

## GABRIELA MISTRAL'S PROSE: THE POETIC MAPPING OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND FEMININE SUBJECTIVITIES

In recent decades there has been a renewal of interest in the essay, that hybrid literary genre which evasively defies definition, embracing as it does countless topics, approaches and modes of expression, including travel writing, confessions and memoir. This resurgence of interest and fascination with the personal or familiar essay, conversational and collegial in tone, as opposed to the outmoded, positivistic essay with its basis in argumentative, expository writing, has been associated with those cultural theorists and critics, particularly feminists, who openly question and assail the prevailing canonical modes and styles from which they have been excluded, those which have denied them language or inhibited the expression or representation of their selves. Among the principal objectives of the critical rereading of Latin American female authored essays, such as the prose texts written by Gabriela Mistral, is the desire to rewrite the authorial canon and rescue these authors from their shared fate of absence, indifference and/or oblivion. Of equal importance is the need to understand Latin American women's prose writing as the rearticulation of the constructs of engendered identity and their desire to creatively write a utopian space in which to affirm the right to presence, as well as the right to representation of the other and the self.

Latin American writers, from the colonial days to the present, in the questioning of realities and the search for identities, have often courted and engaged the essay as a form that lends itself to the creation of uniquely personal visions and uncontestable worlds, given that experience is the authorizing force that anchors the essay, and that the construction of such visions is largely subjective. The Latin American essay evolved from the chronicle of Indies, those colonial texts of fact and fiction in which historical documentation was often combined with personal testimony—"lo visto y vivido"—, and even the fantastic. In a seemingly relentless, endless search for identity, essay has been employed throughout Latin America in an attempt—the very term *essayeur* in French, *ensayar* in Spanish, signifies to endeavor, to experiment, to rehearse—to enunciate cultural identities, individual, national and continental. Since the beginnings of European colonization, Latin Americans have sought to define themselves and their cultural identity, from el Inca Garcilaso's *Comentarios reales* (1609, Lisboa), also published posthumously in his *Historia general del Peru* (Córdoba, 1617), which constitutes an epic revision of the history of the conquest of Peru, a correction of the "official stories" narrated by Spanish

chroniclers by incorporating the mythopoetic vision of the Incan culture and restoring the Indian's place at the crux of cultural production and identity; and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz' autobiographical *Respuesta a sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1691), a learned treatise in which she defends for women and all individuals the right to knowledge and literary activity; to the nineteenth and early twentieth century political writings of leaders and intellectuals such as Sarmiento and Bolívar, Bello and Martí, Rodó, Mariátegui and Vasconcelos, whose texts were definitive in instilling in the reader a national consciousness of shared identities, grounded for many in the concept of cultural hybridity; to the contemporary Latin American essay by writers such as Borges and Cortázar, for whom the non-fiction form serves as a means of negating the coordinates of space and time and all human constructs on the map of reality and postulating the existence of an other or multiple realities. For some contemporary Latin American writers, the essay has signified the means by which one may undertake the mythic reconstruction of history, as in the Colombian Germán Arcineiga's *América mágica* (1961) and *El continente de siete colores* (1965), and in Octavio Paz' works—*Laberinto de la soledad* (1950); *El arco y la lira* (1956)—, in which the poet has replaced historians and philosophers in the revitalization of myths from antiquity, thereby enabling the individual to reconstruct his past and recuperate his personal and cultural identity. For many Latin American women authors of the recent decades—the Mexicans Rosario Castellanos and Elena Poniatowska, Puerto Rican Rosario Ferré and the Argentine Luisa Valenzuela, the essay has lent itself to the charting of new courses for representations of female subjectivities, to female identities other than those prescribed by cultural mandates, heretofore largely invisible or silenced within the realm of objective discourse associated with males.

