A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 18, Num. 2 (Winter 2021): 152-172

Unbecoming *Nadie*: Feminism and the Epistolary Form in María Lourdes Pallais's Novel *La carta* (1996)

Greg C. Severyn
Susquehanna University

María Lourdes Pallais's epistolary novel *La carta* was published in 1996, not long after the February 1990 general elections in Nicaragua that gave way to a Sandinista electoral defeat and the presidency of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.[1] While the presidency of Chamorro was based on an image of "maternal reconciliation" after the Contra war, an image that paired well with her representation as wife and widow, it did not align with the predominant vision of feminism at the time (Kampwirth 47). This political transition, at once marking a notable loss of revolutionary power and the affirmation of more traditional gender roles, was accompanied by widespread sociopolitical disenchantment that quickly became reflected in Nicaraguan literature. Guatemalan and Salvadoran literature would reflect similar phenomena soon thereafter, as critics like Beatriz Cortez and Misha Kokotovic have theorized with their concepts of the aesthetics of cynicism and neoliberal noir, respectively. Under these circumstances, Nicaragua also witnessed the concomitant rise of the *Movimiento*

[1] Though María Lourdes Pallais (1953-) was born in Peru, the topics of her fictional literary production are decidedly Nicaraguan. This has much to do with her Nicaraguan heritage, including family ties to the Somozas, as well as connections with the Sandinista revolutionary project. Pallais has also lived for years in Mexico and the United States and ultimately considers herself "Latinoamericana," per her Twitter account @mlpallais.

Autónomo de Mujeres, an autonomous feminist movement that increasingly distanced itself from the Sandinista Revolution.[2] Within this historical context, *La carta* tells the story of Claudette, a former Sandinista supporter and intelligence agent who is betrayed by her fellow *compañero*, Antonio, a betrayal that leads to her incarceration in a South Carolina jail for having infiltrated the realm of U.S. intelligence. Due to the accumulated weight of the betrayal, the demise of the revolutionary project, and her imprisonment, Claudette begins to identify herself as *Nadie*. Before long, she also refers to the other inmates, who are all women, as *Nadie* as well. This title establishes a common experience among these women as it alludes to their collective anonymity in addition to the diminishing value that society has afforded them, especially when we consider that their crimes relate to maternity and womanhood (27).[3] Ironically, her jail cell comes to serve as an impromptu room of her own (à la Virginia Woolf) from which she can reflect upon the revolutionary experience and deeply embedded patriarchal structures, consequently yielding *this letter* written for Antonio.[4] Claudette's imprisonment, as I discuss below, intends to intervene not only on her body and its liberty, but, more so, on her soul: it is a "punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (Foucault 16). In other words, following Foucault, this type of punishment is primarily ideological and, undoubtedly, is a patriarchal imposition since Antonio remains free despite his greater involvement in the Revolution and with the United States (23).

La carta intertwines a number of literary genres and tendencies which, in turn, allows the novel to challenge strict categorization within the prevailing periodization of

---

[2] As Shelly Grabe and Anjali Dutt explain, the combination of male Sandinista leaders who had marginalized women—in addition to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's neoliberal policies that exacerbated women's rights violations—gave way to a prolific rise in autonomous organizations (90). Growing awareness of injustice towards women throughout the 1980s had already sparked the production of counter narratives of which, I suggest, we may consider Pallais's a part, as she seeks to elevate women's voices from positions of marginality (Grabe and Dutt 92, 99). Nicaraguan feminists quickly gained momentum indeed: "between 1990 and 1992, the *Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres* became a network comprised of 150 women's groups in 38 locations throughout the country that coordinated efforts, met annually, and had by-laws to direct their action" (100). As Karen Kampwirth affirms, "By 1992, the autonomous feminist movement was large, diverse, capable, and increasingly daring" (63). Before long, the movement also began to connect with the global discourse on women's rights (Grabe and Dutt 100).

[3] One inmate, Camila, killed her mother for never revealing who her father was, while another, Manuela, had drowned her baby because he wouldn't stop crying, a situation that she could not alleviate since her breasts would not produce milk and she didn't have "ni un cinco para comprar comida" (27). Lucía, Claudette's cellmate, had murdered her son-in-law for impregnating her 13-year-old daughter and then abandoning her (26).

[4] Claudette explicitly references Virginia Woolf on multiple occasions, making comparisons between herself and the isolated Rhoda from *The Waves* (1931) (93) and Eleanor, "la intrépida viajera", from *The Years* (1937) (113).

recent Central American narratives. Unlike the *testimonio* that held prominence throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s, *La carta*, as Werner Mackenbach maintains, breaks from the representative nature of *testimonio* in order to concretely center the individual, a dynamic that serves to separate the testimonial text from the revolutionary project: "En Pallais, funcionan [las formas narrativas testimoniales] para conferir al desencanto, en estos proyectos, su expresión literaria" ("De exclusiones" 212). Pushing further, Mackenbach affirms that the designation of *Nadie* that Claudette assumes as her identity is one that deconstructs the revolutionary myth of unity between the individual and the people: "La protagonista no es la encarnación sinecdótica del pueblo que lucha por su liberación, sino una 'Nadie'" ("De exclusiones" 211). In this way, Mackenbach interprets the novel as a parody of the testimonial form ("El testimonio" 412). Likewise, literary critic Leonel Delgado Aburto also approaches *La carta* from a generic positioning as *testimonio*, appealing to the fictional editor's epilogue at the novel's close that assesses Claudette's letter as "un interesante testimonio" (159). Delgado Aburto does point towards the work's disarticulated nature of the testimonial form, however, by citing the "exiling" of revolutionary discourse along with the evident ambiguity of the literary characters (148). The novel, while dialoguing with *testimonio*, also invokes, in part, the prison-writing sub-genre of this narrative form.[5] Nevertheless, *La carta* may also be read as part of the "post-war" narratives that explore the psychological aftermath of the armed struggles, fictional works that develop a stronger focus on aesthetics, notably those of profound disenchantment in the neoliberal era (Browitt 1-2).[6] A relevant sub-genre within this tendency for Pallais's work would be the post-Sandinista narratives. In conjunction with these tendencies, *La carta* also incorporates a feminist agenda that was particularly prevalent in the region's poetic production during the 1970s and 1980s. Many of these (women) poets frequently employed what literary critic Magda Zavala calls an autobiographic referentiality: "La referencialidad autobiográfica o, por lo menos, la creación de un efecto estético de

