

Maternal Agency in Lucía Etxebarria's *Un milagro en equilibrio*

Marina Bettaglio

University of Victoria

La maternidad ocupa, a finales del siglo XX, el lugar que correspondía a la sexualidad en la segunda mitad del XIX: la sede de conflictos que no se pueden enunciar ni pensar.

Silvia Vegetti-Finzi

Awarded the prestigious Planeta literary prize in 2004, *Un milagro en equilibrio* consecrates Lucía Etxebarria among the most prominent Spanish literary figures, while it inaugurates a new authorial persona, that of a mother. For a highly commercial author with a strong media presence, often identified with her depiction of dissident sexualities, writing a first-person narrative from a maternal perspective implies assuming an unexpected identity, in apparent contrast with her previous “impersonations.” Acquiring a maternal role and writing a matrifocal narrative, nonetheless, need not entail a break with Etxebarria’s iconoclasm, as a detailed reading of the novel will point out.¹ This analysis will show that *Un milagro* is more complex than it looks, in that it undermines the potentially subversive maternal discourse it articulates. Examining this novel within the literary and critical production of this controversial writer, I question the feminist claims displayed in this commercialized portrait of transgressive maternity. On its surface, the novel succeeds in its aim to “interrupt the master narrative of motherhood,” which, according to Andrea O’Reilly, is one of the goals of a feminist practice of mothering (2006: 326); but at a deeper level, *Un milagro en equilibrio* reinscribes that master narrative by undoing, even denying, women’s agency in reproduction.

¹ As Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly point out, “A matrifocal narrative, then, borrowing Johnson’s terminology, is one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance, and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and structurally central to the plot” (3)

Although there is no univocal definition of maternal agency, this feminist practice, in its multifaceted aspects, comprises two stages. It begins with “identifying, interrupting, and deconstructing the patriarchal discourse of motherhood”; it then proposes “a counter maternal narrative, one that redefines mothering as an empowered and empowering practice” (O’Reilly 2006: 325). The aim of the *pars destruens* coincides with the general feminist goal of dismantling patriarchal practices. The *pars construens* is more complex because of the specific conditions that long prevailed in Spain, a country in which even in the twentieth century the equation femininity = maternity dominated the imaginary for close to forty years. In the Spanish context, motherhood became a crucial site for the articulation of female identity. Just as Franco’s death constituted a rite of passage that gave life to a new democratic country, so too has the killing of the ancient regime’s mother, a construct of Francoist National Catholicism, heralded the birth of women’s liberation.² Spanish literature thus reflects feminist concerns that are both international and uniquely Spanish; the trajectory of that literature starts with a critique of the discursive forces that shape women’s relationship to reproduction, and proceeds with an attempt to dismantle them.³ Etxebarria’s book is an important anomaly in that development, in that it evinces a seeming willingness to critique and dismantle those forces only to stop short of invalidating them.

Written in a post-feminist context, at a time when Spain has reached the lowest birth-rate in the world, *Un milagro en equilibrio* continues “la reflexión sobre la condición femenina actual” (Nieva de la Paz 202) that began with Etxebarria’s debut novel, *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas* (1997) and developed with her later books. The real innovation of this maternal narrative lies in its apparent, dramatic change in attitude towards reproduction and the mother-daughter bond.⁴ For the first time in her career, Etxebarria now presents mothering as a viable option for women. This theme contrasts sharply with her previous, daughter-centered narratives, which make significant contributions to blame-the-mother literature: in them, the mother-daughter relationships are characterized by a lack of communication and connection that stems from the progenitors’ inability to offer any form of emotional support. While her previous novels explore young women’s relationships to established models of femininity, asking the question: “what does it mean to be a Spanish young woman beyond the constraints of the models and social paradigms assigned by the historical moment” (Bermúdez 2002: 276), *Un milagro* examines new configurations of maternal identity in the third millennium. Aware that “motherhood is an identity or role imposed on the mother” (Ruddick 1), Etxebarria embarks on a project that questions patriarchal constructions of femininity. In doing so, she reveals how in post-Franco Spain

² For an analysis of the role of motherhood in Franco’s Spain, see Roca i Girona.

³ For an outline of the mother-daughter relationship in post-Franco literature, see Arkinstall.

⁴ I borrow the term from Hirsch’s famous essay *The Mother-Daughter Bond*, which analysis the relationship between mothers and daughters in English and American literature.

procreation no longer “spell[s] the death of the woman or girl that once had hopes, expectation, *fantasies* for herself” (Rich 166). Eva Agulló, protagonist and first-person narrator of *Un milagro*, manages to preserve her own selfhood even while she passes on the gift of selfhood in childbirth. Far from being sentenced to the historical silence imposed on the maternal in the Western literary and philosophical tradition, she uses narration as the very basis of her relationship with her newborn daughter. Meanwhile, behind the curtain of the novel, the author Etxebarria turns her character Eva’s maternal experience into a successful marketing strategy.

