

## ‘Con el ropaje de la novela’: Margarita Práxedes Muñoz’s *La evolución de Paulina* as an attempt to (re)negotiate literary forms and contest normative subjectivities

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### Abstract

This article examines a text by the nineteenth-century Peruvian writer Margarita Práxedes Muñoz to explore how she plays with the boundaries of the emerging form of the novel to bring together scientific knowledge and experiences that do not fit normative social models of womanhood. Through an analysis of the text as autobiographical fiction and its portrayal of the figure of the *ángel del hogar* (angel of the house), this article argues that we need to find new ways of reading this type of text that consider how the conditions of production both create and limit the spaces that nineteenth-century women writers have for expressing their lived realities.

**Keywords:** ángel del hogar (angel of the house), autobiographical fiction, Margarita Práxedes Muñoz, nineteenth century, Peru, positivism, science, women writers

[I]t is *form* that should be looked at. Particularly in fiction, the struggle to achieve form expresses the writer’s efforts to construct a coherent scene, a narrative that might overcome the almost metaphysical impossibility of representing the present.

Said 1999: 38

In their ground-breaking study of nineteenth-century women’s writing, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the main obstacle an author faces is to find her own voice and identity outside the confines of masculine discourse. For the woman writing, the challenge of inscribing

herself requires a revisionary process in which ‘she must redefine the terms of her socialization’ (1979: 49). It is precisely the challenges presented by negotiating authorship and socialization that make the Peruvian writer Margarita Práxedes Muñoz’s (1862–1909) *La evolución de Paulina* (1893) so interesting.<sup>1</sup> The text tells the story of Paulina’s struggle to study science and establish herself as a scientist, her relationship with another young scientist Alberto and her subsequent social exile to Colombia, from her own perspective. It also contains a long lecture on the benefits of Comtian positivism for the social body told from the perspective of a Jesuit priest Father Esteban. Paulina’s account of life as a nineteenth-century woman of science in Lima mirrors many of the events in Práxedes Muñoz’s life. Both author and protagonist demonstrate the ways in which women navigate authorship, education and careers in science when confronted with social dictates and official state bars on education for women. These are narratives of non-conforming women struggling to find a voice and place within a national community they strongly identify with but, ultimately, feel they must leave when it does not allow them to occupy a self-determined space. Práxedes Muñoz’s life reflects the problems of shaping non-normative subjectivities within the field of science and the larger social body, while her writing reveals the difficulties of finding a genre within which to express these realities.<sup>2</sup> This article explores how Práxedes Muñoz complicates and resists normative models of femininity and writing through a text that pushes the boundaries of established narrative forms in an attempt to open space for new ways of being and ideas to emerge and take shape.

One of the challenges of conducting research about Práxedes Muñoz is how few traces of her life and writing remain, especially in Lima. What is available demonstrates a life and body of work that run counter to normative social and intellectual expectations for women of her class and time. In Peru she is best known as the first woman to receive a university degree, having graduated from the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos with a

Bachelor of Science in 1890.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, President Andrés Avelino Cáceres presented her with a scholarship to pursue further studies. She took up this funding and left Peru for Chile where it was possible for women to study medicine. After four years as an auditing student in Santiago's School of Medicine, Práxedes Muñoz worked as an assistant in a clinic for nervous disorders in Chile and later moved to Buenos Aires to teach and work in journalism (Basadre 1969). Her arrival in Argentina coincided with that of other non-conforming Peruvians, such as Clorinda Matto de Turner (1852–1909), and former President Cáceres, who went into exile after the ultra-conservative Nicolás de Piérola seized power in Peru in 1895.

In Argentina Práxedes Muñoz was active in scientific circles where she found a community open to her ideas. From 1898 she published a short-lived journal *La filosofía positivista*, which disseminated Comtian ideas, while establishing an intellectual space that developed a positivist agenda for social and political change.<sup>4</sup> The journal addressed issues such as the separation of Church and State; freer immigration policies and the naturalization of foreigners; 'popular' education and free university tuition; and the development of telegraphic and railway connections in the outer regions of Argentina (Omar de Lucia 2009). Intellectuals in Argentina embraced Práxedes Muñoz's brand of positivism and, although the journal was ephemeral, she quickly integrated into the community and became a prominent voice among radicals for national regeneration through positivism (Omar de Lucia 2009).

