

Working Paper OP-9

Mothers and Daughters in Transition and Beyond

by

Emilie L. Bergmann

March 5, 2004

Abstract

With Spain's political changes, including the enfranchisement of women, in the late 1970s, and feminist theories that challenged stereotypical views of motherhood, Spanish women writers began to create more varied depictions. This essay briefly discusses the work of Montserrat Roig, Esther Tusquets, Ana Maria Moix, Nuria Amat, and Maria Mercè Roca, but its focus is on two writers' inscription of motherhood in terms of autonomy and mutual dependency: Carmen Martín Gaité's creation of maternal 'interlocutors,' and Soledad Puértolas's memoir, *Con mi madre* (2001) in which she writes with extraordinary honesty of the closeness and the silences she shared with her mother.

Emilie L. Bergmann, University of California, Berkeley

Mothers and Daughters in Transition and Beyond

Emilie L. Bergmann
Department of Spanish and Portuguese, U.C. Berkeley

Whether or not we become mothers, women continue to be daughters throughout our lives. Whatever our relationship with them, our mothers are mirrors in which we form our identity, our sense of ourselves as women. This makes it difficult to perceive mothers and, by extension, women in general, as autonomous subjects with desires of our own. The maternal role, so commonly identified with gender norms for women, is such a culturally contested space, a notoriously “vexed” category, that it is no surprise that relationships between mothers and daughters are fraught with vexation, guilt, self-loathing and the profoundest love of self and other. While the mother-daughter relationship underlies much of women’s writing, it is also one of the most difficult topics for women to write about, in part because of the complexity of the psychological relationship between language and the maternal body, a central topic of debate in psychoanalytic theory. Laura Freixas, in her anthology *Madres e hijas* (1996) notes the paradoxical “contraste entre la importancia, la riqueza, la universalidad de la relación madre-hija, y su escasísima presencia en la literatura.”¹ Although the topic seems an obvious one, the development of twentieth and twenty-first century Spanish women’s writing about mothers and daughters has been the rare product of painful processes of self-knowledge.

This discussion of the ways in which recent generations of Spanish women have written about mothers and daughters is by no means intended to be exhaustive.² The texts, both fiction

¹ Laura Freixa. *Madres e hijas* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996): p. 11.

² Christine Arkininstall surveys a wider chronological range of texts, beginning in the 1940s, against a detailed account of legislation affecting motherhood in Spain, in “Towards a Female Symbolic: Re-Presenting Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Spanish Narrative by Women” in *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, ed. Adalgisa Giorgio (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002): pp. 47-84. Arkininstall focuses on Rosa Chacel’s *Memorias de Leticia Valle* (1945), Mercè Rodoreda’s posthumous *Isabel y Maria* (1991), Esther Tusquets’s *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978), and Carmen Martín Gaité’s *Nubosidad variable* (1995). Arkininstall’s title refers to Luce Irigaray’s concept of a “female symbolic” Arkininstall p. 66, citing Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 52.

and memoir, that form the basis of this overview are authored by several generations of women: those whose childhood memories were of the Second Republic and the Civil War, and those who were aware of the silenced voices of that generation and sought to reconstruct the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. My focus is on Carmen Martín Gaité and Soledad Puértolas, with comparative glances at Montserrat Roig, Ana Maria Moix, Esther Tusquets, Nuria Amat, and Maria Mercè Roca. Aware that I have left out important writers and texts, I offer my observations toward further discussion.

My central argument is suggested by the ambiguity of my title, “In transition” and “In the *Transición*”: the political context has had a significant impact on the way Spanish women write about motherhood. While mothers were often represented in the first decades of the dictatorship as “repressive figures who, having internalised patriarchal mores, become the defenders and transmitters of an oppressive system,” Christine Arkininstall also finds a recurring theme of “elegy for the missing mother.”³ With women’s rights of citizenship still more than a decade in the future, the political protest and sexual liberation of the 1960s opened a chasm between rebellious daughters and mothers still burdened with the responsibility of raising them to live within the narrow constraints of the Franco dictatorship. Carmen Martín Gaité and Montserrat Roig, although they belong to different generations, shed new light on the failure of communication between generations of women with vastly differing experiences of what was possible for women in Spanish society. In 1987 Carmen Martín Gaité dedicated *Usos amorosos de la postguerra*: “Para todas las mujeres españolas, entre cincuenta y sesenta años, que no entienden a sus hijos. Y para sus hijos, que no las entienden a ellas.” She wrote “hijos” and not only “hijas” because sons were also adjusting to these new parameters for women, and needed to understand their mothers’ far more restricted lives. Women’s political enfranchisement in the late 1970s led to a “proliferation of texts engaged in recovering women as political subjects,” both historical and

