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Repository Citation

Ochoa, D.J. (2013). The *chica rara* as observer in Concha Alós's *los cien pájaros*. *Ámbitos Feministas*, 3(3), 147-161.

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The *chica rara* as Observer in Concha Alós's *Los cien pájaros*

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Concha Alós (1925–2011), born eleven years before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), witnessed the three-year conflict and its devastating aftermath first-hand. Similar to other writers of her generation, she captured *los años de hambre* of the 1940s in her first novel, *Los enanos* (1962), and delved into the depiction of gender inequality during the Franco era (1939–1975).¹ However, despite the publication of eight novels and a collection of short stories, she received limited critical attention until the last decades of the twentieth century.² The previous absence of scholarship about Alós's work may have been caused by disparaging comments that earlier literary critics made about what they considered inappropriate language and subject matter for a woman writer (F. Rodríguez 20).³ This study aims to contribute to the increased interest in Concha Alós and distinguishes itself from existent criticism by examining how the protagonist of *Los cien pájaros*, Cristina, can be understood through Carmen

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Martín Gaité's (1925–2000) concept of the *chica rara* (“strange girl”), a literary trope that appears in many novels written by Spanish women during the Franco era.

Martín Gaité, in addition to her extensive body of fiction, published several essay collections in which she analyzes both Spanish and world literature, thus emphasizing the importance of both historic and contemporary Spanish literature, particularly the work of Spanish women writers within international letters. Because scholars have only recently begun to “excavate” Alós’s writing, it is imperative that her work be contextualized according to Martín Gaité’s definition of the *chica rara* to see what specific contribution Alós makes to this well-established tradition. A consideration of such a concept avoids what Roberta Johnson calls the “foreign occupation” of Spanish feminist criticism, which occurs when Hispanists exclusively rely on American, British, or French literary theories to support their analyses (“Spanish Feminist Theory” 17). Nino Kebabze opines that the corpus of neglected works by Spanish women writers “is not necessarily an index of some inherent inadequacy of the texts . . . but rather a possible failure of existing interpretative models,” and she encourages critics to use Martín Gaité’s term *chica rara* as a critical tool (80). The novels of many postwar Spanish women writers are difficult to categorize because they are “neither low enough to appeal to popular culture studies nor literary enough to be considered high art” (Brownlow and Kronik 17). However, if we apply Martín Gaité’s term *chica rara* as an “interpretive model,” we can analyze *Los cien pájaros* within an appropriate historical context to better understand Alós’s writing.⁴

Martín Gaité first coined the term *chica rara* to describe the protagonist of Carmen Laforet’s novel *Nada* (1945)—young Andrea, who sets off for Barcelona to study at the local university. Andrea is a “precedente literario” that Ana María Matute, Dolores Medio, Mercè Rodoreda, and Martín Gaité herself emulate in their writing (“La chica rara” 99–103). In Martín Gaité’s *Entre visillos* (1958), Natalia’s “strangeness” results from her questioning of “las normas de convivencia habituales” that no other character appears to evaluate (100). Martín Gaité explains that in postwar Salamancan society people used the word *rara* to describe any young woman who exhibited disinterest in clothes or suitors: “De las chicas poco sociables o displicentes, que no se ponían a dar saltos de alegría cuando las invitaban a un ‘guateque’, descuidaban su arreglo personal y se aburrían hablando de novios y de trapos se decía que eran ‘raras’, que tenían ‘un carácter raro’” (“En busca de cobijo” 38). Martín Gaité appropriates the meaning of the word *rara* by removing it from its historically pejorative connotation and utilizes it to celebrate autonomous female characters created by Spanish women during the postwar era.

Martín Gaité delineates three main characteristics of the *chica rara* that empower her to reject traditions that would otherwise limit a young woman to a future of domestic duties. First, the *chica rara* functions as a witness to her surroundings; she gleans much of her education and maturity from interpretations of her environment (“La chica rara” 94). Second, the *chica rara* resists confinement

within the home and seeks exterior spaces that possess “una función catártica” (96); urban settings provide an escape from dominating family members and function “para dar un quiebro a su punto de vista y ampliarlo” (101). This type of character values her solitude while exploring her environs, despite warnings that the city poses a threat to a young woman’s virtue. A third characteristic is that, because of her orphanhood, the *chica rara* exercises certain freedoms that would otherwise be denied to her. An initial comparison between Alós’s Cristina in *Los cien pájaros* and the *chica rara* model reveals that the protagonist’s “strangeness” results largely from her role as a witness who, like Andrea in *Nada*, evaluates her surroundings and the people with whom she interacts. However, Cristina differs from the other “strange girls” because she is the daughter of a former prostitute, and the novel’s details about the protagonist’s first sexual experience further distinguish Alós’s *Los cien pájaros* from Laforet’s *Nada* and Martín Gaité’s *Entre visillos*.

