OF COOKPOTS, KETTLES AND CODES: 
LANGUAGE AND LIBIDO IN 
CRISTINA FERNÁNDEZ CUBAS 
AS READ THROUGH HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

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... en el libro, no hallé sones infantiles ... Aquellas palabras no pertenecían a ningún idioma conocido. Y sin embargo, resultaban sonoras, poderosas ... No me atreví a pronunciarlas en voz alta.

Cristina Fernández Cubas, 
"Los altillos de Brumal"

She (woman) lets the other languages speak—the language of 1000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death. To life she refuses nothing. Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.

Hélène Cixous, 
"The Laugh of the Medusa"
In a 1991 interview, when queried as to the existence in Spain of a culturally specific feminist literary criticism as distinct from that created by French and North American theorists, celebrated Spanish author Cristina Fernández Cubas ( Arenys de Mar, Barcelona, 1945-) and fellow writer and compatriot Soledad Puértolas gave the following, rather vigorous reply:

Cristina: Yo creo que sobra.
Soledad: Yo creo que sobra. Y no sé si la hay. Pero si no la hay, mejor.
Cristina: Mucho mejor, y que no llegue. (Carmona 161)

Such a response should come as no surprise, as it is hardly the first time a woman writer from Spain would forcefully deny any and all associations with or inclinations toward feminism. Indeed, speaking on behalf of herself, her colleagues Puértolas and Mercedes Abad, and perhaps Spanish escritoras in general, Fernández Cubas would insist in the same interview that “Ninguno de nuestros libros se puede considerar feminista” (Carmona 158).²

Curiously enough, someone who appears to share exactly these same sentiments is none other than Hélène Cixous. Toril Moi reminds us, in fact, that the French feminist theorist largely responsible for first conceptualizing the idea of écriture féminine, that is, distinctly feminine writing, “is, after all, the woman who first flatly declared that ‘I am not a feminist’ (Revue des sciences humaines 482)” (Moi 103).³

Fernández Cubas and Cixous coincide in more ways than one. At the same time that both refuse the feminist label for themselves and their works, they are in agreement that writing is an act of supreme dissidence or, as Cixous notes, “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous 311). Fernández Cubas puts it even more succinctly: “Escribir tiene mucho de transgresión” (Glenn, “Conversación” 361).
For each of these two authors, this transgressive act achieves greatest potency when it is least constrained by the limitations of self-identifying definitions and clear-cut distinctions between self and other. Indeed, what appears to motivate both Cixous and Fernández Cubas—at least in part—is the creation in discourse of a limitless space *between* concretely defined realities, identities, and ideologies. Cixous explains this idea in the following manner:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death—to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms. . . . (Cixous 314)

In Fernández Cubas’s short fiction, it is possible to see Cixouian theory in praxis. The author herself notes her own discursive tendency toward that which lies in this limitless space of discursive *between* and the ensuing disquiet that results from such texts:

En mucho de lo que he escrito más que moverme en el mundo tangible, o en el más allá—in el que tampoco me muevo—*me encuentro en una zona de límites imprecisos*. Una zona de grises y clarosuros. . . . (Glenn, “Conversación” 360, emphasis added)
De lo que siempre he sido consciente es de mi gusto por los espacios de límites difusos, por la engañosidad de las apariencias, pero, sobre todo, por las situaciones o los elementos "inquietantes." No hablo de terror, tampoco de horror, sino de inquietud. (363, emphasis added)

While many scholars have argued convincingly that this discursive "inquietud" is a function of both the fantastic and the related gothic motif in Fernández Cubas's works (Bretz; Glenn, "Gothic Indecipherability"; Ortega; Talbot; Zatlin, "Tales"), we wish to suggest that it might also plausibly be read as a characteristic feature of discourse that foregrounds what Cixous refers to as the feminine libidinal economy. In the present study, we will examine a representative sample from Fernández Cubas's first collection of short fiction for manifestations of this economy as outlined by Cixous in her influential essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." In so doing, we hope to shed much-needed light on the pivotal role of language in the construction of these narratives which—whether or not the author wills it so—can very accurately be described as "woman-centered texts" and are highly illuminating when read from this optic. 4

