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## The Construction of a Transatlantic Subject: Family and Nation in "Sola" by María José de Chopitea

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The narrative in Maria José de Chopitea's practically unknown novel *Sola* takes place between 1938 and 1950 in Spain, France, Switzerland, the United States, and Mexico, tracing the author's own trajectory of exile. The young protagonist of the novel, Montserrat, virtually abandoned by her whole family, struggles to make ends meet in Barcelona in the middle of Spanish Civil War and begins to fear for her life. When she meets José Carlos, a young and successful Mexican journalist on a diplomatic mission in Catalonia, she sees him as her ticket into a better future. José Carlos is charming and intelligent. He takes Montserrat to social gatherings and pursues her with small luxuries that are hard to come by in the war-torn Barcelona. Their romance develops quickly yet promises to be problematic from the very start: José Carlos has to evacuate in the face of the Nationalist occupation of Barcelona. Despite her parents' warnings, Montserrat decides to leave behind the Europe on the brink of war and travels to Mexico, which promises peace, freedom, and a new beginning with her lover.

Until now, critics have not looked beyond the novel's romantic facade and have approached *Sola* as a work lacking ideological argument. Josebe Martínez, for instance, considers Chopitea's novel "una historia de amor netamente *femenina* en el sentido de que está contada por una mujer que, abstraída de cualquier ambiente político, y no pronunciándose en términos públicos sobre nada, cumple con el arquetipo de tal narrativa: el de la confesión íntima, e intrahistórica, sin postular ningún planteamiento que no sea estrictamente personal" (200-201, original emphasis). In order to avoid categorizing feminine experience and the articulation of female identity as inherently apolitical and peripheral to the discourses of nation and of exile, I propose an alternative reading of Chopitea's novel. In what follows, I approach *Sola* as an ideologically charged

narrative that creates space for the negotiation of exile's identity vis-à-vis Catalonia, Spain, Mexico, and the transatlantic space.<sup>1</sup>

Chopitea's writing in general, and *Sola* in particular, have a very prominent autobiographical component and tend to blur the boundaries between fiction and memoir. Born in 1915 in Barcelona to a well-off Catalan-Basque family, Chopitea received a privileged education both in Catalonia and abroad. As a cultured woman, she supported the liberal and progressive values associated with the Republic, to which the writer remained faithful throughout her exile. In one of her exile letters, Chopitea writes: "Mucho debo a mis mayores republicanos, con quienes siempre he compartido actos de protesta o de apoyo en la causa común, actos culturales, conmemoraciones y charlas amistosas" (qtd. in Bados Ciria 78). During the Civil War she met her future husband, Luis Octavio Madero, then the consul of Mexico in Barcelona.<sup>2</sup> Both her relationship with Madero and the uncertainty of the political situation in Spain forced her to go into exile. Like thousands of her Republican compatriots, in 1939 she crossed the border into France to escape from the violence and political persecution. After spending some time in Paris and Geneva, she undertook the transatlantic journey to arrive in Mexico in November of 1939. By the time she published her novel *Sola* in 1954, Chopitea had been living in Mexico for over a decade and, since 1946, she had been a naturalized Mexican citizen. According to Concepción Bados Ciria, the author has been integrated into the Mexican society through her rigorous journalistic work in the Mexican capital, contributing to newspapers of national significance (78).<sup>3</sup> Although Chopitea made the decision to remain in Mexico permanently and showed a genuine interest in its culture and people, she could not help seeing Mexico through the eyes of an exile. Her experience as a minority intellectual in

Spain and an exile in Mexico shaped her unique perspective on both countries. As the prominent Mexican writer and anthropologist Andrés Henestrosa wrote, "María José tiene dos sangres y, como quien dice, tres espíritus, tres maneras de ver y sentir las cosas: española, vasca y catalana. Y, ¿no pudiera yo decir que después de veinte años de vivir en México ya es, también, un poco Mexicana?" (cover).<sup>4</sup>

While in *Sola* Chopitea grants Montserrat the authority over her own story of exile, she closely identifies with her protagonist. In the prologue to the novel, Chopitea notes: "escribo páginas de una vida real, en las que la ficción verosímil se enlaza de tal manera que no sé dónde empiezan ni en qué momento acaban lo verdadero y lo ficticio" (9). The prologue also states that the year 1936 marked the beginning of a difficult yet meaningful journey that they both share:

Montserrat, a quien conocí en la niñez, me había sido indiferente hasta entonces, casi tanto como mi propia vida. Fue durante la guerra y, después, en la derrota y el destierro, cuando su existencia y la mía cobraron importancia, igual que ocurrió con todos y con todo lo que nos era habitual.  
(9)

Chopitea is thus convinced that life in exile acquires a greater meaning that transcends individual context. As I am about to show, Montserrat's story connects the personal and the collective experiences of exile, delineating the trajectory not only of a displaced person but also of a whole nation.

Like Montserrat's exile journey, the narrative begins in Spain during the Civil War as the protagonist grapples with her internal conflict, represented through her difficult relationship with her parents. Her mother, Teresa, comes from a conservative family of

provincial Catalan landowners. As was customary in rural Catalan families at the time, her first-born brother inherited the patrimony and, being second-born and female, Teresa's only option was to get married. Although she briefly attended school, her parents pulled her out of that school and married her off while she was still practically a child. The text exposes the objectification of Teresa who was known in the society for her exceptional beauty as "la princesita de Panadés" (29).<sup>5</sup> Chopitea represents the backwardness of some traditions still thriving in rural Catalonia by criticizing the old primogeniture law practiced by the Catalan aristocracy. She does so through the words of José Carlos who comments on Montserrat's narrative: "Esa costumbre debe ocasionar envidias," to which Montserrat replies, "Algo hay de eso.... Deberían abolirla definitivamente..." (29).

