CAN WOMEN PLAY?: THE GAME OF POWER IN THREE LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

CAMILLE BETHEA: Can Woman Play?: The Game of Power in Three Late Twentieth-Century Mexican Novels
(Under the direction of María A. Salgado)

This dissertation studies how women with access to political and societal power navigate the “rules of the game” of patriarchal society as portrayed in three Mexican novels: Ángeles Mastretta’s Arráncame la vida (1985), Dorotea Leyva’s La familia vino del norte (1989), and Carlos Fuentes’ Los años con Laura Díaz (1999). Chapter one focuses on how the role of Mexican female protagonists has changed over the last two decades, possibly due to the influence of a new generation of female authors that are writing bright and capable women characters. In chapter two, I discuss what is meant by the “rules of the game” in the context of Mexican culture and establish a theoretical framework within which to examine how contemporary women challenge the conventional gender constructs. In the third chapter, I incorporate the theories of French philosopher Michel Foucault regarding power, knowledge, truth, and strategy. My basic thesis posits that as the female protagonists empower themselves with knowledge, they are liberated from the oppressive rules that limit their freedom. In chapter four, I introduce two other strategies of empowerment: the ways in which the women use language to have their voices heard, as well as the manner in which they create an alternate discourse, thereby freeing themselves from having to rigidly adhere to the dominant social scripts. In chapter five, the conclusion, I examine to what extent these women are able to become players in the game of society, revisit the strategies that they employ, and discuss how one may gage their success.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

CAN WOMEN PLAY THE GAME OF MEXICAN POLITICS?

Revolucionarios, caciques, políticos; these are the primary figures that dot the landscape of Mexican canonical fiction. For decades such narratives have reflected the traditionally patriarchal reality of representing males in dominant positions of power. Since the 1980s, however, there have been a large number of novels published in Mexico, to great critical and public acclaim, that are primarily centered on the significant role of a female protagonist. Contemporary female characters appear to have become active participants in society; their actions persistently challenge the traditionally accepted social scripts for women. This shift in focus provides fertile ground for reexamining conventional gender roles and how these roles are changing or at least how they are being represented in works of fiction. Because women have typically been marginal characters, according to Maureen Shea, studies of their portrayal in Latin American literature have customarily focused on how they “stand outside the boundaries of what their respective societies have established as the status quo” (2). My study also explores the changing status of women in these recent novels.

How women with access to political and societal power navigate the “rules of the game” of patriarchal society as portrayed in Mexican literature is my subject of inquiry. These are some of the questions that I pose: What is meant by the “rules of the game,” and are such rules different for men and women? What is “the game” and what is the role of
women within it? What are some of the strategies adopted by both genders? And finally, what are men and women hoping to gain by playing the game?

The three novels that I use to explore these questions are Ángeles Mastretta’s *Arráncame la vida* (1985), Silvia Molina’s *La familia vino del norte* (1989), and Carlos Fuentes’ *Los años con Laura Díaz* (1999). I select these three works because each narrative features a female protagonist who, because of her social status or family ties, has direct access to power. Also, these novels represent an important change in the portrayal of women in Mexican literature. It is important to note, however, that the use of a female character close to power is not a new phenomenon. Catalina Bernal, the wife of political strong man Artemio Cruz in an earlier novel by Carlos Fuentes, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), is a prime example. Her father, a wealthy landowner, marries her off to Artemio, a virtual stranger, in an arrangement to ensure the family’s security. Ironically, it is through his marriage to Catalina that Artemio gains access to property and status, which he uses to rise to the heights of power in Mexican society. Catalina herself, however, remains a marginal character in Artemio’s life—as well as within the circles of social and political power in which he moves—as he becomes more influential and authoritative. In spite of her being part of the landed aristocracy and having the capacity to provide the base for her husband’s success, she is not portrayed as an active player in the game of Mexican society.

By contrast, the novels studied here indicate a significant and notable change in the portrayal of women’s relationship to power and the men in their lives. The female protagonist is no longer simply a marginal character. Her presence, voice, and desires have become an important part of the narrative. It is no longer uncommon for the story to be told from a feminine point of view, depicting women as active players in society. This shift in the
portrayal of female characters may be primarily due to the influence of a new
generation of female authors who are writing bright, conscientious, capable women
characters. Today’s female protagonists reject the notion that the stifling patriarchal order of
Mexican society should determine their choices in life. At the same time, they empower
themselves by recognizing the importance of understanding the rules and playing anew the
game within society. Critic Manuel Medina concurs with my assessment that in many of the
narratives by contemporary women writers in Mexico, “the female protagonists appropriate
strategies of empowerment traditionally controlled by men; by so doing, they militantly
confront the obsolete conformity of the status quo” (vi).

Mastretta’s Arráncame la vida, published in 1985, is one of the first Mexican novels
written by a woman that enjoyed great critical and unprecedented commercial success. It is
also one of the first narratives in said literature, told from a woman’s point of view, in which
the female protagonist is at the center of Mexico’s political life.¹ Due to her marriage to
Andrés Ascencio, a well-known politician, Catalina Guzmán has the opportunity to be an
active player in society. She is unique in that, according to Angélica María Lozano-Alonso,
she “confronts the official discourse, which can be read as an act of emergent feminism,
using the social codes established by the very system to which she is opposed” (32).

Silvia Molina’s La familia vino del norte, published in 1989 just four years after
Arráncame la vida, is also told from the perspective of the female protagonist. Dorotea
Leyva’s position within an influential family allows her more social, educational and
economic leverage to challenge the patriarchal system than earlier women had in society. As

¹ Elena Poniatowska’s Hasta no verte Jesús mío, published in 1969, is also told from the point of view
of the female protagonist (Jesusa Palencares) who has an active role in Mexico’s social reality. She is not
included in my study, however, because she remains a marginal character within society due to her low class
status. Also, for that same reason, she does not have direct access to power (through an influential man, or
otherwise), Therefore, she never has the opportunity to learn how to play the game.
she seeks the truth about her family and her own identity, she finds a new level of independence that up to this time had rarely been represented as achieved by a woman in Mexican literature.

Los años con Laura Díaz came out in 1999, five years after La familia vino del norte. It is one of the first examples of a male author of the stature of Carlos Fuentes focusing on a woman’s story. Fuentes has explained his motives for writing the novel from the female perspective in the following terms: “I see the book as a counterpoint to La muerte de Artemio Cruz . . . because it is more or less the same years but from a very different point of view, a woman’s viewpoint. It’s about the formation of a woman against all the odds we know in Mexico--not easy” (Bach 24-25). Indeed, Laura Díaz’s relationships with politically active men allow her to observe and describe important events in Mexico’s history in a way that was previously rarely expressed by female characters. By the time she reaches her sixties, however, she transforms from a mere observer of society into an active participant, becoming a noted photographer. The creation of such a character by Fuentes marks a significant change as it shows the interest of established authors that are a part of the canon in portraying a different type of female protagonist. Because of his status and the wide readership he enjoys, Fuentes’ work undoubtedly helps to change the way in which women characters are perceived by his compatriots.

As suggested, the novels that I analyze represent a significant shift in the depiction of women in Mexican literature. I use feminist theory to examine the strategies that female characters have traditionally used to challenge the confining roles typically allotted to them in any patriarchal society. But even more importantly, I show the new strategies that women are learning and appropriating from men as they gain a better understanding of how to play
the game of Mexican politics. It is only through such strategies that women have been able to free themselves from the cultural constructs designed to limit them and their role in society. As the tendency to write female protagonists who liberate themselves by rejecting traditional social scripts continues, we must also continue to evaluate what we can learn from these characters about what may be even deeper changes on-going in the structure of the country’s society.

A large number of studies have been written about Mastretta’s *Arráncame la vida*, including examining the use of music in the text and analyzing the narrative as a form of romance or as a historical novel. In “Popular Music as the Nexus to History, Memory, and Desire in Ángeles Mastretta’s *Arráncame la vida,*” in Textured Lives (1992), Claudia Schaefer discusses the use of the boleros as part of the creation of an alternative discourse. “Jugando con el melodrama: género literario y mirada femenina en *Arráncame la vida* de Ángeles Mastretta” (1995) by Aída Apter-Cragnolino examines the narrative as an example of “la novela rosa.” Angélica Lozano-Alonso’s dissertation “Subversive Women in Mexico’s New Historical Novel” (2001), comments on how many narratives published in Mexico since the 1980s tend to include the active participation of female protagonists like Catalina. In her opinion this inclusion calls for a reevaluation of the historical novel.

The majority of the criticism on *Arráncame la vida*, however, reflects a feminist approach that emphasizes that the rebellion, liberation, and independence of Catalina makes her a different kind of female protagonist. Eva Nuñez-Méndez’s “Mastretta y sus protagonistas, ejemplos de emancipación femenina” (2002), focuses on how Catalina achieves independence and sexual liberation. In Ignacio Trejo Fuentes’ *Guía de pecadoras, personajes femeninos de la novela mexicana del siglo XX* (2003), there is a chapter on
Arráncame la vida in which he discusses how the female protagonist adeptly manages to free herself from her domineering husband. Danny J. Anderson also talks about Catalina’s liberation in “Displacement: Strategies of Transformation in Arráncame la vida (1988), by Ángeles Mastrettta.” According to Anderson, the creation of a rebellious character like Catalina allows Mastretta to displace the traditional social scripts for women, which can be read as a strategy of transformation of the historical record. Catalina’s duplicity is a common theme in Janet N. Gold’s “Arráncame la vida, Textual Complicity and the Boundaries of Rebellion” (1988) and Kay Garcia’s chapter on Catalina entitled, “Fidelity, Credibility, and Duplicity in Angeles Mastretta’s Mexican Bolero” in Broken Bars (1994). Both critics point out that even though the female protagonist becomes her husband’s accomplice, she is also a duplicitous character, because in the end, she betrays him. In my study of Arráncame la vida, I discuss similar themes to those that take a feminist approach, examining the strategies of rebellion that Catalina utilizes to find a space of liberation and become a player in the game of society. My analysis is unlike the others in that I ultimately offer a different interpretation as to how one can evaluate Catalina’s success at achieving independence.

Unlike Mastretta’s Arráncame la vida, there have only been about fifteen critical articles written about Silvia Molina’s La familia vino del norte. Most of them focus on Dorotea’s empowering turn as the writer of the narrative that becomes the novel La familia vino del norte. Katherine Sugg’s “Paternal and Patriarchal Identifications: The Fatherlands of Silvia Molina” (1989), discusses the struggles that Dorotea endures to take authorship of her grandfather’s story. Carlos Von Son’s “Metaficción e historias en La familia vino del norte de Silvia Molina and Jesús L. Tafoya’s “Historia, mujer, y traición en La familia vino del norte de Silvia Molina” (2002), point out that it is important for Dorotea to be aware of her
family’s history so that she can gain a better understanding of herself as both a member of the family, and as a woman. In “De proceso a producto: la historia de y en La familia vino del norte de Silvia Molina” (1996), Manuel F. Medina examines how Dorotea’s search for her grandfather’s true identity results in finding her own, as well. In “Fictions and History in Silvia Molina’s La familia vino del norte” (1993), Kay García also focuses on Dorotea’s ability to establish a self-identity, but attributes her success at doing so to her creation of an alternate discourse. And, once again, Angélica Lozano-Alonso’s dissertation “Subversive Women in Mexico’s New Historical Novel,” looks at the narrative from the viewpoint that it challenges the historical record. Although my study discusses many of the aforementioned themes, including Dorotea’s defiance of patriarchal rules by taking control of her grandfather’s story, her search for identity, and her use of alternative discourse, it differs from the others in that it examines Dorotea’s actions in the larger context of how learning the rules of the game helps to make her an active player in society and focuses more on the specific strategies that she employs to find a space of liberation for herself.

Similarly to the situation with La familia vino del norte, and surprisingly, given Fuentes’ popularity, there have not been many critical studies published about Los años con Laura Díaz. Including book reviews, there are only fifteen to twenty sources. Critics have taken a variety of approaches to this novel, such as examining the use of time, of mythology, and the references to art. In “Los demonios de la nostalgia: La mitificación de los orígenes en El amor en los tiempos de cólera y Los años con Laura Díaz” (2003), Rafael E. Hernández examines how several secondary characters take on mythical characteristics. In “Dreaming a Mural of Mexico: Fuentes, Rivera, Siqueiros” (2003), Nancy A. Hall, focuses on the cultural aspect of the art included in the narrative. Both Gloria Prado’s “La construcción de un pasado
histórico: Entre la ficción y la historia” (2003) and Angélica Lozano-Alonso’s dissertation analyze the narrative as a historical novel. In “La experiencia del dolor en Los años con Laura Díaz de Carlos Fuentes” (2001), Paloma Andrés Ferrer discusses the sense of loss and grief experienced by several characters due to the death of others. Ángeles Mastretta has also written a short piece entitled, “Laura Díaz y Carlos Fuentes: La edad de sus tiempos” (1999) that she used to introduce the novel in Chicago when it was first released. She speaks of her relationship and experience with Fuentes and praises the novel. My analysis of Los años con Laura Díaz is radically different from the critical studies that have already been done. This study focuses on Laura’s character in the context of how she learns the rules of the game of society and how, after many years, she becomes an active participant due to the methods she learns and that she so ably employs.

A pattern is established that suggests that there are three significant ways in which the strategies that women use to navigate the game of society have changed: 1) contemporary women are more aware and more knowledgeable about how the game is played; 2) they have found new ways of using language to have their voices heard, and 3) they have developed an alternative discourse, thereby freeing themselves from the dominant one. Using ideas from such feminist critics as Gerda Lerner, Rosario Castellanos, and Debra Castillo, this work explores the cultural constructs that determine the parameters in which women are typically expected to act. My analysis shows some of the ways in which contemporary women in Mexican literature are incorporating old strategies and inventing new ones to challenge and erase conventional boundaries.

2 In “Fictions and History in Silvia Molina’s La familia vino del norte,” Kay Garcia defines alternative discourse as “a creative deviation from the established, dominant discourse” (275). I discuss this concept in greater detail in chapter three.
Chapter one explains what is meant by “the rules of the game,” clarifying the use of the term “the game” and identifying what these rules imply in Mexican society. The definitions regarding the country’s politics and public life and the traditional roles of both males and females within this society are based in great part on the opinions expressed in Octavio Paz’s El laberinto de la soledad (1950) and Alan Ridings, Distant Neighbors (1984).\(^3\) Patriarchy and machismo are both fundamental elements of Mexican culture.\(^4\) The motivations that drive the Mexican male, such as the desire for influence and domination, are critical determinants of why and how they play the game of politics. Their aspirations to power help to shape the unwritten “rules” that inevitably develop in traditional patriarchal systems and determine the social scripts that define the male-female relationship, as well.

Chapter one also explains, in greater detail, a framework within which to examine how contemporary women challenge the cultural constructs imposed by their society. It defines the concept of patriarchy and expounds on how it has shaped women’s lives, relying heavily on Gerda Lerner’s, The Creation of Patriarchy and The Majority Finds Its Past. Both texts provide the terminology for discussing traditional gender roles and feminism in Western societies. I foreground, in general terms, the significance of what Lerner refers to as a “feminist consciousness” as an important precondition for developing strategies for change.\(^5\)

To conceptualize feminism in Mexico I use Rosario Castellanos’ Mujer que sabe latin (1973), Jean Franco’s Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico (1989), Kay

\(^3\) Both El laberinto de la soledad and Distant Neighbors are widely recognized as important sources of insight into the inner workings of the Mexican system and psyche.

\(^4\) Machismo is defined as “a social relationship that promotes male superiority over the female in all aspects of life” (Valdés 15).

\(^5\) Gerda Lerner explains “feminist consciousness,” in part, as the “autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition and the development of an alternate vision of the future” (242).
García’s *Broken Bars, New Perspectives From Mexican Women Writers* (1994), and María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem’s *Reading the Feminine Voice in Latin American Women’s Fiction* (2002). These essays help to identify a pattern of strategies used specifically by the female protagonists in Mexican narrative.

Chapter two discusses the ability of the female protagonists at playing the game focusing on a common key element: knowledge. I examine whether Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Levya and Laura Díaz become more knowledgeable at recognizing and understanding the game of society, as they become more adept at finding ways to challenge and undermine the rules that limit their freedom. This chapter also draws on the theories of power and knowledge of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault’s fundamental thesis that every item of knowledge is equally a means for attaining power helps to discuss the concepts of power, knowledge, truth, and strategy within the context of Mexican society.

Chapter three focuses on two other strategies: the ways in which the women use language to have their voices heard, as well as the manner in which they create an alternate discourse, thereby freeing themselves from having to rigidly adhere to the dominant social scripts of their society. The concept of “language” in this chapter expands beyond simple linguistic expression. Language is a structure of power. It can also be an instrument of command over one’s self and one’s reality. The chapter shows how the female protagonists use language as such: an instrument of command. Catalina Guzmán understands the nuances of both verbal and written communication and she ably maneuvers through both to have her voice heard at critical moments. Dorotea Levya uses her writing as an instrument of command to tell, or rather rewrite her grandfather’s controversial story, thereby challenging

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6 These assertions about language are taken from Helene M. Anderson’s article “Rosario Castellanos and the Structures of Power.” I discuss additional ideas from this article in chapter three.
the “official” version. Laura Díaz expresses herself through photography, which she uses to present an alternate viewpoint of society that challenges the historical record. The ways in which these women use language as a tool of command is instrumental in helping them to create an alternative discourse—-a term that refers to both language and behavior. I show that by generating an alternative way of being, the women strive to create a space of independence and liberation for themselves.

The fourth and concluding chapter revisits the “rules of the game” of patriarchal culture in these three novels and points out how women with access to political and societal power have appropriated a variety of strategies to accomplish their goals. It also evaluates the level of success that each protagonist achieves in both her effort to become an active participant in society, and in her quest for autonomy. Additionally, the chapter explores to what extent the liberties that they gain truly allow them to become independent so that they can formulate an encouraging alternative model for future generations.

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7 I define discourse following Lois Tyson’s use in Critical Theory Today: “a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, [expressing] a particular way of understanding human experiences” (281). When using the term to indicate behavior, I refer to Discourse/Counterdiscourse, in which Richard Terdiman describes it as “a culture’s determined and determining structures of representation and practice” (12).
CHAPTER TWO
THE MEXICAN GAME AND SOME FEMINIST THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When General Andrés Ascencio chastises his wife, Catalina Guzmán, the protagonist of Ángeles Mastretta’s *Arráncame la vida*, for staying out late with friends after she carries out a political errand on his behalf, she assuages him, in part, with the following words: “[d]e todos modos yo juego en tu equipo y ya lo sabes” (115). It is noteworthy that Catalina uses such a metaphor, likening her husband’s political pursuits to a game. At the same time, she makes it clear where her loyalties lie, affirming that she is on his team. Throughout the novel one sees the transformation of Catalina from an inexperienced young girl who is largely dependent on her husband to a knowledgeable woman skilled at understanding the political and social rules of her society. Though both she and Andrés come to recognize that she is a valuable player in her husband’s “game” of politics, this is not a role traditionally associated with women, in general, but most especially with the women of Mexican culture.

When one thinks of the “rules” of the political and social game of a patriarchal society, one typically thinks primarily of the male’s contributions. The more recent contemporary Mexican novel, however, illustrates how female protagonists have begun to seek active participation in society outside of the traditional roles allotted to women as mothers and housewives, dependent on their husbands for their identity. Antonio Sobejano-Morán affirms that women, in general, have long sought to change their condition: “[t]he struggle to defy patriarchal models and to reevaluate epistemological methods has been
jointly undertaken by women writers and feminist theorists since the sixties and seventies, when the women’s liberation movement brought a wake of female consciousness” (1-2). The defiance that Sobejano-Morán refers to is also represented through the women characters in the Mexican novels in this study.

What exactly is meant with the metaphor “playing the game” of Mexican society? In *The Politics of Latin American Development* Gary Wynia offers an explanation of how social politics may be imagined as a game:

[One may] study politics as if it were analogous to a game. The game idea is helpful not because politics is primarily recreational; obviously it is not. Politics affects the most fundamental aspects of human life, sometimes cruelly. What makes the game metaphor valuable is the way it helps us see politics as a dynamic process involving contests among people with different ideas. . . . It directs us to examine the rules followed, both formal and informal, and to study players and how they collaborate and compete with one another. Politics is part of social life. (24)

In this study I examine this dynamic process of competition and contests among different players using the term “rules of the game” to refer to both the formal and informal codes of conduct that govern the interactions of the various players in both the political and social aspects of Mexican society and in Latin America, in general.

Alan Riding, in *Distant Neighbors* (1984), describes the political situation in Mexico as “political theater” or “an elaborate ritual” (68). In other words, for Riding, those involved in politics play a role or go through the motions of upholding the political process to maintain themselves in power in a ritual easily compared to a theatrical performance. Riding points
out, however, that real politics take “place behind masks, far from the view or influence of the great majority of citizens” (68). Though the general public may participate in the political process, real power is, in fact, concentrated in the hands of a few.

Referring to the political situation as “theater” or as an “elaborate ritual” is in no way meant to diminish its importance. Quite the contrary, “the ritual is considered vital because, like most authoritarian regimes, Mexico’s ruling elite is obsessed with the need to justify the perpetuation of its power” (Riding 69). Holding on to control is a key motivator for those in command. Furthermore, according to Riding, there are two “golden rules” of the political game that help to consolidate the power of the ruling elite: paternalism and the expectation of corruption. Paternalism is “the practice of treating or governing people in a patriarchal manner, especially by providing for their needs while allowing them a minimum of responsibility, and while expecting their loyalty in return” (Merrell 391-92). Paternalism helps to fuel the game of politics in Mexico by creating a network of allegiances and a system of favors in which “loyalty and discipline are rewarded with power and privilege” (Riding 77).

The second “golden rule,” deals with the expectation of corruption within the political process:

Corruption is essential to the operation and survival of the political system. But the system has in fact never lived without corruption and it would disintegrate or change beyond recognition if it tried to do so. In theory, the rule of law would have to replace the exercise of power, privilege, influence and favors as well as their supporting pillars of loyalty, discipline, discretion
and silence. In practice, the mere attempt to redefine the rules could shatter the entire system of alliances. (Riding 113)

Corruption is undeniably a vital part of the Mexican political system. Like paternalism, it involves a network of favors and influence, but it may also manifest itself in the form of bribery, fraud, payoffs, and other deceits.

As a rule, those who seek power and privilege must understand its function in society in order to be successful at playing the game. Corruption is deep-rooted in Mexico’s system of political alliances and has been for some time. Riding explains that it is closely linked to financial prosperity: “[b]y the late nineteenth century, public life could be defined as the abuse of power to achieve wealth and the abuse of wealth to achieve power” (114).

Historically corruption has been an important part of Mexican politics and there is little doubt that it still is. Perhaps its use today is best described by Riding in this way: “corruption enables the system to function, providing the ‘oil’ that makes the wheels of the bureaucratic machine turn and the ‘glue’ that seals political alliances” (114). Though it would be unjust to say that all politicians are crooked and an exaggeration to say that all of Mexican society is dishonest, “corruption is nevertheless present in every region and sector of the country” (Riding 123).

It is evident that the desire for power and wealth are key motivators and facilitators in the game of politics. Patriarchy and machismo have also been important elements in shaping Mexican culture. Men have traditionally ruled the system, enjoying freedom of movement and positions of privilege in society. But how is one to understand the mindset of the man who plays the game of politics in Mexico?
Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) paints a picture of his male compatriots as someone who must appear manly or macho at all times. The author explains that men must be strong and silent: “[e]l ideal de la ‘hombría’ consiste en no ‘rajarse’ nunca. Los que se ‘abren’ son cobardes” (26). They must also be able to dominate: “[l]o único que vale es la hombría, el valor personal, capaz de imponerse” (71). Men must never show weakness for fear of being labeled a coward, less than a man, and therefore likened to women. Manliness, personal strength and the ability to control others are his most valuable traits. For the Mexican male, as depicted by Paz, the expectation of masculinity is synonymous with strength and aggression.

There is nothing more important to a man than power. Paz confirms that it is precisely this word, power, that most aptly summarizes the Mexican ideal of manliness: “[u]na palabra resume la agresividad, impasibilidad, invulnerabilidad, uso descarnado de la violencia, y demás atributos del ‘macho’: poder” (73). From this quote one can conclude that some of the fundamental attributes of the Mexican male are aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability, and the indiscriminate use of violence to meet his ultimate goal: obtain power. Paz underlines the strong connection between power and violence: “. . . el hecho es que el atributo esencial del ‘macho’, la fuerza, se manifiesta casi siempre como capacidad de herir, rajar, aniquilar, humillar . . .” (74). The mindset of the stereotypical Mexican male that Paz describes indicates that he is not above using force to obtain power. It is inevitable that these qualities influence how men approach the game of politics.

There are several unspoken rules that affect how men seek to get ahead in Mexican society, including those that deal with threats and exploitation: “el empleo de la violencia como recurso dialéctico” and “los abusos de autoridad de los poderosos” (Paz 64-65). The
ability and willingness to lie is also an important strategy. For Paz, Mexicans, including himself, enjoy lying, but he adds that there are other reasons that push people to do so:

Mentimos por placer y fantasía, sí como todos los pueblos imaginativos, pero también para ocultarnos y ponernos al abrigo de intrusos. La mentira posee una importancia decisiva en nuestra vida cotidiana, en la política, el amor, la amistad. Con ella no pretendemos nada más engañar a los demás, sino a nosotros mismos. . . . La mentira es un juego trágico en el que arriesgamos parte de nuestro ser. Por eso es estéril su denuncia. (36)

Lying is a way for men to protect themselves, allowing them to hide their true persona. At the same time, in both the professional and the personal contexts, it is also an important tool in the game of a society in which one either deceives or is deceived.

By the same token, in the quest for power and influence one either controls or is controlled. Paz describes not just the game of society, but also life, in general, for the Mexican male in exactly these terms. If he is not the aggressor, he risks being victimized: “[p]ara el mexicano la vida es una posibilidad de chingar o de ser chingado. Es decir, de humillar, castigar y ofender. O a la inversa. Esta concepción de la vida social como combate engendra fatalmente la división de la sociedad en fuertes y débiles” (71).

The desire to get ahead at all costs in Mexican society can best be described as a type of survival of the fittest. The “game” or competition and contests among different players divide society into the strong and the weak. One either dominates or is dominated. The strategies for playing are two-fold. First, one must understand the rules of the game—a system based on favors, paternalism, and corruption. Secondly, one must be willing to abuse their

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8 In the English translation of El laberinto de la soledad, Lysander Kemp translates chingar to mean “to do violence to another” (76). In Alan Riding’s Distant Neighbors, the literal meaning of chingar is given as “to rape” (13).
authority, lie, be aggressive, and even violent to be successful. Success means having power, wealth, privilege, and dominating others.

In the picture of male-dominated society divided into the strong and the weak, women, naturally, belong to the second category. According to Paz, the female’s primary function is to serve man and to, without question, accept the subordinate position that is conventionally assigned to her by patriarchal ideology:

Como casi todos los pueblos, los mexicanos consideran a la mujer como un instrumento, ya de los deseos del hombre, ya de los fines que le asignan la ley, la sociedad o la moral. . . . En un mundo hecho a la imagen de los hombres, la mujer es solo un reflejo de la voluntad y querer masculino. . . . La feminidad nunca es un fin en sí mismo, como lo es la hombria. (31-2)

Women are an “instrument” or reflection of what both man and society desire for them to be. Furthermore, Paz describes the Mexican female as having no sense of self and no real purpose without the attention and influence of a man: “[l]a mexicana simplemente no tiene voluntad. Su cuerpo duerme y sólo se enciende si alguien lo despierta. Nunca es pregunta, sino respuesta, materia fácil y vibrante que la imaginación y la sensualidad masculina esculpen” (33). For Paz, women are submissive, passive, and lack an identity of their own.

As the weaker sex a woman must rely on men to give her life structure and meaning.

Paz’s view of woman as an “instrumento” or “materia fácil” that requires the influence of a man to have purpose, while severe, is in fact not far from the traditional depiction of most women of the society to which he belongs. In Mexican culture there is a “deeply rooted concept that women are inferior” and “that their purpose is to serve men” (Riding 240). In keeping with the patriarchal order, women have had their role limited in
society and in family life to that of “abnegated wives and mothers” (240). In the following letter written in the nineteenth-century by a Mexican politician, the respective roles of husband and wife are clearly delineated:

The man . . . will give protection, food and guidance to the woman. The woman, whose principal attributes are abnegation, beauty, compassion, perspicacity and tenderness, should and will give her husband obedience, pleasure, assistance, consolidation and counsel, always treating him with the veneration due to the person that supports and defends her. (qtd. in Riding 241)

The man undoubtedly dominates the relationship. The woman is expected to dutifully and ungrudgingly take care of her husband and family with little regard for her own needs.

Though the above description of gender roles was written over a century ago, the belief that men should be in control and that women should be submissive is still deeply rooted in Mexican culture. Helene Anderson’s 1992 essay “Women’s Voices in Mexico: the Politics of Transformation” echoes similar ideas about the dominance of men and the abnegation of women. Anderson affirms that the traditional ideals for women are those associated with her role as wife and mother: “pre-nuptial purity, marital fidelity, commitment to maternity, dedication to domesticity, humility, submission and dependence” (18). Just as Paz described it, since the stereotypical Mexican male is expected to be strong, aggressive, and in control, the idealized female is a devoted, submissive spouse and mother who is obedient and dependent.

It is important to note that over the last several decades, the limiting gender roles assigned to women in Mexican society have started to change. Economic difficulties and
material expectations have prompted more middle-class women to work and to study outside of the home, which in turn has given them more freedom (Riding 248). As a result of these changes there has been a “gradual, often reluctant, acceptance of the greater independence of women” (248). While many females embrace the new freedoms of contemporary society, at the same time it is challenging for many to see beyond the social programming of patriarchal ideology that customarily governs their life. Riding stresses that it can be difficult to break the patriarchal mind-set: “. . . though some women are determined to assert their personal and professional identities, the majority still unconsciously accept the dictates of their fathers, brothers, husbands and even sons. Male domination is perceived as the price of maintaining traditions, morality, and security” (253). Most women are accustomed to being subordinate to male authority figures. Just as men are indoctrinated in the beliefs of patriarchal ideology, women are, as well. They are expected to maintain the status quo, and most do so.

The idea that both men and women alike are responsible for upholding patriarchal ideals is also echoed in María Elena de Valdés’ The Shattered Mirror: Representations of Woman in Mexican Literature. She points out that both sexes have internalized masculine principles: “[t]he more one probes into the social status of most Mexican women, the more it becomes evident that neither men nor women have a clear idea of the domination/submission relationship which rules their lives. On the contrary, they have interiorized it into a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world . . .” (17). Patriarchy is a dominating influence in Mexican society; it is thus not surprising that both men and women instinctively accept its norms and values. In order to make significant changes in the feminine condition both sexes
have to begin to transform their attitudes about the way that gender roles are constructed in conventional Mexican society.

The situation of women in Mexican culture may have started to improve; a closer look at both patriarchy and feminism, in general, will shed light on both the perception that women have had in society and their possibilities for the future. In The Creation of Patriarchy Gerda Lerner provides a broad definition of patriarchy, which she describes as:

[t]he manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society, in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources. (239)

As underlined by Lerner, patriarchy means that men hold superior positions both in society and within the family. Men have the power, and though women may be denied access to that power, it is important to note they are not powerless.

It is also significant to point out that in Latin America class is an important determinant of the position and influence that a man has in society because, as Lerner explains, his status is linked to his ability to control others: “[c]lass, for men, was and is based on their relationship to the means of production: those who owned the means of production could dominate those who did not” (Creation 215). Consequently, “it is through the man that women have access to or are denied access to the means of production and to resources” (215). For women, class is mediated through their ties to a man. In other words, following patriarchal ideology, fathers, husbands and brothers determine whatever power or
status may be accorded to women in a given culture (Green and Kahn 2). The notion
that the men in her life determine a woman’s class and worth is, in part, why women have
been devalued, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, as the “second sex.” In comparison to
their male counterparts, “they have no significant power or influence within a system which
is controlled by men and works to their benefit” (qtd. in Green and Kahn 7).

Feminism, according to Lerner, is “a doctrine advocating social and political rights
for women equal to those of men,” which rejects the notion that men are innately superior to
women (Creation 236). She also notes that feminist critics encourage women to bear in mind
that patriarchy is simply a cultural construct; women should not allow themselves to be
controlled or limited by its dictates. In fact, Lois Tyson, another critic states that feminists
distinguish between “the word sex, which refers to our biological constitution as female or
male, and the word gender, which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or
masculine, which are categories created by society rather than by nature” (84).