[5] While *La carta* arguably shares stylistic tendencies with prison narratives such as Nicaraguan Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's *Diario de un preso* (1961), Salvadoran Ana Guadalupe Martínez's *Las cárceles clandestinas de El Salvador* (1978), and Salvadoran Nidia Díaz's *Nunca estuve sola* (1988), Pallais's fictional text does not seek to have Claudette represent a revolutionary ideology in the same fashion. Rather, the novel supports an array of autonomous women's organizations and collectives reflecting a wide variety of ideologies. As such, the novel offers what may seem, in comparison, to be a more "subdued" ideology.

[6] Literary critic Emiliano Coello Gutiérrez, who describes Central American literary tendencies along the same lines as Browitt, points towards Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004) as an example of how ideologically driven testimony has given way to aestheticized questions of psychology, trauma, and disillusion (49).

referencia autobiográfica, será otra constante de relativa importancia en los textos de las poetas centroamericanas" (87). Not surprisingly, autobiographical stylistic elements are also manifest in *La carta*. Such eclectic merging of literary tendencies and genres permits the novel to establish its own, distinct space as epistolary fiction, a notably absent genre in contemporary Central American literary production. This combination of particularities presents a compelling reason to study this fictional narrative in greater depth as opposed to a justification for the critical disinterest that the novel has largely experienced, a reality that the protagonist Claudette foresaw because her letter is not especially "sexi" (62). Thus, from a marginalized position within Central America's recent literary periodization, *La carta* is a transgressive counter narrative, one that generically exemplifies the notions of autonomy, the recuperation of literary territory, and the creation of space for new (women's) voices that the text so adamantly seeks. In this sense, Pallais's novel contests the dominant political, social, and literary narratives.

With these assessments of the novel in mind, I propose a reading of *La carta* that pushes further into its generic "situación fronteriza" via an exploration of its epistolary form (Delgado Aburto 150). While I agree with Mackenbach's conclusion that *La carta* mocks the *testimonio*, I disagree with the conclusion that Pallais's novel rejects "toda posibilidad de construcción de un sentido, incluso bajo el signo feminista" ("De exclusiones" 215). Instead, I see the text's disenchanted tone give way to a deeper reflection regarding the imperfect revolutionary project and patriarchy generally that, in turn, allows for the expression and subsequent rise of a feminist ideology, one that makes strides towards collective-based social change. This is the case even more so if we read Claudette as representative of the autonomous feminist movement, for her individuality and separation from the Revolution, in a way, allegorizes the "autonomous" status of the various feminist collectives. This dynamic is compounded if we consider the solidarity between Claudette and other women that already exists, like the shared experience of being *Nadie* in jail in addition to the connections with the women serving as pseudo-mothers after her own mother's recent passing: "las otras madres, esas que, cuando supieron que la mía había muerto, quisieron tomar su lugar, esas madres de otras y de otros" (29). These "faceless mothers" would send gifts and messages of support to Claudette in jail despite never having met her (15). This solidarity serves, in part, as a catalyst for the "rebirth" of Claudette from revolutionary-minded *Nadie* to feminist self. Taken altogether, I contend that *La carta* represents a feminist vision that develops an understanding of the collective by centering individual experience in order to challenge patriarchal social structures. Furthermore, I argue that

it is precisely the epistolary form that allows the novel to transform its seemingly overwhelming resignation into a powerful act of feminist ideology. Such an interpretation of the novel allows for the reframing of Claudette and her imprisonment to be understood not as a victimization due to patriarchal politics that deserves sympathy, but rather as a voice that questions authority, knowledge, and manipulation as discursive tactics employed to maintain society's hegemonic status quo. Therefore, I explore the "un-becoming" of *Nadie* as the protagonist at once regains her identity as Claudette while simultaneously appropriating and finding resolve in the very name of *Nadie*. I further maintain that the employment of epistolary fiction is a subversive literary choice that challenges patriarchal structures, a manner of resistance that some in positions of power might deem "unbecoming" of a woman since Claudette refuses to conform to traditional gender roles. It is also my hope that this exploration of Pallais's work may contribute to the broader exploration of the notably understudied epistolary form in Central America.

Claudette's transition to *Nadie* is easily perceptible based on the novel's tone that expresses significant dissatisfaction with gender relations and the Revolutionary project, as made evident through Claudette's conclusion that it was all a "tremenda tontería" (13). Compounding the resignation that Claudette faces is the fact that she now sees herself as defeated, tamed, and ugly (10); the notion of a revolutionary love has failed her, and this resentment comes through powerfully when she states that the revolutionary project was merely an illusion, a deceit (108). It is no wonder that literary critic Nathalie Besse describes the imprisoned Claudette as a degrading image of waste, an absence similar to death (np). This death, or rather, if we consider the parallel between waste and Claudette as a discarded human being, may be traced back to complex patriarchal politics throughout the Sandinista armed struggle and Revolution: "if the revolution did not demand the dissolution of women's identities, it did require the subordination of their specific interests to the broader goals of overthrowing Somoza and establishing a new social order" (Molyneux 229).[7] Not only had the idea of collective love failed Claudette, "la *causa*, [el] proyecto de las pequeñas y grandes mentiras" (113, emphasis in the original), had converted her from an independent

[7] Once the Sandinistas gained power in 1979, one of the first legislative changes made was to revise gender-related laws (Kampwirth 21). This momentum, however, quickly folded as the Contra war escalated, at which point gender equality fell by the wayside as resources were diverted to the war effort, an obstacle further aggravated by leadership concerns over feminism in the revolution (Kampwirth 21-24). As Maxine Molyneux points out, women's emancipation thus became subordinate to keeping the revolution alive out of necessity (238).

woman into "una digna y leal perra de raza" (54). Antonio was successful in manipulating Claudette in this regard because he, like the other revolutionaries, was well aware that to advance their cause, they needed to take advantage of certain people. Everyone had their price; for some it was money, but for Claudette, it was love (54). Antonio also took advantage of Claudette's youthful fantasies knowing that she was "motivada por la rebelión típica de las niñas que nacieron ricas, que se rebelan por haberlo tenido todo" (67).