Cixous and the Feminine Libidinal Economy

Despite her abhorrence of the repressive binary logic associated with terms such as "masculine" and "feminine," the concept of "writing said to be feminine" (écriture féminine) owes its very existence in no small part to Cixous (Moi 108). Indeed, Toril Moi notes that it "is largely due to the efforts of Hélène Cixous that the question of an écriture féminine came to occupy a central position in the political and cultural debate in France in the 1970s" (Moi 102). The primary vehicle through which Cixous articulates her views on the subject is "The Laugh of the Medusa,"5 portions of which appear in numerous other essays.6

This work has been described variously as a "feminist 'tract'" (Cixous 308), "a lyrical, euphoric evocation" (Moi 114), and a "manifesto, an exemplar, and an expression of
utopian longing" that is at once "rousing, irreverent, joyous, disturbing, and willfully inconsistent" (Gasbarrone 2-3). Diversity of characterizations notwithstanding, the work’s singular project is the disruption of the phallocentric discursive hegemony through the development and fostering of writing that is run by what Cixous calls a feminine libidinal economy.

Cixous posits in this essay that the vast majority of written text has historically been "marked" by its subordinate relationship to the phallocentric order that she describes as a libidinal masculine economy that represses the voice (discursive and otherwise) of women:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak. (Cixous 311)

While she insists that "it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing" (Cixous 313) as the enterprise itself is resistant to such constraints, one can detect a type of "libidinal femininity which can be read in writing produced by a male or a female" (Moi 108). The language generated by this feminine libido defies the patriarchal order in that it refuses to accept traditional binary relationships between self and other, dominant and inferior, masculine and feminine, as such relationships seek within the confines of phallocentrism to silence women. In place of such binary positionality, feminine libidinal discourse moves flexibly between con-
straining definitions. Hazard Adams summarizes Cixous's stance on this matter thusly:

A feminine libidinal economy is flexible toward the concept of property, tolerates separation, the otherness of the other, and difference; that is to say, it is conducive to freedom. For Cixous, this is not a matter of taking a position between the masculine and the feminine. Rather, it is to be always "on the side with" and on the side of movement. The literary text of the libidinal feminine must tolerate freedom from self-limitation and from neat borders, from beginnings, middles, and ends, from chapters. Such texts will be disquieting. (Cixous 308)

With an eye to Fernández Cubas, one finds evidence of this same flexibility, tolerance of separation, otherness and difference, and resistance to self-limiting borders and constraints on identity in her short narrative. Moreover, a primary vehicle conveying these disconcerting features—to wit, this discursive inquietud—is the curious linguistic play manifest in a number of these texts. Of the many that one could examine for this phenomenon, the tale that, in our view, offers the most compelling evidence of the same is "La ventana del jardín" (Mi hermana Elba [1980]).

"La ventana del jardín"

Although it appears as the second story of four in Mi hermana Elba (1980), Fernández Cubas's first collection, "La ventana del jardín" is, according to Fernando Valls "el primer cuento que escribió la autora" (Valls 18). From the outset, linguistic peculiarities in this narrative are plainly in evidence. Indeed, Valls points to what he describes as "la contaminación del lenguaje" as the principal motivating factor in every action taken by the story's male narrator/protagonist (Valls 18).

The primary setting of this tale is the isolated rural farm of the Albert family with whom the narrator has long been
acquainted. Expressing a desire to look in on his high-school chums, the narrator makes an unannounced visit to the farm under the pretense that “la granja me quedaba de camino” (Fernández Cubas 33). What prompts this stopover, however, is the narrator’s recollection of his previous stay and his brief interaction with the couple’s sickly young son Tomás because of whose “debilidad,” the narrator supposes, the Alberts moved to the secluded spot “a varios kilómetros de la aldea” (33) in the first place. Tomás is described by the narrator as “un tanto especial” (33). Because of his mysterious condition, the child never attends school and spends his existence “prácticamente recluido en una confortable habitación de paredes acolchadas” (33). These “comfortable” padded walls suggest that the child’s illness is not entirely physical in nature and that, further, he is either being restrained or protected from the world outside his room.