In Making a Difference, Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn point out that gender plays
an important role in the cultural constructs that are supported by patriarchal ideology: “the
inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural
construct . . .” (1). These feminist critics leave no doubt that gender roles are determined by
the customs, values, and social norms of any given society; women are not innately inferior
to men. Furthermore, Green and Kahn explain that there is a male agenda hidden behind
gender construction: “it is generally true that gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the
interests of male supremacy” (3). One way that such interests are served, according to Tyson,
is by constantly subjecting women to situations that undercut their chances for success:
“patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and
assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive” (85).

Critics agree that contrary to the ideas of patriarchy, men are not naturally superior to women. Many have held such a belief because, as Lerner asserts, traditionally “how we see and interpret what we know about women has been shaped through a value system defined by men” (Majority 160). She points out that the problem or limitation of such a perception is that it “deals with women in male-defined society and tries to fit them into the categories and value systems which consider man the measure of significance” (Majority 149-50). If man is the constant standard by which the contributions of women are judged, then the question remains as to whether or not women can contribute significantly to society outside men’s parameters. Lerner has examined the topic of whether or not the traditionally marginalized position of women meant that they had no power at all. From her research she concludes that women did indeed wield “considerable power,” through the years, even more than has been apparent (Majority 11). But even more importantly, as women have progressively become more aware of their power, a new female or feminist consciousness has formed. Lerner affirms that developing such awareness is necessary for women to begin to bring about change: “[s]ince women’s thought has been imprisoned in a confining and erroneous patriarchal framework, the transforming of the consciousness of women about ourselves and our thought is a precondition for change” (Creation 220-21).

Developing a feminist consciousness becomes essential for women to transform their own perceptions about conventional gender roles. Lerner defines the term “feminist consciousness” in part, as the “autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition and the development of an alternate vision of the future”
(Lerner, *Creation* 242). If women wish to be liberated from the cultural constructs of patriarchal ideology, they must recognize the inequalities of the system, stand in resistance to patriarchal domination, and assert their will in shaping society. At the same time they must determine their own aspirations and purposefully pursue their objectives, showing that they are aware of their situation and actively taking steps to improve it. Lerner explains the importance of this heightened awareness: “[t]his coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society” (*Creation* 5).

Many feminist critics agree that it is only through developing a feminist consciousness that women can improve their situation. In “Women’s History,” Joan Scott comments on the connection between progressive thinking and achieving liberation: “[c]onsciousness-raising involved the discovery of the ‘true’ identity of women, the shedding of blinders, the achievement of autonomy, individuality, and therefore, emancipation” (54). Green and Kahn affirm that for women, having a ‘feminine consciousness’ is necessary in their process of self-discovery (48).

If this heightened awareness or feminist consciousness empowers women to develop goals and strategies for changing their condition, then one must consider what it is that most women strive for. Also, one needs to reflect on what strategies they use to achieve their goals. Most women want freedom from the cultural constructs of patriarchal ideology. They want equality, choices and independence. In fact, one of the primary desires of women repeatedly identified by feminist critics is the need for both autonomy and emancipation.

In *The Majority Finds It’s Past*, Lerner speaks specifically about the importance of autonomy for women that seek a different vision for the future:
the quest for female emancipation from patriarchally determined subordination encompasses more than the striving for equality and rights. It can be defined best as the quest for autonomy. Autonomy means women defining themselves and the values by which they will live. . . . Autonomy for women means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, bound to a past without meaning, and prepared for a future determined by others. It means moving into a world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one’s future. (161-62)

For Lerner, women seek independence from the prescribed, limiting roles assigned to them in patriarchal society. They want to define themselves, make their own decisions, and be active in determining their own futures.

Although Lerner speaks of autonomy as a goal for women in general terms, this study shows that autonomy and emancipation are equally important goals for women in Mexican society. The female protagonists it examines also have to contend with the limiting constructs of patriarchy. As they develop a feminist consciousness they begin to bring about change in their condition, with liberation and independence as their primary goals.

In order to further discuss the representation of women in Mexican literature, it is necessary to first identify the conventional images of women in patriarchal society and how these images have evolved, particularly in Mexican culture, in the late twentieth century. In Critical Theory Today Lois Tyson points out that in patriarchal cultures women have, in general, customarily been divided into two categories:

Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules,
she’s a ‘good girl’; if she doesn’t, she’s a ‘bad girl.’ These two roles--also referred to as ‘madonna’ and ‘whore’ or ‘angel’ and ‘bitch’--view women only in terms of how they related to the patriarchal order. (88)

In Mexico’s society such dualistic perceptions about women are widely accepted--those that agree with the role assigned by society are thought to be good girls; those that do not follow the rules are considered to be a bad. Luis Leal believes that the two aforementioned possible identities for women are deeply ingrained in the Mexican mind-set: “[t]he characterization of women throughout Mexican literature has been profoundly influenced by two archetypes present in the Mexican psyche” (227). The good girl (identified with the Virgin Mary) is the woman who has kept her virginity; the bad girl (identified with La Malinche) is the one who has lost it (227).9

In El uso de la palabra, a collection of essays published in 1974, Rosario Castellanos, a poet and novelist, but also widely acknowledged as one of the leaders of the women’s liberation movement in Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s, addresses the issue of female archetypes in her country’s culture. She expands the list beyond the two typical identities for women in patriarchal ideology recognizing three prominent historical female figures in Mexican history:

Hay tres figuras en la historia de México en las que encarnan, hasta sus últimos extremos, diversas posibilidades de la femineidad. Cada una de ellas representa un simbolo, ejerce una vasta y profunda influencia en sectores muy amplios de la nación y suscita reacciones apasionadas. Estas figuras son la Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche y Sor Juana. (21)

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9 I will discuss La Malinche in greater detail later in this chapter.
It is apparent that La Malinche, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz are each a significant yet distinct symbol of the female image in Mexican culture. In reference to patriarchal ideology, as mentioned above, La Malinche is frequently associated with the “bad” girl, la Virgen de Guadalupe with the “good” girl, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a well-known seventeenth-century writer, provides a sort of sexless alternative to the other two gender models.

The image of the bad woman (in this case, the violated woman, la Chingada) emerged in the history of the conquest. La Malinche, interpreter and concubine of conquistador Hernán Cortés, became the prototype of the “bad girl” because together with Cortés, they “represent, symbolically, Mexico’s ‘ancestral couple,’ responsible for the ‘fall’ of the Indian nation” (H. Anderson, “Rosario Castellanos” 22). As H. Anderson points out, she is frequently compared to the biblical Eve because “through her knowledge she facilitates the penetration and violation of Mexico” (22). Symbolically, as the “bad” woman, La Malinche represents sexuality and a general lack of morals and values. Castellanos describes her as defined by Mexican society, as someone whose sexuality makes her indifferent to the rules and values of her culture: “La Malinche encarna la sexualidad en lo que tienen de más irracional, de más irreductible a las leyes morales, de más indiferente a los valores de la cultura” (Palabra 22). In Mexican literature the female characters that are considered to be the “bad girls” are often a reflection of the negative characteristics associated with La Malinche such as betrayal, violation, and sexuality.10

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10 I should note that Chicana feminists have reevaluated and in a sense, vindicated the image of La Malinche. In “Reconfiguring Epistemological Pacts: Creating a Dialogue between Psychoanalysis and Chicano/a Subjectivity, a Cosmopolitan Perspective,” Ezequiel Peña, points out that La Malinche is now recognized as a victim of the patriarchal system: “Chicana writers have illustrated that it is not Malintzin who sold out her race but, rather, that her culture betrayed her, quite literally, by selling her as a slave so that her brother’s inheritance might be secured” (314).
In contrast, and according to Leal, “[t]he violated woman, has as her opposite the pure woman, whose symbol in Mexican literature is the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe” (229). As the “good girl,” the Virgen represents decency, purity, and the maternal ideal. Additionally, “[s]he is also the shield behind which the poor, the humble, and the helpless take refuge” (229-30). Castellanos, too, recognizes the importance of the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican culture as a figure that provides hope and protection: “[e]n la Virgen de Guadalupe parecen concentrarse únicamente elementos positivos. Es, a pesar de su aparente fragilidad, la sustentadora de la vida, la que protege contra los peligros, la que ampara en las penas. . . .” (Palabra 21). H. Anderson states that the Virgen de Guadalupe “became the emblem and symbol of Mexican nationhood during the struggle for Independence” (“Rosario Castellanos” 22). As an image that provides hope and protection, she is considered to be the maternal ideal. As the opposite of La Malinche, however, she is a figure unrelated to sexuality (23). That is to say that la Virgen de Guadalupe, is associated with the symbol of a type of motherhood that is untainted by the sexual implications of La Malinche’s maternity. Guadalupe is the maternal ideal, representative of purity and not sexuality (23).

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the third symbolic image of woman in Mexican culture, is a curious alternative to the other two oppositional figures. The seventeenth-century poet-nun, who entered a convent so that she could study and write, is seen to embody intellectual activism (H. Anderson, “Rosario Castellanos” 23). For Castellanos, Sor Juana is not a “curious” phenomenon because as a woman she wrote verses, but rather, because she managed to write in spite of the resistance that she faced. She describes Sor Juana’s “phenomenon” in this way: “[no sorprende que] tuviera una vocación intelectual siendo
mujer. Porque, a pesar de todas las resistencias y los obstáculos del medio, ejerciera esa vocación y la transformara en obra” (Palabra 24).

To be a writer in the seventeenth century, Sor Juana had to overcome many obstacles. Outside the convent, there was no place for intellectual activity within the traditionally accepted roles for Mexican women. By pursuing writing within a public context (amorous poetry, plays, and even religious commentary), Sor Juana implicitly rejected the established norms for women. Even more significantly, however, according to Helene Anderson, “by embodying intellectuality in the figure of a nun, Sor Juana symbolically conveys an image of intellectuality as a negation of both motherhood and sexuality” (“Rosario Castellanos” 23).

Sor Juana’s intellectual activism served to shatter the dichotomy associated with women in patriarchal societies between the good and bad woman, purity and betrayal, and maternity and sexuality, by showing that there were other options or alternatives to the prescribed roles for women.

Helene Anderson explains that as Castellanos has outlined these three women—and until Mexican authors began to write multi-faceted female protagonists—the three elements that were a symbolic synthesis of woman’s image and reality in Mexican culture were: 1) “sexuality, or betrayal leading to the fall of (Mexican) man,” as seen in La Malinche; 2) “motherhood, which is chaste and excludes any recognition of sexuality,” represented by la Virgen de Guadalupe; and 3) intellect, which is a negation of both motherhood and sexuality,” as identified with Sor Juana (23). H. Anderson further underlines that Castellanos gathered one of her collections of essays under the title, Mujer que sabe latín in 1973, in order to “raise consciousness and to awaken the critical spirit” (24). With this title Castellanos wanted to emphasize the sexism of a culture that gave rise to the popular saying
a woman who knows Latin will never marry and will not have a good ending.” Despite her prominence in the spread of feminism in Mexico, Castellanos’ perspective is not unique. Several other Mexican female authors that started publishing in the 1950s and 1960s began writing female characters that would serve as an alternative to the previously accepted polarized images that portrayed women in limited roles. It is important to stress how these authors, among them Elena Garro and Elena Poniatowska--whose work I consider fundamental and will briefly address later in this chapter--bridge the gap between traditional female archetypes perpetuated in canonical Mexican literature and the more recent portrayals of the female protagonists here examined.

Rosario Castellanos’ role as a feminist is undeniable. In addition to her essays for her daily newspaper column, she wrote short stories, novels, and poems “protesting women’s subordination.” She most certainly had a pioneering role in helping to establish the female voice in Mexican literature (Franco 138). In the “nota preliminar” to another of her collections of essays, El uso de la palabra, Carlos Monsiváis explains how significant she was to promoting women’s writing in Mexico: “Rosario Castellanos inicia la literatura de la mujer mexicana. . . . Gracias a [ella], las mexicanas reencontraron su voz” (qtd. in Pacheco 7). The aforementioned journalist and creative writer Elena Poniatowska echoes a similar sentiment about Castellanos’ great importance in Mexico’s women’s liberation movement in the same “nota preliminar”: “con la tesis que Rosario Castellanos presentó en 1950 sobre cultura femenina, justamente para negar la existencia discriminatoria de una cultura femenina, se establece el punto de partida intelectual de la liberación de las mujeres en México” (7). It is worthy of notice that not only the critics, but also the writers themselves,
among them Poniatowska, recognize Castellanos as a pioneer in bringing attention to matters concerning women and their secondary roles within Mexico’s patriarchy.

During her literary career Castellanos examined issues such as “submission and domination, from a consistently unique female perspective” (H. Anderson, “Rosario Castellanos” 22). For Maureen Ahern, Castellanos’ legacy is to have created a space for women’s writing and for their voices (7). Furthermore, Ahern asserts that Castellanos’ work may be considered a “mirror and model for several generations of writers throughout Latin America” (x).

Another important contributor to initiating a change in the portrayal of women characters is Elena Garro, a novelist, short-story writer and playwright. She was another significant female voice during the second half of the twentieth century. At the time of her death in 1998, the president of the National Council for Culture and the Arts in Mexico, Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, labeled Garro as one of the three most important female writers that Mexico had produced, placing her alongside the 17th-century nun and poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Garro's contemporary Rosario Castellanos (DePalma 3). Garro’s works frequently deal with social issues and question the patriarchal representation of women. Evelyn Picón Garfield has also underlined Garro’s commitment to bringing attention to societal injustices: “[i]n her narratives, Garro often denounces social and economic exploitation of certain groups in Mexico such as the Indians and exposes the victimization of women in her society” (69).

Elena Poniatowska, the third major female author who began writing during the 1960s, is also a novelist, journalist, and essayist that has been described as a “legendary figure” among Mexico’s female writers. De Beer describes her as “a mentor to her peers as
well as to younger women writers” (4). Poniatowska has been writing since 1954 and is, today, the most successful woman author in her country (Valdés 117). Poniatowska is open about her feminist affiliations affirming that, “[i]t would be absurd to say that I am not a feminist. I am completely on the side of women, I want women to progress” (14). The popular writer is not only recognized for her feminist convictions, but she is also known for her profound commitment to giving voice to those that have been marginalized and silenced. María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem calls Poniatowska’s work “an ‘excellent example’ of fiction that incorporates the suppressed voices of marginalized characters to ‘challenge the official discourse’” (123).

Indeed, Castellanos, Garro, and Poniatowska have made their mark in Mexican literature. Aralia López González, Amelia Malagamba, and Elena Urrutia concur with my assessment of their prominence: “[e]l panorama literario femenino es rico en México sin embargo, tres escritoras son significativas: Rosario Castellanos, Elena Poniatowska y Elena Garro” (130). Gabriela De Beer has also pointed out their importance as groundbreaking authors: “[n]o discussion of contemporary women writers would be complete without giving these pioneering authors the recognition they have earned” (2). The fact that these accomplished female authors made a name for themselves as writers, and used the lens of their gender to bring their point of view to the forefront eased the way for other women to follow their example and pursue writing professionally (De Beer 4-5). Castellanos, Garro and Poniatowska set the stage not only for the female writers that are considered in this dissertation, Ángeles Mastretta and Silvia Molina, but also for countless other contemporary fiction writers in Mexico and Latin America at large. The three authors’ appeal for change in Mexico was determined by the fact that they also lived through an event that would come to
be a defining moment in the country’s history and that had a profound influence on the writers of that time: the massacre of students in Tlatelolco, also called “La plaza de las tres Culturas.

On October second, 1968, the military attacked thousands of Mexican citizens--students, university personnel, professionals, women with children, and others--who had gathered in the Plaza de Tlatelolco to listen to the speeches protesting, among other things, “the government’s infraction against freedom of expression, the threat to the university’s autonomy, and the incarceration of political prisoners” (H. Anderson, “Women’s Voices” 1). The repercussions of the violent confrontation, in which hundreds were killed, imprisoned or disappeared, were, “felt on every level and left an indelible mark on an entire generation of Mexican writers” (H. Anderson, “Women’s Voices” 1-2):

Although the consequences of that confrontation affected all sectors, the trauma of 1968 triggered for the first time in a number of women writers, an aggressive rejection of the forms, attitudes and roles established for them by the established patriarchal order that had governed their lives. In that terrible act of repression and domination they recognized the dynamic that had always governed their lives in order to assure their conformity to the Mexican female ideal of passivity, humility, resignation, self-sacrifice and submission.

Tlatelolco was a transforming event; in women writers it triggered the search, through literature, for new forms of being and expression. (3)

The brutal acts of the government and military during the Tlatelolco Massacre emphasized the controlling and unyielding nature of Mexico’s authoritative regime. In response to the aggression and repression exhibited by those in control, many women, and more specifically,
female authors, began to reject the dominant patriarchal dictates that had structured and governed their lives seeking new ways of expressing themselves.

The act of writing became a symbolic and cathartic way of casting off their conformity to the dominant discourse and experimenting with new forms of expression, thereby creating an alternative discourse. For H. Anderson, writing became a way to challenge the dominant order, giving a voice to those that had previously been silenced: “[t]he act of writing would be an assertion of true freedom and autonomy, an act of liberation. The univocal voice of official history would be subverted and transformed into a multiplicity of formerly silent, marginalized voices” (“Women’s Voices” 3).

Ironically, but unsurprisingly, the oppressive acts of the government during the Tlatelolco Massacre had an empowering effect on female authors. The severity of the government served as a catalyst for inspiring women to develop a feminist consciousness as it helped them to verbalize the inequalities of their authoritarian society. Consequently, women began to resist, challenge, and reject the rules of patriarchal ideology. Their defiance resulted in a concerted effort to seek more freedom and more independence as they began to assert their will in shaping their own lives. H. Anderson describes the phenomenon of feminist rebellion that developed from the massacre: “[i]t is precisely this discourse of rebellion and transformation, the repudiation of patriarchal authority and the search for autonomy that defines it as a product of 1968” (“Women’s Voices” 19).

Since the events surrounding the massacre had such a compelling influence on women writers, it is not surprising that there was also a transforming effect on how female protagonists were portrayed in the Mexican novels that were published in the last three
decades of the twentieth century. H. Anderson points out that the role of female protagonists changed post 1968:

... through a series of transformations--of space, of character, of language, of role--the women’s voices in the narratives written in Mexico after 1968 redefine the terms of the social contract which has framed their existence and, in that intersection of individual and collective history, the woman’s voice becomes an instrument of powerful historical relevance. (“Women’s Voices” 21)

Unlike Catalina Bernal, who is never more than a voiceless, secondary character in Fuentes’ pre-massacre novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), the female protagonists of the works published after 1968 began to escape the margins and move toward center stage. They challenge the dominant dictates and find new ways of expressing themselves, creating discourses that represent, according to H. Anderson, a “multiplicity of languages and voices that begin to make themselves heard, redefining traditional concepts of narrative voice and structure” (“Women’s Voices” 4).

Helene Anderson also notes that Jesusa Palancares, the protagonist of Elena Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte Jesus mio*, published in 1969, is an early and prime example of the type of previously silenced female character that escapes the margins to make her voice heard. Jesusa, a poor, rural woman, tells the story of her life before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution, exposing her “resistance to submission and violence” and “her determination to appropriate the strength, virility, action, and authority usually reserved for men” (“Women’s Voices” 6). As this critic points out, Jesusa’s own voice becomes an important tool: “it is Jesusa’s language, more than any other narrative device, that structures
her personality for us, with its combativeness, and independence, demolishing the
traditional image of the passive and submissive woman” (“Women’s Voices” 6-7).

It is indeed powerful that Jesusa narrates her own story. By doing so she is not only
able to dispel the image of the weak and submissive female, but also, by telling about her
experiences--for instance as a soldadera in the Mexican Revolution or a witness to the
massacre at Tlatelolco--her voice becomes a significant instrument of historical reference.\textsuperscript{11}
By recounting her version of important events in Mexico’s history, she constructs an
alternate discourse to oppose the “official” story. In \textit{Reading the Feminine Voice in Latin
American Women’s Fiction}, María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem acknowledges the significance
of a new or different kind of female protagonist, like Jesusa, in Poniatowska’s work: “the
discourse of feminine identity as a voice of resistance and transgression opened the way for
the incorporation of the hitherto suppressed voices of the marginalized as voices that
challenge the official discourse and the work of Poniatowska is an excellent example” (122).

However, while Jesusa is representative of a new type of female protagonist in that
she escapes the margins, resists submission, and seeks autonomy, at no point in the narrative
does she show herself to be an active player in the game of Mexican society. Her social status
as a poor, uneducated, rural woman, and her lack of connections to any men of wealth or
influence, keep her from having access to the sources of real political and social power. She
is, however, a precursor to the rebellious female protagonists that are the subject of this
study.

Another post 1968 writer whose characters resist patriarchal dictates, reflecting the
boldness of Poniatowska’s Jesusa, is María Luisa Mendoza, who published \textit{El perro de la

\footnote{In Sobre las culturas y civilizaciones latinoamericanas, Floyd Merrell explains that soldaderas were women that broke with traditional gender roles by taking up arms and fighting alongside men in the Mexican Revolution (219).}
escribana in 1982. The novel tells the story of three characters that are representative of contemporary women: a spinster, a divorcée and a married woman with many children. H. Anderson notes that their story is told subtly with an underlying eroticism (“Women’s Voices” 11). She adds that what marks this work as characteristic of the post 1968 novel is the presence of women as central characters, as they share their stories of love and sex (“Women’s Voices” 11). The protagonists represent a multiplicity of female voices that reflect their boldness and their refusal to be passive. Also, by openly discussing their relationships and expressing their sensuality—topics that women customarily did not discuss in earlier canonical novels—they subvert the dominant discourse, thereby creating an alternative way of being. Helene Anderson identifies Mendoza, a Mexican writer born in 1930 in Guanajuato, as an author whose work--like that of Castellanos, Garro, and Poniatowska--frequently challenges patriarchal models: “[t]he conscious invention and elaboration of literary language as a mark of freedom and defiance of traditional limitations is most dramatically expressed in the work of María Luisa Mendoza” (“Women’s Voices” 9-10).

Female authors that began to publish post 1968, especially Elena Poniatowska, influenced a new generation of women writers that penned narratives in the 1980s and 1990s. Both Ángeles Mastretta and Silvia Molina acknowledge Garro and Poniatowska’s role as mentors. In reference to these legendary female authors, Mastretta has said, “I am reading Fuentes now, . . . but never read Fuentes when I was young. I think that he is a strong presence in everyone’s life, but I think that Elena Poniatowska and Elena Garro weigh on me more” (García, Broken Bars 81). Silvia Molina has also pointed out those who influenced her writing underlining Poniatowska’s importance: “[m]y style was formed in a literary
workshop with Elena Poniatowska and Hugo Hiriart, and that was thanks to the events of 1968” (García, Broken Bars 117).

Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Leyva, and Laura Díaz, are female protagonists that are reflective of another transformation in women that occurred after the narratives published post 1968. Characters like Jesusa Palencares managed to challenge the dominant discourse, but they were never successful at becoming players in the game because they lacked the status and the resources. They also appear, in general, to be ignorant about the rules of the game. While they may escape the margins to make their voice heard, or challenge the dominant constructs of patriarchy in small ways, they do not produce any significant, long-lasting changes to their condition. Neither can they be offered as positive role models for modern Mexican women; it is my contention that that is so because they do not devise any specific strategies of empowerment to successfully bring about an alternative vision of the future in which they are recognized as active and successful participants of their society.

Though women have normally worked from a subordinate position, over the years they have also developed tactics or strategies for resisting and rebelling against the dominant order. One such strategy, a tactic classified by critic Josefina Ludmer among the “tricks of the weak,” was the use of silence. Treated as a muted group for ages, women skillfully began to use silence to their advantage as a means of creating a space of resistance. Ludmer underlines the importance of the use of silence in reference to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She begins her introduction to the nun’s letter, Respuesta a sor Filotea de la Cruz, explaining that she will point out several feminine writing strategies, “. . . we shall read in Sor Juana’s letter tricks of the weak, of one in a position of subordination and marginality” (87). One of said “tricks” is Sor Juana’s use of silence. She explains that the poet-nun erects a “chain of
negations: not to say, to say that one doesn’t know, not to publish. . . . The double
gesture combines acceptance of her subordinate position (the woman ‘shutting her trap’) and
her trick: not to say but to know . . . or saying the opposite of what one knows” (91).

Throughout her letter Sor Juana claims that she does not know how to say (creating
silence) while at the same time through her denial (lack of silence) she shows herself to be
quite knowledgeable. For Ludmer, Sor Juana “fills the space of knowing with silence” (91).
Through the act of writing, even though she claims that she does not know what to say, Sor
Juana creates a space from which to be heard. Consequently, her use of silence constitutes a
space of resistance to the dominant discourse.

Sor Juana was not unique in using silence. In Talking Back: Toward a Latin
American Feminist Literary Criticism, Debra Castillo emphasizes that women can effectively
“use the myth of silence to create a free space for either intellectual activity or simple privacy
. . .” (40). While women have successfully used silence to establish a space of liberation or as
a means of resistance, as a strategy, it undoubtedly has its limitations. Castillo points out that
using silence is not sufficient for helping women to bring about change: “[a]s a political
strategy . . . to embrace silence is clearly of limited value. Silence alone cannot provide an
adequate basis for . . . concrete political action. Eventually, the woman must break silence
and write, negotiating the tricky domains of the said and the unsaid . . .” (42). Women must
take action and express themselves to ensure that their voices are heard if they want to alter
their situation.

This is precisely the path that Mexican women writers began to take during the
second half of the twentieth century. As women have struggled to try to change and improve
their condition, it has been essential for them to pursue strategies of empowerment. In the
essay “Mujeres, género y el arte de escribir en México,” Roselyn Costantino asserts that it is important for women to continue looking for new strategies to bring about change in their situation: “[e]l feminismo busca estrategias . . . para evitar este callejón que parece sin salida” (194).

Debra Castillo emphasizes that women must develop tactics to assert their rights as they seek independence. One way of doing so is by “appropriating the master’s weapons.” Castillo elaborates this concept, urging women to reassume or seize control of their lives: “[a]propriamiento is the public assertion of rights to that personal and private space. It is to take that which has been assigned to another for her own, for the first time to take herself and take for herself the woman customarily appropriated by another as his property” (99).

In many of the novels that were published in the 1980s and 1990s, not only is the narrative primarily centered on the significant role of the female protagonist, but also, these texts are reflective of authors that create a space that gives the female characters more openings and opportunities within society. The importance of this space that allows for rebellion against the conventional social scripts is underlined by Costantino: “[las autoras intentan] crear un espacio en el cual los personajes tienen el poder de subvertir los sistemas represivos . . . y desarrollar una sensibilidad que les dè acceso a otros códigos y a otros territorios de sentimientos y de creatividad antes negados” (195). Many of the female characters in the more recent texts not only manage to subvert the repressive dictates of the patriarchal system, but they also, more so than ever, exhibit a better understanding of both the obvious and the unspoken political and social rules of their society.

The female protagonists in this study are active participants in their respective societies. They are also far more successful at navigating the rules of the game in Mexico’s
patriarchal system. Their achievement may be due, in part, to the fact that they have access to political and societal power through their connections to the men in their lives. Their success, however, is also due, more importantly, to the fact that they conscientiously appropriate strategies typically controlled by men or develop new methods to achieve their goals. Costantino points out the importance of women developing new strategies if they are to bring about change in their condition: “... planteo una relación dinámica entre la representación simbólica hecha por la mujer ... y las nuevas estrategia que éstas emplean en sus luchas para llevar a cabo cambios en la realidad política, económica, cultural y social de México” (188). Armed with such strategies, each protagonist seeks to find her own way, continuously challenging and resisting traditional power relationships. By purposefully and consciously doing so, each proves that she is capable of participating in the game of Mexican society and politics, ultimately seeking her liberation and independence.

The strategies that I focus on are, first, the use of knowledge--women become more aware and more knowledgeable about how the game is played; second, the use of language--its creation and manipulation to make their voices heard; and third, the development of an alternative discourse, thereby freeing themselves from the dominant constructs of patriarchy. Empowered with such strategies these three protagonists bring about a change in their condition and perhaps, create for themselves and the newer generations an alternate vision of the future.
CHAPTER THREE

KNOWLEDGE AS A STRATEGY OF POWER

As Catalina Guzmán, the female protagonist of *Arráncame la vida*, thinks back to how it is that she came to be married to her husband Andrés Ancensio, she ends her reflection with the following words: “[c]on los años aprendí que Andrés no decía nada por decir” (20).\(^{12}\) Catalina’s statement is just one small way in which she indicates that she is aware and knowledgeable about how her husband, a well-known political figure, operates. She comes to understand not only the motivations behind Andrés’ words, but also, consequently, the larger picture of how one plays the social and political game in which her husband skillfully participates. With the knowledge that she acquires she also becomes an active participant in society’s game of politics. But even more importantly, as Catalina becomes more astute about how both Andrés and society function, she manages to create a space where she has liberties that go beyond the conventional, limiting opportunities that women typically have in patriarchal cultures.

This chapter discusses the use of knowledge as a strategy that the female protagonists use to challenge the dominant social scripts of patriarchal society with the ultimate goal of achieving liberation and autonomy. It focuses the novels primarily through the theories on power of Michel Foucault, who has written extensively about power and knowledge, which he postulates as inextricably linked. Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Levya, and Laura Díaz, each

\(^{12}\) Her marriage is the result of an arrangement between her husband and her father. After Andrés threatens him, her father quickly agrees to allow Catalina to marry a man that the family barely knows.
exhibit a propensity for using knowledge as a means to empowering themselves to change their situation.

Each of the three protagonists follows a similar pattern in her pursuit to be able to define her life and her happiness on her own terms: as young women each protagonist is naïve and has no or very little experience with society and its political and social games. Due to the primary men in their life, however, each has access to societal power. As they gain experience with how the system works, they become increasingly disillusioned not only with the masculine figures in their life, but also with the stifling constructs of patriarchal society, in general. When the protagonists begin to recognize the constraints of the dominant gender scripts that limit their freedoms, their feminist consciousness is awakened. As a result they begin to stand in resistance to the limitations placed on them as women. Consequently, they learn and/or develop strategies for asserting their will in shaping their life.

In this chapter, I also discuss how, with time and with exposure to the maneuvers of men near power, each protagonist becomes more knowledgeable at understanding how to gain power in society. They become skillful at finding ways to challenge and undermine the rules that limit their freedom. The protagonists pay a great deal of attention to how the men in their lives play the game and each seeks opportunities to acquire information and to learn skills. Ultimately, they use knowledge as a means of empowerment to change their situation.

Michel Foucault’s theories help to establish a framework within which to discuss both power and knowledge. To understand the French philosopher’s ideas on what power is, it is equally important to clarify what he states that power is not. In the History of Sexuality (1978), Foucault states that power is not an object that one can possess: “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the
name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (93). In Michel Foucault, Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain, explain that for the French thinker power is a phenomenon that “denotes the ensemble of actions exercised by and bearing on individuals, which guide conduct and structure its possible outcomes” (229). Because Foucault places a great deal of emphasis on how actions and relationships generate power, the question “what is power?” is actually secondary to the question “how is power exercised?” (Cousins and Hussain 227). In the deliberation of how power is created, the French theorist considers how it relates to knowledge, truth, and strategy.

Foucault postulates that there is an undeniable link between power and truth: “there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operate through and on the basis of this association. We are subject to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Power/Knowledge 93). This truth, which is based on the rules or principles established within any given society, is also closely linked to knowledge. In reference to Foucault, Thomas E. Wartenberg affirms that knowledge plays an important role in a person’s ability to dominate or control others: “domination requires a particular form of truth, of ‘knowledge’, without which it could not exist. But equally important, a particular form of knowledge or truth can only be conceived of in relation to a particular structure of domination” (137-38). In order to dominate others, one must have knowledge and understand the discourses of truth that form the realities of any given society. Furthermore, Wartenberg underlines one of the theorist’s primary arguments regarding the connection between knowledge and power: “Foucault’s fundamental thesis . . . is that every item of knowledge is equally a means for attaining power” (139). As Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Levy, and Laura
Díaz become more aware about the rules of how one plays the game of society, they become active participants, empowering themselves to achieve their own goals of liberation.

Arráncame la vida begins with the meeting of a naïve, fourteen year old Catalina Guzmán and Andrés Ascencio, a man is over thirty. Andrés refers to himself as a “General” and tells grand stories of having fought in the Mexican Revolution. Catalina does not find him physically attractive at first. However, with his charismatic and infectious personality, he eventually manages to win over both her and her family. After a brief courtship, they marry and have two children. As time passes, Andrés makes a successful bid for the governorship of Puebla, gaining political power and falling into the corruption that typically goes along with it. As rumors begin to circulate about Andrés’ criminal behavior and his affairs with other women, Catalina becomes increasingly disillusioned with her general. In spite of the persistent buzz about Andrés’ brutality, Catalina does not fear him until after she begins a love affair of her own with Carlos Vives, the conductor of the national orchestra and an ally of one of Andrés’ political opponents. Though Catalina denies their affair, when her husband finds out, he has Carlos killed. Catalina subsequently begins serving Andrés an herbal tea, that, when taken over periods of time, is lethal. Andrés dies shortly thereafter, leaving the reader with the definite impression that the tea caused his death. The narrative ends with Andrés’ funeral and Catalina’s hope for a happy future now that the death of her husband has made her free.

