

“La cara de luna de mi madre”: Nuria Amat’s Revolution  
in Poetic Language in “Casa de verano” (1999)

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Critics who have commented on the work of Barcelona writer Nuria Amat—novelists Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Rosa Montero, and Juan Goytisolo—consider her among the most accomplished contemporary Spanish writers (“Escritora” n.p.). Amat has published nine novels, dating back to her first, *Pan de boda* ‘Wedding Cake’ in 1979, but she is also the author of numerous short stories, volumes of essays about literature and the craft of writing, dramatic texts, and a pair of poetry collections. A marginal figure for many North American critics, Amat is still not as well known as other Spanish women authors born in the 1950s and 60s, such as Rosa Montero, Paloma Díaz-Mas, Almudena Grandes, Paloma Pedrero, and Lucía Etxebarria. Amat’s works, however, present significant contributions to recent developments in contemporary peninsular literature and she is regularly associated with what some have called Spanish New Narrative or the Catalan Renaissance (Capdevila-Argüelles, *Challenging* 2, 6). In fact, her latest novel, *Amor i guerra* ‘Love and War’ (her first written in Catalan), won the prestigious Catalan literature *Premi de les Lletres Catalanes Ramon Llull* award in 2011.

Amat’s writings meet at the generic crossroads of fiction, autobiography, poetry, and meta-literature. Her brand of lyrical narrative borders, at times, on the hermetic, and the generic “mestizaje literario” (Ballesteros 679, 686) ‘literary crossbreeding’ informs her most commented work, the 1997 novel *La intimidad* ‘Intimacy,’ wherein the protagonist attempts to write unreadable books, “textos ilegibles” (Amat, *Escribir* 102) ‘illegible texts.’<sup>1</sup> The

hybrid genre constitutes what Amat calls the “counter-novel,” and in her 1998 book of essays on literature and writing, *Letra herida* ‘Wounded Letter,’ the Catalan writer explains that, “[e]l término contranovela parece llevar consigo una ruptura de formas narrativas establecidas ... [y constituye una] rebelión ante la clasificación de géneros” (222) ‘the term counter-novel implies a rupture from established narrative forms and constitutes a rebellion against genre classifications.’ Critics including Samuel Amago, Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles, Zulema Moret, and Susanna Regazzoni have commented on Amat’s innovation of generic conventions related to novels such as *Pan de boda*, *Amor breve* ‘Brief Love,’ *Todos somos Kafka* ‘Everyone is Kafka,’ and *La intimidación*.<sup>2</sup> This essay expands upon the findings of previous critics by exploring concerns related to genre and gender in the 1999 short story “Casa de verano” ‘Summer House,’ a text virtually unexamined until now. The poetic prose of the 15-page narrative engages in a rupture with narrative practices as it presents a sensorial collage of unsettling language and violent images that effectively portray domestic abuse and the difficulty of escaping an oppressive environment. More so that Amat’s earlier works, many of which rely on “una estructura clásica, donde se respeta el tiempo cronológico lineal” (Regazzoni 263) ‘a classic structure, wherein chronological linear temporality is respected,’ “Casa de verano” constitutes a text that flirts with the generic boundaries of both narrative and poetry. The short story’s free flowing and irrational discourse employs persistent narrative fragmentation, in addition to a wide variety of poetic devices such as metaphor, metonymy, and antithesis.

What stands out in “Casa de verano” are the dense lyrical images encoded into a fragmented discourse riddled by temporal and spatial lapses. Just as the three orphaned children of the story need a revolutionary figurative language to express their intentions under censorship, so too the poetic prose unsettles the genre conventions of signification. For Julia Kristeva, the conventions of the symbolic order rely on proper grammar and syntax, chronological narration, and logical sign systems that clarify meaning (*Revolution* 29-30). However, Kristeva shows that the structural network of the signifying process contains within it subconscious and (pre)linguistic impulses, subversive irrational drives, and referential language rooted in

metaphor and metonymy that unsettle the signification patterns of the symbolic order. The semiotic, as Kristeva calls it, remodels the symbolic and "[t]his is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of 'natural' language which binds together the social unit" (*Revolution* 62). The semiotic, therefore, "breaks through the symbolic border, and tends to dissolve the logical order" (*Revolution* 79). Additionally, for Kristeva, whereas the symbolic order is often associated with a patriarchal order of discourse rooted in logic and stability, the semiotic rupture entails a distinctly feminine (even maternal) disordering of discourse centered on narrative fragmentation, poetic language, uncertain movement, and instinctual pulsations (*Revolution* 25-27).

The dissident politics of Amat's short story approaches Kristeva's theoretical explanations. In her 2010 volume titled *Escribir y callar* 'Write and Silence,' Amat details the revolutionary thrust that poetic language has in cultural thought: "Lo poético, es decir lo literario y vivo, lo irreductible, lo verdadero, sigue significando, al menos para mí, el nervio revolucionario, subversivo, trasgresor del pensamiento" (14) 'The poetic, that is to say, the lively and literary, the most irreducible and truthful, continues to be, at least for me, the most revolutionary, subversive, and transgressive vein of thinking.' Amat's lyrical short story embodies a similar dissidence, a subversive linguistic and thematic rupture from traditional narrative norms that favor linear chronology and clear relationships between signifier and signified. The contention here is that in Amat's "Casa de verano" the disordered and highly poetic language, the rhetorical structures and narrative fragmentation, and the subversive political thematics centered on dissent and liberated expression contest conventional signification systems of the symbolic order as outlined by Kristeva. In direct contrast to the embodiments of the symbolic, "Casa de verano" issues a lyrical escape (or revolt) through recourse to poetically charged rhetorical devices, dissident utterances from the mouths of children, and imaginations of a subversive (but nourishing) maternal force. In this sense, the disjointed and difficult story challenges, in both form and content, issues of genre and gender alike.