Ever since the singular, solitary voice of Sor Juana first emerged from the shadows of the labyrinthine patriarchal society that was seventeenth century Mexico, defending in the *Respuesta* her right and that of other women to knowledge, self-expression and all forms of intellectual pursuit, there has been a continuum of female authorship in Latin America, often engendered in the struggle to redefine one's roles in relationship to society, to others and to the self. Among the first writers of this feminine tradition to emerge on the cultural horizon of twentieth century Latin America is the Chilean Nobel Prize laureate, Gabriela Mistral, known to most individuals as a poet par excellence more than as a writer of prose. Like her Argentine contemporary, Victoria Ocampo, who ranks among the Latin American literary elite as founding editor of one of the region's most important journals, *Sur*, Mistral is one of those few female essayists to be anthologized with the canonical Latin American male writers of non-fiction. Like the aristocratic and cosmopolitan Ocampo, Mistral also frequents the essay, that amorphous, protean testimonial form, with its focus on the ontological self as it journeys, ruminates and remembers. For these female essay writers, the self is progressively discovered, disclosed and devel-

oped *in* and *as* discourse in the essay, coming into being through speculative, ruminative expressions on the non-self, or the other.

Whereas for male authors, the fundamental masculine view of the self is of a separate, unique individual in relation to the world and others, the basic feminine view of women writers, most particularly autobiographers, is founded upon the notions of identification, interdependence and community. The female subjectivities that are mapped in many of the prose texts of Gabriela, as a female chronicler of human geographies and chronologies, are not defined in isolation, but rather, in relation to others, through an interconnectedness with the world.

The *recados*, a term which can connote varied meanings, from a simple "message" or "greeting", to "complimentary regards" or "gift", to "outfit, "tool or implement", "daily supply of provisions" and even "abundance", were journalistic pieces, impressionistic articles, sketches, portraits, that Mistral published in several Latin American newspapers: *El Mercurio*, Chile; *El Repertorio Americano*, Costa Rica; *El Tiempo*, Colombia; *El Universal*, Mexico; *El Universal*, Caracas; *Sur*, Buenos Aires; *La Revista Bimestre Cubana*, to name a few. Although several have been composed in verse, the vast majority of the *recados* are prose texts that constitute a new genre in Gabriela's literary development as an author. Lamenting the lack of opportunity to maintain faithful correspondence with friends and acquaintances due to the increased demands on her time, particularly with regard to travel and her consular duties, Mistral invokes the *recado* as a forum from which to continue to educate the world on the wonders and woes of her beloved American continent, as she had been doing hitherto throughout her informative journalistic pieces, while simultaneously delving into expansions and expressions of the self. Through an opening up of epistolary expression from the merely personal, subjective rendering of realities recollected by the author to the more extensive commentary of geopolitical topographies and mapping of intersubjective and cultural identities, Mistral successfully engages in interpretive discursive practices often inaccessible to women during the first half of this century. The engagement of the personal, experiential form of the *recados* allows Gabriela to poetically move beyond the journalistic cataloguing of epic events and achievements, characteristic of male autobiographical authorship, and embark upon the discovery and exploration of a discursive space in which to *ensayar* or rehearse the many versions of the other, and the self, in the examination and analysis of historical processes and social practices that condition and shape personal and cultural identities.

Accompanying the first of her *Recados quincenalesis* is a note in which Gabriela defines the *recados* as a kind of a generic letter destined for an extensive, more inclusive readership, with commentaries on newsworthy events and noteworthy individuals, from the epic to the pedestrian:

Pido, pues que se me consienta esta especie de "carta para muchos" aunque no sea para todos, según las exigencias priodísticas. ... Pido que se me acepte esta posta barroca, donde van comentarios de sucesos grandes y chicos, de algunas lecturas que se quiere comentar, de eso que llamamos por allá "ecos escolares", de tarde en tarde encargos durotiernos para mis gentes: duros por ímpetu de hacerse oír, y tiernos por el amor de ellas.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout her literary career, Gabriela invokes the model of José Martí, whom she strives to emulate both in terms of composition and ideology. In his formidable, authoritative study of Mistral's prose production, *Pensamiento y forma en la prosa de Gabriela Mistral*, Luis de Arrigoitia insists upon the influence of Martí upon Mistral in the formation of an instructional, educational journalism, the expression of an authentic Americanist voice on a multitude of topics, fueled and conditioned largely by concerns both moral and aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> It is through these writings in prose that she often articulases her most poetic visions of reality and of herself, as she authenticates herself in the prose on the page, essaying herself into being, a point made by Emerson and echoed by Lydia Fakundiny,<sup>3</sup> in the forging and fashioning of herself in and through the written word in the world of prose, in the observation of others, and of the self as reflected in the other.