Catalina’s social and political education are essential to helping her acquire the understanding necessary to navigate the rules of the game in Mexico’s political system of the 1930s and 1940s, the time period in which the narrative is set. Armed with such knowledge, she is able to challenge and resist the constraints of the gender script assigned to her by her
father, her husband and patriarchal culture at large. Catalina, however, is a complex
color; while she does manage to gain freedoms, the level of independence that she
achieves is questionable. She learns how to play the game all too well from her husband, to
the extent that in many cases, she ends up simply imitating his immoral actions instead of
seeking a different, more honest way to be. Her character illustrates that being able to take
liberties does not necessarily lead to success and autonomy.

A pattern emerges in Catalina’s quest for emancipation that is similar for all of the
female protagonists in this study. At the beginning of the narrative Catalina is naïve and
inexperienced with the political and social game. Due to her relationship with Andrés, who
becomes a well-known political figure, she has access to societal power. After she marries
him and is exposed to his world, Catalina becomes increasingly disillusioned with the corrupt
nature of both her husband and the (patriarchal) system that he represents. As the young
protagonist’s awareness of her reality heightens and she begins to recognize the restrictive
and limiting nature of her situation, her feminist consciousness is awakened. She begins to
stand in resistance to the dominant social scripts and she consciously makes choices in hopes
of changing her condition as both a woman and an individual. Consequently, she learns to
develop alternative strategies for asserting her will in shaping her own life.

There are many instances in the beginning of Arráncame la vida, in which Catalina’s
interactions with Andrés exhibit her naïveté and general lack of understanding. At the same
time, in spite of her ignorance, she also shows signs of rebellion. When Andrés stops by one
Sunday afternoon to collect Catalina and her family announcing that they are going to get
married, he and Catalina have the following exchange:

--Diles que vengo por ustedes para que nos vayamos a casar.
--¿Quiénes?--pregunté.

--Yo y tú--dijo. Pero hay que llevar a los demás.

--Ni siquiera me has preguntado si me quiero casar contigo--dije--¿Quién te crees?

--¿Cómo que quién me creo? Pues me creo yo, Andrés Ascencio. No protestes y súbase al coche. (17)

Once Catalina realizes Andrés’ intentions, she is quick to speak up and point out that he has not proposed to her. She does not understand at this point that her marriage to the general is an arrangement that has already been worked out between him and her father. Janet Gold notices the boldness of Catalina’s inquiry (“¿Quién te crees?”) pointing out that her young age does not stop her from challenging her husband: “[Catalina makes a] rebellious enough statement for a fourteen-year old confronted with a powerful thirty-year old general used to getting his way” (36). In spite of Catalina’s slight protest, she keeps to the traditional mold and dutifully marries Andrés.

Immediately after their wedding Andrés insists that Catalina add “de Ascencio” to her signature, and she, once again, defiantly asks why Andrés is not required to add “de Guzmán” to his name. He informs her that she now belongs to him: “[n]o m’ija, porque así no es la cosa. Yo te protejo a ti, no tú a mi. Tú pasas a ser de mi familia, pasas a ser mía” (19). In spite of Andrés’ obviously dominant position in their relationship, Catalina’s questioning reveals her strong sense of self: “a seed of personal awakening, and her own stubborn insistence that she be recognized as a separate individual” (García, Broken Bars 94).
Catalina’s “stubborn insistence” that Andrés acknowledge that she has her own opinions leads, as Janet Gold has pointed out, to “a series of little verbal rebellions” and “a superficial layer of questioning and resisting” that bring no real change to their relationship (37). Such minor sparrings do, however, continue to underline Andrés’ domineering nature and Catalina’s desire for an identity of her own. Her exchanges with Andrés also indicate her willingness to speak up for herself.

Before they marry, Andrés whisks Catalina away on a trip to the beach, where he takes her virginity. She comments on as aside that while they are together he talks constantly, but is clearly not concerned with hearing her opinions: “¿de qué tanto hablaba el general? Ya no me acuerdo exactamente, pero siempre era de sus proyectos políticos, y hablaba conmigo como con las paredes, sin esperar que le contestara, sin pedir mi opinión, urgido sólo de audiencia” (13). Catalina is aware that Andrés is not interested in actually having a conversation with her or in knowing her thoughts. In spite of knowing that, after several days of listening to the same rants she feels qualified to offer her opinion, showing, once again, that she is willing to speak up and challenge her husband:

Por esas épocas [Andrés] andaba planeando cómo ganarle al general Pallares la gubernatura del estado de Puebla. No lo bajaba de pendejo pero se ocupaba de él como si no lo fuera.

--No ha de ser tan pendejo donde te preocupaba--le dije una tarde.

--Claro que es un pendejo. Y tú qué te metes, ¿quién te pidió tu opinión?

--Hace cuatro días que hablas de lo mismo, ya me dio tiempo de tener una opinión.
--Vaya con la señorita. No sabe ni cómo se hacen los niños y ya quiere dirigir
generales. Me está gustando--dijo. (13)

Andrés’ response is condescending, but he is also amused by Catalina’s bold insistence in expressing her opinions. De Beer affirms that even though Andrés does not take Catalina seriously, she does persist in having her voice heard: “Andrés usually pooh-poohs her opinions, considering them worthless, Catalina does say what she thinks and points out his hypocrisy” (127). These early, assertive incidents are another indication of her independent spirit.

The young protagonist does question the general though in minor ways, but at the same time she is the first to admit that at the beginning of their marriage, she is naïve and completely dependent on him: [o]ía sus instrucciones como las de un dios. Siempre me sorprendía con algo y le daban risa mis ignorancias” (24-25). Thus, Andrés sets about educating Catalina on every thing from how to ride a horse to making her take cooking lessons so that she can prepare his meals. As a recently wed young girl in Mexican culture in the 1930s, the expectation of patriarchal society is that Catalina assume the conventional female role of a submissive, obedient, and dependent wife and mother. Andrés pushes Catalina in that direction and she dutifully follows his lead.

The fact that Catalina is so young and does not have social experience or a formal education only works to limit her options. As García points out, Catalina’s lack of worldly knowledge means that she has no alternative to the prescribed gender scripts for women that she has been handed down: “[i]n spite of her obvious intelligence, Catalina has little more than an elementary education, and once she marries Andrés she settles into the traditional roles of housewife and mother” (Broken Bars 94). Andrés’ expectations of domesticity and
obedience are clear and are reflected in the way in which Catalina explains their daily routine: “Andrés se levantaba con la luz, dando órdenes como si fuera yo su regimiento” (23).

Catalina’s lack of experience with the political and social game also makes her unable to understand her husband’s political ambitions. She describes Andrés as having a passion for something that she does not quite understand: “[e]staba poseído por una pasión que no tenía nada que ver conmigo, por unas ganas de cosas que yo no entendía” (35). Subsequently, she likens her interaction with Andrés and her role in their marriage to that of him playing with a doll: “[y]o al principio no sabía de él, no sabía de nadie. Andrés me tenía guardada como un juguete con el que platicaba de tonterías, . . . y hacía feliz con rascarle la espalda y llevar al zócalo los domingos” (37). At this point in their marriage, Catalina simply does not have the tools to understand Andrés’ world. He speaks to her as if she were not there, expecting no response, and he treats her like a child or a toy that he plays with, shows off, and then puts away.

The turning point in Catalina’s transformation from a naïve, young bride eager for her husband’s guidance to a more mature young lady on her way to understanding the rules of the game, occurs during Andrés’s second campaign for the governorship of Puebla. As the accusations of corruption against the general begin to mount, Catalina has no other choice but to acknowledge and admit to herself that her husband participates in crooked dealings. During the campaign she slowly starts to see that he will say whatever is necessary to win votes as he vies for the position of power. When Andrés gives a speech advocating women’s rights, a stance that Catalina is certain is not genuine, she explicitly expresses her doubts about Andrés: “[d]e ahí para adelante no le creí un solo discurso” (58). After observing
Andrés for years, Catalina finally becomes adept at recognizing and understanding his political machinations and she learns not to trust what he says. Danny Anderson has argued that the first part of the novel represents a period of awakening and gaining knowledge for Catalina: “[i]n the first thirteen chapters of the novel Cati begins her sentimental and political education. Indeed, the first chapter abounds with words that refer to learning (aprender, enseñar, saber), and learn she does, everything from the pleasure of orgasm to jealousy, ‘long-suffering’ discretion, and under-handed political manipulation” (16). Eventually, Catalina’s “sentimental and political” education makes her open her eyes to Andrés’ ambitions for power and his willingness to do whatever is necessary to get it.

Andrés becomes the stereotypical crooked politician described by Paz in El laberinto de la soledad, and represented by Carlos Fuentes in La muerte de Artemio Cruz. Jorge Fornet describes Andrés as an unscrupulous opportunist that is anxious for power: “[e]l general Andrés Ascencio simboliza al clásico oportunista, ansioso de poder y sin escrúpulos de ningún tipo. Es el hombre dispuesto a auspiciar las mayores crueldades y los actos más ruines si ello le rinde beneficios . . .” (59). The main motivation behind all of his actions is to attain more power and he will do so at any cost.

Andrés is successful as a politician because, first of all, he understands the rules of the game very well. Secondly, he is willing to abuse his authority, be violent, lie, and even murder his opponents when he deems it necessary. Success for Andrés means wealth, power, privilege, and dominating others. De Beer further expounds on how Andrés character fits the mold of a shady public official: “General Andrés Ascencio . . . is the prototypical political boss: cruel and corrupt, false and hypocritical, scheming and manipulative. All his actions are
taken in the name of the good of his country and his people, but in truth are only undertaken to further his own advancement and career” (216-17).

After Andrés first wins the gubernatorial election, Catalina, as the first lady of the state of Puebla, quickly begins to learn the political and social rules that result of their new status. She soon cannot simply ignore the rumors that she hears about both Andrés’ corruption and the lovers that he has taken. She also cannot deny that as his wife, she is perceived as an official accomplice to his crimes. Danny Anderson comments on Catalina’s complicity in Andrés’ quest for power pointing out that though she is already aware of some of his abuses, she still backs her husband:

[Catalina] recognizes her role as ‘cómplice oficial’ and sets out to learn about Andrés’s business and politics. Although Cati often becomes indignant upon confronting isolated instances of Andrés’s injustice and abuse, when she reduces her situation to its minimal terms, she unconditionally supports Andrés in his struggle for power. (16-17)

Catalina does “unconditionally support” Andrés, but at this point in their marriage, she does so primarily for three reasons. First of all, she believes that the rumors that reach her through her friends and family are very exaggerated: “me enteraba por mis hermanos, o por Pepa y Mónica, de que en la ciudad todo el mundo hablaba de los ochocientos crímenes y las cincuenta amantes del gobernador” (71). With so much hyperbole coming even from those that are closest to her, it is difficult for Catalina to determine what she can believe.

A second reason is that she still does not understand the extent of his corruption. She hears gossip and accusations, but has no real proof of his brutality:
¿Quién hubiera creído que a mí sólo me llegaban rumores, que durante años nunca supe si me contaban fantasías o verdades? No podía yo creer que Andrés después de matar a sus enemigos los revolviera con la mezcla de chapopote y piedra con que se pavimentaban las calles. . . Yo preferí no saber qué hacía Andrés.

(72)

While Catalina acknowledges Andrés’ corrupt nature in lying and deceiving others, without concrete proof she cannot be certain of the validity of the rumors about his brutality. She is clearly not prepared to believe that her husband is capable of such a high level of cruelty. At this stage she prefers not to know.

The third reason that Catalina continues to support her husband is that he provides her with a life of material comforts. Even before she becomes aware of the extent of Andrés’ crimes, she considers leaving him and their children, going as far as to board a bus for Oaxaca. Once she sees the hard conditions in the world outside of her life of privilege, she quickly returns. She explains that after getting a taste of how uncomfortable her situation could be if she were on her own, she rethinks her plan to leave her husband:

Quería irme lejos, hasta pensé en ganarme la vida con mi trabajo, pero antes de llegar al primer pueblo ya me había arrepentido. El camión se llenó de campesinos cargados con canastas, gallinas, niños que lloraban al mismo tiempo. Un olor ácido, mezcla de tortillas rancias y cuerpos apretujados lo llenaba todo. No me gustó mi nueva vida. (72)

Catalina shows herself to be a contradictory character. On the one hand, she is concerned enough about being unwittingly linked to her husband’s corruption that she decides to learn about his business affairs. On the other, she lacks the courage to leave him, seemingly
because she selfishly does not want to give up her comfortable lifestyle. Also, as I mentioned earlier, she declares that she prefers not to know what her husband does. It is not clear if she makes such a statement because she feels overwhelmed by the thought that she is married to a monster, or if she simply prefers to turn a blind eye because knowing the truth could be inconvenient. Either way, as García points out, the protagonist’s unwillingness to walk away shows to what extent she is dependent on her husband: “[Catalina] reveals her own lack of identity and her inability to live apart from Andrés. . . . Her failed attempt to escape exposes a basic weakness in [her character]: she is intelligent . . . yet she is not strong enough to face life on her own, separate from Andrés” (96).

It is relevant to note that when Andrés becomes governor he gives Catalina a minor role in his cabinet, making her the president of public welfare. He does so for appearances’ sake, so that he can keep an eye on her, and to give her something to do. At first, Catalina is genuinely enthusiastic about her new role. She takes her mostly inconsequential duties very seriously and is somewhat effective at making changes. As more people approach her to intercede on their behalf concerning different issues that they have with the governor, she begins to realize that Andrés has his own agenda and that trying to get him to reverse his decisions is a losing battle. It should be said on her behalf that as she becomes aware of his abuses of power, through her interactions with the people who come to her for assistance, she does express to her husband her objections to his injustices. He, however, disregards her concerns.

As time moves on, Catalina becomes increasingly disillusioned by what she knows of Andrés’ corruption and displeased with the role of being her husband’s “cómplice oficial.” Plagued by rumors of his viciousness, she makes the conscious decision to learn about the
general’s dealings: “me propuse conocer los negocios de Andrés . . .” (89). In doing so, a sort of feminist consciousness is awakened within her as she begins to consider what her goals are apart from those of Andrés, and she becomes determined to assert her will in decisions that affect her life. She begins to distance herself from the role of simply being her husband’s official accomplice. In deciding to learn about Andrés’ actions, Catalina begins to arm herself with knowledge. Her new attitude is clearly a departure from her behavior at the beginning of their marriage when she admittedly followed her husband’s instructions as if he were a god.

The idea of Foucault that every item of knowledge is equally a means for attaining power in certainly applicable in the case of Catalina, who seeks to become more knowledgeable, not just about Andrés’ business, but also about how the game of society is played. In Andrés, Catalina has the ideal model to learn from since her husband has mastered to perfection the art of manipulating the system to get what he wants. On her own, she also seeks opportunities to gain information and to learn skills. Gold stresses the importance of Catalina’s concerted efforts to learn about what is going on around her: “[k]nowledge is an acutely important element of this novel” and Catalina “is very much in control of her knowledge” (39).

Catalina begins to read the newspaper of Andrés’ political opponents so that she may gain an opposing viewpoint to what he tells her. She also has her chauffeur teach her to drive in secret so that she can go places without her husband knowing. And although she finds it disturbing, she seeks to discover the extent of Andrés’ crimes, attempting to separate fact from fiction. By pursing the truth outside of that which Andrés would have her to believe, Catalina is not only empowering herself by becoming aware of the reality of her situation,
but she is also, at the same time, resisting Andrés’ efforts to dominate her because she no longer simply takes his word. For Garcia, Catalina’s desire to learn about Andrés is important for her liberation: “[Catalina] struggles to resist Andrés’s efforts to control her: she manages to learn how to drive without his knowledge, and she reads the newspapers to find out about everything that Andrés claims is none of her business” (Broken Bars 95).

In Catalina’s case, every item of knowledge that she gains is equally a means for attaining power. As she gathers undisputable proof of Andrés’ affairs, violence, abuses, and killings, she begins to distance herself from him. By becoming knowledgeable about what her husband does, Catalina attains the “power” to rebel against him. She also begins to free herself from Andrés’ influence, rejecting the role of the obedient, self-sacrificing wife. She starts taking more liberties, staying out later, and making more choices without consulting her husband. Eva Núñez-Méndez has also noted that Catalina’s awareness about Andrés’ crimes has a liberating effect on her:

El conocimiento de los asesinatos ordenados por su marido la hacen rebelarse contra él y de alguna manera emanciparse--tanto emocional como sexualmente--se niega a acostarse con él, sale por las noches y cuando Andrés le pregunta quién le da permiso, ella simplemente le contesta ‘yo me autoricé.’ (116)

Empowered with the knowledge about the reality of her situation, Catalina begins to assert her will in making her own decisions. Claudia Schaefer describes Catalina’s progress in taking command of her marital situation: “. . . little by little, she assumes control over her own life, managing to replace the traditional place/space of the father or husband” (90). The
protagonist transforms from the naïve girl who once followed Andrés’ lead, into a bright and capable woman who has a diminishing regard for her husband’s demands.

Catalina’s new found freedom is by no means a total release or escape from the patriarchal culture that shapes the belief system of both her husband and their society. Though she challenges and resists the dominant discourse, she does not want to totally subvert it. She seems to be knowledgeable enough to realize that “to have her cake and eat it too” she must work within the system in order to find a space of liberation. Gold confirms my reading of Catalina’s success at working within Andrés’ whelm of control: “Catalina, working within the world circumscribed by Andrés’ power, nevertheless finds a space for her own action and for her own rebellion, which leads to change in her own life”(39). It is my contention that in finding a space for her own action, Catalina, in fact, also becomes an active player.

While it is true that as Catalina becomes more knowledgeable, she takes more liberties, she still remains a contradictory character. Prior to learning the truth about Andrés, she laments that she is his accomplice because she does not know if the rumors about him are fact or fiction. Once she gathers proof of his crimes and brutality, however, she still does not do anything to change her situation in any significant way, or to alter the course of her husband’s career. Her heightened awareness of how one plays the game, and even her role as an active participant, do not inspire her to change the fundamental rules. Instead, she uses her knowledge as a means of gaining personal liberties, such as staying out late and making decisions independent of her husband. Beyond that, it appears that she is willing to tolerate or overlook Andrés’ corruption because it is part of a system that affords them a comfortable lifestyle. Ironically, before she finds out the truth about Andrés’ crimes she makes her
protests known to him, even though he ultimately dismisses her concerns. After she becomes aware of the extent of his abuses, however, instead of trying to fight the injustice, she allows herself to be incorporated into it.

Catalina even acknowledges how her role has changed—which can be seen as a reflection of her integration into the system—one day after arriving late from an errand that she has run on Andrés’ behalf. When he questions her tardiness and inquires as to her whereabouts, her response indicates that regardless of her tardiness she is always on his side: “[d]e todos modos yo juego en tu equipo y ya lo sabes” (115). Catalina recognizes that she is also now an active player in the game of society. Even Andrés must acknowledge that she has become a skillful player. When she scores him political points with his compadre, Fito, a candidate for the presidency, he says, “[e]res una vieja chingona. Aprendiste bien. Ya puedes dedicarte a la política” (121). Catalina has, in fact, learned how the system works, and for Andrés, she has become a valuable asset in his political and social game. Andrés, himself, is compelled to admit her worth, thus suggesting that she could get involved in politics.

What becomes apparent to the reader, however, is that Catalina is now undeniably complicit in maintaining a system that she, herself, has been critical of because it is oppressive for women and promotes the success of duplicitous men, like her husband. Instead of using her knowledge to make concrete goals to affect significant change to improve corruption, or to try to find a new and different way of being a better human, she seems content to maintain the status quo as long as she finds a way to benefit personally. She simply follows her husband’s lead and in that regard, she is not much better than he is. Gold has also noted that as time passes, Catalina becomes more complicit in Andrés game of
power: “[w]e find ourselves seeing Catalina more and more as an accomplice in Andrés’ megalomaniacal quest for power. After all, he’s now doing it partly for her, too” (39).

Catalina imitates Andrés’ immoral behavior in other ways. After his term as governor ends they move to Mexico City. It is there that she meets Carlos Vives, the orchestra conductor with whom she begins a romantic affair. Prior to starting the relationship with Carlos, she is motivated to learn about Andrés’ dealings as a way of resisting his control. With Carlos, Catalina feels that for the first time, she experiences true love and happiness. Her motivations for wanting to make her own decisions are now altered as she begins to hope for a future with her lover. Even though Catalina justifies her romance with Carlos because she feels like with him she finally has the opportunity to be happy, she is still mimicking her husband’s actions by engaging in an adulterous affair.

While Catalina is shrewd enough to know how to work around Andrés to secretly spend time with Carlos, she is also, for the first time, fearful of her husband because she realizes that the relationship with her lover is a betrayal in patriarchal society. She admits that before she met the orchestra conductor, the ways in which she challenged Andrés were just a part of the game: “[l]as cosas con las que lo desafiaba eran juegos que podían terminar en cuanto se volvieran peligrosos” (197). Danny Anderson underlines the difficulty of the position in which Catalina now finds herself: “[i]n the last . . . chapters of the novel, Cati has to depend on her ever evolving political and sentimental savvy in order to negotiate the triangle among herself, Andrés and her lover” (17). In having a romantic affair with Carlos, the protagonist has much more at stake.
Catalina, taking another cue from her husband, lies about her interaction with Carlos and denies their affair in hopes that Andrés will not hurt him. I believe, however, that Catalina lets her feelings overcome her logic and instincts about how her husband operates; at this point in her life she should be well aware of his penchant for both revenge and violence. She also seems to underestimate the social significance of the patriarchal code that demands that a husband avenges his honor. When Andrés learns of the true nature of his wife’s relationship, coupled with the fact that Carlos is the ally of one of his political opponents, he does have Catalina’s lover murdered. Though Andrés feigns surprise when Catalina informs him that Carlos has been taken away against his will, she is justifiably suspicious that Andrés is involved with the kidnapping and her intuition is correct.

After spending years learning about Andrés’ underhanded dealings and the viciousness with which he handles his political opponents, Catalina is knowledgeable enough about Andrés’ brutality to already have a network in place among the servants so that she can get information quickly. They inform her that Carlos has been taken to a prison where Andrés kept his political enemies when he was governor. Schaefer has noted that Catalina’s knowledge about how Andrés operates with his enemies works to her advantage when attempting to save Carlos:

Catalina exhibits her knowledge of secret political detention centers as she instructs authorities exactly where to search for her lover. Before this moment she had never revealed to Andrés her knowledge of the government’s violent police tactics. Hitting close to home, the attack on Carlos is the catalyst that motivates her to take action. (101)
Catalina admits that she knows the location of Andrés’ clandestine prisons, but it is too late; when they find Carlos he is already dead. Though Catalina is devastated by his murder, she is also smart enough to know how to control her emotions and not cry for him publicly.

Andrés’ responsibility for the brutal murder of Carlos only serves to further distance Catalina from him. His actions make her resolute to change the situation in which she finds herself and more determined than ever to move away from a future controlled by her husband, while seeking a world in which she acts and chooses to shape her own life. Núñez-Méndez shares my view that Carlos’ murder heightens Catalina’s desire for liberation: “[e]l brutal asesinato de Carlos Vives provoca que Catalina se resista abiertamente contra su esposo . . . el hecho de que Andrés lo mande matar marca el comienzo de un desafío constante por parte de Catalina para liberarse” (116-17).

In response to Andrés’ killing of Carlos, Catalina starts to openly resist and defy her husband, taking even more liberties both privately and publicly. She begins a new romantic affair that she boldly flaunts in public, she opens her own bank account and she goes as far as to install a door between her side of the bedroom and Andrés’. De Beer also concurs that Carlos’ murder motivates Catalina to seek a new level of independence as she resists both Andrés and society’s constructs: “[s]he attempts to challenge the patriarchal system and take control of her life by opening a bank account, . . . staying out late, and moving out of the bedroom” (217).

As time goes on, Catalina continues to observe Andrés and learn from him. As she comes to understand her husband better, his decisions on how to handle issues no longer seem random to her. In fact, she explains that Andrés becomes almost predictable:
Aprendí a mirarlo como si fuera un extraño, estudié su manera de hablar, las cosas que hacía, el modo en que iba resolviéndolas. Entonces dejó de parecerme impredecible y arbitrario. Casi podía yo saber qué decidiría en qué asuntos, a quién mandaría a qué negocio, cómo contestaría a tal secretario, qué diría en el discurso de tal fecha. (271)

Catalina is fully aware of how Andrés plays the game now. She is even able to anticipate his reactions and the choices that he will make. As she comes to better understand her husband’s actions and the motivations behind his decisions, she feels more empowered to resist his control and to undermine the rules that limit her freedom.

When some time later a new political rival challenges Andrés’ position as top advisor to Rodolfo, the President of the Republic, Catalina finds that Andrés turns to her even more for companionship. Though she is practically leading her life independently from her husband, the two have a type of reconciliation and they begin, once again, to regularly spend time together. As Andrés becomes increasingly frustrated about his waning political influence his health begins to rapidly decline. When he calls his physicians to the house one day, everyone thinks that he is exaggerating his symptoms, but he dies shortly thereafter.

Catalina’s possible role in his demise could be yet another example of one of the lessons that she learns all too well by following in the footsteps of her corrupt husband. To explain my thinking it is necessary to go back to the aftermath of Carlos’ murder.

As Catalina continues to recover from the devastating loss of her lover she meets a woman that gives her some tea leaves to help her combat a lingering headache. The woman claims that the tea can give one energy, but she also warns that, over time, regular use of the liquid can be lethal: “[e]l té de esas hojas daba fuerzas pero hacía costumbre, y había que
tenerle cuidado porque tomado todos los días curaba de momento pero a la larga mataba” (258). As Andrés becomes increasingly agitated about his tenuous political position with Rodolfo, Catalina, fully aware of the long-term effects of the tea, decides to share it with her husband. At no point does she warn him that it should not be consumed daily. Though the tea has an energizing effect on both Catalina and Andrés, the next day she does not drink more: “[a] mí, también me sentó el té de Carmela, pero a la mañana siguiente no lo tomé” (277). Andrés, on the other hand, consumes more tea on the next day and on many subsequent days: “Andrés, sí, quiso más, esa mañana y muchas otras hasta que llegó el día en que solo eso pudo desayunar” (277). Aware of its potentially deadly effect if taken daily, Catalina says nothing. When their cook Matilde tries to warn Andrés that he is drinking too much of the tea, he ignores her concerns by asserting that Catalina also drinks it regularly, and she is fine: “[m]ira cómo está de rozagante la señora y ella también lo toma” (286). Catalina, once again, remains silent about the potentially hazardous effects of the tea or the fact that she is not drinking it regularly.

After Andrés falls ill he calls in his physicians. As he lays suffering, convinced that he is dying, the doctor leaves him with specific instructions in hopes of calming him down: “[d]escanse general, no tome café, ni coñac, ni excitantes” (293). In blatant disregard of the doctor’s orders, Catalina’s next move, aware that Andrés has been warned not to have any stimulants, is to serve him a cup of tea. Andrés dies shortly thereafter. There is much critical debate as to whether or not Catalina is responsible for her husband’s death. It is possible that he dies as a result of natural causes; he was already under a great deal of stress and in poor health before Catalina introduced him to the tea drinking ritual, and the warning about consuming the liquid too frequently could simply be an old-wife’s tale.
While it is not stated that Catalina causes Andrés’ death, it appears that her actions indicate that she had every intention to do so. She never informs him that one is not supposed to consume the tea daily, she leads him to believe that she is drinking it as regularly as he is, and even after the doctor warns him not to have any stimulants, she pours him a cup of the liquid that she knows has energizing, but deadly, properties. These facts lead me to believe that after Andrés has Carlos killed, Catalina considers him to be an enemy and similarly to how her husband treats his adversaries, she plots to eliminate him.

Before Andrés passes away he admits that he never knew his wife or figured out what it was that Catalina desired in life:

\[
\text{Te jodí la vida, ¿verdad? Porque las demás van a tener lo que querían. ¿Tú qué quieres? Nunca he podido saber qué quieres tú. Tampoco dediqué mucho tiempo a pensar en eso, pero no me creas tan pendejo, sé que te caben muchas mujeres en el cuerpo y que yo sólo conocí a unas cuantas. (288)}
\]

Andrés’ words suggest what the reader already knows, that Catalina is not simply the typical, predictable, self-sacrificing woman of Mexican patriarchal culture who lacks an identity of her own. In fact, Andrés’ remarks indicate that with the character of Catalina, Mastretta has succeeded in creating a different kind of female protagonist that someone like Andrés, a stereotypical male, would not readily understand. Though Andrés acknowledges her savvy, he never quite comprehends her need to be free.

It is important to note that Catalina manages to create a space of liberation for herself, but this does not mean that her character serves as a good role model. On the one hand, it is admirable that she learns the rules of the game from her husband, and even becomes a valuable player in his world of power, but on the other hand, she does not do anything
constructive with such knowledge. And while it is true that she appropriates many more liberties than had been typical of female protagonists in Mexican literature up to this point, it is not accurate to affirm, as many critics have, that she is successful at becoming an independent woman (while her husband is alive).

When she decides to leave Andrés early in the novel, boarding the bus for Oaxaca, she returns before she even arrives to her destination, showing that she is more concerned with maintaining her privileged lifestyle than with becoming her own person and making it on her own. Later on, after she learns about his crimes and brutality she still tells her husband that she “plays on his team,” which is tantamount to admitting her complicity in his corruption. Finally, after Andrés has Carlos killed she appears to distance herself from him; she gets her own car, opens her own bank account, and leads a separate life from her husband, but ironically she does so using his money. Throughout their marriage Catalina is financially reliant on her husband and though she does rebel, her dependence on him does not change. The fact that she appropriates an independent life style does not mean that she actually achieves the feminist goal of becoming an independent woman. At every step of the way Catalina “belongs” to her husband, as he so defiantly asserted after their wedding; not even his death alters her status. It does give her final freedom, but that freedom is still being paid by his bank account.

In case Catalina was not aware of the advantages of being a widow her friend Josefita explains them to her at the funeral:

La viudez es el estado ideal de la mujer. Se pone al difunto en un altar, se honra su memoria cada vez que sea necesario y se dedica uno a hacer todo lo que no pudo hacer con él en vida. Te lo digo por experiencia, no hay mejor
condición que la viuda. Y a tu edad. Con que no cometas el error de prenderte a otro luego, te va a cambiar la vida para bien. Que no oigan decírtelo, pero es la verdad y que me perdone el difunto. (297)

Catalina ponders Josefita’s remarks and comes to the conclusion that what she has said is, in fact, true. She then talks to her husband as he lies in the coffin, telling him what she wants, which is, ironically, just what he had said that he had been unable to figure out in life: “[y]o quiero una casa menos grande que ésta, una casa en el mar, cerca de las olas, en la que mande yo, en la que nadie me pida, ni me ordene, ni me critique. Una casa en la que pueda darme el gusto de recordar cosas buenas” (299). Catalina’s words supports the notion that this ending is what she had sought: she wants to autonomously make the decisions that affect her life, with no one else having command over her.

Even though Catalina offers a list of her immediate wishes, her goals for the future remain unclear. Throughout her marriage she resists her husband’s efforts to control her but she never puts forth a concrete plan to change her situation so that she can have a different vision for the future. Other than her rebellion, she seems to lack the imagination to suggest a different way of being in the world. Beyond her material comforts and her desire for autonomy, she does not appear to have any lofty ideas or be troubled by spiritual concerns. And ironically, although she does seems to develop a budding feminist consciousness in which she begins to make decisions apart from Andrés, she never takes a second step and thus remains trapped in a masculine way of thinking where she simply learns to mimic her husband’s behavior. If she is, as it indeed seems to be, responsible for his death, her failure to break out of the model that he provides her is especially tragic.
Dorotea Leyva, the protagonist of *La familia vino del norte*, also persistently challenges the accepted social scripts for women, with liberation and autonomy as her primary goals. While the title of the novel refers both to Dorotea’s ancestors that moved from the north to settle into Mexico City and to the “revolutionary family” to which her grandfather belonged because, as a general, he fought alongside other prominent leaders in the Mexican Revolution, these aspects are eclipsed by the main focus of the novel: the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery. The narrative begins with the death of Dorotea’s beloved grandfather, Teodoro Leyva. The young protagonist is determined to discover why he hid himself in his mother’s basement for a year during General Alvaro Obregón’s presidency. It is a secret that none of her relatives is willing to openly discuss. Their silence is due principally to the fact that because of the general’s status within the government after the Revolution, the members of the family are well-connected and enjoy a privileged life.

