

Gendering the Poetic Nation:  
Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda as Chilean Icons  
by  
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"Lo que el alma hace por su cuerpo es lo que el artista hace por su pueblo."

– Gabriela Mistral



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## Abstract

Both Nobel Prize winners in Literature, Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda remain in the cultural imaginary as two of Latin America's finest poets. Beyond their literary renown, both poets also served as consuls to Chile and were intensely involved in both domestic and international politics, marking them as contributors not only to a Chilean literary identity, but also to the development of Chilean nationalism.

However, despite the fact that the two were contemporaries, colleagues, and influencers of one another's work, their poetry has yet to be subject to a direct comparison. I argue that a gendered binary has discouraged that exercise. In this project, I highlight how gender has contributed to the formation of each poet's status as a national icon.

Mistral's attention to themes of maternity and childrearing in her poetry has led to her construction as the "National Mother" and "National Schoolteacher" of Chile. She is "la Divina Gabriela" or "Santa Mistral," the model stateswoman whose presence on the international stage is marked by essentially feminine tropes of suffering and sacrifice.

Meanwhile, Neruda emerges in the tradition of the Latin American man of letters. Neruda's intellectual identity was necessarily embroiled in political ideology and the struggle for independence from colonial imperialism. Accordingly, the poet has been iconized as the archetypal Latin American romantic revolutionary.

To accomplish this gendered, comparative reading, I first consider Mistral and Neruda in separate chapters, using close readings of their poetry to establish how they have been rendered as cultural icons. In the third chapter, I compare their work directly. In so doing, I argue that the poets' prefabricated and gendered public identities ultimately converge to reveal the misrepresentation inherent to and in these mythic constructions.



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Short Titles

*Madwomen*: Mistral, Gabriela, and Randall Couch. *Madwomen: the Locas Mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral*. A bilingual ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

*Selected Poems*: Mistral, Gabriela, and Doris Dana. *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral*. Baltimore: Published for the Library of Congress by the Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

*Heights*: Neruda, Pablo. *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. Trans. Nathaniel Tarn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.

*Memorial*: Neruda, Pablo. *Memorial de Isla Negra*. Madrid: Visor, 1994.

“Muchos somos”: Neruda, Pablo. “Muchos somos.” *Universidad de Chile*. Web. 9 Mar. 2015.

*Residence*: Neruda, Pablo. *Residence On Earth (Residencia en la Tierra)*. New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1973.

“Sexo”: Neruda, Pablo. “Sexo.” *Claridad* 1.23 (1921): n. pag. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

*The Poetry*: Neruda, Pablo, and Ilan Stavans. *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.



## Introduction

Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda are two complex figures in the poetic and political history of Chile. They remain the only Chileans to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, with Mistral being the first Latin American woman ever to receive the honor. The poets were contemporaries, colleagues, and critics of one another's work. Their relationship, though, preceded this professional link, beginning in 1920 when Mistral was headmistress of the Girls' School in Neruda's native Temuco, Chile. Given these ties, the poets' names certainly have appeared together in print numerous times. However, I argue that a gendered binary has discouraged a direct comparison of their work. In their overwhelming popularity, both poets have transitioned into not only literary figures, but also highly symbolic ones, becoming protagonists in a larger "narrative" plot of the nation-state internationally: Mistral is commonly known as the Mother and Schoolteacher of Chile. Meanwhile, Neruda is iconized as the romantic revolutionary, his socialist politics lending themselves to a heroic, conventionally masculine iconography. I argue that these public images are inherently gendered, placing the poets into a reductive binary that disallows complexity and mobility. In this thesis, I take on the task of direct comparison, offering close readings of Mistral and Neruda's work to reveal how the poets act as both producers and products of Chilean nationalism.

Within an international discourse, Chile's reputation as the land of poetry prevails. Neruda's biographer Adam Feinstein quotes Neruda dramatically claiming, "Chileans have always had a weakness for poetry" (29). In a Latin American context, this "weakness for poetry" extends beyond the realm of literature and into politics. While generalization about region can be problematic, many have noted that Latin American nation-states share a long history of appointing literary greats to consular positions, which suggests that Latin Americans have

conflated the poetic and the political more than their northern neighbors. In the introduction to his anthology of twentieth-century Latin American poetry, Stephen Tapscott writes, “When Latin American countries nominate their writers to be diplomats, international attachés, or makers and administrators of public policy, we in North America still register a mild surprise at the level of respect for creative writers and at the public familiarity with (and official tolerance of) their works” (1). As is true for many Latin American artists and intellectuals, Mistral and Neruda’s literary renown meant that they both formed public, political existences in Chile and abroad. Both served as consuls to Chile in various countries throughout the world – Neruda in the Far East, Spain, and Argentina, and Mistral in the United States, Mexico, and Western Europe, among other locations.

There are ways in which both poets performed their gender roles as well: Neruda the fearless, heroic contrarian and Mistral the National Mother. Mistral was a strong social justice advocate and an important, international educator. Yet critics remember a different, strikingly more sentimentalized version of the poet: in the public imaginary Mistral remains buried beneath a conventionally feminine identity; she is “la Divina Gabriela” or “Santa Mistral,” the childless sufferer who was capitulated onto the literary scene by way of her mournful 1914 collection *Sonetos de la muerte* (*Sonnets of Death*), in which she mourned the loss of a lover. A contemporary *New York Times* article notes that she is often “packaged as a symbol of social order and submission to authority” (Rohter).

And yet if readers probe even immediately beneath that gendered veneer, they will learn that Mistral was not “childless”; she in fact spent seventeen years raising her adopted son. She also did not spend her lifetime mourning her fallen lover. On the contrary, many contend she spent her adult life in romantic relationships with women. Despite that incongruence, Mistral’s

reputation is tidily packaged into predictable, safely feminine identities; her public image is marked by “cardboard mythologies” that are privileged over complex readings of her work (Horan and Meyer 3). In *¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Emilie Bergmann points out that “the recognition and status [Mistral] achieved in her day... derived less from an attentive reading of her poems and prose works and more from her public persona: the ‘Schoolteacher of America,’ a celibate, dutiful, heterosexual woman” (Bergmann 201). The Mistral scholar Ursula Le Guin sums: “having been adulated as a poetess, she is not read as a poet” (xx).

Neruda, meanwhile, garnered quite a different representation in the cultural imaginary. In Neruda, critics find what Abril Trigo in her introduction to *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* refers to as “the typical Latin American man of letters: at one and the same time politician, statesman, and writer” (19). Neruda emerges in a long line of iconic male figures in Latin America who contributed immensely to national identity formation in the midst of the struggles for independence that characterized much of the nineteenth-century in the region. Ben Fallaw and Samuel Brunk assert that the Latin American hero, beyond his immediate role in helping to achieve independence for his nation, “serves as a kind of cultural glue that helps hold together many kinds of communities – tribal, local, regional, national, international, religious, and ethnic” (3). This “cultural glue” was especially important in the wake of newfound, national autonomy. But why did the romantic revolutionary archetype take hold in Latin America, in particular?

The Latin American romantic revolutionary differs from heroic figures in other parts of the world: “Many scholars have suggested that Latin Americans have had a greater number of personalistic leaders than some other societies, and have sought to explain why. One of the most

common arguments... is that less stable nations need more such leaders because their institutions often fail” (Brunk and Fallaw 270). That is, in a tumultuous political context like that of Latin America, entering public discourse as an intellectual figure is in part governed by the image one is able to craft for oneself. Considering the romantic revolutionary archetype, then, is important in that it is telling of cultural values: who could be a hero in a Latin American context? I argue that the available role for male nation builders in this context is gendered, too. While Mistral relied on motherhood, education, and piety to propel her to international recognition, the available role for the male public figure depended on being an idealistic, romantic dreamer who unified his peoples by way of developing his nation’s identity. Accordingly, through his scathing political poetry, his world-renowned love poems, and his epic ode to the Americas, Neruda is iconized as such: the poet of the people, and darling poster boy of socialist ideals. It is a public image ostensibly less confined than Mistral’s, but it is equally prefabricated and gendered in the final analysis.

These differences can be observed even in the words used to honor the poets with their respective Nobel Prizes. In 1945, Gabriela Mistral won the Nobel Prize in Literature “for her lyric poetry which, inspired by powerful emotions, has made her name a symbol of the idealistic aspirations of the entire Latin American world” (“Nobel 1945”). More than two decades later, Mistral’s contemporary, former student, and consular colleague would win the same honor, in his case “for a poetry that with the action of an elemental force brings alive a continent’s destiny and dreams” (“Nobel 1971”). Neruda is distinguished for the “action” and “force” of his work, which does the act of “bringing alive” the culture of the Americas and its peoples, although Mistral’s efforts also depended on her agency in constructing a national imaginary. Meanwhile, Mistral’s work is lauded for its display of “emotions,” despite Neruda’s corresponding allegiances to the

sentimental. These differences – although made manifest twenty-six years apart – are a clue to the distinct ways in which gender norms or prescriptives dictate how Mistral and Neruda are remembered as literary figures.

Essential to this comparative study are the political conflicts that were playing out in Chile as both Mistral and Neruda were emerging on the literary scene. In this thesis I argue that the poets' respective lives and work during the better part of the twentieth-century provide a rich basis for comparison. Chile was developing its national identity during this time period, fluctuating between militaristic and democratic rule. Latin American literature has been linked to the development of national identity since the emergence of Romanticism in the nineteenth-century, a movement that marked the rejection of European influence in favor of forging an autonomous literary identity. Tapscott sums: "romanticism empowered an aesthetic of ego and assertive autonomy; of anguish and personal turmoil manifested through social rebelliousness and through fierce fidelity to local experience; of heroic youthful liberalism... of sensibility to the landscape... of compassion for disenfranchised classes and races of people" (5). If hemispheric or Pan-American literature is marked by regional authors' searches for tradition and identity from the eighteenth-century onward, then Mistral and Neruda were instrumental in the construction of Chilean national identity. Their instrumentality, however, still must be understood as separate. Neruda with his "elemental force" and Mistral with her "idealistic aspirations" for Latin America set the terms – gendered – for the poetic nation.

### **I. "Both Volcanic and Maritime"**

In order to properly read these poets, it is important to establish the context that produced them. Neruda attributed Chile's "weakness for poetry" to the nation's "volcanic and maritime"

seclusion (Feinstein 29). Though it shares borders with Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru, Chile is remarkable in its isolation: an account of its geography is drenched in the superlative, as the nation's northern and southern ends are marked by extremes. In the north resides the driest desert on earth, the Atacama, and to the south is the planet's southernmost city: Punta Arenas. To the east, the Andean mountains provide an imposing geographical border between Chile and Argentina; meanwhile the western end of the country is met only by the Pacific Ocean. The fact that Mistral and Neruda developed as national and international figures despite these imposing geographical borders adds to both poets' popular mystiques.

Geography is literal, but also metaphoric, often figuring prominently to describe politics. In this regard, Chile is no exception. After achieving independence from Spain in 1818, Chile would begin to be known as a relatively stable republic, compared to some of its South American neighbors. During Mistral and Neruda's era, however, the struggle between military and democratic rule would threaten that stability, moving the republic from one of calm seas to volcanic eruption. I aim to give a brief history of Mistral and Neruda's Chile, focusing on 1920 onward, as this is when both poets were publishing their first works. This time period was, among other things, marked by growing tensions among the nation's labor force. The global market was suffering from post-World War I depression; Chile in particular relied heavily on its production of nitrate, which was stunted by Germany's production of synthetic nitrate. The nation's middle and working classes gained political sway in the 1920s as a result of the formation of social organizations and unions, but conflicting political beliefs and factions polarized the industrial and mining industries (Rector 119). The fact that Mistral and Neruda were emerging as international figures in the midst of the world's first wholly international conflict and a decimated global economy enriches the study of the two poets: this era was

marked by the search for a unifying Chilean national identity, and that search undoubtedly colors Mistral and Neruda's rendering as cultural icons.

The two major parties in Chile are the Liberals and Conservatives, though those groups segmented and formed new factions at varying times in the nation's history, particularly during Mistral and Neruda's time, as mounting political tensions birthed the formation of the Communist party in Chile in 1922. At the time, Chile needed a leader who could unite dissenting voices in the labor force, and it was Arturo Alessandri who would be elected president from 1920-1925 as a candidate of the Liberal party. Ultimately, however, Alessandri was unable to enact reform due to a conservatively controlled Congress. He eventually resigned on September 9, 1924 after an event known as the *ruido de sables*.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> of that same year, fifty-six military officers had protested their low salaries, rattling their sabers against the walls of the Congressional building in order to voice their discontent with the gridlocked political leadership and to demand action from the president. Alessandri, feeling pressured, elected Luis Altamirano as head of a new cabinet. This would later become known as the *golpe de estado* of 1924, as the *junta militar* took control in the wake of Alessandri's absence. These circumstances presaged the increasing role the military corps would take in Chilean politics in the years ahead.

