

**SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET.
READING SEXUALITY IN ALLENDE'S
*LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS***

Since its publication in 1981 much has been written on Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*.¹ The vast majority of critical works have focused on the construction of male and female characters and their implications for the ideology of the novel which has been overwhelmingly characterized as progressive. *La casa de los espíritus* has been defined by some critics as a "feminist" (Meyer) and "androgynous" text (Gould Levine) while others have resisted the feminist label in favor of a "feminocentric" or "gynocentric" writing which subverts patriarchal despotism and challenges social and sexual prejudices (Rojas).² One of the very few exceptions to this predominantly positive reception of the novel is Gabriela Mora who criticizes Allende for confirming old clichés about the ahistorical role of women. While Mora reads the novel's ending in which Alba talks about destiny and the inevitable circularity of Latin American history as a sign of political conservatism, Nelly Martínez sees it as a sign of radical "matricircularity" which brings attention to the infinite possibilities of change contained in the present which lead to rebirth, transformation and healing of the whole nation.³

However, there is an important aspect of the novel closely related to the themes mentioned, which has been completely overlooked by the critics, namely the representation of those sexualities which do not conform to the heterosexual norm privileged in the novel. While it can be said that the issues of gender, race and class are widely recognized in Latin American literary criticism as significant categories in the construction of textual meanings, the same cannot be said about sexuality which is commonly overridden by these other, more 'urgent' issues. As pointed out by Manzor-Coats, Latin American critics are also noteworthy for reading with a so-called 'straight mind' and for avoiding the issues of homosexuality even in the cases where it is difficult not to

¹ Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus*, Barcelona, Plaza & Janés, 1983.

² Doris Meyer, "Parenting the Text. Female Creativity and Dialogic Relationship in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*," *Hispania*, 73.2 (1990); pp. 360-365; Linda Gould Levine, "A Passage to Androgyny: Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*," in *In the Feminine Mode. Essays on Hispanic Women Writers*, ed. N. Valis and C. Maier. Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1990, pp. 164-173; Mario Rojas, "*La casa de los espíritus*, de Isabel Allende. Un caleidoscopio de espejos desordenados," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 51. 132-133 (1985), pp. 917-925.

³ Nelly Martínez, "The Politics of the Woman Artist in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*," in *Writing the Woman Artist. Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. S. Jones, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 292; Gabriela Mora, "Las novelas de Isabel Allende y el papel de la mujer como ciudadana," *Ideologies and Literature*, 2. 1 (1987): 53-61.

read the lesbian or gay (con)texts (Manzor-Coates xxx).⁴ This statement is also pertinent in the case of *La casa de los espíritus*, particularly in relation to the Count and Férula who have received very little critical attention and have been generally regarded as anomalies who do not fit comfortably within the dominant male and female groups.

I believe that the exclusion of these two sexually unproductive characters who cannot be positioned 'properly' within the ruling heterosexual economy of the novel goes hand in hand with the ultimately conservative political nature of the text, amply evident in the novel's New Age conclusion in which dire historical and political conflicts are resolved on personal rather than on a collective level and the torturers and their victims are in the end reconciled. The great patriarchal and conservative force in the novel, Esteban Trueba, is absolved of his sins and dies in peace. The torturer Esteban García, like so many other torturers in the extra literary reality of Latin America, walks free, while the victim Alba finds a blissful inner strength in her pregnancy and decides, against all odds, to break the circle of violence by having a child who is fathered either by her lover, the revolutionary Miguel, or by her torturer Esteban García. And they all live happily ever after.

While the political 'transgressors' are unpunished and possibly forgiven, the sexual ones experience a very different fate. Férula and the Count, two skeletons in the closet of the novel are banished from the Trueba household to reappear later only as corpses. Indeed, their presence in the novel creates exemplary moments of panic.⁵ Férula is expelled from the house by Esteban who labels her a dyke. Blanca escapes in panic from the Count, Jean de Satigny, when she learns of his 'deviant' sexuality. The authorial voice experiences its own moments of panic particularly in relation to the lesbian desire of Férula which is defused whenever it appears.

The Count is a character surrounded by ambiguity on many levels. A veil of mystery surrounds his age, origin, civil status and sexuality. He is supposedly a fabulously rich French aristocrat who brings the air of metropolitan culture to the periphery. But he is also a man who has no problems marrying Blanca, already pregnant with another man's child, in order to obtain a share of Esteban's fortune. With his French sophistication and his effeminate manner

⁴ The topic of sexuality and homosexuality has been gaining increasing popularity in the field of Hispanic studies. See for example some more recent compilations of essays in Pamela Bacarisse ed. *Carnal Knowledge. Essays on the Flesh, Sex and Sexuality in Hispanic Letters and Film*. Pittsburgh, Tres Ríos, 1994; and Emily Bergman and Paul Julian Smith eds. *Entiendes. Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995.

