

Latin American and French Postmodern Aesthetics in *María la noche*¹

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Published in Barcelona in 1985, *María la noche* is Anacristina Rossi's first and most experimental and subversive novel, a quintessentially postmodern work for its questioning of literary and cultural categories. It does away with traditional notions of time, space, character configuration, plot, and language, mostly through surrealist techniques and the deployment of various psychoanalytical theories. In cultural terms, this novel offers a deep exploration of gender and sexuality, and in doing this it also questions notions of subjectivity, identity, and patriarchy. This study looks into the synergetic combination of French and Latin American postmodern aesthetics in the crafting of *María la noche*. In particular, it looks into the literary influences of *Tel quel*, the French avant-garde group, as well as those from the tradition of Latin American women's literary writing. It considers the processes of literary appropriation and adaptation and their implications at the stylistic and conceptual levels.²

María la noche's writing and publication outside Latin America bears significant weight in its style and subversive character. Rossi had moved to Europe in the 1970s, living first in England and later in France. In Paris she obtained a degree in translation, studied psychoanalysis, and encountered *Tel quel*. As a student in Paris, Rossi was able to participate in *Tel quel's* discussions and to become acquainted with its members and their literary experimentations. The intellectual atmosphere of the time, as described by the

¹ Thanks to my colleagues in the Furman Faculty Seminar, particularly Nick Radel, for suggestions for improving this essay.

² Anacristina Rossi is one of Costa Rica's best-known authors. Accepted into the *Academia costarricense de la lengua* (The Costa Rican Academy of Language) in 2007 (a post she later rejected), she has published four award-winning novels, a short story collection, and a significant body of journalistic and opinion articles. Her first novel, *María la noche* (1985), won the 1985 *Aquileo J. Echevarría* national prize for best novel. It was published in French translation as *Marie la nuit* (1997) by Actes Sud. Her second novel, *La loca de Gandoca* (1991), is an ecofeminist testimonial narrative that became a bestseller and required reading for school children in Costa Rica. *Limón blues* (2002) and *Limón reggae* (2007) are historical revisionist novels, the first concentrating on the presence and contributions of blacks of Jamaican descent in Costa Rica, and the second on the Central American political upheavals since the 1960s and the ideals, failures and legacies of the leftist movements in the region. *Limón blues* won the *Casa de las Américas' José María Arguedas* prize in 2004. Her short story collection *Situaciones conyugales* appeared in 1993.

author herself, was highly stimulating, one of “ebullición permanente, con el polémico Sartre y la bella Simone todavía alzando broncas” (“Desde mi ventana”).³

Tel quel was the famous literary group and journal that shook Parisian and French intellectual circles from the early 1960s until the early 1980s. Founded in 1960 in Paris by Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier, its name came from an epigraph by Nietzsche and means “as it is.”⁴ This name refers to *Tel quel's* aesthetic goal to affirm the power of literature by itself in reaction to Sartre's *littérature engagée*. Following Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman's* lead in the 1950s, *Tel quel* questioned Sartre as well as Aragon for having sacrificed their writing to politics. However, this rejection of engaged literature did not imply a reactionary escapist rejection of politics. It is simply that *Tel quel's* focus was different, not on history and politics per se but on “a speaking subject embedded in a sociopolitical context” (Marx-Scouras 96), a divided subject that speaks from the conscious/unconscious split at its core. This new focus on the speaking subject came from many influences, including Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucault's contestation of the division of madness and reason in Western culture (in his *Histoire de la folie*), and Derrida's deconstruction, which challenged structural linguistics' idealist assumption of the existence of a subject previous to language.

Because of the new discoveries in the field of psychology, and the new readings of Freud that were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, psychology and psychoanalysis became central topics to *Tel quel*, particularly Lacan's writings on the unconscious and its close links to language and desire. Barthes and Kristeva were mainly responsible for *Tel quel's* articulation of semiotics, literature, and psychoanalysis. Kristeva, in particular, produced her *semanalysis*, “a critical theory and literary practice that mixed semiology, Marxism and psychoanalysis” (Marx-Scouras 101-03).

Tel quel took issue with structuralism for its separation of science and literature, its relation to capitalism, and its disregard of the avant-garde and poetic language. Avant-garde aesthetics were of high value to *Tel quel* because they afforded ways to challenge structuralism and ways to integrate Freudian and Marxist theory in the study of literary texts (Marx-Scouras 122). Surrealism, in particular, with its emphasis on blurred boundaries, inspired their *écriture*, a new type of experimental literary text that would attempt the fusion of all genres (55), and of diverse fields of enquiry such as art, the sciences, literature, philosophy, and politics. Adding to its complexity was textual self-reflectivity, one of *écriture's* most prominent characteristics, which integrated literary criticism within the literary text itself. *Écriture* was a philosophical experiment rooted in avant-garde idealist view of literature as a revolutionary force that could promote social change (“*Tel Quel* Group” 302). As Gavronsky describes,

... [*écriture* was] an aesthetic experience associated with the explosion of limits, the transgression of identities and the crossing of boundaries. What is implied by *Tel Quel's* notions of “poetic language” and writing as an “experience of limits” is that language, and

³ *Tel quel* influenced other Latin American authors such as Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes. Severo Sarduy was the only Latin American official member of *Tel quel*, participating in it since the 1960s and publishing in its journal (González Echeverría 113).

⁴ The epigraph by Nietzsche, quoted in *Tel quel's* opening issue, read: “to want the world and reality as it is [*tel quel*]” (Marx-Scouras 43).

thus sociability, are defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution and transformation. (179)

María la noche must be understood not only as appropriation of *Tel quel's* aesthetics but also in its relation to Latin American literary and cultural contexts. Considering its publication date and the critique of heterosexuality it engages, this novel clearly was ahead of its time. Heterosexuality was reaffirmed rather than critiqued by Latin American writers before the 1980s. Women writers in particular, whose publication output and prominence rose dramatically during the 1970s, remained as conventional in their literary approaches to gender issues as their male counterparts. *María la noche* clearly breaks this trend, daring to delve into diverse types of desire.

The novel's exploration of gender and sexuality can be read as a rebellious reaction to the Latin American literary cannon and its strong emphasis on heterosexual love. Love and sexuality were at the center of the romantic novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Written by male authors, these canonical narratives presented a national project through romance, mixing literature and politics to appeal to the public of the nascent nations. In them heterosexual love represents political desire to consolidate the many heterogeneous national factions after the independence wars, therefore hiding tensions at the private and political levels. As Doris Sommer explains of these "foundational romances," the couple's "[e]rotic passion was the opportunity (rhetorical and otherwise) to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races, religions" (14). Interestingly, this urge to unite disparate national elements symbolized by the male-female union allowed for a welcoming of the feminine, to the point that many of the heroes of these narratives are "remarkably feminized" (16). The foundational romances that followed in the early twentieth century, known in Spanish as *novelas de la tierra* were similar to the former by the logic of heterosexual love, but differed from them in their more militaristic themes and the suppression of the feminine. Their populist impulse, as opposed to the positivist impulse of the former, reflects the stress created on the relatively new nations by US imperialist aggression at the turn of the century. These *novelas de la tierra* often rebuked miscegenation and idealized authoritarian power. In terms of gender representation, the "gender 'confusion' [that appeared in nineteenth-century romances] is cleared up as a matter of national defense, [and] a sensual woman is degenerative by definition" (23). Women were usually not welcome within these later romances, but representatives of the land or parts of the nation yet to be tamed ("civilized" [56]), often viewed as a problem for the nationalist agenda.