Former Minister of War Carlos Ibañez del Campo was president of Chile from 1927 to 1931. Seeking to regulate unions under the federal government, Ibañez drastically weakened the Communist Party to which Neruda would later claim membership (Rector 144). The previously mentioned growing middle class supported the military's intervention during the 1920s, but the Great Depression of the 1930s turned the tide in favor of democratic rule. The government was forced to intervene during the Depression, providing welfare and circulating extra currency,

which contributed to increased inflation rates (Rector 139). Reflecting on the global Depression and its effects on Chile in particular, Mistral wrote “I saw such misery there, that my flesh aches to remember it. It makes you want to sob aloud. The rest of the Pacific is worse, it’s a wound... Hunger, filth, and dictatorship” (Horan and Meyer 75). Mistral was abroad in 1930, teaching courses in the United States in the literature and indigenous civilizations of Latin America (Horan and Meyer 54). Her sense of Latin American identity in relation to the global community certainly was developing at this time, and her sympathy for those affected by the economic crisis is palpable in her written reflection. However, the historical event that would have the greatest influence on both Mistral and Neruda during these years occurred farther from home: the Spanish Civil War provided grounds for both poets to take literary and literal action against the fascist regime threatening to take hold there.

Connected to the Spanish Civil War was the formation of the Chilean *Unidad Popular* (Popular Front) in Chile in the 1930s. As fascism was taking hold in Europe, the Soviet Union encouraged Communist factions around the world to broaden their ties to existing political parties in order to strengthen their influence. For the Communist Party in Chile, this meant joining forces with left-wing socialist groups to create the *Unidad Popular*. The *Unidad Popular* sought to “defeat fascism on the international front while, on the domestic front, fighting for the social wages, benefits, and compensation as well as nationalization of vital national industries through an electoral framework” (Dawes 234). It was during this time that Neruda’s involvement in politics was growing substantially. He distributed copies of his controversial collection *España en el corazón* when he traveled to France, and upon his return to Chile, he worked to support the *Unidad Popular* candidate Pedro Aguirre Cerda, who was a friend of Mistral’s (Horan and Meyer 56). It was under the *Unidad Popular* that Salvador Allende, Chile’s first

socialist president, ran a successful presidential campaign thirty years later, in 1970. Allende became the target of the much more infamous 1973 *golpe de estado*, by most accounts the most gruesome event in Chile's twentieth-century history. Neruda himself was nominated as a candidate for the presidency that year, but he ultimately decided to back his competitor.

Allende proved an enormously polarizing president, as his socialist policies conflicted with conservative Congress. This was exacerbated by a growing gap between the wealthy and poor. On September 11, 1973, military and police forces overthrew Allende with support from the United States, as the U.S. feared the growing leftist movement in the Global South. Thousands of Chilean citizens died in the conflict, and, amidst the bombing of the presidential palace *La Moneda*, Allende allegedly shot himself. Within one year, Augusto Pinochet, Allende's army chief, would rise to power, giving way to the most brutal years of military rule in Chilean history. Neruda died just twelve days after the military overtake, and many contend that the fall of Allende contributed to the ultimate decline in Neruda's health, as he witnessed the demise of the government of which he had dreamed.

Meanwhile, Mistral bore witness to Pinochet's reign only symbolically: though she died in 1957, Pinochet leveraged Mistral's conservative image by depicting her on Chile's national currency in the wake of his takeover (Rohter). This event would mark an important moment in the treatment of Mistral and Neruda as bastions of national morality: "After the 1973 coup, Mistral and her religiosity were used against Neruda and his atheism... Any time an official representation of Chilean culture was needed, it was Mistral and not Neruda to whom they turned" (Rohter). This is but one indication of the ways in which Mistral's and Neruda's lives and work were disentangled, and coopted to suit the needs of the national agenda.

## II. Engendering Chile: a Chapter Summary

To give a sense of how Mistral and Neruda – gendered female and male respectively – interacted with and contributed to the developing Chilean national imaginary, in this project I analyze each poet and his or her work individually before comparing the two figures and their corpora directly. In so doing, I am careful to separate the poems’ narrators from their authors, instead reading the poets’ symbolic personae into the works. In the first chapter, I offer close readings of Mistral’s poetry to provide grounds for an analysis of the poet’s public persona compared to her private one. I aim to read Mistral as a poet rather than a “poetess,” and to afford her a complexity unhindered by her inherently feminized public image. To do so, I examine “Dos canciones del Zodíaco” (“Two Songs of the Zodiac”), “Apegado a mí” (“Close to Me”), and “Niño Mexicano” (“Mexican Child”) from *Ternura* as well as “La oración de la maestra” (“The Teacher’s Prayer”) from *Desolación*. I argue that Mistral deploys the archetypes available to her as a woman entering the public, literary world: her poetry is grounded in her performance of the roles of National Mother, Educator, and Sufferer.

In the second chapter, I trace the arc of Neruda’s work, pausing to offer close readings from poems in *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*), *España en el corazón* (*Spain in Our Hearts*), and *Canto general* (*General Song*). My analysis is driven by three poems: “Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche,” (“Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines”), “El general Franco en los infiernos” (“General Franco in Hell”), and “Las alturas de Macchu Picchu,” (“The Heights of Machu Picchu”). I set close readings of these poems alongside a discussion of Neruda’s political activism, paying close attention to how his denouncement of fascism manifested itself through controversial public acts.

In so doing, I aim to offer a symbolic reading of Neruda as the enigmatic love poet, rebellious political poet, and definer of inter-American mythology.

Finally, in the closing chapter of this thesis, I compare Mistral's and Neruda's works directly. Perhaps most revealing in the scheme of my argument is that the poets themselves reflected on their public images in their later collections of poetry. "Las cartas perdidas" ("Lost letters") by Neruda and "La contadora" ("The Storyteller") by Mistral were written just a few years before each poet's death. The poems function as reflections on Mistral and Neruda's anxieties about their public images and their critics. In this chapter I argue that in their turn toward autobiography and self-reflection, the poets' distinctly gendered iconographies ultimately converge to reveal that their mythic statuses as national icons prove unproductive of the nation. However, as this project attempts to do some work in opening up other possibilities for Mistral and Neruda as national and international icons, my analysis ends with more questions than declarations. Specifically, I ask what other scripts are available to Mistral and Neruda that fall outside the lines of these stereotyped roles? And, I argue that a consideration of the poets' public images in the context of gender illuminates the intricacies of their constructed representations.

### **III. Methodology**

Throughout my analyses, I include both the original Spanish versions of the poems I consider alongside their translations in English. While I make note of various moments in which I take issue with a given translator's choices, I also recognize that translation allows for a certain distance that discourages any temptation to collapse Mistral and Neruda's public and private images. The constructed nature of language is a reminder that these authors are read in "translation" in more ways than one – their corpora have transcended national, cultural, and

linguistic boundaries. With that said, I have selected translations that I think do justice to the original Spanish texts and to the authors that produced them.

## Chapter 1

### Reconciling the Private and Public: Gabriela Mistral

When Mistral began publishing poetry in the 1920s, women's voices were just beginning to emerge on the national stage. Early Latin American feminist movements at the turn of the twentieth-century saw women as civic actors that championed traditional Catholic ideals of motherhood and domesticity. Implicit in women's involvement in Chilean politics at the time was the representation of conservative interests. Amidst the emerging women's suffrage movement in the 1920s in Chile, it was taken for granted as a point of debate that women would position themselves against the liberal, anticlerical political party (Pernet 672). Vicky Unruh notes that in the 1920s and 30s, "Latin America's reformist upper- and middle-class feminists lobbied for civil rights and imagined a useful woman citizen as the guardian of national family values through the concept of social motherhood" (2). As women transitioned from mere muses to cultural actors, their presence was governed by a conservatism that marked them as agents of domesticity and, indeed, "social motherhood."

This idea extended to women's involvement in literature: just as gender shaped women's presence in the political sphere, it also dictated how women were to be received as writers. Unruh writes, "Like the modern civic woman imagined by emergent feminist political reformers, the woman writer was to forge her artistic identity through the 'special' qualities of her sex" (11). Accordingly, women's poetry was lauded for its lyricism and its performance of traditional femininity. One can observe as much in the 1926 review of María Luisa Carnelli's poetry collection *Rama frágil*, which Unruh cites:

The verses of this distinguished poetess possess the eminent quality that all poetry should have, and especially those by women: they create emotion softly and

deeply. They have no passionate violence whatsoever; rather a sweet resignation translated in always harmonious, well made, and diaphanous verse. (11)

It would seem that sentimentality was not just a byproduct of women's socialization in a conservative society, but was also a *necessary* component of women's literary production if they sought critical – and State-granted – acclaim.

It is no wonder, then, that despite Mistral's position as a public figure, she was relegated to the private sphere as she occupied the role of National Mother, Educator, and Sufferer. In her work *Passionate Subjects/Split Subjects in Twentieth-Century Literature in Chile*, Bernardita Llanos writes, "The inclusion of women in public life meant a continuation of maternal duties – such as the education of children, tending the sick and the poor... Mistral assumed a public persona between the identities of mother and teacher that enabled her to act publicly as a writer" (36). That is, not only did Mistral occupy these identities of "mother" and "teacher" through her work, but, further, it was these roles that *enabled* her to exist in public consciousness. Women's role in cultivating a national identity was necessarily intertwined with the cultivation of a *domestic* identity, of being at the center of home and family life. As a result, Mistral became an enigmatic figure, torn between her construction of Chilean nationalism and its construction of her. The question, then, is to what degree Mistral both actively deployed these roles to her own benefit and simultaneously was repressed by a national agenda that required these traditional archetypes of its female national icon?

The fact that Mistral had to perform a traditionally feminine identity in order to exist as an early twentieth-century woman writer in Chile illuminates the contradictions that arise between her private and public personae. Accordingly, I argue that Mistral's popularity was dependent on her deployment of these feminine roles. Far from boxing Mistral into a "cardboard

mythology” in which she is read as an obedient agent of feminine national morality, I offer a reading that accounts for Mistral’s performance of traditional femininity as a means to achieve national and trans-national popularity. Ultimately, I argue that Mistral gained her access to the popular by writing about those subjects “allowed” to her by the State, with its still rigid, early twentieth-century parameters on femininity, sexuality, and power.

### **I. Early Life**

Gabriela Mistral was born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga in Vicuña, Chile in 1889. Mistral was not the product of a normative family structure, which is revealing in light of her later choice to “advertise herself” as a champion of home and family life (Fiol-Matta xvi). The poet spent her early years in the picturesque Elqui Valley in the north of Chile, with a mother who supported her and her older sister, Emelina, by working as a seamstress. The girls’ father, Jerónimo Godoy, abandoned the family when Mistral was just three. As a means to support her family, Mistral taught elementary and secondary school, despite the fact that the poet herself only attended school until the age of thirteen. She contributed poetry to literary journals and prose pieces to local newspapers as a means to build her recognition as a writer (Fiol-Matta xvi). Mistral eventually gained national recognition for her collection of poetry entitled *Sonetos de la muerte*, propelling her into an international career that spanned three continents and most of her adult life.

Mistral adopted her pseudonym – a name “derived from the Archangel Gabriel and the fierce mistral wind that blows over the south of France” – in time for her first publication (Aguilera xi). She had employed various other names, among them the ambiguous “Alguien” (“Someone”), “Soledad” (“Loneliness”), and “Alma” (“Soul”) before arriving at her ultimate

choice of Gabriela Mistral (Fiol-Matta xvi). Her use of a pseudonym was unsurprisingly governed by gender politics. In his introduction to Mistral's 1954 work *Locas mujeres* (*Madwomen*), Randall Couch writes, "At this time even upper-class women writers in Chile employed pseudonyms as a screening gesture, a transparent concession intended to preserve the names and reputations of fathers and husbands" (6). The need to conceal identity in the interest of "fathers and husbands" is an early indicator of how expectations of gender would play a prominent role in Mistral's life and work.

## **II. Sexuality: Reading the "Queer Mother"**

In order to complicate the conception of Mistral as a public figure and poet, readers must first consider the contradictions that arise between Mistral's reputation as an emblem of the nuclear family and the details of her personal life. Despite her position as the national mother figure, Mistral's sexual preference has long been a subject of debate. Some scholars refer to the poet as a "closet lesbian" while others adhere to Mistral's own denial that she had relationships with other women. Llanos argues, "In the case of females, deviation from assigned gender identities and socially expected behaviors yields chastisement or criminalization" (37). Llanos goes on to note "[Fernando] Blanco also asserts that the literary canon, as does the Chilean family, incorporates non-hegemonic sexualities only as long as they do not alter the class, ethnic, and ideological imperatives driving the national project" (16). Mistral's life and work offered no such alteration. On the contrary, she continued to further the "national project," despite the possibility that to the State, she might have been an imperfect ambassador of and for its agenda. Further, I would add to Llanos's assertion by acknowledging that not only could "non-hegemonic sexualities" be included in this canon, but also women in general could be included

as long as they performed their gender roles. Mistral did so by presenting in her poetry the conflation of Womanhood with Motherhood and the endorsement of approved positions for females as mothers and educators.

