Transgressive Femininity in Emilia Pardo Bazán and Kate Chopin: Destabilizing Spanish and Southern Exceptionality Via a Naturalist Aesthetic

Brittany Powell KENNEDY
Tulane University

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article examine l'esthétique naturaliste de Kate Chopin et Emilia Pardo Bazán pour montrer comment, en questionnant le rapport implicite qui existe entre femme et nature, ces deux écrivains déstabilisent le caractère d'exception associé tant à la femme qu'à la région, en Espagne et dans le Sud des États-Unis.

Tandis que les deux auteurs décrivent des environnements masculins qui semblent déterminer le destin des protagonistes féminins, Chopin dans The Awakening *(1899) et Pardo Bazan dans* Los pazos de Ulloa *[The Manor at Ulloa, 1886] et* La madre naturaleza *[Mother Nature, 1887] créent des personnages qui ne cessent de forger une identité personnelle en dépit de leur milieu.*

L'examen de la dimension "mauvaise" de ces personnages démontre combien une féminité transgressive destabilise non seulement le féminin mais aussi le régional. En effaçant la connexion entre femme et nature et en écrivant au sujet de régions d'exception (ainsi, la Galicie et La Nouvelle Orléans), ces auteurs effacent aussi la connexion entre la nature et "l'Espagne" ou le "Sud."

Cette vision de la nature propre à ces écrivains naturalistes est toutefois repérable dans des œuvres contemporaines telles que celles de Carme Riera et Gloria Naylor dont l'étude concluera cet article.

While critics often simplify nineteenth-century Spanish and Southern literatures as mere copies of French Naturalist writings, this lens makes it far too easy to overlook the commentary that their two most famous female writers developed regarding regional exceptionality and gender. While French naturalism did influence both Emilia Pardo Bazán and Kate Chopin, it did not define them. Meanwhile, given the lengthy history of Spanish and Southern female exceptionality, both Pardo Bazán and Chopin employ a naturalist aesthetic in a manner that attempts to foreground female expression and experience within a deterministic social world coded as masculine. Specifically, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Emilia Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* [The Manor at Ulloa, 1886][1] and *La madre naturaleza* [Mother Nature, 1887] demonstrate an ambivalent relationship with femininity and nature as their protagonists struggle to assert selfhood against both a "nature" and a "society" that doom them to failure. While the "naturalist" moniker implies determinism, both authors' female characters do succeed at asserting a sense of self that partially defies the determinism of naturalism and hints at a modernist aesthetic. Specifically, the manner in which the protagonists reconcile how nature

[1] Emilia Pardo-Bazán, *Los pazos de Ulloa* [1886] (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1974). Henceforth, all references to Pardo-Bazán's novel are to this edition and page numbers only will appear within the text.

codes their femininity creates a space in which they forge a transgressive femininity. Thus, while both authors treat femininity in a way that equates woman with nature, they do so on their own terms by rejecting regional exceptionality based on a "unique" natural world. Thus, it should be less surprising that Chopin's and Pardo Bazán's success at reconfiguring region and womanhood within a naturalist world points to a similar trend in more contemporary literature. For this reason, I will end by discussing briefly Carme Riera's *En el ultimo azul* [Into the Last Blue, 1994] and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) in order to give examples of how contemporary writers similarly re-code the female body's relationship to nature and the body politic. This effort to re-write national femininity allows for a reconceptualization of regional exceptionality through micro-exceptionality within Spain and the South − specifically Catalan and low-county identity, respectively. Ultimately, what Pardo Bazán and Chopin as naturalists show us is how "nature," when equated with womanhood, is in constant flux, thus pointing to a branch of modernism that hints at a neo-naturalist aesthetic.

