

Correspondence as Resistance: The Epistolary Genre in Dulce Chacón's Narrative

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## Abstract

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(Under the direction of Dr. Alfredo J. Sosa-Velasco)

Although the author Dulce Chacón is probably most famous for her novels, *Cielos de barro* (2000) and *La voz dormida* (2002), she wrote three other works that are important precursors to her later critically acclaimed books: *Algún amor que no mate* (1996), *Blanca vuela mañana* (1997) and *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* (1998). The present study would argue that Chacón's novels all provide important commentary on the place of women in their corresponding society and that they often characterize women as being trapped or imprisoned, both literally and figuratively. It is through the epistolary genre that the feminine figures in Chacón's novels are able to rebel against their confinements and constraints. Thus it is that this intimate type of writing becomes a transgression that allows them to break free of their imprisonment and to gain a place in the memory of those that read their letters.

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## I. Introduction

Although Dulce Chacón is probably most famous for her two final award-winning novels, *Cielos de barro* (2000) and *La voz dormida* (2002), she wrote three other works that are important precursors to her later critically acclaimed books. *Algún amor que no mate* (1996), *Blanca vuela mañana* (1997) and *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* (1998) are considered by some to be sentimental novels,<sup>1</sup> a trilogy whose categorization as such has provided them with little critical attention.<sup>2</sup> My analysis would argue that these three early novels, along with her final two works, all provide important commentary on the place of women in their corresponding society. Dulce Chacón's novels, culminating in *La voz dormida*, characterize women as being trapped or imprisoned, both literally and figuratively. These characters portray women that are captives of their circumstances, females that are imprisoned at times by their relationships, their political convictions, their social and cultural status, their ignorance and even in one case, their health. As Carmen Servén Díez states, "en las novelas de Dulce Chacón encontramos una construcción ficcional realista en la que se desarrolla la epopeya de las mujeres humilladas y ofendidas en la España contemporánea; una escritura comprometida con su tiempo y con su género" (254). Arguably, Chacón's first

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Gil Casado in his article "Dulce Chacón y la continuación de la novela críticosocial" states that the author's first three works "son novelas sentimentales, donde se narra el desencanto entre una pareja y la resultante ruptura o abandono. Típicamente son obras de diseño deshumanizado, pues las relaciones humanas están privatizadas e interiorizadas" (81). The back cover of the edition of *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* states that "Dulce Chacón cierra su *Trilogía de la Huida* con esta novela sobre la incomunicación en el mundo de la pareja." It is unknown if this was the design of the author or if it was a scheme created by her publisher.

<sup>2</sup> *Algún amor que no mate* is the most studied novel of Chacón's earlier trilogy; see bibliography for related works, many of which focus on violence against women. These articles include those written by Ana Corbalán, Jacqueline Cruz, Esther Raventós-Pons, María del Carmen Servén Díez, and María Ángeles Suz Ruíz.

three works are more social in their commentary, while her last two novels become much more political.

Throughout her novelistic work, Chacón includes many letters written by female characters that become an important recourse for their claiming a place in the narrative and thus in history. It is through the epistolary genre that the feminine figures in Chacón's novels are able to rebel against their confinements and constraints; this intimate type of writing thus becomes a transgression that allows them to break free of their imprisonment and to gain a place in the memory of those that read their letters.<sup>3</sup> Like many other authors of the "boom" of women writers in Spain which include such women as Soledad Puertolas, Rosa Montero and Clara Sánchez, Chacón's novels "possess two intertwined characteristics: memory as a driving force and the search for a new identity. Moreover, the act of writing, whether in the form of letters or diaries, plays an indispensable role in many of these novels as a way of providing a coherent explanation of the protagonists' world" (Urioste 286-87). It is through these letters that the author gives women a voice that previously would have been silenced, ignored or forgotten. Correspondence is thus appropriated as resistance for these repressed women and my analysis will study the use of these letters and notes in each work as a way to escape the circumstances that bind Chacón's female characters.

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<sup>3</sup> The use of letters by female writers is nothing new and is part of a long tradition which includes Sor Juana and her famous "Respuesta a Sor Filotea." Laura Freixas includes a very interesting analysis and history of the literary work of women in her book *Literatura y mujeres* which argues that "los géneros literarios escogidos [...] por las mujeres no tienen sólo en común el ser menos codificados y prestigiosos—los géneros situados en la periferia de la cultura—, sino también [...] los géneros del yo" (156). These genres include letters, diaries, lyrical poetry and novels which traditionally could be created in the private sphere where women spent most of their time (the household).

Female writers and their respective works have become more significant in recent years in Spain as the debate over the existence of feminine writing has grown.<sup>4</sup> In her article “Narrative of Spanish Women Writers of the Nineties,” Carmen Urioste gives an overview of many of these authors including Dulce Chacón who “represent the third generation of Spanish women writers in the second half of the twentieth century” (282). According to Kyra A. Kietrys and Montserrat Linares, the three generations discussed by Urioste include the postwar writers, the “boom” writers and the nueva narrativa. Forming part of the postwar generation are “women born in the 1920s who experienced firsthand the Spanish Civil War and whose first works were published during the Franco dictatorship” (2). Included in this group are Carmen Martín Gaité and Josefina Aldecoa. The “boom” consists of “women born in the 1940s and 1950s whose literary careers flourished during the transition to democracy or shortly afterward” including Soledad Puertolas, Rosa Montero and Clara Sánchez (2). Finally, the nueva narrativa which is made up of women such as Belén Gopegui, Marta Sanz, Luisa Castro, Espido Freire and Lucía Extebarria, who were “born during the 1960s and 1970s who started publishing in the solidly democratic 1990s” (2). Although most of her works were written during the 1990s, Dulce Chacón is part of the “boom” generation which Urioste further analyzes.

In her article, Urioste discusses the reasons for the relative explosion in production, publication, and readership which some have called a “boom”. She argues that when literature becomes an industrial good it is subject to market laws and the whims of the reader.

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<sup>4</sup> For a very interesting analysis of this question see *Literatura y mujeres: Escritoras, público y crítica en la España actual* by Laura Freixas which attempts to explain the attitudes that people have toward women writers in Spain today. Freixas aims to debunk the popular myth propagated by the media and literary critics that there is an unprecedented number of successful women writers in both publishing and sales which she attributes rather to the higher visibility of a select few. She also analyzes the idea of what constitutes “feminine literature” and whether or not it exists as being separate from and in opposition to “masculine literature.”



As reader interest in women writers grew, so did the publication of works that reflected this taste and vice versa. However, this “boom” in works by female authors has “raised the concern that their works are ‘light’ marketing products of dubious value” (284). In order to retaliate against this depreciation and marginalization, women writers have established ways to react against the transitory nature of the text as a commodity. These combative methods include a “preference for the first-person narrative,” “perspectivism through different points of view,” a “preference for a woman or group of women as protagonists,” and “fragmentation as a narrative technique” (284-85). All of these strategies have helped the works of women writers gain literary merit as they explore and expand themes, ideas, and techniques in their novels.

In the introduction to their book *Women in the Spanish Novel Today: Essays on the Reflection of Self in the Works of Three Generations* (2009), Kietrys and Linares include a brief list of common concerns for women writers in Spain. These themes include “the need to recover the voices of women lost to history [...] as well as the need to establish connections between those lost women and Spanish women today [...] the need to reclaim a literal or metaphorical space [...] the need to repair broken relationships of the past” (3). For women writers of the 1990s specifically, it was important to “produce texts brimming with postmodern elements—supremacy of subjectivity, fragmentation, discursiveness, search for a new identity—in which the logocentric patriarchal tradition is contemplated and configured in a systematic way” (Urioste 283). Through their writing, these women questioned their position in world, striving to “subvert hegemonic roles within Spanish society” as well as within the literary community (286).

Thanks to much effort, in the end women writers have accomplished a great deal. They have stepped into the forefront of the literary world and this visibility of women authors in public spaces allows them, as social beings, to surpass the gender role normally assigned to women and to modify the symbolic meaning of language to give rise to a new representation based on the change of ideological positions [...] the women writers of the 1990s [...] are redefining the meaning of the language on which the female world and woman's identity are based. (Urioste 283)

Though it has been a process that has taken some time, Spanish women authors have gained legitimacy in their writing, a trend reflected in the greater publication of their works and the winning of prestigious literary awards in recent years.

Dulce Chacón (born in Badajoz, 1954-died in Madrid, 2003) is one of the female authors that have contributed to this change in the literary landscape of modern Spain. Though many of her works have women as their main characters as well as dealing with what some people might call women's issues, it is important to keep in mind the author's view of "feminine literature." When asked in an interview if she believed there was a literature of women and a literature of men, Chacón's response was as follows:

La literatura femenina no existe, existe una literatura escrita por mujeres y una literatura escrita por hombres, escrita por homosexuales, escrita por morenos, por rubios, por pelirrojos [...] Pero solamente a la literatura escrita por mujeres se le pone un apelativo, "femenina". Eso me parece que es menospreciar a la mujer que escribe. La literatura no necesita de adjetivos, es universal. (qtd. in Velázquez Jordan)

In her lifetime, cut short by an untimely death, Chacón wrote not only in the narrative genre, but also poetry as well as theater.<sup>5</sup> Her poetry includes the following works, *Querrán ponerle nombre* (1992), *Las palabras de la piedra* (1993), *Contra el desprestigio de la altura* (1995), *Matar al ángel* (1999) and *Cuatro gotas* (2003). Her two theatrical pieces are *Segunda mano* (1998) and an adaptation of her novel by the same name *Algún amor que no mate* (2002). She is, however, more well-known for her novels because in Spain, like most other countries, prose has become the dominant literary genre in recent years. Several of her later novelistic works won prestigious literary awards including the Premio Azorín for *Cielos de barro* and the Premio de Libreros de Madrid for the best book of 2002 for *La voz dormida*.

Chacón's first novel, *Algún amor que no mate*, tells the story of Prudencia, a woman who finds herself trapped in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with a husband whose infidelities lead her to commit suicide. She tells her story from a hospital room, having overdosed on pills after discovering that her spouse's lover has an illegitimate child. Throughout the novel, Prudencia's story is presented as a lost cause as she recounts what she has suffered during the brutal cycle of an unloving marital relationship that she is unable to escape. Interspersed in the second half of the work are eight letters written by her husband's lover to him, letters that detail the development of their clandestine relationship that also eventually becomes violent, paralleling and supplementing the anecdotes that

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<sup>5</sup> In the same interview Chacón was asked which literary genre she personally liked the best, her answer revealed that: "Todos los géneros son muy gratificantes, porque escribir me apasiona. Cuando estoy escribiendo una novela, me encanta andar indagando en ese mundo durante tanto tiempo. Cuando escribo un poema, si me dura más de dos meses estoy sufriendo del poema y no disfrutando de él, mientras que en una novela, si estoy un año y medio, estoy disfrutando de la estructura, del momento mágico de la creación, que es muchísimo más largo en una novela que en un poema. Sin embargo, cuando escribo un poema y lo leo y me gusta siento una gratificación enorme y quizá es lo más grande en el terreno del sentimiento" (Velázquez Jordan).

Prudencia tells. These letters are important in that they show how the lover eventually breaks away from Prudencia's husband as well as representing the catalyst needed by the abused wife to finally make a decision for herself, to take her own life.

Chacón's second novel, *Blanca vuela mañana*, recounts the story of two different couples. The first consists of Blanca, a Spaniard, and Peter, a German, who have a relationship in which it appears that language and cultural barriers are not their only misunderstandings. Throughout the novel they are a pair that, after seven years together, discover that they are not as in love as they once thought and that breaking the cycle of their relationship of obligation and comfort is not as easy as it might appear. Blanca is trapped not only by her own demons but also those of Peter and the novel shows her struggle to find herself. The other couple, Heiner and Peter's cousin, Ulrike, were never married but were deeply connected and in love. Theirs is a relationship that survives even the long illness of Ulrike, a cancer that is slowly killing her when a car accident finally takes her life. Letters play a central role in the novel as Ulrike writes them to her children, lover and cousin in order to say goodbye, give advice and to gain a bit of immortality through her own written words.

*Háblame, musa, de aquel varón*, is the story of Adrian Noguera, an insomniac who is looking back on the actions and events that led his wife Matilde to leave him for his associate, the film producer Ulises. An aspiring screenwriter, Noguera is so focused on and engrossed with his blossoming career that he is unable to see his wife's distancing until it is too late and she leaves him. The novel recounts the process of separation between the couple, the gradual disintegration of their relationship, the clues and signs that Noguera ignored and denied until he is able to look back and reflect with the help of an omniscient narrator. In the

end, after her own personal odyssey, Matilde escapes from her suffocating relationship, but not before writing a letter of goodbye. When there is nothing left to say, her written words will have to suffice to finally break away. Matilde does not allow for the possibility of a response from Noguera and for this reason her husband can no longer sleep, a common refrain throughout the novel.

*Cielos de barro*, considered by some to be a modern example of the detective novel in Spain, relates the answers given by a potter in his interrogation by a justice of the peace about a multiple murder that had just occurred in a nearby property.<sup>6</sup> Though the authority's questions are not included in the text, the happenings and history of the area are constructed through the words of the man being questioned. Interspersed in his dialogue are chapters that relate the story of a wealthy, land-owning family for which he and most of his neighbors worked. Class divisions, discrimination and abuse abound in the novel, to the point that a childless, vindictive, yet rich woman is able to take the son of a poor one, thus creating the need for clandestine letters as a means of communication between the child and his illiterate mother. An intermediary helps in the process of writing the goings-on of this area of post-war Extremadura, letters which are important in that they give a voice to not only the women who are trapped by the inequity from which they suffer, but to a whole sector of society that is imprisoned by their circumstances and social position.

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<sup>6</sup> See in particular the article "History and Memory, Detection and Nostalgia: The Case of Dulce Chacón's *Cielos de barro*" by Shelley Godsland as well as the one she co-wrote with Stewart King "Crimes Present, Motives Past: A Function of National History in the Contemporary Spanish Detective Novel." Both articles discuss the detective novel as a genre that is used by recent Spanish authors in order to explore their nation's past and how Chacón's book can be considered an interesting mutation. The aim of the first is to explain how: "in contrast to the norm established in many other detective sub-genres, in which the investigator has recourse to multiple interviewees from varied social backgrounds or from the same, bourgeois one, the resolution of the crime in *Cielos de barro* depends almost exclusively on the memories of this socially and economically marginalized figure" (254). The second states that: "in Spanish detective texts, far from the past being viewed through rose-colored glasses, however, it is revived usually to perform a cathartic function; writers work through unresolved issues and episodes in search of answers and seeking closure" (34).

*La voz dormida* tells the stories of a group of female inmates in Las Ventas prison in post-war Madrid. Together they suffer the injustices and indignities associated with being incarcerated while their family members and loved ones on the outside attempt to make their lives more bearable. These women band together against their oppressors and Chacón uses their letters in the novel to give a voice to the women who did not have one previously. Their inclusion helps to carve out a place in both history and memory for those who suffered doubly for being not only political prisoners, but also women. Based on testimonies gathered by the author, the novel, complete with correspondence, questions the culture of silence that existed for many years in Spain. The personal letters and diaries that Chacón includes in her novel contrast with the “official” documents that are also present which again stresses the need to know all sides of the past, not just the government sanctioned and traditional one.

