Out of the Closet and onto the Bookshelf: Lesbian Liberation in Elena Fortún's *Oculto Sendero*

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Abstract

This paper investigates Elena Fortún's lesbian *Bildunsroman* titled *Oculto Sendero*, published posthumously in 2016. By engaging with queer theory and gender studies, I explore how the author revisits traditional gender roles in 1920s Spain through her protagonist. Then, I outline the new lesbian identity this character begins to adopt by the end of the novel. This paper aims to bring visibility to lesbian identities and desire while also highlighting Fortún's impact on the Spanish literary tradition.

Trigger warning: sexual assault, homophobia, gender-based violence

Keywords

Lesbian literature, queer studies, Spain, *Bildungsroman*, *Oculto Sendero*, Elena Fortún

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1. INTRODUCTION

One can discover a lot about a nation by the stories it tells about its people. Who is represented on screen and in literature? Who is omitted? Who decides which stories will be told? In recent years, rising acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community has encouraged the recovery of forgotten lesbian and gay literature, bringing visibility to once taboo works of fiction and non-fiction from across the world. Amidst heated debates over sexual orientation and gender identity, and public outcry about marginalized groups in the media, scholars are revisiting authors' unpublished manuscripts and hidden subtexts. Academia's newfound interest in LGBTQ+ authors and writings prevails over the long history of homophobia intent on its erasure.[1] And while the works of some (especially male) homosexuals have already found the spotlight, less has been done in the realm of lesbian literature.

Many are familiar with the name Federico García Lorca, famous Spanish homosexual poet, but fewer can name lesbian writers who lived and wrote on the Iberian Peninsula. This paper will explore a celebrated literary figure whose lesbianism has seldom been mentioned in academic studies. While Elena Fortún (1886-1952) gained recognition in Europe for her series about Celia, a girl who challenges traditional gender roles in her musings on politics and education, it is only in *Oculto Sendero* [The Hidden Path], an autobiographical novel that remained unpublished until 2016, that the author explores her closeted lesbian identity; her published works and public appearances never revealed or addressed her sexual orientation.

The novel follows María Luisa Arroyo through her childhood, during which she was branded a "weird girl,"to her late thirties, when she rediscovers herself outside of societal

[1] Although the emergence of terms like LGBTQ+ occurred well into the 21st century, this paper will use more contemporary terms to ensure inclusivity and fill in the blanks left by a heteronormative society.

norms.[2] Although María Luisa's existence is characterized by suffering, her journey towards escaping compulsory heterosexuality and building a life she can tolerate in an independent space demonstrate the importance of being free to grow into one's identity. The many parallels between this narrator and her author suggest that María Luisa's misery was not uncommon for real-life lesbians like Fortún living in early 20th century Spain. In fact, Fortún's personal investment in the protagonist's plight is likely what kept *Oculto Sendero* off the bookshelves for so long. The author uses this work of fiction to criticise the institution of marriage and the traditional family, the very foundation of social and moral order in Spanish society (Capdevila-Argüelles 47). Fortún's *Bildungsroman* shows an unconventional girl's process of self-realization as she battles traditional gender roles and works toward accepting her identity as an intellectual, an artist, and a lesbian whose existence is in itself a rebellion against the patriarchy.

After outlining my objectives and research approach, this Master's memoir will detail the context in which *Oculto Sendero* was produced, describing the radical changes in Spanish politics during the 20th century. Then, I will explore Fortún's biography and specifically her writings—children's books, unpublished manuscripts, and personal correspondence—which provide insight into the author's own struggles with marriage, sexual expectations, gender conformity, and intellectual freedom. I will thereby draw a portrait of *Oculto Sendero*'s creator based on the limited personal information available before diving into the analysis portion of this memoir. My analysis will focus on the difficulties that lesbians like María Luisa faced as women, intellectuals, artists, and homosexuals, proving that the intersectional discrimination that targeted lesbians made for unique challenges on their road to self-realization and acceptance.

[2] The umbrella term "queer," an insult in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that has since been reclaimed by the queer community, will be used interchangeably with "weird girl" or "chica rara" to address the novel's gender nonconforming protagonist, or with LGBTQ+ in reference to the community.

2. Research Objectives

This paper has three main objectives that are deeply intertwined due to the intersectional nature of gender, sexual orientation, and identity. First, I intend to contribute to the growing corpus of LGBTQ+ literature by underscoring the work of lesbian author Elena Fortún who ensured that her autobiographical novel *Oculto Sendero* would not be published during her lifetime. I hope to bring visibility to lesbian identities and lesbian desire, especially considering the shifting ideologies of Spain concerning the queer community in the 20th century and the recent efforts to bring LGBTQ+ creations into national (and global) contexts. Second, I will draw from said novel and from scholarship on the writer's children's books about the rebellious Celia in order to demonstrate the breadth of Fortún's impact on Spanish culture and the national literary tradition—both in children's literature and lesbian writing. This research will help delineate a more complete picture of the author, whose contributions to children's literature are generally the focal point of academic studies. Finally, my analysis of Fortún's novel will emphasize the author's social commentary, namely how she challenges compulsory heterosexuality and the patriarchal institution of marriage, and how she develops new gender identities within liberated social spaces.

3. Research Approach

This section will outline my methodology, define the key terms and concepts of my theoretical framework that centres on gender studies and queer theory, and finally review existing investigations on Fortún.

3.1 Methodology

This memoir will trace the relevant historical context of Spain during the 20th century in order to situate the research. Then, it will explore the life and works of the celebrated Spanish

children's book writer Elena Fortún before focusing on *Oculto Sendero* (2016), the novel this paper intends to study. Using a close reading and textual analysis, I will engage with critical discussions on *Oculto Sendero*, its author, and her other works, and with contemporary critical discourse on gender studies and queer theory. Particularly useful will be a) studies on *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall that address the concepts of the mannish lesbian and the invert; b) Virginia Woolf's writings on the need for female independent spaces and financial autonomy; c) Carmen Martín Gaite's essay on the *chica rara* [weird girl]; d) Adrienne Rich's reflections on compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum; e) Judith Butler's studies on gender construction; and f) Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Next, this paper will summarize the novel and dive into its analysis, first by showcasing how the novel revisits traditional gender roles and later by exploring the new lesbian identity it creates. I will then conclude the study and list my references.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper builds on several scholars' argumentation within the overlapping areas of gender studies and queer theory, beginning with certain themes from readings of English lesbian literature. The 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* (hereafter *The Well*) by British author and lesbian Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943) explores gender identity and sexual orientation, bringing visibility to homosexual women's plight in conservative British society.[3] Almost a century later, numerous scholars have investigated different aspects of the British lesbian experience; studies on inversion, the mannish lesbian, and cross-dressing are particularly relevant to Fortún's protagonist. The mannish lesbian is, according to Esther Newton, "a figure who is defined as lesbian because her behavior or dress (and usually both) manifest elements designated as exclusively masculine" (560). Clothing is important in both novels as the protagonists reject

[3] See Kara Cybanski's "Reshaping Womanhood: Lesbian Realities in The Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall."

feminine apparel in favour of more "mannish" outfits. Although Laura Doan's study of cross-dressing fashions centres on the British context, her explanation can be extended to Fortún's work; while a masculine clothing style later became associated with female homosexuality, the 1920s androgynous look was more in line with the modern woman than the lesbian (122). Nevertheless, the "distinctive marks of a lesbian sub-culture" (122) represented in this aesthetic allowed members of the queer community to recognize each other, if only subconsciously. Melanie A. Taylor adds that gender roles, attributes, clothing, and behaviours were considered inherent to biological sex, meaning that a woman attracted to women would be conceptualized and characterized as male (288). This gender reversal was often called inversion, especially in the legal and medical fields. In 1920s Europe, "The term 'invert' reflects the belief that same-sex desire is in fact an inversion of the sexual instincts, since the *natural* direction of sexual attraction within a heterosexual paradigm can only ever be towards a person of the 'opposite sex'" (Taylor 288, original emphasis). Consider 19th century sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis's understanding of inversion: "As gender role and behavior was deemed to be the natural consequence of sex, if an individual's sexual desire belongs to the opposite sex then, it was reasoned, so must his or her gender attributes" (qtd. in Taylor 288). These sexologists conflate gender expression and sexual orientation, even conceptualizing lesbians as male in terms of gender and sexual desire (288). Luz Sanfeliu adds that in 1886, von Krafft-Ebing developed "una escala de inversión sexual que iba desde las mujeres que no manifestaban la anomalía en su apariencia física ni en su comportamiento, hasta las más degeneradas, aquéllas que sólo eran femeninas en sus órganos genitales: en todo lo demás sentían y vivían como hombres" (45-46) that contributed to the pathologization of sexual inverts and encouraged their perception as perverted. In 20th century Spain, much like in Britain,

homosexuality was pathologized and LGBTQ+ individuals were branded inverts—this rhetoric influenced prejudices towards gay people, who were often seen as crazy, ill, and even dangerous.

Also in 1928, the same year Virginia Woolf published her groundbreaking *Orlando*, this celebrated British author read two papers at the Newnham and Girton colleges. These essays became *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a publication Woolf knew would see backlash—in her private journals, she predicted she would be "attacked for a feminist & hinted at for a sapphist" (qtd. in Gordon vii). Woolf's proposal is, simply put, that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). In essence, Woolf criticises the gender roles that force women into bearing and raising children as a top priority and blames this for their lack of financial resources. Without these resources, women cannot afford an independent space in which to develop their literary or artistic creativity. Without this room, they cannot contribute to the intellectual and artistic traditions of their nation, leaving men feeling superior and exerting their academic authority to keep women out of their sphere. This patriarchal cycle, along with Woolf's plea to allow independent spaces for women, will serve to analyse *Oculto Sendero*'s protagonist's difficult journey as a female artist; struggling with her reputation, her husband's dismissals, and her limited space, María Luisa's creative potential suffers and is nearly extinguished.

Space is also key in Martín Gaite's essay "La chica rara," where she defines the categorical weird girl as "un tipo de mujer ajeno a los esquemas convencionales de orden y desorden que [presiden] la educación de la época" (111). This *chica rara* also has "una peculiar relación … con los espacios interiores" (113) and her goal is to escape the confining domestic sphere to find freedom outside the home. Both types of spaces signify liberty to act as the woman pleases: while Woolf defends an independent interior space free from masculine oppression,

Martín Gaite's *chicas raras* leave the home and abandon patriarchal gender roles. Martín Gaite also highlights that many Spanish post-war authors created weird girl protagonists to reflect their own experiences in the margins (111). Indeed, considering the autobiographical components of *Oculto Sendero*, it is safe to say that both protagonist and author fit Martín Gaite's definition.

Part of what makes Fortún and her protagonist "weird" or "queer" is their sexual attraction to women, which did not suit existing ideals of family and love.[4] Many societies, Spain being one of them, emphasized the importance of heterosexual unions for the sake of the nation's growth and well-being. In her now classic 1986 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich explores the notion of compulsory heterosexuality that characterizes lesbianism as "deviant" or "abhorrent," or renders it invisible (178). There are two main parts to her argument: first, women's female partners have been invalidated and forced into secrecy; and second, lesbian existence and experience is lacking from "a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship" (178). In terms of "scientific" or psychological studies, the focus is on male desire and men's need to control women—often, according to Rich, "lesbians simply do not exist" (179). Although much has changed in terms of society and scientific thought, Rich's essay is relevant for the study of *Oculto Sendero*, a novel written during the first decades of the 20th century. Rich uses Kathleen Gough's eight characteristics of male power to outline her study (qtd. in Rich 183-184, original emphasis):

1. *to deny women* [their own] *sexuality*
2. *to force male sexuality upon them*
3. *to command or exploit their labor to control their produce*
4. *to control or rob them of their children*
5. *to confine them physically and prevent their movement*
6. *to use them as objects in male transactions*
7. *to cramp their creativeness*

[4] Although Martín Gaite never associated the *chica rara* with lesbianism, several literary weird girls are attracted to other women.

8. to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments

She then adds detailed historical examples to illustrate these eight forms of control, including: the destruction of lesbian documents/archives, gender-based violence, the "idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising," motherhood and marriage as unpaid production, and male control of abortion and contraception, among others (Rich 183-185). In regards to the seventh point, she mentions two examples that *Oculto Sendero* reflects perfectly—the "definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female" and the "social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations" (184). In fact, all but point four is relevant to Fortún's novel. Gough's eight characteristics of male power help convince women that "marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable" (185), which ties into Rich's claim that men's true fear is that "women could be indifferent to them altogether" (187). This leads them to control and indoctrinate, and to attempt to eliminate the lesbian experience.