By examining how Pardo Bazán's and Chopin's employment of a naturalist aesthetic actually works to deny essentialist ideas of "woman" and "nature," one readily observes how femininity, and with it nationhood, is re-constructed in later modernist fiction in a manner that owes much to Chopin and Pardo Bazán. Thus, not only does one observe a soft break between protagonists fated by nature and society, one also finds modernist heroines who decide to fight against this nature − even when they know they will fail. This effort to "fight back" is the precise reason I do not examine "perfect" models of Spanish and Southern womanhood, but instead what society asserts must inherently exist: her uncanny opposite, her exception, the "bad" woman. In other words, the multiple transgressions of regional female exceptionality illustrate the manner in which both gender and nation are equally imagined − specifically at the end of the nineteenth century when both Spain and the South were engaged in their respective civil conflicts over competing views of nationhood. In highlighting these various reconfigurations of Spanish and Southern womanhood; furthermore, an uncannily hybrid, and highly ambivalent, sense of place emerges within women's writing as early as nineteenth-century novels and proceeding into contemporary artistic expression. In the end, the "bad woman" becomes an uncanny form of regional exceptionality whose grotesque bodies and moral transgressions tell us less about "exceptional" Southern and Spanish womanhood than they do about the supposed exceptionality that compelled them to be "bad" in the first place.

Thus, both Pardo Bazán and Chopin create "bad" women − what I term the "picarona" in Spanish and what has been termed the "bad belle" in Southern letters[2] − while simultaneously positing a different version of Spanish and Southern society, choosing to explore rural Galicia and "exotic" New Orleans from the eyes of characters who are not from those places. Thus, by showing different kinds of women in competing versions of Spain and the South, both women writers hint at the non-deterministic implications of regional exceptionality despite the era in which they were writing. Yet, examining these novels as naturalist allows an exploration of both Chopin's and Pardo Bazán's construction of a transgressive femininity − quite specifically articulated via the female body − as a means of subtly critiquing the nationalist discourses inherent in the way their environments code gender. With regard to Pardo Bazán, Carmen Pereira-Muro explains:

[2] Betina Entzminger, *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress* (Baton Rouge, USA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 2.

> El análisis de la teoría nacional-literaria desarrollada por la propia Pardo en su crítica y ficción realista-naturalista muestra cómo esa autora, siguiendo parámetros similares a la noción de "mimicry" de la teoría poscolonial, o el mimetismo como forma de resistencia femenina apuntado por Luce Irigaray, adopta el discurso cultural patriarcal del nacionalismo para subvertirlo desde dentro, insertando en él y haciendo convivir en una productiva tensión dialógica categorías en principio ajenas a él tales como "mujer," "región" y "cosmopolitanismo."[3]

For this reason, Pereira-Muro shows why Pardo-Bazán adopts a "masculine" discourse by embracing "Spanish" nationalism instead of "Galician" regional (and linguistic) identity. Meanwhile, for both Pardo-Bazán and Chopin, their use of a naturalist aesthetic permitted them entrance into the Spanish and American literary canon, allowing them to critique the environments that constrained them by painting Galicia and South Louisiana the way Benito Pérez Galdós painted Madrid or Theodore Dreiser New York.

Emilia Pardo Bazán, at first glance, seems right at home among various Southern women writers who critiqued the agrarian system that held them hostage, since both *Los pazos* and *La madre naturaleza* depict the decaying agrarian aristocracy in the harsh Galician landscape. At times, Pardo Bazán's two most ambitious and canonical novels, with their description of a family's struggle with reversed fortunes and incest, seem almost Faulknerian in scope. Yet, Pardo Bazán does not take on Faulkner's epic sense of place, instead choosing to depict rural life in the "costumbrismo" tradition by exposing rural and regional customs throughout her fiction. Such "costumbres" ["customs"], furthermore, are observed through the eyes of outsiders who are attempting to civilize the "barbaric" inhabitants of the manor at Ulloa, thus they are painted as cold, masculine observers that Pardo Bazán uses to mimic the patriarchy inherent in nineteenth-century Spain. Indeed, Pardo Bazán constructs a stark picture of regional exceptionality here. Yet, what emerges in these "exceptional" views of nature and society is an ambivalence as the women in both novels attempt to assert a sense of self − away from coded exceptionality − and instead are doomed to become "bad" women as their seemingly exceptional environments deceive them.