In my analysis I will explain the use of the epistolary genre in each work separately as well also showing how their inclusion is related throughout the five texts. In other words, I will show how the letters were used in the first several novels in order to reflect the often dysfunctional relationships to be found in the narrative while the letters in the last two reveal the situations of specific groups in Spanish history, the lower-class in Extremadura and women political prisoners after the Civil War. By shifting her focus from interpersonal relationships to the exploration of her nation’s recent past, Chacón’s work gains a political tone in these last two novels. Additionally, throughout my analysis I will attempt to create links between each novel in order to show how they are related to one another which can help one understand Chacón’s views on more universal themes such as love, sex, maternity, relationships and memory.

## II. *Algún amor que no mate*

*Algún amor que no mate* begins with an explanation of how the protagonist no longer has sexual relations with her husband: “Hace muchos años que no hago el amor” (11). What might seem like a somewhat normal, albeit sad portrayal of a now celibate marriage after fifteen years together soon is revealed to be the history of an abusive one as the novel continues developing and explaining the story of what began as a happy relationship but ends in the suicide of Prudencia, the protagonist with an apparent split personality.<sup>7</sup> Ana Corbalán explains the use of two distinct perspectives in order to recount the abuses suffered by Prudencia:

Mediante la yuxtaposición de ambas perspectivas, la de Prudencia y la de su *alter* ego, los lectores o espectadores pueden visualizar las dos caras de una misma moneda, el desdoblamiento del monólogo interior de la protagonista y la expresiva narración del sufrimiento de su vida. Esta técnica narrativa ayuda a comprender la situación de aprisionamiento en la que se encuentran muchas mujeres maltratadas debido a su sometimiento y conformidad con las relaciones patriarcales basadas en la dominación y en la autoridad del hombre. (179)

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<sup>7</sup> Abusive relationships are not a new phenomena in Spain as Jacqueline Cruz states in her article “Amores que matan: Dulce Chacón, Icíar Bollaín y la violencia de género” which begins with some disturbing statistics about the number of deaths of women at the hands of spouses or boyfriends in 2003. She says however that even with the stark reality of this social problem, “sorprende que, a pesar de la magnitud del problema de la violencia de género en la España actual y de su protagonismo en los medios de comunicación, muy pocas obras artísticas lo aborden frontalmente” (67). The novel of Dulce Chacón is one of these works as well as the film *Te doy mis ojos* (2003) by Icíar Bollaín.

Trapped by her husband, imprisoned in her own house, Prudencia's only recourse is to create another voice with which to tell her story. As Raventós-Pons points out "the double permits Prudencia to distance herself from her weak personality that shows through her lack of will power required for change" (104). Along with her tragic narrative, which is not told in chronological order but jumps around, the novel contains eight letters and notes from the lover of her husband which offer another angle, revealing a similar story of mistreatment.<sup>8</sup> These letters serve to show the gradual process in the development of a bad relationship as well as supplementing Prudencia's story. They also present a different option for women suffering from abusive relationships to escape, that of leaving to places unknown.<sup>9</sup> As opposed to Prudencia who stays with her husband throughout years of battery, the lover eventually leaves him and her final letter reveals this. Her writing which allows her to put into words what she cannot say out loud gives her the strength to escape and save herself.

Prudencia finds the first of these letters while searching for the veterinarian's phone number after the dog her husband allegedly received as a birthday gift from his mother gets sick: "Prudencia encontró la nota en la chaqueta de su marido, por casualidad, al ir a buscar la tarjeta del veterinario porque el perro se había comido un bote de pastillas" (64). The note reads as follows: "Felicidades, mi amor, espero que mi regalo de cumpleaños te acompañe, para que no te sientas tan solo cuando no estoy contigo. Dale mucho cariño, es muy mimoso,

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<sup>8</sup> Esther Raventós-Pons argues that "instead of the story unfolding in a chronological narrative, the linear time-sense is displaced by another more abstract, where time is broken up, placed and displaced, moving forward and backward, reflecting Prudencia's contradictory and fragmented sense of herself. Linear time is constantly confused and unwound as the narrative voices create a sense of the synchronicity of past, present, and future that structurally reflects the narrator's inner division" (106).

<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline Cruz also states that another option for women who are abused to escape from their relationship is to go crazy which is arguably something that Prudencia does, "la protagonista...representa dos de estas 'salidas' extremas: la locura y el suicidio" (73). Interestingly, denouncing the husband or taking legal action against him, is not presented as an option by either Cruz or by the author Chacón. This is probably a criticism of the judicial system in Spain and its treatment of cases that have to do with domestic violence especially against women.



se parece a ti” (64). Not written in the handwriting of her mother-in-law, Prudencia immediately knows that the dog was a present from her husband’s lover. Enlisting the help of her cousin, they tear the house apart looking for other letters and evidence of the affair. They do not find anything else and when her husband arrives home Prudencia “no se atrevió a decirle que había encontrado la nota pero le exigió que sacara al animal de su casa, sin darle más explicaciones” (66). Her husband goes to remove the dog from the house when Prudencia, suffering from a sense of remorse for the innocent animal, tells him to leave it where it is. The dog dies a few days later from the pills it had ingested. This scene serves to foreshadow the suicide and death of Prudencia who remains just as loyal and subservient as man’s best friend throughout the novel. As her name would suggest, Prudencia (Prudence) is the model wife and interestingly is the only character to be referred to by their name. All of the others are identified by their relationship to Prudencia, they are just the husband, the lover, the mother-in-law, the cousin, etc which allows the novel to have a more universal aspect in that these characters become unspecified and are therefore collective. Chacón often plays with characters’ names in this way, giving them ones that reflect an inherent quality or personality trait.

This incident is further revealing in several ways and plays an important role in the narrative. First of all, it is the first concrete physical evidence for Prudencia that her husband has a lover, although she admits in previous pages that she knew about the affair. Using her alter ego as a resource, Prudencia is able to talk about the most painful of subjects in a detached way, including the fact that: “Hace años que sabe Prudencia que su marido tiene una amante. Al principio sufrió mucho, se ponía a llorar mientras planchaba y lo tenía que dejar porque mojaba la ropa...poco a poco se fue acostumbrando y le encontró las ventajas”

(22). The letter is the first physical manifestation she has found of his infidelities. She does not however, confront her husband with the undeniable truth that she has found. She had apparently learned her lesson after having suffered previously when she attempted to leave him. He says to her: “Tú no te vas a ninguna parte, ni muerta te vas, se acabó la discusión. Y le dio dos bofetadas que la tiraron al suelo” (54). She is trapped in her marriage unable to break away from the pains that “no le dolieron en la cara, sino al lado del alma, en ese rincón que no se le puede enseñar a nadie” (55). The fear, anger and embarrassment of Prudencia in this situation juxtaposes drastically with the words of her husband’s lover in his letter.

The note, though relatively short, shows the love and affection of Prudencia’s husband’s mistress for him. She calls him “mi amor” and expresses her hope that the dog will be a consolation to him when they are apart, that he will not feel so lonely without her. The love they share is a romantic one, most likely sexual as well because as the lover states, the dog is spoiled much like Prudencia’s husband. The note and the emotions expressed contrast with what the narrator feels toward her husband when she explains that she no longer is intimate with him:

Y es que a Prudencia hacía mucho tiempo que ya no le apetecía lo más mínimo, dice que quería a su marido como a un hermano. Y digo yo que eso no tiene ni pies ni sentido, cómo alguien va a querer al hermano por marido. Pero Prudencia sí. Y en las siestas tenía que fingir. Y después ya no hubo siestas. Ya no tuvo que jadear hasta que él acabara, ni decirle que sí cuando él le preguntaba si le había gustado. Porque los hombres necesitan saber que son muy hombres y hay que decirles que lo hacen muy bien. Eso me contaba Prudencia. (22)

It would appear that the lover has eliminated the need for sexual relations in Prudencia's marriage. She no longer has to suffer through the motions, all the while thinking about what she would make for dinner the next day. This first note shows the honeymoon stage of the relationship between the husband and his lover, in which everything appears perfect. When at the end of the novel Prudencia finally discovers the rest of her husband's mistress's letters in a toolbox, they reveal another story altogether.

Unlike the account told by Prudencia, the letters appear in chronological order in the narrative. Though not found until the end of the novel, they are interspersed in the story as if to further explain situations and to show the development of another abusive relationship. The letters appear in a more organized and cohesive way that juxtaposes Prudencia's arguably unstable mental state. They help guide the reader when neither the narrator nor her alter ego can. The second letter tells of the sacrifices that the lover is making in an attempt to appease Prudencia's husband even though according to the mistress, "yo también sufro, por otras razones, y estoy cansada" (67). The lover gives up a lot for her relationship with Prudencia's husband. She sacrifices the possibility of any normalcy in her life by becoming a mistress. She will never be the only woman for Prudencia's husband nor will she ever hold a position of legitimacy as the kept woman. The lover is tired of waiting and being patient in a situation that she does not control, "cansada de que estemos juntos sólo a ratos, cansada de no cansarme nunca de ti" (67). Like the one he has with his wife, Prudencia's husband has the power in his relationship with the lover as well because he is the one that directs how things are and how they will be. This is reflected in the words of Prudencia as well when she describes their relationship, "es verdad que su amor dependía de la dominación: mientras Prudencia se sometió a su marido todo fue bien. El hombre tiene el poder. Y la mujer debe

aceptarlo así. El hombre toma las decisiones. Si las toma la mujer debe hacer que parezca que es el marido quien decide” (73). Though Prudencia does so consciously, it would appear in the letter that the lover is ceding control to Prudencia’s husband almost without realizing it.

One of the ways that the lover reveals her loss of power is by giving up her job: “Me pides que deje de trabajar. Bien. Ahora podrás demostrar que es cierto que no vienes más a menudo porque nunca estoy en casa. Estaré aquí. Esperándote” (67). It would appear that part of the strategy of Prudencia’s husband to maintain control in his relationships is to deny his women the right to be independent by working, that is to say that he creates in them a financial dependence from which it would be more difficult to escape. Prudencia does not work outside of the household either. The one time she attempted to emancipate herself by finding work while her husband was unemployed she was punished for her actions:

Con mucha alegría se lo contó a su marido: que no era gran cosa; que el sueldo era pequeño [...] el marido se fue poniendo rojo por momentos, se acercó a Prudencia y le gritó: ¿Qué te he dicho yo? ¿Qué te he dicho? Ella no sabía contestar [...] el marido le apretó los brazos con mucha fuerza, la empujó contra la pared [...] le gritaba una y otra vez [...] gemía. Lloraba. ¡Qué mi mujer no trabaja! ¿Te enteras? ¡Mi mujer no trabaja! (74-75)

Though she had been trying to help bring money into the household, her husband would not allow her to work. It would hurt his pride too much and therefore he hurt her.

Another strategy of the husband in his manipulation of the women with whom he has relationships that is revealed in his lover’s letter is making them wait. They are subject to his whims and must pass the time waiting for him, which gives him power. As Prudencia explains, “qué triste el dolor del que siempre espera y un día no tiene que esperar. Eso le pasa

a Prudencia. Esperaba a su marido para comer, con la mesa puesta. Siempre a la misma hora. Y desde que murió su suegro come sola sin esperar a nadie, sin mirar el reloj” (69). His lover also tells him that she will wait for him in her house even though she had previously expressed her growing impatience with the situation. She is tired of waiting, but will do it anyway and in doing so gives up more of her power in the relationship.

The third letter was written after Prudencia attempts to confront her husband with his lover when she discovers that they will be meeting at a bar near her house. Though she does not see his mistress, the lover does see Prudencia when she enters behind her and is given a signal by the husband to leave. The letter reveals her pain at the husband’s inaction, in his not recognizing their relationship: “Quería que supieras que no sé cómo me siento. Tanto es el dolor. La humillación. Nunca, nunca me sentí tan despreciada. Es verdad, no ha sido tu culpa, pero eso a mí no me sirve de nada. No me sirve. Mi lugar, el que tú me obligas a ocupar, no es el mío” (72). The lover does not blame the husband for what happens, nor can she tell him exactly how she feels after such a hurtful situation. She knows that she has the disadvantage: “Tú pones las reglas y de antemano sabes quién será el perdedor. Ni me despidió diciéndote tuya” (72). The lover recognizes that she will be the loser in their relationship and in what seems like an example of when she might finally be breaking away, denies the husband the satisfaction of signing the letter ‘yours.’ He does not possess her at this point, a situation that does not last long.

An abrupt change in perspective is shown in the following letter that comes after the husband has hit his lover for the first time. She explains that, “aún no puedo creer lo que pasó ayer. Nunca imaginé que llegaras a ponerme la mano encima, y menos aún que lo hicieras delante del niño [...] espero que esto no se repita. Mi amor, es una frontera peligrosa la que

acabas de pasar, la que acabo de pasar yo” (80). Though in the previous letter the lover was incensed at being ignored by the husband, in this one she forgives him for hitting her because she knows that “me quieres y te perdono por eso, porque yo también te quiero, y porque sé que eres tú el primero en sentir lo que has hecho, que te duele verme llorar. También a mí me duele verte llorar, pidiéndome perdón, abrazándome y secándome las lágrimas” (80). What the lover cannot know is that a very similar situation has happened between the husband and Prudencia when after he hit her

se asustó cuando vio que la había golpeado tan fuerte [...] le cogió la cabeza entre las manos [...] y le secó las lágrimas con los dedos [...] se puso a besarla en la boca. Ella se resistía [...] pero él siguió sin escucharla, le secó las lágrimas con la lengua. Déjame, aparta, gritaba Prudencia [...] entonces la miró como un poseso y se le encendieron los ojos. Quieta, nena [...] y allí mismo, en el comedor, la violentó dos veces. (55)

This letter represents the beginning, but not the end of the physical abuse that the lover suffers at the hands of the husband. It also reveals that the reason for the husband’s anger is his suspicion of the grocer who he believes was flirting with the lover. She states that “no iré más al supermercado, encargaré la compra por teléfono [...] espero que me creas cuando te digo que el dueño piropea a todas las señoras, no sólo a mí” (80). The husband thus isolates his lover even more from the outside world, like Prudencia who is also gradually separated from her friends and later her parents. His possessiveness and irrationality, traits that will not change, cause him to hit his mistress yet she stays, showing that like Prudencia, she too is trapped in a vicious cycle.

Though she had mentioned her son in her previous letter, the one that follows expands on who the father might be. When Prudencia's cousin discovers where the husband's lover lives, she goes to visit her. She pretends to be gathering donations for a cause and in their conversation directs a look toward the child. As the lover writes, "qué niño más mono, me dijo, a quién se parece, desde luego se me parece mucho a alguien pero no sé a quién [...] miró al niño, y me miró a los ojos, con una mirada que me heló por dentro" (83). This chilling look is because the cousin recognizes that it is Prudencia's husband who has fathered the child though the lover does not know this. In the end when Prudencia discovers that her husband has a child, something that she always wanted for herself, it is one of the things that pushes her over the edge: "Cuando Prudencia se enteró de que su marido tenía un hijo se le escapó el mundo. La pobre lo supo por casualidad, porque llamó al supermercado para hacer el pedido y el chico [...] la confundió con la otra, le preguntó por su hijo [...] se había acostumbrado a la amante. Pero, un hijo" (86). She could grow accustomed to the idea that her husband had a lover, but not a child. A child is what Prudencia had always longed for yet could never have: "Los primeros años del matrimonio lloraba cuando le venía la regla, como si perdiera un hijo. Tiene que ser horroroso que se te muera uno cada mes" (39). As the second narrator, her split personality, explains, Prudencia dreamed about her children and what it would be like to be a mother: "Inventas los nombres que tendrían. Les enseñas a hablar. Les cuidas cuando están enfermos" (40). Prudencia was not sterile but because she and her husband no longer had sex there was no chance for a child in their marriage. The revelation of this letter is one that finally drives her to commit suicide but not before reading the others that she has found.

