

**DELINEATING DIFFERENCE AND SPACES OF RESISTANCE:
READING THE NANA'S SILENCE IN ROSARIO CASTELLANOS'
*BALÚN CANÁN***

Leah Strobel

Abstract:

Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos incorporates silences into her works in a way that allows the reader to question the very meaning of agency and the nature of subjectivity for a female protagonist. Silences tend to create gaps in the narration, illuminating class and racial differences that the first-person narration evades. Moreover, it is revealed that the subject frames herself in opposition to the silence of less-privileged female characters and that there is indeed no place from which the subaltern can actually speak. I am interested in her novel *Balún Canán* (1957), in which a young girl's Indigenous nanny complicates her desire to ascend within the patriarchal structure of her land-holding family, as the girl learns that what would make her life comfortable is the cause of her "other mother's" subjugation. The text is developed around a desire to speak from the margins, and there is a clear effort to give voice to the subaltern. Nevertheless, the relationship between the girl and her nanny is neither romanticized nor idealized; rather the presence of the colonized woman both resists marginalization and signals that which is being covered over in the process of individual development. Anxiety arises within the girl's narration as she realizes her privilege as a member of the landholding class, and the narration navigates between different manifestations of silence: the girl's silencing of the nanny in a replication of colonial violence, and the conservation of silence as a barrier of respect.

Keywords: Rosario Castellanos, Mexican literature, female Bildungsroman, silence

Resumo:

A escritora mexicana Rosario Castellanos incorpora silêncios em suas obras de uma forma que permite ao leitor a questionar o próprio significado da agência e da natureza da subjetividade de uma protagonista feminina. Silêncios tendem a criar brechas no texto, iluminando as diferenças sociais e raciais que a narração em primeira pessoa foge. Além disso, é revelado que o sujeito se imagina em oposição ao silêncio de mulheres menos privilegiadas, e que realmente não existe um local em que o subalterno pode falar. Este projecto se centra em seu romance *Balún Canan* (1957), em que a babá Indígena de uma menina complica o desejo de ascender dentro da estrutura patriarcal da sua família mais privilegiada, como a menina descobre que o que faria sua vida confortável é a causa da subjugação de sua "outra mãe." O texto é desenvolvido em torno de um desejo de falar a partir das margens, e há um esforço claro para dar voz aos subalternos. No entanto, a relação entre a menina e sua babá não é nem romântica nem idealizada; a presença da mulher colonizada resiste a marginalização e ressalta que está sendo coberto no processo de desenvolvimento individual. Ansiedade

surge dentro da narração da menina como ela percebe seu privilégio como membro da classe latifundiária, e a escrita navega entre diferentes manifestações de silêncio: o silenciamento da babá em uma replicação de violência colonial, e a manutenção do silêncio como uma barreira respeitosa.

Palavras-chave: Rosario Castellanos, Literatura mexicana, Bildungsroman feminino, silêncio

It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other (Fanon 17).

El sentido de la palabra es su destinatario: el otro que escucha, que entiende y que, cuando responde, convierte a su interlocutor en el que escucha y el que entiende, estableciendo así la relación del diálogo que sólo es posible entre quienes se consideran y se tratan como iguales y que sólo es fructífero entre quienes se quieren libres (Castellanos, MSL 140).¹

When considering fictions that deal with the subaltern, textual silences tend to be read as illuminations of the condition of the subject that cannot speak, implying a state of de-politicization, an inability to speak in the master's tongue, passivity and acceptance. Embodied by the preferred peaceful Indian that Columbus contrasted with the *Carib/Cannibal* image (see Fernández Retamar, 14), silence becomes misinterpreted as natural benevolence and obedience; thus political representation could only be achieved through the charity of the writing subject that is able to speak for the disenfranchised. Readings, therefore, of the neo-indigenista² works of middle-class writer Rosario Castellanos tend to focus on that necessary failure of the liberal writer to be able to adequately lend voice to her indigenous characters. While this is indeed exhibited in authorial anxiety, I argue that through a close reading of the silences in her texts that the differences between social classes are maintained in a way that saves the subaltern characters from being appropriated in a way that would only alleviate the writer's guilt. This distance is preserved even when there is a mother/daughter bond, as is the case with the indigenous *nana* (nanny) and the ladino girl in her first novel, *Balún Canán*.

Furthermore, as a literary device silence creates a gap in the narration through which shame emerges, as we find that the narration is unable to live up to its purported ideals – to create a space of solidarity across borders of race and class in resistance to patriarchal oppression. In *Balún Canán* it is seen that the presence of a marginalized space and body

1 “The sense of the word is in its addressee: the other who listens, who understands and who, when he or she responds, becomes the interlocutor in which he or she listens and understands, establishing therefore the dialogic relationship that is only possible between those who consider one another to be, and treat one another as, equals, and that is only fruitful between those who want each other to be free” (my translation).

2 According to Luz Elena R Zamudio and Margarita A. Tapia, Castellanos' writing formed part of the *Ciclo de Chiapas*, which refers to those narratives written between 1948 and 1962 that deal with Indian/Ladino relations by writers that have knowledge of the region.

within the borders of the master's house echoes the framework of the text, which also constructs limits that are questioned by its exclusions. The type of reading proposed here echoes what Gayatri Spivak suggests when she states: "The effect is to demonstrate how all narratives – fictional, political, economic – construct themselves (like empire itself) by suppressing, or marginalizing, competing possibilities, viewpoints or material" ("TWT" 146). In this way the novel may be considered a failure since it suppresses viewpoints that are other than that of the narrator, while the author simultaneously proposes the need for liberation based upon inclusive notions of identity. Still, failure is not an end of discussion; rather, following John A. Ochoa's readings of failures in Mexican literature, while they "can indeed threaten, alarm, and be used to assign blame; ... they can also be deeply useful" (5).