Bored and disillusioned with her problematic parents--her father is cold, domineering, and only interested in his business; her mother is an alcoholic--Dorotea begins working for Manuel, a well-known journalist and publisher. Struck by Dorotea’s lack of refinement, Manuel takes it upon himself to educate her about music, literature and other aspects of culture. He is intrigued when she shares what she knows of her grandfather’s story and they begin to work together informally to determine the general’s secret. Eager to escape the dominance and dysfunction of her family, Dorotea gets her own apartment and begins a tumultuous love affair with Manuel. While this is going on she struggles with the decision of what she wants to do with her life, and to her dismay, she soon finds that her lover is as controlling and stifling as her father.
Ultimately, Manuel betrays Dorotea by publishing an essay exposing what he believes is the truth about her grandfather’s past. Unbeknownst to the young protagonist, Manuel was more interested in the story than he admitted; he does extra research without her knowledge. Likewise, he releases the article without advising her of his intention to do so, and without giving her credit for her input. After Manuel’s essay comes out, Dorotea learns additional information that reveals the truth about her grandfather’s motives for hiding himself. Using both Manuel’s work and her grandfather’s diary, she publishes what she considers an accurate account of the general’s story. The narrative ends with Dorotea working temporarily in Paris having distanced herself from both Manuel and her family, determined to have a happy future as a liberated, independent woman.

In this chapter, much like with Catalina, I argue that Dorotea’s social and cultural education is essential to helping her to acquire the understanding necessary to navigate the rules of the game of Mexican society in the early to mid-1980s, the time period in which the narrative is set. Armed with such knowledge, she is able to challenge and resist the constraints of the gender script assigned to her by both her family and Manuel. A similar pattern to that of Catalina’s emerges in her quest for emancipation. At the beginning of the narrative it is clear that Dorotea is not as naïve as Catalina because she already understands that there is a social and political game that plays out among those that have power in society. At first, however, she does lack the know-how necessary to be an active player.

Unlike in Catalina’s situation, the game of society that Dorotea encounters does not take place in a political arena, in the sense that none of the characters are politicians. The game that I refer to in La familia vino del norte is a result of the complex set of interactions that takes place among those who hold positions of power within society. In the case of her
family, Dorotea describes her father as an important businessman: “uno de los industriales más fuertes de la Iniciativa Privada” (95). He regularly deals with high-level government officials. In similar fashion, because of Manuel’s position in the publishing world, he frequently interacts with other well-known journalists, public officials, and a host of “personajes célebres” (95). Therefore, due to both her family ties and her relationship with Manuel, Dorotea has access to those with power in society.

She becomes increasingly disillusioned with the deceitful and controlling nature of both the men in her family and Manuel and the patriarchal values that they rigidly uphold. As Dorotea’s awareness of the world around her heightens and she begins to recognize the limiting nature of the expectations for females within her family and her society, her feminist consciousness is awakened. She begins to stand in resistance to the dominant social scripts and she starts to consciously and autonomously define her goals for changing her condition. Consequently, she learns to develop alternative strategies for asserting her will in shaping her own life as a way of liberating herself from those that try to control her. By doing so, she brings about change and an alternate vision for her future.

Dorotea’s social and cultural education is best examined on two levels: in the context of her family and also in the circumstances that surround her relationship with Manuel. Within her family life, the experiences that shape her view of how society functions begin with the “education” that she receives from her grandfather. Though Dorotea enjoys a close relationship with the general, he strongly upholds the patriarchal principles that men should hold superior positions within the home and in society, while women should conform to the ideals of submission, obedience and dependence. Dorotea explains that her grandfather expected total compliance to his rules: “[s]ólo había algo permitido: la sumisión unánime e
incondicional ante el patriarca, el general de división Teodoro Leyva” (33). The grandfather’s command over the family was absolute and unquestionable. Kay García’s article underlines how general Leyva completely dominated the female members of the family: “[h]er grandfather was a patriarch, ruling over the women of the family with an iron hand” (“Fiction and History” 278-79).

During their familial gatherings, which Dorotea describes in the following passage, her grandfather would allow her to escape the kitchen so they could chat apart from the others. At the same time, he would make his expectations for all the other females very clear, leaving them to do the women’s work:

Cuando terminábamos de comer, me lanzaba una mirada cómplice y decía autoritario: “[a]compáñame, Doro; deja que estas mujeres levanten la mesa. ‘Estas mujeres’ eran las primas, las tías, la abuela y mi mamá. El abuelo casi no las tomaba en cuenta; las sentía más útiles para la cocina, la puesta de la mesa, las decisiones del mercado, el juego de baraja. . . . Las primas se morían de envidia de que yo fuera la consentida; cuando me hablaban, imitaban la voz del abuelo: ‘Ven, Doro, mira lo que te traje’. (49)

General Leyva pays little attention to the female members of the family, leaving them to the chores typically assigned to women. In contrast to his behavior with the other females, he treats Dorotea in a special way, freeing her from such tasks so that she can spend time with him. She acknowledges feeling like his accomplice, especially when her cousins resentfully tease her for receiving better treatment.

There is a strong connection between Dorotea and her grandfather and she, herself, points out that they are alike in many ways: “[t]eníamos muchos puntos en común. Los dos
éramos igual de rebeldes, de tercos, de empecinados, de aficionados a ir en contra de la corriente. No sé por qué” (49). Even though they have very different roles or positions within the family, Dorotea emphasizes that they have very similar personalities. Though the two maintain a loving relationship, at the same time, General Leyva also puts pressure on her to assume the roles customarily assigned to women in patriarchal culture. Her grandfather would not only like for her to marry, but also he wants her to have a child, his great-grandson, whom he would like to be named after him. Dorotea acknowledges his wish and promises to comply: “[e]l abuelo quería un bisnieto que se llamara Teodoro; yo se lo había prometido,” but she never makes mention again of her intention to follow through with his request (51). This seems to suggest that even from an early age she has a different plan or vision for her future.

In spite of the fact that Dorotea and her grandfather are close, he does not place much importance on her being formally educated. His idea of contributing to her learning was to offer her piano lessons when she was a young girl so that she could learn to play like her grandmother (García, “Fiction and History” 280). He tells Dorotea’s mother that his granddaughter needs refinement: “Esta niña tiene que aprender a tocar el piano, ha de cultivarse” (49). Jesús L. Tafoya agrees that because she is a woman, the general does not place much value on her schooling: “[c]omo hija única de familia, Dorotea fue vista como un objeto más de decoración. Su educación nunca tuvo la misma supervisión que la que tuvo su padre pues no se esperaba que ella, como mujer, tomara control de los negocios de la familia” (69). The general does not consider that Dorotea will have a place working within the family business and he does not seem to envision a future for her outside of the limited gender roles conventionally assigned to women. García points out that Dorotea’s grandfather
does not see her fulfilling a role beyond the expectations of patriarchal culture: “[e]ven though he recognized her as special, he was still encouraging her to follow the family traditions, and to live the limited life that her mother, grandmother, aunts, and female cousins were all enduring” (“Fiction and History” 280).

Though her grandfather is conservative and authoritarian, Dorotea cherishes the warm relationship that they share. The same cannot be said, however, about the rapport between the young protagonist and her father. She holds her grandfather in high esteem, but lacks such fondness for her dad: “. . . sentía un profundo respeto por él y el cariño que nunca había podido expresarle a mi padre, más preocupado por sus negocios que por mí” (49). Dorotea’s father seems mostly concerned with getting ahead and keeping up appearances. Cold, distant, and self-involved, he is much like the stereotypical male described by Octavio Paz in El laberinto de la soledad. Dorotea also portrays him in a negative light: “[m]i papá no tiene otro interés en la vida que sus negocios. Es un hombre tempestuoso, sabelotodo, que se complace en contradecir. Ante cualquier cosa que yo hubiera decidido, él habría dicho lo contrario” (60). According to her, he is domineering, combative, and a know-it-all. He tries to control his daughter, but to no avail; she consistently resists the authoratative posture that he takes with her.

Though Dorotea struggles with issues of control resulting from the patriarchal ideals that the men in her family strive to uphold, at the same time, she recognizes the benefits of observing their actions and learning how they maneuver. The advantage that she gains from interacting with both her grandfather and her father is that she develops a sense or an awareness of what they do in order to be successful at getting what they want. In other words, she understands very well how the game of power works within her family.
When assessing her relationship with her parents, she indicates that her mother’s general passivity and alcoholism make her almost a nonentity in her life. She would like to be able to communicate openly with her father, but she realizes that he prefers to deny the reality of his troubled relationships with both she and her mother. Dorotea understands, however, that being aware of how her father operates empowers her to resist his efforts to dominate her. Such knowledge, as she explains, allows her to be successful at playing the game that results from their interactions: “[a]demás, no se trataba de decirle la verdad porque no la entendería, sino de que yo supiera elegir las reglas del juego” (60).

It is not just Dorotea, but also many of her female friends that are of the same age that enjoy similar liberties within their families because they are knowledgeable about how to play the game. Dorotea describes the freedom that she and her friends have within the context of getting what they want with their family: “[n]o conozco a ninguna sola amiga que no haga lo que desea a pesar de la familia. Sólo hay que saber hacerlo; hay que saber jugar” (60). The notion that Dorotea and her friends enjoy a certain amount of freedom within their families or their society may be reflective of both the contemporary time in which the novel is set and the fact that, like Dorotea, the majority of her friends are from wealthy families. Most of the action takes place in the early to mid-nineteen eighties, a time when Mexican women, in general, were experiencing greater liberties in society as a result of more women working and studying outside of the home. Also, being from the upper class means that they have greater financial resources, which typically translates into more liberties, in general, and therefore more opportunities within society.

While Dorotea and her friends may be successful at challenging their parents to have their way, there are limitations. They still have to work within the dominant system of social
values of patriarchal culture. Thus, the ways in which Dorotea and her friends take liberties are not really significant or threatening challenges to the dominant structures maintained by patriarchal ideology. They may know how to maneuver in the context of their family to get what they want, but they are not active participants able to change the rules in the game of society, at large.

The death of Dorotea’s grandfather gives her a new outlook on life because it represents an end or at least a break with the traditional ideals that he represented. After he passes away, Dorotea feels liberated, as if a door to new possibilities has been opened: “[l]uego, empezó a sucederme lo otro, aquello que fue haciéndome sentir intensa y rotundamente llena de vida, como si la muerte del abuelo me hubiera abierto la puerta de la libertad” (22-23). She feels energized and free, but at the same time she acknowledges having conflicting thoughts about taking charge of her life because she has many expectations, but is not sure of her next step:

Estudiaba biología y a punto de terminar me había dado cuenta de que no era lo mío. . . . Me veía a mí misma como un personaje contradictorio. Era lo que no quería ser; quería ser lo que no era. Estaba llena de una absurda sensación de expectativa, de intensidad, de una curiosidad sin límites que el abuelo llamaba apasionamiento, porque me gustaba llegar siempre hasta el fondo de las cosas. (29)

Dorotea’s “curiosidad sin límites” is an early indication of her thirst for knowledge and her strong desire to learn. Being young, she also feels some uncertainty about her goals, and she struggles to determine what it is that she wants to do with her life. Dorotea is bright and capable, but at this point, with little experience in life, she lacks the social and cultural
education necessary to be successful outside of the structure of her family. She first needs to learn about both the social rules and about herself before she can “get to the bottom of things.”

It is around the time of her grandfather’s death that she begins to pull away from her family and spend more time with Manuel, who has hired her to be his assistant. Dorotea’s interaction with him is the second level on which she considers the idea of playing the game, this time within the bigger picture of society. While she appears to be very knowledgeable about maneuvering within her family in order to get her way, the same certainly cannot be said for her understanding of the game of power, at large. She has had access to influential people because of her family, however, as a young, somewhat uninformed and passive female, she would not have interacted with them in any assertive way.

Dorotea’s social and cultural awakening really begins with her relationship with Manuel. As a journalist that is in the process of launching a new newspaper, he is well-known and well-respected. When Dorotea starts working for him, she is already aware that there is a game of power in society. In reference to Manuel and how he skillfully approaches life, Dorotea states: “[p]ara mí, todos los actos de Manuel estaban más que pensados” (29). Her comment is just one way in which she shows herself to be aware about how the journalist operates: she realizes that all of his actions are very deliberate, and constructed to obtain a particular goal.

She eventually comes to understand not just the motivations behind what Manuel does, but also, consequently, the larger picture of how one plays the game in which he so adeptly participates. With the knowledge that she acquires she also transforms into an active player in the struggle for power. But even more importantly, as Dorotea becomes more astute
about how both Manuel and society function, she manages to appropriate the tools to create a space of liberation for herself that goes beyond the conventional, limiting opportunities typically assigned to women.

There are several instances at the beginning of the narrative in which Dorotea’s interactions with Manuel reveal that she lacks social and cultural knowledge. She shows her ignorance of classical music immediately when Manuel begins the habit of announcing the recordings that he will play while they work and she does not recognize renown pieces: “[s]olo una vez él había dicho ‘¿Te gusta Brahms?’, antes de poner un disco, y yo había contestado que así se llamaba una película con Anthony Perkins; entonces se dio cuenta de que mi cultura musical estaba a la misma altura que la literaria” (27-28). The fact that Dorotea does not know Brahms indicates to Manuel that she lacks refinement and he takes it upon himself to educate her. Tafoya points out that Dorotea’s relationship with Manuel does, in fact, help to make her more culturally aware as she begins a process of self-improvement: “[s]u exposición a la cultura ha sido mínima. Es su contacto con el periodista lo que la enfrenta o más bien la reta al estudio y a la autosuperación” (69).

Manuel begins instructing Dorotea not only about music, but also about everything from spelling to literature. As he slowly transforms her, she describes the intensity with which he makes the decisions on her education: “[t]al vez no sea exagerar si digo que meditaba con mucha seriedad en los libros que me prestaba, en como me iría enseñado pacientemente lo que debía de aprender, desde algo de ortografía hasta los mitos clásicos. Proyectaba cómo me iría haciendo a su manera de ser” (29). At first Dorotea is accepting of Manuel’s advice and the idea that he is interested in educating her in areas that are needed when moving in high society. At the same time, she also recognizes that in his efforts, he is
trying to turn her into what he would have her to be and she does not always obediently follow his suggestions.

Having grown up with a domineering father and having recently ended a relationship where she dealt with issues of control with Carlos, her former boyfriend, Dorotea is particularly resistant to Manuel’s attempts to dominate her. With Carlos, after accompanying him on a dig to Oaxaca, Dorotea does not take long to determine that he wants to impose his will on her. She explains his attempts to change her: “[a]l cabo de varios meses me di cuenta de que él quería implantarme a toda costa una manera de ser. Quería que yo fuera a su modo no al mío” (61). Despite her realization, she does not leave Carlos. On the contrary, they break up because he gets another woman pregnant and is forced to marry her. Nonetheless, the relationship leaves her wary of men who desire to change women into their ideal. García also emphasizes that the men in Dorotea’s life expect her to conform to their ideal woman: “[b]oth Manuel and her first boyfriend (Carlos) try to manipulate her to re-make her into the woman they want” (“Fiction and History” 279).

In spite of Dorotea’s lack of knowledge about many of the subjects that Manuel exposes her to, she begins to show signs of resistance. Manuel, himself, tells her that he feels like he is going to have to break her of her surprisingly rebellious nature: “[c]avilaba, también, me lo dijo después, en cómo destruir mi ‘rebeldía’ que llegaba a veces al extremo de sorprenderlo” (29). Manuel’s surprise may have to do with the fact that she is so young. When Dorotea and Manuel begin to interact regularly, he is forty-six years old and she is almost twenty-four. From the beginning she recognizes his controlling tendencies stating that it is difficult for her to see him outside of the intellectually superior role that he often assumes: “Manuel era arrogante y pagado de sí mismo. Me costó trabajo verlo sin esa capa
de ‘hombre de letras sabelotodo’, que se ponía con cierta frecuencia” (29). In spite of the fact that Manuel is domineering and maintains the dominant position in their relationship because he is an older male with far more experience in how society works, Dorotea still insists on expressing her opinions and having her voice heard.

One way in which she rebels is by turning the tables on him in his ritual of choosing and announcing the music that they will listen to while they work. Dorotea relates what happens one day when she interrupts his routine by rejecting his music. He is stunned, at first, but then reluctantly accepts her change:

--Sonata para cello y piano número 2 de Fauré--dijo en un solo tono de voz, y fue a sentarse al sillón frente a mí.

Me puse de pie y caminé hacia las bolsas que había dejado sobre la silla de la entrada. Hurgué entre ellas y saqué un disco que había pensado regalarle. Fui a quitar a Fauré y me quejé:

--¡El cello es tristísimo!

Lanzó hacia mí una mirada de horror y no le di tiempo de decir nada porque, imitando su tono de voz, me le adelanté:

--Canción Novia envidiada, de Ricardo Palmerín.

Estaba sorprendido pero contento; así aproveché la oportunidad:

--Te voy a regalar este disco que compré. . . . A veces como hoy no tengo ganas de aprender nada. Además creo que deberías tener un disco de Agustín Lara, otro de Toña la Negra, otro de. . . .

--¡Eh, eh! Solo por hoy--terminó aceptando complacido aquella ruptura del orden. (32)
Dorotea demonstrates that she is not afraid of challenging Manuel, going as far as to remove his record in favor of her own. By insisting on playing her music, she resists his efforts to impose his cultural standards on her. Perhaps the act of replacing his classical song with her popular music is also her way of indirectly suggesting her rejection of the old, well-established, stifling dominant order. Be that as it may, it is important to emphasize that the young protagonist’s actions prove that she also has something to offer; she is capable of contributing to Manuel’s cultural formation, as well, albeit with music of popular culture.

Dorotea continuously rebels or resists in what may be considered small ways, but they are significant to her. As she struggles with the decision of what to do with her life, she seeks to find direction and purpose. She has always had liberties and options because of her family’s wealth. As she grows closer to Manuel, it is both her familial ties and her relationship with the well-known journalist that gives her access to societal power. Manuel’s influential opinion is evident when he takes her to their first party together with his friends from the newspaper. The power emanating from those in the room is almost palpable as she is introduced to a world that is completely different from the one she knows: “[e]sa noche fui con él a la fiesta del periódico y conocí un mundo todavía más grande y contradictorio que el mío. Sentí un aliento de poder en casi todos los asistentes” (62).

As stated above, Dorotea may play the game very well within her family, but she is not as familiar with the rules of power in society, at large. Manuel exposes her to a different world with which she has little experience, thus allowing her to enter the larger stage in which Mexicans exert their power. While he does invite her to this party with his peers, Dorotea notes that he does not include her, otherwise, in the activities of his professional life in any significant way. She especially underlines that he does not allow her to participate in
his business affairs: “. . . Manuel se esforzaba en mantenerte de lado su vida de trabajo sin dejarme participar . . .” (75). His attitude of excluding her from discussions about relevant matters concerning his work is reminiscent of how both her grandfather and her father kept her out of the family business.

In the midst of her own quest for self-discovery, and in spite of her observations that Manuel is arrogant and difficult, Dorotea begins a romantic involvement with him. Having recently distanced herself from her family, at first the relationship with Manuel gives her what she needs in her desire for liberation. She explains that with Manuel, unlike with her family, she feels free to be herself: “[n]o puedo decir que estuviese enamorada. Salía con él porque. . . . Con él me sentía totalmente libre de ser yo misma” (58). Away from her conservative parents, Dorotea feels ready to question the patriarchal standards that her family upholds. Dorotea also turns to Manuel because, unlike the members of her own family, he is someone with whom she can openly discuss her grandfather’s past. She feels compelled to learn what motivated the general to go into hiding, and Manuel is also interested in uncovering the truth.

Although at first the relationship has a liberating effect on Dorotea, she soon realizes that her initially positive impressions of Manuel do not accurately reflect who he really is: “[p]ara mí era como si al principio hubiera estado conteniéndose, portándose bien, para luego mostrar su verdadera cara” (44). After she gets to know him better, Dorotea describes Manuel as domineering and self-centered, in similar fashion to how she thinks of her father: “[a]unque Manuel podía ser el hombre más sencillo de la tierra y el más seductor, era en extremo egoísta: primero pensaba en él y luego en él otra vez. Organizaba el mundo a su conveniencia y pocas veces cedía ante las necesidades de alguien más, incluso las mías” (92).
She eventually learns that Manuel is self-centered and that he will always put his needs ahead of hers.

Dorotea begins to discover that her lover has many of the negative qualities associated with the stereotypical male. He is closed about sharing his feelings and the details of his life with her. He is also eager to dominate, and above all else, maintain himself in power, which Dorotea later learns that he will do at any cost. She realizes that while he pretends that his demanding personality is a product of his journalistic style, in fact, it is just a pretext to mask his need for control, which Dorotea describes as a “desenfrenada ambición de poder aunque podría disfrazarla llamándola ‘periodística’” (107). Dorotea begins to realize that Manuel is successful at maintaining himself in power because he understands the rules of the game very well and, as evidenced later when he betrays her, he is not above abusing his authority and lying to get what he wants.

The turning point in Dorotea’s transformation from an unsophisticated young lady to a knowledgeable apprentice who ultimately becomes totally adept at playing the game of power comes when she takes charge of her own education. By assuming responsibility for her own learning, Dorotea finds both direction and purpose in her life. She no longer aimlessly searches outside of herself for something that holds her attention. Taking control of her learning also means that she no longer needs Manuel to educate her. Slowly, she begins to notice that when she pursues interests outside of what he is trying to teach her, he becomes jealous. She explains that as she explores new authors and interacts with new teachers, Manuel becomes resentful because he, alone, wants to direct her instruction:

Y Manuel empezó a sufrir de celos por mis enamoramientos de temporada, como él llamaba a las lecturas que yo estaba descubriendo y también a los
The idea that Dorotea seeks to learn outside of Manuel’s influence is a challenge to his authority. Tafoya has also noticed that while Manuel undoubtedly contributes to Dorotea’s intellectual development, he reacts very negatively when she pursues her own interests: “[a]unque Manuel fue una gran influencia en su desarrollo intelectual, Dorotea siente que éste desea que ella aprenda tan solo las cosas que él le quiere enseñar. Cualquier intento de la protagonista por aprender fuera del círculo de nutrición cultural inventado por Manuel, es atacado o minimizado por él” (69). In Manuel’s attempts to control Dorotea, he wants her to learn just what he thinks is appropriate. For that reason, he ridicules or rejects that which she pursues on her own.

Foucault’s idea that every item of knowledge is equally a means for attaining power becomes evident in Dorotea’s situation. As she becomes more in tuned with her own interests and in control of her education and knowledge, she takes a more profound look at those around her. She remains dismayed by what she sees in her father because she still finds him to be domineering and distant, almost like a stranger: “[m]iré a mi papa con odio, como si estuviera viendo a un extraño” (84). Her mother continues to be insignificant to her life, with Dorotea describing her as being occupied with useless projects: “llena de ese tipo de conocimientos inútiles que brinda la etiqueta social” (61). In what becomes her most significant relationship, her association with Manuel, Dorotea also finds that instead of encouragement, her lover prefers to almost stifle her intellectual development when he feels threatened.
The combination of the circumstances surrounding Dorotea’s relationships with her father, her mother and her lover, leaves her disillusioned with her situation, empowering her to make a change. Her feminist consciousness is awakened at this point in the sense that she begins to reconsider whether she has any goals apart from the influence of both her family and Manuel. In doing so, she starts to consciously make her own decisions. She becomes more determined to establish goals for herself outside of what her family and Manuel want for her and she starts to more assertively resist their attempts to control her. She goes about developing strategies to free herself from the limiting gender scripts for women within Mexico’s patriarchal culture.

Once again, the idea that every item of knowledge provides a means for attaining power is evident in Dorotea’s case. As she contemplates her situation, she realizes that because she has made a concerted effort to learn and expand her horizons, she has changed in significant ways that go beyond the limits of what Manuel has taught her. She acknowledges his contributions to her early formation, but emphasizes that she is responsible for the need that she feels to be active and make changes in the world around her:

Quiero decir también que desde la muerte del abuelo yo había comenzado a cambiar; y que si bien Manuel había tenido algo que ver en la primera etapa de mi ‘desarrollo’ (por llamarlo de algún modo), no podría jamás atribuirsele nada que tuviera que ver con mi forma de apreciar el mundo, de querer caminar por él. Nadie me enseñó a percibir las contradicciones que me rodeaban ni a desear un cambio en lo más profundo de mis costumbres; de la misma manera que nadie pudo impedir que fuera descubriendo que Manuel se acercaba cada día más a eso de lo que yo venía huyendo. (107)
Dorotea readily admits that Manuel had much to do with her early development in understanding the world (and thus in how one plays the game) but she takes responsibility for empowering herself beyond what Manuel has taught her. She desires to take an active role and experience all that the world may have to offer. It is her own process of self-discovery that helps her to perceive that she desires a different vision of the future.

Both the knowledge that Dorotea acquires and her longing for autonomy empower her to stand up for herself against her family and Manuel. Just like her social and cultural education is best examined on two levels--in the context of her family and in her relationship with Manuel--so is her quest for freedom and independence. In taking charge of her life, one of Doretea’s first decisions is to move out of her parents’ house. She explains that she can no longer tolerate her difficult family: “[d]ecidí dejar la casa de mis padres. Estaba cansada de sobrellevar las relaciones de una familia complicada que gozaba de un sinnúmero de privilegios que no había hecho nada por merecer” (82). This is her first real step toward being independent because she goes beyond the family structure in order to explore her options within the larger context of society. She wants to avoid the trap of patriarchal obedience that stifled the other female members of her family: “yo tenía que luchar por mí misma, para salir de esa trampa que la familia, toda, incluido el abuelo, me había tendido” (85).

Before leaving her parent’s house, Dorotea confronts her father, making it clear that she understands the manipulative nature of her family, and that she will no longer play their game of control:

--Así, papá. Estoy harta de que nadie diga la verdad de nada.

--¿Qué verdad, Dorotea? Estas loca, hija.
She exposes and then shatters her father’s sense of denial about the problems within their family. They lie, or rather do not admit the truth, about their flaws and they prefer to avoid topics that paint them in a negative light. For instance, though it is significant to the family history, no one wants to discuss her grandfather’s past.

Dorotea understands the game that her family plays and it is empowering for her to face the reality of how they operate. By confronting her father about their shortcomings, she makes it difficult for him to try to control her in the name of upholding family standards. She is released from his domination because she is no longer trapped by the lies. Also, as Tafoya points out, by openly admitting the issues that the family would prefer not to acknowledge, Dorotea assumes an active voice in contrast to their silence: “[e]l autoconocimiento como miembro de la familia Leyva, es uno de los pasos de la protagonista hacia la autoidentificación que le permitirá ser y convertirse en una voz activa que contrastará con la pasividad del resto de sus miembros” (68).

When Dorotea leaves her parents’ home she gets her own apartment, supporting herself by tutoring students in biology. Contrary to Catalina’s dependence on her husband, Dorotea refuses to accept money from her family, because, as Tafoya asserts, she wants to be
completely autonomous: “[p]ara alejarse completamente de todo aquello que la ata, Dorotea busca la independencia, una independencia total, incluso económica . . .” (69).

Likewise, when Manuel requests that the two of them share an apartment, Dorotea rejects the idea because she realizes that living with him would mean giving up her newly claimed freedom.

Dorotea’s autonomy becomes a difficult issue in her relationship with Manuel. Unlike declaring her independence and moving out of her father’s home, it is tougher for her to break away from her lover, mostly because he refuses to relinquish control. Additionally, they are both still involved in trying to solve her grandfather’s mystery. Dorotea discovers that as she heads in what she feels is the right direction, she gets increasingly further from the path that Manuel has chosen for her. She remains committed, however, to being recognized as an individual that has her own needs and interests. According to Tafoya, Dorotea’s newfound independence complicates her relationship with Manuel as they both struggle for control:

A pesar de los varios intentos desalentadores que hace Manuel acerca de su educación, Dorotea continúa el proceso de adquisición de una cultura propia. Este proceso la obliga a enfrentarse a una cruda realidad, su vida ha sido un constante ir y venir de un poder patriarcal a otro del cual ella forma tan solo una mínima parte. . . . (69)

Dorotea persists in trying to establish her own identity, against Manuel’s controlling ways. Imagining a new future for herself, she starts taking classes at the university again, and decides to pursue a career in history. Though Manuel voices his doubts about her choice, she
feels confident that she is on the right path: “estaba totalmente segura de que por fin la carrera que seguía era lo que esperaba” (96).

With Dorotea’s strong desire for independence and Manuel’s inclination to dominate, it becomes inevitable that they will not be able to have a successful relationship. She recognizes that he is bothered by the ways in which she has changed and that he does not encourage or accept her growth. Dorotea’s knowledge helps her to see that her relationship with Manuel is bound to fail because he wants to stifle her progress: “[e]l conocimiento propio le permite empezar a crecer intelectualmente así como comprender que su relación con Manuel está destinada al fracaso, ya que éste no permitirá su crecimiento ni su desarrollo como persona ni como mujer” (Taforya 70). Dorotea starts to turn her attentions from pleasing her lover to focusing on her new career. When she gets her first serious job working as an assistant to one of the historians studying náhuatl culture in the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, she delights in her new position. It is apparent to the reader that due to Manuel’s patriarchal mindset, he no longer fits into what Dorotea has envisioned for her future.

Their already precarious relationship sustains another damaging blow when Manuel betrays Dorotea by publishing an essay revealing what he believes to be the truth about her grandfather’s past. He releases the piece without informing her of his intention to do so, and without giving her credit. After her family notifies her about the article, Dorotea is dismayed, explaining that Manuel never revealed to her that he planned to write about her grandfather: “Manuel demostraba interés, desde luego, pero jamás comentó que de verdad pensaba escribir sobre Teodoro Leyva. Al publicar su ensayo sobre el abuelo, me traicionó; me correspondía a mí desmitificar la figura de Teodoro Leyva” (121).
Manuel’s publishing of Dorotea’s story without acknowledging her input is yet another way in which he makes it obvious that he has no regard for her opinions or intellectual capacity. He claims that he published the article as a favor to her and does not comprehend why she feels deceived. I believe that the reason why he does not grasp that Dorotea feels betrayed is that, in similar fashion to the situation of Andrés and Catalina, Manuel does not ever really understand the young protagonist. He spends a great deal of time and energy trying to mold her into what he wants her to be, but he never takes notice of the ways in which she is different and has grown as a person. Even after she begins to independently pursue her own interests, he still does not acknowledge that she has developed into a knowledgeable and capable woman. Dorotea is not the typical, predictable, passive, woman of masculine discourse that lacks an identity of her own that he had in mind. She stands apart from the other females in her family that continue to follow prescribed gender scripts. Her character is representative of the new type of female protagonist that has distinct goals and desires for what she wants and is determined to bring about a different vision for her future, and that of other women.

Prior to Manuel’s betrayal, Dorotea had two principal goals. She desired to live an independent life and she wanted to be good at her new career in history. This is evident when she refers to her “empeño en llegar a ser no solo una buena historiadora sino una mujer independiente” (94). When Manuel deceives her by publishing his article about her grandfather, she begins to pursue another objective: retake control of the general’s story, which is, after all, her story as well. Dorotea’s resolve and her subsequent actions show the extent to which she has also become a player in the game of society. Actively working in a promising career in history, she has realized her previously stated desire to participate in the
world around her. In her new job she works with influential people; this gives her access to those with power, which does not come from her family or from Manuel. Both her education and her work help her to be more knowledgeable about how the game of society functions. Such factors come together to help her reclaim not only her grandfather’s story, but also her life from Manuel.

In her first step towards getting to the truth, Dorotea does not simply accept Manuel’s published account of the events surrounding her grandfather. She continues to question and investigate. Using the information that she learns from her historical research, Manuel’s article, and her grandfather’s diary, Dorotea reconstructs an accurate account of the events that led to the general taking refuge in his mother’s basement. Teodoro claims that he did not support the Serrano movement against General Alvaro Obregón’s reelection, but Dorotea finds proof that he did, in fact, participate in the revolt against his compañero Obregón.

Those that were caught were killed, but Teodoro Leyva managed to escape. Until the political situation stabilized he was forced to go into hiding. When her grandfather emerged a year later, he rejoined the “revolutionary family:” “[m]uerto Obregón y expulsado Calles, la familia lo volvió a acoger en su seno, y en él ocupó puestos de importancia” (151).

When Manuel publishes his essay, he does not have all of the historical facts. Instead, as García explains, he takes the human interest angle: “[i]n his article, Manuel attempts to supplement the official story by revealing the human side of the story, that is the personal experience of General Leyva during and after the revolt” (135). Since Manuel based his piece on inaccurate information, many of the ideas contained within his essay must also be incorrect. As a well-respected journalist, having someone refute his work could be damaging to his career. Dorotea publishes her account not to hurt Manuel, but because it is important to
her to reveal the whole story, including the part that he omitted: “[c]omo Manuel no había contado más que una parte de la historia, me pareció, entonces, que debía contar yo la otra” (153).