The plots of *Los pazos* and *La madre naturaleza* weave together as both novels describe the intentions of a priest, Julián, to civilize/Castilianize the Marquis of Ulloa, while the women in both novels fall victim to the harsh "nature" that causes Julián to also fail in his efforts. The Marquis follows Julián's advice and, despite the fact that he has already fathered an illegitimate son, Perucho, with his caretaker's daughter, seeks marriage as a means of legitimizing his line. When his weak wife, Nucha, however, not only gives birth to a daughter but is told she can have no more children, the Marquis rejects the clearly feminizing force of legitimacy − symbolized in the similarly effeminate and celibate Julián − and returns to his old ways. Nucha attempts to leave with Julián's help, but fails, dying soon after. *La madre naturaleza* continues the story of *Los pazos* in relating the story of Manuela, Nucha's daughter, and Perucho as they, not knowing

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[3] Carmen Pereira-Muro, *Género, nación y literatura?: Emilia Pardo Bazán en la literatura gallega y española* (West Lafayette, USA: Purdue University Press, 2012) 10. In English: "The analysis of the national-literary theory, developed by Pardo herself in her realist-naturalist fiction, shows how this author, following similar parameters of the idea of "mimicry" from postcolonial theory, or mimesis as a form of feminine resistance described by Luce Irigaray, adopts a cultural patriarchal discourse of nationalism in order to subvert it from within, placing within it and joining in a productive dialogical tension categories that in principle are detached, such as 'woman,' 'region,' and 'cosmopolitanism.'" All translations from Spanish, except where otherwise noted, are my own.

Perucho's parentage, fall in love and unknowingly commit incest, resulting in their detachment and, more importantly, Manuela's exile to a convent. Despite a "nature" that appears violent and masculine, Pardo Bazán is careful to implicate female experience into this world even as that experience seems coded and fated by men. For example, while Nucha is described as weak and innocent to her husband's actions, she is aware of her husband's parentage of Perucho and attempts to leave the manor at Ulloa before her plan is discovered and ended. Ultimately, while the attempt to "civilize" the manor at Ulloa fails, it is both Nucha's death and Manuela's incest that highlight such a failure as their feminine experiences in these novels becomes subsumed by the nature that surrounds them.

One of the most striking examples of Pardo Bazán's effort to re-code female experience fated as masculine is in the lengthy description of Nucha's giving birth to Manuela in *Los pazos de Ulloa*. Throughout the novel, there is a stark contrast between civilization and nature that is represented by the brash and rustic Marquis, who figures both the wild Galician landscape as well as bourgeois opportunism since he has bought his title, and Julián, the priest whose efforts to civilize the Marquis involve finding him a wife from the city. At first, Nucha's pregnancy stereotypically confirms her femininity and connection to nature as her body is described as becoming curvaceous and her features illuminated as the "natural aumento de su persona […] la afeaba, prestando solamente a su cuerpo la dulce pesadez que se nota en el de la Virgen en los cuadros que representan la Visitación" (79).[4] While Nucha's pregnancy seems to equate woman with an essential femininity, the reference to art depicting the Virgin (which clearly does not refer to Nucha's situation) subtly critiques this connection. Nucha's childbirth, meanwhile, is far from picture-perfect as her labor lasts days while being attended by a liberal doctor who often declares that women from the city − Nucha being a prime example − lead "unhygienic" and sedentary lives that do not prepare them for the "gran combate de la gestación y alumbramiento, que al cabo es la verdadera función femenina" (82).[5] While Nucha does experience a lengthy, painful childbirth and a difficult post-partum, her recovery is described almost as a revolt: "Pero la solicitaban hacia fuera la juventud, el ansia de existir que estimula a todo organismo, la ciencia del gran higienista, Juncal, y particularmente una manita pequeña, coloradilla, blanda; un puñito cerrado que asomaba entre los encajes de una chambra y los dobleces de un mantón" (90).[6] While it seems that Nucha has not performed her "female function" according to the doctor's vision of nature, his science (and the liberal ideas critiquing "traditional" Spain that coincide with it) allows her to fight back against how nature has doomed her. What stands out in the scene most, however, is the image of her little daughter's fist fighting through the constraints of her clothing and blankets − clear metaphors for a society that binds women − to be seen and recognized by the world around her. It is that "particular" image, moreover, that elicits Nucha's recovery and allegorizes her own fight against both nature and a traditional Spain that codes her existence.

While many critics use scenes like the one above to place *Los pazos de Ulloa* among Pardo Bazán's most canonical examples of naturalism, critics like Maurice Hemingway point to the author's rejection of naturalist determinism in her treatise on the subject, *La cuestión*

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[4] In English: "[The] natural growth of her person […] did not ruin her beauty, only adding to her body the sweet weight that one sees in the Virgin in paintings that show the Visitation."

[5] In English: "[The] great fight that is pregnancy and childbirth, that in the end is the true female function."