Referring to Castellanos' poem "Silencio cerca de una piedra Antigua" ("Silence Near an Ancient Stone") and thinking through the ethical space carved out by the author in the entirety of her works, Eleonora Cróquer Pedrón highlights the lyrical "I" that confesses a knowledge of her own incapacity to act for the other through writing:

lo que el saberse apelado opera sobre este *yo* es un progresivo estado de auto-conciencia y de implicación: no solo reconoce la presencia del otro que espera, sino que se asume (a pesar de su propia impotencia) responsable frente a la demanda que esa espera formula silenciosamente (15).³

"Not speaking" or "not writing" becomes a way of signaling accountability for that which is outside of the narrative ego. The "other" waits for the "I" who considers an appropriate response, as well as her own feelings of powerlessness to change the dynamics of their encounters. Responsibility is signaled in the "I"'s knowledge of the proximity of the other; and the silence indicates a meditation concerning what the response to that proximity should be. The position of the "I" in that situation is one of fragility according to Pedrón; and one in which the "other" may be construed as an individual with her own desires despite not being "represented" by the writing/speaking subject.

Although it must also be taken into account, as Debra Castillo notes, that silence as a political strategy has limited value – "eventually it must be broken" (*Talking Back* 255). It is most significant to note with respect to Castellanos' works, that silence is that which points to the privilege of the writing subject by remaining outside of that subject without being employed as its object; effectively standing in for what might otherwise be limited to a reflexive, confessional narrative directed solely towards interiority. Therefore, the reader may refer to the distinctiveness of the marginalized subject without looking for

3 "that which the knowledge appealed to produces over this *I* is a progressive state of self-consciousness and of insinuation: not only does it recognize the presence of the other that waits, but also it assumes to be (despite of its own impotence) responsible to the demand that this waiting is silently formulating" (my translation).

evidence of her existence only through the lens of the first-person narration. The limits of this project are noted – the silence is not broken within the text, although the writing expresses the urgency needed to imagine future solidarities and emancipations.

Balún Canán was written in 1957 and takes place in Comitán, Mexico, during the land and education reforms of Lázaro Cárdenas' presidency in the 1930's. The first and third sections are narrated by a seven-year-old girl, who is the daughter of ladino landholders and the sister of Mario, the future of the family as the only boy child. Ignored by her parents, César and Zoraida Argüello, the girl forms a close bond with her nana, who introduces her to the indigenous side of her culture. The middle section of the novel gives way to an omniscient voice, which offers a wider perspective of the reforms being enacted on the hacienda and the tensions as the Argüellos resist any changes. In this section the nana is absent and the girl practically disappears as several other important characters are introduced, who are either those who speak, who are silent, or who are silenced. For example: Ernesto, César's illegitimate nephew, is appointed to be the schoolteacher on the hacienda although he does not speak or understand the local language; Felipe, an Indian educated in the metropolis, leads the *campesinos* to demand their rights promised to them under *Cardenismo*; Juana, Felipe's barren wife only has an interior monologue with which to resist her husband's abuse.

This analysis focuses on the relationship between the girl and her nana as a guiding structure to which the ethics and politics of the novel refer, even when they are absent. The negotiation between self and other that is necessary for the development of subjectivity is the inheritance of the girl who, as a semi-autobiographical figure of the author, will enter into the intellectual world – conversely the nana, without being able to realize that form of individuality, resists being possessed by the narration and points to the failures of the girl's quest. The nana is a marginal force destabilizing the controlling center, while a critical negotiation is undertaken between what is spoken and what is held back, silenced, or not heard as a result of indifference. Moreover, through these silent spaces one may sense both shame and a proposal for a type of solidarity not readily accessed by the author at the time. Interestingly there is not a simple presentation of a cross-cultural relationship between female characters that would perhaps satisfy the desire for harmony; instead, by revealing the not-always-so-empathetic intentions of the little girl, the narrative problematizes *for whom* that alliance is formed.

For the indigenous woman in the text the peculiarity of her position is manifest – her oppression more pronounced than that of the narrator, as her uncomfortable closeness to the at once master/daughter/friend/stranger has alienated her from the family and community into which she was born. Even as she nurses, protects, and disciplines the children, she is ultimately reminded of the racial and cultural markers that construe her as unequal. She occupies the role of sacrificial mother, without ever being afforded the same respect that a mother receives. As the children grow up, she can only anticipate that at some point

they will understand their societal dominance over her, and she will return to being a faceless Indian, who nonetheless is no longer accepted by that community given her closeness to the masters. The girl becomes unmistakably conscious of the inequalities that form her world when an Indian is killed by his community for being close with her father – an event that she undoubtedly begins to connect with the situation of her nana. She runs to her nana who she finds washing *their* clothes: “Yo huyo, despavorida, y encuentro a mi nana lavando nuestra ropa a la orilla de un río rojo y turbulento. De rodillas golpea los lienzos contra las piedras y el estruendo apaga el eco de mi voz. Y yo estoy llorando en el aire sordo mientras la corriente crece y me moja los pies” (33).⁴ The reality that the nana is always tied to work is perhaps most poignantly felt in this scene, as for the first time the nature of the system is defamiliarized and showing its frays. The girl’s inability to be heard as if it were a nightmare forces her violently into herself, at the same time as she echoes the pain of losing language that the nana announces in the first words of the novel: “...Y entonces, coléricos, nos desposeyeron, nos arrebataron lo que habíamos atesorado: la palabra, que es el arca de la memoria” (9).⁵ This is the initial loss that the girl comes into contact with as she feels the fear that her nana experiences living between two worlds and threatened by both. Their encounters continuously reenact the silences that distance them; and instead of working to bridge their cultural expanses, at times when the nana is speaking the girl is not listening, or she complains that she doesn’t feel like hearing her stories. Even though she is complicit in the erasing of indigenous knowledge, she may briefly empathize with the nana in moments of silence.