Hailed as an example of a new feminist discourse on mothering, *Un milagro* exposes the discursive practices that construct dominant paradigms of motherhood. Even as it does this, however, it raises doubts about the possibility of maternal agency in conception. Although it would be tempting to argue that with the birth of her daughter the protagonist and first person narrator of *Un milagro en equilibrio* is herself born anew, the superstitious and fatalistic tone of the novel offers textual clues that undermine its feminist claims. In fact, the conditions in which the protagonist becomes a mother encourage a skeptical reading of this highly commercial novel. Published shortly after the birth of Etxebarria’s real-life daughter, *Un milagro en equilibrio* is a “carta diario” written by the fictional character Eva Asunción Agulló Benayas to her infant daughter Amanda. In its daily entries, this controversial journalist, author of the sensationalistic book *Enganchadas*, which, like Etxebarria’s own *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*, explores the multifaceted world of female addiction, frames a space in which to articulate her maternal experience. In recounting the pertinent episodes of the history behind her daughter’s birth, Eva discloses something of the Etxebarria we have come to expect. With a frankness seldom associated with maternal narratives, Eva strips motherhood of its aura of sanctity, giving voice to a woman whose sexual agency is not censored, thus defying the idea that “[t]he mother is a profoundly desexualized figure” (Benjamin 88). Explicit references to the night of her conception can be found in various places in the narration. In the first diary entry she explains:

¿No es curioso que en todos aquellos años que pasé borracha nunca se me olvidó enfundar en condones los aparatos de mis amantes esporádicos o que, cuando me embarcaba en una relación más larga, no hubiera resaca ni borrachera capaz de hacerme olvidar la ingesta diaria de mi pastillita blanca ni hubiera vómito que arrojara de mi estómago la mágica pildorita ... y, sin embargo, fuese precisamente tras dejar de beber cuando olvidé una noche, disuelta en esa niebla del cuerpo aborto en sus propios misterios, mis precauciones profilácticas y me abrí de piernas y de paso a la posibilidad de que existieras? (19, 20)

More vivid details of the encounter with the girl’s father are described towards the end of the book (408-410), when the maternal discourse gives way to erotic narration. In it

Eva, a name reminiscent of the first, biblical temptress, presents the “woman-mother,” one who displays her sexual agency and thus breaks what Hélène Cixous calls “the taboo of the pregnant woman” (891), the proscription against assigning sexual desire to the maternal body.

Read within the context of a feminist discussion of the relationship between femininity and maternity, Etxebarria’s treatment of maternal desire rejects patriarchal representations of maternal images, that of the Virgin Mary in particular. As Boulos Walker notes, in patriarchy “[w]oman’s desire dissolves before this image of the reproductive mother. Her sexuality is repressed, along with her voice and breath” (135). Eva, on the other hand, rejoices in her sexuality and thus presents a new maternal model, that of a “mujer liberada sexualmente, que dispone de su cuerpo de manera democrática,” as Carmen de Urioste indicates with regard to Etxebarria’s previous novels (2000: 126). Her uncensored portrayal of the moments that led to her daughter’s conception and her insistence on the absence of condoms during intercourse, “el pene trota libre” (411), stand in seeming opposition to the image of the sexless mother, the Virgin Mary. In spite of their differences with regard to sexual matters, the woman who is “alone of all her sex” (as Marina Warner defines the Virgin Mary) and the sexually uninhibited Eva share a common destiny. They both put their bodies at the service of a divine plan, as my analysis will demonstrate. This unrestrained and uncensored attitude towards sexual matters follows Etxebarria’s well-established trend in what Bermúdez calls “the openly ‘let’s-talk-about-sex-while-laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank’ premise that supposedly guides her writing” (2002: 224). The insistence on and indulgence in erotic descriptions undoubtedly contribute to her success as a writer at a time when female-authored erotic literature has become a prominent feature of the Spanish literary market. Therefore the explicit treatment of maternal sexuality serves a double purpose: a feminist agenda that reclaims maternal desire, as well as a commercial scope, the marketability of the “diary” for a young audience.⁵

The novel comprises three sections that mingle the challenges and rewards of maternity with a retrospective narrative that explains Eva’s psychological state before her daughter’s conception. Eva’s vivid narration chronicles the many salient events of her past: her troubled sense of self; her years as a struggling novelist seemingly destined for failure; the unexpected fame she achieved with *Enganchadas*; the scandal and the lost lawsuit surrounding a libelous article that tainted her reputation; an abusive love story she maintained for four years in Madrid; her journey to New York and the self-destructive relationship with a famous jazz musician; and her alcoholism and subsequent recovery, which culminated in her affair with a Romanian graduate student

⁵ As Ferrán and Glenn observe in their introduction to *Women’s Narratives and Film in Twentieth-Century Spain*, “Today, therefore, partly because sex sells, and partly because women have gained an unprecedented degree of freedom, female sexuality is expressed in a much more open, unfettered manner than ever before” (xv).

who rescued her during her summer in the Big Apple and eventually fathered her daughter. The first and second parts of the novel are told through double narration, which mixes post-pregnancy events with the details of Eva's life as a "single" woman. The adjustments to a new social identity as a mother, with the ups and downs of raising a newborn, are interleaved with details of the emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of co-dependent men. In the second and central part, "Este valle de lágrimas," Eva's personal past—her sojourn in New York, her love affairs, and her descent into a spiral of addiction—is recounted along with fragments of the history of her own mother, also named Eva, who is dying; those fragments are pasted together through her aunt's narration. This hotchpotch of recollections confirms a key feature of maternal narratives, that "we learn less about what it is like to mother, than about what it is like to be mothered" (Daly and Reddy, quoted by Podnieks and O'Reilly 2). Because Eva's daughter is so very young, Eva herself tells her life story in such a way as to foreground her own experiences as a daughter, in effect proving that when a woman negotiates her sense of self in first-person narratives, she often finds herself re-negotiating her relationship with her mother.

