances in Latin America. Within that context, this chapter explores the construction of female identities and the ways in which legitimate lineages and inheritances have been used to force women into positions of subordination to men. This will be carried out through an analysis of works by three Latin American authors. The overall argument advanced in this chapter is that these authors don’t just identify the problem at hand, they actually engage these social relations at close distance and enact a subversion of the system of oppression from the inside.
This chapter is structured in four main sections. The first section addresses dominant notions of patriarchal tendencies in the establishment and realization of patrilineal lineages and inheritances in the West, in general, and in Latin America, in particular. It also includes a socio-historical example from Puerto Rico. The three remaining sections of the chapter center on the textual analyses of literary works by Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, and Gabriela Alemán, respectively. A central argument in this chapter is that these authors expose and destabilize the dominant constructions of female identity in Latin America that have been imposed through belief systems set up around lineages and inheritances. The analysis draws on textual analysis and an application of the Triangle of Desire as a theoretical framework of gender relations, as detailed in Chapter 1. The Triangle of Desire reveals a process through which women have been constructed as something other than their full selves. It allows critics to elucidate deeper intentions, both systematic and personal, behind women’s oppression. The Triangle facilitates the analysis of how such processes of female objectification are vulnerable to resistance and critique.

The authors to be discussed in this chapter are illustrative of how women writers in Latin America have challenged and subverted the prevailing hegemonic notions of patrilineal lineages, legitimacy, and the right to inheritances in their writing. I’ve chosen authors who are unified both in their understanding of the system and in their destabilizing gestures. Each of these authors goes beyond naming the problem; they actually engage with it. Their works speak to two realities that they all represent in their writing: 1) that there exists a patriarchal tradition within Latin America that is both cultural and codified by the legal system, and that encompasses women’s lives in all
spheres of society; and 2) that effective and lasting change can only come from within the oppressive tradition. It is not enough to attack it from the outside; in engaging with the patriarchal system, these authors let their characters enter into the oppressive hold of the system before enacting its subversion. I have chosen authors who represent both the problem and the process of change. At the same time, these authors question different aspects of the patriarchal enterprise from which they write. They also have different rhetorical weapons in their arsenal, from biting irony to humor, with which they engage the reader as they act out their subversive tactics.

In my analysis I include works by Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla, who, writing in Puerto Rico in the 1970s and ’80s, represent how the rights and subjectivities of women were truncated in their country. I also include a more recent literary work, published in 2007, by Ecuadorian writer Gabriela Alemán, who also represents, in a different scenario, the tensions within the patriarchal system of lineage and inheritance.

The analysis of Ferré’s writing centers on how she approaches the themes of legitimacy and inheritance to expose the injustice of the economic power to which the male aspires at the expense of the women around him. She shows how, in a situation where both the legitimate wife and the illegitimate concubine gain an inheritance, the man—even after his death—still attempts to maintain authority and use that inheritance as a power play against them. Thus, he holds more legally given power as a dead man than they do as women who are still alive. The analysis of Nolla’s two poems focuses on how her discourse on family lineage and social inheritance reveals the impossible standard set by patriarchal traditions and the aristocratic elite on women: to either be a man (impossible as that is) who carries on the family’s name, renown, and property, or to
be little more than an adornment in service of a man. Both Ferré and Nolla start illuminating the particular experience in order to expose the more universal plight of women at the hands of patriarchy. They also employ irony as a device with which to break down the patriarchal structures around them. Alemán takes a different approach, focusing on an unidentifiable group of men who have no particular ties to any demographic, other than the fact that they are male. From that point, Alemán speaks to the general, allowing her readers to situate her work in their own particular context. The analysis of Alemán’s work highlights how she employs humor to expose the shortsightedness of patriarchy and patrilineal desires.

**Dominant Notions of Patriarchal Lineage, Legitimacy, and Inheritance in Latin America**

Questions of legitimacy, lineage, and inheritance, as Mala Htun points out, underscore the fluidity between the law of the land and the values of the people. She cites Mary Ann Glendon (1987) when she notes: “The law ‘tells stories about the culture that helped to shape it and which it in turn helps to shape: stories about who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.’ The civil and criminal laws of Latin America thus have a strong ethical component” (Htun 3). The culture helps shape the law, the law informs and shapes the culture, and both tell stories about one another. One could argue that the stories about the law present fertile grounds to stress its ethical components, since value is assigned in discursive dialogue. Because of this, discourse on the law comes to carry a significance that is both written and unwritten, both code and story, both legal and sentimental.
We see a strong example of this in Puerto Rico during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During that time period, the economic system was transformed from subsistence farming into an agrarian system structured around aristocratic landowners (hacendados) during the 1800s, still under Spanish colonial domination and before becoming a more industrialized society under U.S. colonial rule in the twentieth century (Acosta-Belén 6). Within this system, where land and the passage of land was essential to maintaining the socioeconomic order, the importance of discourses on family lineage and inheritance went far beyond just what was dictated by the law. The value of preserving the family name and the family legacy by way of the male heir was a socio-cultural-legal way for a small group of elite families to maintain control of their land and their virtually unquestioned power over the majority of the economic and cultural life in the small island nation. Beyond the written code, this value became ensconced in society through dominant discourses on personal, familial, and cultural values. It went from practice to identity. This wasn’t unique to Puerto Rico. In Latin America, with the transition from colonial rule to independence (with the exception of Puerto Rico) and from an agrarian society to a more industrialized economy, there are common stories where laws and traditions became intertwined and reified in discourse about national identity.

Stories and discourses about the law are, however, situated in a much greater socio-historical context that has placed women in Western societies in a particular position. As Mary Wollstonecraft points out in her foundational work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, the French Revolution and the progressive wave of thinking that accompanied the
Enlightenment gave newfound rights to certain subjects, but denied women those new rights. What’s more, they were conditioned to remain in such a state that would not merit those rights. At a time when many were rising up to fight for rights, Wollstonecraft notes how men would “try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood” (Wollstonecraft 46). She further argues that “female education” as a whole served only the purpose of rendering women emotionally unstable:

Women have seldom sufficient serious employment to silence their feelings; a round of little cares, or vain pursuits frittering away all strength of mind and organs, they become naturally only objects of sense. –In short, the whole tenour of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean. (Wollstonecraft 102)

According to Wollstonecraft, the act of denying women the newly established freedoms that were ushered in with the Enlightenment wasn’t only discursive; it was practically implemented and enforced through legal means.

This subordination of women is a condition deeply entrenched in modern Western discourse and practice. For example, Friedrich Engels argues in his foundational work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (originally published in 1891) that the emergence of monogamous marriage (for women) and privatized property across Western societies, starting with the ancient Greeks, brings with it reified patriarchal and patrilineal tendencies that continued through the time of his writing. Since women were predominately not allowed to own property in many societies under this gendered economic structure, anything passed on to a woman would be at risk of becoming the property of her husband and his family line. As a result of this unique intersection of law
and tradition, most property, if it were to stay in the family, would be passed on to a male. Engels argues that this created a period over the course of centuries in which every step forward “is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others” (96).

Engels further claims that the requirements for inheritance create a relationship in which the wife is treated almost like a prostitute, providing a legitimate heir in return for her keep. It’s well known that Engels’s ideas have not fully held up over time, especially as women have gained an education, made their way into the work force and, in some cases, have found economic independence, as Michele Barrett points out in her introduction (24). Engels has also received criticism for having a reductionist view regarding his theory that the origin of the family is situated exclusively in economic terms. However, Engels’s proposition about the connection between ownership of property and the desire for a male heir did appear to be the reality up through much of the twentieth century. The desire begins as a point of ethical value, practicality, and control, but brings with it an emotional fondness and preference for male offspring. And as Rosalind Delmar states, Engels’s work “‘asserted women’s oppression as a problem of history, rather than of biology, a problem which it should be the concern of historical materialism to analyse (sic) and revolutionary politics to solve’” (qtd. in Barrett 28).

With roots stretching far before the twentieth century, the patriarchal legacy of Latin America only gained strength over the years. Tied to the law as it was, this patriarchy reached everywhere the law reached. As Htun points out, the nature of legal traditions in Latin America is pervasive, reaching far in space, but also in time:
In the civil law countries of Latin America, laws on abortion, divorce and family relations are embedded in civil and criminal codes. They are not short-term policies introduced and withdrawn by each incoming government but weighty tomes passed from one generation to the next. The historical institutions of the civil and criminal codes are decades, and often centuries, old. [. . . ] Like other institutions, the civil and criminal codes structure social action over time and serve as transmitters of common values [. . . ]. (2-3)

As a result, throughout much of Latin America the functional practice surrounding legitimacy and rights is hard to confront because their very nature is blurry at best, depending in part on written code, in part on embedded meaning, and in part on the subjective will of certain individuals.

Because of how the system is established, however, those individuals who have agency within the system are traditionally male, though both women and men participate in upholding patriarchal values. Celia Amorós discusses patriarchy and illustrates how the system is set up to remain that way:

A system of domination establishes itself by means of two articulated correlative practices: self-designation where members of the dominating group designate themselves as members by defining what entitles one to such membership; and heterodesignation where the dominating group has the power to define what others are [. . . ] the self-designation taking place here (in patriarchy) is the practical belonging to the ensemble of males. (112-13)

She notes, however, that “being a male” isn’t an a priori state that men naturally occupy, as one might assume; instead, it is a belief. Males believe themselves to be males in
reference to who they believe other males are. “Being a male is not a ‘cogito,’ nor is it a perception, but a belief-exigency” (Amorós 113). Still, even as a constructed belief, being a male is only a possibility so long as women are not able to belong to that ensemble. It seems that the practices that go into the “practical belonging,” as Amorós words it, are either kept out of the reach of women, or they lose their male significance when carried out by women. In fact, one of the practices necessary for patriarchal males to carry out in order to belong is to not be women: “in an active and belligerent sense, to be like other members of the series, that is, to be men” (Amorós 115).

Amorós’s analysis also marks the European Enlightenment as an important turning point in the history of the patriarchal treatment of women and its intersection with the law. While pre-Enlightenment patriarchal ideas and ideals about women “stem from religion, tradition, and custom,” the very spirit of the Enlightenment was to destabilize, and prove irrational, those pre-existing explanations of the world. This spirit of change opened passage for women to question “men using exactly the same revolutionary arguments applied against the Ancien Régime” (114). This freedom to question, however, came with consequences:

The male aristocracy so addressed will not hesitate to employ repressive violence to restore a ‘natural order’ that is in itself constituent violence. To re-place women in their space, to re-codify this new space that men will force women to stay in, men will apply exemplary measures [. . .]. (Amorós 114)

Ironically, in the so-called age of reason, the unreasonable traditions of patriarchy became ensconced in code and carried out in violence. This set the stage for people, even those in legal authority, to pre-interpret woman, further enacting violence towards her by
ignoring or assuming her subjectivity and identity based on pre-conceived and antiquated notions that now carried a weight of legality (Amorós 117).

**Patriarchy and U.S. Imperialism in Twentieth Century Puerto Rico: Setting the Stage for the Women’s Movements of the 1970s**

Because of the deep-rooted normalization of these patriarchal beliefs, they go unquestioned and mostly unchallenged during much of the nineteenth century in Latin America. Though there were some incidents of women who break out of prescribed roles, the feminist movement did not emerge as a significant social factor in nineteenth-century Puerto Rican colonial society as it did in Europe and the United States (Acosta-Belen 4). With the turn of the twentieth century, however, several important changes began to take place that influenced the status of women and their roles. We see in Puerto Rico’s history an example of these changes. The shift from subsistence-based, family farming to the hacienda system during the nineteenth century created a “structural step towards capitalism” and the development of a “class in need of selling its labor” (Acosta-Belen 6). Then, in 1898 Puerto Rico passed from being a colony of Spain to being militarily occupied and claimed by the United States after the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War. The U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico led to the end of the hacienda agrarian system as the main economic model on the island and spurred a growing move towards capitalist industrialization during the first half of the twentieth century (Acosta-Belen 7).

The U.S. control of Puerto Rico was economically polemical in a variety of ways as it ushered in a model of production centered predominately around sugar cane and
tobacco. This development of commercial enterprises brought in “an influx of foreign capital looking for cheap labor” (Picó 47), simultaneously demanding and devaluing Puerto Rican labor. Furthermore, this model of single product production for export set the Puerto Rican economy on precarious ground if those products ever decreased in demand or if the market price went down due to competing suppliers. Still, the expansion of industrialization and the end of the hacienda system marked a significant change in the lived reality of women, as the need for cheap labor included the need for women in the workforce. Though women had worked alongside men during the time of subsistence farming and the hacienda system in domestic and service roles, they were predominately not gainfully employed. Their work was essential but also taken for granted.

While the new economy relied heavily on women, it also exploited them. The workforce was divided into gender specific roles, and the roles of women were the lowest paid and set in terrible working conditions. The industrialized economy marked a new era in the public roles of women, but the preferential treatment of men persisted, and patriarchal traditions were enacted in new and unique ways. In fact, as Picó points out, this move to the workforce not only didn’t erase women’s inferior status; it actually highlighted it: “For the first time in our history, women recognized a collective experience as a position of subjugation [. . . ] oppression was part of their new collective experience” (Picó 50). The traditions of patriarchy and machismo remained very much intact in both the public/political arena as well as in the private/domestic arena. Edna Acosta-Belén notes:
Despite the dramatic changes experienced by Puerto Rico since industrialization and the changing role of women, sexism and male chauvinism remain deeply rooted in Puerto Rican culture and society. Institutions and social and cultural patterns inherited from the past continue to deny and deprive women of real equality. (14-15)

The turn of the nineteenth century indeed saw an increase in women’s participation in the production of the country, coupled with an increase in their exploitation. It was from this context, however, that it also saw a growing number of women (and men) who rose up and began to fight for the rights of women, now so obviously denied. The Feminist Movement in Puerto Rico had two different but equally important branches: the petit bourgeois and the proletarian. The petit bourgeois suffragists demanded political rights for women, finally winning the vote for all women, regardless of literacy, in 1936 (Acosta-Belén 8). This major accomplishment (Puerto Rico was the second Latin American nation to grant women the vote), along with the advances for proletarian women in the areas of property rights, workers’ rights, and rights within the domestic space and marriage, marked a vibrant time in the feminist history of Puerto Rico. The proletarian feminist movement was centered on workers’ rights. Female workers joined with working class men as comrades and equals, fighting against the awful working conditions and exploitation suffered not only by women, but by many men as well.

These important battles weren’t easy, and they weren’t universally accepted and unquestioned. Acosta-Belén explains some of the reason for this:
Political parties in Puerto Rico have always downplayed the issue of feminism and women’s liberation since it is perceived as a threat to the institution of the family which has been so traditionally valued in Puerto Rican culture, and to the male superiority and female subordination ingrained in the patriarchal concept of machismo. (14)

Many of the unions and coalitions that were formed in the early decades of the twentieth century, both labor and feminist alike, were dissolved during the late 1930s and ‘40s. However, those early movements set the stage for what would come in the closing decades of the century.

After several decades, the women’s movement began to gain ground again in the 1960s in Puerto Rico, as it did across the globe. This came with many advances for women. In 1976 family and labor laws regarding community property in marriage, authority over children, and labor practices were revised to make them more equitable. By the ‘70s many Puerto Rican women, a demographic that was previously largely illiterate, had received a secondary education. And though the work force was still sexist and segregated, women came to make up a third of the labor force and 46% of government employees (Valle Ferrer 80). What’s more, women’s groups and coalitions began to take shape again. Political parties began to appeal to women, creating women’s organizations within their ranks. The Popular Democratic Party even passed legislation in 1972 in favor of creating a commission that would: “contribute to improving the status of women and protecting them from the discrimination that they had been subjected to in the past” (Valle Ferrer 82). Though this commission didn’t accomplish what it promised, it marks a heightened state of awareness for Puerto Rican women.
However, by the end of the twentieth century when Ferré and Nolla started producing their work, women were still suffering from and responding to the consequences of the patriarchal system (Acosta-Belén 3). Though disheartening, this wasn’t exactly unexpected since this centuries old system had been, at every point, reified and more firmly fixed in its oppressive nature. Though exemplified here in Puerto Rico’s history, this is true throughout Latin America. The patriarchal tradition in Latin America has deep and convoluted roots, and each country’s legal systems find their roots intertwined with that of patriarchy. While women’s legal position cannot be attributed exclusively to either societal sentiment or legal inequality, strong factors as they are on their own, the contingency of that social sentiment on legal inequality (and vice versa) has solidified the inferior treatment of women in Latin America since colonial times, making the subordination of women to men “almost absolute” (Acosta-Belén 3). This reified system, which carefully and intentionally protects the men within it, also gives way for those men to carry out their own acts of self-preservation, oftentimes for a high price: they preserve themselves by destabilizing the identity of women.

The Horizontally Divided Inheritance in “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres”

In her short story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres,” Rosario Ferré exposes the hegemonic hold and restrictions that a legal inheritance can impose on women in a patriarchal society. Ferré, however, doesn’t just expose this oppressive system. Throughout her collection of short stories and poems entitled Papeles de Pandora (1976), Ferré creates female characters that gain agency and, taking autonomous
action, subvert and overturn the control of these hegemonic systems. Cynthia A. Sloan notes that:

For Ferré, this first impulse of freedom does not result simply from rejecting patriarchal configurations of female identity. Instead, she engages them in order to destabilize the patriarchal determinations that infuse these images with meaning. (Sloan 38)

This story, like “La Sunamita” (discussed in Chapter 4), centers on the theme of inheritance to subvert and complicate the dominant understanding of women’s role in society. In this case, instead of having an inheritance passed on from one generation to another, this inheritance is horizontal and divided between two women. Though this story deals with several themes, including the economy of female currency, I will focus primarily on the divided inheritance as a manifestation of the man’s patriarchal control and prerogative, even after death. The inheritance represents the man’s legal ability to enforce his will over the women in his life, and serves as the tool with which he carries his plans out. I will then analyze that same legal control, the inheritance, as the starting point of the man’s demise.

“Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” is a short story about two women, Isabel la Negra and Isabel Luberza, who love the same man, Ambrosio. In the story, Isabel Luberza is Ambrosio’s wife, a dame of society. She is a white woman of Hispanic descent. Isabel la Negra is, as her name so blatantly states, a black woman. She is Ambrosio’s lover and becomes a prostitute. Though her story is fictional, Ferré draws upon the social history of her own hometown, Ponce, Puerto Rico, to develop these characters. Historically, Isabel Luberza was Isabel la Negra. She was a black woman
who rose to renown and financial success as the owner of a brothel in Ponce. For the sake of her story, however, Ferré portrays the two women individually as Ambrosio draws dividing lines between them, their reputations, and their functions in reference to him.

The action of this story is triggered not by Ambrosio’s infidelity, but rather by his decision in life to divide his inheritance between the two women upon his death. The women are unaware of this decision until Ambrosio dies. Out of kindness for her counterpart’s reputation, Isabel la Negra doesn’t initially claim her half of the inheritance, which would entail sharing the house that they’ve both inherited. However, years later, Isabel la Negra comes for her inheritance, and the two women see each other face to face for the first time.

The private scandal that Ambrosio provokes through his ongoing infidelity causes a disruption within his house and family. The decision to divide his inheritance makes this scandal public and fixes it in a legal way, “restrellando tu buen nombre contra las paredes del pueblo” (22). What’s more, his private transgression becomes a social sin when he decides to give a prostitute part of what, in the public eye, rightfully should belong to his legitimate wife, a woman in good social standing. He transgresses social lines of stratification, raising the prostitute to the equivalent of a legitimate position in society and lowering his wife to a shared status with Isabel la Negra. From the first line of the short story, this act and scandal are named and centrally situated in the ensuing action.

The irony of the situation is made obvious: Ambrosio is transgressing social lines and social roles that he himself has created for Isabel la Negra and Isabel Luberza (the
roles of prostitute and dame of society, respectively). These definitions come as a direct reflection of who the women are with regards to Ambrosio, and who he allows or demands them to be. As with all acts of classification, the distinction between them that he has created is an act of control. This implies, however, that in transgressing the same social and legal lines that he has created, he works against the very system of control that he has put in place. The result of this is a blurred line of distinction between two women whom he worked so hard to keep compartmentalized: “porque nosotras, Isabel Luberza e Isabel la Negra, en nuestra pasión por ti, Ambrosio, desde el comienzo de los siglos, nos habíamos estado acercando, nos habíamos estado santificando la una a la otra sin darnos cuenta” (23). In the end, it is through this singular, unified identity that the women ultimately subvert Ambrosio’s hold.

As an act of control, it is important to note that Ambrosio’s decision to divide his inheritance is not a benevolent or innocent impulse that just happens to backfire in the end; it is planned, calculated and self-serving. It is, effectively, his use of the law as a way to maintain a hold over the Isabels. In the Triangle of Desire, this is the act with which Ambrosio attempts to displace them from the plane of subjectivity, in order to reach his desired state.

Isabel la Negra exposes Ambrosio’s plan of self-preservation to the reader: “empezaste a temer que me vieran [the young sons of Ambrosio’s friends to whom Ambrosio “lends” Isabel la Negra] a escondidas de ti, que me pagaran más de lo que tú me pagabas, que un día te abandonara definitivamente. Entonces, [. . . ] redactaste un testamento nuevo” (34). Isabel la Negra knows that the inheritance is not a gift free of obligation for her; it is instead a security investment that Ambrosio makes for himself.
Ambrosio attempts to secure Isabel la Negra’s faithfulness to him, and more importantly her rejection of all others, even in his death, through the means of a horizontally divided inheritance.

We can trust Isabel la Negra’s conclusion that this will is intended to guarantee her faithfulness after he dies because of the nature of a will, which can only be enacted after the death of its author. There is no other way for a will to take effect, and that has always been the case. We see that even in the Hebrew Biblical Law this is also true: “a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living” (Hebrews 9:17). In effect, one could argue that the body of the will is intended to take the place of the body of the person who dies, in this case Ambrosio. His intention then, as Isabel la Negra points out, is to bind her to the will in his stead; to legally give her part of his estate, yes, but to also legally obligate her loyalty and faithfulness to him as well.

Ambrosio’s divided will is, in many ways, very cruel as he makes assumptions about Isabel la Negra and exploits her weaker social position, the very social position that he took part in creating when he prostituted her out to his friends’ sons. He assumes, because of these factors, or perhaps because he sees money as the only thing of real value, that she will need his money. He further assumes that his inheritance is enough to secure her fidelity to him for an indefinite amount of time after he dies, essentially until her own death. His plan, much like Apolonio’s plan in “La Sunamita,” reveals that the true inheritance is the undermining of Isabel la Negra’s identity and subjectivity while his subjectivity, desires, and power live on even after his physical death. Though the act of
giving the inheritance seems to benefit la Negra at first, the connection that is reinforced is within Ambrosio and his side of the triangle.

The divided inheritance is an attempted act of control on Isabel Luberza’s life, as well. One has to wonder why Ambrosio doesn’t just give Isabel la Negra his entire estate since she is clearly the woman who fans the flame of his passion and satisfies his erotic impulses. She is the true object of his affection and the reflection that reaffirms his precarious identity, as Woolf observes (24). Or, in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, she is: “made to represent all of man’s ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence” (34). Still, even though Isabel Luberza sits outside of Ambrosio’s romantic and passionate desires, she reaffirms his identity in another, socially significant, way; drastically different than Isabel la Negra, but equally important in Ambrosio’s eyes. The reason for including his wife in the inheritance, I propose, is centered squarely around the patriarchal tradition of patrilineal desire.

Ambrosio’s decision regarding Luberza has to do with preserving his lineage and name through a woman who is socially qualified to do so. While Isabel la Negra reaffirms Ambrosio’s private persona, Isabel Luberza establishes his public, social standing: “la alcurnia de nuestros apellidos” (37). Her porcelain white skin displays her pedigree as the one who is socially and racially fit to carry “la semilla sagrada” that received Ambrosio’s “orgasmo fértil” (38); the seed that will carry on Ambrosio’s name and social position alike. A legal dissolution between Ambrosio and Isabel Luberza would indeed be of no benefit to Ambrosio since custom dictates that his legitimate lineage depends on her good name.
She, too, fits in the theory of the triangle. But rather than elevating her to a position above her social standing, as he does with Isabel la Negra when he gives a prostitute an inheritance befitting that of a dame of society, Ambrosio effectively lowers Isabel Luberza by giving her only half of the inheritance that she rightfully and legally would otherwise receive. He lowers her to the level of a prostitute, a woman who doesn’t get what she deserves as her husband’s equal, but is rather paid for her services. In doing so Ambrosio forms an inverted triangle with Isabel Luberza by ultimately creating two triangles back-to-back with the two Isabels falling into an existence of mirroring each other on either side of the plane of subjectivity. Though the actions done to the two Isabels seem opposite, they are indeed one and the same. Sherry Ortner describes this phenomenon in terms of culture: the woman is above the man (referring to the spiritual) or below the man (the woman made monster), but never next to the man, excluded from the plane of culture that is in fact represented by manliness and the pen (26-27).13 In Ferré’s story, both women have been set to the side, written into a partial existence through Ambrosio’s legal will and testament as part of his quest to secure his precarious identity.

In both cases, the divided inheritance has as much, if not more, to do with Ambrosio as it does with the women. While the partial inheritance confirms the partial worth of each woman as subordinated subjects in Ambrosio’s economy, this legal decision is an act of self-preservation for Ambrosio on both a private and public level. At the root of the decision is a man split between the patriarchal traditions of lineage that he would give almost anything to preserve, and his own passions that, ironically, can’t be

13 Gilbert and Gubar expand on the idea of Woman as angel or monster in their chapter “Toward a Feminist Poetics” (1980).
fully realized within those same patriarchal traditions. Indeed, at the root of the decision is a precarious male identity. Ambrosio’s identity is precarious in two ways: on one hand, he is divided and insecure of himself, and he needs mirrors that can “reflect him as bigger than he is” (Woolf 24). On the other hand, his identity is literally precarious as he is dying, soon to be stripped, irreparably, of all control; and though he has been able to use his assets in order to secure his desires in the past, his money, his social position, and his sexual drive cannot impede his imminent death. Ambrosio’s inheritance, again, not unlike Apolonio’s (as I will show in Chapter 4), signifies a sinister attempt to extend his life and identity after death at the expense of the women’s lives. At the expense of Isabel Luberza, he would extend his life through lineage and renown, and at the expense of Isabel la Negra he would extend his life by securing her affections forever.

Though Ambrosio’s actions with the women are culturally normalized, his divided inheritance is historically and legally rare. His plan supports the dominant meanings of lineage that his culture perpetuates by upholding hegemonic ideas that would dictate that he, the male, makes the legal decisions that are convenient to him. However, in including Isabel la Negra, Ambrosio steps outside the bounds of historical normality. In his desperate attempt to affirm his identity, Ambrosio takes the privately condoned lover and makes her a public spectacle. He enters into the tradition of patriarchal inheritances and lineages only to sabotage his own plans.

When considering that all important detail in light of the Triangle of Desire, it is clear that the final point of the triangle for Ambrosio, his desired state, includes but goes far beyond sexual satisfaction and social renown; his desire, in reality, is for those things to exist in perpetuity. For Ambrosio, as with others, this is a question of identity. He
doesn’t just desire the immediate satisfaction that comes with his public and private personas, he desires for his identity to be established and secured long after his death. Indeed, he wishes for immortality. That would be the greatest satisfaction. Perhaps that is the desire behind every patriarchal lineage and inheritance. To accomplish this, the women are necessary pieces, for they are carriers and affirmers of his identity as long as they don’t trade his identity for an identity of their own. As such, in Ambrosio’s plan they must be emptied of their identity in order to make room enough to bear his.