Mistral had one son, Juan Miguel Godoy, who was her adopted nephew. Juan Miguel committed suicide at the age of seventeen by ingesting arsenic, an act that, according to Licia Fiol-Matta, author of *A Queer Mother for the Nation*, “supplied the last missing item in the national fantasy life – the enormous tragedy entailed in the loss of a child – thus sealing the myth of the childless sufferer in Mistral’s iconography forever” (xv). The notion that suffering could be viewed as the “missing item” in Mistral’s iconography is inherently gendered, and raises the question of why Mistral had to be rendered “childless” to cement this “national fantasy life.”

It should be mentioned, too, that the “childless sufferer” image likens Mistral to the sacrificial figure of Mary, which again would be a State-approved public image as women were called upon to endorse the dominant religious ideology. The result in Mistral’s work is a crafted breed of nationalism that fell in line with Chilean Catholicism. Llanos notes an interesting dichotomy between this “Virgin Mary” figure and what she calls the “military male:” “The predominance of the military male and its counter female figure, the Virgin Mary (patron of the Chilean military) reshaped a national gender politics and public discourse in which Catholic ideology and militarism join” (17). The female sufferer is coopted as an emblem of the increasingly militaristic national government – her suffering itself is used in order to propel this agenda. Specifically with respect to Mistral, there is irony in the fact that she is known as the mother figure while simultaneously having endured a tragedy that left her without her only adopted son. Religion becomes the underpinning of national politics just as Mistral becomes a symbol of maternity. Ultimately, as long as Mistral was willing to mobilize this construct of the

woman, mother, and sufferer, her real life and its presentation of potentially problematic contradictions in her identification with these archetypes could be disregarded.

Still others contest the representation of Mistral as the national mother figure: in their introduction to a series of letters between Mistral and Victoria Ocampo, editors Elizabeth Horan and Doris Meyer cite Francisco Ayala: “In practice, I never observed her stopping to take note of any child, except for the day when she officially learned of having obtained the Nobel Prize” (3). This is not to say that Mistral was a fraud, but rather that perhaps the public latched on to an image of Mistral that fit an existing, accepted conception of femininity in public discourse. Regardless, her reputation was symbolically meaningful. The radically experimental, feminist writer and professor Diamela Eltit referred to Mistral as “a uterus birthing children for the motherland,” which implies not only the emblematic status of the mother, but also Mistral’s position as a synecdoche for the motherland, even as she was called upon both to create and be created by it (Fiol-Matta xiii).

It seems Mistral was well aware that her public image was at odds with her personal beliefs. In a letter written to Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo from a collection of the pair’s correspondence entitled *This America of Ours*, Mistral muses, “I’ve been busy with some of those things called ‘propaganda articles.’ They’ve got me on recess here, the office on vacation, and I have to pay those semi-amusing salaries with something” (Horan and Meyer 36). In the same work, Mistral speaks about how her writing has been interpreted within literary criticism: “We die, we poor poets, and they get hold of us to gnaw on our bones in their literature classes, and from that gnawing they live, year in, year out, fabricating classes that let them eat” (Horan and Meyer 36). Mistral’s private musings on the reception of her work and her seeming loss of agency therein begs the question of what sort of freedom was allowed to her as a female in this

male-dominated landscape, and whether she could be more than “educational missionary” and “icon of quasi-maternal suffering” (Horan and Meyer 14).

### III. Mistral and the Motherland: Birthing *Ternura*

The notion that suffering marked Mistral’s entrance into literary discourse in Chile is in line with critical response to her work. In *Critical Passions*, a landmark text in the field of Latin American cultural studies, Jean Franco identifies “two roles available to women in the de facto male public space of Latin America: the maternal figure, whose entry into the plaza is tied to suffering and sacrifice, and the performer/libertine, whose sexuality is a central aspect of her taking the stage” (Horan and Meyer 36). Fiol-Matta would likely place Mistral in the former category, as she describes Mistral as the “celibate, saintly, and suffering heterosexual national icon” (xiv). Indeed, the notion of suffering is present from the beginning of Mistral’s literary career and continues to inform readings of Mistral’s work as conservative. It was her 1914 *Sonetos de la muerte* (*Sonnets of Death*), written about the suicide of an ex-lover, which not only established her on the literary scene, but also mobilized her career in education. Due to the success of the poems, the Chilean Ministry of Education granted her a position as principal, despite her lack of formal education (Aguilera xii). This, of course, would not have been done had the poems lacked artistic merit, but the theme of the collection likely played a role in the ministry’s endorsement of the work. Fiol-Matta, for instance, notes the negligence with which the majority of Mistral’s poetry was met: “Her work was not only barely read but sneered at, because it was ‘sentimental’ and supposedly solely concerned with and aimed at mothers and children” (xiv). The popular to which Mistral had access, then, was and remains a low-brow popular, one easily dismissed as too emotive, indeed excessive, in its focus on the familial.

In studying Mistral's 1924 collection of poetry *Ternura (Tenderness)* it becomes clear that the romances of the "childless" female offer little flexibility to their central actor. In the anthology *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral*, Ursula Le Guin writes that the poems in this collection were "met with the same total popular acceptance that Neruda's love poems met" (53). In other words, Mistral achieved equal popularity with her male colleague only by writing about the romances of the mother/child relationship. This notion of Mistral as "childless sufferer" is perhaps most obvious in her poem "Dos canciones del Zodíaco:"

Un niño tuve al pecho  
 Como una codorniz.  
 Me adormecí una noche;  
 no supe más de mí.  
 Resbaló de mi brazo;  
 Rodó, lo perdí.

I had a child at my breast  
 like a little quail.  
 One night I fell asleep  
 and knew nothing more.  
 He slipped from my arms,  
 rolled away, and I lost him. (*Selected Poems* 48-49)

While these lines might call to mind the death of Juan Miguel, it should be noted that this collection preceded that tragedy by nearly two decades. This makes Mistral's exploration of tragedy and loss in these lines all the more interesting and, I would argue, all the more performative. It seems possible that Mistral could have catalogued rage in light of this imagined tragedy. Instead, she writes of the loss of the child as a simple "rolling away:" "Resbaló de mi brazo" or "He slipped from my arms." Her tone verges on the matter-of-fact: "Me adormecí una noche" has a casual connotation that does not seem to foreshadow tragedy. It would seem that even grief manifests as passive in the poem. Lines later, Mistral writes,

Pregunto, y ando, y peno  
 por ver mi hijo venir.

Ay, vuelva, suba y llegue  
 derechamente aquí,  
 o me arrojó del cielo  
 y lo recobro al fin.

I ask, I walk, I suffer  
 to see my son again.

Let him return, let him  
 climb the skies straight to me,  
 or let me fling myself from the heavens  
 to find him at last. (*Selected Poems* 50-51)

The stanzas certainly are marked by more direct action than the previous ones. However, instead of outrage at the cruelty of circumstance, the narrator of this poem “asks,” “walks,” and “suffers,” as she begs for the child’s return. Additionally, she offers to sacrifice her own life, in effect to commit suicide, to be with the child at the earth’s and the poem’s end. Sacrifice again ties this female narrator to the image of the Virgin Mary and the propagation of the Woman’s relationship to religion as an upholder of the national agenda. The narrator’s embodiment of suffering places Mistral in a position of perceived weakness. By attaching herself to themes of tragedy, suffering, and loss, Mistral enacts the sentimental in a way that furthers the national agenda by containing public, female voices within a few restricted categories.

Beyond “Dos canciones del Zodíaco,” more general themes of motherhood and sentimentality rebound in Mistral’s poetry. *Ternura* is dedicated to and “for mothers and children” (*Selected Poems* 40). To give the English-speaking reader a sense of the scope of Mistral’s Latin American readership, one needs only to turn to the introduction of a 1971 reprinting of *Ternura*. Translator and editor Doris Dana notes, “To this day in every classroom throughout Latin America, wherever little children learn to read and write, their voices haltingly pronounce the syllables of these verses” (41). Mistral’s attention to children in her poetry was

certainly one of the means through which she became integral to the construction of Chilean national identity.

One wonders, though, what might happen if critics more carefully separated the poet from her narrator. The poems of *Ternura* are rife with maternal imagery, but what if readers understood them as signaling Mistral's performance versus perfect transcription of motherhood? "Apegado a Mí" (Close to Me), suggests as much with its singsong quality:

Velloncito de mi carne,  
que en mi entraña yo tejí,  
velloncito friolento,  
¡duérmete apegado a mí!

Little fleece of my flesh  
that I wove in my womb,  
little shivering fleece,  
sleep close to me! (*Selected Poems* 56-57)

The rhyme between the final words of the second and fourth lines "tejí" and "mí," and the playful rhythm of the lines in their totality might explain why these poems remain so ubiquitous in "classrooms throughout Latin America." Despite being easy to memorize and seemingly harmless in content, they do offer important insight to Mistral's performance of motherhood. The poem portrays the mother's ownership of the child in birthing and child rearing. The child is the "fleece of [her] flesh, which [she] wove in her womb." Mistral depicts the biological connection between mother and child, and so by implicit extension, between Woman and Mother. Yet, perhaps most striking about these lines if they are connected to Mistral's biography is that the poet herself (versus the poem's narrator) never "wove" a child in her womb, as she was never a biological mother. This is not to say that all of Mistral's maternal poetry is a farce or sham, but in this instance, in which she underscores the biological connection between mother and child in the womb, she clues in a knowledgeable reader that the verse can be read as performance. Fiol-

Matta writes that these poems “became fetishes, for the national imagery and also for Mistral herself” and that the child subjects of said poetry are “a construction of [Mistral’s] and not to be confused with any actual infants” (98). That she so intricately connects womanhood to motherhood is even more telling, then, of her willingness to perpetuate the State’s ideals on the role of the female.

#### IV. Nurturing the Nation

In “Niño Mexicano” (“Mexican Child”), a poem from the same collection, Mistral’s identities as educator and mother converge to reveal how gender affected her participation in national projects. In 1922, the poet helped develop the public school system in rural, post-revolutionary Mexico (Fiol-Matta xviii). The title “Mexican Child,” then, references both that nation-building project but also the maternal image Mistral carried with her even transnationally. The poem displays the more tangible actions of motherhood: its narrator describes combing “a little boy’s hair,” according to the “eternal custom” of mother caring for child. The poem reads, “Lo alimento con un ritmo, / y él me nutre de algún bálsamo” (“I feed him with rhythm / and he nourishes me with balm”) (*Selected Poems* 65). Its narrator continues, “Yo juego con sus cabellos / y los abro y los repaso” (“And I play with his hair, / part it, caress it”). This act is described as

. . . una maternidad  
que no me cansa el regazo,  
y es un éxtasis que tengo  
de la gran muerte librado!

. . . a maternity  
that never tires my lap.  
It is an ecstasy I live  
freed from great death! (66-67)

Interesting here are the ways in which Mistral depicts a symbiotic relationship between mother and child. Motherhood is not centered solely on a mother caring for a child. Rather, the narrator of this poem presents the child as serving the mother, too. Maternity “frees” the narrator from “great death,” and as mother feeds child, so too does child “nourish” mother. Having noted Mistral’s conscious deployment of the identities she was expected to perform, it is possible that this symbiotic relationship is not a literal one. Rather, Mistral may be alluding to the ways in which motherhood has nourished her as a female writer – it is an identity she plays off of in order to be “nourished” – that is, successful in the public sphere. This brand of maternity “never tires [her] lap,” because it is a metaphorical one, deployed in order to enable her existence in public discourse.

But, the queerness of this position has not been lost on some critics, including Fiol-Matta, who appoints Mistral “a queer mother for the nation.” In the latter vein, Mistral extrapolates these themes of motherhood to the history of the nation, evidencing her performance of femininity within the political sphere. Mistral reclaims an indigenous identity in post-revolutionary Mexico. The “balm” that nourishes her is the “bálsamo del maya” or “balsam of the Mayas” (64-65). In the young boy’s hair she finds “los mayas dispersados” (“my lost dispersed Mayas”) (66-67). Here, Mistral links childrearing to cultural customs and the passing on of tradition, but also surreptitiously to indigeneity in the Americas. The Chilean government certainly backed the notion that women were crucially important in their place in the household in their capacity to raise the next generation of State subjects. Here, though, Mistral exceeds that concept, brushing it against the grain, so to speak. She relates the simple act of combing a child’s hair to a sweeping history of mother, child, and State, and, further, she depicts acts of nurturing as a way to gain access to those roots: aligning herself with national projects – even radical ones

like the reclaiming of an indigenous identity in post-revolutionary Mexico – is predicated on her alignment to *motherhood*. In writing about the development of a post-colonial nation, Mistral writes of the Mexican *child*, and positions her narrator as that child’s maternal, nurturing figure. This further cements the idea that as a female writer, Mistral’s work was tethered to an ascribed femininity – an identity she enacted even as she involved herself with matters of the State.

