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From Silence to Obscenity: Tracing the Reappropriation of Misogynistic Language to Assert Female Subjectivity Through the Works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés

Reine L. (Reine Lynn) Turcato
FROM SILENCE TO OBSCENITY: TRACING THE REAPPROPRIATION OF MISOGYNISTIC LANGUAGE TO ASSERT FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH THE WORKS OF FERRÉ, VEGA AND VALDÉS.

By

Reine L. Turcato

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The members of the Committee approve the dissertation *From Silence to Obscenity: Tracing the Reappropriation of Misogynistic Language to Assert Female Subjectivity Through the Works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés* of Reine L. Turcato defended on May 24, 2006.

______________________________
Delia Poey
Professor Directing Dissertation

______________________________
Virgil Suarez
Outside Committee Member

______________________________
Roberto Fernández
Committee Member

______________________________
Brenda Cappuccio
Committee Member

Approved:

______________________________
William Cloonan, Chair, Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
To Leonard and Carol Turcato, Everything I am is because you love me.

In loving memory of Wiley, my love, my heart...
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to show the need for language change according to current French feminist criticism and to demonstrate the reappropriation of traditionally phallocentric language to assert female subjectivity in works of Caribbean women writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century. According to French feminist criticism, a key element of oppression is language. Therefore, the use of language is important in examining the writing of these three women authors. In this project, the idea of language reappropriation is seen in the short story, “The Youngest Doll” (1976) by Rosario Ferré; the short story “Solutions, Inc.” (1987) by Ana Lydia Vega (1987); and the novel, I Gave You All I Had (1996) by Zoé Valdés. The French feminist critical framework also serves to show how Caribbean woman writers have used language not to just break through ideological constraints inherent in it, but have found language to be an important instrument to bridge the gap between the masculine and the feminine. Thus, they can supersede the traditional phallocentric word in order to assert their own feminine voice. The continuum of the use of language, as demonstrated in this study, begins in the 1970s with Rosario Ferré using silence in her work as a way to communicate, making what is not written a powerful voice. In the 1980s, Ana Lydia Vega skillfully decodes the patriarchal ideal of the female/wife and uses it as a tool to regain control in order to destabilize societal constructs in her short story “Solutions, Inc.”. It is with Zoé Valdés in the 1990s that one can see that silence and subtlety give way to salacity in her use of the taboo. This project elucidates how contemporary Caribbean women writers, despite their differences in socio-economic, educational, and familial backgrounds, have reappropriated misogynistic language in keeping with their own personal history to privilege the feminine voice that was once hidden in literature. In addition, this study situates these texts in
relation to the idea of *l’écriture feminine* as originated by Hélène Cixous in French feminist criticism.
CHAPTER 1: LA RANA APLASTADA: THE USE OF FRENCH FEMINIST CRITICISM TO LOOK AT THREE CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS.

"The squished frog croaks the loudest" is a popular Mexican saying. This particular proverb is most valuable to express the idea that the one who objects the most is the one who suffers the most. The suffering of the “squished” is the product of oppression. Furthermore, the brutal act of ‘squishing’ can be seen as a metaphor for violent acts perpetuated on women’s bodies and psyches, specifically through language as it inherently possesses phallocentric ideology which subjugates the female. The use of language becomes an important element in examining the writing of women authors as they attempt to take back control of their own minds and bodies. Therefore, this dissertation demonstrates the reappropriation of traditionally phallocentric language to assert female subjectivity in works of Caribbean women writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century. In this project, the idea of language reappropriation is seen in the short story, “The Youngest Doll” (1976) by Rosario Ferré; the short story “Solutions, Inc.”(1987) by Ana Lydia Vega (1987); and the novel, I Gave You All I Had (1996), by Zoé Valdés. The French feminist critical framework also serves to show how Caribbean woman writers have used language not just to break through ideological constraints inherent in it, but have found language to be an important instrument to bridge the gap between the masculine and the feminine. Thus, they are able to supersede the traditional phallocentric word to assert their own feminine voice. The continuum of the use of language, as demonstrated in this study, begins in the 1970’s with Rosario Ferré using silence in her work as a way to communicate, making what is not written a powerful voice. In the 1980s, Ana Lydia Vega skillfully decodes the patriarchal ideal of the female/wife and uses it as a tool
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and linguistic taboos. This project elucidates how
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feminine voice that was once hidden in literature. In
addition, this study situates these texts in relation to the
idea of l’écriture féminine as originated by Hélène Cixous in
French feminist criticism.

This chapter contains three essential and
interconnected discussions that substantiate the premise of
this dissertation. The first discussion is about the complex
definition of language and how it is employed in this study.
Since the French feminist framework sees language as a tool
of oppression, the second discussion is on the theoretical
approaches used in this project. The discussion on French
feminist criticism shows how it applies to language as seen
through the writings of Irigaray and Cixous who are the key
authors in identifying the oppression of women through
language. Moreover, Cixous’ idea of l’écriture féminine is
discussed as an essential assertion in the area of language
and women’s writing. Finally, the historical and
contemporary connection between the Caribbean and France
shows how a Western theory can be applied to the
Caribbean/Latin America.

The term “language” encompasses an immeasurable realm
of meanings. The definition of language is determined by
one’s particular perception of the word. Language is defined
in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as

(2): a systematic means of communicating ideas or
feelings by the use of conventionalized signs,
sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings.²

For the purposes of this project, the term language will be used to embrace any and all features that fall within this broad definition so that analysis will not be limited just to linguistics and semiotics, but will also incorporate what can be found in the absence of it. This project uses the idea of language as conventionalized understood meanings to identify the sociological ideologies that feminist criticism explores.

Ferré, Vega, and Valdés use phallocentric language in their exploration of hegemonic ideology to subvert masculine subjectivity to create a voice of their own. Within Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré’s 1976 collection of short stories The Youngest Doll, the short story “The Youngest Doll” lacks description of masculine characters in order to subvert the masculine role. Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega’s 1987 collection True and False Romances contains the short story “Solutions, Inc.” which decodes the patriarchal concept of women as ideal female/wife to appropriate the masculine voice so as to give an opening for the feminine voice. Cuban writer Zoé Valdés’ 1998 novel I Gave You All I Had utilizes taboos as a way to identify and break with societal constructs to assert the female voice. Through analysis of these works, it will be shown that language becomes a tool for the defense of women to surpass their subordinate roles within the phallocentric system that allows these authors to assert their own feminine voice.

A look at the overall research on these authors’ works (not just the particular texts examined in this study), shows that Ferré’s texts have received broad criticism. Vega’s texts have not been looked at to the extent that Ferré’s have been, yet there is still a good amount of research on her works. Finally, Zoé Valdés has received very little criticism. In looking at the particular short stories “The Youngest Doll” and “Solutions, Inc.”, there is limited
research using feminist criticism to analyze the use of
language. The work that has been done shows that many
critics have touched upon Ferré’s works looking at her use
of symbolism while others explore identity and
representations of women in her work. Ana Lydia Vega’s
critics look at her work in terms of her use of humor,
identity construction, and the literary techniques of
imagery, imaginary, satire, code switching, parody,
intertextuality, orality, and narrators that she
incorporates into her texts. The only criticism to date on
Valdes’ *I Gave You All I Had* looks at the economic
representation of the dollar. Furthermore, some critics have
coupled Ferré and Vega, as they are both from Puerto Rico
and have similar educations, showing the influence of
feminist criticism in their works. However, they have not
been linked together through a continuum of language
reappropriation as argued in this study. At present, there
has been no connection of these three Caribbean women
writers as to how their use of language connects them
through French feminist criticism.

The overall theoretical framework for this study is a
French feminist critical approach that shows the necessity
for language change. The need to question the phallocentric
system of language is discussed by French feminist critics
Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Therefore, “This Sex Which
Is Not One” (1977) and “The Laugh of Medusa” (1975),
respectively, are discussed as they are the key texts that
represent the argument of the oppression of women through
language. In order to discern these ideas of feminism, a
discussion on the background of French feminism as related
to language is needed. The works of the theorists
represented in this chapter have looked at language in the
mediums of the spoken word and the written word. For the
purposes of this project, the presentation of the theorists
has been limited to refer to writing with the understanding
that speech is also a representation of language.
The idea of oppression of women through language in French feminist criticism is a complex perspective that has been influenced by various Western philosophies beginning with the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and then later fused with Saussure’s theories in linguistic structuralism. Many literary and social theorists, such as Lacan and Derrida, have used the ideas of Freud and Saussure to form new paradigms that consequently have influenced French feminist criticism.

Freud is the foremost writer of psychoanalysis. It is through his work in psychology that current psychoanalytic theory has developed. Freud utilizes phallogocentric logic as an explanatory device for the justification of many his views. However, Freud does not have a definitive body of text to his approaches, thus leaving his views open for various interpretations. Indeed many theorists have used Freud’s psychoanalytic theories as the basis for their own works and incorporated the ideas of linguistic theories when applied to the written word. Only Freud’s basic principles are stated here as further details of his ideas are looked at through Cixous and Irigaray. In order to understand Freud’s influence on contemporary feminist theory, one must look at his basic principles:

The assumption that there are unconscious mental processes, the recognition of the theory of resistance and repression, the appreciation of the importance of sexuality and the Oedipus complex—these constitute the principal subject-matter of psychoanalysis and the foundations of its theory. (Strachey 122)

It is specifically Freud’s idea of the Oedipus complex—the process of a subject taking up a sexualized identity by transferring affections from the mother on to the non-family members of the opposite sex—that many theorists challenge (Green and LeBihan 178). Freud’s explanation of sexual development is that during the period of sexual development
identification, an infant’s sexuality is determined after they have experienced and resolved the Oedipus complex. The girl sees the penis and desires it, feeling her own inadequacy; the little boy sees the female lack of penis and becomes afraid for the safety of his own. Freud reduces sexual determination to a matter of which genitals can be seen and which genitals are ‘invisible’ or perceived absent. This basic biological determinism is the foundation for the phallocentric Western world that privileges the male. In this order, women are judged as inadequate or lacking. This is a major element in not only feminist writing, but in other Western thought.

The second influence on feminist criticism is structuralism. This theory is an interpretative application that picks out significant patterns of signs and draws conclusions from such patterns to seek order from the text. Saussurean linguistics implies that binary oppositions organize all language. Binary oppositions are dichotomies that represent theoretical opposites. According to this body of thought, there is “an assumption of ultimate sources of meaning” (Chandler 1). Saussure advanced this idea when he looked at the level of the signifier and the signified in relation to the sign. The following equation shows Saussure’s idea:

\[
\text{Sign (whole)} = \text{signified (concept)} + \text{signifier (word)}
\]

The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signified/concept with the signifier/word. A sign must have a signified/concept and a signifier/word. In Saussure’s theory, the word (the signifier) is not determined by its mental concept (the signified). He shows this idea in looking at various languages:

Languages differ in how they refer to the same referent... No specific signifier is 'naturally' more suited to a signified than any other signifier; in principle, any signifier could represent any signified. (Chandler 1)
This arbitrariness of the signified/concept and signifier/word helps to identify “the distinction which separates each from the other” (Saussure 79). This is called the Arbitrariness Principle in which Saussurean semioticians emphasize that there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified” (Chandler 1). This distinction is an important point for analytical purposes. The arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier/word and signified/concept is an important issue adopted by Lacan. Lacan’s post-structuralist ideas expand upon Saussure’s structuralist view to show that the same signifier/word can be attributed to different signifieds/concepts. The only way of understanding which signified/concept is being invoked is to look at the relationship between the two signifiers/words. Lacan then draws a relationship between the signifier/word, signified/concept and the subject interpreting them in that the subject is ruled by the law of the signifier/word over the signified/concept (Green and LeBihan 171). Thus, this interaction between signifier/word, signified/concept, and the subject is a point for further interpretation.

Lacan connects Saussure’s ideas of language to Freud’s psychoanalysis in that language establishes order in two distinct ways. Organization of language is determined through 1) systems of syntax and 2) polarities through systems of semantics. As Freud’s views are in psychology, Lacan takes a philosophical approach to look at Freud in a way that is more figurative than literal. He suggests that the female and (in consequence) her subjectivity are defined by what she lacks, what is absent. Lacan’s paradigm—Real-Symbolic-Imaginary orders—is deeply rooted in Freudian notions of the Oedipal phase, infantile sexuality, and the project of uncovering unconscious processes through language and associations. It is through Lacan’s principle called the Mirror Stage that the infant learns through the absence or
presence of satisfaction (i.e. breast milk from the mother, then later the mother herself). He links the idea of absence or presence as it is recreated in language through locating the infant in the world by another intervening force- the patriarchal law or *nom du père*. This law situates the infant in the patriarchal society of Western culture (Lacan “The Symbolic Order” 86). According to Lacan, a child must separate from the Real phase (from its mother's body) in order to enter into the Symbolic phase. It is through the figurative Mirror Stage that the subject becomes situated in the realm of the Symbolic, which is the realm of language and representation. Lacan names the center of the Symbolic as the ‘Phallus,’ disclosing the patriarchal system of language. By the recognition of the self and of the ‘Other’ in the reflection, the process of gaining subjectivity begins. Lacan incorporates Freud’s ideas of the ‘self’ as he reconstructs Saussure’s principles in order to focus on the metaphorical and physical figure of woman to locate ‘her’ outside the ideological structure of language thereby giving ‘her’ a poorly constructed identity that leaves an open interpretation of subjectivity that feminism finds so important. Lacan’s application of this idea to language through the structuralist idea of the signifier/word and signified/concept has been a point of interpretation for other poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida.

In his book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida presents his theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction attacks the Western metaphysical thought that privileges certain ideas and concepts. Derrida uses Saussure’s idea of binary opposition to show that, in each pair in the opposition, one element is suppressed and the other is privileged. This leaves the privileged term dependent on the suppressed term for its meaning, concluding that language is an ultimately arbitrary unstable system. As Saussure saw language as comprised of a differential network at the level of the signifier and the signified, Derrida saw this as a path to
discern that language never contains full meaning. By looking at binary opposition, one can ‘deconstruct’ the terms to allow the suppressed or marginalized term to destabilize the dominant. Many theorists, including Cixous and Irigaray, have incorporated this idea into their work. Unfortunately, deconstruction has an innate flaw at the theoretical level. “It deconstructs itself pedagogically because its very applicability belies the strength and complexity of its philosophical base” (Green and LeBihan 215). The search for a final meaning can lead to naïve readings of texts, according to Green and LeBihan (215). Despite the inherent drawback to deconstruction, it has functioned as a valuable analyzing tool in the works of feminist critics.

French feminist critics Cixous and Irigaray, in “The Laugh of Medusa” and “This Sex Which Is Not One” respectively, use the ideas of Freud, Lacan, and Derrida for another interpretation of the hegemonic system of language and its oppression of women. Derrida’s idea of the structure of language produces the term "logocentric" to describe word/logo system in the Western culture. This system, in general, places primacy of certain terms over others in the array of binary oppositions. Furthermore, in Lacan’s Mirror Stage, the center of the Symbolic is named the “Phallus” producing the term ‘phallocentric’ to show that the structure of language is centered on a patriarchal system. Combining the ideas of Derrida and Lacan, Cixous coins the term: phallo(go)centric.

Thus a phallogocentric culture is one which is structured by binary oppositions-- male/female, order/chaos, language/silence, presence/absence, speech/writing, light/dark, good/evil, etc.--and in which the first term is valued over the second term; Cixous and Irigaray insist that all valued terms (male, order, language, presence, speech, etc) are aligned with each other, and that all of them together provide
the basic structures of Western thought. (Klages
"Helene Cixous” 1)

In “This Sex Which Is Not One,” Irigaray, like Cixous, follows the thinking of poststructuralist theories to question the relationship between language and bodies. Irigaray particularly addresses male and female bodies and masculine and feminine language by looking at the differences between the two in autoeroticism. Like Cixous, she focuses on the female body and how it has been constructed in the phallogocentric systems of Freud and Lacan. Irigaray explores more in depth the question of a female or feminine sexuality constructed under this paradigm as she examines the question of a feminine pleasure and how it might be defined on its own terms outside of Freud or Lacan.

According to Irigaray, "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (363). Her comments stem from Freud who defined all active erotic behavior as masculine and all passive erotic behavior as feminine. In addition, one of Irigaray’s major points is that Freud sees female masturbation in two distinct ways as he does not differentiate between stimulation of the clitoris and the vagina. Clitoral sexual pleasure is seen as active/masculine and vaginal sexual pleasure is seen as passive/feminine. Freud also stated that the clitoris was literally a "little penis" in so much as it gave a female a "masculine pleasure.” Irigaray shows that Freud sees female sex organs and female eroticism as being defined against male sex organs and masculine. By confining the terms in such a way, the female is looked at as being inferior to the male in that

If the female sex organ is the vagina, then it is passive, waiting to be filled with a penis in order to experience pleasure, rather than seeking pleasure itself, actively. Rather, vaginal female sexuality is oriented toward finding a penis--in a father/husband,
in a baby, or in masculine social roles. (Klages “Luce Irigaray” 1)

Irigaray states, “About woman and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say” (361). She takes issue with Freud in that he defines the female sex organ as the clitoris and the vagina. Freud’s woman has nothing to see: “woman’s genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their ‘crack’” (365). There is not ‘one’ female sex organ, according to psychoanalytic theory. As Irigaray states “and her sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none” (365). She questions that if there is no one term to represent the female sex organs, as there is of male sexuality (penis), how can one discuss female sexuality. As Western society views concepts in terms of binary opposition, then what is the opposite of penis? She further claims that:

“Her lot is that of ‘lack’, ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value” (361).

According to Freud’s view, Irigaray comments:

Woman lives her own desire only as the expectation that she may at least come to possess an equivalent of the male organ...Yet all this appears quite foreign to her own pleasure, unless it remains within the dominant phallic economy. (361)

Irigaray goes on to talk about female sexual pleasure as being in a different category than male sexual pleasure if one looks at the different biological design of female and male bodies. She argues her case by looking at autoeroticism. If the male’s pleasure is based in his penis, then he must have an instrument with which to touch himself, ‘his hand, a woman’s body, language...” (361). In female pleasuring, the structure of the female genitals provides constant autoerotic contact and, in that, at least “two lips” are always pressing against each other and providing pleasure:
Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, with herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other. (361)

In this way, in order to place female sexuality back within a phallic system, Irigaray sees heterosexual intercourse as an interruption of female autoerotic pleasure,

a violent break-in: the brutal separation of two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this ‘self caressing’ she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations. (362)

Irigaray concludes that female desire should be defined in its own terms, and not in relation to masculine desire or male bodies that is inherent in Western philosophy that privileges presence over absence and visible over invisible. She says that the definition of female desire defined on its own terms is like an “archaic civilization”:

That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language. Therefore, woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s. (362)

Irigaray refers again to Freud and Lacan to claim that female sexual pleasure is based in touch, not in sight. According to them, the first human sexual or erotic experience comes from physical contact with the caregiver’s, the mother-female, body. In Freud's model, girls repress or renounce this original eroticism of touch in order to become heterosexual. Boys defer that eroticism in favor of getting to touch another female body. In Lacan's version, the Real, which is associated with the pre-linguistic, with touch from the maternal body, is what must be left behind in order to enter into the Symbolic Order- into language. Lacan’s Imaginary is the stage where the child shifts its primary
mode of perception from touch to vision. In Lacan’s Mirror Stage, one internalizes the concept of "other" by seeing and conceptualizing one’s image in the mirror. The notion of otherness is possible only when vision is the primary sense, since the sense of touch does not allow for distance or otherness. “Hence for Lacan all "I"dentity is a visually-based illusion” (Klages “Luce Irigaray” 1). For both Freud and Lacan, the desire to return to touch (the maternal-female body) is forbidden in their notions of adulthood. Therefore the original erotic connection to touch is banned, banished to the unconscious, and unrepresentable in language.