But women, hetero and homosexual alike, continue to exist within and beyond patriarchal norms. Rich uses the term "lesbian continuum" to mean "a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (192). Lesbian existence, meanwhile, "suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and [their] continuing creation of the meaning of that existence" (192). Framing her work with Gough's eight points, Rich explores lesbian existence and the lesbian continuum as uniquely female experiences (192-193) and draws parallels with lesbianism in other parts of the world (194). Her study seeks to liberate female identities and experiences, specifically those of lesbians, who lead double lives for the sake of self-preservation (199).

Moreover, my analysis will rely on one of the "founding texts of queer theory" (Butler vii), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. This seminal feminist study of bodies, gender performance, and social constructs is an essential part of any investigation that critically explores heteronormativity and gender identity. By questioning the notions of masculine and feminine, of man and woman, Butler proposes that gender is a social phenomenon and not a biological reality. Taking into consideration LGBTQ+ identities, as well as feminist theory, Butler asks thought-provoking questions about drag queens, phallogocentric language, power imbalances, and politically constructed bodies that prove gender is, essentially, make-believe (xxxii-xxxiii). Questions of gender only become more complicated when they intersect with sexual orientation.

While both heterosexual and lesbian women face discrimination, the latter are subjected to different oppresive practices due to their sexual orientation that require an intersectional approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality to mean the unique challenges facing women of colour, especially in terms of identity politics and violence.[5] She explains that "when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1242). When race and gender intersect, the threat of violence, oppression, and marginalization increases dramatically. Although intersectionality developed as a response to the experiences of Black women, it is now widely used to refer to the intersections of other marginal identities, such as sexual orientation and race or disability and sex (or a plethora of other combinations). This broader definition of intersectionality refers to the difficulties experienced by someone marginalized on more than one front.

[5] Crenshaw herself later expanded her definition of intersectionality to include other intersections such as sexual orientation, though she mentions gays and lesbians in passing even in 1993 (1242). She highlights the case of gay Black men and concludes that "Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations as well" in the sense that a group marginalized based on, say, race may have gay and straight members coming together, therein overcoming a different marginalization (1299).

Finally, we must keep in mind that the very definition of lesbian literature is complex. While Rafael M. Mérida Jiménez proposes that studies of Spanish Sapphic literature are greatly influenced by Anglo-Saxon and French models (11), lesbian literary criticism in Spain has been limited not only by misogyny and homophobia, which forced writers to codify their language and use subtexts (qtd. in Mérida Jiménez 11), but also by the ambiguous definition of lesbian literature (11). Marilyn R. Farwell posits that, "Instead of a recognizable genre, lesbian literary narrative is, in reality, a disputed form, dependent upon various interpretive strategies" ("When Is" 4).[6] Consider Farwell's criteria for a lesbian narrative:

> not necessarily a story by a lesbian about lesbians but rather a plot that affirms a place for lesbian subjectivity, that narrative space where both lesbian characters and other female characters can be active, desiring agents. This subjectivity is a way to describe the disruption that happens in the Western narrative … when female rather than male desire dominates the plot. ("The Pursuit" 157)

Farwell contrasts this plot to the traditionally male-dominated sphere that controls the passive female form ("The Pursuit" 158) and proves that the fear is for lesbians to "become active sexual subjects rather than passive objects" ("The Pursuit" 161). The common trait in most of the narratives Farwell explores is the representation of the lesbian subject as non-feminine, disruptive, and grotesque ("What Is" 16-17).[7] This disruption of the preconceived social order is key when looking at *Oculto Sendero*, which by Farwell's standards is without a doubt a lesbian narrative.

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[6] Farwell lists several narratives that have been, at one time, identified as lesbian. In *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, for example, the protagonist is implicitly homosexual, and the author did not publicly address her attraction to women. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well*, meanwhile, has a main character who explicitly declares herself a homosexual, and Hall herself was an *out* lesbian. Other works mentioned here predate "notions of sexual identity and … vaguely but provocatively [hint towards] lesbian content and authorship" (7).

[7] Farwell's study considers narratives from the last 25 years before her article was published (1996), but also evaluates the impact of 19th century works such as those of Ellis and von Krafft-Ebing.

3.3 Literature Review

While many studies on lesbian writing begin by referencing Virginia Woolf's famous line from *A Room of One's Own*, "Chloe liked Olivia for perhaps the first time in literature" (82), this brief investigation into lesbian desire was neither the first nor the last time love between women would be represented in the pages of celebrated novels or forgotten manuscripts. In fact, most countries including Spain have a history of same-sex literature that is finally starting to emerge from the shadows. Considering the societal rejection of homosexuality that pervaded not only the fields of literary academia but also of science, medicine, and psychology, then it comes as no surprise that lesbian narratives are rarely explicit, well-known, and/or thoroughly studied. In fact, there is a definite lack of active female relationships, sexual or platonic, in classic literature—as Woolf notes in *A Room of One's Own*, women are nearly always "shown in their relation to men" (82), and, contrary to male friendships, female friendships are seldom developed or show any emotional depth.[8] Taking into consideration Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum, Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego reflects on the difficulty of determining if a relationship between two women is friendship or indicative of lesbian desire, due in part to little data for the construction of a history of female sexuality (23). In addition to the ambiguity that Cornejo-Parriego explores in several 20th century female-authored novels, Ricardo Llamas and Fefa Vila propose that "la cultura gay y lesbiana no presentan en el Estado español la incidencia que se aprecia en otros países, lo cual hace difícil hablar de una literatura o de un cine lesbiano o gay (qtd. in Cornejo-Parriego 33). The 1940s saw the publication of two novels that prioritized female relations: in 1944, Carmen Laforet published her debut novel *Nada*, which quickly gained international

[8] Possibly inspired by Woolf, American cartoonist Alison Bechdel created the Bechdel (sometimes Bechdel-Wallace) Test to measure the representation of women in media creations. To pass this test, a work of fiction must include a) two female characters who b) talk to each other about c) something other than a man.

recognition, and in 1945, Rosa Chacel published *Memorias de Leticia Valle*.[9] While these two novels "se convierten en pioneras de la narrativa de amistad y deseo entre mujeres" (Cornejo-Parriego 43), lesbian writing in Spain did not really flourish until the Transition to Democracy in the 1970s.[10] However, in the same way that Fortún's *Oculto Sendero* was written in the 1940s but remained unpublished into the 21st century, more archival work would surely uncover forgotten narratives on same-sex desire among women.

Unlike Woolf's *Orlando* or Hall's *The Well*, both published in 1928 amidst widespread controversy and homophobic outcry, Fortún's *Oculto Sendero*, a lesbian *Bildungsroman* like the two British novels, did not appear until 2016, and has, therefore, not received the same critical attention. If for Hall, Woolf, and other European authors it was already challenging to publish their works with queer themes, more so for Fortún who lived under a Catholic dictatorship. In fact, Spain's political circumstances might explain why Fortún balked at publishing her manuscript. Though Fortún began her revolutionary children's book series in 1928, it was during her exile in Argentina in the 1940s that she wrote *Oculto Sendero*, a manuscript that only reached bookshelves 64 years after her death. Although in the last five years scholars have begun paying attention to the *Bildungsroman*, there is still much more scholarship on Fortún as the author of the groundbreaking *Celia* series than as the creator of a fascinating piece of lesbian literature. Since Fortún never publicly announced her sexual orientation, her lesbian identity is also missing from some of the research on her contributions to Spanish women's literature. Recent compilations and studies of epistolary exchanges between Fortún and Spanish novelist Carmen Laforet, and between Fortún and the Argentine intellectual Inés Field, however, give

[9] In 1909, Ángeles Vicente (1878-?) published *Zezé*, the first Spanish lesbian novel. For an extensive list of lesbian narratives in 1970s Spain, see Cornejo-Parriego's introduction, especially page 42.

[10] Ana Maria Moix (1947-2014), Spanish author and translator, wrote about lesbian love over the course of her career, which began in the late 1960s. Although she is not of the same era as Fortún, Moix celebrated her literary foremothers and penned journalistic pieces on Rosa Chacel, Viriginia Woolf, and other notable figures.

insight into the author's personal life and sexual orientation.[11] As social acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities continues to grow, we discover that more and more historical intellectual figures had secret same-sex relationships.

However, the majority of the scholarly articles on Fortún investigate the subversive nature of her *Celia* series and its impact in Spanish culture and society. Ana Puchau de Lecea's "Girl, Interrupted and Continued. Rethinking the Influence of Elena Fortún's *Celia*" looks at Fortún's proposed "alternative models of femininity … through the character Celia and the social context of the series" as well as her impact on posterior generations of women writers (137). Like several other scholars, María Elena Bravo Guerreira and Fiona Maharg-Bravo consider *Celia* as a grassroots attempt at feminism that spread through Spanish society in their article, "De niñas a mujeres: Elena Fortún como semilla de feminismo en la literatura infantil de la postguerra española."[12] Kathleen M. Vernon furthers the research on Fortún by remarking on the cinematic adaptations of *Celia* in "'Niña somebody': Bringing Elena Fortún's *Celia* to Spanish television," while María Jesús Fraga Fernández-Cuevas compares the young protagonist to don Quijote ("Don Quixote and Celia: The Desire to Live Other Lives").

In regards to *Oculto Sendero*, while Patricia Barrera Velasco briefly mentions the occasional presence of lesbian desire as part of her study on Spanish lesbian narratives of the 20th century (250-251), Eva Moreno-Lago's 2021 article "Signs and Literary Spaces for the Reconstruction of the Sapphic Circle of Madrid in the Works of Elena Fortún, Rosa Chacel and

[11] Letters between Fortún and Laforet are assembled in *De corazón y alma (1947-1952)*, edited in 2017 with prologues by both of Laforet's daughters, Silvia and Cristina. See also "Letters to Liberty. Intimacy, Subjectivities and Desires in Elena Fortún and Carmen Laforet Writers' Correspondence (1947-1952)" by Sara Martín Gutiérrez. *Sabes quién soy* and *Mujer doliente*, volumes one and two of *Cartas a Inés Field*, respectively, comprise correspondence between Fortún and Field published in 2020. Nuria Capdevilla-Argüelles, editor of *Oculto Sendero* and author of the introduction to the novel, edited the *Cartas* collection as well. Capdevilla-Argüelles is the leading Fortún scholar at this time and works with the publishing house Editorial Renacimiento.

[12] See also works by R. Lucas Molina-Angulo & Moises Selfa Sastre, María del Carmen Alfonso García, and Pilar Nieva de la Paz.

Victorina Durán" seems to be the only scholarly source that explores *Oculto Sendero* beyond a brief mention of title and author, excluding Nuria Capdevilla-Argüelles's introduction to the novel.[13] Moreno-Lago compares three autobiographical works that touch on lesbian desire—*Así es* by Victorina Durán (manuscript, c. 1970-1980), *Oculto Sendero*, and Rosa Chacel's *Acrópolis* (1984)—in order to develop a picture of 20th century Sapphic circles and other female gatherings in Spain.[14] The author begins by explaining why it is so difficult to recreate these feminine circles: "Uno de los impedimentos con los que se ha topado el feminismo para construir la historia de las mujeres han sido las fuentes, ignoradas, desechadas y/o minusvaloradas por la mirada androcéntrica" (213). Many homosexual authors, having internalized this androcentric perspective, feared the repercussions of publishing lesbian literature. In fact, the *Oculto Sendero* manuscript was nearly destroyed at Fortún's request, and the letters from Durán's lover are long gone (213-214). Overall, the author highlights the clandestine, silent nature of feminine encounters and the importance of their spaces within an "investigación geográfica-literaria" (216). According to Moreno-Lago, this investigation would uncover the codified language and symbols that fellow female writers would understand, but that those without the necessary context would not notice or censor (216-217). This critic briefly traces the history of Spanish lesbianism in the early 20th century, defining key concepts like the pathologization of homosexuality and showcasing the emergence of lesbian relationships beyond literary circles (218). The first Sapphic space or "geocódigo" is the realm of the clandestine (219); Paris is another for Durán (222), and all three works describe or imply that cafés are a safe space, a refuge with an "aura académica e intelectual" (225). Finally, Moreno-Lago dives into the

[13] Marisol Dorao (1930-2017) wrote the introduction to *Celia en la revolución* (1987) and explored Fortún's biography in *Los mil sueños de Elena Fortún* (1999), neither of which addressed the author's homosexuality (Capdevilla-Arguelles 16).