Prose and poetry during the first half of the twentieth century replicated conventional representations of love and sexuality. However, literary texts written by women deserve special attention because, although firmly set within a heterosexual frame, they increasingly exposed the dangers of heterosexual arrangements for women. Therefore, unlike most texts written by men, women's texts became tools for gender critique in this time period. Diane E. Marting aptly explains the importance of women's literary voices in spearheading such critique:

Literature has been changed by the new ways sexual themes have been deployed by women. To understand this change in the production of a novelistic discourse of female sexuality and

in its product, the literary history of the twentieth century must consider the importance of women writers, of women's themes *and* of sexuality more generally—the discourse about sex which Michel Foucault has called modernity's characteristic obsession—if it is not to suffer a fatal blindness. (3)

There was an abundance of gender critique by women, mostly through poetry, during the first half of the twentieth century. This is due to the fact that poetry could be read in more allegorical or metaphoric terms than prose and was perceived as less threatening. Through poetry, women writers dared to criticize male domination and unequal heterosexual relations, and to express female desire.⁵

New narrative parameters associated with modernist aesthetics that had appeared since the 1940s (with Borges and others) became world-famous in the 1960s with the “Boom” novelistic phenomena. As a reaction to realist aesthetics that had dominated the genre until that time, there was a general acknowledgment among the (mostly male) writers of a complexity of reality that could be represented textually only in more flexible and less Manichean terms. Thus, ambiguity became valued in matters of novelistic structure and themes (Payne and Fitz 5). But in terms of gender and sexuality this was not the case. In fact, in comparison to Brazilian new novels of the mid-twentieth century, Spanish American ones remained set in “the logocentric system in which binary opposition—especially the male-female opposition in gender representations and character relationships—played such a crucial role” (8).

Within this dichotomist gender logic, there was a progressive change, however, that took momentum during the 1960s: the appearance of the “sexual woman metaphor,” a positive image that associated female sexuality with freedom, rather than with libertinage. The underlying causes for the appearance of this new metaphor, according to Marting, are found in the social changes of that time:

In Latin America, the association of the sexual woman with freedom became a powerful new metaphor to deal imaginatively with the urgent social and political crises of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. . . . [A] sexual woman character [emerged] who could symbolize or be a metonymic figure for some of the more subtle—and intimate—aspects of the 1960s upheavals. . . . In fact, to a large coterie of leftist and liberal novelists in Latin America—men and women—the sexual woman became a vehicle for speaking about more general hopes for a future with greater political and social freedoms, as well as sexual freedoms. (12-13)

However, the sexual woman metaphor remained completely within the bounds of heterosexuality. It was only in the 1970s that textual representations of gender started to be less rigid, and the male-female dichotomy was relaxed “through play, parody, and

⁵ Among the best-known poets of this period are Uruguayan Delmira Agustini and Argentinian Alfonsina Storni. By the 1930s and 1940s, Chilean María Luisa Bombal added an important body of gender critique through her narrative. Perhaps as a way of self-protection from the wrath of male critics and society at large, her novels deploy highly stylized surrealist language and techniques that hide and soften her social (gender) critique. By mid-twentieth century, renowned Mexican author Rosario Castellanos seized the opportunity to critique heterosexual and race relations through multiple genres. But evidently the freedom to write about sexuality and gender was still not completely owned by women, as Castellanos' case illustrates. She exercised self-censure in her prose, avoiding representations of female desire, expressing it rather in poetic form because, as Marting explains, “as professor and diplomat [erotic prose] was a weapon that could backfire and injure her reputation” (23).

poetry” (Marting 44). Gender ambiguity was now associated with freedom, as the sexual woman had represented freedom earlier. New gender-ambiguous characters posed a direct challenge to heteronormativity for the first time and signaled a more radical textual strategy for cultural analysis.⁶

María la noche fits within this context because of its specific probing of masculinity and femininity as traditionally understood and portrayed, and because of the notions of fluid, unfixed sexualities that it presents. Furthermore, its presentation of nontraditional desire is associated with a fluid conceptualization of ethnicity and race that challenges monolithic representations of the nation-state. By considering not only fluid sexual modes of relation (which seem to integrate lesbian, homosexual, and bisexual sensibilities in a continuum), but ethnic backgrounds marked by miscegenation, it exposes the traps of binary conceptions of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity and their relationship to nationalist agendas.

In the following analysis, I do a close literary reading organized into nine thematic clusters introduced by subtitles, based on my own interpretations. I deem it necessary to divide my analysis in this way because of this text’s contestation of literary parameters, particularly plot coherency, which makes it difficult reading that demands a very active reader. It poses difficulties in terms of literary analysis as well because it is a text open to multiple interpretations. I intermingle my explanations of psychoanalytical concepts within my textual interpretations since *María la noche* undertakes an exploration of the human mind, showing particular fascination with Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian theories. These theories are applied in the critique of normative heterosexuality, the novel’s main topic and the centerpiece of its subversive intent. Foucault’s ideas on the crucial role of power in the production of heterosexuality are also important, since the novel traces patriarchal manipulations of truth and exposes the contradictions and unreliability of conventional gender and sexual arrangements.

Frame Story: A First Encounter

María la noche’s plot is set in a mental plane where the division between conscious and unconscious is initially highlighted and linked to the male/female gender dichotomy through Antonio and Mariestela, the main characters. Presented first as opposites, Antonio is the masculine conscious voice, while Mariestela is the female unconscious. According to Freud, the conscious is ruled by rational logic and constituted primarily by negation

⁶ It is important to note that novels portraying male and female homosexuality had appeared in Latin America since the 1960s. According to David William Foster, the Mexican novel *El diario de José Toledo* by Manuel Barbachano was the first to portray male homosexual desire (50). But, perhaps because of strong homophobia within Hispanic cultures, textual representations of this desire remained restricted to marginal texts and did not have the cultural and literary impact that the sexual woman or the gender-ambiguous characters did. Lesbian desire made its textual appearance much later, in the 1980s. Well-known novels are *En breve cárcel* (1981) by Sylvia Molloy, *Amora* (1989) by Rosamaría Roffiel, and *Dos mujeres* (1990) by Sara Levi Calderón. Considering the literary canon, heavily invested in heteronormativity, and the particular and pernicious restrictions on female desire within the Latin American context, their representation of female desire located outside the heterosexual frame is radical. Novels portraying lesbian desire, however, continue being exceptions and, as Marting notes, “were (and still often are) encoded, marginalized, or silenced within a hegemony of heterosexual desire” (53-54).