⁵ As it will become evident in this essay my use of the notions "homosexual panic" and "closet," while obviously indebted to Kosofsky Sedgwick, depart from her definitions and are used as convenient metaphors which best describe the expression and representation of 'other' sexualities in this novel. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990.

he occupies a pole diametrically opposed to Esteban who epitomises the crude *chingón* of Latin America. Esteban's excessive masculinity (he rapes young Indian girls, hits Clara, cuts off Pedro Tercero's fingers) is posited against the excessive mannerism of the Count. Yet, throughout the book the reader is at a loss as to how to interpret the obvious otherness of the Count in relation to other male characters in the novel. His uniqueness can be seen as a sign of his cultural otherness in which the sexual script of the French male differs markedly from that of the Latin American male, or as a sign of his sexual difference, i.e. homosexuality, which is never named as such in the text but only alluded to through the chain of signifiers which in Latin American cultural context are habitually associated with females or with men of dubious masculinity: "usaba zapatos de cabritilla...no sudaba como los demás mortales, y olía a colonia inglesa"(164); "usaba un pijama de seda negra y un batín de terciopelo pompeyano"(220); "pasaba una o dos horas dedicado a su arreglo personal...sabía cocinar algunas recetas francesas, muy aliñadas y magníficamente presentadas" (173). Clues regarding his sexuality are also provided by his association with other characters of equally unmanly behavior and appearance. Aguirrazábal "un fífiriche acicalado que hablaba con voz atiplada y recitaba a Rubén Darío" (190) and an Italian artist who designs the Count's wedding cake.

The fact that the French Count is constructed as a cluster of signifiers which denote a weak and effeminate man, the inverted image of the super virile Latin American Esteban, constitutes a peculiar reversal of the colonialist paradigm in which precisely the opposite was true. Europe, which during the colonial enterprise saw itself as the site of virility and superiority, is now, in the figure of the Count, rendered powerless, decadent and unmanly.⁶ The Count's effeminate manner and his passivity in front of Esteban's active will designates him the status of inferior (fe)male which allows Esteban to treat him without the respect he would normally grant to another man: "Sin ningún respeto, Trueba levantó al conde francés por las solapas de su impecable chaqueta escocesa y lo sacó de la confitería prácticamente en vilo" (190). Esteban now assumes the role of the colonial master when he waits for the Count, "con la fusta en una mano y el bastón en la otra" (190), to pack his bags and come to the city to marry Blanca, pregnant with the child of Pedro Tercero.

It is precisely their awareness of the Count's feeble masculinity which allows Esteban and Blanca to proceed with their own projects. The Trueba's family honor is saved by Blanca's marriage to the Count who in this commercial arrangement receives a rich dowry and a promise of inheritance. This also proves to be a perfect arrangement for Blanca who can stay emotionally and

⁶ On conflicting Indigenous and European masculinities see for example Rene Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini eds.. *Amerindian Images and the Legacy of Columbus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

sexually faithful to Pedro Tercero given that the Count himself admits that,

no tenía ninguna inclinación especial por el matrimonio, puesto que era un hombre enamorado solamente de las artes, las letras y las curiosidades científicas, y que, por lo tanto, no intentaba molestarla con requerimientos de marido, de manera que podrían vivir juntos pero no revueltos, en perfecta armonía y buena educación... Blanca suspiraba entre sueños que era estupendo estar casada con un intelectual. (220-1)

The forbidden word, homosexual, is not mentioned but it is ironically present in the word with which it rhymes, "intelectual," and also euphemistically in the concept of being in love with the arts and literature, which in the context of predominantly patriarchal and macho culture depicted in the novel signposts suspicious masculinity. Even though the text is rich with hints and allusions which point to his homosexuality, throughout the novel the Count remains firmly closeted. It is only when Blanca and the Count move out of the metropolitan space ruled by the heterosexist and patriarchal laws into the house in "la más olvidada provincia del Norte" (222) where his transgressive sexuality begins to emerge more clearly.

The house which the Count constructs in this remote province is characterized by "un refinamiento equívoco y decadente" (222) which reflects his own ambiguity and startles Blanca who is unaccustomed to such decorative excesses:

Jean colocó sospechosos jarrones de porcelana china que en lugar de flores contenían plumas teñidas de avestruz, cortinas de damasco con drapeados y borlas, almohadones con flecos y pompones, muebles de todos los estilos, arrimos dorados, biombos y unas increíbles lámparas de pie, sostenidas por estatuas de loza representando negros abisinios en tamaño natural, semidesnudos pero con babuchas y turbantes. La casa siempre estaba con las cortinas corridas, en una tenue penumbra que lograba detener la luz implacable del desierto... Contrató varios indios para su servicio... A todos puso vistosos uniformes de opereta...(222)