[14] The three authors in this study were actually good friends (Moreno-Lago 215).

creation of new spaces, like the *Lyceum Club*, as environments where female intellectuals and artists could flourish, free from male criticism and expectations (227).

Other studies on Fortún explore her participation in Spanish cultural movements. Elvira María Melián Pérez studies Fortún's testimonials about her experience in these early feminist organizations in "Elena Fortún y el grupo de alumnas de biblioteconomía de la Residencia de Señoritas (1930-1936)," while Shirley Mangini comments on the impact of the *Lyceum Club* on Fortún's career and social life. Finally, a book titled *Elena Fortún, periodista* (2013) by Fraga Fernandez-Cuevas considers *Celia* alongside Fortún's journalistic pieces. Although *Celia* is evidently celebrated and widely studied, less has been written on Fortún's adult compositions, least of all *Oculto Sendero*.

4. Historical Context: Spain in the 20th Century

The 20th century saw radical changes in governments across Europe. In fact, the emergence of a modern woman during the First World War impacted European perception of gender roles and bolstered emancipation movements across the continent. Flappers changed views on femininity in the Western world during the Roaring Twenties, or *los años felices* in Spain. These women not only embodied political liberalism and professional engagement but also modernity, both in their manner of dress and their personal grooming (Mangini 75). After the Second World War (1939-1945), however, several countries returned to their conception of the woman as belonging in the home. Nonetheless, the level of education increased among women while their illiteracy rate dropped, along with birth rates. This, along with the new "masculine" appearance and style the modern woman adopted, threatened the traditional nuclear family (Mangini 74-76). Spain was no stranger to these fluctuating concepts of womanhood, or to ideologically diverse governing powers. Following centuries of monarchy, Miguel Primo de

Rivera's erratic right-wing dictatorship (1923-1930) and the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, which led to King Alfonso XIII's exile, highlighted the country's continued political, socio-economical, and ideological polarization.[15] The Republic worked to improve conditions for working class citizens, the queer community, Spain's autonomous regions, and women—in other words, it embarked on a project to modernize the country through equal rights and secular education. Women obtained the right to vote and female cultural institutions flourished in this new socio-political climate. The *Residencia de Señoritas*, for example, encouraged women to pursue university instruction, while the *Lyceum Club* defended women's rights to education and cultural activities.[16] According to Mangini, María de Maetzu (1882-1948) founded the *Lyceum Club* (1926), directed the *Residencia*, and helped found the *Asociación Universitaria Femenina* (1920); she continued creating, directing, and participating in organisms that supported women's education until her disappearance in 1936, the year the Civil War began (80-91).[17] Thanks to Maetzu, Spanish women found encouragement in a thriving academic community that saw female scholars choosing careers that were previously for men only, such as pharmacy studies, which became popular among *Residencia* women (82).[18] Over the years, the *Residencia* hosted academic and literary discussions that even saw male authors like Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) in their midst (84), while the *Lyceum Club* played a fundamental role

[15] The First Republic lasted only from 1873 to 1874 and was quickly replaced by King Alfonso XII, the predecessor to Alfonso XIII.

[16] The Madrid *Lyceum Club*, for example, comprised six sections: "social, de música, de artes plásticos e industriales, de literatura, de ciencias e internacional" (Gómez Blesa 206). The social category included courses by female lawyers to discuss female suffrage, women's rights, and women's legal standpoint in society (206-207).

[17] During her studies in philosophy, Maetzu forged a friendship with José Castillejo, secretary of the *Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios e Investigaciones Científicos*. In 1915, the *Junta* founded the *Residencia de señoritas*, and Castillejo nominated Maetzu as director (Mangini 81).

[18] Other prominent female figures involved in these organizations were Rafaela Ortega, who worked as director when the *Residencia* split in two due to its increasing numbers, and Isabel Oyarzábal, a writer and actor who served as Spain's first female ambassador (Mangini 83).

in female writers' and businesswomen's careers (90). These organizations contributed to the overall liberal atmosphere of early 20th century Spain.

This same liberal society not only saw certain bourgeois women actively participating in the traditional male spheres of academia, science, and literature, but also created a more positive environment for the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, the aforementioned intellectual organizations, and the *Lyceum Club* especially, were (relatively) safe spaces for the "modern" women who shied away from heterosexual marriage (Mangini 79). However, openly admitting to lesbian or bisexual desire was not accepted—homosexual women not only threatened the nuclear family but also supposedly turned men gay by usurping traditional gender roles (Mangini 100-101). Gema Pérez-Sánchez highlights the "parallel ebbs and flows between open public discussion and severe censorship of all expressions of sexual desire, but particularly of same-sex sexual practices" that accompanied Spain's rapid-changing governing powers in the 1900s ("Spanish Literature" 438). Yet the Second Republic leaned more towards openness, especially in contrast to the severe repression and criminalization of homosexuality during the 1939-1975 dictatorship and beyond. This posterior suppression sought to erase and oversimplify LGBTQ+ contributions to Spanish literary history ("Spanish Literature" 442). Nevertheless, female writers such as Concha Méndez (1898-1986) and María Teresa León (1903-1988), and lesbian authors such as Elena Fortún, found their place in communities like the *Lyceum Club* (Mangini 79).[19] Homosexual intellectual men also flourished during the Republic; in fact, "there was a recognizable and fairly open gay male cultural milieu that produced … writings of high literary quality" (Pérez-Sánchez, "Spanish Literature" 439). Several writers of the famous Generation of

[19] Maria Teresa León's case is one that parallels that of the *Oculto Sendero* protagonist; both were overshadowed by their artistic and intellectual husbands. León's work has been pushed aside in favour of her husband Rafael Alberti's—as a celebrated member of the Generation of '27 and an award-winning poet, Alberti's success dwarfed León's.

‘27 were indeed homosexual: Vicente Aleixandre (1898-1984), Luis Cernuda (1902-1963), Emilio Prados (1899-1962), and García Lorca (Pérez-Sánchez, “Spanish Literature” 443-444). Even the heterosexual Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) introduced “several queer characters in his works” including a bisexual marquis; he also satirized and denigrated his homophobic characters (Pérez-Sánchez, “Spanish Literature” 444).

Unfortunately, the result of the Civil War led to the violent persecution of this up-and-coming community. After a three-year armed conflict between opposing ideological parties—on the one hand, the progressive Republic, and on the other, the military fascism of Francisco Franco (1892-1975)—what began with a coup d’état became a 36-year oppressive dictatorship under the self-proclaimed Caudillo of Spain. This political upheaval was backed by powerful allies, namely the Church, the monarchy, Italy, Germany, and economic elites such as landowners. Any ideological opposition was quickly repressed. Political prisoners found themselves in work camps, building monuments to honour Franco, and dying in his service.[20] Adam Hochschild clarifies that while many dissidents simply went “missing,” the death toll of Francoism is estimated to exceed 20,000, not counting the 200,000 executed during the war and the countless civilians who perished as Franco bombed Spanish cities.[21] Of these, many were intellectuals; in fact, García Lorca is considered the earliest and most famous victim of Francoism, having vanished August 18, 1936, exactly a month after the initial coup. By the time the war ended, the usurpers had revoked most of the Republic’s advances in social modernity. Furthermore, Franco’s Nationalists embodied what they considered to be Christian values and

[20] The *Valle de los Caídos*, an enormous monument near Madrid that housed Franco’s body from his death in 1975 to his controversial exhumation in 2010, is a prime example of Nationalist arquitecture constructed by Republican prisoners.

[21] Many obstacles prevent historians from declaring an accurate number of deaths. David Casado-Neira explains that several factors, including inaccuracy of information, soil acidity, and human activity, make finding human remains difficult (47). He adds that, in addition to mass graves, many execution and torture sites were unmarked and have been erased by time and shame (49).

started building a nation according to misogynistic and homophobic ideals. This patriarchal regime not only enforced traditional gender roles but reduced women's purpose to childbirth and maintaining the home. Spain suffered greatly in the early years of the dictatorship: exiles, executions, ration stamps, censorship, and the outlawing of manifestations and strikes.[22] The Francoist cultural and economic autarchy rejected foreign influences as contaminated, further isolating the nation.[23] Spain's autonomous regions were all but erased and only Castilian could be spoken in the nation.[24]

And what about the queer community during all these human rights abuses? To begin, the 1933 *Ley de vagos y maleantes*, which during the Republic detailed the treatment of vagabonds, pimps, and other unsavoury characters, was modified by the Caudillo to include penalties for homosexuality. According to Pablo Alcántara, approximately 5,000 homosexuals and transsexuals were detained by the regime; this number is once again uncertain because many died before arriving at the prisons, or their crimes were registered as something else, such as prostitution. Homosexuals were treated as mentally ill and dangerous individuals who needed up to four years in prison, often submitting to electroshock, to cure this social "aberration." Many "effeminate" men were simply executed in secret to mask the shame of having homosexuals in a pure, Catholic, Francoist nation—this was perhaps a driving factor in García Lorca's death. Andrea Weiss states that others were sent to jail or to asylums, or "campos de corrección," to cure their "perverse" desires (16). Homosexuality and transsexuality, and gender nonconformity in general, did not fit the concept of a Catholic nation the dictator was so intent on creating. In

[22] With the inevitable state censorship in mind, many authors self-censored their work. This is likely the case for *Oculto Sendero*, since Fortún never tried to have it published and even wanted to destroy it (Moreno-Lago 213).
[23] It is important to note that Franco's mutually beneficial relationship with Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) during the Second World War resulted in tension between Spain and the Western World—countries that could have helped Spain rebuild in the 1940s refused due to the peninsula's fascist ties. Franco also established relations with Latin American dictatorships during his time in power.
[24] Spain comprises several unique regions with their own languages, including: Castilian Spanish, spoken in most of the country; Catalan, spoken in Catalonia; Basque, spoken in the Basque Country; and Galician, spoken in Galicia.

addition, alternate notions of gender identity and roles disrupted Franco's obsession with the nuclear family: one man (in charge), one woman (bearing children), and their progeny. Undoubtedly, this nuclear family served as an allegory for his nation. While the father led the household, the Caudillo led Spain—and both enforced traditional domestic roles for women.

In spite of the violence of the dictatorship, lesbians were safer and suffered less persecution due to the historical invisibility of lesbianism. By excluding the possibility of lesbian sexual relationships, Franco's regime unwittingly allowed an important segment of the LGBTQ+ community to continue unopposed, albeit clandestinely.[25] According to Marta Medina, since lesbians technically did not exist, they were able to meet up within lesbian circles and see each other without risking outright persecution. Transsexuals, meanwhile, were much more visible and suffered violence, were forced into prostitution, and faced jail time (Medina). For all their suffering, transsexuals remain, according to Pérez-Sánchez, one of the most forgotten minorities in Spain ("Franco's Spain" 943).

Fast-forwarding to 1970, a new law replaced the *Ley de vagos y maleantes*: the *Ley de peligrosidad y rehabilitación social*, which labelled homosexuality and prostitution equal crimes and proposed re-education for those afflicted. The law explained that many groups, including "Los que realicen actos de homosexualidad," drug traffickers, and alcoholics, "Serán declarados en estado peligroso, y se les aplicarán las correspondientes medidas de seguridad y rehabilitación" ("Ley 16/1970"). During the *Transición*, when the Amnesty Law for political prisoners was approved (1977), it was still a crime to be gay, and while Republican prisoners

[25] Francoist Spain is certainly not the only historical period during which homosexuals faced persecution; in Nazi Germany, for example, those publicly out as gay where branded with an inverted pink triangle. According to Wolfgang Röll, many were sent to prisons or concentration camps, where they were "among the lowest of the groups in the camp hierarchy" (16). Lesbians, meanwhile, often escaped undetected because the regime could not imagine same-sex desire between women, especially given that they codified their experiences to avoid punishment. Franco and Hitler were not alone in their phallocentric beliefs: across history, lesbians have largely been ignored because their sexual activity did not conform to heterosexual ideals. Simonis calls lesbianism "el pecado que no se podía nombrar, por lo tanto inexistente" (111).

were finally released, homosexuals remained incarcerated and continued to be tortured and raped (Medina; Weiss 16). In 1977, Barcelona held its first Pride Parade, which included, as the iconic pictures of the *Transición* reflect, a group of transsexuals bravely walking the streets (see *Fig. 1*), and, finally, two years later, homosexuality was decriminalized.[26] In the 80s, several LGBTQ+ groups and publications were formed, and some like the *Colectivo LGTB+ de Madrid* (COGAM) still exist today. Spain did not escape the 80s AIDS crisis, however, and although gay neighbourhoods, such as the famous Chueca in Madrid, began to appear in the 90s, queer Spaniards still suffer marginalization. On July 2, 2005, during the presidency of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*), both same-sex marriage and adoption by gay couples were legalized in Spain.[27] This law saw Spain move to the forefront in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, becoming the third nation to approve same-sex marriage. In 2021, only 29 countries have approved this same law. However, discrimination has not completely disappeared in Spain and the queer community continues to fight for increasing acceptance.