Now, however, Claudette realizes to what extent she had been manipulated by and even participated in such an oppressive, patriarchal ideology:

> Creyéndonos dueños de *la verdad*, no creo que ni tú, camarada Antonio, ni yo Nadie, hayamos alguna vez pensado que podríamos estarle haciendo daño a alguien—que no fuera el *enemigo*—, construyendo más vacíos y elaborando más mentiras en las vidas de quienes nos rodeaban. Asumimos, creo, que cualquier cosa se justificaba para cambiar el mundo en el que vivíamos" (112, emphases in the original).

This realization tangibly marks the process of deideologization, a vital step in separating herself from the dominant Sandinista narrative in order to adopt a more autonomous feminist vision, one that she develops with certain urgency throughout her letter: "Me urge romper tantos años de silencio para empezar a hablar de nuevo" (47). Claudette, now at a distance from the struggle, has also inevitably come to understand that Nicaraguan women still face significant social inequalities despite an approximately 30% participation rate towards the end of the armed struggle against Somoza, for such access to the public sphere "stopped short of transforming gender relations in the family and society" (Babb 59). Such serious contradictions within the Sandinista ideology have now become much easier to identify and serve to inform Claudette's new understanding of patriarchy and her nascent feminist perspective. Claudette's writing therefore hands Antonio back his half-lies and half-truths, a process that allows for liberation from her past (50). This untangling of herself from a previous ideology is a fundamental step to the process of re-identification: "The letter-writing female protagonist uses the pen not only to affirm herself, not only to bridge the gap between self and other, but often to *rewrite* the self, presenting a personal self-definition that contradicts, supersedes, or supplements the identity others have assumed her to have" (Bower, *Epistolary* 14, emphasis in the original).

Claudette's reflections recorded in her letter, then, are precisely what begin to invert the power-knowledge dynamic, for as Foucault reminds us, these concepts work not only to re-enforce authority, but also to facilitate resistance (28). Claudette, from

her "noble cuna" origins (112), comes to understand that she is no longer a submissive woman: "Lo más raro—sólo ahora me doy cuenta—era que a mí, que nunca quise tener dueño ni sentirme subyugada a nadie, me parecía lógico, natural, así tenía que ser" (58). While the mundane, bourgeois life that Claudette once maintained has disappeared, the broken woman before us recognizes that traces of her are still left (17); the passivity of life before Antonio has, in a certain sense, returned. Claudette understands that even now in jail she still holds onto certain class privileges (15). Nevertheless, her original domesticity has been unlearned; it now unfolds, not as a Sandinista, but rather as an autonomous feminist: she writes, she speaks out. Such a decision is reminiscent of Grabe and Dutt's discussion of rights and duties regarding the *Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres*, where a right is something to be demanded and a duty is a sense of responsibility and an action taken on behalf of others to ensure those rights (91). Claudette's sense of duty has not only developed as a result of her reflections, it has manifested in concrete form in her narrative. This act is significant, for the autonomous women's movement sought to recognize that "women could and should take action based on their unique social locations," and for Claudette it is from a space of isolation and imprisonment (Grabe and Dutt 99). In this regard, Claudette recognizes the power that such concrete action inspires as it at once drives identity formation and subversion of the patriarchy. She subsequently recalls the demands she made of Antonio and other *compañeros*, including the right to opine first regarding plans (99), the elimination of all condescension towards her (100), and the necessity of knowing her as a person (101). As Nicaraguan feminist María Teresa Blandón indicates, this type of equal involvement in the decision-making process is more important than just carrying out various actions (Blandón 98). This step towards gender equality would ultimately become an indelible part of Claudette's life: "parte de la piel que uno lleva" (101).

In another memory, Claudette recalls announcing to Antonio that the revolutionary cause was her destiny, yet Antonio responds that "el destino no existe […] sólo existe la lucha contra el imperialismo" (36). This remark brings to mind the then extant belief that "the transformation of women's roles would be the automatic result of other revolutionary policies" (Kampwirth 25). This, however, was not, nor could it have been, the case, as feminist critics like Margaret Randall have vehemently emphasized (21-22). Along similar ideological lines, Claudette's lawyer, Bernie, informs her that since her imprisonment began 25 months ago in late 1988 that capitalism has won out and the Cold War has ended; ideologies and economic borders are disappearing (37). Within this context, Bernie declares that the guerrilla fighters, or at

least their leaders, now desire to become fully integrated in and take advantage of the lifestyle that capitalism offers, for they now see this as the way of the future, of freedom and democracy (37), a blow that parallels Antonio's betrayal as if these actions represented a natural course of events (51). Claudette, in fact, draws a similar connection as she speaks of Antonio's betrayal: "Lo tuyo, que no fue solamente tuyo, me lo escondiste con la tranquilidad del inocente que desconoce la mentira de sus gestos y el doblez de sus verdades" (52).[8] Claudette does not respond to Bernie's statements with surprise or horror, but rather ironically as one of the Surrealist strategies for social change pops into her mind: "habría que transformar al hombre antes de cambiar la sociedad, y no al revés" (38). This challenge that focuses concretely on individual (and male) transformation points towards Claudette's concrete vision for a restructured, feminist society. While socialism remains a prized ideology for achieving this vision, she describes it as a "utopía que no deberá asociarse con ningún sistema hasta la fecha instaurado y mucho menos derrocado" (48). This utopic vision of society is paralleled by a desire for gender equality, as expressed in one of Claudette's dreams where there exists a world with beings "sin sexo, sin vientre, sin pene, sin tener que hacer el amor, sin luchar por nada" (19-20). This Surrealist challenge is, in my interpretation, one that Claudette's letter writing takes up as she confronts Antonio, the revolutionary project, patriarchy, and, undoubtedly, the reader.