³ Arkininstall, p. 52.

fictitious.⁴ From that perspective, women writers were able to perceive their mothers in a larger context, beyond that of the family that reproduced a politically and sexually repressive society. They began searching for the woman who existed before she became a wife and mother. A central question in fiction and historical research was how women participated in and experienced the liberation and the conflicts of the Second Republic and the Civil War, as well as the repressive conditions of the dictatorship. Key examples of this awareness of the unvoiced desires and conflicts that were suppressed by older generations of Spanish women are the novels in Montserrat Roig's trilogy, *Ramona, adèu* (1972), *El temps de les cireres* (1977), and *L'hora violeta* (1980). More recent texts in that project of historical recovery are Josefina Aldecoa's *Historia de una maestra* (1996), Tomasa Cuevas's *Cárcel de mujeres, 1939-1945* (1985),⁵ and Dulce Chacón's *La voz dormida* (2002). Imaginatively bridging the genres of history, memoir and fiction, these works place women, including mothers and daughters (the "maestra" in Aldecoa's title is a fictionalized version of her own mother), in the landscape of Spanish political history in the twentieth century.

The legal rights that U.S. women have taken for granted—such as the ability to obtain a passport, travel, and sign contracts—in other words, to exist as persons in the eyes of the law—were granted briefly to Spanish women under the Second Republic in the 1930s, and finally reinstated in the 1978 constitution; after nearly fifty years, divorce became legal again in 1981. The absurdity of such limitations on capable adults was highlighted in Lidia Falcón's *Cartas a una idiota española* (1974). These legal constraints created a state of dependency that shaped Spanish women's lives and self-image and deeply affected their relationships with their children.

⁴ Arkinstall's cronology continues on p. 70: "The early 1990s witnessed a greater impetus to rewrite myths pertaining to mothers and daughters [. . .] a more recent development has been a demythification of maternal stereotypes [. . .]."

⁵ Published in Spanish in Barcelona by (Barcelona: Ediciones Sirocco, 1985); English translation by Mary E. Giles published as *Prison of Women: Testimonies of War and Resistance in Spain 1939-1975* (State University of New York Press, 1998).

While the narrative of oppression of daughters by maternal figures has a long tradition in Spain,⁶ the past twenty years have witnessed a changing climate in which Spanish women have written from their experiences as mothers, and created empathetic images of mothers in fiction and memoir. What stands out in this writing is a departure from the stereotypes of motherhood and a tendency toward closer observation of mothers' autonomy, even eccentricity, as in Inma Monsó's *Tot un caràcter* (2001), a portrait of a disarmingly human mother.

If the self-fashioning of the orphan, set adrift in society to find a place for him or herself, is a commonplace of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, it seems clear that female autonomy is more difficult to achieve in proportion to women's bonding with their mothers. For Carol Gilligan, this bond produces the sense of connection with others that is fundamental to the highest levels of moral development, but in both Gilligan's and Nancy Chodorow's influential psychological research, it is also shown to produce blurred ego boundaries, and an identity framed in mutual dependency.⁷ A version of Luce Irigaray's concept of the "female symbolic" that has been influential in Spain is Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro's argument that what is crucial for daughters' achievement of autonomy is not rejection of the maternal, but acceptance of the symbolic authority of the mother, precisely the kind of authority denied by the dominant culture.⁸

In the decades since publication of Gilligan's and Chodorow's studies, the importance of their situatedness in terms of race, class, national culture, and historical context has become more visible. Similarly, it can be argued that in Spanish women's writing, a *rapprochement* among generations of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters became possible after the death of the

⁶ I thank Alda Blanco for pointing out that this image dates back to nineteenth-century Spanish literature by women.

⁷ Carol Gilligan. In *A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Nancy Chodorow. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁸ "Non c'è dubbio che la storia della filosofia, come la cultura di cui è parte, mostri i seguiti una rivalità con l'opera e l'autorità della madre." Luisa Muraro. *L'ordine simbolico de la madre* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991): p. 9. Muraro's study has been translated as *El orden simbólico de la madre*. (horas y Horas, 1994).