The necessity of gender performance as it concerns national projects is further evidenced by the poet’s response to the Spanish Civil War. Mistral published *Tala* in 1938 and donated the proceeds from the book to Spanish children displaced and orphaned by the war, making manifest her literary work on motherhood and nurturing. While Neruda wrote a scathing poem that calls for the death and torture of General Franco, Mistral made use of the symbolic, and turned her disapproval into charity for those affected by the conflict. Notable in this comparison are the implicit and explicit ways in which both poets treat this international conflict. As a woman finding her place in a male-dominated literary landscape, Mistral deploys gendered tropes of nurturing and sacrifice as a means to gain access to national projects. Performing femininity, then, was a chore that transcended Mistral’s poetry and affected even her public and political personhood.

#### IV. Teaching Women

A consideration of Mistral’s performance of traditional femininity as it concerns the crafting of national identity is perhaps best served by a discussion of *Lecturas para mujeres* (*Readings for Women*). During her time in Mexico, Mistral edited this work as a foundational text to be used at the Escuela Hogar Gabriela Mistral, a Mexican school “for homemakers” that honored the poet by bearing her name (Marchant 49). Mistral’s participation in the formation of

Mexican national identity is evidence of the same type of contradiction found in her status as the non-reproductive national mother figure. In *Lecturas para mujeres*, Mistral writes: “Y sea profesionista, obrera, campesina o simple dama, su única razón de ser sobre el mundo es la maternidad, la material y la spiritual” (“And whether she be a professional, a worker, a peasant, or simply a lady, her one reason to be in this world is motherhood, material and spiritual”) (Bergmann 212). Despite Mistral’s public position as schoolteacher and writer, here she champions the notion that women’s sole purpose is motherhood. This is an example of what Lila Zemborain in her book *Gabriela Mistral: una mujer sin rostro* terms “problematic maternal representation” (78, translation mine). Zemborain refers to these contradictions as “zones of tension, in which the text cancels itself out... in which the official persona and the hidden persona intermingle to create a problematic maternal representation” (78, translation mine). This is the same contradiction that can be seen in Mistral’s reputation as “childless” despite her adopted son, and as woeful sufferer of a fallen lover despite her disputed sexual orientation. Each of these prefixed identities is gendered, and each allowed Mistral to exist as a public literary figure in a nation that championed normative ideals of femininity.

But Mistral’s work in this text is not purely obedient to those ideals. She ultimately does not denounce women’s role in the private sphere, but rather uses that role to make a declarative statement about the power women have in sculpting national subjects. In her article “The Professional Outsider: Gabriela Mistral on Motherhood and Nation,” Elizabeth Marchant reads *Lecturas para mujeres* as an empowering text for its female readers: “The home, [Mistral] suggests, demarcates a feminized space – one distinctly separate from men’s sphere – over which women have complete control. The home thus becomes a place of resistance to patriarchal order” (51). This use of the domestic as a means to propel female independence is related to

Bergmann's argument about the "available cultural representations of women" and Mistral's "manipulation" of them (202). While the "official" and "hidden" Mistral certainly do exist in conflict with one another, the poet recognizes the power that women have in rearing children and maintaining their homes, and that complicates all the more the task of distinguishing her "propaganda" from her principles.

### V. The Schoolteacher's "Organdy": Performing "La oración de la maestra"

Beyond motherhood, Mistral seemed also to recognize the power inherent to her role as educator. Franco's assertion about the available roles for female writers does not account for Mistral's role as educator and her awareness of the pedagogical temporality of the State – that is, that education was a real means by which women had access to the burgeoning identity of the nation. Accordingly, I would argue that in addition to her status as "sufferer" and "mother," the female body is inherently tied to another, more public role: the schoolteacher. In her 1922 volume *Desolación*, which remains one of Mistral's most popular works, the poet included "La oración de la maestra" or "The Teacher's Prayer" (Bates xix). This poem illuminates its narrator's desire to "mold" her students along with the hand of God and her maternal instincts – a sort of culmination of the public image Mistral held as model woman for the State. The narrator asks: "Dame el ser más madre que las madres, para poder amar y defender / como ellas lo que no es carne de mis carnes" ("Let me be more maternal than a mother; able to love and defend / with all of a mother's fervor the child that is not flesh of my flesh") (*Selected Poems* 22-23). The narrator desires to be more of a mother than mothers themselves – to be able to serve children who are not "flesh of [her] flesh" in the same way their own mothers would. Mistral herself *was* "más madre que las madres" in her position as the ambassador of motherhood for her

nation: she occupied a role that went beyond the individual mother/child relationship and extended to a national context. Her reference to children who are not “flesh of [her] flesh” thus aligns with this iconic status, as she was a motherly icon yet did not have any biological children.

The poem continues, “Hazme fuerte, aun en mi desvalimiento de mujer, y de mujer pobre” (“Make me strong even in my weakness as a woman, and particularly / as a poor woman”) (22-23). “Desvalimiento” can also be translated as “helplessness,” which is perhaps a stronger statement than the translator’s selected “weakness.” In either case, this poem is marked by a sense of surrender. Its narrator submits to a force greater than she is, and asks for some semblance of strength in order to occupy the role of schoolteacher. She asks, “Aligérame la mano en el castigo y suavízamela más en la caricia. / !Reprenda con dolor, para saber que he corregido amando!” (“Let my hand be light in punishment, and my caresses ever more / tender. May I reprimand with regret so that I may know I have / corrected with love”) (24-25). Even in her use of discipline, she asks for the softness that, paradoxically, seems to be a source of conflict for her throughout the poem – the narrator vacillates between tenderness and toughness. Again there is this “tension” that Zemborain notes. Mistral’s narrator asks to be strong “even in [her] weakness as a woman,” despite Mistral’s own iconic status as “Schoolteacher of America.” The poet is in this larger than life role, yet in this poem she still plays on the smallness of the relegation of women to spheres of complacency and submission. If we separate poet from narrator, these contradictions key a probing reader into Mistral’s performance of a stereotypically feminine role. It is worth considering that her invocation of this weak, passive voice, as it sits in contrast to her national status, is a performative act.

This is closely related to Mistral’s “manipulation” of “the available cultural representations of Woman” in order to service the State (Bergmann 202). Indeed, in her private

correspondence, Mistral remarks: “Until the day I die I’ll be bogged down in organdy, the organdy of all the women schoolteachers who take hold of me or write me as something belonging to them” (58). According to editors Horan and Meyer, the use of the word “organdy” was an agreed-upon code between Mistral and Ocampo to indicate Mistral’s grievances about “formal public receptions given for her involving starchy, stiffly dressed schoolteachers, over the course of [a] year-long lecture tour” (60). Mistral complains of being coopted by “women schoolteachers,” of “belonging” to them, yet she writes poetry meant to appeal to them. This suggests that Mistral was torn between her own opinions and sentiments and those willed upon her by outside parties. She laments being “bogged down” by others’ conceptions of her, but ultimately works within and with the dominant discourse that established her as a female national icon. The fact that Mistral might have made this concession in order to sustain herself financially as a writer further supports the notion that only certain conceptions of femininity were valued in Mistral’s context as a female writer.

Mistral’s participation in that dominant discourse means that she seems always to be defined in relation to others: “mother” indicates her relationship to children – be they metaphoric children of the State or her own – “educator” indicates her relationship to students, and “sufferer,” in Mistral’s case, points to the death of her son. Meanwhile, Neruda is never classified as a national father figure or sufferer, even though he, too, endured the loss of his child Malva Marina. While the private elements of Neruda’s life are certainly discussed in public discourse, they do not become a part of his national iconography in the same way Mistral’s do for her. Mistral is allowed to exist in the public sphere, and is even permitted success, but her career as a writer depends upon her propagation of the gender roles set forth for her. Mistral’s case suggests that to gain the sort of acclaim that she did, she had to subscribe to existing notions

of female performativity, and only subtly, or privately, subvert them. With this in mind, I turn to her most famous pupil: Neruda.

## Chapter 2

### Pablo Neruda as Agent and Object of Myth

While Mistral performed the archetype of National Mother and Educator, Neruda performed another, gendered archetype: that of the romantic revolutionary. Neruda's place in the cultural imaginary calls to mind other Latin American icons such as Ernesto "Che" Guevara, hero of the Cuban revolution, and Simón Bolívar, a key figure in obtaining Venezuela's independence from its South American neighbors and from Spain. Fundamental to these men's roles as revolutionaries was the task of gaining national independence from imposing colonial forces. The consequence is that the forging of a Latin American identity is both a catalyst and product of their work. After the fact, all of these men have been commoditized within both national and international culture: their names can be found on t-shirts, coffee mugs, and countless other trinkets. Neruda does not deviate from this script of iconization. In his case, even condominium complexes bear his name (Longo 114). In sum, the romantic revolutionary figure has been rendered mythic in popular culture. He is an idealistic dreamer, rebel, and symbol for a cause greater than himself.

Neruda, statesman of letters, has been iconized as a community builder and poet of the masses. Stephen Tapscott asserts that Bolívar and Latin American Romanticism provided a "dream of an organic Latin American unity, an organized hemisphere with a common historical destiny overriding its differences" that would "remain an attractive ambition, or at least a fertile metaphor, for many later writers and theorists" (5). It would seem that Neruda was one of these affected writers, as the poet has become a bastion for unity and wholeness, his poetry "deploy[ed] to narrate the myth of hemispheric harmony" (Longo 115). In the English-speaking world, however, Neruda occupies a near opposite position in the third millennium. After the

tumultuous 1960s in Europe and the United States, he has been rebranded as apolitical, as the quintessential love poet. Acknowledging this discrepancy, Greg Dawes separates Neruda's critics into two camps: the liberal and the Marxist. The liberal critics have disconnected Neruda's poetry from his politics, relying on an aesthetic reading of his body of work, while the Marxist critics have attributed social, political, and historical context to his poetry. Dawes himself leans toward the Marxist approach, asserting that the most "comprehensive and convincing analyses of Neruda's work" have "placed his poetry in its proper biographical, historical, and political context" (64). In this chapter, I investigate the "myth" of Neruda through a discussion of his reputation as the "romantic" via his love poetry, his "revolutionary" acts of rebellion against the State, both literary and literal, and finally, his epic move onto the national and inter-American stage with his *Canto general*. In so doing, I hope to fall into a third camp of critique by considering Neruda as a product of his literary culture, and separating Neruda the poet from Neruda the symbol. I ultimately argue that Neruda embodies the stereotype of the Latin American man of letters: a conventionally masculine iconography governed by the poet's mysterious romanticism, his assertive, polemical politics, and his role as a key developer of inter-American mythology.

### **I. Early Life**

Like Mistral, Pablo Neruda acquired his name by design, rather than by birth. Also like Mistral, he negotiated a non-normative family structure. Neruda was born Ricardo Eliecer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto in central Chile in 1904. His family would soon relocate to Neruda's hometown of Temuco, in the nation's south. Neruda's mother, Rosa Neftalí Basoalto Opazo, died shortly after giving birth to him, and so the poet grew up with his father, José del Carmen,

his father's second wife, Trinidad Candia Malverde, and two half-siblings. According to Neruda's biographer Adam Feinstein, José del Carmen's multiple romantic loves complicated Neruda's family tree: Rodolfo, his half-brother, was born after a fleeting romance between José del Carmen and Malverde that occurred prior to the marriage of Neruda's mother and father. José del Carmen also had an affair while he was with Malverde that resulted in the birth of Neruda's beloved half-sister Laura.

A largely unremarkable student, Neruda excelled only in his study of French and French Romanticism, in particular. Russian literature, too, would spark a passion in Neruda. Interestingly, it was Gabriela Mistral, then still Lucila Godoy, who introduced Neruda to the likes of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov (Feinstein 21). Neruda was a voracious reader, and began writing poetry at a young age. In 1920, he adopted his pseudonym, becoming Pablo Neruda in full. Mistral and Neruda had in common the judgmental "fathers and husbands" that inspired their name changes: Neruda's switch was probably made in order to conceal his identity from his disapproving father, who viewed writing poetry as an unacceptable career choice (Feinstein 22).

