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Mad Love: The Problematization of Gendered Identity and Desire in Recent Mexican Women's Novels

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Despite the fact that the issue of gendered representation in literature has provoked lengthy and often heated debate among theorists for most of the twentieth century, women writers today still face the complex task of creating a uniquely feminine voice for self-expression in their texts, regardless of whether their work is meant to speak for women's experiences in general or one woman's experience in particular. As Shoshana Felman points out, to speak for women or to speak in the name of women is:

> a precise repetition of the oppressive gesture of representation by means of which, throughout the history of logos, man has reduced the woman to the status of a silent and subordinate object, to something inherently spoken for... To "speak in the name of," to "speak for," could thus mean, once again to appropriate and to silence. (8)

How, then, does a female novelist create female characters who speak in their own voices and function as subjects when women are perceived in our culture as objects who are spoken for and acted upon? This important theoretical question is one that women writers must contemplate and attempt to resolve each time they produce a work of fiction, for it becomes not only a question of *how* to speak but of *who* is speaking in the text. Simultaneously, the writer must attempt to find a way for the female character to act as an autonomous subject, *to do* rather than *to be done to*. The shift from object to subject position is a difficult one to achieve in a society where gendered identity is rigorously upheld through a system of binary oppositions; femininity is defined as what is not masculine, as lack, as absence. Since males have historically occupied the subject position, both in literature and in life, the representation of women as objects has become a cultural norm.

Specifically, the representation of feminine sexuality in literature, together with the difficulty of pinpointing how women's desire might manifest itself through the written word, have been intense areas for investigation in women's writing because they beg the larger question: can women ever function as desiring subjects in their own right? Freud's belief that women embody desire but cannot possess it has been questioned, disputed, and negated by an army of scholars over the past decades, yet the concept has become so deeply ingrained in our culture that it has become a subconscious truth for many people. Jessica Benjamin

notes, "At times we are shocked by how much the reality of woman's condition differs from what we, in our minds, have long since determined it should be. Even the more modest demands for equality that we take for granted have not been realized" (87). Women's liberation has allowed women more freedom in the expression of their sexuality, but, as Benjamin observes, the sexually active woman does not necessarily signify an active subjectivity. Rather, the "'sexy' woman ... is sexy, but as object, not as subject. She expresses not so much her desire as her pleasure in being desired; what she enjoys is her capacity to evoke desire in the other, to attract. Her power does not reside in her own passion, but in her acute desirability" (89). In an effort to sidestep the thorny problem of feminine desire, some women novelists shy away from sexually explicit texts. Their female characters appear as de-sexualized beings who, although they escape the confines of masculine desire, "can only avoid sexual objectification and passivity by giving up on sex altogether" (91). Both of these extremes—the sexy wontan and the sexless woman—perpetuate and preserve the old gender system in which women acquire value only through their ability to evoke desire in others or through their renunciation of desire in favor of a de-eroticized existence.

In a society where woman is positioned and identified as "Other," the path of least resistance has led some women writers to embrace feminine "otherness" as a redemptive quality. By inverting the value system through which feminine identity has been assigned a negative quality and by subverting the power structures that prop up a patriarchal order, these authors question "the metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions which dominates philosophical thought (Presence/Absence, Being/Nothingness, Truth/Error, Same/Other, Identity/Difference,) etc.," (Felman 7). The madwoman, formerly silenced, hidden in the attic, and erased from the text, now steps forward in a new light; she represents "the innate disruptive, revolutionary force of the female" (Baym 157).[1] As such, she claims a space outside man's reason, thereby escaping the narrow confines of her culturally assigned gender. Phyllis Chesler states in her book *Women and Madness* that "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable.... The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture" (68-69). According to Chesler, "What we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (56). Felman sees mental illness as "a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration" (7). For this reason, she defines madness as "the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation" (7) and concludes that "What the narcissistic economy of the Masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate, under the label of 'madness,' is nothing other than feminine difference" (15). Reading madness as feminine difference, as "otherness," is a risky proposition,

as Nina Baym observes, because it not only positions woman outside of man's reason but also may dehumanize her (156). In an attempt to break down hierarchical thinking, women writers today find themselves attempting to walk the fine line that separates madness from reason, the Imaginary from the Real, and desirability from the ability to desire in the creation of their literary characters. Not surprisingly, it is along these blurred frontiers that the problems related to a gendered identity emerge most clearly in a number of recent works by Mexican women writers.