Fig. 1

5. AUTHOR: ELENA FORTÚN (1886-1952)

Born in Madrid, María de la Encarnación Gertrudis Jacoba Aragoneses y de Urquijo, generally known as Elena Fortún, gained fame in the late 1920s for her children's books. Her writing was greatly influenced by her family. After marrying her cousin Eusebio Gorbea, she had

[26] Photo source: www.visitgaybarcelona.com

[27] On July 20, 2005, Canada became the fourth country to legalize same-sex marriage on a federal scale (after the Netherlands in 2001, Belgium in 2003, and Spain in 2005).

two sons, one of whom died in 1920 at the age of ten (Puchau de Lecea 139).[28] She spiralled into depression but emerged again to create her series, which frequently reflected her suffering and the condition of women and girls in Spain in the pre-war period. Elena Fortún adopted her pen name for her books about Celia, "a girl who encouraged children to wonder why grown-ups have to be right even in the most illogical of circumstances" (Puchau de Lecea 137).[29] Starting with *Celia, lo que dice*, the titular protagonist has adventures, some small and some large, ranging from matrimony (*Celia se casa*) to world travels (*Celia, institutriz en América*) to political upheaval (*Celia en la revolución*).[30] According to Bravo Guerreira and Maharg-Bravo, her books "abogan por la liberación de la mujer y cuestionan el orden patriarcal, aunque lo hagan de una manera sutil que pasó desapercibida a los guardianes de este orden" (201). Fortún's stories, in addition to navigating a patriarchal society through a growing girl's perspective (who eventually falls into her role as a wife and mother), sometimes touch on anticlerical and anti-military themes (Moix 416-417). On January 4, 1993, this rebellious little girl hit the television screens with permission from Fortún's daughter-in-law, who had held onto some of the author's unpublished works after her death (Capdevilla-Argüelles 12-13), and the reach of *Celia* increased exponentially. According to Jaime Cedillo, Fortún wrote to Laforet to inform her when the books were outlawed in Spain; though her societal criticism had at first been overlooked by censorship boards, her work was eventually banned, and facing the Civil War, she exiled herself to Argentina where her husband was already living, and where she wrote the forerunner to *Oculto*

[28] Her other son died by suicide in the mid-1950s, six years after his father's suicide in 1948—both faced the same "desequilibrio mental" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 13). For more about Eusebio's suicide's effect on Fortún's writing, see the introduction to *Mila y Piolín* (2015), also a collection of children's stories by Fortún.

[29] In fact, the name Elena Fortún was created by Eusebio for his book *Los mil años de Elena Fortún*, similar in nature to Woolf's *Orlando* in that the protagonist cross-dresses and eventually transitions from woman to man (Capdevilla-Argüelles 13). Encarnación chose to use this as her pen name.

[30] While the second edition of *Celia en la revolución* (2020) is easily available through its publisher, Editorial Renacimiento, the original 1987 edition has all but vanished, according to Andrés Trapiello's introduction. (https://www.editorialrenacimiento.com/biblioteca-elena-fortun/2436-celia-en-la-revolucion.html).

Sendero in the mid-40s. In 1948, she travelled to Spain to process her husband's amnesty, but while she was away, Eusebio ended his life, soon followed by their son. Fortún died of a pulmonary illness in 1952 in Madrid at the age of 66 (Cedillo).

Finally, in 2016, Editorial Renacimiento published *Oculto Sendero*, adding this posthumous lesbian novel to its growing Fortún library. Other works in the collection include letters between Field and Fortún, the *Celia* series, and an ensemble of short stories and journalistic pieces. In a 2019 Facebook Live event, I asked editor Nuria Capdevilla-Argüelles why she chose 2016 for the release of *Oculto Sendero*. Her response was that there was now a framework for the manuscript, and its publication contributed to the corpus of lesbian Spanish literature for which there was an important public response. This study represents only the beginning of my work on Fortún's impact on the Spanish literary tradition.

The early 20th century was rife with writers and publications that would later see immeasurable posterity. The Generation of '98 and the Generation of '27, for example, created poetry and prose that changed the Spanish literary tradition.[31] Writers in this era often formed academic circles where they discussed literature and cultural phenomena; as mentioned, for female intellectuals, communities such as the *Lyceum Club* were invaluable both as networks and safe spaces. Mercedes Gómez Blesa describes the club as a "lugar que se convirtió en un espacio femenino propio, donde hallaron salida las inquietudes intelectuales y las necesidades formativas de muchas mujeres que todavía no contaban en casa con una «habitación propia»" (204-205). It

[31] The Generation of '98 was founded by Pío Baroja, José Martínez Ruiz, and Ramiro de Maetzu, and included Miguel de Unamuno, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Antonio Machado, and other notable members. The Generation of '27, most known for Federico García Lorca, also included Luis Cernuda, Vicente Aleixandre, and Rafael Alberti, among others. While the very idea of dividing writers into Generations is debated even amongst members, renewed efforts to include women authors in these lists mean a severe restructuring of the Spanish literary canon (García). Fernando García's article explores these efforts, such as the contemporary project "*Caravana de las escritoras del 98*, ideada para reivindicar en sus poblaciones de origen a casi una decena de autoras que, a juicio de los organizadores, deberían figurar en los anales de la literatura en pie de igualdad con Machado, Azorín, Baroja o Valle Inclán." See also the 2015 documentary *Las sinsombrero* for more on the female writers (ex. Concha Méndez, Rosa Chacel, María Teresa León, and Luisa Carnés) who belong with the male authors of the '27.

was not only an escape from the domestic sphere but also a place to grow as individuals. Women of the *Lyceum Club* benefited from the association, but some men *and* women still criticized these liberated individuals, calling them criminals, "enemigas de la familia cristiana," and deserters of the hearth (209). Although there were also some veiled accusations of lesbianism surrounding the *Lyceum Club* in the 1920s (Capdevilla-Argüelles 16), it was an era during which one did not talk about sexual inversion outright—"Se observa y se rumorea sobre ella" (62). Fortún was not the only lesbian to enjoy the independent female space and relative safety of the *Lyceum Club:* lesbian activist Victorina Durán, for example, founded the club alongside María de Maetzu.

For Capdevilla-Argüelles, the modern woman made her debut in the 1920s, but this modernity "fue mucho más accesible a mujeres diez años más jóvenes que [Fortún]," especially in terms of escaping the domestic sphere (45). Fortún is the last generation caught in between two centuries: "llega a la modernidad y a la autoría tarde en la vida y también llega tarde al conocimiento de la propia sexualidad" (62). Capdevilla-Argüelles explains that the writer lived her life half out of the metaphorical closet, "dejando tras ella indicios" that alluded to her homosexuality (8). *Oculto Sendero* is one of them, but so are her letters and other unpublished manuscripts. Until recently, however, her sexual orientation did not appear at the forefront of academic studies concerning this author; even Martín Gaite, through all her private research on Fortún and her published writings on women's literature, never mentions the author's Sapphic tendencies, not even in her essay on "la chica rara" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 14). Nor does she highlight the obvious relationship between Fortún and Carmen Laforet, who created perhaps the first "chica rara" in *Nada* (15). In spite of their difference in age, Fortún and Laforet communicated frequently, with the former encouraging the latter in her career as an author and

cautioning her to avoid marriage and maternity, which would impede her writing (16).[32] This connection was one of solidarity, love, and mentorship. Fortún also had a (very different) relationship with Matilde Ras (1881-1969); letters between the two were discreet yet undoubtedly homoerotic (Capdevilla-Argüelles 61).[33] In fact, Ras encouraged Fortún to write what ultimately became *Oculto Sendero*, although Ras never got to see the manuscript (61). Nearer the end of her life, Fortún established a strong emotional connection with Inés Field; this relationship was most likely chaste, as was common with early 20th century lesbians who were devoutly religious like Field (Capdevilla-Argüelles 19). A few months before her death, Fortún asked Field to destroy some manuscripts—Field did not, perhaps because, as Capdevilla-Argüelles suspects, the demand was in the margin of a letter (18). Whatever the reason, Field saved the author's work, therein preserving invaluable lesbian texts from the early 1900s.

6. Analysis: *Oculto Sendero* as a Lesbian *Bildungsroman*

This analysis is divided in three parts, the first of which summarizes the novel. Then, I will examine how Fortún revisits traditional gender roles and creates a new lesbian identity, highlighting the importance of independent spaces.

6.1 Summary of Novel

The novel follows María Luisa Arroyo from childhood to her late thirties, with chapters divided amongst three sections that correspond with the protagonist's age ("Primavera," "Verano," "Otoño"). From the first pages of the novel, María Luisa rejects traditionally feminine clothing, hobbies, and expectations—which creates tension in the relationship with her conservative mother.[34] This traditional woman frowns upon disobedience and holds different

[32] Laforet eventually had five children and stopped writing.
[33] See their correspondence in *El camino es nuestro* (2014).
[34] Newton highlights that *The Well*'s protagonist is also alienated from her mother "as the New Woman often was from her own mother" and "as the lesbian was, increasingly, from heterosexual women" (570).

standards for María Luisa and her brothers. The family's patriarch, meanwhile, is not overly involved in his daughter's upbringing but keeps the family together and engages in business until his death. When an incident in school forces the family to turn to private tutoring for their daughter, our protagonist discovers her artistic talents which eventually lead her to Jorge Medina. Once her supportive art teacher and later her controlling husband, Jorge, like any Spanish man at the time, insists on regular sexual intercourse with his wife and demands unending menial labour. Eventually, María Luisa becomes pregnant, and struggles to connect with her newborn María José. She grows to love the girl who, sadly, falls ill and dies at age 12. After her death, María Luisa and Jorge suffer a disconnect. The only activity that makes María Luisa feel is art, and as her artistic reputation increases, Jorge, "homófobo y a veces anti-moderno en lo referente a la mujer" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 52), retreats even further into his patriarchal worldview. Although they eventually divorce, the couple spends many unhappy decades together that make up the majority of the "Verano" and "Otoño" sections.

Every time the couple moves between cities and the countryside, María Luisa tries to find new female acquaintances with whom to spend time. Often, she is drawn to what Jorge calls "dishonourable" women, and he gaslights her into staying away from them. This makes it challenging for her to find a community of people like her; it is not until later in life that a doctor informs María Luisa that her inversion is not uncommon in the intellectual/artistic community. It is in this social stratum that María Luisa finds a string of female lovers with whom sexual activity does not feel repulsive as it does with Jorge. She also falls in love with a few different women artists, but never finds one willing to commit to her wholeheartedly. She frequently suffers during these clandestine relationships. The novel ends with María Luisa still heartbroken but free to be her authentic self; much of her life was a mistake, but she now knows who she is

and embarks on a melancholy voyage that will surely continue to impact her identity. While María Luisa's existence is characterized by her pain, her journey towards escaping compulsory heterosexuality and building a life she can tolerate in an independent space demonstrate the importance of being free to grow into one's identity.

6.2 Revisiting Traditional Gender Roles

Historically, at least in most Western nations, a woman's life was to be dedicated to marriage and motherhood. As a girl, her education and training were centered on preparing her for being the perfect wife and mother, running the home from the shadows while the husband brought home enough money to have a comfortable lifestyle, or at least to maintain appearances. In Spain, strictly enforced gender roles ensured that women followed this assigned path or else were branded as weird girls, lesbians, home wreckers, and other such insults. *Oculto Sendero* follows a child as she navigates these roles and finds ways around them. For this reason, María Luisa's childhood is full of conflict—with her family, with other girls at school, and especially with society's expectations for women. The protagonist often finds herself alone because she is an unusual girl; she says, "¡Ya no tenía amigas!" (Fortún 206) and "¡Ya no tenía a nadie, a nadie, a nadie!" (211). Capdevilla-Argüelles mentions a few of the reasons the protagonist is weird and alone: "por «chicazo» e «istruida», por ser mala con la aguja y aficionada a los «juegos de corer»" (38). These and other traits incite her classmates to keep their distance. But the protagonist's interest in other kids is limited at best; her peers make fun of her anyways (Fortún 210), and they only talk about love and relationships, much to María Luisa's discontent. Indeed, talks of sex give her "disgusto y malestar" (140), prostitution horrifies her (213) and, when she walks in on her parents one night, she thinks, "Toda la verguenza que puede caber en una criatura humana subía a mi garganta para ahogarme…" (146). While shock seems like a normal

response to seeing one's parents engaging in sexual acts, combined with her other instances of repulsion towards heterosexuality, it is clear that María Luisa has a much stronger distaste for men and their reproductive organs than most children would.