The letter form that Claudette employs as she addresses Antonio has traditionally been deemed "feminine," not feminist, by literary scholars (Gilroy 1). Nevertheless, it is the selection of this particular genre that allows Claudette to transform and appropriate a form of literary expression in order to reclaim cultural territory that had previously been lost to patriarchal judgments. In this way, Claudette's recuperated voice may be more forcefully asserted as she breaks with gendered writing norms. Unlike the traditional epistolary novel, where "[l]as implicaciones ideológicas […] presentan la temática de la mujer, silenciada y aprisionada en un mundo patriarcal" (Morales Ladrón 295), Claudette refuses to be confined to the private and domestic sphere, she refuses to be silent, and she refuses to accept patriarchal impositions. In a

[8] Claudette's comment calls to mind the "piñata," where Sandinista leaders held onto and distributed state property after the 1990 electoral loss. Claudette later remarks: "En todo caso, sigo pensando que los que llegan al poder—independientemente de sus orígenes—se apropian de los bienes de todos y no permiten compartir nada con esas grandes mayorías que tú y los tuyos llamaban *las masas*" (108, emphasis in the original). This type of "selling out," for Claudette, is claimed by society to be natural and expected, just like Antonio's betrayal of her, yet we clearly see that women in particular have been "sold out" in post-revolutionary times (Molyneux 230).

sense, then, Claudette employs a subversive tactic by utilizing a "permitted" form of "women's writing" to discuss her personal experience and to speak out against dominant voices without question or suspicion. This is largely so because the epistolary form typically does not raise concern among men and, therefore, can be a strong vehicle for the insertion of her ideas into the public sphere (Pulido Tirado 437).[9] Letters thereby open spaces for voices where social conventions and restrictions on public discourse may have otherwise stifled such expression (El Hamamsy 152). This carving out of cultural and literary space for her voice, though, is intended to be more than just finding room to speak out; rather, Claudette is reclaiming and inhabiting spaces that the patriarchy had previously taken away from her. According to Randall, only an autonomous movement is capable of creating this type of room that women need, which speaks once more to Claudette's representative support for the autonomous feminist movement of the time (83-84). Pursuing this line of thought, El Hamamsy goes even further along gender lines when it comes to epistolary fiction: "Letter writing becomes a question of identity that has to do with a whole gender's choice to speak, instead of being silent, and to subvert, instead of being subservient" (153-154). In other words, Claudette's letter elevates not only her own voice, it seeks to elevate those of many other women as well. As Claudette becomes more autonomous, she finds the capacity, like Nidia Díaz, to reclaim her own story: "The act of narrating her prison experiences grants Díaz verbal agency by allowing her to reclaim those moments of her life which, at the time of their occurrence, seemed to belong to those individuals who were violently exercising power over her body" (Hutson Mihaly 79). Claudette's letter to Antonio, then, is really about empowerment, and, as we know, "[p]ower is a feminist issue, perhaps the central feminist issue" (Randall 16).

The novel, then, effectively serves to divorce Claudette from the Revolution: "escribirte *esta carta*, camarada Antonio, sería la única manera de adaptarme al mundo de nuevo, de adueñarme de otra identidad para impulsarme, para lanzarme […] directo hacia una vida, una vida sin ti y los tuyos" (46, emphasis in the original). The idea of marriage surfaces on more concrete terms within the narration as well when Claudette considers the incompatibility between matrimony and independence, with Claudette going so far as to say that marriage is a "cárcel atrofiada de rutinas y de almuerzos" (72-

[9] Evidence for this ideological literary strategy comes from the editor's epilogue. We know that the editor is male and that his evaluation of the letter is anything but political or subversive: "es un interesante testimonio de una mujer que se enamoró de la lealtad a un hombre que nunca conoció" (159).

73). It comes as no surprise that she also likens her commitment to the revolutionary cause as one of marriage that has relegated her to a subordinate role (72). Similarly, in the span of a few pages, Claudette recalls her indecision regarding marriage. First, she claims, "me casaría con Michael y punto" (94). However, when a comrade joins her for coffee, one she calls "*el patriarca observador*", a brief conversation with him leads her to reflect on what defines a romantic hero (96, emphasis in the original). For her, it is not subordination to reason and certainly not passivity, characteristics that define Michael; she thus concludes: "De pronto me di cuenta que nunca podría casarme con la razón, y aún menos con lo pasivo" (97). This particular episode reveals just how the epistolary form captures not only to what extent "[p]atriarchy profoundly affects how we see ourselves" (Randall 160-161), but also the interior struggle that Claudette faces even as she recognizes her daunting task of confronting such a deeply embedded social structure.

This vacillation likewise reflects a certain internal anguish that parallels the astounding difficulty of closing past wounds and of coming to terms with the downfall of revolutionary power and ideals while also realizing their imperfection. Not only is this hesitation evidenced in some of the letter's section titles, such as "El primer intento," "El primer receso," and "El segundo receso", Claudette's letter to Antonio can also simultaneously be interpreted as both a love letter and as a break-up message.[10] Epistolary fiction, as literary critic Rafael Cabañas-Alamán asserts, is an ideal form where contradictory opinions frequently coexist given that letters reflect varying emotional states as the author writes at different moments (138). As a result, letter writing freely permits, if not encourages, the incorporation of feelings and thoughts, a stylistic aspect that honors what many critics consider integral to a feminist agenda: the subjective and personal experience (Randall 21). Such a divulgence of emotions and interior thoughts significantly improves Claudette's self-esteem; she feels a significant burden lift as she writes, recuperating a sense of self through the written expression of what she has carried within for so long (61). This process of what is essentially self-discovery ultimately shapes Claudette's new identity, which we may understand as a form of liberation in and of itself (El Hamamsy 164).