Castellanos’ poem “Nocturno” presents an alliance between those who are both twins and enemies, hinting at the strained relationship of dependency that is also present in the novel:

Atados mano contra mano y vueltos / --forceando por irnos-- / uno hacia el sur,
hacia el fragante verde, / y el otro a la hosquedad de los desiertos; / desgarrados;
sangrando yo con la herida tuya / y tú quizá doliéndote / de no tener siquiera
una pequeña brizna / de dolor que no sea también mío, / hemos sido gemelos y
enemigos

(*Poesía* 193).⁶

4 “I run away terrified, and I find Nana washing our clothes on the banks of a swirling red river. She is on her knees, beating the linen against the stones, and the noise of it muffles the echo of my voice. And I’m weeping in the silent air while the river rises and my feet get wet” (Nicholson 34). Although Nicholson chooses the word silent in her translation, I believe it is important to emphasize that the air was *sordo*, meaning deaf or indifferent. Her cries are muffled by something bigger than herself, in this case nature, the representation of her nana’s world.

5 “And then in anger they dispossessed us, they confiscated what we had treasured: the word, which is memory’s strong-box” (Nicholson 13).

6 “Tied hand in hand and returned/ --forcing to leave-- /one towards the south, towards the fragrant green,/ and the other to the hostility of the deserts; /torn; I’m bleeding with your wound/and you perhaps hurting/ of not having even a small strand /of pain that is not also mine, / we have been twins and enemies” (my translation).

While the poem reflects the pain of separation, it also demonstrates an interconnectedness that is as much suffocating as it is liberating. Within the margins of the girl's narration in which the nana is present, there is exhibited a longing to see herself in another woman thus finding her own silence; the sense of shared oppression operates to bring about a consciousness-raising. But the act of sharing in another's pain is not merely consoling; Castellanos' writing instead wonders if perhaps the other laments that she is not able to even have her *own* pain, independent of the one who seeks to *know* her. The need for recognition as a human trait is complicated in these situations tainted by power. To what extent is the bridging between cultures being undertaken a failure of women's liberation, since it cannot fully account for the multiple layers of inequalities that exist between them? How does the use of silence as a literary device signify this failure? Moreover, if political agency can be read in the silence of the marginalized, is the polarity between writing subject and written object in any sense overcome?

It should be stressed that it is the girl's privilege to occupy the role of the "I" who determines in what way her encounters with the other will benefit her development; it is a challenge to read from the side of the nana, who also influences and manipulates those meetings, even though she is shrouded in silence. Castillo's attempt to imagine the voice of the nana is telling as it points to both the needs of the girl and the nana to be heard: "I am watching you listen/refuse to listen to me as I tell myself (but implicitly you) this story, and you are angry because you want me to hear you" ("Ashes" 250). The girl will run to her nana anxious to tell her about something that she experiences; the nana in turn makes the girl wait until she is ready to listen. The protagonist learns respect from this, although as Castillo asserts she ultimately rejects the ear for the written word. The implications of reading both sides is to see in what ways the meetings between the two characters creates an open space for dialogue; even if the narrator in the end chooses the privacy of writing over a view of the world based upon intersubjectivity.

Language stands out as the primary means through which those with access to power distinguish themselves from the subaltern – the entering into the political system is afforded only through access to the Spanish language. Threatened by the Indians' emerging consciousness of their place within the landholding system, César and Zoraida work to maintain their power most strongly by insisting that they be the only ones that speak Spanish – therefore the Indians effectively had no voice within the system dominated by the Spanish language. Castellanos' concern with these dominating tendencies is clear; as expressed in her previously-cited essay "Notas al margen: el lenguaje como instrumento de dominio" ("Language as an Instrument of Domination," *MSL*), language may be exercised against others, as an expression of privilege, property, and exclusion. Finding an alternative language means creating dialogue in which the speaker waits for a response from the listener. Determined to make dialogue impossible, César even employs a schoolteacher that has no understanding of the local language; consequently there would

be no possibility of mutual comprehension. This reality makes the novel all the more awkward, although I argue self-consciously so, as it is a Spanish-language text within which indigenous characters are contained. Female characters are limited to interiorized dialogue, while indigenous characters are enveloped in a silence that makes speaking impossible.

The Indian silenced through violence is also evoked in Castellanos' poetry: "El borbotón de sangre que sale por su boca deja su cuerpo quieto" ("La oración del Indio" (*Poesía...* 67)).⁷ The contemplation of the quieted body evokes the biopolitical implications for the silenced community. In one sense a community is broken through violence, while silences are also recuperated as a means of refusing the dominating language and culture. Although Mayan languages are incorporated into the text (the title itself is Mayan, referring to the previous name of Comitán; the "nine guardians" that watch over their pueblo) and she attempts to capture some sense of orality at times within the omniscient voice, it is difficult to imagine anything outside of a paternalistic relationship between narrator and narrated, or writer and written, since everything is filtered through the Spanish-dominated text. As Castillo states drawing from Carlos Fuentes' wording "la palabra enemiga":

Castellanos never forgets that, by writing her story and the story of the Tzeltal-speaking Indians in Spanish, she is making herself complicit in one of the most tortuous ambiguities of the 'palabra enemiga' – giving voice to herself and to them in the language of the oppressors, in a form and style inaccessible to the people she represents ("Ashes" 245).