While Práxedes Muñoz was still living in Peru, her degree from San Marcos resulted in official academic recognition of her abilities in the field of science and served as a point of entry into the public sphere. *El Perú Ilustrado* announced her achievement: 'En la tarde del 24 ha dado la universidad de Lima un paso más en la senda de los progresos, confiriendo el bachillerato a la contraída e inteligente señorita Muñoz, cuya lúcida tesis sobre la unidad de la materia bajo el punto de vista químico, fuera sustentada con brillo' (*El Perú Ilustrado*, 25

October 1890, 994) [‘On the afternoon of the 24th the University of Lima took another step on the path of progress by conferring a degree on the committed and intelligent Miss Muñoz whose lucid thesis on the unity of matter from a chemical perspective was defended brilliantly’]<sup>5</sup>. Although the journal’s editors viewed her work as an accomplishment and a sign of national progress, it has vanished almost completely from Peru’s public archives. No copies of her thesis can be found at the University of San Marcos. In fact, it proved impossible to find any of her longer pieces of writing in public depositories in Lima, though they are available in Argentina and in academic libraries in the United States.<sup>6</sup> What remain easily accessible in Lima are her two scientific articles written for and published in *El Perú Ilustrado* shortly after they announced the conferring of her degree. These texts confirm her scientific training and reveal the ways in which she links moral order and national progress to scientific knowledge and advancement.<sup>7</sup> What is more difficult to locate are copies of her book-length publications which include *La evolución de Paulina* and a collection of essays, *Mis primeros ensayos* (1902). Práxedes Muñoz’s almost total erasure from the Peruvian public archive may indicate how radical and anti-establishment her views were or reflect the tenuous position that women held as writers and scientists.

For much of the twentieth century relatively little attention was paid to nineteenth-century women’s writing produced in Lima. This has changed in recent years as critical studies investigating their lives, work and the sometimes radical nature of their ideas have been published.<sup>8</sup> Although research is emerging about Práxedes Muñoz’s years in Argentina, notably by Omar de Lucía (1997, 2000, 2009), there has been very little examination of her life in Peru and her fiction. There are two notable exceptions to this. The first is a comparative article on Práxedes Muñoz and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera that analyses the treatment of positivism in their novels. Tausin Castellanos (1996) argues that in Lima it was women who took up and debated positivist theory in their work as opposed to its more

practical application which preoccupied men of science with access to universities and laboratories. The focus of Tauzin Castellanos' work is on Práxedes Muñoz's use of positivist theory and ideas in the text's narrative while the emphasis of the present analysis is primarily on the question of form and the complications that arise from attempting to bring scientific ideas and subjectivities to fiction. The second exception is Jorge Basadre's one-page entry on Práxedes Muñoz in *Historia de la República del Perú* (1969: 54). Her inclusion in Basadre's text demonstrates that, although virtually forgotten, she made a significant enough contribution to nineteenth-century literature and science to be included in what is considered one of the most comprehensive histories of Peru. The paucity of critical literature raises the question as to why no one has engaged in a more detailed analysis of her work. Certainly, as Basadre suggests, the argument can be made that her novel lacks in traditional literary merit and this may explain why it has not been taken up in literary studies (1969: 54). However, this argument has been applied frequently to nineteenth-century women's writing and overlooks the issues of form and subjectivities with which Práxedes Muñoz grapples.

*La evolución de Paulina* was published in Santiago in 1893 with a second edition appearing in Buenos Aires in 1897.<sup>9</sup> The text is divided into three discrete parts, which are framed in a letter from Paulina to her girlhood friend Estela. It opens with Paulina narrating her educational and romantic experiences against the backdrop of the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). The narrative voice then shifts to Father Esteban, a Jesuit priest who explains the principles of positivist philosophy. This middle part of the text also contains citations to scientific papers by leading figures in the positivist movement from Europe and Latin America (1897: 222). It also moves away from a fictional form and takes on the structure and narrative of an essay. In the final part, readers return to the voice of Paulina as she writes about her own understanding of positivism, the possibilities it might offer for social change and what she considers to be its limitations.

Though the text was reviewed favourably by Cabello de Carbonera in 1894 it was not hugely successful in Lima and has since received relatively little critical attention. The reasons for this are, in part, fairly straightforward: the text has a soporific effect on most of today's readers and one can imagine that the same was true in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> While Paulina's account of her life is engaging, Father Esteban's lecture on positivism is not engrossing literary reading. For nineteenth-century readers the text would be complicated for other reasons as well. Práxedes Muñoz's representation of female education and sexuality outside the safe confines of family and domesticity would have upset the Limeñan Catholic hierarchy of values. Denegri argues that the relative success of women's writing in late nineteenth-century Peru can be attributed to novels following the genre of the modern Peruvian romance, which was rooted in domestic and sentimental values conceived of as feminine (1996: 41). By negotiating acceptance for themselves and their writing from within the space of a romanticized nation and domesticity, these writers' encroachment on the masculine realm of authorship could be forgiven. To leave this realm was to move beyond acceptable gender and genre boundaries. Práxedes Muñoz makes this double move and this sets the novel apart and complicates it for readers and critics.<sup>11</sup>