Los cien pájaros narrates several months in the life of Cristina, an eighteen-year-old woman who, like Andrea in Laforet’s *Nada*, has high expectations about her future. She initially expresses great enthusiasm about tutoring Mina Muñoz, a young girl from a wealthy family. Cristina hopes to benefit from working for the Muñoz family, but she soon realizes that although she has access to their world, she remains tied to her economic class. During the hours she spends tutoring, she befriends her student’s older brother, José María, and a relationship between them soon develops. This older man seduces the naive Cristina, whom he intends to keep as a mistress. Although she at first falls victim to her lover, Cristina soon recovers and makes plans to pursue a degree in education despite her pregnancy. When contemplating the decisions she must make, she reflects on her mother’s favorite saying: “Vale más pájaro en mano que ciento volando” (246). For Cristina, opting for the *pájaro en mano* would be to accept salvation in the form of a marriage proposal from a friend of her stepfather. But she refuses this “solution” and leaves her hometown of Castellón de la Plana for Barcelona: “Hacia el futuro, en busca de los cien pájaros” (247). Although it would have been very unlikely for a young, pregnant woman to live on her own during the Franco era (J. Pérez, *Contemporary* 111), Alós’s depiction of an independent, strong-willed character who rejects domestic conformity remains significant because the character reminds readers of the possibilities available to women. Francisca López observes that by creating a career-minded character, Alós problematizes the patriarchy: “[E]l mito de la necesidad de dependencia femenina es uno de los que más abiertamente subvierte la novela” (84). During the Franco era, society saw a woman who prioritized education and employment as a person who “ostensibly betray[ed] her very nature” (Kebadze 61). Thus from the onset of the novel, Alós creates a “strange” protagonist even before she enters into taboo subjects.

The controversial topics of prostitution and sexuality in *Los cien pájaros* raise questions of how Alós avoided censorship.⁵ Patricia O’Byrne observes that Francoist censors did not oppose all taboo subjects if the “perpetrator was

adequately punished and ostracized" (205). During the dictatorship, becoming pregnant outside of marriage would have been interpreted as a form of punishment, and one can speculate that the censors permitted the publication of this novel to warn female readers against the dangers of breaking religious doctrine. Furthermore, in a novel such as *Los cien pájaros* that focuses on the working class, the censors may not have seen Cristina's moral standing as a threat because they only esteemed the "correct" portrayal of the upper classes.⁶

While Alós benefited from her focus on an economically disadvantaged protagonist, the time period in which she wrote further facilitated her ability to publish. By the beginning of the 1960s, the regime had relaxed its censorship laws; this fact, combined with the efforts of preceding writers, who had already published social criticisms, allowed Alós to more directly examine the injustices suffered by women during the Franco era (G. J. Pérez, "Determinantes" 229). Such conditions helped Alós; as a result, she produced a more condemnatory depiction of the *chica rara* than many of her contemporaries. Alós uses mirrors and a photograph to underscore Cristina's role as witness in *Los cien pájaros*.

In *Los cien pájaros*, Cristina primarily notices gender and social inequalities, and she compares her family's financial struggles to the Muñozes' wealth and privilege. Such awareness may be based on Alós's personal hardships, which she weaves into her early novels.⁷ Based on the biographical information that exists on Alós, we can infer that Cristina's desire to become a teacher came from the author's own work experiences. Like Laforet and Martín Gaité, Alós incorporates many autobiographical elements into her writing. However, Cristina's more humble upbringing distinguishes her from the other "strange girls." The setting of the novel, Castellón de la Plana, does not possess the caché traditionally associated with large urban centers such as Barcelona, the setting of Laforet's *Nada*, or the university city of Salamanca, the setting of Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*.⁸ Although *Nada* takes place soon after the end of the Spanish Civil War, the affluent characters Ena and Pons make evident that life remains comfortable for certain classes. In *Entre visillos*, Martín Gaité focuses on the routine diversions of young men and women and does not address the struggles that Alós chooses to examine in *Los cien pájaros*. Another difference involves the portrayal of the *chica rara*'s parents; while Laforet's Andrea and Martín Gaité's Natalia lost at least one parent, Cristina's mother Julia is alive and has a significant role in the narrative. Julia became pregnant with Cristina by an anonymous man while working as a prostitute, and Cristina's status as an illegitimate child causes her to suffer more than Natalia and Andrea.