Throughout her life Gabriela left an indelible imprint of her personality on all with whom she came into contact as she charted new directions for Latin American women in the first several decades of this century, journeying from the rural schoolchildren of her native River Elqui Valley, for whom she would improvise her verses with facility, to foreign dignitaries and heads of state. It is an amazing odyssey, indeed, her voyage from the desk of a self-taught school mistress, having been dismissed from school as unworthy of formal instruction, to the throne of poetry, as the "spiritual queen of Latin America", the great singer of mercy and motherhood honored by the Swedish Academy in 1945. While no one would question the significance or the legacy of her poetic text, I am reluctant to concur with the opinion that Mistral's true world was her poetry, and that through the intuitive reality of this medium she spent a lifetime retracing those lost steps a woman and a human being searching for identity."<sup>4</sup> A critical examination of the prose in her *recados*, I believe, will reveal

<sup>1</sup> "Correspondencia de Madrid; Recados: quiero ser noticiero de los míos, Ímpetu de comunicación, y brevedad", *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, July 23, 1934. In Luis de Arrigoitia, *Pensamiento y forma en la prosa de Gabriela Mistral*, (Río Piedras, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1989; p. 285. To date, Arrigoitia's text is the unequivocally the most comprehensive, authoritative historical/critical study of Mistral's prose.

<sup>2</sup> Luis de Arrigoitia, *Pensamiento y forma en la prosa de Gabriela Mistral*, Río Piedras, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1989; p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> Lydia Fakundiny, ed., *The Art of the Essay*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991; p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Carmelo Virgillo, "Feminine Symbolism in Gabriela Mistral's 'Fruta'" in *Latin American Women Writers: Yesterday and Today*, Pittsburgh, *Latin American Literary Review*, 1977; pp. 105-114.

the existence of discursive spaces that emphasize feminine experience and essence, and the emergence of a feminist consciousness, in the female poet's appropriation of an engendered literary tradition, the essay, to further advance the formulation of female identity.

Mistral, born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga in Vicuña, 1889, was first recognized as an author in 1914, when she was awarded the highest distinction for her "Sonetos de la muerte" in the "Floral Games", a juried poetry competition celebrated in Santiago, Chile. It is at that moment when the poet began to use her literary pseudonym, *Gabriela Mistral*. Gabriela was chosen for the archangel Gabriel, that divine messenger of good news, for Mistral identified herself as a child of "air", as opposed to one of water or fire, distinguishedly blessed with intelligence and a spiritual grace; as such, she believed that she was destined to mediate between God and men, as a creature of pure spirit and intellect. Mistral is the name of the strong, warm wind of the Mediterranean, and also the name of a French poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1904, and whose compositions reflect a love for his motherland, his native Provence, and the search for cultural identity, themes that surface constantly in both Gabriela's poetry and prose production.

In 1922, Gabriela's first book of poetry, *Desolación*, appeared in New York, edited by the *Instituto de las Españas* (Columbia University) under the direction of Federico de Onís. It is also the year that Mistral left her homeland for the first time to move to Mexico, which will come to have a profound impact upon the development of her vocation as a literary artist. At the invitation of Mexico's Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcelos, Mistral was asked to participate in the educational reforms of that country. Here she collaborated in the humanistic endeavors of the *Ateneo de la Juventud*, an important center of artistic renovation that promoted the concept of culture as a good belonging to the people, alongside Vasconcelos (author of *La raza cósmica*, 1925) and other great essay writers, such as Alfonso Reyes (*El deslinde, Última Tule, Visión de Anáhuac*), and Pedro Henríquez Ureña (*Seis ensayos en busca de nuestra expresión*, 1928). Most importantly, the *ateneístas* confirmed for Mistral the belief in the importance of education in the process of social change. Furthermore, by inspiring examinations of national cultures and continental histories, in such works as the Argentine Ezequiel Marínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1933) and José Carlos Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928), these epic essayists illuminated for her the powerful path of prose in the dissemination of significant messages, which would later translate into her *recados*.