I have chosen for discussion and analysis here three contemporary novels that speak directly to the issue of how feminine desire and madness intertwine in response to the construction of a gendered identity in the texts: *Demasiado amor* (1990), by Sara Sefchovich; *Inés* (1995), by Elena Garro; and *Y si yo fuera Susana San Juan...* (1998), by Susana Pagano. Although these novels are little known outside of Mexico, they are nonetheless important works in terms of what they tell us about women's writing today. *Demasiado amor* received the prestigious Agustín Apes award for a first novel in 1990 and has achieved bestseller status in Mexico, going through a number of reissues within the first two years of its appearance on the literary scene.[2] *Y si yo fuera Susana San Juan...* received the National José Rubén Romero prize for a first novel in 1995 and was published under the auspices of the National Council for Culture and the Arts in Mexico. Garro, an established and much published author, died soon after the appearance of *Inés*. Currently, a number of book-length studies are under way in which critical attention will be given to Garro's work, and, no doubt, detailed discussion of *Inés* will find its way into most of these texts. Given the international popularity of other Mexican women writers, such as Laura Esquivel and Angeles Mastretta, it is also very likely that translations of *Demasiado amor*, *Inés*, and *Y si yo fuera Susana San Juan...* eventually will appear and that they will gain a wider audience over time. While these three novels appear to be very different on the surface, they intersect in ways that invite discussions of feminine subjectivity, sexuality, and culturally defined notions of madness within the context of Mexican fiction at the close of the twentieth century.

Although one may argue (in patriarchal terms) that a convincing case could be made that the protagonist in each text either is mad or goes mad over the course of the novel, other readings from different angles might lead to the opposite conclusion—that the society in which the female character lives is insane and that the character, through her refusal or inability to play an assigned gender role according to cultural expectations, manages to "cure" herself of madness and gain an autonomy that previously had been denied her. To a great extent, we are called upon to define the meanings of madness and reason and to determine for ourselves on which side of the line the female character stands. Madness is not so much contained in the text as it is insinuated between the lines of our reading.

In this way, the three novels conform to a pattern that Catherine Belsey identifies as characteristic of much postmodern narrative:

> In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values, in the sense that is available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader, and in this process it can provide a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation. (604)

This observation has particular importance for a study of gendered representation in fiction, for it calls our attention to the fact that "inscribed subject positions are never hermetically sealed into a text, but are always positions in ideologies" (Willemen 63). By showing us that our perception of the dichotomy between madness and reason is an ideological construct, these novels also suggest that the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and their culturally assigned roles as subject/object are ideological constructs, as well, and therefore may be open to re-evaluation and redefinition.

To some extent, our belief that the female character is mad depends on the authority we grant to the work's narrative voice. For example, Inés, from the novel of the same name, is almost never allowed to speak in her own voice, except in rare instances when she expresses fear, confusion, or doubt. She may ask questions, but she never answers them. A third-person omniscient narrator guides us through the text, at first carefully explaining small details about the young woman's background and present circumstances and giving us the impression that we are privy to her thoughts and emotions. It becomes clear, however, that we have no real insight into her character because we must see her as characters in the text do: she is an object to be looked at and to be acted upon—nothing more. She cannot function as a subject in the text because she is defined only in terms of lack: she is not powerful, not wise, not experienced, not desirable, not aggressive—she is literally a nobody who is eventually erased from the text altogether. She is kidnapped, tortured, sexually abused, and eventually murdered; her body remains unclaimed in the city morgue because the other characters repeatedly insist that she is "una desconocida" ("an unknown"). She is no longer human; she is merely someone else's nightmare, and the memory of her fades from the text before the novel has even come to a close.[3]