The legal inheritance, then, becomes an instrument that the hegemonic system has placed in Ambrosio’s control that can help him accomplish his plan. What would appear to be a gain for the women, receiving a large inheritance (for even if divided, we can only assume that the two halves would be large in and of themselves), is in fact the very mechanism that would destabilize their identity. After a lifetime of creating and establishing the two Isabels’ roles and dependence upon himself, the divided inheritance is Ambrosio’s final, legal, declaration that without him they are nothing; more specifically, without him they are no one. His patriarchal society has given him, and only him, the prerogative to decide how that money is divided, giving Ambrosio more power in death than the women have in life. It is with this tool that Ambrosio enacts the process of re-signification on the women; their newly conceived identities being a distant cry from their former selves. If executed successfully, Ambrosio’s plan would not only displace the Isabels from the plane of subjectivity, but it would remove them indefinitely. For in a perfect world (for Ambrosio), as the architect of their identities, only he would be able to release them; impossible to accomplish once he has died.
Ferré, however, does not leave the Isabels without the agency Ambrosio tried to strip them of. In a world that has been created around them, the two women have little or no authority to overpower the system that binds them with brute force from the outside. They did not overpower Ambrosio’s constructs in life, nor transcend the roles assigned to them, and the chance to do it in his death would appear beyond hope. Instead of an act of brute force, something that is not allowed for submissive, docile women, the two Isabels, in an act of true rebellion, adhere to their prescribed, permitted actions…and they do submit. Rather than struggle to overpower it head on, they allow themselves to be taken in to Ambrosio’s constructed world before subverting it from the inside.

The Isabels’ acts of subversion begin before Ambrosio’s death, as the two, from afar, willfully begin to blend into one, both in body and in voice. Though Ambrosio has blurred the very lines of distinction that he had placed between them in the past, negating their identities and reducing them to caricatures, this act of blending together into one is their own doing, and it, indeed, draws out the complexities of who they really are. No longer trapped in a mirror image of one another, Ferré blurs the words of each woman, making distinction between their voices difficult to distinguish at times throughout the story. Their words are the first evidence the reader is given of similarities between them. Then, each envisions the other, bringing their counterpart to life within their very own minds and lives. Their physical bodies, so drastically different when first described, also start to blend, so that when they finally meet face to face they each see the other as themself (41).

This course of action destabilizes the different roles that Ambrosio has assigned to the women. Initially each woman carries on her body the signifying mark of different
aspects of Ambrosio’s compartmentalized identity; the dame Isabel Luberza’s porcelain skin and silky hair; the prostitute Isabel la Negra’s black skin and cherry red lips. As the two women become one, the dividing walls between them, upon which Ambrosio has built his life and identity, begin to collapse. When this process of metamorphosis reaches its climax at the end of the story, and the two women are physically brought together in time and space at the house they must legally divide, the two different poles of Ambrosio’s life are brought forcefully together. The two Isabe...siempre hemos sabido que debajo de cada dama de sociedad se oculta una prostituta [... ] porque nosotras siempre hemos sabido que cada prostituta es una dama en potencia” (23).

As the two women willfully crash into each other, they also crash onto the plane of subjectivity. Together the Isabels have established themselves as whole subjects and not partial caricatures. They have disposed of the two-dimensional categories that the patriarchal practices allowed for them and they have repurposed the binding inheritance to fit it into their desires, to serve their purpose. Interestingly enough, that purpose includes deciding together to turn the house into a brothel. While Ambrosio can no longer reach beyond the grave he so desperately wanted to escape, the Isabels break free of the half-life which Ambrosio relegated them to and finally begin to live, taking their place as autonomous subjects on the plane of subjectivity.

**Patriarchal Inheritances and Legitimate Lines: Legality and Legitimacy in the Domestic Space in Two Poems by Olga Nolla**
Questions about the social construction of legal inheritances are closely related to the problematic of family lineages that has deep roots in Latin American cultures. For centuries the legitimacy of a woman depended directly on her relationship to the central man in her life: father, husband, even brother. While boys would eventually become men and gain their independence, women remained in that dependent state perpetually, their place in the family lineage being subsumed by the place of the man. Olga Nolla engages this problematic in order to confront it in her two poems “Para quien tañen a fiestas las campanas” from her book of poems *El sombrero de plata*, and “Educación sentimental” from her book of poems *El ojo de la tormenta*, both published in 1976.

Nolla’s poetry is marked by a bold poetic voice that has no fear in expressing discontent with the accepted societal code of conduct. Throughout her work her poetic voice embraces her independence, her erotic nature and her understanding and interpretation of the world around her. Nolla’s critique ranges from the aristocratic class to the Catholic establishment to patriarchal society. Here, I will be analyzing her approach to the legality that stems from patriarchal traditions and sentiments in Latin America.

In Latin America, the oppression generated by patriarchal fervor and tradition was, indeed, reinforced with laws that then further legally restricted the rights of women who were already living out their existence in a perpetual orbit around men. While referencing Puerto Rican society, Acosta-Belén states:

Women of all classes were *conditioned* to be obedient daughters, faithful wives, and devoted mothers. *Their inferior status was reinforced by juridical inequality.* Laws concerning the family, the administration of community property in
marriage, authority over the children, and some labor practices limited the rights of women. (3; emphasis added)

The status of women in Latin America and the roles that were created for them, no matter their class, were reinforced both publicly and privately, through societal laws and cultural conditioning. As Mala Htun points out, laws in civil states were directly connected to the worldviews of that society rather than just to legal proceedings. In these societies the law was expected to maintain a certain moral order as well (10-11). It would seem that women had no recourse as they were closed in on all sides by the unquestionable code of patriarchy.

As with all unquestioned systems, those who desired to keep the patriarchal system in place expected it to remain unquestioned. Perhaps they saw the socially contingent walls set up on all sides of the woman and believed those walls to be naturally fixed and unmovable, or perhaps they were the ones who just didn’t bother to question them. Either way, whether out of the desire for control or out of genuine ignorance, the expectation was that women would accept their prescribed roles without hesitation or complaint. In fact, many well-intentioned men would probably have been shocked to find out that the women living in the patriarchal societies of Latin America desired anything other than the patriarchal bounds within which they lived. Nolla is an author who breaks with that expectation through her work.

Writing from within such a reified system requires an understanding of the complexities of that system and its public and private realms, as well as a certain engagement with the system itself. Olga Nolla doesn’t just engage the system of patrilineal preference, but she names it. She brings the untouchable down to her pen’s
level; she brings the unquestionable to the forefront of her mouth. Then, in the most personal way, she doesn’t just speak the system; she speaks specific names within the system. Nolla names the impersonal system and she names the familiar names. She enters into the political and the personal, for she knows that the personal is political and that where those two overlap exists a point of vulnerability that she can attack. For the purposes of this chapter, the analysis of Nolla’s work focuses on the poems “Para quien tañen a fiesta las campanas” and “La educación sentimental.”

“Para quien tañen a fiestas las campanas:” The Destruction of the Symbol

Nolla’s poem “Para quien tañen a fiesta las campanas” centers on the construct of male lineage, rightful heirs, and the family line. In this poem, the narrative voice refers to the grandfather, the macho, gun shooting, military-dressed, imposing six-foot figure who is the symbol of the family. Her act of confronting this construct, then, coincides with confronting her grandfather, and reducing him, the symbol of the family, to a fixed, codified, finite – and ultimately destroyable – meaning; in other words, she converts the symbol into allegory.

The poem starts by establishing the grandfather’s identity and legacy: “mi abuelo solía reunir sus casi / treinta nietos / en el ancho balcón / frente a la casa solariega” (El ojo de la tormenta 10). This image juxtaposes the grandfather’s stately past (casa solariega) with the future legacy that will continue his name (casi treinta nietos). At the very center of this family’s story, this family’s line, which stretches from the past and

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reaches into the future, is the grandfather. He is an imposing figure who commands attention: “ejercía un hechizo, / sobre los nietos, hijos, sirvientes / y empleados, / sobre los habitantes de toda la comarca” (El ojo de la tormenta 11). Similarly, this family is prominent and imposing, commanding attention in a society that is driven by social class and lineage.

The macho-male grandfather, with his ancestry and future seemingly secured, epitomizes and symbolizes the hegemonic, paternalistic system of legitimate family lines. No doubt his grandfather once stood in that very place, the ancestral home, symbolizing that exact same system, desiring his own future family line that is now represented in the poetic voice’s abuelo. Now this grandfather is ready for his desires to be fulfilled and reinforced. There is, however, one thing in the grandfather’s well-established, well-controlled patriarchal world that is out of place: his granddaughter.

This granddaughter, the poetic voice, does not fit into the essentialist box that has been created for women within the system: an all-encompassing gender construct of docility, passivity, and dependency upon which the system’s own future depends. The poetic voice fails to check those determined (and determinist) boxes: “En cuanto a mí respecta, / solía mirarme andar con paso decidido” (El ojo de la tormenta 11). This verse is the hinge upon which the poem turns, as the poetic voice’s decided step marks the point of disruption to the harmony in which everyone in the grandfather’s world lives.

The grandfather’s response to his granddaughter’s purposeful gait confirms that such purpose is not expected and not allowed for a woman in the grandfather’s system: “y comentaba en broma / (o entre broma y en serio): / ¡Qué hombre se perdió / en esa muchachita!” (El ojo de la tormenta 11). Within the grandfather’s system, the men are
hombres while the women are muchachitas. Men can walk with purpose, but women should have no such decided step. The list of the poetic voice’s gender transgressions continues, and includes having healthy shoulders and the fact that she would gallop on her horse through desert planes and sugar cane fields, in spite of getting cut by the sugar cane’s sharp leaves. All the while the grandfather sat unsettled: “sostenía sus ojos / cuadrándome y frunciendo la nariz” (El ojo de la tormenta 12).

The poetic voice recognizes that there was a time when she did not understand these strange reactions from her grandfather, but now that has changed: “ahora que comprendo / que cuando me apuntabas con el dedo / deseando un hombre, / era que sobre mi cabeza / hubieras colocado tu corona.” (El ojo de la tormenta 12). As she discovers the truth, the reader discovers the truth: the poetic voice’s actions are actually fitting, according to the grandfather, but her gender is not. As we inferred in the analysis of Amorós’s work above, the practices that constitute being a male lose their male-ness when performed by a woman. The grandfather could never place his crown (reserved for a rightful heir) on the head of a muchachita, for his patriarchal system will not allow it. The grandfather betrays his own intentions. It is not enough for him to gather his thirty grandchildren and bask in the legacy carried on in his progeny if there is no male heir who is qualified to carry on the family name and line. In the grandfather’s system, only a male can one day stand where he stands.

In the scheme of the Triangle of Desire, this poem stands alone, unique among the oworks we will analyze. The grandfather attempts to push his granddaughter off the line of subjectivity, both in his discourse and his actions, not because he wishes to use her in order to fulfill his desires, but because if she remains on that plane, her very existence
would negate his desires. She, a woman, would take the place of the imposing male figure of the family if he does not stop her, because she possesses the necessary attributes. Though he wishes her to be passive, he has seen and knows the strength of her decided step, and even he can anticipate the outcome. Nolla doesn’t depict the grandfather employing the legal tradition in order to destabilize his granddaughter’s agency; rather it is his legal tradition that demands her removal from the plane of subjectivity in order for it to be preserved. That tradition then provides the grandfather with the language to use in order to accomplish his scheme.

The trigger for Nolla’s confrontation with this patriarchal system is that moment of understanding for the poetic voice. When she finally realizes what her grandfather was doing all those times he pointed her out, that he actually values his legacy more than his own granddaughter, she exclaims: “casi podría detestarte” (El ojo de la tormenta 12). Understanding leads to anger, and out of that anger springs the destabilizing action that she takes against her grandfather and, by extension, against the system as a whole since he is its symbol.

Nolla begins to destroy the symbol of her grandfather when she has the poetic voice name him directly, Don Alfredo Ramírez de Arellano (El ojo de la tormenta 11). She connects the infinitely signifying symbol of the grandfather (and the system he represents) to one specific human being who is finite, bound by space and time, and two generations closer to the grave than she is. With just one stroke of the pen, the symbolic grandfather becomes the very specific Alfredo Ramírez de Arellano. The grandfather’s limitless, misogynistic control has now been named and thus controlled, made vulnerable by the granddaughter to time, space and even death.
This act of naming her grandfather happens not once, but twice. The second time, Nolla codifies his signification even further as she binds it to a fixed point with a universally fixed meaning: his tomb. In doing this she takes the eternally present symbol of the grandfather and converts him into allegory: “Mírame ahora, abuelo, / Don Alfredo Ramírez de Arellano, / estoy frente a tu tumba / y golpeo a la puerta de tu ataúd” (El ojo de la tormenta 12). Standing at the edge of his grave, the poetic voice marks the grandfather’s death by setting his meaning in stone (literally). The tombstone is a well-known marker of allegory, for while the symbol exists always in the present, allegory marks the past; while the symbol tries to forget what has come before, allegory always remembers; while a symbol’s meaning is infinite, allegory’s meaning is fixed. Avelar describes it in these terms: “Allegory maintains a fundamental relationship with time. Whereas the symbol privileges timeless, eternalized images, allegory, by virtue of being a ruin, is necessarily a temporalized trope, bearing within itself the marks of its time production” (4).

There is very little in our world that is more fixed, that maintains a greater relationship with time, than a tombstone. As a result of this metamorphosis from symbol to allegory the grandfather, and the system he personified, end up still, lifeless, and powerless in the ground beneath the poetic voice’s feet. She is the one who now sends out the commands, ones that the grandfather is unable to respond to in his death: “levántate, / Ajá, / sí, / así, / Ahora que me miras de nuevo / Ajá, / sí, / así / [ . . . ] ¿me dirías lo mismo? / Contéstame, / ¡Te ordeno me respondas!” (El ojo de la tormenta 12). The grandfather, of course, marked by the silence and lifelessness of the grave, is unable to respond. The symbol of the patriarchal system of the family line has been destroyed
with the marked death of the grandfather. With this, the only voice the reader is left hearing is that of the poetic voice, a female, who has broken out of the life-taking force of the family line and has broken onto the plane of subjectivity.

“La educación sentimental:” The Privilege of a Lost Identity

Nolla’s poem “La educación sentimental” speaks of the legacy of a social inheritance that is designated for, and required of, the aristocratic woman in Puerto Rico. Nolla interrogates this inheritance in two ways: first, she represents the disillusion that the aristocratic woman experiences because of the restrictive nature of the legacy that is left to her; and second, she destabilizes the idea of this social inheritance by exposing the irony of the perpetual paradox that exists between the privileges of her social position and the physiological and emotional effects that her position forces upon her.

The disillusionment experienced by the poetic voice is rooted in the restrictive nature and demands of her social inheritance. Unlike an inheritance of goods or character traits, the inheritance of a social position demands constant attention and preservation of that very position: “me dijeron [. . . ] / que debía conservar mi posición aristocrática” (El sombrero de plata 15). This act of preservation, required as it is, dominates all other aspects of the woman’s being. It restricts the woman’s body and her actions carried out within that body, for only certain body types and activities are worthy of the aristocratic class, and it restricts the possibilities of identity for her future self.
The poetic voice notes that the actions taken in the body are under constant supervision as part of one’s status in the aristocratic class.\textsuperscript{15} She must know how to behave in public, and be able to organize dinners. She must dress well and appropriately, so as not to betray the established rules set before her. Similarly, her body itself is under surveillance: “a juntar las piernas al sentarme / de modo que nunca se sospechara el nacimiento de los muslos” (\textit{El sombrero de plata} 15). Naturally, in this society if someone were to suspect her thighs and, as such, that which is between them, then it would be her fault. While her body must be dressed to draw attention to her class, her dress should in no way draw attention to her body, which must remain hidden and invisible. Her class trumps her identity, as she serves as a marker of class for the men in her family, and anything that distracts from the strong announcement of her social position must be truncated at the source. Instead of allowing her body to be seen, her position demands that her body do nothing more (and without a doubt nothing less) than create future aristocratic babies. It’s arguable that the implication is that she must exchange calling attention to the \textit{nacimiento de sus muslos} for the \textit{nacimiento} of her children.

These restrictions have profound effects on the trajectory of her life as well. Because of her social inheritance, her course is predetermined: “trazado con una precisión matemática” (\textit{El sombrero de plata} 15). First, she is to marry a man “como mi padre” (\textit{El sombrero de plata} 15); not like her father in terms of character, but rather someone of his same social position (or perhaps those two are seen as interchangeable), who can give her the same type of life that her father can give her mother. Still, the

\textsuperscript{15} See, also, Nolla’s poem “Cierto y Falso” regarding social expectations for women of the aristocratic class.
social position of her suitor is of highest importance since her position comes from her father and will be carried on by her husband. The irony of the system is that, though her position demands much maintenance on her part, she is not autonomously aristocratic. She could never achieve this on her own; all her hard work to preserve her station would be futile without a man of her same station by her side. In addition, her carefully calculated path requires that she have many children and that she participate in activities designated to women of her class: “actos caritativos” and “fiestas que son la admiración y envidia / de los más prestigiosos círculos de la sociedad” (El sombrero de plata 16).

In spite of its restrictive nature, the poetic voice fulfills the duty her inheritance demands, but “sin embargo, algo anda mal” (El sombrero de plata 16). Her disillusion with her position in society is not limited to the fact that she is restricted within that position. The real problem is that, in spite of having “cumplido mis instrucciones al pie de la letra” (El sombrero de plata 16), her identity has begun to fade, and her socially acceptable facade is just a skeleton of her true self: “todas las noches / cuando me siento frente al espejo / para aplicarme los cosméticos de rigor / encuentro que mi cara huye despavorida / no puedo acordarme de cómo era mi boca / y el color de los ojos se me diluye entre las lágrimas” (El sombrero de plata 16). Her unrecognizable face is arguably a reflection of her unrecognizable identity. Julia de Burgos, one of the most important poets in Puerto Rico in the twentieth century, depicts this duality of aristocratic identities in her poem “A Julia de Burgos” (1938): “porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo; / [ . . . ] Tú eres fría muñeca de mentira social, / y yo, viril destello de la humana verdad” (2). The difference is that the poetic voice in Nolla’s poem has not yet discovered her essence, and she is left with what de Burgos calls the cold doll of the
social lie. What’s more, she may never discover it, for that would imply refusing her inheritance and resisting what is rightfully hers. It would require an act of rebellion, and such acts are not permitted among women of her aristocratic position.

The irony of this situation, however, is that this life experience is not just an unexpected side effect of her social inheritance; it is the very thing her educación sentimental has prepared for her. The viciously perpetual cycle of her class inheritance is that the docility, idleness, and passivity that her class affords her are actually inescapable burdens of that class. Her symptoms at the hand of these burdens, then, are prepared for her in advance. Here are some of the symptoms she notes at the end of the poem:

“duermo mucho / no como casi nada / [. . . ] Yo solo quiero que me dejen acostar / y quedarme quieta / y no mover más nunca / ni un solo músculo del cuerpo” (El sombrero del plata 16). The question is, was there ever a chance that she would not fall into this identity abyss when her privileges include “organizar una comida sentada servida en bandejas de plata” (El sombrero de plata 15), instead of eating something herself; “levantarme a las once de la mañana,” instead of waking up early to be active during the day; “tener dos sirvientas por lo menos” (El sombrero de plata 16) who move their muscles all day long so that she doesn’t have to? “Después de todo, tengo derecho, he cumplido mis instrucciones al pie de la letra” (El sombrero de plata 16; emphasis added).

As the poetic voice points out, she has fulfilled her side of the bargain, and with that she now has the right to the very things that are causing her to fade away. Her education, after all, is sentimental and not practical. It is an education of laziness, one that reflects more on her husband’s wealth and ability to have a kept wife than it does on the wife’s interests or abilities. Her class gives her the right to a forgotten identity.
When analyzed through the lens of the Triangle of Desire, we notice that that which is at work against the woman in this poem isn’t one particular person or man, but rather the aristocratic society as a whole, embodied not in human form, but in code and unwritten expectations. If read in those terms, the desired state of the aristocratic society, the end point on the triangle, is to reproduce itself. The inheritance of the so-called privileges that women in this class receive from birth is actually the mechanism that assures that these women will not stray from their purpose and function within the patriarchal system. As the poetic voice describes, these women are taught their purpose, but then they are also forced into it by having their bodies and minds conditioned to be incapable of anything else. Much like the process of symbolization, the connection between the identity that the woman’s class demands and her sense of self is not naturally occurring; it is assigned and then learned. They are taught to be docile and so they become docile; they are taught to be modest and so they become modest, and so forth. Their sentimental education doesn’t open the world up to them for their appropriation, rather it opens the women up to the aristocratic class for its appropriation; it puts them at the aristocratic class’s disposal. These women are simultaneously disregarded by and indispensable to their class. Their pedigree assures the continuation of a lineage of purebred aristocrats in the world, but it doesn’t assure the woman of a real footing in that same world.

Unlike in her previous poem, Nolla doesn’t break boundaries in this one. The woman is left in her kept state; she is not only kept financially, but she is kept passive and docile, an adornment who reproduces. The plane of subjectivity continues to project on toward the future. The aristocratic class continues on that plane, self-perpetuating and
achieving its desired state time and time again, while the woman is stagnant, relegated to a life as the connecting point of the triangle, without autonomy or agency. Even at a historical time when women were gaining more agency during the 1970s, the end of this poem reminds the reader of a reality that still persists. To construct a fully liberated woman at the end of every poem or work of literature would be the dream, but it isn’t yet the reality.

A discursive strategy shared by Nolla and Ferré is that they both address the effects of patriarchy, whether it be codified legality, patriarchal traditions or both, from a situated point in time and space: Puerto Rico during the second half of the twentieth century. Though their works arguably speak about general themes regarding women in the face of set notions of patriarchal legitimacy, family lines, and inheritances, these two writers don’t fail to ground their works by naming actual historical figures from their lives and from Puerto Rico’s history. Ferré establishes the fictional life of a real person, Isabel la Negra. Similarly, Nolla’s two poems are tied to the reality of the aristocratic elite, and specifically her own family, on the island during much of the twentieth century. This personal and inductive approach to addressing the plight of women on a universal level is poignant and effective, drawing the readers into the authors’ critique of their particular world before opening up the broader world to their understanding. It is not, however, the only approach to destabilizing the patriarchal ties that bind women, as the discussion of Alemán’s work in the next section will demonstrate.

**Blind Desires and Shortsighted Lineages in *Poso Wells***
In her novel *Poso Wells* (2007), set in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Gabriela Alemán takes a different approach to confronting patriarchal traditions than Nolla and Ferré, for she places the question of a legitimate lineage in the hands of an invented race of creatures. Suffice it to say that these creatures are not real historical figures; but beyond that, they don’t even represent a certain race, class, or ethnicity. Their dominant defining characteristic is that they are male. In drawing the point of focus away from any specific person or human group, Alemán subverts the rationality of the system of legitimate lineages from a deductive standpoint, parodying the system on a universal level, and leaving the reader to apply her critique at a particular or personal level on their own.

*Poso Wells* is based in part on H.G. Wells’s *The Country of the Blind* (1911), which is set in Alemán’s native Ecuador. Her work is part detective/police novel, part mystery novel, and part political commentary. Much like the works in the tradition of *lo real maravilloso*, she writes a world where the real and the fantastic coincide in an expected and unquestioned fashion. Though this novel encompasses several primary themes, for the purposes of this dissertation I will center this analysis on Alemán’s use of humor and parody in order to critique the socially constructed and legally upheld tradition of the legitimate lineage. The book is episodic in nature, and has a wide range of characters, but we will look specifically at the section of the book entitled “Amazonas y Naciones Unidas.”

As previously mentioned, at the center of her story lies a mysterious population of blind creature-men who live in catacombs under Guayaquil. Gonzalo Varas is an investigative reporter who is following the disappearances of young women in the area. His investigation eventually lands him in these underground, pitch-black tunnels where
the only ones who can find their way around are the blind creature-men. The story unfolds, and these creature-men eventually wind up above ground, accompanying an aspiring presidential candidate whom they had previously captured and held for three weeks, unbeknownst to the general public. Though the candidate, Vicuenza, uses these men as political currency, claiming that they are divine wise men who have foretold his presidency, it is clear that they have a different agenda.

While different episodes with different characters unfold during this portion of the book, the politician, Vicuenza, and his staff tote these hapless underground creature-men around the city. They go from a press conference with Vicuenza, where they softly chant random phrases about God and the coming of the Son of Man, to an elegant hotel suite that the politician has reserved for them, treating these wise advisors with the utmost respect. The five wise men do not act as humans necessarily would, and they immediately open every faucet in the suite until their room is flooded, recreating, perhaps, the underground well from which they emerged. Their movements are clumsy, and their organisms are fragile, as Vicuenza’s assistant notes (217-18). In spite of all the discord, however, these men are undeterred: “pensaron que estaban en buen camino de lograr lo que se habían propuesto” (216). It’s important to note here that the narrator tells us that these creature-men have an agenda, they are acting with intention.

The reader is thus far unaware of what the wise men’s agenda actually entails. Their movements would suggest no such coordination and their hapless behavior seems to lack purpose and orientation. Apart from being blind, they seem to be figuratively groping in the dark through this aboveground world for other reasons as well.
It is at this point that the reader is reintroduced to a young, adolescent girl who has come from the town of Quevedo to the big city to try and make quick money in order to follow her ambitions. This quick money comes by way of prostitution. Sun Yi is followed one morning by some of the politician’s staff. She assumes those in the vehicle want to solicit her services, but before terms are agreed upon, she is pulled into the car: “esperen, esperen, yo suelo ponerme de acuerdo antes de subir al carro de un desconocido” (223). Her words fall on deaf ears. Instead: “un hombre regordete con manos minúsculas [. . .] le dije que si cooperaba no le pasaría nada y la dejarían ir al amanecer” (223). They take her to the blind men’s suite at the hotel. Upon reaching the door of the suite, Sun Yi sees the strange men inside and asks the chubby man escorting her what they want: “Poco [. . .] digamos que no mucho, un heredero,” (225, emphasis added). “¿Qué dijo? ¿Me va a dejar aquí? ¿Cuándo me puedo ir?” The man yells back at her: “hubo un cambio de planes, el tiempo de una gestación, digamos que algo así como nueve meses” (225-26).

The situation, in spite of its gravity, is humorous, and I posit that it is intentionally so. The entire mystery surrounding these horrific disappearances that have gripped the city of Guayaquil has to do with a community of strange creature-men who are going extinct because they have no women in their community and they cannot reproduce the future generation. Arguably, Alemán’s social commentary is clear: in the system of legitimate heirs, women, though necessary, are considered to have no lasting importance. The operators of this patriarchal system assign value exclusively to the male, as lineage is only traced from one male to another. The five blind men exemplify this patriarchal value, for they are not interested in co-existing with women, but still they are desperate
for one. This is why all of the women they have brought to their lair were kidnapped and held against their will, not invited to join the community.

In the situation at hand in the novel, it’s clear that Sun Yi has no value to the men either. They see past her to their next generation; she is nothing more than a way of securing their lasting legacy and identity. Still, in spite of their spite for women, Sun Yi possesses something they don’t have. They may not see her, either literally because they are blind or metaphorically because she is a woman, but they know they need her. Her gestation-capable body is the necessary element; a young female body with no sense of self but still sexually active and capable of reproduction.