From the first day of her life, Montserrat is defined by her gender as an unwanted child as she betrays her mother's hope of producing an heir: "Mi madre dice que esperaba un niño, pero resulté niña" (30). She further experiences a physical and emotional disconnection from her mother, as Teresa refuses to breastfeed her as an infant. She then leaves Montserrat's upbringing and education entirely up to her father, Salvador, who virtually becomes her main caregiver. This early dissociation from her mother marks the protagonist's detachment from the world that Teresa represents – the burden of tradition, where femininity means blind submission to authority, social immobility, and financial dependence on the patriarch. In a way, the text dialogues with the tradition of the postwar novel that flourished in Franco's Spain, in which by eradicating the matriarchal figure women "disidentified" with the fate of other women, particularly their mothers (Schumm 11). Yet, Chopitea does not completely eliminate Montserrat's mother

from her text, instead exploring their relationship, which, in many ways, is parallel to the uneasy bond between Catalonia and its Republican exiles. Montserrat dislikes the boundaries set by her mother who attempts to tame Montserrat's free spirit by locking her in the basement for hours. These punishments, nonetheless, only further inflame Montserrat's desire to explore the world: "[mamá] dijo que debí nacer con las maletas junto a mi cuna: ¡siempre dispuesta a viajar! Y, es curioso, desde niña, cuando me reprendía sin pensarlo mucho se me ocurría decir: 'Si me riñes me marcharé a América!'" (42).

Salvador, on the other hand, encourages his daughter's urge to travel and explore. Coming from a family of immigrants: a Uruguayan-born Basque father and a Cuban-born Catalan mother, he represents Montserrat's hybrid origins. Salvador also embodies the link between Spain and its former colonies in the Americas, which makes Montserrat's exile journey, in a way, also a return to her distant routes. He enjoys a wealthy inheritance, receives a good education and has opportunities to travel abroad. Salvador nurtures Montserrat's inquisitive personality and shows her that traveling can be a learning experience, an attitude that she maintains throughout her exile. His multicultural lineage and education both encourage and represent the rebellious and unconstrained side of Montserrat's personality. Although Montserrat's parents come from the same social class, they have very different life paths, dictated by their gender and upbringing. They have dissimilar access to education and wealth as well as distinct social responsibilities and opportunities to see the world. As a typical representative of Catalan bourgeoisie, Montserrat rejects the backwardness of the rural Catalonia that her mother represents and finds more in common with her father, who stands for knowledge and progress in the

midst of stagnant tradition. In exile, she expresses gratitude to him for having played an essential role in her development as an emancipated woman: “Merced a la buena semilla que tú sembraste en mí, a la prebenda establecida, la que tú reclamaste para mí, y a la estancia en Suiza, todo, gracias a ti, ha hecho que yo sea algo en la vida” (410).

Similar to the way in which the protagonist feels split between her father’s and her mother’s values, she finds herself divided between two conflicting worldviews, in the interstitial space of transition from one socio-political system to another. Montserrat confesses that she has experienced “el balance de dos corrientes: de lo pasado, decadente, con su tradicional secuela de incomprensiones, injusticias, convencionalismos sociales, menosprecios y congelada desigualdad económica, y de lo presente, progresista, con proyección al porvenir que, reuniendo todas sus fuerzas, se dispone a sacudirse el tiempo pasado que la ahoga y que se opone a su desarrollo” (66). The clash between the Republican progressive present and the decadent traditions that defined her parents’ lives eventually culminates in the bloodshed of the Civil War. The novel condemns Spanish Nationalists for their association with fascism and speaks in favor of the progress and equality that the democratically grounded Republic stands for. However, the text also equally expresses bitterness towards both political groups that unleash a brutal battle, which, in Montserrat’s view, can only lead to pain and destruction. One can almost hear Chopitea’s own voice through Montserrat’s confession: “en mi voz, temblorosa, vibraba un acento de resentimiento hacia ambos bandos” (49). Montserrat refuses to take sides in this devastating battle and identify with either political group: “¡La política sectaria!” – she exclaims – “¡Los ideales, de uno y otro bando, valiéndose del crimen para imponerse!” (67). While she repeatedly expresses her faith in the Republic

and its progressive ideals, she is extremely critical of the atrocities that some people commit before and during the war in the name of the Republic. During the first weeks of the war in Catalonia and other regions of Spain, revolutionary tribunals replaced courts and almost all leftist militants carried out extrajudicial killings based on political allegiance and social class as a response to Franco's military uprising in the South. This period is known as Red Terror (*Terror Rojo*). "In Barcelona," Anthony Beevor explains, "the wave of repression was carried out mainly by 'investigation groups' and 'control patrols' created by the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias, but also by unscrupulous and sometimes psychologically disturbed individuals, taking advantage of the chaos" (85). Montserrat's family is directly affected by this chaos and violence since they belong to the class of property owners. With the Republican victory in the elections in Barcelona, her uncle Ramón, a monarchist, is persecuted and her father, Salvador, is forced to flee to Geneva for his life. The members of the left-wing Catalan Nationalist syndicate, the *rabassaires*, threaten her uncle, Pedro María, despite his commitment to the Republic and to Catalan nationalism.<sup>6</sup> After interrogations and imprisonment he is eventually executed on Montjuic and Montserrat finds out about his death on the radio. Out of loyalty to her family, she pays visits to her uncle's home and the prison where he is kept prior to his execution, a behavior that arouses suspicion. A Republican intelligence organization hunts her down, arrests, incarcerates, and interrogates her with extreme brutality: "Me trataron mal," she confesses, "me empujaron contra las paredes, me vejaban con burlas y amenazas... me tomaron fotografías, con magnesio, sorprendiéndome en posturas en que no hubiera querido que me viera nadie" (64). Eventually, another relative rescues

Montserrat from her incarceration. However, after her imprisonment, she is convinced that someone is watching her everywhere she goes.