“Casa de verano” focuses on three orphans, Bel, Moni, and Tom, who live with their brutal grandfather during the summer as a result of their mother’s detainment and their absentee father’s expatriation. During an unknown period of the Franco regime (1936-75), the children experience the censorship and tyranny of the socio-political context, but also suffer a similar lack of life within the confines of the summer house ruled by the unrelenting *abuelo* ‘grandfather,’ a figure whom Capdevila-Argüelles refers to in a footnote as “the cruelest depiction of the dictatorial father ever written by Amat” (“Textual” 12). The children’s only escapes from the house are monthly visits to see their mother at the local juvenile court in Barcelona. Told from Bel’s viewpoint (in the first person and usually in the present tense), the story relates that Bel’s father has left Spain and is currently in France, that her mother is incarcerated for an unknown reason (presumably for dissidence), and also that her mother is bisexual and has a transvestite female lover. While in the house the children have very little that provides escape from the authoritative grandfather, so they seek refuge in their imaginations, in the few toys that are not prohibited, and in the memories evoked by the hidden portrait of their mother. Bel’s narration of life in the summer home appears as momentary mental digressions and fragments of fresh memories of the immediate past, but also as a consideration of the harsh cruelty exercised by the *abuelo* and thoughts on ways in which she can flee the house. The grandmother, tired of a life of maltreatment, commits suicide, and, in the end, Tom imagines escaping on a boat to the exotic waters of the Orient.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, Moni and Bel dream of marriage as a way to leave the confines of the summer house. The story’s last scene (and perhaps climax) reflects the children’s final moments with their grandfather following his death. The children return to the summer home, contemplate the *abuelo*’s cadaver, and unleash their fear and contempt by whipping his corpse with a leather belt.

### A Poetics of Dictators and Death

From the initial lines of the story, the reader senses a pessimistic tone of oppression and death, entangled with metaphors and imagery that elude comprehension much like the children who seek to avoid the *abuelo*. The depressive tone and shocking imagery

are mimicked by narrative fragmentation that dissolves, from the commencement of the story, any notion of linear chronology or stable narrative coherence. For example, the first page of the text is comprised of seven short paragraphs, each one presenting images that resist connection to those of previous passages. In just a few short paragraphs the narrator discusses death, escape, the moon, the mother, the garden, the grandfather's beatings, and an airplane. The stream-of-consciousness and disjointed contemplations reflect a text that articulates, as Kristeva claims in relation to revolutionary poetic language, a narration directed by an irrational "flow" and "the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material" (*Revolution* 40). The narrative gaps and jumps de-center the text just as the three children of the story are jolted by violence. The text continues in a related pattern of storytelling, constantly negotiated by fragmentation, illogical references, and resistance to linear narration.

The pessimism of the first page is evident in the first line of the text, which reads: "Recostaré la escalera en el tejado y despistaré a la muerte, dice Tom" (25) 'I'll lean the ladder on the roof and send death the wrong way, Tom says.' The ladder at once brings to mind an image of escape, and the first sentence of the story allegorically personifies the *abuelo* as death—he who torments others and saps their life-giving strength. By placing the ladder at the wall, Tom seeks to send death (or the *abuelo*) wandering, suggesting that the grandfather persistently follows the children and surveys their every action. The unsettling tone of death continues on the first page as Bel speaks of the dismal images of her dreams—" [e]l sueño siempre me habla de muertes" 'sleep always speaks to me of deaths'—and also of the cryptic hanged man's tree in the garden of the summer house, "el árbol del ahorcado. Un árbol con una leyenda menos triste que la nuestra" (25) 'the hanged man's tree. A tree with a legend not so sad as ours.' However, the fragmented text evades description or context of what occurs in Bel's dreams or of the events that occur at the hanged man's tree. From the outset of the text, the reader is left with vague images of brutality and destruction that depict the deadly realities of the post-war period.

The dark tones of the story are underscored on the third page of the text with the metaphorical description of the *abuelo* as a Franco-

like dictator:

En España existen dos dictadores al mismo tiempo. El pequeño dictador familiar y el otro gran dictador, lejano e invisible. El invisible vive en el centro del Estado y sólo se le puede ver en el cine. Antes de la película, nos enseñan las imágenes del general dictador mientras pasea por su finca de invierno o de verano. Camina como el abuelo, con su escopeta al hombro y pisando los arbustos del bosque de la casa de verano. (27)

Because here there are two dictators at the same time. The little family dictator and the other, big dictator, far away and invisible. The invisible one lives in the centre of the state and can only be seen in the cinema. Before the film they show us the images of the general dictator as he walks around his summer estate or his winter estate. He walks like our grandfather, with his shotgun on his shoulder, trampling the shrubs in the woods of the summer house.