The experiences of Cristina's mother, Julia, exemplify the economic strife of the postwar *años de hambre*, which often made it necessary for women to work as prostitutes. Prostitution, an institution that the regime did not abolish until 1956 (Morcillo 90), seventeen years after Franco's rise to power, went against Spain's National Catholicism, the product of the Francoist blending of Falangist doctrine and religious dogma, which legitimized patriarchal control over women (Arkininstall 48). Helen Graham states that the incongruity between

Franco's promotion of Catholicism and prostitution speaks to the "complex, conflictive, and plural" lives of women during the early postwar years (182). Women became victims of the country's sexist justification that if men did not have access to prostitutes "they would defile the pure and chaste bodies of their fiancées—True Catholic Women and the future mothers of the New Spain" (Morcillo 92). As a result, the government condoned the abuse of women from lower social classes, such as Julia, to ensure the virtue of more economically privileged women. Through Cristina's role as observer, Alós condemns these contradictions and gives voice to the women who suffered under such hypocrisy.

Mirrors appear throughout *Los cien pájaros* and underscore Cristina's role as observer, particularly when she evaluates herself. In the opening chapter of the novel, Cristina evaluates the monotony of her working-class existence: she eats the same dinner of boiled potatoes and string beans every night with her mother and stepfather whose tattered, stained clothing embarrasses her (10–16). After the portrayal of the drab kitchen setting, Cristina looks into a small mirror and identifies what she considers an oversized forehead as an additional detail that displeases her (13). This mirror, and others that will appear throughout *Los cien pájaros*, evokes those found in *Nada*, "imágenes especulares" that Spanish women writers use to symbolize the characters' psychological and physical maturity (M. Rodríguez 27–28). Something similar occurs in *Los cien pájaros* as Cristina undertakes a series of challenges, and on each occasion she gazes into a mirror to see if her physical appearance matches her altered interior state of being.

In addition to mirrors, Alós introduces a photograph that will force Cristina to confront her past before she can make any future decisions. The photograph functions as a mirror because of the way it reflects the protagonist. In the opening chapter of *Los cien pájaros*, after Cristina negatively reflects on her family's evening routine, she retreats to her bedroom where she pauses to look at a photograph of her first communion: "[L]a niña que era yo a los diez años. Soy yo, tristonaa, afectada y tiesa" (19). The photograph introduces a flashback in the narrative in which Alós gives details about Julia's former life as a prostitute and the friendships she established, particularly with her madam, Señora Pilar. Cristina recalls that Julia took her on a visit to a prohibited part of the city to find an inexpensive dress for her first communion. The circumstances under which Julia procures the dress and the pink garment underscore the novel's taboo focus. This unorthodox color for a religious celebration, an occasion when young girls traditionally wear white, expresses Alós's parody of an institutionalized rite, one of the many practices that the dictatorship promoted to bolster its weak stance when it first came into power.

Franco collaborated with Pope Pius XII to "create a 'virgin' model for Spanish women that essentially 'swallowed' their individuality and imposed an unattainable prototype of perfection created by men" (Schumm 45). The regime encouraged women to read narratives about historical and religious figures (e.g., Isabel the Catholic, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Teresa of Avila) to provide women

with “proper” models of female comportment. In *El cuarto de atrás*, Martín Gaité addresses the absurdity of such models when the protagonist C. states her beliefs in mysterious figures but her rejection of Franco-approved role models: “Que sí creo en el diablo y en san Cristóbal gigante y en santa Bárbara bendita, en todos los seres misteriosos, vamos. En Isabel la Católica, no” (92). Martín Gaité recalls that although the regime extolled Isabel the Catholic as an example of domestic perfection, she questioned its validity: “Se perfiló mi desconfianza hacia los seres decididos y seguros, crecieron mis ansias de libertad” (85).⁹ In comparison to Martín Gaité’s rejection of regime’s role models for women, Alós’s novel exhibits a much more overt dismissal of tradition. The pink communion dress displaces the traditional white and its association with purity, and later in the novel, Alós destabilizes the Catholic Church’s control over women again when Cristina loses her virginity during Holy Week.