However, if it is read as an open-ended text with multiple interpretive possibilities, there is potential for imagining outside of the central narration and thus finding possibilities for alliances exterior to the hegemonic structure of language. While the girl views the Indians as silenced, they also exercise power when refusing to speak, and possess a language outside of the dominant linguistic system.

One of the ways in which the narrative is challenged is by presenting the silence and silencing of the indigenous other, creating a sense of disorder that counters a progressive Bildungsroman format desired by the girl.⁸ The novel begins with the imposed silence of colonization, and then throughout the narrative the nana performs willed silences that form a barrier between herself and the person with whom she is closest. An exteriority to the girl's world is opened up, and to her dissatisfaction she is unable to assimilate all of it. At this point it is necessary to mention what for many is the most perplexing point

⁷ "The gush of blood that exits from his mouth leaves his body still" (my translation).

⁸ I follow the definition of the female Bildungsroman as described by Ian Wojcik-Andrews, which points to the failures of the traditional form: "If the success of the male Bildungsroman is defined by the degree of separation the hero achieves from the family and the community, the *failure* of the male Bildungsroman is defined by the degree of interconnectedness achieved by heroines in the female Bildungsroman, narratives of community" (68).

of the novel, the erasure of the nana's face from the girl's memory, since its analysis is essential for understanding the silences that foreshadow that act. The third section returns to the first-person narration as the family returns to Comitán and the girl and the nana are reunited. As the tension between the workers and the landholders has begun to erupt into violence, the nana approaches Zoraida with a prediction concerning Mario's fate, declaring that the *brujos* of Chactajal will "eat him up" as condemnation to the *patrones* for their treatment of the Indians. Zoraida is incensed, striking the nana and expelling her from the house. The girl is left with a final image of her nana left undone on the floor, abandoned like a thing of no worth. The boy does eventually succumb to an unknown illness for which ironically the girl feels responsible, believing that it was she that brought judgment upon Mario since she hid the key to the altar box so that he could never take first communion. In a crucial scene that establishes the attainment of individuality as a separation from her surrogate mother and reintegration into society, while visiting the cemetery the girl thinks that she sees her nana:

¡Es mi nana! ¡Es mi nana! Pero la india me mira correr, impasible, y no hace un ademán de bienvenida. Camino lentamente, más lentamente hasta detenerme. Dejo caer los brazos, desalentada. Nunca, aunque yo la encuentre, podré reconocer a mi nana. Hace tanto tiempo que nos separaron. Además, todos los indios tienen la misma cara (291).⁹

In one fell swoop this alternative mother figure is lost; not only are memories of her erased, but her uniqueness becomes something that the girl would not again be able to *recognize*.

The girl's startling statement may be read as recognition that she had always to some extent seen her nana in the faces of other Indians, and in her absence the nana becomes completely engulfed; consequently the girl could no longer claim a personal connection to their world. Her nana was no exception to the distance that she perceived between herself and the indigenous community. What is new for her in that moment is that she cannot, or will no longer, distinguish her nana within that collectivity. She refers to something that was done to both her and her nana – "they separated us" – and then confesses to that same attitude within herself. If the little girl ever recognized the humanity of her nana, she then disappears again into the collective fabric of all faceless Indians. The girl has seemingly fully incorporated the society's values into her world view, achieving a successful formation of the Bildungsroman. That is, she transforms from being a subject in a community to an individual, while the nana moves in the reverse direction.

The inability to "recognize" her nana's face, I propose, is part of her way of rationali-

9 "It's my Nana! But the Indian watches me quite impassively, making no welcoming sign. I slow up – slower and slower till I stop. I let me arms drop, altogether discouraged. Even if I see her, I'll never recognize her now. It's so long since we've been parted. Besides, all Indians look alike" (Nicholson 271).

zing her failure to establish dialogue with the other. In “Approaching the Other as Other,” Luce Irigaray speaks to the will to appropriate:

Our manner of reasoning, even our manner of loving, corresponds to an appropriation. Our culture, our school education, our cultural formation want it this way: to learn, to know, is to make one’s own through instruments of knowledge capable, we believe, of seizing, of taking, of dominating all of reality, all that exists, all that we perceive, and beyond

(*Key Writings* 23).¹⁰

No one could expect the girl, who desires her own education that was lost when the government removed her teacher for teaching Catholicism, to not take part in that type of domination that has to do with “knowing” *her* world. She in fact begins this process out of boredom, sneaking into her father’s library where she attempts to see and absorb all of the knowledge she can, even if she is not able to understand it all. Yet this determination to know is confronted with the opposing will of the nana to establish boundaries, thus protecting her own knowledge and history from being appropriated for the ladino girl’s use. This type of resistance may be read through Emmanuel Levinas’ explanation of the relation with the face, or the other that cannot be contained: “[t]he ‘resistance’ of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical” (197). The space in-between the two signals an asymmetrical relationship that forms the backdrop of the Bildungsroman narrative, at the same time working to imagine a relationship that is not built upon the exclusion or assimilation of the other. Irigaray also proposes: “It is in the first moments of drawing near to one another that the other moves us the most, touching us in a global, unknowable, uncontrollable manner. Then, too often, we make the other our own” (*KW* 123). Analyzing their encounter by way of this thinking, the girl works to make the nana’s experiences her own: presented with unsolvable problems, that is perhaps why in the final pages the girl willingly takes Mario’s name in her writing, suggesting to some extent an acceptance of the masculine order.