The following two letters recount more examples of the physical abuse that the lover suffers. Again, she rationalizes and enables the violence: “sé que pierdes el control, y que sabes que te quiero, que vas a pedirme perdón y yo te voy a perdonar. Quizá por eso te atreves a maltratarme así. Volví a perdonarte la segunda vez, y la tercera, y la cuarta” (92). The letter allows her to write what she cannot say: “Ahora sé que me atrevo a escribirte lo que pienso pero no a decírtelo, por si te enfadas, y esto no puede ser” (93). The letters have the power to communicate that which she cannot speak out loud. They detail the cruelty she endures and yet each time she forgives him: “No es que no quiera hablarte. Es que cuando te enfadas no sé qué decir. He estado callada toda la semana porque el lunes me diste muy fuerte. Y porque mandaste callar al niño cuando se puso a llorar, le levantaste la mano y casi le pegas también a él, y eso sí que no te lo puedo consentir” (98). Again she is unable to express herself and remains quiet until her writing allows her to speak. She states that abusing her son is something that she will not stand for and that the argument had started because she did not want to suffer the humiliation of having to stand outside the door of her house to wait for the husband to pass by with Prudencia each Sunday before mass. When he drags her to the door, she writes “sé muy bien que no se te debe hablar si te pones así, porque tienes un pronto muy violento, por eso no te he hablado en toda la semana. Pero ya ves cómo hemos estado en la puerta [...] te esperaremos todos los domingos si es lo que tú quieres” (98). Once again, the lover gives in to the demands of the husband and agrees to continue waiting for him. She is unable to see through his manipulation nor can she recognize that there is very little chance that he will ever change, as it can be assumed that if her son is now older that their relationship has been continuing in the same way for years.



The last letter that the lover writes is one to say goodbye to the husband. In this relatively short note, she is finally able to break away from the cycle of violence by escaping somewhere far from where the husband is. The lover does not write what it is that finally caused her to make the decision to leave, yet one can assume that it would have to be something horrifying as she had put up with so much abuse throughout the rest of their relationship. She reveals that she truly loved the husband but in the end, that was not enough to make her want to stay in the situation in which she was suffering:

Adiós mi amor:

Principio y fin. Tú y yo tuvimos un principio. He encontrado un trabajo lejos de aquí. Todo tiene un final. No te reprocho nada. Sé que la culpa, si es que hay culpables, es toda mía. Nunca debí consentir que me anularas así, me negué a mí misma, me he perdido la vista. Me pediste tiempo y yo te di toda la vida. Todo lo hice por amor, te quise hasta ese punto, hasta éste. Ahora ya no. Voy a aprender a quererme de nuevo, lejos de ti, lejos.

Cuando pase el tiempo suficiente, cuando te pierda el miedo, te mandaré nuestra dirección para que puedas visitar a tu hijo.

Te quise hasta la locura. Ni un paso más. (103)

Unlike Prudencia who gets away from her husband by committing suicide, the lover takes her son and disappears with him, not letting the husband know where they are going. She becomes independent by finding a job, something that previously had been denied her by the husband. In this letter she is able to recognize that she had lost herself in their relationship and that now it is time to find herself, to gain a sense of self esteem, to learn how to live without fear again. Once more it is the written word that allows the lover to say what she is

unable to say out loud to the husband. Writing in this way becomes a statement of independence.

This final goodbye allows the novel to offer a more inclusive panorama of options for abused women. As Ana Corbolán states, “*Algún amor que no mate* ofrece un cuadro complejo que sirve para ejemplificar los aspectos sórdidos de las relaciones de pareja [...] así como dos de los modos de afrontar y liberarse ante estas agresiones violentas: o bien por medio de la huida o cometiendo un acto de suicidio” (182). In contrast to the death of Prudencia, the escape of the lover is a more hopeful ending to the cycle of violence she had suffered. María Ángeles Suz Ruíz argues that “frente a situaciones durísimas vividas por las protagonistas de sus obras, Dulce Chacón reivindica la esperanza” and the inclusion of the lover’s letters presents an optimistic contrast to the passing away of Prudencia (78). The letters also offer a more coherent way to read the story of an abusive relationship. Without their inclusion, the narration of Prudencia and her alter ego is arguably difficult at times to piece together, with its changes in subject, non-chronological order and jumps in time. The letters help provide structure to the novel, as well as the thoughts of Prudencia, who is arguably mentally unstable. Without the letters, which could be considered written, concrete proof of the abuse suffered in the relationship between the lover and the husband, the story of Prudencia could be seen as being of questionable veracity. She is a woman who early on admits to attempting suicide and her way of often referring to herself in the third person in order to relate her story further adds to the problem of truthfulness. With their inclusion however, the letters complement the testimony of Prudencia and provide an all more encompassing view of what women suffer when they are in violent relationships that they are unable to leave.

### III. *Blanca vuela mañana*

*Blanca vuela mañana* tells the story of two women, Blanca and Ulrike who are linked together by one man, Peter, who is Blanca's lover and Ulrike's cousin. It is the story of how both women let go, Blanca of her bad relationship and Ulrike of her life which is finally cut short by an accident though a cancer had been killing her slowly for quite a while. Ulrike writes letters to her children, her lover Heiner and her cousin in order to put into words a final goodbye, a theme repeated throughout Chacón's writing. Unlike the lover in *Algún amor que no mate* Ulrike's letters express her anguish at not being able to know a response. She is not escaping anything except her illness and her letters are much longer and more sentimental than the lover's in the previous novel. Ulrike's letters contain her fears, thoughts, advice and messages of love. They are eloquent and help her maintain a presence in the memory of her loved ones. In contrast, Blanca also writes but the totality of her words are contained in one short note that though not lengthy is quite revealing of her situation, confusion and feelings throughout the work, which begins with the death of Ulrike because according to Urioste: "for Blanca in Chacón's novel, the illness and untimely death of her friend Ulrike motivates a reflection on the meaning of love in general [...] and on her private relationship with Peter" (287-88). This reflection involves confronting and dealing with the demons that plague her.

*Blanca vuela mañana* is another novel that is not told in chronological order but rather has many examples of flashbacks as the characters remember events past. The book

opens with Heiner sitting in Ulrike's garden, thinking about her because "es tiempo para el recuerdo," a phrase which is repeated often and becomes a sort of slogan throughout the narrative (13). The first note appears as part of another jump in time at the opening of the novel, when Ulrike has an accident and is taken to the hospital in an ambulance. The police and emergency workers leave a note for her closest of kin to come as soon as possible to the hospital:

HOSPITAL GENERAL

URGENCIAS

TRAUMATOLOGÍA

PERSONARSE ALLÍ LO ANTES POSIBLE

INGRESO: 08.15 HORAS. (19)

Heiner, her longtime lover, receives this note from Ulrike's neighbor who states that "la policía me ha dejado esta nota. Por mi memoria tan mala, para que no me olvidara de lo que tenía que decir" (19). Here the words that are written serve to help the neighbor remember something. They are put down on paper to resist being forgotten. The inclusion of this seemingly inconsequential note is a way to foreshadow the importance of the act of writing in memory. Without the note, the neighbor might have forgotten crucial information. Ulrike has a similar goal in her own writing: that she will be remembered by her loved ones. It is through her words that she is finally able to solidify herself in the memory of others. The note from the police is short, direct and to the point. It contrasts with the letters that are later included in the text which are much longer and more personal in nature. There is a distinction between the official nature of the first note written in all uppercase script, giving it a more

urgent, bureaucratic feel and the later private letters which is a theme repeated throughout Chacón's novelistic work, especially in her last book *La voz dormida*.

When Heiner arrives at the hospital after getting in contact with Ulrike's two children, Maren and Curt, he realizes that "ya no quedaba nada de ella, sólo su cuerpo tendido, inconsciente, ajeno a él, indiferente a todo" (14). He receives more details about the accident which actually killed her: "un coche se saltó el semáforo. Ulrike estaba empezando a cruzar la calle. Fue un golpe suave, el coche iba despacio, sólo la tocó con el espejo retrovisor, pero el pavimento estaba helado y rebaló. Se ha destrozado la cabeza contra el bordillo de una acera" (15). In the end, it is not her cancer which finally causes her death but rather a minor accident. In fact, she had actually been feeling better the day before the accident. Though this manner of dying is somewhat ironic, Ulrike still had time to prepare herself for her death: "Ulrike sabía que iba a morir. Todos lo sabían. Esperaba la muerte, aun así, la cogió por sorpresa, y ahora moría de una muerte que no era la suya. Se preparaba desde hacía tres años, con temor e incertidumbre, tenía miedo a sufrir, miedo al dolor" (23). Ulrike had been waiting for her death to come as her disease progressed, yet by a quirk of fate she dies as a result of an accident. It is as if the author wants to show that no one can be one hundred percent certain of when or how they will die and that we all need to be ready. Part of Ulrike's preparation for her own death was the writing of letters that aided in the settling of her affairs.

Interestingly, the two young protagonists in both of Chacón's first novels die in hospitals. In *Algún amor que no mate* Prudencia expires after having committed suicide. In *Blanca vuela mañana*, Ulrike passes on after her accident. Though both are tragic situations and outcomes, both characters had been suffering for years, one from abuse and the other

from cancer. Their deaths perhaps represent an end to suffering and the chance to finally have peace. It is especially significant that the family and loved ones of both characters go to the hospitals to see them one last time. Prudencia's estranged parents and mother-in-law arrive to say goodbye and ask forgiveness. They are perhaps able to gain a sense of closure. Ulrike's family arrives but she is already unresponsive. It is her letters that will serve to provide closure for those close to her.

When it is known that the prognosis of Ulrike is not good, her cousin, Peter, is contacted in Spain where he lives and he comes directly to Germany to be by her side. When he tells his girlfriend, Blanca that he is leaving, she decides to go with him because, “a Blanca no le sorprendió la reacción inmediata de Peter, adoraba a su prima Ulrike, y a Peter tampoco la de Blanca, que le adoraba a él” (15). At this point in time, it would appear that the relationship between Blanca and Peter is a happy one but as the novel progresses it is revealed to be quite the opposite. Much like someone suffering from a debilitating and slow moving illness, Blanca has also been ailing for years from her dysfunctional partnership with Peter. The cultural and language barriers that separate them are not their only problems. Like Prudencia in *Algún amor que no mate* she had been living for years in a partnership in which she was never equal. Though she was not being physically abused, theirs was also a relationship without passion or sexual relations. This fact is made quite clear throughout the novel and would appear to be the author's way of showing that part of a healthy and stable relationship is the physical aspect of it. Without this, relationships like those between Prudencia and her husband, or Blanca and Peter, become harmful and dysfunctional, doomed to fail. However, they arrive together in time to see Ulrike before the doctors take her off life support. This sad scene in the hospital marks the beginning of the end of their relationship as

the death of Ulrike forces Blanca to reevaluate her life, an exploration that eventually leads her into the arms of another man.

After Ulrike dies in the hospital, the family makes its way home and “cuando llegaron a casa, Peter se fue directo al dormitorio de Ulrike, miró en el armario. La carpeta estaba dispuesta para ser encontrada de inmediato. Varios sobres. Nombres escritos con la letra de Ulrike. Peter. Heiner. Maren. Curt” (26). She has written four letters to each of her loved ones which are all included in the novel, starting with the one directed to Peter. Though it is not revealed until later in the narrative, in the form of other flashbacks, Peter and Ulrike had become like brother and sister after surviving the horrors of the Second World War in Germany. The tragedy of losing parents and grandparents, of being uprooted and moved across the country, of losing their innocence had created a strong bond between them as well as causing some of the problems they experienced in their respective relationships. In other words their experiences as children had created demons in their lives as adults because they were unable to forget or repress their past no matter how hard they tried.

In her letter to Peter, Ulrike starts off asking if, “¿Aprenderás a vivir sin mí?” (27). This question reflects their close bond; Ulrike knows that her death will affect her cousin greatly. She laments that “todos los días me despierto pensando que no es justo. Por qué me ha tocado a mí. Precisamente ahora. Debe quedarte este consuelo. He sido feliz, por fin” (27).<sup>10</sup> After having lived so long in dysfunctional relationships she has finally found

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<sup>10</sup> Julia Neuberger explains the idea of the ‘good death’ in the second edition of her book *Dying Well: A Guide to Enabling a Good Death*: “The idea of the good death is an ancient one [...] we are supposed to die in generational order, parents before children, grandparents before parents [...] the most satisfactory outcome to be desired is that we will die peacefully, possibly aware that we are near our end, having achieved most of what we wished to achieve. Our hope is that there will be no pain, either physical or emotional [...] and that we will either know nothing about it [...] or that we will know very little, just enough to say our farewells to those we love” (1). Ulrike does not have this kind of an experience in the novel, which causes her anger and forces her to make different plans, like writing letters which help her work through her feelings toward her inevitable death.

happiness with Heiner and hopes that this knowledge might make her death a bit easier on Peter. She shares her fears as well, “estoy sola. Todos estamos solos. Frente a la muerte siento más la soledad [...] la muerte, a todos nos espera la muerte [...] es difícil de aceptar, no tengo siquiera el consuelo de la religión” (27-28).<sup>11</sup> At a time when many people would turn to religion in order to gain a sense of solace and hope, Ulrike turns to those closest to her, including her lover Heiner and her cousin Peter. They might be able to help her work through the processes of her grief. She however recognizes that though she now has Heiner by her side, where she is going, she goes alone. She asks Peter to help take care of Heiner after she is gone because “su fortaleza es sólo fachada” (27). They try to be strong for each other but Ulrike knows that her illness is weighing heavily on Heiner, though he urges her to keep ‘fighting,’ a way of speaking that she scorns even while using it herself:

Utilizo la jerga militar, como los médicos, como si fuera el paciente quien tiene que «vencer» a la enfermedad, y no la medicina la que debe curar [...] en la terapia de grupo los médicos nos prometen la salvación, luchar es ya una victoria, dicen, yo me indigno, no sólo por el lenguaje marcial, sino por los que se lo creen, pero me indigno aún más cuando me lo creo yo, porque después vienen los análisis y éstos no mienten, la enfermedad avanza [...] para seguir con palabras de guerra: estoy invadida. (28)

This part of her letter can be seen as a criticism of how terminally ill patients are dealt with and how sometimes they are forced through treatments they may not want. She resists

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<sup>11</sup> With this phrase it would appear that Ulrike has passed through the five stages of grief as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her groundbreaking work *On Death and Dying*. These include: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and finally Acceptance. In her writing, Ulrike expresses how she has finally reached a sense of acceptance after making her way through the previous stages. Her letters help underline the process that she has undergone to reach the sense of acceptance that she is experiencing at the time of her death.



speaking of her illness in terms of a war. Ulrike has survived a real war, World War II, and knows what that experience is like, one in which horrible, unexpected and tragic things happen. Her illness is not a battle. The real thing that Ulrike is fighting against is time, which is interestingly what is also paradoxically the most precious for someone who is dying. Time becomes the enemy because there is so little left and though Ulrike has come to terms with the fact that she is dying, she is afraid. Writing her letters allows her to prepare a bit more, she can say goodbye and share her true feelings. Her letter helps her in healing, maybe not in terms of her body, but surely in terms of her mind and soul.