What might otherwise be the key scene of the novel—the segment in which the crimes are committed against Inés—is curiously glossed over and presented in such an ambiguous and fragmentary style that it is difficult to know exactly who is doing what to whom. One consistently clear point, however, is that Inés is always the object of the actions, never the subject of them. When her cousin, Jesus, attempts to rescue her, one interpretation to others' reactions to her is that she has gone mad: "La gente de los automóviles miraba con estupor a Inés, que

a la luz del día parecía la imagen de la muerte. Su cráneo afeitado y su rostro verdoso de mirada extraviada hacían que todos los conductores de los automóviles se volvieran a verla" ("The people in the cars looked in astonishment at Inés, who in the light of day looked like death's image. Her shaved skull and greenish face with vacant stare made all of the people driving in cars turn around and look at her"; 120-121). Inés, on the other hand, sees nothing when she looks at them: "Inés miraba las calles como a un papel en blanco" ("Inés looked at the streets as if she were looking at a blank sheet of paper"; 121). Unable or unwilling to speak after what has been done to her, Inés is further dehumanized and objectified under the male gaze. As her cousin stares at her, he notes that, "Inmóvil, parecía una piedra verdosa" ("Immobile, she seemed like a green rock"; 121). Precisely because she no longer appears "normal" to others who might see her, she becomes a problem for the man who has victimized her; rather than contemplate what he has done to her, he now worries about how her strange appearance will reflect on him: "Javier la contempló incómodo. ¿Qué iba a hacer con aquella mujer impresentable?" ("Javier looked at her uncomfortably. What was he going to do with this unpresentable woman?"; 122). Although it was he who tortured and abused her, the victimizer now casts himself in the role of victim because it is the only way for him to remain firmly seated in the subject position. As he looks at Inés in her androgynous and de-sexualized state, he feels an almost primal terror: "La imagen de Inés en pleno día lo trastornaba. 'Así me dejarán a mí,' se repitió con horror" ("The image of Inés in plain daylight unglued him. 'That's what they're going to do to me,' he repeated to himself in horror"; 121).

Implying that Inés is going mad, the narrative voice depicts her as Other by emphasizing her disconnectedness to the world around her. "Inés no escuchaba, parecía haberse sentado ahí dispuesta a quedarse, como si estuviera domesticada por una fuerza desconocida" ("Inés wasn't listening; she sat there, apparently willing to stay there, as if she were tamed by some unknown force"; 127). When she fails to engage in conversation with her cousin, he concludes: "Había perdido la razón y la memoria, no lo reconocía" ("She had lost her reason and her memory; she didn't recognize him"; 131). By his own admission, he does not know what has happened to Inés: "'Qué le hicieron? Yo qué sé!'" ("'What did they do to her? How should I know!'"; 132); nevertheless, his point of view carries authority, and, for the remainder of the novel, everyone in the text (and many readers, as well) assume that Inés is indeed insane. Since she dies soon after this point and never enjoys agency, there is no way of judging the correctness of Jesus's interpretation. Because Inés's longstanding silence, now absolute, calls into question the shaky foundations upon which the established authority lies, the reader must conclude that any attempt to reconstruct her story in a meaningful way will fail. We simply do not know enough about her to say with any certainty what has happened to her. Denied access to the subject's position in the telling of her story, the only way Inés can avoid occupying the object position cultural-

ly assigned to females is by using absence and passivity—the approved norms of silence. While these responses place her outside the grasp of other characters, they have the double effect of denying our access, as well. Her silence is incontrovertible. Garro cleverly erases her protagonist from the narrative by using the same bold strokes that created her in the first place: Inés's story is left behind, but Inés, the character, is essentially missing from it. The voice claiming to speak for Inés is shown to be fraudulent, the authority of the narrative voice is undermined, and the entire process through which feminine identity is constructed in fiction is called into question.