Revisiting that foundational, at times extremely dangerous liaison often involves a struggle to come to terms with a maternal phantom. When writing as a mother, a female author faces the specter of a sometimes ignored female lineage. Virginia Woolf, who was keenly aware of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, affirmed long ago that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (99). As chronicled in Eva's daily entries, her mother's illness spurs a process of introspection that reveals a conflictive relationship marked by mutual incomprehension. Her narration, in fact, demonstrates how "exploring maternity means first considering the figure of one's own mother [...] and opening up a comparison or a conflict that hinges on some failing, some lack of vital nutriment" (Vegetti Finzi 116). Eva's diary shows a mother-daughter relationship worsening with time as the girl distances herself from her parents in search of a personal space in which she can assert her own individuality without criticism. As a child, in fact, she harboured negative feelings towards her mother:

De pequeña hubo una temporada en la que odié a mi madre con toda mi alma porque no conseguía entenderla y porque me exasperaban sus suspiros, sus enfermedades, sus cansancios y sus lágrimas, y transformé mi amor en odio (394).

Nonetheless, her hostility was mixed with a sense of responsibility, because as a little girl she felt she was in some way responsible for her mother's condition. Therefore, as an adult, Eva experiences ambivalent feelings towards her mother: she cannot stand her, yet she cannot escape the need for that fundamental bond with her.

Juggling the care of her infant daughter with visits to her ailing mother who, struck by severe pancreatitis lies, unconscious in a hospital bed, young Eva is forced to contemplate the past and the future more or less simultaneously; when concentrating on the former, she ponders the enigmatic life of the unfathomable woman with whom she shares her name. Reflecting on her life as an unemployed aspiring writer, Eva must confront her own mother's untold story; therefore, her narration "encodes the silent history of the mother and the matrilineal line within the stories of self" (Hennessy 311). Her mother's long terminal illness has brought to life obscure aspects of the human enigma Eva had never truly known: "mi madre siempre ha sido un misterio" (313). As Eva confesses to her daughter: "No sé nada de mi madre, de tu abuela" (160); she remembers only her health problems and her secondary role within a dysfunctional family towered over by her father. Eva has never truly communicated with her: "[n]unca me he parado a escucharla" (160). The barrier of silence that divides them hides an untold story, that of a woman who, due to "una cardiopatía congénita" (298), had been considered unfit for marriage. As Eva eventually finds out through her aunt Eugenia, her mother had been betrothed to a weak-willed man, Miguel, who, obeying his mother's precepts, refused to marry the elder Eva because people thought that she could not have children. After a long engagement, Miguel left her for a younger woman, Reme, whose brother Vicente Eva's mother eventually married. Pondering this thwarted love, the narrator understands how her mother subscribed to the belief that femininity embodied motherhood and then put that belief into practice by sacrificing her selfhood and health by giving birth to four children.

The last of the four, the younger Eva herself, never knew the full extent of her mother's sufferings, or that her mother had spent her last pregnancy in bed, or that her own birth, protected by the *Virgen de la Asunción*, was considered something of a miracle. Recognizing the effects of divine intervention in her own creation, Eva compares it to that of her daughter and concludes: "Yo nací cuando ella tenía más de cuarenta, muy mayor para parir según los cánones de entonces. Mi llegada fue un milagro, como la tuya" (256). Although Eva is by no means Catholic, her superstitious temperament leads her to believe in the miraculous nature of her own birth as well as that of her daughter's, as she explains to her newborn child. Eva, in fact, had been diagnosed with endometriosis (85) and never consciously thought she could conceive a child. As she explains in the opening pages of this epistolary diary, "conscientemente nunca pensé en tenerte" (19). Her daughter Amanda came into being as a result of what Eva calls "elecciones inconscientes" (19). Not only was there no conscious decision on the mother's part, but, as Eva is keen to point out, her daughter's birth is considered the fruit of a divine plan: "Espero que entiendas que no soy más que el vehículo que la Providencia o Dios o el Uno o el todo o el Orden Cósmico o como quieras llamarlo puso a tu disposición para que tú vinieras al mundo" (38). Abdicating any conscious responsibility for her daughter's conception, Eva wants to make clear that supernatural forces were responsible for the miraculous event. Regarding herself as a vehicle for

mystical intervention, Eva harks back to the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion that considers women as the passive vehicles of reproduction. Her shocking declaration revives the patriarchal notions of women's subordinate function in reproduction criticized by Carme Riera. In her pregnancy diary, the Mallorcan writer challenges the traditional notion of female anatomy as "sólo una especie de cavidad, un poco de tierra a la espera de ser sembrada" (24). This passive notion of the female body is in fact the basis of women's discrimination and inferiority: "dado que a menudo seguimos siendo consideradas sólo receptáculo de la simiente masculina, somos tenidas como inferiores" (25). Against this reductive conception of women, Riera's *Tiempo de espera* theorizes and explains the empowering experience of motherhood to an audience for whom maternity has become more and more a foreign matter.

On the contrary, Eva, in underlining her instrumental role in her daughter's conception—a role that she chanced upon and that was predicted by Tarot cards (85, 219)—validates "a culture based on a denial of female generative power" (Vegetti Finzi 152). Ironically, the author who offers an iconoclastic image of maternity—one that dismantles the angelic figure of the seraphic mother—evokes the Catholic notion of divine intervention in conception. In spite of their apparent difference, the sexually active Eva and the sexless Virgin Mary share a similar story: each is the medium through which a divine plan is carried out. While the Virgin Mary carries a male child who embodies the promise of human salvation, in Etxebarria's postmodern theology Eva is the vehicle for the creation of a female child, Amanda, whose love will save her mother from her profound "vacío existencial" (411). She lives in an age of emptiness, and after years of self-destructive conduct—"matarme a base de copas" (18) and a series of "catástrofes sentimentales" (49) in which alcohol and emotional abuse go hand in hand—Eva eventually conceives her daughter with a man who patiently helped her recover from alcoholism. This self-declared feminist, who lived in search of Mr. Right in the form of famous musicians, eventually settles for an apparently insignificant man symbol of male stability. In her choice of partner and in her reasons for giving birth to her daughter, Eva displays a rather conventional notion of femininity, one that considers children an instrument to fulfill a woman's incomplete existence. As she admits to her daughter: "Te concebí como asidero a la vida, ... te utilicé incluso antes de que nacieras" (399). Reflecting on her past after her mother's death, Eva confesses her self-serving use of maternity. In fact, as she reiterates, Amanda was created as a means to give meaning to her mother's existence: "Te utilicé para llenar mi vida vacía" (399). In the nihilism of postmodernity, Eva embraces a surprisingly familiar version of maternity, one that is not freely chosen but that, nonetheless, is assumed as a way of overcoming her existential emptiness.