The narrator recalls how, during his prior visit with the Alberts, Tomás furtively deposited a note in his pocket with a strange message that he could only interpret as “una broma incomprensible” (33). Written in concentric circles, the inscription on the note reads:

Cazuela airada,
Tiznes o visones. Cruces o lagartos. La
noche era acre aunque las cucarachas
llorasen. Más
Olla. (33)

It is in this curious missive that Cixous’s libidinal feminine first surfaces. Cooking pot and kettle, the first and final figures presented in this surreal quasi haiku—mirror images, in fact—recall the traditionally female space of the hearth. Coupled with this association, their convex shape is also suggestive of the womb, a figure Cixous connects metaphorically with text in feminine discourse. Moreover, their roundness also forms an imagistic parallel to the concentric circles in which the missive is written. Despite the fact that the male narrator/protagonist finds this note “incompren-
sible,” he is nevertheless compelled by its coaxial nature and must attempt to unravel the mystery it presents. As Jessica Folkart observes: “The concentric structure of this note evokes the dizzying vortex of a radically different logic that sucks the detective into its center” (55). As we will attempt to demonstrate, the “logic” of this text is entirely resistant to that with which the narrator, a representative of patriarchal society, is familiar.

The intervening images in Tomás’s note reflect a foreboding darkness in their perpetual fluctuation between black soot stains and minks, crosses and lizards, acrid night and weeping cockroaches. The presence of such descriptors as “airada” and “acre” in juxtaposition with night, insects, soot, crucifixes, and lizards communicates a prevailing sense of apprehension. Additionally, the frequent repetition of the vowel “a” (Cazuela airada/ . . . lagartos la/ . . . era acre aunque las cucarachas llorasen. Más/Olla) provides the structural suggestion of a prolonged wail that further heightens this disquieting sensation. Finally, the message/poem concludes in disconcertingly open-ended fashion with the promise of “Más . . .”

In the five verses that make up Tomás’s stealthy communiqué with the narrator/protagonist, there appears to be a manifest lack of adherence to fixed identity markers. Rather, framed as they are between traditionally female-oriented tropes (cooking pot and kettle respectively), the figures in this disturbing poem operate in the limitless space between the parameters of identity and otherness. They are either soot stains or minks, either crosses or lizards. Refusing to differentiate between self and other or that which is not the self as in Judith Butler’s notion of subject and abject, they are both and neither, something altogether greater than the sum of their parts, “Más.” Furthermore, one could reasonably interpret the disquiet that this text provokes, an emotional state perhaps more aptly described in connection with the ailing Tomás as a kind of dis-ease, as the anticipated emotional response to the libidinal feminine discourse described above by Adams.
In the narrator’s present visit to the Alberts, he confronts Tomás’s perplexing language yet again. As he stands at the family’s doorstep, after nervously stammering excuses for his unannounced arrival, “un silencio molesto” (35) between himself and his old friend José Albert is dispelled by the laughter of the latter’s wife Josefina who, as yet unaware of the narrator’s presence shouts «¡Manzana!» (35) from somewhere inside the house. The laughing voice of Josefina, a woman and mother, erupting into this male-dominant tableau, shattering the tense standoff between them with an apparent non sequitur and thereby initiating a new phase in the story with the sound of her voice, has striking resonance with Cixous’s laughing Medusa. This figure represents, among other things, the vital importance of the maternal voice in the construction of the libidinal feminine language as an antidote meant, in Cixous’s view, to counteract the “phallic mystification” that “generally contaminated good relationships” within the patriarchal hegemony (Cixous 312).

Fascinated by what he perceives as an attempt on the part of the Alberts to hide something regarding Tomás, the narrator invents “un contratiempo” (39) involving transportation difficulties and so contrives to stay with them for the night. The couple stoically complies, and the narrator begins subtly to snoop for clues in order to solve the mystery that Tomás presents. During a trip to the bathroom, he notices the family’s three toothbrushes, each with a perplexing word written on it: “... reparé en un vasito con tres cepillos de dientes. En uno, escrito groseramente con acuarela densa, se leía «Escoba», en otro «Cuchara» y en el tercero «Olla». La Olla, esta olla que por segunda vez acudía a mi encuentro, me llenó de sorpresa. Salí del baño y pregunté: «¿Y vuestro hijo?»” (36).

It is at this point that the narrator begins to suspect that “esta olla,” the same figure that appeared in the cryptic message of two years past is, in fact, Tomás himself. By extension then, José and Josefina must be Escoba and Cuchara. Once again we are met here with written text that inscribes traditional feminine imagery of the hearth and home—kettle,
broom, spoon—set in juxtaposition with the Albert family. This text is written, furthermore, in what we suspect is Tomás-Olla’s own hand. And yet, while events thus far are taking place, despite signs that the family had planned a celebration in honor of his fourteenth birthday, a purportedly indisposed Tomás remains alone in his room, removed from direct interaction (“¿Cenará esta noche Tomás con nosotros?” Ellos contestaron al unísono: “No. No va a ser posible” [40]).