Returning to the photograph, the first communion memento reminds Cristina of her differences. She has to contend with derogatory comments and judgmental looks from both her teacher and classmates. Cristina recalls her feelings of rejection when her teacher wrote on the chalkboard: “Yo tengo un vestido blanco. Tú tienes un vestido blanco. Todos los hijos de Dios tienen un vestido blanco”(23). Such bitter memories influence Cristina to react strongly to the photograph on two occasions. The first instance takes place after she has worked for the Muñoz family and has earned sufficient money to purchase books to create a library in her bedroom. While she rearranges her furniture to make space for her books, she decides to hide the photograph because she dislikes her awkward appearance: “Mi imagen, aquella niña de diez años que había sido yo, larguirucha y afectada” (78). Cristina naively believes that she can rid herself of such memories by hiding the photograph, but the subsequent specular encounters reveal the difficulty of such a process.

Cristina’s self-evaluations, whether they occur while looking in a mirror or a mirror-like object, communicate a “proceso de concienciación” (Ciplijauskaitė 38) that resonates with a common characteristic that Jenijoy La Belle identifies in European and American literature. After the nineteenth century, the significance of mirrors extended beyond vanity to symbolize the self as an activity, “a continual process that gives rise to concepts of her species and situates herself in relation to these other ‘selves’” (La Belle 3). Additionally, the mirror scenes reveal Cristina’s evaluation of her “interiority and exteriority”: the process by which she determines who she is “to herself and who she is to her culture” (9). The locations in which these specular evaluations occur, either in Julia’s home or in one of the Muñoz estates, influence Cristina’s self-perception because she determines her identity in relationship to her surroundings. The first mirror, located in the kitchen, belongs to her mother Julia and thus symbolizes maternal dominance. The mirror frame precisely delineates Cristina’s face as a synecdoche of her identity, one that she hopes to disassociate from Julia and her past. However, subsequent mirror scenes, to Cristina’s disappointment, fail to confirm her hopes of seeing a more sophisticated, mature reflection.

After this mirror scene, a second specular evaluation occurs when Cristina rushes home after her first kiss with José María: “Todo lo que me había ocurrido cobró por el camino tal aire de irrealidad que fui a mirarme al espejo para ver si había sido verdad y si quedaba alguna huella en mí. Pero no, en mis labios no había ninguna señal” (91). Cristina’s expectations stem from the pressure young women experienced to “echarse novio,” believing that, like the stock protagonist of the *novela rosa* (“romance novel”), she too would be transformed by a romantic encounter (Martín Gaité, “*En busca de cobijo*” 36). Martín Gaité explains that for her generation the more desperate young women felt about their reality, the stronger their desire to read about heroines: “[A] las que cuando menos lo esperaban les llovía del cielo una ilusión que las hacía sentirse transfiguradas, distintas. El mago de esta alquimia, por supuesto, era siempre un hombre” (Martín Gaité, “*Nubes de color de rosa*” 144). Cristina projects her desires onto José María who, due to his age and affluence, does bear some resemblance to the male lead of a romance novel.¹⁰ However, throughout *Los cien pájaros*, Alós gives indicators about José María, such as his unexplained illness and rumors about his previous relationship, that tell the reader he will fail to “save” Cristina in the manner of a true hero. Cristina proves to be the opposite of a woman in need of rescue, although she at first hopes for a fairy tale ending and evaluates herself according to societal expectations.