(taboo), while the unconscious is a structure that works parallel to the conscious but without the awareness of the conscious speaker. It is that repressed “other scene . . . [that] knows no negation,” and that works with a different logic, different linguistic operations, and different imagery from those in the conscious realm (MacCannell 440-44). Following Freud, Mariestela and Antonio’s relationship involves “a profound and secret duel”⁷ in which he occupies the dominant rational disposition while she occupies the unconscious, where equal weight seems to be given to the rational and the libidinal.

The plot starts with a frame story narrated by Antonio and addressed to Mariestela using “tú,” the familiar “you” in Spanish, which describes Mariestela’s emergence into his conscious realm and into the narrative. In the manner of surrealist aesthetics, the bizarre and the mundane blend in this frame story to create a dream-like effect, which in turn casts doubt on the narrator’s reliability. It happens at a strange place, a cave by the ocean in England, supposedly over a two-month period. This is an important location because the cave’s enclosed dark space connotes an interior private location between Antonio’s conscious and unconscious states, and because it is in England where Antonio works and where he is undergoing psychoanalysis.⁸ Time seems suspended in the cave in order to allow for his monologue to flow, and for his first meeting with what the reader eventually realizes is his anima.

A pronounced emphasis on the dichotomies conscious/unconscious and masculine/feminine is achieved by the inclusion of Jung’s anima and animus archetypes as constitutive functions of the main characters. According to Jung, archetypes are related to the shaping of the personality as templates of images that are universal, that is, every person inherits them. They are “the contents of the collective unconscious . . . original model[s] after which other similar things are patterned . . . not to be regarded as fully developed pictures in the mind . . . [but] more like a negative that has to be developed by experience” (Hall 41-42). The anima archetype refers to the female side of the personality. It is the “inner attitude” or the soul of the psyche. It maintains a complementary relation to the persona (Jung, *Basic Writings* 273). In the novel’s initial setting, Mariestela is Antonio’s anima, that is, not only his unconscious, but clearly, his feminine side. Jungian theory depicts both anima and animus as important parts in the process of individuation, which involves the integration of the contra sexual other and a search for the ideal of androgyny. This means that for women it is necessary to integrate their masculine side or animus, and for men their feminine side or anima. Integrating the contra sexual other leads to a harmoniously balanced personality, according to Jung. *María la noche* uses these eminently heteronormative concepts as the foundations for the plot’s beginning. It toys with the concept of androgyny, teasing the reader with the possibilities of a supposed goal of gender balance. But the development of the plot shatters any illusions of the androgyny ideal.

The frame story also draws from Freudian and Lacanian theory to portray the dynamics between the main characters. Mariestela shows up as a physically and emotionally

⁷ Danielle Marx-Scouras describes this dynamic as “a profound and secret duel between a dominant disposition and its other, thanks to which and against which the former succeeds in instituting itself. Each scene of thought is possible only at the cost of denying the struggle by which it establishes itself and which never ceases to disturb it secretly” (100).

⁸ The cave might simply refer to Antonio’s psyche, following Jung’s dream of the house/cave. See Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (56-57).

wounded young woman, who, in terms of language and behavior, seems to be at the pre-Oedipal stage, sucking her thumb, unable to speak, and with nonhuman looks. However, she has an ability to express, in a nonverbal way, her uncanny and extensive knowledge of minerals and sea creatures. This is a different relation to knowledge (of nature and of the world in general) that is so far barred to Antonio, whose cognitive understanding is exaggeratedly rational. He does not comprehend her different awareness of reality, which is not based exclusively on rational language and, as main narrator, interprets and categorizes her difference as pre-Oedipal—that is, prelinguistic and prerational. As the plot develops, however, it becomes clear that this pre-Oedipal identification is in fact Antonio's manipulative interpretation of Mariestela's reality. She actually belongs in an indeterminate location, which can be related to Lacan's realms of the Real and the Symbolic, intervening in Antonio's Imaginary. But he must portray her as pre-Oedipal in order to assert his superiority.

For Lacan there are three main dimensions of the human psyche: the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic. A brief explanation of these terms is necessary here in order to understand *María la noche's* characters' relationships. First of all, these dimensions are deeply rooted in Freudian concepts such as the Oedipal phase, infantile sexuality, and the unconscious aspects of language. The Imaginary is "an internalized image of this ideal, whole, self and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation" (Loos). It produces a sense of stable subjectivity based on dyadic, symmetrical complementarity originated in the idealized pre-Oedipal mother-child unity. This fantasy of stability is shattered through Oedipus, which for Lacan is the fulcrum that provides the male child access to the Symbolic. The Symbolic is the realm of language, rationality, and culture. Importantly, culture is understood as the system of social conventions, including the differentiation of masculine and feminine. The Symbolic intervenes in the Imaginary to provide context, especially in the mother-child dyad. But it is important to note that the way the male child gets situated in the Symbolic is radically different from the way the female child does, according to Lacan: the male child obeys the Law of the Father that prohibits his Oedipal incestuous desire for his mother. But obeying this law means two things: he must repress his desire (which gets stashed away in the unconscious), but in exchange for this repression, he gains access to rational language and the Symbolic. Thus, the male child's identity is marked by repressed desire, sexual difference, and rational language. The female child, on the other hand, goes through a different process. She feels desire for her mother but unlike the boy she is never forced to relinquish it because there is no recognition of it, within the Law of the Father (the prohibition of incest is between the male child and his mother); she does not fully enter the Symbolic order since the Law of the Father only applies to males. She is "doubly poised both sexually and in relation to language"; that is, she desires both the mother and the father, and she is both outside the Symbolic (and therefore prelinguistic) and in the Symbolic as a crucial part of the male sense of subjectivity, as the other reflected in the mirror in order for him to assert his difference (Hayward 194).

The third Lacanian psychic dimension is the Real, which is not what we understand as reality but "the order preceding the ego, and the organization of the drives. . . . It is what is 'unassimilable' in representation, the 'impossible' . . . [It] has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of 'raw materials' " (Grosz 34). It is "what is pre-

mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic—what cannot be symbolized—what loses its [sic] 'reality' once it is symbolized (made conscious) through language" (Loos).