Ulrike further reveals that “escribiendo me enfrento a la verdad, reconozco lo que pienso, lo que siento, lo que sé, y lo que quiero ignorar. Es mi forma de prepararme” (28).<sup>12</sup> It is through writing that Ulrike is able to truly get in touch with her feelings. Writing becomes therapeutic for her and makes her pending death a bit more bearable. By putting words on paper, Ulrike’s thoughts, fears and emotions become more concrete. She wonders how to end her letter to Peter:

Me gustaría no dejar de escribir esta carta, porque mientras me lees estoy con vida para ti, pero hay que saber acabar, todo. ¿Cómo hacerlo? ¿Cómo dejar de hablar contigo intentando que no quede ninguna pregunta al aire, porque no me podrás responder? ¿Cuál será la última palabra que te escriba? Tampoco

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<sup>12</sup> Ulrike seems aware that she has reached the final stage of acceptance in which Kübler-Ross states, “if the patient has had enough time [...] and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages, he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his ‘fate.’ He will have been able to express his previous feelings, his envy for the living and the healthy, his anger at those who do not have to face their end so soon. He will have mourned the impending loss of so many meaningful people and places and he will contemplate his coming end with a certain degree of quiet expectation” (99). Ulrike uses the epistolary genre in order to get to this stage.

esta vez te he dejado decir la última palabra, querido primo, como cuando  
éramos pequeños. (29)

Unlike the last letter included in *Algún amor que no mate*, Ulrike laments at not being able to know the response to her letters and her inability to continue communication in the future even if she wanted to do so. Though both letters were written in order to say goodbye, the lover in the first novel writes one last note as a way to escape to places unknown; it is a choice that she makes in order to save herself and her son. By getting away from the abusive husband, the lover gains a life. In contrast, Ulrike's final writings are filled with love and a certain sense of sorrow at her leaving. She grieves her losses. Interestingly, she also gains a sense of a new life through her writing because while Peter reads her letter she will be alive for a bit more time, even if just in his memory. This final letter becomes a way for her to remain present in the recollection of her cousin, just as her later letters will do the same for her children and Heiner. In this way, Ulrike is able to escape her own death because her written words will allow her to live on in the memory of others.

Peter hands over the other letters written by Ulrike soon after her death and the next that is included in the narrative is the one that she wrote to Maren, her daughter, in which she reveals that their mother-daughter relationship was not always perfect. She writes, “nos hemos peleado tanto, me gustaría que estas pocas palabras fueran nuestra definitiva reconciliación” (58). This becomes the main focus of the letter. Ulrike wants a reconciliation with her daughter before she dies. She explains to her daughter that:

La vida compensa a veces de la manera más extraña: mi enfermedad me ha servido para verte, para disfrutar de ti. Aún tengo tiempo. Tengo tiempo para ti. Ésa es la ventaja de mi enfermedad, alguna tenía que tener, me ha enseñado

a valorar el tiempo que me queda. Nos queda tiempo. Ahora soy capaz de dejarme querer, y sé cómo quererte [...] Yo me iré, pero antes te habré dado todo mi amor. Mi amor quedará contigo para siempre. (59)

Ulrike cannot leave her daughter without attempting to explain her actions as a mother.

Again she stresses the fact that time is of the essence when one is dying and knows it. She wants her to know that even though they fought often, that she always loved her and that her sickness has allowed her to appreciate their relationship more. We see that in confronting her death, Ulrike is also able to confront her flaws as a person and as a mother. In a sad and desperate situation, she is able to find the positive aspect, something that surely helps her get through this difficult time. She closes her letter with the following words: “Sé que recordarás lo mejor de mí, aunque yo no te lo pida. Pero te ruego que recuerdes estos momentos, la felicidad que me has dado. Y piensa que cuando discutía contigo era porque te quería y no supe decírtelo nunca” (60).<sup>13</sup> Like many people, Ulrike wants to gain absolution for her mistakes before dying. Her letter to her daughter allows her to do so, and she is able to put into words what she might not have been able to say to Maren in person. Like in *Algún amor que no mate*, again we see that in an emotionally charged situation, the act of writing can keep one sane by enabling the writer to express the things that they may not be able to say

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<sup>13</sup> According to Kübler-Ross there are two types of depressions that people experience when they are confronted with the fact that they are dying. One of them is reactionary and is marked by “unrealistic guilt or shame which often accompanies the depression” (76). This type of depression is usually combated by taking care of vital issues and addressing worries about future for the patient’s loved ones. In her letter, Ulrike works through her guilt about her relationship with her daughter in order to move forward. The other type of depression is preparatory: “the second type of depression is one which does not occur as a result of a past loss but is taking into account impending losses [...] when the depression is a tool to prepare for the impending loss of all love objects, in order to facilitate the state of acceptance [...] if he is allowed to express his sorrow he will find a final acceptance much easier” (76-77). Ulrike’s writing is a way to express her sadness and work through it.

outloud. Although in the first novel the letters were used to catalog the abuses suffered by the lover at the hands of Prudencia's husband, in this case it is a mother trying to explain to her daughter why their relationship was rocky at times. Her letter helps Ulrike not only with her own guilt but also that of her daughter because she will always have that physical piece of paper in which her mother explained her feelings. Again, the written word converts into a place in the memory of Ulrike's loved ones as she asks her daughter to remember the good times that they shared.

The next letter that is included is the one that Ulrike writes to her son, Curt. She thanks him for helping her recognize that her death was inevitable as well as allowing her to put into words her fears: "ayer me preguntaste si tenía miedo a morir, has sido el único que se ha atrevido a preguntármelo [...] sé que me has ayudado a reconocer la mentira que se empeñan en construir a mi alrededor, la curación, y que muchas veces yo misma quiero creer" (63). She realizes through her son and his attitude towards her disease that "negarse a nombrar la muerte no es evitar que exista" (63). She gains strength through the fact that Curt is able to talk to her rationally about the possibility of her death. Many times, all that a dying person needs is someone to listen to them talk, and in that way her son has helped her work through her grief. She tells him that, "admiro el valor que has tenido, siempre que intento hablar de este tema la gente lo rehúye, yo no quiero esconder la cabeza, tú tampoco. Supiste acercarte a mí, sin morbosidad, con pudor, y compartir mi miedo" (63). Although her son has been strong throughout her illness, Ulrike admits that "no sé cómo ayudarte, mi miedo se acaba conmigo, tú debes aprender a superar el tuyo [...] has de reconocer tu dolor, compartirlo, y buscar consuelo. No intentes hacerte el fuerte, como hice yo cuando murieron mis padres y mis abuelos" (63). She tells him that she understands what the pain of losing a

parent is like, especially after the explosion that destroyed her house and killed her family during the Second World War. She explains that “la muerte fue el primer dolor que yo no supe reconocer. No la entendía” (64). Her final advice to her son is: “no tengas miedo a mostrar tu dolor, busca consuelo en tu hermana, deja que ella lo encuentre en ti” (64). In this letter Ulrike focuses on saying goodbye to her son, leaving him with some words of wisdom on how to deal with her death. Her letters are perhaps the culmination of her own process of grief at the reality of her death and may be able to help her children grieve as well. They are a way to say farewell as well as to put into words what she might not be capable of saying outloud. Ulrike’s letters become a permanent reminder of her as a mother because they are physically written down and can be referred to often by her children.

In this way, by writing letters to Maren and Curt, Ulrike is able to create a kind of inheritance. The letters become a physical link between her children and their deceased mother as well as creating an emotional bridge that allows communication albeit not a response after her death. The letters are therapeutic for the writer, Ulrike, who can express hopes, desires and fears and are arguably helpful in various levels of the readers’ process of grief as well. Maren and Curt are lucky in a way because they are granted a final goodbye. Many people do not have this chance to make amends or express love for a dead or dying person. The letters represent this idea of closure. Taking it a step further, perhaps the reader of the novel who has had a similar experience as the characters but was unable to say their goodbyes may be able to gain some solace by reading through Ulrike’s letters as well,

possibly adapting them to a different set of circumstances in order to move through the grieving process.<sup>14</sup>

Though he too receives his letter soon after her death, Heiner decides not to read it right away. He argues that “la carta convierte el pasado en presente, y el presente le ofrece futuro con ella” (57). Heiner decides to wait until the spring to open his letter from Ulrike: “Heiner aprieta la carta contra sí. No quiere abrirla. «Estaré contigo un poco más.» Sabe que mientras mantenga la carta cerrada tiene pendiente una conversación con Ulrike [...] es una nuevo encuentro con ella, una cita, hasta que no abra la carta, Ulrike le espera, y él espera a Ulrike” (56-57). He waits until spring, the time of growth and rebirth, because her words will give her new life when he finally reads them. He understands the power that her writing has even after her death. Again, the reader sees that writing is linked intimately to life because the letters contain the last thoughts, feelings and words of Ulrike. She wrote them consciously knowing that it was possible that after time, her letters might be all that remain of her in the memory of her loved ones. The letters help her maintain her presence even after she is gone as well as allowing her to say goodbye. The connection between writing and memory is another repeated theme throughout Chacón’s novelistic work and becomes especially important and developed in *La voz dormida*. When Heiner finally opens Ulrike’s letter, spring has almost passed and he finds himself in her garden where he can still feel her presence: “Tres días para la llegada del verano, el momento de la cita estaba marcado. Primavera. Debería leerla ahora. La acariciaba, la olía, la sostenía en la palma de su mano

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<sup>14</sup> In a somewhat ironic end, the author herself died in 2003 of cancer. In a 2000 interview Chacón was asked what she would do if she only had three days left to live. Her answer seems something that her character Ulrike might reply if given the same question: “Pues estar con mi gente: mis hijos, mi marido, mis hermanos, mi madre” (Brasa). One wonders if perhaps Chacón might have written letters similar to those included in her novel in order to say goodbye to her family as well.

calculando el peso, muchas palabras de Ulrike, mucho tiempo de nuevo con ella” (131-32). Heiner has finally reached a place in his grieving when he can open the letter and read it.

The letter begins “Mi amado Heiner. Querido mío” and goes on to describe how Ulrike likes to watch her lover work in her garden, growing flowers to create elixirs that he believes will help heal her (133). She tells him, “me gustaría tener tanta fe como tú en los remedios [...] pero no tengo esa suerte [...] me niego a luchar contra un adversario que no es el mío, yo no tengo enemigo: estoy enferma, y la enfermedad no se combate, se cura o ne se cura” (133). Again Ulrike shows how she has come to terms with her sickness, how she detests “la palabra luchar, la palabra rendirse, yo no me rindo, mi lucha es otra” (133). Her other fight is against time, or as she says, “el tiempo que me queda para amarte, para mirarte” (133). After years of being in dysfunctional relationships Ulrike has finally found love with Heiner because she tells him, “perdí mi escepticismo frente al amor cuando me amaste y yo pude amarte, cuando me diste tu amor y te lo devolví crecido” (134). She reveals that, “he aprendido a amar amándote, a necesitar necesitándote [...] tengo suerte, te tendré hasta el último momento de mi vida” (134). To close the letter, Ulrike writes that she will not keep her writing a secret because, “quiero que la esperes, que sepas que estaremos juntos cuando yo me haya ido. Un ratito. Quiero que sepas que la escribo para no irme del todo. Para estar contigo un poco más” (135). Ulrike accomplishes this goal because while reading her letter, Heiner does feel her presence and can hear her voice. Her letter helps her memory live on.

The four letters written by Ulrike that are included in the novel help her escape her terminal illness even if for a while. She resists viewing her cancer as a war being waged but rather accepts it as inevitable. Through her writing, she is able to express her doubts and fears in a therapeutic way. Ulrike can also ask for forgiveness and can gain absolution for the

mistakes she believed she made in life. Ulrike is able to give advice on how to deal with loss. Finally she is able to express her love and gratitude for the support that she has received throughout her illness as well as thanking her family and lover for helping her learn about herself in the process. Though Ulrike dies after her accident, she had plenty of time to prepare herself and an integral part of that preparation was the act of writing, which soon converted her presence in the memory of her loved ones as they read her letters. She resists being forgotten. Ulrike is able to work through her own grief at leaving her life and loved ones behind. These letters will also help them grieve their loss, as well as serving as a physical reminder of their mother, cousin and lover. Like the husband in *Algún amor que no mate* who collected his lovers letters and hid them in his toolbox obviously in order to be able to re-read them and refer to them in the future, Ulrike's loved ones will also have a piece of her in the future.

Four months after Ulrike's death, in a series of flashbacks as well as jumps forward in time, Blanca tells of how it was "tres semanas desde que [...] le dijera a Peter que había llegado el momento de su separación, esta vez, definitiva [...] deseaba poder apartarse de él, desapegarse, desgajarse" (31-32). Blanca had finally decided it was time to escape her relationship when she met a man named José in a park in Madrid. After he followed her for a short time, they finally introduce themselves and walk the park together for a while. They stop in front of a statue of a Fallen Angel and Blanca explains what she sees when she looks at the fountain:

El amor está en esta fuente. Mira [...] la cara del ángel es una mueca de placer y dolor; una de sus alas toca siempre el cielo [...] la otra se dirige hacia la tierra; su brazo izquierdo se defiende de lo alto y el derecho sucumbe a la



serpiente que rodea su sexo. Así empieza el amor: es una lucha entre lo que deseas y lo que temes. El deseo vence y atrapa a los enamorados. Después, uno de los ocho demonios de la base lo sujeta con sus garras y les impide escapar. (48)

Blanca sees herself and her situation with Peter reflected in the Fallen Angel statue. She is not only trapped by her own demons but also those that Peter has in his life and she is unable to break away. As her conversation with José continues, she further states that:

al final pasa siempre lo mismo: las parejas están unidas, sin embargo miran cada uno hacia un lado, están juntos porque un demonio les obliga, si pudieran liberarse de él huirían en dirección contraria [...] busco la manera de escapar, pero no la encuentro, por eso mis demonios me acompañan siempre. (48)

In a very pessimistic interpretation of what love and relationships can be, Blanca shows her true unhappiness. She and Peter do not see eye to eye on most things, they have grown apart over time and are no longer in love: “le dolía el amor que se da por costumbre, que se convierte en hábito de amar” (51). They have a relationship that is based on comfort and not passion. Like Prudencia and her husband in *Algún amor que no mate*, Blanca and Peter lack an integral part in their relationship. Blanca, like Prudencia, is not satisfied with her celibate partnership but rather than attributing their lack of sex to Peter having a lover, it is linked to issues that he has with his past, issues that he cannot seem to get over. This personal history is linked closely with his country’s national history and it is something he will eventually have to work through. The idea of the past haunting the present is a theme that will be repeated in later novels by Chacón, especially *Cielos de barro* and *La voz dormida*.

Later on, Blanca reveals that after meeting José that day, “es tiempo de recordar que aquella tarde hicieron el amor por primera vez. Tienes en los ojos todos los ríos del mundo, dijo mientras la descubría. Y ella le contesto riendo: Es que soy el mar” (44). In her anxiety to get away from Peter and his problems, she falls into the arms of another man, one she barely knows. Afterward Blanca is torn apart by her emotions:

No quería llorar, era que otra lloraba en ella y Blanca se abandonaba a su llanto. Permaneció así, dócil a su íntima contradicción, llorando y apartándose las lágrimas con los dedos, los mismos que poco antes acariciaban el cuerpo de José con una pasión que ella había olvidado, deteniéndose en él. Recordó tanto amor, inútil, tanto desea, tanto vacío. Y otro olor. Se vistió, dejó una nota sobre la cama, y se marchó. (46)

In the only example of Blanca’s writing, which is in fact quite short and to the point, she reveals much about how she is feeling. Knowing her interpretation of the fountain and the Fallen Angel statue helps her words become less cryptic. The totality of her note reads, ““No quiero otro demonio”” (46). Though there was an obvious connection between herself and José, she is still not free of her entanglement with Peter. She runs away from what she feels for José, right back to Peter who guilts her into a trip to Germany. It is during this excursion that she is finally able to rid herself of most if not all of her demons.