The mirror takes on an “intermediary role” that represents society’s hold on female characters, causing young women to judge themselves by patriarchal standards (*La Belle* 16). *La Belle*’s description of the female protagonist’s predicament in British and American novels resonates with Cristina’s experience: “She must consult the mirror, compare the image with social norms, and thereby test her beauty against an instrument offering full (although silent) disclosure” (16). Cristina looks for outward reassurance, but she continuously fails to find a confirmation of her expectations, ideas that result from living in a society that tells women: “La mujer no tiene más misión que el matrimonio” (Martín Gaité, “*En busca de cobijo*” 49). Alós repeats this sentiment at the end of the novel when a different suitor, Manolo, proposes to Cristina and says, “La mejor carrera de una mujer es el matrimonio” (202). Such ideology restrained women’s futures. In response, Alós presents a character who evaluates her circumstances and challenges societal norms by refusing to marry, an inconceivable decision for most women during the Franco era.

Cristina’s rejection of marriage places her into a category that makes her even more peculiar than the typical *chica rara*; she would be labeled “más rara que las monjas” (Martín Gaité, “*En busca del cobijo*” 38). Martín Gaité explains that during the Franco era people used this expression to describe young women who exhibited disinterest in any vocation; they neither appeared inclined to dedicate themselves to family nor to a religious order. Although women had one of two options during the regime—marriage or the convent—Alós creates a character who rejects both, thereby making Cristina a “fallen” woman according to

Francoist norms. However, in retrospect, the *chica rara*'s flaws permit Alós to question the regime while publishing the novel under its censors.

In the next two mirror scenes, Cristina's evaluation of her clothes and body suggests that she finds herself in front of a full-length mirror, unlike the previous passages in which her focus on a fragment of her body communicates that she looks into a small mirror. These more thorough evaluations symbolize her progress beyond a preoccupation with a singular body part, such as her face, to a more detailed physical inspection. The first full-length mirror scene occurs during Cristina's preparations for a date with José María when her friend Vicenta offers to do her hair and makeup. Cristina wants to emulate her older, sophisticated friend and willingly accepts Vicenta's help. Afterwards, Vicenta proudly encourages Cristina to look at her reflection, but Cristina does not share her friend's enthusiasm: "Allí me vi distinta a la Cristina de siempre. Parecía mayor, lo menos de veinte años. Salí al comedor sintiéndome torpe, insegura, sin saber dónde colocar mis brazos ni mis manos" (163). Vicenta takes pleasure in dressing Cristina according to her personal style, but Cristina does not identify with this new appearance and feels awkward and disappointed. After previously feeling this way, Cristina becomes depressed, and José María sees her desperation as an opportunity to seduce her.

Cristina remains withdrawn throughout the evening, and José María suggests that she consume some alcohol. Alós reveals very few details about the evening's events except to state that José María leads Cristina upstairs to a bedroom that contains "una vela roja y gruesa casi consumida" (166). The color red, a signifier of passion, and the almost completely burned candle symbolize the consummation of their relationship. However, Alós does not confirm that they had sex until the next morning when Cristina examines herself in a mirror:

No había ninguna señal. Las piernas y los brazos seguían estando más morenos que las otras partes, junto al ombligo tenía también la peca redonda que mi madre aseguraba que era un antojo. Nada había cambiado. Decían que los pezones cambian de color cuando una ya no es virgen, pero no es verdad. (174)

Cristina's critique of her naked body makes this specular encounter the most intimate of the mirror scenes in *Los cien pájaros*. The physical location of this post-coital self-inspection, inside the Muñoz country home, reinforces José María's dominance over Cristina and her self-image in accordance to his influence. Furthermore, Cristina's reference to her mother underscores her difficulty with moving beyond the "mark" that her mother's past has left on her life; she rejects Julia's opinion that a freckle symbolizes a sign of beauty and dwells in disappointment. Cristina's disillusion echoes Andrea's mindset in *Nada* when she expresses her initial belief that nothing significant had occurred during her time in Barcelona. However, unlike Andrea who must rely on hindsight, Cristina realizes, in the present moment, that she has indeed changed despite the lack of

physical evidence: “Nada es igual que antes. El tiempo lo ha cambiado. Yo misma no soy la de otros tiempos” (175). Cristina’s ability to distinguish between physical and emotional development marks this *chica rara*’s transition into adulthood; this increased maturity allows for more insight into herself and others.