In Western phallocentric order, which sees relationships in binary opposition, the female genitals are excluded from representation because male genitals are defined as “one” and the female genitals are “not one.” Thus the female body, or more specifically the female genitals, is inherently "deconstructive" to the stability of the binary oppositions (Klages “Luce Irigaray” 1). Irigaray sees that the feminine body experiences sexual pleasure (outside of Freud or Lacan) everywhere. Freud looks at sexual pleasure limited to just reproductive heterosexuality in which man is limited by the focus on the penis as the only source of sexual pleasure (or the only correct source in phallic order). Irigaray explores the idea of what constitutes female sexual pleasure as related to the genitals. The female genitals, according to Irigaray, are not one, or two, but a multiple of loci of pleasure for woman.

So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural... Indeed, women’s pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity...The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted
for that of the clitoral caresses. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman’s pleasure. Among other caress… Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. (Irigaray 366)

Irigaray then discusses the idea of a female or feminine language. She follows Cixous and Lacan in basing this conception of a feminine language on the multiplicity of the female body. The female body can speak from everywhere, according to Irigaray, just as the female body can experience sexual pleasure everywhere. Like Cixous, Irigaray imagines that female/feminine language is something unfixed, slippery, not anchored firmly within the phallogocentric order:

...an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. (Irigaray 366)

Irigaray makes an important point that if women do not find this language with which to write, they are simply reproducing their suppressed position in the hegemony.

If women do not find their own language, if they simply want to reverse the order of things… history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallocentrism. It would leave room neither for women’s sexuality, nor for women’s imaginary, nor for women’s language to take their place. (369)

The construction of a feminine language is an alternative means that women can find a way out of the hegemonic system that suppresses them. This idea is looked at closely by Cixous in what she calls l’écriture feminine. As Cixous states in “The Laugh of Medusa,”

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been
driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. (347)

Cixous shows that the female body and female sexuality in general become unrepresentable in language, that it cannot be spoken or written in the phallogocentric order by turning to the ideas of Lacan and Freud. Lacan’s idea is that a child must separate from the Real (the mother’s body) to be able to enter into the Symbolic (adulthood) to take up a subject position. Cixous then looks at Freud's Oedipus complex that states that girls have to make many connections from one phase to another to achieve adulthood. They must make connections from the clitoris to the vagina, from attraction to female bodies to attraction to male bodies, and from active sexuality to passive sexuality, in order to become "normal" adults. Freud shows that sexuality is not about female sexuality, but about male sexuality. He states that the woman’s pleasure is to come from passively being filled by a penis. Therefore, Cixous concludes that there is, in essence, no female sexuality in and of itself in this phallogocentric system. Female sexuality means having only one kind of sexuality; that which is passive, vaginal, heterosexual, and reproductive, and it is always defined by the presence of a penis and not by anything intrinsic to the female body or to female sexual pleasure (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1).

Cixous questions whether it is possible for a woman to write at all. She says that the structure of language itself is phallogocentric with stable meaning centered by the phallus and that everyone who uses language is taking up a position as male within this structure. This then excludes female bodies. She states, “What I say has two sides and two aims; to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project” (347). She wants to deconstruct the phallogocentric system Lacan describes and foresee a new
strategy for a new kind of relation between female bodies and language.

To accomplish her first goal, Cixous looks at Lacan’s realm of the Symbolic. She sees that men and women have different positions in relation to the Phallus. Men perceive themselves as being closer to it and that women are farther from the center as they have no penises. Because of that distance from the Phallus, women are closer to the margins of the Symbolic order. They are not as firmly anchored or fixed in place as men are and are therefore closer to the imaginary, to images and fantasies, and further from the idea of absolute fixed and stable meaning than men are (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1).

In her argument to project a new strategy for women’s writing, in “The Laugh of Medusa,” Cixous argues that most women write from a "masculine" position in a stabilized fixed system of language. Women authors who were published are viewed as having developed their works according to the expectations of society, a society dominated by men. These works have reproduced a stereotypical representation of the woman as sensitive, intuitive, and dreamy (349). There has been little or no "feminine" writing (349). She says that writing is “marked” within a Symbolic order that is structured through binary opposites, including the "masculine/feminine" image in which the feminine is always repressed (340). Therefore, in order to break from linguistic positioning, feminine writing must come from women’s bodies. Men could occupy a structural position from which they could produce feminine writing (Cixous 349). Cixous also argues that men have not yet discovered the relation between their sexuality and their writing, as long as they are focused on writing with the penis:

And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it’s up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us
once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly. (348)

In an endnote, Cixous states, “Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write” (362). She does note that men's sexuality has been defined by binary oppositions (opposition with female sexuality) and that “heterosexual relations have been structured by a sense of otherness and fear created by these absolute binaries” (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1).

Cixous’ strategy for a new kind of relation between female bodies and language is the idea of l'écriture feminine. This is an innovative notion of feminine writing. She sees l’écriture feminine as something possible only in poetry because the structure of language in poetry is less fixed and meaning flows more freely:

But only the poets- not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive... (350)

According to Cixous, novels involve a stable language with one-to-one fixed meanings of words. She says that poetry is closer to the unconscious, and thus to what has been repressed. Feminine writing will serve as a point of transformation or change from the phallogologic system and allow the deconstruction of that system.

L’écriture feminine can be applied to two levels that correspond to the individual and the structural. On the individual level, the individual woman must write herself, must discover for herself what her body feels like, and how to write about her body in language. “Specifically, women must find their own sexuality, one that is rooted solely in their own bodies, and find ways to write about that pleasure, that jouissance” (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1). On the structural level, women’s position as subject in
language will shift as women become active subjects, not just passive beings. According to Klages:

Women who write—if they don't merely reproduce the phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning which already exists (and which excludes them)—will be creating a new signifying system; this system may have built into it far more play, more fluidity, than the existing rigid phallogocentric symbolic order. ("Helene Cixous" 1)

Cixous claims that l’écriture feminine essentially will erase the divisions of binary opposition. In this way, l’écriture feminine will be an inherently deconstructive language. Cixous says that l’écriture feminine flows from metaphors. It is distinguished from existing forms of writing in that she associates it with existing non-linguistic modes.

Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from “mother” (I mean outside her functions: the “mother” as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink. (352)

Cixous equates l’écriture feminine with milk (metaphorically), or with a song. It does not contain representational language. It is writing “with rhythm and pulse, but no words, something connected with bodies and with bodies' beats and movements” (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1). In addition, Cixous’ ideas of metaphors are associated with “slippery” and “fluid” showing that l’écriture feminine is something that cannot be defined, theorized, coded or understood. It is a conception that “in writing is precisely the very possibility of change” (Cixous 350). It remains outside “existing systems for classification and ordering of
knowledge in phallogocentric western culture” (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1).

Cixous also examines how the “who” exists on the margin by looking at bisexuality. She reverts again to Freud who claimed that all humans are fundamentally bisexual and that through the Oedipus complex children are guided into heterosexuality by the constraints of culture. As Cixous’ idea of culture is phallogocentric order that subordinates and represses the feminine, bisexuality demolishes the lines set between the binary opposition of masculine and feminine. She argues for a new bisexuality which refuses the dichotomy of self/Other (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1). With the rejection of this dichotomy, the representations of female sexuality, as see in Western culture, will collapse.

If women could show men their true sexual pleasures, their real bodies--by writing them in non-representational form--Cixous says, men would understand that female bodies, female sexuality, is not about penises (too few or too many) at all... she says we have to show them "our sexts"--another neologism, the combination of sex and texts, the idea of female sexuality as a new form of writing. (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1)

Cixous argues that, along with female sexuality, female bodies must be written in l’écriture feminine. She includes the idea that family formation, according to Freud and Lacan, is traditional trends that uphold the phallogocentric order. This leads to the idea that pregnancy, like all functions of the female body, needs to be written into l’écriture feminine.

When pregnancy is written, and the female body figured in language as the source of life, rather than the penis, birth can be figured as something other than as separation, or as lack. (Klages “Helene Cixous” 1)
Cixous maintains that women need to write despite the patriarchal system that constrains them:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women - female-sexed texts. That kind scares them. (Cixous 348)

The challenges to feminist criticism are, intriguingly, also the bonds that indirectly tie Latin America/Caribbean to Europe. Arthur Schopenhauer’s work has a connecting influence on current Western philosophical thought and Latin American/Caribbean literary development. The discussion that follows serves as a brief and basic background on the history of the long and complicated influence of Schopenhauer’s work on the current philosophy and literature of the Western world.  

Schopenhauer’s ideas are found in his most famous work, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). His work profoundly influenced the fields of Western philosophy, psychology, music, and literature. In the realm of psychology, Schopenhauer first discussed the inherent drive within human beings to live and to reproduce. He saw it as an immensely powerful force lying unseen within man’s psyche. His ideas foreshadowed and laid the groundwork for Freud’s concepts of the libido and the unconscious mind. Freud’s work is influential as a philosophical base for theorists such as Lacan, Derrida, Cixous, and Irigaray.  

In addition, Schopenhauer’s work also influenced the Parnassians (specifically, the French symbolist poets) in that he pessimistically saw life as being essentially evil, futile, and full of suffering. The detachment element in his work is found in the works of the Parnassians in their
reaction to the inadequate forms they saw in Romantic poetry. This new genre strove for exact and faultless workmanship as exotic and classical subjects were selected and treated with rigidity of form and emotional detachment. French Parnassianism had a decisive influence on the Latin American literary movement called modernismo.

Modernismo was a literary response to a new society emerging in Latin America/Caribbean countries around in the late nineteenth century. This ‘new society’ was attributable to a transformation of their economies, due in large part to the influence of US capitalism. The traditional European agrarian economy left by the British, Spanish, and French colonizers since the thirteenth century was being challenged by the capitalist economy of the U.S. As a reaction to the new cultural values that were being established on the criteria of monetary worth rather than intellectual quality, writers such as José Martí and Rubén Darío were challenged by the endeavor of not becoming just another commodity. Paris was, at the time, the epicenter of high culture. New York and London were the heart of business ventures. So in an attempt to identify and describe an existence never imagined, the modernistas looked toward the structure of Europe’s classics and, most notably, toward the techniques of the French symbolists poets.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam were under Spanish colonial rule. From the thirteenth century, the economies of Cuba and Puerto Rico had already undergone one transformation. Initially, mineral extraction was the economic base. However, an agrarian economy was formed once the value of the sugarcane crops was seen. With the new economy involving sugarcane plantations, the Spanish imported slaves from Africa. During this time, Cuba was the leader in its production of more than one-third of the world’s sugarcane. In an agrarian economy, the distribution of wealth is limited to only a select few—the aristocracy—leaving the
majority of the population in poverty. In 1899, Cuba and Puerto Rico, along with the Philippines and Guam, were taken from Spanish rule to become U.S. territories according to the Treaty of Paris. During the first half of the twentieth century, Cuba became independent in 1902 while Puerto Rico remained a U.S. territory. In 1917, The Jones Law made the residents of Puerto Rico U.S. citizens. With the aftereffects of World War Two, when Vieques served as an important base for the US military, the US’s interest in Puerto Rico became heightened. In 1952, Puerto Rico officially became a commonwealth of the U.S. (Estado Libre Asociado). Until the 1950s, Puerto Rico continued to be an agrarian-based economy; however, with “Operation Bootstrap” the US diversifies Puerto Rico’s economy through incentives of tax breaks (no federal tax) provided to US manufacturing companies. Thus, the industries of pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, and electronics changed the once agricultural-based economy to one of manufacturing. Under, this new economy, women could easily incorporate into the workforce. In addition to diffusing the elite aristocracy initiated by the former agrarian economy, the manufacturing industry itself inherently brought about a working middle class. With a new society, new educational opportunities for women arose. Women were able to complete secondary and even higher education and thus became “increasingly aware of the contradictions of their subordinate role in society” (Olmos Fernández 79).

Furthermore, by the middle of the twentieth century, Latin America/Caribbean was also seeing another literary reaction, one that arose from modernismo. Most notably in posmodernismo literature, a reflection of society can be seen its intertextuality that does not separate high culture from popular culture. This is a characteristic not found in modernismo. During the 1960s and 1970s, a period referred to as “The Boom”, Latin American writers such as García Márquez, Cortázar, Fuentes and Vargas Llosa excelled in the
growing international literary market demanded by the middle class readers'. However, the Boom period notably excluded women writers. It is in the post-boom years that one can see the emergence of women writers in large numbers dealing with an issue that had not be seen before—female sexuality. Due to the economic and social changes that took place in Puerto Rico starting in the 1950’s, current Puerto Rican women writers, such as Ferré and Vega, are products of those changes. Their works have not only been influenced by the writers of posmodernismo movement in which the novel is more popular than poetry, but their philosophical bases have been influenced by French feminist criticism as can be seen in the brief biographies on each in their respective chapters.

Once again, this discussion returns to Schopenhauer whose work influenced current Western philosophical and literary thought. One must acknowledge the impact of Schopenhauer’s ideas in the groundwork of Freud, especially in terms of the psyche and the unconscious mind. This concept, inherently an essentialist viewpoint, sees the emergence of Freud’s ideas of the Oedipus complex. Although Schopenhauer had direct influence in Freud’s work, it is with Freud’s work that feminist critics find opposition. Feminist criticism’s attempt to de-patriarch society has one inescapable fallibility. It only promotes the hegemony by recreating similar structures since its foundation is inherently misogynistic. As Baym argues, if feminist criticism is to be taken seriously in the academic (male-oriented) world, it has to be “theoretical” in male constructed terms which mean that feminist criticism is building on models that are inherently phallocentric.

In other words, feminist theory addresses an audience of prestigious male academics and attempts to win its respect. It succeeds, so far as I can see, only when it ignores or dismisses the earlier paths of feminist literary study as ‘naïve’ and grounds its own theories in those
currently in vogue with the men who make theory: deconstruction, for example, or Marxism. These grounding theories manifest more than mere indifference to women’s writing; they are irretrievably misogynist. As a result of building on misogynist foundations, feminist theories mainly excoriate their deviating sisters. (Baym 279)

Freud’s ideas are based on a biological determination point of view. Thus, feminist critics also use that same essentialist view. This can be seen in Irigaray’s limited construction of male and female sexuality. Furthermore, it is seen in Cixous’ idea of l’écriture feminine where the line between biology and subject position becomes distorted when Cixous says that woman is more slippery, more fluid, less fixed than man. Despite the challenges inherent in Cixous’ work on the theoretical level, I discuss here specifically Cixous’ comment that l’écriture feminine is only possible in poetry where there is less fixed structure and more flow of meaning and that prose is too centered on one-to-one fixed meanings (350). The techniques in poetry that lead to the unstable meanings that Cixous finds necessary in writing are imagery, metaphor, and symbolism. By examining the prose writing of these women authors, one finds that their texts provide rich examples of these techniques. In addition, Olmos Fernández’s 1987 article, “Desde una perspectiva femenina: La cuentística de Rosario Ferré y Ana Lydia Vega” discusses the increasing popularity of prose over poetry in Puerto Rico in the 1970s when the first of the authors began to write. Therefore, it is justifiable to situate contemporary prose into the ideas of l’écriture feminine. In addition, my use of the term l’écriture feminine shall not compromise the ideas of Cixous who gives no definition to the term. Furthermore, the term l’écriture feminine is maintained in its original French in this study to show that there is a difference between what
Cixous has described and the way critics have interpreted it as “feminine writing” or “women’s writing.”

Moreover, the challenges to feminist criticism on the theoretical level give question to the application of feminist criticism on the practical level and then in particular, its application to Caribbean/Latin America:

The most serious issue facing feminist critics today is that which divides the profession as a whole, the division between theory and practice. Leaning on the Greeks, our culture still posits philosophy, music and mathematics as the highest forms of intellectual endeavor. They have been the fields most zealously guarded against female incursion, the fields where it has been most difficult for women to gain training. (Marcus 264)

Critic Jane Marcus has concern for the practice of feminism, particularly in academia— a field that has been, until recently, the most elusive endeavor for women’s education. In order for feminist critics to be able to enter into literary theory:

They learned history, textual criticism, biography, the recovery of manuscripts. They began to search for and reprint women’s works and to study the image of woman in Western art. May moved into linguistics to get at the origins of oppression in language, while others worked to find the writing of women of color. We were all forced to become historians and biographers and to train ourselves in those disciplines. We devoured theories of female psychology, anthropology, and myth to broaden our grasp of the work of women artists. The more materialist and particular the labor of feminist critics became, the more abstract and antimaterialist became the work of the men (Marxism, deconstruction) the more we spoke in moral indignation and anger, the more
Parnassian were the whispers of male theorists. (Marcus 264)

Despite the opposition facing feminism on the academic level, the success of the work of the French feminists on Anglo-academia can be seen in the 1960s and 1970s when feminism branched out and was used as an approach to literature and cultural activity which had seen the exclusion of texts by women from mainstream studies. It also branched out to politics as it became a framework for political movements. Current feminism includes several theoretical frameworks that are informed by race, class, and/or geography. These different varieties lead one to different critical approaches. Showalter states, as example, that in broad terms, English feminism stresses oppression (Marxism), French feminism stresses repression (psychoanalytic); and American feminism stresses expression (textual).

When feminist criticism is taken outside of the European and the North American world to Latin America, this criticism is seen to be multifold. As stated by Showalter, when Latin American feminism stresses compression it is fragmentary, when it stresses concession it is communal, when it stresses impression it is aesthetic, when it stresses consumption it is marginalistic, and when it incites depression it is underdeveloped (qtd in Castillo 1). The challenges to Western feminist criticism applied to Caribbean/Latin America are seen in the work of Castillo. According to Castillo, applications of other “feminisms”, foreign to Latin America, continue the destructive stereotype as described by Jean Franco: “British intellectuals, Latin Americans revolutionaries” (qtd in Castillo 2).

Castillo’s claim that applying French feminist criticism to Latin America continues the destructive stereotype of ‘revolutionaries’ is only possible if one perceives a negative and reductive connotation to the word.
Castillo sees feminist criticism in the first world as intellectual thought and in the third world as activism, thereby suggesting that there is a contradiction between the thought and action. This study uses French feminist criticism as a framework to look at the use of language of current Caribbean women writers because, in a way, these women are “revolutionary”—in a positive connotation—to mean that they are innovative in the way they have used phallocentric language to privilege their own feminine voice to assert female subjectivity in literature. Therefore, these women writers can be viewed as “thinking revolutionaries.” In addition, as there are varieties of feminism that have developed according to race and class, this study seeks to use French feminist criticism, as have many critics before, as an approach that is a valuable tool for looking at the oppression of women through language. Moreover, its historical ties to Caribbean/Latin America and its influence on the lives of the authors chosen for this study make this framework an excellent choice. The influence of French feminism is seen in the authors’ education in literature (Ferré and Vega) and to another extent, their time lived in Paris at the university (Vega and Valdés), once the heart of modern philosophy and literary theory. Therefore, this approach is most advantageous to accomplish the goal of this study—to demonstrate how contemporary Caribbean women writers, despite their differences in socio-economic, educational, and familial backgrounds, have reappropriated misogynistic language in keeping with their own personal history to privilege the feminine voice that was once hidden in literature.
In 1970, Rosario Ferré’s first short story appeared in a university-published magazine entitled *Zona de carga y descarga*. Since that time, she has written twelve books of fiction including three collections of short stories, one of which is a collection of children’s songs and stories called *Sonatinas*. *Cuentos de niños* published in 1991. Ferré has written seven critical essay collections, two books of poetry, and a biography of Luis A. Ferré, her father and former governor of Puerto Rico. Also to her credit are innumerable columns and articles written for newspapers and journals. Her latest novel was the *Flight of the Swan*, published in 2001.

This chapter will look at Ferré’s “The Youngest Doll” from *The Youngest Doll* collection to see what lies between the lines, what extends beyond the symbolism and representation of her characters and objects in the story. It is said that “silence is more eloquent than words”.

Therefore, it is in what Ferré does not write that a powerful voice can be heard. By looking at what Ferré has written in her texts, the space that she leaves by her lack of language becomes clearer. It is in what is not written that the characters can be seen in different dimensions of development. By juxtaposing the portrayal of the masculine and feminine characters through the narration, one finds an open space. It is in this space that the portrayal of the masculine characters falls vacant and the lack of narration itself brings forth new grounds for interpretation and legitimization of the feminine voice. Therefore, in this chapter, “The Youngest Doll” will be analyzed by looking at what is written to show how what is not written becomes the more important analyzing tool.
In over thirty years of writing, Rosario Ferré has become an important voice in not just Puerto Rican literature, but “She is also one of the strongest feminist voices of the 21st century” (Stark 1). It is without doubt that her work has been highly researched and critiqued. With such extensive analysis of her work, looked at through various theoretical frameworks, the articles discussed in this chapter reflect the issues specific to this project’s purpose. That is, the articles demonstrate analysis observed through a feminist framework that explores Ferré’s work in terms of one of the underlying preoccupations of feminism: the use of language to oppress women. The following articles exemplify the research done on the short story the “The Youngest Doll.”