In fact, the whole idea of marriage is something the protagonist rejects: "todo eso de casorios [la] tenía sin cuidado" (Fortún 139). Often she announces: "Yo no me casaré nunca" (177). This is likely due in part to her peers' and her mother's insistence that "Para la mujer no hay más camino que el matrimonio" (220), a job that entails managing the husband's money, sewing his clothes, entertaining him by playing piano, and making him happy (221). Unsurprisingly, this does not enchant María Luisa—why would she want to dedicate her life to a man's desires?—and she has not even realized she is a lesbian yet. As she gets older, and starts experiencing unwanted attention from older men, her aversion to marriage becomes more severe. While her mother would love to marry María Luisa off to an older, well-to-do man named Antonio, the protagonist is undeterred: "Antes de casarme con Antonio prefería morir… ¡Sí, morir!" (273). But like Fortún, the protagonist ends up (unhappily) married to a man.

In addition to rejecting the institution of heterosexual marriage, María Luisa embodies traits of the modern woman even as a young girl, when she shied away from traditionally feminine garments. In the first pages of the novel, she feels the same "anxiety and discomfort" that Hall's protagonist does when wearing "conventionally 'feminine' clothing" (Taylor 293).[35] Both hate wearing dresses and love masculine or androgynous costumes. As a child, María Luisa does not have much freedom in terms of clothing, because "Con idéntica recurrencia se pone freno inmediato a cualquier expresión de individualidad que ella pueda manifestar" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 43). The first chapter, "El vestido," introduces the protagonist as she rejects the new

[35] *The Well*'s main character, Stephen Gordon, "experiences a great deal more self-confidence and self-ease once she can re-gender her clothing and appearance," leaving behind the girlish dresses of her childhood (Taylor 293).

dress her family has purchased for her. The first person narrator describes this disappointing garment as being met with "angustia" and tears (Fortún 73). Later, when asked what she will do as an adult, the protagonist responds: "Vestirme de hombre y montar a caballo" (115). Only her aunt Manuelita supports her gender nonconforming clothing choices—her mother is upset on multiple occasions when María Luisa voices her desire to be more masculine. In fact, Manuelita brings the protagonist a Dutch boy costume for Carnaval which María Luisa dons with great joy. Because of her masculine outfit, "¡Todos creían que [ella] era un niño! Esto [la] entusiasmaba" (169). A few pages later, María Luisa is again *encantada* to be wearing mourning clothes, which give her "un aire … un poco andrógino" (189). Over the course of the *Bildungsroman*, María Luisa's love of androgynous clothing only grows as she leaves the home her mother controls. Once she is an adult, María Luisa has her clothes custom-made by the same tailor as her husband (Fortún 378). While Fermina, a lesbian acquaintance, immediately recognizes María Luisa's clothing as a mark of homosexuality and identifies her as "una amiga más" when they first meet (378), the protagonist

> tardará en asociar su rechazo a la ropa femenina y la inseguridad que le produce con otras facetas de su identidad que debiera haber considerado síntomas de esa patología que según la medicina es su inversión: el temperamento artístico, el desvarío y tentaciones de suicidio que le causa el coito, la poca destreza en la administración del hogar … De su primera juventud rescata la narradora el recuerdo de la extrañeza que siempre produjo en los hombreas, debido a su poca femenidad. (Capdevilla-Argüelles 51-52)

Indeed, some of the more stereotypical characteristics of "butch" or androgynous lesbians prove accurate when it comes to María Luisa's appearance.

If her clothing preferences are not enough to indicate her disregard for gender norms, consider the extent to which she feels personally attacked by homophobic remarks her family makes towards strangers. In the second chapter, her parents are critical of a wealthy lesbian couple in a restaurant (82).[36] Even if she is years from discovering her same-sex attraction, María Luisa already has an unusual fascination with gender non-conforming adults and does not understand why her family condemns them for how they dress and act. Her parents react to gender nonconformity as if it were a sin. In her analysis of *Nightwood* (1927) by Djuna Barnes, Angie Simonis explains that the true *pecado* is indeed "la transgresión de la diferencia sexual" (124). And yet, María Luisa is captivated by that couple and by her neighbours in chapter four, aptly named "Las mujeres malas" (Fortún 99). The protagonist often goes onto her balcony, which is prohibited by her mother because the neighbours are *mujeres malas*. Of course, la Señora Arroyo never explains why the women are so awful and even *desgraciadas,* leaving María Luisa to imagine that they fight and yell (99-100). This misunderstanding eventually causes a confrontation between the family and their servant, Casiana, whom María Luisa accuses of being *mala* like the neighbours (based on her own definition) (103). Casiana takes this to heart, threatening to kill herself (104), and prompts "largas explicaciones que tuvieron la virtud de despertar en [María Luisa] una inquieta curiosidad por las *mujeres malas*" (107, original emphasis). These explanations, given because the child does not understand "lo que son [las vecinas]" (106) has the opposite effect: instead of instilling homophobia in the young girl, the mother unwittingly encourages María Luisa to reflect on the *mujeres malas* and perhaps see herself in them in a sort of gentle awakening to her own homosexuality. This is but one of the

[36] Their criticism of the couple recalls Freud's pathologization of "la mujer que no se plegaba a la norma" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 22).

ways in which Fortún rejects the heteropatriarchy through María Luisa.[37] These interactions with her parents impact how she subconsciously realizes what parts of her identity must remain private, and which would be publicly criticised.

Moreover, María Luisa develops feelings, however fleeting, for some of the older girls in her life. From her crush on her cousin Dulce Nombre ("mis ojos bebían su belleza perfecta" [Fortún 128]) to her admiration for women she sees in passing ("¡Qué guapísimas me parecieron!" [145]), María Luisa's love of women shines through her repressed childhood. While nobody explicitly flags María Luisa's homoerotic feelings at this stage in her life, Dulce Nombre tells María Luisa: "Tu [sic] eres una niña muy rara…" (135). While her cousin likely cannot pinpoint what about María Luisa is so weird, she identifies her as "un tipo de mujer ajeno a los esquemas convencionales" (Martín Gaite 111). As María Luisa ages, the reader realizes that the protagonist of *Oculto Sendero*, like Martín Gaite's weird girl, "pone en cuestión la «normalidad» de la conducta amorosa y doméstica que la sociedad mandaba acatar" (111). Who or what is normal? Who decides what will fall under that category? What happens to those who digress from the norm?

Fortún's novel demands of its readership reflection on the heteropatriarchal gender roles that dictate society's perception of women, especially tying into notions of marriage and motherhood. One of María Luisa's tutors tries to explain, for example, the marginalization of unmarried women: "no sabe usted lo amarga que es la vida de la mujer soltera… Es el tropiezo de todo el mundo… todos se ríen de ella…" (Fortún 221).[38] Indeed, once a woman reaches a

[37] Beatriz Suárez Briones defines the patriarchy as "un sistema cultural, político y económico que produce sujetos con género sobre un eje de asimetrías en derechos, posibilidades, libertades" (1-2) in which man has power over woman. The addition of the prefix *hetero* emphasizes the patriarchy's fixation on heterosexual traditions and institutions, such as marriage between one man and one woman.

[38] While Spanish women did not work outside the home in this era, I want to highlight that this *solterona* would not be free of judgement if she could dedicate herself to a career either; Catharine A. MacKinnon notes that "the woman

certain age, her unmarried status begins to arouse suspicion, and she becomes a sort of pariah, especially if she is frequently seen with another unmarried woman. A few of the lesbians in the second half of the novel, like Julieta, a family friend of María Luisa's, marry men to avoid ostracism and benefit from the heteropatriarchy. Rich states that "Women have married because it was necessary … in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women because coming out of 'abnormal' childhoods they wanted to feel 'normal'" (196). To comply with gender norms and erase their so-called queerness from the public eye, both María Luisa and Fortún learn to hide their homosexuality by internalizing society's homophobia as early as during their childhood. For the protagonist, at least, this continues well into her married life.

Gender expectations for married women are clearly established in the novel, often told through older female characters. As the driving force behind a conservative family in a society that offered limited paths to women, María Luisa's own mother constantly upholds female subjugation as the natural order, claiming women's lives are "un sacrificio constante" (Fortún 349). In consequence, our protagonist only voices her homosexuality aloud in the days before her wedding, when it is too late to change anything: "Pues… que a mí no me gustan los hombres…" (301). Admitting this to her aunt Manuela, María Luisa takes a crucial step in realizing her true identity—but on any level other than personal, this realization has no effect. The day of her wedding to Jorge, Antonio makes a crude remark about sleeping very little that night. María Luisa reacts poorly to this comment: "No era vergüenza sino horror lo que me producían las alusiones a algo misterioso y terrible en lo que no quería pensar…" (300). Still, she has no idea what intercourse is, but knows it is something she will not enjoy. Fortún presents "el matrimonio como una institución esclavizadora que legitima la venta del cuerpo de la mujer al hombre"

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who too decisively resists sexual overtures in the workplace is accused of being 'dried-up' and sexless, or lesbian" (qtd. in Rich 186). Indeed, the only woman who avoids criticism is the one who complies with gender norms.

(Capdevilla-Argüelles 39). Recalling Gough's sixth characteristic of male power ("to use [women] as objects in male transactions" [qtd. in Rich 184]), while there is no exchange of money, María Luisa goes from belonging to her family to being Jorge's possession.[39] Indeed, as of her wedding night, María Luisa is now expected to perform sexually to please her husband, but her first experience is so traumatic that she contemplates suicide the next morning: "Al día siguiente de la boda me desperté cansada y dolorida … El más absoluto desencantado había vaciado mi alma y mi pensamiento. Me asomé al balcón que daba sobre un patio y miré al fondo… ¡Si me dejaría caer! Era tercer piso y me mataría… ¡Todo acabado! ¡Qué bien! Ya ni marido, ni casa, ni hijos…" (Fortún 302). Luckily, Jorge startles her out of this depressing fantasy and our protagonist drudges onward. Over the course of the next few months, María Luisa reflects on "esa vida de la recién casada … en la que la joven esposa se presta dócilmente a satisfacer los apetitos reprimidos o mal saciados del hombre en plena virilidad…" (302), wondering if this is the case for all women. She begins to make excuses to avoid sex, claiming she has a headache, or is too tired, or has to wake up early (326). Her "obligación de mujer casada" is "intolerable" for her (326), partially due to her phallophobia. Nonetheless, María Luisa continues to have intercourse with her husband, as is her duty. Sexual activity may be just one of the aspects of womanhood she is forced to endure for the sake of normalcy, but it is certainly Fortún's most obvious rejection of heterosexuality. She describes María Luisa's aversion to male genitalia as horror, *espanto*, and "repugnante" (326). With the doctor, the protagonist calls it "horror al macho" (432), and with Julieta, she identifies heterosexual sex as "un acto contra naturaleza" (448). For María Luisa, "el sexo es algo sucio que nada tiene que ver

[39] Similarly, Señora Arroyo wanted her daughter to marry Antonio, a rich friend who gave the family many gifts—likely in an attempt to "purchase" María Luisa.

con el placer femenino" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 39) that she later discovers with her female lovers.