In her explanation of the motives that led to her daughter's birth, it is hard to perceive any convincing feminist message. While the book has been celebrated for "setting forth a new model of openness, visibility, and strength for females" (Schumm 154), Eva's candid declarations reveal that her seeming unconventionality is belied by

very traditional notions of femininity. Like the heroines of romance novels, Eva admits having lived in search of a man who would validate her. When during her sojourn in New York she met a jazz musician nicknamed Famoso Músico Negro, or FMN, she fell madly in love with him for what he represented: fame, power, glory, and, most of all, social acceptance. In her words:

[E]l FMN representaba el Santo Grial que yo me había pasado media vida persiguiendo, ... en aquellos tiempos en que trepaba la escala social de Madrid tratando de que me invitaran a las mejores fiestas para ver si allí encontraba a ese hombre rico, famoso, talentoso, glamoroso y además adjetivos terminados en -oso que me gustara, que cuidara de mí, que me hiciera la mitad de una pareja, de la pareja del milenio a ser posible, y que me diera una vida fácil y llena de lujos, una vida en la que el dinero nunca fuera un problema, una vida en la que las entradas y salidas viniesen a colmar el vacío inmenso del que estaba hecha mi historia, una vida en la que experimentara por primera vez sensación de pertenencia, en la que pudiera llamarme “señora de” para poderme decir a mí y al mundo que efectivamente yo era de alguien, una vida en la que los demás me colocaran en un puesto fijo, en la que los otros me reconocieran por mi nombre y así me explicaran quién era, una vida en la que se acusara mi presencia, se registrara mi nombre, se perdonaran mis errores y se atendieran mis necesidades. (310-311)

The allure of a powerful man who can grant her entry into the golden world of glamour and acceptance—acceptance that she sought in vain at home—is of key importance for an emotionally dependent person such as Eva, who seeks validation and vicarious power. Famous, wealthy, and charming, the so-called FMN sums up all the qualities that Eva had looked for in a man. Much like the mythical grail of the Arthurian legends, the FMN appears as a magical solution to her existential woes and lack of confidence.

Revealing an ideology worthy of trite romance novels, the protagonist of *Un milagro en equilibrio*, in spite of her feminist claims, is a weak woman in search of validation and protection from a man who, in a paternalistic way, can grant her a sense of identity as his wife. Eva’s choice of words, “señora de,” is particularly revealing, since it seems to confirm that, beyond the pretense of the independent journalist, there lies a very conventional Austenesque heroine in perpetual search of a postmodern Mr. Darcy. Once the fantasy of her love affair with the FMN is dispelled with a literal slap in the face, Eva suffers the most dramatic crisis of her life, one from which she emerges only because of the loving care of her Romanian roommate, Anton, a seemingly insignificant man who seduces her with his understated charm and, while lacking the social allure of the man of her dreams, wins her over as her rescuer. Although he does

not represent the ticket to the world of celebrities, he does offer the physical and emotional support she has always needed. This introverted graduate student, so different from the glamorous jazz musician who offered her champagne in bed in the morning and bought her expensive designer clothes, wins her over with his chicken soups, dinner table conversations, and loving care. While the musicians she liked so much represented “energía, movimiento, exaltación” (399), Anton “representaba todo lo contrario: tranquilidad, sosiego, paz... inmovilidad” (399). After a life of excess, Eva needs tranquility; thus, after the commotion of her youth, she settles down in a soothing relationship which represents the victory of conformity over excess and transgression. The former Goth girl, who in her youth wore “túnicas negras hasta los tobillos y ... Muñequeras de pinchos, emulando a Robert Smith y a Siouxsie” (13), opts for a more traditional lifestyle and chooses a man who had spent most of his life caring for his alcoholic mother back in Romania and studying in Canada and the U.S.

Her life story, narrated in order to nurture her daughter’s self-esteem, reveals a fragile woman incapable of making any conscious decisions without consulting fortune tellers. Her transformational journey to New York that leads to her daughter’s conception is decided on the basis of the divinations of Tarot cards and a premonitory dream. If, on the surface, Etxebarria seems to “renegotiate women’s role as mother” (Bourland Ross 147), her discourse fails to propose an alternative maternal model, one that can be truly empowering for women. While on the one hand it can be said to articulate a social critique of the role of women in post-Franco Spain by rejecting the traditional image of the abnegated self-less mother represented by Eva’s progenitor, on the other it undermines women’s creativity and agency in reproduction. In this sense, a comparative analysis of Riera’s pregnancy diary *Tiempo de espera* and *Un milagro* reveals that there is more than meets the eye in Etxebarria’s unmasking of motherhood. Comparing her own gestational experience to the sense of serenity that emerges from the pages of Carme Riera’s pregnancy diary, Eva turns to popular culture to express the hardships she experienced: “Me sentía como el teniente Ripley teniendo que manejar una nave en la que se había colado un alien, con la diferencia que no contaba ni con el valor ni con la resistencia física de la heroína galáctica” (37). This is one of several textual clues that point to the lack of women’s agency in reproduction. In fact, comparing her situation to an alien invasion, Eva evokes de Beauvoir’s pessimistic notion of the foetus as “a parasite that feeds on it,” i.e. the maternal body (495). According to the French feminist, pregnancy denies women agency, since during this period a woman is “possessed” by her foetus (495). “She feels that she is no longer anything” (495). Her loss of individuality and agency is emphasized in her passive role in this “drama that is acted out within the woman herself” (495). When compared to artistic creation, reproduction for de Beauvoir is a process in which women appear only as “life’s passive instrument” (495). Likewise, Etxebarria reinforces women’s passivity in gestation when she tells her daughter that she was only the instrument, “el vehículo,” of her creation. Although, as Eva points out, Riera’s pregnancy diary describes