The violent connotations and metaphorical associations here are stark in their clarity. In fact, the entire story can be interpreted as an analogy of the Franco regime and the difficulties associated with expression during times of censorship. The *abuelo*, like Franco, obliterates all in his path, even trampling the verdant life of the garden. In the summer house, it is the *abuelo* alone who dictates the rules as he leaves no room for individual expression. Similar to those who lived in fear and isolation during the Franco regime, the frightened children in Amat's text are also required to surrender their wishes and desires to an unrelenting ruler. Their freedom to leave the house is limited, as is their ability to express openly their discontent or dissent. During Franco's reign, "[f]or all those who did not share the aims of the new regime, life was claustrophobic; without freedom of expression, their beliefs, and—in Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia—their own language, were confined to private spaces" (Balfour 266). Likewise, in the summer home in Amat's tale, the children's fearful expression is confined to private and encoded communication in order to avoid the "golpes y patadas del abuelo" (30) 'grandfather's kicks and blows.'

The family dynamics established in "Casa de verano" mimic

the structures of surveillance and control exercised in Spain's fascist period wherein the family was propagated as a microcosm of state-imposed top-down authoritative strategies. Helen Graham suggests that under Franco "[t]he family, as envisaged by the regime, was unthreatening because it connected vertically with the state rather than horizontally with society. Thus it reinforced the unity and power of the state, rather than challenge it as did the horizontal solidarities of civil society" (184). Further, this model of power structure (of the state and of the family) isolated its members in order to prevent unlawful gatherings and potential revolt. For the children in Amat's summer home story, the dysfunctional family dynamic creates fear and a sense of abandonment such that Bel asserts, "[e]n la casa de verano no teníamos amigos. Un abuelo dictador convierte la familia en una isla.... Le digo a Moni que morir o vivir son la misma cosa" (33, 35) '[a]t the summer house we had no friends. A dictator grandfather makes the family an island.... I tell Moni that living or dying are the same thing.' The metaphorical associations of the loneliness of the home are described as life on an island, and they underscore the oppressive and destructive effects of authoritarianism.

The Franco regime used both religious rhetoric and rigid gender expectations in order to maintain familial regulations, and similar tense relationships are central to Amat's text. The *abuelo* is represented as a god-fearing religious man "de misa y comunión diaria" (28) '[who] goes to mass and communion every day,' but paradoxically, he is a vile and despotic guardian. This confusing religious hypocrisy, akin to the religiously-inspired rhetorical mobilizations employed by Franco, is noticed by Bel when "el abuelo se santigua con la mano derecha, la misma mano que peca y borra los pecados" (25), 'grandfather crosses himself with his right hand, the same hand that sins and wipes away the sins' and later as "[e]l abuelo golpeaba a Tom hasta que su brazo dolorido de dar tantos latigazos terminó por agarrotar la mano del pecado. Al poco rato, el abuelo rezaba el rosario contando ave marías sonoras en la capilla de la casa de verano" (34) '[g]randfather beat Tom until his arm, sore from so many blows, ended up clutching the hand of sin. A little while later grandfather was saying the rosary, intoning sonorous Ave Marias in the chapel of the summer house.' Throughout the course of the text

the grandfather is unrelenting in his abuse not only of the children, but also of his spouse, giving persistent “*latigazo[s] religioso[s]*” (35) ‘religious lashing[s]’ in order to maintain control of the family. Through a rigid patriarchal structure of violence, Amat’s text demonstrates that “the family’s function was complementary to the state’s goals since it facilitated the imposition of ‘order’ and regime stabilization” (Graham 189). These realities, rooted in paradoxical religious devotion, are highlighted when the *abuelo* states that, at his death, his entire inheritance will go to the local monastery and not to the children for whom he has parental responsibility (36).

The persistent nature of patriarchal violence toward women and children calls attention to the way in which the regime, and the *abuelo* by extension, brutally maintained control of a social milieu. Not only does the *abuelo* continually strike the *abuela* ‘grandmother’—“*le da una bofetada.... Y, después, cuando la mano le duele tanto de pegar a la abuela, comienzan las patadas*” (30) ‘grandfather punches her.... And then, when his hand is sore from hitting grandmother so much, the kicks start’—but the grandmother is also seen throughout the text as a model of prototypical femininity under the Franco regime: passive, quiet, submissive, obedient. The narrator of “*Casa de verano*” describes the *abuela* in these terms: “*La abuela tiene en la cara dos surcos de lágrimas. La abuela habla sola. Es una abuela muda*” (27) ‘Grandmother has two furrows of dried tears on her face. Grandmother talks to herself. She is a mute grandmother.’ The expressionless and symbolically muted grandmother does little throughout the story other than perform house chores and mechanically obey the *abuelo*’s demands. According to Bel, “*la abuela obedece y ordena una y otra vez todos los armarios de la casa de verano*” (28) ‘grandmother obeys and tidies again and again all of the armoires of the summer house.’ The grandmother, without voice and reduced to a shadow of herself due to aggression and cruelty, finally becomes completely mute: “*Y aquí enmudecía la abuela. Siempre teníamos miedo. La abuela tenía más miedo que nosotros porque llevaba más años soportando los golpes y patadas del abuelo*” (30) ‘And then grandmother fell silent. We were always afraid. Grandmother was more afraid than us because she had endured grandfather’s kicks and blows for more years.’ The fear and violence finally lead to death when the *abuela* grows



too weary of the domineering home environment and decides to take her own life. Although the children constantly witness the *abuelo's* "bofetada[s]" 'punches' and "patadas" (30) 'kicks' directed at the *abuela*, they do not initially know the cause of her passing. Notwithstanding the grandfather's attempt to hide the reality of the *abuela's* suicide, the children do find out the details of her death the following summer thanks to Tom, who discovers the "secreto peor guardado de la familia" (37) 'family's worst-kept secret.' Bel relates that after the grandmother closed the doors and windows of the kitchen, she turned on the gas stove and sat to die "con la cabeza apoyada en la mesa, junto al frutero. Así murió la abuela. Con su cabeza sacrificada sobre la mesa de la cocina, junto a la tijera de podar pecados" (37) 'with her head resting on the table, by the fruit bowl. That is how grandmother died. With her sacrificed head on the kitchen table, by the sin-pruning shears.'