In this episode, the reader sees that Blanca does not want to start another relationship like the one she has with Peter. She is very much like other characters included in Chacón’s novels, trapped in a relationship that is not working, yet unable to leave it. Her writing becomes a way to escape, much like in other instances. Similar to the lover in *Algún amor que no mate* she denies the recipient of her writing the ability to respond. This action shows

that like the lover, Blanca has a fear of future communication though not as a result of physical abuse. Blanca rather fears beginning another relationship that she is not ready to have. Though her words are few, they speak volumes. They reflect her reluctance to start up with someone new after not having purged her life of her previous boyfriend. It takes a trip to Germany with Peter to force her to finally realize she needs to move on, after a last ditch effort to save their failing relationship. Her writing is a way to avoid the confrontation and explanation she owed to José after sleeping with him. Her note, a total of four words, is not therapeutic like Ulrike's letters because of this apparent denial to work through her issues. Blanca's writing stands in stark contrast to Ulrike's letters because though her note is in a way a manner of saying goodbye, it offers no explanation for her actions. Blanca's note is however an attempt at self-preservation, which represents an effort at survival on her part. This aspect is another similarity between her writing and Ulrike's who also attempts to survive her own death by remaining in the memory her loved ones.

#### IV. *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón*

*Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* is a novel in which the chapters are directed towards a male insomniac, Adrián Noguera. Told from an omniscient perspective and written as if a dialogue with the screenwriter, complete with questions and accusations, the novel recounts the disintegration of his marriage until his wife, Matilde, finally leaves him through a letter. It is the story of a woman who is trapped in a marriage of misunderstandings who finally meets someone with whom she can truly communicate, the producer Ulises, with whom she runs away at the end of the novel. Again the reader sees Chacón's play on names as it is a man named Ulises who helps Matilde on her personal odyssey. As the narrator explains, speaking to Noguera:

Tú vivías en paz con tus grandes aspiraciones literarias y Matilde sin ninguna gran aspiración. Hasta que llegó Ulises. Tus sueños se convirtieron en codicia y no pudiste confesarlo. Entonces fue cuando ella comenzó a sentir el silencio. Y empezaste a perderla. Matilde encontró la complicidad en una tercera persona; y al tiempo, y de forma paulatina y severa, se fue llenando de desprecio hacia ti. (16)

It is this scorn and contempt that Matilde eventually describes in her letter of goodbye to her husband. Like the lover in *Algún amor que no mate*, her writing becomes a way to escape her bad relationship that though not abusive, is unhealthy. She is also much like Blanca in *Blanca vuela mañana* who needs to go on a personal odyssey before being able to finally

break away from a partnership that is not working. It is only in her letter that she is finally able to communicate with her husband who naively thought the marriage was going fine and who only through a reflection on the past can see the truth.

The novel opens with the first business meeting between the aspiring screenwriter and the director, Ulises. Noguera wants Matilde to come along against her wishes. He argues that: “No tienes ni siquiera que hablar, no te preocupes. Ponte guapa, ya verás, se quedará impresionado” (18). This is the first example of Adrián’s attitude toward his wife and what he values in her. Noguera does not appreciate his wife’s intellect or thoughts, something that occurs repeatedly throughout the novel. In fact, he speaks for the both of them in most situations, not allowing her to share her opinion about topics being discussed. Adrián wants Matilde to be there at his side almost like a trophy, someone to be beautiful and silent, someone there to impress. Matilde ends up having this desired impact on Ulises. It is during this first dinner and subsequent car ride which the two of them take alone that can be considered the beginning of the end of Noguera’s marriage as well as the start of the relationship between Ulises and Matilde.

Adrián is a man who desires to become part of the elite intellectual group to which Ulises belongs. He wants to be a writer and proposes a complex screenplay based on an adaptation of Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Both of these works are based on male characters or heroes who go on journeys and represent two important and influential books in the western canon of literature, which is traditionally made up of works created by men. They are chosen by Noguera for their complexity and what they represent: the ambition of the character in his writing talent and his ability to become the hero of his own life drama, both of which he fails at miserably. On another level, they are chosen by

Chacón in order to subvert this masculine canon of literature. She uses Noguera and his failure in order to showcase her own success as a writer. She is writing a novel about a man's frustrated attempt at writing and in that way shows that women are capable of creating their own works. These two canonical books also stand in contrast to his wife's writing of a letter, which is much more personal and intimate as well as being traditionally a feminine genre. Chacón's book traces Noguera's ambition from, according to the narrator who dialogues with the character: "El punto de partida. El comienzo de tu carrera literaria. El primer guión. Y después vendrían otros. Y la fama. La oportunidad de escribir una novela, de publicarla en la mejor editorial. Las traducciones. Reconocerían el genio que habían en ti" (26). It is this ambition which drives his actions, though he never consults with his wife in his decisions: "tu sueño crecía paralelamente a tu ambición, y eso no podías compartirlo con Matilde. Ella era tu esposa, cómplice en el terreno de lo doméstico, disfrutaría de las mejoras económicas. Le comprarías una casa, que ella podría amueblar a su gusto" (27). In her husband's mind, Matilde belongs either at home or accompanying him to his meetings. He views her to be like, "Nora, la esposa, fidelísima, de James Joyce era una mujer inculta, criada en un hotel cuando la conoció, jamás leyó sus libros. Tampoco Matilde lee lo que escribes tú" (58). Always dependent on him in the beginning, she gradually begins to form her own opinion, first befriending Ulises and later Aisha, a Moorish woman who is brutally murdered at the end of the novel. Both of these characters are crucial in Matilde's eventual decision to leave her husband as they permit her to grow as a person and to find out not only who she really is, but, what real love is and can be. She herself goes on an odyssey.

Meeting Ulises becomes the catalyst that Matilde needs in order to begin to question her relationship with her husband. She is like Blanca in *Blanca vuela mañana* in that it is

meeting another man that eventually causes her to begin to reevaluate her current relationship. In fact, it is Ulises who allows Matilde to start to form her own opinion about things. He encourages her to share her thoughts and pays real attention to her when she speaks, unlike Noguera. For example, though she had not read it before their first meeting, Matilde is inspired to read *The Odyssey* in order to be able to talk about it with Ulises. When Noguera discovers this, he is shocked: “Había leído la *Odisea* y no te lo había dicho. ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué la había leído? ¿Por qué no te lo había dicho? ¿Seguro que la había leído? Matilde carecía de iniciativa para la lectura, sólo leía lo que tú le recomendabas” (31-32). Noguera cannot believe that his wife has taken it upon herself to read something that he would never have guessed her capable of handling. She had not only read it but also understood it. From this point on, Matilde begins her own odyssey which rather than being written by a male author like Homer, is written by a female author, Chacón. It is a play on and subversion of the male dominated tradition of literature. In stark contrast to her husband’s reaction, Ulises gives Matilde confidence, always attempting to include her in their conversations. He appreciates her beauty and her intelligence, something that Adrián is unable to do throughout the novel. Ulises also shares his own ambitions and shortcomings with Matilde, as he does when the two visit his secret hiding place at his beach house where they all have gone to work on the screenplay. He pulls out a box that is full of photos, folders and books that represent three generations of frustrations, physical reminders of loved ones past like Ulrike’s letters in *Blanca vuela mañana*, as he explains:

Mi abuelo era fotógrafo [...] éstas son las fotografías malogradas, las que le hubiera gustado hacer bien y le salieron mal [...] Mi padre era abogado, un hombre de letras, los cuadernos los escribió él, novelas, malas novelas que

escondió junto a las fotos mediocres de su padre [...] Mi frustración: los libros que nunca he podido leer. Los que me avergüenza no haber leído. (113-14)

In a demonstration of humility, Ulises shows that not even the most seemingly successful and intelligent person is perfect. Unlike Noguera who sees himself as infallible, Ulises shows himself to be human and not a god. It is this act of confidence that helps solidify the relationship that is blossoming between Matilde and Ulises and it is right after this revelation that they have their first kiss.

Another character that plays a significant role in the development of Matilde is Aisha, who is the housekeeper of Aguamarina, Ulises house on the shore where the group goes to work on the screenplay. In an attempt to avoid Estela the wife of the film director chosen for Noguera's film, a man named Estanislao who is working with her husband Noguera, Matilde goes to the kitchen to spend time with Aisha each day as the men work on writing the script: "Trabajaron juntas, rieron juntas. Y a partir de entonces, Matilde acudió a la cocina cada día y pasó las horas hablando con Aisha [...] la confianza dio paso al cariño. Aisha descubrió que podía mantener con Matilde conversaciones de mujeres. Y Matilde descubrió el mundo de Aisha" (129). The world that she is invited to discover is one that began in Morocco, the country from which Aisha immigrated to Spain. After her fiancé drowned, Aisha soon met other refugees and began to assimilate to the new culture, learning Spanish and finding work at Ulises's home as well as meeting Pedro, another immigrant who she eventually marries. Aisha and Matilde become fast friends and share confidences with each other. Aisha helps show Matilde what a loving relationship is like when she describes how:

su familia la prometió en matrimonio nada más nacer, al hijo menor de una familia de ebanistas. Cómo ella se enamoró de Munir, el novio que le habían



destinado, y cómo él se enamoró de ella. Su prometido se dejó seducir por las alharacas de Europa. Y Aisha le siguió en su seducción hasta una patera.

(172)

Aisha describes in rich detail how her first wedding would have been had her fiancé not drowned and also how her real wedding to Pedro was. Through these long conversations, Matilde discovers that she and her husband have never really loved each other in the way that they should. At the end of the novel when Aisha along with Pedro are killed by a group of men bent on racially cleansing the area of illegal immigrants, it is Ulises with whom Matilde leaves, not her husband and the letter that she leaves him explains why.

The relationships that exist between women play an important role in Chacón's novels and *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* is no exception. Matilde finds a friend in Aisha who is able to help her escape on a daily basis during her stay at Aguamarina. They are able to form a bond in which men are excluded, one that is played out in the kitchen, an arguably feminine area. Matilde listens to Aisha's stories about her past and is helped along on her journey of self discovery that eventually culminates in her leaving her husband. Blanca has her sister as her support system in *Blanca vuela mañana*. They live together and own a company that is involved in sewing and embroidery, another feminine activity. They rely on each other through difficult times, including when Blanca's sister loses her children to her ex-husband. In contrast, Prudencia has no friends, sisters, not even her mother in *Algún amor que no mate*. Her husband isolates her from everyone and the only woman who figures in her life is her cousin who does not appear to offer the outlet that Prudencia needs while suffering from abuse. Her cousin is rather an instigator who causes more problems than she solves. Perhaps this lack of healthy female contact is another cause for the creation of Prudencia's

split personality. It would appear that relationships between women are held in high esteem by Chacón, a theme that will be developed further in her two later novels, especially *La voz dormida* when women that are imprisoned must band together in order to survive, creating relationships and families that provide food, care and love during difficult times.

Though the problem of spousal and partner violence was tackled in Chacón's first novel *Algún amor que no mate* we see perhaps a greater delving by the author into controversial social issues in *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón*. The inclusion of the Moorish immigrant characters who are so brutally murdered at the end of the novel can be read as a damnation of the treatment of such ethnic groups in Spain and elsewhere, especially because both Aisha and her husband had the documentation necessary to be living legally in the country. The work provides detailed descriptions of Moorish customs and traditions which would indicate a certain knowledge by the author as well as appreciation for the beauty of their culture. Though their killers refer to them as "cerdos" or pigs, the reader is left with the feeling that the real animals in the situation are those who murdered without piety or remorse. This novel marks a move towards the more socially aware works that will follow as well as showing Chacón's ability to perform research in order to create more realistic literature.

Adrián receives Matilde's letter after Aisha and Pedro's elaborate Moorish funeral and like Heiner in *Blanca vuela mañana* it becomes something that holds her memory as long as he touches it. The narrator speaks to Noguera: "No puedes acusar a Matilde a traición. Te dejó una carta, la que reposa en tu escritorio. La carta que tocas mientras miras el cuadro, la que te niegas a leer de nuevo para evitar los sentimientos que te provocó la primera vez que la leíste" (202). Matilde's letter has influence over her husband, reading what she has

written causes him to feel deep emotions. In this way we see the power of writing. Though he might have been able to forget or twist around a goodbye that Matilde had spoken, her written words remain as a constant and unchanging reminder, there physically for him to see and relive. He cannot deny them. It is the letter and its contents that cause his insomnia because Matilde's writing holds her memory.

The letter begins: "Querido Adrián" and though Noguera admits, "hubiera deseado quedarte con eso," it continues to explain her reasons for leaving:

Hemos tenido tiempo suficiente para conocernos, y nunca nos hemos conocido [...] Durante el tiempo que hemos estado juntos [...] he vivido a tu lado, pero no contigo. No quiero buscar un culpable, yo pensaba que amarte era estar a tu lado, tú me amabas para tenerme junto a ti [...] eso ya no me vale, y ahora te desprecio, por no haberme amado más allá, y me desprecio a mí misma, por no haber comprendido antes lo que buscabas en mí: complacencia [...] He reconocido tu disfraz, y el mío. Los disfraces sirven para confundir a los demás, pero deben engañarnos también a nosotros si quieren ser eficaces. Yo ya no me engaño. Nuestro amor ha sido siempre una palabra, un sonido que se pierde en el aire [...] Te desprecio, y por eso debo marcharme, porque me avergüenzo ante ti.

Matilde. (202-03)

Again as in the other novels written by Chacón, a female character uses a letter in order to say goodbye, in order to escape a relationship that is dysfunctional. In this case, Matilde recognizes that she should expect more in a marriage and that perhaps she never really loved her husband because they never were themselves around one another. Unlike Prudencia in

*Algún amor que no mate* she represents a much stronger female character who through a process of self reflection can see that she needs to leave her husband. She is unhappy and must move on.

The letter begins by stating that though they had been together for some time, they never really knew each other or at least not to the extent that Matilde now knows is possible after meeting both Ulises and Aisha. Adrián never viewed Matilde as an equal even as they lived together in matrimony. He did not show an interest in her thoughts, her intellect or her true feelings. He is much like the Prudencia's husband in *Algún amor que no mate*. The narrator accuses Noguera of the fact that "tú te habías enamorado de ella sin conocerla, desde el mismo instante en que la viste, hermosa. La amaste porque era hermosa. No habías necesitado conocerla para amarla" (202). For him, Matilde represented just a physical being. She was certainly not someone who could share with him in his ambitions for a literary career though in the end he comes to realize that she is his muse and without her he cannot continue writing. Without that emotional and intellectual connection there could never be true love and for that Matilde feels contempt toward her husband. Matilde's unsuccessful marriage rounds out the trilogy of examples found in Chacón's two earlier novels. Each is based on misunderstandings, miscommunication and a lack of passion and is destined to fail. In Matilde's case however, she goes on an odyssey that helps her finally escape, ending up with Ulises who promises a type of happy ending.

In her letter, Matilde explains that she does not look to find someone to blame for her and her husband's situation that puts her written voice in contrast with the narrator of the novel who dialogues with Adrián. This voice constantly provokes Noguera, taunting him with facts about the illicit relationship that developed between his wife and Ulises. It is a

dialogue that offers facts and information that Adrián would probably not have known about otherwise. Though Matilde does not look for someone to be culpable in the disintegration of her marriage, the narrator certainly does. This voice refers to Noguera in the informal “tú” form when speaking to him, which would indicate a certain degree of familiarity. Though the reader is unable to identify the voice, it is known that it is not one that comes from Matilde because she is referred to always in the third person, as are other characters. The narrator could be therefore, a voice from within Noguera himself. Just as Prudencia had to create an alter ego in *Algún amor que no mate* perhaps Adrián had to create another voice in order to explain to himself why his wife left. The story of what happened between Matilde and Ulises could be then a story that Noguera invented in an attempt to cope with the end of his marriage. The only concrete proof that remains is her letter, which reveals very little information. Perhaps the creative Noguera had to fill in the gaps during his many sleepless nights.