Each of *María la noche*'s characters fit into Lacan's realms. Antonio seems to be located between the Imaginary and the Symbolic dimensions, fitting what Judith Butler calls the "phantasmatic subject," that is, "[the one who] maintains the illusion of its autonomy insofar as it covers over the break out of which it is constituted" (10). Mariestela, like the female child, is at once outside and inside the Symbolic realm. But she also seems to belong in the Real, since she seems uncategorizable. However, the frame story is Antonio's attempt to categorize her as prelinguistic and therefore outside the Symbolic. It is also his attempt to produce a particular self-portrayal as Mariestela's savior. According to his own narration, he nurtures her back to health. But the frame narrative ends abruptly with Mariestela's escape from the cave. In reaction to this escape, Antonio describes a sense of abandonment in him at the same time that he admits that he willingly allowed her to go: "La solté," he says (8). Here there is a seemingly double discourse that is quite significant: one that expresses his lack of power for having been abandoned, and another expressing his power by allowing her to escape. It portrays a conflicted speaker whose thoughts and actions do not necessarily fit together. It also poses a challenge to the reader, since most events in the narrative can be interpreted in several ways. One possible interpretation, which fits the conclusion of the novel's main plot, is that meeting his anima is psychologically taxing, and so he proceeds to 'let her go'; that is, he pushes her back into oblivion in order to re-establish his threatened rationality.

This frame story, thus, records the first time that Antonio is aware of a psychic split in himself, or, in Jungian terms, of his anima. It hints at the fact that he is dealing with unconscious issues and, more importantly, it foreshadows an emotional aspect that becomes central to the novel's plot: Antonio's ambivalent reaction to his encounter with what he sees at first as his *feminine* side.

Mariestela's Return

Mariestela's second appearance and ensuing relationship with Antonio constitute the main plot. Her return is enabled by "un impasse" (78, 142, 274) a lapse in his rationality that causes him to have hallucinations. Expressed through a combination of monologues and dialogues between Antonio and his roommate and between Antonio and Mariestela, this narrative shows Antonio in the midst of researching for a major breakthrough publication on economics at the peak of his academic career, but also suffering a writer's block and a mental breakdown caused by a recent divorce. His mental breakdown lasts approximately a year, which coincides, textually, with the length of the novel's main plot. He undergoes psychoanalysis in this time period and, importantly, asserts that he does so in order to "comprender al sexo femenino" (28), a detail that might explain his initial willingness to give access in his mind to his *feminine* side.

As had been the case in Mariestela's first appearance, the second is bizarre and takes place in yet another liminal enclosed space, the back of a London pub, described in Antonio's monologue as a "no man's land" (21; English in original). The bizarre is evident when Antonio sees a long-haired woman who attempts to strangle a younger one, an event in which he intervenes, preventing the strangulation attempt. The would-be victim turns out to be Mariestela, while the other woman is, as revealed toward the novel's end, her

mother. This whole scene turns out to be one of Antonio's hallucinations and thus casts doubt on both main characters: Is Antonio crazy? Is Mariestela real or merely in his imagination? Is she the insane one? Why is it that the other woman (her mother!) wants to kill her?

Other hallucinations and strangulation images, in which Mariestela's neck is either bleeding or covered by a bloody handkerchief, appear only at the beginning and end of the plot, when Antonio seems more mentally unstable. The reader eventually realizes that these images, like the frame narrative, are deceiving. They point to some traumatic event in Mariestela's past, but they appear only within some of his monologues and are accessible only to him and not to her. She knows about the visions of her own neck bleeding only through the obsessive worries that Antonio expresses to her. He is convinced that she is in imminent danger, something that she denies repeatedly. The two reveal a controlling aspect of Antonio's personality, seen first in his role as Mariestela's savior in the cave and later as her self-appointed protector. They also reveal an obsession of his with one of her body parts—her neck—which points to a possible case of fetishism.⁹ Antonio's attitude toward Mariestela's presence is one of ambivalence first, but obviously one of fear as well. Fetishism explains his refusal to see her whole. He can cope only by fixating on her neck and on visions of her as strangled. These strangulation images will become an important element for the novel's gender and sexual critique. But at this point in the narrative, the pub incident, Antonio does not know who these women are, nor does he realize that the woman he thinks he saves from strangulation is the same he had supposedly nurtured in the cave. This is apparent only to the assumed active reader of this demanding narrative, who must connect the many scattered dots carefully.

Power Struggles

Antonio and Mariestela's personalities and worldviews are at first represented as quite contrasting. Their monologues allow the reader to see the perceptions and misperceptions that they have of each other. While Antonio's monologues describe Mariestela as an enigma, hers portray him through sustained irony as stubbornly set in the stereotypically Hispanic macho role, particularly evident in his looks (he is in his mid-thirties, of dark complexion, tall, muscular, hairy, and handsome), in his academic profession as Marxist professor of economics at prestigious Birbeck College, and in his repetitious remarks about being straight and a firm believer in "la pareja," referring to the heterosexual couple (104). Cultural binaries frame his sense of gender as strictly male, as described on the left side of the prescribed list: male/female, reason/emotion, intellect/sensuality, work/pleasure, reality/dream, day/night, present/past, and so on.

Mariestela makes fun of those categorizations and seems free from them. In fact, she describes herself at some point as androgynous. She is relaxed and unrestrained in her social life, particularly in her sexuality and sensuality, which she expresses openly toward

⁹ Fetishism, as defined by Freud, is "an exclusively masculine perversion which consists of deriving sexual gratification from the association of the female sexual object with a fetish, generally an inanimate or partial object" (Schor 113). It is a male's coping strategy to counter his fear of sexual difference. The boy sees his mother's reflection in the mirror and is horrified by the missing penis. He sees it as castration but at the same time denies it, by substituting the missing part with the fetish. It is his way to see her as phallic and therefore safe.

both men and women. She has an ethereal textual presence, which can be understood in Lacanian terms as coming out of her location in between the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic. Through Antonio's unreliable narration, the reader gets sketchy information about her life: she is a twenty-three-year-old Latin American student—Costa Rica is never mentioned but clearly implied as her country of origin—who has quit school and is trying to figure out her life in London. The places that she inhabits or visits do not seem real. For example, her apartment in London is a white and quiet space where several women come and go, and which Antonio visits at night only. This important detail is an obvious reference to 'María the night' in the novel's title ("María" is short for Mariestela). This title refers to the fact that she is *his* night, which can be read in various ways: as his unconscious, but also as an unattainable reality that could be identified as Lacan's Real. Importantly, it could also relate to Georges Bataille's concept of "inner experience": "a space which is *interior* and *sovereign*. . . . It is NIGHT, but a night which 'is' not—a night which can only be apprehended by a vision which has been decentered, rendered 'ex-orbitant' by the emptying of its contents into the abyss of non-knowledge" (Boldt, Introduction xviii-xix).