For the majority of critics, as well as for most readers, Mistral is synonymous with poetry. As the designated 'Schoolteacher of America', Mistral has been canonized as exemplar of the most lofty of feminine virtues, particularly those of chastity, magnanimity, and selflessness, ideals, extolled by the

patriarchal order, which defined and constructed sexual and gender identities as fixed and stable cultural functions. At once Mistral was transfigured into the poetic representation of the intimate, interior realm of the passive, the sentimental, the intuitive, the irrational, but fundamentally, the maternal; and this image was then appropriated by a nation whom she later came to represent as spokesperson in her consular capacity. Current feminist interpretation, nonetheless, posits the possible coexistence of multiple identities, in light of the complex, androgynous non-conformist aspects of Mistral's persona. The circumstances of Gabriela Mistral's life contradict her designation as 'spiritual mother' of Latin America. Despite her own public career as poet, pedagogue, and diplomat, she suggests a domestic, private, passive role for the intended *destinatario*, as in the intended female audience of her pedagogical anthology, *Lecturas para mujeres*. In a brilliant piece that examines the issue of gender and mestizaje in Mistral's prose, Amy Karninsky points that Mistral lived most of her adult life as an émigré, despite her passionate Americanism; and that just as she lived outside a Chile for which she felt profound nostalgia, she lived a life that she did not affirm for other women.<sup>5</sup>

It is only recently that critics have seriously reconsidered the other Mistral, the Mistral of prose writing, in critical re-readings of her essays that attempt to establish the relationships between gender and genre, and to identify the coordinates of an alternate canon of which, while maintaining dialogue with the established tradition of the male canon, transgresses those established boundaries in order to chart a new site of female authorship in the landscape of Latin American cultural production. By virtue of the essay, with its characteristic openness, elusiveness and fluidity, Mistral is able to reconfigure the space of interpretive practice, once the exclusive domain of male writers within the context of Latin American patriarchal hegemony, in a willful reconstruction of the feminine to include public spaces of active production alongside those traditionally sanctioned inner private spaces characteristically associated with motherhood and reproduction.

The essay's shifting, porous nature proves to be the perfect discursive form for establishing a forum from which Mistral freely expresses her opinions as a literary critic and social/political commentator, as well as her reflections on a multitude of topics, which included poetic musings on individual persons, places and objects, along with critical commentaries on contemporary events, or political, social or moral issues. With its shifting generic boundaries, and its coalescence of diverse, often oppositional elements, Mistral's journalistic prose, which spans the years 1907-1957, the year of her death on Long Island, New York, serves as a means to construct and define this evolved sense of self as divine messenger, to chart new topographies of cultural identities and feminine

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Kaminsky, "Essay, Gender and Mestizaje" in *The Politics of the Essay*, eds. Boetcher Joeres, Ruth-Ellen and Mittman, Elizabeth, Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1993; p. 118.

subjectivities through the exploration and representation of others in the text.