This extravagant and implausible interior in the midst of the desert recalls an Orientalist ambience, described by Said as "a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world... half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes, terrors, pleasures, desires."⁷ It is also evocative of other remote and exotic places which, like Northern Africa, have always had a particular appeal for Western aristocrats, intellectuals and artists whose homosexual desires were a source of persecution at home. Read in this light, the Count's orientalist house, his demeanor, decadent taste and opium smoking become signifiers suffused with homosexual connotations. The fact that the Count feels at home in these arid borderlands can be explained in the same way in which William Burroughs describes the attraction of Morocco for the European gays: "exemption. Exemption from interference, legal or other-

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 1991, p. 63.

wise. Your private life is your own, to act exactly as you please... It is a sanctuary of non-interference."⁸

While for the Count these borders of national territory represent a site of liberation and possibility to realize his wildest imaginings, for Blanca this is the space at the margins of civilization, an unknown and indecipherable world in which she feels lost: "La realidad le parecía desdibujada, como si aquel sol implacable que borraba los colores, también hubiera deformado las cosas que la rodeaban y hubiera convertido a los seres humanos en sombras sigilosas" (225). For Blanca, the Count's Orientalist palace becomes a Gothic house of horrors, exacerbated by the presence of "los indios inmutables que la servían desganadamente y parecían burlarse a sus espaldas. A su alrededor circulaban como espíritus... casi siempre desocupados y aburridos" (222). The Count's and Blanca's view of the Indians and native Latin America are comparable to the narratives of the New World which in their representations also oscillate between the marvelous and the monstrous.⁹ While for the European Count the Latin America he found in the remote province belongs to the sphere of the marvelous, particularly in relation to his desire which converts the New World into an unbridled libidinal zone, for his Latin American upper class wife this is the space of the abject and the monstrous. For the Count, the Indians are an exotic other, a screen onto which he, literally, projects his own desires. Dressed like characters from an opereta or undressed in the erotic photographs, they still remain an enigma completely impervious to the western eye.

It is this complete inscrutability of the Indians which most unsettles Blanca. She sees them in stereotypical terms similar to those of the early explorers, as "inmutables" (222), "siempre desocupados" (222) and not fully human because they can not even talk "como seres humanos" (222). The Indians are also "silenciosos, toscos e impenetrables... todos se parecían" (227). It is the language of the conquerors, Spanish, which they either do not speak or refuse to speak, which in Blanca's view makes and unmakes their humanity. Blanca reads their silence and the native language which she occasionally hears as the site of some potentially monstrous discourse directed against her. Her paranoia and anxiety are also heightened by the house's location at the national border ignored by the Indians who slip across without "documentos que los acreditaran como seres humanos" (227).

The sinister atmosphere in the house is made worse by the presence of precolombian mummies, illegally shipped to Europe by the Count. Together with the Indians they belong to the domain of the abject other to whom Blanca allocates the same ontological status:

⁸ Joseph Boone, "Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism," *PMLA*, 110. 1 (1994), p. 99.

⁹ For the interpretation of these narratives see, Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Esos seres encogidos, envueltos en trapos que se deshacían en hilachas polvorientas, con sus cabezas decarnadas y amarillas, sus manitas arrugadas, sus párpados cosidos, sus pelos ralos en la nuca, sus eternas y terribles sonrisas sin labios, su olor rancio y ese aire triste y pobretón de los cadáveres antiguos, le revolvían el alma... Blanca soñaba con ellas (mummies), tenía alucinaciones, creía verlas andar por los corredores en la punta de los pies, pequeñas como gnomos solapados y furtivos. (228)

Blanca's horror culminates when she breaks into an area forbidden to her, the Count's 'dark room' in which he is supposedly indulging in his "manía por la fotografía" (223). This "dark room" ("el laboratorio") becomes a metaphorical closet which contains "a private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view" (Sedwick Kosofsky 65). This 'private trouble' is the Count's homosexuality to which the excesses of signification throughout the novel have been pointing to.

When Blanca, eager to investigate the secret behind the "gemidos...gritos sofocados y risas" (229) coming from the dark room, which she originally attributed to the mummies, opens the door to the Count's secret den, she finds herself in a fairy tale land. She steps into "una espaciosa habitación con los muros pintados de negro y gruesas cortinas del mismo color en las ventanas" whose floor is covered with "gruesas alfombras oscuras" and open trunks that hold "ropajes emplumados de todas las épocas" (230). But what really shocks her are the photographs of "acongojantes escenas eróticas... desordenadas y tormentosas eran una verdad mil veces más desconcertante que las momias escandalosas que había esperado encontrar" (231). The photographs reveal "la oculta naturaleza de su marido" (231) which she does not define but about which she feels disgusted. The glimpses of these photographs that we get through Blanca's eyes disclose a homoerotic desire in her husband in a peculiar blend of fin-de-siecle Western decadence and the colonial fantasy of the oversexed Native:

Reconoció los rostros de los sirvientes de la casa. Allí estaba toda la corte de los incas, desnuda como Dios la puso en el mundo, o mal cubierta por los teatrales ropajes. Vio el insondable abismo entre los muslos de la cocinera, a la llama embalsamada cabalgando sobre la mucama coja y al indio impertérrito que le servía la mesa, en cueros como un recién nacido, lampiño y paticorto, con su inmovible rostro de piedra y su desproporcionado pene en erección. (231)¹⁰

¹⁰ An example of conflation of racial and sexual anxieties is provided in Vespucci who in the following segment reveals more about his own fantasy of female insatiability and fear of castration than about the native practices:

"Their women, being very lustful, make their husbands' members swell to such thickness that they look ugly and misshapen; this they accomplish with a certain device... and by bites from certain poisonous animals. Because of this, many men lose their members, which rot through neglect, and they are left eunuchs." Luciano Formisano ed., *Letters from a New World. Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America*, New York, Marsilio, 1992, p. 49.