This depiction of both Republicans and Nationalists as aggressors does not communicate an apolitical message. On the contrary, it constitutes an alternative political standpoint in opposition to the mainstream urge to take sides in a civil conflict. In a civil war, the novel proposes, nothing is black and white as boundaries are blurred, if not erased completely. This constant invasion of the protagonist's privacy taken to the extreme, demonstrates how, during a twentieth-century war, the spaces of both the human body and the family, conventionally regarded as private, are invaded as they become exceedingly politicized. The novel distorts the distinction between the secure domestic space and the public space of politics. As Montserrat puts it, "el drama de un país en la guerra moderna no solo está en el frente de batalla. El verdadero espanto amagó nuestra retaguardia, donde el peligro aumentaba día a día" (98). The front line of the Spanish Civil War, the novel suggests, traversed families, dividing parents and children and forcing brothers and sisters to fight against one another. Chopitea shows that politics cannot be perceived as disjointed from the experience of real people who suffer in the conflict no matter whose side they take. Hence, in a civil war, personal experience is intrinsically political. The divorce of Montserrat's parents is symbolic of the "divorce" of the Nationalists from the Republican state that was no longer capable of handling the violent outbursts on the part of both political groups.

The connection between the family and the nation is implicit throughout the novel. The troubled space of the protagonist's family of origin, allegorical of the Spanish nation fragmented by the war, is juxtaposed with that of the Fredlander household. As an

adolescent and, later during her exile, Montserrat visits this Swiss family that epitomizes national stability and the integrity of one's identity. Monsieur Fredlander, his wife and their three children, Violette, Rose-Mai and Pierre, provide Montserrat with the stable nurturing environment she lacks in Catalonia: "la familia Fredlander," she admits, "acogía mis desahogos con ternura, compartiendo mi sufrimiento" (133). The fact that the text refers to the Fredlanders by their family name emphasizes their unity and closeness. On the contrary, we never find out Montserrat's last name, which prefigures the lack of coherence of her family and indicates the need to hide her identity. Curiously, at the beginning of the novel, in order to get employed in the Republican-occupied Barcelona, Montserrat has to conceal her family name since being associated with the privileged class does not only make it hard for her to find a job but also puts her life in danger.

Montserrat recalls the summer she spent in Switzerland with her father as the time when she could travel the perfect roads and spent nights camping out in the woods. She associates both the Fredlanders and Switzerland with freedom, mobility, and acceptance, which contrast with her mother's methods of upbringing in Catalonia. The protagonist exalts the Swiss tradition of liberal democracy, social equality, and the order in both the Swiss family and society. The text counterpoises those ideals to the class division that has created many barriers and conflicts in Spain, leading to absolute chaos. Montserrat also admires the Swiss' strong sense of national identity as the Fredlander family partakes in the all-national mobilization in order to protect the country in the face of a possible fascist invasion. By evoking the traditional Swiss pastoral song, *Le ranz de vaches*, that is usually associated with Swiss nostalgia for the homeland, the novel indicates Montserrat's search for coherence and stability in the context of the

disintegration of both her parents' household and the Spanish nation. Perhaps most importantly, the novel's fascination with the Fredlanders and with Switzerland indicates Chopitea's openness to foreign models of the nation.

In order to escape from the Civil War, Montserrat goes first to France and then to Switzerland. However, as she finds Europe on the brink of World War II, Mexico is the only place that promises her safety. The protagonist's first virtual encounter with Mexico happens through José Carlos who introduces her to certain aspects of his home country while they are still in Barcelona. Her love for him grows parallel to her appreciation for Mexico and she cultivates unrealistic expectations of both him and his home country. He enamors her by frequently taking her out to dinners, celebrations, and hunting trips and by simply putting food on her table in a time of scarcity. As their romance develops, José Carlos paints her a picture of their perfect wedding in Mexico after the war in Spain is over:

La blancura de tu traje se confundirá con las flores; tu rostro entre ellas, parecerá un capullo.... Surcando con los remos el espejo azul de las dormidas aguas de mi lindo lago michoacano olvidarás cuanto has padecido. ¡Seremos muy felices! (70)

He eroticizes her innocence through the image of the flower bud yet to open. By picturing her in a white dress, he accentuates the patriarchal ideal of woman's chastity at her wedding. Although she and José Carlos consummate their relationship while they are still in Spain, Montserrat promises to dress in white when she reunites with José Carlos in Mexico as a sign of her love and devotion. She keeps her promise wearing a dress

“blanco como la espuma de mis ilusiones” as she actively participates in creating this illusion of a blissful union both with José Carlos and with Mexico:

¡Qué bonito debe ser México! Las costumbres parecidas a las nuestras....  
Habrá contrastes; la ciudad moderna...por el interior del país aún hay  
indígenas; conoceré su indumentaria, su manera de vivir, me adentraré en  
su historia.... En su antigua cultura. Comentaré en cartas a papá; para él  
será interesante; le enviaré fotografías de ruinas arqueológicas; le hablaré,  
también, de las aves....” (190)