With this revelation about the woman’s usefulness, we have the three pieces of the triangle laid out. Point 1, the men/creatures in their frustrated state as they desire an heir but have no way of producing one or sustaining their line on their own. Point 3, the men/creatures in their potential future state in which they have attained an heir, thus satisfying their desire. And point 2, the woman, who, in the Triangle of Desire, exists only as the necessary piece that connects points 1 and 3. She is literally the vehicle, meant to carry their heir, who can satisfy the frustration of the men and deliver them to their desired state. Once that is done, she is disposable:

![Figure 2](image-url)
Sun-Yi’s disposability reaffirms one crucial detail regarding this triangle that we have seen previously: the axis on which points 1 and 3 sit is the axis of both time and subjectivity. Through the men-creatures’ scheme, if successfully executed, Sun-Yi, point 2, would have to be displaced from that plane. Once subjectivity is destabilized, only then will she pass from being the woman that she is to being the useful instrument that the men-creatures require. This process is made possible and permissible because of the patriarchal demand for a legitimate heir.

**Destabilizing the Triangle**

Alemán is unique among the authors that we will study in this dissertation because a major strategy she uses in questioning the hegemonic hold of legality and legitimacy over women is humor and ridicule rather than biting irony. The only issue is that no one inside this world seems to get the joke. As just seen, Alemán destabilizes this notion of a legitimate heir by exposing the shortsighted, misogynistic underbelly of that whole institution; but her commentary doesn’t end there. Alemán employs her pointed humor in the scene of struggle between Sun Yi and the five creature-men in order to reveal the truth regarding the identity of the men, both fictional and real, behind these hegemonic systems of meaning. Alemán plays with the duality of incompetence and impotence in her representations of these creature-men and their failed system of legitimate heirs.

In the scene, Sun Yi is thrust into the creature-men’s room as the politician’s men leave to their own room. As Sun Yi enters the room, one of the creature-men comments: “A ver muchachos, tenemos que organizarnos, que así no se puede” (232). Discovering
their lack of vision (literally and figuratively) she realizes that they have no idea what they are doing, and that she can easily gain control of the situation with just a little planning. “A fin de cuentas nadie se había quedado para vigilarla y ella estaba en la habitación con un montón de viejos decrépitos que, encima, eran ciegos.” The scene continues: “entre todos no hacían un miembro erguido; los mayorcitos intentaban pero no podían” (232-33). The sight of five old blind men trying to “get it up” is so pathetic that it even inspires sympathy on the part of the narrator, manifest in the use of the diminutive: *mayorcitos*. At the core, these creature-men – who are trying to orchestrate a legitimate biological legacy with complete disregard for the woman involved, who have wreaked havoc in Guayaquil through mass abductions of women – are men of precarious masculinities. They could arguably be described as “incompetent,” and one starts to wonder how they were ever able to exert any control over anyone since this young teenager is not only unafraid in their presence, but also completely equipped to outsmart them.

The comedic scene doesn’t end there. The men do finally overpower Sun Yi, but only because their attempt at any sort of virile fluency takes so long that she gets lost in forming her own plan of escape, and the men are able to drag her to the floor. It is then that she remembers her snake, named X, whom she always carries with her in case she ever needs protection to “petrificar a sus clientes” (196). It’s worth noting that Sun Yi’s plan, though unusual, creates a stark juxtaposition to her male captors’ disorientation and lack of coordination. She procedes to put the snake on the belly of one of the men: “la X no alcanzó a deslizarse mucho pues sintiéndose amenazada clavó sus dientes en la primera protuberancia que encontró y que resultó ser el flácido miembro de uno de los
ancianos” (234). Sun Yi’s snake turns out to be more potent and virile than the old man, who dies shortly after. Before that happens, though, he lets out a yell that even the presidential candidate Vicuenza hears from the other room. As he comes running into the suite, Sun Yi slips out, never having to employ her escape plan, as the men make her get-away easier than she had expected. The precarious nature of the blind men’s lives (as old and frail) and masculinity (as impotent and without direction) puts into question the whole concept they have devised of engendering an heir. On one hand, the blindness from which these men suffer is not just physical; they lack the foresight to see why a community of men that is completely devoid of women will never be self-sustaining. Even if this attempt succeeds, what will happen when this new heir is old and decrepit like them? On the other hand, how was this attempt ever going to succeed? Not one of them is actually physically equipped with the anatomical and virile vigor to produce any offspring. Their plan has no reach beyond recognizing that there is a problem, and that a woman has to be involved in some way if they are going to fix it.

Alemán’s humor is undoubtedly pivotal in exposing the unstable base of the traditional system of a legitimate heir. In writing a scene where the design of the system is literally thwarted and figuratively ridiculed, Alemán does two important things with respect to the triangle of desire: 1) She keeps the men from reaching their desired state by way of impregnating a non-consenting Sun-Yi; and 2) she saves Sun-Yi’s character, claiming a space for her in the society of Guayaquil just as she is: unattached to any male or their lineage. In other words, Alemán gives Sun-Yi, a marginalized outsider, her own place and agency on the axis of subjectivity.
Conclusion

Whether it is through pointed irony or blatant humor, these authors confirm that the system of traditional and legal patriarchy in Puerto Rico and throughout Latin America manifests itself in every corner of society, and cannot go uncontested. Ferré and Nolla present protagonists and poetic voices that withstand the effects of the system. In “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” and “Para quien tañen, a fiestas, las campanas,” the women recover from those effects, and then, after their resilience has exposed the system’s vulnerability, they subvert it. Their situated writing draws the reader into the lived realities of women who are themselves withstanding the effects of the system. In destabilizing particular manifestations of patriarchy, these authors give way for the destabilization of the universal. Still, with these works, we see that the characters end up jaded or scarred. They withstand these emotional and psychological traumas, but they are still forced to suffer through them. In her poem “La educación sentimental,” Nolla presents a woman who suffers through those same traumas without being able to withstand them. She reminds us that the reality of patriarchy doesn’t just exist in the past tense.

Alemán’s approach is different. Sun-Yí, the victim of this part of the story, isn’t the protagonist of the novel. In fact, she only figures prominently in the novel during the extent of this episode. While she is clearly living in a world where patriarchal ideals still abound, she seems to be mostly in control of her life. She is a prostitute, yes, but she has chosen that profession and has some degree of agency within it. She is the target of the men-creatures’ scheme, but she escapes before having to withstand the would-be consequences of their plan. There is no recovery necessary. While the system of
patriarchy and its echoes are still around in the moment in which Poso Wells was written, Alemán’s writing shows the autonomy that women have gained in the years since Ferré and Nolla wrote.

The different approaches to questioning the unquestionable aren’t surprising given the time periods and moments in which these women wrote: while Alemán wrote Poso Wells in 2007, well after a decades-long surge of female voices flooding the literary market in Latin America and the fight for women’s rights, Ferré and Nolla were writing in the 1970s and ‘80s, at the forefront of that proliferation of female voices and the Second Wave of Feminism. Their work projected and paved the way for future realities that would be different for women. This is, in part, evidenced in Alemán’s work. While Alemán is indeed destabilizing the same system that Ferré and Nolla are attacking, she has the freedom to do it with humor in a detective novel where the plight of the young woman isn’t the driving force of the plot. Because of the work of female writers across Latin America during the last few decades of the twentieth century, writers like Alemán are able to represent female characters that have broken out of the prescribed roles to which earlier characters were bound. Furthermore, she herself, as an author, is able to break out of the limited space of content and genre to which women had traditionally been limited in their writing.
Chapter 4

Perverted Uncles and Unwanted Legacies:

Blurred Intersections of Family Code and Legality

The intersection of family code and law presents an area of liminal legality that has long engendered oppression towards women. One particular social relation that serves as a microcosm of that intersection is incest, an act that is situated squarely on the unequal ground between law and family, legality and permissibility. This chapter will explore the themes of abuse and incest, and the ways in which the legal system, shrouded in patriarchy, is designed so that abusive acts of incest can further the control that the abuser holds over his victim rather than posing a legal threat to him as the attacker. This power dynamic is, in part, engendered by the ambiguity of this legally liminal circumstance and the predisposition of the patriarchal system. Against this backdrop, the representation of intra-familial relations, incest in particular, by Latin American women writers has produced contestatory discourses worth elucidating. This chapter will focus on representations of a specific intra-familial relation, that of uncle/niece incest, in contexts in which the law becomes warped, misconstrued or ignored altogether, leading to the construction of fragmented and fractured identities for the female victims of those relations. While in Chapter 3 my analysis centered on the unquestionable in patriarchal societies, this chapter centers on the unmentionable. The analysis will center on the works of two Mexican authors who represent different scenarios of relationships between an uncle and his niece. My main argument is that these authors engage with the uncle/niece incest trope in order to confront and expose the predisposition of the legal system and the patriarchal tradition in which it is situated to further empower those who
already hold power and to silence the victim, leaving that which happens behind closed doors hidden.

The authors I am studying in this chapter, Inés Arredondo and Adriana González Mateos, situate their works precisely in that blurry intersection. This is a broad topic with far-reaching implications. In confronting liminal legality in the family unit, Arredondo and González Mateos don’t necessarily address the full potential breadth of the situations that involve family code and societal law. Rather, they take a cross-section, situating their stories in a much narrower field, as they focus the readers’ attention specifically on transgressive, incestuous relationships between uncles and their nieces. As we will discuss below, in clarifying their scope the authors actually expose the blurry lines of legality even further. My textual analysis will focus on representations of incest, abuse and legacies, and an application of the Triangle of Desire, as detailed in Chapter 1, as a theoretical framework of gender relations.

With their revelatory acts of writing, these authors problematize the very institutions that should protect women: the law and the family. Arredondo and González Mateos each take the reader into that liminal space of legality and family code in different ways through their texts. Arredondo creates a world where an almost magical mystery co-exists with the reality of everyday life. Her use of fantastical elements, as I will discuss throughout this chapter, to demonstrate the abusive control of the uncle opens up her short story to interpretation by the reader, inviting readers to be active in their approach. At the end of Arredondo’s story, her main character is left trapped in her painful existence, a reflection of both the reality of incest and the shared reality of gender inequality for women during the time period in which Arredondo wrote “La Sunamita”
González Mateos, however, avoids metaphor almost entirely in her short novel, *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* (2007). Her portrayal of a young girl’s abuse at the hands of her uncle is explicit and gritty. The only obfuscation of the details comes from the confusion that the incest causes for the young victim, and the gaps in the narrator/protagonist’s memory. Still, despite their differing approaches, both authors confront the abuse of incest, and the abuse of the legal system that allows the incest to continue. In doing so, they expose the social relation between uncle and niece as one site at which the oppression engendered by the system of legality can be exposed, critiqued, and destabilized.

In order to accomplish this, I posit that the authors examined in this chapter, regardless of their different styles and approaches, use three common discursive strategies: they highlight the point(s) at which the uncle takes advantage of the niece; they uncover the motive behind it and the legal system that allows or even condones it; and they lead readers on an empathetic journey in which they vicariously live out the trauma that the attack causes in the women and the lasting effect that it triggers in their lives.

After tracing the details of the abuse, these authors also make commentary on another interrelated aspect of legality and family legacy in the lives of their female characters: that of inheritance and legacy. In one of the texts analyzed, the inheritance that comes as both the cause and effect of the incest is on center stage. In the case of Arredondo’s “La Sunamita,” the inheritance in question is legal, consisting of material or financial possessions. In González Mateos’ *Lenguaje*, the inheritance is not legal, but rather a legacy of emotional trauma, social disenfranchisement, and familial shame.
While an inheritance should bring a level of freedom, incestuous relations can alter the course of the emotional and familial inheritance that is passed down from generation to generation. These unwanted legacies of fractured identity, forced onto these particular characters by way of the uncles’ abuse, are in and of themselves an entire arena of social relations that perpetuate oppression on women, reinforced by law and tradition, and silenced by family shame and social taboo.

This chapter is structured in three interrelated sections. The first section focuses on incest itself as it is defined and regarded in the West, as well as on the ambiguous character of the legality of incestuous acts. I highlight the uncle/niece relationship by drawing on the information gathered in two empirical studies about similar cases of incest: one from the United States in the 1980s and another from Mexico in the 2000s. The second and third sections of this chapter build around the textual analyses of works by Inés Arredondo and Adriana González Mateos, respectively. I open the analysis of Arredondo’s narrative with a brief framework and an early feminist perspective regarding inheritances, based on a chapter from A Room of One’s Own by Virginia Woolf, with the goal of underscoring the liberating potential of an inheritance. In the analysis of the two texts selected, I examine how the authors expose not only the abusive impulse that lies behind the incestuous acts they depict, but also the way the system is designed to leave hidden that which happens behind closed doors.

**The Problem of Incest: Confusing Act, Blurry Legality**

Legality in the family space presents a complex problem, as it encompasses different codes that must co-exist together. The layering of these different codes creates
an interesting paradox: on one hand, the law of the land extends to everyone living within the borders of that land; on the other hand, each family can be considered, to a certain degree, a self-governing unit. Many countries’ governments, in fact, give certain autonomy to families in order for them to carry out their own codes within the confines of their household. In their article “Best Practices: Laws Protecting Human Life and the Family Around the Globe,” Jane Adolphe and Michael Vacca point out that, even beyond individual countries’ recognition of the family unit, international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights actually grant families space within which to establish and live by their own personal code and to receive “protection from the society and the state” (21). The UDHR was established in 1948, but Adolphe and Vacca remind us that this type of freedom for the family was re-established, and made even more demanding, almost 20 years later at the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: “The widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society” (21).

On the other hand, this degree of legal autonomy for the family unit can create ambivalence and a lack of clarity when the law of the government crosses the code of the family; incest sits in that space. To examine that intersection, it is necessary to explore the nature of incest as an act and crime. *The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* states: “in general, incest is defined as intra-familial sexual relations.” Yet there is a caveat:

Although this definition appears straightforward, a deeper examination reveals that incest is a complex topic and determined by beliefs, values, and norms embedded in society and culture about sexuality, family-relatedness, and consensual sexual behavior. (455)
Caveat aside, the very first line of this definition poses problems: what defines “sexual relations?” Some will go so far as to distinguish between incest, defined as sexual intercourse, and incestuous acts, which only hint at incest without fully fitting the definition. That is only one piece of the polemical legal puzzle that surrounds incest.

*The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* goes on to state that incest itself is, in general, “expressly prohibited and criminalized by statutes and laws regardless of age or, in the case of adults, the existence of consent” (455). Incest with a minor, however, treads in even more precarious legal territory: “adult-child incest is not only a prohibited behavior but one that involves a willful perpetrator and a relatively powerless victim. In short, it involves abuse” (Vander Mey & Neff 2). Vander Mey and Neff’s understanding that adult/child incest always constitutes abuse, regardless of whether the child allegedly consents, is important. Their sociological understanding of incest with a minor, however, doesn’t necessarily always align with the law of the land, depending on the country. In Mexico, for instance, “legally, incest is assumed to be *voluntary* sexual activity between equals who are blood-related” (González-López 14; emphasis added). For this reason, according to the Mexican Código Penal Federal, while there is a penalty for the perpetrator of incest, there is also one, to a lesser degree, for the other participant as well (272). Outside of the context of incest there is a law against sexual abuse of minors, but the legal age of consent is 12 (Article 261) and for youth between the ages of 12-18, any sexual contact is assumed consentual, therefore voluntary, if a complaint is not filed (Articles 262 & 263). It’s impossible to ignore that this assumption about the voluntary nature of all incest, even among minors, adds yet another complicating layer to the already blurred lines of legality with respect to incest, as “incest per se (with all its
complexities) is lost in these legal classifications, it is punished only indirectly and remains invisible” (González-López 14).

To further obfuscate the issue, the definition of family can be extended or narrowed to include or exclude certain individuals depending on the context. While some view the family as the central, nuclear unit formed around two parents and their children, in Latin America the definition of family usually includes extended family members including aunts and uncles and grandparents. Others might expand this definition to people who, “although not biologically related,” have a function and care for members and recognition as a family that “creates bonds that are similar to biological relationships” (Encyclopedia of Gender and Society 455). This is the type of relationship we will see depicted in “La Sunamita.” In her extensive sociological study on incest in Mexico, Gloria González-López describes how family relationships and terms can be far-reaching in Mexico in particular, with words like tío referring to a number of different relational types, not all blood-related (126). Similarly, she notes how aunts in some parts of Mexico are actually referred to as mamá or mamita, demonstrating a relational closeness that, while not literal, is legitimate in other ways (170). This poses the question: could an incestuous relationship exist outside of family bloodlines? Would it still be classified as such? Even if the law can turn a blind eye in those situations, the victim doesn’t necessarily have the liberty to do so. These questions only start to scratch the surface of the problem with incest and the ambiguity that lies at the intersection of family code and law.

Part of the nebulous nature of the legality (or lack thereof) of incest is the law’s contingency on patriarchal norms and traditions, especially, though not exclusively, in
Latin American societies. In her sociological study on incest in Mexico, González-López traces many accounts of incest back to patriarchal roots, in which it is common for women to be expected to serve men, or be of service to men. She even recounts testimonies of girls who are abused precisely during the act of service towards a male in their family (125). Furthermore, she notes how in patriarchal societies women are simply believed to be inferior; a belief that creates what she dubs “genealogies of incest” (128). In these, sons are raised to see their value as greater than their sisters’ value. They then grow up to value their daughters less, as well, and feel no inhibition when it comes to sexually exploiting them.16 When these patriarchal beliefs are normalized and perceived as harmless, they can then “take a perverse turn,” even in families without a history of incest (7). In the end, the blurry nature of incest, coupled with the traditions of patriarchal societies, leaves many women without recourse:

> These cultural ambiguities are reinforced by the double standards of morality that disadvantage women within both the family and society, and by family ethics promoting the idea that women should serve the men in their families—all of which makes girls and young women especially vulnerable. (González-López 4-5)

**Why the Uncle/Niece Relationship?**

As we have seen above, incest sits uniquely in the crosshairs of family and law, because it is a crime that necessarily involves family. The uncle/niece relationship in particular affords much content to authors who, like the writers examined here, explore

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16 González-López coined the term “feminization of incest” to refer to her findings in Mexico that most uncle/niece incest occurs through the niece’s maternal side of her family. See chapter 4 of her book entitled *Nieces and Their Uncles.*
that nebulous intersection. On one hand, this trope stems from phenomena and situations that actually occur between uncles and nieces. Rather than situating their critique in the metaphor of a foreign reality, these authors are responding to a particular lived reality that is present, very present, in fact, in Western societies. In her book *The Secret Trauma,* Diana E. H. Russell points out that the most commonly recorded occurrences of incest are between uncles and their nieces, and this has been the case since at least 1953 when the Kinsey study on female sexuality came out. As such, it is a phenomenon that deserves our attention (323). When González-López conducted her research on cases of incest in Mexico in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, she found the same pattern to be true there, as well; the highest recorded incidents of incest are between an uncle and a niece (126).

I would maintain, however, that there is also further motivation for representing this particular relationship beyond the fact that it occurs in society. In speaking about the intersection of family code and societal law, the uncle/niece relationship serves as a microcosm that is indicative of a broader issue. It is arguably a better canvas on which to situate certain discourses and arguments than, for instance, an incestuous father/daughter relationship. That isn’t to say that father/daughter incest isn’t a reality in societies as well, but, rather, that such a scenario can limit the grounds on which to draw out the ambiguous nature that incest can present, a goal that I argue is central to each of these authors’ works.

17 Though incest between uncles and nieces is not as well researched as the father/daughter relationship, Russell has a chapter dedicated to it in her book *The Secret Trauma* (1999), based on a study in the ‘70s and ‘80s in San Francisco, that is insightful.
While incest is already a grey area at best, the uncle/niece scenario is even more nebulous because it is not as strong of a social taboo as father/daughter incest (Russell 323). Russell goes so far as to wonder if there is a wider cultural understanding of incest in which that term only applies so long as the act occurs between a parent and their child, disqualifying the uncle/niece relationship, and the legal ramifications that come with it, from that stigma altogether (337). She also notes that the uncle/niece relationship is important theoretically since father/daughter incest is often explained away by, or attributed to, discord in the family unit: “a mother who is weak, sick, or unavailable; a wife who rejects all aspects of the traditional wife role, particularly sex with her husband; a daughter who plays the role of little mother” (323). She adds: “clearly, such explanations are irrelevant to uncle-niece incest” (323). Along these lines, González-López notes that the father/daughter scenario is often tied to the marital arrangement, as understood in patriarchal societies, which is designed to satisfy the sexual needs of married men (23). Contrarily she states that indirect bloodlines and emotional distance are important factors in uncle/niece incest (127). This type of scenario is less dependent on circumstance and demonstrates a clear act of will by the uncle. The confusion is clear: on one hand, some are willing to dismiss the uncle/niece relationship as not being incest, or at least not as offensive an act; on the other hand, it is a relationship that could be as condemning, pointing to the issue of intent and human nature, and being less excusable by family circumstances.

I also believe that in choosing to focus on incest in a relationship that is, though scandalous, not as taboo (Russell 323), these authors symbolically reproduce the dynamic they are depicting: they blur lines. They put their readers in the middle of a moral
dilemma rather than representing a scenario that might be rejected outright. Once they are willing to enter into the story, the readers become complicit in the text through their reading, which is, I posit, the authors’ intention. The authors put the reader to the test; can the reader be exposed to the justifications of the perpetrator? Can we stand in the place of so many women and children who have been told that the abuse carried out against them was either justifiable or their own fault, and still be able to resist believing that, just as the women have had to resist? Could we actually stand where the nieces stand and come out on the other side unscathed and unmoved?

We must remember, however, that these authors are not depicting voluntary incest. Instead, they clearly depict incest without consent; they depict sexual assault. This adds yet another obfuscating layer to the already complex situation that is both relational and legal. Relationally, this adds a degree of shame and distrust within the family. Legally, this should add charges relating not just to the act, but also to the intent and motive behind the act; the sexual act goes from being a mutual fulfillment of desires to an attack on someone else’s rights and sense of self.

An Early Feminist Framework for a Gendered View of Inheritances

In the story of incest narrated in “La Sunamita” by Inés Arredondo, the passing of an inheritance, given from an uncle to his niece, is a central theme. To frame my analysis of this short story, I will begin this chapter with a discussion of the theme of inheritance as presented by an early feminist perspective. This opening discussion illuminates the empowering potential of an inheritance, and serves as a reference point to my analysis of the story.
In the chapter from *A Room of One’s Own* entitled “Women and Fiction,” Virginia Woolf’s narrator speaks about the inheritance of five hundred pounds a year that her aunt left her. She was previously unaware that she had been left an inheritance in this aunt’s will, and she is surprised when it arrives unannounced one day after her aunt’s tragic horse accident. She notes that this took place around the time that women had been granted the right to vote in England, and Woolf’s narrator is quick to mention that “of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important” (26). Though that distinction is a bold one, as suffragists fought for years trying to earn the vote for women, and women still fight for legal, social and political equality, it is undeniable that an inheritance for a woman was also scarcely heard of and incredibly liberating.

Woolf’s inheritance, though not rich-making, granted security that few women of her day enjoyed apart from a man: “food, house and clothing are mine forever” (26). It also offered Woolf a position from which to write (she begins her book, as one will recall, claiming that in order to write a woman needs an income and a room of her own). Woolf goes on to qualify her statement by saying, “indeed my aunt’s legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky” (27). This relative autonomy from men that comes with the inheritance is perhaps its greatest value for Woolf. It sets her apart from almost all others; apart from women, for the financial autonomy of women from husbands, fathers, brothers or sons was almost unheard of; and apart from men, because, as she states, “I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me” (26).
I believe it is fair to assume that Woolf is perhaps speaking with some hyperbole as she makes her case for the freedoms that come with her aunt’s inheritance. It is plain to see, however, that this inheritance does indeed give Woolf unique liberties, expanding her reach within the world as well as her view of “the open sky” (27). It releases her from the weight of daily confinement. Woolf outlines an example of one way in which an inheritance, in particular, and the system of legality, in general, can cede to freedoms and liberties otherwise unknown. Her case, however, is in many ways an exception to the rule.

Hers is an inheritance between women, and counter to the wider hegemonic (male) control of legality. Woolf’s story reveals the liberating potential of an inheritance that is free from the limiting bounds of patriarchy. I posit that, in this way, not only does Woolf’s story present a juxtaposed reality to the one presented in “La Sunamita”; Woolf also establishes that the effect of an inheritance is contingent on the context in which it is given, and thus intricately connected to the intention behind it.

Inheritance and Twisted Intentions in “La Sunamita”

Inés Arredondo wrote prolifically during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, and thus became one of the trailblazers for the myriad female voices that followed after her in Latin America and particularly in her native Mexico. She is an author who, in many ways, pushes social bounds. In much of her work she breaks with the nationalistic aesthetic of the Revolution and the ideal of the idyllic, pure campo while embedding her stories with an air of mystery that surrounds the transgressive relationships between characters. These relationships often exhibit strong sexual motives and desires as they
break from social norms and define the stories in which they reside. Her story “La Sunamita,” first published in La señal in 1965, is of particular interest for this chapter because the central relationship is between a young woman and her dying uncle, and at the heart of this story is an inheritance.

In La señal, Arredondo explores themes from religion and belief, to sexuality and coming of age. Her characters, both male and female, navigate a world where the exciting unknown is juxtaposed with the quotidian mundane. Many of her characters transgress established norms, especially sexual norms, while others submit to the customary religious and cultural paradigms, even if they don’t understand why. Though my scope of analysis for “La Sunamita” doesn’t cover the themes of religion and coming of age in depth, they are all manifest in the short story. Arredondo begins “La Sunamita” with a Biblical epigraph from 1 Kings 1:3-4. These verses speak of the young Shunamite woman who was brought to King David before his death to live with him and lie with him to keep him warm. In doing this, Arredondo squarely fits her story in the centuries old context of religious and cultural norms in which women serve men, and are disposable for the full extent of their comfort and desires.

Luisa, the first person narrator, is a confident young woman. She lives in the city, where she is described as uninhibited: “orgullosa, alimentando el fuego (de la ciudad) con mis cabellos rubios, sola” (131). She’s self-confident and in control, returning young men’s stares with indifference as she dominates her passions and does not let herself become consumed by the flames. Even when she receives word of her favorite uncle’s imminent death, she makes sure to inform the reader that nothing had changed in her way of being in the world: “la tristeza que me trajo no afectaba en absoluto la manera de
sentirme en el mundo” (131). Still, moved by her affection for Don Apolonio, Luisa goes to spend his final days with him. The story takes place in the liminal space between reality and fantasy, made evident in the mysterious town in which Apolonio lives, and the inexplicable spell it casts on Luisa. Upon arriving to the small village, Luisa notices that the world around her starts to affect her in strange, inexplicable ways: “fui cayendo en el entresueño privado de la realidad y el de tiempo que da el calor excesivo” (131). This effect, however, doesn’t just have to do with the temperature, and the reader soon discovers that this mysterious ambience of the town is an extension of the fantastical reality that surrounds the imminent death of her uncle.

Arguably, the story hinges on the moment right before Don Apolonio is about to die. Everyone has come to the house, from family members to the doctor and, of course, the priest. Luisa tries to avoid being in her uncle’s presence, but he calls for her and, through the priest, makes one last petition: “Es la voluntad de tu tío, si no tienes algo que oponer, casarse contigo en artículo mortis, con la intención de que heredes sus bienes, ¿Aceptas?” (134). There are two legal transactions at work here: First, a marriage; that is, a legal binding before God and man (as Apolonio will remind her later on); and second, an inheritance; the legally protected passage of money and possessions from one person (usually a family member) to another.

Arredondo’s narrative magnifies the intersection of these two legal actions to show the oppressive control that they can have over the woman they are enacted upon. I argue that through this discursive strategy, the writer illustrates three realities that expose the themes of incest and abuse in a legally permissible context: 1) the potential perversity
of marriage, 2) the false economy of Apolonio’s inheritance offer, and 3) the true inheritance that Luisa receives.