Blanca, accustomed to a straight heterosexual experience with Pedro Tercero, confronted with these images of (homo)erotic desire remains "estupefacta" (230). Such expressions as "desconcertada," "suspendida en su propia incertidumbre," "insondable abismo" (230) and "estupefacta" (231), used to describe Blanca's speechlessness when faced with the kind of sexual desire she is incapable of understanding, reveal the existence of a particular epistemological crisis. The presence of the abject Indian and homosexual other draws Blanca "towards the place where meaning collapses" and with it the language which tries to comprehend it.¹¹ The unspeakable aspect of her husband's sexuality is also evident in the following phrase in which Blanca simultaneously recognizes and refuses to name the Count's sexuality: "Entendió lo que Jean de Satigny había querido decir la noche de bodas, cuando le explicó que no se sentía inclinado por la vida matrimonial" (231). The same resistance to name the obvious is evident with the Count himself who, as we have seen in earlier examples, is either silent about his sexuality or tends to resort to the use of euphemisms which discreetly allude to his homosexuality.

It is precisely on the issues of sexuality and race that Allende's and most of her critics' claims *La casa de los espíritus* is a progressive novel fail. Located topographically in the center of the novel, the chapter which deals with the Count and the revelations made about his 'dark' room constitute, metaphorically speaking, a black hole of the novel into which the supposedly 'progressive' ideology of the text disappears. Blanca, together with all the other principal female characters in the text, actually inhabits a world not dissimilar to Esteban's, in spite of the authorial voice's intention to convince the reader that the female space portrayed in the novel is more open, permissive, magical, and therefore diametrically opposed to the male one dominated by logic, reason, order, heterosexuality and Christian morality. However, Blanca's encounter with the sexual and racial other, together with the scene in which she flees from the house of horrors, demonstrate that this is not true. Immediately after the discovery of the abominable photographs, Blanca feels that she is a "prisionera en la antesala del infierno" (231), a place characterized by tormented sexualities and the sinister power of the Indians. When the child moves inside Blanca "se estremeció, como si hubiera sonado una campana de alerta" (231). The pregnant female, a site of fecundity, nature and the heterosexual principles privileged in the novel, feels threatened by the Count's 'deviant' sexuality and the "maléfico reino de los incas" (232), the image in which Blanca fuses together her racial and sexual anxieties. She flees from this hell of ambiguity and uncertainty to the patriarchal, ordered and heterospirited house of her father.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 2.

From this moment the Count is banished from the narrative, a veil of mystery covering his whereabouts. Clara, supposedly the most eccentric and free-spirited female character, is herself implicated in the Count's disappearance through the 'disciplinary' role she plays in silencing the 'true' nature of his sexuality, a role more suited to Esteban. Guided by their ultimately bourgeois and Christian morality, Clara and Blanca rewrite the history of the Count, erasing from it his 'problematic' sexual identity. The story which they fashion for Alba contains a double lie which is meant to cover the girl's illegitimacy and also the nightmarish possibility of her legal father being a homosexual:

Clara, que había pasado nueve años muda, conocía las ventajas del silencio, de modo que no hizo preguntas a su hija y colaboró en la tarea de borrar a Jean de Satigny de los recuerdos. A Alba le dijeron que su padre había sido un noble caballero, inteligente y distinguido, que tuvo la desgracia de morir de fiebre en el desierto del Norte. (235)

The Count returns much later in the text, duly punished for his sexual 'transgression', as "un cuerpo hinchado, viejo y de color azulado... un tipo común y corriente, con aspecto de empleado de correos... que no tiene nada interesante que contar" (236). The last image of the Count, stripped by death of rich and allusive signifiers and turned into a boring common man represents the very antithesis of the flamboyant and polymorphous character of earlier descriptions. His definitive marginalization and excommunication from the patriarchal Trueba family is confirmed by his posthumous fate—he was buried in the main cemetery in a municipal grave because Esteban refused to make room for him in the family mausoleum (277).

The other character who undergoes a fate similar to the Count's is Esteban's sister, Férula. Her entry into the novel, similar to that of the Count, comes loaded with ambiguities and insinuations which point to the existence of a secret surrounding her identity that will eventually give itself away. Behind Férula's face of a Roman madonna lurks "la fealdad de la resignación" which could be glimpsed through her "ojos llenos de sombras" (45), a description which signals the presence of hidden, unnamable forces which in the beginning of the novel the reader tends to attribute to her excessive religious devotion.