The origins of his adopted name are not totally clear, however. "Pablo" has been attributed to the Italian "Paolo," and also to the French poet Verlaine, who adopted the name at times in print (Feinstein, Moran). The choice of "Neruda" is clearer: it is usually connected to Czech writer Jan Neruda, though Neruda's biographer Adam Feinstein suggests that "Neruda" could also have hailed from pianist Wilhelmina Norman Neruda, whose name appears in a Sherlock Holmes story that would have been within reach (the poet was a fan of detective novels). To complicate matters further, Neruda himself wrote in his memoirs that he chose the

name from a newspaper simply because he liked its ring. Regardless of its origin, the name change marked a pivotal moment in Neruda's self-construction.

## II. The Enigmatic Romantic: *Veinte poemas de amor*

The notion of “hemispheric harmony” and a unified Latin American identity is an inherently romantic one, and can be linked to the more literal romances of Neruda's love poetry. In an Anglo-American context, Pablo Neruda is known primarily as a love poet, as his second published work *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924) brought him international recognition. The collection sold over a million copies and has been translated into numerous languages. In this section, I argue that these poems contribute to Neruda's rendering as a symbolic figure. Relying on a close reading of Poem XV in particular, I aim to show that Neruda's love poetry cemented his place in the cultural imaginary as the romantic dreamer, qualified to mythicize America and its peoples.

In his book *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, René de Costa notes the “romantic exaggeration” with which Neruda spoke about the love poems. In a letter to Chilean newspaper *La Nación*, Neruda wrote, “I undertook the greatest departure from myself: creation, wanting to illuminate words... I have made these poems and I have suffered much in making them” (21). Neruda presents himself as a tortured soul, a construction that can be noted within the poems themselves as their narrator laments lost loves and seems tormented by new ones. Critics still guess at the inspirations for this collection. Neruda cites two women named Marisol and Marisombra as muses for the work – a claim that reads as metaphorical insofar as it depends on the maritime (mar) and a comparison between the light (“sol”) and dark (“sombra”). Moran

points out that there were several other women in Neruda's life, too, and the poems seem to resist any direct reading that attribute them to real-life women (39-40).

The crafting of Poem XV is fundamentally gendered, as its narrator ultimately commands agency over his female subject. In the year of its publication, *Veinte poemas* was hugely controversial: its explicit references to sex and the female body were grounds for its rejection by literary journals and publishers (de Costa, 17-18). This explicitness can be attributed to the "free love" movement that was at the time championed by the anarchist student groups with which Neruda identified (de Costa 23). Neruda published an article called "Sexo" in *Claridad* in 1921 that exposed the misogyny of the movement:

Fuerte y joven, busca un objeto en quien vaciar su copa de salud. Es el animal que busca sencillamente una salida a su potencia natural. Es un animal macho y la vida debe darle la hembra en quien se complete, aumentándose. ("Sexo")

Strong and young, he hunts for an object in which to empty out his cup of youth... He is the male and life should supply him with the female in whom he can find satisfaction. (de Costa 23)

Here, Neruda relates maleness to uncontrollable sexual desire. He refers to the male as the "animal" who is both "fuerte" (strong) and "macho" (masculine). The word "aumentar" is translated here as "to satisfy," but can also mean to grow or to increase, an alternative that would suggest that sexual experience is both a formative and definitive aspect of male socialization. This attitude toward male/female relationships can be observed in the poems themselves, and is an indicator of Neruda's gendered construction as the indeed "macho" man of letters. In Poem

XV, for instance, the female subject has little agency, but instead is coopted as a tool by the male narrator.

Moran's recourse to biography again runs the risk of conflating the writer and his poems' narrator(s). I would suggest that, in the love poems, Neruda constructs a narrator as abstract, symbolic, and enigmatic as the women he addresses, that nonetheless contributes to the "fiction" of Neruda as the mysterious romantic. On the one hand, Neruda crafts the brooding lover, who "can write the saddest lines tonight" over lost love. On the other hand, he idolizes and objectifies the female body. In Poem XV, women remain symbolic and passive in lines such as the following:

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente,  
y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te toca.  
Parece que los ojos se te hubieran volado  
y parece que un beso te cerrara la boca.

I like for you to be still: it is as though you were absent,  
and you hear me from far away and my voice does not touch you.  
It seems as though your eyes had flown away  
and it seems that a kiss had sealed your mouth. (*The Poetry* 15-16)

Neruda's narrator speaks of his muse as one whom he prefers to be "still" and "absent." To be clear, I do not wish to assert that Neruda is a misogynist who seeks to silence his lover. I do want to clarify, however, that predictably, Neruda's love poetry reflects the gender roles of the time in which it was written. Consider, for instance, how his narrator compares women to "flowers," "fruit," and a "butterfly" (*The Poetry* 14). Neruda writes of the woman as the object of the male gaze. Twice removed, he seemingly prefers his voice not to touch his muse. Romantic attachment in effect silences the female, just as the narrator's kiss "seals" her mouth. While Neruda's poetic protagonist does afford some complexity to the female in her transience, he at the same time uses her in a predictable attempt to sort out his own melancholy. In this way, he is

still able to claim agency over the female presence in the poem. Neruda's sentimental love poetry did not override his masculine iconography as a revolutionary and political poet. That is, unlike Mistral, his brooding over romantic love did not lead him to be cast as the suffering singleton, but rather as the mysterious romantic.

The dramatic, romantic character of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* seemingly finds form in the poet's life, hence critics' conflation of the narrator and poet. Dominic Moran writes that Neruda's life was "bursting with the type of incident and upheaval that would look more at home in a Romantic melodrama or Mexican soap opera than in a synoptic and purportedly sane literary biography" (8). The poet's work, which ranges from the initial success of his love poetry to *Canto general*, the meaning of which extends to the whole of his continent, marks him as the unknowable artist who dodges a coherent analysis of his body of work. Moran wearies of attempting to define not only the poet, but also his corpus: "Neruda, whose sprawling, dizzyingly varied *oeuvre* hardly seems to be the work of a single poet [...] defies every attempt at watertight summary or overarching theorization" (10). Neruda's many loves, his complicated involvement in national and international politics, and his vast array of poetic production make for an enigmatic character suited to the epic nature of both *España en el corazón* and *Canto general*.

### III. "The Duty of a Poet": Turning Toward Politics in *España en el corazón*

While Neruda entered the literary scene with his love poetry, he is also known in the Spanish-speaking world as one of Chile's most famous political poets. Neruda's public acts against the political regime mark him in the tradition of the Latin American man of letters: he follows a long line of Latin American revolutionaries whose fights for independence won them

iconic reputations, and also marked them as targets of the governments they opposed. In Neruda's case, this polemic nature manifested itself in his poetry. Neruda was no stranger to using his work as political commentary: he wrote "A las poetas de Chile," in which he took a public stance demanding the release of friend and fellow Chilean poet Joaquín Cifuentes Sepulveda from jail; he published scathing articles in national newspapers, did a public reading of the invective poem "Song to Stalingrad" at a USSR support rally in 1942, and then pushed the envelope further by crafting the "New Song of Love to Stalingrad" as a response to the "public outcry" with which the original was met (Santí 35). In 1945, Neruda was elected Senator under the Communist party for the northern regions Antofagasta and Tarapacá, formalizing his involvement in Chilean politics (Santí 39). Neruda openly denounced fascism, supported Communism, and was forced to flee from anti-Communist Chilean president Augusto Pinochet as a result. But, where did Neruda's political persona, indeed personae, begin?

Like Mistral, Neruda expressed his opinions on the Spanish Civil War through his work, though his were the more explicit protestations of fascism. With respect to Neruda's connection to the war, I turn to *España en el corazón*, originally published on its own but later added to *Residencia en la tierra* in its third section, *Tercera residencia*. Neruda himself distinguished the work as a turning point in the relationship between his poetics and politics. The Spanish Civil War not only changed Neruda's political party identification, but also his work: *España en el corazón* was the first explicitly political volume of poetry that he published. Distributed in three parts, the collection's third installment that most obviously brims with the shift in Neruda's political leanings. When Neruda published *España en el corazón* in 1938, he was serving as Chilean consul to Madrid. He composed the work to show his disgust for Franco, his outrage at

the assassination of his friend and fellow writer Federico Garcia Lorca, and his support for the anti-fascist Republican side of the conflict. Neruda said of the work in an interview,

I began to become a Communist in Spain, during the civil war... That was where the most important period of my political life took place – as was the case for many writers throughout the world. We felt attracted by that enormous resistance to fascism which was the Spanish war. But the experience meant something else for me. Before the war in Spain, I knew writer who were all Republicans, except for one or two. And the Republic, for me, was the rebirth of culture, literature, the arts, in Spain. Federico Garcia Lorca is the expression of this poetic generation, the most explosive in the history of Spain in many centuries. So the physical destruction of all these men was a drama for me. A whole part of my life ended in Madrid. (Feinstein 115)

But documenting this “drama” was more than just a personal endeavor: it was also intricately tied to Neruda’s role as a Latin American poet. Dawes writes, “From Neruda’s point of view... the issue at hand was a ‘People’s War,’ and the poet’s duty [was] to provide a literary rendering of it... He felt an urgency to address the paramount political matters of the day. To concentrate on divergent topics other than the defeat of fascism would be tantamount to avoiding one’s duty as a poet” (235). Neruda felt an obligation to leverage his poetry as a tool to document societal ills. This distinction suggests his subscription to the available role for male intellectuals in Latin America as witnesses in the public sphere. The fact that *not* writing about the Spanish Civil War would be “tantamount” to rejecting his identity as a poet is telling of whom exactly Neruda thought he had to be in order to exist in a public, literary world that valued male intellectuals for their commentary on political events.

A prime example of Neruda's political verse is the vitriolic "El General Franco en los infiernos" ("General Franco in Hell"). The poem refers to the fascist general as "dog of the earth" and "evil one" in response to the murder of Neruda's friend and fellow writer Federico García Lorca (*Residence* 283). In it, Neruda offers an impassioned account of Franco's atrocities as his narrator claims:

Solo, solo, par las lágrimas  
todas reunidas, para una eternidad de manos muertas  
y ojos podridos, solo en una cueva  
de tu infierno, comiendo silenciosa pus y sangre  
por una eternidad maldita y sola.

Alone, alone, for the tears  
all gathered, for an eternity of dead hands  
and rotted eyes, alone in a cave  
of your hell, eating silent pus and blood  
through a cursed and lonely eternity. (*Residence* 284-85)

The voice of the poem relies on the literal, material effects of war in order to dramatize his outrage. Neruda repeatedly brings to his readers' attention the carnage that characterized the Spanish Civil War by describing physical body parts like hands, eyes, blood, and pus. The use of second person directs the narrator's rage toward Franco in particular: "infierno" ("hell") becomes "tu infierno." That is, it is an entity owned or controlled by Franco intimately, as signaled by the use of the informal "tu." In this vein, Neruda's narrator continues,

No mereces dormir  
aunque sea clavados de alfileres los ojos:  
debes estar  
despierto, General, despierto eternamente  
entre la podredumbre de las recién paridas,  
ametralladas en Otoño. Todas, todos los tristes niños  
descuartizados,  
tiesos, están colgados, esperando en tu infierno  
ese día de fiesta fría: tu llegada.

You do not deserve to sleep  
even though it be with your eyes fastened with pins:

you have to be  
 awake, General, eternally awake  
 among the putrefaction of the new mothers,  
 machine-gunned in the autumn. All and all the sad children  
 cut to pieces,  
 rigid, they hang, awaiting in your hell  
 that day of cold festivity: your arrival. (*Residence* 285)

Here, the poem's voice speaks directly to the general. This might be read as a formal address were it not for the informal "tú" conjugations, which instead suggest that the capitalized "General" is scathingly ironic. The narrator commands "you have to be / awake, General, eternally awake," demanding that Franco be held accountable for his actions. The unthinkable is mixed with the mundane in order to sensationalize the brutality of the war: people are "machine-gunned in the autumn." Including the seemingly matter-of-fact, casual mention of the season here acts as a commentary on the way the world has been turned upside down by brutality and violence. It is this explicit manifestation of rage that characterizes this collection, distinguishing it from Mistral's more subtle acts of resistance in response to the war and locating Neruda in the tradition of the Latin American rebel.

#### **IV. Writing the Nation, Writing the Self: *Canto general***

It was *Canto general*, however, that extended beyond immediate political affairs and thus most contributed to Neruda's position as a defining voice of popular American mythology. First published in 1950, *Canto general* is the *General Song* of Latin America, through which the indefinable poet attempts to define his people and the land they inhabit. It is Neruda's most epic work of poetry and one that marks him most clearly as a scribe for his nation's and continent's peoples. In *Canto general*, the myth of the nation, the myth of Latin America, and the myth of the poet converge. Nationalism sustained Neruda in his career as a poet insofar as it provided

him a script to follow as the revolutionary, political man of letters. In his “reclaiming” of America, Neruda writes himself into national legend: in his introduction to a 1991 reprinting of *Canto general*, Roberto González Echevarría notes, “At the core of the *Canto general* is an effort to create an American myth... Because Neruda is a romantic, that myth had to have as protagonist his own poetic self, the individual whose suffering and vision the myth will legitimize” (2). Echevarría notes that Neruda’s “suffering” and “vision,” which are ingrained in his role as the romantic revolutionary, work to “legitimize” the overarching story he helps to construct. It seems logical Neruda would be the primary actor in the myth of his homeland as he, too, has become a mythical character in an inter-American imaginary.