caudillo and the formation of a new Spanish state with an awareness of its repressive history. Ana María Moix and Esther Tusquets picture the protagonists' mothers in *Julia* (1969) and *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978) as distant and rejecting of their daughters. In Tusquets's case, the castrating mother is a Nordic "diosa altiva" while the nameless protagonist longs for that symbiosis that is imagined as preceding and transcending language. The abjected daughter in *El mismo mar* suffers doubly as her own daughter aligns herself with her mother. The protagonists' unhappiness and their frustrated attraction to women in *Julia* and *El mismo mar* are framed in terms of castration and traced to inadequate mothering. In response to this construct of "good-enough mothering," Barbara Johnson points out, however, that the ideal of "perfect reciprocity, perfect knowledge, total response" that constitutes the "phallic mother" is not the representation of a lost reality; rather, that figure is constructed in response to the recognition of loss that psychoanalytic theory terms "castration." "Only mothers are supposed to subordinate themselves entirely to the needs of someone else,"⁹ she argues, and yet, "The perfect fusion of mother and child never existed even in the womb."¹⁰

In apparent contrast to the powerful, rejecting, and castrating mothers of Moix's and Tusquets' novels, the protagonist's mother in Maria Mercè Roca's little-known novel *Els arbres vençuts* (1987) is distant not because she is powerful, but because she has suffered a breakdown. Hollowed out over the years like the trees in the town square that were blown down in a storm, this mother lost her sense of self in a love affair with a man who immediately forgot her. After her death, her daughter uses her letters and diaries to piece together the narrative and struggles to free herself from the seduction of her mother's passive role. She writes her own story in a new political and social environment.

While significant political changes in the Spanish state allowed mothers greater personal autonomy, more recent changes have made possible the envisioning of new maternal roles

⁹ Barbara Johnson. *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003): p. 79.

within the family in society, and different perspectives on the relationships between mothers and daughters. For women writers, in Spain and elsewhere, the “recent evolution of feminist thought” has undergone what Jessica Benjamin terms “a process resembling psychoanalysis”:

the transference to the preoedipal mother has ‘returned’ many feminist thinkers, as mothers and daughters, to the deep conflicts that had been evaded by the idealization/defiance of the father. It faced them with the struggle for recognition, the problem of destruction and survival, the confrontation with imperfection, the conflict between idealizing the other and having one’s own desire.¹¹

Benjamin writes of attempts to define a space in which “a mother might be represented who can play with her child and thus be recognized ‘most fully as a subject—autonomous and free . . .’ a mother who can open up the symbolic space of play,”¹² Not surprisingly, it was the eminently playful Carmen Martín Gaité who directly attempted in a series of essays and novels from the mid-1970s through the 1990s to imagine maternal space that is autonomous, creative, and nurturing for both mother and child.¹³ In response to the fears Benjamin and Suleiman depict as most characteristic of women writers, that their writing itself will damage their children or even place their lives at risk, Martín Gaité imagines a wide range of alternatives involving new arrangements of space and time, and explorations of separation and attachment.

A central structuring principle of Martín Gaité’s essays and fiction is the dialogic nature of language and narrative. The interlocutors in her fictional dialogues are rarely mothers and their children; rather, the relationships are oblique, displaced from the intimate intensity of

¹⁰ Johnson, p. 87.

¹¹ Jessica Benjamin. *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 109.

¹² Benjamin, p. 111, quoting Susan Suleiman “Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the Mother” in *Subversive Intent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990): p. 180. Suleiman’s image evokes a verse of a children’s song with many variants throughout the Spanish-speaking world: “Arroz con leche.” The one requirement for the woman (sometimes a “viudita”) described in the song is “que sepa abrir la puerta para ir a jugar.”

¹³ See Kimberly Ford Chisholm. “Maternal-Filial Mirroring and Subjectivity in Carmen Martín Gaité’s *Lo raro es vivir*.” In *Carmen Martín Gaité: Cuento de nunca acabar/Never-Ending Story*. Glenn, Kathleen M., ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 2003): pp. 109-27; and also

parent-child dyads. In *Retahílas* (1974), for example, a young man spends a long night in conversation with his dying aunt, who explains the dichotomy between feminism and motherhood that constrained her as well as her sister. Conventional domesticity continues to render women useless as mentors to their children in *Caperucita en Manhattan* (1990), in which the mother is a caricature of domesticity and over-protectiveness. Martín Gaité chooses no less a crone figure than the Statue of Liberty herself. In her later fiction, Martín Gaité's female characters struggle to balance their creative vocations and professional careers with childrearing and family life. The protagonist of *Lo raro es vivir* (1996) is an archivist. Her ability to impersonate her deceased mother and to resolve her long-held resentment of her mother's autonomy coincides with her own conception of a child. To claim her own autonomy, she must embrace the independence as well as the "symbolic authority" exemplified by her mother, a successful painter. Always conscious of the essentially dialogic nature of language, Martín Gaité, signaled a revisionist view of the mother-daughter relationship in the recollection of a remarkable dialogue with her daughter in her exploration of narrative, *El cuento de nunca acabar* (1983),¹⁴ and in the "Apéndice arbitrario" of her collection of essays on women's writing, *Desde la ventana* (1987). Her oneiric vision of communication with her mother in *Desde la ventana* envisions an arcane, playful language, a "female symbolic" perhaps, passed from mother to daughter:

Anoche soñé que le estaba escribiendo una carta muy larga a mi madre para contarle cosas de Nueva York, pero era una forma muy peculiar de escritura. . . . lo que hacía no era propiamente escribir, sino mover los dedos con gestos muy precisos para que la luz incidiera de una forma determinada en un espejito como de juguete que tenía en la mano y cuyos reflejos ella recogía desde una ventana que había enfrente, al otro lado del río.

her Ph.D. dissertation, "Maternal Voice in the Novels of Carmen Martín Gaité" (U.C. Berkeley, 2001).

¹⁴ For a discussion of this passage, see Randolph Pope, Amy Kaminsky, Andrew Bush, and Ruth El Saffar, "El cuento de nunca acabar: a Critical Dialogue." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 22:1 (1988): 107-133, and the present author's "Narrative Theory in the Mother Tongue: Carmen Martín Gaité's *Desde la ventana* and *El cuento de nunca acabar*," in *Spanish Women Writers and the Essay: Gender, Politics and the Self*.

Se trataba de una especie de código secreto, de un juego que ella había estado mucho tiempo tratándome de enseñar . . . Y la felicidad que me invadía en el sueño no radicaba sólo en poderle contar cosas de Nueva York a mi madre y en tener la certeza de que ella, aun después de muerta, me oía, sino también en la complacencia que me proporcionaba mi destreza, es decir, en haber aprendido a mandarle el mensaje de aquella forma tan divertida y tan rara, que además era un juego secretamente enseñado por ella y que nadie más que nosotras dos podía compartir.¹⁵

What gives Martín Gaité the greatest happiness in the dream is the sharing of a secret code with her mother. Still enjoying the role of daughter, Martín Gaité is pleased to see how well she has learned to communicate using this “forma tan divertida.”

It is telling, nonetheless, that so many women write their sympathetic portrayals of maternal figures in the mother’s absence, when she has been effectively silenced by death. Montserrat Roig’s *L’hora violeta* (1980) relates a daughter’s search for her mother through memory, imagination, and friendship, more than a decade after her death. The daughter enlists the help of a friend to write a novel about her mother and her friendship with a politically and sexually liberated friend who committed suicide at the end of the Civil War. The process reflects upon women’s conflicted relationships with men and with each other, and their participation in political movements. While Roig wrote in Catalan about bourgeois women of the Eixample, Nuria Amat writes in Castilian about the isolated, disappearing world of Barcelona’s most privileged women. Having lost her own mother in childhood, Amat has written two novels haunted by the death of a mother, *La intimidación* (1997) and *El país del alma* (1999). In *El país del alma*, the mother’s death at the end of the novel infuses the narrative with a sense of impermanence. The poetry Nena Rocamora leaves behind is in the form of private and limited

eds. Kathleen Glenn and Mercedes Mazquiarán de Rodríguez. (University of Missouri Press, 1998): 172-197.

¹⁵ Carmen Martín Gaité. *Desde la ventana: Enfoque femenino de la literatura española* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1987): pp. 113-114).

communication, a barely-audible voice. In *La intimidad*, the mother has already died at the beginning of the novel, and her children grow up in the shadow of her absence. Although it is commonplace to regard writing as the response to absence, both the presence and absence of mothers is so powerful and conflicted that few many writers address it at all.

This is, however, clearly not the case with Soledad Puértolas. The first sentence of her memoir *Con mi madre* (2001) gives the date of her mother's death in 1999, and the next frames her memoir in terms of this loss. There is an unrelenting honesty in Puértolas's fictional portrait of a woman "on the run" from love and the process of aging, confronting her mother's death in "La hija predilecta" in 1996.¹⁶ The honesty of this fictional construct, however, is of an entirely different order from that of the memoir prompted by her mother's death in 1999. While the short story reveals the emotions of a hypothetical daughter, the memoir focuses on the author's memory of her mother. What readers may perceive as minor oversights are rendered enormous burdens of guilt because she and her mother never spoke of them and they are now irreparable. Puértolas recalls a moment in which she found herself unable to respond adequately to the needs of her mother while anticipating those of her son, born a few days afterwards. She became aware of a change in her mother at the prospect of returning to Spain instead of staying for a month to help her daughter with her new experience of motherhood: "Más que un cambio, una revelación: la conciencia de sentirse terriblemente sola. Sola y derrotada. Estaba empequeñecida, triste. Lo veo ahora. Sé que me necesitaba. Necesitaba una ilusión, la de poder ayudar a su hija en el cuidado del primer hijo, su nieto. . . . Toda esa ilusión se desvaneció."¹⁷ She remains tormented by this memory: "No sé si mi madre lo recordó alguna vez, pero es evidente que yo, aunque traté de sepultarlo en la memoria, no lo logré. Y si lo he recordado tantas veces debe de ser para que no me duela tanto [. . .]"¹⁸ What follows this passage is a narrative from a later time,