**The Potential Perversity of Marriage**

Arredondo’s pointed commentary on the potential perversity of marriage as an artifice of incest is conveyed through the representation of three interrelated mechanisms through which female oppression is carried out in the story: a) the family relationship between Don Apolonio and Luisa, b) the outside accomplices that don’t question, and indeed condone, Apolonio’s behavior, and c) the perversity of Don Apolonio’s actions within their union.

**The Family Relationship**

This marriage is first and foremost perverse because it is a marriage of, if not literal, symbolic incest. The uncle, Don Apolonio, isn’t actually related to Luisa by blood, instead he is her uncle by marriage. The relationship and the family ties, therefore, fall along blurred lines. Still, Luisa recalls that during the time she lived in their house when she was younger she became like a daughter to her uncle (131). Even the maid reminds her that she was like a daughter to her aunt and uncle, and the affection between Luisa and Don Apolonio earlier on in the story is described as the same type of affection one would expect between a grandparent and his grandchild.

Though their family relationship falls into the category of a legal technicality, since it is not bound by blood, I argue that through the description that Arredondo gives the reader, she depicts a bond that goes even beyond that of the blood relation between an
uncle and his niece; Luisa is more like his daughter. Vander Mey and Ness point out that the US National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, when describing the parameters of incestuous child abuse, “included as perpetrators in intrafamily abuse by anyone who victimizes a child and is a parental figure or a ‘significant other’ in the child’s intrafamily life” (44). Though Luisa is no longer a child, it is clear from the context and description that this is, indeed, the type of relationship she had/has with her uncle. That there is a bond between Don Apolonio and Luisa is not transgressive, rather it is to be expected. The transgression comes when Apolonio attempts to alter the nature of their relationship with a one-sided, legal joining of two people, who were like father and daughter, through marriage.

*Apolonio’s Outside Accomplices*

When Luisa first hears her uncle’s offer she becomes sick, physically repulsed by the idea. Everyone, from the maid to her cousin, tries to convince her that it is not only profitable for her, but that it would be rude to Apolonio not to accept. The systematic control that this legal act holds across this wide group of people is seemingly absolute. It’s as if these people are responding to an unwritten code in the situation, or perhaps they have come under the same fantastical spell that Luisa experiences. Still, in spite of the social pressure she encounters, Luisa knows that she does not want this marriage: “porque mi cuerpo joven, del que en el fondo estaba tan satisfecha, no tuviera ninguna clase de vínculos con la muerte” (135).

It would appear, however, that Apolonio’s request brings these mysterious ties with death with it, for death begins to invade her. The first sign of this death is when her
physical reaction to the request forces her to faint. When she wakes, still in that initial death-like state, the crowd of Apolonio’s accomplices has taken advantage of the physical effect that Luisa succumbs to and has forced her by Apolonio’s side. “Me hacían firmar, y responder” (135). Whether intentionally or not, I would argue that Arredondo enters into dialogue with A Room of Her Own by relating the circumstances of a niece’s inheritance. Arredondo, however, depicts an experience that is the polar opposite to that of Woolf’s. While the inheritance that Woolf receives from her own accomplice, her aunt, allows her a view of the open sky, Luisa’s marriage, and with it the receipt of her uncle’s inheritance, has the exact opposite effect: “Sufría y no podía levantar la cara al cielo” (136).

Along with being a marriage of convenience, this is a marriage of coercion by Apolonio’s accomplices, including the local priest, and it is corrupt from the first day. The fact that such a binding legal action could be taken without the true consent of one of the people involved is shocking, and, I posit, a revelation through which Arredondo questions the validity of the institution of marriage in its twentieth-century state. Luisa’s consent is substituted by the approving sympathy of the uncle’s crowd.

Apolonio’s Perverse Actions in the Confines of Marriage

The perversity of this marriage does not, however, end there. The interactions between Apolonio and the niece once they are married are also perverse. At first, their interactions seem unintentional. Though Luisa convinces herself that she can withstand the few days of suffering as her uncle’s wife, the days begin to prolong themselves as her uncle gradually recovers strength. This strength mysteriously comes at the expense of
Luisa’s own life, another inexplicable physical manifestation of the ties of incestuous relations with death. While her uncle is living a death with just a trace of life left in it, it is clear that her life is being returned to her as a life laced with death. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar posit that for centuries women have been killed into art by men; in this case it is as if Luisa is slowly killed into her uncle’s plan, leading to what they describe as “a posthumous existence in her own lifetime” (25). “La muerte da miedo, pero la vida mezclada, imbuida en la muerte, da un horror que tiene muy poco que ver con la muerte y con la vida” (Arredondo 137).

In this world of fantastical reality, the effects of this death-in-life begin to penetrate her life and body even further. Apolonio’s slow, weak breathing soon conquers Luisa, as she begins to breathe, and lose her breath, like her uncle. The recovery of his life means the loss of hers. A shadow envelops her as Apolonio gains more strength. Luisa tries to convince herself that their unusual, inverted connection isn’t real, but the effect it has on her physical and mental state proves otherwise.

The mystical control that Luisa’s rejuvenating uncle has over her seems incidental at first, but it becomes clear that it is intentional and explicit as he starts to gaze upon her body, eventually caressing her hips without her consent. He then coerces her into having sex with him, and it seems that the mystical stupor that has enveloped Luisa since arriving to the small town prevents her from refusing his advance. The peculiar effect of the town seems inescapable; completely changing the person the reader is first introduced to in the story. Luisa states that she can hardly remember the scene because of how terrible it was: “como un sueño repugnante” (140). The death that was so frightening before now becomes her only perceived hope for escape. Instead of hiding this repulsive
behavior, Apolonio justifies it, stating that they are now even closer relatives (138-39): “¿no eres mi mujer ante Dios y ante los hombres?” (140). Apolonio’s defense rests squarely on the legal act of marriage, for it’s clear that they are not emotionally or relationally closer as relatives, just legally. His socially repulsive behavior is now legally permissible because of the marriage agreement. When Luisa goes to the priest, she finds that the priest is also convinced of the power of the legal agreement, and his response is simply to remind her to consider her duties (140). We can only surmise that these duties refer directly to her legal role as his wife, for there are no set duties established for nieces with regards to their uncles.

This act of sexual coercion within the confines of their marriage speaks to another layer of legality that was not punishable by law in 1965: marital rape. It was not until 1994 that marital rape began to be questioned at the legal level in Mexico. Eleven years later the Mexican Supreme Court passed a law that stated that a sexual attack within the confines of marriage is, indeed, still rape. Obviously, when Arredondo was writing, this wasn’t even a question. It was commonly accepted that, within the confines of marriage, sex could be expected and even demanded as a duty for the woman to fulfill. Since the culturally and traditionally accepted purpose of a marriage was procreation, forced sex was not seen as a violation of the woman (Malkin & Thompson).

As Anne K. Mellor points out in her introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria (1994), marriage laws in Western Europe were originally based on villeinage or serfdom, wherein the wife belonged to her husband as property (v-vi). While those laws changed in Europe in the late nineteenth century, the legacy lived on in the treatment of wives.

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18 Marital rape was declared a crime in 2005 in Mexico. See Malkin and Thompson.
This presupposition that marriage can be a legal cover for a whole manner of the husband’s sins, rather than being based on “equality of the sexes, on mutual esteem and [. . . ] rational love” (vi), as Wollstonecraft preferred, makes Luisa’s legal entanglement all the more complex and inescapable. The law and tradition don’t just bind her in her position; the free Don Apolonio to act in any manner he chooses.

While I wouldn’t claim that Arredondo considers the institution of marriage as a whole perverse, it is arguable that she sees the potential for its perversity. Much like Wollstonecraft (vi), I believe that Arredondo presents this marriage, in this form, as little more than legalized prostitution, justified by the law and condoned by the community.

**The False Economy of the Inheritance Offer**

What is perhaps most shocking about the uncle’s offer of an inheritance that is contingent on marriage is that it creates a false economy of benevolence that conceals sexual exploitation. There is nothing noted in the story that would be able to keep Apolonio from bequeathing his inheritance to Luisa in a simple will and testament. As far as the reader is informed, anyone who would have legal access to his inheritance is either dead (his wife), or doesn’t exist (there is no mention of children). The maid does tell Luisa: “si no te casas, los sobrinos de México no te van a dar nada” (135). This concern, however, seems based on nothing. What legal rights do the nieces and nephews in the city have over Apolonio’s inheritance that Luisa wouldn’t have as a niece herself? Furthermore, Don Apolonio doesn’t seem to have any issue with bequeathing his belongings to Luisa as he so chooses, without any legal process.
At closer glance this plan is undoubtedly contrived since Apolonio has already been giving Luisa precious valuables on his own accord, without any legal pact. Upon her arrival he tells her to take possession of the house, and she does so. She runs everything as if it were her own out of love for her uncle. He also starts giving her gifts; valuable jewelry that he had bought as gifts for his wife, for instance. When she objects to the gesture he responds: “todo es tuyo ¡y se acabó!” (133). His offer of an inheritance for the price of marriage, then, clearly has an ulterior motive, for he could easily continue to give Luisa his belongings without making a legal document; as he states before he asks her to marry him: “regalo lo que me da la gana” (133).

**Luisa’s True Inheritance**

In reality, this new, contingent inheritance that Apolonio offers represents something far less desirable and far more dangerous than just a marriage. Whereas before, Luisa notes that with each story Apolonio told her while she was a child, he was passing on his life to her, this new perverse (legal) inheritance is steeped in death (133). “¿Por qué me quiere arrastrar a la tumba? [ . . . ] Sentí que la muerte rozaba mi propia carne” (134). With the pact of the legal inheritance come the traces of death that start lodging themselves in Luisa’s body. Instead of a physical death, however, the legal control exerted over her by Apolonio forces Luisa to succumb to the death of her identity. Elisabeth Bronfen describes a similar phenomenon in her book *Over Her Dead Body*: “The soul has departed [ . . . ] but her beauty has not yet begun to disappear” (5). In the case of Luisa, it’s as if the reader is witness to her soul departing. The proud, independent, optimistic young woman who first appears on the scene at this later moment
claims that she has lived “el último (verano) de mi juventud” (131). Her innocence is
lost: “yo no pude volver a ser la que fui” (140). She was once surrounded by flames that
could not engulf her, but her uncle’s inheritance leaves her consumed: “sola, pecadora,
consumida totalmente por la llama implacable que nos envuelve a todos” (140).

The Triangle of Desire

The story of Luisa and Don Apolonio begins to take new form when it is stretched
out over the Triangle of Desire. It is then that we can clearly see that Don Apolonio’s
actions aren’t innocent or even unwitting. Rather, I argue that Luisa is the useful niece
who connects Don Apolonio in his initial, frustrated and dying state to his future, desired
self. It is noteworthy that Apolonio does not treat Luisa as a means to this end until it is
evident that her presence begins to spark the possibility of recovery for Apolonio. This is
the first clue the reader is given to Apolonio’s twisted intentions. Even the doctor
mentions that he sees an improvement in Apolonio’s health after Luisa arrives, though he
had been the one to declare that there was technically no cure for him. Luisa’s presence
gives life, and when Apolonio realizes this, his intentions with her change: at first he
intends to trade her life for his, but he goes even further to use the legal confines of their
marriage to satisfy his sexual urges.

In order for Luisa to be useful in these endeavors, however, she must be displaced
from the temporal plane and taken out of the life she would have lived, and the future she
would have had. This shift off the plane of subjectivity is not harmless. It requires an
emptying of, and an aggressive re-signification of, the subject. As we have seen through
this analysis, Don Apolonio accomplishes this life-draining process through his twisted
implementation of the law. What begins as an inheritance morphs into a marriage, all with the intention of legally covering a multitude of his own sins, and gaining strength and life from her slow death. The legal mark of approval on the wedding and the inheritance clears Apolonio’s name, at least in his own eyes, and makes permissible a completely selfish act against his own niece, presented in the guise of kindness. Arredondo’s use of the mysterious forces and effects that are at work on Luisa can, arguably, be read as literary representations of the strong grip that predators hold over their victims. Luisa’s personality seems to change under the inexplicable stupor of the town, making her escape impossible, and her resistance futile.

As with Sedgwick’s triangle, the strongest relationship is not with the woman, but rather between Don Apolonio in his current, frustrated state, and Don Apolonio in his future state of his realized desire. That is the bond that triggers the action, and it is the relationship that is ultimately reinforced throughout the story. Though dying and almost lifeless, Apolonio is able to reinforce his own subjectivity by drawing upon that of Luisa.

The act of removing the woman from the plane of subjectivity has the false pretense of elevating the woman in some way. With Sedgwick, I posit that the woman is elevated as an object of affection, but ends up as just an object. In “La Sunamita,” Luisa is elevated as the chosen heir, but she ends up becoming nothing more than a niece with benefits for Apolonio. The ruse of giving her the honor of his entire inheritance merely cloaks Apolonio’s vicious attack on Luisa. It serves as an act of legal misdirection, causing Luisa to look away just long enough to lose her identity and the life she would have otherwise had: “that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven” (Gilbert & Gubar 25).
Apolonio’s perverted twisting of the law drains the life out of his supposed favorite niece. As we find, Arredondo makes no attempt at rescuing Luisa from that life-draining relationship of an incestuous nature. There is no happy ending for Luisa. The game that Apolonio plays with her, though materially rich-making, is unbelievably costly. There’s no doubt that Arredondo’s decision to leave Luisa in her moribund state, though painful, reinforces the reality of her situation and of the life of women in the mid-twentieth century. All women who find themselves trapped beneath the strong gaze of the hegemonic law have to pay consequences, but the harsh reality of Arredondo’s story made a strong case for the activism of the feminist movements that would break out within the next couple of decades.

**Hidden Secrets, Hidden Suffering in *Lenguaje de las orquídeas***

“La Sunamita” is unique among the works in which we are analyzing the uncle/niece relationship because of the added legal layer of the marriage and inheritance. The fact that Luisa and Apolonio aren’t blood relatives gives room for those themes to be drawn out, and for Arredondo to destabilize the legal hold on women from that very specific point. Over forty years after Arredondo penned “La Sunamita,” another Mexicana rose to tell of another uncle, another niece, another perversion of family relationship, and another tale of incest. Rather than confronting the very public institution of marriage and inheritance practices, this work takes us behind closed doors as it deals with the age of legality, the act of consent, and the dark shadows of the private space.
Lenguaje de las orquídeas, published by Adriana González Mateos in 2007, is a short novel that is narrated in the first and second person, in the past and present tense, but all by the same narrative voice. The voice is that of the main character, the nameless niece. She tells the story of the encounters that her uncle, her mother’s brother, initiates with her when she is just 12 or 13 years old, though it could be earlier as those details are blurry in the niece’s recounting of her story. He steals moments away with her while others are busy talking at family events; he takes her with him while running errands; he stays with her in the hospital after a harrowing bike accident lands her there. He takes advantage of the “intricate web of family processes that create circumstances facilitating sexual access to girls and women within these extended families that are part of everyday family life” (González-López 127).

The encounters are not only physical, but also emotional as he confides in her with secrets of his own childhood, gaining sympathy from his victim. The encounters are also psychological as he gives his niece contradicting signals; like threatening suicide if anyone finds out about them (29), but also telling the niece that she should stop seeing him, though it’s obvious that he has no intention or desire of stopping. From the first encounter when he touches her in inappropriate ways and places, his actions cause confusion for the young niece. Years down the road, when she chooses to speak, we find the niece/narrator in the act of untangling that confusion.

Though she narrates much of the story in the first person (based on her memory), the narrator maintains an air of omniscience, though not because of her own knowledge alone. As she relates her history, the niece tells part of her uncle’s, and even her grandmother’s, history as well. She has been given these stories as windows into a past
she didn’t live, by way of the family legacies that have been passed on to her at family gatherings and from behind closed doors with her uncle. This omniscience doesn’t make her pompous or condescending. Quite the opposite, it makes her even more sympathetic, for it shows that she isn’t self-absorbed. She recognizes that her grandmother’s and uncle’s lives were hard too, and that they both suffered through obstacles that influenced their harmful future actions: the grandmother towards her son (the uncle), and the uncle towards the niece.

While it makes sense that the family stories should intertwine in the narration of her story, the uncle’s actions have made it so that their stories actually blend into each other, making a distinction of what truly belongs to the niece difficult to determine. Even as the narrator tries to sort out the trajectory of her life, it is clear that the uncle’s actions have blurred the lines that should exist between an uncle and a niece. Her story becomes a microcosm of her identity: confusing (her narration jumps around between events and timelines), and devoid of autonomy (it is completely dependent on her uncle, impossible to tell without him).

In spite of the circumstances, the narrator seems mostly indifferent, if not kind, in her portrayal of her uncle. She narrates these histories not as an accusation against him, but as an unemotional statement of facts. In this novel, it appears that the narrative voice has very little ill will towards the uncle, and no intention other than relaying information about her past. The narrator is definitely not ignorant of the complex implications of the situation, but she is in no way scandalized or terrified of it. It is as if she is somehow dissociated from the events that she narrates from her own life.
While there are clear similarities between “La Sunamita” and *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* (which will be discussed at the end of the chapter), there are some stark differences as well. Perhaps the most important difference is how the two protagonists’ predicaments lead to two very different endings in terms of acquiring, or not, a voice and sense of agency in the face of victimization and trauma. We have already seen the effect this trauma has on Luisa, and further on I will analyze the effect on the niece in *Lenguaje*. Another important difference, however, has to do with the trigger that leads to the abuse, and the way this plays into the different uncles’ actions. The inappropriate relationship in “La Sunamita” is triggered by a legal marriage. This marriage is inspired by a supposed legal inheritance of goods, whose façade is unraveled until it is revealed that the true inheritance that Don Apolonio passes on to his niece is that of a death in life.

In *Lenguaje de las orquídeas*, however, there is no apparent trigger, no reason given for the uncle’s abuse of his niece. In fact, the word abuse is hardly mentioned in the niece’s narration. Even at the end, the uncle doesn’t reveal a reason for his actions; he only goes so far as to say that his motive wasn’t pleasure. The niece, therefore, is left with the task of slowly uncovering possible motives through the process of narration. As she does this, the reader begins to see that the result of the uncle’s actions stems from a different type of inheritance than that of “La Sunamita:” one that is familial rather than legal, and psychological rather than monetary. As the narrator explores the history and the reasons for what happens between her and her uncle, she doesn’t cast judgment nor does she portray these as direct triggers, but rather as conspicuous hints to motive.

I propose that this narrative choice is intentional; the niece is juridical in her approach and discourse, yet she does not rely on the authority of the courts, which so
often betray victims of sexual assault. Instead, the niece mounts her own case against her uncle that will point to the one thing she is unable to state in her narration: that regardless of his motive or his excuses, her uncle’s actions were criminal; and regardless of his slipperiness, his actions deserve legal recourse. Leaving emotion to the side, the narrator lays out the individual pieces of evidence before the readers and lets them enter into the story to examine, scrutinize, and judge the situation for themselves. In the following sections, I explore three rhetorical moves of the niece/narrator that invite the reader to be a part of the symbolic trial against her uncle: 1) building the need for an unconventional court case, 2) preparing for the uncle’s trial, and 3) exposing the uncle’s reaction and testimony during that trial.

**Building the Need for an Unconventional Court Case**

The narrative leaves no doubt that a case needs to be mounted against the uncle. While Don Apolonio uses marriage to exploit the law in order to make the exploitation of his niece legal, the uncle in *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* pays no such attention to legalizing his actions. This isn’t a reflection of the permissibility of his actions, for from the start what he does isn’t just socially taboo but illegal as well. His niece is but a girl, barely pubescent if at all, and she does not give consent, but is instead taken by surprise at the first encounter (21-22).

Still, the uncle isn’t fazed by the illegal nature of his actions. He tells the niece: “*para mí era un juego. Totalmente desconectado de consecuencias o significados*” (98-99; emphasis added). He doesn’t need to be fazed, really, because his situation is different than that of Apolonio’s in two distinct ways. First, his actions are private.
Apolonio’s situation is necessarily public. Because of his terminal illness, Apolonio has a constant crowd around him who is giving him care. This forces his actions to be public, and what’s more public than a wedding? Meanwhile, the uncle in *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* has no such need for that kind of dependence on others. He is not ill or physically dependent, and he is of good standing in society, freeing him from any suspicion of scandal. As such, he is able to freely carry out his actions privately. He has no need of legal justification because if no one knows, who will be the one to bring a charge against him?

Second, the uncle’s victim is far younger and less established than Luisa in “La Sunamita.” The uncle in *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* is able to manipulate her to the point not only of coercion but of complacent silence, as well: “Hubiéramos destruido a la familia [if she spoke about their relationship], pensábamos melodramáticos” (29). Thus, the only one who knows is his young victim. We can only assume that the young niece either has no idea of customs or laws (why would she?), and/or no idea that her uncle’s actions merit a legal prosecution; at least not at first. She knows something isn’t normal, but at the time she has no idea of her rights, nor any impulse to stake her claim to those rights. Regardless, her age and their familial relationship simultaneously prohibit his actions while, ironically, making them feasible, for she knows not what they mean.

As long as these two realities remain true (her complicit silence and her lack of understanding due to her young age), there is no recourse for the niece and no punishment for the uncle. It makes sense, then, that the story comes to its climax years in the future when the niece is no longer young and naïve. If the niece were going to confront the uncle, it would be necessary for time to pass before she does so. For to
subvert the hold he has on her because of her age, there is only one option: the passage of
time (that is, outside of an adult discovering the abuse and advocating on behalf of the
niece).

The passage of time lies entirely outside of the niece’s control. But once
sufficient time has passed for her to come into full understanding of her uncle’s actions,
her silence, or not, is dependent on her. In order to break that silence the niece has but
one choice: to speak, and in speaking, to live. To this end, there are two important
actions the niece takes.

The first necessary step comes in her early 20s when she actively chooses not to
Todo sería tan rápido, no sentiría gran cosa [. . . ] Di el salto pero cai del otro lado, es
decir, de éste” (97). Though the uncle killed the person she might have been, she chooses
not to silence herself completely by finishing off the job. Her life may be
partial because of her uncle’s abuse, but she chooses to hold on to the pieces that are left. As she notes earlier in the story: “la experiencia estaba destinada a destruirme, pero [. . . ] en vez de
cederme a la muerte, sobrevivi” (25-26). Then, years later, she takes another step
towards life. She decides to speak, or better yet to write, the atrocities acted out against
her. In this act she begins to reclaim a full life from out of the pieces that the uncle left
over. Her portrayal of her victimization by the uncle is, at times, so unassuming that it is
easy to forget that in narrating the novel she is actively breaking that chain of silent
secrecy.

Preparing for the Uncle’s Trial
Throughout the rising action, the narrator presents evidence, her history, to the reader. As we noted above, it is predominantly presented as unbiased evidence, with little to no judgment or emotion placed on it. In fact, instead of casting blame the narrator readily admits that she was complicit in the incest as a way of rebelling against the middle class mode of living (25). She scarcely passes a charge against her uncle, but her unemotional narration does serve a purpose; in doing this, the narrator creates a public of witnesses: the readers. As the readers accumulate the clues in the story, they themselves are able to piece together the evidence. The narrator doesn’t make the direct connection for us, nor does she tell us what our reaction should be. Instead she lets the readers enter into the story to examine, scrutinize and judge for themselves.

As the action reaches towards the climax, however, the narrator makes a brief, yet significant, change. For one short chapter she switches to using the second person tú, speaking no longer to the reader but, I suggest, to her younger self. It is as if, after gaining witnesses in the readers, she must also gain a witness in herself. As such, she steps outside of the situation in order to see it from the second-person point of view. She must now, in her 30s or 40s, be the responsible adult who can interpret what happened all those years ago when no one else knew or cared to notice. She becomes the one who comforts herself, who enables herself to speak, and who names the uncle’s abuse as it is. In this short section of second-person language, the narrator portrays herself as a victim for the first time, a child unequipped with the tricks of a woman, nor the words, nor the gestures, nor the skill to evade the pressure of her uncle’s coercive hand (78).

At this point neither the reader nor, I would maintain, the niece, are aware that the climax of the story will be a conversation between the grown niece and the uncle. But by
the end of the novel, the sequence is clear: first the narrator speaks to the reader—to those who will listen without bias and who can decide a just verdict—and then she speaks to herself, establishing herself as the prime witness.

As the niece gains confidence in speaking her situation, there is still one more person the niece has to speak with in order to shine full light on the horror of what happened: her aunt. This act is necessary; she has to tell someone else, someone who will care. The intention is not to hurt the aunt, though the niece admittedly doesn’t care for her at all (31). Rather, she wants to make public that which has for years been private. In doing this, the niece destabilizes the walls, of both her youth and her silence, which the uncle has hidden behind to protect himself from the repercussions of his illegal act.

Though the niece doesn’t initiate her final encounter with the uncle, she has, in her own way, forced his hand. With her telefonazo, the aunt becomes aware of the situation (94). The uncle has no choice but to show his face and confront the niece, if for no other reason than to clear his name now muddied by scandal. He is, after all: “acostumbrado [ . . . ] a medir en su fuero interno la necesidad de cubrir este pequeño punto leproso” (90). This time, however, she will sit before him not as an isolated, defenseless child, but as an adult in the company of witnesses. She needs more than just her word against his. She knows his ways and the force of his coercion, but this time she is prepared with the “tricks of a woman” that she lacked as a young girl. This time she won’t be caught naïve and unprepared.

We don’t know her reasons, but we can easily assume that the niece chooses not to send her uncle to court for his illegal acts based on a mistrust of the legal system that
has historically served to further shame victims and protect male aggressors. Instead, in the last conversation between the two of them, the niece puts the uncle on trial herself. She interrogates him, now as a grown woman, from the perspective of two realities: that of a child who has experienced his abuse first hand, and as an adult who has processed the story from afar.

Beginning with the phone call to her aunt, this final section of the book is narrated in the present tense. She begins this section by stating: “no hay razón para hacerlo hoy (to call the aunt), pero hoy es el día” (81). The action to follow happens in real time, hoy, today. The reader, therefore, has a firsthand experience of the trial that will presently ensue. The courtroom scene is set: the niece is the prosecution, the uncle is the defense, and we are the cloud of witnesses, soon to be judges, who will decide for ourselves his guilt or innocence. The same narrator who has faced a lifetime of silence, sworn to secrecy by her abuser and her shame, has, by the time of this private trial, created a public that can give a fair and unbiased verdict in her decades-old case.

**The Uncle’s Reaction and Testimony**

The uncle’s reaction to his niece’s prosecution is expected. He’s a diplomat, and as such he proceeds in a politically correct, yet evasive, way: “quiere hablar de nuestra historia desde un lugar donde el agua no cae aunque cuelgue de una palangana destapada, adherida al techo, boca abajo, dejada ahí por alguien que caminaba al revés” (85). He evade lines of questioning, and he gives a weak confession that presents him more as a victim than a villain (90). His rebuttal of her accusations is expected, especially considering his view of the offense: “algo de lo que se siente perféctamente inocente”
He cross-examines, turning the blame on his niece while questioning her motives for the conversation as well as the validity of her memory of what really happened: “Él jamás se habría reconocido en la palabra abuso. Me reprocha la distorsión: ¿no es verdad que yo lo seduje a él?” (95).