Whereas Neruda’s earlier work was marked by his polemic political beliefs, *Canto general* is a broader attempt to unify what Benedict Anderson would call the “imagined community” of the nation. Santí notes this transition, summing, “The new poems... showed a gradual change, a ‘conversion’ that could be traced to Neruda’s experiences during the war and his increasing social conscience” (32). This “new stage,” he states, “made Neruda think in terms of a wholesale popular mythology” (Santí 33). So determined to perpetuate this “popular mythology” was Neruda that in 1949, the poet denied Hungarian translators permission to publish any of his more tortured, dark work from *Residencia*. Instead, “he had become an outward-looking messenger of the joys of life, speaking to the ordinary people” (Feinstein 243). This statement is in keeping with Neruda’s construction as a poet of the masses, and the themes of wholeness and unity that have been underlined in criticism of his work.

*Canto general* is marked by the poet’s search for a coherent, national and Latin American identity that emerges despite imposing colonial forces. The collection celebrates the heroes of Latin American independence such as Chilean liberator Bernardo O’Higgins, and meanwhile

denounces U.S. corporations like Coca-Cola and the United Fruit Company, which have threatened that independence. In the collection, “we are given mass virtue: the persistent and sometimes unconscious struggle for an America of the people” (Brotherston 119). In Neruda’s struggle for an intelligible continental identity, readers also find “gross simplifications” and “difficulties... in making his vision coherent, in attributing to his various liberators a common cause and allegiance” (Brotherston 120). It would seem that Neruda sought to tie his peoples’ history up in a bow, to craft a trans-national history that celebrated that story’s heroes and denounced its foes. The volume itself is perhaps as “general” as that goal; its content covers the story of the Americas from 1400 to 1949 (Santí 24). Santí quotes Neruda’s own commentary on his intent for the collection: “I wished to cover my country’s physical and human landscape, to define its people and production, its living nature” (27). My analysis of this work takes as its focus *Las alturas de Macchu Picchu*, which for perhaps obvious reasons feels like the pinnacle of this grandiose collection. In reading the poem, I aim to assert that it presents a case for the mythic Neruda who, in his role as the Latin American man of letters, also had to become a national architect and storyteller for his peoples. The work, then, presents a parallel between the formation of Latin American identity and the formation of the poet’s own identity as a definer of his land and people.

Though it is not clear what inspired Neruda to write these poems, at the very least, I feel safe noting that *Las alturas de Macchu Picchu* represents a crucial moment in the work. Some have asserted that Neruda’s 1943 visit to Machu Picchu can be pinpointed as a moment of inspiration for the volume in its entirety (Echevarría 9). In his introduction to *Canto general*, Echevarría refers to the poem as “literature of ascent” that marks a transition in the center of the vast work from lamenting the toils and difficulties of the past to envisioning a utopian future (7).

*Las alturas* comes in twelve parts, which de Costa notes provides a structural parallel to the stages of the cross. This is a fitting comparison, says de Costa, considering Neruda's invocation of an "oracular" or prophetic voice (de Costa 115). The work feels essentially Nerudian in its grand romanticism of nature, indigeneity, and the epic history of the Americas, a quality that Tapscott refers to as the "myth of a lost Utopian unity, often a pre-Columbian Eden" (10).

In the work, Neruda wonders at the men who built Machu Picchu and what can be said of their history:

Piedra en la piedra, el hombre, dónde estuvo?  
 Aire en el aire, el hombre, dónde estuvo?  
 Tiempo en el tiempo, el hombre, dónde estuvo?

Stone within stone, and man, where was he?  
 Air within air, and man, where was he?  
 Time within time, and man, where was he? (*Heights* 56-57)

The repetitive question functions rhetorically. Neruda himself takes on the responsibility of communicating these men's stories and at challenging their disenfranchised position in Latin American history. The poet places himself alongside his reader: he envisions his own rebirth and the simultaneous rebirth of his fellow brethren: "Rise up to be born with me, my brother" (67). As the nation comes into being, so too does Neruda; his identity as a poet is dependent on a national identity. But, importantly, this is a brotherhood – Neruda does not wield an inclusive plural, gendered male, but explicitly addresses men and brothers. Neruda imagines himself speaking for his ancestors:

Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta.

A través de la tierra juntad todos  
 los silenciosos labios derramados  
 y desde el fondo hablad me toda esta larga noche,  
 como si yo estuviera con vosotros anclado.

Contad me todo, cadena a cadena...

I've come to speak through your dead mouths.

let dead lips congregate  
 the silent scattered lips  
 out of the depths spin this long night to me  
 as if I rode at anchor here with you.

And tell me everything, chain by chain... (*Heights* 68-69)

The privileged position Neruda grants himself as the interpreter of his ancestors (“Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta”) lends insight to his attempt to document the history of the continent and his sense that he is entitled to do so. He does this by joining his readers together under the common injustice of colonial force, advocating instead for an indigenous, native, and original identity. Brotherston refers to this as Neruda’s “desire that America may awake and grow in a popular spirit of professedly orphaned brothers and comrades” (127). Gone is the gory outrage of *España en el corazón* or the tortured loneliness of *Residencia en la tierra*. Instead, this poem presents an attempt to rally “orphaned” voices in the name of a greater mythic unity.

If the romantic revolutionary role in Latin America is linked to the formation of an autonomous national identity, the fifth section of Neruda’s *Canto general* is most revealing of his enactment of this archetype. In it is “La United Fruit Co.,” a poem that rebels against U.S. imperialism in Latin America during the Banana War epoch. The United Fruit Company was an American corporation that, by way of its popularization of bananas, came to control nearly a dozen nations of the Western Hemisphere for the greater part of the twentieth-century, dominating the railroad and shipping industries and manipulating federal governments in the region. Neruda sums:

la Compañía Frutera Inc.  
 se reservó lo más jugoso,  
 la costa central de mi tierra,

la dulce cintura de América.

United Fruit Inc.  
reserved for itself the juiciest,  
the central seaboard of my land,  
America's sweet waist. (*The Poetry* 222)

The reference to “la dulce cintura de América” effectively genders the nation as female, calling to mind Mistral’s position as a synecdoche for the motherland and the use of the female body in Neruda’s work. The products of the “costa central” of Latin America are later referred to as the “tesoro” (“treasure”) of the region, “spirited away” from the “submerged” Latin American nations. Meanwhile, Neruda writes of the “collapsed Indians” who fall, “nameless” as “lifeless fruit / dumped in the rubbish heap” (224). Here, defining national identity is linked to the rejection of imperialist forces. Forging a national identity is also a personal endeavor for Neruda in this collection, as he “begins to identify the story of the continent with his own, the likeness of the two becoming ever clearer as the poem develops” (Brotherston 121-122). Because Neruda’s public image is sustained by a national myth, part of his work as a poet is to define that myth. To fill that role, he rejects foreign intervention in the name of an autonomous national identity.

The collection closes with the culmination of this intersection between Neruda’s poetic identity and the identity of the nation. In “América, no invoco tu nombre en vano” (“America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain”), Neruda most explicitly claims his right to speak on behalf of his peoples, and expresses his servitude to that national identity. The poem begins with the titular line, and continues:

duermo y despierto en tu esencial aurora  
dulce como las uvas, y terrible,  
conductor del azúcar y el castigo,  
empapado en esperma de tu especie,  
amamantado en sangre de tu herencia.

I sleep and rise in your essential dawn,

sweet as grapes and terrible,  
 conductor of sugar and punishment  
 soaked in the sperm of your species,  
 nursed on the blood of your legacy. (*The Poetry* 244-245)

Here, the convergence of the poet and his nation, gendered female, is perhaps most clear. The narrator of the poem self-effeminizes, “nursing” on the “blood” of America’s “legacy,” or its national identity. This calls to mind the “maternity” that similarly nourished Mistral. Neruda’s popularity and his mythology are dependent on the mythology of the Americas: for Neruda, interpreting the nation means interpreting the self, as nationalism has sustained him in his career as a poet. Is it any wonder, then, that the poet who has been defined by nationalist ideals would feel obligated to interpret those ideals? That he would conflate his own poetic voice with the voice of his nation?

de Costa asserts that in *Canto general*, “The soul of the poet is united not with nature or with God, as in traditional mystic poetry, but with the continent and its past history” (123). That is, within a Latin American literary identity, the soul of the poet is connected with the continent because the poet is instrumental in forming the identity of that continent. Part of Neruda’s responsibility as the man of letters is undertaking the immense work of transcribing the story of his peoples. As Neruda evolves from controversial love poet to national romantic, he works to perpetuate an American, decidedly continental or hemispheric, myth while also being defined by one. Ultimately, “we do not argue, we accept his dreams, which are our dreams as well. We defend, with him, the utopia of a happy world over and above reality itself” (Longo 11). Readers grant Neruda this power as national architect, and indeed “accept his dreams” as the reality of his nation. His romantic musings on the founding of his country and continent cement his place as the larger-than-life romantic revolutionary, at varying times a target of the State and a key

developer of its identity. He, like Mistral, deploys his assigned iconography, but his is one that allows, indeed calls for, rebellion against the State and the interpretation of its lost history.

It seems fitting that this involvement in matters of the State followed Neruda even to his death, an event that is now marked by various conspiracy theories. Neruda died just 24 hours before he was to flee the country in the wake of the violent coup in 1973. The poet was suffering from prostate cancer at the time, but the official version is that the downturn in his health was brought on by the trauma of the coup and the lethal persecution of many of his friends – including Allende – who opposed it. However, some still contend that Pinochet had Neruda murdered, as he would have been an outspoken voice against the new dictator even in his exile. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that Neruda's funeral became an act of revolution: though Pinochet would not allow for the funeral to be a State-sanctioned public event, thousands of Chileans gathered in the streets, and this became the first public manifestation against the new military government. Brunk and Fallaw would argue that this is in line with Neruda's position as a Latin American hero: "one of the most valuable attributes of a hero or heroine is a dramatic death, and preferably one that can be represented as a martyrdom for the benefit of a national community" (268). The fact that even the poet's death became a vehicle for political action cemented Neruda's symbolic status as the romantic revolutionary, as his funeral made manifest the poet's lasting legacy on his people as a symbol of his romantic ideals.

### Chapter 3

#### Negotiating Selfhood

I have considered Mistral and Neruda in separate spheres thus far, but what would happen if we placed the work of these two luminaries side by side? Perhaps most interesting with respect to such an analysis would be the simple observation that the poets themselves expressed concerns about the identities that they and their work came to represent. “La contadora” (“The Storyteller”) from Mistral’s *Lagar* and “Las cartas perdidas” (“Lost Letters”) from Neruda’s *Memorial de Isla Negra* offer rare, personal glimpses into the poets’ inner conflicts regarding their own popularity. The selected poems are labors of anxiety: anxiety about the poets’ public images, about their critics, and about their respective statuses as public figures in a nation whose literary renown they so contributed to constructing. What is most revealing about this comparison is that, in this mutual effort to unmask themselves later in their careers, both Mistral and Neruda distance themselves from their iconographies. Mistral strays from her model stateswoman image, instead depicting complex and deviant female voices. She expresses weariness at her obligation to tell the stories of State subjects to the point at which she loses herself in the voices of the masses, calling to mind the trope of the sacrificial mother. Meanwhile, in accordance with the convergence I have traced between Neruda’s identity and the identity of the nation, the masculine hero self-effeminizes in the wake of burgeoning U.S. imperialism.

While I acknowledge that both “Las cartas perdidas” and “La contadora” have been received as autobiographical works within a critical context, to read them plainly as such would be to risk collapsing Mistral and Neruda the symbols into Mistral and Neruda the poets. In this

project's aim to separate narrator from author, I have instead considered the poems' voices as a triangulation of the narrator, the poet proper, and the poet's symbolic personhood.

The stylistic differences between *Lagar* (1954) and *Memorial de Isla Negra* (1964) are also of note insofar as they suggest the poets' lingering adherence to their gendered iconographies. As Randall Couch observes in his introduction to the *Locas mujeres* poems, which are housed within *Lagar*, "Mistral's search for elemental diction did not lead her – unlike her diplomatic colleague Neruda – to depart from traditional meter and rhyme" (23). Aside from mechanics, Mistral's "La contadora" is predictably veiled in abstraction and metaphor, while Neruda assumes a direct, confessional tone in "Las cartas perdidas." The poets' styles, which I argue are products of their gendered constructions, are present even in what critics consider to be their most autobiographical works. The subject matter of the poems, however, reveals deviation from gendered constructs in favor of the complexity that archetype often discourages.