Mariestela's subjectivity, unlike Antonio's, is multiple and unstable, conformed by a multiplicity of subjectivities that dwell in or around her. In what seems to be multiple mirror images, Mariestela has a double, Octavia. And Octavia too has her own double, her lover Parsimonia. Although each subsequent double seems to be less real, and less textually defined (Octavia rarely talks, for example, and we know very little about the shadowy Parsimonia), they do mirror Mariestela in her principles of "inmensa ternura contenida" (88), of sexual and physical mobility enabled by an absence of traditional gender normativity and of mechanisms to impose or police particular gender configurations. These doubles show a freedom to come and go, geographically and sexually, wherever they please. In the silence of Mariestela's apartment, Antonio observes them all coming and going, which is to say entering and exiting his mind. And he sees them fluctuate among lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual orientations. Thus, we could say that while Antonio believes the fantasy of a unified identity, which links him to the Imaginary realm, Mariestela displays a multiple and dialogic makeup marked by physical, psychic, and gender mobility.

The meeting of these opposites produces expected frictions, most noticeable in the realm of desire. Each has an obvious need for the other, but their needs are of two different kinds that produce misunderstandings at first. She looks for a closeness that could be categorized as ontological. In fact, her presence seems to be motivated by a desire to counter Antonio's unified conception of self with her multiplicity. She attempts to show him that the supposedly fundamental split between self and other is false. But he interprets her need, erroneously, as sexual. When she rejects his sexual advances, he feels confused. She ends up conceding to his requests for sex, which proves to be a disaster, a miscommunication that becomes evident in each one's accounts of this sexual encounter. According to her, "Muero de desolación y de cansancio. Me aburro. No hay suavidad en su besuqueo taurino" (50). While, according to him, "Después de amarnos tiene los ojos tristes. Está seca y distante. Resentida" (34). Following stereotypical heteronormativity, she accuses him of ignorance in matters of sex and the female body, and he describes her as frigid and resentful.

Mariestela's Take-Over

Mariestela quickly establishes herself as a strong presence that overturns Antonio's sense of reality. She is both a nurturing and an unsettling presence, on one hand supportive of his search for emotional stability and identity, but the other threatening with her stifling presence. She establishes her own agenda, which is to carve out a space of her own within Antonio's mind and within the narrative; that is, a psychic and discursive space. The following dialogue, in which Antonio and Mariestela talk about their common interest in economic theories, clearly records her intention:

[Mariestela]—... antes yo juraba que la clave del mundo era la economía, y admiraba patológicamente a tus homólogos.
[Antonio]—Yo también creía que era la clave.
[M]—¿Y ahora?
[A]—Ahora ya no sé.
[M]—Ese no sé es la brecha por donde puedo introducirme.
[A]—¿Cómo dices?
[M]—En vos hay una brecha, una falla, un espacio entre las certidumbres. (27)

Mariestela reveals some important information about herself here: her ontological location is in a 'space among [his] certainties,' which in Bataille's terms means a lapse or rupture of his rationality and discourse, or in Lacanian terms, in a break in the chain of signifiers. The reference to economics as 'the key' to understanding the world is not trivial, since Antonio is an economist who understands reality only through rational means. But with the mental 'split,' produced by Mariestela's presence, his absolute reliance on rationality is crumbling.¹⁰

His rational instability is represented textually by a change of narrators. Mariestela, unlike her first appearance, when she is supposedly prelinguistic, does speak abundantly now, becoming the main narrative voice. In the style of stream of consciousness through a series of disjointed monologues, dialogues, and recollections of past events, her narrations concentrate obsessively on her own past, a topic that she is at first reluctant to talk about but later agrees to engage due to Antonio's curiosity and relentless prodding.

Interestingly, both characters' attitudes here are revealing of each one's manipulation of the other. His insistence in getting to know her past is a facet of a voyeurism that is at the basis of his relationship to her. Voyeurism appears from the very beginning of the plot, when Antonio obsessively watches Mariestela's sexual encounters with her lover Octavia, feeling both fascination and revulsion for what he sees as "sucio" (157).¹¹ These voyeuristic rituals give Antonio a sense of control that is very evident in his monologues. But he also wants to look into Mariestela's past because he sees her as mysterious and unexplainable

¹⁰ This is evident through his research, in which he considers different economic models (nineteenth-century's Walras theory of economic equilibrium or New Classical economics, twentieth-century Keynesian and Post-Keynesian theories) and concludes that none is able to explain the perennial problems of world poverty. He starts to doubt the validity of the field of economics. His former worldview becomes unstable.

¹¹ According to Freudian psychology, voyeurism is a deviant manifestation of sexuality that involves looking without being seen in order to obtain sexual pleasure. Like fetishism, it is a male coping mechanism to counter fears of sexual difference. It is also a controlling mechanism: she becomes "the object of his investigation, and thus safely contained. As the object of his look and surveillance, meaning is ascribed to her by him" (Hayward 420).

and wants to decipher her. Mariestela's agreeing to talk about her past is also revealing because it shows that her initial reluctance is just a ploy since she knows from the very first moment she appears in the narrative that creating or re-creating her past is her goal: "¿Querés saber de mí? te vuelvo a preguntar sin confesar que te busqué para eso, que en la seguridad de tu respiración podría desarrollar tiras y tiras de personal historia . . . accedo a enseñarte el tejido suelto de algunas obsesiones, o capítulos" (113). There is an equalizing element here: each character manipulates the other for his and her own purposes. Antonio's curiosity about Mariestela's past might very well mean a curiosity about his own, about an unresolved psychological issue. On the other hand, Mariestela needs textual and symbolic space, therefore her 'developing strips and strips of personal stories,' that is, the textual inscription of her own story. It is through language, that is, through the Symbolic, that she establishes her presence in the narrative and in Antonio's psyche. But manipulation is not the whole story. There is also a mutual enabling: as he enables her to enter his consciousness, to explore her own past, and narrate her own life story, she enables him to explore his Imaginary.

Revolution

Antonio's cognitive/linguistic awareness is construed around discourses of economics and mathematics, in sharp contrast with Mariestela's, which involves multiple cognitive approaches to reality including not only rational intelligence but emotional, psychological, and artistic intelligence as well. He relates to reality in a way that could be described as detached.¹² While he talks about math and economics and assumes that sex is what needs to happen between them if they want any closeness, she displays a more nuanced emotional make-up, evident in her easiness to express desire verbally. In fact, she experiences their relationship first through language, as read in one of her early monologues: "no se trataba de jueguitos de apareamiento: se trataba sobre todo de palabras. . . las yemas de mis dedos florecen y se regocijan al contacto con la piel de tu cara o de tus manos, gracias a la palabra. Es una celebración, un reconocimiento, una fatiga" (26). The closeness she looks for is possible only through the language of desire, a language he seems to fear.¹³ It is language, in fact, that gives her textual presence and power. According to Lacan, the unconscious and language work similarly, both structuring human subjectivity. The structure of language is linked to the unconscious field, where "the signifying chain" is engendered. Therefore it is the unconscious that brings into existence the speaking subject: "[I]t is not only man who speaks, but that in man and through man *it* speaks (*ça parle*), that his nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material, and that, therefore, there resounds in him, beyond what could be conceived of by a psychology of ideas, the relation of speech" ("The Signification of the Phallus" 39). Rossi recreates these Lacanian concepts and their relationship to language and identity in order to establish Mariestela as a decisive part of

¹² Comically, even his expression of emotion happens through the language of economics and math, as in this excerpt, in which he describes one of his "satisfacciones estéticas completas": "La Teoría del Equilibrio General. La armonía —esotérica al principio— de las ecuaciones me deja como anonadado. Nunca olvidaré el día en que descubrí su existencia. ¿Sabrá ella de ese tipo de emociones?" (37).