The attitude of the writing subject towards the “not I” can be explored from a variety of standpoints; there is always the danger of treating the other as a “natural resource”¹¹ to lend interest to the piece, or as an alibi to excuse pandering to liberal notions of emancipation that fail to recognize the real project of dismantling the system of oppression altogether. Using the metaphor that Jean Franco offers when speaking of the mediation

10 The “our” that Irigaray uses is of a generalized West. Her rather strict polarization of self and Other, East and West, may be critiqued; for the purposes of this paper it is only necessary to point out that the manner of reasoning that she speaks of is the type of logic that the girl recuperates and that the nana challenges.

11 I borrow this wording from Franco, who quotes Alfonso Reyes: “The autochthonous culture [is] an enormous reserve of raw material, of objects, shapes, colors and sounds, which need to be incorporated and dissolved in the fluidity of the broader culture, to which it lends its condiment of mixed, tasty spices” (452).

that the Mexican intellectual undertakes in the mid-twentieth century between native and metropolis, the native plays the role of the guest who can bring a bit of flavor to the party organized by the host – but the host makes the rules, implies a dress code, and sets the language that will be spoken. “We should not forget” Franco asserts, “that at this banquet, the autochthonous culture is only a condiment that makes food more easily digested” (452). On the other side of this paradigm, the guest in the narrative does not make anything easy on her host, nor on the reader; she complicates any efforts toward talking about emancipation, liberation, or equality, thus provoking a rethinking of what it means to write a socially-conscious text. The nana is able to assert criticism by addressing the girl’s privilege when she would prefer not to hear it.

Whether or not the nana is actually able to speak within the narrative has been the central concern of various critics,¹² preoccupied with whether or not the liberal feminist elements of the text actually engulf any meaningful portrayal of the indigenous reality. The issue of representation is always on the table; given that Castellanos’ works, while they are hopeful, seem to reiterate the notion that indeed the subaltern woman cannot speak within a text that takes her as its object of interest, sympathy, or investigation. As tight as the connection is between the girl and the nana, her initial announcement of dispossession made possible by the hierarchy of the speaker and the spoken cannot be ignored. The repercussion of being silent is de-politicization, although those that speak run the risk of having their voices co-opted. This leaves an impossible space to be in; just as the nana works her voice into the narration, she also resists being the embodiment of “traditional” knowledge for the girl. Although, through a more careful reading a sense of purpose is revealed. That is, while looking to connect with an indigenous world view and to include an indigenous perspective within her feminist text, the author also works to critique those very efforts towards solidarity in a way that is not unproductively guilty, but perhaps better categorized as remorseful. The text displays a failure of living up to an ideal that the author has extolled in her work.¹³ While the two female characters share their experience of invisibility, the girl nonetheless is reminded of her privilege as a member of a landholding family. There is a sense of shame, then, as the narration is conscious of the fact that as much as it works to speak against oppression, that it does not and cannot completely escape its own reproduction of inequalities.

12 See for example Catherine Grant, who argues that because the novel relies on the elements of a European family chronicle, it is no more than a “typical confessional tale where the female protagonist’s quest for self-identity through writing both mirrors and prefigures similar narratives by other twentieth-century feminist authors” (93).

13 Modeling what would be viewed by subsequent generations as the “new” Mexican woman, Rosario Castellanos opened the door for women writers and feminists who would have a newly formed place from which to speak. Her legacy provided an example of a committed life – she used her intellectual platform to dedicate her life to speaking for the disenfranchised and marginalized populations in Mexico. As a creative writer and essayist, teacher, activist, intellectual, and ambassador to Israel, she drew upon her experiences to call out and defy the machismo that dominated Mexican cultural and political life, and to speak in opposition to the bigotry directed towards indigenous peoples.

A careful examination of the discursive employment of silences in the text allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which inequalities are confronted. The text's movement is constituted by navigations between instances of profound silence and something that breaks it. Often that which breaks it is a distraction, which provides a way out of the confrontation. For example, after a fight with Ernesto, his lover Matilde laughs in order to break the useless silence: "No podía quedar así, sentada en el suelo, ridícula, con todo el odio que aquel silencio sin reproche transformaba en nada. Rió entonces escandalosamente" (159).¹⁴ Different from what may otherwise be characterized as interiorized, unproductive speech; here she demonstrates an ability to break the silence that entraps her in codes of acceptability that do not allow her to live the life that she desires.

The silences may also mark limits of expression, illustrated when Tío David tells the girl and Mario the story of the "nine guardians" of their pueblo, advising the girl to keep quiet about it and for Mario to keep his distance: "nosotros, la gente menuda más vale que nos callemos. Y tú, Mario, cuando vayas de cacería, no hagas lo que yo. Pregunta, indágate. Porque hay árboles, hay orquídeas, hay pájaros que deben respetarse. ... No los toques porque te traería desgracia" (26).¹⁵ At that point then they find it impossible to speak, until the girl breaks the silence by suddenly playing a chord on the guitar, and then asks him to sing again. Two silences are employed: the girl is asked to silence herself, to not be curious about things that are not supposed to pertain to *la gente menuda* – those who are small, meek. After his warning there is silence that is pregnant with meaning that they cannot access, and the girl enacts a disruption as if the silence were too difficult for her to bear. Her impulsive action also denies the colonial silence that she is not prepared to confront.