Montserrat imagines Mexico as being very similar to her blue-eyed fiancé: European in its values and appearance with an exotic flavor of its ancient indigenous cultures. The familial relationship that she seeks to establish with José Carlos epitomizes the “irresistible romance” between a Republican exile and Mexico. Doris Sommer employs the terms “irresistible romance” and “foundational fiction” interchangeably to refer to the use of “productive sexuality in the domestic sphere” in Latin American novels to portray a “non-violent national consolidation” (76). Through the love affair, and later marriage, between Montserrat and José Carlos, Chopitea articulates such an alliance between Mexico and the Republican Spain, which is based on false aspirations to a cultural resemblance and political unity between the two nations. The novel illustrates the inaccurate picture of Mexico promoted by the brand of *hispanista* discourse that the Republican intellectual elites exiled there internalized (Faber 68). According to Sebastiaan Faber, Spanish intellectuals in exile in Mexico emphasized Spain’s cultural dominance in Latin America and strived to compensate for both the Republican defeat in the Civil War and for Spain’s loss of its political authority in the Americas at the end of the

nineteenth century. They aspired to reestablish Spain's cultural hegemony in its former colonies through the emphasis on the cultural and political links between the two nations, a view that, Faber reminds us, was not drastically different from Franco's imperialist ambitions at the time.

In *Sola*, this vision of a productive alliance between Spain and Mexico is also inherent in the discourse of some Mexican intellectuals associated with the Spanish Republic. Chopitea turns Luis Octavio Madero into a fictional character to incorporate in her novel the actual speech that he gave at the *Ateneo Profesional de Periodistas* in Barcelona in 1938:

... España vuelve a ser matriz, y su parto es, como todos los partos, hemorrágico y fecundo. España está sacrificando para salvar a los mismos que la han abandonado. Y a Méjico le cabe el honor de ocupar un sitio al lado de esta gran nación, víctima de un asalto de encrucijadas. (95)

In this transatlantic alliance Spain assumes the role as the original, the mold, and the leader of the Spanish-speaking world. Through this gendered metaphor of a female body in labor Madero's speech longs to erase the spatial borders between Mexico and Republican Spain to portray them as one productive family. The discourse of the fictional Madero has a profound effect on Montserrat: "Me sentí más cerca de México; se me había abierto el horizonte y, con paso firme, penetré en él, para seguir de cerca sus problemas y aspiraciones" (95). This is one of many instances in the novel that indicate the Republican longing for a shared pan-Hispanic identity that transcends the borders of individual nation-states.

For Montserrat, as for many Spanish Republican exiles, Mexico presents a chance to start a new life free from persecution and violence: “¡Con cuánto gusto me habría unido a mis compatriotas para cruzar el océano! De no encontrarse José Carlos en México, igualmente me habría sentido atraída por ese incomparable país, pensando en él como en una nueva patria, con el anhelo de un remanso de paz y tranquilidad” (144). For her, the act of crossing the Atlantic is an act of community building, during which she feels as part of a migrating nation in search of a new start: “México,” Montserrat states, “acoge a los republicanos salidos de España, yo estoy con ellos, voy entre ellos” (190). Although the protagonist uses the pronoun “ellos” instead of “nosotros” to refer to the exiles, by means of the prepositions “con” and “entre” she positions herself in their midst. The incompatibility of her political views with the regime that is about to take power in Spain makes Montserrat identify with the rest of the refugees aboard the ship *Washington*. She is quite open about her ideological affiliation: “No soy franquista, ¡no! ¡jamás!” (190). Their transatlantic journey is both a triumphal voyage toward a collective dream of freedom and the incarnation of the political and cultural alliance between Mexico and Republican Spain: “En los corazones de muchos peninsulares se afirmaba la fe y renacía la esperanza en un futuro inmediato, de un ‘después’ ya no lleno de angustia y de dolor, sino de paz y confianza en los destinos de estos dos grandes pueblos – México y España -, que acudían, una vez más, como dijo Zamacois ‘a una histórica cita de solidaridad en el dolor’” (144).<sup>7</sup>

Despite this longing for a pan-Hispanic community, which surfaces throughout the text, Chopitea’s *hispanista* vision of the Atlantic is not devoid of skepticism. Her text debunks the problematic basis for this “irresistible romance” between the two nations. It

challenges Montserrat's smooth integration into the Mexican nation through problematizing her relationship with her Mexican lover. A struggling journalist on the verge of poverty, José Carlos is not ready to assume financial responsibility for a family, is emasculated, and seeks consolation in alcohol. As he sinks deeper into his addiction, his physical and mental health rapidly deteriorate, making him more susceptible to an emotional crisis. He becomes short-tempered, violent, and manipulative as, on several occasions, he threatens and even hits Montserrat. She finds herself divided between feeling responsible for her lover's life and fearing for her own. She begins to feel helpless in the face of the battle with José Carlos's alcoholism that they both are losing: "El aspecto del ser amado era lamentable. Su mirada no guardaba relación con su inteligencia. Mi postura estática le movió a darme un golpe para que me retirase. Confieso que en ocasiones similares se lo había devuelto. Sí, ya nos faltábamos al respeto. Aquella noche le tuve miedo" (337). Montserrat starts having second thoughts about their long-awaited wedding as she fears being trapped in an abusive marriage. Ironically, one half of the public building where they are about to wed is a courthouse and the other half is a prison, which brings back her memories of imprisonment and interrogation during the Civil War: "Este edificio es la cárcel,' me repetía el eco en mi cerebro. Me sentí transportada en la checa, allá en mi Barcelona. Estoy en la cárcel; me están interrogando. ¿Qué debo responder...? me costó esfuerzo pronunciar el tan esperado 'sí', no me salía la voz" (330). By relating the space of prison to that of the matrimony, the text portrays the latter as a trap, from which Montserrat feels the urge to escape. After she writes her name in the official document followed by her new last name, which, again, is never revealed, Montserrat feels claustrophobic as if the space were closing in around her: "Me sentí

oprimida por un continuo circulo de brazos, pero, entre tantos, ninguno era el de José Carlos" (330). The protagonist sees her future marriage as an entrapment, in which she will be forced to cede to the emotional and physical abuse resulting from José Carlos's drinking problem.