An additional series of violent (and phallic) symbols associated with the vicious grandfather in "Casa de verano" warrant attention. In the initial passage that establishes the Franco-*abuelo* metaphor, both figures are seen "pisando los arbustos del bosque de la casa de verano" (27) 'trampling the shrubs in the woods of the summer house.' The act of destroying nature persists throughout the text and is associated with a dry and dying garden, as well as with the often-present, lengthy, and pointed pruning shears. Seemingly intent on continually pruning the garden, the *abuelo* sharply asks: "¿Dónde está la tijera de podar?, grita el dictador pequeño.... Entonces, llega el jardinero con la maldita tijera de podar del abuelo en las manos" (30) 'Where are the pruning shears? the little dictator shouts.... Then the gardener appears with grandfather's bloody pruning shears in his hand.' While no specific reference is made to what the pruners are used for, they draw attention to two violent actions: trimming trees or shrubs, and killing natural life. Further, as a sharp and pointed metal tool, they are designed for cutting and perhaps poking, prodding, or other malicious deeds. The text suggests that the pruners may well be a tool designed for torture since immediately after the gardener arrives with the metal object, the children react to the "golpes del abuelo" (30) '[g]randfather's blows' and lament that their incessant wounds no longer evoke tears. The effects of the garden violence are lasting. Bel relates that "[a]ntes de la guerra,

decía la abuela, el limonero daba más limones. De hacerle caso a la abuela parecía que antes de la guerra el mundo había sido distinto” (37) ‘[b]efore the war, grandmother said, the lemon tree gave more lemons. If you listened to grandmother, it seemed that before the war the world had been different.’ That is, prior to the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing fascist rule, the garden bore more fruit; indeed life was more abundant. On the final page of the text, the children reflect on the effects of other botanical butcherings at the summer house: “En el jardín de la casa de verano los rosales están secos. Los árboles frutales de la abuela han ido desapareciendo con el dolor del tiempo” (41) ‘In the garden of the summer house the rose bushes are dry. Grandmother’s fruit trees have been disappearing with the pain of time.’ The once vibrant beauty and sweetness of the rose bushes and fruit trees of the garden are finally lifeless, and Amat’s text intimates that the individuals living in the *abuelo*’s summer home undergo a similar loss of vitality.

### Imagination and the Search for Expression

Notwithstanding the harsh environment of aggression and abuse, Bel, Moni, and Tom find ways to express themselves and revolt against the rule of the family dictator. Even though the three children are prohibited from speaking about their subversive mother, from reading the few remaining books in the house, or from playing with their scarce toys, they do seek refuge in their imagination, thus escaping to a hidden world of portraits of their mother, vivid images, and a rich and lyrically-encoded language. In Amat’s short story, the children’s linguistic nonsense is comprised at times of dislocated phrases that contest the dictates of the *abuelo* as they utter, in Bel’s estimation, “palabras que saltan de mi boca como peces hambrientos” (40) ‘words [that] leap out of my mouth like hungry fish.’ The words-as-fish simile evokes imagery of language beyond control, of words that hunger for utterance and expression. At once the words uttered by the children fulfill the need for expression, although they also cause trouble amid the regulatory structures of propriety in the summer house. Their metaphorical language constitutes a strategic attempt to speak, to verbalize the violence of an unspeakable experience.

The children are always seeking avenues of escape and Bel

suggests that "[Moni] espera que el árbol sea como un avión que nos traslade a otro mundo" (25) '[Moni] hopes the tree will be like an aeroplane that will take us away to another world.' Their search for "another world" is acquired in part through the imaginations aroused by film.<sup>4</sup> The exotic beauty of actresses such as Rita Hayworth suggests an age of free artistic expression and nostalgia. Additionally, the allure of Hayworth reminds the children of their mother: "Mi madre es como Rita Hayworth, dice Tom. No, dice Moni. Pero, en verdad, se parece a las estrellas de las películas" (26) 'My mother is like Rita Hayworth, Tom says. No, Moni says. But she really does look like the stars in the films.' Later, when the children devise a plan to escape the house, their goals are focused further on the imaginative world of film and contact with their mother. According to Tom, "[t]enemos dos propósitos. Uno, dice Tom: entrar en un cine y buscar a mi madre en las películas. Dos, digo yo: buscar a la amante de mi madre" (31) '[w]e have two objectives. One, Tom says: to go into a cinema and look for my mother in the films. Two, I say: to look for my mother's lover.'

The children's search for escape is additionally forged through the usage of multi-layered metaphorical speech that is complicated by "desordenando palabras" (28, 31) 'muddling up words.' In this way, not only do the children engage in a quest for liberated expression within the confines of the summer house, but Amat also establishes a revolutionary aesthetic by breaking with stable boundaries regarding genre and comprehensible narration. Concerning Amat's use of language and voice, Zulema Moret proposes that the Catalan writer employs "una lengua al borde mismo del delirio, sin estallar, pero convulsionada por la repetición" (166) 'language on the verge of delirium, without bursting, but profoundly affected by repetition.' Additionally, as Samuel Amago describes, "[t]he struggle for a unique narrative voice [in Amat's texts] mirrors the social struggle" (118). A similar linguistic dissidence evident in the disordering of words, childlike babbling, and discursive fragmentation is described by Kristeva in terms of the semiotic *chora*, (pre)linguistic expressions that are in direct contrast to the symbolic order dominated by fixed grammar rules and syntactic regulations. Indeed, as Kristeva proposes, the linguistic "slippages" evident in poetic devices such as metaphor and metonymy enable language to disassociate itself from

the strictures of signification (*Revolution* 29).