In any case, Matilde goes on to admit that though she might have been naïve enough to have believed what they had was love, now she knows that it was not true. They were both wearing disguises that they cannot hide behind anymore. Matilde has undergone a drastic change, which has caused her to reevaluate her relationship, and in doing so she has come to see that what her husband had wanted from her was compliance and satisfaction. Their marriage had never gone farther than that and she cannot live that kind of a lie anymore. Matilde is able to recognize the false that is her life with Noguera and finally makes the decision to leave him. Like in the other novels by Chacón, her letter does not allow for a reply after saying goodbye and this certainly causes her husband to pass many sleepless nights. Unlike Blanca and the lover from *Algún amor que no mate* however, not allowing a

response does not seem to be driven by a sense of fear. Rather, by denying Adrián the ability to have his say in the situation, she not only claims her independence but in the process also causes his mind to be flooded by unanswered questions that become such an obsession that he can neither sleep nor write. It is her ultimate revenge.

Even after having finished reading the letter, Noguera cannot believe that his wife has made such a decision on her own: “pero qué clase de carta te había escrito Matilde. Esta mujer ha leído demasiado últimamente, y no está preparada” (203). Continuing on with his conservative and chauvinist mindset he argues that Matilde has read too much recently and has learned about or gained ideas for which she was not ready. Noguera in this sense represents the entire tradition of men who believe that women are incapable of being intelligent, articulate beings. He cannot admit that she has grown as a person and that she might have formed an opinion without consulting him. He cannot see that she is capable of writing something that would cause him so much pain and emotion. Matilde has created a letter that serves as a statement of independence, much like other characters in Chacón’s novels. She was able to communicate her feelings through the written word, something she had been unable to do previously before meeting Ulises and Aisha who showed her what real love is.

Ironically in the end, it is Matilde who is the successful one in writing. She is able to write something that truly touches another person’s life, something that strongly affects them, while in contrast her husband had spent so much time and effort writing a screenplay for a film that would never be made. Her letter contains her feelings and emotions, something much more personal that reflects her as a person. Rather than an attempt at synthesizing two canonical texts as her husband does, she simply writes a letter. Though throughout the novel

Noguera had viewed her with a certain disdain when it came to her intellectual capabilities in a show of strength at the end, Matilde is the one who becomes a triumphant writer. She is the one who undertakes a real odyssey and whose creation is worth something to another person. In contrast to the two works that her husband was attempting to emulate and adapt, Matilde works in a so-called feminine genre, the epistolary text. Adrián set out to write a screenplay based on two canonized works written by men and yet he could not succeed. His wife however creates in her husband an insomnia which he cannot shake after reading her letter. She pens a work that remains in his memory, robbing him of his own literary ability. This irony is Chacón's way of subverting the male dominated literary tradition. Her character writing in a "femenine" genre which is encapsulated in a novel written by a female author is the one who is successful in the end.

## V. *Cielos de barro*

*Cielos de barro* is the novel that marks a shift in focus in Chacón's narrative. Rather than works that deal with female characters and their relationships with their loved ones, this novel tackles the subject of repression and exploitation in Spain around the time of the Civil War. It is a novel that is geared towards the recent past which until the last several years had been ignored. Chacón moves toward a more political commentary in this novel, a shift that becomes even more pronounced in her final work, *La voz dormida*. Though relationships and love are still important themes, others are highlighted as well. Justice, social status and the way that the past can affect the present all become key issues.

*Cielos de barro* is a novel which utilizes the testimony of Antonio, an illiterate potter, as well as chapters told from an omniscient perspective in order to solve the mystery of a multiple murder while at the same time telling the history of a *cortijo* and its inhabitants and workers. As Godland and King state, "Chacón's *Cielos de barro* is a fiction that gives voice to members of Spain's voiceless *campesinado* (peasantry). This unusual novel documents the investigation of the murder of several members of a single family on the huge *latifundio* (rural estate) in Extremadura that had belonged to generations of their ancestors" (35). As the work develops, clues are given in the whodunit mystery until in the end the reader is fairly certain they know who shot the four people found. Unfortunately, the novel closes with the supposition that though the crime had been committed by an upperclass person, a poor peasant will take the blame in an example of an unfair and biased judicial process.



Interspersed throughout the work are letters written by the two poor villagers who were literate and capable of doing so. The drastic contrast between the chapters containing Antonio's answers to questions that are put forth by a *comisario* but not included in the text and those that contain the history of the area further underlines the social and economic discrepancies that existed, including the inability of most workers to read and write. As Godsland argues:

the voice of literary legitimacy belonging to the omniscient narrator recounts in articulate, educated Spanish the history of the victorious land-owning class [...] and furnishes details of the community's recent past of which the old potter is unaware, Antonio himself communicates orally the very personal memory of his family and close friends, employing informal linguistic patterns [...] a discursive mode deployed in material collected in oral histories of marginalized, disenfranchized, and voiceless groups [...] the old man's illiteracy also contrived to ensure the silencing of the losers [...] as only two of the local *campesinos* could write, the history of that class's experiences of the war and its aftermath were confined to oral transmission [...] while its literate members used their skills only to write private letters. (257)

These letters serve to further highlight the sad situation of the peasantry as one plagued by discrimination, both economic and social as well as cataloging and enunciating the cruelty of the ruling class for which they worked. Two of the characters in the novel are involved in the writing of these letters and though one is a male, it is significant to note that the only person who lives in the poor community and is at the same time literate is female.

The novel takes place over many years but focuses in and around the time of the Spanish Civil War. This preoccupation for the Civil War and its victims becomes even more developed in *La voz dormida*. However, *Cielos de barro* begins in the present with Antonio describing how the son of his friend Isidora, “vino de noche. Dijo que regresaba para morir. Traía la muerte en los ojos” (9). This son who has come home after many years of being away becomes the prime suspect in the murders until false evidence points to Antonio’s grandson as being involved as well. The son is a character that is never referred to by his actual name. Perhaps by not specifying in this way, he becomes the son of everyone, the son of the whole community to which he belongs. Through a close reading of the novel, one is able to piece together the history which has led to Antonio being questioned. A long chain of events appear to have contributed to the murders which have taken place and for lack of space, my analysis will focus just on those linked to the letters which were written. In other words, it will discuss the story of this son who was taken away from his mother Isidora and his father Modesto, good friends of Antonio and also workers on the *cortijo*.

When the war broke out, many of the peasants joined up in order to fight on the side of the Republic including “casi todos los jornaleros del cortijo y muchas mujeres. Isidora fue una de ellas, se incorporó a la milicia con Modesto” (111). Trapped by their economic situation, they viewed fighting as a way to perhaps escape. Though atrocities were committed on both sides including the burning of churches and mass executions, the most poignant episode is the rape of Isidora and the consequent rape and murder of her friend Quica, the mother of Antonio’s wife Catalina, who ends up an orphan. Isidora is brutally violated and comes back to the *cortijo* in order to tell her mistress about the men she saw there, including the future husband of Victoria, the mistress’s daughter who also has a symbolic name like

several other of Chacón's characters. Her name "Victory" represents the Nacionalista side who won the war, those who came to power. Isidora, one history's losers tells her story:

le contó que ella no huía de nadie, ni siquiera de los soldados que la habían deshonrado. Que ellos la dejaron marchar, riéndose [...] y le contó que los que reían no la reconocieron. Pero ella había visto dos caras entres los que reían, y que iba a gritar a los vientos cuáles eran sus nombres. Y que a eso venía al cortijo, y que por eso corría por la calleja Chica [...] y tampoco huía del hombre del turbante que degolló a la lavandera. (148)

Isidora had seen both Victoria's fiancé as well as his brother in the crowd of men who watched her attack and had come running back home in order to reveal their cowardice at the loss of her honor when she came across Quica also being assaulted. Isidora killed the soldier with the turban who was brutalizing her friend and brought back her necklace as proof: "le mostró la medalla ensangrentada que escondía en la mano. Dijo que Quica estaba muerta. Y que todos eran iguales. Todos" (148).

In order to save her family's reputation, the mistress of the *cortijo* manipulates the situation in her favor, using the fact that Isidora had killed the soldier to cover up all that had happened, claiming that it was a grave crime. Talking to her servant, she argues that, "y lo que nadie ha visto es que no ha pasado, ni has matado a un hombre ni has luchado en el frente" (151). She goes even further to threaten Isidora's husband: "acuérdate de lo que le ha pasado a Marciano en la plaza de toros, a Modesto podría pasarle lo mismo. Ya sabes, ni una palabra [...] a nadie. [...] tú y Modesto estáis a salvo aquí" (152). Marciano had been part of a slaughtering of Republican forces who all ended up in mass graves and serves as an example of what might happen to anyone believed to be a traitor. Using power and fear, the

mistress is able to silence Isidora while at the same time creating a debt to the rich family that the peasant must make huge sacrifices in order to repay, especially after she and her husband receive the safepasses that validate the lie that neither of them had been fighters in the war. The mistress takes the medallion that Isidora has brought with her as further evidence of her guilt and seals the pact of silence. Because they pertain to a specific social class, the workers of the *cortijo* are manipulated and abused. Chacón's representation of this group is indicative of the shift in her narrative towards novels that are more politically and socially aware. Though in previous works she had included important issues like domestic abuse in *Algún amor que no mate* or the problems that face immigrants in *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón*, this novel tackles the problems of repression and class conflict head-on.

Several years later, Victoria is married yet remains without children. Isidora however, has had a son whom she regularly brings to the *cortijo* to play while she works. She introduces him to Victoria and “desde el momento en que [...] tomó al niño [...] en sus brazos ya no quiso desprenderse de él” (262). Victoria becomes more and more attached to Isidora's son over the five years that he is brought daily to see her, even suggesting that she be allowed to adopt him in order to educate him better. One day, the child is overheard calling Victoria “mama” and when she is questioned about it replies, “sí, desde pequeño, es que pasa más tiempo conmigo que con su madre” (265). When Isidora hears this she stops bringing her son to work with her. Victoria “intentó convencerla de que volviera a llevarlo al cortijo, le prometió que lo trataría como a uno más de la familia, que lo educaría en los mejores colegios” (266). When Isidora refuses, Victoria forces her husband to threaten Modesto with the past in order to blackmail him into giving up his child.

“Le mostró los documentos, diciéndole que aún bastaba un solo dedo para mandar a prisión a los traidores a la patria [...] le reveló entonces que sabía que Isidora había matado a un hombre. Sacó del cofre la medalla de Quica. Se la mostró. Y le amenazó con entregar a su mujer a la justicia. Añadió que el asesinato tampoco se olvida, y que Isidora podría ir al patíbulo. (268-69)

In an attempt to save himself and his wife, Modesto finally brings his son to Victoria who takes him away to the city, thus creating the need for clandestine letters between the child and his family in order to maintain in contact.

Because Antonio's wife Catalina is the only person who knows how to read and write, Isidora relies on her to read her son's letters as well as to reply to them. The letters they received usually began the same way: “Queridísimo padre, amadísima madre: Me alegrará que a la llegada de ésta se encuentran bien. Yo quedó bien gracias a Dios” a manner of speaking which Antonio argues shows the son had moved away from the countryside (10). Even the handwriting of the son shows progress: “Hasta en la letra se le notaba que se había ido del pueblo, de tan fina” (10). The distinction between the illiterate peasantry and the educated upperclass becomes obvious with this statement. The simple act of being able to write puts the son on a higher level than his parents and their friends who have remained on the *cortijo* and a certain sense of awe at the ability to read and write is shown. The formal way of writing also becomes a manifestation of the inferred improvement in the quality of life of the son.

Catalina would read the letters to Isidora, though she would often omit or change the information they contained in order to save the mother from unnecessary suffering: “aunque el hijo le hubiera escrito que estaba encamado con cuarenta de calentura, la Nina le decía que

estaba bien, porque la Isidora prefería no enterarse de eso” (11). Here the reader sees the power of literacy. Catalina is able to change what information she provides because she is the only one able to read it. She controls and filters what she relates to Isidora and though it would appear she has good intentions of doing so, it is an example of how those who can read and write often hold the authority and can influence easily those who do not. Being illiterate, Isidora is at the mercy of Catalina to maintain contact with her son which becomes a metaphor for the social and economic situation in which they all live. Another example of this is Modesto and Isidora’s inability to read the safe conduct passes they have received after the war, thus creating a need to rely on Victoria and her husband to keep them out of harm’s way. As far as the two peasants know, the documents are falsified or do not carry the necessary information yet they must trust in the landowners because of their inability to read or write, much like children who rely on their parents. It is a relationship of power in which they are trapped.

Antonio was able to memorize the letters that his wife helped Isidora write to her son while he was living in the capital and in this way can relate them to the *comisario* during his interview. Because the letters were later burned, memory becomes vitally important in reconstructing the past. Antonio must give his verbal testimony of what was written because the documents no longer exist. History thus becomes dependent on his personal memory, a theme that is carried on in *La voz dormida* which is a novel based on the testimonies that Chacón gathered during years of research. Chacón acts like the *comisario* as he asks Antonio questions which relate back to the letters including the replies to the letters that Isidora received which would contain advice for her son such as:

manda padre que te portes como Dios manda, hijo, que los señores nos van a ayudar con la siembra [...] que te diga que este año no hay un real para la simiente y que el señorito le ha prometido dárselo a fiado. [...] que no vengas al pueblo, que si la señora te necesita allí es de ley que te quedes. [...] manda que te diga que la miseria es grande y que es de preferir que tú no la veas, para que no sea más grande su miseria (12).

These short passages contain first a brief description of the dire economic situation that the peasants experienced. They were indebted to the owners of the *cortijo* each year as they needed to borrow on credit in order to plant and harvest. A deeper meaning might be inferred from the first few phrases though. The parents might write to their son referring to their debt to the owners in order that he himself also feel more beholden to them. It could work as a way to keep their son in the city by creating a sense of guilt, thus keeping Victoria happy and them safe. The parents are able to paint a picture of Victoria and her husband as being benevolent and even kind by telling their son that they have helped them financially, perhaps in order to hide the fact that he was basically kidnapped. This kind of psychology on the part of the parents represents a huge sacrifice. They tell their son not to come visit and try to dissuade him by describing the sad circumstances that they live in. Perhaps they are even optimistic that he will have opportunities that they never would be able to provide him.

The letters that the son and his family send must be done in secret as eventually Victoria prohibits him from writing. A plan is hatched by the son and Lorenzo the driver and is revealed in a later letter: “que no les ponga el remite, por si alguna se llega a perder [...] me dice el Lorenzo que le diga que escriba su nombre en el sobre [...] y que pinte usted una cruz chiquinina en vez del remite [...] y así sabemos las que son mías, y que es secreto” (54-

55). It becomes a village wide effort in order to maintain contact between the son and his parents. The letters help the son remain a part of the community that he has left. They become a link to his heritage and the place from which he came. Instead of being a personal inheritance like is seen between Ulrike and her children in *Blanca vuela mañana*, these letters become a connection to his entire community, though they come specifically from his parents. The letters in this way come to symbolize the solidarity that the peasantry feels against its repressors. They become a transgression that shows the rebellion of this group of people. If the son represents the hope of the parents because he has been given an opportunity to move away and become educated, then the inclusion of the entire community in the writing and receiving of the letters converts him into everyone's hope.