In her version, which ends up being the novel *La familia vino del norte*, she not only exposes that Manuel’s article is inaccurate, but she also includes the story of their relationship and his betrayal. Dorotea decides that if he can deceive her and take possession of her grandfather’s story without her knowledge, then she is certainly within her rights to reclaim it and share her journey of self-discovery. In the prologue to the novel, Dorotea writes to Manuel letting him know that she understands how he operates: “. . . comprendí que el zorro, el dios de la astucia y de la traición, era tu dios” (13). In other words, she now understands that Manuel is obsessed with showing his intellect and power, even if it means betraying her. She also informs him of her intention to publish her own version:

> Como hiciste pública tu versión, deseo hacer lo mismo con la mía, aunque dé un paso más y cuente también lo nuestro. *La familia vino del norte* va a ser publicada por Ediciones Océano, gracias a un amigo en común que nos puso en contacto: Miguel Ángel. Ya envié por correo el original y el contrato firmado. Serás tú, X, el primero en conocer la novela, para que no te sientas sorprendido; por eso, te envío la copia. (13-14)

Dorotea’s letter makes it clear that she is also an active player in the game of society. The fact that she is publishing her version shows that she, too, has connections in the publishing world. By making reference to the fact that she is sending Manuel a copy so that he is not surprised, she is alluding to the unexpected way in which she found out about his initial article. Though she does include the story of their relationship in her novel, the difference
between the two of them is that Dorotea does not behave unethically. Unlike Manuel, she does him the courtesy of informing him of her intention to publish her account before she does so.

Dorotea’s journey of learning about the world and about herself helps her to overcome the dominant constructs of patriarchal society that typically hold women back. In the following quote she emphasizes the importance of breaking away from confining structures and how important it is to have freedom:

Mucho tiempo mi vida fue estar dentro de una serie de estructuras que no me permitían mover. Ahora sé por experiencia que sólo basta el deseo de cambio para que esas estructuras comiencen a romperse. Aunque mi formación me ha enseñado a desenvolverme en el rigor objetivo para interpretar los hechos históricos, al escribir esta versión de lo que Manuel ocultó, he recreado ‘mi historia’ con lujo de libertad. . . . (153)

Dorotea is determined to break down the structures that have limited her; she makes changes so that she can have a different vision for the future. With the knowledge and experience that she has gained, she is well on her way to meeting her goals. Writing her story has a liberating effect as it helps her to confront and try to understand the past. It also gives her the strength to leave Manuel. Finally, it proves to her to what extent she has transformed into a self-supporting, independent woman.

Laura Díaz, the protagonist of *Los años con Laura Díaz*, is similar and yet different to Catalina Guzmán and Dorotea Leyva. She also challenges the conventional social scripts for women in her quest for autonomy and liberation and eventually becomes an active player in the game of society. Unlike the other two protagonists, however, she does not do so until
later in her life, when she turns sixty years old, and becomes a noted photographer. Prior to that time she rebels against and resists the dictates of patriarchal culture, but she does so with no concrete goals in mind. On several occasions during the narrative Laura expresses a desire to be politically involved, but she does not follow through. Instead, she spends many years observing the events that take place around her until she takes the steps necessary to become an active participant.

Laura’s story begins on a coffee plantation in Catemaco, Mexico, where she lives with her grandparents, her mother, and her three single aunts. Her parents are married but they live apart so that her father can establish himself financially in the city. When Laura turns twelve years old she and her mother move to Veracruz to live with her father and half brother, Santiago. Laura’s political awakening is sparked when her brother is executed for being a subversive against the Porfírio Díaz regime during the widespread movements of opposition to the government that sparked the beginning of the Mexican Revolution.

In her early twenties she meets Juan Francisco López Greene, an idealistic post-revolutionary union leader. After a brief courtship, they marry and immediately move to Mexico City. Laura again displays her political consciousness by showing her interest in listening in on Juan Francisco’s political discussions with his comrades. When she tells her husband that she would like to join him in his work, however, he discourages her efforts to get involved.

Several years and two children later, Laura becomes disillusioned with her husband who is not only machista, but also, an ineffective labor leader, and prone to corruption. Fed up with her situation, she abandons Juan Francisco and their two sons and carries on a love affair with another man. During this relationship she has the opportunity to move in
intellectual and artistic circles becoming acquainted with the painters Diego Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo. When her love affair ends bitterly, she travels with them to the United States. There, an important bond develops between the two women, as Frida becomes both her friend and mentor.

After a six-year absence Laura decides to return home to raise her children with her husband, although they never really succeed in becoming a happy family. Juan Francisco dies when Laura is in her late fifties and like Catalina Guzmán, she is finally set free from her domestic commitments by widowhood.

A couple of years after her husband’s death Laura begins a romantic involvement with another intellectual/artist, Harry Jaffe. Their relationship is very important in her development in that he places a camera in her hands and requests that she takes a picture of Frida Kahlo on her deathbed. That photograph of her friend inspires Laura to take a more critical look at the social situation that surrounds her. Consequently, with camera in hand, she finally begins to take part in the social and political activism that eluded her for many years. As part of her work she influences public opinion, photographing and making public important events that mark Mexico’s history, such as the 1968 Massacre at Tlatelolco. Through her pictures she becomes well known and well respected in her field. By the end of the narrative, Laura’s career achievements have made her an active player in the game of society and she finally enjoys the liberation and autonomy that she had sought for most of her life.

Much like with the other female protagonists, Laura’s social and political education is essential to helping her to acquire the understanding necessary to navigate the rules of the game in Mexican culture. Armed with such knowledge, she is able to rebel against her
husband’s controlling ways and resist the constraints of the gender script assigned to her by the society in which they live.

As mentioned above, Laura shows signs of having a political consciousness when she is in her early twenties, but she does not actually do anything about it until she reaches her sixties. During the years in between--that is to say for close to thirty-five years--through the men in her life she has access to Mexico’s political world but, like Catalina, she remains a marginal figure. Once she does become politically active, however, she uses her photography as the artistic medium through which to bring attention to the marginalized people of the city that are typically not recognized as part of the official landscape of Mexican society. She also uses her craft to shine a light on those who are persecuted for their political ideals.

A similar pattern to that of Catalina and Dorotea emerges for Laura in her early quest for independence. At the beginning of the narrative, having grown up in a small, rural town, she is naïve and inexperienced with the political and social games of society. After she marries, it is due to her relationship with the politically involved Juan Francisco, that she has access to political and societal power. Laura, however, is never an active player in her husband’s world of politics. After many years of seeing how he operates, Laura becomes increasingly disillusioned with his weak and corrupt character. As her awareness of the world around her heightens, she begins to recognize the restrictive and limiting nature of the machista society in which they live. Her feminist consciousness is awakened when Juan Francisco commits the grave act of turning in the nun to whom Catalina had given refuge in their home; as a result of his actions, she abandons him. The transgressive act of leaving her husband and especially her children proves beyond any doubt that she rejects the dominant
social scripts for women--whose main roles are those of wife and mother--acting autonomously to change her situation.

One problem with Laura’s character not only from the point of view of society, but also, from that of a conscious feminist, is that she selfishly and impulsively walks out on her husband without having concrete plans for the future. To her credit, however, she moves in with a girl friend and once she meets the man that becomes her lover, she does take advantage of the opportunities offered by the intellectual circles in which he moves to get the social, cultural, and political education that she was sorely lacking. After she eventually returns, and during the many years that she subsequently spends with Juan Francisco, the knowledge that she has gained empowers her to assert her will and consciously develop goals for changing her marginalized social condition within the home. In the end, Laura has learned enough to be successful at both finding a space of liberation and becoming an active player in the game of society.

Laura’s first impressions of the world come from the narrow confines of her family life on the coffee plantation where she grows up in Catemaco. She lives there with her grandfather and grandmother, Felipe and Cosmina Kelsen, both European immigrants to the region. She also spends time with her two aunts, Hilda, who has aspirations of being a famous pianist and Virginia, who desires to be a great writer. Due to the restrictive patriarchal rules by which they live, neither one of them ever achieves her goals remaining unfulfilled throughout their lives. Laura’s other half-aunt, Maria de la O, is a mulatta that is a product of an affair between her grandfather and Maria’s mother prior to his marriage to his wife Cosmina. Following Latin American patriarchal norms, Doña Cosmina generously takes her in and she remains with the family until the last years of her life.
Laura never has an opportunity to gain experience outside of the limited setting of the coffee plantation until she and her mother, Leticia, move away from their rural town to live in Veracruz with her father, Fernando Díaz, and her half brother, Santiago. As a young girl her political awakening begins as a result of the special relationship that she forms with the much older Santiago. When the two of them start regularly spending time together, she is just twelve years old and he is twenty. In spite of their difference in age, they develop a very close friendship.

Laura’s first hint that her half-brother is involved in something dangerous comes one night when she finds him wounded in his room. Neither of them speaks of the circumstances that led to his injuries. However, during their long weekly walks she begins to learn about the precarious political situation in Mexico and about the Revolution. Santiago opens up to Laura about his ideals, explaining the need for change in terms of democracy, elections, and labor. Laura is too young to grasp the significance of the information that he shares with her; she is just glad that they are close. And yet, her eventual consciousness later on in her life may be attributed, in part, to the early politization carried out by her half-brother.

Their time together, however, is cut short; Laura and her parents are jolted when Santiago is arrested and executed in November of 1910 before a firing squad for being a part of the liberal conspiracy against the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz. Though, once again, she is not mature enough to understand her brother’s political activism, at his funeral she vows that in honor of his memory, she will take an active role in matters that are important:

. . . de ahora en adelante ya no voy a esperar que las cosas pasen, ni las voy a dejar pasar sin poner atención, tú me vas a obligar a imaginar la
vida que tú ya no viviste pero te juro que la vas a vivir a mi lado, en mi cabeza, en mis cuentos, en mis fantasías, no te dejaré escapar de mi vida, Santiago, tú eres lo más importante que me ha ocurrido nunca, voy a serte fiel imaginándote siempre, viviendo en tu nombre, haciendo lo que tú no hiciste, no sé cómo, pero te lo juro que lo haré. . . . (73-74)

Laura’s inexperience causes her to make a promise that she will not passively accept what happens, but that instead she will live life for Santiago, fighting for causes that are meaningful. She fondly reflects back on her time with her half brother throughout the rest of her life, and while she spends many years not living up to her early promise, toward the end of her life she does take an active role in bringing injustices to light.

Because Santiago was a revolutionary, Laura’s father is forced to give up his job at the bank in Veracruz. He is transferred to a similar position in the less important town of Xalapa. The family moves to a very modest house and Laura is immediately warned that the attic is off-limits because Armonía Aznar, the former owner of the home, still resides there. This character is described as an old, delusional woman--the daughter of Spanish anarcho-syndicalists--that the bank generously allows to stay in the attic after the sell of the house. Laura never sees Ms. Aznar, but her existence later becomes a point of contention in her marriage to Juan Francisco. Since she is told not to bother the elderly woman, she obeys her parents and never goes to the attic. Once she makes friends in town and becomes involved in the local social scene, she loses interest in Ms. Aznar.

It is in Xalapa, in 1920, that Laura meets her future husband Juan Francisco López Greene. He is a labor leader fighting for post-revolutionary ideals. They become acquainted at the Casino ball and the awkward way in which they relate to each other during their initial
meeting becomes indicative of the communication problems that plague their relationship for the duration of their marriage. While López Green is focused on explaining his political cause to Laura, she is far more interested in flirting to attract his attention:

--Juan Francisco insistió.--Sí. Yo ya sé que todos tratan de usarnos.

--¿De usar a quién?--preguntó sin afectación Laura.

--A los trabajadores.

--¿Tú lo eres?--se lanzó Laura de nuevo, tuteando convencida de que no lo ofendía, desafiándolo un poco a tratarla igual, no de señorita o usted. . . .

--Es el riesgo, señorita. Hay que aceptarlo.

(Que me hable de tú, rogó Laura, quiero que me hable de tú . . . quiero que una vez sentirme diferente, quiero que un hombre me diga y me haga cosas que yo no sé o no espero o no puedo pedir. . . .)

--¿Cuál riesgo, señor Greene?--Laura revirtió al usted formal.

--El de que nos manipulen, Laura. (123-24)

The two characters’ behavior foregrounds the conventional gender roles of that time. Laura is flirtatious and unconcerned; Juan Francisco is serious and committed to his ideals. When they meet, Laura is twenty-one and most of her childhood friends have already married. Not wanting to end up like her single aunts, her hope is to find a potential suitor. She is not concerned with political issues.

Juan Francisco, however, is very interested in talking about his work for the liberal cause. He is the person that informs Laura that her own father took part in supporting the woman in the attic: Armonía Aznar. Juan Francisco informs her that don Fernando let the
Spanish exile live in the house so that she could carry out her work in support of the Mexican revolutionaries as a way of honoring the memory of Santiago:

    Esto fue posible gracias a la generosidad revolucionaria de don Fernando Díaz, . . . que aquí permitió a Armonía Aznar refugiarse y hacer su trabajo en secreto. . . . Este hombre discreto y valiente actuó así, nos lo hizo saber, en memoria de su hijo Santiago Díaz, fusilado por esbirros de la dictadura. Honor a todos ellos. (127)

Laura’s lack of awareness about political matters, even in her own surroundings, is apparent. It is only through a stranger that she learns about Ms. Aznar’s support of the revolutionary cause and about activities that occurred in her own home.

The promise that she made to Santiago seems to have been forgotten. After a brief courtship, Juan Francisco and Laura marry. In truth, Laura’s social and political education really begins when she and her husband move to Mexico City shortly after their wedding. The reader immediately encounters more evidence of Juan Francisco’s patriarchal mindset. He establishes that he is the authority figure in the marriage and believes that it is his duty to teach his wife about the world. He pompously declares himself to be a man serious about his causes: “[e]stás al lado de un hombre que lucha seriamente” (132), and takes on the role of educating Laura on how to be a good wife and how to live in society: “[y]a te iré educando en la realidad. Has vivido demasiado tiempo de fantasías infantiles” (132).

There are several instances at the beginning of their married life in which Laura proves her naïveté and her general lack of understanding. At the same time, in spite of her innocence, she also shows signs of rebellion. When Juan Francisco reproaches her for calling him ‘sweetheart’ in front of his comrades, Laura questions why it is inappropriate:
--Quítate la costumbre de decirme ‘mi amor’ en público.

--Sí, mi amor. Perdón. ¿Por qué?


--¿No hay amor entre tus camaradas?

--No es serio, Laura. Basta.

--Perdóname. Contigo a tu lado para mí todo es amor. Hasta el sindicalismo—rió como siempre reía ella. . . . (133)

Laura’s training in patriarchy’s idealist concepts of romantic love causes her to be caught up in the lessons she has learned about how newlyweds should behave. Juan Francisco, however, being a man, is more concerned about the image that he projects to his comrades. In this instance, though Laura complies with his request, she does dare question her husband as to why he rejects her loving terms in front of his colleagues.

In another instance, when Juan Francisco inquires as to why Laura never talks of her previous boyfriends, she responds by defiantly asking him why he never mentions his former girlfriends. Juan Francisco’s answer makes it clear that he, like society, has different standards for men and women:

--Nunca me hablas de tus novios.

--Tú nunca me hablas de tus novias.

La mirada, el gesto, el movimiento de hombros de Juan Francisco significaba ‘los machos somos distintos’. ¿Por que no lo decía de plano, abiertamente?

--Los machos somos distintos. (135)
Their conversation shows, once again, not only, that Laura is willing to question her husband, but also the extent to which Juan Francisco’s mindset is ingrained in patriarchal ideology. For him, explaining himself with a shrug of his shoulders and the response “los machos somos distintos” is a sufficient answer.

The above examples are incidents in which the reader begins to understand how Juan Francisco tries to control or criticize his wife. His domineering attitude, or rather, his need to put her down in order to maintain his control, is also evident in other aspects of their marriage. One of the biggest conflicts at the beginning of their married life arises when he continually admonishes Laura for never having had the courage to go up to the attic to meet Armonía Aznar. She attempts to justify her lack of action by pointing out that she was just a child; her husband, however, rejects her explanation:

--Laura, ¿nunca sentiste curiosidad por ver a Armonía Aznar?

--Era muy niña.

--Ya tenías veinte años.

--Será que mi impresión infantil perduró, Juan Francisco. A veces, por más que crezcas, te siguen asustando los cuentos de fantasmas que te contaron de niña. . .

--Deja eso atrás Laura. Ya no eres una niña de familia. . . (131-32)

Later in the same conversation, as Laura continues to defend herself for not having gone up to the attic, she assures Juan Francisco that she will try not to do anything else that he finds disappointing:

--Trataré de no decepcionarte, mi amor. Te respeto mucho, tú lo sabes.
--Empieza por preguntarte por qué nunca te rebelaste contra tu familia y subiste a ver a Armonía Aznar.

--Es que me daba miedo, Juan Francisco, te digo que era yo muy niña.

--Perdiste la oportunidad de conocer a una gran mujer.

--Perdóname, mi amor. . .--Ella misma dio órdenes de que no la molestaran.

¿Quién era yo para desobedecer?

--En otras palabras no te atreviste.

--No, hay muchas cosas que no me atrevo a hacer--sonrió Laura con cara de falso arrepentimiento. (131-32)

Juan Francisco insists on disparaging his wife, even after she explains that she was young and frightened. He continues to pursue the issue because he is adamant to bring attention to her shortcomings. The reader notices, however, that Juan Francisco seems to miss the irony that he reproaches Laura for not going against her family’s wishes, when he, himself, expects her unconditional compliance.

Laura’s actions are not as innocent as they seem. She never reveals to her husband that the real reason that she did not go to the attic was because she feared that a young man that she met earlier at a party, Orlando Ximénez, might be there to seduce her (as he had teased her that he would). She prefers to let Juan Francisco believe that she never sought out Armonía Aznar because she was a coward. Laura hides the truth from her husband for two reasons. First, she does not want anyone to know of the conversation in which Orlando invites her to have a secret rendezvous in the attic, and second, because at the beginning of her marriage she is determined to be happy.
Laura’s insistence on being happy met that though she questions Juan Francisco in small ways, she does obediently comply with his wishes. To appease her husband she blames their misunderstandings on her inexperience and makes it clear that she is aware that he is in control: “tú eres mi macho y yo soy tu esposita, mi amor es mi macho pero no debo decirle mi amor. . . ” (133). The novel makes it abundantly clear that early in their marriage, Laura assumes the typical role prescribed to females by patriarchal society: that of an obedient and dependent wife whose life is centered in domesticity.

It should be noted, however, that while Laura makes such conciliatory statements (“tú eres mi macho y yo soy tu esposita”) and accepts Juan Francisco’s reproach for her inaction, she resents his criticism. She reveals her underlying displeasure with her husband: “[l]a razón inmediata de su desazón, la que registró en ese momento su cabeza, era que su marido la reprochaba por no haber tenido el coraje de subir la escalera y tocar a la puerta de Armonía Aznar” (134). This incident is just one of the many in which Laura responds in one way to appease her husband, but her thoughts reveal discontent and uneasiness about his authoritarian attitude.

Much of Laura’s discontent is due to the way in which her husband’s restrictions impede her eagerness to lean. In “Laura Díaz y Carlos Fuentes: La edad de sus tiempos,” Ángeles Mastretta emphasizes Laura’s determination to understand the ways of society, calling her, “incandescente, ávida, luminosa e iluminada por la curiosidad . . .” (32). During her husband’s political meetings with his comrades at their home she is not allowed to actively participate or even sit in the same room. She does, however, attentively listen from the next room to their conversations accurately describing herself as absent in body but present in mind: “invisible para ellos pero atenta a cuanto decían” (142). She is uninformed
about political matters, but she does not simply rely on Juan Francisco to educate her. She takes the initiative to listen in on the meetings so that she can form her own opinions. Her participation, however, is limited to what amounts to eavesdropping; the only role that she can assume in her husband’s world of politics is that of an observer.

Though Juan Francisco has a tendency to be controlling and distant with Laura, she does not resent it and after their first couple of years of marriage she becomes somewhat content with her husband. She believes him to be a decent man and a hard worker. She also appreciates that he provides her with a good life. The young woman describes her husband as being a man of good moral character, diligent, and passionate about his cause: “un hombre fuera de lo común, difícil a ratos porque era un hombre recto y de carácter, un hombre que no transigía, pero amante, siempre preocupado, embargado por su trabajo, pero que a ella no le creaba problemas” (148).

The turning point in Laura’s relationship with her husband begins when she lets him know that she would like to join him in his work. As a labor leader for the Worker’s Party, Juan Francisco has access to those with power. After spending years listening in on his meetings, and becoming more knowledgeable about the social and political situation in Mexico, Laura decides that she is ready for activism; she no longer wants to remain in the marginal position of an observer, she wants to be an active participant. She and Juan Francisco have had two sons, so another motivation behind her desire to work with her husband reflects the fact that she wants some freedom from her domestic responsibilities.

At first, Juan Francisco appears to support her request. He allows her to work with him for two days, taking her to the poorest parts of town in an apparent move to discourage
her. When she inquisitively insists in asking where they should begin their efforts, he abruptly advises her to go home:

--¿Por dónde quieres empezar, Laura?

--Tú me dirás, Juan Francisco.

--¿Te lo digo? Por tu casa. Lleva bien tu casa, muchacha, y vas a contribuir más que si vienes a estos barrios a organizar y salvar gentes que además ni te lo van a agradecer. Déjame el trabajo a mí, Esto no es para ti. (150)

Laura again acquiesces to his wishes and does not persist in assisting her husband; nothing comes of these early efforts to be an active participant and she remains outside of his world of politics. In all likelihood, Juan Francisco rejects his wife’s request because of his own macho pride. He likes to control and dominate and he is not comfortable with Laura working at his side as an equal. Additionally, because of his patriarchal mentality, he holds fast to the belief of domesticity; for him, his wife’s place is in the home, taking care of the chores and the children.

Though Laura agrees to stay home, those two days out in the city awaken a passion or excitement in her and she realizes how stifling it is to be limited to working in the house. As she begins to contemplate the void that she feels, she reflects on the sacrifice that Juan Francisco expects her to make by insisting that she remain in the home:

Puede que tenga razón. No me entendió. Pero entonces tiene que darle algo más a lo que se mueve en mi alma. Quiero todo lo que tengo, no lo cambiaría por nada. Quiero algo más también. ¿Qué es? Él le pedía muda obediencia a un alma apasionada. (151)
Laura is aware that simply being a wife and mother is not fulfilling. She also understands that Juan Francisco does not comprehend her need to have an active life. She comments on the difficulty of her situation, in that her husband expects total obedience when she feels strongly drawn to activism. It is both his lack of understanding of her situation and his growing move toward political corruption that make Laura start to see her husband in a negative light.

Her dissatisfaction with Juan Francisco increases when she is confronted with his impropriety. When the leader of the official union (CROM) gives him a car, he accepts it. He later admits to Laura that he returned the gift, but he did it only at the request of his comrades:

--¿Dónde está el coche, Juan Francisco?

--Lo devolví. No me mires con esa cara. Me lo pidieron los camaradas. No quieren que acepte nada del sindicato oficial. Lo llaman corrupción.

(151)

Laura is as much disheartened by her husband’s inappropriate acceptance of the gift as she is by his lack of understanding of the impropriety he has committed. A few years later, as she continues to question Juan Francisco’s effectiveness as a leader, she thinks back to this incident and remembers that it had not been his idea to return the car; he gave it back at the behest of his comrades: “[n]o había sido acto voluntario de él. Se lo pidieron” (156).

Gradually, as Laura gains a better understanding of the rules of the game, she becomes more and more disillusioned with her husband, realizing that he is ineffective in his position. She notices, for instance, that even though the union members still come to their home for the weekly meetings, Juan Francisco’s cause has become nothing more than a
boring routine that he repeats year after year. As she takes notice of her husband’s
impotence, she describes the monotony of the situation that he and his comrades have slipped
into, listening to the same discussions and going over the same issues: “[t]oda su vida de
joven casada escuchando la misma discusión: era como ir a la iglesia todos los domingos a
oír el mismo sermón . . .” (160).

Laura’s disappointment with Juan Francisco reaches its maximum point when she
takes in Carmela, a woman that comes to their house desperately seeking refuge. It is not
clear what she has done to need such assistance, but Laura agrees to hide her, giving her a job
as their cleaning lady. Shortly thereafter, Laura leaves for Xalapa with her sons and María de
la O to visit her mother and other aunts. When she returns she finds out that Carmela was
actually Gloria Soriana, a Carmelite nun that was a conspirator in the 1928 assassination of
President-elect Alvaro Obregón. She also learns that Gloria was killed trying to escape from
their home after Juan Francisco turned her over to the police. Laura is in complete disbelief
that her husband, who had admonished her for over nine years for never having the courage
to go up to the attic to meet Armonía Aznar, is the same man that has turned in Gloria
Soriana, who was also fighting the rebel cause of anti-reelection for the presidency.

Disgusted by Juan Francisco’s incorporation into the corrupt political regime and by his
stifling and controlling ways, Laura walks out on him.

Her decision to abandon her husband is impulsive; when she leaves she does not have
any concrete plans. She moves in with her childhood friend Elizabeth and spends time
thinking about her tarnished image of her husband, while she ponders what to do next. In one
of her conversations with Elizabeth, she explains that she left her home because Juan
Francisco is not the honorable man that she thought he was:
--Pero no te comprendía. Te largaste el día que entendiste que eras más inteligente que él. No me digas que no.

--No, simplemente sentí que Juan Francisco no estaba a la altura de sus ideales. (178)

Laura now admits that Juan Francisco is not the man of strong moral character that she once believed him to be. The following passage, taken from her thoughts during this conversation with Elizabeth, highlights that as she comes to terms with her disappointment, she struggles with the dilemma of revealing his shortcomings to her family and friends. On the one hand she wants to tell them what has happened, but on the other, she does not want to tarnish the family’s image of her husband by admitting that he is a failure:

... sobre todo no quería hablar mal de Juan Francisco, quería que todos siguieran creyendo que ella puso la fe en un hombre luchador y valiente por encima de todo, un líder que resumía cuanto había sucedido en México en este siglo, no quería decirle a su familia me equivoqué, mi marido es un corrupto o un mediocre, mi marido es un ambicioso indigno de su ambición, tu padre, Santiago, no puede vivir sin que le reconozcan sus méritos, tu padre, Dantón, es derrotado por el convencimiento de que los demás no le dan su lugar--mi marido, Elizabeth, no es capaz de reconocer que ya perdió sus méritos. Sus medallas ya mostraron todas el cobre. (181)

Though Laura must face the truth about Juan Francisco, she cannot bear to reveal it to her family. Instead, she decides to leave the boys with her mother and begins an independent life without explaining why.
Laura’s disappointment and frustration with her husband play a large part in her decision not to return to him right away. In fact, it is due to her disillusionment with Juan Francisco that her own feminist consciousness is finally awakened, causing her to reject the patriarchal life that she had lived. Prior to his betrayal with turning in Gloria Soriana, Laura was not necessarily happy with her life, but she had not considered leaving her husband. Instead, she had resigned herself to continuing in what had become a displeasing situation: “había que resignarse a vivir con un hombre que trataba a su mujer y a sus hijos como público agradecido” (155).

When Juan Francisco turns Gloria over to the police and Laura walks out, she begins to autonomously make plans for her future without considering her husband’s (or her children’s) opinions. She asserts her will in making decisions that affect her life and she finds a new level of independence, liberating herself from both Juan Francisco’s and society’s constructs of what her life should be as a wife and mother. Years later, Laura points out that it was indeed her disillusionment that caused her to justify the unthinkable action of leaving her family to seek an autonomous life:

. . . que la desilusión flagrante la había conducido a la mentira: ella misma se sintió justificada en romper con el hogar y entregarse a lo que dos mundos, el interno de su propio rencor y el externo de la sociedad capitalina, consagraban como aceptable vendetta para una mujer humillada: el placer, la independencia. (247)

Dissatisfaction and anger about her home life and the limited choices that she faces as a woman move Laura to rebel and seek fulfillment and independence outside of the home.
The main problem that may be pointed out in Laura’s behavior is that while she does stand in resistance to the conventional social scripts for women by emancipating herself from her marriage and domesticity, she does so impulsively and without a rational plan. That is to say, she thoughtlessly leaves her husband and children without considering the consequences of her actions; financial considerations are not taken into account either. She begins an independent life, but at no point does she define her goals or strategies for a long-term change in her condition so that she may have different options in the future.

Laura deserts her family in a rebellious act that affords her some freedom, but she is not really completely autonomous; she continues to be financially dependent on Juan Francisco and she lacks the social and political education to be a successful player in the game of society. Sadly, she has no plans as to what she wants to do with her life due to her lack of education and experience. In other words, when she leaves she has not considered what her goals are to permanently change her situation and she lacks the monetary means to become independent.

There is no doubt that the fact that Laura abandons her husband and children is reprehensible; additionally, in the absence from her family she is aimless for several years. It should be noted, however, that she does take the opportunity to begin educating herself in the refinements enjoyed by high society. Laura spends two years living the life of a socialite with her friend Elizabeth, who covers her expenses when the monthly allowance that she receives from Juan Francisco is not sufficient. During those years Laura starts a love affair with Orlando Ximénez, the young man that she feared would try to seduce her in the attic. They move in together and he contributes to her social and cultural education by taking her to the fine parties of high society where she meets many prominent people. In this new group,
Laura’s horizons are expanded as she has the opportunity to interact with artists, intellectuals, and the important people that have great influence in shaping Mexican society. She and her lover attend premiers, concerts, art exhibits, and other cultural events that Laura never had mentioned as having been part of her life with Juan Francisco.

While Laura is with Orlando, she also educates herself by reading the works of important authors. She admittedly begins reading with no specific plan in mind but her hobby does give her the chance to become more knowledgeable. She, in fact, uses her reading to come to an understanding of her situation, to find purpose in her life, and to establish goals for herself:

Laura se había engañado leyendo en la cama, diciéndose que no estaba perdiendo el tiempo, que se educaba a sí misma, leía lo que le había faltado leer de adolescente, después de descubrir a Carlos Pellicer, leer a Neruda, a Lorca, y atrás a Quevedo, a Garcilaso de la Vega . . . no, no había perdido el tiempo en las fiestas de Carmen Cortina, al leer un libro o escuchar un concierto dejaba, al mismo tiempo, correr su pensamiento personal más interior y profundo con el propósito--se decía a sí misma--de situarse en el mundo, comprender los cambios en su vida, proponerse metas firmes, más seguras que la fácil salida . . . de la vida matrimonial con Juan Francisco. . . .

(209-10)

Laura is aware that she needs direction in her life and she obviously draws into herself with the aid of art to establish a plan. She wants to make significant changes and not just feel a temporary sense of liberation. She understands that she is not independent as long as she is still financially reliant on Juan Francisco.
Eighteen months after she moves in with Orlando, Laura leaves on a trip to visit her mother and sons in Xalapa. Upon her return to Mexico City she finds out that her lover has ended their affair. Feeling alone and abandoned Laura remembers that she had previously met Diego Rivera while he was painting in the Palacio Nacional and she goes to his house in search of work. The year is 1932 and Diego and Frida Kahlo invite Laura to accompany them to Detroit where he has been hired to complete a major painting. Once again, while Laura’s decision to accompany them may seem frivolous or random, she does take advantage of the trip as another learning experience. Laura describes her awe at being in the presence of the artists: “[a] Laura se le hacía que el viaje a Detroit en compañía de Frida y Diego le llenaba de tal modo la existencia que no le quedaba tiempo para nada más, ni para pensar en Xalapa, su madre, sus hijos, las tías, Juan Francisco su marido, Orlando su amante. . . .” (225)

During their time together Frida shares the details of her life with Laura, including the story of the accident that made it impossible for her to carry a child to term. While they are abroad Frida suffers yet another miscarriage. Devastated by her loss, she sublimates her pain through her painting, a lesson Laura learns from both her and Diego. From her bed in the hospital Frida asks Laura to bring her painting supplies so that she can express her grief: “. . . te pido en cambio unos colores y un papel y convierto el horror de mi cuerpo herido y mi sangre derramada en mi verdad y en mi belleza . . .” (236). Later, when the hospital staff complains about the disorder that Frida’s painting supplies create in her room, Diego defends his wife, asserting that her art is an important outlet for her pain: “esta mujer que es mi mujer pone toda la verdad, el sufrimiento y la crueldad del mundo en la pintura que el dolor le ha obligado a hacer . . .” (238). Expressing grief or suffering through art is an important lesson
that Laura assimulates and is able to use when her grandson is killed during the massacre at Tlatelolco. Armed with her camera, produces powerful, award-winning images.13

Shortly after Frida is released from the hospital Laura returns to Mexico. She subsequently decides to reunite with her husband and children after being separated for six years. The decision to return is based on the lessons that she has learned during her absence: “decidió rehacer su hogar con Juan Francisco, no por la flaqueza, sino por un acto de voluntad fuerte e indispensable que resumió para ella las lecciones de su vida con Orlando” (246). Laura’s decision should not be viewed as an act of powerlessness or as a lack of options; on the contrary, she willfully makes the choice to resume her life with her husband and children in an attempt to do the right thing. When she goes back she is no longer the same naïve, love-struck young girl that Juan Francisco married. Her experiences in the years that she is away have taught Laura to become more knowledgeable on how relationships work and on the rules of society.