A closer look on José Carlos's alcoholism contributes to our understanding of the way in which the text defines the relationship between the family and the nation. Drinking at the *cantina* is, simultaneously, a destructive and a constructive experience in the text. Besides being a dangerous addiction, it also has a temporary therapeutic effect on José Carlos. It fosters his sense of belonging to a community where he finds understanding and a short-term relief for his mental problems. Timothy Mitchell views Mexican urban *cantinas* as places of "self-construction in the midst of self-deconstruction" and as "a collective, alcohol-assisted birth of the nation" (*Intoxicated Identities* 10). *Sola* too portrays the *cantina*, where José Carlos becomes a frequent visitor, as an alternative space of nation building. In the novel, it is a common gathering place of the brightest male intellectuals who accompany their poetry readings with liquor that, paradoxically, stimulates their creativity and fosters the feeling of comradeship among them. Chopitea chooses the names of prominent Mexican intellectuals at the time to name José Carlos's friends who gather at the *cantina*. Among them are the journalist and diplomat, Luis Octavio Madero, the poet, Guillermo Aguirre y Fierro, the Mexican silent film director, Leopoldo Beristain, the composer, Leopoldo Palacio, and the famous actor, Alfonso Bedoya. It is not unlikely that she was personally acquainted with these men from the *tertulias* that she attended with Madero in Mexico City. The reference to these people once again complicates the boundary between fiction and reality.

Whereas in the novel, *cantina* is the space of community and nation building, it is also a space of male “homosocial desire,” virtually inaccessible to women. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick employs this term to refer to same-sex bonding that is not necessarily or obviously sexual. Homosocial bonds, she upholds, grant men the privileged access to social power that simultaneously requires women’s presence and excludes them. In her well-known study, *Between Men*, Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that, in patriarchal societies, the relationships between men such as friendship, mentorship or rivalry are articulated in a triangular structure. In this structure, the woman (or a discourse of “woman”) has the function of “the conduit of homosocial desire” (99). Put differently, in the transactive sexual economy of patriarchal society, the woman is both structurally important and subordinate to male social space. In the novel too, the *cantina* is an exclusively male space as the door sign suggests: “Se prohíbe la entrada a menores de edad, a mujeres y a uniformados” (279). This prohibition treats women as minors and, at the same time, compares them with the people in uniform who are called to protect national integrity and order. Having ignored the sign, Montserrat manages to sneak in through the back door. This demonstrates that, even if she gains access to public places and intellectual circles in urban Mexico, for the most part, she is still seen as an intruder who has to infiltrate the space of civil society inconspicuously and remains on its margins. Despite the general prohibition, however, she accompanies José Carlos to multiple *cantinas*: *Las Veladores*, *El Retirito*, *Peregrina*, *La Rendija*, *Taquería Dolores*, *Chez-Raulito*, and others, visiting this eternal kaleidoscope of urban bohemian geography. José Carlos brings Montserrat to the *cantinas* so she can serve as an excuse for him to leave earlier if his drinking buddies insist on him staying. Hence, her ultimate role is to establish

boundaries for José Carlos while her presence is, for the most part, ignored by everyone in the *cantina*. She neither participates in the alcohol-induced intellectual debate nor does her presence prevent José Carlos from consuming liquor uncontrollably. His companions encourage him to stay longer by questioning his masculinity: “¡Tómame otra, José Carlos! ... ¿Qué? ¿tienes miedo de perder a Montserrat?, ¿a poco ella te domina?” (284). In this situation, Montserrat feels completely helpless as she realizes that José Carlos’s homosocial bond with his male friends not only is much stronger than their relationship but also threatens to destroy it: “Ninguno quiso contribuir a nuestra felicidad; muy al contrario: eran cómplices en el drama que se avecinaba” (284). Through the *cantina* scenes, the novel rejects the model of community and nation building that allocates to women the role of passive bystanders.

Moreover, Chopitea represents this man’s lifestyle as destructive both to the human body and the body of the nation since substance abuse is capable of driving even the brightest minds to madness. As Montserrat explains to the doctor after José’s alcohol-induced suicide attempt: “Se trata de un hombre que se vuelve loco...es periodista, muy inteligente; pero bebe” (337). José Carlos incarnates the archetypical mad intellectual that Miguel de Cervantes once exemplified in his timeless *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. In her description of her fiancé in crisis Montserrat makes an allusion to this masterpiece of Castilian literature: “Nunca hasta ahora vi en el rostro y en la postura de José Carlos una semejanza tan clara con don Quijote de la Mancha. Mi cuarto me parecía la sala de un castillo...” (297). If Don Quixote chooses to live in the fantasy world of chivalric novels, José Carlos’ insanity stems from him living in an alcohol-induced illusion and his inability to accept reality. Chopitea paints a grotesque image of José Carlos’s body rejecting the

toxins, an image similar to those found on the pages of Cervantes's novel: "su intoxicación era tan aguda que le incitaba a los accesos de vómitos – llamados por los médicos 'vómitos bulbares' -, estruendosos y lanzados con tal fuerza que, desde la cama, salpicaba las paredes laterales y aun la de enfrente" (336). Chopitea turns to Cervantes once more to highlight the universality of the woman's condition in a man's world. Montserrat recalls flipping through the pages of *Don Quixote* and realizing that Cervantes's novel is full of love stories in which women are always the victims of men's betrayal and abuse. They are also the ones who pay a high price for their right to love and be loved:

¡Cuántas historias de amores se han escrito! – pensé – En casi todas la mujer es la eterna víctima. El caso de Lucinda: por no obedecer a sus padres. El de Dorotea: por quedar prendida, a escondidas, de los amores de aquel Fernando y por creer en unas promesas, al dejar de ser doncella, también fue otra víctima.... (183)

Montserrat wants to change that unfortunate pattern and begins to question if she too is destined to fall victim of her love for José Carlos because of her blind trust in his promises. When his madness makes her feel as if she was confined in a medieval castle, Montserrat realizes that she has turned into another unlucky heroine of a love story, whose prince charming betrayed her. She refuses to be José Carlos's victim and decides to leave him, asking for a divorce. On the one hand, these direct and indirect references to Cervantes aid Chopitea in painting a picture of a failed male-dominated model of the nation, where women are nothing but victims of their blind trust in the patriarchal order. On the other hand, these references also suggest that Chopitea's perspective on exile identity is a

complex one: she marries Montserrat's Catalan origin with the Castilian literary tradition on the Mexican soil.

While the novel challenges the protagonist's smooth integration into the Mexican nation by proving her relationship with José Carlos dysfunctional, it does not however completely deny the possibility of that integration. On the contrary, the text reimagines the Mexican family to allocate in it a place for a female Catalan exile. Disillusioned by both her sterile and oppressive marriage and the exclusiveness of the male-dominated urban intellectual community, Montserrat leaves Mexico City for the rural town of Arroyozarco that, for her, epitomizes "el verdadero México" (352).<sup>8</sup> The bucolic landscape of Arroyozarco reminds her of Catalonia before the Civil War. Here she establishes a school for small children, teaching them everything from the catechism to history and music, and eventually, wins the trust and respect of the whole community. Religion plays a central role in this model of community and nation building. For Montserrat, it is an effective way of communicating with indigenous Mexicans who have internalized Catholicism as part of their identity over the centuries of Spanish colonization. Hence, the novel represents the indigenous characters as part of the global Catholic community, echoing the nostalgia for the lost Empire founded on Catholic values and the idea of a shared pan-Hispanic spirituality.

At the same time, by taking on the role of a rural educator in Arroyozarco, the protagonist acts in unison with the impetus of the Mexican revolutionary government to bring culture to the masses and, in that manner, to integrate the rural indigenous masses into the state. Unsurprisingly, the state authorities do not welcome Montserrat's use of Catholic doctrine in her school. It is not long before she receives a warning from a state

official: “todas las dependencias del gobierno eran laicas y que, si bien [ella] no pertenecía oficialmente a la brigada, podía tener la apariencia” (356). Even though Montserrat is not officially part of the Brigade, she is working in Arroyozarco with the permission of the leader of the Brigade, Poncho.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the authorities encourage her to represent the Mexican state accordingly, promising her all the support she needs if she complies: “¡Adelante, señorita Revolución! ¿Qué más necesita?” (365). The state official thus acknowledges her role as an instrument of the state, through which the government can control the education of rural indigenous communities like Arroyozarco.

Chopitea positions Montserrat in the very center of this modernizing project. The text portrays the people of Arroyozarco as “gente tan abandonada, sufrida y noble” that have put their hopes in her (359). The novel thus implies that these silent and unjustly mistreated indigenous subjects desperately need someone to comprehend them and to speak for them, a role that the protagonist of *Sola* gladly assumes. Chopitea emphasizes both the need and the difficulty of the incorporation of the indigenous subject into the modern nation-state:

En más de una ocasión, ellos me colocaron en un brete; su ciencia empírica, hija de una secular experiencia transmitida de generación a generación, estaba frecuentemente en desacuerdo con los modernos métodos de los cuales me habían hablado los ingenieros, y era obra de romanos hacerles entender que estaban equivocados. (367)

This vision of Mexico deems the indigenous subject as backward and socio-economically peripheral to the Mexican nation. Ironically, the novel portrays the indigenous inhabitants of Arroyozarco as exiles, deprived of their rights and displaced to the margins of the

Mexican nation-state, and not Montserrat, whom Chopitea positions in the very center of the community and the nation. By representing Montserrat, a white European who came to Mexico with nothing more than a suitcase, as more privileged and successful than the natives of Arroyozarco, the text also raises the question of race and social class within the discourse of Spanish Republican exile.

Chopitea's view of race is further complicated by Montserrat's identification with the Virgin of Guadalupe, a product of the syncretic joining of the dark-skinned Aztec goddess, Tonantzin, and the Christian Virgin Mary. The text refers to Guadalupe as "una voz híbrida," drawing a connection between the Virgin's hybrid identity and that of Montserrat, who proclaims herself a "ciudadana del mundo" (140). Montserrat's exile mimics Mary's symbolic journey across the Atlantic as part of Catholic tradition and her transformation into Guadalupe, the "orgullo del mundo católico de México" and a Mexican national symbol (140). Montserrat's new life in Mexico retraces the conflation of Virgin Mary's image with that of an indigenous deity.