Práxedes Muñoz was not the only writer concerned with questions of form and identity at this time. Throughout the reconstruction period (1884–1895) writers and politicians alike grappled with the social, economic and political impact of Peru's losses during the War of the Pacific (1879–1883) and struggled to find ways to re-imagine citizenship and national projects. The novel as literary form and as a tool for social and political transformation also became the subject of intense debate among Peruvian writers in print media and meetings of literary societies. Publications, such as *La Revista Social* (1885–1888) and *El Perú Ilustrado* (1887–1892), printed articles and letters written about the novel in Peru specifically, as well as the European novel. Speeches from *El Ateneo de Lima* (1885–1888) also demonstrate a

preoccupation with defining a Peruvian literary form that would move away from European models and establish itself as autochthonous. Additionally, authors wrote tracts on the desirable content and form of the novel, such as Cabello de Carbonera's *La novela moderna: estudio filosófico* (1892). Peruvian intellectuals did not limit themselves to theorizing about form, but also wrote a significant number of novels during the post-war period. Basadre (1971) lists thirty novels published in Peru between 1884 and 1895 and a further eight published by Peruvians and read in Peru in places such as Sucre, Guayaquil, Santiago, Havana and Madrid. Lima dominated the market both in terms of production and consumption, though some novels were written and published in other cities such as Arequipa. Half of these novels were authored by women. While many of the novels have fallen into obscurity and are no longer available, a number of them – notably those written by women – are still in print.<sup>12</sup>

A significant aspect of both the literary and political debates during the post-war period is their concern with developing a national body, either of citizens or of literature. By engaging in these dialogues Peruvian intellectuals sought to distinguish a progressive national literary form from colonial and European styles and to create something reflecting a modernized nation. Indeed, Manuel González Prada's iconic 1888 speech in the Politeama Theatre is partly about the construction of a Peruvian literature and who was best equipped to produce it. The speech's allusions to a new youthful generation poised to take over from an older one are as much a reference to literature as to post-war politics (1888: 458). The group of writers that emerged in the post-war period took on the dual task of national regeneration and the creation of a national literature. Through writing novels these authors moved the theoretical debate out of literary meetings and periodicals and placed it in the hands of readers. As a result, fiction became an important site for shaping a new Peruvian identity and a different set of values for participation in the nation. As Ward notes, one of the ideas

circulating as part of Comtian positivism in post-war Peru was the notion that literature represented a tool for social transformation (2001: 90). One of the most overt representations of this idea can be found in the prologue to Matto de Turner's 1889 novel *Aves sin nido*: 'en los países en que, como el nuestro la LITERATURA se halla en su cuna, tiene la novela que ejercer mayor influjo en la morigeración de las costumbres' (51) ['In those countries where, as in ours, Literature is in its infancy, the novel must exercise greater influence in the refinement of mores'] (1998: 3). Práxedes Muñoz introduces her text in a similar fashion: 'Al presentar hoy al público los principios de la escuela positivista con el ropaje de la novela, hemos creído cumplir un deber social a la vez que satisfacer una necesidad moral' (1897: 5) ['By bringing the principles of positivism to the public today in the clothing of a novel, we believe we have fulfilled a social duty at the same time as satisfying a moral necessity']. This grouping of positivism, fiction and social obligation demonstrates Práxedes Muñoz's personal project as well as reflecting some of the ideas in larger debates about the place of literature in the post-war period.

Within the larger social and literary context Práxedes Muñoz's contribution to the practice of writing Peruvian novels is of particular interest. Although published in Chile (1893) and Argentina (1897), her novel's historical frame is the period of the War of the Pacific and its aftermath in Peru, while the novel's characters are concerned largely with national politics and the social spaces permitted to women. Through this text Práxedes Muñoz inserts the question of the subjectivities available to women into the debate about how to develop a modernized citizenry. As Paulina makes clear, the prevailing attitudes toward women in Peru were that they should not voice political opinions: 'nosotros las mujeres no sólo no tenemos el derecho de ser oídas por los políticos de nuestro país, sino que ni aun siquiera se nos permite emitir privadamente nuestra opinión' (1897: 13–14) ['not only are we women not permitted to be heard by the politicians of our country but we are also not allowed



to give our opinions privately’]. She argues that this silencing also extends to women who wish to study – particularly law or science – with the result that, unlike in other Latin American countries, such as Argentina or Chile, women who are unwilling to conform to the limited social and political spaces available to them are faced with the choice of exile or going mad (1897: 24–25). We can read this text as a response to those attitudes and structures which created such limited spaces for women in Práxedes Muñoz’s circles. The text’s title and form also directly confront prevailing attitudes about the social and literary spaces that should be available to women. Through its full title, *La evolución de Paulina: novela sociológica*, Práxedes Muñoz negotiates the gap between a growing acceptance of women as writers and their absence in the field of science. Her use of this form allows her to engage with and promote scientific ideas in a fictional genre that diminishes her trespass into a masculine domain. As we saw above, Práxedes Muñoz is clear that her purpose in writing is to introduce the reading public to positivism through fiction. By clothing the principles of positivist science with the form of a novel she produces the *novela sociológica* and bridges the divide established between science and fiction to create something different. For Práxedes Muñoz, this new form, the *novela sociológica*, is not simply about the pleasures of writing or reading but also about social responsibility and moral necessity.