pregnancy in idealized terms as “una especie de remanso idílico de días huecos y redondos, una paz derivada de la conexión mística entre la madre y el bebé” (37), behind this poetic description of gestation we find a celebration of women’s unique generative power. In its pages, Riera proclaims the cause of motherhood, not as an alienating service to the cause of patriarchy, as de Beauvoir had indicated, but as an empowering female experience. “Es necesario que el sufrimiento y la carga sean superados por el gozo y el placer de la maternidad” (62). The all-too-familiar image of the suffering mother, the *mater dolorosa*, is supplanted by a joyous and sensual female subject who lives her sexuality and reproduction with intelligence and pleasure. Echoing Luisa Muraro’s feminist stance with regard to the need to establish *L’ordine simbolico della madre*, a maternal symbolic order, Riera explains:

Llevamos demasiados siglos pariendo con dolor. Ha llegado la hora de transgredir ese dolor y transformarlo, de pasar de la casi inconsciente gestación a la experiencia de una maternidad consciente, asumida desde la inteligencia. Tengamos o no tengamos hijos, la posibilidad recreadora, la posibilidad maternal está escrita en nuestro código genético. Estériles o prolíficas, todas las mujeres nacemos con ovarios y con útero. Deberíamos aprender a reivindicar y a valorar mucho más nuestra condición. A mirar el mundo con ojos maternos. (61-62)

While Riera insists on the need to be an active participant in gestation, to transform it from an “unconscious” experience to a consciously and intelligently chosen one, Etxebarria, who presents a seemingly more transgressive mother, nonetheless shows a woman who still considers her gestation as an event alien to her responsibility and decision.

On the one hand, *Un milagro* challenges the pervasive “image of a desexualized mother” (Benjamin 91) that informs both religious and psychoanalytic discourse, and presents a woman whose sexual agency is not censored. On the other, it echoes patriarchal notions with regard to women’s role in reproduction. As is often the case with Etxebarria, her iconoclastic tone is at its best when it exaggerates sexual matters; for example, in her critique of the euphemism “estado de buena esperanza” (37), Eva points out that during her pregnancy “las tetas me llegan hasta el ombligo” (37). Nonetheless, the devastating effects of morning sickness are treated with a rather subdued tone—“una náusea pegajosa en el estómago, como si me hubiera comido un kilo de toffee” (36)—that hardly captures real life experience. Banking on the appeal of sexual images, Etxebarria suppresses the most pronounced woes of pregnancy because undoubtedly they would prove less sexy than Eva’s enlarged boobs, to which she devotes numerous pages. As indicated above, Etxebarria’s ability to scandalize her audience derives from her exploitation of eroticism. This is a common feature in her work, from her debut novel *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas* to her more recent

productions. Like Grandes, she gives voice to uninhibited women who approach sex in an uncensored way. Yet while on the surface she presents sexually liberated women, at bottom she portrays their uninhibited sensuality in such a way as to suggest that they remain imprisoned within traditional gender models. The female characters of this and other Etxebarria novels, including her award-winning *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, find no viable alternatives to conventional femininity in Spain's newly democratic society:

[I]n spite of their transgression of sexual taboos (by engaging in sex with members of the same sex, with multiple partners, with a machine, etc.), Etxebarria's female characters are confined fundamentally to their roles as victims (of rape, sexual abuse, emotional abandonment, obsessive-compulsion, and even pornography which, in this case, represents not a source of erotic pleasure or empowerment, but simply a psychological addiction). (Tsuchiya "Gender" 249)

As the "Descaradas chicas Etxebarria" approach their thirties, they become commodities for a reading audience who are making their own *transición* from nineties-style hedonism to early twenty-first-century mothering, trading in their old addictions for new ones.

With a postmodern twist, Etxebarria offers her personal and seemingly transgressive maternal narrative, seasoned with her particular kind of *tremendismo* centering on sex and drugs. Once again, in exposing the myths of motherhood, especially the claim of an innate maternal instinct, her iconoclasm is confined to the form, rather than the substance, of her discourse. Eva, in fact, does not challenge the notion of the idyllic relationship between mother and child in the first few days of the baby's life, though she describes it in unconventional terms. Abandoning the pastel-color tones of the Hallmark cards, Eva resorts to a comparison that her audience can easily understand, as when she likens maternal love to the experience of being on ecstasy. If on her first night as a mother Eva felt "completamente fascinada," "totalmente enamorada," the sensation was due to "el efecto de una droga, porque aquello era exactamente igual que ir de éxtasis. Pero no iba de éxtasis, no. Aquello era un subidón de oxitocina. Una droga de la que nadie hablaba en *Enganchadas*" (44-45). The reference to these two drugs, ecstasy and oxytocin, the so-called hormone of love secreted during orgasm and childbirth, aligns Eva's maternal narrative with the subculture of drug addiction explored in *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*. Like Cristina, who was addicted to ecstasy, Eva, after giving birth, feels a rush of elation. With her unconventional diction Etxebarria replaces syrupy descriptions with crude ones that have the power to reinforce the very same conventional message they seem to challenge. In this way, Etxebarria creates the illusion of a transgressive maternal discourse without actually undermining its foundation. By choosing to compare her relationship with her daughter to the feelings caused by the nineties recreational drug *par*

excellence, she repackages the time-tested notion of maternal love for those who have never held a child but are familiar with the night club scene. Behind the curtain of alternative language, her discourse about maternal love preserves the image of the adoring mother, madly in love with her child.