[6] In English: "But from outside she was called by youth, by the anxiety to exist that animates all organisms, the science of the great hygienist Juncal, and particularly by a small hand, pink and soft; a little closed fist that appeared out of the laces of her jacket and the folds of her blanket."

palpitante [The Burning Question, 1882-83], and instead point to an ambivalent attitude toward the role of woman within an oppressive nature − an ambivalence that shows itself most prominently by capitalizing on the image of a strong, independent Manuela in *La madre naturaleza*.[7] For example, the tree under which Perucho and Manuela take shelter during the storm and commit incest is at one moment, "protector magnifico castaño, de majestuosa y vasta copa, abierta como pompa casi arquitectural sobre la ancha y firme columna del tronco, que parecía lanzarse arrogante hacia las desatadas nubes."[8] Yet, on the same page, the tree is described as a "árbol patriarcal, de esos que ven con indiferencia desdeñosa sucederse generaciones de chinches, pulgones, hormigas y larvas, y les dan cuna y sepulcro en los senos de su rajada corteza" (287).[9] Thus, the tree is simultaneously a "patriarchal protector" whose "bosom" protects life even as it observes it with disdainful indifference. What proves most interesting about this depiction of nature, however, is that Manuela as a fallen woman is invested with all of the naturalistic fears that the tree implies in the sense that her voice is constantly subsumed by the male characters, most notably her uncle, Gabriél; yet she is depicted as a strong character who chooses the convent and insists that Perucho be looked after and inherit the manor. Maryellen Bieder characterizes Manuela's contradictory depiction best when she describes how Pardo Bazán "integrates the silenced voice of female experience into the narration of the male world without disrupting the surface of that world."[10] In so doing, this aesthetically naturalist writer prefigures a modernist ideal by making one woman's assertion of self, what Bieder identifies as the transformation of a child of nature into a woman of society, into a reflection of nature's simultaneous oppressiveness and potential for spiritual exploration.

When examining the role of "nature" in Pardo Bazán's novels, one must remember that this "nature" is specifically the harsh landscape of Galicia − a region that has its own language and customs and for which "civilization" comes in the form of colonizing priests or noblemen from Madrid. Thus, through her ambivalent view of Manuela's volition within a harsh yet nourishing landscape, she creates a further "exception" to the supposedly already-exceptional Spanish national identity. Such attempts at what is known in American letters as "local color" also pertains to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as she describes her "bad belle" within the confines of Creole Louisiana − another region that, within the exceptional South, had its own language, customs, and cultural heritage. Chopin's novel, following the work of Donald Pizer comparing Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos,[11] provides another example of a text whose highly ambivalent view of nature in which a character tries, and fails, to assert selfhood, suggests modernist implications for a text firmly grounded in realism and naturalism.

Edna Pontellier is the indulged wife of a New Orleans businessman who is "awakened" to her sexual and artistic self when she attempts to explore and develop both in the highly coded

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[7] Maurice Hemingway, *Emilia Pardo Bazán: The Making of a Novelist* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[8] Emilia Pardo Bazán, *La madre naturaleza. Obras Completas (Novelas y Cuentos)*, vol. 1, ed. Federico Carlos Sainz de Robles (Madrid: Aguilar, 1964) 285-410, specifically 287. In English: "great dark protector, of a majestic and vast top, open like an almost-architectural bubble over the firm and narrow column of the trunk, that appeared to hurl itself toward the wayward clouds."

[9] In English: "patriarchal tree, of those that observe with disdainful indifference the development of generations of bugs, fleas, ants, and larvae, giving them cradle and grave in the bosom of its split bark."

[10] Maryellen Bieder, "The Female Voice: Gender and Genre in *La madre naturaleza*," *Anales Galdosianos* 22 (1987): 103-16, 115.