Part of the irony of the situation, however, is that the uncle, who lives by his eloquence, uses the very thing that should condemn him as his defense: a legal approach (93). The private crime is finally brought out into public as they meet at a café in town. “Ahora lo veo intentar una de sus proezas más difíciles, un truco de prestidigitación [. . . ] porque esta mañana él es el paladín de la ley, del orden familiar y de las buenas costumbres” (88). From his self-appointed seat of legal and familial authority, he doesn’t deny the incest. Still, he alludes to legal procedures with his claim: “tenemos discrepancias técnicas” (88). He begins by questioning whether or not she consented and was of legal age: “él procura convencernos de que debí ser mayor” (88). Then comes the negotiation of meaning of what truly happened between them. As the niece says: “Discutimos los términos” (95):

Él jamás se habría reconocido en la palabra abuso. Me reprocha la distorsión: ¿no es verdad que yo lo seduje a él? Me mira, traza sobre los míos los rasgos de esa joven libertina, una tigresa adolescente de rugido temebundo. Sé que muchas veces estiré el ingenio de mis catorce años para parecerme a ella [. . . ]. (95)

The uncle employs an age-old technique of blaming the victim, painting her as someone else, other than the person she is. It isn’t surprising. He has already attempted to empty her of herself through his actions; now he tries to do it with his words. When the niece insists that she needs a way of categorizing what happened between them, “necesitaba
entenderme con los demás,” he responds simply: “tuvimos una responsabilidad compartida” (95).

He then tries to attack her track record. The niece anticipates her uncle’s defensive move: “Habla de dos o tres encuentros esporádicos sucedidos mucho después, cuando yo tenía veinte o veintidós años. Apenas empieza sé que va a referirse a eso” (96). These encounters make up a single category for her: “los instantes más horribles de mi vida” (96). They are unplanned, as the two happen upon each other one day. The niece figures that she is finally at a place where she can have a conversation with her uncle about the things only he can speak to: “ya sin la torpeza de mi adolescencia, sin las inhibiciones y los miedos que habían hecho todo tan horrible en ese tiempo, ahora definitivamente superado, según yo” (96). Unfortunately, the niece quickly finds out that she, in fact, isn’t over those fears and inhibitions. Her need and desire to speak to her uncle, to confront him with her words, is thwarted: “Buscara lo que buscara en mí, mi cuerpo parecía estorbarle y había que quitarlo de en medio. Yo era testigo de su violencia desde una distancia congelada, incapaz de interponer un diálogo” (97). These two or three encounters are what lead the niece to contemplate, and even attempt, the aforementioned suicide.

As with any court case, the uncle interposes attempts to garner sympathy for his defense, but the niece does not let her guard down: “trata de convencerme de que está solo en una isla que se hunde” (89). His contrived confession aims to serve this same purpose, to paint him as the victim: “Dice: así arruiné mi vida y ni siquiera me di cuenta” (90). The niece notes: “cuando lo dice, falta algo” (90). He is like a lawyer who has meticulously planned a defense (during almost the entirety of the niece’s life). “Sus
palabras me parecen piezas de ajedrez, no una revelación de sus sentimientos, ni siquiera un juicio sincero sobre su vida” (91). His attempt to garner sympathy continues throughout the entirety of their conversation. When one attempt for sympathy fails, he tries another: “también dice: ni siquiera fue un gran placer,” and “jura que el goce no fue el motivo ni el resultado” (100). He then turns the pressure on his victim: “Me está preguntando si me obligaba, si de alguna manera se puede decir que yo no era completamente libre” (100). It is at this moment that the niece tells the reader or, perhaps, she tells herself:

sus palabras me duelen

registro que sus palabras me duelen

permite que su palabras me duelan. (100)

With this moment of realization and clarity, the confusion finally starts to dissipate. The mixed emotions start to become clear; of course she wasn’t free, she was a child. And though the uncle’s hold has been so strong for so long, and she is still tempted to believe him, she can finally hear her own voice, sense her own feelings, above his (101). She has successfully begun to disentangle her life from his.

The Triangle of Desire in Reverse

The manner in which González Mateos unfolds this story makes it unique among the works examined in this dissertation. As a recounting of a history, the understanding that the reader gains comes through the narrator’s voice, revealing only what the narrator knows, as she knows it. As such, the key element of the Triangle of Desire, the intention of the perpetrator, is left unknown throughout the bulk of the novella. I would maintain,
however, that this late revelation is actually an accurate reflection of the uncle’s own actions. That is to say, it seems that the uncle never actually reveals his intentions early on in the narrator’s life. He didn’t have to, he could keep his intentions hidden on the front end because a little girl wouldn’t think to demand an answer, nor would she be able to formulate one herself. In the uncle’s struggle for power, as long as he has the ultimate power, he doesn’t have to expose himself in that way.

This all changes when the niece calls him to account. As she sits in the coffee house courtroom where they have their conversation, it’s clear that his position of power starts to succumb to the power of the truth. Even though his words try to say that his intentions were pure and innocent, his actions speak otherwise; this is evident in his immediate need to meet with her, his desire to silence her, his counter-attacks, his profuse protests, and his shameless struggle for sympathy. With each attempt his protective façade begins to fall, and the reader can see very plainly that these actions all have one aim: he is scrambling to justify and give legitimacy to his former self and desires, to affirm his prior identity, and to qualify himself as acceptable and good. In this way, the uncle lives out the Triangle of Desire in reverse. In other words, rather than looking forward to arrive at a desired state, the uncle looks back, trying to justify the desires he had as a young man, so that he can somehow validate his pitiful existence in the present. And in doing so, his own words seem to ring true: he is on an island that is sinking as he, now an old man, struggles to validate his younger self.

As the narration at this point carries out in real time, the reader realizes the uncle’s intentions exactly when the narrator does. His intentions are motivated by power, and as such he created a power struggle between himself and his niece that he thought he
would have no problem winning; not only because of her circumstance as a young girl, but because the predisposition of the law and tradition in which they live would allow it. It is obvious that he sincerely thought he could abuse his niece and get away with it, and now he intends to rectify the situation; not by accepting blame, but rather by discrediting his niece and rendering her silent once again. His intentions are clear.

Yet again, now decades later, the uncle attempts to remove the niece from the plane of subjectivity, only this time he doesn’t do it as an attempt to secure a future state but, rather, to justify his prior desires with impunity. The uncle is ready to completely dismiss the niece and debunk her credibility in order to excuse his perverted, younger self. The bond between the uncle and his former self is clearly the most important relationship to him, for in that bond lays his real identity. He wants to preserve that identity in the false state of pretense that he created, and even believed, all these years. Meanwhile, his bond with the niece hasn’t changed. Her body, and her being, still seems to affect him: “estorbarle y había que quitarlo de en medio” (97). In the midst of his protests, the uncle reveals the truth that he never would have spoken aloud: that his desire for his niece is and always was woven together with disdain, and that his willingness to dispose of her (literally and figuratively) is matched only by his need for self-preservation.

Conclusion

Arredondo and González Mateos both situate their narrative in the blurry, liminal space between family and legal code. The ambiguity of the uncle/niece incest that they present allows for the reader to enter into their texts and participate in their acts of
exposure and denunciation. Though Arredondo leaves Luisa as the silenced victim, it is unquestionable to the reader that Don Apolonio’s interactions and intentions with his niece were violent and heinous, in spite of the façade of love and care. Both his abuse of the legal code, and the traditional, patriarchal view of wives and women, become self-evident throughout the short story. By the end of the story, Luisa isn’t any closer to achieving her freedom from the law’s oppression; but perhaps, because of the story, women in the society at large will be.

While Arredondo represents the oppressive patriarchal traditions with an air of mystery and fantasy, like the inexplicable stupor that comes upon Luisa when she arrives at her uncle’s town, González Mateos’ novel is devoid of any such mystical forces. *Lenguaje de las orquídeas* is almost gritty in its realism; unemotionally narrated as we discussed earlier, but relentless in depicting all that the narrator could recall of the abuse. There are no metaphors for what happens, just the facts. In creating this type of context, González Mateos invites the reader into a different arena of ambiguity, that of the human conscience. The patriarchal, oppressive tendencies and traditions aren’t implied in any way, they are explicitly spoken through the mouth of the uncle. The reader must experience the tricks that the human mind can and will play on itself, we must sit in the coffee shop courtroom and determine who the more reliable witness is. This comes, of course, after accompanying the narrator on her journey to untangle the ambiguity inside of herself, caused by years of abuse, shame, and silence.

Marta Aponte Alsina’s novella *Sobre mi cadáver*, with which I open the dissertation, sits in this liminal space of blurred lines, familial abuse, and power plays. Aponte Alsina obfuscates the murky situation of incest even further with an uncle who is,
in fact, the father as well, marking generational incest and abuse. Her novella, however, is also about generational resistance to this type of abuse. What Josefina failed to do in protecting herself from her brother, she executes with her own power and agency when it comes to protecting her daughter. Her actions place her back on the plane of subjectivity just in time to impede her brother’s heinous plot.

Though this wasn’t the original intent, it’s enlightening to be writing this chapter during the year of the #metoo movement. The #metoo movement isn’t necessarily related to incest (though it isn’t expressly divorced from incest), but the discourse surrounding abuse, assault, and even harassment has broken open in new ways this year. In Lenguaje de las orquídeas, we don’t ever hear the narrative voice’s reason for not taking her uncle to trial. We can assume, however, that the combination of his position in the society and the history of blaming the victim played a part in her decision. It has not always been enough to be right when fighting legal cases, as they are contingent on so many factors.

In 2018, however, following the 2017 accusations against Hollywood film mogul Harvey Weinstein, there was a proliferation of female voices that accused their attackers and were met with acceptance and credence in their accusation. The beginning of 2018 in the US was highlighted by the very public trial of US Gymnastics National Team Doctor Larry Nassar, and his accusers statements were not only welcomed, but also televised for the nation to see. Even when these cases have not gone to trial, the public witness of such heinous acts has led major companies and corporations to take their own action, deliver their own verdict, and refuse to allow known predators to work for them. This even happened earlier in 2018 in Mexico, where the #metoo movement has received
much more backlash than in the US. Still, after one such accusation by Mexican actress Karla Souza, Televisa fired director Gustavo Loza (Kahn). Whether it is through fiction or television interviews, these are necessary steps towards breaking the silence, the stigma of abuse victims, and the legal vulnerability that certain subjects have been sentenced to over the years.

Authors like Arredondo and González Mateos are among the ranks of the brave ones who spoke out before it was accepted, inviting their readers to enter into the text and participate in the decision for change. Their works don’t just envision a transformation of the circumstances for the victims, but a change in public reaction; the kind of reaction that allows for participation in order to push back against abuse, to stand up to the excuses, and to move forward into a new reality.
Chapter 5

Motherhood, Menstruation & Madness:

Scientific Notions of Femaleness

As I have discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the hegemonic system of legality and related construct of legitimacy have a far-reaching hold in patriarchal societies. Their effects stretch throughout time and space, as well as the social and the personal realms. Legality shares much in common with science as systems that have supported the hold of patriarchal societies. Both systems are vulnerable to manipulation and can have adverse effects on the lived reality of disadvantaged sectors of society, and on women in particular. At the same time, the role that science plays in patriarchal societies is distinct in many ways.

This chapter centers on a critique of the scientific discourse to explore some of the historically dominant beliefs regarding women and femaleness upheld and advanced by the scientific establishment. Within that history, I focus on the ways in which women have been construed as beings inferior to men in a discourse that has justified their positions of subordination within the domestic and public space. I develop my analysis of the misogynistic character of scientific discourse through the textual analysis of works by two Latin American poets. The overall argument advanced in this chapter is that, though these writers represent and address different manifestations of hegemonic scientific discourses, they are, fundamentally, confronting the same root cause of female exploitation. I also argue that these authors don’t just subvert the practices that the dominant discourse engenders; they add their voice to the discourse itself and, in doing so, they change it.
This chapter is structured into four main sections. The first section discusses the reductive character of scientific discourse, primarily through the lens of feminist critique. In it, I address dominant notions in the differentiation between genders, their roles, and their permitted functions in a given society. The three remaining sections center on the literary analysis of works by Rosario Castellanos and Anjelamaría Dávila in order to show how these authors engage with and question certain recurrent female constructions along the spectrum of scientific discourse on women in patriarchal societies. These range from the conflation of woman and mother, to the connection between lunacy and menstruation, to the world of psychiatric drugs that are prescribed for the condition of femaleness. As in the previous chapters, I will employ textual analysis and draw on an application of the Triangle of Desire as a theoretical framework of gender relations (detailed in Chapter 1). The Triangle of Desire allows critics to examine beyond the moment of the woman’s oppression in order to reflect upon the deeper intentions, both systematic and personal, behind the oppression. For this chapter, I will primarily examine the first side of The Triangle of Desire, part one of the process I outline in Chapter 1, which specifically exposes the act of destabilizing the woman’s identity and displacing her from the plane of subjectivity.

While the authors I analyze in this chapter are unique in their approach and their points of critique, they are unified in a few significant ways. First, they address the scientific discourse that prescribes the women’s identity. Second, the works I have chosen for this chapter are different from those discussed in other chapters because they generally exclude male characters. In the texts analyzed here, the tension or struggle is not with one character who is abusing the system; rather, the discursive tactics truly
expose the system and its discourse as a whole. Lastly, one of the unifying gestures among these authors is that they don’t represent a direct contestation or confrontation with the system and its totalizing discourse. Their critique is subtle and often unassuming. These authors use locally situated female characters and poetic voices, often in isolation, to speak to global manifestations of the generally accepted construction of female identity.

In the first section of literary analysis, I discuss the way women have been scientifically defined as inferior because of their reproductive role. They have been classified as and relegated to the role of mother, of the passive recipient of the male sperm. My textual analysis will center on the poems “Se habla de Gabriel,” by Mexican author Rosario Castellanos, and “Ante tanta vision,” by Anjelamaría Dávila of Puerto Rico. Castellanos moves the discourse away from romanticized ideas about women and childbearing and focuses on the realities that motherhood presents. Her response to the prevailing scientific discourse is a firm “no;” childbearing is not identity, it is not deterministic, it is a fact of life. And while it can only be a fact of life for women, it is not an *a priori* pronouncement on the identity of all women. Castellanos resists the dominant discourse of the passive mother by presenting the theme of the active mother, who has the agency to make a decision that reflects the poetic voice’s true sense of self. Dávila, on the other hand, re-appropriates the scientific discourses of biology, natural history, and anthropology regarding women. Her discursive tactic is to reclaim dominant notions of femaleness: that the female is an animal, with a baby, walking on a ball of dirt. She recognizes the scientific discourse, but she is conscious of the limitations of those notions—calling them half-truths at best—that have been a subterfuge of prevailing
notions about a woman’s identity and role in modernity. Dávila rests her contestatory stance on the themes of collective identity and collective hope, two things that science can’t fully define or classify. Her word choices expose the reductionist character of the centuries-old discourse.

My analysis of the scientific patriarchal constructs of female identity continues in the second section of this chapter, as I analyze the themes of lunacy and menstruation in two of Dávila’s poems: “Luna Cumplida” and “déjenme sola.” Dávila explores erroneous discourses of female lunacy in two ways: 1) she shows the coherent, heroic gestures and actions of women in spite of their menstruation; and 2) she claims a space for the temporary madness that is a woman’s menstrual period. Recognizing it for what it is, a passing state, Dávila rejects the idea that it constitutes the woman’s identity.

The last section of analysis will focus on Rosario Castellanos’ poem “Valium 10.” Castellanos enters into dialogue with the trend of prescribing psychiatric medicine for middle class, middle-age women in the late twentieth century. In doing this, she confronts the belief that women are chaos that needs to be controlled, and she sheds light on the vicious cycle of such psychiatric medicine: though meant to solve a condition, it only exaggerates the condition even more, maintaining women in the very state the medicine is meant to alleviate.

At the end, I discuss how these works are unique within my dissertation in how they relate to the Triangle of Desire and amplify and highlight the first side of it. In doing this, they focus on the unassuming and unquestionable tool that is used in attempts to empty a woman of her subjectivity, in this case, the patriarchal scientific discourse itself. These authors actually illuminate the bleak reality that, even when there isn’t a
singular subject acting against the woman, the system is always acting and, often, it is against her.

**Scientific Discourse and the Inferiority of Women**

The scientific logic and discourse that claim women to be inferior to men trace their roots back to Ancient Greece, if not earlier. Aristotle’s pseudo-scientific model relied heavily on the idea that the life force and active nature of a man’s semen set him above and apart from the woman, who was defined by her passive role and her passive contribution of material to the reproductive process; Lynda Lange paraphrases Aristotle:

Since the female contributes the material of the new individual, it cannot be the case that she also has the power to infuse soul into it, for then she could reproduce herself without a male [. . . ] The form of the child exists potentially in the male soul. (5)

Lange points out that Aristotle’s reasoning was speaking not only about biological function, but also about the soul. In such, it was unobservable and, therefore, incredibly hard to disprove: “women’s inferiority was taken as a given and established fact, as opposed to something determined by proper scientific study or rational thought” (Frize 18-19).

Beyond casting women as inferior to men, “Aristotle considered the existence and nature of women to be one of the features of life that most compellingly called for an explanation” (Lange 2). From an early point in the historical designation of gender roles and identity, women were not only made subordinate to men, but their very existence also demanded (because of their inferior position) that the superior man study them, explain
them, and, in fact, write them. Sandra Harding argues that “women’s different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims” (121). In this devaluation, a woman cannot consider or generate the evidence; rather she is the evidence to be considered.

These two markings that have been historically placed on women (that of inferior and observable) create a scientifically approved relationship between women and men that has endured over centuries. “Having divided the world into two parts – the knower (mind) and the knowable (nature) – scientific ideology goes on to prescribe a very specific relation between the two. It prescribes the interactions [. . .] which can lead to knowledge” (Fox Keller 190-91). These prescribed interactions require a separation between knower and knowable, subject and object, man and woman. The knowable female object exists to serve the pursuit of the knowing male subject to gain and produce more knowledge. These assigned roles in the scientific process “far exceed what can be traced to mere biology; that once formed these ideas take on a life of their own – a life sustained by powerful cultural and psychological forces” (Fox Keller 191).

Culturally situated as these ideas are, and even as science adapted to new social conditions, the scientific discourse on women endured. In the thirteenth Century, Thomas Aquinas translated Aristotle’s work in order to “reconcile Aristotle’s work with Christian doctrine” (Frize 13). While there were some ancient philosophers whose views were more favorable towards women, Aristotle’s views prevailed. The blend of his philosophic/scientific views with those of the religious institution rooted women’s inferiority in the Medieval European culture even more deeply (Frize 14).
Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s opinion that a male child is perfect and a female child is the result of a defect, as an explanation of what was taken to be fact, namely, the inferiority of women, and supplemented it with the claim that a woman is not misbegotten insofar as she fulfills what is required for the human species to reproduce. (Frize 15)

Women, it would seem, are rescued from their inherent “defect” through childbearing. Not only is reproduction now her identity, it is her salvation.

Michael Gross and Mary Beth Averill analyze the scientific relationship between men and women in the early to mid nineteenth century when Darwin’s theories of evolution and natural selection were widely accepted in the world of natural sciences. Although much of the intertwining of science and religion was predominantly undone in the seventeenth century, the culturally ensconced belief about women’s inferiority was still upheld by the science of the day (Frize 13). For instance, Gross and Averill have focused primarily on how the ideas of scarcity and competition within the process of natural selection relate to gender politics and dynamics:

Evolution and natural selection, as products of nineteenth century thought, coincide with other reflections of men’s anxiety about women, most plainly displayed in their preoccupation with her reproductive ability: her uncontrolled sexuality, her (“pathological”) reproductive physiology, even her (hysterical) psychology. The nineteenth century medicalization of women’s reproductive capacities, as an attempt to control and contain women’s fecundity, parallels the emphasis on domination and competition in nature as the main restraints over unbridled chaos in the orderly evolution of the species. (81)
While the field of natural science had changed, the discourse was quite the same during the nineteenth century. It still centered on women and reproduction, the chaos that this represented, and the need to control the chaos.

Part of the feminist response to the patriarchal, scientific discourse regarding female identity has been to champion women’s involvement in earlier and earlier stages of the scientific process, not just in carrying out the observations, but also in determining what is to be studied, in adding to the epistemology (Harding). This is not an easy task, for it is incredibly difficult to work against the culturally embedded reasoning that has existed for centuries. As participants in the culture, the commonly held beliefs about women are also embedded in their own thinking. Women critics don’t just have to confront the scientific discourse, but the patriarchal tendencies, as well.

A feminist task is to reconsider patriarchal images: to understand them as reflections of a male mentality; to consider whether they even answer any questions feminists want to ask; and to remake the image of nature in metaphors conformable to woman’s reality. (Gross and Averill 71)

The authors in this chapter reconsider the patriarchal images that have been thrust upon them by exposing them, laying them bare before the reader, and inviting the reader to see them plainly for themselves. In doing so, these women expose the vulnerabilities in the historic strength of scientific discourse; they level the myth of the superior sex.

The Woman as Mother, Exclusively

Much of the scientific discourse regarding the subordination of women is centered on her role in reproduction: she is the recipient and the one whose biological material
lacks the active strength that the man’s biological material presumably holds. She represents chaos to a man’s order, and someone (something?) who must be known and controlled. Still, though women have long been defined by reproduction, they are often conveniently excluded from the transcendent nature of reproduction in the course of human history: “The individuals who seek to partake in the eternal and the divine by reproducing themselves are by implication only the males. *Her* partaking is quite different. She is instrumental to species eternity, and potentially rather than actually human” (Lange 11-12). The woman is a necessary vessel, taking on the role, as Evelyn Fox Keller argues, of nature objectified (191).

Undoubtedly, only women have the biological potential to be mothers, to carry a child, to see through an entire gestation. Still, it requires a significant act of deterministic reduction to tie an indisputable link between the identity of all women and reproduction or motherhood. This is true even for women who have given birth. If motherhood is the extent of a woman’s identity, then she cannot resist objectification. The problem with this essentialist discourse isn’t in the observation of women as mothers, it is in the ensconced cultural assumptions that reproduction tells us something more about a woman’s identity than it actually does. In this section, I examine two works from two different authors who problematize this assumption.

*The Active Mother in One Poem by Rosario Castellanos*

Rosario Castellanos’s book of poems *En la tierra de en medio*, found in the collection *Poesía No Eres Tú* (1972), contains gestures that push against heavily entrenched cultural and historical myths in Mexico. Castellanos’s poems seek to forge a
new collective memory as they engage the socialized roles to which women have been relegated. Her poem “Se habla de Gabriel” speaks of motherhood as a circumstance, but one in which the woman can have agency.

In “Se habla de Gabriel,” a poem she wrote after giving birth to her son, Castellanos problematizes the idea that reproduction and motherhood define the woman. While still a poem and not necessarily an autobiography, it is significant that “Se habla de Gabriel” was written from the first-hand experience of bearing a child. Castellanos, a woman, had reproduced. Still, she rejects the notion that this is a woman’s exclusive identity and destiny. Castellanos uses the space of the poem to put this essentialist idea in question. She does so in three ways: 1) she establishes a distinction between the two subjects: the poetic voice and her son; 2) she shows a certain discord rather than harmony with the baby; and 3) in the face of that disunity, she establishes the woman’s voice and agency in this phenomenon that has so long been wrenched from her control.

Castellanos begins “Se habla de Gabriel” by calling her son a guest (160). He is the other, existing separately, someone who is borrowing space within her before breaking into the world. The language that Castellanos uses to describe the poetic voice’s baby is not one of connection but of distinction, and she draws the line between the two. Castellanos establishes this distinction in two ways: through their individual bodies and their individual will and desire.

Castellanos is careful to draw distinguishing lines between the bodies of the mother and the son. It’s notable that the son’s body grows within the mother’s, at her expense, rather than with the mother’s in some sort of harmony. He is alien. As he grows within her, he robs her body of that which it needs, her blood’s color, and adds to
her body that which she doesn’t want: weight and size (160). The son’s body also physically takes up the space that once belonged to the mother, and now demands the food that was once hers for the taking: “Haciéndome partir en dos cada bocado” (160).

At the same time, the son (or rather, the son’s body) has a distinct will as well: “Su cuerpo me pidió nacer.” The poetic voice responds: “Consentí ” (160). Castellanos presents the two of them in dialogue, a negotiation between two distinct people.

Beyond making clear the distinction between the poetic voice and the son, Castellanos shows struggle between the two. They struggle for food and space, as we saw above, but they also struggle for time and a place in the world. His arrival is marked as a bad time for the poetic voice, but for him it is different. In order for his history to begin, time is a gift: “La provisión de tiempo necesaria” (160). Furthermore, while the son literally struggles inside the mother to break out, he causes a figurative internal struggle in her, as well. His presence forces her to deal with her new state: “Fea, enferma y aburrida” (160). Thus, the relationship between mother and son, since even before his birth, is marked by contrary impulses and realities.

At the end of the poem, however, Castellanos affirms the woman’s agency in the midst of reproduction and motherhood. The hinge of the poem, I would argue, lies in one sentence made up of one word: “Consentí” (160). To all that the son demands of the mother, to all that he takes away or adds, the poetic voice consents. Perhaps we can even read in her acquiescence the decision not just to consent to the birth, but to what lies ahead in motherhood: “Quedé abierta ” (160). This is a moment of action in the midst of a phenomenon that has been considered not only passive, but also simultaneously binding and out of the woman’s control. It is an act of subjectivity that makes motherhood a
choice and not an obligation, a circumstance and not a natural state. In the end, the reader is not left with the scientific discourse, but rather with the woman’s choice. The woman is not just who she was always meant to be, if that even exists, but this has, in fact, changed her.

**Collective Identity and Collective Hope in Anjelamaría Dávila’s Poetic Response to the Scientific Discourse on Women**

Dávila’s second book of poems, *Animal fiero y tierno* (1977), contemplates myriad phenomena, from what I would call the nature of the earth (that which is naturally occurring) to the nature of the world (that which is culturally occurring). Dávila has a sense of optimism and lightness, but also nostalgia and sadness in her tone as she alludes to all these sentiments through her book. Her poetry speaks of resilience and hope, even in light of the reductionist cultural ideals that she confronts. Her poem “Ante tanta visión” speaks about women’s identity, and their role as reproducing subjects. By using the discursive tactic of accepting this identity as pre-determined by nature, she shows that it is actually a result of the discourse created within the nature of the world (culture), akin, perhaps to what Mimi Sheller calls “culturing nature” in her book *Consuming the Caribbean* (19).

From the first line of the poem, Dávila lets the reader know that she is entering into a pre-existing discourse about women that has spanned generations: “ante tanta visión de historia y prehistoria / [. . .] me vi” (16). The poetic voice willfully looks at herself through the lens that the world has historically used to look at her, the vision that has been perpetuated throughout the centuries by disciplines like history, natural history,
biology, or anthropology. We know from that moment that she is engaging with the scientific view, the entrenched ideal that has prevailed century after century. It is significant, however, that after naming her scope (history and prehistory) she includes in that same breath: “de mitos, / de verdades a medias –o a cuartas–” (16). Though willfully invoking the dominant historical vision, she recognizes that it is laced with fictitious inventions and even lies. It isn’t an even playing field, and yet she boldly confronts it.

After setting the stage for her poem by declaring, and also revising, her scope of analysis, Dávila uses three tactics to refute those dominant claims about women: 1) she narrows the universal generalization down to a local, personal level in order to address the discourse on motherhood; 2) she reveals the beliefs that lie just below the surface of the scientific discourse; and 3) from her situated context, she actively embraces a collective identity which leads her, in spite of the sadness of the poem, to find a collective hope in the end.