Soon after spending the night with José María, Cristina sees that, despite her efforts to be different than her mother, she finds herself in a situation that reflects Julia’s past almost exactly: “Había oído hablar de los señoritos que ponían un piso a sus amantes. Me daba miedo dar un nombre humillante a aquello que nos unía” (188). In this instance, physical mirrors are absent, but the commonality between mother and daughter creates a reflection that resonates with the novel’s theme of specular encounters. Through Cristina and Julia, Alós exposes Spanish women’s struggles for autonomy throughout the Franco era. While Julia suffers through the 1940s, the most impoverished decade of the post-war era, Cristina benefits from coming of age in the 1960s, a time marked by the dictator’s loosened grip on control because of age and looming illness. Despite such an advantage, her experience with José María humbles her into realizing her precarious state.

While Cristina and Julia have a problematic relationship, Cristina eventually recognizes redeeming qualities in her mother: “Puede que me sirva su ejemplo. Ella construyó todo su porvenir sobre un suelo tambaleante” (93). As Cristina matures, she begins to appreciate how her mother struggled to make a better life for herself and her daughter. Conversely, Cristina no longer sees any value in José María, who only has a negative influence on her. According to Martín Gaité’s comparison between relationships and mirrors in the essay “Los malos espejos,” José María would be considered a “bad mirror” because he fails to recognize the true Cristina, an independent woman with hopes of pursuing an education. Martín Gaité analyzes the dynamic between lovers in the *novela rosa* and criticizes the genre’s lack of authenticity that prevents intimacy between characters. Appalled by the formulaic style that “anesthetizes” the characters in a romance novel (16), Martín Gaité encourages her readers to search for the “buen espejo,” a person with whom one can feel at ease, one who accepts the other’s fragmented, incoherent, or indecipherable “reflections” (19). José María’s wealth and privilege blind him from seeing Cristina as anything more than a possession to be enjoyed at will. However, because of her role as a *chica rara*, whose keen eye permits her to evaluate both herself and others, Cristina identifies her dilemma and plans her escape.

Cristina’s new perspective culminates with the final specular encounter of *Los cien pájaros*, one that exemplifies her development from a naive adolescent to a mature young woman. Alós completes a circular narrative when Cristina returns to the same kitchen mirror that appears in the opening chapter of the novel. However, unlike the first self-evaluation in which Cristina negatively views both herself and her surroundings, the final specular encounter reveals a new outlook:

Antes de sentarme me miré un momento en el pequeño espejo colgado al lado de la cañería. Contemplé mi cabello cortado en forma de flequillo sobre la frente. Vicenta me había aconsejado aquel peinado para disimular el nacimiento de mi pelo, unos cabellos tan cortos que parecen vello. (196)

In contrast to the first self-encounter in which Cristina examines her forehead harshly, this final self-evaluation includes little judgment on the protagonist's part. Most importantly, this passage demonstrates Cristina's resourcefulness to make self-improvements; whereas, on a previous occasion, she had passively allowed Vicenta to groom her. The mature Cristina deliberately acts to disguise a physical flaw and now finds satisfaction in her appearance. Her change in attitude towards her parents, who sit near her while she looks into the mirror, also distinguishes this last specular encounter from the one in the opening chapter of the novel. She once again observes the monotony of their lives, but on this occasion, instead of merely judging them, she expresses a sense of guilt: "Me siento distinta, superior a ellos y eso me irrita" (196). Cristina's education, a privilege Julia never knew, allows her to work as a tutor, an experience that inspires her to pursue a teaching degree. When Cristina makes this final self-inspection, she recognizes her development and sees that, in comparison, her parents' lives remain unaltered.

As the novel draws to an end, the reappearance of the communion photograph reminds Cristina that, despite her progress, she has yet to confront her past. After hiding the photograph in an attempt to suppress her memories, Julia finds it and returns it to the top of Cristina's dresser. When Cristina sees the photograph, she uses the same words to describe the image: "La niña que era yo a los diez años, tristonada, afectada y tiesa . . ." (219). Despite the repetition, this self-encounter differs because of the way in which Cristina reacts to her image: "Me mira bobamente desde su marco de cuero y por un momento he creído que me levantaba a poner delante de ella dos grandes crisantemos blancos. Flores para los muertos. Grandes flores para los pequeños muertos" (219). Cristina bids farewell to her former self, an innocent, young girl frozen in time. The imaginary placement of the flowers in front of the photograph as a gesture of mourning resonates with the notion that all photographs possess an inevitable expression of loss, making the subject a form of "death in person" (Barthes 14). To put this idea into context, Cristina's communion photograph captures a particular place and time: the economic hardship of the early postwar years that Alós depicts through Julia's financial struggles while raising a young child. As the *chica rara* looks upon an image of her former self, she realizes that the photographed subject must experience a "death," a distancing beyond the photographed moment, to experience the future in which the mature Cristina resides. This death occurs in tandem with a loss of innocence that ushers Cristina into adulthood; once she becomes aware of this process, Cristina views both herself and others more clearly.