While the Revolution's betrayal of Claudette and her gender is what effectively imposed upon her the identity of *Nadie*, one that would presumably continue

[10] We might read the constant address of "camarada Antonio" as both a painful departure of relinquishing the past as well as a sarcastic attack on revolutionary ideology and values as understood through its actors.

throughout her imprisonment, her time in the structured, isolated space of her jail cell in fact yields opportunity for subversion. This is so since what is intended to be a confining patriarchal and political punishment ironically provides the aforementioned room of her own: the time and resources to reflect, write, and, in collaboration with the other women inmates, contest the hegemonic patriarchal system. The physical space of the jail cell from which Claudette writes, then, is one that deserves our attention. Claudette confides that it is within this limited space that she has almost always felt "a gusto, cómoda" (22), and it is also the only place that she has ever felt free. This space, completely separated from the Revolution and its ideology while being entirely dedicated to women, is where Claudette gains a sense of belonging (18), where she finally learns to share practically everything (26), and where she chooses to put down roots (26). This begins to make sense if we understand that, for Claudette, beyond the walls of the jail true "freedom" does not exist, for she perceives the entire world as "una gran cárcel" (41), a clear reference to patriarchal dominance. As such, we might read Claudette's choice to settle down in jail as an "autoencierro libertario" (Martínez 86). This would be, I suggest, a strategy to control her "freedom" while imprisoned, an interpretation that Besse also considers as she questions whether Claudette's freedom emanates from acceptance or rather if her confinement is aggravated by it (np). This interpretation finds affirmation when Claudette expresses uncertainty, fear, and sadness when she learns of her upcoming release from prison, for she will have to renegotiate the terms of her "freedom" upon reentering society. In reminiscent fashion, Claudette references Virginia Woolf once more, reflecting upon how the isolated attic room is the font of so much writing and expression (93). That is, from within the niche that she has carved out of the patriarchal realm, Claudette has managed to find a way to express her subversive thoughts that, like Woolf's writing, explicitly connect with gender interests (120). In keeping with the idea of the "autoencierro," cultural critics Ileana Rodríguez and Adriana Palacios consider for prison testimonies that, "Las cárceles serán otro tipo de casa. Será la casa-encierro, la casa-castigo, la casa zona de fuego en la que se forja la identidad y se constituyen las subjetividades y se pone a prueba el yo-ideal combativo" (41). Rodríguez and Palacios go on to assert that in jail the family is reconstructed and becomes fundamentally based on solidarity with other inmates in order to reinforce the revolutionary front (41). Claudette indeed partakes in the reimagining of family and community while incarcerated, as evidenced through the collective *Nadie* of women inmates and her relationship with Manuela (which I explore below), though she certainly does not make efforts to continue her engagement with Sandinista ideology.

To this end, we may begin to understand that Claudette has not entirely lost her notion of love towards the people; rather, it has been dramatically transformed. Coincidentally enough, Claudette is prisoner 505 (Nicaragua's country code), an aspect that I see as an indication that though individuality is prized in this particular novel, there is still an inherent, if not intimate, connection between the individual and collective experiences. Claudette, though, claims to hide behind her prisoner number: "en esos tres números llevo estampada mi dignidad, en el primer número cinco disequé mi venganza, el cero de en medio es el tatuaje de mi integridad, y en el otro número cinco, escondí mi identidad, aunque nada de eso tenga importancia" (17). Nevertheless, this number has simultaneously empowered her to reject death's invitation; she does not succumb to suicide or any of the other cruel, harsh, or unpleasant realities pertaining to her imprisonment (17). In other words, it gives her a reason to live. Claudette likewise claims that this number, in its very physical sense marking her as a prisoner, alleviates her from the responsibility of making many personal decisions, including to which ideology she currently subscribes (20). This is clearly not the case, however, for the letter writing to Antonio and all of her reflections and revelations *are* an undeniably ideological choice; they *are* an acceptance of great responsibility to speak out, a decision that comes with serious social and personal implications.[11]

Another challenge to male-dominated society that also speaks to the re-imagining of family and community (and, consequently, society) comes from Claudette's sexual experiences while in jail. All sexual encounters in the women's jail, she asserts, represent "una aberración fuera de orden, pecado inaceptable, una monstruosidad", a deviance scorned upon simply because they are women (16). Claudette recalls her first "seducción forzada" with Manuela with pride and even tenderness, feelings that were decidedly not part of the loss of her virginity, as she was raped at the age of 17 (23). Shortly thereafter, Claudette and Manuela become "cómplices", a sexual and transgressive relationship that offers "delicioso placer que es más rico que cualquier libertad que [le] podría ofrecer el chato mundo allá afuera" (25-26). Claudette's relationship with Manuela, read through Mackenbach, calls attention to female suffering due to the relationship's focus on violence and pleasure, a dynamic

[11] In following with these examples, Claudette is not the most reliable of narrators, as we can see here. In another case, she states, "No es que por este medio pretenda yo explicarte los porqués y los cómo-es-posible de ese mi pasado" (49), only to come back and say, "Dije que no quería explicarte nada, pero mentí un poco" (51). This type of narration has much to do with my focus on the epistolary form in and of itself in order to understand the underlying feminist ideology of the text.

that essentially elides a deeper condemnation of the patriarchy ("De exclusiones" 218-219). Alternatively, I read this part of the narrative as one small segment of the whole feminist discourse that intends to disrupt, to challenge, to reappropriate social norms. The novel thus calls attention to the fact that compulsory heterosexuality must be eliminated given its roots in patriarchal structures, and the jail, at the level of the guards (read: authority), is a male-controlled sphere that Claudette directly opposes (Randall 172). After release, a similar social transgression occurs, for she lives with a lesbian couple. This circumstance calls to mind the broader call for diversity within the autonomous women's movement, reminding the reader of Claudette's dream about a woman named Juana who was once rich but now serves those in need and whose ideology is "la integración de los intereses de todos" (78).