In a 1994 article, “Eros y logos confrontados: reivindicación de la esencia femenina y destitución del mito de la superioridad masculina en "La muñeca menor" de Rosario Ferré,” Sandra M. Palmer focuses on demonstrating how Ferré embodies patriarchal ideology only to break with it through her female characters. This idea is similar to the ideas presented in this study; however, the method of analysis in both studies differs. Palmer focuses on individual female characters while this study juxtaposes both the male and female characters in order to show how the masculine is subverted.

As Palmer concentrates on the ideas in the philosophical essays of José Ortega y Gasset and how they combine with the psycho-mythological theories of Carl Jung, she explains the concept of the archetypes of Logos/Reason and Eros/Love as they function in the realm of symbolism in literature (680). She goes on to say that these theories imply, as with the reasoning of Ortega y Gasset, that the man, being governed by the archetype of Logos/Reason, comes to the world endowed with intellectual capacity while the woman, being governed by Eros/Love, is not capable
of logical thinking nor of developing her Being to the exactness as essentially man would do. \(^6\) (680)

Palmer further states that feminist theories assert the concept of Logos/Reason and Eros/Love to provide a way of utilizing patriarchal ideology as a way to reveal the justification of unequal social hierarchies between the masculine and the feminine. She goes on to say that found within this socio-cultural imbalance between men and women are the myths of masculine superiority and female inferiority which feminism questions to reestablish the values of everything related with feminine essence (681). Palmer accomplishes her goal by looking at certain terminology used in “The Youngest Doll.” In agreement with Palmer’s idea to use French feminist criticism to look at how Ferré breaks from patriarchal ideology, this study, however, uses the overall text to show that what is not written is where Ferré breaks away from patriarchal ideology.

Palmer begins her analysis of “The Youngest Doll” by looking at the words “muñeca,” “menor,” and “médico.” With the use of this terminology, she says that Ferré embodies the masculine superiority myth within the characters of the aunt, the youngest, and the doctor. The aunt represents the spinster, the niece represents the patriarchal feminine ideal and the doctor represents the male oppressor. The aunt is victimized by the doctor and becomes a “solterona” in response to his “unwillingness” to cure her for the sake of making money to educate his son. \(^6\) She seeks revenge on the doctor/oppressor which she fulfills through the wedding doll that she made for her niece when she married the doctor’s son. The niece and the doctor’s son carry on the oppressor/victim relationship. This falls in line with the Logos/Reason; Eros/Love concept. This construct is broken, however, with the fusion of the niece and the doll for is it not just the niece and the doll that become one, but also the aunt (as her oppression is passed onto the niece) and
her anger (shown in the prawn) all come together. The aunt’s revenge shows her to be controlled by human emotion and intellectual superiority when compared with the masculine characters thereby breaking with patriarchal ideology and reestablishing the value of feminine essence. This study focuses on the space that Ferré creates by what she does not write about the characters. By juxtaposing the portrayal of the masculine and feminine characters through the narration, one finds that the masculine characters are flat and undeveloped while the feminine characters are fully developed in their psychology. The idea of subverting the masculine in order to break with traditional patriarchal ideology is an idea similar in both studies. However, where Palmer focuses on particular words in the text to prove her point, this study shows that it is in what is not written in the text that privileges the feminine voice.

In 1996, Birmingham Pokorny’s work, "(Re)writing the Body: The Legitimization of the Female Voice, History, Culture and Space in Rosario Ferré’s “La muñeca menor,” was published showing the continual view of Ferré’s work through French feminist criticism. Like Palmer, Birmingham Pokorny looks at the female character of the aunt to demonstrate how Ferré “denounce[s] and subvert[s] the mechanisms used by the hegemonic patriarchal system” (76) through images, contrasts, and phrases. This study demonstrates a similar idea only using an opposite position. This study shows that what is not written in the text reveals the subversion of the patriarchal system.

Birmingham Pokorny sets up her argument by starting with the ideas of Kate Millet’s 1969 publication, Sexual Politics. The author sums up Millet’s ideas that call upon women who have been the object of male subjectivity, to reappropriate themselves as subjects and to invent a new language and a new poetics, based on women reclaiming… control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it. (75)
Birmingham Pokorny goes on to cite further works written in response to Millet’s that have had major influence in the area of feminist criticism. These works include those of Hélène Cixous, Claudine Hermann, and Monique Wittig that support the idea of women finding their own voice.

Birmingham Pokorny writes of Ferré’s literary and critical writings, specifically mentioning *Sitios a Eros* in 1980, as:

...a book of literary essays about women writers and about female authenticity in art as well as for her fiery commitment to liberate a Female Subject, to dismantle or deconstruct the mechanisms and myths of the dominant system, to appropriate the dominant voice to parody and undermine the epistemological foundations of phallocentrism...

(76)

Birmingham Pokorny uses the character of the aunt and her subsequent creation of the dolls to accomplish her task. She starts with the scene in which, after a month from the initial bite, the doctor returns and puts a mustard plaster over it having the aunt spend a week with her leg covered in the ointment. When this does not help, she resigns herself to the permanent disfigurement of her leg caused by the prawn. According to Birmingham Pokorny, this paragraph in the text shows the “unequivocal signs of the subjugation and deformation of the female’s body and identity” (77) dominated by the patriarchal system’s image of the female body and identity. That identity that contains the woman’s personal value and desirability is inseparable from her body (77). The aunt’s reaction to lock herself up in the house and refuse to see any suitors, beginning her process of making dolls, is a response to the norms of a patriarchal society and also

a desire to escape the dominance and containment encoded in the masculinists conception of woman’s nature and destiny based solely on the female’s physical attributes and sexual desirability. (77)
It is through the creation of the dolls that the aunt finds a substitute to fulfill her societal role and a way to reject the masculine concept “of women as a commodity or object of sexual and economic value,” especially when she never sells any of the dolls (77). Birmingham Pokorny goes on to state that the use of the cultural sign of the dolls and its creation shows the process of “transgressing the hegemonic values and the authority of the phallocentric discourse” by overturning and “demythologizing the myths and taboos construed by men” (77). The “repressed Female Subject” (78) finds liberation through Ferré’s images, contrasts, and phrases. According to Birmingham Pokorny, the dolls become the liberating sign though which the self censorship of the repressed female subject is broken to denounce the frustration experienced by women in carrying out their traditional assigned roles, the binary opposition that structures the representation of the Other’s reality, i.e. language, culture, identity, history, space and body in phallocentric discourse. (78)

In quite a different position to Birmingham Pokorny, this study shows a similar idea expressed by Ferré. Ferré’s short story “The Youngest Doll” is used to look at how the dominant hegemonic system is subverted through the lack of development in the male character. Through the juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine characters, this study asserts that there is a space created by Ferré in what she does not write in the text that demonstrates the reappropriation of the masculine voice to privilege the feminine voice. It is through her silence (what she does not write) that one finds the breaking with phallocentric constructs. Moreover, the ideas presented in this study parallel those of Palmer and Birmingham Pokorny in that Ferré reappropriates the masculine to assert the feminine voice. However, the analytical approach to this study is based in the lack of
the narration as a whole rather than the terminology, images, contrasts, and symbolisms shown in both Palmer and Birmingham Pokorny.

In order to better understand Ferré and her writing the following is a brief background on her life. Among the various venues of information about the life of Rosario Ferré, there are also many discrepancies about her life, such as her date of birth. Some indicate that it is in 1942 while others state that it is 1938. With this in mind, the information provided about Ferré’s life in this project is a compilation from various sources for the purpose of a general overview of Ferré: her life and her work.

Rosario Ferré was born in 1938 in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Her parents were representatives of the socio-economic phenomenon happening in Puerto Rico. The agricultural economy was being replaced by one with an industrial basis. Her mother, Lorenza Ramírez Ferré, was part of family whose wealth came from landowning in a time when sugarcane plantations were fading from the economy. Her father, Luis A. Ferré, was part of the new upper class whose wealth was based in the industry and banking supported by US corporations. At home, Ferré was cared for by her black nanny whose stories she treasured and began to write down as a way of preserving them.¹⁷

Rosario Ferré was educated in a Catholic school for girls, although for a brief time she was allowed to attend the school for boys where her brother was studying.¹⁸ The difference in curriculum between the schools made it obvious that there was a difference in education for boys and girls. In the school her brother attended, Ferré was introduced to the world of the fantastic through reading fairy tales and other stories of exotic places. In the school she attended, Ferré was taught that a woman should be virtuous and silent.

After graduating from high school, Ferré went to study English literature at Manhattanville College in New York, from which she graduated with her B.A in 1960. She returned
to Puerto Rico in that same year. She then married her first husband, Benigno Trigo González. She had three children with him: Rosario Lorenza, Benigno and Luis Alfredo. In the early 1970s, Ferré’s mother dies. As her father is serving as governor of Puerto Rico until 1972, Ferré serves as official hostess at the governor’s house. Interestingly, it is at this time that she divorces her first husband and begins her Master’s degree at the University of Puerto Rico where she was influenced and encouraged to write by Angel Rama and Mario Vargas Llosa. She makes known that her political views are opposite of those of her father through the publication of a magazine entitled Zona de carga y descarga (1970-1976). It is in this magazine where her first short story “The Youngest Doll” appeared in 1970. This story was later included in the Papeles de Pandora collection which was published in Mexico where Ferré briefly moved to in 1976. With this collection began her long and success career as a contemporary Puerto Rican woman writer who translates or participates in all translations of her work. Moreover, she has recently written The House on the Lagoon (1995) in English that was then translated into Spanish.

While she was studying Spanish and Latin American literature at the University of Puerto Rico, she met her second husband, José Aguilar Mora. This marriage ends in divorce only a few years later. Ferré graduated with her Masters degree in 1985. She returned to the United States to begin her Ph.D. at the University of Maryland, graduating in 1987. While earning her doctorate, she met and married her third husband, Agustín Costa Quintano, who she still is with today. She has been a professor of Latin American literature and has taught at the Universities of California, Berkeley, Harvard, Rutgers, Johns Hopkins, and Puerto Rico at Río Piedras.

Among the various elements that Ferré employs in her writing such as the socio-economic division of the depleted
aristocracy and the emergence of the bourgeois in Puerto Rico, the solidarity among the female characters as a crucial element in the struggle against the patriarchal system is seen most prominently. As a literary technique, she employs the common and vulgar speech of the working and poor classes of the island. Her use of language is both to demystify and to attack the social and political structures that oppress women. She also uses allegory, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and personification as tools in her writing (Voices from the Gap 1).

Throughout her life, Rosario Ferré has continually published her works which deal with the themes of the various roles of women in Puerto Rican society: the oppression of women which takes place at all levels of society, regardless of class or race; homosexuality; racial discrimination; the clash between Creoles and North Americans; the hypocrisy of the Catholic church; the corruption of institutions; and the breakdown of social order. “Ferré is revealed in her stories as a rebel, a non-conformist, a woman exploring her feelings and her surroundings; and as a writer who is aggressive, imaginative, and lyrical” (Vazquez 1).

As a strategy of capturing the power of the word and converting the masculine character to the subordinate role, Ferré employs the use of silence: that which is not stated. In what is not stated, one can see that the traditional inferior role of the female is used to challenge the patriarchal system by converting her position to the subjugated force of the narration while subverting the traditional dominant male character to function in only a secondary position in the discourse. Upon investigating the utility of the masculine role through its portrayal in the narration, one sees that this role functions as only a focal point and from this one can see the loss of the masculine character through death or through his absence or his disappearance from the narration or through his emotional
and/or physical abandonment of the woman. In addition, in the narration there is almost no physical description of the male and there is a definite and intended lack of development in masculine character. Therefore, by looking at what is stated in the narration, the individual character portrayals both of the feminine and masculine characters and their relationships with one another will be analyzed to show that in what is not stated one finds the subordination of the masculine voice and the legalization of the feminine voice. It is in this juxtaposition between the narration of the male and female characters, supported by their individual portrayals, that the stories of Ferré appropriate masculine domination by breaking the constructs (or the phallocentric system) of a machista society. Ferré manipulates the traditional patriarchal roles allowing the feminine voice to pass through the void which has been created by her silence to finally be heard by the reader.

The short story “The Youngest Doll” is an outwardly simple tale of an aunt and her youngest niece who are members of an old aristocrat family in Puerto Rico. The story begins with the beautiful young aunt being bitten by a prawn while she is bathing in the river. The doctor says that he cannot cure her and as a result she becomes a recluse, not accepting suitors and never leaving the house. She dedicates her time to caring for her nieces and then to making elegant life-size dolls for each of them, presenting them every year on the girls’ birthdays. When the youngest niece marries the doctor’s son, also a doctor, she is given the last doll made for her on her wedding day. The story of their loveless marriage ends with the youngest niece morphing into the doll that her aunt had made for her.

There are two principal female characters in the story, the aunt and the youngest niece (who is referred to as “the youngest”). Likewise, there are two principal male characters in the story, the doctor and his son (who is referred to as “the young doctor”). The young doctor and the
youngest have a relationship that mirrors that of the doctor/father and the aunt. The characters in the story have no names and are only referred to by their familial or legal relationship between each other (i.e. aunt, niece, doctor, ‘patient,’ father, son, husband and wife, etc.) The proceeding textual analysis shows what has been written in the discourse about these characters individually as well as what has been written about their relationships to and with one another. Following that will be an exploration of what is not stated about the characters in their portrayal and in the narration of their relationships. It is in this lack of narration (what is not stated) where one finds the use of silence to subvert the dominant position of the male to assert female subjectivity.

Ferré writes minimally about her characters. From what is seen in the text, the aunt is portrayed as a woman who was once carefree, just at the point of discovering her own sexual awareness.

With her head nestled among the black rock’s reverberations she could hear the slamming of salty foam on the beach mingled with the sound of the waves, and she suddenly thought that her hair had poured out to sea at last. (1)

Just then, she is bitten by the prawn which abruptly stops this process of consciousness. The prawn buries itself in her leg, causing disfigurement and making her “unacceptable” for marriage by society’s concept of beauty. The injury that occurred to her was not just physical but also psychological as can been seen when the aunt acquiesces to a life of seclusion, only interacting with her family in the care of her nieces and creating dolls for them.

She had been beautiful, but the prawn hidden under the long, gauzy folds of her skirt stripped her of all vanity. She locked herself up in her house, refusing to see any suitors. (2)
The aunt is loved by her nieces. She is nurturing as she cares for them in their daily upkeep. She is creative and crafty with the making of the dolls for her nieces. She dedicates her life to her nieces and to creating the dolls for them.

As the girls grew up, the aunt devoted herself to making dolls for them to play with... As time passed, though, she began to refine her craft more and more, thus earning the respect and admiration of the whole family. (2)

The youngest was the last of the nieces to be married. She, like her aunt, was just becoming aware of her own sexuality as she agreed to marry the doctor’s son “because she was intrigued by his drowsy profile, and also because she was deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). The youngest is portrayed as a traditional young woman who follows the constructs of a patriarchal society obeying her husband’s wishes for her to sit out on the balcony every day to be seen by the entire town’s people.

Each day he made his wife sit out on the balcony, so that passersby would be sure to see that he had married into society. (5)

The doctor and the son are mirror images of one another. Not much can be said about them other than both take what they can get especially by using women. They both have the viewpoint that women are a commodity, a means to a desired end - financial gain or a higher social position. The fact is that there is not much written about these men and what is said is seen through their self-seeking actions of using women for money and for gaining social status.

The relationships between the characters as described in the narration of the story are intrical to their development, or even more, to their lack of psychological progression. The aunt is adored by her nieces regardless of her physical deformity. She takes care of them, helping to raise them after the prawn bit her and she became a recluse.
in the old house. The following quote shows the extent to which the aunt participates in the caretaking of her nieces:

She would comb their hair, bathe and feed them, and when she read them stories, they would sit around her and furtively lift the starched ruffle of her skirt so as to sniff the aroma of the ripe sweetsop that oozed from her leg when it was at rest. (2)

As the girls were maturing, the aunt devoted herself to making dolls with which the nieces could play. Through time, the dolls became more intricate and detailed, finally resembling each niece’s exact measurements for each year of her life. The final doll made was one that was a lifelike relica of her youngest niece. The doll that was presented to the niece at the time of her wedding was the one that the niece would take with her to her new home with her husband. The aunt became well known for making the dolls. Each one that was made was preceded by an intricate “ceremony” of the gathering of the materials for the aunt to create the doll. The doll given to the youngest at the time of her wedding was similar to the dolls given to her other nieces on their respective wedding days with its clothing of “old-fashioned kid slippers and gloves, and with Valenciennes bloomers ... under their snowy, embroidered skirts...filled with honey” (4). Yet this doll was somewhat different. This doll was warm, its hands and face were made of Mikado porcelain, the mouth contained the youngest’s baby teeth and there were real diamonds as pupils for the eyes. From this point, there is no more written about the relationship between the aunt and the youngest. Once the youngest married, it seems that she left her family completely.

The relationship between the doctor and his son, the young doctor, is one of no emotion. The only narrated interaction between the two is when the father takes his son to the aunt’s house when he is treating her and he shows his son “the prawn that has been paying for your education these twenty years” (4).
The relationship of the aunt and the doctor goes beyond that of a simple doctor-patient relationship. When the aunt is young, she is bitten by a prawn in a river while she is bathing. The prawn insinuates itself into the aunt’s calf causing excruciating pain so that the aunt had to be carried out of the river and taken back into the home. The doctor is called to help her; however, despite his perceived attempts to get rid of the prawn, it only implants itself more deeply into the aunt’s leg. The only way to get rid of the prawn would endanger the entire leg, which the aunt does not want. So she resigns herself to living a life secluded away from everyone except the doctor and her family. Every month since the bite, the doctor came to check up on the aunt. She spent years as his patient with a condition that was never cured. One day, after all the nieces were married, with the exception of the youngest, the doctor brought his grown son, also a doctor, with him to see the aunt. The son reveals that the problem could have been cured when it first happened, but the doctor responded that it was because the money he received in caring for the aunt that he was able to pay for his son to go to the United States for medical school. Thus, the doctor is just using the plight of the aunt for financial gain.

This idea is furthered when you look at the courtship and marriage between the young doctor and the youngest niece. The young doctor was interested in the youngest from the moment he saw her. He took over care for the aunt allowing him to go to the house every month. To catch the attention of the youngest,

He would always show up for the visit wearing a pair of brightly polished shoes, a starched collar, and an ostentatious tiepin of extravagant poor taste... and each time he would hand the youngest an identical bouquet of purple forget-me-nots. (5)

The youngest finally decides to marry him because she was captivated by his “drowsy profile” and was “deathly
curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). As soon as the marriage ensued, the youngest went to live with the young doctor in his house in the town. She, in essence, becomes his pretty piece of aristocratic property to display for the town residents.

As the doctor used the aunt’s body to make money, this use of the woman’s body as a means for gain is also a pattern that is reflected in the situation of the youngest, although in this case, the difference is twofold. First the youngest’s body was used as a display for her husband to assert his new-found social status after he married her. Subsequently, this is also reflective of Ferré’s popular theme of the socio-economic division of the depleted aristocracy and the emergence of the bourgeois in Puerto Rico. Secondly, the money was not gotten from her physical body, but from that of the materials of a doll that was representative of her body— the life-size doll that her aunt gave to her on her wedding day. The doll was made of valuable materials:

The... face and hands were made out of the most delicate Mikado porcelain, and in her open and slightly sad smile she recognized her full set of baby teeth. There was also another notable detail the aunt had embedded her diamond eardrops in the doll’s pupils. (5) which the husband sold for money:

One day he pried out the doll’s eyes with the tip of his scalpel and pawned them for a fancy gold pocket watch with a long, embossed chain. (5)

What Ferré does not say in the portrayal of the female and male characters is more important than what she does say. Although the female characters, like the male characters, have no names, they have psychological development as can be seen in through their self-sexual awareness, sexual curiosity about men, the seeking of revenge, and their need to try to find escape from their male-dominated lives. There is no psychological development
in the male characters. They are nothing more than flat, undeveloped individuals whose function in the story is only to be the axis upon which the female characters emerge in full psychological development – a development that is not traditionally seen in feminine characters.