Prior to her return Laura has a conversation with her mother in which Leticia points out that it is, indeed, time for her to stop relying on others: “[l]o importante es que tú tomes a tu cargo algo verdadero y te decidas a salvarlo tú, en vez de esperar a que te salven” (248). The knowledge that Laura has gained while she was away, empowers her to accept the reality of her situation; she returns with no great illusions about her husband or their marriage. She also comes back determined to voice her opinions, challenging and resisting to play the role of the obedient, dependent woman that Juan Francisco initially assigned to her.

Another difference in the attitude of the more mature Laura pertains to her understanding that to truly find a space of liberation she must work within the established

13 I discuss in detail the incident with Laura’s grandson at Tlatelolco and her response through her art in chapter four.
Consequently, she reassumes the role of wife and mother, but from her newly
developed feminist consciousness, she continues to assert her will in making decisions that
affect the household. She and Juan Francisco decide together when is the appropriate time to
send for the boys and they both determine the routine of the family after their sons return.

Despite their efforts to get their relationship back on track, the couple remains
unhappy in their marriage. Laura does not leave her husband again, but she does begin to
consider what her goals are apart from him. Her hopes for the future include emancipation
from domesticity, a greater level of autonomy, and a space of liberation within the
household. Having become more knowledgeable about how the rules of the game work to
shape the roles of both men and women in society, Laura boldly asserts that such rules need
to change. Shortly after she returns to her husband, as she reflects on her situation, her
thoughts reveal a condemnation of the double standards of patriarchal society:

\[\ldots \text{lo que hay que cambiar son las reglas del juego, las reglas hechas por los}
\text{hombres para los hombres y para las mujeres porque sólo ellos legislan para}
\text{ambos sexos, porque las reglas del hombre valen lo mismo para la vida fiel y}
\text{doméstica de una mujer, que para su vida infiel y errante; ella siempre es}
\text{culpable de sumisión en un caso, de rebeldía en otro; culpable de la fidelidad}
\text{que deja pasar la vida recostada en una tumba fría con un hombre que no nos}
\text{desea, o culpable de la infidelidad de buscar el placer con otro hombre igual}
\text{que el marido lo busca con otra mujer, pecado para ella, adorno para él, él}
\text{Don Juan, ella Doña Puta. \ldots (345)}\]

As Laura struggles with her own domestic situation, she ponders the inequalities in the
expectations for both men and women. Men make the rules for both sexes and as a result
women find themselves in the difficult position of either being guilty of being too submissive or too rebellious. Also, she notices the double standard where women are unjustly vilified for committing acts that are viewed as being perfectly acceptable and even commendable for men.

Laura points out to herself the need to change the rules of the game, and it is in part because of her determination to do so, that she justifies the liberties that she begins to take in her marriage. When her mother dies she brings her aunt María de la O to live with her family and gladly relinquishes to her many of the domestic chores. She begins to spend time outside of her house, visiting with Diego and Frida whenever she pleases. And though she enjoys spending time with her sons, particularly with Santiago, with whom she grows very close, she feels unfulfilled by her husband Juan Francisco. As a result, she begins to carry on another love affair with a Spanish intellectual named Jorge Maura. Within her household and her marriage Laura, at this point in her life, has learned to challenge the rules of the game, to rebel, and to succeed at finding a space of liberation.

Years earlier, when Laura had requested to join Juan Francisco in his work and he did not permit it, she came to the conclusion that what her husband really wanted from her was total compliance: “muda obediencia de un alma apasionada” (151). A few years later, when she starts feeling disillusioned with Juan Francisco, she repeats those words to remind herself of how stifled she feels in the marriage. Much later when Laura returns to her husband, her “mute obedience” is simply no longer an option. She stays with Juan Francisco, but makes it clear that she has assumed an active role in their relationship.

Juan Francisco passes away in 1950 and Laura gets the opportunity, in similar fashion to Catalina Guzmán, to be truly independent for the first time. Her son Santiago had died
years prior to her husband, and her other son, Dantón, had married into a wealthy family and left their home. With her husband’s death, Laura is on her own. At his funeral she makes her first autonomous decision as a widow, refusing to let the priest place a crucifix in Juan Francisco’s coffin because he was anticlerical. Her insistence that he be buried without the cross is met with strong disapproval from Danton’s affluent in-laws and friends, scandalizing those present. Laura is not concerned with their opinions since her decision represents an important step in her emancipation:

Sabía que había hecho algo innecesario, una provocación. Le salió natural. No pudo impedirlo. Le dio gusto. Le pareció, de repente, algo así como un acto de emancipación, el comienzo de algo nuevo. Después de todo, ¿quién era ella desde ahora sino una mujer solitaria, una viuda, sin compañía, sin más familia que un hijo lejano capturado en un mundo que a Laura Díaz le parecía detestable. (429)

Her husband’s death brings Laura freedom and independence and she rejects the notion of continuing to be controlled by the social scripts. The knowledge that she has gained makes her ready to tackle the challenges of widowhood as she looks forward to a new beginning.

Two years after Juan Francisco’s death Laura begins another love affair, this time with Harry Jaffe, a Jewish exile that sought refuge in Mexico. Though their relationship is often tempestuous, Laura is satisfied with Harry in a way that she never was with Juan Francisco: “la liga creada entre los dos . . . era inquebrantable, se necesitaban. . . .” (457). They remain together for two years and it is this relationship that has a transcendent impact on Laura’s future career path. When Frida Kahlo dies in 1954, Harry gives Laura a Leica camera, and requests that she uses it to take a photo of the artist on her deathbed. Laura does
so, spending time and great care to capture her friend’s image. In “Imágenes de la historia. Una relectura de Carlos Fuentes,” Nana Badenberg and Alexander Honold credit that photo with transforming Laura into an artist: “[l]a muerte de Frida Kahlo, contemplada a través del ojo de la cámara y conservada en la fotografía, transformó a Laura Díaz, a sus casi 60 años, en una artista” (50). It is true that the critical eye that Laura uses when taking that photograph is the same that she employs later when she focuses on other important images.

After a massive earthquake hits Mexico City in 1957, Laura begins to use her camera to take pictures of the destruction and by doing so she portrays the city in a different light. She starts to see the social realities from which Juan Francisco tried to shield her years earlier when he refused her assistance in his work. The experience inspires her to finally embrace the political activism that she had wanted to be a part of since the promise that she made in honor of her half-brother. Through photographing the city, Laura learns about herself and she brings to light the injustices and misery of those who suffer:

Salió a fotografiar las ciudades perdidas de la gran miseria urbana y se encontró a sí misma en el acto mismo de fotografiar lo más ajeno a su propia vida, porque no negó el miedo que le produjo penetrar sola, con una Leica, a un mundo que existía en la miseria pero se manifestaba en el crimen. . . . (513)

The photos that Laura takes after the earthquake comprise her first great photo essay. They inspire her to look beyond her comfort zone and go to places that she would normally not dare to visit so that she can bring to the foreground those that are typically marginalized—the poor, the homeless, the criminal element—as part of the city’s official landscape.

Laura’s life during her later years is one of independence and vigorous activism. When her son Dantón, who has become a powerful businessman, tries control with her by
proposing (after the earthquake destroys her home) that she reside in one of his buildings and live off of his financial support she declines his offer. Dantón had assumed that he would have to take care of his widowed mother, but by that time Laura had embraced her autonomy. At this stage in her life she understands the rules of the game and she refuses to be dominated by anyone, including her son. In the following conversation she makes clear her desire to handle her affairs on her own:

Precisamente, ella quería pagar de ahora en adelante su propia renta, sin ayuda de él.

--¿De qué vas a vivir?

--¿Tan vieja me ves?

--No seas terca, madre.

--Creí que mi casa era mía. ¿Lo tienes que comprar todo para ser feliz?

Déjame serlo a mi manera.

--¿Muerta de hambre?

--Independiente.

--Lléname si me necesitas, pues.

--Igual aquí. (508-09)

Laura makes it apparent that she values her independence. As she continues to channel more of her energy into her work, she finally finds the purpose and sense of direction that she had vainly pursued for many years.

Laura’s photography also comes to serve another very important purpose in her life. As she dedicates more time to her craft she becomes very successful in her field. The money and recognition that she earns have an empowering effect, as they help to support her desire
to live as she pleases and frees her from any financial dependence on her son. Over time, she even begins to exhibit her work. The more her celebrity grows, the more she becomes an active player in the game of society. Prior to her own successes she had access to power through the men in her life--Juan Francisco, Orlando, Jorge, Harry, and lastly, Dantón. After she becomes a politically committed artist, the attention that she gains from her work gives her direct access to those with power because Laura’s success makes her a valuable player in the game of society, in her own right.

When the protagonist looks back over her life and considers her success, she gives credit to Diego and Frida and the lessons that she learned from them: “[a]l lado de Diego y Frida, sin percatarse, había acumulado, como en un sueño, la sensibilidad artística que tardó la mitad de los años con Laura Díaz en aflorar” (516). She does not lament that she had to wait so many years to be free: “[n]o se quejaba de ese tiempo ni lo condenaba como un calendario de sujeciones al mundo de los hombres . . .” (516). She has no regrets because she recognizes that everything that she has been through in her life--including her unfulfilling marriage, her love affairs, and her time with her family--has contributed to making her the woman that she is. The woman that she always wanted to be: independent, liberated, fulfilled, and an active participant in society content to face a future of her own design.
CHAPTER FOUR

LANGUAGE AND ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE AS NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

In the previous chapter I discussed knowledge, or rather, making oneself more knowledgeable as one of the alternative strategies of empowerment that the female protagonists employ in their quest to find a space of liberation. This chapter focuses on two other such strategies: the ways in which the women use language to have their voices heard, as well as the manner in which they create an alternate discourse that frees them from having to rigidly adhere to the dominant social scripts prescribed by Mexican society.

As each protagonist becomes more knowledgeable about playing the game of society, each also becomes more conscious about effectively using their language skills, which include verbal communication, writing, and other forms of overt non-verbal expression, such as photography. The case of Catalina Guzmán, exemplifies how she understands the nuances of both oral and written communication and she ably maneuvers through both to make her voice heard at critical moments. Dorotea Levya uses her writing as an instrument of command by publishing a narrative in which she rewrites history to include both the story of her life and her own account of the events surrounding her grandfather’s controversial past. By telling or rather retelling what she concludes is the accurate version of the story, she boldly asserts her voice to challenge the official discourse of both her grandfather and her lover Manuel. Laura Díaz expresses herself through photography, which she uses to present an alternate viewpoint that, as it is the case with Dorotea, challenges the official record. By
purposefully photographing typically marginalized characters she brings attention to those that are generally ignored as part of the landscape of Mexico City’s society.

The significance of language as a strategy of empowerment is focused primarily through the concepts put forward by Rosario Castellanos and Argentine novelist Luisa Valenzuela. Both ardent feminist critics offer ideas about how the power of not just oral, but also written expression can be used by women as an instrument of liberation. They additionally contend that when women consciously take control of language, they acquire the power to both challenge and change the limiting gender roles assigned to females by patriarchal ideology.

Language is an integral part of discourse, and the construction of an alternative discourse is the third strategy that I identify as used by the female protagonists in their quest for autonomy. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson defines discourse as “a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, [expressing] a particular way of understanding human experiences” (281). The female protagonists challenge the dominant discourse by resisting and reject the conventional gender roles of patriarchal culture. Such canonical constructs, as outlined in chapter two, include the idea that men are unquestionably in control and should rightfully enjoy the privileges that holding the dominant position in society affords them. By contrast, the patriarchal ideals for women maintain that they should occupy an inferior position in society in the role of passive, obedient, and dependent daughters, wives, and mothers.

In the works that I discuss in this study, each protagonist manages to create an alternate discourse--that is, a discourse that represents a departure from the established, dominant social rules--in her quest for autonomy. Catalina Guzmán not only refuses to be a
passive wife, but she also has love affairs, talks back to her husband Andrés, and seeks to find happiness outside of her family. Dorotea Levya assertively includes her own story when she rewrites her family’s history, thus creating an alternative individualized discourse to the official version as told by her grandfather and Manuel. In doing so, she establishes her own identity (as opposed to it being defined by the men in her life). Laura Díaz, after being disillusioned by her husband, also rejects the patriarchal ideal of being the dedicated wife and mother. She abandons her family for several years, has affairs with other men, and finally feels fulfilled when she becomes a noted photographer and develops a strong sense of self-sufficiency. By taking action and behaving in ways that produce a deviation from the established discourse, these women manage to liberate themselves from the dominant social scripts that attempt to control their lives.

To discuss the creation of an alternate discourse as a strategy of resistance, I refer principally to the ideas of Kay García, Richard Terdiman, and Danny J. Anderson. Each of these critics addresses the challenges that someone in a subordinate position faces when attempting to move away from the prevailing dominant constructs of society. It should be noted that there are several instances where the female characters go against the prescribed social scripts with no conscious or intentional thought of creating an alternate discourse. Even so, their acts of rebellion represent a deviation from the established way of thinking. As such, when they behave in ways that do not support the prescribed gender roles for women, they do, in fact, generate an alternative discourse that counters the dominant point of view.

In Rosario Castellanos’ collection of essays *El uso de la palabra*, she readily acknowledges that the patriarchy’s dominant discourse limits a woman’s options in society. However, she also discusses the importance of typically marginalized groups being able to
communicate and express themselves. To the Mexican author, language is a structure of power, and it is also an instrument of command over one’s self and one’s reality (H. Anderson, “Rosario Castellanos” 31). Understanding the value of language and being able to control its use is empowering because it allows for the creation of a personal discourse. Helene Anderson emphasizes how powerful Castellanos believed language to be, declaring that the Mexican author’s work is: “infused with the idea that consciousness of the significance of language is one of the keys to taking possession of the world” (31).

The use of language as a structure of power is certainly not limited to oral communication. As Helene Anderson affirms in the following quote, one can also be set free by the action of composing a text: “[b]y virtue of having written the words, tensions are released and a sense of liberation achieved” (31). Dorotea Levy in La familia vino del norte, which I discuss later in this chapter, provides a prime example of how writing can both empower and liberate because becoming an author helps her to establish her own identity.

Several other Latin American feminist critics, including the novelist Luisa Valenzuela, also stress how important it is for women to understand the power of communication. In “Appropriating the Master’s Weapons” in Debra Castillo’s Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism, Valenzuela posits that language can be used as both an instrument and a weapon. She proclaims that men have always used their words as a tool of command, and urges women to do the same, calling for an “appropriation of language that asserts a woman’s rights to an estranged linguistic property as her personal possession” (99). In fact, Valenzuela contends that this necessary appropriation goes beyond language, declaring that women need to seize control not only of their words, but also of their bodies and of power (99).
The Argentinean writer also points out that in the past women were reluctant to speak openly and directly because their right to speech had, by tradition, been restricted (98). Coming from the conventional tradition of being part of a muted group, women have suffered from what Valenzuela calls “linguistic censorship” because they have typically been predisposed to be more reserved in expressing themselves. This hesitancy to speak forthrightly is a result of what the feminist theorist explains has been a long-established type of cultural conditioning: “[w]omen maintain a linguistic conservatism intimately linked to their greater attachment to tradition and formality. Women, consequently, are ‘naturally’ more retiring, more superstitious, less able to speak directly . . . ” (98). When Valenzuela proclaims that women need to use language as a tool of command, she is encouraging them to not be reserved, but to exercise their right to use all words to express themselves, in any way they desire. It is only with such directness that they will be effectively be able to challenge and resist the codes established by men (99).

Appropriating the master’s weapons, that is to say, taking control of language typically controlled by men, is, admittedly by Valenzuela, a daunting task as it involves “entanglement” and the “exposure of vulnerabilities” (99). At the same time, it allows a woman to seize control of her own voice. By taking up both the tools and the language used by men, women have the opportunity to “forge new instrumentalities” (Valenzuela 99). In other words, by finding ways to use language as an instrument of command, women discover new ways of expressing and empowering themselves.

One such way to take control of language is to create an alternate discourse that challenges the dominant social scripts. In Discourse/Counter-Discourse Richard Terdiman discusses the power of discourses explaining that they make up the foundation of any given
society: he describes them as “a culture’s determined and determining structures of representation and practice” (12). Those that hold positions of power in society typically establish the representative constructs and norms of that culture. Those that contest the “dominant habits of mind and expression” create what Terdiman refers to as a counter-discourse (12). More formally, he defines counter-discourse as the “principal discursive systems by which writers and artists sought to project an alternative, liberating newness against the absorptive capacity of those established discourses” (13). A counter-discourse or alternative discourse is created when one seeks liberation from the dominant structures that determine the rules of the game of any given culture. This liberation may manifest itself in the form of challenging, resisting, or subverting the principal institutions that form the basis of society. As Terdiman points out, the two concepts naturally, create opposing points of view: “[f]or every level at which the discourse of power determines dominant forms of speech and thinking, counter-dominant strains challenge and subvert . . .” (39).

In “Fiction and History in Silvia Molina’s La familia vino del norte,” Kay García also discusses the importance of creating an alternate way of thinking to counter the prevailing social scripts. She defines alternative discourse simply as a different perspective: “a creative deviation from the established, dominant discourse [presenting] the other side of the story, the side that is not told in history books, newspapers, or other sources of the ‘official story’” (275). By writing to give an account of what happens in their life, women have the power to challenge the historical record, which, within patriarchal culture, has not typically recognized female activities, contributions, or accomplishments.

García also points out how, for marginalized characters, and more specifically, for women, creating an alternative discourse can be a strategy of liberation. By deviating from
the established norms, women free themselves from rigidly adhering to the dominant cultural constructs. In the process, not only is an alternate discourse generated, but also, when such divergence involves creating a written account of events, women have the opportunity to add their voice to the official register.

In Danny J. Anderson’s “Displacement: Strategies of Transformation in Arráncame la vida,” he presents the same such idea of creating an alternative discourse, but refers to it as displacement of the traditional scripts. Anderson argues that displacement can also be used as a strategy to bring about change because it allows women to challenge the gender ideals that work to shape their life. By “displacing” the dominant constructs of patriarchal culture through resisting or rebellion, a woman is able to transform her reality by rejecting the oppressive social conventions that make up the rules of the game.

As Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Leyva, and Laura Diaz become more knowledgeable, they become more conscious about communicating and more aware of how to successfully use language and discourse as a strategy. These women become adept at “appropriating the master’s weapons,” to have their voices heard, whether through linguistic performance, writing, or another form of expression. Additionally, each protagonist finds ways to create an alternative discourse, which allows her to undermine the dominant social scripts for women. With the ultimate goals in mind of independence and finding a space of liberation, each woman ably employs these strategies to change their situation, as they become active participants in the game of society.

Catalina Guzmán’s social and political education are essential to helping her acquire the understanding necessary to become an active player. As part of that learning, she also becomes more aware of how to effectively use language to undermine the rules of the
dominant discourse. This chapter focuses on four instances, in particular, that illustrate, that Catalina understands the nuances of both oral and written communication and she ably maneuvers through both to make her voice heard.

One of the key situations in which Catalina shows that she understands how to effectively use language takes place when she finds out that her father is mixed up in one of Andrés’ business dealings. She reacts very strongly because she does not want her family involved in the general’s typically corrupt affairs. The following passage points out that, motivated by her immediate concern, having just learned of her father’s involvement, Catalina starts off talking to Andrés with a strong tone. She softens her voice, however, once she realizes that taking a hostile stance will not get her what she wants:

--No quiero que metas a mi papá en tus cosas. Déjalo que viva como pueda, no se ha muerto de hambre, no lo revuelvas--dije.

--¿Para eso me interrumpiste? ¿Por qué no miras si ya está la cena? ¿Y desde cuando los patos les tiran a las escopetas?--dijo riéndose--¿Por qué te cortaste el pelo?

--Lo odiaba cuando se portaba como mi patrón. Pero me aguanté y cambié el tono por uno que funcionara mejor:

--Andrés, te lo pido por lo que más quieras. Te dejo que le regales el Mapache a Heiss, pero saca a mi papa de un lío con Amed.

--¿El Mapache a Heiss? ¿Tu caballo adorado? Voy a ver qué puedo hacer, te lo prometo, llorona. . . . (80-81)

Catalina’s exchange with her husband illustrates that she understands the power of choosing her words and tone carefully. If she wants to achieve her goal--that is to end her father’s
involvement with Andrés--it is better for her not to be aggressive, especially since they are entertaining guests and the general is acting particularly arrogant. Instead, she adjusts both her attitude and her language, to express her request to get her father out of the deal. Though her husband tries to provoke her by asking why she cut her hair, she remains focused on the main issue.

Catalina realizes that Andrés has the upper hand in this situation, but she also knows that she is not completely powerless. She appeals to his sense of superiority by offering her prized horse for his friend Heiss in exchange for ending her father’s involvement (Andrés will gain favor with Heiss when he turns the horse over to him). In reference to this incident, Danny J. Anderson shares my assertion that Catalina understands the power of language and knows how to maneuver it with her husband: “[i]n this exchange Cati clearly understands the rules of the game: she cannot demand things from Andrés as an equal and in order to achieve her goal she must shift to a tone of voice ‘que funcionara mejor’ and implicitly recognize Andrés’s superiority as she ‘begs’ him to help her father” (20). Indeed, Catalina shows herself to be quite perceptive. Once she realizes that her initial approach will not work, she quickly adjusts her words and behavior. By doing so, she is successful at getting Andrés to assist her father, which is ultimately her primary objective.

In that same dinner party the reader sees another instance of Catalina’s growing understanding of language and how to astutely maneuver it to have her voice heard. Because of conventional gender roles, Andrés interacts primarily with the men at the party and Catalina is expected to entertain the women. She, however, expresses her internal displeasure with such an arrangement: “[p]refería oír la plática de los hombres, pero no era correcto. Siempre las cenas se dividían así, de un lado los hombres y en el otro nosotras hablando de
partos, sirvientas y peinados. El maravilloso mundo de la mujer, llamaba Andrés a eso”

(81). Catalina does not like being limited to the “marvelous world of women,” that is to say, to mingling with the women who talk primarily about domestic female topics that are of little interest to her. She reluctantly accepts this gender division while the guests socialize before dinner, but she also seeks other ways to have her voice heard during the rest of the evening.

Catalina reveals that she purposefully invites Andrés’ colleague Sergio Cuenca to their dinner parties and that she also strategically makes the sitting arrangement, insuring that he occupies the seat next to her. In that way, she is able to feed him conversational tidbits that she would like mentioned without breaking the social conventions of speaking on topics that, as a woman, are not supposed to concern her. This arrangement also gives her the chance to express her opinions at moments when it would customarily not be appropriate for her to do so. In the following passage she explains how she bypasses the rules, surreptitiously acting to have her voice heard:

Me gustaba pasar a la mesa porque ahí la conversación podía volverse interesante. Como yo colocaba las tarjetas con los nombres y sentaba a cada quien donde me convenía, me acomodé junto a Sergio Cuenca que era un hombre guapo y buen conversador a quien yo invitaba a las cenas aunque no viniera al caso porque era de los pocos amigos de Andrés que me divertían. Le gustaba llevar la conversación y si yo me sentaba junto a él podía decir bajito cosas que quería que se dijeran alto sin decírlas yo. (81)

By using what is typically a female duty--making the seating arrangements for a dinner party--Catalina cleverly arranges the guests to her advantage. In doing so, not only does she ensure that she has the pleasure of Sergio’s company, but she also provides herself a way to
publicly express her thoughts (albeit through a more acceptable outlet, the voice of a man). Danny J. Anderson makes note of how Catalina empowers herself by manipulating the situation in the dinner party to be able to express her thoughts:

. . . Cati does not passively conform to such prescriptions for she tacitly controls the seating at the dinner table and creatively gives expression to her muted voice through a male guest who is allowed to participate in the conversation. It is, nevertheless, once again the cultural ideal of male dominance that constrains Cati and it is through a man that she must maneuver her access to the conversation. (20)

Refusing to be muted, Catalina resourcefully finds a way to join the discussion. Her actions, once again, show not only that she understands the rules of the game, but also, more importantly, that she has figured out how to maneuver around such oppressive rules to make her opinions known.

Another instance in which Catalina uses her savvy to publicly express herself is after she begins her adulterous love affair with Carlos Vives. One day in the early morning hours when Andrés returns home inebriated he insists on having Toña Peregrino, a noted singer and close friend of Catalina, perform a collection of his favorite songs. Toña arrives alone so Carlos agrees to accompany her on the piano. The duo is so outstanding that Catalina cannot help but to sing along. Because of her enthusiasm, Toña invites her to join them at the piano. Catalina readily admits that she does not have a good voice: “canté con mi voz de ratón” (190). Sitting on the bench next to her lover, however, she gets inspired by the music and belts out the songs with her friends, much to Andrés’ dismay. Her husband repeatedly insists that she stop singing, but she defiantly continues:
Ahora la que está echando a perder todo eres tú, Catalina--dijo Andrés. Cállate, deja actuar a los grandes.

No le hice caso. Seguí: ‘pero ¿qué tú estás haciendo de mí?, que estoy sintiendo lo que nunca sentí?’ Mi voz parecía un silbato junto a la de Toña pero yo la seguía. . . . Hasta llegué a sentir que era mía su voz sobre mi voz. . . .

--Catalina, deja de estar chingando--decía Andrés--El borracho soy yo.

“Cenizas”, Vives--pidió.

--Sí, “Cenizas”--dije yo.

--Pero tú cállate, Catín--dijo.

--Sí mi vida--le contesté. . . .

--Catalina no jodas--volvió a decir Andrés.

--Más jodes tú con tus interrupciones--le dije y alcancé a Toña. . . . (190–91)

Andrés’ continued attempts to silence his wife are ignored. On the surface it appears that she refuses to be hushed by her husband simply because she is enjoying herself. On a deeper level, however, the reader realizes that the experience of singing lyrics that mirror the true feelings that she cannot publicly acknowledge gives Catalina the opportunity to indirectly express her sentiments about the clandestine relationship that she has started with Carlos.

Claudia Schaefer makes reference to the significance of Catalina’s refusal to keep quiet in this scene, explaining that it provides the protagonist with the chance to secretly declare her love affair: “when Catalina and Carlos unite with Toña to sing together for the first time,
[they] symbolically announce their union in spite of Andrés’ adamant protests about the quality of [his wife’s] voice, an excuse to keep her quiet” (101).

The lyrics of the songs take on a personal meaning for Catalina. When she belts out the lines such as, “pero ¿qué tú estás haciendo de mí?, que estoy sintiendo lo que nunca sentí?,” she is, in fact, communicating that the feelings that she has for Carlos are emotions that she has not experienced with Andrés (190). Schaefer also notes that the music allows Catalina to publicly express her secret desires:

Catalina’s appropriation of this music . . . as a vehicle for the public performance of private desires substitutes for the loss of communicative language in interpersonal relationships, especially in the case of Andrés’ censoring power over her life and over others, and the necessity to self-censor the spontaneous expression of her pleasure. (94)

Andrés typically tries to control Catalina’s speech and behavior, and he even does so in this case, repeatedly telling her to be quiet. Realizing, however, that she is in a unique position to sing about emotions and passions that she would normally not be able to acknowledge publicly, Catalina takes advantage of the situation to assert her will against her husband’s.

Affected by the alcohol, Andrés passes out before the performance ends. The fact that he is no longer listening does not deter Catalina because for her, what is most important is that she has the opportunity to express herself. Schaefer agrees with my assessment that for the two lovers the singing and the lyrics are representative of their strong feelings for one another: “[the songs are] confessions, cathartic assertions of freedom, [and] emotional outlets for their mutual discoveries and pleasure” (102). This situation is reminiscent of the dinner
party in which the social codes do not permit Catalina to participate directly in the conversation at the table, so she finds an alternate outlet to have her voice heard.

Once again, as in the case of Laura’s adulterous love affair, even though Catalina justifies her relationship with Carlos because she feels that he is the love of her life, she is still engaging in an inappropriate extra-marital affair that goes against the social ideals of marital fidelity and self-sacrifice. She cannot directly share her emotions about the passion that she feels for Carlos. Instead, she finds a creative way--through the music and the act of singing--to confess, to declare her feelings, and to convey her excitement about her new, forbidden relationship.

The last specific situation that I will highlight in which Catalina demonstrates that she knows how to effectively use language is when she writes an insightful, political speech for Andrés. In this instance, her words also make it clear that she comprehends the rules of the game of the dominant political discourse. They also, once again, exhibit to what extent she has become complicit in Andrés’ world of corruption. Towards the end of the general’s political career, after he has realized his wife’s value to him in his game of power, he appoints her to be his private secretary. Shortly after he does so, he finds himself struggling to prepare a speech that he will give at a ceremony in his honor. Catalina comes to his rescue by offering him a draft of some thoughts that she has penned for the occasion. Her words show that she understands the value of rhetoric for an elected figure such as her husband. They also show that she, like Andrés and the other public officials, is guilty of supporting the farce that he is deserving of such recognition:

Estaré siempre al servicio de todos ustedes, aquí y fuera de aquí, como funcionario y como simple ciudadano. Les pido que desechen rencillas, que
eliminen dificultades, que sigan trabajando con entusiasmo, como hermanos, como hombres que fueron a la Revolución con un programa social bien definido y por cuyo rescate si llegara a ser necesario iría con ustedes nuevamente a la lucha, sin llevar conmigo ninguna ambición personal política, porque ya como gobernante he cumplido, pero sí iría con el deseo de velar por la tranquilidad y el progreso de nuestro querido estado. (285-86)

As Catalina narrates the events surrounding the ceremony, she notes the hypocrisy that moves the leaders of their community to bestow on Andrés, who has been a crooked politician throughout his career, an honor naming him “hijo predilecto de la población.” Ironically, she does not appear to recognize or be bothered by the fact that by writing such a speech on his behalf, she is also being hypocritical and contributing to the general corruption of the political system. While her participation in the farce is wrong, her behavior also indicates that she has come to understand very well the language of dominant discourse, playing into the public pretense by imbuing the general’s speech with a tone of false humility and revolutionary rhetoric.

Andrés is overwhelmingly pleased with his wife’s words, and in his elation he makes the following declaration about her value to him: “[n]o me equivoqué contigo, eres lista como tú sola, pareces hombre, por eso te perdono que andes de libertina. Contigo sí me chingué. Eres mi mejor vieja, y mi mejor viejo, cabrona” (286). Andrés’ words confirm that Catalina has, indeed, become not only very conscious of the effective use of language, but also very adept at playing with discourse. She is a valuable player in his game of power and in reaction to her speech he acknowledges that because she is savvy like a man, he allows her more freedoms. But Andrés statement (“pareces hombre”) also supports my earlier criticism
of Catalina; instead of using the strategies that she develops to seek a different path for herself, she continues to mimic Andrés’ unethical behavior and therefore remains trapped in a masculine way of thinking.

Catalina’s speech proves that she has, in fact, done what Luisa Valenzuela called for; she has appropriated the master’s weapons, but not in the feminist sense that the Argentinean writer suggested. The protagonist uses the language, tone, and sentiment that would typically be reserved in writing for and by men and successfully produces a text that Andrés could have authored. When Valenzuela called for women to take control of their language, however, she did so with the intention that it would be an appropriation that asserts a woman’s rights so that they could express themselves, their sentiments and their ideas as alternate ways of living. Catalina’s speech only reinforces masculine discourse; it is not at all representative of the type of writing created to resist or challenge the codes established by men (although it does illustrate that as a woman, Catalina is a capable writer). While this instance of her taking control of language does not advance the cause of empowering women in general, it does show that Catalina clearly has a good understanding of how dominant discourse works, which gives her some insight into how to possibly subvert it. Her comprehension also helps her as she struggles in her attempt to create an alternative discourse, albeit in minor ways.

Before discussing ideas about the creation of an alternate discourse, I want to emphasize, once again, the importance of language as a strategy for Catalina. The instances that I mention above provide good examples of how she is not only conscious of the significance of the use of language, but they also emphasize how she adeptly utilizes it to her advantage, in most cases to provide an outlet for self expression. There are several other
instances in the text that illustrate how Catalina effectively uses her voice as a tool to challenge both Andrés and the prescribed social scripts. In *Reescrituras de la memoria*, Jorge Fornet draws a connection linking Catalina’s ability to resist the dominant constructs of patriarchy to the power of her voice: “[p]ara escapar al lugar que la sociedad le depara por su condición de mujer, Catalina practica muchas formas de resistencia, tanto activas como pasivas. Pero sin duda su rebelión más eficaz se expresa a través del dominio de la memoria y de la voz. Toda la novela está narrada por ella (en primera persona) a *posteriori*” (53). As Fornet points out, in Catalina’s quest to defy many of the structures created to keep women in their place, the authority that she has acquired over her own speech becomes one of her primary weapons. Andrés repeatedly tries to silence Catalina and each time she refuses to be quiet. A large part of the reason that Catalina is successful at having the freedoms that she does is because she knows how to effectively use language and her voice as tools of command.