For Bel, the children's poetically-infused language suggests that words are "abanicos, nada más. Mis palabras salen a pasear sin herir a nadie. No pretenden llegar a parte alguna" (40) 'fans, that's all. My words go out for a stroll without hurting anyone. They don't try to get anywhere.' Her goal in communication is not focused on signification, for her words "don't try to get anywhere." This underscores that the act of expression is most significant for Bel, not the transmittal of logical ideas. Further, that her words are like a fan implies that they open up levels of meaning, that they can expand consciousness or understanding. The children's linguistic confusion is disconcerting for the *abuelo* who resists uses of language alternative to normative communication. At the end of the story, once the *abuelo* is dead and the children stand contemplating his corpse, Bel describes the way in which her speech defies the grandfather's intentions by stating that "las palabras despiertan de mi boca y caen violentas y desorbitadas sobre los oídos del abuelo" (41) 'the words awake in my mouth and fall violent and excessive on grandfather's ears.' Amat's fragmented narration and lyrical discourse contend with symbolic signification by offering illogical associations and the deferral of meaning. Kristeva highlights the linkage between poetic language and transgression by asserting that "with the bourgeoisie, poetry confronts *order* at its most fundamental level: the logic of language and the principle of the State. From its roots in ritual, poetry retains the expenditure of the *thetic*, its opening onto semiotic vehemence and its capacity for letting *jouissance* come through" (*Revolution* 80).<sup>5</sup> Thus, poetic utterance and linguistic nonsense constitute explicit confrontations with socio-linguistic norms and a rejection of logical referential language, linear narration, and the imposition of meaning. In the case of Amat's story, the imaginative poetics emerges from the mouths of children. Through this attribution, the innocence and tolerance of youth, their attraction to kindness, and their rejection of adult-established filters concerning age, appearance, gender, and religion are all emphasized. In turn, their poetic utterances, mature and original, underscore the manner in which oppression often yields heightened creativity.

In addition to the orphan children's linguistic and poetic revolution, the casual usage of their names also challenges the

dictates of the *abuelo*, who only refers to them by their official names. According to Bel, "[p]ara el punto de mira del abuelo nosotros éramos Antoni, Isabel y Montserrat. Por este orden. El resto de la casa nos llamaba con nuestros nombres verdaderos [Tom, Bel y Moni]" (32) '[t]o grandfather, we were Antoni, Isabel and Montserrat. In that order. The rest of the house called us by our real names.' Rather than conform to the signifying standards of the grandfather, the children use names that better reflect their individuality, breaking with the linguistic signifying processes established by the symbolic order. Bel goes even further reacting against the usage of her official name by her grandfather: "Isabel es la peor, dice el abuelo. Siempre será una desgraciada. Nadie me llama así. He prohibido ese nombre en el mapa sonoro de mi vida. Hasta mis documentos dicen Bel. Vomité mi nombre como si fuera una palabra sucia y desgastada" (38) 'Isabel is the worst, grandfather says. She will always be a disgrace. Nobody calls me that. I have banned that name from the sound map of my life. Even on official documents I am Bel. I vomited my name as if it was a dirty, worn-out word.' The act of vomiting out an unclean name rids Bel of the undesired utterance and also presents a subversive performative act in its own right. Approaching what Kristeva deems the abject, Bel vomits the name espoused by the symbolic order in favor of a name that captures a unique individuality and subversion. The abject, the unclassifiable, or unrepresentable is the revolutionary name, as Kristeva suggests, "where meaning collapses" (*Powers* 2). In her examination of Amat's text *Viajar es muy difícil* 'Travelling is Very Difficult,' Capdevila-Argüelles contends that "the abject, corporeal and unclean, ... has to be expelled so that the clean and proper subjectivisation process can occur" (*Challenging* 58-59). Bel's concept of self-identity is thus negotiated through an affirmation of linguistic practices that contest the stable and official signifiers spoken by the grandfather.

With the disordering of words and the re-signification and expansion of meaning, Amat's text confronts convention at the semantic level. The temporal and spatial fragmentations of the recounting of experiences also break with narrative norms. Throughout the text, Bel presents her ideas as a series of disjointed and disparate memories of the recent past. In addition to the

narrative fragmentation of the text's initial paragraphs, pages 30 and 31 demonstrate a rapid succession of unconnected reflections related to the protagonist's father, the pruning shears of the *abuelo*, the local church priest, the mother's transvestite lover, film culture, and ideas for escaping the house. Nevertheless, Bel reveals (in part) her cerebral structure of disordering words and narratological jumps through the processes of fragmented memory: "Tengo un armario en la cabeza. Mientras la abuela trastea en la despensa yo cambio de lugar el cajón de la memoria.... La fotografía de mi madre sigue oculta entre los dobladillos de mi ropa" (31) 'I have an armoire in my head. While grandmother is moving things around in the pantry I change the place of the memory drawer.... My mother's photograph is still hidden among my folded clothes.' The sudden chronological leaps are explained through a metaphorical consideration of the brain as a large wardrobe or cupboard full of miscellaneous objects and articles of clothing. Bel's mental armoire is associated, further, with the "cajón de la memoria" (30) 'memory drawer' and later with photographs (memories) of the mother. Bel's storytelling strategy is comprised of spontaneous expression, as if narration were achieved by removing photographs from a scrap box, strewing them about the table in a collage-like fashion, and then picking them up so as to construct a story without regard to chronological order or cohesion. The images here conform closely to Amat's own views on narration, memory, and incomprehensibility. In *Escribir y callar*, the writer explains that, "[m]i pensamiento era ilegible y los poemas, los mejores, también tenían algo de ilegibles. Fotografiaban los instantes del recuerdo" (87) 'my thinking was illegible and the poems, the best ones, were also somewhat illegible. They photographed instances of remembrance.' Like the synchronic nature of photographs, the children's experiences in "Casa de verano" constitute disjointed and unconnected fragments of the present and past.