Práxedes Muñoz’s choice of the word ‘ropaje’ or clothing is significant for understanding her investment in writing a fictional text. The 1884 *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* defines *ropaje* as the body’s outer garments and as possibly long, showy and of authority (942). While choosing the form of a novel for her text permits Práxedes Muñoz the authority to speak about science, at the same time it covers a trespass into the world of science and thus functions both to reveal and to hide. Before engaging in an analysis of the text we might first ask why Práxedes Muñoz feels the need to clothe her science in a novel. There are multiple, entangled issues at stake here. First, there is the obvious problem

of the perceived legitimacy of scientific endeavours for women as well as the broader question of the legitimacy of science as a way of knowing about the world. Second, there is a question about how to reach a broad audience with messages about science and non-normative subjectivities that would go against the social grain. Third, there is the issue of the novel being a relatively new form. So the basic problem of writing about science as a woman is further compounded by the issue of how to write about science. Práxedes Muñoz attempts to resolve this through playing with form and creating a hybrid text which she asks us to read as a *novela sociológica*, although she is clear that it is not simply a novel but also a public engagement with scientific theories.

If readers do as Práxedes Muñoz asks then a further question of form is raised. This relates to her presentation of the first part of the text, which can most easily be read as fiction, as a personal letter between the protagonist Paulina and her friend Estela. Just as the *ropaje* of the novel authorized a discourse on positivism, so the epistolary form functions to sanction a woman writing because it draws on the language and intimacy of friendship between women. As a letter the text gives the appearance of being less transgressive until readers notice the content. So just as the novel clothes a lecture on positivism, the letter also clothes socially subversive material that is presented as secondary to the science. The play with form here thus works on more than one level as what happens in the fiction and its structure is as radical as the idea of clothing scientific ideas in a novel.

The epistolary form masks the science and represents an attempt to make the content of the fiction more palatable to its audience, who include Estela, to whom the letter is addressed, and the implied readers. Paulina gains their sympathies by drawing upon an established friendship and thus creates an intimacy with her other readers by implication. She writes, '[v]oy a cumplir una obligación sagrada, mi querida Estela. Impaciente estarás por conocer los misterios de mi alma' (1897: 11) ['I will keep a sacred obligation my dear Estela. You

must be impatient to know the mysteries of my soul’]. This move toward the confidence of friendship between women and the realm of emotions separates Paulina from Práxedes Muñoz’s scientific voice and positivist claims in the prologue. By making this transition Paulina establishes herself within the sentimental realm traditionally assigned to women before beginning to justify her desire to study and leave the feminine sphere. Paulina’s insistence that she fulfils a sacred obligation can also be read as an assurance to readers, who might be concerned about reading a scientific and therefore potentially secular text, that she has not lost sight of the spiritual. This confession might calm fears that a scientific education destroys a young woman’s relationship to Catholicism and its social practices. Paulina navigates between Práxedes Muñoz’s scientific revelations in the prologue and her reader’s expectations about femininity with these lines and attempts to create confidence in her ability to negotiate these areas. Furthermore, as a personal communication, Paulina’s letter to Estela returns her words and ideas to an intimate domestic space and draws on an already socially authorized form in which to speak and validate her experience. By addressing Estela informally as *tú* and calling upon her prior knowledge of Paulina’s life, the letter is meant to win the trust of other readers as it establishes credibility with its fictional audience, Estela.

While presenting the text as a letter may have been intended to smooth Práxedes Muñoz and Paulina’s trespasses into the terrain of science through the medium of an acceptable form of communication between women, it also raises further reading challenges because it does not fit easily within the nascent genre of the novel in post-war Peru. For example, whereas other novels written by women at this time normally feature a third-person omniscient narrator, *La evolución de Paulina* is narrated predominately in the first person.<sup>13</sup> This aspect of the text allows readers unique access into the interior space of a female protagonist and into her thoughts and ideas directly instead of having them mediated by a third party. This narrative technique appears to allow access to what would otherwise have

been strictly guarded under Limeñan social mores. By being the central figure and translator of the drama of her own life, Paulina takes responsibility for its direction, owns her choices and organizes the daily structures of her life outside of domestic relations. She is able to do this after a 'titánica lucha' ['colossal struggle'] with her extended family to avoid a convent and gain the freedom to become a person of science (1897: 21). As an orphan of independent means Paulina escapes some of her family's pressures but she also refuses to comply with social expectations. For instance, she rejects the conventions of religious marriage as apostasy and so does not marry Alberto since civil marriage is not available in Peru (1897: 48). The first-person narrative voice means that readers are presented with a female protagonist as the instigator of action instead of a subject who is acted upon or mediated through male characters. That this narrative voice gives the appearance of direct experience is especially important if we consider the uniqueness of the voice in terms of a search for form and what it says about the possibilities and limits of non-normative feminine subjectivities. This makes the letter an aspect of the text that is important in terms of both structure and content.