Though Catalina has difficulties escaping the influences of the masculine mindset, many of her actions constitute at least an intelligent attempt on her part to create an alternative discourse because they represent a “creative deviation” from the dominant social constructs. Within this novel there are several minor incidents in which she resourcefully departs from the traditional gender expectations for women in patriarchal ideology. I have already discussed two examples, such as when she uses the male guest at the dinner party to be able to make comments at the table and when she joins the sing-along so that she can surreptitiously acknowledge her passion for Carlos. In both cases, Catalina is successful at sidestepping the canonical rules that try to prevent her from participating in the discussion or expressing how she really feels.
Two other minor, yet significant ways in which she deviates from the roles offered by dominant discourse include the instance in which she begins to read the news in the newspaper of Andrés’ opponents, so that she can have more information than what her husband tells her, as well as the fact that she secretly decides to learn to drive so that she has the freedom to go places on her own. In both of those situations, she goes against the conventional gender expectations for women, showing that she is neither, passive, nor submissive. Early in the narrative, she even questions Andrés’ use of discourse when, after hearing him tell so many contradictory stories, she makes the conscious decision to no longer believe what he says in his speeches. In Broken Bars, Kay García explains how Catalina’s doubts about her husband’s words is another example of alternative discourse:

[Catalina] establishes the blatant difference between what Andrés says and what he does, offering his speeches as the official discourse and her negation of his words as the counter-discourse. She also tries to create for herself an alternative discourse, her own story, told from her marginalized position within Mexican politics and society. (94)

These are some of the significant ways in which Catalina tries to create what Terdiman refers to as counter-discourse as she seeks to project an “alternative, liberating newness” by subverting the dominant constructs that work to limit women’s options.

Perhaps one of the most notable examples of Catalina attempts to make a relevant change in her life is the way in which she champions her right to make her own decisions in love relationships. Chances are that she is inspired to do so by her own situation in which her marriage to Andrés was not voluntary but the result of an arrangement between he and her father. When Catalina is in her early twenties, and already married, several of Andrés
adolescent children from previous relationships come to live with them (there are a total of seven kids in the household after one of them runs away). The step-daughters are not too far from Catalina in age and she and Lilia, who is twelve years old when the children arrive, develop a very close bond. Several years later when Andrés insists that Lilia marry Emilio, the son of one of his business associates, instead of the man that she is in love with, Javier, Catalina intervenes on her daughter’s behalf. Recognizing that if Lilia is forced into an arranged marriage she will be trapped into a similar confining situation to the one she has had to endure with Andrés, she repeatedly tries to convince the general to let Lilia marry the man of her choice. When Emilio arrives unexpectedly one evening to serenade Lilia, Catalina, makes sure that Javier is notified so that he can come and counter Emilio’s move, which he does. Andrés is angered by Catalina’s interference, but she makes her objections very clear:

--Cállate, Catalina. No tienes por qué meterle insidias en la cabeza a la niña.

--Conste que no estoy de acuerdo en eso--dije.

Catalina makes evident her opposition to Andrés’ plans for their daughter. Sadly, Lilia’s chance for happiness with the man that she loves ends tragically. Six months after the serenade Javier is found dead, having driven off of a cliff under mysterious circumstances. While no direct evidence of Andrés’ involvement in his death is offered, the reader is left with the impression that the general is responsible.

Catalina is not successful at stopping the arranged marriage, as this is a case in which Andrés’ power ultimately determines the outcome. Lilia and Emilio marry within a year of Javier’s death. Catalina’s objections to the marriage still signify an important step in going against convention and trying to offer an alternative, less prescriptive plan for Lilia. Her protests represent a departure from the dominant social scripts that foreground a passive,
accepting wife and mother; she speaks out, ultimately declaring that a man should not be able to use a woman as a bargaining chip in a business arrangement and conversely, a woman should have the right to choose the man that she marries. Catalina’s objections are also significant because they show that she is aware of challenging the established rules, not necessarily for her own benefit, but for her daughter’s generation. Schafer also notes Catalina’s potential for making changes for women in the future: “Lilia belongs to a new generation of Mexican women . . . who are coming of age in the transition between her father’s personal embodiment of political authority and her mother’s first tentative steps toward change” (104). Catalina, undoubtedly, wants to provide Lilia and all of her children with opportunities that she, herself, was denied because of her gender, so they can have more options in the future.

After Andrés has Carlos killed, Catalina also struggles with trying to construct an alternate discourse for herself. Having already declared that she no longer fears her husband, and perhaps feeling that she has nothing else to lose, she takes many more liberties and drifts even further from the patriarchal ideal of what is acceptable for a proper wife. As Núñez-Méndez points out, Carlos’ eventual murder causes Catalina to become even more defiant: “[e]l brutal asesinato de Carlos Vives provoca que Catalina se resista abiertamente contra su esposo. El hecho de que Andrés lo mande matar marca el comienzo de un desafío constante por parte de Catalina para liberarse” (116-17). As a result of the general’s actions, Catalina becomes even more determined to assert her will, putting more distance between she and her husband while seeking a space of liberation outside of his direct control. She moves out of their bedroom, takes a new lover, and begins going to social events and making family plans without necessarily including her husband. For Fornet, Catalina’s unconventional actions
constitute her own form of resistance to the dominant social scripts: “Los adulterios de Catalina, sus problemas íntimos, en cambio, no son solo problemas personales, sino formas de expresión o de rebelión de su ‘ser’ marginal” (53).

It should be noted that although Catalina does make some strides with thinking of an alternate plan for herself, she is never completely independent or successful in attaining freedom because, once again, she appears to be locked into a masculine way of thinking. In most cases her behavior is more accurately described as acts of rebellion against the prescribed rules that the dominant discourse dictates for women; beyond that she does not prove to be a valid alternate model of a woman that constructs a new or different way of doing things. Catalina can be credited with skillfully using language as a strategy of empowerment to make her voice heard; by doing so she becomes a player in Andrés game of power. She also constructs an alternative discourse in some ways, such as trying to help her daughter have a different vision of the future, though Catalina, herself, does not manage to escape the patriarchal mindset. She is also successful at appropriating many liberties that women typically did not have at that time, and at showing that women do not have to obediently adhere to the roles assigned to them by patriarchal ideology. Most of her actions, however--having affairs, ignoring her husband, being able to come and go as she pleases--simply mirror the patriarchal conduct that she learns from Andrés, and thus she basically becomes as immoral and unethical, in her own way, as her husband.

In La familia vino del norte Dorotea Leyva also effectively uses language and the creation of an alternate discourse as strategies of empowerment. In Dorotea’s case the two are inextricably linked; it is through her writing that she relates her version of the events surrounding her grandfather’s secret. The narrative that she produces becomes an explicit
example of alternative discourse because it represents a creative deviation from the official story as told by her grandfather, her father, and her lover Manuel.

In this chapter I point out several conversations, some between Dorotea and her father and some with her lover, in which she assertively expresses her opinions, using a tone of language that defies the conventional gender discourse prescribed for women. In these exchanges she is quite the opposite of the female ideal of the passive and submissive woman. Instead, the young protagonist makes it apparent that she understands how to “appropriate the master’s weapons”; that is to say that she shows herself capable of using speech typically reserved for men, to effectively communicate, but making sure that her voice is heard expressing an alternative message.

The main focus of this section of the chapter is, indeed, to illustrate that Dorotea consciously uses her writing as an instrument of command. By telling or rather retelling what she concludes is the accurate account of her family’s history, she boldly asserts her voice, thus challenging the “official” discourse as it had previously been established by the male characters in the novel. The young protagonist ingeniously expands the story of what she deduces is the truth about her grandfather to inscribe in the narrative the personal journey that she undertakes while uncovering the facts of his situation. By doing so, she not only adds validity to the authenticity of her version, but she is also able to establish her own identity, which becomes a part of the public record.

Chapter three pointed out that the death of Dorotea’s grandfather, General Teodoro Leyva, is a turning point in her life because it represents a break with the traditional ideals of patriarchal ideology that he strongly upheld. The language that she uses when communicating with him is considerably different from that which she utilizes with the other
male characters after his death. With her father that is the case, in part, because Dorotea enjoys a much closer relationship with her grandfather than she does with her dad. It becomes clear that the assertive way in which she begins to address both her father and her lover Manuel is also a result of the newfound freedom that she experiences after the general’s demise.

Dorotea describes herself as her grandfather’s accomplice. She explains that after family dinners he would invite her to accompany him outside of the kitchen where they would have private conversations. The young protagonist enjoys this special relationship that she shares with the general and holds him in high esteem: “[a]cabábamos de descubrirnos los dos: sentía un profundo respeto por él y el cariño que nunca había podido expresarle a mi padre . . .” (49). Though she rejects the conventional lifestyle that he desires for her, that is to say, wanting her to become a wife and mother, she is still very respectful when they discuss such issues, using a tone that reflects the regard that she has for him as an authority figure:

--Y usted, ¿qué no piensa casarse?
--Pero ahorita, ¿para qué, mi general?
--¿Pues cómo? Ándele, búsquese un novio.
--Tengo uno, mi general. Pero no se lo presento porque sé que no le va a gustar. Es arqueólogo. (51)

Dorotea recognizes her grandfather’s status as the patriarch of her family and as a result she only uses what would be considered “proper” language with him, referring to him as “mi general.” She does not always agree with his wishes for her, but she does not openly contradict him either nor does she address him in an aggressive or socially unacceptable way.
The same cannot be said, however, for the manner in which she behaves toward her father. As previously mentioned, the two have a disagreeable, contentious relationship because Dorotea considers him cold, overbearing, and unapproachable. She is also critical of his refusal to acknowledge the problems within their family. The sense of liberation that she experiences after her grandfather’s death makes her determined to assert her will in making her own decisions. As she begins to stand in resistance to both her father’s and Manuel’s attempts to exert control over her life she begins to exhibit more self-assured behavior in her dealings with both her family and her lover. The change in perspective that she adopts as a result of coming to terms with her own process of self-discovery is reflected in the defiant way in which she begins to speak to her dad. The language and tone that she uses go against any conventional gender scripts prescribed for how a young lady should address an authoritative family male figure.

When Dorotea decides to move out of her parents’ home, one of the first acts she takes in order to assert her independence, she has a heated confrontation with her father. During their argument she makes it clear that she is aware of the manipulative and deceitful nature of her family, which refuses to acknowledge the controversial circumstances surrounding the grandfather’s past. She speaks very assertively, informing him that she is tired of the lies:

--¿Qué tienes?
--Nada papá, déjame.
--No te entiendo, hija.
--Nunca me has entendido, papá. ¿De qué te sorprendes ahora?
--No me hables así. No me gusta.
--¿Cómo quieres que te hable? ¿Cómo se hablan los Leyva?

--¿Cómo?
--¿Mintiendo para que les gusten las cosas?

--Eres insolente.
--Digo la verdad; eso es todo. Pero como ya había aprendido tu juego, ahora te sorprendes.

--¿Qué juego?
--Aprendí a mentir como ustedes, papá. . . . (83)

Dorotea’s use of language with her father is indeed direct and derisive. Not surprisingly, he points out that he finds her tone to be inappropriate, calling her insolent. The young protagonist counters that in her case such language is justified because, unlike the rest of her family, she is speaking truthfully. The way in which she challenges him is a clear departure from the acceptable manner in which a young lady would ideally speak to her father or any other respected male figure.

Later in that same conversation Dorotea once again asserts her voice, boldly informing her father that if he does not disclose what he knows about her grandfather’s past, she will leave his house right away:

--Antes de que comas, quiero decirte algo. Fíjate bien, papá. No-vuelvo-a-jugar-tu-juego. ¿Entiendes?

--¡No me hables así!--gritó.

--Si no me lo dices ahora, no me lo dices nunca porque me voy de la casa.

--¿Estás loca?--volvió a gritar.
--Es la verdad. La verdad--dije sin levantar la voz. (84)

Once again, Dorotea angers her father by using strong speech that defies his position as an authority figure. The manner in which she addresses him is one more example of her appropriating the master’s weapons in that she speaks with a man’s aggressive tone and language.

It is evident that Dorotea’s approach to dealing with her father does not follow the prescribed gender scripts for women in Mexico or anywhere else. Because of his patriarchal demeanor and his unwillingness to tell the truth, she feels justified to speak to him in such a strong manner. Perhaps it is this departure from conventional constructs that leads to her success in persuading him to contemplate what she has said and to take her seriously. Before she leaves the house he invites her to join him for a drink and conversation. His willingness to discuss the general with her at this point shows to what extent she has successfully made sure that her voice is heard. Their conversation is one of the first exchanges that they share in which Dorotea feels that he is being sincere:

--Me voy a México . . .

--Me gustaría que te tomaras un coñac conmigo--dijo sin volverse hacia mí.

--No quisiera irme más tarde; me da miedo la carretera.

--Quédate, mañana te vas. Quiero hablar contigo.

--Nada que puedas decirme, va a cambiar mi decisión.

--Lo he estado pensando toda la noche, nadie puede ocultar la verdad.

--No por mucho tiempo, papá.

--Sírvete un trago, Dorotea.
During this conversation and their subsequent interaction there is a type of subversion of their assigned gender roles. Her father invites her to join him for a drink; having a pre-dinner cognac is typically a ritual shared by men in social gatherings, from which women are usually excluded. Also, whereas before it was Dorotea demanding that her father talk to her, in the above exchange it is her dad who insists that she stay and discuss the grandfather’s story. While she had previously taken an aggressive stance with him to counter his normally authoritative attitude, he now takes a sincere, conciliatory tone with her, showing more understanding and less arrogance.

This subversion of gender role speech patterns continues as Dorotea’s father gives in to her wishes and shares what he knows about the events surrounding the general’s mysterious past. For Dorotea, having this kind of interaction with him feels almost as if she were speaking with a different person: “[I]e serví más coñac a mi papá. Nunca lo había oído hablar así, en ese tono de voz que le salía de muy adentro. . . . Tenía la impresión de no estar hablando con mi padre” (87). This time it is he who adopts a more subtle tone and speech, which is uncharacteristic of the arrogant posture that he normally assumes. As their conversation continues, Dorotea depicts him as moving further and further away from the domineering personality that he has always exhibited:

Mi papá estaba ya muy quebradizo: tanto miedo me tenía o se tenía a sí mismo. Sé que hubiera querido volverse hacia mí y abrazarme, lo intuía. No lo hubiera detenido; yo misma soñaba de niña que era importante para él, más
que el mundo de negocios en el que se había refugiado para ‘no afrontar’ el fracaso de su mujer. (88)

Once again, the conventional gender roles are subverted. Dorotea remains composed and seems to even pity her father who appears emotionally conflicted. Instead of the distant, arrogant, know-it-all characterization that she typically uses to describe him, she sees him as weak, fearful and unsure of how to approach her. Such traits are not normally associated with dominant male figures. The young protagonist’s firm and direct approach to dealing with her father underlines that when women consciously take control of their use of language, they have the power to bring about change.

Dorotea does not just assert her voice by appropriating the master’s weapons when dealing with her father. She also expresses herself boldly and defiantly when interacting with Manuel. Though he is an older, well-known journalist with more life experience, she does not hesitate to speak up when she disagrees with him. And, though he holds a position of power within society, she refuses to accept that she is subordinate to him in their relationship. In chapter three I provided many examples to illustrate how she continually resists his tendency to exert control over her. In reference to her use of language, there are also many instances in which she appropriates an assertive tone, using speech patterns typically reserved for men to undermine Manuel’s attempts to control her.

One of the first events in which she expresses her rebellious nature takes place when she and the journalist begin to work closely to piece together the mystery of her grandfather’s secret. Though she is eager to have his assistance, she refuses to let him use this project to dictate her actions. She even boldly threatens to disassociate herself from him if he does not stop trying to dominate her:
--. . . tienes que averiguar qué hizo tu abuelo cuando enfermó el general Hill.

--¿Por qué?

--Porque así son las reglas--contestó autoritario.

--Y ¿quién las escribe? Odio las reglas--le reproché. (62)

When Dorotea tells Manuel that she hates the rules, she is, in fact, conveying that she rejects his patriarchal notion that his gender or position in society makes him superior. Nor does his status give him the right to tell her what to do. With an admonishing tone she makes it clear that she does not subscribe to his authoritarian beliefs, resisting his control and defying conventional gender scripts.

After Dorotea gets her own apartment Manuel repeatedly encourages her to move in with him. She refuses because she realizes that being a man he would automatically become the head of the household, and as such he will expect her to take on a subordinate role. She additionally does not want to make the mistake of leaving the house of one dominating male (her father) for another (her lover):

Las veces que me propuso vivir con él, le contesté exactamente lo mismo: ya tienes una sirvienta, para qué quieres dos. En realidad había otra causa: no quería depender de él. Se me hacía idiota haberme salido de la casa de mis padres para entrar en la casa de otro señor igual de dominante que mi papá.

(92)

Dorotea rejects Manuel’s request to live with him because she is aware that this is another way in which he tries to keep her under his influence. Speaking with a direct and frank tone not typical of the language used by female characters, she ably resists his attempt to turn her into another “sirvienta.”
The foremost way in which Dorotea proves her command of language, however, is when she constructs an alternative discourse by writing the narrative *La familia vino del norte*. She does so as a strategy of empowerment and liberation after Manuel betrays her trust by publishing an essay about her grandfather without her knowledge and without giving her credit for her collaboration in the project. In what becomes an ironic twist, at the beginning of the novel the work that Dorotea does for the journalist consists of her cutting out articles that he may need later, and arranging them on a blank page for his convenience: “[m]i trabajo consistía en recortar los artículos que él había señalado en diversos periódicos y revistas . . . pegarlos en una hoja en blanco . . . y archivarlos ordenadamente para que él pudiera consultarlos cuando mejor le conviniera” (26). As Carlos Von Son points out, at this point in their relationship there is a big difference in the significance of the work that each does in their respective jobs: “ella recorta historias ya escritas y las archiva mientras él las escribe. Dorotea está consciente de su posición, pero sabe que está por cambiar” (50). By the end of the novel there is indeed a change in their roles: Dorotea becomes a writer taking bits and pieces from Manuel’s unauthorized article about her grandfather to use for her convenience as she constructs what she concludes is the accurate version of the general’s story.

After the death of her grandfather, Dorotea is determined to figure out what she wants to do with her life. The first time that the reader is aware of her interest in writing occurs when she is working for Manuel and she buys a book by Boris Pilniak that contains a chapter about how to create stories. She shares her find with Manuel but he is only humored by her interest, explaining to her that for real authors, the talent to write is instinctive; they do not have to be taught their craft:
Le enseñé el libro que había comprado: Caoba, de Boris Pilniak. Al hojearlo me había llamado la atención un título anunciando en el índice: ‘Un cuento sobre cómo se escriben los cuentos’. Se rió preguntándome si pensaba escribir. Nunca lo había intentado pero me parecía interesante saber cómo un escritor hacía su trabajo. Manuel volvió a sonreír y me dijo que el escritor llevaba adentro lo que hacía, que era algo que no se podía ni enseñar ni explicar. (57)

The condescending attitude that Manuel exhibits once he learns of Dorotea’s budding interest in writing implicitly betrays his feelings that he does not think that it is the type of work for which she, a woman, is suited. Tafoya has pointed out that Manuel’s patriarchal mindset makes him doubtful of Dorotea’s ability to become a good writer:

Manuel intenta desalentar a Dorotea del trabajo de creación pues su visión sobre la escritura es la de un proceso en el cual el escritor es casi un Dios. De acuerdo con su visión reflejada por la sonrisa paternalística que le proporciona a Dorotea, sólo algunos elegidos pueden escribir, entre los cuales no figura ella. (69)

Considering Manuel’s machista mentality and the nature of the problems in their relationship, his discouraging attitude is not surprising. Prior to their discussion about writing, he already feels threatened by the fact that Dorotea is pursuing interests outside of his sphere of influence. She realizes that he is not comfortable with her independent intellectual growth, but despite his lack of support, the idea of writing continues to hold her attention.

At some point Dorotea makes up her mind that she wants to study history at the university, and it is then that she develops a renewed interest in uncovering her grandfather’s
secret. In reality, she had never abandoned the story, though due to a lack of new information, and the other activities in her life, she had stopped both discussing it with Manuel and actively searching for the truth. It comes as a complete shock to Dorotea when he publishes an article about her grandfather without telling her of his intention to do so. She finds out only after the story is released and it has already become a scandal for her family:

Hubiera sido distinto si me hubiese comentado que iba a escribir sobre el abuelo. Por supuesto que yo no lo habría impedido, pero la actitud de Manuel habría sido abierta. Supe de su ensayo, quien lo iba a decir, por los miembros de mi familia: ‘¿Ya leíste el periódico? ¡Qué escándalo!’ (121-22)

Manuel not only fails to notify Dorotea about his plan to publish the essay, but he also defends his unethical actions, claiming that he has done her a favor by bringing the story to light. Dorotea rejects such a notion, pointing out that Manuel’s motives for publishing the article were not to please her, but rather to advance his own career:

No me hizo un regalo, como insistió: se empeñó en no dejar que yo sola me librara de los demonios familiares, y además quiso dar la apariencia de que él había llevado a cabo la investigación tratando de aparecer una vez más como un ‘genio’ del periodismo, lo que le valdría más tarde un premio modesto, pero al fin y al cabo un premio que debió compartir conmigo. Así que no nada más me robó una historia sino que, además lo premiaron por un plagio. (121)

By publishing the essay without her knowledge Manuel deprives Dorotea of the chance to tell her own story, gaining accolades for himself at her expense. To further add insult to injury, he wins an award for the article, which he also does not share with her.
Manuel’s assertion that he published the essay as a gift to Dorotea proves to what extent his patriarchal, self-centered mindset has precluded him from recognizing that Dorotea has become a knowledgeable and capable young lady. It appears that he never considers that she may have wanted to be the one to uncover the truth about her grandfather or bring the story to light. As Von Son points out, they initially agreed that they would work together on the project about the general: “[e]l acuerdo es el de encontrar juntos la ‘verdad’ sobre la historia del abuelo de Dorotea . . .” (51).

There is every indication that Dorotea is competent and that she intended to play an active role in deciphering the mystery surrounding her grandfather’s past: she is, in fact, the one that initially brings the story to Manuel’s attention, she has become a serious student of history at the university, and she has clearly expressed an interest in writing. Despite the unmistakable evidence that Dorotea would have wanted to be consulted about the article, and perhaps even participate in composing it, he still claims not to understand why she feels betrayed by his actions. As Tafoya explains, it is Manuel’s arrogant attitude that makes him incapable of comprehending the gravity of his own deceit:

Manuel no entiende su propia traición, para él, el haber escrito su versión del abuelo Leyva fue una forma de contar algo que sólo él podía contar ya que poseía toda la información ‘robada’ a Dorotea. Manuel es incapaz de entender la necesidad de Dorotea de contar su historia porque, en realidad, jamás pudo comprenderla. Ella fue para él la musa, la amante, la acompañante, pero no la creadora. (71)

It is true that Manuel never considers that Dorotea should be a part of the creative process in composing the essay about her grandfather. After he betrays her, the young protagonist finds
herself in a precarious situation. She can either accept the story as he has published it--that is to say, accept it as part of the dominant discourse of the historical register--or, suspecting that there is still a piece of the puzzle missing, she can continue to pursue the truth. Doing so is tantamount to questioning the validity of historical information, which, due to Manuel’s status as a well-respected journalist, has become a part of the official record.

The last time that the reader sees Dorotea discuss her grandfather with Manuel took place when she moved out of her parent’s house and her father finally shared with her the information that he had about the general. She recalls that at the time his account provided her with more details, but she considered it to be only one side of still uncertain story: “[t]he version of my father about the escape and imprisonment of Teodoro Leyva is this: one side of the coin. If I told him that night it was because it could serve to tie loose ends” (95). Realizing that Manuel based his article on what she believes to be incomplete information, Dorotea logically calls into question his version of events. After she does more research, she comes to the undeniable conclusion that Manuel has in effect only given a partial account of the story:

El otro lado de la historia, es decir, la verdadera historia de Teodoro Leyva, la supe por los ‘apuntes’ que transcribí—en realidad, fragmentos de un diario que nunca supe si continuó—y también, aunque me siga doliendo aceptararlo, por el ensayo que Manuel publicó en el periódico traicionándome y haciendo honor a su astucia: “El camino de Texcoco, 1927.” Después fue demasiado tarde: le quedaría el peso de una historia que solo escribió a medias. (114-15)

Once Dorotea discovers that Manuel has only told part of the story, she feels compelled to set the record straight. She is particularly eager to retake control of the story because, although
she shared it with him, she feels very strongly that it is both her right and responsibility to uncover the events that comprise her family’s history: “Manuel demostraba interés, desde luego, pero jamás comentó que de verdad pensaba escribir sobre Teodoro Leyva. Al publicar su ensayo sobre el abuelo, me traicionó; me correspondía a mí desmitificar la figura de Teodoro Leyva” (121). Tafoya has also pointed out that it is very important to Dorotea to take an active role in deciphering her grandfather’s past:

. . . para Dorotea era vital contar (y apropiarse en el proceso) la historia de su familia. Escribirla significa para ella ser parte activa, no pasiva como su madre y su abuela, de los Leyva. Al escribir Manuel el artículo, la está privando de la oportunidad de integrarse activamente a su familia. (70)

By insisting on getting to the bottom of the general’s story, Dorotea sets herself apart from the rest of her family, firstly, by trying to uncover the inconvenient truth that the other members are content to keep hidden and secondly, by refusing to be passive and muted like the rest of the Leyva women.

Dorotea’s pursuit of the real story becomes another example of a woman’s constructing an alternative discourse in two ways. First of all, she rejects the official version of the story as told by her father, her grandfather (in his diaries), and Manuel. Being males they are authority figures and their accounts have become part of the official register. Once she determines that their stories were incomplete and that what she concludes is the accurate version of events and publishes it, Dorotea’s text has the chance of also becoming a part of the historical record. Her narrative thus represents a creative deviation from their dominant, established discourse.
Secondly, when she writes *La familia vino del norte*, Dorotea not only establishes her grandfather’s story, but her own, because when she decides to narrate her life she makes her experiences—and not her grandfather’s—the focus of the novel. In “Fiction and History in Silvia Molina’s *La familia vino del norte*,” Kay García asserts that Dorotea’s alternative discourse, “presents the other side of the story, the side that is not told in history books, newspapers, or other sources of the ‘official’ story” (275). By including her personal search for the truth in the novel Dorotea creates an alternative discourse. Publishing the narrative permits her to foreground her own character, bringing the persona of someone that would typically be considered a marginal figure to the forefront, and adding both her voice and presence to the historical record. Von Son also asserts that the way in which Dorotea writes the novel allows her to successfully subvert the dominant discourse: “. . . se apropia de la vida y de la identidad del abuelo para insertar a la mujer en el registro del discurso patriarcal por excelencia” (49).

As an exercise in counter-discourse, Dorotea is aware that her account of events contradicts much of what has already been exposed about the general. She cleverly takes many steps to add validity to her version of the story, one of which is to describe the process that she goes through in order to arrive at the truth. Having been trained as a historian, she explains that she uses the resources at her disposal to research the other men with whom her grandfather would have interacted. She mentions real historical figures such as General Calles, Arnulfo R. Gómez, and Gilberto R. Limón, whom she identifies as her grandfather’s best friend. Once she establishes this official background information, she describes how she revisits her grandfather’s private diaries, carefully comparing what she has determined to be...
the facts of the situation with what Teodoro has written: “[c]uando tuve claro todo esto, pude interpretar mejor los apuntes o el diario del abuelo” (139).

After further review of the general’s notes Dorotea explains how she arrives to the conclusion that even though he proclaims in his diary that he did not support the Serrano movement, that is, in fact, not true: “Teodoro Leyva estaba metido hasta las caches en la revuelta serranista, y yo se lo hubiera podido probar” (141). By authoritatively stating that she can disprove what the general has written in his diary, Dorotea once again adds validity to her claim that, unlike the previous versions, her’s relates the truth.

Ironically, it is neither with the help of the general’s papers nor with any official document that Dorotea finally discovers what really happened. She surprisingly learns the truth from another marginal character, her grandparents’ cook. Having worked for the family all of her life, Senobia has also been a witness to their history. After Dorotea casually mentions that she is investigating the general’s past, Senobia unwittingly gives her valuable information about Teodoro Leyva. Dorotea describes the conversation between the two that finally provides her with the answers for which she has been searching:

Primero me contó cosas sin importancia hasta que salió la persecución de Calles, para variar. Sabía prácticamente lo mismo que yo. Pero de pronto, unas palabras suyas me iluminaron:

--Tu abuelo se salvó de milagro, ¿verdad?

--Como le haría, Seno?

--¿No sabes?

--No.

--Uh! Tu abuelo me lo contó. Fue un milagro. Un milagro. Tu tío Antonio. . . .
Así, Senobia, puso también su pieza en el rompecabezas. ¿Quién lo iba a creer? (143)

The fact that Senobia also participates in unraveling the mystery surrounding the general’s past, in a sense, puts the cook on equal ground with the historical men in the narrative. In fact, Senobia’s input is even more valuable than the canonical sources previously used because it provides the key piece of information that clarifies what Dorotea has been told by the male characters. Von Son underlines the significant role played by Senobia plays, pointing out the irony that she, a humble servant, is the one that supplies the missing piece of the puzzle:

Pero la información que ayudará a la narradora a poner las piezas en su lugar proviene de un ser marginal por excelencia en la cultura mexicana: su nana.

Es irónico que los datos procedan de un miembro de la servidumbre, pero por otra parte Molina registra este recurso como un elemento fundamental de nuestra identidad: la nana es los ojos y los oídos de esa historia silenciada.

(53)

Because Dorotea’s text is an example of alternative female discourse, it is not surprising that Senobia plays an integral role in exposing the general’s secret. As both a woman and a servant, she would typically be relegated to the margins. Instead, Dorotea underlines Senobia’s role in the story when, once again, she uses her writing as a strategy of empowerment giving voice to a character that would have normally be silenced in masculine discourse with as much certainty as Manuel silenced Dorotea’s information.

With the mystery finally solved, Dorotea points out that in order to give an accurate account of her grandfather’s story, she has to refute information that Manuel published in his
article, literally destroying his version of events. She explains that she does not do it in order to hurt him, but rather because it is necessary to get to the truth:

Sé que he ‘destrozado’ (literalmente) el ensayo de Manuel, y no por venganza sino por comodidad. Aunque no he dejado que su ‘prosa limpia y su estilo inconfundible’ puedan apreciarse en las citas que he tomado . . . no fue para herir su orgullo. (146)

Dorotea is intent on setting the record straight about her motives for disproving elements of Manuel’s essay. At the same time, however, she also cleverly adds validity to her version of events by pointing out that her findings are based on facts that have been legitimated as the official discourse. In fact, she takes excerpts from both Manuel’s article and her grandfather’s diaries to piece together what she calls the “real story” (García 276). By doing so, she ultimately shows that the “real story” is, in fact, many stories. It is her grandfather’s past, her family’s conflicts, her relationship with Manuel, her conversation with Senobia, and most importantly, her personal journey of independence. Von Son also stresses that Dorotea’s discourse includes not a monolithic canonical discourse, but rather, a multitude of perspectives: “[h]a abierto y ha inscrito la historia de su investigación, la historia del romance, y la historia humana que incluye la historia del padre, de la abuela, y de la nana” (54).

The act of writing the novel La familia vino del norte--of taking command of the use of language to construct an alternate discourse--becomes a strategy of empowerment and liberation for Dorotea. By taking control of the story she steps outside of the prescribed gender roles for women, declaring her independence from those that try to control her. She also successfully establishes an identity of her own, apart from the influences of her father.
and Manuel. For García, taking an active role in composing the narrative brings about a significant transformation for the young protagonist: “Dorotea is reconstructing her history, pulling together bits and pieces of information, discarding some, reorganizing others, finally managing to transform these disparate parts into a coherent whole, which helps to form her own identity” (278).

Establishing a sense of self apart from the roles that her family and Manuel would have her to play is very liberating for Dorotea. As quoted earlier, Helene Anderson asserts that the act of writing can set one free: “[b]y virtue of having written the words, tensions are released and a sense of liberation achieved” (31). Both composing the narrative and establishing her own identity are significant steps in the young protagonist’s quest for freedom and independence.