Although at various points in her narrative Eva expresses her ambivalence towards her daughter, nonetheless her narration re-masks what it pretends to unmask. In spite of expressions of frustration towards her “bicho chantajista” who demands unrequited attention, *Un milagro* protects the traditional mother-daughter bond from any serious critique. The novel’s participation in the idealization of motherhood can actually elicit the same response as the one Eva felt when reading Riera’s pregnancy diary. A woman could experience the same abysmal distance between her feelings as a new mother and the ecstatic descriptions of *Un milagro en equilibrio*. Many women, in fact, struggle with their own sense of maternal inadequacy when they realize that holding their newborn baby does not necessarily fill them with joy. Isabel García-Zarza in her *Diario de una madre imperfecta* confesses that her encounter with her infant did not spark a sudden love affair: “tampoco me avergüenza reconocer que tardé más de un mes en sentir algo parecido a eso que llaman «instinto maternal»” (9). Eva, instead, insists on the positive, even therapeutic effects of her daughter even in light of her post-partum depression. To that end she tells Amanda: “Eres Prozac natural” (152), echoing Anton’s comment “Mira esta niña: es Prozac natural” (108). The reference to this particular antidepressant, so popular in the nineties, links this maternal narrative with Etxebarria’s previous novels, especially with *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*, thus emphasizing the continuity between her pre-pregnancy identity and her newly minted maternal persona. Etxebarria is reaching out to a specifically Gen X audience born in the late sixties and early to mid seventies who, like Etxebarria, grew up in democratic Spain, in an affluent, hedonistic society characterized by a profound *desencanto*.⁶ For them she translates the often idealized and ineffable experience of mothering into the language of antidepressant and recreational drugs with which they are familiar.

At a time when Spanish women harbor serious doubts about the value of maternity, Eva, who, like Etxebarria, had garnered considerable media attention after the publication of her first book *Enganchadas*, receives numerous invitations to share her experience. One of them comes from a certain Nuria. During a book-signing session on the feast day of San Jordi in Barcelona, when Catalans celebrate their patron saint by giving a book or a rose to their beloved, Nuria writes:

⁶ The label Generation X is often used as a literary denomination to refer to a group of young writers who came to fame in the mid to late nineties, mainly José Angel Mañas, Ray Loriga, and Lucía Etxebarria. For a discussion of the characteristics of this writers see, Carmen de Urioste 1997-98 and 2009, Dorca, Martín-Estudillo, Henseler and Pope, Everly, Navarro Martínez, and Odartey-Wellington.

“Sé que estás embarazada y quiero felicitarte de corazón. Yo tengo ahora treinta años y a veces pienso en tener un hijo, pero me asaltan un montón de dudas: ¿se me deformará el cuerpo?, ¿Perderé mi libertad?, ¿Sabré quererle? Por eso me parece tan importante que una mujer como tú escriba un libro sobre la experiencia, porque sé que no harás nada cursi ni lleno de tópicos. ¡Anímate a empezarlo! Y luego anímate a acabarlo, claro. Por favor ... muchas te lo agradeceríamos” (35).

A self-declared former cocaine addict, Nuria is a GenXer who has moved beyond the transgressions of the nineties to consider adopting a more traditional lifestyle.⁷ She finds herself immersed in a culture in which thinness and beauty are synonyms for power and social prestige. Consequently, the young woman is concerned first and foremost with the aesthetic effects of pregnancy. She worries that she will lose her slender figure. This fear is accompanied by deeper questions. Caught between her generation’s rejection of motherhood as a patriarchal institution and a possible recuperation of the maternal role, Nuria is searching for a more authentic account of the maternal experience than that found in the airbrushed portraits of parenting books and magazines. Responding to Nuria’s request to provide an uncensored account of pregnancy and mothering, Eva is also moved by marketing forces. Her literary agent and the editor of *Enganchadas* are in fact “ansiosas ... de repetir el éxito ahora que el público me conoce” (29). Given her financial difficulties, therefore, Eva decides to give a written account of her personal experience, including its intrauterine phase and the *pueperium*.

Once again in the fictional world created in the novel—a world that mirrors closely the situation of contemporary Spain—Eva’s testimonial responds to marketing forces. Eva therefore resorts to the same commercial strategies employed by Etxebarria herself in her previous books. As an author who “juega con su imagen por razones de promoción” (Henseler 2005, 501), Etxebarria has not passed up the opportunity to bank on her experience as a mother; she has created a literary character who exposes the very marketing forces that enveloped her too as an author. Eva thus behaves like her real-world creator, offering her experiences to a faithful reading public that, after the excesses of the late nineties, is weighing the pros and cons of childbearing. As Tsuchiya indicates with regard both to Almudena Grandes and to Etxebarria: “They see themselves negotiating the demands of the market and the perceived needs that their literary work must fulfill for its consumer, particularly for women” (“Gender” 242). In a post-feminist environment, Etxebarria creates a fictional universe in which a more realistic representation of pregnancy and childrearing responds to a double void, one

⁷ If we consider that Cristina was 23 in 1997 when *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas* was published, she would be exactly 30 in 2004, when *Un milagro* appeared. For this reason, Nuria, like Eva, can be considered one of the “chicas Etxebarria” (María Bengoa, quoted by Christine Henseler 2004: 699).

that is both existential and commercial. Fertility rates have plummeted drastically in post-Franco Spain as women realize that motherhood is no longer their only “opción vital.” As they gain equal rights in the work force, new challenges loom on their horizon, left as they are with unanswered questions about how to define their identities.