Bringing Paulina's interior world into the public sphere involved risking alienating an audience who were accustomed to a different type of reading experience. The apologetic tone of the opening of Paulina's letter to Estela can be interpreted as an attempt not only to pacify Estela but also to develop a conciliatory relationship with readers. This is a quality that critics of nineteenth-century women's autobiography identify as particular to this genre.<sup>14</sup> Winston (1980) analyses this relationship in women's autobiographies from the United States and Britain before 1920 and shows how important it was for these authors to build positive relationships with their audience in order to create spaces for them to write about their non-normative subjectivities and choices. This observation provides us with a way of understanding how Paulina addresses Estela and how Práxedes Muñoz engages with her

audience. Before Paulina can begin to explain herself and validate living outside the social and educational limits established for young women, she must first ensure for herself a readership favourably disposed to hearing her justification. As we have seen, Paulina does this by framing her opening lines in the language of friendship and spirituality, which were standard ways for young women to understand their relationships to the social body. Love between friends is an accepted social form that the novel builds on to create a new one (love of science) that escapes normative ways of being. Establishing a positive relationship with her audience allows Paulina to justify her deviation from normative models of womanhood such as the prevalent *ángel del hogar*. Understanding this dual justification, for the act of writing and living outside of normalizing stereotypes, as a prevailing characteristic of women's autobiography (Winston 1980) aids a reading of this text as autobiographical fiction.

Indeed, interpreting this text from the framework of autobiographical fiction allows us to understand Práxedes Muñoz's complex negotiations with form more easily. For instance, structurally this text shares a number of characteristics with nineteenth-century women's autobiography. Critics have argued that a fragmented and non-linear narrative is a feature of early women's life writing and reflects the structures of these writers' lives. For instance, Jelinek (1980) demonstrates that these works, from the earliest autobiographies by fifteenth-century European women through to contemporary women's life narratives, are frequently interrupted by expository, apostrophes to God, dissertations, quotations from the Bible and anecdotes about others with the effect that these forms and structures mirror the nature of their lived experiences. Pfeiffer (2010) similarly observes that the nineteenth-century Argentine author Juana Manuela Gorriti's autobiographical writing is marked by a lack of internal coherence. *La evolución de Paulina* represents this type of fragmented narrative with its tripartite structure and this has two effects on how the text is received. First, the voice of

Father Esteban creates a different type of authority from which to speak about science. He is both a man and a priest which places him in a social position of power from which he can influence readers accustomed to heeding clerical voices. This positioning deflects potential criticism away from Paulina and permits Práxedes Muñoz to enter into a debate about science and *La religión de la humanidad*. Second, the text's structure reflects back to the reader the fragmentary nature of Paulina's character and its conflicts. Its organization permits readers to enter into the difficulties Paulina has in redefining her subjectivity against the oligarchic norm and to react sympathetically to the conflicts that arise as a result.

The textual features identified above are ones that critics identify as particular to the genre of nineteenth-century women's autobiographies and Práxedes Muñoz's book may have more in common with this genre than with nineteenth-century Peruvian novels (Jelinek 1980; Winston 1980; Pfeiffer, 2010). However, it is not a straightforward process to assign this text to a different genre. If the Peruvian novel was a relatively new form, then women's autobiographies were even less established.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the introduction and prologue to *La evolución de Paulina* ask readers to take the text as a novel. Thus it is difficult to argue that Práxedes Muñoz's text should be read strictly as autobiography. It is, however, possible to read it as an autobiographical fiction that brings together Práxedes Muñoz's experiences with fictional elements and thus moves between genres. Although the known details of Práxedes Muñoz's life are few, they bear a remarkable resemblance to those of her heroine Paulina, which permits an interpretation of Paulina as a thinly veiled fictional recounting of Práxedes Muñoz's experience. Given the limited genres in which women could write (for example, hagiography, educational texts and novels), to write an autobiography, and one calling for radical social change, was impossible and required finding another form in which to represent the realities of lived experiences. A fictional life narrative permitted Práxedes Muñoz to clothe her voice with Paulina's, relate her story and address the issues she viewed as

important without overly offending the social oligarchy. In doing so she writes a different subjectivity into being and voices another way of living as a woman, a writer and a scientifically-minded citizen. The overlap between Práxedes Muñoz and the narrative voice of Paulina permits us to treat this novel as autobiographical fiction and to understand it within the critical framework of nineteenth-century women's autobiography. By shifting the emphasis from *La evolución de Paulina* as a novel to a piece of life writing, the text's aesthetic complications become less important than Práxedes Muñoz's attempt to alter social practices.

As the text and the characters unfold, a series of power binaries, such as masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, science/Church and public/private, become evident and develop in relation to Paulina's education, sociability and freedom. The tensions arising between them are confusing because it is impossible to apprehend or categorize them neatly. Their relationships to one another are never completely transparent as at times they seem to oppose one another and in other instances they appear to be the same thing. This lack of clarity reflects the author and protagonist's internal and external struggles to negotiate social structures and to be self-determining. The reading difficulties that arise serve in part to expose the mechanisms and contradictions of patriarchal social power. These become clear as Paulina attempts to negotiate the binaries of her social world in order to redefine the terms of her socialization. However it is precisely this confusion in the text that allows readers to enter the space between the act of writing, or the structuring of the novel, and the characterization of Paulina. Distinguishing between these two levels permits us to apprehend more accurate visions of the spaces Práxedes Muñoz occupied as a woman writing in the late nineteenth century and those of Paulina, who desires more education and social agency than was permitted to the *ángel del hogar*, but who both still operate within those parameters. The text's lack of clarity reflects the impossibility of finding a form with which to express these

contradictions. Furthermore, Paulina's complications do not fit with the subjective identities found in other print media of the time, but are indicative of some of the ways in which women attempted to negotiate the gaps between idealizations and realities.