¹³ His fear might be identified as erotophobia, the root cause of sexual repression, which is manifested in the control and policing effectuated through heteronormativity (Gaard 118).

the speaking subject, and as the voice that expresses the novel's self-reflectivity. Through her the novel promotes "una revolución" (98-99) at the linguistic level which consists, in her own words, of "minar las bases de la narratividad" (98). She deplores Antonio's perception of language as "un medio transparente cuya función más alta es expresar verdades, por ejemplo verdades económicas" (98). With sarcasm toward this referential conceptualization of language, Mariestela asks Antonio: "¿la palabra perro muerde?" (143). Referential language is, in her view, "un campo literal en el que todo está contado, pesado, dividido" (99). *Tel quel's* distaste for language understood as a simple instrument of representation is readily apparent here. For Mariestela, as for *Tel quel*, language is first and foremost an experiment to stretch the limits of signification, to reach what Foucault describes as "that formless, mute, unsignifying region where language can find its freedom" (Marx-Scouras 90). A particular monologue in stream of consciousness style shows this experimentation. In it Mariestela expresses unconscious or preconscious sensory impressions of a trip that she takes with Octavia, her lover and double, to Eastern Europe. Reminiscent of surrealist landscapes, the places that they visit are blurred and their experiences strange as if in a dream. Although it is described as a summer trip and many of the scenes take place at night, time is otherwise undefined and does not seem to pass in a linear manner. Octavia and Mariestela have a series of sexual encounters with different men that seem more shadowy than real. Their several *ménages à trois* show lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual desire. This lack of borders or limits is expressed in a language that mirrors its content, blurring the limits between narrative and poetic form, the descriptive and the lyric, dream and reality:

unión de tres y la brisa robándonos el pelo confundiendo
sus cosas con las mías él
nadie ve sus manos en mis piernas sus manos dedos
largos decididos
todo esto es solamente para nosotros tres que
miramos el mar
ni siquiera sabía para dónde íbamos no pregunté
porque nadie me hubiera contestado
¿qué cambiaría saber? de todos modos íbamos
íbamos
quiera o no
quiera íbamos o no íbamos. (126)

In true *écriture* fashion, this linguistic experimentation is part of a textual linguistic self-reflexivity that is expressed both in unconscious and in conscious/conceptual terms in the narrative. Conceptually, the novel spells out its narrative revolutionary project by invoking the atonal revolution in Western music in the early twentieth century, which introduced music without a tonal center or key.¹⁴ Mariestela literally embodies such revolution as registered in her first-person musically inspired description: "Yo no tengo ojiva cadencial, hablo y actúo en modos gregorianos, sin cadencia y sin tonalidad que garanticen la coherencia de la obra. No tengo de dónde partir, adónde dirigirme, y dónde llegar, ni nada

¹⁴ The Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg, associated with the Second Viennese School, is recognized as the major figure in the atonal revolution.

que defina ni articule mi materia sonora" (98). This musical analogy echoes *Tel quel's* associations of literature with other arts,¹⁵ and it resembles Battaille's "inner experience" for its insistence on "the absence of a center, origin, or foundation" (Marx-Scouras 88) and its reference to the unspeakable "impossible abyss glimpsed at the moment of transgression . . . arising at the moment of language's rupture" (Boldt, Preface xxxi).

Rationality, and all it implies in terms of language and identity, is the target of Rossi's critique. This questioning goes all the way to the level of epistemology, making suspicious the pursuit of knowledge exclusively through rational means. The novel's underlying premise coincides with feminist critiques of traditional epistemology in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the time when Rossi conceived and wrote this text.¹⁶ Feminists at that time put to the test "ideals of reason, objectivity, autonomy, and disinterestedness operating in assumptions about inquiry, . . . [and revealed them] to be connected to and constitutive of gender relations" (Janack). This is exactly what this novel proposes and strives for: to transcend rationality through narrative experimentation in order to allow for other textual and ontological possibilities.

Climax

The music/language analogy is carried into a climatic moment when a deep level of communication between the anima and the animus seems to be reached. Both Mariestela and Antonio sing in French the aria "Habanera" from Bizet's opera *Carmen*. The choice of this highly emotional and melodramatic aria sung in French is telling for various reasons: on one hand, it reveals an ironic tone toward the subject matter, specifically toward Antonio's sudden relaxation of his limits; on the other hand, it shows a momentary deep connection of the two characters. They seem to reach a new level of communication that allows Antonio to incorporate a new language in his psyche: that of desire expressed, however ridiculously, through the singing of "Habanera." His embracing of the ontological and epistemological fluidity that Mariestela represents changes him dramatically. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he sees 'an other,' according to Mariestela's narrative voice: "En el espejo del baño se reflejaba otro. . . . Qué agonía es un cuerpo de mujer. Aceptaste que nunca habías creído al tuyo capaz de sentir tanto y por razones y en formas tan distintas. . . . Y cediste de lleno a la noche que empezó a caer tibia sobre tu cara. Y cediste totalmente al recuerdo . . ." (158). In one of *María la noche's* greatest moments, Antonio regresses to the 'mirror' stage and takes a second look. He sees his reflection, and experiences *jouissance*, a multiple type of pleasure associated with the feminine, an idea explored by 1970s French feminists, in particular Luce Irigaray. But, unlike the Freudian prescribed mirror stage, he does not distance himself from woman out of castration fear, but has an "inner experience" in which all limits are transcended. Steering clear from French gender essentialist conceptualizations implied in the notion of *jouissance*, Rossi bridges the gap between the feminine and the masculine. Antonio is able to experience a multiple type of pleasure once he frees himself from traditional gender normativity.

¹⁵ Philippe Sollers gave great prominence to music in his narrative.

¹⁶ Feminist epistemologists such as Genevieve Lloyd, Ruth Bleir, and Sandra Harding studied the relationship between knowledge and gender and published their works around the time of the publication of *María la noche*, when Rossi was studying epistemology in Europe.