Though Mistral does adhere to "traditional meter and rhyme" within the *Locas mujeres* poems, the collection features a sense of rebellion not found in her early work. Critics seem to agree that *Lagar* is Mistral's most complex work, breaking as it does from her earlier romanticism and commitment to religion, which earned her the reputation of being a mouthpiece for the national agenda. Couch contends, "In contrast to her first book, *Desolación*, these poems do not perform loss and longing in a florid or sentimental style... The tone of moral security, of tender didacticism, of speaking from safety on behalf of the childlike and vulnerable, is gone" (1-2). This sense of turbulence can at least in part be attributed to the fact that several of the *Locas mujeres* poems within *Lagar* were written in the midst of World War II. As such, they reflect the chaos Mistral felt both witnessing and being displaced by that international conflict. The most powerful event for the poet during this time, however, was Juan Miguel's suicide in

1943, an event that colored her poetic production thereafter. Mistral's life in the early 1940s was turned upside down by national and personal tragedy. Perhaps it was the resulting disillusionment that led her to break from her submission to nationalist ideals and portray, instead, sardonically termed "mad" women that complicate and challenge static notions of femininity.

Indeed, while Mistral's earlier work is marked by her subscription to available gender roles, in this collection she instead depicts women who are often wandering, displaced, and multifaceted, at times to the point of duplicity. They are *vagabundas* (vagabonds), and they are themselves classic (Greek) myths: Antigone, Cassandra, and Electra are found within this collection's pages. Interestingly, each title features the same attention to archetype that haunted Mistral's life in the public eye: "La Otra" ("The Other"), "La Dichosa" ("The Happy Woman") and "La Abandonada" ("The Abandoned Woman") are just a few examples. This labeling creates distance between reader and subject (the women are not describing themselves, but rather are *being described*) but also suggests that their stories transcend individual experience. Put differently, this collection cannot be reduced to the supposed lowbrow nursery rhymes of Mistral's earlier fame. On the contrary, its poems both take on the nuances of the female heart and mind, but also name and defy the expectations of stereo- or archetype. Though the *Locas mujeres* collection does this probing work, these poems were also her least popular, reinforcing the notion that the model Stateswoman Mistral, and not the complex, tormented Mistral, was the preferred iteration of the poetess.

This sort of anxiety is not limited to Mistral: perhaps most revealing in the scheme of my argument is that Neruda shared this sentiment. Neruda's *Memorial de Isla Negra* was published in 1964, its title an homage to the poet's beloved home by the sea in Isla Negra, Chile. In E.

Rodríguez Monegal's essay "A Personal Poetry," in which he analyzes the introspective nature of Neruda's later work, Monegal calls *Memorial de Isla Negra* Neruda's "partial autobiography in verse" (93). In his move away from the grandiosity of *Canto general*, Neruda does seem to grow into himself, writing simple poetry inspired by his room with a seaside view. The poem expresses a distinct anxiety at the voices of critics, which are depicted as an abstraction from the narrator's private self. Despite his enactment of a markedly less constricting identity trope than Mistral's in the Chilean popular imaginary, Neruda is not exempt from the crisis of identity that accompanies public existence.

It is valuable to consider "Las cartas perdidas" in the context of other poems of Neruda's that also detail the inner division he felt between his private and public selves. Monegal, for instance, cites "Muchos somos," in which Neruda writes: "De tantos hombres que soy, que somos, / no puedo encontrar a ninguno" ("Of the many men who I am, who we are, / I can't find a single one"). In distinguishing Neruda's earlier *Odas elementales* from the 1958 *Estravagario*, which includes "Muchos somos," Monegal writes:

In the *Odas elementales* there is always a turn at the end of every poem that converts pain into hope, death into rebirth, desire into returned love. Here Neruda places in full view, without the sugar-coating of any credo, both the bright and dark aspects of life. Because of this, even his own personality is open to question.  
(103)

Neruda's "credo" can certainly be traced in his work. After Neruda discontinued the reprinting of *Tercera residencia*, he turned to poetry that was, ultimately, "sugar-coated" in its expression of optimism, unity, and socialist politics. When he drops that "credo" in *Estravagario*, readers are left with a far more troubled, introspective collection that calls to question Neruda's private

identity as a man, rather than as a public poet. It is only when he allows the “dark aspects of life” to creep into his work that he expresses doubt about how he has been rendered a symbol for something greater than, and perhaps separate from, himself.

It is important to acknowledge the historical moment in which *Memorial de Isla Negra* and *Estravagario* were written and published. The collections are linked to U.S. intervention in Latin America during World War II and the Cold War in both content and chronology. During World War II, protection of the Panama Canal was of grave importance to the United States, marking the beginning of U.S. interest in the region. As a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Latin American nations severed their ties with Axis powers and became dependent on the United States for trade. This led to inflation and a distortion of domestic Latin American economies as the United States demanded high quantities of natural resources for the war effort. The Lend-Lease Act of 1941 allowed the U.S. to offer large-scale military aid to foreign nations, Brazil being a primary example in Latin America, as a means to protect their interests in the war (“Lend-Lease Act”). Meanwhile, the Cold War marked a transnational effort on the part of the U.S. to contain the spread of Communism.

In “Muchos somos,” Neruda exhibits this political turmoil by referencing popular savior figures like “bomberos” (firemen) and “jinetes” (cowboys):

Cuando arde una casa estimada  
 en vez del bombero que llamo  
 se precipita el incendiario  
 y ése soy yo. No tengo arreglo.  
 Qué debo hacer para escogerme?

Cómo puedo rehabilitarme?  
 Todos los libros que leo  
 celebran héroes refulgentes  
 siempre seguros de sí mismos:  
 me muero de envidia por ellos,  
 en los filmes de vientos y balas

me quedo envidiando al jinete,  
me quedo admirando al caballo. (“Muchos somos”)

When a stately home bursts into flames,  
instead of the fireman I summon,  
an arsonist bursts on the scene,  
and he is I. There is nothing I can do.  
What must I do to distinguish myself?  
How can I put myself together?

All the books I read  
lionize dazzling hero figures,  
brimming with self-assurance.  
I die with envy of them;  
and, in films where bullets fly on the wind,  
I am left in envy of the cowboys,  
left admiring even the horses. (*The Poetry* 475)

These lines suggest the narrator’s own separation from the hero iconography. He “dies with envy” at the “dazzling hero figures” he finds in literature and film. He idolizes the “cowboys,” of course, but also “even the horses.” In other words, even playing second fiddle to the “cowboy” is a fantasy for the narrator in this passage. Here, Neruda seeks to portray the *destruction* of a hero identity within the Latin American male writer: “en vez del bombero que llamo / se precipita el incendiario / y ése soy yo” (“instead of the fireman I summon, / an arsonist bursts on the scene, / and he is I”). In trying to “summon” the hero figure, Neruda’s narrator is left with its opposite: the “arsonist.” His public identity is multifaceted and complex, and he exhibits a lack of control over the conflicting voices within him to the point at which he cannot distinguish “fireman” from “arsonist,” nor can he claim agency over his own being “(Qué debo hacer para escogermé?)”

If he lacks this control, then his status as the romantic revolutionary, the hero of the masses, cannot be so intricately tied to his private persona. It was always an identity that was being manipulated, or unconsciously deployed. It is an external identity, pinned to him as merely

one of the “many men whom [he] is.” The identity that the narrator as Neruda’s spokesperson cannot claim in these lines is a demonstrably *masculine* one. The gendered component of this comparative reading is more clearly pronounced in Mistral’s work, which is unsurprising: Mistral was more constricted in her public identity, so she is of course more perceptible to the limitations and inequality that come with that disparity. While Neruda is acutely aware of being made into an archetype in “Muchos somos,” he does not explicitly cite gender as contributive to this fact. He does, however, write of “cowboys” and “firemen:” strong, heroic, protective figures that call to mind hegemonic masculinity, in these instances, collapsing into the U.S. Empire that was on the rise after two world wars. The mention of stately officials such as firemen and cowboys recalls the historical moment of the poem, suggesting a reference to the U.S.’s tendency to “police the world.” The poem’s voice is not able to claim those official, masculine identities, instead self-effeminizing by plainly stating his “envy” of them and his inability to liken himself to them.

Neruda’s mention of “cowboys” is important within this discussion of competing masculinities. The word “jinete” has its origins in the Spanish cowboys of the Middle Ages and the expulsion of Islam from Spain. In another poem of Neruda’s, he refers to the “jinete imperioso” or “imperious cowboy.” What is to be gained by referring to this foreign cowboy, and not the Chilean “gaucho”? The word choice is tied to the loss of identity insofar as it alludes to colonial imperialism and the oppression of native values. Beyond its connection to Spain, it is difficult to ignore the reference to the American Western genre in the line that describes “los filmes de vientos y balas” (“films where bullets fly on the wind”). Neruda vehemently opposed domineering U.S. conglomerates like the United Fruit Company, so it seems fair to read these “foreign cowboys” as imperialist figures, especially in the wake of U.S. intervention in Latin

America during World War II. Neruda compares himself to men who imposed their own beliefs on others; in other words, to a quintessentially domineering masculinity that relies on military might. Neruda's fear of losing his own identity, then, is inextricable from the loss of an inherently masculine self. Is it any wonder that a threat to national identity would mean a threat to the identity of the national poet? In this moment, the masculine romantic revolutionary identity collapses, and Neruda's narrator recasts himself by standing in envy of these figures rather than equating himself to them.

Monegal connects "Muchos somos" with the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges's "Borges y yo," in which Borges separates himself from his status as a public literary figure. Borges writes of seeing his name on his mail and feeling detached from the moniker. He writes, "yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica" ("I live, I let myself live so that Borges may continue weaving his literature, and that literature justifies me")<sup>1</sup> (Borges 69). In the end, he confesses, "No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página" ("I am not sure which of us is writing this page")<sup>2</sup> (Borges 70). Though not as explicitly revolutionary in his work, Borges was another poet whose literary renown intermingled with his politics. And certainly, Borges and Neruda have their immense popularity in common. So perhaps it is no wonder that they both experienced crises of identity toward the end of long careers in the public eye; the comparison certainly calls to mind this noted conflict between personal integrity and public image.

But where Neruda's identity was dependent on a masculine assertion of trans-national power, Mistral's is linked to her people's dependence on her as National Mother and Schoolteacher. "La contadora" depicts an anguished sense of servitude to sharing others' stories

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Translation mine.

as a public poet. Mistral writes of these narratives: “Sin llamada se me vienen / y contadas tampoco me dejan” (“They come to me uncalled / and don’t leave me once told”). Mistral’s narrator describes how unsolicited stories “corren [su] cuerpo” (“run through [her] body”), and “zumban, hierven y abejean” (“buzz, boil, and bee-drone”). These irritating, yet compelling noises allude to Mistral’s constant responsibility to be a representative voice for her nation. Couch writes of the poem: “one senses Mistral’s fear that her creative individuality had been eclipsed by her work as a spokesperson, that she had become but a shadow of her own myth” (19). The word “spokesperson” calls to mind Mistral’s political presence, as does Couch’s note on the poet’s “*campesino* populism,” a sort of working class appeal lent to her by her *mestizo* race and the poverty in which she grew up. While the poem could be read as a reflection on Mistral’s poetic process and the inspiration for her work, given what is known about her position as a representative of the social ideals of the State, it seems fair to read politics into “La contadora.”

This “*campesino* populism” is most evident in the lines that recall Mistral’s allegiance to those affected by social inequality. Mistral writes: “Los que están mascando bosque / y los que rompen la piedra, / al dormirse quieren historias” (“People who are chewing the forest / and those who break stone / want stories at bedtime”) (*Madwomen* 102-103). These can be read as marginalized voices; those who are left with nothing to “chew” but the “forest.” The laborers who “break stone” call to mind the hungry, working class that ask for representation from public, political figures of their nation. Further, the “mujeres que buscan hijos / perdidos que no regresan” (“women looking for lost / children who don’t return”), most likely refers to the “persecutions, concentration camps, refinements of physical and psychological tortures; forced, mass exodus, insecurity, suspicion, fear, [and] hysteria” that characterized World War II (Couch

18). It seems likely that this is an extension of Mistral's commitment to the children of war, evidenced by her activism in aiding displaced children in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.

Although these are State subjects, the poem goes beyond the political to the personal by portraying its narrator's reaction to those who ask her for "stories." The stories of others are a burden: they "come to [her] uncalled / and don't leave [her] once told" (103). This burden becomes physical when she describes how the stories "[se] tejen y [se] envuelven" ("weave [her] and wrap [her]") (102-103). She writes that she is exhausted ("me rindo") and trapped ("me atrapan") by her role as mouthpiece for others (102, 104). While this could be seen as a Whitmanesque nod to her position as a vessel for a greater calling to poetic production, Mistral was, ultimately, the Mother of Chile – an inherently political position. She was an ambassador to the world, and so political subjects of the State were certainly among these "uncalled" stories for which she felt responsible.