As the novel continues to break down traditional notions of "women's writing," the novel's epistolarity also challenges the reader to directly engage the text. The work, consistently written in the second person, is a narrative that speaks to Antonio, yet the fact of the matter is that we as readers, just like Claudette, recognize that it is exceedingly unlikely that Antonio will ever read this letter, even if it were to be published. Nonetheless, Claudette continues to write, hoping that a random reader might aid in the unification process of Antonio with the letter (47-48). As literary critic Anne Bower maintains, power and agency are foregrounded as one writes a letter, meaning that the absence of the addressee is not nearly as important (*Epistolary* 6). Bower continues to explain that this absence, if it generates a relative unlikeliness, if not impossibility, of the addressee responding to the text, only means that we the readers feel a stronger impulse to respond (*Epistolary* 59-60). This idea signals the inherent conversational sequence that underlies most letters where an obligation of response is automatically placed upon the reader (Violi 88). In this way, the epistolary form "places the reader in the position of a confidential friend, thus creating a connecting contact between writer and reader" (Singer 84). This simultaneously literary and ideological positioning of the reader is deepened when Claudette senses that only Antonio would commit to reading the text from start to finish (49), a remark that certainly implicates the reader to a significant extent.

This combination of narrative and generic attributes effectively aligns the reader with the position of interlocutor. I also insist that it is, in a certain sense, irrelevant that the letter is directed to Antonio, for names within the text are of fairly minimal import; they are fluid and detached. Claudette is *Nadie*, who is also Claudia, or Sofía, depending on the circumstances; Antonio is a *nom de guerre*, and we never learn

his real name; Claudette's U.S. intelligence agent contact, Lisette, never reveals her real name either; and, naturally, the identity *Nadie* floats between the individual and the collective at once. Complicating this second-person direct address is what Claudio Guillén has deemed the "epistolary double pact": the first being that the I of the author is equal to the I of the text, and the second being the inverse, where the author assumes that the written-for you is the actual reader (88). In other words, we as readers are bound to the position of interlocutor as *tú*, intertwining our ideological relationship with the text ever tighter. Furthermore, when an epistolary text is published, as Claudette's writing eventually is given the fictional editor's epilogue at the novel's close, the intended recipient automatically changes (Violi 92). Therefore, the epilogue confirms that we the readers are indeed the intended recipients. As Anne Bower maintains while analyzing Gloria Anzaldúa's work, publishing a letter involves those who were not originally part of the *you* to whom it was addressed: "This formal maneuver quietly and non-confrontationally positions the reader to recognize his or her own position in society and to think about how that position affects each individual's relationship to reading and writing as parts of the social structure" ("Dear" 167). Accordingly, as Claudette redefines herself, there is a simultaneous redefinition of Antonio, which means there is also an attempt at redefining, or re-ideologizing, the reader (Gilroy 14-15).

Since the dynamic of epistolary writing always marks a temporal and physical distance, the letter therefore "[s]e escribe para ese futuro en que la carta sea leída" (Violi 89). This notion of a written-for future binds the future, necessarily so, with the past in which the letter was written. This binary runs parallel to the allegorical interpretation of the jail cell as interior/exterior, where Claudette's personal revelations have broader public implications, further merging the private and public spheres that must both undergo transformation if feminism is to have profound and enduring effects (Kampwirth 74). Nevertheless, outside or inside, public or private, oppression does not disappear. As Delgado Aburto points out, the novel is framed by the Sandinista revolutionary process that sought to work against U.S. imperialism on one side and the subsequent neoliberal agenda of the 1990s on the other (148), neither of which truly permitted social liberty or national autonomy. Thus, the novel not only signals the idea that confinement is also outside the walls of the jail cell, but that confinement, whether physical or patriarchal, is a form of inner death (Besse np). Consequently, *La carta* criticizes the exterior in its entirety, not just the Somoza dynasty or any other dictatorship, for it is the society of men that truly encloses everyone (Besse np). As

Claudette finds a certain comfort and stability in jail, her letter serves, as prison writing oftentimes does, to delegitimize her imprisonment by calling attention to context (state power) via discourse (personal experience) (Whitfield 2). To follow this thread that Joey Whitfield begins to weave, many of those in prison are incarcerated due to their vulnerability and not necessarily for the crimes they have committed (12). Claudette is a strong example of this vulnerability, and, I would contend, it is precisely due to her gender. Her lawyer, Bernie, explains that "*tu caso es político, como los delitos de los que te acusan*" before going on to explain that, since the Cold War has now ended, she is free: "*lo tuyo es un caso político que ya no les interesa*" (34, emphases in the original). This statement reminds us of Foucault's general rule for his study of the history of the penal system: "Regard punishment as a political tactic" (23). In addition, it is worth recalling that all of the other inmates are women, and that Antonio remains free, an ever more important circumstance when it comes to considering and challenging the public-private gender divide. Furthermore, upon release, Claudette sees Antonio with one of her (male) U.S. interrogators having a drink, a sure sign of complicity that connotes (male) impunity. The interrogator's name, Dick, certainly plays into this interpretation as well.