After the initial acts of oppression on the women, there is a loss of the male characters. There is little of any physical description or name given to the male characters. The older man is referred to as the doctor. Also his son is never referred to by name, always as the son, the young one, the young doctor and then, as time goes on, as finally, the doctor. There is a loss of the masculine character through the absence of him in his disappearance from the narration or through his emotional and/or physical abandonment of the woman. The doctor disappears from the narration after he reveals to his son that he could have cured the aunt but that he perpetuated her condition for twenty years so that he could get money to send him to medical school. From this point on, nothing more is said about the doctor. His disappearance from the narration shows that he was no more than a catalyst for the next generation, i.e., the young doctor and the youngest, to repeat the cycle.

The doctor is negligent in his care for the aunt in order to get money from the family to send his son to medical school. According to the Hippocratic Oath, the doctor should have cured the aunt immediately from the prawn bite and stayed away from corruption. As he abandons the aunt as his patient, he abandons his oath as a doctor leaving him to be nothing more that a greedy, envious and corrupt man.

What is not said in the portrayal of the young doctor is similar to what is not said in the portrayal of his father. Aside from having no name, all we see of his physical appearance is that he has a “drowsy profile,” a “paper silhouette,” and “dolphin flesh” (5). When he saw the
youngest on his first visit to the aunt, he became interested in her. After taking over care of the aunt, he would come to the house every month.

His interest in the youngest niece was evident from the start... He would always show up for the visit wearing a pair of brightly polished shoes, a starched collar, and an ostentatious tiepin of extravagant poor taste...and each time would hand the youngest an identical bouquet of purple forget-me-nots. (5)

However, nothing more is said of his interest in her. This "interest" is never elaborated. It can be concluded from the rest of the story that his interest in her was similar to the interest that the doctor had in the aunt - a means to a desire of financial and social gain. The young doctor is also greedy, envious, and corrupt like his father. He sells the parts of the doll which were technically his wife's property. He pried the doll's diamonds eyes out and pawned them for a fancy gold pocket watch. As he sees her as his property, her things are also his.

He also has no emotional or physical attachment to his wife as can be seen in that there is absolutely nothing said of this issue in the story. The youngest and he never have children which would have been an indication of sexual intimacy. He continued to perceive her as only an object to look at. "One night he decided to go into her bedroom, to watch her as she slept" (6). He finally noticed that while he was aging, his wife still looked as young as the day he met her:

> There was only one thing that was missing from the doctor’s otherwise perfect happiness. He noticed that, although he was aging naturally, the youngest still kept the same firm, porcelained skin she had had when he had called on her at the big house on the plantation. (6)

He notices her skin is still as young and firm as it was when they first met. Typically men view a woman’s skin
in a sexual way. However, his only point in looking at her skin was to check for signs of aging. His mental and physical abandonment of his wife took place just after she agreed to marry him. He only did what was minimally necessary to get her attention so that he could marry into her aristocratic family.

The relationships between the characters add to the void that is created in the narration. There is practically no relationship between father and son other than they are related to each other and that they are both doctors. There is a hole in the discourse, a lack of development in the masculine characters.

The relationships between the aunt and the niece and the doctor and the young doctor parallel each other. The youngest corresponds to the aunt and the young doctor is comparable to the doctor when we see that the youngest, like the aunt, is oppressed by the man. The aunt is forced to abandon the idea of marrying as she is not socially acceptable anymore because of the prawn embedded in her leg. She resigns herself to a life without a husband and children. The youngest is trapped in a loveless marriage to the young doctor. The doctor uses the aunt’s body for financial gain as the young doctor uses the youngest to sit on the balcony on display. Moreover, he also uses the youngest’s body for financial gain as can be seen when she eventually morphs into the wedding doll and he was selling the body parts of the doll for money.

The relationship between the aunt and the doctor is not unlike that of the pimp and the prostitute. The doctor exploits the aunt’s body for financial gain. The aunt pays money to the doctor for his monthly visits to check on the bite so that it will not endanger her leg. However, he perpetuates the farce of no cure for twenty years when in reality she could have been cured immediately when she was bitten. The subsequent twelve visits per year for the past twenty years were nothing more than the doctor making money
from his patient. As a pimp makes money from the prostitute’s body, the doctor is making money from the aunt’s body. In essence, a prostitute is fucked for money and the aunt is fucked because of money. The only difference between the aunt and the prostitute is that the aunt was unaware that her medical condition was indeed curable.

The young doctor has a duplicate relationship with the youngest that the aunt had with the doctor. They are both physically used by the men and neither man is concerned about the emotional abandonment of the women. The doctor does not cure the aunt when he can, leaving her to be socially unacceptable and thus she never marries. The young doctor has no emotional attachment or sexual attraction toward the youngest who obviously had those feelings for him as she was “deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). This idea is blatantly sexual, proving that the youngest had a positive curiosity about sex. These, however, are the first and only comments on the youngest’s sexual interest in the young doctor. There is a lack of description about her sex life as seen in her marriage years later when “One night he decided to go into her bedroom to watch her as she slept” (6). She sleeps in her own bedroom—separate from him. There is also the fact that she bore no children. Thus, the reader concludes that the youngest does not have physical intimacy with her husband. From her initial reaction to the young doctor through years of marriage, one sees that her sexual interest in him was stifled by his lack of attention to her. The lack of physical intimacy between the two shows the lack of emotion the young doctor has toward his wife. As he has her sit on the balcony to be seen by all as if she were just a trophy, she begins to comprehend the real reason he married her. The youngest proves to herself that she was only an award that he somehow won when she hides the wedding doll from where it usually sets on the grand piano.
A few months later the doctor noticed the doll was missing from her usual place and asked the youngest what she’d done with it. A sisterhood of pious ladies had offered him a healthy sum for the porcelain hands and feet, which they thought would be perfect for the image of the Veronica in the next Lenten procession. The youngest answered him that the ants had at last discovered the doll was filled with honey and, streaming over the piano, had devoured it in a single night. Since the hands and face were made of Mikado porcelain and were as delicate as sugar, she said, the ants have probably taken them to some underground burrow and at this very moment are probably wearing down their teeth, gnawing furiously at fingers and eyelids to no avail. (6)

She has taken away from him the object he treasures. Her resentment for him is shown in the revenge she feels she has deserved when “That night the doctor dug up all the ground around the house, but he could not find the doll” (6). His search for his lost treasure ends in frustration, mimicking the same frustration that she feels in her marriage.

As she knows that she is also only an object that he values, she continues to sit out on the balcony just as he wanted while the years passed on. When the townspeople who were his patients would come and sit beside her, they noticed something that he, her husband, did not notice until many years had gone by: “They would notice a strange scent that would involuntarily make them think of a slowly oozing sweetsop” (6).

Furthermore, the young doctor does not notice that the youngest has actually made her escape from her loveless marriage and objectified life at the very end.

One night he decided to go into her bedroom to watch her as she slept. He noticed that her chest
wasn’t moving. He gently placed his stethoscope over her heart and heard a distant swish of water. Then the doll lifted up her eyelids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes came the frenzied antennae of all those prawns. (6)

The lack of consciousness of the two males furthers the issue of them being one-dimensional, flat characters. This is in opposition to the female characters that appear to fit with the traditional roles subscribed for them. However, this is not the case at all. The aunt is a seemingly traditional woman who was deemed as not suitable as marriageable material after the prawn embedded itself into her leg. She has to live her life without a husband and children. However, despite the societal constructs of what makes a woman, she finds a way of fulfilling society’s expectations by being mother-like through caring for her nieces and through the creation of or “giving birth” to her dolls. However, it can be seen that she herself had thoughts of escape prior to her injury: “she suddenly thought that her hair had poured out to sea at last” (1). This idea of being poured out to sea can be perceived as a way to freedom from her traditional life as an aristocratic woman. One could conclude that the aunt passes on this idea of escape to the youngest when she presents her with the doll that she eventually morphs into after many years of marriage to the once young doctor.

The psychological development of the youngest is first seen in her sexual interest in the young doctor. The youngest is described as a young woman who agreed to marriage because she liked the young doctor’s “drowsy profile” and was “deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). Yet another emotional advancement of her character comes just after her marriage when she realizes the young doctor has married her for her money and social status. “Her suspicions were confirmed” when she noticed that he had removed the doll’s open eyes, which were
diamonds (5). She sought retribution. She removed the doll from its place on the grand piano, thereby, hindering the young doctor from harvesting and selling the material of which the doll was made. When he asked her what had happened to the doll, she responded that maybe the ants had taken it as it was filled with honey. She had finally stopped him from destroying the doll to make money from its valuable materials. Yet he continued to objectify her. He went on to become a millionaire as his clients came to “see a genuine member of the extinct sugarcane aristocracy up close” sitting on her chair out on the balcony” (6).

The psychological growth of the female characters is set off by the male-dominating objectification of them. The aunt is prevented from further exploration of her own sexual awareness when the prawn bites her in the leg. She is then additionally impeded from exploring her sexual curiosity about others as the prawn bite is not cured causing her physical disfigurement. This deformity leaves her unable to be courted by suitors and therefore she never marries. The youngest’s interest in the young doctor is left unmentioned after they marry. However, she never has a child which leads one to believe that a definite lack of sexual intimacy took place during the marriage. The youngest is not able to explore beyond her initial curiosity. By being objectified for financial worth or gain, the need for revenge grows in the female characters. The aunt gets back at the doctor through his son by giving her niece a way to escape from her loveless marriage, and the youngest gets back at the young doctor by first taking away his means of making extra money and then by taking away his prized possession—herself. The seeming submissive behavior of the women is actually passive-aggressive behavior. The anger of the female characters toward the male characters for their selfish ways causes them to seek revenge. These are not actions or emotions typically attached to the patriarchal characterization of the female. Thus, Ferré manipulates the
traditional patriarchal roles allowing the feminine voice to pass through the void which has been created by her silence to move her patriarchal objectified female characters to ones who assert their female subjectivity.

Through what is written in the narration, one can see that there is so much missing from the discourse. Located in this space of what is not written (the silence) is where Ferré gives emphasis to the feminine voice. The doctor and the young doctor are greedy, envious, and corrupt. They both view the women in the story as a means to their financial gain or moving up in social strata. The masculine characters are flat, lacking in psychological development and only serve as a focal point from which one can see the growth of the feminine characters. The female characters become ones who are not passive to their situations, but ones who react to their situations. In the psychological development of the female characters, one sees that they are much more than the perceived objects that are their assigned roles with the patriarchal system.

Subsequently, it also because of the psychological development of the female characters that make them react to their situation that one finds where Ferré falls short. The female characters are ruled by hegemonic ideology and are not allowed any personal choice. They have no control over their minds or bodies. When you read between the lines, these women are strong and attempt to make changes in their lives, yet they are unsuccessful. Despite her disfigurement, the aunt could have married outside of her class. Yet she did not. There was no concept of marriage outside of social class as it is not even a thought allowed in the woman’s mind.

In addition, the only escape for the female characters from the control of phallocentric society is through death and/or inanimacy. The cycle repeats generation after generation as seen with the relationship between the doctor and the aunt and the relationship between the young doctor
and the youngest. The women are fully psychologically
developed individuals who attempt to break away from their
patriarchal typecasts, yet there really is no escape other
than death which propagates the violence perpetrated against
the women.

The continuum of language use as started in this
chapter begins in the 1970s with Rosario Ferré using silence
to assert the feminine voice. By looking at what is not
written, one sees the reappropriation of the hegemonic
patriarchal system. This subversion of phallocentrism can
further be seen in the 1980s. In this decade, Ana Lydia Vega
uses subtlety to accomplish the same task as Ferré did a
decade before. Vega skillfully decodes the patriarchal ideal
of the female/wife and uses it as a tool to regain control
in order to destabilize societal constructs in her short
story “Solutions, Inc.”.
Ana Lydia Vega’s literary endeavors began in 1953 with the simple unpublished poems she wrote at the young age of seven. By the year 2006, she has to her name eighteen works of mystery and romance that she wrote in English during her adolescence (unpublished); four books on language pedagogy; two essay collections; five short story collections; one screenplay; and three anthologies. She also has been a contributor to numerous journals, newspapers, and other periodicals. She has won national and international awards for her work including the Juan Rulfo International Award for her Pasión de historia collection. Ana Lydia Vega is "one of the most important and popular writers of the new generation of Puerto Rican writers," according to Julia Cuervo Hewitt (1).

This chapter will examine the use of language in terms of how Ana Lydia Vega decodes the patriarchal concept of women as ideal female/wife in her short story "Solutions, Inc." as a way of taking back control in order to destabilize the societal constructs of gender roles. As the ideal is based upon society’s concept of the perfect male or female, Vega identifies the ideal through juxtaposing male and female gender roles in order to show the control society has over individuals. She then manipulates the female role to act in a manner contrary to the ideal in order to take back control and result in a destabilization of social constructs to assert female subjectivity.

In order to understand Vega and her writing, the following is a brief background on her life. The information provided about Vega’s life in this project is a compilation from various sources for the purpose of a general overview.
Vega’s life and work. Ana Lydia Vega was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, in 1946. Santurce is a sector of Puerto Rico that has a mixture of middle- and working-class families that includes blacks, mulattos, and whites. Her parents, Virgilio Vega and María Santana, were her first and most significant influences. Her father was a department store owner who had a fascination for oral poetry, a genre characteristically found in Caribbean cultures. In oral poetry, music accompanies words of a particular rhyme and meter. As an improviser of this particular poetry, he sang in competitions with other oral poets. Her mother, who spent her life as a public school teacher, brought out Vega’s passion for education. As a result, her father encouraged her love of story telling and her mother inspired her to be a language teacher.

In her formative years, she attended the Academia Del Sagrado Corazón. Her childhood best friend and neighbor, who was French, stimulated her interest in the language. After high school, she went to the University of Puerto Rico to study French, graduating with her Bachelor’s degree in 1968. After graduating from UPR, she went to France on a scholarship to study literature. She earned her Master’s degree in French literature from Université Paul Valéry in 1971. She then went to Université de Provence to attain her doctorate in comparative literature, graduating in 1978. It was also during her time in France that she met French professor and poet Robert Villanua, who became her husband and father of her only daughter, Lolita. Today Vega and her husband are retired and live in the Rio Piedras suburb of San Juan. Lolita is a ballet dancer and studies foreign language (Rodriquez 1).

In the 1970s, most of Vega’s work was published in newspapers and magazines. In the early 1980s, upon Vega’s return to Puerto Rico, she became a professor of French literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. It was then she, Robert, Carmen Lugo Filippi, and
Ruth Hernández Torres published a manual for teaching French entitled Le français vécu. She then collaborated with Carmen Lugo Filippi on the book called Vírgenes y mártires. With the notable reception to this collection, Vega became inspired to write more, sparking her now 25-year career as a Puerto Rican woman writer that belongs to the first generation of Puerto Rican women “whose texts are representative of contemporary efforts to inscribe the female experience within the general cultural discourse” (Bellver 789).

A vital point in Vega’s writing is her use of language. Vega’s work contains sensorial references, free association, humor, gender stereotypes, and intellectuality among other elements. Also in her work, one can find components of historical parody and pop culture including street language. According to María Cristina Rodríguez in her article titled “Ana Lydia Vega”,

She has been mentioned as the feminine counterpart of Luis Rafael Sánchez because of her use of street language, the concern for the voiceless, the transformation of the offensive, sexual, male jargon, the constant presence of colloquial humor, and the subversion of language and literary structures. (1)

The use of language is one of the most important characteristics of Vega’s work. Consequently, one can find much investigation of different ways that Vega manipulates language in her texts. Moreover, the collection titled Encancaranublado received the most criticism through this viewpoint. In particular, the short story also titled “Encancaranublado” has been a key story used to prove this argument. The word language, as defined through these arguments, is limited to a linguistic and semiotic context of the term.

This chapter focuses on the language employed in the short story “Solutions, Inc.” from Vega’s True and False
Romances collection in terms of how Vega decodes the patriarchal concept of women as ideal female/wife as a tool to manipulate control. Boling (1995) utilizes a similar concept to examine how Vega reproduces cultural ideology in her texts. To date, “Solutions, Inc.” has not received criticism through a feminist framework that explores Vega’s use of language.

This chapter analyzes Vega’s use of language in terms of how Vega uses the ideal as a tool to reclaim control. The ideal of male and female roles in society is constructed according to patriarchal order. The ideal in society functions as a form of control to manipulate the behavior of an individual to act in accordance with a phallocentric society’s biological determinist attitude toward the roles of men and women in the social order. Therefore, the first discussion of this chapter focuses on the ideal of the male/husband as identified in the narrative. The second discussion focuses on the identification of the ideal female/wife. Vega decodes this concept by manipulating the Client’s behavior to act in ways contrary to the ideal set forth by society. Thus, one can see in the operations designed by the Company and the actions of the Client and Sylvia the Sweet Tart the identification of the ideal female/wife. Furthermore, the ideal is challenged by the Client behaving in opposition to it in order for the Client to gain control over her situation, that is, to find grounds for divorcing the perfect husband.

“Solutions, Inc” is the story about a company run solely by women whose purpose is to help other women resolve problems in their marriages. The plot of the story reveals itself through files, memos, and letters sent back and forth from the company’s Corrector-General to the benefactor that provides money for the company to operate. As the benefactor is anonymous, the assumption is that the gender is female. She is known only as the “Patroness.” The conflict of this story is that the company has been successful with all of
its cases until case 6000. This particular case has not been resolved successfully and the company comes under scrutiny for incompetence. Through the communication between departments, company employees, the Corrector-General, and the benefactor, one sees that the Client cannot reach her desired goal. She has what society considers an ideal marriage to the perfect husband. Herein lies the problem. Because the husband is so perfect it makes her realize her own imperfections. She has no other reasons for dissolving her marriage, so legally she cannot obtain a divorce. The Agency helps her to take actions so that her husband will want to seek a divorce from her. Despite all the help from the Agency, the grounds for divorce are not attainable.

In “Solutions, Inc.”, the umbrella of patriarchal idealization of gender not only involves the male concept about the ideal female/wife, but also includes the female concept of the ideal male/husband. Written in the discourse itself is the female concept of the ideal male/husband. The Client directly states the ideal in her initial deposition with the Agency. She testifies that she has no reason to complain of her husband’s behavior as it “has been without reproach” (68). However, the Client wants a divorce from her husband because it is in his perfection that she sees her own flaws: “4. That the Actionable’s said perfection threatens and violates the Clients’ self-image by emphasizing, underscoring, and otherwise making obvious her own imperfections” (68). The Client approaches the Agency “in recognition of the fact that she lacks objectively sufficient grounds for a divorce action, and feeling herself therefore unable to broach the subject to her husband” (68). She seeks their guidance “in hopes that the Agency may be able to provide the pretext required by law for said action…” (68). Furthermore, in her deposition, she states:

2. That she imagines the great majority of wives in the country would envy the apparent perfection of her marriage, since she believes herself to be
the possessor, however unhappy, of what is
generally and insistently referred to as the Ideal Husband
3. That said Ideal Husband (hereafter to be known as “the Actionable”) shares the household chores, is a good provider, is responsible, serious, sweet, attentive, polite, affectionate, faithful, and efficient in the functions pertaining to his sex and that no other defect or flaw may be detected in him except for his total and absolute perfection. (68)

The ideal male/husband according to the Client and the “majority of wives in the country” is seen through the various descriptions implied in her words (68). Interestingly, most of the adjectives of the ideal entail psychological traits. The ideal male/husband is one who participates in the care of the physical home and one who earns money to maintain not only the house, but also to provide for his wife’s needs. The husband is also “efficient in the functions pertaining to his sex” suggesting that he can sexually please his wife (68). He is also dependable both financially and emotionally. He listens to his wife. He is serious in his responsibilities. He has a good nature and has a positive attitude toward his wife. He is polite and attentive to her. He shows his love by being affectionate. He trusts in her and he, himself, is trustworthy not to engage in extramarital relationships. These ideas are strengthened further in the husband’s reactions to the operations that the Agency sets up.