Homosexuality Displaced and Concealed

Once a deep and meaningful connection is established between the main characters, Antonio is able to relax about sexual and gender constraints, and to explore one of the most repressed aspects of his sexuality. Homosexual desire had been suggested at various points in the plot, but never acknowledged by him. On each occasion he would dismiss this desire, forcing himself to regain control over what he described as 'these crazy thoughts.'¹⁷ However, Mariestela intervenes in various ways throughout the plot to bring forth this desire. One of those ways occurs when she, in her *anima* guiding role, serves as Antonio's displaced desiring subject. This is represented textually by a few occasions when she desires men. But, what seems as heterosexual desire on her part is also a textual and psychological device to suggest Antonio's homosexual desire. In other words, it seems that her desire for men is also a projection of *his* own homosexual desire. He does desire men, but this desire is so repressed that it can only be channeled through her, hidden as *heterosexual* desire. It is clear that his mind devises a protective mechanism (hiding homosexual desire by projecting it as Mariestela's heterosexual drive) by which the heterosexual binary is kept intact.¹⁸

Antonio's culminating assumption of homosexual desire occurs through another decisive intervention by Mariestela. Through an entourage of male characters who share her surreal qualities and her alterity, among them three young Armenian men named "los tres davides" (89-90) and the Costa Rican Alberto, Mariestela first introduces him into a different concept of masculinity, most notoriously defined by tenderness. These males express a benign type of irony toward Antonio's macho antics, and usher him into other possibilities of desire. Alberto, in particular, becomes central to Antonio's process of self-awareness. At first, Antonio is intrigued by this man's cool manners and clothes, but quickly dismisses him as "niño bien" (253). Unbeknownst to Antonio, but quite obvious to the reader by the hints in his monologues, Antonio is sexually attracted to Alberto. In typical fashion, however, Antonio covers up this attraction and rationalizes it as confusion. His monologue reveals his fear of Alberto's sexual advances toward him. However, fear and anxiety yield to excitement when Alberto finally kisses him, at which point Antonio faints. Suddenly and quite meaningfully, the narrative perspective changes to Mariestela's, signaling once more her linguistic intervention and guidance. Briefly and in a humoristic tone, she refers to Alberto and Antonio's sexual encounter. Her narrative takeover signifies once more her role as provider of a language that Antonio lacks; in this case, language for a type of desire outside heterosexuality.

¹⁷ For example, in a rather strange scene at the pub a few days after he meets Mariestela, he sees her kissing two teenage males on their lips. This produces in him a wave of jealousy and self-hatred. Mariestela, recognizing his desire, proceeds to insert her fingers in his mouth, which is sexually arousing to him. Her fingers penetrating his mouth arouse a desire to be penetrated, which, until then, he had never acknowledged. But his reaction is fear and dismissal of the whole episode: "me controlé. Me detuve en seco. Es hora de irse, basta de locuras" (23).

¹⁸ This displacement and concealment of homosexual desire is also obvious in Antonio's relationship to Lord Laghlin, a character present in both Antonio's conscious and unconscious life.

This sole homosexual encounter referred to in the narrative is a turning point in the plot because it brings a brief phase of emotional stability in Antonio's life during which he is able to identify deeply with Mariestela, his anima, in a nonsexual but deep emotional closeness, as in the mirror and the "habanera" scenes. It seems that he finally understands the nature of the relationship with his anima, which Mariestela clarifies further in this way: "esto no es pasión sino raigambre, lastre, fondeo o permanencia, es cierto que no te amo, sólo te necesito" (245). It is deep communication and reciprocity based on common aspects rather than oppositional differences that unites them at this moment.

The Phallic Mother

Both main characters go through their own processes of maturation. Mariestela's process involves her European trip and the inscription of her own story. Through this inscription, a picture of her past finally emerges. It is a past marked by horrific childhood abuse and her dealing with the "phallic mother." The Freudian "phallic mother" dominates the child's psychosexual development in the pre-Oedipal stage and is both positive and negative: she is "an omnipotent and absolutely powerful, sexually neutral figure," who provides perfect satisfaction to the child's desires (Grosz 314). But she is also a crippling presence whose close and unmediated relationship to the child can stifle his/her development of independence and growth (314-15). As a result of the Oedipus complex, "the mother's pre-Oedipal omnipotent status is transferred to the symbolic father; she is now construed as castrated or lacking [and] the child—of either sex—turns away from her" (315). Mariestela's mother exerted emotional cruelty on her daughter by giving and withholding her love, and by making attempts against her life when she was a pre-Oedipal infant. The mother's cruelty creates a void or lack in the daughter that seems to define her childhood and teenage years. She longs for her mother's love, but that love is not there for her, therefore her sexual/emotional search. But it is obvious that she has achieved psychological healing and maturity in the present, because her descriptions, even though terrible and painful, do not dwell on the hatred that one might expect but on understanding of where her mother's acts came from. This is most apparent when she is able to provide textual space to her mother's voice within one of her own monologues.

Mariestela's mother's sole monologue in the novel reveals an emotionally disturbed, distant, and abusive mother figure, which contradicts traditional motherhood idealizations associated with the Virgin Mary icon within Hispanic culture, and links Rossi's text to both surrealist and feminist aesthetics, which render negative depictions of such figures as part of their revolt against conventional female roles.¹⁹ In the monologue the mother addresses Mariestela through the familiar Spanish "tú," and reveals details of the causes for her hatred and unhappiness: having conceived Mariestela out of wedlock and being in a conservative patriarchal society, she felt forced to marry the baby's father, even though she did not love him. She felt controlled by her husband and unable to express her likes and dislikes openly. She seemed to feel this control particularly in terms of location: for many months of each year her husband forced her to live in their farm in the Caribbean plains, a place of rainforests and violent climate, which she abhors since she is a city girl from the

¹⁹ See Susan Rubin Suleiman's essay "Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the mother."

cool mountain climate and urban capital San José.²⁰ To the reader, a contrast becomes evident between the mother's past stupefying lack of mobility and freedom and her daughter's high mobility and ethereal nature in the narrative's present. The monologue also reveals the mother's mixed feelings toward her daughter. On one hand there is a sadistic pleasure in her desire to strangle her infant daughter: "apretar con delicia tu cuello hasta que esa carita que me observa siempre con esa mirada de interrogación, esa carita sorprendida, temerosa, se convierte en una cara de dolor y se va poniendo morada" (197). But it is obvious that she is also fearful and needy of her daughter. Her daughter is described as an unsettling presence through the sustained image of the river's flow, full of movement and obscenity. Movement and obscenity could refer to Mariestela's search for sexual freedom, which the mother wanted feverishly in her own youth but was never able to achieve. In a revengeful way, she ends up ascribing to prescribed gender and sexual norms, and strictly policing them in her daughter. But when Mariestela deviates from these norms, as is evident in her descriptions of bisexual desire during her preteen and teenage years, she can see her only as savage, unruly, and possessed (199-200), like the Caribbean natural landscape: "Sé que estás a merced de brujos y de zegas en un claro que oculta la montaña . . ." (199). To equate her daughter's search for sexual freedom to being possessed shows the mother's fear and inability to accept sexuality and identity outside the traditional normative.