Inés functions like a distorted mirror against which images of traditional gothic fiction are reflected in new and uncomfortable ways. Of specific interest is the representation of the virgin as victim, or the manner in which a young, sexually inexperienced woman's innocence is turned against her and becomes an obstacle to her survival. In Garro's novel, as in traditional gothic fiction, the convent-bred Inés has been conditioned to regard virginity as a virtue. However, when she leaves the convent and becomes a maid in the home of a mysterious, older man, Inés is forced to assume a new role as the object of the male gaze, a role in which she is found to be lacking. Her first encounter with Javier is marked by rejection: "'¿No tiene usted algo más propio que ponerse? No me gusta ese traje de monja,' dijo el hombre, haciendo un gesto de disgusto profundo. Inés se ruborizó hasta la raíz del cabello" ("'Don't you have something more appropriate you can put on? I don't like that nun's uniform,' said the man, making a gesture of profound disgust. Inés blushed to the roots of her hair"; 13). Contrary to what she has been taught by the nuns, her virginity is not valued by this man, and her inability to hold his gaze as an object of desire marks her as a de-sexualized, devalued commodity to be used and cast aside. This is, in essence, what happens to Inés over the course of the novel as she becomes the target of Javier and his friends' sadistic behavior. Unable to become a desiring subject because she does not know how, and unwilling to continue in the role of sexual object because she finds no pleasure in it, Inés has no place to go in the text except to disappear from it completely. In this sense, her death and the erasure of her presence from the narrative become the only possibility for Inés to achieve any degree of autonomy: by not being, by becoming literally the absence or lack that has been used to characterize femininity in our culture, Inés calls attention to problems inherent in constructing subjectivity along gender lines in any work of literature.

The protagonist of *Y si yo fuera Susana San Juan...*, like Inés, is a young woman poised on the brink of adulthood but reluctant to leave behind the anonymity of a non-sexual, childlike persona for the more complex role of a sexually active woman. In large part, the novel is an exploration of the ways through which its protagonist learns to act out desire and come to grips with identity issues related to her gender. Perhaps it is not a coincidence then that, like Inés, Susana teeters on the brink of madness as she makes this journey toward self-

recognition. From the opening page of the novel, it becomes apparent that, although Susana speaks in the first person *yo* (*I*), she is speaking from a multiple viewpoint as not one Susana but two: she is both herself, a middle-class young woman from a dysfunctional family living in Mexico City in the 1990s, and Susana San Juan, a ghostly figure who haunts the pages of the Juan Rulfo's classic novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955), the ultimate symbol of woman as Other, the unknowable, unattainable missing element who is eternally destined to remain an enigma. Although the two characters are poles apart, it is this extreme polarity that attracts Susana, the narrator, to her literary namesake; together, they constitute an imaginary whole. As the title suggests, Susana defines herself not so much in terms of who she is but, rather, as who and what she is not: by linking the first person subject pronoun (*yo*) to a verb in the past subjunctive (*fuera*), Susana acknowledges that she is not Susana San Juan, and yet she dares to speak for her as if she were.[4] In fact, she goes a step further: she claims ownership of Rulfo's Susana, telling us, "fui su inspiración para ese personaje" ("I was his inspiration for that character"; 11). To wrest credit from one of Mexico's most revered authors for his most poetic creation is no easy feat, especially because Susana's remark has no rational basis. She admits that Juan Rulfo wrote the novel and died before she was born, and she knows that her character in no way resembles that of Susana San Juan. Nevertheless, she tells us, she has intimate contact with Rulfo because he has returned from the dead to be her lover, and she knows through conversations with him that he wrote the book about her:

> Llegó a mi casa un día, arrastrando esos ojos melancólicos como un alma en pena sus pecados. Te traje un regalo, me dijo. Sobre la mesa del, comedor dejó un libro de pasta gruesa y sin haber sido abierto nunca. Era un libro nuevo, él sabe cómo me gustan los libros nuevos, pues los viejos encierran olores de un pasado lejano del mío. Aquel regalo de Juan fue para mí como penetrar en la realidad de mí misma, en la materia prima de mi alma y de mi carne.
>
> He arrived at my house one day dragging with him those melancholic eyes like a lost soul dragging his sins behind him. I brought you a gift, he told me. He left a book with a thick cover on the dining room table, a book that had never been opened before. It was a new book, he knows how much I like new books, because used ones have the strange odor of some distant past in them, a past that isn't mine. That gift from Juan was, for me, like going straight to the reality of my being, to the raw material of my soul and flesh. (11)