In the first stage of “Operation Turn up the Heat,” “domestic sabotage,” the Client stopped cleaning the house while her husband was away on a business trip. She let unclean dishes, pots and pans pile up in the sink. She did not take out the trash so that flies would come. She unplugged the refrigerator so the food would rot. She left food out on the counter so that bugs would infest the
house. She did not change the sheets on the bed when they were dirty. She piled dirty clothes around the house. She even stopped cleaning the bathroom so that scum and mildew would grow. Yet, when the husband arrives home from his business trip, he simply “put on his rubber gloves and checked Bermuda shorts and within two hours he had the house spic-and-span again” (70). Here one can see the ideal male/husband sharing in the household chores. In this extreme case, he did all of the cleaning. He did not complain that the house had not been cleaned. Moreover, after the failure of “domestic sabotage,” the second stage of “Operation Turn up the Heat,” “physiological terrorism,” went into action. The Client claimed to be sick by feigning dizzy spells, fainting, and nausea. She complained about being ill, but refused to see a doctor. Yet, her ideal male/husband had a positive attitude because instead of being dismayed at his wife’s supposed illness, he reacted with “ravings of delight” thinking that she was pregnant (70). Furthermore, in yet another phase of “Operation Turn up the Heat,” “psychological offensive,” the wife’s supposedly has a psychological breakdown. She faked nervous tics while her eyes blinked, her nose twitched and her lips trembled. She was grouchy and always in a bad mood, she was sarcastic and disrespectful toward her husband. She would insult and curse him and scream and yell at him. Yet the husband remained sweet, attentive, polite, and affectionate, “My husband was so tender and understanding during this stage of the program that it almost drove me crazy” (71). Moreover, Operations “Spanish Fly” and “Motel” show the ideal traits in the male/husband that the Client mentioned in her deposition.

In “Operation Spanish Fly,” the Agency hires “Sylvia the Sweet-tart” to try to engage the husband to cheat on his wife thereby giving her sufficient legal grounds for divorce. Surveillance of the husband concluded that he went “from home to work and from work to home again, no stop-off,
no detours—no bar, no pool hall, no gym, no liquor store, no girlfriend, no boyfriend, no nothin’” (Vega 74). The ideal male/husband has no vices as he only goes from home to work and back home to his wife. Therefore, Sylvia concludes that the only place that she could engage his interest was at his workplace. Despite all her attempts at seduction, she could not get his attention. She even throws herself at him in an attempt to kiss him and while doing so, tries to unzip his pants. However, the husband not only did not participate, he had her fired and filed sexual harassment charges against her proving that he is trustworthy not to engage in extramarital relationships. Furthermore, he also demonstrates the trust he has in his wife in “Operation Motel.” The scene is set for it to appear that the wife is having an affair with another man. An employee from the Agency phones the husband at his office to alert him to his wife’s supposed extramarital activities. Nevertheless, the husband hangs up the phone before the caller can give the details. What’s more, when the Client returns home from the supposed meeting with the other man, “The Actionable did not even ask where she had been; he was too busy putting the finishing touches on the gourmet dinner he had prepared to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary” (80). The husband had complete trust in his wife. These scenes further the evidence of the ideal characteristics of the male/husband that the Client listed in her initial deposition. Intriguingly, the majority of these characteristics are psychological in nature, especially when compared to the patriarchal idealization of the female/wife.

The idealization of the female/wife, as found in the narrative of “Solutions, Inc.,” focuses more on physiology than psychology. The physical body of the woman is valued more so than her mind. This idea is seen in both the characters of the Client and Sylvia The Sweet Tart. Vega decodes this glorification of the female physical body by manipulation of the Client’s behavior to act in contrast to
the ideal set forth by society and through the extreme tactics employed by Sylvia The Sweet Tart to entice the husband into an extramarital affair. Furthermore, Vega challenges the ideal through the Client behaving in opposition to it in order for the Client to gain control over her situation, that is, to find justification for divorce.

Encoded within the actions that Agency designs and the wife utilizes to find grounds for a legal divorce from her husband are the patriarchy’s idealized qualities of the female/wife. In order to decode the patriarchal idealized concept of female/wife, one must look at the actions of the Client in behaving in opposition to her ordinary demeanor and also at the actions of Sylvia The Sweet Tart whose actions exemplify the polarized opposite of those of the Client. The Agency’s strategies to help achieve the goal of their clients—some behavioral change in their marriage partner and/or marital status—show this opposition. The patriarchal concept of the ideal female/wife is the basis of the tactics themselves. It is the Agency’s thought that “Systematic reversal of this exemplary behavior should lead to the destabilization of the relationship” (69). Therefore, the programs designed by the Agency use the male’s expectation of the female to challenge it, oppose it, and thus cause the destabilization in the relationship resulting in the desired change. There are several approaches designed in this manner. Operations “Turn up the Heat” (and its consequent four stages), “Spanish Fly” and “Motel” first demonstrate the encoded ideal of the female/wife and then manipulate that idealization in order to gain the desired control of the situation.

The Agency offers free classes to women through workshops entitled “Techniques of Vexation I and II” (69). Clearly, these workshops demonstrate methods preparing females to change their normal behavior so that it will aggravate the male companion in order to manipulate a change
in him. The Client attended these workshops and earned an “outstanding” rating (69). The Agency then designs an individual program for her called “Operation Turn up the Heat” in which she will use the tactics she learned in the workshops. According to these tactics, she should meet her goal in four progressive steps (69). She was to change her ways gradually to result in abnormal behavior in order to create disharmony in the marriage. The behavioral change of the Client functions on two levels - her physical body and her psychological state- during these operations.

In order to challenge the ideal of the female/wife, the stages of “Operation Turn Up the Heat” call for the Client to manipulate her surroundings, her physical body, and her state of mind. Three out of the four stages to “Operation Turn Up The Heat” involve the manipulation of the Client’s physical body. The first stage of the operation is called “domestic sabotage.” In this stage, the Client is to alter her surroundings. As domestic chores involve movement of the physical body to cook and clean, the Client opposes that movement of her physical body in her refusal to do the chores while, on the other hand, she uses her body to create a mess in the house. “Domestic sabotage” takes place in the residence shared by the Client and her husband. The idea of the “home” is one of being a safe, comforting place. It is where the individuals are most comfortable. By starting in the house, the attack on husband disturbs his comfort level in his safety zone. In this phase, the Client stopped cleaning the house while her husband was away on a business trip. She starts with the kitchen. She let unclean dishes, pots and pans pile up in the sink. She did not take out the trash so that flies would come. She unplugged the refrigerator “so that the meat would thaw and maggots would start breeding in the freezer” (70). She left food out on the counter. After cooking, she did not clean the stove and “the stove turned into a luxury condominium for high-living cockroaches” (70). She then moves onto the bedroom where she
did not change the sheets on the bed when they were dirty so “The sheets started to get that musty smell of old sweat mixed with Vicks Vaporub” (70). She then piled the dirty clothes around “in every corner of the house” (70). In the bathroom, she did not clean the bathtub which “got this gray scum around it, and then that hardened into a crust” (70). The implication of her not performing the expected common household chores is that the ideal female/wife is one who is a good housekeeper. She maintains domestic order in the home in terms of the housecleaning. She does the cooking and cleaning in the residence. Interestingly, there is no mention of the Client having a job outside the home. Therefore, one can conclude that her primary responsibility is to care for the home.

When “domestic sabotage” had failed, the second and consequent third stages of “Operation Turn up the Heat” went into action. The intent of these plans was for the Client to modify her normal physical and emotional behavior. When the husband returned home and cleaned the disaster that the Client had created in the physical home, she then went into the second stage, “physiological terrorism.”

Forewarned is forearmed, as they say, so I had been careful to collapse into the bed with a case of dizziness, fainting spells, nausea, and other made-up symptoms. (70)

The Client manipulates her physical body with made-up symptoms that illustrate a weakness in her health demonstrating that the implied expectation of the ideal female/wife is one who is in good physical condition. Moreover, the Client again manipulates her body by altering her routine of personal cleanliness in an effort to make herself undesirable to her husband after trying unsuccessfully to frustrate her husband with her supposed poor health.

What came next represented a real sacrifice for me, because I am very careful about personal
hygiene. But I stopped bathing every day, in spite of the terrible heat. I didn’t brush my teeth even if I ate mangoes and got fibers all between my teeth. I stopped shaving my legs and underarms. I threw out all my combs and brushes so I wouldn’t be tempted to do something about the tangled, greasy, mess my hair soon turned into. Since I have dry skin, in no time it was scaly as an iguana’s. I had never in my life been so disgustingly, horribly, repulsively filthy—sometimes I almost made myself puke. I don’t know how he could stand it… (71)

The implications of this plan, which operate in opposition to the ideal, demonstrate that the idealization of the female/wife on the physiological level is about maintaining physical health as well as physical appearance. Basic oral hygiene is not followed which causes bad breath and rotten teeth— all signs of poor personal care of the body. The idea of shaving the legs and armpits indicates the male’s preference for a smooth body. In addition, the unkempt hair shows the ideal of a highly visible part of the body that requires regular maintenance. The hair on the woman’s head is also a part of the body that the male/husband commonly considers sexy. When the Client refuses to brush her hair, she is going against the societal norm— the patriarchal concept of beauty. In addition, the Client’s hair is unclean signifying again that personal cleanliness is important in the female/wife. The Client’s new appearance manipulates the patriarchal concept of beauty in order to control her situation, which is to have her husband divorce her. The third phase of “Operation Turn up the Heat,” “psychological offensive,” serves to attack the husband on the psychosomatic level. In this plan, the Client manipulates her physical body to act emotionally and mentally unstable in order to disrupt the relationship between herself and her husband.
I didn’t have to fake the nervous tics that the program recommended. My eyes blinked, my nose twitched, my lips trembled.

By this point in the plan, I found it easy to be in a bad mood. I loved following the instructions to be grouchy! At the slightest pleasant word out of my husband’s mouth I would bite his head off. I was sarcastic about everything. I showed how much he bored me by openly yawning whenever he tried to make conversation. If he invited me to go out somewhere with him, I would automatically say no. And if he had the nerve to ask why not, I’d unleash a torrent of verbal abuse at him that I’d never before have dreamed myself capable of. Insults, vulgarities, cursing, screaming, fighting—that was the order of the day... (71)

By utilizing her physical body to resemble someone with psychological instability, the thought is that it would provoke either fear or anger in her husband resulting in him wanting to end the marriage. The physical use of her body demonstrates to her husband psychological instability. She manipulates movements of her head, eyes, nose, and lips. She yawns and cuts him off in conversation and most importantly, she uses inappropriate words to abuse him. The words and actions of the Client are contradictory to the mental and emotional consistency of the idealized female/wife. That is, that the ideal of female/wife is one who has a positive outlook on life; one who is not cynical; who pays attention to what the male is saying and does not interrupt; who is eager to spend time with the male; and one who does not use offensive language.

In the fourth stage of “Operation Turn Up The Heat,” “sexual lockout,” one can again see the use of the physical body in terms of how it is manipulated by the ideal. As the Client states, “I simply denied him the slightest physical
contact - I turned my back on him as soon as we got into bed” (72). In this stage, one can see the identification of the female/wife on the sexual level. The ideal female/wife should be a willing sexual partner to the male/husband. She should always be accepting him as a lover. Her body is for his pleasure.

Idealization of the female in phallocentric society continues to be identified through the actions of the character Sylvia The Sweet Tart. Again, the idealization is on the physical body of the woman. As the Client used opposition to the ideal as a means of manipulation, Sylvia takes the ideal to the extreme. She uses her body to manipulate him, demonstrating that the female body is a sexualized object for the man. For “Operation Spanish Fly,” the Agency hires “Sylvia the Sweet-tart” to try to engage the husband to cheat on his wife thereby giving her sufficient legal grounds for divorce. Sylvia attempts to seduce the husband into a sexual relationship with her. In order for her to engage the husband in an extramarital affair, she has first to get his interest. In order for her to get his attention, she plays on the ideals the male/husband finds sexually attractive in a woman based upon how she dresses and how she acts. Seminars entitled “How to Dress for Sex-cess in the Modern Office” and “Office Rules of Misconduct” aid her in her attempt to seduce him. In her seduction effort, she needs to look attractive to the male in order to get his attention. She buys new clothing, make-up and has her hair done in order to work at a professional office and look sexy doing so. As she says, “Fucked up my budget good, too, buying dresses and getting my hair fixed and buying makeup for that job” (74). When she goes into the office to start her job she wears exposing clothing hoping to attract the husband’s notice and then coax him into an affair. She also buys cigarettes with long holders that have a visually phallomorphic connotation.
So on November 1 I was all settled in behind the reception desk, with my panoramic neckline and a skirt slit up to where the Decency Police said Hold it right there, miss. Just to finish off my look, I bought a pack of those cigarettes with the holder, like those little cigar things?, and in I went. (75)

The indications here are two-fold. First, the clothing a woman wears to sexually attract a man are not the clothes a woman would wear if it were not her intent to visually appeal to the man. It should be noted that, in keeping with phallocentric order, the visible is privileged. Therefore, the type of clothing to get sexual attention is short tight skirts and low-cut tight shirts. Secondly, the cigarette with the holder is an obvious Freudian (again, phallocentric) image of fellatio designed to entice the male/husband through the prospect of oral stimulation. Sylvia dresses according the patriarchal ideal of a sexy woman to attract the husband. At first, she uses her eyes to look at him sexually, then her mouth to smile in a provocative way. She increases her body language to the action of bending over so that she reveals more of her body to him.

I’d have this big bedroom smile on my face and these fake eyelashes would be stirring up Hurricane Honey all over the lobby… and I’d bend over real nice for the man, he could see all the way to the Equator, and I’d say good morning so sexy it would’ve stopped an army of eunuchs in its tracks. The only other thing I could’ve done would be sit my ass on my desk and show him the rest of the Made in P.R. merchandise. (75)

Sylvia’s use of her body demonstrates the phallocentric ideal of the sexy woman. She is one who wears revealing clothing and subtly uses her body to get his attention.
The idealization of the female/wife once again returns to the character of the Client. With the failure of "physiological offensive," the Client’s current appearance is less than perfect. However, when "Operation Motel" begins, she once again modifies her physiological look to one considered sexy, as described above with Sylvia. In her home, the Client stopped her normal behavior of personal upkeep thereby leaving her seemingly undesirable to her husband. However, in order to incite anger in him, she dresses in a sexy way to be seen leaving the house with another man. She was "...wearing a very revealing tight outfit of black silk with platform heels..." (79). One can conclude that the patriarchal ideal of a sexy woman is not just one who wears revealing clothing as with Sylvia, but the material and color of the clothing aid in its degree of sexiness. Thus, the ultimate of sexy is revealing clothing made of black silk and she wears high heels.

As "Operation Turn up the Heat" and "Operation Spanish Fly" had failed in their attempts to disrupt the marriage, "Operation Motel" is the Client’s and Agency’s last hope. In this operation, the Client seemingly leaves the house in the middle of the afternoon, all dressed up, and in the company of another man. She then is away from the house for a number of hours when finally,

...the Client returned home at seven o’clock that night, her hair tousled, her mascara run and her lipstick smeared, looking as though she had been through a session of sado-masochistic sex therapy...(80)

The woman comes home, knowing her husband will be there. In a state of physical disorder, she hopes he will attribute her unruly appearance to a sexual affair. With her clothing, hair, and make-up in disarray, the Client has once again manipulated her physical body. This time she gives the image that she was involved in a violent sexual act with another man. This tactic is based on the ideal of fidelity on the
part of the woman. If the maneuver is in opposition to the patriarchal ideal, the ideal is then defined as infidelity on the part of the female/wife is a dishonor of the marriage.

Despite all the tactics, the Client was never able to obtain legal grounds for a divorce. Her ideal husband thwarted her efforts. His seeming perfection is itself an example of control. Unbeknownst to the Agency, their benefactor, the Patroness, is actually the husband himself who already knows the methods they use to destabilize relationships. Therefore, as he is aware of what his wife is doing, he does not react in the expected way. One can see the Patroness revealed through the following quotes. The first is one in which Sylvia is describing the pictures of the husband as she prepares for her part in the operation:

The only thing about the look of this guy that didn’t seem like it went with the rest of the picture were these three black rings on all three fingers of his right hand. And I say three because he was missing two. ’Vietnam Vet,’ I say to myself, right off. But there was no army stuff in his file, so I let it slide. (74)

The second quote demonstrates the reaction of the benefactor upon reading the Client’s file:

The Patroness leafed once more through the documents before slipping them into the manila envelope stamped with the number 6000 in red ink. Then removing the three black rings and setting them carefully on the desk, pulling on rubber gloves with expert elegance, rolling the official-looking paper with its embossed letterhead in the typewriter, and lightly posing eight virtuoso fingers about the keyboard, there was a pause for thought. The Patroness stroked that gray-speckled moustache for just a moment, pushed up the eyeglasses, and smiled, almost tenderly. (81)
Through the narrative of “Solutions, Inc.,” Vega identified the ideal of gender roles in patriarchal society. The male is idealized primarily in psychological terms while the female is idealized by her physical body. Vega uses the ideal of the female/wife as a tool of manipulation for the wife to regain control and find grounds for divorce from her seemingly perfect husband. As the idealization of the female/wife is about her body, the female body is used to regain control over itself. However, the following quote indicates that that attempt failed:

**BURN THIS FILE**
**SILENCE CLIENT**
**ASSIGN NEXT CASE NO. 6000 (81)**

In this seemingly perfect marriage, with a seemingly perfect partner, perfection is the worst adjective to describe the relationship. The Client feels herself “unable to broach the subject to her husband” (68). Therefore, there is no communication between the partners. Furthermore, the marriage is not ideal as can be seen in the Client’s deposition listing the characteristics of her husband as being “efficient in the functions pertaining to his sex” (68). The implication of this statement is beyond that of a sexual nature. It involves the patriarchal idea of control. It involves an inherent attitude in Latino society toward the role of men in general.³¹ Machismo has been described by Evelyn Stevens “as ‘a cult of virility’ whose chief characteristics are ‘exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence … arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships’ (qtd in Waldemar 1). This aggression is exemplified in “Solutions, Inc.”. The violence perpetuated on the female body is multiple. The text implies rape and sodomy of the woman’s body.

I simply denied him the slightest physical contact – I turned my back on him as soon as we got into bed. This tactic, which would have backfired, so to speak, with any other Puerto Rican husband, was
perfectly safe for me. His principled stand on the equal rights issue kept him from taking the back-door route unless he had my permission (72). Furthermore, the ultimate violation of the woman’s body is seen with the last lines of the story. The husband commands his wife be silenced, inferring that she should be killed. The ultimate act of control is taking someone’s life. As the husband speaks those words, not only does he control the life of his wife, he also controls the women who run the Agency as it is their job to fulfill his commands. Once again, Vega shows that there is no escape from the social order of phallocentrism. As death was the only escape for the women in “The Youngest Doll,” it is also the only escape for the Client in “Solutions, Inc.”. Unfortunately, the man controls the death of the woman.