[11] Donald Pizer, "Is American Literary Naturalism Dead? A Further Inquiry," *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*, ed. Mary E. Papke (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003) 390-404.

world of New Orleans Creole society. Edna herself, however, is not a native of this world since she is a Protestant from Kentucky horse country who is sent South to marry. Thus Edna is simultaneously "exceptional" within the mainstream U.S. South (as a Southerner) and exceptional from this manifestation of Southern society (New Orleans). Part of the problem that Edna faces in this novel, however, not unlike Manuela in *La madre naturaleza*, is the issue of voice and her inability to express her desire given the discourse available to her. The relationship between linguistic registers and female voice finds a parallel in Pardo Bazan's description of the masculine "pazos" − a uniquely Galician term for what is more or less a plantation − and the influence of this environment on Nucha and Manuela; her description demonstrates the degree to which feminine oppression, and its regional implications, have linguistic consequences as the "bad" woman becomes a figure who does not oppose discursive femininity, but simply seeks an individual voice. In *The Awakening*, for example, Edna never understands why she is so saddened by the departure of Robert, a local gentleman with whom she has a close friendship, and never identifies this loss as love until the novel's end. In addition, when she begins to neglect her social and maternal duties as she discovers her own volition, she has no way to express her frustration, describing how she "was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility."[12] Her "responsibility," furthermore, is not just to her family, but to the code of femininity her region has set out for her; by defying these norms in both her actions and in her very non-Creole existence, she demonstrates the construction of both region and woman at the level of language.

As Edna attempts to give herself a voice by renting a place where she can practice her art while having an affair with a known scoundrel she does not love, it seems as though she is a child floundering in the dark. The description of this artist's living quarters underscores her ambivalent situation − it is referred to as a "pigeon house," thus another cage that holds her in (303). Like most "bad" women seen within women's writing, furthermore, Edna is constantly compared to another female counterpart that is every bit a perfect embodiment of Creole society, Adèle Ratignolle. It is not surprising, therefore, that two events precede Edna's realization that she will never escape the bonds of female exceptionality: the first is her almost-mocking of Robert's assertion that her husband would grant her a divorce; and the second is the painfully detailed description of Mme Ratignolle's birth, a realist move not unlike Pardo Bazán's lengthy passage describing Nucha's giving birth to Manuela. Like Pardo-Bazán, Chopin uses the experience of childbirth as a means of destabilizing the connection between woman and nature. When Mme Ratignolle goes into labor and summons Edna, who has promised to be there, the scene seems reminiscent of countless descriptions found in novels of the period as women help women perform their "function" − to quote the doctor in *Los pazos*. Yet Edna recalls her own childbirth as wholly unnatural, remembering an "ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a new little life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (343). While Edna is desperate to leave the grisly scene, she stays "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature" (343). Seeing precisely how nature codes femininity and feminine experience via what she describes as "torture," Edna's resolve is like Nucha's in that it contains a revolt against nature; but unlike Nucha, Edna refuses to "think of the children" like the good woman of nature Mme Ratignolle cautions her. Instead, both in the social

[12] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Other Stories* [1899] (New York: The Modern Library, 2000) 220. Henceforth all references to Chopin's novel will be to this edition and page numbers only will be given parenthetically in the text.

and natural world, Edna's fate is determined, and she resolves to fight back. But, unlike Nucha, her only available option is to take her own life − destroying the body that has been so coded and failed in its attempts at freedom through transgression.

While Edna's suicide, like Manuela's exile to a convent, seems like a deterministic, and naturalist, view of the ability for woman to assert selfhood, in reality, the suggestion is far more ambivalent given that Edna makes a choice to die rather than conform, which, in many ways, connects her to several characters from other novels of the same period, for example, Pío Baroja's Andrés Hurtado or Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Yet, such a decision again possesses an ambivalent tone when we read the final passage that describes Edna's allowing herself to drown in the Gulf of Mexico. Like the tree in *La madre naturaleza*, the gulf has a dual quality that both alienates and creates calm:

> [It] stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down into the water. (350)

As the ocean "welcomes" one into a sea of solitude and wounded death, nature, usually associated with femininity, here dissolves differences. Thus, like Manuela, Edna asserts her female voice within a nature that favors the masculine, by becoming a "bad belle" in a man's world; and, the reader is meant to judge regional and gender norms in the same vein, for their thwarting of the female quest for personal autonomy in the face of this "exceptional" womanhood thrust upon her.