*The Poetic Voice’s Personal Point of View*

One of the tenets of second wave feminism was that the political is personal, and vice versa. It was a rejection of broad generalizations that operate on a theoretical plane but that ignore the lived reality of those affected by them. As if in lockstep with that ideology, Dávila’s poem isn’t set in the context of women as a category but set in the context of one woman, the poetic voice, who examines herself rather than women as a whole: “me vi” (16; emphasis added). There’s vulnerability in this act. The poetic voice doesn’t just confront a system that pronounces verdicts over the female gender in general; she confronts a system that pronounces a verdict over her: “soy un animal triste” (16).
But the personal reflection doesn’t end there. The poetic voice recognizes herself in the discourse that inextricably connects femaleness (whether human or animal) with reproduction; she is “hembra con cría” (16). There’s more to the story, however: “con una infancia torpe y oprímida por cosas tan ajenas” (16). The poetic voice finds herself contesting the discourse regarding her identity and motherhood after passing through life experiences that are out of her control, some of which might have led her to pregnancy before understanding. She doesn’t reject her motherhood; rather, she appropriates it, recognizing that it, much like her identity, is contingent on multiple factors, some of which are outside of her control.

Below the Surface of the Scientific Discourse

When Dávila questions the content of the historically rooted scientific claims about women, her questioning is subtle and unassuming. She adjusts the language of the discourse ever so slightly in order to reveal the whole truth (as opposed to the half or quarter truths) that lies just below the surface. It is significant to note that Dávila doesn’t mention the words “woman” or “women” in her poem. This is significant because the term woman refers to a category of humans. Rather, the poetic voice identifies first with being an animal: “soy un animal triste parado y caminando / sobre un globo de tierra” (16). Animals, even female animals, will never be women (nor humans, nor citizens with equal rights, for that matter). While the cultural discourse insists on establishing differences between men and women, Dávila knows that the discourse is really between (male) humans and animals, and the historical treatment of women places her, squarely,
in the category of animal. She names what has long been implied.\textsuperscript{19} Her commentary doesn’t end there, however, for as a woman of color, the term animal has a racial connotation as well, which I will discuss further ahead.

Dávila represents the scientific discourse in the only way it can truly be read, as if a woman cannot see or understand herself apart from it. Dávila engages the idea that the poetic voice cannot see herself until she has looked at herself through the historical and pre-historical lens that has shown her only in a certain light; she challenges the discourse that says she cannot understand herself until someone or something else has explained her to herself. In making this personal, she reveals the folly of such a line of reasoning. Perhaps it seems reasonable to scientifically explain the woman to a group of men, but for a woman, the fact that she must be explained to herself is absurd. It is to assume she has no sense of self, no point of reference, until she stands before the vision laid out for her and looks at it as if staring into a mirror. This, however, is part of Dávila’s commentary.

Those scientific explanations are most certainly about women, but they are not for women. They assume a population in which women don’t belong as subjects, but only as test subjects. In this poem, Dávila isn’t necessarily talking back or replying insolently to the scientific claims about women; rather, she re-appropriates the discourse to problematize the entire rationale behind such claims. She exposes the assumptions that

\textsuperscript{19} It’s worth noting that Aristotle does use animals as a way of defining the difference between men and women in his work \textit{De Generatione Animalium}. Though his basis for defining the genders for both men and women lies differences between the sexes in animals, he also states that the male carries the soul, arguably lifting him off the plane of \textit{animal} and onto the plane of \textit{human}. 
underlie the patriarchal scientific discourse to the effect that not only are women explainable, but that they are so because they exist in an alterior category from men.

Interestingly enough, the reader doesn’t know for certain that the poetic voice is female until about two thirds of the way through the poem, when the poetic voice reveals that she is a female with a child: “hembra con cría” (16). It can be inferred by its late reveal that it is not what the poetic voice views as the central characteristic of her identity. Still, her biological ability to reproduce marks her. The link between women and reproduction as her identity is not innocent or harmless. Dávila connects it with the link between animals and reproduction, ergo the degrading link between the poetic voice and animal is stressed. Perhaps the patriarchal discourse wouldn’t explicitly call the poetic voice an animal, but Dávila knows the implication of its essentialist analysis, and she spells it out for the reader.

Collective Identity and Hope

Beyond writing as a woman, Dávila is unique in that, as a woman of color from a lower socio-economic stratum, she is writing from the intersection of gender, race, and class. Intersectionality, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, refers to the specific experience and discrimination that women of color have, an experience that amounts to more than the sum of its parts:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And
sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (Crenshaw 149)

Indeed, Dávila’s commentary goes beyond gender discourse. As noted above, it’s significant that the poetic voice’s first point of identification isn’t as a woman, something revealed almost at the end of the poem, but as an animal, a categorization that that ties her to historical dimensions of scientific discourses regarding people of color. After that, the poetic voice situates herself as one part of a collective, an identity marker of many marginalized people: “un animal que habla / para decirle a otro parecido su esperanza.”

Further, the poetic voice refers back to this: “animal colectivo / que agarra de los otros la tristeza como un pan repartido” (16). From her contingent position in society, the poetic voice finds her identity in solidarity with others who are in a similar position. She re-appropriates the scientific discourse to humanize the female subject, to make something positive out of it in human solidarity, a common technique for poor, marginalized women to transform the conditions of their oppression. This is what leads her, even in the midst of a bleak situation on a desolate ball of earth, to be able to embrace a collective hope, even in the midst of shared sadness (16-17).

In light of this collective hope, reproduction, at the end of the poem, is cast in a new light, for it comes with enriched conditions in the context of her solidarity with others. She re-claims the space of reproduction, speaking about it now in the first person: “soy un animal triste, esperanzado / vivo, me reproduzco, sobre un globo de tierra” (17). Similarly, she reclaims the physical space of the ball of earth that she inhabits, taking the lack that history and pre-history have afforded her, perhaps reflected in the bare portrayal of the earth, and she takes action towards life.
Hysteria and Menstruation

There is a moment during the seventeenth century when the object of the Western discourse surrounding lunacy, or madness, switched from being a condition that affected the lovesick male protagonist, driven crazy by romantic rejection, to one affecting the lovesick female (Small 6). Helen Small notes that the lovesick female was not a new trope, by any means, but the decline of the lovesick male trope during the late seventeenth century was obvious (7). This decline paved the way for the “feminization of madness” (Small 7). Lunacy went from being the product of a circumstantial state (that of unrequited love) to the product of a natural condition from which predominately only women suffer, the “debility of the nerves” (Small 7). The discourse switches from depicting a situational condition in men and women to a permanent condition in women, from an acceptable ailment to a social sore that needs (male) attention, testing, and control.

The etymology of the term hysteria reveals that in its very root is the word for uterus or womb. Small gives a concise history of the term in her book Love’s Madness. In summary, the first recorded reference to an instance of the “womb’s pathological influence on female behavior” was as early as 1900 BC, though the word hysteria is attributed to the second century AD physician, Galen (Small 16). While the influence of psychology pointed to an indirect effect of the womb on female behavior, if any, by the early nineteenth century, there was still believed to be a link between the womb and hysteria. This idea circulated in the culture until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During that time, several psychologists, including Sigmund Freud, conducted clinical work that showed hysteria’s root as psychological rather than anatomical, thus
disconnecting it from the determinist discourse tying hysteria exclusively to women. Still, cases of hysterical men were rare until the incidence of shell shock during WWI (Small 16-17), when thousands of men affected by the horrors of the war produced symptoms of shock and neurosis without any physical explanation ("Shell Shock").

With the discourse of lunacy finding its strength in words like hysteria and its essentialist female connotation, the object of most studies on lunacy could scarcely resist focusing on females. After discursively establishing the object of the condition, science and scientists set out to test and cure the hysteric. Advances in medicine and technology at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century led to more and more invasive testing that left increasingly severe marks on the subjects.\(^{20}\) Initially, treatments included such remedies as complete isolation, staying indoors, and not working. The weight of work and production was considered to be too much for a woman, so naturally if she were deemed hysterical there would be an expressed need to release the woman from that stress. This type of treatment is represented in literary texts internationally, in works like "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892, and La Regenta by Leopoldo Alas y Ureña in 1885. As Perkins Gilman signals, this treatment of isolation and idleness leaves the women even more depressed and delusional, causing many to act, and eventually fit into, the category of hysterical.

While isolation and social restrictions carried strong social and psychological side effects that were both damaging and limiting, advancing technology and twisted curiosities led to treatments that were explicitly harmful, not only socially and

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\(^{20}\) Michel Foucault traces these advances in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *The Order of Things* (1966).
psychologically, but also physically.\textsuperscript{21} The creation of psych wards and hospitals in the nineteenth century also added a greater degree of isolation for these women, now not just removed from the society but also from their families. As the cycle of diagnosing, testing, and treating the subjects continued, the scientists and psychologists of the day succeeded in producing an entire population of women who fit the discourse. It became a proverbial witch-hunt. Once a woman was considered a hysteric, her fate was sealed, for even if she were completely sane, the treatment would often drive her mad.

The discourse on lunacy and hysteria extended throughout the twentieth century, still centered predominantly on women. For the sake of this dissertation, this is where we will enter the conversation about this well engrained belief system. With the centrality of the uterus in the root of the word hysteria, it is unsurprising that there would be a focus on female insanity centered on menstruation. Menstruation seemingly presents a literal connection between the uterus and the behavior, between the natural, internal condition and the external characteristics. As menstruation finds its way into the discourse of insanity, the deterministic belief that women are naturally given to lunacy would gain ground.

\textit{Menstruation Interrupts; it Does Not Define: Two Poems by Anjelamaría Dávila}

Anjelamaría Dávila confronts these notions in her two poems “déjennme sola” and “Luna Cumplida” from her posthumously published book of poems \textit{La querencia} (2006). \textit{La querencia} is a collection of poems that reveals different voices woven together to

\textsuperscript{21} There are myriad studies done on the experiments carried out by J.M. Charcot at the Pitié Salpêtrière hospital in France. See Georges Didi-Huberman’s \textit{Invention of Hysteria} (2003).
paint a picture of the human experience and, specifically, the female experience. This experience, as Dávila interprets it, is cultural, physical, sexual, and emotional; it is all encompassing. In the two poems I analyze in this section, she demystifies the phenomenon of menstruation while establishing a historical context for the strength of Puerto Rican women, even when women have to deal with the pain, discomfort, and invasiveness of the period. I analyze these two poems in a parallel manner, drawing an analysis from them together that is singular and univocal.

Anjelamaria Dávila confronts scientific discourse in different ways throughout her work; from questioning the validity of the reason that the Enlightenment and modernity bring, to attacking gender-based stereotypes that supposedly rest on scientific proof. Her poems “déjenme sola” and “Luna cumplida” address culturally preconceived and deterministic ideas surrounding menstruation. In these poems, Dávila questions the essentialist discourse surrounding the role of menstruation in a woman’s life while also re-classifying and carving out a space for the supposed hysteria that coincides with menstruation.

From the beginning of both poems, it is clear that menstruation, while inescapable, is not a defining characteristic of the woman’s identity. Though a marker of latent maternity, it is not necessarily a marker of the woman’s subjectivity. “Luna cumplida” begins with the poetic voice’s preference on the day of her period: “mejor que no venga nadie hoy. / caí mala” (163). Menstruation presents a disruption of the poetic voice’s normal life. It is an interruption, not the norm. The poetic voice in “déjenme sola” is more direct with her desires during these days: “déjenme sola con mis cosas. / déjenme sola en mi baño con mis pestes” (141). With the interruption of menstruation
comes special accommodations, things that may be reserved solely for *that time of the month*; like drinking “un tesesito / de yantén y amamá” (“Luna” 163) to alleviate the pain (note that it is a non-scientific approach to pain treatment), and like cutting herself off from the people in her life: “sola en mi cuarto al desvelo / [ . . . ] -escúsenme del beso por un tiempo-” (“déjenme” 141).

Instead of defining the totality of the woman, it is clear that menstruation is a force that displaces the woman’s typical self for those days, as she lives out a shadow of her normal existence: “porque esta noche estoy / sin ánimo para nada y va y se asusta que hoy ando / jirando lenta y redonda desde mi cántaro” (“Luna” 163). The interruption that menstruation presents has an alien effect not only on the poetic voice’s mood and temperament, but on her physical body as well. In “déjenme sola” the poetic voice demands that the others “déjenme así: apestada / espinada con la rosa, hincada. / en esta piel de lama hedionda” (142). “Luna cumplida” describes these physiological effects of menstruation: “estoy feísima, hinchada / me duele la cintura, tengo sueño” (163).

The use of *estar* instead of *ser* is important; this is a passing condition, it is not a permanent overarching reality. It is only during these rare days that her body passes through these changes. Though menstruation does have a tangible effect on the woman’s body and psyche, these effects are fleeting, while the woman’s identity is not. In “Luna cumplida,” the poetic voice is reminded of other women who have been affected by “lunas antiguas” (163); women whom she is connected to, not just because they experienced this monthly intruder, and not just because they would turn to “el té para el alivio” (164), but because of their revolutionary spirit. She is reminded of her foremothers: “las mujeres apagan su fogón revueltas en guasábara / con traje de luna
These women maintained their true identity and subjectivity in spite of their period. What’s more, they did so bearing the physiological pain and psychological effects of that period: “blanca canales, en regla, hinchada / dolor de ijá sin tesesito en la candela de jayuya;” “Isabelita Freire menstrual envuelve revolver sagrado en la bandera” (164); “doris herida sangra dos veces el martirio / desde su torre fiera (no había teses)” (165). The poetic voice recalls these women who took up their menstruation and fought for their political belief in Puerto Rican independence. Though menstruation was a factor they were dealing with in these distinct situations, it does not define the women, their heroic patriotism does.

“déjenme sola” explores, more than anything else, the idea of the hysteria that is associated with the woman because of menstruation. “déjenme [. . . ] alucinada y llena de llagas, o / ardorosa o aullando. / dejen que llore cuan-do-me-dé-la-ga-na” (141); “déjenme por la calle pensando en lo que se me antoje / dándole mordiscas al aire. no me sujeten” (142). The poetic voice is not only going through the hormonal effects of menstruation on her emotions, but she has to deal with all of the people who won’t leave her alone; who are reacting to her in this situation. Dávila confronts this image of the hysterical woman in two ways: 1) she appropriates the temporary hysteria, creating a space for it, and 2) she demystifies it.

Dávila claims a space for this hysteria in public and private: “en mi baño” (141), and “por la calle” (142). She does not, however, just ask for this space; she demands it! Ten times throughout the poem she gives the order of “déjenme.” She demands that she be left alone with the physiological and emotional responses that accompany menstruation, as well as with the unladylike urges that may also accompany it: “quiero
escupir encima del pasto más tierno, / espantar mariposas amarillas y abofetear margaritas; / chascar retoyos. descoyuntar capullos” (142). We can only imagine that her reaction comes in front of a male audience who has no experience with the corporeal and emotional reactions to menstruation, and who is quite put off by them. Simone de Beauvoir, in the section of *The Second Sex* (1953) entitled “Myths,” notes the horror that a man experiences when faced with the menstruating woman, for it references her fecundity, her creative power: “Woman becomes impure the day she might be able to procreate” (167). That horror arguably reveals itself as repulsion to menstruation’s manifestations in and through the female body.

In claiming a space for this hysteria, Dávila also accomplishes demystifying it, confronting that horror and repulsion. In “Luna cumplida,” the poetic voice specifies: “que no venga nadie hoy” (163; emphasis added). The request is situated in time, because this condition is temporal. The poetic voice does not need to be avoided for the rest of her life for fear that she might go crazy; she is not a monster, she’s just on her period. “déjenme sola” states this even more plainly; just after making her last (shouted) command, “DÉJENME QUE ME JODA,” she quietly finishes the poem with “-que esto pasa-” (142). Her current state is not without cause and it is not permanent; it is passing. In this sense, her argument regarding the fleeting nature of menstruation and its effects is an incredibly reasonable explanation when compared to the arguably hysterical reactions of men, prone to dramatic hyperbole, which de Beauvoir describes above.

**Prescription Drugs and the Myth of the Superwoman**
With a surge in the practice of psychiatry during the twentieth century (and the consensus that certain former treatments were archaic and cruel), we see an increase in prescription medication as treatment for the condition of hysteria, especially for upper and middle class, middle-aged women (i.e. – those who have excess money to spend). With medication came a new wave of idleness among the women who took depressants, as the pills would numb the senses and quell the women’s impulses and desires to live an active life. Mexican author Rosario Castellanos deftly illuminates this state of stupor in her poem “Valium 10,” from her collection of poems entitled *En la tierra de en medio* (1972). In it she confronts this use of medicine as well as the impossible societal expectations that are placed on twentieth-century women in Latin America. They are pressured to be both a superwoman who tirelessly works for the good of the family, and a chemically dependent woman who must take pills to control the depression that make her idle and listless.22

Rosario Castellanos’s poem “Valium 10” confronts the scientific answer for life’s deceptions and disappointments. It makes as much a statement about the effect of medical science (through a pharmaceutical drug) on women as it does about the society (and social class) in which the use of this drug is common or in style. Castellanos makes the paradox clear: the society that has produced the drug is the same one that causes the need for the drug in the first place. The cycle relies not only on science, nor only on the expectations of a patriarchal society, but on both.

Castellanos’s poem is very specific to women from the middle to upper class. It’s important to note this for two reasons: 1) Societal expectations for a woman of the middle

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22 Betty Friedan writes about this phenomenon in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).
and upper classes are different than those established for women of a working or lower class, and 2) the access to this type of medicine is limited to those with money and medical connections. We saw a similarly narrow focus in the poems we analyzed by Olga Nolla in Chapter 3, as she also explores societal expectations on women of a certain class, carried out by way of legitimacy and legal traditions. In this way, I don’t pretend that the subject of “Valium 10” is universal for all women. On the contrary, I recognize that the specific problematic that Castellanos (and Nolla for that matter) centers on fits a very specific demographic. However, it is an important thread in the tapestry that shows that which confronts women in a patriarchal society.

Though not universal, it is important to engage with this situation for a couple of reasons: on one hand, Castellanos is responding to the actual lived reality of a sector of women, and their story deserves to be told. On the other hand, in highlighting this very class-based situation, Castellanos sheds light on the way in which the abuses carried out through the scientific system, whether by a single person or by the society as a whole, are often tailor-made to fit a specific subject. We aren’t talking about a one-size-fits-all abuse that women unwittingly fall into. Rather, as Castellanos demonstrates, the abuses of the system, though they share the same root, are often crafted with acute intentions and carried out with precision, debunking the common response that women victims “should have known better.” Just as the woman in “Valium 10” is targeted and compromised precisely in the socioeconomic position she sits in, so too are women in different walks of life. The problem may be framed differently for women in different backgrounds, but the result is similar.
With the importance of the class position of the poetic voice established, as I analyze this poem I will examine: 1) the way in which the Castellanos makes the woman’s specific socioeconomic situation known, 2) the false façade that conceals the poetic voice’s empty life, and 3) the irony with which Castellanos demystifies the socio-scientific cure that actually perpetuates her social/psychological condition, rather than ending it.

**The Woman’s Specific Socioeconomic Situation**

This poem deals with a woman who belongs to the middle or upper class. There are several details that indicate this. Her three sons’ interests and activities, for example, are one clue. The sons—possibly teenagers or college students—are all involved in multiple extracurricular activities and have belongings like a record player next to their Che Guevara poster (163). The poetic voice also tells us that the family has a cook who collaborates with the mother in order to plan the week’s meals. Furthermore, the poetic voice is educated, and she is both a teacher and a writer. She embodies the life that early (white upper/middle class) feminists strove for, one that affords her agency inside and outside of the home (Wollstonecraft 15). The question, then, is why would a woman who has access to a privileged life, who has a family, and who is in a position of financial stability, have the need for a drug like Valium?

**The False Façade on an Empty Life**

It’s clear that the poetic voice has been dragged into an orbit around what should be her life. “A veces (y no trates / de restarle importancia / diciendo que no ocurre con
The gravitational pull of the duties and occupations that fill this woman’s life have turned into repetitious habit. Taking on a life of their own, they seem to take over her life and overwhelm her subjectivity. Though she forges ahead, another paradox occurs: her life does not gain any more significance, and she does not gain any significance within her own life. What’s more, she is fully conscious of this painful process: “y en la oscuridad, en el umbral del sueño, / echas de menos lo que se ha perdido: / el diamante de más precio, la carta / de marear, el libro / con cien preguntas básicas (y sus correspondientes respuestas) para un diálogo / elemental siquiera con la Esfinge” (163). She is entirely aware that she has lost something valuable (el diamante), she has lost her sense of adventure and her direction (la carta de marear), and she is in front of the vicious Sphinx without the answers to its riddles.

Still, the title of this poem tells the reader exactly what our focus should be while reading it; we are not just reading the sad poem of a life that does not resolve, we are reading about the attempt to bring resolution. Castellanos tells us directly how society combines with science in order to treat the diagnosis of this woman’s banal existence of habitual tasks devoid of meaning: Valium 10. It was not uncommon for women of a certain class in the 1960s and 1970s to resort to the chemical relief found in Valium.23 In her poem, Castellanos questions this commonplace practice by demystifying its positive effects and depicting the hard truth of its use in the woman’s life and on her identity. She uncovers the true physiological effect that Valium has on women over the course of time.

23 The Rolling Stones even penned the song “Mother’s Little Helper” (Aftermath, 1966) about the popularity and accessibility of this drug for housewives in the ‘60s.
**Prescribing Irony as a Treatment for the Ironic**

Castellanos employs a biting irony in order to confront this medical and social practice. As seen above, the poem recounts repetitious tasks and obligations that are perpetual and oppressive to the woman’s psychological health. The growing tension in the poem, however, reaches a point of climax at the end when the woman takes her pill, her Valium, in order to sleep. This happens, however, under the shadow of one ominous fact: “y no puedes dormir si no destapas el frasco de pastillas y si no tragas una” (163-64; emphasis added). “Not being able” (el no poder) is exactly what the woman is trying to escape in taking the pill: not being able to break out of oppressive routines, not being able to dictate the direction of her own life, not being able to recover that which she has lost. To this list, the woman now adds *not being able* to dissociate herself from this pill. Sleep only comes as the pill beckons it, and taking the Valium becomes one more of the routine acts she so abhors: “funciones que vas desempeñando por inercia y por hábito” (163).

The irony continues, though, as Castellanos shows that the Valium doesn’t actually resolve the original problem that the woman faces. The inane nature of her life means that she has been depleted, living as a shell of who she could be. Her Valium use, however, only adds to this, bringing another state of lifelessness. While the poem notes that she cannot sleep (*dormir*) without the Valium, the question now is, “but is she able to live (*vivir*) without it?” Valium delivers sleep, but not life. It does nothing to bring resolution to the woman’s un-resolving existence either. The Valium exercises control over the woman’s body by bringing a corporeal lifelessness that echoes the lifeless subjectivity in which the woman dwells. We can infer that the chemically pure ordering of the world (164) that comes at night dissipates each morning into another day which,
once again, presumably “Se convierte en una sucesión de hechos incoherentes” (163). Taking Valium, then, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it demands that she take more Valium. As we will see in “La muñeca menor” in Chapter 6, this scientific creation perpetuates its own use: first, by not appropriately recognizing and resolving the true diagnosis at hand and, second, by creating chemical dependence, yet another force of habit which the woman cannot escape.

**Conclusion: The Triangle of Desire in Focus**

The analysis in this chapter is unique in my dissertation because I narrow down my analysis to the misogynistic scientific discourse, in particular to the moment of reductive yet unquestioned scientific diagnosis, and the ensuing discourse that justifies the oppression of women. In the Triangle of Desire, this discourse is what justifies displacing the woman from the plane of subjectivity, the moment when the process of destabilizing the woman’s subjectivity, discussed in Chapter 1, is enacted. This leads, presently, to her symbolic re-assignation of meaning. To symbolize the woman this way is to only see a tangible, concrete, body. It is to ignore her intellect, her being, and her subjectivity. It is, in fact, one of the worst kinds of objectification. After revealing the irony and distortion in this discourse, these authors confront it in the moment of its articulation. The discourse is not given the space to carry out its full effect in most of the poems. These works represent the women standing firm, staying put on the plane of subjectivity even when they recognize the forces that are at work against them. This is about the women calling the entrenched conventional wisdom’s bluff.
Castellanos’s poem “Valium 10” stands out among the other poems in this chapter because she doesn’t cut off the scientific discourse in the moment of its articulation. Instead, the female subject represented in the poem does fall under the heavy hand of the scientific diagnosis and prescription for her. Still, this poem is similar to the others in this chapter in that there is no singular person who is responsible for her oppression; it is the social system as a whole. She finds herself at the mercy of the patriarchal discourse’s pronouncement. Unlike the other poetic voices, she succumbs to that pronouncement. Within the Triangle of Desire, however, we still only see one part of the process, the tool that destabilizes the woman’s identity. In her case, the tool is successful. This is important for my argument because Castellanos draws our attention back to the most important aspect of the abuse of patriarchal discourses against women: it is not just about what the man/men gain, for even when there is no individual gain the women still loses. Her identity disappears at the mercy of the very thing that was meant to preserve it.

I’ve included this chapter and these works in this study, even though they don’t conform to the full dynamic tensions of The Triangle of Desire in action, for two reasons: 1) They stand on their own in their problematizing of predominant patriarchal notions about women; and 2) they highlight the most essential part of the Triangle, the moment and justification of displacing the woman from the plane of subjectivity. If the tool that allows for the women’s use and abuse were not functional, nothing else would matter, since the man’s plans would be unattainable. The man might still have a desired state, but no way of reaching it. He might still carry ill intentions or misogynistic attitudes toward the woman, but he would have no vehicle for carrying them out. The authors in this section show the strength of scientific discourse; its strength lies not only in the fact
that individuals can manipulate it for their own personal gain, but rather in the fact that even when there is no singular person acting, the discourse still operates. A woman isn’t just under the oppression of individuals who work the system to their advantage at certain times, but under the system that works all the time, giving the woman little reprieve.
Chapter 6

The Desire to Reproduce:
Engendering Science Through Women

The reach of legality in the reinforcement of patriarchal tendencies and traditions in Latin America finds a complementary force in the pervasive role of science. Legality bears the burden of legitimacy, but equally important is the burden of scientific proof. While the Enlightenment doesn’t mark the beginning of the pursuit of scientific reason by any means, it did usher in a shift in the role science would play in Western societies. It fostered an affinity and deep trust of the verdict of science over the metanarratives that had previously guided general thought, primarily religion, as well as a desire and pursuit for the control that comes with that kind of naming power.

This chapter focuses on two authors who problematize the patriarchal attitudes about women in Latin America that have been constructed and reified through the use of science and scientific discourse, specifically that which leads to the reproduction of science through abusive and dishonest means. Within that context, these authors depict how female bodies and identities have been scientifically appropriated, shaped, and forced into inferior and subordinate social positions. The overall argument that will be advanced in this chapter is that these authors identify a willful intent behind the seemingly objective and necessary pursuit of science. They then confront those intentions through female characters that have become victims of the scientific pursuit. The authors then destabilize the scientific system from a subversive point of the female characters’ vulnerability.
This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the patriarchal tendencies and cultural climate in the West that have enabled men to use women as suitable specimens for scientific pursuits. This objectification has established and reinforced the status of women as inferior, enigmatic other, and in need of observation. In this section I also address Thomas Kuhn’s theory regarding changes to the scientific institution. The second and third sections of the chapter center on textual analyses of literary works by Christina García and Rosario Ferré, respectively. In these analyses, I argue and demonstrate how the authors expose and destabilize the dominant constructions of female identity in Latin America that have been imposed through the belief systems engendered by scientific discourse. This analysis, as in my previous chapters, will draw on textual analysis of the works and an application of the Triangle of Desire as a theoretical framework to elucidate gender relations, as presented in the last section of the chapter.