The continuum of the use of language presented in this study begins in the 1970s with Rosario Ferré using silence to assert the feminine voice. By looking at what is not written, one sees the reappropriation of the hegemonic patriarchal system. This attempt at subversion of phallocentrism continues into the 1980s with Ana Lydia Vega. Vega skillfully decodes and manipulates the cultural ideology of the ideal female/wife in order to subvert that the same hegemonic system as Ferré a decade earlier. Both authors were able to assert the feminine voice to a certain extent. At look at Zoé Valdés shows that the reappropriation of phallocentric language continues into the decade of the 90s. In the novel, I Gave You All I Had, Valdés uses social, sexual, and linguistic taboos to up the degree of emphasis of the feminine voice that was once hidden in literature.
The pornographic language of Zoé Valdés’ writing in her novel, *I Gave You All I Had* (1996), is just one of the many techniques that she employs in her work. These techniques, which include the use of the taboo, make her one of the most interesting and controversial Caribbean women writers of the late twentieth century. To date, Valdés has to her name, eleven novels; six books of poetry; four screenplays; two books of cinemagraphic texts; one book that is an interview with Sylvie Douce de la Salle; one book with four North American and three Cuban cinema specialists about Cuban cinema; one short novel; and one book of short stories. She has been chief editorial director for several magazines, has contributed to various journals, newspapers and other periodicals, and has attended many “festivales,” conferences, literary and cinemagraphic events including the Cannes Film Festival. Valdés’ work has received many nominations and several awards including two for her books of poetry, two for her novels (which she was a finalist for the 1996 Premio Planeta award for *I Gave You All I Had*). She won a German literature award for *La nada cotidiana* in 1997 and received yet another award for one of her screenplays.33

This chapter will discuss Valdés’ use of language in terms of how she violates taboos in *I Gave You All I Had* to break with the social norms of a patriarchal society in order to gain control for the feminine voice. The use of taboos allows Valdés to write about what is not considered traditional or appropriate.34 Valdés’ novel is so rich in analysis, there are endless possibilities to explore. Therefore, the taboos examined in this chapter demonstrate
the extreme examples of the taboos found in Valdés’ work. Furthermore, within one example of taboo, there are several more that are also functioning. As such, the discussion of the taboo focuses primarily on the subjugation of women in patriarchal order.

In _I Gave You All I Had_, Valdés uses language to its maximum effect by creating shocking scenes that both amuse and disgust the reader. As Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky notes in her article “Valdés, Zoé”:

Zoé Valdés is one of those controversial writers who inspire admiration in many and aversion in others. While countless readers enjoy her direct style, humor, and abundant eroticism, others criticize her for what they see as repetitiveness, quantity over quality (she publishes roughly one novel per year), crudeness, pornography, and megalomania in her interviews. (1)

To date, there has been very limited research done on the novel _I Gave You All I Had_. There has been no research done on the use of language in this novel. Therefore, the need to look at the language used by Valdés is an important contribution to the field as Valdés serves as the final representative in this project of Caribbean women writers in the latter part of the 20th century. Valdés’ writing is an essential element in the time spectrum argued in this study of how contemporary Caribbean women reappropriate language. The continuum begins in the 1970s with Rosario Ferré using silence in her work in order to make what is not written a powerful voice. In the 1980s, Ana Lydia Vega juxtaposes gender ideals to subtly decode the patriarchal ideal of the female/wife in order to manipulate societal constructs. It is with Zoé Valdés in the 1990s that one can see that what was once hidden is now directly thrown in your face.

In order to understand Valdés and her writing, the following is a brief background on her life. The information provided about Vega’s life in this project is a compilation
from various sources for the purpose of a general overview of Vega’s life and work. Limited information about the life and work of Zoé Valdés is available, serving as a testament to her being new and relatively unknown in the academic field. She was born May 2, 1959, in Havana, Cuba to Gustavo Valdés and Gloria Martínez. She is of Cuban and Chinese descent. Her father abandoned their family very early, leaving her mother and her grandmother to raise her.

Her upbringing may have influenced her work, which invariably presents a woman’s world and her concerns, relegating male characters to marginal and often questionable positions. (Bialowas Pobutsky 1)

As Valdés was born the day after Cuba celebrated its first "May Day," she grew up under a strictly socialist regime. She studied physical education for four years at el Instituto Superior Pedagógico Enrique José Varona until she was expelled. She then studied philosophy at la Universidad de Havana for two years until she decided to leave. She has also studied at la Alianza Francesa in París. She has never finished a degree from any of the schools she has attended.

Valdés eventually took a job as the assistant director of Revisto de Ciné Cubano, a journal of cinema review. In her spare time, she wrote short stories, poems, and then novels. Two books, Respuestas para vivir and Sangre azul, were published in Cuba between 1986 and 1993. Because of a paper shortage in Cuba at the time, the Revisto de Ciné Cubano ceased publication. While still in Cuba, Valdés had a manuscript for the novel, La nada cotidiana, smuggled out of the country with the help of a French journalist. Interestingly, another copy of the manuscript came to Miami on one of the rafts that transported illegal immigrants to the United States. The manuscript became a book (La nada cotidiana) that was published in Spain and France and became a best-seller in both countries. 37

Valdés left Cuba in 1982 and has yet to return. She went to France with her first husband, Manuel Pereira, who
was elected as a delegate for the Cuban delegation to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). From 1984 to 1988, Valdés worked in Paris as a cultural “documentalist” for the Cuban delegation to UNESCO in the Cultural Office of the Cuban embassy. From 1990 to 1995, she worked as assistant director of Cine Cubano and as a screenwriter at the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). Today, Valdés lives in Paris with her daughter, Attys Luna, and her second husband, film-maker Ricardo Vega.

Larry Rohter notes of Valdés in the New York Times:

Using the slang and cadences of the Havana streets, she . . . writes with frankness about sexual matters that, by the strait-laced standards of the Cuban Revolution, is considered politically unacceptable for an educated woman. (New York Times B2)

In an interview with Valdés, Hector Piña asks about her use of crude language in the novels I Gave You All I Had and Café Nostalgia yet this same style of language does not appear in Milagro en Miami. Valdés responds that the novel uses language and situations specific for that novel. It makes sense that in I Gave You All I Had, the severe economic and social situations of the time are described with language that indicates such harsh sentiment. Moreover, by employing the taboo, Valdés is able to go beyond patriarchal language tradition to assert the feminine voice.

A taboo is a strong social exclusion relating to any area of human activity or social custom declared forbidden. Freud provided an analysis of taboo behaviors, highlighting strong unconscious motivations driving such prohibitions. In this system, described in his collections of essays Totem and Taboo (1913), Freud proposes a link between forbidden behaviors and the sanctification of objects to certain kinship groups. When this concept is looked at in areas of Western society, one can see the connection between certain
behaviors deemed appropriate and those deemed inappropriate. In this chapter, the taboo is examined as a form of control that censors the individual. As the breaking of the taboo is considered objectionable or abhorrent by society, then one can see what society privileges by looking at what it marginalizes. As this study focuses on phallocentric language and its reappropriation by women writers, one must keep in mind that Western society sees relationships in binary oppositions. Thus, the taboo is the binary opposition to acceptance. Therefore, what is unacceptable becomes a tool to recognize the marginalized in social order. Furthermore, it provides a way for Valdés to reveal the subjugated and as a result make the unspeakable “speakable” as she takes control in order to assert her own feminine voice. Moreover, the taboo, by privileging certain behaviors over others, is a form of control that restricts the body. The taboo controls the thoughts, actions, and speech of the body. Phallocentric society places limitations on the marginalized—women. Simply put, it is the bodies of woman that are the ones most controlled by the taboo.

It is important to acknowledge the technique with which Valdés is able to break taboos. She takes the use of the taboo to the extreme in that every scene in the novel presents a new topic that offends someone, regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual preference, politics, etc. She makes light of society’s polarization of certain social ideas trivializing the violation itself with humor. She spares no one, not even herself as she writes, “Because this book, ladies and gentleman, is unabashedly X-rated material for marginals, crackpots and housewives” (106). She acknowledges that her writing is intended to offend, that she herself is marginalized for even writing the novel. What’s more is that she reaches all readers by making them part of the marginalization. She does this under the guise of poverty. The protagonist in the novel is Cuca who lives her entire life in poverty. The words of the novel are her
life, her story. The reader is drawn immediately to her within the first few pages of the novel in which the reader sympathizes with her simply because, from the moment of her birth, her life is difficult. She is born into poverty. She is the underdog. While society interestingly roots for the underdog, the underdog itself is the marginalization of society. Poverty is a taboo conversation topic, however, but it is not unacceptable in reading because it is only taking place in the mind. As such, the reader is able to distance him/herself from the novel. In order to break down the resistance of the reader and draw him/her back in, Valdés first excessively uses the taboo and then employs humor as the only acceptable way to break the taboos. She breaks down the resistance of the reader to the point that they not only accept the desecration of social customs, but that they do not realize that they themselves have become part of the marginalized simply by reading the book, because one must remember that only marginals, crackpots, and housewives would read the X-rated material.

The taboos of patriarchal society function to dominate every aspect of the woman—the body and the mind. Valdés uses one the most extreme examples of the taboo of control of the body. She demonstrates that control through the act of rape. Moreover, she uses the bodies of children as the ones who are violated. The rapist, the “damn near white mulatto” son of Cuca’s godmother, María Andrea, is the man who perpetuates the violence.

His cock was stiff before he even entered the room, a cudgel going before him toward the Girl. With one smack he knocked her onto the divination board, where she lay amidst the cowries. He hurriedly ripped off her panties and spread her skinny rash covered thighs and was about to force his meaty rod into her dry little bald pussy,
when the godmother María Andrea reeled in, still heaving in spirits and in full rapture, and picked up a plank with a nail poking out of its end slammed it on the back of her son, the rapist. (5)

In this scene, Cuca is a preadolescent who had just sat down to sew a new dress for her doll. The innocent action is interrupted when the mulatto attacks her. Cuca is a child; therefore, she has no control in patriarchal order. Rape is not about sexual behavior. It is an act of attempt to gain power over another individual. In phallocentrism, there is a hierarchy of control. Even thought the mulatto is male, he is an additional marginalized subject of phallocentric order because of his race and class in society. His attempt to rape Cuca’s physical body is an attempt gain control over someone who is in an inferior position to himself, thereby leaving him to feel that he has gained some sort of power. However, María Andrea (an adult woman) thwarts his attack on Cuca. Not only is María Andrea an adult, like him in terms of maturity, she is his mother. She physically attacks her own son in order to protect the child thereby taking away his control. Thus, he runs out of the house:

Along the way, and on the wing, he jammed his prick into a calf, came, and considered hanging himself. But as it was stolen rope that would have done the trick, and as the shopkeeper from whom he filched it had spotted him, he didn’t get too far before the police picked him up right in front of the tree that could’ve been his gallows. (5)
As the mulatto is unsuccessful in his attack on Cuca, he tries to obtain control over something that has an even more subordinate position to the young girl. He rapes a young animal. Animals are not part of the hierarchy of phallocentrism. Therefore, in his attempt to control, the only domination he has is over an animal. He needs to find control, any sort of control. It is not important what he can control as long as he can dominate something—anything. His last effort in attempting to gain control is to use the only control he has left—control over his own life. However, his attempt at suicide also is impeded by the fact that he is arrested for stealing the rope from which he wanted to hang himself.

The mulatto’s efforts to find domination persist. In the most shocking and disturbing scene found in the novel, one again sees the rape of the body of children as the ultimate taboo. Phallocentric society does not recognize children as sexualized beings until they have reached sexual maturity. Therefore, gender is not important when it concerns children. Thus, the mulatto seeks control by dominating the body of a young boy.41

The Girl Cuca’s brother, laid low by asthma and chronic Catholicism, was settled in the damn-near-white mulatto’s hole of a room, walled off by a wooden partition from the pigeonhole where his sister slept. Not that she was so little anymore, now that she had reached adolescence. It was a morning of pouring rain when the Girl (she’d only shake the name as a full-grown woman) heard something like the parched panting of a horse, the rustling of bedsheets, and the rip of yielding cloth. T’was not curiosity, but fear,
the kind that chills and convulses the belly with simultaneous urge to shit and vomit, that sent her spying through a crack. The scream she stifled dangled in her open mouth. There was her brother, forcibly pined down by his hair, all naked, all wet, slobbering. Tied up and scratched up, weeping and mumbling an “oh my God! oh my God!” beneath his breath. Buttocks glistened like tallows in the grid of moonlight sifting through the slats, the damn-near-white mulatto’s peninsular penis pumped away, in and out, plunging with the ease of a Turkish saber into a heart. The Girl Cuca saw her brother’s ass, chafed and raw, and that other one’s cock smeared in shit and blood. She wanted to scream, call for help, rescue her brother, the Catholic laid low by chronic asthma. But the damn-near-white mulatto chose that very minute to come, to pull off the finale of the century, sealing his moans with a bite to the other one’s back. Laughing and crying in one breath, the other one whimpered away—“oh, my sugar angel, my mulattokin, my honey cock.” And then, he too was coming in some intergalactic orbit... (6)

The mulatto succeeds in his efforts to find control when he rapes the young boy. Gender is not important to him; all that is important is the domination. The non-recognized sexuality of the young boy in phallocentrism leads to his subjugated feminization. If the boy is not recognized sexually in phallocentric order, which functions through binary opposition, then he is not male, and therefore, through the act of anal penetration, he can be
seen as the female. This returns to the idea of the physical violation of the female body. Furthermore, Valdes dismisses the matter in Cuca’s goodbye to her brother, who is “laid low by asthma and chronic Catholicism” (4); “Taking a terse and maternal tone, she parted from her brother with a word of warning about his asthma. He had already found his remedy, settled on his optimal spray, the intestinal inhaler” (7). Valdés trivialization of the matter furthers her breaking the taboo, thus showing the control phallocentrism maintains over the female body.

In its power over the woman’s body, patriarchal order also functions to control the language of women. It controls that which a woman should not say. Therefore, there are certain thoughts that are inappropriate to be spoken aloud. The following scene demonstrates this idea.

She wished for this man, with whom she was now dancing cheek to cheek, to stay right where he was, forever...

And then, he sighed, and Cuquita inhaled the foul effluvium of his breath.

‘Oh! You’ve got bridgework?’ she asked, wondering if he had false teeth.

‘No, why?’ and he pulled back, self-conscious all of a sudden.

‘Because your mouth stinks a little, you know, bad breath. You should have a look around, ‘cause what if a dog crawled in there and did his business under the bridge...’”. (23)

The moment, which is set up to be exciting and wonderful is supposed to be controlled by society’s privileged idea of the refined woman. Nevertheless, the moment is interrupted not just by the fact that Cuca finds
Uan’s breath repulsive, but that she says something about it. Phallocentric order forces a woman to control her speech. A lady is supposed to be subtle in her communication with the opposite sex. Therefore, the problem of halitosis should never have been mentioned aloud. Nonetheless, not only does Cuca not monitor her speech, but her comments on his personal hygiene are also an affront to the male body that is privileged in society.

Moreover, the taboo of obscenity functions to the control a woman’s language. The concept implies that there are certain words women are not supposed to say aloud. Furthermore, phallocentrism maintains the idea of masculinity and femininity in males and females respectively. These constructs dictate that there are certain qualities assigned to each based upon their anatomy. However, Valdés breaks the taboo by using excessive obscenity. Green and LeBihan comment on the action of language stating, “Certain verbs actually ‘perform’ an act when uttered. Verbs such as those to do with warning, prohibiting or promising and so on perform the very function encoded in the word” (29). From this perspective, the word fuck functions to recreate the violent act that it signifies.

So they fucked morning, noon, and night for a week. In all the usual, and a few unusual, positions: on top, beneath, on the side, on the other side, standing, handstanding (the wheelbarrow, sitting, leaning on the balcony railing, on the bathroom sink, the toilet bowl, on the kitchen sink, in the rocker, on the U-shaped sofa, on the hard granite floor. (53)
Valdés truly enhances the mental image of the word fuck by describing Cuca and Uan’s interaction as animalistic behavior. That is, they simply followed their sexual desire/instincts rather than prescribed social etiquette. They had sexual intercourse anywhere and everywhere they could in all the possible positions they could. Phallocentric society holds a certain expectation of the sexual act. It privileges particular moments and places for the act to take place. Any other way is considered inappropriate. On the surface, it seems as though the constructs of masculinity and femininity are the reasons for which women should not use the word fuck. However, deeper analysis shows that the term is marginalized for women because it reflects the true nature of hegemonic rule—the violent behavior of men toward women.

Phallocentrism not only controls the mind and physical body of the woman, but also strives to control that which possibly cannot be controlled—the anatomy of the body and the functions the organs perform. In language, the production of speech involves anatomical organs. If those organs do not operate properly, then speech production is impeded. This is the case with stuttering as can be seen in the character of Concha.

Leth go! Hop thoo ith! There’s everythin thoo be done here. I’ll give you a cot in the room with La Methunguita and La Puthunguita. Lataah, I might thee about a job with Pepe in the cafeteria, but thtarterth you’ll get room and boarh in exhange for cleanin the bildin with theal and dedicathion…(7)

Stuttering is an articulatory disorder. In society, one who does not communicate properly is ostracized.
Furthermore, it is Concha, the female character, who is the one with the speech impediment demonstrating women’s speech interrupted and, in an obvious way, censored.

In addition, the control exerted on the bodily functions of the woman’s body is seen through the idea of flatulence. Because of phallocentrism’s constructs of masculinity and femininity, this particular behavior is considered crude for women. In the following scene, La Mechunguita and La Puchunguita, Cuca’s roommates whom she had not yet met, enter the room unaware she was there.

Tit to tit and clit to clit, they mashed so hard they gave off sparks. In a flash of cheap rings, fingers were strumming clits at the speed of light. Jumbo lips sucked on any protuberance that came their way. They also spanked each other’s asses to a lurid pink and tweaked and pinched each others nipples until they set off a delirium of screeches. Cucquita thought she would die of shame. Why did life always place her before scenes intended for much more mature audiences? At a loss, she tried to call attention to herself by vigorously clearing her throat, but those two seemed not to notice. So she coughed and her anus went slack and honked...

“Hey! Who farted? You?” (9).

Cuca’s physical body needed to expel intestinal gas through her anus. Phallocentrism attempts to control the woman’s action of passing gas as the taboo dictates that this action only should be done in a designated place (preferably the bathroom) and it should never be done in the presence of others. Furthermore, if the act should happen, one must apologize for the offense. This does not
happen. What ensues is a dialogue between the characters as to who is the culprit of the offense. Valdés not only breaks this taboo, but she also intensifies the violation as it is done in the presence of other women.

Moreover, phallocentrism’s attempt to control the anatomy of the woman’s body is seen through the following extreme situation. The female character, Xerox Machine, earns money through prostituting her body. However, due to the abnormal anatomical structure of her clitoris, she is constantly beaten up by the men with whom she is about to engage in sexual intercourse.

Xerox Machine needs to have another go at it, give the old reproductive system one more chance, despite missing ovaries and her nonexistent periods. For years now, she’s had to put up with a minor but annoying problem— a jack-in-the-box that pops out of her vagina each time she opens her legs. More than once she’s been slapped around by fellows who though she was mocking their prowess. And slapped around is the least of it. At one time, she was in love with an intellectual, an essayist with a dinky dick who was an agent for Internal Affairs. She couldn’t bring herself to do it with him, go all the way I mean; she knew what was coming, and sure enough, it was exactly as she had anticipated: she opened her legs and out popped the clown, standing a full head taller than the intellectual’s minuscule member. It is still a mystery why, on that same afternoon, the militant masses came to jerk her by the hair and drive her from her house with blows and kicks to the tits. They shipped
her off with a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses, delinquents, and homosexuals to a forced labor camp.\(^{44}(137)\)

This particular scene demonstrates phallocentrism’s attempt to exert control over the anatomy of women—something over which women have no possible control. Furthermore, it demonstrates that what cannot be controlled must be removed from society. Xerox Machine’s large clitoris is the anatomical structure of her genitalia. She cannot control how she was born. As her clitoris resembles a penis in its size, the men perceive the sexual act that is about to take place as being homosexual rather than heterosexual. Men, who see her clitoris, view her as masculine; thereby, she is not considered a woman, and is repeatedly and violently attacked. In the end, she inevitably is removed from society.

Valdés amplifies the spectrum of reappropriating language to assert female subjectivity. With the taboo, she furthers the idea that phallocentric rule oppresses the woman in seeking to control even that which it cannot. Ferré and Vega have shown patriarchal control of the mind and physical body of the woman. Valdés uses the taboo to show that the domination goes deeper to attempt to force the woman to control what she cannot possibly control. Like Ferré and Vega, she demonstrates that when the woman’s body cannot be controlled, it is inevitably removed from society.