Sexually speaking, Tomás-Olla is himself an ambiguous figure who resists specific characterization. In the narrator’s first encounter with him, the child strikes him as much younger than his twelve years would suggest: “su aspecto era bastante más aniano” (34). In their second meeting, which takes place later in the evening of the fictional present after he has made repeated inquiries about the youngest Albert, the narrator sees that Tomás “había crecido y era hoy un hermoso adolescente” (41). However, as an adolescent, Tomás still stands at the interstice between childhood and sexual maturity. Hence, once more, the narrative presents us with a writing agent who is himself in motion between the limits of identity. A child/adolescent described by the narrator as “hermoso” and “guapo” who calls himself by a name inscribed with feminine associations, Olla.

During their second encounter, the narrator/protagonist finds himself in possession of another written artifact from Tomás-Olla. However, on this occasion, he appropriates it himself in an act of sleight of hand that is equally as furtive as the one through which Tomás placed the note in his pocket two years earlier:

Ya en mi cuarto respiré hondo. Sentía repugnancia de mí mismo y una gran ternura hacia el niño y mis pobres amigos. Sin embargo, mis intromisiones vergonzosas no habían terminado aún. Desabroché mi chaqueta, separé los brazos y el cuaderno de dibujos de Tomás Albert cayó sobre mi cama. Fue un espectáculo bochornoso. (41)
The narrator soon discovers that the contents of the purloined notebook are as opaque to him as the concentric note had been. While he recognizes certain features of Tomás's text, he is incapable of identifying any discernible meaning:

. . . nada entendí de aquel conjunto de incongruencias. Frases absolutamente desprovistas de sentido se barajaban de forma insólita, saltándose todo tipo de reglas conocidas. En algún momento la sintaxis me pareció correcta pero el resultado era siempre el mismo: incomprensible. (42)

Once again, just like Tomás’s first note, the language of this text is to the narrator “incomprensible.” And what appears to cause the most confusion is the fact that this language is the same as the narrator’s and yet it isn’t. He can distinguish syntax and script, but the meanings he traditionally associates with the words he sees do not apply. “Olla’s language,” posits Folkart “might well be classified in some alternative order straight from Borges’s encyclopedia. Disturbingly, it is his own language subject to a different logical order.” She notes, further, that:

Considering Saussure’s definition of the sign as an arbitrary relationship between the signifier (the symbol) and the signified (the meaning), Olla employs the same signifiers as the protagonist, but his signifieds are entirely disparate from the arbitrary relationship the protagonist—and readers—understand. As a result, the frustrated hero is completely thrown off the track in his detectivesque search for meaning. (Folkart 64)

The ramifications of this situation begin to dawn on the narrator in his third encounter with Tomás-Olla, wherein the former steals out to the latter’s window for a private conversation in the dead of night. During this meeting, Tomás-Olla attempts oral communication with the narrator in this
Spanish-that-is-not-Spanish. It quickly becomes apparent to the narrator that “el lenguaje que había aprendido Tomás desde los primeros años de su vida—su único lenguaje—era de imposible traducción al mío, por cuanto era EL MIO sujeto a unas reglas que me eran ajenas” (44). Through “gestos, dibujos rápidos esbozados en un papel, sonidos que no incluyesen para nada algo semejante a las palabras” (45), Tomás communicates that he does indeed call himself Olla and his parents Escoba and Cuchara, although it is never explicitly clear which is which and as such the figures become interchangeable to the reader. Furthermore, the narrator infers through their interaction that Olla “estaba deseoso de conocer un mundo que ignoraba pero del que, sin embargo, se sentía excluido” (45). The narrator then resolves to escape with the child in the hired car scheduled to pick him up the next day.