The two works I will discuss in this chapter come from two different time periods, but they both confront the use and abuse of women in the scientist’s pursuit and desire to reproduce or advance science. In her novel *The Agüero Sisters* (1998), Cuban-American author Christina García portrays an honest and earnest natural scientist in Cuba whose pursuit of pure scientific knowledge is interrupted when he meets a woman who does not fall into his established classifications and is, in fact, unclassifiable (by him). His pursuit of knowledge is compromised, and his image as a man of science tarnished, the longer he spends with this woman without being able to explain her. In this story, García exposes the limits of science. Through the representational practices in her narrative, she proposes that there is much that lies outside its bounds, and that science cannot unlock
every truth in the natural world. She also enacts a role reversal in the realm of social classifications. By the end of her novel, the woman protagonist seems to have the upper hand in the knowledge struggle (typically thought of as the male’s rightful position) because she knows herself. In turn, it is the scientist’s actions that must be observed, studied, and understood when his (pure) pursuit leads him to unreasonable and irrational behavior (attributes typically assigned to women).

While García delves into the world of natural science, Rosario Ferré explores this phenomenon in the world of medical science. Ferré unveils the narrowly focused, malicious intent of a doctor towards his patient in “La muñeca menor” (Papeles de Pandora 1976). Ferré explores the generational aspect of this malpractice, and the legacy of thought and action that this doctor passes on to his son, the future doctor/abuser. While Ferré exposes the abuse of science across generations, she also champions the vision of the cycle of abuse being broken over generations, as well, to advance the possibility of a sisterhood of women that isn’t only horizontal, but also vertical and familial. Ferré’s text leads the reader to the intersection that forms the focus of this dissertation: legality and science. I argue that her work confronts not only the process of the reproduction of scientific knowledge, but also human reproduction and reproductive rights. I situate this analysis in the historical context of reproductive rights in Puerto Rico during the twentieth century, with which, I argue, Ferré’s short story is in conversation.

Both of these authors are representative of how female authors writing in the Latin American context towards the end of the twentieth century saw abuses of scientific knowledge and hegemonic power, and lifted their pen to subvert them. While the works of García and Ferré are marked by distinct differences when it comes to the field of
science with which they are in dialogue, the time period in which they were written, and the genre in which they fit, they are unified in several ways: they represent the neutral and even earnest façade that science and scientists can easily put on; they are not naïve in their notions of subverting this hegemonic hold; they recognize that the power of science is indeed powerful, and it takes a legitimate toll on their female characters – the loss of literal life in one, and the loss of the life that would have been in the other; and lastly, in the face of an institution that pursues the absolute, they both represent and embrace ambiguity.

Patriarchal Tendencies in the Pursuit of Scientific Knowledge in the West: The Woman as Scientifically Observable

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf signals various ways in which women are placed under the microscope of the male gaze. In this regard, she states that women are the most discussed animals in the universe (26). She then clarifies the extent of her point:

Sex and its nature might well attract doctors and biologists; but what was surprising and difficult of explanation was the fact that sex – woman, that is to say – also attracts agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the M.A. degree; men who have taken no degree, men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women. (Woolf 27)

According to Woolf, the scientific act of observing and explaining that is carried out upon women knows few bounds; it encompasses everything from the scientific microscope to the social microscope, with commentators ranging from the expert in his
field to the uneducated layman. The implication of this breadth of investigation and classification across fields and (male) personalities is that a woman, naturally, is as enigmatic and inferior to a man as the animals that man also observes and classifies. She is enigmatic because she is the “other” (de Beauvoir 160). She is inferior because it is men who, from a privileged position of superiority, are able to study her. In fact, we can infer that for men, her inferior alterity demands observation and categorization. Celia Amorós describes this phenomenon as follows:

A system of domination establishes itself by means of two articulated correlative practices: self-designation where members of the dominating group designate themselves as members by defining what entitles one to such membership; and heterodesignation where the dominating group has the power to define what the others are. (112-13)

Woolf expresses how disconcerting this fact is to her, as “one does not like to be told that one is naturally the inferior of a little man” (32; emphasis added).

While Woolf wrote during the First Wave of feminism in the early 1900s, the idea of women’s inferiority to men has a long history. Though the Enlightenment doesn’t mark the inception of a woman’s perceived and projected inferiority, it does mark the point of its transition into the context of the current day and age in the West. Mary Wollstonecraft, who lived and wrote in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was one of the early female voices during that time to publicly recognize the paradox that the advancements made for mankind due to the Enlightenment, of which she was an advocate, were not extended to women. In her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she details the contradictions found in the arguments against women’s
rights: “Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices which they have imbibed” (38). In a sense, Wollstonecraft questions the value of reason if it is used to further prejudices that are unreasonable in the first place. And if these antiquated depictions of women are allowed to persist during the same Age of Reason that produces legal reform, scientific advances, and basic rights for individuals, then the metamorphosis of the reasonable forms of societal relations is placed into question, as well.

Wollstonecraft later details how the attributes considered natural to women, and the prejudices against them, are indeed not naturally occurring; that is to say, the inferiority (of which Woolf speaks) isn’t a matter of biological differences but rather a matter of constructed reality, often by men, that is then reinforced by those same men, other women, and the society as a whole:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of a man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (45)

Childlike weakness and docile outward behavior are learned characteristics, not innate. The scientific reasoning that would claim the physical inferiority of women is heavily influenced by outside forces and factors. Unfortunately for Wollstonecraft and the women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they wouldn’t live to see major changes in the expectations and treatment of women. They did, however, see the beginning of the tides of change. The rate of change varied by region and country. In
Latin America, it wasn’t really until the twentieth century that some of these prejudices against women were confronted in significant ways with lasting effects.

The plight that women have long had to suffer due to the “natural” inferiority that is thrust upon them, in part through the reasoning of hegemonic scientific discourse, is quite disconcerting to the authors that we will be discussing in this section, and understandably so. This discourse is not comprised of harmless words and theories; instead, it carries over into practices and policies, and they have direct effects on the lived experiences of the women they strive to classify. What’s more, this scientific classification is, by its very nature, reductive. The scientific historian Thomas Kuhn, writing in the 1960s, explains that Normal scientific research, as he calls it, is “a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education” (5). He maintains that its goal is to fit the scientific object into pre-existing categories, set by the same professionals in the field who carry out the research, and reified with each experiment they take on. The institution of science is embedded with its own importance and meaning, and as we saw in Chapter 2, it resists change.

Kuhn, however, shows us that there are cracks in the scientific field’s protective shell, and that change is indeed possible:

That is why a new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known. Its assimilation requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single man and never overnight. (7)
The only change that can come about in such a cemented institution must, at its very core, be revolutionary, and alter the paradigm that was before. There is no room for new theories that mimic old ones, for the established theory will always win out; scientists will fight for it because their identities and careers depend on their past work being proven legitimate. A new theory, however, requires a complete reconstruction of what was previously held to be true.

The authors discussed in this chapter use different strategies and tactics to confront, question, and subvert established scientific thought and discourse regarding women. With such a destabilizing gesture, these women don’t just confront peripheral thoughts or practices but take on the long held patriarchal scientific beliefs regarding women’s otherness and inferiority to men. In doing so, they do not strive to bring only incremental adjustments to the scientific view of women. Rather, they call for a complete “re-evaluation of prior fact” (Kuhn 7). What these women are after is a revolution.

You Have to Kill a Creature in Order to Understand it: Woman as Enigma in

Cristina García’s _The Agüero Sisters_

Cristina García’s novel _The Agüero Sisters_ recounts a family history, told through the lens of natural science. Ignacio and Blanca Agüero are both scientists who meet while Ignacio is teaching at the university, and they eventually marry. Blanca is a student of his, giving her a position at the beginning of their relationship that is socially and intellectually inferior. Together they carry out fieldwork, exploring the flora and fauna of Cuba and documenting the rare and fading species of the island. Their two daughters, Constancia and Reina, also have distinct connections to the scientific realm: as an adult,
Constancia creates a wildly popular skin-care product from a scientific, and carefully selected, combination of fruits and plants from Cuba. As a child, she goes with her father on his observation trips, and he instills in her a meticulous, studied approach to carrying out scientific research. Reina, on the other hand, has an instinctual connection to nature; nature seems to respond to her as if interrelated to her being. She has also inherited a part of Ignacio’s legacy, but instead of receiving his habits of strong methodology and studious approach, she receives his books and part of his collection. It is telling that Reina’s scientific inheritance isn’t a shared character-trait with Ignacio since we find out later in the novel that she is actually his stepdaughter, having been fathered by another man during a period when Blanca leaves Ignacio without a trace before returning again two and a half years later with a child.

Given the context, it is indeed apparent that this novel recounts the history of the Agüero family through the scope and discourse of the field of natural science. As such, García’s novel generates questions of observation about this family that require an inquisitive reader who is willing to jump, both spatially and chronologically, through the disordered telling of the story in order to piece together the answers, a gesture that places the reader in a parallel position to the scientists that attempt to put in order the chaos of the natural world. I would argue, however, that the inverse is also true. This novel represents a history of science, told through the lens of the Agüero family. In this way, García also generates a wide range of questions about scientific discourse and practice throughout the course of the novel. For the sake of this dissertation, I will focus primarily on the lives of, and the relationship between, Ignacio and Blanca, and how
García uses these characters in order to examine, uncover, and demystify scientific discourse and practice.

The enigma that lies at the heart of all of the questions having to do with the identity of the Agüero family is revealed, interestingly, in the preface of the book before the reader knows anything of the family. In that preface scene, Ignacio inexplicably kills Blanca, his own wife. Within three pages the reader is given this crucial information that casts a shadow over the rest of the story, demanding our attention even when other details attempt to and distract from it. In the scene, Ignacio and Blanca are on an expedition hunting ducks for a museum collection. There seems to be no discord between them, and there is no explicit reason given for the murder. Blanca merely turns to tell her husband of the small hummingbird that she’s spotted, and she sees the barrel of his gun directed straight at her. He has his mark, he takes his shot, and he kills her. The story recounts that he waits until nightfall, takes her body to the nearest village, “and began to tell his lies” (5). From that point on the reader has no choice but to interpret the rest of the story, whether it takes place chronologically before or after that moment, through the focused lens of Blanca’s murder.

In my analysis I argue that García destabilizes the identity of the man of science. The destabilizing gesture is rooted in revealing ambiguity (in spite of Ignacio’s quest for certainty), and exposing the tension between his self-perception and reality. There are three themes of ambiguity that I will focus on: 1) the truth seeker’s lies; 2) the pure scientist’s impure motives; and 3) the ultimate paradox: “one simply had to kill a creature to fully understand it” (150).
The trope of the lie versus the truth is carried throughout the story. In fact, the novel is bookended by it; the opening scene is paralleled in the last chapter when Ignacio recounts that scene of killing his wife from a first-person narrative, ending with the first-person confession: “I reluctantly began telling my lies” (300). The admission of such destructive lies would appear to be out of place in the mouth of such an earnest seeker of scientific truth; and yet, that is precisely what Ignacio is, one who seeks truth but speaks lies. In order to understand the full impact of his lies, it’s necessary to understand Ignacio’s initial relationship with the truth.

The reader becomes acquainted with Ignacio’s high regard for the truth throughout the entirety of the novel. Scattered throughout the story are first-person accounts, akin to a diary, of Ignacio’s personal encounters with science. These narratives give a totalizing impression of the nature of Ignacio’s scientific interest, as well as the earnestness and purity of motive with which he pursues his field. In one journal entry, Ignacio shares of the time a famous scientist came to Cuba to do research. Rumor had it that this scientist was looking for an assistant, and of course, all of Ignacio’s classmates applied. In the end, it is Ignacio’s careful and precise, yet unsentimental answer to the scientist’s question that wins him the position (115-16). He learns a great deal from his relationship with Dr. Forrest. As part of his practical education from Dr. Forrest, Ignacio learns that the pursuit of truth is always worth his time, and that “no expedition was ever futile” (119).

With time, Ignacio becomes quite good at interpreting and understanding the world around him. “It was true,” says his daughter Constancia, “that with a quick glance,
Papi could identify a creature’s essential habits – its food preferences and mating rituals, its nurturant or aberrant behavior” (134). His hunger for truth often succeeds in leading him to the truth for which he seeks. The more Ignacio’s identity as an accomplished man of science becomes reified throughout the novel, the more startling his actions at the beginning of the book appear. His sudden and abrupt impulse to kill his wife and then delve into the world of lies seems more and more implausible, enshrouded with mystery. The root of the lies, of course, is embedded in his wife’s death. Her death, conversely, also reveals the truth about Ignacio’s beliefs and identity as a man of science. It is this identity that contains the key to unlocking the mystery.

I have already established that Ignacio’s identity as a man of science reflects directly on his view of the truth. He pursues science earnestly, willing to go wherever it may lead him, as this pursuit is never futile. Science and scientific knowledge become synonymous with truth in this case. According to Ignacio, there is something pure and unselfish in this pursuit, and it is clear that much can be forgiven in the name of science: “to me, shooting animals is neither recreation nor sport but a necessity subsumed to either hunger or higher scientific purposes” (150). These “scientific purposes” are attributed as high a degree of necessity as our basic human need for food. In other words, our existence depends on it. Science is to be pursued and perpetuated at all costs, for it is as essential to humanity as food is to humans.

*The Pure Scientist’s Impure Motives*

What the reader slowly discovers, though, is that in spite of his discourse, the scientist’s interest in science is not entirely pure. Ignacio slowly discovers that the reason
and understanding that come through scientific pursuit are necessary for his ego and survival; beyond his desire for the natural world to be understood in general, his pure intentions become tainted with his selfish desire to be the one who understands everything. If something falls outside of his abilities of analysis, it takes a toll on him. Consider these words that Constancia recalls her father saying:

Analyzing people is infinitely more taxing than distinguishing among even the subtlest variations of subspecies [. . .] human beings are distressingly unpredictable. They have a natural propensity for chaos. It is part of their biology, like a capacity for despair or profound joy [. . .] there is comfort, mi hija, in knowing what to expect. (134)

Though chaotic and irrational, the inexplicable behaviors that Ignacio encounters in humans do not convince him to find solace in researching only animals and plants, for his scientific ego needs to understand humans, too. Knowing what to expect indicates power and control, and as long as there exists something that Ignacio (i.e. - the scientist) cannot grasp or fully understand, he lacks that control.

For Ignacio, it is, arguably, Blanca who becomes the personification of this lack of control, in a variety of ways. When he first meets Blanca at the university, he notes that she has an innate connection to chemistry: “when she worked with sulfur, for example, her normally green eyes took on a yellowish tinge [. . .] it was as if matter spoke to Blanca directly, revealed to her its secrets” (183). Ignacio admits, “as a practical man, a man of science, I could not make sense of any of this. Yet how could I be logical when the very sight of this woman uprooted my heart?” (183; emphasis added). Blanca disturbs the logic and control that Ignacio exercises on two levels: first, because she has a
quality within her that he sees evidence of, but has no way in which to study or prove; and second, because of the (irrational) emotions that she stirs within him. Her effect is so strong, for instance, that it causes him to forget his name after dreaming of her (184). He later comments, “it disturbs me now to think how passion ruled me like an ordinary man” (224; emphasis added). His pride would tell him that he, as an accomplished scientist, is nothing but extraordinary. Blanca’s effect, however, makes him question the very fabric of his identity, as well as his superior social status.

There are more enigmas about Blanca that Ignacio can’t unlock; like why she eats such bizarre meals, or figuring out certain details about her past. Still, in spite of the enigma she represents, or perhaps because of it, Ignacio wants to marry her. After their wedding, though from the very beginning of their marriage, he only becomes more aware of his lack of understanding. On their wedding night, the first night of their honeymoon, an animal in the river bites Blanca while she and Ignacio are making love. In spite of his best efforts, Ignacio cannot figure out what bit her. Though literal, this scene also serves as a metaphor for what awaits him in their life together: an endless pursuit of unattainable knowledge and understanding.

The culmination of the perplexing, unsolvable mysteries involving Blanca comes the day she disappears. She has had their first baby, and it is clear that having the baby changes her. After giving birth to Constancia, the normally active and inquisitive Blanca becomes stoic and almost catatonic. Ignacio resorts to modern medicine and psychiatry (electroshock therapy, to be exact) to try and bring his wife out of her “terrible spell” (229), but nothing works. Then, “five months after Constancia was born, Blanca disappeared. She left no note, no clue to where she would go, only our daughter
shrieking blue in her crib” (229). More than the pain of emotional loss, this loss seems to cause in Ignacio what Freud, upon losing his daughter to death, refers to as a “narcissistic wound” (qtd. in Bronfen 17). She has left no clue, no way for Ignacio to know. Blanca’s inexplicable disappearance wounds Ignacio’s pride to such a degree that, when all practical attempts at finding out the truth about her fail, he eventually abandons reason altogether and goes to a santera for truth. The narcissistic wound is opened even further when the santera tells him there is nothing he can do, but that she will return on her own accord, bearing a child who is not his. “For a man of science,” he confesses, “I became shamelessly superstitious” (261).

The Paradox: You Have to Kill a Creature to Understand it

There is a moment in the novel, quoted previously in this chapter, where Ignacio talks about the permissibility of shooting animals if done for either satisfying hunger or scientific purposes. He also refers to how the younger generation of scientists is resorting more and more to technology in order to document different species, but he states that this was not available during the time of his scientific formation. Instead, “one simply had to kill a creature to fully understand it” (150).

Upon Blanca’s return, Ignacio finds himself with fewer answers than before she left. Their relationship has changed, and Blanca, cold and distant, has forced Ignacio to send the daughter they have together, Constancia, away, while Reina, the daughter with whom she became pregnant during her absence, can stay. I argue that his desire to know the truth, and his pride as a man of science, lead him to resort to his old ways of understanding, his basic scientific formation: “you had to kill a creature to fully
understand it” (150). Whether it is due to a desire for scientific knowledge, jealous anger towards his cheating wife, or his desired identity as a man who values reason but is actually quite unreasonable in his pursuit of it, we don’t fully know, but Blanca becomes (or always was) the creature he has to kill in order to fully understand her.

In her book *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), Elisabeth Bronfen analyzes the aesthetic of the dead female body in art and literature. To establish the basis for her book in the first chapter, Bronfen analyzes Gabriel von Max’s painting *Der Anatom* (1869), in which an anatomist is looking upon the dead body of a young female. One of the anatomist’s hands holds his chin as if contemplating the cause of her death; the other is in the act of pulling back the sheet that is covering her breasts. The hesitation found within this scientist’s gestures results from an opposing force between two conflicting desires within him: first, the scientific desire to dissect the girl’s body in order to gain, and then produce, knowledge; and second, his personal, sexual desire for the body of the young girl. “Signification can be understood as implying an absent body or causing the signified body’s absence. The dead body as text serves as a metaphor of the correlation between designation, as well as interpretation, and absence” (Bronfen 6).

The dilemma this painting presents, however, is that both desires cannot be fully realized, for scientific understanding and actualization comes at the risk of destroying the object of the scientist’s affection. Ultimately, however, the scientific desires within him must win out, because these are the actions that reaffirm the man’s identity as he writes the dead body into a text that he has authored. Bronfen speaks of “the survivor’s ability to translate an ephemeral object of sight into stable signs, which, in addition to the translated signifier, will carry his own signature” (8). Understanding and transcribing the
woman’s death becomes a reaffirming, self-articulation of the scientist’s identity. Her death gives way to his self-representation by means of knowledge production and authorship.

Bronfen’s analysis of the scientist in this work of art provides much insight into the scientist we find in *The Agüero Sisters*. As Ignacio recounts killing his wife at the end of the novel he claims, “I do not recall taking aim, only the fierce recklessness of my desire” (299). Despite the fact that years after Blanca’s death Ignacio claims that he still loves her with “a rich, blind, orphaned love” (263), it would appear that his narcissistic scientific desire ultimately gained control over that love and passion, for those two contrasting desires cannot coexist.

Though the scientist aims at securing his own precarious identity through this process of signification (understanding + assigning meaning), his proximity to death causes him to run the risk of being affected by deathlike characteristics. In knowing through the process of his wife’s homicide, he too has to take on death in some degree; it becomes an extension of who he is (Bronfen 10). Constancia realizes this about her father the night he finally speaks (indirectly) about her mother’s death. After having lied at length, saying that her mother drowned, this time he lies a bit closer to the truth and tells Constancia that Blanca shot herself. “This frightened Constancia more than his original version, because now she knew she couldn’t rescue Papi, knew for certain that he would die next” (81).

Bronfen explains the phenomenon like this:
The corpse is not only the passive medium through which he will gain knowledge and writing, he too is dependent as object and receiver of this alterior knowledge of death or of sexuality, which the dead woman has. (10)

In “analyzing death by proxy” the scientist is “placed into a death-like position himself” (Bronfen 10), “between material physicality and spiritual immateriality” (Bronfen 9). In this sense, Ignacio’s attempt actually backfires, for in the end he destroys the possibility of attaining the knowledge he desires, while pushing his precarious self further into insecurity, closer to the death that he has tried to evade through all of his scientific research and knowledge production.

**Reproductive Rights: Scientific and Human Reproduction in Rosario Ferré’s “La muñeca menor”**

While the reproduction of a body into texts, knowledge production and acceptable science, is a necessary area of research and critique, it is not the only type of reproduction of a body that exists. In “La muñeca menor,” Rosario Ferré does address the malicious use of the female and her body for the expressed purpose of reproducing science. I argue that it is also possible to read in her short story a criticism of, and response to, the decades-long battle over biological reproduction and birth control rights that played out during much of the twentieth century on the island of Puerto Rico, and that still affects Puerto Rican women today. In this analysis, I discuss both areas of critique, re/productions of knowledge and re/production of babies, as they signify a point of confluence between the patriarchal traditions, legal regulations, and scientific desires that press down on the Puerto Rican woman. To this end, I incorporate a short history of the
battle for reproductive rights in Puerto Rico, and the paradox this battle has engendered over the years.

I would argue that the majority of the authors that I analyze in this dissertation are responding in general terms to general practices in Latin America (either legal or scientific) carried out against women through their fictional work. Ferré’s short story, on the other hand, deals more directly, albeit metaphorically, with this question of scientific causes and justifications for reproduction. Though the author doesn’t mention this in explicit terms, it is arguable that she is, indeed, responding to a particular historical intersection of patriarchy, science, and legality in her country.

“La muñeca menor” is the first short story in Ferré’s first collection of short stories and poems, Papeles de Pandora (1976). Papeles is a foundational work from the second wave of feminism in Puerto Rico and Latin America in general. In it, Ferré explores different genres of writing to give voice to women and to instill in her female characters a defiant will against the social and cultural structures that oppress them.

Ferré’s short story “La muñeca menor” presents an explicit, literary confrontation with scientific discourse and practice, as it portrays the decisions and actions of a doctor regarding his female patient. The story tells of an aunt who lives with her nieces. She belongs to the decadent aristocratic class that owned sugar cane plantations in years past. As part of her relationship with her nieces, the aunt hand-makes a doll for each of them each year. As the nieces get bigger, the dolls get bigger, matching their stature and marking their growth.

At the beginning of the story, the reader finds out that as a young woman, while bathing in the river, the aunt is bit one day by an insect, which the young village doctor
claims cannot be removed from her leg. Given the prognosis, the aunt resigns herself to her house, denying any suitors and never marrying, while the doctor tends to her perpetual wound on a monthly basis. One day, the doctor’s son (who is previously unmentioned) appears after finishing his own studies in medical school in the US. The father invites him to the aunt’s house to see her leg and the son questions his father’s decades-old decision, stating that the insect could have been removed years ago. To this the doctor replies: “es cierto, pero yo solo quería que vinieras a ver la chágara que te había pagado los estudios durante veinte años” (6). This revelation is the hinge in the story, and the point of entry for my analysis.

In my examination of “La muñeca menor,” I elucidate three analytical insights: 1) I argue that Rosario Ferré doesn’t just destabilize the essentialist, scientific discourse regarding the “nature” of women as we discussed above, but she also reveals the intentional scientific agenda that propels this discourse; 2) I posit how Ferré works through her female characters to subvert the hold of this discourse and thwart the scientific agenda, and 3) I then turn my focus towards the idea of reproductive rights (both scientific and human), and offer a potential reading of “La muñeca menor” that is situated in the history of reproductive rights in Puerto Rico.

**Destabilizing the Scientific Discourse**

The father’s confession to his son is integral in the analysis of Ferré’s confrontation with the scientific institution and its discourse. First, she destabilizes the essentialist discourse that woman is the weaker sex and is therefore dependent on man (Woolf 32; Wollstonecraft 15; Gilbert & Gubar 21). Ferré shows that it is in fact the
doctor’s scientific gaze and subsequent decision that weakens the aunt, not a pre-existing state found *a priori* in femaleness. Rather than an absolute truth, Ferré shows this essentialist discourse to be more of a self-fulfilling prophecy (that, no doubt, science itself is capable of bringing about). The doctor is directly responsible for keeping the aunt in her physically weakened and medically dependent state. What’s more, his confession reveals that this has been his intention all along, as opposed to an accident or a medical gamble gone wrong.

Ferré reveals in this moment a dark side to the field of medical science. The power to improve and even sustain life carries within it the latent power to oppress and destroy. I draw again on Kuhn’s analysis of the history of science in which he makes clear the fact that the scientific community at any given time influences the way science operates and the knowledge that it produces at that historical moment (4). The supposed objectivity of science is mixed with the subjectivity of the scientist (though neither is absolute), replete with that scientist’s personal and professional agendas, pre-existing ideals, and the scientific trends of that moment. We see this clearly in the case of “La muñeca menor.” The doctor’s medical observation and analysis of the *chágara* are not to blame. That is to say, his objective scientific observation isn’t wrong; he admits to his son that upon revision of the *chágara*, he *knew* that it could be removed. His scientific and medical observation is sound. It is instead his application, and dismissal, of the evidence that plays out in the aunt’s body and subjectivity. This bears witness to the idea that science’s pronouncement over the female body is not objective, for the experimental proof cannot ever be fully divorced from the scientist’s own context and subjective limitations.
Along with destabilizing the essentialist scientific discourse about the nature of “women,” the confession of the doctor gestures towards what Ferré arguably perceives as the goal of science and the scientist: namely, to perpetuate science and scientists, to reproduce or procreate. In this regard we see a parallel with Gabriela Alemán’s representation of patrilineal desire as analyzed in Chapter 3: the woman is necessary to bring about the desired result, but disposable once her use has run out. The system needs her, but she has no real agency within it. With respect to science, those whose identity and livelihood are contingent on this institution are interested (and invested in the material sense of the word) in the existence of more science.

In “La muñeca menor,” the doctor needs for his services to be required in order to make a profit and gain attention and a clientele from other townspeople. He then creates a situation in which the aunt’s medical need persists for a lifetime. He has, in a way, symbolically impregnated the aunt with the *chágara*; not placing the insect in the aunt, but deciding to keep it there, creating a mutual dependency between the doctor and the aunt to which she never wittingly consents that will lead to the symbolic birth of a son she never chose. It is arguable that the doctor’s decision to leave the *chágara* in the aunt’s leg is primarily financial, however the symbolic impregnation can also be read in light of women’s reproductive rights, and the right to exercise (or not) control over her own reproductive choices. As a result of the doctor stealing away her reproductive right, albeit symbolically, by forcing her to turn into an old maid, the aunt falls prey to the phenomenon that Nuala Finnegan signals regarding the representation of biological reproduction in the Latin American context: “the foetus monsters that invade these
women’s bodies are the grotesque offspring of the phallic powers that created them. All are products of a tyranny that is sustained by means of the female bodies” (1006).