*La evolución de Paulina* does not always criticize the practices of the oligarchic social order. Instead, it navigates between them to help Paulina redefine her socialization within established parameters, but with a different understanding of who she is and the spaces available and closed to her in this structure. A good example of how this occurs is in the representation of the *ángel del hogar*. In the literature of the time how women negotiate this figure demonstrates some of the ways in which they navigate the tensions between their writing vocations and social expectations. In 1874 when another well-known author, Carolina Freire de Jaimes (1844–1916), was inaugurated into the *Club Literario de Lima*, Ricardo Rossel's welcome address demonstrated what was required of the woman author who wished to maintain her social standing as a virtuous wife and mother:

[EXT]Ha demostrado que nada hay más sublime, más poético, que la figura de la buena madre y excelente esposa, que terminadas las tareas domésticas, callada la bulliciosa máquina de coser y silencioso el hogar, se sienta cerca de la cuna donde duerme el fruto de su amor y al compás de la suave respiración de su pecho infantil, deja correr la pluma empapada en su santa inspiración. Ella olvida entonces las penalidades de la vida, remonta su espíritu a las remotas regiones donde habitan la Verdad y la Belleza, y cuando desciende de esa encantada mansión, vuelve a sus prosaicas tareas con el alma retemplada por la fe y el amor.  
(quoted in Denegri 1996: 83–84)



[She has demonstrated that there is nothing more sublime, more poetic than the figure of the good mother and excellent wife who, once domestic tasks are completed, the noisy sewing machine has stilled, and the home is quiet, sits close to the cradle in which the fruit of her love sleeps and with the compass of the soft breathing of her child's breast, begins to write with a pen soaked in saintly inspiration. Then she forgets life's hardships as her spirit soars to the remote regions where Truth and Beauty reside, and when she comes down from that enchanted mansion, she returns to her mundane tasks with her soul tempered by faith and love][end EXT]

As Denegri indicates, this image creates an impossible tension for women writing as it requires them to navigate the opposing movements of ascending to Truth and Beauty while descending to the everyday world of domesticity (1996: 84). Práxedes Muñoz does not fulfil these expectations nor does she create a protagonist who straightforwardly fits this image. Instead, through her life and text she makes a case for an education in science, the freedom to enter and leave romantic relationships through civil marriage and divorce, and the separation of Church and State. *La evolución de Paulina* demonstrates the conflicts that ensue when a woman attempts to choose these things instead of conforming to the social expectations and horizons of the *ángel del hogar*.

In the first part of the text Paulina's dismissal of the *ángel del hogar* is complete. She refuses to marry, studies science and rejects the domestic sphere. However as Tauzin Castellanos notes, in the second part of the text Father Esteban's portrayal of women as the guardians of the domestic realm in *La Religión de la Humanidad* appears to contradict Paulina's narrative of her life. This creates a tension between the desire Paulina narrates and

the expectations of her new religion (1996: 95). Father Esteban's account of women's participation in the social and public spheres does not differ greatly from Rossel's:

[EXT]el bello sexo no debe tener otra ocupación que la de santificar el hogar doméstico. Nueva vestal que siempre habrá de alimentar el sacrosanto fuego del amor, la mujer, inspirada por el altruismo, educará el corazón del hombre, dándole lo que no se encuentra en los liceos y las universidades, la inspiración, el sentimiento, en una palabra, la virtud. (1897: 230)

[the beautiful sex should not have any other occupation than sanctifying the home. As the new vestal virgin who should always feed the sacred fire of love, woman, inspired by altruism, will educate the heart of man, giving him what cannot be found in schools and universities, inspiration, feeling, in a word virtue][end EXT]

This image once again places women as representing emotion and virtue in opposition to men's intellect and reason. Tausin Castellanos is right to question Práxedes Muñoz's commitment to emancipating women when she appears to deny them access to the education and freedom that she herself has fought for (1996: 96). However, there is also evidence in the text that makes it possible to read this contradiction as the result of the author's attempts to find a way through the constraints placed upon women by their social and intellectual circles and their desire for self-determination. First, these ideas are voiced by Father Esteban and not Paulina. This is significant because it creates a debate between them, and Father Esteban's words therefore do not necessarily reflect Paulina's thinking. Second, while Paulina does not

challenge Father Esteban directly on these ideas, as she does on others, she suggests that the type of self-abnegation necessary to fulfil this role may be impossible for someone like herself (1897: 230). Finally, the way in which Paulina makes her path and justifies her earlier choices contradicts Father Esteban. As a letter which gives an account of the past, the structure of this text implies that if Paulina were fully advocating the *ángel del hogar* position she would explain her life in Lima differently and with less passion for breaking the norm in order to redefine her place in the social body.