The letters that arrive from their son show a kind of progression as he gets older. They begin by relating the daily life he experiences away from his family, often reflecting a certain sense of wonder at his new surroundings. They tend to reflect a positive attitude at first: "hoy es mi cumpleaños y la señora me ha regalado unos zapatos Gorila y una pelota verde" (54). With time the tone changes as Victoria gives birth to three children of her own and his letters begin to highlight how he is treated differently than the other children:

Agustín y Julián me han roto el tren, mama, y la señora me ha echado una buena riña, porque yo les he pegado [...] a ellos no les ha reñido, pero a mí me ha dicho que soy un desagradecido [...] me ha cambiado de cuarto. Ella dice que es de preferir que duerma con Lorenzo, que no es bueno que me acostumbre a cosas que después no voy a tener. (65)

In what began as a simple argument between children ended in Victoria showing her true colors. Though she claimed that in bringing Isidora's son to the city that she would treat him



as another part of the family, this is not the case. He is nothing more than another servant, like Lorenzo the driver. In this way, she maintains the class distinctions that keep her and her family in power. In another letter the son reveals that: “ya sé leer y escribir bien, como usted quería, pero que ya no entro en la escuela” (65). Though he has gained an ability that sets him apart from his parents, gradually he is treated more and more as a peasant than as an adopted son in the city. Educating the masses is a dangerous enterprise and landowners like Victoria and her husband know this. Isidora’s son is allowed to learn yet he is kept repressed and in his place. In his letters he also consistently asks his mother why she will not allow him to come visit, ignorant to the real reason why he must stay where he is: “tengo ya veinte años, madre, y no puedo entender por qué me tiene usted ignorante de todo. Por qué no me da su permiso para ir a verla” (66). The son does not know that his parents have been blackmailed.

In a final act of cruelty, Victoria ends the written connection between parents and child by lying about the reason they allowed their son to leave the village. When the writing of letters stops, so does all communication. She tells Isidora’s son that: “no se le pasara por el pensamiento volver al pueblo, porque allí nadie le quería, ni sus padres [...] que ni sus padres le querían, y que por eso se lo habían vendido a ella. Vendido [...] que se lo cambió por algo. Lástima de criatura, que se lo ha creído” (83). He writes one last letter to his parents in order to:

decirle que me voy al extranjero a buscar trabajo. Y no pienso volver al pueblo. Usted sabe bien por qué. La señora me lo ha contado todo [...] decirle que no la juzgo, ni a padre tampoco, sus razones habrá tenido para hacer lo que hizo y los hijos no deben juzgar a los padres, ni pedirles cuentas. Aunque

me voy con una mentira arrastrada en tantos años, y en tantas cartas [...] tampoco le pediré cuentas de cómo pudo escribirme las tuyas [...] decirle que si me las mandó para mantenerme ignorante de todo [...] le ha salido mejor que eso. Porque a mí me han servido para mucho más, las he leído y releído cientos de veces, cuando me daba la pena de estar solo, y me acompañarán hasta el día en que deje de creer que usted me quiso. (104-5)

In this final goodbye, the son reveals that the letters that he had received provided him with consolation during times when he felt alone. Like Curt and Maren in *Blanca vuela mañana* the letters served as a type of inheritance from a missing parent. Though his parents were not dead but rather very much alive and well, reading them allowed the son much like Ulrike's children to have that person close to them again, even if it were just for the time it lasted for them to read the written words. The letters were his connection to his parents during a prolonged absence and though they were always read through an intermediary, the letters were his only means of communication to remain part of the community as well as his family.

As in each of Chacón's previous novels, this letter is an example of one which serves as a way to say goodbye. The son does not allow his parents to reply as he tells them that: "la voy a echar en el buzón justo antes de coger el tren, de forma y manera que no se moleste en contestar porque se la van a mandar devuelta. No le dejo las señas a las que voy" (105). Like the lover in *Algún amor que no mate* he is escaping to places unknown although he says that perhaps: "a lo mejor me lleva a escribirle cuando me recomponga, o me lleva al pueblo algún día" (105). In this way he does not completely cut ties with his parents because he does still love them despite everything. It is this return of the son which Antonio describes in the first

lines of the novel. He had come back to see his parents one more time before dying but had missed them by a few years. Instead he witnessed the murders of the four people in the *cortijo*.

The last letter that Isidora's son writes is one addressed to Antonio himself, one that must be read to him by the *comisario*. It is the first letter that Antonio had received in his lifetime. It is one that they found in the son's hand when they discovered his body after he died of cancer. The letter reveals what really happened at the *cortijo*. In an effort to clear himself of guilt, Isidora's son writes to Antonio:

Me fui [...] por ver si en el cortijo quedaba algo de ella. La puerta principal estaba abierta. Y entré. Desde el pasillo escuché tres tiros de escopeta. [...] A Aurora la vi la primera [...] su madre estaba muerta. Y su marido. Y su hermano. Los tres muertos. Y ella tenía una escopeta en la mano, y le gritaba a su padre que se había vuelto loco. [...] se disparó. Y el padre de Aurora cayó muerto. (298-99)

Aurora who is Victoria's daughter had shot her father after he had killed her brother, husband and mother over a family feud related to land. The letter further details the cover up that Isidora's son is involved in though he wants to make it clear to Antonio that: "yo no maté a nadie. Y sólo me queda despedirme de usted. Y pedirle que tenga en su recuerdo a éste, su amigo que lo es. Y que Dios le conserve la salud" (301). His letter serves as a testimony to what had really happened during the murders. It is an important function of the written word but one wonders how much credit the judicial system will lend his evidence as he is only a peasant. In fact, when the *comisario* reads the letter to those involved in the murder: "ningún argumento escapó la sagacidad del abogado, que exigió un perito calígrafo y cuestionó la

imparcialidad del testigo por su relación con la familia asesinada. Y añadió que aquella artimaña se trataba de una astuta venganza” (303). The novel ends with Antonio’s grandson still in jail, accused of the murders and there is no indication that justice will be served.

*Cielos de barro* includes personal letters written between a son and his parents that help them maintain a family connection, however they also serve the function of linking the writer to a greater community, that of the peasantry. The novel along with the letters it contains creates a collective memory through the voice of Antonio that gives the work a more socially critical tone than Chacón’s earlier books as “remembering and nostalgia are deployed not only to resolve a crime, but also to investigate the national past as it is structured as ‘official’ history and ‘unofficial personal or collective memory’” (Godsland 254). Casado states that: “la dicotomía del asunto sirve para poner en evidencia la orientación criticosocial del libro. Al fin de cuentas, los trabajadores del campo y sus familias llevan las de perder frente a la aristocracia de la tierra, ya sea individualmente o como clase social” (82). The letters are an example of this unofficial memory that reflect the criticosocial tone of the novel. They provide a dialogue that reflects the economic and social injustices suffered by an entire class as they were repressed before, during and after the Spanish Civil war. The very reason for the need to write letters between Isidora’s son and his parents is a perfect example of this subjugation. Victoria and her family had complete control over the people who were working on their *cortijo* and could manipulate situations to their advantage. Keeping the peasantry uneducated and illiterate helped them in doing this.

Though most examples of the letters in the novel are written by Isidora’s son, Antonio’s wife was the only person who remained in their village who was able to read and write. Being a woman and having such an ability certainly set her apart from the rest of the

women in her community. Including this strong female character as well as the fact that in her novel Chacón showed “una explícita voluntad de denunciar los abusos sexuales contra las mujeres [...] sitúa a la novela dentro de una reivindicación feminista” (83). This also creates an arguably more socially aware work. The women in the novel exploited the strengths they had in order to better their lives, including the writing of letters and banding together to help one another when possible. There was certainly a strong sense of camaraderie in the community, especially between women which is another example of the importance of relationships between feminine figures in Chacón’s novels, one that is carried on in her final work.

*Cielos de barro* contains many of the same concerns as Chacón’s first three works and yet it seems to take them a step farther. It moves toward a more politically and socially compromised novel that culminates in *La voz dormida*. Though some critics consider her first trilogy to be somewhat superficial, they can be seen as experimentations in social criticism which leads the author to her later works. Though in her first three novels the characters pertained to a relatively comfortable social class, as seen in their ability to travel, maintain a certain lifestyle etc, *Cielos de barro* presents a shift in focus on the lower class and its problems. Chacón also looks toward the past in this novel. Her preoccupation for her country’s heritage is carried on even further in *La voz dormida*, a novel in which she refocuses on female characters as the principal actors in her drama.

## VI. *La voz dormida*

*La voz dormida*, the last of Chacón's novels and the arguably most successful tells the stories of several women incarcerated in Las Ventas prison in Madrid after the Spanish Civil war. Though each female is an individual, they band together in order to tolerate the hardships they must endure. Part of what helps them, as well as their loved ones who are living on the outside survive is the writing of letters. Almost all of the cases of the epistolary genre utilized by the author are political in nature, which adds to the political tone of the work. These letters maintain contact with the world beyond the prison walls, ask for clemency for the inmates and most importantly strive to keep the memory of those women who participated as protagonists in the war alive, even after they are executed. It is the memory of the silenced voice of these women that Chacón strove to reawaken in writing the novel, as she revealed in an interview:

esto fue lo que me motivó a centrar la historia en las mujeres, porque creo que son las protagonistas de la Historia que nunca se contó. Esa es la voz silenciada, la figura en la sombra. La historia con minúscula es la que me ha servido para darle carne a los personajes e incorporar a cada uno de ellos una historia real. (qtd. in Velázquez Jordán)

Part of her tactic in creating stories which were based on interviews, research, and documentation that she spent over four years investigating is the inclusion of the epistolary genre as my analysis will show.

The first mention of writing by one of the characters is that of Hortensia, “la mujer que iba a morir,” who pens in blue notebooks (11). She has been imprisoned for taking part in the armed resistance and is pregnant when she is condemned to death. Her husband Felipe has provided her with the means to write diaries that though not exactly the same form as a letter, are directed to someone specific, first her mate and then her daughter Tensi. In other words, they take the epistolary form because they are written for someone else to eventually read. In the beginning the narrator describes the happenings of the prison:

Y Hortensia escribe en su cuaderno azul. Escribe a Felipe. Le escribe que siente las patadas de la criatura en el vientre, y que si es niño se llamará como él. Escribe que piensa que Elvirita se muere, como se murió Amparo, y Celita, sin dejar de toser, como se murieron los hijos de Josefa y Amalia, las del pabellón de madres. Escribe que la chiquilla pelirroja tiene una calentura muy mala. Y que lo único que pueden hacer por ella es darle el zumo de las medias naranjas que les dan a cada una después del rancho. (22)

Hortensia has begun to create a diary directed to her husband that tells her story, thus cementing herself in the memory of others. By mentioning the names of other women who have died in the prison she does the same for them as well. As long as their names are written down, they will not be forgotten. She also describes how the imprisoned women have come together in order to help Elvira, the redhead who has become ill. Interestingly, just the act of writing is one of transgression as it would have been forbidden especially because Hortensia describes the maltreatment and poor conditions of the prison. The banding together of the women in order to help one another is another form of transgression, as they adopt a maternal identity which subverts the traditional one being presented by the Fascist regime. Mayock

argues that, “la maternidad tan aceptada e institucionalizada [...] se convierte en elemento transformador y transgresor dentro del contexto de las múltiples madres y la metáfora de la maternidad en *La voz dormida*” (24). In other words and as Hortensia describes, females who were believed by their jailers to be the opposite of the ideal woman for being political entities, were capable of camaraderie and maternal acts in order to survive, such as providing a sick cellmate with food and care.

In another act of maternal transgression, Hortensia continues writing in her blue notebooks throughout the novel, eventually directing them to her child. When she is eventually executed after finally giving birth, she leaves her newborn daughter Tensi her notebooks as a type of inheritance. The fact that the birth was complicated and the child at one point appeared to be unable to pass into the world, has led Matousek to argue that: “la incertidumbre del venir y no venir representa el temor de salir de la protección del vientre ‘subversivo’ al mundo caótico y represivo bajo una dictadura militar” (77). When she is finally born, Hortensia is given several weeks in order to care for her daughter but her sentence is not commuted. She is executed one night, leaving her daughter her diaries as a way to come to know her as a mother and a political figure. Similar to other novels by Chacón, in this case a child is connected to their mother through her written words. Pepita, Hortensia’s sister and Tensi’s aunt, describes what she feels when she sees her niece reading the notebooks:

le gustaba ver la expresión de su rostro cuando se abstraía en los cuadernos azules. Sentía que la madre acompañaba a la hija. Que las dos se unían a través de las palabras que Hortensia escribió para Tensi. Hace años que las lee



en voz baja [...] Pepita siente al verla que su madre también la está viendo.

(395)

The diary which is political in nature tells Hortensia's story and is able to unite the mother and daughter who share the same name. Matousek states that: "el acto de nombrarle igual que la madre ayuda aún más con el simbolismo del encargo de Tensi de seguir luchando por los ideales y los valores de Hortensia" (77). As Edurne Portela argues, her writing is an inheritance which transmits her memories "a través de la palabra escrita, una palabra que en el caso de Hortensia no ha sido silenciada [...] por la represión, ya que sus cuadernos narran la historia de su lucha [...] protegida por la paradójica libertad que le otorgan el aislamiento de su celda y la inmediatez de su muerte (60). In other words, the diary keeps Hortensia alive in her daughter's memory and also acts as the catalyst she needs to become politically active which she does when she turns eighteen even though Pepita is against the idea at first: "Pepita sabe que no podrá convencer a Tensi. Sabe que no podrá ir en contra de las palabras que escribió su madre. Lucha, hija mía, lucha siempre, como lucha tu madre, como lucha tu padre, que es nuestro deber, aunque nos cueste la vida" (397-98). Tensi has been able to gain solace through the writing of her mother and understands why she lost her life while fighting for a set of ideals, a fight that Tensi will join as well. The diaries show how the maternal connection is intertwined intimately with political resistance, a reality denied to many people whose mothers were against the fascist regime.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Picornell-Belenguer states that: "las mujeres 'rojas' no debían transmitir su identidad a sus descendientes. La separación entre padres e hijos y, sobre todo, entre madres e hijas era uno de los propósitos de instituciones [...] el patronato se encargaría de distanciar a los hijos de sus madres para que éstos no le pudiesen 'contagiar' sus ideales. [...] se entiende en este contexto la insistencia de Hortensia [...] de dejarle como testimonio un cuaderno escrito por ella donde le pide que entienda la lucha de sus padres pese a crecer en un ambiente adverso. Ante un proyecto penitenciario de represión y transformación que atenta contra la identidad de las mujeres vencidas, el mantenimiento de los ideales por los que las presas han sido encarceladas supone un acto de insumisión y de resistencia" (124-25).