The narratological fragmentation suggests a variety of constants about the nature of memory and personal experience in literary discourse. The holes in narration reflect the trauma of the protagonists and their desire to omit certain details of their (hi)story, but they could also signal either the dissent of the storytellers and the need to break with established narrative practices, or the textual evidence of the free-flowing processes of liberated expression.

Regarding writers such as Goytisolo, Carmen Martín Gaité, and others whose writing is a form of dissent, David K. Herzberger asserts that the overt use of narrative fragmentation in writing "convey[s] a reality that is less discursive than experiential (i.e., it is 'lived' life written into discourse, rather than discourse reframed in another discourse)" (36). In Amat's story, the experiential fragmentation portrays at once the trauma of the children's experience in addition to an attempt at articulating a discourse capable of expressing desire and sorrow.

In the case of the linguistic disorder and the fragmented narrative structure, Amat makes a bold statement about literary genre and the search for expression:

Porque el intento de romper el lenguaje para renovarlo no significa necesariamente tener que torturar el cuerpo de la lengua para hacer con ella una página vistosa y atrevida. Basta con un simple y contundente gesto. Una especie de fuerza interior o de deseo inmenso que empuja a escribir garabatos de la memoria para luego dejar de escribirlos y mantener el arrebató innovador del deseo. Un deseo radical e irrefrenable de destruir la lengua para enseguida volverla a tejer y repararla. Con firmeza callada y obstinada se escribe y des-escribe a un tiempo. (*Escribir* 103)

Because the attempt to destroy language in order to renovate it does not necessarily mean having to torture the body of language so as to make an attractive and intrepid page. It is sufficient enough to make a simple and convincing expression. A sort of internal force or immense desire pushes one to scribble down memories in order to later stop writing and thereby maintain the innovative outburst of desire. It is a radical and unstoppable urge to destroy language only to immediately mend it. With silent and obstinate firmness one writes and un-writes at the same time.

Through metaphorical language and fragmented memories of the past, "Casa de verano" consistently breaks linguistic expectations and simultaneously renews expression. Concerning the ambiguity and open spaces in narratives of history and memory, Herzberger concludes that "the fragmented composition compels the reader to

reconfigure the design of storytelling through the evocation of a past that is not static but dynamic and ever changing” (38). The movement toward a multi-perspectivism in (hi)story telling in Amat’s tale—a process that recognizes the holes left by traumatic experience and the unavoidable gaps left by the processes of memory—resists the unflinching dogmatic strictures followed by the *abuelo* and affirms, in their place, a dynamic ethics and politics of change and novelty.<sup>6</sup> According to Susanna Regazonni, Amat’s writing reflects a feminine resistance in which “no es posible fijar una tipología de escritura, excepto la de la rebelión a toda definición, de la subversión considerada como necesidad de reflejar en la escritura el cambio de estructuras sociales, de subrayar una especie de espontaneidad y de ambigüedad como nueva afirmación de ellas mismas” (267) ‘it is not possible to affix a typology of writing, except that of rebellion against all definition, of a subversion considered as a necessity to reflect in writing the challenging of social structures, of underscoring a type of fresh and self-affirming spontaneity and ambiguity.’ In a gesture of rebellion and subversion through narrative fragmentation, poetic language, and semiotic drives that challenge the symbolic order, Amat’s story contests conventions of aesthetics and ethics, of genre and gender.

### Maternal Emanations from the Moon and the Sea

Beyond the alternative linguistic and generic features of Amat’s text, which create a youthful dissidence and semiotic challenge to the symbolic order, the story employs a series of harsh antitheses in order to frame the children and their mother in direct contestation with the grandfather and his dictatorial rule. For example, the hostile representations of the heat and the summer are metonymically linked to a chain of signifiers including the patriarchal sun, the suffocating summertime, the *abuelo*’s house, and the brutality of both the family dictator and the *gran dictador* of the State. In Amat’s portrayal of the repressive backdrop of Francoist Spain—and the extension of that violence into the household where the family dictator rules—the suffocatingly hot environment of the summer house is ever-present. Yet the children establish strategies that allow them to temper the heat of the summer house and to counterbalance its effects. In contrast to the images associated with the heat and



the *abuelo*, the children find a soothing consolation in the quiet maternal associations emanating from the soft twilight of the moon, and in these images the rhetorical innovations and the feminist politics of Amat's story reach their culmination. Although on one level the maternal motifs in Amat's text rely on a conventional vision of femininity (the woman as a protective mother), the term mother is a signifier in flux, which breaks with a traditional usage of that term. Even though the mother is a source of calming protection for the children, the dissident version of maternity that Amat suggests challenges sexual orientation and gender expectations, and it rejects the Francoist notion of femininity embodied by the subservient and mute *abuela*. In this way, the maternal metaphors associated with the moon and the sea in "Casa de verano," along with the stark antithetical contrasts with the domineering paternal sun, offer a transgressive vision of femininity wherein the woman ruptures boundaries of norm and difference.

Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove suggest that "'moon-thinking' and lunar matter are characteristic of cultures interested in the feminine, and solar matters of the patriarchy" (147).<sup>7</sup> The opposing symbols related to the sun and the moon infuse Amat's story from beginning to end. In "Casa de verano," Amat establishes a complex metonymic chain of signifiers that engages archetypal imagery by connecting the moon, the twilight, the mother, and the sea. As the antithesis to the suffocatingly hot sun associated with the *abuelo*'s summer house, the children take refuge in "[l]a luna que atraviesa la ventana [que] tiene la cara de mi madre" (25) '[t]he moon that comes through the window [that] has my mother's face.' Whereas in other works Amat narrates stories of the death of the mother, as Capdevila-Argüelles details in her study of Amat (*Challenging* 164-74), the moonlight in "Casa de verano" provides an unconditionally constant connection to the comforting pulsations of a maternal nature such that the lunar figure even offers to the children the image of their mother's face. Further, the moon is always present at night for the frightened children in their bedroom and it acts as an accessible surrogate mother while their real mother is imprisoned far away. In Helen Tookey's reading of similar maternal-menstrual motifs in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, the "ascription of a 'look' or 'gaze' to the moon is in the context of the anthropomorphisation of the moon, usually as some kind of goddess" (32). Bel, Moni, and Tom refer to their absent

mother in terminology that recalls the divine: beautiful, mythical, protective, redemptive.

And yet, in “Casa de verano” the mother is more than just a distant moon. Her gender, her desire, and her memory are dangerous, even subversive. The *abuelo* prohibits the children from speaking about her and he destroys anything that evokes her memory. In terms of the menacing aspects of feminine sexuality and fertility, which Shuttle and Redgrove connect to menstrual rhythms (which follow the lunar cycle), there is an “active eruption, there is a fiery spirit: of anger, courage, possession, rage. This spirit is ‘fiery productivity,’ it leads to lying, crime, cognition, prophecy, and poetry” (146). The transgressive (and poetic) embodiments of the feminine figure in Amat’s text are connected to a dissidence that confronts strict gender roles and identities. The three children discover that their mother “tiene una amante, un amante que es una mujer vestida de hombre, ... [a]hora tenemos dos madres” (31) ‘has a lover, a lover who’s a woman dressed like a man, ... [n]ow we have two mothers.’ This passage is revealing for various reasons. First, it suggests that the youth find little problem with the dissidence of their mother’s bisexual orientation, and it demonstrates the innocence and tolerance with which youth confront society. The children consider gender further as they encounter their mother’s partner. Tom suggests that the transvestite woman “[e]ra una mujer con vestido de hombre. O un hombre con cuerpo de mujer, una mujer maravillosa” ‘was a woman dressed like a man. Or a man with a woman’s body. A wonderful woman,’ to which Moni responds, “[a]hora tenemos padre y madre” (35) [n]ow we have a father and a mother.’ These statements imply that the titles “mother” and “father,” and genders including female and male, matter little for the children; the terms are unstable and subject to slippage. What is important to the youth is that “[n]uestra segunda madre nos daba los besos” (35) ‘[o]ur second mother gave us kisses,’ that they receive affection and care from their bisexual mother and her ambiguous partner. An unprejudiced perspective breaks with norms regarding gender and (homo)sexuality under the regime in Spain, since, “[d]urante el franquismo se trató el tema de la homosexualidad como una lacra que la sociedad padecía y que el régimen debía eliminar con todos los medios que estuvieran a su alcance” (Bedoya 1) ‘during the Franco period the topic of

homosexuality was considered a plague suffered by society, one that the regime sought to eradicate with any and all methods at its disposal.' By prohibiting conversation and images of the mother in the summer house, the *abuelo* seeks to eradicate the influence of homosexual attraction just as Franco executed similarly-inclined citizens during his dictatorship. With the persistent surveillance of the "family dictator," the children are forced to hide the few remaining artifacts that remind them of their mother; thus the "fotografía de [la] madre sigue oculta entre los dobladillos de [la] ropa" (31) 'photograph is still hidden among [the] folded clothes.'

The memory of the mother and the poetic associations derived from the moon grant necessary outlets for the children's imagination. Bel details the absent mother's protective powers by stating that "[h]ablar de mi madre está prohibido en casa del abuelo. Pero la luna protege el cerebro de lo prohibido" (27) '[i]t is forbidden to speak about my mother in our grandfather's house. But the moon protects our minds from what is prohibited.' Kristeva recognizes the gendered characteristics of the semiotic since the poetic *chora* has its foundations in the distinctively nourishing and maternal aspects of the feminine (*Revolution* 26-27). This perspective highlights the feminist politics of Amat's text as the poetic and irrational language of the children resists the grandfather and the symbolic order through the imagery of the moon and the subversive mother. Zulema Moret proposes that in Amat's *La intimidación*, "los libros se imponen como objeto intermediario entre la madre muerta y el querer saber" (166) 'books impose themselves as intermediaries between the dead mother and the desire for knowledge.' In "Casa de verano," Amat adds to the metonymic chain of signification to contiguously link the mother with books, photos, moonlight, and even an electric train gifted to Tom. The train is a central image in the text due to its connection with both the world of childhood innocence and play, and its association with the mother, since it originated from her. And if the train evokes the undercover presence of the banished mother, then the *abuelo*'s drastic annihilation of it proves all the more relevant and tragic for the children because "[c]ada patada al tren es una patada en la cara de luna de mi madre" (29) '[e]ach stamp on the train is a stamp on my mother's moon face.' With this act, the *abuelo* destroys one of the few remaining symbols of energetic and imaginative play that

remain in the house; he also initiates, through constant aggression, the loss of innocence of the children. Tragically, the destruction of Tom's train signals a final blow to the existence of the mother in the house and this provokes a bleak loss of hope for the three children.