Given Mistral's reputation as the ever-sacrificing National Mother, it is unsurprising that the voices of women and children prove most exhausting to her. These are the stories of "my dead," of "children," and of "women looking for lost / children" (105, 103). Mistral writes of the stories that come to her narrator: "Las de niños, de ser tantas, / en las palmas me hormiguean" ("Those of children, being so many, / swarm like ants on my palms") (104-105). The prevalence of insect imagery is notable: Mistral writes of bees and ants swarming and buzzing, the hives and anthills of which suggest a connection to the "masses." Children's stories are pointed out specifically for their volume, and Mistral says that women "cada noche piden historias / y yo me rindo cuenta que cuenta" ("ask for stories every night / and I spend myself telling and telling"). She writes of "las que se creen vivas / y no saben que están muertas" ("women who think they're alive / and don't know that they're dead") (102-103). This calls to mind one of the final lines of

the poem, which states that the narrator's "own story," despite her "living tongue," is "dead" (107). In "La contadora," female voices and the stories they tell are equated not only with silence, but also with death, which echoes Mistral's position of surrender at poem's end.

In this way, Mistral's poetic voice is ultimately overruled by the voices of others. The burdensome hangers-on in "La contadora" can be read as metaphors for Mistral's dutiful adherence to tropes of motherhood, suffering, and education – those, too, are narratives she was pressured to perpetuate. Accordingly, she grapples with how to leverage the power inherent to her position as a nationally recognized poet and product of her culture. Even to do this contemplative work, though, Mistral had to declare herself "mad," as this is not a space she was allowed to occupy. And so, even in trying to rebel against the dominant narratives available to women by declaring herself one of these "locas mujeres," readers find Mistral in much the same place they left her: in the trope of self-sacrifice, the mother and caretaker of her people and their stories. Even in *Locas mujeres*, a collection that deliberately displays deviant female voices, Mistral remains unable to claim her own, as it has been too clouded by her role as national mother, indeed National Woman, of Chile.

The same attention to archetype can be found in Neruda's "Las cartas perdidas." Although readers can observe Neruda's crisis of identity in "Muchos somos," it is "Las cartas perdidas" that lends the most insight into the poet's sense of separation between private and public selfhood. In "Las cartas perdidas," Neruda's narrator expresses concern about his public status, and detaches himself from that status. He claims that it is separate and distinct from his own "skin," "hair," and "teeth" – the intimate parts of his body that are so privately his that they feel both invulnerable and vulnerable to public critique. There is an especially important moment in which Neruda's narrator wonders at being "prised...open" by others:

Por qué me pregunté, me preguntaron,  
 otro ser sin amor y sin silencio  
 abre la grieta y con un clavo  
 a golpes  
 penetra en el sudor o la madera,  
 en la piedra o la sombra  
 que fueron mi substancia? (*Memorial* 120)

Why, why, I asked myself, and others asked me,  
 does someone else, loveless and ready with words,  
 prise me open and, hammering away  
 with a nail,  
 pierce my wood, my sweat,  
 my stone, my shadow,  
 the elements that are me? (*The Poetry* 682)

Here, others' interpretations and critique manifest as acts of violence. Critics "hammer away," "piercing [his] wood, [his] sweat." The carnal diction of this stanza calls to mind Mistral's statement about the "gnawing on the bones" of public literary figures. Though Mistral was not alluding to her critics, she was referencing her anxiety about the academic market for her poetry and her treatment therein. Both poets attribute a sense of loss to being objects of interpretation: others' projections onto their work feel like physical abuse.

For both poets, it seems, archetype has somehow triumphed over artistic integrity, or at least the two are in direct competition. In "Las cartas perdidas," Neruda's lines call to mind Mistral's grief in "Dos canciones del Zodíaco." Here, Neruda's narrator is desperate, searching, and places himself in a position of weakness:

A quiénes pertenezco?  
 Cómo se hipotecó mi poderío  
 hasta llegar a no pertenecerme?  
 Por qué vendí mi sangre?  
 Y quiénes son los dueños  
 de mis incertidumbres, de mis manos,  
 de mi dolor, de mi soberanía? (*Memorial* 121)

Who do I belong to?  
 How come I mortgaged my being  
 till I don't belong to myself?  
 How come I sold my blood?  
 And who now owns my indecisions, my hands,  
 my private pain, my pride? (*The Poetry* 682)

The poem's voice employs the language of public exchange, asking who "owns" him, and why he "mortgaged" himself. This calls to mind the idea of "selling out" that, previously, readers might only have attributed to Mistral and her direct mention of her work as a propagandist. But it is even more telling in its mention by Neruda: even the rebellious figure that seemed to have free reign on his own self-expression is asking the modern reader to consider how he has had to negotiate his personal integrity with the expectations and desires that accompany being a national literary figure.

Neruda also creates a resonant tension between public image and the most private parts of himself – his "indecisions," his "hands," his "private pain," and his "sovereignty." Neruda's attention to his hands is reminiscent of Mistral's use of the same body part in "La contadora:"

Al pulgar llegan las de animales  
 al índice las de mis muertos.  
 Las de niños, de ser tantas,  
 en las palmas me hormiguean.

At my thumb come those of the animals,  
 at my forefinger those of my dead.  
 Those of children, being so many,  
 swarm like ants on my palms (*Madwomen* 104-105)

The hand is a nod to poetic production – if hands are the literal instruments with which these poets write, then they are also inherently personal, used to carry out the labor of the soul. In both cases, the poets worry that their hands no longer belong to them: Neruda asks who owns his hands, while Mistral writes of hers as being claimed by others' stories - the "animals," the "dead," and "those of children." Here, both Neruda's and Mistral's poetic production – the work

of their hands – is overrun by an intruding voice. Given their demonstrated struggles with their identities in these poems, it seems fair to attribute that “intruding voice” to the pressure of their status as public poets, as speakers on behalf of their nation.

Just as Neruda detaches himself from the roles of the “fireman” and “policeman” in “*Muchos somos*,” in essence rejecting the hero role, he also distinguishes himself from the “lost letters” that lie at the heart of this poem, suggesting he is aware of his separation from his gendered iconography. At poem’s end, the narrator dismisses these aptly named “lost letters:”

Y las pasé de largo,  
sin ofenderme y sin desconocerme,  
como si fueran cartas  
escritas a otros hombres  
parecidos a mí, pero distantes  
de mí, cartas perdidas. (*Memorial* 121)

I skimmed them indifferently,  
neither offended nor slighted,  
as if they were letters,  
letters to other people,  
others like me, but remote from me,  
lost letters. (*The Poetry* 682-683)

The fact that Neruda recognizes critics’ responses as “remote” from him implies an equal remoteness between the poet and his iconography. His ability to detach himself from critique of his work suggests the poet’s awareness of a distinct separation between himself and the romantic revolutionary image that garnered him international acclaim. As in “*Muchos somos*,” in which Neruda is unable to command control over his identity, here he is equally distant from critical reception of his work, which has been defined by this archetypal framework. It becomes clear, then, that Neruda’s public image was never fixed, but rather always attached to him and for that reason *detachable* from him.

### Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that Mistral and Neruda's contributions to the formation of Chilean national identity are governed by the demands of gender performance, which cast women as mothers and educators, and men as traditional men of letters. Just as Neruda was confined by masculine stereotypes of the revolutionary, brooding, and idealistic hero, Mistral was confined by a Chilean femininity that required her subscription to traditional, domestic realms. The love poems in *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* are evidence of the romances of the poster boy revolutionary to which Neruda had access. Meanwhile, the sentimentality of Mistral's work could also be configured as a romance: that of the mother/child relationship, and perhaps also the woeful suffering of an early male death in *Sonetos de la muerte*. As Le Guin notes, "Many of those who wrote about [Mistral] had to tame her, to reduce her, before they could admire her" (xx). Meanwhile, Neruda had neither to be "tamed" nor "reduced," but instead had the equally arduous task of performing fearlessness to become a symbol of his socialist politics and the unity of his people.

However, both poets step outside of these gendered tropes in their later reflections on their lives and work, effectively functioning as poet critics themselves. In "Las cartas perdidas," Neruda recasts himself in the effeminate role, contemplating his loss of an autonomous identity in the name of a greater national fiction. With Neruda's musings on "lost letters," he also signals the ultimate loss of the "man of letters" identity. Meanwhile, Mistral, too, critiques her public construction in "La contadora." In contrast to her earlier maternal or pious poetry, she instead turns to a commentary on her own role as the mouthpiece for national subjects. Mistral writes deviant female voices and claims that her own poetic voice has been overridden by the demands of a national ideal. She resists her role as spokesperson, but ultimately still locates herself within

that paradigm, sacrificing her own voice for the voices of others. In this way, the poets' identities converge: the effeminate role Neruda assumes in "Las cartas perdidas" effectively closes the gap between what has been considered a very distinct gender binary between the poets. In this way, *both* poets are left in moments of critical questioning, detached from ascribed iconographies.

What are readers to conclude from the observation that the poets do not uphold these endorsed images in their later, autobiographical works? The fact that both poets neglect to perform their roles as archetypal national figures reveals the unproductivity of reading these poets along the lines of their respective mythic statuses. Mistral and Neruda's mutual impulse to stray from their public identities suggests that their iconographies were always fictional or imagined: the mythologies that followed them throughout their long lives as poets and diplomats never served the complexity and nuance of both of these writers' epic lives and work. In their service to the development of Chilean nationalism, these myths rely on divisive binaries that discourage attentive, complex readings of the poets' corpora.

Reading Mistral and Neruda together allows for the deconstruction of the false binary that has limited a critical understanding of the two poets. Instead of boxing Mistral and Neruda into their gendered roles, this comparative analysis offers modern readers the understanding that both poets were equally limited by their nation's gendered expectations of its cultural icons. In writing this thesis, I confess that I have had to resist my own temptation to lend more sympathy to Mistral than to Neruda. However, this project's study of Neruda has shown that males are anything but exempt from dominant national narratives. What this comparative analysis has tried to reveal are the distinct ways in which *each* poet's work has been coopted to suit certain scripts of Latin American femininity and masculinity, respectively. But it is only in reading the poets together that readers can understand the distinct ways in which gender has contributed to their

construction as icons – a task that would be impossible if we as critics continued to separate Mistral and Neruda’s lives and work. It is in dissecting the role of the Latin American hero that we can better understand the construction of its female counterpart, and vice versa. Without a discussion of Mistral’s role as the National Mother and Schoolteacher, Neruda’s subscription to the romantic revolutionary archetype would not seem as clear, nor as important. Likewise, by establishing Neruda’s performance as the masculine Latin hero, Mistral’s position as a staunch upholder of conservative femininity becomes all the more telling of Chilean national ideals. It is in understanding how both female *and* male writers become agents of the national narrative that we uncover what gender has to say about public intellectuals’ role in constructing that nation’s identity.

This thesis has attempted to open up space for Mistral and Neruda as key voices of the poetic nation. Accordingly, I argue that modern critics should afford the poets more complexity, accounting for the ways in which their statuses as national and international figures contribute to their poetic production and their reception in both North and Latin American contexts. Readers are in many ways indicted by these poets, as Mistral and Neruda were keenly aware of, and indeed participants in, their renderings as cultural icons. Mistral was weary of readers’ tendency to “gnaw on the bones” of her life and work, while Neruda expressed an intense detachment from his asserted image as a public poet and intellectual. This comparative reading, then, serves as something of a cautionary tale to the modern critic: as the poets expressed anxiety about their reception as public literary figures, Mistral and Neruda *themselves* invite a critical reading that is attentive to the ways in which their iconographies have contained them within certain – gendered – roles and expectations.

In light of this, critics must be attentive to the ways in which, while Mistral and Neruda acted as key developers of Chilean nationalism, they were simultaneously confined by existing national ideals of femininity and masculinity. In what ways do public poets sacrifice integrity and complexity for the sake of a mythic, symbolic status? As consumers of their work, how have readers and critics participated in this process? Most importantly: how can those readers and critics subvert an oversimplified and reductive reading of these authors? Instead of defaulting to the ascription of biography in analyzing the poets' work, I argue that critics should consider the mythic identities that both poets formed as national, political figures. What if, instead of dismissing Mistral as the poetess for mothers and children, critics acknowledged her national personhood as governed by the confines of gender performance? Or if in reading Neruda, critics considered the long line of male revolutionary figures that preceded and presaged, for example, *Canto general*? Such lines of interpretation, I think, would do justice to these two poets whose lives and work cannot be reduced to gendered archetypes, but instead call for attention to the nuance, complexity, and historicity that produced them.

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