A seemingly submissive silence that brings death is exemplified metaphorically when the children witness Ernesto shoot a deer and the girl states: "No sabíamos que fuera tan fácil morir y quedarse quieto. Uno de los indios, que está detrás de nosotros, se arrodilla y con la punta de una varita levanta el párpado del ciervo. Y aparece un ojo extinguido, opaco, igual a un charco de agua estancada donde fermenta ya la descomposición" (68).¹⁶ The girl notes the unsettling looks in the other Indians that observe the deer's eye, and her father explains only that they are *supersticiones*, and that the deer will have to rot there. "Desde entonces," the girl explains, "los indios llaman a aquel lugar 'Donde se pudre nuestra sombra'" (69).¹⁷ The hunted deer as the Indians' "shadow" indicates a startling

14 "She couldn't stay like that sitting stupidly on the ground, with all the hate that crumbled away in the unrepenting silence. She laughed indecently" (Nicholson 151-52).

15 "we, little people, it's better we keep quiet. And you, Mario, when you go hunting, don't do as I did. Ask, find out things, because there are trees and orchids and birds that one ought to respect. ... Don't touch them or they'll bring you bad luck" (Nicholson 28).

16 "We did not know it was as easy as that to die and to lie quiet. One of the Indians just behind us kneels, and with the tip of a stick pries open the fawn's eyelid. There is the iris, all snuffed out and opaque like a puddle of stagnant water where things have already begun to rot" (Nicholson 66-67).

17 "From that time the Indians have called the place 'Where our Shadow Rot'" (Nicholson 67).

connection between silence and death. Ernesto claims that the deer had come to look for death, suggesting responsibility on the part of the deer for his own demise given his failure to resist when confronted with the superlative power of Ernesto's pistol. It seems as though it is a silent acceptance of one's fate in a world in which one cannot live with unequal weapons. A theoretical stance that the weak are always inescapably devoured by those with authority is also revealed, signifying the certainty of the continuation of the cycle of victimhood and power.

Different from the suffocation felt in these scenes, defiance, resistance, and refusal to cooperate are also communicated through silences. This is clearly witnessed when the Argüellos, caught in the rain and hungry on their way to the hacienda, ask a man who appeared to be the *dueño* of an Indian village for shelter. The family is fearful as they are confronted only with silence: "No hace más que negar y negar con su triste rostro ausente, inexpresivo" (66).¹⁸ His absent face suggests a refusal to be present for the family in this case, using invisibility or the ability to go unrecognized as strength. Thinking of his absent face juxtaposed with the nana's that is eventually made to disappear, the notion that she becomes "just another Indian" may also serve a reminder of this resistance that is enacted through denials (*negar*). While demonstrating realistically the way in which the author had failed to recognize the domestic service that had made her life more comfortable, facelessness also allows the nana refuge from the coming-of-age story that would have captured her alterity for its own end.

The apolitical notion of silence that may be troublesome to readers with an eye towards the empowerment of the characters is thus mitigated by these denials. Despite the hopelessness that is evoked, there may also be dignity in silence, and maintaining unintelligibility may be a way of protecting the sovereignty of cultural traditions. The author's writing of the nana takes up the difficult contradiction between a complete, mythic silence and one that is necessary for survival. When the family travels to the hacienda and the girl must separate from the nana, her absence in this section does become mythified; she is given the power to transcend time and space in order to be there for the girl:

--Es hora de separarnos, niña.

Pero yo sigo en el suelo, cojida de su tzec, llorando porque no quiero irme. Ella me aparta delicadamente y me alza hasta su rostro. Besa mis mejillas y hace una cruz sobre mi boca.

--Mira que con lo que he rezado es como si hubiera yo vuelto, otra vez, a amantarte (64).¹⁹

18 "[H]e goes on flatly refusing with his sad, absent, expressionless face" (Nicholson 64).

19 "'It's time for us to say good-bye, my child.' But I stay on the ground and cling to her tzec, weeping for I don't want to go. She loosens my hold gently and raises me up to her face. She kisses me on the cheeks and makes the sign of the cross on my mouth. 'You see, what with all that praying it's as if I'd gone back to the times I gave you suck'" (Nicholson 62-63).

The material reality of why the nana cannot go – because she is in danger of being harmed by *los brujos* – is obscured in favor of a transcendent love between the two, made possible by the nana's bodily offering of breast milk. It is indeed difficult to conceive of the nana as not occupying that space for the girl – that is, that she somehow from a distance provides comfort to her surrogate daughter whose class is assailed by dramatic changes. In the end however that absence is demystified by the violent act of separation enacted by Zoraida and the subsequent imposition of facelessness that brings attention to the realities that leave her vulnerable to domination. Within the encounter between the two mother figures, it is clear that the nana's silence is at once defiant and a mark of the boundaries of her rebellion. She at first asserts her independence, telling Zoraida to not touch her, that she has no rights to her since she did not buy her with her dowry. Then, refusing to deny what she said about Mario's fate, the nana's silence enrages Zoraida; although it does nothing to help the nana herself, as the girl recounts: “Ella no se defendía, no se quejaba. Yo las miré, temblando de miedo, desde mi lugar” (232).²⁰

It is instructive here to refer to Castillo's in-depth analysis of the strategic uses of silence by those who have been silenced: “Silence,” she contends, “once freed from the oppressive masculinist-defined context of aestheticized distance and truth and confinement and lack, can be reinscribed as a subversive feminine realm” (*Talking Back* 40). In her examination of the poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's use of negativity, Castillo goes on to explain that there is a

no decir that is quite different from *callar*, in which the traversal of speech by the negative allows for a trace of its passage, maintaining her essential self at a safe spatiotemporal distance that both permits her free play of thought and subtly establishes her own agency as the concealed subjectivity alone capable of bridging the gap of silence (42).