Within both Chopin's and Pardo Bazán's fiction, labels like "local color" and "costumbrismo" become easy markers for asserting regional exceptionality when in reality, these writers' grapplings with gender roles become an indictment of the very culture that so rigidly defines them. What informs both of these novelists' indictments of their environments is their use of a naturalist aesthetic. Donald Pizer notes the following when trying to locate what he calls the "plain meaning" of *The Awakening*:

> One angle of interpretation, however, […] is that of its participation in the naturalistic belief that the human will is often deeply circumscribed by the inseparability of the lives of men and women from the natural and social world they inhabit. The naturalistic novel, we have come to understand, despite Zola's explicit demands in his criticism to the contrary, can express this view of experience without absolute fidelity to the principle of determinism; in other words, it frequently introduces determinism as a thread among a complex of themes, whatever the violations of philosophical logic which may result from this mix.[13]

Indeed, both Pardo Bazán and Chopin use the deterministic nature of Galician and Creole society as a means of destabilizing the forces that control, and preordain, their protagonists. Meanwhile, as both Spain and the South transitioned into a modernity that, through the guises of Francoism

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[13] Donald Pizer, "A Note on Kate Chopin's *Awakening* as Naturalist Fiction," *Southern Literary Journal* 33.2 (2001): 5-13, 11-12.

and Jim Crow, enacted specific codes about how members of society should interact with one another, the idea of womanhood still contained specific implications for regional exceptionality. Thus, writers like Carme Riera and Gloria Naylor created characters whose exception to Southern and Spanish female socialization similarly reconfigures the relationship between woman and region in order to deconstruct both ideals discursively. In so doing, Riera and Naylor hint at a modernist ethos of seeking individual subjectivity but in a way that reconciles that identity with environment and the deterministic role it plays, particularly in relation to the female body. Thus, while they are modernist in tone, one can make the argument that such novels also hint at a neo-naturalist aesthetic since the representation of female efforts to achieve individual subjectivity denies any concrete attempts to equate woman and nature, yet still shows how nature and society fatalistically, and perpetually, strive to code femininity, particularly within the confines of national and regional identity.

Within Spanish literary production post-Franco, there has been considerable attention paid to Spain's so-called "minority" languages that were banned from public use during Francoism, specifically, Galician, Basque, and Catalan, and their use within literary production. Simultaneously, there has emerged what many call an "exceptional" feminism among Catalan women and women writers − an "exceptionality" that many see as historically based in Catalunya's more progressive stance toward women during the Second Republic. For a writer like Carme Riera, who chooses not just to write in Catalan but in the even more rare Majorcan dialect of it, the choice to engage such "exceptionality" results in works that do not just explore female or Catalan exceptionality and "otherness," but the idea of the "other" as a whole. Riera is not alone in this endeavor, however, as Kathryn Everly notes in her book, *Catalan Women Writers and Artists: Revisionist Views from a Feminist Space*:

> While addressing universal problems and triumphs of all women, Catalan literature thrives on the tension between pertaining to a national literature and maintaining a sense of regionalism. In this sense the regional exile of Catalunya from the rest of Spain acts as a backdrop provoking women to go a step further and experiment with their own sense of gender separation within their particular culture.[14]

Quite specifically, Riera's novel, *Dins el darrer blau* [In the Last Blue, 1994][15] employs her so-called "minority" voice in an experiment with history, particularly the historical account of thirty-seven Jews' failed attempt to escape the Spanish island of Majorca during the Inquisition. In her effort to explore the manifestations of "other" as it relates to Spanish historiography and her own Catalan heritage, it is not surprising that Riera's approach to exceptionality is to reconstruct memory and reinstitute several narratives, and not just one, that have been lost within the confines of "official" historiography.

What stands out about Riera's narrative is that the image of Jewish identity becomes one that sees it as a performance elicited out of its "othering" by discourses of power − specifically the Inquisition. Even more importantly, Riera uses erotic themes as a means of showing how the objectified female body, including physical desire, reveals the "lost" feminine presence within

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[14] Katherine Everly, *Catalan Women Writers and Artists: Revisionist Views from a Feminist Space* (Lewisburg, USA: Bucknell University Press, 2003) 15.