In the morning, as the narrator waits for the arrival of the car, he busies himself as noisily as possible in order to occlude his plans for the “rescue” of Tomás-Olla. In doing so, he himself begins to make non-standard use of language. As he nervously wastes time making and unmaking his bed, he sings: “mi garganta emitía marchas militares” (46). And he is not the only one. Josefina, too, sings as she prepares breakfast (“también ella, a su vez, cantaba” (47)). Thus, characters of both genders begin to evince the Cixouian proclivity for the maternal voice raised in song, attempting perhaps to access the power with which it resonates in Cixous’s philosophy.9

Communication among all of the characters, in fact, begins to transform at this juncture. Coming in from the garden wearing amorphous, androgynous coveralls and smelling of the rabbits the family raises on the farm, José bids the narrator good morning. However, the meaning of his communication is subject to interpretation as the narrator observes that “En realidad, no dijo exactamente B-u-e-n-o-s d-i-a-s, con estas u otras palabras, pero, por la expresión de su cara, traduje el balbuceo en un saludo” (47) (emphasis added). Even Tomás-Olla—still isolated in his room at this point—inserts himself into this strange brand of wordless commu-
nication by ringing a bell to which Josefina responds by bringing him breakfast (48).

At the stroke of nine o’clock, the hired car’s appointed arrival time, Tomás-Olla magically appears in the garden, liberated from the confines of his padded room. However, just as his language differs from the norm, so, too, does his body resist normative patterns of behavior:

Precipitated by Tomás-Olla’s movement from the interior space of the house to the world outside, complete language breakdown ensues. When she realizes that her son is no longer in his room, a distraught Josefina appears “gritando—aullando, diría yo,—,” José mutters incoherently (“mascullaba incoherencias”), and even the narrator ultimately reverts to Olla’s language, shouting the first word the boy would direct at him in their clandestine encounter the night before: “¡LUNA!” (49-50).

In contrast to the other lexical items from Olla’s linguistic inventory that the narrator manages to translate (“Bueno no significaba Malo, sino Estornudo. Enfermedad no hacía referencia a Salud, sino a un estuche de lapiceros . . .” [45]), this is a term whose meaning remains ambiguous. Strange, too, as it is a word that Olla directs at the narrator in apparent desperation and dire need:

Tomás extendió su mano hacia la mía y dijo «Luna, luna», con tal expresión de ansiedad en sus ojos que me quedé sobrecogido. A continuación dijo «Cola» y, más tarde, «Luna» de nuevo, esta vez suplicándome, intentando aferrarse a la mano que yo le tendía a través de la
reja, llorando, golpeando el alféizar con el puño libre.

(43-44)

Based on this exchange and the narrator’s subsequent deduction that Tomás-Olla is an unwilling prisoner beseeching his aid, one might infer that this word means something akin to "¡Socorro!". However, as the narrator is swept further along in this verbal maelstrom, another meaning presents itself. As the Alberts try frantically to revive their son, who has fainted in the arms of his would-be rescuer, the narrator attempts to make sense of the linguistic nightmare in which he himself is now prisoner:

¿Por qué . . . ese lenguaje, del que yo mismo—con toda seguridad único testigo—no conseguía liberarme mientras José y Josefina reanimaban a su hijo entre sollozos? ¿Por qué? Me así con fuerza del brazo de José. Supliqué, gemí, grité con todas mis fuerzas. «¡POR QUE?» volvía a decir y, de repente, casi sin darme cuenta, mis labios pronunciaron una palabra. «Luna», dije, «¡LUNA!». Y en esta ocasión no necesité asirme de nadie para llamar la atención. (50)

In yet another demonstration of the flexibility and resistance to self-limiting definitions common to the libidinal feminine as conceptualized by Cixous, this utterance can now either be construed as a cry for help or a demand for knowledge. Or, given the narrator’s tenuous grasp of Olla’s language, it might mean something else entirely. What is noteworthy about this word, however, is its symbolic connection with the feminine. As Barbara Walker notes: “Because of its apparent connection with women’s cycles of ‘lunar blood,’ which was supposed to give life to every human being in the womb, the moon became prime symbol of the Mother Goddess everywhere” (344). Like Olla, Escoba, and Cuchara, then, this declaration binds the Alberts to a reality that is clearly inscribed with recurrent polyvalent imagery that speaks of woman, mother, womb. Despite multiple attempts to gain access to the language of this interior feminine space,
the narrator, a representative of the exterior masculine economy, is ultimately forced out.

At the story's conclusion, the narrator flees, sans Tomás-Olla. The latter's prostrate form is returned to the house by his parents, who shut the door on the narrator as Josefina lances him with "una mirada cruel" (50). As he climbs breathless into the ancient hired car after running "enloquecido por el sendero" (50) for several kilometers, the narrator himself is devoid of normal speech: "... no podía articular palabra" (50). Instead, he is reduced to communicating with the driver via "un jadeo" and gestures (50). Signaling his own familiarity with the Alberts and their situation, the driver asks after the health of Tomás and whether or not it has improved. When the speechless narrator shakes his head in negation, the driver responds "—Pobre Ollita" (51), and the story ends to the eerie sound of his wordless whistling.