## Conclusion

The imaginary and linguistic escapes employed by the children serve as a survival tactic that enables expression at some level. Unbeknownst to the *abuelo*, Tom imagines a raft of tree trunks, ropes, and wood and sets sail toward the exotic and foreign waters of the Indian Ocean. Bel and Moni search for another escape and settle on the idea of marriage, what they call “una especie de puente, un trampolín de matrimonio. Me casaré contigo para escapar de la casa de verano del abuelo, dije” (40) ‘a kind of bridge, a trampoline of matrimony. I’ll marry you to escape from grandfather’s summer house, I said.’ As a bridge to another place, marriage removes them from the summer house, but perhaps from there they jump to somewhere else as if on a trampoline. Such is the case in Amat’s text because, in the end, Bel and Moni marry and escape the house; however, their new husbands are represented as “un marido trampolín que es a la vez nuestro mejor amigo y enemigo” (40) ‘a trampoline husband who was at the same time our first friend and enemy.’ It is as if the contract of matrimony offers a way out of the summer house, but then subsequently establishes a new pattern of male-dominated enslavement and expressive fatality. In this sense, the husband is the “mejor amigo” (40) ‘best friend’ that saves one from present malice, but also the worst enemy due to the potential abuses that might ensue. That marriage is a bridge or trampoline suggests that it is merely an intermittent point rather than an end in and of itself. Amat’s rich lyrical language at times evades meaning and the disjointed imaginations of the children provide both a contestation of the clear-cut language and constrictions of the grandfather, and also a strategy for coping with his cruelty. The associations that Bel, Moni, and Tom make between the moon and the mother are rooted in their dreams of escaping the summer house and are represented through fragmented memories, maternal metaphors, and a feminist politics wherein unstable notions of both genre and gender challenge traditional discourses.

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### Notes

1 All translations from Spanish to English are my own, except those of Amat's "Casa de verano," from Graham Thomson's translation of the story published in *The Barcelona Review* (1999). In a few instances I have made minor adjustments to Thomson's translation.

2 In contrast to authors such as Montero and Díaz-Mas, who receive critical attention among the academic community, articles dedicated to Amat's works are sparse and most often centered on her novel *La intimidación*. The few studies that have treated her work are focused on metafiction and the anxiety of influence (Samuel Amago), autobiographical writing and the act of reading (Zulema Moret), and the ambiguities between reality and fiction in her novels (Susanna Regazzoni). Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles engages the writings of Amat more than any other critic. Her book *Challenging Gender and Genre in the Literary Text: The Works of Nuria Amat* offers close readings of Amat's narrative from the 1979 novel *Pan de boda* to the works of the late 1990s, including *La intimidación* and *El país del alma* 'Country of the Soul.' Capdevila-Argüelles primarily discusses metaliterary aesthetics in Amat's work, focusing on intertextuality, self-reflexivity in writing, and the fashioning of the female authorial voice.

3 At one point Bel attempts suicide due to the oppressive conditions of the summer home. She uses a rope to hang herself and describes it metaphorically as "[u]na cuerda que es como un vómito indefinido y largo" (35) '[a] cord like a long indefinite vomit.'

4 The text alludes to the children viewing films on several occasions (26, 27, 31, 37). Bel relates that Tom "veía demasiadas películas" (37) 'watched too many films,' even though Amat does not include specifics regarding when the children watch movies, how they are able to escape the summer house to see them, and which films they view. They do know of Hayworth, and they associate her beauty with that of their mother. Several contemporary film productions have dealt with Spanish children in similar violent settings and the way in which they use their imagination to cope with (and at times escape) trauma and/or the disasters of war-torn societies; or to transport themselves to another world, as Bel proposes. The reader could refer to *El espíritu de la colmena* 'The Spirit of the Beehive' (Victor Erice, 1973), *La lengua de las mariposas* 'Butterfly' (José

Luis Cuerda, 1999), *El viaje de Carol* 'Carol's Journey' (Imanol Uribe, 2002), *La educación de las hadas* 'The Education of Fairies' (José Luis Cuerda, 2006), and *El laberinto del fauno* 'Pan's Labyrinth' (Guillermo del Toro, 2006).

5 Kristeva defines the "thetic" as "a break in the signifying process" (*Revolution* 43). This type of rupture provides semantic flexibility and the expanded possibility for the metaphorical-metonymical associations of words.

6 Echoing Martin Heidegger, David Wood writes in *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction* that poetry has a "world-opening power" and that multi-perspectivism resists the rigid linguistic norms, identities, and normative "enframing" provoked by the symbolic order (37, 55, 135). In this sense, change and novelty, such as that espoused by the young protagonists of Amat's text, point toward a broader ethical and political stance based on difference and liberated expression.

7 For more on the anthropological and archetypal study of the varied symbolisms of feminine motifs (the moon connection included), see Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother* and Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*.

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