Language holds the inherent thought of phallocentric society that operates using binary opposition. This ideology privileges one thing and subjugates another. The position of women in the society then is seen as secondary to that of the man. Language is the primary manifestation of thought.
that functions as the control and power of the ideology of phallocentrism. It serves to control the mind and therefore the body. It perpetuates the oppression of women. If one can control the mind, then one can control the body. The control that phallocentric ideology has had over the woman is seen in the continuing male violence that is demonstrated in the thoughts that then are transferred to vocalized or written language and then taken to the extreme on the physical violation of the female body. Unfortunately, the extreme is the present brutal reality for women.

Women have sought to challenge this reality by using the same language that perpetuates it. However, with language, its inescapable fallibility is that one inevitably falls back into phallocentric thought. They only way to overcome the subjugation is it to change the ideology. The process through which this can be accomplished is by simply imagining. The mental activity of envisioning is a necessary precondition to reconstruct a different reality. The imaginative act creates a different situation from the radically frightening present experience, that is, the brutal reality of phallocentrism which rapes and murders the minds and bodies of women. Through writing, using language, a new imaged reality can be disseminated. Writing constitutes an act of resistance toward the male violence in the hope that the mental activity (imagining) will lead to a change of the physical living experience. The visualization of an alternate reality is only possible when women use the only tool that they have—language. This step has already been taken as can been seen in the works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés as they have reappropriated misogynistic language to assert female subjectivity. Ferré chose to use silence finding a power voice in what is not said. Vega chose subtlety in what she said and Valdés uses salacity in a powerful voice that speaks out loud and in your face. Furthermore, as pointed out by Cixous, it is not only important for women just to use language, to write, but they
must be careful that the language they use does not simply reproduce phallocentric thought. The next chapter serves to show that these women have not. They can be situated in the way that Cixous has already imagined to use language—l’écriture feminine.
CHAPTER 5: WOMEN ON WOMEN ABOUT WOMEN: A LOOK AT L’ÉCRITURE FEMININE THROUGH FERRÉ, VEGA AND VALDÉS.

It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. (Hélène Cixous)

According to Cixous, l’écriture feminine is something that cannot be defined, theorized, coded or understood. Therefore, as Harmon states, l’écriture feminine is more of a philosophy than a literary practice (1). It is simply a conception that “in writing is precisely the very possibility of change” (Cixous 350). With this in mind, this chapter seeks not to define l’écriture feminine, but to show the characteristics of this writing as seen in the specific works of Ferré, Vega, and Valdés through their literary techniques and themes.

The critics who address the idea of l’écriture feminine in the writings of Ferré and Vega have translated the concept as “women’s writing” and “feminine writing.” According to Cixous, l’écriture feminine is new strategy for a new kind of relation between female bodies and language, that once women begin the process of writing what results is a personal history being inscribed by them.

An act that will also be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. (Cixous 351)

The texts examined represent a body of work on Ferré’s writings as feminine writing and in particular, views the reinscription of women’s personal history in writing through the short story “The Youngest Doll.” To date, there has been nothing published that situates neither Valdes’ I Gave You All I Had nor Vega’s “Solutions, Inc.” in l’écriture feminine. 47
In chapter two of this study, Birmingham Pokorny’s 1996 article, “(Re)writing the Body: The Legitimization of The Female Voice, History, Culture and Space in Rosario Ferré’s La muñeca menor,” was looked at to show how Ferré uses the character of the aunt and her creation of the dolls to subvert the patriarchal system. Additionally, this article also looks at Ferré’s attempt to “dismantle the hegemonic discourse by inquiring into women’s writing as a disglossic process” (76). The article also shows how Ferré brings about the “legitimization of the female voice, history, culture, space” as she “calls for women to reappropriate their bodies so they can reinscribe on them, their own personal history and the island’s history” (76).

According to Birmingham Pokorny, through the narration of the act of creating the dolls, Ferré explores the:

unexpected impact that her [the Aunt’s] ‘innocent’ craft has on the life of her nieces, in particular, of her youngest, on their identity, on their behavior, on their personal history, on their response to the traditional roles assigned to them by society, on the prevalent cultural construction of the female sexual identity and/or destiny, on their perception of the mechanisms of power, on their future, and on a broader aspect, in the everpresent history of patriarchal and colonial oppression of the Puerto Rican society. (76)

Birmingham Pokorny looks at feminine writing simply through the action of one character. I argue that it is through the literary techniques of the narration and the themes presented by the authors that one can see the idea of l’écriture feminine emerge.

Women who write—if they don’t merely reproduce the phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning which already exists (and which excludes them)—will be creating a new signifying system;
this system may have built into it far more play, more fluidity, than the existing rigid phallogocentric symbolic order. ("Helene Cixous"
1)

Thus l’écriture feminine allows women to write while keeping with their own personal history that places women back into literature- giving them a voice that has remained silent in the phallogocentric order of Western culture.

Despite Cixous’ comment that l’écriture feminine is only possible in poetry where there is less fixed structure and more flow of meaning and that prose is too centered on one-to-one fixed meanings, the techniques in poetry that lead to the unstable meanings that Cixous finds necessary in writing are imagery, metaphor, and symbolism (350). Therefore, in the prose writing of these women authors, one finds that their texts provide rich examples of these techniques. Furthermore, one can find similar themes of women’s bodies and women’s issues within these texts. For the purposes of this chapter, the analysis of these authors as seen through the idea of l’écriture feminine provides a preliminary basis for further research by providing strong examples from their texts. This chapter is divided into three integrated discussions that respectively focus on Ferré’s, Vega’s and Valdés’ literary techniques and themes on women’s issues as all three ideas interconnect in their work. The final discussion not only concludes this study, but also gives future ideas for examining the concern of the oppression of women through language in the works of contemporary Caribbean women writers.

Ferré, Vega, and Valdés incorporate powerful imagery and symbolism that relate the woman’s physical and psychological body to nature to combine with themes of female sexuality and violence perpetuated on the woman’s body in their texts. The use of symbolism and imagery connect nature to the physiology and emotions of women. The themes found within these texts also explore the idea of
female sexuality, in its development (or lack of) and the brutality of the violation of women. The literary techniques found in their texts situate their writing in the idea of *l’écriture feminine*. The idea of *l’écriture feminine* calls for using images of language that are fluid and flowing not just in word choice itself but in the meaning conveyed. Ferré’s word choice in “The Youngest Doll” integrates nouns and adjectives that indicate the fluctuating movement of water and the woman’s body.

As a young woman, she had often bathed in the river, but one day she had a soft feeling of melting snow in the marrow of her bones. With her head nestled among the black rock’s reverberations, she could hear the slamming of salty foam on the beach mingled with the sound of waves, and, she suddenly thought that her hair had poured out to sea at last. (1)

The connection of bathing, melting snow, reverberations, salty foam, waves, and hair pouring out to sea connect the physical body of the aunt, her bones and hair, to nature, specifically with the idea of water. Water is necessary to sustain all life. Ferré links the physical body to nature and then nature back to the physical body, creating a circle of flowing images. Therefore, the connection between the physical bodies of woman to water is multiple. First, water nourishes and cleanses the physical body. The idea of bathing in a river shows the ablutions of the aunt related to the natural environment around her—the river. The physical body of the aunt is submerged in water. The water supports and controls the movements of her hair, which give the image of her hair as pouring out to sea. The image of flowing also connects the physical body, the marrow of the bones, through which blood (fluid) flows and the physical body of the woman who is herself the sustainer of new life as the baby in uterus is surrounded by fluid that sustains and nurtures its existence.
The association of body to nature and nature to the body is also seen in the connection between the body of the youngest to water. Ferré describes the youngest’s sexual curiosity about the young doctor as she was “deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). The correlation of the dolphin (sea/water) and sexual curiosity shows the youngest’s sexual curiosity tied to nature.

In “The Youngest Doll,” Ferré comes full circle with her use of imagery when she connects the prawn (nature/water) to the aunt’s body, which is then passed on to the doll’s body (a feminine body) and then on to the youngest’s body in her transformation from her physical body into the doll. Interestingly, one can see that the use of imagery and symbolism interconnect.

The doctor who examined her assured her it was nothing, that she had probably been bitten by an angry river prawn. But the days passed and the scab would not heal. A month later, the doctor concluded that the prawn had worked its way into the soft flesh of her calf and had nestled there to grow. (1)

The prawn is a water creature that bit the aunt and then insinuated itself into her leg (body). Because of the prawn bite, the aunt’s leg is disfigured, leaving her unacceptable for marriage. Thus, she dedicates her life to her nieces and to making dolls for them. Moreover, in the aunt’s methods to create the dolls are further evidence of the imagery of nature and the body and her use of symbolism:

The only items the aunt would agree to use in the birth of a doll that were not made by her with whatever materials came to her from the land were the glass eyeballs. They were mailed to her directly from Europe in all colors, but the aunt considered them useless until she had left them submerged at the bottom of the stream for a few
days, so that they would learn to recognize the slightest stirring of the prawn’s antennae. (3)
The eyeballs (part of the physical body surrounded in liquid) are immersed into the same river in which the aunt was bathing and where she was bitten. The aunt intends for the dolls to be able “learn to recognize the slightest stirring of the prawn’s antennae” (3). As the dolls (symbolic of feminine bodies) are physical replications of the nieces, the image of the prawn is transferred to the youngest through her wedding doll. Ferré shows the transformation of the youngest into the doll.

One night he decided to go into her bedroom, to watch her as she slept. He noticed that her chest was not moving. He gently placed the stethoscope over her heart and heard a distant swish of water. Then the doll lifted up her eyelids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes came the frenzied antennae of all those prawns. (6)
The empty sockets of the eyes were not actually empty. They contained numerous prawns. Ferré has connected back with nature/water and the feminine body by linking the aunt to the doll to the youngest who turns into a doll from which the prawns emerge. The symbol of the doll is the representation of the feminine body that interconnects with the prawn, a nature/water figure.

In addition to the imagery and symbolism found in “The Youngest Doll,” Ferré explores the theme of women’s bodies through female sexuality and violence that is perpetuated on them. Female sexuality becomes an important topic that situates “The Youngest Doll” securely into the idea of l’écriture féminine. By writing very little about it in the text and then divorcing it completely, Ferré’s silence indicates the strength of the issue. Female sexuality is only given the chance to blossom, but never to reach full bloom. The idea repeats in the aunt and the youngest.
With her head nestled among the black rock’s reverberations, she could hear the slamming of salty foam on the beach mingled with the sound of waves, and, she suddenly thought that her hair had poured out to sea at last. (1)

The images of the black rock’s reverberations, the slamming of salty foam on the beach, the sound of the waves and the hair pouring out to sea imply that the aunt as a young woman is beginning to explore her own sexuality. However, she painfully is stopped in the process when the prawn bites her. From this point on, the aunt is regarded as a non-sexual being. She never marries, and her dolls become the children she never had. As she is not married, the assumption is that she never lost her virginity and never was able to explore fully her own sexuality. Interestingly, even the married woman in this story does not have sexuality. The youngest has a sexual attraction to the young doctor from the moment she met him. He had a “drowsy profile” and she was “deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like” (5). This idea is blatantly sexual proving that the youngest had a positive curiosity about sex. However, what follows after they marry is a lack of narration about her sex life as seen in the line: “One night he decided to go into her bedroom to watch her as she slept” (6). The fact that she had her own room, separate from her husband, and that she borne no children, shows that there is no sexual intimacy in the marriage. Her initial sexual curiosity for the young doctor is stifled from the moment they marry.

Furthermore, Ferré explores the idea of violence perpetuated on the female body in two distinct ways. First, the negative adjective of angry describes the prawn (nature) that embeds into her soft (positive adjective) flesh (body) of the aunt. This scene is the first in her story to demonstrate the destruction of the female body. As the aunt’s body was violated by the prawn, the doll’s body is
desecrated by the young doctor as he tears apart the doll piece by piece to sell its valuable parts.

One day he pried out the doll’s eyes with the tip of his scalpel and pawned them for a fancy gold pocket watch with a long, embossed chain (5).

Secondly, one can see the ultimate destruction of the female body by the transformation of the youngest into the doll. The reader figures out that she has become the doll through the lines:

He noticed that, although he was aging naturally, the youngest still kept the same firm, procelained skin she had had, when he had called on her at the big house on the plantation (6).

The youngest has ceased to exist in body and mind. It is the equivalent of death. What remains is the corpse of the doll with prawns crawling from the eye sockets. The final words of the story describe a horrible scene in which the ultimate violence of the female body has culminated in death. This represents the control (oppression) that patriarchal order has over the woman. The image of a corpse with prawns crawling out of the eye sockets is a powerful that the reader can only find disturbing.

As Ferré uses imagery and symbolism to connect nature to the female body, Vega likewise connects nature to both the physical body and the emotional states of women. From the beginning of the story, one can see an excited emotional state in characters starting with the Corrector General.

On December 2, 1990, the lightening in the Corrector-General’s eyes set off mood alarms all over the building. Storm clouds brewed in her office, and the defenseless button of the intercom received the brunt of her fury. (65)

In this scene, lightening and storm clouds, elements of nature’s fury, are linked with the developing anger in the Corrector-General. The image presented here equates the woman’s emotions with these elements of nature. As the aunt
in “The Youngest Doll” submerged the glass eyeballs (body) of the doll in the river (nature), similarly, Vega conveys the image of the Corrector-General’s eyes (body) to lightening (nature). Furthermore, the image of storm clouds (nature/water) reveals the brewing rage in the Corrector-General (female body). Moreover, as nature describes her mood, that likely conclusion is that the physical body reacts to it as can be seen when her finger (body) aggressively slams the button of the intercom. Here, Vega combines violent elements of nature and the female body in a powerful image to demonstrate enraged emotions of the Corrector-General.

In addition to the striking imagery presented in the first words of the story, Vega also explores the same themes that represent women’s issues, as does Ferré. The examination of female sexuality is seen through Sylvia the Sweet Tart and the Client. Curiously, Vega approaches female sexuality differently from Ferré. Sylvia the Sweet Tart has an obvious overt sexual appetite compared to the lack of sexuality seen in the aunt.

Hmm, I said to myself, the dude’s do-able, all right, got to hand it to ‘im – cute face, a little silver sparkle in the moustache, matching the highlights in the sideburns. Got good hair on his chest, and he’s in pretty good shape for his age, although he is definitely not my type (73). Sylvia’s interest is in the physical appearance of the husband in that she finds him acceptable for sexual intercourse. In her words, “...the dude’s do-able, all right...” (73). One can see that male physiology plays a role in the female’s desire. On the other hand, the Client, similar to the youngest, has been married for many years. Although there is no sexual interaction between the youngest and the young doctor, there is sexual intimacy between the Client and her husband. However, this intimacy is minimal in that it just barely satisfies the Client. Sylvia the Sweet Tart
finds the husband good-looking enough for her to have sex with him. The Client, who has had sex with him, describes her husband as simply efficient. Amusingly, neither one of the women are overly enthusiastic in their feelings of sexual desire for the husband.

Through the Client, one can see another level of female sexuality. This level locates the source of pleasure for the Client as not being just sexual, but also mental. Her pleasure is found in her brain, not her genitals. “I’ve never been overly given to the pleasures of the flesh. My main erogenous zone is definitely inside my head” (71). Vega adds a new dimension not seen in Ferré in that female sexuality/pleasure has multiple sources. It is that female sexuality is only about genital stimulation, it also involves psychological stimulation.

The theme of violence on women’s bodies runs strong through “Solutions, Inc.”. The first scene in which this idea is presented is the client’s self-desecration of her body in “Operation Turn Up The Heat”. As she seeks grounds for a divorce from her husband and given that she is controlled by society’s ideal of the woman’s physical body, she uses that ideal to destroy her normal appearance. One can see her actions in “Operation Turn Up The Heat”.

What came next represented a real sacrifice for me, because I am very careful about personal hygiene. But I stopped bathing every day, in spite of the terrible heat. I didn’t brush my teeth even if I ate mangoes and got fibers all between my teeth. I stopped shaving my legs and underarms. I threw out all my combs and brushes so I wouldn’t be tempted to do something about the tangles, greasy, mess my hair soon turned into. Since I have dry skin, in no time it was scaly as an iguana’s I had never in my life been so disgustingly, horribly, repulsively filthy-
sometimes I almost made myself puke. I don’t know how he could stand it... (71)

Another scene that demonstrates violence on the woman’s body, again manipulated by the Client, is the scene in which she arrives home from hotel:

...when the Client returned home at seven o’clock that night, her hair tousled, her mascara run and her lipstick smeared, looking as though she had been through a session of sado-masochistic sex therapy... (80)

The ideas presented here are those that seemingly resulted from an infliction or subjugation of extreme cruelty for the purposes of pleasure. The image of physical body of the Client as having taken part in “a session of sado-masochistic sex therapy...” demonstrates the exploitation of her physiology due to a violent activity of which her body seemingly was a participant (80).

Soon after this scene, one can see the ultimate violation of the female body in the words:

BURN THIS FILE
SILENCE CLIENT
ASSIGN NEXT CASE NO. 6000 (81)

The Client is murdered, the definitive act of control and oppression of the woman. The decisive role the husband plays in her death is an important factor. He is the benefactor of the company of which she seeks help to gain grounds of divorce from her husband. Therefore, he was aware of all of what was going on all the time and at each point was able to thwart the operations. The last words of the story indicate that rather than be divorced from his wife, he wanted her dead. It is an even more shocking scene than Ferré created in “The Youngest Doll.” One sees the husband give the order to silence her. He murders her through the power of his command—his language.

As Ferré and Vega employ imagery and symbolism to relate nature to the woman’s body, Valdés also uses these
strategies in I Gave You All I Had. Two female characters in the novel demonstrate this relationship. The mother of Cuca, the main character, is described as “...she of stormy red hair and the sea blue eyes...” (4). An intense picture of the mother is painted with imagery that links violent nature (storms) with vibrant color (red) to describe her hair. Moreover, the image of the calm sea with the tranquil color of blue are used to describe her eyes. The image of the mother connects different elements of nature with her physical appearance. It also implies characteristics of the mother’s personality. On one hand, her hair is not just the unusual color of red, but of stormy red. Presenting the idea that part of her personality is volatile while the another aspect to her is serene. Her sea blue eyes indicate this tranquil side to her personality. Likewise, the first physical detailed description of Cuca connects her physical body to various elements of nature.

She stood before him with her wavy hair, black as jet, and the perfect oval of her face and the slight stoop of her shoulders (hallmark of profound sensuality and a surefire signal of uterine blazes to come), with her wide brow and her gently slanted golden eyes, like honeysuckle, like rum, and her flat button of a nose and her rosy mouth much bolder than a bud and her pearly skin. Her face bare, clean, smooth, childlike. Her dripping hair revealing her for what she was, a schoolgirl, emerging from the sea or a river or simply the shower...(25)

The description of Cuca’s hair equates her body to water. The waviness of her hair is reminiscent of the sea. Additionally, her hair is sweaty because she is dancing. This depiction conveys the idea of water and the youth of her physical body. Her wet hair exposes her adolescent age painting her in the picture of just emerged “from the sea or a river or simply the shower...” (25). The image of water is
not the only natural element that describes her hair. The color is jet black. The adjective jet relates the color of her hair to dense, black, highly polished coal. Furthermore, another natural element that is equated with her body is the shape of her face. It is oval shape resembles the form of an egg. Here one can see again the implication of youth with the image of the egg, symbolically, the beginning of life. The description of her eyes is very detailed. The color itself relates to natural elements that are brown and yellow in color with the clearness of liquid. While adjective of slanted is used to describe the shape of her eyes, the similes of gold, honeysuckle, and rum present a meticulous image of their color. Gold is a natural stone with a shiny yellow color. The honeysuckle is a flower that is characterized by its silky texture and its yellow-brown color. Rum is a clear, glossy liquid made from molasses, which is a substance with a light brown color. Cuca’s mouth is described as a red flower. More specifically, her lips are a red color and the shape and size of her mouth are compared to the anatomical structure of a flower. Her skin is equated to pearl, yet an element found in nature, specifically in the sea. The pearl is smooth to the touch and alabaster in color. Finally, her shoulders are described in such as way as the shift of her stance indicates erotic desire. The words that describe the position of her body indicate a “…surefire signal of uterine blazes to come…”(25). One can see the relationship of the uterus (woman’s body) to blazes (fire/natural element) (25). These few words foreshadow the burgeoning of erotic desire that Cuca feels when she is with Uan.