I would relate her *no decir* with the nana's act of “keeping silent” when the girl asks her questions: *guarda silencio* codes other realities/experiences/stories that she could say, but will not. Zoraida's accusation that the nana and those of her race have a way of walking without making a sound, and popping up where they are least expected, challenges an apolitical reading of the nana's silence, since it is her agency of which Zoraida is most frightened: “Me asustaste. Esa manía que tiene tu raza de caminar sin hacer ruido, de acechar, de aparecerse donde menos se espera. ¿Por qué viniste? No te llamé” (229).²¹ *How could she dare to approach the mistress, without first being invited to*

20 “Nana neither defends herself nor protests. From my corner I watch them, trembling with fear” (Nicholson 218).

21 “You scared me. This mania your people have of walking about so noiselessly, lurking in ambush, jumping out when one least expects. Why did you come? I didn't call” (Nicholson 215).

peak? Moreover, the notion that she shares the same space but always threatens getting too close indicates that she has political potential that needs to be contained.

This scene finds that the nana initiates an encounter; it does not follow the implicit rules that she and Zoraida normally follow, that she maintain her distance. As the girl states: “Durante los años de su convivencia mi madre ha procurado hablar con ella lo menos posible; pasa a su lado como pasaría junto a un charco, remangándose la falda” (229).²² Silence is not proposed as an answer, rather it is a sign of a “not yet” situation. The historical silence of the rural indigenous people of Chiapas remains unbroken; not to mythify it, but to bring attention to the larger colonial narrative of which all of the characters are a part.

What is more, although the girl often resists the nana’s voice, her willingness to listen when she waits for her nana’s responses demonstrates a type of silence that has to do with listening to the other that Irigaray proposes when she states:

I am listening to you ... as the revelation of a truth that has yet to manifest itself – yours and that of the world revealed through and by you. I give you a silence in which your future – and perhaps my own, but *with* you and not *as* you and *without* you – may emerge and lay its foundation. ... It is a silence made possible by the fact that neither *I* nor *you* are everything, that each of us is limited, marked by the negative, non-hierarchically different. A silence that is the primary gesture of *I love to you*. Without it, the “to,” such as I understand it, is impossible (*I love* 117).

Irigaray’s understanding of this relationship as something that looks towards the future illustrates that the silences enacted are neither wholly positive nor wholly negative; rather they indicate a situation of being with the other in which at times they are further away and other times closer to each other. Coming from the girl it is a small gesture that forges the possibility of understanding. The nana however also identifies the violence of “silencing,” using it to shield herself from appropriation but also falling into a docile silence when she has no opportunities for resistance.

22 “During all the years they’ve lived in the same house, Mother’s tried to have as little to do with her as possible. She edges past her as she would circumvent a puddle, with petticoats drawn up” (Nicholson 216).

Encounters through Inequalities

To think a freedom exterior to my own is the first thought. It marks my very presence in the world
(Levinas 17).

Finally, keeping the various instances of textual silences in mind it is possible to further tackle the way that the nana escapes being the embodiment of oppression for the girl's understanding. As the *charco* (puddle) with which Zoraida seeks to evade contact, the nana is dismissed by the mistress as less than human; but at the same time by not being seen she is able to maintain a space for herself exterior to the family. As the subaltern she is not able to speak within the story, but neither is she expelled entirely.

Through encounters between subjects that experience differential treatment, past injustices and future inequalities emerge. The silence that is broken in the meeting between Zoraida and the nana is different from the silencing of colonialism; this time the nana keeps quiet, refusing to deny the truth of what she revealed about Mario's fate regardless of Zoraida's insistence that she recant. Infuriated, Zoraida strikes her, breaking the silence with a violent act. Before this point any connection between the two women is unknown; there is only one passing mention by Zoraida of the nana's presence, claiming her ignorance of Spanish as proof that Indians are lesser beings: "La primera vez que vine a Chactajal quise enseñarle a hablar a la cargadora de la niña. Y ni atrás ni adelante. Nunca pudo pronunciar la *f*. Y todavía hay quienes digan que son iguales a nosotros" (96).²³ Her later reaction to the nana's startling presence evokes again racist rhetoric that would posit the Indian as inferior, only worthy of receiving either reproach or charity from the "civilized." The nana's responses in this encounter are complex: in one sense she betrays the Indians of Chactajal by revealing their secrets, calling to mind the collective historical imaginings of *La Malinche* as collaborator and traitor to the Mexican (*Mexica*) people. She also demonstrates resistance by insisting on telling the truth; yet in not acting in self-interest she exhibits loyalty to the family that possesses her. In any case, like the girl's story of formation she negotiates a space between the self and socialization, refusing the normality that is expected of her. Hence, she cannot be easily categorized as either peaceful Indian or *Carib/Cannibal*.