While the Count's excesses are linked to his camp mannerism, Férula's are related to her religious passion which originates in her 'dark', almost medieval notion of faith marked by martyrdom, pain and religious ecstasy which at any moment threatens to explode in sexual frenzy. Férula finds a peculiar pleasure every Friday when she emerges from her mother's house marked by stench and decay to sink only more deeply into the abject world of the slums. Unlike Esteban and Blanca, who flee in panic from the abject other (Esteban from pregnant Pancha, and the poor and diseased peasants in Tres Marías; Blanca from the abject sexual and Indian other), Férula submerges herself passionately into the filth of the Misericordia District where she goes,

todos los viernes... a rezar el rosario a los indigentes, a los ateos, a las prostitutas y a los huérfanos, que le tiraban basura, le vaciaban bacinillas y la escupían, mientras ella, de rodillas en el callejón del conventillo, gritaba padrenuestros y avemarías en incansable letanía, chorreada de porquería de indigente, de escupo de ateo, de desperdicio de prostituta y basura de huérfano, llorando ay de humillación, clamando perdón para los que no saben lo que hacen... (83)

The marginal people themselves are superfluous to Férula who stubbornly pursues her own masochistic pleasure in this scene which also reveals her superiority (she is like Christ) and also her social blindness, conditioned by Christian passivity in the face of suffering. The poor, who are not interested in easing the conscience of the rich, in a peculiar reversal of roles turn Férula herself into the figure of the abject.

In the same scene, the link between religious and sexual ecstasy becomes more explicit, and Férula's religious frenzy is finally understood as a sublimation of her frustrated sexual desire: "un calor de verano le infundía pecado entre los muslos, aparta de mi este cáliz, Señor, que el vientre le estallaba en las llamas de infierno, ay, de santidad, de miedo, padrenuestro, no me dejes caer en la tentación, Jesús" (83). Unlike the mystical nuns described by Franco, who feel the burning in their heart—a typical site of joy and suffering—Férula locates it in the forbidden zone between her legs.¹²

While Férula's masochistic and self-hating pleasures are undeniable, it is also true that she is condemned to sacrifice herself for her mother because the social and cultural norm binds her to the role of dutiful daughter. Férula is described as a tormented soul:

Sentía gusto en la humillación y en las labores abyectas, creía que iba a obtener el cielo por el medio terrible de sufrir iniquidades, por esto se complacía limpiando las pústulas de las piernas enfermas de su madre, lavándola, hundiéndose en sus olores y en sus miserias, escrutando su orinal. Y tanto como se odiaba a sí misma por esos tortuosos e inconfesables placeres, odiaba a su madre por servirle de instrumento. (45)

On the other hand, the social norm allows Esteban to leave the oppressive atmosphere of his family home. Before him lies a destiny that is bright, free, and full of promise: "podría casarse, tener hijos, conocer el amor" (47), while Férula was condemned to be a spinster, "aburrida, cansada, triste" (46). This injustice creates tension between the brother and the sister and is acknowledged by both:

"Me habría gustado nacer hombre, para poder irme también", dijo ella llena de odio.

"Y a mí no me habría gustado nacer mujer", dijo él. (47)

¹² Jean Franco, *Plotting Women. Gender and Representation in Mexico*, London, Verso, 1989, p. 17.

Férula's powerlessness in relation to Esteban, on whom she and her mother depend financially, and her resentment of his male privilege find their expression in emotional blackmail, the single form of revenge available to a powerless female: "lo envolvió en la red invisible de la culpabilidad y de las deudas de gratitud impagas" (45).

However, Férula's pleasurable pain in which the religious merges with the sexual seems to signal the presence of otherness that goes beyond being the dutiful daughter, an attitude better explained in her relationship with Clara. Until she meets Clara, Férula remains firmly closeted both sexually and emotionally. The meeting between the two takes place in the all female space of the Hotel Francés where they are "rodeadas de pastelillos con crema y porcelana Bavaria, mientras al fondo del salón una orquesta de señoritas interpretaba un melancólico cuarteto de cuerdas" (89). Férula's initial disdain of her sister-in-law is completely dispelled by Clara's psychic understanding and tenderness. When Clara plants a kiss on Férula's cheek and says "No te preocupes. Vas a vivir con nosotros y las dos seremos como hermanas" (89), Férula loses her severe mask and breaks out of her first, emotional closet. Clara's remark about being just like sisters acquires an ironical resonance further in the text when it becomes evident that Férula's love for Clara surpasses sisterly love.