Throughout colonial history, Guadalupe has been a contradictory figure. Whereas the paternalistic colonial order used her to legitimize the subjugation of the indigenous people to colonial officials, Louise Burkhart reminds us that, throughout history, her cult also left room for the "subversion" of that order and hierarchy (219). Burkhart maintains that the Virgin's destabilizing potential lied within her pivotal role in the construction of Mexican identity. During the independence wars, the worshipers of Guadalupe, both indigenous and creole, saw each other as family, which eventually helped them articulate their collective identity as opposed to the externally imposed authority of the Spanish Crown (219). During the Mexican Revolution, for the first time people began to associate

Guadalupe with the dispossessed indigenous masses and with class struggle (220). Guadalupe represented the possibility of the inversion of social hierarchy as her less fortunate devotees believed that she empowered and protected them against injustice and abuse by the authorities. In post-revolutionary Mexico, Burkhardt upholds, Guadalupe has embodied the Mexican national identity that presupposes the unity of all Mexican people, rich and poor, indigenous and *mestizo* under one mother (220).

Montserrat is in many ways similar to Guadalupe. In Arroyozarco, she experiences a sort of virgin motherhood, as she is the mother figure despite being childless. She assumes responsibility over the children and the adults of Arroyozarco, caring for them and teaching them everything from hygiene to how to use new farming technology. They often come to her for advice and in search of consolation: “Las esposas de los trabajadores y madres de mis alumnos empezaron a venir a mí. En un principio fue para pedirme que escribiera una carta al familiar ausente; luego, en busca de consejo. Fue así como entré no solo en las casas, sino, muchas veces, en los corazones de la gente” (359). She acts as their protector and strives to help them out of poverty and destitute. At the same time, she appeals to Catholic values as a universal language that helps her foster a community and enter people’s homes and hearts. They see Montserrat not only as an educator but also as their spiritual leader.

Furthermore, the protagonist’s name evokes the homonymous Virgin of Montserrat, who resembles Guadalupe in that she also has a dark complexion, due to which she is commonly referred to as La Moreneta. La Moreneta’s blackness is accidental: the figure of the virgin was blackened overtime due to burning of candles in the shrine where it was located. Nevertheless, Elisa Foster argues, in the early modern

period it began to be associated with race (20-22). After the Reconquest of Spain, for white Christians the darkness of one's skin began to epitomize inferiority. Instead of representing the non-Christian and non-white other, however, La Moreneta became "the champion of Christian faith" (Foster 23). Catholic Spain appropriated this Catalan symbol to embody the power of Catholicism over Muslim and Jewish infidels, an attempt by Catholic Spain to reconcile its own hybrid cultural and racial past (23).

In the twentieth century, Catalan nationalists adopted La Moreneta as a symbol of protest against Franco's homogenizing cultural politics. Tomas Harrington reminds us that the reconstruction of the Catalan identity during the dictatorship was the initiative of Catholic nationalists and the cultivation of Catalan national sensibility within Catholicism contested Franco's model of the nation (128). The new Catalan Church, according to Claudi Esteva Fabregat, was based on the cult of Virgin de Montserrat and was the source of recuperation and cultivation of Catalan identity during Francoism (162). Moreover, La Moreneta represented an alternative deity to Saint Teresa of Avila, who, according to Mitchell, was the "mythic symbol of the 'racial essences' of Spain" during the Franco regime (*Betrayal of the Innocents* 99). Saint Teresa, born in the province of Castile and León, epitomized the centralistic Castilian cultural model under which Franco attempted to unify the country. Not surprisingly then, *Sola* juxtaposes Montserrat with her mother, Teresa, who embodies the hostility of both the protagonist's family of origin and Franco's Catholic nationalism toward any sort of divergent liberal thinking. By incorporating Catalan Catholic symbolism, Chopitea expresses an affinity to the Catalan Nationalist struggle against the regime. Bridging the symbolism of the two black virgins is yet another way, in

which the novel establishes a meaningful connection between Catalonia, Spain and Mexico in order to challenge Franco's imperialist ambition.

Chopitea also employs Catholic symbolism to redefine the Mexican nation and to propose an alternative model of the *mestizo* family, in which both indigenous and white women are in the center. Soon after she moves to Arroyozarco and ends her marriage with José Carlos, Montserrat receives a call for help from a Yucatecan woman, Cecilia, whom she met in Mexico City. To a certain extent, Montserrat identifies with Cecilia as she is too a displaced person. Like many indigenous people who live in the countryside, Cecilia is forced to leave her village and look for work in the city. There, a man, whose identity the text purposely silences, seduces, impregnates, and abandons her. Cecilia's family rejects her for having conceived a child out of wedlock. When everyone urges her to abort the unwanted fruit of her sin, Cecilia insists on keeping him despite her community's disavowal: "¡Qué importa lo que diga la gente! ¡Es mi hijo!" (379). She goes against the social norm by refusing to abort her child for the sake of honor like many of her "experienced" friends do (379). She moves to Arroyozarco where she helps Montserrat care for the village's sick and gives music lessons to children, occupations that facilitate her reintegration into the community. Cecilia's character resonates with La Malinche archetype, as the society perceives her both as a sinful mother and a victim of seduction. Montserrat, on the other hand, acts as the protector of that unborn child and as his spiritual mother, similar to Guadalupe: "el niño era un hijo para las dos. ...lo colmábamos de mimos y procurábamos suavizar la voz y el trato entre nosotras" (401). Like the *mestizo* child in Paz's proverbial *Laberinto de soledad*, he has two mothers, Montserrat (Guadalupe) and Cecilia (La Malinche). His father (El Chingón) is completely

absent from the picture; he is just a penetrating force that does not need to be named. This child is thus the epitome of the nation that was born of a sin and that must recognize both its European and indigenous heritage. Importantly, he inherits Catholicism and the novel portrays him as Jesus. Cecilia's son is born on a Christmas Eve when Montserrat is away from the village. She is notified about his birth and rushes back to find him "envuelto en pobres pañales" in a barn, surrounded by barn animals (399). Naturally, Montserrat names him after her own father, Salvador, the saviour, which reinforces the idea of continuity between generations and between Mexico and Spain through Catholic tradition.