María Luisa's self-discovery spans several chapters, and during this reflection, the pressure to engage in sexual activity with her husband—and carry his children—comes from all directions. At one party, María Luisa meets a doctor's wife who "tenía un niño todos los años … porque para eso se había casado" (Fortún 335). While María Luisa rejected motherhood as a child, she is unable to avoid getting pregnant with Jorge once they are married. In a comical discussion between a doctor and María Luisa, the latter exclaims, "¡Si parece una mona!" when she first sees her newborn (322). She needs time to adjust to her role of mother and to the idea that she has a daughter: "No podía comprender que aquella mona colorada que gañía junto a mí tuviera nada que ver conmigo…" (322). When María Luisa's mother asks her, a few days after María José is born, if she loves her baby, María Luisa's first response is no—soon thereafter, "el instinto que toda hembra lleva en sus entrañas" awakens and she becomes obsessed with her child, never leaving her side (322-323). When her daughter dies, María Luisa is devastated, and never again wishes to have a child. Her grief ends the second part of the novel, "Verano," on a disturbing note: "No, no; que nadie llore a mi hija, que era mía sola… ¡nadie más que yo tiene derecho a llorarla! Había brotado de mis entrañas milagrosamente…! Y yo, ¡¡ay!!, la lloro, no por lo que la he querido, sino porque algunas veces no la he querido bastante… ¡Hija! ¡Hija! ¡Hija!" (365). From María José's naissance to her untimely death, María Luisa undergoes a great change. At first, she could not connect with the child she had birthed, and 12 years later, she refuses to even allow Jorge to share in her pain, claiming María José for herself. Although María Luisa originally did not want the traditional role of mother, her sorrow is undeniable.

Over her years of marriage, María Luisa experiences homoerotic feelings for different women, still not totally realizing what they mean. She meets a young woman at the park when her daughter is still young and thinks: "Los labios de Mary eran como dos bombones… Así debían de ser de dulces y gustosos" (Fortún 344). Then, she is startled by her own same-sex desire: "qué idiotez se me había ocurrido" (344). In the early years of her marriage, the protagonist remains sheltered—she does not know that homosexuality exists, nor that she is allowed to experience it. According to Rich, "the enforcement of heterosexuality for women" constitues "a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access"—and this is in part achieved by "the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility" (191). Rich insists that heterosexuality has been propagandized; in fact, María Luisa's new family constantly reminds her of a woman's place in society and in the home, contributing to this heteropatriarchal marketing. Her brother-in-law, who orders his wife around as if she were his maid, promotes the following:

> una madre de familia debe levantarse la primera y acostarse la última, … debe educar a cada uno de sus hijos según su temperamento, debe cuidar esmeradamente de que en la ropa no haya jamás un descosido, ni falte un botón, debe tener un carácter igual, inalterable, debe ser alegre y activa sin desfallecimientos… debe sentir el arte y la belleza al mismo tiempo que su marido… vibrando el unísono… (Fortún 371-372)

María Luisa, after one of his "sermons," asks if there is a book that describes the tasks of the father, and her brother-in-law "desde entoncés [la] miró con desconfianza" (372). Of course, there is no such manual, but men also suffer at the hands of the patriarchy, especially gender nonconforming men and *invertidos*. Married men and fathers are expected to have control over their wives and daughters respectively, and Jorge's fragile masculinity is challenged by his

wife's *queer* ways—even as she tries her best to conform to social norms. As the novel progresses, it becomes more and more difficult for the protagonist to pretend she is happily married, and she rejects the position of subjugation she is supposed to occupy: "siempre él [Jorge] y yo una prolongación de él, sin más ideales que los suyos, sin más alegrías que las escasas que le deparaba su carácter melancólico" (429). In her career and in her personal development, María Luisa is limited because of her husband and the strict position she must maintain if she is to remain a *mujer decente*.[40]

Trapped as she is in a heterosexual union, Jorge is the main discriminatory perspective with which María Luisa must contend; he criticizes her friendships and even gaslights her into abandoning certain friends, like Carmen. First, he is firm: "No volverás a casa de esa mujer … y te prohíbo que continúes esa amistad…" (313). Then, he pretends that he is not forcing her to change anything: "Es decir, tú puedes hacer lo que quieras … Ya te he dicho que puedes continuar teniéndola [la amistad]" (313-314). Finally, he forbids Carmen from entering their home, and when she knocks on their door, the maid has her leave (314)—this effectively isolates María Luisa from the "negative" influence of someone Jorge considers *deshonrada*. Lonely and depressed, María Luisa suffers mentally and physically, even at fun events. During a formal banquet, for example, the protagonist looks around and thinks, "Ninguno de aquellos … hubiera

[40] Near the end of the book, when María Luisa is finally actively trying to leave her spouse, Jorge tells her "una divorciada no es nunca decente" (Fortún 451), but by the time the protagonist is ready to talk to her female lawyer friend, Jorge has gotten used to the idea and has found a new woman who is "buena y honrada" (475). Capdevilla-Arguelles brings forth the term *matrimonio fraternal* to represent the eventual relationship between María Luisa and Jorge. The protagonist offers her husband "un cariño fraternal en camas separadas" (32) once she realizes she can no longer keep up the heterosexual charade. Luckily for Jorge and María Luisa, the couple is free to separate officially; divorce became legal in the Second Spanish Republic in 1932 but was completely outlawed by Franco by 1945. Fortún's inclusion of a historical detail helps situate the novel: "Por fortuna la República nos da resuelta esa cuestión [de divorcio]" (Fortún 475).

podido ser mi amigo" (377), and she heads outside feeling indisposed. This is when she meets her first lesbian friend, and a new door opens for María Luisa.[41]

However, the emergence of lesbians like Fortún and her protagonist in the public sphere is disturbing for a patriarchal society, as Simonis argues: "La opción lesbiana es sumamente desestabilizadora y peligrosa para el sistema patriarcal porque siente coma una amenaza la independencia del hombre que la lesbiana asume en su programa vital" (109). Destabilizing the system also leads to violence. Although Simonis's article focuses on the 70s and 80s, her thoughts on gender-based violence are applicable to the early 20th century as well. She rightly blames the patriarchy for this cruelty:

> No hace falta insistir en que el sistema sexo/género es generador de la violencia contra las mujeres y que existen múltiples formas de violencia, más o menos sutiles. … La frecuencia de los episodios violentos dirigidos a las mujeres ha sido tanta y tan simultánea en todos los rincones del planeta que lamentablemente ha revertido en una especie de aceptación y tolerancia perversa que no beneficia en nada a su erradicación. (110)

She goes on to explain how this violence takes on a different form in the case of homosexual women:

> Las lesbianas sufren un tipo de violencia que no es visible ni impactante como el del maltrato en pareja o la violencia directa contra las mujeres en situaciones límite de guerra o explotación, pero que no deja de ser menos injustificable. Violencia que es silencio, indiferencia, negación, exilio interior, escarnio, coda una serie de imposiciones que llevan a la invisibilidad. Una invisibilidad dolorosa para las lesbianas que ha prosperado gracias a estrategias sutiles como la creación de tópicos y estereotipos denigrantes (110)

[41] I explore the new possibilities this encounter creates in section 6.3.1 of this memoir.

Indeed, Fortún describes how her protagonist is a victim of several types of violence. Again and again, those around her encourage her to erase her differences and mould herself to contemporary gender norms, therein negating her true identity. But María Luisa is also physically assaulted by a group of boys ("otro había deslizado sus manos ásperas por mis muslos y trataba de meterlas por la boca de los pantalones…" [Fortún 192]) and, later, she is verbally harassed by an older man ("El señor juez me quería mucho y constantemente me llamaba para decirme que era una chica muy salada" [193]). The judge sexually assails her in the next pages, but María Luisa escapes before he can penetrate her—the mother and the other women staying in the hotel agree that "Menos mal que no la ha desgraciado para toda su vida…" (196). María Luisa finds this attack horrifying, but less so because she does not know what could have happened to her because "era solo en la cama donde pasaban ciertas cosas" (196). The protagonist has been shielded in the name of propriety, but this actually leaves her more vulnerable to the dangers of men. In the "Verano" section of the novel, María Luisa is again assaulted by an older man, Antonio, who finds her alone in the evening and kisses her aggressively (277). He continues to harass her, trying to convince her to marry him, and María Luisa's mother even encourages her to accept Antonio's advances. But all the protagonist and reader feel is "asco al hombre predador que se cree con derecho a disponer del cuerpo de la mujer a su antojo" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 39). Even once María Luisa is married, Jorge feels like he owns her body, and our protagonist continues to be a victim of aggression.

Male entitlement to female bodies plays an important role in sexual violence, as is outlined in Crenshaw's 1993 article that starts by recognizing a shift in perspective: once considered individual issues, domestic violence and sexual assault are now seen as systemic and social (1242). While this change has yet to occur in *Oculto Sendero*'s timeframe, many of

Crenshaw's arguments predate the shift; race, class, and sexual orientation have always intersected with sex and gender-based violence. Valerie Smith adds that "To the extent that rape is constructed as a crime against the property of privileged white men, crimes against less valuable women—women of color, working-class women, and lesbians, for example—mean less or mean differently than those against white women from the middle or upper class" (qtd. in Crenshaw 1269).[42] Note the use of *property,* a term in line with notions of *ownership*—women's bodies are a commodity to be possessed and used by the men who have power over them. María Luisa is the property of Jorge Medina, though marital rape does not yet count as a crime in their era—even if it did, as a lesbian, this crime would be rated differently.

On one hand, while it is never made explicit, perhaps Jorge hopes, following a heteronormative script, María Luisa will recover from her inversion through heterosexual intimacy. Even the doctor's surface-level suggestions for remediating her lesbianism are accompanied by a more subtle suggestion: "complacer a su marido" (Fortún 433). This *complacer* can be understood either as a) satisfying Jorge's need for heteropatriarchal normalcy or b) satisfying Jorge sexually, as a good wife should. As a woman living under the patriarchy and as a lesbian, María Luisa is left with little choice in regards to her own body. On the other hand, the *Oculto Sendero* protagonist is middle class, and the older men who assault her in her youth are both more powerful than her due to their finances and careers—even Jorge benefits from a higher status than María Luisa simply because he is a man. Again, her suffering means less, and little comes of the violent encounters María Luisa faces during her youth or adulthood in terms of justice. In fact, the assaulters face no punishment other than the judge being pressured into leaving the hotel—no law enforcement figures are brought into play, and no counselling is

[42] While certain North Americans may not necessarily perceive Spaniards as White, Jorge and María Luisa are never racialized and will not be considered people of colour in this paper.

offered to the victim, as would be expected in 2021. But this is 1920s Spain, and the resolution to María Luisa's plight is silence.

6.3 Towards a Lesbian Identity and an Independent Space

This section will first examine lesbianism in both the queer community Fortún describes and in the protagonist's own self-reflection before analysing the importance of space for women's intellectual pursuits.

6.3.1 Discovering Female Homosexuality

More than two thirds into the novel, Fermina Monroy is the first lesbian with whom María Luisa develops a relationship, platonic or otherwise. Although María Luisa is married to a man, Fermina immediately notices the cut of her clothes and pegs her for an artist, lamenting: "¡Qué desastre es una mujer como nosotras casada!" (Fortún 380). Her use of "nosotras" includes her in the definition she has assigned to María Luisa—although not explicitly stated, both women are lesbians. She is one of the many "mujeres abiertamente andróginas que miran a María Luisa y la invitan a reconocerse en ellas" that María Luisa meets during her marriage (Capdevilla-Argüelles 49). In fact, Fermina has a reputation, a sort of "mala fama" (Fortún 382) due to the people with whom she associates, and both Jorge and María Luisa's sister-in-law are concerned about how this may reflect on their family. Nevertheless, María Luisa revels in her new friendship, meeting a group of artistically inclined homosexuals including Lolín, a married woman; Rafita, said to be "un invertido" (385); Rosita Aguilar, a beautiful poet who is María Luisa's first kiss (with a woman); and later Florinda, a rich heiress with whom María Luisa has sexual relations. Indeed, this queer community shares more than its inversion—as the doctor mentions to María Luisa when she approaches him with concerns about her identity, this case "es

más frecuente de lo que se supone, sobre todo tratándose de artistas" (433).[43] Do homosexuals have more natural talent in the arts, or are the arts perhaps a more liberal space with freedom for self-expression not found elsewhere?

While homosexuality is not limited to artists, intellectuals, or rich heiresses, María Luisa's circles certainly are. Carmenchu, one of our protagonist's friends, introduces her to more artists: the art critic Júpiter, the violinist Leonarda, the theatre critic Jaimito, and two more women, Lupe and Rosalía. This unusual group meets at the bar Dublín, "mezcla de bar, *brasserie*, y salón de té" (456) and has many interpersonal dramas, especially competing romances. Now a member of this "subcultura de invertidos" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 49), María Luisa discovers much about the world and the different kinds of people in it from an open perspective, rather than a homophobic one. While the doctor treats the protagonist as "Un caso típico de inversión del instinto en persona honrada" (Fortún 433) and refers her to a psychologist, Julieta laments all the "pobres seres [a los que] se ha insultado y rebajado por una inversión del instinto de la que ellos no eran culpables" (445). It is evident that Fortún and her characters, like *The Well*'s Stephen Gordon, are limited by contemporary discourse on homosexuality: Freud, von Krafft-Ebing, and Ellis's ideas, for example.