Gradually Férula's affection becomes "una pasión por cuidarla, una dedicación para servirla y una tolerancia ilimitada para resistir sus distracciones y excentricidades" (91). Férula takes an enormous pleasure in pampering Clara's body. She bathes her, dresses her and brushes her hair with a devotion to which the narrator attributes an innocent, motherly quality by comparing it to what Nana used to do (91). However, the text quickly offers indications that signal the presence of a lesbian desire which the narrator refuses to define as such.¹³ We are told that Férula "no quería separarse de Clara, había llegado a adorar hasta el aire que ella exhalaba" (101), she slept in the same bed with her when Esteban was not around, with Clara "ella podía manifestar, aunque fuera solapadamente, los más secretos y delicados anhelos de su alma" (102). They develop a relationship which is marked by the peculiarly female notion of the erotic defined by Audrey Lorde as a "resource within each of us which lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feelings," or by Adriene Rich as "that which is

¹³ My reading of Férula focuses only on her sexuality and deliberately overlooks other facets of this ambiguous character. However, I believe that Férula's mystery and tragedy are best explained by her frustrated lesbian desire and her unrequited love for Clara rather than, in the conventional reading, by the lack of fulfilment as wife and mother. In this essay the term lesbian is used in Faderman's sense as a concept which "describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent." Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men. Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present*, New York, Morrow, 1981, pp. 17-8.

unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself."¹⁴

Nevertheless, it is the narrator, Alba, whose value system is defined by the heterosexual norm who displays anxiety in relation to Férula's lesbian desire. Even though Alba as a narrator 'prohibits' the proper naming of Férula's love for Clara the name of this love gradually emerges and "insistently speaks through the very displacement that the prohibition produces."¹⁵ The love whose name the narrator doesn't dare to speak is expressed through a chain of euphemistic signifiers whose intention is to disguise the unsettling emergence of the word lesbian and the disturbing fact that the secret yearnings of Férula's soul are also, most importantly, the secret yearnings of her body. Expressions such as "terribles y magníficas pasiones, que la ocupaban por completo", "amor desmesurado", "(Clara) fue la depositaria de sus más sutiles emociones" and "era uno de estos seres nacidos para la grandeza de un solo amor" (102) which describe Férula's love for Clara are promptly defused by the narrator who converts her same sex desire into a safe, heterosexual one. Even if Férula herself never mentions a male as an object of her desire the narrator 'normalizes' her passion for Clara by interpreting it as a displaced desire of wife and mother: "esa mujer grande, opulenta, de sangre ardiente, hecha para la maternidad, para la abundancia, la acción y el ardor" (102). This same paragraph which describes Férula's adoration of Clara is, in addition, 'neutralized' by the description of the incident of the mouse in Férula's corset and the mayor of the town walking in on Férula sitting on the toilet (101). The ultimate effect of this carnevalesque juxtaposition is a mockery of Férula's forbidden love for Clara which together with the heterosexual explanation of Férula's sexual desire reveals what, modifying Sedgwick Kosofsky's terminology, can be called the lesbian panic of the narrator, Alba.¹⁶

The true lesbian nature of Férula's desire emerges more clearly in the

¹⁴ Audrey Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic. The Erotic as a Power," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale and Halperin, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 339; Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Ablove, Barale and Halperin, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 240.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 162.

¹⁶ In her essay "'And I Wondered if She Might Kiss Me': Lesbian Panic as Narrative Strategy in British Women's Fictions," Patricia Juliana Smith takes Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of homosexual panic where the threatened enactment of male homosexuality sets the stage for homosexual panic, i.e., the irrational and often violent response of one man to the real or imagined sexual attentions of another," and modifies it into "lesbian panic" which she defines as the "disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or, conceivably, an author—is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire." Patricia Juliana Smith, "'And I Wondered if She Might Kiss Me.' Lesbian Panic as Narrative Strategy in British Women's Fictions," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41. 3-4 (1995), p. 569.

confessional when, helped by the priest who, typically, encourages the very transgressions he should be controlling, Férula turns into a gifted storyteller who, at first narrates, with the wealth of detail, sexual encounters between Esteban and Clara, and then openly admits to her desire to occupy her brother's place in Clara's bed: "sentía la tentación de meterme en su cama para sentir la tibieza de su piel y su aliento" (93). In Esteban's absence, she actually usurps the male prerogative by replacing her brother in his wife's bed and enjoys the harmony between the two of them in an all female environment. Férula comes to love Clara "con una pasión celosa que se parecía más a la de un marido exigente que a la de una cuñada" (116) but is herself incapable of properly naming this passion: "Cada noche, en el momento en que los esposos se retiraban a sus habitaciones, se sentía invadida por un odio desconocido, que no podía explicar y que llenaba su alma de funestos sentimientos" (92).