[15] Carmen Riera, *In the Last Blue*, trans. Jonathan Dunne (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2007).

historical narrative.[16] For example, it is a woman, Blanca Maria Pires, who first contacts a ship's captain about escaping the island; and it is her appropriation of the male gaze − by not letting the captain see her body when they converse or make love − that allows her to leave the island. Similarly, the tragic end of two Moorish slave-girls, Aixa and Laila, entails a narrative in which the "exotic" female body is invested with fears of male inferiority. For example, when the girls dance for the Viceroy, he is aroused but does not achieve a full erection. Realizing his incapacity in front of the dancers, the Viceroy attempts to regain power over them by playfully turning the tables, pretending to be a dog to their master, but he quickly turns on them, mutilating Laila's clitoris and Aixa's nipple. The Viceroy, realizing that his moral authority could be jeopardized, has the girls killed. Neus Carbonell posits that the story of these slave girls is emblematic in Riera's historical narrative:

> [The scene with Aixa and Laila] can be read as a display of the violence and contradictions ingrained in any narrative about race, class, and gender. Power and impotence, silence and speech, horror and pleasure mix and expose the paradoxes of an enunciative position regarding the repression of otherness.[17]

Yet, in making both woman and Jews the "other" in this novel − through the lens of performance − Riera inscribes in her narrative a multiplicity that does not create essentialist divisions but "enunciative" comparisons.

The resistance to essentialist divides, between "self" and "other," have proven just as dominant within Southern women's writing, particularly among African-American authors. While Southern studies at one time (both consciously and unconsciously) saw an essential divide between representations of white and black women within culture, recent work by critics like Lucinda MacKethan see a dialogical relationship between these two discursive figures, particularly within the depictions of plantation culture, since both served the master who, in turn, controlled their bodies and identities.[18] As we have already observed in Riera's novel, competing discourses of "otherness" − be it black and white, Catalan and Jewish, male and female − only become non-essentialist when the label of difference, or "exceptionality" is re-configured to involve plural narratives of self and nationhood. Gloria Naylor's 1988 novel, *Mama Day*, is an exercise in just such plural narratives as she describes what seems to be the unique world of Willow Springs − an island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina that officially belongs to neither state − and the various stories, legends, documents, and voices that define it. Yet, within all of these claims to "truth," Naylor uses a prodigal daughter who stands at the center of these competing narratives, but whose body and memory ultimately must contend with them all as she is consumed by the nature that surrounds her.

Like Riera's multi-voiced narrative, Naylor's novel centers around three main perspectives: that of Mama Day, Willow Springs's matriarch who represents the views of the island's inhabitants; that of Cocoa, Mama Day's great niece who has left the island to work in New York city but returns home every August; and that of George, Cocoa's engineer husband

[16] Geraldine Nichols, "Carme Riera," *Escribir, espacio propio: Laforet, Matute, Moix, Tusquets, Riera y Roig por sí mismas* (Minneapolis, USA: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures, 1989) 187-227, especially 202.
[17] Neus Carbonell, "The Ethics of Dissidence: Resistance and Relationality in *Dins el darrer blau*," *Moveable Margins: The Narrative of Carme Riera*, ed. Kathleen Glen, Mirella Servodidio, and Mary Vásquez (Lewisburg, USA: Bucknell University Press, 1999) 221-22.
[18] Lucinda MacEthan, *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story* (Athens, USA: University of Georgia Press, 1990) 9.

who is an orphan, and is thus the most enchanted by the island's eternal origins. Even though the first-person narratives of these characters appear throughout the novel, there is a single voice in the opening chapter insisting that there is no one truth about the island, despite the bill of sale for the mythical slave, Sapphira Wade, who supposedly talked the master into giving it to the slaves as a group, along with a map of its location. This narrator, furthermore, opens the novel by describing the efforts of a prodigal son, who, like Cocoa, comes back to the island to do an ethnographic study, but whose exploration of the island's exceptionality only relegates it to "other." As "Reema's boy" uses his tape recorder to unlock the island's secrets, the narrator asserts that "truth" does not come from the voices of others, and that this ethnographer's problem is that he "d[oes]n't know how to listen." The narrator explains:

> [H]e coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-knows-where. It's August 1999 − ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own.[19]

When the narrator acknowledges the voice of the reader/listener, she simultaneously asserts that only our truth is real to us in a specific moment in time, thus the only "truth" in the novel is not in the characters' competing truths, but their one story as we, the readers/listeners, interpret it.