To combat this society of men, as Claudette drafts her letter, she effectively inserts her voice and memory into the revolutionary past, a memory that clearly occupies a marginal space on the forgotten fringes of the armed struggle. She thus confronts History, which allows the novel to more powerfully struggle against the dominant voices (Randall 35). This notion approaches what literary critic Alexandra Ortiz Wallner has deemed "*f(r)icción*," which occurs when a fictional work "oscila entre los polos de la H/historia, el testimonio, la memoria y la ficción" (90). This understanding of the novel, in turn, creates an inclusive space as autobiographical, historical, testimonial, and fictional discourses intertwine (Ortiz Wallner 261). Fictionalizing, or frictionalizing, in the epistolary form is one that possesses a deep relevance here: the act of writing the letter, as opposed to the performance of any other action or written form, means that Claudette prioritizes this particular message over anything else (Singer 86). This is a powerful conclusion if we consider that her written expression takes precedence over other forms of sociopolitical activism in which she previously participated. Instead of succumbing to the overwhelming resignation that she experiences while imprisoned, she speaks out. As Claudette replaces History with a new vision of the past, like other Central American writers such as Claribel Alegría and Gioconda Belli had done before her, traditional History becomes threatened as do the nations and identities that feed directly from it; this dynamic, in turn, "threatens not

just the past but also the present and the future" (Barbas-Rhoden 2). That is, it threatens to change the way we understand the past and present, paving the way for future social change. In this manner, looking towards the past, given its multiplicity of interpretations, while establishing an active dialogue between the author (real and fictional alike) and the reader as interlocutor, the public and collective nature of history is reaffirmed (Gianni 281). As we can see, then, and as Linda S. Kauffman argues, epistolarity is a destabilizing category not only due to its subversive qualities but also due to the critical conversations that it opens (263).

Choosing to publish the letter written for Antonio is likewise not only a means of making it accessible to him in the hope that he might randomly cross paths with its message, but it is rather the only way that Claudette can truly begin a new life by separating herself from Antonio (read: patriarchal oppression) (46). In doing so, Claudette explicitly states that she intends for her letter to betray Antonio (47); that is, she intends to betray her role as a submissive and accepting woman, to betray all of the patriarchal expectations that society has forced upon her, like silence, submission, motherhood, marriage, and heterosexuality. Antonio thus becomes an excuse for Claudette to speak out, diminishing his importance as Claudette's voice gains relevance (107). This concept of betrayal finds echoes in the work of John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman when they assert that if *testimonios* were written in another literary form (like the fictional epistolary one, I would propose), the message would be betrayed, or misrepresented (178-179). Yet it is this very betrayal of Antonio, the revolutionaries, and the patriarchy that is precisely what is at stake. In affirmation of this betrayal, Beatriz Cortez points out that in the "post-war" period, one must be irreverent in order to work against the powers that be (300). My positive reading of this sense of irreverence, however, is identified and interpreted quite differently by Mackenbach: "La desilusión de las utopías que fracasaron duele aún demasiado para ser tematizada de manera tan irreverente" ("De exclusiones" 228).

Perhaps society is still unprepared for such irreverence, for at the end of the novel, Claudette walks out of jail, sees Antonio with Dick, the U.S. interrogator, and later returns to let out a powerful scream that she has carried within her for years, and "Nadie se dio cuenta" (158). Our role as readers is, therefore, to deconstruct the patriarchal structures to which Claudette constantly alludes. This remains true especially after her release and death. Shortly before drowning, Claudette rereads what she has written and wishes to burn the pages, yet she decides to keep writing because she never finished. At the same time, she also comments that "a lo mejor nunca terminó nada"

(154), a comment that I read in reference not only to her past still being intimately affected by the revolutionary project, but also as an indication that patriarchy and impunity still live strong. Claudette's death shortly after her release points in this direction: Is it a political murder? An accident? We are left to wonder.[12] Claudette, in this way, experiences a forceful return to the anonymity and nothingness, literally speaking, of *Nadie* in death (Besse np). This ironic ending signals just how all-encompassing patriarchal punishment is, and it positions the reader ever more so as interlocutor while demanding, now more than ever, a response: What will we make of Claudette's story? Will we as individuals understand that together we do form a collective, even if the idea of revolutionary love and of the people has departed radically from what it meant just a decade before? While Claudette's drowning death in the ocean is certainly not narrated as a public execution, we might still consider her vulnerability and death along similar lines due to the public exposition of her drowning by way of the fictional editor's epilogue. Following Foucault on the matter, public deaths draw attention to (gender-based) power dissymmetries within society (48-49) and oftentimes served to strengthen the people's solidarity (63). Claudette's death functions along similar lines, reinforcing the connection between reader and text by pushing for a response to all of the damaging patriarchal influences that we have witnessed working on her throughout the work. Alternatively, we may also find connections between Claudette's death and the allegorical demise of residual Sandinista power and the death of the revolutionary utopian dream (Besse np), a death that gave new life to the autonomous feminist movements that were gaining solidarity and strength at the time of Claudette's fictional death in early 1992.

What we have been observing, then, is how the novel, through the trope of the patriarchal prison, reinvigorates the feminist slogan that the personal is political, an affirmation that unites the relevance of the private and the public spheres. Nevertheless, we must be aware that we as readers might also be contributing to her "imprisonment." I refer here to the voyeuristic space that we the readers occupy upon having access to Claudette's every move and even her most intimate thoughts while in jail. You might even say that she is under our surveillance. This dynamic situates us as readers into a position of power not so different from Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon, a

[12] Werner Mackenbach, on the other hand, reads Claudette's death as a suicide, an allegorical reading that calls attention to the impossibility of women from breaking from normalized social roles ("De exclusiones" 225). The suicide reading would coincide with the irreverence towards such social structures and the appropriation of personal autonomy of which Beatriz Cortez speaks when discussing the aesthetics of cynicism.

central prison watchtower that ensures the possibility that all inmates may be under constant surveillance at all times, yet the prisoners are entirely unaware if anyone is observing them at any given time. Thus, each prisoner becomes an "object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault 200), a dynamic that Claudette seeks to reject as she struggles against the automatic functioning and renewal of power that the Panoptic and patriarchal structures perpetuate (Foucault 201). Claudette, realizing that she will need to decide who she is once and for all upon release (28), wonders if she will have the strength to maintain the identity she has constructed for herself while in jail: "¿sería observadora o sería partícipe? ¿podría volver[se] interlocutora, defensora apasionada de algo, de alguien? ¿o debía ser simplemente Nadie, a quien nada le importa?" (21). This decision is a significant one, for, as Foucault argues, the idea of the Panopticon defines power relations on the level of everyday life (205).