Like many educated women, Eva faces mothering in loneliness, but her solitude is especially pronounced because her own mother and the traditional, prescriptive culture she embodied are both fading fast. Cut off from a female genealogy that could provide her with knowledge of maternal matters, Eva, like many first-time mothers turns to parenting books and magazines for lack of better options. In spite of her reservations about these dubious resources, she acknowledges their allure: “una embarazada y primeriza se siente siempre sola y desprotegida, y desesperadamente necesitada de información, de una mano amable que le guíe a través del misterio y la confusión de la maternidad y de su propio cuerpo” (43). Her words demonstrate her awareness of the sense of helplessness and anxiety that comes with the birth of a child, as well as the need for support and guidance to face the physical changes of pregnancy and the demands of mothering. This personal void that Eva experiences first-hand is linked to her realization that the parenting publications reinforce “mommy myths.” No alternative sources of information lie to hand, no dissident voices that expose the myths as such. Because she has no access to books that defy an idyllic view of pregnancy and childrearing and the deep-seated gender-biases that inform it, Eva decides to turn her experience into “materia novelable,” to use Galdos’ famous expression; and in doing so she explores the economic potential of her newly acquired maternal image. If “sex sells,” as Silvia Bermúdez has pointed out, then Etxebarria, through her fictional character Eva, will exploit the marketing forces she knows so intimately to make the most of motherhood in the new millennium.

In an interview that took place during the author’s pregnancy, Antonia Pérez Franco asked her “Te gustaría escribir un libro sobre la maternidad?” To this question Etxebarria made the following intriguing reply:

La maternidad es un tabú tan grande que no sé cómo lo enfocaría. Para mí hay una mentira muy grande en torno al tema y un simbolismo inventado por la escritura patriarcal. No sé si me voy a atrever porque tengo la idea de que todo el mundo me va a acusarme de ser una bruja tremenda, una madre horrible, y de no tener instinto maternal. (191-92)

Etxebarria’s initial reaction indicates her awareness that, as Silvia Vegetti-Finzi points out in the epigraph to this essay, the institution of motherhood lies at the heart of a complex network of discursive forces that renders it a taboo topic. Indeed, it takes a lot of courage to expose what Susan Maushart calls the “masks of motherhood.” Those women who dare to reveal the constructedness of the multiple and sometimes conflicting myths of motherhood expose themselves to hostile criticism. By voicing

their real-life experiences as mothers, they risk revealing at least some ambivalence towards their maternal role. Conscious of the paucity of texts centering on the maternal, Etxebarria embarks on a mission to challenge some of the myths and stereotypes regarding sexuality and gender. As Gagliardi Trotman points out, Etxebarria “makes a conscious effort towards breaking the taboo associated with speaking candidly about motherhood” (265). She sets the tone for a more nuanced portrait of mothering that includes realistic descriptions of the physical and psychological effects of pregnancy and *puerperium*.

The result is a text that “materializes ‘pregnancy,’ ‘giving birth’ and *puerperium* as literary topics worth of authorial attention” (Bermúdez 2008: 97) while revealing the ambiguity of its feminist claims. While it dismantles the fantasy of idyllic representation of pregnancy, it also presents a woman who lacks agency in reproduction. It is for this reason that Etxebarria only seems to violate, without actually violating, that “tabú tan grande” indicated during the above-mentioned interview. To this end she pre-emptively the critical voices that would label her as “bruja” by adopting the identity of the “mala madre.” The possible impasse she envisioned when asked about her plan to write about mothering finds commercial resolution in her testimonial book co-edited with Goyo Busto, *El club de las malas madres* (2009). Playing with her reputation of “chica mala,” Etxebarria appropriates that deviant identity to dismantle the image of maternal perfection packaged by traditional and neoconservative discourses of mothering. Against the cloying propaganda of parenting guides and magazines, with *El club de las malas madres* Etxebarria presents what she considers a progressive book (348) in response to the growing debate about parenting. Trusting in the marketing appeal of her name, Etxebarria shows the contradictory claims of contemporary Spanish society, which condemns mothers whether they decide to devote their time to their children’s upbringing or continue to work. In the first case, she is labelled as “hiperprotectora”; in the other, she gets a bad reputation because “desatiende ... a sus hijos” (19). In an age of “mommy wars” dominated by guilt and conflicting messages, Etxebarria debunks the fantasy of maternal perfectability by stating “Yo no soy una buena madre. Y probablemente usted, que me lee, tampoco” (19). Indeed the conflicting models of motherhood presented by the media make it impossible to escape guilt and frustration in mothering. Writing in a post-ideological age, Etxebarria reveals the impossibility of escaping contradictions in her articulation of a maternal narrative. Her *Un milagro en equilibrio* advances a dubious feminist agenda: purporting to reclaim maternal desire, it persists in representing desiring women as passive victims of their environment.