Although María Luisa's new friends are well aware of their marginal status within Spanish society, they treat their queerness as something natural and encourage María Luisa to feel more comfortable in her own skin, inviting her into their community with open arms. This is a far cry from the heteropatriarchal standards her family enforced on her during her youth. María Luisa, by the end of the novel, affirms that *these* are her people, if only to herself: "Los míos son esos que despreciáis, Joaquinito, Fermina, Lolín, Rafita… los parias de una sociedad normal que

[43] Gerald Heard, an author whom Fortún read frequently, identified a gland behind the nose as the cause of the sexual appetites that "salen a la luz en el arte y la poesía" (Capdevilla-Arguelles 23), strengthening the idea of the art world as more in tune with homosexuality.

no tiene otro fin más que reproducirse, los que habéis echado de vuestras honradas casas … Ellos son mis compañeros de camino y me voy con ellos" (494). This response to what María Luisa imagines her brother-in-law will say when he finds out she is leaving her husband and country proves that the protagonist has grown since the beginning of the novel, when she struggled to find a community with which she felt at home.[44] This speaks to the importance of kinship, support, and shared experiences, especially for minority groups.

Moreover, while we know Fortún's novel was largely inspired by her own experience in 1920s Spain, Moreno-Lago laments the difficulty of studying real-life Sapphic circles: "existieron las reuniones y círculos sáficos entre las intelectuales en el Madrid entre los años veinte y treinta, pero se han olvidado por falta de escritos directos que lo legitimen" (215). Much like the lesbian literature that was destroyed over the years, or even the writings that were never written—since "las lesbianas no suelen dejar documentos acerca de sus vidas que incluyan detalles sobre sus prácticas sexuales o sus deseos eróticos" (qtd. in Moreno-Lago 213)—lesbian intellectual experiences in Madrid have largely been erased from history. There is no doubt, however, that they existed and are reflected in the works of authors such as Fortún. Like Rich, Annis Pratt uses the term "continuum" to refer to female experience—the continuum between the borderline (or marginal spaces) and the new spaces created by women's fiction (100). She relates this continuum to the realm of the clandestine: "The necessity of disguise, encoded messages, and secret agents in novels of friendship recurs in the lesbian novel where heroes must find their ways through the labyrinths of sexual politics in both the external world of male society and internal world of women's embattled psyche" (100). Indeed, from a geocritical perspective, "Los espacios literarios … no son lugares imaginarios de las autoras, sino que

[44] At the end of the novel, María Luisa is on her way to meet Carmenchu in America, the country Capdevilla-Argüelles labels a "mundo nuevo para la mujer nueva y la nueva sexualidad" (59).

constituyen una ficcionalización de la realidad que vivieron en los ambientes vanguardistas e intelectuales" and can be defined by certain *geocódigos* that ensure the safety of the authors in times of censorship (Moreno-Lago 216-217). One of these is silence. The title *Oculto Sendero* already suggests that something in the novel will be hidden, and it is indeed the sphere of secrecy that prevails when it comes to lesbian experiences.[45] The bar Dublín, for example, is a safe space for homosexuals, but only those on the inside know it; keeping the secret, then, becomes primordial if the bar is to remain safe. When María Luisa is allowed in, her friend swears her to secrecy: "Carmenchu me pone en antecedente de lo que no está a la vista, aunque advirtiéndome que guarde el secreto más profundo, porque, aunque es del dominio de todos, fuera de la peña jamás sale nada" (Fortún 459). Moreno-Lago's study compares the café refuge in three different works, highlighting their academic aura (225) and their "ambiente … más libre y consciente de la diversidad sexual" (226). Even so, the cafés remain "territorios masculinizados" that offer no respite from patriarchal views (227).[46]

Outside of these circles, lesbian interactions are even more subtle. Sometimes, a simple pronoun speaks volumes. Like when Fermina uses *nosotras*, classifying María Luisa and her as the same, Julieta claims that nobody will be compassionate towards María Luisa when they discover her lesbianism because "los que son normales *nos* desprecian" (448, original emphasis). Julieta, divorced and closeted, has given María Luisa an encrypted message, a sign of shared experiences, just by including herself grammatically in her advice to María Luisa. Julieta quickly stops talking after this sentence, then changes the subject, but the use of *nos* is not lost on María Luisa, who thinks, "Aquel *nos* que la colocaba a mi lado, puso entre nosotros una inquietud y un

[45] Capdevilla-Argüelles calls it an "oculto sendero de autoría y amor" that demands the reconstruction of one's identity (60), and Julieta tells María Luisa it is imperative to "pisar con pie firme" along this hidden path (Fortún 445).

[46] Moreno-Lago contrasts these cafés to *tertulias*, that "no forman parte [del territorio masculinizado] y se sienten desligadas, desterritorializadas" (227).

silencio…" (448, original emphasis). Fortún explicitly shows the importance of silence, of talking about homosexuality without really talking about it; Moreno-Lago proves that "Los códigos encriptados, los secretos y los eufemismos muestran que, pese a vivir su sexualidad libremente, lo hicieron «siempre dentro del más estricto decoro y nunca con pública ostentación» (Carretón 7)" (221). Unfortunately, Spanish Sapphists had limited spaces where they could leave behind this clandestine decorum, not all the intellectual spheres where they operated were inclusive of openly lesbian and bisexual women. Although the *Lyceum Club* and its fellow organizations were indispensable for intellectual female growth, certain members rejected homosexuality and gender nonconformity (228). Some lesbian intellectuals, like the protagonists studied by Moreno-Lago, met instead one or twice a week in one of their homes; for María Luisa, this happens at Fermina's (Fortún 383). Like the café gatherings, "Los salones de escritoras son un ejemplo concreto de geocodificación" (Moreno-Lago 231) in that both spaces are created for the community and rely on the secrecy of their members. Moreno-Lago concludes that intellectual (and often homosexual) women left the realm of the domestic looking for freedom, entered the public sphere to find others like them, and created new private spaces together—complete with new codes independent of men's pre-established norms (232).[47]

Moreover, although María Luisa has always been branded as queer ("rara"), it is not until the "Otoño" section that María Luisa begins to understand what she feels towards women, starting when Consuelo, her sister-in-law, explains that Fermina "se enamora de las mujeres" and "ha tenido queridas" (384). Until this point, María Luisa had not realized same-sex relationships

[47] Lesbians in urban Spain could not depend on others to create spaces for them or allow them into established spaces. They made incredible advances on their own while facing adversity: "Son mujeres transgresoras que tuvieron que trazar estrategias, como la creación de estas reuniones privadas, para romper los roles establecidos sobre la identidad femenina para poder conseguir su emancipación y su libertad sexual. Estos movimientos informales consiguieron unir a las mujeres y establecer una corriente de sororidad que continuó en el exilio y traspasó las barreras de la distancia que las separaban" (Moreno-Lago 233).

were even a possibility. Then, she meets Rosita, Lolín's *querida*, and "Algo luminoso y dulce, esperado instintivamente toda la vida, inundaba [su] pensamiento…" (400). Another moment of revelation strikes María Luisa: women can be in love with other women, and this fact fills a void that has plagued her since her youth. Capdevilla-Argüelles considers the impact of female friendships on María Luisa's emancipation, and how different women participate in the broadening of María Luisa's worldview: Julieta, "que le hablará de la existencia del oculto sendero del título; las ancianas y vivarachas solteronas tía Teresa y tía Manuelita, figuras maternales que empatizan con María Luisa más que su propia madre" (37); the women who, like Fermina, noticed "su homosexualidad antes que ella misma" (59); and her two careerwoman friends, Carmenchu (a doctor) and Rosarito (a lawyer) who offer a glimpse into the rise of the modern woman (59). In addition, the women to whom the protagonist is attracted also impact the construction of her lesbian identity as she matures:

> Dulce Nombre, la prima mayor que ella de la que se enamora; Consuelo, la cuñada hermosa por la que se siente atraída y cuyo estropeado físico tras alumbrar muchos hijos y vivir relegada a la casa no puede dejar de notar; … la atractiva y racial Florinda, su primera amante; Lolín, Rosita y Fermina, reflejo de ella misma y sus apetitos (37)

In spite of a lifetime of feeling like the weird girl, María Luisa learns more about herself and the world with every woman she meets. These relationships, however fleeting, help her by establishing shared experiences between women, or more specifically those on the lesbian continuum as defined by Rich: experiences that are uniquely female but transcend any other socioeconomic, political, or geographical differences.

As a lesbian *Bildungsroman*, the novel traces María Luisa's (homo)sexual awakening not only as self-reflection but as actual homoerotic activity. In a chapter aptly titled "Revelación,"

Rosita becomes María Luisa's first kiss with a woman: "echándome los brazos al cuello apretó su boca contra la mía… sentí la pulpa húmeda de sus labios carnosos en los que se hundieron los míos… y el mundo dejó de existir" (404-405).[48] This is also the first kiss María Luisa actively enjoys, and the first physical intimacy between women Fortún describes in her novel. In the next chapter, the summer heat forces Jorge and María Luisa to rent a cottage in the mountains where the latter meets Florinda. When María Luisa visits her in her mansion, she is almost dizzy because of Florinda's beauty (417). They talk about "amor carnal" (417); finally, she admits to Florinda that she loves her, and Fortún implies that the two have sexual relations through a series of "……" that spans one line (418). Moreno-Lago's study on *geocódigos* reminds us that anything embarrassing or shameful "no [podia] salir a la luz" (214) but can instead be recreated by reading between the lines or, in this case, the dots. Although Fortún wrote about lesbian desire, she never intended for this transgressive manuscript to reach the public; she and her lesbian contemporaries "juzgaron sus sentimientos, condenándolos a estar encerrados y escondidos" (Moreno-Lago 214). This page, with only a few sentences that indicate love between women, is nevertheless an important clue in the reconstruction of Fortún's own sexuality and of Spain's lesbian literary tradition. Like Fortún, Florinda and María Luisa know that their love must remain in private spaces. Sadly, their relationship only lasts a few months—Florinda eventually leaves for London because "La gente comienza a vernos siempre juntas … Si ahora no me fuera, como siempre lo he hecho, habría comentarios…" (Fortún 421). When she reappears, she is engaged to a man, much to María Luisa's chagrin (425). Again and again, the

[48] After dating for five years, Lolín and Rosita broke up when Lolín got married to a man to save face (Fortún 402), like so many others who "married … in order to remain respectable" (Rich 196). Rosita's stance on heterosexual marriage involving lesbians can be summarized in her claim that the María Luisa is only married to Jorge "Nominalmente" anyways (Fortún 402).

protagonist's heart is broken by her family, her lovers, and her society's desperation for the repression of women.

Narrating María Luisa's path towards a lesbian identity, *Oculto Sendero* also questions the male-female binary through María Luisa and Julieta's reflection on the third sex. Fortún writes: "[Julieta] Estaba de acuerdo conmigo en que no debía haberme casado. Los artistas no deben casarse pero eso se aprende tarde, cuando ya no tiene remedio" (444). María Luisa adds, partly in jest, "El artista es tal vez el *tercer sexo* … Creo que entre los humanos son los artistas que no deben reproducirse" (444, added emphasis). This same "third sex" is associated by Freud, Ellis, and von Krafft-Ebing with "female lust and with feminist revolt against traditional roles" (Farwell, "Narrative" 160). Indeed, nobody is more transgressive in the novel than María Luisa and her fellow lesbian artists, who reject gender roles and gendered clothing. It is no surprise, then, that Julieta takes her friend's comment in stride, explaining that "el artista lleva en su cerebro y en su alma comprendidos los dos sexos" (Fortún 445). María Luisa's doctor also insists that artists are seldom complete without a certain inversion of the spirit (433) and immediately associates female homosexual encounters with being an artist (432). Combining Julieta's logic with the doctor's rhetoric, it is clear that Fortún's writing was marked by the leading research on the queer community that did not treat homosexuality and gender nonconformity as natural phenomena, but rather as deviance that could be supressed.[49] To remedy its inversion, the "sexually independent lesbian body" (Farwell, "Narrative" 162) must conform to heteronormative boundaries by making simple adjustments. For María Luisa, this means leaving behind her masculine clothes, painting less, and taking care of the house, according to the doctor (Fortún 433). Although María Luisa will never visit the psychologist her doctor recommends, in

[49] Freud, Ellis, and von Krafft-Ebing believed the lesbian's existence was a crime in itself (Farwell, "Narrative" 161).

this moment she is determined to please Jorge and be the perfect heterosexual wife. This delusion can only last so long—eventually, María Luisa must make the difficult decisions associated with living an authentic lesbian life if she is to survive in her early 20th century Spain.