Mistral, the essayist, appropriates the public sphere of male critical discourse by infusing the traditionally distant, overtly objective essay form with the informal, the intimate, the subjective, in order to engage in untraditional practices of interpretive power. In critical discourse, such as that of the essay, the critic's gender often determines whether a work is considered of broad interest: what is uncomfortably recognized as the 'subjective' nature of criticism is seen as weakness in criticism, doubtlessly produced by women, even though it is acceptable in the writings of men. Furthermore, literary traditions have often favored 'national' works over those with 'personal' themes, and thus have contributed to the categorically inferior status of writings by women over the centuries, particularly in Latin America. It is important to point out, however, that for many of these female writers of prose, there was little or no distinction between the writing of objective history and that of personal histories. As Ruth-ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman have pointed out in their "[An] Introductory Essay" to *The Politics of the Essay*,<sup>6</sup> it is really only in the past century that more women have begun to appropriate the essay as a form of their own. Prior to that not only were they rarely represented in the world of letters, but it was unfathomable that they should or could employ a genre that exuded experience, wisdom, and contemplation, the essay's defining characteristics that are most characteristically associated with the realm of male authorial power.

The canonization of Mistral as a poet engendered the necessary authorial stance, essentially spiritual, moral, maternal, of one familiar with the particulars of this world, which she then passed on to the world, via the vehicle of the *recado* or journalistic essay, from which to launch those moral missives which took shape from the impressions left upon her through encounters with the other. Both as a poet and an essayist, Mistral's production characterizes her as a writer acutely aware of the social, political, and cultural problems of the mid-twentieth century, a time in which Latin America had recently incorporated the literature and culture of modernity. She engaged actively in protest and social criticism, often focusing on the material, symbolic and subjective situation of women and other marginal elements of Latin American society, as voiced in the following *recado*, "Sobre la mujer chilena", found in the chapter entitled "Chile o La voluntad de ser" in *Gabriela Mistral: Escritos políticos*, a selection of her prose texts:

En Santiago, al margen de los meetings feministas, la mujer ha forzado ya todas las puertas de hierro forjado que eran las profesiones: es cajera en los bancos, y los libros mayores no le conocen fraude; es médica en los hospitales y juez de menores ... Sus colegas refunfuñaron al dejarle entrar, y están arrepentidos de un desprecio tan

<sup>6</sup> Boetcher Joeres, Ruth-ellen and Mittman, Elizabeth, [An] "Introductory Essay" in *The Politics of the Essay*, Boetcher Joeres, Ruth-ellen and Mittman, Elizabeth; p. 13.

tonto; es creadora en la novela, bellamente audaz en las artes plásticas, y no le asustan las duras ingenierías y la arquitectura más cualitativa.

Lo que falta todavía a la gran acreedora es que la peonada de una hacienda, cuando ella siega o cultiva, sienta bochorno de que le paguen la mitad de su salario; lo que no se entiende es que el legislador no sepa todavía que *esa* obrera suele trabajar para tres creaturas y que éstas suelen ser un marido ebrio o gandul y dos críos suyos; y lo que irrita es que una mitad de la ciudadanía haya vivido hasta ahora al margen del sufragio purificador que esas madres pueden ejercer en cuanto a la administración, y al margen del sufragio liberador que pueden usar en bien de la miseria campesina.<sup>7</sup>

As a female essayist, Mistral directly intervened in the traditionally masculine domain of literary and journalistic production, thereby challenging established models of the role and function of the intellectual in Latin American cultural history, and creating an alternate space for women intellectuals in the public sphere. Continuing the ongoing project of nation-building since the days of independence in the nineteenth century, Mistral, like Ocampo and other contemporary female intellectuals of Latin America, brings a feminist agenda into her elaboration of a discourse that challenges and often overtly criticizes established paradigms of social space, official versions of history and sedimented constructs of gender.

Mistral's prose is best understood in the context of the readership that she specifically addressed. The strength and beauty of these texts reside in her ability to identify and respond, as an equal, to the concerns of a newly-emergent audience of educated, middle-class women, and to exploit the very language of feminine purity and genteel sensibility that had kept other women marginalized and silent. Borrowing conventions from biblical scriptures and from religious poetry, and establishing parallels with religious exemplars and cultural icons of the male-authored canons further enabled her to legitimate her speech, a rhetorical strategy employed centuries before by a kindred spirit of hers, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*. Throughout her prose production Mistral conveys to the reader a sense of women's roles as producers of cultural knowledge, working against their erasure within a still masculinist discourse on cultural production. Her prose texts open up a site for reflection upon the part of women as active agents in the creative process and in the production of culture, and for the articulation of authentic feminine identities.