What, in most contexts, would appear to be the ravings of a madwoman are actually, in Pagano's novel, intertextual references to Rulfo's masterpiece. In *Pedro Páramo*, the dead do speak; there are no dividing lines between the ghosts

that speak from their tombs and the few living characters who wander around the deserted town of Comala. It is often difficult to determine who is speaking or at which moment any particular action occurs. Time is arbitrary, fragmented, virtually non-existent, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish between past, present and future. Pagano takes these elements, which have long been recognized as signs of Rulfo's genius, and turns them inside out in order to call attention to the fact that it is not so much *what* is said, but *who* says it and *how*, that determines how readers will respond. Pagano is no more outrageous than Rulfo in her use of fantastic elements, but, by making concrete and direct reference to the act of literary creation—to the way in which literary characters come into being—in the opening lines of her text, she challenges readers to take an immediate stance about what is possible and "real" in a work of art. By having her narrator, Susana, speak in the first person but in a voice that is fluid, fragmented, and pluralistic, she calls attention to the lack of subjectivity behind the *I* in the text. At the same time, she allows us to see why her Susana does not aspire to become an object of desire like Susana San Juan because, although Rulfo's character is "el personaje cuyo poder sobre el hombre que la idolatra va más allá de los límites" ("the literary character whose power over the man who idolizes her goes beyond all limits"; 11), it is "un poder, sin embargo, que ignora" ("a power, however, that she doesn't know exists"; 12). By undermining the myth of the *femme fatale* and advancing the belief that the power to attack the male gaze is not real power at all, Pagano's narrator tears apart one of the most remarkable love stories in Mexican fiction and reconstructs it from a postmodern feminist perspective. It is significant that, of all the strange and obsessive characters in Rulfo's novel, Susana San Juan is the only one who is clearly designated as mad; she is also the one who embodies the most potential as a desiring female subject. When Pagano's narrator tell us, "Esa Susana San Juan melancólica y por los recuerdos sólo podía ser yo, el reflejo de mí misma en el espejo de un libro impreso" ("That melancholy Susana San Juan obsessed by memories of the past could only be me, the reflection of myself in the mirror of a printed book"; 12), we are left to wonder whether it is desire or madness that links her to Rulfo's character, or if these qualities are, indeed, one and the same.

Constant references to the book as a mirror lead us to see that *Y si yo fuera Susana San Juan...* is an interrogation of women's reading practices as much as it is about the search for subjectivity and representation through the written word. The literary canon in Mexico is not only dominated by male authors, but the pages of their works uniformly seek to present a male world in which women are marginalized and portrayed (when they are portrayed at all) as virgins, mothers, or whores. Female readers hoping to find their reflections within these texts have little chance of finding anything concrete with which to identify. Pagano's narrator bumps up against this tradition and decides to unmask it by showing that when she speaks for other women, she is, in fact, speaking for no one—not even

for herself—because she can never pin down the slippery subject position and speak with authority as a singular, grounded *I*. The *I* of her narrative is a masquerade, and her identity is never more than a metonym for an endless chain of signifiers. Susana circumvents desire by projecting it onto others: she is Susana San Juan; she is her own mother; she is her grandmother; she is all women who have been abandoned by or ripped away from the men they loved and from the possibility of sexual pleasure and fulfillment. These women experience what Mary Ann Doane calls "the desire to desire," a longing to take up the subject position while at the same time being denied access to it. The voice through which desire manifests itself in Susana is not her own; it leaves her unable to speak for herself because she is never able to say with any certainty who she is. Her identity as a woman is no dearer to her at the novel's end than it is in the beginning because she has merely shifted from one fictional scenario to another, and the desire she claims as her own is, in essence, the reconstruction of someone else's.[5]