The chauffeur's surprising response and his obvious familiarity with and insouciant acceptance of the Alberts' strange language that is at once familiar and unfamiliar are highly disturbing. In shattering the narrator's firm belief that he alone is the "único testigo" (50) to this language and the world it represents, it also destabilizes the reader's tacit assumptions. While this uncanny conclusion might be theorized as a function of Todorov's fantastic, the Cixouian perspective provides additional complementary readings.

By virtue of his profession, the driver is himself a figure that exists "on the side of movement" (Cixous 308). Therefore, in keeping with the tenets of feminine libidinal discourse, he tolerates and accepts the Alberts' otherness and in this tolerance participates in their refusal of self-limiting borders that enclose identity in accord with the patriarchal order. He understands and moves freely between both phallocentric and feminine libidinal languages and is conversant in both. When all is said and done, this character—the only one left at the end of the tale with the power of speech—is the sole figure in the narrative capable of successfully sustaining such flexibility. In sharp contrast, the narrator must escape the farm, running pell-mell toward the patriarchal hegemony
whence he came, and Tomás-Olla must retreat to the confines of his family's isolated home lest he die without.

Between the arrival of the car and the conclusion of his clandestine exchange with Tomás-Olla, the narrator ruminates over what he considers the Alberts' “monstruoso experimento” (46) in teaching their son this strangely (un)familiar language. Among other possible motives for their actions, the narrator wonders if one might be: “¿No querer compartir por nada del mundo el cariño de aquel hermoso y único hijo?” (46). This brings up an interesting point that has further ramifications in this study. Tomás-Olla exists exclusively and reclusively within the protective confines of his padded room, a dark, womb-like space in which only his mother appears to come and go with ease. A psychoanalytic interpretation would, in fact, suggest that, never having separated from his mother, Tomás-Olla has not developed beyond the Pre-Oedipal phase, a process which Lacan maintains is crucial to identity formation.11 His only means of communication, then, is the one he learned in this maternal space, taught to him by the mother herself.

In “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language and Sexuality,” Gilbert and Gubar examine the historic, competitive struggle of both male and female English-speaking writers to develop gender-exclusive language codes that would endow one sex with linguistic superiority over the other. They argue that all speech is initially associated with the mother, as it is she who first teaches us this communicative tool, known in so many languages as “Mother tongue” (Gilbert and Gubar 91). “European male writers” they note “have, since the High Middle Ages, been deeply involved in a struggle into the vernacular which has continually forced them to usurp and transform the daily speech of women and children so as to make it into a suitable instrument for (cultivated) male art” (91).

The results of their efforts, that which Gilbert and Gubar refer to as “father speech” or patrius sermo, is the so-called “civilised” version of the mother tongue (materna lingua) that becomes the dialect of the literate and thus of those who have discursive agency in the phallocentric hegemony. Be-
cause Tomás-Olla has no contact with the patriarchal order and the *patrius sermo* inherent to it, the unadulterated *materna lingua* maintains linguistic supremacy in his world, and in this way, so, too, does the libidinal feminine and its corresponding *écriture*. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, contrary to the assertions of male authors—architects of the phallocentric discursive economy—it is mother rather than father who maintains linguistic primacy even within the patriarchal order:

... the power of the father, while obviously representing the law of patriarchy, need not be inextricably bound to the power of language. Indeed, the fact that the father is a supreme fiction in this now widely disseminated French Freudian theory points, paradoxically enough, to the primordial supremacy of the mother, for if, as language acquisition researchers have demonstrated, and as most mothers know, it is in most cultures the mother who feeds the child words even as she furnishes her or him with food, then, as Freud himself observed, the birth into language delivers the child from helplessness at the goings and comings ... of the mother. (Gilbert and Gubar 96)

Maternal supremacy as outlined above is highly manifest in the Albert family language and in the linguistic agency accorded to the members of this isolated enclave. In fact, José, the *paterfamilias*, is rendered speechless at various points throughout the narrative. Beginning with his “silencio molesto” on the doorstep at the narrator’s arrival, he is then “taciturno” (37) during dinner. In the story’s final scenes, wearing an amorphous shape-concealing coverall and looking and smelling more animal than human (“Vestía traje de faena y olía a conejo” [47]), he is reduced further to incoherent babbling and muttering.