The essay becomes a means of erecting bridges to unite distant, disparate entities; the reader of the *recados* is invited to sit back as would an airchair traveler, and accompany Mistral to explore uncharted terrains and the dynamics of a dialectic in which that yet unknown, but always emerging, continent of

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<sup>7</sup> "Sobre la mujer chilena" in *Política y Espíritu* Santiago de Chile, June 13, 1946; reprinted in *Gabriela Mistral, escritos políticos*, selection, prologue and notes by Jaime Quezada 2nd ed. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica: Colección Tierra Firme, 1995; pp. 62-3.

woman's being is in the making.<sup>8</sup> The itinerant Mistral, "a person somewhat errant, yet faithful to her paths", as she describes herself in her "Recado for Doña Carolina Nabuco", the Brazilian author of *A Sucessora*, had hoped to settle down in Chile, once retired from the teaching profession, and establish her own rural school with its own curriculum and norms, one born of experience, and not that of "bald pedagogy". Upon her return from Mexico, the United States and her first trip to Europe, she decided to carve out of the Chilean space a place of her own, but she was unable to transform herself, as she declares, into a "stable creature of my race and my country". In order for Gabriela Mistral to come to full knowledge of herself, Mistral the intellectual recognized the need to view herself in terms of a stable other, and the need to distance herself once more from her native country and the American continent which she dearly loved, to thereby achieve greater objectivity in her gaze. For the self to constitute and define itself, it must pass through the detour of the 'other' and the "disembarking on the shores of solitude", and for this very process to take place, one must seek and confront the other, or if it is nonexistent, create it. In one of her numerous reflections on the virtues of travel, she remarks:

Nada penetra en nosotros sin desplazar algo: la imagen nueva se disputa con la que estaba adentro, moviéndose con desahogo de medusa en el agua; después la cubre como una alga suavemente, sin tragedia. Viajar es profesión del olvido. Para ser leal a las cosas que venimos a buscar, para que el ojo las reciba como al huésped, espaciosamente, no hay sino el arrollamiento de las otras.<sup>9</sup>

The act of writing becomes for Mistral, consequently, a vital force or process, a locale to inhabit, as if the word were another world or the womb, a place of significant space for the expression of subjective identity. Self-exiled and alone, in the service of the nation as lifelong consul, Mistral, without a permanent residence, homeless if you will, is at the same time, homeward bound, in the sense that she is tethered to the word, seeking company in discourse and residing on the page, resolved to inhabit the word and fashion a discursive means of reflecting on her own and the experiences of others in terms of a critical self-reflexive relationship to the past, present and future.

Engaging in interpretive discursive practices most readily accessible to men during the first half of the twentieth century, Mistral expresses in the *recados* her views in an intimate, often autobiographical form considered more appropriate to women's 'personal' expression, which simultaneously reveals the influence of cultural mandates, and the complex relationship of gender and class to authorial power. Among the strategies and the literary devices used in her

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to Part 1 "Women, Self, Writing" of *Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology*, eds. Sara Castro-Klarén, Sylvia Molloy and Beatriz Sarlo, Boulder, Westview Press, 1991; p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> "Viajar" (June, 1927) in *Gabriela anda por el mundo*, selection of prose and prologue by Roque Estéban Scarpa, Santiago, Chile, Andrés Bello, 1978; p. 20.

prose to crease the illusion of authority in the text is the disembodied narrative voice, the alternate of the use of the appearing and disappearing first person "I", which serves to mark the text with authentic, testimonial experience. The discourse employed throughout her production in prose provides the framework and methods for individual and societal transformation through the presentation of the female as subject, an active agent in cultural production; the revision of patriarchal cartographies by means of the creation of alternative codes and signs; the emphasis upon dialogue as action and community as a viable, preferable means to personal development; the presentation of the sexuality and the institutions of marriage and motherhood from the perspective of women; and the identification of the feminist with the struggles of all marginalized groups throughout the world, though most particularly, in Latin America.