Susana's ability to assume multiple personalities and speak in multiple voices does not necessarily lead her to self-recognition as a desiring subject, but it is a strategy that leads readers to question the ways in which female desire has been represented in other texts. It also links desire to madness and suggests that any woman who shows the potential to become an agent of desire poses a threat to societal order. For example, Susana learns that her grandmother was committed to an insane asylum as punishment for having taken a lover. Susana's mother, whose sexuality is so repressed that it borders on the neurotic, feels uncomfortable casting a woman in the role of desiring subject, so she presents the family history to her daughter in inverted terms, making the man the locus of desire: "No era que estuviera loca de verdad, pero tu abuelo la odiaba y sólo así podía deshacerse de ella y tener todas las amantes que se le antojaran" ("It's not that she was really crazy, but your grandfather hated her and that's the only way he could get rid of her and have all the lovers he wanted"; 17). Susana reclaims the grandmother's history by reading her old letters and by acting out the story from her grandmother's point of view, much as she did in the case of Rulfo's Susana San Juan. In each scenario, by becoming the "madwoman" and attempting to speak in her voice, Susana experiments with the fluid nature of feminine identity and plays with the notion of desire; through these processes, she scrutinizes the limitations that have been imposed on femininity through cultural norms.

Demasiado amor differs from the other two novels discussed here in that the protagonist and narrator is a young woman who freely embraces the role of prostitute and her own status as object of desire in order to use the established system to her advantage. On the surface, Beatriz is a "good girl": she is from a decent, middle-class home, she works during the day as a secretary, and she shows no particular interest in sex. But she is more than she appears on the surface, for Beatriz, like Susana, has multiple voices and personalities, and she

refuses to be defined by any one of them. She does not speak for other women but for all the facets of her own character, for all of the women she is and would like to be. Although Beatriz does not stand out as a highly independent and rebellious young woman in the early pages of the text, she gradually discovers that conforming to pre-established rules of feminine behavior does not lead her in the direction she wants to go. If society insists on seeing women as a commodity to be exchanged, bought, or sold, then she will take herself to market and exploit the system that has given the female body its commercial value.[6] By deconstructing the idea of sexual love in the novel and reconfiguring it as the business of sex, Beatriz becomes the vendor of a highly desirable product in a free-market economy and, as a result, she lays claim to the subject position—not as a body to be consumed by others but as the provider of a service through which their desire can manifest itself.

The flaw in Beatriz's plan, of course, is that in the economy of desire such transgressive behavior threatens societal order and may cast her in the role of madwoman. At the end of *Demasiado amor*, Beatriz's lifestyle and behavior are eccentric enough that some readers would be tempted to see them as proof of her madness: she removes all of the windows, doors, and interior walls from her apartment building; she removes all of the furniture except her bed; she turns the bathtub into a fish pond with fountain, releases butterflies that flutter around her living room, and wanders from room to room naked, stopping occasionally to have sex with anyone who is interested. Her clients are so numerous they no longer all fit into the building at one time. They camp out in her hallways and on the stairs, naked like her, and, while they wait their turn, they engage in sexual activity with each other whenever the urge strikes. Beatriz no longer leaves the apartment or has contact with anyone in the outside world. In the space she inhabits, no one speaks; all communication is through the body, through touch and physical sensation. She breaks off contact with her lover of seven years and also with her sister, her closest living relative. The letters she has sent her sister over the years and the diary in which she has recorded her life—texts that have made up the novel we have been reading—come to an abrupt end and are replaced by silence; in her final letter to her sister, she explains, "Sólo se escucha el aleteo de Las mariposas que se posan en una oreja, en el pelo. Sólo se ve la neblina del incienso densa y perfumada. Sólo se huelen nuestros cuerpos, nuestros líquidos, nuestros deseos. Lo que se ve, se huele y se oye son nuestros placeres" ("All you hear is the beating of butterfly wings as they light on an ear, on someone's hair. All you see is the mist of thick and perfumed incense. All you smell are our bodies, our fluids, our desire. What you see, what you smell, and what you hear are our pleasures"; 182).

Beatriz's world is not idyllic, however; in contrast to the optimistic tone she takes when writing to her sister, her final diary entry makes it clear that she is not as self-fulfilled as she pretends to be. For seven years, Beatriz has led multiple