Another character who utilizes the epistolary genre is Reme, who Mayock argues is, “la quintaesencia de la madre adoptiva del grupo en la cárcel” (29). She takes care of everyone after being imprisoned for “bordar una bandera en la camilla de [su] casa” (52). When she is finally released after many years in prison, she decides that she will remain in contact with Tomasa who is still incarcerated. Tomasa is a woman who has no one left after witnessing the murders of her entire family and Reme decides that:

le escribiré cartas, porque no tiene a nadie que le escriba, y no hay tristeza más grande que verla en la hora del reparto esconderse en una esquina. Se esconde, Reme la ha visto esconderse muchas veces. [...] le escribiré, y le dará noticias de la hija de Hortensia. Y de Elvirita. Y de Sole. [...] Querida hermana, así empezará la carta. Querida hermana, para que se la entreguen se hará pasar por su hermana. (313-14)

In another example of resistance against repressive powers, Reme writes to Tomasa to keep her up-to-date on the happenings outside of the prison. Mayock points out that: “la carta, Reme está segura, empezará con ‘Querida hermana’, un saludo que vincula de nuevo lo personal (los lazos fraternales entre las mujeres después de su experiencia casi familiar en Ventas) con lo político (el ideal comunista de la igualdad y la camaradería)” (30). The letter will be comforting and reassuring that on the outside there is someone waiting for her that is continuing the fight that they had begun politically. The use of “hermana” will also protect the writer and the reader in case the letter should be reviewed before it gets to Tomasa. Trueba Mira states that: “no sólo deben cuidarse las cartas que llegan a prisión. También las que llegan a domicilios particulares, lo que confirma la extensión del universo carcelario” (322). In a world in which everyone is suspect, one cannot be too safe and the use of a code

is necessary though Tomasa: “reconoció a Reme por las cosas que le contaba. Reconoció a Hortensia en la madre de la niña que no quería nacer. Reconoció a Sole en la puerta abierta de la jaula y supo que seguía en Francia, aunque la palabra Francia estuviera tachada” (315). By providing her with information about the goings-on outside of the prison, Reme gives Tomasa access to a power and importance that she did not have previously. She becomes a source of information for other inmates and thus gains a sense of belonging again that she had lost when her whole “family” had either died, escaped or been released.

One more important letter that Chacón includes is that which Dolores Conesa, the mother of one of the ‘Trece Rosas’ writes in order to ask for the pardon of her daughter Julita.<sup>16</sup> She directs it: “Al Excmo. Señor General Don Francisco Franco Jefe del Estado Español [...] y adjuntó un pliego con las firmas que había recogido entre vecinos [...] treinta y cinco firmas, junto a una carta escrita por una madre” (218). The almost absurdly long, formal title of the head of the government reads ironically, as if almost a joke as the mother writes, asking that they not carry out the “sentencia fatal [...] espero en estos momentos de amargura la ayuda de V.E., de su bondad infinita, pidiendo a Dios le conceda vida larga para nuestra España conducida por su mano sea pronto la nación Grande que sirva de modelo al mundo entero” (218). In the end there was no clemency offered for Julita or her twelve young companions as they were killed anyway. After her daughter’s death, “la madre de Julita Conesa sólo tuvo un consuelo: las cartas que su hija le escribió en la prisión de mujeres [...] el día de su muerte escribió Julita la carta que provocará más tristeza en su madre. La

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<sup>16</sup>Several authors including Picornell-Belenguer have discussed the importance of including references to real historical personages or events in Chacón’s novel: “en su mayoría, la introducción de hechos reales entre las experiencias de la presas se refieren a anécdotas y a situaciones que podemos encontrar en los otros documentos editados hasta el momento. En este sentido, *La voz dormida* permite, desde la ficción, elaborar una síntesis representativa, síntesis que fundamenta su verdad más que en el establecimiento de fechas históricas y datos concretos, en la aglomeración de voces y de casos” (135). Ramos claims that Chacón: “lo que ha hecho [...] en esta novela es ficcionalizar la realidad” (245).

carta más triste. La última. Y la más corta” (219). This letter which had provided some consolation for her mother is also included in the novel, another example of what Mayock calls: “la carta, una estrategia literaria en que insiste Chacón para darles voz directa a sus personas” (26). It is through the epistolary genre that the true voices of the female protagonists can truly be heard. It is through writing that they are free to really express themselves, though not necessarily without fear of reprisal.

Julita composes her letter knowing that she will be executed, with this in mind she writes:

Madre, hermanos, con todo el cariño y entusiasmo os pido que no  
lloréis ni un día. Salgo sin llorar, cuidad a mi madre, me matan inocente pero  
muero como debe de morir una inocente.

Madre, madrecita, me voy a reunir con mi hermana y papá al otro  
mundo pero ten presente que muero por persona honrada.

Adiós, madre querida, adiós para siempre.

Tu hija que ya jamás te podrá besar ni abrazar.

Julia Conesa

Besos a todos, que ni tú ni mis compañeras lloréis.

Que mi nombre no se borre en la historia. (219-220)

Through the act of writing, she too cements herself in history. Like Hortensia she leaves a written legacy that the other characters will not forget: “No, el nombre de Julita Conesa no se borrará en la Historia. No” (220). Mayock explains that: “la ‘H’ mayúscula y la repetición de la palabra ‘no’ refuerzan el tema de la voz que se despierta, la voz que ayudará a volver a escribir la Historia para darle más profundidad, y por ende, quizás otorgarle más verdad”

(26). In her letter, Julita is also like Isidora's son who wants Antonio to know that he dies without guilt in *Cielos de barro*. Though Julita was actually convicted, had Isidora's son survived his cancer, he most certainly would have been as well though neither actually committed any real crime. The death of the innocent shows in both cases the brutality and oppression that were being experienced in post-war Spain.

Julia Condesa's letter is set in a different script than the rest of the novel, one that it is most likely meant to mimic a handwritten note. The use of this font sets it apart from the main narration as well as the "official" documents that are also included throughout the three different parts of the story. Casado tells us that: "*La voz dormida* contiene ocho documentos completos, y otros parcialmente reproducidos. Claro es que no son 'documentos' en el sentido propiamente dicho de 'un' documento oficial, pues todos carecen de membrete, sellos y firmas, si bien aparentan proceder de diferentes máquinas de escribir" (92-93). Edurne Portela adds that: "estos documentos transcritos en el texto con tipografía de máquina de escribir dialogan con las historias de los personajes, las cuales se inspiran en testimonios tanto escritos como orales" (61). The letter of Julia Condesa is an example of this type of testimony which has withstood the passing of time. It sums up exactly the goal of the author Chacón herself, that the women who fought not be forgotten. The other documents contrast with her letter in their coldness, representing the official and government sanctioned history that had created the pact of silence in Spain.

In *La voz dormida* Chacón's writing continues on the socially and politically aware path that she began in *Cielos de barro*. Though the first of the two novels that she wrote attempted to describe the situation of an entire class, both males and females, that was repressed and suffered from their economic and political situation, the second strove to

recover the voice of women whose story was never told. She wanted to revindicate the women who had suffered twice, first for being female and second for being “rojas.” The use of letters in her novel helps show how the epistolary genre was appropriated by women whose situation did not allow them other means of communicating their thoughts, ideas and beliefs. In a Spain in which they were being repressed, the act of writing a letter became a transgression for these women.

Though in each of her previous novels the relationships between females were important, in this last one they became the only means possible to survive. In *Las Ventas* those who were without a “family” of women to belong to would not have food to eat or someone to take care of them. Especially important are the maternal relationships that developed between different characters in the novel. Hortensia gives birth to Tensi, a daughter who eventually follows in her footsteps because of the political writing she left her as a legacy. Dolores Conesa writes to the government in order to ask for her daughter to be pardoned. She enlists the help of her community by gathering signatures of support and yet the system is not swayed. Though her daughter was innocent of a crime, she was executed anyway. The inclusion of Julia’s letter of farewell is directed to her mother yet her words resound for the readers of the novel in the present day. She asks to be remembered, that her name not be forgotten and the inclusion of her letter in *La voz dormida* accomplishes this goal. Letters also helped the imprisoned women maintain contact with those on the outside as well. Reme writes to Tomasa addressing her as ‘hermana’ and providing her with important information about their friends and their actions, many of which are subversive. The letters are clandestine yet pass through inspection for their coded nature. It is an ingenious

adaptation of the epistolary genre, one traditionally linked to women that they were able to use for their own advantage.

*La voz dormida* is not only the last novel that Chacón wrote before her death but it also represents the work that has received the most critical attention because of the role it played in bringing to light the experiences of women and their families after the Spanish Civil War. Though other works had presented similar testimonials, Chacón's representation seemed to touch her audience on a different level, becoming very popular fairly quickly. The shift to a more political commentary that addressed the contributions, trials and tribulations of the female characters does not make for a dry, fact-driven, unsentimental novel to which her readers may be unable to relate. Chacón intertwines several love stories, the connections between families and their members, and their feelings and emotions in order to create a fictional account of what had happened. Though it is based on testimonies and research that she had performed, *La voz dormida* remains connected to her previous novels through themes, her portrayal of characters, their relationships, struggles and most importantly their use of the epistolary genre to resist being repressed and forgotten.

## VII. Conclusion

Love and relationships along with the problems that go along with them are the basis of and driving force behind the action in Chacón's first three novels. Her female characters Prudencia as well as the lover in *Algún amor que no mate*, Blanca in *Blanca vuela mañana*, and Matilde in *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* are all trapped in their respective relationships and yet each is in the end able to break away from their partners. They are characters that struggle to find meaning and a sense of self in unloving relationships often characterized by a lack of communication. In each case, though their relationships may have started out with a sexual aspect, it is now non-existent. Chacón seems to suggest that a sexual relationship is vitally important for a relationship to remain healthy. She also shows that whether married or not, a lifelong commitment does not necessarily ensure happiness. Though in general the representation of marriage is fairly pessimistic, there are an equal number of characters involved in other types of relationships that are just as unhappy and unfulfilled. It is only by getting away or escaping from their boyfriends and husbands that Chacón's female characters are finally able to assert themselves, thus affirming their identity even if this paradoxically means committing suicide.

As Chacón begins to become more politically compromised in her final two works, the themes of love and relationships remain important but are no longer necessarily at the forefront of her message. Her works evolved from what some would dub sentimental to novels dealing with pressing social and political issues which are relevant in Spain today.



Though her earlier novels presented more universal themes such as love, betrayal, and abuse, her last two books became much more specific both spatially and temporally, showing the effects of the Spanish Civil War and giving a voice to those (women and the lower class) who were silenced by the government for many years. Though she moved geographically throughout her earlier novels, the inclusion of areas outside of Spain such as Germany in *Blanca vuela mañana* or Morocco in *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* allowed Chacón to experiment with how the memory of tragic events such as war or the drowning of a person's loved one can have effects in the present day. The inclusion of these effects in other countries and the fact that the characters who suffer from them are eventually able to work through their issues seems to suggest that Spain may also be ready for this type of reconciliation with its past, leading the way for a work such as *La voz dormida*. Throughout the evolution of her narrative whether sentimental or political, Chacón seems to root for the underdog in each of her novels and it is usually women who are the ones who suffer. Her characters however are not passive and do not allow themselves to be victimized without a fight.

In her very first novel, *Algún amor que no mate*, Chacón presents her reader with two battered women, Prudencia and the lover, who are trying to break free of the man who confines them in abusive relationships. Though this story is probably the most obvious and physical example, violence against women is a common thread that links each of her novels in some way. Whether they are trapped in relationships with men who do not understand them, their feelings, intellect etc., or they are being raped, beaten, tortured and incarcerated due to their social or political status, women seem likely to suffer in Chacón's novelistic world. Unexpected and tragic deaths also abound, whether it be the brutal murder of Aisha in *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* or Ulrike's ironic accident in *Blanca vuela mañana*. Perhaps

these deaths are a way to show that life is unpredictable and one must take advantage of the time they have here on earth. In many cases, it is only after being confronted with the death of others that Chacón's characters are motivated to finally begin their personal journeys which end in an affirmation of their right to live on their own terms. By presenting the brutal side of things which has been and continues to be the reality for many women, Chacón brings the issue of gender violence to the forefront. What for some might be a pitiable situation is used by the author in order to vindicate the strength of women. Her characters show courage and ingenuity in responding to this violence. They are not passive and show that women are able to resist the violence to which they are subjected. They become examples for those reading, women who employ a variety of methods to combat the violence from which they suffer including the epistolary genre and banding together with other females.

The importance of relationships between female characters is another central element which is carried through each of Chacón's novels. It stands in stark contrast to the representation of men and their frequent *machismo* which so often cause the women's problems. As a marginalized group, women must band together in order to survive, just as the poor and illiterate social class in *Cielos de barro* had to come together as a community in order to survive the repression and discrimination they suffered. Chacón seems to believe that women are able to draw strength from one another and that being in close contact serves the purpose of providing a network of support in most cases. In contrast to the violence a woman might be suffering at the hands of a man, Chacón presents the reader with the alternative which consists of female relationships that are warm, open, loving, protective and compassionate. Though women too can be cruel, including Victoria in *Cielos de barro* or the nuns and wardens in Las Ventas prison in *La voz dormida*, they are overwhelming

represented as being united against that which causes their pain. Friends, sisters, cousins, neighbors, daughters and mothers whether by birth or adopted are some of the female relationships that help the female characters in Chacón's novels survive and thrive.

Motherhood and maternity are undeniably important in almost every story. Simply being a female character however does not guarantee fertility and thus the gift of children. For example, Prudencia wants nothing more than to have children but cannot in *Algún amor que no mate*. Victoria also wants a baby and when she is denied one, she steals Isidora's son in *Cielos de barro*. These two characters see part of their self worth tied into the raising of children and are therefore part of a more conservative way of thinking. In contrast, neither Blanca nor Matilde have children in *Blanca vuela mañana* and *Háblame, musa, de aquel varón* which would seem indicative of the fact that they were truly unhappy in their relationships. They did not want to bring children into a world of such misunderstandings and misery. They represent a more modern or progressive mindset in which having children is not necessary to live a fulfilled life. Both Ulrike in *Blanca vuela mañana* and Hortensia in *La voz dormida* are mothers who know that they will soon die. In order to create a connection to their children they both write letters to them which eventually convert into a kind of inheritance. Maternity is tied intimately to the act of writing and thus to memory in both cases. To be a mother is to create a life, to nurture it and help it thrive. Both characters do this with their writing as well, but instead of a physical life they create a memory of themselves for their children which can live on after they have died.

The idea of memory and of being remembered is one which also links Chacón's novels. Women who traditionally would not have been given a voice, are the protagonists and main characters of her works and they do not want to be forgotten. Whether it is a

debilitating disease or a death sentence soon to be carried out, some women are conscious of the fact that they will soon be gone from this earth. Others want only to be remembered after they get out of their relationships, almost as a type of revenge. Regardless of their motivation, or why they want to be remembered, their method for accomplishing their goal is almost exclusively the use of the epistolary genre. By putting down their thoughts and feelings in written form, the female characters in Chacón's novels are able to create concrete evidence of their existence. By addressing their letters to someone specific, be it their children, their lover, husband or friend, they create a bond to that person and thus live on in their memory. Writing letters is intimately linked to memory as the characters live on in those who read what they have written.

Correspondence serves as a form of resistance in each of Chacón's works. Whether the letters are written to escape being erased from other's memory or they are a way to leave an unhealthy relationship, the epistolary genre is appropriated by females and used to their benefit. As her novels evolve from dealing with social issues to presenting a more political commentary, culminating in *La voz dormida*, letters are adapted by the characters to be useful in their individual situations. In Chacón's short life she was able to write five novels that included women who were trapped in some way or another. Her representations of these female characters shared in common their strength, ingenuity and the use of the epistolary genre in order to escape their situation. Never written in a traditional way, each work utilizes a different narrative technique in order to keep the reader engaged and to reflect in a more accurate way the feelings and emotional state of the characters. Distinct voices become important in each novel as they tell individual stories that convert into collective memory for those who have experienced similar situations in their lives. Many times the voices are heard

most clearly in the letters that are included in the novels. It is the voice of these women that Chacón vindicates, not allowing them to be victimized and in doing so, ends up creating an example for her readers to look to and live by.

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