Moreover, at no point in the story is there ever a direct verbal exchange between father and son. Rather, it is only Josefina’s laughter and initially inexplicable shout of «¡Man-
zana!» that, in retrospect, bear any resemblance to Tomás-Olla’s language. One can assume, furthermore, that this utterance was in all probability directed at the child, as José’s attention was fixed at the time on the narrator and the exterior world outside the home. As the narrative progresses, it is Josefina who delivers Tomás’s meals and leads the narrator into and out of his padded world in the narrator’s second encounter with the child. José’s only contribution to the facilitation of this meeting is, compellingly, to enjoin the narrator himself to silence: “—Ya lo sabes—dijo José—, ni una palabra . . .” (40). Indeed, José seems to fade into the background whenever Tomás-Olla or Josefina are at the forefront. Even his names give him secondary positionality in the story inasmuch as “José” is merely a fragment of “Josefina” and the man himself is only one of two possible referents for “Cuchara” and “Escoba” as we never learn precisely who is who or if there even is a single signified for each name/sign. In the story’s final moments, he and Josefina discursively fuse into the same identity (“Ambos, como una sola persona, parecieron despertar de un sueño” [50, emphasis added]), and together with Olla they retreat back into the maternal sanctum of the house. The ousted narrator is then left to find his way to the chauffer who will lead him back to the town and to patriarchal order.

The existence of a figure such as the chauffer who comprehends and can “drive” fluidly between both the feminine libidinal and phallocentric realities, flexibly speaking the language of each, is precisely the personification of the feminine libidinal economy. Recalling Hazard Adams’s description of this economy which, in its tolerance of separation, otherness, and difference, is “conducive to freedom” (Cixous 308) (emphasis added), it is particularly poetic that the primary function of the character who represents this economy in this provocative story is to drive or, in Spanish, conducir.

* * *
In this her inaugural tale, Cristina Fernández Cubas constructs a linguistic code that is at once comfortably familiar and strangely enigmatic. While structurally and syntactically identical to traditional discourse, the language of “La ventana del jardín” and the characters it speaks reflects radically divergent meanings which, in their persistent refusal of self-identifying limits, can be read as an articulation of the feminine libidinal economy as outlined by Cixous. In keeping with Cixous’s philosophy, the character who is most successful in the game of survival is that figure which exists most comfortably between identities and gendered economies, in continual fluid motion and fluently articulated tolerance of otherness and extremes.

Returning to Fernández Cubas’s own philosophy regarding feminism as it relates to her works and to those of her female colleagues in Spain, the author makes the following observation:

Realmente que, más que leer un texto y ponerse al servicio de [la teoría feminista] . . . lo que nos están haciendo muchas veces es . . . hay un corsé e intentar que nuestro texto encaje en el corsé. Es como un corsé de talla única y que, sea una señora oronda o una señora delgadísima, pues a todos nos tiene que ir. Esa es la sensación que me da. . . . (Carmona et al. 162)

Hélène Cixous also declares her acute discomfort with the binding nature of feminism and the bourgeois socioeconomic realities it has been known to represent. This is precisely why Cixous’s conceptualization of feminine écriture as a discourse that resists such binding resonates so plainly in Fernández Cubas. As Cixous describes it in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” writing that inscribes the feminine is impossible to define as it “can never be theorized, enclosed, coded” (317). Rather, it is a practice that moves flexibly between definitions as it tolerates difference, embraces otherness, and celebrates the power of woman, the female body, and the maternal. In so doing, it creates a feminine libidinal space
that, through multilingual discourse resists subjugation by the phallocentric masculine economy at the same time that it "revel(s) in the pleasures of open-ended textuality" (Moi 108). As we have attempted to illustrate, a Cixouian reading of the provocative short narrative of Cristina Fernández Cubas and the fascinating nova lingua manifest therein informs our understanding of the "espacios de límites difusos" that separate and bind reader, writer, and text.

NOTES

1. This study was completed with the support of the EXCEL Scholars Program at Lafayette College. Under the auspices of this program, undergraduate students in high standing assist members of the Lafayette faculty with their scholarship. A member of the class of 2004 and Sigma Delta Pi, the Spanish National Honor Society, Ms. Guarino is a Spanish and Government and Law major who has been actively engaged in Geoffrion-Vinci's ongoing research on Fernández Cubas since 2002.