As the implicated interlocutor with the power to remain silent or to respond, power is indeed on our side. I coincide with Anne Bower when she states that letter writing, such as that found in *La carta*, elicits from us a response; a response, though, is not necessarily a concrete, written reply, for it might take any variety of forms (*Epistolary* 2-3). In following with this concept, Whitfield points out that prison writing, whether fictional or not, leaves the reader with a challenge: "even the most fictional of these texts confronts readers with the question of what to do with the knowledge that has been disclosed" (181-182). It is wholly within our capacity, then, to determine the fate of Claudette's message: Is she an object of information, or is she a subject in communication?

Works Cited

Babb, Florence. *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2001.

Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. *Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003.

Besse, Nathalie. "Enfermements et délivrances au Nicaragua: *Diario de un preso* de Pedro Joaquín Chamorro et *La carta* de María Lourdes Pallais." *América. Cahiers du CRICCAL*. No. 47 (2015): np.

Beverley, John and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990.

Blandón, María Teresa. "The Impact of the Sandinista Defeat on Nicaraguan Feminism." In *Compañeras: Voices from the Latin American Women's Movement*, edited by Gaby Küppers, 97-101. London: Laitn American Bureau, 1994.

Bower, Anne. *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in 20th-Century American Fiction and Criticism*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The U of Alabama P, 1997.

___. "Dear ----: In Search of New (Old) Forms of Critical Address." In *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, edited by Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, 155-75. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.

Browitt, Jeffrey. *Contemporary Central American Fiction: Gender, Subjectivity and Affect.* Eastbourne, England: Sussex Academic P, 2018.

Cabañas-Alamán, Rafael. "El recurso auto-epistolar como terapia: motivos temáticos recurrentes y greguerías en *Cartas a mí mismo* (1956) de Ramón Gómez de la Serna". *Olivar*. 12.16 (2011): 137-157.

Coello Gutiérrez, Emiliano. "El discurso crítico sobre el cinismo en la novela centroamericana contemporánea: bases para una lectura alternativa". *Revista Convivencia*. 1.1 (2014): 31-55.

Cortez, Beatriz. *Estética del cinismo: Pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2010.

Delgado Aburto, Leonel. *Márgenes recorridos: Apuntes sobre procesos culturales y literatura nicaragüense del siglo XX*. Managua, Nicaragua: IHNCA/UCA/Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, 2002.

El Hamamsy, Walid. "Epistolary Memory: Revisiting Traumas in Women's Writing." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. No. 30 (2010): 150-175.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. Translated by Alan Sheridan, 2nd Edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Gianni, Silvia. "'El provenir del pasado': La novela nicaragüense entre historia canonizada, lucha representacional y pluralidad de lecturas". *Revista Estudios*. No. 20 (2007): 277-284.

Gilroy, Amanda and W. M. Verhoeven. *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 2000.

Grabe, Shelly and Anjali Dutt. "Counter Narratives, the Psychology of Liberation, and the Evolution of a Women's Social Movement in Nicaragua." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*. 21.1 (2015): 89-105.

Guillén, Claudio. "El pacto epistolar: las cartas como ficciones." *Revista de Occidente*. No. 197 (1997): 76-98.

Hutson Mihaly, Deanna. "Re-Scripting the Resistive Body in *Nunca estuve sola*, the Prison Memoir of Nidia Díaz." *Letras Femeninas*. 30.1 (Summer 2004): 79-91.

Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2004.

Kauffman, Linda S. *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago, IL: The U of Chicago P, 1992.

Mackenbach, Werner. "De exclusiones e inclusiones: Tres aproximaciones a la novela *La carta*, de María Lourdes Pallais." In *De márgenes y adiciones: Novelistas latinoamericanas de los 90*, edited by Jorge Chen Sham and Isela Chiu-Olivares, 207-235. San José, Costa Rica: Ediciones Perro Azul, 2004.

___. "El testimonio centroamericano contemporáneo entre la epopeya y la parodia". *Kamchatka*. No. 6 (2015): 409-434.

Martínez, Luz Ángela. "La celda, el hábito y la evasión epistolar en Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." *Revista Chilena de Literatura*. No. 81 (April 2012): 69-89.

Molyneux, Maxine. "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua." *Feminist Studies*. 11.2 (Summer 1985): 227-254.

Morales Ladrón, Marisol. "La dialéctica entre la presencia y la ausencia ficcional del destinatario en el discurso epistolar." *1616: Anuario de la Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada*. Vol. X (1996): 285-295.

Ortiz Wallner, Alexandra. *El arte de ficcionar: la novela contemporánea en Centroamérica*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2012.

Pallais, María Lourdes. *La carta*. Mexico: Textos de Difusión Cultural UNAM, 1996.

Pulido Tirado, Genara. "La escritura epistolar en la actual encrucijada genérica." *Signa: Revista de la Asociación Española de Semiótica*. No. 10 (2001): 436-448.

Randall, Margaret. *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda*. New York: Monthly Review P, 1992.

Rodríguez, Ileana and Adriana Palacios. "Interioridades/Exterioridades: Mujeres y Frente Interno en Nicaragua." *Cuadernos de Literatura del Caribe e Hispanoamérica*. No. 17 (January-June 2013): 29-48.

Singer, Godfrey Frank. *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence*. 1933. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963.

Violi, Patrizia. "La intimidad de la ausencia: formas de la estructura epistolar." *Revista de Occidente*. No. 68 (1987): 87-99.

Whitfield, Joey. *Prison Writing of Latin America*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic P, 2018.

Zavala, Magda. *Con mano de mujer: Antología de poetas centroamericanas contemporáneas (1970-2008)*. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial INTERARTES, 2011.