Published over a span of several decades, Mistral's *recados* represent an exemplary and influential model of female authorship in Latin America, one of the first conscious attempts by a Latin American woman writer to erase traditionally sanctioned boundaries of subjectivity in order to redraw the cartographies of cultural identities, thereby inscribing the feminine within spaces other than those of the irrational, the lyrical or the maternal. In the *recado* dedicated to the memory of Luisa Luisi, Uruguayan poet, pedagogue and literary critic, Mistral writes a moving defense of her recently deceased friend, to counter allegations of perceived political transgressions; the text also serves as a platform from which to voice her rejection of dichotomies, often associated with masculine behaviour and discourse, and the celebration of synthetic, syncretic modes, more authentic components of feminine identity:

Alguna vez, en Chile, andando la Cordillera, llegué al famoso lugar de la 'división de las aguas' argentino-chilenas, tocando aquel punto mágico que llaman una frontera. No había tal espinazo andino, no existía tal divorcio de cumbres. Aquello era un hermoso caos antojadizo de alturas y descensos, y en la ceguera de nubes inmediatas lo que parecía era un inmenso difumino. Muchas veces he vivido la misma experiencia con las fronteras ideológicas y sobre todo con las religiosas. Pero me he rehusado a quedarme allí por una terca voluntad que me hace antipático lo vago y me hace aborrecer lo que hay de ladino en la niebla y en las doctrinas sin contorno.<sup>10</sup>

In this and in similar *recados*, Mistral reconfigures the map of subjective identity, freeing the coordinates of engendered space to allow for the reconstruction and expression of authentic feminine essence and experience, for the emergence and exploration of worlds hitherto unknown, or those waiting to be rediscovered, "lost within the folds of memory". The literary form most suitable to this process of discovery of self and others undertaken by Mistral is the *recado*, which most often translates into a missive of edifying testimony. As a communicative medium these prose texts serve as an epistolary bridge between

<sup>10</sup> "Mensaje sobre Luisa Luisi" (February, 1941); p. 67.

sender and receiver, a means of intimate, interiorized communication which reflects an absence made presence in the evocation of a distant addressee. The focus of the reflection in the *recados* is both outward and inward, as the author of the missive endeavors to establish a link between the other and the space of her own time, with the aim of discovering and developing the self in the literary act of essaying on worldly events and individuals in an intimate, conversational tone. For Gabriela Mistral, the act of writing is an act of pleasure and of empowerment, as revealed in the description of her poetics pronounced during a gathering of three feminine luminaries in the constellation of Latin American literary production—Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarbourou and Mistral—at the University of Uruguay in the summer of '38:

Escribir me suele alegrar; siempre me suaviza el ánimo y me regala un día ingenuo, tierno, infantil. Es la sensación de haber estado por unas horas en mi patria real, en mi costumbre, en mi suelto antojo, en mi libertad total.

Me gusta escribir en cuarto pulcro, aunque soy persona hartamente desordenada. El orden parece regalarme espacio, y este apetito de espacio lo tienen mi vista y mi alma.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the overall silencing of women throughout the ages, and particularly in light of Mistral's additional marginality in having spoken as a woman from the Third World, the reader of these prose "messages" is better able to comprehend Mistral's need to assert her authority as a testimonialist. Appropriating the space of essayistic prose, once regarded as the privileged domain of male authorship, Mistral emits her missives from a subjective stance, evoking through memory the experiences of a life that is a past-made-present and a present-as-becoming, in the literary act of personal testimony, in the reflective act of writing oneself in relationship to others by means of the prose texts that constitute the *recados*.

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<sup>11</sup> "Cómo escribo" (January, 1938), in *Gabriela Mistral: Páginas en prosa*, Ed. María Hortensia Lacau, Selection, prologue and notes by José Pereira Rodríguez, Buenos Aires, Editorial Kapelusz, 1962; p. 3.