Férula's behavior is tolerated by Esteban as long as it stays within the patterns of accepted female conduct. She is herself fully aware of Esteban's hegemonic position in the house and when he is around she retreats into the 'closet': "con él en la casa, ella debía ponerse a la sombra y ser más prudente en la forma de dirigirse a los sirvientes, tanto como en las atenciones que prodigaba a Clara" (92). However, as Férula's love deepens she loses her prudence and openly shows her adoration of Clara: "perdió la prudencia y empezó a dejar translucir su adoración en muchos detalles que no pasaban inadvertidos por Esteban" (116). She transgressively encroaches onto Esteban's territory and, in a script normally played out between men, actively competes with him for the love of his wife: "Los dos hermanos llegaron a ser rivales declarados, se medían con miradas de odio, inventaban argucias para descalificarse mutuamente a los ojos de Clara, se espiaban, se celaban" (120).

Given that Férula, as spinster and possibly lesbian, is not placed 'properly' within the heterosexual economy of the novel which privileges marriage and procreation, Esteban considers her a site of potentially sinister and monstrous sexual power that he will be unable to control. Slowly there emerges the picture of Férula as a stereotypical devious lesbian who will stop at nothing to seduce the unsuspecting innocent heterosexual. Esteban is convinced that Férula "había sembrado en su mujer un germen maléfico que le impedía amarla y que, en cambio, se robaba con caricias prohibidas lo que le pertenecía como marido. Se ponía lívido cuando sorprendía a Férula bañando a Clara..." (119). The climactic moment of the novel finally occurs when Esteban returns home on a stormy night to find Férula innocently, but compromisingly, sharing Clara's bed. Férula's transgression of the sacred male space provokes a violent reaction from Esteban and brings about an ancient punishment—the expulsion of the 'deviant' from 'normal' society:

A solas con Férula, Esteban descargó su furia de marido insatisfecho y gritó a su hermana lo que nunca debió decirle, desde marimacho hasta meretriz, acusándola de pervertir a su mujer, de desviarla con caricias de solterona, de volverla lunática, distraída, muda y espiritista con artes de lesbiana ...que ya estaba harto de tanta maldad... (121).

The unspeakable aspect of Férula's sexuality is finally named by her brother in a true moment of (homo)sexual panic in a shaming interpellation "marimacho" which fuses together the notions of female (María) and male (macho), thus confirming the ambiguous (non)position of lesbian in the sexual hierarchy. Not only does Esteban name Férula but he invokes homophobic stereotypes that until now have only been suggested in the narrative. His words evoke an old concept of lesbian sexuality which supposedly involves esoteric mysteries, (Férula's arsenal of lesbian arts) and illustrate a heterosexual anxiety in front of lesbian sexuality based, among other things, on not knowing precisely what two women do when they are together. The sexual and gender transgression committed by Férula is so threatening to male hegemony that apart from the eviction from the patriarchal home it also incurs a threat of death should she return. For her part, Férula responds to Esteban's more concrete power in a 'magically feminine' way by cursing her brother: "¡Te maldigo Esteban!... ¡Siempre estarás solo, se te encogerá el alma y el cuerpo y te morirás como un perro! (121). While this curse does work on Esteban's body, its second part paradoxically turns against the curser. It is Férula herself who dies alone, like a dog in the slums. Her brother, on the other hand dies peacefully, redeemed of his sins. Férula, a devious dyke must be sacrificed because she stands between Clara and the economic and social security provided by her marriage. In this way, Férula comes to share the fate of so many other lesbian or potentially lesbian characters who, as pointed out by Patricia Smith in the case of British female fiction, must be destroyed for the sake of men and women. Lesbian departure from masculine and feminine norms of social behavior represents a threat to traditional gender constructs and requires their violent removal from the plot.

Férula, like the Count, will reappear in the novel under the sign of the abject, as a corpse in a small and dirty house in the slums. While the flamboyant and 'overdressed' Count resurfaces as a naked corpse stripped of rich signifiers, quite the opposite happens with Férula who reappears dressed as a drag queen. She lies on her deathbed "engalanada como reina austríaca, vestía un traje de terciopelo apolillado, enaguas de tafetán amarillo y sobre su cabeza, firmemente encasquetada, brillaba una increíble peluca rizada de cantante de ópera" (137), the complete antithesis of the severe and conservative Férula before her banishment. The surplus of signifiers which in death define Férula and her surroundings points to the existence of a more complex character, stifled and suppressed in the patriarchal homes of her mother and Esteban.

Esteban's and Clara's entrance into Férula's house mirrors Blanca's entrance into the Count's 'dark' room. Both spaces are marked by theatricality, performance and disguise and on a symbolic level they both represent a closet which contains a disturbing secret about particular character:

El resto de la vivienda de Férula pareció a Clara congruente con la pesadilla que había comenzado cuando su cuñada apareció en el comedor de la gran casa de la esquina.... De unos clavos en los muros colgaban trajes anticuados, boas de plumas, escuálidos pedazos de piel, collares de piedras falsas... vestidos que fueron ostentosos y cuyo brillo ya no existía, inexplicables chaquetas de almirantes y casullas de obispos, todo revuelto en una hermandad grotesca... Por el suelo había un trastorno de zapatos de raso... un descomedimiento de artículos imposibles sembrados por todos lados. (136)

Again, as in the case of the Count the presence of concepts such as "pesadilla," "falso," "inexplicable," "grotesco," "trastorno," "imposible" signify the collapse of meaning and the impossibility of fixing the other in a stable identity demanded by the logocentric and heterosexist norm of the novel.