After several self-critiques, Cristina then evaluates her friend Vicenta and her mother Julia, two women who, although independent, fall victim to societal pressures to conform. During Cristina's specular encounters, both women play a part in how the protagonist views herself; Cristina desires to emulate Vicenta, but she vehemently wishes to be different than her mother Julia. Cristina measures herself against both women and feels disappointed when she learns that Vicenta is engaged: "Yo debo sonreír. Ahora soy yo la mujer y ella la niña. Estoy llena de experiencia, plena, madura" (237). Cristina then compares Vicenta's fate to that of her mother and notes a similarity between the two women: "Igual que mi madre. Tuvo que buscar un marido para hacer frente a la vida. Mujer sujeta al varón. Detrás de él siempre" (237). Cristina observes a form of mirroring between Vicenta and Julia in which two women of different generations make the same decision to marry. Although each woman confronts disparate challenges, both find a common solution through marriage, and Cristina, who often feels inferior to others, now sees herself as the most autonomous of the women around her. As a *chica rara*, Cristina learns that nonconformity, despite its difficulties, leads to freedom.

The mirror and photograph scenes in *Los cien pájaros* function as moments of revelation in the novel, situations in which the *chica rara* analyzes her life and determines how she can rescue herself from a working-class existence. Following the publication of such novels as Laforet's *Nada* and Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*, Alós takes advantage of previously published critiques of the regime and contributes to the depiction of the *chica rara* with a character who defies the status quo. Alós anticipates that the censors would see Cristina's dilemma as a punishment, but readers familiar with the techniques used to avoid censorship know that she writes *Los cien pájaros* to promote female autonomy.

Cristina, like other *chicas raras*, is an observer, but she also possesses certain characteristics that make her special. Like the author, Cristina grew up in Castellón de la Plana and represents young women from provincial locations who had less access to subversive culture and influences than those from cosmopolitan cities. Cristina, as the illegitimate daughter of a former prostitute, stands out among the *chicas raras* found in Franco-era literature. The maternal presence in *Los cien pájaros* adds another unusual characteristic to the novel because other *chica rara* narratives are often bereft of mothers. Julia represents women who endured prostitution to survive postwar destitution, and Cristina benefits from the struggles confronted by her mother's generation. In addition to all of these qualities, Cristina also stands out for her decision to leave her hometown and begin a new life in Barcelona. The Catalan capital is the setting of Laforet's *Nada*, and by sending Cristina to the same the city, Alós connects her novel to that of her predecessor. Additionally, *Los cien pájaros* anticipates the writings of Esther Tusquets (1925–2012) and Carme Riera (1948–) that narrate the lives of autonomous female characters in post-Franco Barcelona.

A reading of *Los cien pájaros* according to Martín Gaité's concept of the *chica rara* extracts Alós from the annals of neglected authors and places her in a

category on par with Carmen Laforet, Carmen Martín Gaité, and others. Similar to her protagonist, Alós rebels against patriarchal codes. The author portrays an independent woman who rejects domesticity during a time of great inequality for women. *Los cien pájaros*, unlike the *novela rosa*, does not conclude with marriage, the *final feliz* that comforts readers who desire formulaic narratives. Alós focuses on Cristina's development as an individual unfettered by duty and concludes her novel with few details in order to suggest alternative futures for women.