It has been shown through silences that mark differences and that are reminders of inequalities that the relationship between self and other is presented not as static, but based upon a series of encounters through which each party is transformed each time. Even Zoraida transforms as a result of her encounter with the nana, as for the first time she must acknowledge a connection with indigenous thought. Offsetting the closed and

23 "The first time I came to Chactajal I wanted to teach the woman who looked after my baby. Not a word could she get into her head. She couldn't even pronounce the *f*. And yet there are people who say they're the same as us" (Nicholson 94).

one-sided communications of César and Zoraida towards their indigenous subjects is the impossibility of closure that is perceived by the reader through the nana's silence and invisibility. In *Intercultural Mediations*, Ana María Manzanás and Jesús Benito evoke the figure of Eshu (Yoruba spirit of trickery and chaos) to carry out this type of disruption: "Eshu disrupts their sense of friendship and community by revealing the emptiness of the surface harmony – buried in the past and in repetition – and thus ignites a healing process oriented towards a dynamic rethinking of their position towards each other" (2). Thinking in this light, given the encounters through inequalities there cannot be a successful Bildungsroman in the conventional sense in which, according to Franco Moretti's definition, "the countless nuances of the social context blend together in a harmonious 'personality'" (21). The girl's act of silencing is not the completion of anything; rather it is a process that has been repeated and will continue to be repeated in future encounters.

By way of conclusion, I submit that the relationship put forth at times approaches something like what Spivak refers to as "ethical singularity"; recognition of the full particularity of the other person in confrontation, in which responses flow from both sides.

We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability. We also know that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across. This we call the 'secret,' not something that one wants to conceal, but something that one wants to reveal (Introduction xxv).

In the context of this novel the girl is required to respond to what goes unsaid. It is the nana that maintains a secret between them, not to exclude the girl, but to assure that she uphold her individuality within their encounters. In addition to this movement towards ethical singularity that valorizes two-way communication, it should be recognized that the relationship cannot only be perceived as a whole which is either positive or negative; rather it ought to be viewed as a continuous reaction to scarring left from past encounters and the possibilities for future wounds. Spivak asserts that responsibility in the context of resistance consists of "responding and being responded to" (Introduction xxvi). By holding back information and requiring that the girl wait before she responds, the nana models the dialogue that demands that both sides listen, keeping in mind that one is always waiting for an adequate reply. Castellanos is very possibly working out an ethical response to what she has perceived in her life as her own privilege, combined with the discrimination that she experienced within a machista environment. Although it is clear that the pessimism at the end of the novel prevents either character from acting in resistance, through the employment of critical silences Castellanos does open up a possibility for responding to the particularity of the subaltern in her novel. Aurora M. Ocampo stated regarding the author's delicate position: "Rosario Castellanos supo escuchar las voces

de los desposeídos porque ella también fue una desposeída, las voces de los oprimidos porque ella también fue una oprimida y las de los verdugos porque también tuvo ocasión de serlo” (qtd. in Castillo “Ashes” 245).²⁴ As a champion of the rights of the dispossessed Castellanos would need to recognize the complexities of her own space of enunciation in order to not continue mistakes made in the past. Although, it is important to stress again that responses must come from “both sides” – a possibility that is rarely recognized in her work. That is to say, the girl’s striking erasure of the memory of her nana’s face leads the reader to forget the nana’s responses within their relationship.

The faceless nana at the end is something different than the violence of conceiving of someone as the absolute other: her invisibility reveals complacency on the part of the narrator, which figures something like recognition of complicity. Castillo points out perceptively that the work uncomfortably “opens with a tale of silencing and closes with a strictly parallel act of silencing: the negation turned against itself” (“Ashes” 258). I have insisted that what must be added to this formulation are the willful silences of the nana in-between those two acts that confront the domination of the Spanish text. What is more, the novel highlights a double failure: the writer illustrates that one cannot speak for the subaltern, and neither can the subaltern speak within the confines of her text. Yet the fragments that remain reveal that the girl knows that there is no complete absolution in the end; that the portrayal of the connection with her *other mother* will never serve to alleviate the writer’s sense of shame over who is excluded in the linear, self-involved pursuit of the Bildungsroman.

Works Cited

- Castellanos, Rosario. *Bahún Canán*. México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957.
- . *Mujer que sabe latín*. México, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1973.
- . *The Nine Guardians*. Trans. Irene Nicholson. Columbia, LA: Readers International, 1992.
- . *Poesía no eres tú; obra poética: 1948-1971*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972.
- Castillo, Debra A. “Rosario Castellanos: Ashes Without a Face.” *De/Colonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women’s Autobiographical Practices*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 242-269.
- . *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

24 “Rosario Castellanos knew to listen to the voices of the dispossessed because she also was dispossessed, the voices of the oppressed because she was also oppressed, and those of the tyrant because she also had the occasion to be one” (my translation).

- Cróquer Pedrón, Eleonora. *El gesto de Antígona o la escritura como responsabilidad: (Clarice Lispector, Diamela Eltit y Carmen Boullosa)*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1982.
- Fernández Retamar, Roberto. *Todo Caliban*. Concepción, Chile: Cuadernos Atenea, 1998.
- Franco, Jean. *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Grant, Catherine. "Women or Words? The Indigenous *Nodriz* in the work of Rosario Castellanos." *Women Writers in Twentieth-Century Spain and Spanish America*. Ed. Catherine Davies. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993. 85-100.
- Irigaray, Luce. *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- . *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*. London; New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Manzanas, Ana María and Benito, Jesús. *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987.
- Ocampo, Aurora M. "Debe haber otro modo de ser humano y libre: Rosario Castellanos." *Cuadernos-Americanos* 250 (1983): 199-212.
- Ochoa, John A. *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Introduction. *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- . "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. Ed. Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 145-165.
- Wojcik-Andrews, Ian. *Margaret Drabble's Female Bildungsromane: Theory, Genre, and Gender*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.
- Zamudio, Luz Elena R. And Tapia, Margarita A. *Rosario Castellanos: de Comitán a Jerusalén*. Toluca: Tecnológico de Monterrey; México, D.F.: CONACULTA, FONCA, 2006.