In a peculiar reversal of roles, it is now Clara who pampers dead Férula with the same "infinito servicio" (137) Férula used to lavish on her. With Férula definitely disarmed it is now safe for Clara to perform the forbidden. She caresses and kisses Férula, returning her in death the kind of affection Férula was longing for in life. When Clara says: "me acuerdo siempre, Férula, porque la verdad es que desde que te fuiste de mi lado nunca más nadie me ha dado tanto amor" (137), she finally acknowledges that she was always aware of the fact that Férula's love has surpassed the innocent love of a sister-in-law, but she makes no claim of loving Férula back. Clara does not speak to the corpse about the very 'unspeakability' of her love named by Esteban. Until the end the narrator refuses to implicate Clara in the same sex desire maintaining her in the safe zone of romantic friendship, "noble, virtuous, asexual," typical of the pre-twentieth century concept of relationships between women in which romantic love and sexual impulse were considered unrelated.¹⁷ Even if the depth of Clara's affection for Férula can be glimpsed from the fact that Esteban felt that his wife had ceased belonging to him ever since he threw Férula out of his house, Férula's love for Clara remains unrequited, a fact confirmed in Clara's notebooks where she writes that Férula "la amaba mucho más de lo que ella merecía o podía retribuir" (102). Despite the fact that the text gives evidence of homoerotic tension between Clara and Férula, the word lesbian is nowhere in sight and it only appears once, on the lips of Esteban whose male hegemony is threatened by his sister.

However, from Férula's position this was a lesbian love even though her conservative, catholic background would never allow her to name the unthink-

¹⁷ Faderman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

able. Indeed, she would be incapable of recognizing her love as lesbian, a "concept incomprehensible in the phallic regime of an asserted sexual difference between men and women which is predicated on the contrary, on indifference for the 'other' sex, woman's."¹⁸ The same refusal to read Férula as a lesbian character is undoubtedly present among readers and critics whose ability to recognize the lesbian in Férula is precluded by their implicated position within the ideological apparatus designated by Adrienne Rich as the system of compulsory heterosexuality, which assumes that women are innately sexually oriented only toward men and that the female sexual conduct can be defined only vis-à-vis male sexuality.

As I have proposed throughout this essay, the fate of the Count and Férula, who at the end are the only unhoused characters in the novel, throws into crisis the text's implicit claims to anticonservative and feminist politics. The very presence of lesbian and homosexual characters creates conflictual tensions necessary to advance the narrative but it also requires their final disempowerment and banishment from the plot in order to allow the narrative ideology of compulsory heterosexuality to reestablish its rule.

While there is no doubt that the principal female characters and the author herself are battling against the machismo and conservatism embodied by Esteban, ultimately they fail to question their own complicity with the patriarchal system. Given the exclusive preference for heterosexuality and procreative sex, the novel remains confined within the bourgeois and Catholic values which initially it sets to critique. In this sense, *La casa de los espíritus* remains faithful to the ideological exigencies of melodrama and its obligatory happy ending which confirms the victory of traditional values (family, heterosexuality and social order) threatened, in this case, by the evil forces of the sexual other.

While it can be argued that *La casa de los espíritus* indeed engages with a number of feminist issues it is necessary to acknowledge that it treats its main theme, sexuality, in a form acceptable to a general audience which may display the same attitude towards the 'deviant' other as do the characters in the novel, i.e. they both flee in panic condemning these characters to the silence of the closet. Homosexual and lesbian sexuality are inevitably repressed into the negative realm of "unthinkability" evident in the refusal of the narrative voice to properly name these sexualities. Within the heterocentric universe of the novel, homosexuality and lesbianism can have no place. Férula and the Count are unthinkable subjects who fall outside of the conceptual boundaries of the straight mind.

The novel's more progressive politics are thus located exclusively within

¹⁸ De Lauretis, Teresa, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Abelove, Barale and Halperin, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 142.

the sphere of the immediate historical reality of the Chilean dictatorship of the 1970s but they do not extend into the field of sexual politics. Rather than being a feminist novel which endows its female characters with the agency of change, *La casa de los espíritus* is a feminine text whose authorial voice as well as the voices of its characters remain trapped within the confines of traditional values and heterosexual ideology.

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1. See also the discussion of the military's role in the process of modernization in the book by the same author, *The Military and the State in Latin America* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
2. For a discussion of the social organization of state intervention see Carlos Faletto, "YOUTH, POLICE AND MODERNITY" in Juan E. Corradini, Patricia Marín Fajardo and Manuel Antonio Lombardo (eds.), *Fire at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
3. See The International League for Human Rights, Uruguay's Human Rights Record: Overview, Analysis and Synthesized Information on the Government of Uruguay's 1982 Report to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, December 1982.