NOTES

1. Concha Alós's complete bibliography includes the following novels: *Los enanos* (1962), *Los cien pájaros* (1963), *Las hogueras* (1964), *El caballo rojo* (1966), *La madama* (1969), *Os habla Electra* (1975), *Argeo ha muerto supongo* (1982), *El asesino de los sueños* (1986). In addition, Alós published a collection of short stories entitled *Rey de gatos* (1972). See Genaro J. Pérez's *La narrativa de Concha Alós: Texto, pretexto, y contexto* for detailed summaries of each work.
2. Fermín Rodríguez and Genaro J. Pérez wrote the first two book-length studies on Concha Alós's work. In addition to these two books, short biographies on Concha Alós appear in *Contemporary Women Writers in Spain*, written by Janet Pérez; *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature*, edited by Janet Pérez and Maureen Ihrle; and *Spanish Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, edited by Linda Gould Levine and Ellen Engelson Marson. In specific regards to Alós's novel *Los cien pájaros*, Francisca López gives a brief interpretation in *Mito y discurso en la novela femenina de posguerra en España*. Additionally, Lucía Montejo Gurruchaga investigates the censors' evaluation of the novel, which I will address later in this study. Finally, in *Romance and Exemplarity in Post-War Spanish Women's Narratives*, Nino Kebabdzé recognizes that Concha Alós, along with several postwar women writers, received promising recognition upon publication and is now "subject to a significant, albeit slow, process of recovery" (79).
3. In *Mujer y sociedad: La novelística de Concha Alós*, Fermín Rodríguez gives several examples of critics' sexist remarks, including the following quote by Sainz de Robles: "Unas docenas de terminachos zafios y expresiones excrementicias. Que extrañan e irritan más porque salen de la pluma de una mujer" (20).
4. Ellen C. Mayock and Nuria Cruz-Cámara utilize Martín Gaité's concept of the *chica rara* to analyze contemporary Spanish women writers; however, they focus on writers who are more well known than Concha Alós (e.g., Martín Gaité, Mercè Rodoreda, and Ana María Matute).
5. In her study, Montejo Gurruchaga includes the censors' official evaluation of *Los cien pájaros*: "La obra es una especie de diario de una joven, hija de una familia humilde, que estudiando adquiere una cultura suficiente para dar clases. Se encarga de dar lecciones a la hija pequeña de los Muñoz. En la casa conoce a José María, el clásico señorito, que la enamora y fruto de ese amor vendrá el nacimiento de un niño. Cristina ante su problema, se da cuenta de que existe Dios, reza, ve claro su camino. Trabaja y lucha resolviendo su problema. Puede autorizarse" (qtd. 181). In this instance, the censors clearly overlooked the feminist message of the novel that defies Francoist doctrine, and although the novel is absolutely void of any form of religious conversion, the censors chose to interpret Cristina's development as a spiritual experience.
6. Patricia O'Byrne observes that Ana María Matute succeeded in publishing *Los soldados lloran de noche*, despite writing about abortion, because the moral integrity of working-class women did not concern the censors (209).
7. In her book *Contemporary Women Writers of Spain*, Janet Pérez describes how, during the Spanish Civil War and the proceeding years, Alós and her family suffered privation and her

father's imprisonment (110–114). In addition to these struggles, circumstances relating to her mother's death forced Alós to work outside the home (110). After winning the Planeta Prize in 1964, Alós finally settled in Barcelona and dedicated herself exclusively to writing. Previously she worked as a teacher, similarly to the characters Cristina in *Los cien pájaros* and Asunción in *Las hogueras*.

8. Although Martín Gaité did not originally specify the setting of *Entre visillos*, she later acknowledged that the novel takes place in Salamanca (Brown 58).

9. Keadze explains that, even before the civil war, the Spanish government promoted normative representations of Isabel the Catholic and Saint Teresa of Avila to counteract the feminist movement of the 1930s (53). During the Franco era, the regime glossed over the queen's and the mystic's true characters and focused on their "domestic proclivities" to encourage emulation (53).

10. Andrés Amorós describes the typical male and female characters of the romance novel. The male hero is always tall and strong, "de anchas espaldas y cintura breve, musculoso, delgado, de elegante porte, moreno, alto y fuerte, de músculos duros" (18). Conversely, the heroine is always younger, smaller, and less privileged to emphasize the hero's dominance, "frágil, bonita, sensible, esbeltísima de cuerpo escultórico, aquel cuerpo de diosa mitológica" (18). *Los cien pájaros* reveals very little details about Cristina's physique with the exception of a brief mention of her height. This absence of physical description, as Martín Gaité observes, distinguishes the *chica rara* narratives from the abundant physical descriptions found in romance novels ("La chica rara" 93).

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