¹⁶ Soledad Puértolas. "La hija predilecta." In *Madres e hijas*. Ed. Laura Freixas (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996): pp. 117-138.

¹⁷ Soledad Puértolas. *Con mi madre*. (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001): p. 92.

¹⁸ Puértolas. *Con mi madre*. p. 94.

exemplifying mother's and daughter's ability to understand and acknowledge each other's feelings, and her mother's willingness to apologize for not having understood her: [L]loré yo cuando colgué el teléfono . . . sienténdome profundamente incomprendida, casi rechazada. . . . me dije que quizá ella se estaba defendiendo de algo . . . Mi madre no me vio ni mi oyó llorar, pero lo supo. Supo que cuando colgué el teléfono no me sentía ofendida, sino dolida. Vino a casa el domingo por la mañana . . . traía un ramo de flores en la mano. . . . Se aferraba al ramo de flores como si fuera un bastón. Hija mía, dijo, perdóname."¹⁹ What is left out by my ellipsis is significant: a description of her aging mother's difficulty in walking and in making decisions. Despite the silences she describes, the unspoken forms of communication between Puértolas and her mother are extraordinary; they reflect precisely the kind of intimate shared knowledge mothers and daughters desire and often expect from each other, and only rarely achieve.

Puértolas writes about her mother's strength of character and her own commitment to take responsibility for her, and to conduct her life with mindfulness of her mother's legacy: "He mirado siempre a mi madre, no sólo con la sensación de que era esencial para mí, sino de que, de algún modo, tenía que ayudarla. [. . .] No sé en qué momento creí percibir que no era feliz. No me sentí culpable, sino triste, dolida."²⁰ This empathy is clearly an adult response to another adult woman, rather than the childish expectation that the mother will respond fully to the child's needs, requiring nothing in return. In writing about this woman with whom she was very close throughout her life, Soledad finds that while she has come to understand her mother, she still feels that she never really knew her: "Siempre he creído comprender a mi madre, pero nunca he sabido hasta qué punto la conocía."²¹ We know the constraints under which she somehow managed to succeed in nurturing a creative daughter, but what were the resources upon which she drew in order to accomplish this in a stiflingly repressive environment, and thrive herself? Puértolas

¹⁹ Puértolas. *Con mi madre*. p. 95.

²⁰ Puértolas, 77.

²¹ Soledad Puértolas. *Con mi madre*. (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001): 77

recreates an image of her mother at family celebrations, always insisting upon red wine, and always keeping the glass filled, celebrating her own life.

Alice Walker's remarkable volume of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, was published in 1987, the same year as Martín Gaité's *Usos amorosos de la posguerra*. Walker writes of her mother's creativity, which found its outlet by making flowers grow wherever she lived. But this is no sentimental memoir; it traces in outraged imagination the frustrated artistic energy of generations of young women. Walker quotes Virginia Woolf: "When . . . one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet . . ." and Walker goes on to say, "our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."²² Because the feminine is traditionally associated with nature and the body, in contrast to the association of the masculine with abstract reasoning and mind, it is important for women writers to explore ways to inscribe their mothers into text culture.

Underlying women's writing about their mothers is the sense of loss and absence haunting the words before us, the sense that there was another story, another poem that was not written. While all writing is haunted by absence, the daughter's words in particular resonate with their inability to compensate for another generation's loss of the feminine voice. In place of stereotypes of strong, forbidding mothers, mothers who capitulate and attempt to imprint upon their daughters the Law of the Father, and mothers who are crushed by that implacable law, new images continue to emerge, of mothers who are too eccentric, too full of life and creativity to be limited by stereotypes, mothers whose daughters are beginning to take the risk of speaking as

²² Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987): p. 241.

mothers and confronting the imperfections and the fulfillment of relationships with their own mothers.