Interestingly, the sensuality of the dancing scene sets the stage for when Cuca gives her virginity to Uan. Again, the female body is represented by nature:

Later, in his apartment, on the tenth floor of the Somellan Building, she would go all out.

Virginity, be damned! Hymen! Who cares about that
scrappy piece of lace, the hell with it and with wedding bells! It happened on a terrace, large as a ballroom, facing the sea, way up high near the sky, the way she liked it— in command of the view like a night watchman. There was wind, there was salt on their lips, and when he entered her, there was thunder. Then came the rains, the heavy rains that go on and on for days. (53)

The location of Cuca’s physical body, high up near the sky on the terrace facing the sea, links her with two parts of earth (nature) — the ground and the atmosphere. Furthermore, she could feel the salt from the sea (ground) and the wind from the clouds (atmosphere) at the moment that she lost her virginity. There is a multitude of connections between nature and the feminine body. Most interestingly, this scene further shows the connection of nature, the female body, and female sexuality.

Theme of female sexuality and violation of the female body is very strong in Valdés. Like Ferré and Vega, Valdés examines female sexuality in the protagonist.

Alone, locked up in her sauna of a room, she spent sweaty hours admiring her shameless nakedness in the tall, mirrors doors of a Spanish Mortification—style armoire. Best of all, she liked to stroke her pubic hair and tell herself that it was Uan himself, who was running his fingers through her thick, black bush, because in addition to being as meaty as a papaya, Cucquita’s pudendum was as magnificently maned as her head. (36)

Again, one can see the connection of the woman’s body to nature through simile of the woman’s genitalia (body) to papaya (nature). This scene also explores female autoeroticsm. In the description of masturbation, one can see that female sexuality is no longer stifled as it was in “The Youngest Doll.” It is also taken a step further than in “Solutions, Inc.” in that not only does Valdés locate female
sexuality with the mind and body, but the body is doing the self pleasuring, while the mind is imaging that which Cuca associates with pleasure. She is able to image her own fingers as Uan’s fingers giving her the physical stimulation that she is giving herself. The scene is unique from Ferré and Vega in so much as Valdés combines the body and mind to create sexual pleasure for the woman, but that the woman is the one to pleasure herself.

The theme of male violence on the female body is also examined by Valdés. In Ferré and Vega, the women’s bodies were violated by murder— the ultimate act of control by the man. Valdés shows the result of the act itself by disembodying her principal narrator (female) from the first line of the novel. The act has already been committed when one reads the line, “I AM NOT THE AUTHOR OF THIS NOVEL. I am the corpse”(3). She furthers this notion of death when the narrator states about Cuca’s daughter, “She can’t read, and neither can anyone read it to her. She’s dead. Remember? And the dead feel no pain” (234). What is interesting to point out in Valdés is that for her, death is not the end of the story, but the beginning. What is different is that in order for the voice to be heard, the body has to be dead. Even though Valdés seems to divorce the female voice and body, the result is still the same— they are dead.

The destruction of the female body has already taken place before the novel begins. Valdés perpetuates the violence by looking at yet another violation of the female body through rape. The attempted rape of Cuca was only thwarted by her godmother.

His cock was stiff before he even entered the room, a cudgel going before him toward the Girl. With one smack he knocked her onto the divination board, where she lay amidst the cowries. He hurriedly ripped off her panties and spread her skinny rash covered thighs and was about to force his meaty rod into her dry little bald pussy, when
the godmother Maria Andrea reeled in, still heaving in spirits and in full rapture, and picked up a plank with a nail poking out of its end slammed it on the back of her son, the rapist. (Valdés 5)

This scene is most shocking in that the violence that had been perpetuated on the female body in Ferré and Vega had been on the adult female. Valdés uses the image of the pre-adolescent girl as she is the precursor to the adult female. The violation that almost befalls her as an adolescent is act that foreshadows her adult body. Additionally, Cuca is speared violation when her godmother (an adult woman) uses her own body to intervene.

The violence of the woman’s body is the disturbing reality that all women face and one that all these authors have addressed in their work. With the combination of imagery, symbolism and themes, the works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés fit into Cixous description of l’écriture féminine. Moreover, they have incorporated their own lives into their writing.

Ferré, Vega and Valdés use language to combine powerful imagery and symbolism to relate the female body to nature. These techniques are fused with the themes of female sexuality and violence perpetuated on the female body to create the overall picture of women bodies to nature, especially violent nature, that represent the violence that the female body has been subjected to in phallocentric society. Moreover, they have incorporated their own personal history into their texts following in the characteristics of Cixous idea of l’écriture féminine. Their history is the stark reality of phallocentric order. They are women. They are the oppressed. Yet, they continue to write, regardless of the varied backgrounds from which they come.

L’écriture féminine allows women to use their imaginations to create a different situation. They can escape phallocentrism through imagery, symbolisms and are
able to explore the themes in ways that they would not elsewhere be able to do. The work of Ferré, Vega and Valdés, as examined in this investigation, show the preliminary and necessary steps that women are taking in order to create a new reality— one in which they have control over their bodies and minds. The works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés show the reappropriation of language in order to assert female subjectivity in a hegemonic society. Moreover, their writing can be situated in Cixous’ idea of l’écriture féminine. In this form women are able to use the phallocentric language that oppresses them in order to break free in their imaginations and create that different position for women in society. As to imagine an alternate reality is the first step to creating that new reality, further investigation would need follow more recent works of Ferré, Vega and Valdés and would also need to expand to include more Caribbean women writers of the 21st century in order to present an even more panoramic view of the way Caribbean women writers are using language.
ENDNOTES

1. “The squished frog croaks the loudest.” 10 March 2005
   <http://www.academia.org.mx/dicrefran/DICAZ/r.htm>

2. definition of language as found at, 14 October 2004

3. For more on the Oedipus Complex see Sigmund Freud’s
   “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920).

4. For more information, see Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as
   Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in
   Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949) and “The Symbolic
   Order” (1956).

5. For more information on deconstruction, see Derrida’s Of
   Grammatology (1976).

6. For more information on Irigaray’s critic of Freud’s
   views on female autoeroticism see Speculum of the Other
   Woman (1985).

7. For the purposes of this study, only a brief and
   simplistic view of the ties between Europe and Latin
   America/Caribbean are discussed here. Additionally,
   there are several important resources that show this tie
   in a number of issues that are only mentioned in this
   chapter. The following are sources to consult for further
   information:
   - The Repeating Island (1992) by Benítez-Rojo;
   - The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragment Nationalism
     (1990) by Franklin W. Knight;
   - Modernismo Modernity and the Development of Spanish
     American Literature (1998) by Cathy L. Jrade;
   - The Contemporary History of Latin America (1993) by Tulio
     Halperín Donghi;
     by Iván A. Schulman;
   - Las entrañas del vacío: ensayos sobre la modernidad
     hispanoamericana (1984) by Evelyn Picon Garfield and
     Ivan A. Schulman.

8. For more information on the Boom period see Donoso (1977)
   and Santana (2000).

9. In addition to the challenge of applying l’écriture
   feminine to prose, there are two other challenges to
   Cixoux work that are important to note:
   a. The line between biology and subject position
      becomes distorted when Cixoux says that woman is more
      slippery, more fluid, less fixed than man. She is
      referring to both the literal woman (the person) and
the signifier (woman). Because women are less fixed in Lacan’s Symbolic realm than men, women (as well as their language) are more fluid, more flowing, more unstable than man. By using the binary opposition as produced in phallogocentric thought, Cixous is simply reproducing the very concept that she is trying to escape. One can refer back to Freud’s notion that anatomy is destiny.

b. The poets and "feminine" writers Cixous mentions specifically are men. She talks about Kliest and Hoffman on page 350.

10. This idea is defined and examined in Elaine Showalter’s “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981). Furthermore, in her work, “Toward a Feminist Poetics” (1979), Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases. The following phases are outlined clearly in her work “New feminist criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory”:

1. Feminine: In the Feminine phase (1840-1880), “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature” (137).

2. Feminist: The Feminist phase (1880-1920) was characterized by women’s writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women’s rights and values, including a demand for autonomy (138).

3. Female: The Female phase (1920- ) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, “women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature” (139).

The field of feminist literary theory and criticism was just emerging as a serious academic pursuit in the universities in the United States in the 1970’s. Showalter's writing reflects a conscious effort to convey the importance of mapping the discipline’s past in order to both ground it in substantive theory, and build a knowledge base to inform a direction for future feminist academic pursuit. Showalter advocates approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current Female phase, rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from a phallocentric perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories. In her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), Showalter says, “A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women’s culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that
binds women writers to each other over time and space” ("New Feminist Criticism" 264). Showalter does not advocate replacing psychoanalysis, with cultural anthropology. Rather, she suggests that approaching women’s writing from a cultural perspective is one viewpoint that will uncover female traditions. Showalter sees that the fields of cultural anthropology and social history are especially rich because they “can perhaps offer us a terminology and a diagram of women’s cultural situation” ("New Feminist Criticism" 266). Showalter also cautions that feminist critics must use cultural analyses as ways to understand what women write, rather than to dictate what they ought to write ("New Feminist Criticism" 266).


12. The information as listed at Ferré’s official website, 24 October 2004 <http://www.rosarioferre.net/works.htm>

13. Reference to Carlyle’s quote.


15. The quote is a translation from the original Spanish used by Palmer. The author of the dissertation also serves as the translator of the original quote: “teorías que implican, al igual que los razonamiento de Ortega y Gasset, que el hombre, al estar regido por el arquetipo de Logos/Razón, viene al mundo dotado de capacidad intelectual, mientras que la mujer, al estar regida por el arquetipo de Eros/ Amor, no es capaz de pensar lógicamente ni de desarrollar su Ser a cabalidad como esencialmente lo haría el hombre” (680).

16. For further development of the idea of “la solterona” as a patriarchal myth see Palmer (1994), page 690.

17. The information provided about Ferré’s life in this project is complied from the following sources: Florida
18. Her brother attended a Jesuits’ school for boys.

19. As stated by Doris M. Vazquez. 24 October 2004 <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1987/1/87.01.09.x.html>

20. The Genre Evolution Project comments on the different dimensions of character development:
   “The first group is the one-dimensional character, which is defined as a category of instances, like a voice in the crowd, or a crowd itself; a face across the room. Something in the story elevates the one-dimensional character beyond being mere background. The second group is the two-dimensional character, which is defined as a character not so deeply explored or a flat character. Superman in the 1950’s whose psyche was left relatively untouched, and who was only two-sided: mild-mannered Clark Kent or the superhero. This is a wide category. The third group is the three dimensional character, which is defined as a character presented in some detail.” Erik Rabkin and Carl Simon, January 1998, 7 February 2005 <http://www.lsaumich.edu/lsa/detail/0,2034,462%255Farticle%255F46,00.html>

21. The word machista comes from the machismo, a concept explained in the following definitions from Miriam Webster Online Dictionary (1 March 2005 <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/machismo>):
   a. Machismo – a gender construct
   b. Machismo (mä-chês`mô) noun. Exaggerated male pride.
   c. "Evelyn Stevens has described machismo as "a cult of virility" whose chief characteristics are "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships." (Waldemar 1).

22. The idea of women and motherhood in a patriarchal society is an extensive concept. Therefore, for the purpose this project, the following description most aptly depicts the idea of women and motherhood: Women are encouraged to be good mothers — they need, therefore, to first attract a man to depend on; they are
expected (by culture) to be giving, emotional, unstable, weak, and talkative about their problems; they are valued for their looks or charm. Women are expected to serve others, to sacrifice their ambitions and personal needs in order to please and care for others, 26 March 2005

<http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap9/chap9p.htm>


24. The information about Vega’s life is complied from the following sources: 18 February, 2005 Florida State University Literature Resource Center; Leslie Santiago Colón: (work submitted as partial requirement for Ed. 664 direct by Dr. Cirilo Toro Vargas) la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Puerto Rico, 18 February, 2005 <http://www.angelfire.com/ny/conexion/ana_lydia_vega.htm>; Maria Cristina Rodríguez, Hope Collage, Holland, Michigan, 7 February 2005 <http://www.hope.edu/latinamerican/Vega.html>

25. To date, the general analysis of Vega’s works in terms of how she uses language include her writing techniques, her use of humor, and how she constructs identity. The use of irrationality, desire, imagery, imaginary, satire, jokes, code switching, parody, intertextuality, orality, and narrators are seen in the works of Vélez (1994); Macias Rodríguez & Jae-Woo (1995); Boling (1996); Fragoso (1997); Gomes (2001); Grau-Lleveria (2001); and Perez Ortiz (2003). Arroyo Toledo (1992) and Niebylski (2003) analyze her use of humor. Gelpi (1997), Valerio-Holguín (1997), Puleo (1999) and Green (2002) look at her construction of identity.

26. The connotation of “language” encompasses a vast amount of diverse definitions. This project embraces the term in all of its features including the conventionalized understood meanings that identify the sociological ideologies that feminist criticism explores.

27. Through the short stories of “Pasión de historia” and “Caso Omiso”, Boling “examine[s] the role of the reader and the issues of female spectatorship, its implication and possible complicity in gender constructs at the bases of mass culture” (89). Boling discuses how “much of the popular culture in urban Puerto Rico has been saturated by the images and ideology of an imported US culture” (89). Using Todorov’s idea of the “whodunit” of detective fiction (89), Boling demonstrates how “Vega uses her female detectives [in “Pasión de historia”] to question a woman’s role in the reproduction of such images” (89).
Boling examines how Vega represents Puerto Rican culture (with US influence) in these stories to show “the ways in which women are fetishized [and] the way in which masculinity is constructed” (97). The reproduction of ideology in Vega’s work is an idea similar to those presented in this chapter. However, this chapter serves to show how the female/wife is idealized in a phallocentric society. Through the narration of the text and manipulation by the female characters, Vega elucidates the ideal female/wife in the short story “Solutions, Inc.”.

28. Currently, “Solutions Inc.” received only one critical analysis. Carol J. Wallace’s 2002 article titled “Translating Laughter: Humor as a Special Challenge in Translating the Stories of Ana Lydia Vega” looks at the problems of translating humor between languages in order to show the functions and techniques of humor that Vega uses in “Solutions, Inc.”.

29. The idea of the ideal male/husband being “efficient in the functions pertaining to his sex” receives further investigation in the conclusions of the chapter.

30. This concept is a cultural one in when compared to other cultures that hold the image of hair anywhere on the body is natural and beautiful.

31. For an interesting commentary on machismo in latino society see Ana Lydia Vega’s article entitled “On Machismo”.

32. The quote is the English translation from the original Spanish used by Valdés. The author of the dissertation also serves as the translator of the quote in English as the English version of Te di la vida entera by Nadia Benabid has failed to capture the true sentiment of the statement. The original quote status: 
   Venía ya con la picha parada, como una trunca, se dirigió hacia la Niña y de un trompón la tiró, sin sentido, en la estera de los caracoles. (Valdés, 16)

33. The information was complied from the website “Festival De Cannes”, 7 February 2006 http://www.festivalcannes.fr/perso/index.php?langue=6002 &personne=22099

34. According to the dictionary, taboo is defined as:
   1. a ban or an inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion
   2. Excluded or forbidden from use, approach, or mention.
   3. prohibition imposed by social custom
   4. excluded from use or mention
35. Esther Katheryn Whitfield has looked at the novel Te di la vida entera in terms of the representation of the dollar through the “special period” in Cuba during the 1990’s. This economic view of the text is the only criticism found to date on the novel.

36. “May Day” is “the international holiday in which socialist and communist groups demonstrate their solidarity with one another through parades and rallies. Just five months prior, revolutionary leader Castro had established a one-party Marxist government” (Literature Resource Center).

37. The information is compiled from the website “Valdes, Zoé”, by Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky, Oakland University: 7 February 2006 http://www.hope.edu/latinamerican/valdes.html

38. In addition to there being limited information about the life and work of Zoé Valdés, the information that is available is often contradicting. Therefore, the facts presented in this project are compiled from various sources with the interview with Zoé Valdés taking precedence when other sources conflicted with her information. The information is compiled from the following sources: Florida State University Literature Resource Center and the websites entitled: “Festival De Cannes”, 7 February 2006 http://www.festivalcannes.fr/perso/index.php?langue=6002 &personne=22099; 7 February 2006 “Valdes, Zoé”, by Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky, Oakland University: 7 February 2006 http://www.hope.edu/latinamerican/valdes.html; “Nunca dejaría de escribir: Entrevista con Zoé Valdés” by Hector Piña for the literary agency LibrUSA, 7 February 2006 http://www.librusa.com/entrevista_zoe_valdes.htm

39. The following is a part of the interview with Zoé Valdés in which she comments on her use crude language:

HECTOR PINA: En novelas como Te di la vida entera y Café Nostalgia utilizas un lenguaje que algunas personas consideran “demasiado crudo”, sin embargo en Milagro en Miami no se aprecia ese desborde de crudeza que empleaste en novelas anteriores. ¿Esto significa un cambio de estilo o es que al pasar el tiempo tú misma te has asombrado de lo que has escrito?

ZOE VALDES: (Riendo) No, yo creo que la misma novela pide el lenguaje y las situaciones. Milagro en Milán es una especie de fábula, un homenaje al Milagro en Milán,
la película de Cesare Zabattini y Vittorio De Sica, y entonces yo quería justamente que mi novela guardara esa ingenuidad tipo cuento de hadas, un poco eso de que la pobreza es esto, pero un día será arte y es la única manera de salvarse; no reivindiquemos la pobreza, sino salgamos de ella. Creo que la novela necesitaba un lenguaje que oscile. Por ejemplo, el personaje de Neno, que es una especie de guardaespaldas, está viendo una película pornográfica y el Lince entra en el cuarto y ve que el hombre se está masturbando con la película, pero cuando mira la pantalla se da cuenta de que la mujer le está chupando el dedo gordo del pie al hombre, y entonces dice algo que justifica esta escena, pues era lo que me interesaba que dijera el Lince: “qué bajo hemos caído desde Buñuel hasta acá” (Valdés termina la frase riendo).

40. The mulatto is also a marginalized subject in phallocentric order. For more on the idea of the mulatto and Cuban society see Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba (2000).

41. It is understood and acknowledged that Valdés also is commenting on the idea of homosexuality in patriarchal society. As this study focuses on language and its control over the woman’s body, what is pertinent in this idea is not just only the hierarchy of phallocentric order, but also how it maintains that control through violation of the physical body.

42. For the purposes of this study, speech act theory serves as a descriptor, providing more of a definition rather than a theoretical base for the analysis. For more information on speech act theory see Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse (1977) by Mary Louise Pratt.

43. It must be acknowledged that Valdés again comments on homosexuality- specifically lesbianism. For the purposes of this study, the focus remains on the issue of language.

44. It must be acknowledged that Valdés comments on transexuality. For the purposes of this study, the focus remains on the issue of language.


46. For more information on the idea of women’s writing and Ferré, Vega and Valdés see: Davis, (1979); Matildde
47. Other works by these authors have been looked at through the idea of feminine writing: Acosta Cruz, in her 1993 article “Historia y escritura femenina en Olga Nolla, Magali Garcías Ramírez, Rosario Ferré, y Ana Lydia Vega”, looks at Ferré’s “Maldito Amor” (1986) and Vega’s “Sobre tumbas y héroes” (1987) in the Pasión de historia collection to examine the interaction between writing and history in order to present new definitions of feminine identity and Puerto Rican cultural identity.

48. Sexual curiosity is a natural human desire. It should be noted, however, that it is influenced and limited by society constraint.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

EDUCATION
2006 Florida State University PhD. Hispanic Literatures
1998 West Virginia University M.A. in Secondary Education
1996 West Virginia University M.A. in Foreign Languages
1993 Indiana University of Pennsylvania B.A. in Spanish

PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOPS
-- "Come Learn About Latin Music" and "Vallenato Music" Presentations at Foreign Fest, West Virginia University, April 1998.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
-- "Con la pinga parada: The use of language in the novel I Gave You All I Had by Zoe Valdés". Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations, University of Nevada, Las Vegas February 2003.

AWARDS
January 2003 Winthrop-King Research Travel Award