The significance of this monologue by the mother must be emphasized. Mariestela shows that she has come to terms with her past suffering and that of her mother's.

Back to Square One

But if Mariestela is so free from her painful past, why, then, the persistence of Antonio's hallucinatory strangulation images at the beginning and most particularly toward the plot's end, which seem to point to an unresolved pain of hers?

Antonio's last hallucination reveals a different agenda of his as well as the novel's critical stance toward psychoanalysis. He has a vivid image of the green-eyed woman slashing Mariestela's neck, which causes him such concern that he becomes physically sick. But Mariestela shows up shortly afterward and insists that she is fine and that she has not had any such encounter with her mother, something that Octavia corroborates in a later conversation. What becomes certain from the ensuing conversation between Antonio and Octavia is that he is dealing with such guilt after his sexual encounter with Alberto that he wants to go back to his old macho ways, which means his psychological repudiation/negation of Mariestela's sexual fluidity. Octavia sees ongoing signs of this repudiation and suspects its causes: "Mariestela no corre ningún peligro. A menos que . . . , a menos que tú le cobres algo, le tengas asco o la desprecies" (265). And indeed, from his now reinstated position as phantasmatic subject, Antonio sees Mariestela as perverted and crazy, that is, outside heterosexual norms and away from rationality. And he blames 'the mother': "Perfecta ejemplificación del 'double-bind', esa actitud ambivalente de la madre, origen de un sinnúmero de casos de locura" (265). This is ironic, of course, since he is unable to deal with his feminine side, which might be a symptom of his own unresolved Oedipal issues.

²⁰ This negative depiction of the Caribbean lowlands contrasts sharply with positive depictions of tropical landscapes by Mariestela, and with positive, almost idealized, depictions found in Rossi's later narratives.

Following prescribed heteronormativity, he must project the women around him as *the other* in order to reaffirm his location as subject of language and culture. His textual and representational ploy is an attempt to impose an interpretation or a discourse over another, that is, his over hers. The last hallucination is important because it shows Antonio's controlling side and also because its narration shows the novel's ironic stance toward psychoanalysis. It is his return to psychoanalysis, after a hiatus of several months, that ushers in this hallucination and his repudiation of Mariestela. The implication is that psychoanalysis functions as one of the social control mechanisms that Foucault refers to as "technologies of sexuality," which reinforces "the law," that is, sexual normativity (129-31). In Antonio's case, psychoanalysis seems to take him back to his imaginary and phantasmatic self, whose very existence can only happen by ignoring the psychosexual diversity discovered through Mariestela.

Antonio, as the textually and socially privileged male psyche and discursive subject, feels threatened by the presence of his female side or anima. In order to overcome this threat and to keep his privileged position, he first presents her as a defenseless child toward whom he can act as a caring protector, as represented in the cave scene. Although he eventually opens up a textual and ontological space for her by relaxing his rigid gender and subjectivity paradigms, this proves to be too much for him. In order to keep the status quo, that is, his rational masculinity, he must make Mariestela disappear, which, he acknowledges as "el proceso, el paulatino —y repentino— cesar de la memoria" (276). Closing his mind to his past and his sexuality means Mariestela's dissolution, which is textually dramatized as a painful process for her. Fears and anxieties besiege her and undercut her free spirit. She shows something totally out of her own character: a wish to enter into a traditional marriage with Antonio. What this shows is that Mariestela understands that in order to remain present in Antonio's psyche, in the narrative, and, by extension, in society, she will need to forsake her fluid and free sense of identity and sexuality. She seems to be prepared to do this, but to no avail, since Antonio closes the door to any further self exploration. She disappears from his mind, but at the closing of the plot, he has a nagging sense that "de haber persistido en el impasse, de haber seguido habitando la duda, de haberme dado realmente con la cabeza en el muro, habría ocurrido el milagro. Habría ocurrido algo terrible y prodigioso" (274). In other words, deep inside he lacked the courage to embrace his newly found multiple psychosexual perspective, which would have led to a more truthful sense of self. However, there is a glimpse of hope at the very end when doubt takes hold of him again, and he looks for Mariestela and Octavia once more. He goes back to their apartment and, importantly, he acknowledges what his "inner" truth is:

Me atravesó un chispazo. La certeza con un peso terrible, sin la duda: mi comercio con Mariestela había durado lo que duró la brecha entre las certidumbres. Lo que duró el desvelo. Lo que duró mi impasse o el de la teoría económica. Sí, ellas estaban ahí, pero yo ya no tenía llave —o clave— para entrar. Al obturarse la falla, había perdido el camino hacia sus cuerpos. Hacia eso desbocado en la noche, buscándose. (273-74)

Mariestela and Octavia, representing a way of being and a sexuality not bound by rational dichotomies and heterosexual restrictions, are there, they reside inside him, in his unconscious, but he will hide this truth in order to conform to social norms that endow him with privilege.

María la noche is an experiment that follows, almost to the letter, *Tel quel's* mandates of textual self-reflexivity and explosion of all limits: stylistic, linguistic, epistemological, ontological. It challenges cultural dualities such as the real/the imagined, male/female, straight/queer, narrative/lyricism, reason/emotion, and so on. It is a literary experiment marked by stylistic and thematic risk-taking that reflects its rebellious and revolutionary character. Its appropriation and questioning of psychological theories is noteworthy. While they serve as important structural and thematic narrative pillars, they are undermined at the same time. Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian theories are founded on notions of heterosexuality and assumptions of female inferiority. The novel challenges these notions by exposing their inconsistencies, as seen through Antonio's patriarchal mindset. Freud and Lacan masculinist analyses associate women with a *lack* and with the unconscious, which imply inferiority for its dissociation from rationality. They also assume heterosexuality as normative. Rossi, like other *Tel quel* and post-*Tel quel* feminist writers and critics, challenges these Freudian and Lacanian concepts.

In comparison to other novels produced in Latin America in the 1980s, *María la noche* can be considered radical for its formal experimentation and for its probing of heterosexuality. It reflects a changing sexual landscape in the 1980s and the need for a shift in conceptual paradigms and power relations. It engages a politics of pleasure and sexuality and effectuates a cultural critique of patriarchy's imposition and policing of heteronormativity. It registers a genealogy of patriarchal male subjectivity, deconstructing its "truth" as rooted in fear and denial of sexual possibilities outside the traditional heterosexual dichotomy. Patriarchy, as represented by Antonio, not only ignores Mariestela's multiple sexuality, but willfully misinterprets it in order to maintain its dominance. Rossi's representation of Mariestela's final disappearance and Antonio's reinstating of his old self could be interpreted as a sociological critique of the impossibility of psychosexual diversity within heterodox patriarchal society.

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