This metaphorical impregnation, however, produces more than just medical science; it produces another scientist. The doctor’s son is not mentioned until late in the story; there is never a mention of his mother, and his spontaneous generation seems to be directly connected to the _chágara_ inside the aunt. Furthermore, we know with certainty that his being a doctor is directly tied to the aunt and the _chágara_, as revealed in his father’s declaration: “la chágara que te había pagado los estudios durante veinte años” (6).

One could argue that the _chágara_ isn’t the most dangerous parasite in this story. While the doctor has used his profession to, proverbially, suck the aunt dry financially, the product is not just a son, but also an educated son; another male doctor who will follow in his father’s footsteps. The father’s parasitic tendencies have given life to his identity and his scientific desires. So, while science and scientific discourse are embedded with the need to pro-create, the reality that Ferré exposes is that third parties are required to fulfill this desire; medical science, in particular, needs carriers: of diseases, of _chágaras_, and of money.

**Subverting the Intention of the Scientific Agenda**

After questioning and destabilizing some of the scientific institution’s long-standing discourse on women, Ferré equips the aunt with the ability to subvert the control that these systems have held over her. In a stroke of poetic justice, it is through the parasitic _chágara_ that the aunt’s subversion of the cycle of the parasitic doctors takes
place. Not coincidentally, this subversive act hinges on a seemingly frivolous symbolic and non-scientific hobby: that of making dolls for her nieces.

In the story, the doctor’s son eventually marries the aunt’s youngest niece and takes her to the city where he places her high in a balcony with a specific intention: “para que los que pasaban por la calle supiesen que él se había casado en sociedad” (6). This ploy works, and he soon has the many residents of the city on his patient list, as all desire to see what he wants them to see: “un miembro legítimo de la extinta aristocracia cañera” (7). Before the youngest niece leaves her home after marriage, her aunt gives her the final doll she has made for her, the most magnificent and costly doll yet. When the niece feels the waist of the doll she recognizes that it is warm, but she quickly forgets that detail as she admires the doll’s beauty.

One day, years into their marriage, the young doctor decides to exploit the doll for its worth, much like his exploitation of the young niece. He gouges out the diamond eyes and sells them. Upon seeing this act, the niece confirms what she had previously suspected, that this young doctor has no soul. As the years pass, the doctor becomes distressed by his advancing age while his wife looks the same way she did all those years ago at the sugar cane plantation, with her porcelain skin. He is upset by the very phenomenon he created: a wife that has been objectified into a beautiful doll by her husband. One night when he enters her room, he sees that she is not breathing. He checks with his stethoscope—a means through which the medical man interacts with those around them, even loved ones in this case—and finds that instead of breath there is the sound of running water. As her eyelids open, the doctor is shocked to see two antennae of a chágara coming toward him in place of her eyes.
Ferré leaves the ending of the story ambiguous and open for interpretation, but one thing is clear, the niece is no longer under the control of her doctor-husband. She has either escaped, leaving the aunt’s doll in her place, or she has somehow merged her identity with that of the doll. Either way, the doctor has lost the power that he once had over her, and the ability to appropriate her for his gain. It is arguable that when the aunt places the *chágara* inside the doll, she also instills in the niece the spirit of resistance required to break free from the doctor’s oppressive schemes: “Aquí tienes tu Pascua de Resurrección” (5), she would tell each of her nieces as she gave them their final doll after they married. Through this act, and through the niece, the aunt turns her pain into strength, her suffering into empowerment, her oppression into freedom.

The process of the aunt’s resistance is slow. It takes until the end of the next generation for its full manifestation; but the final scene reveals something more about the aunt. Those many years ago, the aunt’s life was all but taken away by the doctor, leaving her to reside in an almost perpetual daze:

La tía se sentó en el sillón frente al cañaveral y no se volvió a levantar jamás. Se balconeaba días enteros […] y solo salió de su sopor cuando la venía a visitar el doctor o cuando se despertaba con ganas de hacer una muñeca. (3)

After hearing the doctor’s confession to his son, the reader is left to think that the aunt has been taken advantage of and has no recourse in the relationship. The reader realizes at the end of the story, however, that while the aunt definitively was taken advantage of, she doesn’t succumb to the oppressive stupor. She maintains agency in her doll making, and she religiously passes that agency on to the next generation.
It is of note that part of the delay in the full realization of this final subversive act is contingent on the fact that the aunt does not dictate or demand her niece’s actions. She does not decide upon her future, as the doctor does with his son. Instead, the aunt equips the niece to make the decision she needs to make, and then she lets her choose for herself. In that, Ferré highlights a difference between the nature of relationships among women and among men. As a woman, like many others, who is living out her slow death in life, her actions go beyond self-preservation and, rather, point to a society in which women as a whole can become the agents of their own stories. Indeed, through her actions she helps create that society for her niece.

**Scientific and Biological Reproduction**

An important detail in this story is the fact that the doctor’s decision regarding the aunt effectively takes away her right to live the life she would have lived, with the husband she would have chosen from among her suitors, with the children to whom she would have given birth. The pseudo-impregnation with the chágara takes the place of a symbolic gestation and actual children. While we don’t know what the aunt would have chosen in this regard, we do know that it becomes a choice that someone else makes for her. To subject the woman to this type of process where her identity is re-assigned in such a way (what I call the process of symbolization) is to only see her as a tangible, concrete, body. It is to ignore her intellect, her being, her will and her subjectivity. It is, in fact, one of the worst kinds of objectification.

The action of this story poses a question regarding science, for it is a scientist who makes this decision for the express purpose of reproducing more science and establishing
himself. On the other hand, it also poses a question regarding rights and responsibility. The aunt should have the right to make the decision to reproduce (whether it be science or a baby) on her own, but that has been denied to her. Similarly, the doctor has the responsibility to care for his patient in an honest, disinterested manner, but he has abandoned that responsibility for his own agenda.

The aunt’s reproduction predicament sits at the intersection of legality and science. In this way, Ferré, whether intentionally or not, represents a parallel of the state of Puerto Rican reproduction battles that had been waged for decades, but were still prevalent in the 1970s while she was writing.

*La Operación in Puerto Rico*

In Puerto Rico, one point of confluence between tradition, legality, and science is the battle over reproductive rights that took place during much of the twentieth century on the island. This long history is highlighted and documented in books and documentaries alike (Lopez 2008; Briggs 2002; Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp 1983; *La operación* 1982), and I won’t be detailing all of it here. For the purposes of this study, it is important to underscore that many women in Puerto Rico were subjected to testing in the scientific development of contraceptive means, were denied other birth control methods, and were sterilized, either by choice or as part of the US attempt to control the population of Puerto Rico. In the ensuing debate over reproduction in Puerto Rico, women have often found themselves wedged between their own desires when it comes to birth control and a combination of sociocultural factors that included: traditional views on contraception within the church and local political party ideologies; the pursuit of
scientific advancement of contraceptive techniques and possibilities; and contradicting laws coming out of the US – such as the Comstock Law, which made all contraceptives illegal on the island, paired with the US mandates that would seek that the population of Puerto Rico be controlled and regulated (Lopez 6-7, 10, 11, 12-15).

While US laws banning contraceptives clashed with US mandates to control the population of Puerto Rico, many women who wanted their own control of their bodies underwent sterilization as a way to stop having children. Although this was a choice for many women, they largely made this choice because they had no other viable options, and/or they didn’t know that the procedure was irreversible. The sterilization procedure became so commonplace in Puerto Rico that it was dubbed “la operación,” with the definite article “la” signifying more, perhaps, than the name itself. As Iris Lopez points out, though some women chose this, they were mainly coerced. Furthermore, those who did choose it did so without fully understanding the implications that la operación would have, and without having any other options for birth control. That being said, many groups within Puerto Rico weren’t given the choice, particularly those who were deemed inferior and unfit to reproduce because of their social class and/or race (Lopez 4). Lopez articulates the complexities of this history: “just because Puerto Rican women exercise some agency does not mean they have full reproductive freedom; and just because they do not have full reproductive freedom does not mean they are all victims” (154). Still, the reality is that from the early twentieth century on, so many women underwent la operación that 40% of Puerto Rican women were sterile by the 1980s, lowering the birth rate by more than a third, from 2.7% to 1.7% (Lopez 8). In turn, sterilization became a defining mark of Puerto Rican women’s reproductive profile.
These juxtaposed discourses abounded during the twentieth century. The contradictory realities include: 1) the patriarchal ideal (held by political leaders and the Catholic Church) that women are first and foremost mothers versus the idea that women have the right to choose the number of children they want to have, if any; 2) the US desire to control the population of its relatively newly acquired commonwealth island versus the Puerto Ricans’ desire to maintain their culture and traditions in the face of the US Imperial machine (of which birth control was a symbol, both positive and negative) (Lopez 10); 3) the US economic interests and policies that favored private investment in industrial expansion and led to high rates of unemployment and poverty in Puerto Rico versus the US disdain for the high rates of unemployment and poverty in Puerto Rico (which led to efforts of population control, according to Lopez 6); 4) the coexistence of laws restricting birth control for women with laws mandating irreparable sterilization as a means of birth control during the first decades of the century (Lopez 9); 5) the desire to produce and test scientific methods by US scientists like Margaret Sanger and Clarence Gamble (Lopez 15-17), versus the decision to carry out those tests on Puerto Rican bodies; 6) the personal desire among Puerto Rican women to possess some form of birth control versus their limited options and misinformation; and I would add to this list, 7) the intense US desire to maintain control of Puerto Rico as an economic and military enclave to advance US national and private interests, versus the racist, classist, and eugenicist discourse of disdain coming out of the US Congress and political party leaders against Puerto Ricans (particularly poor Puerto Ricans of color). Across these tensions, the women of Puerto Rico were often left with few options and without much of a voice,
as the strict walls of patriarchy, science, and law seemed to grow stronger and stronger to reinforce the limitations placed on women.

Just like the aunt in “La muñeca menor,” these women were living in a litany of binaries between women and men; Puerto Rico and the US; women and doctors; and women’s interests and the rule of science and law in general. The scientific and legal agendas in Puerto Rico in the twentieth century were placed at a far higher value than the decisions and realities of the women who were subjected to these laws and experiments. Rather than being actions based on objective policies, the scientific enterprise and legal framework regulating women’s reproduction were responding to misogyny, eugenics, and political power plays. Arguably, Ferré doesn’t just hint at this long-standing tradition, but she exposes and condemns it. She brings the conversation away from what is legally permissible and scientifically possible, and she gives life to the women who are literally and metaphorically under the microscope in order to represent their oppression and envision their freedom.

**The Triangle of Desire**

These two works, “La muñeca menor” and *The Agüero Sisters*, both illustrate the death of the female subject, but they do so in two very different ways: figuratively and literally, respectively. The aunt in “La muñeca menor” is forced to live a type of death-in-life, as well as the death of the life she was kept from having. On the other hand, in *The Agüero Sisters*, Blanca is killed outright and taken off the plane of subjectivity by

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24 The son in the story is educated in the US, after all, and the declining cane sugar aristocracy (“decadente aristocracia cañera”) was in decline precisely because of the US’s privatization and exploitation of the island’s land and resources.
losing her agency and physical life at the same time. In both cases, the Triangle of Desire allows for an analysis of the death of the female subject. The theory, centering male desire and identity affirmation in male-female relations, calls attention to the malicious, self-centered intent behind these two different types of death.

The Triangle of Desire applies to the deaths represented in these works in that: 1) there is a clearly defined state of frustration or unfulfilled desire in which the male subjects, masterminds of the transformation of the female subjects, find themselves; 2) the death or oblivion of the female subjects signify their removal from the temporal plane of subjectivity, 3) by way of the death or oblivion of the female subjects, the males’ desired state and reaffirmation of male identity can be accomplished.

For instance, the doctor in “La muñeca menor” finds himself in a predicament at the beginning of the story, a frustrated state. Though not explicitly voiced, I claim that through the ensuing action of the story it’s clear that he, at that point, desires something more than what he is and more than what he has. He is presumably a young doctor who is just starting out and is trying to establish himself, both economically and professionally. Under the guise of an earnest interest in performing his medical duty, it is his frustrated state, marked by the desire for scientific success and a comfortable living, which truly drives his actions and decisions in the story.

When the doctor comes across the aunt with the chágara in her leg, it is made clear that one of two things can happen: 1) he can fix her condition, and they both would continue along the plane of subjectivity, living their lives as they are laid out before them, or 2) he can use her condition and his position as a doctor, as the one who knows, to remove her from that plane, fully justified by his scientific persona. Ironically, the aunt’s
presence as a fully formed person on the plane of subjectivity wouldn’t necessarily have impeded the doctor, as is the case with other works I have analyzed in this dissertation.\textsuperscript{25} Arguably, her death-in-life wasn’t necessary for him to eventually reach his desired state. But he desired the guaranteed outcome and a quick timeline to his goals, which would have been harder and less certain without the aunt’s continued dependence on his services.

The doctor’s intentional decision becomes even more marked with his confession to his son. As the doctor looks forward in time as a young man, assessing his greatest desires, we find out that he doesn’t just want to secure a life and a future for himself, he wants to sustain his identity as a scientist and reproduce—through procreation—the very institution that allows for his malicious ploy in the first place. The sacrifice of the aunt’s personal future is justified by the future generation of more science and, specifically, more male scientists. While the doctor may be able to make money and gain renown without the aunt, her body is the necessary carrier of future science. She is the proverbial mother of the scientist son; the child that she couldn’t have once the doctor’s decision reduced her to locking herself away in her house and refusing all suitors.

What’s interesting is that, in the case of the aunt, the triangle appears to become inverted (similar to what we saw in Chapter 3 with Ferré’s other story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres”). The aunt is not elevated, as if to say, lifted up off the plane of subjectivity under the guise of extreme admiration or love (this turned out to be the case of the doctor’s son and the aunt’s niece who is lifted \textit{up} off the plane of subjectivity, literally, elevated above the crowds in the city for all to see only to be

\textsuperscript{25} For example, the granddaughter in Olga Nolla’s “Para quien tañen a fiestas las campanas,” and the niece in Adriana González Mateos’ \textit{Lenguaje de las orquídeas}.  

exploited by her husband). In the case of the aunt, she is pushed down below the plane of subjectivity, objectified and removed by way of the degradation of her body, now permanently infected and diseased. She is made monstrous, an abomination that cannot even leave her home. The end result that the doctor wants, however, doesn’t change; the aunt is still ripped from the plane of subjectivity, objectified for the doctor’s appropriation. Sherry Ortner notes how women are often relegated to two seemingly paradoxical states: either the “Angel” of the house, or the “Monster.” In both cases, each of those two categories represents the same result: the woman is either above the man or below him, but she is cast out of the realm of culture, the realm of agency, which is represented by manliness and authorship (Ortner 26-27). The woman doesn’t author, she is authored; written, as is the case in “La muñeca menor,” into dependency and weakness, and relegated to a different realm than the man.

Perhaps in another era the aunt would be destined to stay in her monstrous, less than human state, but Ferré doesn’t abandon her there completely. She employs subversive discursive tactics to break the Triangle of Desire, which is meant only to affirm the male’s identity. Ferré restores agency to the aunt by literally making her an agent in the world of production with the dolls that she fabricates. As this seemingly non-consequential production falls under the radar of the scientific gaze, the aunt carries it out within that very system. Without the possibility of biological reproduction, the aunt chooses to reproduce these dolls. Each one carries some of her. While she doesn’t pass on her genetic make-up through the dolls, she does pass on pieces of herself: her sense of identity, her spirit of resistance, and her fight for autonomy. She doesn’t try to fight the
system from the outside, but instead she lets herself be consumed by it before breaking it down from her point of scientific weakness and inferiority.

Gubar and Gilbert point out: “women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (25). At the end of “La muñeca menor,” the reader is left to assume that the aunt and the niece have together done just that. They have taken the aesthetic that they were substituted for, the cash cow and the doll, and they have killed it, interrupting the older doctor’s ploy and leaving for the young doctor only a shell of a woman, the rushing sound of water and the parasite which represents the true nature of the son and father. We are left to assume, I would argue, that the parasite is the symbol of the women’s agency as well.

For Ignacio, in The Agüero Sisters, his intentions are actually more pure than the doctor’s. Indeed he is a purist in his craft. His search for scientific truth is earnest, and as such he doesn’t try to hold Blanca back in her own search for truth. His desired state doesn’t initially have anything to do with Blanca, for even before meeting her his pursuit for scientific knowledge is unwavering. When Blanca comes into his life, however, she represents the only insurmountable interference in his pursuit that he has ever had. His frustrated state begins with her.

García complicates the position of the female subject in the system of science. It is not just the woman’s body that is under the microscope here, it is her entire existence that confounds the man, body included. If we apply Elisabeth Bronfen’s analysis we can infer that Ignacio, though a natural scientist rather than an anatomist, is at once in love with Blanca and frustrated by her. He desires her sexually, but he also desires to master her in his mind, as a puzzle to solve and then a text to author. “The anatomist constitutes
himself as surviving, analyzing and writing subject only in relation to the other dead objects” (Bronfen 8). Ignacio’s job as a scientist is to “translate an ephemeral object of sight into stable signs which [. . .] will carry his own signature” (Bronfen 8).

There’s no doubt that Blanca constitutes an ephemeral object of sight for Ignacio. As a fully formed living woman, however, with a will, secrets, strengths, and weaknesses of her own, Blanca is far too “unstable” for Ignacio to translate into his own stable signs. Her existence on the plane of subjectivity literally means that he will never reach his fully realized desired state: to understand everything. This challenges his pride as an extraordinary man of science and, in the end, his hubris wins. His desire, unlike the doctor’s, isn’t to further the institution of science as a whole through more scientists (nor is it monetary); it is to further himself as a scientist in a world that is just waiting to be discovered [. . .] by his observation. His frustrated state is based on the fact that, because of Blanca, his set of knowledge is perpetually incomplete. Although he loves her, his love of knowledge and self-actualization is greater, and the two cannot coexist. He is like the Anatomist in the painting Der Anatom that Bronfen analyzes, with one hand on his chin, and one pulling back the sheet that reveals the woman’s breast. He is caught between two desires, and the desire for his scientific identity and production finally wins.

While he may truly believe that it is necessary to kill a creature in order to understand it, Blanca proves to be an exception to that rule: though he kills her, understanding still eludes him. Dominant though he would have believed science to be, Ignacio discovers that there are some things that lie outside of the reach of scientific pursuit, inexplicable in spite of extensive research. With Ignacio facing this reality, García masterfully debunks the myth that the man of science is the reasonable, rational
one. The hierarchy established by scientific discourse would place him at the top, but his irrationally violent behavior actually comes about because of his pure pursuit of science, not in spite of it. As a result, he takes on characteristics that would normally be associated with the weaker, less predictable woman. What’s more, while he would expect himself to author a groundbreaking work of scientific truths, in the end he is left only to author lies, protecting an image that is not only stained, but also corrupted.

When examined through the lens of the Triangle of Desire, it is arguable that Ignacio’s act of removing Blanca entirely from the plane of subjectivity, killing the creature, is intended to allow him one of two things: either to understand Blanca, thus removing the ambiguity of his scientific understanding that is bound up in her person; or to return to living in the world of pure scientific pursuit that he knew before meeting Blanca. In the end, the very thing that was intended to lead him to his desired state only makes that state perpetually unattainable. Without Blanca, he cannot reach it. Instead, in her death, Ignacio has coupled the enigma of Blanca with her loss, sealing his unfulfilled scientific desires in the same grave where he laid his wife. It was not enough for Ignacio to know that scientific knowledge existed; he personally had to have it.

The Triangle of Desire, however, is still at play here, even though it doesn’t produce the understanding Ignacio expected. He could not fully understand Blanca, but, arguably, in killing her he came to better understand himself in light of who he always thought he was. He learns that in reality, he is a scientist who would exchange love for knowledge, truth for lies, and the pure enjoyment of the wonders of the world for authorship. García problematizes the persona of the scientist that is presented by the scientific discourse. In the end, Ignacio has desperately emptied Blanca of her
subjectivity, but it has not brought the desired state for which he longed. What’s more, his actions have, in fact, sealed his frustration for good. The fleeting understanding he gains in his wife’s death seems to leave Ignacio wanting. We find out at the beginning of the novel from Reina, the daughter Blanca had with another man, that Ignacio shoots himself, just as he had shot Blanca, two years after her death. “‘The quest for truth’ Ignacio Agüero had written his daughters, ‘is far more glorious than the quest for power.’ Their father had written this and then he shot himself in the heart” (García 13).

Perhaps García would argue that a fulfillment of his scientific desire, even the reification of his identity, was never something for him to establish on his own, but in collaboration. In the end, it is, after all, his two daughters who, though estranged, unravel the mess of their family history. Maybe Blanca was never the enigma to solve, but the partner with whom to solve life’s enigmas.

**Conclusion**

Both García and Ferré expose the folly of the desires that the naturalist (Ignacio) and the medical doctors possess. This is a gesture that destabilizes the Triangle of Desire to incorporate a feminist critique. Built into their systems of scientific knowledge-production, authorship, and self-promotion are destabilizing factors that the men have failed to anticipate. Though they try to create closed systems that are manipulated by and acted upon only by them, García and Ferré show that their systems, and science in general, are susceptible to outside forces. They are not autonomous; they are not impenetrable; and though they can be incredibly harmful, they do not have to be the final word over the life of women. Both Ferré and García allow their protagonists to be
subsumed within the system, but from that inside position they can set their work in motion. This is consistent with Kuhn’s observation that the novelties that spark scientific revolutions are “produced inadvertently by a game played under one set of rules, their assimilation requires the elaboration of another set” (Kuhn 52; emphasis added). The protagonists come under the established order of science, but they are primed to change the rules.
Conclusion

Through critical textual analysis, in this dissertation I examine literary representations of the instances of social relations that have been appropriated to marginalize, abuse, and engender oppression towards women in patriarchal societies, specifically in Latin America, by way of the systems of science and legality. These systems and their discourses are created to reify themselves, and they give very little opportunity for the outsider to enter, for the abused to have a voice, or for the oppressed to gain freedom. The deliberate oppression must be met with intentional resistance and critique, as well as imagined realities of destabilizing gestures.

Employing the theory of the Triangle of Desire, I also argue that the acts of exclusion and abuse represented in the works I examined here are made permissible by the far-reaching, unquestionable nature of the law and science. They are not innocent occurrences, but rather intentional, reductive acts of violent power relations carried out against women with the explicit goal of confirming the man’s identity at any cost; a cost which is often paid by the women. Beyond exposing and confronting dominant patriarchal notions regarding women, many of the authors studied in this dissertation also make active attempts at subverting the power of the very systems they are exposing. Then, they project a future reality where women can be the agents of their own lives.

These eight authors confront different impulses within the multifaceted, patriarchal system. They represent the process of the social construction of women’s identities and roles within that system that forces women into particular positions of subordination in patriarchal societies. In doing this, when considered in unison, their collective voice reveals the myriad structures and restrictions that lie within legality and
science, exposing their contingent nature, and demystifying their unquestionable
universality. By engaging with these structures from a close distance, they are able to
subvert the restrictive hold they possess on women’s lived realities. The authors’ literary
gestures twice break the subordinate role that has been assigned to women in patriarchal
societies: first in their brave act of writing, and second in their subversive content.

In the literature I analyze, many of the instances of social relations in which
oppression engendered by legality surfaces take place in relationships in the home,
attesting to their commonality: A grandfather’s desire for a male heir; a husband/lover’s
split inheritance; an uncle’s twisted inheritance; another uncle’s inappropriate, secret
relationship with his young niece. The same is often true for science: A woman claiming
the space of her bathroom when she is on her period, or the space of her body when she is
pregnant; a house-bound aunt with a monstrous parasite in her leg, and a monstrous
parasite for a doctor; a scientist whose desire to understand his wife drives him beyond
reason. Part of the significance of this dissertation is in showing that each of these
occurrences isn’t just possible, but actually deemed permissible, either explicitly or
implicitly, by the legal and scientific traditions of the patriarchal societies in which they
occur.

Throughout the dissertation, a common thread in the systems of law and science
lies in the force of their respective discourses. Both systems have the power of official
language: to deem some citizens first-class and others second or third-class; some
autonomous subjects and others test subjects; some authors and others objects of
interpretation; some knowledgeable and others knowable. The arguments for these
pronouncements rely on reasoning that is supported by the internal workings of the
systems themselves: scientific practice works to uphold the scientific discourse, and legal practice does the same for the legal discourse. In turn, the discourses, yet again, reify the institutions of science and law. The cycle of exclusion and abuse, perpetuated and justified by the two discourses separately and in conjunction, constitutes an entire framework of social relations and practices that engender oppression against women. This framework has both the breadth of the systems’ pervasive reach, as well as the depth of their entrenched position in Western societies.

It is important to note that the fight for gender equality was gaining some traction during the time frame when many of these women wrote, towards the end of the twentieth century. Therefore, on one hand, they were writing at a time when it was evident that change was, indeed, possible; but on the other, it was also clear that true equality was still a long way off. The values, practices and systems within any given patriarchal society are meant to keep men in control, and women exploited. This type of pervasive paradigm cannot shift overnight, and it cannot shift without tremendous effort. Because of that, the change that these women write for couldn’t happen from a distance. The oppressive systems of legality and science, and the men who wield them as weapons, had to be engaged with, and even entered into, in order for them to be destabilized. This is no small feat, for it carries its own degree of risk for the authors, and yet it is from that inside position that these women are able to carry out their subversive acts of change. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, these authors choose to let their voices be heard through their writing.

This dissertation’s contribution lies, in part, in illuminating how these authors are able to expose the underlying motives and desires of the traditions and systems of legality
and science as carried out against women across Latin America, beyond their implications and sociocultural manifestations. As I have shown, the authors don’t just protest and suppose mal-intent; they prove it by embedding the gestures of intention subtly in their texts. Throughout the dissertation I elucidate the men’s intentions that the authors mark through the use of the Triangle of Desire, one of the main contributions of this dissertation to the field. The theory of the Triangle of Desire is an analytical tool that takes an occurrence of oppression and, beyond just condemning it, allows for a temporal examination of motive and subtext. With respect to the Triangle of Desire, there is a clear possibility of future research in applying the Triangle to literary representations in which social phenomena like education and women in the workforce are central themes. Much of this dissertation centers on the domestic/private space. It could be worth exploring representations of women’s lived experiences in public spheres of society as well. There are also myriad possibilities of further research with the Triangle of Desire as it applies to other marginalized demographics based on race, class, and gender.

Another main contribution of this dissertation to the field is the analysis of patriarchal oppression against women through the dual lens of two hegemonic systems: science and legality, and often the intersection between the two. This approach allows for a totalizing examination of the far-reaching, oftentimes invisible, patriarchal system in which many women in Latin America find themselves, and have found themselves throughout the latter half of the twentieth century when many of these authors were writing. One question for further research that emerges from my work is whether such an analysis of other hegemonic systems, such as religion, would be enlightening as well. I believe it would.
Throughout this dissertation I have engaged with authors who capture the literary imagination of the reader and cast a vision of possible change. Though it is commonly believed that art imitates life, these authors harness the power of art that can indeed project future reality. Through fiction they imagine and elucidate a vision of breaking the oppression that comes with the systematic hold of legality and science in patriarchal societies. Their discerning eye allows them to detect the sometimes-obscured vulnerabilities of patriarchy, and their biting tongue allows them to expose and attack those vulnerabilities, to undo what has been done, and to create a future where the undoing isn’t necessary.
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