Even if Father Esteban's voice is read as a manifestation of Práxedes Muñoz's and Paulina's ideas, these tensions are found frequently as women write their life narratives. Smith and Watson cite the example of Alexandra Kollontai, whose autobiography reveals similar contradictions. They suggest that 'throughout her narrative the residual imprint of the given model persists even as she insists on the transformation to a new ideological model' (1998: 65). The process is similar in *La evolución de Paulina*. If Práxedes Muñoz, through Paulina, is attempting to redefine women's socialization and bring them both into a new subjectivity, it is unlikely that she could complete this project in one text. To redefine the terms of a debate requires a sustained and ongoing effort. Paulina's character is still young and this text captures her in a moment of transition, when she is working out the terms of her self-definition. In this case, then, the text may reflect the imprint of the *ángel del hogar* while also presenting a new ways of being outside of this model.

A further example of how *La evolución de Paulina* negotiates dualities without reconciling them is in the representation of the separation between the masculine and feminine spheres of influence. A traditional division between these domains is very present in the text and in the worldview Paulina represents. Although she struggles against this divide it is not so much to challenge its existence as the space she is permitted within it. Paulina does not contest the underlying split between emotion and reason but the dictates that exclude

women from the masculine realms of scientific education and political involvement. The split in the narrative voice between Paulina and Father Esteban perhaps best illustrates the ways in which the dualities between feminine/masculine and emotion/reason play out in the novel. The narrative voice's division functions at both the structural and narrative levels. Paulina recounts her experiences and her desires while Father Esteban gives an account of positivism, its history and its scientific and sociological principles, even though Paulina has all of the education and learning necessary to undertake these explanations. It is only after Father Esteban gives his account that Paulina openly engages with positivist principles. This choice by Práxedes Muñoz underscores the problematic nature of her writing act. While, on the one hand, she calls for access to a scientific education and a political voice for women, on the other hand, she resorts predominantly to a masculine narrative voice to explain science to her readers. With the move to Father Esteban, Práxedes Muñoz drops the intimate tone of Paulina's private letter and switches to a scientific essay. In doing so she illustrates the difficulties for a woman to come to voice in masculine spheres, such as science and the essay form, as well as the negotiations and contradictions that women writing outside of normative forms and content had to negotiate to write.

Paulina attempts to live between spaces and to occupy more than one domain in a series of opposing social expectations and possibilities. She is not wholly successful, either in her personal or public life, and remains a fragmented character. However, in creating Paulina, Práxedes Muñoz pushes the boundaries of accepted practice for Peruvian women and authors from the solely private and literary to the scientific and the political. What becomes evident through Paulina's contradictory character and subject position is that Práxedes Muñoz is not completely optimistic about the possibility of reducing the barriers between these dualities. Paulina must divide herself in order to pursue the two things she loves, science and Alberto. Although Paulina and Alberto study together and, in the beginning, their mutual love of

scientific enquiry serves to solidify their relationship, Paulina perceives her failure in the sentimental realm to be the cause of the downfall of the affair. While Paulina imagines herself to be Alberto's intellectual inferior but emotional superior she is disillusioned to discover that his ability to express emotion is actually greater than hers (1897: 52 and 61).<sup>16</sup> She repeatedly refers to her inability to emote at the same level as Alberto, although she also confides to Estela the power of the emotions that exist beneath her rational surface.

The result of Paulina's pursuit of reason, educational mobility and love is a character trapped between the normative expectations of masculine and feminine domains and who feels uncomfortable in both. This account can be read as an attempt to question received truths about who can be intellectual and who can be emotional. In effect Práxedes Muñoz's portrayal of Paulina works to destabilize essentializing characteristics associated with binary understandings of gender. Ultimately, Paulina leaves Lima and Peru in search of a space in which she can pursue her education, recover from her love affair and be surrounded by like-minded people. She finds this in Colombia, where she feels women are permitted to inhabit spaces not open to them in Peru. It is there that she discovers *La Religión de la Humanidad* in which she claims to find a way to reconcile her life with her desire to pursue knowledge.