lives: she has been the devoted sister, the adoring lover of one man, the hard-working secretary, and a successful prostitute. When she attempts to consolidate all of these identities in one body and reveal all of the facets of her life to those she loves, she meets with criticism and rejection from everyone except her loyal customers. Her lover, a man to whom she has been blindly devoted, is appalled to find out that the body he has enjoyed for so long is a commercial product that she proudly sells. Her sexually transgressive behavior is at odds with the culturally constructed notion of romantic love, and this discovery leads her to conclude: "Hoy ha terminado mi historia de amor y con ella todo el sentido de mi vida. En adelante voy a desaparecer, a perderme en Las sombras, a dejarme llevar por los amores fáciles, gozosos, que son los únicos que no hacen daño, que no lastiman" ("Today my love story ended and with it all sense of meaning in my life. From now on, I'm going to disappear, to lose myself in the shadows, to let myself be carried along by casual, pleasurable love affairs, the only kind that don't hurt you, that don't do any damage"; 185). The message of *Demasiado amor* is not so much that transgressive sexual behavior destroys love but that love is not strong enough to stand up to the threat of a sexually liberated woman. Contrary to what romantic fiction has taught women for many generations, Beatriz discovers that it is love, not sex, that brings pain into her life and reveals the emptiness of her existence.

Like Inés and Susana, Beatriz takes refuge from a rigidly structured, unaccommodating, and cruel world by alienating herself from it. She retreats into silence and void, into an otherness that removes her from the very text she has labored to create. Seen in this light, madness becomes a metaphor for the subversion of the patriarchal order and a means by which women can break down traditional representations of femininity in literature. The characters in these novels are driven mad if they conform to society's expectations of them; on the other hand, they are perceived as mad if they do not live according to these expectations. They are pushed into a literal no-man's land, into a representation of femininity that is constructed through the floating signifier of a misplaced, fragmented, or fluid *I* that escapes clear definition. While narrating their own stories, or while their stories are being told by someone else, they slip between the lines of the narrative and elude our grasp. Women are often portrayed in literature as shadowy, elusive figures, but what is different in these novels written by women is that the authors do not attempt to conceal the mechanisms through which gendered identities are constructed along ideological lines. If women always fall into the category of Other, if they are always defined in terms of absence and lack, if they are silenced and cannot function as desiring subjects, it is because society has determined that these are the attributes of femininity, not because these qualities are inherent in all women.

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NOTES

[1] See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) for an extensive study of this theme in British women's literature.

[2] Debra Castillo does a superb reading of this novel in *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modem Mexican Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[3] Paula, the female character who has felt the most sympathetic toward Inés during the course of the novel, appears to identify with the young woman to such an extent that she claims the subject position for herself when speaking of Inés's fate. When she learns that Inés has been murdered, rather than acknowledge what has happened to her friend, she exclaims "'Me he vuelto loca ... y tuve una pesadilla horrible, horrible!'" ("'I've gone crazy. I had a terrible nightmare!'"; 156). In this way, Paula stands in for the other woman and claims Inés's story as her own.

[4] The past subjunctive is used in "if" clauses in Spanish to indicate a condition contrary to fact.

[5] At the end of the novel, Susana "becomes" her grandmother, Anastasia, and she forces her half-brother, Pedro, to play out the role of Beto, Anastasia's lover. In this way, Susana discovers her own desire: "te hace sentir increíblemente viva descubres en ti una extraña sensualidad oculta y apagada durante mucho tiempo" ("it makes you feel incredibly alive and you discover in yourself a strange sensuality that has been hidden and extinguished for a long time"; 135). However, the extreme fragmentation of her personality causes her to project even this action onto others, causing her to switch suddenly to a third-person verb although she is talking about herself and Pedro: "Bailan muy cerca el uno del otro, sintiendo sus cuerpos, sus alientos" ("They dance very close together, feeling their bodies, their breath"; 135). Appropriating the desire of someone other than herself (in this case, Anastasia and Beto) is the only way Susana can come near to self-fulfillment: "Deseas que no termine este momento, el más feliz de tu vida, el más real, quizá el único que de verdad ha existido")("You desire this moment never to end, the happiest moment of your life, the most real, perhaps the only one that has ever really existed"; 135). The constant shifting of subject pronouns makes it clear that Susana's identity is not rigidly fixed.

[6] Luce Irigaray has observed, "Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market.... So women have to remain an 'infrastructure' unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they never take part as 'subjects'" (*This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985: 84). Beatriz's insistence on representing herself as a commodity can be seen, in this light, as a direct challenge to the system Irigaray describes.

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