By imagining this *mestizo* family in terms of the homosocial partnership between Cecilia and Montserrat, the text undermines the foundation of patriarchy itself. It disrupts the traditional structure of the patriarchal family, in which the man is reproduced as the superior member of society through his domination of the woman, and challenges men's hegemony over the space of civil society. Consequently, it grants to women the authority to envisage the nation from the locus of their gendered experience. Nonetheless, the power within this non-traditional household is not balanced. Montserrat is the one who occupies the position of the patriarch and Cecilia's role is limited to reproduction. By naming Cecilia's son she symbolically gives a direction to this newborn nation and reinforces its ties to Catholic Spain.

*Sola* articulates the nation beyond state borders and in terms of a transatlantic journey from Catalonia to Mexico. By expanding the national borders, the novel allocates space in that nation for an exiled woman previously excluded due to both her gender and her status as political exile. Chopitea's often evokes the Golden Age of Spanish Empire

through the allusion to Castilian literary tradition and the use of Catholic symbolism. She establishes a spiritual connection between Spain and Mexico, grounded in the nations' shared past, language, and religion. However, her text does not have an easy relationship with that *hispanista* view of the Atlantic. Catholic symbolism also enables Chopitea to expose tensions between different nationalisms within Spain and to raise the questions of race and class in the discourse of Republican exile. The text articulates the exile identity as flexible and fluid throughout the novel: at times Montserrat identifies as Catalan, and other times, Chopitea emphasizes her Spanishness or Mexicanness. As the protagonist breaks some familial ties and establishes others in their place, she constantly remaps her identity. While the novel does not resolve the conflicts triggered and exposed by the experience of exile, it opens up space for the negotiation of those conflicts. Ultimately, *Sola* shows that an exile's internal struggles and experiences are intertwined with the battles of national and international significance, an argument that is fundamentally political.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I understand the Atlantic in terms of the Hispanic Atlantic, a discursive space, in which the Spanish Conquest of the Americas symbolically marked the beginning of colonial relationships that laid a foundation for the existing structures of power. Importantly, I conceive of the Hispanic Atlantic not only in terms of a dualistic post-colonial relationship between Spain and Latin America but also as a space influenced by the political and cultural presence of English-speaking nations (the United States in particular) and contested by cultural minorities such as, in this particular text, the Catalans.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Diccionario de escritores mexicanos: siglo XX*, Luis Octavio Madero was born in Morelia, Michoacan, in 1908. He studied law but abandoned that career in order to move to Mexico City and dedicate himself to journalism. He was one of the founders of *El Nacional* where he contributed for about thirty years. He formed part of the "Grupo Agorista" between 1929 and 1930, a group of young intellectuals and artists that promoted social and revolutionary art. He worked as a reporter in Spain and served as a consul in Barcelona between 1938 and 1939, where he met Chopitea. Madero's writing reflected his support for the Spanish Republic, the politics of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, and the working classes in both countries. He wrote poetry and several plays, *El octubre español* (1935), *Los alzados* (staged in 1935), *Sindicato* (staged in 1936), and *Cuando ya no vivamos* (year unknown). Madero died in 1964 in Mexico City.

<sup>3</sup> Some of those newspapers were *El Nacional*, *Nosotras*, *Confidencias*, *Todo*, *Mañana*, *La semana ilustrada*, and *Nuevo Mundo*.

<sup>4</sup> Henestrosa's remark appeared on the cover of Chopitea's later book-long essay *Gueshuba* published in Mexico in 1960. This autobiographical essay with an anthropological bend narrates her short trip to Juchitán de Zaragoza in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, during which her narrator becomes an inquisitive observer and participant in the culture of Isthmus Zapotecs. The essay provoked so much interest in the Mexican media at the time of its publication that it was followed with a second edition just a year later. Unfortunately, it has been completely overlooked by literary critics today and is yet to be explored in depth.

<sup>5</sup> "Panadés" refers to Penedès, a prosperous wine-producing coastal region located in southern Catalonia.

<sup>6</sup> *Unió de Rabassaires*, or Unión de Arendadores, was a syndicate of non-proprietary vine growers founded in Catalonia in 1922. This syndicate grew rapidly during the Second Republic and was closely related to the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* in 1931. The triumph of Franco in the Civil War marked the end of the *Unió de Rabassaires*.

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Zamacois (1873-1971) was a Cuban-born novelist and journalist who sympathized with the Republican cause, lived in Barcelona, and went into exile in France, Mexico and, eventually, in Argentina.

<sup>8</sup> Arroyozarco (or Arroyo Zarco) is located in the municipality of Aculco, one hundred and sixty kilometers from Mexico City. During the Spanish Empire, it was called the *Hacienda* of Arroyo Zarco. Maximiliano de Habsburgo stayed here with his wife Carlota in 1864 and 1867, a fact which Chopitea mentions in *Sola* and which brings up the last attempt of Spain to establish a monarchy in Mexico.

<sup>9</sup> Created by President Álvaro Obregón in 1921, the Missions functioned as a mediator between the state and the countryside. They represented the attempts by the post-revolutionary Mexican state to modernize rural areas between the 1920s and the 1950s. José de Vasconcelos viewed the Missions as a way to foster the *mestizo* identity that would, in turn, reinforce the stability and power of the nation-state.

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