Dorotea’s narrative can also be read as an exercise on how to successfully appropriate the master’s weapons. Ironically, but not surprisingly, she admits that it is through her relationship with Manuel that she comes to understand the power of language. As their relationship begins to sour she calls him “el ‘ansioso’ de poder” and explains that interacting with him means dealing with his obsession with power: “. . . el poder, siempre el poder: el político, el económico y, otro que conoci a su lado, el poder de la palabra” (137).

Dorotea’s relationship with Manuel exposes her to his world of influence and teaches her how to play the game of power. She takes note of the lessons that she learns at his side and uses that knowledge as a foundation to establish her independence. She comes to understand the game of power, but even more importantly she learns to recognize and appreciate the value of language. Doing so allows her to create her own discourse and to take control of her own voice, thereby appropriating the master’s weapons and using them to
accomplish her own goals. Tafoya concurs that being able to express herself is the most important goal in order for the young protagonist to present her own account of the events: “Dorotea desea explicarse a sí misma y no ser explicada, retratada o contada por otros como le ha pasado durante toda su vida” (71). The narrative that she composes is proof that she does not need Manuel, her father, or any other man to relate her story or to define her identity. Her writings prove that she is quite capable of doing it herself.

Dorotea’s ultimate goal is to find a space of liberation so that she can lead an independent life. For her that place turns out to be Paris, where she travels at the end of the novel to undertake a short-term historical research project, but mostly to put distance between herself and Manuel. It is there that she writes her narrative, freeing herself from the limiting scripts that both her family and her lover had tried to impose on her. She concludes it with these rousing words, asserting the same determination to be successful that she exhibits throughout the novel:

No pretendo quedarme aquí [in Paris], sería estúpido, mi vida está allá, en México. Sólo me estoy dando un tregua para regresar más fuerte, a enfrentarme a todo aquello de lo que no puedo huir. Tal vez no llegue a ser esa historiadora que busco. Tal vez, no pueda volar tan lejos como pretendo; pero nunca dejaré de intentarlo. (155)

She leaves the reader with the encouraging feeling that she will continue to strive to reach her goals. García also acknowledges the optimism of the young protagonist’s final words: “Dorotea thus ends on an inspirational note, making her an important role model in Mexican literature. She has managed to free herself from traditional bonds, and she has created her own discourse. . . .” (281). Dorotea successfully creates a space of liberation for herself and
she remains determined to shape her own life, thereby bringing about an alternate vision for the future, and offering a positive type of role model that subverts patriarchal patterns of female behavior while upholding genderless ethical conduct.

Unlike Catalina Guzmán and Dorotea Leyva, Laura in Los años con Laura Díaz, is not a character that stands out for her bold use of language. In fact, for most of her life she adheres to the conventional gender scripts for women and is rarely shown to assert her voice. This chapter focuses primarily on her pointed use of non-verbal language in reference to the effective way she expresses herself through photography. When Laura turns sixty, she becomes a noted photographer. Until that time, through her actions she rebels against the rules of patriarchal culture, but she is hardly ever shown to aggressively speak up for herself. In most cases, especially during her youth, when she is in a situation in which she is displeased, she either keeps quiet or becomes compliant, saying whatever is necessary to appease the other person. She does act boldly when she abandons her husband and children to live with a woman friend, and when she reunites with her family, after an absence of six years, she becomes more assertive about voicing her opinions. Once she realizes that the communication problems that she has with her husband are not going to improve, she grows ever more reluctant to outwardly share her frustration; she knows that because of his narrow-minded demeanor, their situation will not improve. Eventually she finds her passion in photography, however, and once she does she uses it as an instrument of empowerment, expressing herself and bringing her creative “voice” to life.

Laura successfully uses the construction of an alternate discourse in photography as a strategy of empowerment. After an earthquake shakes Mexico City, Laura sets out with her camera to capture images of the devastation in order to expose it to a world that is alien to
what is occurring. The experience inspires her to take a closer look at the lives of the marginalized characters that she meets and that are typically ignored, among them the poor and downtrodden. Laura’s photography becomes an alternative discourse because her images present “the other side of the story, the side that is not told in history books, newspapers, or other sources of the ‘official’ story” (García, “Fiction and History” 275). Her work shows a different viewpoint of the city; one that counters or challenges the public record because she brings attention to those that are generally not recognized as part of the official landscape of Mexico City’s society. Through her photography, she not only creates an alternative discourse, but she also establishes an identity for herself adding both her images and her presence or point of view as a photographer to the historical register.

Laura Díaz is not a character that stands out for asserting her voice, especially in her youth. Considering her background--she grew up in conditions that the narrator refers to as “la vida rural y el patriarcado de don Felipe Kelsen”--her submissive nature is not surprising (55). Both Laura and her mother, Leticia, eventually become “patriarchal women”; Leticia is passive by nature and appears to pass this trait on to her daughter. On more than one occasion the narrator underlines Leticia’s silence: “Leticia, una chica que aprendió muy pronto las reglas de un silencio provechoso . . .” (56). For many years, Laura’s behavior mirrors that of her mother. Both women appear to exhibit what Luisa Valenzuela refers to as “linguistic censorship” as they are both very reserved in expressing their opinions (55).

Just as he inspires Laura’s political awakening, her brother Santiago was also the first to bring to her attention the power of language. After he is assassinated she thinks back and remembers how he tried to teach her about the importance of taking control of her words: “--

14 In Critical Theory Today, Lois Tyson defines the term “patriarchal woman” as one who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy.
Mira Laura, escribes solo, muy solo, pero usas algo que es de todos, la lengua. La lengua te la presta el mundo y se la regresas al mundo. La lengua es como el mundo: va a sobrevivirnos. ¿Me entiendes?” (78). Though Laura is too young to fully understand the significance of her brother’s advice, she remembers what he has told her and reflects back on it later in her life.

When Laura marries Juan Francisco, she obediently adheres to the conventional gender scripts of dominant discourse, perpetuating the patriarchal ideal of the dependent and submissive wife. She does challenge her husband in small ways, (I pointed out several instances of her minor rebellions in chapter three) but for the most part, she dutifully follows through with his wishes. Though the reader is made aware of her discontent, she does not express it directly to her husband. Instead she acquiesces, making statements such as: “[c]ontigo sí me atreveré. Tú me enseñarás, ¿verdad?” and “. . . tú eres mi macho y yo soy tu esposita” (132-33). In both cases, it is almost as if Laura feels the need to diminish herself before Juan Francisco, suggesting that she needs him to teach her how to be brave and recognizing that he is the authority figure while she is his “esposita.” She makes such comments to appease her husband, and for the same reason she takes the blame when they have disagreements, attributing it to her lack of experience. At the time of their marriage, Laura is around twenty-one years old and Juan Francisco is sixteen years her senior. Laura is young and understandably full of illusion about their future together. She tries to conform to the patriarchal ideals of romantic love and of how a proper wife should behave, compliantly accepting both Juan Francisco’s demands and criticisms, and rarely asserting her voice in any significant manner.
In keeping with the conventional image of women in masculine discourse, Laura frequently describes herself as invisible or muted. When Juan Francisco’s comrades from the syndicate come over for their weekly meetings, Laura listens carefully to their discussions from a different room, emphasizing that she remains hidden: “invisible para ellos, pero atenta a cuanto decían” (142). And when, after only two days of working with him in the field, Juan Francisco sends her home, telling her that there is where she belongs, outwardly she agrees with him. The reader understands, however, that she feels disheartened at the fact that he wants to silence her: “[é]l le pedía muda obediencia a un alma apasionada” (151). After eight years of marriage that phrase still echoes in Laura’s thoughts. It is indicative of the fact that for quite a long time she feels stifled by the limitations placed on her by her husband following the prescribed gender constructs of their society. Over the years it becomes obvious to both Laura and Juan Francisco that their marriage is troubled, but in keeping with the conventional role of the self-sacrificing wife, she does not ever directly verbalize to him the extent of her discontent. The reader is made aware through her thoughts that she is disillusioned with her husband, disappointed in her unfulfilling marriage, and strongly desiring something more out of life.

The turning point in their marriage comes when Laura finds out that Juan Francisco turned in the Carmelite nun that she had given refuge in their home. When she returns from Xalapa and discovers that Gloria Soriana has been killed as a result of her husband’s betrayal, she is so angry with Juan Francisco that she leaves him. In what is probably the strongest speech that the reader sees her use with her husband, as she storms out, she lets him know that he has irrevocably lost her respect: “¿[c]on quién quisiste quedar bien, Juan Francisco? Porque conmigo ya quedaste mal para siempre” (171).
When Laura leaves her husband and children to begin a separate existence under the protection of a woman friend, her new life is representative of what Danny J. Anderson refers to as displacement of the traditional social scripts. In other words, her actions are clearly a deviation from the conventional gender expectations for married women in patriarchal cultures. When she moves in with her friend Elizabeth, for the first time in her life she lives in a home that is not dominated by a male. During the six years that she is away from her family, she also maintains an adulterous romantic affair with the debonair Orlando Ximénez, travels out of the country with the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and takes full responsibility for the decisions that affect her daily life. Danny J. Anderson posits that displacement can be a strategy for transformation; Laura is, indeed, transformed by the experiences of her autonomous life away from her family. Unlike Catalina Guzmán, who remains trapped in a masculine way of thinking, and although her character defies the rules, does not otherwise undergo any significant change to threaten patriarchy’s gender constructions, Laura Díaz does demonstrate that her perspectives on life are altered by her rebellion and are beginning to push her toward ways of living that challenge canonical patterns.

While she is living with Orlando she makes a brief visit to her family in Xalapa, while there, she has an epiphany that makes her realize that she should want more out of life--that is to say, she recognizes that there should be something more significant to her existence--than just being the wife of Juan Francisco or the lover of Orlando Ximénez. For the first time, the reader sees her contemplate setting goals for herself. Leaving her family was an incredibly selfish act, so it is a step in the right direction when she begins thinking about wanting to be both a better person and a better mother to her children:
[Laura piensa en] situarse en el mundo, comprender los cambios en su vida, proponerse metas firmes, más seguras que la fácil salida . . . de la vida matrimonial con Juan Francisco o incluso la muy placentera vida bohemia con Orlando—algo mejor para sus hijos Santiago y Dantón, una madre más madura, más segura de sí. . . . (210)

Laura starts to see beyond the patriarchal ideal of being a passive woman that is only defined or given purpose by the men in her life. She realizes that relying on a man to establish her identity is the easy way out. Instead, she starts to take into account what her place is in society and ponders setting clear-cut goals for herself so that she can become a more confident woman and a better mother.

Laura’s new perspective is a sign of her emergent efforts to begin constructing an alternative discourse for herself. When she decides to remake her life with her husband and children, she is not the same person that abandoned them six years earlier. By displacing the traditional female gender scripts, she learns valuable lessons that transform her reality. The experiences that she has while away—finally gaining some liberties while she lives with Elizabeth, the broadening of her political, social, and cultural horizons with Orlando, and living abroad with Frida and Diego—each represents important stages in her spiritual development and in moving away from simply being a passive patriarchal woman. While she admittedly makes some regrettable decisions, each incident is an important step for her personal growth:

Laura . . . entendió . . . que Leticia lo sabía todo sobre Laura, el fracaso de su matrimonio con Juan Francisco, su rebeldía contra el marido disuelta en la cómoda aceptación del trato protector de Elizabeth y de allí a la vacía,
prolongada y al cabo inútil relación con Orlando; y sin embargo, ¿no habían sido
indispensables estas etapas, en sí tan dispensables, para acumular instantes de
percepción aislados pero que, sumados, la estaban conduciendo a una nueva
conciencia, aún vaga, aún brumosa, de las cosas? (246)

Displacing the conventional gender scripts or creating an alternative way of living her life,
allows Laura to have a variety of experiences, each providing her with some moments of
clarity, that, when considered as a whole, bring about a significant change in how she views
both herself and the world. She is described as pursuing a new consciousness, where she does
not simply follow the same banal patterns for women that she learned from her mother, but,
instead, she seeks to find a new and different way of being human.

The process of finding the delicate balance between being a good wife and mother
and also trying to be an enlightened woman with a new consciousness is one that Laura
struggles with for the rest of her married life. When she restarts anew with Juan Francisco,
she does not approach the marriage with the same naïve illusions that they will dutifully
behave like the ideal couple of the patriarchal model that she had initially followed. In her
transformation in perspective, the reader also sees a change in her use of language with Juan
Francisco. She begins to speak openly and directly to her husband, readily accepting the
blame for having entered into their marriage with unrealistic hopes. In a sincere tone she
explains that she expected Juan Francisco to be the man of her dreams and did not deal well
with the reality of who he actually was:

... tú entiendes, Juan Francisco, que antes de conocerte ya te conocía por lo
que se decía de ti, tú nunca te jactaste de nada, no puedo acusarte de eso, al
contrario, apareciste en el Casino Xalapeño con una simplicidad que me
resultó muy atrayente, tú no me presumiste para impresionarme, yo ya estaba impresionada de antemano por el hombre valiente y excitante de mi imaginación, en ella suplías el heroísmo sacrificado de mi hermano Santiago, tú sobreviviste para continuar la lucha en nombre de mi sangre, no fue tu culpa si no estuviste a la altura de mis ilusiones, la culpa fue mía, ojalá que esta vez podamos vivir juntos tú y yo sin espejismos. . . . (249)

For the first time Laura and her husband have an honest conversation where she admits the mistakes that she made in their relationship. Juan Francisco, in turn, confesses that he always put up a strong façade with Laura to hide his weaknesses and self-doubt: “[m]e hice fuerte porque era débil” (251). By finally voicing their true feelings (as opposed to Laura remaining silent and accepting the blame for their misunderstandings and Juan Francisco playing the part of the strong, assertive man) they are able to acknowledge that they both entered the marriage with a mindset constructed of canonical stereotypes that produced unreasonable expectations.

Though Laura and Juan Francisco try to work through their conflicts, they both remain unhappy. For the rest of their marriage, Laura has difficulties trying to be a good spouse and mother, while, at the same time, fulfilling her own needs. She frequently comments on how much easier her life would be without a husband and children: “‘[q]ué fácil sería la vida sin marido y sin hijos’” (256), but this time she remains committed to staying with her family: “pues Laura ya sabía lo que era la vida sin Juan Francisco y los niños, Dantón y el joven Santiago, y en esa alternativa no había encontrado nada más grande ni mejor que su renovada existencia de esposa y madre de la familia” (256). Laura also begins another adulterous affair, though she later confesses her indiscretion to her family and
asks for their forgiveness: “Me enamoré de un hombre. Por eso no venía a la casa. Estaba con ese hombre. . . . Les pido que a su edad muchachos, empiecen a comprender que la vida no es fácil, que todos cometemos faltas y herimos a quienes queremos porque nos queremos más a nosotros mismos que a cualquier otra cosa. . . .”(336-37).

While Laura is a contradictory character, whether judged by canonical or feminist standards, she differs from Catalina Guzmán in that, although she is not always successful, she strives to be an ethical person that attempts to fulfill her commitments to be best of her ability. She admits that she would like her independence, but because she is more responsible when she returns to her family she makes the conscious decision not to abandon them again. Also, although she immorally commits adultery, she acknowledges her mistake, explaining to her sons that sometimes people are selfish and make poor choices. She commits an egregious error, but she does seek her husband’s and her sons’ pardon for her poor judgment. Laura’s life after returning to her family is indicative of the difficulties that women face when they strive to have liberties and be fulfilled, while at the same time trying to carry out their domestic duties.

After Juan Francisco dies, Laura finally has the opportunity to be independent. When she becomes a photographer several years later, the reader realizes that she not only uses her vocation to establish an identity for herself, but also to bring attention to the typically ignored marginalized characters of society. Additionally, she uses her lens to shine a light on those that suffer because of their political beliefs, such as her grandson, Santiago, a victim in the massacre at Tlatelolco. Using her photography as an instrument of command, Laura constructs an alternative discourse, which she uses as a strategy of empowerment. In What Can a Woman Do With a Camera, Jo Spence and Joan Solomon discuss the powerful effect
that photographing reality can have on women: “[o]ur aim is . . . to show that in using our cameras as a form of visual diary, in disclosing ourselves to ourselves, we can empower ourselves and each other” (10). Through her photography Laura finds her creative “voice” and she also transcends her woman’s anonymity by adding her presence as a female photographer to the public record.

After the massive earthquake that hits Mexico City in 1957, Laura goes out to photograph the destruction and she takes notice of the increased migratory flow of marginalized characters into the city. She is struck by the misery of these overlooked beings and begins to photograph the “lost cities” or the informal communities into which they settle. These alternative images of urban life become her first great photo-essay, which is described as being comprised of both the pictures of the “lost cities” and the sum total of Laura’s lifetime experiences:

Ése fue el primer gran reportaje gráfico de Laura Díaz; resumió toda su experiencia vital, su origen, provinciano, su vida de joven casada, su doble maternidad, sus amores y lo que sus amores trajeron . . . la muerte . . . de Frida Kahlo . . . todo ello lo reunió Laura en una sola imagen tomada en una de las ciudades sin nombre que iban surgiendo como hilachas y remiendos del gran sayal bordado de la ciudad de México. (510)

For Laura, her photography is not only powerful because it allows her to expose the hidden and ignored lives of the poor and downtrodden that live on the fringes of society, but also, because it allows her to see how all the of the incidents of her life come together to form her new outlook and transform her into the person that she has become. Through photographing the underbelly of the city, Laura not only manages to bring to light the
injustices and desolation of those that suffer, but in the process she also learns about herself and uses her new vocation to establish her own identity:

Salió a fotografiar las ciudades perdidas de la gran miseria urbana y se encontró a si misma en el acto mismo de fotografiar lo más ajeno a su propia vida, porque no negó el mundo que le produjo penetrar sola, con una Leica, a un mundo que existía en la miseria pero se manifestaba en el crimen, primero un muerto a cuchilladas en una calle de polvo inquieto; miedo a las ambulancias con el ruido ululante y ensordecedor de sus sirenas a la orilla misma del territorio del crimen; las mujeres matadas a patadas por sus maridos ebrios; los bebés arrojados, recién nacidos, a los basureros, los viejos abandonados y encontrados muertos sobre los petates. . . . (513-14)

After seeing the suffering of the marginalized people of the lost cities, Laura is very thankful that it was not her fate to endure such hardships. By putting the focus on these otherwise disregarded and unrecognized members of society, the protagonist creates an alternate discourse as she uses her photography to add their images, their stories, and their presence to the official register.

As a result of Laura’s work in the 1950s and 1960s, she becomes a very successful photographer. She attains financial independence and recognition in her field. Through her art she has managed to appropriate the master’s weapons, taking command of her camera as an instrument of expression, and standing out in a field that, up to this point, had been dominated by men. There is even a connection drawn by Carlos Fuentes between Laura and the famous Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913): “Laura Díaz a los sesenta años, es una grande artista mexicana de la fotografía, la mejor después de Álvarez
Bravo, la sacerdotisa de lo invisible (la llamaron), la poeta que escribe con luz, la mujer que supo fotografiar lo que Posada pudo grabar” (516). It is ironic and highly appropriate that Laura, who as a woman is also a marginal character in patriarchal culture, manages to escape the fringes, gaining visibility and becoming an active player in the game of society, by photographing other typically unnoticed individuals.

When Dantón’s son, Santiago the third, comes to her home in 1966 with his girlfriend, Lourdes, seeking a place to live, Laura realizes for the first time how independent she has become. Because of his father’s disapproval of Lourdes, her grandson decides to leave his father’s house. Laura is delighted to take them in, but at the same time she reflects on how much she has grown to value having a space of her own: “[s]e encontró, por primera vez en su vida, con una habitación propia, de ella, el famoso ‘room of one’s own’ que Virginia Woolf había pedido para que las mujeres fuesen dueñas de su zona sagrada, su reducto mínimo de independencia: la isla de su soberanía” (527). When they arrive Laura is leading the autonomous, politically active life that she had always sought. She is thrilled to have their company and even more pleased when they marry a short time later.

Laura, Santiago, and Lourdes develop a very close bond. The joy of having him in her life quickly turns to sorrow when he is killed during the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968. She is present at the beginning of the protest simply to photograph her grandson and the event: “Laura Díaz fotografió a su nieto Santiago la noche del 2 de octubre de 1968. . . . Había venido fotografiando todos los sucesos del movimiento estudiantil, desde las primeras manifestaciones a la creciente presencia de los cuerpos de la policía. . . . (549). When the protest turns violent, however, and the police begin to fire on the students and other innocent people, Laura swings into action, boldly capturing images of the massacre:
Disparaba su cámara, la cámara era su arma disponible . . . la cámara de Laura Díaz subió a las estrellas y no vio nada, bajó temblando y se encontró el ojo de un soldado mirándola como una cicatriz, disparó la cámara y dispararon los fusiles, apagando los cantos, los lemas, las voces de los jóvenes, y luego vino el silencio espantoso y sólo se escucharon los gemidos de los jóvenes heridos y moribundos, Laura buscando la figura de Santiago. . . . A culatazos sacaron a Laura de la plaza, la sacaron no por ser Laura, la fotógrafa, la abuela de Santiago, sacaron a los testigos, no querían testigos, Laura se ocultó bajo las amplias faldas su rollo de película dentro del calzón,. . . pero ella yo no pudo fotografiar el olor de muerte que asciende de la plaza empapada de sangre joven. . . . (554-55)

The narrator likens Laura’s camera to a weapon, the only instrument that she has to record the injustices that take place in Tlatelolco. Because the police did not want any witnesses, Laura’s photos of the massacre become evidence that counters the government’s story of what happened in the plaza. As such, with the pictures that she develops from the film that she conceals, she is able to create a counter-discourse, presenting the side of those that suffered in Tlatelolco, and challenging both the police’s account and the official record of what took place on that fateful day. As she channels the pain of her loss through her work, she solemnly reflects back on the lessons that she learned from Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo about how artists sublimate their grief through their craft.

Laura leaves her influence on future generations through her photography, but also, on a more personal level, she encourages women to excel based on the lessons that she has learned throughout her life. She and Santiago’s widow, Lourdes, bond over his death as
Laura tries to present a positive example of how to be a strong woman. Additionally, it comes as a great surprise to Laura when one afternoon she receives a visit from Magdalena Ayub Longoria, Dantón’s wife. Magdalena is still distraught over the death of her son and she seeks Laura’s advice on how to escape the patriarchal model of the submissive and passive wife that Dantón has locked her into. Laura can relate well to Madga because her case is very similar to Laura’s when she first married Juan Francisco. She advises her daughter-in-law to stop resigning herself to accept Dantón’s insufferable behavior, to be brave, and also, to triumph over her husband by pardoning his faults. Laura had never managed to forgive Juan Francisco for his weaknesses, but she has learned that the only way to prevail over a domineering husband is to pardon his flaws so that as a wife, the woman may be set free. When her daughter-in-law leaves, the narrator describes her departure in terms that indicate that Laura has perhaps given Madga some hope as to bring about changes that will help to liberate her: “Laura recibió la mirada sonriente de Magda antes de que ésta abordara el taxi. Quizás la próxima vez vendría en su propio coche, con su propio chofer, sin esconderse de su marido” (578).

When Laura is seventy-four years old, in 1972, she learns that she has cancer and has no more than one year to live. Much like she has done with other aspects of her life, she decides to take control of the situation. Instead of waiting for a long and possibly painful death, she returns to Catemaco, the city in which she was born. She goes into the forest, where there are many of the ceiba trees that she remembers from her childhood. In her final act she forcefully hugs one of the spiny trees, thus ending her own life through an intimate embrace with the natural setting of her idyllic childhood. Just as Laura was determined to live by her own design, she ultimately decides how she will die, as well.
Laura Díaz leads an incredible life. Though in her youth she is locked into a patriarchal mindset, she manages to break away from such conventions, seeking a new consciousness. When she leaves her husband, displacing the social scripts of patriarchal ideology, she has experiences that expose her to new ways of thinking. She makes immoral and detrimental errors along the way, but once she gains maturity, she becomes determined to make a difference in the world in which she lives, thus turning herself into a positive alternate role model for future generations of men and women.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In my analysis of *Arráncame la vida*, *La familia vino del norte*, and *Los años con Laura Díaz*, I examine the role of the female protagonists in an attempt to explore whether they learn to play the eminently masculine social and political game of politics in their respective societies. My interest in this topic stems from the fact that since the 1980s, there has been a large number of novels published in Mexico that are primarily centered on the significant role women characters have began to play. Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Leyva, and Laura Díaz each appear to have the opportunity to become active participants in society because they have access to influential men. Instead of being represented as tangential to the male characters, as most females have been portrayed in the past, these women manage to escape the margins, taking a position that is front and center and, in the case of Catalina and Dorotea, even take hold of the narrative in order to tell their own stories.

The portrayal of women in the contemporary Mexican novel has changed significantly; the female characters in these more recent narratives have become active participants in society, persistently challenging the conventionally accepted social scripts prescribed for women in canonical narrative. Much of the criticism written on these new novels takes a feminist approach, focusing on the rebellion, liberation, and independence of the female protagonists. While I also explore these aspects, my study differs from the others in that I focus primarily on the women’s relationship both to power and to the men in their lives. In particular, I examine to what extent these women are able to become independent
players in the game of society, the strategies that they employ, how their success may be measured, and whether they succeed in offering a new or different model for women to follow that differs from the canonical portrayal of female characters.

Catalina Guzmán’s access to power comes through her marriage to Andrés Ascencio, a well-known politician. When they first marry she is young and has no experience with the game of politics. She was raised in a patriarchal culture, and has been trained to obediently follow the conventional gender scripts of masculine discourse. Nonetheless, in spite of her naïveté, when faced with Andrés’ authoritarian demeanor, she raises minor rebellions and exhibits early signs of having an independent spirit. Early in the novel, and reading from a feminist perspective, one would hope that such indications of resisting her husband’s control would mean that she would ultimately offer an alternative viable model to that of the passive and submissive patriarchal woman. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Catalina, at first, begins to slowly learn the rules of the game by closely observing Andrés; eventually, after she becomes overwhelmed by the rumors of his corruption, she makes the conscious decision to learn more about her husband’s business dealings and political maneuverings. She also forms at this point an emergent feminist consciousness, and as she learns the truth about Andrés’ brutality, she begins to develop strategies that will allow her to assert her will in making her own decisions. The reader witnesses her transformation from a naïve adolescent to a savvy woman that understands the games of power. Once again, the feminist reader keeps hoping that the changes that she undergoes while learning the truth about Andrés’ viciousness would have inspired Catalina to correct or at least improve the inequalities of Mexican society. Instead, she becomes immersed into her husband’s web of corruption, even proudly eventually declaring that she is a player on his team. The reader
realizes that she distances herself from Andrés, not as a show of opposition to his abuses of power, but rather, because she wants to resist his attempts to control her.

As she becomes more insistent about rejecting and undermining the conventional gender scripts that work to limit her freedoms, a feminist still hopes that she is doing so with the lofty goal of bringing about changes that will benefit women, in general. Disappointingly, Catalina appears to be more interested in having personal liberties than she is in possibly making significant strides for herself or others. While she repeatedly criticizes her husband for being corrupt, it seems that she is not interested in changing the system because it provides both of them with the opportunity to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle.

Catalina has the potential to pose a real challenge to the dominant constructs of patriarchal ideology. Because of her acquired knowledge, and her understanding of how to effectively use both language and discourse, she has the elements to imagine an alternative model of female or even genderless behavior to that of masculine discourse. The feminist reader finds, however, that because of her flawed character, though she does challenge her husband, her rebellions do not go beyond little more than self-serving victories that allow her to maintain her privileged existence. Instead of using her knowledge to make a difference, she ends up simply mimicking Andrés’ unethical behavior by staying out late, taking a lover, and possibly killing her husband to attain the liberation that she desires. The foremost lesson that Catalina appears to have learned from Andrés is that in order to get one’s wishes, one must be willing to deceive and even kill. In the end, though she is liberated by Andrés’ death, she remains trapped within the patriarchal structures of a system that contributes to her own oppression and to that of others (García, Broken Bars 194).
Dorotea Leyva also has access to power in society, both because of her familial ties and due to the relationship that she develops with her lover, Manuel, a well-known journalist. When her story begins she is not as naïve as Catalina since she is already aware that there is a social and political game that plays out among those that have power. At first, she does lack the resources to become an active player. After the death of her grandfather, Teodoro Leyva, authoritative family patriarch, Dorotea is unsure of what to do with her life. Manuel helps to provide her with the social and cultural education necessary to gain an understanding of the rules of the game. When she eventually begins to resist Manuel’s influence over her and attempts to take control of her education, the reader is hopeful that Dorotea will be successful at achieving her goals of becoming independent, and she, in fact does so.

Like Catalina, she appropriates male strategies to help reach her goals; she consciously acts on her decision to learn about a variety of subjects considered part of the baggage of an educated person. When Manuel publishes her grandfather’s story, thus depriving her of the opportunity to tell her own version, she becomes even more determined and uses her writing, to construct a personal version that challenges the official account. In doing so, she creates an alternative discourse, countering the historical record as written by both her grandfather and Manuel, and adding her voice and identity to the public register. Dorotea’s appropriation of the master’s weapons allows her to become a positive role model. She adeptly and ethically uses her newly gained knowledge, language, and alternative discourse to achieve her goals of becoming a liberated and independent woman that is able to live by her own means while creating her own vision of the future.

Laura Díaz also has access to political power through her marriage to Juan Francisco López Greene, a post-revolutionary union leader. Laura grows up in the country within a
patriarchal family and like Catalina is well trained to obediently follow the conventional
gender scripts of masculine discourse. When she marries she is young, naïve, and full of
romantic illusions, however, she quickly becomes disillusioned with her husband and his
authoritarian posturing. She, like the previous protagonists, begins to learn the rules of the
game from the men around her; in this case, Juan Francisco, but Laura soon realizes that he is
corrupt and inefficient as a leader. When he betrays her trust by informing the police on one
of her friends, she takes the bold action of abandoning him and their sons for an autonomous
existence. While she is away from her family she learns valuable lessons about how society
functions from her lover, her cosmopolitan friends, and the historical figures Diego Rivera
and Frida Kahlo.

Laura’s unethical abandonment of her family and her involvement in adulterous
relations are reminiscent of Catalina’s selfish behavior and the reader begins to wonder if the
character can be redeemed. It soon becomes clear, however, that Laura differs from Catalina
in that while she is away she also makes the significant decision to approach life with a new
consciousness and to be more mature and responsible for her actions. Accordingly, she
reunites with her family and though she is never happy with her husband, she tries to be a
better mother to her children. Even after she returns home Laura makes mistakes, becoming
engaged in a second adulterous affair, but in this case, being the more responsible character
that she has become, she admits her errors to her family and asks for forgiveness. This
behavior fits the pattern she sets at this time in her life, in which she frequently admits her
frustrations with her husband and children, but she remains committed to staying with her
family.
Laura does not become an active player in the game of society until after she becomes a noted photographer. Though her career starts by accident when she is asked to take a picture of Frida Kahlo on her deathbed, once she finds herself in possession of a camera she starts to look around her in a different way. And because of the knowledge and experience that she gains throughout her life, she is successful at using her creative voice to construct an alternative discourse, by including photographs of marginalized characters that challenge a public record that typically does not recognize these people as part of the official landscape. Laura arrives at the end of her life fulfilled and independent. Though she does make some poor decisions along the way, Laura, like Dorotea, also succeeds in offering a new or different model of rewarding female behavior.

Catalina Guzmán, Dorotea Leyva and Laura Díaz are, in fact, successful at becoming players of the traditionally male game of society. Though when their stories begin they are naïve and inexperienced, they each appropriate strategies from the men in their lives, becoming knowledgeable about the rules of the game and how to utilize actions, language, and discourse to reach their goals. While the male characters seem to play the game to acquire power and influence for their own sake, it appears that the women ultimately want liberation from the conventional social scripts of dominant discourse and independence. Dorotea and Laura manage to achieve the freedoms that they desire, but Catalina is different. Although most critics read her as an independent character, who succeeds in constructing a valid model of female behavior, I believe that her actions demonstrate that she remains locked into a masculine way of thinking and unlike Dorotea and Laura, who ultimately achieve supporting themselves financially, Catalina continues to be dependent on her husband’s wealth. Additionally, unlike Catalina’s mimicry of masculine molds, Dorotea and
Laura offer new or different models of female protagonists; their characters do not follow the old-fashioned canonical models of patriarchal women. Instead, they manage to escape the margins and offer from center stage an alternative image of successful women.

The female protagonists in my study undoubtedly gain more freedoms than women had previously been portrayed as having in Mexican literature. They empower themselves by becoming aware of the importance of understanding the masculine rules of power and playing anew the game within society, both with strategies that they learn and appropriate from the men in their lives, and also from the lessons that they gain from their own experiences. Women can become successful at being active players in the masculine game of power. From my analysis of these female protagonists it also becomes evident that if women want to truly break out of confining patriarchal models, then they must not be satisfied with simply understanding or altering the existing rules the dominant discourse. They must take their efforts a step further and work to change the whole game.
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