While it appears that the denial of truth leaves the reader plunged into postmodern fragmentation, in reality, the character of Cocoa, particularly her body, encapsulates the voicelessness and half-truths that we encounter throughout the novel in the sense that she is part of the island's history but also in a self-imposed exile from it. Cocoa's moment of reckoning occurs when a local woman, Ruby, who thinks that Cocoa has tried to steal her husband, weaves in her hair a poison that almost kills her. As Mama Day tries to use traditional medicine to counteract Ruby's curse, George helps rebuild the bridge connecting the island to the mainland, after it is destroyed during a hurricane. Although both figures tap into a knowledge gained from different forms of experience − one coming from nature and the other from science and engineering − Cocoa suffers immense physical pain and emotional distress since, when she looks in the mirror, she only sees grotesque and mutated versions of her flesh. Cocoa herself, with her reddish hair and light complexion, almost embodies a history of racial miscegenation, and seeing her mutating flesh inscribes the violent memory of this history onto her. Ironically, Cocoa's realization of her ailment is never explicitly voiced by her, only subtly realized when she notices that her grandmother is not surprised at her hallucinations. It is only as Mama Day and George seek separate "ways" of healing her that the reader understands the full gravity of Cocoa's illness. Thus, it is only when Mama Day convinces George to sacrifice his life for her − giving her the sense of self, and not of historical or essentialist origins, that only an orphan can have − that Cocoa is able to overcome her illness and reconcile what her body has gone through. Of course, the only way Cocoa can understand what her body already knows is through memory, remains alive just as she does. She admits as much when she attempts to describe her loss and says, "I didn't understand that every hour we keep living is building material for a new world, of some sort" (302). Cocoa does build a "new world, of some sort" as she moves nearer to the island and has two children. Through the female body, moreover, Naylor protagonizes the

[19] Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* [1988] (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 10. Henceforth, all references to Naylor's novel will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear parenthetically within the text.

movements of self and nation from crisis, and loss, to rebirth. The fact that Naylor has achieved this end using the body of the prodigal daughter − the figure who both openly questions and passively accepts the island's essentialist allure − not only rejects racial essentialism but gendered essentialism as well.

Thus, in the end, as Cocoa constantly tries to re-narrate the story and, at one moment, explain it to her young son, whom she has named George, she relies on what Mama Day calls "simple truth" and says to her dead, voiceless, husband: "And it's the one truth about you that I hold on to. Because what really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean − there are just too many sides to the whole story" (311).

In her multi-voiced novel that denies the idea of any single voice except that of the reader/listener, Gloria Naylor has not only rejected the deterministic, and thus essentialist, ideas of race, gender, and nation; but, in so doing, has also created a living, breathing memory that is communal, thus utterly non-exceptional. Such a rejection of regional female exceptionality entails a multi-layered process that has occurred in Spain and the South throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the transition to modernity − with its very gendered crush of individual agency − only experienced a soft break to postmodernity with the fragmentation of selfhood into false images, be they national, commercial, or gendered. What stands out over time is the degree to which transgressive femininity has served to provide alternate narratives of gender as they have been put forth by a supposedly exceptional, and highly coded, Spanish and Southern nation. Given that Pardo Bazán's and Chopin's protagonists are forced to reconcile femininity and nation because of how their environments determine them, scholars like Donald Pizer, when writing about the way Theodore Dreiser's naturalist metropolis influences John Dos Passos's modernist city, then point to a soft break between naturalism and modernism. In this way, what I identify as a neo-naturalist aesthetic in Naylor's low-county and Riera's Majorcan islands could be informed by a branch of modernism described by Marshall Berman in the Preface to the 1988 edition of *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). Berman defines "modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it."[20] Berman's brand of modernism understands that humans will be determined by their environment, but he insists that the process by which they make themselves at "home" in it involves a philosophical enterprise in which we never arrive at a concrete idea of identity. Thus, my conceptualization of neo-naturalism in Riera and Naylor's novels, that is, an aesthetic where environment and "nature" are written discursively on the female body as a means of coding it, is constantly thwarted by a transgressive femininity observed even in the naturalist writings that precede them. Ultimately, what Emilia Pardo Bazán's and Kate Chopin's naturalisms (leading to Riera's and Naylor's use of plural, and not just "minority" voices) show is an intense desire to expose the various manners that the feminine, via the female body, makes claims to regional exceptionality while questioning it. In so doing, it becomes readily apparent how establishing connections between seemingly exceptional nations and identities, instead of asserting essentialist differences, becomes a means of exposing not just the methods of establishing exceptional ideas of gender and nation, but the uncanny fears, desires, and conflicts that such imaginings produce.

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[20] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* [1982] (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) 5.