The gender binary of the 1900s still inhabits the minds of many in 2021, even as terms like nonbinary, genderfluid, and transgender enter common usage. But already in 1990, Butler and other scholars questioned the relation between biological sex and the social construct of gender.[50] Butler proposes that "gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" because "gender is culturally constructed" (8); in essence, gender is an interpretation of sex by a given culture and cannot be associated to any one biological body (8-9).[51] And though Butler does not reflect on the *third sex*, she does point out that "there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two" (9). While Newton explains that the "true invert was a being between categories, neither man nor woman, a 'third sex' or 'trapped soul'" (568), Butler's theory rejects the male-female binary even more drastically than Julieta and María Luisa, limited as they are by 1920s sexology and psychology. Indeed, Butler explains that

> The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one … (9, original emphasis)

[50] Although many of those who reject contemporary discourse on sex and gender do so because they believe it to be something new, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) said in 1949 that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" because of a cultural compulsion and not a biological antecedent (qtd. in Butler 11).

[51] Butler even asks the reader whether *sex* is a social construct as well (10)—then we must ask, what is male? What is female?

If we think of María Luisa's clothing choices, the cut and colour of a piece of fabric has, according to her peers, a gender, and the ones she chooses are typically more masculine. In a later chapter, Butler examines gender as performative—"that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (34). This leads the reader to a sort of conundrum: if gender is the action of conforming to the identity with which it is associated, how can it be understood as the result of this identity (34)? For those whose identities do not conform to expectations, there is a choice to make—live outside the binary, or on an *oculto sendero*. The latter is called a "construction of coherence" which "conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which … sexuality … does not seem to follow from gender" (185). According to Farwell, as mentioned earlier, lesbian protagonists are disruptive and non-feminine (16), and María Luisa's same-sex attraction does indeed disrupt the "fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler 185) in that her gender expression and her sexual desire transcend the norms of her era.

6.3.2 A Room of Her Own

The concept of the room is crucial in Woolf's discourse as seen in the theoretical framework; the author of *Orlando* firmly believes that women need both financial freedom and independent space to write fiction. While Woolf's argument pertains to women writers in particular, María Luisa cannot reach her full artistic potential until she has her own room in which to create and the means to leave Jorge. But the main character's intellectual and artistic inclinations—also significant characteristics of modernity—first appear during her childhood. When María Luisa is expelled for pushing a girl down the stairs, she embarks on a homeschooling journey that actually serves her well: her tutors cater to her interests in history, literature, geography, and art. With private instruction, she focuses on the subjects that interest

her, and she discovers her artistic talents that later lead to her career as a painter. One of her tutors, Clara, says to the family, "Deben ustedes buscar un professor… Creo que María Luisa llegará a algo si aprende a conciencia la técnica del arte" (Fortún 223). The parents are less enthusiastic; while her father "se opuso resultamente" and her mother agreed with him (223), *tía* Manuela is the one to bring Jorge in as her next art teacher. He teaches her a lot about art and brings her novels to read because a "pintor debe leer mucho" (228). Jorge raves about her work, even offering to marry her later in their lives so she may continue on an artistic path. When her mother finds out, however, María Luisa must bid Jorge farewell.

Luckily, they meet again years later and get married. But the supportive, modern man María Luisa thought she was marrying turns out to be an egotistical, manipulative narcissist whose interest in her artistic talents decreases dramatically.[52] Her growth as an artist is obstructed by Jorge, whom the protagonist and the reader once thought of as an ally. Jorge's ego turns out to be the main obstacle to María Luisa's career. Woolf's two keys to female creation, money and an independent space, go hand in hand: with the space to create, a woman can find financial freedom—then she can afford an autonomous space in which to practice her craft, and make more profits from her art. This independence also allows women to enter the public sphere and have a greater effect on their society and culture. In line with Gough's seventh characteristic of male power, cramping women's creativeness, Jorge implies that his career as an artist is more valuable than his wife's, and he disrupts her creative aspirations when he encourages her to focus on running the household instead. He leaves her with literally no physical space in which to

[52] Woolf asks: "Married against their will, kept in one room, and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting or truthful account of them?" (83-84). For this reason, women in literature are represented in relation to men and rarely as independent characters. Woolf flips the narrative, asking what would be left of Shakespeare's work should men be only "represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers", and concludes that there would be very little remaining of his plays (83).

create, effectively trapping her in the home due to lack of funds. So, she has to hide to create art, especially once her friend Lolín has her painting many *abanicos*, to avoid upsetting her husband: "Los pinté escondiéndome de Jorge, esperando que se fuera al instituto, y recogiendo las pinturas antes de que volviera…" (Fortún 388). If Jorge is home, "Pintaba en el cuarto de baño, a veces sentada en el suelo, y con los tubos de pintura que Jorge tiraba por inservibles… luego los abanicos se secaban en el estudio de Lolín" (389). Her artistic output is limited by the space she can occupy, a fate not uncommon for women in Fortún's era, and for the author herself.[53]

Woolf explores these limits, highlighting the losses in the literary field due to "the doors that have been shut upon women" (83). She traces her reasoning back to the historical money management by men—in fact, since women were not legally allowed to own their earnings, they saw little benefit to engaging in business, since their reward would be spent by their spouse (22-23). Woolf applies this rhetoric to the academic sphere:

> If only [a woman] and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money, and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex … we might have looked forward without undue confidence to a pleasant and honourable lifetime spent in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions. We might have been exploring or writing; … or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half past four to write a little poetry. (21)

Woolf explains that women need that room of their own because, traditionally, no space has existed in academia and no money has been set aside to fund their studies and creative output. María Luisa, while not a writer, but a painter, cannot fully develop her art until she has an

[53] Capdevilla-Argüelles explains that Fortún's marriage was an unhappy one, partially because of the author's literary recognition—Eusebio felt emasculated by her success (and the money she brought in) and began to hate her (17).

adequate space in which to do so: her intellectual community, her friends' houses, and especially a space away from Jorge.[54] Jorge not only limits her physical room but is also cruel when critiquing her art. The only time he actively compliments her work (not counting before they were married) is when he does not know she is the artist behind the *abanicos*. His initial reaction to the art is enthusiastic: "Quien ha pintado esto tiene sentido del color, tiene imaginación… ¡ya lo creo! Tiene verdadero talento … el pintor está por encima de su obra… es un técnico del arte" (Fortún 389). His tune changes quickly once his wife admits to having painted them; while still being honest about their worth, he is indifferent and sarcastic, and blames María Luisa anytime something in his art studio seems amiss, such as an absent paintbrush. While his wife has not touched his supplies, Jorge's bruised ego does not listen to reason, threatening to abandon art altogether if he does not have adequate materials (390). This shows his male privilege—while his wife paints on the bathroom floor without protest, Jorge has the luxury of complaining about his extensive resources.[55] The concept and application of independent space is crucial not only for lesbians but for women in general in these times of social transformation. Woolf's insistence that women need a room in which to create goes beyond the physical; it also signifies the mental space required for artistic production and the respect that comes from being valued enough to have a physical room.[56] Nevertheless, both find various successes in the art world as they move between different Spanish cities including Madrid and the countryside, and for María Luisa,

[54] Capdevilla-Arguelles highlights how *Oculto Sendero* "documenta la relación del yo de mujer con la palabra escrita, el arte, el saber o la educación así como las cortapisas y acicates puestos por el otro masculino … con el poder o deseo sea de permitir sea de impedir el desarrollo de la autoría y del conocimiento de la mujer cercana" (27-28). Indeed, while María Luisa's father had control over her education as a child, Jorge takes the reigns once they marry and does his best to intervene when his wife wants to study or practice her craft.

[55] Capdevilla-Arguelles shows a parallel between author and protagonist in that both "verán su trabajo como secundario al del hombre que las acompaña, seres débiles martirizados por la fuerte y no natural personalidad de sus esposas" (31). Reading the "Verano" section of the novel, it is obvious that Jorge takes personal offense to his spouse's success and indirectly blames her for his own shortcomings.

[56] Consider Irish author James Joyce's 1916 debut novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which is also a *Bildungsroman* about the formation of an artist. While both protagonists struggle in their journeys, María Luisa faces obstacles unique to her gender—not having a room of her own.

what started as small commissions becomes a significant cornering of the market on painting children's portraits. Once emancipated from Jorge, María Luisa is free to paint at her leisure and develop as a professional artist.

Oculto Sendero fits into the conflict "entre la heterosexualidad dominante y una subcultura homosexual, es decir entre la norma y la subversión [que] genera … nuevas formas de entender la medicina, el teatro, el arte, la política, el cuerpo, el sexo y la sexualidad" (Capdevilla-Argüelles 43). Fortún's writing gives insight into many of these themes as she experienced them in spite of doubting that her own "salida del rol de esposa y madre y asunción del rol de moderna emancipada fuese correcta" (43). Regardless of the author's personal hesitations, the novel makes it clear that living authentically as an emancipated, modern woman and lesbian is the only path that will allow María Luisa to find freedom, success, and happiness.[57] Capdevilla-Argüelles describes this liberation as "la eventual vivencia de un lesbianismo discreto amparado por la libertad económica que le procuró dedicarse al arte" (31). By the end of the novel, our protagonist has developed an identity she can embrace with little reluctance: she is a lesbian, a painter, and an independent woman leaving her past behind in order to be the individual her family tried so hard to keep her from becoming.

7. Conclusions

Formed from the German words *Bildung* (formation) and *Roman* (novel), the *Bildunsroman* as a literary genre follows a child through their process of maturation towards a defined identity. Indeed, the coming-of-age novel allows readers to trace the development of a young character through the various difficulties they face in their respective plot. In María Luisa's case, these difficulties include repressive familial relationships, gender-based violence,

[57] The modern woman was identified as such not only because she had a cultural education, a professional vocation, and a liberal (sometimes feminist) political consciousness, but also because she applauded technological advances and "reflejaba la modernidad en su aspecto físico y su modo de vestir" (Mangini 75).

self-doubt, social rejection, compulsory heterosexuality, and ambivalent feelings regarding motherhood. Out of her suffering, however, María Luisa discovers more about herself and finds connections with people who experience similar challenges, such as those in the Sapphic circles she eventually joins. Her journey toward self-realization is truly an *oculto sendero*, and a narrative that is not uncommon for women of Fortún's era. In fact, María Luisa shares many characteristics with the downtrodden Stephen Gordon of *The Well*. Questioning and rejecting dominant concepts of womanhood, facing and internalizing homophobia, and overcoming the limits of domesticity are but a few of the experiences these protagonists—and likely most 1920s lesbians in the Western world—have in common. While many lesbian authors never publicly revealed their homosexuality, literary and epistolary works from the 1900s help us piece together the hidden path upon which so many closeted intellectuals were forced to embark. *Oculto Sendero*, based on the metaphor *to come out of the closet* that so aptly combines the notions of intimacy and identity (Capdevilla-Argüelles 8), is a touching exploration of pain, self-realization, and desire belonging to both the protagonist and the author. Living on her own *oculto sendero*, Fortún challenges traditional and modern notions of sexual identity and echoes María Luisa's cries for freedom with her own (21).[58] Through archival research, we will surely discover more unpublished works of Sapphic literature, and be able to fill in some of the blanks left by centuries of lesbian invisibility and suffering.[59]

[58] María Luisa, just like Fortún, was born a decade late. She cries for "¡Libertad! ¡Libertad! Ser como el aire, a quien nadie pregunta a dónde va ni de dónde viene… ¡Ah, las muchachas modernas! Las veía solas por la calle, con su cartera bajo el brazo, camino de la universidad, del instituto, de la escuela… ¿Por qué había venido yo al mundo diez años antes de mi tiempo?" (Fortún 363). This question is surely posed both by the protagonist and the author, who would have benefited more completely from the modern women phenomenon had she been a decade younger (Capdevilla-Argüelles 45).

[59] This Master's memoir is only the beginning of my research into 20th century female authors. My upcoming doctoral thesis will investigate Fortún alongside Isabel Oyarzábal, Mercedes Formica, and Luisa Carnés—four women from different sociocultural and political spheres whose writing greatly impacted the Spanish literary tradition.

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