2. In her 1995 study, Phyllis Zatlin cites this same interview, noting as well the frequent disclaimers on the part of "the majority of [Spanish] women writers" who actively disassociate themselves and their works from the slightest hint of feminist leanings. For more information, see Phyllis Zatlin, "Amnesia, Strangulation, Hallucination and Other Mishaps: The Perils of Being Female in the Tales of Cristina Fernández Cubas."

3. In Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi analyzes Cixous's rejection of this term and of feminist analytical discourse in general. She maintains that it is first and foremost based on a definition of "feminism" as a bourgeois, egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system; for Cixous, "feminists" are women who want power, "a place in the system, respect, social legitimation" (RSH, 482). Cixous does not reject what she prefers to call the women's movement (as opposed to the static rigidity of so-called "feminism"); on the contrary, she is strongly in favour of it. . . . (Moi 103)

4. To date, of the numerous studies that examine Fernández Cubas's works, only three focus specifically on issues involving the feminist/female/feminine. Prior to Zatlin's aforementioned article
which explores several of CFC's short stories from "a woman-centered perspective" (Zatlin 36), Bretz analyzed the 1983 collection *Los altíllos de Brumal* for evidence of the Kristevan semiotic. See Mary Lee Bretz, "Cristina Fernández Cubas and the Recuperation of the Semiotic in *Los altíllos de Brumal.*" Finally and most recently, in her 1998 dissertation that forms the base of her recently published book, Folkart incorporates feminist and gender theory in her cogent interrogation of subjectivity in CFC's literary corpus. See Jessica Aileen Folkart, "Angles of Otherness: Subjectivity and Difference in the Fiction of Cristina Fernández Cubas." None of these studies, however, focuses explicitly and exclusively on CFC's unique use of language as it relates to this topic.

As regards Cixous's own text, while she lists several authors whose works reflect writing that can be seen as feminine (Colette, Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet [Cixous 308]), she offers very little in the way of explicit analysis of specific writers whose works reflect the feminine libidinal economy. This essay, therefore, also seeks to address this lack.

5. First published in French in 1975 ("Le Rire de la Méduse," L'Arc 61, 39-54) and in translation the following year (trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1, 875-99), this powerful essay appears in numerous critical anthologies, including *Critical Theory Since 1965.* All references to this piece in the present study come from the Adams collection.

6. See for example Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays." Moi observes that constant resurfacing of the principal features of Cixous's theoretical philosophy in different texts serves a deliberate purpose, primarily that it "tends to present her work as a continuum that encourages non-linear forms of reading" (Moi 102).

7. In her examination of Bakhtin's influence on Cixous, Lisa Gasbarrone observes the following about Cixous's association with womb and feminine text:

Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "there is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other" (245). Playing on the metaphor of womb and text, she invites women to engage in a type of writing—a feminine *écriture*—that would cultivate the "locus," that would defy the monologue of patriarchy and express, through language, a relationship between self and other that might be called dialogic. (Gasbarrone 2)
For further insights see Lisa Gasbarrone, “The Locus of the Other: Cixous, Bakhtin, and Women’s Writing.”

8. Butler posits that the subject depends for its existence on the co-existence of the Other or, in her words, the *object*, that which the subject is not. See Butler’s exposition on subject and object in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*.

9. Cixous articulates her position on the power of this musical maternal voice in the following manner:

In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You don’t build walls around yourself, you don’t forego pleasure as “wisely” as he. Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from “mother” (I mean outside her role functions: the “mother” as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink. (Cixous 312)

10. With specific reference to the fantastic as it informs Fernández Cubas’s works and the manifestations therein of the play between familiar and unfamiliar, real and unreal, Ortega draws the following conclusion:

Lo fantástico en los relatos de Cristina Fernández Cubas obedece a un deseo por trascender la falsa racionalidad, o lógica de nuestra cultura, buscando una realidad más humana. Esta búsqueda de conocimiento—objetivo central de lo fantástico—no constituye una percepción estática ya que es provocada por la vacilación entre lo real e irreal, lo racional e irracional. La ambigüedad e indefinición que caracterizan estos relatos apartan al lector de toda interpretación univocal. (161)

For further insights see José Ortega, “La dimensión fantástica en los cuentos de Fernández Cubas.”

11. For further information on this process, consult Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I.”