WORKS CITED

- Arkininstall, Christine. "Towards a Female Symbolic. Re-Presenting Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Spanish Narrative by Women." *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. Ed. Adalgisa Giorgio, Oxford, New York: Berghahnbooks, 2002. 47-84. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988. Print.
- Bourland Ross, Catherine. "The Changing Faces of Motherhood: Lucía Etxebarria's *Un milagro en equilibrio*." *(M)Othering the Nation*. Ed. Lisa Bernstein, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publications, 2008. 147-160. Print.
- Bermúdez, Silvia. "Let's Talk about Sex?: From Almudena Grandes to Lucía Etxebarria, the Volatile Values of the Spanish Literary Market." *Women's Narrative and Film in Twentieth-Century Spain*. Ed. Ofelia Ferrán and Kathleen M. Glenn. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. 223-37. Print.
- . "Here's Looking at You, Kid': Giving Birth and Authoring, or the Author as Mother and the Mother as Author." *Visions and Revisions. Women's Narrative in Twentieth-Century Spain*. Ed. Kathleen Glenn and Kathleen Mcnerney. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2008. 95-107. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of Medusa." *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-99. Print.
- Dorca, Toni. "Joven narrativa en la España de los noventa: La Generación X." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 31.2 (1997): 309-24. Print.
- Etxebarria, Lucía. *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*. Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1997. Print.
- . *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*. Barcelona: Destino, 1998. Print.
- . *Un milagro en equilibrio*. Madrid: Planeta, 2004. Print.
- Etxebarria, Lucia and Goyo Bustos. *El club de las malas madres*. Madrid: Martínez Roca, 2009. Print.
- Everly, Kathrine. *History, Violence, and the Hyperreal. Representing Culture in the Contemporary Spanish Novel*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2010. Print.
- Ferrán, Ofelia and Kathleen Glenn. *Women's Narrative and Film in Twentieth Century Spain : A World of Difference(s)*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- García-Zarza, Isabel. *Diario de una madre imperfecta*. Barcelona: Viceversa, 2010. Print.
- Hennessy, Margot. "Listening to the Secret Mother: Reading J.E.Wideman's Brothers and Keepers." *American Women's Autobiography: Feasts of Memory*. Ed. Margo Culley. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1992. 295-321. Print.
- Henseler, Christine. *Contemporary Spanish Women's Narrative and the Publishing Industry*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2003. Print.
- . "Pop, Punk, and Rock & Roll Writers: José Mañas, Ray Loriga, and Lucía Etxebarria Redefine the Literary Canon." *Hispania*, 87, 4 (2004): 692-702. Print.

- . "Acerca del fenómeno Lucía Etxebarria." *Revista de Literatura* 67.134 (2005): 501-521. Print.
- Henseler, Christine and Randolph Pope, ed. *Generation X Rocks, Contemporary Peninsular Fiction, Film, and Rock Culture*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2007. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989. Print.
- Martín-Estudillo, Luis. "The Moment X in Spanish Narrative (and Beyond)." Ed. *Generation X Rocks, Contemporary Peninsular Fiction, Film, and Rock Culture*. Ed. Christine Henseler and Randolph Pope. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2007. 235-245. Print.
- Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*. New York: New Press, 1999. Print.
- Muraro, Luisa. *L'ordine simbolico della madre*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991. Print.
- Navarro Martínez, Eva. *La novela de la Generación X*. Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2008. Print.
- Nieva de la Paz, Pilar. "Modelos femeninos e indeterminación de la identidad: *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas* (1997), de Lucía Etxebarria, y *Atlas de geografía humana* (1998), de Almudena Grandes." *Hispanística* 20.17 (1999): 197-210. Print.
- Odartey-Wellington, Dorothy. *Contemporary Spanish Fiction. Generation X*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2008. Print.
- O'Reilly, Andrea, ed. *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2003. Print.
- . "Introduction." *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born*. Ed. Andrea O'Reilly. Albany: SUNY P, 2004. Print.
- . "Between the Baby and the Bathwater. Some Thoughts about a Mother-Centered Theory and Practice of Feminist Mothering." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 8.1-2 (2006): 323-330. Print.
- Pérez Franco, Antonia. "Feminismo y literatura en la España del nuevo milenio: Encuentro con Lucía Etxebarria." *Letras Peninsulares* 17.1 (2004): 181-192. Print.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth and Andrea O'Reilly, ed. "Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives" *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010: 1-27. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976. Print.
- Roca i Girona, Jordi. *De la pureza a la maternidad. Construcción del género femenino en la postguerra española*. Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1996. Print.
- Ruddick, Sara. "Preface." *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*. Ed. Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006. Print.

- Schumm, Sandra. "Revaluing the Mother in Lucía Etxebarria's *Un milagro en equilibrio*." *Women in the Spanish Novels Today: Essays on the Reflections of Self in the Works of Three Generations*. Ed. Kyra Kietrys and Montserrat Linares. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009. 153-170. Print.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "Writing and Motherhood." in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. 352-377. Print.
- Tsuchiya, Akiko. "Gender, Sexuality, and the Literary Market in Spain at the End of the Millennium." *Women's Narratives and Film in Twentieth-Century Spain*. Ed. Ofelia Ferrán and Kathleen Glenn. New York: Routledge, 2002. 238-55. Print.
- . "The New Female Subject and the Commodification of Gender in the Works of Lucía Etxebarria." *Romance Studies* 20.1 (2002): 77-87. Print.
- Urioste, Carmen de. *Novela y sociedad en la España contemporánea, 1994-2009*. Madrid: Fundamentos, 2009. Print.
- . "Las novelas de Lucía Etxebarria como proyección de sexualidades disidentes en la España democrática." *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 34.1 (2000): 123-37. Print.
- . "La narrativa española de los noventa: ¿Existe una 'generación X'?" *Letras Peninsulares* 10.3 (Winter 1997-1998): 455-76. Print.
- Vegetti Finzi, Silvia. *Mothering: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Construction*. Trans. Katherine Jason. New York: Guilford, 1996. Print.
- Walker, Michelle Boulous. *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf, 1976. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. Ed. Morag Shiach. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.