*La evolución de Paulina* is Práxedes Muñoz's only ostensibly fictional text and provides readers with fertile ground for understanding the complexities and limitations of how women could navigate the spaces between the social, scientific and literary worlds, into most of which they had tenuous entry at best. While the difficulties of this text are numerous – it can be tiresome to read, it contains narrative contradictions, it constantly escapes generic classification – this should not lead to the conclusion that it lacks in literary merit. To declare it a failure would be to overlook its strengths and the social and political work that it does. A reading of failure also means losing sight of how the conditions of production do not allow Práxedes Muñoz's lived realities to be captured in the novel form. The ways in which the text

eludes easy classification reflect Said's observation that it is in looking at the issues of form that we see the difficulties of representation. In effect this text's failure to conform to generic norms is one of its strengths as it is through its textual resistance that it brings to light the problems of non-conformity. If we understand this writing as a space in which Práxedes Muñoz works to come to voice in a patriarchal system of learning, as an attempt to redefine women's socialization and as an experiment with a type of writing completely different from the nineteenth-century Peruvian norms, then we find an innovative text that pushes the boundaries of accepted social and literary values and practices. This attempt to re-negotiate literary form is about both what is acceptable content and the form to give it. Women living socially conventional lives in late nineteenth-century Peru did not write about science, nor did they write about the things Paulina experiences. While the epistolary form can be read as a nod in the direction of conformity, its content is transgressive. Práxedes Muñoz thus plays with the form of a novel to voice what was otherwise unspeakable in her social milieu. In her text Práxedes Muñoz creates an image of a studious woman dedicated to scientific enquiry, whose secular romantic ties can be dissolved, and whose relationship to the Catholic Church is not one of faith and confession. This depiction goes against the grain of the faithful, maternal figure projected by much of Lima's elite. Although her protagonist, Paulina, is not always successful in navigating these issues, Práxedes Muñoz advocates a scientific education and freedom for women as she writes and lives against the grain of the *ángel del hogar*. She thus engages, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, in redefining her socialization and bringing non-normative subjectivities into print.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There is some debate about Práxedes Muñoz's date of birth. Denegri (1996: 125) suggests 1848. However, Tauzin Castellanos (1996: 85) and Omar de Lucia (2009: np) suggest it was circa 1862 which seems more plausible given the other events in her life.

<sup>2</sup> By non-normative subjectivities I am referring to subjects that resist or do not conform to the expected social codes of their time.

<sup>3</sup> Generally, women could not pursue university studies in Peru until 1908, but in exceptional cases, entry was granted based on outstanding achievements (Villavicencio 1992: 54).

<sup>4</sup> Omar de Lucia (2000, 2009) has studied this journal and notes that it is not available in any public libraries in Argentina and that his work is based on access to a private collection.

<sup>5</sup> All translations in this article are mine.

<sup>6</sup> A research trip to Peru in 2002 to the National Library in Lima, the Instituto Riva-Agüero, the University of San Marcos and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú revealed no material as did a subsequent search by an archivist at San Marcos. I obtained copies of *La evolución de Paulina* and *Mis primeros ensayos* from Columbia University (New York). *Mis primeros ensayos* includes a copy of her thesis so it is still possible to access it, though not in its original form, and as Magdalena Chocano (2010) notes it also was published in the *Revista Masónica del Perú* in 1891.

<sup>7</sup> 'Atracción Universal', *El Perú Ilustrado*, 8 November 1890, 1053; and 'Progresos de la teoría evolutiva', *El Perú Ilustrado*, 20 December 1890, 1283.

<sup>8</sup> Denegri (1996), Villavicencio (1992), Batticuore (1999), Mannarelli (1999), Muñoz Cabrejo (2001), Pinto Vargas (2003), Peluffo (2005) and Martin (2010) are examples of this work.

<sup>9</sup> All citations here come from the second edition.

<sup>10</sup> Tauzin Castellanos suggests it may be due to limited copies arriving in Peru, although she does refer to Cabello de Carbonera's favourable review in *El Perú Artístico* (1996: 86).

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<sup>11</sup> Other women writers engaged with the themes of female education and sexuality during the same period. However, they did this within the framework of family and marriage. For examples, see Matto de Turner, *Aves sin nido* (1889) and *Herencia* (1895); Cabello de Carbonera, *Blanca Sol* (1889) and *Sacrificio y recompensa* (1886); and González de Fanning, *Ambición y abnegación* (1886) and *Regina* (1886).

<sup>12</sup> For instance new editions of Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* (1889), *Índole* (1891) and *Herencia* (1895) and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's *Sacrificio y recompensa* (1886) and *Blanca Sol* (1889) are all currently in print.

<sup>13</sup> An exception to this is Cabello de Carbonera's 1892 novel *El conspirador: Autobiografía de un hombre público* which is narrated in the first person, though not by a female protagonist.

<sup>14</sup> Since women's life narratives in Peru before the twentieth century are rare, there is a corresponding lack of secondary literature. For this reason I have turned to critical work from Argentina (Pfeiffer 2010) and from Britain and the United States (Jelinek 1980; Smith and Watson 1998; Winston 1980) that analyses the specific conditions and issues around nineteenth-century women's life narratives.

<sup>15</sup> An exception to this is Flora Tristán's *Peregrinaciones de una paria, 1833–1834*, published in Lima in 1838. This work recounts Tristán's return to Peru from France to reclaim her inheritance. More generally life narratives about women do not emerge in Peru until the early twentieth century and even then these are written by women about other women (see, for instance, García y García (1924) and Matto de Turner (1902)).

<sup>16</sup> There is not scope in this article to explore Práxedes Muñoz's portrayal of Alberto but it is worth noting that this also breaks with normative models of masculinity.



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